Restitution of agricultural land in Estonia: Consequences for landscape development and production

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Online publication date: 15 September 2010
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Two prominent features of present-day Estonia are large tracts of formerly productive land laid idle and production buildings of collective farms in ruins. However, in some areas most farmland remains actively used. An investigation of possible ‘landscapes of action’, both for national decision-makers and single landowners, can help with understanding recent transformations. The article examines local responses to the land restitution and agricultural restructuring measures adopted by the Estonian Government in the 1990s and the resulting effects on the cultural landscape and agricultural development. Restitution was politically necessary, but has had a number of unexpected effects on landscape development and agricultural production. Among the negative effects have been new speculative land-use patterns of urban sprawl around the larger cities. However, where large production units could be converted to capitalist enterprises and where agricultural land is good, agricultural production has been maintained. The article demonstrates how individuals and local communities interpret opportunities and obstacles set by personal ambitions, local conditions, and general policies. Case studies of the former collective farms in Sauga, Surju and Tori municipalities show that the proportion of unproductive agricultural land and recent development of ownership structures show marked differences from case to case.

Keywords: cultural landscape change, large- and small-scale farming, production unit, restitution, transition economy

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Introduction

A typical feature of the present-day Estonian landscape is that large tracts of formerly productive land lie idle, partly overgrown with bushes (Fig. 1). Other features are former large production buildings of collective farms more or less in ruins and partly deserted blocks of flats built for collective farm workers (Figs. 2 and 3). The impressions are confirmed by Estonian statistics: since 1990 productive farmland, measured in sown crop area, has decreased by 50%. A significant decline in gross agricultural production has occurred, there is a trade deficit in agricultural production, and the number of agricultural workers has declined by 88% since 1991 (Reiljan & Kulu 2002; Raagmaa et al. 2009). Most of the farmland is, however, still actively used in central Estonia and other locations with the best soils, and new farm buildings are present in the rural landscape.

The aim of this study is to illustrate with examples some local effects of the agricultural restructuring and land restitution policies adopted by the Estonian Government and the more recent effects of the European Union (EU) agricultural policies. The case studies are intended to provide insight into how individuals and local communities interpret possibilities and obstacles set by policies and local geographical situations.

Fig. 1. Ruins and scrub overgrowth on a pre-World War II farm in Sauga (Photo: Arild Holt-Jensen 2009)

Fig. 2. Ruins of pig-breeding collective in Sauga (Photo: Arild Holt-Jensen 2007)
When analysing agricultural and landscape changes in the transition period from 1991, particular attention has to be given to institutional or structural factors. Some of these are embedded in historical legacies, former institutional structures and national sentiments. There was a political need to break completely with the Soviet system of collective farms and return the land to native Estonians. However, as pointed out by Unwin et al. (2004, 110), key international organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which had a rather crude understanding of ‘transition’, have also influenced the development. Demands to reduce public expenditure and services and the ‘shock therapy’ of a shift to market liberalism have had a number of negative consequences for the agricultural economy. Since joining the EU in 2004, Estonia has been included in the support systems of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). This gives priority to the largest producers. Restitute farmers complain that the support system is complicated and that the policy does not take into account the special and acute need for investments in buildings and modern equipment in Estonia. Our empirical investigations focus on the responses and adaptations of the individual landowners to the local conditions, general policies, and economic trends.

Forces influencing landscape change

The development and restructuring of Estonian agriculture in the last two decades can be understood in terms of what Bladh (1995) calls landscape of action, linking the material landscape, the institutional landscape and the landscape of meaning. The material landscape is the landscape we see and move in, a landscape which also gives the farmer insight into the physical conditions that he or she has to base farming activities on. This relates to the functional factors (Jones 1988) that partly explain the forms of the cultural landscape. The institutional landscape is related to what Jones (1988) calls structural factors, which cover different institutions regulating human activities through economic and political tools. The landscape of meaning relates to individual or group perceptions and intentions, particularly local motives of individual actors (e.g. farmers). These are influenced by functional and structural factors, including farming and national ideologies (Jones 1988). Eiter & Potthoff (2007) discuss the concept ‘driving forces’ in analysing changes in land use and vegetation cover in a historical perspective. Direct and indirect driving forces include social and ownership structures, values and attitudes, prices and subsidies, legislation, transport facilities, technical innovations, potential productivity of an area, and geographical location in relation to markets. Such driving forces are clearly related to behavioural geography, as introduced by Wolpert (1964) in his comparison of actual and potential agricultural productivity on farms in central Sweden. He found that the sample farm population did not achieve profit maximization, nor were its goals solely directed to that objective. The farmers were ‘spatial satisfiers’ rather than ‘economic men’. The main influence on their farming performance came from personal factors such as age, whether or not they had heirs that would continue farming, economic ambitions, education, and income from other jobs.

Bech Sørensen (2004, 361) points out that the farmer’s landscape of action in Estonia has a special background ‘formed out of the turbulence of political and economic transition and agricultural restructuring’ that has taken place since 1990. Equally crucial for understanding the landscapes of meaning and action are the long historical traditions that link Estonians to their land and also the fundamental transitions from landed estates and serfdom to freehold farming in the period 1919–1940 and the brutal Soviet collectivisation after 1945 (Peil 1999).

Legacies of the past

The Estonian rural landscape has been in part shaped by large production units such as manors, collective farms, and capitalist enterprises – and now in suburban areas real-estate companies. Small-scale farming has been seen as an ideal, but dominated rural land use only in the relatively short period 1919–1940.

The pre-1850 period was characterised by noblemen’s landed estates of manors and their associated villages. The majority of estate owners had been of German origin since the 13th century. Until 1816–1819, during the period of serfdom, these estates had also had social and administrative functions. Officially, communes (cald) became independent from the rule of the nobility in 1866, but the voices of the farmers and other local inhabitants were not listened to in local politics before the beginning of the 20th century. For many barons, their living environment was their first priority and they invested heavily in manor houses, parks, orchards, tree avenues, etc. (Fig. 4).

An Estonian national awakening started in the 1840s and the first newspapers and literature in the national language appeared. A main aim was to fight the cultural and economic dominance of the Baltic Germans rather than to demand independence from Russia. The intelligentsia and poets who are today commemorated as national icons praised the ‘homeland’, defined by typical Estonian settlement features and rural values. Attaining freeholds for farms...
was seen as a means of cementing the connection between the Estonians and the land and redeeming the ills of foreign rulers (Peil & Soova¨li 2005, 52). When the first Estonian republic was established in 1918, after the collapse of Russian tsarist rule, one of the first actions was to expropriate the 58% of the farmland still belonging to the nobility (Peil 1999, 36). The land reform of the 1920s aimed at creating farm units of at least 24 ha per household, of which half was to be arable (Peil 1999, 55). However, the land available was not sufficient to satisfy demand, and the result was many smaller units, particularly where the former tenant farmers lived in villages with limited agricultural land, such as on Vormsi (Fig. 5).

The freehold period dominated only from 1920 to 1940. By 1940, when 1.2 million people lived in Estonia, of which 60% lived in the countryside, there were almost 140,000 farms. Most farms were very small with 12 ha of arable land on average. However, especially in southern and central Estonia, there were also large well-mechanised (mostly) cattle-breeding farms using more than 50 ha of arable land. Rich farmers were in some areas called ‘grey barons’ (hallparun in Estonian) because of their large dwelling houses and luxurious lifestyle.

Collective and state farms were created by Soviet power mainly in 1949–1950. The total number of units decreased from the 1950s, when there were 2400 state and collective farms in Estonia, to 317 in 1988, when the system started to vanish. The collective farm period was accompanied by large-scale out-migration from rural areas and urbanisation of the population. Estonian rural areas lost their most active and productive population also because able farmers who had resisted collectivisation were deported to Siberia or killed. In the deportations of 1941 and 1949, more than 30,000 people were removed, a large proportion of them

![Fig. 4. Former manor, today a school in Abja-Paluoja, Abja Municipality (Photo: Arild Holt-Jensen 2007)](image)

![Fig. 5. Vormsi (Ormsö), showing location of woodland, arable land, villages, former Magnushev Manor, and the island centre at Hullo; note that ‘arable’ does not mean that this land is actively used for agricultural production](image)
involved in agriculture, resulting in a sharp decline in agricultural production in the 1940s and 1950s (Palang et al. 1999, 154).

Under communism, virtually all investments in production and in the social and cultural sphere in rural areas were made by the collective and state farms. They concentrated investments predominantly in their production centres. Large cattle or dairy farms and piggeries were set up, making demands on surrounding grassland and arable land. Usually such farm complexes included blocks of flats for housing workers within walking distance of the farm where they worked. Larger centres had also mechanical workshops, office buildings, canteens, and other functions supporting agricultural production. Enterprises and collective farms also took care of social infrastructure, such as schools, kindergartens and nurseries. When two or more collective farms merged, most investments were directed to the new centre, usually the strongest centre, leaving the former centres with their surrounding villages without the necessary level of services (Raagmäa & Kroon 2005).

Especially during the 1980s, extensive housing and production constructions considerably changed the appearance of the Estonian rural landscape. Many villages lost their functions as local centres (Raagmäa 2009). Collective farms were in some ways similar to manors: managed by powerful leaders, using local people as a workforce, and shaping and changing rural landscapes intensively.

Restitution, a political necessity with unforeseen consequences

When Estonia regained its independence in 1991 and re-established capitalist relations, one of the first acts was denationalisation of property:

Land restitution was to strengthen the bond between the people and the land, indicating that the ideal of the small farm had survived throughout the Soviet period. It was believed that there was a specific Estonian way of life, deeply connected with a rural lifestyle that has resulted in traditional landscapes. (Peil & Sooväli 2005, 53)

Peil & Sooväli (2005) and Peil (1999) discuss the role of rural landscapes for Estonian identity. They point out that rural landscapes traditionally have a central role in the national imagery; rurality and the narrative of the land have played important roles in Estonia’s imagination of the homeland. Although the rural land from medieval times onwards had been owned by ‘foreigners’, a nobility mainly of German ancestry, ethnic Estonians worked the land as serfs. The cities were to an even larger degree ruled and inhabited by ‘foreigners’. Compared to the ‘spatial satisfier’ farmers in Scandinavia, whose freedom of action was mainly framed by the spatial quality of the territory they commanded, along with the corporate rules of agricultural policies, the landscapes of action for Estonians were quite different. The territorial freedom was very limited under both the manorial system and the Soviet collectives; work was given and not chosen. The right to choose was new for the restitutees of the 1990s, but there was no significant support to be obtained from national agricultural policies or from local agricultural advisors. The physical farming landscapes, particularly derelict buildings from former periods, set problematic frames for agricultural production.

Restitution involved the return of property rights – or the granting of compensation for property lost – to pre-Soviet owners or their heirs whose land had been expropriated through nationalisation and collectivisation. The task of restitution included finding maps of land ownership prior to collectivisation and tracing the former owners or their heirs. In principle, heirs that lived outside the country had the same rights as those living in Estonia, but they needed to affirm interest in regaining property rights. When possible, this was followed by the return of the land in question, but in many cases compensation was given in the form of government vouchers or land elsewhere. This was the case if the land had been taken into use for, for instance, urban development or factories, and in cases where others had been given the possibility to set up a private house or single farm there in the Soviet era (Hedin 2005). Even if restitution was stated as a simple political aim, the policies carried out had to include many compromises. In some cases, single farm units of the 1930s have been divided up among heirs, making fragmentation even greater than in 1940 (Hedin 2005, 247). The speed of restitution was not rapid, as it could be delayed by several factors, such as individual differences in the paper-processing abilities of claimants and legal disputes among the descendants of the pre-war owners (Tammuru et al. 2007, 425). It was important for Estonia to signal that, because the country de jure had not ceased to exist after the Soviet takeover, nobody who had had property and citizenship in 1940 had legally lost these. For example, the c.7000 Swedish Estonians who had fled to Sweden during World War II had the right to have their properties returned to them.

According to Kuddo (1996, 167), Estonia chose the most complicated way of restitution, taking justice into consideration but leaving aside economic, technical, and other practical considerations. Dividing collective and state farm property among the heirs of former owners, most of whom were living in cities, caused the destruction of economic units. Farms were left out of use, and cattle were slaughtered.

Small-scale farming had not disappeared entirely during the era of collective and state farms. People had used their small garden plots – 0.6 ha for collective farm workers and 0.25 ha for state farm workers – which were extended by partly illegal land use (e.g. for grazing) in order to generate extra income. This activity was supported by a new Soviet state policy in the 1980s. Facing shortage of foodstuffs, the Soviet regime allowed private producers to sell their products and supported this by a heavily subsidised state procurement system. For instance, payment to small producers for milk was close to the retail milk price, and salaries in agriculture were increased to levels higher than those in manufacturing (Marksoo 1984; Leetma & Tammraru 2007). As a result, hundreds of farmers’ sons and daughters living in urban areas moved to the countryside and invested their savings in agriculture. Farming seemed to offer good opportunities for a better life. Many private farmers were prepared for new institutional frameworks after restitution
and accepted changes optimistically. However, by the end of the 1990s, most farms with fewer than 10 ha of arable land had turned to subsistence production because the Estonian agricultural policy did not support small-scale farming. As a result, the number of agricultural holdings dropped rapidly during the 2000s (Table 1).

The restituents that took over the land and farms of their forefathers encountered many problems in starting agricultural production. The old farm buildings were generally in ruins or unserviceable and the collective farm buildings inappropriate for the restituted farms. A proactive agricultural policy from the government, including state loans and support for agricultural investments, did not materialise. The successive Estonian governments of the 1990s implemented a liberalistic shock therapy with very limited agricultural and rural infrastructure subsidies.

Enthusiasm over private farm re-establishment, resulting from restitutions at the beginning of the 1990s, lasted just a few years and was replaced by deep rural recession lasting more than 10 years. Restitution created tens of thousands of owners, many living in cities with no qualifications necessary for managing agriculture, forestry, or fisheries. A solution for many was to sell or rent out their arable land. On the other hand, many collective farm workers lost their jobs as they had no inheritance rights. Table 1 shows the number of agricultural holdings by size classes and the change between 2001 and 2007. The transition from small to large units has been dramatic during recent years, and there is now a slight increase in the agricultural land, although not making up for the loss in the 1990s.

Large agro-firms started to be established in the mid-1990s. Small family farms could not compete with the new productive and effective capitalist enterprises. When Estonia joined the EU in 2004 and the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy came into effect, large enterprises increased their profitability and competitiveness. These enterprises focused mainly on production and efficiency without much regard for landscape consequences. Due to their higher technological and organisational efficiency, they released a majority of workers formerly employed by the collective farms, causing unemployment and out-migration. Consequently, remotely located farmhouses and many blocks of flats on the former collectives have been abandoned.

Farmlands close to the cities have often been sold to real estate developers and divided into 1000 m² plots for the construction of new housing estates (Samarüütel et al. 2010). In many rural suburbanising areas, one can find ‘wounded landscapes’, where agricultural land use has ceased while new suburban land use is not completed. On abandoned agricultural fields there are scattered small groups of houses, unfinished construction sites, and speculator-owned overgrown plots with ‘for sale’ signs.

Restitution in west and north-west Estonia

Existing literature has discussed the effects of restitution in west and north-west Estonia. One special group of restituents were the Swedish Estonians. A number of studies have been carried out in ‘Swedish Estonia’ by Swedish academics, for instance Göran Hoppe (1993; 2000), Sigrid Hedin (2003; 2005), and Ann Grubbström (2003; 2004). Before World War II, c. 7000 citizens of Swedish ethnicity were settled in rural areas, particularly on the islands of Vormsi (Ormsö in Swedish), Pakri (Rågörne), Naisaar (Nargö), Osmussaar (Odensholm) and the peninsula of Noarootsi (Nuckö) in the north-west and the island of Ruhnu (Runö) in the Gulf of Riga (Fig. 1 in Holt-Jensen 2010, 128 – this issue). The Swedish community had existed for many hundreds of years, just as the Swedish settlements in Finland. However, in 1944 almost the whole Swedish population escaped in boats to Sweden and were integrated into Swedish society. By restitution, however, they were given the possibility to reclaim the land that their forefathers owned in 1940.

A personal account by one of the returning Estonian Swedes is that of Sven Svärd (2007), who had to leave Vormsi for Sweden as a boy in 1944 and was able to return home to his native island in the 1990s. He tells a family story covering many generations, with a focus on life on the island in the 1930s, particularly his home village, called Keršleti in Estonian and Kärsslät in Swedish (Fig. 5). Vormsi had a Swedish-speaking population from the 13th century until 1944. The population lived in twelve villages in which the farmers tilled the land in a communal system. Each field was divided into a number of small plots for the village farmers, and fishing was as important for survival as agriculture. Swedish rule from 1561 did not benefit the village farmers, and fishing was as important for survival as agriculture. Swedish rule from 1561 did not benefit the early freeholders, as the island was given to one of the military leaders. One of the villages was destroyed and Magnushov Manor established (Fig. 5). The village farmers became serfs with corvée duties at the manor. In the 18th century the family of Baron von Stackelberg owned the manor and the villages. Finally, the rule of the barons was broken and the farmers became freeholders, but the farms in the villages were small and further subdivisions reduced their viability.

Table 1. Agricultural units in Estonia by size classes, 2001–2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0–1 ha</th>
<th>1–2 ha</th>
<th>2–5 ha</th>
<th>5–10 ha</th>
<th>10–20 ha</th>
<th>20–30 ha</th>
<th>30–50 ha</th>
<th>50–100 ha</th>
<th>&gt; 100 ha</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of holdings</strong></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>14,047</td>
<td>16,516</td>
<td>10,791</td>
<td>7715</td>
<td>2512</td>
<td>1687</td>
<td>962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Change 2001–2007</strong></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>14,047</td>
<td>16,516</td>
<td>10,791</td>
<td>7715</td>
<td>2512</td>
<td>1687</td>
<td>962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agricultural land (ha)</strong></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>19,607</td>
<td>52,567</td>
<td>76,161</td>
<td>107,177</td>
<td>60,482</td>
<td>64,063</td>
<td>65,667</td>
<td>425,262</td>
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Source: Statistics Estonia 2010
In the 1930s the c.300 inhabitants of Kärrslätt village combined small-scale farming with fishery and seamanship. The population of Vormsi was more than 2500 in 1934. After the exodus of the Swedish Estonians in 1944, the population in 1945 was 912, mostly Estonian speaking (Palang et al. 1999, 158). In the 1990s the properties in Kärrslätt were restituted to those interested. However, it is impossible to live from the small farms in the village, with buildings often in ruins, and most of the restitutees have much better incomes in Sweden. Many have, however, returned to set up summer cottages and some new activities and businesses have been established (Figs. 6 and 7). The collective farm buildings on the island are falling apart. The population of the whole island of Vormsi is now c.300. The majority are Estonian speaking, often catering for Swedish tourists and summer-home owners. The former pasture land has become thickly overgrown with juniper bushes and is transforming into forest. Only small parts of the land are in agricultural use.

Tiina Peil (1999) has made detailed studies of some of the small Estonian islands: Osmussar, Rammu, Kessulaid, Vilsandi, and the very small islands Keri and Harilaid. Each of the islands had between 60 and 170 inhabitants in the 1930s, but they were depopulated in the Soviet period to make way for military installations and control. The long settlement history up until 1944 had created a traditional farmer-fisher landscape. The farms on Osmussar and Vilsandi typically had 20–30 ha of land, of which half was pasture, including communal pasture, and only 2–3 ha arable. During the five decades of Soviet rule, new military settlements replaced the villages and the former inhabitants were denied admission. Those returning in the 1990s had problems recognising old landmarks. Although they had been prepared to see great differences, the extent of the difference was still unexpected: ‘The islands were primarily characterised by signs of wilderness and abandonment where once orderliness and activity had reigned’ (Peil 1999, 234). Could restitution be an option? The old generation of former islanders, interviewed by Peil, had realised that the past lifestyle could not be revived; members of the younger generation was happy to accompany those of older generations there for a week in the summer, but launching some project there on their own seemed ‘intangible and impractical’ (Peil 1999, 231). The islands studied by Peil (1999) are small and special cases. However, the situation reflects to some extent that on Vormsi. There is no possibility that restitutees will restore the small-scale farming of the 1930s. The only possibility lies in summer house development and some tourist activities. At best, some of the land can be rented to larger contractors for grain or grass production.

Two other recent case studies of agricultural reform and land restitution in Estonia, both covering the period from the mid-19th century to the beginning of the 21st century, are Hellström’s study (2002) of the farming landscapes of Hiiumaa and Maandi’s analysis (2005) of land reforms and landscape change in Rapla and Muhu municipalities.

Methodological approach

The present article presents the results of empirical case studies in three municipalities in Pärnumaa County, covering the former collective farms in Sauga and Surju municipalities and the three former collective farms in Tori Municipality. The methods used were field observations, analysis of land use based on air and satellite photos, and interviews with farmers and local authority representatives in Sauga, Surju and Tori municipalities and in the Pärnumaa County administration. Sauga was chosen as a suburban municipality in which a large part of the agricultural area was not used. Surju was selected to represent the case of a collective farm that has been continued as an agrobusiness. Tori was chosen as a municipality with good agricultural land, extensive restitution, and the initial establishment of a number of private farming units. Tori is also so far from Pärnu town that it is not affected by urban sprawl.

The first study, undertaken in 2006, was based on interviews with six informants in Surju and Sauga, one in Pärnumaa county administration, and one with the head of the board of Pärnu Agricultural Union. The second study,
undertaken in 2007, conducted interviews with seven informants in Tori and a consultant at the office of the Estonian Agricultural Registers and Information Board (PRIA) in Pärnu. In June 2009 further interviews were carried out with two farmers in Sauga and the leader of Surju Farm and land use was registered in both municipalities. Mapping and interviews with farmers and the local authority agricultural officer of Tori were undertaken in summer 2009.

The case studies in Pärnumaa
It has been pointed out by Peil (1999), Julegina (2007) and others that, since the implementation of restitution and a free market economy, national Estonian policies have not engaged to any large degree with agricultural policies and land-use planning. This contrasts with the policies in the 1920s, when co-operative credit unions, commodity co-operatives, farmers’ purchasing units, and other co-operative movements and programmes for land reclamation were established (Peil 1999, 55).

Sauga Municipality (Fig. 8) (165 km², population c.4000 in 2010 (Statistics Estonia 2010)) is the northern neighbour to Pärnu town, but settlement and road connections are confined to the eastern and western margins as the large Rääma bog covers a large area in the southern part of Sauga (Fig. 8). In the 1980s, Sauga had two large collective farm units. One was a large piggery close to the main road to

Fig. 8. Sauga, showing owned and rented areas of the two production units of the interviewed active farmers. Most of the ‘white’ areas within the municipality comprise arable land not in use.
Tallinn, while the other was a state farm tilling all the arable land in Sauga Municipality and with production units in the villages of Urge and Kõllaksama for dairy products and meat. Restitution provided property for more than 300 restitutees, 23 of whom took over the pig-breeding unit that formerly delivered more than 40,000 hogs for slaughter every year. Most of this large unit is now in ruins; there is a small workshop in one building, but otherwise equipment has been sold as scrap (Fig. 2). The farmland and buildings of the cattle-breeding units are largely abandoned; the municipal informant stated that less than 20% of the agricultural area used in 1989 was in agricultural production today. The restitutees can be divided into three groups: a few that till their own land and in addition may rent land; those that rent out their land; and whose land is disused and who hope to sell it for housing or to industrial developers. The latter group is the largest and dominates in the western and south-eastern parts of Sauga, which are close to Pärnu town and have some possibility for housing and industrial development. Urban sprawl is a new landscape feature here. However, the greater part of the abandoned land will never be attractive for development other than agriculture. The informants complained that many restitutees ought to rent out their land, but had too high expectations about the rent that they could receive. Only two farmers in Sauga could be regarded as professionals, operating units large enough to be able to live from agriculture. The land owned and rented by these two production units is shown in Fig. 8.

Farmer 1 was educated as an agronomist and bought a farm from a restitute close to the abandoned pig-breeding collective. All of the agricultural land around his well-tilled farmland was overgrown with shrubs. The farmer owned 104 ha and in addition used 88 ha of state land and rented 14 ha from restitutees. There were no usable outhouses on the unit and the old dwelling house from 1939 was in a very poor state. The dwelling house has been rehabilitated, but animals cannot be kept due to the lack of suitable outbuildings. Instead, ensilage, rapé, grains, and potatoes are produced.

Farmer 2, whose farm lies in the north-eastern part of Sauga, stated that it was necessary to have at least 300 ha of land to survive as farmer in Estonia. He owned 63 ha and rented 240 ha from 20 other restitutees. A major problem for this farmer was that there were no usable farm buildings on the restituted land. Investments had to be made in a new dwelling, buildings for machinery, and a grain elevator. The land he tilled would be most suitable for animal husbandry, but he could not take the chance of making the large investment needed for a cow barn. Therefore, production had to be limited to growing grains and rapé, which had the advantage that extra farm hands were not needed. The farmer maintained that the main problems were security for needed capital investments and the long-term predictability of the EU’s and national agricultural policies.

The situation in Surju (Fig. 9) (358 km², population c.1100 (Statistics Estonia 2010)) is quite different from that in Sauga. In the Soviet period, all of the arable land belonged to one large collective farm, which was surrounded by forests and mires mainly in state ownership. The collective farm was centred on quite modern building complexes, including a barn for 1000 dairy cattle. The landscape has not changed much since 1991; only 15% of the arable land has been abandoned and farming is still practised in one unit, using the cowsheds of the former collective farm along with some new ones (Fig. 10). The present director of the large production unit that is now Surju Farm informed that it utilised 1300 ha, of which 800 ha were grazed land, and that the number of cattle was c.1000, the same as in the 1980s; 80% of the income came from the sale of milk. The first years after 1991 were very problematic, when the price of milk was extremely low due to the loss of the Russian market and the collective was supposed to be divided between 260 restitutees. A dispute ensued between the former leaders of the collective and the restitutees. Many of the latter were proud to regain the land of their forefathers and wanted to retain it. On the other hand, the local workers at the former collective wanted to keep their workplace and the leaders felt they had an obligation to the local community to provide employment. In the end, some owners were bought out, while the large majority rented their land out to Surju Farm and some of them found work in the large unit. Only four restitutees decided to keep the land for themselves. Farming has been abandoned on two of these small units.

It has been possible to modernise and rationalise production. In the Soviet period the collective had 230 workers; in 2009 there were only 42 workers. Surju Farm is, however, a good example of a locally owned agrobusiness that has the possibility of surviving. In 2009 the problem was falling milk prices due to competition from other European countries. The animal-breeding seemed effective, but fodder production was limited, mainly concentrating on hay, ensilage and pasturing; grains and other energy-rich fodder were bought. Surju is located 20 km farther away from Pärnu than Sauga and there has been no particular interest from developers in suburban housing projects. This has made it easier to persuade restitutees that their only option of land use would be agriculture.

Tori Municipality (281 km², population c.2500 (Statistics Estonia 2010)) is located even farther from Pärnu than Surju, on the main road to Paide and Rakvere. In Tori there were first three large collective farms, Tori, Selja and Jõesuu/Vihtra. In 1989 Jõesuu/Vihtra was divided and the part that was located in Vändra Municipality became Vihtra collective. The key informant interviewed in 2007 maintained that the first part of the 1990s was a period of confusion. All, including proved heirs of owners from before 1940, had to send in an application to regain their land back or to obtain compensation. In this process applicants that had worked on the collective farms were given priority over those that no longer had any local connection, thus avoiding the problems of absentee owners. Although the restitution process started in 1991, the map registration only started in 1993. From 1996 the privatisation process speeded up, but forests, which in Tori form a patchwork dividing up the agricultural land, were as a rule kept in state ownership.

A tradition of breeding horses in Tori dates back to 1856 (Fig. 11). This was originally connected to an old manor, and some of the stone buildings of the manor still survive.
Horse-breeding continued in the Soviet period and the horse-breeding station and animals were owned by the Estonian state until 1993. Then a private company took over responsibility for the animal breeding, but land and buildings still belong to the state. Some land is also rented from restitutees (Fig. 12). This production unit is relatively concentrated around the breeding station. The informants at the horse-breeding station stated that this was not a lucrative business, but maintained that it was a national obligation to preserve the attractive breed of horses. The breeding of Tori horses is an example of traditions that have survived through dramatic shifts in Estonian agriculture.

During the process of restitution, more than 10,500 ha of agricultural land in Tori were divided into almost 2400 cadastral units. However, in 2009, only seven farmers earned their living from agriculture. Most of the arable land used in Soviet times was still tilled. Only a few plots of land close to Pärnu and Tori centre had been taken over by speculative real-estate development. Those owners that did not use their land rented it out to the active farm units. A major problem after restitution was how to utilise the large production buildings of the former collective farms. A solution has been found for a large pig-breeding building, which has been completely rebuilt by a Danish-owned window and door factory. This started in 1999 and by 2009 the factory was the largest employer in Tori, with 110 workers. The farmland belonging to this unit was rented out to a farmer who used it for grain production.

Fig. 9. Surju Municipality
Most of the agricultural land of former Surju Collective Farm is now tilled by Surju Farm, but the major part of this production unit is rented from restitutees; the forests are mainly in state ownership, the Pärnu-Riga railway line crosses the north-western part of Surju
Mapping of the present property structure in Tori was carried out in summer 2009 and interviews were held with managers of three production units: Piistaoja Farm, Selja Farm and Ritsu Farm. Piistaoja Farm (formerly part of Selja collective) is owned by the University of Life Sciences in Tartu. Piistaoja Farm has expanded its activities from Tori to neighbouring Va¨ndra Municipality. In 2009, it had 899 ha of arable land, of which 160 ha were owned (18%), plus an additional 16 ha of forest. This production unit had 350 dairy cows and also kept young cattle. They were using the newest, highly productive farming technology and therefore employed only 25 workers.

Selja Farm, the successor to the former Selja collective and now owned by a partnership, had 1734 ha of arable land in 2009, in three municipalities: Tori, Are and Va ¨ndra. Of this, 230 ha were owned (13%), along with 10 ha of forest. The distance between the different parts of this production unit is more than 30 km. It had 650 dairy cows and 550 cattle, and employed 60 workers. The partnership has succeeded in continuing the production of the former collective and provides jobs for local people.

Ritsu Farm is in private (family) ownership and had 625 ha of arable land, of which 200 ha were owned (31%), plus 200 ha of forest (interview with the owner, autumn 2009). It did not have livestock and the main production was grain. As the land of this production unit was scattered, animal husbandry would have been complicated. Nature tourism (canoeing, hiking, camping, and catering) and forestry are important side activities. Apart from the owner, this production unit employed only two workers and a few extra people seasonally. The young owner told that he had acquired his grandfather’s place as restitutee and had started farming at a very young age without having any special education. He was happy about the CAP subsidies, which allow profitability and the possibility to obtain necessary productive machinery.

As in Sauga and Surju, a major part of the farmland of each production unit in Tori was rented. The production units’ land in Tori was spread in different parts of the municipality, and in addition they rented land in neighbouring municipalities. Fig. 12 shows the arable land in the central parts of Tori used by the four production units described. Only two of these have their land relatively concentrated in one area in Tori. The horse-breeding station has a relatively limited area. The land belonging to Selja Farm is concentrated where the collective was, but this unit also utilises agricultural land outside Tori and a major part of the land is rented from restitutees. The land used by the other two production units, a large part of which is rented, is dispersed throughout the municipality as well as in Va¨ndra Municipality to the north of Tori and Are to the west. Such a situation creates practical problems concerning the transport of machinery and products.

As we have not carried out investigations in other municipalities, we cannot document that the areal fragmentation of production units is a general feature, but there is reason to believe that it is widespread in the light of the increasing size of production units documented in Table 1. According to representatives of Tori municipal administration, Estonia now needs a new land redistribution law in order to consolidate the land of each production unit. This is, however, quite complicated as long as a large part of each unit is rented rather than owned.

Conclusions

The case studies in Surju, Sauga and Tori confirm that the historical legacies of large production units such as manors and collective farms are now followed by capitalist enterprises. Even the few relatively large family farms in Sauga and Tori have problems of survival and they fear absorption by large foreign agribusinesses, particularly of the rented land they depend on. This threat has probably become more likely in the economic recession that started in 2008. The current effects of the EU agricultural policies are working in the same direction; most farmers interviewed stated that applications for agricultural support were complicated and in reality only open to large producers. In addition, long-term predictability of financial support and loan conditions is a particular problem for
Estonian farmers as in most cases all machinery and buildings have to be completely renewed.

The restructuring and restitution adopted by the Estonian Government in the 1990s has had profound effects on the cultural landscape and agricultural development. Primarily, it has meant the abandonment of collective farm buildings, even those that were relatively modern. In Surju and Tori, however, it has been possible to utilise buildings of former collective production units. In Tori most of the farmland is in agricultural use, but production is in general lower than it could be, partly as individual production units do not have the resources to build the appropriate new barns and buy new equipment.

The Sauga, Surju and Tori cases differ from the case of agricultural recession and landscape change in the former Swedish-speaking areas of Estonia, such as Vormsi. On Vormsi the arable land is cut for hay only to a very limited extent, and pastures have mostly become overgrown by juniper scrub and encroaching forests. On the other hand, new activity has come in the form of summer houses and

Fig. 12. The central parts of Tori Municipality showing agricultural land owned and rented by four active production units (forests and bogs not shown); production units: 1 The horse-breeding station, 2 Selja Farm, 3 Piistaoja Farm, 4: Ritsu Farm
protected heritage farms. The local situation is special as the original farms were very small and agricultural land was scattered in small villages. It was not possible for restitutees to re-establish farming, but they wished to retain the links to the land of their forefathers. The establishment of summer houses has brought new, and maybe the only possible, activity to the island.

New speculative land-use patterns as a result of urban sprawl are also a clear consequence of the restitution. Restitutees whose land lay in the vicinity of towns preferred in many cases to wait for a private developer to buy the land for industrial or housing purposes rather than to make the necessary investments in farming. This is clearly a major factor in the overgrowing of arable land in the western parts of Sauga and also in many other suburban municipalities. Restitution of agricultural land was a political necessity in the 1990s, but in hindsight it was not wise in relation to landscape development and agricultural production.

From this limited material we can make some tentative conclusions:

- Small restituted farms cannot in general survive as profitable production units under the present agricultural regime. Exceptions may be units converted to greenhouse and specialised horticultural production. Some small units can also survive as tourist establishments or as second homes, and the landscape can be maintained.
- Where new large production units are formed, agricultural production and the landscape can be sustained. However, as demonstrated by the selected production units in Tori and Sauga, they are also vulnerable because a major part of the land is rented and the production areas are fragmented, resulting in long distances for the transport of products and machinery.
- The structural implications of the EU’s agricultural support favour large units. Most of the interviewees mentioned that the application forms for obtaining support were complicated, and they also feared that the policy could change over time. As all were producing on a small economic margin, predictability was a major concern.
- Urban sprawl and the hope of earning money without bothering to start agricultural production have led many restitutees in the vicinity of towns to wait for developers of housing and industrial areas. As witnessed by the situation in Sauga, this has led to good productive land becoming overgrown by scrub. Some developers that have bought land for housing, which is not possible to sell in the present recession, try to rent out the land to people who can at least cut the grass to stop the invasion of scrub and forest.

Returning to the concept landscape of action (Bladh 1995), our case studies demonstrate the importance of individual actions and preferences. This is most clearly demonstrated by the leadership of Surju Collective Farm, which led to continuation of this production unit as Surju Farm, retaining the knowledge basis of the farm workers in milk production. Personal motivation and knowledge were also clearly demonstrated in all of the interviews held with the active farmers, and to a large extent this explains the choice of production forms.

Notes

1 Initial data for this article were provided by two unpublished BA reports from the Department of Geography, University of Bergen: 1) A. Bergstrøm, S. Kvitvold & M.K. Persson (2007) ‘Jordbruk i Tori – før og nå’ (GEO 292 Regionalgeografisk feltskurs). 2) K.S. Hauge, M. Haukås & S. Sandvik (2006) ‘Estland gror att. Eit feltarbad om restrukturering av jordbruk’ (GEO 286 Regionalgeografisk feltskurs). Further investigations were carried out in summer 2009 by the authors to provide maps of the property changes in Tori, Sauga and Surju.

2 Pöllumajanduse Registrit ja Informatsiooni Amet.

Acknowledgements – This paper was supported by the Target Funding Project No. SF0180052s07 ‘Factors influencing spatial mobility of population and the impact on the regional development’ of the Ministry of Education and Science of Estonia.

Manuscript submitted 29 May 2009; accepted 5 May 2010

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