

Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARUD)

Erasmus + KA2 project number 561969-EPP-1-2015-1-DE-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP

SARUD has officially started

The kick-off conference of the SARUD project took place on 19-22 April 2016 at Omsk State Agrarian University hosted by the Rector, Prof. Dr. Oxana Shumakova. Representatives from partner universities and institutions from Europe, Kazakhstan and Russia gathered at the site of the regional coordinating university in Siberia to officially open the project and to start the joint international cooperation. During the meeting, chaired by the project coordinator Prof. Dr. Martin Dieterich (University of Hohenheim, Germany), the project partners exchanged the working results of the starting phase and situation analysis. Based on this, next priorities in the project development have been discussed, including the elaboration of the intended master's program curriculum as one of the most important project tasks.

The Minister of Food and Agriculture in Omsk region, Dr. Maxim Chekusov opened the event. Together with chairperson of the Association "Ecological Committee" Prof. Dr. Sergey Kostarev they provided an overview of the agricultural sector and ecological problems in the Omsk region. Both institutions are project partners and Local Working Group members representing the non-university sector of the region. Obviously, the project meets the present concerns of the speakers about the necessity to modernize education in the agricultural sector and to adjust study programs to the urgent and long-term needs of the region in order to meet current needs of the job market and address long-term perspectives for regional development. Sustainable approaches are seen as an important trend for the development of rural areas and the agricultural sector in particular.

Keynotes on rural development in Russia and Kazakhstan were given by Prof. Dr. Alexander Merzlov (Russian Timiryazev Academy) and Dr. Sergey Mogilnyy (Kazakh Agro-Technical University). They underlined the importance of the addressed topics by the SARUD project for the development of rural areas in both countries. Sustainability concepts, which have been just recently introduced into the agricultural policies of the partner countries, although receiving more and more attention from local authorities and population, are still not comprehensively implemented and often misunderstood. Therefore, raising awareness and knowledge of rural population, students, university- and non-university staff and in particular decision makers is a very challenging but at the same time very demanded task.

Reflecting the development processes in agricultural policies of partner countries the project leader Prof. Dr. Martin Dieterich highlighted that sustainable rural development needs cooperation of different fields (namely ecology, economy, social sciences). Therefore, transdisciplinary education should be introduced/improved in order to educate experts who will be able to consider various aspects of sustainable land management in planning and decision-making.

Local working groups partners from Russia and Kazakhstan represent universities, who plan to introduce the new master program, as well as practice partners from the pilot regions. They presented the outcomes of their joint situation analyses on the local labor markets. Special attention was paid to the analysis of employers' expectations from future SARUD graduates. The labor market research was executed under the supervision of Doc. PhDr. Ph.D. Michal Lostak (Czech University of Life Sciences Prague), who has given his feedback and summarized the tasks performed. A special workshop dedicated to the practice orientation and stakeholder's involvement was

moderated by Prof. Dr. Schuele from Nuertingen-Geislingen University, Germany. The representative of German Agricultural Center in Kazakhstan Dr. Alexander Toews has enliven the workshop by practical examples of co-beneficial collaboration between business and education.

To exploit previous project results, special attention was given to get informed about the experiences of SARUD “predecessors”, TEMPUS Projects RUDECO (159357- TEMPUS-1-2009-1-DE-TEMPUS-JPHES) “Vocational training in Rural Development and Ecology”, <http://tempus-rudeco.ru/en/main>) and EPASAT (517313-TEMPUS-1-2011-1-IT-JPHES “Environment protection through development and application of sustainable Agriculture Technologies”, <http://www.epasat.uz/index.php/en/about-us>). Capacities built within these projects include a pool of experience on different Sustainable Rural Development topics of former “RUDECO” partners in Russia combined with the EPASAT experience of Kazakh partners on elaboration, implementation and even international accreditation of new curricula. This unique combination of project experiences was appreciated as very advantageous and beneficial for all sides involved.

Besides the elaboration of the study programs new modules and required competences, a core topic to discuss was the knowledge platform to be elaborated by partners from Russian Timiryazev Academy. Implemented as a project work package, the idea is to provide a source of information and experiences on sustainable rural development that shall last beyond the project lifetime. First ideas for the concept of the future platform were explained and will be further elaborated to present a final concept at the next project meeting. Study materials developed in the frames of SARUD will be also placed on the knowledge platform, freely available to the academic community.

Furthermore, the EU partner universities gave an overview on the preliminary planning of the study trips for the Russian and Kazakh colleagues. Two weeks study trips, foreseen as a vocational training for university teachers from partner countries, with emphasis on sustainability issues for rural development and agriculture will take place in Poland and the Czech Republic in autumn 2016 and in Germany in spring 2017. Both study trips include a didactic training prepared in collaboration with the State Agency for Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas of the Federal State of Baden-Wuerttemberg (LEL).

Presentations and clarification of open questions on quality control and dissemination plans, project management and partnership agreement completed the conference program. Therefore, the conference covered a very broad range of topics regarding organizational matters and the contents of the study program development with all necessary steps and framework conditions.

Pictures of the working sessions, but also in the provided presentations and handouts support the impression of a very intensive and fruitful exchange. Getting a common project overview as well as project partners’ contributions, interests and expertise facilitated the clarification of the next tasks, activities and assignments. During the 2nd session of the steering committee at the end of the conference the next steps and to-dos were summarized, especially for the next six months.

Quite a range of tasks and home works concern the immediate after work of the conference. Important next steps refer to the consultations and finalization of the SARUD study plans within the local working groups from the pilot regions, who need to decide on the specific variations that the individual universities require due to institutional and local preconditions. After this, the regional coordination meeting in Kazakhstan and Russia in June and July 2016 respectively will follow to harmonize the common SARUD study program elements. This will be an important step to finalize the study plan outlines and based on this arrange the distribution of responsibilities and contributions for the elaboration of new modules. Next opportunity for the entire consortium to meet will be the interim SARUD networking conference scheduled for summer 2017 on the premises of Kazakh Agro-Technical University in Astana.