

AGRICULTURAL MARKETS TASK FORCE

ISSUE PAPER

Subject: Market transparency

1. DESCRIPTION OF ISSUE

Market transparency can be defined as the availability of relevant market information to market participants. This includes prices, weather, production and stocks.

Transparency increases the efficiency of markets, reduces information asymmetries and supports evidence-based policy-making. Accurate, relevant and timely data on the market situation helps market participants reduce uncertainty (and execute effective risk management strategies) and allow better adaption of their production to market signals.

Market transparency is furthermore useful for policy-makers, for example as regards their decisions to use the market measures or to create instruments smoothing price volatility (such as through legal provisions on contracting).

Three considerations related to market transparency have repeatedly come to the fore:

- The market information available must be accurate and relevant to farmers lest their production decisions will reflect misleading market signals. This is particularly important for reference prices, so it must be clear what they indicate (volumes traded, quality, period) and how representative of the market they are. Yet, such information should not lead to collusion on prices and thus to the distortion of competition.
- Much information, especially downstream in the food chain, is not available to farmers. This is liable to create an asymmetry of information between farmers and downstream operators; the latter benefit from more information as they deal with a larger number of parties and products.
- Farmers should be in position to operationally benefit of market transparency, that is to say understand its meaning and be able to incorporate it in their decision making.

Both public and private bodies provide market information, depending on the characteristics of the market and the data collected. Public institutions are often seen as more objective and credible, assuring better accessibility to information for all market participants and giving a more stable and standardised framework for collection of data.

Market transparency has an impact on other issues that will be discussed by the AMTF. When farmers have more complete market information they can develop more effective negotiation strategies with partners in the food chain. In some cases, where no reference was available before, this is likely to lead to improved prices, as the downstream buyer would typically have better information due to contacts with many sellers. Where the additional information relates to the rest of the food chain (e.g. about prices downstream), this can help the whole chain adapting faster (to new consumer trends, quality expectations etc).

Reliable market information can also improve access to finance through more robust business plans and better appreciation of market risks by financial institutions. The availability of market information helps to develop futures markets, as it facilitates creating acceptable contract specifications and attracts financial actors to maintain liquidity. Reliable information on production and stocks may help to organise collective actions in response to overproduction.

Finally, market transparency can play an important role in encouraging operators to sign forward contracts, because it helps to create reasonable expectations about price risks in signing such a contract for both parties.

2. POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

What kind of data?

The most important information from the perspective of market transparency on commodity markets relates to prices and production, stocks and trade. Consumption data has traditionally been less available, because of the difficulty of capturing the different uses of basic agricultural products, but increased competition requires a quick adaptation to consumer trends and better understanding of consumer information (such as increasingly available scanner data from retail available from private providers).

The availability of such information at basic agricultural product level helps the horizontal transmission of prices and proper functioning of the Common Market. It helps farmers to better understand consumption trends and be in a position to continuously adapt its production to it. For vertical transmission of prices across the food chain, information upstream, at the level of input markets, and downstream of farmers (i.e. wholesalers, processors, retailers) is desirable. In terms of policy, which often has redistributive objectives, an important category of information relates to the margins across the food chain, including farming, processing and retailing.

There are specific issues linked to specific agricultural sectors – their structure and product characteristics (the supply chain specificities, seasonality, perishability, market stratification). In the cereals sector, where the EU is integrated fully in the global market, the transparency is already quite high. In the meat markets, the relations across the food chain as well as the increasing role of contracting make reference price information difficult to obtain. In the milk markets, the end of the quota system leads more variable production levels than in the past and the pricing models, especially in cooperatives (which are prevalent), are quite complex. In the fruit and vegetables sector, the different seasonality and varieties make information collection and aggregation difficult. In some sectors, such as beef, the producers are clearly less concentrated than the downstream operators (in pork and poultry, vertical integration makes the relation much more formalised), while, for example, in the well organised fruits and vegetable sectors in Belgium and the Netherlands the situation is the opposite.

The main requirements regarding the market data are accessibility, accuracy and timeliness.

Accessibility

The information has to be accessible to users. The increased availability of information technologies make it easier to disseminate information, however there are language

barriers and different forms and types of information provided make it difficult to make use of all of the data that is collected in the EU. At the EU level, the information has generally been used internally for policy goals, but increasingly the emphasis is on the dissemination of market data, either regarding the current situation (e.g. Milk Market Observatory¹, market dashboards²) or short- and medium term projections³.

Accuracy

The information has to be accurate and reliable in order for the operator to relate this information to their situation. This requires a clear definition (including type of product, stage of production and quality characteristics) of the product for which prices are quoted and the volume and type of transactions which the quotation covers. The methodology should be consistent in time and the quotations regular. This has largely been achieved in different Member States, however given that most markets cover more than one Member State and some have a global perspective, there is scope for better harmonisation of the methodologies and definitions (taking into account the possible segmentation of the market). Also quality control, especially in the case of aggregated data is an important issue. At the same time, some physical spot markets which used to play the role of market information are less relevant, because a large part of the trade happens through dedicated marketing chains. The question is then how to capture these transactions, so that the information remains relevant. Again, as relevant markets transcend national borders, there is increased need for farmers to make use of information outside their country, while, on the other hand, an EU average is very often too aggregated to be relevant.

Timeliness

Finally, the information has to be available in a reasonable time for the operator to respond to it. For the price data, this will depend on the frequency at which the prices are set in the food chain or the frequency of transactions on physical markets. For the production estimates and harvest progress, the information should be available at critical moments in the harvest (or planting) and at regular intervals for products with continuous production process. The time between the collection of data and its dissemination should be as short as possible. The Commission has introduced an electronic system for exchange of information with Member States - ISAMM (Information System for Agricultural Market Management and Monitoring), however better linkages to national systems of collecting information could be explored. Also, a delay or no response from one Member State makes it difficult to provide information representing the full EU situation.

For policy making, the needs in some of these areas are slightly different. The harmonisation and comparability of data is more important to take decisions related to the whole EU market, while the frequency is relatively less of an issue.

Market transparency downstream of farmers

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/milk-market-observatory/index_en.htm

² <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/dashboards/>

³ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/markets-and-prices/short-term-outlook/index_en.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/markets-and-prices/medium-term-outlook/index_en.htm

Finally, there is much less information available for input markets or downstream stages of the food supply chain. While producer prices are largely available and retail prices can be derived from data collected for the purpose of calculating inflation (or scanner data), there is an important gap with regard to wholesale and processor prices (such as prices of cuts of meats). In general, only a few Member States have created institutions that explicitly have a mandate to look across the different stages of the food supply chain (e.g. in Spain and France such organisations were created in recent years). The experience of these organisations and their findings could be useful to all. Therefore a forum for exchange of information would be useful. At the same time, some broad information about the situation can be compiled in the form of simple aggregate indicators linking the amounts spent on food to the value added at farm level, imports, taxes, processing, retail trade and transportation (the food dollar calculated by USDA or the food euro of the French Observatoire de la Formation des Prix et Marges⁴).

At the EU level, the Food Price Monitoring Tool has been set up to compare changes in food price at the level of agricultural commodities, food industries and consumer goods. However, further work on the quality and accessibility of disaggregated data is needed (currently it is too aggregated to be useful for practical purposes).

Who collects the data?

The bulk of information is collected in Member States at the basic agricultural product level. The collection of data by public authorities can help to set common standards and legislation helps where the information is otherwise difficult to obtain. Such data is more likely to be provided free of charge. Private institutions are usually more responsive to customer requirements and more likely to add value through analysis, but the access is limited.

The CAP also provides a potential role of professional organisations, such as interbranch organisations (IBOs), to improve knowledge and the transparency of production and the market (e.g. publishing aggregated statistical data on production costs, and when appropriate prices, price indices, volumes and duration of concluded contracts and providing analyses of potential future market developments at regional, national or international level) as well as forecasting production potential and recording public market prices.

Currently both private and public bodies are responsible for the collection of information, partly depending on the type of information provided and the approach to data collection.

The European Commission collects data from Member States and disseminates this information by way of market balance sheets (production, trade, stocks, consumption) and price information (see Annex I for a list of current notifications under the Common Market Organisation regulation). Initially, this information was used to manage the markets through market measures; increasingly however, its value is in its availability to market participants. This data complements the information collected through Eurostat – EU statistical office (See Annex II).

There are two complementary actions which should be encouraged: one is that of better cooperation between Member States. The other one relates to EU data collection and dissemination.

⁴ <https://observatoire-prixmarges.franceagrimer.fr/Pages/default.aspx>

Beyond the EU, and as markets become more globalised, there is also an issue of transparency of global markets. The EU participates actively in the FAO AMIS (Agricultural Markets Information System) for the crops sector and in different International Commodity Bodies (Int. Grain Council, Int. Olive Council, Int. Sugar Organisation, Int. Organisation on Vine and Wine). In cereals or sugar, the future markets become global references, in some others what is available becomes a (dubious) reference point (such as the GlobalDairyTrade platform in dairy).

Some of the questions which should be addressed to find the balance between the network and centralised approach relate to:

- **Standardisation** – is more uniform data needed at EU level (including through carcass classification in some meats or marketing standards) or are diverse sources, but closer to market reality better?
- **Representativeness** – is the data representative for the markets or should more attention be paid to representativeness?
- **Quality of data** – as market transparency becomes more important more care should be given to the quality control, especially at Member State level;
- **Confidentiality** – as markets become more concentrated, more and more cases of Member State data is confidential and while EU aggregates are too general to be useful, there will be a need for new aggregates at different levels;
- **Timeliness** - can the frequency and the speed with which data is available be improved, especially given the electronic means available?

The use of data by farmers

If the information is to serve its purpose and lead to more informed production and marketing decisions, it has to be useful for farmers. While some farmers are well equipped to understand and interpret the data others may not find it easy to incorporate it in their practices.

There is therefore a role for policy to improve the use of market information. This issue could be solved with a proper infrastructure, including development of broadband coverage in rural areas. The second issue is the provision of training for farmers. This can be provided by advisory services in Member States, but also through different kinds of collective cooperation (cooperatives, producer organisations) with the aid of EU rural development programmes or European Innovation Partnership.

The availability of market data has to be also seen in the greater context of increased data availability and management at farm level and also across the food chain (linked to food safety, traceability, consumer expectations etc.). At farm level it should be a part of general farm management information system, combined with data coming from precision agriculture, weather data etc in order to improve risk management. This requires the possibility of exchange and interoperability of data, format standards, including market data. The mixed system of provision of data by public authorities and private institutions give rise to issues of free and open data vs. proprietary data. Another broader challenge is the use of online platforms to share data coming from voluntarily associated farms. While in the case of price information this may raise competition issues, it can be useful for production information (e.g. the US Farmers' Business Network <https://www.farmersbusinessnetwork.com/>).

3. RELEVANT POLICY QUESTIONS

1. What role for agricultural policy to set standards and common frameworks in data collection? What should the role of the European Commission and Member States be in the collection and dissemination of agricultural market data?
2. What can be improved in the data on agricultural markets? Is it relevant?
 - Which sectors are most in need of market transparency?
 - Which data should be collected and disseminated?
 - At which levels of the food chain should data be collected?
 - Is the level of product disaggregation satisfactory taking into account cost-benefit ratios of mandatory data collection?
3. Is policy support needed to improve the use of market information (directly and indirectly) by farmers (targeted training, advisory network)?

4. READING LIST

- Food prices in Europe - Commission Communication, COM/2008/0821 final <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1448877054386&uri=CELEX:52008DC0821>
- Report on the Competitiveness of the European Agro-Food Industry, High Level Group on the Competitiveness of the Agro-Food Industry, 17 March 2009 <http://ec.europa.eu/DocsRoom/documents/2666/attachments/1/translations/en/renditions/native>
- A better functioning food supply chain in Europe – Commission Communication COM/2009/0591 final, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1415277101018&uri=CELEX:52009DC0591>
- Price transmission in the sugar sector, Areté srl, DG AGRI commissioned study, TENDER N° AGRI-2011-EVAL-03 http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/external-studies/sugar-price-transmission_en.htm
- High Level Forum for a Better Functioning Food Supply Chain Report, 15 October 2014 <http://ec.europa.eu/DocsRoom/documents/7194/attachments/1/translations/en/renditions/native>
- The State of Food Prices and Food Price Monitoring in Europe (Document Accompanying The Forum's 2014 Report), High Level Forum for a Better Functioning Food Supply Chain <http://ec.europa.eu/DocsRoom/documents/7195/attachments/1/translations/en/renditions/native>
- The Transparency of Food Pricing Research Project (TRANSFOP) – EU 7th Framework Programme, <http://www.transfop.eu/>, KBBE-265601-4-TRANSFOP
- Food Price Formation - 7th OECD Food Chain Network Meeting - October 2015 <http://www.oecd.org/site/agrfcn/meetings/agrfcn-7-food-price-formation-paper-october-2015.pdf>
- 7th OECD Food Chain Network Meeting - October 2015, meeting materials <http://www.oecd.org/site/agrfcn/meetings/7th-oecd-food-chain-analysis-network-meeting-october-2015.htm>
- Observatoire de la formation des prix et des marges des produits alimentaires – rapport au Parlement 2015 https://observatoire-prixmarges.fr/Lists/Liste%20Rapports%20au%20Parlement%20et%20Lettres/Attachments/7/Rapport_2014_v18_.pdf
- How ICT is changing the nature of the farm: a research agenda on the economics of big data, K. Poppe, S. Wolfert and C. Verdouw, LEI Wageningen UR http://ifsa.boku.ac.at/cms/fileadmin/Proceeding2014/WS_2_11_Poppe.pdf