

Article

The Development of Sustainable Social Farming in Italy: A Case Studies Analysis

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Abstract: Social Farming (SF) is a rising practice that offers various typologies of initiatives involving different actors. Peculiarities consist of the types of networks organized at the territorial level and in the innovation processes they implement. In this study, through a cross-case analysis, we take into account six Italian social farms as case studies, interviewing them to understand the activities provided and their organization with the aim of highlighting both the strengths and the criticalities that may limit possible further development of Social Farming in Italy. The results of the analysis pointed out the specificities of the services offered by the social farms and the points of view of the farmers in the sector. Reflecting on these cases in light of the innovation system theory, it was possible to understand both the innovation system in which they developed and the enabling and the limiting aspects for Social Farming initiatives, as well as to codify useful lessons regarding the future organization of sustainable Social Farming services.

Keywords: social farming; sustainability; social innovation; multifunctional agriculture; networks



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1. Introduction

Social Farming (SF) is a key concept that expresses the link between the use of agricultural resources and the provision of social services at the farm level in both traditional and innovative business activities [1]. SF offers innovative solutions to a multitude of people for well-being, therapy, rehabilitation, social inclusion, job inclusion and civil services for both peri-urban and rural areas [2–5]. The literature offers different approaches and also different definitions to this complex and heterogeneous phenomenon [6]. In particular, a distinction is made between Green Care [7], Care Farming and Social Farming, even if these terms are often considered equivalent referring to “the use of commercial farms and agricultural landscapes as a base for promoting mental and physical health, through normal farming activity” [8].

Specifically, the term SF is used mainly in Italian studies [4], and it refers to “the paths and practices that through the development of agricultural activities (or related to them) are explicitly proposed to generate benefits for vulnerable groups of the population” [9].

Although it is still difficult to have a database of the existing practices, SF initiatives are increasing in Italy as well as at the international level, and the scientific research has underlined a considerable variety of experiences in several countries [10–14].

State of the Art of SF in Italy—The Italian Legislation

In all of Europe, SF is seen through various interpretations: multifunctional agriculture [15,16], organization of ecosystem services [17] and nature-based solutions [18], diversification in agriculture and opportunities for new non-agricultural sources of income [19]. Although SF projects are based on the same principles and on the same categories of

resources, they give rise to practices characterized by distinct organizational modalities and orientations. In this regard, the reference to the five welfare models [20–23] recognized in Europe is clear—*Northern European model, Workfare, Anglo-Saxon, Eastern European, Mediterranean welfare*—which differ in the legislative and cultural frameworks in which they are inserted but also in the results they give rise to. The Italian situation, although clearly linked to the *Mediterranean welfare model*, is characteristic in the way that everything is based on a specific law for SF.

Which practices can really be framed in this context is better clarified by the Italian Law n. 141/2015 [24] that is the first systematic national regulatory intervention specifically dedicated to SF, even if several regions started approving legislative measures to facilitate SF dissemination and benefits before this National Law (Table 1).

Table 1. Italian Regional Laws on Social Farming.

Region	Regulation	Title
Abruzzo	Reg. Law No. 16/2011	Provisions on Social Farming
Basilicata	Reg. Law No. 53/2018	Provisions on Social Farming
Calabria	Reg. Law No. 14/2009	New regulations for the implementation of didactic and social activities and agritourism
Campania	Reg. Law No. 5/2012	Regulations on social agriculture, social farms and social gardens and modification of Regional Law No. 11/1996
Emilia Romagna	Reg. Law No. 4/2009	Regulations on agritourism and multifunctionality of farms
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	Reg. Law No. 2/2018	Modification of Regional Law No. 15/2000 and provisions on Social Farming
Lazio	Reg. Law No. 7/2018	Provisions on simplification and regional development
Liguria	Reg. Law No. 36/2013	Provisions on Social Farming
Lombardy	Reg. Law No. 35/2017	Provisions on Social Farming
Marche	Reg. Law No. 21/2011	Regional provisions on the multifunctionality of the farm and diversification in agriculture
Molise	Reg. Law No. 5/2014	Provisions on Social Farming
Piedmont	Reg. Law No. 1/2019	Reorganization of regulations on agriculture and rural development
Province of Bolzano	Prov. Law No. 8/2018	Social Farming
Province of Trento	Prov. Law No. 12/2016	Modification on Provincial Law on agritourism 2001 and Provincial Law on kindergarten 2002 on Social Farming
Puglia	Reg. Law No. 9/2018	Provisions on Social Farming
Sardinia	Reg. Law No. 11/2015	Regulation on agritourism, fishing tourism, didactic and Social Farming
Sicily	Reg. Law No. 16/2017	Regional Stability Law for the year 2017–Art.41–Social Farming
Tuscany	Reg. Law No. 24/2010	Provisions on Social Farming
Umbria	Reg. Law No. 12/2015	Consolidated Law on agriculture
Veneto	Reg. Law No. 14/2013	Provisions on Social Farming

The national legislator classified the SF services into four fundamental areas:

- (a) Socio-employment integration of disadvantaged workers and people;
- (b) Social services and activities for local communities through the use of tangible and intangible agricultural resources;
- (c) Services in support of medical, psychological and rehabilitation therapies, including using farm animals and growing plants;
- (d) Projects aimed at safeguarding biodiversity, fostering environmental and food education and making the territory known by organizing social and educational farms.

In art. 1, the National Law considers as “Social Farming professionals” both agricultural entrepreneurs—individuals and those associated defined according to art. 2135 of the Civil Code—as well as social cooperatives whose revenue from agricultural activities represents at least 30% of the total. From this point of view, the attention of the Italian Law is on the real presence of professional agricultural activities in the SF providers, making a

distinction with the Green Care initiatives that are run outside the agricultural practices. In addition to this, social farmers can carry out the activities listed in art. 2 of L. 141/2015 also in collaboration with other actors, such as associations of social promotion, social cooperatives and social enterprises, as well as in generic terms as reported by the Italian legislation, “*other subjects identified in art. 1 of Law 328/2000*”. Moreover, where envisaged by the legislation of the sector, SF activities can be carried out under the responsibility of the social and healthcare services and with the competent public bodies of the territory.

The development of SF in Italy took different forms, according to the degree of maturity of the phenomenon across any specific geographical area, according to the local administrative and organizational culture and the proactivity of the different actors involved [25]. Agricultural enterprises usually combine the main agricultural and/or animal production activities with one or more related activities that allow them to start multifunctional and/or diversification processes [26].

However, not only the typologies of SF initiatives differ, but also the socio-economic links they implement and the type of networks they organize at the territorial level. These specific aspects are positively correlated with the results of the SF activities and with the collective knowledge organized in the co-design of innovative solutions at ground level [27]. Social Farming is a good combination of agricultural production with health, ecosystem and social services but also a good example of networks between different actors [28] (farmers, social-health workers, disadvantaged people/beneficiaries, local communities, public administrators, etc.) and different fields (agriculture, tourism, health, etc.). This involves a system including innovation in the welfare system [29] and combined income, environmental care, education, well-being activities, nature therapies, etc.

The purpose of this study is to identify at the national level, through the use of some case studies of SF activities, weaknesses (critical success factors) and strengths (facilitating factors) able to facilitate future sustainability in Italian social farms. Moreover, it analyzes the specific SF cases to distill lessons for further organization of innovation systems in the perspective of the reorganization and the reinforcement of the local social protection nets, including more SF initiatives.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. The Selection of the Case Studies

The case studies used in this analysis come from a project that was started in November 2020 and carried out by the Operational Group AGRI SOCIAL NETWORK (Italy) thanks to funding from the Rural Development Plan—Umbria Region 2014–2022 Innovation Measure 16.1.1, and the research area refers to the whole national territory.

The identification of the different cases proceeded by steps. The lists of SF experiences created by *Coldiretti Campagna Amica* [30] and by Galasso et al. in *Buone prassi di multifunzionalità nello sviluppo rurale—Raccolta di esperienze aziendali* [31] were used as the first databases to identify and select the social farms active at the Italian national level.

Firstly, two basic criteria have been defined: (1) project-holders should be recognized according to the Italian Law 141/2015 [24]; (2) they should be involved in at least one of the four areas of SF practices referred to in the Law 141/2015 [24].

After this first selection, a further skimming to identify the case studies was conducted according to what were defined as “additional criteria”, such as the following: (3) to come from territories as varied as possible, to be able to represent the regions of the north, the central and the south of Italy and the local systems in which SF might meet facilitating as well as stopping elements; (4) to currently be within a network or have had at least the opportunity to directly or indirectly relate to various actors involved in the management of SF practices in the territory (for example Local Health Unit, External Criminal Enforcement Office, Province—Training and Employment Service and Employment Centre, schools, farms, social cooperatives type A and B, associations, training agencies, municipalities, etc.); (5) to have been conducting SF activities for at least 5 years; (6) to carry out SF activities continuously and not episodically, as reported in the Ministerial Decree 12550/2018 [32];

(7) to be a farm specialized in agriculture—separate from the social/health sector—to better understand the innovation process able to bring farmers to the provision of social/health services and the factors that have an implication on the resource mobilization process.

2.2. Data Collection

In a first phase, a direct survey carried out through semi-structured interviews [33–35] was organized. The cases were six and the interviews were conducted online in June 2021 and video recorded with the consent of participants.

After the selection of the 6 participants that respected all the criteria, the interviews were conducted; they lasted around one hour each, were administered in Italian via internet through the Zoom platform and the videos were recorded to be analyzed by the researchers. The online interview mode was due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation in Italy in 2021.

The structured interviews were organized as follows: a first part, made of 12 questions, concerning the general information about the farm; a second one of 14 questions concerning the activities of SF provided. In detail, the first part allowed to collect information related to the history of the farms, both in terms of evolutionary profile and in terms of physical characteristics. In addition, the productive aspects of each farm were also investigated, such as type of production and production methods. In the second part of the interview, instead the questions focused on SF initiatives carried out, and addressed targets, organizational choices, relationships with local health and social authorities and received funds.

In a second phase, the data collected were elaborated through the cross-case analysis [36–38], a methodology that allowed the researchers to examine the data in a qualitative way reflecting on commonalities and difference in the cases and outlining the combination of factors that may have contributed to their success.

2.3. Method for Analyzing Innovation in the Case Studies

Today the necessity of innovation is no longer only due to economic issues, but also social and environmental issues, since innovation can lead to the creation of new products, processes and services that promote human well-being and yet do not harm the environment [39].

According to the innovation system theory [40,41], every firm reads the external environment in which it operates, the existing structure of norms and incentives, as well as the dominant cultural elements (e.g., administrative/institutional, collaborative vs. conflicting) and adopts an internal lens to design, according to the existing internal resources, opportunities and development paths.

In such respect, the innovation process can be read as a knowledge system in which a certain division and knowledge sharing is needed to facilitate the process of change. This can be progressively organized by the existing actors, but at the same time could also find obstacles when the diverse elements of the puzzle do not fit together. From this perspective, an innovation system is based on diverse elements: the set of existing resources at the level of project-holders, their perception in reading their resources according to the external ones, the local actor system and their ability to cope and to generate new knowledge that is needed to foster and to stabilize the innovation process.

In parallel, the flows that are generated inside the system and the way they are connected to the existing stock of resources might be seen as key to understanding the innovation process. Again, stocks, flows and knowledge among diverse actors are demanding in terms of local coordination around the innovation process. At the same time, the inter-relation among organizations is regulated by the existing as well as the emerging institutions. The way in which the institutions are adapted to the innovation process might slow down (when they are not adapted to support the innovation process) or speed it up, thereby facilitating the innovation process.

According to general reflections mentioned above, the cases can be analyzed by using the lens of the innovation system, as presented in Figure 1.

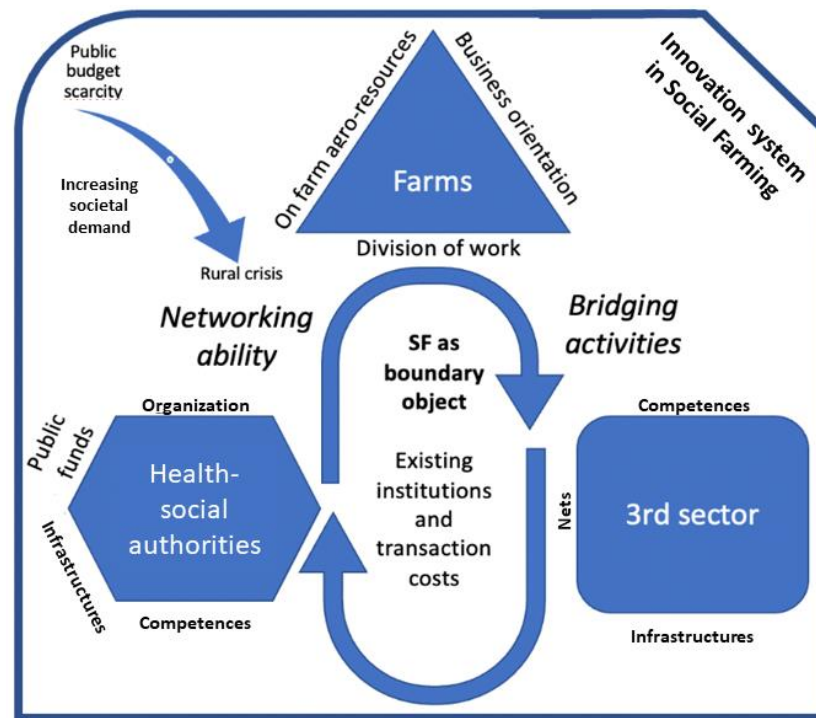


Figure 1. Elaboration of a diagnosis lens for social farms.

As shown in Figure 1, SF can be considered as a boundary object [42,43] able to link actors ordinarily specialized on specific/specialized competences (in the social, health and agricultural sectors) in a dynamic process that should generate innovation in terms of shared vision and frames, new institutional setting and new shared knowledge, all facilitating the mobilization of new flows of resources among the local actors involved. The nature of such new bonds might differ according to the typology of services provided and the local cultural and administrative environment.

The social innovation process needed for the organization of new flows of resources from the existing actors and stocks can be facilitated by the presence of specific institutions or attitudes in the actors involved able to facilitate networking and bridging initiatives [44–47]. Bridging institutions and attitudes can both facilitate the organization of an innovation system able to facilitate the overall facilitation of SF projects as well as generate specific agreement among a close number of actors involved in SF. In one case, the new set of institutions generated at the local level might reduce the transaction costs for all and might facilitate more actors and project-holders to enter in the dynamic processes. In the second case new initiatives can be set among a certain number of actors to run specific, still isolated, projects.

3. Results

3.1. Characteristics of Participants

All farms (Table 2) in this study have been working in SF since the last 5 years (case 5 being the more recent one, and case 1 the oldest); they are distributed in Northern, Central and Southern Italy, giving an insight into homogeneities and diversities of SF experiences in Italy. The farms differ in terms of dimension and production systems (mainly meat, extra virgin olive oil, vegetables, cereals and grains), most of them are larger than the Italian average farm and all of them (except case 6, the smallest one) adopt organic farming methods.

Table 2. Characteristics of case studies.

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6
Dimension	98 ha	40 ha	400 ha	18 ha	140 ha	4 ha
Year of Social Farming start-up	1997	2012	2000	2006	2016	2015
Province	GO (Friuli-Venezia Giulia)	FM (Marche)	CL (Sicilia)	TO (Piemonte)	CZ (Calabria)	VR (Veneto)
Productions	Meat	Meat; extra virgin olive oil; vegetables; fruits	Milk and cheese; eggs; meat; wheat and bran	Biological potatoes; vegetables; grains; fresh pasta	Extra virgin olive oil; cereals; fruits and jams; nuts; vegetables	Breeding farm: donkey and sheep (“Brogna”)
Certifications	Organic agriculture	Organic agriculture	Organic agriculture	Organic agriculture	Organic agriculture; DOP; PGI	/

3.2. Typology of Social Farming Activities Carried Out

In addition to agricultural production, the farms run diverse SF services (Table 3), such as socio-employment integration and educational and rehabilitative activities targeted to different groups of people. For example, the service provided by case 2 seems very peculiar. The farm was born from a family tradition of beef cattle breeding—“*I inherited a small cattle shed with less than a dozen cattle of Marchigiana breed, which were only used for the needs of the family and for a few close friends*”—and the current entrepreneur then created a project through support from a Rural Development Plan, expanding the farm to diversify the on-farm activities. Thanks to the development of a project on “*agrinidi*” (farm kindergarten) in the Marche region, the entrepreneur showed an interest in the subject, and the farm has been rebuilt according to guidelines designed by the Marche region for this type of activity. The deployment continued with the market research focused on the demand for such a service at the local level: “*we saw that in the neighboring cities the numbers of children in the public registers covered a percentage that could represent a good number of users of the service, so we decided in 2012 to risk and to open the agrinido (farm kindergarten)*” (case 2).

Even if with different aims, the story of case 1 has similarities to case 2. This farm focuses on services for mentally disadvantaged/disabled people, but originally it was a sheep farm. Over the years, the livestock farming activity moved from sheep to beef cattle, which are still free-range, to a lesser extent for a farm choice but rather to devote itself completely to social activities. In addition to social services, the farm also shows an orientation to environmental management: “*we maintain very carefully in the right balance the coexistence between the rural and the natural world. We produce biodiversity and, even if it is still a bit difficult to understand, this is the most important aspect for us*” (case 1).

In case 3 the social activity is totally dedicated to socio-employment integration of migrants, drug addicts and mentally disadvantaged people. The main productive activity is goat milk production and processing, as on the farm there is a small cheese factory. This project is combined with two farms, one of which is a rented farm that has been managed by the study participants since it was confiscated due to organized crime. As the farmer says, “*for both companies we always keep an open door for social activities*”.

Case 4 has been a horticultural/cereal farm for generations, but with a strong social vocation given by the professionalism of the current entrepreneur: “*I studied and I was trained as a professional educator, but I was born in a farm, and I’ve always been a farmer with my parents. I tried to make the two things coincide and in the same year we became an educational farm accredited to Piedmont Region*” (case 4). In this case, the SF activities are addressed to children for those of an “*educational farm*” (the laws and the regulations disciplining and encouraging educational farms—the Italian “*fattoria didattica*”, referring to the activities carried out by the farms and addressed at children of school age—which farms must follow are issued mainly by the regions; in most cases, the regions regulate the educational activity within the

laws and regulations on agritourism) and to mentally disadvantaged people and women in difficult situations as regards socio-employment integration. They give a lot of importance to this part of the work, and the aim of the farm is “to be a crossing point where people can acquire and maintain skills that they can spend elsewhere”.

Table 3. Typology of Social Farming activities.

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6
Social Farming activities	Co-therapy	<i>Agrinido</i> (farm kindergarten)	Socio-employment integration	Educational farm; socio-employment integration	Educational farm; socio-employment integration; <i>Agrinido</i> (farm kindergarten)	Animal-Assisted Interventions for co-therapy; educational farm and activities
Beneficiaries	Mentally disadvantaged/disabled people	Children	Mentally disadvantaged people; adults with addiction problems; minor and adult migrants	Mentally disadvantaged people; children; women	Mentally disadvantaged people; disabled children; children and adults	Mentally disadvantaged people (minors); disabled people (adults)
Number of simultaneous projects	10	1	1	10	5	10
Number of users at a time	1–5	11–30	3–6	5–7	1–10	1–4
Collaborations with local authorities	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
External funds	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Strengths	Greater personal satisfaction compared to other activities	Strong ideology behind the projects and awareness of the territory	Benefit as a workforce for the farm	Indirect positive impact on the farm	Personal satisfaction and opportunities of diversification for farms	Increased sensitivity and altruism from the agricultural towards the social part
Weaknesses	Difficulties of dialogue with the public services	Lack of initial aid by other actors of the territory in the development of new projects	Little operative involvement by the healthcare services	Lack of adequate funds	Lack of regional legislation	Difficulties with the bureaucratic aspects

Case 5 is still a family farm experience, but it changed in some ways when the current entrepreneur joined the farm. His/her idea from the beginning was to diversify the agricultural activity with agritourism (the activity of agritourism in Italy is regulated by the National Law 96/2006 [48]), which was then added to the educational and social initiatives. At the same time, a specific attention to innovation and quality products was introduced (in extra virgin olive oil production). The educational activity is not only for schools, but also for groups of adults; indeed, they offer to tourists “educational walks in which we tell our story, we introduce them to the present varieties of plants, vegetables and aromatic herbs, which are often local varieties. We also offer various types of workshops: oil tasting, production of bread and pasta with wheat and flour of the farm, sensorial laboratories etc...” (case 5). In addition to educational activities, the farm also provides internships and individual job placements for mentally disadvantaged people, and, in recent years, they started to also work as an “*agrinido*” (farm kindergarten) for children.

The farm in case 6 is quite different from the others, because it was born with an SF goal: “In our family we are social workers, and we previously carried out integrated experiences between rural and social landscape for children with difficulties of various kinds that could be tested within a rural landscape” (case 6). From this precondition the idea of building an experience that could diversify and try out new models of care was born.

The farm activity is represented by donkey and sheep (“brogna”) breeding, and the animals are used to socialize with minors and adults to support them in rehabilitation. Furthermore, the farm gives importance also to the educational aspects organizing activities addressed both to adults and children.

3.3. Operating Methods of Design, Development and Management of Social Farming Activities

In general, the organization and management of all the farms analyzed considers the development at the same time of more than one social project, on average from 5 to 10 for more structured experiences, divided into the different types of activities. Case 2, which exclusively offers the service of “*agrinido*” (farm kindergarten), carries out only one project but often with a high number of children taking part in the activities (on average up to 30, and in some projects higher numbers were also reached). The other farms that carry out several projects at the same time choose instead to work with small groups (on average five participants or a little more).

For example, in case 6 the various types of groups are divided and managed differently at different times with different operators/educators. The participants are managed either in a dual relationship (one user to one operator) or in a small group. In case 1, during the activities the users work in small groups divided between tasks. However, each one has different objectives, and consequently, in rotation, different assignments within the various laboratories are carried out.

Networking in the territory is pivotal in all the operational frameworks of the six case studies. However, even if almost all the farms have official connections—such as agreements, Memorandum of Understandings, Temporary Associations of Purpose with different actors of the territory (associations, municipalities and schools)—only cases 4 and 6 have structured relationships with cooperatives. Case 6 has an agreement with an accredited cooperative that relates to the various entities in the territory (municipalities, local health authority, etc.). The cooperative, depending on the situation, proposes to the institutions a project that includes SF activities and, if accepted, builds together with the farm a project depending on the type of disadvantage of the users. Case 4 too has an agreement with social cooperatives, but it also has agreements with other different institutions, such as public authority, region, schools and a training institution. In case 2 the farm has relationships with all the institutions supporting the “*agrinidi* (farm kindergarten) project” (region, municipality), but with none of these formalized affiliations, because they have realized they work better alone without waiting for any external aid. Case 3 is an interesting example, where the farm offers social services, maintaining a constant contact with various associations of the territory. The farm makes its land available, but the associations are responsible for proposing and designing the projects. Depending on the type of project, agreements, Temporary Associations of Purpose or protocols are then stipulated.

Nearly all the farms interviewed obtain external funds for the SF projects, and mainly they can be divided in two types according to the services provided: direct payments from the families of the beneficiaries and funding by calls. Farms running “*agrinido*” (farm kindergarten) work in the perspective of economic diversification, selling services directly on the private family market. Those can then request funding or bonuses from local municipalities according to their level of income, as for other privatized services. For other projects, the farm mainly gives value to the social multifunctional aspect of agricultural processes, obtaining only small reimbursements or participating in calls for social investments to restructure and expand the facilities used for SF projects. In addition, in case 3 the projects have always been supported from calls, and the financing has been used in order to buy small useful materials for the projects and bigger equipment essential for the farm. In case 4, for the educational farm projects there are some direct payments, but for the socio-employment integration activities the farm does not receive any direct monetary funds; in this case the users are directly paid from the project for their work. The advantages generated by these activities are indirect, such as the presence of the people

who perform the work, the benefit generated by being inside the network and perceiving a continuous training in progress and update that otherwise could not be received. In case 6 we found a different situation: all the projects with the cooperative are volunteer based and free of charge. As a personal choice and in the spirit of charity, the farm has strongly wanted to make all its spaces available for these projects free of charge, while staff and transport are guaranteed by the cooperative.

3.4. Social Innovation System

In two cases the local environment seems to have a level of innovation in the institutional frames, able to further accompany the local initiatives by reducing the transaction costs. In such cases (case 1 or case 4), the facilitating actors were the public authorities or the farmer organization. In the first case, the bridging institution was mainly public actors. In the second one, as well as in case 3, the farmer association (in both cases Coldiretti) played a double role as the bonding actor (bringing together many farms in the SF arena) and as the bridging actor, by linking the farms with the local public authorities and the third sector.

In case 2, the decision for entering the SF arena was strongly influenced by the institutional frame defined by the region in the field of kindergarten: *“we saw that the Marche Region, together with Fondazione Montessori as expert partner on technical issues, was involved in developing a project on agrinidi (farm kindergarten), and we took an interest in understanding how it worked”* (case 2). In this case, the region took the role of studying and defining a set of new institutions able to accompany the farm throughout the process of services provision for the support of families and children.

In the other cases, the farmer initiatives were mainly negotiated, co-produced and co-deployed with the local third sector actors, and SF—as a boundary object—catalyzed human and physical resources and infrastructure among the local stakeholders into new flows of services.

3.5. The Strengths and the Weaknesses of Social Farming Projects

All the interviewees agreed about the strengths and weaknesses of SF projects. The main strength point was the personal satisfaction of the farmers in supporting disadvantaged people and the local community. All farmers showed commitment to their job and specific values. These non-profit goals can also be seen as another strength that leads to a diversified business orientation of the farms towards beneficiaries and the community. The case 2 farmer underlined how the project of *“agrinido”* (farm kindergarten) changed the territory: there has been a strong awareness of an alternative type of education. More than one interviewee highlighted the indirect positive consequences for the farm both from the point of view of increasing the consumer base for the farm and benefits of a workforce that takes care of various parts of the farm. In this regard, according to case 5 SF is seen as an opportunity for farms: *“agriculture is not only production, it’s territory, landscape, it helps people who have difficulties or go through difficult times”* (case 5). From this case it emerged that agriculture therefore has a future from this point of view and not just from a productive one.

The main weakness concerns bureaucratic aspects. Difficulties of dialogue with institutions and public services is certainly the most important point of agreement among all the interviewees; recognition of the role played by SF and support and active involvement turned out to be fundamental for the viability of these activities. Case 1 and 6 stressed a lack of sensitivity to the theme of SF also by many farmers who remain very linked to the productive aspects and fail to open up to the vision towards the social field. Interviewees supposed that this may be due both to a lack of specific training for the farmer who intends to approach the social world (case 1) and to the request of too strong requirements by the Regional Law for the registration and the maintenance of the title of social farm (case 6). According to case 4, adequate funds could help farms to invest more in hiring people for SF projects (e.g., project manager or educator).

4. Discussion

The six farms case studies, although very different from each other both in geographical location and by agricultural and social vocation, supported us to understand the innovation system in which they developed and to understand and codify useful lessons.

To reflect on the cases, we performed the following:

- Firstly, we analyzed the internal aspects (stock of resources, attitudes and business orientation). A specific focus on the division of work was provided, both internally to the farm and in relationship with the local system.
- In the organization of SF as boundary object, a specific focus was given to the relationships organized with other local actors and to the privileged relationships organized with all or some of them in the provision of the organization of innovative SF services.
- The facilitating elements as well as the bottlenecks were put in evidence as networking and bridging attitudes and actors. From this point of view, a specific focus was given to the existing and the changing institutions.

By chance, all the farms managed to give value to their internal stock of resources, although in different ways, and to organize flows of innovative knowledge and SF services.

Most of the farms (five of six) have a long history of operation throughout different generations in the family. Only one evolved from the provision of services for less empowered people to an agricultural firm.

A common feature regards specific attention given, not only to the social aspect, but also to the environmental ones [49]. From this point of view, all the farms in their productive history evolved by organizing added values to agricultural processes (PDO, old varieties, food processing, direct selling and restauration) and to nature management (biodiversity, landscape management and organic farming). In all cases, the entrepreneurial attitude was clearly innovation oriented in the range of the farming activities, including the social ones. In such respect the innovation goes hand in hand with responsibility in regard to the local/global community. Keeping to the topic of the territory, an interesting element found in most cases was a strong inclination to highlight the environmentalist spirit of the business and the search for coexistence between the rural world and the natural world (especially evident in case 1, but not only in this case).

What emerged was that in front of the lack of public authorities' initiative the intense dialogue among the farms and the active local associations facilitated the division of work and competences needed to organize the SF services (farmers, mainly those with agricultural competences and those of the third sectors' associations mainly providing the social/health competences and infrastructures). The mobilization of internal farm resources emerged as a mix among the farmer attitudes and competences (in some of the farms, educational and social competences were already present when the social farm activities started; in other cases, they were introduced according to the specific typology of social initiatives introduced in the farm, especially in two cases providing kindergarten at the farm level), the social demands emerging from the local environment, as well as the type of relationships established on the ground with other actors (third sector and public authorities). From this point of view, it seems quite evident the process of transformation of internal stock of resources into flows of services as a process of shared knowledge creation of the farms with other relevant local stakeholders. The cases cover most of the targets normally addressed by SF initiatives and by the National Law, such as people with autism, with Down syndrome, with psychiatric and physical disabilities for co-therapeutic initiatives and less empowered for vocational trainings (migrants, people with social difficulties), as well as civic services for families and adults (kindergarten, services for children and their families, and elders).

Depending on the targets, but also on the level of innovation in the local system, the main relationships are established with public authorities, with third sector actors or with both.

According to the institutional frames, the organization of the competences and of related human resources and the division of work also might change. In all cases where the

SF services are directly recognized and paid (such as in the cases with services for children), the farms recruit directly the human resources that are needed, organizing inside the firm the division of work. In co-therapeutic and social inclusive projects, the collaboration and the division of work among the farmers and the social worker of the third sector organizations facilitate the provision of the competences that are involved in the SF initiatives. In the last cases, a clear separation between the roles of the agricultural enterprises and the social ones by coordinating transversal skills emerged. In this regard, although some farmers have previous experience in the social field, as in case 6, the evident key is the clear division of roles and competences in a new hybrid environment where agricultural activities and social ones mutually reinforce each other. The strategy chosen for SF projects, then, was to provide the specialized farmers' agricultural skills, leaving, however, the social competences to the educators of the external collaborating cooperative/associations. New common and hybrid knowledge was shared among the actors involved to face the possible risks and dangers related to the agricultural activities as well as to share information regarding the social practices. Among the elements found, a clear point was the organization of permanent networks among the actors taking the lead in the organization of SF initiatives in the territory—sometimes between farmers and local public authorities, in other cases between farmers and social cooperatives and/or associations and in other situations among the three different actors. The role of such nets was to share and to generate the new knowledge needed, to facilitate common understanding and ideas and to mobilize the needed resources for the implementation of the new services for the communities. Inside the new nets, the bridging activities generated the competences needed, the division of work among different organizations and the rewards themselves. A particularly interesting element in the good management of SF practices was the organization of SF services according to a methodology involving the definition and the subsequent investment on innovative ideas for the territory, thereby developing specific skills. This is the situation of case 2, where the entrepreneurs started the process of SF through an analysis of the territorial context and subsequently defined the idea through a continuous collaboration for the implementation with an external expert institution.

In all SF projects, sustainability was found under specific perspectives and by following new principles. A new mix of public fund provision, voluntary and responsible attitudes—mainly from the private actors—and a new engagement in growing local networks at the local level with local community members was framed. In the SF projects, sustainability was so achieved due to an innovative mix composed of public expenditure, resource activation, scope economy (linked to the multifunctional use of agricultural processes and existing rural structures), the existing infrastructures (especially for users' transportation) available in the local cooperative and associations, some voluntary work of both the private non-profit and for profit actors and the direct recognition of the community regarding the agricultural products produced by the farms involved.

The resource mobilization from the actors involved (farmers, the third sector and public authorities) was every time engaging in terms of bridging activities for the reorganization of the existing institutions into new and useful ones. This process was differently shaped according to the different roles played by public authorities as well as the typology of SF services provided. In a way, this was the hardest and still not totally solved aspect. In most of the interviews, the difficulties with existing rules and institutions were the most mentioned weak points. They still are considered as obstacles in the resource mobilization process for the provision of SF services.

In addition to such common evidence, differences also emerged from the single cases. When the provision of services involved children and kindergarten activities (cases 2 and 5), specific new frames were designed or the existing ones were adapted to the new needs. Either way, due also to the intense investments needed in terms of both human and structural resources, the sustainability arose from direct payment paid by families (with some refund from the public policies).

In addition, in other cases a process of adaptation of the existing institutions into new more suitable/adapted ones was previously achieved. This was for migrants' inclusive paths with specific projects (SPRA system), as for co-therapeutic and other inclusive initiatives (in Friuli the FAP system Funds for Possible Autonomy was adapted to the SF initiatives oriented to young people in need). As for the social inclusion and vocational training on-farm activities, the existing procedures were activated, mainly due to the efforts of the third actor partners.

A further element to underline among the keys to managing these farms well can certainly be traced back to the basic idea: the motivation that encourages the entrepreneur to introduce in the business project processes that fall outside the agricultural production. In addition to this, from the interviews it emerged the importance to put in synergy already existing resources and competences, taking advantage of the past knowledge in favor of the social projects of the farm and exploiting on-farm existing resources and the scope economy (the possibility to give added value with different processes to the same resources used in a multifunctional purpose).

In terms of sustainability, a strong point for the farms was also given by the social impact that they received in terms of social recognition from the territory and the communities that started finding SF experience something important to have and to share.

The rearrangement of exiting institutions into new ones is a key point in the innovation system, and it followed different paths according to the actors involved taking the leadership in the innovation processes. When the public authorities are proactive in institutionalizing the new frames, they become then open to every possible entering actor in the SF arena, therefore reducing the transaction costs for the followers.

The innovation system differs when the bridging activities are played by other private actors (farmers, their institutions and third sector actors). In this context, initially the actions regard mainly the actors involved in the growing SF networks which struggle with finding new solutions, which only with difficulty can be adopted immediately by eventual newcomers. Both the bureaucratic part of the social activity and the organization of the projects are mainly entrusted to the associations of the territory with which farmers establish networks. The transaction costs remain quite high, reducing the entry possibility for new actors and frustrating the mobilization of extra resources. A strong motivation of the engaged actors and their openness to the needs of the community were the main elements for overcoming the existing obstacles and facilitating the innovation process. Co-design and co-deployment really matter in the definition of SF projects, being a key element in terms of sustainability. From this point of view, the added value coming from the on-farm resources and the business orientation of the farmers supported the organization of innovative SF services that were more suitable and sustainable for the local communities than the conventional ones. Therefore, when properly valued, the elements of specificity endogenous to the business system can represent a flywheel of good overall management (for example, case 1). Another important aspect in explaining the sustainability of these SF projects was related to the possibility to invest on-farm existing resources or to co-activate public funds such as those coming from the RDP. However, in SF projects sometimes the return is not guaranteed in a short time (for example, case 2).

Regarding the choices about the typology of SF services offered, apparently in each case the choice comes closer to the system of values and entrepreneurial experience/attitude of the farmers involved, from their background, their willingness, as well as from the relationships they established with other actors in the area. From this point of view, the final choice emerged from the overlap of diverse elements and opportunities that took shape in the farm and in the dialogue with other local actors.

Comparing and reflecting on the different farms analyzed, the case analysis in light of the conceptual frame that we defined working on the theory of the innovation system—although with the existing specificities—offered some key generalized lessons regarding the organization of SF services and the critical facilitating and obstacle factors. They are the following.

SF mobilizes existing on-farm resources, and to achieve this a strong bridging activity has to be carried out by local actors in agreement with the existing general framework (defined by the National and the Regional Laws). When they are sustained by public authorities the impact in terms of transaction cost reduction can be higher and more long lasting, and the innovation can be faster. At the same time, the excess of institutionalization might generate bureaucratic obstacles that might have a negative impact on the foregoing projects.

In absence of the public authority's proactivity [50], the alliance among farmers and third sector actors became crucial [51] to organize the right division of vision, knowledge, work and competences that the complexity of SF initiatives—both from the agricultural and the social/health point of view—ask to solve. Such networks and alliances are relevant but also demanding in terms of transaction costs. They generate effective projects and services but might with some difficulties be transferred as such to other places.

To mobilize existing resources into innovative SF services, new institutions need to be set, especially in the Italian situation. Such a process is quite often under-evaluated and is translated into bureaucratic obstacles [6] that increase the transaction costs and might frustrate innovation in the local systems.

Sustainability of SF [52] innovative services depends on a mix of new principles based on public intervention but also voluntary actions, scope economy and community recognition. This can be supported by dedicated tools such as dedicated economic resources for SF activities and tax relief in the case of hiring disadvantaged people, a factor that could greatly facilitate the systematization of such types of actions.

The innovation system [41] is crucial to mobilizing existing resources (from farms, third sector and public authorities), and quite often there are no policies able to support this process of change that is mainly based on the voluntary action of the actors involved more than on a designed and sustained process able to support transition.

Transaction costs are still too high in relation to the high level of bridging activities that need to be run in absence of a proactive role of the public authorities in this direction. The organization of local bridging institutions [47] might facilitate the innovation system to better accompany the organization of innovative SF practices.

The new principles that are frequently mentioned by the people interviewed are rooted in a mix of responsible entrepreneurship, not-for-profit projects, project initiatives, quasi market organization for some of the services provided, networking and community alliances and community recognition for the actors engaged.

5. Conclusions

In our work, by starting from selected case studies, we tried to distill some lessons regarding the enabling and the limiting aspects of SF initiatives.

In all cases, the presence of the mentioned actors played a different role in accompanying the process of innovation and resource mobilization and contributing to the main outcomes of the initiatives, perhaps often focused on diverse targets of societal needs.

As pointed out in our discussion, the case analysis offered some clear insights about the enabling and limiting factors in the social innovation process of SF initiatives.

Regarding the enabling factors, we highlight the following:

- The bridging activities among actors and resources that in different ways are the primary element for every first stage of SF projects. When they are not effective in facilitating the discussion around the boundary object that SF is, the transaction costs to the innovation become so high that obstacles are created for any opportunity for the actors involved, regarding for the local system.
- The bridging activities regard the co-design of common vision, knowledge and resource sharing related to the new hybrid object that bonds the new actors into the new system.

- The main outcomes of the bridging activities regard the evolution of the existing institutions into new ones able to be supportive for the innovation process in SF and to transform the existing stock of resources into new flows of activities and services.
- The bridging role can be played by all the actors involved, although with different costs according to the scale of action of the actor themselves. When the bridging institution is represented by public authorities, the impact might be larger not only for the actors immediately involved but for the system, reducing the transaction costs of the innovation also for newcomer.
- The bridging activities consolidate new hybrid networks that facilitate the circulation of existing as well as new resources in the system, supporting the forthcoming of other initiatives and services.
- When there is a lack of initiatives of public authorities, the arena can be only facilitated by the collaboration among farmers and the third sector actors, by way of a division of work and competences able to support the whole process but only for the actors directly involved. In this case, the role of the association and of the social cooperatives involved covers mainly the institutional role they are demanded to play from the public authorities, although not directly in the SF area of interest.
- The sustainability of SF initiatives arose from a new mix of business orientation and entrepreneurship offered by the farmers, the multifunctional scope economy of on-farm resources, and the new project ability and institutional setting co-designed and co-deployed by public authorities and third sector actors. Limiting factors might be seen as the opposite of the previous ones:
- When the innovation system is not able to start working in a collective way on SF as a new boundary object, when there is a lack of attention on the bridging elements and actions and when SF is conceived as a new tool more than a new approach, immediately there emerges difficulty in approaching innovation as a systemic perspective. In such cases, the lack of transformative institutions and knowledge generates bureaucratic burdens and high transaction costs for the innovators acting on the ground. As such, the existing stocks of resources are only with difficulty transformed into new flows and new practices and services.

In view of the results obtained, the study also offers valuable policy implications. First of all, in order to overcome the divergent positions between agricultural and social components, a cultural change (beyond a political one) is fundamental to recognize SF as an activity transversal to both sectors. SF is a tool capable of enhancing both agricultural and social activities, innovating both sectors and their respective operating practices. This cultural change can take place by encouraging economic networks between farms and social cooperatives. It is important to help them understand that these networks are increasingly strategic for both realities, since they can generate various benefits: (i) to diversify their fundamental sources of income; (ii) to structure new local production chains; (iii) to increase shared social responsibility; (iv) to improve their visibility and positioning on the market; (v) to find new employment opportunities at the end of training and a work integration path.

Providing SF services means social inclusion—ensuring life experience, training, orientation, socialization and personal growth for the disadvantaged people involved and providing new social, health and educational services—but also guaranteeing the highest quality for the consumer. To combine these aspects, building networks between farms and social cooperatives helps to overcome barriers linked to the absence of specific social skills within the farms and agricultural skills within social cooperatives. However, to really build these networks and allow them to operate, it is necessary to recognize the roles and skills of those who are specialized in one field (agricultural) or in the other (social), and to combine these skills through cooperation as a coordination mechanism to pursue a common goal in a synergistic and more functional way.

To really recognize the social, economic and environmental value of SF (and to reinforce this process of innovation), it is therefore essential to strengthen and expand co-

operation between the agricultural world, the social world and public administration by rethinking their relationships and facilitating their networking. Only in this way can SF become a new welfare tool that focuses on the need to take care of people not as simple passive beneficiaries of a service, but as subjects that are part of the local community, enabling their empowerment.

Limitations of the Work

The work carried out has some limitations that can be blamed on the necessary steps of the work and the criteria defined by the project. One of the first limitations refers to the variability of the chosen cases. The sample, although small in terms of numbers, is well distributed in terms of geographical representativeness at the national level, but it is limited to Italian cases and lacks referring to the representativeness of all types of projects and opportunities that SF can offer.

Another limitation of the work is related to the bottlenecks that emerged from the analysis. It would have been useful to associate to the analysis of the case studies a dialogue with the other stakeholders involved—the subjects with which the companies work on in the territory. In order to understand the critical issues faced by farmers in SF projects, it would have been interesting to also interview the various interlocutors with whom they have interacted over the years.

It would therefore be very useful to add further research to extend the work through an analysis of the networking that is created around SF projects. In this sense, an analysis of territorial cases could be developed covering the point of view of the other stakeholders involved.

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