

SOCIAL AGRICULTURE – OPPORTUNITIES AND PERSPECTIVES FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Manuela–Dora ORBOI¹, Adrian BĂNEȘ², Simona Cristina CONSTANTINESCU¹,
Andreea Adriana PETCOV¹, Ana Mariana DINCU¹

¹University of Life Sciences „King Mihai I” from Timișoara, ²Romanian Academy – Timișoara Branch

Corresponding author: anamariadincu@usvt.ro

Abstract. The paper “Social Agriculture – Opportunities and Perspectives for a Sustainable Future” explores an emerging concept that lies at the intersection of agriculture, social inclusion and sustainable economy. Social agriculture is defined as a model of agricultural activity that combines agri-food production with social, educational and therapeutic services, having a significant impact on the revitalization of rural areas and the integration of vulnerable people, such as the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, the elderly or young people in placement centers. The paper highlights the contribution of this model to employment in disadvantaged areas, combating social exclusion, non-formal education and the transition to an agriculture with a positive socio-ecological impact. In addition, a multidimensional analysis of social agriculture is carried out, starting from the European and national legislative framework, studies of good practices from countries with a tradition in this field and the assessment of the applicability of these models in the Romanian context. Social agriculture can become an important pillar in the sustainable restructuring of the rural environment, contributing to the diversification of agricultural incomes, increasing social cohesion and valorizing local resources in an inclusive and environmentally responsible manner. Social farming represents an innovative approach with significant potential to generate multiple and interconnected benefits in the social, economic and environmental dimensions.

Keywords: agriculture, social inclusion, restructuring, rural environment

INTRODUCTION

Social farming is an innovative model of agriculture that goes beyond the conventional paradigm focused exclusively on food production and profit maximization. It is defined by the deliberate and synergistic integration of social, economic and environmental dimensions in agricultural activities, with the aim of generating multiple benefits for individuals, communities and ecosystems.

Social Farming adopts a multifunctional view of agriculture. The main products, in addition to saleable produce, are health and employment, education or therapy. (DI IACOVO *et al.*, 2006)

Several EU countries have adopted Social Farming (and, implicitly, Animal-Assisted Therapy, Animal-Assisted Pedagogic Therapy, and Horticultural Therapy) as a multifunctional innovative strategy: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, The Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Macedonia, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom (BRAASTAD *et al.*, 2007; DI IACOVO & *al.*, 2009; HARBISON, 2010; BRITES *et al.*, 2012; CONTO, FIORE & DI MATTEO, 2013; KROM & DESSEIN, 2013; LECK, 2013; COFINI, 2014; HASSINK *et al.*, 2014; TODOROVA & IKOVA, 2014; TULLA *et al.*, 2014; PARZONKO & SIECZKO, 2015; HEMINGWAY *et al.*, 2016; TULLA *et al.*, 2017; UJJ, 2017; HASSINK *et al.*, 2018).

Social farming is an innovative approach that combines agricultural practices with social and inclusion services, targeting vulnerable people, such as people with disabilities, the elderly, young people without opportunities or the long-term unemployed. The concept has

gained momentum in Europe over the last two decades, supported by public policies and rural development programmes.

Amid the challenges related to the aging rural population, the decline in agricultural employment, and the need for social services in isolated communities, social agriculture is emerging as a sustainable, integrated, and participatory solution.

Social agriculture is distinguished by the wide range of activities that go beyond traditional agricultural production. This includes:

- *Diversified agricultural production*: Cultivation of vegetables, fruits, cereals, animal husbandry (on a small scale, adapted to the capacities of the participants).
- *Therapeutic and occupational activities*: Therapeutic horticulture, animal care, agricultural product processing activities (preserves, jams), handicrafts from natural materials.
- *Educational and training activities*: Learning programs about agriculture, healthy eating, environmental protection, development of social and professional skills.
- *Social services*: Assistance for people with disabilities, occupational therapy for people with mental health problems, social reintegration programs.
- *Community and leisure activities*: Community gardening, social events on the farm, social agritourism activities.

This diversity allows the adaptation of activities to the specific needs and capacities of the participants, creating meaningful and varied opportunities for involvement.

The current situation of agriculture, both globally and in Romania, is complex and faces multiple challenges, with a particular focus on sustainability issues, social inequalities in rural areas and the need to find innovative solutions, such as:

♦ **Sustainability issues:**

- *Soil degradation*: Intensive agricultural practices, such as excessive tillage and monoculture, lead to loss of organic matter, soil erosion and reduced fertility.
- *Biodiversity loss*: Simplification of agricultural landscapes and intensive use of pesticides negatively affect wildlife, including pollinators essential for agriculture.
- *Excessive water use*: Inefficient irrigation and increased water demand for agriculture put pressure on water resources, especially in the context of climate change.
- *Impact on climate change*: Agriculture is both a victim and a contributor to climate change, through greenhouse gas emissions from fertilizer use, animal waste management and land use change. Extreme weather events (droughts, floods, storms) increasingly affect agricultural production.
- *Dependence on external inputs*: Conventional agriculture is often dependent on synthetic chemical fertilizers, pesticides and fossil fuels, which has economic and environmental implications.
- *Agricultural waste management*: The large amounts of organic and inorganic waste generated by agricultural activities represent an environmental challenge.

♦ **Social inequalities in rural areas:**

- *Unequal access to resources*: Smallholder and young farmers often face difficulties in accessing land, financial capital, information and modern technologies.
- *Low income and precarious working conditions*: Many agricultural workers, especially those employed seasonally or on small farms, have low incomes and precarious working conditions.
- *Depopulation and ageing of the rural population*: The migration of young people to urban areas leaves behind an ageing population and reduces the available labour force in agriculture.

- *Limited access to services*: Rural areas often face limited access to education, health, infrastructure and transport services, which affects the quality of life of residents and economic opportunities.

- *Gender inequalities*: Rural women often face inequalities in land ownership, access to credit and participation in decision-making processes.

- *Marginalization of vulnerable groups*: People with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in rural areas may face additional barriers in accessing economic and social opportunities.

♦ **The need to find innovative solutions:**

- *Sustainable agricultural practices*: Adopting agroecological methods, regenerative agriculture, agroforestry and other systems that conserve natural resources, improve soil health and reduce environmental impact.

- *Smart technologies*: Using precision, sensors, drones, artificial intelligence and other technologies to optimize input use, monitor crops and livestock and reduce waste.

- *Diversifying agricultural activities*: Encouraging the combination of agricultural production with other activities, such as agritourism, on-farm processing, renewable energy and social services (social farming).

- *Strengthening short food chains*: Supporting local markets, direct sales and partnerships between farmers and consumers to reduce transport costs, increase added value for farmers and promote fresh and quality food.

- *Integrated public policies*: Developing policies that support the transition to sustainable and inclusive agriculture, promoting investments in rural infrastructure, education and social services, and ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities for all rural actors.

- *Community engagement and partnerships*: Stimulating collaboration between farmers, researchers, non-governmental organizations, local authorities and consumers to develop and implement solutions adapted to the specificities of each region.

- *Education and training*: Investing in the education and training of farmers and agricultural workers to develop their skills to adopt innovative and sustainable practices.

In conclusion, the current situation of agriculture is marked by significant challenges related to sustainability and social inequalities in rural areas. Finding and implementing innovative solutions is essential to ensure the viability of the agricultural sector, environmental protection and the well-being of rural communities.

Social farming represents such an innovative solution, with the potential to simultaneously address issues related to sustainability and social inclusion. Social farming is not just a niche, but an innovative and integrated response to multiple global challenges.

According to Mihalache, the main specific activities traditionally operating in the social economy are: animal husbandry, beekeeping, crafting, farming, and agri-tourism activities. These activities operate mainly in areas with greater openness to entrepreneurship and social economy. (MIHALACHE, 2015)

In conclusion, the opportunities offered by social agriculture in terms of social inclusion, local economic development and environmental protection, together with its growth prospects and policy integration, position it as a relevant and valuable model for a sustainable future. Its potential to contribute concretely to the achievement of a wide range of Sustainable Development Goals underlines the importance of supporting and developing this innovative sector.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Social farming is defined as a model of agricultural activity that combines agri-food production with social, educational and therapeutic services. The collected data were qualitatively analyzed, with a focus on identifying recurring themes and successful models. A mixed methodology was used to carry out this work, which includes: Documentary analysis – scientific articles, European Union reports, rural development strategies and examples of good practices from Italy, France, Romania and other EU member states were studied and Case study – three social farms in Romania were analyzed: one in Cluj County, one in Bacău and one in Argeş, focusing on the activities carried out, the target groups and the results obtained. The transdisciplinary approach is an essential strategy for the efficient integration of social farming into rural and social development policies. It transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries, involving close collaboration between researchers from various fields (agronomy, sociology, economics, psychology, public policy), practitioners (social farmers, therapists, educators), policy makers, non-governmental organizations and members of local communities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Essentially, social farming is a holistic approach that recognizes the interdependence between people and the environment, using agricultural activities as a platform to generate social, economic and environmental benefits simultaneously and synergistically. It redefines the role of agriculture in society, transforming it from a simple production activity into an instrument of social inclusion, community development and environmental protection.

Analyzing concrete examples of social farming initiatives in Romania and other countries provides us with valuable insight into how this model works in practice, the impact it generates and the challenges it faces.

Among the **examples** from **Romania** we mention:

♦ Association "Atelierul de Pânză" (Cluj County):

- *Practices*: This association runs a social farm where people with disabilities are involved in various agricultural activities (growing vegetables, caring for small animals), but also in textile handicraft activities.

- *Impact*: Provides opportunities for occupational therapy, development of practical and social skills, increased self-confidence and social integration for participants. The products made are sold, generating a source of income for the association and the participants.

- *Challenges*: Ensuring long-term financial sustainability, finding stable markets for the products made and managing the diverse needs of the participants.

♦ "Urban Cultor" Community Garden (Bucharest):

- *Practices*: An urban green space transformed into a garden cultivated collectively by the residents of the area. Gardening workshops, community events are organized and the exchange of seeds and knowledge is promoted.

- *Impact*: Strengthens social ties between neighbors, promotes a healthy lifestyle, provides access to fresh vegetables and improves the quality of the urban environment.

- *Challenges*: Ensuring continuous access to the land, managing conflicts between participants and maintaining long-term motivation.

♦ Motivation Romania Foundation:

- *Practices*: The Foundation has implemented projects that include agricultural activities adapted for people with locomotor disabilities, offering them opportunities for physical recovery and professional integration.

- *Impact*: Improving the mobility and health of participants, developing transferable skills and increasing employment opportunities.

- *Challenges*: The need to constantly adapt activities to the specific needs of participants and ensuring an accessible working environment.

Examples from other countries include:

- **"De Oude Zusteruin" (Netherlands):**

- *Practices*: A former convent garden transformed into a social farm offering therapeutic and educational activities for people with intellectual disabilities and mental health problems. Vegetables, fruits and flowers are grown and the products are sold locally.

- *Impact*: Improving the quality of life of participants, developing skills, social integration and contributing to the local economy through the sale of products.

- *Challenges*: Dependence on external funding and the need to secure specialized expertise in the social and agricultural fields.

- **"La Fattoria di Vaira" (Italy):**

- *Practices*: An organic farm that integrates people with disabilities in all stages of production (cultivation, processing, sales). It also offers educational programs for schools and social agritourism activities.

- *Impact*: Creating jobs for people with disabilities, promoting organic farming, raising community awareness of inclusion and sustainability.

- *Challenges*: The need to balance social and economic objectives and ensure efficient management of agricultural activities on a commercial scale.

- **"The Green City Growers" (USA):**

- *Practices*: An organization that develops urban farms and provides employment and training opportunities for young people at risk of social exclusion. Vegetables and herbs are grown and sold to local restaurants and markets.

- *Impact*: Providing positive alternatives for young people, developing professional skills, improving access to fresh food in deprived urban areas.

- *Challenges*: Ensuring financial viability in the context of high urban land costs and competition in the food market.

Common practices observed include:

- *Focus on participant needs*: Activities are tailored to capitalize on the skills and meet the specific needs of the individuals involved.

- *Multidisciplinary collaboration*: Involving professionals from agricultural, social, therapeutic, and educational fields.

- *Strong community ties*: Direct sales, community events, and local partnerships are essential.

- *Emphasis on sustainability*: Many initiatives promote environmentally friendly and responsible agricultural practices.

Common challenges are:

- *Financial sustainability*: Dependence on external funding, difficulty in generating sufficient sales revenue.

- *Managing social and agricultural complexity*: Balancing the diverse needs of participants with the demands of agricultural production.

- *Securing specialized expertise*: Need for qualified social and agricultural personnel.

- *Bureaucracy and legal framework*: Lack of a specific legal framework or difficulty in navigating existing regulations.

- *Scaling impact*: Difficulty in scaling up successful models.

These examples illustrate the diversity of forms that social farming can take, the significant positive impact it can have, and the challenges that initiators face. Analyzing these concrete experiences is crucial to inform public policies and support the sustainable development of this sector.

Social farming offers a wide range of opportunities, with significant positive impacts on individuals, communities, and the environment. These opportunities can be grouped around the three key dimensions of the concept: social, economic, and environmental.

♦ **Social Opportunities:**

a) *Social inclusion and integration of vulnerable groups*: Social farming creates inclusive spaces where people with disabilities (physical, intellectual, sensory), people with mental health problems, disadvantaged young people, people at risk of social exclusion, migrants, isolated elderly people or people facing addictions can actively participate in agricultural activities. It offers:

- Employment and activity opportunities: Farm work, adapted to individual capacities, offers a valuable social role and a sense of usefulness.

- Development of social and professional skills: Interaction with others, teamwork, learning new tasks and responsibilities contribute to personal and professional development.

- Combating stigma and isolation: Participation in a productive activity and interaction with other people reduces the feeling of isolation and promotes social acceptance and integration.

- Improving quality of life: Outdoor activities, contact with nature and a sense of belonging to a community have a positive impact on physical and mental well-being.

b) *Improving health and well-being* through:

- Occupational and vocational therapy: Agricultural work can have therapeutic effects, reducing stress, anxiety and improving mood.

- Promoting physical activity: Agricultural activities involve movement and physical effort, contributing to maintaining good health.

- Education for healthy eating: Participation in food cultivation increases awareness of the importance of a healthy diet and can encourage the consumption of fresh and local products.

c) *Community development and social cohesion* through:

- Creating social bonds: Community gardens and other social farming initiatives bring people together, fostering interaction, collaboration and relationship building.

- Strengthening a sense of belonging: Participating in a common project creates a sense of collective identity and responsibility towards the community.

- Promoting volunteerism and civic engagement: Social farming provides opportunities for volunteering and active involvement in community life.

- Transferring knowledge and skills: Experienced farmers can share their knowledge with participants, who can bring new perspectives and innovative ideas.

d) *Education and awareness* through:

- Agricultural and environmental education: Educational farms and community gardens provide hands-on learning opportunities about the life cycle of plants and animals, the importance of biodiversity, and sustainable agricultural practices.

- Raising awareness about social inclusion: Interacting with people from diverse vulnerable groups can increase empathy and understanding within the community.

- Promoting responsible consumption: Direct contact with producers can encourage consumers to make more informed and responsible food choices.

♦ **Economic Opportunities:**

a) *Income diversification and job creation:*

- For farmers: Social agriculture can provide additional sources of income by selling products, providing social or educational services, and accessing specific funding for the social economy.

- For participants: It offers opportunities for paid employment or obtaining allowances for the activity carried out.

- Creation of new social businesses: Social agriculture initiatives can evolve into viable social businesses, with sustainable social and economic impact.

b) *Valorization of local products and short circuits:*

- Access to local markets: Social farming facilitates direct sales to consumers, local markets, restaurants or canteens, reducing dependence on long and expensive distribution chains.

- Increasing added value: Small-scale processing of products or offering agrotourism experiences can increase the added value of agricultural activities.

- Supporting the local economy: Purchasing inputs from local suppliers and selling products in the community contributes to the development of the local economy.

c) *Development of the social and solidarity economy:*

- Operating on ethical principles: Social agriculture promotes values such as solidarity, cooperation, social responsibility and the reinvestment of profits in social purposes.

- Access to specific funding: There are funds and funding programs dedicated to the social economy, which social agriculture initiatives can access.

- Reducing social costs: By integrating and supporting vulnerable groups, social agriculture can contribute to reducing the costs associated with social assistance, medical care and long-term mental health services.

♦ **Environmental Opportunities:**

a) *Promoting sustainable agricultural practices:* Social agriculture often adopts ecological, agroecological or regenerative farming methods, which:

- Conserve biodiversity: By creating habitats favorable to wildlife and avoiding the use of synthetic pesticides and herbicides.

- Improve soil health: By using compost, green manures and crop rotation.

- Reduce water consumption: By implementing efficient irrigation systems and adapting crops to local conditions.

- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions: By avoiding the use of synthetic chemical fertilizers and sequestering carbon in the soil.

b) *Education and awareness-raising on environmental protection:* Participants and visitors to social farms learn about the importance of environmental protection and sustainable agricultural practices.

c) *Valorisation of local resources:* Social farming tends to use available local resources, reducing dependence on external inputs and transport costs.

d) *Contribution to valuable rural landscapes:* Maintaining agricultural activity in rural areas contributes to the conservation of traditional landscapes and natural and cultural heritage.

In conclusion, social agriculture represents an innovative approach with significant potential to generate multiple and interconnected benefits in the social, economic and environmental dimensions, thus contributing to building a more sustainable and inclusive future.

The development prospects of social agriculture are promising and are emerging based on current socio-economic and environmental trends, as well as the growing recognition of its multiple benefits. Here are some of the **main development prospects**:

♦ **Strengthening and scaling up existing initiatives**: Many social farming initiatives are still in their infancy or operating on a small scale. There is significant potential to strengthen these initiatives by improving management, diversifying activities, and expanding production and service capacity. Also, replicating successful models in other geographical and social contexts can help increase the impact of social farming.

♦ **Increasing political recognition and support**: With the awareness of the social, economic and environmental benefits of social farming, increasing recognition and support from public authorities at local, national and European levels is expected. This could include:

- *Developing specific public policies*: Creating legislative frameworks and national strategies to promote and support the development of social farming.

- *Allocation of public funds*: Including social farming in funding programmes for agriculture, rural development, social economy and social services.

- *Facilitating access to land and other resources*: Removing administrative and financial barriers that hinder social farming initiatives' access to agricultural land and other necessary resources.

♦ **Integration into mainstream agricultural and social policies**: Social farming has the potential to no longer be perceived as a niche sector, but to be integrated into conventional agricultural policies (e.g. through diversification of agricultural activities supported by the CAP) and social policies (e.g. as a form of publicly funded social service or occupational therapy).

♦ **Development of networks and partnerships**: Creating and strengthening social farming networks at national and international level facilitates the exchange of experience, good practices and resources. Partnerships with non-governmental organizations, research institutions, local authorities and private sector actors can amplify the impact and sustainability of initiatives.

♦ **Increased community and consumer involvement**: As awareness of the benefits of social farming increases, greater local community involvement is expected through volunteering, donations or participation in CSA initiatives. Consumers are increasingly interested in products with social and environmental added value, creating a growing market for products from social farming.

♦ **Innovation and diversification of forms of social farming**: New forms of social farming can be developed that are adapted to the specific needs of different target groups and local contexts. For example, initiatives that combine social farming with social tourism, environmental education or care services for the elderly may emerge. The use of technology can also bring innovations in the management of social farms and in communication with beneficiaries and the community.

To fully capitalize on these prospects, it is essential to create an ecosystem conducive to the development of social agriculture, which includes adequate political and financial support, a solid network of actors, greater public awareness, and an innovative and adaptable approach to diverse local contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

Social agriculture represents a valuable opportunity for building a sustainable future, in which economic development is combined with social solidarity. In the context of climate

change and socio-economic transformations, this model offers: a viable alternative for the revitalization of the rural environment; a tool for the active inclusion of disadvantaged categories; a conducive framework for ecological education and community participation. In order to capitalize on the potential of social agriculture, it is necessary to develop coherent public policies, form collaborative networks and support applied research in this field.

The role of social agriculture in promoting a sustainable future is crucial and multidimensional, deriving directly from its ability to harmoniously integrate social, economic and environmental dimensions. Through this holistic approach, social agriculture goes beyond the conventional agricultural model, which often prioritizes economic productivity to the detriment of social and environmental aspects.

To fully harness the transformative potential of social agriculture, a collaborative and strategic approach by policymakers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local communities is essential. Here are some specific recommendations for each group:

- Recommendations for Policymakers: creating a favorable legislative and strategic framework, allocating adequate financial resources, facilitating access to land and other resources, promoting research and exchange of good practices, simplifying the legal and administrative framework;

- Recommendations for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): developing innovative projects and initiatives, building strategic partnerships, strengthening organizational capacity, raising awareness and advocacy;

- Recommendations for Local Communities: identifying local needs and resources, supporting local initiatives, promoting responsible consumption and local products, initiating community projects.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers, NGOs and local communities can create an ecosystem conducive to the development of social agriculture, thus fully harnessing its potential to contribute to a more sustainable, inclusive and prosperous future for all.

The current situation of agriculture is marked by significant challenges related to sustainability and social inequalities in rural areas. Finding and implementing innovative solutions is essential to ensure the viability of the agricultural sector, environmental protection and the well-being of rural communities. Social farming represents such an innovative solution, with the potential to simultaneously address issues related to sustainability and social inclusion.

In conclusion, social farming represents an innovative approach with significant potential to generate multiple and interconnected benefits in the social, economic and environmental dimensions, thus contributing to building a more sustainable and inclusive future.

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