

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

Active Aging and Social Farming Practices: Animal-Assisted Interventions for Elderly People in Assisted Living Facilities

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The demographic transformation underway in Italy, marked by declining birth rates and increased life expectancy, is reshaping the national welfare landscape and posing challenges to the sustainability of traditional care systems. In this context, Social Innovation (SI) offers valuable pathways to address emerging needs through more inclusive, effective and efficient responses. Among these, Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI), framed within the broader concept of Social Farming and Green Care, represent a promising approach to promote active ageing and enhance the well-being of older adults, particularly those living in long-term care facilities.

This article explores the outcomes of an innovative AAI programme implemented in the city of Lucca, Italy, as part of the Horizon 2020 project IN-HABIT ("INclusive Health and wellBeing In small and medium size ciTies"). The initiative aimed to promote inclusive health and well-being by mobilizing underutilized local resources across the participating cities - such as the human-animal bond in Lucca - within a public and participatory governance framework. The Lucca case promoted a novel vision of animals as Nature Based Solutions (Animal-NBS), proposing their role as a public resource capable of generating inclusive health services and contributing to community resilience and social innovation.

The intervention focused on co-designing and delivering AAIs for elderly residents, including individuals living with dementia, in two local nursing homes. The design process involved the municipality, selected third-sector associations, residential care staff, and academic researchers. A total of 90 sessions were conducted over nine months (September 2023–May 2024), engaging 70 elderly participants grouped according to their cognitive and motor abilities. The activities were tailored to the functional profile of each group and implemented with dogs by certified organisations following national AAI guidelines.

To evaluate the perceived impact of the interventions, two focus groups were carried out (after two months and at the end of the programme), involving educators, AAI professionals and municipal staff. The findings highlight multiple benefits for the elderly, including improved motor skills, enhanced attention and memory, increased calmness, emotional expression and social interaction.

The presence of the dog was noted as a catalyst for engagement, frequently encouraging participation among residents who would otherwise remain disengaged. Educators observed that the effects extended beyond the sessions, with residents recalling the names of the dogs and anticipating the next visit. The animals also served as mediators in group dynamics, reducing interpersonal conflicts and fostering cohesion.

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The study underlines the importance of co-production in aligning services with users' needs, while also acknowledging challenges such as the limited engagement of non-educator staff and the time required to overcome institutional and cultural inertia. Moreover, while the qualitative approach enabled an in-depth understanding of outcomes, future research should include quantitative measures and investigate long-term effects, optimal frequency and economic sustainability of AAIs in care settings.

In conclusion, the case study demonstrates how AAI, when framed within a social innovation and public health perspective, can enhance the quality of life of frail older adults and serve as a complementary, non-pharmacological care strategy. Inclusion of animals as a component of inclusive urban policies opens new avenues for the development of integrated and holistic welfare models.

Cite me: Francesco Di Iacovo, Roberta Moruzzo, Leonardo Catena e Giulia Granai, "Invecchiamento attivo e pratiche di agricoltura sociale: interventi assistiti con animali per anziani in RSA" in "WELFARE E ERGONOMIA" 1/2025, pp. 151-166, DOI: 10.3280/WE2025-001010.