



Witzenhausen Position Paper on the Added Value of Social Farming

Call to decision-makers in industry, administration, politics and the public to support social agriculture in Germany

Compiled by participants of the workshop "Added value in social farming" from 26 to 28th October 2007 in Witzenhausenⁱ

Background

Social Farming adopts a multifunctional view of agriculture: the main products, in addition to saleable produce, are health and employment, education or therapy. Agriculture offers opportunities for people to participate in the varied rhythms of the day and the year, be it in growing food or working with domestic animals. Social farming includes agricultural enterprises and market gardens which integrate people with physical, mental or emotional disabilities; farms which offer openings for the socially disadvantaged, for young offenders or those with learning difficulties, people with drug dependencies, the long-term unemployed and active senior citizens; school and kindergarten farms and many more. Prevention of illness, inclusion and a better quality of life are features of social agriculture.

Throughout Europe social farming initiatives are springing up. Farming enterprises are increasingly becoming the focus of developments in rural areas, creating work and employment for the socially disadvantaged and people with disabilities and taking on an educational role. In countries such as Italy, Norway, Belgium and the Netherlands these individual initiatives have long since grown into movements, thanks to political and financial support. The development of social farming in Germany is lagging behind that in Europe. In the Netherlands and Belgium the number of *Care Farms* is growing rapidly. They integrate people with disabilities and therefore receive assistance from central coordinating authorities. In Italy, agricultural cooperatives are providing new jobs for socially disadvantaged people in underdeveloped areas. And in Scandinavia family businesses are developing new sources of income through providing social services.

In Germany there is little sign of the European mood of optimism. Farmers and people in need of help and their parents, who themselves want to take the initiative, but also therapists and social workers who are in search of suitable farms for their clients, all find themselves faced with an almost impenetrable jungle of laws and authorities associated with different contact partners, funding bodies and government departments which, in addition, vary from one Federal State to another. School farms which are funded independently have to fight for economic survival because, as places for extracurricular learning and experience which offer the children a new relationship to animals, plants and nutrition, they receive almost no recognition. Doctors and therapists are often unable to find suitable farms which would be able to provide many a patient with new prospects. And farms which receive requests from those in need of help or their relatives are seldom equal to the demands, because they lack the support structures for professional supervision. There is a shortage of advice, professional support, education and training opportunities, and structural and funding instruments which could promote the development of social farming.

The **Future of Social Farming in Germany** needs support and a reliable framework: This includes:

1. Recognition of the added value of social farming for society

The added value created for society by social farming must receive recognition and targeted support. The diversity of social and cultural services and the social endeavour for people and nature need public support in order to maintain and develop the various fields of activity in social farming. The integrative and educational work in particular, but also the health provision and therapeutic effects of social farming (through meaningful work and therapy, responsible use of natural resources, sustainable nutritional education) must be recognised, encouraged and researched further. The potential cost-savings for health insurance schemes and the health sector as a result of health improvements appears to be an additional argument.

2. Creating transparency in the legal framework

The confusing variety of laws, authorities and funding options for all user groups and providers as a result of the federal structure but also the responsibilities of different government departments needs to be made more transparent and accessible to agricultural enterprises. In addition, marginal groups in particular who do not fit any medical diagnosis or have fallen through the social security net, such as young people disaffected by school, burn out patients, the homeless, asylum seekers or emigrants need a legal framework which enables them to participate in social farming.

3. Fostering communication and the exchange of experience

The opportunities for sharing experiences between different initiatives which have been very limited to date need to be improved. Pioneer projects with their own history and development who are often unaware of one another need to be linked up and cooperation within existing networks needs to be promoted. Initiatives in social farming can be supported and access new sources of funding through joint publicity, publications, a presence on the Internet and political representation of their interests.

4. Setting up a central network and advisory service with coordinating responsibilities

Social farming needs contact points. The creation of a central network and advisory service which could be established within the framework of existing advisory provisions would be a first step in overcoming the lack of transparency in the system of laws and authorities, officials, networks, funding and initiatives. This coordination would not only bring together supply and demand for social services on farms, but would give competent advice on options for further training and funding, thus helping to develop and implement good ideas in the long term. The remit of this institution would also include representing the interests of social farming and informing the public.

5. Promotion of education and training opportunities, supervision and coaching

Education and training in social farming must be promoted by support for existing educational initiatives and the setting up of new ones. The job profile combines skills and qualifications in different disciplines and supplements the traditional job description of the farmer. Education and training measures will secure, improve and develop the quality of social and agricultural services on farms.

6. Support for interdisciplinary research on social farming

Social farming needs support from research in the fields of therapy and medicine, social work and agriculture and education which cannot be separated from one another in the actual life and work on the farm. What is learned from experience regarding the effectiveness of integrating people in the daily and yearly rhythms on the farm and the communal agricultural work

needs to be documented and used for the further development of social farming. There needs to be support for the work in caring for nature and the cultural landscape which is made possible on social farms through many helping hands. Interdisciplinary research which disseminates the knowledge gained from experience and integrates and supervises participating actors from practice, user groups and administration, can foster innovative ideas and involvement in social farming. Scientific support for pilot projects can be of help in the development of models based on single enterprises and cooperatives right up to entire model regions.

7. Promotion of European cooperation

The cooperation at a European level which has been started through the SoFar project (Soziale Landwirtschaft – Soziale Leistungen multifunktionaler Höfe [Social Farming – Social services on multifunctional farms], www.sofar-d.de/), the COST- Action *Green Care in Agriculture* (www.umb.no/greencare) and the *Farming for Health* international working group (www.farmingforhealth.org/) must be supported and developed. Practitioners and scientists throughout Europe need to learn from one another through the exchange of ideas, practical solutions and research projects in order to make innovative ideas and solutions available for practical application.

Outlook

Social farming enterprises already provide society with added value at several levels within multifunctional agriculture. The measures for supporting social farming detailed in this position paper call upon politicians, ministers, scientists, consumers and the wider public to be aware of, recognise, maintain and promote these services. Social farming opens up the social, cultural, educational and therapeutic potential of managing the land.

We do not want to see social farming as merely another specialist option for agricultural enterprises, but also as a possible building block for a more socially-minded future. Social agricultural enterprises within transparent systems offer opportunities for the individual development of those in need of help, a sustainable approach to managing nature and the revitalisation of rural areas. When many individuals act in concert and develop social values, small-scale alternatives to the advancing rationalisation, competition and price wars are able to emerge. The added value of social farming opens up prospects of a potential paradigm shift.

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