

**“SOCIAL AGRICULTURE”: A PATTERN BETWEEN FARM  
INNOVATION, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND  
MULTIFUNCTIONALITY**

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**Paper prepared for presentation at the 113<sup>th</sup> EAAE Seminar  
“THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE, INNOVATION AND HUMAN CAPITAL  
IN MULTIFUNCTIONAL AGRICULTURE AND TERRITORIAL RURAL  
DEVELOPMENT”, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia  
December 9-11, 2009**

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# **“SOCIAL AGRICULTURE”: A PATTERN BETWEEN FARM INNOVATION, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND MULTIFUNCTIONALITY**

## **Abstract**

Rural context and agricultural process are assuming growing credibility as a mean to promote well being and social inclusion in the population as a whole.

Fattoria solidale del Circeo” constitutes one of the many examples of social agriculture that have risen in the recent years in Italy. Differently from the general case, it is a large farm which is moving from a conventional an intensive farming system to another model, without abandoning its entrepreneurial nature.

Even if it is not easy to assign a theoretic paradigm, it could be useful both in order to understand it and to give correct instruments to policy makers. So we can try to put the Fattoria Solidale del Circeo’s experience in a theoretic context.

It seems to us that at least three different models can be applied: the well-established Schumpeterian model of innovation; the Corporate Social Responsibility, the Multifunctionality of agriculture.

**Key words:** Social agriculture, Innovation, Corporate Social Responsibility, Multifunctionality of Agriculture

## **Introduction**

Rural context and agricultural process are assuming growing credibility as a mean to promote well being and social inclusion in the population as a whole. We do not refer only to the countryside capacity to improve individual welfare because of the slower and relaxing lifestyle, we refers to specific experiences developed by some farms in supplying social and health services. In Italy, role of agriculture in social and sanitary processes is not news: agriculture has been used for at least 30 years in social inclusion trail in the case of drug dependency and more recently it has been used in psychiatric department as a support in therapy. However, now the range of social services supplied by farms is widening and, at the same time, agricultural policy has started to support farms which supply social and health services, namely project of labour training for disabled people (especially mentally deficiency); didactics visit for school children; “green cares” such as horticultural therapies. Even if “social agriculture” has not yet a juridical framework in Italy, at least two important planning documents mentioned it: the rural national strategy plan, produced in the context of rural development policy and the programme “Guadagnare Salute” approved by ministry of Health in 2007. In

the latter it is hoped that rural development policy takes in account the aim to develop healthy activities for population also through social agriculture.

On the other side, Italian National Strategy Plan considers “social agriculture” as a possible mean of farm diversification beyond to be an opportunity to improve quality of life in rural areas. More specifically, strategic plane considers interesting to promote and support the increasing trend of farm to implement private enterprises which develop practices addressed disabled, weak and socially excluded people.

### **Different practices and different juridical frameworks**

Many activities can be considered under the category of “Social agriculture”. These practices may be very different each others, except for the fact that every of them is based on natural resources and rural context. It does not refer to a passive experience of the beauties of the countryside as it happens in the agro-tourism. It deals with the use of the vegetable and animals as a tool in different kind of social services (therapeutic, rehabilitative and social integration activities) because of the persuasion that natural cycles and rural rhythm have a thaumaturgical attitude.

A part of the possibility of overlapping, we can group the Italian experiences under a few different categories according to their prevalent ambit of action (Di Iacovo, edited by, 2008). The grouping on one side implies a simplification which reduces the complexity of the real situation, on the other side is useful to supply a briefly presentation of this world<sup>1</sup>.

The groups are:

**Professional training and labour inclusion**, directed to low bargaining people (disabled individuals, ex drug-addict, detainees, etc) where agricultural creates the opportunity of employment and income for disadvantaged people;

**Recreation and quality of life**, which are mainly “not for profit” activities, often managed by municipality which give little allotments to elderly people with the aim to create opportunity both to enjoy oneself and socialize with the neighbored;

**Education**, that is actions to improve knowledge of agricultural practices and rural culture and to develop the environmental sensitivity in the new generation (garden in the school managed by the schoolchildren, educational farms, etc.);

**Services to population in rural areas**, such as kindergarten, summer reception for children, elderly home. Since lack of services, together with the low job opportunities, is one of the most important reasons of depopulation in rural areas,

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<sup>1</sup> A wide description of Social Agriculture is available on the “Social Services in Multifunctional Farms” (So Far) project’s website: <http://sofar.unipi.it>.

this opportunity seems particularly interesting on the point of view of the local development dimension;

**Rehabilitation and therapy**, where socio-sanitary professionalism prevails. Agriculture is a tool to improve the welfare of individual with some kind of problems (generally psychiatric). Agricultural activities could be carried out in sanitary structure or in farms which supply their resources and expertises.

From the normative point of view, social agriculture often finds a settlement in the field of social cooperation<sup>2</sup>. More specifically, agriculture could have a passive role being part of a wider therapeutic project because of the “thaumaturgical” power of the rural context. This is the case of the Animal Assisted Therapy with or horticultural therapy (Sempik, 2007).

Another is the case in which agriculture constitutes the business of social cooperative and it grants the opportunity of employment and income for disadvantaged people<sup>3</sup>.

In Italy, cooperative is a consolidated normative framework for the social agriculture, as well as for the “social oriented” activities in general. Further this typology social agricultural could be implemented both by public bodies and by “for profit” enterprises, but often it implies some kind of agreement between public and private sector (table 1).

Recently, new opportunities could rise from the decree n. 155/2006 which acknowledges the social enterprise as the firm which does not pursue the aim of profit but social welfare improvement. This new rule could produce an improvement in the social activity in agriculture as well as in other sectors.

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<sup>2</sup> According to law381/1991, the social nature of the cooperatives in Italy – which implies some fiscal facilities– could be linked to the object of the services supplied or to the characteristics of their members. So they could be: “A kind”, which supply educational, social and sanitary services; “B kind”, which have the aim to improve the opportunity to work of disadvantaged people. In addition the cooperatives could be a mix of the two typologies.

<sup>3</sup> About 30% of the “B Kind” or mix cooperative is active in the agricultural sector.

**Table 1 - Main kind of social farming experiences in Italy**

<b>Kind of organisation farm</b>	<b>Kind of activities</b>	<b>Position of organisation/farm</b>	<b>Position of disadvantaged persons</b>
“A” social cooperatives (non for profit enterprises)	care farming, education	providing care services’ or education; care is paid by social/health public bodies (daily fees); education can be paid by diverse institutes; obligation: no profit	public services’ users; can be also members of the cooperatives
“B” social cooperatives (non for profit enterprises)	labour integration; socio-therapeutic integration; training; socio-recreation	doing business in agriculture (and other sectors) as a means of social inclusion; opportunities: subsidized contracts, tax relief, systems of agreements for adjudication of jobs; obligations: no profit, minimum 30% of employed disadvantaged persons	can be regularly employed, trainees or volunteers; can be also members of the cooperatives. In case of socio-recreation can be paying users/participants
Private farms (for profit enterprises)	training; socio-therapeutic integration; labour integration; socio-recreation	doing business in agriculture for profit; opportunities: human resource for labour, subsidized contracts, (other indirect advantages).	can be trainees, volunteers or regularly employed. In case of socio-recreation can be paying participants/users
Public Institutes	care farming; socio-therapeutic integration; training	providing care, education, rehabilitation; being involved in research or other activities in the fields of agriculture and/or social/care	can be users, be engaged in rehabilitative, research or educational programmes, volunteers, trainees or else.

Source: Di Iacovo, Pieroni, 2006

### A case study

“Fattoria solidale del Circeo” constitutes one of the many examples of social agriculture that have risen in the recent years in Italy. At the same time this experience is particularly interesting because, differently from the general case, it is a large farm which is moving from a conventional an intensive farming system to other model, without abandoning its entrepreneurial nature.

The farm was established in the Pontina Plane to the South of Rome in the XIX century and it witnessed to great natural and social changes. In fact the area was a marsh which has been reclaimed during the Fascism regime. After reclamation productive organization of the area changed from a marginal model linked to the traditional *transhumance* to a very intensive and modern exploiting of land. The farm has been managed by the same household for four generation and the family was always able to readapt its business to the new environment over the time.

Nowadays, social demand towards agriculture is being enriched by new expectations from agriculture activities and rural context. This fact gives to actual young holder – Marco – the opportunity to combine his entrepreneurial attitude with the attention towards the disables. For a long time he has given voluntary services within an organization for disables. There he could notice that disables’ capabilities were probably unevaluated. In fact they were engaged into a lot of activities but to work. On the contrary he was sure that they could be able to do some kind of jobs. After he became the holder of the farm, in 2004 he invited some disabled persons to work in his farm during summer period. In this first experimentation 40 persons were involved in different productive phases according to their abilities.

During this experience, both disables and their voluntary assistants were accommodated in one of the building within the farm. In fact, together with the 150 ha of land the farm includes some buildings and even a little chapel. Since the farm is specialised in dairy, that is a low labour intensity activity, some vegetables were planted to give the guests the opportunity to do a simple, not dangerous cultivation with a short productive cycle. So they could have the possibility to see the concrete results of their work. In addition to farming simple conservation process had been done in order to give the opportunity to participate to people unable to walk.

On the very beginning, Marco had an entrepreneurial approach that is he was immediately oriented to economic self-sufficiency. In fact he registered a brand “Splende il Sole!” (Sun is shining!) which made it clear that the products involved disabled people’s work.

After the products were carried on the market, it seemed clear people prefer “social products” among others but they are not willing to pay a higher price. As a consequence Marco decided to concentrate on high added value and labour intensive production such as ready-prepared fresh salads. On the same time he

turned to direct selling and created an organised purchasing group, which is a group of people looking for ethical consumption.

Together the feasibility of the project, the test demonstrated the existence of some needs. First of all the necessity of training on the agricultural practices. Assistants have to do training as well as disabled people. Otherwise sanitary operator was not able to valuate neither the dangerousness neither the potentiality of the agricultural practices for disabled people.

Training has become an important part of the Fattoria Solidale's activity, further the necessity of its own projects. Many experiences were born which gave also the opportunity of collaboration with local professional schools. After this positive experience he decided to set up a professional training activity for disabled. The two years course is now going to finish and some people will be employed in the farm. The farmer, together with a specialised pedagogue team, is now planning other activities in the field of social services. One of the most interesting features of this experience is the owner's strong will that social services achieve an economic self sufficiency so that they could have continuity without weighing on other farm's activities or depending on public support.

### **Some possible theoretic frameworks**

Social agriculture is a spontaneous phenomenon which is not easy to put into a theoretic paradigm. Agricultural economists are trying to understand in which of their categories they have to allocate these experiences with the purpose to suggest instruments to policy makers.

So we try now to put the Fattoria Solidale del Circeo's experience in a theoretic context.

Generally speaking social agriculture can be trace back to, at least, three different models. They are the well-established Schumpeterian model of innovation; the Corporate Social Responsibility and the Multifunctionality of agriculture.

Social practices in agriculture need of a double kind of professionalism: agricultural and social expertises must interact to conceive actions and adapt them to specific context and requirements. At the same time, this is a very new field and protocols do not already exist. As a consequence these practices are always very specific and farmer's ability to innovate is a key element for their successful implementation. As usual, attitude to innovate is the main incentive for survival and expansion of business and – in a wider perspective – for the general development of society. Entrepreneurs introduce innovation to look forward to improve their earning and, doing that, they also improve collective welfare. On the other hand, since we are talking about private enterprise, it is important to consider that each experience must be remunerative, and

so self-sufficient. In a capitalist system profit-seeking is the drive behind the economy. Social agriculture could be interpreted as a product innovation to meet the new demand rising from the post-modern society.

On another point of view, in the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) approach, profit is conceived in a new way. It is not still strictly related to firm perspective but it must involve other expectations. In fact, in the CSR profit maximisation is still considered the main motor of the economy but entrepreneurs must limit themselves in order to consider also other stakeholders' needs. Widening the meaning of profit is considered necessary to prevent social conflict and, definitively, to let capitalism survive. In fact, conflicts are perceived as intrinsic to capitalism and without a new ideology able "to widen the definition of capitalism from being economic-specific, to include the social and environmental" issues, capitalism will fatalistically destroy itself (David Birch, 2003). Social agriculture could be interpreted as a tool to involve social concerns in the purposes of economic activities.

Finally, since we are in the context of primary sector, Multifunctionality of agriculture can constitute a specific theoretical framework. Multifunctionality refers to the specific capacity of agriculture to supply benefits beyond its ability to be remunerated for them. This happens because of the presence of jointed products. More specifically, according to the "working definition" of OECD (2000), two key elements concur to the definition of Multifunctionality: "the existence of multiple commodity and non-commodity outputs that are jointly produced by agriculture; and the fact that some of the non-commodity outputs exhibit the characteristics of externalities or public goods".

Social agriculture supplies externalities because it contributes to quality of life in rural areas and in this way it could play a part in prevents their depopulation. In fact scarcity of services in rural areas could be one of the factors which reduce their viability. At the same time, development of social agriculture, because of its multidisciplinary nature also feeds local social capital, which is a public good.

The definition of the theoretical framework is not a pure academic exercise, but it is necessary to individuate which role must be attributed to policy maker. In the case of innovation, public intervention must support the general contest in order to create a good environment for the development of the farm.

In the CSR context, the main problem is the "information asymmetry". It deals with the situation in transactions where one party has more or better information than the other. This creates an imbalance of power which can sometimes produce a "market failure", that is the transactions does not occur as in the case of adverse selection (Akerlof, 1970) or it results unfair. In this case the role of State is to grant the transparency on the market, so that the farm does not boast a virtuous behaviour without reason.



Finally, if we are considering the case of the Multifunctionality of agriculture, it will be necessary to support the producing of good externalities or public goods (such as social well being and cohesion).

### **Conclusion**

After the brief review of the possible theoretical approach, we can compare our case study to it.

Fattoria Solidale del Circeo was born as a consequence of the holder's sensitivity about social inclusion of disables. Even if, as we said, he adopts an entrepreneurial approach, his main concern is to supply an opportunity to improve quality of life of a specific category of people and not to improve his earning.

This attitude is consistent with other actions he puts into practice on the territory. For instance, independently of this specific experience, he has often employed disadvantaged people when he was asked by local association to help someone.

Since the main drive behind Fattoria Solidale is a social concern, we conclude that in this case the CSR model seems to prevail, but together with CSR feature we can underline that it is also a case of innovation as well as an example of Multifunctionality of agriculture.

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