

FRAGILE AREAS CONFERENCES 2023

Social farming and work in fragile rural areas Position Paper

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Social farming and work are the words and the concepts that guide the 2023 Fragile Areas Convention. The association between agriculture and social is already ambitious, adding the term *work* to this implies a further move toward a space where descriptions of practices and experiences meet desires, toil, sweat, food and relationships.

"Farming is Social" is the title of the book by Roberto Brioschi (2017), land activist and member of the "rete semi rurali". But how much awareness is there in this relationship? Can there be agriculture that is not social? Farming is work: what does this imply or what may it imply for fragile areas so needy of real work which is justly paid? In the conference, we will discuss this issue by examining the complexity of its nuances, its multiple perspectives and points of view.

Social farming is an area of potential social innovation - novel without being excessively so. The first forms of agriculture recognized as social in Europe date back to the beginning of the nineteenth century (Pascale, 2007). We recall some emblematic examples such as the rural community of Gheel, a village not far from Antwerp in Flemish Belgium. Families in Gheel were indeed entrusted with individuals with mental problems, who became part of the community, working as much as possible in the fields and living the everyday life of farming families. The success of this model was followed with interest by academics of the time, who noted how the coexistence between the community and the "guests" was very peaceful, despite the fact that in some periods the number of "alienated" people (as they were called at the time, even in medical terms) was quite substantial. Another significant experience is the agricultural colony in Clermont Ferrand, France, where the psychiatric hospital itself managed a farm on which patients could spend part of their days employed in field work. Lastly, the York Retreat was a rural home managed by the religious sect of the Quakers in England who in the late 1700s, had been established as an aid community for people with mental problems, and made farming one of the main methods to rehabilitate patients. In the early 1800s, farming penal colonies also emerged in Europe, in isolated places far from the motherland, where prisoners serving long terms of imprisonment were relegated. The British Empire sent several prisoners to plantations in North America, especially in the province of Georgia, and later in Australia, to Norfolk Island or Van Diemen's Land. In Italy, the first farming penal colony for young people was established in 1858, on the Island of Pianosa (Santoro, 2020).

However, the first organized and recognizable experiences of social farming are identified in the central regions of our country in the 1970s as part of the realm of social cooperatives. These are the years in which many rehabilitation communities for drug addicts were set up, in which the combination of manual agricultural work and the rehabilitation path triumphs. The stories of the Capodarco cooperative in Rome and San Patrignano community in Coriano are just a few examples of these experiences, which still continue today. Moreover, with

regard specifically to people with disabilities, it is worth recalling how Decree number 68/1999 promotes pathways and services aimed at employment integration, which very frequently finds a natural sphere of development in the environmental and farming sectors

Embedded in this story are public policies sprouting within the agricultural policy sector at a European and even a national level. Social farming is a potential expression of the multifunctionality of farms. The term multifunctionality refers to the need to develop the potential of farms so that they can go beyond their dominant productive focus. In order to ensure an adequate income, one which is economically sustainable, farms are then supported in doing something else. Therefore, the actions to promote farm tourism, educational farms and social agriculture take shape.

Box 1. Social farming: the national normative context, Law 141/2015 I

Decree August 18, 2015, No. 141 Regulations concerning social agriculture.

In Italy, Decree No. 141 of August 18, 2015 tries to bring some order to the theme of social farming by codifying four of its main areas of action. Social farming refers to activities carried out by farmers (referred to in Article 2135 of the Civil Code), individually or in groups, and by social cooperatives (referred to in Decree No. 381 of November 8, 1991, within the limits set by paragraph 4 of this article), aimed at implementing:

- a. the social and employment inclusion of workers with disabilities and of disadvantaged workers, defined in accordance with Article 2, numbers 3) and 4), of Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 of June 17, 2014, of disadvantaged individuals referred to in Article 4 of Decree No. 381 of November 8, 1991, and of minors of working age included in social rehabilitation and support projects;
- b. social performance and service activities for local communities through the use of the tangible and intangible resources of farming to promote, support and implement actions aimed at the development of skills and abilities, social and work inclusion, recreation and useful services for daily life;
- c. services which support medical, psychological and rehabilitation therapies aimed at improving health and the social, emotional and cognitive functions of the persons concerned, even through the use of farm animals and the cultivation of plants;
- d. projects aimed at environmental and food education, the preservation of biodiversity as well as the dissemination of local knowledge through the organization of social and educational farms recognized at the regional level, such as initiatives for the hospitality and accommodation of pre-school children and people with social, physical and mental health difficulties.

In social farming, two different worlds, the world of farms and the world of social and socio-health needs, meet or rather they have the potential to do so. Despite the potential that policy makers picked up on, social agriculture is difficult as it still remains under practiced, underestimated or perhaps, not well-known in Italy. Experiences have been researched,

mapped and even enhanced, yet all the potential present in social farming is struggling to flourish. The National Plan for Recovery and Resilience forgot about it, but that is no reason for not seeing the great benefits that can indirectly involve social farming (Genoa, Viganò, 2022).

Social farming stands at an intersection between the rural development issues on the one hand and, therefore, the daily lives of farmers and agricultural workers who have their hands in the soil and, on the other hand, the social and social health needs of communities, disadvantaged people, and people with disabilities. It is a work in progress of farm, social and health policies. The new prevention plan, with its focus on the one-health approach centered on the integration of environmental, human and animal welfare, outlines a fruitful space of operation for social agriculture, but again it forgets to explicitly refer to it (Borgi, Genova, Coracchi, Cirulli, 2022).

Social farming prospects as a topic is not exactly at the center of the policy agenda, but the world of researchers and practitioners continues to discuss its potential. It is however a developing presence that we want to try to make shine through the discussion and reflections among the current practices present in Italy and Europe.

Farm workers are among the categories of workers in which labor exploitation is most common. The worker exploitation of Italian or migrant workers extends to the dramatic experiences of the *caporalato*, but also includes self-exploitation when one owns or shares the means of production. The farmer never stops working. He produces food and perhaps this is one of the problems. The amount of value our society today puts on the food it eats is not so great. In the pursuit of smart spending, Italian consumers are not very critical or attentive to the origin, quality, and impact of the food they consume. Although the percentage of those who shop through a solidarity buying group has grown in recent years, rising from 10 percent in 2018 to 12.3 percent in 2020, it is nevertheless a small percentage of those who make their purchasing choice a lifestyle. Studies show a process of divergence between 'responsible' citizen-consumers (around 60 percent of the population) and 'indifferent' citizen-consumers who say they are not interested in sustainable consumption practices (Forno and Graziano, 2020). And so Italian farmers and peasants work hard and, especially in fragile areas, earn very little. Can social agriculture and a fairly paid job support the economy of fragile areas? Can it be a 'mixed' social and farming work that also produces personal well-being, meaning and dignity?

Discussing the topic of social farming, a topic that is not central in the context of rural areas, involving the disadvantaged workers or people with disabilities, is not easy: "two weaknesses don't make a strength," are the words of a social worker who tried to invest in social farming when the time was not yet ripe. Are the times ripe today? How can social farming and social farming labor contribute to reflections on the fragile areas?

Di Iacovo F. and O' Connor D. (2009) assert that through the 'correct' use of the earth resource we also help to positively redefine the relationship between farming and society. With the involvement of ever new heterogeneous actors in fact, unseen areas of trust are created.

And thus it is from the main hypothesis that the relationship between farming and social dimensions can be very heterogeneous as we aim to analyze practices, legislation, actions and

actors operating in social or farming not only in different national contexts, but also inside the same national and local level. And such elements do not yet recognize themselves in the framework of the paradigm and can be actively enriching the latter.

The European policy framework promotes social farming as one of the rural development strategies, through policies and funding managed at the regional level in rural development programs and cascading into local development plans.

In Italy, Act 141/2015 makes a great effort to delineate the domain of social farming and identifies its two main actors in the various activities: farming entrepreneurs and social cooperatives. It also defines the recipients and in addition to confirming the role of social farming as a tool for social and work inclusion, leads the way for a panorama of reflection and comparison that allows going beyond multiple and fragmented regional experiences, in order to support innovative paths of constructing services, through the involvement and active participation of multiple actors, contributing to the creation of living environments that promote the well-being of people and communities (Di Iacovo, 2008; Borgi, Genova, Coracchi, Cirulli, 2022). The Social Agriculture Forum provides a valuable setting for reflecting and acting on social farming in Italy (Forum Agricoltura Sociale, 2022).

The aim is to reflect on international experiences and analysis both already regulated or not, in order to challenge the very definition of social farming from very different contexts and tools by focusing on a perspective of change of the whole society. The experiences we are looking for are posed as services useful for daily life, educational activity, recreational, therapeutic, and environmental protection activities. These are resources for fragile areas where work is an important way to develop pathways of self-determination, inclusion, and growth of social groups that recognize themselves as communities based on ideals of social justice.

The connection with the long series of 'fragile areas' conferences can be perceived along several dimensions:

(a) social, socio-occupational, therapeutic and therapeutic-rehabilitative integration experiences have often been carried out in remote areas since they allow easier contact with nature, the agricultural environment, and animals;

(b) social farming is a measure of income integration for the farmer who generally needs it most in marginal areas;

(c) in such areas the inclusion of disadvantaged people can be problematic due to opposition from local community or from neighbors;

d) there is a fragility of the 'middle lands,' those who have been penalised by the urban-industrial development, without a cultural identity and with continuous high-impact activity proposals in which the initiation of social farming may be ambivalent if not supported by strong values.

The conference of "Fragile Areas 2023" aims to promote knowledge of different experiences of social farming in a comparative perspective, contributing to the debate on the potentials

and critical aspects in the trials of this paradigm with a special focus on the processes of their construction.

Especially appreciated will be the contributions and reflections in which the social and the agricultural perspectives are analytically interwoven, looking at the integration between different policy areas, the comparison of national and European and international experiences, the practices structured by s-actors working in farmers, social, environmental and climate justice movements, the presentation of inter- and multidisciplinary approaches to the topic and innovative paths of social farming in different social, social-health, educational and job inclusion areas of peoples on the margins of the labor market such as temporary workers and migrants.

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