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**Brouwer, F., van Rheenen, T., Dhillion, S. S. and Elgersma, A. M. (eds.):  
Sustainable Land Management: Strategies to Cope  
with the Marginalisation of Agriculture<sup>1</sup>**

Mészáros, Sándor<sup>2</sup>

A new book on sustainable agriculture was published by the Edward Elgar Publishing Company in 2008. The content of this multi-author work is based mainly from the EU research project with the acronym EUROLAN. Most of the 13 chapters are case studies focusing on some northern, southern, eastern and western EU Member States, plus Norway, whilst the United States and Japan are each covered by a chapter.

The subject matter of the book can be described in four **key terms**, namely: marginalisation of agriculture, sustainable land management, multifunctional agriculture, and social capital.

The term ‘marginalisation’ was first used at the end of the 1980s and, in European context, at the beginning of the 1990s. According to a definition in the book “marginalisation of land is a process of changing land management practices, driven by a combination of social, economic, political and environmental factors by which the use of land for the main land-dependent activities (agriculture, forestry, housing, tourism, local mining) ceases to be viable under an existing socio-economic structure” (p. 237). Marginalisation is therefore a socio-economic process decreasing the viability of agriculture. This process “might be invisible in many parts of Europe” (p. 6), though, at the same time, “marginalisation is an early warning for future abandonment of land” (p. 246). The book covers also to the factors of marginalisation; in some parts of Spain, for example, the population density is about 10 persons/sq.km, which is considered to be the minimum threshold for ensuring sustainability of county-level services.

A separate chapter deals with multifunctionality, and presents eight different meanings and interpretations thereof. Multifunctional agriculture is considered as a social concept that, beyond its primary function “also provides other functions such as the viability of rural areas, food security, cultural heritage and environmental benefits” (p. 2). In this respect, the most interesting thing for me – considering multifunctionality and sustainable development as separate categories – is the fact that the book links these two concepts. It is appropriate to cite one of the paragraphs of the last, recapitulatory chapter: “Multifunctionality could be a concept to understand sustainable development better. Multifunctionality strengthens our body of knowledge on sustainable development, making the linkages between the different components transparent. For example, farmers producing food and meanwhile also maintaining the landscape contribute to the economic, social and ecological dimensions of sustainable development.” Of course, multifunctionality is also connected with the marginalisation of agriculture.

No separate chapter is devoted to the theoretical issues of sustainability, but chapter 2 discusses in detail its connection with the previous two concepts (pp. 48 and 52-53). In this respect, the last two chapters summing up land management practices are also worth mentioning; one of them also illustrates by means of a flow chart the dependence of the outcome of sustainability and marginalisation on land quality and correct land management (Figure 12.1, p. 229).

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Chapter 11, discussing social capital, also provides important theoretical and conceptual contributions; and includes three case studies. Putnam linked the term ‘social capital’ to civic organisations and voluntary associations and suggested the ratio of the number of such organisations to the population as its indicator. In his opinion, social capital may really serve rural development in “well-connected” societies. “It facilitates the utilisation of local resources both in terms of natural and human resources by the creation of social networks, trust and civicness” (p. 211). In the last section of the chapter, the authors illustrate the relationship between social capital and rural development with a lively metaphor: this relationship is the same as the connection between the software package with the hardware facilities; these latter being represented here by local employment, infrastructure and services.

The case studies firstly provide an overall picture of Europe. Chapter 9 includes also a recapitulatory study on the condition of the EU-15 countries, i.e. the more developed part of the EU, with the objective of forecasting the problems which can be expected between 2010 and 2020. The extent of risk of marginalisation is described by four indicators: the percentage of regions with a population density below 50 persons/sq.km, the percentage of farmers over 55 years of age, the percentage of farmers with incomes below half of the average for the national economy, and the rate of areas exposed to erosion in excess of 2 t/ha per year. The data detailed by regions are also displayed in four maps which clearly show the hot spots of the EU-15 countries. All four indices are between 20 and 30% as an average of the EU-15 countries. It has been established that there is no risk of marginalisation on two thirds of the territory of the EU-15 countries. However, a great risk exists in 5% of the territory, especially in Portugal, but also in Greece and in Italy, though to a smaller extent. The main hazard is constituted in these Mediterranean regions by the insufficient rainfall anticipated due to climate change, but, of course, there are also other risks of a social character. Also the important connection has been emphasised that the rates of land abandonment and depopulation is dependent on policy (support).

The case studies by countries have however demonstrated that marginalisation does not concern only the Mediterranean regions. Chapter 5 includes case studies in Norway and Finland; in these North European countries, the cold climate, the low population density and the large geographical distances constitute the specific causes of marginalisation; and the same factors also prevent pluriactivity. The authors suggest two economic strategies for farmers against marginalisation: increasing the farm size and growing of more productive, special plant varieties. Beyond this, the other option concerns the change to pluriactivity. As to the state (policy), subsidy represents the only tool for counteracting marginalisation; without support, the agriculture of these two countries is not competitive with the other economic sectors.

The situation is somewhat similar in the mountain regions, presented by Chapter 7 in a case study in the Alps region in Austria. Though there are differences in the demographic trends (the population is increasing in the Western Alps, while decreasing in the Eastern Alps), the marginalisation process is proceeding, albeit slowly (the livestock levels and the intensity of agricultural production are decreasing). Here, tourism and forestry may represent the main alternatives for farmers, but the agricultural (support) policy is not sufficient for arresting the unfavourable trends, but “integration programmes combining regional, environmental, socio-cultural and economic development will also have to play a major role in combating marginalisation and land abandonment”(p. 145).

Hungary is strongly represented in the volume in several respects. On the one hand, Alajos Fehér and Gábor Szabó are members of the team of 24 authors, the latter contributing to two chapters. On the other hand, the Czech Republic and Hungary represent in the book the ten countries which joined the EU in 2004, partly in chapter 6, discussing both countries, and partly in chapter 11,

devoted to social capital. As regards the situation in Hungary, there are of course similarities with the Czech Republic, for example the composition of land holdings by size is bipolar in both countries; however, at the same time, the proportion of mountain areas, especially that of high mountains, is greater in the Czech Republic. Though in Hungary, at present, only a few micro-regions and settlements are endangered by the risk of depopulation, the marginalisation process is nevertheless present, especially in some regions located in the north-eastern and south-western parts of the country, as illustrated by a map on p. 112. In Hungary there are several factors preventing the rationalisation of land management, some of them encumbering also the change to multifunctional agriculture. As the authors put it: “The poor development of human and social capital as well as of regional economies are crucial factors hampering agriculture from undertaking functions other than commodity production (for example environmental protection and nature conservation, tourism, landscape protection and so on)” (p. 111). Due to this reason: “The development of multifunctional agriculture in Hungary is still in its infancy” (p. 122). However, the authors make four proposals for improving the situation and suggest measures for the period between 2007 and 2013 (pp. 123 and 127 respectively).

The problem is contemplated with a different attitude in the United States of America than in the densely populated Europe. There, already three quarters of the population live in cities, occupying however barely 3% of the territory. And again, only a part of the rural population is engaged in agriculture; this is perhaps the reason why this chapter was entitled: “The clock is ticking for rural America”. That is, one sign of marginalisation is the decrease of the agricultural area. This diminution amounted to 5% on average across the entire USA between 1990 and 2004, exceeding 10% only in three areas. Land abandonment does not constitute a serious concern, either, because areas suitable for recreation purposes (hunting, tourism, cottage and summer-house construction) are in great demand, thus land prices are high. Urbanisation and size increase of the farms are considered to constitute the two main factors of marginalisation. The latter is the principal reason leading to the decrease of the population employed in agriculture. Of course, several government programmes are in place in order to protect the agricultural and natural lands; these are discussed in a separate section of chapter 4. Regarding multifunctional agriculture, the author is of the opinion that it could be helpful in developing the relationships between agricultural and non-agricultural regions.

In Japan, farms are located on just 13% of the total area and even those – from European or American eyes – can be considered as micro-farms, with an average size of 1.8 ha. As in the US, marginalisation manifests itself also here in urbanisation and – in the provinces – in the increase of the proportion of the non-agricultural population. Land abandonment concerns by today about 10% of the cultivated area. Here, multifunctional agriculture has been involved in the agricultural legislation since 1999. New management concepts have been disseminated, one of them named Nature Management Farming, which is the more common (more current) category. This movement has started from the Netherlands and Great Britain in the 1980s and 1990s and refers to multifunctional farming laying great emphasis on nature protection. “Nature management farming can be defined as land management practices that support multifunctionality of land. Farming provides food and fibre, maintains agricultural landscapes, generates employment in rural areas, supports the bio-ecological system and biodiversity, and also controls the quality of water, air and soil, and animal welfare” (pp. 187-188). The other new term is High Nature Value Farming, where farmers not only cohabit with the wild plants and animals but accept also restrictions, as is usual in Europe in nature protection areas. By way of a concrete example, the book cites a wild-goose migration site, where ploughing is restricted in winter and pesticide use in the breeding season; however the price of the rice produced in such area covers the excess costs.

IN SUMMARY: A very interesting, accurate and useful new book has been published on the topic. **One of its principal merits** consists in the thorough clarification of the topic's basic concepts (marginalisation, sustainability, multifunctionality and social capital), covering all interrelations. **Its other advantage** lies in the image of Europe, gradually evolving in the reader's mind, revealing the condition and concerns of the continent's agriculture and rural areas and also the methods and tools for their remedies. **As its third virtue** it can be emphasised that it is far from being only a theoretical work of basic research character, but it applies a highly practical approach to the relevant problems, providing several ideas, methods and tools for the agricultural and rural policy makers. In addition to the authors' work, the efforts of the four editors – F. Brouwer and T. van Rheenen of the Netherlands and S. S. Dhillon and A. M. Elgersma of Norway – also merit special recognition. As a person participating both in eastern and western European collaborative research projects, I know by experience what a difficult task they had, from standardisation of the terminology to the preparation of scientific syntheses.

Of course, also questions emerge in the reader's mind when studying the book. In me, for example, the question emerged, to what extent phenomena and issues similar to marginalisation of agriculture or development of sustainable land management may be subject to European (EU) level eco-political management, and also to what extent such management is necessarily of national competence. The book convinced me that, due to the differences in the natural conditions, the population density and the degree of social development in each country, no uniform, supranational formula can be conceived in the foreseeable future. Readers may also ask to what extent the discussion of the topic may be considered as comprehensive and whether there are some issues that are dealt with to a lesser extent. I have felt two weaknesses: the one is the situation in eastern Europe (i.e. the recently accessed EU-10 countries) that, though not entirely neglected in the book, their greater representation could have been decidedly useful for a more complete European image. My other thought is that the theoretical questions of sustainability did not perhaps received sufficient attention in the book in accordance with their actual importance, with special regard to their connections with the likely climate changes. Although the book briefly addresses climate change, for example in the closing chapter (pp. 243-244) and also in the case studies here and there, all the same, a chapter discussing systematically the topic of sustainability would have been of benefit for the work.

Apart from the above-mentioned critical remarks, I can strongly recommend the book to agricultural economists, particularly researchers, professionals and PhD students dealing with the restricted issues of marginalisation, sustainable development, multifunctional agriculture or with the problems of the disadvantaged regions. However, the volume merits wider attention, including first of all teachers interested in environmental economics or in rural development, and, on the other side, agricultural experts interested in the life and problems of rural Europe. Last but not least, I also recommend this work to the attention of agricultural policy makers and decision makers having competence in respect of the issues discussed therein; they may then act upon the lessons and proposals of the book when formulating their measures, or if they would like simply to enhance their European outlook.

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(Koester, 1988:12) indication of page  
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#### **Books:**

Harris, S., Swinbank, A. and Wilkinson, G. (1983): **The Food and Farm policies of the European Community**. New York: Wiley.

**Book chapters:**

Tarditi, S. and Croci-Angelini, E. (1987): Efficiency and equity components of sector policy analysis and evaluation. In: I Y. Leon and L. Mahé (eds.): **Income Disparities among Farm Households and Agricultural Policy**. Kiel: Vauk, 43-80.

**Articles:**

Mergos, G.J. and Yotopoulos, P. A. (1988): Demand for feed input in the Greek livestock sector. **European Review of Agricultural Economics** 15(1): 1-17.

**Proceedings, reports, theses etc.:**

Koester, U. (ed.) (1988): Disharmonies in the EC and US Agricultural Policy Measures. Report prepared for the Commission of the European Communities. Brussels: EC Commission.

**Internet sites:**

EUROSTAT (2000): Regions: Statistical Year Book 2004. Luxemburg: European Communities <http://www.google.hu/search?hl=hu&q=eurostat+regional+year+book+&meta=>

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