



# **Social Farming for the Elderly**

## **Issues, Challenges and Opportunities in the European Union**



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# INTRODUCTION

Social farming, also known as “care farming” or “green care”, refers to the therapeutic use of farming landscapes and practices in order to provide health, social, educational, and/or vocational support to a small number of people at risk of social exclusion. It relates to farming activities where communities of people can stay and work together, thereby addressing the diverse needs of different groups of less empowered people (elderly, individuals with intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, drug/alcohol recoveries, terminal patients, and individuals going through or recovering from burnouts) (Di Iacovo, 2009). The special added value of social farming is the possibility for disadvantaged people or people with ‘low contractual capacity’ to be integrated into a living context, where their personal capabilities are valued and enhanced (Di Iacovo & O’Connor, 2009). This report will specifically focus on social farming for elderly people in the EU.

The report will provide an overview of the main challenges faced by the elderly and the potential of social farming to meet these challenges. In addition, it will also provide a comprehensive overview of social farming at the European political and policy level as well as outline the various EU-level funding mechanisms available to farmers willing to engage in social farming.

## 1 THE STATUS OF ELDERLY PEOPLE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

This section will provide an analysis of the main issues and challenges faced by Europe’s elderly population. These issues and challenges will then be examined through the lens of social farming to understand how social farming can mitigate the different challenges faced by the elderly.

### 1.1 Issues and challenges faced

#### 1.1.1 Ageing population & rural depopulation

One of the main challenges associated with Europe’s population is the rapidly ageing population, which is even more severe in rural areas. Projections indicate that the share of people over 65 years old could reach nearly 30% of the entire EU population by 2050, as opposed to 19% in 2018 (Eurostat, 2019). Higher percentages of older people in populations lead to serious consequences such as increasing pressure on healthcare systems (Gagliardi et al., 2019). This demographic trend is even more pronounced in rural areas, where ageing populations are combined with high rates of rural depopulation. These trends result from a vicious circle of inter-related social and economic factors involving the out-migration of younger people to urban centres. In predominantly rural areas, there are now fewer than two people of working age for every elderly person (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020).

The ESPON policy brief 'Shrinking rural regions in Europe' (ESPON, 2017; Raugze et al., 2017), explains how depopulation results from “a complex 'vicious circle' of interrelated economic and social factors,



presenting acute challenges for regional development and governance (ESPON, 2017). These can include, for example, the restructuring of rural areas in which agriculture has become less labour intensive and out-migration, involving the loss of younger and well-educated workers, occurs (Raugze et al., 2017). Such areas suffer from decreased job opportunities as well as underutilised and underfunded public services including transport and health services (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). Combined, these factors have a significant impact on local living conditions, reducing the migratory pull-factors of such areas and leading to a further “downward spiral of demographic decline through falling fertility rates and enforced ageing of the remaining population” (ESPON, 2017; Raugze et al., 2017). This results in significant pressures on healthcare systems, which are key for elderly populations.

### 1.1.2 Health & access to services

Elderly populations in Europe are affected by a combination of social, economic, and territorial issues (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). One of the main issues is the rising need for medical care and the lack of sufficient health and care services in some rural territories (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). This issue is exacerbated by the inability to attract new generations of health workers to rural areas. Increasing rates of rural depopulation further aggravate this issue seeing as this results in public disinvestment from key services (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020).

Therefore, interventions aimed at promoting health and preventing diseases are therefore particularly important among elderly people. According to the WHO, the global strategy for a healthy ageing population is to reduce disability through the promotion of health and disease prevention. This includes physical exercise and social involvement (Gagliardi et al., 2019). Even moderate levels of physical activity and involvement in recreation activities can maintain mental functions and decrease the incidence of dementia (Gagliardi et al., 2019).

### 1.1.3 Social isolation & loneliness

Elderly people can also suffer from social isolation and loneliness, sometimes even leading to social exclusion, especially in rural areas that lack public transport or are more geographically isolated.

Lack of social interaction has been recognised as a risk factor for both depression and cognitive decline, both of which are disabling conditions in older age individuals (Gagliardi et al., 2019). Loneliness, social isolation, and social exclusion are also identified as important disease and mortality risk factors in older people (Gagliardi et al., 2019). Studies have shown that increased time spent engaging in social activities results in a reduction of restless behaviour, use of medication, and improved nutrition in elderly people. Social engagement, therefore, plays a key role in maintaining mental performance in elderly people. Nonetheless, continuous social engagement and relationship support networks are not always available to people aged 75 or older, due to declining health, social, support, and social opportunities (Gagliardi et al., 2019).

Although new technologies can help to reduce social isolation, many rural areas are still lagging behind in terms of digital infrastructure, with a lower share of households having internet access, and a lack of digital skills among older people (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). This is where social farming can play a major role.

#### 1.1.4 Demographic challenges in the farming sector

The demographic challenge affecting the rural population is particularly severe in the EU's farming population (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). These communities play an invaluable role in keeping rural areas alive and in providing sufficient food for all EU citizens (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). Nevertheless, in addition to the number of farmers steeply declining over recent decades, generational renewal is no longer assured, with only an average of one in ten farmers being under the age of 40 (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). Through its common agricultural policy (CAP), the EU supports young people willing to start a career in farming. Nonetheless, research on generational renewal indicates that policy interventions need to improve their consideration of the complex nature of the farm succession process, which has both emotional and social dimensions for older farmers (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). In such cases, service users of social farming can play an important role in the livelihoods of farmers.

#### 1.1.5 Vulnerability to climate change

Populations over the age of 65 years old are particularly vulnerable to the health effects of climate change and extreme weather events (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). The 2003 heat wave, which saw temperatures of 40 °C, resulted in the deaths of an estimated 70,000 elderly people in Europe (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). Furthermore, temperature records were also broken in Europe during the summers of 2006, 2007, 2010, and 2013 to 2020. Estimates show that mortality rates increase by 1-4% for every one-degree rise in temperature (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). The impact of climate on the health of older people living in rural areas is particularly relevant.

These areas may require unique and targeted responses seeing as the vulnerability of the elderly to the effects of climate change is tremendously exacerbated when elderly people are socially excluded. Social farms can play a key role by preventing elderly people from being left alone and monitoring/taking care of ensuring that they are equipped to deal with increased temperatures.

## 2 THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL FARMING TO MEET THESE CHALLENGES

Social farming is targeted at vulnerable people at risk of social exclusion. Social farms offer assisted work placement and therapeutic activities to specific target populations such as children and the elderly through recreational services and assistance (Gagliardi et al., 2019). These activities are effective in meeting the needs of these target groups and addressing some of the above-mentioned challenges they face.

Social farming for the elderly is traditionally focused on providing care to elderly people with mild or severe signs of dementia (Gagliardi et al., 2019). Presently, the available literature analysing the experiences of elderly people with social farming is limited, with only a few studies reporting the characteristics and strengths of these experiences. Nonetheless, there are a number of key benefits to be discussed. This section will outline the benefits of social farming in the context of the challenges elderly people face, outlined in the previous section.

Many service users report a positive effect on physical health, mental health, and social well-being (Table 1) (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009). Service-users also commonly report improved well-being, increased sense of freedom and space and improved integration in society (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009).

<i>Physical health effects</i>	<i>Mental health effects</i>	<i>Social effects</i>
More physical strength	Increase in self-esteem	Better social interaction
Better appetite	Increase in self-respect	More social contacts
Development of skills	Enthusiasm	More social skills
Better use of energy	Increase in self-awareness	More independence
Better use of senses	Increase in responsibility	Employment

**Table 1 Summary of benefits of social farming for service-users (adapted from Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009)**

Social farming can improve the quality of life for older people and those living with age-related physical and mental disabilities. Some social farms, for example, run specialist dementia services, which are adapted to suit people living with the condition (Social Farms & Gardens, n.d.).

Individuals that have been diagnosed with dementia can often be at risk of social isolation and declines in both mental and physical health. Research shows that regularly spending time in nature can slow the progression of dementia (Social Farms & Gardens, n.d.). In addition, it can improve sleep, concentration, appetite and communication skills. Research conducted by the Dementia Adventure charity demonstrates that individuals living with dementia often face barriers to accessing the outdoors (Social Farms & Gardens, n.d.). Social farms attenuate these risks by providing services that offer vital local support to these individuals and their communities (Social Farms & Gardens, n.d.).

Issues with health and social marginalisation such as loneliness, social isolation, social exclusion, lack of engagement, and low levels of physical activity are recognised disease and mortality risk factors in older people (Gagliardi et al., 2019). Social farming provides therapeutic activities that can address these risks and greatly improve quality of life, social relationships, activity participation, and physical activity (Gagliardi et al., 2019).

### 3 EU POLICIES, INSTITUTIONS AND FUNDING MECHANISMS LINKED TO SOCIAL FARMING

This section will provide an overview of the policy and institutional landscape of social farming in the EU. A focus will also be placed on potential funding mechanisms for farmers who want to engage in social farming either as practices integrated into their farming activities or as a separate social enterprise.

It is important to note that social farming is shaped differently across different EU countries. This is because (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009):

- Many social farming initiatives are built bottom-up from a grassroots level;
- Different initiatives or models of social farming can be targeted at different service users;
- Growth of social farms occurs in different institutional contexts regarding the social sector in specific countries/social systems;
- Social farming evolves and adapts based on the emerging and evolving needs within local communities.

#### 3.1 Rural development policies

At the EU level, “social farming” is often linked with rural development policies, even though these policies are still being developed. In the context of the European Union's rural development policy, there is a range of measures to improve the quality of life of the rural population. Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 provides support for rural development. One of this regulation's six priorities is directly targeted at the general local development of rural areas and the welfare of its inhabitants: “promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas.” It specifically focuses on facilitating diversification, creation and development of small enterprises; job creation; fostering local development in rural areas; and enhancing the accessibility, use and quality of information and communication technologies (ICT) in rural areas.

Among the 20 measures covered by the regulation, some are better suited to addressing the challenges faced by the elderly in rural areas. Specifically, Measure 7: Basic services and village renewal in rural areas. Its sub-measures include:

- 7.2 'broadband infrastructure, including creation, improvement and expansion, passive infrastructure and access to broadband and public e-government';
- 7.3 'investments in setting-up, improving or expanding local basic services for the rural population including leisure and culture, and related infrastructure';
- 7.6 'investments targeting the relocation of activities and conversion of buildings or other facilities located inside or close to rural settlements'.

Next, Measure 16: Cooperation – which promotes cooperation between actors of the agri-food chain sector, which can be used to address the challenges directly linked to the difficulties faced by elderly populations. Various types of cooperation are supported: for example, improving services related to accessing healthcare. Commissioner Wojciechowski highlighted the possibility of using funds to



support investments in small local infrastructures and services that facilitate the delivery of healthcare services and facilities in rural areas.

Regarding its further integration into rural development policies, Di Iacovo and O'Connor (2009) identify ways in which social farming fits with many emerging issues :

- Social farming promotes a wider idea of multifunctional agriculture
- Social farming diversifies on-farm activities and can involve new family members in health/care provision, enhancing job opportunities
- Social farming is in line with the diversity that characterises rural EU areas and their social structure
- Social farming may represent an opportunity to reduce the lack of services in rural areas and redesign them in a more innovative way
- Social farming improves farmers' reputation in society
- Social farming offers services to urban citizens and establishes a new bridge between urban and rural areas
- Social farming re-introduces and strengthens the concept of social capital
- Social farming reconnects local agriculture to local needs in a more sustainable and responsible way
- Social farming fits in with scenarios of sustainable rurality that is able to organise vibrant communities in different EU rural areas and offer more sustainable models for emerging countries.

## 3.2 Care strategies for rural areas

Eurostat's (2019) data indicates that older people tend to live more in rural areas. While the majority of these older people continue to live in private households, there is a trend toward single households where elderly individuals live alone (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). For example, in 2017, the share of women living in single households was 40% across the EU. A key challenge presented by the ageing population is therefore the management of care needs.

Traditionally, in rural areas, the family has often been seen as the provider of care. However, this is becoming less common as family members migrate to urban areas. This reduces the availability of social care and demonstrates the need for strong communities of networks of a shared identity, which helps to boost resilience among elderly populations and reduce the depopulation of such areas (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020).

Eurostat data also shows that there is a high proportion of individuals aged 75 years and older that face difficulties in carrying out various daily tasks. It can be expected that there will be increasing demand for such services in rural areas that have higher concentrations of elderly people (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). This is exacerbated by increasing numbers of people with dementia. Estimates indicate that by 2050, there will be a doubling of people living with dementia. Older people with dementia in rural communities' face challenges in accessing services where traditional specialist service systems are not available (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). Care policies will therefore need to reflect this increasingly emerging need.

## 3.3 Funds & programmes

### 3.3.1 Social farming in EU ESI funds

The EU Europe 2020 Strategy identified the fight against poverty and marginalisation as a key objective (De Vivo et al., 2018). Special attention was given to active inclusion in society for vulnerable groups. This section will outline the evolutionary framework of EU policies concerning social inclusion and discuss the European Structural Investment (ESI) Funds.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) highlighted the importance of coordinating different policies related to social farming at EU, national and regional level. Social inclusion has been on the EU agenda since the 1990s with the Maastricht Treaty, the Structural Funds, and the establishment of the European Observatory on policies to combat social exclusion (De Vivo et al., 2018).

Recently, the approach to economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU has been reinforced, setting common rules for ESI funds to harmonise the implementation of cohesion policy (De Vivo et al., 2018).

In the last 20 years, a community of researchers have influenced the Opinion of the EU Economic and Social Committee on the topic of “Social Farming: Green Care and Social and Health Policies.” The EESC stated the need for a European-level definition of social farming in order to better support and put in place regulatory frameworks. Social farming opens a door to concretise the sustainable and innovative model of combining agriculture and social welfare (De Vivo et al., 2018). It is also an important part of the Europe 2020 Strategy, which identifies social integration as one of its 5 principal objectives (De Vivo et al., 2018).

The 2014-2020 Partnership Agreement for Italy, the national programming instruments of the European Structural and Investment Funds (including the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development), defines strategies for achieving the goals of Europe 2020. One of the main objectives is the promotion of social inclusion. Social farming, therefore, falls in line with the social and health goals supported by EU funds and regulations (De Vivo et al., 2018). The incorporation of social farming in EU Regulations and Partnership Agreements represents an important instrument contributing to increased social inclusion (De Vivo et al., 2018). However, social farming is still only partially supported by adequate legislative and operative definitions (De Vivo et al., 2018).

### 3.3.2 Additional funding opportunities

In addition to rural development funds, older people in European rural areas can also benefit from projects supported by funds such as the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which do not only specifically target rural areas (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020).

Interreg Europe is an interregional cooperation programme covering all EU member states in addition to Norway and Switzerland, under the European territorial cooperation fund. (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). It is funded by the ERDF and its main goal is to improve regional development policies through exchanges of experiences and good practices. An example of its application for older

people is the Silver SMEs Interreg Europe Project. This project aimed at supporting regional policies in rural and mountainous areas by highlighting the potential for SMEs to develop new innovative services benefiting the elderly population. This in turn should stimulate the growth and competitiveness of rural areas and generate services that contribute to improving the quality of life within an ageing population. Social farming initiatives fit these goals well.

In 2011, the European Commission launched the European Innovative Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing (EIP on AHA). It aims to foster innovation in the field of active and healthy ageing. An example of the EIP-AHA in action is the Ageing@Coimbra consortium in Portugal. The main goal of the consortium is to reduce the burden of brain diseases in older people and tackle social isolation, thereby improving the lives of the senior citizens in Portugal through better social services, healthcare, and creating new innovative products and services such as therapeutic tools.

The Investment Plan for Europe and its successor, InvestEU, are another source of support for social farming initiatives. This investment support was used in Poland to set up social farms for the elderly. Over two million people reside in Polish rural areas, many of which suffer from isolation, social exclusion, and deteriorating health. In order to tackle isolation and prevent health issues, 15 social farms were set up. 225 seniors suffering from mental and/or physical illnesses or disabilities spend their days on these farms alongside the farmers, carers and their families. These social farms have also created jobs in the region (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020).

A list of specific funds targeted at farmers can be found [here](#).

### 3.4 The position of the European Parliament

The European Parliament is also involved in a wide range of issues concerning older people. They have worked on issues such as health and long-term care, the digital divide, age discrimination, the issues of pension, employment and retirement policies that support active ageing, gender equality and solidarity between generations (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020).

In 2018, the Parliament highlighted the importance of support for overcoming challenges such as rural depopulation. They stressed that in addition to ageing, there are increasing European regions where demographic decline is occurring as a result of falling birth rates, population decline, and reductions in the number of people working in rural areas (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). These areas are especially hit hard by ageing as they have few resources and infrastructure. It called for stimulus plans to be put in place to address these issues (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020).

The Parliament will have an important role to play in terms of ongoing legislative processes concerning CAP regulations, multiannual financial frameworks, the Next Generation EU recovery fund and the Farm to Fork Strategy. In combination, the Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI Committee) is considering opinions on two reports. These reports cover an opinion from the Committee on Regional Development (REGI) on reversing demographic trends in the EU using cohesion policy instruments. The second opinion for the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) focuses on the possibilities and challenges related to the ageing policy post-2020. It calls for greater use of EAFRD funds to counteract the isolation of older people in rural areas. Social farming can play a role in accessing such funds.

### 3.5 Consultative committees

In June 2016, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) underlined that the ageing of the population is a major concern in rural areas. For this reason, the CAP is promoting generational renewal and women's employment (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). The CoR calls for a CAP that incorporates measures to foster generational renewal in rural areas. It calls for the improvement of methodologies and increasing the participation of stakeholders from rural areas as well as implementing integrated development strategies (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020).

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has also identified that one of the major areas of underinvestment was most evident in the long-term health care services for ageing people, calling for special attention to be given to elderly rural populations (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020).

### 3.6 Stakeholders & networks

Various stakeholder organisations and networks have provided their views and opinions on the position of older people in EU rural areas. The Poverty Watch 2018 released a statement highlighting the growing relevance of poverty and social inclusion within elderly populations. Among its key recommendations to the EU, it called for actions to address social exclusion and rural isolation (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020).

In June 2020, the European association of mountainous areas, Euromontana, set out a range of measures to address the issues impacting older people in rural and isolated areas (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020). Actions included:

- ensure accessible and innovative care services;
- improve the quality of life of older people through adapted goods and services;
- address the mobility needs of older people;
- and improve the contribution that older adults can make to areas such as increasing their active engagement in rural communities.

VolontEurope, an international network promoting volunteering, active citizenship and social justice in Europe ran a two-year campaign on rural isolation to highlight the importance of helping elderly people gain social stimulation to improve their resilience (Augère-Granier & McEldowney, 2020).

### 3.7 Gaps

Social farming cuts across many different policy domains from agriculture to health, rural development, environment, education and social services (among others) (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009). Not only are there many challenges in formulating policies across the range of sectors social farming is involved in, but also within particular policy domains. In EU countries, the lack of a coherent policy framework has resulted in a reduced space or "home" for social farming initiatives (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009).

This has major implications for practitioners, such as too much dependence on sporadic funding sources and limitations that do not allow initiatives to pass the pilot phase. In the Netherlands and

Belgium (smaller states), it can be seen that regional and national networks are most successful in developing policy coherence for social farming activities (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009). Given their size and connectedness, it is easier to access decision-makers and request both financial and institutional support. This is not very common in countries such as France, where complex forms of decentralised governance have resulted in uncertainty about the funding available for social farming (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009).

These disparities within countries have made it rather difficult for policy and funding mechanisms to be made specifically for social farming at the EU political and policy level.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

Social farming has an incredible potential to meet the needs and challenges faced by the elderly population in Europe. By bringing together farming activities and features with care services, social farming can directly address the risks elderly populations face and improve the mental, physical and social health of these populations.

At the European policy level, social farming is recognised as an innovative approach that combines multifunctional farming and social services/healthcare at local levels. Recently social farming has spread throughout Europe. Nevertheless, a recognised framework and criteria at the European level would play a major role in increasing the funding mechanisms and policy support available to the social farming sector. The lack of such a framework makes coordination between the various EU institutions difficult, even though social farming meets many of the shared interdisciplinary goals.

In the future, knowledge sharing and training based on good practices need to be widely shared for social farming to become entrenched throughout Europe. Europe's Common Strategic Framework allows for the combination of funds as part of a multi-financing strategy. Social farming should be included in this plan to enable the sector to benefit from increased accessibility to funds.

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