

Long Abstract – Monographic Section

SOCIAL AGRICULTURE BETWEEN NEW AND OLD SOCIAL WORK PRACTICES, THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND POLICY INNOVATIONS.

edited by Angela Genova and Tiziana Tarsia

Rural Tourism and Social Farming: An Exploration of Possible Synergies

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This paper explores the intersection of social farming and rural tourism as a driver of social innovation in inner and rural areas. Social farming refers to agricultural practices that integrate social goals such as the inclusion of vulnerable groups, therapeutic activities, and community cohesion. Rural tourism, on the other hand, promotes sustainable local development by enhancing rural lifestyles, landscapes, and cultural traditions through tourism-related experiences and services.

The research compares two areas in Italy's Veneto region: the Belluno UNESCO Dolomites and Bassano del Grappa. Though close geographically, they differ in socio-economic dynamics, tourism patterns, and demographic trends. Both host grassroots initiatives addressing depopulation, unemployment, and the erosion of local identity through integrated practices connecting agriculture, culture, and tourism.

The study is based on 22 semi-structured interviews conducted in the second half of 2024 with key stakeholders in social farming, rural tourism, and related sectors (11 in Bassano del Grappa, 11 in the Belluno Dolomites). The analysis focused on four core themes—collaboration, empowerment, public actor involvement, and local characteristics. An iterative process combining empirical data, institutional reports on tourism, field notes, and theoretical reflection supported triangulation and strengthened the validity of the findings.

Results show that integration between social farming and rural tourism can promote inclusion, strengthen community identity, support local economies, and enhance territorial resilience.

In Belluno, a fragile and unevenly touristed area, social farming is increasingly embedded in tourism (e.g. farm visits, inclusive hospitality) but remains marginal in prevailing narratives. In Bassano, tourism and agriculture coexist, yet largely operate in parallel, with some social cooperatives participating in both sectors without coordinated strategies.

In both areas, innovation emerges from local collaboration among social cooperatives, associations, and cultural actors, often through informal networks and shared spaces. However, coordination across sectors is limited, and institutions are seen as weak or absent. Stakeholders highlight fragmented governance and the need for integrated policy frameworks. The study finds that integrating social farming with rural tourism can foster social innovation, though outcomes are context-dependent.

In Belluno, such innovation helps mitigate the negative effects of mass tourism, whereas in Bassano it leverages dense social networks. Both cases, however, face challenges related to

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institutional weakness and short-term funding. Tourism also tends to reshape local social structures, reducing informal exchange and reinforcing formal governance, which can limit grassroots innovation. Ultimately, areas with strong relational capital support more robust innovation, while fragmented territories risk exclusion.

These findings call for stronger multi-level policies to ensure that social innovation can thrive beyond the most resourceful communities.

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