TRUST AND SOLIDARITY IN BULGARIAN COOPERATIVES

Poverenje i solidarnost u bugarskim zadrugama

APSTRAKT U ovom radu se analiziraju strategije na koje se ljudi oslanjaju u poljoprivredi, naročito u planinskim predelima gde je fragmentacija zemlje u značajnoj meri izražena. Takođe tu je i količina zemlje ograničena. Ovo ima značajne posledice za poljoprivredni razvoj. Kultura zadržavanja zemlje predaka je opterećujuća za tržište poljoprivrednog zemljišta. Proces uzimanja zemljišta u najam uslovljen je vrstom biljaka koje će se na njemu uzgajati, i kako su zakonom o dodeljivanju zemljišta u najam dozvoljeni ugovori sa važenjem od najviše pet godina, za zemljoradnike je nesigurno da uzgajaju višegodišnje biljke na takvom zemljištu. U ovakvoj situaciji opstanak malih zemljoradnika zavisi od njihove sposobnosti da saraduju i međusobno se potpomažu. U ovom članku se opisuje javljanje zadruge za biološku proizvodnju ruža, nane i mleka u “Dolini ruža”, oblastima Karlovo i Gabrovo, solidarnost između zemljoradnika, podsticaji i prepreke koje stoje na putu njihovih aktivnosti. U njemu se otkriva kultura uzajamnog pomaganja koja se ne zasniva toliko na ekonomskim podsticajima već na ljubavi prema prirodi i životnoj sredini, snažnoj želji da se dokaže da biološka proizvodnja može da se razvije u ovoj zemlji i da su biološki proizvodi budućnost za bugarsku poljoprivredu. U pitanju je drugačija vrsta zadruga u odnosu na socializtički kolektiv. Trenutno oformljena zadruga ujedinjuje zemljoradnike po pitanju obrazovanja, kvalifikacije, tržišta i uzajamne pomoći pri ostvarivanju ciljeva, ali svaki zemljoradnik sam proizvodi svoje proizvode. Zemljoradnici zajedno prodaju svoje proizvode i svaki zavisi od odabrane kulture uzgajanja bioloških proizvoda od strane drugih. Dosadašnje iskustvo se pokazalo kao pozitivno a zadruga je pokazala održiv razvoj. Ovome je takođe doprinelo stvaranje tri profesionalne oružanih organizacija - zadruge kao jedinice za proizvodnju, organizacije za širenje znanja o organskoj proizvodnji i ovlašćene organizacije za izdavanje sertifikata za biološke proizvode. Opstanak zadruge zavisi od napornog rada i solidarnosti zemljoradnika, snažne želje za opstankom, nade za budućom značajnom pomoći i subvencijama na polju poljoprivrede kada Bugarska postane član EU i za poboljšanjem ekonomske situacije u zemlji koja bi doprinela većoj platežnoj moći stanovništva.

KLJUČNE REČI poljoprivreda, Bugarska, zadruge

ABSTRACT The paper analyzes the strategies of people in agriculture, especially in the mountain regions where the fragmentation of land is significant. The quantity of land there is also limited. This leads to important consequences for the agrarian development. The culture of keeping the lands of the predecessors burdens the market of agricultural lands. The renting of lands depends on the types of plants to be cultivated as the law for renting lands allows contracts for the max of five years and for the farmers it is insecure to cultivate perennial plants on such lands. In this situation the survival of the small-scale farmers depends on their ability to coop and support each other. The article describes the emergence of a coop for bioproduction of roses, mint and milk in the “Valley of Roses”, Karlovo and Gabrovo regions, the solidarity between the farmers, the stimuli and barriers to their activities. It

reveals the culture of mutual support based not so much on economic but rather on other incentives such as love to nature and environment, strong desire to prove that bioproduction could develop in the country and that bioproducts are the future for Bulgarian agriculture. It is a different coop in comparison with the socialist collectives. The now established coop unites the farmers for education, qualification, market and mutual support for objectives, but each farmer produces his/her products alone. The farmers sell the products together and each one depends on the culture of others' conscious cultivation of bioproducts. Until now, the experience has been positive and the coop has sustainable development. This is also due to the creation of three professional organizations – the coop as a producing unit, organization for distributing knowledge on organic production and a certifying organization of bioproducts. The survival of the coop depends on farmers’ hard work and solidarity, the strong will to survive, the hope for future significant agricultural support and subsidies when the European Union enlargement involves Bulgaria and the improvement of the economic situation in the country that could bring better buying abilities of the population.

KEY WORDS agriculture, Bulgaria, cooperatives

Introduction

In the years of transition the Bulgarian agriculture has been characterized with significant changes. There are major ownership transformations that are taking place as well as legal and structural reforms (Zhivkova V., 1998; Dobreva S., 1997; NSI Investigations, 1992). As a consequence, the trust and solidarity, the work motivation and expectations of the members of the newly emerging agricultural organizations are of crucial importance for the sustainable development in rural areas. In this regard a major objective in this article is to describe and analyze (the strategies of people in agriculture), in the setting of significant political, economic and social changes, the strategies of people in agriculture. In order to present a more clear view on these issues we will present our empirical results from a study on a newly emerging coop Bio Bulgaria portraying the stimuli and barriers to its development. Studying the institutional, economic and individual sources, we will especially delve into the rising idea for biological agriculture in Bulgaria, uniting a group of people willing to cooperate with each other in the years of difficult agricultural survival and succeeding because of outside help and their comprehension of the necessity for mutual trust and help as a basis that could bring sustainable advance to them and their families.

We will concretely analyze the creation of the coop Bio Bulgaria in 2000 considering the mechanisms of cooperation and solidarity among the producers of bioproducts, their suspicions, fears, expectations from the coop institution and relationships with the rest of the villages’ producers and with the local and state authorities.

In order to fulfil the above stated objectives we carried out an empirical investigation in 2002-2003 in the region of the Valley of Roses and especially in the villages of Kliment, Bogdan, Banya and the small towns – Karlovo and Kalofer and in the region of the North Stara Planina – the villages of Burya, Boriki and the town of Gabrovo. The choice of the two regions is intentional. It permits to compare the
various strategies, motives and possibilities with regard to different and specific economic, demographic, social, geographic, infrastructure locations that could accelerate or burden the cooperation of the agricultural producers. The interviewed individuals are all initiators of the production of bioproducts in Bulgaria. Before explaining the strategy of these people in the farming of organic products, we would like to present a brief description of the development of agriculture in the years of transformation.

**Transition in Rural Bulgaria – Impacts and Changing Values**

Changes in Bulgaria’s politics and political institutions since 1990 have been rapid and quite fundamental. The Bulgarian State has had a broad and general vision for development. In this regard the maintenance of the macro-stability was the prior objective. Sustainable structural reforms, especially restructuring of the energy sector, the transportation system, telecommunications and the water sector, rank high on the agenda. The vision embraces also the strengthening of market institutions (competition, legal reform, and public services), the developing of the financial sector (crediting), the improvement of governance (corruption, strength of local governments) and investments in human capital (education, health, pension, social assistance). In the long term the tertiary sector (trade, construction, communication, and education) is expected to expand. The private sector, expanding in the field of small and medium enterprises, has become the main source for labor demand. Yet, in the last 16 years the political elite, expected to lead the country on the path of such a development, acts in a state of constant replacements or recycling, which constrains the decision making process and the implementation of any long-term strategy.

Moreover, the unemployment rate in the years of transition is high (11.77% in 2005) and there are rural areas such as North-East Bulgaria and North-West Bulgaria where the unemployment rate is about 20%\(^2\). The primary sector (mining industry as an example) continues to shrink, as enterprises in coal mining and metallurgy are not profitable. In the absence of a real market economy and due to restricted access to credits, small and middle enterprises have difficulties to come up. The legal framework is still inconsistent. There are repeated changes in registration requirements and tax system. The taxation in Bulgaria is high.

The fast privatization of huge assets of state property enabled influential members of the former socialist elite to transform their political power into economic power\(^3\). The transformation polarizes society, producing winners and

---


losers. The new economic elite lives largely isolated from the wider stratum of the population, which experiences material conditions declining to sheer misery.

Our interviews reveal that Bulgarians perceive their country as part of Europe and very often consider Switzerland (about 75% of the respondents) as the reference model of development. While most people welcome this opening of the country as a positive outcome of transition, they perceive the massive de-industrialization and the rapidly diversifying social environment as the most tangible outcomes of this process. In short, they experience economic decline with widespread unemployment, combined with a rise of social inequality. The public opinion from 2005 reconfirms that, in contrast to 1989, now 50% of the respondents claim that the situation has worsened, 33% see no change, and only 17% perceive an improvement.4

National Statistical Institute (NSI) data is discouraging. The lion’s share of the household incomes in Bulgaria in 2005 was spent on food and electricity, water, fuels and rental bills. A much more humble share went for clothes, shoes and new furniture. The National Statistics Institute survey has also found that Bulgarians have allotted less money for cultural events and education than in 2005. The share of such expenses is a mere 3%.5

Poverty in Bulgaria has by now also acquired a territorial dimension. In particular, there is a notable difference between the capital city, Sofia, and the rest of the country. Programs for poverty alleviation try to re-establish a safety net for the poorest households. The nature of poverty in the first decade of transformation (1989-1997) was a transient phenomenon resulting from the immediate shock of hyperinflation and sharply increasing unemployment. After 2000 poverty affects clearly defined groups: in the first place unemployed and the long-term unemployed who have lower education and lack of professional skills. Then also the old people, especially those without family support. There are also specific social exclusions at work. Ethnicity has become a clear correlate of poverty. Reducing unemployment and mending the net of social security have become a crucial challenge for Bulgaria’s further development.

Transition has created a space for choice for the Bulgarians. Under socialism all people were employed in the state sector. The leveling was significant and enterprising individuals did not find adequate room to develop. Socialism offered

---

4 www.bnr.bg/RadioBulgaria/Emission_English/Theme_Lifestyle/Material
5 http://www.nsi.bg/ZActual/BudgetHome05.htm
6 In its Report, Bulgaria Poverty Assessment, Oct. 2002, the Worldbank recommends establishing a poverty map.
7 In 2001, the unemployment rate amounted to 18.1 % and improved to 11.77 % until end of 2005. Especially worrisome is the long duration: Roughly 64 % of the unemployment is long-term (more than one year).
8 While ethnic Bulgarians (82.3% of the population) show a poverty rate of 5.6%, the one of the Romas (4.7%) amounts to 61.8 % and the one of the Turks (9.4%) to 20.9 %; WB, Poverty Assessment, 2002: 15; http://www.nsi.bg/Census/Census.htm
“sustainable livelihood” within a narrow frame. The transition has put the established patterns of values out of use. Enthusiasm alone, this was the first lesson of the transition, was not enough for developing new strategies. These are assets, know-how and social networks that matter, especially for realizing aspirations in the private business.

In 2005 the euphoric attitude from the beginning of the transition has made room to more rational and practical choices, based on one's own resources (land restitution, accumulated financial resources, education, experience, expertise, family work force) and credit possibilities. Very often people learn the rules of the market economy by their own experience. Our empirical data reveal that two out of three Bulgarians consider the lack of knowledge as a crucial entry barrier for a business start-up. From this perspective all initiatives for transfer of knowledge and experience from more advanced societies that links people’s motivation with practical and internationally acceptable standards and know-how are welcome. In addition, the preferences of young people to study economics, law, and medicine and computer science can be interpreted as an indicator of the gradual shift towards market-oriented life values and strategies.

Transition challenges traditional top-down development approaches as well and encourages participation and one's own initiatives. This appeals more to people with university education and the younger generation in general. Yet, these Bulgarians also represent the majority of the potential out-migrants, estimated at 7% of the population⁹. Members of the older generations, in turn, still show preferences for a strong state offering stability and security in the country. They continue to perceive the state as the main provider of solutions.

People shape their values according to their own perceptions and experience. “What is ‘transition’ for the expert is life for the people” reminds Ivan Krastev. Any development support to a pre-defined target group, be it farmers or traders, must be negotiated on the basis of this.

The agrarian reform has accelerated the return of the private property to the villages. More than 1.7 million restitution applications for land are made. Nevertheless, the land restitution has not restored the old peasant society of pre-socialist times. However, for Bulgaria with its tradition in agriculture and farming, small agro-based businesses are increasingly regarded as a significant source of ensuring a decent living. Yet, the rural population still faces low levels of income as well as low levels of agricultural production, due to the lack of access to markets, inadequate investments and severe constraints in land use development because of land fragmentation, resulting from the restitution process.

---

⁹ Between 1995 and 2005 alone, the population of Bulgaria declined from 8.3 Million to 7.8 Million, http://www.nsi.bg/Population/Population.htm

¹⁰ Krastev Ivan, 2003, The Inflexibility Trap, Sofia: Center for Liberal Strategies
In Bulgaria, tracing the life story of an average family of three generations, means moving through consequences of three distinctively different historical periods. There is the generation of the grandparents, which has grown up in the pre-socialist period and has gone through an enforced transition period after World War II, leading to a society under a socialist regime. They are followed by the parents generation, born into the socialist era and carrying that legacy into today’s life. Finally, we meet the youngest generation of their daughters and sons, whose values evolve in the ongoing transition from socialism to democracy and market economy. Transition is thus not a new phenomenon for a Bulgarian family but forms part of an intergenerational experience. We would like to illustrate some aspects of this process in the case of family M., introducing first the present head of this family.

M.M. is in his forties, lives in a village in the region known as the “Valley of Roses”, is married, and has a daughter of 8 and a son of 14 years. He has higher technical education and worked for a specialized branch of a large regional army factory with a workforce of roughly 15,000 employees. The region was highly industrialized under socialism. From this village alone a daily bus service shuttled 350 persons to the factory. In contrast to other employees, he left his job in the late 1980’s and very soon turned to cattle breeding, motivated by a friend who managed to become rich through illegal large-scale private farming close to Sofia. Yet, at that time, M.M., as all other villagers, actually had the right to keep only one cow and to cultivate 0.2 ha of land to support the family consumption. To M.M.’s luck, his initiative coincided with the beginning of transition marked by a rapid breakdown of the Bulgarian industry and the restitution of agricultural land to the former owners.

The transition, M.M. feels, has brought political freedom, value system change but not significant economic progress yet. The re-privatization of the land has encouraged his family to return to private farming, where the family looks back on a tradition in cattle breeding, as his grandfather was holding cows and sheep before socialism. His village is situated in a hilly region and the arable land is limited and very fragmented. While the land was collectively cultivated under socialism, the re-privatization happened according to the ownership within the boundaries of 194611. The land fragmentation has substantially increased, since the holdings of 1946 were meanwhile to be split between many heirs, living in urban areas and not being anymore interested to cultivate their plots. This motivated M.M. to lease 50 ha of land, by the means of no less than 30 contracts, all restricted to a lease period of 5 years maximum. As all the other farmers in such a situation, he adapts his farming system to this fact. He cultivates perennial crops such as roses, mint and lavender, which requires investments for his own land of 3.5 ha. However, seasonal crops like potatoes and fodder for 35 cows, he cultivates on the leased plots. From the abandoned socialist coop he bought machinery and a decaying stable.

M.M. has the personality of an entrepreneur who felt attracted by the option of organic farming introduced by the Swiss project at an early stage. With his large family of

11 Land Law, 1991, Sate Gazette 17; Land Law, Changes, 1992, Sate Gazette 28; Land Law, Changes, 1995, Sate Gazette 45
Dobrinka Kostova: Trust and Solidarity in Bulgarian Cooperatives 155

10, the parents, his brother and himself, with their wives and children, he is able to mobilize the manual labor needed for bioagriculture. He has become president of the co-operative society “Bio Bulgaria” and is actively involved in building up production associations in milk processing, as well as in the cultivation and processing of roses and herbs.

His mother represents a generation already experiencing already the second transition. As a young girl she became witness of the conflicts caused by the collectivization in her village. In order to acquire a suitable personal record for an envisaged employment in the newly established factory of the Bulgarian army, where her husband also worked, she first had to prove herself in a cow-milking brigade of the regional coop for two years. She can document her factory life with many photos from excursions. She now receives a monthly pension of 120 levas. Yet, she is rapidly losing her former working colleagues due to the health hazards they had been exposed to in their factory life.

M.M.’s wife holds a university degree in economics and is a part-time employee in “Bio Bulgaria”, a foundation established for extension services in organic farming. She is actively involved in their farming activity and takes care of the accounts. She and her husband shuttle between the village and the nearby town, where their family owns a house and where the children attend school since the village school is about to collapse. While she is aware of the new options a democratic Bulgaria could offer, she is deeply worried about her children’s value system development. She speaks of a “lost generation” because, in her eyes, the quality of schooling decreases and the social value system decays under the impact of a chaotic transition process.

M. M.’s family pins their hopes on a successful development of bioagriculture with access to the EU-market and a steady development of the local demand. The support, trust and solidarity among the members of coop Bio Bulgaria are considered as absolutely essential for realizing sustainable development.

The above family life story acquaints us with a self-assessment and the outlook of a stakeholder, which should be put into a larger context of rural transition, summarized in the following paragraph.

At the outset of the transition the agrarian reforms in Bulgaria were aimed at re-privatization of agriculture. In 1993, the share of private cultivation already reached 59.7%. In 1995 it increased to 74.7%. Full privatization was completed at the end of the 1990s.

This development reveals an interest and a motivation for privatized agriculture in Bulgaria. According to the statistical data the agricultural land in the country amounts to 6.2 million ha, of which 4.8 million is arable. About 27% of the arable land or around 1.5 – 1.6 million ha is divided amongst not less than 1.7 million “new” owners. Nowadays the newly established coops cultivate 2.2 million ha and the private farmers 1.1 million ha.

13 Statistical Yearbook 1996: 138
14 Statistical Yearbook 1999: 137
However, privatization has significantly changed the value system but it still has not brought substantial economic prosperity to this sector of the national economy. The agricultural information reveals that the output at the end of the 1990's (still) remains still below the level reached during the last years of socialism\textsuperscript{16}. One of the main explanations can be found in the ineffective use of the land. At the beginning of the 21st century for example, only two thirds of the arable land was under cultivation.

In today’s agriculture we encounter four distinctively different ownership patterns with equally different management approaches.

(1) Landowners with no interest or no possibilities to become farmers

Apparently, 1.5 million owners do not cultivate their re-privatized land at all or, if so, only a plot of land of 0.5 up to 1 ha to meet family food needs or to have the opportunity of an additional labor activity. Such land is free for lease, at low prices, yet only for a period limited to five years.

(2) Cooperative agricultural enterprises\textsuperscript{17}

The coops formed after 1992 constitute the second type of ownership in Bulgarian agriculture. These new co-operatives are in an extremely critical situation. Technical, economic and managerial problems are undermining their actual existence. Because of the negative experience with collectivization during socialism, the new coops have low prestige. Their members live in the villages and are either elderly people, or not enough educated, or too accustomed to the socialist collective cultivation. With this blend of ownership they are rarely able to develop agriculture on capitalistic market principles. Moreover, the coop leaders are often close to retirement and rarely have sufficient contacts with the agricultural trading firms and the food industry. Due to insufficient political support, these new coops have no great chances to get financial credits or investments at favorable conditions.

(3) Large-scale agricultural entrepreneurs

This third group embraces a small number of entrepreneurs belonging to the former leadership of the socialist collectives, who, in the beginning of the transformation period, managed to become agricultural capitalists. Paradoxically, the land reform brought profits mainly to them. The liquidation of the collectives with the 1992 law\textsuperscript{18} has meant the suppression of the agrarian socialist management through the collectives’ property distribution and their leaders’ dismissal. This has been a political attempt for the agrarian sector’s “de-communization” in the country. Their strategy is large-scale agriculture. They cultivate between 600 and 3 000 ha of land in the plain regions of Bulgaria and they are now buying the land of the small owners.


\textsuperscript{17} Compare; Giordano Ch. and Kostova D., The Crisis of the Bulgarian Cooperatives in the 1990's, JOURNAL OF RURAL COOPERATION, 27(1), 1999:17-29

\textsuperscript{18} Land Law, Changes, 1992, Sate Gazette 28
(4) Re-emerging family farming

The re-establishment of ownership of relatively small plots of land in the mountain regions and the process of a rapid de-industrialization in these regions stimulated family farming, the fourth significant group in Bulgarian agriculture in the transition. The interest of some of these owners in the field of organic farming is due to a significant change in the value system and involves the following reasons. These farm families have to carve out special market niches and are therefore inclined to explore the option of organic farming for sustainable rural livelihood. They aim at reliable markets with prospects and good prices. Organic farming requires substantial labor inputs that are available under conditions of de-industrialization of the mountain regions. It can rely on a well-educated labor force with limited alternatives in the ongoing transition. Organic farming may also stimulate social networking, trust and solidarity.

Changing Value Systems and Emerging New Strategies

According to the value system of the families interviewed in this survey, organic farming should become the core of their future livelihood strategy. This change in the value orientation is generated by push and pull factors:

Among the pull factors we noticed, during the interviews, a deep-rooted belief in the positive prospects for organic farming, a conviction that there is an existing market in the European Union (EU) and a potential local one in Bulgaria. The SAPARD fund has nurtured the hope for an EU support for developing biofarming. This positive outlook is reinforced by the expectation that organic farming and the image of a clean region would enhance the tourist attraction, especially of the Valley of Roses. Last, but not least, reference is made to the tradition of organic farming based on respect for nature and its regeneration cycles.

After the first round of interviews, the question remains open: to what extent organic farming with perspectives of external support just attracts people with an entrepreneurial spirit and an outlook for new options or people that look for solidarity into an activity with high social profile.

Prominent among the push factors is a strong conviction that, in the given context of Bulgaria’s agriculture, family farming along traditional lines has no future and hardly a chance to compete with large agro-enterprises in the market or with the imported goods from subsidized European agro-production. This outlook is also corroborated by the inability to afford the required chemical fertilizers and

---

19 For livelihood approach please see: Baumgartner R. and Hoggere R., 2004, In Search of Sustainable Livelihood Systems
20 Special Accession Program for Agriculture and Rural Development, an EU-fund available for the rural development program of Bulgaria.
pesticides. Organic farming offers also prospects to absorb surplus manpower within the one's own family.

The farm families are aware of the many steps to climb towards sustainable rural livelihood. The most crucial ones in their opinion are:

- To manage the conversion of their farms to organic agriculture
- To get the required certification for their products
- To tap gainfully the European demand for bioproducts
- To contribute to the development of a local market for bioproducts in Bulgaria
- To generate enough income for consolidating the farms in terms of land ownership and lease contracts as well as productive investments.

For all these steps the farmers count on solid assistance from each one of the family involved with organic agriculture. From this perspective, the trust and solidarity is considered, for the time being, as a basic factor in the sense of the sustainability of the organic production, trade and development.

### Crucial Elements in the Cooperation Context

#### Table 1: Cooperation: Vulnerabilities, Strategies and Solidarity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived vulnerability</th>
<th>Coping strategy</th>
<th>Role of trust &amp; solidarity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scarce financial resources with limited access to credit</td>
<td>Concentrate on labor intensive small-scale agriculture, use second-hand machinery and rely on their own mechanical skills</td>
<td>Provide know-how to those interested and motivate them for agro-production with high value added for increasing income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak position in local market with cheap imports of agro-products</td>
<td>Join the cooperative society and pool sales</td>
<td>Empower the cooperative society to produce niche products and build up urban markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependency on unreliable traders belonging to rackets</td>
<td>Focus on products which can be marketed through channels offered by the cooperative</td>
<td>Provide professional support in market development through the co-operative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreasing safety and increasing robberies of harvests and animals</td>
<td>Invest time for protection, not leasing faraway land</td>
<td>Support each other in the protection of the fields and the harvest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited ownership of land and no long-term land leasing contracts</td>
<td>Save money – buy land, be selective in choosing contract partners for land lease</td>
<td>Provide information on credit facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts in the villages based on ideological positions</td>
<td>Orientation to privacy and one's own family</td>
<td>Solidarity in economic terms, neglect of political differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreasing quality of schools in villages</td>
<td>Send children to nearby towns</td>
<td>Provide information and mobility of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic success generates mistrust and envy</td>
<td>Do not share too much within the village</td>
<td>Trust and solidarity among the members to increase the chances for success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reference frame applied for investigating solidarity among bioproducers puts emphasis on the vulnerability context as an important factor in shaping livelihood strategies. The conducted interviews offer interesting insight into farmers’

---

21 Fertiliser use declined from 800 000 tons in 1989 to 200 000 tons in 1996 according to the statistical data
value system and perception of solidarity in the conditions of vulnerability, understood as an assessment of their capability to cope with external threats and risks. Comparing the cooperation, we therefore list the following three - the perceived values and vulnerability, the corresponding coping strategy and add the role of trust and solidarity. The table indicates to what extent farmers perceive vulnerabilities outside and inside the coop and their prospective strategies relying on the solidarity between themselves.

Using the above table as a reference frame for analyzing the changes in the value system suggests making a distinction between the physical framework (ownership changes, skills, traditions, etc.), the socio-economic, family and inner-human dimensions and the orientations and values. In the next paragraph we refer selectively to these properties of the value system.

**Assets, skills and experience**

The ownership of a house (assured also under the socialist regime), land (as a result of re-privatization in the transition), cattle (increased during transition) and machinery (acquired from defunct socialist collectives) form the *material* pillar of the family farms. The land fragmentation in the process of re-privatization offers the option of taking additional land under cultivation through lease-arrangement. This entails, however, a much differentiated land use, with preference to cultivate perennial crops on private land only. Cattle ownership has become an important and necessary component in biofarming. The increase of herds is favored by access to vast underused pasture areas.

Among the assets of the “new farmers”, skills and experience in the transition process in Bulgaria have created a very specific situation. In most of the family farms we find a productive combination between traditional agro-based skills and knowledge as well as experience gained in industry during the socialist time. In this regard the life story described above is representative. This constellation has certainly generated a motivation to learn, to structure and to plan rationally, as well as to make productive use of the exposure to bio-agriculture. The ability to work with second-hand machinery and to maintain it with limited access to spare parts is another positive outcome.

And finally, we should also not underrate the role of emotional attachments to farming, also maintained in rural areas during the socialist period.

**Trust and collaboration in the socio-economic sphere**

Without deeper insights into the “family space”, with the gender-related decision-making and task sharing, we limit ourselves here to some observations regarding the “socio-economic space”, the field of social and economic interactions. Village life of the pre-socialist time is remembered as a time of reciprocal support, for house construction for instance. This contrasts to the perceived loss of
trust and motivation for collaboration in the rural society of present days. Thus, the significance of trust and cooperation between the members of the coop for organic agriculture is considered indispensable.

Moreover, this is needed as farmers’ experience in the markets for agricultural products was unpredictable and a source of irritation for all those used to the regulated contract-delivery-system of the socialist period. Markets are increasingly perceived as “mafia-controlled”, with instrumentalisation of members of the Roma community as “traders”. Finally, in contrast to the declared de-centralization, reality in the countryside is perceived as Sofia-dominated; farmers have to deal with powerless local authorities.

**Values, orientations and worldviews**

Differentiating in detail between various types of livelihood values on the narrow basis of the conducted interviews would invite too much interpretation, not to say speculation. Yet, two conflicting perceptions remain noteworthy: On one hand there is an agreement that democracy offers choice! But on the other hand transition is linked to anarchy and chaos, re-distribution of wealth in favor of a few. Security, retreating into family solidarity, is a widespread reaction in the post-socialist society. The orientation for family farming and bio-agriculture is based on a strong conviction to have embarked on a path towards “sustainable livelihood”. There is a feeling of being pioneers: “… we are light-years ahead of agricultural thinking in the government”. The interaction with biofarmers in Europe and especially Switzerland has a tangible impact on farmers’ orientations, because it offers “role models”.

And finally, the biofarmers of Stara Planina wish to be perceived as “farmers” and not any more as peasants of pre-socialist status, and thus as entrepreneurs with skills, education and an open mind.

**Conclusions: The Bio-Farming Coop - the Hope for Solidarity**

Rural life in Bulgaria has undergone deep-rooted changes since 1989. The two guiding assumptions for us on changing values in rural cooperation and solidarity in the transition process of Bulgaria can be interpreted as follows:

- On the micro-level of Bulgarian society, the transition process is experienced in the form of rapidly changing values in the rural context, which compels
people in bioproduction to develop solidarity for sustainable cooperation in the post-communist society.

- The trust and solidarity in organic farming coop develops slowly among farm families with perspectives for sustainable livelihood.
  “Organic farming is a realistic option for achieving sustainable rural livelihood in the Stara Planina region!” This conviction appears to drive the coop Bio Bulgaria and to motivate the involved farmers in their engagement in biofarming.

Changing from conventional to biofarming clearly goes far beyond a mere intervention into a specific field of a given farming system, e.g. changing an irrigation system or turning to stall feeding. It rather means to develop and adopt a new strategy, trust and solidarity. This involves not only changes within the value system of the farm families but also means to promote changes in the larger social, economic and political environment. The coop history with its intensive learning process confirms this assessment. But what has the coop and what have the farmers reached with this effort by now?

The coop efforts are done, mainly in the form of the new value orientations towards biofarming, adoption of required skills, creation of private and common physical assets and, to a lesser extent, in the development of market connections processing facilities. The three support units of the farmers – the coop, the knowledge proposing fund “Bio-Selena” and the licensing institution “Bio Cert” - have developed competence and are on the way to a reasonable task sharing.

Yet, in terms of market cooperation, the farmers are still very much in the phase of investing in the development of specific knowledge and practical basis in the fund “Bio-Selena” and in the bio-certification unit “Bio Cert”. The test run on the new strategy “bio- farming” has recently begun and, consequently, the vision of sustainable development remains for the time being as a hope. Concerning the sustainability of biofarming under Bulgarian conditions, the coop would have to assume responsibilities to coach, support and monitor the actual marketing of biofarming production. This would be a crucial task of a next phase. Concerning the capability of the cooperative society, its social and financial viability appears to be a pre-condition for and a consequence of successful implementation of bio-farming in the region. The formation of interest groups among members with a common product focus leads in the appropriate direction.

A solidarity system comprises the economic, social and cultural “universe” wherein rural families are bound to make their living. Improving solidarity by means of development support brings the cooperation strategies into focus. It is assumed that rural strategies of individuals and of social units such as families aim at material and non-material livelihood outcomes. In the complexity of the environment including the major external fields of influence, which are the vulnerability context on the one hand and the policies, the institutional framework of values and norms on the other.
and organizations on the other, the trust and cooperation between the individual families contribute to the sustainable rural organic development.

References


http://www.bnr.bg/RadioBulgaria/Emission_English/Theme_Lifestyle/Material
http://www.nsi.bg/Census/Census.htm
http://www.nsi.bg/ZActual/BudgetHome05.htm
http://www.nsi.bg/Population/Population.htm


Giordano Ch. and Kostova D., 2002, Die soziale Produktion von Misstrauen, in: Ch. Hann, Hg., Postsozialismus. Transformationsprozesse in Europa und Asien aus ethnologischer Perspektive, Campus Verlag

Krastev Ivan, 2003, The Inflexibility Trap, Sofia: Center for Liberal Strategies

Land Law, 1991, Sate Gazette 17 (In Bulgarian Language)

Land Law, Changes, 1992, Sate Gazette 28 (In Bulgarian Language)

Land Law, Changes, 1995, Sate Gazette 45 (In Bulgarian Language)

Zhivkova V., 1998, The Village and the Industrialization – the Bulgarian Road, Sofia: Alya (In Bulgarian Language)


Report, October 2002, Bulgaria Poverty Assessment, World Bank


Special Accession Program for Agriculture and Rural Development