

Land consolidation and rural development in Serbia

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1. Introduction

Unlike many other countries in transition, Serbia has a long tradition in land consolidation. The main aim of this activity has mostly been estate consolidation. The first consolidations were done on the territory of today's Vojvodina as early as 1848 under the laws of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Works on land consolidation in central Serbia started for the first time only after World War II. Long after 1945 it was considered that land consolidation is a capitalist measure that leads to the strengthening of private property. In order to prevent further parcel fragmentation, however, land consolidation began to be implemented in 1956. The initiators of this consolidation were large farms in the social sector and its aim was the grouping of socially-owned land.

It was only in 1974, when the Law regulating land consolidation works was adopted, that consolidation began to be implemented in the wider territory of Serbia. In this period, it was mostly compulsory consolidation that was being implemented in Serbia. Consolidation works were completely suspended in 1998 because the price of works was several times higher than the price of land itself.

Apart from the fact that a lot has been done on compulsory consolidation, which is a successful model for resolving the issue of rural communities, the results were not satisfactory, primarily due to the fact that the emphasis of consolidation has exclusively been on increasing agricultural production and not on integrated rural development. The latest data represent a serious warning. Namely, 674 villages or 15% of the total of 4,528 villages in Serbia are populated by people who are over 50 years old on the average. As many as 327 villages or 7.5% of the total number are inhabited by people whose average age is over 60. In 191 villages or 4.3% there are no inhabitants who are under twenty. Unless serious measures are undertaken, at least a thousand villages will disappear in Serbia in the next fifteen years. Village life cannot improve if its citizens are exclusively involved in agriculture. Other economic and service activities must be developed, which will secure the creation of new jobs and the employment of workers in villages. Land consolidation is a very successful instrument that can be used for rural development and as such it should provide:

- Improvement of rural living conditions and not only the improvement of primary agricultural production

- Renewal of villages by permanent economic and political development of the community and the protection and permanent management of natural resources
- Active and democratic participation
- Assistance to villages in order to define the new use of community resources and appropriate spatial rearrangement
- Connection between the elements of rural development and the elements of wider regional development including connections between rural and urban areas

2. Current activities

Realization of the Pilot Project for Land Consolidation (TCP/YUG/3001) in Serbia is ongoing. (The Project was prepared with support of FAO experts, and funded by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). It has three main objectives:

- Preparation of the Proposal for the national strategy for land consolidation.
- Realization of the land consolidation pilot project.
- Capacity building for the land consolidation implementation.

Three models of land consolidation are proposed within this Strategy:

- Simple voluntary consolidation.
- Consolidation as part of an investment project (construction of highways, etc).
- Comprehensive compulsory consolidation.

These consolidation models are based on the contemporary principles of land consolidation and are the most appropriate for our conditions and needs. Which of these three models will be applied in a specific situation depends on the given requirements and restrictions. For each of these models to be successfully implemented it is necessary that it be based on the new concept that involves a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach and the fusion of elements of agricultural development and rural development. Development plans on the local level and plans for the use of land should serve as a basis for land consolidation. Consolidation should and must provide that a democratic principle is applied regarding the participation of all stakeholders. It must be ruled by mutual interests. The basic elements of a new concept for proposed land consolidation models in Serbia should be:

- Distribution of responsibilities.
- Beneficiaries' participation.
- Land consolidation as the sale and purchase of land.
- Connecting land consolidation with rural development.
- Connecting land consolidation with restitution and privatization.
- Connecting land consolidation with land registration.

Recognizing key elements of a new land consolidation concept, each consolidation model should be comprised of four phases: (Figure 1):

- Preparatory phase
- Decision-making phase
- Negotiations and planning phase
- Implementation phase

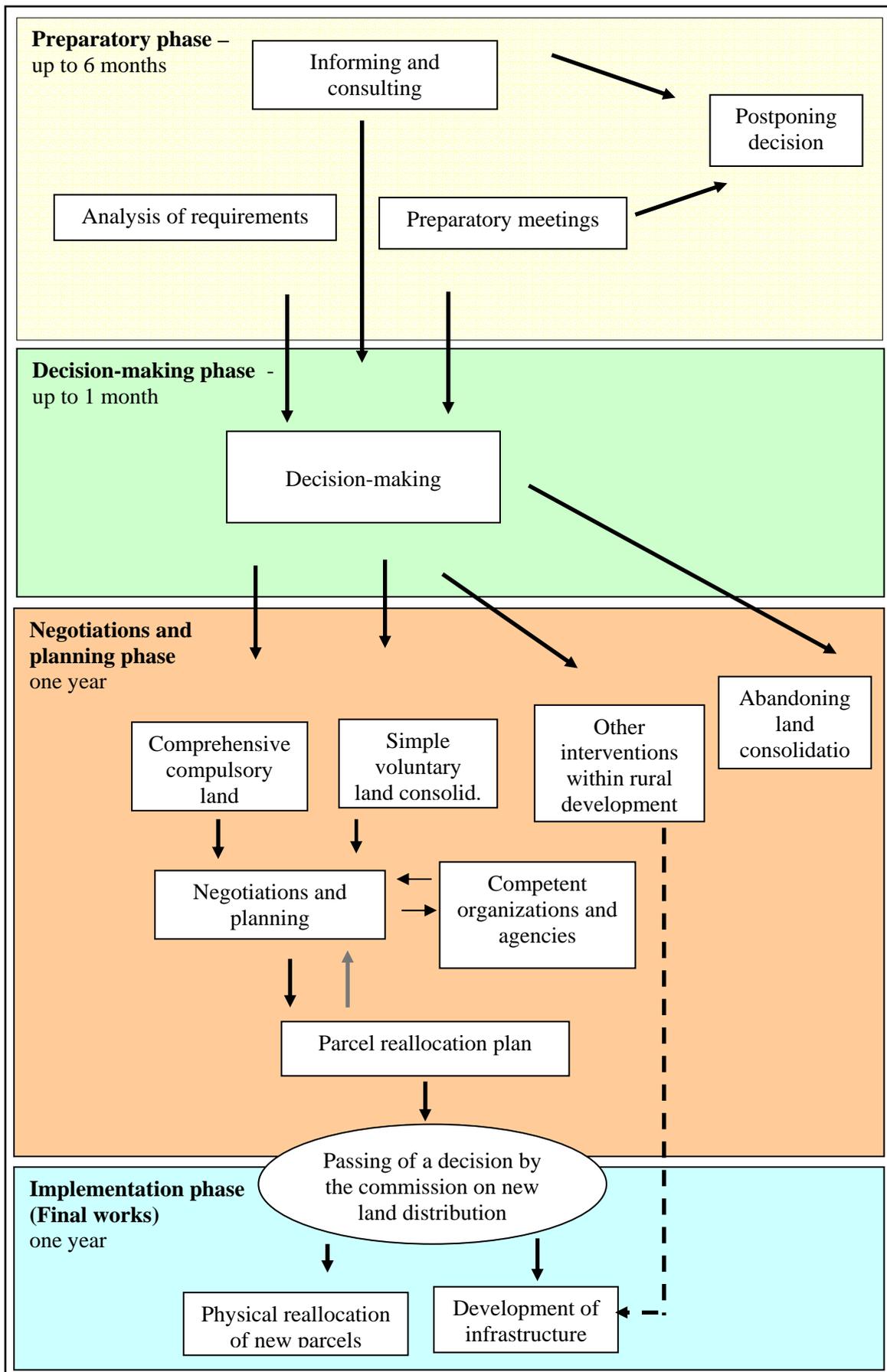


Figure 1: Phases of land consolidation activities

In the preparatory phase, apart from providing information to rural population and analysis of all the challenges rural community is faced with, a decision would be made whether land consolidation is an adequate response or if some other measures for the improvement of the environment concerned need to be taken.

The negotiations and planning phase represents the most important phase after the decision on commencing the land consolidation activities. In this phase negotiations would be held with every single owner and a temporary parcel reallocation and other required plans would be a result of iterative procedure. This phase would be closed after a decision on a new land reallocation has been passed by the land consolidation commission. In the implementation phase, new holding would be physically handed over to those taking part in land consolidation and its new status would be registered in the real property cadastre.

The Strategy emphasizes that land consolidation should be instrument for realization of many public projects as:

- Support to village based agro-processing
- Building local infrastructure
- Enlargement of urban zone
- Building of agricultural and local roads
- Protection of environment
- Building and renewal of irrigation channels
- Building and renewal of drainage canals
- Protection from erosion

In order to successfully implement land consolidation it is very important to establish division of responsibilities between participants. Very important for the implementation process is the question - who will have full responsibility for land consolidation. In the Draft Strategy for Land Consolidation in the Republic of Serbia, it is recommended that full legal responsibility and leading role should have Agriculture Land Administration (organization formed by the Ministry of agriculture, forestry and water management). The proposal of organization between key participants, from republic level, local level, beneficiaries and Organization for land consolidation implementation is presented in figure 2.

Experience that we got during the realization of the Pilot Project of Simple Voluntary Land Consolidation in the cadastral municipality Velika Mostanica, is showing us that implementation of this model should follow next steps:

- *Preliminary research* – Need assessment and possibilities of potential participants in land consolidation, as well as assessment of social, economic and environment possibilities of selected community, assessment of present state of cadastral data.
- *Organizing workshops* – Informing inhabitants in local community and motivating them for participation in land consolidation through presentations and discussions.
- *Organizing survey* – Collection of necessary information regarding farmers, land consolidation participants as well as their land. For this survey we used special questionnaire.
- *Preparation of Plan 1* – Preparing list of all participants for land consolidation and identification of their parcels on the cadastral plan, on the basis of the implemented survey.

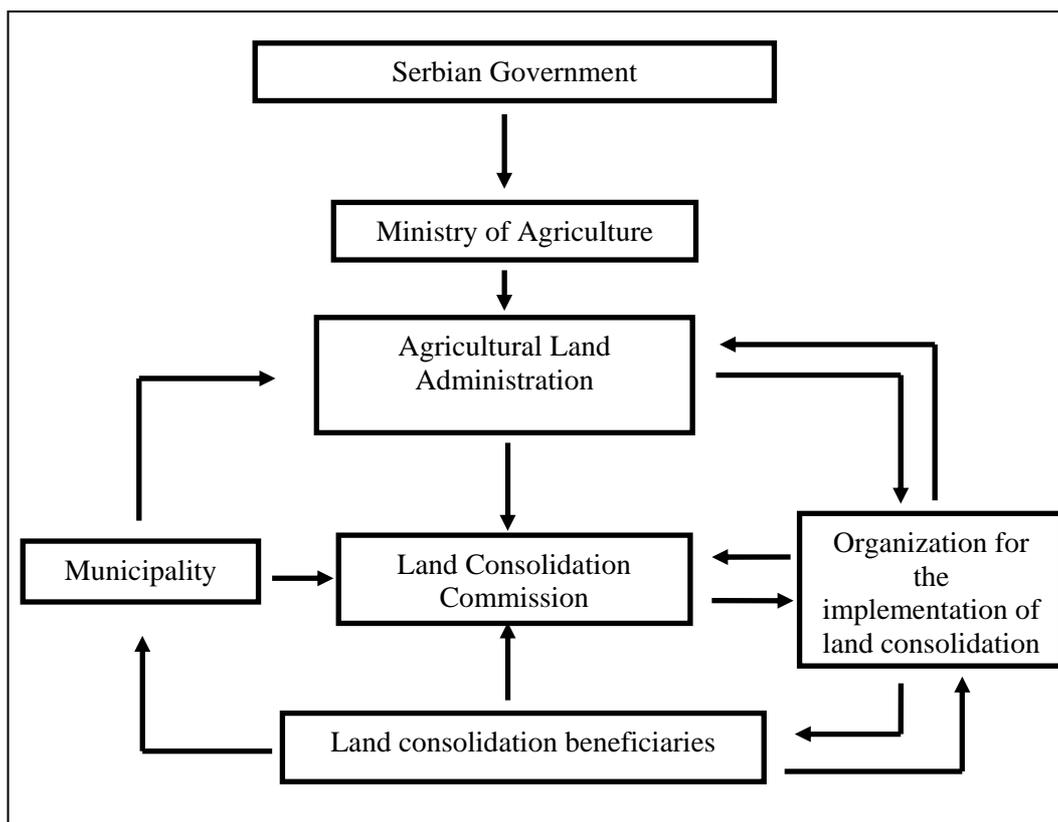


Figure 2: Organizational chart of land consolidation

- *Negotiation with every participant in land consolidation* - Detailed discussion and collection of information and wishes of participants in land consolidation.
- *Preparing map of wishes for land consolidation participants*
- *Preparing plan of land consolidation* – It is formed on the basis of map of wishes of all participants in land consolidation and on the realistic possibilities of consolidation.
- *Preparation of contracts for all agreed transactions.*
- *Legalization of all agreed transactions from the Commission for land consolidation.*

3. Conclusion

Land consolidation is important instrument for agriculture and rural development of every country. For Serbia, and other transition countries, it has even bigger importance, because it represents part of the political, economic and social reconstruction. The Pilot Project (Support to the preparation of a national land consolidation strategy and a land consolidation pilot project in Serbia, TCP/YUG/3001, FAO), which is already in the phase of realization, will help Serbia in developing new institutional and legal framework and start a new phase of land consolidation.

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