

EU best practices for land consolidation

A case study from Serbia

Project name	Strengthening Municipal Land Management
Commissioned by	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Project region	Seven pilot municipalities in South East Serbia
Lead executing agency	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management (MAFWM)
Duration	2013 - 2015

The challenge

The fragmentation of agricultural land is one of the major problems of Serbia's agricultural sector. Compared to the EU countries, Serbia's agricultural holdings are highly fragmented and their production is less efficient. Average parcels sizes in South East Serbia amount to less than 0.30 ha and many parcels are not accessible by roads or tracks. Experience from other European countries suggests that investing in land consolidation, although costly, can have high returns.

The benefits of such a program include consolidated properties, better infrastructure, accurate property registers and cadastral maps, increased market values for properties, increased investments, production and employment, higher tax revenues and better rural conditions.



Fragmented parcels in Paraćin

In the past, Serbia has conducted a large number of land consolidation projects, predominantly in the Northern region (Vojvodina), a highly productive area in the Danube basin. In order to achieve high productivity, large areas of bush, shrub

and trees have been cleared, swamps have been drained and high amounts of pesticides and fertilizers have been and still are applied. This led to degraded and imbalanced ecosystems and a loss of biodiversity. Applying these practices in the south, which is still rich in biodiversity, would contradict current EU practices as stated for example in Flora and Fauna Habitat Regulations, Natura 2000 and others. Serbia has now started negotiations for EU accession, and faces the challenge to comply with EU standards and regulations, which emphasize sustainable agricultural production in balanced ecosystems.

Our approach

The project closely cooperates with the Serbian Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management (MAFWM), in particular with the Directorate for Agricultural Lands (DAL). It is funded by the European Union (2.8 million EUR), the German Government (1 million EUR) and MAFWM (0.1 million EUR). The Serbian Republic Geodetic Authority (RGA) and the local governments are involved as well, in particular those of seven pilot municipalities.

The project operates at local and national level. At national level, the project supports the review of the current legal framework according to EU best practices. At local level, several EU standards are tested within the work flows in land consolidation projects in seven pilot municipalities. Based on experience gained from that process, legal documents (revised laws, new bylaws and regulations) as well as improved administrative procedures will be elaborated. Change of laws and regulations also require a change in administrative structures and processes as well as improving administrative capacities. For that purpose, capacity building measures and the development of training manuals and PR materials will help improve the understanding of the newly applied approaches.



L. to r.: Identification of natural assets within the pilot area; Discussion with farmers on economic gains of land consolidation.

Selected EU best practices

The following EU best practices have been prioritized for Serbia and are stepwise introduced and tested with the support of national and international experts:

- Active participation of the involved farmers and other stakeholders to ensure a fair and transparent process. In order to strengthen the role of land owners, a board of participants is created in each land consolidation area, and procedures for hearings and complaints are established.
- Preparation of a plan for common and public facilities with landscape development plan. This introduces an environmental assessment as part of land consolidation and the implementation of environmental compensatory measures.
- Introduction of additional checks and balances on local and national level.
- Elaboration of a vision and strategy in order to contribute towards a municipal and regional economic development strategy.

Capacity Development

New approaches require also a shift in value systems and an increased awareness. Therefore the project offers a number of capacity development measures. A study tour to Germany was organised to provide an insight on how EU member states implement land consolidation and to ensure an exchange of experiences (peer-to-peer learning approach), to discuss challenges and to develop solutions. Particular interest was raised on the plan on common facilities and environmental compensatory measures. The study tour group comprised staff from DAL, RGA and staff from each pilot municipality.

Programs for land consolidation for each of the seven pilot municipalities have been established and their implementation has started including the testing of the selected EU best practices. A high level of participation and dialogue with all stakeholders has already been achieved. Training materials on the revised land consolidation process, including environmental assessments, have been elaborated and trainings have started for the land consolidation commission and the board of participants. Furthermore, a discussion on establishing a body for supervision of the work and performance of the land consolidation commissions has been initiated. It is expected that as a result of the land consolidation process the average parcel size will grow by at least 40% and will significantly reduce the costs for agricultural production.

Conclusion

The project has just started to implement land consolidation in all pilot municipalities. The new approach with focus on participation and inclusion of EU best practices is widely accepted by the involved actors as well as by the participants in the pilot municipalities. Many farmers have learnt that land consolidation is the entry point in producing more efficiently and becoming active entrepreneurs ready to compete in the European market.

Land consolidation will continue to be a task for generations in Serbia. After improving the legal framework based on the experiences gained, implementation of land consolidation schemes will be possible at a larger scale and within a wider municipal and regional development strategy. The pace with which land consolidation will be implemented in the future highly depends on the available resources, in particular in view of staff for conducting the land consolidation process and sufficient funding to improve the required rural infrastructure. This project lays the groundwork for future land consolidation in Serbia according to EU standards.

Achievements

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