




EU CAP Network
Focus Group - Social farming and innovations



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Executive summary

This report presents an overview and synthesis of information compiled through the EU CAP Network Focus Group (FG) on **Social farming and innovations**, which was launched in November 2022 and completed its work in October 2023. Social farming has grown in value both as an important innovation in the context of multifunctional farming and as a driver of further innovation at farm level. The Focus Group of 20 experts has sought to draw attention to and further explore social farming through the lens of innovation. The key findings from the deliberations of the Focus Group on 'Social farming and innovations' and which are contained within this report are:

- Social farming represents innovation at multiple levels: as an innovative response to social needs and as an innovative use of agricultural/farm-based resources. While the focus on this report is largely on social farming as an innovation within agriculture/rural development, Focus Group members were very clear that it **requires innovation at all levels** and a **multi-disciplinary and multi-actor approach** to be really successful and impactful.
 - To date, the development of social farming across the EU has been **inconsistent and fragmented**. A very wide range of projects and practices, with diverse organisational structures and outcomes, has emerged. This diversity reflects social farming's entrenchment in different sets of conditions both within and outside agriculture. National context remains very important and there is **no singular or 'best practice' model for the development of social farming** or for the innovations, which will develop over time. However, there is significant learning to be gained from exploring the practice across the EU, as the outcomes of this Focus Group demonstrate.
 - Social farming is **inherently innovative** but also **builds and strengthens innovation** on farms, often triggering worthy benefits in areas such as new investments in the farm, development of new networks and connections to consumers, generational renewal, enhancement of the skills base and the pursuit of further/linked diversification opportunities. Focus Group members laid particular emphasis on the so-called '**triple bottom line**', arguing that the impacts of social farming and the innovation that it triggers cut across economic, social and environmental spheres. They also agreed that any related business models should incorporate multiple objectives and perspectives, including additional income for the farm together with considerations such as social care, ethical employment, environmentally positive activity and ecological inclusion, social justice, etc.
 - **Two broad business models** emerged from the Focus Group deliberations. The first of these is a model where farmers would be paid to **provide social farming support by public administrations** via mechanisms such as core health/social care/education/em-
- ployment budgets. The second model is where social farms use the same resources deployed in social farming activities to create **additional business opportunities**. This could include providing services and spaces to the wider community, providing the social farming offering to cohorts of people who may not be amongst the 'typical' target groups of social farming. These people could benefit from the direct selling and marketing of products, which arise as part of social farming activity.
- Social farming has a major role to play in **connecting rural and urban, agriculture and the wider society**. Many ideas and good practices emerged in the Focus Group discussions. These include providing solutions to typical urban problems such as summer camps for urban children; providing opportunities for people to access open air and nature for exercise; promoting short food supply chains with social farm products; creating volunteering opportunities; and providing a space and place of education around farming, growing and working with nature.
 - The group agreed that there are **four factors** which are key to supporting the growth and development of social farming and in embedding innovation in its development:

 1. Continually encouraging the interest and involvement of **new entrants** in social farming, be they existing farmers/'neo-rural' farmers or health/social care practitioners seeking to use more innovative methods to support people.
 2. Support from within key EU and national level policies, programmes and projects. At **EU level**, this could include programmes and projects funded from within different policy areas. At **national level**, this could be via the kind of funding, animation and development support which already exists and which could be further strengthened by national governments and other (rural) development actors.
 3. **Shifts in macro-level policy and funding** regimes in health/social care/education/unemployment/social inclusion. While outside the remit of this Focus Group, the long-term funding of these policy areas is necessary to ensure its viability and sustainability. This will enable farmers to plan in the medium to long-term and ensures that the rights and well-being of participants, staff, trainees and volunteers are considered.
 4. Develop and introduce **supportive actors and initiatives** including innovation brokers (such as social farming representative bodies/networks, agricultural advisors, academics, champions and Local Action Groups (LAGS)); quality assurance systems; and the development of tools to measure impact.
 - Focus Group members also identified four key research needs which should be addressed and they developed three suggestions/recommendations for Operational Groups. [See Section 4].



Introduction to the report

This report presents an overview and synthesis of information compiled through the EU CAP Network Focus Group (FG) on **social farming and innovations**, which was launched in November 2022 and completed its work in October 2023. The Focus Group brought together 20 experts from across Europe and was established to address the following key question:

‘How can social farming contribute to innovation in agriculture while strengthening the multi-functional role of agriculture and connecting people from urban and rural areas’?

This **Focus Group** has approached social farming from the point of view of **innovation**, looking at the innovations that social farming can bring to farm enterprises and how it can benefit users and surrounding communities. It has also explored how to support a more inclusive form of agriculture and enhance the connectivity and mutual benefit between urban and rural people. For this purpose, this Focus Group sought to identify the factors triggering the implementation of social farming models across the EU and how social farming can contribute to the innovation ecosystem in rural areas.

The **main tasks of the Focus Group have been to:**

- › Collect and highlight best practice and inspiring success stories in social farming, which have been set up on farms.
- › Identify challenges and opportunities to develop social farming models, including business models, and ways to strengthen the links between agriculture and social/health care sectors, education and employment sectors and between urban and rural people.
- › Explore how social farming could bring innovation into farms and how it could benefit users and the surrounding communities.
- › Identify the factors needed to support social farming and how to build or strengthen innovation through social farming activities.
- › Identify research needs coming from practice and possible gaps in knowledge.
- › Propose potential innovative actions and ideas for Operational Groups and other innovative projects.

This **final report** draws on a number of sources and the following process:

- › The starting paper prepared by the coordinating expert, which included the results of a survey of the 20 Focus Group (FG) members (January 2023);
- › Case studies submitted by FG members;

- › The deliberations and outcomes of the Focus Group meetings held in Prague in January 2023 and in Rome in May 2023;
- › The Mini Papers prepared by Focus Group members.

The report is divided into three key sections:

- 1. Understanding social farming and its development in Europe to date**
- 2. Social farming through the lens of innovation**
- 3. Key factors in supporting the growth and development of social farming**



1. Understanding social farming and its development in Europe to date

1.1 Defining and understanding social farming

There is no single, internationally recognised definition of social farming but the definition by Di Iacovo and O'Connor (2009)¹, which echoes the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Social farming (2012)², captures the main characteristics:

“Social Farming (SF) is both a traditional and innovative use of agriculture. It includes all activities that use agricultural resources, both from plants and animals, in order to promote (or to generate) therapy, rehabilitation, social inclusion, education and social services in rural areas.”

In simple terms, social farming involves providing opportunities for people who face a range of challenges in life to spend time and carry out activities on farms and in agricultural settings. A growing number of studies (for example, Rotheram et al. 2017³; Borgi et al., 2020⁴ and insights from practice highlight well-being and development benefits and outcomes across many measures. The work of this Focus Group has highlighted that social farming is a very diverse field and associated initiatives across the EU differ in many respects. Some differences include the targeted client group, objective and length of the stay, the offer on the farm, financial aspects, the qualification of the service provider, certification, institutional support, etc.⁵ However, all social farming activities in some way **rely on an agricultural context and the use of the farm's agricultural resources, including the natural environment of the farm, for the provision of care activities and social services.**⁶

Key target groups of social farming include people with mental health challenges, people with intellectual, physical or sensory disabilities, youth-at-risk, the elderly, people with substance abuse issues, refugees, etc. but new needs and new target groups emerge all the time. For the purposes of this Focus Group and starting paper, we use the term 'health/social care/education/unemployment/social inclusion' to encompass the full range of service types from which participants are

typically drawn. By 'education', we are largely referring to people who are educationally disadvantaged accessing social farming, rather than the trend for kindergartens or schools to be on farms.

Social farming is also tied in closely with the **multi-functional nature of farming and farms** and is part and parcel of the concept of **sustainable rural development**. It gives farmers the opportunity to diversify their sources of income outside a purely productive system (focusing mainly on economic production) and experience a range of other benefits and positive outcomes. Social farming can take place within a variety of agricultural settings and contexts, depending on the regulatory framework of the different countries. This might be on farms owned by private operators (and in many cases, their families), on farms/gardens attached to health and social care services, on farm-based work integration social enterprises – as is common in Italy, for example, linked to the historical experience of social cooperation (national law 381/1991) – or within the context of community projects.

Social farming has been attracting increasing attention across Europe in terms of both of these frameworks – as an innovative response to social need and as an innovative use of agricultural/farm-based resources. As an output of the EU CAP Network Focus Group, **the focus of this report is largely on social farming as an innovation within agriculture/rural development** whilst acknowledging that it requires innovation at all levels and a multi-disciplinary and multi-actor approach to be really successful and impactful.

1.2 The development of social farming in Europe – diverse but also uneven

While the concept of social farming overall has continued to attract attention, to grow and to evolve since the 1990s in particular, it remains somewhat fragmented both at EU level and within countries [Briers, S., Burlando, C., Doimo, I., O'Connor, D. and Elings, M. (2021). Social Agriculture Market Outlook. Erasmus+ Green4C project Deliverable 3.4: EU Market outlooks.]. A very wide range of projects and practices, with diverse organisational structures and outcomes, has emerged. Amongst the Focus Group members alone, we can observe a wide variety of social farms, operating at very different scales and with a range of target groups, organisational structures and levels of professionalism.

¹ Di Iacovo, F. & O'Connor, D. (2009) Supporting Policies for Social Farming in Europe: Progressing Multifunctionality in Responsive Rural Areas; ARSIA: Firenze, Italy, 2009.

² EESC. 2012. Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Social farming: green care and social and health policies (own-initiative opinion). NAT/539. Bruxelles: European Economic and Social Committee.

³ Rotheram, S., McGarrol, S. & Watkins, F. (2017). Care farms as a space of wellbeing for people with a learning disability in the United Kingdom. *Health and Place*, 48, 123–131.

⁴ Borgi, M., Collacchi, B., Corrales, C., Marcolin, M., Tomasin, P., Grizzo, A., Orlich, R. and Cirulli, F. (2020). Social farming as an innovative approach to promote mental health, social inclusion and community engagement. *Annali dell'Istituto superiore di sanità*, 56(2), 206–214.

⁵ Giuliani, C.; Wieliczko, B. Social agriculture as an example of social innovation emerging in rural areas and the role of public policy. *Rural Areas Dev.* 2018, 15, 7–23.

⁶ Di Iacovo, F. & O'Connor, D. (2009)

⁷ Briers, S., Burlando, C., Doimo, I., O'Connor, D. and Elings, M. (2021). Social Agriculture Market Outlook. Erasmus+ Green4C project Deliverable 3.4: EU Market outlooks.



Table 1.1: Sample of different types of social farms in which Focus Group members are involved

Name of Farm	Country	Brief Description
Social farm De Horst & Millsveld	Netherlands	Full time family-farm. Mainly work with people with dementia or Acquired Brain Injury.
Bio&co	Romania	Work Integration social enterprise. Target group are vulnerable workers, largely from the Roma community or the Ukrainian community.
Middlethird Farm	Ireland	Family farm, small-scale, multiple target groups.
Tourinha Bio	Portugal	Numerous urban agriculture projects (e.g. Edible Garden, Orchards by the Window, Olive Oil from our Garden).
Agricoltura Capodarco	Italy	Social cooperative. Mixed farm with residential accommodation, training centre, restaurant, shop, winery, etc. Multiple target groups.

This diversity reflects social farming's rootedness in different sets of conditions, cultures, legal and organisational frameworks etc. both within and outside agriculture. While a strong emphasis is often placed on the predominant welfare model in a particular country or region and its impact, the roots of the diversity are much wider than that. Within the agriculture and farming context for example, factors such as the predominant farming systems, attitudes towards diversification and multifunctionality, the strength of the farm family model and the broader attitude within society towards farming and agriculture all come into play. Equally, other factors such as the presence or otherwise of social farming support organisations, levels of political support and the legal/regulatory framework in individual countries play a key role⁸. It is apparent from the literature, from the results of a range of EU-funded projects and, especially from discussions held amongst the Focus Group experts, that:

1. **National context remains very important.**
2. **A wide range of overlapping factors** influence both the **relative strength** but also **the specific nature/model** of social farming in different countries and regions. The diverse, fragmented nature of the social farming landscape across Europe is therefore inevitable and not inherently problematic.

3. While there are certainly good practices and success factors, there is **no singular or 'best' way practice model** in developing or organising social farming: it has tended to develop organically according to specific conditions and contexts.
4. Equally, **the kind of innovations which will continue to emerge in social farming will develop according to specific sets of conditions and needs**. However there are significant lessons to be learnt from observing practices across Europe, as this report shows.



⁸ Table X in the Focus Group on Social farming and innovations starting paper summarises the key factors influencing the specific nature/model of social farming in different EU countries.



2. Social farming through the lens of innovation

2.1 Social farming as an innovative response

Social farming has been described as a **breeding ground for social innovation**⁹, with the resources of the farm being deployed to offer alternative solutions to required needs. These resources include, for example, the skills and experience of the farmer(s) and/or staff, the location and facilities, the diverse range of activities on offer and the wider community around the farm. Discussions amongst the diverse group of Focus Group members highlighted the high level of innovation associated with social farming. In simple terms, it provides a service and meets needs in a new and often better way, but more specifically:

- It **brings together two typically unconnected concepts**: services in areas such as health/social care/education/employment and multi-functional farming, with significant benefits for all participating stakeholders.
- It can help **meet the needs of people in vulnerable situations** in ways which existing models, governance arrangements and public services are often **unable to adequately address through conventional paths**. Social farming has a role to play in overcoming some of the gaps and challenges from both the farm/rural development perspective (for example in providing a source of additional farm income) and the health/social care perspective (for example, by providing social care facilities in rural areas).
- Social farming **takes the latent, often underused assets and resources** of people, place, environment and community, **which already exist, on many farms** and uses them in **new, creative and environmentally beneficial ways**.¹⁰
- It represents a genuinely **multi-actor and multidisciplinary approach to different socio-economic problems** and can contribute to the definition and implementation of **new pathways of change and new connections**.

Social farming is divided across different policy competences – agriculture, health, social care, education etc. – making it complex to implement across different sectors and challenging in terms of in-

creasing awareness across society. Clearly, it demands innovative thinking, actions and connections amongst multiple actors at multiple levels. This Focus Group is particularly interested in **innovation at farm level** but members strongly emphasised that **innovation is also required from health/social care/education sectors**. It is largely from these sectors that funding and support should be provided to make social farming happen on the ground. For example, from amongst the Focus Group members, we heard numerous examples of health and social care professionals starting social farms or initiating them within their own services etc. **Innovation and fresh thinking is required within all of these sectors in both policy and practice.**

2.2. Social farming builds innovation and has multiple impacts

A range of studies and the inputs from Focus Group members indicate a very wide range of impacts from both a farm business and wider rural development perspective. Many of these actively **build and strengthen innovation on the farm** as they involve the development of a new way of thinking, new ways of maximising the farms resources, engagement with new partners and stakeholders and significant learning and development opportunities. A worthy **cycle of innovation** can be initiated or developed. Table 2.1 below describes the key innovations and impacts identified as part of the Focus Group process, as well as in a range of studies^{11 12}. As can be seen, many of these impacts can be said to be economic and social and environmental. This focus on the so-called **'triple bottom line' was a key theme of the Focus Group deliberations** and is increasingly necessary when undertaking any innovations within farming and agriculture.

Social farming and ecological inclusion

There is a particular synergy between the values and practices of social farming and that of **ecological inclusion**, which are explored further in a **Mini Paper** developed by Focus Group members.

The term 'ecological inclusion' is used to describe the possible benefit of social farms not only providing social inclusion for people in disadvantaged situations but also care for nature, wildlife, animals, plants and the soils at farm level.

⁹ Galardi, M.; Filugelli, L.; Moruzzo, R.; Riccioli, F.; Mutinelli, F.; Espinosa Diaz, S.; Contalbrigo, L. Challenges and Perspectives of Social Farming in North-Eastern Italy: The Farmers' View. Sustainability 2022, 14, 8390.

¹⁰ Giuliani and Wieliczko (2018)

¹¹ di Iacovo and O'Connor (2009)

¹² Briers et al.



This Mini Paper shows that social farms are regularly naturally managed in an environmentally friendly and sustainable way. From the point of view of current challenges and threats, such as the climate crisis and the decline of biodiversity, social farming can meet political demands for diverse methods of farming that can provide so-called 'ecosystem services' and contribute actively to improve nature and landscape development at farm level. It can also give people in disadvantaged situations the opportunity to move from being cared for to caring, to actively contribute to a healthy environment.

The Mini Paper offers a number of fascinating case studies of social farms which typify this concept of ecological inclusion, including [Fleckenbühl Farm](#) (Germany), [Surcenord Farm](#) (France), [Šťastný domov](#) (Czech Republic) and [CERCICA](#) (Portugal).



Table 2.1: Key impacts and innovations at farm level arising from social farming activity

Social farming from farming and rural development perspectives: impacts and innovations	Economic	Social	Environmental
Additional source of farm income	v	v	
Improves the viability of less intensive and mixed farms in particular, can support some to become/remain full-time farmers	v	v	v
Can help prevent land abandonment and retain rural vitality	v	v	v
Can increase farm income outside an intensive commercial framework and contributes to extensification and deceleration	v	v	v
Diversification opportunity with minimal capital outlay or resource implications	v		v
Can lead to a change in mindset and ambition for the farm, as farmers see the (often untapped) potential of the farm in a new way	v	v	v
Opportunity to make improvements to the farm (aesthetics, amenities, health and safety, etc.)	v	v	v
Opportunity to build new networks and circuits to promote farm products, particularly to ethically minded consumers	v	v	v
Strongly associated with more environmentally benign farming practices, positive actions in terms of biodiversity and animal welfare		v	v



Base to pursue linked diversification opportunities, to build the innovation eco-system	v	v	v
Fosters generational renewal or new entrant interest in farming as a viable source of a values-based livelihood and lifestyle	v	v	
Opportunity to build new networks and circuits that can put farms in touch with other rural development actors, etc.	v	v	v
Enhancement of the skills base across a range of areas, such as networking, marketing, financial management, etc.	v	v	v
Can help create new and supportive connections with like-minded farmers/colleagues		v	v
Can make new connections between urban/rural and improve understanding of, and support for, agriculture and farming in wider society	v	v	v
Potential for traineeship/learning opportunities on the farm for a range of actors - participants, students in agriculture and health/social care, etc.	v	v	v
Encourages social connection, balance and solidarity - social farms can act as informal, inclusive community 'hubs'		v	v

In addition to such impacts and innovations from a **business and rural development** perspective, Focus Group members placed particular emphasis on the more **social and non-monetary benefits/impacts for farmers and farm families** of participating in social farming. In the survey of Focus Group members carried out at the beginning of the FG process, ten of the twenty experts cited 'sense of personal satisfaction and reward from supporting others' as the most important benefit to farmers and their farm enterprise while a further five listed 'encourages social connection and inclusion' as the most important. Experts spoke of the extent to which social farming can

lessen feelings of loneliness and isolation, which can be common on increasingly mechanised farms. Only two Focus Group members cited 'additional income' as the most important benefit. This is confirmed in a range of studies^{13 14} which emphasise the importance of the **sense of meaning** derived from the activity, beyond any impact on the farm business. Awareness of the relatively **high importance attached to the social or non-monetary benefits of social farming** is also key to developing the business model and to understanding the motivation to engage in this particular diversification opportunity, as discussed in Section 3.1 on page 14.

Zorgboerderij de Horst: A case study in social farming as innovation - and a trigger for innovation

Zorgboerderij de Horst in the Netherlands is a former conventional dairy farm that started its activities in 1970 and which was transformed into a social farm in 2006. The farm continues to work mainly with people with dementia and with people with an acquired brain injury, dividing the group into those over 65 ('de Horst'), and those between 46 and 60 ('Millsveld'). The impact of the move towards social farming has been profound, multi-dimensional, and demonstrative of how **social farming can drive innovation**.

What began with income diversification has ended with a complete switch over time - and in response to a range of market and other forces - away from dairying and towards social farming and horticulture. The farm has become a source of **employment and volunteering** opportunities in the local community and **two generations** of the farm family are now fully involved. Since becoming a social farm, Zorgboerderij de Horst has converted to **organic production** and embarked on many other **environmentally beneficial actions**. It has also made valuable **structural and safety adjustments**. Diversifying income in this way has **increased economic stability** in terms of the profitability, solvency and liquidity of the family's enterprise. Contributing to solving societal problems for an ample (and increased) economic return has also resulted in **increased well-being and personal satisfaction** for the family running the enterprise.

For a more detailed description of this case study, please see Annex 3 or go the farm website <https://zorgboerderijdehorst.nl/>

¹³ di Iacovo and O'Connor (2009)

¹⁴ Briers et al. (2021)



2.3 Potential business models underpinning social farming

A key finding from the discussions of FG members is that **there is no one business model in social farming, but several**. There is great variety in terms of what can work, depending on context, funding, resources, the people coming to the farm and their needs, farm type, the goals and motivations of the farmer, etc. Another key finding, which ties in with the finding on innovation, is that **business models need to bring together multiple objectives**. Other benefits, such as increasing the social sustainability of the farm, also count and should be considered. This was summarised in FG meetings as 'follow the money, but with diversity' by having a business model that considers all the potential resources of the farm and the short-term and long-term sustainability (economic, social, environmental) of any model. Social farms must clearly not operate with a 'business as usual' approach but instead satisfy multiple needs at the same time, including elements such as income to the farm, food production, solidarity, social care, ethical employment, environmentally positive actions, social justice, animal welfare considerations and many more.

At its heart, social farming involves providing support to people who are disadvantaged in some way and who are in need of additional health/social care/employment/educational/other social inclusion services. The business model is generally based on **accessing financial resources from within public administrations**¹⁵. In many cases, social farms will **combine** a multiple of these options. Equally, it is prudent to spread risk and to ensure the stability of the business by working with multiple target groups and/or multiple services.

Funding options

- › Social farmers/farms are **paid or commissioned from within core national or municipal health/social care/education/employment budgets** to provide social farming support to people accessing these services and who could benefit from this type of intervention. To ensure long-term viability and sustainability, contracts will ideally have a certain length and continuity.
- › **Farm-based supported employment**, where a proportion of the salary of participants/workers is paid by the government.
- › Funding from within Local Action Group (LAG) and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) budgets to support the development and running of social farms.
- › **Funding of prescriptions for green care**, as happens in the Netherlands, for example. In this case, either a) the doctor or physician

prescribes green care and directs the patient to the local authority to get access to a certified social farm, which then gets paid for the service or b) a patient/client is granted a personal budget to spend in a social farm of their choice.

- › **Public procurements** (for example, supplying institutional settings such as schools, care homes, hospitals, etc. with products from social farms).

2.4 Related or linked activities and business opportunities

For an entity to describe itself as a social farm, social farming should be the base and key focus activity. However, there can also be significant opportunities for additional diversification, innovation and income generation using many of the same resources. By **extending and combining these income sources, the viability of the farm is further increased**. Social farming can be a link in a long chain in the **development of an innovation eco-system** with multiple business opportunities, satisfying people's needs, addressing major issues and being part of swings in wider society. Underpinning all of this should be the ability to 'tell the story' of the farm, to communicate values of what is being achieved. The specific examples and cases highlighted by Focus Group members include:

- › Using the amenities/facilities and human capital developed for social farming to provide **services to the wider community** for which they are willing to pay (e.g. meeting space, venue for team-building, farm/nature walks, linking in with educational providers, providing cultural, heritage or festive activities, etc). The kind of setting and atmosphere typical of social farms is very much in tune with 'deceleration', a call for slowing down in life which has turned more popular after the Covid-19 pandemic and the various current crises.
- › There may be particular opportunities to offer the essence of the social farm offering – time in nature, carrying out ordinary farm activities, connecting with others in a rural setting – to a **cohort of people who may not fit the criteria of 'classic' target groups of social farming but who may nonetheless benefit**. Some of these clients may be in a position to pay an amount in excess of that obtainable from contracts with public administrations which can supplement the social farming aspect of the business.
- › Adding further value by production methods – e.g. organic, bio-dynamic, etc. –, which are highly compatible with social farming.

¹⁵ There are of course some exceptions to this. In the case of agricultural social cooperatives in Italy, for example, the business model is largely based on generating income by 'farm reputation' and sale of products. It is more linked to the development of a niche market than to income generated by social activity.



- › Production and **direct selling of existing or new products from the farm**, which have arisen as part of social farming activity (for example, sales of fruit, vegetables or herbs grown by participants).
- › **Labelling/branding and promotion of products as being from a social farm** – using social value and values as a marketing tool and achieving a premium on this basis. [Agricoltura Capodarco](#) in Italy is a good example of a social farm producing their own pasta, with the label clearly showing that it was produced on a social farm.

A number of Focus Group members have expanded on these opportunities in detail in a **Mini Paper** entitled **'Expanding target groups of social farming'**.

One of the examples that they highlight is the [Svobodný statek na soutoku](#) (the Free Farm at the Confluence) in the Czech Republic, where care for people with intellectual disabilities is combined with opportunities for a range of other groups to be part of the farm. These include volunteers (WorkCamps, HelpX, WWOOF), interns from schools, and most significantly, 'healthy', wealthy and overworked people and their families who want to go to the countryside for real work, rest and to meet people with disabilities. The farm is a meeting place for the neighbours, people struggling with burn-out and mental fatigue. It is a place which offers physical activities for families coming from cities who miss physical work. They can also feel part of the community.

2.5 Social farming connecting farming & agriculture with the wider population

Social farming can have a major role to play in developing linkages and mutually beneficial relationships between agriculture/farming and the wider population and especially between urban and rural areas. These can be of social benefit but also involve income generation. It is an important aspect of social farming and a key interest of this Focus Group, which offered many suggestions and cases of good practice: some of which, have been alluded to in the section above but **additional ideas and examples of best practice** are described below.

- › Social farming can help to provide some solutions to **contemporary challenges** such as providing a positive environment for summer camps for children or opportunities for people with addiction issues to take a break from negative social influences and triggers.
- › It can also better **link urban and rural areas as social farms located in rural areas** may attract urban dwellers that are looking for an open-air space where they can reconnect with nature.

- › There are potentially multiple **opportunities for the wider population to participate** and become physically included in social farming. Such physical contact and connection is important for a better understanding of farming and rural affairs. Some ways that promote this include: providing volunteering opportunities; engagement with NGOs cooperating with social farms; providing crowdfunding experiences; opening the farm for training courses, holding regular events at farms such as concerts, exhibitions, heritage events, seasonal events, etc.
- › The strong connection to **biodiversity or environmental preservation** and education also has significant resonance with many people in the wider population and can be promoted as a tool to connect with social farming. Farms are naturally green environments for the public to go to and do practical, 'hands-on' work, with benefits for all parties.
- › Social farms can help **promote short food supply chains** by selling their products at the farm gate or in proximity to urban outlets (farmers' markets, retailers, etc.). Social farms in peri-urban and urban areas can foster special connections with the population in a variety of ways based on population density (e.g. catering for companies, holding corporate team-building events or company lunches on farms; participation in markets and events in the town/city).
- › Social farms can and should promote and/or comfortably work alongside other **types of agriculture which engage the public**, like urban agriculture, Community Supported Agriculture, provision of space for allotments, etc.
- › The use of some kind of **'social farm label'** or certification for products from the social farm can help to make consumers aware of the added value. Investments should be made in meaningful consumer engagement, so that they are aware that products from social farms are more than a standard offering.
- › **Education, increasing knowledge and awareness of farming** amongst present and future consumers is key for a full change of mindset towards connecting the public with farming and social farming in particular. Social farming provides broad, accessible and grounded education for a broader number of people than hitherto. This includes areas such as how farming works, what is involved in animal care and welfare and the complexity and challenges of farming and working with nature. This in turn increases societal appreciation of these elements of farming and agriculture and support for the work that farmers do.



Members of the Focus Group have written a **Mini Paper** on ***the role of social farming in bridging the gap between agriculture and society***. It notes the widening gap between agriculture and society. This gap has several dimensions: a physical gap between increasingly urbanised societies and farms; a knowledge and awareness gap with a lack of understanding of how farming works; a communication gap with limited and fragmented messages being conveyed; and a cultural gap in terms of lifestyles, values and how farming is perceived.

There is also, of course, an internal gap within agriculture between larger, more intensive farms and more small scale or multi-functional farms, which complicates the 'story' of farming further.

The Mini Paper proposes a number of actions and offers a number of examples of how social farms are working to bridge this gap, including [Bio Statek](#) (Czech Republic), [Ter Wielewalle](#) and [Eemlandhoeve](#) (Netherlands).

Case studies in connecting farming and wider community

Bio&co Social Farm, Bucharest, Romania

The main objective of [Bio&co](#) is to **provide jobs to disadvantaged workers** in a vulnerable peri-urban community with few mobility possibilities, including workers from the Roma local community or from Ukraine. It gives them an opportunity to earn an income, build their skills and do meaningful work in a supportive, community-based environment.

Another objective of the farm is to create **a link between the farm and consumers** in Bucharest, as well as its citizens in general. Bio&co farm is located less than one hour away from Bucharest by car. Vegetables are delivered to 14 delivery points in the city. The vegetables are freshly cut, local and seasonal, providing a **valuable understanding of what the soil delivers** in the respective season. **Weekly newsletters** are delivered with the vegetable basket, including some recipes, updates and pictures about what is happening in the farm in that week. An **open door is organised** with workshops and activities for children. **Team-building events** are organised at the farm with dedicated activities around biodiversity, healthy lifestyle, agriculture. **School visits** are held with dedicated activities around sensory discoveries (sensorial garden, seed planting, etc.), sustainable farming and healthy lifestyle. Bio&co has a strong presence at fairs and events, where it can share its products and its business story.

Read more about the story of Bio&co on the EU CAP Network website:

https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/news/inspirational-ideas-healthy-tasty-and-social-vegetables_en.

Middlethird Farm, Co. Galway, Ireland

[Middlethird Social Farm](#) is an 11-acre mixed family farm originally developed by the O'Dowd family as a place to live and work in a sustainable, healthy and environmentally conscious way. The farm is located in a very scenic coastal location close to Galway City. **Social Farming activity** usually takes place 2 to -3 days each week with four participants each day coming from the surrounding community, including the city of Galway.

Social Farming provides **access to the farm** so that a wide range of people - participants in social farming, their support staff and families and also the wider community - can enjoy the farm and its activities. Neighbours and passers-by are also welcome to visit - the farm operates with an 'Open Gate' policy. Income from social farming has provided an income and impetus to further develop accessible **facilities**, such as a multi-purpose meeting/craft room converted from an old shed, a canteen area, polytunnel space, etc. The farm also carries out a range of farm-based **activities of social/community value**, which, in many cases, also **generate additional income**. This includes social and seasonal events such as concerts, plays, art and photography exhibitions, live nativity, pumpkin picking, etc. A **farmgate shop** with an honesty box and the sale of baked goods at the local shop provide local people with access to local food and help shorten the food supply chain.

When combined with social farming, these kinds of events and initiatives have brought more vibrancy and life to the farm, created a focal point in the neighborhood and opened a space and a hub for learning, conversation and activity.



3. Key factors in supporting the growth and development of social farming

We have already noted the **uneven development of social farming** across Europe and the diversity which exists in scale, funding, levels of support within health and social care systems, models of social farming and levels of interest within the farming community. Social farming is divided across different policy competences - agriculture, health, social care, education etc. - making it complex to instigate across different sectors and challenging in terms of increasing understanding of the concept across society.

However, it is also apparent from this Focus Group process in particular that there is **significant potential for further growth across Europe**. It is also apparent that support for such growth is **an investment in multifunctional farming**, in a model of farming which is more **economically, environmentally and socially beneficial**. **The social farming model was identified as sustainable with significant benefits for participants and wider society.**

Whilst initially observing the farm level core business and then moving outside that, this Focus Group has identified **four key elements or factors** which must be worked on to create the broad set of conditions needed for social farming to grow and thrive across the EU:

1. Encouraging the interest and involvement of new entrants in social farming
2. A support framework from key EU and national level policies
3. Shifts in macro-level policy and funding regimes in health/social care/education/unemployment/social inclusion
4. Presence/development of other supportive actors and initiatives

While all of these are presented separately, in reality they must, to some extent, happen simultaneously for real growth and development to occur. So, while having a cohort of interested, trained and suitable farmers (or farms) is essential, so too is funding from within health and social care provision for social farming, support from within macro-level policy and decision-making in agriculture and rural development policy and the existence of other supportive factors such as social farming networks, innovation brokers, etc. The case of the Netherlands described in Box 3.1 below is illustrative of this need for the various factors to come together.

Box 3.1: Netherlands as a case study in building a supportive environment

Building a supportive environment for the development of social farming: the case of the Netherlands¹⁶

The Netherlands has the largest and most embedded social farming sector in the EU, with at least 1 250 social farmers and up to 30 000 people availing of social farming support per annum. In 2018, the social agriculture sector in the Netherlands had revenues of €250 million, equating to an average revenue for care services of €200 000 per social farm. The case of the Netherlands provides us with a clear example of how innovation and good practice in farming/agriculture services, macro policy and decision-making level amongst support bodies can combine to create a vibrant social farming sector.

In the Netherlands, we have:

- > A large **cohort of interested and entrepreneurial farmers** willing to explore this social innovation, many of whom were (and are) seeking an alternative to conventional food production and/or a more diversified income portfolio.
- > **Innovation within health and social care** and the availability of **funding for social farming through multiple sources**. Key milestones have included the introduction of the personal budget (PGBs) in 2003, meaning that clients could choose and pay for their own day support, enabling many to choose social farming. In 2005, the liberalisation of long-term health care came into force, allowing social farmers or regional organisations of social farmers to receive their own AWBZ (General Law on Special Health Care Costs) recognition. This allowed social farmers to get a direct agreement with the government for providing care. Revenue can also be obtained via contracts with insurance companies or the municipalities where the participants live. Lastly, care farms can have direct contracts with healthcare organisations to provide care. Overall, social farms are integral to the established health care regime in the Netherlands.

¹⁶ The information in this case study is largely drawn from Hassink, J., Agricola, H., Veen, E.J., Pijpker, R., de Bruin, S.R., van der Meulen, H. and Plug, L.B. (2020). The Care Farming Sector in The Netherlands: A Reflection on Its Developments and Promising Innovations. Sustainability, 12.



- › **Strong and innovative support organisations**, from the establishment of the National Support Centre in 1999 – with support from the Ministries of Agriculture and Health, Welfare and Sport, which led to the establishment of the [Dutch Federation of Care Farmers](#) in 2009. The Federation is a national organisation representing and supporting 15 regional member organisations that represent 853 care farms in the Netherlands. It also oversees the **quality mark of care farming**, which is necessary to have long-term contracts with municipalities, insurance companies or other healthcare organisations and which has been key to the professionalisation of the sector.

3.1 Encouraging new entrants

The question of what motivates and encourages farmers to become social farmers has been a key one for this Focus Group. The literature on farm decision-making and on diversification in general suggests that a complex web of motivations and perspectives, only some of which are concerned with economic logic, inform decision-making.¹⁷ One [study conducted in Northern Italy](#) found that social farming services have largely developed thanks to the **strong motivation of the farmers involved and their conviction in the potential benefits that they can offer not only to their users but also to society as a whole**. Drawing from their extensive experience of working with a very large cohort of social farmers in the country with the largest social farming sector, the Dutch Federation of Care Farmers (2022)¹⁸ also highlight deeper motivational elements beyond income, including: the desire for a way of life. This combines intensive contact with nature and animals with plenty of contact with people; a desire for entrepreneurship and self-development; having a sense of engagement and responsibility for other people and for nature, the land, the animals together with the place; and a desire to contribute and be part of a great development.

In addition to attracting new entrants and suitable farmers, the Focus Group members also discussed which **kind of farms** might have potential to develop this type of diversification. The overarching trend in European agriculture is for a steady increase in average farm sizes, a concentration of production on fewer and larger farms and a decline in the numbers of farmers. However, there is still unique potential for innovations such as social farming on **semi-subsistence and small to medium farms where farmers are seeking additional income to increase their viability and especially so where there is a traditional practice of on-farm diversification activities**. Social farms will usually be operating at the more small-scale, non-intensive end of the agricultural production spectrum, often combined with a commitment towards techniques and processes with low environmental impact, which may be carried out by social farming participants. Social farming provides an alternative to intensified growth, which is still rooted in farming. Geographically, these types of farms are concentrated in countries such as Greece, Portugal, Croatia, Romania, Hungary,

Bulgaria, the Nordic countries, Italy, Spain, Ireland, etc. Equally, there are countries/regions (for example the Czech Republic, Slovakia, parts of Germany and France) where very large intensive farms prevail where the motivation or capacity to undertake social farming may be more limited, though still obviously possible. Clearly, social farms operated by charitable bodies, institutions, etc. and in the case of Italy in particular, by social cooperatives, are in a separate category, with different criteria used in the decision-making process.

Another key requirement in identifying potential for new social farms is **proximity to urban areas**. Farms in peri-urban areas are at a natural advantage in being able to draw on a cohort of potential services and participants. They may also be in a better position to leverage the facilities and human capital gained from social farming practice into other diversification opportunities under the broad umbrella of 'opening up' the farm and as described in greater detail in Section 3.

Whilst there is potential for growth in the numbers of social farmers, there was agreement in the Focus Group that there is a general need to improve knowledge, understanding and engagement in social farming amongst the farming community across the European Union.

Among the **challenges and barriers** identified are:

- › **Lack of information on social farming**, identified by a quarter of Focus Group members as the foremost barrier. This lack of information is not only amongst farmers/potential social farmers but also amongst consumers and other stakeholders.
- › **Uncertainty of income**. With the majority of social farming projects/initiatives reliant on public funds, the very wide variation in the levels of sustained administrative, legal and other support for social farming coming from State actors is problematic.
- › **Farming systems may be incompatible** with this kind of activity (for example, due to scale of operation or a lack of suitable/safe activities for participants).
- › In some countries, the **lack of support organisations** to promote social farming and support social farmers.
- › **Lack of human resources** (skills, education, etc.) of the farm owner or staff to work with specific target groups.

¹⁷ Vik, J., & McElwee, G. (2011). Diversification and the entrepreneurial motivations of farmers in Norway. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 49(3), 390–410.

¹⁸ Dutch Federation of Care Farmers (2022) [Handbook of Agriculture and Care](#)



All aspiring social farmers will probably **require training, mentoring and other support** from within networks, support organisations, from other farmers etc., not least to address any gaps which they might have in their knowledge and experience. Notwithstanding these challenges, there are two main sources of potential new farmer entrants to social farming:

1. Existing farmers/people from a farming background and so-called 'neo-rural' farmers. The latter group are generally people who come from non-agricultural backgrounds and who set up farms (often small-scale) using regenerative agriculture

techniques (very respectful of the environment) and who have limited ability to generate a stable income. They may be particularly interested in social farming both as an income supplement and because they are more inclined towards activities which focus on social inclusion.

2. People from a health/social care/educational/social inclusion background who wish to use more innovative approaches to supporting people in a farm setting.

In addition, if the aim is to encourage and to support farmers from within 1. or 2. above, the following is good practice.

Box 3.2 Strategies to encourage and support different types of new social farming

Type of entrant	Strategies to encourage and support new social farmers
Farmers (existing, from farming background, neo-rural farmers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Target recruitment efforts on farms/farmers, which are most likely to be open to this kind of diversification opportunity. These include: farmers with a background in ecology, biodiversity, organic production, etc.; farmers who have previous experience of diversification; and farmers with a strong community orientation and/or with a passion for the countryside, for rural heritage and the rural way of life. Small-scale non-intensive farms, where there is an orientation towards techniques and processes with low environmental impact, are much more likely to be open to social farming. > Peer to peer learning (from farmer to farmer), ideally on-site, is key to encouraging other farmers to consider social farming as an option. > The multiple benefits - and especially the extent to which this can become a viable lifestyle and business enterprise - need to be clearly articulated in farmer-friendly language and through the kind of sources which farmers naturally access, such as farmer education services, farming media, agricultural events (e.g. fairs markets, shows) and farm/rural development advisory services. Existing farmer networks could be used to disseminate information in a way that increases credibility and 'buy-in'.
Background in health/social care, education, social inclusion, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Highlight that social farming can provide a significant opportunity to 'make a difference' compared to working within a health institution. Having your own farm can grant you more freedom to do what you want and address some of the gaps you see within institutions. > In the post Covid-19 context, many more people want to move to rural areas. Therefore, there is significant potential for health and social care professionals to embark on social farming ventures. This cohort may be particularly skilled in dealing with new challenges and target groups or may be able to leverage their professional experience and networks to create successful social farming enterprises.



3.2 Support from within key EU and national level policies, programmes and projects

Social farming has attracted increased interest and support at an EU level as an innovation which is **both in tune with and helps meet a range of broad EU agriculture, rural development and environmental goals**. Table 3.1 both outlines the **key features and benefits of social farming** from these perspectives and the specific EU policies and strategies to which they are aligned.

Table 3.1: Alignment between key EU policies/strategies and the benefits of social farming

Benefits of social farming	Key EU policies and strategies aligned
Farm Income & Sustainability	<p>CAP 2023-2027, namely Objectives relating to 'Ensuring Viable Farm Income', 'Jobs, Growth and Equality in Rural Areas', 'Increasing Competitiveness', 'Improving Farmers' Position in the Food Chain', 'Generational Renewal'.</p> <p>Long-term Vision for Rural Areas, in particular the focus on creating 'Prosperous Rural Communities through diversification and adding value to agriculture'.</p> <p>The European Green Deal, which, in the realm of agriculture, is designed to 'boost the economy, improve people's health and quality of life, and care for nature'.</p> <p>The European Care Strategy, which calls for investment to improve the accessibility of care services in rural and remote areas.</p> <p>The Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, which points out the insufficient provision of appropriate community-based services and points to the limited availability of support for families and of personal assistance, including in the area of mental health, which is particularly alarming in rural and remote areas.</p>
Innovation & Diversification	
Generational Renewal	
Environment & Climate	
Vibrant Rural Communities	
Social Equality & Inclusion	

Some of the most important 'moments' in the recognition of and support for social farming at EU level to date include:

- › The development of the Farming for Health Community of Practice between 2004 and 2010 was a pivotal moment in the recognition of social farming.
- › At EU level, a number of diverse spin-offs arose from it, including the [SoFar Project](#) (2006-2009) and the [Cost Action 866 on Green Care](#) (2007-2009).
- › These clearly informed the European Economic and Social Committee ([EESC](#)) [2012 Opinion](#), which stated the need for a definition and quality criteria and the belief that EU institutions and various regional and national authorities should support social farming, putting in place appropriate regulatory frameworks.
- › A large number of projects (Erasmus Plus, Operational Groups, Horizon 2020 Thematic Network and research projects, INTERREG, etc.) either focused on or highly relevant to social farming have emerged and have been funded at EU level since 2012. Annex 3 contains an indicative list.
- › The Focus Group on Social Farming and Innovations.

There was broad consensus in the Focus Group that this **kind of support at EU level is necessary and should continue and grow**.

The group also arrived at a number of key ideas for research topics and Operational Groups (see section 4 below) which, if funded and supported, could assist the further development of the sector. The ongoing encouragement of better cooperation and networking between actors, transfer of experiences, building of infrastructure, etc., at European level, including the possibility of a European-wide Thematic Network on social farming, were also suggested.

Agriculture and rural development actors at national level can also have an important role in developing social farming. In **Ireland**, for example, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine funds a number of different social farming projects, most significantly the **National Social Farming Network** ([Social Farming Ireland](#)), which, since 2016, has worked to grow the sector to where there are now 130 active social farms, with significant further growth expected in the coming years.



In **Poland**, social farming has developed with the significant participation of the State agricultural advisory service, whose activity inspired many farmers to include social services in their activities and resulted in the development of the concept of various types of social farms. Key actors have included the Agricultural Advisory Centre (AAC) Branch in Krakow, which initiated the Polish National Educational Farms Network and the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Agricultural Advisory Centre in Minikowo and pilot care farms were established, which proved that this form of activity could also work well in Polish conditions.

Members of the Focus Group prepared a **Mini Paper** on *'The role of LAGs (CLLD/LEADER) in triggering the implementation of social farming'*, which highlights the significant (further) potential for these rural development organisations to act as multipliers or key support providers for social farming. They highlight a number of examples where this has happened to significant effect, including:

- › Stimulating social farming activity at a municipal level, as in the case of the Italian [LAG Sulcis Iglesiente Capoterra e Campidano \(SULCIS\)](#), in Cagliari, Sardinia, through the development of the [Agrisociale: Coltiviamo Cittadinanza](#) project, which started in 2011. At the outset, five municipalities were selected, via a public call by the LAG, to manage financial resources aimed at creating social farms.
- › Providing an organisational 'home' or base for social farming networking organisations and activities, as in the case of [Leitrim Development Co.](#) in Ireland, which has been pivotal in animating and developing the social farming concepts, practice and structures in Ireland. This LAG now holds the contract with the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine for the establishment of a National Social Farming Network and has contracts with three LAGs in other regions to develop social farming across the country.
- › Funding of individual social farms to carry out capital projects, as in [Bühübl farm in Sankt Martin im Mühlkreis in Austria](#), where LEADER (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale) funds were used to convert the holding into a horse-assisted therapy centre for children and adults with special needs.

3.3 Shifts in policy and practice in health/social care/education/ unemployment/social inclusion

This Focus Group is particularly concerned with social farming as an innovation within farming, agriculture and rural development. However, policy and practice within health/social care/education/employment services/education is perhaps the key determinant – of whether social farming will grow at any kind of scale and become a mainstream activity in individual countries. **Long-term funding from within budgets in relevant policy areas is necessary to ensure viability and sustainability, to enable farmers to plan in the medium to long-term and to ensure that the rights and well-being of participants, staff, trainees and volunteers are considered.** A key challenge is that, unlike much of agriculture and rural development policy, health, social care and education, social inclusion policy, etc. are mostly organised at national level and in many countries at a regional level. That can partially explain why it is difficult to align policy across different countries and their respective health and social care systems. Another difficulty is the complexity of the subject area, where numerous and diverse representatives of health, social policies and services appear, all of whom must be engaged with separately.

There are significant differences between EU countries in the extent to which innovations such as social farming and other green-care initiatives have taken root. No Focus Group members described the level of support for and engagement with social farming from within these sectors as 'high' and only six as 'moderate'. The remaining fourteen members described it as 'low'. Eight participants saw 'lack of knowledge of social farming as a support' as the number one barrier while a further six felt that 'funding' was the predominant barrier.

Clearly, there is significant untapped potential and there are opportunities to further develop social farming as an option and opportunity for people in a vulnerable situation. These opportunities exist across different countries and different policy/institutional contexts and in particular in countries/regions with currently low levels of activity; with increased levels of activity within key target groups; and with new target groups of social farming and catering to emerging demand. A detailed description of how this opportunity can be seized is beyond the remit of this Focus Group. Members did suggest some measures, which will help build support for social farming within these sectors.



- › **Highlight its value.** Social farming has significant potential to help address some pervasive social challenges. It is strongly aligned with and can help deliver on many of the shifts in policy and in (some) practice in service delivery for people in disadvantaged/vulnerable situations. These include the shift from a medical to a social model of disability, towards a more recovery, community-orientated approach to mental health care and an increased recognition of the need for a person-centred, individualised approach within social inclusion work generally.
- › **Raise awareness of the good value that social farming represents.** It was noted in the Focus Group that, in the Netherlands, social farming is mostly supported by the health sector because it is the lowest cost treatment or therapy available. The model also shifts supports towards an upstream service, which should ultimately mean that more complex and expensive downstream acute and crisis response services are deferred or avoided. This is particularly the case when working with people with mental health challenges, with youth, with people accessing homelessness and addiction services.
- › Raise awareness about **flexibility and diversity** within the social farming model. Social farms operate at many different scales and can meet the needs of multiple target groups. They have proven adept at **responding quickly and effectively** to new and emerging demands and needs (e.g. in providing support to Ukrainian and other refugee groups, in post-Covid-19 recovery)
- › Highlight its particular value in reaching some traditionally **hard-to-reach groups** such as older men, people with mental health challenges reluctant to access clinical supports, etc.
- › Helping to negotiate and navigate the working culture and bureaucracy associated with operating in this space – which will be very different to that associated with agriculture.
- › To act as agents with services and to provide assurances that care is not only their responsibility but also that of other professionals supporting people.

Focus Group members have produced a **Mini Paper on Brokerage and Advisory support**, which sets out the case for building an effective Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) in all countries to support the generation of innovation and exchange of knowledge between advisors, farmers, researchers, rural networks, national and regional authorities, media, all people involved in education and training, and consumers.

There are a number of different types of innovation brokers who work in this space:

3.4 Presence/development of other supportive actors and initiatives

Innovation brokers

For individual businesses starting, operating or looking to grow/develop in this very complex and ever-changing environment – and across multiple policy competences – the need for what we might call ‘innovation brokers’ is particularly acute. These are intermediaries who work at various levels and who carry out actions such as:

- › Promoting and developing an understanding of social farming amongst farmers, service providers and the wider public.
- › Working with individual farmers or networks of farming to provide training, mentoring and other support to enable them to embark on social farming as a diversification opportunity.
- › Helping to identify and signpost new opportunities and to maximise the farmer’s return from this kind of activity.
- › **Social farming networks or representative bodies** are, in countries where they are active and provide support, the most important innovation brokers. Examples include [Social Farming Ireland](#) and the [Dutch Federation of Care Farmers](#). They are the **specialists** in social farming and the most likely to be able to fulfil the kind of functions listed above. They are also ideally placed to do the necessary kind of work which develops the sector overall, both at regional and national level. Financial and other support for the development of these kinds of networks or representative bodies is crucial for the meaningful development of social farming behind individual initiatives.
- › **Farm and agricultural advisors** who work on the ground with farmers and who may be able to direct farmers towards social farming as a diversification opportunity. It is important that they receive the kind of information and advice that they require to communicate effectively about social farming with the farmers with whom they work.
- › As already noted, **LAGs**, who work and have contacts and knowledge at the interface of farming, rural development and social issues, etc. can be natural bridges between stakeholders and key promoters of social farming.



- **Interested academics, teachers and researchers** working in both specific agricultural colleges and in third-level institutions have a major role to play in teaching the next generation about social farming, in producing research on this innovation for a range of audiences and in doing the kind of cross-disciplinary work and networking which this kind of social innovation requires.
- **'Champions' of social farming.** An innovation such as social farming needs its champions, the kind of people who will tell the story of social farming in a compelling way, who will advocate strongly for it in their own spheres of influence and networks, and who will do the necessary work to highlight and develop the sector. These champions can be farmers, participants, advocates within health and social care, politicians, academics, researchers, writers, journalists, family members of participants, rural development actors and many others. It is important that these (potential) champions are cultivated and nurtured.

Quality assurance systems

The possibility of developing a **unified quality assurance system for social farming in Europe** was discussed in some detail in the Focus Group. While there was broad agreement that this would largely need to be developed at a national level given the diversity and complexity of social farming, it was also agreed that such a system might be something to be worked towards in the future. It was also agreed that national level certification processes such as those used in the Netherlands are a valuable tool in legitimising, professionalising and mainstreaming social farming and in raising the standards of practice.

Development of tools to measure impact

Focus Group members noted the **lack of any single universal approach to measuring the impact of social farming** on farmers; their farms and farming communities and some members developed a **Mini Paper** to explore this further. They also noted the need to develop such tools in terms of being able to measure and communicate the full range of direct and indirect impacts, tangible and intangible aspects. The kind of indicators that might be measured include: mission; production (type, level); revenue; internal organisation and staffing; infrastructure; relationship/interactions with customers; environmental impacts; personal well-being and development of farmer/farm family; succession, etc.

They presented an overview of a number of the methodologies used in similar contexts and concluded that the **Theory of Change** model has the most potential to be adapted to measuring change and impact at farm level.

4. Suggestions for research needs and Operational Groups

4.1 Research needs identified by the Focus Group

1. Investigate how social farming services be made available to a broader target group and thereby bridge the gap between agriculture and society

Social farming has the potential to offer substantial benefits to people outside the 'typical' target groups of social farming (e.g. people with burnout, caregivers, children, refugees). Research is needed on how social farming can be opened up to meet this potential area of development and on how this could also help bridge the wide concept gap of understanding between agriculture and society.

2. Exploring ecological inclusion: developing landscape and biodiversity by including participants in social farming

The potential of social farming to promote biodiversity in farms is much higher than what has been achieved to date (e.g. in active landscape development, by applying farming systems, which include handicraft, skills, etc.) Research is required on how social farming can further promote such activity and facilitate a win-win situation for the different target groups involved, for biodiversity and for climate change.

3. Examine the profile of a skilled adviser and (social) innovation broker in social farming

With a lack of advisors and innovation brokers in social farming at national and EU levels, there is a need to identify the profile and skills (not only agronomical skills) of current and future agricultural advisors and innovation brokers for social farming.

4. How can we quantify the impacts of social farming?

There is a lack of data that quantifies the impact of social farming in numbers and specific values, which can be key to securing support for social farming. There is a need to identify impacts that can be quantified more easily as well as those that can be converted to economic values.



4.2 Potential Operational Groups and other innovative ideas identified by the Focus Group

The experts discussed some project ideas that could be developed through Operational Groups. These are:

1. Social farming and migrant inclusion

Social farming can have a vital role to play in migrant inclusion, providing work as well as community-based integrated support. The Operational Group could work on areas such as engaging farmers and migrants to explore the potential; recording and sharing good practices; and examining technology and platforms for engaging migrants on their rights on farms/social farms.

2. The inclusion of social farming participants in on-farm processing and marketing

In many cases, there is a lack of on-farm processing capacities on farms. Social farming offers possibilities to create such facilities and to involve clients in production, marketing and distribution processes, to the mutual benefit of all parties.

3. Pilot project for implementation of social farming models for social innovation

There is potential for a cross-national Operational Group, which could 'match' a more experienced country and also a less experienced or progressive country (for example, Greece) in terms of the development of social farming. Learning from this engagement could lead to the development of a roadmap, toolkit, business models, etc.

Additionally, some other project ideas emerged as measures to satisfy some other needs, particularly in relation to communication.



4. Communication of the benefits of social farming to policy-makers

In some of the countries with a weak/under-developed social farming sector in particular, there is still a need to communicate the benefits of social farming to policy-makers. An Operational Group could explore how this kind of communication could be carried out most effectively, taking account of time and resource constraints.

5. Improving external communication about the added value of social farming

There is a need to really engage with and energise both existing supporters and champions and new supporters. In particular, the potential contribution of social farming towards meeting the current challenges of society need to be emphasised and communicated more effectively. An Operational Group could develop a strategic communication plan with key messages, tools and tasks.



Annex 1: List of FG experts

Family name	First name	Professional background	Country
Albers	Jelle	Farmer	The Netherlands
Brito	Olga	Farmer	Portugal
Dejonckheere	Nele	Adviser	Belgium
Dreer	Johannes	Adviser	Germany
Dziasek	Elżbieta	Civil servant	Poland
Elings	Marjolein	Researcher	The Netherlands
Galasso	Angela	Adviser	Italy
Hubaux	Samuel	Working at an NGO	Belgium
Hudcová	Eliška	Researcher	Czech Republic
Moudrý	Jan	Researcher	Czech Republic
Navarro	Ismael	Farmer	Spain
O'Dowd	Colm	Farmer	Ireland
Pálsdóttir	AnnaMaría	Researcher	Sweden
Partalidou	Maria	Researcher	Greece
Signoriello	Ilaria	Other	Italy
Smyth	Brian	Working at an NGO	Ireland
Thiery	Damien	Farmer	Romania
Torquati	Biancamaria	Researcher	Italy
van Elsen	Thomas	Researcher	Germany
Yrjas	Christer	Adviser	Sweden



Facilitation team

Family name	First name	Professional background	Country
Moroney	Aisling	Coordinating Expert	Ireland
Verwimp	Bavo	Task Manager	Belgium
Guimarey Fernández	Beatriz	Co-Task Manager	Spain



Annex 2: List of Mini Papers

MP	Mini Paper title	Core Team
1	<u>Social farming for society: expanding the target groups by recognising and marketing the distinctive value of the farm environment</u>	Marjolein Elings (Coord.), Nele Dejonckheere, Johannes Dreer, Eliska Hudcova, Jelle Albers
2	<u>The role of Social Farming in bridging the gap between Agriculture and Society</u>	Marjolein Elings (Coord.), Nele Dejonckheere, Eliska Hudcova, Damien Thiery & Ismael Navarro
3	<u>Measuring impacts of Social Farming at the farm, on farmers and on the local community</u>	Damien Thiery (Coord.), Johannes Dreer, Ismael Navarro, Maria Partalidou, Ilaria Signoriello
4	<u>Quality assurance in social farming</u>	Anna María Pálsdóttir (Coord.), Christer Yrjas, Olga Brito, Jan Moudry, Elzbieta Kmita-Dziasek, Angela Galasso, Biancamaria Torquati
5	<u>Ecological Inclusion and Social Farming</u>	Thomas van Elsen (Coord.), Olga Brito, Eliška Hudcová, Colm O'Dowd
6	<u>Brokerage and advisory support</u>	Biancamaria Torquati (coord.), Elzbieta Dziasek, Angela Galasso, Eliška Hudcová, Maria Partalidou, Thomas van Elsen
7	<u>The role of LAGs (CLLD/LEADER) in triggering the implementation of social farming</u>	Maria Partalidou (Coord.), Samuel Hubaux, Ilaria Signoriello, Brian Smyth



Annex 3: Relevant projects related to social farming

The following table provides a list of some EU funded or co-funded projects focused on, or highly relevant to, social farming, for the period from 2012 until 2022.

Further Horizon projects related to social farming may arise from the current *HORIZON-CL6-2023-COMMUNITIES-01-1: Enhancing social inclusion in rural areas: focus on people in a vulnerable situation and social economy call*. Resolution of the call is expected for autumn-winter 2023 and the list of projects will be available on the [Funding & tenders \(europa.eu\)](https://europea.eu) website.

Title of the project	Country	Type
Added value of social farming for agricultural production	Germany	Operational Group
Organic vegetables: Enabling regional cultivation, creating jobs for people with disabilities, shaping processing, developing sales.	Germany	Operational Group
Social farming as an instrument for the diversification of agricultural enterprises in Bavaria - Development of innovative model projects	Germany	Operational Group
Comeragh Uplands and Communities EIP Project	Ireland	Operational Group
BIOSOCIAL. Small farm organic vegetable production as integrated model between production and local social impact	Italy	Operational Group
Montessori thought as innovation in social agriculture in the Marche Region	Italy	Operational Group
MULTINET - social and organizational innovation for developing multifunctionality in farms: models, co-production, inclusion	Italy	Operational Group
SOcial Farming - Innovative Agriculture	Multiple	INTERREG
SoFAB - Social Farming Across Borders	Multiple	INTERREG
Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas (SIMRA)	Multiple	H2020 project
NEWBIE New Entrant Network: Business models for Innovation, entrepreneurship and resilience in European agriculture [2 of 2]	Multiple	H2020 Thematic Network
RURALIZATION - The opening of rural areas to renew rural generations, jobs and farms	Multiple	H2020 project
FARCURA - Fostering Inclusion through social farming	Multiple	Erasmus+
FARMelder - Social Farming for the Elderly	Multiple	Erasmus+



Title of the project	Country	Type
<u>SoEngage/SoEngage Plus Engaging Farmers in Social Farming</u>	Multiple	Erasmus+
<u>SocialFARMS - Social Farm Activities for Rural Management Services</u>	Multiple	Erasmus+
<u>SoFarEDU & SoFarTEAM - Social Farming in Higher Education</u>	Multiple	Erasmus+
<u>Green4C - Innovating and promoting nature-based solutions for health, well-being, and social inclusion</u>	Multiple	Erasmus+
<u>Cultivating new skills in the social farm</u>	Italy	ESF
<u>Hands-on-training, down on the farm</u>	Slovenia	ESF



Annex 4: Inspiring cases

The following inspiring cases were provided by the experts as input for the 1st meeting of the Focus Group.

- › De Horst, the Netherlands - Jelle Albers
- › Parish Council of Santo, Portugal - Olga Brito
- › School@RuralAreas, Belgium - Nele Dejonckheere
- › FARCURA-project (2019-2021), Germany - Johannes Dreer
- › SoEngage-project (2018-2020), Germany - Johannes Dreer
- › Initiatives and networks in Germany - Johannes Dreer
- › Polish National Educational Farms Network, Poland - Elżbieta Dziasek
- › Kracht van de Zorglandbouw (The strength of social farming), the Netherlands - Marjolein Elings
- › Green4C, the Netherlands - Marjolein Elings
- › Hoge Born, the Netherlands - Marjolein Elings
- › SoFarTEAM, EU - Marjolein Elings
- › Building Bridges: AICARE experience, Italy - Angela Galasso
- › Vaches et bourrache (Cows and Borrage), Belgium - Samuel Hubaux
- › Protestant Theological Faculty, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic - Eliška Hudcová
- › University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Czech Republic - Jan Moudrý
- › Asociación Valenciana de Agricultores, Spain - Ismael Navarro
- › Middlethird Social Farm, Ireland - Colm O'Dowd
- › Medical nature assisted therapy (MNT) The foundation Humlamaden Green Rehab, Sweden - Anna María Pálsdóttir
- › FARMWELL, Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Romania - Maria Partalidou
- › Agricoltura Capodarco, Italy - Ilaria Signoriello
- › Social Farming Ireland - Brian Smyth
- › BioEco, Romania - Damien Thiery
- › Social FARMS, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, Spain and Turkey - Biancamaria Torquati
- › German Community of Practice on Social Farming DASoL, Germany - Thomas Van Elsen
- › Grön Arena, Sweden - Christer Yrjas

All projects are available on the [Focus Group webpage](#) in the booklet of projects.



Innovation & Knowledge Exchange | EIP-AGRI
Koning Albert II-laan 15, 1210,
Brussel, België
+32 (0) 2 548 12 87
innovation-knowledge@eucapnetwork.eu

