

# Social Farming: Dealing with Communities Rebuilding Local Economy

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## Abstract

*Social farming is a traditional as well as an innovative activity for farmers. It regards the use of resources from agriculture for rehabilitation and social inclusion. The term SF has recently entered the scene of rural development in 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 long time. SF activities regard 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 element of solidarity and reciprocity. The paper present some first results of the SoFar project funded by the VI EU Research Framework (<http://sofar.unipi.it>) and rooted in seven EU countries. Aim of the project is to support EU agricultural policies on multifunctional agriculture and to support local pathways of rural development.*

## Keywords

Social Farming, multifunctional agriculture, social inclusion, social services, rural areas.

## 1. 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 about social farming is not yet agreed around Europe. Still today there are different ways to indicate 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 nets quite well 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 built a *life sustaining web* (Barnes, 2007) it is important to accompany to the formal and more professional social services a large net of

more informal relationships. Moreover, informal nets 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 in other sectors (like education, health, social sector). So: It will enlarge the number and typology of stakeholders, both the young generation and the wider society have the opportunity to change the perception about farming; farmers have the opportunity to build new nets and circuits that can be helpful to qualify their offer, especially with respect of ethic 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'<sup>1</sup>; the opportunity to innovate activities: in agriculture, health care, education, social sector; the opportunity to strength *urban-rural relationships*; the *economic impact* on farms and rural areas toward diversification, reputation and responsibility of enterprises; the opportunity to cope with *social capital*, to improve *social services* in rural areas, to promote healthy and *alive rural communities*.

## 2. Social farming across Europe

The phenomenon of SF is well present in Europe (Hassink, 2006). At the same time practices are quite often unknown and not yet recognised. Perhaps the situation is quite different Country by Country when the number, the typologies and the target addressed are considered. SF increased its relevance everywhere in EU in the '70s 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 antroposophic and youths movement in many EU countries), or the organisation of religious communities (Ireland and the Netherlands). The process has been grown to a recognizable representation of the agricultural

Tab. 1: Social farming in Europe

<u>Country</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>% of total farms</u>
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

<sup>1</sup> The reported effects of SF regard: 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).

practice in the different countries. The process of development was mainly stimulated from the communities and individuals nor policy driven. Nowadays in Europe an increasing number of experiences and projects and a very quick growth is recorded (tab.1).

### Similarities and diversities of social farming in Europe

The common elements of SF in the European countries are related to some features like: the presence of animal production and or horticulture; farms are quite often organic and labour intensive, able to offer different products; there is an 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 people involved has a large capability to act in local and wide networks as well as there is a strong commitment and motivation of highly engaged persons involved in the projects. In general, the target groups are in all countries comparable and consist of a wide range disabled people (mental, physical, psychiatric), addicts (drugs, alcohol), children, youngsters, re-socializing prisoners (ex), long run un-employed, terminal patients, burn outs and elders.

Apart from similarities, there is a large diversity between countries in terminology, users and their position (clients, employees), financing structures, sectors involved and project holders (tab. 2). In most Countries use of agriculture involve the health sector with public

Tab. 2: The organisation of social farming in Europe (source Sofar project)

sector involved <i>Providers</i>	Health	Health/ agriculture	Agri- culture	Labour	Justice
<i>Public</i>	D,SL,Irl,A, I				I
<i>Third sector</i>	I			Fr, B, I	
<i>Private</i>		NL	I, B, N		

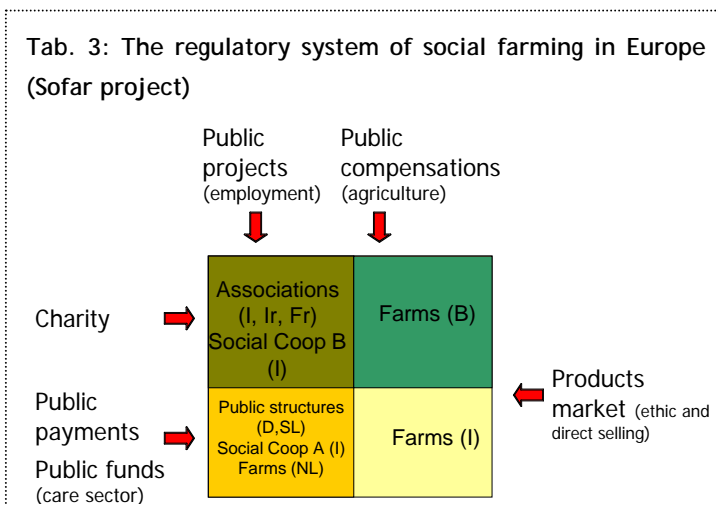
structures (sheltered workshops, geriatric hospitals, hospitals for people with mental disorders) or the third sector (in the Italian case) where agriculture

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 RDP 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 disabilities, addressed as "clients") can decide to use public vouchers (60€/pd) in recognised structures, like accredited social farms. In many Countries (France, Belgium, Italy) labour sector can fund agricultural project and social economy in order to promote work inclusion of medium-long term un-employees. In Italy, inside the prisons, the Minister of justice organise farms able to involve prisoners in agriculture. Aside form the previous cases there are educational farms (in France mainly) that provide services for different target groups, like youngsters (in Norway) that has difficulties to follow school programmes.

### Regulatory system and process of change

The regulatory system is quite different place by place also. It drives SF along different pathways (tab.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 peculiar effect on the evolution of practices. Where SF "has an economic value", the role of institutions, quality control and professional training became important. Here the risk is to lose



some specific value of agricultural activities. In other situations farmer' attitude is more on the spot (philanthropy, voluntary based activities with public compensation, Corporate Social Responsibility) and involve a diverse organisation of local relationships.

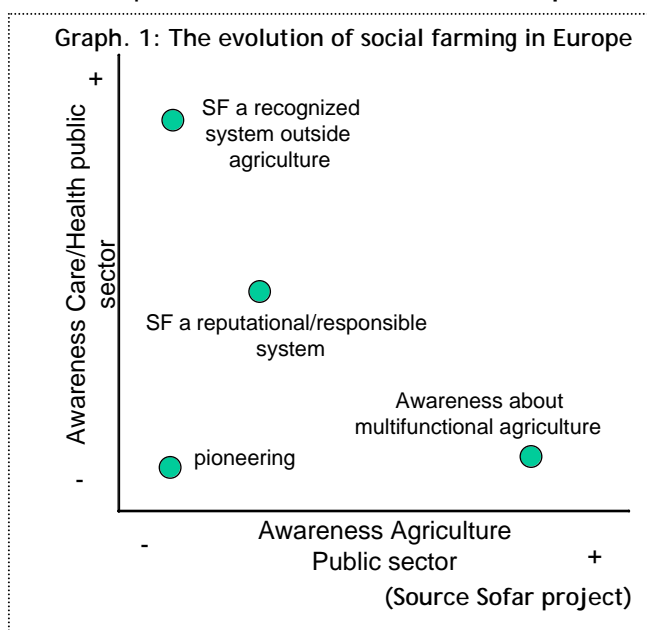
A dynamic process is accompanying the organisation of SF across Europe (graph.1), the organisation of practices as well as the relationships at local, regional, national level. About four different stages can be distinguished, each differs in development as well as the awareness of different public sectors (agriculture and care/health sector) and as a consequence the regulatory systems adopted at local/regional/Country level as indicated.

**Pioneering situation:** few experiences, voluntary action based on very strong motivation, public/care recognise 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 experiences, the interest come from agriculture, there are local practices (private and public), no awareness from the care sector that funds public structure, strong commitment from farmers aided. **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. 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.

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**Strengths and Challenge**

During the "SoFar" project practitioners were asked to debate



around a SWOT analysis on SF at this stage. As indicated in table 4 potential of SF is mostly related to the reconnection of professional knowledge with informal nets aided by the use of nature.

“Products” of SF are health and social services, both for urban and rural population. However an important topic is related to the lack of scientific evidences about the effects of the use of agriculture and nature. Moreover, social farming can also be involved in re-designing the welfare system in rural areas (Di Iacovo, 2003 a, b). Here urgent questions are emerging after the fiscal crisis of the State about how to provide services to local

Table 4: SWOT analysis for social farming in EU (Source: SoFar National and EU platforms meeting)

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Practices &amp; Relations:</b> high potential; tailored-made practices; comparatively cheap; small groups, social dimension, familiar character, large offer</li> <li>• <b>Territorial Dimension:</b> Integration at territorial level among society and economy; Increased sensitiveness and awareness, new ties, attention from consumers, effects on landscape;</li> <li>• <b>Entrepreneurial Dimension:</b> innovation &amp; diversification”; involving youths in agriculture.</li> <li>• <b>Care users:</b> strong benefits, support from families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Local System</b> increasing sensitivity and demand from society, positive reputation, newcomers in agriculture</li> <li>• <b>Policies &amp; Institutions:</b> new juridical framework; wider recognition and support, multifunctional agriculture</li> <li>• <b>Practices:</b> shift from medical to social model (citizenships instead of patient), community integration (care by the community)</li> <li>• <b>Networks:</b> broadening relations and networks.</li> <li>• <b>Marketing:</b> enhanced reputation/image</li> </ul>
WEAKNESSES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Rules and laws:</b> juridical framework; still limited diffusion and consolidation; gap between demand and offer, dependence from public support, lack of recognition and evidences, strong heterogeneity</li> <li>• <b>Start-up:</b> Difficulties to start-up; distances (physical and figurative); not easy inter-cultural/professional integration; confusion of roles and competences,</li> <li>• <b>Local system:</b> Prejudices for disabilities; Lack of transports,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Policies &amp; Institutions:</b> bureaucracy; standardization, loss of original value-systems; no institutional change, lack of interest</li> <li>• <b>Actors:</b> Competition among actors; development of opportunistic behaviours; market oriented welfare systems; hospitals in the countryside</li> <li>• <b>Practices:</b> incidents</li> </ul>

inhabitants (elders, young families, child, immigrant, et.). In that respect family farms can differentiate their activities and became more involved in the organisation of the local welfare mix also than in economic activities. In more remote areas SF can improve and integrate the social net ensuring proximity (in food catering and temporary night assistance) and diversifying services (like transports, schoolchildren, recreational activities for elders, et.). Perhaps in rural areas social services are strictly connected to the organisation of local economy. They act on social capital and on relationships especially when informal nets are re-established. Both of them are relevant for regenerating in a contemporary way immaterial resources (like culture, identity, landscape) normally used by rural knowledge economy.

### 3. Conclusions

Farmers are everyday asked to redefine their position in front of consumers and local communities, as far as local communities are facing their own reorganisation under wider economic and social pressure (Shortall, 2004, Shucksmith, 2004). More problematic seems 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 converging point 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 nets among sectors, competences and places (healthy cities reconnected with countryside). It's able to link actors inside fragmented communities and to offer peculiar win-win solution (among private and public, users and enterprises, producers and consumers), better suitable for rural context. Improvement of SF in rural areas open 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 became 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. In 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 able to promote social change.

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