

Extended abstract

Keywords: multifunctional agriculture; extra-productive functions; social function of agriculture; landscape; local actors; municipalities

Introduction

Rural areas occupy an ambivalent position in the modern consciousness, often caught between perception of a lower standard of living and density of services, conservatism, backwardness and rigidity. In contrast, there is a romanticized ideal of a traditional community, positive norms, and security. Rural areas are most associated with the agricultural sector. At first glance, the agrarian sector may appear incompatible with a romanticised vision of naturalness, tradition, and community. Particularly in recent decades, agriculture may evoke images of parched—or conversely waterlogged—expanses of arable land dominated by heavy machinery, monolithic and degraded landscapes, spruce monocultures, and silos disfiguring rural panoramas, together with the associated negative economic and at times political connotations. Such imagery has entrenched a stereotypical understanding of agriculture in the collective imagination. This understanding reflects a model that expanded in response to the post-Second World War imperative to “feed” large populations rapidly and at low cost and was further shaped by subsidy policies. Over time, however, this model has arguably been distorted through substantial financial injections into a system of globalised agribusiness, often operating with little regard for ethical considerations. Yet it is precisely agricultural entrepreneurs who, through their networks of support, may actively cultivate these very qualities as a by-product of their primary economic activities.

Alternative perspectives on agriculture beyond an exclusively productivity orientation began to develop within the agricultural sphere from the 1980s onwards. Indeed, scholars have referred to a paradigmatic shift in the understanding of agriculture. This shift juxtaposed the previously dominant and deeply internalised forms of intensive, productivity agriculture with concepts such as multifunctional agriculture (MFA) and post-productivity agriculture, both of which emphasise environmental sustainability and the local embeddedness of agricultural practices (Wilson, 2007; Randall, 2002; Huylebroeck et al., 2007; Renting et al., 2009). The present paper draws upon the theory of multifunctional agriculture, with a particular focus on the reduction to its social functions. It seeks to address the following research question: *How is the social function of agriculture perceived by practitioners, and which forms of assistance are most prevalent?* The principal methodological approach consisted of a questionnaire survey conducted among medium-sized and large-scale agricultural entrepreneurs who are members of the largest employers’ organisation in the agricultural sector in the Czech Republic. Findings indicate that farmers primarily stabilise regions through landscape maintenance, public road care, and logistical support for municipalities and local associations. While direct social support for individuals remains secondary, the provision of local food and catering only in the case of small-scale production and their own processing. The paper concludes that these “unsolicited but expected” activities create a vital network of reciprocity. By fulfilling these roles, farmers transcend their economic identity to become influential political actors. Their involvement not only preserves social stability in a changing world but actively shapes the character and future of the rural landscape.

Theoretical background

The concept of multifunctional agriculture (MFA) gained prominence following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which resulted in the adoption of Agenda 21. The document emphasised that agriculture should produce more than food and fibre; it should also fulfil additional functions, such as stewardship of renewable resources, landscape management and biodiversity protection, and should contribute to the socio-economic viability of rural areas (Renting et al., 2009).

Since 2001, this rhetoric of multifunctional agriculture has also been employed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), particularly in relation to the economic aspects of agriculture, the legitimacy of agricultural support policies, the liberalisation of commodity markets, and the adaptation of a neoclassical liberal economic approach. Neoliberal discourse, however, struggles to incorporate into its economic framework markets in which goods are valued on the basis of positive or negative externalities (OECD, 2001: 13). Outputs of agriculture such as healthy landscapes and biodiversity, functional water management systems, food security, employment, or the socio-economic viability of rural areas are difficult to quantify in monetary terms (Renting et al., 2009). MFA is likewise presented as an instrument for enhancing landscape aesthetics, encompassing natural heritage and the visual value of landscapes, historical context, environmental quality, and residents' demand for recreation (Renting et al., 2009; Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007).

Beyond positive and negative externalities and the visual value of the landscape, MFA highlights a third approach that focuses on the benefits of agricultural activities in relation to livelihood strategies and rural development, with an emphasis on actors/participants who are central to the social construction of MFA practices. This dimension encompasses social scientists, rural sociologists, policy-makers, agricultural economists, and rural inhabitants themselves. In this perspective, multifunctional agriculture is conceived as a guarantor of sustainability, viability, and quality of life in rural areas (Renting et al., 2009). It provides a framework for domains such as tourism and cultural heritage, educational activities and therapeutic services, the maintenance of traditional housing forms, residential and lifestyle preferences, leisure pursuits, and recreation (Librová, 1994; Blažek, 2004). Some authors refer to this sphere as a new “rural development paradigm”, which, in contrast to conventional models, conceptualises agriculture in terms of deepening and “re-grounding” its relationship with wider society (Ploeg and Roep, 2003). It addresses transformations and identities associated with agricultural activities and the growing acceptance of alternative development trajectories within farming communities (Wilson, 2007; Pospěch et al., 2014). In this regard, farmers are understood as key decision-making actors, whose motivations, incentives, and decision-making processes are integral to these developments. Accordingly, recent MFA discourse has increasingly oriented itself towards innovative perspectives, including the strengthening of relationships between agriculture and wider society and the promotion of sustainable rural development (Renting et al., 2009).

Finally, MFA may also be viewed from a political and institutional perspective, which may be classified as an approach centred on public regulation. This dimension is shaped by the context of the European Union and its rural development policies, including agri-environmental schemes. For example, conceptions of agriculture within rural development policies have been influenced

by the Sustainable Development Strategy adopted by the European Commission in Gothenburg in 2001, in connection with the United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002 and subsequently renewed in 2006 as the EU Sustainable Development Strategy. This perspective must simultaneously consider significant differences between countries and regions and respect the varying recognition and utilisation of the MFA concept within political discourse (Ploeg and Roep, 2003).

MFA should not be perceived statically, but rather as a dynamic transitional process in which the above-mentioned components and perspectives are balanced. Such an approach acknowledges both historical and contemporary agricultural and land-use practices, incorporates new forms of knowledge, innovations in support systems, political frameworks, regional specificities, markets, and consumer habits and demand. Renting et al. (2009) propose describing this process as an “integrated transitional framework” of MFA, characterised by the co-production, interaction, and evolution of social and natural processes aimed at rural development, strengthened by local social, cultural, and environmental capital. MFA must therefore respond sensitively to spatial heterogeneity, contextual conditions, and non-linear development processes, as well as to consumer demand, societal expectations, market dynamics, and the prevailing political and institutional frameworks within a given country and period.

Methodology

The principal methodological approach in this paper consists of a quantitative questionnaire survey conducted among medium-sized and large-scale agricultural entrepreneurs who are members of the largest employers’ organisation in the agricultural sector in the Czech Republic. The aim of the questionnaire was to identify the activities undertaken by farmers (member organisations of the Agricultural Union) beyond their primary business operations in rural areas. Initially, the activities commonly carried out by agricultural enterprises were identified, whether remunerated or not, which may be classified as so-called “social functions”. Five principal areas were delineated and further elaborated through several sub-questions:

1. care for greenery and the landscape;
2. events for the public;
3. provision of catering and local food sales;
4. support for local associations;
5. assistance to municipalities, families, and individuals.

The questionnaire further explored the perceived importance and evaluation of social functions from the farmers’ own perspective, as well as their views on the broader societal significance of these activities—that is, how farmers believe their activities are perceived by the public. The third section addressed the recognition and media coverage of the social functions of agriculture. The final section collected several basic characteristics of the enterprises themselves.

Prior to its launch, the questionnaire was discussed with representatives of several member organisations of the Agricultural Union, and its clarity and length were pilot-tested. The survey

was open from 10 to 30 November 2025 and was distributed to 1,821 contact email addresses. A total of 288 completed questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 15 per cent.

Preliminary results

The findings of the questionnaire survey indicate that the activities described as the social functions of agriculture—namely care for greenery and the landscape, public events, the provision of catering and local food sales, support for local associations, and assistance to municipalities, families, and individuals—are largely undertaken by agricultural enterprises incidentally, as a matter of routine practice. These activities appear to constitute a form of implicit automatism. This may be explained by the fact that agricultural entrepreneurs have access to heavy machinery, produce and process food, act as employers, and, as business operators, are able to allocate part of their profits to support selected events or initiatives.

Agricultural entrepreneurs seek to maintain a good reputation within their municipality and among the wider public, yet they do not expect financial remuneration for these activities. At the same time, they express a desire for greater public awareness of their engagement. The most important social functions identified include:

- care for the landscape and public roads;
- assistance to municipalities and support for associations.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are:

- assistance to individual persons;
- initiatives undertaken independently at the farmer's own discretion.

The type of social function performed most frequently depends on the specific agricultural sector in which the farmer operates.

The responses further suggest that social functions are not clearly conceptualised or formally defined, as respondents often refrained from expressing strong agreement or disagreement when evaluating these activities. Nevertheless, agricultural enterprises consider these “social functions” to be important. Consequently, they should (1) be more explicitly emphasised and (2) more effectively utilised. Public appreciation of these services appears to motivate farmers to continue engaging in such activities.

The questionnaire did not sufficiently capture more nuanced relationships, for example between enterprise size, type of production, geographical location, and the extent of assistance provided. This initial research would therefore benefit from further investigation incorporating additional “social” and non-productivist aspects of agriculture as a sector.

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