

Land consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe: Moving to the next challenges of capacity building

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The concept of land consolidation as a tool to improve rural conditions is now becoming widely accepted in Central and Eastern Europe. Extensive fragmentation of rural lands adds to the difficulties that farmers of the region have in competing with farmers of western Europe, and land consolidation is now recognized as a useful way to address the problems arising from such fragmentation. Moreover, land consolidation is being seen as an important part of rural development projects which are impacted by the large number of small and fragmented farms.

Recognition of the potential role of land consolidation in rural development has come relatively recently. During the 1990s, attention was focused on the “first wave” of land reform, i.e. privatization and restitution and the accompanying tasks of building land registration systems to protect land rights. It was only towards the end of the 1990s that the problems of fragmentation made their way onto the agenda, and even then, many people argued that land markets would provide the solution. The experience, however, has been that while land markets can play a role in reducing fragmentation, they are not sufficient by themselves.

Building capacity for pilot projects

Starting in 2000, FAO began to document the problems of land fragmentation in the region. There was early recognition that while the experiences of western Europe were valuable, they could not provide all the answers. Land consolidation in western Europe takes place within programmes that operate under stable financial management, whereas the immediate problem faced by transition countries was how to take the first steps.

FAO, together with its partners, embarked on a multi-year programme to assist countries in the region to develop responses to their problems of fragmentation and adverse rural conditions. This programme comprises three interrelated components:

- a series of workshops – the Czech Ministry of Agriculture has been an important partner to FAO, and has supported three workshops in Prague (2002, 2005, and 2006);
- a series of technical publications; and
- pilot projects.

The workshops have provided a forum for specialists from different countries to meet one another and to develop a peer network. The initial workshops identified the need for information on how to start land consolidation activities in a country. In response, FAO, together with its partners from a number of countries, prepared guidelines on the design of land consolidation pilot projects, and a companion manual on the operations of such projects. Subsequent workshops served to disseminate these guidelines, along with other FAO documents on topics such as leasing.

Land consolidation

At one level, land consolidation is about making changes on the ground. There is great variation in the scope of land consolidation projects, but possible changes may include:

- Improving the tenure structure in rural areas:
 - the creation of farms with fewer parcels, but which are larger and better shaped for agricultural production, by addressing the effect of fragmented farms;
 - the creation of larger farms by allowing some farmers to acquire the parcels of others who decide to exit from farming, and/or to acquire parcels from the public land reserve.
- Improving the physical conditions of individual parcels:
 - land levelling;
 - soil improvement measures.
- Improving the physical infrastructure that serves the parcels:
 - irrigation and drainage systems;
 - rural roads.
- Improving the rural environment:
 - the change of land use patterns especially in areas endangered by soil erosion or frequent floods, e.g. by converting agriculturally inferior land into forests or wetlands;
 - the construction of roads to suit the landscape;
 - the restoration of water bodies, often with buffer zones;
 - the protection of wetlands.
- Improving the living and working conditions of farmers and others in the community:
 - the provision of adequate land for new houses, workplaces, recreational use, etc;
 - the renovation of unused buildings (often previously used for agricultural purposes) and their conversion to other social and commercial uses.

(Such "village renewal" might not be considered as "land consolidation" but it is becoming part of an integrated process in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands.)

At another level, land consolidation is about making changes to:

- The agricultural sector through the creation of more competitive agricultural production arrangements.
- Rural conditions through more efficient multiple use of rural space by balancing the interests of agriculture, landscape and environmental protection, recreation and transportation. This is occurring in modern land consolidation practices in Western Europe, and through co-financing under the EU Rural Development Programme.

At yet another level, land consolidation is about making broader societal changes regarding property:

- Land consolidation can be viewed as the "second" wave of land reform in Central and Eastern Europe, the "first" wave being the transition from socialist property to private property. Land consolidation is about re-organizing the results of privatization projects.
- The approach to land consolidation is about a conceptual shift to investing in incentives to encourage changes in behaviour, rather than relying on enforcements. It is also about a shift towards a "service-orientation" in government land agencies.
- Demographic factors will increasingly influence these broader societal changes. Rural populations are declining because of rural-to-urban migration. Rural populations are also aging, and a number of beneficiaries of the land reforms are no longer able to work the land, or have died. Changes to the population will affect the changes to the way in which the land is owned and used.

The foundation of workshops and technical documents has allowed several countries to initiate activities in land consolidation. FAO is currently working with Armenia, Hungary, Lithuania and Serbia in the introduction of land consolidation activities, and is providing technical advice to projects in other countries that are funded by other donors. The FAO projects generally aim to assist in the development of a national strategy for land consolidation in a country, and to gain experience in the design and implementation of land consolidation activities in a community. These projects have been structured around training workshops that are held at strategic points in the implementation. FAO has produced training

materials for these workshops, based on the early experiences with land consolidation. In this way, the experiences of countries that have already started with land consolidation are being made available to other countries that are just beginning. It is anticipated that these training materials will be revised based on the experiences of additional projects.

Land consolidation workshops of FAO and its partners

- 2002 Munich Symposium
- 2002 Rome Workshop
- 2002 Prague Regional Workshop
- 2004 Tonder Workshop
- 2005 Prague Regional Workshop
- 2006 Prague Regional Workshop

Land consolidation and related documents prepared by FAO together with its partners

- "The design of land consolidation pilot projects in Central and Eastern Europe" (FAO Land Tenure Studies 6)
- "Operational manual for land consolidation pilot projects in Central and Eastern Europe" (FAO Land Tenure Manuals 1)
- "FAO land tenure training materials on land consolidation pilot projects"
- "Good practice guidelines to agricultural leasing arrangements" (FAO Land Tenure Studies 2)
- "Leasing agricultural land" (FAO Land Tenure Notes 1)
- "A short introduction to microregional planning"

Electronic versions of some FAO documents on land tenure can be obtained from:

http://www.fao.org/sd/IN1_en.htm

http://www.fao.org/sd/LTdirect/ltstudies_en.htm

http://www.fao.org/regional/seur/MRP_en.pdf

The papers and presentations of the 2005 Prague Regional Workshop on Land Consolidation can be obtained from:

http://www.fao.org/regional/seur/events/landcons/landcons_en.htm

Building capacity to manage several projects simultaneously

Compared with the situation in 1999, considerable progress has been made in building capacity in several countries of the region to:

- develop a national framework or strategy for land consolidation, in preparation for a national policy and legislation on land consolidation; and
- to design and implement pilot projects.

It is clear that capacity building is not yet complete in these areas. Most countries have not yet obtained all the answers necessary before they can proceed with the development of a national policy and legislation on land consolidation. In addition, an initial pilot project may not have answered all questions of design and implementation, and there may be a need to have other projects in areas of different environmental or socio-economic conditions. But it is also clear that in a number of countries the level of understanding of the issues of getting pilot activities started is considerably greater than it was just a few years ago. It can be anticipated that additional countries will similarly make significant progress during the next few years.

As countries have progressed with their pilot activities, the next challenges have emerged. One important issue is building capacity to design and implement more than one land

consolidation project at a time. In the pilot projects, it has been possible (even if not always easy) to find people who can be used as team leaders and specialists to carry out the land consolidation activities in one community, or perhaps a few communities. The next step after the pilot project phase will be to simultaneously implement a number of projects in different communities. Finding the financial resources for these projects is only one challenge. A major challenge will be finding people with the management and technical skills needed for these projects. It is one thing to find a good team to work on one project; it is quite another to find five or ten such teams.

The development of national training courses will be important if countries are to train sufficient people for the projects to be implemented. What should land consolidation planners/designers know about land consolidation if they are to have responsibility for managing a project and planning the re-allotment of land parcels in a community? How will they get the required information? How will courses be taught? What material should be in these courses? How long should these courses be? How will they be funded? Who will provide them?

The 2006 Prague workshop will provide an opportunity for people to discuss these and other questions, and to think of what training courses should be introduced in their countries.