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Towards a Farmer-Centric Approach to Advise Provision †

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Abstract: The objective of this piece of work is to further the understanding of the roles played by a wide range of advice providers in farmer decision-making. Results show that from the perspective of a farmer, advice provision and advice providers are much more varied than is assumed in common perspectives in policy and research. This, in turn calls for a 'farmer centered advice paradigm' while acknowledging (a) the heterogeneity of farmers' circumstances, and (b) that the term advisor may fit any person who provides advice.

Keywords: advice provision; advisors; farmer-centric paradigm

1. Introduction

In the past, the European Commission EC has shown its interest to facilitate the development of farm advisory systems, confirmed through the latest Common Agricultural Policy (CAP; Reg. (EU) 2021/2115). Indeed, the latter stresses again the need for the provision of agricultural advisory services (Articles 15 and 78) while also emphasizing that the advice given shall be impartial and that advisors have no conflict of interest.

The Horizon 2020 AgriLink project [1] focused on the role that advisors play to help farmers to adopt more sustainable farming practices. One of the objectives of the project was to further the understanding of the roles played by a wide range of advice providers in farmer decision-making. Built on 26 case studies, carried out in 13 project partner countries, one of the main findings was that from the perspective of a farmer, advice provision and advice providers are much more varied than is usually assumed [2]. In this piece of work, based on the farmer surveys from two H2020 projects (INNOSETA [3] and AgroFossilFree [4]) we aim at addressing the AgriLink findings and their consequences for innovation support/advisory services.

2. Methodology

The INNOSETA project dealt, among others, with empirical research on innovation processes related to Spraying, Equipment, Training and Advising (SETA). INNOSETA strived to assess end-user needs and interests, and identify factors influencing adoption and diffusion of SETA technologies. Through targeted surveys, in the 8 partner countries, 348 farmers were interviewed in late autumn 2018 till winter 2019. Farmers were selected according to their (pre-defined) cropping system and farm size class. Both adopters and non-adopters of the SETA technologies were included in the sample.

Similarly, in the AgroFossilFree project a survey, addressing different types of renewable and energy saving technologies/practices, was carried out in 8 European countries. Overall, 470 farmers, in late winter 2020 till spring 2021. Additionally, in the AgroFossilFree project the concept of microAKIS was used [5].

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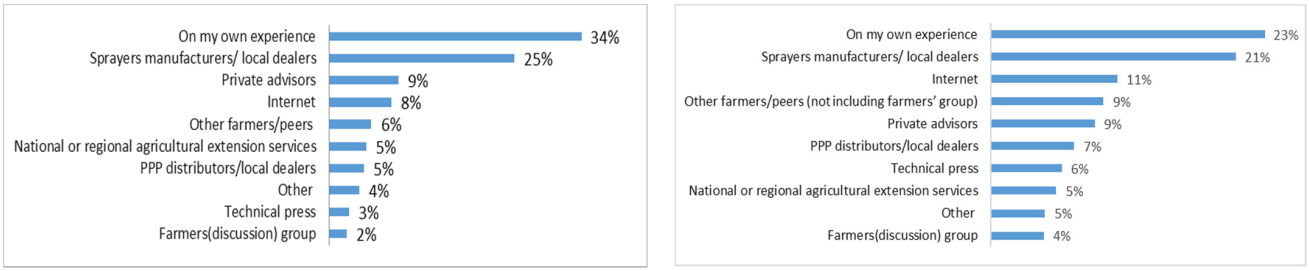
3. Results

3.1. INNOSETA [6]

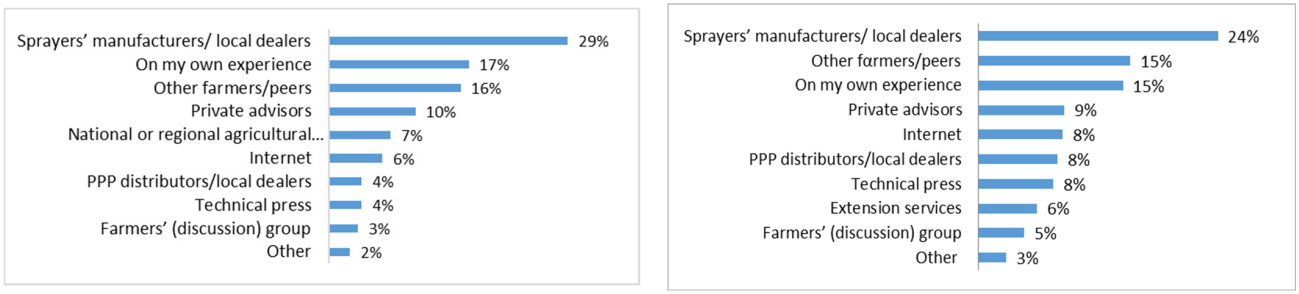
Farmers' most important source of knowledge/know-how on the use and operation of spraying equipment (Figure 1) are their own experience (34%), manufacturers and dealers (25%) and advisors (private: 9% and public/cooperative: 5%). When the three most important sources of information are taken together (Figure 1) again farmers' own experience (23%) and equipment manufacturers and dealers (21%) predominate followed by advisors (private: 9% and public/cooperative: 5%), other farmers (9% peers and 4% farmer groups) and the Internet (11%).



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 1. (**a**) Most important source of knowledge/know-how on the use and operation of spraying equipment; (**b**) Three most important sources of knowledge/know-how on the use and operation of spraying equipment.

For adopters, the most important source of information on buying innovative spraying equipment (Figure 2) are sprayers' manufacturers/dealers (29%), farmers' own experience (17%), other farmers (16%) and private advisors (10%). When the three most important information sources are aggregated (Figure 2), sprayers' manufacturers/local dealers (24%) along with other farmers/peers and their own experience (15% each) predominate.

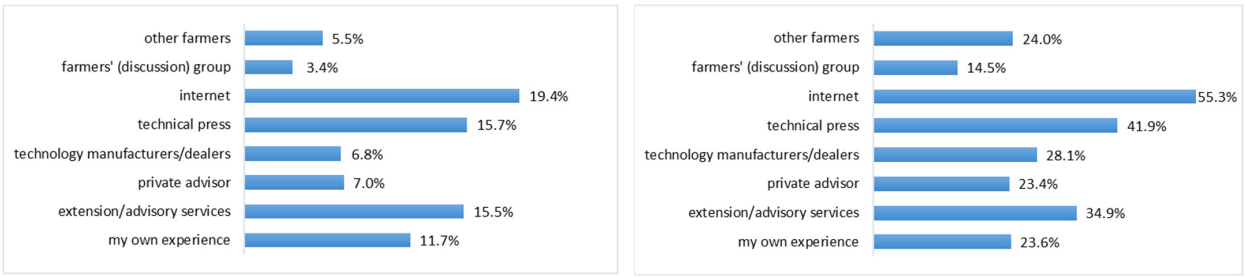


(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 2. (**a**) Most important farmers' information source on buying innovative spraying equipment; (**b**) Three most important farmers' information sources on buying innovative spraying equipment.

3.2. AgroFossilFree [7]

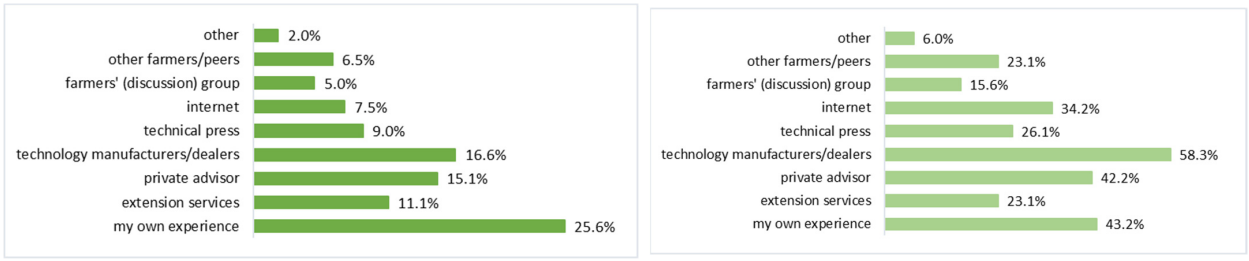
Farmers' most important source of knowledge/awareness on Renewable Energy Sources (RES) (Figure 3) are the Internet (19.4%), technical press (15.7%), agricultural (public, cooperative) extension/advisory services (15.5%) and their own experience (11.7%). When the three most important sources of information are taken together (Figure 3) the Internet (55.3%) and technical press (41.9%) predominate followed by agricultural extension/advisory services (34.9%). Technology manufacturers/dealers (28.1%), other farmers (24%), farmers' own experience (23.6%) and private advisors (23.4%) also play a role in raising farmers' awareness on RES.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 3. (**a**) Most important source of information on RES; (**b**) Three most important sources of information on RES.

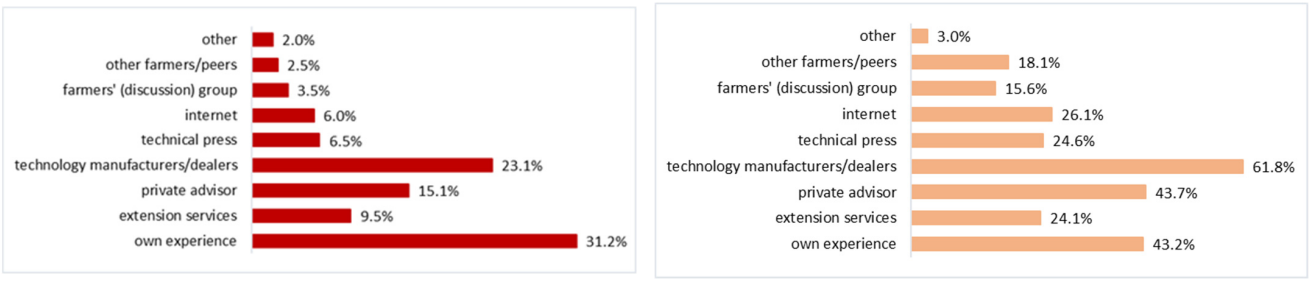
Out of the 438 interviewees (93.2% of the sample) who were aware of RES, 199 (45.4%) use RES on their farms. Among them, the most important source of information/support on the assessment of RES (Figure 4) are farmers' own experience (25.6%), manufacturers/dealers (16.6%), private advisors (15.1%) and agricultural extension services (11.1%). Concerning the three most important sources of information/ support on the assessment of RES (Figure 4) these are manufacturers/ local dealers (58.3%) along with their own experience (43.2%) and private advisors (42.2%). The Internet (34.2%), technical press (26.1%) and agricultural extension services (23.1%) along with other farmers/peers (23.1%) and farmers groups (15.6%) also assist farmers to assess RES.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 4. (**a**) Most important source of information/support for RES assessment; (**b**) Three most important sources of information/support for RES assessment.

The most important actors supporting farmers in the establishment and use of RES (Figure 5) are farmers' own experience (31.2%), manufacturers/dealers (23.1%) and private advisors (15.1%). The three most important actors (Figure 5) are manufacturers/ local dealers (61.8%) along with private advisors (43.7%) and their own experience (43.2%). The Internet (26.1%), technical press (24.6%) and national or regional agricultural (public, cooperative) extension services (24.1%) along with other farmers/peers (18.1%) and farmers groups (15.6%) also assist farmers to establish and use RES on their farm.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 5. (**a**) Most important source of information/support for RES establishment and use; (**b**) Three most important sources of information/support for RES establishment and use.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Both projects' findings verify the AgriLink's findings implying that from the perspective of a farmer, advice provision and advice providers are much more varied than is assumed. Therefore, there is a bias in both policy and research in starting from the side of advice provision while having little or no attention for farmers' advice needs. In this respect, countries' AKIS should start taking a closer look at these needs at the micro-level and to try and connect them to advice provision in various AKIS environments (see also [8]). This calls for a 'farmer centred advice paradigm' while also acknowledging (a) the heterogeneity of farmers' microAKISs, and (b) that the term advisor may fit any person who provides advice.

Furthermore, farmers' microAKISs include various sources of advice that are beyond independent influence. Independent advice providers should thus take farmers' reliance on such potentially biased sources as a starting point and help farmers to assess the validity of this type of advice and help them to place their advice needs in a broader context which also includes policy and societal objectives for sustainable development.

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Data Availability Statement: Publicly available data were used in this study. This data can be found here: (a) https://www.innoseta.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/D2.2.pdf and (b) https://www.agrofossilfree.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/D1.3.pdf.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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