

Italian agricultural extension system: old issues and new ideas

Anna Vagnozzi, senior researcher, National Institute of Agricultural Economy

Introduction

Italian agriculture needs a well organized system of services, because the gap between the profitable and non profitable farms is wide and the risk that a large portion of the latter ones comes out of the market and close their operations is very high. This situation has been considered in a positive manner until some years ago, but now, in a time of turbulences, maintaining jobs is a very sensible issue.

The agricultural knowledge system in Italy consists of two parts, very different for their objectives, methods and evolution: the complex organization connected with the firms that produce fertilizers, seeds, chemicals, animal feeds, human food (and so on) and the system of public services for farmers, connected with national and regional institutions for agriculture.

The components of first group have the principal objective to keep / expand their market share, while the second group wants to promote the development of agriculture and rural territories. Both try to respond to the farmers needs concerning: innovative or more rational product processes, improving agricultural products, decreasing costs and also lowering agriculture impact on the environment. The first group has two types of bonds: internal - preserving their own gains, external - respecting the European and national laws and rules etc.; the second group is a policy instrument that, especially now, has to promote both the growth of farmers income and the demand of the society to reduce the pollution and to improve food safety.

These “sections” of Italian agricultural knowledge system are separated and, seldom if ever, worked together; traditionally there is not a strong relationship between them; the private sector believes the public sector is wasteful and ineffective, the public one thinks the private takes advantages of the good faith of farmers.

In Italy, there is another group of organizations that supplies services to the farms: the farmers’ professional associations (trade unions or agricultural products associations) that are private bodies, but they often work connected with public institutions or with the public funding. In the last years the agricultural products associations, that have the main task to organize the production for the marketing, supply technological and economic services to their partners, asking them to pay a contribution for the costs. Among these associations, the most active are fruit/vegetable and breeder associations.

Many experts affirm that the development of Italian agriculture, from the Second World War to the Seventies, depended on the private firms that introduced the innovations among the farmers and

induced the productions' increase and the bigger use of technical inputs (fertilizers, machines etc). It is true, but also the public bodies, alone or through the agricultural trade unions, worked very much to improve the technical and economic culture of the farmers and, when the European policy became more complex and more difficult to implement, they have supported the farmers to approach the new issues about environmental impact, food quality, labour safety, etc. A question open for discussion for the public system of services is the commitment to help the farmers who are in an intermediate position: these farmers have to change their strategy to start up a more profitable economic activity, but they are reluctant in using the private advisors, because they are very expensive. This commitment, towards the small producers, is put into practice only by a few public organizations, located randomly on the national rural territory.

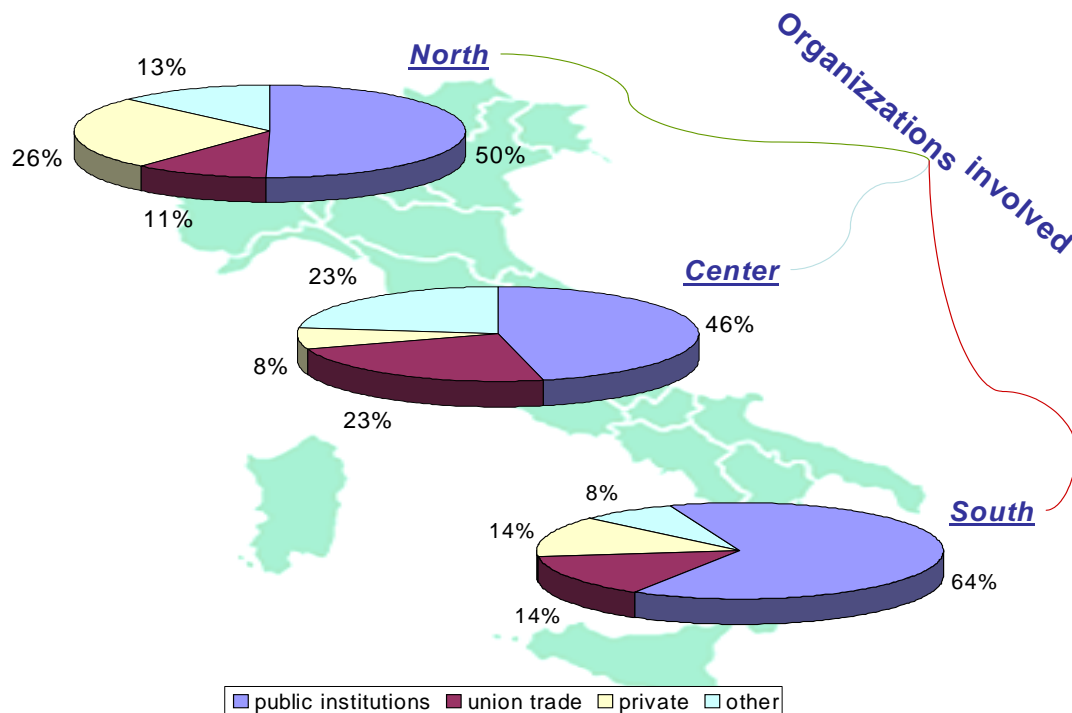
This paper will focus the attention on the public initiatives to improve the extension and adult vocational training in Italy in the last 15 years, underlining the main types of organization, fields and methods; the evolution of the last years; the actual issues and new proposals.

Since 1988, the National Institute of Agricultural Economy has a study group specialized in the agricultural services (in the first period) and the agricultural knowledge system (in the last period). This research group is the reference for many public institutions, for the Ministry of agricultural policy and for many Regions, because it alternates research activities with initiatives of support to the public administrations. By doing so, the general and theoretical questions can be checked inside the real situations and the activity of support becomes an important case study where it is possible to verify: the relationships between the different components of rural system of services; the needs of the farmers, of the technicians, of the public officers; the characteristics of the different kinds of agriculture and rural territories.

Extension and adult vocational training

In Italy, agricultural extension and applied research have a long tradition, briefly illustrated by Santucci (1994) and Volpi (1994). More recently, the annual Conference of the Italian Agricultural Economists Society was devoted to analyse the complex system of services (Carrà 2001). Since 1972, almost everything concerning agriculture is responsibility of the Regions, the public institutions that implement European policy, promulgate legislation and fund the main agricultural bodies. Then, the offer of public services for farmers is managed by Regions. The first consequence is that there are almost 20 different organizations for the system of extension and adult training. All Regions have their own legislation in this field and independently distribute the funds to the different organizations. Nevertheless, is possible to identify some common choices about the kind

of involved bodies, the activities that are promoted, the farmers' involvement and, in short, to sum it up, the policy objectives.



According to the graph, the Northern and Central Regions involve the same number of private bodies and public institutions,¹ while the Southern Regions involve more public institutions (64%). Compared to the '90s, the situation has changed, in fact another survey emphasizes a major involvement of the public organization both in Northern and Southern Regions. Another aspect to highlight is the type of NGOs and private bodies that are involved; the organizations connected with agricultural trade unions are decreasing, in favour of the agricultural products associations or/and groups of private advisers.

With regard to the public institutions, it is interesting to note that the political and administrative institutions have no technical tasks, but only role of direction and coordination. Instead, there are some technical structures, the agencies of agricultural services, that are increasing their importance. Usually they deal with and manage some technical supports, like the meteorological networks, the chemical laboratories, multimedia initiatives etc. and they employ specialized staff. Often these

¹ The information that are used in this paragraph is collected in a research (2004 -2006) of the Interregional program "Agricultural development services" funded by the Ministry of agricultural, food, forestry policy; the results regarding the northern regions overestimate the number of public institution because they don't include the situation of Emilia Romagna, the region that has chosen to fund only private bodies .

agencies are delegated by the official agricultural institutions to manage the funds to realize the calls for tender and to choose the firms able to supply the extension service to the farmers.

The main fields of extension service funded by public institution are: very specialized technical supports (33%), basic extension services (32%), specialized extension services (14%), information services (6%).

The first two fields are very traditional services in Italy. The technical supports are those activities that collect and process data useful to the agricultural processes, by advanced level technical instruments (for example the meteorological networks and chemical laboratories). They usually are funded by the public institution, because they have the high investment costs and the extension organizations can not afford them. In reality, they are very expensive also for the public, but now they are not put in discussion since these technical supports are very useful for the surveys on the environmental impact or the food quality and safety.

The basic extension is a kind of all-purpose assistance for the farmers, that nowadays is useless because the farms are often specialized and they need expert advice.

However, taking account of all Regions, the field of interest for the public supported extension is very broad and varied and, as the following pattern shows, they have needed a complex system of classification to include everything.

EXTENSION SERVICES CLASSIFICATION

First level services (target: farms and local territories)

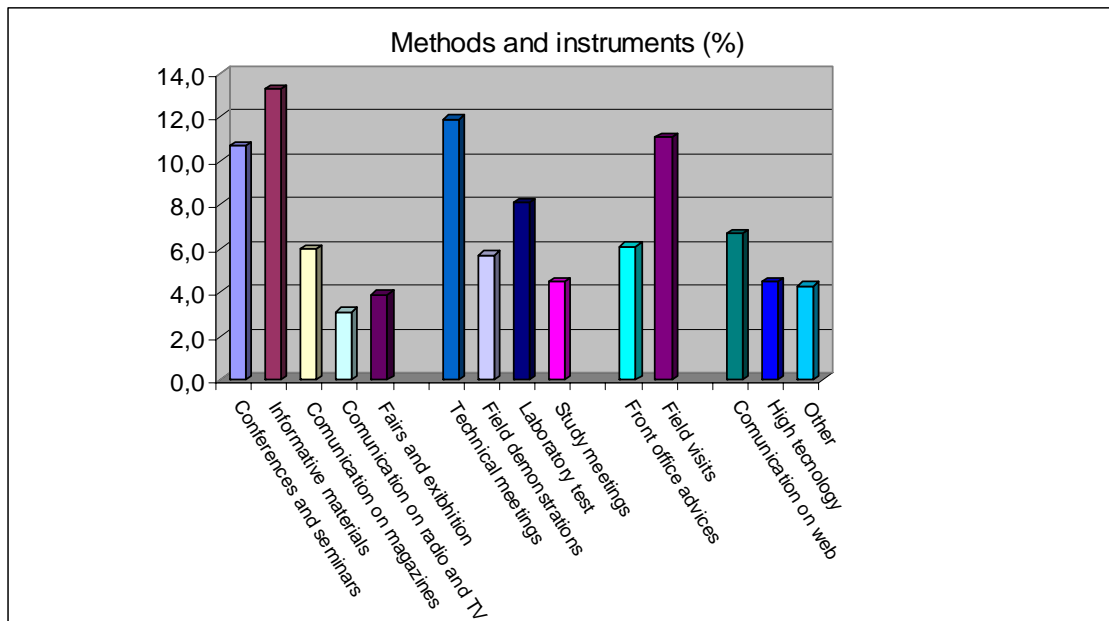
<p>a. Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a1. Technical magazines a2. Fairs and exhibitions a3. Conferences and seminars a4. Other 	<p>b. Basic and local services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> b1. Cultural activities b2. Basic farm advice b3. Technical advice b4. Marketing advice b5. Customer advice b6. Other
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<p>c. Advanced level support services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> c.1 Network of environmental monitoring c.2 Specialized supports c.3 Marketing promotion c.4 Networks, data base and multimedia c.5 Other 	<p>d. Product specialized services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> d1. Test d2. Technical advice d3. Marketing advice d4. Farm advice d5. Other 	<p>e. Managerial services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> e1. Accounting e2. Managerial and financial advices e3. Support to implement policy e4. Other
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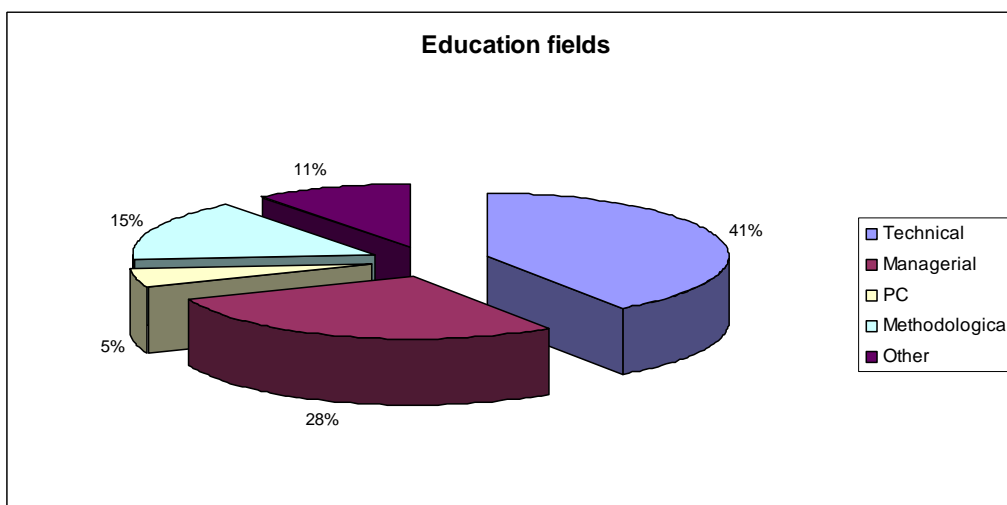
Second level services (target: technical organizations)

<p>f. Planning and management advices</p> <p>g. Analysis of innovation demand</p> <p>h. Other</p>

Regarding the methods and instruments used by the technicians to advise the farmers, they are numerous and different for typology. It is possible to collect them into four groups: information activities, advice for small groups, individual advice, multimedia and high technology. The most used communication channels are very traditional: informative materials (13.3%), technical meeting (11.9%), field visits (11.1%). However, there are some other methods, like seminars (10,7%), laboratory tests (8,1%) and communications on web (6,7%) that are connected with aspects more technological and scientific and that can be consider more innovative.



Regarding to the vocational training for farmers, the funds independently managed by the agricultural public institutions are connected with the rural development European policy. The main fields of the educational activities are technical and managerial issues; it is interesting to note the increasing importance of methodological issues.



The participants in such training programs are especially the farmers (48,3%) and the technicians (31,9%). Jobless individuals and consumers are not present, because the European funds for agriculture define the beneficiaries very rigidly.

Issues and proposals

According to the information and data resulting from the mentioned research, the regional institutions² invested a large amount - more than 350 million € an average of 4,3 million € per region per year - for the Italian agricultural extension system between 2000 - 2004. However, this amount was lower than in the previous five years (about the half), with respect to both nominal and actual value³.

The real issue of Italian extension system is that the commitment of the public institutions is not continuous, since it is conditioned on the availability of the European funds, especially those attributed to rural development. For example, in the period 2000-2006, the European policy neglected the advisory activities and many Regions did not replace the European funds with their own funds. They only assured the functioning of the public structures and the basic services.

This situation does not allow a structural flow of resources to the system, especially with regard to the management and the organization of bodies offering specialized services to the farmers. The result is that the agricultural extension system is characterized by a high turnover of personnel, low specialization of firms, continuing changes of the administrative procedures.

Another relevant question about the Italian agricultural extension system is the lack of coordination with respect to the development policy for rural territories. The paradox is that the rural development policy funds the advisory services, but it disregards them and the extension and vocational training system operates with their own specific objectives, not always consistent with the political goals.

The new age of the European agricultural policy could be a chance to resolve this old Italian matter, because the current funds for the farm advisory system (FAS), provided by the rural development European regulation (Reg. EC. 1698/2005), intend to promote “cross –compliance”. This means that these funds are committed to support the farmers adapting to the European laws on environmental impact, soil erosion, animal well-being, food safety, labour safety. De facto, this rule connects the FAS with the new European political aims.

² The research involved 16 Regions: Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Friuli V. G., Lazio, Liguria, Lombardia, Marche, Piemonte, Puglia, Sardegna, Sicilia, Toscana, Umbria, Veneto.

³ INEA survey – European operative programme on Italian extension service 1994-1999

However, another purpose of European policy is “... *to help farmers and forest holders to meet costs arising from the use of advisory services for the improvement of the overall performance of their holding ...*”(art. 24 Reg. EC 1698/2005). Furthermore, the Italian agricultural extension system has to implement also more traditional activities and instruments with the goal of farm’s competitiveness.

In my view there are two directions to undertake: the promotion of expertise and the improvement of the governance processes.

In the first case, it is necessary to give more stability to the public intervention. It is important that the bodies (professional associations or private organizations or technical public institutions) that want to operate in this field can have a long time prospect, to organize their structure, to specialize the staff, to promote the evolution of methods and media and, in short, to develop a network of organizations with a real expertise about the agricultural extension and adult training.

At the same time, the policy makers would have to plan the actions of advice and support more clearly, declaring the needs of the rural territories and of the farmers, identifying specific aims, applying a reliable monitoring and value system.

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