

Italian proposal on “innovative social practices in agriculture”

Opportunity to join forces between social services and social farming in the field of mental disease in Europe

Role of agriculture in social and sanitary services is not new in Italy: at the beginning of the past century mental patients were sent to work in neighbour farms as well as nowadays horticultural therapy is used in modern mental hospital. Moreover since 70ies agriculture has been used in therapeutic community for people affected by drug dependency.

However, the range of social services supplied by farms is wider now and, at the same time, agricultural policy has started to support farms which supply social and health services, namely projects of labour training for disabled people (especially for mental deficiencies); school trips for children; “green cares” such as horticultural therapies. These practices may be very different to each other, except for the fact that they always use natural resources and rural context

With the aim to valuate efficacy of this experience, **INEA*** is now coordinating a research project **"Evaluation of innovative social practices in agriculture as an opportunity for sustainable rural development and analysis of implications for policies"**, funded by the Italian Ministry of Agriculture. Project focuses mainly on mental deficiency and mental disease and it involves the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (National Authority for Health).

Through an evaluation of the efficacy of the co-therapeutic interventions developed in rural settings regarding mental health and the quality of life of individuals with disabilities, the project sets out to:

- Evaluate the opportunities that social agriculture can give to rural development in terms of innovative socio-therapeutic services, social cohesion, sustainable economic development;
- Propose suggestions for a better definition of the policies and intervention instruments to support the spread of social agriculture practices.

Project applied a participated methodology which involves many actors coming from farms as well as universities and local institutions. By now, project produced and tested a questionnaire for collecting information on the field and it also identified some crucial points to describe successful experiences in Italy.

On the basis of results coming from this experience, we propose to compare social farming experiences in the mental disease field in Europe, especially referring to formal and informal relationship between social farms and local (public and private) health care actors in order to improve opportunities for social integration of mental sick persons in rural areas.

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