

Federal agricultural consultants must come back!

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, our grandfather took over the family farming business from his father with the obligation to house and care for his parents. Two of his siblings sought their future in Nebraska, United States, to work as farmers.

My father and uncle, respectively, were initially a business successor, but the prospect of a small business was too limited. He took advantage of his training at the Winter Agricultural School in Boxtel and in 1954 he switched to the national agricultural advisory service at the Consulentenschap voor de Rundveehouderij. He initially went on his bicycle, later by car, to visit all the farmers in an area that covered North-East Brabant. He knew all the peasants, and all the peasants knew him. Everywhere he got coffee, attention and time. He and his colleagues implemented national and later European agricultural and livestock policies. The farmers, but especially their wives, listened carefully to what he had to say, yet made their own decisions about business management, business development, education and upbringing of the children, and finances.

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Background

In the Netherlands, agriculture has developed rapidly since the Second World War. First to fight hunger, later with the Marshall Aid, mechanization, land consolidation, economies of scale and automation were introduced and implemented. As part of the Marshall Aid, an uncle of ours went on a study trip to America as a national agricultural adviser. There he learned the use of tractors and large agricultural implements during his internship with a farmer, he learned to share the latest developments with groups of farmers in the form of study clubs, he traveled with a colleague through several states in the Mid-West to discover the American experience developments. He returned with many slides and stories, which he presented at study club nights.

In those years, Mansholt was initially the bearer of the message 'more' with Marshall aid. Later he repented - probably partly due to the influence of Petra Kelly, one of the founders of Die Grünen - with the desire for 'better'. But that mission change hasn't landed

Labor productivity has increased steadily over the years. The outflow of servants/employees, seasonal labour, from a large number of entrepreneurs has been absorbed with a permanently low sales price per unit of product, in short with an ever lower margin and less and less future for the smaller, mixed agricultural company. Farming has changed from a way of life (farming class) to

entrepreneurship. With this turnaround, the Netherlands gradually lost the peasant class after the middle class.

With Minister Braks, a farmer's son from Odiliapeel who started out as a national agricultural information officer, the turnaround also came in agricultural information from 'more' to 'better' in the 1980s. Subsidies to specialize and increase, such as in the context of the Investment Account Act, have disappeared. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the national agricultural advisory service calculated how the farmer could account for new investments to the bank as a lender. These investments resulted in companies specializing, so several branches were divested and growth took place in the remaining branch. The choice for specialization led to an increase in scale on many farms in order to still realize something of an income with more animals and the same small margin per animal. As a result, the business risk immediately increased in the event of setbacks or poor market prices.

However, in the 1990s, national agricultural information disappeared. Farmers now mainly consist of suppliers and buyers of the farm. Think of sellers of feed companies, advisors of the milk processing companies, and the veterinary surgeons. They come for the farmer as a contract partner, not to guide the entrepreneur in his personal development, his investment plans or the transfer of his business to one or more children. In recent years, activists have also entered the agricultural business, such as the barn occupation on May 13, 2019 in Boxtel. Fortunately, many agricultural companies have also come up with mini-campsites, farm shops, nurseries, day care facilities for the elderly and other people entering the grounds.

Despite the decreasing number of farms, despite the continuously low market prices for meat, milk, eggs, potatoes or other products, despite the very small

margins, the total production remained stable. The agro chain remained full and sales abroad remained intact.

In the agro-chain, it is a 'fight' for the sale of standard products such as regular milk, meat or eggs. In that fight it is about the last cent per unit of product. And then the farmers are less united among themselves. Sometimes it seems that the farmers do not yet allow each other the loss when there is really an oversupply.

Provincie Noord-Brabant heeft met het project Voedsel1000 in het voorjaar van 2019 geprobeerd een brede maatschappelijke discussie op te zetten. Paul van Zandvoort noemde als Rosmalense veehouder zijn gemis van die oude rol van de rijkslandbouwvoorlichter Jacobs bij de Voedsel1000 bijeenkomsten. De discussie gaat nu over melkquota, productierechten van fosfaat en stikstof, over het handhaven van productie naast natuur, en over het in stand houden van de totale productie.

A small number of farmers has already made a switch to 'better'. Often a smaller company. Often a niche product such as organic. Often a direct processing and delivery to a well-paying consumer. As a result, a much larger part of the margin for the farmer on the farm.

Conclusion

As a third generation and as knowledge developers and knowledge applicators, we have compiled this article. Looking back at the turbulent developments in these hundred years, including the aftermath of the First World War, the crisis of the 1930s, the Second World War and now a combination of pandemic - war in Ukraine - climate crisis.

Grandpa Jacobs farmed with horses without a tractor with a strong connection to nature. That connection with nature can be found again and rebuilt while maintaining the support of mechanization and automation, preferably without

chemistry. This applies to the farmer as well as to the agro-chain, as well as to citizens and consumers. The advisory role of the agricultural extension officer can be effective and efficient as a catalyst for knowledge dissemination and knowledge utilisation.