

Proceeding Paper

In Search of the Agronomist as Trusted Advisor: A Farmer-Centric Case Study [†]

Eleni Pappa and Alex Koutsouris * 

Department of Agricultural Economics & Rural Development, Agricultural University of Athens,
11855 Athens, Greece; elenip@aua.gr

* Correspondence: koutsouris@aua.gr

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Abstract: Given the interest in the new CAP in advisory services and the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS), and the importance of trust development between farmers and advisors, in this piece of work we explore the issue of farmers' trust towards their sources of advice. The field research addressed professional farmers who were in contact with agronomist(s) in Ioannina. Overall, 51 farmers were interviewed using a snowball technique. The trust model was utilized to provide important insights about the antecedents of trust towards advisors on the part of farmers, focusing on three elements: ability, benevolence and integrity.

Keywords: key farmers; advisors; antecedents of trust; ability; benevolence; integrity

1. Introduction

The current advisory landscape in Greece is marked by the absence of a structured advisory system as well as a weak and fragmented AKIS [1]. Given the interest in the new CAP in advisory services and AKIS (Reg. (EU) 2021/2115), and the importance of trust development between farmers and advisors [2], we explored farmers' trust towards their sources of advice. We particularly aimed to identify the characteristics of the trusted agronomist with whom farmers would prefer to build advisory relationships. Trust between advisors and farmers has been underlined in the agricultural advisory literature to promote important outcomes such as advice seeking and usage [2] and knowledge exchange [3]. Relevant research in the field is deemed important [4,5]; nevertheless, it is scarce and limited in terms of analytical depth. The trust literature outside the 'agriculture/advisory' field(s) underlines that trust (willingness to depend on another party) is a highly complex and context-specific concept [6]. One of the most influential trust models is that of Mayer et al. [7]. The model argues about the importance of the antecedents of trust, focusing on three elements: ability, benevolence and integrity.

2. Materials and Methods

Our explorative research took place from January to March 2022 in the Prefecture of Ioannina (Epirus Region) which borders Albania and the Ionian sea. Out of its 8 municipalities, 5 municipalities were selected as they cover 86.8% of the cultivated land (with the other 3 being mountainous with much fewer farmers, mainly sheep and goat semi-nomadic breeders). The total cultivated land is 2654 ha., half of which (1345 ha.) is devoted to the cultivation of fodder crops; other important crops are vineyards and potatoes (in 1 out of the 5 municipalities each), corn and tree orchards. The field research addressed professional farmers who were in contact with agronomist(s)-as-advisors. For the research, an aide memoire was used comprising, among others, questions on the characteristics of the farmer and his/her farm, as well as the following open questions: (a) which are the characteristics that an (ideal) agronomist should have to trust him/her as your advisor? (b) what (and



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how) would you like the trusted agronomist-advisor to (be able to) do for/with you? and (c) which would be the characteristics and actions of an agronomist whom you would not trust becoming your advisor? Overall, 51 farmers were interviewed following a snowball technique for each of the 5 municipalities. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to produce computer-generated documents using Google Docs. The research material comprised 570 pages analyzed per topic (exploratory analysis) [8,9]; some of the topics were based on the literature review, while others emerged from the primary material.

3. Results

Ability. The knowledge of the advisor is a given since all agronomists are university graduates. Nevertheless, trusted advisors should have in-depth knowledge and be continuously seeking to update it; their knowledge has to 'surpass' that of an experienced cultivator. Additionally, a trusted advisor should be an expert on farmers' specific crops. Advisors are judged by farmers according to their 'local level' and long-term experience; theoretical knowledge has to be integrated with practice. Specialization and experience are achieved, for the farmers, through farm visits or/and being cultivators themselves.

Ability is 'mediated' through the specific actions and behaviors of the agronomists that signal their ability, such as communication mode, roles and working methods. Of paramount importance is communication. Advisors' analytical and substantiated advice and answers, along with the ability to respond to complex questions, demonstrate their competence. Additionally, the advisors should be confident about their advice.

Concerning their role and working methods, agronomists should actively collect farmers' and regional data and base their advice on this analysis (including local experimentation/trials). The provision of concrete and stepwise advice based on data shows technical capacity and knowledge. The presence of the agronomist on the farm is the major 'criterion' which makes a good advisor. During field visits, agronomists can better demonstrate their knowledge to the farmer and thus farmers can better understand their competence. Finally, the effectiveness of the plan and/or suggested solutions is indicative of their ability.

Benevolence. With regard to 'benevolence', farmers underlined that a trusted advisor is one who strives to ensure farmers' interests. In turn, the advisor should not be entangled in any kind of interests (i.e., private companies) which might work against them. The above clearly favor the existence of a public extension service. Additionally, a trusted advisor must show his/her interest in farmers, i.e., to undertake concrete actions which benefit them. Finally, the advisor should have empathy and respect for farmers' efforts.

Benevolence is also 'mediated' through specific actions and behaviors. Advisors must initiate the establishment of communication, thus manifesting their interest in farmers. Additionally, the advisor should put questions to farmers and visit their farm to see the results of the implementation of the provided advice. Farmers appreciate an advisor's endeavors to provide tailor-made advice and devote substantial time to discuss with each farmer. The above underlines the advisor's interest in helping them. Farmers insist that advisors should be on the farm, signaling their interest to them.

Integrity. With regard to 'Integrity', farmers underlined that the advisor must treat them fairly, servicing all farmers on an equal footing and irrespective of their farm size, locality, etc. Moreover, advisors must be honest, transparent and accountable in their interventions. Additionally, integrity refers to reliable and predictable behavior in conjunction to the farmer's needs and values.

Integrity is 'mediated' through specific actions and behaviors. Trusted advisors are honest and transparent through the provision of information to farmers about the expected results of their interventions. Advisors should also be frank about a farmer's mistakes and dare to intervene when they notice them. Finally, advisors should transfer their knowledge and explain their recommendations to the farmer. For farmers, advisors' consistency and predictable behavior is mainly shown through farm visits. Farm visits must be frequent,

especially in the critical moments of the cultivation period. In the same vein, the advisor must be available and promptly provide assistance, especially in case of crises.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Our research in Ioannina Prefecture confirms, in the first place, previous findings in the extension/advisory literature, albeit in a more systematic way. Moreover, our research revealed mediators of trust, i.e., go-between ‘variables’ explaining the process through which two ‘variables’ are related. This piece of work in progress will allow for the better understanding of the degree to which farmers trust various types of agronomists (public, private, company representatives) and other actors-as-advisors, and thus of their (current and potential) role(s) in farmers’ micro-AKIS [5]. It may also assist in the design of effective Innovation Support Services (ISS) in Greece. Furthermore, it may inform the Higher Educational Institutes (agronomic universities) curriculum in terms of several issues concerning future advisors’ skills and approaches. It may be of interest to find out similarities or dissimilarities with farmers’ views elsewhere and under different AKIS. Finally, this work aims to trigger more nuanced research on the topic of trust in advisory relationships. A farmer-centric contribution to the theory of trust is needed vis à vis the revival of the interest (in both research and policy orientations) for (plural but also inclusive and impartial) advisory services.

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