

Social Farming as a Perspective for Organic Farms in Europe

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Abstract

Social farming in Europe integrates “users” like people recovering from drug addiction, psychiatric, mental, or physical diseases or handicaps, long term unemployed, people with depression or burnout, homeless, former prisoners, old people suffering dementia, or currently active contributors to farm life as well as disadvantaged young people such as truants, urchins, and young people with eating disorders. Social farming means a perspective of multifunctional agriculture and an alternative to the further reduction of expensive human labor in farming systems. Within the “SoFar”-project (<http://sofar.unipi.it/>, www.sofar-d.de/), diverse European experiences are brought closer in order to compare, exchange, and coordinate experiences and efforts. Different typologies and schemes of “social/care farming” practices can be distinguished. There are care oriented, labor (employment) oriented and education/pedagogic oriented initiatives. According to the (juridical) nature of the social/care farm (or social/care farming initiative), we can distinguish between institutional, third sector, and private promoters/holders. According to the features of the organization and labor, we can also distinguish between family-based, community-based, professionally based, and voluntary based. There are initiatives that focus on a specific target group and initiatives that include a mix of persons with different backgrounds.

In European countries, similar phases of developing social farming can be discovered. Starting with a pioneer situation of single innovative projects like in Slovenia, a second phase is characterized by an increase of number and variety of initiatives. Networks specialized on certain user groups and clients can be built. In this phase, the movement lacks attention by policies, and the development takes place despite

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financial difficulties and resistance. Germany and France can be seen as countries in this state. This is followed by a third phase, where a breakthrough takes place; Italy, Flanders, and The Netherlands are countries in this position. Policies start to recognize social farming as an interesting topic, the health sector discovers therapy and employment on farms as a possibility to reduce costs, and green care becomes a topic of public interest. Farmers discover social items as a possible source of income, and the frame conditions and subsidies become improved. The breakthrough event for phase three seems to be the implementation of a coordinating center for advice and support, and also some politicians that become aware of the topic. One step further is the development in Norway (phase four), where collaboration between scientists and stakeholders form the ministries of health, agriculture and employment has started in order to support social farming initiatives.

Organic farms are specially suited for green care. Due to the grassroots level of the experiences and to the incremental nature of this process, policies devoted to social farming have to be carefully designed in order to promote and to reinforce pathways of change and increase the relevance of policy networks.