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High Nature Value Farming for sustainable local food production and consumption

Mariya Peneva¹, Yanka Kazakova-Mateva², Plamen Mishev³

¹ University of National and World Economy (UNWE), Department of Natural Resources Economics, Student town “Hristo Botev”, Sofia 1700, Bulgaria, e-mail: peneva_mm@yahoo.co.uk

² European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism, South-Eastern Europe coordinator, e-mail: yanka.kazakova@gmail.com

³ University of National and World Economy (UNWE), Department of Natural Resources Economics, Student town “Hristo Botev”, Sofia 1700, Bulgaria, e-mail: mishevp@unwe.bg



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HIGH NATURE VALUE FARMING FOR SUSTAINABLE LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

Abstract

In the last hundred years, great changes have taken place in the farming systems all over the world. They were economically driven and beneficial but they also lead to a range of negative side effects. At the same time consumer awareness regarding food quality and safety grew, together with rising willingness for nature conservation and rural identity preservation. The paper focuses on the High Nature Value (HNV) farming as an environmental solution for long-term conservation and protection of biodiversity and its broader impact on the economic and social sustainability of agriculture and rural development at regional level.

Keywords

High Nature Value Farming, Local Food Production, Sustainability

Introduction

In the last hundred years, great changes have taken place in the farming systems all over the world. The same is valid for Bulgaria: the focus is on large scale production and strongly mechanized agriculture with high external inputs. These changes were economically driven and beneficial for farmers and industry. But they also lead to a range of negative side effects: such as crisis of the productivist agricultural model; environmental pollution; biodiversity and landscape decline. At the same time consumer awareness regarding food quality and safety grew, together with rising willingness for preservation of cultural identity and traditional knowledge; integration of traditional agri-food products in the EU rural development and food policies etc. There is a general consensus about the new role of agriculture and the need of change toward more sustainable development of agriculture and rural areas.

The question is about the viability of these production systems that provide public goods and services part of which is HNV farming. It is an extensive system that requires and promotes adaptation of agricultural practices to specific natural circumstances, the production processes are in compliance with the natural capacity of the land, and it can also provide employment in rural areas.

The paper focuses on the HNV farming as an environmental solution for long-term conservation and protection of biodiversity and its broader impact on the economic and social sustainability of agriculture and rural development at regional level. It is based on the initiative studied in the framework of the 7th FP project “Farming transitions: Pathways towards regional sustainability of agriculture in Europe” (FarmPath¹). The case study area is located in Central South Bulgaria – an individual protected area of Bessaparski Hills.

The paper is organized as follows. Section one is Introduction. In Section 2 we present a short review of the HNV farming concept. Section 3 continues with the main socio-economic developments of the case study area. Section 4 gives a brief description of the methods and data used. In Section 5 we analyse the key issues of HNV farming implementation for sustainable local food production and consumption. Section 6 gives some conclusions.

¹ <http://www.farmpath.eu/>

HNV farming

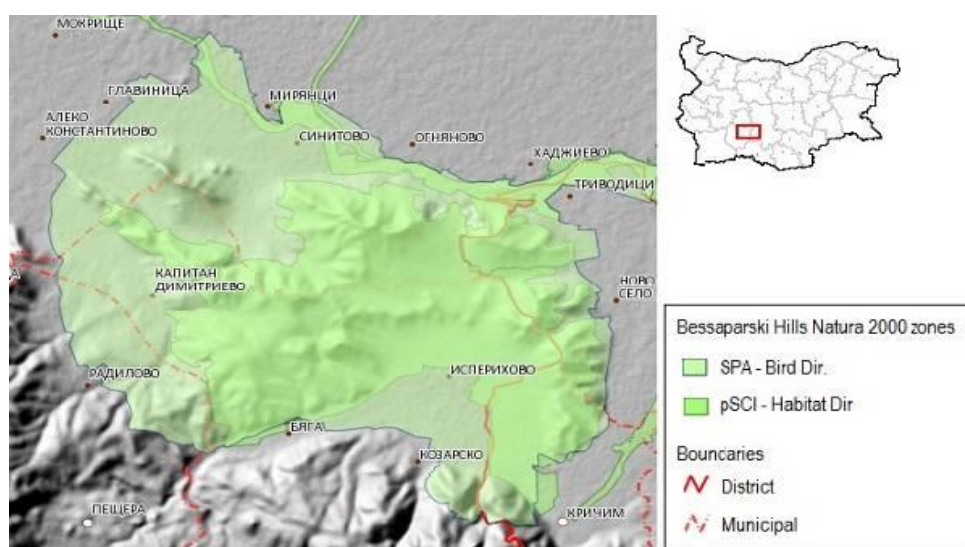
The concept of HNVF is developed in the early 1990s from a growing recognition that the conservation of biodiversity in Europe depends on the continuation of low-intensity farming systems across large areas of countryside (Opperman et al., 2012; Baldock et al., 1993; Bignal and McCracken, 1996). The HNV farming system is in conformity with the regulations of the territories under Natura 2000 and other requirements of the protected areas. In general, it implies grassland management with benefits to the biodiversity. HNV farming has the potential to become a key concept in the European model of agriculture through its contributions to the diversity of rural areas and preservation of biodiversity.

The HNV areas are also acknowledged in the formulation of the new post-2013 CAP, within the greening requirements. Therefore HNV farming is a top-down approach underlined in the EU directives² that encourage bottom-up initiatives adopting environmental-friendly land management practices for HNV grassland, biodiversity protection and nature conservation in HNV areas in Europe. HNV farming tends to generate lower incomes for the farmers from the market and they receive the smallest Pillar 1 payments. The challenge is how to attract the HNV farmers not to abandon or to intensify their farming system in the search for better returns – both paths are major causes of biodiversity loss (Beaufoy and Marsden, 2011).

HNV farming in the Bessaparski Hills region

The case study of HNV farming aims at implementing traditional extensive and agro-ecological land management practices that preserve and maintain the existing biodiversity and habitats throughout the Bessaparski Hills (Map 1). The model region is designated as Natura 2000 zone, Important Bird Area and HNV farmland. The area is predominantly hilly with pastures most of which are of low nutritional quality but of HNV representing a mosaic of land cover and land use.

Administratively, it falls within the boundaries of five municipalities (LAU1 level) – Bratsigovo, Peshtera and Pazardjik in Pazardjik district and Stamboliiski and Krichim in Plovdiv district.



Map 1. Bessaparski Hills Natura 2000 zones. Source: MRRB GIS System Security Division.

² Birds Directive 79/409 and Habitats Directive 92/43, etc.

The overall regional economy, despite some differences at municipal level, is largely determined by the existing natural production conditions and encompass following sectors: 1) Agriculture and food industry (production and processing of fruits, vegetables and herbs and essential oils plants and livestock production and processing of meat and dairy products). 2) Forests. 3) Mining and extraction. 4) Trade and tourism. 5) Other industries: there are several SMEs in other industries (e.g. two companies bottling of mineral water) but their overall contribution to the regional economy and employment has only a complementary role.

The villages in all the municipalities are generally characterized as lively and populated which is largely due to the favourable geographic location and the proximity to large urban areas. However, the region is also subject to an ongoing decrease in the number of inhabitants. For a period of five years, there is a 10% decrease in Bratsigovo municipality up to 19% decrease in Peshtera municipality.

Traditionally well developed in the region are fruit and vegetable production, as well as sheep and cattle breeding. The official land cadaster data for the five municipalities reports total agricultural land of 60 952ha in 2011 (54,5% of the total territory). It is dominated by arable land (73%) while pastures and meri cover 13% and permanent crops only 6% (Stefanova and Kazakova. 2012). Livestock farming (traditional common grazing) is well developed due to the presence of large areas of grasslands. The extensive grazing of sheep and cattle created and maintained favourable conditions for flora and fauna species which represent the HNV farming system.

Farm structures in Bessaparski Hills are still dominated by small scale farms varying from 0,1–0,3 ha to 0,5-1,5 ha and having on average 1- 3 cows or sheep. Most of the farms are semi-subsistence ones. Their production is both for family (including extended family) consumption and for the market.

Nowadays the small-scale animal husbandry is disappearing due to the ageing of the elderly people who were involved in it, and the introduction of the EU sanitary and hygiene rules in the country. The few larger livestock farmers in the region operating mainly for the market (i.e. more than 10 animal units), with a few exceptions, have diversified their economic activities, although animal farming remains their dominant activity, partly due to its labour intensity.

The concept of HNV farming as a policy support measure in Bulgaria is a top-down approach. Its implementation in the region of Bessaparski hills started with the grant scheme realised through the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB) project, which tested pilot compensatory measures comprised a mixture of area-based payments and investment support measures as well as advisory support provided by mobile teams. Later, the agri-environment measure under the Bulgarian RDP was announced and currently, in the region there are farmers working simultaneously under the both measures. This creates a mosaic of the implementation of the agroecological practices in the HNV farmland at different times and places.

Methods

In the case study area semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of farmers including young farmers and new entrants (animal breeders and farmers growing plants), local and regional authorities, agricultural officers and experts, NGOs, entrepreneurs. Documentary analysis and desk research were performed on the contextual analysis and policy related issues.

The main questions aim to identify: Who are these farmers? What are their socio-economics characteristics? What kind of land management practices do they implement to

preserve and maintain the existing biodiversity and habitats? What are the advantages and disadvantages of HNV farming (the costs and revenues)? What are their value orientations? What kind of strategies (networking, marketing, certification) and innovation actions they performed?

Results

The research addresses the complexity of HNV farming as an environmental solution with a broader impact on the economic and social sustainability of agriculture and rural development. The key issue is the policy instrument of the agro-environmental measures (AEM). The specific requirements and nature constraints in the region were imposed as top-down restrictions by the national environmental legislation and policy and later upon the AEM. The AEM concerning HNV grasslands is designed at national level, and some adaptations are needed to address the area of Bessaparski Hills. But it encourages bottom-up initiatives in the area. That was exactly the reason to conduct the survey among the HNV farmers – plant-growers (roses, vegetables, fruits) and animal breeders (sheep and cows). Their socio-economic characteristics are: small and medium size farms, mostly young livestock farmers (enterprising and innovative young people are in the core of the successful implementation of the HNV practices) or inheritors whose parents/grandparents carried out farming activities, educated, participated in training courses, exchange visits, learned new farming techniques, planning expansion of the activities through investments in purchase/lease land, buying new equipment, diversifying and broaden the range of products and services offered (transition to organic farming, diversification of activities outside agriculture: tourism, forestry, services) etc.). The proportion of young people involved increased during the time as they appear more sensitive to issues of environmental protection and have more willingness to undertake new initiatives.

The key factor identified for the HNV farming development and its economic viability (also increasing farmers' incomes) are marketing activities concerned direct marketing of local food; diversification; promotion of traditional foods to new customers; creating better quality food. Also, new skills are required, such as good hygiene practices; design skills (jar choice, packing, and labelling); and marketing techniques to retain customers and to build long-term relationships. The nostalgic notion regarding cultural values of HNV farming and the tasty food products coming from them as well as the evolution in farmers' marketing activities further encouraged farmers' activities.

The market mechanism is advancing and farmers start direct sales. They are more flexible and have choice in planning and realizing their sales, seeking the best conditions for reducing their dependence on intermediaries. Traditional food production and application of the local certification scheme (engaged in the development and expansion of the local festivals, fairs of local agricultural products, traditional foods and crafts etc.) is another consequence of that process. At the beginning of HNV farming implementation the traditional agricultural system was declining; local products and local markets were disappearing; there was a risk of losing local knowledge, heritage and biodiversity. Currently, the initiative succeeds to rise and to keep the recognition of the quality of existing products and to build up new demand due to the new values and beliefs of the farmers and locals, new understanding about the worthiness of nature conservation and development of the environmental attitudes and behaviour.

Furthermore, the development of the HNV farming and quality products marketing is combined with rural tourism. The diversifications to tourism activities expand the promotion of the local heritage and contribute to the regional-specific characteristics of the agricultural

and rural areas. All these changes created potential opportunities to secure new sources of income and employment.

Conclusions

The main findings and challenges for the sustainable local food production and consumption in the region of Bessaparski hills are: the very initial phase of direct sales and short supply chains; the limited variety and small quantities of products that are not enabling small and young farmers to access the conventional supply chains; limited access to financial sources for investment; the legislation and policy support regulations.

The following recommendations are formulated: 1) foster consistent marketing strategies which are promoting regional features and quality of products; 2) organize and set up local markets in the cities only for farmers' production in order to improve consumer-producer relations and initiate training and awareness campaigns sensitizing consumers to regional specificities; 3) provide investment support for farmers to meet the official and marketing requirements for direct sales; and improve the existing ordinance on direct sales (flexibility rules) in order to better reflect small farms' realities.

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