



## Rural development and challenges establishing sustainable land use in Eastern European countries

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### ABSTRACT

The European Union Rural Development Policy (RDP) for the period 2007–2013 seeks to establish a coherent and sustainable framework for the future of Europe's rural areas and is closely related to the improvement of living conditions in the countryside involving aspects of housing, the environment, infrastructure, communication, employment possibilities, land management, etc. Such interventions are very welcome in many Central and Eastern European countries where land reform after the collapse of the Soviet regime has resulted in a worrying drift towards rural depopulation. It is expected that the land consolidation (LC) process will not only allow solutions to the structural problems of rural land but could also create viable rural areas through improvements to rural services and infrastructure, and incentives for economic diversification, etc. Permanent and fluent communication between private and public interest groups is a most important aspect of achieving the stated objectives of land consolidation. However, this presently takes the form of a monologue rather than a dialogue in many Central and Eastern European countries. Today, and after the period of the currency of EU RDP 2007–2013, it is necessary to investigate the attitude and expectations of the interested parties if further degradation is to be avoided and the attractiveness of rural areas through LC projects is to be enhanced. The case study introduced in this paper, based on quantitative and qualitative surveys done with related key groups in Lithuania, reveals the main problems and offers possible solutions which should be reflected in the legislation to avoid the future degradation of rural areas.

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### Introduction

With over half of the population in the 25 Member States of the European Union (EU) living in rural areas that cover 90% of the territory, rural development is critically important. Farming and forestry remain heavily dependent on the use and management of land and natural resources in the EU's rural areas, and play a significant role as a platform for economic diversification of rural communities (European Communities Commission, 2007).

Often rural areas are treated as mendicant cases because of the prevalence within them of socio-economic problems, underestimating their potential as core economic assets. That is why appropriate attention has to be paid to these areas. The most acute problems are felt in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) where the restitution of private ownership rights has been almost completed (Vidican, 2009; Pašakarnis and Malienė, 2010). Land ownership issues are recognized as a substantial problem in the

sustainable development of rural areas as revealed by the two following phenomena: firstly, landholdings tend mainly to be small, fragmented and highly dispersed around the neighbourhood of the farms, and secondly, the abandonment of the land is becoming a serious and growing trend that is accelerated by the retirement of the older generation of farmers and by the significant migration of young people to urban areas (van Dijk, 2003; Sikor et al., 2009). It is clearly noticeable that more and more arable land is left unused or is poorly cultivated. Many plots lie fallow as rural areas of CEE countries have suffered particularly badly during the current economic crisis which increased migration, and froze rural homestead development, etc. Increasingly, plots of land which are located away from populated areas are becoming overgrown. Grubbström (2011) has noticed that such degraded landscapes raise the stress levels between neighbours and negatively affect rural tourism. Emigrants who have agreed to sell their land to active land owners lose their emotional connection to it (van Dijk, 2007). All of this hampers the viability of rural areas and acts as a brake upon the development of both private and social capital.

A fundamentally different approach to rural development is required. An increasing number of voices are calling for an approach

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wherein the countryside is no longer seen narrowly as a factory for producing food, but as providing a multitude of functions including recreation, work and living places, aesthetic and environmental services, water management and purification, as well as ecological stability (Beckmann and Dissing, 2004). Land development approaches are not able to stop entirely the migration and further marginalisation of agricultural regions. A combination of different tools such as land banking, land consolidation, formation of larger units by cooperation, land re-allotment, and the promotion of other land uses should help regions find a new balance between commercial farming, nature and landscape preservation (van Dijk and Kopeva, 2006; van der Jagt et al., 2007).

Rural Development Policy (RDP) seeks to establish a coherent and sustainable framework for the future of Europe's rural areas (European Communities Commission, 2007) and is closely related to the improvement of living conditions in the countryside by impacting on the housing environment, infrastructure, communications, employment possibilities, land management, etc. (Backman, 2002; Malienė and Malys, 2009). A pleasing living and working environment is needed to attract enterprises to economically attractive regions; this is one of Europe's core objectives in the global framework (van der Jagt et al., 2007; Malienė et al., 2008; Mulliner and Malienė, 2011). The European Council emphasises the economic, environmental, and social elements of sustainability which were set in EU RDP for the period of 2007–2013 through three following themes (European Communities Commission, 2007):

- improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector;
- improving the environment and the countryside;
- improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of the rural economy (Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005).

It was expected that the land consolidation process would resolve not only the structural problems of rural land but could also create economically viable rural areas through improvements to rural services and infrastructure, incentives for diversification, etc. (Pašakarnis and Malienė, 2009, 2010). In many Western European countries land consolidation is an integral part of a broader rural development process which includes community renewal (Thomas, 2006). In the EU member states it is often implemented with EU co-financing under the national rural development programme.

Ossko and Sonnenberg (2002) argue that land consolidation will be the most important procedure in Central Europe in the near future if it can enable the creation of an economic agricultural property structure and properly functioning rural land markets.

If further rural degradation is to be avoided after the expiry of EU RDP 2007–2013, and if the attractiveness of rural areas through LC projects is to be enhanced, then the attitudes and expectations of the interested parties need to be investigated. The authors of this paper investigated the situation in Lithuania as a case study and provide findings, which could be used as guidance in other CEE countries. This paper will proceed to present the investigation which centred upon:

1. A qualitative survey with private land owners participating in the LC project implemented in 2005–2008, and
2. A quantitative survey with representatives from local government (municipalities) in the year 2010.

Based on revealed attitudes and expectations, the authors of this paper provide suggestions for possible solutions, which could serve as guidelines for policy makers, land management office specialists

initiating new projects based on the needs of land owners, local municipalities, communities interested in LC projects, and other interested parties.

### The evolution of land consolidation in Lithuania during the decade 2000–2010

Over the past 19 years Lithuania has been in the process of restoring ownership rights in land, forests, water bodies, residential houses, and commercial buildings. Three methods were applied to the restoration of land ownership rights to the former owners – in kind, in equivalent, and by compensation. The restitution process is now coming to an end (more than 95% has been restored in rural areas), but watchfully observed it appears that this process is never to end as strong governance is still missing.

Now more and more it can be perceived that even after the land reform the resultant land holding structure is inefficient because of its fragmentation, and that this situation has led to a rise in the number of abandoned plots. State land is also very scattered and spread chaotically, which in turn hampers its sale and its effective usage. There is also Free State land – land not privatized during the land reform which has been left to the State. Such plots are often of poor quality and therefore not very attractive. It is expected that Free State land will be privatized during land consolidation projects.

Lithuania's rural areas cover more than 97% of country's territory and are home to 33% of people (LIAE, 2011b). In recent years, the average size of farms has slightly increased from 10.4 ha (2003) to 15.0 ha (2010) (Statistics Lithuania, 2011). However, at the same time, the amount of abandoned land has increased from 400 to 900 thousands of hectares. This land is used neither as an economic nor as an agro environmental resource, which reduces the country's agricultural development, hinders the land resource management, undermines the country's image. Land consolidation is one of measures seen by Lithuanian government to form viable agricultural holdings (LIAE, 2011a).

Land consolidation in Lithuania started from the year 2000 with pilot land consolidation projects carried out with the support of experts from Denmark representing the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. The first stage of the LC project was focused on formulating the legislation and improving farm structures (Hartvigsen, 2006). The second stage of the project was launched after one year and was focused on sustainable rural development. Immediately after this, a draft LC legislation model (originally created during the first wave of pilot projects) was improved by integrated rural development measures, and this, the 2004 LC legislation model, remained valid until 2010. The continued involvement of international land consolidation experts would be appreciated today not only to assure transparent use of EU financial support, but also for decision support.

In 2005–2008 the first 14 land consolidation projects in four counties (Telšiai, Marijampolė, Panevėžys and Tauragė) started on a “learning-by-doing” basis in an area of 4827 ha with the participation of 388 land owners and an aggregate total of 731 plots (see Table 1).

Financing of these projects (their organisation, preparation and implementation) was covered under the Lithuanian Single Programming Document for the period of 2004–2006 (with support from The European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund Guidance section), under the IV priority “Rural development and fishery”, measure 4 “Promoting the adaptation of rural areas”, sub-measure “Land re-parcelling”. These 14 LC projects (amounting to €753,000) were financed by the European Union (71%), and from the National budget (29%). For the land owners this process was totally free of charge. Land consolidation projects are implemented

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