«14 years of support for High Nature Value farming systems in Bulgaria: Lessons learnt about the policy and socio-economic challenges underpinning the loss of cultural landscapes in the Mediterranean region»

14 YEARS OF SUPPORT FOR HIGH NATURE VALUE FARMING SYSTEMS IN BULGARIA:

SYNTHESIS OF LESSONS LEARNT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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2022

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The importance of High Nature Value farming is grounded in its diverse and multifunctional character: forage land resource, habitat for flora and fauna species, host for a series of ecosystem services, cultural landscape, local traditions, and rural economies. It is in the focus of European policies for close to two decades – both agricultural and environmental.

In 2021, STEP was awarded a MAVA Learning grant (1) to extract and formulate the lessons learnt about the CAP public support, the donor supported project schemes, as well as the accompanying socio-economic challenges for High Nature Value farming systems in Bulgaria, and (2) to share them with CAP decision makers at national level and with MAVA OAP M6 partners from the Alliance for Mediterranean Nature and Culture. Below are the key findings and recommendations captured by our analysis and survey.

A. Lessons learnt and recommendations for HNV policy support in Bulgaria:

A1. There is a clear and loud need of new assessment of the current HNV farmlands and targeting the support

The need for a proper assessment of the HNV farmlands in Bulgaria was stated already in the conclusions of the official working group adopting the 2007 HNV farmland map. This need was made urgent already by the HNV1[1] implementation fiasco in 2008, when most of the farmers applying under the HNV1 scheme were penalised due to their pastures ineligibility for support. There has been little improvement since 2008. On the contrary, the LPIS layer of HNV farmland was continuously changing from year to year but there was no information on what basis.

A2. The territorial scope of the HNV grasslands support needs to be reconsidered

The current territorial scope of the HNV1 support is still based on the intersection of the GIS layers, which are result of a desk exercise without field-based verification. Even when the new assessment of HNV farmland is done, it still needs to be revised if support should be provided based on GIS intersection of layers that are not annually updated with field-data verification. It is advisable to consider and reflect on the experience of the "successful" agri-environmental schemes and Natura 2000 measure – for example, implementation at the level of land units or at other territorial level with data about the land use intensity on the farm.

A3. Adapt the permanent pastures definition and use the EU flexibility options

The EU requirements and definitions about permanent pastures have changed several times since 2007. The regulations have provided different flexibility options which willing member states could make good use of and justify the eligibility of permanent pastures with even a high share of trees and/or scrub. This has not yet happened in Bulgaria. Despite the serious lack of grazing areas, which burdens livestock breeders in the recent years, the Ministry of Agriculture still showed no willingness to address the issue.

There are at least 500 000 ha which can be made eligible for support and be used by livestock breeders. This will also reduce the pressure on the currently eligible pastures.

[1] HNV1 – Agri-environmental scheme supporting HNV grasslands.

A4. Communication with the target farmers and PR about the HNV farmland

There is a clear need to improve the communication with farmers in HNV farming area about their needs and priorities as well as to improve the image of HNV focused support. Our analysis revealed that there was a significant share of the permanent pastures, which were supported under SAPS but were not supported under the agri-environmental schemes and/or Natura 2000 measure. Considering the 2007 HNV farmland approach that all permanent pastures were included in the map, they would be either eligible for the agri-environmental HNV1 scheme or if they fell within Natura 2000 boundaries – for the Natura 2000 compensatory measure.

A5. Advice and training of farmers

So far, there is complete lack of specialised and targeted training and advice for HNV farmers, including in Natura 2000 sites. There is some environmental advice and some training but their general statements have a negative effect and demotivate farmers to participate. Advice and training need to be a lot more focused to the actual needs of the farmers, to be relevant to the regional characteristics and realities.

A6. Training of the local administration and advisors

Farmers systemically point out the municipal agriculture offices and the National Agriculture Advisory Service are their main source of information on CAP support. It is important that the experts in these administrations have the capacity and the knowledge to provide information not only on the administrative aspects of the application and control process, but also on the specialised aspects of the actual farm implementation of the HNV focused schemes and measures.

A7. Monitoring and evaluation of the implementation effects

The lack of monitoring of the implementation effects leads to the lack of proper evaluation of the RDPs support in the last 14 years. All official evaluations of the RDPs have stated that this issue had to be addressed. The only focus of the monitoring and evaluation of RDPs is the number of supported farmers and the size of the paid subsidy. Even the size and type of the supported area in area-based support is not reported, monitored or evaluated systemically.

The development of any new support schemes, especially the result-based agri-environmental payment schemes, is high highly dependent on the availability of adequate and comparable data from the monitoring system. The longer a proper monitoring scheme is postponed, the less likely that any innovative support schemes can be established.

A8. Cooperation with NGOs and researchers

Some of the most innovative and integrated approaches for HNV farmland support are developed and implemented by nature conservation NGOs. The experience and capacity gained by NGOs in the development, testing and extraction of recommendations for the national public programmes should not be wasted.

The knowledge and the research experiences of scientists are not adequately involved for targeted analysis and evaluations of the environmental effects and impacts of CAP support on HNV farmland or in Natura 2000 areas.

B. Lessons learnt from donor projects supporting HNV farming

B1. The implementation of the projects' grant schemes clearly demonstrated that biodiversity-friendly support schemes could be very successful when they were designed according to the specific regional characteristics and socio-economic conditions and implemented in face-to-face consultation with applicants and provided clear explanation of their biodiversity conservation goals. Therefore, HNV farming support measures, including eligibility conditions and other requirements, should be developed at regional or local level to reflect the specificities of High Nature Value farming.

B2. When implementing the HNV farming measures at national level, the flexible approach used in the various projects should be introduced to allow for the adaptation of the measures even after their initial implementation. Nevertheless, flexibility and adaptation of the implementation rules and procedures should not be abused to oversimplify and overcompensate unambitious practices that are easy to implement but not contributing to High Nature Value.

B3. Public authorities should encourage the involvement of nature conservation NGOs in the process of formulating and implementing policies and measures for the protection and management of HNV farming systems and for the monitoring of the measures' impact on the biodiversity.

B4. Public institutions need to support NGOs in the development and implementation of projects related to the management of and innovations in HNV farming and to get actively involved in them. The longer-term benefits from these projects to public policy are guaranteed – gaining experience of what to do or not to do, what works or not, what needs to be improved, etc.

C. Summary of socio-economic changes and challenges of HNV farmers in Bulgaria

C1. The livestock breeding in Bulgaria is still characterised by two production systems – grazing livestock breeding and mixed livestock-crop production systems. Permanent pastures are very important for livestock farms – some farmers rely entirely on them and for some farmers pastures form the majority of their land. Therefore, the issues of pastures availability and pastures eligibility are critical to the future development of the sector. The more pastures are abandoned and ineligible for support, the more difficult it would be for livestock breeders to sustain their business and the more pressure would be put on the small area of pastures eligible for support.

C2. The most important support from farmers' perspective are the schemes of CAP Pillar I – SAPS and coupled support. The rules and eligibility under these schemes will continue to play a major role on the farming activity, including on HNV farming. If they are sympathetic

to HNV farming, there will be positive effects. If they ignore HNV farming, the effect would most likely be rather negative.

C3. The targeted support to HNV farming is important for a significant number of livestock farmers. They need to feel continuity of support in an improved legal and administrative environment. This will free them of thinking about paperwork and focus on actual activities for the maintenance of the High Nature Value on their farms.

C4. The increased inflation and prices of inputs and fuel will inevitably increase the costs of production for all farmers. So far, farmers rely on the public support and their existing marketing channels and customers. The future will show if the current economic situation will have a more disruptive effect and would force farmers to change their current practices.

C5. The lack of farm workers will continue to be a significant problem for farmers. This will likely challenge farm development in product diversification and alternative marketing outlets. Innovations to address the issue will be very important. It will be also important to integrate the High Nature Value aspects of the farming system in the innovative approaches. Innovations that exhaust or decrease the nature value of farmland should be discouraged.

C6. The positive attitude towards the farming business is inspirational. Farmers benefit particularly from participating in various projects, in which they create new and useful contacts, see interesting examples of innovations and farm development ideas and gain new knowledge on farm management, including on environmental and marketing aspects. It is, therefore, important to continue to offer such opportunities to livestock breeders in HNV farming areas.

D. Key findings and recommendations regarding HNV farming

The 14 years of support to the Bulgarian High Nature Value farmland seem to have brought them a disheartening policy fate. After the glorious start with specific national effort to identify the HNV farmland and to ensure they would be supported, the loss of half a million hectares of pastures and the conversion to arable land of other 230 000 ha does not seem encouraging. Nevertheless, **there is still quite a significant territory of High Nature Value farmland that had sustained the pressure of abandonment and intensification of the last 14 years and that needs to be supported in a wise and considerate manner.** It is already clear that the CAP budget for the next programme in 2023-2027 will be significantly reduced, so any support needs to be well targeted and closely monitored.

Policy makers need to recognise that HNV farming has several distinct aspects that need special attention, promotion and support.

I. HNV farmland

HNV farmland is decreasing across Europe. However, this should not be used as an excuse to do nothing about it.

Rather, policy makers should insist on good assessments on where the HNV land is; what is the type of land use; how many are eligible for support under the current rules; how many are not eligible for support, but still in agricultural use; what can be done to support them; what are the reasons for being excluded from support – technical? legal definitions? other?

The current regulations at EU level delegate many policy support responsibilities to national governments. It is a matter of willingness and persistence to design, implement, monitor and adapt a good HNV support schemes.

II. HNV farmers

HNV farmers are critical for the survival and resilience of HNV farming. Losing the people willing to work the land in an extensive way will bring the end of HNV farming. The area may become wilderness site or intensive agriculture but it will lose all these values created by the intersection of farming and nature.

Policy makers needs to have a really good understanding of who are the farmers that still maintain HNV farmland; what are their production systems and their farming practices; what are their needs; what is their level of understanding of high nature value characteristics; what is the most effective way to support them.

They have the option to develop targeted agri-environmental measures or eco-schemes to support the HNV farmland; to promote innovation partnerships aiming to address particular production or marketing issue on HNV farms; to design consultation and advisory scheme for HNV farmers; to support investments in production or marketing of HNV products. The options provided by the EU regulations are many; however, they need to be appropriate to the needs and realities in HNV farms.

III. The High Nature Value

The High Nature Value of farmland comes from the species and habitats, and ecosystems and ecosystem services that are sustained on it and by it.

Agriculture and environmental policy makers need to understand better the interrelationship between farming and nature – which species, habitats and ecosystems thrive in which farmland uses and farming practices; how they differ in different production regions – lowlands or mountains; what type of support is needed to maintain or improve the conservation status of species and/or habitats and/or ecosystems; who is best suited to provide support to farmers to ensure the maintenance of the high nature value.

Few are the countries/regions that provide such targeted consultations and advisory services. That lack of wide and regular monitoring on the biodiversity and land use effects and changes on agriculture land is another major weakness that needs to be addressed in the coming period.

IV. HNV innovations

Innovations have a very important role to play in preserving and maintaining HNV farming. Innovations can help address the problems with lack of workers, specific technological issues, small quantities and seasonal raw products, etc.

However, innovations can easily trigger intensification that may reduce the farmland nature value in the long term. Therefore, it is important to assess the impact of innovations on the high nature value of farmland. This can be done in specific innovation partnerships and/or in targeted collaboration with academic researchers.

V. HNV partnerships

Collaboration with non-governmental organisations and researchers have proven to be highly beneficial for both policy making and practical support to HNV farming (see Section 2). Some of the most innovative and integrated approaches for HNV farming support are developed and implemented by nature conservation NGOs, for example in pilot testing support schemes, delivery and advisory mechanisms, as well as monitoring and control approaches.

Policy makers need to open up, encourage and get involved in partnerships with farmers, NGOs and researchers of both agricultural and environmental background.