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KNOWLEDGE NEEDS OF YOUNG FARMERS IN THE EU

Subtheme: Labour Force of the future

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Abstract:

A project has been commissioned by the European Commission (DG AGRI) to identify the needs of young farmers and to design an exchange programme tailored to the needs of young farmers. To achieve this, a survey was carried out among 2,205 farmers younger than 40 in all 28 EU Member States. In addition, in each Member State a focus group was organised (or a few additional interviews with relevant stakeholders were performed if it appeared not possible to organise a focus group in a country) to validate the results of the survey.

The results showed that young farmers have different needs, depending on the region in which they live (new MS or EU15), the agricultural sector in which they work, their education level and their farm situation (owner of the farm or not). This indicates that knowledge offered and exchange programmes should be tailor-made to the specific needs of young farmers. They should have the opportunity to 'design' their exchange programme themselves, taking their time and financial constraints into account, so that they can obtain the knowledge and experience they need.

Keywords: young farmers, knowledge needs, exchange programmes

Introduction

Challenges for (young) farmers across the EU

Agricultural entrepreneurs face many challenges. According to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), 'EU agriculture needs to attain higher levels of production of safe and quality food, while preserving the natural resources that agricultural productivity depends upon. This can only be achieved by a competitive and viable agricultural sector operating within a properly functioning supply chain and which contributes to the maintenance of a thriving rural economy' (European Commission, 2013).

An extra challenge is the decreasing number of young people in the agricultural sector. This challenge creates specific difficulties for generational renewal and raises concerns regarding the loss of valuable skills and knowledge as older, but experienced people, leave the sector. According to the Overview of CAP Reform 2014-2020, only 14% of EU farmers are under 40

(European Commission, 2013). Sotte (2003) already stated in 2003 that the presence of young people is declining practical everywhere, both in absolute terms and in relation to older age groups. Therefore, according to Sotte (2003), the question of the entrance of young people into agriculture and rural areas should be the touchstone of the actual implementation of European agricultural policies.

Knowledge needs of (young) farmers

The evolution and specialisation of agriculture and forestry and the particular challenges faced by micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises in rural areas (meaning farmers, forest producers, winegrowers, horticulturalists etc.) require an appropriate level of technical and economic training (DG AGRI, Tender No AGRI-2012-Eval-03). The regulatory framework of the EU for rural development 2014-2020 has stipulated that the knowledge transfer and information actions should not be provided only in the form of traditional training courses but rather be adapted to the needs of rural actors (European Commission, 2013). The importance of fine-tuning agricultural training programmes to the needs of farmers has been mentioned before (Brent and Adams, 1999; Duram and Larson, 2001; Obaa et al., 2005). However, it is not only important to adapt training programmes or other forms of knowledge transfer to the needs of (young) farmers, but also to take into account to whom the knowledge is transferred. The knowledge needs differ across the different types of farmers, as do the preferences for learning methods (Chase et al., 2006; Noar et al., 2007; Hawkins et al., 2008; Jansen et al., 2010). Interactive educational programmes such as exchange programmes may not be suitable for all farmers. This depends on the farmers' competences (Man et al., 2002) but also on context-specific factors such as the institutional environment, the availability of resources and the opportunities and threats that farmers perceive. According to Vanclay (2004), 'an understanding of social issues, the social nature of farming, and the social basis of adoption is needed if agricultural extension is to be effective in addressing natural resource management issues, and in promoting sustainability in its triple bottom line conceptualisation'.

Addressing the needs of young farmers

Appropriate training is especially important for young farmers because they can contribute the most to fostering innovation and resource-efficiency to achieve the EU2020 objectives (Dellapasqua, 2010). Furthermore, they face specific challenges linked to high investments in the start-up phase, difficulties in accessing finance and a small turnover in the first years of business. Combined with prolonged generation renewal and diminished access to land, this can reduce the interest of the young farmers in entering into the sector. This showcases that

young farmers are facing a specific situation that requires advice and knowledge adjusted to their specific situation (Sotte, 2003).

Because of the above-mentioned concerns regarding young farmers throughout Europe, the Directorate General Agriculture and Rural Development (DG Agri) of the European Commission has initiated a Pilot project 'Exchange programme for young farmers'. In this project, emphasis was on the needs of young farmers (aged under 40). The aims of this study were amongst others:

- To provide a comprehensive assessment of the specific needs of young farmers across the EU;
- To provide recommendations on the design, implementation and delivery of exchange programmes.

In this paper, the needs of young farmers are presented and some recommendations are made for the design of tailor-made exchange programmes for young farmers. The paper summarises Report I, 'Needs of young farmers' of the project mentioned above (Zondag et al., 2015; http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/external-studies/2015/young-farmers/final-report-1_en.pdf).

Material and Methods

To provide a comprehensive assessment of the specific needs of young farmers across the EU, a survey was carried out among 2,205 farmers younger than 40 (further referred to as 'young farmers') in all 28 EU Member States in the spring of 2014. In addition, to validate the results of the survey, focus groups were organised in all Member States - one focus group per Member State - or a limited number of interviews with stakeholders were performed if organising a focus group in a country was unsuccessful.

The number of collected questionnaires per country varied from 25 in small countries in which agriculture was of little importance to 100 in big countries with an important agricultural sector (based on standard output). In addition, 25 extra questionnaires were collected if the percentage of less-favoured areas was >50% in a country¹. Initially, it was

¹ In the European Union, less-favoured area (LFA) is a term used to describe an area with natural handicaps (lack of water, climate, short crop season and tendencies of depopulation), or that is mountainous or hilly, as defined by its altitude and slope.

decided to collect the questionnaires by phone. This, however, did not work in all countries. Therefore the farmers were also given the opportunity to finish the questionnaire by e-mail or through a web-based questionnaire. This resulted in 1,518 finished questionnaires by phone, 657 finished questionnaires through the internet and 30 finished questionnaires by e-mail. The largest part of the questionnaire existed of structured questions with pre-programmed answers to guarantee that all questions were asked in the same way in each country and to make it possible to analyse the data in a statistically sound way. Some open questions were asked at the end of the questionnaire about the age of the farmers and the number of ha of owned and rented UAA (utilized agricultural area). The structured questions covered the general needs of young farmers, knowledge needs of farmers, knowledge – and information sources they like to use, farmers' participation in and awareness of exchange programmes and the extent to which they were satisfied with these exchange programmes, issues that hinder young farmers from obtaining knowledge or participating in an exchange programme, the farmers' attitude about participation in an (inter)national exchange programme, the farmers' intention to join an (inter)national exchange programme and the farmers' expectations about participation in an exchange programme. Most questions were presented as prepositions which could be answered with 'yes', 'no', 'neutral' or 'don't know/not applicable'.

The data were analysed per country, moment of accession to the EU (EU15 or new Member State)² and sector. In addition, it was checked whether education level and the farm situation (owner of the farm, partnership with parents or others, employee on a farm or employee on parents' farm), affected the results. Chi² tests were carried out for the analyses.

Results

Knowledge needs of young farmers

The survey results showed that more than 60% of the interviewed young farmers perceived it as likely that they would develop skills related to the development of a farm strategy and that they would develop technological knowledge necessary for the farm. More than 50% of them perceived it as likely that they would develop all kinds of entrepreneurial skills such as

² Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom belong to the EU15, and Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Malta, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia belong to the new Member States (new MS). In total, 1,332 of the interviewed farmers came from the EU15 and 873 from one of the new MS.

marketing, finance, communication, networking and management and skills related to resource and environmental management, to animal welfare improvement and to applying for subsidies.

Knowledge sources and information sources

The interviewed young farmers prefer to use all kinds of knowledge sources. More than 70% of the respondents use internet to read and look for information, field days or excursions, individual advice, fairs or exhibitions, (agricultural) trainings or courses and farmers' journals. Workshops and joining a study group or network were slightly less popular. These knowledge sources were used by more than 60% of the respondents. Participation in exchange programmes, social media, participation in discussions on the internet and online trainings or e-learning were used the least by the interviewed young farmers (by respectively 54.5%, 40.1%, 35.9% and 31.7%).

Other farmers appeared to be the most important information source for the interviewed young farmers, followed by farmers' associations and agricultural consultants and advisors. These information sources were mentioned by 86.0%, 67.5% and 67.3% of the interviewed young farmers respectively.

Lack of time appeared to be the most important hindrance to obtain information for the interviewed young farmers (mentioned by 58.4% of the respondents).

Participation in exchange programmes

The participation rate in exchange programmes was low among the interviewed young farmers: only 17.5%. However, the young farmers who did join an exchange programme were content about it. This was confirmed in the focus groups. In addition, most interviewed young farmers had a positive attitude to and positive expectations about exchange programmes. Lack of time and having no replacement on the farm were the most important obstacles to join an exchange programme (mentioned by 69% and 48.6% of the respondents respectively).

Other needs of young farmers

The survey results showed that knowledge needs are not the most important needs of young farmers in the European Union. These appeared to be land to buy or rent, followed by subsidies, credits and qualified labour. This is confirmed in focus group meetings.

Factors affecting the knowledge needs of young farmers

The survey results showed that, in general, young farmers in new Member States have more knowledge needs than other young farmers in the European Union. They seem to be more eager to develop all kinds of skills and obtain knowledge from different sources and they have a higher intention to join an exchange programme and a more positive attitude towards such programmes.

In addition, the survey results showed that the knowledge needs of young farmers are affected by the agricultural sector in which they work, their education level and their farm situation (owner of the farm or not):

- Young farmers working in a specialist sector (for example olive orchards) seem to have higher knowledge needs than young farmers working in more extensive or 'common known' sector such as dairy farming or arable farming; possibly because not so much knowledge is available in these specialised sectors;
- Young farmers with a high education level are more eager to develop different kinds of skills, they perceive less hindrances to obtain information or to join an exchange programme, they have a more positive attitude towards exchange programmes and also participated in them more often than lower educated young farmers.
- Young farmers who are the owner of the farm seem to be more confident: they perceive less general needs when compared with all the interviewed young farmers but they also are less eager to develop different kinds of skills and often consider it unrealistic that they will join a(n) (inter)national exchange programme.

Discussion*Different exchange programmes for different knowledge needs*

The interviewed young farmers were quite eager to develop all kinds of knowledge skills. In the present context in which farmers have to adapt their businesses to the structural changes in the environment, young farmers should be aware of the importance of entrepreneurship to keep their farm viable (Vesala and Pyysiäinen, 2008; McElwee, 2008). However, according to the results of the survey they still have a technological focus, as more than 60% of the interviewed young farmers perceived it as likely that they would develop technological knowledge necessary for the farm. Other studies also show that many farmers still have a

‘productivist’ mind set and wish to maintain an agricultural focus (Walford 2003, Chaplin et al. 2004, Burton and Wilson 2006, Gorton et al. 2008). This is reflected by the presence, often decade-long, of the more ‘classical’ types of exchange programmes (meaning that a young farmer goes to another farm, preferably in another country, for a few months). However, the majority of exchange programmes propose an opposite approach: taking a young farmer out of his/her comfort zone and exposing him/her to completely new circumstances enhances learning and understanding.

Knowledge and information sources

The interviewed young farmers use all kinds of knowledge sources. However, exchange programmes, social media, discussions on the internet and online trainings or e-learning seemed to be the least popular among the interviewed young farmers. This is remarkable because online trainings, e-learning and social media are mentioned quite often by focus group members and other stakeholders (in addition to direct contact). However, an encountered difficulty in obtaining knowledge through the internet according to some focus groups was a missing or low quality (i.e., too slow or not easily accessible) internet connection, especially in mountainous or remote areas, or a lack of skills to use the internet in a proper way.

Participation in exchange programmes

The participation rate in exchange programmes among the interviewed young farmers was low. Lack of time and having no replacement on the farm were the most important obstacles to join an exchange programme. Finding ways to compensate young farmers for their lack of time or having no replacement on the farm may be helpful to stimulate more young farmers to join an exchange programme, as does offering shorter-term opportunities. In different countries, focus groups mentioned that exchange programmes should be specifically tailored to the time and financial constraints of those interested in participating. Also, the availability of replacement on the farm, for example by a reliable farmer relief service or farm replacement services, was mentioned in several focus groups.

Differences between countries

The results of the needs survey as well as the comments of the focus group show differences between countries. There are clear country-specific indications of the demand for exchange programmes (among other needs). In general, young farmers in the new Member States have

a higher intention to join an exchange programme and a more positive attitude towards exchange programmes than young farmers in the EU15. For young farmers in the EU15, this may be less important because they have a lot of knowledge already (or they think they have). In the EU15 more emphasis also has been on the development of entrepreneurship. This also may have helped to make them more aware of their own and their farm's possibilities in the context in which they have to operate (Bergevoet, 2005; De Lauwere, 2005; Rudman, 2008; Lans, 2009). These knowledge needs are addressed by the rise of new types of exchange programmes in the EU15 (such as programmes that focus on leadership or on specific business/supply chains).

Other factors affecting the needs of young farmers in the EU

The moment of accession to the EU is not the only factor that has contributed to the differences in needs of young farmers throughout the EU. The sector or main economic activity of the interviewed young farmers, their education level and the farm situation also affected their needs. This should be taken into account when designing training programmes or exchange programmes for young farmers. These programmes should be differentiated for higher and lower educated young farmers in order to better fit their needs. With regard to the farm situation, the results showed that interviewed young farmers who were the owner of the farm seem to be less eager to develop different kinds of skills. They also perceived it relatively often as unrealistic that they will join a(n) (inter)national exchange programme, probably because they feel more responsible for their farm and therefore do not want to leave it behind. However, they appeared to have a higher age, which increases the chance that they had a family already. This probably made it more difficult to leave the farm to join an exchange programme as well. At the same time, young farmers who were the owner of the farm relatively often indicated that they used discussions on the internet and online trainings and e-learning to obtain knowledge. Although the general results showed that these knowledge sources were not that popular among young farmers, this seems to be different for farm owners. For them these knowledge sources are probably a solution because they enable them to develop skills and obtain knowledge while they do not have to leave their farm.

Conclusions

The presented results show that knowledge should be tailor-made and tuned to the specific needs of young farmers living in different regions, working in different sectors, having

different education levels and being in different farm situations. However, it should be taken into account that young farmers need technological skills and skills to develop a farm strategy as well as entrepreneurial skills – such as marketing, networking, communication and financial skills – to keep their farm viable. The young farmers are not always aware that they need all these kinds of skills. They are used to managing their farm in a traditional way and do not see why they should change this. Within the European Union, attention should thus be paid to raising awareness on this issue.

Another conclusion is that the wide array of existing exchange programmes seem to meet different needs expressed by the young farmers: from programmes focused on ‘cultural exchange’ to programmes more specialised in ‘agricultural and supply chain’ issues, from exchange of individual farmers to group travel, from a single day to a full year and from exchange within Europe to worldwide.

Reasons for the low participation of young farmers in existing exchange programmes are lack of time, having no replacement on the farm, high costs, language barriers, restricted transferability of knowledge, restricted practical applicability, administrative burdens, too long a time span, too big travel distances and sometimes the mentality of young farmers (not willing to go abroad). Taking away these barriers would be useful to stimulate more young farmers to join an exchange programme. A keyword to achieve this is ‘flexibility’. Young farmers should have the opportunity to ‘design’ their exchange programme themselves, taking their time and financial constraints into account so that they can obtain the knowledge and experience they need (this can be on the technological or practical level or on the entrepreneurial level).

The survey results showed that knowledge needs are not the most important needs of young farmers in the European Union. Land to buy or rent is the most important general need of young farmers in most EU countries. This is caused by legislative issues, institutional issues, issues related to inheritance and land prices. Solving these issues may (also) facilitate the entrance of young farmers in the agricultural sector.

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