

# RURAL AREAS NEWSLINK

NEWSLETTER FOR AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND  
RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

## RURAL POLICIES FOR AN ENLARGED EUROPE

The European Commission has proposed taking the first decisions about EU Accession in 2002. The first Applicant Countries might then join the EU in 2003 or 2004. Nevertheless, the screening process still needs to be completed and the actual accession negotiations have yet to begin. Much work remains to be done before the first central and eastern European countries become EU Member States, not least in agriculture and rural development policy.

Two main positions can be discerned with regard to rural policies for an enlarged Europe. EU representatives are mainly concerned about preparations for the implementation of the single market and the related legislation. This demands capacity building in the administration, large investments in food production, processing and marketing, improved hygiene controls etc. Policy makers in central and eastern Europe (CEE) recognise the importance of these issues, but they also see a need for new employment and higher income for the rural population and protection for possibly

'inefficient' producers.

The ability of the farm and food sectors to compete successfully in the single market and comply with EU standards is an essential prerequisite for a smooth integration into the EU. These sectors are the primary source of income in most rural areas of CEE. However, many smaller farms and enterprises will not be able to carry out the required hygiene and efficiency improvements due to lack of capital, relevant expertise, or an insufficient production base. They need to be able to sell their produce on local markets and/or develop sustainable sources of additional income. Incentive schemes, particularly for good environmental management, should also be available to supplement market income. This requires adequate support for rural development at all levels, encouraging initiative rather than dependency.

Experience in EU Member States has shown that to be successful, rural development needs to engage the local population and be fostered by appropriate administrative support, local structures and

marketing opportunities. These need a long time to develop, hence the importance of providing resources for rural development work as early as possible.

Pre-accession aid and national policies should, therefore, not only focus on building infrastructure and institutions. They also need to give attention to people, training and local initiatives, to set in motion new ways of thinking and development at local level that take rural areas in CEE into the next century. This is a complex task, admittedly, but the seeds of change need to be laid now to introduce new attitudes and opportunities both among the administration and rural people in CEE as well as among western partners and potential customers. Experience in Germany shows that this change cannot be avoided and should be tackled sooner rather than later.

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Issue 5 December 1999

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IIEP London

ISSN-1561-591X

Edited by Jan-Erik Petersen of IIEP London. Designed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB, BirdLife Partner in the UK). The newsletter is supported financially by the RSPB, WWF-Europe and the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety.

Views expressed within this Newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of the editors or the supporting organisations.

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# REVITALISING RURAL AREAS IN SOUTH EAST SLOVENIA

Rural areas in Slovenia face many economic and social disadvantages. These include a loss of cultural heritage and identity, a lack of competitiveness in the farm sector, shortage of jobs, as well as an aged and declining population. These problems are compounded by the administrative structure in Slovenia which consists of a strong state government and 192 municipalities that are technically, financially and cadre poor. This leads to regional imbalances where the situation in town and suburb municipalities is satisfying, but where rural communities, which form 85% of Slovenia, face serious problems. Areas without economic and political weight do not receive adequate attention and continue to decline.

The development of disadvantaged rural areas as well as environmental protection are the focus of VITRA's work. Although we are ambitious in our work we never forget that we have to preserve our living area for future generations. VITRA aims to share ideas, knowledge, experience and opportunities for the sustainable development of rural areas with inhabitants of the villages where we work. This vision helps us to approach people who know that something needs to be done, but who do not know how. The overall goal is to revitalise rural areas with, through and for local people.

In 1995 VITRA started a revitalisation project based on its motto – that the sustainable use of space is the optimal form of protection. The project covers the 'The Land of Wooden Ware' that comprises hilly areas of 15 municipalities in the Notranjska and Dolenjska regions of south east Slovenia. Only 15,000 inhabitants in 390 settlements live in the entire project area of about 200,000 ha.

The starting point of action by VITRA is an evaluation of the values and objectives of rural areas and their inhabitants. With local inhabitants VITRA develops a vision for revitalisation which we call 'the ideal countryside'. The defined ideal is supposed to become reality, as a result of joint ideas, efforts, initiatives, actions, projects, and foremost, as a result of concrete work. Through renewed social contacts and activities we aim to connect and activate

individuals in villages to work on economic development on the basis of a well-maintained cultural and natural heritage. This means preserving the architectural heritage and beauty of country houses and villages, open landscapes, the development of family businesses, organic farming and green tourism, to give some examples. VITRA aims to provide support for self-employment and to unite inhabitants with similar interests. We try to develop the knowledge of handicrafts, in particular the design and innovative production of wooden ware.

VITRA has developed long term aims on the basis of our current work. The idea of the rural revitalisation of a homogenous region has gained widespread acceptance and will continue to guide our work. VITRA plans to realise the following objectives in future:

- practical research into concepts for rural revitalisation
- international co-operation and research camps
- training of employees, VITRA members and inhabitants of The Land of Wooden Ware
- informal ways of adult and youth education
- taking our ideas and experience to other parts of Slovenia
- connecting with other NGOs in topics which are not our priority
- extending The Land of Wooden Ware project and other projects in co-operation with Eko Liburnia (NGO) from Croatia
- searching for constant and stable sources of financing for our work
- to provide regular advice on the sustainable use of rural areas.

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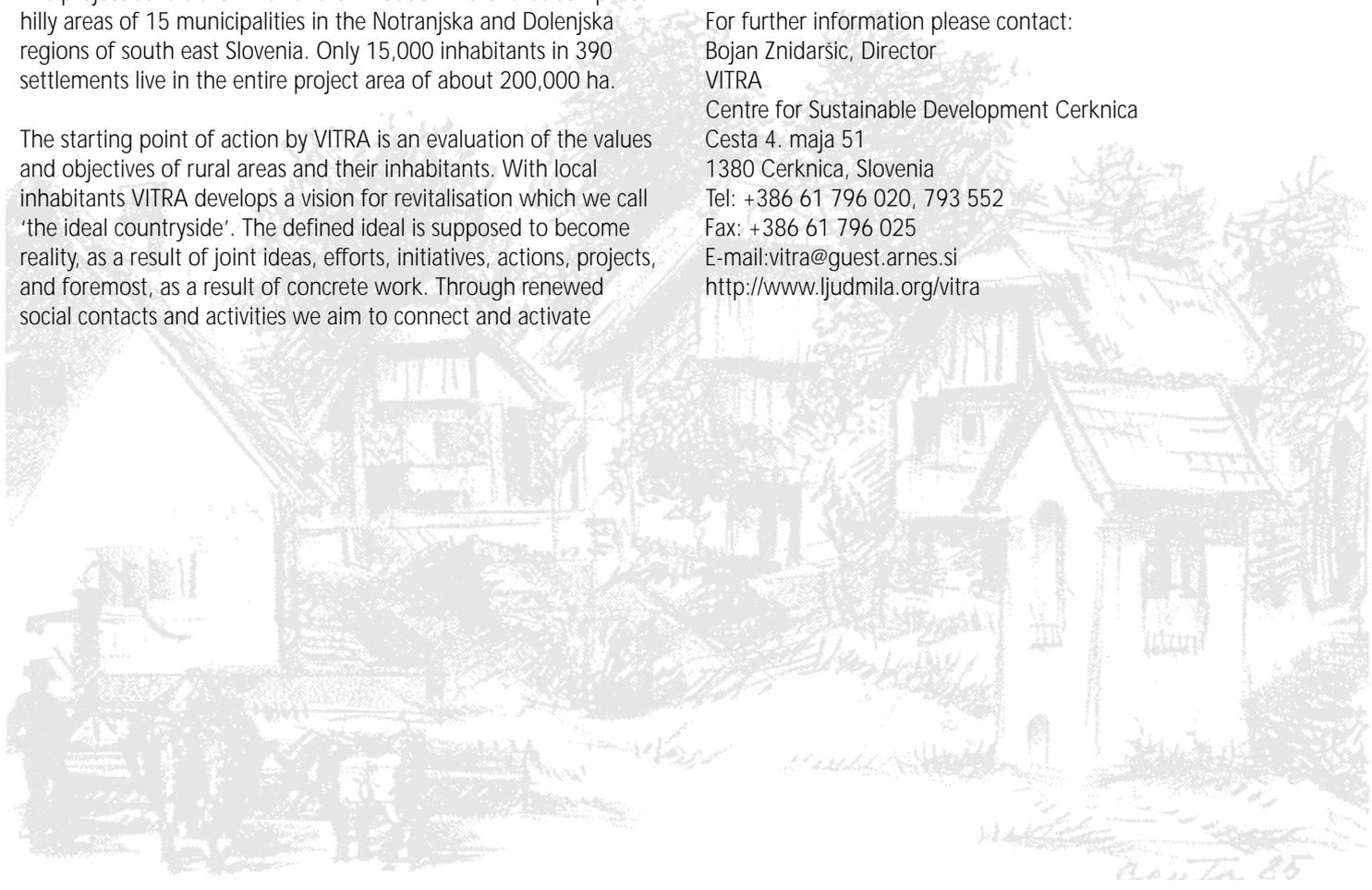
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# PRE-ACCESSION SUPPORT FOR TRANSPORT AND ENVIRONMENT PROJECTS

ISPA (Instrument for Structural Policies for Pre-Accession) is a new EU pre-accession fund, which forms part of the Agenda 2000 reform package. ISPA's aim is to align Accession Countries on Community infrastructure standards in the areas of environment and transport. As such, ISPA is similar to the Cohesion Fund, which is applicable in Spain, Greece, Portugal and Ireland, the current four poorest EU Member States.

The ISPA budget amounts to 1,040 million euro per year (2000–2006) to be distributed amongst the 10 accession countries according to the indicative breakdown set out below. This financial allocation is based on population, GDP per capita and surface area of each country. Thus, Poland and Romania will receive at least half of the total funds. ISPA can co-fund up to 75% of the cost of individual measures. If the European Commission considers that a higher rate is required for projects that are essential to achieve ISPA's objectives, this rate can be raised to up to 85%.

Country	Allocation (%)
Poland	30–37
Romania	20–26
Bulgaria	8–12
Hungary	7–10
Czech Republic	5.5–8
Lithuania	4–6
Slovakia	3.5–5.5
Latvia	3.5–5.5
Estonia	2–3.5
Slovenia	1–2

There is no specific provision on the scope of the environmental and transport measures to be funded by ISPA. The only requirement in the ISPA Regulation is that 'environmental measures' eligible under ISPA are those which help the Accession Countries comply with the requirements of EU environmental law and with the objectives of the Accession Partnerships. 'Transport infrastructure measures', however, must promote sustainable mobility and be based on the criteria of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) guidelines.

In practice, this means that the priorities for the Accession Countries will be waste, water and sewage infrastructure (as environmental measures) and the construction of the TINA network (as transport infrastructure measures). This mirrors the priorities of the Cohesion Fund. The Accession Countries are proposing projects to the ISPA Unit in the European Commission (DG Regional Policy) which will carry out a 'thorough appraisal' of the proposed measure and

take the final decision after having consulted the ISPA Management Committee.

## A Fund for Sustainable Development?

The only reference to sustainable development in the ISPA Regulation is a general statement in its preamble, recommending that ISPA 'should contribute to sustainable development in these countries'.

In this respect the ISPA Regulation ignores the Amsterdam Treaty, the Cardiff integration process and the new Structural Funds General Regulation, where sustainable development is a specific objective. The Informal Meeting of the EU Ministers for Environment in July 1999 concluded that 'the EU pre-accession financing instruments should be used to promote sustainable development'. The EU Transport Council environmental integration strategy (adopted in October 1999) invites Accession Countries to follow the integration principles and indicates that the allocation of pre-accession funds (i.e. ISPA) 'could be linked' to the development of less harmful transport modes such as railways, inland waterways and public transport.

Although transport and environmental infrastructure are its priority areas, the EU Cohesion Fund has also funded nature conservation projects. In 1993–94, 3.9% of approved environment projects, totalling 30 million euro, had nature conservation objectives (e.g. adaptation and conservation of the Spanish National Park network, raised bog restoration projects in Ireland, etc.). There is then no reason why ISPA could not also fund nature conservation projects in rural areas (as projects under 5 million euro can be considered in exceptional circumstances).

BirdLife International is supporting project proposals at EU level that aim to improve the environmental quality of rural areas under the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund. Through our Pre-Accession Project we are also keen to promote similar initiatives in the Accession Countries. For further information on ISPA, the possibilities for environmental projects or about BirdLife International's activities please contact:

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## PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS

Successful integration of the Applicant Countries into the EU needs the full participation of their citizens in the accession process. EU pre-accession regulations specify that 'appropriate economic, social and environmental partners' should be consulted. However, the inclusiveness of this process remains undefined and central and eastern Europe (CEE) governments are largely left to their own devices in consulting citizen organisations and ensuring the transparency of the EU accession process.

Due to the complexity of the accession process, its speed and a lack of openness or interest of some officials, the possibilities for public consultation are limited and not satisfactory for citizen organisations in CEE. Opportunities for consultation depend generally on the ministry or even individual officials involved. In many cases plans are not available for comments at all, despite repeated requests. When documents are made available it is only in their final form or with an insufficient consultation period (as little as 24 hours!). Thus, public participation is one of the weakest points of the EU accession process in CEE.

Democratising the EU enlargement process demands transparency, access to information and compulsory NGO and public participation. More attention and resources are required, therefore, to establish adequate mechanisms, structures and possibilities for a fuller participation of citizen organisations in the accession process. Currently, even strong citizen groups in CEE feel overwhelmed by its complexity and the difficulties in ensuring public opportunities for information and consultation.

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## NATURE CONSERVATION WEBSITE HOSTED BY ECNC

The European Centre for Nature Conservation (ECNC) in Tilburg, The Netherlands, is a key institution for linking science and policy development with regard to nature conservation in Europe. With the support of its network partners, the research projects and support programmes of ECNC focus on the implementation of the ecological network idea in Europe, integrating biodiversity conservation into economic sectors, and on supporting policy instruments such as the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy (PEBLDS) and the EC Biodiversity Strategy. These strategies also address economic sectors with an impact on land use and biodiversity, such as agriculture.

ECNC maintains a comprehensive and well-maintained website as part of its information activities. The site contains three main sections:

- information about ECNC, its partners, meetings, publications, news bulletin, programme and activities;
- nature conservation in Europe, including a directory of organisations, policy and legislation, a virtual library and a calendar of events;
- services, including biodiversity databases, LYNX (an information service on ecological networks), a guide to PEBLDS, and the Saxifraga Foundation collection of slides on Europe's biological and landscape diversity.

There is also a news section about the latest conferences, ECNC projects and the bulletin 'ECNC Update'. The site can be visited at: <http://www.ecnc.nl>

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## INTEGRATING LITHUANIA'S AGRICULTURE INTO WIDER MARKETS

The share of agricultural employment accounts for 24% of Lithuania's total employment, whereas the EU average is only 5.1%. These figures indicate the importance of agriculture in Lithuania and the large impact that EU accession will have. It is essential, therefore, to analyze how EU membership will change the agricultural sector in Lithuania, what must be done to restructure and prepare farms and enterprises and how they can be protected from negative consequences. A key issue to solve is the acceptance of Lithuanian agricultural produce on EU markets.

The present outlook in the agricultural sector is not optimistic, but preparatory work for EU membership is already going on with EU support. Since 1998 Lithuania has been developing an Agricultural Information System, which will help to administer EU financial support and to formulate agricultural policy. In 2000, the SAPARD programme will begin with a budget of 29.8 million euro per year. The agricultural screening and evaluation procedures have made good progress and Lithuania is likely to be invited into the negotiations for EU membership. Lithuania will soon also join the World Trade Organisation, which will bring changes to agricultural policy. Some of them are in contradiction of EU policy, but we hope that in the end a good solution will be found and that Lithuanian agriculture will be integrated into the world economy.

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## PROGRAMME TO SUPPORT AGRICULTURAL ORGANISATIONS IN CEE

Assistance to farmers' organisations in central and eastern Europe is the objective of a 2.5 million euro PHARE-funded project of COPA/COGECA and CEJA, the representative organisations of farmers, co-operatives and young farmers in the EU. The 15-month project intends to support the EU accession process by:

- strengthening the democratic and independent representation of farmers and farming-related co-operatives;
- increasing the efficiency of their representative organisations as interest groups at national and international level;
- developing the organisations' understanding of the rules of the internal market for agriculture and food and their knowledge of EU policy and market mechanisms;
- providing the organisations with expertise on internal management and institutional development.

In the framework of twinning agreements between farmers' unions in EU Member States and partners in the Applicant Countries the project will deliver assistance in the form of:

- placements of EU experts for 12-month periods with organisations in each Applicant Country to facilitate work on institutional and organisational questions and to transfer knowledge from EU farmers organisations to partners in the Applicant Countries;
- internships of 12 days for staff from CEE organisations in EU twinning partners to gain direct insight into the functioning of EU interest organisations;
- exchange visits between young farmers' organisations in east and west;
- a high-level seminar and workshop in Brussels.

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