

LAND CONSOLIDATION – A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Discussions of the future European rural development policy started in September 2016. Participants at the Cork 2.0 European Conference on Rural Development have declared that an innovative, integrated and inclusive rural and agricultural policy in the European Union (EU) should be guided on ten policy orientations. Rural Europe is home to more than half of the EU population and covers more than three quarters of the territory. Rural areas are also important in the preservation of Europe's natural and cultural landscapes and heritage. EU support for investment in rural areas should focus on generating added value for society. Land management has a key role in the interface between citizens and the environment. Policies must incentivise the delivery of environmental public goods, including the preservation of Europe's natural and cultural heritage. Increased pressure on natural resources must be met by coordinated cross-sectorial policy responses. These should ensure the sustainable management of natural resources such as water, soil, and biodiversity, being the very means of agricultural and forestry production. There is a need to develop and mainstream innovative, science-based solutions that allow for producing more with less while ensuring that natural resources are at the disposal of future generations. Effective formats of knowledge exchange and advice should be developed and support provided for the adoption of well-designed land management schemes. For achieving the above-mentioned objectives, in the EU regulatory framework is envisaged a possibility for direct and indirect support for land consolidation, as a tool for sustainable rural development.

In the late 1990s, after the fall of the former Soviet Union, a new political and economic reforms era has started in Europe. One of the first activities of the reforms were targeted to the land – a territorial basis for various economic activities. Each country chosen its own way to carry the land reform, keeping it high on the political and economic reforms' agenda, but already very soon it became evident that the result of such activities is not satisfactory, as the newly formed agricultural land parcels in rural areas were small and fragmented for efficient farming activities, not adjusted to the existing rural infrastructure.

The best tool to address the mentioned problems is the land consolidation. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is leading the process of methodological guidance on land consolidation, with the special focus since 2002, when the Munich Symposium was organised to address these issues.

Modern land consolidation could be defined as the process of rearrangement of the land parcels in a certain territory, aiming to enlarge those parcels, optimise farm holdings and establish necessary infrastructure, at the same time taking into consideration other rural development and environmental protection policy objectives. As land consolidation is by nature multi-functional, from the very beginning of initiating the process, it is recommended to apply land consolidation with different approaches.

After regaining the independence in 1990, land reform based on the restitution of land ownership rights to the previous owners and their successors have started in Lithuania in 1991. Due to the restitution of ownership rights to the real property available in kind as well as conveying to the ownership of persons land parcels of equivalent value without equitable

payment small parcels of cultivated land were prevailing, farms were formed without designing the layout of their land tenures. The fragmentation of land parcels encumbered organisation of agricultural activities and increased the costs of production, infrastructure in rural areas was poor. Disparities between rural and urban areas, also increased competition with the farmers in the other EU countries lead to the introduction of a new land management tool – land consolidation. In the framework of the EU rural development policy land consolidation is seen a tool for solving jointly the issues of increasing the competitiveness of farms, environmental protection, fostering landscape, natural and cultural heritage, rational use of natural resources and improvement of the quality of life in rural areas.

Starting with the first pilot land consolidation projects in 2000, legal framework for carrying land consolidation projects was adopted in 2004. In 2008, National Land Consolidation Strategy was developed and adopted. Since 2004, land consolidation being considered as a tool for sustainable rural development in Lithuania, is supported under the EU funded Rural Development Programme.

Under the EU Delegation Agreement, FAO since March 2017 in the Republic of North Macedonia is implementing a project “Mainstreaming of the National Land Consolidation Programme (MAINLAND)”. The main aim of the Project is to assist smallholders and family farms to overcome the problems arising from excessive land fragmentation, small farm sizes and insufficient agricultural infrastructure to increase productivity, competitiveness and efficiency of farms, thus enhancing the potential of the agricultural sector in the Country.

While implementing the Project, previous experiences in building up modern land consolidation in the Country gained through various international support projects that were on-going since 2008, also learning from the other European countries with long, as well as shorter experience in land consolidation, are taken into consideration.

In addition, the Project identified linkages and creates synergies with the other FAO and EU IPA funded projects, thus putting efforts to create synergies and added value towards achieving the objectives of the MAINLAND project.