

EU CAP NETWORK FOCUS GROUP SOCIAL FARMING AND INNOVATIONS

**Social farming for society:
expanding the target groups by
recognizing and marketing the
distinctive value of the farm
environment.**

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Introduction - motivation

1. Problem

In modern Europe, issues arise that may need an innovative approach rather than the traditional approach of public health systems. Before COVID-19, an estimated 27% of the EU adult population suffered from a mental health disorder (Vigo et al., 2016). Furthermore, 10.6% of European workers feel burnt-out (Schaufeli, 2018). The fast pace and high sensory input of modern society seem to constitute an environment that fuels overstimulation, higher levels of stress, and worse mental health. Secularized countries have a lower sense of meaning in life, which may also contribute to lower mental health (Oishi & Diener). Moreover, our societies are becoming more individualistic, which is correlated with loneliness (Barreto et al., 2021; Heu et al., 2019). There is less connection with the other, but also a distance from the natural environment (Cazalis et al., 2022). Urban neighbourhoods often lack restorative, green spaces. At the same time, in rural areas, basic services are disappearing. Physical activity levels and diet quality have decreased, which has led to increasing incidences of non-communicable diseases (Lachat et al., 2013). One cause of this is the more sedentary lifestyle, probed by digitalised environment (Moreno-Llomas, 2020). Children are spending multiple hours per day on their screens, potentially leading to nearsightedness, concentration problems, and disconnection from nature and reality (Larson et al., 2019). Social Media and gaming are addictive and pose physical and psychological risks when used in excess (Riehm et al., 2019). Even though contact can be made with anyone anywhere at anytime, social interaction in real life is jeopardised and loneliness is rising.

These modern issues can be classified in four dimensions: 1) physical 2) mental 3) social 4) spiritual. These are partially caused by the following aspects of modern society: digitalisation, individualization, and urbanisation, which leads to distance from nature.

Some of these modern issues, such as suicide and loneliness, are also present amongst farmers.

Issues on a more societal level are inequality and disintegration amongst different levels of education and income, urban vs. rural areas, different ethnic groups etc. These issues should be considered in finding a solution for the afore mentioned issues. There is societal awareness of these issues, but still there is a lack of such effective solutions.

The distinctive value of social farming has the promising potential to be a holistic solution to these modern issues. This paper will explore why and how social farming could be a social innovation supporting human health and well-being.

2. Proposal

The social farm, including its activities and environment, can provide a place and space where some of the above mentioned challenges can be overcome both for individuals outside the 'classic' target groups of social farming but also the wider society. The opportunities are inherent in its environment and functioning: farmers have 'diamonds



in their hands', but are insufficiently aware and proud of them and thus do not play them out.

Social farming may not need to distinguish itself so much in its therapeutic qualities to differentiate itself from other care initiatives. Rather, it should highlight its unique characteristic, and recognize three core social values of the farm:

- The farm as local meeting place for a diverse group of people
- The farm as a physical, sensory, authentic, and meaningful environment
- The farm is a place that invites holistic support for physical exercise as well as healthy and sustainable food

Recognizing this distinctive value of social farms, we believe that their services should not only be present to the typical target groups in social farming (people with disabilities, mental-ill health problems, elderly). Other target groups should also experience the special qualities of the farm, and farms could distinguish themselves as a company by offering those to them.

Those novel target groups could be all people who want to improve on physical, mental, social and/or spiritual well-being. Among many others, these could encompass:

- The general public willing to be in a green or farm environment
- People needing to recover from stress or burn-out
- Youth, school children or students who drop out/don't fit in regular school system
- Urban citizens
- Refugees
- People feeling lonely (e.g. young parents without social bonds, youngsters)
- Non-formal caretakers (respite care)
- People looking for job rehabilitation or re-integration

We see that several European countries already have experience with some of the above groups on social farms. From examples we know that a smart mixture of activities and target groups is a double-edged sword: it may benefit society, but also the farmer, through using their distinctive value as a business model. The resources developed to provide support to the typical target groups of social farming, like the skills of the farmer and their ability to work and communicate with people, the facilities and amenities of the farm, and its accessibility, the range of potential experiences already available can also be used to provide a beneficial environment to other individuals and groups.

Distinctive values of the farm

As described in the introduction, the farm can be a supportive and meaningful meeting place. It can be a place where diverse groups of people (income level, cultural background etc.) form a community by offering multiple services like nutritious meals, conversations, workshops, or an administrative and digital helpdesk. This would facilitate social integration and facilitate liveability. A farm is also a place where you literally discover the living 'world' with your hands and all your senses instead of digitally. The farm environment is special. There is the typical nature of seasons (spring, summer, autumn, winter) along with organic terrestrial logic of seed, care, harvest and rest. Being there is not just plugging out, it is entering the wonderful natural environment where there is contact with animals, the soil, the air and sun, wind and



rain. It can be a detox from our ratio-oriented and online world and a place to develop more practical talents. Lastly, the farm is a place where nutritious, fresh foods are produced, thus visitors are automatically in contact with a healthier diet, but also an awareness of where their food comes from. Furthermore, farm work provides a more physical lifestyle. Furthermore, farm work provides a more physical lifestyle. Lastly, the farm is a place where nutritious, fresh foods are produced. In this way, visitors automatically become aware where their food comes from.

From research we see that being on the farm can have a positive effect on the physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being of visitors. We see that on social farms, participants gain an increase in physical strength and fitness, their appetite increases, they use their senses more, they get more work out of their hands and manage their energy better, and they get tired of the physical work on the farm (Elings et al., 2011; De Bruin, 2009; SoFarTEAM, 2023). Looking at mental well-being, we see that the farm environment provides opportunities for self-reflection, participants have a goal for the day and they unwind in the green environment (Elings et al., 2011). We see that participants feel part of a community and that they gain new social contacts (Elings et al., 2011). Finally, working in nature offers participants wonder and they feel part of a bigger picture (Elings, Hudcova et al, 2023).

Proposal

We believe that social farming can play a broader role in the future in addressing the challenges and issues that currently exist in society. Various research shows that working on social farms makes a positive contribution to the physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being of specific target groups. Given the experiences among these target groups and the challenges they face, correspond to challenges currently prevalent in society such as loneliness, mental problems and lack of exercise. Many social farms already have years of experience in serving different target groups and have appropriate facilities on their farms. These services could also be made available to society and more general target groups. Our ideal would be that every inhabitant of Europe has access to green space, can gain insight into how his or her food is produced and has the opportunity to join a farm once in a while. In this, social farms can play an important role because they are shining examples in this respect. Connecting the agricultural sector with other sectors such as health care, education and general welfares cuts both ways. Agriculture comes closer to society and society, the citizens, can use the potential that social farmers have for their health and well-being.

Case examples

1. Community Houses - 'Dorpspunten' (EN: village points) in Flanders

The village points in Flanders are not (yet) on a farm, but they provide a meeting place, public services and are a selling point of local products. This is an initiative by municipality, province and care facilities providing public services in rural areas where basic services like supermarkets, public transport are not present anymore. Research



on liveability shows that it leads to social cohesion, and determines that rooms and playgrounds should be good, usable, sustainable and accessible. Research also show that the key success factors are local participation and ownership next to the quality, reachability and smart combinations of the services and facilities. De Lovie, a social institution for people with mental disabilities, started the first village point in West-Flanders in 2015 under the name of the former pub 'In Beveren'. Four new village points are elaborated after the successful and local supported first experiences. Example Dorpspunt In Beveren: <https://delovie.be/dorpspunt-in-beveren/> & <http://www.facebook.com/Dorpspuntinbeveren>

2. Community Gardens - Bloei & Groei Community gardens for women in vulnerable neighbourhoods in Amsterdam

Bloei & Groei (EN: Bloom & Grow) is a gardening project in Amsterdam for women in the neighbourhood. It comprises 6 gardens in different urban neighbourhoods in Amsterdam. Their vision is 'for Bloom & Growth to be a green oasis where resilient women blossom, see and new possibilities, and explore.' Some of the gardens are 'community gardens', gathering neighbours for gardening and workshops, where 'garden coaches' support with planning and growing the plots. A few of the gardens are 'healing gardens', where women can apply to work on their resilience and talk to so-called 'blossom coaches' to support their personal growth. These are very accessible, as only a good motivation and small fee (with a high discount for people with low income or city pass and students) are needed. No diagnosis or referral from a health professional is needed. This way, Bloei & Groei brings women together from all ages with diverse cultural backgrounds, creating community in vulnerable neighbourhoods. Through the gardening and the workshops, the women can experience a place of relaxation, connection with nature and others, and fulfilment. The slow pace and imperfections in gardening are a contrast with the fast pace and perfectionism of the modern urban environment. Thus, they can connect with their own resilience, and feel empowered.



Website: <https://www.bloeiengroei.org/tuinieren>

Documentary (in Dutch): https://www.npostart.nl/2doc/18-05-2019/VPWON_1306922

3. Community gardens - mixed target groups at KOKOZA

Prague's productive community garden (urban farm) called KOKOZA (short for Community Composting and Garden) was established in 2012 to promote urban composting and prevent food waste. The organisation has 2 community gardens in Prague open to the public, providing a refuge for young parents excluded from society, families, lonely seniors, international students or just passers-by. They do not present classical groups of people that can easily access public health care or social services but who need to meet others naturally. Farming activities are calming activities, and in



the garden, they are safe. The organisation operates as a social enterprise employing people with mental illness. In addition to the technical maintenance of these gardens, the employees also take care of public green spaces. In the past, they have built community beds at IKEA and Kaufland department stores on housing estates where the possibility to grow your own food is very limited and where people can experience community, natural physical activities, and meet new people. KOKOZA is not a farm in the true sense, but it offers a bit of a "rural atmosphere" in an urban environment. The organisation carefully cultivates good relationships with various institutions, including schools. It offers workshops and excursions to schoolchildren from excluded localities in its community gardens and friendly organisations. It proposes children with fewer social stimuli and opportunities with activities not provided by their parents and care-takers. On the outskirts of the cities live poorer families who do not have the opportunity to go on holidays or trips, the community garden gives them this experience.

The Free Farm at the Confluence (mix of target groups coming to the farm and delivering the wide scope of diverse services) - the case from Czechia

Another example of a holistic social farm approach from the Czech Republic is Svobodný statek na soutoku (the Free Farm at the Confluence). This farm balances very well in its social, environmental and economical approach. It was originally



established as Camphill, which has expanded greatly to include the farming part, which the people who live and ride on the farm consider crucial. The farm can combine care for the traditional group of people with intellectual disabilities but is very mindful of the offer for volunteers (WorkCamps, HelpX, WWOOF), for interns from schools, and organises events for the public (lectures, rural traditions, concerts). They bring their production to Prague and widen their activities within their community that supports agriculture. The community members come to work on the farm. "Healthy", wealthy and overworked people and their families go to the countryside for a real work, rest, help, and meet people with disabilities. People from the city put down their jobs and their smartphones and literally work for a while. Although The Farm at the Confluence is well-networked with many other organic farmers and producers in Prague and other cities, people there strive to meet local needs. The farm is an important

local stakeholder. It is a meeting place for the neighbours, people struggling with burn-out and mental fatigue. It is a place offering physical activities for families coming from cities who miss physical work. They all can feel the participation in the community.



4. Social Farming – Food and Friendship at Botildenborg, Malmö, Sweden

This small urban farm focuses on social farming and market gardening. It is a meeting place, a living lab, for all interested in learning about urban agriculture ranging from technical aspects of growing, market gardening, social farming and outdoor cooking. It also welcomes short-term visitors such as students, growers and private companies interested in knowledge exchange.



There is an outdoor education for children and youth in collaboration with surrounding schools. The work also includes supervised vocational training for migrants (over several weeks) either in the urban garden or the restaurant. Also, the monthly gathering for the “growing buddies” group of locals and newly arrived in Sweden to make new friends or socialise.

Each month there is an open market for the public where other local farmers sell their produce. As a part of the holistic approach, there is a restaurant using the produce from the garden. It is open to the public and for catering (also part of the vocational training program). The social farm at Botildenborg embraces social, ecological and economic sustainability in all their work (Pálsdóttir et al. 2021 and Orsini et al. 2023). (Picture by H. Zettergren).

Conclusions

The cases show various (overlapping) ways in which social farms can reach multiple target groups for instance

- The social farm with the function of a community house with additional benefits, like public services, sales of products, meeting place
- Urban garden or farming projects in or nearby cities that are easily accessible by city dwellers and also offer a green oasis in the city
- The social farm open to people interested in personal development and if needed can offer personal coaching.
- People who seek variety in addition to their office jobs with occasional physical work on a farm or in a green environment.
- People seeking meaning and experiencing this meaning through food production and nature management on the farm.

Ideas for innovations

1. Ideas for innovate projects/solutions

Next to the cases, other ideas for innovative projects could be: education for youth on farms; providing retreats for people with burn-outs.

Unique, complementary combinations of target groups could both bring in novel target groups: People with learning disabilities inspire managers with a burn-out on a retreat;



lonely people integrate with refugees; playing children give joy to older adults' lives. This is also beneficial for the farmer. The social farming target groups of today will play a role in welcoming novel target groups to the farm. These are not only 'client/care recipient', but also play an intermediary role. This is how we achieve more complex relationships and target groups in social farming.

2. Footnotes and barriers Business model

The essence remains offering services that benefit people, but farmers are entrepreneurs and need income to sustain themselves and the farm.

To enlarge opportunities, it can be argued that we should not only look at subsidized care/public sector, but wonder if we can find a revenue model in the private market. It is worth to check not only the already regulated market but to offer a unique product/service.

It is crucial here to maintain the social farming principle. This principle asks for inclusion of people with all incomes. Paid services can attract novel target groups, for example in the form of wealthy and busy business people who want a 'retreat' from their work life. However, only offering paid services would exclude a vital part of the novel target groups.

Nonetheless, here lies a promising opportunity: what if better-off people indirectly pay for people who have less access to resources? Consequently, there is an opportunity for integration between different populations.

Or what if social farms could be offered as a common good, just like the roads and the street lanterns? Paid by health insurance or the government.

To install these novel systems, it is important to know the existing systems of market, regulatory framework, and insurance system. But above all, social farming needs to be distinctive, find a niche as a company so that people want to pay. Highly subsidized, mainstream services often come in highly regulated systems that entrepreneurs get bogged down in.

This different approach also gives farmers a different business model. They are not solely dependent on the funding stream associated with state supports for vulnerable groups. They are able to find other funding streams including from private individuals/companies or organisations who may be willing/able to pay a premium to access the environment of the social farm. This gives the farmer more autonomy and diversifies the income stream.

Research Needs

1. Knowledge gaps

- How to attract the general public to farms, being an equal opportunity with equal accessibility for everyone? Not only for citizens who are, for example, very concerned about the environment or highly educated. How to reach the widest possible audience and perhaps the very audience that could benefit from staying on the farm.



- What is the distinctive value of the farm environment? In comparison with other sources of support (medical, psychological) and other natural environments? This is the start to make a business model.
- Better communicating and highlighting the positive impact of working on social farms for 'classic' target groups like people with intellectual disabilities, mental-ill health, dementia or recovering from addiction can create more interest from society and other target groups (e.g. youth with mental health problems, children, refugees, respite care for informal care takers, people with a burn-out etc.).
- Better communication of the positive impact of working on social farms for different target groups is needed to highlight the importance of social farms and encourage collaboration with other sectors such as health-care, education and social welfare.

2. Research needs from practice

- Making social farming services available to a broader target group and, with this, also contributing to bridge the gap between agriculture and society.
- Research and experiences show that social farming can have a positive impact on participants' well-being in several ways. Could staying or working on a social farm also have a positive impact on the quality of life of a broader target group than just the 'classic' target groups?
- If social farms in the future will open up to more target groups and participants how can we monitor the balance between care activities and agriculture production. As the last is our distinctive value.
- And also managing the balance between the core social farming model of supporting our 'classic' target groups and opening up the farm for other individuals and groups. And keep the social farm environment a safe environment also for the more vulnerable target groups. There could also be challenges in retaining the identity and not 'chasing' the money. Authenticity and social values have to remain central.
- Legal barriers and opportunities for innovative forms of social farming and funding.



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