

GEOGRAPHICAL ASPECT OF RURAL AREAS : TRANSFORMATION IN SLOVENIA

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Résumé

Depuis sa récente indépendance, la Slovénie tente d'intégrer de nouvelles structures et institutions économiques et politiques. Le passage d'une économie planifiée à une économie de marché a provoqué d'importants changements structurels. Les espaces ruraux ont été particulièrement touchés. L'article discute des spécificités des espaces ruraux slovènes, analyse la conception nationale du développement rural et évalue les possibilités pour un développement rural durable.

Mots-clés

Slovénie, agriculture, développement rural, développement durable

Zusammenfassung

Nach der Deklaration der Selbständigkeit fang Slowenien mit der ökonomischen und politischen Integration an. Der Übergang von der Planwirtschaft in die Marktwirtschaft brachte wichtige Änderungen, ländliche Gebiete wurden extrem kräftigen Einflüssen ausgesetzt. Der Beitrag diskutiert über spezifische Eigenschaften der slowenischen ländlichen Gebiete, stellt nationale Idee der ländliche Entwicklung dar und evaluiert die Möglichkeiten für deren zukünftige nachhaltige Entwicklung.

Slowenien, Landwirtschaft, ländliche Entwicklung, nachhaltige Entwicklung

I. SOME BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL AREAS IN SLOVENIA

Respecting the geographical point of view Slovenia represents distinctive transitory country due to its site and location on the crossroad of four European landscape units (Mediterranean, Pannonian, Alpine and Balkan). On 20 273 km² of national territory (one of the smallest European countries; nevertheless it extends over two thirds of the size of Belgium) impacts of different types of climate, vegetation, civilisation... are evident. The landscape itself can be described as heterogeneous (in the field of physical- and human geography), mosaic and filigree in structure. With the decay of Yugoslavia and the announcement of independency in the year of 1991 Slovenia has ranked amongst the youngest countries of the World. With the population of two million and observed from the Western Europe relatively low population density (98 inhabitants per km²; 2001) Slovenia ranks in the group of small, but very interesting, dynamic and specific areas of Europe, which therefore demand and need special attention. In the process of accession to European Union (EU) very often different

stereotypes (usually connected to the area of Eastern Europe and Balkan) are addressed to Slovenia due to shortage of knowledge and simple generalization. These stereotypes and common images often do not receive an adequate confirmation in the landscape itself as also in people's mentality and lifestyle. Actually at the same time numerous situations reveal quite a strong attachment to Western Europe and active participation in the Central European territory that has been evident for more than a thousand years.

In this preface reflexion therefore a question raises: how to define rural areas in Slovenia? Uniform, clear and widely accepted definition of rural areas in Slovenia does not exist. Respecting OECD and EUROSTAT quantitative indicators (i.e. population density less than 100 inhabitants per km²), almost complete Slovene territory is enlisted as rural area. But more detailed surveys show that especially flat areas in alpine and pre-alpine valleys and basins as also narrow littoral area experience bigger population agglomerations with declared population density up to 500 inhabitants per km².

the urbanization stage is usually used in Slovenia as an indicator, which defines the extension of urban and indirectly also rural areas. With relatively low degree of urbanization, i.e. 51 % (2001; compared to the Western Europe countries), Slovenia ranks among the most rural areas in Europe due to this second commonly used indicator. The expressed statement can be confirmed also with the fact, that only 55 Slovene settlements of totally 5 954 are defined as «urban settlements» (there is not officially accepted definition of urban settlements), and there are only two cities with more than 100 000 inhabitants (Ljubljana, the capital, with 270 000 inhabitants; Maribor, regional centre, with 100 000 inhabitants).

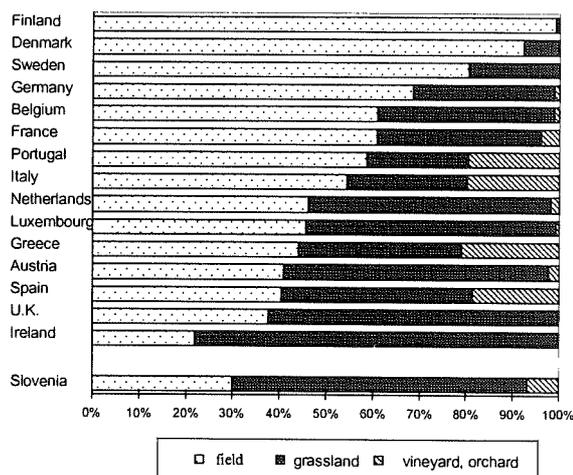
On the basis of the above one might suppose that Slovenia could be described as a monotone, plain and homogenous rural area, and therefore simply round off in only one spatial unit in the frame of EU (as a NUTS 2 region), with provided uniformed development prorates and totally equal measures. No such declaration would find suitable confirmation in reality: Slovene settlement area and especially rural areas represent very heterogeneous areas, which therefore request a use of specific and different development measures.

Considering physical geographical conditions three quarters of Slovene territory can be declared as less favoured areas for agriculture obtaining the EU definition : 44 % of territory belong to karst area, there are a lot of hilly and mountainous areas. Even though the practised way of defining the less favoured areas for agriculture is not directly compatible with the EU approach, we can state, that in the frame of EU, only Luxembourg, Portugal, Finland and Greece seem to have more difficult conditions for cultivation. Unfavourable cultivation conditions do not make the agricultural production impossible, but they do have impact on low farm competitiveness, lower assortment of cultures and cultivation orientation. They also outbid the production.

The overview on the land use structure (Fig. 1) would also supplement and enlighten the above mentioned statement: regarding this issue Slovenia is very close to Scandinavian countries, as at the beginning of the third Millennium more than 60 % of total territory is covered by forest (with the evident tendency of growth in the past decades and expected also in the future). Slovenia therefore deviates a lot from the EU average in the field of land use, especially when compared to Central European countries (in EU countries forests usually cover only one third of territory). Slovenia, with the exception of plain land (in Subpannonian area and some areas on the bottom of valleys and basins), has no important vast areas, favourable for intensive agricultural production. Fields are limited to relatively small areas and also

threatened by suburbanization and the expansion of highway network.

Figure 1 : Agricultural land use structure in Slovenia and EU countries



Source : Cunder, 2001.

With the exception of Ireland, there is no country in the EU with lower percentage of fields in the agricultural land use structure as Slovenia. Grassland absolutely dominates in Slovenia with more than two thirds of agricultural land. Due to the specific geographical site and position at the edge of Mediterranean and Pannonian Basin the percentage of agricultural land, appropriate for vineyards and orchards in Slovenia is relatively high.

Rural areas at the same time demonstrate unique demographic and economic development. Due to the industrialization, motorization, urbanization, deagrization and depopulation, an important part of Slovene territory has been cleared from demographical point of view, or with other words, it lost its vital strength. Therefore Slovene rural areas in many cases express totally matchless and specific demographic status compared to the central urban areas on flat land.

Data on paid income tax per inhabitant would provide a very interesting starting point for analysing the progress of development and indirectly the quality of life. These data are actually accessible, but they are aggregated to bigger spatial units, and therefore they enable more detailed surveys, but on the other hand very loose conclusions are possible : the central part of Slovenia faces higher quality of life than other areas with the exception of littoral area. It is also evident that regional disparities in the last decade have not been diminished, on the contrary, they have actually emerged and deepened.

Even if we would be able to set the definition of rural areas, we would have to adopt development measures to micro- and middle scale. Obtaining the actual arrangement of the state with recognised 192 municipalities (in the year of 2002 the planned fragmentation and the establishment of approx. 50 new small municipalities is expected), but without any intermediate administrative institution. Therefore highly centralistic arrangement is in operation, which does not apply to rapid and qualitative improvement of regional development or diminishing of regional disparities in the near future. Since the early nineties Slovenia confronts with zero population growth. Therefore for Slovenia and especially for the majority of rural areas not positive demographic tendencies are relevant for more than a century. Slovene rural areas had experienced its maximum density at the end of the 19th century with agrarian overpopulation, which generated mass exodus of population to towns, to the various European countries and also to the other continents of the World.

Compared to rural areas in other European countries rural areas in Slovenia have specific characteristics, because they have experienced very fast, strong and mostly from urban development planners conducted changes, which have been carried out in the EU countries for more than a century. These changes have occurred in Slovenia in only fifty years, with apparently very strong spatial, social and economic impacts.

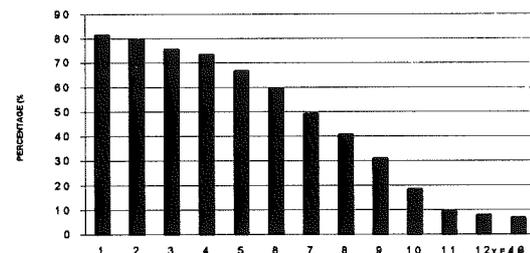
Slovene rural areas are also faced with one feature: inhabitants prefer living in the countryside in the houses of their own, with garden, and on exposed location apart from their neighbours. This runs towards very strong impact on space (because it actually generates very expensive construction of individual buildings), high pressure on water resources, enlargement of traffic network and demands modern and expensive communal infrastructure.

II. NATIONAL IDEA OF THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

After the World War II. Slovene rural areas have experienced essential changes. Agriculture as an economic activity as also agrarian population (in the year 1931 almost 70 % of active population received their income from agriculture; Fig. 2) had prevailed. Agrarian structure in Slovenia was relatively compatible to the one of the Western European countries (for example the average farm size). But Slovene rural areas have nowadays totally different picture: absolutely reversed process has been in operation till the nineties. For a long period agriculture has been developed in totally opposite direction compared to agriculture in EU countries, where agricultural technology has been continually improved,

farm sizes have been increased and production is highly specialised.

Figure 2 Agrarian population in Slovenia from 1869 to 2000

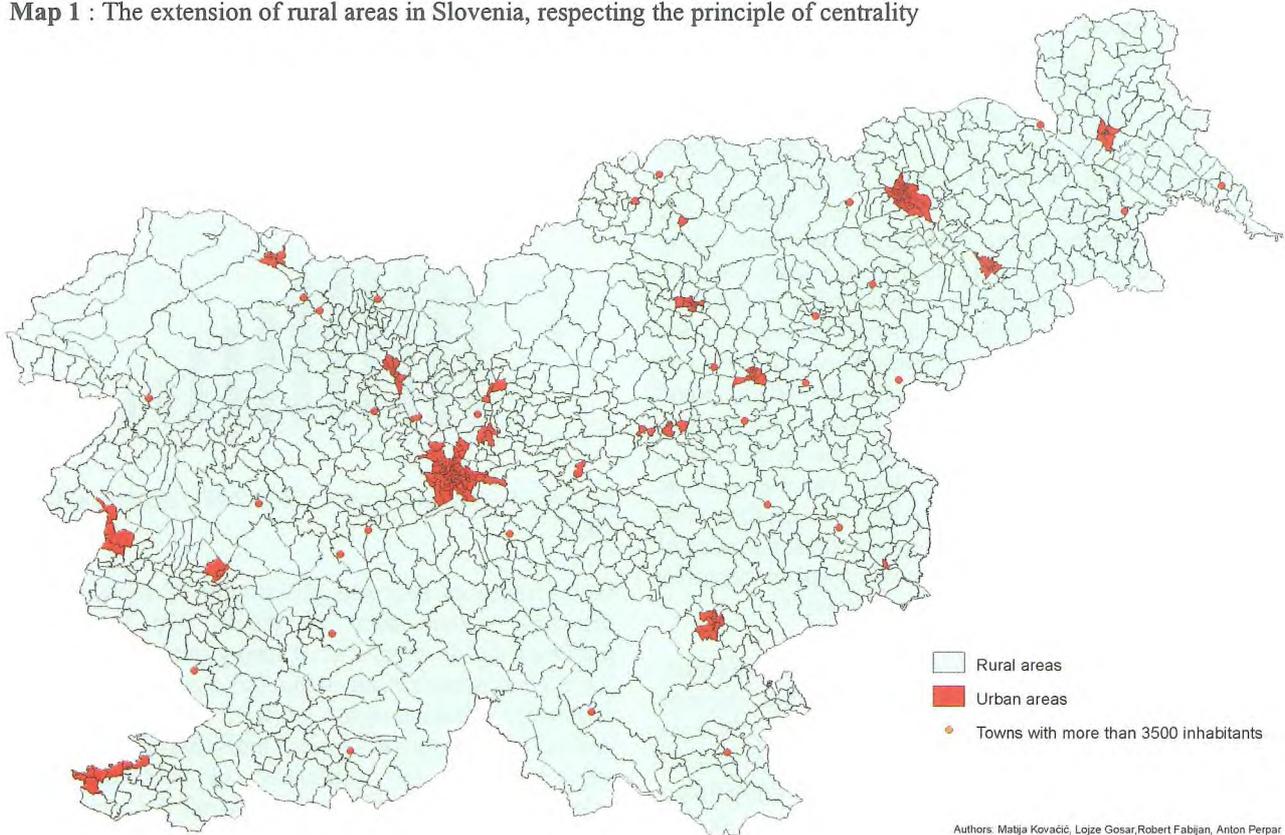


Source : Population census, 1869-1991; Statistical Report 2000.

In the sense of accepted philosophy of socialist socio-economic system after the World War II. the state preferred the development of heavy industry and towns. As a consequence rural areas and agriculture had been neglected. Implementation of land maximum act (with limited 10 hectares of land per individual private farmer) was followed by artificially blocked process of enlargement and rounding of farm land. But on the other hand the system supported an establishment of socialised group of enterprises that would gain necessary land for operation with nationalisation and rounding of confiscated land. Compared to other Eastern European countries relatively small share (approx. 30 %) had been nationalised and very important and characteristic figure of Slovene agriculture became apparent: in many views very small and fragmented land structure as a remnant from the middle of the 19th century. Therefore Slovenian agriculture confronted with continuously deteriorated land and farm structure, low work intensity and (in some areas) also with the abandonment of cultivation. This process resulted in deepening of contradiction between socio-economic structure of agrarian population and agrarian structure as whole. Consequences are confirmed with the fact that there are many similarities between Slovenian society and developed post-industrial society in the case of social and demographic structure of agrarian population. But agrarian structure still bears the burden of classic agrarian society.

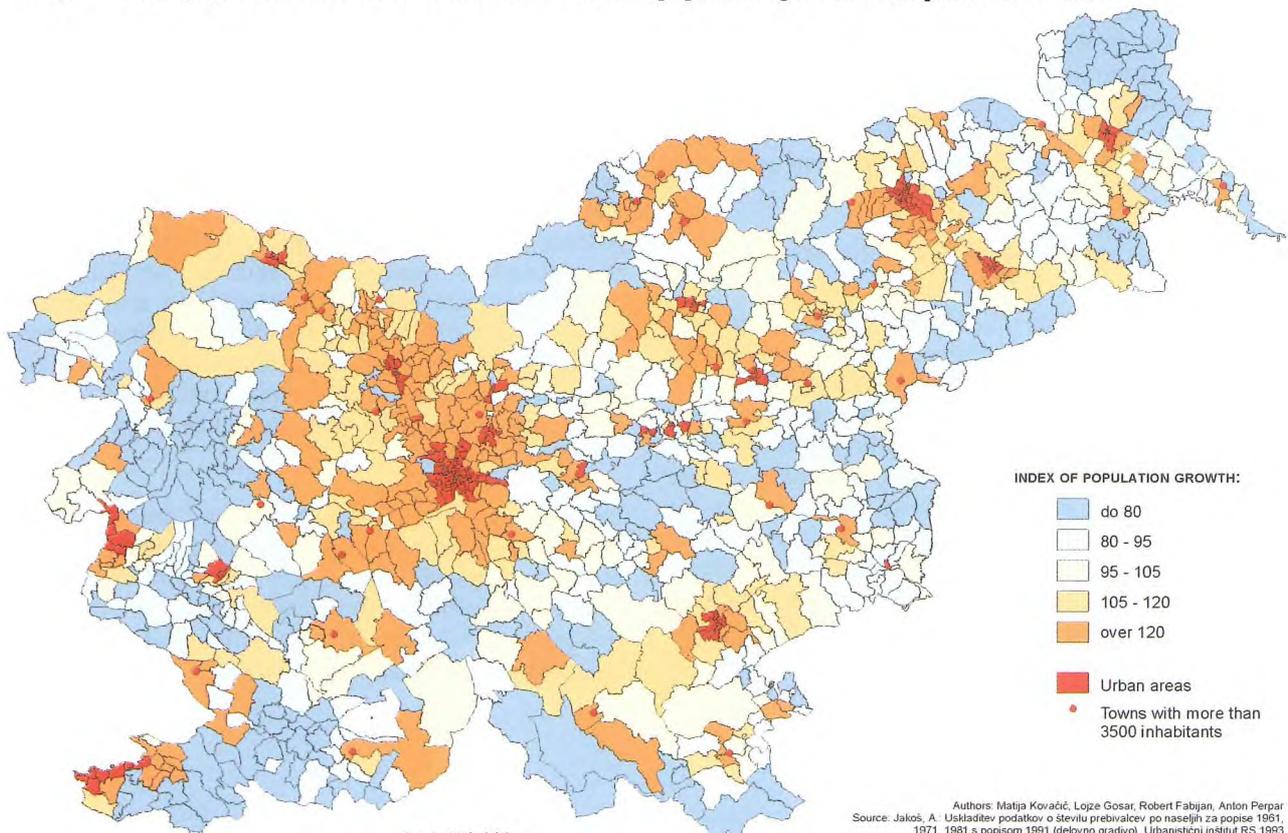
Industrialization and accompanying processes have caused the decreasing importance of primary economic activities, population found employment in non-agrarian activities (especially manufacturing industry), developed in bigger urban centres and on the long run it has raised depopulation of numerous rural areas.

Map 1 : The extension of rural areas in Slovenia, respecting the principle of centrality



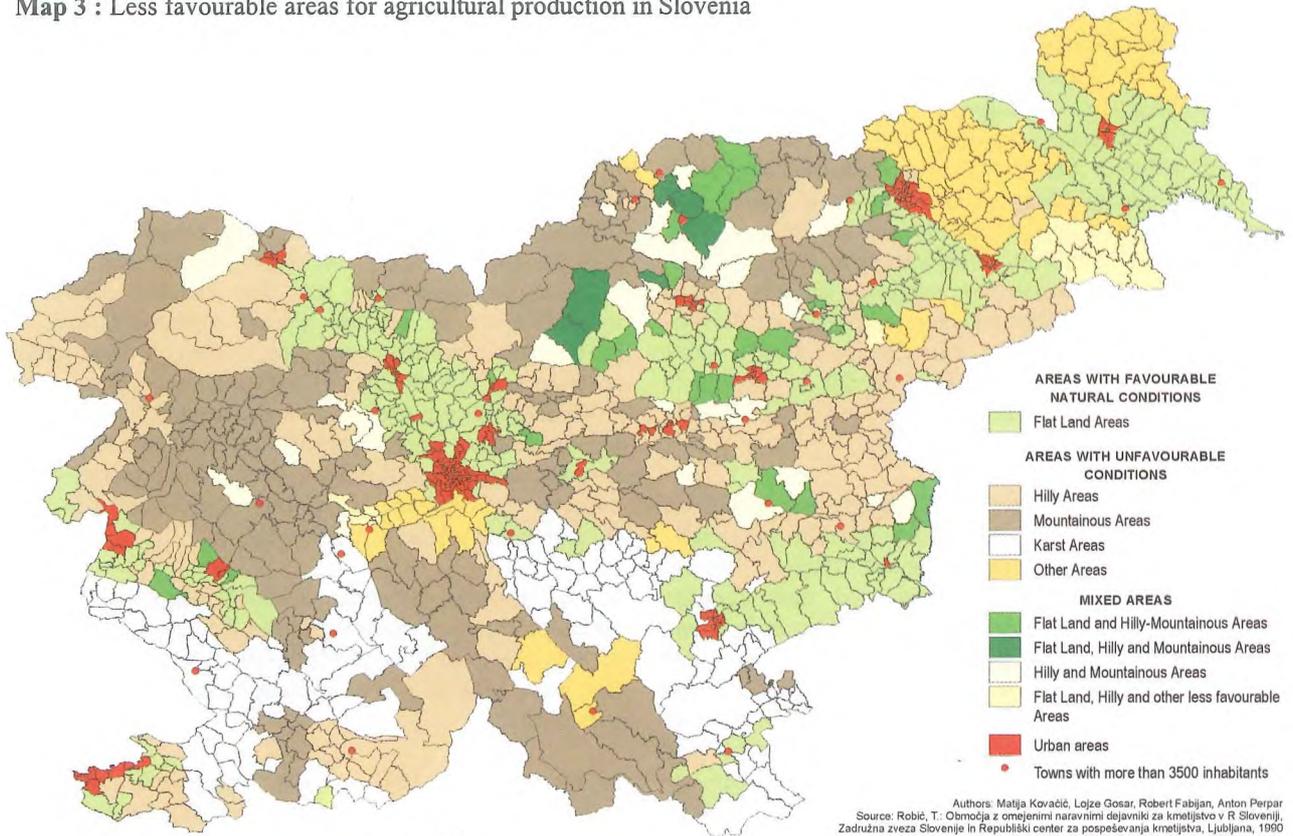
1 : 1 750 000

Map 2 : Demographic characteristics of Slovenia : index of population growth in the period 1961-1991



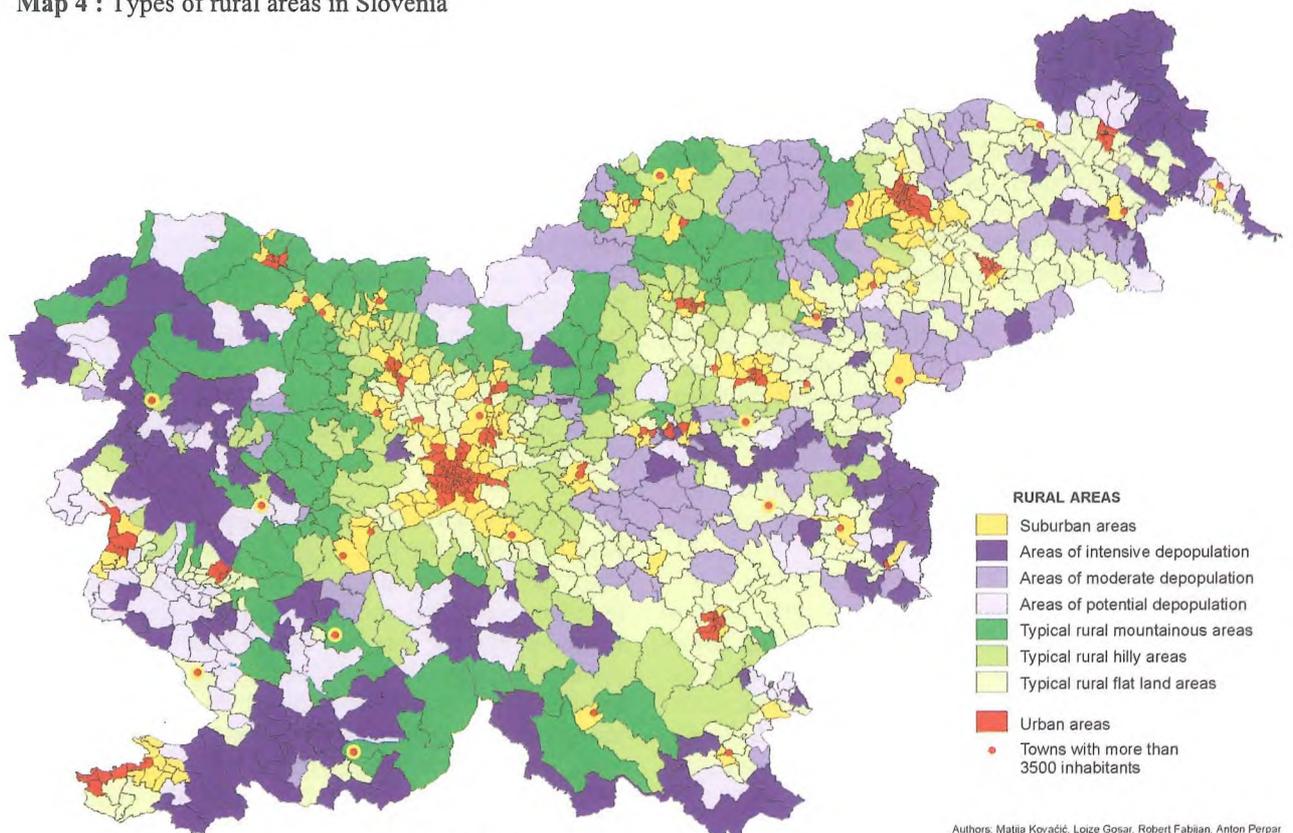
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Map 3 : Less favourable areas for agricultural production in Slovenia



1 : 1 750 000

Map 4 : Types of rural areas in Slovenia



1 : 1 750 000

It was in the seventies that spatial planning «approached» rural areas for the first time. The polycentric system of economic development had been implemented: the foundation, strengthening and spreading of small economic (and also educational, health care etc.) centres across the whole state's territory occurred. Such decision has had different positive (better infrastructure, lower emigration, strengthening of local economic power etc.) and negative impacts (dependence on headquarters, monostructured economy, sensitiveness to market trends, higher environmental pressure, suburban sprawl). Taking into account various estimations around 60 % of Slovene population live in rural areas (Kovacic et al., 2000), which are in wider sense recognisable on 90 % of state's territory with the predomination of non-agrarian population.

One third (according to some calculation even a half) of Slovene territory is subjected to depopulation (especially hilly, mountainous and border areas; Map 4). Mostly young people emigrate, whereas old and agrarian inhabitants remain. This results in reduction in size and intensity of cultivation, overgrowing of less favourable areas for agriculture and weakening of social and cultural connections. Economic potentials decline, infrastructure and cultural heritage are rejected and at the end disintegration of cultural landscape follows. The reactivation of such areas demands large financial investments.

Concentration of population is still evident in plain areas (in towns and also in rural settlements). Therefore the very best agricultural areas are exposed to urbanization and suburbanization. At the same time the possibilities for food production decrease. In the last decades in many ways *ad hoc*, not suitable or even entirely non-professional development of rural settlements spoiled their image and appearance, destroyed cultural heritage a lot and brought inconvenient elements into rural cultural pattern with wide range of consequences (Map 4).

The third segment of Slovene rural areas is facing (small) constant population growth and has to deal with very large number of daily commuters due to weak economic infrastructure. In this areas agriculture still plays quite an important role, negative progress trends are not so prominent. The preservation of natural and cultural heritage is a consequence of less aggressive past development (Map 4).

Taking into account economic indicators, rural areas in Slovenia confront worse economic situation than urban regions. Differences appear when comparing eastern and western part of Slovenia: the eastern part lags behind. On the other hand, central part (capital and surroundings), partly mediterranean and north-western part (traditional manufacturing area) exceeds the average values of

national development index. The reason is to be seen in cancellation of numerous working places in manufacturing enterprises in rural areas at the time of adaptation to market economy and globalisation trends in the nineties, but partly also in higher percentage of people, employed in agriculture.

Quite an extensive programme of farm development stimulation and regulation of agricultural land has started also in the seventies. Such programme has brought technological renovation and has enabled production intensification of mostly market oriented farms (as programme is limited only to agriculture). Unfortunately, no wide positive changes of agrarian structure occurred. After the 1990 especially areas, declared as less favoured for agriculture, have received state's subsidies (i.e. for animals, seeds, fuel, different types of investment, young farmers, environment measures, agriculture advisory, education and research; OECD, 2001).

In the nineties Slovenia accepted quite a renewed agricultural policy, declared in the Development Strategy of Agriculture in Slovenia (MKGP, 1993), which for the first time, officially defined multifunctional character of agriculture.

In the year of 1991 a new programme under the supervision of Ministry for Agriculture and Food has been launched : « The Complex Development of Rural Areas and the Village Renewal, *CRPOV* ». Especially local (i.e. thematic routes : wine-, tourist- etc.), and regional projects of rural development have been implemented (for example : project of renovation and proclamation of cultural heritage).

With the implementation of mentioned programme local population ought to be enable the for autonomous development, complex problem solving, development and preservation of rural areas characteristics, existed settled area and cultural landscape. The methodology provides three stages: preparation (co-ordinated one year work of local population, local administration, experts and state), introduction (deeper and wider involvement of local population) and implementation of projects (application to different financial sources for selected programmes and their realization).

More than 200 villages from ail parts of Slovenia have been enlisted in the first stage. The programme's second stage has numerous demands (mostly bureaucratic) and therefore only few projects enter the third stage. An important reason also lies in the fact that very small financial support has been given by state. Evident is also uncoordinated work of different institutions and the absence of clear national strategy for development of rural areas. The financial means from state have actually risen, so has the number of projects at the initial stage.

Nevertheless the question remains: why not to support the projects which are really vital and necessary for preservation of settled rural areas and cultural landscape? Some very stimulative results have been achieved on the local stage. But very profound monitoring of accepted projects and revision of aims and measures is needed.

After the fall of Iron curtain Slovenia is entitled to EU programme *PHARE* funds. Numerous projects have been carried out in the last decade. Especially programme *PHARE-CBC/SPF (Cross-Border-Co-operation/Small Projects Fund)* is very important for development of economically weak rural areas. Programme functionally connects border areas of EU members (Austria, Italy; also Hungary in the recent years) and Slovenia. Such projects enable activation of local communities (almost a half of Slovene's municipalities participate) and regional development agencies with the planning and implementation of small local infrastructure, strengthening of human capital, economic power, solving environmental problems, sustainable exploitation of natural sources and protection of cultural heritage. Some projects on local scale are very vital and resound, but on the other hand some still have *ad hoc* image. Detailed evaluation of different impacts, derived from this projects, has not been done yet.

In the pre-accession period to EU *aquis communautaire* Slovenia is also entitled to the means of *ISPA*, *TACIS* and *SAPARD* programme in time period 2000-2006. *Special pre-accession programme for agriculture and rural development (SAPARD)* purposes 6,3 million EURO annually for Slovenia (accompanied with state's co-finance, interested individuals and communities or enterprises). The competitive Slovene agriculture should evolve, rural areas ought to be settled and EU legal system implemented. Amongst 15 measures Slovenia has chosen four (farm investments support, investments in food-processing manufacture, the development of supplementary activities on farms and improvement of rural areas infrastructure). Invitation to interested parties is (expected) in December, 2001. The demands are relatively high and severe (farm size, age and education of farm owner, invested means). The number of potential candidates will probably get lower. Following the agricultural census data there are approx. 97 000 farms in Slovenia (the average farm size is 5,4 ha of agricultural land in use, more than a half are part-time farms, the average age of farm owner is 55 years, mostly farmers do not obtain formal agricultural attainment — 84 % have only practical experiences in agriculture). From our point of view also *SAPARD* will not bring a long-term solution to problems of rural areas: there is not enough money for structural long-term changes, transparent national strategy and regional planes are not confirmed yet, development priorities do not get the right attention.

III. CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY

Since the Act of Independence in 1991 many important documents regarding rural areas have been implemented. From official and legal point of view they ensure the sustainable development of rural areas, but the praxis shows very diverse experiences.

Different professions and the state have not accepted the common and official definition of term *sustainability*. Many definitions derive from the UN definition (Our Common Future, 1987). Some geographers (Plut, 1998) justify more holistic approach and talk about sustainable paradigm.

The Law on Agriculture (2000) legalises sustainability (with no definition), as does also the Law on Environmental Protection. Law on Encouragement of Consistent Regional Development (1999) places sustainable development among its top priorities. In the process of preparation is Law on Spatial Regulation, which defines sustainable development as development, which enables nowadays generation to satisfy their needs in such a way, that the natural goods, sound environment, cultural and other values would not be endangered. Therefore it offers development possibilities for the future generations.

The most important development objectives of the Slovenian rural areas are (FAO Conference, 1999) :

- improvement of the standard of living in the rural areas;
- preservation of population density by use of environment-friendly methods of farming;
- protection of traditional rural landscape;
- preservation of soil fertility and water quality by using environment-friendly cultivation and processing methods;
- environmental protection;
- preservation of biodiversity.

IV. CHALLENGES OF AN EFFECTIVE SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development of rural areas is one of the main Slovenian development orientation and aim. Heterogeneity, mosaic structure and relatively good preserved environment and traditional patterns are general characteristics of Slovene rural areas. We consider the above mentioned as a development potential for the vast part of Slovenian rural area. This could lead to the « story of success» if some conditions would have been considered (i.e. favourable demographic and economic circumstances, suitable state support, interests of local population). Too many « if-s » and existing obstacles (natural conditions, small market, unfavourable agrarian structure etc.) are evident. All accepted laws and

regulations comprise dimension of sustainability, but if we look for its confirmation in practice, one would definitely miss co-operation between different sectors and complex overview on impacts of chosen directions and projects. Such implemented measures have included a small part of population (400 farms in Slovenia practice ecological agriculture, 500 farm manage supplementary activities on farm; more than a half, i. e. more than 50 000, still gain the majority of their income from non-agrarian activities).

The final decision is still in the hands of an individual: to live, to think and to function sustainable in rural area? From the West European point of view, Slovene rural areas were and still are sustainable. Therefore, the future development of this unique area ought to be adapted to specific conditions.

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