Young Farmers' Perceived Service Quality of the Greek Ministry of Agriculture: A SERVQUAL Approach

Achilleas Kontogeorgos[1], Dimitrios Tselempis[2] and Philippos Karipidis[3]

1 Lecturer, Department of Business Administration of Food and Agricultural Enterprises, University of Patras, G. Seferi 2, 30100 Agrinio, Corresponding Author, email: akontoge@upatras.gr

2 PhD Candidate, Department of Agricultural Economics, School of Agriculture, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Laboratory assistant, Department of Agricultural Technology - Dir. Agricultural Economics, School of Agricultural Technology, Food Technology and Nutrition, Alexander TEI of Thessaloniki, email: dtselemp@agro.auth.gr

3 Professor, Department of Agricultural Technology -Dir. Agricultural Economics, School of Agricultural Technology, Food Technology and Nutrition, Alexander TEI of Thessaloniki, email: philika@farm.teithe.gr

Abstract

The Greek State, through the Ministry of Rural Development and Food (MRDF) offers different types of public services for rural development to farmers and especially young farmers. The evaluation of these services is of critical importance for the government, concerning the adopted policy and the farmers themselves. In this study, SERVQUAL instrument has been used in a sample of 146 young farmers participating in the measure 112 'Setting up of young farmers' (Common Agricultural Policy, Pillar II), in order to explore their expectations, their perceptions and, through them, the service quality provided by the Ministry of Rural Development and Food in central Macedonia – Greece. The results indicate that the level of quality of the services provided by the ministry is not satisfactory. These quality gaps are observed in quality characteristics concerning the "social skills" of the MRDF's employees.

Key words: *Agricultural Policy, Public Management, Rural Development, New farmers, Customer Satisfaction, SERVQUAL*

1. Introduction

The steady decline in the number of holdings and farmers in the EU has led to a distressing shortage of new farmers. Today, the European Union is consequently faced with a dual problem: the scarcity of young farmers and the rapid ageing of the farmer population. Young farmers can bring new skills and energy, and a more professional management to the farming sector. Against the context of an ageing agricultural labour force, the future of the farmers' profession must be ensured (Redigor, 2012).

Thus, European Unions' Common Agricultural Policy pays particular attention to the decline in young farmers, having established different policy measures and motives for new entrants in agriculture. Support to the setting up of young farmers includes support

to facilitate the initial establishment and the structural adjustment of their holding afterwards. Young farmers have to submit a business plan for the development of their farming activities while in some cases they have to obtain special training (Setting up of young farmers § 20 of Reg. (EC) N°1698/2005 - measure 112).

A higher rate of young new entrants in agriculture could confront this ageing problem and consequently the declining number of agricultural holdings in the European Union as a whole. In general, new entrants face three obstacles, finding it extremely difficult to acquire holdings that: a) are economically viable b) provide full-time employment and c) enable them to earn a sufficient income (if access to CAP payment entitlements is not assured) (Redigor, 2012). What is more, there is a partial participation in such policy measures and motives. For example in 2010, 113 000 young farmers (Eulalia, 2013) benefited from these support measures (that is approximately about 12% of the young farmers and less than 1% of the total farmers).

This is also the case of Greece since, according to PASEGES (2013) the share of young farmers (aged less than 35 years) was 7,2 % of all farm holders. At the same time the number of young farmers who benefited from CAP support measures in Greece was only 13,5%. Keeping this in mind, it is significant to determine how the support measures for new farmers have been applied throughout the public service organizations. In Greece, the Ministry of Agriculture or as its formal name is Ministry of Rural Development and Food (MRFD) along with its supporting facilities are responsible not only to implement this policy but also to attract young farmers to take advantage of in these measures. Therefore the rate of new entrants in agriculture depends also on the way that the Greek MRFD promotes and offers to the citizens (young farmers in this case) the potential to participate in measure 112.

According to Philippidou et al, (2004) the Greek public administration is trying to implement a different management model, in order to create more efficient and effective organizations by simplifying bureaucratic procedures and at the same time, to meet the needs of its citizens and businesses in a more friendly and appealing way. This trend is expressed by the New Public Management (NPM). NPM includes different quality management programs and the realization that understanding, meeting, and anticipating customers' needs and demands, is a critical strategic and tactical issue for public sector organizations in order to provide enhanced service (Dimitriades & Maroudas, 2007). Also according to NPM, citizens who request public services should be regarded as customers in accordance to private firms. For that reason, the public sector should adopt private sectors' practices and methods in order to increase its productivity and quality of services as well as to evaluate them.

In service sector, the definitions used for quality usually focus on fulfilling the needs of a customer according to their expectations. Service quality is generally defined as «an attitude or perception about the overall superiority or excellence of the service» (Parasuraman et al, 1988). A simple way to determine the service quality, as it is evaluated by a customer, is to examine the difference between his expectations from the service and what he actually experiences. (Cronin & Taylor, 1992, Parasuraman et al, 1991). While, understanding the factors that determine the service quality is crucial for organizations that want to provide attracting services that will keep their customers satisfied.

The main objective of this paper is to estimate the expectations and the perceptions of young farmers for the services provided by the Greek MRDF. By estimating the gap

between expectations and perceptions, it is possible to assess the quality of services provided by the MRDF. In general, there is a necessity to explore the quality of the services provided by public organizations to farmers, in order not only to assure new entrants in agriculture, but also to support farmers and their agribusinesses to exploit market trends and opportunities and thus stimulate agricultural development. Furthermore an evaluation of the SERVQUAL scale will also be made in order to investigate the suitability of the scale to further estimate the service quality provided by the Greek MRDF.

2. Methodology

The present study uses SERVQUAL approach to examine the service quality provided by the MRDF to young farmers. SERVQUAL approach is based on the assumption that service quality can be measured by determining the difference between the customers' expectations for a specific service and the perceptions of the actual performance of the service provider (Zeithaml et al, 1993). The scale used by SERVQUAL was originally created in 1985 by Parasuraman Berry and Zeithaml and included 10 dimensions to determine service quality. The same authors limited the dimensions to 5, namely Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy and Tangibility. For the measurement of these dimensions a questionnaire of 2 X 22 questions – criteria (22 questions for the expectations and 22 similar for the perceptions) was developed. In general, SERVQUAL is considered to be a general and widely accepted tool for measuring the quality of a provided service.

SERVQUAL instrument has been widely used to measure service quality in different countries, cultures and sectors such as: health sector (e.g. Babakus & Boller, 1992, Kilbourne et al, 2004), retail trade (Naik et al, 2010), banking sector (Lam, 2002), hotels (Mey et al, 2006), sports (Kouthouris & Alexandris, 2005), telecommunications (van der Wal et al, 2002) information systems (Carr, 2002) and for insurance companies (Gayathri et al, 2005). At the same time, there is a considerable number of researches and studies examining the Greek public service quality in sectors such as the public hospitals (Karassavidou et al, 2009), the public social insurance system (Papanikolaou & Zygiaris 2012), the public financial services (Kakouris & Meliou, 2011), the higher education (Zafiropoulos & Vrana 2008) even the Hellenic police (Boudouris et al, 2007). Nevertheless, our literature review hasn't revealed any study for the Greek MRFD or similar public services for farmers across Europe.

However, studies in different countries and sectors have reported different dimensions for expectations, perceptions and for their gaps (Arasli et al, 2005). For that reason, SERVQUAL approach has been criticized that it cannot incorporate all quality dimensions for all services. Another criticism focuses on neglecting quality dimensions, such as price and accessibility (Gilmore & Carson, 1992). However, despite any criticism the SERVQUAL approach has been widely used to measure the service quality in many and different sectors. Surveys' results on service quality and customer satisfaction indicate that SERVQUAL is an effective tool for measuring the quality of services (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Even more, SERVQUAL can be used as a diagnostic tool,

which can help public and private organizations to identify their strengths and weaknesses for their service procedures.

Summarizing, we can use the comment made by Babakus and Boller (1992) that the quality of a service can be complicated and multi-dimensional in some areas and very simple even single-dimensional in others. Based on the above, we assume that the number of dimensions of the provided services' quality depends on the particular service and thus each sector should be examined separately. Moreover, SERVQUAL authors recommended that the scale should be adapted and modified for specific service sectors or when it is used in cultures different than the one, in which it was initially developed (Parasuraman et al, 1991).

In our study, a questionnaire based on SERVQUAL was used to estimate the service quality for the MRDF. The questionnaire used is divided in three parts. In the first part the demographics of the participants were documented and in the second and the third part of the questionnaire the actual SERVQUAL 22 items - scale was used to identify the expectations and the perceptions of young farmers. The questions used were closed-ended formulated to 7-point Likert scale, with 1 corresponding to «Completely disagree» and 7 to «Completely agree». Thus, the higher the number a respondent assigns to a question, the higher the expectation (or the perception) for the examined quality characteristic.

The survey was conducted during the period September – November 2012 in the broad region of Central Macedonia (mainly in the prefectures of Pella and Imathia). The questionnaires were distributed to young farmers participating in the measure 112 'Setting up of young farmers' from Pillar II of the CAP during an educational course designed for them. Finally, in the statistical analysis of the survey 146 completed questionnaires were used, leaving out 9 incomplete questionnaires.

3. Analysis and Results

In order to facilitate the text flow the analysis is divided into two parts. The first part contains the demographic characteristics and the gap analysis. The second one comprises of the reliability analysis and factor analysis in order to investigate the structure validity of the SERVQUAL scale used.

3.1 Demographic Characteristics and Gap Analysis

The majority of participants are men (61,0%) that have graduated from high school at a rate of 58,9%, are employed exclusively in agriculture at 71,2% with up to 10 years of previous experience in agriculture (67,0 %), while only 1 out of 5 of the participants has to move less than 6 kilometers to be serviced by the ministry's organizations. It is significant that more than one out of three (35,6%) participants need to move in distances more than 20 kilometers in order to receive the MRDF services. The above is quite reasonable if we consider the dwindling number of residence in rural areas in combination with the concentration of public organizations in urban areas. However, this fact may be an important characteristic for the perceived quality evaluation. The demographic profile of respondents in the survey is presented below in table 1.

***Table 1**: Demographics*

Characteristics	***No of Participants***	***Percentage (%)***
Gender		
Male	89	61,0
Female	57	37,0
Age		
<25	23	15,7
26-30	33	22,6
31-35	40	27,4
> 36	36	26,0
Education		
Less than 6 years (primary school)	15	10,3
Less than 9 years (basic education)	28	19,2
Less than 12 years (high school)	86	58,9
More that 12 years (University)	17	11,6
Income		
Exclusively from agriculture	104	71,2
Non Exclusive	42	28,8
Farm Experience (not as a head of the holding)		
0 – 5 years	50	34,2
6–10 years	48	32,8
11–15 years	23	15,7
16 - 20 years	15	13,7
>20 years	2	1,4
Distance to Ministry facilities		
0-5 Km	27	18,5
6 - 10 Km	23	15,7
11 - 20 Km	43	29,4
> 20 km	52	35,6

Note: missing values have been omitted
Source: Results Analysis

The next step in this analysis was to calculate the Gap scores for each item and each quality dimension. The gap score for each item was computed by subtracting expectations from perceptions. Following, to evaluate the mean dimension quality gap scores for each dimension, all the relevant items were added and divided by the number of items in the particular dimension.

It is clear that in all dimensions of quality, young farmers' perceptions of the MRDF service quality are lower than their expectations (see table 2). In other words, the service quality is less than expected. The greatest gaps concern mainly the reliability of the services (including items such as providing service in time, right and appropriate) and secondly its' assurance (including items concerning employees such as politeness, knowledge, instilling confidence). At this point, a closer view should be made to the highest and lowest scores for the expectations and the perceptions even for their gaps.

Table 2: *Gap Analysis*

Quality Dimensions	E: Expectations	P: Perceptions	GAP (P –E)	T test value*
Reliability	4,097	3,532	-0,565	0,00
Responsiveness	4,054	3,606	-0,448	0,00
Assurance	4,119	3,597	-0,522	0,00
Empathy	3,982	3,482	-0,500	0,00
Tangibility	4,315	3,945	-0,370	0,00
Total	4,107	3,621	-0,486	0,00

** Note: Table 1 in appendix presents the results for the Paired-Samples T Test comparing the means of expectations and perceptions*

As far as expectations' statements – questionnaire items are concerned their mean scores ranged (see Table 3a) from 3,52 for "organization's employees understand customers' needs" to 5,636 for the "neat appearance of the employees". The mean scores for the perceptions statements ranged (see Table 3b) from 3,13 for "Organization's physical facilities are visually appealing" to 5,404 for the employees neat appearance.

Table 3a: *The three statements with the lowest and the highest* ***Expectations*** *scores*

Item	Mean Score
Organization's employees understanding of the customers' special needs	3,520
Organization's physical facilities are visually appealing	3,616
Organization's employees give citizens personal attention	3,636
The Organization has operating hours convenient for the citizens	4,465
Organization's employees have a wide range of knowledge and are competent	4,527
Organization's employees have neat appearance	5,636

Table 3b: *The three statements with the lowest and the highest* ***perception*** *scores*

Item	Mean Score
Organization's physical facilities are visually appealing	3,130
The organization provides individual attention to customers	3,157
The organization provides services in time	3,171
Organization's employees have a wide range of knowledge and are competent	4,041
The Organization has operating hours convenient for the citizens	4,062
Organization's employees have neat appearance	5,404

Finally, for the gap score the statement mean scores ranged (see Table 3c) from 0,232 for "the employees neat appearance" to 0,979 for whether the organization (the

ministry) provides individual attentions to customers'. The other two highest gap scores concerns the statements "organization's employees instill confidence" and "the organization provides services in time".

Table 3c: *The three statements with the lowest and the highest* ***gap*** *scores*

Item	Mean Score
Organization's employees have neat appearance	-0,232
Organization's employees understand the citizens' special needs	-0,239
Organization's equipment is comfortable for the public	-0,294
Organization's employees instill confidence	-0,712
The organization provides services in time	-0,897
The organization provides individual attention to customers	-0,979

3.2 Factor Analysis – structure validity of the questionnaire

In order to test the reliability of the SERVQUAL scale and the internal consistency of the five quality dimensions as proposed by Parasuraman et al, (1988), the Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each of the five dimensions for both scales (perceptions and expectations). The reliability coefficients are presented in Table 4.

The results indicate that the internal consistency of the scale measuring quality perceptions (P) are all quite high with values greater than the value of 0,70 as it is suggested by the literature. Therefore, in the case of this particular measurement tool, the overall scale of 22 questions is considered reliable in the sense of internal consistency. We can also conclude that the respondents understood the content of the questions, which resulted in greater consistency of responses. Moreover, the results for the reliability coefficients for the expectations (E) have satisfactory values, but lower than the corresponding values for perceptions. For the overall scale of perception and expectations, the reliability index is high (0,948) and (0,923) respectively. In general, the results in Table 4 show that there are not any reliability problems in using the model to measure the quality of services.

Table 4*: Reliability Analysis for the SERVQUAL scale and the quality dimensions – Cronbach's -α (alpha).*

Quality Dimensions	N^{o} Factors	(P: Perceptions)	(E: Expectations)
Reliability	5	0,816	0,733
Responsiveness	4	0,835	0,716
Assurance	4	0,834	0,768
Empathy	5	0,835	0,754
Tangibility	4	0,705	0,686
Total	22	0,948	0,923

Source: Results Analysis

Considering the second objective of this study, that is to investigate the suitability of the SERVQUAL scale and its quality dimensions to further examine the MRDF service quality, it is necessary to examine the structure validity of the scale used. This means that the scores obtained by the scale should be factor analysed to investigate the dimensionality of the scale. Ideally, a factor analysis in the scale used should reveal five quality dimensions with the items initially assigned to them. In the present study, the expectation scores of the SERVQUAL scale was factor-analysed by principal component analysis as it was suggested by Karassavidou et al, (2009) who have used SERVQUAL to examine the Greek National Hospital System.

Principal components analysis revealed four factors. Nevertheless the fourth factor included only the item "organization's employees have neat appearance". Thus, this item was omitted from the analysis. The results of the factor analysis with the three factors are presented in table 5. Concerning the adequacy of the Principal Components Analysis model, Bartlett's test of sphericity showed that the correlation table has a statistically significant difference from the identity table (χ^2=2257,568, df=210 p=0,000), while the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy, which determines whether the data is adequate for applying Principal Components Analysis (ability to factorize the correlation table), was found to be equal to 0,924 i.e. far above the minimum accepted level of 0,50 according to Hair et al, (1995) or the 0,60 level recommended by other writers. Table 5 shows the components after the rotation along with the values of the factor loadings

In total, the three components that were extracted explain 65,48% of the total variance exceeding the limit of 60% commonly used in the social sciences (Hair et al, 1995). The first component after the varimax rotation explains 35,16% of the total variance and could be called generally *"core service"*. This component contains 15 quality statements that come from all the quality dimensions used in SERVQUAL except tangibility. It is considered to contain basic dimensions that concern the reliability and responsiveness of services provided by the Greek MRDF. It worth mentioning that the highest gaps are observed in the items "the organization provides individual attention to customers" -0,979, "the organization provides services in time" -0,897, "the Organization's employees instill confidence" -0,712. These three items could be summarized as the "social skills" of the employees. In addition, this component also presents the highest overall gap between the expectations and the perceptions of the young farmers respondents, while the other 2 components follow with lower gaps.

The second component explains 17,75% of the total variance and was named *"Service conditions"*. This component includes three items related to reliability, responsiveness and assurance of the provided service according to SERVQUAL scale. The third component explains 12,56% of the total variance and corresponds to the tangible characteristics of the service provided by MRDF. This component comprises only the 3 remaining (after excluding "neat appearance" from the analysis) tangible items of the SERVQUAL scale.

Therefore, in this study the 5-dimensional structure proposed by Parasuraman et al, (1988) for the SERVQUAL scale cannot be confirmed. The results indicate that service quality for the Greek MRDF could be determined by 3 factors.

Table 5: *Factor analysis components for the MRDF service quality and mean scores for young farmers' expectations, perceptions and quality gaps for each item*

	Factor Loadings	***Mean Score Perceptions***	***Mean Score Expectations***	***GAP***
Factor 1: *Core Service* 35,162 % of the total variance; Cronbach's a 0,950		**3,482**	**4,006**	**-0,524**
The organization provides services in time	0,434	3,171	4,068	-0,897
The organization informs citizens about the time required to process their cases	0,549	3,733	4,164	-0,432
The Organization's employees instill confidence	0,865	3,288	4,000	-0,712
The organization provides individual attention to customers	0,717	3,158	4,137	-0,979
The organization handles with responsibility every citizen's case	0,675	3,760	4,212	-0,452
The organization's employees provide prompt service to citizens	0,685	3,521	4,014	-0,493
Citizens feel safe in their dealings with the organization	0,822	3,281	3,788	-0,507
Organization's employees give citizens personal attention	0,827	3,205	3,637	-0,432
The organization provides accurate and in time information to citizens	0,791	3,603	4,082	-0,479
The Organization's employees are willing to help citizens	0,622	3,418	3,760	-0,342
The Organization's employees understand the citizens' special needs	0,739	3,281	3,521	-0,240
Organization provides its services right the first time	0,525	3,315	3,753	-0,438
Organization's employees will never be too busy to respond their customers' requests.	0,597	3,753	4,281	-0,527
Organization's employees have a wide range of knowledge and are competent	0,591	4,041	4,527	-0,486
The organization have their customers' best interests at heart	0,562	3,705	4,151	-0,445
Factor 2: *Service Conditions* 17.754 % of the total variance; Cronbach's a 0,779		**3,886**	**4,333**	**-0,447**
Organization's employees are polite	0,593	3,781	4,164	-0,384
The organization maintain error-free records	0,807	3,815	4,370	-0,555
The Organization has operating hours convenient for the citizens	0,772	4,062	4,466	-0,404
Factor 3: *Tangible* 12,035 % of the total variance; Cronbach's a 0,774		**3,459**	**3,874**	**-0,416**
Organization's equipment is up-to-date and well maintained	0,575	3,808	4,274	-0,466
Organization's physical facilities are visually appealing	0,874	3,130	3,616	-0,486
Organization's equipment is comfortable for the public	0,808	3,438	3,733	-0,295

Source: Results analysis

4. Conclusions

The present study uses the SERVQUAL scale to examine the quality of services provided by Greek Ministry of Rural Development and Food to farmers and consequently to young farmers, a professional group with particular needs. The results indicate that young farmers' expectations were more than their perceptions. This indicates that the level of quality of the services provided by the ministry is not satisfactory for the young farmers participating in this survey. It must be mentioned that the significant gaps are observed in quality characteristics that have to do with "social skills" of the employees such as "instilling confidence" and "giving individual attention" in combination with accomplishing each citizen's case in the promised time. These personnel aspects for example can be part of a quality improving plan for the MRDF aiming to increase young farmers' – and farmers' in general – satisfaction from the services provided by the ministry's organizations. These results could shed some light in young farmers' participation in measures and policies designed to attract new entrants in agriculture that are mainly applied by EU member states´ Ministries and other public organizations.

The conclusions drawn from the results of this study are restricted to the following limitations. Firstly, due to shortage of time and resources, the sample size is not adequate to generalize the model. In order to make the results valid for the whole country, the research should be extended to all geographical areas by using the appropriate sampling. Secondly, this study only examines the relationship between perceived value and the underlying variables. It does not specify the relationship between the quality dimensions and its indicators. A valid conclusion of this study is that the 5-dimention structure of the SERVQUAL scale, as it was initially proposed by its authors, cannot be confirmed. In this way it is crucial to test the validity of the instrument in case it is to be used to in a wider research. This study revealed 3 dimensions determining service quality.

To conclude with, such quality measurements play a key role in the new approach of public sector management, as it is expressed by the New Public Management. Additionally, public service quality could help a top down policy and its measures such as supporting measures for new entrants in agriculture to be successful. More over Farmers and agribusinesses in Greece, as well as in South European in general, have to be provided with improved services in order to exploit market opportunities and thus stimulate the agricultural and consequently rural development.

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Appendix

Appendix Table 1: *Paired Samples Test*

		Paired Differences					***t***	***df***	***Sig. (2-tailed)***
		Mean	***Std. Deviation***	***Std. Error Mean***	***95% Confidence Interval of the Difference***		***Mean***	***Std. Deviation***	
Dimension	***GAP***				***Lower***	***Upper***			
Reliability	(P-E)	-,5643	,9483	,0784	-,7194	-,4092	-7,192	145	,000
Responsiveness	(P-E)	-,4486	1,0759	,0890	-,6246	-,2726	-5,038	145	,000
Assurance	(P-E)	-,5222	1,0827	,0896	-,6993	-,3451	-5,828	145	,000
Empathy	(P-E)	-,4979	,8832	,0733	-,6429	-,3529	-6,789	144	,000
Tangibility	(P-E)	-,3698	,9578	,0792	-,5265	-,2131	-4,666	145	,000