



# Towards a network around civic agriculture in the Province of Pisa

Silvia Innocenti, Elena Favilli, Adanella Rossi<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract* – This paper aims at exploring the pathway towards the creation of a network around the principles of civic agriculture in the Province of Pisa (Tuscany, Italy). The research is part of the process towards a local Food Plan, aimed at coordinating public policies, civil society and private initiatives, to foster the access to a healthy and sustainable diet. In this context, the experiences of civic agriculture have played an important role, highlighting the centrality of agriculture in the animation of rural areas and in the rural-urban relationship and becoming a point of intersection amongst several vital areas for local communities.

The research methods consisted in a first monitoring of civic agriculture experiences, a second round of in-depth interviews and in a more targeted focus group. The research has confirmed the presence of an expressed willingness to create a network of farms engaged on issues of sustainable food and sustainable local development. However, some critical points emerged with respect to the process of network building. Brokerage activities appear crucial to reinforce the relationships amongst the farmers and civil and institutional actors engaged in food related issues.

**Keywords:** Civic agriculture, Civic farmer, Brokerage activity

## INTRODUCTION

As part of a wider trend, during the last decades, there has been a renewal of interest in agriculture in the territory of Pisa (Tuscany, Italy), thanks to the central role played by agriculture in the animation of rural areas and in the re-construction or reinforcement of the rural-urban relationship. In that regard, it is emerged the multi-dimensionality of food, point of intersection amongst several vital areas for local communities (environmental sustainability, health, culture, ethics, economy etc.).

This reflection has involved over time a growing number of citizens and developed the interest of policy makers. In that context, also in this territory, since 2010 a Project for a Food Plan was promoted, in order to coordinate policies and actions around food, starting from the creation of a common language, the definition of shared goals and the clarification of the competences and areas of action of the various actors involved (Municipal administrations, local health agency, hospitals, NGOs, organizations of civil society etc).

The commitment of some local farms in experimenting and developing forms of agriculture that combine food production with the principles of "civic agriculture", appeared since the beginning as a central factor in the realization of this process.

Described for the first time by Lyson (2000) observing the US experience, civic agriculture enhances the positive contribution of those farms that maintain or re-acquire the capacity to interact with the social context in which they are embedded, and actively contribute, with their work, to the health and the vitality of the local community (Lyson 2004). With regard to the last point, several studies analyzed the social impact of some kind of civic agriculture, describing how the presence of these experiences impacts positively on the development of sense of community and of civic engagement among citizens (Obach and Tobin, 2014).

While exploring the characteristics of the civic agriculture in the Province of Pisa, this research focused more specifically on the social innovation that can develop from this experience, through the relationships amongst the farmers and within the wider multi-actor network in which they are embedded. Starting from the role of the civic farmers in the local community as perceived by the farmers themselves, we analysed their capacity to interact with the other farmers, underlying the factors enabling or hindering the process of network building.

## METHODS

The research methods consisted in a first monitoring of civic agriculture experiences, a second round of in-depth interviews and in a more targeted focus group.

The first monitoring involved 48 farmers, through an on-line questionnaire asking general information about the farm activities and the degree and form of involvement in specific networks. Most of these farms already belonged to specific networks, such as those of social farming, of custodian farmers, of Solidarity Purchase Groups (GAS), of other short food supply chains, and of didactic farms.

Thanks to the relationships of the farms, this first monitoring also allowed to widen the data base of civic farms until to 67 experiences.

In order to better evaluate the awareness of farmers and the acknowledgment of their role as innovators, a second in-depth questionnaire was sent to 20 farms already involved in the first monitoring: we selected the most consolidated initiatives in the province and asked about the values they

<sup>1</sup>The authors are from the University of Pisa, Department of Agriculture, Food and Environment, Pisa, Italy ([sinnocenti80@gmail.com](mailto:sinnocenti80@gmail.com); [efavilli@gmail.com](mailto:efavilli@gmail.com); [adanella.rossi@unipi.it](mailto:adanella.rossi@unipi.it))



refer to and, among them, which ones they communicate to the outside. In the second part of the questionnaire we explored the farmers' relational activity, to understand the level of interaction with other farms and organizations.

As final step of the research process we organized a focus group with 15 civic farms: the aim was to validate the results of the analysis and to share a common "chart of the principles of civic agriculture" around which to build a network in the Province of Pisa.

## RESULTS

Civic agriculture links farmers to consumers, fostering the development of shared identity and interests between them and among the farmers themselves (Smithers et al. 2005). The goal is to create a community committed to sustaining the ecological and social aspects of production (Hinrichs and Lyson 2008). The results of our research are in line with these assumptions.

farmers showed a general awareness about their role in the rural community; most of them carry out environmentally friendly farming practices (low impact agriculture, organic farming etc.), pay attention to the quality of products and of the relationships with citizen-consumers. Respect of traditions, biodiversity preservation through the cultivation/breeding of local species, protection of local ecosystems result to be the main inspiring values for farmers.

Farmers considered equally important their role in increasing the knowledge of the "rural world" amongst citizens of all ages and in creating a more direct relationship with them. This commitment is fulfilled through the relationships developed both with the activities of tourist accommodation and with the various initiatives of short supply chain.

Awareness raising and education activities are linked to the renewed pride that farmers show towards their core business, the production of "fresh, honest, healthy, high-quality food".

The research has also highlighted both the need of civic farmers to get in contact with each other and to have recognized their contribution to public wellness by local public institutions.

Farmers ask to public Institutions more support in the enhancement and communication of the strategic role of civic agriculture. When talking about Institutions farmers refers not only to Administrations but, in general, to all those organizations who play a role in food related issues (production, consumption, cultural and social aspects behind these practices and negative consequences of inappropriate behaviors).

These needs underlie the idea of the creation of a multi-actor network around civic agriculture in the Province of Pisa, which can support interaction and cooperation amongst farms and with the other local actors: currently, however, these needs are well expressed but not clearly concretized.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The perspective of creating a network around civic agriculture perfectly fit with the new approaches and new directions of the European Policy, in particular for Rural Development, as well as with the goals of the Pisa Food Plan. In this context, cooperation between different actors becomes a strategic tool for the production and consumption of sustainable food. The international and Regional scenario clearly indicates the need to stimulate a "bottom-up" and interactive approach in order to ensure sustainable local development. The enhancement of collective action to achieve common goals is essential in this scenario and civic agriculture can be a space of encounter of the needs of farmers, citizen-consumers and local administrations.

Civic farmers of the Province of Pisa are aware of this role and have shown a willingness to participate pro-actively to the sustainable development of the territories and the communities in which they are embedded. Although the establishment of the network around civic agriculture in the Province of Pisa appears not only justified but also desirable, being an important contribution in the governance for innovation, the network is not yet established. The difficulty of bringing together different actors, as well as of stimulating the overcoming of an individualistic view toward a common identity and collective action, still remain the main critical element in the process of network building.

Concluding, a strong brokerage activity able to reinforce the relationships amongst the farmers and amongst these and civil and institutional actors, through the definition of a common set of values and objectives, appears necessary, in order to foster collective action and lay the foundations of a collaborative governance around food related issues.

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