Introduction

BERAS Newsletter gives you continuous short information about the different activities within the work packages in the BERAS project from the eight partner countries. For you who are not so familiar with the project we recommend to read the BERAS folder first, which we will send together with this first edition of the letter.
This letter will focus on BERAS Poland, its agricultural situation and its whole food sector.
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Polish Agriculture

Polish Agriculture differs from the one in European Union- and post communist-countries. Due to numerous historical circumstances it is also diversified from the West to the East and from the South to the North of Poland. There are prosperous regions with fertile soils and high level of intensive agricultural production. Those regions will be able to compete against EU markets. However there are also regions where the soil quality is poor, basic and climatic conditions are adverse for farming and where farmers run small-scale farms.

In 2002 agricultural land account for 54 % (16,9 million ha) of the total area of the country with a rate of 0,44 ha of agricultural lands per capita.

38 % of the Polish population live in rural areas of which 29 % work directly in the agricultural sector. Furthermore 36 % of all unemployed people live in rural areas.

Agriculture still plays an important role in the polish economy. However, since the last decade a decreasing share of farming in the GDP has been observed (in 1988 - 11,8 % of GDP, in 1994 - 6,4 % of GDP and 2001 only 3,3 %).

Compared to agriculture systems in other European countries, polish agriculture seems to be a lot closer to environmental solutions and improvements. Efforts made by the communist regime to collectivise the agricultural sector were not very successful. Almost 50 years to collectivise this sector of economy did not bring any spectacular success. Most farmland still is in private hands, farms are small, multifunctional and land management is extensive. 92 % of the land belongs to private owners and 7,8 % is owned by the government.
The last decade brought great economic changes that effected Polish farmers more than any other social group. Nowadays Polish agriculture is extensive and
sustainable in environmental sense more by the default than by farmers will. The crop yield of extensive farming is relatively low, with low usage of pesticides and fertilizers. Vast areas of agricultural farmland in Poland could therefore easily converted into organic agriculture. On the other hand, there is a tendency to intensify the agriculture production, linking up with structural changes and an increased pesticide use.

Unfortunately the support for the organic farming seemed not to have high priority for the Polish decision-makers.

Of the total near 2 million farms about 10 % produce for their own consumption, 40 % produce for both their own consumption and the market and 50 % produce only for the market. Only 10 % of the farms are larger than 20 ha and 70 % of the farms are smaller than 5 ha.

**Organic Farming in Poland**

The situation for organic farming is here quoted from Ursula Soltysiak's (Warsaw Agricultural University, Poland) statistic data: *Organic Agriculture in Poland, Evaluation of the Current State and Perspectives of its Development.*

Stanislaw Karlowski was the pioneer who converted his 1760 ha estate into the biodynamic method in the years 1931-1939. In 1960 Julian Osetek Eng. Continued these methods alone at his small 3 ha farm. In reality however organic agriculture was born around 1981 when many farmers got interested in this method thanks to Prof. Mieczysław Górny from Warsaw Agricultural University.

Farmers - the participants of "biodynamic" courses, who created firstly informal groups, established in 1989 the Association of Organic Producers in Poland EKOLAND- the first Polish organic agriculture organisation.

Statistic data about the number of farms and their size starts from 27 farms with 300 ha altogether, which got EKOLAND certificate in 1990. Until mid 90 the number of farms nearly doubled year after year (in 1995 262 farms with 4962 ha altogether), with later stagnation caused by the lack of private recourses for support. The state subsidies became a new impulse and in 2003 the number of certified and converting farms is 2304 with 61 236 ha altogether (49 928 agricultural land).

The direction of economic and social policies will have a decisive impact on the development or stagnation of organic agriculture. Currently organic agriculture is seen as a positive but marginal way of farming. Polish policy makers do not notice its potential for sustainable development but associate with misery and backwardness. Polish scientists ignore it as it does not correspond with their "the more the better" agricultural production approach. Polish businessmen involved in agriculture services sector fight with it, as it does not give them good profits. Polish consumers believe that Polish food is "better anyway…"
It would be a great loss if Poland does not appreciate and use the opportunity which organic agriculture gives and allow to be outstripped by the other countries, which do not have so many hard points but understand the needs of the future.

**BERAS Poland**

BERAS Poland covers both the agricultural sector and the whole food system from production to consumption on to places. The Polish BERAS coordinators Maria Staniszewska and Ewa Hajduk describe this in the following way:

**Introduction**

Polish agriculture differs from the rest of Europe's - both from the European Union as well from post-communist ones. The last decade has brought great economic changes that have touched Polish farmers more than other social groups. Polish agriculture has become more extensive and environmentally sustainable - more by default than by farmer's choice. This extensive farming uses little pesticides and fertilisers but it also gives a low yield. As a result of this situation there are a lot of agriculture areas in Poland that can easily be converted to organic production. At the same time there is another trend to intensify agriculture production, linking up with structural changes and an increased pesticide use.
The case of Kluczbork and Zbiczno - Linking consumers and organic producers in Poland

The Kluczbork case

Location
Kluczbork is a rural municipality with its centre in the town of Kluczbork in the Opolskie voivodship. It is located in South West Poland - 40 km from Opole, 96 km form Wroclaw, 205 km from Poznan and 120 km from Katowice. The climate in Poland is temperate. The average yearly temperature in Kluczbork municipality lies between 8.0 and 8.3°C. The average yearly rainfall varies between 410 and 839 mm. The vegetative period lasts about 220 days.

Present situation

Description of the farms
There are six farms, including those that are certified and those in the conversion process. A bicycle path will connect these farms. A short description is given in the table below.

Janusz and Iwona Sliczni started the organic farming in this part of Poland. Their farm in the small village of Biadacz is 8.9ha. They have been certified organic since 1993. Their agricultural land is divided into 8 sections. Four people live on the farm - the parents and their adult children who are now studying.

Although the farm's main production is cereals - wheat (winter and spring), rye, barley (winter and spring), they also produce fruit and vegetables, egg apples, peas, potatoes, fodder beets, as well as milk. They keep one cow, four pigs, one horse and four goats. They sell about 3000 l of milk yearly. They sell their produce at different outlets: cereals (processed in their own mill) - 90 % to the wholesalers and 10 % in own shop; milk - 100 % direct selling; potatoes - 100 % direct selling; apples - 50 % direct selling and 50 % in own shop. In addition to their agriculture production activities they also provide environmental education to pre-school and school children; keep their own shop and run an agro-tourist service. A pond for tourists has been dug on 0.3ha and another 0.7 ha is not used for agriculture production.
The processors and distributors
The Kluczbork initiative includes only one processor/distributor - Iwona and Janusz Sliczni. They run a small mill and keep a shop in Kluczbork. The cereal processing is still being developed. Up until 2003 they only processed their own produce but now that other organic farms have started up in the same municipality they are thinking about increasing the production.

The bicycle path
This initiative in Kluczbork is very recent. It started in 2000 when most of the involved farmers decided to convert to organic production. In 2003 they started cooperation with the main nature-protecting organisation in Poland, the Polish Ecological Club and in collaboration with them identified a variety of possible activities for implementation. Several meetings and information exchanges have been held. One result is the involvement of the Kluczbork farmers in the BERAS project. They will create a unique link between consumers and the organic farmers involved in the project. This will take the shape of a bicycle path that will lead consumers from farm to farm. While bicycling on this path the consumers will be able to talk to the farmers, buy products and make use of other services by farmers.

Farmers are interested in providing other services as a way of diversifying their source of income. One very popular type of activity is farm-based environmental education. Children can come to the farm and learn for example how to bake bread or churn butter. This will bring children closer to their food producers.

The Zbiczno case

Zbiczno municipality

Location
The municipality of Zbiczno is situated in the eastern part of Kujawsko-Pomorskie region not far from the Poznzn-Torun-Olsztyn highway. The nearest towns are Brodnica, which is seven hundred years old, and Grusziadz and Torun, both medieval. Neighbouring municipalities are Biscupiec, Kurzednik, Warmisko-Mazurskie Brodnica, Brozozie, Bobrowo and Jablonowo Pomorskie.

Seventy percent of the municipality is situated in the Brodnicki Landscape Park area, which also covers areas in four other municipalities: Jablonewo-Pomorskie, Zbiczno, Biskupiec and Kurzetnik. This park was created in 1985 as the first landscape park in Torunskie voivodship and the 25th in Poland. The flora of this park is characterised by a great diversity and richness of species. There are about 950 species of vascular plants. Most of them are protected or semi-protected. There are also relict species. The most valuable nature areas are protected in six nature reserves. One more is being planned.

Soil types
Sixty eight percent of Zbiczno municipality has soils that are classed as quite fertile. The moronic clay and sand-clay upland soils that are fertile brown and buff. In these areas agriculture is intensive.
**Economy**
The main source of livelihood for people in Zbiczno municipality is agriculture, tourism, small scale processing, crafts and services. There are 4,720 inhabitants and a registered unemployment rate of 12%.

**Organic farms in Zbiczno municipality**
Organic agriculture in this region started in the early eighties. Today there are 8 organic farms with a total area of 85.15 ha and a varied production.

*Mieczysław and Aleksandra Babalscy*
This farm is 9.97 ha in 6 sections. The agricultural land is 4.37 ha, pasture 2.42 and vegetable gardens and fruit orchards 1.2 ha. They started organic production in 1985 and were first in this region. Their main production is wheat and half of this is spelt and other traditional species of wheat. Seeds were also obtained from the Gene Bank in Radzików. In addition to wheat they produce a variety of fruits (mostly traditional species) and vegetables such as carrots and beans. They have two milk cows and two calves, bringing them an income from the sale of organic milk (6300 l per year) and meat. Two people work full time on this farm. This is not a typical organic farm focusing only on production. During the past twenty years Mr Babalski has helped and trained many other farmers to change over to organic production. He is one of the founding members of EKOLAND - The Association of Organic Producers and has led this organisation for many years. He is not only active in Zbiczno municipality, but also in the Kujawsko-Pomorski region as a whole. He is also the author of many publications on organic agriculture.

**Pasta processing plant in Zbiczno municipality**

*History and current situation*
This pasta processing plant in the small village of Pokrzydowo has been operational since 1991. The owner is Mieczyslaw Babalski, but it is run as a family business. They started with old equipment imported from Switzerland and produced about 3 tons of pasta per year made from their own whole meal flour. Initially it was difficult to find customers in the village and neighbouring towns so they started selling their pasta and ecological products from other farms (fruits, vegetables, juices) in Warsaw at eco-fests, Earth Days and other similar events. In this way organic farmers started to cooperate and a network was established.

By 2002 production had grown to 200 tons and the plant employed three full time and two part time workers. The variety of products had also increased. Today they produce whole meal flour and pasta from wheat, spelt and rye mixed with herbs as well as wheat, rye, spelt and oats. A professional does the bookkeeping. Wholesalers from Warsaw, Gdansk, Szczecin and Łódz collect the products.

*A network of cooperating organic farms*
The development of the organic pasta processing plant required increased production of organic crops. Mieczyslaw Babalski started to encourage neighbouring farmers to convert to organic production. Now there are eight farmers in the Zbiczno municipality with whom he collaborates closely.
Future plans

There is a growing consumer interest in organic food. Many people are concerned about their health and realise that organic products are better for them. The production from this pasta processing plant is too small to meet the demand from growing number of consumers. New investments are necessary and more organic farms to deliver organic products. The site for the new processing plant has been purchased and the installation of equipment started this year. Additional farmers have received training and are in the process of converting to organic production. A new phase in organic food production and distribution has started.

Discussion and comments

Obstacles

The farmers participating in these initiatives face different problems. Some of them can solve themselves but most are beyond their control. The most important constraints include:
- the small size of the farms
- a poor local retailing system
- limited possibilities for food processing
- lack of financial capital
- poor advisory services for organic farmers (especially Kluczbork)
- low consumer awareness on environmental issues
- new standards for organic products as a result of joining EU

The most important obstacle for developing local organic food systems seems to be the low society awareness about environmental issues. Compared to the situation in Nordic countries Poland has a long way to go. This is partly because such changes require educating the society and this takes time. This education started in Poland in the beginning of the 90's. In EU countries, and especially in Nordic countries this process has been going on for many decades. Because of the importance of education different promotional events that draw attention to these issues are very important.

Polish farmers are also facing financial problems. Local economies are weak and vulnerable. Unemployment is high and farms in rural areas are being abandoned. For this reason these initiatives are important, not only because they are environmentally justified, but also because they can play a very important role economically. Developments of a local organic food system can provide the basis for economic survival in rural areas.

BERAS planned actions

These initiatives will continue to develop. We expect that additional partners: farmers, retailers, NGO's, shopkeepers, advisory centres and etc. will join these efforts. In the short run we will concentrate on organising the following activities:
- promotional events
- completion of the bicycle path (extending the path, making signs) in Kluczbork municipality and developing other farmer-retailer-consumer connections.
- training for farmers in organic food production
- meetings with local stakeholders (i.e. meetings with local governments, processors and local organisations)

**Final conclusions**

Grassroots organisations and farmers themselves have initiated the organic production and processing activities described above. They have been started without any outside support but due to the BERAS project their development can be much faster.

Such local initiatives are nothing new in Poland. Though rural societies are traditionally closed people are quite active. The new ideas that with these initiatives concern the connection of key groups - farmers, retailers and consumers - as well as the primacy of environmental concerns.

The important lessons to be learned from these initiatives is not only the need for co-operation between the different actors but also the need of a determined driving force. Without the essential work of Iwona and Janusz Sliczni and Aleksandra and mieczyslaw Babalsci the development of these initiatives would not have been possible.

Another important conclusion from these cases concerns the importance of consumer awareness. Without raising their awareness on environmental issues the further development of movements such as these in Kluczbork or Zbiczno will not be possible and their impact limited.

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