

# **'We are sustainable – they are not!' Farmers' understandings of sustainable agriculture in Slovenia**

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## **Abstract**

The transition from socialist to market agriculture in Slovenia has brought radical changes in designing agricultural development. Following Slovenia's proclamation of sovereignty in 1991, agricultural development was oriented towards the high-priced protection of domestic production, while after joining the European Union in 2004, the activities were reoriented towards the adoption of the Common Agricultural Policy reforms, aiming to establish multifunctional farming. Gradually, the national strategy has tied the pursuit of multifunctional farming to the goals of sustainable development, aspiring to the goal of the economically productive, environmentally caring, satisfied and healthy farmer. What the crucial drives behind the development of the observed farms were, and how farmers reflected upon sustainable agriculture in the country and their sustainable farming practices were the research questions of the project Developmental Orientations of Farms in Slovenia. Fieldwork was carried out in 2013 on fourteen intensive and organic farms. Talks were conducted with farm holders and their families about each farm's history as a necessary background for their reflections on sustainable agriculture in general and their farming practices in particular. Farmers' talks revealed meaningful ruptures of contrasting imperatives of economic growth, caring for the environment and social justice, addressed in strategic documents of sustainable agriculture, which were also manifested in their practices and visions of what should be done to implement sustainable agriculture in the country.

**KEYWORDS:** sustainable development, sustainable agriculture, intensive vs. organic farmers, Slovenia

## **Introduction: From the abolishment of the "exploitative nature" of private property to sustainable agriculture**

The transition from socialist to market agriculture in Slovenia has brought radical changes in farming and in designing the agricultural development orientation. In socialism, the vision of agricultural development was consistent with the class and policy orientation of

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the then federal (Yugoslav) and republic (Slovenian) authorities, who sought to eliminate the exploitative nature of private property with the post-war agrarian reform in 1946 (Čepič 1996). The first measures referred to the expropriation of private land which exceeded the maximum of 45 hectares, while other measures pertained to the distribution of land to those who were capable of cultivating it by themselves. However, these measures did not contribute to the elimination of social classes in the village.

On the one hand, the predominantly created small estates (up to 5 hectares) did not enable small-scale farmers to make a living from farming, forcing them to seek additional sources of income in nearby industry. On the other hand, the middle and large-scale farmers became demotivated and frequently in tension with the authorities because their surplus produce was seized by the state. Moreover, collectivisation, i.e., the pulling of small individual farm producers into the farm labour cooperatives, did not meet expectations (Čepič 2005).

Fearing social stratification in the village, the state again radically intervened in ownership structures (Novak 1996, Čepič 1999, 2002). In 1953, the 10-hectare maximum<sup>1</sup> was enacted, and with the gradual introduction of the self-management economy in the country, authorities sought to replace state ownership with the “social type” in order to develop both huge public farms and agricultural working cooperatives (Turk et al. 2007). This reform was the final act of transforming ownership structures until the process of denationalisation<sup>2</sup> after the proclamation of Slovenian independence in 1991.

If in socialism agricultural policy assured food security and safety by the planned economy of guaranteed administrative prices of agricultural products<sup>3</sup> and the gradual overall socialisation of the agricultural sector in the 1950s, such developmental policy was abandoned after 1991, and market-oriented agriculture was established following the example of the European Union. Therefore, the 1993 strategy of agricultural development conveyed to farmers drastically different developmental expectations. In addition to the stable production of cheap and good quality food and food security, the preservation of populated and cultural landscapes and agricultural land, and the protection of agricultural land and water from pollution, the strategy supported a permanent increase in competitiveness and guaranteed parity income for above-average producers. The farmer-entrepreneur became a role-model of a newly defined vision of agriculture which insisted on “a combination of eco-social and market-oriented concept[s] of agriculture” (MKG 1992: 67). With this strategy, Slovenia officially established a multifunctional model of agricultural development, following the example of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union, which Slovenia officially joined in 2004 (Erjavec et al. 2003).

After 2008, considering global demographic and climate changes, it was necessary to redefine strategic guidelines. The current resolution on the development of Slov-

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<sup>1</sup> The 10-hectare maximum refers only to the agricultural land in use of a private farm without woods or meadows.

<sup>2</sup> “Denationalisation” is a technical term for the return of previously expropriated private property to the owners.

<sup>3</sup> In socialism (1946-1991), only 15-20 per cent of agricultural prices were determined on the market (Turk et al. 2007).

enian agriculture with the telling subtitle 'Secure.si [us Slovenians] food for tomorrow' still promotes the multifunctional role of agriculture, yet this time in line with goals of sustainable development. Sustainable agriculture is now imagined as "economically efficient and competitive, socially responsible and environmentally friendly and sustainable" (ReSURSKŽ 2011).

However, this developmental orientation remains very distant from the facts on the ground. On average, about 1,000 farms have ceased farming activity per year since 1991, and the most rapid decline is among medium-sized farms (mostly between 10 and 20 hectares), which are "too small to be economically efficient, but too large to be profitable" (Bojnec & Latruffe 2013), has been registered since 2004. Despite the promising increase of organic-oriented farms in the last decade (since 2010), these farms represent only 5 per cent of all farms in the country, and more and more concerned scholars warn against the lowering level of food self-sufficiency in the country (Perpar & Udovč 2010).

Moreover, agriculture is the second most hazardous sector in terms of reported work-related accidents and health difficulties (SURS 2014). Adding the poor age and educational characteristics of farmers, and the low motivation of young people to continue with farming, it is not a surprise that Slovenia belongs to the group of EU countries with the most unfavourable farmland structure (small size, overgrown, and scattered parcels), very poor labour productivity, and large regional differences in pursuing sustainable development (Lampič et al. 2016).

The gap between ambitious goals towards sustainable agriculture and facts on the ground was addressed by the research project "Developmental Orientations of Farms in Slovenia".<sup>4</sup> This interdisciplinary project<sup>5</sup> aimed to explore the complex realities that underlie the developmental orientations of market-oriented farmers. What the crucial drives, strategies, practices and imaginings beneath their developmental orientations are and how farmers reflect upon sustainable agriculture in general and their farming, in particular, are the main research questions of the qualitative part of the research, designed by the author of this article. The fieldwork was carried out in 2013. Five members of the research team<sup>6</sup> conducted semi-structured interviews with farm holders and in some cases with their adult family members on eight intensive and six organic farms selected by snowball sampling. The initial topics for discussions addressed two broad sets of questions; first, about the history of the farm's developmental orientations, and second, about farmers' understandings of sustainable agriculture. Analysing emerging common and divergent themes from collected interviews, the author discusses farmers' understandings and practices of developmental imperatives towards sustainable agriculture.

Providing suitable context for embedding both the national strategy towards sustainable agriculture and farmers' musings about it, the article begins with a short reference to a normative ideal of sustainable development, and continues with a summary

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<sup>4</sup> The project was commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food and the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS) between 2011 and 2014.

<sup>5</sup> About the design and results of the entire study, see the article by Černič Istenič et al. 2016.

<sup>6</sup> In turn, the author of the article carried out interviews on seven farms, Majda Černič Istenič on two farms, Barbara Lampič on two farms, Irma Potočnik Slavič on two farms and Tone Perpar on one farm.

of the most commonly discussed emphases of discursive struggle over sustainable agriculture between proponents of the so-called mainstream perspective and advocates of the so-called alternative perspective, who both adopt sustainability rhetoric. The article further discusses whether the proponents of sustainable development emphasise the economic over the environmental and social dimensions of sustainability, or the other way round, to explain their positioning in pursuit of weak, strong, or ideal sustainability goals. How farmers in Slovenia reflect upon seemingly controversial imperatives of economic growth, caring for the environment and social justice addressed in strategic documents of sustainable agriculture, the reader will learn in the empirical part of the article. Farmers' contrasting visions of what should be done in achieving sustainable agriculture are summarised in the conclusion.

### **A broad normative ideal of sustainable development**

In most discussions about climate change, agriculture is recognised as both one of the largest causes of global warming and one of the sectors that will suffer the most negative consequences of it. However, the unsustainable conditions of agriculture are not a newly discussed phenomenon. Some authors (Lockeretz 1982, Pimentel & Pimentel 1996) discussed them in the context of emerging modern industrial agriculture in the early 1960s and 1970s, when scholars, activists, and citizens recognised industrial agriculture as both ecologically destructive and, as mechanised and chemical-dependent, vulnerable to energy shortages. Nevertheless, the first conception about sustainable agriculture was a response to the recognition that modern agriculture was not immediately vulnerable to ecological shortcoming or energy crisis if innovations or technical improvements fixed both environmental pollution and energy deficiencies (Buttel 2006).

The recognition of the importance of innovation, however, did not suffice for further visibility of the sustainability issue in the 1980s, when it was addressed in the frame of sustainable development notion as articulated by the World Commission on Environment and Development in its report *Our Common Future*, known as the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987).<sup>7</sup> In response to mounting concerns about global warming, the depletion of the Earth's ozone layer, deserts consuming agricultural land, environmental degradation, uneven global development between the North and South, poverty, and population growth, the WCED proposed solutions for bringing about global sustainable development, a new path 'that sustained human progress not just in a few pieces for a few years, but for the entire planet into the distant future' (WCED 1987: 13). This form of development should meet 'the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987: 16). The long-term vision of this new path of development was further elaborated as limited by the then state of technology and social organisation on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. A solution was seen in "economic growth" as an assurance for the improvements in technology and social organisation (WCED 1987: 16).

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<sup>7</sup> Gro Harlem Brundtland was the WCED chair in 1983.

These most frequently reflected general principles of a “new path” of sustainable development (Dresner 2002, Redclift 2005) have been recognised as insufficient to the question of why contrasting actors in various agri-food systems, ranging from global food corporations to small-scale organic farmers both claim that they carry out sustainable agriculture. Therefore, the authors of such debates have increasingly addressed the issue of the “politics of sustainability” and tackled the question of “sustainability for whom?” (Varley et al. 2009) in order to explain the discursive struggle over sustainable agriculture interpretations.

## **The discursive struggle over sustainable agriculture interpretations**

In general, scholars reflect the discursive struggle for interpretations about sustainable agriculture through analysis of divergences between the so-called proponents of prevailing global industrial agrifood systems and advocates of alternative food movements and practices, ranging from small-scale organic farming, local food and farmer’s markets, fair trade producer cooperatives, local seed banks, to those who are restoring traditional knowledge and farming practices. Because supporters of both broad camps believe that only they indeed perform sustainable agriculture, researchers would prefer to direct attention to their theories and assumptions of how agriculture works and should work, or to their understandings of global issues (food crisis, warming, poverty), and their proposed solutions for them.

Cleveland (2014), for instance, recognises in the “mainstream perspective” supporters of a modern, large-scale, industrially based agri-food system, the only one which after the Second World War succeeded to increase global food production and security. Following the imperative of unlimited economic growth as a precondition for the improvement of any agri-food system, this perspective is to prioritise “modern” knowledge and science. On the opposite side, the author recognises the proponents of the “alternative perspective”, who believe that precisely the putative success of the mainstream or global industrial agriculture of the 1960s and 1970s worldwide simultaneously created numerous environmental and social problems worldwide. Since the demographic and environmental circumstances of the period of mainstream success have vanished, the alternative requires drastically new reflections about the prospects of agri-food systems.

Indeed, a cursory review of global evidence corroborates drastically increased population worldwide compared to the period of mainstream success; this is 7.6 billion people in 2018 compared to 3 billion in 1960. Moreover, evidence shows that nearly half a billion people suffer from chronic hunger, various environments worldwide are degraded, drinking water is polluted by agricultural chemicals, while new sources for agricultural production are ever scarcer and more limited. According to some estimates, the increase of global population to 9.1 billion by 2050 would require 70 per cent increased food production (UN FAO 2009), while global warming would hit the hardest those areas which have already suffered the most harmful consequences of global agribusiness: Africa, Latin America and India (Cline 2007).

Searching for a solution for the resource-population equation or concern regarding how many people the Earth can support (Cohen 1995) also divides supporters of the mainstream and the alternatives. In this case, the mainstream proponents refer to theories and evidence that support the unlimited increase of the Earth's carrying capacity by constant technological improvements and innovations, while the advocates of alternatives speak in favour of reduced consumption and better governance in reducing the unlimited exploitation of natural resources. The mainstream supporters understand population growth as a potential for new inventions for improving the Earth carrying capacity or limited supply of natural resources, which are to be substitutable. The advocates of alternatives, however, insist on a belief that biophysical sources are finite and non-substitutable; therefore, human population should stabilise or decrease to keep sustainable the resource-population equation (Cleveland 2014).

Finally, proponents of alternatives are seen as those actors who have also questioned the existent power relationships in global agri-food systems and their distribution, which as a rule has always excluded the poor, women and other minority groups from equal access to agricultural resources and their position in decision-making. Reflecting upon the 2007-2008 world food crisis, La Vía Campesina for example, one of the most prominent network of “farmers from the global North and peasants from the South”,<sup>8</sup> explicitly blamed the “globalized, neoliberal, corporate-driven model where agriculture is seen exclusively as a profit-making venture with resources” concentrated in the hands of agri-industry (LVC 2008: 43). The movement defends peasant-driven agriculture, local resources, domestic markets, and a struggle for food sovereignty – the vision of a global food system that should bring social justice, economic viability and ecological sustainability.

Against “greener development” as designed and propagated by powerful global actors, such as food corporations, there is increasingly voiced criticism by the proponents of a de-growth society, as well. Challenging the still unquestioned vision of a growth society or its pursuit of twin imperatives of unlimited economic growth and (sustainable) development, propagated by the mainstream, the “degrowthers” have established a counter-hegemonic narrative towards a more sustainable and just global society through “sustainable degrowth” beyond capitalism and its core institutions (Giacomo et al. 2015; Garcia et al. 2017).

This rather oversimplified but regularly discussed divergence of two broad camps of interpreters of sustainable agriculture is often challenged by authors who warn that visions of alternative worlds grounded in the ethics of sustainability, social justice, values of local food cultures, knowledge and practices are frequently captured or co-opted by the object of their critique itself – mainstream corporate actors. Therefore, some authors suggest a more “reflexive localism” (Goodman et al. 2012: 8) as the foundation of local food policy that is processual, negotiable, open-ended, even more chaotic, but less dogmatic and romantic. In this view, the local is not idealised but a contested site of the

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<sup>8</sup> In 2018, La Vía Campesina includes 182 organisations from 81 countries or more than 200 million individuals in the following regions worldwide: Southern and Eastern Africa (9 organisations), Western and Central Africa (9), North America (10), South America (46), South-East and East Asia (13), South Asia (23), Central America (27), the Caribbean (13), Europe (28), the Middle East and North Africa-Emerging Region (3) (LVC 2018).

political-economic struggle of local and external actors who constantly manoeuvre for advantage in pursuit of their goals. Moreover, Goodman and co-authors (2012) proposed to tackle the “how question” of sustainability rather than the “what question” or fixed idea of what alternative or sustainable economies should resemble.

## **Observing sustainable development**

The “how question” of sustainability has also opened a door to discussions about its observation and operationalisation since the concept itself was recognised as a highly contestable social and political construct. One such consideration is associated with focusing on and ranking economic, environmental and social dimensions of sustainability – the lowest common denominator of contrasting descriptions of sustainable development. Cleveland (2014), for instance, insisted that only the analysis of value-assumptions of any agri-food actor that underlay emphasis of the cliché trinity enabled analysts to move beyond Brundlandt’s opaque definition of sustainability. Moreover, with only such an approach may one question the sustainability goals of those who either insist on agri-food “green-washing” practices as truly sustainable, or on context-free indicators of sustainability of agri-food systems worldwide, often ignoring that the indicators themselves were ‘chosen and measured only via decisions based on subjective values’ (Cleveland 2014: 89).

In his variety of simple classifications, such as “weak” and “strong” sustainability, Cleveland identified the mainstream perspective as proponents of weak sustainability and the alternative perspective as the heralds of strong sustainability. The mainstream perspective, represented by most national governments (especially of the industrial world) and many influential international organisations (e.g., the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization) are to prioritise economic concerns. However, the alternative perspective, embodied by many NGOs, community, farmer and grassroots organisations, was recognised as emphasising environmental and social concerns over economic ones. For each emphasis Cleveland proposed examining underlying value-assumptions about the way the world works and should work in terms of natural resources, human nature, internalising externalities, and risk management, providing the framework which he believed could move toward more sophisticated analysis of sustainable agriculture.

In a similar manner, some authors (Baker et al. 1997; Baker 2006) propose a concept of a ladder as a heuristic device for positioning various interpretations and even policies of sustainable development, from a treadmill approach<sup>9</sup> at the bottom of the ladder towards weak, strong, and ideal models of sustainable development. The key metaphor of such division revolves around the question of whether humankind is situated in nature or above it as a philosophical departure for ranking economic, environmental and social sustainability.

In short, in their works Baker and co-authors (1997) and Baker herself (2006) identify as adherents of the treadmill approach those actors who promote sustainable de-

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<sup>9</sup> Discussing the concept of the ladder in 2006, Baker renamed this approach to “pollution control” as a pragmatic, not principled, approach, advocating exponential, market-led growth (Baker 2006: 30).

velopment in terms of the extension of Western capitalism worldwide, believing that with technological improvements of modernisation any environmental problem can be solved. The natural environment is seen in terms of human utility, while sustainable development is viewed as sustainable economic growth, measured in GNP only. Weak sustainable development is ascribed to advocates of the integration of economic growth with environmental concerns; however, without questioning the social dimension in a global context. In this approach, environmental concerns are expressed in a form of environmental costs or environmental management through various tools, such as environmental impact assessment, fees or taxes. Advocates of strong, sustainable development are believed to insist on environmental protection as a precondition of economic development and in market regulation by state intervention in terms of “ecological modernisation”. Social issues in terms of poverty and hunger and the politics of power redistribution worldwide are considered, as well. Finally, the ideal approach authors ascribe to proponents of the ecocentric or biocentric vision, who claim structural change of social, economic and political systems in pursuit of the idea that humankind is part of nature and not above it. Such a vision also rejects the idea of necessary economic growth since human action is limited by finite ecological constraints of the planet itself.

In line with the concept of the ladder, a recent study about various interpretations on sustainable development in Slovenia (Banjac et al. 2015) shows that the notion of weak sustainability prevails in politics, the economy, civil society and the media. The term “sustainable development” was established in public discourse in Slovenia only after 2000, relatively late compared to the earlier intense discussions on sustainable development worldwide. Reviewing and analysing vast material since 1991 (from national development documents, including those pertaining to agriculture, NGOs’ documents, accession documents to the EU, Acts on environment protection, yearly reports of major national firms, to five major online daily newspapers), the study shows that the conception that refers to sustainable development in line with the imperative of unlimited economic growth is over-communicated. The reason that idioms such as “constant competitiveness”, “success”, “green innovations”, “green levies and subsidies”, “creative business potential”, and “raised productivity” prevailed over phrases such as “global poverty”, “social inequality”, “weak regulation” or “control of pollution” Banjac and co-authors (2015: 64) ascribe to ‘unequally distributed access to decision-making and publicity, in favour of the holders of political and economic power’ in the country.

## **Through multifunctional towards sustainable agriculture in Slovenia**

As mentioned in the Introduction, Slovenia has officially followed the so-called European multifunctional model towards sustainable agriculture. Some authors insist (Turk et al. 2007) that compared to the majority of former socialist European countries with a history of strong collectivisation, the vision of a multifunctional role of agriculture in the 1990s seemed in line with the then prevalent privately owned small agricultural holdings in the country. However, it soon became obvious that by acceding to the CAP, Slovenian farmers



and the whole agri-food system would also adopt all the weaknesses of this policy, including the expected constant raising of competitiveness on regional and global markets, which required comprehensive structural changes of agriculture in Slovenia (Erjavec et al. 2003).

Several authors (Swibank 2002; Potter & Burney 2002; Potter & Tilzey 2005) explain that multifunctional discourse in Europe was established in the 1990s, when promoted by the then European commissioner for agriculture, Franz Fischler, in order to defend the position of the EU in the context of negotiations with the WTO about the increasing demands of global liberalisation of agricultural markets. Somewhat paradoxically, in order to combat rural poverty in the global South and fairer markets for farmers worldwide, the WTO itself had embraced the discourse of sustainability, insisting on the moral imperative to dismantle protectionist agricultural subsidies of the CAP policies, recognised under the model of multifunctional agriculture.

Despite the common emphasis that multifunctional agriculture signifies a contribution to the public good of necessarily protected agriculture to the rural economy and environment, there are competing constructions of multifunctionality within the EU itself (Potter & Tilzey 2005; Erjavec & Erjavec 2009). On the one hand, there are representatives of Member States who advocate multifunctionality as resistance to the neoliberalisation of agriculture, insisting that farmers deserve state assistance not only because their existence is to be endangered by exposing them to global markets, but without state support, the communities and environmental amenities of rural space would no longer be sustainable in wider societal and cultural terms. On the other hand, there are Member States that seek to be integrated into the neoliberal agenda, insisting on a decoupled treatment of farmers and those land managers who are willing to produce environmental goods for public benefits. Therefore, they advocate the decoupled multifunctionality agenda.

Slovenia has officially followed the advocates of the joint multifunctional role of agriculture in society since the 1993–2004 transition period to the EU. Due to Slovenia's relatively unfavourable natural and structural conditions for agriculture,<sup>10</sup> it is not a surprise that arguments for protectionist agricultural policy prevailed, which was gradually brought into line with the goals and mechanisms of the CAP. Moreover, even before accession to the EU in 2004, Slovenia implemented CAP-like measures, including direct payments, specific import levies, export promotion subsidies, and rural policy measures, such as compensatory allowances for less-favoured areas and environmental payments (Erjavec et al. 2003). Some authors (Bavec et al. 2009) even recognised the so-called integrated plant production<sup>11</sup> and the introduction of organic farming in the transition period as proof of the practice of sustainable agriculture in Slovenia.

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<sup>10</sup> Given that more than 60 per cent of total Slovenian territory is covered by forests, land suitable for farming is limited to 30 per cent – a share that constantly decreases because of overgrowing and urban sprawl. A further estimation is that nearly 75 per cent of agricultural land is situated in less favoured areas for farming, mostly mountain and hilly areas (ReSURSKŽ 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Since integrated crop management does not exist as a category of farm type in the EU statistics, Bavec et al. (2009) explained that this category was established at the state level only in Slovenia. Integrated production was designed on the same basis and standards as the "Brussels category" of Good Agricultural Practice (2000), which means that it is in line with the more environmentally friendly activities of sustainable agriculture.

However, sustainable agriculture remains a challenge in Slovenia. A recent study (Slabe Erker et al. 2015) about measuring the sustainability of agriculture in Slovenia shows the increasing sustainability orientation in the goals of agricultural development documents over the last two decades. Nevertheless, the sustainability implemented through measuring its three dimensions (economic, environmental and social) by selected indicators proves that agriculture is not sustainable in terms of overall sustainability. Strictly speaking, in the observed period (2000-2010) social and economic sustainability decreased while environmental sustainability increased.

The same study also evidenced huge regional differences (Lampič et al. 2016). Somewhat surprisingly, the results show that the most intensive agricultural lowland region with the highest water pollution in the country proves to be the most sustainable, while the hilly region with the biggest share of organic farms was the least. Finally, the additional survey to the study reveals that people in Slovenia are aware of the importance of sustainable agriculture; while the general population prioritise the health and environmental benefits of quality and safe food, the farmers mostly emphasise the importance of their income (Lampič et al. 2016).<sup>12</sup>

The question remains of how farmers ascribe meaning to, reflect upon and understand sustainable development and agriculture. What explanations can be found beyond the measured shares, figures, indicators or survey's statements, the study below seeks to capture.

## **What do farmers say about sustainable agriculture and their farming?**

Exploring the crucial drives, strategies, practices and thoughts behind the developmental orientations of market-oriented farmers was the primary goal of the qualitative part of the project about developmental orientations of farms in Slovenia. As explained in the Introduction, initial themes for talks with farm holders and their adult family members revolved around two broad sets of questions. The first one about each farm's history and crucial milestones of each farm's developmental contexts was expected to provide a background for an explanation of the second one about farmers' understandings and their imaginings of sustainable agriculture in general and their farming practices in particular. The results obtained through the thematic analysis (Krippendorf 2004), comparing similarities and differences of emerging topics from their narratives, are offered in a somewhat uncommon way. In vignettes, two narratives are summarised as contrasting examples from an intensive farm and an organic farm, while other narratives from twelve farms are employed as a background of comprehensive comparative analysis.

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<sup>12</sup> Rare anthropological studies show, however, that motives of farmers to re-orient their activities to organic farming in hilly regions in Slovenia are very complex and not automatically related to the increased income (e.g. Frelih Larsen 2005; Bartulović & Kozorog 2014).

## **Farms' histories through the talk about crucial developmental milestones**

### *Emil's story*

Emil is the holder of one of the most large-scale livestock-crop farms in the country. Since he took over the family farm in 1977, the farm has been enlarged from 9 hectares and 15 heads of cattle to 350 hectares and 800 heads of cattle. When he took over the farm, only his mother assisted him, while now, there are six farm-workers regularly employed on the farm beside his family (his wife, son, daughter-in-law and himself).

Emil believes that a farmer cannot be successful without sincere love for animals and farmland, and without a desire to make a living out of farming. He is also convinced that he would not have been able to enlarge the farm to such an extent without being involved in loans and risky decisions. His mother was the one who inculcated such a philosophy in his head early in his life; Emil is proud of his mother, who was a very progressive and hardworking woman in the socialist era. It was his mother who persuaded him to take his first loan for building bigger stables from a local cooperative in the 1970s, when cooperatives acted well and justly. Emil also remembers that the then farm advisors were fieldworkers who brilliantly advised young, hardworking farmers, open to innovation, as he was himself. Unfortunately, today's advisers have become office clerks whose work is reduced to filling farmers' applications for subsidies only.

Emil was given a new impetus to farming by the first loan, which he summarised in the formulae: the more cattle required the more land for their fodder and to get more fodder required improved machines. More and more money was circulating and being invested in bigger stables, more land and more machines. Emma, Emil's wife, explained their desire to enlarge the farm through their restless nature: 'We were never satisfied with everything we have done or possessed. We have always moved on, and we have always possessed more. You have to be flexible, resourceful, adaptive. You have to respond quickly!'

Of course, the farm's development was not always that straightforward. Emil and Emma are still concerned about the uncertain consequences of unpredictable weather and agricultural policy, which they cannot control. Such was the case of shutting down the sugar beet processing factory in Slovenia in 2006, because of the changed sugar regime in the European Union. As one of the biggest producers of sugar beets Emil's farm almost went bankrupt for the then still unpaid loan for a machine for picking sugar beets on wet land. Being reimbursed for the beets, Emil kept on all the farmworkers and invested in his herd of cattle. Being the owner of the herd has allowed Emil and Emma to choose their clientele, buyers and consumers, and to negotiate prices for the cattle, which was impossible under the rules of set prices in socialism.

In the future, Emil's family is planning to build their own slaughterhouse on the farm to save expenses for the emergency slaughter of around 30 injured animals per year. However, more important for the family is the fulfilment of their dreams to offer Slovenians "Slovenian beef". This project is about the hope, identity and reputation of the entire family, which is for now, unfortunately, greater with their foreign business partners

than at home. Finally, this project is not about excellent business only; with this project, all of Slovenia would recognise the quality work of the entire family.

*'After all, you have to be flexible!'*

In a similar way to Emil, all holders of selected farms substantially enlarged either their farms' capacities in terms of land size, cattle, mechanisation, or rooms' capacities and varieties of services for guests in tourist farms, or crop diversities and supplemented activities in organic farms after 1991. This moment coincides with the introduced policy measures of the EU pre-accession period, and particularly with the adopted and self-tailored CAP reforms in Slovenia since 2004. Until 1991, the differences between farms were relatively small: the size of their land in use did not exceed the 10-hectare maximum, there were about 10 big cattle on their farms while mechanisation was adopted for work with horses until the 1960s; from the 1970s, their farms were equipped with one to two tractors with several attachments.

However, the post-1991 substantial enlargement of farms was not a result of a dramatic change in agriculture in the context of new developmental "transition" possibilities from a socialist to a market economy. In most cases, the collocutors described the milestones of their farm's development regarding intertwined contingent events, which determined their decisions. Some of them described as decisive "propitious circumstances for pig breeding"; others emphasised "favourable loans for building cattle stables"; many of them mentioned the advantage of "a priori known redemption prices" settled by cooperatives; there were younger farmers who proudly referred to "SAPARD financial support" for modernising their old buildings; and finally, they all mentioned how crucial it was to get numerous forms of subsidies involved in the Agri-Environmental Programme. The majority also mentioned the possibility to buy and rent land or obtain a subsidy for young farmers and early retired farmers. Finally, half of them referred to favourable circumstances since the year 2000 for starting or reorienting to organic farming.

However, besides the radically changed circumstances in agriculture since 1991, farmers believe that their timely and flexible response to the constantly changing context in agriculture has been decisive for their farms' improvements. Employing the phrase "being flexible", the farmers conveyed that it was necessary "to respond quickly", "to take the opportunity", "to adjust to changed circumstances", "to be curious and open to innovation", "to continuously learn", "to keep pace with time", "to create new and to abandon old partnerships" and "to risk", as well.

Therefore, substantial enlargement of a farm's capacity was explained by farmers similar to Emil through descriptions of contingent milestones of their farm's development, to which they referred in their talks about dreams, wishes, projects, disappointments, risks, about the question of what forms of sociality one maintains or abandons, and mostly what kind of a person you have to be to cope with the challenges of developmental policy. The majority of farmers insisted that without love for animals and nature they would not succeed in enlarging their farms to the current extent despite obtained subsidies, loans and successful business. However, there were not a few of them who believed

that being a farmer meant a commitment to continue and improve what their precursors had introduced on the farm.

The above similarities notwithstanding, farmers differently experience their reputation of being a farmer in both their communities and in the country. Collocutors from organic farms believe that being an organic farmer is an increasingly valued job because organic farmers are recognised as reliable providers of healthy and quality food, keepers of populated rural areas and caretakers of nature. Their co-villagers see them as “keepers of the community’s bonds” because as promoters of networking their numerous supplemented activities organic farmers integrate into their business both non-farming rural neighbours and farmers from small, less productive, aged and self-sufficient farms. The majority of organic farmers believe that they are a hope for the survival of ever more abandoned villages.

Completely the opposite was the talk of farmers from intensive farms. The majority complained that their job did not have a good reputation in society because they were constantly represented in the media as the main polluters of nature and as “parasites” who live on subsidies only. As a rule, they are in a conflicting relationship with co-villagers, as Eva from a pig farm illustrates:

Those who do not farm but live in the countryside, they hinder us. Yes, every day. We should not fertilise, we should not use the roads, we should not do anything. They regularly report us to the police... We cannot live together. They [rural people] want peace and quiet, birds and such things. They don't mind that we are the farmers... We are just the ones who destroy their roads and disturb their peace.

Finally, the talk about the history of a farm's development shows some differences in collocutors' motives for their re-direction to organic farming and in their choice to be a farmer by profession. Only a few farmers from organic farms inherited their farms from their parents or other relatives. These farmers usually reoriented from intensive to organic farming because of the recognition that previous practices were detrimental to their health and the environment, or they frankly admitted that there were, at a certain moment, more favourable conditions for organic farming, supported by generous subsidies (cf. Bartulović & Kozorog 2014). The majority of organic farmers did not relate their voluntary decision to become a farmer to examples of relatively successful farming by their parents as was a frequent practice among the intensive farmers. Ivan from an organic farm was quite telling in his description:

I was not born on the farm. My parents are intellectuals, and until I was twenty years old, I didn't have the slightest idea about farming... As a student of agronomy, I composted with earthworms, I started selling compost, travelling around Europe, the world, studying, attending seminars... and I discovered permaculture.

Considering a voluntary decision for organic farming, Anna's story is very illustrative and quite in contrast to Emil's story. Anna's story also represents a suitable

start for a further discussion about farmers' understandings and imaginings of sustainable agriculture and farming, therefore, it merits our attention.

### *Anna's story*

A graduate agronomist, Anna farms on one hectare of land in accord with biodynamic principles. She defines herself as a very, very small organic farmer. A former successful entrepreneur with 14 employed workers, Anna decided to become an organic farmer because of health difficulties, which she ascribed to increasingly stressful climate in her former firm, poor relationships with unreliable employees, and never-satisfied clients. Moreover, because of long working hours, a lack of free time for her recovery, the single mother of two children was gradually falling ill. It was a trip to Australia in 2007, where Anna attended spiritual ceremonies and workshops, which substantially reoriented her life. This was a decisive moment when she recognised that she could find happiness again if she were able to "bring nature to the city".

After her return from Australia, Anna dismissed all her employees, closed her firm, sold her house and bought the land for her farm. It took one year for her to ponder time and again what and how to farm and live to be happy again. Before Anna closed her firm, she fought with severe depression. Finally, she decided to grow vegetables according to the principles of biodynamics and to make a living selling organic vegetables.

Anna loved working with plants in her parents' florist's shop since she was a little girl. She remembers that she could never stand the smell of spraying flowers with chemicals. She also remembers a great disappointment that she experienced in secondary school on a visit to a greenhouse in the Netherlands to learn about advanced technology – hydroponics. Seeing plants in iron boxes without soil but full of iron debris through which nutritious water was running, Anna decided to never buy vegetables from the Netherlands.

Today, Anna makes a living selling green boxes in a town 100 kilometres away. Her customers greatly appreciate her healthy and nutritious vegetables, and among them are many who suffer from health difficulties. Their demand already exceeds Anna's production. However, Anna does not plan to increase her production because she can manage to cultivate one hectare by herself. Such a way of life makes her happy despite not making a profit.

Anna is the most concerned about the changing climate and eventual difficulties of her health and injuries, which she sees as the biggest risks in her business and way of life. Anna is additionally occupied with small-scale eco-tourism, and occasionally she gives lectures on organic farming. However, her income is not enough to cover eventual losses because of uncertain weather or her poor health.

### *'How to farm sustainably under unsustainable policy?'*

Both Emil and Anna believe that only they practice sustainable farming even though Emil works on a large-scale intensive farm and Anna practices small-scale biodynamic farming. Emil insists that sustainable farming must be large-scale to provide food security in the country. Emil disagrees with an existing agricultural policy that promotes balanced, sustainable rural development. He criticises equating meadows and fields, which

he sees as a political decision to treat equally “real farmers who possess farmland and livestock” and “false farmers with land but without animals”; the latter may get payments for cultivating meadows only. Emil’s wife, Emma, is certain that without cattle there is no natural manure, and without natural manure, one cannot cultivate and renew a meadow in a nature-friendly manner. They believe that current agricultural policy tries to punish successful large-scale farmers, taxing them for the burden of a livestock unit per hectare not to contaminate the environment. Emil and Emma regret that lawmakers have no idea about real farming. These bureaucrats cannot see that without large-scale farmers there is no prosperity in the country.

Anna also believes that current agricultural policy is not sustainable but in her case because it does not support small-scale farmers. When she planted six various cultures on one field in accord with biodynamics she met some barriers. Existing standards did not support such a variety or supported only certain kind of cultures planted in certain months per year. Consequently, she was not permitted to apply for a certain type of subsidy. Anna insists that agricultural policymakers try to destroy small-scale farmers with such impractical standards, and with such a policy they will soon also destroy large-scale farmers, who in the long run cannot compete with corporations such as Monsanto.

Anna understands sustainable farming as a way of life, which allows her to be autonomous and happy despite poor financial results at the end of a year. For her, sustainability means being in love with the soil. Anna explains sustainable agriculture as keeping the soil alive, full of micro- and macro-organisms, worms. Alternatively, in Anna’s words:

Sustainable development is not money. Money can be quickly lost. One bad yield and you are broke. But what is in soil, this is gold. If soil is fertile and if you know how to farm, you will always manage well as a farmer. But if you are often spraying, you are killing the life in soil, and you have sealed your fate.

Other farmers reflect on sustainable agriculture in a way similar to Emil and Anna. Farmers from intensive and organic farms are convinced that only their way of farming is sustainable. Somewhat expectedly, their vocabulary did not contain explicitly economic, environmental, and social references to sustainable farming; however, they are implicitly conveyed in their thematic emphases. In this way, farmers from intensive farms explained that a secured successor on the farm is a precondition for sustainable farming in the future. Some added that for them the biggest value was the working habits of their children whom they included into the numerous farming activities early in their lives.

Fear of uncertainty of successfully continuing “what parents had set up” was frequently voiced by young current and future farm holders. Comparing present circumstances in agriculture with conditions when their parents took over the farms in the socialist era, young farmers held that now, it was more difficult to cope with unpredictable and constantly changing price fluctuations, to control complex networks of various partnerships, and to follow and adapt to quickly changing standards and measures regulated by agricultural policy. Most of them were living in multigenerational families and obtained

subsidies for establishing young farmers and early retirement. Discussing these types of payments as “truly sustainable” because they assured continued farming, just payments between siblings, and caring for the older family members, some warned against negative consequences of a property transfer to the young farmer. Eva, the mother of a young farm holder from a pig farm, was particularly concerned:

Yesterday, it crossed my mind ... everybody now talks about young farmers, who take over a farm on time. But nobody is aware that these young farmers have wives who are invisible... Our daughter-in-law, for instance, she does not have the status of a farmer because, among other things, she did not complete school related to agriculture. Now, she can be employed only on her husband's farm, but she doesn't have any property rights.

On the other side, collocutors from organic farms emphasised in their musings about sustainable agriculture more the issues of a way of life according to the principle “to return to nature what you get from it”, healthy life and happiness, provided by such a way of farming instead of pushing for a profit. Some of them decided to become organic farmers because of their health difficulties or the previous intense way of life in a town. The majority also believe that such a way of farming offers more health to their consumers, as well.

Farmers from intensive farms discussed care for their health as a sustainable good somewhat differently. Fear of burnout, as experienced by their parents, was referred by farmers to justify buying more advanced machinery as necessary for maintaining their physical health. The high number of various machines, which men usually call “my giant” or “my tiger”, they explained as a necessary condition for sustainable farming in terms of reducing their physical burden at work.

Just like in their narratives about key milestones of a farm's development, farmers discussed again the quickly responsive, adaptable and flexible nature of a farmer, this time as an assurance for sustainable farming, a farm's survival and a farm's success. Especially farmers from intensive farms reoriented their narratives about sustainable agriculture to a necessarily profitable business. In this line, young farmer Igor from a pig farm understands sustainable development as increasing the number of livestock to stay competitive on the market or “in the game”; otherwise sustainable development was meaningless. However, Igor is also aware of risks brought by investments (loans) in advanced stables because of constantly changing standards and demands of animal welfare, and huge redemption price fluctuations, which prevent him from achieving in the long run what he set today.

Other farmers from intensive farms are also ambivalent in their descriptions of successful and profitable sustainable farming. On the one hand, they emphasised that enlargement of their principal activity on the farm was necessary to stay competitive, yet, on the other hand, they expressed their concerns of experiencing risks and uncertainties primarily because of increasingly unpredictable weather, secondly, price fluctuations, and finally, constantly changing measures of agricultural policy. As with Emil, they were very critical of equating the status of farmers without animals with them. According to inten-



sive farmers, these “spurious farmers” together with organic ones cannot be carriers of sustainable agriculture in the country, simply because they cannot produce enough food and provide national food security.

Being included in the Agri-Environmental Programme, intensive farmers primarily see an opportunity or entrance to obtain other types of subsidies. Yet following animal welfare standards and standards for integrated growing and greening of fields, they are proud to practice more “natural breeding of animals” and to keep quality soil using “nature-friendly mineral fertilisers”. They are certain that by practising such a type of farming they contribute to sustainable agriculture and reiterated that their production of high quality fodder means the highest quality meat of their animals, which resonates in their frequently used reminder of “when you know what you are eating”.

In their talk about quality and healthy food, the majority of intensive farmers criticised the state policy again, which is unaware that a rich state must have rich farmers. They are disappointed that the state allows large retailers, such as Hofer, Lidl, E. Leclerc and Spar, to provide relatively cheap food to Slovenians instead of supporting Slovenian farmers. In this view, Emil’s dreams are still to offer high quality meat to Slovenian consumers instead of being oriented mostly abroad because of his uncompetitive much higher prices.

Farmers from organic farms conveyed their understanding of sustainable agriculture mostly through talk about the cycle of nature, pursuing the principle to return to nature what was taken from it. Contrary to intensive farmers, the majority of organic farmers opened a debate about caring for descendants, which they believed could be provided only from organic farmers who ardently opposed any usage of dangerous substances, mineral fertilisers, and sprays. It is their form of farming which is nature- and human-friendly, drawing on simple machines, much manual work and grounded in knowledge about humans’ symbiosis with nature.

Contrary to intensive farmers, they understand sustainable agriculture as being more in improving the quality of soil and variety of their produce and services, offered through their numerous supplemented activities, than in the expansion of their production. They understand sustainable agriculture broadly, also in terms of binding other local people to their networks of direct local supply and demand in order to keep local communities alive.

Organic farmers, as well as intensive farmers, mentioned that their quick and flexible response to changing climate conditions was necessary for their survival. They even believe that they have the advantage over large-scale farmers in terms of quick re-orientation of their practices because of financially undemanding, simple and relatively cheap mechanisation and quickly dismantled and displaced objects while large-scale farmers cannot easily, without substantial financial investments, reorient and adapt their activities and buildings.

Organic farmers also complain about current state policy, which does not see that in context of increasingly overgrown and built up farmland and poor natural conditions for intensive farming in the country, only organic farming can be sustainable. Policymakers do not understand that despite the increasing support for organic farming in

the previous decade, subsidies for organic farming are too low in a context of high prices for organic seeds, sprays and high expenses for organic cultivation. Yet, like intensive farmers, they are concerned because of the low-priced food supply of large retailers in the country. Therefore, they are ardent advocates of direct local sale and green boxes in the immediate local vicinity.

Finally, all farmers recognise first and foremost climate change among the risks and uncertainties that hinder sustainable farming. Immediately after increasingly extreme weather events, which they more or less successfully cope with, farmers emphasise unpredictable prices which make them feel powerless and without control in planning their long-term activities. All, without exception, are dissatisfied with domestic agricultural policymakers who “blindly follow Brussels’ directions” and who are not sufficiently susceptible to suggestions and initiatives of the farmers themselves and the real situation on the ground. These are the reasons that farmers described their job as a very stressful one; they have no control over several issues which are necessary for practising sustainable farming.

### **Conclusion: What should be done?**

Emil continued to explain his criticism of “unsustainable agricultural policy” through the talk of “what should be done” in the country in order to establish sustainable agriculture beyond mere lip service. As an intensive farmer who is included in the Agri-Environmental Programme, he insists that the state should support and not punish farmers with any kind of cattle because only such farmers can provide enough natural manure for farmland, which is essential for the maintenance and sustainability of the cycle of nature. He also believes that only economically successful large farms can provide food security in the country. Therefore, in addition to cattle farmers, agricultural policy should give more support to bigger than smaller farms. Emil is not against small farmers and hobby farmers; however, agricultural policy should favour financially those farmers who show profit and surplus, who regularly pay for farm, health, and social security and who pay taxes, compared to hobby farmers who do not. Emil is an ardent proponent of the legal status of a farmer; therefore, the state should distinguish between farmers who are making a living from farming and hobby farmers. Finally, Emil does support organic farming in the country, but under certain conditions. The state should introduce a condition that every organic farmer has to provide natural manure if they apply for a subsidy for meadows.

Quite the contrary vision of what should be done was described by Anna. In line with the unfavourable natural circumstances for intensive agriculture in Slovenia, the state should support ecological farming and tourism in order to make them the most profitable industries. Anna does not believe that intensive agriculture in Slovenia could successfully compete in the long-run with intensive farmers and agribusiness from Denmark, Germany or the Netherlands who possess such advanced machinery that they could ‘cultivate half of the Slovenian farmland in one day’. According to Anna, Slovenia is an ideal country for organic farming, which should follow the formulae: the more expensive grown food should be sold at a higher price to consumers and provide ecological tourism

with more quality food which would finally contribute to domestic economic growth. Anna also insists that food produced ecologically is more nutritious. Higher prices of organic food should not be a barrier for those people who cannot afford it. Those consumers could still buy cheaper and lower quality food in supermarkets; however, they should also recognise that more nutritious and quality food they do not need in such a quantity as cheaper and low-quality food. Therefore, consumers should change both their food and behavioural habits to throw away the least food and to carry into effect the culture of “less is more”.

Other farmers commented on the question of what should be done to implement sustainable agriculture on the ground in a similar way to Emil and Anna. Those from intensive farms believe that the agricultural policymakers should support them more than organic farmers because only intensive farmers can provide food security in Slovenia. According to them, the state should prioritise farmers with legal farm status and those who are primarily occupied with farming and are not primarily employed off the farm. The state should re-introduce production-related payments instead of area-related payments. Finally, if the state is sincere in pursuing sustainable agriculture, it should support more farms with a surplus on the market instead of self-sufficient farms.

Collocutors from organic farms have completely different emphases. According to them, the state should increasingly support the promotion of ecologically grown food because only such food is nutritious, healthy, of high quality and, in the long-run, produces a healthy nation. At the same time, policymakers should simplify existent bureaucratic procedures by necessary support to smaller and self-sufficient farmers in order to sell their products in small quantities at home thus also promoting their local places. However, doing so, the state should improve poor infrastructure, and financially support more organised marketing of organic produce to provide circumstances in which organic food would reach more people in Slovenia.

It seems that various farmers' imaginings on both sustainable agriculture and the question of what should be done in Slovenia to implement such a vision echo the intertwined contrasting and even incompatible messages of the imperatives of concomitant economic success or growth, constant competitiveness, environmental protection, social justice, and long-term sustainability of the current strategy of agricultural development in Slovenia. Indeed, the farmers from intensive and organic farms frame such demands in their efforts to make a living with farming and through their love for farmland and animals despite contrasting emphases conveyed by both of them. However, the reputation and income of the farm as a whole overshadow the still taken-for-granted caring practices of women, unarranged property relationships between siblings and between the older and younger generations on the farm, lengthy working hours and farmers' anxieties over their incapability to control unpredictable and uncertain climate, prices, and agricultural policies. These issues apply for all selected farmers who are convinced that “they more than others” practice sustainable agriculture.

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## Povzetek

Prehod iz socialističnega v tržno gospodarstvo je v Sloveniji prinesel radikalne spremembe v kmetovanju in načrtovanju njegove razvojne naravnosti. Po osamosvojitvi Slovenije leta 1991 je bil razvoj kmetijstva sprva usmerjen v zaščito visokocenovnih izdelkov domače proizvodnje, po pridružitvi Slovenije Evropski uniji leta 2004 pa so se dejavnosti kmetijske politike osredinile na prevzemanje reform in ukrepov evropske skupne kmetijske politike s ciljem uveljavitve večnamenskega kmetovanja. Postopoma je nacionalna strategija povezala prizadevanje za večnamensko kmetovanje s cilji trajnostnega razvoja, pri čemer si je zamislila ekonomsko storilnega, okoljsko skrbnega,

zadovoljnega in zdravega kmeta. Kateri so ključni mejniki razvoja opazovanih kmetij in kako kmetje presojuje trajnostno kmetijstvo v državi ter svoje prakse kmetovanja, so raziskovalna vprašanja projekta Razvojne usmeritve kmetov v Sloveniji. Terensko delo na štirinajstih intenzivnih in ekoloških kmetijah je bilo izpeljano leta 2013. Gospodarji in gospodarice ter njihovi družinski člani so presojali zgodovino razvoja svojih kmetij kot podlago za nadaljnje premisleke o trajnostnem kmetijstvu v državi oziroma o svojih praksah trajnostnega kmetovanja. Njihove pripovedi so razkrile pomembne razpoke nasprotujočih si zahtev strateških dokumentov po ekonomski rasti, varovanju okolja in družbeni pravičnosti, ki so se pokazale tudi v njihovih kontrastnih razmišljanjih o praksah kmetovanja oziroma v zamišljanjih, kaj bi morali storiti, da bi se tudi v praksi uresničilo trajnostno kmetijstvo v državi.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** trajnostni razvoj, trajnostno kmetijstvo, intenzivni vs. ekološki kmetje, Slovenija

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