

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Social farming: green care and social and health policies’ (own-initiative opinion)

(2013/C 44/07)

Rapporteur: **Ms WILLEMS**

On 19 January 2012, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion on

Social farming: green care and social and health policies.

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 22 November 2012.

At its 485th plenary session, held on 12 and 13 December 2012 (meeting of 12 December), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 124 votes with 3 abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 Social farming is an innovative approach that brings together two concepts: multipurpose farming and social services/health care at local level. It makes a contribution in the ambit of agricultural production to the well-being and the social integration of people with particular needs. The EESC has been prompted to draw up an own-initiative opinion on the matter by the substantial expansion in social farming.

1.2 Social farming has spread throughout Europe in a variety of guises that have some similarities but also numerous differences in terms of approach, how they relate to other sectors, and funding.

1.3 Nevertheless, a definition is needed at European level in order to identify the activities that comprise it and to define a framework and criteria – including quality criteria – that these activities must meet in order to benefit from support under the various policies. However, this definition must not be too narrow so as not to set in stone a situation that is constantly evolving.

1.4 Since there is no EU or national regulatory framework for social farming, there is a lack of coordination between the various policies or institutions concerned. The EESC believes that the EU institutions and national and regional authorities and institutions should encourage and support social farming by putting in place an appropriate and conducive regulatory framework and implementing the measures set out below.

1.5 Available statistics on social farming are few and partial. The EESC thinks it would be useful, therefore, to launch a programme of statistical research in order to quantify and analyse in greater depth its presence and the forms it takes in

the Member States. The resultant database could be extended to promote research programmes in all the Member States.

1.6 Social farming must be underpinned by interdisciplinary research in different spheres in order to validate empirical results, analyse its impact and benefits from different perspectives (social, economic, health, individual, etc.) and ensure the dissemination of experience on the ground. To this end, it would be expedient to promote and develop the cooperation efforts initiated at European level by the SoFar and COST Action projects in the next Horizon 2020 framework programme (2014-2020).

1.7 The EESC also considers it crucial to put in place and bolster social farming networks in order to share lessons learned, pool experience and raise awareness. Also desirable are a joint representation of social farming interests at the political level and the establishment of an umbrella organisation at European level. This would reinforce both exchanges between those involved and the role of civil society organisations.

1.8 In addition, particular attention should be devoted to the training of those involved – those with particular needs and benefiting from these services as well as service providers – in order to ensure a high level of quality and skills in social farming operations.

1.9 If it is to become entrenched throughout Europe, social farming needs a conducive environment, greater civil society involvement and fruitful collaboration between different policy areas and administrations (health/social affairs, farming, employment) at European, national, regional and local levels. This means that it should be recognised and provided with targeted support by public authorities to give it sustained access to funding for various aspects of this type of farming.

1.10 Equally, it could be useful for the European Commission to erect a permanent system bringing together all the directorates-general concerned. The Member States could make similar arrangements. The Commission should also encourage a comparative study to be carried out of the social protection systems – and how much they cost – in the Member States in order to boost any savings that could be made through social farming projects.

1.11 The EESC is very pleased to note that the Commission's proposals for the 2014-2020 period open up new avenues for social farming. Nevertheless, it would still seem to need better support in the future programming period. To this end, the EU and the Member States should coordinate recourse to the different policies relevant to social farming. The EESC thinks that the Member States and the various authorities (national and EU) tasked with and responsible for the management of EU funds should work more closely together in order to remove barriers to access to structural funds and to facilitate this access for those in the front line.

1.12 The Common Strategic Framework makes it possible to combine funds as a part of a multiple financing strategy. In this connection, the Commission should call on the Member States to refer to social farming in their planning and to take an integrated approach in designing particular programmes that enable the sector to benefit more from the various structural funds. Another possibility would be to conceive thematic sub-programmes devoted to social farming or to support Leader projects in this sphere.

2. General comments

2.1 Almost all of Europe's rural areas have experienced the development of social farming since the end of the last century as a new, economically sustainable practice and experience with it is constantly expanding. While social farming is the umbrella term for these activities, the expressions 'farming for health', 'care farming', 'green care' and 'green therapies' are also used. Each of these refers to different practices or operations in the care, social reintegration, training and rehabilitation of the disadvantaged or the training of people with particular needs. These activities enable those in difficulty to re-establish contact with productive activity and the natural environment and contribute to their well-being, improved health and social inclusion; they facilitate learning and boost self-esteem and hence participation in the life of society.

In this sense, social farming is an innovative approach that brings together two concepts: multipurpose farming and social services/health care at local level. On the one hand, it ties in closely with the multipurpose nature of farming and is part and parcel of the concept of rural development, giving farmers the opportunity to diversify their sources of income. On the other hand, it benefits society by delivering social services and improving existing services for those living in

rural areas by drawing on agricultural and rural resources in the broadest sense.

2.2 Although social farming practices in Europe share similarities in being closely related to traditional rural economy activities and taking place on the farm (organic farms, labour-intensive farms, high degree of multifunctionality, local outreach, diversification and increased flexibility), there are also many differences between countries given their history, approaches and focus. Although approaches vary, there are essentially three main ones:

- an institutional approach, with the prevalence of public/health institutions (the main approach in Germany, France, Ireland and Slovenia)
- a private approach based on therapeutic farms (the main approach in the Netherlands and Flanders in Belgium)
- a mixed approach based on social cooperatives and private farms (the main approach in Italy).

2.3 Their focus is also different: in Italy and France, social farming is mostly connected with the social and healthcare sector; in the Netherlands it is closer to the health system; in Flanders it is nearer to agriculture and in Germany, Great Britain, Ireland and Slovenia it lies somewhere between the social/health and health sectors.

2.4 Financing patterns differ from country to country:

- public projects and charity based on voluntary associations (Italy and France) and social cooperatives (Italy)
- public funds (health/care/education sectors) directed to public bodies (Germany, Ireland and Slovenia), farms (Netherlands) and social cooperatives (Italy)
- rural development policies to support the launch and development of social farms in the 2007-2013 programming period (Italy)
- direct access to food markets for ethical products and direct selling (France and Italy).

In reality, however, funding methods are often more diverse and mixed.

2.5 Social farming can take a number of forms. It may involve privately run farm businesses for which it provides an alternative source of income while still producing for the market; it may also involve social enterprises or cooperatives, associations and foundations – i.e., non-profit organisations. In other instances social farming – while taking place on farms – is carried out by public bodies or agencies in the health sector.

3. Definition of social farming

3.1 Social farming includes a broad range of different practices and so is not easy to define. Nevertheless, a definition is needed at European level in order to identify the operations that comprise it and to define a framework and criteria – including quality criteria – that these must meet in order to benefit from support under the various policies. However, this definition must not be too narrow so as not to set in stone a situation that is constantly evolving. It must instead supply a framework that maintains the flexibility needed to encompass social farming's multitude of activities and bottom-up approach.

3.2 Even though social farming comprises a very wide range of activities, they always have two elements in common: a) the activities take place on a farm and b) they are designed for people who – either temporarily or permanently – have specific needs, including educational needs. As a result, social farming contributes to the well-being of individuals and helps them thrive, but it also contributes to the development of rural regions and better interaction between town and country.

3.3 Social farming could thus be provisionally defined as a cluster of activities that use agricultural resources – both animal and plant – to generate social services in rural or semi-rural areas, such as rehabilitation, therapy, sheltered jobs, lifelong learning and other activities contributing to social integration (according to the definition used in COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Action 866 – Green Care). In this sense, it is about – among other things – making farms places where people with particular needs can take part in daily farming routines as a way of furthering their development, making progress and improving their well-being.

3.4 There are currently four main areas of social farming:

- a) rehabilitation and therapeutic activities
- b) work inclusion and social integration
- c) education activities

d) personal support services.

4. Lack of legal framework at EU and national level

4.1 Through therapy, work and social inclusion, or education, social farming undoubtedly delivers high-value public services and contributes to sustainable development. Moreover, by virtue of the diversification of activities that it generates and the underlying dynamic, it can have a sizeable impact on local development.

4.2 Many instances of social farming have come about through a bottom-up process, creating local networks that enable a global development of geographical areas. This is why social farming is in line with the OECD's 'New Rural Paradigm' publication (2006) and explicitly mentioned in the 'Rural Policy Reviews' concerning the OECD countries (such as Italy). It was also examined at the OECD Rural Development Conference in Quebec (2009). It is worth pointing out here that some social farming initiatives are funded by 2007-2013 rural development policies (Axes III and IV of the Leader programme) and Social Fund social inclusion measures.

4.3 Awareness of the potential of social farming is growing at every level and farmer organisations, local communities, and health and social institutions are taking a fresh look at it. However, only certain countries (France, Italy and the Netherlands) have put sector regulations in place, either at the national or regional level. Moreover, the absence of any linkage between the various policies and/or institutions involved in social farming is evident everywhere.

Nevertheless, its practitioners are beginning to band together to pool experience and the crucial role of spontaneous networks of social farmers has to be recognised.

4.4 In recent years, the European Commission has launched a number of initiatives – such as COST Action 866 – Green Care and the SoFar project (an initiative funded by the European Commission within the Sixth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development) – to support these activities; an initiative launched in December 2009 within the European Network for Rural Development brought together seven Member States to examine the opportunities and obstacles in national and regional rural development plans cofunded by the EAFRD. A position paper on social farming was drafted by Germany (Prof. Thomas VAN ELSSEN) in 2008 as part of the SoFar project and updated in 2009.

5. Action to be taken

5.1 *Recognition of social farming at EU level and establishment of a regulatory framework*

5.1.1 In view of the public goods that it produces and its contribution to sustainable development, social farming should be encouraged and supported by the EU institutions and by governments. This includes putting in place an appropriate and conducive regulatory framework at the different levels, recognising social farming's added value and improving its governance, as well as establishing a conducive environment and fruitful cooperation between different policy areas and administrations (health/social/farming/employment) at European, national, regional and local level. Targeted support from public authorities and an integrated deployment of structural funds to underpin social farming are also desirable, as are the promotion and support of interdisciplinary research and the bolstering of communication and exchange of experience.

5.1.2 In putting in place a regulatory framework, particular attention should be devoted to the quality of social farming and setting out general criteria, including quality criteria, that operations must meet. Likewise, the necessary measures should be put in place to ensure appropriate monitoring of social farming operations.

5.1.3 In addition, a permanent organisational structure, created by the European Commission and involving all the relevant directorates-general, could be useful in encouraging, monitoring and coordinating the development of social farming in Europe. Similar arrangements could be put in place in the Member States.

5.2 *Creation of a database at EU level*

Although the number of social farms is increasing in every country, they generally account for less than 1% of all farm businesses. Nevertheless, available statistics on social farming are fragmentary and scarce. It would be expedient, therefore, to launch a programme of statistical research at European level in order to quantify and more closely analyse the presence of social farming in Europe and the forms it takes. The Commission could extend this database to promote research programmes in each Member State.

5.3 *Encouraging the inclusion of social farming in research programmes*

5.3.1 The cooperation at European level begun by SoFar and the COST Action 866 – Green Care project in farming should be promoted and developed. The production and exchange of scientific, professional and practical data across Europe is very important.

Social farming needs the support of more detailed research in the areas of therapy and medicine, in social work in farming and in farming and training. This research must closely engage

with work on the ground. Positive empirical results obtained in therapies with plants and animals must be validated by rigorous scientific analyses in order to secure acknowledgement from the medical community. Lessons drawn from experience regarding the efficacy of integration of people in the daily and yearly routine of work on the farm must be documented and fed into further developments in social farming.

5.3.2 Interdisciplinary research that analyses the impact and the benefits of social farming from various perspectives (social, economic, health, individual, etc.), ensures the transfer of knowledge gained from experience and involves people on the ground can generate innovative ideas and reinforce their entrenchment in social farming. Scientific support for pilot projects can facilitate the extension of models based on individual businesses or cooperatives across a whole region. Interdisciplinary studies and research should be embarked upon to analyse the impact of social farming in terms of possible savings for health insurance schemes and improvement to the health and well-being of recipients of its services. Some countries, including the Netherlands, have already conducted studies into these aspects.

5.3.3 This research could take place within the Horizon 2020 (2014-2020) framework programme, since this takes on board the social facets of research and innovation. Horizon 2020 support and coordination for social farming is highly desirable, since the programme could facilitate meetings and communication between researchers in various disciplines related to this kind of farming.

5.4 *Encouraging the inclusion of social farming in education programmes*

Particular attention should be devoted to the training of those involved – recipients as well as service providers – in order to ensure a high level of quality and skills in social farming operations. It would make sense, therefore, to design and make available continuing education programmes – in close collaboration with teaching and research institutions – to provide a high level of skills to the heads of undertakings and their staff responsible for social farming beneficiaries. It would also be expedient to examine and put in place the sort of training that could be given to these beneficiaries.

5.5 *Strengthening the role of civil society and the building up of networks*

5.5.1 Innovative projects in social farming are often developed in isolation, without any awareness of – or swapping of experience with – similar projects. It is vital, however, to put in place and strengthen social farming networks so they can pool experience, help make projects known and promote best practices. A first step in this direction has been taken in the ambit of the European Network for Rural Development. This type of network should be bolstered.

5.5.2 Cooperation should similarly be promoted, as should joint publications and an internet presence.

5.5.3 It would also be good to work towards a joint representation of social farming interests at the political level and to promote the establishment of an umbrella organisation at European level. Such an organisation, which would include civil society, could make it easier for social farming practitioners to compare notes and help them both technically and administratively, while also making sure that farming interests are championed at the political level. Farming organisations have an important role to play here.

5.5.4 All of this could be planned and implemented under the new 2014-2020 rural development policy and be based in particular on the European Network for Rural Development and the Member States' rural development networks, so that the social farming initiative mentioned above would be expanded to include other Member States.

5.6 Inclusion of social farming in the sustainable development strategy and the Common Strategic Framework

5.6.1 Social farming has benefited from some support under current rural development policy, especially under Axis 3 (diversification) and Axis 4 (Leader) and under the 'social inclusion' axis of the ESF. The recognition of social farming as an element of rural economy development should enable it to benefit from all the actions promoted and funded by the European structural funds (EAFRD, ESF and ERDF) and so access new sources of financing.

5.6.2 Even if the Commission proposals for the next programming period offer a number of new prospects – in the sense that the fight against poverty, social inclusion and the diversification of farming activities are mentioned as explicit goals of this policy (and ones which can be ideally combined in social farming) –, it would still appear necessary to give social farming even more support by stressing its role in

both the future programming period and the partnership contract. To this end, the EU and the Member States should coordinate recourse to the different policies relevant to social farming. The EESC thinks that the Member States and the various authorities (national and EU) tasked with and responsible for the management of EU funds should work more closely together in order to remove barriers to access to structural funds and to facilitate this access for those in the front line.

5.6.3 In the new programming framework social farming is eligible for funding from several funds – and over several years. It is possible under the Common Strategic Framework to combine the different funds in a multiple financing strategy. Member States should be invited to refer to social farming in their programming and to draft specific programmes that will enable it to benefit more from the various structural funds. It really is crucially important, therefore, to convince national and local authorities to make the most of these possibilities.

Given its multidimensional and multipurpose nature, social farming – and those involved in it – could benefit hugely from a truly integrated approach that facilitates and better coordinates recourse to various funds and the associated procedures and measures.

5.6.4 To achieve this, it could be very useful to put in place a communications policy for the rural development sphere addressed to the Member States that could also include monitoring and reports. Another possibility would be to envisage a thematic sub-programme under Article 8 or to bolster Leader projects dealing with social farming.

5.6.5 Finally, the various directorates-general should step up their collaboration in order to give social farming easier access to all the structural funds by removing the difficulties that have so far prevented farmers from accessing regional policies.

Brussels, 12 December 2012.

*The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee*
Staffan NILSSON
