

Social Innovation in Urban and Peri-urban Agriculture in the Mediterranean region

White Paper



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1. Introduction

The social innovation dimension is inherent to many agricultural projects in urban and peri-urban contexts. In some of them –community gardens, therapeutic and educational farms and social inclusion enterprises, among others– it is even their main drive. These initiatives have great potential in terms of poverty alleviation, integration of vulnerable collectives and community-building and this fact raises social innovation as one of the main aspects of metropolitan agriculture.

This report has been prepared in the context of **MADRE, a capitalization Interreg Med project that addresses urban and peri-urban agriculture in 6 metropolitan areas** (Barcelona, Montpellier, Marseille, Bologna, Tirana and Thessaloniki) with the objective of sharing good practices and creating a Mediterranean network of cooperation. Building on local participatory diagnoses, a series of transnational meetings were held in order to discuss different aspects of this issue. This report is one of the 6 ‘white papers’ deriving from these meetings. In particular, **the social innovation dimension was addressed in a workshop held in Barcelona on 27 and 28 October 2017 with about 60 participants** from different stakeholder groups of the 6 metropolitan areas: farmers and business sphere (10%), academia and research (23%), civil society (41%) and public authorities (26%). The case studies presented in this document are included in the ‘Urban and Peri-Urban Agriculture Best Practice Catalogue’, a collection of 36 key initiatives from the 6 MADRE metropolitan areas. The analysis presented here also complements a more succinct policy recommendations report. All these documents can be accessed through MADRE’s website.

The review of the topic and recommendations that follow aim to address all Mediterranean metropolises. As they emerge to a great extent from the discussions held in the context of the project’s participatory transnational meetings, their relevance and comprehensiveness might be somehow limited by the diversity, expertise and geographic scope of their participants but they pursue a regional dimension of the issue.

The report consists of a general description of social innovation in the context of urban and peri-urban agriculture, after which the main discussions from the project are presented. The last section presents succinct recommendations both for civil society and policy-makers on how to further foster this issue.

2. What is social innovation in metropolitan agriculture?

Social innovation is described by the European Commission as “the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations”¹. It represents new responses to pressing social demands which affect the interactions of local communities. Social innovations are aimed at improving human well-being and they address both the ends and the means of any enterprise. Such innovations are not only positive for society but also enhance individuals’ capacity to act.

Food-oriented social innovation is, in short, the social dimension of new agricultural models and services. A clear example of this is *social farming* (also called *care farming* or *green care*), a set of practices in rural areas that use agricultural resources –plants and animals– with the aim of promoting the rehabilitation, education and care of disadvantaged collectives. These practices adopt a **multifunctional perspective of agriculture** in order to respond to emerging social needs². They include agronomic and organisational advances, but also and above all the dissemination of knowledge and experience through the formation and functioning of social networks.

In the context of urban and peri-urban agriculture, **the development of innovative ways of farming, processing and consuming agricultural products is present in a wide variety of projects, from community gardens to consumer groups.** The emergence and development of such initiatives “is often pioneered by civic networks, small societal groups, platforms or institutes, at the fringe of mainstream society that try to re-establish ownership over certain societal problems and pro-actively generate practical solutions that are within the locus of control of the particular group (empowerment)”³. They enhance community-building and the self-realization of their participants, and the benefits of these projects are relevant to society as a whole.

1 http://ec.europa.eu/growth/industry/innovation/policy/social_en

2 Di Iacovo, F. and O’Connor, D. (eds) (2009) Supporting policies for Social Farming in Europe: Progressing Multifunctionality in Responsive Rural Areas. Firenze: ARSIA. [<http://www.umb.no/statisk/greencare/sofarbookpart1.pdf>]

3 van der Schans, J. W.; Renting, H. and van Veenhuizen, R. (2014) “Innovations in Urban Agriculture” in Urban Agriculture Magazine, n°28, p.4. [<http://www.ruaf.org/editorial-innovations-urban-agriculture>]

Social innovations in metropolitan agriculture are tightly related to organisational and marketing innovations developed by farmers and consumers. Although these links must be taken into account, this report is focused on social diversity and inclusion. It discusses specifically the integration of vulnerable population groups into social life, particularly into the labour market. In this sense, **the most successful initiatives are those that comprise job creation, enhance social mix and reach vulnerable populations.** Some examples of this approach include agricultural farms and community gardens which offer recreational or work-related activities for social services recipients, disabled persons, elderly people, youngsters and children, psychiatric patients, (former) drug addicts, burn-out victims, etc.

3. How to foster social innovation: lessons and challenges

The social innovation dimension of metropolitan agriculture is increasingly valued and supported. In the context of MADRE, a participatory analysis with local stakeholders from the metropolitan areas of Thessaloniki, Tirana, Bologna, Marseille, Montpellier and Barcelona highlighted a number of elements that hamper and foster social innovation projects. The following table presents the **most relevant common factors from each local analysis**, which can be adopted as a first approach to the situation of this issue in the Mediterranean area.

+ Strengths and opportunities

- The **social benefits** of these projects in terms of alleviation of necessities (food), therapeutic and psychological effects, and others.
- Possibilities of metropolitan agriculture to act as a path for social **integration for migrant population** and other vulnerable groups.
- The **community-building dimension** of social innovation projects.
- The **capacity-building role** that urban and peri-urban projects can develop, especially towards unskilled workers.

- Weaknesses and risks

- The **lack of clear regulations and solid support of public institutions** at all administrative levels (local, regional and national).
- The **lack of integration** of such projects in broader social inclusion policies.
- A **low degree of external and professional assessment** to connect projects to specific needs in the territory.
- Difficulties in the access to **available and affordable land** to develop social innovation projects.

The combination of these factors opens up a number of issues that are highly relevant in any effort to support and enhance projects of social innovation in urban and peri-urban agriculture. In order to further develop these strengths and weaknesses, representatives from the MADRE metropolises developed a transnational analysis which led to more in-depth discussions around 3 main topics: recognizing the diversity of social innovation projects (3.1), how to develop successful and impactful projects (3.2) and addressing the social and economic viability of projects (3.3).

3.1 Recognizing the diversity of social innovation projects

Agricultural development in urban and suburban areas can be a valuable tool for the integration of vulnerable populations into the social and economic fabric of local communities. The provision of services and the creation of programmes that are centred on this issue is seen as a favourable strategy to achieve this. Among the initiatives that aim at this broad objective, however, it is important to distinguish between two types, according to their main drive:

- On the one hand, there are **projects that provide agricultural training with the aim of opening new job opportunities for those who participate in it.** Job placement strategies in these projects can vary enormously, but most of them achieve so either by including disadvantaged people in the workforce of the project itself, or by training them in agriculture-related skills so that they can find job opportunities elsewhere. The strength of these projects is that they offer the opportunity to achieve economic autonomy, which is essential to the long-term integration of vulnerable populations.
- On the other hand, there are the **projects that generate appropriate environments for collective activities among different social groups.** These projects, best exemplified by social gardens of any kind, often respond to multiple purposes such as community gathering, self-provision of food, leisure, or political activism. While their main objective is not to help vulnerable populations find jobs, they can be very useful spaces in terms of capacity-building, the creation of social networks and the improvement of their self-confidence. In turn, these factors are strong enablers of social integration, and they can also raise the probabilities for economic autonomy (see example 1).

Example 1 Jardin des Aures (Marseille, France)

This collective garden in the north of Marseille was initiated in 2000 by families of the neighbourhood who wanted to gain green spaces for the community to grow food and have all kinds of social activities. While supported by the Accueil & Rencontres association, which depends from the Protestant Parish of Marseille North, it is essential a community-based initiative that responds to the needs of the neighbour and is managed in a collective dynamic. The current actions of the garden include cooking and nutrition workshops, environmental education programmes and organic farming courses, among others.

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These two kinds of initiatives are not completely detached from each other, and some projects can have a bridged approach. However, there seems to be a clear predominance of the second type, while the **job-placement strategies for vulnerable populations still seem to be underdeveloped** in the field of metropolitan agriculture.

3.2 How to develop successful and impactful projects

Regardless of their approach, most projects of social innovation face similar difficulties and could benefit from the same changes. Firstly, there is a need to **build all projects on a comprehensive understanding of the situation of vulnerable populations in their local context**: number of people, conditions, needs, etc. Since the strategies of integration are very different if we consider migrants, homeless, unemployed, mono-parental families, or other types of vulnerable groups, registering and monitoring them can result in more specific strategies, and consequently more fruitful ones. At the same time, however, projects that **include a high diversity of profiles** are more likely to achieve significant integration. It is important to combine specific strategies for different vulnerable groups with common spaces where all types of people (including groups that are not under risk of exclusion) can come together and interact.

A second important element is that agricultural initiatives in social innovation often meet with a number of groups already working on the integration of vulnerable populations (public departments, NGOs, informal collectives, enterprises...). The lack of coordination between them can turn to be an important weakness, since it prevents them from finding fruitful synergies and often forces different groups to compete over the same resources (funds, participants, support, media coverage and others). A good way to counter these tendencies is the **creation of coordination networks that bring together all local stakeholders working with vulnerable populations**. These boards can also integrate public social policies and unemployment services with more autonomous projects (and vice-versa), and connect the local context to broader regional, national and international programmes (see example 2).

Example 2 CPIE Bassin de Thau (Montpellier, France)

This association in the region of Thau, next to Montpellier (France), aims to promote concerted initiatives in the field of sustainable development. As part of the French CPIE network, its activity represents a good example of a coordination effort, since it brings together a number of different local stakeholders (local farmers and professional associations, consumer groups, environmental collectives, research centres, education institutions and public authorities) in order to develop specific actions or support the initiatives of its members. Its joint work with such a big network is the main added value of the association, and a key element to its success.

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A third significant idea for the improvement of social innovation projects is the **incorporation of external advice**. Bringing experts on social inclusion into the initiatives can result in very useful technical assessments, especially to new projects developed by citizens themselves. Similar cooperation links can be established with professional farmers (who have great expertise in food production) and universities (which can add value to their research and help document the projects).

Finally, it is important to ensure that the creation and development of social agricultural projects empowers the populations they seek to address. Allowing participants to feel ownership over the activities they take part in can be positive for several reasons: on the one hand, it reduces the chances of rejection or disdain that often meet top-down approaches; on the other hand, active engagement in the maintenance and managing of projects enhances personal growth and self-sufficiency, which themselves are objectives for all social innovation initiatives. The vision that underlies these approaches is that working with vulnerable populations is not a matter of beneficence or charity but a **process of co-adaptation and mutual learning** (see example 3).



Example 3

Can Pinyol Community Gardens (Barcelona, Spain)

The **Can Pinyol Community Gardens**, in the municipality of Sant Boi de Llobregat (Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, Spain) are an excellent example of community-building and empowerment. Although the project was initiated by the Barcelona Metropolitan Authority (AMB) in the framework of a European Med Programme (SIGID-MED) with the objective of responding to the social and therapeutic needs of vulnerable populations in the area, the community dimension was present from the beginning. A local NGO was asked to take part in the initiative to animate and involve the beneficiaries of the project in collective gardening activities and in decision-making spaces, such as the assembly of the orchards. As a result, social cohesion, community ties and the implication of participants are some of the current strengths of the project.

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3.3 Addressing the social and economic viability of projects

The social and economic viability of social innovation projects in urban and peri-urban agricultural practices is a crucial yet often underestimated aspect. In the current context, many initiatives arise with a high degree of interest and involvement of their community but fail to consolidate in the middle or long terms. Indeed, finding long-running social projects is sometimes alarmingly difficult. The key question then is how to **reduce the impact of elements that eventually make an initiative become obsolete**. Put differently, what makes a project be viable in the future from a social and economic perspective? While the specific factors can significantly vary from one project to another, the ideas that follow may have a positive impact to all of them.

Firstly, the emergence of a new project can largely benefit from going through a **comprehensive and robust design thinking process** where its viability is considered from a social and business perspective. On the one hand, it is important to make sure that the project resonates with the community where it is to be developed and, when possible, that it engages neighbours and existing groups. The involvement of people from the beginning of the project enhances their sense of ownership and commitment (see example 4) and it can provide of a more realistic picture of the possibilities and resources of the initiative. On the other hand, the economics of the project are important to be considered: not only in the first stages, but also in the middle and long terms. Whether it is a profit or non-profit project, it is necessary to have a solid idea about how to achieve sources of funding that allow it to grow as a viable project. Many initiatives are focused on economic viability through institutional support, but they can also be self-sufficient and rely on private income (although legal frameworks often impede trading produce from non-professional initiatives) and social cooperation (see example 5). Projects and business plans that create a win-win situations for those involved in their day-to-day activities are among the best examples of economic viability: farmers markets established in the city, agro-tourism initiatives, local food tours for all kinds of groups, etc. Crowdfunding campaigns are a particularly interesting resource since they can become a significant economic support at certain stages of the project (for example at the start, or when facing an important investment) and, at the same time, strengthen the engagement of the community around the project.

Example 4

La Cagette (Montpellier, France)

The creation of La Cagette, the first cooperative supermarket in Montpellier, illustrates the importance of a good design-thinking process. This type of community-owned supermarket, based on the models of Park Slope Food Coop in Brooklyn (USA) and La Louve in Paris (France), is developed around clear principles of radical democracy, social inclusion and links to the neighbourhood. The inauguration of the project in September 2017 followed a period of almost 3 years of conversations, fund raising, community engagement and even the setting up of a smaller-scale pilot test that, all together, gave the project the time it needed to start with good perspectives of social and economic viability.

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Example 5 Neapoli-Sykies Vegetable Gardens (Thessaloniki, Greece)

The economic viability is one of the main challenges of the Neapoli-Sykies Vegetable Gardens in the Greek region of Thessaloniki. The project consists of a total of 1.000 m² of urban gardens for self-consumption at the disposal of vulnerable households selected by the municipality according to social criteria. Funded by the European Social Fund from 2012 to 2016, the project first had to overcome the lack of available land in the municipality. One of the barriers now for the continuity of the project is the dependence on Neapoli-Sykies municipal funds, which cover the 51.000 € annual budget of the project.

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Secondly, the viability of social innovation projects also relies on the proper documentation. This documentation can take the form of a website, storytelling methods, local TV and radio stations, social network engagement, and even more extended ways such as school and educational programmes. These actions create wider and deeper engagement on the project, which in turn increases the probability of the project to remain relevant for the community. Having **relevant and comprehensive documentation of both successful and unsuccessful projects** can also be very useful in the design-thinking process of new initiatives.

4. Recommendations

Metropolitan agriculture has multiple dimensions and its development brings together a wide range of stakeholders. The recommendations that follow are some of the actions that can help to preserve and strengthen urban and peri-urban agriculture, with a particular focus on the social innovation dimension and the specific topics discussed in this report.

Civil society, farmers and other private stakeholders:

- Raise social awareness of the importance of metropolitan agriculture and its many different benefits for the community, the environment and the economy.
- Seek for external assessment to strengthen to positive social impacts of these projects.
- Actively exchange information between different initiatives and participate in networks.

Public authorities:

- Develop and incentivise institutional, mixed, or private-led social agricultural projects.
- Support community-led projects, especially when they start, either financially (grants, tax breaks...) or through other forms (simplifying paperwork, providing expertise and guidance, facilitating spaces, etc.).
- Explore the possibilities for preserving and facilitating the access to land for social (and other) agricultural projects: community property, public lease, stewardship arrangements, etc.
- Generate social awareness about the problems that social innovation projects help alleviate.
- Acknowledge the differences between different types of social innovation projects and try to bring them together into a broader context, linking them to policies and programmes.
- Provide special attention to vulnerable populations in social innovation projects, recognizing their potential as a tool for social cohesion, and integrate such projects into broader social policies.
- Develop a legal framework that addresses metropolitan agriculture and its specificities (social innovation projects, among others) in an inclusive and participatory way.



See the catalogue on-line at the following links:

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