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AKIS in action:

Can AKIS interventions help farmers improve their income through direct marketing?

Networking event on March 18, 2026 - Online

Practical training as effective advisory measure for supporting short supply chains

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Local Gastronomic Points in Romania

Bogdan Alecu, Director within the Management Authority, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development

Empowering Farmers Through Direct Marketing and Diversification - The Role of AKIS

Barry Caslin, Energy & Rural Development Specialist, Teagasc, Ireland

Moderation: Julia Eberharter, Austrian Chamber of Agriculture

Q&A Session

Q: Because there is one question that I would like to ask you directly now, if you can show the slide with the solar panels and share your experience with it so since you're already sharing your presentation, maybe we can take this question first

A: Barry Caslin: There wasn't actually a slide with a solar panel image, but many Irish farmers are currently being approached by developers who want to install solar projects on farmland. These developers typically look for large areas (around 200 acres (≈ 80 ha)) so farmers often need to work together. Developers seek long-term agreements such as option contracts and 30-year leases, which makes the decision significant and often "once-in-a-lifetime." Farmers face important questions about taxation, inheritance, land-use implications, and whether they will still qualify for Pillar 1 payments. Teagasc supports them through events, fact sheets, and seminars to help farmers understand what to ask developers before committing.

There is also emerging government support for community energy projects, though uptake is still low. Successful initiatives require communities to form legal entities to generate and sell energy locally, which helps reduce objections. Teagasc works with communities and AKIS partners to explain projects, reduce fears, and provide independent guidance.

Q: In the practical trainings, is there an economic component included — such as calculating costs or determining product prices? And is this knowledge the same for farmers and advisors?

J Fila: Yes, the economic component is included. There are dedicated trainings focused on economic value, for example in milk processing, where trainers show participants whether the activity adds value and how much production costs. The same knowledge and modules are provided to both farmers and advisors. All modules (milk, meat, cereals, fruit/vegetables, etc.) are identical for both groups. If advisors need something more specific, the training can focus on that.

Q: What kind of products do farmers usually sell? Plant or animal, so milk, vegetables, meat? How is the situation in Ireland?

B Caslin: Irish farmers sell a mix of plant and animal products directly to consumers. Milk vending machines have become very popular, allowing farmers to sell a portion of their milk on-site. Many also sell meat directly after processing and packaging it, often supplying urban customers. Some farms run small shops, and groups of farmers frequently collaborate by selling eggs, honey, butter, or similar products together through one outlet. While most farmers still use traditional sales routes through marts and processors, interest in direct selling is steadily growing.

Q: Is energy from solar panels mostly produced for sale or mainly for farmers' own needs?

B Caslin: Most solar energy on Irish farms is produced for the farm's own energy needs, supported by a 60% TAMS grant. This is common among high-energy users such as dairy, horticulture, mushroom, pig, and poultry farms. Some surplus energy can be exported, but these systems cannot be oversized for commercial selling. Large-scale solar or wind projects on farmland are usually developed by outside investors, with farmers leasing their land for annual rent. In many cases, grazing can continue alongside the energy installations.

Q: Are the people who cook in these Local Gastronomic Points considered farmers? Were there any tax issues, and is the income from cooking viewed as agricultural diversification or something else?

B Alecu: Most people cooking in Local Gastronomic Points are farmers, although some are more like subsistence farmers who produce part of what they use themselves and buy the rest from nearby farmers. They often do not have all the ingredients, such as dairy products, so they rely on other farmers in the village. The activity is considered diversification within agriculture, and the income is treated as agricultural income, because the food served is made from their own produce or, in most cases, from products supplied by farmers in the same community. It is also regarded as part of a short food chain because of this local sourcing.

Q: Are consumers willing or able to spend more time and money to buy food directly from farmers?

J Fila: Yes, consumers increasingly show willingness to do so. In Poland, interest in buying directly from farms is growing, especially among people from urban areas who actively look for such places. Part of the advisory service's work is to make these opportunities visible, through platforms like Polski Bazarek and through training activities, and to encourage farmers to share their practical experiences with diversification and

processing. This helps consumers discover direct-sale options and understand the added value of farm-processed products.

B Caslin: There is a growing interest among consumers in organic and high-quality food, as well as in knowing where their food comes from. Although rising food prices make some customers more sensitive to cost, there is still a group willing to pay a bit more to buy directly from farmers, including through online channels. Many families appreciate the chance to visit a farm, meet the farmer, and show their children how food is produced, which adds an educational and experiential value. Consumers also increasingly value food produced without chemicals or pesticides, and this higher awareness strengthens their willingness to support local farmers through direct purchases.

B Alecu: In recent years, there has been a clear trend, especially among urban and middle-class consumers, toward buying more products directly from local farmers. One example is a “weekly basket” initiative created by a Local Action Group, where farmers from different sectors (vegetables, dairy, beekeeping) jointly offered a fixed-price weekly basket to interested families. Many urban residents subscribed and purchased it regularly. The main obstacle, however, is not consumer willingness but lack of accessible infrastructure: many people in cities simply do not know where to find or contact farmers. As a result, they often default to supermarkets. Strengthening connections between farmers and consumers will therefore be an important future policy focus.

Q: Is there a policy framework for farm diversification in Ireland?

B Caslin: There is no single, dedicated policy framework for farm diversification in Ireland, but diversification is embedded across several existing policies and programmes. Supports come mainly through the Rural Development Programme and Pillar 2 of the CAP, which fund diversification measures, as well as through the LEADER programme delivered by Local Action Groups. Most farmers seeking to diversify use LEADER for financial support, while Teagasc provides training and guidance through its Farm Business Options Programme, covering areas such as renewable energy, agritourism, food processing, and accommodation on farms. Teagasc collaborates closely with Local Enterprise Offices, which help with business planning, marketing, IT, and mentoring. Diversification is also supported through national strategies like Food Vision 2030 and the Climate Action Plan, which promote renewable energy developments such as biogas and biodigesters. Farmers play a key role in providing land and resources for these projects, and advisors help ensure decisions align with research and environmental considerations. Overall, diversification is advanced through a combination of CAP measures, national strategies, LEADER funding, and coordinated advisory and enterprise support.

Q: Do you see a risk that farmers might shift away from agricultural activities toward energy production or land leasing, since they can sometimes earn more from solar or wind projects than from traditional farming?

B Caslin: There is certainly a possibility that some farmers will move toward energy-related uses of their land, but this depends greatly on individual circumstances. Succession challenges are common in Ireland, and many farmers, often inheriting land later in life, must decide whether to rent it out, farm it themselves, or use it for energy projects. For some, supplying grass to biogas plants or leasing land for solar panels or wind turbines provides a better income and allows them to keep the land in the family while

still producing both food and energy. Ireland remains highly self-sufficient in food production but depends heavily on imported energy, so finding a balance between using land for food and for renewable energy is important. Energy security concerns and rising prices make these projects increasingly attractive, and while some farmers act quickly, others take more time to decide what is best for their families.

Q: What are the most effective ways to support small farmers after the training, so that knowledge is not lost and actually translates into implementation?

B Caslin: After training, it is crucial not to let farmers “fall off the carousel.” Continuous support is needed to help them apply what they learned. This includes providing follow-up advice, helping them make the right connections, and giving them access to the tools, resources, and knowledge required to move their projects forward. Farmers often need guidance on issues like food quality, recipe development, packaging, labelling, marketing, budgeting, or cash-flow planning. By identifying where each farmer needs additional help and linking them with research, advisory support, or specialist services, they are better equipped to implement their ideas and sustain progress.

J Fila: Most people who attend the training already have a concrete idea for their business and primarily need practical information about legal and technical requirements. Many of them do go on to set up their businesses successfully. However, it is essential not to leave them on their own afterward. Advisors who were trained themselves act as follow-up contacts and can direct farmers back to the training center whenever they have specific questions. Offering ongoing access, personal contact, and the possibility to return for clarification during the implementation phase is seen as the most important form of support.

B Alecu: Ongoing advisory support is essential, because the world, and farming, changes very quickly. Farmers need continuous access to advice that keeps them aware of new opportunities, investments, and development options for their businesses. Continuous advisory services, combined with peer-to-peer learning at farm level, help farmers stay updated and make informed decisions as they adapt and sustain their operations.