

Article

Challenges and Perspectives of Social Farming in North-Eastern Italy: The Farmers' View

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Abstract: In the European framework of multifunctional agriculture, Social Farming (SF) has constantly been spreading. In Italy, these practices are legally connected to Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI), creating new perspectives and challenges for farmers and their territories. In this paper, we report the results of a pilot study conducted in the Veneto Region to understand farmers' opinions about the opportunities and challenges of SF and AAI. Participants were convened by the Italian farmers' trade organization *Coldiretti*. All of them provide social/healthcare services on their farms, including human–animal interaction, and have attended the regional training courses for Social Farming providers. Data were collected during two focus groups that were videotaped and subsequently analyzed by two researchers to categorize and dope out relevant topics. Results show a mismatch between what is stated by national and regional laws and the current situation reported by farmers. They are faced with many economic challenges as well as barriers in their relationship with traditional healthcare services. However, farmers have a strong motivation and believe in the benefits that AAI and SF offer to society in rural and urban areas.

Keywords: animal assisted interventions; focus group; green care; human–animal interaction; organizational model; social farming



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1. Introduction

In the framework of agriculture and rural development, Social Farming (SF) is a set of practices that offer new opportunities to local communities. The term Social Farming has not a univocal interpretation all over Europe, and many definitions exist. However, all of its facets are usually encompassed in what is known as *Green Care* [1]. In Italy, SF is interpreted as a set of practices in which agriculture is used as a tool for public health and where the need for food production and service innovation in rural areas are strictly linked to the creation of trust networks between stakeholders [2]. The concept of SF started to spread in Italy in the early 2000s with different features according to regional specificities [3]. The Italian rural environment embraces a large range of ecosystems, from the Alpine environment in the North (e.g., Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano) to the Mediterranean one in the islands (e.g., Sicily). Therefore, farm productions are strongly influenced by both the characteristics of the territory and the socio-cultural differences between regions. As a result, social farms are also quite heterogeneous [4]. In general, Italian social farms aim at reaching prosperity in rural areas through new solutions [5,6] especially oriented to social and healthcare services, education, work inclusion, and co-therapy; all of these services valorize multifunctionality and diversification in agriculture [7].

In 2015, an Italian national law (Law n. 141/2015) [8] was enacted to regulate the field of SF in Italy and was implemented by a Ministerial Decree in 2018 [9]. This decree formally

connected SF to another legally recognized practice: Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) (Agreement between the government and the regions on 25 March 2015) [10], and it is a unique example of regulation and harmonization of these two fields.

AAI practices also started to spread in Italy in the 2000s in the form of Animal Assisted Activities (AAA), Animal Assisted Education (AAE), and Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) [11]. In AAI, locations must be adapted to a single project, and farms and natural environments can be included [12]. The key element of these practices is the interaction of human–animal, including both companion and farm animals. Such interaction seems to have benefits for humans, although the inner mechanisms involved in this process have not been completely understood yet [13].

Despite the regulation and the advantages offered by *Green Care* [14,15], Italian farmers interested in developing or implementing new approaches to services such as social farms [16] and AAI activities [17] cannot benefit from a shared educational path. Furthermore, even if farms have the nominal possibility to integrate themselves with the healthcare system, supporting services that are reduced because of the lack of funding, this hardly ever happens in practice [3]. In fact, in Italy, traditional healthcare and social services are provided by local health units which are economically supported by the National Healthcare System [18] but managed at a regional level. Therefore, even if care practices follow common quality standards in the whole country, local health units have a different organizational model according to regional laws, which often limits the introduction of innovations into the social and healthcare system.

The need to find new pathways for social services in rural areas is well known [19], but the SF sector is affected by the lack of data about organizational and economic features [20]. An official national list for social farms does not exist, and only incomplete data are available in reports from some research institutes [7]. Regarding AAI, an official national register of professionals is available [21], but the information system does not collect data about the workplace of the people listed; therefore, data related to the number and type of professionals working in rural contexts are not available.

From this perspective, the pilot study reported in this paper aims at investigating the opinion of Italian farmers about SF and AAI, more specifically, farmers located in North-Eastern Italy (Veneto Region). In this area, there is a regional list with about 30 farms registered; however, according to the most important Italian farmer association *Coldiretti*, “more than 300 farmers have attended the regional compulsory SF training courses in the past five years” (*Coldiretti*, oral communication). This seeming inconsistency in data calls for a detailed investigation to understand the gap between the small number of farms officially registered and the huge interest in SF practices shown by farmers, with particular attention to the farms in which human–animal interactions are among the services provided. The reported study collected preliminary data about the organizational models adopted in these farms, the services and path types provided to clients, their features, and possible future evolution.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was designed with the goal of obtaining deeper insights into the dynamics of SF in Italy by exploring farmers’ points of view on their organizational models, the challenges they face, and their perceptions of this field. We used the focus group approach, a valuable qualitative methodology to gather in-depth knowledge about a specific topic [22] and to explore a wide range of opinions, feelings, and experiences that individuals have about a certain issue [23]. This is achieved through the gathering of a small group of people representative of a bigger community, which are convened by a moderator to debate together about a topic in a structured way [24]. Two focus groups were conducted in the territory of Veneto Region during August 2021.

2.1. Territory

The pilot study was carried out in the Region of Veneto in northern Italy, where SF has been regulated since 2013 by a regional law [25] updated in 2018 to allow farms providing AAI to be included in the regional list of social farms. SF and AAI regional regulations are a relevant subject in Italy since sometimes their requirements are much more detailed compared to national regulations or contrast a lot with them [26,27]. For the regional law in Veneto, SF can be provided in four areas: social and working inclusion of disadvantaged people, rehabilitation paths, educational and personal wellbeing programs, and reintegration of inmates. AAI can be integrated as one of the services provided in two of these areas (i.e., rehabilitation paths and educational and personal wellbeing programs). In the region, there is also a regulation on the petting zoo; this is also an activity that can be performed by farmers and requires a specific training course, such as SF. This has to be connected to farming activities, usually animals, but only with the aim of teaching users insights into the rural world [28].

2.2. Selection of Participants

Sample size and group composition were decided following Holloway and Galvin's guidelines [29]. All participants were required to be able to speak Italian, and their participation in the study was voluntary. Moreover, participants needed to have experience working on a social farm. Additionally, other specific inclusion criteria were: attendance to the regional compulsory SF training course in the past five years; being motivated to join the focus group; registration in the regional list of SF or interest in doing so; being an AAI program provider or at least providing human–animal interaction activities in their farm.

According to Krueger and Casey, people are generally more willing to participate if someone they know and respect invites them to take part in the focus group [23]. For this reason, a collaboration with *Coldiretti Veneto* was established. As mentioned before, *Coldiretti* is one of the most important farmer trade associations in Italy, with a strong and positive reputation and image among Italian farmers. Therefore, the support received from them through their regional and Provincial offices was very valuable and helpful in identifying adequate participants for the focus group. A member of the organization, well known and respected by potential attendees, invited participants following the inclusion criteria described above. A total of 10 farmers from 10 different farms in Veneto region were selected.

2.3. Focus Groups

The ideal size of a focus group is usually between four and eight people [30] since small groups may encourage individuals to take part in the discussion [31]; therefore, we decided to divide the participants and conduct two focus groups with five people each.

The two focus groups were carried out during August 2021 on two consecutive days but in two different locations in order to make it easier for participants to reach the place: one in Padua (participants were 4 women and 1 man, age range: 41–51) and one in Vicenza (participants were 2 women and 3 men, age range: 31–63). Both groups gathered in a conference room at the *Coldiretti Veneto's* local offices and were moderated by the same researcher. An assistant moderator helped set up the place and took notes without interacting with the participants. Both sessions were videotaped.

In the beginning, participants were welcomed by the moderator, and consent forms were collected. In both focus groups, the moderator used the same semi-structured interview guide developed by the research team. The interview guide included ten main questions addressing the purpose of the study [23]. The moderator tried to make people as comfortable as possible and kept the discussion “on track”. Both meetings had a duration of two hours, as suggested in the literature [31].

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by two researchers following the methods described by Migliorini and Rania [32] and Rabiee [33]. We videotaped and transcribed both focus groups to facilitate the analysis. To guarantee the privacy of the people involved, we anonymized them by assigning a random letter to each participant. We numbered each line of the transcript and made two copies of the file. The two researchers independently examined the transcripts and identified emerging themes by highlighting portions of text with several colors, each one corresponding to a different topic. The two working sheets were compared, and any disagreement between the two researchers was discussed. Researchers extracted the quotes from the original text and created broad categories under which they re-arranged them [29].

Six major categories were identified from the text: (1) registration in the regional list; (2) barriers hindering registration; (3) critical issues; (4) farmers' opinions about the services provided; (5) remuneration for the services; (6) farmers' opinions about the organization of social services in agriculture.

3. Results

3.1. Description of Participants

The main characteristics of the ten farms involved in this study are summarized in Table 1. Half of them are registered in the regional list. All farms claim to be multifunctional, and their main activities are the production of organic vegetables (50%), animal husbandry (40%), and the plantation of medicinal herbs (20%). A great majority (90%) also provide petting zoo activities, 60% of them provide AAI, and 40% of them have implemented other human–animal interaction activities that are not referable to AAI.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants.

Participant	Category	Registration in the Regional List	Animals Held	Activities
1	Farm	Yes	Donkeys	Petting zoo, organic vegetables
2	Farm	No	Donkeys and hens	Petting zoo, organic vegetables
3	Farm and Social enterprise	Yes	Donkeys, pony and rabbits	AAI
4	Farm and Social enterprise	Yes	Donkeys, horses and dogs	Petting zoo, AAI, organic vegetables
5	Farm	No	Donkeys and hens	Petting zoo, organic vegetables, medicinal herbs
6	Farm	No	Horses and pony	Petting zoo, AAI, medicinal herbs, animal husbandry
7	Farm	No	Dogs, horses and donkeys	Petting zoo, AAI
8	Farm, Social Cooperative and non-profit organizations of social utility	Yes	Hens	Petting zoo, organic vegetables, animal husbandry
9	Farm	No	Donkeys, pony, dogs and barnyard animals	Petting zoo, AAI, animal husbandry
10	Farm	Yes	Donkeys	Petting zoo, AAI, animal husbandry

3.2. Registration in the Regional List

The five farmers belonging to farms that are registered in the regional list have different opinions on the usefulness of the registration. Participants 1 and 4 think that it is the only way for a farm to provide social/health services and obtain public grants. On the other hand, although Participants 8 and 10 are aware of the opportunities that the registration offers, they think that it is not essential, and sometimes it creates problems because of the reporting activities that the region requires every year. Participant 3 did not express an opinion about the topic.

3.3. Barriers Hindering Registration

For the other half of farmers, which are not registered on the regional list, the problem is bureaucracy. They reported different experiences: Participant 2 has not undertaken the registration process because of negative feedback from other farmers. Moreover, he/she thinks that SF is not developed enough in Italy to guarantee a minimum or adequate economic gain:

“The experiences we hear from some fellow farmers about the difficulties they have faced, as well as our own personal problems with the farms structures and economic resources, have made us refrain from investing in the Social Farming sector because it is full of uncertainty.”

Participant 9 said that he/she tried the registration process, but it failed, so he/she preferred to make an investment in the petting zoo activity. Participant 5 thinks registration is not useful because there is no direct economic gain for registered social farms; moreover, working inclusion projects addressed to disadvantaged people can be activated even without regional registration. Participant 7 is not registered because he/she provided only AAI, and this service was only included in SF after the update of the regional legislation. Participant 6 is aware of the bureaucratic difficulties and expresses that they have kept him/her from trying; however, he/she is waiting for some fellow farmers to complete the SF training courses, and probably afterward, the farm will start the registration process.

3.4. Critical Issues

During the focus groups, it was mentioned that farmers have to face many challenges when they try to provide social and health services in Veneto Region. On this topic, participants' opinions were particularly homogeneous, so the main ones are listed below in order of relevance:

- The perceived distance between agricultural and social stakeholders. Farmers complain about the absence of networks that support them in creating partnerships with professionals in the social and health fields for collaboration in projects at the farm. This way, it is impossible to count on the multidisciplinary approach required to serve users that need assistance and who do not want to follow the traditional paths.
- National and regional laws are perceived as a limitation. Participants agreed to consider legislation as a strong deterrent to the development of SF, and they claimed that this is the main reason why many people that attend the SF training courses leave the registration process. Even registered farmers highlighted inconsistencies in the registration system: for example, Participant 10 provides AAI, but this is not stated in the official list. Farmers think that this is one of the main problems affecting the SF sector.
- The economic feasibility in the long period. Farmers have to invest lots of money in their education (SF and AAI compulsory courses), as well as in infrastructure to make the environment suitable for users, but they do not know if this will lead to an adequate remuneration for the services provided.
- The challenging relationship with traditional health and social services. Networking with the local health units is up to the farmer; thus, any partnership between farms and traditional services depends on the personal connection that can be established with

healthcare officers. More specifically, Participant 8 thinks that managers in traditional services are not in favor of these kinds of multidisciplinary and innovative approaches and affirms that, in fact, the majority of them are reluctant to support these initiatives (for example, to establish partnerships with farms for specific projects).

- The poor knowledge about SF and AAI services by the traditional healthcare system and potential users or beneficiaries.
- The economic fragility of the healthcare system, which often cannot invest in innovative external services such as those provided by social farms because of the serious lack of funding.

3.5. Farmers' Opinions about the Services Provided

During the focus groups, participants were asked to identify features related to their services and categorize them as positive or negative. Opinions were not homogenous; sometimes, the same feature had different meanings for different farmers. The opinions that emerged in the discussion are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' point of view on features of providing services at the farm.

Positive Features	Conflicting Features	Negative Features
Positive effects for users	Work inclusion in collaboration with the traditional services	Lack of knowledge and mistrust by traditional services
Strong motivation of providers	Grants for specific activities	Poor recognition of the activities they provide
Multifunctionality and diversification		Difficulties with bureaucracy

Most participants highlighted the benefits that users can obtain by engaging in the activities provided at the farm. Participants 1 and 10 reported experiences in which some of their users had a positive change in their pharmacological therapy with a reduction in medication dose.

Participant 9 said that a strong positive point is the motivation of those farmers who believe in their work and go on despite difficulties:

"We believe in this, if we did not we would have given up already. We like this work; we do it gladly. I always say it is the best work in the world despite the difficulties we may encounter along the process".

All participants believe that multifunctionality and diversification are positive aspects for farms: the innovation of offering social and health services at the farm is perceived as beneficial for users and even for the entire community. This is partly because users, who often experience isolation in care facilities due to their condition, are no longer excluded from society, and this interaction has the potential to help them improve their life quality. Participants hope for the future to enhance these multidisciplinary approaches through new networks with social stakeholders and other farmers in the territory; this way, new knowledge could be developed, which in turn would encourage social inclusion. Participant 10 thinks that the present organizational models of farms are beneficial but not enough, especially because they do not offer economic sustainability in the long term:

"Some projects work and get grants but then afterwards there is nothing. We do not have systematized organizational models; Social Farming could be extremely effective but not in the way it is structured right now. With this rigid system, Social Farming will never develop, and this is a matter of fact."

As shown in Table 2, during the discussion, some conflicting features emerged. For example, regarding the topic of work inclusion, Participant 1 thinks that this activity is the best way to start a social farm. He/she affirms that from a bureaucratic perspective,

it is easier to establish a collaboration with the traditional service already in place. In his/her experience, the relationship established with the respective administration in the territory is good; they decide together the path for the users included in the farm, and the social services agency supervises users regularly. For this reason, there were few negative situations, and the overall experience was positive. Additionally, for Participant 3, the collaboration with the traditional services for work and social inclusion is positive (in this case, referring to services focused only on drug addicts). It has been a good experience because the people selected by the service agency have been suitable for the work on the farm and have had the adequate relational skills to interact with the disabled people they host. On this topic, Participant 3 said:

“We work with the service agency that is in charge of drug users and we are at ease with it. We have found very competent and helpful people there. They select adequate users for our traineeships.”

By contrast, Participant 4 had various negative experiences when collaborating with traditional service agencies for work inclusion. He/she recalls that at one point, there was a very well-established project for disabled people, but when they started to interact with the users that the service agency had sent, they found that some of them were not suitable to stay at the farm, and they had many problems at the workplace. Participant 5 reports the same bad experience related to work inclusion:

“If it is work inclusion, it means that the user has the capacity to perform the activities that are required. Otherwise, it means that I have to become a professional educator in charge of the user and stop being a farmer. I had this experience with the service agency, but my farm can’t afford to waste the time necessary for my work in order to take care of a person.”

Conflicting features also emerged around the topic of the economic reward for the health and social activities at the farm. Participant 1 has a positive opinion because he/she has agreed on a fixed remuneration with the service agencies for the work inclusion of people at the farm. Similarly, Participant 4 has the same chance because his/her farm is included in an experimental project in collaboration with a social cooperative, so his/her position is advantageous. On the contrary, Participants 7 and 10 have had only some sporadic grants from the administration or from private foundations for specific activities, but that does not guarantee the economic sustainability of their farms. Depending on those irregular contributions has been a negative experience for them, and, in this regard, Participant 7 punctually said:

“All the projects that I know of are financed by grants or institutions only.”

Regarding features perceived as negative by all participants, a widespread perceived lack of knowledge and mistrust from traditional service agencies was pointed out. Farmers express that this is especially reflected by the fact that no training courses are offered or not even a communication channel to inform about these alternative services. In their opinion, this lack of support and recognition is what hinders the development of social farms.

Likewise, the topic of “bureaucracy” was recurrent in the discussion. Some participants, such as Participant 2, decided to give up on providing health and social services at the farm because of the bureaucratic burden. A long registration process and the impossibility of receiving any economic support directly from the healthcare system are the main issues. All participants highlighted the need for a law revision to make the interaction between farmers and traditional service agencies easier and more effective.

3.6. Remuneration for the Services

Almost all participants stated that the average revenue from the alternative services offered at the farm is not sufficient. For instance, Participant 5 said that services are not really contributing to improving their revenue and Participant 8 thinks that, at times, it feels as if it was even wrong to look at health and social services as a way to improve farmers’

income because this usually leads to tension and conflict of interests with the traditional service agencies. In this regard, Participant 8 says:

“The world of social services doesn’t look at Social Farming as an inspiration for improvement but as the competition. It becomes a war between the poor and this is not useful.”

Moreover, from his/her own experience, Participant 8 expresses that in these kinds of multifunctional farms, the driving force is the production and direct sale of agricultural products, just like in any traditional farm. Additionally, Participant 7 thinks that those who provide alternative services at their farms, particularly those involved in AAI only, decide to keep on going just because of their strong motivation and conviction, and thanks to the money they earn through other activities that are not related to health and social services. Participant 9 confirms this statement by saying that at his/her farm, they have a fixed revenue from the petting zoo, and AAI are provided only when they find a specific grant. Participants 2 and 4 are convinced that without an external economic contribution, their farms face big difficulties in providing social and health services. Specifically, Participant 4 said:

“In my opinion it’s important to give farmers an economic contribution for these services.”

Participant 10 also agrees with this and says that health and social services in agriculture are currently seen as a volunteering practice for farmers, and as long as the laws do not help in changing this, progressively fewer and fewer farms will choose this path.

Contrasting with the common opinion shared by most farmers, Participant 1 thinks that with all the activities of a multifunctional farm, the remuneration for these services is adequate, even if small, because, in multifunctionality, everything contributes to the subsistence of the farm itself.

3.7. Farmers’ Opinions about the Organization of Social Services in Agriculture

When participants were asked to express their opinions about the organization of social services in agriculture, almost half of them pointed out the need for networks with traditional healthcare and social service agencies. They think such networks can be an effective support for the National Healthcare System (e.g., in the social assistance for elderly people or young people at risk). More specifically, Participant 7 believes that better integration with the territory is a key factor that would improve the relationship with traditional healthcare and social service agencies. Moreover, Participants 2 and 6 emphasized that social farms need more recognition for their role from local communities. In particular, after a pandemic that has increased the need for open spaces where people can get together, social farms could be great locations that offer an inclusive and supportive environment. On this topic, Participant 6’s opinion is:

“Why can’t we interconnect agriculture with social and education environments? Especially in this post Covid era, where we will probably encounter people that although do not have an illness diagnosis they have suffered loneliness because of the lack of socialization; and I’m sure these cases will grow more and more and we are not prepared.”

Participant 1 introduced a new topic related to business model developments. He/she thinks that providing education and training on SF to people working for traditional service agencies could be useful to improve the way they look at alternative services. Furthermore, he/she reaffirms that the key to success in social farms is multifunctionality and thinks that the different activities contribute to the total income of the farm in their own way. This way, if there is a problem affecting one of them (e.g., the boar destroys the vegetable production), all the other activities can go on, providing revenue anyway.

“In my opinion a perfect farm that can survive, because we talk about economic sustainability, is the one that is able to offer different services. [. . .] I always say that traditional agriculture is bound to disappear, multifunctionality is the only solution.”

Regarding the topic of economic sustainability, Participants 2 and 8 instead are sure that for SF to thrive in the future, funding from the administration which supports social

and health services provided at the farm is necessary. More specifically, Participant 8 expresses that this contribution has to be comparable with the one given to traditional services to guarantee an adequate service level and not lead them to look for more users only to cover the costs at the expense of quality.

From this perspective, Participant 10 thinks that for social farms to exist in the future, there will have to be a change in the regulations that differentiate between traditional services and health and social services at the farm. This will imply the definition of quality standards for every service offered at the farm in a way that providers could adapt to them and offer an adequate and standardized service for users. Participant 2 also supports this claim and adds that a good way to encourage farmers interested in Social Farming is by providing them with clear guidelines and operating instructions on how to transition from traditional to social farms.

4. Discussion

The focus group methodology used in this pilot study gathered relevant insights and opinions about SF from farmers providing alternative health and social services at their farms. More specifically, perceptions regarding the main problems and barriers in the SF sector, development perspectives, and information about various existing farm organizational models. Our study revealed an important social aspect it is important to consider when investigating SF and AAI: these services have developed with a bottom-up perspective thanks to the strong motivation of the farmers involved and their conviction in the potential benefits they can offer not only to their users but also to the whole society. The commitment of those farmers who strongly believe in SF is the cornerstone for its development and expansion. This can be considered the main strength of the sector because it is a breeding ground for social innovation with the capacity to offer alternative answers and solutions to unsatisfied needs in the territory [34], making governance easier for institutions and moving towards the empowerment of the territory [35].

The penchant for multifunctionality [36] is also supported to some extent by the resources of the European Social Fund (ESF), which are managed by sectors such as agriculture and local development, opening the further possibility for service innovation [37].

In contrast to this positive scenario, farmers providing these services have to face daily challenges due to bureaucracy and administrative burdens related to regional legislation. Both AAI and SF were born in Italy as a bottom-up social phenomenon, but, particularly in Veneto Region, the legal framework still does not really tackle the needs of stakeholders. A balance between quality and safety standards and the needs of farmers and users should be considered to guarantee the development and improvement of SF and AAI practices.

In addition, the economic aspect should not be overlooked. Economic uncertainty can hinder the continuity of the provision of these alternative services. For farmers, this issue is tightly tied to the lack of guidelines on organizational models and the lack of support when starting off this multidisciplinary path.

Currently, farmers only count on the support of the agricultural trade association, but this is not enough when it comes to SF and AAI practices, which require the involvement of professionals from the social and healthcare sectors. New opportunities could be provided by setting up novel organizational models and encouraging communication between the traditional social and healthcare service agencies and social farms. Quality standards with specific requirements that consider the specific characteristics of the agricultural environment, as well as clear assessment procedures at the farm, are the first step to matching the needs of traditional social and healthcare service agencies with those of farmers, which will, in turn, allow overcoming the existing communication gaps.

Limitations of the Study

The focus group methodology has some intrinsic limitations. The most important is that data can be generalized only in a theoretical way [29]. In fact, standard guidelines do not exist; therefore, variations in the management and application of the methodology

reduce the replicability of the study. Moreover, the small sample size of this pilot research, which is related only to the Veneto Region, further reduced the possibility of extrapolating results. However, focus groups have the advantage of being a flexible and unique tool to increase knowledge and gain an in-depth understanding of the subject being investigated [31]. Moreover, they can be used in combination with other research methods, such as interviews [30]. We are aware that in order to obtain a more accurate picture of the SF and AAI sectors, further studies involving other stakeholders such as users and their families as well as the traditional social and healthcare service agencies are needed.

5. Conclusions

This pilot study highlights the complexity of SF and AAI, which are interconnected with the Green Care framework and supported by the motivation and conviction of agriculture-related stakeholders.

The outcomes of the focus groups revealed that although there are regulations in place and consequent legal recognition of SF and AAI practices, the current situation is not consistent and full of uncertainties. The challenges reported by farmers are mainly related to the difficult or even absent relationship with the traditional service agencies and the feeling that the innovative practices of SF and AAI are still not well known or acknowledged by society. The other main challenge that emerged is uncertain or unstable economic compensation. These two issues, according to them, are related and need to be tackled in a parallel way. According to the participant farmers, the projection for the SF and AAI sectors is positive, but they need substantial changes. Consequently, information and communication with the staff from traditional service agencies regarding the possibilities current regulations allow for SF and AAI practices are needed. Furthermore, a change in regional regulations that guarantee service quality, support involved farms economically, and encourage the development of farm organizational models, which improve the assessment process and facilitate the dialogue with traditional healthcare and social service agencies, is crucial.

Going beyond the local situation of our pilot study, in the One Health and One Welfare view [38,39], the cooperation between healthcare and agriculture would be a great achievement for the development of innovative ways to provide effective assistance to people in a sustainable and respectful way towards animals and the environment.

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