



The development of social farming in Italy: A qualitative inquiry across four regions



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ABSTRACT

In Italy, social farming (SF) did not develop homogeneously across the national territory. In this context, actors with SF aspirations may benefit from knowledge of the factors that fostered the development of SF in the areas in which it showed more remarkable progress. This study adopted a multi-level perspective in order to understand how SF developed in Italy, and to examine its evolution across regions at different stages of development. In order to achieve such aim, a literature study about the development of SF in Italy was carried out, and was followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with 29 stakeholders coming from four Italian regions (Tuscany, Latium, Abruzzo and Molise).

The findings indicate SF practices at the niches level managed to establish connections with the regime as positive results emerged, networks and support organizations were set up, universities became interested in SF, and policymakers started recognizing and funding SF. The different degrees of support coming from the public sector, SF and agricultural organizations, universities, and policymakers, contributed to the differences between the SF practices in the four regions under study. In particular, in the southernmost regions, several SF's stakeholders showed less entrepreneurial skills, while the public authorities tended to have less knowledge about SF, and sometimes diffidence towards it.

In conclusion, some recommendations to foster the development of SF are to make SF practices' success visible, to cultivate entrepreneurial skills, and to build and support networks between actors with different backgrounds, thus facilitating knowledge exchange.

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1. Introduction

Social farming (SF) is the use of farming activities as a means to provide health, social or educational benefits to a wide range of people (Hine et al., 2008). In Europe, the first SF activities date back to the 1960s, but the development of SF took different paths as a consequence of cultural, social, health, and educational differences between countries (Di Iacovo and O'Connor, 2009); therefore, the development of SF has been studied in several countries (Hassink and Van Dijk, 2006). There are two main models of SF in Europe: the Northern European specialized model of SF, and the Mediterranean Communitarian model of Social Farming (Di Iacovo et al., 2014). The Netherlands, for instance, is a pioneer in the SF sector (where it is referred to as *zorglandbouw*, meaning "care farming"),

which started as a result of the initiative of both entrepreneurial farmers and health care professionals, and further developed thanks to the support of ministries and of national and regional organizations (Hassink et al., 2014). However, SF is at different stages of development across European countries. According to Wilcox (2007), SF spread in Europe in spite of a policy, and not because of it. Di Iacovo and O'Connor (2009) recognized four stages of development of SF, namely (1) the pioneering stage, (2) multi-functional agriculture, (3) SF as a recognized system in social/health care, and (4) SF as an inclusive model. These stages constitute a framework that can be used to compare the development of SF in different countries (O'Connor et al., 2010). However, SF practices in Europe do not only differ based on their developmental stage, but also on other characteristics; for example, they can be organized by the third sector (e.g., Italy and France), the private sector (e.g., Belgium) or be institutionalized (e.g., Germany); Social farms can also be family-based (e.g., the Netherlands), community-based (Italy, Ireland), and professionally-based (Germany). Finally, the proportion of care/education and agricultural activities also varies

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across SF practices (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009).

In Italy, SF has a social inclusive potential, and is mainly labor-oriented (Di Iacovo and O'Connor, 2009); Italian policymakers emphasized that SF includes only those practices in which the use of nature is production-oriented (Italian Chamber of Deputies, 2012). It developed very differently across Italian regions, and this resulted in a heterogeneous situation in which some areas are more developed than others (Di Iacovo et al., 2006).

2. Theoretical Framework

The multi-level perspective (MLP) is a useful framework to understand the development of SF, as SF bridges the sectors of agriculture and social/health care, hence bringing about hybrid practices that move away from both sectors and create a new sector as a result (Hassink et al., 2014). According to the MLP, SF can be analyzed at three levels: socio-technical landscape (macro level), socio-technical regime (meso level) and niches (micro level) (Geels, 2002).

Within the level of niches, radical innovations take place. Niches are defined as “protected spaces” where actors work on innovations that deviate from existing regimes (Kemp et al., 1998; Schot, 1998; Geels, 2011). In the case of SF in the Netherlands, for example, pioneers opposing conventional agriculture and/or conventional health care initially operated at the niche level (Hassink et al., 2014). Niches are characterized by little stability and much uncertainty, but they provide space for learning processes and for building supportive social networks (Geels, 2005). However, it is not easy to connect niche-innovations with the existing regime, not only because the regime is already relatively stable, but also because niche-innovations may present a mismatch with the current regime elements; therefore, empowering niches becomes an important step of transition management, as “an empowered niche may cluster with other empowered niches and emerge into a niche regime” (Rotmans and Loorbach, 2009). Furthermore, as networks become larger and the legitimacy of the innovation grows, the pressure on the regime increases, and a window of opportunity for niche-innovations might open (Geels, 2011). With respect to the legitimacy of an innovation, two types are distinguished: institutional legitimacy is achieved when newcomers comply with particular field-specific assumptions about how a participant in that field is expected to look and behave, while innovative legitimacy is granted when newcomers challenge the field's current order and bring something new to the field (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009).

The socio-technical regime accounts for systems' stability, and determines the set of rules that orient and coordinate the activities of the social groups. Geels (2011) gives some examples of regime rules, such as cognitive routines and shared beliefs, lifestyles, and institutional regulations. Regimes are stabilized by various elements, such as social relationships, the interests of existing organizations, and the inhibition of innovations enacted by powerful actors. Thus, innovations at the regime level usually occur gradually (Geels, 2005).

Finally, the socio-technical landscape represents the exogenous environment that influences the niches and the regime's dynamics; it evolves slowly, is not directly influenced by regime actors, and includes demographical trends, political ideologies, societal values, and macro-economic patterns, which form an external context that changes slowly (Geels, 2005, 2011). In the Netherlands, for instance, changes at the landscape level (e.g., the focus on empowerment and on liberalization and socialization of care, as well as the increasing pressures on the agricultural sector) contributed to the development of SF by fostering changes at the regime level, such as

the creation of support organizations and of new funding systems (Hassink et al., 2014). The MLP was found to be helpful to interpret and better understand the development of the SF sector in the Netherlands (Hassink et al., 2013, 2014). Developing legitimacy, coping with conflicting regime elements (like lack of access to financing), creation of new supportive regime elements, and connecting niche innovations with the existing regime were identified as the main challenges for Dutch actors in the development of the SF sector (Hassink et al., 2013, 2014). Previous studies have also shown the importance of entrepreneurship, social action, and dedicated and influential boundary spanners that can link different sectors (Aarts et al., 2007; Hassink et al., 2014). Therefore, it may be expected that similar challenges are also prominent in the Italian situation. Moreover, the rationale behind the adoption of a MLP also lays in its suitability for the analysis of the dynamics that occur at different institutional levels; with this respect, transition management (TM) has also provided useful insights in the field of social innovation in Italian rural areas; in particular, TM is inspired by research on socio-technical transitions, and acknowledges the MLP's multi-level context, while also recognizing the impact of political negotiations on socio-technical change (Voß and Bornemann, 2011). The political dimension is indeed particularly important in the case of Italy, since the Italian countryside is facing increasingly complex challenges (economic difficulties, the State welfare crisis, and climate change among others), and hosts a variety of local political cultures and actors (Di Iacovo et al., 2014). Therefore, the analysis of socio-technical transitions through a MLP would also allow for the study of the political dynamics through which SF processes unfold.

At present, there is a scarcity of qualitative studies exploring SF in Italy through a MLP; however, such design has already been successfully adopted in research that identified the factors that influenced the development of SF in other countries (Hassink et al., 2014). Therefore, the aim of this study is to understand the development of SF in Italy through a multi-level perspective, and to compare SF practices across regions so as to examine their similarities and differences. As a result, some recommendations to further develop the SF sector in Italy are listed.

3. Methodology

This research involved SF stakeholders coming from four regions. The regions of Tuscany, Latium, Abruzzo and Molise were selected because, although they all present a strong rural character, SF practices across such regions were expected to show several differences. Such expectation was the result of a literature study and of the advice of Italian researchers and experts in the SF field. In particular, the SF sector was considered to have developed more in certain areas of Tuscany and Latium, and less in Abruzzo and Molise. The exploration of any differences and similarities both within and between regions, could therefore shed light on which factors hindered or contributed to the development of SF in such places. Practicalities (e.g., the regions' locations, the research group's connections with Italian stakeholders, and the study's time frame) were also considered. Then, data were collected through a literature review and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews took place in Italy between April and May 2016, and the study sample included 29 participants recruited through purposive sampling. The interviewees' backgrounds were varied, and included farmers, social workers, members of SF organizations, researchers, and policy advisors. The choice of such groups was guided by the relevance that they had in the development of SF in Italy. A list of the interviewees is provided in Table 1.

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