

Towards sustainable rural development in Central and Eastern Europe: Applying land consolidation

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ABSTRACT

Over the past twenty years, social and economic decline in rural areas has intensified in the Central and Eastern European countries. A precondition for the reversal of this decline is the implementation of new policies in relation to the fundamentals of land ownership and management. In addition to addressing the problems of land ownership fragmentation, these should include measures to improve agricultural production and employment, taxation policy, and legislation to protect land ownership rights, within the context of acknowledging environmental and sustainability considerations. In Europe, the requirement for readjusting unfavourable land fragmentation and promoting the appropriate use of land combining with positive environmental solutions is expected to create new sustainable land management systems. The consolidation of land ownerships may be an effective and active land management instrument which not only addresses the problems of land fragmentation, but also, if applied sensitively, may be an instrument for delivering sustainable rural development in a wider context. The aim of this research is to investigate land consolidation as an essential tool to create sustainable rural areas in Lithuania.

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Introduction

The rural areas in the less-favoured and least-developed regions, which are still largely dependent on agriculture, are frequently the source of negative growth rates, soaring unemployment and mounting rural poverty. Nearly two decades ago the privatization of the land started the agricultural transition in Central and Eastern European countries. This was followed by the restitution of the land to its former owners, or in some cases its distribution to workers opposed to the pre-existing collective system (Lerman, 2000). As a consequence, many rural areas encountered substantial problems caused by the inconvenient structure of farms and highly fragmented ownership of arable land (Dijk, 2003). This in turn led to a decrease in agricultural production as it prevented the sound development of individual farms by depriving them of significant investment. The negative social and economic consequences upon the rural population are detailed in Vranken et al. (2004) and Dijk (2007). Recent surveys have suggested that larger individually owned farms produce higher family incomes than smaller ones and thus farm augmentation makes a positive contribution to the agricultural economy and well being of the rural population (Deininger et al., 2004; Lerman and Cimpoeș, 2006; Lerman and

Shagaida, 2007). Therefore, in spite of the country-specific complications for traditional land consolidation reviewed by Dijk (2007), the general experience and knowledge of Western land consolidation suggest that it could become a genuine platform for sustainable rural development in Central and Eastern European countries (Dijk, 2002; Weiss and Maliene, 2004).

In majority of Central and Eastern European countries arable land comprises over 50% of their total areas. Here, local agricultural players and stakeholders are experiencing serious social and economic disintegration and widespread disappointment (Hartvigsen, 2005). As a result, people of younger generation leave the farming and more and more arable land becomes uncultivated (Vranken et al., 2004). Often, farmers abandon their traditional and sometime more sustainable methods of production and simplify them, as a result reducing the quality of crops and causing damage to the environment. Unfortunately, ecological considerations rarely dominate short term commercial requirements, and this prompted the need to take urgent action to defend destroyed nature (Gatzweiler et al., 2002).

In order to preserve the natural environment and wealth of the agricultural areas of Central and Eastern Europe it has become indispensable to introduce specific regulations in agricultural policy. These should apply to the specific character of agriculture and to the particular situation of the affected countries. Whilst creating such instruments of agricultural policy it is important to remember that land administration in Central and Eastern European countries

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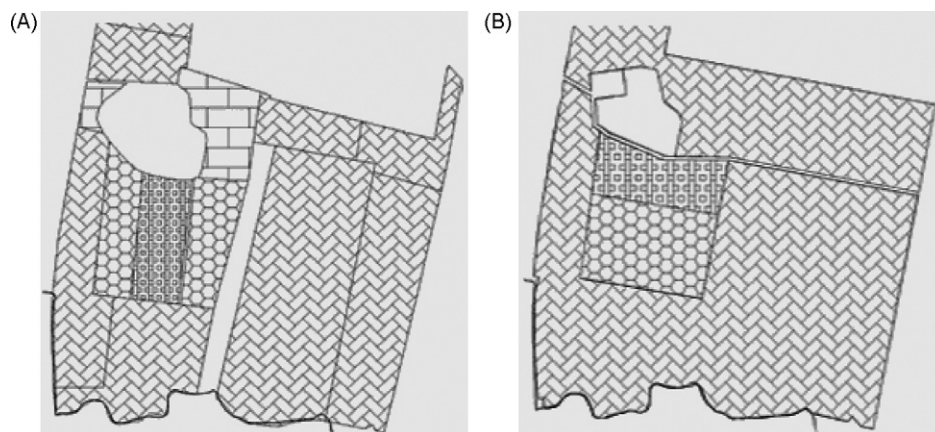


Fig. 1. Land consolidation project in Zidikai and Ukrinai cadastral area, Lithuania. (A) Before land consolidation. (B) After land consolidation.

may be poor and lacking awareness of the environmental issues (Karaczun, 2003). Agriculture is no longer the simple commodity industry that it was years ago, when the only avenue for the farmer's success was to increase productivity and revenue. Environmental considerations (in their broadest sense) now also inform the decision-making process with the realization that the global situation is the product of an aggregation of local land use (and other) practices. The proper management of these practices in that they relate to water, land, forests and wildlife is crucial for sustainable rural development (Gatzweiler et al., 2002).

European agriculture is facing the need for alternatives. Over production, poor agricultural incomes, rural abandonment and the environmental pollution caused by intensive farming practices present themselves as problems for immediate resolution. A recent development of European Union (EU) policy decouples direct aid from the level of production and supports the stronger sustainable use of natural resources (EC, 2005; Palma et al., 2007). All rural development programmes must contain agriculture-environmental measures which are a key instrument of environmental integration.

In the EU, positive environmental effects are expected from new land management systems. The research in this article is therefore, focused on the sustainable rearrangement of rural areas through the land consolidation process.

Land consolidation

Land consolidation may be described as the planned readjustment of the pattern of the ownership of land parcels with the aim of forming larger and more rational land holdings. Other goals may be attached to the process of consolidation such as improvements to the infrastructure and the implementation of developmental and environmental policies (Fig. 1).

Many Western European countries have a long tradition for land consolidation. In England, for example, the 'Enclosure' movement gradually replaced the pre-existing atomised structure of agricultural land use over the period c.1500–1830. In Denmark the land consolidation program has roots more than two hundred years ago with the beginning of land reforms in the 1780s, when the common use of agricultural land was supplanted by forms of private ownership and a private family farms were established (Hartvigsen, 2005). Modern land consolidation practices in Western Europe have been developed since the end of World War II, when notion of the equality between the rural and urban standard of living evolved all over Europe and there was a strong awareness of the importance of food security induced by wartime experiences. Until the 1970s

agricultural policies have focused mainly on the improvement of agricultural structures via reducing fragmentation and enlarging farm sizes (Weiss and Maliene, 2004).

Twenty years ago, land consolidation in some Western European countries changed from being agricultural/farm-focused to being a tool to cover public demands for access to land and to resolve the resultant land use conflicts (Thomas, 2004). It has developed from being commercially focused to being environmentally friendly and more concerned with sustainable land management (Thomas, 1998). A third impetus came from the EU regarding its cohesion policy within which land consolidation was promoted as an indispensable measure for integrated rural development (Thomas, 2006a,b).

In majority Western Europe countries, land consolidation is an integrated part of a broader rural development context (Weiss and Maliene, 2004). In the EU member countries it is often implemented with EU co-financing under the national rural development programme. All EU member countries have prepared new rural development programmes for the period of 2007–2013 (EC, 2006). The new EU Council Regulation for support for rural development defines land consolidation as one of the actions which is supported under the programme.

Whereas Western European countries have long traditions and significant practical experience of land consolidation, Central and Eastern European countries presently stand at the beginning of this process. It is a complex process which covers not only the technical aspects of the plan itself, but also the associated aspects of legislation, the establishment of the agencies to implement the plan, and, not least, the education of their staff (Thomas, 2006a,b).

The result of the massive privatization process is that millions of families in countries in transition became peasants and owners of small plots with an average of about one hectare per household spread over different parcels and located in different areas in the vicinity of settlements, an incredible fragmentation. It is not uncommon for a person to be the owner of ten fruit trees in a garden or half a row of grape vines (UNECE, 2001).

It is the intention of the EU Commission that the new rural development programmes and the subsequent projects shall be as integrated as possible and with a cross-sector approach (EC, 2006). Land consolidation projects are an excellent instrument to implement rural development projects which have and achieve multiple purposes and goals. For example, these projects will improve the agricultural structures (e.g. the reduction of fragmentation and enlargement of farm sizes), implement on nature through the environmental projects (e.g. according to EU Natura 2000- and Water framework directives), influence national and local infrastructure

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