

Position on the European response to the Covid-19 pandemic

The current Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting crisis response all over Europe has illustrated the importance of ensuring food security in every EU member state. The closing of outside and well as internal borders within Europe has caused major problems with the availability of different supplies in grocery stores and supermarkets thus raising the importance of domestic produce and the vital role that agricultural primary production plays in ensuring this food security. Consequently, it is in the best interests of every member state as well as the European commission to a larger extent to ensure that agricultural production will continue without interruptions regardless of the situation in the individual member state. It is the firm belief of us the undersigned presidents of European rural advisory service networks that advisory and extension services play a crucial role in ensuring the continuity of agricultural production. Thus, the availability of services and the ability for advisors to aid farmers need to be ensured even in exceptional times such as these where social distancing is essential. It is therefore necessary to classify rural advisory work as system critical services to ensure food security at EU and member-state level.

The way this availability of advice can be achieved is through modern digital tools enabling the advisor to contact and work with the farmers online without having to physically travel to the farms and risk spreading viruses such as the Covid-19. The current crisis has, however, clearly illustrated that there currently are multiple obstacles in the way of servicing farmers online, the major two being

- There are legislative barriers in several European countries essentially preventing advisory services from being provided online using modern digital tools such as:
 - Organizations have been forced to deny the use of modern online meeting applications such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams etc. or widely used applications such as WhatsApp. Thereby effectively preventing large scale online service provision in situations where simple telephone conversations are not sufficient.
- It is essential for the advisory services to be able to provide strong support for the farmers to enhance their skills of using modern digital communication methods. Farmers should also be encouraged to use the available tools more extensively in accordance with their needs.

It is imperative that immediate steps are taken on the European level to alleviate these barriers hindering the adoption of modern tools and methodologies in advisory service provision. Solutions do exist within European countries, but so far various barriers have prevented spreading these best practices around Europe. This issue needs to be addressed swiftly through policy as well as the targeting of funding schemes. We all need to work towards a future Europe where we have common standards guiding the development of digital tools for agriculture and a common policy framework supporting the spreading of best practices throughout Europe. Today this sharing is too reliant on individual relationships between organizations and every so often the development of common tools is hindered by legislative or individual member state policy. There are currently some on-going initiatives to tackle these issues in projects such as FAIRShare, i2Connect and WiseFarmer, it is of utmost importance that similar initiatives are supported in the future as well.

Sincerely,



Jussi Juhola
President
EUFRAS



Florian Herzog
President
IALB



Igor Hrovatic
President
SEASN