

Anna J. Parzonko

Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW, Poland

RECENT TRENDS IN AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY IN POLAND

BIEŻĄCE TRENDY W DORADZTWIE ROLNICZYM W POLSCE

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Abstract: The organization of agricultural advisory services and the scope of tasks they perform vary depending on the country's political situation, the market conditions and the clients' needs. The primary task of agricultural advisory is to support the rural population in overcoming their problems and adapting to the existing economic conditions. The basic trends in farm advisory are changing. There is a clearly marked tendency to move away from typical agricultural advisory services towards rural advisory services. To a large extent, this is the effect of multifunctional development in rural areas and the need for Polish agriculture to adjust to the requirements of the European Union. This paper presents the history of agricultural advisory system with a focus on the last period, in which the modern system of agricultural advisory services was created. It also defines new problem areas which will determine further changes in the organization of agricultural advisory services in Poland.

Introduction

In response to the need for changes in the farm advisory system resulting from the necessity to adapt advisory services to the changing image of rural areas, in recent years, some countries of the European Union have performed actions aiming at restructuring their farm advisory systems. This is a result of the EU Council Regulation 1782/2003, under which each Member State is obliged to establish an advisory system for farmers. In many countries, actions are taken to adjust the organization of agricultural advisory services to the EU requirements. A noticeable trend is the continued decrease of the role of state-funded advisory services to the advantage of those financed by farmers or fully commercial services. Currently there are three types of agricultural advisory systems:

- 1) state-funded (traditional) system, which is funded entirely by the state budget, at no charge for the services; such systems operate in Belgium, Greece, Luxembourg and Slovenia, where a central government organization supervises advisory services; also Spain, southern Germany, Portugal, Sweden, Italy and Switzerland, have similar systems, except that in those countries advisory services are managed by regional units,
- 2) semi-state-funded advisory system where advice is provided by state organizations charging for a number of services; this system operates in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary,
- 3) private advisory system, which took different forms depending on historical and economic conditions; in this case advisory services are provided by e.g. chambers of agriculture or trade and professional organizations (such systems operate in Austria, Denmark, Finland, France and the north-west Germany) or they are provided by commercial consultancies, owned by private individuals and institutions (such advisory systems operate in England and Wales, the Netherlands, the north-eastern Germany and Scotland).

In Poland, the advisory services are provided mainly by public and private advisory bodies. Public agricultural advisory system provides the same service throughout the country. The benefits of private advisory is primarily an innovative and flexible training system, the search for new solutions and new forms of work.

The agricultural advisory centers play the leading role in the farm advisory system in Poland. They are intended to support farmers and Polish agriculture in the transformation taking place in rural areas. The activities of particular importance include broad-based training activities, assistance in developing business investment plans, completing application forms and writing applications. The adviser helps farmers to overcome the complicated procedures to obtain EU grants and subsidies. Employees of agricultural advisory centers are qualified advisors who, in majority,

hold a university degree, continually improve their skills through participation in training courses and postgraduate programs. Currently, agricultural advisory centers, employ 4,870 workers, including 3,503 specialists. Statistically, in Poland, one adviser provides services for about 428 farms, in Denmark – 20, and in Austria – 300.

The analysis of available literature and the study conducted under the research project: „Models of functional solutions for the cooperation of agricultural advisory centers with farmers from producer groups” legitimize the attempt to present the changes that have occurred both in terms of organization of agricultural advisory services in Poland and substantive content of services provided by advisory centers. Moreover, the analysis of secondary sources makes it possible to identify notable trends for further changes in the farm advisory system in Poland.

The genesis of agricultural advisory in Poland

The history of the development of agricultural advisory services in Poland unveils its important role in the agricultural and rural development. It passed through various stages depending on the socioeconomic conditions of a particular period. In the interwar years agriculture in Poland suffered from extensive structural underdevelopment, the low level of productive forces, illiteracy of a vast part of rural population and lack of vocational training for farmers. Hence, this was a period when social agronomy developed¹. The main domain of social agronomy was educational work, closely linked with political and economic activities run by social institutions and organizations in rural areas, aiming to elevate the rural population to a higher level of material and spiritual culture. It was based mainly on the social movement of the peasant masses, which in this period mainly took forms of such socio-economic and educational organizations such as agricultural circles, circles of rural housewives, circles of rural youth associations, agricultural cooperatives and trade associations as well as economic self-government in the form of Chambers of Agriculture. The period of social agronomy in the interwar years was a major step in creating professional advisory in Poland, unfortunately interrupted by the outbreak of World War II.

Several stages in the development of Polish agricultural consultancy can be identified in the post-war history. At all these stages the organization and tasks of advisory services were strongly interconnected with the objectives of socio-economic policy of the country. Even though shortly after the war (in the years 1945-1949) an attempt to refer to the experience of the interwar period could be observed, it was relatively quickly abandoned. It was only in 1957, when the post-war period of stagnation in the development of agricultural advisory ended. In 1957 agricultural circles were reactivated and the position of a community agronomist was created. His task was to implement expertise in agricultural practice using appropriately structured instruction and advice, promoting agricultural progress and supervising farmers in their basic activities. In addition to agricultural services organized in agricultural circles, similar services were provided by agricultural rural cooperatives, agricultural and food industry and points of crop and livestock purchase as well as by personnel departments of agriculture and forestry councils. In 1968 the Community Agricultural Service was founded. It included: an agronomist, a veterinary technician, assistants of the agronomist and veterinary technician and a drainage specialist. The year 1968 is considered to be the beginning of the national agricultural advisory services. New changes were initiated in 1973 when a hierarchical position of the agricultural instructor was created in the Commune Agricultural Service. In 1975 the Province Centers of Agricultural Progress (WOPR) were founded, entrusted with the methodological and professional care over the commune instructor service. In 1981 the advisory service was entirely transferred to WOPRs [Maziarz 1977, Sikorska-Wolak, 1998, Zawisza 1999]. Methodical and program activities locate these services more explicitly in the processes of educational and advisory services. The subordination of agricultural advisory centers (ODR) to the state government, however, did not absolve the institutions from the responsibility for the implementation of tasks resulting from the agricultural development plans. There is no doubt that the concept of work, adopted by this institution, aimed at meeting the needs of farmers. However the emerging problems of agriculture, reduction in access to the means of production, generated difficulties and made it impossible to fully satisfy the farmers' needs.

The aforementioned facts show that there have been continuous changes in the organization and tasks of farm advisory. But independently of the evaluation of different periods, these activities played a key role in stimulating progress in agriculture.

¹ Currently the term “social agronomy” has only a historical reference. It has been replaced by the term “popularization of knowledge and progress in agriculture”

Evolution of the farm advisory system at the turn of the century

The current system of agricultural advisory services was created in the early 90s when important changes, implemented in farm advisory, significantly modified its operations. The main reasons for improving the advisory system resulted from the political transformation and a new concept of socio-economic development of the country. The agricultural advisory occupied a key role in the processes of transformation of agriculture and rural areas but it was necessary to carry out a major reorganization of the structure and program of this institution. The reorganization of advisory services comprised:

- transformation of province centers of agricultural progress in the agricultural advisory centers,
- socialization of advisory work, giving the farmers the opportunity to influence the content of educational and advisory programs or i.e. the management of advisory services,
- separation of experimental farms,
- changes in the content of advisory services: alongside technological content referring to production, there are issues related to the economics of production, quality of production, marketing, alternative sources of income, organized team activities, environmental protection, social problems of farm families,
- enriched forms, methods and means of securing the availability of assistance to all farmers, mainly by actions aimed at groups of clients in order to disseminate new management concepts such as producer groups and agritourism,
- improvement of the qualifications of professional advisers through the creation of a modern system of training to prepare advisory staff for new tasks,
- building strong relationships with educational centers,
- stimulating entrepreneurial initiative and supporting innovative producers.

Agricultural Advisory Centers (ODR) have been operating in Poland from 1 January 1991. Their prime task is to provide advisory services and supplementary services in the field of education, information and popularization of new concepts. Simultaneously, socialization of agricultural advisory by establishing the Social Agricultural Advisory Councils allowed the rural population to participate in the creation of the main directions of advisory work. Socialized in this way, farm advisory have become advisory partnership characterized by considerable effectiveness. In the years 1991-1999 in each of the 49 provinces there was one Province Advisory Center. After 1999, with the introduction of the new, three-level administrative division of the country, there have been changes in the organization of agricultural advisory. On average, in every new province there were three former Province Advisory Centers (WODR). On 2 January 1999 the National Advisory Centre for Agriculture and Rural Development based in Brwinów near Warsaw and directly subordinated to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development was founded and functioned simultaneously with the agricultural advisory centers. This center was established through the combination of Advice and Education Center for Agriculture in Poznań, the National Center for Agricultural Education in Brwinów near Warsaw and six Agricultural Advisory Centres in Barzkowice, Wrocław, Przysiek near Toruń, Stare Pole, Poświętne near Płońsk and Radom.

These changes necessitated the resumption of work on the act of law, which would clear the situation of agricultural advisory both legally and organizationally. Consequently, since 1 January 2005 by Act of 22 October 2004 on agricultural advisory units the new organization, objectives and rules of operation for advisory bodies were provided. Under the existing law the advisory units list (Act of 22 October 2004 on the agricultural advisory units. Coll. Laws No. 251, item. 2507):

- Agricultural Advisory Centre, based in Brwinów (subject to the minister responsible for rural development)
- 16 province advisory centers whose territorial scope of activity covers the area of the province with jurisdiction over the location for this facility (subject to the local Marshal of the province²).

The evaluation of the changes implemented in recent years, suggests that the tasks imposed on the advisory centers and expectations arising from the economic transformation of agriculture and rural areas and integration with the EU on the one hand, and the conditions for their fulfillment

² According to the Act prepared by the Ministry of the Interior and Administration (MSWiA) and approved by the Sejm, 16 provincial centers for agricultural advisory services has been transferred, with effect from 1 August 2009, to the provincial Assemblies. Only the Central Advisory Centre in Brwinów was left under direct supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. This is an experiment with no precedence in Europe. In no country of the European Union so far the management of advisory bodies was handed over to local self-governments. Advisory centers are subject to the state government or the agricultural self-government.

(the general and professional competence of farmers, their readiness undertake entrepreneurial and innovative activities) on the other hand, do not guarantee high efficiency of their operations. From the perspective of farmers, their participation in actions arising for example from programs such as agri-environmental program, accounting, business development and related EU assistance programs will generate many new and complex problems. To resolve them farmers will require assistance from farm advisers. In order to meet these demands further substantial and deliberately introduced changes in the farm advisory system will have to be made.

The agricultural advisory is being increasingly supported by such institutions as the Chambers of Agriculture, science and research institutes, universities, trade groups, food industry (as a part of vertical integration with suppliers of raw materials), companies dealing with market research, distribution of production or private companies engaged in professional advisory. However, commercial advisory companies are primarily focused on providing advice in the areas for which there is a great demand and for which a client is ready to pay. Consequently, a new farm advisory system is gradually emerging. This new system will consist of various complementary institutions (state, local, private, etc.), working in agriculture or in the rural environment which will vary in terms of funding [Parzonko 2008].

Challenges for the modern agricultural advisory

Changes in advisory systems and the increasing need to link agricultural advisory with the whole system of agricultural knowledge result from present conditions and transformations in agriculture and in rural areas. The basic list of changes include: globalization, trade liberalization and the resulting intensifying competition, the reduction in the number of farmers, the increase in non-productive activities undertaken by rural population and sustainable development accentuating environmental protection and rational management of resources.

The need to develop advisory services results from the reform of common agricultural policy and the common rural development policy. The budget for the support for rural development from structural funds for 2007-2013 allocates finance for agricultural advisory services. The document „Strategy for Rural Development and Agriculture, 2007-2013” in Goal 2 „Improving the competitiveness of agriculture” defines Action 2.2.2 „Development of expert advice.” The proposed new directions for the development of Polish agricultural advisory, which complement existing advisory operations for farmers and rural residents, concentrate primarily on preparing farmers for integration with the European Union, the absorption of EU funds and national support, developing skills and knowledge in modern management and use of standards of production and environmental protection. In the face of a very difficult economic situation of Polish agriculture it is necessary to increase the involvement of advisory support in the process of structural change. The overriding objective of agricultural advisory services in the period 2007-2013 is the profitability of each project and support for activities that contribute to job creation and consequently reduce the areas of rural poverty. The need for specialized advisory services results from the changes in the structure of production and food processing as well as the evolution of agrarian structure of Polish agriculture.

Since the expectations of advisory are different, depending on the nature and size of the farm, its degree of specialization and the educational level of the farmer, the Action 2.2.2 „Development of expert advice” will be aimed at defined target groups. For each group relevant problem areas will be defined:

- farms that do not meet the requirements for minimum economic power (the use of social protection, increasing the economic strength of the farm, combining farming with another form of employment, providing assistance for young farmers, career guidance supporting farmers who wish to retrain in order to start non-agricultural businesses),
- medium-sized holdings with a stable economic position (stabilization of income, investments and support of producer groups, multi-specialty development or specialized production),
- large-scale holdings with leading specialty farm production (marketing management, manufacturing, investment, legal protection, trade, audit).

In the near future advisory policy will focus mainly on providing support for rural population in the following areas: farm management, standards for public health, animal and plant health, animal welfare, food quality standards, the application of good agricultural practice with regard to environmental protection and organic production methods. In order to enhance the effectiveness of advisory services it will also be necessary to develop advisory information system for farmers using the intranet and the Internet.

What requirements should the modern system of agricultural advisory services meet? To answer this question one should repeat in tune with both the academics and practitioners that the

primary goal of advisory services should be meeting the needs of the clients, that is, the participants of the system. In order for this aim to be implemented more efficiently closer relations should be established between science and agricultural advisory which should then translate into higher efficiency of advice, a fuller understanding of the needs for research and development, modern technology and more efficient management of agricultural holdings, taking into account the market requirements. The smooth functioning of the farm advisory system will also depend on the degree of commercialization (the transfer of certain costs of services to customers.) Advisory services will develop in the future according to demand rather than supply and farmers will refer to these institutions which meet their needs best, not necessarily at the lowest price.

Conclusion

The need to improve the advisory system is a natural phenomenon. This is due to its dynamic nature, i.e. adjusting its organizational structures, programs, methods and means to changing conditions on farms and the accompanying changes in the expectations and life needs of farm families. Farmers expect the government advisory system to be organizationally efficient, financially viable, employing professional staff who can improve their qualifications and are equipped with appropriate skills. Today's advisory should primarily provide: technical assistance in completing applications, access to reliable information and technological innovations, opportunities to discuss controversial issues, help in determining the direction of development of an individual farm, etc. These observations indicate the necessity to implement many further significant changes designed to serve the creation of a modern system of agricultural advisory services in Poland.

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Streszczenie

Zarówno organizacja doradztwa rolniczego, jak i zakres realizowanych przezeń zadań zmieniają się w zależności od sytuacji politycznej kraju, panującej koniunktury rynkowej i potrzeb odbiorców porad. Podstawowym zadaniem doradztwa rolniczego jest wspieranie ludności wiejskiej w pokonywaniu ich problemów i dostosowaniu do istniejących warunków gospodarczych. Zmianie ulegają podstawowe kierunki działań doradztwa. Wyraźnie zaznacza się tendencja odchodzenia od typowego doradztwa rolniczego w kierunku doradztwa wiejskiego. W znacznym stopniu jest to efekt wielofunkcyjnego rozwoju wsi oraz potrzeby dostosowania się polskiego rolnictwa do wymogów obowiązujących w Unii Europejskiej. W opracowaniu przedstawiono zarys historyczny doradztwa rolniczego, ze szczególnym wskazaniem na ostatni okres, w którym kształtował się współczesny system doradztwa rolniczego. Zaprezentowano także nowe obszary problemowe, których potrzeba realizacji wymusi kolejne zmiany w organizacji doradztwa rolniczego w Polsce.

Corresponding address:

Dr inż. Anna J. Parzonko
 Warsaw University of Life Science – SGGW
 Department of Education Economics, Communication and Counselling
 Nowoursynowska Str. 166
 02-787 Warszawa, Poland
 tel. +48 22 593 41 62
 e-mail: anna_parzonko@sggw.pl