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Sustained Development and Land Management

The Role of the State and Individual in Sustainable Land Management, edited by Robert W. Dixon-Gough and Peter C. Bloch: Ashgate 2006, Aldershot, Burlington, Hampshire pp. 187

This book which consists of 11 chapters, describes various aspects of sustainable land management using examples in selected countries and regions of Europe, Africa, North and South America. It discusses the significance of ownership rights, the change in structure of land use and its effects, the role of exogenous programmes in the development of rural areas and the influence of public institutions on land management. The book is a collection of many individual examples, rather loosely bonded by theoretical frames of sustained development and these cases can be divided into three categories.

The first introduces the issues of change and reform in the use of agricultural land and changes in ownership rights with a particular emphasis on developing countries. The authors exploring this issue are: Chris Arnison, David Bledsoe, Peter C. Bloch and Robert Dixon-Gough who concentrate on the political mechanisms of access to land and the influence of various aid programmes on the shape of rural areas.

The second refers to the issue of sustained management of natural resources in the context of rural development. The authors of these texts, Munir Morad, Simon Evans and Peter Vynnan consider rural space as a peculiar system of connected containers in which intervention in one sphere influences the entire natural and social system.

The third is about empirical examples of the consequences of reform in land management and their authors, Robert Dixon-Gough, Otladisane Molobeng,

Marina Vskovitch, Erik Stubkjaer and Anthony Andrew concentrate on concrete solutions implemented in Scotland, Denmark, England, Belarus and Botswana.

The area of interest for *Eastern European Countryside* persuades the reader to concentrate on studies involving issues of sustainable land management in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe which have been undergoing social and economic transition for over fifteen years.

The first text about the problems of this European region by David Bledsoe (Characteristic of Land-Related Administrative Institutions) distinguishes and describes the features which should characterise institutions influencing the development of rural areas. By pointing at the flexibility, transparency, decentralisation and openness of their structures and the decision process, he indicates the key elements of effective support for change in the countryside by the public administration. According to the author, in countries moving away from the centrally planned economy one of the more serious obstacles in the sustainable development of rural areas is the rigid, ineffective legal and institutional system, therefore change is becoming a decisive factor as regards opportunities of development of rural areas in Central and Eastern Europe.

The next analysis whose authors are Peter C. Bloch, Sussan Lasstaria-Cornhiel and David Stanfeld (The Contribution of Foreign Assistance to the Development of Land Markets and the Strengthening of Property Rights) is an assessment of the influence of external aid programmes on local land markets and the reinforcement of land property rights in the countries of Eastern Europe and Latin America. Examples describing their effects are provided by the USAID¹ project from which it transpires that the evolution of such factors as reforms in land registry and agrarian law, professional planning, land consolidation, ways of making loans as well as the political and social environment, determine the shape and nature of the rural environment.

The penultimate article of this interesting book is devoted to a comparative analysis of the process of land purchase in Denmark, England and Belarus. The main goal declared by Marina Vaskovitch, Robert Dixon-Gough and Erik Stubkjaer is the identification of differences between the above mentioned countries, assuming that land should be considered as a marketable commodity and buying and selling land should take place without the hindrance of administrative procedures. Unfortunately Belarus has a long way to go to meet the standards which apply in countries with a developed market economy.

The next interesting article (The Role of Land Consolidation and Land Readjustment) written by Robert Dixon-Gough is devoted to the issues of

¹ US Agency for International Development.

consolidation and change in the system of land management. He uses the examples of Central and Eastern European countries, such as Hungary, Albania, Bosnia and Bulgaria, pointing to factors requiring reinforcement such as the need for democracy, guaranteeing property rights and increasing the participation of local communities in the process of planning and land consolidation.

The book contains interesting material although it is uneven as regards academic standard. Reading some of the essays raises doubt as to the possibility of generalising certain processes and phenomena concerning rural areas, on the basis of a simple description of ways of purchasing land or changes in the legal system of ownership, with reference to a particular country. The book lacks a chapter which would put in order the known facts about sustained land management, nor does it have a common theoretical framework which makes it difficult to fit the 11 published texts into a whole.

However, reading them does provide some interesting conclusions. Firstly, developing countries or those undergoing transformation must consider both a sustained system of creating agrarian structures and the indisputability of land ownership law, as factors describing the success or failure of projects of rural development. Both these factors have particular significance in post-communist countries where social practice in this regard does sometimes become more or less distorted.

Secondly, although it is difficult to construct a universal model of sustainable land management, on the basis of analyses in this book the mechanisms contributing to this process can be quite clearly noticed. When planning and implementing reforms it is important to include communities which are the beneficiaries of change. The democratisation of management is not simply an empty slogan; examples show that the success of programmes supporting rural development may depend on it. Moreover, the countryside should be treated as a cohesive system. Methods of influencing the land ownership structure should be included within the framework of sustained development, becoming one of the components during the planning of change.

The third important conclusion that can be reached after reading "The Role of the State and Individual in Sustainable Land Management" is the need to educate efficient institutions at local and national level in the societies of Central and Eastern Europe. That would minimise the costs of potential social conflict and stabilise the legal environment of activities in the countryside. Supporting decentralised, transparent, effective offices may turn out more valuable for countries in transition than typically harsh capital investments. The lack of fundamental, structural changes may lead to the failure of programmes of sustainable management.

The next conclusion concerns the necessity to search for appropriate proportions between projects of environmental protection and modernisation. It is unacceptable for local communities which have restricted access to the resources of a given region to become deprived of access to profits emerging from the new situation. A solution suggested by many of these authors is delegating power to the local level while also finding a new political development concept. There is also a need of adjusting concrete solutions to the local and historical context. The "sustainable" concept merely establishes the general framework for the given mechanism to fit into. The great emphasis on economic efficiency in the economies of Eastern Europe can sometimes lead to relying on the term sustainable development and management with the purpose of legitimising activities which are diametrically different to the fundamental principles of this concept.

One of the most significant merits of this book is no doubt the inclusion of issues connected the land management. Attention is given not only to several interventions (the land registry reform, the change in ownership law, the possibility of buying and selling land, credit schemes, taxation tools and market mechanisms) but also to the influence of external factors, which are the result of the natural, cultural and political character of a particular region and the possibilities of acquiring information and knowledge. The application of sustainable methods of land management leads to the revaluation of resources of the entire rural area, preserving its biodiversity, protecting its cultural potential and reinforcing the countryside as a local economic system.

The demand that the rural area should be treated as a natural and cultural entity seems to create the basic value of this work which is far more important than the problem raised in the title of the position of the individual and the state in sustainable land management.