

CONFERENCE PAPER ¹

**SOCIAL FARMING: DEALING WITH COMMUNITIES
REBUILDING LOCAL ECONOMY**

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Social farming (SF) is a traditional as well as an innovative activity for farmers. It involves the use of resources from agriculture for rehabilitation and social inclusion. The term SF has recently entered the scene of rural development in the EU, embracing a wide constellation of different practices that are emerging in the territories; experiences that, in many cases, were born as bottom-up actions and have 'grown in the shade' for a long time. SF activities involve a large number of target groups, both in urban and rural areas (youngsters, elders, disabled people, migrant, prisoners, added people). SF is also connected to a large number of issues related to rural development like the organisation of local services, the evolution of farmers' attitudes in the relationships with local communities and their reputation, the re-organisation of local economy and the introduction of new elements of solidarity and reciprocity. The paper presents some first results of the SoFar project funded by the VI EU Research Framework (<http://sofar.unipi.it>) and rooted in seven EU countries. The aim of the project is to support EU agricultural policies on multifunctional agriculture and to support local pathways of rural development.

Key words: Social Farming, multifunctional agriculture, social inclusion, social services, rural areas.

Social farming: some features

A tentative definition

In Europe social farming (SF) is an emerging topic for farms and farmers as well as for different stakeholders. SF is an innovative use of agriculture quite often introduced from the bottom by new and old farmers. SF includes all activities that use agricultural resources, both from plants and animals, in order to promote (or to generate) therapy, rehabilitation, social inclusion, education and social services in rural areas. However, it is strictly related to farm activities where (small) groups of people can stay and work together with family farmers as well as social practitioners. The definition of social farming is not yet agreed around Europe. Still today there are different ways to label it (farming for health, green care, social farming) and to use agriculture for social purposes. SF is a new as well as a traditional concept. It originates from the traditional rural self-help networks present in rural areas before modernisation of agriculture and the rise of the public welfare system. Nowadays the concept has been deeply reformed in an innovative and still-changing way. In order to build a *life sustaining web* (Barnes, 2007) it is important to accompany the formal and more professional social services by a large network of more informal relationships. Moreover, informal networks

1. This paper was originally presented at the conference *Rural Futures: Dreams, Dilemmas, Dangers* in Plymouth, UK, April 2008, and is reprinted by kind permission of the Rural Futures Unit, University of Plymouth. It is extracted from the Academic Peer Reviewed Papers section of the Conference Proceedings, ISBN 978-1-84102-185-0.

should be able to improve the capability of the local context to include and increase the opportunities of weaker people.

The significance of social farming

SF has a wide impact on many aspects of agriculture as well as rural life. From an *economic point of view*, SF is related to a specific aspect of multifunctional agriculture. In that respect, it can be indicated as a positive externality of agriculture on social capital (building new relationships among different categories of people like farmers, local communities, users, consumers). From a *technical point of view*, SF has the possibility to cope with nature and to use its own powerful resources. For *agricultural practice*, SF gives a wider view due to the opportunity to enter other sectors (like education, health, social sector). So it will enlarge the number and types of stakeholders: both the young generation and wider society have the opportunity to change their perception about farming; farmers have the opportunity to build new networks and circuits that can be helpful to qualify their offer, especially with respect of ethical consumers; farmers may change their own entrepreneurial attitude towards the idea of corporate social responsibility. From a *social point of view*, SF follows a multidisciplinary approach and may offer new linkages and bridges among sectors. It has a strong *political* impact too. People involved in SF are often strongly motivated and active. They struggle to participate in a bottom up process in order to build policy networks and to discuss the topic in front of a wider public. SF may have a wide impact on many aspects of agriculture and on its links with the society, due to: the *benefits* for ‘users’;² the opportunity to innovate activities: in agriculture, health care, education, social sector; the opportunity to strengthen *urban-rural relationships*; the *economic impact* on farms and rural areas toward diversification, reputation and responsibility of enterprises; and the opportunity to cope with *social capital*, to improve *social services* in rural areas, to promote *healthy and alive rural communities*.

Social farming across Europe

The phenomenon of SF is present in various parts of Europe (Hassink, 2006 and Table 1). At the same time the practice is quite often unknown and not yet well recognised. The situation is quite different country by country when the number, the types and the targets addressed are considered. SF increased its relevance everywhere in EU in the 1970s as the consequence of a change in social structures (like in Italy where institutes for people with mental disabilities were closed down or in Germany with the establishment of sheltered workshops), to the rise of innovative movements (like the anthroposophic and youth movements in many EU countries), or the organisation of religious communities (Ireland and the Netherlands). The process has grown to a recognizable representation of the agricultural practice in the different countries. The process of development was mainly stimulated

2. The reported effects of SF include: physical effects (skills, physical health, employment, day/night rhythm); mental effects (self-esteem, self-value, responsibility, awareness, enthusiasm); social effects (social skills, social interaction, community integration).

from the communities and individuals rather than policy driven. Nowadays in Europe an rapidly increasing number of experiences and projects is recorded (Table 1).

Table 1: Social farming in Europe

Country	Number	% of total farms
Netherlands	700	0.7
Italy	450	0.01
Germany	170	0.03
Flanders	260	0.4
Ireland	90	0.08
Slovenia	20	<0.01
France	>1200	>0.02

Source: Jan Hassink SoFar project 2007

Similarities and diversities of social farming in Europe

The common elements of SF in the European countries are related to features such as: the presence of animal production and or horticulture; farms are quite often organic and labour intensive, able to offer different products; there is a high capability to work on landscape management, and to preserve biodiversity; farms are normally well open to public and they are organised for direct selling. Due to the specific field of activity the people involved have a high capability to act in local and wide networks and there is typically a strong commitment and motivation of highly engaged persons involved in the projects. In general, the target groups are comparable in all countries and consist of a wide range of disabled people (mental, physical, psychiatric), addicts (drugs, alcohol), children, youngsters, re-socializing ex-prisoners, long run unemployed, terminal patients, burn-outs and older people.

Despite the similarities, there is a large diversity between countries in terminology, users and their position (clients, employees), financing structures, sectors involved and project holders (Table 2). In most countries the use of agriculture involves the health sector with public structures (sheltered workshops, geriatric hospitals, hospitals for people with mental disorders) or social cooperatives ³(in the Italian case) where agriculture represents a tool for rehabilitation and therapy. Private farmers can be directly involved in organising services. They are normally recognized by the agricultural sector that can provide compensations for the farmers' extra work (in Belgium 40€/day) and/or financial aids for specific investment (with the Rural Development Programme 2007/13). In the case of the Netherlands farmers provide services directly for the health sector in agreement with the agricultural sector. In this case users (normally with mental and psychiatric

3. In Italy this type of 'Social Cooperative' includes at least 30% of people with disabilities in their organisation. They operate within the agricultural sector partly to facilitate socio-therapeutical activities, but mainly to ensure work inclusion of disabled people.

disabilities, addressed as ‘clients’) can decide to use public vouchers (60€/day) in recognised structures, like accredited social farms. In many countries (France, Belgium, Italy) the labour sector can fund agricultural projects and the social economy in order to promote work inclusion of the medium/long-term unemployed. In Italy the Minister of Justice organises farms which involve prisoners in agriculture. Aside from the previous cases there are educational farms (for instance in France and Norway) that provide services for different target groups, like youngsters with difficulties in following school programmes.

Table 2: The organisation of social farming in Europe

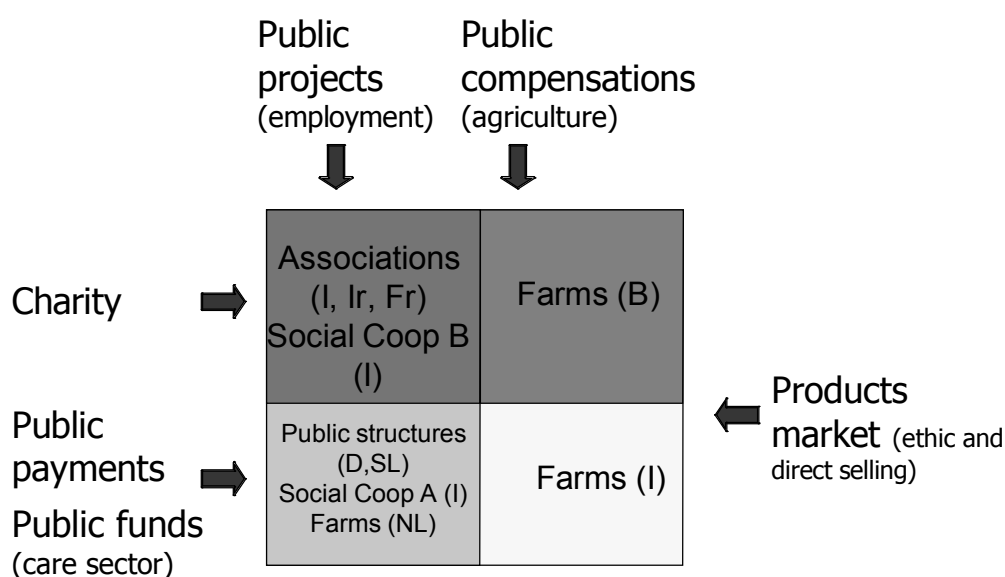
Sector involved	Health	Health/ agriculture	Agriculture	Labour	Justice
Public	D,SL,Irl,A, I				I
Third sector	I			Fr, B, I	
Private		NL	I, B, N		

Source: Sofar project)

Regulatory system and process of change

The regulatory system also varies between countries. It drives SF along different pathways (Table 3). Each model has a distinct impact on the balance between agriculture and services and the accompanying competences (specialisation/multifunctionality). Besides that, each system has a particular effect on the evolution of practices. Where SF ‘has an economic value’, the role of institutions, quality control and professional training become important. Here the risk is of losing some specific value of agricultural activities. In other

Figure 1: The regulatory system of social farming in Europe

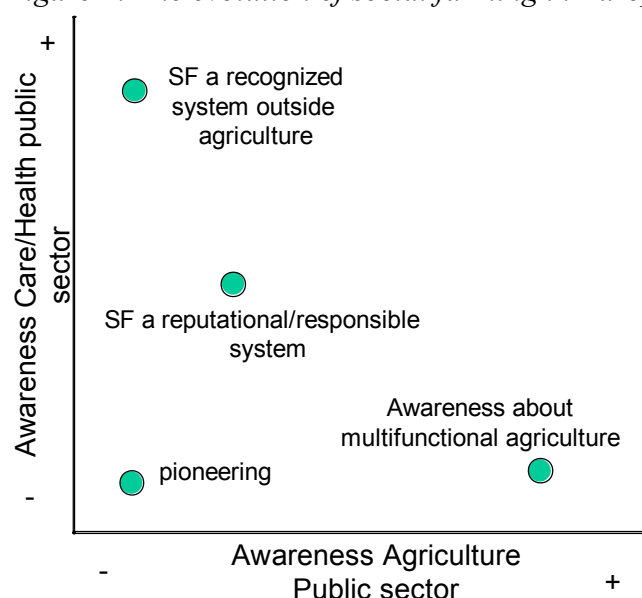


situations the attitude of farmers is more influential (philanthropy, voluntary based activities with public compensation, Corporate Social Responsibility) and involves a diverse organisation of local relationships.

A dynamic process accompanies the organisation of SF across Europe as well as relationships at local, regional, national level (Figure 1). Four different stages can be distinguished, each differing in development as well as the awareness of different public sectors (agriculture and care/health sector), and as a consequence affecting the regulatory systems adopted at local/regional/country level as indicated.

- *Pioneering situation*: little previous experience; voluntary action based on very strong motivation; the public recognise and care for public institutes (for their work, not necessary for SF); private farms act on their own projects; farmers enter in the system from their own commitment; no awareness from the local society.
- *Multifunctional agriculture*: increasing experience; the interest coming from agriculture; there are local practices (private and public); no awareness from the care sector that funds public structure; strong commitment from the assisted farmers.
- *SF as a recognized system*: large interest; social or health public institutes recognise SF as relevant both from private and public structures.
- *SF as a responsible model*: there is a large number of practices, strongly rooted on the ground and in the local society.

Figure 2: The evolution of social farming in Europe



(Source Sofar project)

As a consequence of the different steps in any country also SF networks may be different. In the Netherlands, Norway and Flanders, there are national/regional centres already structured. In Germany, Italy, France we register mainly local networks. In other countries SF is still related to isolated projects.

Strengths and Challenges

During the ‘SoFar’ project, practitioners were asked to debate a SWOT analysis on SF. As indicated in Table 4 the potential of SF is mostly related to the reconnection of professional knowledge with informal networks aided by the use of nature.

Table 3: SWOT analysis for social farming in EU

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES
Practices & Relations: high potential; tailored-made practices; comparatively cheap; small groups, social dimension, familiar character, large offer Territorial Dimension: Integration at territorial level among society and economy; Increased sensitiveness and awareness, new ties, attention from consumers, effects on landscape; Entrepreneurial Dimension: innovation & diversification”; involving youths in agriculture. Care users: strong benefits, support from families	Local System increasing sensitivity and demand from society, positive reputation, newcomers in agriculture Policies & Institutions: new juridical framework; wider recognition and support, multifunctional agriculture Practices: shift from medical to social model (citizenships instead of patient), community integration (care by the community) Networks: broadening relations and networks. Marketing: enhanced reputation/image
WEAKNESSES	THREATS
Rules and laws: juridical framework; still limited diffusion and consolidation; gap between demand and offer, dependence from public support, lack of recognition and evidences, strong heterogeneity Start-up: Difficulties to start-up; distances (physical and figurative); not easy inter-cultural/professional integration; confusion of roles and competences, Local system: Prejudices for disabilities; Lack of transports,	Policies & Institutions: bureaucracy; standardization, loss of original value-systems; no institutional change, lack of interest Actors: Competition among actors; development of opportunistic behaviours; market oriented welfare systems; hospitals in the countryside Practices: incidents

Source: SoFar National and EU platforms meeting

The ‘products’ of SF are health and social services, both for urban and rural populations, although it is important to note the lack of scientific evidence about the effects of the use of agriculture and nature in this way. Moreover, social farming can also be involved in redesigning the welfare system in rural areas (Di Iacovo 2003a, 2003b). Here urgent questions are emerging after fiscal crises about how to provide services to local inhabitants (elders, young families, children, immigrants, etc). In that respect family farms can differentiate their activities and became more involved in the organisation of the local welfare mix as well as in economic activities. In more remote

areas SF can improve and integrate the social network ensuring proximity (in food catering and temporary night assistance) and diversifying services (like transport, provision for schoolchildren, recreational activities for elders, etc.). Perhaps in rural areas social services are more strictly connected to the organisation of the local economy. They act on social capital and on relationships especially when informal networks are re-established. Both of the former are relevant for regenerating, in a contemporary way, intangible resources (such as culture, identity, landscape) normally used by the rural knowledge economy.

Conclusions

Farmers are continually being asked to justify their position to consumers and local communities, given that those communities are facing their own reorganisation under wider economic and social pressure (Shortall, 2004, Shucksmith, 2004). There is a need, though not without difficulty, to reconnect in a coherent way both individual and collective strategies in order to face emerging tensions in rural areas. In this respect SF can be considered as a point of convergence in rethinking the organisation of local life, repositioning multifunctional agriculture to social resources with the aim to organise innovative services able to satisfy new and old local needs. SF is strictly connected to the idea of innovative tradition, with the organisation of new networks among sectors, competences and places (healthy cities reconnected with countryside). It is able to link actors inside fragmented communities and to offer specific win-win solutions (among private and public, users and enterprises, producers and consumers), better suitable for rural context. The improvement of SF in rural areas raises methodological issues, stressing the idea of a *generative change through practices, the establishment of policy networks and the organisation of new decisional arenas able to reshape local habits* and to create a performing environment for citizenship. From a political point of view the question becomes how to integrate a mix of instruments (incentives, animation, networking, education, communication, advice, co-management and co-planning) able to promote a radical change in the vision, planning and management of social services, to stimulate participation of project holders (Di Iacovo, 2007). SF focuses on a development pathway as pattern of change in livelihood strategies. From this perspective also, research activities should be able to integrate technical and social fields in order to promote collective learning and to define innovative practices capable of promoting social change.

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