

The Foundation of the European Forum for Agricultural and Rural Advisory Services (EUFRAS), a Milestone in the Recent History of European Rural Extension

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In the history of agricultural innovation support in Europe the formation of an organisation of extension services by public and private funded, large and small, service and development oriented extension service providers is significant. This occurred at a time when the EU was launching a major new initiative to support agricultural innovation (EIP) focused on increased technology adoption and increasing its funding of research and development. EUFRAS is in effect a thematic network which has self-started without EU funding and is a significant innovation. This is a short history so far but is a positive one for the future of regional, national and international co-operation, in this paper we would like to report some of the story so far.

Introduction

The setting up of a new organisation (EUFRAS) as a network of agricultural advisers/extension agents across different European regions and countries has been achieved. There is a very active global representative body for advisory services (GFRAS) with subgroups set up in other continents. This organisation has been very successful in getting funding for the development, delivery and evaluation of Agricultural and rural advisory systems. EUFRAS is the first European organisation of farm advisory services and is affiliated to GFRAS.

Background

We estimate that there are 40,000 professionally qualified advisers who work in various consultancies and advisory services in Europe. The exact number is difficult to quantify as there is huge diversity of public and private organisations and also diversity of activities. The agricultural adviser definition is broadly based on those who provide front line advisory, rural and extension services to farmers, growers and forestry owners. In the context of some 40 million diverse but mainly relatively small family farms in Europe this estimate of agricultural adviser numbers may be quite conservative.

European extension services are caught between the need to service the farms schemes (Common Agricultural Policy subsidies, Rural Development Programmes and Farm Advisory Systems) and administrative service demands (Income Tax, legal etc.) and the often neglected need for innovation and development support. For those involved in extension aspects of innovation support there is distinction between information provision and the promotion of use of information for action. The understanding of how to best facilitate knowledge transfer across a diverse population within an industry is important. The deliberate interventions that achieve change and the adoption of new practices are at the forefront of strategies to ensure that an industry like agriculture continues to improve its competitiveness and sustainability.

In the past the main stream of advisors didn't cross cultural and language borders for learning and exchange of experience. Their main domain of intervention was the farming community of their home region. The bigger the country the more they were concentrated on home-made knowledge. The smaller and isolated the more there was a need to look abroad. EUFRAS is an innovation because it facilitates these co-learning processes in the European context for all of them as an option and compensates reduced regional and national facilities for capacity building and innovation facing EU-policy and global challenges for innovation.

Storytelling about EUFRAS

If we want to understand why EUFRAS exists and how the key players cooperate, “we have to dig deeper into the analysis with storytelling. For gaining insight in the way partners think about what is happening now, it is important to collect stories. This is different from a report, summarising objectives, means, results and impact. Reporters' stories, are telling how it started, what happened after the first initiative, and how far the initiative is now? Reporters ask questions about what is happening and why. Where there is room for improvement. The answers given by the actors themselves will inspire more than reports for lessons to learn and approaches that appear to work, build a professional network to keep on learning together, and hopefully also to generate agency: a network that is capable of influencing conditions in the different regions for creating a conducive environment for innovating farmers.”
(Storytelling-Memo of AgriSPIN thematic network, from Eelke Wielinga, 18-3-2015)

Why was EUFRAS needed?

This EUFRAS foundation organisation is clearly a response to the need for leadership in how innovation would be supported in future.

All too often in the past policy makers in the EU and in national governments assumed that agricultural innovation was all about research projects and direct grant aid to farmers. At stakeholder consultative meeting where researchers, NGO's, ministries and farmers discuss the development needy and challenges of the industry, advisers are often not present or underrepresented. This led to situations where advisers were being talked about by not having an opportunity to input.

Advisory methodologies have been changing and the absence of a healthy network where best practice, structure organisation could be discussed and shared for mutual benefit among advisers and organisations presented a serious disadvantage. The scale of this was obvious when advisers visited other countries but without a network organisation one off visits have achieved little.

While agricultural graduates were well trained in technology, science and business competencies many universities did little to educate graduates in extension science and less in the development of the skill needed for effective delivery of extension and education programmes.

Who took the initiative, and why?

The association of German speaking advisory services International Academy of Rural Advisers (IALB) which has existed for many years and has been successful in

supporting networks of public and private advisors and consultants in these countries. Supports include professional training in advisory methods and management “Certificate for European Consultants in Rural Areas” (CECRA). However this organisation wished to continue its work within the German language family and additionally be part of a bigger European organisation. 1961 German speaking advisors for the first time officially crossed borders and exchanged experiences with colleagues in Austria, Switzerland. Only little language barriers and cultural differences made it easy to realise regular meetings and congresses. EU-Policy for agriculture was just born and needed a first common answer. Most of the innovation was technical. They established IALB, Internationale Akademie land- und hauswirtschaftlicher Berater. As an association organised by public and semi-public advisors themselves they tried to realise co-learning, independent of their home institutions. The core group of initiators has been participants at Wageningen University to study methodology for rural advisors with Prof. van den Ban since the early sixties. They have been the pioneers to cross borders. Prof. van den Ban was the hero of this first pilot phase. Every year these congresses showed best practise in another German speaking region including the direct feedback of colleagues coming Austria, Switzerland, South Tyrol in Italy, the Netherlands and western German regions. Additionally the so-called IALB-seminar was established. Young advisors were given the chance for training on-the-job cross-border with experienced colleagues under different working conditions for some weeks, in combination with a follow-up group-feedback and preparation of an own advisory project to be realised at home. More and more colleagues from neighbourhood countries have been interested but the German language was the main barrier which hasn't been crossed until 2001 when after 40 years the west Hungarian university in Mosonmagyaróvár was involved to co-organize an IALB congress. 20. Juni 2003 at the IALB-Congress in Oldenburg, northern Germany, and Prof. Volker Hoffmann from Hohenheim University reminded the community of 250 rural advisors from 15 countries to establish their own association because it needs coherence and high performance to be respected as a profession. For nearly 10 years his message was not transcribed. Meanwhile costs for these events increased, translation was needed and the congress and seminar hosting rural advisory services only have been able to finance it with EU support. Interreg3c offered this option to realise a first type of thematic network. It was called RENE the first temporary Rural Extension Network in Europe under a perspective for regional development with 19 partners from 13 countries. In the years 2003-2006 within RENE 9 Workshops, 4 Seminars, 4 conferences, 8 Up-date Meetings, 6 Seminars especially for colleagues from new member states, Policy Dialogue, study visits and excursions have been realised. In total there have been 3'500 participants in 59 events coming from more than 50 Regions in Europe for co-learning and exchange of experience. Since this time many advisors appreciated this cross-border-co-learning together with colleagues. With translation the language and the cultural border was easier to cross, a real added value for Europe. After 2006 when EU-funding was finished there was a risk to fall apart again into the different European language families because translation was no more able to be financed and English as a common language was not yet accepted to be established in the advisors' community of continental Europe as it happened in the agriculture researchers' community since a long time. Only a little bilingual minority of advisors continued to deepen this experience and tried to establish a broader and new project in Interreg 4c called “REDI, European rural economy diversification network”. Unfortunately rural issues were no more favorites under EU-structural funding for regional development of this

generation. The proposal was not successful. Meanwhile since 2006 the European Union insisted to establish rural advisory services at least to facilitate cross compliance conditionality for farming in all member states. This was the first time advisory services have been mentioned as necessary for better implementing common agriculture policy and good farming practice in Europe. It was underlined again 2009 by the EU evaluation report on rural advisory services linked to cross compliance where a high performance of rural advisory services has been identified as indicator of success for this part of EU policy but also for good farming practice. More potential for a higher rate of innovation in agriculture was recommended in combination with a Europe wide coverage of rural advisory services also for small holders and part-time farmers. In parallel IALB in cooperation with the informal network of chambers of agriculture in Europe prepared several position papers and 3 congresses in Brussels with EU-policy recommendations and best practice examples how to fulfill better not only this job as an advisor but also to combine it with more innovation in agriculture in the years 2007-2012. They were highly estimated by EU policy makers because it fits in their preparation for the new CAP (common agriculture policy) period 2013-2020. Since 2013 to support rural advisory services for the first time is a main stream option in EU structural funding for rural development. Additionally unfavorable results of the evaluation of the last EU-research funding period in 2010 insisted to reform also the support system for agriculture research because of insufficient relation between research and practice. Rural advisors have been identified as one of the key drivers for upgrading. The EU-Commission working group on AKIS, the agriculture knowledge and innovation systems development group of SCAR, the standing committee of agriculture research started to develop its reports for this reform since 2011. This was the starting point of EIP, the European innovation partnership which became main stream policy since 2013. Advisory services have been part of this reform process since the beginning but without being structured as an organisation in both policies on the European level but only with representatives coming from the national or regional level. “We need a spokesman of rural advisors in Europe” this was the message of Dacian Cioloş, EU-Commissioner for agriculture in these days. “You have to establish an association to better counterbalance other groups in the civil society” was the recommendation of some heads of unit in DG Agri in 2011. You have to establish your own association to be respected as a profession was the nearly forgotten message of Prof. Hoffmann in 2003. “If we don’t do it now, we will never do it” was the conclusion of Prof. Josef Kania 2012 from Krakow University in Poland. The time was ripe to act.

Which other actors got involved?

A little bilingual minority of advisors continued to deepen their cross-border co-learning experience, made in RENE and elsewhere, established an informal preparation group for EUFRAS without having this name already. Most of these activities already informally started in 7/2011 at IALB 50Th anniversary congress in Landshut, continued at the 2nd GFRAS congress in Nairobi, Kenya 11/2011 and in an IALB working group on international contacts since 2/2012 under the perspective to adjust rural extension services to the new EU rural development policy option. It has been influenced by the IALB position paper with policy recommendation about rural advisory services.

The heroes of these early days of EUFRAS inception period have been Erich

Waldmeier, AGRIDEA, the advisors' service from Switzerland and head of the IALB- group in charge for international contacts with some colleagues: Edda Albers, president of IALB in these days from Lower Saxony's Chamber of Agriculture, Germany; Uroš Zgonec from the Slovenian Chambers of Agriculture, Michael Kügler, VLK, the German Chambers' of Agriculture association, Brussels office, Belgium; Mārtiņš Cimermanis and Edgars Linde from LRATC, Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre; Henrik Fichtner, SMUL, the coordinator for rural advisory services in the Saxon ministry, Germany; Karolin Reisinger, Janos Cser and András Vér from the west Hungarian University of Mosonmagyaróvár; Bernhard Jansen, EkoConnect, a NGO working for organic farming promotion in eastern Europe; Marek Karlowsky, CSB, Poland; Tom Kelly, Teagasc, the Irish advisory service; Sylvain Sturel, APCA, the French Chambers of Agriculture association; Thomas Kitt, SMUL, Germany; Anna Terlecka from the regional government of Lower Silesia, Poland; Anton Stöckli, FOAG, Switzerland; Prof. Josef Kania from Krakow university, Poland; Gediminas Radzevicius, KPVK, Lithuania; Inge van Oost from the EIP unit of the European Commission, Brussels; Manfred Ehlers, LLH the Hessian advisory service and host of CECRA project group, Germany; Berry Caslin, Teagasc, Ireland; Franz Forstner from Austrian Chambers of Agriculture; Stefan Walder, Province of South Tyrol, Italy; Kristin Davis and Lorenz Schwarz from GFRAS, the global forum of rural advisory services, hosted by AGRIDEA and a permanent admonishers since 2011 to show to European that they will be the last continent without a continental association of rural advisors. GFRAS also was the eponym for EUFRAS nomination.

The first official step Feb 2013

Workshop in Wroclaw, Lower Silesia, Poland: This workshop meeting was hosted by the regional government of Saxony and Lower Silesia, Poland, thanks to good informal relations of colleagues from both sides. The conceptualisation and facilitation of the workshop was carried out by Pablo Asensio from the Bavarian State Leadership Academy. It focused on the potential for a European association of advisory services. During the workshop different aspects of a proposed body were discussed. Particularly, several aims of forming EUFRAS were raised – as strengthen rural advisory services, forming an open space for exchange opinions, help farmers and other rural actors to face new challenges. At the same time providing voice of European advisory services to policy makers and other stakeholders (eg. EU; global, private sector, farmers organisations) has been set as an important task, especially at time when new challenges for advisors are foreseen associated to the European Innovation Partnership activities. The huge potential of strengthening rural advisory services through collaboration has been emphasised. Solutions to key advisory problems, enhance knowledge, improve advisory skills and methods, education for advisors, formulating advisors needs for research are just part of the potential challenges that can be steered using EUFRAS. The whole initiative was strongly supported by the EU-Commission, unit innovation in DG Agri, Martin Scheele and Inge van Oost who presented the EU expectations and the EIP-initiative for innovation several times.

While many at this meeting were supportive of the proposal it was felt that EUFRAS should be set up within the next 12 months or the opportunity would be lost.

The Proposal:

To establish a European Association of Farm and Rural Advisory Services EUFRAS at the meeting the scope of the organisation was discussed

- Common mandate to assist farmers and rural dwellers
- Importance of networking
- Opportunities for collaboration
- The degree to which duplication can be reduced or eliminated
- Potential for better interaction with research
- Potential to influence common policy issues
- To contribute to the development of better advisory services in Europe and outside

The meeting had a broad representation for Ministry staff, consultancy firms, state and regional bodies and organisations.

It was agreed to formulate a proposal for EUFRAS as a European Association

- A concept document to be elaborated
- A structure proposed (governance, Statues etc.)
- A source of financing
- A promotion plan

It was agreed that these would be brought to an advanced stage and discussed at the Advisory Conference in Dublin in June 2013.

The Ambition

This initial workshop was very open and inclusive with a modest level of expectation but quickly advanced to an agreed focus the setting up a formal legal structure. A proposal to set up a registered company in Latvian law followed this workshop. It was very important that the focus was on the impact that this organisation could have on the end users of extension services the farmers.

The Second Step June 2013

The preparation group undertook to prepare and present a joint concept paper to delegates at a joint Teagasc, University College Dublin conference organised as an EUFRAS event. There was a discussion facilitated by Michael Kuegler. This enabled the proposal to be articulated and debated totally positive with a wider audience of so many potential members that a foundation event was planned for September to coincide with the GFRAS annual conference in Berlin. This was an important event in that it set a timeline for action and set the scene for work which had to be done so that the foundation meeting could proceed.

The Third Step – Foundation Meeting Berlin September 23rd 2013

Representatives of agricultural and rural advisory services from 20 European countries founded EUFRAS, the European Forum for Agricultural and Rural Advisory Services, in Berlin on Monday, September 23.

The founding members were the International Academy for Agriculture and Home Economics Advisors (IALB - GER, AU, CH, IT), the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre, TEAGASC (Ireland), AGRIDEA (CH), EkoConnect e.V. (GER), the Knowledge Centre for Agriculture, as of 2015 named SEGES (DK), MEDSOFTORG Ltd. (HU), Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia, Agro Information Centre of Azerbaijan, National Agricultural Advisory Service of Bulgaria, die University of Western Hungary - Institute for Consultancy and Training and the Association for farmers' rights defence (Georgia).

In the founding meeting following persons were elected to the board: Pablo Asensio (IALB), Eva Gleerup (Knowledge Centre for Agriculture, as of 2015 named SEGES, Denmark), Edgars Linde, LRATC (Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre), Michael Kügler, VLK (Association of the German Agricultural Chambers) and Dr. Tom Kelly (TEAGASC Ireland). The board elected Dr. Tom Kelly, Director of Knowledge Transfer at TEAGASC chairman. Vice chairman is Edgars Linde from the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre.

Founding EUFRAS took place as side event during the global annual meeting of GFRAS 22.-26th September 2013 in Berlin. Kristin Davis, GFRAS chair, welcomed EUFRAS as “the youngest child in the GFRAS family”. EUFRAS was now formally part of the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services, GFRAS. Additionally Laimdota Straujuma, today Prime minister, in these days minister of agriculture and former director of the Latvian rural advisory service offered a patronage for EUFRAS in Latvia.

Difficulties encountered

One of the major difficulties was the lack of a secretariat and admin support. With a diverse and geographic spread, there was a need to set up a temporary web site and secretariat so as to promote and co-ordinate activity. The provision of support for the secretariat of EUFRAS from the Latvian Ministry through LLKC and was crucial. The early provision of a basic EUFRAS web page set up by Teagasc helped in communications.

In the preparation of legal status of EUFRAS statutes were prepared in Latvian and in English in addition a constitution was prepared to reflect the official policies of EUFRAS. This was a major undertaking, led by Edgars Linde (LLKC) who must be acknowledged for the work and attention to detail need to meet all the legal requirements and foresee difficulties that might arise in future.

The geographic spread of the five board members meant that face to face meetings were not feasible; the solution was regular board meetings by phone conference. These were possible even though participants were located in 3 different time zones.

The board while encouraging membership are clear that members must align with the overall mission of EUFRAS; *“to improve quality, effectiveness and efficiency of agricultural and rural advisors’ work aimed at supporting farming families, farmers local groups agricultural organisations and individuals involved in agricultural and rural development and addressing of the current and emerging problems (economic, environmental and social);”*

No budget and official structure was available to establish EUFRAS, most of the preparation work was done voluntary by the interested potential members. After founding EUFRAS as is a non-profit organisation it was agreed that funds would be generated as follows:

- Annual income from the member fees.
- EUFRAS will search for donors who support with institutional support.
- The association will apply for project funding and grants to fund specific activities.

Member fees should reflect the interest and the financial power of a member. The member fees will be determined from the general assembly of EUFRAS.

Achievements to Date

In the first one and a half years the number of EUFRAS members has doubled. The biggest accesses have been the French (APCA) and the German chambers association (VLK) with together about 9000 employees. There are now 25 members who form a representative network of organisations with an influence directly or indirectly on an estimated 15,000 advisers and on EU-policy on the other side.

EUFRAS is partner both directly and indirectly in EU-Horizon 2020 and other competitive project calls and has a particular interest in the establishment of new thematic networks and multi-actor projects. The most promising and challenging is AgriSPIN with 5 EUFRAS members as partners. The overall goal of AgriSPIN is to systematically explore innovation intermediaries' practices and support services in a diversity of European regions, a core issue of all EUFRAS members. In 5 other more technical thematic networks and multi-actor-projects of Horizon 2020 EUFRAS and its members are involved. EU-wide knowledge transfer and exchange of experience now is no more informal and by accident by structured and based on EU-project support.

Parallel EUFRAS board-members are asked to contribute to several EU-Commission working groups, with a focus on EIP, the SCAR-SWG-AKIS (standing committee on agriculture research-strategic working group on agriculture knowledge systems development) and the rural development assembly.

While these are key measures of success there is also a strong support for regional networks of advisory service providers, particularly in Eastern Europe. For example recent workshop events organised in Baltic and Balkan regions with EUFRAS involvement are promising.

The value of networks is difficult to define and measure, it noticeable the increased information flows mostly by email from EUFRAS members and involvement of advisory organisations in new initiatives.

The development of CECRA towards a European training and certification programme in extension method for practicing advisers is a good example. This programme has been available only to German speaking members of IALB. This is now a project to expand CECRA to wider membership through EUFRAS with strong commitments to make this programme available in all languages.

Over the next 5 years EUFRAS will

- Focus on identified areas of weakness in the application of technology or lack of development on farms. Technologies and practices differ in the ease of adoption and therefore experience is needed in how to achieve adoption that is lasting.
- Establish strong networks of expertise. The integration of research, advisory and training programmes is important. A detailed network analysis is needed to show strong and weak connections between the key stakeholders. The knowledge network may be improved through joint industry programmes, formal alliances and MOU's, much more work can be done to improve the network for agricultural knowledge exchange.
- Provide physical and virtual platforms for thematic networks, exchange on rural advisory services' issues and cooperation in EUFRAS conferences, meetings, projects and workshops and via the EUFRAS homepage.
- Promote co-ordinated, holistic programmes ensuring that resource inputs are optimised to get new technologies adopted by farmers. The innovation challenge is a multi-stakeholder process; it may involve new products, new processes, new social systems and organisation change. In looking at the role of public or private extension services there is a need for a new style innovation intermediary where extension services personnel are co-ordinators and facilitators of knowledge flow in better co-ordinated and branded initiatives.
- Establish stakeholder buy-in and contribution to clear attainable goals, delivery and evaluation. The commitment of all stakeholders is important in the innovation support process; this commitment can be measured by their contribution to funding, direct involvement and participation in activities. These joint programme arrangements must have clear attainable goals, a holistic approach. The alignment and agreement of goals at the outset is most important. As synergies become apparent, trust improves and programmes are renewed, private funding is based on the value shown and pressure to evolve the programme and continuously improve ensures its longevity.
- Maintain the adviser-farmer relationship which is built on independence, quality of service, trust and the perceived value of advice in making business decisions. The need to adapt advice for the individuality of every farm, farm system, family situation and community; general advice is of little use. Combinations of independent one to one contact with an adviser and the network of other farmers in discussion groups provide a valuable developmental support.
- Influence the practical application of new research in profitable farm systems on demonstration farms. The shift from individual component advice to move integrated farm systems advice is important. The use of farmer operated demonstration farms to show the sustained benefit of new systems and technologies is powerful. The flow of information and data from these farms is

crucial and the contextualised use of this data by advisers in benchmarking progress is effective in supporting change. Wider stakeholder input and regular media reporting support this intensive advisory activity, improving impact.

- Education of Professionals to better facilitate knowledge transfer, this involves both the direct and indirect route. Targeting of advisory programmes at the wider population of rural professional and the public increases the efficiency of knowledge transfer and stimulates change amongst farmers. The skills and competencies for advisers can be improved and group facilitation and ICT are huge areas of importance. Other areas such as conflict resolution, filling advocacy roles were also important. The area which requires on-going research is in understanding the effectiveness of innovation support. EUFRAS and its member organisations must show leadership and partner with Education bodies, universities and professional associations.
- Using the farmers own data to support and monitor improvement. The development and use of new ICT provide that enable the sharing of data and benchmarking of financial and physical performance is the basis of better advice and decision making. There are issues regarding the automated flow of data to the farmer and adviser in easy to use report formats.

The Opportunity of EU support.

The commitment of the EU to supporting innovation in Agriculture is a fantastic opportunity for EUFRAS and European extension services to prove their worth. The 2015 CAP has two significant elements which will address the issue technology gaps between research and farm practice as part of the Rural Development Programme.

- (a) Support for an expanded Farm Advisory System (FAS), This will address productivity and efficiency in addition to advice on cross compliance
- (b) Support for innovative actions that support improved transfer of new technology and knowledge from research into best practice delivering a more sustainable and competitive agriculture. This support will take the form of a European Innovation Partnership for agricultural productivity and sustainability. (EIP)

The additional funds under the rural development measure Pillar II of CAP will be used to fund knowledge transfer initiatives and operation groups which can link with the EIP networks and support cost effective applied research and knowledge transfer initiatives.

Conclusion so far

“History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.” Winston S. Churchill. The story of EUFRAS from the authors’ perspective represents a move from one of isolation and reactivity to one of co-operation and proactivity. Others who look at EUFRAS may not be so kind.

The challenge EUFRAS organisations and for all advisers is to work in a complex knowledge system, deal with complex technologies and a diversity of stakeholders and farmers and always present information to the user which is practical, relevant

and easy to implement. A good working relationship is the passport to influencing decisions in the development of the farm. The interpretation of new information from different sources by farmers is essential and the adviser's ability to broker/facilitate better farmer understanding is key to adoption. It is a very good start that advisers from 24 different organisations are meeting and sharing ideas, skills and knowledge. In future let's hope that more will join and benefit from EUFRAS.