

Regional sustainability transitions:

# High Nature Value Farming

## Introduction

The overall objective of this cluster is to explore the implementation of various traditional agricultural practices in High Nature Value (HNV) areas (primarily Natura 2000 sites) aimed at nature protection and biodiversity conservation. High Nature Value farming is seen in its complexity not only as an environmental solution but also as having a broader impact on the economic and social sustainability of agriculture and rural development at regional level.

The **Bulgarian case study** of HNV farming aims at implementing traditional extensive land management practices that preserve and maintain the existing biodiversity and habitats throughout the Besaparski Hills, a 14,765ha Natura 2000 protected site. It is a transitional zone located in southern-central Bulgaria between the lowlands of the Thracia valley and the northern hills of Phodopi Mountains and covers three municipalities – Bratsigovo, Krichim and Stamboliiski. The **French case study** was located in the St Amarin Valley, where the Regional Nature Park (RNP) of Ballons des Vosges was created. This park which covers the mountains of the Vosges. The Vosges is a low mountain region, one fourth of which is protected as a Natura 2000 site (73,300ha) located in the north-east of France. It focuses on conservation of agro-pastoral areas and landscape through re-opening mountains wastelands and opening farmland that lead to the revitalization of agriculture and sustainability of the rural municipalities in the region. The **Portuguese case study** is a collective efficiency strategy elaborated to stimulate sustainable development in the low density rural areas of the region of Alentejo, valuing their natural resources, historical heritage, traditional knowledge etc. for economic,

social and biophysical sustainability. It is located in three municipalities – Almodôvar, Mértola and Barrancos in the region of southern Alentejo – the latter two are rich in protected areas (including Natura 2000 zones) while the latter is totally located within a Natura 2000 at an area of 16,842ha.

## Background to the research

The study of High Nature Value farming corresponds to the key EU concept and policy that approaches nature-conservation and biodiversity protection in Europe through low intensity, low input farming systems. The innovation in the HNV cluster combines traditional extensive farming practices (of pre-modern origin) with a modern vision and behaviour towards nature, such that HNV areas are preserved, maintained and reproduced in their natural rhythm and course.

In the three case studies agro-environmental measures (AEM) are implemented mostly in protected zones under Natura 2000 network. HNV farming in the Besaparski Hills promotes long-term conservation of the HNV grasslands, landscape protection and maintenance of existing biodiversity and habitats, using the traditional agro-ecological practices (extensive grazing, no chemical inputs, low livestock density, late mowing etc.). The use of such practices facilitates the conversion

of conventional to organic farming and may lead to diversification of agricultural activities.

The French initiative runs through four phases and created the Regional Nature Park. The goal is to maintain the quality of landscape and the rich heritage through re-opening once abandoned mountain land, returning it from unproductive scrub land and forests back into pastures, opening farmland under AEM and landscape plans with the objective of protecting the image of the quality of famous local products, particularly cheese.

In the Portuguese initiative the main driving force is the Program for the Economic Value of Endogenous Resources (PROVERE) project, a horizontal policy tool aimed at stimulating sustainable development in low density areas, through multi-level collaboration, partnership and territorial competitiveness. It promotes multiple-use approach to the silvo-pastoral system called Montado through innovative technology of production, conservation and non-conventional use of traditionally used non-timber forest products (e.g. aromatic and medicinal plants, mushrooms etc.).

Although the three initiatives vary in design and form they pursue a common goal – to achieve the sustainable development

of rural areas through multifunctional agriculture that provides a livelihood for local people and allows nature conservation and preservation of biodiversity.

## What changed?

A clear 'transition process' is only evident in the French case study, as it has the longest lifespan to date – it was started in the 80s. In general, the three initiatives changed the consciousness and the beliefs of the local people, especially of the farmers living in protected areas, and has led to the re-evaluation of the areas by the local people. The effect is a higher level of concern and awareness for the protection of the whole ecosystem in the community - the natural environment and its resources and inhabitants. Although in the three cases the agri-environmental measures are implemented through various techniques, the goal is the same – to preserve the designated protected areas.

A very important change in the three cases is the strengthened process of collaboration and networking, in that the partnership have built the new relationships between various actors of diverse interests, resulting in collective actions and increased innovation. Strong horizontal networking has been created in the French and Portuguese initiatives integrating multi-level actors from multi-level origin (from local to regional and even national (in the French case)). The networks facilitate the exchange of information, knowledge, and experience through developing managerial skills to participate in the decision-making process as well as trust and confidence. New bridges were created between the agro-food system and recreational system (French case) and between the agro-food system and rural tourism sub-regime (Bulgarian case). In the Portuguese case no new relationships were created as the Mediterranean Wild Resources already have a close connection with the agri-food and forestry regime, amenities provision (e.g. tourism, trekking) and

biodiversity conservation.

The comparison shows that there are common trends in the three cases, counter those embedded in the dominant regimes. There is a common trend to break the homogenisation of production structures and of products as agricultural activities have become more diversified. Agricultural intensification has reduced, the proportion of young people involved in the initiative increased, countering the aging trends of the rural and farming populations in the three case study areas.

## Key lessons learned:

- HNV farming challenges the trend/aspiration for modern, competitive and high-profit agriculture in a globalized world and in the context of potential food insecurity; however the EU policy on HNV is not an end in itself. Although it is a top-down approach it encourages bottom-up initiatives adopting traditional environmentally-friendly land management practices for HNV farm and grasslands that ensure biodiversity protection and nature conservation in HNV areas in Europe.
- The involvement of various actors and stakeholders from both local and regional levels embedded in formal, informal organizations and/or other bodies and networks was a key element of the success of this innovation.
- In all three cases, young farmers are important actors in the implementation of the HNV and its AEM and practices. They appear more sensitive to issues of environmental protection and are more willing to take risks and to undertake new initiatives. The young farmers and new entrants were the main drivers in the French case study. They initiated many of the partnerships in the collaboration process (e.g., the formation of the association "Agriculture and Landscape"); they created the dynamic in the local agriculture contracted under the AEM etc. However, in recent years they have met difficulties due to the market saturation and more limited access to new lowlands. In the other two cases there are not many young farmers involved, but in the Portuguese case they are more interested in HNV farming than those in the Bulgarian case, where young people

are more attracted to intensive farming.

- To strengthen and make HNV farming more sustainable, continuous and consistent policy and measures are needed by the state institutions who are promoters of the EU policy at national and regional level. These are important for raising awareness, supplying information, knowledge and services of how to carry out HNV farming and why it is necessary to be implemented, so it is not perceived as a restrictive regime in the protected areas.

## For further information

See the FarmPath project web-site:

[www.farmpath.eu](http://www.farmpath.eu)

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