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Short Notes

Social Farming and inclusion in EU ESI Funds programming

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Abstract. EU Europe 2020 Strategy identifies fighting against poverty and marginalization as a key objective, with an attention to active inclusion in society and in the labor market of the most vulnerable groups. The paper aims at outlining the evolutionary framework of EU policies in the field of social inclusion and at analyzing the novelties introduced by the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds 2014-20. A specific focus is dedicated to social agriculture (SF) interventions, which generate social inclusion and innovation with benefits in rural and peri-urban areas and in society as a whole. It is still too early to assess the impact of RDP-funded interventions, as the investments are still ongoing. The analysis of the SF resources highlights a wide range of policy and programming choices.

Keywords: social inclusion, social farming, multifunctional agriculture, EU policies, ESI Funds, rural development.

JEL codes: O20, I31, I38, O35.

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

One of the 5 objectives of the EU Europe 2020 Strategy is fighting against poverty and marginalization, with a special attention to active inclusion of the most vulnerable groups in society and in the labour market and overcoming of discriminations and integration of people with disabilities, ethnical minorities, immigrants and other vulnerable groups. In this policy context, social farming (SF) has been explicitly pointed out in the 2014-2020 programming documents as a tool for addressing social inclusion and achieving the abovementioned goal.

Starting from a definition of SF as innovative opportunity of services delivery, able to address the need of services coming from individuals and communities, and of diversification of agricultural activity, enabling farmers both to integrate their income and broaden their role in local communities and society as a whole, in the framework of the theoretical context of multifunctionality of agriculture, we assume that the adoption at EU level of a cross-cutting approach to social inclusion policies represents a policy innovation generating social innovation. Coordination of different policies relevant to SF at EU, national and regional level has been recently recommended by

the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC).

The paper will outline, through a desk analysis, the evolutionary framework of EU policies on social inclusion and analyze both the novelties introduced by the 2014-2020 programming with reference to the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds and their implementation in Italian programming documents. In this framework, in order to better define the political framework for SF in Europe and Italy, the paper reports the results of an analysis carried out in 2016 on 2014-2020 Italian RDPs, highlighting the political choices made in the planning phase, and comparing them with the partial results emerging by calls released at June 2019 by the Italian Regions. The analysis, focusing on the EU programming in the field of social inclusion, will start with the exam of Partnership Agreement (PA) for Italy, acknowledging the intimate link between economic and social policies and defining thematic Objective 9 “Promoting social inclusion, fighting poverty and discrimination”. A specific focus will be devoted to the Italian case, with the outcomes of an analysis of 2014-2020 Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) and of a LAG experience; the latter represents a best practice in the integration of EU Funds for social inclusion. Social inclusion generated by SF expands its effects both in rural and peri-urban areas interested by SF initiatives and in society as a whole.

2. RESULTS: SOCIAL INCLUSION AND SOCIAL FARMING (SF) IN EU POLICY

2.1. Policy context and theoretical framework

Social inclusion is on the EU and Member States agenda since the 1990s, with Maastricht Treaty and the Structural Funds and the establishment of the European Observatory on policies to combat social exclusion. The historical EU approach to social inclusion is one of «cohabitation» and balance between competitiveness and social in the broad sense. Social inclusion, in the predominant sense of participation, of integration into society, is also at the base of many policies’ design: core elements of rural development policy are participation, networks, partnerships and multi-level governance. It is also very much related to the logic of cohesion at the base of EU Structural Funds (Shortall S., 2008; Shortall S., Warner M.E., 2010), now EU Structural and Investment Funds (ESI). In 2014-2020, the approach to economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU is reinforced, coherently with Europe 2020 Strategy, by setting common rules for ESI Funds, in order to better coordinate and harmonize the implementation of cohesion

policy. The EU Regulation 1303/2013 defined «Common provisions regulation» (CPR)¹, foresees the organization of partnerships for each Member State and for each Programme, in order to ensure respect for the principles of multi-level governance; these partnerships are open to all public, private and third sector components, including bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion.

The theme of social inclusion and fight against poverty is then addressed in the single Funds: ESF supports, among others, disadvantaged people, people facing poverty and social exclusion, actors in the social economy; ERDF, among other, finances social infrastructures; EAFRD focuses on social farming.

SF is a complex body of practices integrating various activities (social, care, educational, etc.) into farming and promoting, among other goals, social inclusion. SF uses agricultural farms and their components as landscape, animal, plants, as a base for promoting human mental and physical health, as well as quality of life, for a variety of client groups (Lanfranchi M. *et al.*, 2015; Scuderi A. *et al.*, 2014; Steigen A.M. *et al.*, 2016). People with disabilities, also intellectual ones, benefit from the practice of SF, becoming part of a social community, working in a farm and establishing relationships with farmers. All these aspects confirm the role played by SF in the development of relational and professional skills in adults with cognitive disorders (Torquati B. *et al.*, 2019).

SF represents an innovative, multi-actor and multidisciplinary approach to different levels (social, economic) of problems in EU territories; it can contribute to the definition and implementation of new pathways of change in rural and peri-urban areas, being an alternative way for delivering innovative and effective social services, with effects on individuals, farmers, local communities (Lanfranchi M. *et al.*, 2015).

In terms of inclusive effects, apart from «direct» inclusion towards service-users, SF can become an element of inclusive development for the whole society due to its characteristics: it uses a community-based development approach, it is based on networking and collaboration between different stakeholder groups, as farmers, disadvantaged people, social/health professionals, local communities, policy makers and administrators (Di Iacovo F., O’Connor D., 2009). The propensity for inclusive development can be found in consumers positive attitude in terms of willingness to pay a higher price for SF products. The aim is to ensure firms economic sustainability, to reinforce positive social externalities generated by agriculture, to bring advantage to the whole society (Torquati B. *et al.*, 2019).

¹ Reg. (EU) 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013.

The emergence of this phenomenon has originated a broad variety of practices and definitions: social farming, green care, care farming, farming for health, etc., involving both different type of farms (institutional/public, ordinary, care farms, etc.) and different specific target groups as youth, children, disabled, prisoners, refugees, elderly people, unemployed, but also the broad population living in rural and urban areas (Dessein J. *et al.*, 2013; Leck C. *et al.*, 2015; Scuderi A. *et al.*, 2014; Steigen A.M. *et al.*, 2016).

From a theoretical point of view, the relatively new social function recognized to agriculture is closely related to the acknowledgement of the multifunctional role of agricultural activity (Dessein J. *et al.* 2013; Lanfranchi M. *et al.*, 2015; Scuderi A. *et al.*, 2014; Zasada I., 2011). SF can potentially further broaden, diversify and add value to multifunctional agriculture, by interlacing farming with welfare services and creating both new markets for farmers (Di Iacovo F., O'Connor D., eds., 2009).

SF originates in a context of changes in lifestyles and economic crisis and generates benefits in terms of inclusion, going beyond the borders of rural territories and reaching European peri-urban and urban areas. With austerity measures and partial shift of responsibility from public actors and governmental support to private business and citizens, new opportunities in terms of social innovation are offered by collaboration and new alliances, new governance approaches towards public-private partnerships promoting social inclusion (Bock B., 2016; García-Llorente M. *et al.*, 2016; Shortall S., Warner M.E., 2010). Social innovation is thus related to self-organization and bottom-up initiatives, partly originating from the need for viable alternatives to poor public services in the EU; expectations on social innovation in particular are based on the idea that public-private forms of partnerships and development of community-based services can help overcoming the existing limits of EU welfare systems (Bock B., 2016; Hassink J. *et al.*, 2010; Maino F., 2014).

SF shows many features involving social innovation: it is a form of diversification of agriculture into social activities and functions, able to deliver services both to direct beneficiaries and to support rural and urban inhabitants and community in general. Also, social innovation transcends the boundaries of specific places and involves actors and networks going beyond the local and the rural, including urban and peri-urban.

The role of social farming as innovative opportunity for the farm of diversification of agricultural activity and providing services and benefits to individuals with specific needs, local community and broad population, territories and their development is recognized both by

literature and policy (Dessein J. *et al.*, 2013; Lanfranchi M. *et al.*, 2015; Tulla F. *et al.*, 2014).

2.2. Social farming in the framework of the EU 2014-2020 cohesion policy

The theme of SF in Europe has emerged in the last two decades, starting with the institution of «Farming for Health», a community of practices of researchers and scholars from 14 European Countries, whose outcomes have influenced the Opinion of the EU Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on the topic «Social Farming: green care and social and health policies»². The EESC, stating the need of «a definition at European level in order to identify the activities that comprise it and to define a framework and criteria, including quality criteria...» believes that «EU institutions and various regional and national authorities should support social farming putting in place an appropriate regulatory framework».

SF represents an opportunity in Europe to affirm a sustainable and innovative model of agriculture and of participated welfare; it is an integral part of the Europe 2020 Strategy, identifying social integration as one out of the 5 objectives for an intelligent, sustainable and inclusive growth.

The 2014-2020 Partnership Agreement (PA) for Italy³, national programming instrument of European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds, including the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), defines strategy and priorities for pursuing the goals of Europe 2020. With thematic objective 9 «Promoting social inclusion, fighting poverty and discrimination», PA acknowledges the intimate link between economic and social policies, also identifying strategic lines of interventions pertinent to each Fund. According to identified priorities and needs, PA foresees some particularly interesting actions: promotion of social inclusion through active inclusion and job placement, reinforcing offer and improving quality of territorial social and health services, reinforcing social economy. The abovementioned principles are outlined in the EU Regulations setting rules for ESI Funds; in particular, EAFRD Regulation⁴ sets as one of the 6 Priorities to

² European Economic and Social Committee, Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on «Social Farming: green care and social and health policies», (2013/C 44/07).

³ Commissione Europea, «Accordo di partenariato» con l'Italia sull'uso dei fondi strutturali e di investimento per la crescita e l'occupazione nel 2014-2020, C(2014) 8021 final «Decisione di Esecuzione della Commissione del 29/10/2014 che approva determinati elementi dell'accordo di partenariato con l'Italia».

⁴ Reg. (EU) 1305/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the Euro-

be pursued in 2014-2020 «social inclusion, reduction of poverty and economic development in rural areas».

In the intention of European policy makers, agricultural firms are increasingly called to implement and provide services for civil society; these services are both environmental, focused on territories and their management, and social.

Also, the Social Investment Package (SIP), adopted by the European Commission (EC) on 20th February 2013, aims at stimulating Member States (MS) to maintain investments in social policy areas, as the enhancement of people's capacities and the support to their participation in society and in the labour market. Following a network logic, connecting agricultural sector, social and health services and training sector, The European Social Fund (ESF) also devotes attention to the theme of SF. The Inclusion National Operational Programme⁵ (20% of ESF financial resources), among the actions foreseen against poverty and social exclusion, considers coordination with EAFRD to be relevant, with specific reference to SF interventions; similar coordination and collaboration possibilities are present in ERDF.

Finally, considerable importance is attached to social inclusion in the EU rural development policy since 2007-2013 (Shortall S., 2008), with EAFRD addressing SF as instrument of diversification of farms also into social activities, mostly in Axis 3 measures dealing with quality of life in rural areas and diversification of rural economy. In the period 2014-2020 the theme of the social functions of agriculture becomes more relevant, putting a stronger accent on policies for social inclusion and in particular on the role of agricultural activities.

In conclusion, SF, following a logic of cooperation with social and health institutions and with the synergic support of EU Funds, can represent a model of social and organization innovation. This path is supported by the EU 2014-2020 Regulations, that have created the conditions to foster SF practices and better define SF activities in European territories.

2.3. Social inclusion in Italian 2014-2020 Rural Development Programmes

As reported in literature (cfr. 2.1.), the context of SF in Italy, confirmed by an analysis carried out on the 21 Italian Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) in 2016⁶,

is that of the increasing demand for services and functions related to agriculture and of the growing potential for the offer of socio-educational and welfare services in agricultural firms. Many RDPs underline the social role of agriculture and express the specific need of supporting the diversification of farm activities towards the offer of welfare services, giving SF the role of stimulating inclusive development (Di Iacovo F., O'Connor D., 2009).

Interventions affecting SF are programmed in various RDPs Measures. Italian Regions, with only one exception, have foreseen SF among the interventions that can be financed, with a relevant variability among programmes, devoting to the theme a more specific attention with respect to the 2007-2013 period, coherently with the current EU cohesion policy framework.

SF is described as: opportunity of social inclusion, innovation and instrument of social and economic development in rural areas, with benefit for rural communities; creation of networks between farmers and social cooperation operators; expansion of diversification and opportunity for farmers to deliver complementary services related to agriculture; opportunity of income and employment both for firms and new operators. SF is perceived as a social innovation that can enable agriculture to become instrument of welfare for the benefit of rural communities.

SF is predominantly programmed within rural development Priorities 2A⁷ and 6A⁸. Measures giving a major contribution to SF are: M16 «Co-operation», with sub measure 16.9 «Diversification of farming activities into activities concerning health care, social integration, community-supported agriculture and education about the environment and food», specifically addressed to SF; M6 «Farm and business development», in particular with sub measure 6.4 «Investments in creation and development of non-agricultural activities», dedicated to diversification. The last has been activated by all the Italian regions, apart from the Province of Bolzano, showing the political relevance given by regional authorities to diversification of agricultural activity for the territorial development of rural areas. In Valle d'Aosta sub measure 6.4 is activated but dedicated to agritourism.

Among the possibilities of intervention for SF and

pean Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005.

⁵ Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali «Programma Operativo Nazionale Inclusione 2014-2020» Decisione della Commissione C(2014)10130.

⁶ Ascani M., De Vivo C. (2016), «L'agricoltura sociale nella nuova programmazione 2014/2020», CREA, Centro Politiche e Bioecono-

mia. Document published in www.reterurale.it, April 2016, Roma, in the framework of the project «Promozione e supporto alla diffusione dell'Agricoltura sociale», Italian National Rural Network 2014-2020. The 21 Italian RDPs have been fully analyzed with specific focus on SF, starting from Swot analysis, and continuing with Priorities and Focus Areas and Strategy.

⁷ «Improving the economic performance of all farms and facilitating farm restructuring and modernization, notably with a view to increasing market participation and orientation as well as agricultural diversification».

⁸ «Facilitating diversification, creation and development of small enterprises, as well as job creation».

Tab. 1. Implementation of sub measures 16.9 and 6.4 in Italian RDPs to 30 June 2019.

Regions	Sub measures					
	16.9			6.4		
	Programmed	Nr. Calls	% of 16.9 resources on M. 16 total	Programmed	Nr. Calls	% of 6.4 resources on M. 6 total
Piedmont	X	1	2,1	X	1	9,2
Valle d'Aosta	--			--		
Lombardy	X			X	1	11,1
Trento	--			X		
Bolzano	--			X		
Veneto	X	2	5,0	X	5	15,4
Friuli Venezia Giulia	--			X	1	7,8
Liguria	X	1	14,9	X	1	8,8
Emilia-Romagna	X	2	7,3	X	1	16,0
Tuscany	X	1	3,3	X	1	3,5
Umbria	X			X	1	9,1
Marche	X	1	1,4	X	3	2,6
Lazio	X			X	1	9,9
Abruzzo	--			X		
Molise	--			X	1	10,0
Campania	X	1	5,1	X	2	36,4
Apulia	--			X	1	11,8
Basilicata	X			X		
Calabria	X	1	8,5	X	1	7,1
Sicily	X	1	5,3	X	1	11,1
Sardinia	X	1	3,3	X	1	10,0

Source: our elaboration on Italian RDPs calls, 30/6/19, in www.reterurale.it.

related services for social inclusion, the most innovative and targeted is sub measure 16.9, foreseen by 14 RDPs, that can be seen as a cooperative form of diversification of agricultural firms; it is also a specific support to different actors involved into providing social services, implemented through a form of cooperation for SF. It specifically addresses the promotion and implementation of social and welfare services by a variety of forms of partnerships. In particular, the sub measure foresees the cooperation among agricultural firms and public, private, third sector entities for the development of social welfare, therapeutic, educational and training, recreational, job placement activities.

In June 2019, 10 Regions issued calls for sub measure 16.9, with differences and peculiarities related to the territories and their characteristics and to the degree of experience on the subject of SF: 16 Regions issued calls for sub measure 6.4, with specific interventions on SF.

It is early for verifying the impacts of the financial resources granted, being investments not yet concluded. The following table highlights the implementation of

16.9 and 6.4 in Italian Rural Development Programmes: all the Regions planned in their RDPs at least 16.9 or 6.4. Calls have been issued on both sub measures, but 16.9 until now has found a minor implementation,

The financial weight of both 16.9 and 6.4 on the whole 16 and 6, with reference to the calls, strongly varies between Regions, highlighting different strategic and planning choices.

Furthermore, within M7 «Basic services and village renewal in rural areas», in some cases investments of sub measure 7.4 «investments in the setting up, improvement or expansion of local basic services for the rural population, including leisure and culture, and the related infrastructure» aim at establishing or enhancing the offer of welfare services, creating a possible link with social farming. A space for growth of SF in RDPs 2014-2020 can finally be traced in transversal measures 1 «Knowledge transfer and information actions» and 2 «Advisory services, farm management and farm relief services», referring to diversification and/or multifunctionality in many cases, and to socio-cultural aspects of agriculture,

services to the population in rural areas and social farming in some cases.

2.4. A Leader best practice on agriculture for social inclusion: the Sulcis LAG

Social farming is a complex of practices integrating social, care, educational and other activities into agriculture, with several aims and recipients: cooperation between different actors, sectors and areas is therefore fundamental; the same cooperation is a peculiarity representing an innovative, multi-actor and interdisciplinary approach to several orders of problems.

The Italian LAG Sulcis Iglesiente Capoterra e Campidano (SULCIS), in Cagliari, Sardinia, is an example of networks created for supporting SF and an interesting experience of use of EU Funds for social inclusion and of promotion of territorial cohesion for answering to a part of population expressing a growing need of citizenship and inclusion.

The project «Agrisociale: Coltiviamo Cittadinanza» started in 2011 various participatory paths at transnational, regional and local level. SULCIS LAG, in particular, created a local network of actors dealing with SF. Setting up a participatory process, together with specific training seminars, have been fundamental aspects of the project. In order to facilitate interaction between the actors involved, specific methodologies have been adopted, allowing mapping actors and skills operating on the territory, knowing the needs expressed by local communities and possibilities offered by the RDP, activating a network between SF operators.

At the beginning, 5 municipalities have been selected with a LAG public call, in order to manage financial resources aimed at creating social farms. Then, agricultural firms and social cooperatives have been selected, with a second call issued by municipalities, in order to offer SF services to population. This process started the local project «Serenamente», involving 5 municipalities, 3 social cooperatives and 4 agricultural firms.

The participatory process resulted in the identification of the focus on social inclusion of people with disabilities, in particular mental ones. The project allowed the construction of paths of social inclusion, both through training sessions and specific workshops directly related to agricultural firms and activities; this local experience was based on the creation of an active space for subjects who were forced to live predominantly between the home walls, giving them and their families, a new perspective made of dignity and participation.

The project has moreover developed other local and transnational activities: at local level, thanks to an agree-

ment with the Ministry of Justice, activities had detainees as target group; at transnational level, in collaboration with other Italian and Finnish LAGs, a document was developed, defining the social farming principles underlying actions of inclusion in social farms.

The end of 2007-2013 programming period did not conclude the local social farming experience, since other projects were launched in the territory, as a social garden (ST'ORTO) created by Giba municipality, where young people carry out agricultural activities with the support of some local farms.

The project «Agrisociale: Coltiviamo Cittadinanza», through a participatory approach, has led to the following results:

- 3 participatory paths (local, at LAG level, regional and transnational);
- 1 transnational SF principles chart;
- 35 boys in social inclusion laboratories;
- 19 boys in pet therapy laboratories;
- 1 social garden;
- 1 enterprise network, «Bio rete terra sarda»;
- 2 internships for mentally disabled boys in farms of the network.

In the current period SULCIS LAG has foreseen in its Local Development Plan measure 16.9 dedicated to social farming; the objective is to develop the past experience, overcoming some critical issues and with the aim of involving a greater number of actors, first of all local authorities, farms and cooperatives.

In LAG's intentions, there is the will to pay a particular attention to other weak components of local community, as women and workers over 40, who could find work placement thanks to SF activities.

The Sulcis LAG experience shows the start-up and development, with a bottom-up process, of a participatory path based on the inclusive nature of agricultural activities. It also highlights that SF in rural areas, especially in marginal ones, can stimulate local economy and play a role of «relational catalyst» among community members. Furthermore, policies for inclusion play a propulsive role in starting participatory processes and in building networks that answer to needs expressed by local communities and in particular by weak groups of population.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In the European political and scientific debate, the theme of social inclusion has gained a primary role and this attention has been translated into a EU regulatory framework identifying objectives, tools and modes of intervention.

Social farming (SF), incorporated into EU Regulations, Partnership Agreement and national and regional programmes, represents one of the instruments contributing to active inclusion. SF activities can therefore represent a social innovation laboratory, where network logic and interconnection among Funds allow the implementation of complex interventions, requiring synergies among policies, actors and territories.

An integrated use of policies and Funds and their proper coordination, also recommended by the European Economic and Social Committee, represents a policy innovation generating social innovation. Public policies and support aimed at enhancing social and territorial cohesion processes are crucial both to answer the growing need of weak components of society and to create virtuous development paths for local economic systems. It is therefore essential to intervene with a network logic among Funds, in order to implement an integrated and multidisciplinary approach.

The analysis carried out on the policy and regulatory framework descending by Europe 2020 Strategy shows the opportunities provided by specific lines of intervention for social inclusion in ESI Funds and their implementing programmes. Italian RDPs extensively recognize the requirement of increasing the diversification and the multifunctionality of farms and of improving services to population in rural territories; many RDPs explicitly underline the social role of agriculture and express the specific need of supporting the diversification of farm activities towards providing welfare services and creating synergies between agriculture and social, as welfare instrument in rural areas. Nevertheless, up to now, a substantial delay in the implementation of programmes has to be pointed out; with specific reference to EAFRD, there is a weak correspondence between targeted provisions for social inclusion in RDPs (mainly within sub measures 16.9 and 6.4) and in related public calls, devoting poor specific funding to SF. Almost all of the Regions that have planned interventions for SF have issued the related calls, with specific aspects depending on the territory and on existing SF realities. It is still too early to evaluate the impact of the resources provided by RDPs, being investments still ongoing. From the analysis of the resources for SF, delivered under sub measures 16.9 and 6.4, with reference to the total financial amount of measures 16 and 6, a wide range of strategic and programming choices does emerge.

Given the importance of interdisciplinarity in SF actions, a negative element that can be found in the current implementing phase is the lack of a multi-fund approach, with a few exceptions in the management of

regional funding to Leader projects. In the case of Leader, this critical issue is indeed partially overcome by the possibility given to LAGs of participating in other Funds and their measures, activating the necessary synergies, as in the case of Sulcin LAG.

In conclusion, despite its spreading in Europe in terms of practices, the attention devoted to it by researchers and the policy and regulatory framework outlined by the EU, SF is still partially supported by an adequate legislative and operative definition. A development and consolidation opportunity for SF experiences in Italy is represented by the issue of a specific National Law in 2015, whose implementing regulation has been issued in December 2018, creating the conditions for its implementation.

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