

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AGRICULTURAL ADVISORS FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE TOPLICA DISTRICT



Marija Stojadinović, Bratislav Pešić, Nikola Stolić, Nebojša Zlatković
Academy of Southern Serbia, Leskovac, Serbia-Department of agriculture and food technology Prokuplje



INTRODUCTION

Agricultural production in the Toplica District cannot be described as intensive although there are adequate natural conditions in that respect. Farmers need to be aware that under the current changeable business conditions they need to take care of the sustainability of their business.

By relying exclusively on traditional knowledge and skills they risk further marginalization of their economic and social status, even jeopardize their survival. To develop business and reach stability decision-makers in agricultural households need to be ready to continuously educate themselves about modern production technologies, financing, marketing, risk assessment, production insurance, information technologies, etc. Farmers need to raise awareness that agriculture is a business like any other. Improvement of work on farms is not possible without proper and timely transfer of knowledge, skills and information to agricultural producers, which is the main task of consulting services and consultants as important factors in the system of developmental institutions in Serbia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The subject of research in this paper is an analysis of the performance of agricultural professional services through the engagement of agricultural consultants, as well as the interest of farmers in cooperating with agricultural consultants. The research was conducted on the territory of the Toplica District, in three municipalities: Prokuplje, Blace and Kuršumljija. These municipalities belong to a group of underdeveloped areas of the Republic of Serbia.

The main research goal is to present the role and significance of agricultural consultants for the development of agricultural production on the territories of municipalities of Prokuplje, Blace and Kuršumljija in the Toplica District.

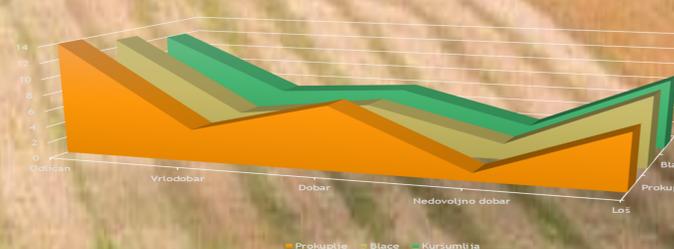
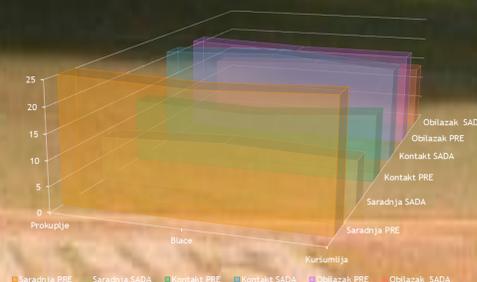
To collect and analyse research data the authors resorted to a non-experimental method of a survey by means of questionnaires comprising 20 items. The first part of the questionnaire included questions regarding the amount of information that farmers have about the work of agricultural consultants and of the transfer of knowledge. The research was conducted on 102 farms, whereby there were 34 randomly selected farms from each aforementioned municipality.

Table 1. Awareness of farmers of the work of agricultural consultants

Opštine topličkog okruga	Saradnja sa gazdinstvima				Kontaktiranje sa gazdinstvima				Obilazak gazdinstava			
	ranije		trenutno		ranije		trenutno		ranije		trenutno	
	Ispi.	%	Ispi.	%	Ispi.	%	Ispi.	%	Ispi.	%	Ispi.	%
Prokuplje	25	24,5	9	8,8	13	12,7	21	20,6	21	20,6	13	12,7
Blace	24	23,5	10	9,7	12	11,8	22	21,6	20	19,6	14	13,7
Kuršumljija	25	24,5	9	8,8	14	13,7	20	19,6	20	19,6	14	13,7
Svega	74	72,5	28	27,5	39	38,2	63	61,8	61	59,8	41	40,2
Ukupno ispitanika	102				102				102			

Table 2. Evaluation of the work of agricultural consultants

Oцена рада саветодаваца	Prokuplje		Blace		Kuršumljija		Prosečno	
Odlitan	14	41,2%	13	38,2%	12	37,9%	39	38,2%
Vrlo dobar	4	9,8%	4	10,5%	5	13,8%	13	12,7%
Dobar	8	23,5%	6	18,6%	6	17,8%	20	19,6%
Nedovoljno dobar	1	3,9%	2	6,8%	2	5,1%	5	4,9%
Loš	7	21,6%	9	25,9%	9	25,4%	25	24,5%
UKUPNO	34	100,0%	34	100,0%	34	100,0%	102	100,0%



RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data processing was performed by utilizing a non-experimental method, i.e. by a survey, whereby the researchers resorted to a questionnaire comprising 20 questions. The first segment of the questionnaire comprised inquiry into general data, while the second segment comprised specific questions relating to the amount of information that agricultural producers possess regarding the work of agricultural consultants and how the knowledge was transferred and acquired. The obtained data were statistically processed and presented by employing tables and graphs. Research results showed that 72.5% of respondents collaborated with agricultural consultants, while 27.5% continued with this kind of collaboration. The contact between agricultural consultants and producers was established through various media, as well as by visiting farms. This assertion was confirmed by farmers who participated in this research, i.e. 61.8% of respondents confirmed that they regularly kept in touch with agricultural consultants by phone, while 40.2% confirmed that they were regularly visited by the consultants. Surveyed farmers provided positive assessments of the work of agricultural consultants, whereby 50.9% of respondents assessed the work of consultants as excellent and very good, 19.6% believe that their performance is good, while 29.4% expressed dissatisfaction with the work of consultants by assessing their performance as insufficient good or poor.

CONCLUSION

Within this research the authors confirmed the socio-economic properties of the largest number of farms in Serbia. Farms that own less than 5 ha of arable surface are predominant. Their owners are older than 50 years of age and they mostly lack higher education. The work of agricultural consulting service in the Toplica District with the seat in Prokuplje was evaluated by the largest number of surveyed farmers as excellent. Their results can be perceived in the field, especially in agriculture on the territory of the municipality of Blace. Nevertheless, the users of consulting services believe that the work of consulting services would be improved if they had more information about tendering procedures as well as about the current state and expected trends on the market. They are also interested in obtaining advice about optimization of the production structure so that they could minimize expenses and maximize profit under the current conditions. Bearing in mind that the survey results showed that agricultural consultants are in regular contact with farmers and that they regularly visit them, as well as that their work to the largest degree is evaluated as positive, one rightly inquires into reasons of underdevelopment of agriculture in the Toplica District, especially in the municipality of Kuršumljija. The reasons can be traced to the migrations of the young working population from rural to urban areas, in unfavourable age structure of the owners and members of farm households, as well as in their low level of education. Difficult adoption of new knowledge and lack of acceptance of innovation leave long-term negative consequences on the development of agricultural production. To overcome this problem a group approach in consulting work is recommended to educate a large number of farmers. Likewise, it is necessary to intensify the promotion activities of the consulting work, as well as farmers' awareness of all domains of this service. All these activities should lead to raising awareness of farmers about the significance of the knowledge and information in modern conditions. A higher degree of acquiring information obtained from consultants could lead to abandoning traditional, low-profit and non-competitive agriculture towards a technologically advanced one. Thus, in the future, one could motivate the young working population to venture into agriculture which would make the sustainability of agricultural production in the Toplica District more certain.