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Commission funds assessment tool for agricultural and environmental policy making

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With 40 per cent of the EU budget currently being spent on the Common Agricultural Policy and a similar proportion of Europe's land surface given over to farming, being able to effectively assess the impact of new agricultural and environmental policies is vital.



If modern agriculture is to contribute to sustainable development, rather than detract from it, productive environmental and agricultural policies are needed at EU, national and regional level. Recognising this, the Commission has launched the 15 million euro SEAMLESS Integrated Project under the 'global change and ecosystems' sub-priority of the Sixth Framework Programme (FP6), which aims to develop an integrated computer toolkit for the ex-ante assessment of such policies (i.e. assessment before their introduction).

Just some examples of how policies can affect the rural landscape include the enlargement of the EU and subsequent reform of farm support subsidies, liberalisation of global trade as a result of World Trade Organization negotiations, and direct changes to the physical environment as a result of policies designed to mitigate biodiversity loss or climate change.

Given the potential of so many areas of policy to have an impact on agricultural systems, the SEAMLESS consortium aims to create computer models and approaches that will allow for the assessment of alternative policy options. The system will incorporate quantitative models that simulate the effects of the changing physical environment, as well as economic developments. Qualitative considerations such as effects on quality of life and the visual landscape will also be integrated.

As Martin van Ittersum from the coordinating institute Wageningen University explained to CORDIS News: 'For instance, the result of a CAP reform proposal on farm subsidies may be a reduction in the price of sugar beet. With such a system, we could simulate the consequences for different farm types and predict, for example, how many farms will decide to move from sugar beet to another crop, and what effect this will have on the environment.'

Such a system requires a comprehensive set of models that can work on many different levels, as while the direct impact of a policy may be most clearly seen at the level of the farm, policymakers must also be aware of the consequences on a European or even global scale, which is the level at which prices and market conditions are often determined.

The highly multidisciplinary nature of the SEAMLESS project is reflected in the consortium, which includes over 80 researchers from 30 institutions in 13 European countries (including several new Member States) under the coordination of Wageningen University in the Netherlands. Areas of expertise covered within the consortium include economic, environmental, agronomic, social and technological. In addition, the project also involves one partner from Africa (Mali) and another from the United States.

Following a kick-off meeting in Lund, Sweden, the project partners hope to deliver a first prototype of the computer system within 18 months, with a fully operational system following in around four years.

Dr Van Ittersum concludes by stressing that 'the key objective of the project is to promote sustainable development, and show how agriculture in particular can contribute to that effort.'

To read a flyer on the SEAMLESS project, please consult the following web address:
http://www.seamless-ip.org/pdf_files/SeamlessFlyer.pdf

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