



# modern **AKIS**

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## AKIS in action:

### Powering up advisors' knowledge through peer exchange

#### Q&A Documentation

Networking event on October 24, 2024 - Online

##### *Communities of Practice and the role of advisory services*

*Jeroen Nagel, Regieorganisatie GLB, Utrecht Netherlands;*

*Paul Daniëls, Association Agricultural Business Advisors (VAB), Amersfoort, Netherlands*

##### *Peer2Peer Exchange: experience-based learning approaches and tools for advisors*

*Simona Cristiano, Council for Agricultural Research and Economics (CREA), Italy*

##### *Cross Visits: Increasing farmers' share in the food value chain through digital services*

*Peter Paree, Southern Agriculture and Horticulture Association (ZLTO), Netherlands*

**Moderation: Elena-Teodora Miron, Austrian Chamber of Agriculture, Austria**

#### **Question:**

Paul, 650 members in VAB, do you know which % of all Dutch advisors that is?

#### **Paul Daniëls:**

A somewhat older research estimate showed a total amount of advisors in the Netherlands of about 3.000, but ... about two third of them are what we call "depending" advisors. They have some form of conflict in interests by for example selling products (company representatives) and are regarded as "not impartial". They have specific knowledge too and we engage in co-operation with them, but they cannot be registered in the BAS. Leaving about 1.000 independent advisors of who 650 are member at VAB and more than half is registered in BAS. There are however advisors that state not to find it necessary to be registered. Two reasons: they already have so many customers that they need no registration (the "too busy to register advisors") or they do not have a fitting fields of expertise in the BAS (example: rural estate advisors).

**Question:**

Are there advisors that specifically focus on organic farming? If so, how many?

**Paul Daniëls:**

A few dozen advisors in the Netherlands are registered on BAS A5, what we call "Nature Inclusive Farming" and has organic farming as a part in it (but also regenerative farming, agroforestry and other forms in this line).

**Question:**

Can advisors get/enrol lifelong training from different providers?

**Paul Daniëls:**

Yes, the VAB provides also the accreditation on any training that brings knowledge or skills to agricultural advisors. This way, their trainings become extra valuable for members that resort in BAS-register or hold the AB-title. Permanent education points can be accredited on:

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Specific fields of expertise in the BAS

**Question:**

Would there be an option to include training programmes developed by, for example Horizon Europe, projects into the accreditation process (advisors gaining PE points if they follow specific training modules)?

**Paul Daniëls:**

Yes, any "knowledge sharing event" can be accredited, but can also provide "free" Permanent Education points to have extra value towards advisors that need the points for their certification or registration in the BAS.

Example: cross visits and participation in national or EU projects are often valued as PE-worthy.

However much I love to participate in cross country visits, I often ask myself how sustainable (climate change is especially for our sector a real danger!), expensive (often takes payers money that also could land at farm level to innovate) and effective they are. This should be taken into account in awareness of all stakeholders involved in cross visits. When you organise it, organise it superb and go deep in exchange of knowledge.

**Peter Paree:**

Completely agreed, Paul, Cross Visits deserve an excellent organisation and good embedding in other activities and they can be very effective on the long term.

**Question:**

Are any farmers trained as mentors - advisers who could supplement the advisory system with very practical approaches and expand the outreach?

**Paul Daniëls:**

Often a VAB training includes a farmer that tells his/her experiences in certain developments. Their practical knowledge is highly valued in the evaluations of our members. Of course one farmer excels in being a good speaker and another invites advisors on excursions on his/her farm.

**Question:**

Do the Netherlands have a specific advisory skills sets related to the training courses, so that you can relate the skills shortage to the specific courses offered to develop these skills?

**Paul Daniëls:**

Yes, indeed ... VAB also does the accreditation in Permanent Education points for all trainings in the Dutch advisory landscape. If some form of education is about agricultural advice, the educator can get accreditation towards:

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Specific fields of expertise in the BAS.

This way the basis is laid for quality in advisors knowledge.

**Question:**

Can you please explain a bit more how the identification of 'hot topics' for trainings, events, etc. is done (who's involved in this)? So how farmers can find your advisors and their specialities?

**Paul Daniëls:**

The VAB has five thematic task groups that are bi-monthly gathering with the association office to discuss about themes that are hot and should be formed to a training or meeting. This can be knowledge or skills. Members are approached to be trainers or they can mention good speakers about topics from their network. This way VAB brings 20 to 30 high end trainings per year in various topics ... but ... VAB also accredits trainings from third parties in Permanent Education points for agricultural advice adding many more educations to the knowledge flow that should improve the expertise of advisors.

**Peter Paree:**

The VAB members & characteristics are also in the i2connect advisory database, thanks to great collaboration with VAB.

**Paul Daniëls:**

Including whether they are BAS-registered or certified as AB-title holder.

**Question:**

What is the potential educational background of the advisors?

**Paul Daniëls:**

Full membership requires a university degree in a certain agricultural field (technical or financial-economic) plus three years of experience as an advisor. Their workload needs to be at least 16 hours of advice in a minimum of 50% primarily agricultural customers.

**Question:**

Impartial and partial (linked with the selling of products) advisors can be a member of the VAB? Do they all have to gather PE-points (education), partial and impartial, or are there different groups in VAB with different requirements?

**Paul Daniëls:**

Yes, all advisors are welcome in the VAB, but we are transparent to them about registration in the BAS. When they are advisors that work for a product selling company, we say up front that this will not be possible. Same with advisors that are paid by governmental institutes (civil servants), where also impartiality is seen by the BAS-board that does the oral examination.

However, membership can be interesting for belonging to the network and for example add to trainings their knowledge and expertise.

Thank you, Paul. Yes, I find it valuable as well that 'partial' advisors can join VAB as well to be integrated in AKIS. But with different expectations/requirements than the impartial ones, I suppose. That's why I asked if there is a kind of clustering within VAB.

**Paul Daniëls:**

More than once, they are trainers or speakers on our trainings.

**Question:**

Are your advisors paying particular and systematic attention to the results from the Dutch Operational Groups (Dutch and also from other countries when relevant)? If so, how is this done? If I remember correctly, you mentioned that project participation itself might not be very interesting for them, mainly for economic or commercial reasons. How do you see the possibility of bringing these novel results to practitioners?

**Paul Daniëls:**

I saw a lot of questions and tried to answer at least a few in the chat because it was really overwhelming. Thank you all for being so interested in the job. We've noticed that there are always the same few dozen advisors who like to participate in projects. Of course, we make the most of that, but we would like to see all the other advisors on board as well. We can also offer project results in our own training sessions.

So, when there is a hot topic, no doubt one of the task groups will mention it. If they don't, I do, because I try to follow as much as possible what is happening across the member states in Europe. I then offer this topic in a task group, and if they are

enthusiastic and say, "Yes, we need to build a training for it," I can invite people from the project—such as researchers or farmers—to provide knowledge to the advisors.

Recently, we had a freshwater farm project in the north of the Netherlands where they are also facing challenges with salinization; the soil water is becoming saltier. It's a perfect farm with all kinds of experiments ongoing. We visited this farm, and a researcher from the project also came to present the theoretical results there. There are many ways to approach this, as we say in the Netherlands: many roads lead to Rome.

### Question:

Jeroen you mentioned that at the national CoP level at the moment, you have several networks who are part there and you intend to include more. How do you select these networks? What are your considerations when you look at the higher level peer to peer exchange? And how do you think about integrating the advisors into this higher level exchanges?

### **Jeroen Nagel**

We don't have a very, very specific framework of indicators how to select the different partners. I think one of the main things is when you have, I say, a broader role, like a network of networks, what we want to be.

So the association of the younger farmers that is in that perspective, a good one, instead of, say, one specific farmer that is in the CoP. But in the activities we do or we exchange on all the organizations that are involved. They have their own activities as well.

And we know to find each other before to see how we can work together instead of only being invited on each other parties, because then it's already quite late to work together. And in the case, say, for example, of the Delta, the Delta approach of the water management. They also have a very, very wide structured network in the Netherlands of innovation projects and demonstration farms in that area.

So that's another reason that we think they might be of added value to our CoP at this phase.

### **Jeroen Nagel:**

For all Dutch participants, hope to meet at our next 'assembly': Verbonden veerkrachtige landbouw, de toekomst van de boer | Werkplaats Netwerk Platteland | Netwerk Platteland

On the VAB website there is a search function to find your right advisor: Onze leden | Vereniging Agrarische Bedrijfsadviseurs



**Question:**

Were there some quality differences between in person and online conducted peer2peer reviews? Which one is richer in results?

**Simona Cristiano:**

Definitely on field reviews are more effective and appreciated by peers! They enable deeper discussion and investigation. For the online review, time and getting familiar are an issue. Virtual meetings are shorter.

**Question:**

Thank you for such an interesting presentation. Does the on-line tool you mentioned, now under development, include any soft critical skills of the advisors? Thank you

**Simona Cristiano:**

The online tool will be the same questions flow that I presented. Questions include also investigating into soft skills needed for innovation support.

**Question:**

We are the network of advisors in Slovakia, what are the possibilities to participate in cross visits or to involve advisors from Slovakia in this event? We do not have any project or funding. Very interesting topic.

**Simona Cristiano:**

Hi, thank you for your interest. Please register to the network of modernAKIS/ATTARCTISS and you will be advised about our activities.

**Question:**

Does the online tool mentioned by Simona for evaluation assess only technical skills or also soft skills for advisors? Maybe you could explore a bit more what the capabilities of this tool are.

**Simona Cristiano**

Thank you. No, the tool is exactly the questionnaire that we prepared to follow the path during the peer to peer exchange review.

So the questionnaire will include the questions to address during the peer to peer review. Of course, they include also questions relating to the investigation about soft skills. I mean, mainly because this is the focus of this peer to peer review.

## Question

While cross visits are very interesting and might be very valuable, they also take up resources from an advisor. Maybe you could explain or elaborate. On how you evaluated what the value versus the costs and the effort are for the cross-visits for the advisers? And how did you improve on this aspect, if at all?

## Peter Paree

Yeah, this is a good question because what we were aware from the start is you have to organize it very well. And you have to take care that the advisers are there on the right subject and on the right place. And if that is so, they already came themselves with the interest to go to other places and to find new views on how to do their work.

So first thing is some advisers that are now really in a stage where they want more information. They come themselves and they say, well, can I go to Italy? Can I go to Ireland? That's one part. The other part is when you offer it to those advisers and when you get to one, when you want the right advisers to come to you, then it's necessary to know which people from abroad fit well. And then it's good that you have partners that can make the choice of those advisers.

And when people are interested, first step, then next step is to make it possible for those people. And for that, I think the money that is reserved in those projects to travel, even often those advisers, they just get the plane ticket or if necessary, or they do it cheaper, then we can, that's often sufficient to involve them, to make their interest and to direct involvement.

So there should be some budget because completely on their own account, it's often not possible. And some organizations do have the possibility to send people out abroad or send people out to visit others. But the competition in advisory service in Netherlands, but I think in many other countries, it's more or less the same.

At least the pressure, the time pressure on the advisers is everywhere, huge. Within that context, you need to have a small support for them. And in most projects, it is that one to include cross-visits, it's included.

And I can say my personal experience is people that were in the cross-visit or in two or three, they just remember that part of the whole project most, but it should of course be placed in a bigger context.

## Question:

In the NUTRI-KNOW project, we're currently organizing in-service short trainings with field visits to showcase innovations from different Operational Groups. I really like the Peer-to-Peer methodology used in i2connect and was wondering if there's any way for collaboration (either with NUTRI-KNOW or other projects) following this approach. Since your final event took place last 1-3 October, I'm curious if you're still active and open to contributing to similar initiatives.

## Juan P Romero MAPA\_Spain:

There will be some continuity of i2connect's legacy in ATTRACTISS and modernAKIS.



### Question:

Sometimes advisers might be willing to participate in cross-visits, but there is also an advisory management in a company or in an organisation. What do you see as the necessary conditions and frameworks to enable and allow advisers to join cross-visits?

Also how do you see the role of AKIS funding measures and the role of the CAP networks to support the advisory managers and encourage these advisory organizations to facilitate this possibility for advisers?

### **Paul Daniëls**

Thank you. Interesting question, exactly what I'm actually dealing with in the landscape in the Netherlands.

Yes, advisers are willing to participate. They are highly interesting. When they talk to me about projects that I once and again try to follow in Europe, they get enthusiastic.

But when they have to choose between participating or going to the customer doing their general work, a private advisor doesn't get the hourly pay that a public advisor is going to get when participating in projects. So maybe the costs are refunded of travel and hotel stay, etc. But the hours that they are spending in the project are not paid at all.

And there is a big difference between private and public advisers. And most of our advisers always complain, "I'm so busy, I'm so busy, I'm so busy", because they have a lot of customers that are at this moment in time also in a transition. There is a lot happening, not only in the Netherlands, all over Europe, climate change is coming, things are shifting.

There are not enough young people to inherit the farm and go on transition to organic farming. So all these advisers are busy, and then they have to choose, and they often choose micromanagement, as I call it, to serve the customer, because that is immediately paying them. And I think then a lot of the knowledge gets lost.

### **Peter Paree**

I agree with Paul. Of course, it's not only a matter of money that you want to visit your clients, it's also a matter of reliability to your clients. You are completely, as an adviser, focused on your clients, and that's only a good adviser then when you can do that.

Looking from the perspective of a manager of an organisation, if this adviser is not working for himself alone or herself alone, some of my best colleagues are still in our ZLTO organisation, because they had the chance, and they have the chance to go international. And that's really an important thing, to keep the best people, is to give them an interesting environment and to give them an interesting space to do such things. In general, I think advisers have to work at the farm for 1,000 till 1,400 hours. They have 1,700 hours available, so it's a matter of choice of the advisers and their management, how to spend that.

### Question:

Simona and maybe then Jeroen, could you possibly address or see any possibilities, how managing authorities and CAP networks can support this tension field of trade-off between developing advisers, helping them to grow as a person, but also as a professional, and the need to deliver services of high value to the customer?

### **Simona Cristiano**

Yes, I would say there are a lot of opportunities.

Of course, there is still some room for sensitization of the advisory services, of course. But there are some interventions. Training of advisers is one of the interventions that can be applied, implemented through the architectures.

The second one is also the technical assistance that can be used, for example, by the CAP networks, to organize cross-visits between operational groups, to organize this peer-to-peer exchange between advisers. This can be also a source of funding for advisory services. For the matter of that, it was very, very interesting of Paola, because it's a real thing, that advisers spend some time also during the project development, not so realization.

So this means, I mean, losing some money from them. I would propose also the use of simplified consumption. In Italy, for example, we developed a methodology for the use of simplified consumption, so to guarantee a certain fee.

Also, two farmers that participate in meetings of operational groups and so on, because until now, they are paid just because of the investments. But they lose some money also, or they are destroyed from the farms also, because of the meetings of the operational groups and so on. So we offered this methodology to pay back them also for the time spent during these meetings.

The same has been done also for the advisory services in some regions in Italy. So this might be some sort of practical solution to apply already and to implement these methodologies, cross-visits, peer-to-peer exchange and so on, under the caps of energy plants, but already with simplified consumption and so on. And another point was, cross-visit, I would suggest also cross-visits as part of the project plans of the operational groups.

This might be very interesting in order to compare one to each other, to mirror one to each other, and maybe to also start co-developing new ideas for innovation and so on, and also for dissemination. Thank you.

### **Jeroen Nagel**

I was indeed thinking about the measures and interventions. I think, actually is not the most suited moment for specifically the management within the advisory-organizations. You could say that the project is a part of it. So Paul and the board member of VAB could participate as a CoP member at a cross-country CoP event.

On the other hand, technical assistance is where we, as networks, are financed from. For instance, we now have some flexibility to compensate farmers for their time when they participate in European meetings, such as focus groups within the CAP network. We want to support their efforts to engage in these focus groups.

While this practice is not widely advocated yet, it's something we are implementing through technical assistance. Additionally, there may be potential within a voucher system related to educational measures. However, I'm not deeply familiar with the specifics of these interventions, so it seems they are more focused on supporting advisors rather than the management of organizations, which was your specific question, Dora.

So mainly now it's more widely used, where there's some flexibility in how to use the technical assistance.