



PRACTICAL SKILLS FOR IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL FARMING ACTIVITIES

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Lesson 1: Designing and Adapting Farm Tasks

Social farming creates opportunities for people who are often excluded from the labour market or community life. Farms that welcome vulnerable groups become places of inclusion, personal growth and social connection. To achieve this goal, farm work must be adapted so that everyone can contribute according to their own strengths and abilities.

This lesson introduces the foundations of task adaptation in social farming. It explains why adjusting work is essential, how to assess participant abilities and how to design tasks that are both meaningful and safe. Participants will learn about different types of farm tasks suitable for various groups, the value of structured daily routines and the importance of risk management for both physical and emotional safety. Case studies and examples will show how these principles are applied in practice.

The lesson is designed to be practical and interactive. It provides concrete tools such as task-matching charts, daily routine templates and progress tracking forms that can be used immediately in daily work. Through exercises and discussions participants will have the opportunity to design their own adaptations and reflect on how to make their farms more inclusive.

By the end of this lesson participants will be able to:

- understand the role of task adaptation in creating inclusive farms;
- assess the abilities and needs of different vulnerable groups;
- match participants with suitable farm tasks;
- create structured routines that balance predictability with flexibility;
- ensure safety through practical risk management strategies;
- use practical tools to support task design and adaptation.

This introduction sets the stage for exploring in detail how farms can adapt work processes. The focus is on combining agricultural production with social inclusion so that farms not only grow food but also confidence, responsibility and community.

1. Introduction to task adaptation

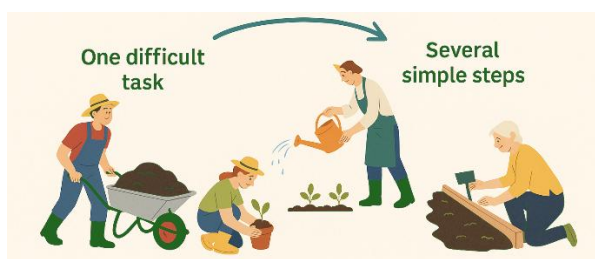
Social farming combines agricultural work with social inclusion. On these farms, people who may otherwise face exclusion from the labour market or community life find opportunities to engage in meaningful activity. The farm is transformed into a space where work tasks become tools for personal growth, well-being and social connection. For this vision to succeed tasks must be carefully adapted to individual abilities.

Adapting tasks is essential because participants arrive with very different physical, cognitive and social capacities. Some may struggle with endurance, others with concentration or memory, while some may lack confidence after long periods of unemployment. If tasks are too difficult or unsafe participants may feel discouraged or excluded. When tasks are adjusted to their needs, the same people can

succeed, gain confidence and gradually increase their contribution. Adaptation is therefore not about reducing standards but about opening access to real work in a structured and safe way.

Starter Task	What it Reveals
 Sort vegetables by size/color	Attention to detail
 Water one bed to the line mark	Ability to follow instructions
 Fold/label 10 packs	Fine motor skills & patience
 Sweep a small area	Endurance & pacing

Experience shows that small adjustments can make a significant difference. A task like planting seedlings may be divided into separate steps such as filling pots with soil, placing seeds, watering and labelling. Each step can then be assigned to different participants according to their strengths. In this way everyone is included in the production process. Breaking down complex activities into manageable units also reduces stress and provides a clear sense of achievement.



Predictability plays a central role. Many vulnerable participants benefit from routine and clear rules. A consistent daily rhythm helps those with mental health challenges or disrupted work habits to build trust and stability. The atmosphere becomes safe and supportive when expectations are clear and tasks are matched to ability. Recognition of effort and progress further strengthens motivation.

The Slovenian survey on social farming confirms these needs. Respondents highlighted the importance of including people with disabilities, elderly individuals, youth at risk and people with mental health challenges. More than half admitted they would need training on how to design activities for such groups. They also expressed a strong interest in mentoring and job-shadowing with experienced social farmers. These findings underline the need for structured approaches to task adaptation that are practical and easy to implement.

Practical examples reinforce this. On farms where vulnerable groups are involved, mentors often observe behaviour to identify hidden strengths or difficulties. A participant who seems restless in long repetitive tasks may perform very well when tasks are shorter or varied. Another who finds verbal instructions difficult may thrive with visual cues such as pictures or colour coding. Such methods make the work more inclusive without changing its agricultural value.

Adaptation also has a protective function. Safety is improved when heavy tasks are allocated to those who can perform them without risk, while lighter indoor activities are offered to those with reduced strength or mobility. Emotional safety is ensured when instructions are simple, feedback is supportive and mistakes are treated as part of the learning process. This balance between safety and productivity is central to sustainable social farming.

In Slovenia, organisations like Korenika, Mozaik and Pribinovina have demonstrated how to integrate adaptation into daily operations. At Korenika, people with disabilities are involved in herb production where roles range from planting to drying and packaging. Tasks are introduced gradually so mentors can assess abilities before assigning more responsibility. Traditional gardening and heritage-based activities are used to connect participants to community identity while respecting individual limits. These approaches confirm that adaptation is not theory but practice that strengthens both farm production and social inclusion.

Practical exercise: Begin this section by inviting participants to think of one farm task they carry out regularly. Ask them how this task could be adapted for someone with reduced endurance, limited concentration or no prior farm experience. Discuss as a group how adaptation can open the door for inclusion without lowering the quality of work.

2. Assessment of participants' skills and needs

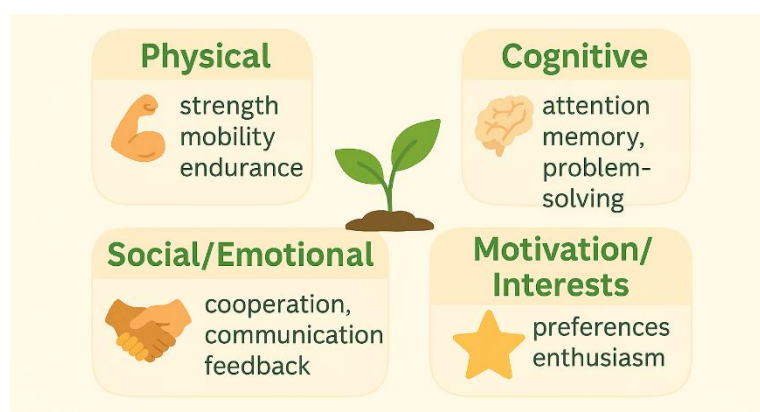
Designing tasks for social farming begins with a clear understanding of the people who will perform them. Every participant brings a unique combination of strengths, limitations and motivations. Without assessment, it is easy to assign work that is too complex, too repetitive or physically unsuitable. A well-structured assessment process ensures that people are matched with tasks where they can succeed, contribute to the farm and experience personal growth.

Assessment is not about testing people in a formal way. It is about observing, listening and gently exploring abilities in a supportive environment. Farmers and mentors often start with simple activities such as sorting vegetables, watering plants or folding packaging. These are safe entry points that reveal how individuals approach work. Some participants prefer to work independently while others need frequent guidance. Some focus well for extended periods while others require variety. These early observations are the foundation for designing inclusive work processes.

Four main areas usually guide the assessment:

- **Physical abilities:** strength, mobility, coordination and endurance. A participant who struggles to lift heavy crates may still be perfectly capable of handling delicate tasks such as planting or packaging.

- **Cognitive abilities:** memory, attention span and problem-solving. People who cannot follow long instructions may thrive when tasks are broken into smaller steps or supported with visual cues.
- **Social and emotional readiness:** cooperation, communication and response to feedback. Understanding how someone interacts with others helps mentors decide if a person will do better in a group or in a quieter space.
- **Motivation and interests:** enthusiasm is a strong predictor of persistence. Someone interested in animals may find meaning in daily feeding routines, while another who enjoys order may excel in packaging or cleaning tasks.



In Slovenia, many practitioners emphasise the need for guidance in this area. Half of the respondents in the national survey said they would require training to design activities that include vulnerable groups. At the same time, all expressed interest in mentoring or job-shadowing with experienced social farmers. This shows that practical knowledge on assessment is highly valued and urgently needed.

Assessment also requires cultural sensitivity and awareness of life circumstances. Migrants or homeless people may not be familiar with local farming practices and may need orientation that combines practical instruction with social support. Youth at risk often respond best to varied tasks and positive reinforcement. Elderly participants may need more frequent breaks and clearly defined roles that respect their slower pace. People in recovery from addiction benefit from structured activities that reinforce routine and stability. Each group requires adjustments that are best identified through careful and empathetic assessment.

Practical approaches from social farms across Europe show that observation is most effective when paired with documentation. Simple checklists help mentors capture important details: Does the participant follow instructions independently or with support? Can they maintain focus for 15 minutes? Do they show signs of physical strain? Recording these answers over several days creates a clear picture of abilities and progress.

Mentoring is part of the assessment process itself. When mentors work alongside participants they model tasks and observe responses in real time. A participant may begin by copying the mentor's actions, gradually taking over when confidence grows. This hands-on style builds trust and gives mentors reliable information about what each person can handle.

Assessment is not static. People change over time. With practice, participants often improve endurance, concentration and social interaction. Regular reviews are essential to recognise these changes and to adjust tasks accordingly. Recording progress not only helps mentors plan but also provides participants with visible evidence of their achievements. This recognition strengthens motivation and encourages continued engagement.

Practical experience from Slovenia confirms these principles. New participants are often introduced gradually with safe, repetitive tasks that allow mentors to observe how they manage instructions, pace and cooperation. Staff also combine observation with personal conversations to understand interests and motivations. Traditional gardening and farming activities are frequently used as assessment tools, showing how individuals react to physical effort, teamwork and seasonal rhythms. These practices demonstrate that assessment is not an administrative step but a daily process of learning about people while they work.

Practical exercise: Ask participants in the training to think about one vulnerable group they may want to include on their farm. In small groups, let them design three simple tasks that could be used as assessment activities. For each task, describe what kind of ability it would reveal (physical, cognitive, social, motivational). After the exercise, share reflections on how assessment tasks can build both knowledge for the mentor and confidence for the participant.

3. Types of farm tasks suitable for different groups

One of the strengths of farming is the variety of tasks it offers. From heavy outdoor work to delicate indoor activities, farms provide a wide spectrum of opportunities that can be matched to almost any ability level. The challenge is to understand which type of task is suitable for which group and how to organise work so that everyone can contribute meaningfully.

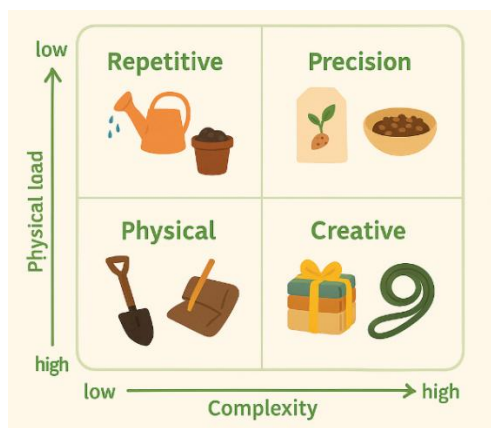
Simple repetitive tasks are well suited for people who may struggle with complex instructions or who have limited endurance. Activities like watering plants, collecting eggs, sorting vegetables or filling pots with soil can be performed with minimal guidance once the process is shown. These tasks provide a sense of completion and are especially useful when participants need to build confidence through visible results.

Tasks requiring precision are appropriate for people who may not have physical strength but have good attention to detail. Examples include labeling jars, sorting seeds, arranging dried herbs or packaging finished products. Precision tasks can also support concentration and fine motor skills, giving participants a way to contribute without heavy physical effort.

Creative tasks encourage imagination and expression. Designing displays for local markets, arranging mixed herb teas or preparing decorative packaging can be highly motivating for people who enjoy

creativity. These activities can strengthen self-esteem and provide a bridge between farm work and community interaction, especially when products are presented to the public.

Physically demanding tasks remain an important part of farming. Digging, carrying hay or soil preparation may be suitable for younger participants or those with higher endurance. It is essential, however, that such tasks are supervised and adjusted in intensity. Dividing heavy work into smaller segments or using group approaches can prevent exhaustion and ensure safety.



In Slovenia, practitioners frequently highlight the importance of tailoring tasks to different vulnerable groups. Elderly individuals are more comfortable with light and steady activities such as harvesting smaller crops or helping with indoor work. Youth at risk often respond well to varied tasks that change every hour, keeping their attention and preventing boredom. People with physical disabilities may participate in raised bed gardening or indoor processing where tasks can be performed sitting or with assistive tools. People with mental health challenges often benefit from tasks with clear beginnings and endings, which provide structure and reduce anxiety.

Flexibility is the key. No single type of task is suitable for every individual in a group and no group is completely uniform. Within any category there will be participants who can handle more or less complexity. Regular observation and willingness to adjust are essential. A task that is suitable for someone at the beginning may need to be made more challenging later on to keep them motivated and growing.

Assigning tasks also has a social dimension. Group work can strengthen cooperation skills but some individuals may need quiet, independent activities to reduce stress. Mixing both options during the day ensures balance and allows participants to experience teamwork without feeling pressured.

Practical exercise: Divide participants in the training into small groups. Ask each group to select one vulnerable population (elderly, youth at risk, people with disabilities, migrants, people in recovery). For that group design three farm tasks that would be suitable. Describe why each task is appropriate and how it could be adapted to ensure safety and success. Present the ideas to the full group for discussion, highlighting how different types of work can meet different needs.

Section 4. Creating structured daily routines

The importance of structure in social farming

Work on a farm is naturally shaped by seasons, weather and biological rhythms. Yet for people who join through social farming programmes this natural rhythm often needs to be translated into clear daily routines. Many participants arrive with disrupted work habits due to unemployment, illness or social exclusion. A structured routine provides more than organisation: it creates psychological safety, predictability and a framework for learning.

When participants know what comes next, they feel more secure. Predictability lowers anxiety for people with mental health challenges and helps those with cognitive difficulties to focus on the task at hand. For elderly participants, structure supports memory and orientation. For youth at risk routines counterbalance instability they may experience in other parts of life. In this sense, structured daily routines are as important as the farming tasks themselves.



Key elements of effective routines

- **Morning gathering:** Beginning the day together reinforces belonging and provides an opportunity to outline tasks, set goals and motivate the group. Even a short 10-minute check-in makes a significant difference.
- **Clarity of expectations:** Participants need to know when the day starts and ends, how long each activity will last and when breaks are scheduled. Visual tools such as whiteboards or pictograms are particularly useful.
- **Balanced pacing:** Dividing the day into segments avoids fatigue and helps participants maintain endurance. Shorter, varied tasks can sustain motivation and prevent boredom.
- **Opportunities for feedback:** Ending the day with a brief reflection allows participants to share how they felt about the work, what they enjoyed and what they found difficult. This promotes self-awareness and gives mentors valuable information for adaptation.
- **Consistency across days:** Even when farm activities change with the season, the overall structure of the day should remain familiar. This consistency is more important than the specific content of tasks.

The social dimension of routines

Daily routines also help build community. Shared breaks and mealtimes become moments of connection where relationships grow naturally. These informal interactions strengthen cooperation during work and reduce feelings of isolation. Group rituals, such as a common morning greeting or a weekly shared meal, create traditions that give participants a sense of identity and pride in belonging to the farm.

For participants who struggle with discipline, structured routines gradually reintroduce habits such as punctuality, responsibility and accountability. Arriving on time, wearing appropriate clothing and preparing tools become part of a culture of respect. Over time, these small habits extend beyond the farm and support reintegration into wider society.

Challenges and solutions

Implementing structured routines is not always easy. Some participants may resist structure because they are not used to regular schedules. Others may struggle to adapt due to health conditions or personal circumstances. Solutions include:

- **Introducing routines gradually rather than imposing them suddenly:** For example, instead of requiring participants to arrive at exactly 8:00 from the first day, the group might begin with a flexible window, gradually tightening the schedule over a few weeks. This allows people to adapt without feeling overwhelmed.
- **Allowing flexibility within the framework:** A participant who feels unwell or anxious on a hot summer day may not manage outdoor work. Offering an indoor alternative such as sorting seeds or packaging dried herbs keeps them engaged while protecting their well-being.
- **Explaining the purpose of routines clearly:** Participants are more likely to accept structured schedules when they understand that routines reduce stress and create fairness. A mentor might explain, “We all take our break at the same time so everyone has a chance to rest and no one feels left out.”
- **Using positive reinforcement when participants follow routines successfully:** Praising someone for arriving on time several days in a row or for completing a task within the planned schedule highlights progress. Recognition of these small but important steps helps participants value routines as part of their own development.

Monitoring and evaluation

Structured routines should be evaluated regularly. Mentors can keep a simple record of attendance, punctuality and task completion. Over time, improvements in these areas reflect not only the effectiveness of the routine but also the participant’s progress in work readiness. Tracking these changes helps farms demonstrate their social impact and strengthens their ability to secure funding and partnerships.

Practical tips for mentors

- **Keep instructions short and concrete:** Instead of saying, “Prepare the area for planting,” a mentor can say, “Please bring the watering cans and place them next to the raised beds.” Clarity avoids confusion.
- **Use the same phrases and signals consistently to announce breaks or task changes:** A bell, hand signal or simple phrase like “time for break” makes transitions smoother, especially for participants who struggle with concentration.
- **Encourage participants to prepare their own tools and workspace at the start of the day to build responsibility:** Setting out gloves, watering cans or baskets gives participants a sense of ownership and pride in being ready for work.
- **Celebrate small achievements during the day to maintain motivation:** Noticing and acknowledging when someone completes a row of planting or keeps focus during a full activity strengthens confidence.
- **Adjust schedules when weather or unexpected events interfere but keep the overall rhythm intact:** If outdoor planting is cancelled due to rain, mentors can move the group to indoor seed sorting while keeping the break times and closing reflection the same. This maintains the feeling of stability even when activities change.

Practical exercise: Ask training participants to design a weekly plan for a social farm programme. The plan should include start and end times, task categories, break times and at least one group ritual. In small groups, discuss how this plan would benefit different vulnerable groups and what challenges could arise. Compare the plans and identify common strategies that make routines both supportive and realistic in a farming environment.

5. Risk management and safety considerations

Safety is a central condition for social farming. Farms are dynamic environments with animals, machinery, tools and outdoor conditions. For people from vulnerable groups these environments may present risks that can easily be overlooked. Risk management ensures that participants remain safe and that the farm can operate confidently as an inclusive workplace. It is not about removing every challenge but about creating the right balance between meaningful work and safety.

Physical safety

Participants often have different physical abilities which must be considered when assigning tasks. Simple adaptations protect people while keeping them engaged in real farm work.

- **Ergonomic or lightweight tools:** Using smaller rakes or lighter watering cans makes it possible for elderly participants or those with reduced endurance to carry out tasks independently. Without these adjustments they might tire quickly and withdraw.
- **Safe and accessible pathways:** Paths should be wide, stable and free of obstacles so that people with mobility difficulties or those using wheelchairs can move confidently. A practical example is ensuring that gravel paths are compacted and that ramps are available where there are steps.
- **Protective clothing and equipment:** Gloves, sturdy shoes, hats and waterproof coats reduce risk of injury or discomfort. Providing equipment shows participants that their safety is valued which encourages responsibility in return.
- **Limiting access to dangerous machinery:** Tractors, chainsaws and other heavy equipment should only be operated by trained staff. Vulnerable participants can be involved in supportive roles such as loading light materials or helping with preparation nearby without direct contact with the machine.

Emotional and psychological safety

Safety is not only physical. People who join social farming may carry experiences of failure or exclusion. Protecting their emotional well-being is just as important.

- **Clear and simple instructions:** Confusion creates stress. Instructions like “please fill these three pots with soil” are easier to follow than vague guidance. This reduces the risk of participants feeling lost or embarrassed.
- **Supportive feedback:** Mistakes should be treated as natural learning moments. If a participant waters too much, instead of criticism the mentor might say, “Next time use half the amount, the plants will grow better.” Encouragement helps participants remain motivated.
- **Safe spaces for rest:** Anxiety or fatigue may arise suddenly. Having a quiet indoor room where someone can rest for a short time ensures they can recover without leaving the programme altogether.

- **Respecting personal boundaries:** Some participants may not feel comfortable with physical contact or being placed in noisy groups. Respecting these limits protects their sense of safety and trust.

Organisational safety

Managing risk also requires clear processes and responsibilities within the farm.

- **Induction and orientation:** Every new participant should be introduced to the farm environment, shown where equipment is stored and explained which areas are restricted. This prevents accidents and confusion.
- **Emergency procedures:** Staff and mentors must know what to do in case of injury, allergic reaction or sudden illness. A visible list of contacts and steps ensures rapid response.
- **Supervision and ratios:** The number of mentors must match the group size. If too few staff are present, supervision weakens and risks increase. For example, a group of ten participants with mixed abilities may require at least two mentors to ensure that each person receives adequate attention.
- **Documentation of incidents:** Recording accidents or near misses helps identify patterns and adjust procedures. If several participants slip on a wet path, it signals that the path must be improved, not that the individuals were careless.



Practical benefits of risk management

When risks are managed well participants feel safer and are more willing to engage. Families and social workers also gain trust in the farm as a reliable environment. Safety practices demonstrate professionalism which strengthens the reputation of social farming initiatives and makes it easier to build partnerships and attract funding.

Practical exercise: Ask training participants to create a simple safety checklist for their own farm. The checklist should include physical aspects (paths, tools, protective equipment), emotional aspects (clear

instructions, safe spaces, supportive feedback) and organisational aspects (orientation, supervision, emergency steps). Each group should then present their checklist and discuss how it could be applied daily.

6. Case studies and examples

Practical examples are essential for understanding how theory can be transformed into daily practice. Social farms across Europe and Slovenia show that well-designed adaptation of tasks and routines can have a profound effect on both individuals and communities. These experiences provide inspiration and also highlight what to pay attention to when developing inclusive work environments.

International experiences

- **Supported employment in farming:** Many farms have successfully applied principles of supported employment, where participants are placed directly into real work environments with a mentor who provides ongoing guidance. Instead of long pre-training, individuals learn by doing. This approach has proven particularly effective for people with mental health challenges who gain confidence when they see immediate results of their work.
- **Therapeutic horticulture programmes:** Farms and gardens in several countries have introduced structured gardening tasks as a form of therapy. Research shows that these activities reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, improve concentration and create positive routines. Tasks such as planting, watering and harvesting are simple yet powerful tools for building mental resilience.
- **Inclusive task design for people with disabilities:** In countries like Italy and the Netherlands, farms have modified workstations so that people in wheelchairs can participate fully in planting or packaging. Raised beds, lightweight tools and visual instruction boards make it possible for individuals to contribute alongside others without feeling excluded.

Slovenian experiences

In Slovenia, social farms and social enterprises also demonstrate valuable practices:

- Participants are often introduced gradually, beginning with short, repetitive tasks that allow mentors to assess abilities and build trust. This avoids overwhelming newcomers and creates early success.
- Seasonal routines, such as planting in spring or harvesting in autumn, are structured in a way that provides participants with a sense of rhythm and continuity. The repetition of these annual cycles reinforces stability and belonging.
- Vulnerable groups such as elderly individuals, youth at risk, people in recovery or migrants are included in different roles according to their strengths. Light indoor work, varied outdoor tasks or culturally familiar activities are all part of the adaptation strategy.

- Farms act as community hubs where participants not only work but also share meals, take part in events and interact with local residents. This integration strengthens social bonds and reduces stigma.

Lessons learned from practice

These case studies reveal several common principles:

- **Start small and build gradually:** Introducing participants to simple tasks at first and increasing complexity over time supports learning and confidence. For example, beginning with watering plants and later adding planting or harvesting once endurance improves.
- **Balance productivity with inclusion:** Farms must find the right equilibrium between achieving economic results and providing supportive environments. Inclusion does not mean reducing standards but adapting processes so everyone can contribute to the final product.
- **Invest in mentoring:** The role of mentors is crucial. They provide not only technical guidance but also emotional support. A mentor who models patience and respect sets the tone for the entire farm culture.
- **Document and reflect:** Keeping records of what works well and what creates difficulties helps improve routines over time. Farms that systematically document experiences can share their knowledge with others and attract more partners.

Practical exercise: Present training participants with three short case descriptions (e.g., a person with reduced mobility, a young person with limited concentration, an elderly participant with low endurance). Ask small groups to design a suitable farm task for each case and explain why their chosen task fits. Then discuss as a full group how these adaptations reflect the broader principles of inclusion, safety and motivation.

7. Practical tips and tools

Adapting farm tasks and creating inclusive routines is easier when mentors and farmers have access to simple, practical tools. These tools make work more structured, transparent and fair. They also help participants see their own progress and give mentors a clear way to plan and adjust. The following tips and instruments are commonly used in social farming and can be adapted to different contexts.

Task-matching chart

A chart lists common farm tasks on one side and participant abilities on the other. By connecting the two, mentors can identify where each person can contribute best.

- For example, someone with reduced endurance but good attention to detail may be matched with labeling products or sorting seeds.

- Another participant with strong physical ability but lower concentration might be assigned to carrying produce baskets or preparing soil.

This tool prevents mismatches that could lead to frustration and ensures that everyone is placed where they can succeed.

Daily routine template

A visual schedule makes the day predictable. It may be displayed on a whiteboard, printed as a sheet or represented with symbols for participants who have reading difficulties.

- A routine might show: arrival at 8:30, group meeting at 9:00, first task until 10:30, break, second task until 12:30, lunch, afternoon task, reflection and closing.
- Knowing what comes next reduces anxiety and supports concentration.

This tool also helps mentors keep the group organised and provides structure that participants can rely on.

Progress tracking form

Recording small achievements gives both mentors and participants a sense of development. A simple form may include checkboxes such as: followed instructions independently, completed task with minimal support, worked for 30 minutes without break.

- When a participant sees a line of checked boxes after a few weeks, they realise how much they have improved.
- Mentors can use the same records to plan the next step, for example moving from simple repetitive work to a more complex task.

Progress tracking builds motivation and shows that improvement is possible with time and practice.

Universal design principles

Accessibility is essential if the farm is to welcome all participants. Applying universal design principles makes the environment safer and easier to navigate.

- Raised beds allow people in wheelchairs or those who cannot bend easily to participate in planting and harvesting.
- Wide stable paths reduce the risk of falls and make movement easier for elderly individuals.
- Clear signage with images as well as words helps people with reading difficulties to find their way independently.

These adjustments do not benefit only vulnerable groups. They make the farm easier and more comfortable for everyone.

Use of visual and practical aids

Visual instructions such as picture sequences, colour-coded tools or sample products help participants who struggle with memory or complex explanations.

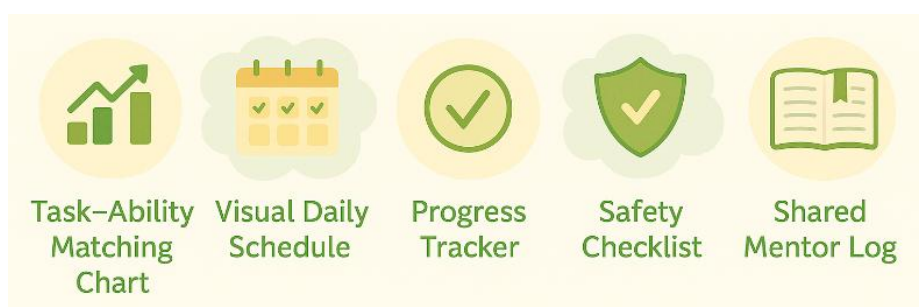
- A photo showing a correctly packed basket provides immediate guidance and avoids repeated verbal corrections.
- Colour-coded watering cans (blue for outdoor, green for indoor) reduce confusion and keep routines simple.

Visual and practical aids support independence and give participants confidence in performing tasks correctly.

Communication notebook or log

When several mentors work with the same group, communication can be inconsistent. A shared notebook or log records what each participant did during the day, what went well and what caused difficulty.

- This ensures continuity even when staff change.
- Participants can also contribute by writing or drawing what they enjoyed, creating a sense of ownership in the process.



Practical exercise: Provide training participants with blank templates for a task-matching chart, daily routine schedule and progress form. Ask them to fill in each tool based on a chosen vulnerable group (for example, elderly individuals or youth at risk). Then discuss how these tools could be adapted for real-life use on their farms. The exercise helps participants leave the training with practical instruments they can implement immediately.

Lesson 2: Developing Inclusive Work Environments

Inclusive work environments are the foundation of successful social farming. They ensure that every individual, regardless of ability or background, can contribute meaningfully and feel a sense of belonging. Lesson 2 introduces participants to the principles and practical tools needed to create such environments on farms.

This lesson explores what inclusion really means beyond physical access. It highlights the importance of removing barriers, fostering participation and building a culture of respect and empathy. Participants will learn how to design routines adapted to diverse abilities, how to promote collaboration within mixed groups and how to resolve conflicts in a supportive and constructive way.

Through practical guidelines, case studies and real-life examples from European social farms, the lesson demonstrates how small adaptations can make a significant difference. It confirms that inclusive environments are not created by chance, but through intentional planning, empathy and flexibility. By the end of the lesson, participants will be equipped with knowledge and strategies to transform their farms into places where people can work, learn and grow together.

1. Principles of inclusion on farms

An inclusive farm environment goes beyond physical accessibility. It is a place where people of different ages, abilities and backgrounds feel welcome, respected and able to contribute. Inclusion is not only about inviting people in but about creating conditions where they can thrive. On social farms this means designing spaces, processes and relationships that reduce barriers and promote equal participation.

Core principles of inclusion

- **Respect for diversity:** Every participant arrives with unique experiences and capacities. Respecting diversity means valuing each person's contribution, whether it is physical work, attention to detail or social presence. For example, one participant may not be able to lift heavy loads but may bring positivity and encouragement to the group which is equally valuable.
- **Equal opportunities to contribute:** Inclusion requires that all participants have a role in the farm's daily life. This does not mean everyone does the same tasks but that everyone's role is meaningful. Assigning a repetitive but necessary task such as labeling products shows that even small contributions are important to the farm's success.
- **Safety and well-being:** A truly inclusive environment protects both physical and emotional safety. Clear instructions, supportive feedback and predictable routines prevent confusion and

anxiety. Providing protective clothing and safe workstations shows that participants' well-being is taken seriously.

- **Participation and belonging:** Inclusion is more than physical presence. People need to feel that they are part of the group. Shared breaks, group meetings and collective achievements such as completing a harvest foster a sense of belonging.
- **Empowerment and growth:** An inclusive farm provides opportunities for participants to learn new skills and take on more responsibility over time. Inclusion is not static but dynamic, supporting personal growth at each step.



Inclusion in practice

Building inclusion requires attention to both the physical environment and social atmosphere. Physical adjustments might include accessible paths, adapted tools and visual guidance for tasks. Social adjustments include patience, respectful communication and recognition of progress. Together these create an environment where participants can perform tasks with dignity and pride.

In Slovenia, practitioners often highlight the importance of routines and structured guidance to strengthen inclusion. Respondents in the national survey emphasised that they need practical training on how to design activities for vulnerable groups, especially elderly individuals, youth at risk and people with disabilities. This confirms that inclusion must be intentional and based on clear principles rather than assumed as a by-product of goodwill.

Inclusive work environments also benefit mentors and the broader community. A farm that is safe, welcoming and structured gains trust from families, social workers and local stakeholders. This reputation helps build stronger partnerships, attract funding and ensure long-term sustainability.

Practical exercise: Ask participants to imagine their farm from the perspective of a newcomer with no prior experience. In small groups they should identify three potential barriers that this person might face on the first day (physical, social or emotional). For each barrier propose one adjustment that

would make the environment more inclusive. Share the ideas in the group and discuss which principles of inclusion were applied.

2. Identifying and removing barriers

Creating an inclusive farm environment requires identifying the barriers that prevent people from participating fully and then removing or reducing these barriers in practical ways. Barriers can be physical, social, communication-related or organisational. Recognising them is the first step to inclusion because barriers often remain invisible to those who are already comfortable in the environment.

Physical barriers

Farms are traditionally designed for efficiency and productivity, not accessibility. This can make daily tasks difficult or impossible for people with physical limitations.

- **Access to workspaces:** Narrow or uneven paths, steep steps and muddy areas can prevent people with mobility difficulties from moving freely. Solutions include stabilised paths, ramps and raised beds that bring work to a comfortable height.
- **Tools and equipment:** Heavy or awkward tools can exclude people with reduced strength. Lightweight watering cans, shorter rakes or adapted handles make tasks achievable.
- **Facilities:** Inaccessible toilets or break rooms can discourage participation. Simple adjustments such as wider doors and handrails make a significant difference.

Example: A participant with reduced mobility may not be able to join planting in ground-level beds. With raised beds at waist height, the same participant can plant seedlings comfortably and safely.

Social barriers

Social dynamics can either create a welcoming atmosphere or reinforce exclusion. Many participants in social farming have experienced rejection in the past and may carry feelings of low self-worth.

- **Group dynamics:** Cliques or dominant personalities can make others feel marginalised. Mentors should encourage rotation of work teams and ensure that everyone has a chance to participate.
- **Attitudes:** Prejudice against people with disabilities, migrants or those in recovery can create invisible walls. Training staff and volunteers in empathy and respect is essential.
- **Participation in decision-making:** When only staff make decisions, participants may feel like passive recipients rather than active contributors. Involving them in small decisions, such as how to arrange a workspace or what to plant, increases belonging.

Example: If participants are never asked for input, they may see their role as limited. When mentors invite them to suggest ideas for the weekly market display, they feel included and valued.

Communication barriers

Effective communication is central to safety and inclusion. For many participants traditional instructions are not enough.

- **Language differences:** Migrants may not speak the local language fluently. Using simple words, gestures or translation cards can prevent misunderstandings.
- **Cognitive challenges:** Some participants cannot follow long explanations. Breaking instructions into steps and using pictures makes tasks clear.
- **Hearing or speech difficulties:** Written notes, visual signals or demonstration-based teaching help overcome these barriers.

Example: Instead of giving a complex instruction like “Prepare the greenhouse by watering all seedlings and checking the temperature before closing the windows,” a mentor can break it into three steps with images: water seedlings – check thermometer – close windows.

Organisational barriers

Sometimes the structure of the programme itself creates barriers.

- **Inflexible schedules:** A strict timetable with no room for adjustment may discourage those with health conditions. Allowing flexibility within structure maintains routine while respecting needs.
- **Insufficient mentoring capacity:** If too few mentors supervise too many participants, some will not receive the guidance they need. Matching staff numbers to group size is essential.
- **Lack of clear orientation:** New participants may feel lost without a proper introduction to the farm layout, rules and expectations. Providing a simple orientation session reduces uncertainty.

Example: A newcomer who arrives without guidance may waste time searching for tools or feel anxious about unspoken rules. A short introduction tour and a written or visual orientation sheet remove this barrier.

	Barriers	Solutions
Physical	narrow paths, heavy tools, inaccessible toilets	<i>ramps, lighter tools, raised beds</i>
Social	cliques, prejudice, lack of involvement	<i>rotate teams, train mentors, invite input</i>
Communication	language gaps, cognitive challenges, hearing issues	<i>step cards, visuals, simple instructions</i>
Organizational	strict schedules, too few mentors, unclear orientation	<i>flexible routines, proper introduction tours</i>

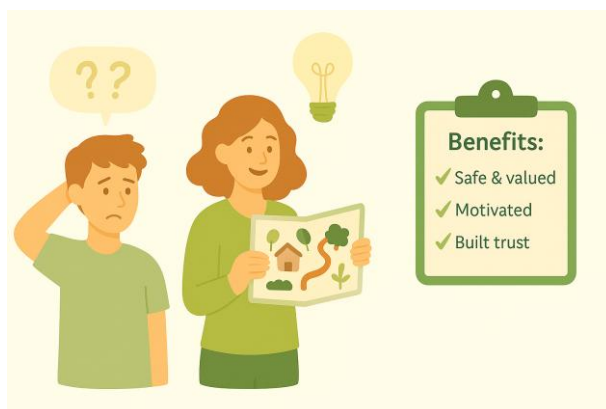
Strategies for barrier removal

Removing barriers requires a proactive and systematic approach. Some adjustments are simple and low-cost while others may require planning and investment. The key is to prioritise changes that have the greatest impact on participation.

- Observe participants carefully and listen to feedback. Barriers often become visible when people hesitate, avoid tasks or show signs of stress.
- Start with quick wins such as providing lighter tools or clearer instructions, then move on to larger infrastructure changes.
- Involve participants in problem-solving. Asking “What would make this easier for you?” often produces practical solutions that staff may not see.
- Review regularly. New barriers may appear as groups change or as the farm expands.

Benefits of removing barriers

When barriers are addressed participants feel safer and more valued. Their confidence grows as they realise that the environment supports their needs. This in turn increases motivation, reduces drop-out rates and enhances productivity. Farms also benefit from stronger trust among families, partner organisations and local communities.



Practical exercise: Ask training participants to walk through a typical farm scenario in small groups. Each group should imagine being a person from a vulnerable group (for example, an elderly individual with reduced endurance, a migrant with limited language skills, or a person recovering from addiction who struggles with routine). The group identifies at least three barriers this person might face and then suggests adjustments that could remove or reduce each barrier. After the exercise, compare the findings and highlight common themes.

3. Promoting participation and belonging

Inclusion is not complete until participants feel that they are not only present but also valued. Participation means being actively involved in work and community life, while belonging is the emotional outcome of this involvement. Farms that succeed in creating both provide more than work experience – they provide identity, self-confidence and stability for people who may have lacked these for years.

Creating opportunities for participation

Active participation must be intentional. Without clear strategies, some people may remain on the margins of group life, simply following instructions without truly engaging. Farms can create participation opportunities at several levels:

- **Shared decision-making:** Even small decisions can have a big impact. Allowing participants to vote on which crops to grow in a community plot or how to arrange produce for the market stand makes them feel included in shaping the farm's direction.
- **Ownership of tasks:** Assigning responsibility for specific areas, such as watering a certain greenhouse or managing a compost pile, gives participants a clear role. They develop pride in "their" responsibility and are motivated to care for it over time.
- **Visibility of contributions:** Making sure that participants can see the results of their work strengthens motivation. For example, when a group plants seedlings and later eats vegetables from the same plants, the link between effort and reward becomes clear.
- **Opportunities to teach others:** Participants who master a task can be invited to demonstrate it to newcomers. This elevates their status, builds confidence and shows that their knowledge is valued.

Building a sense of belonging

Belonging is fostered by consistent practices that communicate acceptance and community. It requires more than words; it is built through daily actions.

- **Group rituals:** Starting the day with a shared greeting circle or ending with reflection reinforces unity. Over time, these rituals become part of the farm's culture and are remembered as meaningful traditions.
- **Shared meals and breaks:** Eating together creates equality, as everyone sits at the same table regardless of their role or background. These informal moments are often when friendships form.
- **Celebrating together:** Harvest festivals, birthdays or seasonal milestones mark achievements and create joy. They remind participants that they are part of a living community, not only a workforce.
- **Storytelling and sharing experiences:** Inviting participants to share personal stories, songs or cultural traditions enriches the group and highlights diversity as a strength.

Overcoming barriers to belonging

Not everyone feels a sense of belonging immediately. Some may carry feelings of shame, fear of rejection or mistrust from past experiences. Others may struggle with social interaction due to disability, trauma or cultural differences. Addressing these barriers requires patience and creativity.

- **Gradual integration:** Some participants may first feel comfortable only in individual tasks. Over time, they can be introduced to group activities in small, supportive steps, such as joining a short team task before moving to longer group projects.
- **Encouraging peer mentoring:** Pairing participants helps reduce isolation. When someone is guided by a peer rather than only by staff, relationships grow naturally.
- **Creating safe communication spaces:** Not everyone is ready to speak in large groups. Offering smaller group discussions or one-on-one conversations ensures that all voices are heard.
- **Fighting stigma through education:** Staff and volunteers need to model respect and inclusion at all times. When negative attitudes appear, mentors must address them quickly to protect the group atmosphere.

The role of mentors

Mentors are central to promoting both participation and belonging. Their actions set the tone for the entire group. By listening actively, recognising progress and treating each person with respect, mentors create a climate where inclusion flourishes. They can also balance group dynamics, ensuring that no participant dominates and that quieter voices are encouraged.

Mentors must also be alert to subtle signs of exclusion. A participant who consistently sits alone at lunch, avoids eye contact or skips group activities may need extra support. Addressing these signals early prevents deeper isolation.

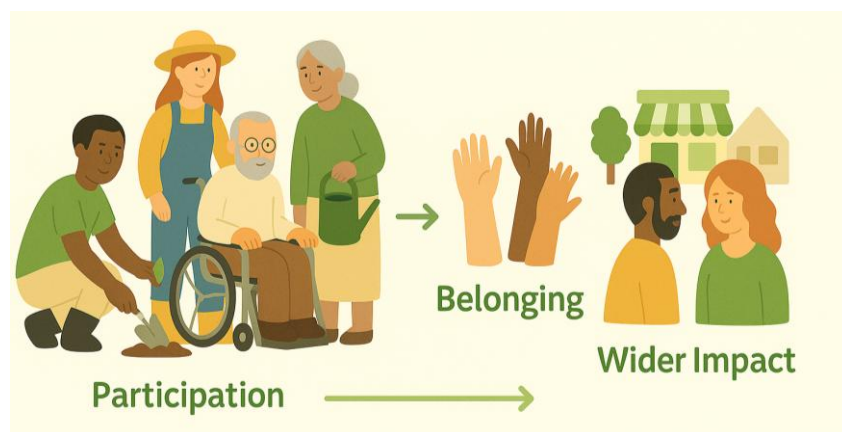
Wider community involvement

Belonging can be strengthened by connecting participants not only to the farm but also to the local community. When farms open their doors for visits, workshops or markets, participants see their contributions appreciated by others outside the group. This recognition reinforces dignity and reduces social stigma.

Examples of community involvement include:

- inviting local schools to visit and learn from participants who demonstrate farm tasks;
- organising open farm days where families and neighbours join in harvesting or tasting products;
- participating in local markets, giving participants a chance to interact with customers and showcase their work.

These activities extend belonging from the farm community to the wider society.



Benefits of participation and belonging

When participants feel included and valued, motivation rises and drop-out rates fall. Belonging improves mental health, reduces loneliness and builds resilience. Farms also benefit because engaged participants contribute more consistently and with greater enthusiasm. At the community level, inclusive farms gain respect and recognition which can lead to stronger support networks and funding opportunities.

Practical exercise: Ask training participants to reflect individually on a time when they felt they truly belonged to a group. In pairs, they should share what made them feel included. Then, in small groups, design one farm-based activity that could create a similar sense of belonging for participants in social farming. Activities could range from a simple morning ritual to a seasonal celebration. Present the ideas to the group and discuss how they address participation and belonging.

4. Team building strategies

Strong teamwork is essential on social farms. Farming is rarely a solitary activity and most agricultural tasks require cooperation. For vulnerable groups, teamwork offers more than efficiency. It provides social learning, builds communication skills and strengthens the sense of belonging. When people work well together, the farm becomes not just a workplace but a supportive community.

Why team building matters

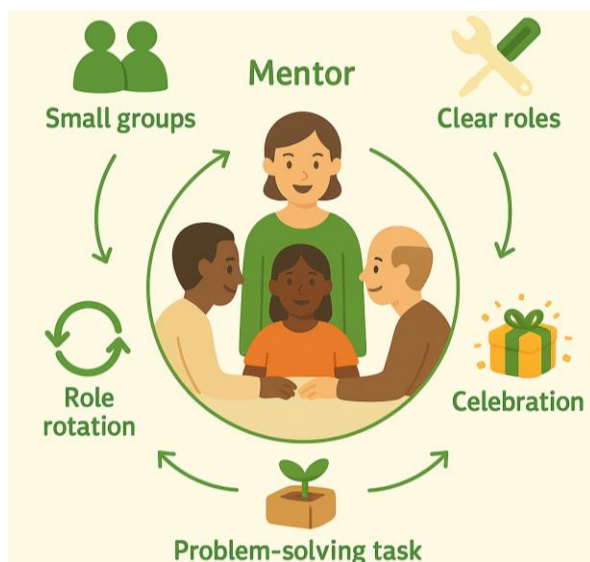
Many participants have limited experience of positive teamwork. Some may come from backgrounds of exclusion, conflict or instability. Others may struggle with social skills due to disability, mental health challenges or lack of confidence. Team building helps participants overcome these barriers and experience cooperation in a safe environment.

Teamwork also improves productivity. When groups learn how to divide roles, coordinate tasks and support each other, work flows more smoothly. A well-functioning team reduces stress for mentors because participants rely on each other rather than only on staff.

Strategies for building strong teams

- **Small group activities:** Working in smaller groups creates space for everyone to participate. For example, dividing a planting field into sections and assigning each to a group of three participants allows for cooperation without overwhelming anyone. Small groups are especially effective for people who feel anxious in large groups.
- **Clear role division:** Teams function best when roles are defined. One person may carry tools, another plants and another waters. This prevents confusion and ensures that everyone contributes. Clear roles also help participants understand their responsibilities and give them a sense of ownership.
- **Rotation of roles:** Rotating tasks within the team gives participants the chance to try new responsibilities. A person who starts as a helper in packaging may later take the lead in arranging products. Rotation prevents monotony and helps identify hidden strengths. It also teaches flexibility and reduces dependence on a single skill.
- **Problem-solving tasks:** Giving the group a challenge such as setting up a compost system or organising a farm stand encourages collective thinking. These activities build trust as participants work toward a common goal. Problem-solving tasks also highlight the value of diverse skills, as each participant contributes in different ways.
- **Celebrating group achievements:** Recognition should not focus only on individuals. When a team completes a harvest or prepares produce for a market, celebrating as a group reinforces unity and pride. This can be done through simple rituals like a group photo, a shared meal or words of appreciation at the end of the day.

- **Use of icebreakers and games:** Short activities at the start of a day or workshop can help participants relax and connect. Examples include name games, simple cooperative challenges or short trust-building exercises. These small steps lay the foundation for stronger cooperation later.



Addressing challenges in teamwork

Not all teamwork goes smoothly. Conflicts, misunderstandings and uneven participation can occur. These challenges can be turned into learning opportunities if handled well.

- **Conflict resolution:** When disagreements arise, mentors should encourage open discussion rather than ignoring tension. Teaching participants to listen respectfully and to find compromise builds valuable life skills.
- **Encouraging quieter voices:** Some participants may stay silent or withdraw. Mentors can ask them directly for input in a supportive way, showing that their opinion matters. Simple gestures like giving them the role of note-taker during group planning can increase their involvement.
- **Managing dominant personalities:** A participant who takes control of every task may discourage others. Setting clear rules about turn-taking and role rotation prevents this imbalance. Mentors can also provide private feedback to help dominant individuals recognise the importance of sharing responsibility.
- **Building trust:** Trust develops gradually. Simple actions such as keeping promises, respecting boundaries and showing consistency help teams feel safe and reliable. Consistent mentoring practices are essential for maintaining this trust.

Additional tips for mentors

- Use visual aids such as team charts or diagrams to show who is responsible for what. This avoids confusion and provides structure.

- Encourage reflection after group tasks by asking, “What went well in our teamwork today?” and “What could we do differently next time?” Reflection builds awareness and continuous improvement.
- Be a role model. Mentors who communicate respectfully, share responsibility and stay calm in stressful situations set the standard for the group.
- Create mixed teams. Combining participants with different abilities fosters learning and reduces stigma, as everyone experiences the value of diversity.
- Allow time for social interaction. Short conversations during breaks are as important as formal teamwork because they build informal bonds that support cooperation during tasks.

Long-term benefits of team building

Strong teams create a positive farm culture where people support one another. Participants learn transferable skills such as communication, problem-solving and leadership. These skills are useful not only on the farm but also in wider society and employment. For vulnerable groups, the experience of successful teamwork can challenge negative self-perceptions and build confidence. Over time, effective team building helps farms become resilient communities where inclusion and productivity go hand in hand.

Practical exercise: Divide training participants into groups of five. Give each group a simple but time-limited task, such as planning how to organise a one-day farm open event or designing the layout of a vegetable stall. After completing the task, ask groups to reflect on how roles were divided, how decisions were made and what could be improved. Discuss how similar activities can be used with participants on social farms to strengthen teamwork.

5. Conflict resolution and empathy training

Wherever people work together, conflicts are natural. On social farms participants often come from backgrounds marked by stress, exclusion or trauma. This means that misunderstandings, frustration or even open conflict can occur more easily. If not addressed, conflicts can harm the atmosphere, reduce participation and undermine trust. Managed constructively, however, they can become opportunities for growth and stronger relationships.

Empathy is the foundation for resolving conflict. It allows people to see the situation from another perspective, to recognise emotions and to respond with respect rather than judgment. Empathy training equips both mentors and participants with the skills to prevent conflicts and to handle them constructively when they arise.

Sources of conflict on farms

Conflicts on social farms can have different origins:

- **Task-related disagreements:** Participants may argue about how to perform a task, who should take the lead or how quickly work should be done. For example, one person may want to finish quickly while another insists on precision.
- **Role confusion:** Without clear roles, some participants may feel overlooked while others may dominate. This can lead to frustration or withdrawal.
- **Personality clashes:** Differences in communication style or personal habits sometimes create tension, especially in groups with limited social skills.
- **Stress and fatigue:** Participants with low endurance or poor coping strategies may react irritably when tired, turning minor issues into conflicts.

Strategies for conflict resolution

Effective conflict resolution combines structure with empathy. Mentors should guide participants toward solutions without taking over completely.

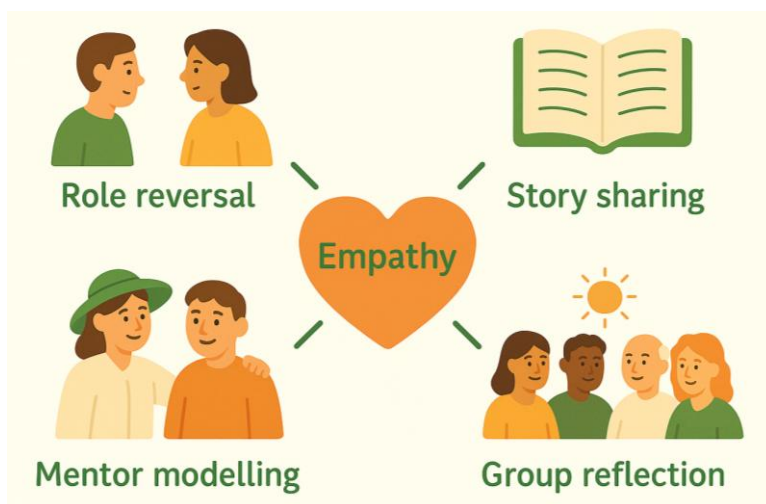
- **Early intervention:** Addressing tension as soon as it appears prevents escalation. If two participants argue about tools, the mentor can step in quickly to clarify roles and calm emotions.
- **Active listening:** Each person should have the chance to explain their perspective without interruption. Summarising what has been said shows that their concerns are heard.
- **Focus on behaviour not personality:** The discussion should concentrate on what happened, not on personal traits. For example, “The watering was done too fast, so the plants were flooded” rather than “You are careless.”
- **Encouraging compromise:** Conflict resolution often requires finding a middle ground. If one participant prefers speed and another prefers precision, the team can agree to alternate methods or to divide tasks accordingly.
- **Using neutral spaces:** Moving the conversation to a quiet place away from the work area reduces pressure and allows for calmer discussion.



Training empathy

Empathy can be trained through daily practice and intentional activities.

- **Role reversal exercises:** Asking participants to describe how they think the other person feels helps develop perspective-taking. For instance, “Imagine you were the one waiting for the tool, how would you feel?”
- **Story sharing:** Giving space for participants to share personal experiences fosters understanding. Hearing about someone’s challenges with disability, migration or recovery can break down stereotypes.
- **Modeling by mentors:** When mentors show patience, kindness and respect, participants learn by observing. Mentors who apologise when they make mistakes demonstrate humility and empathy in action.
- **Group reflection:** At the end of the day, inviting participants to share positive things others did for them builds appreciation and recognition of empathy.



Building a culture of empathy

A single training session is not enough. Empathy must become part of the farm’s culture. This means that respect, listening and understanding are practiced every day. Clear rules support this culture: no insults, respect personal space and listen when someone is speaking. Over time, these rules become habits that protect the group.

Benefits of empathy and conflict resolution

When conflicts are managed well, trust increases rather than decreases. Participants feel safe expressing their opinions and learn that disagreements do not have to end in rejection. Empathy strengthens social bonds, improves cooperation and reduces stigma between different groups. For mentors, a culture of empathy reduces stress and creates a more positive working environment.

Practical exercise: Divide participants into pairs. Give each pair a short conflict scenario, such as “Two participants argue because one takes frequent breaks and the other feels this is unfair.” Ask one to play the role of the person complaining and the other the person defending. Then switch roles. After the exercise, reflect as a group: What did it feel like to see the conflict from the other perspective? How can empathy change the way we react?

6. Examples from Practice

Examples from practice show how the principles of inclusion are implemented in real farm settings. These experiences demonstrate both challenges and solutions, providing valuable guidance for others who wish to create inclusive environments. They also confirm findings from the Slovenian survey, where practitioners stressed the need for practical skills, job-shadowing and hands-on workshops to design inclusive activities for vulnerable groups.

International and European Models

Kerry Social Farming (Ireland) is a community-based, voluntary initiative that brings people with intellectual disabilities onto family farms. Rather than creating special programs, participants join ordinary farm life, carrying out adapted tasks and becoming part of the farm family. Farmers emphasise participation over productivity, while reflection circles provide space to share experiences. This example demonstrates how inclusion works best when rooted in everyday life.

The IPS Model of Supported Employment has been applied on farms to integrate people with mental health challenges. By focusing on individual strengths and offering close mentorship, IPS ensures that vulnerable workers are not excluded but actively supported. Mediation helps transform conflicts into opportunities for growth and participants gain autonomy as well as stability in mainstream environments.

Italy's social cooperatives combine farming with social services for people with disabilities, migrants and young people at risk. Tasks are divided into team-based processes, encouraging peer support. **Slovenian examples** such as Korenika highlight the role of multigenerational centres that combine food production with educational workshops, therapeutic gardens and seed preservation. **Dutch care farms** support elderly people and those with dementia through therapeutic gardening and animal care, where routines provide structure and improve well-being.

Practical Examples from Farm Settings

Structured entry process

When newcomers arrive on a farm, they often feel uncertain or overwhelmed. A structured entry week helps reduce anxiety and build trust. On the first day, a short orientation tour and a simple card with photos of key areas are given. New participants start with easy, low-risk tasks such as watering plants or sorting seeds. Mentors observe how they manage and adjust tasks gradually. Within a week, each

person has a clearly defined role suited to their abilities, which creates a foundation of confidence and motivation.

Adapting planting tasks

During transplanting, differences in working pace may lead to frustration. Dividing the process into roles, placing seedlings, filling soil and watering, ensures everyone has a meaningful contribution. Rotating roles prevents monotony and builds new skills. A simple wooden tool marked with the correct depth reduces errors and replaces long verbal instructions, supporting people with memory or concentration difficulties.

Packaging and production lines

Processing farm products often involves repetitive tasks. Designing a U-shaped packaging table with micro-roles such as folding boxes, filling jars and labeling enables everyone to work at their own speed. Buffer tables prevent bottlenecks and a visual example of the finished product helps participants understand the goal. Each person sees how their part contributes to the overall process, strengthening belonging.

Preparing for markets

Selling at local markets can be stressful for people with limited communication skills or anxiety. Dividing roles into greeter, bagger and stocker makes the process manageable, while money handling is kept with a mentor until participants are ready. Large price boards reduce pressure around calculations. A small quiet corner behind the stand provides a retreat space if someone feels overwhelmed, ensuring that everyone can participate in public-facing activities with dignity.

Weather flexibility

Unpredictable weather can disrupt routines, especially for people who rely on structure. Farms that prepare an indoor “plan B”, such as seed cleaning, box folding or labeling, maintain stability. Break times remain consistent, which preserves predictability. This blend of flexibility and stability is especially important for participants with mental health challenges.

Communication-friendly environments

Clear communication is essential. Many farms use visual instructions in three steps displayed at each workstation. Colour-coded tools, such as different coloured watering cans for indoor and outdoor plants, help participants navigate tasks independently. Demonstrations followed immediately by practice reinforce understanding and reduce reliance on verbal instructions.

Trauma-informed approaches

Some participants have experienced trauma and may become anxious in unpredictable situations. Predictable routines, advance warnings before noisy machinery is used and the option to choose between two tasks give them a sense of safety and control. Establishing a non-verbal signal for requesting a break enables them to manage stress without embarrassment.

Managing fluctuations in energy

Energy levels vary throughout the day. Some farms use a simple red-yellow-green self-check system on a daily routine board. When someone indicates yellow, they are offered lighter tasks or a short pause. If red appears, they are reassigned to safe indoor work or given a supportive break. This system helps prevent accidents and respects individual well-being.

Debriefing after incidents

Accidents or conflicts sometimes occur. Farms that use supportive debrief sessions maintain trust by focusing not on blame but on learning. The group reviews what happened factually, agrees on one small system change and ends with recognition of how people helped each other. This approach transforms setbacks into growth opportunities.



Key Lessons from Practice

These examples highlight several principles. Small steps build confidence, as short and manageable tasks prevent early failure and allow immediate success. Dividing processes into diverse roles increases inclusion by ensuring that everyone, regardless of ability, can contribute meaningfully. Flexibility helps maintain stability, as back-up plans and task alternatives keep routines predictable. Visual tools reduce confusion and enable independence. Above all, a supportive culture that values dignity, respectful feedback and emotional safety allows vulnerable participants to flourish.



Practical Exercise

Participants are presented with short case descriptions such as an elderly participant with reduced endurance, a newcomer with language barriers or a young person with limited concentration. In groups, they design suitable farm tasks or adaptations for each case. Each group then discusses how these adjustments support participation and belonging, and what lessons can be drawn for daily practice.

7. Practical Guidelines

Creating a genuinely inclusive environment on a social farm requires careful planning and thoughtful preparation. Theories of inclusion, empathy and collaboration must be translated into concrete everyday practices that provide staff and participants with a sense of safety, equality and belonging. In this section, participants are introduced to a set of practical guidelines and tools that support the organisation of work, the division of roles and the design of routines adapted to different abilities and needs.



The first step is to consider the physical environment. A social farm should be designed in a way that ensures accessibility for everyone. Paths must be wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair, tools should be stored at a height that is accessible to people of varying stature and spaces should be clearly marked with simple symbols or colour coding. A well-organised environment reduces confusion and stress. When people with disabilities enter a space that is tidy and predictable, they can more easily engage in activities and feel confident in their contributions.

Equally important is the organisation of work. Every person involved in farm activities should have a clearly defined role. Roles should not be seen as rigid job descriptions but rather as a framework that provides predictability and security. When participants understand that their contribution matters, even if it is a small step in a larger process, their confidence and willingness to collaborate increases. Tasks should be adjusted to individual capacities and, when necessary, broken down into smaller units that are easier to manage. A step-by-step approach is particularly effective when working with people who have limited work habits or face cognitive challenges.

The role of staff and mentors is crucial. Mentors are not only supervisors who provide instructions, but also the supportive backbone of the inclusive environment. Their task is to create a setting where people feel respected and valued. This requires flexibility, patience and the ability to recognise when someone needs extra help or a break. Mentors must also find a balance between leadership and accompaniment. At times they need to take initiative, while in other situations they should step back and allow participants to discover their own solutions.

Daily routines on a social farm bring stability and a sense of safety. The work schedule should be clear, consistent and ideally presented in visual form so that it can be followed by people who struggle with written instructions. Each day should begin with a short introduction, during which tasks and expectations are explained. The end of the day should include a reflection session, giving participants the opportunity to share what they achieved and where they needed support. Such routines reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings and reinforce mutual trust.

Checklists are a useful tool to guide this process. A checklist for physical space might include questions such as: Are the pathways accessible for all? Are tools clearly labelled and easy to reach? Are rest areas comfortable and welcoming? A checklist for work organisation could ask: Does each participant have a defined role? Are tasks adapted to abilities? Is time for breaks included? A third checklist might focus on staff: Have mentors been trained to work with vulnerable groups? Do they meet regularly to exchange experiences? Are there established protocols for conflict resolution and crisis management?

Although checklists provide structure, it is important to leave room for flexibility and humanity. Best practice in social farming is not rigid adherence to rules but the creation of a flexible environment centred on the individual. Guidelines should therefore not be used merely as obligations but as tools that help achieve the larger goal of building a farm where everyone can grow, contribute and feel a true sense of belonging.

Practical exercise:

Participants are divided into small groups and asked to design their own checklist for a farm or project they are familiar with. Each group chooses one area—physical environment, work organisation or staff roles—and develops three to five guiding questions they could apply in practice. Groups then present their checklists to the rest of the participants, followed by a collective discussion on how these tools could be implemented in real settings.

Lesson 3: Training and Mentoring Approaches

Social farming relies not only on agricultural skills but also on the ability to guide, support and empower vulnerable participants. Mentoring and training are therefore at the heart of creating inclusive and sustainable farm environments. Lesson 3 introduces participants to the role of mentors and explores how leadership through empathy, encouragement and guidance can transform everyday farm tasks into meaningful opportunities for growth.

This lesson emphasises that mentors are not simply supervisors but facilitators of learning and inclusion. They help participants develop confidence, independence and resilience by listening actively, giving clear instructions and providing constructive feedback. Practical methods such as job coaching, peer mentoring and ongoing support strategies show how mentors can balance productivity with learning while adapting their approach to different groups. The lesson also highlights the importance of long-term relationships, consistent structures and practical tools that support daily mentoring.

By combining theory with concrete examples, Lesson 3 equips participants with both the mindset and the skills needed to mentor effectively. It shows that mentoring is not about control but about creating an environment where individuals can contribute, learn and belong.

1. Role of Mentors in Social Farming

Mentors are the cornerstone of inclusive social farming. They bridge the gap between agricultural tasks and the social mission of empowering vulnerable participants. Their role is not limited to teaching farming skills; it extends to creating a safe environment where people feel valued, capable and connected. On a social farm, mentors lead through guidance, empathy and encouragement rather than authority or control.

Leadership in this setting is relational. A mentor is first and foremost a role model. By demonstrating patience, respect and consistency, mentors establish a culture that others naturally follow. Vulnerable participants, many of whom have experienced rejection or marginalisation, often look to mentors for cues on how to behave and what to expect. When a mentor treats every individual with dignity, it sets the tone for the entire farm community.

Empathy is at the heart of mentoring. Participants may face invisible challenges: anxiety, past trauma, low self-esteem or limited work experience. An effective mentor does not simply focus on productivity but seeks to understand the human being behind the task. Empathy allows mentors to adapt instructions, pace and expectations according to individual needs. For example, a person who becomes anxious in noisy environments may be given tasks in quieter areas, while someone who struggles with memory may benefit from step-by-step visual instructions.

Encouragement is equally vital. Vulnerable participants often arrive with little confidence in their abilities. Even small successes can be transformative if they are recognised and celebrated. A mentor

who provides timely, positive feedback reinforces motivation and resilience. The phrase “well done, I see your effort” can have more lasting impact than a completed task itself, because it validates the person’s worth.

Guidance on a social farm involves more than explaining tasks. It requires building trust, anticipating difficulties and supporting gradual skill development. Mentors must strike a balance between helping and allowing independence. Overprotection can limit growth, while too much freedom without support can lead to discouragement. Effective mentors guide participants step by step, providing enough structure to prevent failure but enough freedom to encourage ownership and responsibility.

The role of mentors also includes managing group dynamics. Social farms often bring together people of different ages, abilities and backgrounds. Tensions can arise when expectations differ, when some participants work faster than others or when communication barriers exist. Mentors act as facilitators who encourage collaboration, mediate conflicts and remind the group that diversity is a strength.



Examples from practice demonstrate the importance of this role. On many farms, mentors are trained to create inclusive environments where tasks are adjusted to individual abilities and where social interaction is valued as much as productivity. In supported employment approaches, mentors provide ongoing coaching and mediation, helping participants maintain both confidence and responsibility. In multigenerational settings, mentorship fosters solidarity across age groups and encourages mutual learning, showing that guidance can empower both younger and older participants alike.

Practical Exercise

Divide participants into pairs. One person plays the role of a mentor introducing a task such as planting seeds, while the other plays a newcomer with limited experience. The “newcomer” intentionally makes a mistake or shows uncertainty. The mentor must respond with empathy, guidance and

encouragement. After switching roles, the group reflects on the experience: What responses made the newcomer feel supported? Which actions built confidence and motivation?

2. Skills for Effective Mentoring

Mentoring on a social farm requires more than empathy; it demands practical skills that allow mentors to support participants in concrete ways. Many participants arrive with reduced confidence, limited work habits or specific barriers such as memory difficulties, anxiety or communication challenges. This section provides practical strategies for active listening, clear instruction and constructive feedback, showing how these skills can be applied step by step in everyday farm activities.

Active Listening in Practice

Active listening means noticing both what is said and what is not said. A mentor who listens actively pays attention to pauses, tone of voice, eye contact and body language. If a participant avoids eye contact and answers briefly, this may indicate discomfort or confusion. Instead of moving on, the mentor can pause and ask gently: *“Would you like me to explain it again?”* or *“Do you feel comfortable trying this?”*

One practical method is the **“listen–repeat–check” technique**. After giving instructions, the mentor asks the participant to repeat in their own words what they understood. This ensures clarity and avoids misunderstandings. For example, after explaining how to plant seedlings, the mentor might ask: *“Can you show me with your hands how deep we should place the seedling?”* This not only checks understanding but also reinforces memory through action.

Another useful practice is **reflective listening**. When a participant expresses frustration, instead of immediately correcting them, the mentor reflects their feelings: *“I hear that you are tired of this task—it takes patience. Let’s take a short break and then try again together.”* Reflection validates emotions and reduces tension, opening space for problem-solving.

Giving Clear and Simple Instructions

Many participants succeed when tasks are broken down into small, manageable steps. Instead of saying *“Please prepare the garden bed,”* a mentor might divide the process into:

1. Bring the tools from the shed.
2. Remove the weeds.
3. Use the rake to smooth the soil.
4. Mark the rows with the stick.

Each step can be demonstrated once and repeated by the participant immediately. This **“show–do–repeat” method** ensures comprehension and builds confidence.

Visual tools are especially helpful. Photos, diagrams or colour codes can guide participants even when verbal explanations are forgotten. For example, using a green watering can for indoor plants and a blue one for outdoor plants eliminates confusion and allows participants to work independently.

Another effective approach is **task modelling**. The mentor performs the task slowly while speaking each step aloud: *“I place the seedling in the hole, I cover it with soil, I press gently, I water once.”* Participants then repeat, with the mentor observing and providing immediate support. Over time, the spoken steps can be reduced as the participant becomes confident.

Providing Constructive Feedback

Feedback is most effective when it is **specific, immediate and encouraging**. General praise such as *“Good job”* is less powerful than focused recognition: *“I see you planted the seeds carefully in straight rows—well done.”* Specific comments show that the mentor has truly noticed the effort.

When corrections are needed, mentors should focus on behaviour, not personality. Instead of saying *“You are careless,”* the mentor can say *“The soil was pressed too hard, so the roots may not grow well. Let’s try pressing gently together.”* This keeps the conversation task-focused and non-judgemental.

The **“sandwich method”** works well: start with a positive remark, offer one clear correction and end with encouragement. For example: *“You worked with great concentration today. To make it even better, let’s try spacing the plants a little further apart. I know you can do it.”*

Practical Examples and Solutions

- **Supporting low concentration:** When a young participant struggles to stay focused, break the task into 10-minute segments with a short pause between. Use a visual timer or routine board to keep track.
- **Reducing anxiety:** For a participant nervous about using tools, start with a safe, simplified version (for example, using a small hand rake before a large one). Gradually progress as confidence grows.
- **Memory support:** Use laminated step-by-step picture cards placed at the workstation. The participant can check them independently, reducing reliance on constant verbal reminders.
- **Building endurance:** When an older participant tires easily, alternate between physically demanding tasks and lighter roles such as sorting or labeling. This keeps them included without overexertion.
- **Encouraging independence:** Instead of intervening immediately when a mistake is made, allow time for self-correction. Ask guiding questions like *“What do you notice about this row of plants compared to the others?”* This promotes reflection and problem-solving.
- **Creating safe failure:** Plan small tasks where mistakes do not cause harm, such as practicing seed planting in a tray before moving to the field. This allows learning without fear of consequences.

Practical Exercise

Participants work in triads: one plays the mentor, one the participant and one the observer. The mentor explains a task using clear steps, active listening and constructive feedback. The “participant” intentionally makes a small mistake or shows confusion. The observer notes how the mentor listened, explained and responded. Afterward, the group discusses: What worked well? What could be improved? How did the participant feel supported?

3. Job-Coaching Approaches

Job coaching is one of the most effective ways to support vulnerable participants on social farms. Unlike general mentoring, which focuses on overall well-being and inclusion, job coaching is directly related to helping individuals perform specific tasks and develop sustainable work habits. It is a method of structured, on-the-job support that balances assistance with encouragement toward independence.

The goal of job coaching is not to complete tasks for participants but to guide them step by step until they are able to work more confidently on their own. The role of the job coach is therefore to observe, support, adapt and gradually reduce direct involvement as participants gain skills. This “fading support” model ensures that responsibility shifts from the coach to the participant, building resilience and autonomy.



Principles of Job Coaching

Effective job coaching on social farms follows several principles:

- **Individualised support:** Every participant has unique abilities, needs and learning styles. Job coaching must be tailored rather than standardised.
- **Step-by-step skill development:** Complex tasks are divided into small, manageable steps, with mastery of one step before moving to the next.
- **Hands-on learning:** Participants learn by doing with the coach providing demonstration, observation and immediate feedback.

- **Encouragement of independence:** As competence grows, the coach gradually reduces guidance, encouraging participants to take initiative.
- **Consistency and predictability:** Routines, clear rules and reliable schedules provide the security needed for learning to take root.

Practical Approaches on the Farm

1. Task Analysis and Breakdown

Before introducing a task, the job coach analyses it into clear stages. For example, “harvesting lettuce” may include: selecting ripe plants, loosening the soil, cutting carefully, washing, and placing in the crate. The coach first models each step, then supports the participant to practice one stage at a time.

2. Use of Visual Supports

Step cards with pictures or icons can be placed at the workstation. For seed planting, the card might show: picture 1 – place seed, picture 2 – cover with soil, picture 3 – water. This allows the participant to work independently while still having a reference point.

3. Prompting and Fading

Job coaching uses prompts to guide behaviour—these can be verbal, visual or physical. For instance, the coach may start with direct demonstration (“do it with me”), then move to verbal prompts (“remember to press gently”), and finally to visual prompts (a picture card). As the participant becomes confident, prompts are reduced.

4. Positive Reinforcement

Acknowledging effort is essential. Instead of only commenting when mistakes occur, the coach provides consistent recognition of progress: “You harvested three heads on your own today—that’s an improvement from yesterday.” Such reinforcement keeps motivation high.

5. Problem-Solving Together

When difficulties arise the coach avoids immediately fixing the mistake. Instead, they involve the participant in finding solutions: “What do you think happened here? How could we try it differently?” This builds problem-solving skills and independence.

Common Challenges and Solutions

- **Slow learning pace:** Some participants may need much more time to master tasks. Solution: adjust expectations, repeat practice in short sessions, and celebrate incremental progress.
- **Resistance or anxiety:** Participants may refuse tasks due to fear of failure. Solution: introduce low-risk tasks first, gradually building complexity, and provide reassurance with small successes.

- **Inconsistent performance:** Some days participants may perform well and others poorly. Solution: maintain routines, avoid comparisons and adapt tasks to energy levels (light roles during low days, more demanding roles on stronger days).
- **Communication barriers:** Participants may not understand complex instructions. Solution: use demonstrations, gestures, pictures and minimal language.

Practical Examples

- A participant who struggles with social interaction is supported to sell farm produce at a local market. The coach first models greeting customers, then stands nearby while the participant repeats and eventually steps back to let the participant manage short interactions independently.
- An older participant with limited strength works in packaging. The coach divides the task into folding boxes, inserting liners and labeling. Over time, the participant masters each stage and the coach gradually reduces supervision.
- A young participant with attention difficulties works in weeding. The coach provides a marked row, encourages short breaks and checks progress every ten minutes. With consistency the participant learns to stay on task for longer periods.

Practical Exercise

Participants are divided into pairs. One plays the role of a job coach and the other plays the participant. The “participant” receives a moderately complex task (for example, transplanting seedlings, preparing a compost pile, or setting up a market table). The coach must break the task into steps, demonstrate the first step, provide prompts and gradually reduce assistance as the participant learns. After the exercise, pairs reflect: What techniques helped? Where was support too much or too little? How did fading support influence independence?

4. Ongoing Support Strategies – Sustaining Inclusion and Empowerment

Mentoring in social farming does not end once a participant has learned a task. To sustain progress, inclusion and motivation, ongoing support strategies are needed. These strategies ensure that vulnerable participants continue to grow, adapt to new challenges and maintain a sense of belonging. Ongoing support is not about constant supervision but about creating systems and practices that provide stability, encouragement and room for development over time.

One of the most important elements of ongoing support is **regular feedback**. When feedback becomes part of the daily or weekly routine, participants know what to expect and feel secure in the learning process. Constructive feedback should always be balanced with recognition of effort. Even when

correcting mistakes, mentors should highlight progress. For example, a mentor might say: *“You worked more steadily today and with just a little more care the planting rows will be perfectly aligned.”* This reinforces growth while pointing out the next step forward.

Routine reflection sessions are another valuable strategy. Setting aside time at the end of the day or week for participants to share what they achieved, where they struggled and what they enjoyed creates a culture of openness and trust. These sessions encourage self-awareness and responsibility. They also allow mentors to adjust activities based on participant feedback, showing that voices are heard and respected.

Ongoing support also involves **adaptation to changing needs**. Vulnerable participants may experience fluctuations in health, motivation or energy levels. A mentor who observes these changes can adapt roles accordingly, ensuring that participants are neither overwhelmed nor excluded. For instance, a participant who is physically tired can be offered lighter tasks such as sorting, labeling or preparing tools instead of heavy field work. This flexibility protects dignity and maintains inclusion.

Peer support is a powerful ongoing strategy. When participants are encouraged to support one another, the farm becomes a community where everyone has something to contribute. Pairing newcomers with more experienced participants helps build confidence for both. The newcomer gains guidance while the experienced participant develops a sense of responsibility and pride in helping others. Over time, this peer mentoring reduces dependency on the main mentor and strengthens the group.

Another important element is **consistent structure combined with flexibility**. Participants benefit from knowing that routines such as start times, breaks and reflection moments are stable. At the same time, flexibility in task assignment ensures that unexpected challenges do not disrupt the overall sense of security. For example, if outdoor work is cancelled due to weather, having a prepared indoor alternative such as seed sorting or packaging maintains continuity. Or another example: if a participant arrives feeling anxious or withdrawn, instead of pressing them into the usual group activity, the mentor can offer a quieter individual role such as preparing seed packets, watering indoor plants or cleaning tools. This adaptation maintains the rhythm of the day while respecting the participant’s emotional state.

Ongoing support also includes **crisis management strategies**. When accidents, conflicts or emotional breakdowns occur, the way they are handled can either build or damage trust. A supportive approach avoids blame and instead focuses on collective problem-solving. After an incident, mentors can hold a short debrief where the group reviews what happened, identifies one improvement and closes with recognition of mutual support. This transforms setbacks into learning opportunities.

Practical Guidelines for Ongoing Support

- Establish regular feedback and reflection routines.
- Monitor changes in participant energy or motivation and adapt tasks promptly.
- Encourage peer mentoring by pairing newcomers with experienced participants.

- Maintain predictable daily structures while preparing flexible alternatives.
- Use supportive debriefing after incidents to protect trust.
- Document progress in a simple, visible way (charts, photos, checklists) so participants see how far they have come.

Practical Examples

- A participant with limited concentration benefits from a daily checklist where tasks are marked off as completed. This creates a visible record of progress and reduces anxiety about forgetting steps.
- A group reflection circle every Friday allows participants to share highlights of the week. One participant says: *"I liked feeding the animals,"* while another admits: *"I found it hard to carry the baskets."* Mentors adjust the next week's roles based on this feedback.
- In a mixed-age group, a younger participant learns faster and begins helping an older participant with tool preparation. This peer mentoring builds confidence for both and fosters teamwork.
- During a conflict, instead of assigning blame, the mentor guides the group to identify what happened, what could change and what they learned. The group agrees to use clearer signals in the future, turning a problem into a shared solution.

Practical Exercise

Participants design an "ongoing support plan" for a fictional group of farm workers with diverse needs. They outline:

1. How feedback will be given each day.
2. How reflection sessions will be organised.
3. How tasks will be adapted when energy levels fluctuate.
4. How peer mentoring can be encouraged.
5. How the group will respond to a conflict or accident.

Each group presents their plan, followed by discussion on which strategies are most realistic and useful for their own projects.

5. Balancing Productivity with Learning – Creating Value while Supporting Growth

One of the most delicate challenges in social farming is finding the right balance between productivity and learning. Farms are real economic units that need to produce food or services, yet they are also social environments where vulnerable participants come to learn, develop skills and feel included. If the focus falls too heavily on productivity, participants may feel pressured and excluded. If learning is prioritised without structure, the farm risks losing efficiency and sustainability. The key is to find a dynamic balance where both goals reinforce each other.

Productivity on a social farm cannot be measured only by the volume of products harvested or the number of tasks completed. It must also include the social value created: confidence gained by participants, new skills acquired or the sense of belonging developed through teamwork. A tomato that takes longer to pick because a newcomer is learning the task still has value, because it represents both a product and a learning milestone.

Learning requires time, repetition and tolerance for mistakes. This can sometimes reduce the speed of work. To manage this, mentors can divide roles so that participants at different skill levels complement each other. For example, newcomers might start with simple, slower tasks such as preparing soil or labeling jars, while more experienced participants handle activities that require speed or precision. In this way the farm maintains productivity without excluding those who are still learning.

Another approach is to integrate **learning into production routines**. Instead of separating training and work mentors can use production activities as teaching opportunities. For instance during vegetable harvesting a mentor can demonstrate proper cutting technique, observe participants' attempts and give immediate feedback all while contributing to the harvest. This method turns the farm itself into a living classroom, where every task has both an economic and educational dimension.

Clear communication of expectations is essential. Participants should understand that mistakes are a natural part of learning and that progress matters more than perfection. At the same time mentors should explain which tasks require higher accuracy or efficiency and why. For example when preparing food products for sale labels must be correct to meet regulations. Participants can then appreciate that some tasks are less flexible while others provide space for practice.

Balancing productivity with learning also means **celebrating both outcomes equally**. Harvesting a high yield is a success, but so is helping a participant complete their first independent planting row. When both achievements are acknowledged, participants understand that their learning journey is valued as much as the farm's economic results.

Practical Guidelines for Balancing Productivity and Learning

- View productivity in terms of both economic output and social value.
- Match tasks to participant abilities combining slower learning roles with faster skilled roles.

- Use production tasks as natural teaching opportunities rather than separating them from training.
- Clarify which tasks require precision or speed and which can be used for practice.
- Recognise and celebrate learning achievements alongside productive results.

Practical Examples

- A group is preparing vegetables for market. Experienced participants clean and weigh produce, while newcomers attach labels. This division keeps the process efficient while ensuring that everyone contributes.
- During bread making a mentor lets one participant knead the dough more slowly as practice while another handles the baking schedule to keep productivity on track. The final bread is both a product and a learning tool.
- In the orchard faster workers harvest fruit while learners practice sorting by size and quality. The two groups' work fits together to maintain farm efficiency without excluding beginners.
- When packaging herbs mentors show newcomers how to fill bags and seal them. Mistakes are corrected with calm feedback while experienced workers manage stock levels and final quality checks. Both sides contribute to the farm's goals.

Practical Exercise

Participants design a weekly activity plan for a farm that needs to harvest vegetables while training five newcomers with little farming experience. They must decide how tasks will be divided, how learning will be integrated into the workflow and how both productivity and personal growth will be measured. Groups present their plans and discuss how they found a balance between economic and social objectives.

6. Mentoring Vulnerable Groups – Tailored Support for Diverse Needs

Mentoring in social farming becomes most effective when it takes into account the specific needs of vulnerable groups. People who join farms may face very different challenges, ranging from physical disabilities and mental health difficulties to social isolation, low confidence or limited work habits. Each of these situations requires mentors to adapt their approach so that participants feel safe, respected and able to grow.

The first principle of mentoring vulnerable groups is **seeing the person before the difficulty**. Instead of defining participants by their limitations, mentors focus on their abilities, interests and potential.

Every person has strengths to contribute even if these are not immediately visible. Recognising and building on these strengths creates the basis for trust and motivation.

Another key principle is **adaptation without overprotection**. Vulnerable participants need tasks and support tailored to their abilities, but they also need the freedom to try, make mistakes and learn. A mentor who does everything for them undermines their independence. A mentor who guides patiently, offers step-by-step instructions and allows participants to practice builds both skills and confidence.

Different groups may require different mentoring approaches:

- **People with physical disabilities** benefit from adapted tools, accessible workspaces and flexible task assignments. A raised garden bed, lightweight tools or clear pathways can make participation possible and meaningful.
- **People with mental health difficulties** often need calm, structured routines and understanding when energy levels fluctuate. Predictable schedules and encouragement during low-motivation days help them remain engaged.
- **Elderly participants** may face reduced endurance or slower learning. Shorter tasks, opportunities for rest and respect for their life experience make them feel valued.
- **Young people at risk** often have limited concentration or weak work habits. Clear rules, consistent boundaries and visible success in small steps help them stay motivated.
- **Migrants or people with language barriers** may need visual instructions, demonstrations and peer support to overcome communication challenges. Using simple pictorial guides and encouraging teamwork reduces isolation.

Practical Guidelines for Mentoring Vulnerable Groups

- Focus on strengths and interests not only on limitations.
- Adapt tools, tasks and environments while maintaining opportunities for independence.
- Use predictable routines to reduce anxiety and increase stability.
- Provide feedback that recognises effort and builds confidence.
- Offer varied roles so that everyone can find a meaningful contribution.
- Encourage peer support to reduce dependency on the mentor.
- Maintain respect, dignity and patience at all times.

Practical Examples

- A participant with limited mobility is given a raised planting bed and a lightweight watering can. With these adaptations, they can manage their own section of the garden and take pride in independence.
- An individual with depression struggles to start work in the morning. The mentor greets them warmly provides a structured list of small tasks and offers praise for each step completed. The participant gradually engages and feels a sense of achievement.
- An older adult finds long field tasks tiring. The mentor arranges alternating roles: half an hour in the garden followed by labeling jars indoors. This balance keeps them active without exhaustion.
- A teenager with limited focus tends to give up quickly. The mentor breaks a task into three steps, provides immediate feedback after each step and celebrates the completion of the whole process.
- A newcomer with language barriers cannot follow complex verbal instructions. The mentor uses a picture-based guide for composting, demonstrates each step once and then lets the participant try independently.

Group / Challenge	Approach	Practical Example
Physical disabilities	Adapted tools, raised beds, clear pathways	Limited mobility → raised bed + lightweight watering can → independence
Mental health difficulties	Calm routines, encouragement on low days	Depression → warm greeting + small task list → gradual engagement
Elderly	Shorter tasks, rest opportunities, value life experience	Older adult → garden work + labeling jars → balanced activity
Youth at risk	Clear rules, visible success in small steps	Teenager with low focus → 3-step tasks + immediate feedback → completion celebrated
Migrants / language barriers	Visual instructions, peer support	Language barrier → picture-based composting guide → independent practice

Practical Exercise

Participants are divided into groups, each receiving a case description such as:

- A person with anxiety who avoids group tasks
- An older participant with reduced stamina
- A young person who becomes distracted after ten minutes
- A newcomer with limited language skills

Each group designs a mentoring strategy for their case, including task adaptation, communication methods and feedback approaches. They then present their solutions and discuss how these strategies can be applied in real farm settings.

7. Good Practice Examples – Innovative Mentoring in Action

Good practice examples demonstrate how theory is translated into daily work on social farms. They offer inspiration and practical solutions, showing how mentors adapt approaches to diverse needs. The following examples illustrate a variety of methods that help vulnerable participants build confidence, learn skills and contribute meaningfully, while also supporting the farm's productivity.

Example 1: Rotational Learning Circles

Instead of assigning one participant to a single repetitive task the mentor organises short “learning circles” where participants rotate through different roles in planting, watering and harvesting. This keeps the day dynamic, prevents boredom and allows each person to discover their strengths. Rotation also reduces the risk of exclusion, since no one is limited to tasks seen as “easy” or “less important.”

Example 2: Story-Based Skill Training

For participants with low literacy or memory difficulties instructions are embedded into a simple story. For example, when teaching feeding routines for animals, the mentor tells a story about the “morning walk”: first greet the animals then give them fresh water then feed them hay and finally check their shelter. By repeating the story daily participants remember the sequence more easily and feel proud when they can recite it themselves.

Example 3: Peer Shadowing

A newcomer is paired with a participant who has been on the farm longer. Instead of the mentor explaining every detail, the experienced participant demonstrates the routine and answers questions. This not only builds the newcomer's skills but also empowers the more experienced participant by recognising their expertise. The mentor supervises gently, stepping in only when necessary.

Example 4: “Quiet Zone” Workspaces

Some participants feel anxious in noisy or crowded environments. To reduce stress mentors designate a quiet zone on the farm where individuals can complete focused tasks such as seed sorting, herb drying or tool cleaning. This provides a safe space while keeping the participant integrated into the workflow.

Example 5: Success Journals

Each participant keeps a simple “success journal” with drawings, symbols or short notes documenting what they achieved each day. The mentor helps them record progress for example by pasting a photo of harvested vegetables or drawing a watering can to mark a completed task. Over time this creates a visual record of growth that strengthens confidence and motivation.

Example 6: Group Problem-Solving Sessions

When a challenge arises, for example weeds growing faster than expected, the mentor turns it into a group problem-solving exercise. Participants brainstorm ideas such as working in pairs, using new tools or dividing the plot into sections. The chosen solution is then tested together. This approach fosters teamwork and teaches participants that their opinions are valuable.

Example 7: Inclusive Tool Design

Mentors create or adapt simple tools that are easier to handle. For example handles are wrapped with soft material for participants with arthritis or watering cans are fitted with lighter spouts. These adaptations allow individuals who might otherwise be excluded to participate fully and safely.

Example 8: Celebrating Micro-Achievements

At the end of each week, the group gathers to celebrate “small victories.” A participant who managed to complete a row of planting independently is acknowledged alongside one who overcame shyness and spoke in front of the group. This practice highlights personal growth and teaches the group to value diverse forms of success.

Example 9: “Buddy Bench” for Emotional Support

A simple bench is placed in a visible spot on the farm as a signal that someone sitting there needs support. Participants know they can take a break there without having to explain in words. A mentor or peer then joins them for a short supportive conversation. This system reduces anxiety and encourages healthy communication.

Example 10: Market Simulation Training

Before attending a real farmers’ market, the mentor organises a “mock market” on the farm. Participants practice setting up a stand, greeting customers and handling produce. Mistakes are discussed in a safe environment. Once they attend the real market participants feel prepared and confident turning what could be a stressful situation into a positive experience.

Approach	Description	Key Benefit
Rotational Learning Circles	Participants rotate roles (planting, watering, harvesting).	Prevents boredom, reveals individual strengths.
Story-Based Skill Training	Instructions embedded in simple stories (e.g., feeding animals).	Easier recall, pride in repetition.
Peer Shadowing	Newcomer paired with experienced participant.	Builds skills and empowers both.
Quiet Zone Workspaces	Designated calm spaces for focused tasks.	Reduces anxiety while keeping participants included.
Success Journals	Participants record achievements with drawings, notes, or photos.	Creates visible progress, strengthens confidence.
Group Problem-Solving	Challenges turned into collective brainstorming and solution testing.	Fosters teamwork and values participants' opinions.
Inclusive Tool Design	Tools adapted for easier handling (lightweight watering cans, soft handles).	Enables participation for those with physical barriers.
Celebrating Micro-Achievements	Weekly recognition of small victories (e.g., finishing a row, speaking up).	Builds motivation, values diverse forms of success.
Buddy Bench	A bench signals that someone needs support; peers/mentors offer conversation.	Encourages healthy communication, reduces anxiety.
Market Simulation Training	Practice market setup and sales in a safe environment before real markets.	Increases confidence, prepares for real social settings.

Key Lessons from Practice

These good practices show that inclusion thrives when creativity meets empathy. Rotational learning, storytelling, peer mentoring and adapted tools make tasks more accessible. Quiet spaces, success journals and buddy systems protect emotional well-being. Group problem-solving and market simulations highlight how social farming can prepare participants not only for farm tasks but also for broader social interaction. The common thread across all these examples is that learning and productivity are combined in ways that empower participants while strengthening the community of the farm.

Practical Exercise

Participants are divided into groups and given one scenario:

- A person who avoids group activities due to shyness
- A participant who becomes frustrated with repetitive tasks
- A newcomer who is anxious about attending a public event
- An older participant with limited mobility

Each group designs a mentoring strategy using inspiration from the examples above, then presents how their solution balances inclusion, learning and productivity.

8. Practical Mentoring Toolkit – Everyday Tools for Inclusive Guidance

Mentors on social farms need not only empathy and communication skills but also concrete tools that help them guide participants in daily activities. A practical mentoring toolkit provides simple, adaptable resources that can be used immediately on the farm to improve clarity, build confidence and support inclusion. This section introduces practical instruments, methods and routines that make mentoring more effective and sustainable.

The toolkit is not a fixed set of materials but a flexible collection of strategies that can be tailored to each farm and participant group. What matters most is that tools are easy to use, accessible to everyone and integrated into daily routines.

Visual Support Tools

Visual aids are among the most effective mentoring tools, especially for participants with memory difficulties or language barriers. Step-by-step picture cards, laminated posters and colour-coded tools reduce reliance on long explanations and give participants independence. For example seed planting can be explained through three illustrated steps: place the seed, cover with soil, water once. Participants can refer to the card at their own pace which builds confidence and reduces stress.

Checklists also serve as visual anchors. A simple board where tasks are ticked off during the day helps participants track progress and prevents feelings of being lost. For groups a shared checklist reinforces teamwork as everyone can see how much has already been achieved.

Communication and Feedback Tools

Mentors can use structured communication aids to make conversations clearer. One useful tool is a **“feelings board”** with simple symbols (smiley, neutral, sad) that participants can point to when words are difficult. This allows mentors to recognise emotions early and adapt tasks accordingly.

For feedback, the **“two stars and a wish”** method works well: the mentor highlights two positive actions and one area for improvement. This creates balance between recognition and guidance making feedback encouraging rather than discouraging.

Routines and Reflection Tools

Daily routines are themselves powerful mentoring tools. A short **morning briefing** where the mentor explains the plan for the day using both words and visuals prepares participants mentally and emotionally. A **closing reflection circle** at the end of the day allows everyone to share what they accomplished, what they enjoyed and what was difficult. These routines create predictability, stability and space for learning.

Another helpful tool is a **progress folder** for each participant. This may include photos of completed tasks, short mentor notes and self-reflections from the participant. Over time, the folder becomes a visible record of growth, which is motivating for both participants and mentors.

Peer Support Tools

Mentoring does not always need to come directly from staff. Structured peer support can be formalised with tools such as a **buddy system**. Each newcomer is paired with a more experienced participant who provides informal guidance. The mentor oversees the process but allows peer relationships to develop naturally. This not only helps the newcomer but also empowers the “buddy” who gains a sense of responsibility.

Another peer support tool is the **shared problem-solving board**. When difficulties arise participants write or draw their ideas for solutions. The mentor facilitates discussion and helps the group select the most realistic option. This tool builds collective responsibility and reinforces the idea that everyone’s input is valued.

Category	Tools & Methods	Practical Examples
Visual Support Tools	Step-by-step picture cards, laminated posters, colour-coded tools, checklists	Participant with limited literacy uses a laminated checklist → ticks tasks off daily.
Communication & Feedback	Feelings board (😊 😐 😞), “Two stars & a wish” method	Mentor uses two positive comments + one suggestion → feedback stays balanced.
Routines & Reflection	Morning briefing with visuals, daily reflection circles, progress folders	End-of-week reflection board → sticky notes under “I enjoyed / I learned / I found difficult.”
Peer Support Tools	Buddy system, shared problem-solving board	New participant paired with a buddy → learns tasks and feels included.

Applied Visuals in Tasks	Pocket-sized instruction cards	During animal care → pocket card with feeding steps ensures accuracy & independence.
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Practical Examples

- A participant with limited literacy uses a laminated checklist with pictures of daily tasks. Each time a task is finished they tick the picture with a marker. At the end of the day they proudly show their completed list.
- During animal care the mentor provides a small pocket card showing feeding steps in order. The participant checks the card at each step ensuring accuracy while gaining independence.
- At the end of the week participants gather around a reflection board where they place sticky notes under “I enjoyed,” “I learned” and “I found difficult.” This creates a structured group reflection that is simple but effective.
- A new participant is paired with a buddy. On the first day the buddy shows them where tools are stored and how to start a simple task. By the end of the week, the newcomer feels included and the buddy feels proud of their role.

Practical Exercise

Participants work in small groups to design their own mentoring toolkit for a fictional farm. Each group chooses at least three categories of tools (visual, communication, reflection, peer support) and creates concrete examples, such as a step-by-step card for planting, a peer buddy system or a reflection board. They then present how these tools would be used in practice and discuss how they could adapt them for their own contexts.

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