



Farming with care: the evolution of care farming in the Netherlands



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe and understand the evolution of the care farming sector in one of its pioneering countries, the Netherlands. Care farms combine agricultural production with health and social services. Care farming is a phenomenon that faces specific challenges associated with connecting two different domains. Organizational ecology, social movement theory and the multi-level perspective are helpful concepts in interpreting and contextualizing the developments that have taken place. Organizational ecology explains how the number of care farms, and the legitimacy and diversity of the care farming sector, have increased rapidly over time. Strategic actions of dedicated boundary spanners have played an important role in the development of the sector. Social movement theory explains the impact of collaborative action in the pioneering and later stages. The multi-level perspective explains changes in the care regime, like the introduction of the personal budget of patients and the liberalization of the Dutch health care sector, helping to provide access of foundations of care farms to the collective health insurance for the costs of long-term care. Media exposure, contacts with ministries and politicians and the development of a quality system have contributed to the legitimacy of the sector. Changes in the care regime and collective action promoted a further expansion of the sector and provided direction to the ways the sector developed qualitatively, especially in terms of the emergence of structures aimed at facilitating existing and promoting new care farming practices. Our framework sheds light on changes in agriculture and transsectoral collaboration.

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1. Introduction

European agriculture has undergone significant changes in the past century. Due to economies of scale and in order to remain economically profitable, farmers increased farm size, efficiency and external inputs, while minimizing labor use per hectare. Environmental problems, homogenization of the landscape, outbreaks of contagious animal diseases and reduced animal welfare resulted in a poor image of the agricultural sector [1]. The growing concern for nature conservation and environment and the increasing competition from new functions such as housing and recreation put pressure on the sector [2,3]. Increasing pressure on the agricultural sector and changing demands from society changed the focus of an increasing number of farmers in the Netherlands. It generated an increasing interest in innovative practices such as environmental co-operatives, organic farming and multi-functional agriculture [4–6]. Multifunctional agriculture integrates new activities around

the core of agricultural production [1,7]. Various case studies have analysed diversification activities, such as recreation, food processing/direct marketing and agroforestry [8,9]. In this study, we describe and analyse the development of the care farming sector in the Netherlands. Care farming is an interesting example of multifunctional agriculture that faces the challenge of connecting and bridging two different domains, namely agriculture and health care. In pre-industrial society, agriculture and health care were closely linked to local and small-scale communities, but the two sectors drifted apart with the emergence of modern society. From the 1990s onwards, the agricultural sector has been increasingly involved in the offering of health care and social services to different patient groups [10]. Also, health care professionals and organizations began to approach farmers to offer all kinds of services to people with a mental illness, intellectual disabilities, elderly persons, children, drug addicts, and long-term unemployed persons.

As such, care farming is an example of multifunctional agriculture that has received little scientific attention so far. Care farms combine agricultural production with health and social services. They offer day care, assisted workplaces and/or residential places for clients with a variety of disabilities [11]. Care farms can be considered examples of innovative community-based service

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providers that can improve people's quality of life [12]. The combination of a personal and dedicated attitude on the part of the farmer, often assisted by the farmer's wife, the carrying out of useful activities, and an informal and open setting within a green environment turn care farms into an appealing facility for various client groups [12]. The perceived benefits of care farms are improved physical, mental and social well-being. The mental health benefits consist of improved self-esteem and well-being, and an improved disposition. Examples of social benefits are independence, the formation of work habits and the development of personal responsibility and social skills [13].

While care farming has now been adopted by a multitude of other European countries [10], the focus in this article is on the Netherlands, one of its pioneering countries [11]. The number of care farms in the Netherlands has increased rapidly, from 75 in 1998 to more than 1000 in 2009 (www.landbouwzorg.nl). In 2005, the sector catered to 10,000 clients in the Netherlands, with average annual revenues of € 73 000 per farm [14]. Although care farming is seen as a successful and innovative sector [10,11], various weaknesses and challenges were identified. The main challenges included: bridging the gap between the agricultural and care sector, developing professional organizations of care farmers and creating sustainable financing structures [15].

Understanding structural change and innovation is the centre of many studies focusing on rural communities and the role of agriculture in recent decades [16,17]. Burton and Wilson [18] argue that, in mapping and analysing changes in agricultural regimes, the focus has largely been on exogenous factors. They suggest incorporating the structure-agency concepts into theorisations of agricultural change. Wolf [16] argued that development of new professional structures are important for agricultural innovation. Previous studies dealing with innovative practices in the Netherlands like organic farming and environmental co-operatives have focussed on their development and challenges [5,6], rather than contributing to a better understanding of agricultural change.

The aim of this paper is to describe and understand the development of the care farming sector in the Netherlands and contribute to the discussion on how to understand agricultural change [18]. Studying the development of the care farming sector can increase our understanding of agricultural change. Like other examples of diversification (e.g. recreation, education) it faces the challenge of connecting and bridging agriculture with another sector. Challenges associated with connecting two different sectors have not received much attention so far. We focus on describing and understanding changes in the number and diversity of care farms, organizational structures and interaction with the environment. In this paper, we describe the endogenous development of the sector by zooming in on the organizations that have played a role in shaping it, the development and role of new organizational structures and the key events and turning points in the emergence and early growth of this new sector. Due to the fact that this is the first attempt at describing the developments in this new sector, it is an exploratory study. Before outlining our methods for the acquisition, analysis and integration of data, we discuss selected theories that may help us understand the development of this new sector.

Previous studies identified legitimacy, knowledge development, agency-structure interactions and collective action as important issues in understanding the development of innovative practices [5,6,19]. So as to identify an overarching theory, we seek to integrate three theories that each comprise and interrelate several of these issues. **Organizational ecology** may help gain insight in the development of a *sector*, as described by the evolution of organizational populations. It emphasizes the need for legitimization and knowledge development during the emergence and evolution of a new industry and sector. **Social movement** theory identifies the importance of collective action and its role in developing influence.

Transition studies, and in particular the multi-level perspective, captures the essence of agency and structure shaping each other and acknowledges the need for boundary spanning and strategic agency. It adds insight on the impact of regimes in the care and agricultural sectors. Thus far, these three different theories have not been connected.

2. Theoretical framework

The theories we have selected to help us understand the development of the care farming sector are: a) organizational ecology, b) social movement theory and c) multi-level perspective.

2.1. Organizational ecology

Ecological theories are concerned with the birth, growth and transformation of firms and industries, or communities of organizations, or formulated more specifically how populations of organizations change over time through demographic processes of selective replacement, organizational founding, mortality and growth [20]. Key elements in their conceptual frameworks are blind and intended variation and experimentation processes by (populations) of organisations, selection and competition in the environment, and retention and institutionalization processes over time [21]. Also the concepts of entry mode and survival are relevant for understanding the ecological approach to organizations. Firms can enter an industry as new ventures, so-called *de novo* firms, or as existing organizations diversifying away from another industry, in the case of *de alio* firms [20]. While some of the firms succeed and grow, roughly half of these firms do not succeed and willingly or unwillingly exit the industry they entered a couple years before. So smaller and younger organizations, facing the liabilities of newness and smallness, usually do not survive and die young.

Founders of ventures in a new population are operating in a situation with few if any precedents. While operating under conditions of ignorance and uncertainty these entrepreneurs must learn about new markets and develop the organizational knowledge and the external legitimacy to exploit them. They must seize a new market, learn new skills and tricks, raise capital from sceptical investors, recruit untrained employees, and cope with other difficulties stemming from their embryonic status. New organizations must also establish ties with an environment that might not understand or acknowledge their existence. Aldrich and Fiol [22] draw a distinction between cognitive and socio-political legitimacy. Acceptance of a new kind of organization or sector by the environment is referred to as cognitive legitimacy. To overcome this legitimacy barrier, network actors must inform the larger community and establish partnerships to create a wider understanding of the new concept or approach. Socio-political legitimacy refers to the extent to which key stakeholders accept the sector as proper and conforming to accepted rules and standards. An important obstacle for new organizational communities is the lack of effective organizational knowledge [23]. New organizations must discover effective routines and competences under conditions of ignorance and uncertainty. They must also establish ties with an environment that may not understand or acknowledge their existence. Pioneering ventures in new populations also face the problem of collective agreement on standards and designs that turns the population into reality that is taken for granted. Without accepted standards and designs, population boundaries will be ambiguous and organizational knowledge fleeting. Failure to agree on common standards leaves a new population vulnerable to illegal and unethical acts by some of its members and may jeopardize the legitimacy of the entire population [23].

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