

TURNING FARMERS INTO SOCIAL FARMER ENTREPRENEURS FOR DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

According to Romania's *National Rural Development Programme*, the socio-economic situation of the rural environment has a large number of weaknesses – among which *low access to financial resources for small entrepreneurs and new business initiatives in rural areas* and *poorly developed entrepreneurial culture*, characterized by a lack of basic managerial knowledge – but also a large number of opportunities – among which *access of the rural population to lifelong learning and entrepreneurial skills development programmes* and *entrepreneurs' access to financial instruments*. The population in rural areas depends mainly on agricultural activities which give them subsistence living conditions. The gap between rural and urban areas is due to low income levels and employment rates, hence the need to obtain additional income for the population employed in subsistence and semi-subsistence farming, especially in the context of the depopulation trend. At the same time, the need to stimulate entrepreneurship in rural areas is high and is at a resonance with the need to increase the potential of rural communities from the perspective of landscape, culture, traditional activities and local resources. A solution could be to turn vegetal and / or animal farms into **social farms** – farms on which people with disabilities (but also adolescents and young people with anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicide, and alexithymia issues) might find a “foster” family, bed and meals in a natural, healthy environment, and share the farm's activities with the farmer and the farmer's family: “committing to a regular day / days and times for a mutually agreed period involves complying with any required health and safety practices (including use of protective clothing and equipment), engaging socially with the farm family members and other people working on and around the farm, and taking on tasks which would include working on the land, taking care of animals, or helping out with maintenance and other physical work” [15].

Keywords: *social farming, social farmer, social farm, disadvantaged people, entrepreneurship*

INTRODUCTION

The following lines are intended for people who live or work in poor communities and who want to make a difference. It is intended to present a few simple, practical guidelines for potential **social farming entrepreneurs**, through a few essential steps before launching the social business. It is meant to be a useful tool both for people who already have business ideas and a contoured direction of

action, and for those who seek inspiration, who are not yet clear whether **social farming** is the best solution for them. Ensuring access for people to **vocational, work-training, entrepreneurship, and independent life** programs is one of the main goals of the National Strategy “For a Society Without Barriers for People with Disabilities” [15].

This is particularly important for Romania’s economic context in recent years, including the unemployment numbers and rates [13] (Figures 1 and 2).

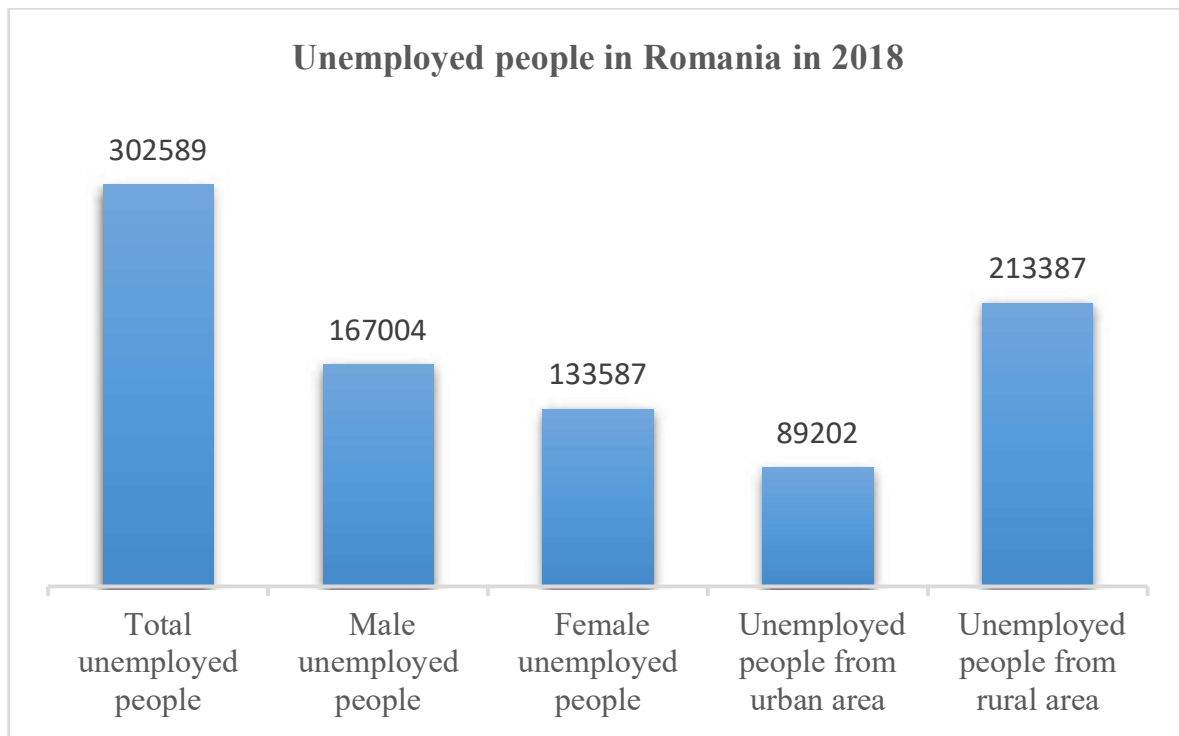


Figure 1. Unemployed people in Romania in 2018

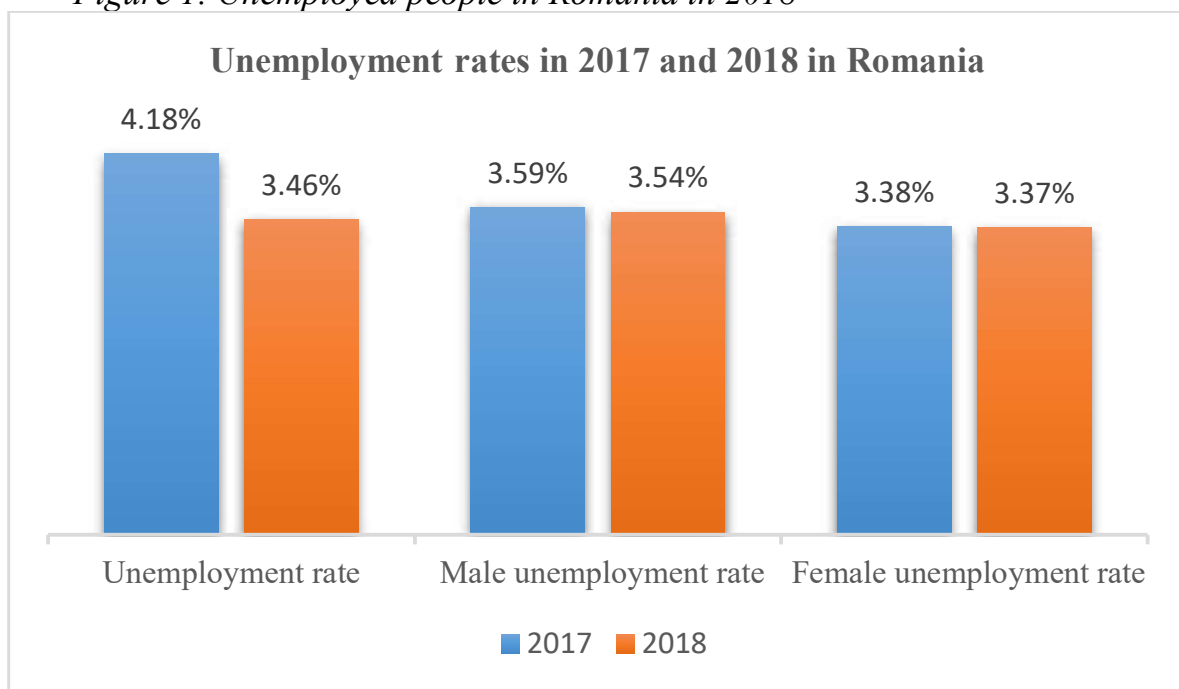


Figure 2. Unemployment rates in 2017 and 2018 in Romania

Benjamin Rush (1746-1813), an American educator, humanitarian, physician, politician, and social reformer, is said to be one of the first medical scientists referring to the positive effects of the practice of **occupational therapy** (and of such chores as cutting wood, *digging in the garden*, ironing, making a fire, scrubbing floors, washing, etc.) on the **well-being of mentally diseased**.

Social Farming is seen as a way to reduce disparities between regions through the consolidation of economic, social and territorial cohesion, as well as playing an important role in **rural development programmes** [10] by supporting the setting up of **rural enterprises involved in co-therapy, social development and inclusion on the labour market**, and of **services for disadvantaged people using agricultural resources** [12]. Thus, through cooperation between different administrative and political entities (agriculture, education, employment, health, justice, and social affairs), **agricultural services turn into social services** (educational, healing, mental health, and social): in addition to *basic agricultural activities*, **social farms** invite *people from disadvantaged groups to participate in agricultural activities*, and social farmers are rewarded [12].

Several EU countries have adopted **Social Farming** and, implicitly, **Animal-Assisted Therapy**, **Animal-Assisted Pedagogic Therapy**, and **Horticultural Therapy**, as a multifunctional innovative strategy: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, The Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Macedonia, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom.

Romania is not among them though it has experienced different forms of **Social Farming** beginning with the 1990s by integrating these practices as a novel experience with increased sustainability [14]. In Romania, they are familiar with **Social Economy**, **Social Entrepreneurship** and **Social Housing** rather than with **Social Farming**. However, **Social Farming** belongs to **Social Economy** (since agriculture is a main branch of economy); to **Social Entrepreneurship** (since entrepreneurship also belongs to agriculture); and to **Social Housing** (because it also refers to people without homes in the rural area).

Care Farms or **Health Farms** or **Social Farms** are operated by social cooperatives of work integration, on common ground, or on residual land resources left in condition of abandonment. They employ a significant number of women, integrate a large number of local outer networks, practice biological production, produce added high value products, produce multiple products, provide a sharply “open” reality to territory and local community, request a lot of manual labour, support connected activities (direct sale of products, hospitality and catering industry, teaching activities, transformation inside the company, etc.), support small-medium farming activities, and use eco-compatible productive techniques.

The terms **Care Farming, Connective Agriculture, Farming for Health, Green Care, Green Therapies, Social Agriculture, and Social Farming** [12] describe *agricultural practices aiming at promoting the rehabilitation and care of disadvantaged people and / or at integrating those with “low contractual capacity” or disadvantaged* (generic term for impairments / affections, restrictions on activities, and restrictions in participation because of auditive, mental, physical, psychic, somatic, and visual impairments, or because of deaf blindness, HIV / AIDS, rare diseases, etc.) [15].

There are several **categories, groups, and types of disadvantages people**: former and current addicted persons isolated from the active part of the society; former and current inmates having difficulties to reintegrate into the society after having served time for their unlawful conduct; immigrants; incapacitated children aged 0-4 and kids until 12 years of age; people affected by autism, children or adults presenting specific autistic syndrome symptoms combined or not with other forms of incapacities; people affected by the burn-out syndrome or presenting the distress of burn-out symptoms originating from professional or private environment and where the full employment is provisionally not possible; people failing to get employed over long periods of time and with no defined perspective of re-employment; people presenting incapacities of physical or psychical nature, challenged or impaired preventing them from complete non-discriminatory interaction with the society; people previously affected by accidents or diseases resulting in severe brain damage impact and facing constraints when attempting to normally act in society; refugees seeking protection, asylum applicants expecting to be granted the habitation rights willing to actively integrate the society and customs including employment; seniors aged 55+ presenting specific symptoms or being affected by dementia; seniors aged 55+ requiring assistance in spending their time; youngsters originating from or integrated in education systems dealing with special needs related to psychological challenges and / or interaction issues; youngsters somewhat mentally challenged and requiring assistance and support to actively integrate into society [14].

Disadvantaged people need to go through **five stages in Social Farming**: technical / procedural interaction with plants, animals and tools → dialogue and relationship with a tutor, with a guiding farmer → enlargement of the relationships with a larger group of people → full inclusion and recognition of the work → economic recognition of the active participation of participants / users.

Social Farming includes *conventional operations* (animal production, crop production, vegetable production, or woodland management and agri-touristic activities) adapted basically in regions where the entrepreneurship benefits of a greater acceptance; *particular productions* (bio-production, processing, and various forms of short food chains); and *traditional rural crafts* (manufactures, handmade local products).

The most common **Social Farming activities**, no matter the type of disadvantaged people targeted, are related to *plant production* and / or *animal production*, which allows distinguishing between **Horticultural Therapy** and **Animal-Assisted Therapy**.

Horticultural Therapy or **Social and Therapeutic Horticulture** designates “the engagement of a person in gardening and plant-based activities, facilitated by a trained therapist, to achieve specific therapeutic treatment goals: direct contact with plants guides the individual’s focus away from stress enhancing his overall quality of life and the visual aesthetics of plants are known to elicit feelings of inner peace, which generates positive emotions toward a meaningful appreciation of life” [13]. **Horticultural Therapy** is “an active process which occurs in the context of an established treatment plan, and horticultural therapists are specially educated and trained members of rehabilitation teams (made up of doctors, occupational therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, etc.) who involve the disadvantaged person in all phases of gardening, from propagation to selling products, as a means of bringing about improvement in their life” [13]. The significant positive effect of **Horticultural Therapy** on human health has been proven in a wide range of conditions: *diminutions* in *anxiety* (an unpleasant state of inner turmoil) symptoms, *body mass index* (body fat measure based on height and weight), *depression* (a state of low mood and aversion to activity) symptoms, *mood disturbance* (the main underlying feature of mood disorder), and *stress* (a feeling of strain and pressure), as well as *increases* in *cognitive function* (mentally-developed action or process of acquiring and understanding knowledge through experience, senses, and thought), *physical activity level* (a person’s daily physical activity as a number), *quality of life* (such as perceived by an individual), and *sense of community* (an experience of community rather than its structure, formation, setting, or other features) [12].

Animal-assisted Therapy is “an alternative / complementary type of therapy involving animals as a form of treatment” [13]: simply seeing animals in a peaceful state or at rest may signal to humans feelings of well-being, safety, and, thus, induce a state in which change and healing seem possible. The most used forms of **Animal-assisted Therapy** are with dogs (or canine-assisted therapy) and horses (or equine-assisted therapy). In **Canine-assisted Therapy**, “therapy dogs interact with disadvantaged people in animal-assisted interventions to enhance therapeutic activities and well-being including their behavioural, cognitive, physical and socio-emotional functioning by comforting patients via body contact, engaging patients in interactions which can help improve their motor skills and establish trusting relationship with others, exhibiting a behaviour that humans construe as friendly and welcoming, possessing a calm temperament for accommodating the contact with unfamiliar patients while they serve as a source of comfort, and reducing stressful and anxious feelings” [13]. **Equine-assisted Therapy** or **Hippotherapy** designates “a physical, occupational, and speech-language therapy treatment strategy that utilizes equine movement as part of an integrated intervention program to achieve functional outcomes for people with

health issues” [13] such as *behavioural* (involving, relating to, or emphasizing behaviour) problems, *cognitive* (relating to cognition) problems, *physical* (relating to the body as opposed to the mind) problems, *psychological* (related to the mental and emotional state of a person) problems, *social* (relating to society or its organization) problems, or *speech disorders* (disorders affecting the ability of speaking normally: articulation – phonetic / phonological disorders; fluency – cluttering / stuttering; and / or voice –pitch, rate, tone, or volume). A large number of health conditions can benefit from **Animal-assisted Therapy**: *advanced heart failure* (heart’s inability to pump sufficient blood to maintain its flow and meet the body’s oxygen needs), *cancer* (abnormal cell growth with the potential to invade and/or spread to other organs of the body), *chronic pain* (a pain that lasts a long time), *dementia* (a brain condition that causes a long-term and, sometimes, gradual decrease in the ability to remember and think), *developmental disorder* (involving serious impairment in different areas), and *psychological disorder* (a behavioural / mental pattern causing significant distress / impairment of personal functioning) such as *Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*, a mental disorder involving behaviour without regards to consequences, difficulty paying attention, excessive activity, and regulation of emotions not appropriate for a person’s age; *Autism Spectrum Disorder*, involving mainly serious social communication and interaction problems manifest in restricted, repetitive activities, interests, or patterns of behaviour; *Major Depressive Disorder*, involving low mood that is present across most situations; *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder*, a mental condition developing after a person has been exposed to an extremely traumatic event (sexual assault, traffic collisions, warfare, or other threats on a person’s life).

THEORY/CALCULATION

Based on the assets of **Social Farming** (and, implicitly, of **Horticultural Therapy** and **Animal Therapy**), **farmers** can be trained to turn into **social farmers** for both their benefit and that of disadvantaged people. In doing so, they can rely on books, courses, guides, handbooks and manuals dedicated to this metamorphosis [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [9], [15].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When considering becoming a **social farmer**, a farmer (designated in the following by “he”, though female farmers can also become social farmers) should mind the following four stages [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [9], [15].

1. Exploring Possibilities

Exploring possibilities means “identifying the sources where he can get more information about **Social Farming**” [15] (what **Social Farming** is about and what **Social Farming** involves) and identifying and accessing **Social Farming** opportunities (health and social care policies, potential clients, services)

(what services are provided by whom, how they are provided, and by whom they are financed).

2. Asking Himself If Social Farming Is for Him

A **farmer** can become a **social farmer** if he is a practicing farmer; if his farm situation can meet **Social Farming** needs (accommodating the comfort, safety, and welfare needs of disadvantaged people coming to work on the social farm; making adjustments and changes on the farm; and being able and willing to make these adjustments and changes); if he can adjust the energy, time, and work commitments necessary to meet the needs of disadvantaged people easily and effectively; and if the farmer's family members have the life experience or skills which could benefit and effective for supporting social farming participants. Operating a **social farming family** means that the farmer is ready and willing to commit himself and his family members to provide social farming services for specified hours, for specified days, and for a specified period of time; to observe every single relevant regulation, including those concerning clearance, health, insurance, police vetting, protection of vulnerable children, adolescents, young people and adults, and safety; to engage fully with clients and service providers in designing and agreeing on a programme of support activities; to encourage and facilitate social engagement between disadvantaged people and local communities; and to open the door to his farm and home to commit and support people with problems.

Before applying for **Social Farming**, the **farmer** should ask himself the following: "Are the family members ready and willing to make the regular time commitment over the period of however many weeks or months involved in a social farming contract? Are the family members ready to ensure full compliance with all health and safety requirements, and to take whatever additional measures may be necessary to safeguard potentially vulnerable adults, who may have limited capacity, and little or no experience of farms or farming activities? Are there any kinds of intellectual / learning, mental, physical, and social needs which they, as a family, are particularly interested in working with, or they do not feel comfortable or confident to work with? Is everyone in the family agreeable to giving it a go, or are there any worries or issues which still need to be talked about? What kind of activities and services can the farmer offer on the farm, within his current range of operations, for the groups of individuals he feels would be a good match for his farm?" [15].

In their turn, **social farming clients** should be ready and willing to commit themselves to a regular day (or to regular days) and/or to regular times for a mutually agreed upon period; to observe all mandatory health and safety practices (including the use of protective clothing and equipment); to engage socially with the farm family members and other people working on the farm or on the farm; and to agree with tasks which might include helping out with maintenance, taking care of animals, working the land, or doing other physical works within the farm.

Before applying for **Social Farming Client**, he should ask himself the following: “Are there any aspects he thinks he might find difficult, or feel nervous about? Are there any kinds of animals he would particularly like to work with, or would definitely not want to work with or be around? Does he think he will be ready and able to give the necessary time and commitment to make it a success for him? How does he feel about interacting and working with animals? How does he feel about working outdoors, about working physically, maybe in mucky conditions, or in bad weather? How does he feel about working with soil and plants and getting his hands dirty? What does he hope most to gain from it? What emotional and practical assistance can he expect to get from care assistants, family, friends, or other service staff? What kind of support and assistance does he think he might need, including practical areas such as health, mobility, transport, and other issues? Why would he like to try **social farming**?” [15].

3. Taking It Further

If the answer to the preceding questions is “yes”, the farmer can take it further, i.e. **prepare a farm profile** and **planning farm business**. The farm profile should include community / locality agricultural co-operative(s), churches, cinema, government offices and services, health centres, post office, pubs, schools, sports facilities, etc.; family farm story and photos (how he got into farming, why he got into farming in the first place, why he is interested in social farming, whether he has got children or not, what his interests are besides farming, etc.); farm activities / jobs throughout the year (harvesting, lambing, potato picking, etc.); farm photos & location; farm projects (diversifying into cheese making or into fruit production, drystone walling around a farm area, establishing a bog garden, establishing a herb or an organic vegetable garden, installing a wind mill, installing solar power, etc.); farm size, farm aspect, farm surroundings, land use, kind of crops, kind of livestock, other activities (making cheese, making preserves, etc.). **Planning farm business** should include “details about financial information (what his costs are; his anticipated income; his anticipated profits, i.e. his projected income less his costs; summary budgets for the period of the plan); other resources he needs to enable him to carry out his planned activities (financial, human and material resources) (for example, the easy access to appropriate financial instruments for farmers, processors, and rural **small entrepreneurs** [12]; the activities the farmer wants to pursue over the number of years covered in the plan (activities, agriculture, associated range of abilities, horticulture, indoors and outdoors activities, physical and non-physical elements of the services he is offering); the current assets and resources (financial, human, and material assets); the kind of business the farmer is in and his model of service provision (how the farm is structured, organised, and registered as a legal entity; whether it is a multifunctional farm, a social enterprise, or engaging in social farming as part of farm diversification); and where and how he proposes to get these resources (access to credit, proposed purchase of equipment, recruitment of personnel, and reinvestment of income back into business)” [5], [8].

4. Delivering Social Farming

This should take into account the following support issues: communication methods used by the farmer and the client, dietary issues, health issues (allergies, diabetes, epilepsy, intimate / personal care needs, medication, vaccine history), likes / dislikes, mobility (accessibility / steadiness), road and traffic awareness, sensory issues (hearing, visual, etc.), and smoking.

In addition to all this, a social farmer should also have some **specific entrepreneurial / management knowledge** (specific comprehension of models and principles related to administration / management, biology, chemistry, construction / design, economics, human interaction / staffing, ITC, legislation, logistics, marketing, mathematics, production / processing, safety / security, technology / mechanical, and training), some **specific entrepreneurial / management skills** (analytical thinking, assessing quality, assessment and deciding, assistance provision, Cartesian approach, communication comprehension, conciliation, coordinating, discoursing, dynamic learning, dynamic listening, financial management, human capital management, identification of faults and reaction, influencing, insightfulness, production activities, production supervising, resources' management, scientific approach, solving complex situations, structural assessment, structure analysing, supervising, systematic learning, technological choosing, and workflow administration), and “some **specific entrepreneurial / management work styles** (achievement / effort, adaptability / flexibility, analytical thinking, attention to detail, concern for others, cooperation, dependability, independence, initiative, innovation, integrity, leadership, persistence, self-control, social orientation, and stress tolerance)” [13]. Of course, nobody is expecting young people living in the rural area to acquire overnight all Agricultural Entrepreneurial / Managerial Knowledge and to develop all Agricultural Entrepreneurial / Managerial Skills and Agricultural Entrepreneurial / Managerial Work Styles. However, they are expected to acquire some knowledge and develop a few skills in their agricultural field of choice [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [9].

CONCLUSION

Cooperative farms and communities, institutional service providers (day / occupational services, mental health services, prison services, etc.), private specialized or mixed family farms, social holdings offering educational, occupational, or training services for disadvantaged people (particularly those including or focusing on people with special needs), and voluntary sector providers (privately and religious support organisations and services that usually target specific groups of individuals with health conditions (e.g. autism, people with Down's Syndrome, etc.) should involve in **Social Farming** for at least three reasons: for both economic and social benefits of the farming family (helping typically excluded people to become more included, making a difference in their lives, and seeing what effects **Social Farming** can have on the people who have

come to their social farm); for the mental, physical, and social benefits of the clients; and for the benefits of the wider community.

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