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## **The Role of Collective Marketing Initiatives in Hungarian Agriculture**

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the role of collective farmers' marketing initiatives in Hungary through three case studies, aiming at contributing to the international discussion about country-specific development paths and different influencing factors of farmers' collective action. Based on the dual structure of Hungarian agriculture described in the first part of our study, we present three case studies on Hungarian collective marketing initiatives. The following comparative analysis helps us identify some of the key factors influencing the development of cooperation amongst farmers. The paper ends with the delineation of the possible future role of the presented initiatives.

**Keywords:** new-type cooperatives, socialist type cooperatives, agricultural marketing, agricultural enterprises, collective marketing.

### **Introduction**

The cooperation and collective action of farmers are important elements of European agriculture and rural development; however, today's existing cooperatives have followed different development paths in Western and Eastern Europe, which resulted in differences in their present market position and social acceptance. In our paper we discuss the situation of collective farmers' marketing initiatives in Hungary in order to analyse how different actors try to answer the challenges of the rapidly changing economic and social environment.

The review of the Hungarian case can contribute to an international discussion about country-specific development paths and different influencing factors of farmers' collective action.

The paper starts by describing the dual structure of Hungarian agriculture. In the second part of the study, we attempt to reinforce this interconnection by presenting three case studies on Hungarian collective marketing initiatives. Then a brief comparative analysis follows, in which we discuss key factors influencing the development of the presented initiatives. In the conclusion some future prospects will be drawn.

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### **Duality and its Historical Roots**

Hungarian agriculture, rural society and the rural economy have a dual structure, which causes a latent conflict between industrialised agriculture and rural development, more precisely between market driven arable crop production and the aims of endogenous rural development and small scale farming for local markets and self-sufficiency. Large estates cannot offer enough jobs for the local inhabitants, whilst local activities are difficult to be marketed. Collective farmers' marketing initiatives promise some solutions, however they have very few traditions in Hungary.

Before World War II, large estates were characteristic in Hungary, although in some parts of the country there were also independent peasant farms. The conflict caused by the concentration of land property, land-use and rural poverty characterised rural Hungary until the end of World War II. Almost half of the rural people had no more land than the piece on which their house was built, thus they had to sell their labour, although they could only work seasonally on the large estates. The industrial sector could not provide them enough workplaces. The farming activity of this social group aimed at self-sufficiency if that was possible, and they sold the rest of their products on the local market. These small-scale farmers did not connect to national or international markets.

After World War II the large estates and those belonging to the Church were partly given to landless people, according to the 1946/XI. Act (Valuch 2001; p. 190). Then socialist type collectives were established in two waves. The first wave of collectivisation took place in the fifties, when the new poor landowners

who did not possess enough land to live on joined and the peasant farmers rejected it. During the so-called period of the second wave of collectivisation in the sixties, the former farm owners were also forced to join the collectives. Self-sufficiency or croft farming remained important and gained a major role in agriculture parallel to collectivisation. It had its tradition from the large estates, where the workers earned part of their money this way, but the socialist economic and agricultural situation also made it necessary to allow croft farming. Despite quick industrialisation, towns and new factories could not absorb the rural workforce, whilst the production of the new agricultural collectives was uncertain and purveyance was unsatisfactory in the countryside even in the early seventies (Kovch, 1988). Hence, the main aim of croft farming was to use the labour of the family, which also reduced the number of jobless. Since the seventies, croft farming was permitted not only for the members of collectives. It was at this time that the market became more and more important for farmers, although their bargaining position was very poor. As there was no market economy, most croft farms could not become real enterprises but remained self-sufficient part-time farms. These were typical examples of the so-called second economy that provided additional income and higher standards of living for rural people.

After the transformation, privatisation and the decrease of employment were fastest in agriculture. The 1992/I. Act on Collectives and the 1991/XXV, 1992/XXIV and 1992/XXXII Act on Compensation created the basis for restructuring agriculture in 1993. According to the research of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO) and the IPS-HAS in 1997, the transformation of collectives resulted in four different organisational structures. About half of the collectives split up one big and several smaller companies, from which the big one could continue farming. 17% of the socialist type collectives became enterprises. From a certain point of view, this was the most successful way of transformation, since they only lost 23% of their previous land, while employing 41% of their previous employees. 30% of the collectives split up several small companies from which some organisations were able to avoid bankruptcy (7.4%), although most of them could not continue farming because of their loans.

Beside the transformed cooperatives about 1,600,000 households (46–47% of all the households) are involved in agriculture to some extent, but approximately 440,000 farms produce for the market only (Countryside 2005 database, IPS HAS). There are 6,902 agricultural enterprises and 708,383 private holdings (family farms). In the last decade, the production of commodity farms has decreased, and there has been a slight concentration of cultivated land, while the non-market-driven farms produce only for self-sufficiency.



The decline of Hungarian agriculture slowed down in the mid-nineties, as Juhász and Mohácsi argue in their article (1996). According to the authors, in 1995 the food processing industry and large wholesalers could invest in agricultural subcontracting and integration. Integration provided the farmers quite a good market, gave them definite technological support and helped their financial management through loans and credits. Smaller farmers could not get a loan because their only valuable property was their land, which was not an appropriate basis for bank credits. According to the 1994/LV Act on Land, private companies were not allowed to own agricultural land (except for a short period). Although this regulation seems to protect small-scale farmers, paradoxically it has helped the emergence of subcontractor/integrator<sup>i</sup> companies, as they did not have to compete with foreign farmers (landowners), and they were the only group together with the transformed former cooperatives and former state farms that could build valuable market relations with banks and big agro-industrial companies.

Nowadays industrialised arable-land farming ensures profitability for subcontractors and large estates. Naturally, these farming methods are not economically sustainable without subsidies (Government press release, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2006). Moreover, these methods neither help rural inhabitants to earn their living locally, nor meet the aims of nature conservation or environmental protection. The subsidies that make subcontractors and industrialised agriculture profitable are mainly from the EU that expresses its desire to protect the environment, conserve natural habitats and maintain viable rural communities through financial support.

Despite the significant history of agricultural cooperatives, farmers' collective marketing initiatives are not widespread in Hungary, even if these are potential channels for smaller farms to appear on the market and stand for their interests. In the following part of the study, we present the most important forms of collective initiatives operating in Hungary nowadays, and discuss some factors that make these initiatives successful and enable member farmers to earn their living in a more predictable way.

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<sup>i</sup> Below we will discuss in more detail the role of integrators among collective initiatives.

## **General Configuration of Collective Farmers' Marketing Initiatives in Hungary**

Three main types of initiative characterise the present situation of farmers' cooperation:

1. integrator organisations (usually successors of former state cooperatives);
2. new-type, EU conform cooperatives that are mainly encouraged by the state and EU support;
3. alternative types of bottom-up initiatives.

We discuss these three types of collective marketing initiative in more detail by analysing their economic and institutional context and presenting one case study per type.

### **INTEGRATOR COMPANIES**

The internal statistics of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) recorded a total number of 987 integrator organisations last year. The number of integrated farmers exceeds 126,000 all over the country of whom 117,088 are small-scale family farmers on a low income enjoying tax exemption and relieved reporting<sup>ii</sup>. The operation of integrators is regulated by the ministerial regulation 3/2003, according to which integrators should provide working capital, market information, technological or administrative services for farmers and should buy up their products. Integrators are represented in every industrialised branch of agriculture from producing corn or fruit to animal husbandry, and both vertical and horizontal integration can be found in the country.

**KITE<sup>iii</sup>** (Corn and Industrial Crops Production Cooperation) **Public Company** is one of the biggest agricultural companies in Hungary that functions as an integrator/subcontractor organisation. KITE was founded in 1972 as the association of nine socialist agricultural cooperatives situated on the Great Plain (the centre lies in Nádudvar, near Debrecen). During the eighties, the number of member cooperatives rose to four hundred with a cultivated area of approximately 1.4 million hectares

<sup>ii</sup> There is no appropriate English word for this category of farmers (*östermelő* in Hungarian) as it is unknown in the former EU countries and not acknowledged by the EU. This category will systematically be abolished in the following years.

<sup>iii</sup> The sources of data are the website of the company (<http://www.kite.hu>) and the presentation of the president of KITE presented in IPS-HAS, Budapest, 15. 02. 2006.

(almost 30% of the total arable lands of the country). In the first period, KITE and its member farms dealt with corn and sugar beet production, and then their activity expanded to vegetables and irrigated cultivation as well. Already in the early years, KITE helped its partners purchase agricultural machinery. Since its privatisation in the early nineties, more than 40% of its shares are the property of the association of the former members and partners, the employee share runs to 15%, other companies own approximately 15% of the shares, while the remaining part is in the hands of private persons, the management and the local government of Nádudvar. Nowadays, the total number of shareholders is about 700 persons (Balogh-Búvár, 2003). The main activities of the company are the following: 1) wholesaling of agricultural inputs (chemicals, machinery, seeds), 2) mixing fertilizers and chemicals from bought materials, 3) technological development, 4) professional consulting, 5) crediting and guaranteeing, 6) maintaining a countrywide network for servicing and 7) buying up the produced agricultural products from the integrated farmers to store and market them. The share of KITE on the market of agricultural input materials is about 25–30%, which provides significant bargaining power against multinational input producers in favour of farmers buying their inputs from the company. Thanks to its countrywide network and huge market share, almost 3000 small-scale producers joined the integration. According to the chairperson, KITE is a “Janus-faced” organisation: towards big multinationals it is a hard and profit-oriented partner, towards producers it accepts joint interests.

The case study of KITE indicates clearly the role of historical roots in the development of collective marketing initiatives. The present power of the company (and usually other integrators as well) stems mainly from their background: its establishment during the seventies as a cooperative of cooperatives ensured that KITE (and similar organisations) could already follow the directions of latest technology in the socialist era. After 1990, the company could successfully transform into a capitalist organisation and continue its former activities. The owners', employees', farmers' and institutional actors' claim for the maintenance and development of the socialist organisation (which can be regarded as a strong organisational inertia) determines the target market (national and international commodity markets) and the interests behind market penetration. Although KITE was not initiated by farmers but the state, it supports the collective marketing of farmers, who may have advantages from the cooperation by means of the economy of scale and bargaining power, for example. Integrated farmers hardly have the possibility to participate in decision making, albeit through integration they receive up-to-date market information transferred by the management (Oláh, 2002), their income becomes more easily calculable and they can also decrease the risk related to partners, prices and marketing (Tátrai, 2003).



Because of the strictly regulated cooperation with farmers (the used input materials, technology, quantity and quality of products are determined in contracts) and the lack of farmers' participation in decision-making, KITE gains superiority above farmers and is able to misuse it through putting down prices or delaying payment. The company is not interested in activities that could "empower" farmers, but recognises that farmers are the basis of its success, thus it tries to create an advantageous environment for cooperation. Based on these arguments we can conclude that KITE shows more similarities with large-scale multinational companies than an ideal type of farmers' collective marketing initiative.

### NEW-TYPE COOPERATIVES

We call the next type of cooperatives new, as the regulation appeared during the process of EU accession. Act CXLI. 2000 on new type cooperatives regulates 93 producer marketing organisations and 252 producer groups<sup>iv</sup> in 2005, these organisations were acknowledged and supported by the EU (functioning in different organisational forms, mostly cooperatives or limited companies). In 2003 there were 662 supplying and marketing cooperatives subsidised only by the state during the period of transforming into one of the EU-conform forms (Dorgai et al, 2005.). The market significance of these initiatives can be shown by the following data: producer marketing organisations provide approximately 21% of the country's total production of fruit and vegetables, while producers' groups give no more than 8–9% (estimated) of the total agricultural production (no data available on new cooperatives) (Dorgai et al, 2005).

The Cooperative of Arany Sárféher Grapevine- and Wine-producers' was founded in 2003 and nowadays has 450 small-scale wine-producers, farming on 1210 hectares. The cooperative is situated in the western part of the Great Plain near Kecskemét, its centre is Izsák. The aim of the initiative is to process and market the characteristic grapes and wine of the region, the Arany sárféher (gold mud-white) – the name of the organisation stems from this – that is an old Hungarian type produced only in this small area, because it needs special ecological conditions. The most important body of the cooperative is the general meeting where the principle of

<sup>iv</sup> Data from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD).

<sup>v</sup> The source of the data is the website of the Cooperative and interviews conducted in the region ([http://hosting.vitae.hu/aranysarfeher/modules.php?name=Arany\\_Sarfeher](http://hosting.vitae.hu/aranysarfeher/modules.php?name=Arany_Sarfeher)).

one member — one vote is dominant. The general meeting decides on the president and the members of the board and on the most important questions concerning the whole organisation. To reach common goals, the cooperative coordinates the marketing activities of the producers; applies for financial support; provides a technological background (storage, processor) and input materials; buys up the wine at a stable, relatively high price (according to the special quality); organises professional forums and training; participates in local and small regional development programmes and lobbies if necessary. Thanks to the lobby activity of the cooperative, the grape became acknowledged officially as a protected origin type whose classification concerns not only the grapevine but also the wine and champagne produced from it. The other important result of the cooperative's activity is that it has gained the support of the agricultural minister to buy up a huge champagne factory in Izsák, where the organisation would be able to produce its own, branded wine and champagne. Currently the cooperative plans to rebuild the export markets of the factory, in order to find a secure market for its products.

Through cooperation, members can realise many advantages. The organisation provides a safe and relatively high income as the cooperative is more successful in applying for financial support and competing in the market than the individual producers. It is able to supply the market with a homogenous high-quality product whether it is grapevine, wine or champagne. The Cooperative is locally embedded, initiated by the vine-producers of the small region. The main reason for establishing a producer group was to gain a better market position and higher income through collective marketing, but it also helped to create a collective identity, which is visualised through the traditional product of the region. The initiative also increased environmental awareness of the members, through emphasising the importance of the local grape variety that requires special ecological characteristics. Another important factor of the success is the enthusiasm of the leader of the Cooperative, who has a good professional relationship. As we wrote above members have the possibility to influence decisions of the initiative. The degree of collective action is also an important factor of success. Although the cooperative offers a wide range of services for the participating farmers, the farmers can themselves decide to use those according to their own interest. The leader realised that involving farmers in decision making and giving them the freedom to choose strengthens the cooperative, whilst members realised that collective action increase their bargaining position on the market. The possibility of acquiring the champagne factory enforced that they have to work together: grapes and wine can be a secure source of income for the farmers, on the one hand, and the factory needs the good quality raw material year by year which can be assured this way,



on the other. Thus, the mutual advantages are the warranty for the cooperation in this case.

### ALTERNATIVE BOTTOM-UP INITIATIVES

Alternative bottom-up cooperative groups as the third type of potential COFAMIs in Hungary differ to some extent from the first two groups. They are like non-professional collective initiatives of farmers or people who imagine rural development through farmers' cooperative groups with the aim of supporting organic agriculture, local food production or providing a more certain livelihood for the local people. However, all these initiatives are generally limited to a settlement or a small region regarding the collaborating farmers, focus on some kind of special product (e.g. organic) and represent only a marginal segment on the market. The latter is the reason why they are mostly invisible for official statistics. As far as we know these kinds of farmers' initiatives can be divided into three groups: cooperatives on organic farming; cooperatives aiming at rural development; and others like initiatives for community-supported agriculture. According to previous studies, cooperation is typical among organic farmers and stems from the fact, that organic farming was a social movement at the beginning (Tovey, 1997) – this assumption also fits Hungary.

Members of the presented group have been using organic methods for decades. Their farms are situated in the Great Plain (Kiskunság). The seven members of the group are quite different. Three of them are relatives (wife, husband and their daughter); they farm together and partly share the work. They have several gardens and produce many kinds of fresh vegetables and fruit. They do not have a green house, and although they have some hens, and sometimes even a pig or a goat, they do not sell animal products. The other four members produce separately, they are part-time croft-farmers and they have jobs (one of them is teacher). They usually produce for self-sufficiency; fresh vegetables, fruits, poultry – like a peasant farm, but sometimes they only have orchards and do not produce anything else. All of them live near each other (in the same village), or at least in the neighbouring town, and most of them meet frequently. It is very important that they are local people; they were born in this county or have at least been living here for decades. The production of the group members is very diverse (a wide range of vegetables and fruit), and they do not have large amounts of products, but they sell the surplus at the fresh organic products market in Budapest. In summer, they go to the market separately, but if they have less surplus only one of them travels there.

The above presented initiative does not have any official form of cooperation, but the members share information and help each other sell their products. It can be seen as some kind of friendship or neighbourhood – economic and social aspects are mixed. The members of the group do not market together in the broad sense of marketing, but help each other in production (sharing special farming practices, knowledge), organise excursions to visit other organic farms in the country and spend time together as they live near each other, and they do not make collective strategic decisions. On the regular organic fresh products market, they can sell everything they have. The farmers typically produce for themselves (self-sufficiency), lacking the financial and human capital and in many cases even the desire to grow bigger

### Comparative Analysis

The comparison of the Hungarian cases shows that the three different types of farmers' collective marketing initiatives differ from each other in many dimensions: they pursue different strategies, they are at a different stage of their life cycle, they produce on a different scale and extend to different regional levels.

Integrators are big, multinational-like companies. The strategy used by them builds on competing firmly on the market, keeping prices down and providing a steady high quality. To realise profit, they need a stable structure of subcontractors, but the present disintegrated structure of land property does not favour their ambitions. Thus, it is in their interest to organise farmers and encourage them to cooperate. Integrators were built during socialism; they have well-known names and contacts all over the country, which results in significant geographical coverage, and thus in a large amount and variety of marketed goods.

New-type, EU conform cooperatives were established after the transformation and they broke away from socialist characteristics. They represent real cooperation among farmers, function democratically and apply innovative solutions in order to keep up with competition. Their strategy is locally embedded, builds on tradition and usually focuses on quality. Although these initiatives are young, they are strongly embedded in their local environment, and they try to build regional networks and interest groups. Their geographical extension is limited to small-regional/regional level, but they sell on the national and even international markets.

Alternative bottom-up initiatives already emerged in the eighties. Some of them disappeared during the last decades, and none of them became successful

in the sense of growing market share, profitability or geographical coverage. They seem to be weak to influence market possibilities (except in niche markets), although usually the main aim of participating farmers is not the increase of profitability through collective marketing but the improvement of community feeling and rural life. These initiatives play an active role in their locality through coming across regularly and building personal relationships – the geographical boundaries of this kind of cooperation is also limited to the extension of these relations.

The differences in the present characteristics of the three types, which are the result of their different development paths, can be traced back to some important factors. As we could see in the case studies and in the brief comparison above, the three types have different historical roots; moreover, their initial post in the dual structure of Hungarian agriculture is completely divergent. While integrators stand at the “large-scale” end of the duality as the former associations of socialist cooperatives and state farms, alternative bottom-up initiatives really build on small-scale individual farmers. New-type cooperatives represent a transition and take place somewhere in the middle between the “large-scale” and the “small-scale” end of the dual structure, since they let the farmers produce autonomously but collective marketing enables them to compete with large-scale farms.

In spite of the different starting points in the duality occupied by the three types, all of them act on the market as a collective representation of individual farmers selling their products together. This similar aim, however, is achieved by the three types through different strategies that are mostly driven by the different motivation of participants. In the case of integrators, shareholders (among whom farmers represent a minority) aspire to gain more and more profit thus the management is encouraged to increase the profit margin and penetrate the market aggressively. Alternative bottom-up initiatives, as we mentioned above as well, often focus on their local well-being instead of growing market share or higher profit margin. The most important motivator behind this strategy is the predictability of livelihood combined with a kind of peasant nostalgia or environmentalism. New-type cooperatives conflate the aims of market success and individual (and collective) well-being since the motivation behind their activity is to provide a stable organisational framework for farmers to earn their living in a more secure and predictable way.

The third characteristic, which makes a considerable difference among the three types, is their local embeddedness. Integrators are not really embedded in local communities since they have members from all over the country and do not concentrate on one or a few regions. The lack of embeddedness, however,



deprives integrators of the advantages of cultural and social cohesion and leaves the self-organising capacity of farmers idle. New-type cooperatives and bottom-up initiatives, on the other hand, are strongly embedded locally. What makes a difference between these two types is that new-type cooperatives use consciously the local social resources in their marketing strategy.

### Concluding Remarks

However, the three types of farmers' collective initiatives were able to appear and exist parallel because of the differences amongst agricultural producers (stemming from the dual structure of Hungarian agriculture), their existence now contributes to soften the initial duality of the structure. We argue that integrator companies using industrialised methods are successful and provide a more secure livelihood for their partners, but conserve the dual structure of Hungarian agriculture by keeping integrated farmers dependent on their assistance. Alternative, bottom-up initiatives seem to be weak to influence market possibilities (except in niche markets) because they lack the necessary human and financial capital, although the main aim of participating farmers is often not to increase profitability through collective marketing but the improvement of community feeling. Thus, these farmers remain small-scale landowners producing mainly for self-sufficiency, and their collective initiatives do not change the duality. According to our research, new-type cooperatives seem to be able to reduce the duality of Hungarian agriculture in the long term, because these organisations give the possibility to small-scale farmers to penetrate national and international markets. Farmers participating in this kind of organisation have to decide on production methods and choose among the services offered by the cooperative, but the products of farmers are marketed collectively, which results in a stronger market position.

Although we analysed three key factors in the comparative analysis, there are many other elements influencing the development and success of collective marketing initiatives. The analysed case studies emphasise that neither the economic and market environment, nor natural and ecological circumstances are the most relevant factors, but case-specific, intangible social and cultural factors, such as local identity. These social and cultural factors must be examined in further research as possible explanations for the success or failure of collective initiatives. Nevertheless, a further question is what stakeholders (and researchers) mean by success: growing market share and profitability accompanied by growing geographical extension, professionalism and the

decrease of community feeling; or the stable livelihood of members achieved by moderate marketing activity and alternative niche strategies accompanied by a strong relationship between them.

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