Estonia and FAO
Partnering to achieve sustainability in agriculture

Estonia has been an important partner since joining the Organization after independence in 1991. In 2012, Estonia became an FAO donor for the first time, signing an agreement to facilitate funding for the Organization’s development programme. Since 2013, the Ministry of Rural Affairs of Estonia has played a leading role in the organization of the Agroforum Mare Balticum, which brings together the Agriculture Ministers from the Baltic Sea and Eastern Neighbourhood countries and includes a high-level representation from FAO. Additionally, the country has shown strong valuable interest in advancing the goals of the South-South Cooperation programme.

Key agricultural research institutions

Agricultural research plays an important role in the implementation of Estonia’s agricultural policy. Therefore, the Ministry of Rural Affairs supports agricultural research and development, and implements the results at the practical business level in many ways. It finances scientific analyses to inform political decisions, ensures the knowledge-based functioning of government authorities, helps to raise the level of knowledge and professional training, and provides consultation and research-based applications necessary for successful management. Alternative farmers services are also promoted. Managed and administrated by the Ministry of Agriculture, institutions involved in agricultural research include the Estonian Crop Research Institute, the Estonian University of Life Sciences, Tallinn University of Technology, and the University of Tartu.

Agriculture and rural livelihoods

Agriculture is just one livelihood activity for rural inhabitants in Estonia, who also run handicraft and amusement farms, develop rural tourism, and run mushrooms production businesses. The number of Estonians involved in agriculture and their relative share in the population has gradually decreased, reflecting a broader European trend. In order to support rural populations, the European Union has provided for a substantial increase in the relative share of alternatives activities under its Common Agricultural Policy. These activities offer farmers new or complementary income-earning opportunities.

Estonian Rural Development Plan 2014-2020

The 2014-2020 Estonian Rural Development Plan aims to raise the competitiveness of agriculture, improve the sustainable management of natural resources, strengthen action against climate change, and ensure the balanced development of rural areas. The plan identifies six priorities as a basis for the programming of rural resources across the board:

- Improving knowledge transfer and innovation in the agriculture and forestry sector and rural areas
- Improving the viability of agricultural holdings and the competitiveness of all agricultural concerns and promoting innovative agricultural technologies and sustainable forest management
- Promoting the organization of food chains in agriculture, including the processing and marketing of agricultural products, animal welfare, and risk management
- Restoring, preserving and improving agricultural and forestry ecosystems
- Promoting resource efficiency and supporting the transition to a low-CO₂ emission and climate-resilient economy in agriculture, food and forestry sectors
- Promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and rural economic development

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Out of the 18,000 rural undertakings, one third relate to agricultural production. Considering the difficulties for small producers to be successful on the agricultural market, diversification and expansion have been important for enhancing competitiveness. Diversification of rural activities has been a target since 2004 when Estonia acceded to the EU.

With a view to contributing to the harmonious and integrated development of rural areas as well as developing rural entrepreneurship, the Ministry of Rural Affairs is coordinating Estonia’s rural development policy, implementing the Common Agricultural Policy, and formulating and implementing the Estonian Rural Development Plans.

**Supporting countries in the region**

Estonia’s current development cooperation strategy centres on three objectives: i) reducing global poverty and human development in developing countries; ii) supporting peace and stability; iii) providing support in the field of global trade networks and agriculture. During the period 2016-2020, Estonian cooperation will focus on supporting EU integration and reforms in Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, as well as Armenia and Belarus. In addition, Estonia has become increasingly interested in trilateral projects, with several initiatives already being implemented in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia in cooperation with Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Canada and the United Kingdom.

As part of the country’s interest in promoting agricultural and rural development in Europe and Central Asia, Estonia is supporting the organization of a Thematic Discussion to be held at FAO’s Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia later this year. The purpose of the event is to provide partner countries and the European Commission with an overview of the main challenges and priorities for the agriculture and rural sectors of countries in the Balkans, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and Central Asia. Special emphasis will be given to identifying the most efficient ways to channel financial support, ensuring synergies and coordination among donors.

**Agroforum Mare Balticum**

Agroforum Mare Balticum IV took place in Tartu from 19 to 21 April. This year, environmentally smart agriculture was the main issue for discussion. The aim of environmentally smart agriculture is to increase yield per unit of land to meet today’s needs without exceeding current resources or reducing the resources needed for the future, while achieving sustainable intensification via smart agricultural practices.

It is crucial to determine the balance between intensification and environmental sustainability in contemporary agriculture. To discuss this issue the Estonian University of Life Sciences (EMU) and Agricultural University of Sankt Petersburg together with the Estonian Ministry of Rural Affairs has convened an international forum to bring together all stakeholders involved in agricultural development – policy makers, entrepreneurs and scientists – from all the Baltic Sea countries as well as from Eastern Partnership countries.

The forum is quite unique, since it provides an opportunity for group discussions in roundtables and intergroup communication followed up by dissemination of information by reliable sector-specific organizations to the wider public.

**Reopening salmon migration routes**

From August 2003 to July 2005, an FAO project in Estonia sought to increase national awareness of the importance of the restoration of salmon and sea trout populations through natural reproduction. Increased natural reproduction was needed to ensure stable and viable salmonid populations, to be sustainably used for the benefit of the country’s local economy. The project was specifically designed to assist the Government in restoring the migration routes of Baltic salmon and sea trout through Estonian rivers. Beneficiaries of the project included government officials; national experts from institutes and universities; engineers; and staff of non-governmental organizations, all of whom received specific training on fisheries management aspects leading to improved long-term and environmentally sustainable development and utilization of aquatic resources. The project raised awareness about the designs available for passing fish upstream and downstream at different obstacles, inter alia through a study tour to Germany and France. Sound fisheries management improves the socio-economic situation of the rural population, as salmonid population growth contributes to food security. It also means higher and/or increasingly diversified income of the rural poor by boosting the supply of animal-based protein and providing income-generating opportunities.

“Sustainable agriculture is crucial for future food security.”
José Graziano da Silva, FAO Director-General