

EUROPEAN FUNDS FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT – HELP OR BURDEN FOR ROMANIA?

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Rezumat

Scopul acestei lucrări este de a prezenta și pune în discuție principalele disfuncții administrative și procedurale care au cauzat o absorbție deficitară a fondurilor europene pentru agricultură și dezvoltare rurală. În prima parte sunt prezentate atât principalele mecanisme financiare prin intermediul cărora fondurile europene sunt distribuite și respectiv atrase, cât și cerințele venite din partea Uniunii Europene, cu privire la sistemul administrativ-instituțional agricol. Cea de-a doua parte prezintă o serie de date statistice care surprind gradul de absorbție a fondurilor europene în România. Următoarea secțiune reprezintă o prezentare a disfuncțiilor identificate de către teoreticienii în domeniu fiind propuse o serie de soluții pentru rezolvarea problemelor de ordin administrativ, procedural, instituțional și a celor referitoare la resursele umane.

Cuvinte cheie

Politica Agricolă Comună; România; agricultura națională; fonduri europene; disfuncții administrativ-procedurale; soluții.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present and discuss the main administrative and procedural dysfunctions, which have caused a poor absorption of European funds for agriculture and rural development. The paper has three parts. The first part presents the financial mechanisms through which the European funds are distributed and attracted. It also speaks of the European Union's requests regarding the administrative-institutional system of the Romanian agriculture. The second part presents some statistical data regarding the absorption degree of European funds in Romania. The next section focuses on the dysfunctions identified by the theorists and gives a series of solutions aiming at resolving the administrative, procedural, as well as human resources problems.

Key words

Common Agricultural Policy; Romania; domestic agriculture; European funds; administrative-procedural dysfunctions; solutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Romania is one of the member states of the European Union that despite its enormous agricultural potential does not use the resources with a maximum of efficiency. The causes of this inefficient relation between resources and production are for instance the poor infrastructure; the large number of subsistence and part-subsistence farms; the administrative, functional and informational dysfunctions, the lack of technology and last but not least the lack of money necessary for the modernization of the agricultural system. In accordance to a report made by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (M.A.D.R.) in 2010, just 55.9% of 23.8 million hectares, that represented the whole agricultural land in Romania, was used for production purposes (M.A.D.R. 2012, 1).

Considering that the agricultural sector is still an important source of income for the Romanian population, the issue regarding the poor absorption of European funds used for agricultural subventions or for rural development remains one of the most important matters to be resolved by the Romanian government. Therefore, the country needs a competent administration, which can coordinate the agricultural activities, deals with the reorganization process, receives and operates the requests of financial support coming from the farmers. Moreover, the informational system must be improved, through offering suitable information to the farmers regarding their funding opportunities as well as the processes and procedures which they need to follow in order to reach their goals.

2. THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY - SOURCE OF EUROPEAN FUNDS

The Common Agricultural Policy (C.A.P.) is one of the European public policies formulated and adopted within the European Union. Its implementation is only possible by using a specialized, decentralized system coming from the European level and adapted to the national one. Even from the beginning, C.A.P. was established in order to solve some of the existing dysfunctions in the national agricultural systems of the EU member states. The decision of a commonly coordinated agricultural sector was a direct

consequence of the negative influence of the Second World War at the level of agricultural production and on the agricultural market (Institutul European din România, Human Dynamics 2003, 4).

Moreover, C.A.P. was seen as a priority right from the beginning, being mentioned in the Treaty of Rome, which was signed in 1957 and founded the European Economic Community. According to the agricultural interests of the founding members, C.A.P. received during the first years of existence, an impressive part of the European budget, namely 75% (Bărbulescu 2006, 236). This percentage was progressively reduced until it reached about 36% (Bărbulescu 2006, 211) in the financial perspective for the 2007-2013 period.

In order to fulfil the general objectives for sustainability and consolidation of the European agricultural system as well as the national agricultural systems, C.A.P. is using two financial mechanisms. One of them is the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (E.A.G.F.), through which the direct payments for farmers, the measures of market regulation as well as the investments and the export refinances are assured. The second one is the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (E.A.F.R.D.), which finances all the rural development programmes initially approved by the national governments (European Commission 2007, 3). Of course, obtaining these European funds is not necessarily an easy job. One must first fulfil a series of formal conditions in order to apply for the financial support. These norms and rules are either imposed, such as the administrative reform or the creation of specialized institutions which are capable of handling the European funds, or recommended through programmes such as the institutional twinning process (Papadimitriou and Phinnemore 2004, 627) and the yearly reports made by the European Commission. These reports offer information about the current situation and make a series of recommendations aiming at resolving the existing problems (Mihai 2005, 3). However, since no enforcing mechanisms were present in the EU strategy, the recommendations for Romania have been without substance, being considered just general proposals (Ioniță and Freyberg - Inan 2008, 217).

One of the most important requests addressed to the member states was to establish specialized payment agencies, capable of handling the European agricultural funds (European Commission 2007, 4). In 1993, Romania has officially started the integration preparations by signing The Association Agreement with the member states of the European Community (Parlamentul

României 1993). In the same year the country started creating the above mentioned specialized payment agencies. One of the most important agencies of this kind - the Agency for Payment and Intervention in Agriculture (A.P.I.A.) - started in 2004, and from that moment on worked as a subordinate of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forest and Rural Development (A.P.I.A. website 2012). This agency was to manage and administrate the European money provided by the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund. In other words, the payment agency had to administrate the direct payments to farmers and the mechanisms of direct market intervention, this way becoming the most known institution of fund transfer towards the agrarian society.

A second payment agency, which was supposed to rationalize the administration of the agricultural system, was founded in 2006, being mentioned for the first time in the Emergency Ordinance no. 13 published by the Government of Romania. The name of this institution is the Payment Agency for Rural Development and Fishing (A.P.D.R.P.). It was managing the funds for rural development provided by the European Union through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (A.P.D.R.P. website 2012). There is a series of selection criteria which the beneficiaries must meet before they come into the possession of the European funds. They must be registered in advance in a data base called the Unique Identification System, part of the Integrated Administration and Control System; the agricultural land must have a minimum of 1 hectare, and the parcels must have at least 0,3 hectare each; the agricultural land must be kept in good environmental conditions, and last but not least the farmer must accept any inspection and control decision coming from the payment agency (A.P.I.A. 2012, 13). Moreover, the money is distributed accordingly with the current legislation setting up a specific level of payments called the quantum of direct payments. This quantum is a fixed amount of money received by the farmers representing the exact number of hectares owned. Starting with October 2012, the amount was increased, reaching 119.66 euro / hectare, from an amount of 100.65 euro / hectare practiced until then (Government of Romania 2012). Also EU funds applicants for rural development must now submit detailed and relevant projects in order to obtain a grant. Moreover, the government should develop a multi annual plan through which the funds will be redirected on priority axes and also decides what shape and in what way will these appropriate actions take place.

The document which incorporates this strategic planning its called in Romania The National Plan for Rural Development (P.N.D.R.) (Government of Romania 2010).

The attributions of the measures included in P.N.D.R. are entirely A.P.D.R.P.'s. All these considered, to streamline the processes, part of A.P.D.R.P. tasks which where included within AX II of the P.N.D.R. 2007-2013 were transferred to A.P.I.A. These tasks were referring to payments redirected to the disadvantaged areas or payments for ecological agriculture schemes, but also measures regarding "the proper agricultural and ecological ways and the measurement of the surfaces and measures of sylviculture" (Government of Romania 2010, 81).

To ensure a smooth and efficient process, several offices of the paying agencies and of those for agricultural advisory as well as those of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (M.A.D.R.) were established. All these institution were in accordance with the principle of decentralization. Therefore, there are appropriate local and county offices corresponding to the Directorates for Agriculture and Rural Development M.A.D.R.; regional centres and county offices of A.P.D.R.P.; county representatives and local centres of A.P.I.A., regional, county and local; agricultural chambers of the National Agency for Agricultural Consulting - main institution agricultural consultancy in the state.

Decentralization and deconcentration are coupled with a process of de-politicization of agricultural administrative system .Although these three elements of reform were not explicitly formulated as requirements of the European Union, in their absence, agricultural modernization and democratization of the administrative system in order to attract and rational use of EU funds would not have been possible. However, the three complementary processes are far from being completed; there are still elements that reveal the political and financial dependence between different institutional levels.

3. THE ABSORPTION DEGREE OF EUROPEAN FUNDS FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA

Recent statistical data shows that the difference between the absorption degree regarding direct payments and the one regarding rural development funds is conclusive.

Until august 2012 about 98.5% of the total amount allocated for the Single Area Payment Scheme, representing approximately 3.16 billion Euros was attracted and distributed (AGERPRES 2012). Moreover, according to a study published by the Romanian government, until the 5th of October, the absolute value of direct payments was raised at about 3.27 billions Euro (Government of Romania 2013). In other words, the absorption of direct payments reached, by the end of the year, almost 100%.

Also, statistical data of 2012 shows that A.P.I.A. has managed to distribute about 1.33 billion Euros from the total amount of payments corresponding to the 2nd AX. These payments refer to the disfavoured areas and the agricultural and environmental measures and they have about 2.097 milliard Euros to their disposal (AGERPRES 2012). In other words, A.P.I.A. managed to distribute about 63% of the amount allocated to these measures.

On the other hand, the results of the intermediary reports show that the situation is different when it comes to the funds for rural development. The absorption degree of European funds programmed by P.N.D.R. was, at the end of 2012, in some degree more than 50%. Moreover, from the total amount of 8.12 billions Euro funds administrated by the programme (Government of Romania 2013), just 4.38 billions were attracted and distributed (M.A.D.R. Direcția Generală de Dezvoltare Rurală 2012). Considering P.N.D.R. includes also the measures which were transferred to A.P.I.A., and which have an execution rate of more than 50%, it can be concluded A.P.D.R.P. is not as efficient as A.P.I.A. Therefore, the main problems regarding the European agricultural funds absorption are situated in the rural development area.

4. THE MAIN DYSFUNCTIONS AND ADMINISTRATIVE OBSTACLES STANDING IN THE WAY OF FUND ABSORPTION

One can identify many dysfunctions and obstacles that may be considered important causes of the poor absorption of European funds. Some of them refer to the human resources, others to the procedural problems regarding the periodical and frequent changes of the rules and codes of conduct or to the incomplete information received from the farmers or from the officials.

One of the administrative dysfunctions is that there are too many payment agencies, departments and branches and their responsibilities are not clearly defined. In other words, their overlapping tasks contribute to a considerable delay of the administrative processes (Wegener et. al. 2011, 596). Accordingly, the General Directions, which are subordinated to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, have official offices at county and local level. Their attributions and those of the A.P.D.R.P. offices at regional and county level are partially overlapping. In addition to these institutions, A.P.I.A. receives also a part of the rural development attributions.

There are also a series of administrative lacks regarding the system of information distribution. On the one hand, the exact moment marking the beginning of a specific programme is not entirely known to the farmers. When a specific date is announced, that date marks the intention of beginning a procedure and not the exact start of the process. Therefore, the farmers who choose to do their projects before the official start of the sessions may find out that these sessions will not start as scheduled. Moreover, the procedural rules may possibly change requiring a redoing of these files (Dărășteanu 2010, 30).

On the other hand, the lack of experience among farmers or officials when coming to project execution is a direct cause of their rejections due to administrative inefficiencies (Lungu 2012, 10). Therefore, the farmers who are not used to signing documents, filling applications and submitting official papers, are usually farmers who own small size farms (Wegener et. al. 2011, 596). These farmers are not familiar with a world of bureaucracy, therefore they need consultants in order to get through these administrative processes. Basically, considering the poor consultancy agricultural system from Romania, to get the help they need the farmers will have to pay a specific price. This amount of money could consist into a major problem for the owners of small size farms, who therefore become barely eligible. They probably would spend

more on consultancy than they will actually receive at the end of the payment process. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the hired consultant, usually less paid, will be able to put up together an eligible file for the paying farmer (Lungu 2012, 11). Following, the farmer will probably choose to create and submit the project files himself. Therefore, the probability of their exclusion from the payment scheme is considerable.

Another important dysfunction is the leniency of the Romanian Government on the quantity and not the quality of the fund distribution. In this respect, the local councils have lobbied at the city halls in order to determine them to write as many projects as possible. In this way, the projects are task oriented and are frequently rejected due to their inconsistency (Dărășteanu 2010, 30). Moreover, entire field actions are organized using human resources coming from the county offices as well as from the national institutions. Their goal is collecting data directly from the source, thus from the farmers (Wegener et. al. 2011, 599). From a different point of view, an institution which initiates such field actions has supposedly enough employees which can compensate the need of front office executives and who can also maintain contact with the subjects in the field. But this is not the case of the Romanian payment agencies. The Management Authority and the payment agencies do not have enough staff and thus cannot handle the great number of requests coming from the farmers. This situation is a consequence of the major agricultural land fragmentation which have made a large number of farmers ask for European financial support. Moreover, most of them choose to submit their requests just before the ends of sessions. For this reason, the staff does not manage to resolve this large number of late requests (Wegener et.al. 2011, 600). The lack of personnel builds up informal connections among institutions, with the purpose of human resources exchange. In other words, the two payment agencies, with relatively different tasks, find themselves unable to solve the problems without sharing officials and field agents (Wegener et. al. 2011, 596). Therefore, the exchange of human resources does not represent a solution but rather a situation of which both institutions are affected when it comes to efficiency.

From another point of view, the staff has no work motivation. The officials' income does not match the volume of the work they perform. The ones who work in central offices of the agricultural organization are better paid than the ones from the local offices, although their tasks are basically the same. Moreover, the salaries of the state officials can not compete with those of

private officials. For this reason, a continuous migration of officials towards a superior level takes place therefore leaving the local authorities without any qualified personal. Another direction of the migration is towards the private sector, where for the same tasks and the same responsibility, the officials will be paid more (Dacian and Neamțu 2007, 635).

Corruption can also be a consequence of the low wages earned by the officials working within the agencies or the agricultural organizations. Along with the low salaries, a great part of the public officials are not permitted to get a second job (Dacian and Neamțu 2007, 635) Therefore, to increase their incomes, many of them will go corrupt.

Politically invested managers and leaders of the agencies and organizations represents yet another dysfunction of the human resources sector (Dărășteanu 2010, 29). This situation leads to disregarding the importance which a leadership position has for the good running of the entire organization. Moreover, the proof of political affiliated leaders together with the corruptibility presumption drives to a general distrust in institutions.

There are also a series of procedural dysfunctions regarding the frequent legislation and conduct guides change, as well as the incomplete information among institutions and between institutions and applicants. On the one hand, despite the wanted decentralization, the regional, county and local agencies still depend on the central offices. The conduct and procedural manuals are still written within the central agency (Wegener et. al 2011, 596). Moreover, these manuals have suffered frequent changes, which affected not only the requests processing, but also the whole process of creating and submitting files. Basically the farmers were forced to adapt to the new rules (Dărășteanu 2010, 30). Regarding the causes of these changes there is more than one opinion available. On the one hand, some theorists affirm the manuals are frequently changed to adapt to the local specific background, or to the requests coming from the European Union (Wegener et. al. 2011, 600). On the other hand, other theorists claim these changes exist due to the inconsistency of the manuals written by inexperienced Management Authorities (Dărășteanu 2010, 30). Moreover, it looks like the procedural textbooks leave room for interpretation, thus implementing procedures and project evaluation are not universal, but vary from county to county (Wegener et.al.2011, 600). Of course, this reality can be placed according with the regional specifics, which must be accurately transposed in the texts of conduct manuals.

However, such approach, which may be different by region, could naturally create confusion among the farmers and may also generate processing difficulties at national level. The excessive bureaucracy might be yet another obstacle when it comes to submitting the files containing these applications (Greco 2009.210).

5. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS: POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR BETTER MANAGEMENT OF EU FUNDS

This study evidently concludes that this poor drawing of funds is a direct consequence of the institutional and administrative shortcomings. Another major cause might be the lack of experience and motivation coming from both the qualified personnel and the beneficiaries.

An optimistic outlook over the Romanian agricultural system shows us there was a significantly growing in the European funds absorption, from 2.77 billions in 2011 up to 4 billions in 2012 (Agroinfo 2012). There are visible signs that this increase will continue the upward trend in the future. However, the European decisions regarding the future assigned amounts show an important 20% cut, down to 7.2 billions in the upcoming financial perspective 2014-2020. We are talking then about a considerable minimization of 770 millions (Ziarul Financiar 2012). Moreover, probably the most important aspect regarding the future of agricultural funds and rural development will be, starting with 2014, the exponential increase of the co-financing coming from the budget revenue. It will reach a rate of about 25% compared to only 5% at the moment.

Distributing funds through projects will naturally become a difficult process and it will directly affect the rural development, one of the most problematic sectors in Romania. Moreover, the accent will be laid on the amounts distributed through direct payments which will increase to about 196 euro/hectare in 2020 (Ziarul Financiar 2012).

All these considered, implementing a set of solutions which can change the present situation is evidently needed. This could also lead to a more efficient agricultural and administrative system.

There is an immediate need of finalizing the decentralization process (Greco 2009, 210) by breaking all the subordination bonds between different levels. To that effect, the local, regional and county representatives must possess

territorial autonomy and they have to be able to choose their own members without any kind of political influence.

This process of decentralization must be effectively enforced by ensuring a proper level of financial resources. Having all these shortcomings when coming to field agents or officials, was the result of a dysfunction in the distribution of funds between agencies, and not necessarily a matter coming from a central level (Wegener et Al. 2011, 597). This situation can be naturally avoided by facilitating periodic surveys among both, public officials and these project beneficiaries or by having periodic inspections within institutions.

The accuracy planning and a direct information communication are needed when it comes to submitting applications and projects. In this way, the farmers will have the necessary time to collecting the appropriate project documentation, thus diminishing cases of incomplete files filling or last day submissions, making processing and analyzing of these files impossible.

To that effect, in mid 2012, A.P.D.R.P. has released a press bulletin generically named "Submitting financing files in the last session day - major risk of fail funding" (A.P.D.R.P. 2012, 1). In order to diminish the number of late requests, they have this way explained to the farmers the file registration procedure as well as an estimation of the maximum number of files with possible processing in the last day of the session.

In order to solve the personnel insufficiency matter there are two different solutions. The first one consists of programmes computerization, allowing online submissions of these applications (Radu 2012) and the second one is investing in specialized personnel by providing vocational training necessary to obtain qualified people needed to attract these funds (Tarnovschi 2012, 360). In A.P.I.A.'s case the electronic submission system was already set in motion starting with 2010. According to the A.P.I.A.'s director statements, Mr. F.M Faur, the electronic system works unexpectedly well, lots of the farmers choosing this system over the classical one (Radu 2012). In the case of A.P.D.R.P. an electronic submission of the projects could be a difficult task, considering the large number of measures comprised by the agency as well as the complexity of the applications. Therefore, a series of training programmes can be one of the solutions for this problem.

The idea of a corruptible system of European fund administration must be considerably diminished through actions such as the increase in transparency when investing leaders, the raise of the salaries accordingly with performance,

the elimination of direct connections with politics, and last but not least forming bounds with the people.

Procedures must be first simplified (Grecu 2009, 210) and made accessible and understandable to each and every farmer which may be a potential applicant. The procedural manuals must become universal in order to avoid officials or applicants confusions (Tarnovschi 2012, 361). Moreover, a frequent change of the manuals must be avoided by investing in creating proper procedures.

However, one of the most important changes regarding the whole process of European fund absorbing must be the look from a different perspective. In other words, a shift from the quantitative approach towards a qualitative one is needed. According to M. Gorton, most of the new member states of the European Union face the challenge of finding the appropriate measures when addressing the rural development (Gorton 2009, 1315). Therefore, the core elements of the national programming strategies must have a qualitative nature, emphasizing the results of the projects and not the ways used in the process. Periodical monitoring processes must be conducted in order to see exactly how the European funds are distributed and to analyze the results of the processes, namely the investments made in the agricultural as well as in the rural development areas (Tarnovschi 2010, 361).

One clear classification and prioritization of the measures and solutions presented defines a difficult task, considering the complexity of the process of fund administration. Another very important fact is that Romania has slowly but surely conducted the system reorganization. This start leads to a progressive increase of the European fund absorption, from one year to another. However, in order to complete the system reorganization, which can bring serious and clear benefits, different interdependent and interconnected measures are needed, along with a number of experts that can programme them.

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