The Czech Republic became an official FAO member country in 1993, and has since provided invaluable support to a number of projects and technical cooperation programmes. Since 2002, the Czech Republic has funded an ongoing series of training programmes in the Balkan region to transfer knowledge and best practices on topics ranging from land consolidation to gender disaggregated data, forest management and rural development. The Government has also contributed to several agricultural development and aid programmes in Africa. FAO’s support to the country has centred on capacity building and policy support, particularly during the transitional period preceding and following the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union (EU) in 2004.

Sustainable utilization of abandoned agricultural land

When the Czech Republic integrated into the EU in 2004, several factors led to decreased production and abandonment of agricultural lands. Traditional farmers were confronted with higher competition and further reduced export possibilities, which affected farm income and employment opportunities. The process of land restitution also led to land fragmentation into very small agricultural plots that were not economically viable. Furthermore, during this transition process, land was returned to its original owners or to new owners, which was not always accompanied by the technical support required for these new farmers to effectively turn these lands into agricultural sustainable systems. As a consequence, the land considered “not productive” was abandoned or neglected, resulting in increased land degradation.

Besides the far reaching social and economic implications, the abandonment of agricultural lands further worsens the ecological cover and eco-sustainability because:

- Original plant systems of grass and herb species disappear from poorly or unmanaged areas, replaced by low quality species;
- The gradual dominance of aggressive species with low ecological significance results in decreased biodiversity of the local ecosystems, thus threatening the survival and reproduction of plant and animal species;
- Aggressive weed species expand also in quality agricultural areas: the higher quantity of chemicals applied for weed control increases production costs and further influences land and water quality.

Building capacity through training programmes

The Czech Ministry of Agriculture has been an important partner in FAO’s multi-year programme of workshops, technical guidelines and field projects to help Central and Eastern European countries address land fragmentation and adverse rural conditions. Since 2002, the programme has featured numerous relevant workshops, including:

- Preparing the forest sector in Eastern Europe and Central Asia to meet global challenges
- Rural development in EU-accession countries: Support programmes and capacity building
- Regional workshop on land tenure and land consolidation
- Gender-disaggregated data workshop
- Building partnerships for technology generation, assessment and sharing among western Balkan countries
- The EU rural development programme 2007-13 and its application to land consolidation
- Harmonization of terrestrial carbon measurements in European countries

The programme is receiving funding from the Czech Republic and other partners, and will continue through 2016.

This project provided recommendations and examples of different agricultural systems that could provide increased incomes, quality products, environmental protection and facilitate the process of integration to the EU through the adoption of new, sustainable agricultural grassland and wildlife systems. Improved native grassland species became sources of feed for grazing wildlife.

FAO assisted in promoting the management of this introduced wildlife, from production to consumption. Over the course of the project, four pilot sites were constructed to demonstrate alternative agricultural systems, accompanied by a training model designed for stakeholders to provide environmental support for Czech Republic Ministry of Environment. A group of nearly 160 farmers and 110 technicians were trained on the management of the grassland and wildlife systems, and over 300 participants attended seminars on related topics organized and co-organized by the project staff. Ideas and techniques presented during training and field demonstrations were successfully replicated by many participants, either by extrapolating individual mechanisms from the original model or by adopting it entirely.

CONTACT

Vladimir Rakhmanin
ADG/Regional Representative for Europe and Central Asia
FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia
34 Benczur utca
H-1068 Budapest
Hungary
Tel: +36 1 4612000
E-mail: FAO-RO-Europe@fao.org
Capacity building and communication strategy for the forestry sector

The Czech forestry sector experienced substantial changes over two decades leading up to its accession to the EU. Forests were returned to their original owners, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil associations representing owners and users of forests emerged. A complete overhaul of state forest administration and establishments took place and new forestry policy and legislation was implemented. However, it was clear that national forest policy could prove ineffectual and even have a negative impact unless it was implemented at field level and reflected the everyday life of foresters, forest owners, local administrative officials, and other relevant parties. Furthermore, although field staff were aware of the ongoing changes, they had only received limited training to provide them with the necessary skills and knowledge to deal with these changes.

In order for forest policy to make a difference in the field, foresters needed to be adequately trained and would, in turn, be required to train other stakeholders on policy issues and their implications, such as the rights and responsibilities of private owners and local communities. These policy changes, in combination with the emergence of so many new interest groups in forests (general public, new forest owners, nature lobbies, licensed forest managers) gave rise to the need for effective communication among the different interest groups. All these issues needed to be addressed by implementing activities such as in-service training, capacity-building and public relations/awareness-raising campaigns.

FAO worked with the Government to hold a “training of trainers” programme on communication techniques and participatory approaches. A strategy document was developed to garner enhanced active public involvement in forest management and to build support for forest service policy. FAO also spearheaded an awareness-raising campaign for the communication strategy on forestry issues, which involved creating an experimental forestry information trail. The objectives of the trail were to evaluate the needs and effectiveness of the communication strategy; achieve sustained, interactive communication between foresters and the local public in the region; and provide information about forests and their multiple benefits.

Restoring livelihoods for youth in Dadaab refugee camp

By the year 2009, Dadaab refugee camp hosted a population of about 250,000 people mainly of Somali origin. Among this population, the youths between the ages of 12 and 17 made up an average of 16 percent of the population in all the camps situated in Dadaab. Lack of basic livelihood, agricultural and life skills kept them in the vicious cycle of food insecurity, malnutrition, violence and disease that threatened their livelihoods. Child malnutrition rates in the refugee camps and immediate host communities were estimated at 18 percent, and micronutrient deficiency rates at over 60 percent.

This Czech Republic-funded project adopted the Junior Farmers and Field School (JFFLS) approach to improving livelihoods of youth, and their parents and guardians within communities in Dadaab refugee camp and its environs. The strength of the JFFLS approach is its unique learning methodology and curriculum, which combines agricultural, life and entrepreneurship skills in an experiential and participatory learning approach uniquely suited to rural communities and low literacy levels. The specific tasks of this projects included:

1. Providing complimentary food through consolidation of JFFLS activities in Dadaab refugee camp for 1,500 vulnerable youths;
2. Building the capacity of 50 agricultural and life skills facilitators in the JFFLS methodologies to run the JFFLS;
3. Imparting agricultural skills to orphans and vulnerable children and their parents/guardians to enhance food security and improve livelihoods;
4. Imparting life skills to deal with gender related issues such as gender based violence (GBV), child labour and abuse, and confidence building among participants;
5. Promoting nutrition and health education among orphans and vulnerable children, guardians and their respective host communities by establishing vegetable kitchen gardens; and
6. Building capacity for improvement and conservation of the environment.

The project outcomes were numerous:

- Five conventional JFFLS gardens measuring 10 m x 10 m were established and formed the learning grounds for the participants. JFFLS participants continued replicating these plots in 150 households contributing to food security at the household level.
- 15 teachers (ten male and five female) from participating schools were selected and trained as JFFLS facilitators to spearhead the implementation of the project.
- 150 most vulnerable children (75 female and 75 male) in the age range of 12–19 years were taught agricultural skills.
- Trained facilitators in collaboration with other extension workers conducted life skills training sessions for JFFLS members and pupils in the participating schools. A total of 2,640 pupils were reached with trainings that covered: basic agriculture, health, hygiene, HIV and AIDS, gender equality, child rights, soil and water conservation, among other topics.
- Field based nutrition and cookery demonstrations were conducted for JFFLS members and their parents/guardians to illustrate the nutritional values of vegetables and how to prepare them for meals.
- Some 800 tree seedlings were planted in the participating schools, among other JFFLS environment conservation dissemination activities.