EXPERTISE BROKERAGE REGIONAL HUBS AS INTERFACE FOR ADVICE, SUPPORT AND CONSULTANCY FOR RURAL AREA

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Abstract: *The expertise brokerage hubs are interface structures articulated as network that identify, quantify, and facilitate the expert interventions meant to contribute at problem-solving and answering the needs of the rural actors and general population. The proposed structures have a regional distribution in complete synchronisation with the regional specificity beyond the administrative limits of the county, region or macroregion. Technically, the hubs are fully equipped to answer technical or logistic needs for intervention in the field or remote operating laboratory and IT hardware and infrastructure. The provided services include counselling, supporting, expertise brokerage, consultancy, training and facilitating knowledge and innovation transfer. Basically, the hubs are answering the needs of intermediation and transport of expertise required by farmers and rural actors ensuring the selection and involvement of the highest-level expertise in the respective fields or domains overpassing past or present administrative or procedural barriers. The regional operation of the hubs develops on the LAG network structure and grows by the addition of other associative structures active in the fields of social, environment or community development. The construction of the network is proposed and participatory bottom-up construction to feed the future AKIS consolidation for the upcoming programming period.*

Key words*: rural development, LAGs, LEADER, expertise brokerage hubs, AKIS*

INTRODUCTION

Starting from the existing gap between the needs and problems on the Romanian rural area [13, 1] and the existing knowledge, innovation, and expertise, currently flowing relatively free the question of pairing the problems with their solutions appears obvious yet nothing happens in this direction. EU public policies at the end of the decision-making part of this environment, followed closely by the national regulatory framework, uses structures such as the Knowledge and Competence Centres to feed their needs to base the decisions [6].

At the other end of the chain, the rural communities in Romania are consistently distant from the respective content, although not meant for their use, still of high interest and potential contributions to the topics. As Randers mentions in Knowledge brokerage for Sustainable Development, The Limits to Growth from 1972 criticised the inability to clearly indicate the conflict between the growth and the available resources while the decision makers at policy level were rather focusing on predictions than better understanding the properties of the system [11].

Knowledge, and particularly the new knowledge, needs to be transported and interfaced to the end users in order to achieve its initial purpose. Reaching a substantially large public remains an attribute of the information and dissemination activities, yet often in rural areas and moreover in the remote ones, the respective contents are failing to penetrate to the general public and even less to the concerned rural actors. The relationship between knowledge, information and data and the path of converting of data to information

and the transformation of information into knowledge by understanding patters leads further to wisdom by understanding the principles as described by Bellinger et al. [7].

One way of bridging the generators of knowledge and the designated users is to use the knowledge brokerage and Hellstrom rightly stresses the importance of pairing the right approach to the existing situation [5]. McKinsey highlights the importance of the initial approach and the right approach as synchronised with the level of effective brokering as related to the complexity of the matter [12].

The integration of the open innovation impacts the product development as organisations are using smart Web-based ways to couple the solvers with the seekers [8]. The brokerage as process in the case of knowledge and problem-solving environments can be approached effectively by engaging as full-service brokers as the other types are far from suitable to the targeted system and end-users [17]. The brokerage role for the further-introduced model fits to the Liaison type of Karner et al. [10] where the knowledge brokerage goes across different groups while the brokers belong to none of them.

Supporting a system modelled for these purposes calls for the remarks of Barnard cited by Cummings et al. [2] where the brokerage remains the support system while the knowledge and information requires continuity in funding: "Investments in knowledge and information need to be seen in the same way as investments in clean water systems, electricity supply grids or urban transport networks. The different types of knowledge are linked by the brokers at grassroots level while the other development actors are linking between local knowledge and scientific knowledge [2].

The knowledge brokers are founding links and networks and are constantly updated with the progress in their line of work emerging into valuable subject experts highly credible [9]. Brokers cannot and should not play only simple roles in information and communication nor they can lobby or advocate any interests. Under the current circumstance "knowledge brokers can effectively use their skills to redistribute power in ways that democratize knowledge" as Dhewa says [4].

When local knowledge is marginalized while attempting to solve the structural gaps the knowledge brokering practice alone cannot be the answer or the solution, while the systematic changes could [14]. Knowledge and knowledge application regarded as content and process coupled with the emergence of knowledge facilitators generates practical knowledge for action that is produced and shared in a modelled framework [15]. The distance, distribution, absorptive capacity, and knowledge brokerage of the system's innovative partners can lead to underuse of capacities and impact over the systems' outputs [16].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The method employed in this paper is based on system design and institutional building projections supported by the complete series of analysis (GAP, SWOT, PEST, etc) originating in the programming framework for the time period 2007-2020 in the field of agriculture, rural and regional development, with accent on the territorial development and the sustainability of the balanced growth.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The need for advice of farmers in Romania is coherently underlined in the proposal for amending public policies by CRPE in 2019 [3]. In this respect, citing an earlier approach by the IRES in 2010, the three main areas of intervention towards agricultural consultancy remain: support for accessing public co-financing from the NDRP, technical advice in plant and animal production, and advice on legal, cadastre, feasibility studies, marketing, management, training, etc. A 2013 Ministry of Agriculture survey (146 small

farmers in 11 counties) indicates that "their options are quite divided between 'official' and accredited sources – Agricultural Chambers, the town hall agronomist and diffuse sources, which provide advice of questionable quality – newspapers, media, etc." The need and obligation, as an explicit requirement, to develop and operationalise a functioning and institutionalised AKIS, as an EU Member State, builds the basis for overcoming current estimates that a public system consultant serves on average more than 12,000 farmers and moves towards the European average level of 100 farmers.

In terms of support services for the rural economy, excluding agriculture, the situation can be characterised by their quasi-absence. The essential needs are consistently affected by the level and quality of the communications and transport infrastructure, access to knowledge and expertise, information, adult/life-long training and education opportunities, any form of selection and verification of information with a direct and indirect impact on the scale of the profession or business.

The model of the Agricultural Chambers in Western Europe, as a form of professional representation, is anachronistic to the needs, requirements, expectations, and opportunities of the Romanian countryside, in which the volume and nature of technical services, especially for the needs of small and medium farms and family farms, is different in a changed CAP context from the time of their occurrence. The natural evolution of Chamber structures is correctly oriented towards the hubs of expertise and knowledge, outsourcing being the most reliable option present. The expertise brokerage hubs are interface structures articulated as network that identify, quantify, and facilitate the expert interventions meant to contribute at problem-solving and answering the needs of the rural actors and general population.

The proposed structures have a regional distribution in complete synchronisation with the regional specificity beyond the administrative limits of the county, region or macroregion. The distribution, also related to the knowledge brokerage gaps [16] disable the previous and present limitations of action given the administrative boundaries with areas falling in two different counties, under different administrative jurisdiction and bypasses the need to articulate artificial groupings to facilitate access to public support interventions.

Technically, the hubs are fully equipped to answer technical or logistic needs for intervention in the field or remote operating laboratory and IT hardware and infrastructure. The reason behind the infrastructure and equipment relays on the need to spare on resources and time and enhance the effectiveness and effectivity of the interventions avoiding the subcontracting procedures for common or specific needs related to transport or general expertise (laboratory based).

Considering the gap between the (long-term) needs and problems of the rural area and of its actors the provided services extend as exhaustively as possible including counselling, supporting, expertise brokerage, consultancy, training and facilitating knowledge and innovation transfer. Any combination of the above listed component services can be compiled according to the formulated or identified demand on the serviced region.

Basically, the hubs are answering the needs of intermediation and transport of high expertise required by farmers and rural actors ensuring the selection and involvement of the highest-level experts in the respective fields or domains overpassing past or present administrative or procedural barriers. Supported by the network of the hubs at the national level, experts from all regions, institutions or businesses become listed and available via the hubs.

From the opposite position of the end-users the innovation generators retrieve in the hubs' network the brokerage partner that can reach and intermediate to the relevant public

and participants to test or validate their innovative products or processes. This type of linkage, currently very local and based on direct contacts with low intermediation is one of the weakest parts of the knowledge and experience transfer and benefits only from the Web-based platforms and technologies that rarely reach the relevant population outside the transfer partners.

The public structures of the local administration aiming to develop and modernise the public services for the citizens from rural and small-urban centres ca largely benefit of the hubs' expertise, including the dissemination of the best practices towards the most relevant institutional public while targeting the highest standards of service quality.

The regional operation of the hubs is projected to develop on the LAG (LEADER) network structure presently listing two dozen of interest points with relevant regional distribution and grows by the addition of other associative structures active in the fields of social, environment, regional or community development.

The articulation and development of the network appears to be the most suitable option with participatory bottom-up construction to feed the requirements and the expectations for the upcoming programming period. An extra opportunity is related to the existing and consolidated position of the network's actors, the involved LAGs, and their existing network for the future activities as part of the upcoming AKIS. The former structure of the non-functional AKIS wasn't even listing the existence and the service portfolios of the public-private local partnerships, while these were and are the most active actor in the proximity and the interface of rural development, agriculture modernisation and diversification included.

The new actor, the network of knowledge and expertise brokerage hubs, becomes the most present and informed structure at the interface with farmers in the context of strengthening the new AKIS in Romania with considerable potential in assuming future technical tasks. Thus, it opens the possibility that the activity of the hubs will benefit from the support funding for FAS as part of the new institutional setup, in conjunction with the potential own revenues from the intermediation services provided in both directions according to the recommendations contained in the CRPE study on agricultural consultancy in Romania. The obligation to operationalize an AKIS for each Member State gives rise to the prerequisites for the revision and reconstruction of the knowledge and innovation system in Romania, activities for which the network of brokerage hubs is best placed.

The targeted system enlists four major objectives to cover without timeframe boundaries in terms of providing the services yet with precise milestones in achieving them:

- Establishment and operationalisation of twenty regional brokerage HUBs network-linked for advising, accompanying, brokering technical expertise, consulting, training, and support for the transfer of knowledge and expertise of soil, water, air, and agri-food analyses.
- Offering intermediation services for custom expertise according to needs and problems downstream of production and interface with agriculture and rural economy services to producers, and upstream, for generators of technology, expertise, knowledge, and innovation.
- Achieving the top position as network of expertise in soil, air, water, and agri-food analyses open to all rural actors.
- Providing new and emerging services in the rural economy: expertise, companionship, and innovation in rural areas.

The construction logic, the involved actors, their maturity and experience, the grassroots approach tested by virtual simulation and projections lead to stable framework

indicating a large growing potential and continuous consolidation of a highly visible position for the knowledge brokers.

CONCLUSIONS

With a crippled AKIS and inexistent FAS the current converging rural economic environment in Romania does not need to pass all development and tunning stages the other developed countries were undertaking along the past several decades.

The knowledge brokerage hubs acting as network emerges into the best placed position to play a key role at the end-user interface for the new AKIS. The initial pillars of the hubs, the LAGs, are in long-term exchange relation for information and communication with the farmer communities and rural actors; supplementing the activities they are in charge for comes with a great deal of economies in all types of resources and feeds on the higher odds to timely reach and consolidate the exchanges of knowledge with the end-users.

The construction of the expertise brokerage hubs and their linkage and operation as network can spare a great deal of material effort and time providing for the needs of both chain-ends actors, the rural communities, and the policy makers.

The best placed actors and players in rural and territorial development are not only willing yet ready and proposing their involvement in the construction, the implementation, and the operation of a knowledge brokerage system.

The present situation, including the development delay and difficult economic setting induced by the pandemic conditions leaves no room for questioning the necessity of a model and system facilitating the knowledge brokerage.

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