



## The societal impacts of the SOCIAL4FOOD project

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### ABSTRACT

The paper describes the social impact of the SOCIAL4FOOD project mainly related to the re-connection of people with nature and the fostering of social aggregation after the pandemic events. The project involved the community of the rural village of Arsoli located in Rome's metropolitan area and known for the cultivation of a typical high-quality bean, named "fagiolina arsolana". The social impact achieved by the project helped to address important societal challenges, including the support for sustainable agriculture and social well-being. To do so, the project followed a hybrid participatory approach based on learning-by-doing and design thinking. The implemented methodology contributed to re-purposing an abandoned green space through the co-design of a social farm for maintaining and recovering the sustainable practices of the "fagiolina arsolana" production and, simultaneously, stimulating the sense of community and belonging.

### Social impact

SOCIAL4FOOD (SOCIAL farming FOR stimulating transgenerational knowledge transfer and production of typical local FOOD - <http://cnrirpps.wixsite.com/social4food/en>) is a project funded by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology under the call "New European Bauhaus Call for Proposals for Citizen Engagement Activities". The project involved the small village of Arsoli (around 1400 inhabitants) located in Rome's metropolitan area and known for the cultivation of a typical high-quality bean, named "fagiolina arsolana". This legume is included in the foods protected by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity (<https://www.fondazione Slow Food.com/en/slow-food-presidia/arsoli-bean/>) because it is at risk of extinction due to the isolation in this natural niche in the Arsoli countryside and the low yield.

The main societal impacts of the SOCIAL4FOOD project were the re-connection of people with nature and the fostering of social aggregation after the pandemic events. The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic highlighted the criticality of the harmonious relationship between people and nature and created an urgency to re-evaluate the ways to use natural resources, including the way to produce food [1]. According to Fei et al. [2] the COVID-19 pandemic has urged the necessity of fostering local food production. Especially, when traditional exchange channels are disrupted, efficient local production could greatly help maintain the flow of food, benefiting both the producers and consumers. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has further reduced the possibility of social

relationships and aggregation opportunities, already undermined by the widespread use of smartphones and other digital technologies that lead people to detach themselves from nature [3,4].

The SOCIAL4FOOD project achieved the abovementioned impacts in a twofold way. First, by re-purposing an abandoned green space through the co-design of a social farm for maintaining and recovering the sustainable practices of the "fagiolina arsolana" production while stimulating the sense of community and belonging. Second, the implementation of several green training activities to promote interaction and collaboration between different social groups. The total number of participants in the activities of the project was 118 people (around 10% of Arsoli's inhabitants) from 5 social groups (teenagers, children (8–12 years), elders, citizens, and farmers). The representatives of the main four social entities have been also involved in the project (the Municipality of Arsoli, Pro Loco of Arsoli, Social elderly center of Arsoli, and local farmers of the association "Amici della fagiolina arsolana"). The quantitative and qualitative indicators expected by the project have been satisfied: the number of local citizens and stakeholders involved (118) was higher than the expected 70 participants; citizen satisfaction degree with the SOCIAL4FOOD activities (92%) was higher than the expected 70%. The citizen satisfaction degree is evaluated using a qualitative survey that is accessible at the following link: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10037040>.

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## Methodology

To achieve the social impacts above described, the project followed a hybrid participatory approach based on learning-by-doing and design thinking [5].

The principles of learning-by-doing [6,7] were suitably employed in the process of stimulating the knowledge acquisition on the cultivation and cooking techniques of the "fagiolina arsolana" thanks to its advantage in strengthening community capacity building and problem-solving. In particular, three different green social laboratories (i.e., "I learn how to grow the fagiolina", "I learn how to cook the fagiolina", and "I learn how to harvest the fagiolina") were organised. On the other hand, design thinking [8,9] encouraged citizen participation in the co-creation of the social farm (people to involve, tasks to perform, etc.) mainly thanks to its effectiveness in involving people in defining a more accepted solution that satisfies their needs. Three co-creation events were organised to stimulate participants in providing some solutions about the organization of the social farm (e.g., people to involve and tasks to perform). Through a collaborative discussion, a shared solution for the co-design of the social farm was provided.

## Results and implications

The SOCIAL4FOOD project helps to address important societal challenges, including the support for sustainable agriculture and social well-being. The green social laboratories allowed the maintenance and recovery of traditional agricultural knowledge and the sustainable practices of the "fagiolina" production through the knowledge transfer of the typical recipes of the "fagiolina" and the experiences and skills needed for its growth. Together with the culinary challenge they also fostered social relationships and the aggregation opportunity. Moreover, the co-creation of the social farm provided social inclusion opportunities to people by building a sense of community and belonging and improving their well-being and quality of life by offering a calming environment, away from the pressures of everyday life that helps to release stress.

The achieved impact was mainly at the local level. In particular, the maintenance and recovery of traditional agricultural knowledge and the sustainable practices of the "fagiolina" production can increase the economic revenue of the local commercial activities linked to the growth and sale of the "fagiolina" by fostering local rural development and social and professional integration of the local young generation. In particular, the local farmers of the Association "Amici della fagiolina arsolana" underlined the potential of the co-created social farm in new incomes for the local agricultural and commercial sector (expected to grow around 10% in two years). This opportunity is crucial for small farmers since it provides the additional income required to enable them to continue the growing of the "fagiolina", thereby reducing the risk of land abandonment and helping to preserve food traditions. Moreover, the hybrid participatory approach implemented by the project was beneficial both for local administrators, to integrate people at risk of isolation in the design of public services, and for citizens, to hand down and/or learn the local traditions.

Mostly local teenagers (including young immigrants), 8–12-year-old children, and elders benefited from the realization of this green space, fostering the reconnection between the rural and urban context, as well as the farming sector and society in general.

For local policy makers, the hybrid participatory approach was beneficial for the cross-territorial communication on the implementation of effective policy measures for the promotion of the local food traditions in the rural areas of the Aniene Valley, consisting of the neighboring villages of Arsoli. This area is rich in olives, grapes, and native legumes that risk extinction due to the lack of interest of young generations in maintaining agricultural traditions. To transfer the policy actions to be implemented to maintain the local food traditions, a focus group with the mayors of Arsoli and the neighbouring towns (Agosta,

Anticoli Corrado, Camerata Nuova, Riofreddo, and Rocca Canterano) was carried out.

The societal impacts achieved by the project can be learned from other research fields, such as tourism and healthcare. The tourism field in general, and wildlife tourism, in particular, which occurs in natural, aesthetically pleasing environments, can build on the experience gained by the project to reconnect people with nature and stimulate social aggregation. For instance, tourism agencies could promote sightseeing tours connected with the events developed during the project for valuable experiences and creative regeneration opportunities for both visitors and residents. Moreover, the social farm developed in the project could be interesting for the healthcare sector, providing meaningful activities that lead to empowerment, health, and social care/rehabilitation, as well as a living environment for disadvantaged people where their personal capabilities can be valued and enhanced.

The hybrid participatory approach developed in the project to achieve the societal impact described above could be used to develop future projects in many settings. For instance, it can be applied in political processes for strengthening citizen engagement, in health management for developing user-centered services, and in the educational domain for defining learner-centered approaches to teaching. The approach can be used at all stages of the project cycle (analysis, collective decision-making, planning, or reflection).

The methodology, tested in the Town of Arsoli, can be reused in other small towns due to its generality and scalability. The hybrid participatory approach can be replicated at local and regional levels by fostering further development of the project ideas and the scaling of the project activities to the neighboring towns of the Aniene Valley and other rural areas in the Lazio Region, which have strong food traditions.

The following recommendations for the replication and/or upscaling of the realized activity resulted from the project's results:

- Periodical meetings with the local administrators of the neighboring towns to continue the process of scaleup of the project activities in the neighboring territory to stimulate the transgenerational knowledge transfer and production of their typical local food;
- Periodical meetings with representatives of the social entities, who signed the collaboration agreement, the school, and the "ambassadors of the Fagiolina Arsolana" to support them and ensure everyone understood the objectives and commitments to maintain the social farm and replicate the project activities in the coming years.

The success of the replication and/or upscaling of the project strongly depends both on the involvement and active participation of citizens and on the funds (both from the public and private sectors) available for replicating the activities.

The SOCIAL4FOOD project helped to deliver a just transition process by fostering sustainable agricultural processes and practices that contribute to achieving the shift toward a regenerative economy. Moreover, the methodology followed in the project is in line with the process for achieving the just transition that should be genuinely inclusive and participatory, giving farmers, communities, and those that are usually marginalised, an opportunity to shape a better food system that works for people and the climate.

A collaboration agreement among the administrative, socio-cultural, and agricultural institutions/associations has been signed to manage the maintenance of the social farm and the re-implementation of the SOCIAL4FOOD training activities in the coming years. The non-compliance with the agreement among the different stakeholders can pose a barrier to maximizing the societal impacts of the SOCIAL4FOOD project.

## Informed consent from human subjects

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

## Author Contributions

Authors are not listed alphabetically but the first author is opportunely defined.

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Alessia D'Andrea reports financial support was provided by European Institute of Innovation & Technology.

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