

Multifunctional farms as providers of social care in the EU

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Abstract

All over the Europe agricultural and rural societies have developed experiences promoting diverse practices and forms of solidarity, social assistance and social inclusion. To implement this valuable tradition in a modern technological, economic and social reality of multifunctional agriculture, a multi-country specific support action, funded by the EU Commission, has been launched with the aim to support the building of a new institutional environment for interlacing agriculture and social care. As Slovenia was partner in the project, the paper is aimed to present and to discuss one of the Slovene green programs of social care. Qualitative case study methodology was used. Due to the novelty of the studied phenomena and its investigation in the real-life context the descriptive type of single case study was applied. Case on cooperation of the Centre for Protection and Care Koper and Goat-Breeding Farm “Brdca” was scrutinized from several angles: motives of stakeholders, process of model and performance building and attained outcomes. The results show that successful interlacing of farming and social care asks for the right motivation of relevant stakeholders, strict planning procedure and professional supervision. If these preconditions are met, the value added of green programs of social care is achieved.

Key words: agriculture, multifunctionality, social care, inclusion, European Union, Slovenia

Introduction

Since ever agricultural and rural societies, all over the Europe, have developed experiences promoting diverse practices and forms of solidarity, social assistance and social inclusion. To implement this valuable tradition in a modern technological, economic and social reality of multifunctional agriculture, a multi-country specific support action, funded by the EU Commission, has been launched with the aim to support the building of a new institutional environment for interlacing agriculture and social care. The research of social services in multifunctional farms or green programs of social care in seven EU-members, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Slovenia, and The Netherlands, revealed that (SoFar, 2009):

- All over rural Europe, there is a widespread and rich patrimony of diverse agricultural realities – inherited from the past or created more recently - which are characterized by such a distinctive, sound relation between practices of farming and practices for social inclusion;
- In many cases these experiences were born autonomously, behind the personal, strong ethical believes and motivations of their promoters, who carried out in isolation a function of collective interest, mostly invisibly. As a matter of fact, the ‘invisibility’ of such reality, is represented by the absence of a defined juridical/institutional framework for the green programs of social care, in most countries and at European level.
- The special added value of the green programs of social care is the possibility for disadvantaged people to being integrated in a living context, where their personal potential

may be valued and enhanced. The presence and the relationship with the farmers, the contact with other living beings – animal and vegetal ones – the assumption of specific responsibilities are some of the key-features of the rehabilitative practices generated by them.

- The green programs appear as an evolving, dynamic scenario, which is gaining increasing attention from multiple stakeholders and favoring the development of new relations between rural and urban citizens. They help to form a new, widespread positive perception of agricultural and rural resources, leading to a raising interest about the beneficial/positive effects of natural spaces and agricultural areas on the social, physical and psychic well-being of people. On the other hand, they represent a new chance for farmers to carry out alternative services and to gain new sources of income, broadening and diversifying the scope of their activities, as well as and their role in society.

As Slovenia was partner in this project, it is our aim to present and to discuss one of the green programs of social care within the reality of Slovenia.

Material and methods

Qualitative case study methodology (Baxter and Jack, 2008) was used. Due to the novelty of the studied phenomena and its investigation in the real-life context the descriptive type of single case study was applied.

Case on cooperation of the Centre for Protection and Care Koper and Goat-Breeding Farm “Brdca” was scrutinized from several angles: motives of stakeholders, process of model and performance building and attained outcomes.

Results and discussion

An exploratory study on the feasibility of green programs of social care revealed that parents of the mentally disabled (parental rights are prolonged beyond the age of 18 for a mentally disabled child) and the farmers do accept the idea of incorporating farms into a general provision of social services for the mentally disabled; although, neither of them have proper knowledge or experience with the green programs of social care (Vadnal, 2004; Vadnal, 2005). Furthermore, the potential users of the on-farm social services and their potential providers, the farmers, are aware of the potential benefits from the green programs in terms of the users’ quality of life and in terms of efficient use of on-farm resources, as well as of the significant responsibility of all involved. However, the decision to take an active part in such activity will be not easy for either of the groups. Considering all this, the model of a green program has been suggested to work within an institution as a project holder and with farmers as partners. Still, the implementation of a green program as a supplementary on-farm activity should be gradual, transparent and economically viable, and needs to be supported by building partnerships between participants, i.e. the persons with special needs, the farmers and the institutions (Vadnal, 2003).

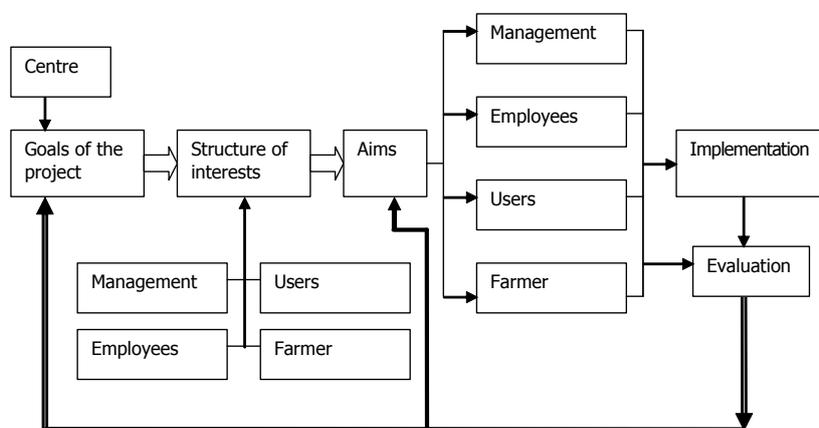
Five years of experience with the on-farm green program, carried out by the Centre for Protection and Care Koper and Goat-Breeding Farm “Brdca”, prove that the model does technically work for actual Slovene conditions. But operating in these real conditions identifies the major weakness of the model: the effects of giving a central role to an institution. Institutions are notoriously ineffective in the field of remobilization; they develop institutional behavior and mortification of ego, and hinder the development of social networking, etc. (Flaker, 1998, Ulaga, 1998). Altogether they are incompatible with modern inclusive philosophy for social care.

The problem of this weakness can not be overcome without profound changes in the role of the state in the area of social care. The state maintains its role of ensuring the provision of public services regardless of adversity. Transitioning to the function of regulating and

setting the scope and conditions for the provision of public services, including the required minimum standard and supervision of the provision of such services, has been announced (Resolucija..., 2006) but not yet implemented.

The Centre is faced with a dilemma: how to reconcile the rigid state system of payments for social care with professional ambitions and the users' welfare. Under such conditions the adjustment of social care activities depends heavily on the philosophy and creativity of the management.

The major strengths of the project are for management to see cooperation with a farm as a possibility to improve the performance of provided care for adult mentally disabled users, to build cohesion between organizational units and employees of the Centre as well as between employees and users, and to expand the area of inclusion in a social environment to rural surroundings. Through a many-sided planning procedure, these goals were transformed into operational aims that correspond to each group of stakeholders, management, employees, users and the farmer. This many-sided evaluation procedure facilitates adjustments in terms of interests and performance.



Picture 1. Consecutive project building procedure

During the planning stage the issue of the users' preferences for agriculture/farming appeared. When given the opportunity to make choices about their involvement (self-advocacy), participants of urban origin were reluctant to join the project. On the other hand, those having some experience with agriculture/farming did not have second thoughts about joining. In order to overcome this problem for the future development of the green programs, the potential users have to be introduced to the agriculture/farm related activities during the early stages of their special education (Košmelj and Vandal, 2003). Therefore, it is crucial to "green" up the existing programs of special education and training in order to provide the room for the mentally disabled to acquire the experience within the program and then to be able to evaluate them.

On-farm activities were structured into three main groups: care for animals (cleaning the stable and its surroundings, trimming and feeding the animals), maintaining the landscape (Karstic grassland, forests and stone walls), and housekeeping (preparing food, tidying). These activities were combined with a variety of periodic activities, such as picking fruits, herbs and mushrooms, gathering acorns for animals, preparing firewood, etc. These activities can only be carried out from May to October due to harsh winter conditions (frequent and strong north wind, snowdrifts and black ice). Introduction of year-round on-farm activities asks for investment into facilities for users and for their corresponding winter activities (processing, packing). Both, Centre and farmer, applied for several tenders

on the local and national level without any success. This indicates that there is a profound underestimation of the innovative potentials of the green programs which would lead to institutional isolation of social care.

The safety of the users on the farm has been an important issue to tackle. In this field it has been essential to balance properly the safety and freedom of all involved. This balance has been established through very intensive consultations between the professionals and the farmer, who was introduced to the Codex of Ethical Principles of Social Care and is obliged to follow it. Furthermore, the lack of practical experience necessitates close on-farm cooperation of the professionals and the farmer, particularly at the beginning. The professionals from the Centre attend to the users during the first few visits to assist the farmer for the first encounter with the moderately mentally disabled users, as well as to assist the users through their first steps on the farm.

The on-farm working day starts with planning daily activities while having morning tea or juice. The users are encouraged to suggest activities. The farmer and the users evaluate the suggestions in terms of their practicality and include them in a daily plan. All the work tasks are written into a diary that the farmer is obliged to keep for the purpose of transparency. Then, the users change into overalls. The farmer gives initial instructions and demonstrates the working procedure. The users work along with the farmer. They perform simple operations independently. At the end of the working day the farmer and the users check the tasks they have fulfilled and compare the outcome with the planned one. The tasks that remain undone or unfinished are put into a plan for the next visit.



Planning daily tasks



Feeding hens



Tea before daily evaluation

Picture 2. On-farm activities

Conclusions

The evaluation of the project by all stakeholders involved showed that all constituent elements have been met. The farmer stressed that the users' quite different views of a farmer were staggering. Some of them see a farmer as an authority, others as someone who is in need of help or as a co-worker, etc. It was very difficult to accept all these different figures. Yet, the farmer has to be able to work with all of them along with their different degrees of disability; being on good terms with them is essential. A farmer has to be attentive to all the clients. They have to feel at home. Therefore, the number of clients and the degree of their disabilities matter. One care-taker can manage 5 or more clients with moderate degrees of mental disability. Yet one client with a profound degree of mental disability requires an additional helper.

The managers and employees found the coordination and implementation of the green program very demanding. It calls for additional efforts dedicated to organization and implementation, and involves great responsibility. Nevertheless, the working conditions are less stressful and more relaxed than elsewhere. The program offers many possibilities to model diverse, more individualized approaches.

Concerning the users, they adjusted to the new environment quickly and established good, relaxed and friendly interaction with the farmer. They learned the basic details of the work on a daily basis and regularly had the opportunity to alter plans with their ideas and suggestions. They took an active role in the evaluation procedure during the activities as well as at the end of the working day. The users came to know the surroundings, names of places and special characteristics of different parts of the farm. Through taking care of the animals they learned why the particular operation has to be carried out in a particular place and on a particular schedule. By performing the work procedures together they learned to cooperate and to help each other. The occupations were neither monotonous nor profit oriented; they were well diversified, providing enough small and simple operations with meaningful, useful and attractive goals.

In terms of economics the program is a micro one. It is oriented to needs of the users, economic effects are of minor importance. Therefore, the impact of the green program on the economic situation of the Centre is moderate. Although the green program is not motivated by economics, it is required to have balanced costs and incomes. Yet, the holder is very optimistic in regard to economic prospects of the program and expects the economic situation to improve in the immediate future.

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