

# Who makes the landscape ?: The small farmer perspective

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## Introduction

The landscape has always been an essential aspect of European agriculture and on the other hand the agriculture has always been one of the major driving forces in the process of creation of unique types of cultural landscape. The landscape represents territorial system, where man through his activities in interaction with his natural environment and resources creates the conditions for existence of organisms and human society.

The effort to conserve the diversity of organisms, ecosystems and landscape ought to lead to conservation of cultural diversity of nations and cultures – to conservation of material and spiritual values as well as to conservation of all nations and nationalities (**Hrnčiarová 2004**). Various types of cultural landscape which represent the reflection of certain historical period are good example of mutual coexistence of man and nature (Fig. 1 and 2).



Fig. 1: Liptovská Teplička – preserved field balks as forms of agricultural anthropogenic relief



Fig. 2: Podpoľanie – narrow field belts as a historical structure of the region

### Structure and development of agricultural sector in Slovakia

Despite some differences the new member states are characterized by dual structure of agricultural sector – on one hand, there is a number of large agricultural holdings, but on another hand there's also a high amount of small farms. From total number of 9 million registered CEE farms there is only 1% larger than 50 ha, but they cover almost 38% of total agricultural area. The share of farm holdings smaller than 5 ha is 82% but they cover only 27 % of total agricultural area (**EC, 2004a**).

The agricultural land in Slovakia represents approximately 2 440 000 mil ha which is almost 50 % of whole territory. Arable land thus represents 55% of this area (**MŽP SR, 2002**). Agricultural production in Slovakia is mainly concentrated in SW and SE Slovakian lowlands. These areas are considered as highly productive and intensify cultivated with large share of arable land managed by mostly large agricultural holdings. Unfavorable climate and topographical conditions determined the structure of agricultural sector in marginal regions of our country.

Due to collectivization period the share of small farms in Slovakia or Czech Republic is much smaller than in Slovenia, Romania or Latvia where collectivization didn't affected farm size structure to such extend. In the year 1949 small farmers owned 28,6 % of all agricultural holdings. Farmers managing land with size of 5-10 ha represented 19,5 % of all holdings, but in 3 years their number decreased to 16,4 % (**FoE and CEPA, 2004**). In general, collectivization does not always represent the negative process. The negative development lies in fact that collectivization was perceived as more political, than social, cultural and psychological transformation (**Slavkovský, 2002**). This resulted to loss of land property rights and consequently also production, economical and land-maintenance function of farming activities. Another remarkable period in development of agricultural sector was privatization after political changes in 1989. This period represented the rapid decline in agricultural production, which was the result of low competitiveness of agricultural sector and too enthusiastic emphasis given to private ownership without considering missing social and cultural linkages of collectivization farmers generation. Nowadays high nature value farmland is threatened by two contrasting trends: intensification and abandonment (**EEA, 2004a**).

Intensification has been a continuous process in most parts of Western Europe for decades, reflected in a steady increase in fertilizer inputs milk and cereal yield. In Eastern Europe investments in agricultural sector dropped substantially during political and economical changes in 1990s. Current input rates are still comparably low, but the new agro-economic framework expect to lead to some intensification, which means that some of the high nature value farmland will probably be exposed to intensification in the near future.

Land abandonment is already a common phenomena in regions where agricultural productivity is relatively low. Depopulation is occurring in many rural areas, affecting countryside and environment profoundly. The situation is particularly worrying in central and Eastern Europe where political and economical changes negatively affected the conditions for farming (EEA, 2004b).

### Farmers profile

In contrast with large farm holdings aimed almost exclusively to production functions, small farmer represents a holder of various cultural, social and also ecological values. The farmer is a personalization of historical, material, social and spiritual values of his region. Up to now farmers and their land were able to survive several difficult periods since Second World War, post war restructuralization, socialistic collectivization period and privatization period after political changes in 1989. Without any remarkable financial or legislative stimulation they were able to preserve unique landscape and environmental features, social linkages, traditions and traditional farming practices. On another hand small farmers were social group which was mostly affected by various political and social changes (Fig 3.).



Fig 3.: Endangered species ?

In Slovakia the farmer as a social group was marginalized by forced collectivization and pressed in effacement by communistic ideology. Nowadays he still exists in rural regions together with other social groups established during collectivization or those introduced by urbanization trends. His dominant feature is that he works on his own property which to a large extend determines his relation and linkage to land, animals, village and also other transcendental values. Since this farmer practise his activities on marginal land characterized by unfavorable climatic, soil or topographical conditions, his productivity is rather low and thus his motivation is not strictly monetary oriented.

For better description, the farmer 's profile will be illustrated on following example based on sociological survey and interviews with small farmers from Chlebnice village in Orava region located in northern Slovakia (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Cultural landscape of Chlebnice village

Thus main characteristics describing the life and attitude of small farmer could be summarized into following points (**Ľapajnová, 2001**) :

1. Land ownership – The dominant feature of small farmer is, that he works on land which is his own property and this also determines his relation to the land. The problem which appeared after the forced collectivization resulted to loose of linkages to a land as an economical value. Mean time, ongoing transformation of ownership leads to the fact that people starting to consider the land as material entity. The old system where the value of the land was excluded from economical mechanism is not valid any more. „You care much more if it’s your own...(interview)”
2. Social relations – His land does not represent only the place of work, but also the space for development of social relations, characterized by mutual cooperation between neighbors or family members. Old farmhouses, cottages, heyselters and granaries are being renewed, reconstructed or rebuild for recreational purposes. They become popular place for meetings of families and neighbors. „The family stays together, the kids are use to come and help with work.“. The work of small farmer is mainly the work based on cooperation of whole family (Fig. 5).
3. Environmental attitude – His linkage to the soil is also demonstrated trough the solicitude, which can be defined as “ecological” attitude of small farmer. According to work of Lapka and Gottlieb (2000), the farmer perceives himself as an integral part of ecosystem. On another hand he can’t be perceived only as a farmer-environmentalist, whos main intension is ecological farming or he choose rural lifestyle as an alternative. In village used as an example the farmers can be defined as “traditional”, that means they inherit their “profession” from their fathers. “We elderly, were educated by our fathers... (interview)”. The farmer perceives his land as home, he realizes responsibility towards his property in regard to past and future generations. Therefore he tries to threat the land as good as he can (Fig. 6). “We do know what we put in the soil, we use natural fertilizers, and much less chemicals than in time of cooperative ...(interview)”

4. Work and motivation – It's not strictly material profit which motivates the farmer to do his job. It's approved also by the fact of low soil bonity, unfavorable topographical conditions and small land area owned by one farmer, usually between 3-5 ha. So in case of small farmers used as an example, the farm work represents only additional income. They are not use to high life standards and farm work represents a worthwhile utilization of their spare time. "I don't consider farming as a job, more as a hobby...(interview)"



Fig. 5: Family cooperation



Fig. 6: Cornflower (*Centuria cyanus* L.) – indicator of extensive cultivation practices

## Future perspective

Nowdays, the future of rural community remains on crossroad. It's crossroad of searching for a new ways and further purpose of existence of small and medium size private farms. From production point of view they are replaceable by large farm holdings. In unfavorable climatic and topographic conditions low productivity could be replaced by economically more profitable product import, but in the present, post industrial period the modern agricultural sector should not fulfill only its production functions. The prospering farming in marginal regions must be accompanied with other non-production activities.

One of the problems is also financial stimulation of these regions, since existence of majority of specific "cultural" forms depend on presence of small farmers who represent not only rescuers of traditional management practices but also modern types of ecologist and nature conservationists (**Hrnčiarová, 2004**). The need for measures to prevent high nature value farmland is widely acknowledged. Its conservation is an explicit objective in the framework of EU rural development policy. There are several policy responses aimed to conservation and maintenance of rural landscape:

- Site protection – NATURA 2000 lists natural and semi-natural habitat types which must be maintained in a favorable conservation status
- Common agricultural policy (CAP) – is the most relevant policy framework with regard to conservation of high nature value farmland. Especially the second pillar of the CAP allows member states to implement measures to support environmentally friendly farming systems trough agri-environmental schemes and less favored area payment
- Agri-environmental schemes – support can be granted to farmers for environmentally favorable measures including of conservation of high nature value farmland.
- Less favored areas – farmers in less favored areas are eligible for payments per hectare in addition to conventional CAP support. They will generally increase profitability of farming in marginal areas under natural constrains and thus help to prevent abandonment of countryside.

In June 2005 the council of EU agricultural ministers ratified final version of new instrument for support of rural development from European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD). In this context the Ministry of agriculture of Slovak Republic should start with preparation of new Rural development plan for period 2007-2013. Agro-environmental schemes still remain essential part of rural development strategy. The new element is the payment for farmers managing their land in harmony with nature conservation within NATURA 2000 sites.

Another EU initiative is program LEADER, which is the instrument for support of integrated rural development. This instrument became an integral part of support of rural development from EAFRD. If we compare the results of utilization of SAPARD fund and Sectoral operational program: Agriculture and rural development, we can see that main portion of this support was targeted to most developed regions, big cooperatives and urban centers only small proportion was utilized for benefit rural regions, less developed and less favored areas.

## Conclusion

Reformed CAP represents a new challenge for Slovak agricultural sector on one hand but on another opens a space for broader involvement of environmental concerns as well. Meanwhile, when increasing emphasis is given to infrastructure or industry investments rather than to rural development, it's important to start discussion how all this changes and implementation of new regulations will affect our cultural landscape. Maintenance of traditional cultural landscape is very complex and problematic process, because the existence of these areas depend of extensive management practices, as periodical mowing or grazing. Without this they are highly susceptible to succession changes and loose of their

multifunctional character and biodiversity. Many of them are also affected by intensification processes and anthropic pressures. The well structured agricultural policy can beside the increase of competitiveness and productivity of agricultural sector help to include environmental concerns in management of agricultural land. The well structured policy, preparation and cooperation between scientists, policymakers and local authorities represent just one side of this process. Small farmer, "the man in action", is also essential element, which determines the future existence of our cultural landscape.

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## Summary

### **Who makes the landscape ?: The small farmer perspective**

The main aim of this paper is to focus particular attention to the role of small private farmer, who represents the key element in process of creation and maintenance of most valuable types of cultural or high nature value (HNV) landscape in Slovakia, which to a large extent represent our cultural identity. The farmer acts not only as a rescuer of traditional management practices, the modern type of ecologist and nature conservationists, but he also represents one of the most endangered social groups, which requires our broader attention and support.