Abstract

Slovenia is characterised by very specific conditions for agriculture (approx. 80 % of territory defined as LFA), extremely heterogeneous geographic features and therefore also by huge regional divergence – especially in rural areas (representing at least three-quarters of the state’s territory). Heterogeneity, mosaic structure and relatively good preserved environment and traditional patterns are general characteristics of Slovene rural areas and we consider the mentioned as development potential for the vast part of Slovenian rural areas.

In the last decade, huge regional disparities have actually arisen. Although the agriculture has lost its importance in economy, the newly proposed Rural Development Programme (for time period 2004 – 2006) is based on agricultural and agri-environment measures and ignores the multifunctional character of rural areas.

Keywords: Rural areas, Regional Disparities, Rural Development Programme, Slovenia.
1 Characteristics of Slovenian Rural Areas

Very high share of rural areas is typical for Slovenia: some typologies encounter as much as 90 % of rural landscape with 60 % of total population.

Respecting OECD and EUROSTAT qualitative indicators (population density less than 100 inhabitants per km²) almost complete Slovene territory is enlisted as rural area. Taking into account the urbanization stage Slovenia with relatively low degree of urbanization (51 %) ranks among the most rural areas in Europe.

From demographic perspective, approx. half of settlements (3000 by number) faces with population decline; almost 700 settlements are endangered by very fast tendencies (Kladnik, Ravbar, 2003).

Slovene urban areas and especially rural areas represent very heterogenous areas (with different processes), this therefore request a use of specific and different development measures while the differences in development conditions and processes are to large to be ignored.

Fig. 1: Slovenian Rural Areas - Processes and Selected Agricultural Structures
1.1 The Role of Agriculture in Slovenia

Following the agricultural census data (in 2000) there are approx. 86,000 family farms (European size class farms) in Slovenia. The average farm size is 5.4 ha of utilised agricultural area. The prevalence of part-time farmers is characteristic and the average age of farm owner is 56 years.

There are only 5 % of active agrarian population in rural areas. Respecting the socio-economic classification, 7 % of farms are defined as full-time, 44 % as part-time, whereas there are 49 % of farms whose (some or all) active family members are employed out of the farm (Kovačič et al., 1997). But it is of high importance, that the mentioned mixed households have been responsible for preservation and maintenance of small mosaic structure of Slovenian landscape.

Tab. 1: Basic Characteristics of Agriculture in Slovenia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Unit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>agricultural area (ha)</td>
<td>663.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utilised agricultural area (ha)</td>
<td>485.878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utilised agricultural area – agricultural enterprises (ha)</td>
<td>29.664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utilised agricultural area – European size class farm (ha)</td>
<td>456.214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arable land (ha)</td>
<td>150.178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>land under permanent crops (ha)</td>
<td>25.207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grassland (ha)</td>
<td>280.829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>average farm size (ha)</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arable land per inhabitant (ha)</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European size class farms</td>
<td>86,000</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


The share of agriculture in the GDP is only 3.3 %, its economic importance in rural areas is continuously declining. Basic characteristics of agricultural sector in Slovenia show very specific image comparing to the majority of European countries. In the first line, one should stress the very modest share of utilised agricultural areas (less than 25 % of total territory; see Tab. 1). Even more unfavourable is the land use structure: permanent grassland dominate (more than 60 % of utilised agricultural area). The next indicator of extensive agricultural activity is the small share of arable land per inhabitant. But on the other side, specific natural conditions (high share of mountainous areas) caused typical orientation of agricultural production into livestock breeding (especially cattle breeding, representing 77 % of total livestock), being our major agricultural orientation.

Contemporary Trends in Rural Areas Development

Numerous processes taking place in the last decades in rural areas of Slovenia have influenced on evident changes in rural areas development. The most obvious changes are reflected in the following segments, described in Tab. 2 (Drozg, 1995).
Tab. 2: The Most Obvious Contemporary Changes of Rural Areas in Slovenia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Change</th>
<th>Impact/Issue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>social</td>
<td>• agricultural population decline (from approx. 50 % at the end of World War II to 7 % in 2002);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• socio-demographic structure getting worse (particularly age structure); one fifth of state territory faces with population decline;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• young (younger) people out-migration;</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• increase of daily commuters and mixed households (approx. 50 %);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>economic</td>
<td>• reduction in agricultural activity extend, diminished economic dependence on agricultural areas;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• rural settlements undertake new functions which are absolutely independent from agriculture (the swing of supply and service activities);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>morphologic</td>
<td>• new (not planned) ground plan scheme: frequently as »adding« new residential buildings to the former structure (usually do not correspond to older part of the settlement);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• autochthon image and regional identity of settlements lost;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• traffic infrastructure designed contemporary;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>functional</td>
<td>• old farm house function changed (the new ones often have different activities joined “under one roof”);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• changed land use inside the settled area (former agricultural areas, gardens, orchards; nowadays green plots, parking areas);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• settlement core withering away (functions re-location, the loss of activities);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• the new residential house type imported from urban milieu and consequently extermination of architectonic regional characteristics (of buildings and settlement forms);</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to interaction and causality of all mentioned (and also some other) factors, the rural areas (and population of rural areas as well) find themselves in an unenviable situation just before the formal entrance to the EU. The regional development discrepancies are enormous, and becoming even larger despite various policies (have been implemented since 1970s) – which ought to accelerate the balanced regional development. The consequences are evident in (forest-) overgrowing, demographic structure aggravation, somewhere even in cultural landscape decay.

Parallel to the above mentioned, we managed (more or less planned) to preserve the exceptional variety of landscape structure, mostly qualitative natural environment. The present rural areas environment degradation is comparatively small and scale limited (thanks to relatively extensive agriculture).

Specific natural conditions (merely 43 % of total area suitable for cultivation; Perko, 1998) caused that in many places agriculture development and intensification did not take place. Today 80 % of Slovene territory is declared as LFA (less-favoured areas for agriculture). Unfavourable cultivation conditions do not make the agricultural production impossible but they impact on lower farm competitiveness, lower assortment of cultures and farming orientation. The land use structure, only 486.000 ha of utilised agricultural land and just 170.000 ha of arable land, but on the other hand more than 60 % (the newest estimations 64 %) of total territory of Slovenia is covered by forest. Slovenia therefore deviates a lot from the EU average in the land use, especially when compared to Central European countries. Simultaneously, the processes of land use non-intensification, especially (forest-) overgrowing continue.
Rural Development Programme

Rural areas are originally multifunctional; the agricultural activities in Slovenia have not been representing the fundamental economic activity of rural areas for decades. But – agriculture is still an activity predominately responsible for cultural landscape forming, it preserves (to certain level) the natural environment; its protection function comes in forefront. For numerous areas has an important development and social role. Nevertheless, the basic function of agriculture is still production (with greater emphasis on quality rather than quantity).

The above mentioned represents the starting-point for the Slovenian Rural Development Programme (based on EU Regulations 1257/99 and 445/2002). In 2002 Slovenia signed Accession Agreement, proposing the measures of our Rural Development Programme (for time period 2004-2006). Herewith, Slovenia chose 3 priorities, accompanied by numerous measures. At the present (since March, 2004) the following measures have been fixed for financing by special state order: less-favoured areas for agriculture, support to Agri-Environmental Programme, early retirement measure, and the implementation of EU standards (nitrate directive).

Some proposed activities and measures do not represent novelty in Slovene agricultural practice (i.e. subsidizing for less-favoured areas), but are adjusted to newly defined LFA (including 80% of utilised agricultural areas).
3.1 Rural Development Programme – Solution for Agriculture or/and Rural Areas?

Rural Development Programme (2004-2006) is harmonised with the EU documents; its obvious deficiencies are:

1. not strategically orientated and not adapted to Slovenian conditions,
2. in special emphasis (besides the Article 33, 1257/99) which is given to agriculture, but – rural areas are «not only agricultural space»,
3. the criterions for the measurement of programme effectiveness being disputable,
4. lack of effective(!) monitoring of programme implementation.

The basic existing criterion is quantitative, i. e. it encounters the number of included participants into particular measure. Among 50,000 to 55,000 farm holdings (with 370,000 ha of utilised agricultural areas) should receive the compensation for less-favoured areas. Agri-Environmental Programme ought to include approx. 30,000 farm holdings; whereas in the first stage, 1200 farmers are supposed to decide for early retirement measure. The implementation of EU standards intends to incorporate 3000 farmers per year.

But the questions arise: what do these figures stand for? What about the real environmental, spatial and economic effect? Are these measures only socially oriented?

3.2 Slovenian Agri-Environmental Programme (SAEP)

The Reform of Slovene Agricultural Policy (in 1998) and The Law on Agriculture (2000) provide the implementation of Slovenian Agri-Environmental Programme (SAEP). It refers to
Slovenian agriculture re-structuring from conventional to environment friendly agriculture. The implementation of measures was progressively performed: started in 2001 (10 measures), proceeding in 2002 and 2003 (12/14 measures). Since 2004 the measures have to be implemented entirely (21 measures) – within the framework of Rural Development Programme.

SAEP involves three groups of direct payments for:

- the reduction of negative impacts on environment caused by agriculture (eight measures for sustainable agriculture: organic farming, regression of forest over-growing, maintenance of agriculture ring etc.),
- the preservation of natural resources, biodiversity, soil fertility, traditional cultural landscape (eight measures: alpine pastures, autochthon species production etc.),
- the protected areas (five measures).

Respecting various perspectives (the environment protection, poor natural conditions for competitive intensive farming) special emphasis has been given to the organic agriculture development. State support for organic farms was introduced in 1999 (as direct payments per hectare). When SAEP was introduced in 2001 as a pilot programme, these payments became one of ten accepted measures. At the end of the year 2003, there were 1354 Slovenian farmers in control: 18.855 ha have been cultivated upon the organic farming principles (3,9 % of utilised agricultural areas – included also agricultural holdings). Organic farming is evident with grassland (6,4 % of all grassland), permanent crops (0,9 %), and humble share of arable land (0,6 %).

**Fig. 4: The Structure of Organic Land in Slovenia**

![Pie chart showing the structure of organic land in Slovenia](source: Kmetijsko-gozdarski zavod Maribor, 2003.)

The formerly performed extensive cultivation in Slovenia becomes even more obvious with the organic land structure: the share of grassland increases up to 94 %. The spatial distribution of organic land is very favourable for Slovenian mountainous and karst areas with traditional livestock breeding. Whereas, the central and eastern parts of Slovenia (with the most favourable natural conditions for agriculture) lag behind with the implementation of organic farming.
Fundamentally, organic farming is an example of agri-environment measure, which can be evaluated as very positive and stimulating from environmental and spatial perspective. The number of organic farms and organic land has been extremely increasing in the past years. This re-orientation towards environment friendly agriculture is bound up especially with subsidies and areas with deprived natural conditions for agriculture (extensive farming by default). In this case, the re-structuring towards organic farming is relatively not complicated. Temporary survey results indicate the non-strategic orientation of this specific measure: the quantity and sort of product is without control. The clear picture of real impacts of these measures is missing. The described example also shows that the expenditure of means is absolutely not developmentally set. It ought to be focused on solid purpose with clear final scope. SAEP does not give guidelines, our programme documents have not respected (enough) the reality.
Regional Disparities

The real extend of regional disparities demonstrates especially when all the above mentioned development characteristics are analysed (and compared) in particular regions. Regional disparities alight specific regional and local problems.

Respecting the existing typologies of rural areas in Slovenia, one should discuss at least three basic types of rural areas (suburban areas, typical rural areas, depopulation areas) (Perpar, Kovačič, 2002). Along with this, we can distinguish numerous subtypes (usually depend on selected criterions).

So far existing measures for regional disparities reduction have not caused significant shifts. Even more, regional disparities inside such a small country as Slovenia, have once more become larger and deeper (with growing tendency).

As the majority of changes usually depends on human potential, we state that the previous measures did not obey enough the strengths (potentials) of »vital« population structure. It has been proved that the employment of just demographic data does not enable a thorough analysis and further projections of demographic development as well (and also the preparation of suitable measures). The projections and measures are far more effective by using the concept of demographic (i.e. households) vitality. The development acteur is not an individual, but household (family as integrity). Vital household (family) units represent the economic potential, they take care of residential function – by preserving the settled area and maintaining the cultural landscape.

The vitality of wider region is to be attained by monitoring the households vitality of particular settlement (and settlements) of selected area. Based upon the vitality potential appropriate measures should be accepted. They have to direct towards desired (and realistic) changes and shift in the context of sustainable regional development.

Our survey (one geographic region, seven selected settlements, 246 households, more than 800 inhabitants) indicated that we should not be limited to only tight aspect of vitality based only on households age structure and on “reproduction potential”. Development of particular
regions hardly depends on vitality deriving from socio-economic factors (age, education, employment of household members etc.).

In a case study of smaller Slovenian region (Suha krajina, situated southeastern from Ljubljana) the households vitality in selected settlements was defined (the basic stage – i.e. reproduction vitality – based on age of each household member). This methodology determined seven household vitality types: extending from the most vital (all household members younger than 35 years, the opportunities for family creation are the best) to aged ones (all household members encounter more than 70 years they are non-perspective and -often-working disable).

We want to emphasise that only the household reproduction vitality aspect is too narrow. For example, households with members elder than 50 years (non-perspective from reproduction aspect – similar to the households with members over 70 years) still attain numerous functions and an important role as they are (mostly) able to work although they are officially »retired«. These particular generations (between 50 and 70 years old) still cultivate the land in many rural areas of Slovenia or are of great help to younger (if living close by).

The household vitality types in selected region are represented from the perspective aspect:

- perspective households (most vital households, all members under 35, often three generations living together),
- potentially perspective (vital: mature generation),
- non-perspective (non-vital: all household members older than 35, the probability of family creating is low) ones.

Case study indicates huge local discrepancies among settlements: some of them are absolutely non-perspective from vitality aspect, on the other side some have good vitality potential. It is very interesting that some settlements hold positive demographic index based on the in-migration of retired people (returning back to the place of origin or to secondary homes), but from the vitality aspect they still remain non-perspective. We are aware of proposed methodology insufficiencies, therefore by evaluation of regional development perspectives, the combination with endogenous potentials and regional economic cycles is to be added.

**Fig. 7: Households Perspective in Selected Settlements of Suha krajina**
5 Conclusion

Different causes have influenced the (present) image and circumstances of rural areas in Slovenia. We have to encounter the industrialization delay (comparing to Western European countries), political influences on agriculture, unfavourable natural conditions for agriculture and especially the policentric regional policy (Klemenčič, 2002). Herewith, we were able to preserve the unique settled rural areas (altogether approx. 6000 settlements) although the agriculture (as the traditional "leading" activity in rural areas) lag behind in sense of development. As a "special heritage" we brought the medieval agrarian structure at the beginning of the 21st century: significant changes are not evident despite the undertaken strategies, programmes, measures and financial means of the 1990s (only slight changes indicated in some areas).

Slovenia has just started with the implementation of Rural Development Programme by EU standards, therefore profound and detailed analysis is not possible. Only slight remarks on selected measures are relevant (i.e. agri-environment measures, organic farming).

We propose combination of various elements for future development projections (and selected measures): vitality ought to be combined with endogenous potentials and regional economic cycles.

Sustainable development of rural areas performs one of the main Slovenian development orientations. Following the recent means expenditure proposed by Rural Development Programme, one should conclude, that they are primarily designed for agriculture stabilisation and not at all for holistic rural areas development. Similarities with other measures occur.

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