

Report

41st Session of the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) of SEE Countries

Date: 10th – 12th April 2018
Location: Sofia, Bulgaria
Report Prepared by: SWG Head Office/Secretariat



April 2018

I. Purpose of the session:

The 41st Session of the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in SEE was organized under the joint auspices of the SWG and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry of Republic of Bulgaria and was held in the period 10th – 12th April 2018 in Sofia, Bulgaria.

The aim of the 41st SWG Assembly Session was to discuss the realized activities in the period December 2017 - April 2018, discussion and planning of the SWG major features as per the operational plan. The future possible initiatives and progress related to the cooperation with SWG partner institutions was also discussed.

All SWG delegates from the eight SWG member institutions, and the eight SWG observer institutions were officially invited to participate on the 41st SWG session.

Representatives from four out of eight SWG member institutions, participated on the session, discussed, gave recommendations and have taken the decisions listed below. Representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture of Croatia and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry of Bulgaria participated on the session as observers.

Representative from the SWG partner institutions and international organizations – German International Cooperation (GIZ), Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), GFA Consulting Group also participated on the session.

The SWG Assembly, assembled on the 41st SWG Assembly Session had qualified quorum.

II. MINUTES OF THE SESSION:

SWG Delegates/ Ministry representatives present from:

- Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Republic of Albania (Mr. Grigori Gjeci, Ms. Teuta Topi)
- Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development – Kosovo* (Mr. Bekim Hoxha);
- Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy – Republic of Macedonia (Mr. Tomo Mojsovski);
- Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management – Republic of Serbia (Mr. Slobodan Zivanovic; Ms. Sanja Prodanovic);

Ministry representatives of the SWG observer institutions present from:

- Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry of Bulgaria (Mr. Tzvetan Dimitrov, Ms. Nina Rasheva, Ms. Eva Yakimova, Ms. Anton Asparuhov, Ms. Pavlina Damyanova, Ms. Elena Hadjinicolova, Ms. Slavina Popova-Koleva)
- Ministry of Agriculture of Croatia (Ms. Irena Georgievski, Mr. Marin Fak);

Other representatives present at the session were:

- German International Cooperation - GIZ (Mr. Benjamin Mohr, Ms. Irena Djimrevska)
- Regional Cooperation Council - RCC, (Mr. Radovan Nikcevic)
- GFA Consulting Group, Bilateral Cooperation Programme of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture – BMEL (Ms. Inge Gaerke)

**This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.*

List of Participants from the meeting - Annex I.

III. Topics discussed at the 41st SWG Assembly Session:

The main topics of the session which were discussed are the following:

I. SWG Assembly Session with participation of SWG partner institutions and organizations

- Rural Development Program of Bulgaria;
- Development of Organic Agriculture in Bulgaria;
- Retrospective of the accomplishment in the period December 2017 – April 2018;
- Elaboration and update on the cooperation with EU, JRC and DG Agri;
- Update and progress in relation to the cooperation with GIZ
- Discussions on the SWG major upcoming activities for year 2018.

II. Internal SWG Assembly Session

- Planning and discussions related to the SWG future proposals and initiatives for the year 2018;
- Discussion related to the Informal Ministerial Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture from SEE, Croatia;
- Discussions and decisions regarding the future functioning of the SWG operational structures;

Meeting programme is presented in Annex II.

DISCUSSIONS:

The 41st Session of the SWG Assembly has been chaired by Mr. Boban Ilic, SWG Secretary General.

On behalf of the host institution the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry of the Republic of Bulgaria which holds the EU presidency, Mr. Tzvetan Dimitrov welcomed the SWG Assembly and highlighted the importance and support of the Republic of Bulgaria as a neighbouring country to the Western Balkans. Mr. Dimitrov expressed the readiness and willingness for regional cooperation for the benefit of all the Western Balkans. Mr. Dimitrov holds a strong belief that Bulgaria as a member of the European Union will further support and encourage such initiatives which are of interest for deepening and enhancing mutually beneficial cooperation between our countries.

III.1 SWG Session (Open Meeting)

The 41st SWG Assembly Session began as an open meeting.

III.1.1 Rural Development Program of Bulgaria

Mr. Anton Asparuhov from the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry of Bulgaria presented the Rural Development Program of Bulgaria for the period 2014-2020. Mr. Asparuhov presented the objectives, priorities and focus areas on European Level as well as the measures under the Bulgarian RDP 2014–2020 to the SWG Assembly.

Detailed information on the Rural Development Program of Bulgaria can be found in *Annex III*.

III.1.2 Development of Organic Agriculture in Bulgaria

Ms. Nina Rasheva from the Plant Production and Organic Production Directorate at the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry of Bulgaria gave an overview of the development of the sector for the Organic Agriculture in Bulgaria. As a member into the EU, Bulgaria has the necessary potential to take an important role in the currently developing organic agricultural market within the borders of the European Union and worldwide, since in the last couple of years the organic agriculture is one of the most rapid developing sectors in Bulgaria.

Detailed information can be found in Annex IV.

III.1.3 Review of the realized activities within the SWG in the period December 2017 – April 2018

The SWG Secretary General presented the realized activities for the period December 2017 – April 2018 as per the SWG Operational Plan for the given year. The upcoming activities for the period April – December 2018 were also presented to the Assembly as well as the framework planned on implementing the set activities as per the SWG Operational Plan containing activities related to the SWG core functions and actions/projects which are to be implemented in cooperation with GIZ, EC, JRC, RCC and other partner organizations.

More details regarding the SWG Operational Plan 2018 in Annex V.

III.1.4 Elaboration and update on the cooperation with EU, JRC, and DG Agri

Ms. Spasovska presented the achievements of the activities and developments being implemented in close cooperation with European Commission related to the project "Regional cooperation and networking in the field of agriculture, rural and economic development of cross-border areas" which is mainly continuation of implementation of ABD approach operations in seven targeted cross-border regions. In the reporting period the main focus of the achievements was given to the open P2P call in Drina – Tara, Drina – Sava, Prespa and Sharra and P2P call in Pcinja-Krajshte, Prokletije-Bjeshket e Nemuna and Krsh as well as organization of SHG meetings in all 7 cross-border regions. List of P2P events in all 7 regions have been also presented which are to be evaluated, contracted and implemented in the period ahead.

More details in Annex VI and Annex VII.

Ms. Pavloska - Gjorgjieska presented the updates on the achievements related to the cooperation with JRC connected to two JRC projects on: "Land Market development and Small Farms' Access to Land in the Pre-Accession Countries (LMSF-AC)" and "Agricultural Policy Developments and EU Approximation Process in the Western Balkan Countries (APDAP-WB)". Joint Kick-off meeting for the both projects have been realized in December 2017 where the draft country/territory papers have been elaborated and developed. The way forward and update on the progress can be found in *Annex VIII*.

III.1.5 Elaboration and update on the cooperation with GIZ

Dissemination of Policy Recommendations related to the evidence-based studies recently produced by SWG and GIZ

- Promotion of the evidence-based studies was done during the International Symposium AgroRes, Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina in February 2018 and at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of Macedonia in March 2018 for the ministry representatives, academia, civil and private sector.

SWG and GIZ underline and appeal to SWG Assembly once again, to take into consideration the importance on the promotion of the studies which is significant not only for their own countries, but for the entire region as well. The response of the representatives from the respective ministries is the following:

Albania - The ministry will attempt to organize the promotion event by beginning of June 2018.

Kosovo* - the promotion of the studies to be organized beginning of May 2018.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (MOFTER), Federation of BIH and Montenegro – to be consulted additionally since there was no representation on the Assembly.

Update and progress on the evidence-based study on Agro – Environment Policy (AEP)

Development of evidence-based policy papers in respect to assessment of the agri-environment policies in the WB, and policy framework for implementation of sustainable agricultural practices in line with EU policies is ongoing. The Regional Expert Advisory Working Group on Agro – Environment policy have been established. The regional methodology and approach for the assessment of agri-environment policies in the countries/territories of the SEE have been developed and agreed. Kick off meeting of the assignment on agro-environment policy have been held March 2018 in Tirana, Albania. 18th national experts from 6 countries/territories together with 1 regional and 1 international expert which have been selected and engaged will jointly develop the national chapters and the regional synthesis report. The whole process is coordinated by the Austrian Environmental Agency. First meeting of the REAWG will be held in May, Montenegro and the final meeting is planned for July, Macedonia 2018.

Update and progress on the assessment of potentials for diversification of economic activities in target rural regions through short value chains

The assessment on the potentials for diversification of economic activities in rural cross-border areas through short value chain in the 7 target ABD regions (Prespa, Sharra, Drina-Tara, Drina-Sava, Prokletije - Bjeshket e Namuna, Pcinja and Krsh) is ongoing as well. Assessment and recommendations of at least 2 value chains with the highest potential from each of the target ABD cross-border regions is the main task. In the reporting period 2 regional, 1 senior and 1 international experts have been selected and engaged. The ABD staff in the 7 regions and 2 regional experts – 1 with focus on agri-food and 1 with focus on rural tourism will collect the necessary information and develop the national assessments. 1 senior expert is responsible for compilation of the 7 assessment reports with assistance on 1 international expert from Austria. The methodology, division of roles and responsibilities and work plan have been agreed during the Kick-off meeting held in March in Skopje, Macedonia. The interim meeting of the engaged team is planned for May and the final meeting for June 2018.

More details in Annex IX.

Update on the assessment on Application of LEADER approach in the WB countries

The report on the assessment on Application of LEADER approach in the Western Balkan countries is in a final stage of completion and publishing. Ms. Gjorshoska presented to the SWG Assembly, that the publication have been translated into the local three languages of the region and is a purpose of proofreading. Distribution of the publications to be done by end of May. *More details in Annex X.*

Update and progress on the assessment of Agrobiodiversity

Ms. Djimrevska gave an update related to the assessment of the Mainstreaming Biodiversity in the Agricultural and Land Management Policies, Plans and Programmes of the SEE countries. The Assessment is in the final stage. The national country reports and contribution to the development of the regional synthesis report have been completed. The final draft of the regional synthesis report has been presented during the final meeting of the REAWG on Agrobiodiversity held in March, Tirana, Albania. General policy recommendations and conclusions of the regional synthesis report have been presented by the international expert. Details on the update of the assessment on Agro – Biodiversity can be found in Annex XI.

Update related to the LEIWW II Phase - SEDRA

Mr. Benjamin Mohr, Team Leader of the Programme for Rural Development through Integrated Forest and Water Resources Management in Southeast Europe (LEIWW) provided short update since the last SWG Assembly in December 2017 related to the Programme LEIWW II Phase “The Support to economic diversification of rural areas in Southeast Europe –SEDRA which is planned to be implemented in the period September 2018 – end of August 2021 jointly by GIZ and SWG. Based on the statement provided during the 40th SWG Assembly, held in Graz, Austria, Mr. Mohr informed the Assembly about the position of the German Ministry. Namely in respect to the financial means foreseen for the implementation of the project 2.2 million EUR, for the moment the German Ministry haven’t allocate additional budget foreseen for implementation of the planned programm LEIWW 2nd Phase. Mr. Mohr informed on the two options on possible further cooperation – either to go only with focus on Output 1 and Output 2 or to another holistic approach and go with cooperation on the three levels, which is more appreciated by the German Ministry. For the moment nothing could be guaranteed, since the project is not yet commissioned, but Mr. promised to look for the best outcome to further continue the successful cooperation between SWG and GIZ.

III.1.6 Discussion on major activities for the year 2018

Overview of the planned major activities by the end of year 2018 have been provided by Ms. Gjorshoska. SWG Delegates have been introduced with their responsibilities and obligations which are following in the period ahead in order to be able to ensure the proper participation accordingly on the major SWG events.

Related to the cooperation with the Federal Ministry for Food and Agriculture (BMEL), Ms. Inge Gaerke form the GFA Consulting Group stated that the German Ministry of Agriculture could support the countries with the projects related to the Agriculture and Rural Development. Ms. Gaerke promoted the topics which are of interest for the German Ministry for possible cooperation with the Western Balkan countries such as: Wine sector, Food Safety, Sectoral development, Agrobiodiversity etc. SWG Secretariat will provide Ms. Gaerke with the summary of the work done by the REAWG within the SWG network.

More details in Annex XII.

III.1.7 Preparations for the Agricultural Policy Forum 2018

Mr. Dori Pavloska-Gjorgjeska presented the preparatory process for the upcoming Agricultural Policy Forum 2018 foreseen to be held in the period 16th -19th October 2018 in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Overall proposed title of the forum: Enhancing Regional Rural Development and EU Perspectives of the SEE through Evidence-Based Agricultural Policy

Plenary session

- Agricultural policy developments in the SEE - monitoring report
- Land market and small farms' access to land in the SEE
- Diversification of economic activities in the rural areas in the SEE
- Conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources in agriculture in the SEE
- Application of the Agri-Environment Policy in SEE
- The role of IPARD in enhancing regional rural development and EU perspectives of the SEE

Working groups

- Land market and small farms' access to land in the SEE
- Diversification of economic activities in the rural areas in the SEE
- Agri-Environment Policy for enhanced regional rural development in SEE

Proposed topics for APF 2018 to be included:

- Mr. Mohr stated that the German Ministry is willing to invest significant resources for startups and returnees in the Western Balkan region as discussed during the last APF 2017.
- Croatian delegates proposed social media and digitalization of agriculture and access to market as a perspective topics to be added for the next APF.

SWG has also made a separate webpage where for the first time this year interested representatives can register online <http://apf.seerural.org/>

More details in Annex XIII.

III.1.8 Preparations for the 12th Annual Meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture from SEE

Ms. Gjorshoska informed the SWG Assembly on the recent development related to the organization of the Annual Meeting of the Ministers the SWG Assembly. The meeting will be held in Macedonia, Struga or Ohrid in the period 14th – 16th November 2018.

Tentative topics to covered:

- EU approximation of the candidate and potential candidate countries from SEE;
- Regional Cooperation and way forward in the region;
- Results and the Agenda from the Agricultural Policy Forum 2018
- Fast green lines at the borders (Trade facilitation)

The Announcements will be send in the course of May, the official invitations will be send by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of the Republic of Macedonia latest by July 2018 and the deadline for confirmation of attendance is September 30th, 2018.

It was announced by the SWG Secretariat and Regional Cooperation Council that there is a possibility for back to back meeting with the Ministers of Environment from the region, with focus on discussion on „Agro Environmental impacts on Economy“. Mr. Nikcevic from the Regional Cooperation Council considered this as an excellent opportunity for cooperation to organize such

parallel meetings of the respective sectors and informed the Assembly that the negotiation process is still ongoing and as soon as this issue is resolved, Mr. Nikcevic will communicate with SWG Secretariat for further possible arrangement of the meeting.

More details in Annex XIV.

III.2 Closed SWG Assembly Session – for SWG Delegates only

- Internal discussions - for SWG Delegates only

Conclusions/Decisions Made:

- Mr. Mohr informed the Assembly about the position of the German Ministry. In respect to the financial means foreseen for the implementation of the project for the moment the German Ministry have allocate only 2.2 million EUR for implementation of the planned programm LEIWW 2nd Phase;
- On behalf of the Kosovo* Ministry of Agriculture, SWG Delegate Mr. Bekim Hoxha announced that will host the next Symposium on Vine and Viticulture and proposed the next meeting of the Regional Expert Advisory Working Group on Wine to be held during the Symposium in July 2018;
- Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture of Germany interested to support the WBs with the projects related to Agriculture and Rural Development. SWG to provide Ms. Gaerke the summary of the REAWG meetings related to Wine and Agrobiodiversity;
- Promotion of the evidence-based studies in the SWG Memeber countries/institutions:
Albania - The ministry will attempt to organize the promotion event by beginning of June 2018. Kosovo* - the promotion of the studies to be organized beginning of May 2018. Montenegro and BIH to be consulted additionally for the appropriate period.
- Agricultural Policy Forum 2018 – tentative topics and working groups presented and agreed. SWG Delegates to nominate the requested participation for the presented working groups.
- SWG Member countries/ Delegates to ensure participation of their Ministers and Ministry delegations at the Annual Ministers Meeting and Informal Gathering of the Ministers from WBs;