THE CURRENT AGRICULTURAL SITUATION IN ROMANIA:
A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The purpose of this theoretical paper was to formulate broad policy recommendations for increasing agricultural production in Romania. The methods and data sources for this scholarly pursuit involved an in-depth literature review of Romania and its components and an in-depth analysis of the current situation in Romania based upon two of the authors’ direct observations of farming practices and interviews with stakeholders including farmers, university officials, representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, and others. The historical/socio-political context of agriculture was presented, bio-physical factors and production systems were discussed, and cultural norms were described. The authors concluded by recommending improvements in the transportation, storage, and marketing infrastructures as well as the development of a comprehensive system of agricultural education.
Introduction

During the 19th century, Romania served as breadbasket to Western and Central Europe. Today, agriculture still remains central to the Romanian economy regardless of several governmental changes. Romanian agriculture has not withstood these governmental changes without making changes of its own. Romanian agriculture has undergone at least three dramatic changes over the last 100 years, nearly one per generation (Buffaria, Gomez, & Willems, 1998). The first major change involved a move toward industrialization, while the second change was an increase in exportation to repay foreign debt, and the final change was an increase in importation and a decrease in exportation due to lack of production.

“Most crops, and many predominant agricultural production systems, are the result of empirical research, or trial and error, by generations of farmers working the land” (Stroup, Hildebrand, & Francis, 1991, p. 1). Agriculture in Romania is no different. Trial and error are two factors that have contributed to the current agricultural situation in Romania. However, as in most developing countries, few resources have been invested in agricultural research for the generation of empirical knowledge.

As we begin the 21st century, nearly two centuries from when Romania was a prominent fixture in agriculture, the future of Romanian agriculture is uncertain. Only by examining agricultural production from a historical/socio-political context and assessing the current bio-physical conditions and cultural norms can policy recommendations be forwarded.

Purpose

The methods and data sources for this scholarly pursuit involve an in-depth literature review of Romania and its components and an in-depth analysis of the current situation in Romania based upon two of the authors’ direct observations of farming practices and interviews with stakeholders including farmers, university officials, representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, and others. The purpose of this theoretical paper was to formulate broad policy recommendations for increasing agricultural production in Romania.

Historical/Socio-Political Context

After falling under communist control in 1947, Romania pursued extensive economic development like other communist regimes of Eastern Europe, but placed top priority to the industrial sector (Romania, 1989). Leadership was intent on building an industrial powerhouse and provided whatever labor or materials necessary. Under communist control everyone was to be equal. Therefore, all farmland was taken by the government and divided equally. During the seventies, while under the control of Nikolae Ceausescu, Romania experienced rapid economic expansion. This growth was spurred by extensive foreign borrowing, substantial imports, and targeted development (Cummings, 1986). During this time, feed was imported, fertilizer was used, and there was an increase in the amount of machinery used (Cummings, 1986).

The first twenty-seven years of communism were good to Romania. Industrial output increased an average 12.9 percent per year (Romania, 1989). Unfortunately, agriculture suffered. After 1976, the economy began to crash. In 1977, a severe earthquake damaged most industrial facilities (Romania, 1989). Recovery was never accomplished, and by 1981
the country was nearing bankruptcy. To compensate for the debt, Ceausescu made drastic changes imposing a program that would curtail imports, while exporting as much as possible to earn cash (Romania, 1989). Agricultural growth was slowed by these changes. Due to food shortages, it became necessary to ration gasoline, electricity, and other consumer products (Cummings, 1986).

In December 1989, the Romanian people had taken all they could from Ceausescu. What was to come was one of the bloodiest revolutions in history. During this revolution, 104 people were killed. Before December 22nd, 162 people died fighting for their freedom (Romania, 1989). At the end of this revolution, Ceausescu was overthrown, tried, and executed. The first elections of independent Romania were held on May 1990. The National Salvation Front won the elections and called for a gradual and controlled transition to a free-market economy.

Biophysical Factors and Production Systems

Romanian lands have always been known for their fertility (Romania, 1989). Unfortunately, foreign powers have dominated the area, exploiting the rich soil and other resources holding the nation in poverty. Corn and wheat occupied nearly two-thirds of all arable land in the 1980s and about 90% of all grain lands (Romania, 1989). Now that Romania has gained its independence, foreign interests continue to dominate the economy. Farmers lack the foreign markets for their products that they once had. Consequently, large tracts of land that were once used to grow grain now sit idle. Outsiders, such as Germans and Hungarians, dominate domestic trade and finance.

Livestock production also plays an important role in Romania. Sheep are raised for their wool, milk, and lamb crops. Most lambs are sold at an early age and exported to other countries. The ewes are then milked and the milk is sold for cheese. They are sheared once a year and the wool is sold at a reduced rate. Most sheep are of the long wool and hair breeds due to the harsh winters. Horses are mainly used to pull wagons and to work on the farm. In 1990, horse-drawn equipment performed 18 to 25% of all harvesting and virtually all hauling on livestock farms (Culturgram, 1997). Pigs are raised on the farm for their meat. They can be purchased out of the trunks of cars once a week at the market. Most farmers raise one or two milk cows. They keep them in the house for 4 months out of the year due to the harsh winters. Several types of poultry are kept around the farm for eggs and meat.

There are three different farming practices in Romania. First, there is the small village farmer with one to five hectares of land. Next, there is the large private farmer having between 10 to 15 hectares. Finally, there are the large-scale government farms which make up most of Romanian agriculture production. In 1989, cooperative or government farms accounted for nearly 75% of all arable land (Romania, 1989). Most of this land is now available for purchase by the private farmer.

Cultural Norms

After the fall of communism, Romanians were faced with disillusionment. For years, Romanians have not possessed the economic and political freedoms they thought would be theirs (Culturgram, 1997). To understand the current agricultural situation, one must first
understand the Romanian society and culture. Under communism, the decisions were always made for them. Little choice was given. But there is a rich tradition of culture in Romania.

Many changes have taken place in Romania, but most of the traditional culture is still intact. In the hills of Transylvania, the farmers grow a great variety of fruit trees, especially apples. Most of the plowing in Romania is still primitive, with the work being done with a small tractor, horse, or oxen. For the most part, farmers use manure and cattle bedding for fertilizer. Weekly markets are held on a given day in each village. They serve as an opportunity for the exchange of news, propagating materials, cooking recipes, and food. The milk cow is still kept inside the house for four months out of the year due to the cold weather. Swine are still taken to market in the trunks of cars. Each Sunday morning, a gracious parade of churchgoers in their white and black suits fill the streets. During the winter the families are less busy with outside work. The men repair the tools and pursue hobbies such as wood carving and scrollwork. The Romanian people are highly educated people. Traditionally, high school and college students have received some education in agriculture. Currently, there remain four agriculture universities in Romania (Otiman, 2000).

Today, in Romania, much of the family-centered traditions remain strong. One reason for this was the government restrictions on migration during communism. Families still retain much of their patriarchal character. People in rural areas still follow the old courting and marriage customs. The family has always been important to Romanians, and the father maintains a dominant role. Most agricultural methods of production are passed from father to son and are rarely changed.

In many mountain villages live people whose origins go far back in history. While Romanian rural life is simple in some ways it has nurtured a rich folk tradition, one developed over several thousand years of absorbing elements of the cultures with which it has come in contact.

Conclusions and Educational Importance

The future of Romania lies in the hands of the Romanian citizens. “Participation, empowerment, and mutual respect enable lowers, and poor people in general, to express and analyze their individual and shared realities” (Chambers, 1997, p. 162). Reality is that the Romanians hold the key to improvement in their own hands. Agriculture will be the driving factor in the economic stability of Romania. As we begin the 21st century, nearly two centuries from the time when Romania was a prominent fixture in agriculture, the future of Romanian agriculture will depend on the development and success of several factors.

1. The development and implementation of a marketing system that will allow Romanian farmers to market their products within their own country.
2. The ability to develop a sustainable system where production can be maintained at current levels or higher.
3. The ability to increase the use of current technology.
4. The cooperation between the Romanian government and universities to provide opportunities for continuing education to the Romanian farmer.

During the rule of communism, it was policy for all products to be sold to State enterprises at a low fixed price (Bufraria, et. al, 1998). The pricing system has since undergone a gradual process of liberalisation. However, there is still not a stable marketing
system intact that will allow Romanian farmers and ranchers to market their products. A majority of Romania’s foreign trade is still conducted by the state sector (Buffaria, et. al, 1998). USAID has stepped in to help Romania establish a market for their products. To accomplish this, USAID has placed a strong emphasis on economic restructuring assistance, reflected in the significant commitment of funds and technical resources to support the country’s development of private independent capital markets (USAID, 1998).

“A sustainable rural community can be described as one which exhibits certain features of economic, social, cultural, and ecological sustainability” (Phelan, 1998, p. 3). “A definition of sustainability is to keep an effort going continuously, and the ability to outlast and keep from falling” (Chizari, Pexeshki-Raad, & Lindner, 1998, p. 1). Romania’s ability to produce a sustainable agriculture system faces several key constraints. There is a slow pace of privatization, lack of respect for contractual obligations, low confidence in the judiciary, and bureaucratic red tape and corruption (USAID, 1998). Until these constraints are overcome, the sustainability of Romanian agriculture will remain in jeopardy.

“Modern technologies have enabled farmers to obtain amazing yield increases from the conventional agriculture” (Betru, 1998, p. 1). At one time, Romania produced its own machinery, which it also exported. However, governmental and economical constraints are causing problems with the quality and quantity of machinery produced. “Between 1993 and 1997, sales of agricultural machines and tools fell from 45,000 to 15,000” (Buffaria, et al, 1998, p. 46). The agricultural machines and tools now in use are dated. There is a need for a substantial investment in capital equipment, particularly for the production of export-oriented crops. However, until world grain markets increase and domestic marketing and transportation infrastructures improve, Romania is not likely to assume regional dominance as the breadbasket for Europe.

Before the revolution, in 1989, institutions of higher education were merely centers for training a limited number of highly qualified workers (Sadlak, 1994). Under communist control, everyone was to have equal wealth and roles in the community. A university degree was often the only item of any value that a child could receive. During communist rule there was a desire to set up a school that would prepare pupils for life; unfortunately, this goal was never achieved.

After the revolution, the new Minister of Education, Professor Dr. Mihail Sora, liberalized the educational system by giving immediate academic freedom to the universities (Reiz, 1994). From the time of revolution until 1993, the number of state universities increased from 8 to 36 (Sadlak, 1994). Unfortunately, many of the new institutions lacked sufficient infrastructure and staff to guarantee an adequate education. As a result, graduates, mainly from technical disciplines, could not find jobs in their specialization (Reiz, 1994).

There is a great need for agricultural and extension education in Romania. In terms of non-formal education, a public-sector extension service is needed. However, until economic conditions improve, the establishment of such a system is many years away. In the interim, Non-Governmental Development Agencies should be established in the country. Linkages with religious organizations and the established church should be encouraged. The NGO’s working in agricultural extension should be required to use participatory approaches in developing programs that will empower locals in the decision making process. In addition, ethnographic linear programming should be used to simulate the effects of potential interventions upon individual livelihood systems. As far as formal education is concerned, each university with an agricultural program should develop a series of required courses in
extension education. A service-learning requirement should be implemented where students leave campus for a semester or term and conduct extension activities at the village level. In the secondary school system, agricultural education courses should be required of all students in rural areas.

Many forces and factors have contributed to the current situation in Romanian agriculture. Food security is dependent upon future cooperation between governmental officials, university faculty, agricultural researchers, the agricultural business sector, the agricultural and extension education sector, and farmers. Developmental professionals have a distinct opportunity to improve agriculture in Romania. Professional experience coupled with cultural awareness form a dynamic combination in which Romanian agriculture can excel far beyond expectations reaching its full potential.

References


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