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Systematic Review

Drivers and Barriers towards Social Farming: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: Social farming (SF) spread across Europe in recent decades. It represents an expression of agriculture diversification and performs a social function expressed through vulnerable individuals' social inclusion. As a result, SF is able to generate positive externalities and thus contribute to social wellbeing. Despite benefits, SF faces several issues related to its dissemination. Although in recent years scholars have been approaching this topic, much remains to be researched. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate, through a systematic review, drivers and barriers related to the spread of this phenomenon. Results showed that factors such as the lack of information on SF, farmers' mental limitations and the lack of economic resources, as well as excessive bureaucratization, could hamper the spread of SF. On the other hand, ethical production, new income sources, sustainable rural development and new employment opportunities can encourage the dissemination of such practices. In order to overcome the barriers and emphasize the drivers pointed out by this study, the role of policymakers is essential, as they should promote information and training activities for farmers and consumers in order to increase awareness of SF social value and encourage a collective approach to SF practices.

Keywords: social farming; social needs; sustainability; value creation

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1. Introduction

The process of diversification in agriculture spread across Europe in recent decades. It represents, particularly for small- and medium-sized farms, an opportunity to increase income, through the carrying out of practices and functions not exclusively linked to primary production and to strengthen the link between natural resources and rural communities [1–3]. It also includes the cooperation between the health sector and non-profit organisations, aimed at combining agricultural work with the improvement of vulnerable people's quality of life, which refers to social farming (SF) [4–6].

Literature offers different approaches and also different definitions to this complex and heterogeneous phenomenon [6]. In particular, a distinction is made between green care, care farming and social farming. Green care refers to a large group of activities that use nature's elements to promote and support physical, mental, social and educational wellbeing [7,8]. It includes treatment and rehabilitation services, as well as health promotion and social and health care, mainly for the most vulnerable social groups [9]. In this context, the environmental landscape's quality represents a crucial factor. The term care farming identifies the activity of promoting physical and mental health through the use of conventional farms and agricultural landscapes [10]. The main emphasis is on therapeutic activity, although some initiatives focus on education as well as occupational or social inclusion [4]. The aim is to create personal development opportunities and rehabilitation for people at risk of marginalization who can access such services through specialized centres [8]. Social farming refers to the set of practices that use the resources offered by agriculture and animal husbandry to provide social or educational assistance services, contributing to collective wellbeing [4,8]. It mainly covers activities and services related to therapy, inclusion, rehabilitation, education and workforce training, using agricultural

resources to promote health, mainly in rural and peri-urban areas [11]. In particular, the actors involved in such practices may be classified as follows: vulnerable individuals who have difficulties with social and working inclusion (i.e., former prisoners, disabled, elderly with diseases, etc.), farmers using their resources to carry out agricultural activities aimed at the social inclusion of the former and personnel specialised in assistance. As a result, SF performs a social function expressed through the employment of individuals with low social and bargaining power [4,11–14].

Despite different definitions, the terms described are often considered equivalent [15–18] referring to "the use of commercial farms and agricultural landscapes as a base for promoting mental and physical health, through normal farming activity" [10] (p. 247).

The development of SF in Europe took different forms, according to the degree of maturity of the phenomenon across different countries [19]. The northern and central European countries are characterised by the state's important role in the regulation of SF practices, which contributes to promoting SF projects and programmes with public subsidies. The countries of southern Europe, instead, are characterized by an emerging stage of development of the phenomenon and by a subsidiary position of the state. Therefore, the work of creating new initiatives, promoting the sector and building support networks falls to the non-profit sector and certain other sectors of civil society [6].

SF, despite its ability to encourage agricultural sustainability [20] and to create externalities through the social inclusion function, still represents an experimental field that requires coordination between the different authorities responsible for legislation and the realities in the territory. For this reason, the development of such practices is often hindered [21]. Although several researchers and institutions are interested in discussing this social practice [22], much remains to be explored.

The purpose of this study is, therefore, to identify, through the use of the systematic review tool, barriers and facilitating factors to the spread of SF activities, in order to clarify which aspects should be taken into account in the development of such practices and which actions may be implemented to overcome the different obstacles that arise.

2. Materials and Methods

In order to appraise and synthesize research evidence in the study area, a systematic literature review method is adopted. According to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses statement (PRISMA), a systematic literature review "uses systematic and explicit methods to identify, select, and critically appraise relevant research, and to collect and analyse data from the studies that are included in the review" [23]. Compared to the traditional method of reviewing literature, a systematic review is characterized by a more transparent paper-selection process, reducing the effects of researcher bias and enhancing rigor and thoroughness of the analysis [24]. By providing a clear summary of all the studies addressing a research topic, systematic reviews allow us to consider all the relevant findings, not just the results of one or two studies [25]. When conducting a systematic review, a paper's search should be extensive, including several research projects, and the study selection criteria should flow directly from the review questions and be previously specified [26]. In this study, a comprehensive search of scientific contributions was carried out using two academic databases (Scopus and Web of Science). Additional relevant literature was identified from the bibliographies of the retrieved articles, from search engines such as Google Scholar and ResearchGate and through an extensive research by authors, including those most interested in the SF topic. After testing a variety of terms, a Boolean search was conducted combining those terms which showed to be relevant for the research aim. Specifically, the combination of keywords used was "care farm*" OR "social farm*" OR "green care" OR "farm* for health", which includes all the terms used in literature to identify the SF activities. It was not possible to perform a more specific search, including terms such as "barriers" and "drivers", as it did not produce results. Therefore, the strategy adopted was to initially carry out a more generic search and then to narrow the field of research through document screening. There

were no limitations on the year of publication and the latest research was conducted in June 2021. English was the selected language and studies were excluded if the researchers did not have access to full-text.

As the SF topic is multidisciplinary, it was necessary to choose the thematic areas to which the research should be restricted. The search on the Scopus database was limited to those thematic areas concerning the study's aim, such as: Social Sciences; Business, Management and Accounting; Economics, Econometrics and Finance and Decision Sciences. The choice of the document type was articles, conference papers and book chapters. Since the search engines Scopus and Web of Science do not have the same subject areas, the following thematic areas have been chosen for the Web of Science database: Public Environmental Occupational Health; Multidisciplinary Agriculture; Economics; Agricultural Economics Policy; Interdisciplinary Social Sciences; Social Work; Management; Business; Business Finance and Multidisciplinary Sciences. On Web of Science, articles and proceeding papers have been chosen as document types. Initially, 142 studies were found. After duplicates removal, they reduced to 110.

The studies were selected through a two-stage screening process (Figure 1) and the selection was conducted independently by two researchers. Any discrepancies were discussed and solved as agreed by the other author.

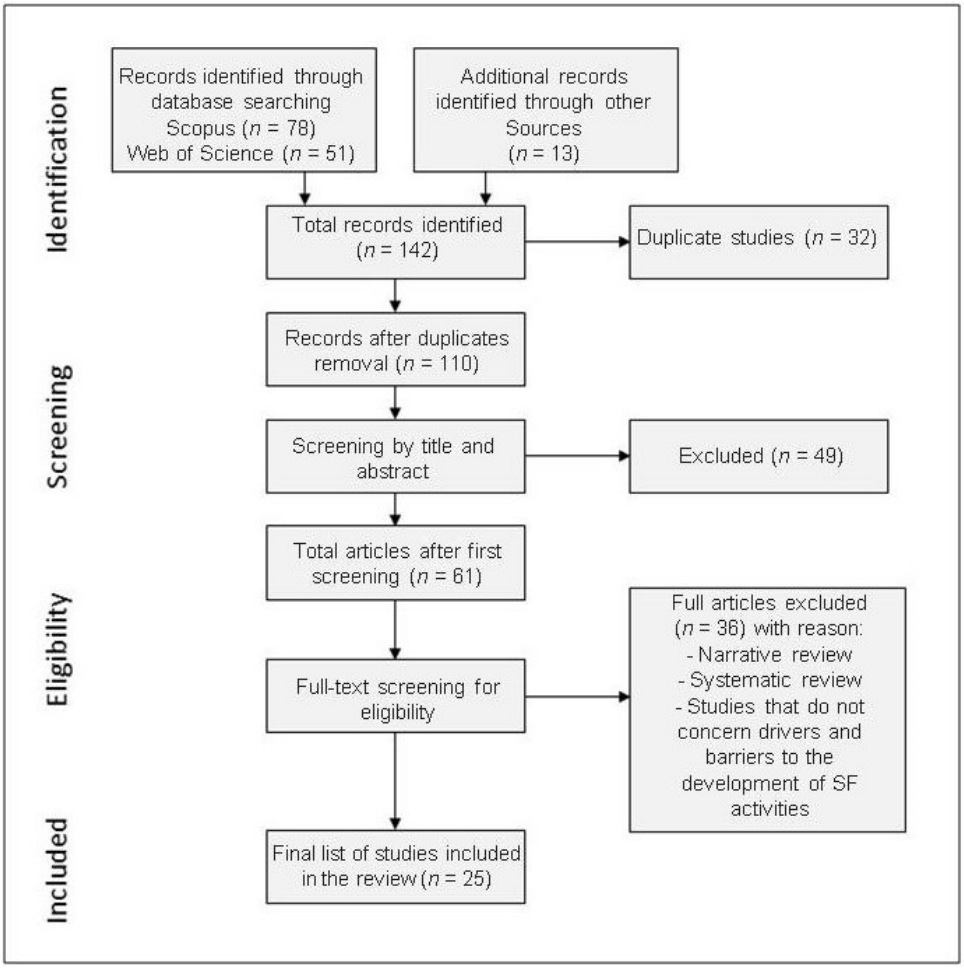

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart of study selection.

The first stage of analysis consisted of the selection of papers by title and abstract, in order to decide whether or not the full paper should be read for further analysis. At the end of this stage, 61 papers were selected. In the second stage, full-text articles were screened to assess eligibility according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. All studies which highlighted the presence of obstacles (barriers) to the development of SF activities

and facilitating factors related to it (drivers), such as positive or negative effects for society, for the farm and for the territory, were considered eligible for inclusion in this review. Secondary research articles, such as systematic or traditional reviews, published protocols, posters or abstracts without the full-text article were excluded. At the end of the two-stage process of selection, 25 papers remained for review (Appendix A, Table A1).

One of the features that allows us to differentiate systematic reviews from other types of reviews is the quality assessment procedure [27]. This step requires the use of specific criteria to create a quality score for each of the included studies in order to produce a ranking of their qualities [28]. Two researchers independently appraised the qualities of the studies identified according to Bimbo et al. [28]'s quality assessment tool. This quality assessment protocol consists of six criteria: type of methodology adopted (qualitative or quantitative); adequacy of sample size; sample representativeness; theoretical framework; confounding factors and biases and validated/objectively quantifiable results. A study could be rated as low-, medium- or high-quality as the result of a combination of the scores assigned to each of the six assessment criteria [28]. The results of the quality assessment protocol are discussed in the next section.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive details of the papers included in this study were extracted and analysed according to the distribution of publications across the period, countries and research methodologies.

Regarding the year of publication, it can be noted that the interest of scholars in SF is very recent, showing a growing trend in the last ten years (Figure 2). That may derive from the evolution of agriculture's role, which pays more attention to the new needs expressed by citizen–consumers and can perform several functions [2,29]. In recent years, in fact, the social function of agriculture has become increasingly important, and it is characterized by a set of practices that combine farming with social activity, aimed at education, therapeutic recovery and social and occupational inclusion of vulnerable individuals at risk of marginalisation [13]. SF activities are, obviously, part of this set of practices.

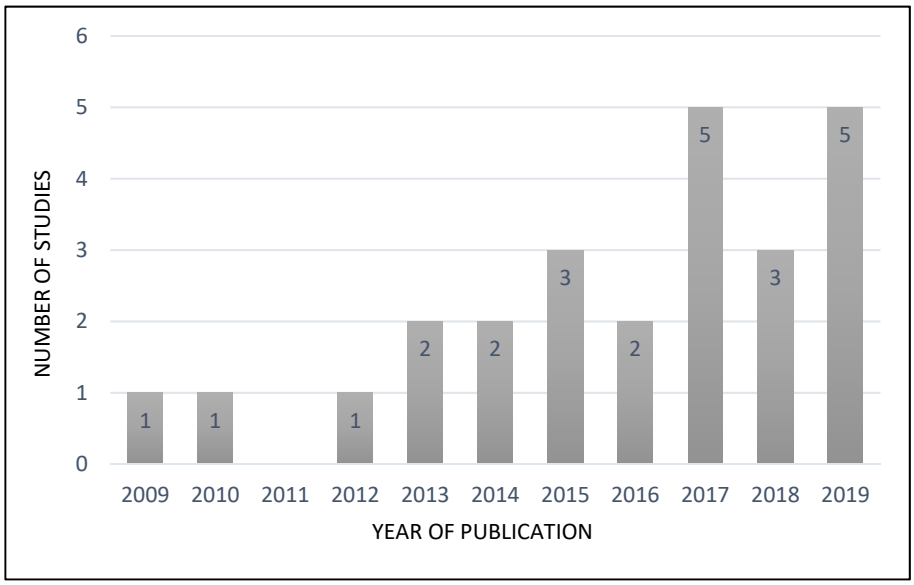

Figure 2. Number of publications according to year.

Concerning the distribution of publications across countries, as shown in Figure 3, there appears to be some predominance from Italy, which represents around 43% of the 25 papers included in the analysis. Spain is ranked second, with around 20% of contributions and Czech Republic is the country that represents12% of the studies analysed.

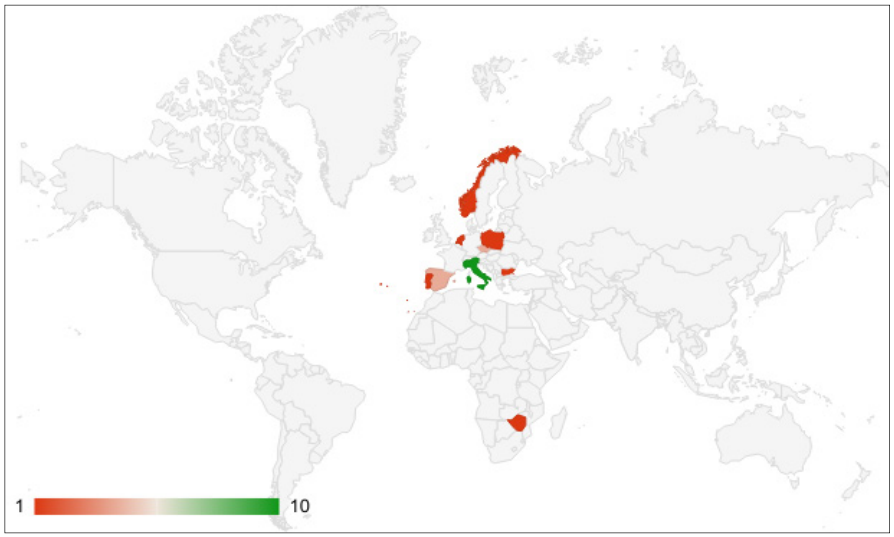

Figure 3. Distribution of publications across countries.

The leading role of Italy can be explained by the role that SF has in the Italian panorama. Although Italian policymakers emphasized that SF includes only those practices in which the use of nature is production-oriented [30], in Italy, SF has a social inclusive potential and is mainly labour-oriented [12]. Furthermore, there is a heterogeneous context, as SF developed very differently across Italian regions [31]. There is, therefore, a complex scenario that may have attracted scholars' interest on the topic of SF in Italy, starting with Carbone and colleagues' studio in 2009 [18], which focused on consumers' attitudes towards SF foods.

According to Seuring and Müller [32], studies were coded into three different research methodology categories: surveys, case studies and theoretical and conceptual papers.

As shown in Figure 4, surveys appear to be the prevalent research method employed, with 18 studies which represent about 70% of contributions. Only 4 of 25 studies present case studies methodology, and three studies are of a rather theoretical or conceptual nature. For the survey-based studies, the sample size is within a wide range of values, from few dozens to hundreds of respondents, belonging to different categories such as farmers, consumers, employees of care institutions, providers and other stakeholders.

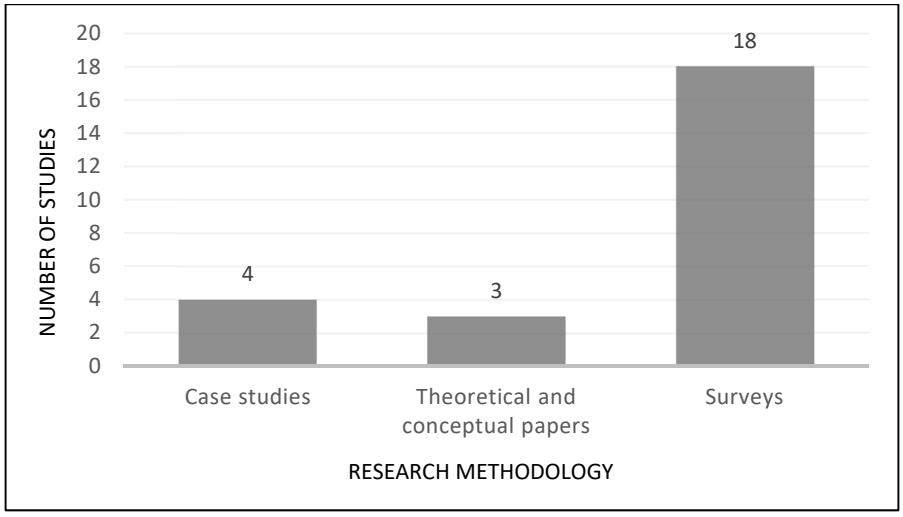

Figure 4. Research methodology applied.

3.2. Quality Assessment

After the analysis, 12 studies were rated as low-quality (48%), 3 as medium-quality (12%) and 10 as high-quality (40%). As shown in Figure 5, 72% of the studies adopted a

qualitative methodology (rated as low-quality), while 28% adopted a quantitative one (rated as high-quality). The sample size was less than 49 in 68% of the studies and the sample was representative of a specific population group in only 4% of the studies. Concerning the accounting of biases, 88% of the studies resulted in low-quality, and56% of the studies presented a defined theoretical framework. Approximately, the other 52% of the studies presents a validated/objectively quantifiable outcome.

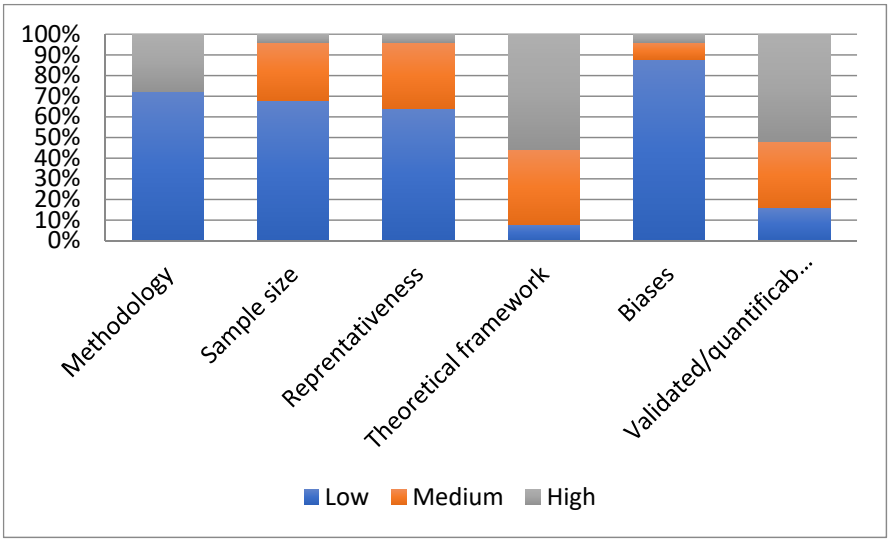

Figure 5. Percentage of articles rated low, medium or high according to the quality assessment criteria.

3.3. Thematic Findings

3.3.1. Drivers

The analysis of the papers included in the study led to the identification of four main supporting factors of the development of SF activities (drivers). Specifically, these are: employment opportunities; sustainable rural development; diversification/new sources of income and ethical production.

As shown in Figure 6, the driver that has been most investigated is sustainable rural development, which covered 64% of the contributions included in the review. Immediately thereafter is the diversification of agricultural activities, which may represent the development of new sources of income for the farmer (36%). In regards to the production of high ethical and social content products, it covered 24% of the papers included in this study, while the creation of employment opportunities for those involved in SF projects (clients and professionals) was covered by 20% of the studies.

Employment Opportunities

According to Tulla et al. [33], SF represents a source of employment and social equality, as it improves the creation of new employment opportunities in agriculture and related sectors [33]. In fact, SF offers working places, and sometimes accommodation, for vulnerable citizens that are mentally or physically disabled or that are facing problems entering the regular labour market [34]. Specifically, SF prepares these individuals to participate in the production and distribution cycle through training activities, especially for groups that had no previous opportunity to learn or who left school [33]. Carrying out such activities allows individuals with specific needs to demonstrate their abilities, which can lead to a greater understanding by the society of their needs and capabilities [12]. In fact, engagement in desired and valued occupations may provide meaning and worth to people's lives, allowing them to develop and express their identities [15,35].

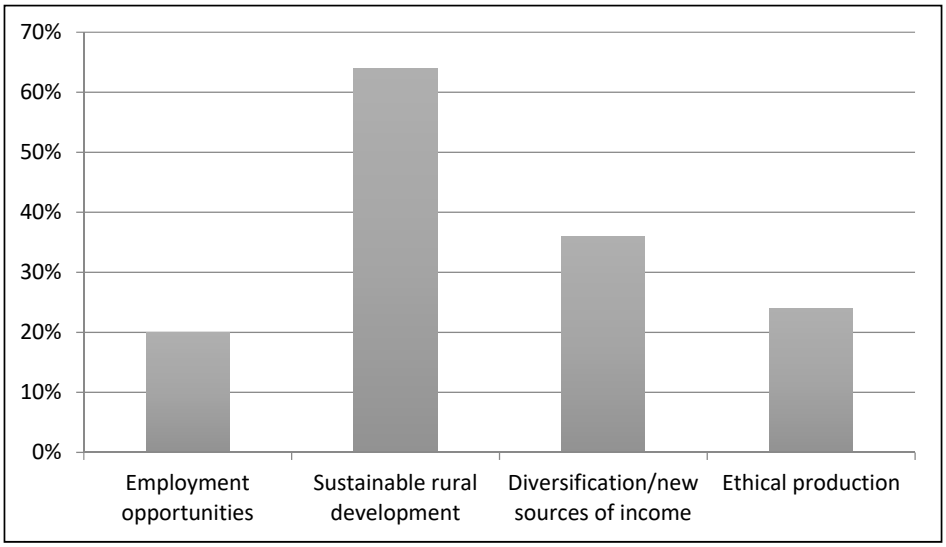

Figure 6. Drivers to the development of SF activities.

SF initiatives could also help to energize rural areas, generating new places of employment that help to stabilize the population with a more attractive level of services and reinforcing the networks of small cities in the countryside [33,36]. They contribute also to the arrival of new families in small villages attracted by new employment opportunities related to SF and by services adapted to their needs, and they support women's empowerment and contribute to social inclusion, to the reinforcement of social protection nets and to the quality of life of rural and peri-urban inhabitants [12].

Despite SF's small resources compared to many other farms, the prevalence of organic farming and the maximization of cultivated crops and kept animals enlarges the working opportunities for vulnerable individuals, as they are allowed to conduct work which suits their special needs through the help of qualified social workers and close connections to social entities [34].

The important success factors of SF are qualified social workers and close connections to social entities, such as job agencies, social welfare institutions and private social associations or companies [34]. According to Gagliardi et al. [15], occupational therapists can gain substantial insight from SF practices for application in their practices [15]. In fact, recent recommendations encourage occupational therapists to establish partnerships with organizations involved in garden activities at farms to utilize their unique services [15,37].

Sustainable Rural Development

According to Tulla et al. [38], SF activities support sustainable local development, linking resources, activities and actors in order to generate innovative practices and products characterized by high added value, capable of reinvigorating the territory and creating new opportunities. The notion of "sustainable development" is used to denote humans' actions involving and using ecological, economic and social resources while not affecting the balance between them (one source is not used at the expense of another) [39].

With regard to rural areas, SF activities can lead to different benefits, such as improving health and social services, value-added transformation and commercialization of agri-food products, increasing social cohesion, as well as the development of a local economy focused on people and capable to promote the common good [6,38]. As Di Iacovo et al. [40] pointed out, SF projects' development allows us to address rural transition challenges, which movein the direction of the sustainable development of rural areas, through a reshaping of traditional practices, attitudes and resources in order to create stronger and inclusive communities in the perspective of social sustainability. Hudcová et al. [16] stated that SF's contribution to rural development concerns the preservation of nature, diversified agriculture and human–nature relationship. Equally important are the transfer

of traditional farm economy to further generations and the possibility to have access to traditional agriculture through the involvement of many different actors that fulfill a common mission and maintain cohesive rural areas [16].

Other important SF benefits could be summarized as the capacity to create synergies with the environment and to connect people with natural cycles, as well as to improve biodiversity, contributing to the recovery of abandoned and degraded rural areas through agricultural activities [38,41].

SF also contributes to creating strong relations between inhabitants and among different actors associated with SF's activities [42]. Furthermore, SF may generate benefits for all sectors involved, as it represents a system based on interaction, communication and information, which are key elements of innovation and development [43]. According to McAllister et al. (2019), who focused on the development of tools for peace building in fragile environments, SF demonstrates a great value in re-forging relationships that are capable of bringing divisions [44]. In addition, Di Iacovo et al. [40] proposed SF as a social protection instrument capable of enhancing the social status and rights of marginalized groups.

In the development arena, SF could represent an example of economic and social innovation, as it facilitates the creation of networks of collaboration and cooperation, promoting social cohesion and solidarity and contributing to the stabilization of the population of a certain territory, increasing the feeling of belonging to a community [16,33]. These are more socially responsible and respectful of the land initiatives that make positive contributions to the construction of new models of development [33]. According to Foti et al. [45], whodeveloped a study concerning the "Sicilian social farm network", there is a trade union between the several individuals involved in SF activities, which represents an important factor, as it increases the local social and economic value.

In addition, SF could help smaller farms to improve their performance though collective actions which allow them to access new resources, economies of scale, economies of scope, network economies and reduced transaction and coordination costs. Such opportunity brings benefits not only atthe farmlevel but also to the territory, as it allows general growth of area attractiveness [43].

In conclusion, apart from the specific benefits related to SF activities for some vulnerable groups of individuals, it can be assumed that SF also helps to realize a more egalitarian and cohesive society, contributing to territorial development [33].

Diversification/New Sources of Income

SF can bring positive contributions to society also at an economic level, as it generates benefits to the rural economy deriving from more diversified farm incomes [46]. According to García-Llorente et al. [47], SF may help to improve farmers' economic status, as it creates new opportunities for acquiring income through the diversification of agricultural activities (non-agricultural and agriculture-related operations) [48]. In particular, SF activities, as well as the other broadening activities, represent a potential new source of income for the farming household, simultaneously implying the delivery of goods and services that society is willing to pay for [4,43,49]. This opportunity could be very important for small farmers [42,43], as the development of SF projects could provide the additional income they require to continue their activities, thereby reducing the risk of land abandonment and helping to preserve local landscape and cultural traditions. In fact, if it is not possible to maintain the farm using only the income generated by traditional agricultural activities, it seems necessary to strengthen agriculture's supplementary functions [42]. Here, caretaking is used as a diversification strategy, which includes a wide range of non-agricultural activities linked to primary agricultural production, such as tourism, recreation, leisure, education, health and cultural and natural activities [34,50,51]. By providing social services, which are currently in high demand, small farms will be able to operate optimally and to face strong competition [42].

SF represents an opportunity also for those farmers who already conduct operations in the non-agricultural sector, as they may have the opportunity to expand their range of services with social services [42].

Ethical Production

Nowadays, there is an emerging interest in the ethical quality of products, which tends to define consumers' lifestyles in specific market segments [3,18,29,52,53]. This phenomenon is spreading in many industrialized countries as part of so-called critical consumption, as consumers tend to be sensitive to the ethical contents of products and are interested in issues such as environmental sustainability, social justice and inclusion, income distribution, economic diversification and preservation of small and local farms [17,18,54].

Within this scenario, SF develops production and processing activities of agricultural products that incorporate social benefits in employment, training or rehabilitation of vulnerable groups [55]. In fact, products obtained from SF are considered to be of high quality and innovative, besides having high ethical content, which represents a differentiating element [38]. Furthermore, SF products are usually commercialized through short chains and local agri-food networks, which may be a competitive advantage for social farmers, as they can establish a direct relationship with consumers, avoiding intermediaries and reducing information asymmetries [56]. This represents a key element, as consumers have the possibility to know who is producing their food and to understand the problems the farm has to face so they can evaluate the importance of such activities and decide to support them by paying a premium price for their products. As Torquati et al. [56] pointed out, consumers were willing to pay a premium price for two products, eggs and zucchini, if these products were derived from SF. Therefore, consumers' intentions to support SF activities is shown through their purchasing choices. Support from consumers is particularly important when there is a lack of public support and also when the social farm shows unsatisfactory economic performance [56].

3.3.2. Barriers

As for the barriers, which include all those limiting or hindering factors to the development of SF activities, the analysis led to the detection of four main categories: lack of information; mentalities changing limitations; need for additional resources and administrative and bureaucratic limits.

The topics covered mainly concern farmers' mentalities changing limitations and the need for additional resources (both factors were analyzed in 28% of the papers included in the review).

Lack of information on SF represents another important obstacle to the development of SF activities, analyzed by 20% of the included studies. Finally, administrative and bureaucratic limitations were covered by 12% of the contributions included in the review (Figure 7).

Lack of Information

One of the main obstacles to the development of SF activities is represented by a lack of knowledge about SF [17,18,41]. In fact, according to Carbone et al. [18], most of the sample included in their study never heard about SF activity or/and never hadbeen in contact with social farms. This is particularly important as, despite consumers showing their willingness to buy high ethical and social content products, they are not particularly interested in products derived from SF, as they are not aware of them. In fact, most of SF products belong to consumers' buying groups [17,18], which represent groups of individuals who organize themselves in order to buy certain goods directly from the producer, usually belonging to the food category [18,56].

Information represents an essential prerequisite in ethical consumerism in order to move from generic expression of interest to concrete purchasing action [57]. Concerning SF, there is a general lack of information with regard not only to consumers but also to other possible stakeholders [58], such as public authorities [22].

Knowledge may represent a key factor in the support of the public sector for SF activities [22] and to make society have a high level of solidarity concerning such activities [58].

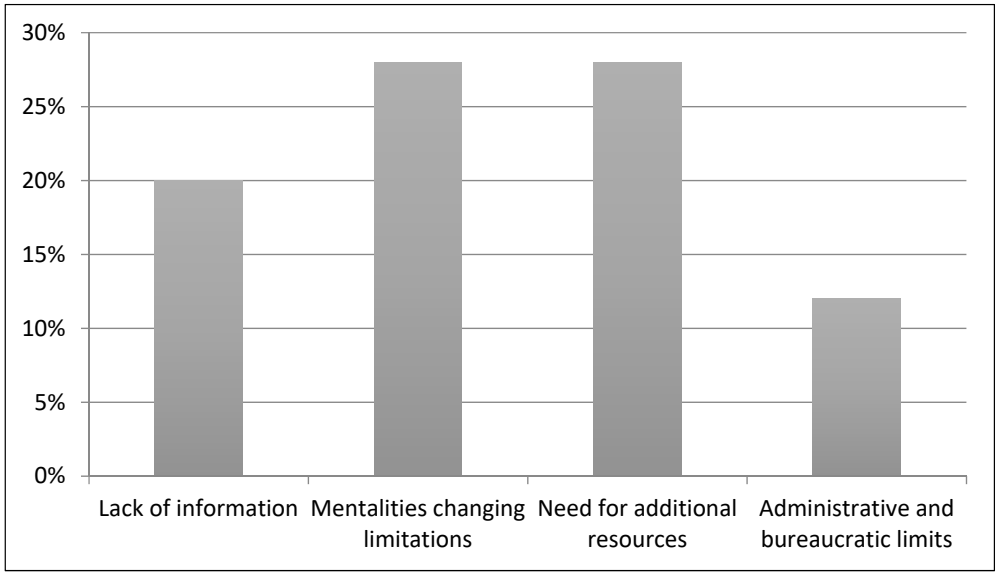

Figure 7. Barriers to the development of SF activities.

Mentalities Changing Limitations

According to Brites et al. [41], farmers' mentalities changing limitations represent a high barrier to the development of SF activities. It refers to factors such as the lack of ethics concerning nature, prejudice in carrying out activities with vulnerable people, the underestimated value of the agricultural sector, the lack of education and information of farmers and the lack of civic consciousness [41]. These factors could influence the development of problematic relationships among different stakeholders involved in SF activities [6,41,59].

The application of SF governance models is not easy, especially when many stakeholders from different sectors are involved, as the level of complexity of governance systems can affect functionality, efficacy and response capacity [47].

Despite it being very important for farmers to participate in SF networks, as it brings benefits in terms of reputation and market recognition [47], network building processes present several obstacles related to reciprocal diffidence and competition between practices [22]. According to Guirado et al. [6], one of the limiting factors of the development and success of SF activities is the lack of connection between those involved. In particular, farmers do not know how to make a network or how to communicate with each other [22,59]. Furthermore, SF entities must have a consolidated team which can accommodate volunteers and experts. The former are crucial in the organization of SF activities; the latter are needed in key areas to improve the daily management of SF projects [38]. These represent crucial factors, as they could increase farmers' empowerment, giving them the opportunity to plan and engage in social activities [47].

Need for Additional Resources

SF requires great effort for its implementation: the recovery of costs related to the performance of its activities occurs after a period of time ranging from two to four years [48]. These costs are, on average, higher than those incurred by traditional agricultural activities, as it is necessary to have on-farm, in addition to farmers, social assistance for specialized skills [6]. Social farmers' farmland resources are rather small compared to many other types of farms [34]. Furthermore, the resources related to the development of marketing and communication strategies are always limited [38]. As Kučera [46] pointed out, economic resources for supporting individuals to engage in SF are often not available, so there is the need of a change in budget allocations and priorities. According to Lund et al. [59], local authorities and other institutions are not interested entering into long-term contracts with SF providers, which represent a situation of uncertainty. In fact, there is often the need to close some well-functioning projects because the funding from local authorities ends.

Tulla et al. [38] underlined the tendency of SF entities to have excessive assets, including liquid assets, which make them less profitable. In this respect, it is important that those who decide to implement SF activities focus on the project's availability regardless of the financial support provided by private funders, local authorities or a parent entity.

Administrative and Bureaucratic Limits

Literature [6,41,59] underlines that the development of SF has to face different administrative, legal and bureaucratic limitations. As Brites et al. [41] pointed out, regulation and bureaucracy represent some of the biggest barriers to the development of such activities, as the majority of SF institutions need the support of public funds. Furthermore, the lack of policies concerning SF is a very big problem, as it is difficult to recognize the institutions and then to attribute them subsidies. According to Lund et al. [59], bureaucracy concerning the development of SF projects is too long and pointless; thus, it needs to be simplified to make these activities more easily implemented. It is due to this that the service providers could feel frustrated and could not feel the need to advertise, manage or monitor their own business constantly [59].

Despite much of SF literature highlighting the presence of bureaucratic, administrative and legal limits to the development of SF activities, it is important to point out that these limitations are closely linked to the legislation in force in the country in which these activities are developed. In fact, there is a substantial difference between legislations among different countries, mostly concerning the role of the state and the recognition of a legislative regulation governing such activities [6,19].

4. Conclusions

In the last few years, scholars showed a growing interest towards the SF phenomenon, as there are an increasing number of studies focused on this topic. Such interest mainly concerned SF activities' therapeutic function, while the issue related to the factors that would be able to encourage or discourage the economic and social development of such activities was rarely addressed. Therefore, this study focused, through the use of the systematic review tool, on the search for barriers and drivers related to the development of SF activities.

The results show, on the one hand, the importance of SF practices in the sustainable rural development of the territories in which they are implemented. SF is seen as a social and economic innovation, able to increase social cohesion through the creation of networks of cooperation and, at the same time, to recover people with fragility and to improve social services and the human–nature relationship. SF is also a source of new job opportunities in agriculture and related sectors, contributing to increases in territory attractiveness, and also allows farmers to diversify their activities, thus acting as a generator of new sources of value creation. In fact, products obtained from SF are innovative, as they present a high added value compared to traditional products. These products are characterized by high ethical and social content, highly valued by consumers, as SF activities are able to create positive externalities by virtue of the social function performed.

On the other hand, the development of SF activities is strongly limited by the scarce knowledge that agricultural entrepreneurs have of them and by their trouble communicating with potential stakeholders, therefore limiting the development of relations and networks necessary for the implementation of such activities. This has led to a weak implementation of SF in the agricultural sector in some European countries, such as in Italy, precisely due to the lack of training and competent human resources in the agricultural enterprise to manage the activities and services of social agriculture, which require specific skills compared to traditional agricultural activities for the therapeutic function performed. The lack of information related to such activities limits stakeholder and consumer support. However, there are also bureaucratic and administrative limits, which differ according to the countries considered.

In view of these results, the study offers valuable policy implications. First of all, in order to overcome barriers related to the lack of knowledge concerning SF and the

absence of specific skills within the farm, policies should promote training activities for farmers and information campaigns for consumers aimed at disseminating knowledge concerning the high social value of SF and its products. Furthermore, policies should encourage a collective approach to SF practices in order to share skills needed for the management of such practices. Rural development programs should include specific technical assistance measures aimed at accompanying the agricultural enterprise in the process of implementing SF.

The study presents several limitations. Firstly, literature research has been carried out considering filters related to the language of publication and the type of article selected. The decision to exclude other types of publications is justifiable in light of creating an equitable basis for comparison, but it may have led to the omission of potentially relevant research. In addition, although during the literature research phase a broad search algorithm was used, which attempted to include all terms used to refer to the subject of the study, other terms may be used in literature to refer to such activities and, therefore, some contributions may not have been included in the study. Therefore, the followed structured and systematic search procedure does not preclude the existence of additional studies which could have qualified for the review. Another limitation is represented by the result of the quality assessment protocol, which showed that the 48% of the contributions included in the analysis were rated as low-quality. This certainly affects the quality of the results.

Despite different limitations, the study produced interesting results and allows us to outline possible future research scenarios relating to the identification of the types of information and their dissemination methods, which could be useful to consumers and stakeholders for an easier recognition of SF activities and related products. Other scenarios could be concerned with the identification of actions aimed at simplifying the bureaucracy inherent in the development of such activities, as well as facilitating the creation and a simpler management of the networks needed to carry out SF activities.

Author Contributions: 1. Introduction, 2. Materials and Methods, 3. Thematic findings, 3.3.1. Drivers, 3.3.1.1. Employment opportunities, 3.3.1.2. Sustainable rural development, 3.3.1.3. Diversification/new sources of income, 3.3.1.4. Ethical production, C.N.; 3.1. Descriptive analysis, 3.2. Quality assessment, 3.3.2. Barriers, 3.3.2.1. Lack of information, 3.3.2.2. Mentalities changing limitations, 3.3.2.3. Need for additional resources, 3.3.2.4. Administrative and bureaucratic limits, A.U.; 4. Conclusions, G.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Summary characteristics of included studies.

Authors (Year), Country	Title	Methods	Barriers to SF Development	Drivers to SF Development	Quality Rating
Carbone A., Gaito M., Senni S. (2009), Italy	Consumers' Attitude Toward Ethical Food: Evidence from Social Farming in Italy	Survey	Lack of information	Ethical production	Medium
Hassink J., Elings M., Zweekhorst M., van den Nieuwenhuizen N., Smit A. (2010), Netherlands	Care farms in the Netherlands: Attractive empowerment-oriented and strengths-based practices in the community	Survey		Sustainable rural development	Low
Brites, C., Miguéns, F., Santos, D., Veríssimo, M., &Moreira, P. M. (2012), Portugal	Green Care and Social Farming: Future Perspectives in Portugal	Survey	Mentalities changing limitations. Administrative and bureaucratic limits	Sustainable rural development	Low
Foti V.T., Scuderi A., Timpanaro G. (2013), Italy	Organic social agriculture: a tool for rural development	Survey		Sustainable rural development	Low
Di Iacovo, F., Moruzzo, R., Rossignoli, C., &Scarpellini, P. (2013), Italy	Innovating rural welfare in the context of civiness, subsidiarity and co-production: social farming	Case study		Sustainable rural development	Low
Foti V.T., Giudice V.L., Rizzo M. (2014), Italy	Relationship system in social farming: The role of "Sicilian social farm network"	Theoretical and conceptual paper		Sustainable rural development	Medium
Tulla A.F., Vera A., Badia A., Guirado C., Valldeperas N. (2014), Spain	Rural and regional development polizie in Europe: social farming in the common strategic framework (Horizon 2020)	Survey		Employment opportunities. Sustainable rural development. Diversification/new sources of income	High
Lund I.E., Granerud A., Eriksson B.G. (2015), Norway	Green Care from the Provider's Perspective: An Insecure Position Facing Different Social Worlds	Survey	Mentalities changing limitations. Need for additional resources. Administrative and bureaucratic limits	Sustainable rural development	Low
Kucera, Z. (2015), Czech Republic	Social Agriculture—Alternative Type of Production	Theoretical and conceptual paper	Need for additional resources	Employment opportunities. Sustainable rural development. Diversification/new sources of income	Low
Di Iacovo, F., Petrics, H., &Rossignoli, C. (2015), Italy	Social Farming and social protection in developing countries in the perspective of sustainable rural development	Theoretical and conceptual paper		Sustainable rural development	Low
Bassi I., Nassivera F., Piani L. (2016), Italy	Social farming: a proposal to explore the effects of structural and relational variables on social farm results	Survey		Sustainable rural development. Diversification/new sources of income	High
García-Llorente M., Rossignoli C.M., Di Iacovo F., Moruzzo R. (2016), Italy and Spain	Social Farming in the Promotion of Social-Ecological Sustainability in Rural and Periurban Areas	Case study	Mentalities changing limitations	Employment opportunities. Diversification/new sources of income	Medium

Table A1. *Cont.*

Authors (Year), Country	Title	Methods	Barriers to SF Development	Drivers to SF Development	Quality Rating
Guirado C., Valldeperas N., Tulla A.F., Sendra L., Badia A., Evard C., Cebollada À., Espluga J., Pallarès I., Vera A. (2017), Spain	Social farming in Catalonia: Rural local development, employment opportunities and empowerment for people at risk of social exclusion	Survey	Mentalities changing limitations. Administrative and bureaucratic limits	Sustainable rural development	High
Dell'Olio M., Hassink J., Vaandrager L. (2017), Italy	The development of social farming in Italy: A qualitative inquiry across four regions	Survey	Lack of information. Mentalities changing limitations. Need for additional resources		Low
Nassivera F., Bassi I., Piani L. (2017), Italy	Determinants of Consumer Behavioral Intention Toward Social Farm Food	Survey	Lack of information	Ethical production	High
Tulla A.F., Vera A., Valldeperas N., Guirado C. (2017), Spain	New approaches to sustainable rural development: Social farming as anopportunity in Europe?	Survey		Diversification/new sources of income. Ethical production	High
Pölling B., Prados M.-J., Torquati B.M., Giacch G., Recasens X., Paffarini C., Alfranca O., Lorleberg W. (2017), Italy, Spain, Germany	Business models in urban farming: A comparative analysis of case studies from Spain, Italy and Germany	Survey		Employment opportunities. Diversification/new sources of income Ethical production	Low
Knapik, W. (2017), Poland	Community-based Social Farming (CSF) and its educational functions	Case study		Sustainable rural development. Diversification/new sources of income	Low
Hudcová E., Chovanec T., Moudrý J. (2018), Czech Republic	Social entrepreneurship in agricolture, a sustainable practice for social and economic cohesion in rural areas: The case of Czech Republic	Survey		Sustainable rural development	Low
Tulla A.F., Vera A., Valldeperas N., Guirado C. (2018), Spain	Social return and economic viability of social farming in Catalonia: a case-study analysis	Case study	Lack of information. Mentalities changing limitations. Need for additional resources	Sustainable rural development. Diversification/new sources of income. Ethical production	High
Husák J., Hudečková H. (2018), Czech Republic	Utilisation of the natural potential of rural areas for social inclusion	Survey	Lack of information. Mentalities changing limitations		High
McAllister G., Wright J. (2019), Zimbabwe	Agroecology as a Practice-Based Tool for Peacebuilding in Fragile Environments? Three Stories from Rural Zimbabwe	Survey		Sustainable rural development	Low
Gagliardi C., Santini S., Piccinini F., Fabbietti P., di Rosa M. (2019), Italy	A pilot programme evaluation of social farming horticultural and occupational activities for older people in Italy	Survey		Employment opportunities	High

Table A1. *Cont.*

Authors (Year), Country	Title	Methods	Barriers to SF Development	Drivers to SF Development	Quality Rating
Torquati, B., Paffarini, C., Tempesta, T., &Vecchiato, D. (2019), Italy	Evaluating consumer perceptions of social farming through choice modeling	Survey		Diversification/new sources of income. Ethical production	High
Shishkova, M. (2019), Bulgaria	The role of social farming for sustainable rural development in Bulgaria	Survey	Need for additional resources	Sustainable rural development	High

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