

STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING EMPLOYMENT IN AGRICULTURAL SECTOR IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract

In Slovakia, land is predominantly used for agricultural purposes, highlighting its essential role in the economy and rural development. Agriculture is not only a fundamental pillar of food production but also an important source of employment, particularly in rural regions. However, a long-term decline in interest in agricultural work has led to a gradual reduction in the number of jobs in the sector. As part of the paper, we also examine the development of agricultural land area over the years and its connection with employment in this sector. The main objective of the paper is to analyse initiatives aimed at increasing employment in agriculture through several partial goals that complement the central research question. These include examining employment trends in Slovak agriculture, analysing the structure of the labour force, assessing wage conditions, identifying the main causes of employment decline, and presenting European initiatives and opportunities for financial support for farmers. The applied method of analysis and deduction provided a comprehensive view of the researched issue. The findings suggest that the future of agriculture requires not only improvements in working conditions and stronger support for young people, but also the effective integration of traditional practices with modern technologies, which is crucial for ensuring food security, economic stability, and sustainable rural development.

Keywords: Agricultural Land, Agriculture, Employment in Agriculture, Employment Policy

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Introduction

In Slovakia, soil is one of the most valuable natural resources and plays an important role, especially in agriculture and forestry. A large part of the territory is used as agricultural land. In the past, agriculture in Slovakia was of exceptional importance and played a key role in the life of society. For the inhabitants, it was the main and often the only source of livelihood. Growing crops and raising livestock were their daily activities. For many, agricultural work was an irreplaceable source of income and the basis of their lifestyle.

In recent decades, we have seen a significant loss of interest in agricultural work and rural life. This unfavourable trend is increasingly recognized not only by the European Union as a whole, but also by individual member states, where farmers constantly point out the unsatisfactory conditions that hinder the development of this sector. The decline in the importance of agriculture is a result of increasing mechanization, technological progress, and the shift of labour to more productive sectors such as industry and services. Global challenges such as climate change, globalization, and demographic shifts create serious obstacles for sustainable agriculture and rural development (Bartošová, Buday, 2013). Research by Debonne *et al.* (2022) shows that European agriculture is facing so-called megatrends – in particular the demographic aging of the rural population, regional differences in productivity, and climate change – which are directly reflected in the structure of the labour force and future employment opportunities.

From an economic perspective, the price of land in a market economy follows the same principles as other goods, being shaped primarily by the forces of supply and demand (Valach, 2019).

Farmers are currently facing difficult challenges, such as meeting EU environmental targets, making the sector more attractive to the younger generation, and coping with pressure for cheap and fast production. However, for young farmers who could revitalize the sector, the entry conditions are so demanding that they are often discouraged from entering the agricultural sector. The system is burdened by complex bureaucracy and high financial costs. Land-users in the study perceived the CAP as containing out-of-touch requirements, an excessive administrative burden and sanctions, as well as disproportionately greater financial support for less sustainable management, thus generating what they deemed as unfair/difficult competition with unsustainable farming systems (Rouet-Leduc *et al.*, 2024). Generational

renewal in agriculture is further constrained by limited access to land and capital, even when EU support schemes are available (Mattas *et al.*, 2024). Empirical evidence from this study also shows that without complementary national measures, these schemes are often ineffective because they do not reflect the specificities of individual regions.

The European Union is trying to reverse this unfavourable trend by introducing various support measures and rural development programs aimed at increasing the attractiveness of working in agriculture. However, according to Vindigni *et al.* (2023), young people often perceive agriculture as an outdated, financially unattractive, and physically demanding profession with low prestige and social recognition. This perception significantly reduces the attractiveness of agriculture as a career path compared to other sectors, highlighting the need for initiatives aimed at improving the image of agriculture among the younger generation.

This situation highlights the need for fundamental changes that would make agriculture more attractive, improve conditions for current workers, and motivate young people to enter this strategically important sector. The European Union has high expectations for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the period 2023–2027, which includes a number of measures aimed at supporting young and new farmers. These include, for example, complementary income support for young farmers, support for starting up in agriculture, and initiatives to develop businesses in rural areas.

Methodology

The main objective of the paper is to analyse and present initiatives and measures aimed at increasing employment in agriculture. To achieve this, it was necessary to examine the issue comprehensively and from multiple perspectives. The paper also focuses on monitoring the development of the area of agricultural land in individual years and its relationship to the level of employment in the sector.

For the systematic treatment of the issue, partial objectives were defined that specify and complement the main objective:

- analysis of the development of the area of agricultural land in Slovakia,
- examination of employment trends in agriculture,
- analysis of the structure of the workforce operating in the sector,
- assessment of wage conditions in agriculture,
- identification of initiatives and measures to support employment in agriculture.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was applied to address the individual objectives. The quantitative analysis was based on secondary data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, the Reports on Agriculture and Food of the Slovak Republic, and government and departmental documents. The qualitative analysis was based on professional literature and studies from domestic and international sources, which provided context and comparative data.

The established methodology made it possible to carry out a comprehensive analysis, combine data on land area, employment, and wage conditions, and provide a systematic overview of initiatives and measures supporting employment. The findings allow the identification of key factors affecting the development of the sector and provide a basis for recommendations to strengthen the workforce and competitiveness of agriculture.

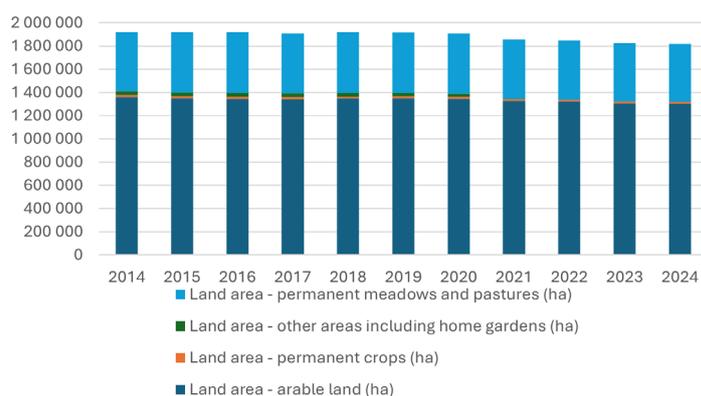
Results

Development of Agricultural Land Area and Development of Employment in Agriculture in Slovakia

Agricultural land covers approximately 49% of Slovakia's territory, and its total area has remained relatively stable in recent years. However, there have been minor shifts in the structure of its use, primarily the loss of permanent grassland and pastures, while the total area of the land fund has not changed significantly (Datacube, 2025).

Statistics indicate that structural changes are occurring within the internal composition of the land fund rather than in its total area, mainly through the loss of agricultural land and its replacement by forest or other land categories. Arable land and permanent meadows/pastures are declining most significantly, which may have implications for agricultural production and rural development.

Fig. 1 shows that in the monitored period 2014–2024, the area of agricultural land is decreasing slightly. Utilized agricultural land declined from 1,921 thousand ha (2014) to 1,819 thousand ha (2024), representing a decrease of more than 100 thousand ha. This trend indicates a reduction in agricultural land, which is being transferred to other categories (e.g., afforestation, built-up areas, infrastructure, etc.). A decrease was also recorded in arable land, which fell from 1,359 thousand ha (2014) to 1,304 thousand ha (2024), representing a loss of more than 55 thousand ha. This negative trend underlines the need to maintain and develop production-efficient agriculture so that the country's land resources are managed effectively while ensuring the



1: Development and changes in land area

Source: Datacube (2025)

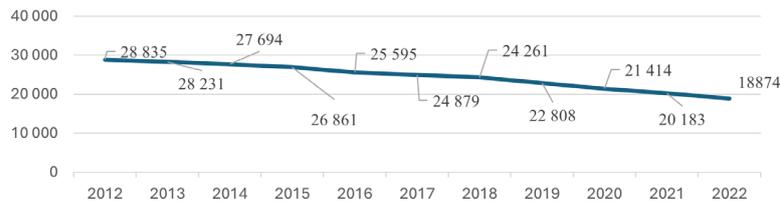
production of high-quality and healthy food for the population of Slovakia. In addition, prosperous agriculture stimulates the social and economic development of regions, contributes to the balanced reproduction and structure of human capital, and helps mitigate regional disparities (Pekárová, 2024).

Another subject of research is employment in agriculture, which continues to be a key component of rural economies and the overall economy of many countries. According to Buchta (2013), living conditions in rural areas and their sustainability depend significantly on the presence of agriculture and its economic efficiency. However, this impact varies by region. In areas with the highest agricultural production, agriculture plays a fundamental role in employment and in supporting the local economy. Conversely, in highly industrialized regions, agriculture has a more complementary function, making use of available labour resources. Its greatest contribution in these areas lies in the maintenance of natural resources and in supporting the territory for residential, recreational, or industrial activities. Agriculture is gradually losing its dominant position in rural areas, creating a need for stronger connections with other production and non-production sectors. The link between the agrarian sector and tourism is becoming increasingly important, leading to the development of agrotourism (Spišiak *et al.*, 2005).

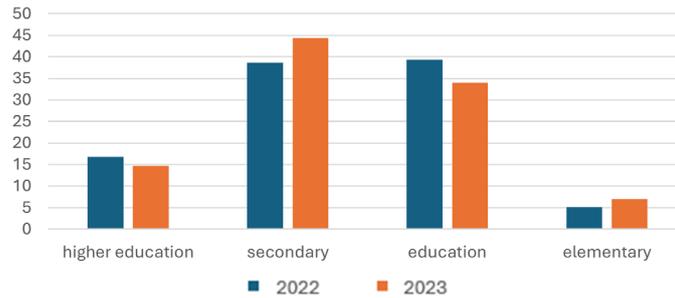
However, the agricultural sector continues to provide employment opportunities for a wide range of people, from seasonal workers to qualified professionals such as agronomists, technologists, or veterinarians. The workforce represents the sum of a person's mental and physical abilities used in the production of material goods, the provision of services, or other socially beneficial activities. The ability to work is a key, active, and necessary factor in the production process. The workforce is represented by the worker themselves, who is its bearer (Jurečka *et al.*, 2018). However, the share of the workforce in agriculture is decreasing due to many factors, such as market requirements, economic interests of society, technological advancement, innovation, and increasing demands on worker qualifications (Szabo and Grznár, 2015). Buchta (2015) considers the reduction of the workforce in agriculture to be one of the accompanying phenomena of the continuous restructuring of the agrarian sector.

The development of agricultural employment in Slovakia is characterized not only by a decline in the number of workers, but also by proportional changes in employment status, in the representation of professional categories, in the gender, age, and educational structure of workers, and by an increase in the number of unemployed persons whose last job was in agriculture – the so-called agrarian unemployment (Jamborová and Masár, 2015). Chrastinová (2014) states that employment in agriculture and the food industry is negatively affected by the high import of agricultural products and finished foodstuffs. This trend leads to a decrease in production and employment in the agricultural sector, while in the food industry it results in inefficient use of existing production capacities. Slovakia has sufficient production and employment potential, indicating the need to address the situation not only within the sector itself, but also through broader measures supporting employment.

The gradual decline in employment in agriculture has been evident since the early 1990s. In 1994, the share of those employed in agriculture in total employment in Slovakia was 10.2%, while in the EU-15 it was 5.3% in the same period. When comparing 1989 and 2000, employment in agriculture decreased by 99.7% (Némethová and Jaďudová, 2018). Slovakia's accession to the EU did not prevent the continuing decline in employment in agriculture. Despite initiatives under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which seeks to maintain and increase employment in this sector through measures such as subsidies for young farmers, the negative trend has not stopped. Low wages and the general unattractiveness of the agricultural sector also do not contribute to its growth (Věžník *et al.*, 2017). Employment may be measured either by the number of persons, the number of full-time equivalent jobs, or the number of hours worked.



2: Development of employment in agriculture in Slovakia, permanent employees
Source: Datacube (2025)



3: Structure of workers in agriculture by education in %
Source: Report on Agriculture and Food Industry of the Slovak Republic for 2023 [2025]

Employment rates are often used to allow comparisons between countries with different population sizes over time. These rates are usually reported for the economically active population of working age (Eurostat – Statistics Explained, 2012).

Fig. 2 shows the development of employment in agriculture in Slovakia from 2012 to 2022. It clearly illustrates the annual decline in the number of permanent employees. While in 2012 there were 28,835 registered, in 2022 this number had dropped to 18,874.

Education and classification are the basic components of human capital that influence the level of wage assessment. A higher level of education also presupposes the transfer of innovative methods and technologies into the production process, thereby contributing to higher prosperity of agricultural entities (Krausová and Szombythyová, 2009). In 2023, the share of persons with higher education in the total number of workers was 14.7%, while the share of men with higher education decreased to 13.6%. The share of women with higher education represented 17.8%. The share of workers with secondary education with a high school diploma, including higher vocational education, reached 44.3%. The share of workers with apprenticeships accounted for 34.0%, and the proportion of workers with basic education increased to 7.0% (Report on Agriculture and Food Industry of the Slovak Republic for 2023, 2025).

Wages in agriculture have their own specificities, arising from the nature of the sector. In Slovakia, wages in this sector have long been below the national economy average. The seasonality of agriculture affects employment in such a way that work is unevenly distributed throughout the year depending on weather conditions (Schwarcz, 2020; Urbánik, 2019). Šlosár *et al.* (2002) define wages as remuneration for work. The decline in wages in agriculture compared to other sectors began in 1992 (Buchta, 2019).

At the beginning of the 1990s, wages in agriculture declined rapidly compared to other sectors. This was influenced by several factors, such as the use of a higher proportion of unskilled labour, the low retirement rate in the sector, the educational structure of workers, and in some cases the low technical level of production. After Slovakia joined the European Union in 2004, the development of wages in agriculture gradually changed, influenced by subsidies, market mechanisms, and the modernization of the sector. Nevertheless, wages in this sector remain among the lowest compared to other sectors of the economy. Among other branches of the economy, wage growth in agriculture is one of the lowest (Urbánik, 2019).

In 2023, the average monthly wage in agriculture increased by 9.8% (+ €97.0) year-on-year compared to 2022 and reached €1,086. The share of wages of agricultural workers in the average wage of the Slovak economy reached 75.9%. The average wage also increased in agricultural primary production (crop cultivation, animal husbandry) in organizations with 20 or more employees by 8.9%, reaching €1,321 (Report on Agriculture and Food Industry of the Slovak Republic, 2023). The average monthly wage in agriculture in Slovakia in the first half of 2024 amounted to €1,177 (Statistical Office, 2024).

The cause of the decline in employment in Slovakia lies in the decline in agricultural production, the transformation process, the disappearance of non-agricultural activities and, consequently, in the low share of diversification activities and lower valuation of work. Due to rationalization and the substitution

I: Average monthly wage of agricultural workers in €

Year	2020	2021	2022	2023
Economy of the Slovak Republic total	1 133	1 211	1 304	1 430
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	872	933	1 009	1 115
Of which agriculture	896	929	989	1 086

Source: Report on Agriculture and Food Industry of the Slovak Republic for 2023 (2025)

of live work with materialized work, paid manual labour is decreasing (Chrastinová *et al.*, 2015). According to Pauhofová and Stehlíková (2017), young people often go abroad to work because, even if they are interested in working in the agricultural sector, they do not have adequate agricultural land available. This situation is a consequence of the overall weakening of agricultural activities in the regions. The lack of young workers is subsequently reflected in the ageing of the agricultural population. Although this trend stopped in 2023 and the average age of farmers reached 46.3 years, the problem of generational change remains relevant (MoARD, 2025).

Initiatives to Support Increased Employment in Agriculture

The topic of increasing employment in agriculture is quite broad, as this sector is characterised by low attractiveness for young people, high seasonality and gradual mechanisation, which reduces the need for human labour. However, there are several initiatives and measures to support employment, the combination of which can contribute to positive developments in this area.

One of the most crucial areas is the education and motivation of young people. The European Union considers young farmers a key element of the future of agriculture and rural areas, which is why it supports them through financial contributions, training, advice and investment in technology. The aim is to attract young people to the sector, strengthen local economies and ensure generational renewal. Under the CAP 2023–2027, Member States must allocate at least 3% of direct payments to support young farmers, with measures adapted to national conditions. In the EU, young people under 40 run only 12% of agricultural businesses, with women accounting for 3% (Eurostat, 2020). Slovakia increases support beyond the mandatory minimum, with the average amount of support reaching €337/ha, and young farmers can also receive start-up grants of €50,000–70,000. Despite financial assistance, however, there remains a lack of access to training and advice, which are extremely important for beginning farmers (Pokrivčák, 2024).

The Rural Development Programme of the Slovak Republic includes the measure “Young Farmers – Support for the Development of Young Farmers' Businesses”, intended for persons under 40 years of age when first establishing or assuming responsibility as the highest representative of an agricultural enterprise. Under the programme, it is possible to obtain a non-refundable financial contribution of €50,000 for the implementation of a business plan in animal and/or plant primary production. The application for support must be submitted within 24 months of the start of the activity, while the business plan must achieve standard outputs ranging from €10,000 to €50,000, depending on the conditions of the specific call (Farmer's Manual, 2023).

The Young Farmers' Association in Slovakia plays a significant role in education and motivation, organising discussions, events and young farmers' clubs, thus enabling the linking of education with practice and the sharing of experience (Young Farmers' Association, 2025). Another important institution is the Agroinštitút Nitra, established by the Ministry of Agriculture, which provides professional training, consultancy and courses for farmers and advisors, while also focusing on e-learning, international projects and sustainable forms of education. The Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Institute in Nitra also operates in the field of professional training, providing certification of professional skills and continuous modular educational programmes for agricultural advisors (Institute of Knowledge Agriculture and Innovation, 2025). These institutions and initiatives contribute to the systematic development of human capital in agriculture and strengthen the connection between theory and practice.

Another option is investment in agricultural modernisation and innovation, which can paradoxically increase employment. The implementation of agricultural innovations is a challenging but crucial process for agricultural development and increasing production (Osumba *et al.*, 2021). Existing studies examine the possible gains and losses of jobs in agriculture due to digitalisation (Christiansen, 2020). In general, they indicate that digital technologies can support the creation of new skilled positions in the sector while replacing part of the low-skilled migrant workforce (Pant, 2017). The introduction of precision agriculture and digitalisation, including sensors, GPS navigation and analytical software, optimises the production process but also creates new jobs for specialists in IT, data management and technological consulting. In terms of employment opportunities for agricultural workers, the widespread application of the digital economy has brought new opportunities for agribusiness. Digital technologies provide new ways of

thinking and employment opportunities (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 2021), such as webcasting, online sales and other flexible work positions, which provide new income opportunities for rural workers (Zhang *et al.*, 2019). While modern technologies reduce manual labour, they also generate demand for skilled workers – maintenance workers, technicians and managers – thereby shifting the employment structure towards professional occupations.

In Slovakia, support for modernisation and innovation in agriculture is implemented mainly through measures of the Rural Development Programme and the CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027, with the most significant being sub-measures 4.1 and 4.2. Sub-measure 4.1 focuses on investments in agricultural enterprises and enables farmers to receive support for the purchase and modernisation of agricultural machinery, such as combines, seeders or sprayers, but also for the introduction of precision technologies such as GPS management, soil and climate sensors or digital farm software. The modernisation of stables and improvements to animal welfare through new housing areas, automatic feeding systems or equipment for more efficient manure management are also supported. Sub-measure 4.2 focuses on investments in the processing of agricultural products and their marketing, including support for small dairies, meat or vegetable processing lines, modern packaging lines or the development of new products with higher added value (MoARD, 2025).

The CAP Strategic Plan also places emphasis on digitalisation and precision agriculture, support for irrigation, adaptation to climate change, the introduction of renewable energy sources such as solar panels or biogas plants, and measures aimed at reducing the use of fertilisers and pesticides. These investments are intended to increase the competitiveness of Slovak agricultural enterprises, improve production and processing efficiency and reduce the environmental burden. The intensity of support varies depending on the type of investment and region, typically around 40–50% of eligible costs, with the exact conditions defined in individual calls of the Agricultural Payment Agency (PPA, 2025).

Another opportunity is the diversification of activities in agricultural enterprises, which Slovakia supports within rural development policy. The aim of these activities is to ensure that farmers are not dependent solely on the sale of raw agricultural products, but expand their income through new activities and thus increase their stability and competitiveness.

Diversification is an important tool for increasing the competitiveness and economic stability of farmers, while contributing to sustainable rural development. The Strategic Plan for the CAP 2023–2027 for the Slovak Republic emphasises the need to diversify activities and expand farmers' incomes through agritourism, product processing and rural services. Agritourism includes providing accommodation directly on farms, organising experiential stays, tastings of local foods or recreational activities, thus creating a connection between agriculture and tourism. Processing their own products allows farmers to move from selling raw materials to producing higher value-added foods such as cheese, dairy products, wine, fruit juices, honey and honey products, thereby increasing their market potential. Direct sales from farms and participation in farmers' markets strengthen the link between producers and consumers, enabling access to fresh, regional products and allowing farmers to secure higher profits without intermediaries. These activities are systematically supported through measure 6.4 of the Rural Development Programme, which is aimed at investments in the creation and development of non-agricultural activities, including agritourism, rural services and food processing. Support is provided mainly in the form of non-refundable financial contributions with an intensity of approximately 40–50% of eligible costs. Its aim is not only to increase agricultural entities' income but also to develop the regional economy, support employment and preserve the cultural and natural heritage of rural areas.

Discussion and Conclusion

Land is one of the most valuable natural resources in Slovakia, making up almost half of the country's territory. Despite the declining interest in working in agriculture and living in the countryside, it remains a fundamental basis for the country's development. The decline in the importance of agriculture and employment in the sector is the result of several factors – from technological progress and the rationalisation of production to low wages and the lack of interest among young people in this type of work. This unfavourable trend is recognised not only in Slovakia but also at the level of the European Union, which is attempting to mitigate it through various measures.

The main objective of the paper was to analyse initiatives and measures aimed at increasing employment in agriculture. Initiatives focused on educating young farmers and investments in agricultural modernisation complement each other and jointly support employment growth in the sector. While educational initiatives such as courses, training and professional counselling increase the qualifications and practical readiness of young people, modern technologies, precision agriculture and the introduction of innovations create new jobs in IT, maintenance, management and specialised product processing. In addition, the diversification of activities allows farmers to expand their income and reduce dependence on traditional agricultural production. These activities include,

for example, the development of agritourism, which encompasses the provision of accommodation, organising experiential stays or tastings of local products.

Such a combination of education, modern technologies and diversification not only increases the attractiveness of agriculture for the younger generation, but also supports the economic stability of enterprises, rural development and the sustainability of the workforce in the sector. The implementation of innovations and the expansion of agricultural activities therefore represent key tools for the long-term competitiveness and multifunctionality of Slovak agriculture.

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