



Original Contribution

MULTIFUNCTIONAL AGRICULTURE AS OPPORTUNITY FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The multifunctional character of agriculture is presented in the context of the functions inherent in the sector. The foci of scientific interest are the productive function, the social function, the employment on the territory and the environmental function. Our attention in this paper is focused mainly on the contribution of agriculture to the economic viability of rural regions. In addition, the opportunities for achieving integrated rural development are discussed.

Key words: multifunctional agriculture, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is a human activity, which has, in various ways, had sustained effect, positively or negatively, on the environment and society at large. In that respect it has always had several functions, which had combined, supplemented each other or had opposing results.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The core of the concept of multifunctionality is traditionally regarded as the characteristics of agricultural production in creating simultaneously several interrelated results – market and non-market ones. The main function of agriculture to provide high quality food for the population is related to the closely linked opportunities for protecting our environment, biodiversity and the wealth of cultural traditions and values in rural life, etc, [1,2,3,4].

Unlike the concept of sustainability, which is justifiably [3] defined as a “resource oriented, long-term and global concept”, the one about multifunctionality is related to the immediate human activity and the way of its implementation. Moreover, it is typical of any economic activity, but undoubtedly its significance is the greatest for agriculture and

forestry. In that sense sustainability is referred most to the ways of utilising resources, while multifunctionality is oriented towards activity, since it is an imminent characteristic of the production process.

Quite common in the reference sources are two approaches in interpreting multifunctionality of agriculture. A number of documents and authors [5] refer to that phenomenon as an intrinsic feature of agriculture to retain value or to contribute to its increase. The so-called “normative” point of view reflects the traditional view about the role of the agricultural branch to provide food for the population. Analysing the essence of the normative approach some authors [6] point out that it focuses on multifunctionality through the complex functions related to agriculture. The most common objects of research interest are the production function, food security, social function, employment, the territory and the environmental impact.

By summarising the differences of opinions one can draw a conclusion that, regardless of accepting multifunctionality, the normative approach distinguishes one of the many functions of the branch – production of agricultural products – as a main one. The other functions are interpreted more as accompanying and subject to the main one.

The positive approach to multifunctionality issues is more and more supported by European researchers. It is related to and deduced from the characteristics of the agricultural production process and its

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results. A great deal of the authors [3,5,7] point out as basic key elements of the concept “the existence of interrelated commodity and non-commodity results, produced by agriculture” as well as the fact that markets for these non-commodity results do not exist or function inadequately. The existence of interrelated results of one and the same production process is interpreted by some authors as production aspects of multifunctionality.

Along with the production of commodity and non-market public wealth a number of authors point out the significance of the impact of agricultural activity. The essence of this impact is rooted in the interdependence of agents. Most authors do not distinguish the impact of agriculture from the related products and public wealth it produces. Even those researchers who make that distinction acknowledge that, due to the complex nature of the impact of agriculture, that borderline is quite vague. In their opinion [7] impact refers to “situations in which the production and consumption decisions of an agent affect directly the welfare or well-being of other agents, but the market does not assess or pay to that agent on that interaction”. Therefore, impact is limited to interdependence of private agents in time and space and they are related to spatial proximity and technical or other interdependence, i.e. they are closely related to the territory and the opportunities for regional development.

The multifaceted role of agriculture is traditionally determined as:

- Providing nutrition for the population;
- Contributing to the sustainable development;
- Environmental protection;
- Creating sustainable viability of rural areas;
- Contributing to reducing poverty.

Regardless of the fact that regional development depends on the economic activity of all inhabitants, some authors [8] point out correctly that the role of farmers is strategic in the initiatives of regional development. Since they are the owners of land, buildings, animals, etc., they are also the individuals who are able to combine these resources according to their goals.

On the other hand, in the conditions of globalisation more and more farming families realise the backwardness of their farms and their way of life compared to the modernisation processes. The latter is the core of the motivation for looking for activities that

contribute to reduction and even overcoming of differences. The participation of farmers in the implementation of new practices results in increasing satisfaction from their work since that enables them keep the farm and the way of life related to it, as well as the family traditions.

The European model of agriculture based on its multifunctional development sets the task of stimulating the positive impact and reducing the negative as far as possible. Due to these reasons and using its instruments EU aims at reaching a delicate balance between the continuing support for intensive production and redirecting resources to multifunctional agriculture. An example of such an approach is the French law on tendencies of agriculture dated July 1999, which establishes the multifunctional character of agriculture and the necessities to be taken into account in the agrarian policy. In order to link regional to branch development, the French law on the tendencies of agricultural development stipulates the signing of an Agreement for regional management, which is to implement the multifunctional model of agriculture. The first part of the contract is a summary of the intentions of individual farmers or their associations in the form of projects. Therefore, it contains socio-economic elements of the project, related to the economy and individual or group employment, while in the second part the emphasis is on territory and environment. It evaluates how much the implemented changes will impact the environment and nature and what compensations farmers will derive from these changes.

The transition to multifunctional agriculture [9] presupposes creating conditions for wide public support and regulations in three aspects at least. The latter could be summarised as:

- Advice and institutional measures;
- Regulations and legal measures;
- Economic instruments.

The first group of measures refers mainly to improvement of the business information environment. In that regard is the importance of further establishment and enlargement of the scope of activity of the National system for advice in agriculture and the creation of prerequisites for implementing the good production practices by the greatest possible number of agricultural producers in the rural area. To that end the opportunities provided by the National centre of agrarian sciences

and its technological stock should be utilised for developing and maintaining crop varieties suitable for the respective region, technologies for growing them, etc. Farmers have to be informed about the recommended fertilization rates, use of herbicides and other technological solutions.

The instruments of agrarian policy have to be implemented simultaneously in order to provide healthy food of high quality and to create conditions for improving and maintaining the environmental characteristics. To that end it is necessary to implement various standards on the emission of various substances in the air, on water quality, etc. In that way standards on quality of the environment would equally be implemented.

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