

ESTABLISHING A NETWORK OF COMMUNICATORS AS AN ENGINE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATURAL GRAZING ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

The development of communication networks has an increasingly important role in the development and modernization of the fields of activity of agriculture. This trend has effects between different actors in the production chain and creates a tighter connection between the stages of land cultivation or the maintenance of natural pastures, ecological grazing, milk, and meat production, respectively the preparation of the final products and their distribution, including marketing techniques. In the paper, an analysis will be made of the specialized publications in the field of Agribusiness in Romania and the effectiveness of the various communication channels used in the present will be discussed with the aim of contributing to mitigating the current problems of natural grazing activities and identifying the main pillars of development and progress. This research paper utilizes an academic research methodology aiming to highlight the importance of communication networks in promoting natural grazing activities. The results of the study demonstrate that the establishment of networks can significantly contribute to the modernization of the Romanian agricultural sector, aligning it with the principles of sustainable competitiveness and resilience. In conclusion, this study provides evidence that the establishment of such networks is essential for the development of a sustainable and resilient agricultural sector in Romania.

Key words: natural grazing, communicator network, dissemination of Information, sustainability, rural development, agribusiness

INTRODUCTION

The importance of establishing natural grazing activities as a means of promoting sustainable land use and conservation has increased. However, the success of these activities depends on effective communication between stakeholders, such as landowners, farmers, conservationists, and researchers. This article emphasizes the significance of establishing a network of communicators to drive the development of natural grazing activities. It discusses key stakeholders, communication channels, decision-making processes, and opportunities for continuing education and training. The article also highlights the benefits of leveraging existing networks and partnerships to promote the success of natural grazing activities. By

creating a network of communicators, all stakeholders can work towards the same objectives and foster sustainable land use and long-term conservation. Similar research in the field of natural grazing shows their importance as a resource of animal feed but recently we are witnessing a significant degradation of this resource due to disastrous management. (Iagaru et al., 2015) [3].

Van den Pol-van Dasselaar A's research indicates that a discernible pattern of declining grazing practices is prevalent throughout Europe, which presents significant challenges as grazing provides various ecosystem services that are highly regarded by a wide range of stakeholders (van den Pol-van Dasselaar A, et al., 2020) [10]. All ruminants used to graze as their main method of nutrition. Grazing enables the most natural

management of animals. Many segments of European society clearly favor grazing, according to citizen surveys (Jackson, et al., 2020) [4].

Grazing-based production systems have the ability to produce high-quality foods like milk and meat while also having a favourable impact on a variety of socioeconomic and environmental factors because of their multifunctionality. Many studies have demonstrated the beneficial impacts of grazing on agricultural revenue, biodiversity preservation, carbon emissions reduction, protection of cultural landscapes, improvement of animal welfare, suppression of wildfires, and food safety. (van den Pol-van Dasselaar A, et al., 2020) [10].

The paper is a part of the research project Grazing4AgroEcology (G4AE), funded from the EU's Horizon Research and Innovation Programme, that aims to support farmers in optimizing grazing for the environment, animals, and society, while producing healthy food with less impact on natural resources [2]. It seeks to use a clear multi-stakeholder approach that aims to restore farmer and agricultural industry confidence in production performance and grazing competitiveness by addressing the entire Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS), including science and practice, Operational Groups (OGs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advisors, as well as consumers and citizens.

The approach of the project will aim to enhance the role of grazing in supporting the objectives of the Green Deal and the Farm to Fork strategy. One of the project's key concepts involves establishing a link between editors, specialized publications, newsletters, and newspapers in the grazing sector from partner countries, namely France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, and Sweden. By creating this network of communication, the research team seeks to foster greater awareness and understanding of grazing practices and their potential benefits, and to encourage knowledge-sharing and collaboration among stakeholders in the field. As a result of this idea, an inventory of this information will be

made, which will be published in the form of a single newsletter for grazing store" which will be synthesized in an aggregated newsletter that will be launched at least 4 times/year using a common template.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Materials and Methods chapter outlines the specific materials, instruments, and procedures used in the study under investigation. This section provides a clear and concise description of the methods employed to gather, process, and analyse the data. The Materials and Methods section into two parts, the first part emphasis the existing papers in this topic while the second part of the Materials and Methods chapter involved the creation of a persuasive document aimed at encouraging publishers in the field to participate in the project. To explore the importance of establishing a network of communicators as a driver for the development of natural grazing activities, a review of relevant literature was conducted. A search of academic databases (e.g., Google scholar, MDPI, Web of Science) was performed using keywords such as "natural grazing," "communication networks," "Agroecology," and "sustainable land use." The search was limited to articles published between 2010 and 2023. Articles were included if they discussed the establishment of communication networks as a means to promote natural grazing activities or if they provided relevant examples of successful networks in the agricultural sector. To ensure a comprehensive coverage of the topic, relevant articles from other countries were also incorporated into the study, with a particular emphasis on countries sharing similar agricultural systems and facing comparable challenges to those in our study area. The same search strategy described earlier was employed to identify the relevant literature.

About 17.34% of the national grassland area is part of the Natura 2000 protected sites which are designated as protected areas, however, this area is currently degraded mainly due to excessive grazing, as

highlighted by Roman et al. (2019) [7]. Due to the traditional practices of small-scale agriculture that persisted for a long time in Romania, natural, biodiverse grazing areas were still preserved, but now they are threatened by the recent intensification of land use.

According to a study carried out based on a survey in the agribusiness environment in Romania, the increased use of IT tools (software and hardware) is a determining factor for the professional success of actors in the field of agriculture (Tudor and Sipica, 2012) [9].

The situation of farms and holdings in Romania was studied by researchers who used statistical methods to determine the evolution of the main indicators such as the dynamics and structure of the number of holdings, the agricultural area used, standard production, the average size of the farm in terms of area land and standard production (Popescu et al 2016) [6]. They concluded that the number of farms is decreasing, the average farm size has increased, but the economic efficiency of Romanian agriculture is the lowest in the EU. A possible path towards the development of a modernized Romanian agricultural sector, which meets the criteria imposed by sustainable competitiveness and resilience, both by using existing agricultural technologies in farms to their maximum potential, and by increasing the number of young people involved in the agricultural sector is the establishment a communication network to ensure the acceleration of farm development and the digital transformation of Romanian agriculture.

Certain species of birds that live in grasslands are in rapid decline, in part due to the degradation of their breeding habitat as private landowners reduce the heterogeneity of crops to obtain large amounts of feed for cattle (Sliwinski et al., 2018) [8]. Natural grazing involves keeping several species of grass and shrubs, which increases the level of biodiversity. Also, the green leaves of the shrubs can serve as food when the grass is not growing.

Natural meadows represent an ecosystem that is prone to degradation if the pasture

management is inadequate (Marușca et al., 2021) [5].

In order to achieve the Newspaper task of the project it nominated a “Communication Officer” from each partner country. Following a meeting of the communication officers it was elaborated the “Collaboration letter” document. In this letter of intent, it is being informed about the Grazing4AgroEcology (G4AE) project and its collaboration and networking opportunities for journalists, authors, and publishers. It is stated that the project is a consortium of 18 partners, including farmers' organizations, extension services, education, and research institutions in eight countries (France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, and Sweden), and is a HORIZON Europe funded project. The partnership aims to create a European Network to promote grazing and support grazing-based farms on their economic and ecological performances and on animal welfare. Together with the network of 120 partner farms (15 per country), the capture and implementation of best practices and innovations to promote grazing will be enabled. It is mentioned that to highlight and share the best grazing practices at European level, an inventory of existing content in the field will be created. This inventory will be published on their website and promoted via all their channels. The so-called “One-stop newsletter” will gather grazing-related expertise from different countries and enable researchers and farmers to address the major natural, scientific, and technological challenges through knowledge transfer. It is stated that the project aims to bring added value to both the consortium and the collaborators with whom they want to create a solid and sustainable partnership. Therefore, they offer access to a large and exclusive European network built in the grazing sector, direct interaction & exchange with other authors facilitated through dedicated events, increased visibility of authors and their published materials in at least 8 countries by presenting their biography, activities and work on their website, and increased impact of work through access to new and international databases and an online repository of

knowledge related to innovations in grazing. The involvement of collaborators entails providing information/articles or journal entries that they wish to promote and permission to use summaries of published materials or if for certain materials no summaries are published to allow them to do their own summarization of the materials, all such extracted information will be centralized in a common newsletter. Collaborators are expected to participate in one or two bilateral meetings with the project team to discuss the optimal way of collaboration and participation in two events dedicated to authors so far as these events are of interest to them.

In many fields, the Slow philosophy of action has appeared for the purpose of sustainable development, for example Slow Food and Slow Tourism. For the field of breeding farms, EFNCP is the only European organization that focuses on maintaining low-intensity animal breeding. In this way, besides the reintroduction of less productive lands in many European countries into the grazing circuit, the most important results are the conservation of biodiversity, the avoidance of desertification, the sequestration of carbon in the soil and the prevention of wildfires.

The primary objective of forming a network association is to amplify representation and ensure that agricultural systems with "high natural value" (HNV), such as traditional pastoralism, are no longer subjected to discrimination by policies like the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

By establishing such a network association, agricultural practices with high natural value in Europe will be able to maintain a sustainable economy and grow through consistent economic incentives and practical support.

In accordance with the objectives of the strategy for research - development - innovation in the agri-food field in the medium and long term 2020 - 2030 and according to the specialty works developed by the university environment, agricultural universities must generate high-quality scientific knowledge, in order to accelerate the transfer of agricultural knowledge -

biotechnology in innovation (Fintineru et al., 2013) [1].

The general goal of the group of authors of this work (belonging to USAMV, ATC, G4AE members) EFNCP is to promote and implement actions to increase the capacity of agricultural farms with high natural value and those with traditional pastoral practices in Romania.

The directions of action to achieve this goal are:

- The proposal for legislative changes at the level of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in Romania to create a support framework for farmers practicing agriculture with high natural value.

- Analysis of the problems faced by small farmers who use traditional methods and how they apply for the financial incentives that are currently available.

- We support and offer specialized training through various university programs or at the Cluster level to increase the level of knowledge and encourage the inclusion of youth in traditional practical castes.

- We propose establishing and increasing the degree of use of networks among farmers, ecologists, and decision-makers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The communication strategies for the development of different practices in agriculture extend from the management of advocacy campaigns, i.e., the organization of demonstrations or street protests as a sign of revolt, and up to the use of communication networks to promote positive changes and increase awareness of various issues related to the importance of preserving natural pasture.

The results chapter of this article provides a detailed analysis of the study's findings. As mentioned, in the previous chapter a collaboration letter was sent to the communication officers in order to be sent to the national editors. The national editors showed their interest to be part of this research and to provide access to valuable information in the domain of sustainable grazing. Following a discussion with the national editors from Romania, it was found

out that the fact that attracted them most was opening to a new audience, having visibility on the website and where the article will be available in the 8 partner countries and the information translated into each national language. Moreover, the publishers mentioned the exchanges of experience with other publishers and the interaction with topics of interest that may not have been addressed by their own publisher.

Another result of this task is the first newsletter, which was launched late January, and disseminated in all the partner countries. The table of content of the first newsletter contains the following: About the project, G4AE stakeholders' benefit, project insights with the Project Manager, project insights with the Work Package two leaders, Meet the partners, Forthcoming Activities, and Contact us.

In the introduction it starts by explaining that The Grazing4AgroEcology consortium has released its first newsletter with insights into their ongoing project. The consortium includes 18 partners from eight EU member states and represents various grazing practices and pedo-climatic conditions in Europe. Their aim is to put grassland knowledge into practice to support farmers with the involvement of the whole agri-food sector, NGOs, and society. They invite readers to join them on this journey.

The Project introduces the readers to the topic of the newspaper by presenting That the Grazing4AgroEcology project, aims to support farmers in implementing grazing-based systems that produce healthier food and have less impact on natural resources. The project will target the EU Green Deal objectives related to biodiversity restoration, nutrient loss reduction, and greenhouse gas emissions reduction. The G4AE project intends to adopt a multi-actor approach that encompasses various stakeholders, including farmers, industry representatives, educators, researchers, advisors, and members of society. By encouraging co-creation and knowledge sharing, the project aims to enhance the adoption of innovative practices and facilitate the transfer of best practices and innovations.

The G4AE stakeholders benefit section starts with The project aims to provide added value to both the consortium and its collaborators by creating solid and sustainable partnerships. The project offers advantages to three types of stakeholders: general stakeholders, farmers, and young farmers.

Advantages to general stakeholders and farmers, including access to a European network in the grazing sector composed of young farmers, partner farms, facilitator agents, and scientific and technological working groups. The project also aims to create synergies and collaborative relationships with other European stakeholders to find solutions to specific grazing problems. Through the project, stakeholders can increase their visibility in the eight partner countries, gain access to an online repository of knowledge related to innovations in agroecological grazing and participate in dedicated events and multinational exchanges of experience. The project also offers opportunities to participate in farm walks and demonstrations hosted by innovative farmers, travel abroad to visit innovative farmers and exchange knowledge, learn how to assess farm sustainability and the impact of innovations on ecosystem services and farm profitability, and develop strategies to promote their own business through video-making and storytelling.

The Grazing4AgroEcology project also offers several advantages to young farmers, including the opportunity to use innovative learning and communication methods such as digitalization, be part of national and European young farmers group network, and meet other young farmers in national meetings. The project encourages young farmers to give input in discussions within young farmers groups, be supported by inspiring mentors, and feed the development of the project with their needs and opinions. Additionally, young farmers have access to useful outputs for the young farming community, educational materials related to grazing-related innovations, and interactive training events on grazing held by international and national experts. Furthermore, they have access to international

multi-day grazing tours that offer mutual learning in an interactive way through farm visits, training, and discussions. The project also provides access to an international grazing network of young farmers, acting as ambassadors for grazing in their own countries.

The highlights of the project Insights
Question: *What are the new inputs in this project and which do you think will contribute the most to its success in the future?*

Answer: Innovation in the grass-based system is much more complex and challenging than in any other type of farming system. The new input of G4AE is the integrated innovation approach through co-creation. Our 3-tier multi-actor approach based on co-creation and knowledge sharing will actively involve all relevant actors of the grazing AKIS.

Question: *As its project coordinator, what are the anticipated challenges/barriers/blocks that could be faced by the consortium during the implementation of this project?*

Answer: Integrating the entire sector with all types of stakeholders means the integration of different expectations, viewpoints, and constraints. It will be a challenging task to keep all on board and to ensure equal engagement. In our G4AE network, we will implement a set of 18 so-called “Facilitator Agents” who are specifically dedicated to this task of mediating and moderation. Additionally, there may be challenges related to language barriers and cultural differences among the partner countries. We will work to overcome these challenges by providing translation services and cultural training to ensure effective communication and collaboration. Another potential challenge is the availability and accessibility of data, especially related to farm performance and ecosystem services. We will work closely with farmers to collect and analyze data in a way that is feasible and meaningful to them. Finally, there may be challenges related to funding and resource allocation, but we will work to ensure efficient use of resources and seek additional funding opportunities as needed.

Question: *What is the role of the partner farms and how can other farms benefit from the results of the project?*

Answer: Farmers are central to the project which has a bottom-up approach. There are 15 Partner Farms in each national network, and they will be the source of the best practices and innovations to enhance productivity, economics, ecology, cultural and societal values on grassland farms nationally, and across the project MS. The Partner Farmers will make short practice videos and provide information for practice abstracts that will be shared through the project network for the wider farming community.

Question: *What are the biggest challenges for WP2 in your perspective as a coordinator?*

Answer: One of the biggest challenges will be maintaining active and engaged Partner Farm Networks throughout the project. The Facilitator Agents will have a huge role to play here

The newspaper ends by telling the reader that We are focusing on building the network of partner farms and creating the first synergies in the coming period.

CONCLUSIONS

Communication is one of the no regrets methods for changing agriculture for progress and the gateway to new resources and opportunities. It connects the key players in agribusiness, makes their dialogue heard and empowers marginalized communities, small farmers who use neutral grazing methods to influence financing decisions that help these practices economically.

Addressing the problems of pastures in an organized way and describing the activities of the network of communicators in a magazine is a source of good practices that can inspire farms all over Europe.

The article emphasizes the importance of effective communication between stakeholders to promote natural grazing activities for sustainable land use and conservation.

A review of relevant literature highlights the importance of communication networks in promoting natural grazing activities. The

establishment of such networks can contribute to the development of a modernized Romanian agricultural sector, which meets the criteria of sustainable competitiveness and resilience.

The Grazing4AgroEcology consortium has released its first newsletter, which provides insights into their ongoing project. The project also provides access to an international grazing network of young farmers, acting as ambassadors for grazing in their own countries. Challenges related to language barriers and cultural differences among the partner countries will be overcome by providing translation services and cultural training.

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