

Who are Advisory Services Leaving Out? A Critical Reflection on 'Hard to Reach' Farmers

Qui les services de conseil laissent-ils de côté ? Une réflexion critique sur les agriculteurs 'difficiles d'accès'

Wen lassen die Beratungsdienste außen vor? Eine kritische Reflexion über 'schwer erreichbare' Landwirte



point de vue

by
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Farm advice as a key instrument of more inclusive European agricultural policies?

Europe's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has broadened its objectives to integrate social issues related to cohesion, labour conditions, occupational health and inclusion. At the same time, farm advisory services have gained further importance in the CAP (Box 1). However, several groups of farmers and workers are still left aside or even ignored by advisory services and associated policies. Reducing inequalities of access to advice by connecting to hard-to-reach groups has a strong potential to enhance the economic and social cohesion of European agricultures. In our research, we interviewed more than 1,000 farmers across Europe. We revealed features of hard-to-reach groups that are often overlooked. They relate to new labour arrangements in the sector (e.g. more employees), but also to the variety of engagement rationales into farming (e.g. career changers/new entrants) and to farmers' relations to innovation. In this *Point de Vue* we critically reflect on the social cohorts who are 'left out' of advisory service provision, and how they can be better reached. Our paper also clarifies the pluralism of actors of the advisory landscape (Knierim *et al.*, 2017), defining 'linked' and 'independent' advisors; that is those who are linked

to or independent from sales of inputs or technologies (Sutherland and Labarthe, [this issue](#)). This enables us to make concrete recommendations about how to engage advisors with hard-to-reach groups, with approaches which are suited to different national contexts of Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS). Hence,

these recommendations can contribute to the 'AKIS dimension' of National Strategic Plans of the next Common Agricultural Policy (CAP 2023–2027).

Who are hard-to-reach social categories for farm advice?

It is well established that access to advisory services is highly variable

Box 1: Farm advisory services in the next CAP (2023–2027) and the contribution of the AgriLink project

Agriculture and rural areas are central to the policy objectives of the European Green Deal. The CAP 2023–2027 encourages farmers and other actors to step up their efforts to accelerate the necessary transition to a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system by 2030. In 2020/2021, Member States (MS) prepared national strategic plans related to a series of specific and Cross-Cutting Objectives, including one focused on fostering and sharing of knowledge and supporting innovation (Art. 5). Functional and effective farm advisory services are an important element of this AKIS dimension of MS plans.

The H2020 project AgriLink (Agricultural Knowledge: linking farmers, advisors, and researchers to boost innovation, 2017–2021) contributed to the debates associated with the role of advice in the CAP (see <http://www.agrilink2020.eu>). One goal of AgriLink was to better understand the roles played by a wide range of advisory organisations in innovation. Central to AgriLink was analysis of the provision of farming advice from farmers' perspectives, utilising the concept of MicroAKIS (micro-level agricultural knowledge and innovation systems): the knowledge systems that farmers personally assemble, including the range of individuals and organisations with whom they exchange knowledge (Sutherland and Labarthe, forthcoming).

We also established strong links with the Strategic Working Group of the Standing Committee on Agricultural Research for Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (SCAR-AKIS-SWG) (see scar-europe.org/index.php/akis). This enabled us to access presentations of draft national strategic plans and fine tune our recommendations to this policy momentum.

across Europe, both within and across the diversity of national AKIS. Some of these differences are well known. Research from Ireland, for example, has demonstrated that farmers at the extremes of the age spectrum (i.e. older and younger) are often 'hard-to-reach' for advisory services (Kinsella, 2018). Farmers operating smaller-scale farms also find it harder to access advisory services (Labarthe and Laurent, 2013), and are similarly not considered to be 'good clients' to private advice providers. The same applies for some new entrants to farming (Sutherland *et al.*, 2017). Female farmers may not be identified as priority cohorts or 'authentic' farmers by advisory services (Prager *et al.*, 2017; Trauger, 2010). However, not engaging with advisory services does not necessarily indicate that there is a lack of need or access to professional advice. As Klerkx and Jansen (2010) pointed out, hard-to-reach farmers are diverse. Some may not be engaging with advisory services because they are working directly with researchers and technology developers; these are frequently very large farms who have the skills and resources to bypass traditional advisory services and go straight to the source of new innovations (Mrnuščík Konečná and Sutherland, 2022). Our analysis supported these findings. They also confirm that financial aspects and advisory costs are not the only reasons for the difficulties in accessing advice. Lack of access also reflects inertia in the

social construction of the relations between demand and supply for advice.

“ Il est urgent de s'engager vers des politiques de conseil davantage fondées sur des informations probantes pour concevoir des services qui répondent à la diversité des besoins. ”

We identified new cohorts who are often overlooked by advisory services and are less well recognised in the academic literature: farm labourers, new entrants or 'career changers', and later adopters. These advisory gaps relate to the increasing fragmentation of farmers' cohorts and farm labour organisations.

The first 'hard-to-reach' cohort are **farm workers**. Recent decades have seen an increase in the average size and complexity of European farms. While small-scale and family farms remain, the growing complexity of large-scale farms poses a number of challenges to advisory service provision (Laurent and Nguyen, this issue). First,

the appropriate candidate for advice becomes blurry. Farm owners may have hired managers, contractors and numerous employees. Enrolment of migrant labour has become common in some regions; these workers are important for up-take of innovative practices, particularly those involved in sustainability transitions. These individuals are disconnected from advisory services, both in relation to their practices on-farm, and knowledge about their rights as employees on farm. Information on human resource management, in particular how to effectively manage salaried labour, is also absent. Advisory services are not meeting the knowledge needs of either farm employers or workers, and a growing proportion of workers are invisible in policy debates, especially casual workers employed by foreign and domestic service providers. Oversimplified representations of the labour patterns at farm level can be highly misleading for policies related to advisory services. Statistics should be improved, and advisory policies should not target traditional family farms only.

Another category are **new entrants to agriculture**. New entrants in farming are an important group to support in the CAP from various perspectives: the broadening of a knowledge base for innovative farming, the change in the sociodemographic profile of the farm, the uptake of the new environmental and social functions embedded in



There are more and more workers employed in farming sectors. Their integration into farm advisory policies is a challenge.

Europe's green policy course, and the development of new rural–urban connections to make food systems healthier and more sustainable. Newcomers who have been employed in other sectors (i.e. 'career changers') may have diverse professional backgrounds, including information and communication technologies, engineering, medicine, and they may also come from an urban environment. For instance, findings of research implemented in Latvia suggest that the gap between knowledge needs and services is being filled by new entrants through the creation of professional networks amongst this new cohort, together with industry experts and customers and also to a lesser degree with formal advisory services (Žabko and Tisenkopfs, this issue).

However, newcomers to agriculture are often disconnected from traditional AKIS structures, and operate businesses with knowledge needs not typically addressed by advisory services (e.g. short food supply chains, Kilis *et al.*, 2021).

The final category relates to the behaviour of farmers regarding innovation. Many innovation studies and advisory policies are still based on diffusionist perspectives following Rogers' early work (Rogers, 1963; Rogers *et al.*, 2014) which suggests supporting pioneers and followers would be the most effective means to

disseminate innovation. Our results challenge this perspective. We purposively sought farmers with variable profiles regarding adoption – including pioneers **but also non-adopters and droppers** (Sutherland *et al.*, this issue). Although the situations of non-adopters often revealed some gaps in the delivery of advice, there were less expected profiles. Decisions not to adopt an innovation can be related to novel advisory networks that might transcend local boundaries. In other words, these farmers cannot be systematically considered as laggards or as resisters to change. Some of them are whistle-blowers who highlight sustainability issues related to innovation. These issues might be addressed with better access to advice. Moreover, farm advice also needs to be integrated with environmental and social legislation that provide direction to these services (Klerkx *et al.*, 2006).

How to engage with hard-to-reach farmers and workers?

Our analysis of draft national CAP strategic plans revealed challenges faced by central administrations of Member States. They shared the need to have a better understanding of who is offering advice (on what and to whom). There was also a recognition in several countries that a better understanding of the needs of farmers is required, which

would contribute to making advice more inclusive and considerate of farm diversity (Labarthe and Beck, this issue). At various AgriLink workshops (Leloup *et al.*, this issue) some advisory suppliers also admitted they lacked knowledge about the situations of certain farmer and worker cohorts. Advisory policy context and history are important in that respect. We acknowledge there are situations where advisory suppliers are willing to engage with 'hard-to-reach' populations (mostly public actors, farmers' organisations or NGOs), and other situations where they are not. Options were discussed with advisors and policymakers in these different contexts.

“ Es besteht ein dringender Bedarf an einer stärker evidenzbasierten Beratungspolitik, um Dienstleistungen zu entwickeln, die der Vielfalt der Bedürfnisse gerecht werden. ”

In situations where advisors are willing to engage with 'hard-to-reach' groups, public funding could be used to enhance their knowledge and skills by:

- Better integrating farm diversity into advisors' education and training. In France, for instance, some agricultural vocational schools use pedagogical modules whereby students (and thus potentially future advisors) have to engage in comprehensive interviews with randomly chosen farmers and describe their farming systems.
- Providing simplified methodological tools derived from social sciences (e.g. AgriLink's microAKIS concept) to understand farmers' personal networks. Different models of giving advice, adapted to specific needs could then be considered (e.g.



New entrants to farming are an important group to support. They often have specific needs for advice and unconventional knowledge networks.



Lessons about innovation sustainability can be learnt not only from pioneers but also from non-adopters or droppers.

mentoring schemes, including digital options). This could help to reinforce information flows beyond the limits of local advisory services.

“ There is an urgent need to go toward more evidence-based advisory policies to design services that fit the diversity of needs. ”

There are other situations where there might be no actors willing or able to take steps towards including hard-to-reach groups. This might occur when advice is mostly provided by ‘linked’ advisors, that is advisors who provide their advisory services jointly with other activities (including trade of inputs, outputs, machinery, digital solutions). This is the case in many European

regions after decades of privatisation. In such situations, policymakers might consider other options:

- Make use of compulsory interactions with farmers (bookkeeping, CAP subsidies) to understand farmers’ situations and needs and propose appropriate advisory schemes.
- Make use of knowledge about on-farm triggers to identify opportunities when these categories of farmers might be willing to look for advice, such as during farm succession.
- Support initiatives from trade unions or non-governmental associations to improve training and advice provision for national and migrant salaried workers.

Integrating social sciences for more evidence-based advisory policies

There is a need to better understand who the hard-to-reach groups are, and

deploy innovative public policies and actors to engage with them. Potential roles can be explored in the context of CAP’s national strategic plans. These roles should aim to (but not be limited to) subsidising access to services. Public actors need to support training schemes on specific advisory skills (soft skills, relational competences) and content (labour rights, etc). Public administration should also support the production of both statistics and qualitative data about farmers and workers’ needs and access to services, for instance through the coordination and monitoring of publicly funded advisory services at the regional level. In other words, there is an urgent need to go toward more evidence-based advisory policies to design services that fit the diversity of needs (Klerkx *et al.*, 2017). In that respect, there is a strong potential to make better use of advances in social sciences, in terms of understanding advice as social interaction and to bolster inclusiveness of public policies.

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Summary

Who are Advisory Services Leaving Out? A Critical Reflection on 'Hard to Reach' Farmers

 Although the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union has broadened its objectives to integrate social issues, several hard-to-reach groups of farmers and workers continue to be ignored by advisory services and associated policies. Connecting with these groups has a strong potential to increase the economic and social cohesion of European agricultures. We interviewed over 1,000 farmers across Europe and identified features of these groups that are often overlooked by advisory services. We critically reflected on the social cohorts omitted from advisory services and how they could be better reached; they include farm labourers, new entrants or 'career changers', and later adopters. We clarify the different types of advisors in the advisory landscape, distinguishing between those who are linked to or independent from sales of inputs or technologies. We make concrete recommendations about how to engage advisors with hard-to-reach groups, with approaches suited to different national contexts of Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS); thus contributing to the 'AKIS dimension of National Strategic Plans of the next Common Agricultural Policy, 2023–2027. We argue for the more effective use of advances in the social sciences through a better understanding of advice as social interaction which can bolster the inclusiveness of public policies.

Qui les services de conseil laissent-ils de côté ? Une réflexion critique sur les agriculteurs 'difficiles d'accès'

 Bien que la Politique agricole commune de l'Union européenne ait élargi ses objectifs pour intégrer les questions sociales, plusieurs groupes d'agriculteurs et de travailleurs continuent d'être ignorés par les services de conseil et les politiques associées. Établir un lien avec ces groupes difficiles d'accès pourrait permettre d'accroître la cohésion économique et sociale des agricultures européennes. Nous avons interrogé plus de 1,000 agriculteurs à travers l'Europe et identifié les caractéristiques de groupes qui sont souvent ignorés par les services de conseil. Nous avons examiné de manière critique les cohortes sociales concernées et réfléchi à la manière de mieux les accompagner. Elles comprennent les ouvriers agricoles, les nouveaux entrants ou 'changeurs de carrière', et les adoptants ultérieurs. Nous clarifions aussi les différents types d'organisations dans le paysage du conseil, en distinguant ceux qui sont liés aux ventes d'intrants ou de technologies de ceux qui en sont indépendants. Nous formulons des recommandations concrètes sur la manière faire intervenir des conseillers auprès de groupes difficiles d'accès, avec des approches adaptées aux différents contextes nationaux des systèmes de connaissances et d'innovation agricoles (AKIS). Ces recommandations pourraient ainsi contribuer à la dimension AKIS des Plans Stratégiques Nationaux de la prochaine Politique agricole commune (2023–2027). Nous plaçons pour une intégration plus forte des avancées des sciences sociales permettant une meilleure compréhension du conseil en tant qu'interaction sociale, afin de renforcer le caractère inclusif des politiques publiques de conseil.

Wen lassen die Beratungsdienste außen vor? Eine kritische Reflexion über 'schwer erreichbare' Landwirte

 Obwohl die Gemeinsame Agrarpolitik der Europäischen Union ihre Ziele um soziale Aspekte erweitert hat, werden mehrere schwer erreichbare Gruppen von Landwirten und Landwirtinnen sowie Beschäftigte von den Beratungsdiensten und den damit verbundenen Maßnahmen weiterhin ignoriert. Der Kontakt zu diesen Gruppen birgt ein großes Potenzial zur Stärkung des wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Zusammenhalts der europäischen Landwirtschaft. Wir haben über 1,000 Landwirte und Landwirtinnen in ganz Europa befragt und dabei Eigenschaften dieser Gruppen ermittelt, die von den Beratungsdiensten häufig übersehen werden. Wir haben kritisch über die sozialen Gruppen nachgedacht, die von den Beratungsdiensten übergangen werden, und darüber, wie sie besser erreicht werden könnten. Hierzu gehören Beschäftigte, Neu- oder Quereinsteigende und spätere Anwender und Anwenderinnen. Wir verdeutlichen die verschiedenen Arten von Beratung in der Beratungslandschaft und unterscheiden zwischen solchen, die mit dem Verkauf von Betriebsmitteln oder Technologien verbunden oder davon unabhängig sind. Wir geben konkrete Empfehlungen, wie die Beratung mit schwer erreichbaren Gruppen zusammenarbeiten kann, und zwar mit Ansätzen, die für die verschiedenen nationalen Kontexte der landwirtschaftlichen Wissens- und Innovationssysteme (AKIS) geeignet sind. Damit leisten wir einen Beitrag zur AKIS-Dimension der nationalen Strategiepläne der nächsten Gemeinsamen Agrarpolitik (2023–2027). Wir plädieren für eine effektivere Nutzung der Fortschritte in den Sozialwissenschaften durch ein besseres Verständnis von Beratung als sozialer Interaktion, die die Inklusivität der öffentlichen Politik stärken kann.