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## Increasing community social capital in north-eastern rural Romania

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to present tangible forms of knowledge generated by analyzing regional/local experiences, during more than ten years of synergetic cooperation between scientific researchers and public consultants in providing “public goods” for rural development in Romania. In this regards, the article contains a theoretical approach of the key concepts and a practical approach referring to the major steps undertaken in order to adjust, at least locally, the “classical triangle” to the new rural paradigm.*

**Keywords:** *public goods, knowledge and information systems; National Agricultural Consultancy Agency; County Office for Agricultural Consultancy*

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### Introduction

Development is a continuous adaptation for maximizing the permanently changing wellbeing, and not a simple movement towards a fixed goal. It is, in fact, a process of continuous adaptation, problem-solving and opportunity exploiting under pressure, searching for wellbeing (Chambers, 1993).

People’s wellbeing depends on two types of goods: private goods that are expected to be obtained through the market, mostly by using own resources, and public goods, various things that usually are generated by the public domain. One main public good might be considered knowledge as it is a non-rival good par excellence and one that in the longer run is difficult to maintain in an excludable form. The knowledge is a dynamic human process of “justifying

personal beliefs as a part of the aspiration for truth” (Brožová et al., 2008). Knowledge can be seen as the basic mean through which we understand and give meaning to the world around us.

The tangible form of knowledge is the information. Human actions and practices can be seen also as tangible expression of knowledge. We are speaking nowadays about knowledge and information systems defined as set of actors, networks and/or organizations, expected or managed to work in synergy to support knowledge processes (Leeuwis and Van den Ban 2004).

## Methodology

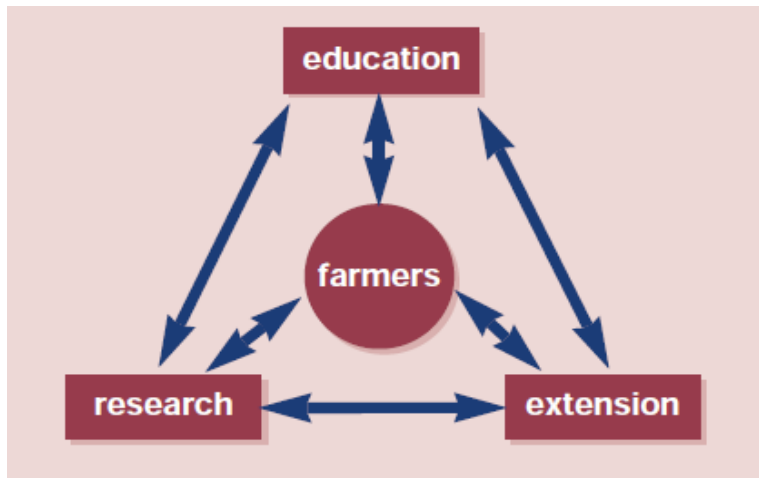
The article contains a theoretical approach and a practical approach. In the first part of the article we are starting by presenting the concept of Agricultural Knowledge and Information System and by describing the Romanian public extension service. We analyze the country coverage of the extension offices and the type of activities provided. In the second part of the article we present the way how the accumulation of social capital is taking place at local/regional level through the quality learning interactions.

## Agricultural knowledge and information system for rural development

The idea of Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (AKIS) was theorized in detail by the Wageningen scholar Röling who described it as “a set of agricultural organizations and/or persons, and the links and interactions between them, engaged in such processes of the generation, transformation, storage, retrieval, integration, diffusion and utilization of knowledge and information, with the purpose of working in synergy to support decision making, problem solving and innovation in a given country’s agriculture or domain thereof”(Röling, 1989).

FAO and The World Bank describes AKIS for Rural Development, known also as “the knowledge triangle”, as a system which “links people and institutions to promote mutual learning and generate, share and utilize agriculture-related technology, knowledge and information” and “integrates farmers, agricultural educators, researchers, various sources for better farming and improved livelihoods” (FAO and World Bank, 2000). Within the knowledge triangle, agricultural extension receives relevant information from the agricultural education system and feeds back field observations to this system. The education system provides also agents who work in extension. The knowledge that agricultural extension transfers is usually generated by agricultural research through applied and adaptive agricultural research development.

“When agricultural extension is combined with rural extension goals, the extension function ranges even more widely in its purposes” (Rivera at al., 2001).



**Figure 1. The knowledge triangle**

Source: FAO & World Bank, 2000

Social and economic trends within the rural areas necessitate more highly trained, specialized and technically competent workers. In this context, the extension specialists, known in the 19th century also as “Lord Clarendon’s practical instructors in husbandry” (Swanson et al., 1998), are becoming more likely socio-economic community workers.

### **Agricultural extension in Romania**

In Romania, the extension services are mainly provided by the ministry-based general extension service. The National Agricultural Consultancy Agency (NACA) was created through the Governmental Decision no. 676/1998, modified by no. 676/1999. The Agency is a public institution, with legal personality, financed from the State budget and which is directly coordinated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

NACA, by its organizational structure and by the activities developed in the territory, performs the transfer of knowledge to the farmers. The need of consulting for farmers is amplified during the process of development, diversification, and specialization of the agricultural production and the transition from the subsistence farm to the commercial farm. At the same time, the level and quality of the consulting services and the consulting activity is more and more oriented towards the market. NACA addresses to all private farmers, regardless their legal status, provides consulting, extension, information and professional training in order to increase the managing performance at the farm level in the market economy conditions.

NACA has 41 local offices in each county, named County Office for Agricultural Consultancy (COAC), whose personnel are advisors and trainers in the territory, offering consultancy regarding issues of agriculture and rural deve-

lopment. At the level of towns and communes operates 546 Local Centres for Agricultural Consultancy (LCAC). In the North-East Region for instance, the coverage of the LCAC is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. LCAC in the North-East Development Region of Romania**

<i>County</i>	<i>LCAC (number)</i>	<i>Localities covered (number)</i>	<i>Total number of communes</i>	<i>Real coverage from the total number of communes (%)</i>	<i>Average number of communes /LCAC from statistical estimation</i>
Bacău	13	83	85	97.65	6
Botoşani	8	53	71	74.64	9
Iaşi	16	37	93	39.78	6
Neamţ	13	39	78	50.00	6
Suceava	23	23	98	23.47	4
Vaslui	10	35	81	43.20	8
<i>Total</i>	<i>83</i>	<i>270</i>	<i>506</i>	<i>53.35</i>	<i>6</i>

Source: own calculations based on data from INS (2009) and the information from [http://www.consultantaagricola.ro/info\\_zonale.php](http://www.consultantaagricola.ro/info_zonale.php)

We can conclude that the number of existing LCAC is not sufficient to cover the total number of existing rural communities in most of the counties.

But how efficient is this system? In order to answer to this question, we start by citing NACA evaluation mentioned in the report provided under the CEEC AGRICULTURE POLICY Project “Agro economic policy analysis of the new member states, the candidate states and the countries of the western Balkan”, the report “Rural Technology Transfer in Transition Economies in Romania”(Reman et al., 2007). This SWOT analysis of the training provision of NACA is presented in Table 2.

From the extension and advisory activities point of view, in the same document (the CEEC AGRICULTURE POLICY Report), the mentioned strengths of the NACA/COAC are:

- the capacity to identify the needs at local level;
- sufficient number of personnel specialized in different fields;
- high demand for professional qualification of farmers;
- services are provided to specific groups of beneficiaries (professional associations, farmers’ organizations).

As weaknesses there are mentioned:

- the lack of financial funds for expenditure;
- difficult & rigid communication between consultant and beneficiary;
- no feedback to the central institutions responsible for developing the agricultural policies;
- insufficiency or even lack of communications equipment;
- legal constraints to stimulate local consultants;
- lack of solid strategy to attract additional funds.

**Table 2. SWOT analysis of the NACA - training provision**

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increasing tendency in demand for continuous professional training activity in agriculture;</li> <li>- diversification of agricultural fields where training is provided;</li> <li>- implementation of externally financed programs (PHARE, World Bank, SAPARD etc.) regarding employment, information and training start showing their results;</li> <li>- the increasing beneficiaries' consciousness intensifies the implication and participation of all training providers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a rather unstable and incoherent legislation system in the last 10 years;</li> <li>- lack of continuous training programs for adults in agriculture and rural development;</li> <li>- lack of financial resources to run the agricultural training programs;</li> <li>- lack of specific material, logistics and of a well prepared human capital;</li> <li>- difficult access to external financial resources for agricultural and rural development;</li> <li>- lack of infrastructure in the rural areas led to increased difficulties to beneficiaries in accessing different training programs.</li> </ul>
<i>Opportunities</i>	<i>Threats</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- accessing EU funds for improving professional education level in agriculture and rural development;</li> <li>- increasing the number of beneficiaries by organizing trainings in the remote areas as well;</li> <li>- increasing the involvement of universities in organizing trainings in collaboration with NACA;</li> <li>- using the experiences collected as a result of the cooperation with international institutions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- lack of proper infrastructure in order to provide trainings in communes, villages (remote areas);</li> <li>- risk of lacking the new techniques and equipment necessary for the implementation of the practical issues of the training courses.</li> </ul>

Source: Report - Agenția Națională de Consultanță Agricolă , 2006, cited by Reman et al., 2007

Besides these issues, we mention some disadvantages of the ministry-based general extension from those identified by Swanson, Bentz and Sofranko (1998), which we consider that are valid for the case of Romania:

- 1) the contradictory nature of established goals (securing subsistence production and promoting cash crops for export; reaching the mass of rural households and serving the needs of specific groups; extending assistance to high potential and disadvantaged producers);
- 2) due to the hierarchical and highly bureaucratic way of organization, the system does not foster critical upward communication (priority setting for research is rarely based on extension field evaluations);
- 3) the way in which knowledge is transformed into field messages frequently leads to distorted and outdated information;
- 4) extension has never been a purely educational activity as the ministry required the “diversification” of the activities in a wide range (statistical data collection, attending foreign visitors etc.);

- 5) financial constraints have produced a strong pressure to reduce staff, and the field level has been hit hardest; under these conditions, many extension workers select the more responsive section of their clientele;
- 6) adequate and location-specific answers to a farmer's problem are often not available because it has not been a research concern or the solution has simply not reached the field.

With all the difficulties that are facing with, NACA and COACs manage to obtain results. For instance, in 2008, there were organized (ANCA, 2008):

- 551 qualification courses in fields like agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, mechanization in agriculture, food industry, fishery, forestry, agro-tourism for 16,173 people;
- 2,356 training courses for 70,754 participants with topics regarding technologies, economics and juridical aspects (continuing and better improving the farmers' professional education);
- 185 courses for 551 specialists from different activities related agriculture and rural development;
- training trainers in agricultural advisory and extension services within the MAKIS project "Improving extension services" – six series with 120 graduates in total;
- 1,149 demonstrative plots in crop cultures and 254 in livestock;
- 94 fairs, 121 exhibitions, 169 contests, 47 festivals, 366 conferences, 585 workshops, 1,200 round table meetings and 7,223 meetings;
- publishing and distribution of brochures, leaflets, magazines etc.;
- 596 radio broadcasted and 309 TV talk shows
- 24,106 practical demonstrations on field for farmers.

Other activities were:

- identification of 130 model farms;
- consulting during the elaboration of 220 projects (European Fund for Agriculture and Rural Development) and consulting during implementation for the 74 projects funded (9,165,516 Euro);
- identification of 1,637 potential beneficiaries of Measure 1.2.1 Farm modernization;
- data collection on market prices for the main agricultural products – data base posted on the web site;
- up dating data bases with input suppliers for agriculture, storing facilities and processing units, research institutes, agricultural education units, private consultancy companies etc.

## Reducing inequalities

We might analyze inequalities at different levels, but the most relevant is to compare some regional data. For the snapshot view on the regional development in Romania we present in Table 3 some indicators from the Regional Operational Programme "Regional Development" 2007-2013 (MDLPL, 2007). All the data refer to the national average which is considered to be the reference (100%).

**Table 3. Regional development indicators in Romania (national average = 100%)**

Region	GDP per capita		Unemployment rate		Direct Foreign Investments per capita		SME's per inhabitant		Rural population	
	1998	2004	1998	2005	1998	2005	1998	2005	1998	2005
North-East	79.8	69.2	133.6	115.2	15.3	7.7	71.3	64.5	123.9	125.5
South-East	100.1	90.7	112.5	108.5	42.7	63.8	101.4	91.4	94.7	98.7
South	85.8	83.4	97.1	123.7	65.5	41.2	77.0	67.7	129.0	129.3
South-West	90.0	83.3	104.8	125.4	11.9	31.9	85.9	70.2	120.8	116.4
West	100.9	114.7	101.9	86.4	99.1	76.3	91.2	105.7	83.8	80.7
North-West	95.5	97.2	84.6	67.8	41.9	45.4	106.5	109.0	104.9	104.0
Centre	105.9	104.2	98.1	123.7	87.7	62.9	101.1	105.7	87.1	88.9
București-Ilfov	162.2	191.5	47.1	40.7	598.3	593.5	194.1	228.2	24.8	21.1

Source: MDLPL, 2007

We can notice that the highest percentage of rural population is in South Region, and North - East Region. If we look to the GDP per capita, the unemployment, SME's per capita and Direct Foreign Investments per capita we notice that the North – East Region is the poorest one. In absolute figures, in the North-East Region we speak about 2,108,094 people living in 2,414 villages, respective 506 communes (INS, 2009). Only 83 LCACs offer services to the highest number of rural population from all of the eight regions.

The need for agricultural and rural information services is intensifying. “Rural populations will undoubtedly be progressively better educated, while their exposure to the mass media will continue to reduce their isolation and detachment from information, ideas, and an awareness of their situation within a national and international context” (Swanson at al., 1998). More knowledgeable farming population requires different kinds of extension services.

The best way of overcoming the disadvantages generated within the existing agricultural extension service and to face with the new challenges is to act together with the other “actors” from the AKIS/RD more efficiently in order to accomplish the common goals.

### Quality learning interactions

It is widely agreed that social capital facilitates “mutually beneficial collective action” (Hobbs, 2000). Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) argue that the accumulation of social capital is the outcome of the process of “learning interactions” (learning event). A precondition to building social capital is considered to be the existence of a sufficient quantity and quality learning interactions.

How does it work?

To show how the accumulation of social capital takes place in practice we present the history of the cooperation between the researchers from



the Rural Economy Department, Economic and Social Research Institute “Gh. Zane”, Romanian Academy, Iași Branch and the public consultants (agricultural extension specialists) from Iași County Office for Agricultural Consultancy.

This cooperation started in the early years since COAC Iași was established and the first activities were related to organization of conferences, seminars, workshops and round tables. The closer cooperation started with the participation in different projects and programs. The main projects, important from the impact point of view, were (Dobay, 2009):

**“The Promotion of Marketing Associations in Agriculture”**, Romanian Agribusiness Development Activity Project, funded by USAID (2000-2002).

Main objectives:

- organizing an international workshop in Iași;
- creating a staff of specialized consultants in marketing associations by training trainers (in each county of Romania);
- elaborating the draft law for agricultural cooperation.

The major impact was the facilitation of establishing the first associations long before the establishing of different forms of associations has become one of the top priorities for the NACA.

*COACs involved: 41 (all the country), plus NACA Bucharest.*

**“Promoting Organic Farming in the North-Eastern Romania”**, funded by the World Bank and MARD (2002-2004).

Activities performed:

- elaborating brochures and books on organic farming (technologies, legal framework, management and marketing);
- organizing the training of trainers and farmers on specific technologies and on marketing organic products;
- disseminating information to farmers;
- organizing demonstrative plots and experience exchanges for farmers interested in organic farming.

Impact: this was an extension type project and constituted the very first promotion of the organic farming at three county level (Iași, Bacău and Neamț), in the North-East Region of Romania, in a systematic way.

*COACs involved: 3 (Iași, Bacău and Neamț).*

**“Elaborating and Implementing Local Economic Development Strategy in Periurban Communities (Metropolitan Area of Iași)”**, funded by GRASP/USAID (2003-2004).

The main objective of the project was to assist a targeted community (Aroaneanu commune) in learning how to elaborate a local economic development strategy in participative way.

Achievements:

- The SWOT analysis was done for each village in a participative way.
- The establishment of the consultative group of the community.

- It was the first real LEADER approach in the North-East Romania. Impact: COAC Iași disseminated at county level the brochures and the book elaborated within the project and managed, in 2006, together with other “actors” active in rural areas (World Vision, Pro Women Foundation, Hope Foundation, Elmol Foundation, Wine Growers’ Association, The Centre for Economic Development – CDE, elementary schools, local public administrations) to mobilize rural people and to support the establishment of the first partnerships for the Local Action Groups in the county. *COACs involved: 1 (Iași).*

“**The Rural Finance Leader Development Project (RFLD)**”, funded by USAID/USDA and coordinated by Iowa State University, Centre for International Agricultural Finance (2004-2006).

The project provided team building and technical assistance with the aim to improve credit access in rural regions of Romania. Through this project there were established regional informal networks of public and private consultants, financiers, companies from agriculture in all the 6 counties of the region.

Main achievements:

- improving the skills of public and private consultants in the elaboration of business plans for agriculture and non-agricultural activities in rural areas;
- strengthening the relationships between consultants and the bankers and increasing the chances of farmers to obtain credit from commercial banks and access SAPARD funds.

Impact: in the North-East Region there are 786 SAPARD funded projects (MARD, 2009), the highest number of projects from all the regions, out of which 100 projects were assisted by the RFLD consultants.

*COACs involved from the North – East Region: 6 out of which 3 (Iași, Vaslui and Botoșani) managed to obtain tangible results (funded projects).*

“**Rural Leadership Development Project**” funded by USAID/USDA and coordinated by CEED Romania (Centre for Entrepreneurship and Executive Development) (2006-2007).

The project continued to foster the rural network established to assist the attraction of financial resources in the rural area.

The project had three main objectives (CEED, 2007):

1. to develop the rural businesses;
2. to improve business knowledge and skills;
3. to achieve regional and national integration.

Main activities performed:

- identifying local leaders and young consultants and training them about how to establish partnerships and to access the EU funds;
- tutoring project proposals;
- assisting the establishment of local partnerships in targeted areas.

Results at COAC level:

- 10 public consultants participated in the training courses organized with the main topic related to the elaboration of projects to obtain EU funds (from the 6 concept papers that were elaborated during the training sessions, one project idea regarding the dissemination of information about CAP to the rural people was funded);
- 2 consultants participated in the study tour organized in Ireland and had the chance to get in contact with LEADER companies, projects, and main institutions dealing with rural development.

*COACs involved: 1 (Iași).*

## Conclusions

The implication level of the consultants/extension workers (from COAC and LCAC) in implementing different types of projects in different regions, counties and areas is different. Even under the same circumstances, with the same given opportunities, the implication level is different. What makes the difference? We may state that all the achievements depend, pretty much, on the willingness of the public consultants to help the communities to improve their livelihood. This goes beyond the formal duties. Is more about being “the guide, philosopher and friend of the existing farmers” (Plunkett, 1901) and that means vocation for the extension worker profession.

Social capital resides in people’s mind, although is manifested in the relations among people. “The roles that people recognize, accept, and perform and the norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs they hold structure people’s relationship with each other” (Grotaert and Van Bastelaer, 2002). The extent to which the members of a community can work together effectively represents, according to Mattessich and Monsey (1997), the “social capacity of the community”.

Can we state without any doubt that the learning interactions conduct to the accumulation of social capital? In order to answer to this question we start by presenting some of the non-typical projects implemented nowadays in the North – East Region in Romania with the participation of the public consultants (Table 4).

These examples highlight the fact that there is a real cooperation between the main actors involved in rural development in their attempt to help the farmers and the rural communities from the North – East Region of Romania to improve their livelihood.

We believe that the examples presented in the article show how the learning interactions clearly generate accumulation of social capital, and that we can speak nowadays about the social capacity of a community, respectively, in extended meaning, about the social capacity of an area, county or region.

**Table 4. Projects implemented in the North – East Region (2006-2009) with the participation of public consultants**

<i>Project</i>	<i>Actors (type)</i>	<i>COAC's involved</i>	<i>Role of COAC's</i>
www.agra.ro web site	Ltd. Company Agronomic University Agricultural high school Assoc. of businessmen Foreign consulting co.	1 (Iași)	- identified the needs of potential beneficiaries - provided information about products, markets, input suppliers
Revival of 2 farmer markets in Iași Municipality	County Office of the MARD Local public administration County Council	1 (Iași)	- identified the farmers' needs and promoted the idea of offering the possibility for them to sell their products in farmer markets without paying any taxes
Promoting traditional agricultural products	Agronomic university Private foundation County Office of MARD Partners from Moldova Republic	2 (Iași and Vaslui)	- disseminated information about the legal steps for certifying traditional products
Promoting regional product brand	Agronomic university Private foundation County Office of MARD Partners from Moldova Republic	3 (Iași, Botoșani and Vaslui)	- supported farmers in establishing producer groups and to protect product brands against non-loyal competition
Tele-centre in the school from Șipote village (Iași County)	High school Local public administration	1 (Iași)	- elaborated the project
Supporting the establishment of agricultural and rural development associations in five communities from Iași County	World Vision Iași	1 (Iași)	- presented the advantages of establishing associations and the legal framework
Celebration of World Rural Women's Day	Private association	1 (Iași)	- organized seminars on topics regarding the role of women in developing rural communities
Improving the skills of rural people in writing projects in order to obtain funding from EU	Private association Foreign experts	1 (Iași)	- selected the 20 beneficiaries
Disseminating info. about CAP policy	LCAC from Iași County	1 (Iași)	- elaborated and implemented the project
Centre of information about rural development strategies	School inspectorate	1 (Iași)	- elaborated the guide regarding agricultural consultancy
Cross-border pilot centre for organic products	Agronomic university	1 (Iași)	- trainings farmers about organic farming

Source: Apetroaie, 2008, 2009

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