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THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION MODE WITHIN PUBLIC/PRIVATE ORGANIZATION IN CENTRAL/NORTH PORTUGAL: A CASE STUDY OF NEW ENTRANT SMALL SCALE-FARMERS.

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Main theoretical framework and contextualization of the research problem

The case study¹ was selected from a production area that is growing and is related with concerns to increase agricultural exports. The blueberry production system was selected for its dynamic promotion by public and private organizations, while having many new small-scale farmers. The new entrant small-scale farmers are assisted by an advisory system that is a mix of private and public institutions that provide advice and services about orchard production and rural development programmes (Baptista et al. 2014). This inter-connected system cooperates through a bottom-up concern to increase economic and social opportunities during an economic crisis. The private-public mix is promoting the entry of farmers into the blueberry production area through European rural development programmes.

Research problem and main aims of the paper

The overall research methods and data collection process can be identified as a qualitative case study design (Cresswell, 1994; Isaac and Michael, 1981). First, the research design was

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initiated through a literature review. This review permitted an introductory analysis and characterization of the blueberry sector. These preliminary steps assisted in selecting the region of study and identifying the key stakeholders within the agricultural development system, concentrating on the advisory services.

The major research objective is to investigate the performance of advisory services with regard to new entrant small-scale farmers and part-time farmers. The objective links to the following themes:

- 1) Farmers access to classical as well as to innovative forms of advisory services;
- 2) The known and unknown needs for knowledge, skills and services of farmers.

Some additional research questions were:

- (i) What types of novel methods addressing the specificities and needs of small farmers have been developed?
- (ii) How do small-scale farmers resort to ICT as a tool to get knowledge and information?

The total number of valid interviews with new small-scale farmers was 25. The study operationally defined the small-scale blueberry farmers with diverse economic criteria, namely:

- Blueberry small fruit production;
- Less than 1,5 hectares in agricultural production;
- Earning less than 25.000 Euros/year from agricultural production;
- Farm installation from 2007/2008 in blueberry production with at least one harvest.

The new entrants often time had prior employment in other sectors, but economic crisis assisted in the decision to invest in family lands through blueberry production for an additional source of income. The farmer profile in this group was high level of education (undergraduate degrees not in agricultural sciences), average age of 40 and predominately male.

The study also completed six interviews with blueberry production and marketing advisors/technicians. The study operationally filtered and defined the small-scale blueberry farmers with diverse economic criteria.

Methodology and techniques used to address the research problem

In the analysis and interpretation of results the study was interested in identifying how these new small-scale entrants increased their knowledge and capacities to produce and maintain blueberry orchards in Portugal. The group had little or no experience in growing blueberries or marketing a quality product in the international market. The interviews assisted the research team to explain and describe bottom-up cooperation issues by the private and public entities, the innovative farmer advisory system, advisory educational methods and the preoccupations for increasing agricultural exports.

Main findings

The interviews confirmed that the small-scale farmers are assisted by a farmer advisory system that is a mix of private and public institutions from the contiguous production area supported weakly by the agricultural knowledge and information system (AKIS) (Rivera et al. 2005). This inter-connected system resembles a commodity-based extension (UNDP, 1991) or advisory service that is predominately privatised. The private-public AKIS mix is also promoting the entry of farmers into the blueberry production area with the assistance of the Regional Development Programme known by the acronym PRODER 113 (Regidor, 2012). The new entrant farmers were encouraged through a bottom-up process to use consultancy services for the writing of their financial projects for funding, certification and the subsidized investments. There were project developers that assisted in this process to secure subsidized investments and loans. This was documented as well in the greenhouse flower production in Trás-os-Montes (Koehnen et al. 1999). However, for some new entrants, there were problems associated to higher costs that did not reflect the investment figures and lower estimated returns as a result of a pricing market change in 2014.

The innovative advisory service system has produced written training materials, ICT platforms and established a demonstration field for farmers. These are some diverse tools and methods developed to communicate to farmers along with the on farm visit and farm demonstrations (Lopes da Fonseca and Oliveira, nd). There are also training programs and workshops offered to the small-scale new entrant farmers. The provision of advisory and training services, in the opinion of the small-scale farmers interviewed, determined no major inequality among the different types of blueberry producers. And yet, 40% felt that small-

scale farmers were at a disadvantage when comparing the large-scale producers in the services offered by the agricultural knowledge system.

One of the conclusions is that the advisory services sustainability factor will be challenged in a relatively short time period as world-wide competition and price fluctuations for the blueberry sector are pertinent factors in an advisory system dependent upon price or sale of the commodity to finance the system. In 2014, the fruit price diminished and in the interviews the farmers addressed their concerns for payment of the PRODER financial project under these conditions. In addition to the price for their fruit, the small-scale farmers identified other issues such as the need for variety testing; resolution of certification issues; managing on-farm storage and fruit preservation; learning more about on-farm sales and safe food processing or transformation of fresh fruit to other saleable products. These concerns are the challenges for both the grower and the AKIS and other governmental and non-governmental entities when considering the community learning process approach (Korten, 1980).

All stakeholders in the cooperative inter-institutional network will need to be more active in engaging with small group learning networks. The non-formal educational services must play a role to construct novel learning networks through ICT tools and traditional methods such as meetings, training actions, orchard visits and workshops.

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