

Knowledge Transfer Management in the Italian Agricultural Cooperatives

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ABSTRACT

Due to the close, direct relation with their members, cooperatives have an advantage over other forms of organization in achieving knowledge transfer. This research aims to identify the way in which the process of transmitting information and knowledge takes place in the Italian cooperative sector. The necessary data was collected by applying a questionnaire through a structured interview to six agricultural cooperatives from the Region of Veneto. Issues such as the communication strategy, the relations with members and third parties and the main means of communication used, were analyzed. The results prove once more, the important role of these structures in optimizing the knowledge transfer process.

KEYWORDS: *Communication strategy, cooperative, cooperative members, information, knowledge transfer management.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION *Q01, Q13, O33*

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, the developed economies have entered a new phase dominated by the intensification of the fast generation, real-time dissemination and application of knowledge in all fields of society.

Thus, market information and knowledge surpassed, in importance, other economic markets. Knowledge transfer, defined as a series of activities that aim to collect and transmit knowledge, abilities and skills, from the ones that generate them to the ones that will transform them in economic results, is becoming a point of interest for most of the actors from the economy (European Commission, 2007).

Nevertheless, achieving knowledge and information transfer is not always easy, since in general it is perceived as a loss of a competitiveness advantage, that is way, in many cases, the ones that produce and/or possess it are detained in transmitting it (Duan, Nie & Coakes, 2010).

Rural areas were also strongly affected by the increased transfers of information and knowledge. Therefore, in the last years, many tools and means of propagation have appeared, promoted either by EU or by national governments. Although in some respects these tools significantly contribute to the exchange of information and knowledge in the Member States, they fail to fully cover the needs of farmers, especially due to the generality of the products and services provided and/or managed. Therefore, especially in the new Member States - most of them with emerging economies and characterized by a low level

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of development of the agricultural sector, it is necessary to create structures able to take over some of the tasks of the European and national institutions regarding the transfer of knowledge.

The close, direct relation with its members is the main advantage that cooperatives have over other structures in terms of correct identification of the needs for information and knowledge of the farmers and in terms of adapting their activities to the specific market requirements and to the environment where they operate (Bhuyan, 2007). Also cooperatives handle more easily and more efficiently the means of achieving knowledge transfer, significantly contributing to the selection and then to their adaptation to the expressed needs of the members on one hand and of the representatives of the external environment on the other hand (Cummings & Teng, 2003).

Italian cooperatives, representative for the sector, are an example to be followed regarding the organization and functioning for this types of structures (Garrido, 2007). Therefore understanding how Italian cooperatives are participating in the transmission of information and knowledge both to members and to the market and other third parties, was the main objective of this research.

In this respect, a questioner was applied to six cooperatives from the Veneto Region, containing questions about their communication strategy, the relations with the members and third parties, the main means used in the knowledge transfer process, etc.. The results confirm the initial hypothesis that the cooperative is the recommended structure for achieving knowledge transfer (Vargas, 2011).

1. KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER IN THE ITALIAN COOPERATIVES

The European cooperative has as its main purpose to satisfy the needs of its members - including the permanent need for information, and/or to develop their economic and/or social activities. (European Council, 2003).

That is way, this research aimed to identify how knowledge and information transfer occurs in the Italian cooperatives, representative for the European co-operatives. (<http://ica.coop/en/tags/blueprint>). In order to understand the whole process, it is necessary first to clarify some aspects related to the relationship between cooperatives, cooperative's members and the representatives of the external environment and also related to the main means of achieving the transfer, which are the secondary objectives of this study.

1.1 Hypothesis

The main hypothesis the research is based on is that, for the Italian agricultural sector, the cooperative is the optimal structure for achieving knowledge transfer, managing to successfully cover the need for information and knowledge of its members. Given that most farmers (about 90% of the total) are affiliated with at least one cooperative, proving the validity of such an assumption is relevant in determining the role and importance of this type of structures in achieving this process.

1.2 Research method

In choosing the research method I considered firstly the type of the research. In relation with the nature of the objectives, this approach falls into the category of descriptive

researches, trying to analyze and understand a process, namely the way in which the transfer of knowledge takes place in the Italian cooperatives. In this respect, in terms of time horizon, the research does not aim to analyze the phenomenon in a certain time frame, but aims to achieve a so-called “snapshot” that captures the existing situation at the time of the research.

Therefore in order to demonstrate the validity of the three assumptions mentioned above, I have chosen as research method the survey based on questionnaire. Usually associated with the deductive approach, it is used to answer questions such as: who, what, where, how, how much and how many, and it is widely used in explanatory and descriptive researches, as it is the case for this study.

1.3 Variables

In setting the categories of variables, I started by correlating them with the objectives of the research - primary and secondary. Quite complex in structure and object, the questionnaire contains questions which aimed to obtain *views* and identify certain *behaviours* related to the process under analysis, these being the two main categories of variables involved. Specifically, it was aimed to identify how agricultural cooperatives contribute to knowledge transfer in rural areas by analyzing their behaviour in the given context and the opinion of their representatives regarding how to successfully achieve the process. The questions from the first part of the survey were designed to identify the main characteristics (attributes) of the cooperatives in order to characterize the population surveyed. However, these types of variables are less important for this investigation.

1.4 Research instrument - questionnaire and method of application

The instrument used for the research was the questionnaire. Specific for this method, it allows obtaining standardized data that can be easily compared and analyzed. It is also very easy to explain and understand, that are important advantages, especially when addressing the rural population.

Considering the sample, consisting entirely of representatives of the rural area, was also determinant in choosing the method of application of the questionnaire, namely the structured interview.

The questionnaire was divided into twelve chapters, including questions about the history of the cooperative, its size and organizational structure, interorganizational relations, communication strategy, relations with members, etc.

Being a questionnaire designed from the start to be applied through the structured interview method, most of the questions are open. Exceptions make the first 3 chapters, where closed questions prevail (seeking to obtain data that will allow the characterization of the cooperatives surveyed in terms of size and the way they are organized and managed) and also the chapters about the product portfolio and trading strategies, dominated by quantitative questions.

In determining the sample I used a non-probabilistic (or non-random) method, which, even if in most cases it does not allow generalization, is appropriate for descriptive researches. Sampling rules are very lax and are more related to the logical link between the technique used in selecting the sample and the purpose of the research.

For this research, the questionnaire was applied to a total of six cooperatives from Veneto region, a representative region in terms of the level of development of the agricultural sector, but especially for the cooperative sector. Here cooperatives stand out not only in number but also for their economic performances. It is also the region where social cooperatives are best represented. Due to the similarities in organization and functioning, which showed a high degree of homogeneity among cooperatives, I consider the sample relevant in relation to the purpose of research.

In choosing the cooperatives I considered aspects like: their purpose, the size of the areas in operation, the number of members and number of employees. What was attempted was actually to identify similar cooperatives considering the characteristics mentioned above, in order to identify possible patterns of behaviour regarding knowledge transfer.

I have analyzed the three main types of relationships that are established at the level of cooperatives. The first is internal, with the members, and the other two, external, related to the market, with the suppliers of inputs (through the supply strategy) and with the consumers (through the marketing strategy).

1.5 Research results - analysis of responses

The first two categories of questions aimed at obtaining information to enable the characterization of the cooperatives surveyed in terms of their history (year of establishment and main evolutionary stages), size - both in terms of number of associates and used area, and organizational structure, namely the number of employees (permanent and temporary) and governing and representation bodies. Collecting this information was considered relevant for a better understanding of how cooperatives are organized and managed.

Based on the information obtained, we made the following centralization:

Table 1. Quantitative data on the analyzed cooperatives

	Founded in	Number of members	Used area	Number of employees	
				Permanent	Temporary
Cantina Colli Euganei S.c.a.	1949	670	700	11	8-9
Cantina Colli Vicentini S.c.a.	1955	1340	1700	29	20-22
Cantina di Gambellara S.a.c.	1947	360	750	17	5-6
Cantina di Monteforte S.c.a.	1952	600	1300	20	20
Conselve Vigneti e Cantine S.c.a.	1950	1341	1100	23	10
Cantina di Soave S.a.c.	1898	2047	6000	119	49

Source: data from the questionnaire (2014)

All surveyed cooperatives were founded around 1950 and they have a history of over 60 years, which proves the effectiveness of this type of structure at least in the wine-making sector. Although not uniform in terms of number of members and hectares, the used area / member does not differ so much from one cooperative to another, ranging between 1-2ha. Only in the case of one cooperative, namely Cantina di Soave, the indicator reaches the value of 2.9 ha / member. I found that the increase in the hectares / member is directly

proportional to the size of the cooperative (established in relation to the two variables). The same is true also for human resources.

Table 2. Distribution of the cooperatives used area per members and employees

	Hectares/Member	Permanent Employees /Hectare	Employees /Hectare
Cantina Colli Euganei S.c.a.	1,04	36,8	63,6
Cantina Colli Vicentini S.c.a.	1,27	34,0	58,6
Cantina di Gambellara S.a.c.	2,08	32,6	44,1
Cantina di Monteforte S.c.a.	2,17	32,5	65,0
Conselve Vigneti e Cantine S.c.a.	0,82	33,3	47,8
Cantina di Soave S.a.c.	2,93	35,7	50,4

Source: data from the questionnaire (2014)

There are several features that stand out on an individual level. For example for the question related to the number of members, two of the six cooperatives presented not only the actual number of shareholders but also an upper limit. This cap is due to the impossibility of expansion, since most people and companies that are working in the field are already affiliated with a structure of this type and the potential new members are resulting from migration, or to the existence of an estimation for an optimal size that will ensure maximum efficiency both in organizing the activity and in obtaining the best results. In terms of staff, one of the cooperatives specifically mentioned, with reference to seasonal employees, their preference for students. Besides the economic reasons, namely reduced staff costs, such an attitude is based on the desire to exploit on one hand their luggage of knowledge and on the other their willingness to learn, which are considered important assets. At the same time, for the cooperatives that lack permanent staff, this may represent a form of recruitment.

Regarding the structure of governing bodies, the cooperative's responses were most varied. But the core issue is one of form and not of substance, because after a detailed analysis, a number of common characteristics were identified for all structures. All the cooperatives start in building their management bodies from the law, very clear and quite strict in this regard. It is evident that as the level of development and size of the cooperative is higher, the level of organizational complexity increases. Cantina di Soave, the largest and most developed of the structures from the sample, has the most developed formula of organization, namely it indicates the presence of nine Offices with responsibilities in various areas of interest, all subordinated to the General Manager. All cooperatives have at least one administrator, a technical manager and a trade responsible.

Most cooperatives indicate among their employees the presence of an oenologist. Given the duties and responsibilities posed by such a function, we can say that this is one of the employees responsible for the transfer of knowledge. His duties in this regard are primarily related to the need to be constantly in touch with all that is new in the field and secondly by his responsibilities in promoting products on the market (action that, among others, is a form of dissemination of information about the cooperative). Its activity usually affects all other departments, including the technical-productive one, where his greatest contribution consists in promoting new techniques, technologies, products. Being well informed about

the processes and products within the structure and the development of the sector as a whole, he is the primary and most comprehensive source of information about and for the cooperative.

Specifically, in order to identify the manner and means by which knowledge transfer takes place in the cooperatives, I analyzed the responses for the questions in chapters 9-12 from the questioner, which refer directly to issues related to the theme of this research. Therefore, the results refer to the cooperative's communication strategy, including preferred information transmission channels and to the relationship with the members, other institutions and organizations outside the cooperative or with other cooperatives or private companies.

In order to have an overall image I considered necessary the individual analysis of each cooperative and the centralization, at the end, of the results obtained for the issuance of general conclusions.

Cantina di Gambellara

The cooperative invested in 2010 about 2% of the turnover in the communication strategy. The biggest part of the total, namely 80%, was allocated for participation in fairs and events in the field, and the remaining 20% for supporting the activities of the public relations department. Regarding the rest of the means of communication, the cooperative is also accessing the mass media, especially television, but only when the services provided are free.

The relations with other actors in the sector take the form of collaboration with other 5-6 cooperatives from northern Italy, which provide inputs when the member's contributions do not cover the production needs. The collaboration with public institutions such as the Chamber of Commerce of Vicenza or Proloco - an Italian association whose business is conducted in tourism, culture and sport, evidence the active involvement in developing and implementing local policies. The cooperative is currently part of three consortia: Gambellara, Soave and Durello. In addition actions were initiated for joining ICE.

The relations with the members are dominated by solving technical and economical aspects, issues related to the quantitative and qualitative parameters of the production or on how to achieve the exchanges with the cooperative, regardless of their nature.

Support services are ensured at all times by an agronomist and two viticulturists who are available to advise members on the various issues they face. There isn't a newsletter owned by the cooperative. In order to inform its members the cooperative makes use of the one available at provincial level. However, there is a billboard at the headquarters that is permanently displaying tables with information for the members.

On the question related to the organization of seminars and conferences the answer is particular. Cooperative representatives stated that this happened quite frequently before, especially at the request of different suppliers of inputs. But there were a number of criticisms and accusations of conflict of interest, which is why the cooperative has given up these practices preferring to leave members full freedom to inform and procure inputs.

Therefore, currently these kinds of events are organized only occasionally and usually have general themes.

Cantina Colli Vicentini S.c.a.

For the second cooperative interviewed, the percentage allocated for the communication strategies is similar, about 1% of the turnover. Again the biggest part of this amount, even if it represents only 30% of the total, was allocated for fairs and events in the field. But the variety of used means of dissemination is, in this case, much higher. In addition to local television services, which use 10-15% of the money, the rest of the financial resources have been allocated as follows: 5-6% for generic printed press, 5-6% for printed press in the field, 2-3% for the website, 7-8% for participation in gastronomic events and tasting events, 5% for sponsorship and 20% for public relations.

Relations with other actors in the sector are represented especially by the relationships with other cooperatives, for procurement of inputs and for marketing the production. At the same time the cooperative is permanently working with local government bodies such as the Chamber of Commerce of Vicenza and ICE and is part of four consortia: Gambellara, Colli Berici, Vicenza and Lessini Durello.

The staff responsible for providing support services consists of two agronomists (which provide technical advice) and a person (part-time) performing specific desk tasks. There is also a special assistance-consultancy service, that provides on the spot advice and a service responsible in dealing with bureaucratic issues. Moreover the cooperative permanently carries out surveillance and monitoring activities.

No newsletters are distributed. The technical aspects are left to the existing services at provincial level, that are constantly sending information to members through SMS. The cooperative organizes two meetings a year with the members, one at the beginning of winter and one in early spring, mainly aimed to present an overview of the existing situation inside the structure.

Cantina di Monteforte S.c.a.

The quota allocated for the communication strategy by the third cooperative is situated around 1-2% of the turnover. The resulting amount is divided as follows: 10% for local newspapers, 10% radio services, 5% for the website, 50% for participation in fairs and events in the field, 20% for sponsorship (especially for local associations) and 5% for billboards.

Relations with the cooperatives in the field are mostly commercial, namely supply and marketing of production. In particular, representatives of the cooperative have mentioned some consultations on technical and legislative issues. This last type of activity is a way of achieving knowledge transfer among cooperatives, common in the Italian cooperative sector.

Unlike the two cooperatives mentioned above, this third one also mentions relationships with the distribution networks, namely with the private companies providing such services. In this sense, the contact with the market and the other structures on the market is stronger.

Of the local, regional and national institutions the cooperative is working specifically with the municipal administration, Confcooperative, Proloco and AVEPA - Paying Agency for Agriculture in the Veneto region. It is also a member in five consortia: Soave, Valpolicella, Durello, Arco and Garda. (www.cantinadimonteforte.it/ita/azienda.php)

In the relation with the members, the three annual General Assembly (additional to the one that is mandatory for the approval of the balance sheet) have the most important role in informing the members. The issues covered are diverse, ranging from technical to economic aspects. For example the first AG is convened before harvesting and aims to establish the details and the rules to be followed in carrying out this action.

Particularly from the rest of the structures surveyed, the cooperative organizes information trainings on different technical aspects, work safety or ways of obtaining patents. The website and SMSs are two other means by which information is transmitted to members, although the latter one is used only in emergency situations.

Services for members, regardless of their nature, are provided by a specialist within the cooperative, which is a permanent employee, and also by an external support person, haired on the basis of firm requests from the members.

No newsletters are issued, but a material is distributed each year, in July, that summarizes the work of the whole year, and also presents different technical, legislative, food safety information.

The cooperative does not organize seminars and conferences for two reasons: firstly it lacks the necessary infrastructure and secondly it considers sufficient the information provided through the annual material and in the general assembly – where, among others, specialists in various areas of interest for the member's business, are invited. With these occasions, visits are organized to other cooperatives from other areas, in order to exchange experiences and develop new ideas.

Cantina Colli Euganei S.c.a.

Of the total of 180 000 euro allocated for the communication strategy, also for this cooperative the highest percentage goes for fairs. As importance and allocation, on the next positions are: attending gastronomic events and tastings, radio services, written press and profile press.

Relationships with third parties are mostly commercial - usually related to procurement of inputs - with other cooperatives, in order to purchase wine and grape must, or with the bottling companies, to which they deliver more than 90% of the bulk wine production. Regarding the relations with the institutions and public and private sector organizations, of great importance is the relationship with the Consortium of belonging, which is considered the main promoter of the cooperative.

The relation between the members and the cooperative is conducted through the agronomist, who has direct contact with the members, making daily visits to farms or following requests from farmers or simply carrying out supervision and control activities. Based on the information obtained from this work a newsletter is issued for the members.

To disseminate information, the cooperative issues a weekly newsletter. It also organizes with a high enough frequency, study visits with technical and agronomic purposes.

Conselve Vigneti e Cantine

The cooperative allocated for the communication strategy, 50.000 euro, representing about 0.5 % of the total sales. The biggest part of the amount, namely 25.000 euro, was used to promote the cooperative and its products through the national television. Also, attending events in the field consumed considerable resources, being spent for this purpose more than 20.000 euro. Of these about 10.000 euro were used to cover the expenses generated by attending Vinitaly, the biggest fair in the field organized nationally. The printed press and the website are other two communication channels where the cooperative has invested quite large amounts: around 3000 euro in advertisements and articles in local publications and 1.500 euro in managing and improving the website. The cooperative has participated in culinary events and tastings, but only occasionally, and the costs of such activities are negligible.

Of the four categories of relationships that I analyzed - with other cooperatives, with third companies, with local / regional / national institutions and organizations and with consortia, the fourth category are the most and were more detailed presented. Even if the cooperative signalled the presence of cooperation with other cooperatives in the area and with other private companies, especially for bottling the bulk wine and for a number of other commercial activities, the ties both with the local institutions in the province of Padua and with the three consortia - Bagnoli Doc, Corti Benedettini, Prosecco, have the greatest impact on the cooperative. (<http://www.cantineconselve.com/chi-siamo>)

The contact with the members is via the General Assembly. Usually there are two such meetings per year, one to approve the balance sheet and the second in August, to establish the state of crops and market research. There is also an agronomist, permanent employee of the cooperative, which provides technical assistance on request.

An ingenious way used by cooperative to transmit certain information to the members is the teletext. On page 415 of a national TV channel, from April to October, phytosanitary bulletin, treatments to be followed (including their method of application), etc. can be consulted. The newsletters are sent weekly and include in addition to the technical aspects, the delivery schedule for the grapes. On request, they can be sent via SMS

Cantina di Soave

Although the largest both in terms of used area and economic size, Cantina di Soave was quite evasive in providing answers to questions about the communication strategy. In general, the policy of promoting the cooperative is centered on the product. Having a large variety of products, it is quite difficult to determine exactly how the allocated funds have been spent on this. There is no preference for a particular communication channel being used, depending on the case, both television and printed press or gastronomic events. Unlike other cooperatives, Soave perceives Vinitaly as a "necessary evil", a major consumer of resources, sometimes unnecessarily. A prominent place is given to the means of communication available and specific for the Internet. Large enough sums are invested in the administration and ongoing development of the website, facebook page and blog of the cooperative.

Carrying out a policy based on the sustainable development not only of the cooperative itself but of the whole community, Cantina di Soave maintains relationships with various institutions and organizations in the field such as Confcooperative Verona, Verona Province Industrialists Association, Industrial Associazione della Provincia di Verona, Opera Scarl, Verona Tuttintorno, Strada del Vino Soave Association, Siquiria, Mediterranean Institute of Certification, Valore Italia.

Also, the relationships with the five consortia to which it adhered, namely: Consorzio Cantina Sociale della Provincia di Verona, the Consorzio Tutela Vini Soave Recioto di Soave is Consorzio Tutela Vini Valpolicella, Bardolino Consorzio Tutela Vini, Consorzio Tutela Vini Lessini Durello have an important role.

The level of opening of the cooperative is not very high. However one of the member farms, namely Borgo Rocca Sveva, organizes meetings with various representatives from the world of wine in the form of gastronomic events or assisted visits in different cellars and production structures. Being specially designed to accommodate groups of visitors, the farm offers to those who are interested the possibility to make a complete tour of the complex, in which all the stages of processing grapes, must and wine are presented. It also provides space for tastings, assisted purchase of products and even the possibility to consult specialized scientific works and publications in the field.

CONCLUSIONS

Some relevant conclusions about the characteristics of the Italian cooperative sector can be drawn out of the research, with direct reference to the embodiment of the process of knowledge transfer in the cooperatives which are representative for the Italian agriculture.

In general, at cooperatives level, exchanges of information and knowledge take place on the one hand with cooperative members and on the other hand with the representatives of the external environment, in particular those specific for the market.

The relations with the members are extremely important for the cooperative. The productive activity of the structure depends, with few exceptions, entirely on their contributions. Direct contact with members represents the best, if not the only way in which the quantity, but especially the quality of inputs can be controlled. Therefore, the coordination, up to a certain point, of the activities of the individual farms (one of the specific activities of this type of structure) is a priority for the cooperative.

The aspects which are prevailing in the relationship with the members are mostly economic and technical. For this study, the economic ones are in a secondary plan. The ones that raise interest are related to the technical problems encountered by the members of that cooperative, that the cooperative, through its representatives, is trying to solve. In this respect, I analyzed, in particular, the manner in which they provide technical assistance services.

Most of the cooperatives interviewed indicate the presence of at least one agronomist in their staff. He has the responsibility to respond promptly and effectively to the requests of the members. The very existence of such a function in the organization chart of the cooperative acknowledges its superior position to the other types of structures, in terms of the information and knowledge in the field.

The channels through which cooperatives communicate with their members are still quite limited in terms of diversity. Most of them reported the General Assembly as the most important occasions on which members are informed about the activities of the cooperative.

Newsletters are another mean by which information and knowledge is transmitted to members. Whether they belong to the cooperative, or it makes use of those issued at provincial level, their role in the strategy of information is very high. Their presence was reported by all six structures surveyed.

When asked about the organization of seminars and conferences the answers were various. In any case, where such activities are present, they are occasional and do not have a fundamental role in the communication strategy. The reasons for their absence are many. If one of the cooperatives invoked lack of proper infrastructure, another considered this approach as recommended in order to avoid the appearance of conflict of interest. Study visits, exchanges of experience, working meetings are other three categories of events that were reported by the cooperatives.

Relations between the cooperative and the external environment were characterized by analysing the three categories of relations that it establishes, namely with other cooperatives and private companies, institutions and public bodies and with consortia.

At sector level the existence of collaboration among cooperatives can be clearly identified. Even though relations between them are mostly commercial (supply and distribution) advisory activities on legal and technical issues have also been reported.

The idea of cooperation among cooperatives is supported by the popularity of second degree cooperative structures. Without exception, all six cooperatives interviewed, are part of at least three consortia, which emphasizes the crucial role that they play in the sector. They are actually the main sources of information for cooperatives, but also for policy makers as they gather inside them most Italian agricultural cooperative structures.

Collaboration with local, provincial, regional institutions and bodies, is also beneficial in terms of knowledge transfer. Their direct contact, from a better position than the individual farm, is facilitating access to information and knowledge when it comes to the relations with the Chambers of Commerce, Payment agencies or other state agencies responsible for agriculture. The availability of the latter to provide detailed statements or centralized data increases significantly when the requests come from a consolidated structure as is the cooperative.

Advantages are, however, for both sides. State bodies and institutions transfer to the cooperative sector knowledge and cooperatives provide centralized data to the public decision makers, facilitating their work in collecting information in the field. In addition, in many cases, cooperatives are directly involved in policy formulation and in the development of policies, especially at local and regional level.

Four of the six surveyed structures allocated in 2010, a rate of 1-2% of the turnover for the implementation of the communication strategies. However, how the resulting amounts were allocated among the various channels available to the cooperatives, differ considerably. In any case there is a preference for fairs and events for all six cooperatives, which spent between 30 and 80% of the total allocated amounts for carrying out this types of activities, placing them in first place in terms of importance.

To achieve its objectives, the cooperatives use a large number of communication tools. TV and radio services, printed media, websites, events, gourmet tasting and in some cases even the services of a public relations department are accessed by all six of the structures surveyed, although in different proportions. Less present are sponsorships and advertising.

For agriculture where the farmer and its farm are the basic units, the cooperative is a body that ensures the proper functioning of the "farm body". Its position in the centre of the system, at a relatively equal distance between farmers, the market and the state, transforms it into the most appropriate structure for ensuring the flow of information and knowledge. In the Italian agriculture, cooperatives successfully meet these responsibilities. The result is the existence of a viable, efficient, profitable system, namely of an agricultural sector in constant development.

Such a structure may also be a solution for the Romanian agriculture. Through association and cooperation, subsistence and semi-subsistence farms, which represent the majority in the sector, could create a structure strong enough to withstand on the market. However, the restrictive factors are still numerous and have a major influence, and the efforts of the public power in promoting cooperatives still inadequate. Therefore the presence of agricultural cooperatives is small and their contribution to the development of the sector limited.

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