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International Benchmarking as a Method for Building a Learning Organisation in Public Administration. A Case Study of Phytosanitary Services in Europe

Abstract

The project analysed the functioning of the State Plant Protection and Seed Inspection Service (SPHSIS), and this article presents a study of the international benchmarking of public administration (6 seed Inspections from European Union countries were analysed). The research question posed by the authors of this article is: how did this tool help in the development and strategy planning of a public administration unit? The project used a number of research steps, both directly dedicated to benchmarking and interviews with Service recipients or Inspection staff. The following recommendations for Inspections emerge from a comparative analysis:

- 1) the introduction of the digitalisation of services, which may enable an increase in customer orientations,
- 2) legal changes in Poland's Inspection Service – increasing powers and building a single, national Food Agency.
- 3) Seed Inspection Service clients suggest increasing pro-export attitudes among officials.

Keywords: International Benchmarking, Learning Organisation, Public Administration, European Comparative Analysis, European Union

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Introduction

Governmental and local administration have been grappling with organisational, financial, and personnel challenges for years. However, there are organisations that do not wait for change but strive to enact it independently. An example of an organisation that takes matters into its own hands is the Plant Health and Seed Inspection Service (in Polish: PIORiN), which joined the GOSPOSTRATEG program and, in collaboration with consortium partners, implemented a project that allowed it to embark on a new path of development.

This article is based on the FITOEXPORT project (of the GOSPOSTRATEG program) funded by the National Centre for Research and Development (in Polish: NCBiR). Within the project, the functioning of the Plant Health and Seed Inspection Service was analysed. The basic tasks of PIORiN in the field of plant protection are regulated by Articles 79–81 of the Plant Protection Act. Among them are actions related to the supervision of plant health, the supervision of the introduction into circulation and use of plant protection products, the supervision of production, evaluation, circulation, and use of seed material. An inspection is carried out by the Chief Inspector of Plant Health and Seed Inspection and the voivode, who performs tasks with the help of the Voivodeship Inspector of Plant Health and Seed Inspection Service – the head of the Voivodeship Inspection of Plant Health and Seed Inspection Service, which is part of the government administration integrated at the voivodeship level. The Chief Inspector is a central organ of government administration subordinate to the minister responsible for agriculture. Appointed by the Prime Minister, the Chief Inspector carries out tasks with the assistance of the Main Inspectorate of Plant Health and Seed Inspection – GIORiN (Kłobukowski, Kłobukowska, 2021).

From the beginning of the FITOEXPORT project, and in parallel to other conducted research, members of a team from Warsaw University sought the best practices that could serve as a platform for discussions about potential new organisational solutions for PIORiN. The essence of benchmarking is the search for best-in-class organisational solutions. The objects of benchmarking do not necessarily have to be companies or organisations operating on the same market. What is important, however, is the convergence of certain features at the level of structures, tasks, serviced clients, etc. Observed solutions are usually not copied but serve as inspiration; a model solution that should then be subject to adaptation. From the FITOEXPORT project's start, it was assumed that the natural objects of benchmarking are phytosanitary inspections from

other countries. The goal of the project was to develop PIORiN towards becoming a learning organisation that modifies and improves its activities based on a database of collected experiences.

The aim of this article is to present, using the example of a state administrative unit, the impact of international benchmarking on the development of a learning organisation. The study guided PIORiN in the process of building its own strategy. The project used a number of research steps, dedicated directly to both benchmarking *and* interviews with Inspection Service recipients and/or Inspection Service staff.

The concept of organisational learning, although present in management sciences almost from their inception, became a popular trend in the 1990s primarily due to the work of Peter Senge (Sułkowski, 2003; Pasiczny, Rosiak, 2022). From his perspective, a systemic approach was crucial to organisational learning. In his vision, learning should not be sporadic or occasional but a constant phenomenon, enhancing an organisation's effectiveness. To achieve this goal, a diagnosis of organisational dimensions such as knowledge management strategies, knowledge-based organisational forms, information management, employee management, and organisational culture is essential (Rosiak, Postuła, 2022). An important element of systems conducive to learning is the utilisation of feedback loops (Senge, 1990). Their construction allows the delivery of feedback at specific moments, enabling a continuous monitoring of goal achievement, potential adjustments, and the shaping of new thinking patterns (Mumford, 1995).

Literature Review

The authors' approach to understanding the concept of organisational learning aligns with classical observations drawn from behavioural organisation studies (Levit, March, 1988). These observations suggest that organisational behaviours are based on routines (Cyert, March 1963; Nelson, Winter 1982). In such conditions, procedures are adjusted more to a specific situation rather than being the result of the process of analysing possible alternatives and choosing a particular option. Organisational actions are dependent on history and past experiences (Lindblom, 1959; Steinbruner, 1974), whereas organisations themselves are oriented towards goal achievement (Simon, 1955; 1957). In this context, organisational learning can be understood as being the ability to interpret conclusions from past experiences and transform them into new organisational routines (Levit, March, 1988). Learning can occur at the individual, team, and organisational levels and can involve many dimensions: climate; culture;

systems; and structures that influence whether individuals learn or not (Marsick, Watkins, 2003). However, barriers that hinder the learning process can also exist (2003). Among the most frequently analysed, we can include political factors (Van de Ven, Polley, 1992), cultural factors (Vince, Saleem, 2004), structural factors (Morgan, 1986), and financial factors (Rosiak, Postuła, 2022).

The construction of organisational learning systems aligns with the change-management concept, involving a sequence of planning, action, and the determination of outcome facts which can be condensed into three phases: unfreezing, change, and freezing (Lewin, 1946; Pasieczny, Rosiak, 2021). Organisational changes can be approached either gradually/incrementally (Braybrooke, Lindblom, 1963; Quinn, 1980; Nonaka, Takeuchi, 1995), or radically/revolutionarily (Stoddard, Jarvenpaa, 1995). Recognising the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches in their work, given the nature of the studied object – public administration, the authors leaned towards incremental changes.

Methodology/Research Scheme

In the study, three types of triangulation were employed in the forms of methodological, theoretical, and researcher triangulation. The research process began with an analysis of literature focusing on topics related to public administration and learning organisations. Simultaneously, analyses of existing documents regulating the functioning of the Plant Health and Seed Inspection Service were conducted. A further part of the research was based on open interviews (Czarniawska, 2014) conducted with a sample of 31 Inspection Service employees and 20 Inspection Service recipients. A benchmarking analysis was also carried out. The choice of benchmarks studied was deliberate. The first criterion was the size of the domestic agricultural market. The second was the structure of the Inspection in the given country and the scope of the tasks (countries where the Inspection has a vestigial role were dropped). The third criterion was the opinion of experts from PIORiN and Inspection stakeholders.

The interviews were always conducted by two researchers simultaneously. Due to the project's timeframe (pandemic), some interviews were conducted on-site with producers and exporters of plant products. Some were conducted on the ZOOM communication platform. Participants were selected in accordance with the principles of maximum variability strategy (Miles et al., 2014). To ensure comparability of results, the interviews were partially standardised. Interview scenarios were developed, and the researcher could expand upon the presented list of questions with additional issues related

to the topics raised by the interviewees. Each interview consisted of two parts. In the first part, the researchers introduced themselves, the goals, and the general significance of the study, indicating how the obtained data would be utilised. In the second part, questions from the questionnaire were asked. Each person interviewed was asked in advance for permission to record, with emphasis placed on the fact that the recording would serve solely research purposes, and the results would undergo anonymisation to prevent the interviewee from being identified. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then coded. Based on code analytics, areas were identified that later became the focus of benchmarking research on other Plant Health and Seed Inspection Organisations operating in Europe. They provided empirical material used in the construction of the new organisational Strategy for the Plant Health and Seed Inspection Service for the years 2022–2027.

Benchmarking Research on Organisations From European Countries

A review of selected foreign state plant health organisations reveals that their placement in the administrative structure and the centralisation or decentralisation of statutory activities reflect the overall constitutional tradition of a given country. In the case of the examined organisations, they are positioned within governmental administration, either as part of a ministry or directly subordinate to a specific ministry (serving as an executive agency or another specialised entity). Some of them are specialised, meaning that the scope of their tasks and competencies focuses on plant protection, and that includes the certification of exports, while some also oversee other fields of activity. For example, one institution may be responsible for the broad protection of plants and animals, thus handling both phytosanitary and veterinary controls, while only within an internal specialisation will there be specific services (departments, directorates) responsible specifically for plant or animal protection. As indicated by the analysis, the proper plant protection services forming the NPPO or performing some of its tasks often have additional responsibilities related to the development/support of agriculture and processing. In such cases, control activities related to export inspection and certification are just one aspect of their duties.

What follows below are descriptions of international benchmarks for PIORiN. Countries that were part of the European Union at the start of the study were selected. This allowed for the exploration of solutions feasible to implement within the community's legal framework. Another

criterion for selecting countries was the size of the agricultural production of a given country. Consideration was also given to the indications from Service recipients and Inspection employees.

Holland (The Netherlands)

The Dutch National Plant Protection Organisation was established in 1899. In 2012, it was merged with other government agencies, leading to the formation of Nederlandse Voedsel-en Warenautoriteit (NVWA; [www5](http://www5.vvwa.nl)) (The Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority), an entity responsible for the broad spectrum of food and consumer product safety. This organisation's scope of interest encompasses both plant and animal health, as well as the prevention of phenomena that could pose a danger to the Dutch economy and Dutch consumers of food products. Due to its extensive competencies, this entity is significant for the functioning of three ministries: the Ministry of Economic Affairs, of which it is an integral part, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, and the Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Sport.

Since the NVWA monitors, among other things, the health of plants, within its structure is the National Plant Protection Organisation in the Netherlands (NPPO-NL). NPPO-NL is responsible for carrying out phytosanitary tasks aimed at preventing the introduction, creation, and spread of harmful plant diseases and pests. In practice, tasks related to crop monitoring and export certification are performed in the Netherlands by four entities, with the division based on the type of cultivation. This way, producers/exporters of specific plants (products) collaborate with the following specialised institutions:

- For flower bulb cultivation – the BKD, as detailed below,
- For horticultural propagation materials, plants grown in nurseries – Naktuinbouw, as detailed below,
- For seeds and potatoes – NAK, the Dutch General Inspection Service,
- For fruits, vegetables, cut flowers, potted plants, and other products – KCB, the Quality Control Bureau.

BKD [Bloembollenkeuringsdienst (The Flower Bulb Inspection Service)] is a public entity that operates at the direction and under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature, and Food Quality. BKD conducts quality checks of products as well as import and export checks on behalf of the NVWA. Naktuinbouw monitors and promotes the quality of products, processes, and chains in horticulture. The emphasis is on propagating material (seed material). Naktuinbouw is an administrative

body supervised by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. NAK is the Dutch General Inspection Service. The tasks it performs are carried out on behalf of and under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature, and Food Quality. KCB is a foundation whose board is composed of members nominated by industry associations from the fruit and vegetable sector and the floriculture sector. The appointment of the board president is approved by the Minister of Agriculture, Nature, and Food Quality. KCB is accredited by the Dutch Accreditation Council (RvA) according to the NEN-EN-ISO/IEC 17020 standard (registration number I070). This standard encompasses requirements imposed on an inspecting body. Accreditation demonstrates that KCB conducts inspections impartially and independently and possesses the necessary expertise to carry out inspections.

KCB's tasks include:

- Inspections of the import and export (quality) of fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Quality control of fresh fruits and vegetables traded in the Netherlands, excluding the retail stage.
- Import inspections (phytosanitary) of fresh fruits and vegetables, cut flowers, potted plants, and plant products not covered by a specific sector, also known as “various products”.
- Sampling and monitoring actions related to exports to specific destinations, including the *monitoring of fruit and vegetable exports* destined for Japan, the USA, and Canada. Despite the numerous powers delegated to KCB, it is important to emphasise that phytosanitary export checks of plant products and the issuance of phytosanitary export certificates are conducted by NVWA officials. Observe, if you will, a much greater centralisation than that which is extant in the Polish model. It is also noticeable that one agency is responsible for a broad range of food protection, both of plant and animal origin. This is a fundamental difference in the functioning of Inspections, but it's worth noting that in Poland, there has been an on-and-off-again debate about the justification for establishing one organisation handling food safety in a broad sense. A very interesting element of the Dutch system is KCB. Perhaps a similar organisation created in Poland would become a significant factor speeding up the export of Polish products.

Indeed, a willingness to increase cooperation between PIORiN and Service recipients has been declared by both sides. Perhaps the creation of a large, centralised foundation would facilitate the export of Polish products and allow for the building of international relations. On the other

hand, in the eyes of Polish Service recipients, the Netherlands is presented as a country focused on food production and its export. Officials from the Netherlands are perceived as being very flexible, customer-oriented, and focused on achieving success: “For example, we also have information from market counterparts such as Dubai that in the Netherlands there is no protocol for exporting to India, but a certificate can be issued. These certificates have been sent, confirming that blueberries from Poland are good and suitable for export. The Dutch have their ways. A Dutch intermediary or company can buy blueberries from Poland, and quickly obtain a phytosanitary certificate in the Netherlands, miraculously. There is no hidden country of origin because there are labels that state the country of origin: Poland. They issue the certificate, send it. There is no problem” (RESP 10).

Thanks to flexible procedures and minimising barriers to export (also within the EU), the Netherlands becomes a country that earns money through mediation and resale of, for example, Polish food: “The Netherlands is an example of a country that has been trading fruits and vegetables for hundreds of years. They handle incredible amounts of those goods. We also know that some of those goods, for example, blueberries from Poland – incidentally, we don’t trade with them because we don’t like it very much – become Dutch blueberries after crossing the border and then, in England, cost two euros more” (RESP 10).

Based on the opinions of respondents, it can be observed that the Dutch counterpart of PIORiN is much more focused on supporting trade activities. It resembles more of a business than an office in its behaviour. This may be a cultural shock for Polish Service recipients.

The United Kingdom

The protection of plants and animals, as well as the implementation of policies to combat, among other things, the spread of plant diseases, falls under the competence of the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA, www.defra.gov.uk). DEFRA serves as the National Plant Protection Organisation under the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC). Specialised entities, varying depending on the applicant’s location, are responsible for receiving applications for phytosanitary inspections and phytosanitary certificate issuance.

Considering the federative nature of the United Kingdom, it should be noted that for England and Wales, the relevant agency is the Animal & Plant Health Agency (APHA), which includes the Plant Health and Seeds Inspectorate (PHSI). In Scotland, the plant-related authority is

the Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture (SASA) branch of the Scottish Government's Directorate for Agriculture and Rural Economy. In Northern Ireland, the plant-related authority is the Plant Health and Tree Health Branch in the Department of Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs (DAERA). The Channel Islands and the Isle of Man have their own plant health authorities.

For England and Wales, the agency responsible for implementing policies related to the health of animals and plants is the Animal and Plant Health Agency, which includes the Plant Health and Seeds Inspection. Producers and/or exporters of plant products must commission inspections from inspection officers and request the issuance of phytosanitary certificates (if required). For the export of seeds, potatoes, and bulbs, it is possible to apply for a certificate online through a so-called "eDomero" system. For other plants (fruits, vegetables, cut flowers, plant products, and grains), export can be declared through the Export Certificates and Inspections Service. To use the portal, one must have a Government Gateway account.

A crucial aspect in benchmarking with the United Kingdom, from the perspective of PIORiN's development, is the construction of an information system focused on customer service. This goal has become one of the key aspects of the development of the Polish organisation. So far, the lack of this type of solution has evoked negative emotions among Service recipients of Poland's Inspection. "It turns out at this moment that we all have to submit applications electronically. We have login systems, passwords, and specified procedures. If we add ePUAP (the electronic platform for public administration services) and the ability to sign documents electronically on this, we could work on utilising these, let's say, 'technological achievements' of the last few years, as I mentioned, and automate some of the procedures related to preparing documentation in PIORiN as well. I think that this is a really significant challenge, and I believe it is also an area where certain data and information could be systematised and globalised, concerning the institution itself, right?" (RESP 1).

Another significant benchmarking solution is the establishment of a single agency dedicated to food control, with the current iteration of PIORiN becoming one of its components. This kind of solution could shorten inspection times and improve the speed of international transport. The multiplicity of controlling entities and an excess of procedures are perceived by Inspection Service recipients as one of the main barriers to the export of Polish food.

France

The institution responsible for plant control in accordance with the Convention (National Plant Protection Organisation – NPPO) in France is the Ministry of Agriculture and Food – Ministère de l'Agriculture et de l'Alimentation (Directorate General for Food – DGAL). It sets developmental directions and creates relevant regulations. In practice, the execution of tasks related to plant production control is delegated to lower levels, following the decentralised nature of the French administration. The Regional Directorates for Food, Agriculture, and Forestry (Direction Régionales de l'Alimentation, de l'Agriculture et de la Forêt – DRAAF) are responsible for agriculture and report to the aforementioned ministry and its prefects. Within DRAAF, regional food services (Le service régional de l'alimentation – SRAL) operate, ensuring product compliance with applicable requirements and conducting phytosanitary certification for export notifications. Following the latest administrative reform, there are 13 Directorates in mainland France (including Corsica) and five in overseas territories (French Guiana, Réunion, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Mayotte).

Producers/exporters of plant products must declare their export-based intention to the relevant local Directorate. Declarations can be made through the electronic Expadon system, providing access to the sanitary and phytosanitary requirements of third countries, allowing consultation of required certificates, and their teletransmission.

French farmers and exporters of plants and plant products can benefit from informational bulletins intended for companies seeking international development. These bulletins present the situation of the agri-food sector. The current 14th edition, prepared for 2022, focuses on 21 sectors of French agriculture and agri-food processing and 50 countries – all of which are potential recipients of French goods. It's also worth noting the advisors supporting agriculture export in the French system who carry out their economic missions in several dozen countries on all continents.

Should one analyse the NPPO in France and compare it to PIORiN, some similarities can be observed (voivodeships in Poland, prefectures in France, and regionalisation), but there is also a difference in one's access to digital solutions. French services offer their Inspection Service recipients access to IT solutions for clients, while in Poland, a client-oriented system is still under development. Also in France, the agency has broader powers and handles the entire food sector. The structure of the French organisation is adapted to the political system of the country. As one respondent put it: "And we suggested letting the exporter take full responsibility. We were

once exporters and worked in a simplified procedure, and the customs service trusted us and said, ‘Okay, you are a credible exporter, you have your own customs code, your unique number, and you are responsible for what you send. That you won’t put beets instead of apples or anything else because you are responsible for it from the beginning to the end’. So why can’t the sanitary services, which are, in fact, checking only the presence of quarantine diseases, which, in Poland, are not really present on apples, be moved to this simplified form?’ (RESP 2).

Germany

The proper functioning of the National Plant Protection Organisation in Germany, as mandated by the International Plant Protection Convention, and the execution of its responsibilities result from a collaboration of entities operating at both the central and regional (land) levels. At the federal level, the responsibility for plant protection and plant health, in accordance with the Plant Protection Act, lies with the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (Bundesministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft, or “BMEL”). BMEL is responsible for creating laws and officially representing Germany in plant protection and plant health matters at the international level.

The Official Plant Protection Services of the federal states (Länder) are responsible for implementing federal laws and regulations and applying phytosanitary measures. They are particularly responsible for inspecting plants and plant products during import, export, and transit, as well as their movement within the EU. They also oversee compliance with the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) and report any occurrences of harmful organisms to the Julius Kühn Institute (JKI). State plant protection services are equipped with diagnostic laboratories for phytosanitary research, and inspectors include officers and public administration employees. Plant health certificates are issued exclusively by the relevant State Plant Protection Services.

Various entities responsible for plant health protection in the federal states handle a wide range of agricultural, rural development, and plant health matters. These entities differ in structure, task scope, and emphasis, reflecting the socio-economic-geographic diversity of the German states. For instance, official information points for plant protection in the federal states (plant protection services) include:

- in Baden-Württemberg – the Augustenberg Agricultural Technology Center and the Regional Council of Stuttgart – Plant Protection Service,

- in Bavaria – the Bavarian State Institute of Agriculture (LfL) – the Plant Protection Institute,
- in Berlin – the Plant Protection Office,
- in Bremen – the state service for food, animal welfare, and veterinary services (LMTVET), which also includes the Plant Protection Service,
- in Hamburg – the Plant Protection Office in Hamburg,
- in Schleswig-Holstein – the Chamber of Agriculture Schleswig-Holstein, Department of Crop Production, Plant Protection, and Environment.

Regardless of which institution handles a case, procedures related to reporting the export of plants have been standardised for the entire territory of the Federal Republic of Germany. This is facilitated by the PGZ portal, which all entities intending to export products requiring inspection and obtain a phytosanitary certificate must use.

Characteristic of Germany is the adaptation of inspection operations to state-level structures while maintaining a clear, overall national centralisation. Germany also has a system oriented towards remote customer service. According to the respondents, the inspection system of our western neighbours is much less formal than in Poland and is more focused on supporting exports than on control: “‘Sir, you would have to come to us because you need to submit an application.’ I say, send it to my email, I will fill in the required data right away in the office and proceed. ‘No, no, no, because it has to have a stamp’. It’s just a disaster. And of course, it ended with a call to the client, I said no, this cannot be done in Poland. After half an hour, literally, there was a phone call because it was supposed to go to Amsterdam. After another half an hour, there was a call that it would go to Frankfurt because some customs agency, together with the German Inspection, I don’t know what the equivalent of PIORiN is there, but with Germany, they will do the documents in half an hour” (RESP 12).

Spain

In accordance with IPPC guidelines, the role of the National Plant Protection Organisation in Spain is carried out by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food (Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación). The relevant department is the General Directorate for Plant and Forest Health and Hygiene (Subdirección General de Sanidad e Higiene Vegetal y Forestal – SGSHVF), integrated with the General Directorate for Health in Agricultural Production (Dirección General de

Sanidad de la Producción Agraria). According to information published on the Directorate's website concerning exports to third countries, businesses interested in exporting plant products must apply through the CEXVEG application for the issuance of the appropriate phytosanitary certificate. In the application, they specify the border control point, seaport, or airport of departure, or a control centre established and authorised for that purpose by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food, where goods will be available for physical inspection, and the relevant phytosanitary certificate will be issued if required by the regulations of the destination country.

Characteristic of the Spanish phytosanitary control system is the operation of special control centres for trucks (ESTACIÓN DE CAMIONES), where, in contrast to other border control points, only *export* checks are carried out. The staff at these centres serve exclusively Spanish agricultural exporters and do not deal with phytosanitary checks of products imported into Spain. Currently, there are 9 such stations across the country.

The Spanish CEXVEG system (foreign trade with plants) is a computerised system for managing and supporting the official phytosanitary certification of exported products, available through the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food (www.mapa.gob.es). In addition to other services, it supports the export certification procedure, provides information to businesses, assists the SISVF and SSVCA services in their activities, and serves as an electronic window for the integrated management of the certification process, from the exporter's application to the printing, registration, and issuance of the phytosanitary export certificate.

Spain has introduced additional facilities for its clients. One respondent strongly emphasises the differences between the Polish and Spanish models. In Poland, there are officials, while in Spain, there are services oriented toward maximising exports: "We mentioned Spain as an example, where sanitary services, I repeat, services, not a sanitary official, but services, serve exporters 24/7. Seven days a week. To export as much as possible. Because there is no better business than export" (RESP 2).

A benchmark that can be borrowed from the Spaniards is joint service checks to expedite the transport of goods: "I imagine something like this; the Post Office, like in Spain, enters at once. Customs services at the same time. And quality and sanitary services. And everyone looks at their level" (RESP 2).

The Polish respondents note that the flexible and business-friendly attitude of the Spaniards hinders Polish products' competitiveness in the European market. On the one hand, the Spaniards have additional facilities, whereas on the other, there are exemptions from control if one

has certificates: “An even worse problem was that, as we see in Spain, not only does the Inspection work around the clock, it is in one place, that is, when leaving Spain towards France, there is one big parking lot where every major exporter applies for a certificate, and if they have a history that the production is supervised, it is simply issued on the spot. No one comes, no one examines because they know that the production is supervised” (RESP 3).

Poland’s Inspection particularly fares poorly in certain categories of fruits, where speed and efficiency obviously matter: “We have supervision in orchards, and sorting is also supervised. So there’s no problem. But in Spain, it’s 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And with us, in the case of soft fruits, it was like this; [supervision] until 3 pm on Friday, and then Saturday and Sunday it’s closed, but these strawberries and cherries are constantly being picked. There is no Saturday or Sunday there” (RESP 3).

Research Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The primary limitation of our study is the need to confirm respondents’ opinions regarding the significantly stronger focus on foreign inspections. Study trips to these foreign inspections were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, future research should aim to verify this hypothesis and conduct an in-depth examination of cultural differences between Poles and residents of Western Europe. It may also be worthwhile to analyse Poland’s post-communist past and its impact on the organisational culture of central offices, characterised by employees’ orientation toward control and supervision rather than supporting economic development.

Discussion of Results

Organisations responsible for global food safety, especially plant safety, continue to seek opportunities to improve their activities. The State Plant Protection and Seed Inspection Service (PIORiN) also follows this path. The FITOEXPORT project, on which this article is based, has enabled Poland’s Seed Inspection Service to enter a new organisational era. Through a new strategy and benchmarking of foreign inspections, PIORiN is becoming a customer-oriented, learning organisation.

Analysing the functioning of PIORiN and National Plant Protection Organisations (NPPO) in European countries, a noticeable trend towards digitising systemic solutions and offering clients the possibility of remote service has been observed. This trend was evident in benchmarks from France, England, Spain, and Germany, and this solution will expedite

customer service and increase the flexibility of inspection activities. Androniceanu et al. (2022) pointed to links between the digitalisation of public services and European countries achieving lower service costs, less bureaucracy and a decrease in corruption. Another benefit of digitising public administration is the building of support for sustainable development and a more inclusive society (Burlacu et al., 2021). Digitalisation has many benefits, and perhaps its introduction could increase customer satisfaction.

The European benchmarks analysed had a much broader scope of activity, usually in the field of food safety agencies. This solution could be implemented in Poland but would require a decision at the ministerial level. Another difference resulting from the analysis of existing data is the uniform subordination of foreign Inspections, while in Poland, there is a consolidated administration where PIORiN sets goals for regional units, and financing is provided by the voivode. This is problematic when planning activities.

In the opinion of Polish Service recipients, there is a belief in a stronger orientation towards export and support for national economies by Inspections from western countries. This is evident in their customer approach and a more flexible attitude towards procedures. It is very risky, as Polish products are exported outside the EU by western Inspections due to their faster operation. Changing the mentality of employees could be a key area of change during the building of a learning organisation. According to a study by Korunka et al. (2007), perceived customer orientation was related to job characteristics, organisational characteristics and the quality of employees' professional lives. Therefore, in order to achieve sustainable change in this area, major organisational changes are needed in the Inspection itself.

It is also worth making note of specific solutions drawn from individual countries, such as the KCB foundation from the Netherlands, whose solutions and working style could be implemented in Poland. Spanish solutions implemented seasonally during the harvest peak should increase exports and reduce the amount of food loss.

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