

CHANGING AGRONOMISTS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES VIS-À-VIS EXTENSION EDUCATION IN GREECE

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1. Introduction

The first systematic attempt of the Greek State in implementing an integrated advisory and training system in agriculture was undertaken in 1951 with the basic aim being the re-organisation of agriculture (in production, economic and social terms) which was ruined after World War II and the following Civil War and resulted in shortages of basic food supplies. For the next 15 years (the 'golden age' of Extension in Greece), there was a massive and well co-ordinated mobilisation of extensionists who performed an educational role explicitly aiming at changing farmers' attitudes (the ideotype of the 'change agent') towards the modernisation of agriculture and, in general, rural areas. The main characteristic of their work was a missionary attitude and popular image. The problems they had to tackle, despite being severe, were relatively easily solved by means of existing technical knowledge and the introduction of new/ improved inputs. As a result, Greece attained self-sufficiency in strategic food crops by the end of the 1950s.

After the mid 60's the issues facing agriculture changed. The Extension Service was not prepared to tackle more complicated issues implying the restructuring of the sector in relation to policy and marketing considerations. In addition, the attitude of the Service towards its clients was transformed from having to work with 'peasants' to having to deal with 'farmers'. Hence, the 'change agent' gave way to the 'advisor' who provided advice, mainly of a technical nature, usually upon request. At the same time the Service, fulfilling the increasing administrative needs of the State (implementation of policies and subsidies) became largely engaged in bureaucratic tasks; extensionists were gradually transformed into almost typical civil servants working in office. The vacuum created was partially filled by private agronomists promoting all kinds of commercial inputs.

Following the accession of Greece into the EC (1981), the administrative burden of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) implementation was designated to the Extension Service. Although the new approach towards agricultural development required that Greek farmers had to become competitive entrepreneurs, both within the CAP framework and in view of the GATT negotiations, extensionists did not escape from their bureaucratic-administrative role. Moreover, due to the lack of an adequate institutional framework (i.e. lack of land and farmers' register), the duty of controlling the implementation of the CAP was imposed upon them. Therefore, extensionists became more than ever severely restricted vis-à-vis the provision of advice to Greek farmers; information was provided to those of the farmers who actively sought for it albeit in a rather fragmented, inadequate and inefficient manner (Koutsouris and Papadopoulos, 1998; Koutsouris, 1999).

Changes, which took place in the mid 90s, such as Ministry's divisions' restructuring, decentralisation of services and the establishment of semi-autonomous organisations for training and research respectively did not have any substantial positive effects. For example, the Service's educational function was restricted to short-term training (150-300 hours) for those eligible for participation in the EU programmes, i.e. modernisation schemes and the establishment of young farmers (R. 797/85 and 2328/91), and continues unchanged (R. 1257/99/EC) to date.

In short, the Greek Extension Service has, during the last three decades, been in a painful process of bureaucratisation leading to its absence from the rural development field. In addition, the Service's homogeneous development policy and ideology, focusing on enhancing agricultural competitiveness in the framework of

'productivist' agriculture, has actually been operating a limited 'progressive farmer strategy'. Under such a mode of function the Service has not been able to provide adequate service to farmers in terms of either agricultural or rural development. This has been verified by a number of studies which attempted to explore the situation both in terms of farmers' perceptions about the Service's interventions and in terms of the intervention policy and practice of the Service (Koutsouris and Papadopoulos, 1998; Koutsouris, 1999; Gidarakou et al., 2006).

The aim of the present paper is to explore agronomists' own views on extension education and their (educational) roles. Towards that end, part of the findings of a study carried out in December 2007 – May 2008 is presented and discussed.

2. Methodology

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with two groups of agronomists. The first group (old agronomists; mean age 58 years old) comprises 10 public servants with more than 25 working years within the Ministry of Agriculture. The second group (young agronomists; mean age 38 years old; in service since 1998-2000) comprises 10 agronomists working in local authorities (6), development agencies (e.g. LEADER+) (3) or Managing Authorities (1), i.e. working for rural development but not in the frame of agronomic units as is the case of former group. Data were obtained through personal non-directive interviews and analysed following the guidelines of phenomenological analysis (Hycner, 1985).

3. Results

3.1 The 'old' agronomists

For the old agronomists extension education has always been their (self-evident) vocation. Before entering the Extension Service all of them thought of their task as falling within the broad area of technical support and provision of advice to farmers. Furthermore, three agronomists mentioned that they were fond of agronomy and two their origin from farming areas as important thus reflecting their conscious choice to become agronomists. Four also mentioned that their image of the profession was the transfer of the knowledge they acquired in the University to farmers. Commends such as "we had a role – we offered a lot", "farmers were in need and I chose to become an agronomist", or "technical support was our single task" underlie the frame of the job. Furthermore, some among the old agronomists held a broader vision of bringing change (even "a revolution") in all aspects of rural life.

While unanimously the old agronomists refer to their working experience as corresponding to the image they held and satisfactory, at least in the beginning of their career it is clear that in the early '80s the nature of their job starts to change; the bureaucratization of the service is a major topic of concern and disappointment for 9 out of the 10 agronomists.

All of them clearly stated that being in contact with farmers has been their major task (vis-à-vis administration) with half of them maintaining that this ("cooperation with farmers albeit with different roles"; "agronomists empathised with farmers and their problems") is the distinctive characteristic of an agronomist's work; therefore, their disappointment from the bureaucratic turn after the country's accession to the EEC (now, the EU).

Their relationship with farmers is described as being friendly (6 cases) and trustful (3 cases), although in varying degrees and through various processes (from "we could sleep in the farmer's house" to "gradually building trust, but under agronomists' terms"). Such relationships stemmed from, on the one hand, the bad economic and socio-cultural circumstances of 'peasants' and, on the other hand, the passion of agronomists to help them (agronomists as "missionaries"). However, it seems that after the mid-70s this changes due to the socio-economic progress (especially in terms of education) of the rural population.

The majority (9 out of 10) of the agronomists firmly believe that through extension work farmers have had economic gains. Nevertheless, their assessment is that their contribution concerns not only economic but general/social progress (socialization, knowledge etc.). A common claim (7 out of 10) is that their influence was much broader than technical support and was based on the trust developed between the two parties. They thus have influenced in some way farmers' livelihoods and have contributed to local development. The majority of the 'old' agronomists (7 out of 10) attribute this influence to their wider educational role (i.e., teachers and mentors within a trust relationship) in the rural areas with only two stressing the provision of technical advice or the implementation of the Ministry's programmes as of utmost importance. Overall, all of them firmly believe that they have actively promoted local development.

On the other hand agronomists themselves claim that they have gained in terms of experiences, knowledge and recognition and satisfaction (especially referred to as of a "moral" nature). This is (again) contrasted with the situation after the bureaucratic turn.

Their understanding of extension education is concrete and integrated; it focused on production and thus the field, the farmer, and the village, but was not confined to it since, as aforementioned, their role was broadly educational based on trust relationships. Agronomists devoted their time in face-to-face, personal contacts out of the office (in the fields in the mornings and in the local cafes in the afternoons) with the building of friendships and trust relationships with farmers predominating. Furthermore, other extension methods are referred to as important, too: demonstration fields (4 cases), leaflets (4 cases) and articles to the local press (2 cases) and to a lesser degree films, excursions, etc. They also note the change of the nature of their work in the 80s and their confinement in the office where they are preoccupied with the distribution and control of all kinds of subsidies and grants provided through the EU programmes and projects. Furthermore, their current involvement in seminars for new entrants in farming and other interested rural youth is not considered to be substantial in educational terms but a formal procedure aiming at the absorption of the available funds.

3.2 The 'young' agronomists

On their part, the young agronomists had a rather vague understanding of their vocation when they graduated. Although the provision of advice to farmers was thought of as constituting an important job task by 6 out of the 10 young agronomists, it is not referred to as the core of their job but in three cases. Furthermore, when employed, for 8 of the agronomists the working environment was rather unexpected/new (work in office; bureaucracy). Nevertheless, after their initial disappointment, it seems that young agronomists conformed with the situation while 6 out of the 10 declared that they are satisfied.

Although contact with farmers is, in general, referred to as an agronomist's task (9 out of 10), in only two cases such an understanding corresponds to that of the old agronomists; but even in these cases there is not a sense of a 'collaborative or collegiate relationship' (Hall and Nahby, 1999). Moreover, there seems to be a lack of (formal or informal) job description clearly identifying and supporting this task; thus, contact with farmers rather stems from the everyday routine (and the satisfaction gained through communication and the provision of technical support; 6 cases) of the young agronomists.

Half of the young agronomists describe their relationship with farmers as 'friendly'. However, this differs from the understanding of the 'old' agronomists. It concerns a rather shallow level, but in 2 cases. The rest of the 'young' agronomists characterise their relationship with farmers as being either advisory (4 cases) or supportive (1 case).

Young agronomists believe that their work benefits, in general, farmers. But they refer less to economic (3 cases) and social progress (socialisation, new knowledge, new horizons, etc.) as compared to the old ones; they mostly refer to farmers' benefits in terms of communication with the carriers of innovations (agronomists; 4 cases) as well as of facilitation/support concerning administrative-bureaucratic issues (3 cases).

Young agronomists do not strongly believe that they influence farmers' livelihoods and local development. Only three of them believe that they influence farmers' lives as their older colleagues did. Another 4 believe that they exert some influence upon farmers' decisions although this is perceived as a normal procedure of the job (advice). Finally, two of them do not believe that they can exert any influence upon farmers' lives. Overall, only half of them believe that they contribute, more or less, to local development.

On the other hand, young agronomists, in terms of their gains, mainly refer to experiences and knowledge (8 cases) with (moral/personal) satisfaction referred to by 4 out of the 10 and satisfaction through 'human' communication by 3 of them.

Their perception of advisory work is qualitatively different from that of the old agronomists. Most 'young' agronomists (8 out of 10) refer to the utilisation of the economic incentives provided through the EU programmes. They seem to be preoccupied with investors; their role mainly concerns the provision of information and support relating to various investment proposals within the current agricultural/rural development programmes. It thus concerns those among the rural inhabitants with the appropriate human, social and financial capital. Contact with farmers is rather official and its major part takes place at office or, secondarily, through lectures which are scheduled according to the service's plans or needs. Face to face contacts are referred to by 3 agronomists who put on them a very high value. In addition, at least 3 express their disappointment with such a situation and their willingness to work more in the 'old fashion' (contacts with farmers in the fields, the local cafes etc.). As far as other communication techniques are concerned there is only reference to emails and pamphlets (1 each).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Nowadays, the transformation of the Greek extension service into a bureaucratic mechanism, results in the provision of inadequate services to farmers, in a time when agriculture faces serious socioeconomic as well as environmental challenges. In parallel, similar shortcomings have been found as far as Development Agencies (preoccupied with rural development projects such as LEADER) are concerned (Koutsouris, 2008). Therefore, for example, many young rural people (18-45 years old), despite their common perception that extension and training should be provided free of charge by the state, appear to be willing to pay for advisory services (Alexopoulos et al., 2009).

Notwithstanding such a general organisational deficit, the current piece of work aims at identifying the situation from the part of agronomists. Thus, two sets of agronomists were interviewed; the first concerns old agronomists who experienced the 'golden' age of extension as agronomists working for the Greek extension service while the second concerns 'young' agronomists working in municipalities and development agencies for the last 10 years. Interviews' analysis shows that the old agronomists (still) praise their broad educational role made possible through the establishment of close relationships with farmers and their contribution in bringing about change and local development; they, thus, feel extremely annoyed with the bureaucratic turn of the service. On the other hand, their younger colleagues are, rather gladly, confined to the provision of techno-economic advice to clients without great expectations that such interventions may bring about substantial change. Therefore, differences as far as the understanding of the aims and the methods of an agronomist's job occur between the two sets of agronomists examined.

Such a change in the perceived role(s) of agronomists further aggravates the situation. In a time where sustainability becomes a major topic Greek agronomists do not seem to be ready to undertake the difficult task of transforming agriculture and contributing to rural development. The issue of sustainability requires the development of new conceptual frameworks and modes of operation. Among others, sustainability involves knowledge of locality-specific systems, appreciation of local knowledge, experimentation with and training of farmers, highly skilled facilitators, etc. (see, for example: Vanclay, 2004). In these terms, there is a draw back

when young agronomists are compared to the older ones. To put it in a nutshell, the research findings presented here raise serious questions for sustainable agricultural and rural development in Greece and the (tentative) role of agronomists. The latter may owe to various reasons, including the role of higher agronomic education (Koutsouris, 2008b). Further research is thus needed to identify factors affecting agronomists' perceptions on adult education and extension (Rogers, 1993) and examine the role of structural factors (extension service organisation and policy) in agronomists' work. In this sense, through the examination of structure and agency, the actual and tentative roles of agronomists in sustainable development will be delineated.

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