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MAP Position Note

EMPOWERING RURAL AREAS IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES



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OPERATION MODEL OF THE SVARUN MAP IN SUPPORT OF PUBLIC DECISION- MAKING IN THE FIELD OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE FUTURE (2024-)

POSITION OF THE MAP

SVARUN

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1. The need to improve management and dialogue in the development of rural areas

Due to its geographical size, historical development and the relative centralisation of the state's governance, rural areas in Slovenia are an inadequately addressed topic. Discussion is limited to sectoral approaches, fragmented decision-making and the poor support of science in decision-making. In Slovenia there is already an established practice of collaboration among stakeholders who cooperate in designing and monitoring agricultural and rural policy. The size of the state, the small size of the sector and the line ministry's focus on the issues of agriculture and the farming population have resulted in the formation of a collective of representatives of various governmental, agricultural and environmental interest groups and research and educational institutions, which cooperates in various formal and informal ways, including membership in the various bodies of the line ministry. We particularly highlight the Council for Agriculture, the consultative body of the line minister, which includes representatives of all key institutions except the representatives of environmental organisations and specialised stakeholders from the field of rural development (i.e. LAG representatives). Although Slovenia has well-developed public research in the appropriate field, which is tied into various national and international research networks, there is no formal platform for the various connections, where there would be systematic dialogue between the representatives of science and governmental and non-governmental spheres.

On the other hand, rural areas' broader interests in the decision-making system are not clearly represented at the governmental level. The jurisdictions of governmental departments are divided, so the field is not covered comprehensively and the formal method of decision-making is not inclusive. With the exception of the agricultural department, the issue of rural areas is not being specifically addressed, and even here it is seen mainly in the context of agriculture and its development issues. Slovenia also does not yet have formed regions and appropriate regional policies. All this complicates the coordinated inclusion of Slovenia in emerging EU policies and mechanisms in the field of rural areas, such as the Long-term vision for European rural areas until 2040 and the emerging Pact for Rural Areas, and partly also in established mechanisms such as CLLD. This is related to issues related to both the institutional arrangement and the drawing and distribution of funds from the relevant funds. The role of existing structures, such as the Rural Network, in the integration into activities and partnerships at the EU level, is also unclear.

Research has shown that designing policies that would be more grounded in scientific facts and have stronger effects in practice requires taking an approach that focuses on stakeholders in the political cycle (El Benni et al., 2023). There is therefore a clear need for designing a management and participatory structure that would integrate various representatives in decision-making and the monitoring of policies related to rural areas. Such a structure could also be supported by more targeted and focused research in the field of various sustainability issues in rural areas.

The **SVARUN Multi-actor Platform (MAP)** was created within the framework of the EU project SHERPA and it aims to establish dialogue between representatives of science, the government and non-governmental organisations in the broader field of rural development. In the last, fifth round of addressing various questions, 40 MAPs across Europe address the strengthening of rural governance. In the Slovenian position we seek answers to the following questions:

- Does Slovenia have needs for further organising the dialogue between researchers, the government and NGOs? What are the experiences of the Svarun MAP?
- In which field of governance does this dialogue need to be strengthened? What alternatives and operating models are appropriate for future work? What are the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches?

While looking for answers to these questions, we also tried to define the future operating model of the Svarun MAP.

2. Defining governance issues

2.1. Experiences of the SVARUN MAP

The Svarun Multi-actor Platform came to life under the SHERPA project at the end of 2019. Its task was to connect the representatives of research, governmental and non-governmental organisations in the assessments of the situation and the search for answers to important issues in rural development. Our basis were objective facts, acquired through previous research or in the process of forming positions, and we developed suggestions for improving public policies. So far, 4 topics were discussed (landscape features, contribution to the vision of long-term rural development, diversification, and social issues), which all led to the formulation of positions and were presented to the public at the national level, and some also at the European level. In the processes of preparing positions, we found that such dialogue is necessary and useful, as well as the possibilities for its long-term maintenance. Svarun is one of forty multi-actor platforms that operate at the national level, so its experience is perhaps somewhat specific. While the project itself and other MAPs highlighted topics and issues that can be placed in the field of broader regional aspects of rural development, which also include various government departments, the Svarun MAP mainly stayed within the framework of the approach and the vision of the (agricultural) line ministry and its key stakeholders, who are also members of the Svarun MAP.

The Svarun MAP's experience is that the research of various issues is atomised, tied to a few individuals, and that there is no comprehensive supply of knowledge that would also enable a more fact based execution of policy. At the same time, the experiences of the platform's operation so far show the potential of the dialogue between representatives of science, politics and interest spheres in the debate on key development topics, which require an additional input of knowledge and whose discussion should be based on facts. The work of the Svarun MAP showed that such an offering of scientific support to constructive dialogue in the field of agricultural and rural policy is possible, beneficial and needed, especially when discussing controversial (hot) topics. The best effect was achieved on topics that related to the need for additional knowledge and understanding of specific measures and guidelines of public policies (landscape features and social issues in rural areas).

The work of the MAP showed that effective dialogue requires the following conditions:

- **a clearly defined topic** that is relevant to public policy decision-making and the decision-makers', stakeholders' and the public's accompanying interest in a public discussion of this topic, based on objective facts and available knowledge;
- the existence of **knowledge on a certain topic**, both at the national level and in the domestic environment; the latter is important so that knowledge on a topic can be understood and translated into the domestic environment; a basic infrastructure (researchers, funding, database access) that enables quality synthesis of this knowledge;
- **an institutional environment** that enables dialogue (process rules, funding, decision-making structures);
- **the relevance of the results** of dialogue for the formation of policies at the national or supranational level.

To a certain degree, all these elements are already encompassed by the previous operation and experiences of the Svarun MAP, which does however not have any funding nor institutional support assured after the SHERPA project ends.

3. The future of the SVARUN MAP

The SHERPA project is ending in 2023 and the source of funding for its operation is going out with it. The general findings of the project consortium and the European Commission are that such operation is an important gain and that such activities should continue. But the question is, within what kind of substantive framework, with what kind of operating model and what kind of organisation. Two developmental paths can be seen. The first is the expansion of views in the direction of a regional approach, i.e. to the integration of policies and issues of comprehensive rural development, as indicated in the work of other European MAPs. The other option is to build on the experience of previous work and the established dialogue and to strengthen fact-based policy with the aim of supporting the strategic planning of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in Slovenia.

In order to develop the discussion, we defined two models of the MAP's operation in the future thus:

- *The RURAL model* (a comprehensive discussion of various issues and policies related to rural development);
- *The CAP-SP model* (supporting the strategic planning of agricultural policy at the national level).

We examined both directions of the further development of the Svarun MAP and looked for possibilities for their realisation. The goal was to select a functioning, simple dialogue system based on previous experience, which would support either decision-making on comprehensive regional-rural policy or strategic planning of the CAP at the national level. We needed to consider the needs, advantages and disadvantages of both models. We wanted to propose a method of operation and an organisation model that also includes potential finances.

The following is an overview of individual elements of how the above-mentioned conditions are potentially implemented in both models of the further development of the Svarun MAP's operation in Slovenia.

The public policy relevance of topics and dialogue

The CAP-SP model of the future operation of Svarun, which would support the CAP strategic decision-making in the country, has a more focused interest of decision-makers, since the needs and appropriate measures must be defined for planning purposes, both of which require the input of science. The topics are also determined in a public debate, first through the determination of priority areas at the European level and then their more detailed discussion at the national level. There is therefore a clear need for dialogue and scientific support for the strategic planning of the CAP, which holds especially true for those topics that require new knowledge for the purposes of designing new measures. However, it is a matter for the line ministry, which is key to strategic planning, to what extent and for which elements of strategic planning (the definition of needs, intervention logic, impact assessment, distribution of resources) it needs additional support.

On the other hand, the *Rural model*, which would try to open broader topics in a comprehensive way by connecting sectors and public policies, does not have a clear structure of decision-makers. There is a clear interest in agriculture and agricultural policy, but it is severely limited in terms of importance, resources and familiarity of decision-makers with the needs of rural areas that go beyond agriculture. However, regional and cohesion policies do not highlight rural areas in particular, so despite the existence of a societal need to address rural development issues and a lively debate at the EU level, this is not a particularly clearly expressed public priority in Slovenia. Consequently, there is definitely less interest in dialogue and the strengthening of development topics related exclusively to rural areas. On the other hand, at least among agricultural interest representatives, the need to address rural development issues is very clearly expressed.

Available knowledge and research infrastructure on specific topics

The research community that deals with individual issues certainly already exists for the *CAP-SP model* and has already significantly supported decision-making on strategic issues of agricultural policy in some instances. Individual faculties of Slovenian universities and various public institutes operate in this field, and

the knowledge and infrastructure of some representative non-governmental organizations (chambers, various societies and other associations) are also important. Of course, there are also differences in analytical capacity and infrastructure, as well as the availability of data for individual sets of issues. It is weaker mainly on some specific economic and social topics, while the situation in the field of the environment can be assessed as relatively satisfactory.

The knowledge and research infrastructure needed for the *Rural model* are significantly less developed. Slovenia does not have specific institutions that would comprehensively address regional development from the perspective of rural areas. The lack of research in this area is obvious and this gap should be systematically filled. Additional investment in data sources and research infrastructure in this area would also greatly contribute to the understanding of the development needs of rural areas.

The willingness of stakeholders and the public to participate in dialogue

According to the Svarun MAP's experience, stakeholders are clearly willing to participate in order to support strategic planning per the *CAP-SP model*. This undoubtedly applies to interest and research representatives, but the readiness of the governmental system for such an approach to work should be strengthened somewhat (depending on the specific area of consideration, where the individual engagement of officials is strongly reflected). It is also expected that this type of dialogue would receive the public's support and participation. There will certainly also be a lot of formal and participatory activity of the line ministry in the field of strategic planning, which in a way also reduces the need for this kind of consideration of agricultural policy issues.

The institutional environment in the field of rural development (according to the *Rural model*) is so scattered, disjointed and closed in terms of sectoral aspects, that it is difficult to speak to the willingness of all stakeholders to be involved in this way. Since, all in all, the Svarun MAP also comes from agricultural groups, its continuation would also be met with less interest of both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to be included in this way of working. Even though the establishment of dialogue and this kind of support for decision-making would be more than necessary in this area as well, a great effort would be required to establish such a structure anew. But we should definitely insist on preserving the platform, which would strengthen the consideration of rural development issues in the dialogue.

Institutional support environment for dialogue

It would appear that the government is not particularly willing to financially support the operation of the platform in either of the models. This also applies to the line ministry for the *CAP-SP model*, as previous attempts to get permanent support were unsuccessful. Based on the experience so far, we may also see certain problems with the inclusion of the line ministry in the substantive part of the operation of the platform and the active use of the acquired knowledge and guidelines.

The *CAP-SP model* may be supported by the fact that the coordinator of the Svarun MAP, the Biotechnical Faculty, as a member of a larger consortium, has recently acquired funding for a project that develops tools and prepares a support environment for Member States for strategic planning in the future (the Horizon Europe project Tools4CAP). Since the clear participation of stakeholders is expected in this project, as well as a similar work method to the one implemented by the SHERPA project, the acquired project funds could be used to continue and expand the work of the Svarun MAP in terms of using methods and tools for the purposes of strategic planning. We may expect that the line ministry will be interested in considering methods and tools that would support strategic planning.

Interest in the *Rural model* should especially be stimulated, likely at the highest level of government, which should also take over part of the coordination. This is not entirely unfeasible, but it would undoubtedly be quite difficult.

Conclusion

We also tried to evaluate the presented analysis of the two models of the Svarun MAP's continued operation in terms of the extent to which individual conditions are met.

Table: Evaluation of the models according to set criteria (scale 1-5; 1 = not at all; 5 = entirely)

Criterion	<i>The CAP-SP model</i>	<i>The Rural model</i>
The relevance of topics and dialogue to public policy	3	3
Available research infrastructure	4	2
Willingness of stakeholders	3	3
Institutional support environment	1*	1
SUM	11	9

*...denoting national funding

We conclude that neither of the models has a particular advantage in terms of implications for the continuation of the Svarun MAP and thus the strengthening of the dialogue between science, the government and non-governmental representatives. The *Rural model* has a distinct potential in terms of needs in this area, which would lead to new institutional and development infrastructure, but there is practically no serious government support for this.

At first glance it may seem more appropriate to choose the *CAP-SP model*, i.e. support for strategic planning. There is potentially also more public interest, a broader research infrastructure, greater willingness of stakeholders and a better institutional environment for it. The latter applies mainly in case Svarun takes over the tasks from the Tools4CAP project. However, the final discussion within the MAP showed that the Svarun MAP stakeholders particularly emphasize the necessity of continuing dialogue and activities in the field of broader rural development issues. They emphasized that they consider this to be more important than the debate on agricultural policy measures, which will have its forum in formal strategic planning procedures.

Finally, the following position was adopted.

A combination of both models would be optimal for the future operation of the Svarun MAP and thus a formal dialogue between representatives of researchers and governmental and non-governmental organisations. This would mean the continued opening and defining of broader rural development issues with the aim of strengthening the development infrastructure and an intersectoral approach. In order to support this operation, a request is addressed to the Government of the Republic of Slovenia (in particular, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food and the Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development). Project funds from the EU project Tools4CAP (support for CAP decision-making at the national level) are also allocated to the basic operation of the Svarun MAP. In agreement with the line ministry, the Svarun MAP could primarily serve as a forum for the assessment and use of methods and tools in support of CAP strategic planning.

In the following, we develop ideas on how the Svarun MAP could work on these starting points in the future.

3.1. Recommendations for the continued operation of the Svarun MAP

3.1.1 Work method of the Svarun MAP in the future

The Svarun MAP would take on various tasks in support of the strategic planning of the CAP in Slovenia in the field of using methods and tools. In addition to this core approach, the Svarun MAP could also address other issues in support of strategic planning that require an additional input of knowledge and discussion

among stakeholders. In particular, it could also be used as a focus group to discuss how to use models and tools to support strategic planning decision-making:

- selecting methods or tools;
- testing methods or tools;
- definition of scenarios for assessment;
- presentation and analysis of results.

For these purposes, a more detailed implementation plan will be drawn up in cooperation with the line ministry.

This would be accompanied, in accordance with the agreement of the Svarun MAP members, by working on individual agricultural policy topics in the field of rural development that require dialogue between representatives of science and the governmental and non-governmental spheres. For each topic, the tasks could be the following:

- presentation and discussion of the topic (based on a review of the literature);
- selection and assessment of data sources;
- assessment of needs;
- selection of model tools to support decision-making;
- discussion of the results of model calculations (if they are carried out);
- selection and definition of measures;

The topics chosen would mainly be those where more new knowledge is needed and where it is also necessary to consider designing government policy and measures. The list of topics would be prepared in advance and based on the interest of the Svarun MAP members and government representatives (the line ministry and other ministries).

Positions would be prepared to support decision-making regarding each topic, following the example of the SHERPA project. For each topic, a group consisting of representatives of various Svarun MAP stakeholders would be appointed, which would prepare materials and help carry out events. These would generally be representatives of all three groups involved in working on the discussed topic, who would carry out all the necessary activities with the help of the platform management and the line ministry. The work of the platform would still be coordinated by the Biotechnical Faculty of the University of Ljubljana.

Thus, 1-2 topics could be processed per year, depending on the agreement with government representatives.

3.1.2 Organisation model of the Svarun MAP

The MAP would keep permanent membership, which could be supplemented according to selected topics, where specialists for certain issues and, especially in the case of problematic issues, the interested public would be invited. Given the new nature of the work, other stakeholders would also be invited to permanent membership.

The MAP would have a leadership consisting of a coordinator and two representatives each from the research sphere, the line ministry and non-governmental organizations. It would also have a secretary who would ensure that members stay informed and that things run smoothly. It would convene at monthly meetings, where activities would be reported and schedules of events determined. The basic work programme would be decided by the MAP as a whole at an annual conference.

The coordinator of the project (a representative of the Biotechnical Faculty) would provide funds for the smooth operation of the platform from the designated EU project. Additionally, if necessary, funds for the operation would also be provided by the line ministry or one of the other involved stakeholders.

The MAP would also seek synergy in its work by including stakeholders in events and projects.

The results and work of the MAP would be public and presented on the website of the line ministry.

4. Conclusions

The aim of preparing this position paper was to determine the potential of maintaining further dialogue between representatives of the research, governmental and non-governmental spheres in the field of rural development, especially in the potential form of operation of the Svarun Multi-actor platform. Funding for the latter, as one of 40 such platforms in Europe, is ending in 2023. Based on previous experience, criteria for assessing potential operation were designed, i.e. the relevance of topics to public policy, available research infrastructure, the willingness of stakeholders and institutional support environment.

Two possibilities were examined. The first one is the strengthening of participatory work on topics regarding broader interest in covering various economic, environmental and social issues in rural areas. The second is the orientation of the work towards supporting the strategic planning of the CAP, especially in the definition of new issues that require the support of science in terms of topics, approaches and methods of strategic planning.

It turned out that the stakeholders see merit in action mainly in the broader field of rural development. The fundamental reason is that rural areas in Slovenia are not uniformly understood, are addressed partially and remain primarily in the domain of agricultural policy. It is precisely the dialogue and operation of the Svarun MAP that can contribute to the strengthening of this issue and the creation of more integrative and comprehensive policies. The issue of strategic support in the selection and definition of agricultural policy topics also has other decision-making channels and has its own formal ways of functioning. Poorer operation is present mainly in the area of research support in agricultural policy decision-making.

The Svarun MAP will thus try to preserve its operation in the future. It will be organised similarly as in the 2019-2023 period, and will mainly work in the area of broader rural development issues and supporting strategic decision-making with the help of various methods and tools. To these ends, it will ask for the support and substantive guidance of government representatives from various departments. Minimal funds for the preservation of the Svarun MAP infrastructure will be provided by the coordinator of the project, the Biotechnical Faculty of the University of Ljubljana, and the exact programme and content of operation in these two areas will be defined in dialogue with representatives of the ministries.

During the operation of the SVARUN platform, it became clear that there is a distinct lack of a comprehensive address of rural areas in Slovenia, both in terms of institutional unity and research support. That is why the platform decided to investigate, within the framework of the 'Governance' topic, how it would be possible to maintain the operation of the platform, which proved to be useful and necessary. Since a lack of specialized central institutions and a culture of close cooperation between science, politics and society is undoubtedly a phenomenon that is also characteristic of some other EU Member States, we reiterate that, in order to address rural development issues better, systemic support at the EU level should be implemented, which would take this lack into account and institutionally encourage the long-term existence of this type of cooperation.

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References

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Appendix 1 Methodology

The position was prepared according to the following methodology:

- preparation of a draft of the position (Biotechnical Faculty);
- discussion of the fundamental issues of the position (see questionnaire in Appendix 1) March 10, 2023;
- corrections and additions based on discussion (Biotechnical Faculty);
- written comments on the revised position;
- adoption of the position.