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Social Agriculture as a Provider of Public Goods

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Abstract

Multifunctional agriculture is a term referring to the production of various noncommercial goods, in addition to the basic food production. It moves the focus from productivity to the production of public goods through numerous aspects of social and environmental sustainability. It is a provider of social public goods, such as rural vitality, food safety, poverty decrease and social inclusion, animal welfare, and climatic change effects amelioration. It plays an important role in the sustainable development of vulnerable rural communities, especially those affected by natural and war disasters. This paper's objective is to represent a part of a theoretical approach and practices pertaining to multifunctional agriculture, with a special emphasis on social farming, since the supported social farming activities contribute to the production of public goods, and their various applications of traditional production modalities contribute to social and environmental sustainability. By virtue of this paper, the authors would like to provide for an incentive to the academia and body politic regarding the establishment of a positive atmosphere and a stimulative legislative framework for the development of social agriculture in the Republic of Croatia.

Key words: multifunctional agriculture, public goods, social farming, green care, sustainability

Introduction

Agriculture is strategically important for the future of humankind. Today, numerous problems associated with climate and poverty are intertwined with industrial agriculture, driven by profits through global agricultural trade, at the expense of environmental and social sustainability. A well-managed agriculture could be a provider of global public goods, such as the agricultural landscapes, biodiversity, climate, water quality and access, land quality, air quality, floods and fire resistance, etc. In addition, agriculture also plays an important social and healthcare role, being a provider of social public goods. Rural vitality is the focus of this concept - a composite size that includes social, cultural, and economic aspects of rural population sustainability, as a repository of skills and knowledge for the maintenance of culture and traditions (Cooper et al., 2009). In this context, the authors illustrate the benefits of social agriculture, nowadays present and applied in a broader framework of a multifunctional agriculture. An agricultural multifunctionality concept in Croatia is still underdeveloped, being only sporadically applied through various social entrepreneurship projects, social inclusion projects pertaining to various vulnerable groups, and through educative awareness-raising projects. The agricultural sector is characterized by a series of changes in economic, social, ecological and energy aspects that endanger sustainability.

Due to its multifunctional role, agriculture should be considered as a general good for mankind, and increasingly as a branch of the economy that is generated by profit (Carles, 2007).

A new approach to the development of the theory of agriculture sees a shift from productivity to public good, i.e., to the multifunctional role of agriculture and ecological intensification with the aim of developing local economies (De Krom and Dessein, 2013). This approach monitors agriculture through numerous aspects of social and ecological sustainability of rural areas and through the development of urban-rural links, which ultimately contributes to overall social and economic progress. The focus is on the environment and the climate, as well as social problems (poverty, food independence, malnutrition, inadequate population activities, loss of rural vitality) and focus on solving small sustainable farms, ecological intensification of agriculture, urban agriculture, social agriculture and others (Cooper et al. 2009).

Materials and Methods

This paper's objective is to represent a part of a theoretical approach and practices pertaining to multifunctional agriculture, with a special emphasis on social farming. A research thesis is that the supported social farming activities contribute to the production of public goods, while enticing various applicative entrepreneurial forms of multifunctional agriculture. The paper presents the theoretical concepts of multifunctional and social agriculture, as well as a part of researchers' excogitations on its application in Croatia.

Results and Discussion

A Need to Redefine the Role of Agriculture

Agriculture is intensively changing in line with political, market and social circumstances. Challenges facing agriculture are related to redefining its role for society's progress. Farming can no longer be valued at the global average profit rates run by the global food market. As to overcome the consequences of such an agricultural development, agriculture has to become much more.

There are many of them, such as the following ones: degradation of natural resources, drainage of watercourses and lack of water for irrigation and drinking, soil erosion especially in hilly areas, catchment of fertile soils with urbanization, unsustainable fishing practices, water and air pollution, inadequate infrastructure, natural disasters associated with climate change, degradation of small farmers and peasants, loss of nutritional independence of poor areas, food quality, nutritionally poor food, loss of rural vitality, etc.

While there is too much food in the world market, many local areas suffer from the insufficiency of elementary living needs, that is, of a food and water scarcity. The risk of poverty and hunger increases as a result of technological revolution, resource wars, natural disasters and population growth.

Because of all this, agriculture is not only food but also access to the poor and hunger; it can not control the global market but local community and national politics; agriculture can no longer define global issues and national balance than national circumstances and conditions of households; agriculture becomes equally important both in the village and in the city; it can no longer be concerned only with the amount of food but with its nutritional values, the way of producing food can not be determined solely by technology but by the policy that defines the entire agricultural management system as a fundamental principle of sustainability.

Resolving these issues requires a new paradigm in food production that involves the local community and the public sector in seeking sustainable strategies and practices, and the scientific community as an aid in shaping public policy focused on the sustainability of small farmers and the diversity of agricultural practices, being of a special importance for the developing countries (Amekawa 2010).

Agriculture from Productivity to Multifunctionality

The lack of food in many local areas, as well as nutritional poverty, have triggered new trends in food production, as well as scientific research aimed at improving the quality of nutrition and health of the population. In this context, there is an incremental number of research into the multifunctional role of agriculture in rural economy and its phenomena, such as social and/or care farming. Thus, within the framework of agricultural theory, one should equally consider both the conventional and multifunctional agriculture.

In addition to the role of agriculture in food safety, there are more frequent practices in the domain of multifunctional agriculture, such as "social farming" and/or "care farming," with a broad spectrum of different activities in support of social and psychophysical development and the health of people for improving the quality of nutrition and the social inclusion of people from various vulnerable groups with social problems.

These unconventional forms of agriculture are indeed multifunctional. Apart from contributing to the development of local economy, they, through their ecological and extensive approaches, retain the knowledge and skills of agricultural population and contribute to the preservation of natural public goods, with all the benefits to the target groups.

Social Farming

In this paper, social agriculture is observed as a social goods provider. In this sense, social agriculture aims to be a broader notion than a green care one, which takes care about human health. Although, the literature frequently fails to clearly articulate a distinction between these two notions, adducing them as the synonyms. As previously cited in this paper, social agriculture has a broader activity spectrum than the green care one, for it also concerns the recruitment of people at risk of being excluded, demonstrative educational activities for social agriculture, and keeping accounts of environmental sustainability.

It is of particular importance for the development of sensitive rural areas, as it links entrepreneurship with culture, tradition, environment, landscape and social relations. This form of agricultural production is most often linked to the national systems of economic and social support and subsidies of local and regional authorities. In view of the diversity of needs regarding the vulnerable groups, there are different forms of social agriculture, such as the one pertaining to the long-term unemployed, socially excluded persons, persons with intellectual and physical disabilities, convicts, drug addicts, minors and migrants, but also other target groups such as children, the elderly, and everyone else who, through their work in agriculture, want to develop psychophysically or recreationally.

The European Parliament considers this topic to be prioritized in the context of measures for the general good, and proposes to take legislative steps to redefine regulations in the field of social agriculture in order to create the new opportunities for education in agriculture.¹

Macri and Perito (2009) argue that social agriculture is a spontaneous phenomenon which is not easy to put into a theoretic paradigm. Generally speaking, social agriculture can be traced back to, at least, three different models. They are the well-established 1) Schumpeterian model of innovation; 2) the corporate social responsibility and 3) the multifunctionality of agriculture.

Green Care

Green care farming is a recognized form of entrepreneurship by many farmers in the European countries. For example, in Italy, agriculture has played an important role in social and healthcare processes for over 30 years (Macri and Perito, 2009). There are good practices in a number of European countries, too, for example, in Germany it is a part of healthcare system (Iacovo, 2003; Neuberger et al. 2006; Custance et al., 2015). In the UK, the farms work together with a broad range of client groups and healthcare and social care agencies, with an aim to improve the health and well-being (Rotherham et al., 2017.).

The notion of a green care umbrella implies social and therapeutic horticulture, animal-assisted interventions, care farming, facilitation of treatment-based green exercise, ecotherapy, and wilderness and nature therapies (Sempik et al. 2010).

The farms engaged in green care are not the specialized ones; rather, they remain typical working farms, where people in need can benefit from participation in farm activities in a non-clinical environment (SoFab, 2011-2014). According to recent research, about 12% of farmers are interested in care activities, and 6% of different target groups are interested in daily activities at green care farms. Presently, less than 1% of farmers are performing care activities. Most Green Care farms are located in the rural areas of the country. The new target groups, like people with an addiction history, the elderly, youth at risk and long-term unemployed, are concentrated in urban areas. The increase in Green Care initiatives may be significant, especially in urban areas (Hassink and Dijk, 2006).

Green care approaches typically involve a therapy or a specific intervention, rather than simply providing a 'therapeutic' experience; or, they are designed for specific participants or for a specific group of patients. In the UK, there is a growing movement towards green care in its various forms and, although there is a diversity in the approaches used, there is a common ethos; that is, to use nature to produce health, and social and educational benefits (Hine et al., 2008).

¹ Cf. Article 133 of the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament's Resolution on Social Agriculture and Opportunities for Education in the Area of 15 Mar. 2016.

Conclusion

Due to its favorable effects on social development, multifunctional agriculture evinces an increased researchers' interest. Social farming is a form of multifunctional agriculture that provides multiple social benefits. In literature, most attention is being devoted to the green care, while other forms of social agriculture are being insufficiently explored. Therefore, the authors have observed a lack of research outcomes that should exert their influence on political decision-makers in the field of agricultural subsidies producing public goods more significantly.

In Croatia, a more significant implementation of multifunctional agriculture may contribute to an increase an interest in high-school and higher educational level of agriculture. In that sense, one should work on the creation of a legislative framework and educational curricula.

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Socijalna poljoprivreda kao davatelj društvenih javnih dobara

Sažetak

Multifunkcionalna poljoprivreda je izraz koji se odnosi na proizvodnju raznih netržišnih dobara uz osnovnu funkciju - proizvodnju hrane. Ona usmjerava razvoj poljoprivrede od produktivnosti prema proizvodnji javnih dobara kroz brojne aspekte društvene i ekološke održivosti. Ona je davatelj društvenih javnih dobara kao što je ruralna vitalnost, sigurnost hrane, dobrobit životinja i drugo. Ima važnu ulogu u održivom razvoju osjetljivih ruralnih područja i lokalnih zajednica, posebno onih na koje su suočene s posljedicama prirodnih katastrofa i ratnih djelovanja. Svrha rada je predstavljanje dijela teorijskoga pristupa i praksi koje se odnose na multifunkcionalnu poljoprivredu, uz poseban naglasak na socijalnu poljoprivredu, jer potpora aktivnostima socijalne poljoprivrede doprinosi stvaranju javnih dobara, a njihove različite primjene tradicionalnih načina proizvodnje doprinose društvenoj i ekološkoj održivosti. Ovim radom autori žele dati poticaj znanstvenoj i političkoj zajednici glede uspostave pozitivnog ozračja i stimulativnoga zakonodavnog okvira za razvoj socijalne poljoprivrede u Republici Hrvatskoj.

Ključne riječi: multifunkcionalna poljoprivreda, javna dobra, socijalna poljoprivreda, održivost