



Investigating the limits of multifunctional agriculture as the dominant frame for Green Care in agriculture in Flanders and the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

European agriculture and rural areas are facing multiple socio-economic changes, including a transition from an agriculture-based to a service-based economy. This restructuring forces agricultural and rural actor-networks to reformulate their (self-)definitions. One reformulation prevailing both in policy and scientific circles focuses on the notion of multifunctional agriculture (MFA). This paper critically examines the dominant role that this notion has played in legitimising and shaping the pathways of rural development now present in Europe. More specifically, we examine MFA's role in promoting and organising Green Care as an innovative agricultural activity in the Netherlands and in Flanders (Belgium). We will demonstrate that the MFA frame does not sufficiently grasp the complex reality of Green Care developments. More importantly, the dominance of the MFA frame and related practices and institutional structures enable as well as constrain Green Care's continuity and further development.

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1. Introduction

Rural Europe is facing processes of fundamental social change. This 'rural restructuring' (Floysand and Jakobsen, 2007: 208) involves a shift from a rural, agriculture- and manufacturing-based economy towards a more service-centred economy, and a related commoditisation of the countryside as a predominantly residential and recreational area (Woods, 2005). In other words, European countrysides are evolving from being 'landscapes of production' to 'landscapes of consumption' (Cloke, 2006: 19). This evolution is caused and accompanied by manifold socio-cultural processes (Risgaard et al., 2007), such as the increasing mobility and connectivity of goods and services, people and knowledge between different regions, including rural as well as urban areas (Marsden, 2007; Hedberg and do Carmo, 2012); the aging populations and a resulting upward pressure on public spending, particularly for health and welfare provisions (Carone and Costello, 2006); and a trend of healthier living reflected in the 'wellness' phenomenon

(Lawrence and Burch, 2010), a positive term associated with vitality, fitness and well-being that relates (amongst others) to the individuals' strong desire to take control of their (future) health.

The interplay of these socio-cultural processes creates a fertile breeding ground for initiatives/activities that combine the common interests of the health and welfare sector as well as the agricultural and food sector in fulfilling the citizens' desire for 'clean and green' foods and services, including stress management and new leisure activities (Lawrence and Burch, 2010). In this connection, an increasingly important activity is Green Care, an umbrella term for a broad spectrum of health-promoting interventions that use biotic and abiotic elements of nature to maintain or promote a person's social, physical, mental, and educational well-being (Haubenhofer et al., 2010). When Green Care occurs in the context of farming activities, we talk about Green Care in Agriculture (GCA), that has been defined as 'the utilisation of agricultural farms – the animals, the plants, the garden, the forest, and the landscape – as a base for promoting human mental and physical health, as well as quality of life, for a variety of client groups' (Memorandum of Understanding of COST866 Green Care in Agriculture, in Dessein and Bock, 2010:11). Starting from this basic definition, research has revealed a wide variety of GCA practices throughout Europe (Dessein, 2008; Di Iacovo and O'Connor, 2009; Sempik et al., 2010). These practices involve different social groups (elderly people, mentally disabled people, former prisoners, youth), various

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farming contexts (intensive and extensive farming, different sectors, professional farms or institutional farms, hospital gardens), and have different objectives (therapy, prevention, health care, rehabilitation). This variety in GCA also becomes evident when considering the different umbrella concepts that are used to describe GCA phenomena (such as Green Care, Social Farming, Care Farming, or Farming for Health), and related types of farms (such as institutional farm, care farm, ordinary farm, *Werkstätte* or social co-operative). More than a mere semantic variation, this glossary of terms designates the representation and organisation of distinct practices.

The development of GCA is one of those processes of rural development that are “essentially about revitalizing and strengthening the rural. [...] Rural development aims to reposition the rural within the wider society, by making the rural more attractive, more accessible, more valuable and more useful for society as a whole” (Van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2009: 3). During the past several decades, the several rounds of CAP reforms have gradually broadened rural development policies (Shortall, 2004); from supporting rural development by supporting agriculture-related practices, to giving more attention and financial support to improving the environment and the countryside (pillar 2) and the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification of the rural economy (pillar 3).

In the course of this evolution, Multifunctional Agriculture (MFA) has gained particular prominence as a new agenda for rural development (Niska et al., 2012; Erjavec et al., 2009). MFA refers to the many functions that agriculture does (could and should) fulfil for societies, which go well beyond the cheap production of food and fibre, such as the management and maintenance of natural resources, landscapes and biodiversity (Potter and Tilzey, 2005). It should also contribute to the socio-economic viability of rural areas by creating employment and enhancing the attraction of rural areas for tourists and other users of rural services (Renting et al., 2009). The approaches within the MFA paradigm are diverse (Renting et al., 2009), but they all consider agriculture to be the main driver of rural development, once its multifunctional potential is recognised and put to work. They all share the assumption that farmers are willing to accept multiple responsibilities; that they will reconsider their singular orientation towards primary production and profit maximisation, and instead will diversify the agricultural economy; will build new cross-sectoral alliances; and will adopt more socially responsible modes of production and marketing.

The objective of this paper is to critically examine the role of the MFA agenda in defining and legitimising particular rural development pathways in Europe. For this end, we investigate the case of Green Care in Agriculture (GCA), as GCA is time and again referred to as an element of the ‘multifunctional turn’ and as typical example of the new activities and services on a growing number of farms that are developing in various ways throughout Europe (eg. Di Iacovo and O'Connor, 2009; Van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2009; Wiskerke, 2009). More specifically, we question the assumption that MFA sufficiently explains the development of GCA throughout Europe. As we will demonstrate, the ‘narratives’ told about Green Care vary across countries, reflecting different historical pathways, interpretations and practices, as well as different forms of legislative and financial institutionalisation. GCA may, hence, mean different things in different countries, with a variable embeddedness in rural development and MFA. This article explores this variation in frames of meaning and discusses their significance for the future development of GCA.

After a methodological and scene setting section (paragraph 2), we present three different frames used to describe and explain the development of Green Care in Agriculture throughout Europe

(paragraph 3). Subsequently, we elaborate upon the cases of GCA in Flanders and the Netherlands, and question the relative position of the three frames presented and their implications for the legislative and financial institutional development of GCA to date (paragraph 4). We then reflect on the consequences that these framings could have on the future development pathways of GCA in particular (paragraph 5), and draw some final conclusions (paragraph 6).

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

The research starts with an analysis of the different GCA frames throughout Europe. The concept of framing has been introduced in the seminal work of Goffman (1974) and has ever since influenced the analysis of discourses (Scheufele, 1999). Our use of the frame-concept is inspired by the work of Arts and Buizer (2009). Arts and Buizer (2009: 342) describe ‘frames of meaning’ (which they also call ‘discourses as frames’) as frames of reference, existing ‘in the minds of people, and in the social networks of which they are part. It is based on their experiences and history, of which they may be aware or unaware, but which in either circumstance influences how they speak and act’ (Arts and Buizer, 2009: 342, our emphasis). Hence, these frames give meaning to social and physical phenomena, and are produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices (Hajer, 2006).

Frames are competing interpretations and, as such, like discourses under contestation and unstable (Arts and Buizer, 2009). Unravelling their difference and predominance unveils the political nature of the social construction and transformation of social phenomena (Fairclough, 2005). Our aim is similar: by unravelling the occurrence of different and competing interpretations of GCA, we want to contest the seemingly univocal interpretation of GCA within multi-functionality, and discuss the possibility of different development pathways. In analysing the occurrence of different GCA frames we study narratives and their interaction with actions and (institutional) practices (Arts and Buizer, 2009). We are inspired by Bevir's (2006) interpretative analysis of narratives that explains practices and actions through their reflexive interaction with actors' interpretations of the world.

Based on data and insights from groups of experts and practitioners, gathered during the year-long involvement of the authors in international networks dealing with GCA –both academic networks such as ‘COST866-Green Care in Agriculture’ (Dessein and Bock, 2010; Sempik et al., 2010) and the FP6-funded project ‘Social Services in Multifunctional Farms’ (Di Iacovo and O'Connor, 2009), and the more practice oriented ‘Community of Practice Farming for Health’ (Hassink and van Dijk, 2006; Dessein 2008), three frames were outlined. These were triangulated, adapted and refined during three consecutive rounds of feed-back and discussion with international experts (in Modena and Antalya in 2009 and in Witzenhausen in 2010).

To understand how these frames are constituted in and are constitutive of practices of GCA with a focus on institutionalisation and financial structuring, we used an explanatory, multiple-case (holistic) research design (Yin, 2009). We made use of multiple sources of evidence such as observations in project meetings of the aforementioned international networks, regional and national umbrella organisations and non-profit organisations operating in Green Care; field visits; regular updates from key persons; scientific literature; legislative texts; policy documents and grey literature that were considered as key documents in the history of social farming. The data were collected in the period 2009–2011. These sources of evidence were complemented in Flanders with a series of 21 semi-structured qualitative interviews with actors involved in

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