

Partnership of organic farming, eco-tourism and wilderness conservation – experiences of the pilot project 'New Thracian Gold' in Bulgaria

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Author's Background

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Summary

The 'New Thracian Gold' project is working in the Eastern Rhodope (ER) region of Bulgaria to alleviate migration and rural stagnation by establishing and testing a pilot model of partnership of partnership between organic agriculture, ecotourism and wilderness conservation. First results shows increasing number of certified organic farms, combined with local eco-tourism, new markets and increasing annual income of rural population.

Background

The 'New Thracian Gold' (NTG) is a project of the Dutch foundations ARK and Avalon. From 2009 till 2014, they work together with Bulgarian partners and experts on establishing and testing a pilot model for partnership between organic agriculture (OA), ecotourism and wilderness conservation in the Eastern Rhodope mountain of Bulgaria. Long-term goal is to create a new landscape with a new type of economy. An economy based on sustainable farming and tourism combined with the development of complete natural ecosystems (see Fig.1 below). In future, people and nature live in harmony and benefit from each other. In 2014, a better development of various organic farms in the region is foreseen. The farms that are producing and selling local organic products, in parallel with providing more opportunities for tourist to stay and to spend time for leisure in the region and see an appealing wilderness features.

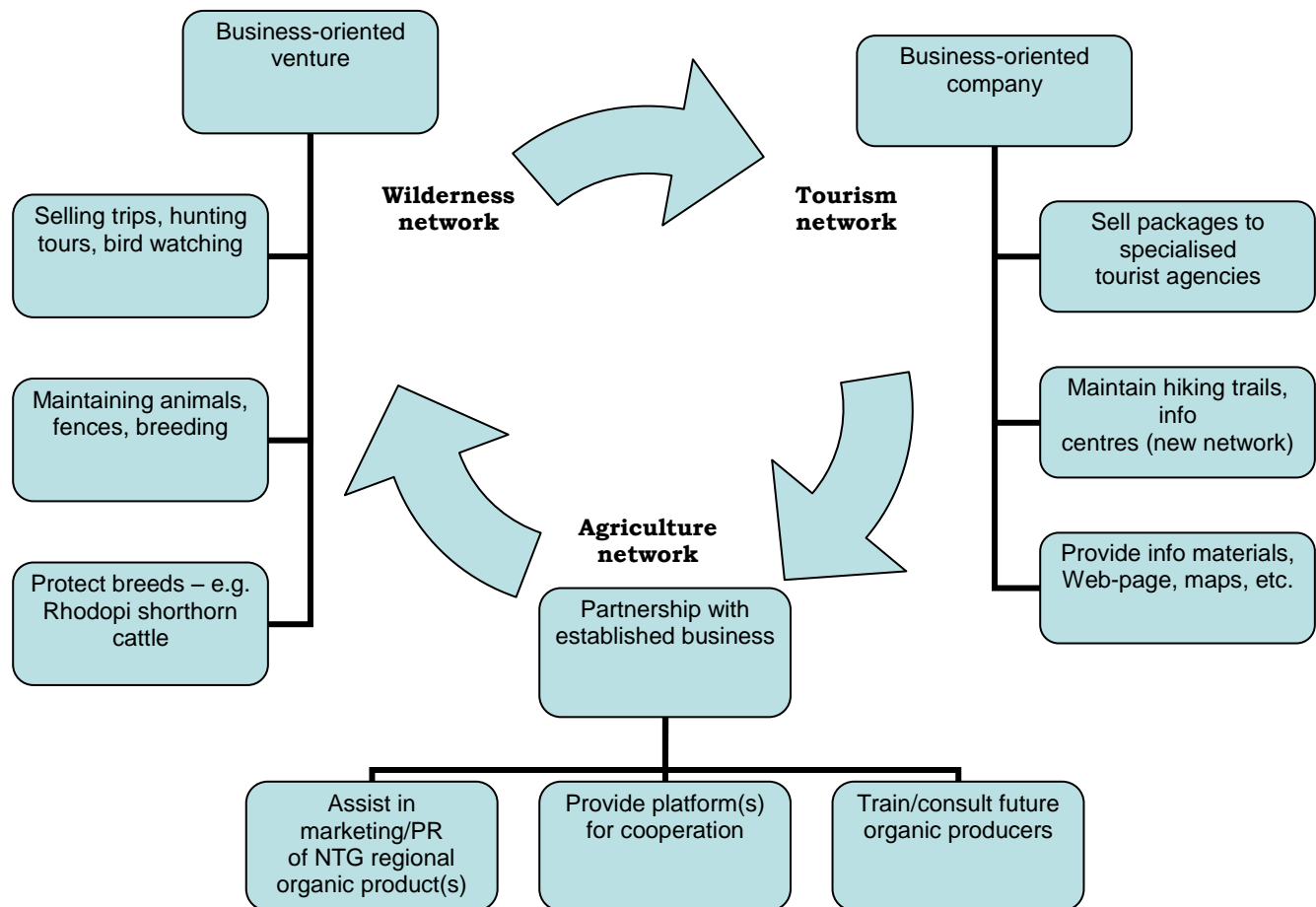


Figure 1 The pilot model of partnership of organic farming, sustainable tourism and wilderness conservation that the NTG is testing by setting up and running business-oriented networks at a regional scale.

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All the work is done in cooperation with local farmers, entrepreneurs, municipalities and organisations. The NTG vision and approach shift from traditional, i.e. nature conservation and economic development are conflicting, to the modern one, i.e. the two can go hand in hand.

Why there is a need for such approaches to marginal rural areas?

1. By reintroduction of indigenous and resistant local breeds of cattle (Rhodopi Shorthorn) and sheep (Karakachan), and wild animals (e.g. horses, red deer, etc.), the NTG wants to restore natural grazing on larger areas. In this way, the NTG practically demonstrates that more animals can maintain the rich biodiversity on the natural grasslands, to prevent grasslands from cultivation and use for intensive agricultural, and to convert them into sustainable business (e.g. 'wilderness meat').
2. Migration from rural areas to cities increases every year thus creating depopulated villages and towns in Eastern Rhodope mountain region. Young families and local communities do not adopt easily the alternatives to tobacco/grain cropping and small-scale animal husbandry. Organic farming, producing tasty traditional food and combined with local guest-houses upgraded to the EU standards, may offer additional (higher) income for local families thus attracting them to stay at rural areas.
3. In the Eastern Rhodopes, agricultural practices are often not sustainable and driven by desire to cultivate more hectares of land for producing high volumes of cereals, alfalfa, vegetables or fruits. The local soils are depleted on nutrients, the yields are low and therefore farmers cannot secure sufficient income for reinvestments, e.g. in new machinery, new inputs (bio-pesticides and fertilisers) or small-scale adding-value processing facilities. Organic agriculture practices promoted by the NTG project aim to provide extra financing to farmers by benefiting from EU subsidies (i.e. Rural Development Plan 2007-2014) as well as by stimulating farmers to setup local marketing cooperatives and by connecting them with processors and retailers interested of buying new organic foodstuffs from a 'region with traditions'.

One of the project objectives was to achieve better income of the local population through "2.6) *One model cooperation has been established and at least one product will be processed before being sold.*"

Theory and practice show that in Bulgaria a number of obstacles and complications preclude the larger development of a new type 'marketing cooperatives', e.g. for about 50 years Bulgarian rural population did not have access to private land, where individual farmers could apply best management practices and aim at better farm income. During this period, land, machines and other production inputs were a 'common property' of workers in state cooperatives, who were taking little care for productivity, stability and environmental sustainability of local agroecosystems. Since 2007, when Rural Development Programme started to develop in Bulgaria, the measure 141 of this programme aims at supporting local farmer cooperatives. However, up-to-date the measure has financed only 1 project.

So far, a number of problems and obstacles were identified by the BG organic team during the 3 years of NTG project work in the ER region:

- **Production:** still small number of certified producers working in the ER region; it complicates the target to achieve 'the effect of scale' – bigger volume of organic produce will generate better prices and more secured market; they have low motivation to produce organically as they do not see secure market and good prices; most of them have wishful expectations that the NTG grants are only way to sustain or be a motivation to continue farm organically.
- **Marketing:** sales are done individually, usually based on best-price-offered, regional and national demand for organic products is still low.
- **Administrative:** insufficient coordination between the five target municipalities in streamlining organic agriculture in ER; insufficient administrative capacity of local agricultural officers which reflects in farmers' low motivation to apply for subsidies;
- **Experience and know-how basis:** farmers not well informed about organic practices, about national and EU financial support and possibilities to apply for subsidies; small-size initiatives for cooperating producers failed (e.g. GTZ project with Regional Agricultural Advisory Service-Kardzhali)
- **Consultancy services:** insufficient capacity to advice and train in organic practices, missing links with processors and traders to facilitate market for producers.

In spite of the above-mentioned problems, some promising trends appear at regional Eastern Rhodopes, such as:

- significant interest to the NTG project as shown by the increasing number of producers and landowners attending the NTG Information days, seminars and training courses.
- about 35 new producers have entered into conversion to organic farming and livestock breeding
- relatively stable interest to cooperate (in formal and informal producer and processor groups) locally and with the NTG project
- increasing interest by local municipalities, forest agencies, fellow NGOs (e.g. "Academia BG", Bulgarian Society for Bird protection), business (e.g. processing in Sofia and Plovdiv, 'Bio-Bulgaria' and 'Zelena zemia' – Sofia, etc.).

- significant community and media interest to the NTG organic farming initiatives.

Major results

Cooperation initiatives and activities

The OA component of NTG project was working in conjunction with a plan of activities that was adopted annually in collaboration with Focus group from the 5 target municipalities in the ER. The NTG intensified agro-technical practices and soil cultivation, provided 'green' technologies involving modern bio-pesticides and fertilisers or manure composting (e.g. from Californian earthworms), new resistant plant varieties and seeds, etc. Because organic agriculture requires specific agroecological knowledge, know-how and management skills often more complex than those in conventional farming, the NTG employed an adaptive step-wise approach involving the following approach:

- inform, educate and train the OA stakeholders (producers, processors, traders) in agro-technical production, processing and storing methods and techniques (Fig.2).
- provide advice to the stakeholders on-the-spot and through NTG external experts
- assist the stakeholders to obtain organic certification
- identify most prospective products, farms, and producer groups in order to provide financial and know-how support and increase further the critical mass of ER producers and organic produce (i.e. effect of scale)
- work with identified producer groups to establish marketing cooperative(s), add value to organic produce, improve marketing and establish/promote regional NTG organic products (Fig.2).

In addition, a number of prospective local ER organic produce were identified, such as:

- **group (cooperative) produce:** grape (vineyards) and wine; sesame (tahini paste) and cereals

- **individual produce:** organic honey, herbs and spices, fruits and vegetables, nuts (cultivated and wild), meat from organic (or) free-range grazing livestock, alfalfa (fresh and hay).



Figure 2 Training courses and consultancy for organic herb producers in ER (left) and presentation of final organic produce (wine) at regional agricultural fairs.

1. Agro-technical basis and improving production

Private organic and in-conversion farmers complained about the lack of investment power to achieve better crop yields and better quality of produce. In addition, a preliminary soil survey in 17 farms and locations in the ER region confirmed expectations of problems related to insufficient nutrients and poorly structured soils. The NTG organic management responded to farmer's request for help by investing in a number of machines (Table 1 above) and equipment to be used commonly in order to facilitate better yields and quality of produce:

- The farmers' group in Ivaylovgrad received agricultural machines for correct sowing of grain and sesame seeds (yield improving), to cope against the weeds (as chemical fertilizers are prohibited; quality improving), and combiner (harvester) (quality improving).
- The farmers' group in Stambolovo region received agricultural machines and equipment for growing grapes, i.e. tractor and respective equipment for weed control (shredder, mulcher), for soil deep cultivation and application of organic fertilizers, and for application (spraying) of bio-pesticides.

2. Processing of row produce and adding value

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The NTG organic management responded to farmer's request for help by investing in new and used machines (Table 1 above) and equipment for common use in order to add value to row produce:

- The farmers' group in Ivaylovgrad received equipment for processing of sesame to tahini (i.e. baking and milling).
- The farmers' group in Rabovo received machine for sieving and complete line for processing of organic grain.

3. Marketing the common types of organic produce

The NTG organic management made significant efforts to establish connections and promote existing and future organic produce. NTG organic producers receive regular technical assistance and information on places and companies that are ready to buy their produce, also through the NTG web-page.

4. Know-how and information

- Distributing books, brochures and technical handouts on target crops and foods, e.g. sesame and tahini, grapes and wine, cereals and flower (bread), herbs and spices, plant protection, etc.
- Facilitating help by machine and equipment suppliers to NTG organic producers in order to acquire the necessary skills of operation.
- Regular NTG web-page update on where to market organic produce, which organic farms and ER guest-houses to visit, etc. that creates opportunities to exchange experience between guest-house owners and farmers.

As a result, more than 320 producers were educated and trained in organic farming by the NTG experts during 14 training events. Five manuals on organic principles and practices, herb production, plant protection, marketing, cooperation, agro-biodiversity monitoring and application for subsidies were published and used for training. Seventeen farmers and processors were financially supported by the NTG through an organic certification scheme that covered 50% of the certification costs for 2011. Two demonstration organic farms were established in the NTG target area and used for education and training of the NTG target farmers.

In 2009, the NTG began with 7 certified producers. Currently, more than 45 organic or in-conversion producers and processors form a network that share knowledge, experience, know-how and market channels, and by common use of agricultural machinery and equipment, animal fodder, etc. They jointly promote organic agriculture and their regional products through participating in a numerous media events, conferences, fairs, exhibitions, open days, Internet web-pages, etc.

The NTG adopted a strategy to provide machines and equipment only to those most committed group of farmers, which were ready to cooperate (i.e. establishing and running marketing cooperatives). First results are encouraging, e.g. 4 types of local NTG-branded wine by 4 organic grape producers (wines are already winning prizes at the International Exhibition Foodtech & Vinaria 2012 and 2013), increased land under organic cereals (incl. einkorn) thus establishing biodiversity-saving crop rotations and creating better marketing opportunities, setup and running a small sesame-processing factory in Ivaylovgrad area and first attempt to demonstrate advantages of added-value product such as tahini, formation of small line for traditional wheat flower production in Rabovo area, etc. In parallel, the NTG organic farmers realise the effect of added-value activities in order to stay competitive and increase annual income. Such activities include provision of tourist services (e.g. bed & breakfast, guest-house, small hotel or restaurant) or local attractions (e.g. farm tour, 'road of bread', 'road of wine' or 'road of milk'), or tasting local traditional food (offering local menu based on the NTG Culinary Guide, demonstration of cooking).

The entire movement and partnership intensify the eco- and rural tourism in the ER, e.g. the NTG organic Model-farm in Gorno pole village managed to increase the occupancy of the small eco-guest house (14 beds) with up to 300% on an annual basis.

Conclusions

The results show that such pilot model is needed for such marginal regions and can be well-accepted and successfully adopted by locals. Efforts to cooperate created a social effect as well. Farmers got together and learned how to make informed decisions, how to plan and manage their farms, their processing units and their markets. They learn how to adjust their strategies to changing local physical environment, local political environment and changing markets. They learn how to get together to taste and appreciate their food, how to celebrate, how to promote their produce and local traditions, how to keep their generations at rural areas and show the beauty of the Eastern Rhodopes.

The NTG partnership model should continue working at regional level on: i) optimising organic quality, ii) maintaining organic certification, improving farm documentation, iii) facilitating and improving access to cooperative processing and marketing, iv) facilitating local community support to organic farming and the NTG concept, v) improving marketing of organic foods to Eastern Rhodopes' tourist places (guest-houses, hotels, restaurants) vi) increasing promotion of organic produce and NTG concept by media involvement, participation in fairs and exhibitions, etc. The local organic community groups should continue to promote agro-biodiversity monitoring as a new tool for increase the value of organic farms and the entire region and make them more attractive for tourists.

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