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## **Rural Development in the Baltic States**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In order to review rural development thinking in the Baltic Republics due cognizance must be taken of the historical significance of radical political and policy change. This paper confines itself to periods of change in this century. This brief review of rural history of the Baltic republics raises ones awareness of the effect of political ideology, policy frameworks, economic environment and social infrastructure, on the rural economies and societies of the Baltic Republics. Since independence in 1991 from the USSR, all three Baltic republics have been somewhat preoccupied with land reform which aims to return land collectivized under the Soviet system to the original owners. It has emerged that rural based societies have found it difficult to understand this process, with future policy issues such as direct support for agriculture debated at national and international level. Furthermore the future development of the socio-economic structure of these rural areas require the advancement of an economic, social and cultural infrastructure which will not only support the new private farming structure but in an integrated manner promote greater economic diversity and enterprising initiative based on indigenous resources.

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The economies of the Baltic Republics have been radically transformed over the last fifty years, shifting from that of a predominately agricultural nations typified by a rural populace to an industrialized one in an increasingly urbanized society. Latvia's rural population dropped from 68.2 per cent of the total in 1935 to 28.9 per cent in 1989, demographic trends in Estonia are similar with a rural population of 28.2 per cent in 1989. Lithuania is the most rural Baltic state with 31.2 per cent of the population living in rural areas.

It was during the inter-war period (1919–1939) that these Baltic states enjoyed political independence and economic and social progress. During this period the private family farm prevailed throughout Lithuanian

villages. Approximately 385,000 individual farmsteads existed each with its own (in the end of the period) settlement system, patriarchal family, particular ethno-culture and traditional peasant mentality. This particular composition in turn influenced the spiritual and material culture which was prevalent at this time. Agriculture was the main branch of the Lithuanian economy. It satisfied internal market needs and contributed to over 80 per cent of export income (26 per cent – meat, 40 per cent of milk products and 80 per cent of flax was exported). According to the amount of exported production, Great Britain absorbed 39.4 per cent, Germany 26.8 per cent and the Soviet Union 5.7 per cent. Lithuania was also positioned sixth on the world market for butter exports [1].

During this period the development of the Estonian rural economy was based on a radical land reform bill, which redistributed the land and inventory of the manors to the people on the land. This produced a lessening of social tensions thereby encouraging the stabilization of society. This resulted in doubling the number of private farms to 56,203 in 1920. The total number of private farms in Estonia in 1939 was 140,000. Specialization in butter and bacon production increased, these products made a major contribution to exports destined mainly for British and German markets. During the 1930s grain production increased based on the cultivation of the productive land and also as a consequence of extensive soil improvement programmes. In the beginning of the 1920s more attention was paid to developing the domestic market, a process which was facilitated by the completion of the rail network. The world-wide depression ended in Estonia in 1931. A period of rapid recovery began in 1934 assisted by government participation in the economy. These development efforts resulted in general economic and social progress within rural areas [2].

By 1914 Latvian peasants had repurchased 40 per cent of agricultural land in Latvia. The large estates still however occupied 60 per cent of the land, 48 per cent of which belonged to landlords (majority of whom were Baltic Germans), and 10 per cent of which were state owned [3].

Radical land reform began two years after proclamation of political independence, on November 18, 1918 and was finally completed in 1937. During 1920–1924 legislation was adopted which provided for the expropriation of the land of the estates and the formation of a state land fund. 52 per cent of land, within the land fund, remained the property of the state, including forests, lakes and the land which was not used in agriculture. The remainder was distributed to the claimants of land which subsequently promoted the rapid growth of peasant farms. In 1923, 35,981 new farms were established, escalating to 69,000 in 1929 and 146,400 farms at the conclusion of land reform in 1937. The average area of these new farms was 22 ha.

Land reform demanded huge investments from the state (approx. 700 million lats), although this investment was considered productive. Growth

in the number of farms enlarged the total area of arable land which stood at 1.7 million ha before 1914, and 2.1 million ha in 1935. Better tilling of the land and the successful application of scientific achievements continuously raised the yield per ha, in many instances increasing by 30 per cent to 40 per cent relative to the pre-war period.

The soil and climate in Latvia are favourable for dairy and livestock breeding. During this period these branches continued to develop a consequence of the planned selection of animals and the importation of better selected animals which subsequently improved the quality of the herd. The number of cattle increased by 40 per cent, the number of pigs by about 70 per cent and productivity increased by approximately 50 per cent relative to the pre 1913 era. Dairy farming proved especially good with the average milk yield of the Latvian brown standing at 2,598 kg and 3.9 per cent fat in 1915 and increasing to 3,279 kg and 4.2 per cent fat by 1939.

Latvia ranked 4th in Europe among the countries exporting milk and meat products following Denmark, Holland and Sweden. As a butter exporter Latvia was third only to Denmark and Holland [4].

Alterations to the social structure of society took place as an essential result of land reform. 39 per cent of the total number of rural inhabitants and members of their families were the proprietors of land while 61 per cent were landless peasants in 1897. In contrast in 1930, 77 per cent were proprietors and only 23 per cent were classified as landless peasants [5]. The collectivization of land during the period 1947/49 to 1990 drastically changed this early twentieth century Latvian farm structure [6].

## COLLECTIVIZATION

In Lithuania from the beginning of the Soviet occupation, the settlement structure of farming and its associated social structure was largely destroyed in accordance with the ideal of a unified Soviet Union. In the summer of 1940 the stratification system within farming collapsed with the economic and physical liquidation of large and medium land owners. On June 14, 1941, the planned deportation of wealthy farmers to the more thinly populated regions of the Soviet Union began. This process was however interrupted during World War Two with German occupation, but was however revised following the war. Private land ownership was restricted to 20 ha and obligations to sell agricultural produce at a low cost was introduced.

In 1948 the collectivization process was intensified resulting in the collectivization of 98.9 per cent of the former 392,400 private farms by 1953. The reason for collectivization was political as opposed to economic. The regime sought the subjugation of independent farm owners into obedient

workers, the weakening of the village structure and the dilution of the national culture. State/collective farms and enterprises were established through political and economic violence including the exile of the more powerful farmers from Lithuania. The latter aroused national resistance and opposition for over a decade.

Agricultural development was severely disrupted, experiencing overall decline for a significant period of time. In 1953, harvested crops were three times less than before the war. It was only in the 60's that the pre-war level of productivity was attained. By 1965 the pre war level of productivity was exceeded by 1.5 times. Since 1965 agriculture has received further concessions with increased prices, debt write-off, improved land reclamation works greater use of mineral fertilizers and greater supply of energy. Despite such improvements the level of agricultural growth was rather slow. On the eve of agrarian reform gross agricultural output was 2.4 times greater than its pre war level. 67.4 per cent of gross agricultural output came from the public sector (46.1 per cent from collective farms and 16.8 per cent from state farms), with the remainder obtained from domestic private production.

Despite the constraints of the Soviet farming system, Lithuanian farming was in a leading position relative to the other republics within the Soviet Union according to the production of milk and meat per person. This was largely due to ethno-social traditions and labour productivity. Evaluating productivity per hectare of farming land, Lithuania was second to Estonia. Nevertheless, when compared with developed foreign countries the Lithuanian agrarian sector and village living standards were quite modest.

As mentioned the period of occupation brought serious demographic changes in the Lithuanian village. In 1939, the urban population constituted 22.9 per cent of the entire population whilst the rural population represented the remaining 77.1 per cent. In 1990 the figures were 68.5 per cent and 31.5 per cent respectively. The great majority of the rural population (from 2341,600 to 1665,500) in the Lithuanian countryside were lost from the year 1939 to 1959, mainly due to the repressive actions of the Nazi and Bolshevik occupation, including the deportations by the Bolsheviks. In 1940–1942 and during the period of collectivization (1948–1952) almost 27,000 Lithuanian families were exiled. The effects of the repression were disastrous not only in size but also due to the more active and industrious members of society being deported.

During the period from 1960–1990 the rural population decreased from 1665,500 to 1173,800. The main reasons for this were migration from the countryside to towns and a decreased birth rate. An ageing rural population remained with almost a quarter of the rural population in some regions being of retired age. Male/female ratios also became more obvious with 1000 men for every 828 women in the same age category. Some regions

had no more than 500 inhabitants and an uneven distribution of labour resources prevailed in other areas. The size of an average family was 3.2 persons, and the mortality rate was higher including the increased suicide rate.

The transitional period must involve private property consolidating its position, in addition to labour and productive resources being used in a more economic manner. Growth must however take place slowly due to the lack of equipment, technical know how and agro-services on farms [7].

During collectivization Estonian private farms were liquidated and their properties (animals, stock, land, production buildings) were collectivized into the ownership of collective and state farms. Each family had the right to keep one cow and pig, some sheep and poultry. People were practically unpaid and families lived on these animals and land of approximately 0.5 hectares.

Traditionally the main branch of production in Estonia was dairy farming, a consequence of changeable climatic conditions which ensure a stable yield of grass may be secured from a rather short vegetative period (4 to 5 months). Under Soviet power the plans for the production of meat were particularly increased. Estonia could then buy grain crops for relatively low prices and forced to sell cheap meat and dairy products to the USSR. The ratio of meat and milk production was 1:16 before 1940, but was reduced to a 1:6 ratio in the 1980s. Collective and state farms existed which were economically weak, due to the central organization of agriculture production plans.

During this 50 year period migration to Estonia from other Soviet republics dramatically increased the population, resulting in the population of the occupied republic increasing from 1 million to 1.5 million of whom 40 per cent were non Estonians. Furthermore there was a strong attack against the Estonian national culture, particularly during the late 1940s when cultural treasures were destroyed in an attempt to sever cultural continuity. This campaign concentrated to a large extent on the Estonia rural population, who were reputed as the historical keeper of many Estonian cultures [8].

Latvia suffered a similar destruction of the settlement structure of farming and its associated social structure due to collectivization of land under the Soviet system. As with Estonia and Lithuania, the Latvian state and collective farms were directed to produce meat and dairy products destined for the markets of other USSR republics and based on cheap feedstuff and energy inputs imported from the east. Deportation of progressive farmers to the east and migration of farmers from other Soviet republics through settlement programmes dramatically changed the natural demographic profile of Latvia [9].

## CURRENT ISSUES

Following the re-instatement of independence of the Baltic states in 1991 the nature and structure of the rural environs has undergone significant development within the recent past. It is accepted that the forceful collectivization of Latvian agriculture was a mistake and that the methods by which collectivization was undertaken were deemed to be unlawful and reprehensible from a political, economical and legal standpoint. All three national governments have progressed land reform policies aimed at returning land to those who owned it (or their descendants) during the 1919 to 1939 period.

For example in Latvian legislation 'Land Reform in the Districts' which provides for land ownership and restitution of property rights, was passed by Parliament on November 21st 1990. The law is being implemented in two phases. During phase one which was completed on June 20th 1991, all former land owners, their heirs and existing land users applied for land use rights. Claimants specified the preferred territory, the agricultural management programme and when they plan to instigate agricultural activities. It should be noted that while this stage was stepping stone for the restoration of property rights, the individuals at this stage did not have any legal standing. The more substantive issue of creating property rights was not addressed until stage two which began on January 1st 1993. In the course of administering this rather difficult task, allocation priority applied to the following groups:

- Former land owners and their heirs
- Current peasants farmers who need to construct a dwelling near their farm
- Home owners who wish to develop a farm in close proximity to their home
- Persons who wish to develop a farm.

The claimant or purchaser must be a national and are disposed to engage in farming. The right to ownership of land is restored in the following ways:

- return the specific plot of land to former owners or heirs,
- return a plot of land equivalent in size and quality but in different location,
- pay state compensation.

The privatization of state and collective farms is achieved through the establishment of share and stock companies under the law on 'Privatization of Agricultural Enterprises and Collective Fisheries'. The essential difference between both companies is that within the latter one may sell stocks

to individuals extraneous to the business structure. This is absolutely forbidden within the former, where one may sell shares only to members of the business structure. Individual stocks and shares are established on the following basis:

— Worker shares related to the value of the enterprise's assets at 1991 price levels less the total value of the expropriated property divided by the number of employees and multiplied by the number of years they worked in the business.

— X shares relate to one's personal assets expropriated during the occupation and nationalization of property.

These companies have been set up to compensate state/collective farm workers for the value they have added to the business. It is something of a transition structure, in that, new private land owners may only take title to their land in 1966. Therefore current (1993/94) land ownership structure consists of private farms (with title in 1996), joint stock company, share company and state owned (e.g. research farms, etc.). A similar approach has been taken in both Estonia and Lithuania, with similar outcome in terms of ownership structure, etc.

The Baltic Republics have since 1991 been moving from a centrally planned to a market-orientated system. These reforms involved fundamental political, economic and social changes. This change requires a new approach to the way many things are done. For example governments are in the process of establishing public administrative systems adapted to their market economy and democracy, production sectors are involved in the privatization of operations and individuals are acquiring new skills and assuming new responsibilities. While this era of change has to be welcomed it also must be recognized that such transition is fraught with short, medium and long term problems. The rural areas of the Baltic states have in the short term been pre-occupied with the issue of land reform. This issue which encompasses economic, social, cultural and environmental change has been characterized by an overriding emotion to return agricultural land to the pre-communist period owners. The understanding of such land reform and support for it however may not be characterized in such simple terms. Studies carried out in both Latvia and Lithuania point to a number of underlying socio-economic problems.

The Latvian Agricultural University in February and March of 1992 surveyed individuals (N=658) working within the field of agriculture to identify their views on the process of privatization. The information acquired provides an insight into the thinking of the rural population in Latvia.

The results of the survey demonstrate that attitudes concerning the current changes in the countryside are rather controversial. Firstly, it is interesting to note that only one fifth (approximately) of the respondents had a definite (positive or negative) point of view regarding privatization

(22.7 per cent). More than half had a rather unstable perspective oscillating more or less in one or the other direction. It was however more generally noted that the perception was more negative than positive. Secondly, the opinion of the agricultural specialists was more negative than that of the manual workers. It was also identified that the people who do not work in the share and limited companies on the large farms have a more negative position than those employed by such enterprises. Thirdly and significantly, it was found that a large number of workers ( every fifth specialist and more than every fourth manual worker) do not understand many of the changes which are presently taking place in agriculture.

The respondents based their predominantly negative attitude as regards the process of privatization on their perception that:

1. the law of privatization had not been worked out completely, it has many contradictions, and does not agree with the documents regulating land reform;

2. the process of privatization itself was done rather hurriedly, it has not been possible to think over and weigh out everything and act only after careful analysis and consideration.

As regards the finding that many rural people do not understand the privatization process, it should be pointed out that the explanatory work relating to the official legislation bills has not received sufficient coverage by the mass media. Terms such as 'privatization', 'share', 'nominal share', 'dividend', 'common estate', etc., are not comprehensible to many people without commentary, especially for the manual workers.

The findings of the survey indicate that 35.6 per cent of respondents (28.5 per cent of manual workers, 38.0 per cent of specialists and 50.7 per cent of those working in other branches) do not understand the advantages of the new forms of management. The most significant number of people working in limited and share companies do however notice some advantages in changing the collective and state farms structure into a share and limited company.

The representatives of all the groups consider that the advantages of share and limited companies pertain to general improvements of the share and limited companies with respect to an improvement in labour discipline and the cutting down on administrative staff. The personal benefits derived in becoming a joint proprietor include receiving dividends while remaining in the background. It was noted that the reason for such beliefs may be related to a lack of understanding of the process of privatization.

Although the transition from state to share company ensures that workers become the owners of a definite part of the property (as regards both the amount and the objects of it), it is generally found that workers have no tendency or inclination to take part in the management of this property.

Two out of three of respondents consider it advantageous to discontinue their membership in the share and limited companies.

The further development and privatization of share and limited companies is directly connected with a reduction in the number of people working in such organizations. Privatization has therefore effectively contributed towards the emergence of three distinct categories of people including:

1. those who remain employed and hold the same position as previously, represent 44.5 per cent,

2. those who will discontinue membership and employment in share and limited companies but who have devised future plans represent about 45.2 per cent,

3. those who have not been offered a job in the share and limited companies and who do not know what their future holds. One in ten previous workers may be classified accordingly. The latter incorporates both manual workers and specialists. There is a high preponderance of females in this category with the number of women being twice as prevalent as men.

The position of those who remain employed in agriculture is not however unenviable. Firstly, the status of share and limited companies remains insecure as many confront the prospect of bankruptcy. Secondly, many private farms must contend with a number of insurmountable obstacles including the inability of the state to provide such farms with credit in which to develop and prosper. The position of both the employed and the unemployed will therefore prove exceptionally difficult. This situation is exacerbated by limited local knowledge on potential strategies which may resolve or at least appease development obstacles. People simply do not know what to do in the rural environs. This situation is compounded by the reality that it is often the young and the more enterprising individuals who leave the countryside in search of enhanced opportunities in the urban environment. The social fabric of the countryside is therefore facing disruption, a scenario which presents possibilities for the emergence of social tension. The position of women also demands more detailed examination as it is the woman who is most likely to lose her position in the share/limited companies.

It is also important to examine the future strategies of those who were not offered a job in the share or limited companies, or those who were offered a job but declined to perceive it as a permanent position. The primary intention of many of the aforementioned is to organize their own farm and establish an independent enterprise. Education will certainly prove instrumental in promoting the rebirth of the Latvian peasantry through stimulating activity within rural enterprise development.

Of the respondents surveyed, 17.7 per cent have decided to seek employment in the agricultural service sector, or to establish a private business with others deciding to transfer to the status and position of crafts person. The transition to crafts person is primarily the domain of people within

the older age category while those deciding to set up a private business are generally less than 40 years. 8.8 per cent of respondents working on the larger farms plan to retire and live off their pension and the income which may be derived from the agricultural produce on their farms. This group is made up primarily of women (5 times greater than men) and livestock keepers with a minimal educational status.

The entire economic and social composition of the village is threatened. Unemployment, underemployment, outmigration and general stagnation undermine the successful development of the rural environs. These problems must be addressed. A united front is called for at local, regional, national and international levels as institutional integration is the cornerstone for the successful realization of a development program.

The findings of a series of similar studies carried out in Lithuania on the eve, and during the first stages, of agrarian reform a group of Lithuanian sociologists from the Institute of Agrarian Reform reflect those of this Latvian study.

The first investigation was conducted in December of 1990 and involved 448 farmers and the main professional groups from all of the regions of the republic. 78 per cent of the respondents were former land owners or their heirs. In response to the preferred farming structure only 6.7 per cent of respondents preferred individual farming. Concerning farm establishment the respondents mentioned poor materials, technical conditions, old age, bad health, and labour shortages as the main reasons militating against the establishment of farms. Some farmers were consequently content with their work on the collective farm. As regards the rights to farm establishment, 72 per cent said that priority must be given to agricultural workers. Only 14 per cent of respondents expressed the opinion that compensation to former land owners was essential. 13 per cent supported partial compensation whilst the remainder argued that compensation was needless [10].

A similar survey comprising of 350 respondents was conducted in September of 1991 when the law on Land Reform was accepted. Although the laws relating to reform had been widely publicized, 86 per cent of respondents pointed out that they did not have enough material on the reform process. It was also noted that the weaker farmers supported the reform process whilst the younger farmers did not express acceptance of it.

Only 9 per cent of respondents said they felt their life would improve after the reform process whilst 12 per cent felt their life would improve in the future. The remainder believed that their lifestyle would deteriorate in the near and distant future. It was also shown that women were more pessimistic than men. As with the previous questionnaire, the question regarding farming structure provided similar results. It was however assessed that the stronger farmers preferred a larger share company in which to be affiliated with.

Additional investigations clarified the reasons why people were so passive concerning land reform. Most of the respondents were familiar with only two farming structures namely the collective farm and the small peasant farm. They therefore preferred the idea of remaining within their existing farming structure as they could not see the possibilities in establishing an individual farm. A clear lack of information also meant that many people could not foresee their position on a post reform farm. The local village administration also contributed to this situation as many feared losing their power and privileges. The questionnaire also exposed the changes which took place in the psychology of the rural population during the occupation period.

## FUTURE OUTLOOK

The share of agriculture in national aggregate output in each of the Baltic States has declined from 1990 to 1993. For example Estonian output has declined from around 20 per cent of national output in the 1980s to 8 per cent in 1993. The Baltic republics have suffered severe economic decline since independence from the USSR. The loss of markets and the pricing of inputs, mainly energy at world prices in hard currency, were decisive in contributing to these economic hardships. A major future problem is unemployment, by western standards this is low now, but growing, and likely to accelerate as underemployment becomes more overt. The OECD has noted a tendency in the Baltic republics to look to western models of support systems that are unsuitable and costly for the republics and will not help economic recovery. However many Baltic agricultural economists forecast a pessimist future for agriculture without support policies. For example in Estonia it has been predicted that 'in the short term the level of Estonia agricultural and food exports will be of little consequence. Further developments will depend on price and income support policies. If the present policy of very little support to agriculture continues, Estonia will be importing large amounts of agriculture and food products. But more probably we will have such policies that will keep the production of our traditional agricultural products on the level of self sufficiency' [11]. This indeed could become an political issue in the upcoming Estonian general election in spring of 1995. The OECD while acknowledging that 'the mounting pressure to protect the domestic market could push Estonia away from it's stated objective of market-orientated agriculture', argue:

'The achievement of income parity through market and trade regulation and more direct support policies is not consistent with a market-orientated agriculture. It has been attempted by a number of OECD countries in the past with little success, but at great economic cost. There is now a

considerable consensus that a more broadly based rural development policy in which agriculture has an important role, but is not necessarily the dominant component, is more likely to achieve improved living standards for rural areas. It is very probable that agriculture in Estonia still faces considerable adjustment, and this adjustment should be facilitated rather than frustrated. Policies that address directly the hardship resulting from adjustment, but do not involve distorting prices and markets, are preferred' [12].

The OECD put forward the same argument for Latvia and Lithuania. In reference to Latvia they acknowledge the difficulty for policy-makers to accept the adjustment required and resist pressures for protection when other countries whose products are appearing on Latvian markets are themselves subsidizing producers and protecting their own markets. However they argue that 'the essential point is, however unfair the behaviour of other countries, their economies are losing by these policies and Latvia can only lose as well by adopting the same approach'. Supporting their argument for a broad-based rural development policy the OECD in the context of Lithuania states that 'given the importance of the rural population in Lithuania, issues such as rural incomes, employment and migration will need to be addressed through a broadly-based rural development policy in which agriculture has an important role but not necessarily a dominant one'.

The importance of land reform to the rural economies of the Baltic republics has taken centre stage during the initial years of transition, 1991 to 1994. The importance of these reforms in economic, social and political terms should not be underestimated, but neither should the challenges associated with such change. These include the social adjustment to and understanding of the emerging socio-economic structure associated with private farming, the economic realities and feasibility of such private farming and the cultural-environmental effects of transition to private farming. It is unlikely that the future of these rural economies will be secured by the introduction of private farming practices alone, rather the integrated development of key economic sectors based on the mobilization of indigenous resources is required. Therefore it is suggested that increased emphasis is given to the establishment of enterprising and dynamic rural economies over the remainder of the decade. This necessitates the integrated development of a truly multi-sectoral economy based on indigenous resources and comparative advantages. To achieve this, these rural economies now need to support the family farm structure with an economic, social and cultural infrastructure which supports enterprise initiative and builds on innate physical, natural, human, cultural and environmental resources. If we are to think of the aim of rural development as to ensure the survival and development of rural culture, society and economies we may then consider the following definition as a basis for future action:

The continuing process whereby the people of a community learn how to use effectively the available human and material resources in order to upgrade the capacity of the community's institutions to more equitably fulfil basic viability needs and social values.

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