

A New Approach To Sustainable Management – The Concept Of Social Farming

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Abstract. *The present scientific paper examines a new approach to sustainable management, related to the concept of social farming. The socio-ecological nature of the social farming makes it a valuable asset, contributing to the welfare, wellbeing, intercultural learning, labour integration and social inclusion of the most disadvantaged groups of society. The potential of the social farming for achieving sustainable development in the rural areas is enormous, including social entrepreneurship and social innovation, increased employment rates and incomes, social inclusion, training, recreation, innovation and environmental protection. Social farming, as a multifunctional model, contributes both, to the public welfare and the alternative entrepreneurial business model. The proposed systemic model represents a more comprehensive approach to the complex nature of the social farming. The results of the study encompass the theoretical review of the concept, an effective social farming model and the existing problem-solving opportunities.*

Keywords: *employment, environmental protection, social entrepreneurship, social farming, sustainable management.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, agriculture has taken on new roles, moving from a simple economic activity for the production of goods for human and animal nutrition to activities capable of improving the environment (land protection, reduction of pollution) and providing services to the community, also connected to social and labour policies [1].

According to the European Economic and Social Committee, *social farming* could be described as “a cluster of activities that use agricultural resources—both animal and plant—to generate in rural or semi-rural areas, social services such as rehabilitation, therapy, sheltered jobs, lifelong learning and other activities contributing to social integration” [2].

The multifunctional character of social farming has been studied and examined [3]. Social farming aims to

enhance the multifunctional character of agriculture and it's linked to a model of territorial and proximity welfare, based on public action to regulate and safeguard the protection of citizens starting from the weakest groups and considers workers, local institutions, the third sector and others as protagonists. Different practices are related to “safeguarding biodiversity, fostering environmental and food education and making the area known by organising social and educational farms” [4]. Social farming recognizes and enhances the heritage of agriculture, made up of natural assets (land, water, landscape, etc.), material assets (tools, buildings, plant varieties, animal breeds) and the set of knowledge, values, traditions (intangible assets) that characterize this sector [5].

Social farming develops on a logic of environmental, social and economic sustainability, with particular attention to the protection and conservation of natural resources for future generations in each individual territory. In particular, social farming tends primarily and progressively towards organic production and environmental protection [6].

Social farming includes a variety of activities, e.g. integration of disadvantaged people, social services for the local communities, services accompanying medical, psychological and recreational therapies [4]. The different social farming activities could contribute to sustainable management and promote sustainable rural development [1]. The complex nature of social farming encompasses the concepts of: social inclusion, labour integration, welfare, wellbeing and learning [7], [6], [8], [5], “connective agriculture” [9], social innovation [10].

With regard to the global health crisis in the past few years and the following economic and social measures, we witnessed dramatic changes globally. The pandemic situation led also to marginalization of many farms [11]. The recent farmers' protests development, due to climate

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change conditions and lack of adequate modernized policy in the sector, evidenced the necessity of introducing new measures and alternative business models. In view of the challenges of the green and digital transitions, “Europe will need innovative solutions and all entrepreneurial talent should be encouraged” [12].

The socio-ecological nature of the social farming makes it a valuable asset, contributing to the welfare, wellbeing, intercultural learning, labour integration and social inclusion of the most disadvantaged groups of society.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of this paper is to review the theoretical concepts related to the social farming and its multifunctional character, as well as to propose a model of its effective introduction. During the first stage of the analysis a systematic literature review was conducted, in order to collect and synthesize research evidence in the selected field. Different European and national strategies and policies were examined in order to highlight the main development trends, existing measures and incentives. The second stage of the research encompassed a comparative analysis of the development in selected EU countries and in Bulgaria. The data for Bulgaria was collected from different sources, including existing information about the social farms in the country and information gathered from interviews. The information gathering encompassed quantitative and qualitative data. The third stage of the research included the elaboration of a model of social farming from the systemic perspective and the social-ecological framework. In the last part of the study the main elements of the system model of social farming were analysed, including the stakeholders, the process itself, the most relevant activities and the results of the social farming. Descriptive and comparative analysis have been used in the study, applying qualitative data review.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *Brief historical overview, development of the social farming concept and legislative framework*

The first example of social farming is the so-called “welfare farms” created in the Netherlands in the 1990s, and there are currently many such initiatives, distinguished by extreme diversity in terms of the activities involved, target groups and method of financing [13].

Of course, social farming has been developed to varying degrees in different European countries.

In the 1970s the birth of City farms in Great Britain became the solution for recovering abandoned places, often transformed into landfills in peripheral urban areas, or the union of a group of family gardens and urban farms. The City farms carry out varied activities: training courses, school visits, hippotherapy and horticultural therapy, vegetable cultivation, composting and recycling of waste, recreational and sporting activities, summer and after-school centres.

In Italy the typology of social agriculture is consolidating, which offers new potential and opportunities for the development of rural areas and

communities by providing responses to the needs of personal services, promoting knowledge and mutual trust.

There are good practices and traditions in Italy – e.g. the health care sector identifies and uses social agriculture as a means of therapy, the economic sector as a tool for providing employment, agricultural producers as a source of income and an opportunity to develop new areas. All this is possible thanks to the existing strong normative and financial support from the state (regardless of the fact that, as a relatively new phenomenon, it is not yet considered comprehensively regulated in a legislative aspect). Social farms in Italy include also the educational farms. In recent years, educational farms have been able to develop all the potential inherent in the agricultural enterprise and have revealed themselves to be dynamic structures, capable of designing complex courses and modifying their training offer according to the needs of the territory. Today, the farm presents itself as a place of active learning and a tool for permanent education, no longer linked exclusively to school users - which nevertheless remains fundamental -, while the service offered is enriched with numerous proposals, up to the organization of cultural and sporting activities, training for adults (cooking courses, vegetable cultivation, recognition of mushrooms or wild plants, etc.), theatre shows for children, activities for disadvantaged children and other.

In Lombardy, “social farms” are growing, accompanying agricultural production with social activities, with a view to multifunctionality. These are corporate projects that offer alternative forms of participatory, territorial and proximity welfare and which open up new spaces for agricultural businesses.

In 2013, with the issuing of the Opinion (2013/C 44/07) by the European Economic and Social Committee [2], the long process of regulation, at European and national level, of this specific area of intervention began. Through this opinion, the formal foundations were laid for EU Member States to work quickly to promote and support this sector, among other things by adopting, at different levels, an adequate and favourable regulatory framework, recognizing its added value and improving its governance” [2].

The operation of an agricultural business is considered, not only from an economic-productive point of view, but also and above all as an intervention aimed at the social and working inclusion [14] of disadvantaged people and the reference explicit to the world of social cooperation and social entrepreneurship as well as other organizational forms of the third sector, with respect to social agriculture interventions, represents an incentive to create forms of collaboration between the world of agricultural entrepreneurship and that of social entrepreneurship in order to guarantee the provision of services aimed at achieving:

- training and job placement: experiences oriented towards the employment of disadvantaged individuals or those with relatively less serious disabilities (internships, job grants, hiring for disabled people, prisoners, drug addicts, migrants, refugees);
- rehabilitation/care: experiences aimed at people with disabilities (physical, mental, mental,

social), with a main socio-therapeutic aim (social workshops, day centres, community accommodation);

- recreation and quality of life: experiences aimed at a wide spectrum of people with more or less special needs, with socio-recreational purposes, including particular forms of social agritourism, the experiences of peri-urban social gardens for the elderly;
- education: actions aimed at broadening the forms and contents of learning to bring young or less young people closer to environmental issues (educational farms, summer camps);
- services for daily life: as in the case of "agri-kindergartens" or day care services for the elderly.

It is clear that the recognition of social agriculture, both by ad hoc legislation and by that of social enterprise, means that new initiatives are implemented with greater awareness that actively involve public institutions, the community and the world of social entrepreneurship leading to the development of specific measures in the development plans of territorial welfare systems. These processes, which have become increasingly consolidated over the years, have allowed social agriculture to acquire considerable importance in both quantitative and qualitative terms. The multifunctional characteristic of agriculture, in fact, is the basis of a reconsideration of this sector: in the past it was mostly the recipient of public policy interventions aimed at reducing the differences between urban areas and rural areas, while today, especially with the recognition regulations of social agriculture and thanks to the active involvement of social entrepreneurship, it becomes the tool through which companies and individuals operating in the agricultural sector are able to offer services of social interest for the communities of reference [15]. Therefore, agricultural companies become the main protagonists in the development processes of rural areas, promoting participatory welfare paths in which local communities, and the various subjects that compose them, act actively in taking care of the most vulnerable categories.

B. Development in Bulgaria

Fostering social enterprise has become a national priority, as is clear from the adoption, in October 2018, of the Act on Social and Solidarity-Based Enterprises [16], which entered into force in May 2019. This law aims to create a favourable ecosystem for social enterprises, providing them with a better access to the market and improving their competitiveness. Moreover, a Social-Economy and Social-Responsibility Department was established in 2018 within the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy [17].

According to art. 3 "The social and solidarity economy is a form of entrepreneurship aimed at one or more social activities and/or social goals carried out by enterprises, including through the production of various goods or the provision of services, in cooperation with state or local authorities or independently" [16].

"Social agriculture" is a very varied set of processes and actions that use agricultural activities to promote aggregative activities for the community or accompany therapeutic, rehabilitation and social and work inclusion actions of disadvantaged people (art. 4 L. 381/ 1991) or at risk of social exclusion.

"Social activity" could be defined as any activity that produces social added value and is aimed at achieving a social goal in support of persons and their social inclusion, raising their standard of living, improving their access to the labor market and to education and the protection of their rights, as well as to improve the living environment through the protection of the environment and biodiversity and in support of the ecological balance.

Social economy serves as an instrument for the development of social services; inclusion of disadvantaged groups on the labour market; improvement of the social services system's functionality; development of local economies as well as fight with poverty and social exclusion.

The development of social economy sector helps expand the possibilities to increase economic growth and contribution to GDP, employment and creation of conditions and a favourable environment for innovative, socially significant entrepreneur solutions.

Social entrepreneurship is an economic activity entirely aimed at the creation, operation and development of social enterprises. It is a relatively new concept for Bulgaria and nevertheless a number of organizations all over Bulgaria perform such activities. The essence of the social entrepreneurship is the creation of public good through activities that combine economic and social goals, provide support for socially vulnerable groups of society, stimulate socially positive changes, satisfies social needs, while utilizing the available resources optimally, applying innovative approaches to the social economy's development.

The social farming activities are part of the social economy and social entrepreneurship.

In the field of employment social entrepreneurships provide services related to:

- Encouraging employment opportunities and career development for the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities and other people on the labour market, as well as providing assistance in finding a suitable position, providing employment and going back to work;
- Encouraging the possibilities of self-employment, entrepreneurship and establishment of cooperatives and starting one's own business.

By providing employment for society's vulnerable groups, social economy helps unite the economic and the social resource for overcoming social isolation and leads to the reduction of the risk of poverty and social exclusion, to enhance the sustainability of the social policy measures.

In Bulgaria, the role of social economy in the country's general development is hardly visible, unlike that in most of EU countries.

C. Social farming in the context of social entrepreneurship and social innovation

Social farming is a relatively new phenomenon that still lacks both a sufficiently comprehensive definition and legislative regulation. However, it is clear that:

- is one of the functions of multifunctional agriculture;
- includes activities related to farms, animals, plants, gardens, forests, parks, etc.;
- has a multidisciplinary nature;
- represents an innovative way of linking agricultural practices and social activities/services [18];
- includes cultural, educational, training, etc. activities aimed at people in difficult situations;
- has an entrepreneurial character and pursues profit (the farm is not a non-profit organization), regardless of the generation of positive effects on public welfare [19].

In the most general sense, social entrepreneurship represents a specific type of economic activity that balances social and economic goals. Similarly, a social enterprise is a type of enterprise that carries out economic activity in the name of a social cause, i.e. some socially significant goal. Each social enterprise:

- has as its main objective the performance of a socially beneficial activity - achieving a social effect and exerting a beneficial influence by solving a specific social problem (e.g. improving the quality of life of vulnerable groups);
- in connection with the above, it also aims to generate income from economic activity, but not to make a profit for its owners, but to be self-sustaining, avoiding dependence on project financing, volunteering and donations - i.e. social objectives or public interest are the reason for its commercial activity;
- performs activities often in the form of social innovation;
- is managed in a transparent manner, in particular by involving workers, customers and employees in the management stakeholders affected by its economic activity.

A social enterprise always functions for the benefit of its employees by providing them with employment, or for the benefit of other vulnerable groups or social causes. In this sense, social economic activity can be divided into two main forms:

- provision of social services to vulnerable users, such as access to housing or care, healthcare, assistance for the elderly or disabled, childcare, access to employment and training, inclusion of risk groups, coping with addiction, etc.;
- production of goods or services in a way that contributes to the labour integration of disadvantaged people, isolated and marginalized mainly due to insufficient qualifications or social

or professional problems, i.e. employment provision.

At European level, there is a lack of a clear definition of the concept of "innovation in rural areas". On the one hand, this provides more opportunities, but on the other hand, it carries the risk of diverse interpretation, and also creates difficulties in terms of stimulating innovation (due to the lack of developed guidelines or financial incentives).

Main areas of innovation in rural areas are: renewable energy sources; rural tourism, economic integration and local partnerships; entrepreneurship; development, food processing and food supply chains. Projects related to the use of renewable energy sources and those related to innovation in services (e. g. facilities for the disabled, broadband internet for more remote settlements, etc.) are considered particularly innovative. Projects focused on youth and women, the structure of the aging population and the emigration of young people from rural areas are considered priorities. Considerable attention is also paid to the relationship between the quality of the environment and tourism, as well as to the addition of value to the main products.

Every social innovation represents a priori a new solution (product, service, model, market, process) that meets specific social needs and problems more effectively than the previous ones. It is always related to the realization of an idea that brings value because it leads to social change and has a direct impact on the quality of life of people and communities. In this sense, social innovation is a tool for long-term change – it increases the capacity of society to function better in the long term.

Social entrepreneurship and social innovation (including in rural areas) are subject to significant financial support, which easily argues for their identification as a European and national priority.

Social entrepreneurship and social enterprises have been identified as a key tool for innovation and overcoming the problems of poverty and social exclusion. In this context, it's important to develop social entrepreneurship and establish it as a business model that generates social value, resilience and contributes to the achievement of smart and sustainable growth, while helping to reduce poverty and social exclusion. In this sense, social farming is seen as valuable asset with enormous potential.

D. Systemic model of social farming

Systems thinking is a way to understand the complexity of economic, social and ecological systems [20]. Having in mind the complex nature of social farming, the systems' perspective would be appropriate for the elaboration of an inclusive model, explaining the dynamic interactions withing the system [23].

Central to a systemic sustainability management perspective is the "interdependence between organizations and the natural environment, given that organizations depend on the natural environment for inputs and organizational actions directly impact the natural environment through feedback loops" [20] -[22].

The proposed model of social farming encompasses the systemic approach, including the *input* to the system –

public authorities, academia, business and society; the *process* – social farming; and the *output* – social inclusion, labour integration, therapy, training, environmental protection and increased income (Fig. 1).

E. System's input elements.

- Government (public authorities) provide the legislative framework, different strategies and funding programmes. The regional and local authorities have a crucial role in supporting the social farming. The regions have a significant role in achieving the sustainable goals because of their vicinity to the ecological problems and the local know-how for overcoming and adapting to the ecological challenges [24].

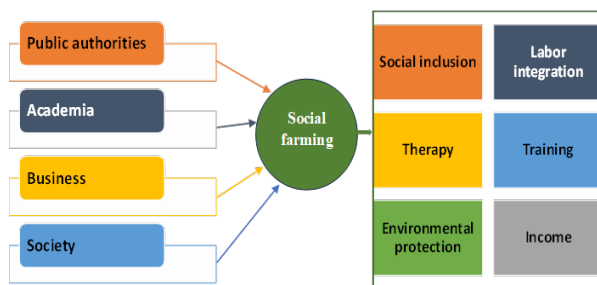


Fig. 1. Systemic model of social farming.

- Academia (educational and research institutions) – provides the training and research activities.
- Business (industry) – provides the expertise and specialists in the sector.
- Society – the engagement of the society as a whole is important in order to implement a successful social farming model. The citizens are both contributors and end-users.

F. System's output elements.

- Labour integration - all studies show that there are certain vulnerable groups in our country with very small chances of employment [25]. The reasons for this are numerous, but in many cases, they are related to the presence of barriers and stereotypes (prejudices) about people of different gender, age, ethnicity, race, health status, etc., built up over centuries. These vulnerable groups include: young people, elderly, women, disabled, Roma minority, immigrants, refugees and citizens of third countries. When the mentioned stereotypes (signs of discrimination) are combined, the inclusion of the vulnerable groups in question in employment becomes almost impossible. For example, it is particularly difficult to integrate persons with low education and without a professional of qualification.
- Social inclusion - in the light of the persistent tendency to isolate the certain groups from the society, social farming can be seen as one of the possibilities to overcome it. Active participation in the daily life of a farm enables disadvantaged people, from different social strata, to improve their mental and physical health, gain access to

paid employment, integrate fully and, accordingly, improve their quality of life - people with physical, intellectual or psychological disabilities, behavioural problems or learning difficulties, permanently unemployed, immigrants, drug addicts, socially weak, criminals, elderly people, etc. [26]. In this sense, with its medical-therapeutic, rehabilitative, educational and integration orientation, social agriculture can make an extremely serious contribution to the development of any society [27].

- Training - educational farms are realities that bring young people and adults closer to the countryside to rediscover the link that exists between the land and the table, enhance the flavours and culture of the rural world, spread knowledge about quality productions, offering growth opportunities for everyone. There is no shortage of expert opinions and hypotheses for the future, which sees generational change and the qualification of the sector as key points. Social agriculture promotes actions to bring environmental, agricultural and social issues closer to all people, especially younger ones; to this end it organizes educational and training activities, in connection with schools and other training agencies in the area.
- Therapy - social farming, by offering activities in contact with plants and animals, contributes to the improvement of individual well-being and of all living beings and of the health conditions of the people involved in therapeutic, rehabilitation and care processes. The outdoor and indoor activities, along with carefully planned therapeutic activities, have beneficial effect for a wide range of mental diseases, e. g. autism [28].
- Increased income – social farming could be considered as an alternative business model, providing additional income to the farmers along with the production of traditional goods. Social agriculture aims to enhance the multifunctional character of agriculture - that is, the fact that this activity simultaneously has the function of producing food goods [29] and other social functions - in the field of personal services, strengthening quality agricultural production, experiment and innovate agricultural practices with respect for people and the environment, integrate the production of goods and services with the creation of informal networks of relationships. It promotes healthy and balanced lifestyles and tends to raise the quality of local life in rural and peri-urban areas through the creation of contexts of social cohesion and the offer of services for people and local populations. With regard to the twin transition, the European Commission aims at “strengthening economic and social cohesion, by for instance, reinforcing social protection and the welfare state, with regional development strategies and investment also playing an

important role” [30]. Social agriculture is part of the cultural movement that sees the production of goods and services oriented not only to containing public spending and satisfying needs, but also to strengthening the quality of social bonds, according to principles of solidarity, subsidiarity and sharing.

- Environmental protection - social farming develops on a logic of environmental, social and economic sustainability, with particular attention to the protection and conservation of natural resources for future generations in each individual territory. In particular, social agriculture tends primarily and progressively towards organic production, capable of safeguarding the health of all living beings and the environment at the same time. Furthermore, social agriculture protects the environmental context through the valorisation of the natural and cultural heritage, the promotion of the typical features and excellence of the territory.

IV. CONCLUSION

The proposed systemic model of social farming includes the main stakeholders as the output to the system, providing the necessary political and legal framework, training and research, as well as financial support and expertise.

The process of social farming is the core of the system, interconnecting the actors in the process, generating social value, inclusive communities, resilience, smart and sustainable growth.

The most important part of the model is the output, the results of the process – social inclusion, labour integration, therapeutic and recreational activities, acquired skills, increased income and environmental protection.

The practical implications of the model could be seen in the potential of social farming to reduce poverty, to enhance the social inclusion, contributing to the climate neutrality, the sustainable management of natural resources, as well as to acquire new skills and develop innovation and entrepreneurial capacity.

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