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Social Farming in Italy: how participatory and co-creative approaches could contribute to innovation in agriculture

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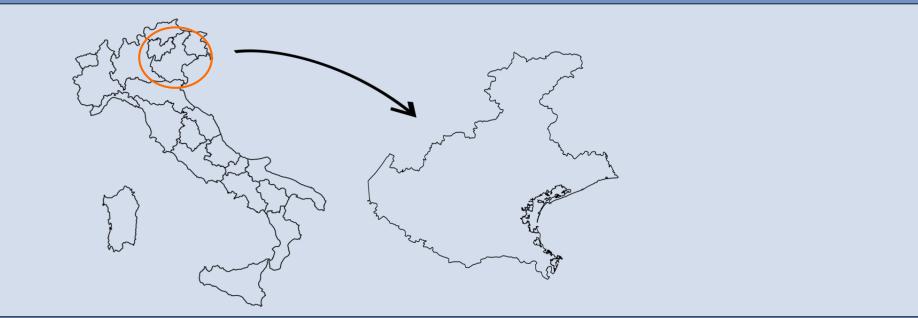
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Introduction

Social Farming is a form of multifunctionality for small and medium-sized farms that, through direct contact with farm resources, plants and animals, offers various services to disadvantaged people, such as work and social integration and animal assisted interventions[a].
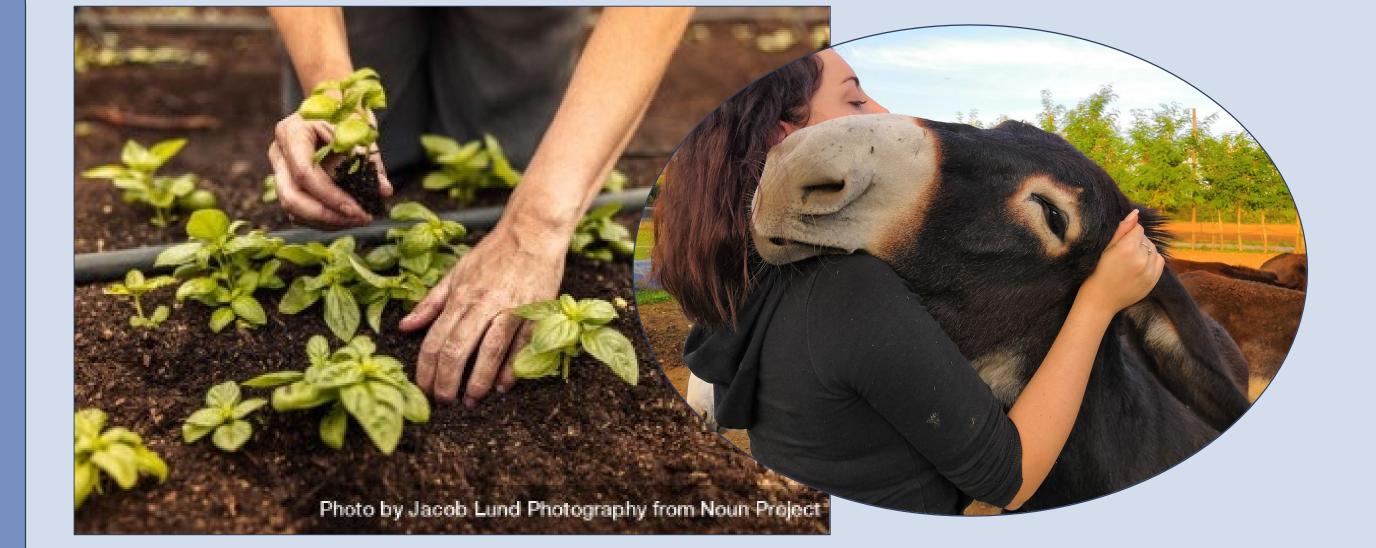In Italy it has developed in different ways depending on the geographical area, the local administrative and organisational models and the proactivity of the actors involved. It was a long and difficult process, but the Italian government succeeded in the regulation of the sector[b, c], although many problems still exist.

Research aims

Starting from the bottom-up process that inspired the Italian government to legislate on such a complex issue, the research defined co-creation and participatory approaches to support the further development of Social Farming in the country.

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Methodology

This pilot study investigated the limited area of the Veneto Region (North-east Italy). The research was based on the Grounded Theory methodology[d], which is a qualitative approach with the aim of generating a theory of practical value using various tools. The study started with focus groups and questionnaires involving farmers who provide these services. It was then extended to include semi-structured interviews with staff of farmers' associations, regional officers and social services. Finally, all stakeholders were invited to a Scenario Workshop[e], a participatory tool designed to identify an appropriate and shared solution.

Results and Discussion

The initial data from the focus groups and questionnaires with farmers (n=41) were analysed and, following Grounded Theory, the research group realised that the views of farmers' associations and regional officers (n=5) were needed. Semi-structured interview questions were developed for them according to the farmers' statements. Data analysis highlighted that the last missing opinion was that one of the social services staff (n=8). This approach provided a complete overview of the sector, considering all stakeholders, and allowed the design of two different scenarios with five main themes that emerged (legislation, education, environment, organisation, economy).

1 Mapping of the services
offered and the specific social and healthcare needs of each territory that can be supported by services in rural environments.

2 Start a test
to identify the requirements to be guaranteed in SF services.

3 Establishment of a Technical Table
for the definition of the supply of services to amend Regional Law.

4 Development of communication system
to facilitate the creation of synergies between farms and traditional service providers and to monitor progress.

5 Implementation of networking
between farms, Local Health Units and municipalities.

The final result was this practical action plan, developed by all stakeholders together (n=15) during the Scenario Workshop, starting from the group discussions of the scenarios and ending in the plenary. Considering the whole research path, this outcome was co-created in all its parts, as stakeholders were involved in the whole process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, considering the practical and operational action plan obtained in this research, co-creative and participatory approaches seem to be useful tools to support and facilitate innovation in agriculture. This statement is particularly true for niches of multifunctionality, such as Social Farming, which are difficult to represent in institutional contexts, but are agents of innovation.
In general, the use of co-creative and participatory approaches can be very helpful for innovation, as it allows it to be disseminated in territories, involving different stakeholders and even citizens, thus strengthening the results of innovation over time. We can see in this particular case which methodology can be replicated in different contexts.

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