

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL CHAMBER'S ADVISORS IN THE LIFE OF FARMERS IN HEVES COUNTY**TIBOR BENCZE¹, GÁBOR KONCZ²**

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ABSTRACT

The Hungarian Chamber of Agriculture (HCA) was established in the spring of 2013 as a public body. The main tasks of the HCA are strengthening and advocacy of domestic agricultural and food sector, supporting the competitiveness of Hungarian food, furthermore the consultancy and delivering fast, accurate and reliable information to farmers. After the integration of village consultants' network in 2014 the HCA established a unified support system for farmers. This system based on five pillars: information, consulting, training, project management and European Innovation Partnership. In Heves County 27 village consultants and 4 village consultant administrators perform advisory tasks coordinated by the chief village consultants. The scope of official duties performed by the network: crop estimation, data collection and reporting tasks associated with state rating, assessment of damages in agriculture etc. The advisors validate about 9500 farmers' cards year by year. In our research we examined the main features of the village consultants and farmers receiving services (such as age, gender, level of education, professional experience, current scope of activities and contacts between the two groups). We hypothesized that the age and vocational qualifications of the farmers are determining the number of services used. To answer our research questions we were performed primary data collection in Heves County. We compiled two questionnaires, one for the farmers (N=150) and one for the village consultants (N=18). To answer the remaining outstanding issues we conducted interview-based survey involving 4 experts. In the course of the survey research for the village consultants we examined their most important activities and ranked by the number of mention. The five most common cases were the Unified Application Administration, the validation of farmers' cards, information services in connection with former Agricultural and Rural Development Agency, monitoring data service and Chamber membership fee acknowledgment. The farmers we've asked were all familiar with the local village consultant and 88% of them known the office client's time. The 69% of the respondents more than three times visited the advisor. Based on our research the village consultants completed more than 50% of administrative tasks of farmers in the 70% of cases. Overall, the village consultant network plays an important role in the life of the farmers regardless of age or level of education.

Keywords: agricultural consultancy, advisory organizations, village consultants, information-flow, administrative tasks

INTRODUCTION

Our ever-accelerating scientific, technical and IT development, cognition and apply new results, the acceleration and continuous change of economic and market processes increasingly put emphasis on the knowledge-based economy. The effectiveness of producer and provider activities largely depends on their adaptability, which is primarily determined by the quantity and quality of the producer's knowledge (ANDERSON, 2007; SZÉKELY, 2011).

Agricultural consultancy is a service which provides training methods for farmers to develop production processes. Thus, enhancing the living standards of farmers and improving the social perception of rural life. Agricultural consultancy has two major target areas. Its economic purpose is to increase the productivity of agriculture through the

transfer of technical progress. The other is the optimal utilization of factors of production: land, labour, capital and management (KOZÁRI, 2009).

Denmark has one of the most advanced agricultural advisory systems in the world, where technical advice can support farmers through comprehensive expert systems. An expert knowledge-based approach, allows complex management of problems in farms (ANDERSEN, 2004).

New things must be delivered to farmers and they must be taught to use them. This is possible only with strong co-operation and centrally supported adequate funding. Of course this depends on the resources granted by decision-makers to perform each task. Research, vocational training and consultancy can only create a successful, competitive, responsible farmer society if they reinforce each other (VARGA AND NAGYNÉ DEMETER, 2015).

Agricultural consultancy has decisive role in that farmers get access to more EU and national sources. Because of this, education and competences of agricultural adviser is one of the direct determinants of farmers' economic success. This fact produces demand on measurement of the agricultural advisers' knowledge and presses them to increase it. The expected quality of potential consultancy services depending on the agricultural adviser's education, experience, frequency of the knowledge improvement and past outcomes of his/her work (ANDRÝSKOVÁ AND FOLTÝNEK; 2006).

For all market players in the agricultural sector and the food industry, the legislation in force since 1 August 2012 imposes mandatory membership in the new Agrarian Chamber. The Hungarian Chamber of Agriculture (HCA) was established in the spring of 2013 as a public body. The main tasks of the HCA are strengthening and advocacy of domestic agricultural and food sector, supporting the competitiveness of Hungarian food, furthermore the consultancy and delivering fast, accurate and reliable information to farmers (PAP, 2014).

The Government is based on a cooperation agreement with HCA decided about that the Agricultural Chamber can get village consultants from the Agriculture Directorates of County Government Offices. Village consultants, who have taken over, together with the 202 agricultural agrarian advisors of HCA, form a single, one-stop farmer support network within "NEGTÁR" system. The purpose of the system is to find solutions to all problems of the farmers. The most important and most perceptible task of HCA is the counselling (NAGYNÉ G. PATAKI, 2014).

Those farmers who do not have an online query interface with the necessary technical conditions. They can still directly contact their village consultants with their questions personally, by phone or email. Village consultants and rapporteurs are given continuous training to cover the details and provide practical information about access to resources (RESZKETŐ, 2015).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

We chose Heves County as the target area for our research, where, due to the varied terrain conditions, all sectors of Hungarian agriculture can be found. However, due to soil conditions, the yield of most crops is lower than the national average.

In Heves County 27 village consultants and 4 village consultant administrators perform advisory tasks coordinated by the chief village consultants. Currently there are 5 centres (Eger, Hatvan, Heves, Detk, Füzesabony) waiting for our customers. Furthermore, in Gyöngyös there is an office open every day of the week, where the presidential cabinet is located. The network has a number of official tasks, such as data collection and data supply about yield estimation, status qualification; survey of agricultural damage events; cross-

compliance verification and control of uncultivated areas. We highlight that they are responsible for issuing and validating the original farmer's ID cards, which is a new chamber service since 2014. In the study region, the consultants carry out the validation of 9500 primary producers' certificates from year to year.

To answer our research questions, we were performed primary data collection in Heves County. Two questionnaires were prepared for our research, one questionnaire for farmers and one for the village consultants. The first questionnaire was filled by 150 farmers. In this questionnaire we asked the age, gender, and educational level of the respondents. Then we were curious about the following: Do you know the village consultant responsible for your settlement? Are you aware of opening hours? Did you visit the office for administration? We got responses about number of administrations per year, what kind of cases they ask for help and how many percent of the administrative burdens can they help? In the second questionnaire following the query of the basic data of village consultants (N=18), we found the following information: number of unique applications submitted in 2015; number of farmer's ID card administration in 2015; responsible area of the village consultants; peculiarities of regular contact with the farmers and name of the most common cases.

To answer the remaining outstanding issues, we conducted interview-based survey involving 4 experts, who have comprehensive information both from official and farmers' point of view. The information they shared we incorporated into our conclusions.

RESULTS

In the first part of our empirical research we asked 150 farmers in Heves County. Based on the age distribution of farmers, it can be concluded that over 40 years are overweight, so the aging of the farmers' society is also characteristic of the county. 39% of the surveyed farmers were women, which was also close to our preliminary assumptions.

The highest level of education in the target group is quite good. *Figure 7* shows that the proportion of people with higher education in the target group is 32% and those with secondary education are 61%. This can be explained by the fact that, in addition to carrying out agricultural activities, administrations and tenders require higher qualifications.

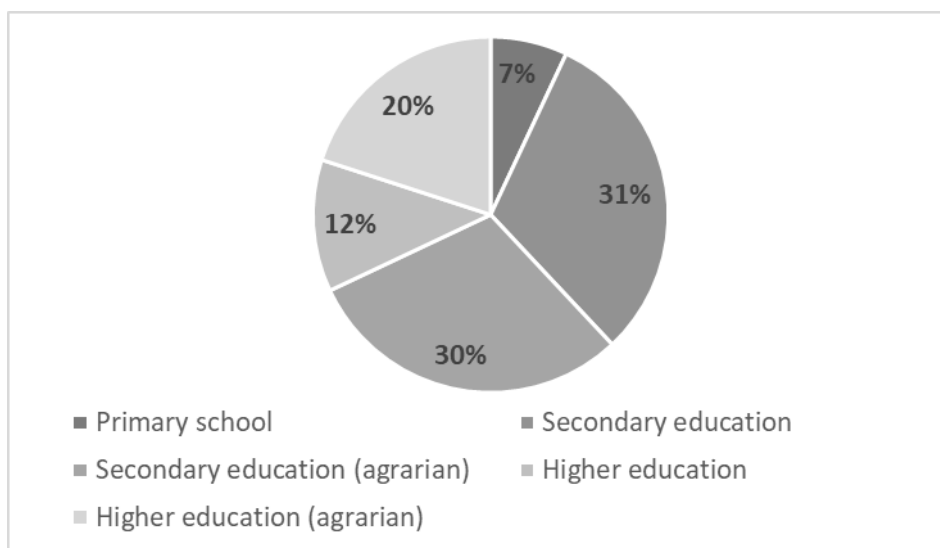


Figure 1. Percentage distribution of farmers' qualifications

Source: Based on questionnaire survey, 2016.

Analysing the results obtained, it can be concluded that the proportion of persons with specialization qualifications is also high. 49% of those with secondary education and 62% of those with higher education qualifications have a specialty agricultural qualification. In the case of non-agricultural graduates, it is likely that they did not care about agriculture in their younger years, they did not see any possibility of living in this sector. These clients are forced to acquire secondary vocational qualifications if they wish to receive subsidies in the future. Furthermore, changes in the land law necessitate the existence of professional qualifications, unless they have been farming for 3 years.

It is comforting to know that 100% of the farmers interviewed are familiar with the village consultant in their village. 88% of the respondents are aware of the customer's reception time of the staff of the Hungarian Chamber of Agriculture. 69% of the farmers visit their village consultant more than three times a year. Only 7 percent of the respondents are those who only visit the chamber labourers once a year. These numbers also support the fact that farmers are in great need of administrative assistance.

One of the main questions of our survey was which are the most common cases in which farmers ask village consultants for help? 90% of the respondents nominated the validation of the Farmers' ID and 75% the area-based support administration. Landlord and land acquisition information is least sought by farmers, which may also mean that most of the producers are aware of this information (*Figure 2*).

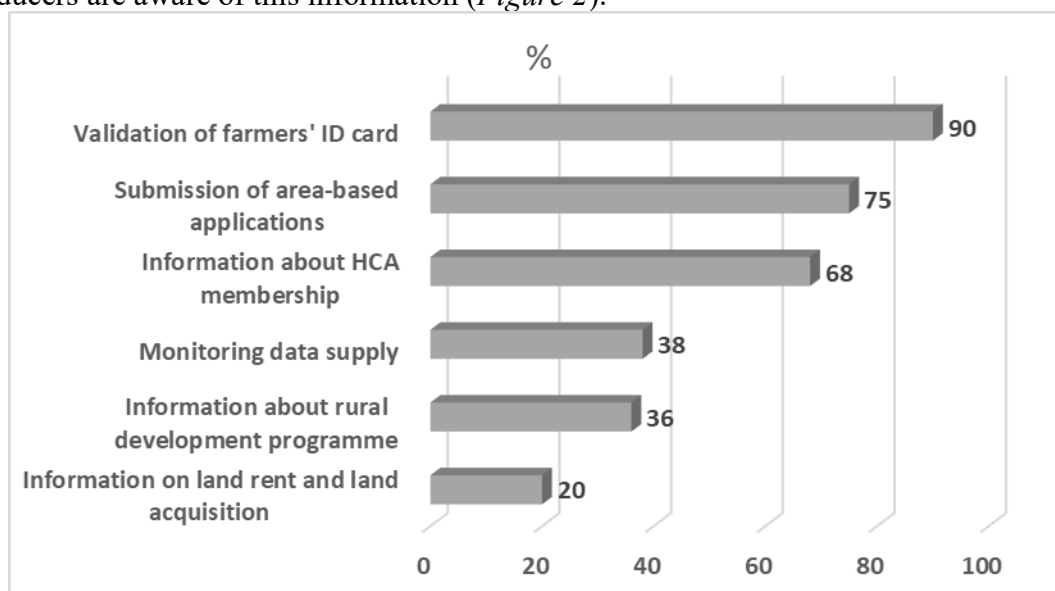


Figure 2. Percentage distribution of type of cases identified by farmers

Source: Based on questionnaire survey, 2016.

The final question of our questionnaire asked how many percent of administrative burdens are taken away by village consultants from farmers' shoulders. 70% of the respondents said that the amount of administration that their village consultant helps them is above the 50%. During our research, we did not encounter a producer who did not ask for help carrying out administrative tasks (*Figure 3*).

Another questionnaire of our research was questioned among 27 village consultants of Heves County. 18 of them answered our questions. The average age of village consultants is 45 years. The majority of respondents belong to the young age group and are innovative in performing the tasks. Our target group contains a person who has been a village consultant for a year, but we've met someone who has been working in this position for 22 years. The surveyed village consultants have been working on average for 11 years in this profession.

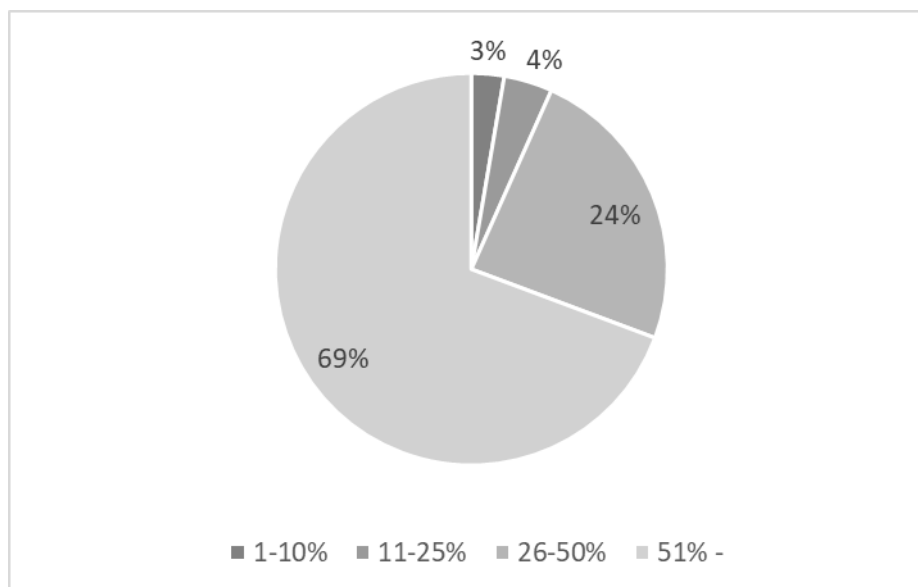


Figure 3. The percentage of administrative burdens that the village consultant helps the respondents

Source: Based on questionnaire survey, 2016.

As mentioned above, one of the most important tasks of village economists is to submit single applications. *Figure 4* shows that 6057 single applications were submitted to the Agriculture and Rural Development Office in Heves County in 2015. The 4002 applications submitted by village consultants represent 66%. The submission of uniform applications for 2015 meant a more complex, new interface for village consultants. Despite the complexity of the new system, county farmers were served and their applications were submitted. As a result of the statutory change that area-based subsidies are deserved for more than one hectare area, the number of county applicants decreased by 800 compared to the previous year. Among the respondents, we can meet with a village consultant who has submitted 122 Area-Based Grant Applications in the year 2015, but also who submitted 320 applications.

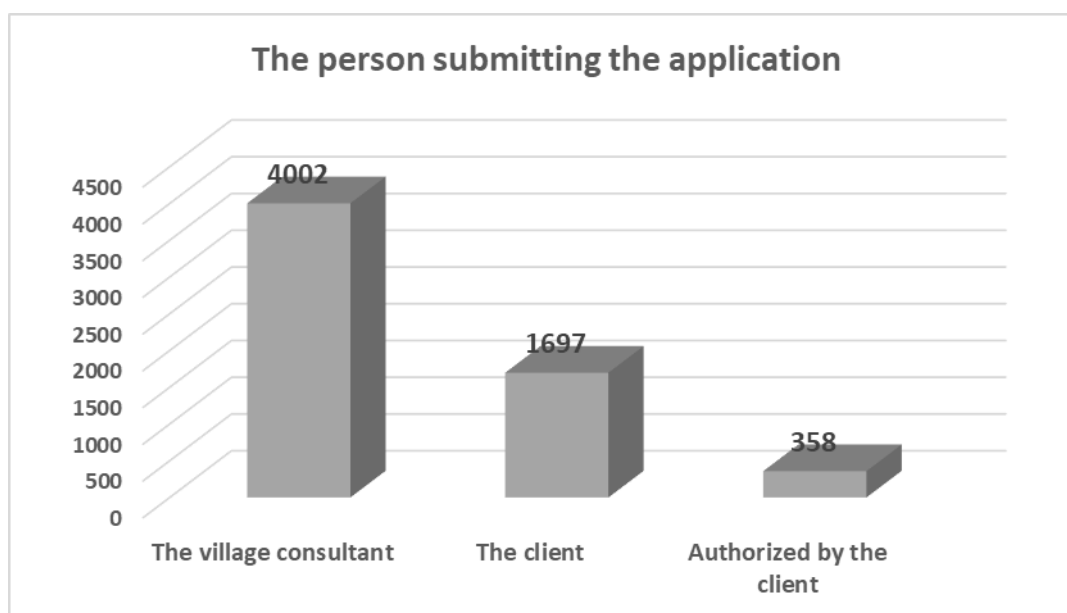


Figure 4. Number of single application in 2015

Source: Edited by the authors, 2016.

The surveyed village consultants are responsible for 2-6 settlements, where customer service offices are reserved and they have reception times. The number of farmers they regularly keep in contact with is between 60 and 730 people.

CONCLUSIONS

Through our research, we pointed out the importance of the activity of village consultant working in the Heves County. The employee of the HCA participating in research submitted 3475 single applications and completed 6664 farmers' ID cards in 2015. These activities were manifested in a large number by each village consultant. In addition, they carried out several special and novel activities in administrative, tender and professional fields.

The farmers questioned also said that village consultants are taking considerable burdens from their shoulders. The hypothesis we made before the survey did not prove that farmers with lower qualifications use the services of village consultants more widely. During the processing of questionnaires and interviews it became apparent, that farmers with higher qualifications also needed the services of village economists because there are cases in which they can only assist. Many people take advantage of their services due to lack of time and to avoid inaccuracy. In addition to the day-to-day activity of the village consultants, they are constantly receiving the necessary training and information.

During the interviews, we found that young highly qualified farmers already use all sources of information (e.g. village consultant, internet, farmers' forum etc.), but in their work many times the administration takes a back seat. In many cases, farmers are notified if they have a mandatory deadline or there are information about new tendering opportunities.

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