Perspective of Greek farmers and policy makers towards agribusinesses sustainability

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Balkan agricultural sector faces strong challenges in terms of unsustainable resources management and GHGs emissions. Although some countries show positive development indicators, however the continuous economic crisis, the low level of participatory/initiatives undertaking by local/regional authorities and the lower capacity and educational level of Balkan farmers in comparison to other European farmers, inhibit the adoption of innovative approaches and conformation of Balkan agriculture to EU policies, mainly at farm/local level.

In the framework of the INTERREG-BALKANMED project, entitled "Towards farms with zero carbon-, waste- and water-footprint. Roadmap for sustainable management strategies for Balkan agricultural sector – BalkanROAD", an in-depth GAP analysis was performed in order the most crucial gaps for adoption of sustainable agricultural and products processing practices to be identified and critically discussed. Emphasis was given to extract issues of current knowledge and future needs of sustainable agriculture in Greece and also in other four Balkan countries, i.e., Cyprus, Bulgaria, FYROM and Albania.

In this context, an extensive literature review has been initially carried out for identifying current status (baseline) of the Balkan agri-business sector in terms of sustainable practices applied. As a result, efficient screening of reliable published sources including several statistical and economic data, information regarding climate change and agriculture, penetration / impact of IT in agriculture and setting of national targets for agriculture has been performed.

Subsequently, a carefully designed web survey campaign with adequate response rate has been performed using on-line questionnaires targeted for two key groups in April and May 2018. The survey primarily consisted of multiple choice/check-box style questions available in the web with opportunities to supply additional commentary. GAP analysis was designed for two key target groups to gauge their opinions, concerns and priorities regarding agri-business behavior to resources and waste management as well as future implementation of environment friendly technologies in the Balkan agricultural sector.

The first target group consisted of policy makers such as leaders and heads of local authorities, representatives of the Ministries of Agriculture and Food, decision makers, state agencies and other stakeholders while the second target group was composed of managers/head of farmers cooperatives/agronomists as persons/links between the government and the farmers. Finally, part of the second target group was also individual farmers/producers of different agricultural products. For Greece, 42 farmers and 8 policy makers were participated in the e-survey.

In general, survey results offered a clear and useful illustration of needs and challenges identified by respondents, lack of knowledge in sustainable farming was pointed out and certain types of information, educational, policy and communication gaps were highlighted. Although in some cases needs and gaps were found to be overlapping among responses between policy and farmers, information and policy gaps were mostly defined by policy makers while farmers were less satisfied with issues related to education, economic status and communication/interaction between different stakeholders.

GAP analysis creates a useful picture of the Greek farmers and policy makers perspective towards sustainable improvement of agriculture and its marketing / business sector and provides a building block for two way communication between authorities and citizens / professional users.