

Article

Agricultural Chambers in the Process of Transfer of Knowledge and Innovations for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas in Poland

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Abstract: Agricultural chambers together with agricultural advisory centers and other entities are part of the European Union Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS). The system consists of a network of entities whose activities are focused on the introduction of new products, technologies, and organizational forms for use in agriculture. The AKIS is also defined as a network of research institutes, advisory centers, agricultural chambers, agricultural schools, and other non-governmental organizations that help farmers to upgrade the innovativeness and competitiveness of their farms and solve agriculture-related problems. In Poland, the activities of self-government in the agricultural sector are specified by the Act on Agricultural Chambers of 14 December 1995. An important research problem is the assessment of the activities of agricultural chambers in terms of the transfer of knowledge and innovations in agriculture in Poland and the determination of their place in the AKIS. This study of the impact of agricultural self-government on the transfer of knowledge and innovations in agriculture was carried out through the analysis of selected agricultural chambers in various regions of Poland taking into account the differences in the average surface area of agricultural land belonging to one farm. The research shows that agricultural chambers' activities had a substantial impact on the rate of absorption of EU funds under the Rural Development Program in the analyzed regions. The comparison of the effectiveness of the agricultural chambers in Poland with the activities of chambers in the other EU Member States indicates a weak influence of the former on developmental processes in agriculture. Agricultural chambers should actively participate in the formulation of the national agricultural policy, take greater measures to ensure the stability of agricultural income and the flow of information, and be an important partner for farmers in representing their interests.

Keywords: agricultural chambers; knowledge transfer; innovation; agriculture



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1. Introduction

Agricultural chambers and agricultural advisory centers are part of the public agricultural advisory system in Poland. These chambers, which are a form of agricultural self-government, obligatorily associate their members, as specified in the provisions of the Act on Agricultural Chambers [1–4]. A characteristic trait of the agricultural self-government in Poland is the obligatory association of all farmers that are taxpayers of agricultural tax and those representing special sectors of agricultural production [5–7]. The European Union imposed an obligation on member states to provide an agricultural advisory system in 2007. Currently, the operation of the system is determined by the provisions

of Regulation No. 1306/2013 of the European Parliament and of the EU Council [8–10] concerning the financing, management, and monitoring of the Common Agricultural Policy. The tasks related to the implementation of innovations in the agricultural sector are outlined by the AKIS, which is organized according to different principles in the individual Member States [11–13]. Given the challenges facing agriculture, especially in terms of innovative activities, the partnership of agricultural chambers requires the competence of their employees and cooperation with agricultural advisory centers. A special task of agricultural chambers is their information-related activity, i.e., the collection and processing of information intended to serve agricultural producers and other participants in the agricultural sector [14–17]. To ensure the welfare of agricultural producers and Polish agriculture, agricultural chambers should actively participate in the formulation of the national agricultural policy. In Poland, the AKIS is composed of agricultural chambers, agricultural advisory centers, and private entities providing advisory services. The multiple important tasks of agricultural chambers include advisory and informational services in the fields of agricultural activities, rural households, and the generation of additional income by farmers. Their information-related tasks are focused on the collection and processing of economic information to serve producers and other business entities [5,18–21]. The AKIS is based on three basic pillars: research, education, and the dissemination of knowledge [22,23]. The Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) is a set of entities, institutions, and organizations whose task is to generate, transform, implement, disseminate, and use knowledge in agriculture [1–3,24,25]. The EU Member States have developed various models of agricultural self-government. Agricultural chambers, together with agricultural advisory centers and other entities included in the AKIS, undertake activities targeted at introduction of new products, technologies, and organizational forms for economic use in agriculture. The implementation of the tasks adopted by agricultural chambers as part of the AKIS requires an efficiently operating local government participating in the establishment of agricultural policy in each Member State. Given the challenges facing agriculture, especially those associated with innovative activities, the partnership of agricultural chambers requires competence from their employees and cooperation with agricultural advisory bodies [26–28]. The special role of agricultural chambers in the AKIS consists in informational and advisory activities in the field of the collection and processing of economic information necessary for farmers and food producers. The function of agricultural chambers should include active participation in the formulation of the national agricultural policy [5,29–31].

The main goal and basic task of the agricultural self-government is to help to solve agricultural problems and represent the interests of its members [5,6,32,33]. As specified in the Act, agricultural chambers are legal bodies supporting agriculture, influencing agricultural policy, and participating in its implementation. The provisions of the Act on Agricultural Chambers specify the tasks of agricultural self-government, the list of member entities, and the principles of organization and financing of the chambers. The Act on Agricultural Chambers indicates that the task of the agricultural self-government is to take actions to solve agricultural problems and represent the interests of its members. The provisions of the Act also define the activities of the National Council of Agricultural Chambers as their national representation. The scope of their tasks is very extensive and is listed in Art. 5 Section 1 of the Act [5,6,34–36]. The 19 established statutory tasks of agricultural chambers are dominated by activities related to providing expert opinions to government administration and local self-government bodies. The scope of statutory tasks of agricultural chambers includes issuing opinions, preparation of analyses with conclusions about the profitability of agricultural production and the operation of agricultural regulations to meet the interests of farmers and agricultural producers, and presentation of the findings to government administration and local government bodies. An important statutory task of agricultural chambers is to present drafts of legal acts on agriculture and to provide opinions on local laws on agriculture established by Voivodes [5,6,37–39]. The statutory tasks of agricultural chambers also include advisory and informational services in the fields of the profitability of agricultural production, alternative sources of income for farmers, and

rural household activities. The chambers provide agricultural advisory services together with the Provincial Agricultural Advisory Centers. The minimum scope of agricultural advisory activity is specified in Regulation No. 1306/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council. It includes advice on the requirements of good agricultural practice, climate friendly and environmentally friendly practices, protection of biodiversity, counteraction of climate change, sustainable development of small farms, and other activities carried out in rural areas, especially the support of innovation and the improvement of the competitiveness of agricultural farms [10]. The advisory services of agricultural chambers also consist in undertaking activities as part of rural development programs adopted in the Member States.

2. Materials and Methods

The basic statutory task of agricultural chambers is to provide advice, to transfer knowledge and innovations in agriculture, and to help farmers to generate additional income. To implement their statutory task, the chambers cooperate with other agricultural advisory institutions in the organization of training, conferences, and meetings. Another category of the statutory tasks of agricultural chambers includes activities aimed at the creation and improvement of an agricultural market [40–42]. This study presents an analysis of the statutory activity of eight agricultural chambers in the following provinces: Podkarpackie, Lubuskie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Dolnośląskie, Śląskie, Wielkopolskie, Podlaskie, and Opolskie. The activities of the agricultural chambers analyzed in this study were focused on support for agriculture and rural development, including the transfer of knowledge and innovations, and representation of the interests of members before public authorities.

The main aim of this study was to evaluate the activities of agricultural chambers as partners supporting modern agriculture via the transfer of knowledge, consultation, and innovations. The analyses covered the activities of agricultural chambers from 2018–2020.

The following specific objectives were defined:

- (a) Identification of the role and tasks of agricultural chambers in the agricultural policy of Poland and other EU countries;
- (b) Recognition of the opportunities and problems encountered by farmers associated in agricultural chambers in the adaptation of their farms to the EU standards; and
- (c) Assessment of the impact of agricultural chambers on the development of agriculture and rural areas in terms of the transfer of knowledge and innovations.

The analysis was based on data published by individual chambers; additionally, the results of surveys conducted in a group of farmers who were members of agricultural chambers in the selected regions of Poland were used. The survey was conducted in 2022 in a group of 1076 members of agricultural chambers, i.e., farmers and owners of agricultural farms obliged to pay agricultural tax. The respondents were users of services provided by the agricultural chambers.

Based on the available literature, the role of agricultural chambers and their involvement in the process of the transfer of knowledge and innovations in agriculture and rural areas was described. The results of the survey on the functioning of agricultural chambers in the transfer of knowledge and innovations for the development of agriculture and rural areas were presented. The respondents, i.e., the members of agricultural chambers, assessed the effects of the activities of the chambers and the degree of adaptation of their offerings to the needs of individual groups of members.

The assessment of the operation of the advisory system in agricultural chambers was carried out in 2020 in regions with a diversified average size of agricultural land. The average farm area in the agricultural chambers ranged from 4.44 ha in Podkarpackie Province to 21.97 ha in Warmińsko-Mazurskie Province. The diversified area of farms and the type of agricultural production had an impact on the scope of the activities of the surveyed chambers.

This study was carried out using several research methods, i.e., comparative and descriptive analyses of national legal acts and the relevant literature, as well as the synthesis and deduction method. The basic research method consisted of the analysis of empirical material, review of the literature, and inference. The calculations were performed using the STATISTICA 13.1 software by SoftStart Polska.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Analysis of the Condition of Polish Agricultural Local Government Compared to European Local Governments

The current agricultural chambers in Poland do not have appropriate assets and sufficient financial resources to carry out their activities. Consequently, they should analyze the costs and profitability of agricultural production [5,43–45]. However, these analytic tasks have not been fully implemented by the chambers due to the small number of employees and their insufficient competence. Therefore, the chambers use profitability analyses reported by provincial agricultural advisory centers. They support farmers in the establishment of unions and associations of agricultural producers.

Agricultural chambers in Poland cannot conduct business activities providing additional income [5,46–48]. In contrast, the agricultural self-governments in other European countries can be involved in such activities. Agricultural chambers operate in many European countries. Germany and France are examples of European Union Member States where agricultural chambers have a long tradition and function as public law associations. The activities of agricultural chambers in both these countries are widely recognized and appreciated by farmers. As part of their public administration tasks, the agricultural chambers in Germany and France decide on the most important matters of agricultural production and the countryside. The strength and effectiveness of the German and French agricultural chambers is a result of the good organization of the agricultural self-governments that is well adapted to farmers' needs and expectations. Agricultural self-government is an integral element of the political system in these countries. It serves a function of decentralized public administration with many tasks related to agricultural production and the agricultural environment delegated by the state in legal acts. As shown by the German and French experience, the development and adaptation of agriculture to contemporary standards and the creation of strategic programs for the development of agriculture and rural areas are achieved with considerable civic participation. The agricultural chambers in these countries legitimize the civil democratic system [49–51].

Various models of agricultural self-government have been developed in Europe [52,53]. Based on the adopted assumption of the political and legal structure, the agricultural self-government is:

- (a) A public law corporation endowed with administrative and legal powers and, by virtue of law, with obligatory membership (continental model: French, German, Prussian);
- (b) An association form with no administrative authority which is based on a voluntary membership model. The chambers function as elite professional organizations of various interest groups (Anglo-Saxon model).

The typology of agricultural self-government based on the degree of its separation distinguishes two models in which:

- (a) Agricultural chambers have not been separated from the economic self-government and operate jointly with the commercial, industrial, and craft self-government (Italian model)
- (b) Agricultural chambers have been separated and operate in compliance with their own legal regulations (French, German, Austrian, and Czech models).

The analysis of the tasks of agricultural chambers in the EU Member States and in Poland indicates that Polish agricultural chambers do not perform important tasks regarding the transfer of knowledge for the benefit of agriculture and rural areas, unlike

in the case of chambers in the other EU Member States [5,10,54–56]. Chambers operating in the EU have greater powers and thus can have a greater impact on the development of agriculture and rural areas. The wide scope of powers of agricultural chambers is also related to the possibility of accumulating greater financial resources. Due to their limited powers, Polish agricultural chambers do not have adequate financial resources that could be allocated to the implementation of a wider range of tasks. The provisions of the Act on Agricultural Chambers prevent these bodies from conducting business activities that could generate income. In the EU countries, e.g., France and Germany, business activity is an important source of income for agricultural chambers. The main source of income for agricultural chambers in Poland is the revenue from the 2% agricultural tax collected in the area of operation of the chamber. In part, agricultural chambers are financially supported by the state budget, subsidies from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, or the EU budget. Agricultural chambers in Poland have only in part implemented projects co-financed by EU funds. Several agricultural chambers have used EU funds to implement projects co-financed by the Rural Development Program 2014–2020 budget as part of the National Rural Network. These funds were used to finance familiarization trips abroad and to organize conferences [5,57,58].

Pursuant to the Act on Agricultural Chambers, the financial management of agricultural chambers should be based on the provisions of their statutes and resolutions of the General Assembly, i.e., the highest decision-making body. The financial resources of agricultural chambers are managed by their management boards in accordance with the principles and objectives defined by budgets adopted by the General Assembly [5,59,60].

As specified by the Act, the agricultural self-government represents the legal interests of farmers who are payers of agricultural tax, payers of tax on income from special sectors, and members of agricultural production cooperatives. The basic objective of the agricultural self-government is to solve agricultural problems and represent the interests of associated entities. The activities of agricultural chambers are mainly focused on representing the interests of individual farmers, mainly those with medium-sized farms, before public authorities and local government bodies [5,10,61–63]. The comparison of the effectiveness of the agricultural chambers in Poland with the activities of chambers in the other EU Member States indicates only a weak influence of the former on developmental processes in agriculture. The basic weaknesses of the agricultural chambers operating in Poland are as follows:

- (a) insufficient legal, material, and financial instruments for their activity;
- (b) underestimation of the role of agricultural self-government in the context of Poland's membership in the EU;
- (c) a lack of clear relationships of the agricultural self-government with state and self-government administration bodies;
- (d) low awareness of the farmer self-government expressed by, e.g., low voter turnout and perception of agricultural chambers as one of the demanding organizations similar to trade unions and farmers' clubs;
- (e) an unsatisfactory level of education about local government and a lack of interest of state and self-government administration bodies in the agricultural self-government [5,64–66].

By virtue of law, the following entities can be members of agricultural self-government:

- (a) natural and legal persons who are agricultural taxpayers;
- (b) natural and legal persons paying tax on income from special sectors of agricultural production;
- (c) members with land resources pooled in agricultural production cooperatives [5,67–69].

The task of the agricultural self-government is to help to solve agriculture-related problems and represent the interests of associated entities. The Act on Agricultural Chambers contains an open catalog of 19 opinion-giving and advisory tasks and activities focused on improvement of the agricultural market and advancement of agricultural education. The tasks of the chambers are defined in the Act as activities aimed at the initiation, establishment, promotion, and development of collaboration in the field of agriculture. Agricultural

chambers can put forward proposals of legal regulations on agriculture, rural development, and agricultural markets; provide opinions on the drafts of these regulations; take actions to develop agricultural and rural infrastructure and improve the agrarian structure; make lists of experts; award qualification titles in the field of agriculture; and cooperate in the field of environmental protection, health, and rural cultural heritage [5,70–72]. The tasks performed by agricultural chambers are focused on organizational and support work; therefore, their position in the system of entities operating in the agricultural environment is relatively weak. The chambers do not have sufficient competence to influence the development of agriculture and agricultural markets. Their tasks as agriculture-supporting institutions also include the promotion of the export of agricultural products as well as the establishment and development of cooperation with foreign organizations of agricultural producers. Additionally, agricultural chambers carry out tasks focused on the improvement of agricultural infrastructure and agricultural production conditions [5,73–75].

The competences of agricultural chambers are also defined by specific laws determining the scope of cooperation with local governments and other self-governments, governmental organizations, business entities, and agencies specialized in agriculture-related issues. These are mainly advisory and opinion-giving competences. While performing their tasks, agricultural advisory entities cooperate with agricultural chambers and the National Council of Agricultural Chambers. It has been shown that the diversified area of agricultural farms and agricultural production types in individual provinces is not associated with differences in the scope of activities of agricultural chambers [76–78].

The Act on Agricultural Chambers offers agricultural chambers the possibility to carry out commissioned government administration tasks delegated based on the statute or an agreement and tasks commissioned by virtue of an agreement with the local government. In practice, these provisions are not applied due to the absence of other legal regulations. Polish chambers do not perform any tasks commissioned or entrusted by the state administration or local governments. The acts concerning the Voivode and governmental administration in the province, district self-government, municipal self-government, and provincial self-government do not ensure the possibility of task delegation to agricultural chambers by these authorities. Due to the lack of implementation of regulations, agricultural chambers cannot cooperate with state administrations and self-government bodies in solving agricultural problems. In these legal conditions, agricultural chambers are not partners of local and regional authorities, but they are evidently marginalized. Provincial administration bodies are obliged to seek the opinion of the local chamber on the drafts of local law acts on agriculture, rural development, and agricultural markets, with the exception of order regulations. These tasks are not implemented because the government authorities have not adopted the relevant resolutions.

The literature presents a view that the statutory tasks of agricultural self-government are not adapted to contemporary agricultural problems [10,79–81]. The catalog of tasks listed in the Act on Agricultural Chambers has been only slightly updated since 1995 despite the changes in the organization and functioning of Polish agriculture, agricultural markets, and rural areas. During this period, the mechanisms of the Common Agricultural Policy have been introduced with changes in the awareness, expectations, and needs of agricultural producers and changes in the possibility of taking new initiatives in agriculture. The provisions of the Act on Agricultural Chambers do not specify tasks associated with Poland's membership in the European Union related to the transfer of knowledge and innovations in agriculture as part of the European Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System or tasks related to the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy [5–7,82–84].

The agricultural self-governments have a problem with registering their members. The chambers do not have data on their members or their total number, although membership in agricultural self-government is obligatory for agricultural taxpayers, payers of tax on income from special sectors of agricultural production, and members of agricultural production cooperatives specified in the Act on Agricultural Chambers [6,85,86].

Unlike in the other EU Member States, the agricultural chambers in Poland cannot maximize profit and generate income from business activities. To implement their statutory tasks and expand the scope of their activities, the chambers may be partners in limited liability companies or shareholders in joint-stock companies. They can also set up foundations and be a supporting member of associations and a founder or a member of a union of associations that conduct activities to the extent consistent with the statutory tasks of the chamber. Income from shares in companies may only be allocated for the implementation of chamber statutory tasks. Agricultural chambers have been found to comply with the ban on conducting business activities. Most of these bodies have established commercial companies with 100% of the share capital. The main activities of the companies set up by the chambers included publishing and transport services, agricultural advisory services, and the sale of agricultural products to farms. The scope of their activities is outlined in establishment agreements and is consistent with their statutory tasks [5,87–89].

As specified by the Act on Agricultural Chambers, the basic source of income for agricultural chambers is the 2% deduction from the revenues from agricultural tax collected in the area of operation of the chambers. The other income of the chambers is provided by

- (a) funds allocated for the implementation of tasks commissioned by the government or local self-government administration;
- (b) shares in companies;
- (c) other assets of the chamber;
- (d) donations, bequests, grants, and other payments;
- (e) membership fees;
- (f) fees for services provided by the chamber;
- (g) income from interest on bank accounts and deposits [5].

The analysis of data on the income of agricultural chambers revealed an unfavorable phenomenon of differences among the chambers in terms of their income, affecting the scope of their statutory tasks. The income of agricultural chambers depends mainly on the revenues from agricultural tax, taking into account the grade of agricultural land, the structure of arable land, and the number and size of farms in the province. This income constitutes from 60 to 90% of the total income structure. The Mazowiecka, Wielkopolska, and Lubelska Chambers have the largest budgets. The 2% revenue from the agricultural tax in the case of these chambers amounts to over PLN 3 million. The lowest income, i.e., less than PLN 1 million, has been reported in the Śląska, Lubuska, and Świętokrzyska Chambers (Figure 1).

The analysis of the scope of tasks performed by the agricultural chambers in Poland and the EU Member States has shown that the Polish chambers do not fulfill many important tasks, such as establishment and management of agricultural schools, broad-sense agrotechnical advisory services for the agri-food industry, or economic and prognostic research. Due to the limited scope of competences, the chambers operating in Poland participate in shaping local and regional development only to a small extent. French and German agricultural chambers are decentralized professional public law corporations influencing the most important decisions on rural areas, agriculture, and agricultural environment. The chambers in these countries are the initiators of new solutions for production technologies, agricultural markets, and improvement in the qualifications of agricultural producers. Having appropriate competences, they are a key factor in the development of agriculture and rural areas [90,91]. The Polish agricultural chambers do not have adequate financial resources to carry out their activities and cannot be involved in income-providing business activities, in contrast to France and Germany, where the agricultural chambers generate considerable income [12,13].

The vast majority of agricultural chambers in Poland have been found to implement the statutory tasks of agricultural self-government specified in the Act on Agricultural Chambers. The statutory tasks are performed less efficiently by chambers operating in areas where agriculture does not play an important role in the economy of the region.

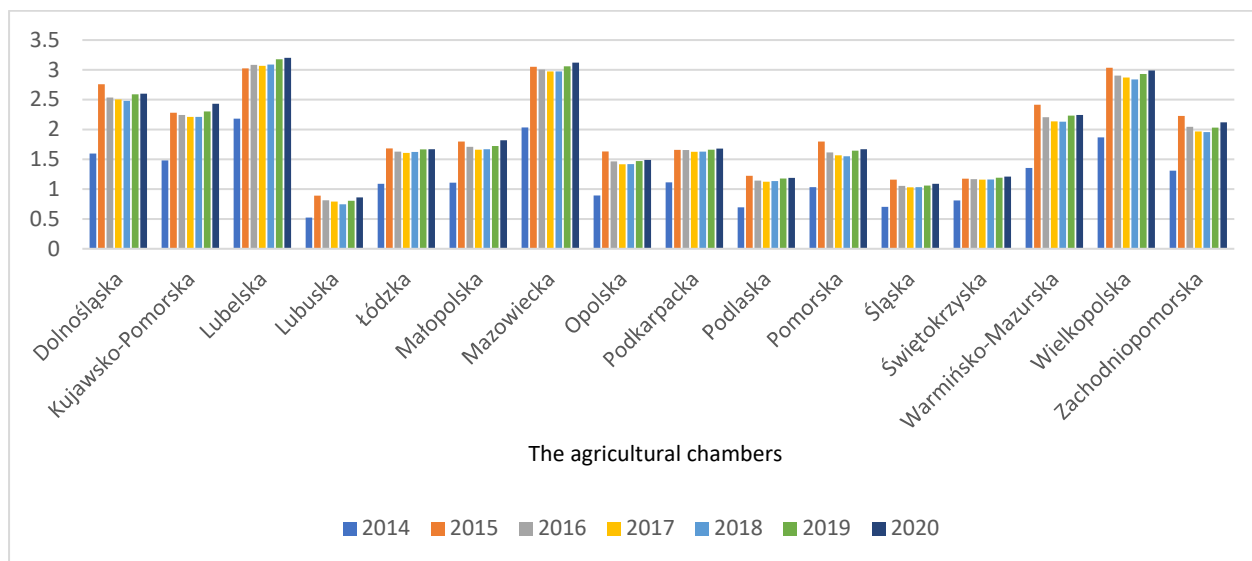


Figure 1. Income of agricultural chambers in Poland from the 2% agricultural tax deduction from 2014–2020.

In summary, despite the legal regulations, the current agricultural chambers in Poland do not play a major role in the development of rural areas and agriculture. The applicable legal regulations on their activities clearly indicate a narrow definition of their powers limited to opinion-giving and advisory activities. Strengthening the position of agricultural chambers within the AKIS requires amendments to the relevant act. Various models of agricultural self-government have been developed in the EU Member States. It is indicated that Polish agricultural chambers should have much broader legislative and decision-making powers [35,36,40,59,60] and greater financial resources for the implementation of their tasks, including business activities.

3.2. Assessment of the Role of Agricultural Chambers in Supporting the Competitiveness of Agriculture

It is widely mentioned that the activities of the agricultural advisory system do not fully meet the expectations and needs of modern agriculture. The main criticism centers on agricultural advisory services provided by provincial agricultural advisory centers. This activity of the agricultural chambers is dominated by legal advisory services. The comments in this field focus mainly on the ineffectiveness of the services provided, poor access to advisors, lack of responsibility for the services provided, limited use of modern forms of advisory services, and bureaucratic procedures. The advisory tasks of agricultural chambers result directly from the Act on Agricultural Chambers. The mutual cooperation in advisory services between agricultural chambers and agricultural advisory institutions is specified in the Act on Agricultural Advisory Units. The provisions of this act indicate that advisory tasks must be carried out in cooperation with agricultural chambers. Therefore, agricultural chambers and agricultural advisory entities conclude appropriate agreements on mutual cooperation, as the advisory tasks of both units are to be undertaken in the same area. In practice, the same scope of tasks and competences of these important parts of the AKIS result in extensive cooperation, exchange of experience, and joint activities. The mutual cooperation between agricultural chambers and agricultural advisory institutions is visible. The provisions of the Common Agricultural Policy indicate great expectations towards advisory institutions and recommend new forms of cooperation, e.g., the European Partnership for Sustainable Development of Rural Areas, allocating substantial financial resources for this strategy. The importance of the agricultural advisory system in the 2014–2020 CAP is associated with Regulation (EU) No. 1306/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council [10,91,92]. The inclusion of the legal basis of

advisory services in horizontal regulations emphasizes the role and importance of the regulations and indicates expansion of the scope of tasks beyond the existing requirements. In the new concept, multi-element and multi-entity agricultural advisory services include all instruments implemented under the common agricultural policy, and their effectiveness is constantly monitored and evaluated. The advisory system consists of any number of public and private entities. The Polish advisory system is dominated by the public sector financed by the state budget. The minimum range of advisory activities refers to:

- (a) the requirements of good agricultural practices,
- (b) climate- and environmentally friendly practices,
- (c) the protection of biodiversity and counteraction of climate change,
- (d) the sustainable development of small farms,
- (e) other activities conducted in rural areas, especially innovative actions.

The advisory task of agricultural chambers is also to undertake activities proposed in rural development programs adopted by the Member States. The use of advisory services is voluntary and widely available. Advisors must have appropriate professional qualifications. As shown by the survey results (Figure 2), the agricultural chambers most often offer assistance in completing applications for co-financing projects from EU funds. They collaborate with agricultural advisory units based on cooperation agreements. The lowest percentage of advisory services provided by agricultural chambers is assigned to the improvement of the professional qualifications of farmers and employees of agriculture-supporting institutions.

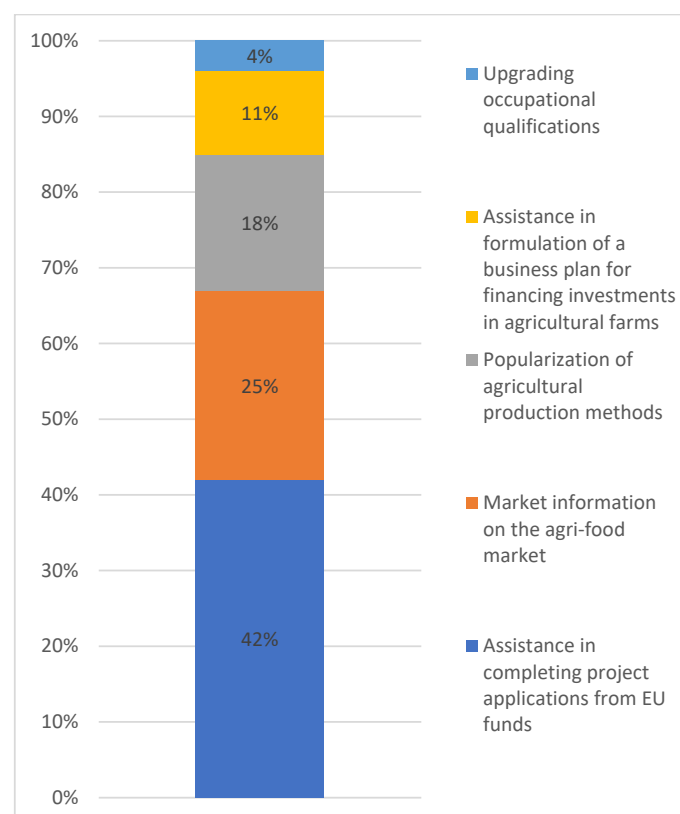


Figure 2. Type of agricultural advisory services provided by agricultural chambers to farmers (% of responses).

The advisory services provided by agricultural chambers are also intended to help farmers to use Rural Development Program funds mainly to increase the competitiveness of agricultural farms. The tasks for agricultural advisory bodies are specified in Art. 5 of Regulation No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the support

for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) establishing a catalog of EU rural development priorities [93]. The detailed catalog of advisory tasks also includes activities related to the promotion of innovativeness in agriculture within the European Innovation Partnership, which is an element of support for agricultural economic development. To perform innovation-related activities in accordance with Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council, a bridge has been created between the latest research and technologies and farmers, entrepreneurs, and advisory institutions within the European Innovation Partnership network (EIP-AGRI) [93]. The EIP-AGRI network consists of operational groups, advisory bodies, agricultural and territorial self-government organizations, and research organizations. The EIP operational groups comprise agricultural producers, advisors, scientists, and agri-food entrepreneurs. The innovation-related activities referred to as the EIP for Efficient and Sustainable Agriculture are focused on the improvement of competitiveness, food safety, climate protection, and the rational management of natural resources. The scope of tasks of agricultural chambers within the EIP should also be included in the Polish Act on Agricultural Chambers. The statutory tasks of agricultural chambers should take into account the recent changes in the organization and functioning of Polish agriculture and the mechanisms of the Common Agricultural Policy [10,93].

The comparative analysis of the income of agricultural chambers with the amounts of payments made under the Rural Development Program 2014–2020 in the individual provinces shows significant dependencies between these variables. The income of agricultural chambers is determined by the scope of statutory tasks performed, which has a strong impact on the rate of absorption of EU funds from the Rural Development Program 2014–2020. In the group of the 16 Polish provinces, the lowest rate of absorption of the RDP 2014–2020 funds and the lowest income achieved by agricultural chambers were recorded in Śląskie, Lubuskie, Świętokrzyskie, Podkarpackie, and Opolskie Provinces (Figure 3).

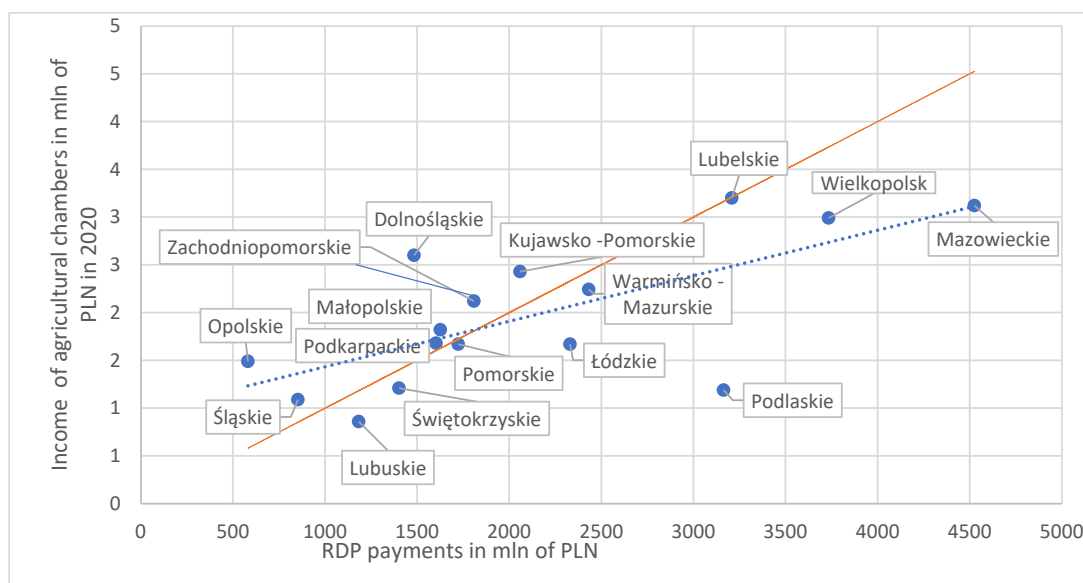


Figure 3. Relationships between the income of agricultural chambers in Polish provinces and the rate of absorption of RDP 2014–2020 funds.

The scheme of the planned allocation of the RDP funds assessed at the end of 2020 (Figure 4) confirms that farmers actively applied for RDP support for their activities, as evidenced by the high rate of use of the funds. Therefore, the effectiveness of the implementation of the agricultural support policy from EU funds should be focused on equalization of regional disproportions in the development of the agricultural sector. Important issues include the use of the potential of local resources, the preservation of

specific natural and cultural assets of the countryside and agriculture of individual regions, and the enhancement of the agriculture-supporting activity of institutions.

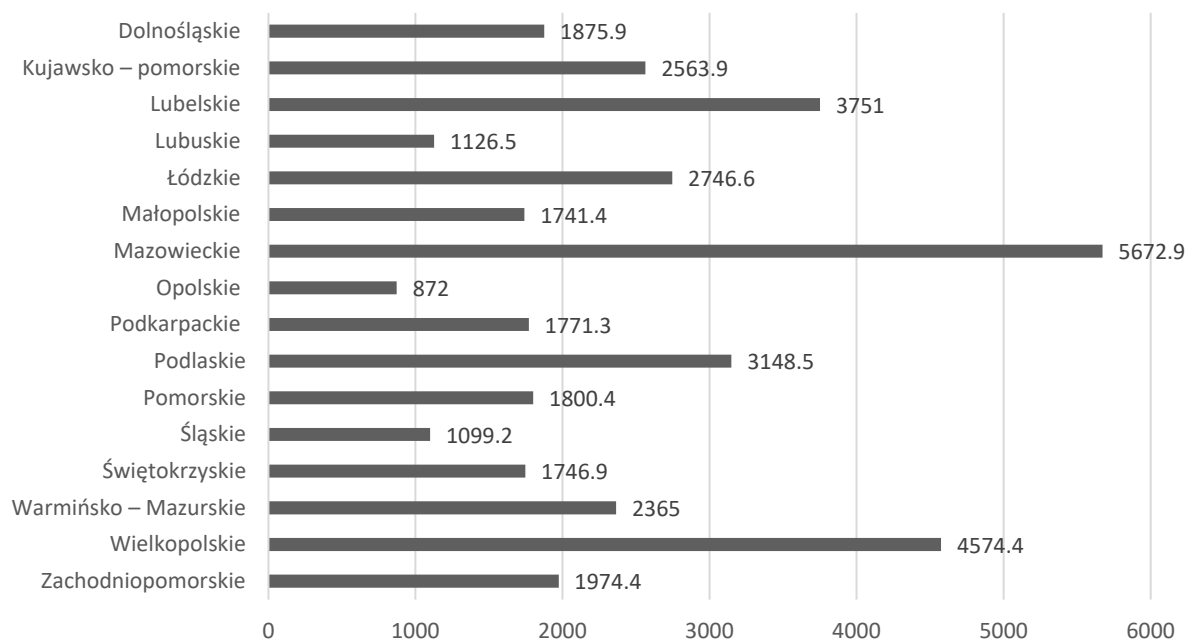


Figure 4. Regional differences in payments from the Rural Development Program 2014–2020 (PLN million).

The analysis of payments from the Rural Development Program 2014–2020 showed that the size of the province, its total number of farms, and the surface area of agricultural land were the main factors in the regional differentiation. This is confirmed by the correlation coefficient (0.94) between the level of financial assistance and the surface area of agricultural land in the provinces. However, the correlation between the number of concluded contracts and the number of farms involved in agricultural activity was weaker, with a correlation coefficient of merely 0.59. The correlation of the share of agriculture in generating GDP with the number of concluded contracts for co-financing from RDP 2014–2020 funds was 0.86, and the correlation coefficient for the amount of payments from RDP funds was 0.70 (Table 1).

Table 1. Correlation coefficients between the participation of agriculture in GDP and the use of RDP 2014–2020 funds.

Variable	Participation of Agriculture in GDP	Number of Applications (Thous.)	Number of Agreements/Decisions (Thous.)	Amount of Payments (PLN Million)
Participation of agriculture in GDP	1.0000	0.8742	0.8636	0.7010
Number of applications (thous.)	0.8742	1.0000	0.9993	0.7362
Number of agreements/decisions (thous.)	0.8636	0.9993	1.0000	0.7458
Amount of payments (PLN million)	0.7010	0.7362	0.7458	1.0000

The participation of agriculture in GDP generation is strongly correlated with all the variables, which is a consequence of the high correlations between the variables. The most adequate variable is the number of payments, as it reflects the real funds from the EU budget transferred to agriculture and rural areas, which in turn has an impact on the GDP. A correlogram is one of the cartographic presentation methods for the presentation of the mean value of any phenomenon in specific spatial units called basic fields or reference units (Figure 5).

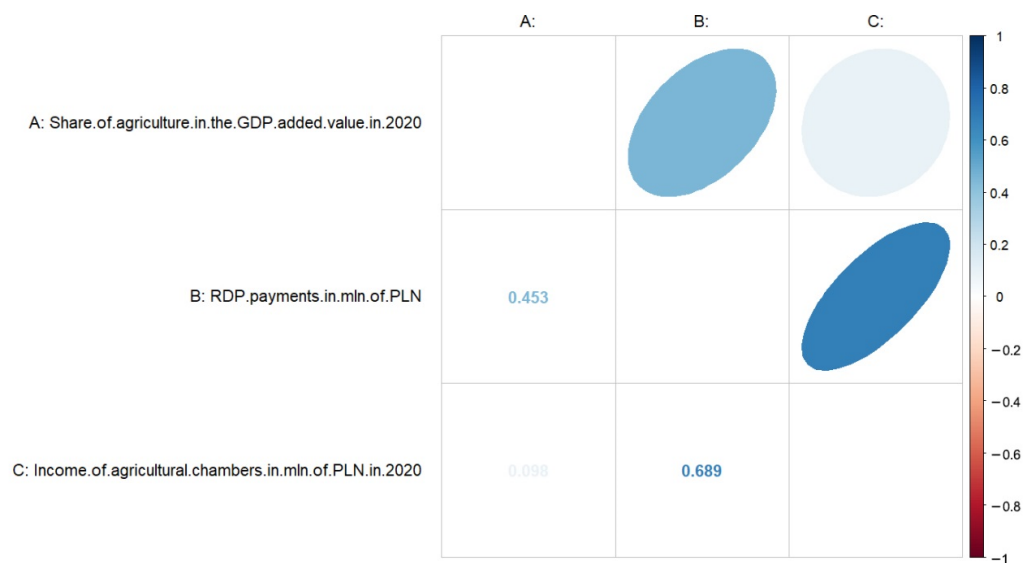


Figure 5. Correlogram of the relationship between the number of payments under the RDP 2014–2020 and the income of agricultural chambers.

The indicator of the income of agricultural chambers is highly correlated with the number of payments from RDP funds for agriculture and rural areas. The most adequate variable is the amount of payment, reflecting the real funds from the EU budget transferred to agriculture and rural areas, which in turn has an impact on GDP. A low correlation coefficient was found for the relationship between the income of agricultural chambers and the participation of agriculture in GDP (Figure 5).

An important element of any intervention policy is the assessment of its implementation and outcomes. The greatest amounts of funds per farm and per 1 ha UAA were transferred to the Mazowieckie, Wielkopolskie, Lubuskie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie, Podlaskie, and Łódzkie Provinces, strengthening the competitiveness of regions with a relatively good agrarian structure and high level of agriculture (Table 2).

Table 2. Differences between regions in the use of EU RDP 2014–2020 funds.

Provinces	Amount of Financial Aid per Farm in Thousands of PLN	Amount of Financial Aid per ha UAA in Thousands of PLN	Amount of Financial Aid per Farm in Thousands of USD	Amount of Financial Aid per ha UAA in USD
Zachodniopomorskie	67.9	2.36	17.5	607
Wielkopolskie	37.2	2.62	9.6	674
Warmińsko—Mazurskie	56.4	2.32	14.5	591
Świętokrzyskie	19.4	3.5	5.0	900
Śląskie	18.6	2.87	4.8	338
Pomorskie	45	2.44	11.6	627
Podlaskie	39.8	2.93	10.2	753
Podkarpackie	13.3	3.03	3.4	779
Opolskie	32.6	1.67	8.4	429
Mazowieckie	26.7	2.98	6.9	766
Małopolskie	12.2	3.12	3.1	803
Łódzkie	21.4	2.8	5.5	720
Lubuskie	53	2.76	13.6	709
Lubelskie	21	2.73	5.4	702
Kujawsko—pomorskie	39.4	2.44	10.1	627
Dolnośląskie	31.5	2.03	8.1	522
Poland	27.2	2.66	7.0	684

The regional diversification of the absorption of EU funds under the RDP 2014–2020 was also confirmed by the analysis of the use of these funds per employee in agriculture and per PLN 100 of fixed assets in agriculture. The greatest amounts of the EU funds were used in Mazowieckie, Wielkopolskie, Lubuskie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie, Podlaskie, and Łódzkie Provinces, which potentially increased their competitiveness in agriculture (Figure 6).

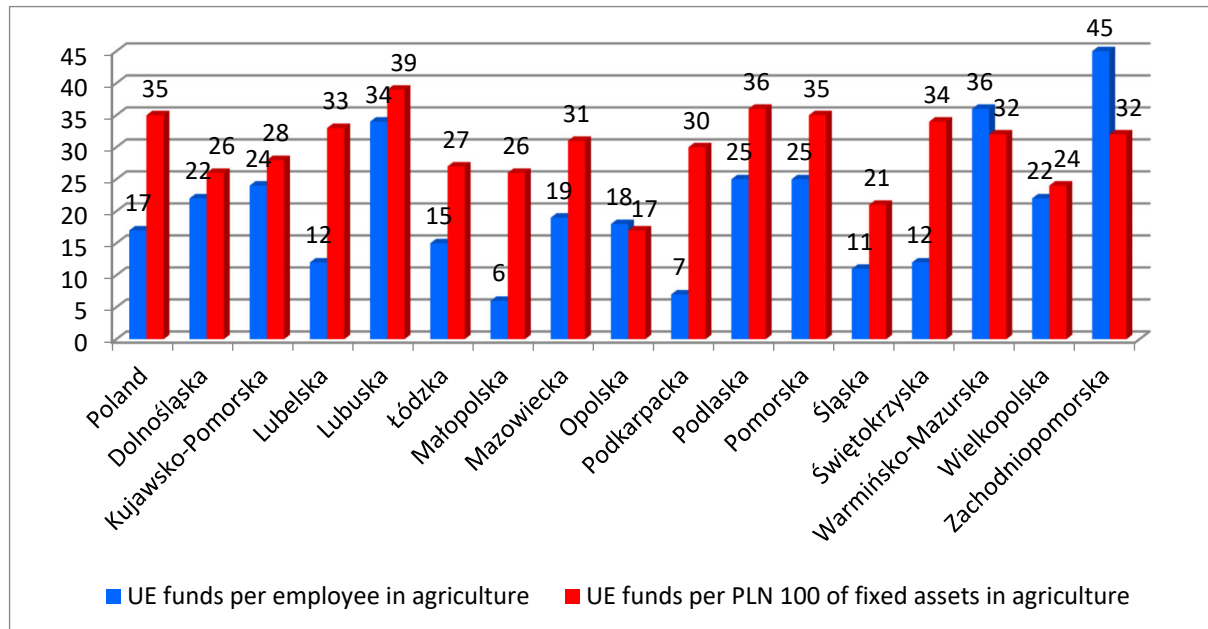


Figure 6. Absorption of EU funds per employee in agriculture and per PLN 100 of fixed assets in agriculture.

It has been shown that agricultural chambers can and should undertake systematic advisory activities focused on the innovativeness of farms, quality management, human resources, economic potential, and the participation of farms in scientific and research projects. The advisory activity should largely be aimed at the possibility to absorb EU funds under the RDP. The competences of the chambers should also include consultations on the conditions of food safety, cooperation with research centers and agri-food industry entrepreneurs, environmental protection organizations, entrepreneurs associated with the agricultural environment, and all levels of agricultural administration and local government organizations. Agricultural chambers should provide paid services, which is impossible in the current legal system regulating the activities of agricultural chambers. The Act on Agricultural Chambers does not specify the type or rules of services to be provided. Agricultural chambers have indicated the necessity of introducing paid services in terms of food safety conditions, the involvement of farms in scientific and research projects, applications for EU funds, quality management, and human resources. The income generated by such services could significantly improve the financial situation of the chambers.

3.3. Activities of Agricultural Chambers for the Development of the Agricultural Market and Rural Areas

The tasks of agricultural self-government should comply with the assumptions of the EU long-term socio-economic growth program defined in the European Green Deal strategy (formerly: Europe 2020 Strategy), which outlines three priorities ensuring smart and sustainable development promoting social inclusion. The implementation of these goals is largely related to agriculture and rural areas. The implementation of innovations in the agricultural sector is necessary to respond to the challenges associated with food security and the sustainable development of agriculture. Socio-economic and production conditions

are some of the determinants of the implementation of innovations in agriculture. An important role in the stimulation of innovation in rural areas is played by agricultural self-government through advisory and informational support for agricultural producers in the field of absorption of EU funds provided by the financial instruments of the CAP strategy.

The tasks related to the implementation of innovations in the agricultural sector are to be ensured by the AKIS, which is organized on different principles in the individual Member States. Each EU country has built its own system defined by its own legal acts based on the characteristics of research institutions and advisory organizations, education structure, sources of financing, the characteristics of farms and farm owners along with their needs and expectations, and the necessity of implementing CAP and local agricultural policy strategies.

The organization of the AKIS in the EU Member States is highly diversified, ranging from 500 entities in Romania to 36 in Ireland, 28 in Bulgaria, three in Poland (AAC, Agricultural Chambers, private entities), and one in Sweden. In the AKIS, special emphasis is placed on the role of an agricultural advisor, and this position can be held by a person registered in the list of agricultural, forestry, or agri-environmental advisors by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. The modern CAP supports the role of agricultural advisory bodies within the AKIS, which is important for the approval of CAP strategic plans. As reported by Wiatrak [79,80,94], the advisory system of agricultural chambers in Poland does not fully fit into the European Knowledge and Innovation System in the field of agriculture. The scope of advisory tasks conducted by the agricultural self-government should be focused mainly on CAP-related advisory services. The main cause of the failure in adaptation of the advisory system of agricultural chambers to the AKIS strategy is their inadequate organization and the lack of the required advisory qualifications of chamber employees. Countries that had achieved an extensive network of advisory bodies within agricultural chambers by the end of 2019 were France (116 chambers and 5000 advisors), Austria (nine chambers and 600 advisors), and Slovenia (one chamber and 330 advisors). This system in Poland comprises 16 chambers, but there are no published data on the number of advisors.

Agricultural chambers are the only universal professional self-government authorized to represent all farmers and the various interests of national agriculture. The provisions of the Act on Agricultural Chambers include a list of their tasks, i.e., the preparation of expert opinions, analyses, assessment, and conclusions on agricultural production and the agricultural market for the needs of government and self-government administration bodies. Agricultural chambers can propose legal regulations on agriculture, rural development, and agricultural markets and express their opinions on drafts of these regulations. They undertake activities focused on the development of agricultural and rural infrastructure and improvement of the agrarian structure. They also make lists of experts, award agricultural qualification titles, and collaborate in the field of environmental protection, health, and rural cultural heritage. One of the tasks of agricultural chambers is to solve agricultural problems and represent the interests of associated entities. They initiate and introduce changes in agriculture and its environment. As one of their very important tasks, the act specifies that the chambers should provide expert opinions to the government administration and local self-government. These tasks include assessment, expert opinions, conclusions, and analyses of agricultural production and the agricultural market to be presented to state and local government bodies [2,21,95]. Agricultural chambers may initiate the creation of legal acts for agriculture and provide opinions on legal acts developed by other entities. They also carry out informational tasks and advisory services regarding agricultural activity, rural households, and the generation of additional income by farmers. The information-related tasks are focused on the collection and processing of economic information to serve producers and other business entities. Another group comprises tasks related to the creation and improvement of the agricultural market. As part of these competences, agricultural chambers analyze production costs and profitability, initiate the establishment of unions and associations of agricultural producers, and support already existing societies. They

promote the export of agricultural products as well as the establishment and development of cooperation with foreign organizations bringing together agricultural producers. These tasks are also focused on the improvement of agricultural infrastructure and production conditions [5,96]. Agricultural self-government is obliged to ensure an appropriate level of education among agricultural producers and employees, cooperate and support the activities of institutions running agricultural schools, or initiate the establishment of new institutions. Agricultural chambers should train agricultural producers and help upgrade their professional qualifications, thereby shaping their ecological awareness.

The wide range of statutory tasks of agricultural chambers has been assessed by members of agricultural chambers. The majority of the surveyed farmers (48.20%) expressed an opinion that agricultural chambers do not contribute to the development of agriculture in the region. A definitely positive answer was chosen by 31.50% of the respondents, “definitely not” was indicated by 6.50%, and 2.40% of the respondents had no opinion (Figure 7).

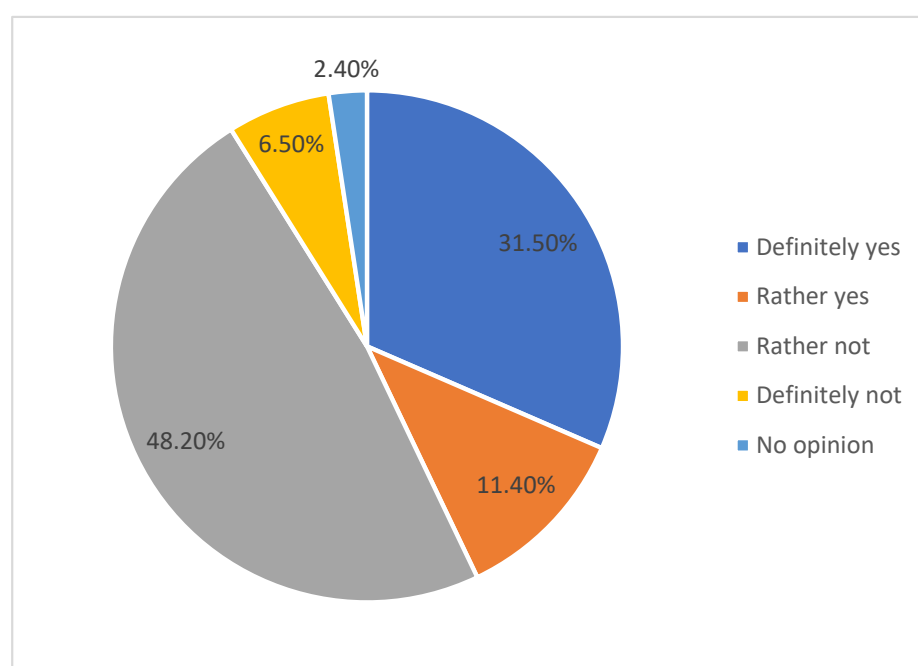


Figure 7. Assessment of the impact of agricultural chambers on the development of agriculture in the region (the percentage of responses).

The advisory services provided by agricultural chambers aim to help farmers to use the RDP 2014–2021 funds intended to increase the competitiveness of agricultural farms. The tasks of agricultural advisory bodies are specified in Regulation No. 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development [93], establishing a catalog of EU priorities in this field. The respondents assessed the advisory services provided by agricultural chambers as very good (55.30% of responses). A minority of the respondents (23.70%) indicated a good level of activities in this area. A low percentage (2.20%) of the respondents evaluated the advisory services as insufficient, and 3.00% had no opinion (Figure 8).

The scope of the statutory tasks of agricultural chambers also includes actions targeted at development of the agricultural and rural infrastructure and improvement of the agrarian structure. However, the Act on Agricultural Chambers does not specify a broader scope of activities in this area. The respondents assessed the activities of agricultural chambers in terms of activities for development of the agricultural and rural infrastructure and improvement of the agrarian structure as good (60.00% of responses). In turn, 23.70% of

the respondents rated these activities as very good, 4.40% indicated insufficient actions, and 1.00% had no opinion (Figure 9).

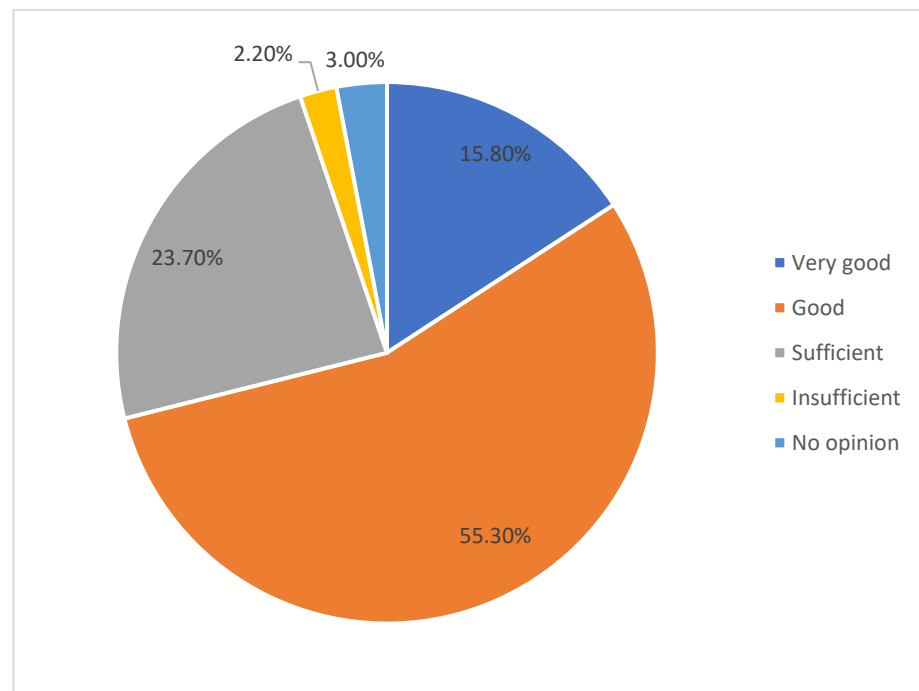


Figure 8. Assessment of advisory services provided by agricultural chambers (% of responses).

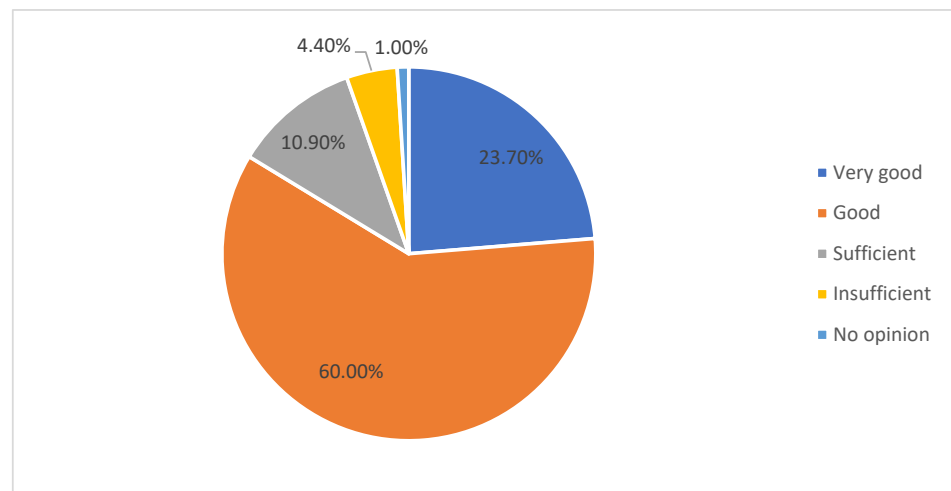


Figure 9. Assessment of the activities of agricultural chambers targeted at development of the agricultural and rural infrastructure and improvement of the agrarian structure (% of responses).

3.4. Effects of the Activity of Agricultural Chambers and Adaptation to Farmers' Needs

Agricultural chambers can and should undertake systematic advisory activities targeted at the innovativeness of farms, quality management, human resources, economic potential, and the participation of farms in scientific and research projects. The advisory activity should primarily be aimed at aiding in absorbing EU funds under the RDP. The competences of the chambers should also include consultations on the conditions of food safety, cooperation with research and scientific centers and agri-food industry entrepreneurs, environmental protection organizations, entrepreneurs associated with the agricultural environment, and all levels of agricultural administration and self-government entities.

The advisory services of agricultural chambers also consist in activities undertaken as part of rural development programs adopted by the Member States.

As part of the advisory task in the field of agricultural activities, rural households, and the generation of additional income by farmers indicated in the Act on Agricultural Chambers, the chambers cooperate with agricultural advisory units in the organization of training, conferences, and meetings. They provide advice and conduct training focused on agricultural activities, rural households, and the possibility of generation of additional income by farmers. A vast majority of these services are focused on applications for direct subsidies, subsidies for seed material, and drought damages.

There is an obvious need for the cooperation and active partnership of agricultural chambers in the transfer of knowledge and innovations together with institutions working for agriculture. The welfare of agricultural producers and Polish agriculture requires that these chambers should actively participate in the formulation of the national agricultural policy, ensure its stability, guarantee the flow of information, and be an important partner for farmers in representing their interests. To this end, changes in the legal regulations are necessary. The special role of agricultural self-government defined by the Act on Agricultural Chambers is associated with representing the interests of farmers and solving agriculture-related problems. This should be the major idea in the introduction of changes in the organization and competences of agricultural chambers. The position of agricultural chambers is evidently disregarded by administrative bodies, especially by the government. Economic partnership should become one of the most important areas of activity of agricultural chambers in the implementation of their statutory tasks imposed by law. Then, the implementation of the opinion-giving, advisory, and educational functions will strengthen the importance of the chambers in the system of professional farmers' organizations and in the processes of political and strategic decision making in agriculture. An effective representation of farmers will strengthen the opinion expressed by the chamber members on the relevance and function of professional self-government entities for the development of agriculture as an element of the self-government structure in Poland.

As specified in the Act on Agricultural Chambers, the members of an agricultural chamber are natural and legal persons who are taxpayers of agricultural or income tax from special sectors of agricultural production and members of agricultural production cooperatives with land contributions in these cooperatives. The surveyed members of the agricultural chambers indicated the benefits of the statutory membership in their regional agricultural self-governments. The vast majority of the respondents (78.9%) indicated the benefits of advisory and consultation services as well as the support in obtaining funds from the EU budget (52.6%). Improvement in the production technology was indicated by 42.1% of the respondents. A substantially smaller group (4.7%) declared benefits from the opportunity to learn about good agricultural practices, and the participation in integration meetings of the agricultural community was indicated by 3.7%. Approximately 2.1% of respondents could not indicate any benefits (Figure 10).

As specified by the provisions of the Act on Agricultural Chambers, the General Assembly, the Audit Committee, the Management Board, and District Councils are the main bodies of the chamber. The surveyed farmers indicated that the main benefits of cooperation with the agricultural chamber bodies included information and assistance in obtaining EU funds (60.6% of responses), the possibility to participate in familiarization trips to other farms in EU countries (57.8%), and information about new possibilities for farm financing (56.7%). Notably, the respondents only rarely indicated the increase in the competitiveness of farms and the possibility of concluding favorable long-term contracts (Figure 11).

The applicable regulations clearly indicate that the powers of agricultural chambers are defined too narrowly and, in principle, are limited to opinion-giving and advisory powers.

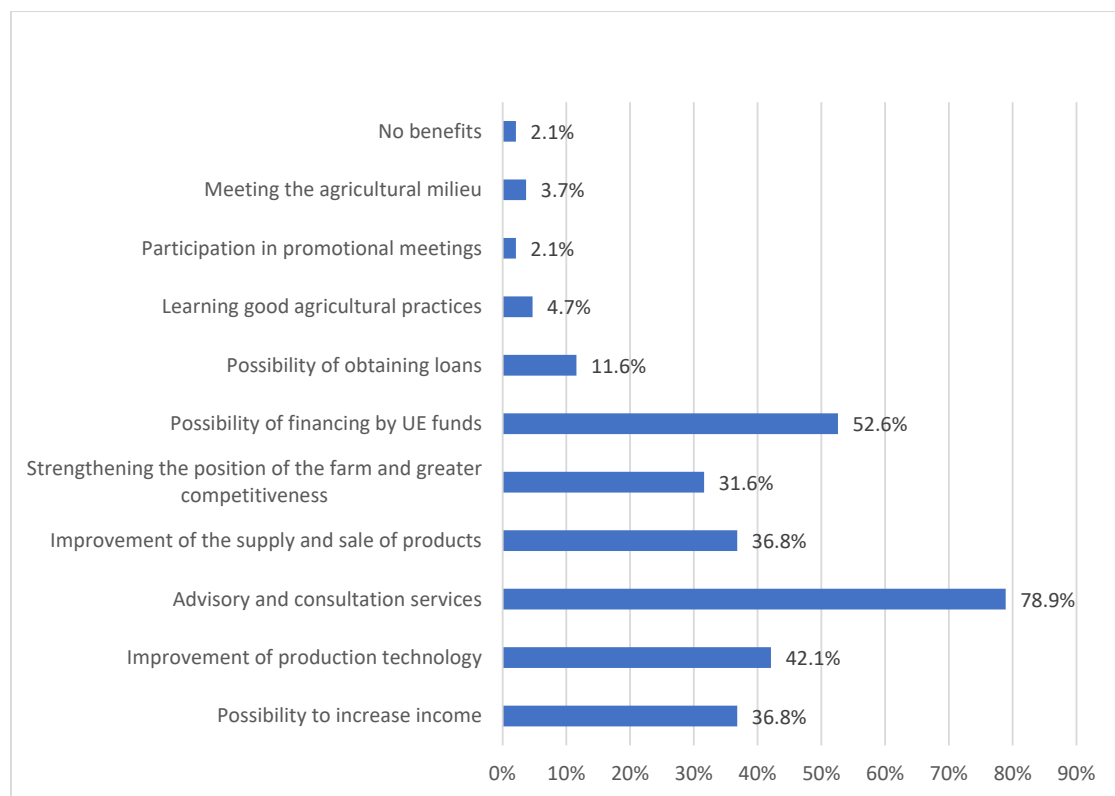


Figure 10. Benefits of membership in agricultural chambers (% of responses).

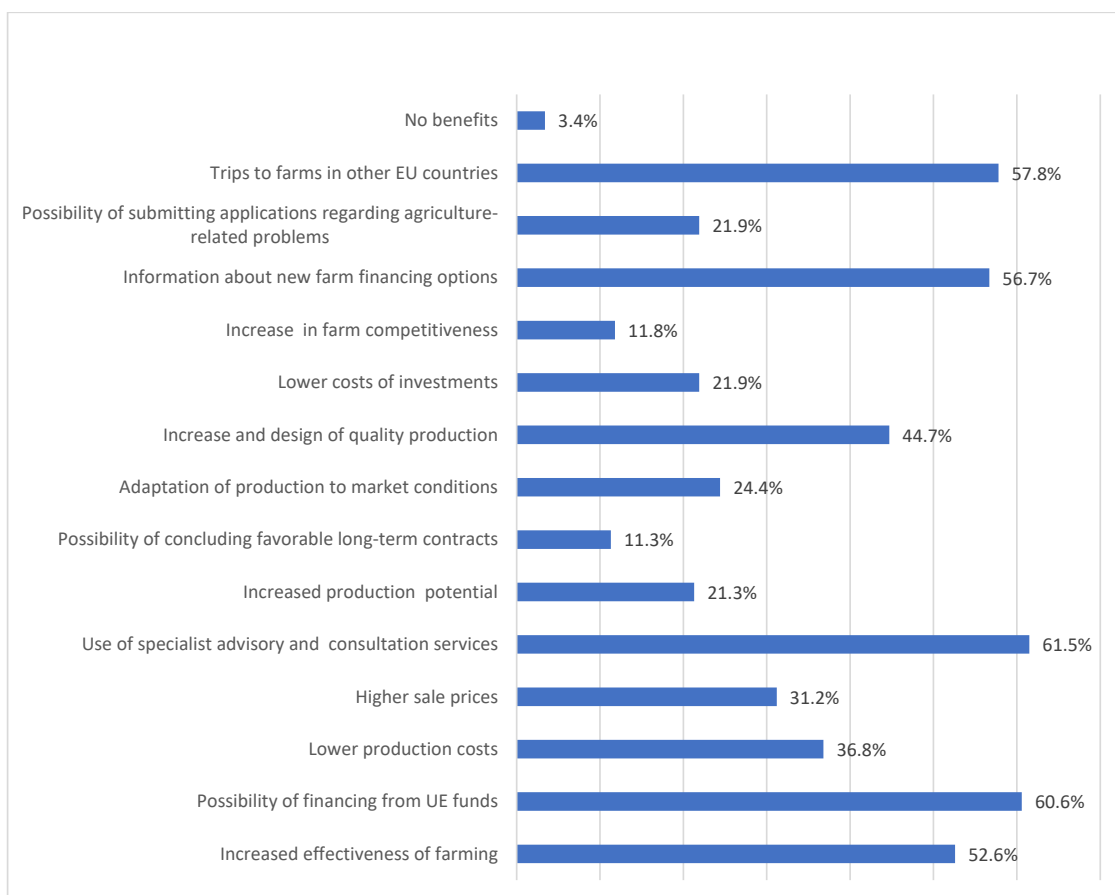


Figure 11. Benefits from cooperation with the agricultural chamber bodies (% of responses).

As indicated by the surveyed farmers, the agricultural chamber should mainly communicate with the authorities on behalf of farmers to represent their interests (87.2% of responses), carry out promotional activities for agriculture and chamber members (56.9%), and organize social life (46.7%). In accordance with the act, agricultural chambers should not be involved in business activities. However, the need for agricultural service-related business activities of chambers was indicated by over half of the respondents (52.3%) (Figure 12).

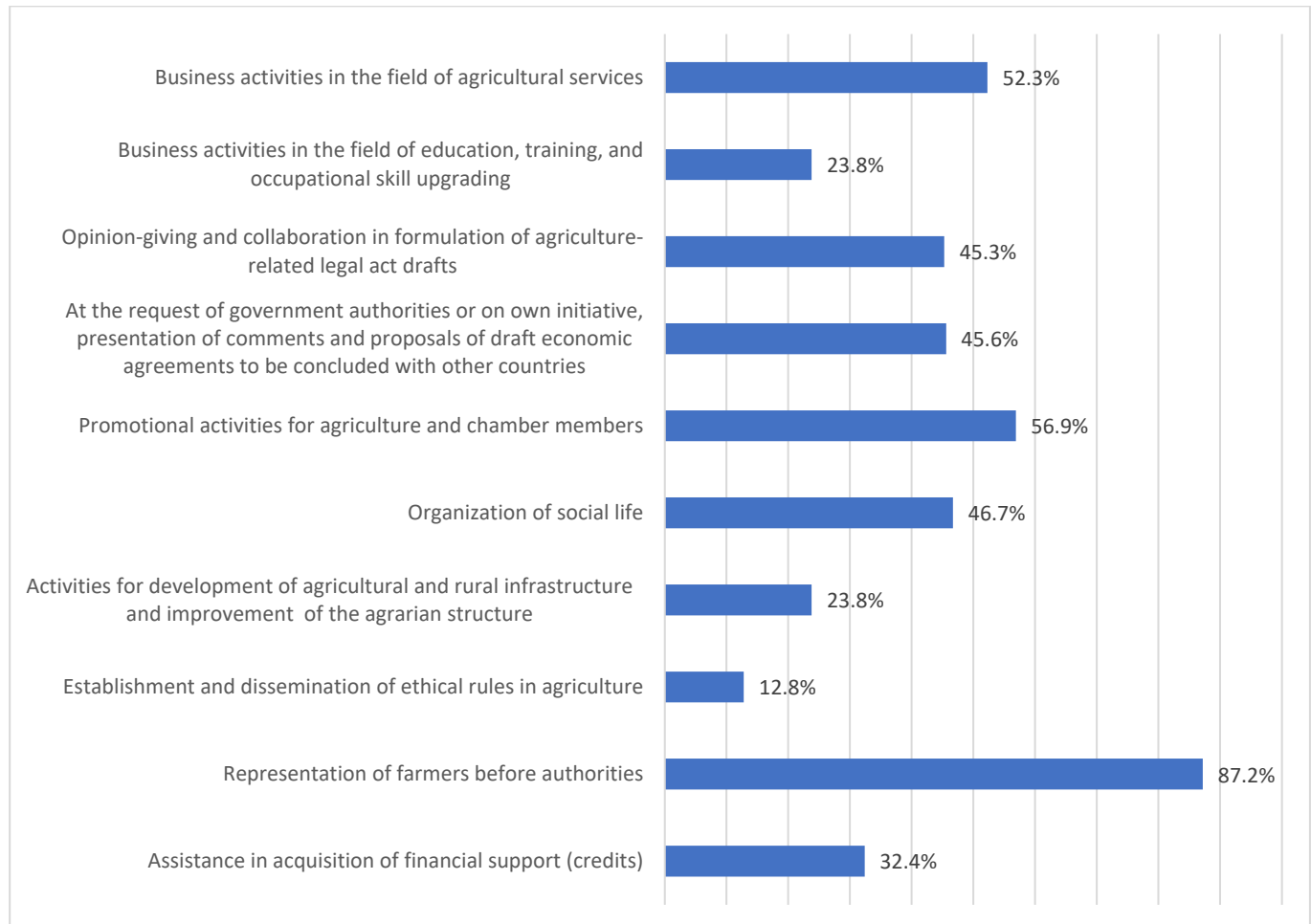


Figure 12. Tasks implemented by agricultural chambers (% of responses).

In the answers to the question about the proposed changes in the activities of agricultural chambers to be introduced, the respondents mainly indicated an increase in the influence of the chambers on the work of the government and self-government in agriculture and rural areas (78.9% of responses) and enhancement of the role of agricultural chambers as an entity influencing the implementation of the CAP and other programs targeted at the development of agriculture and rural areas in the province (73.7%). Over half of the respondents indicated the need to improve the offer of the advisory bodies for farmers. A large number of respondents raised the problem of enhancement of the activity of agricultural chambers related to the implementation of projects co-financed by EU funds (36.8%) and improvement of the organization of agricultural chambers. The surveyed farmers also mentioned the need to enhance the role of district councils of agricultural chambers in the implementation of their tasks (36.8%). The respondents positively assessed the professional competences and qualifications of agricultural chamber employees. Only 18.1% of the respondents suggested changes in this area (Figure 13).

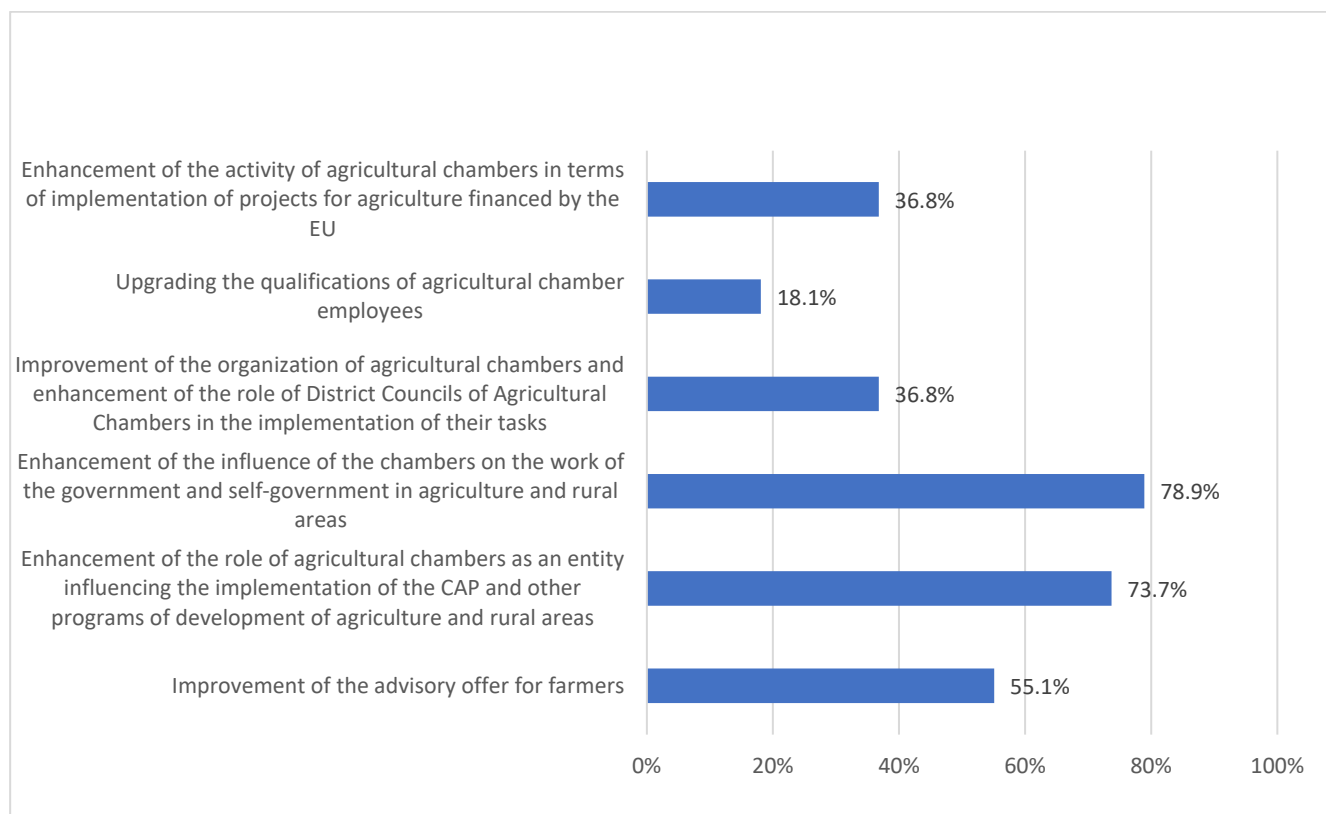


Figure 13. Proposed changes in the activities of agricultural chambers (% of responses).

In July 2019, all agricultural taxpayers with the right to vote elected their representatives in the communes for the sixth time in the Republic of Poland. The causes of the low turnout reported by the surveyed chambers were very similar. The main issue raised was the election date coinciding with the most intensive field work. The chambers also suggested a need to change the regulations and organize the election together with local government elections in the future as such changes could increase access to polling stations and contribute to a substantially higher turnout of farmer voters.

The low turnout was also associated with the fact that farmers who owned land in several communes were registered in several lists but usually voted in polling stations located at the closest distance from their place of residence. The expenses of agricultural chambers related to the organization of elections were not correlated with the voter turnout. The lowest sum (PLN 14,000) was spent by the Śląska Agricultural Chamber, which had a voter turnout of 3.50%. The highest turnout of 7.58% was recorded in the Warmińsko-Mazurska Agricultural Chamber (expenses: PLN 202,900). The highest expenditure (PLN 249,100) was reported by the Wielkopolska Agricultural Chamber, but the voter turnout was only 5.81%. In 2019, the average turnout in the elections for agricultural chambers in the country was only 5.93% (Figure 14).

The main cause of the low turnout in local government elections indicated by the respondents was the insufficient information about the elections on social media, which was pointed out by as many as 68.6% of the respondents. As indicated by a high percentage of the respondents (67.5%), the high level of politicization of chamber members was another cause of the low voter turnout. More than half of the surveyed farmers (56.8%) indicated a lack of knowledge about the elections and the candidates. Disbelief in chamber effectiveness was declared by 45.9% of the respondents as the cause of the low voter turnout. Every fifth respondent indicated the constantly decreasing number of farmers and farms (Figure 15).

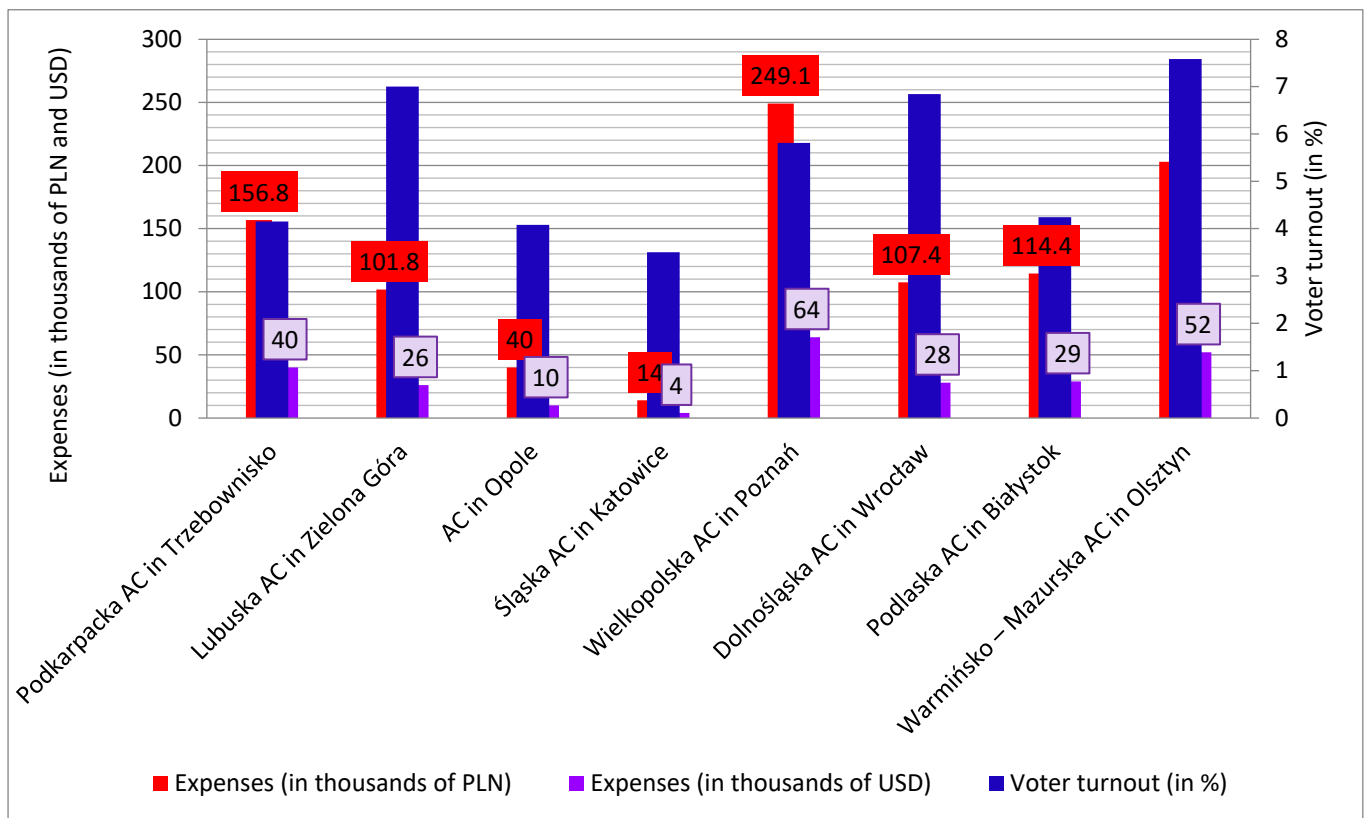


Figure 14. Voter turnout in elections for agricultural chambers and associated expenses in 2019.

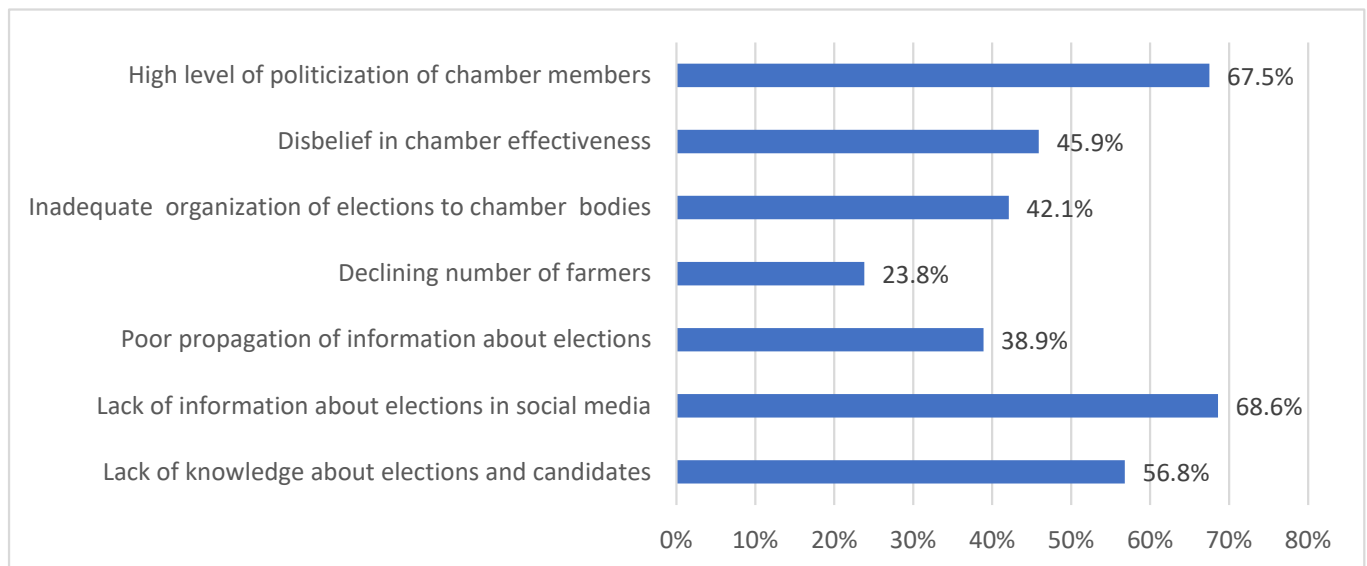


Figure 15. Causes of low turnout in elections for agricultural chambers (% of responses).

The respondents also assessed the tasks performed by agricultural chambers for the benefit of their members, e.g., the adaptation of the offer to individual groups of their members, i.e., farmers, producers in special sectors of agricultural production, and members of agricultural production cooperatives with land contributions to the cooperative. The survey results showed that the chambers represented the interests of farmers to the greatest extent (92.8% of responses) but the interests of producers in special sectors of agricultural production and members of agricultural production cooperatives to the lowest extent. These activities of agricultural chambers were reasonable, as the basic income of

agricultural chambers is the revenue from agricultural tax paid by farmers. The other members of agricultural chambers do not generate chamber's income (Figure 16).

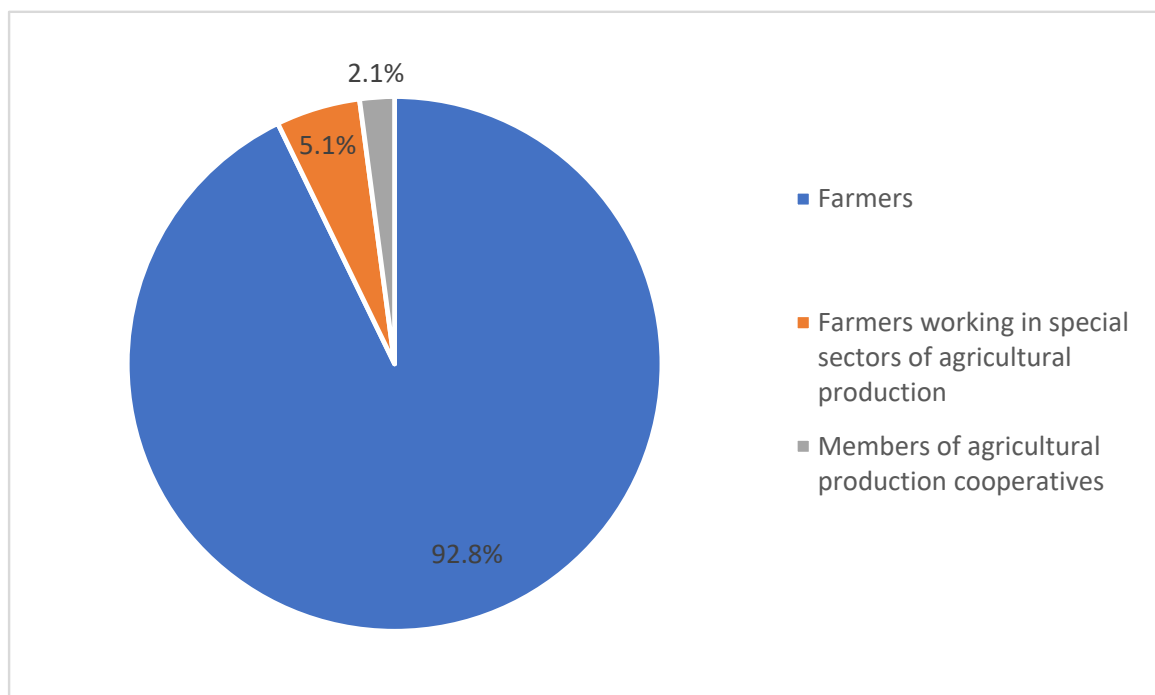


Figure 16. Assessment of the offer of agricultural chambers by their members (% of responses).

The respondents indicated that the activities of agricultural chambers were not adapted to the needs of their members (48.2% of responses), while 31.5% of the respondents chose the “definitely yes” answer. The “definitely not” answer was given by only 6.5% of the respondents, and 2.4% had no opinion (Figure 17).

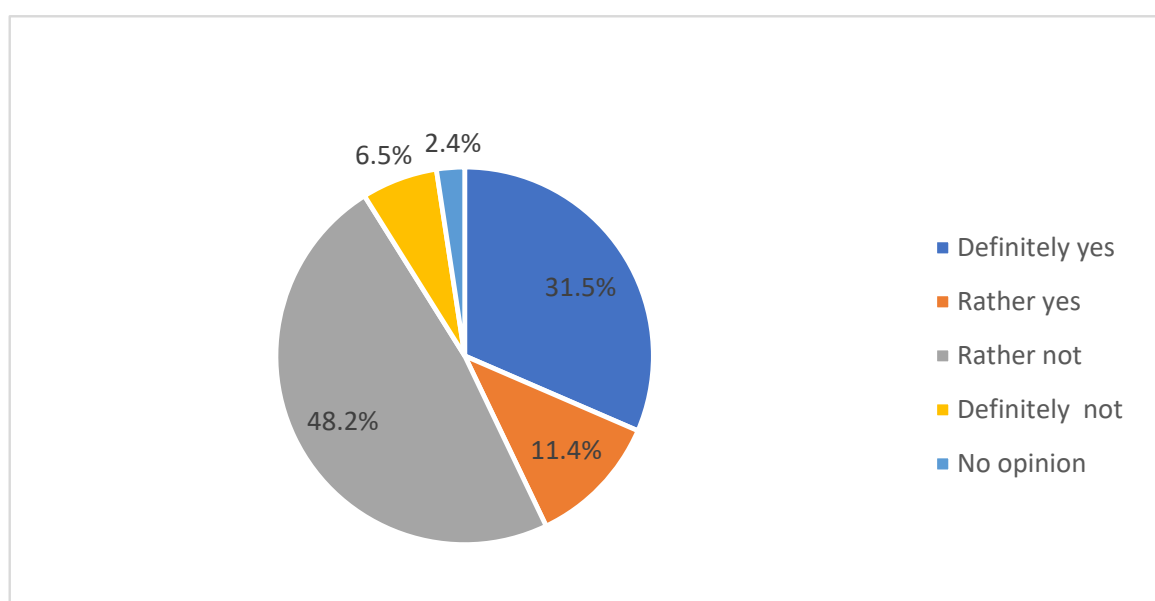


Figure 17. Assessment of the adaptation of agricultural chamber tasks to the needs of their members (% of responses).

This study shows that, due to the inconsistency or lack of legal provisions, the role of agricultural chambers is clearly marginalized by administrative bodies, especially by

the government. Amendments to the Act on Agricultural Chambers strengthening their role in the processes of political and strategic decision making in agriculture could bring great benefits. It should be emphasized that farmers expect new legislation to enhance the role of agricultural self-government in Poland in the structure of agriculture-supporting institutions and to ensure greater involvement of the self-government in representation of the interests of farmers and agricultural producers.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, there is a need for cooperation and active partnership in the transfer of knowledge and innovations between agricultural chambers and agriculture-supporting institutions. To ensure the welfare of agricultural producers and Polish agriculture, agricultural chambers should actively participate in the formulation of the national agricultural policy. Agricultural chambers should take greater measures to ensure the stability of agricultural income and flow of information and be an important partner for farmers in representing their interests. Effective representation of the interests of associated members requires changes in the legal regulations concerning agricultural chambers. A modern agricultural self-government responding to the problems of modern agriculture requires amendments to the Act on Agricultural Chambers. The provisions of this act regarding the tasks of agricultural chambers were relevant at the time of their formulation. The present Act on Agricultural Chambers does not specify tasks related to transfer of knowledge and innovations. The tasks of agricultural advisory institutions under the AKIS in the 2014–2020 CAP result from Regulation (EU) No. 1306/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council [10].

The special role of agricultural self-government in representation of farmers' interests and solving agriculture-related problems is defined by the Act on Agricultural Chambers. Due to the inconsistency or lack of current legal provisions, the role of agricultural chambers is evidently marginalized by administrative bodies, especially by the government. Farmers expect new legislation to enhance the role of agricultural self-government in Poland in the structure of agriculture-supporting institutions and to ensure a greater impact of the self-government representing the interests of farmers and agricultural producers.

The assessment of the effectiveness of the activities of agricultural chambers in Poland versus other EU Member States shows their weak role in influencing development processes in the country's agriculture. Their major weaknesses include insufficient legal, material, and financial instruments, underestimation of their role to be played in the EU, lack of clear relationships of agricultural self-government with state and local self-government administration bodies, and low awareness of the role of self-government reflected in low voter turnouts.

The study results have shown that agricultural chambers have a considerable impact on the transfer of knowledge and innovations in agriculture. Nevertheless, the partnership of agricultural chambers with other agriculture-supporting institutions should be more visible. The activity of agricultural chambers has a large impact on the absorption of EU funds under the RDP in the analyzed regions. To ensure the welfare of agricultural producers and Polish agriculture, agricultural chambers should actively participate in the formulation of the national agricultural policy. They should take more actions to ensure the stability of agricultural income and flow of information and represent the interests of all their members. A new act on agricultural chambers is necessary for the chambers to effectively represent the interests of associated members. The current legal regulations clearly indicate a narrow definition of their powers limited to opinion-giving and advisory activities. The scope of the current tasks of agricultural chambers does not take into account experience, changes in the organization and functioning of Polish agriculture, agricultural markets, rural areas, higher awareness of agricultural producers, better knowledge of the mechanisms of the common agricultural policy, or the expectations and needs of agricultural producers.

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