

AGRICULTURE AND THE SOCIAL FARM: EXPRESSION OF THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL MODEL OF AGRICULTURE AS A SOLUTION TO THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract

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The aim of this paper is to portray the main features and characteristics of the social farms and to examine how these organizations can contribute to the definition and the implementation of new pathways of change in rural areas, providing several benefits for individual with specific needs and local community. This close analysis addresses conceptual issues useful to understanding the main activities and initiatives to better answer to the needs of different involved actors, such as individuals, farmers, and local community.

Keywords: social farm; multifunctional model of agriculture; rural areas

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to portray the main features and characteristics of the social farms and to examine how these organizations can contribute to the definition and the implementation of new pathways of change in rural areas (Galluzzo, 2013). Specifically, this close scrutiny addresses conceptual issues useful to understanding the linkage between social farming and improvement of different intervention areas oriented to better answer local and social needs.

Several factors, such as globalization, technological innovations, changes in lifestyles of individuals, economic and energy crisis reinforce strongly the need for the development of new approaches, heterogeneous initiatives and practices promoting different forms of social assistance, solidarity, social responsibility and social inclusion (Vujicic and Ristic, 2012). Recently, in Europe the social farming (also called care farming) is increasingly considered a suitable alternative way “for delivering innovative and effective social services in remote rural areas where public care services are often non-existent or inadequate, inaccessible and of poor quality” (Di Trapani et al., 2014). Observing both a traditional and innovative ac-

tivity of agriculture for social purposes, social farming is frequently presented from “grassroots level” by new and established farmers, including all activities that use agricultural resources, both from plants and animals, in order to promote (or to generate) therapy, rehabilitation, social inclusion, education and social services in rural areas (Leck et al., 2014).

In reality, this emerging phenomenon, that involves different actors and requires active participation, is strongly pushed by some significant factors (Bernard et al., 2014). Firstly, the figure of the farmer has undergone many changes due to the complex relationships between his organization, territory, production processes and socio-economic system. In this regard, one of the first factors of marginalization of the small farm has been the outsourcing of certain production processes passed on to the food processing industry (Peters and Gregory, 2014). As a result, the farmer, increasingly ousted from the market, has felt the need for an adjustment to his being, one possibility is to be able to diversify the production and, at the same time, to be able to expand the business income through other complementary activities alongside agriculture (Pruteanu et al., 2011).

The wording of Article 2135 of the Civil Code and Legislative Decree no. 228/01, based on multi-functionality and multiple activities of the farm, gave a decisive impetus in this direction. The term “multifunctional” includes all the functions ascribed to agriculture: from the socio-cultural to environment, from travel services to the educational and cultural services. Otherwise, the term “social” is referred to all those activities, actions, interventions related to the main agricultural activity, but that directly involve the people belonging to vulnerable groups. Therefore, the two most important expressions of social farming are: educational farm and farms which play a key role as a human resource development because it involves all categories, from the young to women and even the elderly, historical memory and connection with the past. In fact, one of the main aspects of the therapy is to organize and facilitate the rehabilitation of social and work integration of disadvantaged people. Therefore, in this perspective, it is possible to highlight that social farming, which as well as producing goods for the satisfaction of basic needs of the individual, plays an important role in the protection of the environment, deals with the development of rural areas thereby preventing depopulation, serves as guardian of the historical and cultural heritage, and in the productive activity involves the weak or disadvantaged and provides benefits to people in need of care (Table 1).

Social farm: An Overview

In agriculture there isn't still a detailed regulation for the social organic farm on the definition of social, as this is not addressed in a systemic way at any level. It can only search for the rules that deal with the subject in a cross, and that they are, for example, designed to regulate the health care industry or agriculture in general terms (Oxouzi and Bagiatis, 2012). However, despite the delay of the legislature, several projects have taken shape in recent years, a sign that, even if slowly, the focus is shifting more and more in that direction. At the EU level, for

example, was made the *Cost Action 866 Green Care*. It is an action of European origin whose main objective is to increase scientific knowledge regarding “best practices” in the field of social farming, to help support and improve the conditions of people with mental or physical problems and to improve their quality of life (Gozener and Sayili, 2011). As there is no specific regulation, the national legislature uses the term social farming when it wants to refer to the farms, animals, plants, gardens, forests, landscapes, such as basic and essential factor in order to promote both mental health and physical that the quality of life for certain groups of people (Bryant and Garnham, 2014). It is clear that we are dealing with a report alleging a multidisciplinary scientific approach and this is because social farming has a multidisciplinary nature. This implies a need for more synergy professionalism.

In European Countries social farms a developing phenomenon that is characterized by the innovative and necessary relationship between agricultural practices and social activities/services (Pruteanu et al., 2012). Although the first example appeared in the “*social care farms*” in Holland in the 90s, today there are about 400 organizations, which show a large diversity in terms of users and their position (i.e., clients, employees), financial aspects, institutional support, sectors involved, projects addressed and community development (Lanfranchi et al., 2014).

Initially, the social projects are more focused on cultural initiatives, education activities or training paths dedicated to people in difficult situations. For example, prisoners and drug addicts during their social reintegration, but also to the elderly and people with physical, sensory, intellectual or psychological disabilities. These figures are often included within the same company that made the proposal. For this reason, the social farm frequently collaborates with schools, organizations and associations (such as those operating the care of the disabled). Finally, although they try to combine profit for the company with the good of the community, it should always be remembered that they maintain their entrepreneurial

Table 1
Areas of intervention relating to social agriculture

Training, mentoring, social and employment inclusion of subjects at risk of exclusion.
Acceptance of people in difficulty (children, disabled, elderly, etc.). Within family homes, apartment-groups, community emergency reception, housing communities, rest houses and vacation homes.
Socio-psychological rehabilitation, with the help of garden therapy, pet therapy, donkey therapy, etc.
Recreational and educational activities aimed at children and adolescents (educational farm).
Agro-nests and agricultural nurseries for children in pre-school age.
Group activities and local animation aimed at young people, the elderly, families, etc.
Social tourism, which may provide farm accommodation, catering, excursions, etc.

Source: our elaboration

nature (they are not non-profit organizations) and do not pursue welfare-logic (Foti et al., 2014).

National context of the Social Farms

The case of Italy

The social farms in Italy have a vision too limited in terms of quantity and in terms of communication. In fact, the company looks at social farming as a niche phenomenon. To date, they are estimated at about 2000 Italian social farms (mainly cooperatives), of which 70% are organic farms. According to the Italian Association for Organic Agriculture, the social farms in Italy are mainly distributed in the North. In the Southern Regions the most significant experience is represented by unions *Libera Terra*. They are principally born on land confiscated from the mafia. It is important, therefore, to realize an alternative market, in which the contents are easily found in the reality of “social”, as the social farms can not live on handouts and subsidies, but must prove socially and economically sustainable. For example, it would be useful to make available to these companies those acres of land, often related to public entities, which are not used to stimulate the development of these cooperatives (possibly younger), or facilitating the marketing of farm produce industry. So what now appears the real weak point of this parallel system is the component that information does not create the proper foundation for a new mentality in favor of a society in flux, with a lifestyle more healthy and sustainable (Regorsek et al., 2011).

In Italy the concept of agricultural enterprise with a social purpose began only at the end of the nineties. In most cases, however, they are small realities. Only in the last years, the agricultural world has expressed an interest in such initiatives, perceived not only as a means of intervention systems of health and welfare, but also as potential elements of economic diversification. In this direction, an input was given by the Legislative Decree of 18 May 2001, n. 228 (Orientation and modernization of agriculture), which aims to revive the agricultural entrepreneurship through non-traditional areas such as education and teaching. According to official estimates, currently the move involves about 500 disabled people. Another attempt aimed at creating a network of organic social farms, is the one made by Coldiretti of Vicenza. Social farming is, at this moment, still an experimental and new intervention that necessarily requires coordination between the agencies responsible for the elaboration and adoption of legislation and actually made on the ground. From a proactive, it must use the funding from rural development policies and regional as well as the safety and legality (agriculture prison, alternatives to prison, confiscated property). As for the legal process to follow we must encourage - you have to convey the

various energies in this direction - a joint reading of the rules of social security and health care (Abumhadi et al., 2012). In fact, it is necessary and desirable to a greater recognition of the value and usefulness of the deep social farming by the National Health Service and a continuous and ever deeper synergy and cohesion between them. Thus, the greatest obstacle to date appears to be the formation of a new mindset necessary for an opening in the direction of medical treatment alternatives.

The elderly, especially those with walking disabilities, have had the most benefits, both physically and mentally. Positive results have also been obtained with blind people who have managed to orientate and move in an environment, the rural one, totally different to the urban environment (Hyttiä, 2014). Important progress, both psychological and physical, was recorded by people who have experienced “Pet Therapy” through the use of the horse and the donkey. It is clear that the social enterprise, despite its potential, can not replace the presence of institutional structures and professional social service. However, it can represent a strengthening of the network of services in support of rural areas and in many cases urban centres, intervening in specific aspects of prevention, spatial dispersion, small size, light services, rehabilitation, routes outgoing following structured therapeutic practices (Foti et al., 2013).

The case of Bulgaria

The development of the social farming in Bulgaria is in an extremely initial phase. Still there are some existing examples even in a small case, although the possibilities and the advantages of the social farming are not well known on the society level, as well as on national managing bodies level and there is no adequate policy focused on developing and popularizing this type of activity. The existing social farming examples are a result of a private initiative without any coordination of the government. The social farming is almost unknown to the Bulgarian society; the information is episodic and extremely insufficient to provoke public interest and to turn the attention to this direction. There is also a lack of research interest to this problem in Bulgaria, which is in compliance with the priorities and the adjustments of the society and the existing practice.

The basic activities, which find application in the country, include animal interaction (mainly with horses) for children, youngsters and adults with different medical/health problems, as well as participation in agricultural activities of adults, having problems with the social behaviour and adaptation (prisoners and minority representatives). Centres for rural/agrarian tourism exist in the country and their activity is oriented to the people from all age groups without specific needs, the goals of these centres are above all recreational (Table 2).

Five types of actors are engaged in realization of these activities, depending on the type of the activity exercised: therapists, instructors, educators, consultants and farmers.¹

Bulgaria is a country with already established traditions in the building and development of the agricultural co-operatives, which together with their production activity had a number of social functions. Unfortunately at the moment the country does not have an established example of a co-operative that is engaged in this sort of activities, even though 1100 agricultural co-operatives function in the Bulgarian villages.

Although the society is not sufficiently acquainted with the ideas and practices of the social farming and the state, in all its governing bodies, didn't create any appropriate conditions for stimulating and popularizing these types of activities, there is a potential in the country for development of the social farming because of:

- the suitable natural-climatic conditions;
- the existing traditions in the agricultural output;
- the necessity of such type of activities for solving problems of various groups of the population with specific needs;
- the existing financial resource for starting and development of this kind of activities.²

Social farming activities could contribute to the overall sustainable development of the rural areas by reducing poverty and increasing farm income. These activities may stabilize the social and economic life in rural areas and protect the environment in Bulgaria.

As a new EU member state, Bulgaria should continue to adapt its legislation and system of administration to the existing European institutional environment, and at the same time to use the good practices of the older and more advanced

member states, in order to foster the social-economic development.

Main Features and Characteristics of the Agricultural Social Farms

The social farms take on various dimensional production and organizational forms. Nevertheless, it is possible to outline some recurring features. From the point of view of the management, there are two professional figures needed: one that takes care of the production cycle and one that has expertise in the healthcare sector (Lanfranchi et al., 2014). It is necessary to highlight that in this contest the considered reality present a high degree of product diversification (indoor or outdoor cultivation, cultivation or livestock) (Ozer and Akcay, 2013). This diversification is underlined by the realization of an agricultural activity closely related to agriculture or livestock. Interesting examples are the holiday farmrestaurants of typical and local products, the academic and laboratory activity for primary and secondary schools, the realization of sales points directly on the farm. We can notice that the majority of social farms have organic production methods, although they are not certified (Oxouzi and Papanagiotou, 2010). The choice of organic is on one hand a practical need, or subsequent to security reasons in a context characterized by the presence of human resources particularly sensitive, but on the other hand, expresses an attitude of environmental responsibility on behalf of the enterprise which is considered naturally akin to conduct a social function. So, it is at least appropriate to structure a marketing policy by choosing no more than three customer targets,

Table 2
Kind of activity, users, specific needs and actors involved

Kind of activity	Name of the therapy	Users' specific targets	Specific needs	Actors involved	Location
Interaction with animals (horses)	Hypotherapy	Children	Autism	Therapist/instructor	Horse Ranch in Pernik
Interaction with animals (horses)	Riding physiotherapy	Children	Cerebral paresis	Therapist/instructor	Horse Ranches in Pernik and Skravena
Vocational training and/or participation in farm activities	Vocational training and/or socio-therapeutic farm activities	Youngsters / Adults	Prisoners	Educators/ Prison administration	Prisoners' farm in Bobovdol
Interaction with animals (horses)	Gymnastics through riding	Youngsters/ Adults	Physical disabilities	Instructor	Horse Ranch in Skravena
Vocational training in agriculture, consulting and help in starting farm activities	Vocational training in agriculture, consulting and help in starting farm activities	Adults	Social adaptation problems	NGO	Plovdiv
Social agro-tourism and leisure activities	Holiday centers for rural and agro-tourism	Adults		Farmers	Farms

Source: <http://www.maie-project.eu/index.php?id=45>

¹ <http://www.maie-project.eu/index.php?id=45>

² <http://prsr.government.bg/index.php/bg/sections/12/101>

which will benefit from the social provisions (De Castro et al., 2014).

Results: The Different Forms of Social Farms

In dealing with the discussion on the types of agricultural enterprises, it is essential to outline a preliminary model of social farm. After having stressed how important the role of social farms is to allow the collective insertion and employment of disadvantaged people, it is important to emphasize the educational function. These aspects create a link between the urban “world” and the other, and also between tradition and technology. The main objective of experience on the farm (which is absolutely not a non-profit organization but rather, *not for profit*) is “to improve the quality of life of the person and not the production cycle”, and the farmer has the role of technical support for the achievement of the result (Lanfranchi et al., 2014). This explains the inclusion of disadvantaged people, which in a pure maximalist economic parameter vision would not be taken into account. The first type of social agricultural enterprise was contemplated in the law 381/91 discipline of Cooperative Societies. “The law that marks the actual opening words”, intended as legal recognition of Italian territory, of the idea of a union between entrepreneurship and social function. This measure distinguishes between different types of social cooperatives; the classification is outlined in the following table (Table 3).

Discussion: Social Agricultural Functions and Intervention Areas

Social agricultural enterprises, as mentioned, comprise a variety of services and functions. In fact, they include the ed-

ucational farms, which are aimed primarily at children in order to show and make them part of life, tradition and culture of rural and country places, but also real welcome centres for the elderly, and disadvantaged people such as former drug addicts, people with disabilities and young people marginalized by society (Lanfranchi et al., 2014). In particular, in the case of disadvantaged individuals, businesses that deal with social farming often offer the chance, not only to enjoy a rural setting, but also the contact with animals as a real therapy. *Horticultural therapy* is an example, consisting in planting or at least treating seeds, flowers or trees, by people with problems especially those with psychological or psychiatric problems and people with disabilities. This acts as a “rehabilitative cure” because it improves the perceptual capacities of time, of the environment, relationships with other living beings and with other people. Another example, as mentioned, is *Pet Therapy*, which through the aid of docile animals realizes a participation process among disadvantaged subjects. As in the case of horticulture therapy, which allows the “patients” to regain contact with reality and learn or return to socialize with others (Lanfranchi et al. 2014). These methods, in fact, as the case maybe, serve as both therapy and rehabilitation for those who, so as to say, had these perceptions but for some psychic reason lost them (Figure 1).

Interventions for people with disabilities

Disability is a complex issue because it is different for each kind of existing disability. You can have physical disabilities, with mobility problems or mental disabilities. Each type of “disability” has different needs and should therefore be treated in a personalized way. All the people affected by these forms of “hardship” have the same problems and basic needs in common, and equally risk social exclusion and marginal-

Table 3
The different forms of social enterprise farm in Italy

<p><i>Social cooperatives of type A:</i> responsible for management of health services and educational services, day centres and nightclubs hosting various subjects suffering from disabilities (handicapped, the mentally ill, young immigrants or people with problems of exclusion, etc.) either for rehabilitation educational purposes or for socialization, or those which host elderly people in critical periods of the year, when loneliness and other problems are more pronounced or farms that offer themselves as instruments that transmit the agricultural and rural culture to the younger generations (so-called educational farms).</p>
<p><i>Social cooperatives of type B:</i> have as their main objective the promotion of the employment for disadvantaged people, initiating activity of production of goods or services. Agricultural enterprise that fall into this category have taken on the training and specializing of particular subjects, such as the physically and mentally handicapped, the mentally ill, migrants, marginalized young people, ex-convicts and others with low bargaining power, offering them a job within the company, or at least allowing them, thanks to the training received, to qualify for employment opportunities in other agricultural enterprises or derived from them, but more simply, businesses that promote employment in agriculture and the training of young entrepreneurs or women.</p>
<p><i>Cooperatives of mixed type</i> which have both connotations.</p>
<p><i>Social consortia</i>, which must be made up of cooperative societies, with at least 70% of its social base capital represented by social cooperatives.</p>

Source: our elaboration

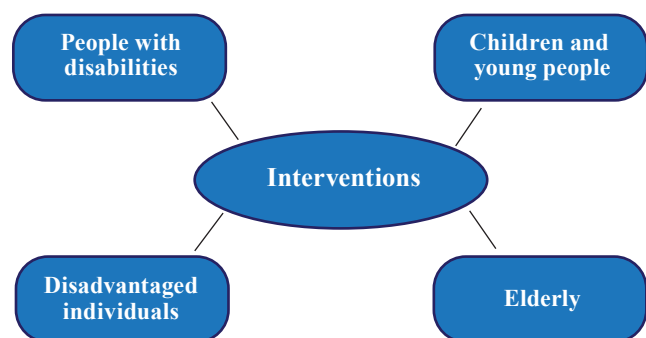


Fig. 1. Main Interventions

Source: our elaboration

ization. Agricultural activities have recently offered new possibilities to try to meet the needs of such people. In fact, it is evident that these people due to their condition, present some peculiarities and specific opportunities of the highest interest and absolutely unique in the paths of including the vulnerable: in fact farms or agricultural businesses represent a great opportunity to include vulnerable subjects, they have flexible qualities, versatility, simplicity, multiplicity of processes and functions: in particular, a great variety of possible jobs which are not found in other sectors, and which thus allow the material inclusion in the production process to anyone, regardless of discomfort - mental or physical - of which the subject is affected. In particular, plant care, entrusted to people with mental disabilities, in an open space - even within institutions or in companies with the help of competent staff - gives responsibility to the patient who may also collect and eat the fruits of their own job (Spampinato et al., 2013).

Interventions for children and young people: educational farms, agro-nests and agricultural child nurseries

The term agro-nests, means a host structure built inside a farm and intended to accommodate children, up to three years of age, corresponding to kindergarten. The agricultural child nurseries, however, can be compared to preschool, involving children from three to six years. Currently in Italy these facilities are lacking and sometimes of low quality, at least according to ISTAT data on nest bins, relative to the period 2011-2012 (Lanfranchi et al., 2014). However, the number is growing. From a structural point of view, the agro-nests and agricultural child nurseries are often small classes (having between 19 to 50 children), and this is because on one hand the regulations and regional regulations set a maximum number of children in relation to the surface area of the premises, and on the other hand because they are considered as additional services in the broader basket of services offered by the farm. They constitute a significant workload, because they

offer all the services normally provided by traditional reception facilities (meal, change, rest, etc). What they offer extra is the more significant time outdoors in contact with nature. The first agro-nests in fact, date back to a decade ago, on the basis of experiences of family child care; they derive their origin from the need of women engaged in any occupation, on farms, to combine work with having children.

To be considered, is that a significant contribution to the spread of agro-nests and agricultural nurseries comes from the fact, that they are located in areas lacking childcare facilities, public and/or private; furthermore not to be underestimate is the fact linked to the ability to offer an innovative service as it is placed in a natural environment, which is managed with creativity and with a range of additional services that differentiate this type of asylum from others. Today in Italy the management of agro-nests has to deal with legislation, which is still backward if not non-existent, and this at the expense of their diffusion. As part of a bleakscenery, the reference regions that have already developed specific legislation to regulate this activity are Piemonte, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna and Trentino-Alto Adige. In other regions, if you want to open a agro-nests or agricultural child nurseries, everything is based on the general rules that govern the services of care for children, without any specific reference to the placement of these services in the context of a farm (Rusev et al., 2012).

Interventions for the elderly

As for the elderly, the needs to which social farming can answer are predominantly those of relating to other living beings and to overcome critical periods of the year. The main problem of elderly people is to be alone and often being marginalized from the rest of society. For this reason, in fact here are “social farms” for the elderly, in which the farm becomes a social gathering place, where the variety of spaces and activities is associated with the being together, participation and sharing. It is a form of temporary reception, but it is of fundamental importance, for example, for the elderly who are alone or in institutions (Sulemana and James, 2014). In these farms they can rediscover the pleasure of being in a community, in natural areas, and often in contact with pets, which causes in their “partners” a positive empathy, and where the elderly can have incentives to participation in various activities.

Actions in support of disadvantaged individuals

The use of techniques and tools that favour the farming activity for therapeutic rehabilitation or for employment and social inclusion is well planned. As we have already said, in fact, the rural area has some peculiarities that are suitable for all those who have special hardships. As explained above, the

agricultural work lends itself well to make possible the participation of all the participants and to stay in a rural setting; in addition, adherence to typical agricultural tasks brings significant positive effects and acts as rehabilitation and therapy for individuals with special needs. So small jobs are given to the subjects, tasks more or less difficult, depending on the difficulty that distinguishes them, relative to both cultivation, and the care of the animals, everyone will be engaged in something, no one will be marginalized or excluded from the agriculture production process (Sgroi et al., 2014). Everyone can feel integrated in a large single biological process called the productive “farm”, with the ability to see, touch, eat and sometimes commercialize the fruits of their work. The last element is undoubtedly more present in agriculture than in other sectors, it is also of great interest in the potential of marketing the products of social farming (Sgroi et al., 2014). Often people with disabilities that have participated in these initiatives of social entrepreneurship not only got rehabilitation results, but they have developed a kind of ability and professionalism that has allowed them, as a result, to stay and work within the company originally the host or in other farms. At this point of proceedings it becomes necessary to refer to other categories of people with “low bargaining power,” or weak individuals, who have a form of discomfort of a different nature. This refers to former drug addicts, ex-prisoners, young people with problems of marginalization and young immigrants from outside the EU (Crescimanno et al., 2014).

In spite of these categories of people seeming totally different to the previous ones, as they actually don't have any disability, but probably have some of the problems of psychological distress however, they are linked together with the previous ones because they are connected to them through their primary need, namely that of a both social and professional integration. Within the agricultural enterprise, the production systems can be chosen from a very wide range of possibilities, of course taking into account the subjects that are going to be “hosted”, which include different types of activities, depending on whether we are talking about growing plants or breeding animals, whether it be a short cycle or long cycle, etc.. The ways in which procedures can be carried out in a production process are manifold, and if the objective that guides the choices of the entrepreneur is not only to profit, but also takes into account the results of a social nature, such as the training and active participation in the work of disadvantaged people, use will be made of production techniques, which in a purely economic logic would be inefficient. Often, the ethical and social responsibility in this type of business will be accompanied by the use of environmentally friendly production methods, in the respect of nature of production

cycles, animals and the land, just like the biological method (Shalaby et al., 2012). Almost always, in fact, the agro-social enterprises are also biological, or with the character of environmental sustainability, because moral values dedicated to social wellbeing go hand in hand with those devoted to the care of the environment, because, even for the disadvantaged people involved, working, for example, without the use of harmful substances, which are dangerous makes the fulfillment of the productive tasks easier and safer.

Conclusions

This analysis has examined the main features and characteristics of social farms, showing that these organizations can represent an innovative way to satisfy economic and social needs. Combining harmoniously different actors, they can play relevant role in the development of rural areas, redefining the positioning of enterprises and their products and contributing to the improvement of activities directed to enhance economic empowerment of individuals with specific needs and disabilities (Lanfranchi and Giannetto, 2014). In addition, they can also become a suitable solution to reduce out-migration and the depopulation process of the agricultural and rural areas.

The limitation is tied to the explorative nature of this analysis oriented mainly to highlight conceptual issues for understanding the phenomenon under investigation. Future research could include an extensive empirical analysis of social farms for examining the efficacy of these emerging organizations in different sectors of activities.

Author's Contributions

The work is the result of a full collaboration of the authors. However, Maurizio Lanfranchi, in addition to coordination and setting the study, the writing of the paragraphs 3.1, 5, 6.3 and 6.4; Carlo Giannetto paragraphs 2, 4, 6.1, and 6.2; Tindara Abbate paragraphs 1, 7, and 6; Vihra Dimitrova paragraphs 2 and 3.2.

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