

From the “best fit” to the “big fuss”: the lost opportunities of the Italian advisory services

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Abstract

The regionalization of the public Italian advisory services responds to the extreme differentiation of the local farming systems, institutional arrangements, market opportunities, and many other contextual factors. In Italy, each Region has its institutional framework on agriculture advisory services, developing 21 different Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System that rarely interact with each other.

The possibility to design an agricultural advisory system on local basis could be an important prerequisite in devising a system that fit the specific needs and situations, according to the theoretical framework that support a shift from a “best practice” or “one-size-fits-all” to a “best fit” approach in the reform of public advisory services (Birner, 2006).

However, the decentralization of Italian advisory system produces a great variety of regional public systems with different quantity and quality of service delivery, poor coordination, duplication of efforts by key players, limited funding, penalizing the farming systems in some Regions. The recent measures to cut public extension system have further compromised the quality of services offered while new challenging scenarios demand an even more complex knowledge needs.

The main aim of this paper is to analyze the effects of decentralization and of current disinvestment in the Italian public extension services, while the knowledge needs of small and medium-sized farms (by international standards, the farms managed in Italy are very small and thus rarely competitive on the global markets), the emphasis on public goods provided by agriculture and the dominant narrative of rural development require more support from advisory services.

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