Setting up a Sustainable Training Center for Agricultural Consultancy in the North West and Central Region of Romania

Sorin Liviu ȘTEFĂNESCU1), Roxana VIDICAN2), Liviu MĂRGHITAȘ2), Ekkehardt SCHROEDER3), Simona STERIU1)

1) PMU MAKIS/CESAR-MADR, Bucharest, Măriști Boulevard, No. 59, ICC Building, 2nd floor, Sector 1, Bucharest.
2) University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine (USAMV) Cluj-Napoca, Cluj-Napoca, Mănăstur Street, No. 3-5, 400372, Romania, Phone: +40 264-596 384
3) ADT Projekt GmbH, Bonn Adenauerallee 174, 53113 Bonn, Germany, Tel: 0049-228-9144730

Abstract. The Modernizing of Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (MAKIS) Project, financed through the World Bank Loan no. 4758-Ro, had through the component “Support for Advisory and Information Systems” (Official Monitor, 2005), the objective to set up Training and Information Centers in the main regions in Romania. A functional TIC for agriculture for the North-West and Central Region of Romania (counties Alba, Bistrița, Cluj, Harghita, Maramureș, Mureș, Satu Mare, Sălaj), was set, fully integrated to and hosted by the USAMV Cluj.

It was planned as a permanent training and information center with wider and structured curricula as well as information providers for topics of regional importance that are readily accessible and applicable for the agricultural/rural population. Its main tasks are to: i) gather knowledge on agricultural technologies from within the country and abroad in order to meet both the farmers needs as well as EU requirements, ii) develop relevant extension packages and training modules for selected topics for each agro-farming area; iii) train trainers and providers of agricultural extension and advisory services and provide them accreditation, iv) train trainers and inspectors within the food safety system and provide them accreditation and v) train researchers on how to develop research proposals and integrate within the European Research area.

The training activity started in October 2008 and is ongoing. Overall there were trained: 80 food safety inspectors, 40 researchers and 400 extension staff. Each training session was organized for 20 participants and lasted between 1 (for researchers) to 4 weeks (for consultants).

Keywords: MAKIS, training, extension staff, researchers, food inspectors

INTRODUCTION

A relatively recent report concluded that short before EU accession, the overwhelming majority of Romanian farmers lacked awareness and knowledge on the consequences, both positive (i.e., access to subsidies) and negative (e.g., strict compliance norms in a range of fields) of integration process (Doorman and Eissen, 2006). In addition, a large majority lacked the business and technical skills to effectively develop their farms into viable businesses, able to compete in the European and world market. Moreover, beyond the well known inadequate quantity of staff to cover even a minor proportion of Romania’s farmers, overall the National Agency for Agricultural Consultancy (ANCA) and especially its former county and local offices network staff (OJCA and CLCA, now decentralized to local administration), lacked expertise in such issues as farm-business management, consulting-communication skills, project design and monitoring, law, marketing, and facilities (notably, with regard to compliance with EU standards).
Recognizing the need for high quality agricultural services to facilitate compliance with the obligations of EU membership, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) was involved in continuation of assisting Romania to set up a modern agricultural knowledge and information system, the aim being not only to establish an EU compliant system but also to develop national institutional capacity for implementing the new requirements and to improve the flow of information on EU requirements and standards related to production. The Modernizing of Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (MAKIS) Project, financed through the World Bank Loan no. 4758-Ro, had through the component “Support for Advisory and Information Systems” (Official Monitor, 2005), the objective to set up Training and Information Centers (TIC) in the main regions in Romania, as knowledge resource bases for improvement and updating the professional capacity of the research, extension and food safety specialists to better serve the needs of farmers’ knowledge and technologies related to production, quality control, food safety processing and marketing in order to permanently know, adapt and meet EU requirements.

A functional Training and Information Center for agriculture for the North-West and Central Region of Romania (counties Alba, Bistrița, Cluj, Harghita, Maramureș, Mureș, Satu Mare, Sălaj), was set, fully integrated to and hosted by the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine in Cluj. This Center, along with other three (one in Bucharest for the entire South Zone, one in Timișoara for the West Region and the last in Iași for North and East Region), is acting like a focal point and an agricultural knowledge resource base, able to serve the need for regular or ad hoc training under continuously updating broad topics of EU requirements.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The original design of the Project foresaw that the TIC would be located at the University of Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences (USAMV) in Bucharest and would have linkages with the agricultural universities in Cluj, Iași and Timișoara.

After several meetings with the parties involved in the Project, based on the most feasible developed scenario according to the existing legislation, the option to set-up one independent TIC in each region was accepted and specified in a General Agreement, prepared and signed on May 8th 2006 between the Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development (MARD), National Agency for Agricultural Consultancy (ANCA), National Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority (ANSVSA), Agricultural and Forestry Science Academy (ASAS), the agricultural universities from Bucharest, Iași, Cluj and Timișoara and the MAKIS Project Management Unit (MAKIS PMU). A Training and Information Center Consultative Council was set comprising 11 members (one representative of each institution/organization listed above, Romanian Farmer Association and the private sector). The main responsibility of the Consultative Council is to annually approve the training programs (curricula) to be delivered in the Training and Information Centers based on information regarding the training needs identified by the extension personnel who is in touch with farmers at the local level, special needs assessments carried out in order to determine gaps in farmers’ knowledge on specific matters, priorities set up by the MARD in order to meet the EU requirements as well training programs developed for the extension and food safety specialists by ANSVSA or ANCA with funds from other sources.

Teams from the agricultural universities, ANCA, MARD’s Euro-Counselors Bureau and PMU MAKIS worked together and identified the training sub-domains for the agricultural consultants according to the acquis communautaire and to the Common
Agricultural Policy (CAP). The curricula for the general topics common to all TICs (topics established in a participatory process which ensured its relevance to the current needs of the agricultural sector), was approved by the Consultative Council in April 2007 and a proposed team of trainers for agricultural consultants were trained for two weeks by the Danish Agricultural Advisory Service (DAAS) in Horsens, Bygholm College.

Following the launch of an international bid, USAMV Cluj prepared a technical and financial proposal for the TIC North-West and Central Region of Romania, as the World Bank considered that the training providers for all regional TICs (Cluj, Timișoara and Iași) should be selected following a competitive selection process. The Quality and Cost Based Selection process started in September 2007. Reputed international consultancy organizations submitted to the MAKIS-PMU the documents of expression of interest for bid participation. The technical offers were opened at the end of February 2008 and the evaluation process was finalized in May 2008, concluding that, for the North-West and Central Region of Romania, the best proposal was submitted by USAMV Cluj in association with ADT Projekt from Bonn, Germany (as sub consultant). The proposal of ProAgria International in association with Finish Food Safety Authority and MTT Agrifood Research, Finland, was ranked second. In October 2008 the contract for TIC in North-West and Central Region of Romania was signed with USAMV Cluj.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The North-West and Central TIC was planned as a permanent training and information center with wider and structured curricula as well as information providers for topics of regional importance that are readily accessible and applicable for the agricultural/rural population. Its main tasks are to: i) gather knowledge on agricultural technologies from within the country and abroad in order to meet both the farmers needs as well as EU requirements, ii) develop relevant extension packages and training modules for selected topics for each agro-farming area; iii) train trainers and providers of agricultural extension and advisory services and provide them accreditation, iv) train trainers and inspectors within the food safety system and provide them accreditation and v) train researchers on how to develop research proposals and integrate within the European Research area.

The training activity started in October 2008 and is ongoing. Overall there were trained: 80 food safety inspectors, 40 researchers and 400 extension staff. Each training session was organized for 20 participants and lasted between 1 (for researchers) to 4 weeks (for consultants).

The core of the curricula for food inspectors included topics as food and feed law, different stages of production, processing and distribution, possible risks for human, animal and plant health and for the environment, the assessment of non-compliance with food and feed law, HACCP procedures, management and official certification systems, contingency arrangements for emergencies and control techniques and procedures. The one for researchers focused on EU’s Seventh Framework Program and National Programs for Research and Development: structures, priorities, mechanisms and procedures in funds accessing.

Half of the curricula for agricultural consultants comprised general interest topics (standard training modules, common to all MAKIS set TICs) and the other half tailor-made training courses for agricultural extension and advisory specialists, in accordance with regional specifics and needs (beekeeping, cattle production, fodder farming and sheep and goats), as following:
• The CAP general framework: rural development policies, key elements of the reformed CAP, SAPS, CNDP and RD choices;
  • The institutional framework for implementing the CAP in Romania;
  • Agriculture and food: food quality schemes, general food safety issues, traceability, animal health and welfare, plant health;
  • Agri-food certification and control systems in Romania;
  • Agriculture and environment: good agricultural practices, cross-compliance, organic farming, agri environmental schemes;
  • Marketing of agri-food products: EU regulatory framework and specific methods and techniques;
  • Farm financial management: basics of accounting and assessment of farm profitability, finding resources, business plans;
  • Communication techniques and modern methods in agricultural consultancy;
  • Modern technologies and EU regulations in beekeeping and silk worm keeping;
  • Fodder farming, pastures and biodiversity conservation;
  • Modern technologies and EU regulations in cattle production, milk and meat marketing;
  • Modern technologies and EU regulations in sheep and goat production.

The agricultural extension and advisory specialists were drawn in an earlier stage, mainly from the staff of the county and local structures of the public agricultural advisory system (formerly under ANCA), at present decentralized and in transition to Agricultural Chambers.

In a later stage, the courses for extension and advisory specialists were attended by the staff of the local Rural Development and Agriculture Departments (DADR) and other local institutional structures of MARD as well as university graduated representatives of farmers’ association and recent graduates of the agricultural universities seen as further specialists to be included within the technical staff of the Romanian public and/or private agricultural consultancy network.

The food inspectors were drawn mainly from the ANSVa county network staff and the researchers from the young staff of the research and development stations within the Region.

Based on developing guidelines for preparation of training materials and training methodology, on the continuous assess and update specific training needs of the different target groups, adaption and fine tuning of training content and materials as well as exchange experience with other TICs in Romania on regular basis, TIC Cluj succeeded to reach all the targets within the frame of the prior agreed contractual schedule.

Questionnaires filled up by the graduates at the end of the courses provide a complex data base including information on age, genre, education, background of trainees as well as completed inquiries regarding each subject, such as the usefulness of the topic, the trainer’s performance, the degree of interactivity, views on the quality of the content of training modules, trainers, course administration etc. The processed data are updated within the progress reports of the TIC monitoring department and the feedback received from trainees is being incorporated to improve the training continuously.

The website (www.cpicluj.ro) developed by TIC is interconnected with all the other MAKIS set TICs and effectively used by trainees, professionals in the field and students.

Based on the practical experience and achievements during the first year of implementation of the MAKIS training programme for updating the professional capacity of
extension and advisory specialists, food inspectors and agricultural researchers in the region, on experience in other EU member states as well as on the assessment to achieve an efficient and sustainable agricultural “knowledge and information transfer” system in accordance with the future needs, a strategy document has been developed, aiming to back up the sustainable development of the Center (ADT, 2009).

The document was prepared by ADT Consultants in dialog with TIC project management staff and several trainers in Cluj as well as in cooperation with the project management team of the parallel running MAKIS training project in Timisoara and MAKIS PMU.

CONCLUSIONS

The training courses for researchers mainly contributed to developing the capacity of competing for research projects and the courses for food-safety inspectors were particularly important for ANSVSA and the connected county network since its inspection staff is required to participate to periodic refresher training courses. The former ANCA network was trained to better address the farmer’s consultancy needs regarding EU/CAP environment and farm marketing and management. Positive effects at farmer level are expected to appear towards the end of the MAKIS project, due to receiving up-to date information/advice from the agricultural consultants, better technologies available from the research institutes and improved practices regarding food safety.

The training program is considered to be a success by all parties involved in the project and is likely that this type of activities can be self-sustainable in the future (once the funding form MAKIS project ends). Also, the consultants that developed the TIC’s strategy recommended that the training programs should be addressed in the future to other target groups as well. The TIC Cluj (along with the other three set TICs) would continue to meet the training needs, as already is foreseen, with further expected Governmental employed trainings, applications on EU funded projects as well training to private sector on fee basis.

To date, TIC Cluj has capacity for continuously updating relevant technical and administrative information and knowledge through the universities scientific body, institutional stability and good training infrastructure as being embedded in the structure of USAMV Cluj, proven capabilities in training and project management and the regional knowledge and networks to be an attractive partner for cooperation with national and international partners for joint project applications and implementation.

Acknowledgments. This study has been financed by the Ministry of Environment and Environmental.

REFERENCES