

EU CAP NETWORK FOCUS GROUP SOCIAL FARMING AND INNOVATIONS

The role of LAGs (CLLD/LEADER) in triggering the implementation of social farming

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1. Introduction

This minipaper stems from the following facts-starting points:

- Social Farming (SF) is perceived as a Social Innovation (SI),
- SF involve organisations nested in several scales, from local to regional and national ones.
- SF involves the engagement of farmers with a constellation of other local actors-stakeholders,

Therefore, in order to achieve transformative social innovation through social farming, agency¹ is needed, as well as new models of governance and new agreements with organisations and institutions.

Local Actions Groups (LAGs) can be seen as such, as they have established their role in rural areas and have acted for many years, through the lens of [LEADER](#) and now [CLLD](#) approach, as catalysts - agents of social innovation. Although they work at local level (on the ground) they are supralocal and reach also a regional and national and even transnational audience through their EU networking. Therefore, within the rationale of this mini paper, they are possible contributors to the strengthening of the links between agriculture and social/health care sectors, education, and employment sectors and a bridge between urban and rural people. In other words, they are seen as possible multipliers of Social Farming not fully explored.

Today there are almost 2,800 LAGs engaging tens of thousands of local authorities, social and economic organisations, businesses and citizens in rural Europe but to our knowledge not so many LAGs have been engaged in social farming projects in the past programming periods so we will try to explore the following questions in order to frame some useful steps towards triggering the implementation of social farming models across the EU and within the LAG cosmos.

Why?

Why do we need LAGs? What do they offer? Only a handful of projects were found on the [repository](#) of previous projects within LEADER/CLLD referring to SF but those existing examples highlight operating frameworks, the advantages that LAGs have as agents of change due to their specific working environment and governance at multiple level (local-national-transnational).

How did some LAGs manage to embrace SF within their vision and Local Development Strategies? We will draw in our collective experience as well as from case studies from the ENRD project [database](#) in trying to address key challenges on implementing SF

HOW?

¹ refers to specific values, visions and trust, willingness to act, reflexivity and capacity for change, which influence how actors or groups of actors (agents) seek to change practices in response to specific needs. Agency also refers to agents' level of motivation and power to act and sustain their action toward specific goals[1]



projects. By using examples of SF we aim to provide practical examples for other LAGs to follow on their future local programmes.

What shall be needed for the future? We will try and provide creative and practical approaches to the needs of LAGs by describing diagnostic tools when mapping local needs and assets/resources such as human capital (experts, social workers etc) while trying to trigger SF; as well as recommendations for ways to disseminate experience and practical knowledge.



2. LAGs' operating framework, opportunities and why they can be seen as perfect multipliers or support providers for Social Farming

During the current [\(2014-2022\) programming period](#), the **LEADER** method has been extended under the broader term **Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)** including three additional EU Funds:

- the [European Maritime and Fisheries Fund \(EMFF\)](#)
- the [European Regional Development Fund \(ERDF\)](#)
- the [European Social Fund \(ESF\)](#)
- and of course the [European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development \(EAFRD\)](#)

This multi-funded approach gives the floor to LAGs to integrate local needs and solutions and especially when talking about Social Farming address social inclusion and achieve interaction between people and nature while at the same time enable the provision of diversified services by farmers, social agencies, and institutions [4]. This is initially why Local Action Groups, operating under the LEADER/CLLD, are seen as providing agency for social innovation and social farming.

In addition, there are other reasons why LAGs can be perfect multipliers or support providers for Social Farming, as for example due to the:

- diversity of missions, audiences and partnerships potentially involved in the missions (and services) of the LAG
- they have a local mission and local diagnosis hence they address a wide variety of topics² : forging links between actors and citizens in rural areas, powerful tool for well-being and social cohesion (diversity of audiences!), support for health support mental – management of burnout, etc.

² in the previous (2007-2013) programming period examples of funding social farming individual projects or networks through Axis 4 – LEADER fall within M311b, 312 & M413 but also within Axis 3– Quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy of the RDP at either a regional or national level. Measure 312 “Support for business creation and development” was clearly the route through which most Social Farming activity is receiving RDP funding whether mainstream funds or through the LAG’s, indicating that most Social Farming enterprises are being established as separate legal entities [5].



- flexibility³ and creativity in the implementation of their projects
- transversal approach to the eligible competences
- the complementarity with local, national or regional matters

3. How are LAGs involved in social farming projects

Examples of LAGs that did manage to embrace SF within their Local Development Strategies or within broader projects and networks provide practical examples on the pathways to achieve a multiplier effect but also the bottlenecks.

3.1 Level of involvement and Stakeholders reached

For the LAGs, the primary level of implementing SF projects is the local (municipal) level. We see that for example in the case of the Italian [LAG Sulcis Iglesiente Capoterra e Campidano \(SULCIS\)](#), in Cagliari, Sardinia, through the development of the project [«Agrisociale: Coltiviamo Cittadinanza»](#) which started in 2011. At the beginning, 5 municipalities were selected with a public call by the LAG, to manage financial resources aimed at creating social farms. Then, other stakeholders at local level such as agricultural firms and social cooperatives have been selected, with a second call issued by municipalities, to offer SF services to the population. This process started the local project «Serenamente», involving at the end 5 municipalities, 3 social cooperatives and 4 agricultural firms.

At local level LAGs may directly support through the funds that they use from LEADER the establishment of private social farms by rural dwellers. An Austrian farm for example used LEADER funds through the LAG to convert the holding into a horse-assisted therapy centre for children and adults with special needs. The [Bühübl farm in Sankt Martin im Mühlkrei in Austria](#), integrates social services in an innovative way. Partnerships have been established with local schools, kindergartens, an agricultural institute, and specialists as well as facilities for the care of people with special needs.

Another SF project in Austria [Green Care – Where people flourish](#) found support within [M16 – Cooperation-RDP Measure \(2018–2023\)](#) and was also the winner of the Rural Inspiration Awards in the category “Socially Inclusive Futures” for the year 2021. In this project the LAG was involved at a regional level in a cooperation driven by the Vienna Chamber of Agriculture. Establishing cooperation to integrate green care into regional development processes through networking with stakeholders including the Association of Municipalities, LEADER and Familie & Beruf GmbH, along with targeted awareness-raising activities/events makes this example a rather interesting one on the levels of engagement of a LAG, apart from direct involvement.

³ in both programming periods farmers or networks or other stakeholders working with the LAGs to develop social farming projects were able to better communicate and develop a mutual understanding with the fund administrators, far more rapidly than is possible with mainstream RDP funders [5].



In Wallonia, the hospital centre in Lierneux - founded in 1884 and located 50 km South East of Liège, in upper Ardennes - is famous for its dedicated work in the field of psychiatry. In the 2007-2013 programming period, a pilot project called 'social inclusion farms' was successfully coordinated by the LAG 'Haute-Sûre Forêt d'Anlier'. This project aims to support vulnerable people and facilitate their re-integration into society through small volunteer jobs on local farms. The grant by the LAG mainly covers the costs of having two 'Positive Agritude' supervisors in the hospital centre (recruited in February 2017).

Under the Support for Investments for Diversification Activities measure, farmers were able to get financial support for the investments they need to provide facilities for their service users e.g. bedrooms or a common room. Under Leader + (2000-2006), support was provided to Stimuli for New and Recently-Started Care Farms in the Pajottenland (LAG Pajottenland+).

In Belgium the Boerenrustpunt project in the municipalities of Retie, Mol and Balen, was supported by the LAG at local level. Four farms/care farmers were given training and a cooperation framework with seven participating, professional coaches that shaped a coaching process with the care farm as a starting point.

In West Flanders, there are some other projects approved by LAGs. They are related to social farming/green care but the promotor is not a farmer, more a health/care institution that works in a context of gardening, short chain supply etc (see Annex for examples-a).

In Ireland Leitrim Integrated Development Company as a LAG for the 2007-2013 programme committed significant time and staff resources to animating and developing the social farming concepts, practice and structures in Ireland resulting in direct exchequer funding support from the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine which has led to the establishment of a strong national network called [national Social Farming Network](#) Social Farming Ireland. This work aligns and delivers on a number of the LEADER principles Innovation, networking and multisector co-operation.

In the 2014-2022 LEADER programme period in Ireland there has been a significant expansion in the commitment of these resources from Leitrim Development Company and other LAGs/ implementing partners West Limerick Resources, South West Mayo Development Co and Waterford Leader Partnership resulting in over 200 trained social farmers and 130 active social farms across the country. One LAG (Kildare LCDC) has also approved a capital grant of over €70,000 in facilities on Rye Lodge social farm to support its farm diversification into Social farming.

3.2 Methods used and target groups reached

LAG SULCIS in Italy used a participatory process, alongside with specific training seminars. In addition, interaction between the actors involved was facilitated with the use of specific methodologies have been adopted, such as mapping actors and skills at the local level, knowing the needs expressed by local communities and possibilities offered by the RDP, activating a network between SF operators [4]. The participatory process resulted in the identification of the focus on social inclusion of people with disabilities, in particular mental ones. The project allowed the construction of paths of social inclusion, both through training sessions and specific workshops directly related



to agricultural firms and activities as well as internships. The LAG also aims in the future to include women and workers over 40, who could find work placement thanks to SF activities.

The Austrian social farm Bühübl farm supported by the LAG can accommodate 45 people each week and employs 8 therapists on the farm.

In Ireland a number of LAGs are now including social farming in the development of their Local Development Strategies for the 2023-2027 period. This is arising out of the needs of social farmers to invest in safety and welfare, in other facilities and spaces, in activities and promotion of their social farms with increasing demand for support placements from many people across the country. They are now being commissioned and paid using their farm assets, their own time and experiences for non-agricultural purposes to provide farmer led supports to people who need it and to increase their income and multifunctionality. This also enhances community inclusion and provides new opportunities for people who are disadvantaged in rural areas. This growing interest means that new projects and initiative for and among farmers, participant groups and other stakeholders will emerge including training, participation seminars, information sharing etc demonstrating the growing interest in the sector in Ireland and the need for information dissemination and knowledge development to support its growth.

In Wallonia a method used to raise awareness for social agriculture in Wallonia, supported by the LAG was a festival “del Agriculture Sociale”. The Walloon Network for Rural Development, in collaboration with the LAG and the Plaines de l'Escaut Natural Park, organized the [Regional Seminar](#): "Social agriculture and forestry: when humans take their place" in Brasménil (Peruwelz) with the aim to provide an opportunity to focus on projects that innovatively combine social integration and agriculture and bring together many actors from the agricultural, forestry and social worlds (farmers, foresters, social institutions, etc.), and rural development actors (LAGs, Natural Parks, administration, etc.).

3.3 Added value of projects implemented

After running the project “Positive’Agritude” In Wallonia, for one year, there are now 12 farms enrolled in the scheme. They support the participation of 13 vulnerable people, who each engage in farming activities one day per week.

A LAG in Wallonia was involved in supporting a [festival “del Agriculture Sociale”](#) with 25 artists, 7 concerts, 8 expositions, 5 projects, 2 round tables and more than 1000 visitors. The participants were mainly beneficiaries of Measure 16.9 of the Walloon Rural Development Programme.

In West-Flanders there are two Leader regions: ‘Westhoek’ and ‘Midden-West-Vlaanderen’. Each of them has an action about ‘poverty and vulnerability’ with sub actions like ‘Social welfare role for agriculture’. Leader gives opportunities for individuals farmers to apply for projects to change and develop their farm to a social/care farm. Local cooperation with health/social care and other partners is always a condition. Costs for expertise, on-farm equipment and adjustments are the most asked support (see Annex for some examples-b).



3.4 Scaling up

The Italian LAG SULCIS scaled up the local project in two ways: developed other local and transnational activities. At local level, thanks to an agreement with the Ministry of Justice, activities had detainees as target group; at transnational level, in collaboration with other Italian and Finnish LAGs, a document was developed, defining the social farming principles underlying actions of inclusion in social farms (transnational SF principles chart). Finally, SULCIS LAG has foreseen in its Local Development Strategies Measure 16.9 to develop and support social farming; the objective is to develop the past experience, overcoming some critical issues and with the aim of involving a greater number of actors, first of all local authorities, farms and cooperatives.

Through the support of the Irish and UK National Rural Networks, Social Farming stakeholders in Ireland have undertaken joint workshops to identify mechanisms through which RDP instruments could progress the development of Social Farming. As an initial step LAGs should be encouraged to include Social Farming in their Local Development Strategies – something which has happened to a very limited extent already in Ireland.

4. Ideas for innovative projects by LAGs in the next period

A couple of ideas to move forward emerge from the involvement of LAGs in triggering the development of SF as social innovation in the rural.

Impact thinking into future LEADER/CLLD projects: This would be of great importance to the LAGs when submitting their Local Development Strategies. Towards this direction further research is needed especially in measuring the impact (economically but also socially) of SF especially bearing in mind that pressure on LAGs to allocate their budget on projects with measurable short-term economic results is limiting the possibility to support SF projects that might need a transition time period and have a longer-term horizon.

Cross boarder cooperation: In order for LAGs to be effective multipliers of SF they need to develop an understanding of the sector. In doing so they could work trans-nationally to investigate cross border initiatives that will serve as a platform for exchange to further support the growth of SF.

Develop the “smart villages” concept : *“Smart villages are “rural communities that refuse to wait for change to happen to them. Such communities are made up of rural people who take the initiative to mobilise themselves and explore practical solutions to the day-to-day challenges they face, as well as seize new opportunities for improving their quality of life and standard of living” [7].* They get smarter when they include social innovation as a way to enhance and build on inclusion, equality, integration and



improved health and social service delivery. Rural villages have many assets including farms, farmers and their families, the natural environment, and the many diverse activities on those farms. Social farmers may use and release all these assets and leave a community more resilient in many and different ways; Smart health might be one of the axes that LAGs can work on and suggest within their Local Development Strategies They enhance people's physical and mental health and wellbeing, they provide a space for inclusion and learning, a basis for people to develop a wide range of interests and connection and even provide opportunities for work and employment. Social farms are therefore can be an integral and vital component of smart rural villages. In the future LAGs may benefit from looking beyond digital and technological innovations and examine all the assets locally which can be released to create smart rural areas and future farms.

5. Conclusion

The potential contribution of the LAGs (LEADER/CLLD) to triggering SF lies within the bottom-up process and participatory paths based on the inclusive nature of agricultural activities [4]. Furthermore, LAGs provide the opportunity to develop local, national and transnational networks and cooperation. The latter takes time but it is vital for beneficiaries to invest in good relationships before they start a project. The success of such projects depends upon the development of good relationships, mutual assistance and the exchange of knowledge.

People involved in SG through the guidance and support of the LAGs find it easier to flourish as the Leader approach is administered at the local level, it is easier to develop the links, awareness and understanding with their local funder to enable the benefits to be understood and the funding secured. LAGs are heavily embedded in their local communities and can strongly support the improvement of communication and networking between Social Farming practitioners and appropriate institutions. This improved communication and networking among different actors involved in Social Farming also supports the movement to the next stage of development and is considered crucial for spreading Social Farming concepts and practices.

However, LEADER/CLLD and LAGs alone are unlikely to sufficiently address the needs of rural areas regarding SF. There must be interaction and compatibility with other measures of the CAP. The latter has been highlighted by the [SoFar project](#) [2] within a SWOT analysis as an opportunity not only to sustain the agricultural part of the farm but also the social activities and its functionality (this was highlighted both in the French and Slovenian SWOT analysis). Especially within the new CAP Strategic Plans [3] the following three Specific Objectives were found relating the future contribution of LAGs to SF:

- attract and sustain young farmers and new farmers and facilitate sustainable business development in rural areas...
- promote employment, growth, gender equality, including the participation of women in farming, social inclusion and local development in rural areas...
- improve the response of Union agriculture to societal demands on food and health...



Finally, when discussing the establishment of [Operational Groups](#) LAGs may be used as one stop-shop due to their prior experience in collecting ideas/challenges from local actors and setting up innovative projects. Their contribution would be of great importance in order to build a roadmap with goals, timing and budget for specific identified problems in each country especially when it comes to : larger and more mainstream farms; dapting the tools and machinery within the farm and scaling-up networking processes.

6. References

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