

## **SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN RURAL AREAS: OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CARE FARMS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Aim:** The aim of the research was to find the advantages and disadvantages of running care farms, one of the forms of entrepreneurship in rural areas that drive social innovation. **Methods:** The study's analyses consisted of secondary research and a qualitative approach. The target group reached were people interested in or already running care farms in Poland ( $n = 17$ ). The research was conducted between December 2022 and March 2023. **Results:** The findings reveal the observed advantages and disadvantages of care farms as reported by those overseeing these centers. Operators of such facilities emphasize the importance of their centers being part of a network of similar entities. **Conclusions:** The most important conclusions were the need for further regulation to help social farming actors stay in business through networking, better marketing and advertising of social farming operators that support the local community, creating jobs, and improving the quality of life of those in need.

**Keywords:** social innovation in rural areas, networking, social farming, local community, support for rural areas

**JEL codes:** L26, O13, O18

### **INTRODUCTION**

Social farming encompasses activities that use the opportunities provided by agriculture to support therapy, rehabilitation, social inclusion, education, and social services in rural areas [Hine et al. 2008, Chmielewska 2018, Wojcieszak and Wojcieszak, 2018]. The understanding of the concept of social farming varies from country to country, depending on the specific conditions of its development. Most

of the case studies described in the existing literature concern Italy, the Netherlands, the UK, and Norway [Leck et al. 2014, Guirado et al. 2017]. The beneficiaries of social farming try to publicize the benefits for both sides: social benefits, health benefits, educational, environmental, and economic advantages. Green care farms (social farming) are significant actors in rural development, work, and social inclusion. They can respond immediately and innovatively to local needs.

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Despite the popularity of social farming around the world and its potential role in developing effective services for people in need, as far as we know, only a few studies have examined how organizations are developing social innovation in services for people with disabilities, the socially excluded, seniors in general, and in social farming (in particular).

According to Ewers and Eweret [2015], among the social innovations potentially implementable by NGOs are:

1. Innovations in the sphere of services involving their individualization, tailoring them to the needs of specific groups of recipients, aimed at increasing their subjectivity;
2. Innovations in the sphere of regulations and laws on forms of assistance aimed at their activation on an ad-hoc basis, in emergency situations, and innovations in the sphere of social contacts on the rights and obligations of assisted persons in solving the social problems affecting them;
3. Innovations in the sphere of local development management strengthening the cooperation of various entities, building their coalitions, and partnerships;
4. innovations in working methods and ways of financing them involving, for example, combining various knowledge resources for solving social problems;
5. Innovations concerning the entire functioning of social policy aimed at achieving the involvement of representatives of all sectors (especially local entities) in activity on their behalf.

Zajda [2022] defines “social innovation” as changes introduced in the area of social problem-solving, involving the emergence of alternative social practices to the dominant ones.

Driving factors of social innovation in rural services may be a focus on social farming in the form of various forms of social economy businesses. Furthermore, given that certain normative requirements – together with the need to achieve economies of scale – necessitate networking between non-profit organizations, this study aims to explore the role of networking in the development of social innovation.

The network approach, as a new concept for the analysis of economic reality and cooperation between

entities, emerged in the late 1970s in the wake of technological changes in the market. It exposes the importance of the totality of an organization’s contacts with the environment, forming an extensive network of relationships [Bogusz et al. 2021].

The main distinguishing feature of the network approach is the consideration of the social context of the behavior of organizations, which is that they are seen as a fragment of a broader system of many actors, activities, and resources that influence each other.

A network is a set of long-term formal and informal relationships (direct and indirect) between two or more actors, and “networking” implies a focus on the links between an enterprise and the entities in its environment. All relationships are taken into account, including those that go beyond typical organizational and formal contracts, encompassing the totality of relationships relevant to the organization [Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej 2021].

The aim of our study suggests adopting a qualitative research approach applied to the case of service research. Although several previous studies have focused on innovation and its driving factors [Joao Roland and Granados 2020], few researchers have addressed the topic of services in rural areas. This study aimed to answer the following two research questions: What are the causes of social innovation in rural areas? (RQ1); What characteristics make networks a driver of social innovation in rural care farm services? (RQ2)

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Beginning at the end of the 20th century, the influence of the European community has led to a redefinition of the agency of nation-states: the regulatory power of national governments is decreasing, while the powers of Brussels and regional/provincial authorities are increasing. As a result of decentralization, local and regional authorities are becoming more independent political actors with greater responsibility. At the same time, the presence of European bodies limits the scope of national, regional, and local decision-making in many areas – agricultural policy being one example [Wickerke et al. 2003, Pomianek and Kowalczyk 2016].

### **Social farming – objectives, beneficiaries**

The main initiatives to define social farming in the EU were the Cost Action 866 – Green Care – European Cooperation in Science and Technology project and the follow-up actions of the European Economic and Social Committee [Jarobkova et al. 2022]. The European Economic and Social Committee defines social farming as an innovative approach combining two concepts: 1) multifunctional agriculture; 2) social services/health care at the local level, contributing to the well-being and social inclusion of people with special needs.

Farms can not only be providers of agricultural products, but they can also offer various services with a social dimension. These services can relate to various spheres such as culture, education and upbringing, social assistance, or healthcare. Farms, therefore, have the potential to provide educational services such as after-school activities, activities for children with special educational needs, or full-time pre-school care – as in Norway, for example [Hassink et al. 2016, Kalinowski et al. 2021]. They are a good place for using nature-based therapy (silvotherapy [“forest bathing”]) to support and treat people with mental disorders. Lastly, they can also act as refuges for older people often struggling with reduced independence and illnesses, including dementia, and requiring care as a result.

Social farming, including care farms in particular, plays a crucial role in the context of the challenges posed by an aging population, resulting in a shrinking workforce and an increase in the number of people requiring support. To tackle these challenges, a range of innovative initiatives is currently underway. These efforts aim to provide support for individuals with disabilities, those facing the risk of exclusion, the elderly, and those who are dependent. The initiatives encompass diverse forms of assistance, including education, vocational activation, socialization, therapy, and, notably, care services. Social farming is just such an initiative, undertaken in a rural environment and combining not only the desire to achieve social objectives, but also the desire to diversify agricultural activities, activate people in rural areas, and make use of human capital – the undeveloped resources, potential, and skills of rural people [Karanikolos et al. 2013].

### **Benefits of social farming**

The concept of socially involved agriculture boasts numerous strengths. Engaging in outdoor activities, participating in economic endeavors, and recognizing one’s contribution as a valuable member of a community are all pivotal elements that significantly contribute to well-being and enhance health, irrespective of age. The care farm allows available labor resources in the villages to be used for the good cause of providing care for the elderly living in less populated areas. The countryside is a source of knowledge and experience in caring for the elderly, given the deficiencies in infrastructure in institutional and residential forms of care. Combined with the human intrinsic motivation to do the socially right thing and the financial motivation associated with increasing non-agricultural income, care farms seem to be a win-win solution for all parties involved. The multidimensional benefits of social farming can be grouped as follows [Sekula et al. 2022]:

- the economic benefits are more jobs in rural areas and a source of livelihood for families involved in agriculture. On the one hand, it is the activation of the elderly, the disabled or those distanced from the labor market who can realize the need to be useful through valuable work in agriculture. On the other hand, it is also an additional motivation to develop professionally and professionalize one’s role in providing care services for people – mainly women – caring for dependents at home;
- the social benefits are not only the improved well-being and health of the care beneficiaries, but also the increased awareness of the local community living near the farms about the disability or other ailments of the farm’s residents;
- the technological benefits are the opportunity to create a new function for the farm without investing in costly technologies to improve agricultural production while reducing the environmental impact;
- the benefits of agriculture are not only the opportunity to run a farm with a multifunctional character, allowing for entry into new areas of activity and diversification of agricultural income. It is also an opportunity to promote a new image of agriculture among representatives of all generations.

### **Problems and challenges of social farming**

It is important to bear in mind that the intrinsic diversity of the phenomenon of inclusive agriculture means that the challenges or problems in this area depend on the form of farm run. Social farming is an idea still insufficiently described in the literature and still in the beginning stage of development in most countries. It is still a social innovation rather than a widely implemented practice. In some countries – due to the development still being in the beginning phase and the lack of legal conditions – there may be problems with the public (co-)financing of the social services provided by the farms. Due to the still innovative aspect of care farms in many countries, there is a gap between supply and demand [Hassink et al. 2016]. In an era of increasing care needs for an increasing number of elderly and dependent people in ageing societies, few places in rural areas offer such profiled services. In addition, the gap between potential clients and potential providers is exacerbated by the fact that this is an unfamiliar form of care services. Unaware of possible solutions, seniors and their family members look for different options to meet their need for support in the local environment, in various forms of assisted housing (also still innovative in Poland) or care homes, without turning their attention towards rural areas. Both areas require extensive information and awareness-raising efforts for both farmers and potential users of their services. Running a care farm is not only a response to the need to provide work for the people there, but also to provide a variety of classes and activities, transport, accommodation, food, and professional care appropriate to the needs and profile of the farm [Elsley et al. 2018]. These responsibilities require different competencies, an appropriate division of roles, and some management skills. From a strategic planning perspective, it is also important to prepare for the challenge of succession and the implications of ageing on the farm, especially for care farms providing long-term and 24-hour care.

### **The concept of care farms in Poland**

As care farms are a form of farming that combines agricultural activity with care for people in need of support, the participation of farmers or homemakers is

recommended in the process of setting up and properly functioning of such a facility. The current legal conditions restrict the possibility of combining agricultural activity with the provision of care services [Stępnik 2022]. Therefore, there are two possible forms of providing such services – as a social economy entity (foundation, association, social cooperative) and as an economic activity. Who can be service recipients? Those who receive services include senior citizens, who are elderly and require care, therapy, rehabilitation, and integration activities due to their age; people who are physically and mentally disabled; the unemployed; people who suffer from addictions; people who have been released from prison; so-called “difficult young people”; and children with special educational needs.

Despite their diversity due to their farming activity profile and target group, care farms have common features. Every farm has resources that can be used when providing services. These include livestock farming, cultivation of commodity crops, forestry, herbalism, and horticulture. In the initial stages of a farm’s existence, it is recommended that the main recipients are elderly, economically inactive, or dependent people [Ministerstwo Rolnictwa... 2021].

### **RESEARCH MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study adopts a qualitative approach. This was considered appropriate as it enables the study of a social phenomenon, such as “social innovation”, in rural services and the collection of relevant data in its natural environment. In addition, for the purpose of this article, secondary data taken from internet sources was used, including those prepared by the EU, national and local government institutions, government administrations, and other actors (including local community organizations in rural areas) involved in the development of social farming. The analysis also included reports and studies prepared for EU-funded projects. The data method used was a “desk research” tabular presentation.

Face-to-face interviews were used to collect in-depth qualitative data [Fisher 2007]. To explore the data, thematic analysis was used to identify common themes – namely, the driving factors of social innovation in rural services. The research was conducted between Decem-

ber 2022 and March 2023. The target group reached were people who were interested in or already running care farms in Poland ( $n = 17$ ). The survey had a pilot character because the authors wanted to see if there is interest in social activities among owners of active farms in rural areas. The people who took part in the survey were recruited among those who participated in the training and webinar conducted by the Agricultural Advisory Center. Due to the fact that they were from different ends of the country, the interview was conducted by telephone. It was an attempt to define a research problem, which will be developed and analyzed in depth later.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Care farm services mostly target the elderly (senior policy) and people with disabilities, who require a group setting for therapy support [Krzyzanowska 2018].

The driving factors presented in Table 1 were analyzed.

The number of points does not add up to 100% as respondents were able to indicate between one and three factors in each group. The questions were based on research by Mion et al. [2022] conducted in Italy, where social farming is quite developed.

### RQ1. What are the causes of social innovation in rural areas?

At the individual level, the driving factors of social innovation are the following three factors: entrepreneurs' and employees' motivation and commitment to the social mission, individual commitment and passion for social benefit creation, and a cooperative attitude. Those taking part in the survey emphasized that entrepreneurs and employees are deeply motivated to create social value, share this value with users, and integrate care farm users into a broader human rights framework – as some respondents (care farm employees) explained:

- “We strive to develop services that fit the specificities of the local communities in which we operate.

**Table 1.** Driving factors influencing social farming innovation in rural areas

Driving factors	Indications of supply-side actors in social farming services	
	( $n = 17$ )	%
<b>Individual</b>		
Motivations to achieve the social mission	12	70.58
Individual commitment and passion for creating a community of benefit	10	58.82
Collaborative attitude	16	94.11
<b>Organizational</b>		
Hybrid business models	10	58.82
Social education	9	52.94
Organizational flexibility and employee engagement	17	100.00
Experimentation	12	70.59
<b>Networking</b>		
Cooperation with entities and organizations in the same sector and with public authorities responsible for services for persons with disabilities	12	70.59
Cooperation between public and private bodies that are competent in the same service area	16	94.12
Cross-sectoral partnerships and collaboration with various stakeholders and profit-making companies	17	100.00

Source: own research.



In order for our beneficiaries to actively participate in the life of the community, we prefer access to inclusive and supportive spaces in local communities.” (Respondents <R> 1,8).

- “We are becoming a community that does things together. There is no longer an ‘I’ who comes in and tells the wards what to do, but we all work together, doing specific tasks to achieve a common goal.” (R2).
- “The satisfaction is to gradually see people coming to improve their self-esteem and sense of autonomy and develop relationships.” (R3–7).

The involvement of people representing the supply of social agriculture and staff has made it possible to sense a social need and translate it into a product/service that provides a solution to a social need. Since the main beneficiaries of care farm services are the elderly or disabled, this involvement has become one of the pillars of care for the socially excluded.

- “The main thing that unites us as partners and employees is passion. We want to go home satisfied with what we do.” (R4–11).

Another investigated driver of innovation, developing in the context of social farming, is a cooperative attitude – which provides a more suitable environment to identify opportunities, as well as to accelerate the spread of the innovation process, as described by the respondents:

- “These services work and offer a certain added value precisely because there is close cooperation between families. It’s the foundation without which the service becomes complicated.” (R9).
- “In order to start a project like this, one should have an aptitude for networking with people.” (R10).

Four organizationally related driving drivers of social innovation were identified by the analysis: employee commitment, organizational flexibility and flexibility, social education, and hybrid business models. In particular, the Innovation Networks’ business models discussed in the interviews highlight their hybrid nature, which is determined by operating in line with both market and social orientation, as stated by the following respondent:

- “My goods and services are bought not only because they are produced and provided by people with disabilities, but also because they are of good quality and are appreciated in the market.” (R13).

Adopting a hybrid business model enables social entrepreneurs to collaborate with multiple partners to access the resources, knowledge, and competencies required to develop and scale up the Innovation Network.

- “The environment in which we work is like a process of continuous improvement because we learn from other farms, and they learn from us. This way of working leads us to network the human side.” (R11).
- “We have created something new out of the exchange of good practices. And this is because a specific model is in place – sharing knowledge and skills.” (R13).

Further factors that emerged from the analysis were organizational flexibility and employee commitment. To achieve these goals, the commitment and involvement of laborers was important. Everyone contributed much more than just working hours.

- “It takes a certain attitude not to lose patience, to understand how communication works with a disabled person, and to understand how their learning process works. It requires a certain ability to listen and multiple diverse skills belonging to both agrarian and social domains” (R6).

Experimentation is the final driver of the organization and was mentioned by many respondents, who emphasized the importance of engaging in this practice on a daily basis for continuous improvement:

- “The specific nature and peculiarities of innovation lie in the dimension of the willingness to experiment to improve oneself and the willingness to experience improvements in spaces, resources, and even services.” (R10).

In their study, Moriggi et al. [2020] highlight the importance of social innovation in rural areas, extending it to include elements of sustainable development. They emphasize the importance of community involvement and combining the good practices of other actors in the market. The relevance of and positive qualities for both

service providers and receivers of care farms' services are demonstrated by comparisons of Finland's rural social care providers. Conversely, Scartazza et al. [2020] stress the value of the setting in which social innovations are developed as well as the advantages of incorporating the environment and chances to take advantage of nature via horticultural therapy, zootherapies, and sylvotherapies – which are limited to rural areas.

## **RQ2. What characteristics make networks a driver of social innovation in rural care farm services?**

Networks – more or less structured – are the “normal” state of organizations providing services to people with disabilities. Relational and networking capabilities play a key role in the whole process of social innovation, which involves three steps: (1) opportunity recognition; (2) innovation implementation; (3) innovation consolidation. Regarding the recognition of opportunities, several respondents confirmed the impact of the legislation on the creation of networks between different service businesses in a specific territory that had previously operated individually [Hassink 2016]. In these cases, it was through social networks that entrepreneurs were able to sense opportunities with strong social value and facilitate the process of social innovation, as stated by the interviewed respondents:

- “At the beginning, many small social enterprises were created. Later they were put on a network (R6-R10). This gave them many growth opportunities (R8-R13)”.

Among the persons interviewed who were interested in running care farms, the identification of opportunities was possible. For these interviewees, the fact that they were already in a network with other organizations gave rise to a process of experimentation that would have otherwise been much more difficult. Strong links with the territory and external interested parties allowed the social entrepreneurs to see an opportunity in the needs of the families themselves, who were not satisfied with the existing solutions, as shown in the following excerpts from the interviews:

- “The need comes from the families, and with this project (EU funding for the activities of the care farms), we were able to have families discover forms of care for their relatives”. (R1–R10).

When it comes to implementing social innovation, networks are essential to seize opportunities because they enable the integration of different approaches to innovation that are not always identifiable within a single organization. Firstly, networks enable access to economic and material resources, ensuring their equal distribution and increasing the overall economic sustainability of a social innovation project. Respondents highlighted how the network made up for the lack of resources:

- “In terms of economic viability, we work with the companies we trade with (R2–R8). The network gives economic viability (R8–R15)”.

Firstly, networks are essential to the social innovation process because they provide access to intangible resources such as knowledge and competencies. Networks provide opportunities for organizational learning and knowledge sharing.

Several interviewees acknowledged that networks are a source of assistance and make work much easier: Networks enable good cooperation between social enterprises.

- “This openness and this collaboration between farms facilitates work that would otherwise be difficult (R9). We have been successful only because we have established cooperation and sharing of the project with other care farms (R12)”.

Another aspect confirming the importance of networks in the implementation phase of social innovation, mentioned by some respondents, was the role of networks in increasing the project's overall value. In fact, the collaboration with other local social enterprises enabled the diversification of the services provided in order to reach more users and improve the end-user experience:

- “The service is innovative because it is an alternative to the existing solution (daycare center). It is based on contact with the natural environment: I believe that these services can work and contribute some added value precisely because, at their core,

there is a close collaboration and sharing of intentions with families, people, and colleagues (R9).”

Concerning the final stage of the process, the consolidation of social innovations to create a successful practice, networking, and collaboration were extremely important. Several respondents acknowledged that the support of the local community was essential for disseminating social innovation. Some respondents described it as follows:

- “Creating educational products together as a future tool to improve the quality of life (R7). Transformation of owned assets is a social collaboration process that goes back to the community (R11). The goal is to design all services with the relationship of service recipients with the community in mind (R12).”

On the other hand, institutional support is important in the initial phase of opportunity identification but seemed insufficient in the innovation consolidation phase. Many respondents confirmed that the regulatory system was poorly structured:

- “We started the project with funding. So, the law gave us the financial basis to start the project. Then we have to look for funds and resources from other sources – e.g., sponsors.” (R7).

Networks are recognized as an important driver of social innovation at all stages of the innovation process, although with different functions and dimensions. There is an emerging need for better marketing and promotion of the services provided by social farming actors (care farms):

- “We need to involve the local authorities to make this new service known (R5). We have always acted alone, only sharing good practice (R13).”

Hassink et al. [2018] and Dell’Olio et al. [2017], in their research in both the Netherlands and Italy, who are pioneering the development of care farms, demonstrates the validity of considering care farms at the level of linking them to an economic sector with elements of a social movement. Undoubtedly, solutions from more experienced countries should be used to develop and support social economy actors in rural areas.

## CONCLUSIONS

Social farming is an innovative approach to agriculture in which the essence is its multifunctionality – understood as the possibility of satisfying on the farm not only production and market needs, but also non-agricultural needs: environmental, cultural, economic, and social. The economic dimension of the operation of care farms should be considered not only from the point of view of potentially reducing the costs of care borne by local authorities and the families of those in need. In the context of rural development, it is vital that the care service can be a profitable form of non-agricultural activity. It is an opportunity for small family farms to survive and thrive. Consequently, care farms should be seen not only as an instrument of social policy, but also as part of rural development policy. Thus, it can be concluded that the idea of developing care farms in Poland is a response to the needs of the market and the social and economic development risks facing rural areas.

In terms of social implications, the results of this study show that organizations involved in social farming can create social value beyond the system’s capacity. In this respect, social innovators are certainly responding to the unmet needs of those in need of care by providing opportunities for improved well-being and integration in the workplace. Therefore, the whole community benefits from the value created by social innovators. Furthermore, social innovation contributes to better use of tangible and intangible resources, which is a prerequisite for achieving the goals of social and cultural sustainability goals. The study is not without limitations. Firstly, the sample for the analysis included people interested in social farming in one of the developing countries in Eastern Europe, where social farming is only just being introduced to the care market and great incentive is needed for this type of service from both service providers and service recipients. Secondly, the qualitative methodology of the current study is consistent with the exploratory nature of the research questions but does not lead to insights into the characteristics of the nodes and links in the network of interested parties involved in the social innovation process. Thirdly, the importance of



each social innovation factor is expected to change at different stages of the process [Oeij et al. 2019] – an issue that was partially ignored in the current study. Starting from these limitations, the present study opens up further research on social innovation in services for people in need of care. This study also has important practical implications. Social farming is a valuable response to social problems not adequately addressed by existing solutions. As with technological innovation, social entrepreneurs cannot act in isolation; they need to network to achieve a better reach for their offer [Penco et al. 2021, Vezina et al. 2019]. The presented research is a small fragment, so the obtained results cannot be generalized and transferred to the entire population. Because the study was a pilot, it was possible to identify the future course of research that needed to be established.

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## SPOŁECZNA NA OBSZARACH WIEJSKICH: SZANSE ROZWOJU GOSPODARSTW OPIEKUŃCZYCH

### STRESZCZENIE

**Cel:** Celem badania było znalezienie zalet i wad prowadzenia gospodarstw opiekuńczych, które są jedną z form przedsiębiorczości na obszarach wiejskich, napędzających innowacje społeczne. **Metody:** Analizy zastosowane w badaniu polegały na badaniach źródeł wtórnych i podejściu jakościowym. Docelową grupą

badawczą były osoby zainteresowane lub już prowadzące gospodarstwa opiekuńcze w Polsce ( $n = 17$ ). Badania prowadzono w okresie grudzień 2022 – marzec 2023 roku. **Wyniki:** Wyniki pokazują, jakie wady i zalety gospodarstw opiekuńczych dostrzegają prowadzący takie ośrodki. Wskazują na potrzebę przynależności ich placówek do sieci podobnych podmiotów. **Wnioski:** Najważniejszymi wnioskami była potrzeba dalszych regulacji prawnych, aby pomóc podmiotom zajmującym się rolnictwem społecznym utrzymać się na rynku poprzez tworzenie sieci współpracy, lepszy marketing i reklamę oferentów rolnictwa społecznego, którzy wspierają lokalną społeczność, tworzą miejsca pracy i poprawiają jakość życia potrzebujących.

**Słowa kluczowe:** innowacje społeczne na obszarach wiejskich; tworzenie sieci; rolnictwo społeczne; lokalna społeczność; wsparcie dla obszarów wiejskich