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The Aleksanteri Institute in Helsinki is one of the 26 research organisations of 15 countries participating in the MultAgri project. Its goal is to carry out an inspection of the current knowledge, state and results of research concerning the question of the multifunctionality of agriculture and rural areas throughout the world, with particular emphasis on Europe. The Institute carries out research on this issue for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly emphasising the importance of significant aspects in this region such as the cultural identity and development of the system of new institutional mechanisms supporting the development of agriculture and rural areas.

A seminar summarising the fourth stage of the MultAgri project was organised at the Aleksanteri Institute on 3–4 December, 2004. One of the goals of the meeting of the international research group was to discuss the results of research carried out to date in the framework of the project “Multifunctionality of agriculture and rural areas” carried out for 8 years by research teams in 8 countries in Central and Eastern Europe: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia. Research gets carried out in a multidisciplinary perspective. It concerns areas particularly connected with the study of socio-political changes in Russia and Eastern Europe. Research concerning rural development is currently given priority. The Institute also annually organises “Autumn academic meetings.”

“Multifunctionality of agriculture and rural areas” is part of the fourth stage of the MultAgri project called the “Multifunctionality of economic

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activities, pluralism of identity and new institutional solutions." It is also part of an entire cycle of research on the issue of development of rural areas and agriculture in Europe. The idea behind the project is a multifaceted review of the multifunctional development of rural areas and its reflections in academic research and social reality. MultAgri is a specific part of the Sixth General Programme of the European Commission "Global changes and the ecosystem" financed by the European Commission funds (DG RTD). One of the main objectives in all the stages of the MultAgri project is the recognition and promotion of the multifunctional rural and agricultural development throughout the world, and particularly in the regions of Europe. A long-term goal of the extensive project is working out a European model of agriculture involving the paradigm of multifunctionality of agriculture and countryside and the balanced development of rural areas. The MultAgri project consists of six research topics and three summarising blocks: Definitions, references and interpretation of concepts of multifunctionality of rural areas and their contribution towards the popularisation of balanced development; Social and consumer expectations; Knowledge, models, techniques, tools and indicators applied in research on the multifunctionality of rural areas; multifunctionality of economic activities, the pluralism of identity and new institutional solutions; management of social policy involving the multifunctional aspect: including agriculture into new market sectors; the evaluation of the effectiveness of political tools in relation to the multifunctionality of agriculture; summary and comparisons; exchange of knowledge and information; project management. Projects should be carried out (current work concerns the fifth stage) in six phases, whose conclusion must be the formulation of a model of development of rural areas and agriculture and defining the recommendations for further academic research connected with the promotion of the multifunctionality of agriculture and the countryside in Europe.

This is important for several reasons. The ever growing recognition of the role of agriculture and the countryside regarding their multifunctionality brings about a change in the attitude and expectations regarding the countryside and agriculture and the role they can play in a developing Europe. It has explicitly been certified that in agriculture the role of the mass producer of food and other organic raw materials (plant and animal) is dropping whereas the role in environmental, natural and cultural protection is growing, in the production of ecological food and widely understood diversification of the role of rural areas (agro-tourism and other non-agricultural sources of income).

In specific groups among EU member countries these non-agricultural functions of agricultural and rural areas are differently recognised and documented. In some EU countries these studies are relatively complete, which is not the case in new member countries. In Central and Eastern

Europe, contrary to the general view, there is a wide diversity of forms, dominant models of farming and potential. This diversity is also manifested in the high number of concepts reflecting the trend of the widening of the role of agriculture and the countryside. While in Western Europe mention is generally made of "multifunctional agriculture" (due to the lack of "countryside" in the traditional Central-Eastern European understanding), in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the same phenomenon exists among others within the framework of the concept of "additional sources of income of the rural population," "non-agricultural farm activity," "alternative forms of activity of the rural population," "diversification of paid activity by rural inhabitants" and "multifunctional development of rural areas."

The purpose for research teams from different countries to meet in Helsinki was, as has already been mentioned to summarise work carried out in the fourth stage of the project. The intention was to evaluate the documentation (i.e. the statistic and legal documentation) regarding the phenomenon of the multifunctionality of agriculture and rural areas in particular regions of Europe, singling out similarities and differences as to the level of knowledge between the countries of the Central and East European region and to create a picture, which would in due course be useful for references in situations in the remaining EU member countries. During the discussion interesting views emerged complementing the discussed phenomenon pointing to the specific approach to this issue in different countries.

The debate on the phenomenon of the widening function of the countryside and agriculture in the world, and particularly in the region of Central and Eastern Europe involved many levels and analytical dimensions, it pointed to many regional and cultural differences. Several aspects of multifunctionality were singled out giving them a fundamental rank. **The role of the social potential and context of globalisation were underlined, as inseparable from the concept of multifunctionality.** Attention was paid to the non-material aspect of the phenomenon (quality of life, nutrition, health, natural and cultural heritage) and perhaps above all to the multifunctionality of agriculture and the countryside in the context of **social policy**. Attention was also drawn to the significance of the accuracy of evaluations the extent to which we can move at this stage of knowledge with regard to opportunities for rural development and the extent to which and how successfully to struggle through from the political concept to its operation at the social practice level. Regarding agricultural production there was a discussion on the dynamic narrowing of the margin between production costs and profit gained from the distribution of food and the necessity to find solutions neutralising the consequences of this phenomenon.

In the context of further analyses concerning Poland, particular emphasis was placed on the difference, potential and needs of the countryside as an area – one of the few in Europe which has not undergone total degradation as a result of industrialisation or total collectivisation. Particular attention was paid to the social development of multifunctionality of agriculture and rural areas as a strategy having a fundamental influence on **raising the quality of life by increasing employment opportunities**; extending possibilities for making conscious choices regarding way of life (for both the rural and the urban population); raising the level of awareness; and a greater role of cultural and natural heritage in maintaining social continuity. Particular attention was also paid to the extension of choices of lifestyle through education, access and dissemination of information, the possibility of earning additional income from non-agricultural activity on farms and non-agrarian rural households. Many references concerned the role of **programmes and policy tools regarding the improvement of agriculture and safety strategies and the development of rural areas**. **National programmes for rural development** were given considerable attention, dependent on international principles taking into consideration the resources and conditions of the different countries.

An interesting example was the analysis of activities of the organisation of NSPARD in Hungary. Embracing three hundred experts from diverse fields the institution's goal is the wide inclusion of Hungary's specificity, cultural and economic diversity and adapting international strategies and stipulations to the country's internal socio-economic conditions and needs. Underlining the differences of specific countries attention was given to the fact that Slovakia stands out for its particularly low level of national financial assistance, this role being dispersed among institutions such as the Development Agency, unions, associations and organisations which do not have nationwide reach. The Rural Parliament is one of the more powerful of these, being one of the non-profit NGOs (others include "Ekotrend" www.ecotrend.sk, SOSNA, SOVS www.sovs.sk).

One of the themes which were raised was the mechanism of the "social exclusion" of many groups and related problems. Deliberations eventually led to considering the concept of multifunctionality as an opportunity for their partial dissolution. Among strategies practically reflecting the concept of multifunctionality rural tourism was often underlined in all its variants, as one of the fullest forms if suitably organised, using resources in all the sectors (nature, culture, food). **Direct marketing** was another example of the effective strategy of multifunctional rural and agricultural development. There was an interesting example of its application in Estonia where reference was made to a model example of a farm being the animator of a widespread individual marketing campaign "Ecofood box." The idea is creating an offer for ecological food and developing a strategy of successfully

propagating it by one family. The farmer with his family and friends while organising direct selling for local consumers sends them a standard parcel (Ecofood box) containing 10 ecological food products described in the offer. The products included in the "self advertised" parcel are a set of high quality ecological products. Each ecofood-box always includes one extra product – a surprise – depending on the season. The price of the set is not low, however the social reaction to the idea is reflected in the entrepreneur's high income and the expansion of his sales from one year to the next.

Summarising the discussion on the issue of rural and agricultural multifunctionality in such a wide context the organisers underlined how much can be achieved through cooperation and collective activity. A drawback in the propagation of their effectiveness can be the distinctly felt unwillingness in some countries to rural inhabitants organising themselves collectively, into associations and groups due to their experience of forced collectivisation. It was emphasised that there is a certain reference to romanticism in the philosophical sense and also clearly pragmatic closely connected with the realities of needs for activity. We are facing global challenges one of which is the dualism in understanding the countryside: tradition and nature versus modernised agriculture and production. Another important observation concerned the need to work out a wide strategy of rural tourism due to its important role in linking the domain of agriculture and the sector of the much needed non-agricultural services in the countryside. Another important comment concerned the phenomenon of summer houses. Here attention was drawn to migration and the issue of unstable population and new trends in demographic fluctuation (people going to the country as tourists – a partial visit to the country; partially migrating from town to country – owning summer holiday homes; regularly spending time in the country on a seasonal basis – a partial stay in the country "at home"; partially migrating from the country – to work in town, arrivals and departures; those who have moved to their homes in the country, yet have remained bound to the town due to work) etc.

Attention was also paid to the significant role of recognising and becoming aware of who currently decides about the shape of the country and the kind of relations of these actors – decision makers with rural inhabitants with their aspirations and plans. The term "social contract" concerning agricultural and rural development, takes on a different character with the domination of these rather than other actors in the contract.

In the summary restrictions in feasibility during this phase of certain ideas and strategies were also underlined. The often mentioned barriers include the necessity to raise the awareness of the rural population and the creators of social and economic policy of specific countries and the level of coordination and cooperation between programmes at all levels of social

theory and practice. Regardless of this the concept of the multifunctional rural and agricultural development has enormous cognitive significance, it serves to show the diversity of the functions of agriculture and that under different terminologies there lies a common concept of extending the function of agriculture and farms. Whatever the point of view of either local communities or individual farms, the nation as a whole or Europe as a region, such an awareness of extending the understanding of the role of agriculture and rural areas can contribute to a successful future at all levels. This motion was partly an answer to the question about the basis of philosophical premises, towards which the authors of the project are inclined bearing in mind all the aspects of living in the country: mass production, the creation of additional income, the production of ecological and organic food, environmental protection, national and international EU policy. The conclusion was the statement that regardless of the philosophy lying at the base of the research, it is necessary to assume an unequivocal view that: the former understanding of agriculture narrowed during the time of industrialism, is now out of date in both Western Europe and in the very different and diverse remaining part of Europe. The time has come for it to be replaced by a conscious, open, multidimensional character and complexity for creating a common future.