

SOCIAL AGRICULTURE FOR LIFE QUALITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: A CASE STUDY

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BACKGROUND

Social Agriculture (SA) represents an innovative practice that combines agricultural production and social purposes, offering inclusion, rehabilitation and well-being paths to vulnerable categories. This practice is increasingly spreading, especially as a response to the needs of an aging population. For older people, the experience of SA is an opportunity for aggregation and improvement of life quality and psychophysical well-being, according to the WHO's definition of active aging as a “process of optimizing health opportunities, participation and safety to improve people's quality of life”.^{1,2} Individuals with satisfactory social relationships have a survival chance of almost 50% greater than those who maintain poor, insufficient, or in adequate social relationships.³ SA, regulated in Italy by Law 141/2015,⁴ is part of a welfare model in which environmental protection, valorization, personal well-being and social integration find or can find their maximum expression.

METHODS

We conducted a preliminary desk analysis to size number, sectors of specialization and recipients of companies operating in SA in Italy using data provided by ISTAT 2020⁵ and CREA 2023.⁶ Therefore, we identify a sample of 19 companies located in Calabria and Sicily (Southern Italy) available for the case study to analyse their activities and the psychophysical well-being parameters linked to the stay in natural environments. The case study involved 14 over65 people attending the farms on regular basis/residential mode and was conducted through the administration of online (Google Forms) or face to face questionnaires.

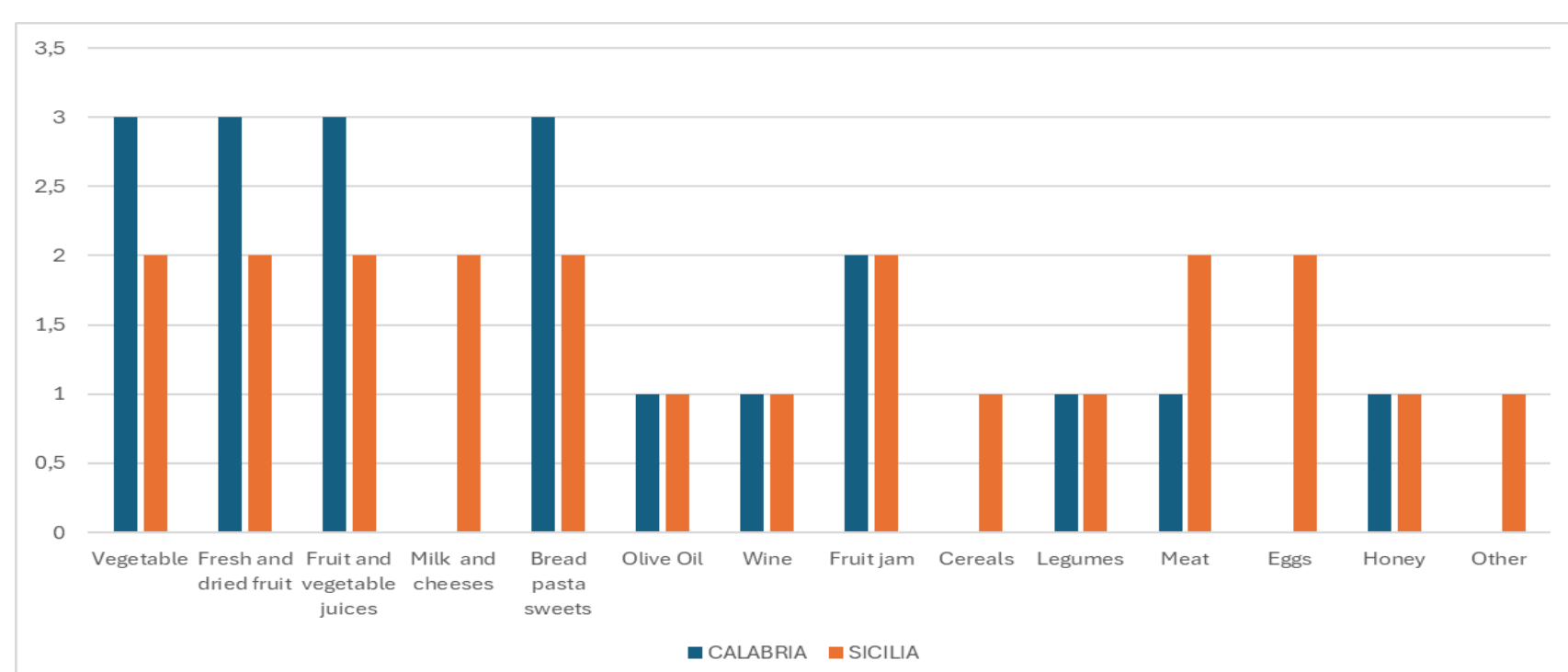


Table 1 – Types of home-produced food administered to over-65s in Calabria and Sicily

Activity at Social Farms that most influences Psycho-Physical wellbeing	%
Contact with nature	20.7
Green space maintenance	22.4
Physical exercise	15.5
Workshops/creative activities	20.7
More varied and healthier diet	20.7
Total	100

Table 2 – Activities performed by individuals over65 at Social Farms that have the greatest impact on psycho-physical well-being

RESULTS

The desk research and case study highlight the vital role of the Green Care sector and nature-based services in supporting the most socially vulnerable groups, especially the elderly. Farms are attended not only for horticultural therapy and the related nutritional potential of the home-grown product consumption (Tab.1), but also for the ecosystem services they offer, including improved air quality and the emotional and spiritual value of the landscape. According to the 14 interviewees (8 female, 6 male, mean age 76,93±12,344), these elements contribute significantly to psycho-physical and cognitive well-being, alongside the Mediterranean diet, healthy lifestyle habits, and social engagement. Respondents reported experiencing enhanced well-being from spending time in green spaces. They view their connection with nature as a fundamental part of their lives and feel a deep bond with other living beings (Tab.2).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Social Agriculture (SA) enhances the multifunctional role of agriculture by promoting high-quality production, encouraging experimentation and innovation in farming practices that respect both people and the environment, and integrating social services through the creation of informal networks of relationships.⁷ Our research confirms that SA can support a welfare model where environmental protection, personal well-being, and social inclusion are fully expressed through an ethical commitment to sustainable development and healthy lifestyles. It also offers a positive response to issues such as loneliness and degenerative diseases affecting older adults. As highlighted, farms become spaces of community, learning, and personal renewal. These evidences can guide public policy toward new models that promote increasingly participatory and inclusive processes of active aging.

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