

EU CAP NETWORK FOCUS GROUP SOCIAL FARMING AND INNOVATIONS

Ecological inclusion and social farming

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July 2023



Introduction

This Mini Paper focusses on two important interrelated issues connected to social farming: its essential relevance with ecology, natural heritage (landscape) protection and the relation of farming to the environment position, and the connection to the connected sectors of society. Ecology is considered both in the environmental sense and in the potential of social farms to create a 'community' ecosystem that supports economies at a local level. The term "ecological inclusion" is used to describe the possible added value of social farms not only providing social inclusion for vulnerable people but also care for the vulnerable nature, for wildlife, animals, plants and the soils on farm level. Social farms can provide a supporting environment for people and nature as well.

This Mini Paper shows that social farms are often run in an environmentally friendly and sustainable way. In many countries, most social farms are managed as organic. From the point of view of current challenges and threats, like the climate crisis and the worldwide decline of biodiversity, social farming can meet political demands for multifunctional ways of farming that can provide so-called "ecosystem services" as well as active care and development of "cultural islands" that do not only conserve nature but contribute actively to improve nature and landscape development on farm level. The social farm can become a nucleus, a starting point for rethinking the relationship between humans and nature, catalysed by people with special needs that are included in the farm system. Their special needs have the potential to adapt the whole farming system in an environmentally friendly way. So social and ecological inclusion aims become two sides of the same coin.

The Mini Paper also shows that people with lower social participation due to health or other disabilities have diminished access to a safe and diverse environment and healthy food and have fewer opportunities to change their situation. In social farming, they are empowered and allowed to participate actively in a better environment.

The last point of this Mini Paper is also to rebuild the ecosystem of social farming, which includes interdisciplinary collaboration and the multifunctionality of agriculture. Social farming includes culture, aesthetics, recreation, education and more and is able to add value to the farm, to people, to the rural area and nature as well.

1. Why is this Mini Paper needed?

- › The Mini Paper highlights the positive impacts of social farming on environmental sustainability. We are convinced that social farming can deliver valuable contributions to preserve and develop biodiversity and cultural landscapes starting from the farm level. Therefore, it can provide new and valuable impulses for the sustainable development of rural areas.
- › The Mini Paper presents the potential of social farming in changing the perspective of those who are cared for into those who care actively, emphasising their contribution to a healthy environment. This focus group believes that social



farming is a tool to bring people from the margins of society to the centre of attention.

- › The Mini Paper notes the full range of related services associated with social farming in a particular locality and their implications for environmental and economic improvement.
- › The Mini Paper highlights how social farming can contribute to reverse trends of population loss in rural areas, by working together in close connection with communities, using more environmentally sustainable production techniques, providing not only products but also social services that benefit the entire community.

2. Added values

This Mini Paper addresses policies as well, since social farming can deliver valuable contributions to preserve and develop biodiversity and cultural landscapes starting from the farm level and, therefore, can provide new and valuable impulses for the sustainable development of rural areas. Striving for social and ecological inclusion improves the quality of life for people not only on the farm, creates a healthy environment and also adds value for the farm organism. I.e., harvesting branches from hedgerows rejuvenate old shrubs and provides healthy fodder for goats and cattle that can be dried, stored, and fed in the wintertime as a healthy addition to silage or hay. There are many more labour-intensive old techniques that normal productive farms usually cannot apply.

This focus group understands social farming not as a niche of specialisation or an approach to add additional income for a farm but as a starting point for farming becoming “more social”, for the inclusion of vulnerable and other people as for the healthy development of nature and landscape as well.

By gathering and sharing practical examples and approaches to ecological inclusion on the farm level, this paper presents social farming as an essential element in creating a resilient countryside where no one is left behind.

Dissertation

In the following chapter, state-of-the-art and the most relevant and recent discoveries on the topic are highlighted.

Ecological and environmental issues of social farming

Social farming *uses* the environment of a farm to improve the living conditions for different target groups of people with special needs. The relation of man to nature, in general, is a “taking” one and anthropocentric: Nature provides the conditions for humans to spend their life on our planet; the minerals provide the solid ground, plants provide oxygen and food, and animals accompany human beings on earth. The relation of people to nature in social farming includes the risk of exploiting nature for the well-being and therapy of vulnerable people. On the other hand, social farming includes the option “to pay nature something back” to widen the aim of social inclusion (= supporting and including people with special needs) towards “ecological inclusion”, meaning to include the development of nature into the goal of support and care. Social



farming reinforces the idea that I, too, am capable of caring, not just being an object of care.

From the margins to the centre of attention

Although this paper focus primarily on agriculture, people cannot be forgotten in social farming. In social farming, environmental and ecological justice are directly declared, which are the concepts that have become widespread in social work in recent decades. Next to social justice, environmental justice also has relevance for human dignity and well-being. It was observed that poor communities are highly inequitable in sharing the environmental harms, suffer the most from pollution problems or environmental risks. Poor living environment is associated with lower chances of future life success. “Environmental justice’s first task is to preserve the integrity of the natural environment and its resource potential for the benefit of human welfare” (Besthorn 2013: 35).

Still, environmental justice sounds rather anthropocentric, as if nature should serve the benefit of man. Taking this a step further is the concept of ecological justice, which notes the strong connection, mutual respect and interdependence between humans and nature is at the very heart of ecological inclusion. In ecological justice all human and non-human species are entitled to a just and equal claim to existence that ensures their well-being. “A radical equalitarian ecological justice stresses that humans are systemically embedded and biologically embodied being whose ethical responsibilities emerge from and extend to all non-human beings and entities” (Besthorn 2013: 39).

Social farming embodies these ideas of environmental /ecological justice. Social farms are environments that offer even the most vulnerable people a dignified living environment. As cultural islands, social farms provide security, healthy food, water and landscape access, social life, and variable services. In a profound sense, partnerships and interdependence develop here. This is also an aspect of ecological inclusion. The social farm improves the quality of life of people, but also, people create a healthy environment through their actions. They care for animals by hand, in close contact with the soil and living organisms. They can observe the process of life and protect it. They can experience a role reversal from the person being cared for to the person doing the caring. Just as vulnerable people become the focus of attention on the social farm, so too is vulnerable nature, the basis of human existence, well cared for.

The double-added value appears in social farming. In caring for the land, animals and the landscape, people become able to develop nature. They become actors themselves. They thus strengthen ecology and environmental sustainability. They improve their societal position and regain the opportunity to be in a healthy environment, fully participate in society and eat healthily.

When looking at social farms as organisations, it is possible to see how much they as entities contribute to the resilience of rural communities, providing benefits and positive externalities to a specific space. It is not only about production and consumption, but about linking topics, organizations, and projects and creating a real ecosystem.

1. Providing good examples

In this Mini Paper, we would like to focus on practical examples and approaches to ecological inclusion on the farm level. Two farmers, Colm O'Dowd from Ireland and



Olga Brito from Portugal, provided examples from their social farms. Eliška Hudcová from Czechia, who has initiated an Erasmus+ - project on “Eco-Social farming”, and Thomas van Elsen from Germany, who has been working on synergies of Social Farming and landscape development for several years, contributed with their experiences. All members of the Focus Group were invited to contribute as well.

a. Middlethird Farm

Middlethird Farm is a 4.5 ha coastal farm located across the bay from Galway City in Ireland. The aim of this family farm was to re-imagine life in rural Ireland by building a farm enterprise based on sound environmental, social and economic principles and provide inspiration for other farmers across rural Ireland. The farm currently comprises 4 commercial polytunnels, a kitchen garden, orchards, vegetable and herb gardens. It originally converted to organic to add value to the produce. Traditionally restored farm buildings including a workshop, a glasshouse and animal enclosures were developed and the farm began welcoming participants for social farming activities in 2015 with support from Social Farming Ireland. It has since hosted more than 1200 participant days, one of the busiest social farms in Ireland, where the social farming concept is relatively new. 2 local staff are employed each day to support the participants and an open gate farm policy means that the farm has become a lively social resource for many neighbors and passers-by.



Figure 1a. The Arch Group planting trees provided by the Tribes Beekeepers Association @ Middlethird; 1b. wildflowers grown for seed collection @ Middlethird; 1c. wildflower seed bombs sold at community events @ Middlethird.

Broadening the social farming concept, Middlethird established an indoor and outdoor stage which provides our local rural community with a unique venue for socially inclusive activities (e.g. concerts, theatre, art exhibitions). Community social events provide a platform to highlight social and environmental issues of concern and provide an opportunity for visitors to learn about how to address these issues at a personal level. The social farm participants carry out the preparations (setting up seating, lighting, signage, refreshments etc.), attend and participate in the events (bird photo exhibition, live nativity, open days). Demonstrations of our work at Middlethird include composting and soil health, wildflowers and tree planting for bees and highlight the marine plastic waste issue especially through plastic waste art, which we gather from our shore.





Figure 2: Visitors enjoying traditional Irish Music during the festival of Lughnasa @ Middlethird Social Farm.

b. Association of Syntropic Land (Mértola, Portugal)



Figure 3: Regenerative farm project in Mértola (Cortegano 2021).

Mértola is a municipality located in the south-east of Alentejo (Portugal) with a semi-arid climate, being amongst the regions in Europe most susceptible to desertification. The vulnerability leads to severe limitations both in agricultural and other economic activities, accelerating migration and depopulation. To try to reverse this, local farmers and entrepreneurs created a new association in 2020, named Association of Syntropic Land. It's a local initiative that aims to foster agroecological transition, in a logic of partnership, amongst the local community (Cortegano et al. 2021). There are several objectives, being one of the most important to encourage agroecological and

regenerative practices that counteract soil degradation (desertification) and promote adaptation to climate change. The farmers receive people who want to settle as new farmers in Mértola and provide education, training, and support for the installation of regenerative agriculture projects. The target population of this community social farming project are everyone who wants to change their lives, are looking for new work/life opportunities as farmers, but also education and tools on how to do it. By creating the opportunity for the installation of these new agricultural projects, it directly benefits to the environment and also to the rural development of the area. Working as an association of Social Farmers, the benefits cover more territory, and the impacts are much more efficient for biodiversity protection and soil improvements (Fig.3).



c. CERCICA – social farming, ecosystem improvement and innovation

CERCICA is a social cooperative founded in 1976 by parents as an alternative to the regular education for children with disabilities. It is based in Cascais Municipality, near Lisbon. In 2006 started a small business of gardening services and plant production, aiming to provide therapeutic and occupational activities, training, and professional opportunities for citizens with mental disabilities. In 2009 the plant production occupied less than 2000 m², but to innovate and provide more social services it was important to improve the production. At first the agricultural practices were conventional, making it difficult to do occupational activities, sometimes making it impossible to access the greenhouses and fields of production. The biodiversity at the time was very poor, and in the space that was provided for CERCICA from the Municipality, there were 2 ha of land used as illegal deposit of waste, with poor and very compacted soils. To provide more and better social services, the decision was made to convert agriculture to organic. There were applications for the support agriculture programs of the CAP and for other investors. In 2013, these supports allowed to start to recover the soils. At the same time, it was possible to construct rock walls and to plant autochthonous and melliferous shrub hedges, that were essential for the recovery of auxiliar insects and fauna (Brito 2016). The improvement on the ecosystem was visible (Fig4). The bees, ladybugs, praying mantises, lacewings, amphibians, snakes, etc, started to appear in great abundance. The workers and clients started to cheer these visits, and, at the same time, it was finally possible and safer to work and for activities of green care in the fields and greenhouses. Clients from the different sections of the occupational activities, including the more profound disabilities started to use the fields for therapy, as well as the monitors and therapists.



Figure 4: The fields of CERCICA in 2017 (Brito 2017).

The Garden Center was built, and new products were also produced like organic vegetables and dry herbs. With these new products it was also possible to develop the first Social Farming label in Portugal, with the garden centre clients recognizing the differentiation of the products that they consumed.

d. Surcenord Farm

An example of the synergy between social agriculture and development of the natural surroundings is provided by Surcenord Farm (Alsace, France), an organic grassland farm founded in 1978 which keeps cattle and forms part of a remedial educational institution with several residential homes and workshops. Fifteen young people with learning disabilities aged between 15 and 27 receive instruction and therapy (riding, art therapy), work on the farm and undertake domestic duties. The two farmers place the land and the farm facilities at the disposal of the educators and carers. Some seven or eight of the young people at a time, always accompanied by educators, are involved in the farm work which mainly comprises work in the cattle sheds, harvesting fodder, woodland management and landscape care (fig. 5) as well as the maintenance of fences and traditional irrigation systems.





Figure 5: Landscaping with youngsters on Surcenord Farm (André Frommelt)

The farm is situated on about 100 ha of largely sloping land at 850-1140 m AMSL above the parish of Orbey and Weisstal in the Vosges (cf. also Köppl & van Elsen 2005). It is managed as pasture and mowed for forage. The livestock comprises 25 cows and calves, about 20 beef cattle, 10 heifers and 10 horses. The products sold are meat, wood and woodchips. In 2004, the subsidies, which include state support for integration of the disabled, comprised 44% of turnover.

The management of Surcenord Farm are working to open the landscape, part of which has become scrubby with broom, by planned clearing. Farmer André Frommelt stressed that they are of course not trying to revert to the 'monotony' of the bare hillsides that were there at the end of the 19th century but rather they value a 'diversity of habitats' on the land they manage and strive to 'maintain and further develop' them. During tree-felling, individual pines, firs, rowans, junipers, dogrose and whitebeam are preserved. The tree stumps are left in the ground and eventually rot away. The fellings are used in the woodchip central-heating system which meets all the heating and hot water requirements of the living accommodation and the farm buildings, using some 3,000 cubic metres of fuel annually.

e. Šťastný domov Líšnice

The farm Šťastný domov Líšnice is located in Eastern Bohemia. It was founded by a family that had four children with mental disabilities in foster care in order to create a background for meaningful employment and life in the future. They thus created a model and a place where they invite other children from institutional foster care and foster families. The farm covers 33 ha of meadows where horses, donkeys, cows, goats and sheep graze. Bees are still kept on the farm. There is a big productive garden and one greenhouse. The participants are involved in animal care, gardening, beekeeping and other jobs. The farm also has a soap-making and sewing workshop. There is also a riding club on the farm.

It is important that during the holidays, the farm becomes a place for people with severe mental and physical disabilities to stay, for young people from excluded locations (disadvantaged and poor regions), but it is also the destination of trips for ordinary families and people passing through.

Social sensitivity is very important for the farm, but also mutual symbiosis and respect for nature and man. The farm is large enough for participants to engage in normal farm work, not as a hobby or therapy. People realise that the farmer is the landscape administrator but that he is essentially dependent on its good condition. That is why he actively participates in this care. Participants eat what they grow and understand the processes they are involved in, despite their disabilities. They become real partners with nature, animals and plants, and they understand their responsibilities. On the farm,



there is enough time to realise the relationship between man and nature, whether positively or negatively.



Figure 6: Šťastný domov Lišnice (Kaplanová, 2022)

f. Fleckenbühl Farm

Fleckenbühl Farm was founded in 1984 as a self-help community for addicts. They converted the farm to biodynamic and restored the farm buildings. The concept: People with addiction problems can come at any time. The community helps them live a long-term, addiction-free and self-determined life. All the residents of the farm have chosen to live soberly - without drugs, alcohol and tobacco - and to take their destiny into their own hands. Today about 140 people live on the farm that consists of 250 hectares of agricultural land, of which 170 hectares are arable land, 80 ha of permanent grassland, 1 ha orchard and many hedgerows. 70 Red Holstein-Friesian dairy cows and 50 young cattle, 10 fattening cattle, 30 dairy goats are kept. The operational focus is on dairy farming. Two thirds of the milk is processed in the farm's own cheese dairy. The grain is marketed in their own bakery in the city of Frankfurt bakery.

On the Demeter farm, which is run by addicts, Klaus Renner has been in charge of a landscape maintenance group for over 25 years. The hedgerows that were planted thirty years ago to protect against erosion are being tended in sections, species-rich meadows are being cultivated to encourage rare butterflies, nesting aids are being laid out and orchard meadows are being developed. With official support, farmer Uwe Weimar has renatured a brook. Rare wild herbs grow in the fields, such as the field buttercup. Because a nature conservation program promoted transition zones, such were created by open land strips in existing coppices - as everywhere, the measures need a financial counter entry in order to be included in the economy in the long term.



"Today all hedges are fallow hedges" wrote a Witzenhausen agricultural student years ago in his bachelor thesis. Trees and shrubs are currently experiencing a renaissance in efforts to promote "regenerative agriculture". Starting with "short rotation coppices", the focus has expanded to include agroforestry systems and keyline design to protect against erosion and store water in the landscape. In addition to the many possibilities of using woody plants as firewood and even as building timber, berries and the harvest of hedge growth are becoming interesting as dietary feed. In social farming in particular, there are options to get active with many helping hands. Another example is the Bauckhof Stütensen, where people in need of assistance regularly harvest winter fodder as leaf hay under the guidance of farmer Jörg Timme-Rüffler. The leafy branches are preferably harvested before 15th of July and hung up to dry - poisonous species such as Euonymus or thorny and prickly trees are excluded. Harvesting is done in sections and rejuvenates the hedges; the fodder benefits the health of the ruminants and is a valuable addition to the easily digestible hay and silage fodder, which also dominates the winter fodder on many organic farms (van Elsen 2023).



Figure 7: Landscape development on Fleckenbühl Farm (Thomas van Elsen)



Conclusions

Social Farming has the potential for ecological inclusion by including different target groups into activities of active nature and landscape development. It is especially suited to contribute to an environmentally friendly way of farming by integrating vulnerable people, contributing to their health and a healthy and bio-diverse environment as well.

The relationship between man and nature is still characterized today in the broadest sense as a benefit - "use", "exploit" up to the "exploitation" of nature by man, through the consumption of resources. During the first meeting of the community of practice *Farming for Health* in 2004, the participants of the meeting all agreed that working and living on farms can be therapeutically effective and also fulfill pedagogical goals. In some cases, working with animals and plants is also used specifically for therapy, for example in "animal-assisted therapy" and garden therapy. The instrumentalization of animals for therapeutic purposes includes the danger of exploiting them on a psychological level after they have been degraded to meat and milk producers in industrialized agriculture.

The examples shown above show that social farming also offer opportunities for the development of nature. Nature - animals, plants, minerals - form the basis for people to live and develop on earth. The earth as a place of development for humans and nature offers opportunities that may or may not be taken up. Farming can provide a place where people with special needs are given opportunities to develop aptitudes and skills by seeking and finding appropriate niches within a farm's multitude of activities. The aim is not to judge the people being cared for based on their deficits, but to look for opportunities to pick up on dispositions and train skills. This puts them in a position to make a productive contribution to the farm as a whole according to their possibilities. And this extra work can also have a positive effect on nature, as more "helping hands" enable maintenance work and the sensible inclusion of biotopes in the operating cycle, for example through the use of hedges for leaf hay production, which at the same time reduces to ecological backdrops reevaluates landscape components. In social farming, the idea of inclusion expands to include nature, becomes "ecological inclusion" when not only the needs of farm animals are met as "species-appropriate" animal husbandry or the plants grow without pesticides and artificial fertilizers, but also the question of their care and development. The social interaction between people and nature can change – towards, a development from "taking" to "being able to give". In this sense, social agriculture - overcoming the mere utilitarian thinking - can be developed as a place of therapeutic effectiveness: therapeutically effective on people and nature, i.e. up to "ecological inclusion". Nature and people are development tasks, it's about "participation" and "inclusion" in the broadest sense.



Research needs

1. Knowledge gaps to be covered by research

- › Examples of best practice developing landscape and biodiversity on social farms across Europe
- › Factors limiting ecological inclusion on farm level and strategies to improve the situation
- › Number/percentage/statistical data of social farming projects with practices of organic, regenerative, permaculture, syntropic farming vs conventional farming in European countries; educational level and average wage of employees on social and conventional farms
- › Main impacts of social farming projects on rural development and environmental protection policies, for governments at local, national and European level;
- › Obtain statistical data of the number of jobs and diversity of professions on social farms with comparable conventional farms. This need relates to research on the ecosystem of social farms. Social farming is not only about the expertise of an agronomist, technician, zoologist, economist, and other professions in conventional agriculture, but a whole network of different professions and skills is involved in it.

2. Research needs from practice

- › Compilation and exchange of knowledge regarding practical measures how to improve the impact of SF on landscape and nature development
- › Educational needs of farmers and people with special needs on social farms to apply concrete measures developing landscape and biodiversity on farm level
- › Side effects of climate change to the symbiotic relationship between social farms and the ecosystem. Innovative ways to approach this forthcoming challenge for many rural areas that are at risk of losing biodiversity due to climate change.

Further research needs coming from practice, ideas for Operational Groups and other proposals for innovation can be found at the final report of the focus group, available at the FG webpage:

https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/social-farming-and-innovations_en



Ideas for innovations

These are ideas for innovative projects and solutions and/or potential EIP operational groups

- › Exchange of experiences how to implement social inclusion on social farms aiming to collect and transfer knowledge to improve the ecological impact of social farms
- › Research among participants on social farms, and how they perceive their empowerment through a stay on a farm. How they perceive their role as an actor in environmental protection. How they perceive the relationship between man and nature.
- › Synergies of social and ecological inclusion provided by SF should be further investigated and highlighted and the aspect of societal demands and challenges like the decline of biodiversity and the climate change.
- › Greater involvement of social sciences and humanities in social farming. Use their methods and expertise to determine the improvement of the life quality and social integration of people from fragile groups.

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