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Vakanjac, Danijela; Šimunija, Kristian; Bedeković, Mladena

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR FOR THE ECONOMY OF CROATIA

Danijela Vakanjac
Kristian Šimunija
Mladena Bedeković

Abstract

Agriculture has a significant impact on the economy of every country, including Croatia. Its three primary functions are to feed the domicile population, to supply all the industries requiring so with raw materials, and to export production surplus. For any country, agriculture is one of the fundamental activities to be mastered to enable further development and progress. Natural resources and a capable labour force are the key prerequisites for agricultural development and expansion. Croatia has highly favourable conditions for the development of agriculture, due to the intertwining of two different climatic regions, namely the Mediterranean one, being a temperately warm and humid climate with hot summers, and the humid snow forest climate with cooler summers. The aim of this paper is to explore and present the importance of the agricultural sector for the Croatian economy, specifying some basic issues such as outdated agricultural machinery and facilities, insufficient land consolidation and irrigation and drainage infrastructure, lack of interest of young people in agriculture, insufficiently educated agricultural population, etc. In addition to presenting the situation and current issues based on statistical indicators, the paper also illustrates the measures that the European Union provides and the grant opportunities which most of young people successfully use today, thus defining new standards for their agricultural holdings which is extremely important for the future of Croatian agriculture.

Keywords: agricultural issues, agricultural policy, natural resources

1. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture has significant functions in every country, and these are: feeding the local population, supplying the industry with agricultural raw materials and achieving the highest possible value in the export of agricultural products. If the agriculture of a country functions efficiently, it not only supplies the domicile population and the food economy, but also makes large profits in the foreign market.

This paper studies the issues of the economic development of agriculture from the theoretical aspect, examines the issues that emerge in implementing rural and regional development policies, as well as examining the current issues of agriculture such as insufficient land consolidation, necessary building of an agglomeration infrastructure, frequent changes in laws, the importance of educating young and old farmers and the issues alike. The paper also lists previous research related to the topic of the paper.

2. HISTORY AND KEY PRECONDITIONS OF AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

“Agriculture, in its millennia-long historical development, was the least written about when it was the activity that a far larger percentage of the population was engaged in. The first simple written traces of agriculture were written by numerous historians, writers, philosophers, chroniclers, and travel writers, who recorded observations, for example, on the manner of performing certain works (ploughing, sowing, harvesting and

similar jobs), as well as on the means (tools) with which these jobs were done” (Grahovac 200, 27). It follows from the above that in the beginning of agriculture, the methods of cultivating crops were not recorded because the knowledge and experience about cultivating the land was transmitted by word of mouth.

According to Defilippis (2005), some of the first preconditions for economic and cultural development were created in the time of classical antiquity, around 3000 BC. The interest in agriculture deepened and expanded during the time when there were greater difficulties in feeding the population, i.e. hunger, and all this was preceded by various factors such as extremely unfavourable climatic conditions, disease epidemics, war, major natural disasters and similar situations. All this has led to agriculture having not only a function of production but also pronounced ecological and social functions.

“The primary task of agriculture is the production of food for the population, i.e. the supply of sufficient quantities, diverse, high quality and nutritionally high value products at moderate prices. Likewise, agriculture should provide raw materials of precisely defined characteristics for the needs of the food industry” (Kovačić 2000 151). Mataga (2002) states that the modernization perspective of the Croatian countryside also depends on several assumptions.

Since Croatia has adopted an agrarian strategy aimed at developing agriculture on market principles, it seeks to meet an aggregate demand for agricultural products at the lowest possible total cost, which can be defined as a general economic goal that is almost identical in all market economy countries that conduct a market economy and strive to achieve growth dynamics in agricultural production (Grahovac 2005). Defilippis (2005) emphasizes that the main goal of agricultural policy is to encourage efficient production and marketing of agricultural products in order to improve the welfare of farmers, thus contributing to economic growth and protecting the country's natural potential as well as ensuring the competitiveness of agriculture.

In order for agriculture to develop properly, it is necessary to meet certain conditions such as favourable weather conditions, satisfactory soil quality and sufficient amounts of water or, as Grahovac (2005, 96) states, “historically, labour and land, with scarce means of production that are and remained almost unchanged for centuries, were fundamental factors in the maintenance and development of agriculture”. Global trends show that the agricultural workforce is declining. Another issue that agricultural development is facing is the growing outflow of labour to the non-agricultural sector.

Since technology is evolving exponentially and many technological innovations have nowadays replaced human labour, nature and the landscape cannot be relocated or replaced, but need to be developed and improved in correspondence to technology. Although the results of the research conducted by Zrakić et. al. (2018) cannot postulate on the entire agricultural population due to the convenient and small sample; it can nevertheless be concluded that farmers have positive attitudes about technological innovations.

When it comes to the agricultural resources of the Croatian economy, it can be claimed that the Croatian economy meets almost all the preconditions to produce a quality and

competitive product coming from domestic fields and arable land. Natural resources are one of the most important factors when it comes to the progress of the domicile economy, and the development of the Croatian economy largely depends on their controlled and responsible use (Skala 2003).

3. CHARACTERISTICS AND DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION IN CROATIA

In the last decade of the past century, Croatia found itself in a market transformation. Macroeconomic factors such as employment, economic growth and even other variables such as population growth have been on a downward trend, while external debt has tripled (Družić and Tica 2003). Croatia began to experience its shift when the effects of the stabilization program were noticed, i.e. when inflation was reduced to zero in 1994. According to Hodžić (2002), the results of a 1996 survey showed that Croatia had reached the level of a highly industrial country, in contrast to being a highly rural country in the past.

After 2000, the Government of the Republic of Croatia adopted a strategy for macroeconomic development, which indicated that Croatia could achieve the transition process in a rational time with decisive and rapid actions to accelerate the process of economic integration and expansion of the open market, by means of accelerated implementation of reforms as well as by accelerating the processes necessary for enterprise restructuring, implementing quality education programs and similar factors (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2002). According to Čavrak (2003), one of the key steps in the active role of the central government in regional development and its policy is the adoption of the Law on Regional Development and the establishment of the Regional Development Fund, whose main purpose was to encourage the balanced regional development of the country in accordance with the Regional Development Program of the Republic of Croatia.

3.1. Agricultural products market

According to Grahovac (2005), domestic production is the most important source of supply formation in the Croatian market, but it is not the only one. In addition to domestic production, foreign trade is another source of supply, since imports increase and exports reduce the supply of each individual product, which leads to an imbalance in supply and demand of domestic products. In agricultural terms, exports are one of the main factors of every country. It is necessary to achieve the highest possible foreign exchange inflow which would finance the import of other agricultural and other products. This is a very significant task for the Republic of Croatia and other countries with relatively low per capita income and great importance of agriculture in the economy.

The European Commission closely monitors the situation and price movements in the markets of agricultural products and food and publishes monthly reports on an annual basis. In February, June and September, short-term prospects are published, which include the markets for field crops and meat and dairy products in the EU (European Commission 2021).

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Croatia in the foreign trade of agricultural and food products, exports have increased by 3.2% in the first eight months of 2020 compared to the same period last year and imports of the same products decreased by 7, 6%, while cereals were highlighted as the most important export product in the agricultural and food sector of the Republic of Croatia (Ministry of Agriculture 2020). When looking at the whole of 2020, imports of agricultural and food products were lower by 5.8% than in the previous year, while exports were higher by 8.8%, which means that the coverage of imports by exports increased from 64 to 74% (Croatian Chamber of Commerce 2021). It should be noted that these trends emerged as a consequence in the decline of tourism, as well as due to the reduction in consumption of agricultural and food products due to the COVID-19 virus pandemic.

Another parameter that shows the importance of agriculture for the Republic of Croatia is the representation of agricultural products in foreign trade. In 2019, Croatia thus exported HRK 2.15 billion of agri-food products, that accounts for 1.9% of total exports in the total amount of exports of HRK 113 billion (Central Bureau of Statistics 2020).

When it comes to the internal market of agricultural products, it should be noted that part of these products is used for further distribution of agricultural production, i.e. for seeds, livestock, animal feed, fertilizers etc., while the other part is used for direct personal consumption, mostly food consumption (so called natural consumption), and the third remaining part of production is surplus, i.e. it makes up the supply of agricultural products (Grahovac 2005).

3.2. Analysis of agricultural performance indicators in the Republic of Croatia

This chapter analyses some of the indicators on the basis of which the importance of agriculture in the Republic of Croatia for the period of three years – from 2017 to 2019 – can be seen, and they are shown in Table 1. As it can be seen, the value of agricultural production recorded a slight increase every year; an increase of 5.5% in 2018 compared to 2017, as well as an increase in the value of agricultural production by 4% in 2019 compared to the previous year.

The number of people employed in agriculture in 2017 was 36,640, and a year later that number increased by a slight 0.03%, or 36,651 employees in the agricultural sector in 2018, while in 2019 the number of employees increased by 3% compared to the previous year. According to the data of the Ministry of Agriculture, out of the total number of employees in the Republic of Croatia, 2.6% refers to employees in the agricultural sector in 2018, while in 2019 this share amounted to 2.4%. Furthermore, the average net salary per person employed in agriculture in 2017 amounted to HRK 4,717, while in 2018 it amounted to HRK 5,056, which is an increase of 7.2%, and in 2019 it increased by another 3.3% compared to previous year, i.e. by HRK 5,222 per employee.

If the number of active farmers from 2019 is put in relation to the total population (4.078 million), then it can be concluded that 0.93% of the population in the Republic of Croatia are farmers (Worldometers 2021).

Indices of food products in 2017 recorded a growth of 2.9% compared to the previous year, in 2018 this index increased by 1%, and in 2019 it decreased by 0.1%, which shows that in the last analysed year the prices of goods and services for personal consumption have only slightly reduced compared to previous years.

The last parameter shown in Table 1 is the export of agri-food products. As can be seen, total exports in 2017 amounted to HRK 14 billion, while 13.3% of them related to exports of agricultural products, or HRK 1.86 billion. In 2018, total exports amounted to HRK 14.5 billion, and 14.3% of that was the share of agricultural products, or HRK 2.07 billion. In 2019, total exports amounted to HRK 15.2 billion, of which HRK 2.15 billion was exports of the agricultural sector, or 14.3%.

Table 1. Indicators of Croatian agriculture in a three - year period

	2017	2018	2019
Value of agricultural production (billion)	16.4	17.3	18.0
Number of employees in agriculture	36,640	36,651	37,774
Average net salary per employee in agriculture	HRK 4,717	HRK 5,056	HRK 5,222
Food product indexes	2.9%↑	1%↑	0.1%↓
Exports of agri-food products (billion)	1.86	2.07	2.15

Source: author's work according to the data of the Ministry of Agriculture 2017, 2018, 2019

If the previous analysis is taken into account, according to the observed parameters, it is evident that agriculture of the Republic of Croatia has recorded its slow but sure growth and progress in recent years. If the measured parameters continue this trend, it can be concluded that Croatia has a bright future in agricultural production. Back in 2000, Franić (2000) concluded in her research that it is necessary to understand economic and technological laws for the quality calculation of indicators and their interpretation, as well as that multidisciplinary cooperation between agricultural policy makers and scientists is necessary to define the framework of state intervention.

4. STATE, ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES OF CROATIAN AGRICULTURE

In order for agriculture to be able to develop further, it is necessary to identify two major factors, namely: the current situation and the overall historical heritage as well as all measures that agricultural policy is taking and will take to promote agriculture (Grahovac 2003).

Land consolidation and management is identified as one of the issues in Croatian agriculture, since the fragmentation of land leads to a large loss of time, i.e. opportunity cost, since more fuel is used to get the farmer to some more distant lands. According to the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Croatia, the majority of farmers who manage the land is over 45 years old, and when it comes to keeping records on the farm, they leave the job to other institutions responsible for it (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020a). Also, in order for agriculture to be efficient and effective, agricultural land must be fully regulated in such a way that land registers are harmonized with the cadastre, because after 30 years of Croatia's independence there is still no fully settled data on agricultural land, although progress is visible.

In the near future, environmental sustainability in agricultural practice should be improved – in terms of renovating the water supply infrastructure and developing access to irrigation water, which is still limited, given that over time there will be problems with water pollution if people do not begin to consciously separate waste depending on its type and dispose of it in places and institutions that are prescribed and responsible for it (Ministry of Agriculture 2020a).

Thus, the future of agriculture should strive for organic production, which implies a management system of agricultural food production that combines environment, climate, great biodiversity, conservation of biological resources and application of standards in the welfare of animal and plant species. The Republic of Croatia records a large growth of agricultural entities and areas under organic production. In 2013, the total number of entities was 1,789, while in 2019 this number increased to 5,548, which is 310.18% of entities (Ministry of Agriculture 2021). The goals of organic agriculture are: responsible use of energy and natural resources, preserving the ecological balance in the regions, maintaining water quality, maintaining biodiversity and increasing soil fertility. These objectives are regulated by high-standard EU rules and regulations and provide a clear framework for the production of organic products throughout the EU (European Commission 2021a). Pejnović et.al. (2012) concluded based on the conducted research that market disorganization and insufficiently developed environmental awareness are limiting factors for a more rapid development of agriculture in the Republic of Croatia.

4.1. Measures, Subsidies and Legal Basis in Agriculture

In 2015, the European Commission approved the Rural Development Program of the Republic of Croatia for the period 2014-2020 which represents the end of a long process of preparation of the above-mentioned development program (European Agricultural Fund 2014). The program defines 19 measures aimed at increasing the competitiveness of Croatian agriculture, processing industry and forestry, and improving working and living conditions in urban and rural areas. As the years passed and the system upgraded, the number of measures increased to 21. Some of the measures to help the Croatian economy include quality systems for agricultural products and food, investment in physical assets, development of farms and businesses, investment in forest development and sustainability forests, establishment of producer groups and organizations, organic farming, animal welfare, risk management, cooperation, agriculture, environment and climate change and many others (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development 2021).

All the mentioned measures, including some others, contribute greatly to the development of the Croatian economy and lead to an increase in market competitiveness which also leads to the implementation of a better agricultural policy and an improved acquaintance of farmers with development measures and the obligations that each measure brings.

Unlike EU measures, the state support for agriculture refers to state grants through various forms of assistance to the agricultural sector. In practice, every developed country has its own measures of supporting farmers, as more and more young people today want to pursue occupations not related to agriculture but to technology and countries are looking for ways to attract young people to agriculture by means such as grants or majority funding. “The purpose of direct state support is to ensure the long-term sustainability of active farmers engaged in agricultural activities. The supports are allocated for the production, breeding, or planting of agricultural products, for the breeding or keeping of livestock as well as for maintaining agricultural land in a condition suitable for grazing or breeding.” (Agency for Payments in Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development 2021).

The Law on Agriculture of the Republic of Croatia contains all the foundations of agricultural policy, the forms in which rural and regional areas will be developed, information on what grants are paid and in what way, how markets for agricultural products will be regulated or organized and other measures to achieve goals in agricultural policy (Law on Agriculture OG 118/2018). Laws related to the agricultural sector in the Republic of Croatia are prone to numerous alterations and adjustments, and it is thus extremely difficult for farmers to comply with them.

Another issue in the state is the practice of allocating state land in a non-transparent manner. Moreover, milk producers are faced with the problem of high milk prices. Table 2 shows the milk price indices in the Republic of Croatia for the period 2005-2020.

Table 2. Milk price indices (2015=100)

2005	2007	2009	2011	2012	2014	2015	2018	2019	2020
77.3	7.7	8.1	100.3	96.4	109.2	10.0	98.7	100.3	102.1

Source: author's work according to the Central Bureau of Statistics (Central Bureau of Statistics 2021)

According to these indices, it can be concluded that the price of milk was very low before the financial crisis and has risen since the 2008 financial crisis. Also, it can be seen that after Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, prices did not deviate greatly, and are stable due to various state and European interventions.

Given that 2014 has been declared the International Year of Family Farms, it is evident that the importance of agriculture was emphasized globally, with the aim of raising the awareness about the importance and role of reducing poverty and hunger in the world, ensuring food safety and nutrition, environmental protection, sustainable management of natural resources and achieving sustainable development of rural areas (International Fund for Agricultural Development 2014).

Another area that needs to be regulated relates to family farming, which is regulated by the Family Farming Act, which states the purpose of the conditions for performing economic activities of agriculture, and related additional activities performed in rural family farms as an organizational form. The methods and conditions in the Register of Family Farms, as well as the responsibility of the rights and obligations of the holder are determined by the competent authorities (Family Farming Act OG 29/2018).

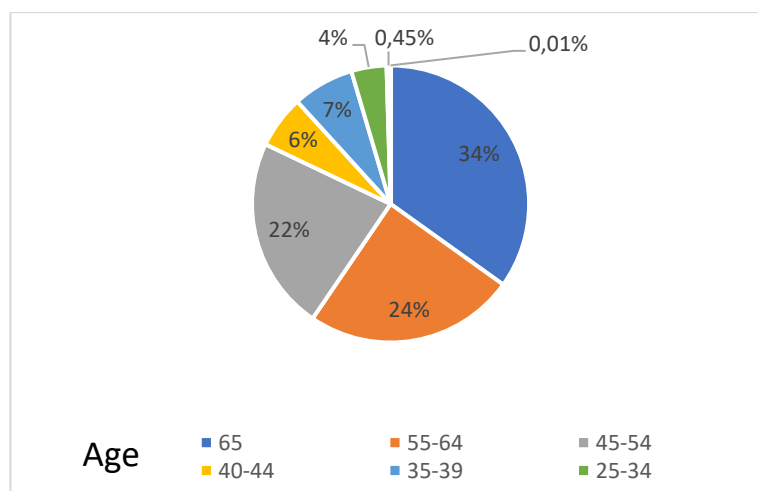
In June 2021, a reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was agreed upon at EU level, the implementation of which will begin in early 2023 with the aim of a fairer distribution of aid to farmers (European Commission 2021a).

4.2. Young People in Agriculture

One of the current problems that Croatia is facing is the exodus of young people who are leaving the country for better incomes and working conditions or seeking jobs in other non-agricultural sectors, while older farmers who remain in the Republic of Croatia mostly possess small and fragmented lands that they cultivate with outdated technology and in addition to that also require health and social care (Jerić 2019).

According to the European Commission (2016), young farmers in the EU are considered to be under 40 years of age and there is 11% of them in the EU. Motivating young people to engage in agriculture is pointed as a great challenge. Therefore, the EU strives to provide assistance to young farmers in starting businesses through grants when setting up new businesses, as well as offering income support and continuous training. The results of a survey conducted by the European Commission in 2016 at the EU-28 level, which relate to the representation of farmers in the agricultural sector by age are presented in Graph 1.

Graph 1. Representation of farmers according to age



Source: https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/income-support/young-farmers_hr (2 August 2021)

It can be concluded that almost 80% of farmers are older than 45, which means that young farmers comprise a very small proportion in the overall number of farmers. The European Union provides financial assistance through income support measures to motivate the young farmers to engage in agriculture more, better, and more frequently and provides additional measures to young farmers in the form of grants under the rural development program, guarantees or loans to encourage rural development.

In particular, the EU seeks to help young farmers invest in agriculture through a program launched in 2013 (European Commission 2016a). This measure seeks to increase the production of agricultural products, as well as natural cultivation, which would simultaneously take care of the landscape and its natural diversity, and thus help in the fight against climate change. Special emphasis should be placed on Measure 6, which refers to the development of agricultural holdings and businesses, its sub-measure 6.1. that refers to support for young farmers, whose beneficiaries are persons between 18 and 40 years of age. Under this measure, the beneficiaries can apply for support in the amount of 8,000 to 49,999 EUR, while this cost includes the purchase of domestic animals, restructuring of existing plantations, equipping of facilities for agricultural production, purchase of machinery, equipment, and tools, etc. (European Agricultural Fund for rural development 2022).

This measure is extremely important for young farmers, given the possibility of family heritage in the form of land, and the start of production and processing of agricultural products with the help of these grants for the further development of agriculture.

According to the results of the research, Čop and Hadelan (2020) concluded that the key to the success of Croatian agriculture lies in strengthened exports, growth and implementation of innovations, stimulating education and the financial perspective of business.

5. CONCLUSION

The subject of this paper is aimed at emphasizing the importance of the agricultural sector on the Croatian economy. In addition to the listed historical features and conditions necessary for the development of agriculture, the paper describes the key issues that the agricultural sector is facing, as well as perspectives and guidelines towards which agriculture should be directed.

This primarily refers to the promotion of regional and rural development through the implementation of agricultural strategies and policies defined by the Republic of Croatia and the European Union. This emphasized the importance of using measures, incentives, grants, and directing young people to engage in agriculture.

If issues in agriculture such as frequent changes in the law, better implementation of agricultural policy and more active involvement of young people continue to be solved, Croatian agriculture would be enabled to have a sustainable growth and development, the country's economy would rise to a higher level and Croatia could make its products competent not only in the European but also in the world market. In conclusion, it can

be added that this paper sought to point out the key aspects of agriculture in the Republic of Croatia since agriculture is the "driver" of the population and its development results in the well-being of the whole community.

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