

EU CAP NETWORK FOCUS GROUP SOCIAL FARMING AND INNOVATIONS

The role of social farming in bridging the gap between agriculture and society

**Marjolein Elings, Nele Dejonckheere, Eliska
Hudcova, Damien Thiery & Ismael Navarro**

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1. Introduction

Problem

There is a growing distance between society and nature, caused by urbanisation, technology, capitalism and individualism. 9.7 km is the average distance that a human needs to travel to be in a natural area, which is doubled for several European and Asian countries (Cazalis et al., 2022). The gap between agriculture and society is a manifestation of that gap. Industrialization and upscaling of farming in the past decades means that only a small fraction of the world's population is a farmer or a farmworker, visitor or family member. There is a physical distance between the consumer and the producer of the food on their plate, the farmer. Many urban citizens never visit a farm in their life, which leads to misunderstanding of the effort that goes into the production of their food, and its impact on the environment (Homans, n.d.). This is reinforced by the fact that many children do not receive education about agriculture at school. From the perspective of agriculture, we see that many farmers feel isolated and worried about the future of their farms (Fraser et al., 2005). The negative image that agriculture has in some European countries does not contribute positively to this. The above leads to a gap between agriculture and society.

We see that in recent years the number of social farms has increased in several countries in Europe. Social farms are farms that combine health care and social services with agricultural production or working in a green environment (Elings et al., 2022). Different target groups visit these farms: participants who work on the farm, their family members, consumers who visit the farm shop or are engaged in other multifunctional agricultural activities. This ensures that these social farms are well embedded and connected to society. Besides having a positive impact on participants' quality of life, we therefore believe that social farms can also make a valuable contribution to bridging the gap between agriculture and society. In this mini-paper, we provide insight into how social farms can contribute in bridging this gap and will describe some best-practices.

Relevance

Social farms can make a valuable contribution to connecting agriculture and society in several ways. First, we see that participants and family members who visit the farm pass on their experiences to others. Often, social farms have several multifunctional agricultural activities on their farms, for example a farm shop, tourism or other social services such as education. This ensures that consumers can take a look around the farm and therefore get a picture of what farming and being a farmer is all about. Social farmers who have switched from a regular farm to a social farm indicate that they feel less isolated, they experience more pleasure in their work and they also say that the image of their farm towards society has improved. We see that many social farms eventually switch from conventional farming to organic farming because it combines better with the care for people. We see that by opening up the farm, social farms can contribute to the perception of agriculture and how food is produced. Consumers see with their own eyes the effort the farmer makes to produce their food.



As a result, consumers may also be willing to pay a fair price. And vice versa, the contact between farmer and consumer can also lead to the farmer adapting his/her farm management by for instance growing other products or producing them in a more sustainable way.

Description of key issues

Attempting to describe the gap, leads to an understanding that it has multiple aspects and exists on different levels that feed into each other. Agriculture is more than food production alone. Farming and agriculture can also contribute to keeping the countryside liveable by offering services, employment or care close to home. We also see a growing group of farmers contributing to ecosystem services such as nature and landscape management, short-chain food initiatives and nature and environmental education.

We see that the gap between agriculture and society has several aspects namely:

A physical gap; there is a literal distance between urban and rural areas, especially clear in Czech Republic, where rural sociologists Bernard (2018) and Pospěch (2014, 2021) point out how a lower level of services, poorer education, lower availability of employment, and related income levels determine success in the future life of rural citizens. The remote and peripheral countryside is characterised by predominantly agricultural activities, which in Czech terms are usually agro-industrial isolated enterprises and employ a small number of local inhabitants. The profits from production are not invested locally but are taken out of the region. Thus, they strengthen the poor livelihood of local people.

A knowledge/awareness gap; many urban citizens are not aware of what happens on the farm and how the food they buy in the supermarket is produced. Education and understanding of the value of farming is lacking.

A communication gap; the physical gap leads to lack of social interaction between farmers and citizens. Moreover, differences in culture and communication styles may complicate conversation. On a larger level, communication is fragmented. Because of diversity in forms of agriculture, there is not one overarching sector that communicates outside. Furthermore, farmers are not educated to be great marketeers.

A cultural gap; there has been an identity change. Farmers used to have a higher social status, fulfilling a more diverse role in the neighbourhood: facilitating a place for connection and care for vulnerable people of the village, being a nature expert and offering jobs. In the last decades their role has been reduced to food production.

These aspects of the gap fuel a negative reputation of farmers amongst citizens, where they are being viewed as either pollutive, big, industrial factories or as old-fashioned. Reasons for the bad reputation also varies among the different European countries. To illustrate, in several European languages (e.g. French, Romanian and Dutch), the word for 'farmer', or 'peasant', has the connotation of an insult. In Spain, farming is regarded an old-fashioned job, being 'stuck in the past'. Contradictorily, in other countries, farms are regarded as pollutive factories. For example, in the Netherlands, restrictive regulations against nitrogen pollution have caused multiple



national farmers' protests, creating the image of an angry, nature-destroying farmer. Nitrogen issues are also present in Flanders and Czech Republic. In Czech Republic, agriculture has a bad image for its negative impact on soil and biodiversity. The profession itself is also not popular in some European countries because of mental health and loneliness issues, such as France where it is known for its high suicide rates among farmers. In Czech Republic, agricultural policies are associated with corruption, leading to a bad reputation, whereas agricultural policies have also been very beneficial for new ecosystem services. However, in Flanders, 80% of citizens still admire farmers, although it has decreased compared to five years ago (VILT, 2020). These differences in reputation could depend on the spatial intensity of agriculture and the way they are portrayed in the media.

There is also an internal gap between large, more intensive and small scale farms, which may complicate bridging the gap within the agriculture sector itself. We see that nowadays some agricultural models receive less social appreciation and support than others. The models that citizens often see as 'better' are often the farms that e.g. have a multifunctional farming branch or have a short food chain and therefore have more contact with citizens/consumers. Social farms are also often among the farms valued by citizens. The majority of these farms are well embedded in society and host many citizens/consumers on their farms or go out into society by offering different services. This raises the question: to what extent can social farms therefore contribute to bridging the gap between agriculture and society?

Proposal

We think social farming can close the gap between agriculture and society because it has so many other beneficial aspects for the community besides producing food. Here we can think of:

- A social farm can be beneficial for the physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being of participants working on the farm
- Social farms open their farmyards allowing citizens and their children to take a look at a farm and gain insight into how crops grow and animals are kept (education)
- Bringing citizens and farmers together which facilitates dialogue and knowledge exchange
- It engages citizens in farm work allowing citizens to experience from the farmer's perspective which can lead to mutual understanding
- By shortening the food chain, consumers get a better idea of what it is like to produce food, they come into contact with people with disabilities and the farmer has more contact with consumers which in the future could lead to adapting his or her farm management to consumers' needs, for example, making the food chain more sustainable.
- It gives citizens the opportunity to be and recreate in a green space.

To further explore this potential of social farms, we believe a number of action points are needed. Namely:

- More target groups need to be reached, this will be further elaborated in mini-paper 1 about broadening target groups.



- The informal network of participants working on social farms could be better utilized and used as a marketing platform to show what happens on social farms.
- Better communication of exactly what happens on social farms and what positive impact they have on the lives of participants and society. As a result, these social services will be better appreciated, which may lead to better embedding in current systems and funding of what social farmers offer. This can lead to better awareness of the phenomenon of social farms not only in society but also within the agricultural sector. This recommendation also emerges from the market outlook report on social agriculture of the EU project Green4C (www.green4c.eu).
- Better communication of the positive effects social farms has on landscape maintenance and nature conservation via providing eco-system services and with this contributing to biodiversity and sustainability.
- Also communicating more proactively as agricultural sector as a whole. Communication still takes place too much in different groups or by individual farmers. This also emerged from a study done on society's image of farmers in Flanders (2017).

Case examples

We collected some best practices of social farms that are already carrying out many activities and initiatives which are contributing to closing the gap between agriculture and society.

Case 1. Field trips with students of social work in Czech Republic- BioStatek

There is a need to show life and opportunities in the countryside to non-agricultural students. Social farms can create such an environment that is attractive even for urban people and thus create a positive image of farming. In the Czech Republic, excursions to social farms are facilitated for future social workers at several higher education schools. An example is the Biostatek farm, situated in the remote rural area of the structurally disadvantaged Karlovy Vary Region. It is a sheep farm that manages approx. 11 ha of pastures and 2 ha of orchards. At the farm, sheep's milk is processed into cheese, ricotta, butter and ice cream, and sheep meat is offered. The farmer processes vegetables into chutneys and fruits into ciders and jams. The farmer very carefully revitalises the surrounding landscape, and the farm operates agroecologically. It is visited annually by approx. 500 school pupils and volunteers from the WWOOF platform and the CSA community. The farmer cooperates with regional non-profit organisations. When one of their clients needs extra support, the farmer involves them in agricultural work in a non-violent way, houses them and gives them extra attention. Field trips to social farms are one way to show agriculture at its best.

Reducing the gap between urban and remote rural environments is also important. In the Czech Republic, they are devoted to this topic. One way to prevent this distancing of remote areas to centres is to explore and support these social farms constantly. It is important to promote vibrant, lively organisations such as social farms. Agricultural social enterprises often act as islands of positive deviation.



Case 2. Bio&co farm aims at creating a link with Bucharest's citizens
<https://bio-co.ro/>

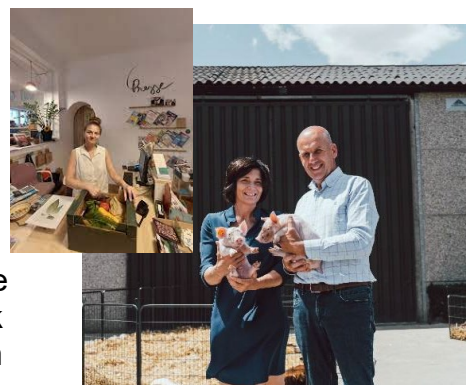
The main objective of the Bio&Co farm is to integrate vulnerable workers in the conventional job market, but another objective of the farm is to create a link between the farm and consum'actors in Bucharest, as well as its citizens in general. Bio&co farm is located less than 1 hour away from Bucharest by car. The following activities contribute to bridging the gap:

Vegetables are delivered in 14 delivery points in Bucharest: school parking lot, libraries, cafes, hotels, delicatessens. Consum'actors come every Wednesday to the same delivery points creating a habit for them/the delivery point owner. the vegetables are freshly cut, local and seasonal. Thus, the consum'actors learn to understand what the soil delivers in the respective season. Weekly newsletters are delivered with the vegetable basket, including some recipes, updates and pictures about what is happening in the farm in that week. An open door is organized with workshops and activities for kids. Team-buildings are organized at the farm with dedicated activities around biodiversity, healthy lifestyle, agriculture. School visits are held with dedicated activities around sensory discoveries (sensorial garden, seed planting, etc.), sustainable farming and healthy lifestyle. On numerous fairs, the farm presents itself and its products. A closed Facebook group was created to increase the sense of community between consumers and the farm. Update of the farm as well as recipes from clients will be shared in the group.



Case 3. Family farm in Flanders -
www.terwielewalle.be

Ter Wielewalle in Pittem (West-Flanders, Belgium) is a family-runned production farm. Their main productions are pork, arable crops and vegetables for the frozen food industry. In 2004, Bart (53) and Marleen (51) started social farming. Daily, they host vulnerable people in a natural environment. The range of target groups represents their wide network and cooperation with local social organisations: from persons with physical or mental disabilities over burn-out to people with addiction problems. Recently (ca. 2020) they extended their farm activities to other target groups like children for school visits, birthday parties, summer camps. People can visit, taste farm products, etcetera in their leisure time. These last activities are only possible through the participation and support of the vulnerable people. Their help and enthusiasm makes it possible for Bart and Marleen to open up their farm to the neighbourhood. For example, they guide farm visits or



facilitate a monthly afternoon get-together with homemade pancakes. Thus, Ter Wielewalle shows how social farming activities can support the integration and cohesion between farmers, participants/client groups and the neighbourhood.

Case 4. Multifunctional farm De Eemlandhoeve in the Netherlands - <https://www.eemlandhoeve.nl/>

Farmer Jan Huijgen of the Eemlandhoeve intentionally aims to bridge the gap between farmer and citizen, rural and urban, creator and creation. It is a 'broad' farm: it has a store, a café, a children playground, overnight stays, and rents out its space for parties, events and meetings. Other than that, it is planning to build a 'campus' for education on ecology and agriculture. Notably, a bridge is also built with large scale farming by organising excursions in which both the Eemlandhoeve and the neighbouring large scale farm are visited. The Friends of the Eemlandhoeve Foundation, with around 100 friends over recent years, is also a way to strengthen the citizen-farmer connection. Citizens participate by investing €1.000, for which they receive 5 kilos of organic meat.



Case 5. Social farm Hoeve Klein Mariendaal - <https://www.hoevekleinmariendaal.nl/>

Hoeve Klein Mariendaal supervise young people, adults and seniors who needs some guidance. These are mainly people with mental-ill health, learning difficulties, non-congenital brain injury, autism and elderly with dementia. They can work in the garden, animal care, picking garden, tea shop and green maintenance in the neighbourhood. Everyone can learn, participate and learn to participate. At their own pace, in their own way. the farm is located on the outskirts of the city of Arnhem and thus also offers citizens of Arnhem the opportunity to go for a walk on the grounds, have a drink in the tearoom and children can play in the garden or with the animals. Participants of course also work in the tea shop's service. In addition, a harvest subscription was set up this year. Families can take a paid vegetable subscription but they do not receive the vegetables in a package to take home but can come and harvest these vegetables themselves every week. With this, the farm hopes that citizens will become more involved in how food is really grown and that there will be mutual integration between participants and citizens.



Conclusions and ideas to put things in practice

We see that social farms can bridge the gap between agriculture and society in different ways. The cases described above underpin this. What is key in these examples is that they are all social farms in which the farmer offers not only care and social services but also other multifunctional activities so that in addition to providing



care, the farm is open not only to the participants and their families and friends but also to many other visitors and consumers. Examples of good practices farmers can implement to connect better with society are:

- Rent out space for parties/events, having catering facilities on the farm
- Organize education, excursions and work session for companies/schools
- Restaurant/ cafe/ tearoom
- Visibly sell produce directly to citizen (stall, store etc.)
- Using (social) media for marketing/promotion/communication and creating an online community
- Connect with the family/caretakers of participants on the social farm
- Having a play area for children
- Organize workshops that attract citizens
- Offering vegetable packages where consumers can harvest their own vegetables and/or fruits. In this way, education also takes place.
- Sell products in the city paired with sharing knowledge about farm on fairs or selling points. This is also a good way in shorten the food chain between farm and consumer.
- Sponsorship/crowd funding for instance adopting fruit trees or setting up a club of 100 where people invest their donation in e.g. setting up a vegetable garden on the farm or building a shed.

The above ideas can all be applied on individual (social) farms. However, looking at agriculture as a whole, social farms do not give the whole picture of agriculture given the sometimes small-scaled or family farm nature of social farms. Therefore, it is good to think about how consumers also get that broader picture. We see this happening e.g. at the Eemlandhoeve, where the farm is a combination of a multifunctional farm and a conventional large-scale farm. In that way, you can also show citizens that part of agriculture during excursions or working days.

It is important to realize that this agriculture-society gap is not in a vacuum and lies within the broader issues of social trends, as described in mini-paper 1 on other target groups. Therefore coalitions and collaborations should be made with other sectors that try to combat these larger issues. In it, we see social farms making connections more often with movements such as agroecology or community-supported agriculture. Often, this is because farmers working with people recognise that they care for people and therefore also care for a good planet. One example is social farm Wenum Hoeve in Lochem, the Netherlands, where the social farm has made a connection with Herenboeren. Herenboeren is an organisation supports citizens in developing nature-driven cooperative farms. They see these farming communities, with their skilled professional farmers and gardeners, as a growing alternative to the current food system (www.herenboeren.nl). Bottleneck is that even this collaboration still fails to connect conventional large-scale farmers and consumers. However, we think the connection between social farmers, consumers and citizens can be a first step in the process between a better understanding and connection between agriculture and society. Social farms can also be a shining example or best practice to their fellow farmers in taking a step in which they open up their farm and products more to society and provide insight into what they do.



Research Needs

Knowledge gaps and research needs from practice

- Better understanding of the existing gap, diversity in reputation amongst countries, and the effects of this gap.
- What effect do social farms have on connecting farmers with citizens?
- How to engage and connect relatives of participants in social farming?
- Social farming can have a positive impact on participants' well-being in several ways. Is it possible to open up what social farming has to offer to a broader target group than just the 'classic' target groups and thereby also bridge the gap between agriculture and society?
- 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. Where there are examples of cooperation between the agricultural sector and the education, welfare and healthcare sector, do we see that this creates a better connection between the agricultural sector and other sectors? And does this improve connection between agriculture and society at large? Where there is collaboration with other sectors such as education, welfare and health care is there a connection between these sectors and agriculture?

Further Reading

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