

Long Abstract – Monographic Section

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

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Rural gardens as experiences of widespread social farming: the case of Polesine

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This paper examines the phenomenon of social gardens in rural contexts, with a focus on a case study from the Polesine area (Province of Rovigo, Italy). While urban gardens are well-documented, little attention has been paid to their presence in rural contexts. The research primarily investigates the organizational and institutional diversification of rural social gardens, and secondly, examines whether these initiatives represent an innovative solution to original forms of sharing in contexts where traditional village ties have been weakening.

The working hypothesis starts from the assumption that gardens produce a sociality capable of opening up to third parties and to local services, fostering social connection and contributing to the local welfare systems through the creation of ‘weak ties’.

Eleven social gardens in Polesine were identified and analysed using a qualitative approach, including semi-structured interviews and field visits. The study reveals a surprising organizational diversity among these gardens, ranging from informal grassroots initiatives to more institutionalized projects embedded within schools, parishes, and healthcare facilities. Findings reveal that rural social gardens act as hubs of social innovation, fostering mutual support and social capital. However, challenges remain, particularly the risks of exclusivity and dependence on charismatic leadership in the absence of formal governance structures.

The study’s typology shows that less institutionalized gardens often build stronger social connections, while more formalized ones focus on care for vulnerable groups.

Overall, rural social gardens emerge as a promising resource for enhancing local welfare and community resilience, with their success depending on a delicate balance between informality and institutional collaboration. In theoretical terms, the findings show that rural areas—even marginal ones—are less uniform than often assumed; that gardens more open to the outside world are more likely to endure; and that ties mediated by gardening somehow allow individual needs and a community spirit to be reconciled.

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