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The Role of Agency in the Emergence and Development of Social Innovations in Rural Areas. Analysis of Two Cases of Social Farming in Italy and The Netherlands

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Abstract: Social innovation is considered a relevant concept to tackle societal challenges and needs in rural areas and to promote smart, inclusive and sustainable growth. The characterising sector of rural areas is agriculture; therefore, the focus of this paper is on social innovation in the field of social farming. Among the many factors leading to the emergence and development of social innovation, agency has been considered relevant in the literature on transformability and transformative social innovation as it is the ability to turn contextual difficulties into opportunities for social innovation and for inclusive growth. This paper proposes an evaluation framework to assess the different dimensions of agency by triangulating quantitative with qualitative data and by using indicators. This paper adopts a case study approach, analysing two cases of social farming in Italy and the Netherlands. The results show that the social innovation idea and the resilience of the agency are among the most relevant dimensions for the emergence and development of social innovations. Finally, this paper discusses the three most relevant factors for agency to lead to social innovation: idea and embeddedness of the agency, transformability of the context through agency's resilience, and agency as catalyst for empowerment.

Keywords: agency dimensions; transformability; resilience; social innovation idea; rural areas; societal challenges; vulnerable groups; empowerment; embeddedness

1. Introduction

Social innovation was introduced in the European Union's Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth as a concept that supports processes of social change. It is also meant to support the introduction of new solutions in response to current urgent needs and challenges of vulnerable groups [1]. Among the source of needs and challenges of our times we can list

global economic and financial crises at multiple scales and the consequent spending reviews and reforms of the welfare state, environmental disasters linked to increased resource extraction and climate change [2]. They also lead to cascading effects at smaller scales. Existing production models, governance arrangements and public institutions are unable to deal adequately with these emerging challenges through ordinary paths [3,4]. This is particularly true in several rural areas of Europe facing challenges to become innovative and inclusive places, due to relatively low accessibility of public services, low economic competitiveness due to high production costs, population decline, brain drain and increasing environmental threats, such as those posed by the effects of climate change [3,5–7]. In these areas, small-scale farmers, people with disabilities, the elderly and women are vulnerable groups reported as being at high risk of poverty and social exclusion [8]. In these rural areas, the primary sector characterizes socioeconomic development. Against this background, social- and care farming can be responsive practices for addressing disadvantages and drive place-based, inclusive rural development [9–12].

With social farming we refer to a practice that “includes all activities that use agriculture resources, both from plants and animals, in order to provide therapy, education rehabilitation and to promote social inclusion and social services in rural areas” [13]. Social farming differs across countries and regions; for example, when therapeutic benefits are central it is often labelled as ‘green care’ [14]. In this paper, we will use the more general term ‘social farming’. Social farming often emerges from innovative processes of multi-actor and multi-sector engagement [15]. These processes transform attitudes, networks and governance arrangements and often include the engagement of civil society. As will be explained in the theoretical framework (Section 2.2), for these reasons social and care farming initiatives can be analysed under the frame of social innovation [16,17]. Within the rich literature on social innovation produced since the 2000s, transformative social innovation theory [18] has acknowledged agency as a determining factor for social innovation emergence [19–21]. By agency it is meant the agents’ ability to recognise needs, exploit contextual social, normative and financial resources and to engage civil society through collective actions. Therefore, agency is closely linked to the concept of transformability, which is the capacity to initiate alternative pathways, through the introduction of new variables and the loss of others, in order to reach a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic or social conditions make the existing system untenable [22]. According to the theoretical framework of ‘structure-agency’ [23,24], agency operates in response to the needs of the context within the influence of enabling and hindering factors that characterise socioeconomic, institutional and environmental systems. Exploring the dimension of agency can be the starting point for understanding why and how social innovation initiatives emerge and develop in rural areas, which contribute to a shift to community-based care, to cross-sectoral collaboration and to private–public cooperation [25]. For policy makers at different levels it is important to know the characteristics of agency in order to design suitable policies that enhance the human- and social capital factors and the other factors that contribute to the ecosystem of social innovation and to have potential positive impacts for the territories [26]. It can also be relevant for supporting practitioners (e.g., social entrepreneurs) in gaining awareness on their role in addressing societal needs and reaching societal outcomes, but also on the needed factors for making a social innovation emerge, develop and be implemented [27]. It has been shown that social farming is able to emerge from local contexts as grassroot social innovation thanks to motivated actors aiming to define innovative solutions for strengthening social/health care by mobilising agricultural resources [28]. However, empirical evidence on the agency-related factors determining social innovation to start and develop is still lacking, especially if we consider rural areas. To fill this gap in the literature, the paper aims at identifying which characteristics and dimensions of agency play a role as factors in affecting the emergence, development and implementation of social innovation initiatives in the field of social farming. A special focus is given to the strategies and actions adopted by the agents to turn difficulties into opportunities for innovation in rural areas through social farming. In order to do that, this paper relies on the evaluation framework of social innovation based on the concept of agency-structure [5,29,30]. This framework identifies a set of key dimensions

considered relevant for the description of the concept of agency and the evaluation of its role in the processes of development of social innovation in rural areas. Contextual factors (i.e., socioeconomic and normative-political characteristics) leading to the emergence of needs and triggers for action are also considered in the analysis, to better understand the structure that constrains or enables agency, or that is reproduced by agency [23,31]. The analysis has been conducted in two cases of social farming located in the Province of South Tyrol (Italy) and in the Province of Zeeland (the Netherlands). The former relates to the creation of a women farmers' social cooperative for the provision of childcare services on the farm in 2006. The Italian initiative was led by the former spokesperson of women farmers of South Tyrol who was aware about the disadvantageous socioeconomic situation of these women. Today, over 118 are involved in the initiative, which provides childcare to over 500 children every year. The latter relates to the extension/diversification of a single farm's business by integrating green care services to support people with disabilities. The Dutch initiative was led in 2003 by the owners of the farm in collaboration with a regional network of green care enterprises and local policy makers and now has integrated 50 people with disabilities into its productive activities.

2. Theoretical Background of Social Innovation in Rural Areas and The Role of Agency

The term social innovation has been widely used in theory and practice for its ability to provide a conceptual framework for innovative solutions that promote societal benefits [3,4,6,26,32]. In the literature, the concept of social innovation stems from the debate and critique of Schumpeterian traditional innovation theory [33]. By using the concept of social innovation, the importance of the social factor in influencing the development, diffusion and use of innovations is recognised [34]. Mulgan et al. [35], define social innovation in terms of "innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organisations whose primary purpose is social". The concept of social innovation is frequently used in rural development literature [33,36–38] to frame innovative solutions that, in response to negative socioeconomic trends, revitalise social fabric through the involvement of the community. As there exist multiple definitions of social innovation [36], this paper adopts that developed in the Horizon 2020 Social Innovation in Marginalized Rural Areas (SIMRA) project, which focuses specifically on agriculture, forestry and rural development. It defines social innovation as "the reconfiguring of social practices, in response to societal challenges, which seeks to enhance outcomes on societal wellbeing and necessarily includes the engagement of civil society actors." [39,40]. In the following two sub-sections we highlight, respectively, how social innovation is linked with social farming in rural areas (Section 2.1) and how agency is a driver of transformation and social innovation (Section 2.2).

2.1. Social Farming as a Form of Social Innovation in Rural Areas

The need to respond to societal challenges and to strengthen civil society in rural areas provides a strong impetus to farmers and groups of stakeholders to innovate both the primary sector and linked socioeconomic and political structures in these territories [12,41]. Social farming comes forward as a 'broadening' activity that may diversify farmers' income flows, contributes to (re)new(ed) agriculture-society relations and fosters rural development [42]. Accordingly, Bock and Oosting [43] distinguish three meta-discourses that underlie social farming: those of (1) 'multifunctional agriculture' that sees social farming as a novel agricultural function and income source; (2) 'public health' that conceives social farming as a health-promoting instrument operating through clients' engagement with nature and green labour; and (3) 'social inclusion' in which social farming is a facilitator of social re-integration and social justice in a new model of community welfare.

- (1) According to Horlings and Marsden [44], and to Marsden [45], innovation in agriculture requires the conception of a new paradigm of rural development tending towards ecology and the development of a multifunctional and integrated agri-food system. According to this concept, the farmer no longer aims to maximise profit by minimising agricultural production costs alone,

but by developing new products and services. These may include: high-quality local gastronomy that jointly promotes the region, its culture and natural resources; the preservation of natural capital and landscape care; and the promotion of rural tourism and social farming [46]. From this perspective, social farming represents an opportunity for farmers to diversify their agricultural income by rethinking agriculture in a multifunctional way [10,11]. In addition, social farming opens up new markets and offers integrated services that go beyond food production, providing an innovative response to the community's need for more flexible, personalised, delocalised social services, closeness to nature and a rural lifestyle.

- (2) Social farming has assumed an important role for local development especially following the welfare crisis, the progressive decrease of public resources invested in social services and the growing demand for personalisation of social and health services [16]. In general, social farming is seen as a social innovation “emerging at the cross-roads of the agricultural and healthcare sectors” [47]. Social farming activities like rehabilitation, therapy, social and work integration, education and care services are integrated into the agricultural context [12].
- (3) Social innovation can respond to problems such as rural marginalisation, poverty and discrimination of certain social groups [25,48]. Social innovation is therefore linked to concepts such as empowerment and inclusion, social capital and social cohesion [33]. Through social farming, this paradigm shift determines the fulfilment of emerging social needs of inclusion and empowerment through agriculture and the involvement of civil society. Finally, social farming focuses on personal development, especially the empowerment of disadvantaged groups. It benefits both the users of the services and the providers of the services. One example is women farmers, who benefit from this opportunity for professionalisation and economic independence in the agricultural sector, in which their role is still poorly recognised and not very visible [9,49,50]. From a socialisation-of-care perspective, care farming offers a concrete example of an empowerment-oriented practice focussing on social integration [51]. Moreover, social farming could be a living lab [52] that experiments with the organisation of a welfare community approach and the reconfiguring of entrepreneurship in the perspective of civic economy [16,28]. The welfare community approach promoted through social farming is based on deep and renewed collaboration among private and public actors, and on co-producing public/private services and values [16].

2.2. Agency in Social Innovation: The Concept of Transformability

In the literature about transformative social innovation [19,53,54], agency is “the actor's capacity to reinterpret and mobilize an array of resources in terms of cultural schemas other than those that initially constituted the array” [20]. More specifically to social innovation, agency “refers to the capacity of social innovation agents to transformative change” [19], by “modifying, eliminating or creating new institutions and eventually new social systems” [23] or by exploiting contextual factors in order to implement the idea for social innovation [20]. This definition implies that “the structural context, and the developments therein, acts as an opportunity context for human agency” [31]. Context is subjective: it is part of the agency of transformative social innovation and it is framed by those engaged according to their perception. Moreover, “the structural context is the object of transformative social innovation, in the sense that the transformative aspect of social innovation is defined by the extent to which the structural context is altered, be it change in regimes, institutions, or rules” [31].

Agency includes agents and their actions. It refers to specific values, visions and trust, willingness to act, reflexivity and capacity for change, which influence how actors or groups of actors (agents) seek to change practices in response to specific needs. Agency also refers to agents' level of motivation and power to actually act and sustain their action toward specific goals [20,23,55]. As described by Sewell [20] “agents are empowered to act with and against others by structures: they have knowledge of the schemas that inform social life and have access to some human and nonhuman resources”. Social innovation agents can include individual and collective human actors but also ideas, objects,

activities, discourses and narratives of change [19]. Leadership, motivation, networks, learning, diverse cultural and knowledge systems, worldviews, values and perceptions, as well as self-organisation toward sustainability can be analysed as part of agency [21,56]. Action refers to all those activities that social innovators, intended as actor-agents, as individuals or group/s in their dialectic relationship with structures [23], may carry out in preparation for the reconfiguring of social practices that seek to enhance outcomes on societal wellbeing. In this sense, social innovation should not be considered as a “neutral process”, i.e., just a change, rather, it should be considered for its capacity to lead to something new as compared with historical and/or recent trajectories in social action [32,57], thus being connected with transformability.

Transformability is the capacity to initiate alternative pathways, through the introduction of new variables and the loss of others, in order to reach a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic or social conditions make the existing system untenable [22]. ‘Game-changers’ [31]—such as global economic and financial crises, environmental disasters linked to increased resource extraction and deforestation and pandemics threatening populations’ health—can provide important opportunities to start the transformative process. Empirical studies show that transformations are multi-level (global-local, economic-societal-environmental) and multi-phase processes that involve different degrees of change (incremental-abrupt). Olsson et al. [58] stress the importance of the role of agency throughout the transformative process in a social-ecological system. Agency is the key element to transform the threats of an unsustainable system into opportunities, and to initiate a transformation process that responds to immediate needs and creates a new socioeconomic and ecological system. Transformability is a process that can be bottom-up but must be expanded on several scales. It involves a reorganisation of actors, the engagement of a wider set of stakeholders, the reconfiguration of social networks, new models of interaction between actors and leadership, new agreements with organisations and institutions, and changes in perception [59]. It must involve organisations nested in several scales, from local to regional and national ones [60]. Leadership is essential for effective governance, providing vision, social cohesion and action [61].

3. The Evaluation Framework of Agency

This section presents the framework used to evaluate the role played by agency in the emergence and development of social innovation.

For the evaluation of agency in the two social farming initiatives (selected as case studies) we adopted the evaluation framework built by Secco et al. [29,30]. The evaluation framework as well as the qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection and analysis derive from a revision process based on its empirical application in 11 Case Studies in the SIMRA project, which included the two cases presented in this paper. The framework assumes that two categories of people (or organisations) interact and form agency (the core group of the social innovation initiative): innovators and followers. Innovators have an idea that may be visionary but not necessarily applicable in practice given prevailing conditions; they are key leaders and, often, the first drivers of innovation. They are identifiable and either had the idea, invented it, discovered it or were attracted to it. Followers decide to believe in and to take up the idea proposed by innovators. They make it acceptable, feasible, and often amplify and implement it in its initial stages; they can be skilled at its promotion and dissemination at early stages. Innovators and followers constitute the core of agency, together with their ideas, values, willingness to act, capacity to act and reflexivity. Agency is able to involve network members in the development of the social innovation initiative. These contribute to mainstreaming the idea, to policy change and to the network’s growth. Therefore, they can also be considered as a driver of the emergence and development of social innovation.

Initially, innovators and followers respond to needs and triggers (push factors) by identifying an idea for change that motivates them to act. In responding to needs and triggers, agents operate under the influence of facilitating and limiting factors, which are connected to the specific context in which they act. This context is characterised by economic, social, policy, governance and institutional elements that can be perceived as challenges to be transformed into opportunities by the agency. In identifying them as perceived opportunities and threats (POT), reference is made to the theory of access [62]. According to Ribot and Peluso [62] “[...] access analysis involves (i) identifying and mapping the flow of resources or the lack of resources; (ii) identifying the mechanisms by which different actors involved gain, control, and maintain the benefit flow and its distribution; and (iii) an analysis of the power relations underlying the mechanisms of access involved in instances where benefits are derived”. Agents lead a set of preparatory actions required to develop the social innovation initiative [29], identify required human resources (such as skills and capabilities required for the development of the initiative) and progressively involve other actors (network members) accordingly. Through developing the social innovation idea into the initiative, agents identify difficulties and can transform them into opportunities, through the dimensions characterising agency. These include, e.g., the innovative idea, the vision and trust, the resilience, the reflexivity, the sense of challenge, the capacity for change (competences and leadership) and others [29]. Out of 11 dimensions related to agency’s characteristics tested in the field, only six have been found to be both relevant and measurable [30,40]. This paper assesses agency with regard to the following six dimensions and related sub-dimensions (Table 1): (a) the social innovation idea provides an answer to the societal needs/challenges and triggers; (b) leadership refers to the capacity of individuals to lead collective action and be respected as a leader based on previous experiences and accountability, thus attracting other actors in the social innovation process [21]; (c) resilience is intended as the capacity to overcome obstacles and the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances [63–65]; (d) capabilities refer to various issues: technical capabilities to develop the social innovation idea, capabilities to influence the internal decision-making process, to create bridges with external actors and to face challenges. Moreover, capabilities refer to competences, abilities and skills, which also are gained from previous experiences, and allow actors to bring about changes [66,67]; (e) endogenous and exogenous drivers refer to the role of newcomers (intended as exogenous actors) in the social innovation development with respect to the role of the members of the local community (endogenous actors) [68–70]; (f) preparatory actions refer to the actions that agents (innovators and followers) carry out to start a social innovation initiative. They typically include actions such as: preliminary analysis of similar initiatives; writing the concept note for the idea development; collecting data about the local context; setting preliminary agreements on how to organise interactions among the involved actors and manage possible conflicts; contacting experts for support on specific technical issues and other actions. Innovators and followers in the agency are considered agents. Differently, network members are considered as coming into play outside the agency, typically entering into the process at a later stage. They however actively contribute to transforming difficulties into opportunities. The first output of the interaction among agency and context in the emergence and development of social innovation, to which network members contribute, is the implementation of the initiative.

The evaluation framework is summarised in Figure 1.

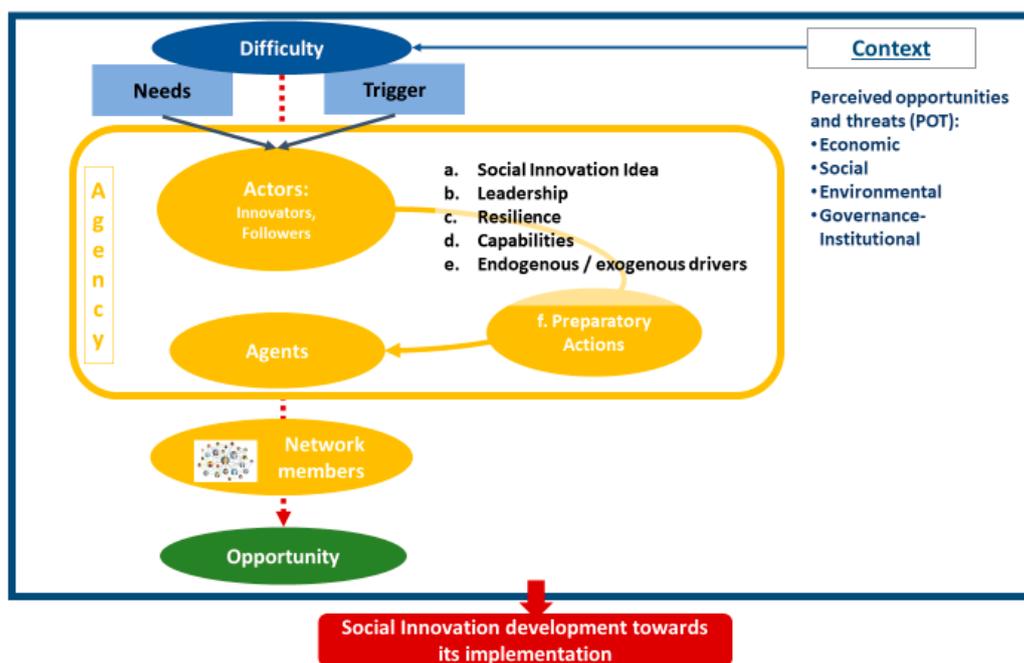


Figure 1. Simplified version of the evaluation framework, focussing on agency in social innovation (Source: own elaboration by authors based on [5,29]).

4. Materials and Methods

This section presents the methods used for data collection and analysis. To explore the agency-related factors that influence social innovation emergence and development, this paper uses case study-based findings [71] based on quantitative and qualitative data. The case study approach used in our research does not focus on the quantitative representativeness of case studies selected, so results and findings obtained cannot be generalised. Our aim is to reach a qualitative relevance in relation to the specific case studies selected, by interviewing a purposeful sample of the key stakeholders and actors of the social innovation [72]. Such an approach is used in qualitative research to obtain very detailed information on actors' perceptions measured through a Likert scale. This allows the calculation of specific indicators and composite indicators to be used for self-evaluation purposes in relation to the specific topic of agency.

The two cases studies under investigation were selected from the Horizon 2020 SIMRA project case studies of social innovation [73] according to the criteria set by the definition by Polman et al. [39]. Details about characteristics of the selected case studies can be read in Section 5. In both cases, research design started in 2017, data collection took place in 2018 (sample details can be found in Table 1, sampling details can be read in Appendix B, while for interviewees' code and profile please consult Appendix C) and data analysis was concluded in 2019 [74,75]. Following the data collection tools designed by Secco et al. [29], the research was implemented using a sequential order (a) the focus group approach, (b) in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews and (c) structured interviews (questionnaires) [76]. Specifically, a focus group with key informants from the initiative (experts and actors directly involved in the initiative) was held in the first phase of data collection to co-construct the storyline of the social innovation in the case study, evaluate perceptions on societal needs, analyse involved actors' specific roles and characteristics and assess the impacts of the social innovation initiative on the rural area. In each case study, a focus group was conducted, with seven key stakeholders in the Dutch case and six in the Italian case. The stakeholders invited to the focus groups were part of the core group of actors of social innovation, some network members participating in the reconfiguring process, external experts and policy makers. Data collected in the focus group were both quantitative (perceptions measured through Likert scale) and qualitative. The focus group

was followed by in-depth face-to face semi-structured interviews with the innovator(s) as well as with experts and policy makers to collect qualitative information about the context and about the characteristics of agency. The mixed target of the semi-structured interviews aimed at collecting the perspectives of the actors that founded the initiative, that of the experts that have direct knowledge of the initiative and policy makers that had dealt with social agriculture in the region and were familiar with the specific social innovation initiative. The content of the semi-structured interviews focussed on the qualitative characteristics of agency with respect to the six identified dimensions for assessment. More specifically, in the Dutch case six key respondents were interviewed and in the Italian case four key respondents were interviewed. Interviews lasted from 45 min to 1.5 h. Data collected through semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed using qualitative content analysis method [77]. Finally, targeted questionnaires were submitted to the involved actors (core group, network members, project partners) of the initiatives (for the design of the survey tools question see [29] Appendix A). In total the information from eight respondents in the Dutch case and from fourteen respondents in the Italian case were collected. Information collected through the questionnaire-based surveys was used to calculate the indicators that evaluate the dimensions of agency, according to the methodology and formula conceptualised by Secco et al. [30]. The indicators build on data from different types of actors, including innovators, followers and network members. Each of the six dimensions of agency are represented by one or two indicators (Table 1). The table also reports the source of the data (Respondent type) used for calculating the indicators and the size of the whole sample of the two case studies (more details on the sampling and sample size of each case study can be found in Appendix B) The indicators' values range from a minimum value of 0 to a maximum value of 1. Moreover, a composite indicator for each dimension has also been built by aggregating the values of single indicators per dimension using an equal weighting approach [30]. Moreover, questionnaires were used to collect qualitative information on perceived opportunities and threats (POT) of the context. Therefore, qualitative information was used for the analysis of context. Furthermore, a triangulation was performed to yield different types of results which support each other by providing in-depth information to the results of quantitative indicators [29,78]. Finally, qualitative data contribute to an in-depth explanation of the main dimensions of agency and identify the agency-related characteristics influencing social innovation emergence, development and implementation.

Table 1. List of indicators related to agency in social innovation (Source: authors based on Secco et al. [30]).

Agency Dimension	Code	Indicator Name and Meaning	Respondent Type	Sample
A. Social innovation idea	A1	<p>Attractiveness of the social innovation idea. Measures whether the social innovation idea was amongst the motivations that drove the followers and network members to get involved in the social innovation initiative. Respondents were asked to indicate the motivation for their engagement by selecting one or more amongst nine predefined options (e.g., “they liked the idea and it made sense”; “they wanted to serve a good cause”). If transformers decided to join the initiative because they “liked the idea and it made sense”, i.e., the idea was considered interesting and valid and the initial actors (innovators and followers) were able to attract others, positively contributing to its development.</p>	Network members	7
	A2	<p>Innovativeness of the social innovation idea in the region. Measures to what extent the actors in the whole social innovation network perceive their social innovation idea to be innovative in their region. The perception is expressed on a Likert Scale from 1 (=not at all) to 10 (=to a great extent).</p>	Core group; Network members	11

Table 1. Cont.

Agency Dimension	Code	Indicator Name and Meaning	Respondent Type	Sample
B. Leadership	B1	Attractiveness of the leadership. Measures whether the leadership features of the innovators and followers have motivated and thus engaged others to join the initiative, who enlarge the social innovation actors' network Innovators and followers' contribution to the results of the social innovation initiative.	Network members	7
	B2	Measures to what extent the results of the initiative can be attributed to the action of the core group (innovators and followers), compared to the contribution of other factors. It is based on perception of the core group itself and members of the network (transformers).	Core group; Network members	11
C. Resilience	C1	Perceptions of network members of the resilience of innovators and followers. Measures the perceptions of transformers of the capability of the core group to overcome obstacles and flexibly adapt to changing circumstances.	Network members	7
D. Capabilities	D1	Innovators and followers' capabilities to develop the social innovation initiative. Shows the rankings of the innovators and followers with respect to other actors involved in terms of four types of capabilities: technical capabilities, capabilities to influence the internal decision-making process, to create bridges with external actors, to face the challenges that could have made the social innovation process fail. Those in the top ranking have contributed significantly with their capabilities to the development of the initiative.	Core group; Network members	11
	D2	Previous experience of the actors in the social innovation process. Measures whether the innovators, followers and transformers have had previous working experience in fields related to the initiative. It is assumed that, having had previous experiences in similar fields, the actors have higher levels of capacity to contribute to the development of the social innovation initiative.	Core group; Network members	11
E. Exogenous drivers	E1	Role of newcomers in the social innovation process. Measures if innovators, followers and transformers have a specific relationship with the region where the social innovation has been implemented. It can be used to verify if the social innovation process has been totally endogenous or with an exogenous component (percentage of actors who are newcomers to the region).	Core group; Network members	11
	E2	Perception of social innovation actors of the contribution of external helpers to the results of the social innovation initiative. Measures to what extent the results of the social innovation initiative can be attributed to external helpers, such as advisors, brokers, animators, politicians, etc. It is based on the perceptions of respondents and expressed on a Likert Scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (to a great extent).	Core group; Network members; Project partners	22
F. Preparatory actions	F1	Preparatory actions developed by innovators and followers. Shows how many preparatory actions (to be selected from a pre-defined list of typical actions undertaken during an initial phase) have been carried out by the core group for the development of the social innovation initiative.	Core group	4
	F2	Expertise motivating the engagement of social innovation actors. Measures if the expertise of transformers was a determining factor in their engagement. Respondents are asked to indicate their motivation for engagement in the social innovation initiative by selecting one or more options in a pre-defined list of 9 options.	Network members	7

5. Case Studies

The two selected cases studies of social innovation deal with social farming initiatives in rural areas in Italy [75] and in the Netherlands [74]. The contexts are characterised by relative geographical

marginalisation due to mountain and peninsular geomorphology which limit accessibility. However, linking marginalisation only to geographical features of the territories of the case studies can be a limiting description [70]. Both case studies are in fact characterised by relative socioeconomic marginalisation due to limitations in social service provision and lack of opportunities for the integration of vulnerable groups. Although the context can be considered similar, the perceived context (its opportunities and threats) by the agency and the socioeconomic needs it responds to are different. As a consequence, the targeted group and the activities of the social farming initiatives are different: in Italy, women farmers providing childcare service to (0–4-year-old) children; in the Netherlands, people with disabilities working in a dairy farm. The agency of the two cases are comparable in many regards: the core group members are farmers willing to change the characteristics of farming and the role of farms into a social, more inclusive and more diversified sector. They acquire relevant representative roles in the networks of the territories of their case studies. Despite their similarities, the Italian case (hereafter Case Study A) and the Dutch case (hereafter Case Study B) have evolved into two distinctly different types of organisations for comparable activities: the first is a cooperative social enterprise while the second is a private business. This distinction is reflected in the impacts of the two initiatives: Case Study B has produced mainly social impacts of integration of people with disabilities at a local level, while Case Study A has fostered the empowerment of the providers of social farming services as well as having socioeconomic impacts on the revitalisation of farms in South Tyrol at a provincial scale. In the following paragraphs, the cases will be described in more detail.

5.1. Case Study A: Social Cooperative of Women Farmers Providing Childcare Services on the Farm in South Tyrol (Italy)

The Province of South Tyrol is a region mainly covered by mountains (97%), located in the northern part of Italy and bordering with Austria. The socio-cultural context of the Province is characterised by peculiar ethnolinguistic specificities, linked to the co-presence of Italian-, German- and Ladin-speaking groups [79,80]. From an economic point of view, small-scale farming is an important economic sector, contributing 4.5% to the added value of the Province (in comparison to the Italian national average of 2.2%). Farming in South Tyrol is culturally represented by a typical farm structure: the family-run *Bauernhof* (farm), dominated by the German and Ladin-speaking groups [81,82], whose activity ranges from milk production in the mountain valleys to apple and wine production in the lowlands [83]. Regarding gender roles in the *Bauernhof*, the male farmer (husband, partner or family member) is primarily responsible for agricultural production and is the representative of the *Bauernhof* to the outside [84]. Differently, the areas of the women farmer's duties are very diverse: they are responsible for the maintenance of the house, the care of family members, the vegetable garden and secondary agricultural activities [85]. These tasks are neither formally recognised nor economically remunerated. Therefore, they are often economically dependent on the farmer [86]. As a result, women in farming families are disadvantaged and vulnerable in terms of access to agricultural resources and decision-making power.

From this context emerged the social innovation initiative of the social cooperative of women farmers for childcare provision on the farm. The social cooperative was founded in 2006 and aims to provide professional opportunities for women farmers by offering social services (i.e., childcare) on their farms and thereby contribute to an integrated offer of social services in rural remote areas of the Province. The trigger that led the agency to the idea to create a childcare service delivered by women farmers directly on their farm was an ongoing reflection on the disadvantaged socioeconomic condition of women in rural areas of South Tyrol. The needs of the context evolved around two issues: from the offer side, women farmers needed qualified employment, independent income, a specific role on the farm and personal satisfaction. Moreover, small-scale farming needed an opportunity for additional income. The second issue concerns the need of delocalised, high-quality childcare services for families living in rural areas and willing to go to work after maternity. Lately, the initiative has been

able to involve 118 women farmers as providers of childcare services on the farm to over 500 children in rural areas of South Tyrol [75].

The agency of this case is composed of the innovator, a women farmer who developed the idea and sought to create an opportunity for other women farmers to build their own roles, have responsibility and generate their own income on the farm. The idea was primarily shaped with the follower who was interested in being a pioneer as a provider of childcare on her farm. Network members that engaged in the development of the initiative are members of the women farmers organisation of South Tyrol. They helped the innovator and follower in presenting the idea to the male farmers' union to get support. Finally, the director of one of the vocational schools for households and agriculture of the Province supported the innovator in designing the training course for women farmers to become childminders following the principles of nature pedagogy [87].

In South Tyrol, social farming is relatively young. The evolution of this sector is connected to the foundation of the social cooperative of women farmers under study and to the development of legal frameworks for social farming at the national level. In 2015 a national law on social farming was approved, defining what constitutes social farming and setting guidelines to implement the law at regional and provincial levels. In the meantime, the innovator, being herself a member of the provincial council, established a working group for drafting the provincial law on social farming, which was approved in June 2018.

5.2. Case Study B: Care Farm for the Socioeconomic Integration of People with Disabilities (The Netherlands)

The care farm is located in a region that preserves the historical hedgerow landscape. It is a predominantly rural region, in the south-west of the Netherlands. The economy of this province is 1.75% of the size of the Dutch economy and 77% of the dry surface area is used for agriculture. Most of the farms in the region are arable (61%), with other important categories of cattle (8%) and mixed farming (8%). The area is considered relatively marginalised in the Dutch context due to its geography and infrastructure. In terms of accessibility by local road transport, the care farm is connected to a nearby major city. Travel time to the rest of the Netherlands is relatively long compared to other parts of the country. The area also faces depopulation, unemployment (particularly among youth), an aging population and limited service provision.

From this context emerged the initiative of the care farm for socioeconomic integration of people with disabilities. The care farm was originally a farm carrying out only agricultural activities. In 2003, the response to the requests by some families of people with disabilities for daily activities on the farm led to the creation of a care branch in the farm. At the care farm, knowledge and experience in the fields of agriculture, livestock farming, and care are combined. For people with disabilities, working on a farm is made possible through integrating them in different aspects of the farm: as shop assistant in the dairy shop (milk and cheese) and as operators in the camp site. In this way, an innovative service is delivered as it focusses on tailor-made care and fulfilling work-related activities for people with disabilities. The social innovation initiative has become a professional organisation, including an association for volunteers and a quality assurance system. The size of the social innovation grew from having a few clients yearly to approximately 25 in 2012 and 50 in 2018 and employing five care supervisors. The initiative reflects new attitudes of Dutch society regarding the role of farmers in rural areas for delivering tailor-made care and responding to needs of 'social inclusive care' for vulnerable people. At the same time, it reflects the need of the farmers for farm diversification through the integration of innovative activities that promote natural local resources and ecological agriculture.

The main agents of the social innovation are the owners of the farm, who developed the idea on their own. They were both visionary and practice oriented, for instance in their contacts initially with the care business organisation and later in setting up their own organisation and employing a staff of five persons in 2018. They are now skilled at promoting their ideas. The members of the network are one expert of a regional organisation grouping care farms at provincial level and a policymaker at municipal level. They adopted the idea in an early stage, supported the care farm in its

development and contributed to network reconfiguration. Volunteers played an important role in the implementation of the care farm.

In parallel to the initiative, the entire sector of social farming in the Netherlands has been evolving. In 2009 a Dutch organisation for agriculture and care started professionalising the sector, facilitating the creation of regional organisations involving care farmers and becoming the central point of contact for stakeholders. The organisation connects agriculture and care, stimulating cooperation between the stakeholders of the two sectors. It also stimulates innovative developments in social farming. This is reflected in the number of social/care farms in the Netherlands, which grew from 218 in 1999 to 931 in 2011.

6. Results

The results of the analysis are presented in the following paragraphs: a general overview of the characteristics of the agency is made according to the six explored dimensions and visually represented in the Radar graph in Figure 2 (5.1); an analysis of each dimension is presented triangulating quantitative with qualitative information supported with examples taken from the two case studies (5.2).

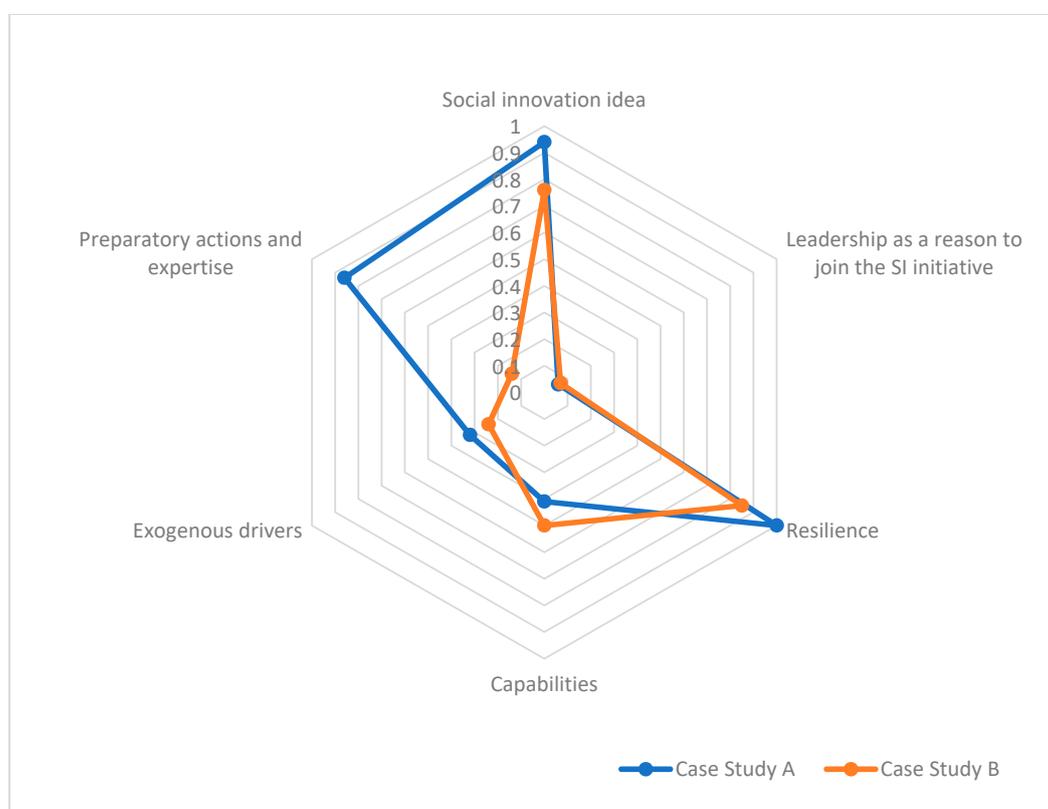


Figure 2. Radar graph showing the distribution of composite indicators' values in the two case studies according to agency dimensions (Source: elaboration by authors).

6.1. Characteristics of the Agency

Overall, the cases show similar trends in the dimensions of agency, as presented by the Radar graph displaying the values of the composite indicators (Figure 2). In both case studies the dimension scoring the highest value is "resilience", followed by "social innovation idea", which was in both cases attractive and innovative for the region. Medium values are registered for the dimension "capabilities" in both cases while low values are registered for the dimension of "exogenous drivers" of the social innovation, showing that both social innovation initiatives were endogenously developed. In both case studies, "leadership of the innovator as the reason for other stakeholders to join the initiative" is the dimension with the lowest relevance. This implies that it was rather the interest in care farming-the

farm-based promotion of human health and social benefits—that motivated actors to join the initiatives. The dimension “preparatory actions and expertise” shows high divergence of values between the case studies: for Case Study A it is quite a relevant dimension, while for Case Study B it is not among the most relevant ones. This could be explained by the business model development path adopted by the two case studies and the level of organisational complexity: while Case Study A represents a social cooperative organising the delivery of the service by 118 associated women farmers, Case Study B represents a single private farm delivering care service following the approach of learning by doing.

6.2. Results of the Indicators of the Six Dimensions of the Agency

6.2.1. The Social Innovation Idea

In both case studies, the social innovation ideas—relating to green care for people with disabilities and childcare on the farm respectively—were completely novel for the regions and are more generally considered as a market niche in rural areas.

In Case Study A, the main actors (core group) perceived their social innovation idea as being very innovative for their region, as shown by the high value of indicator A1. Before the creation of the social cooperative, childcare on the farm using the natural pedagogics approach did not exist in the Province of South Tyrol. At the time of the foundation of the social cooperative, the innovator of the social innovation was the representative of the women farmers of South Tyrol. The innovator was looking for a solution to make women independent and fulfilled. As one expert (A015) acknowledges about the social innovation initiative: “Our colleague A001 oversaw it and has brought it to life”.

In Case Study B, the network members concur that the idea to establish the care farm was predominantly the motivation for joining the process and developing the social innovation initiative (A1, Table 2). The innovativeness of the social innovation idea to combine agriculture and the provision of care by developing a care branch on a private farm was considered by network members as high (A2, Table 2). The innovativeness of the social innovation idea relates to the fact that it was able to tackle a challenge relating to the (lack of) care services for people with disabilities. In some rural areas of the Netherlands there is a lack of appropriate daytime activities to improve integration this group in society through fulfilling work-related activities. Therefore, the agency was able to turn farming into a space for people’s wellbeing. The farm becomes socially inclusive and integrates a rehabilitative mission while at the same time offering opportunities for the diversification of the farm’s income. The innovators state the key aspects that drove the establishment of the care farm as “the aim to put humans and self-development opportunities at the centre and to develop their ‘own’ initiative model” (B003).

6.2.2. Resilience

The core group in both cases had the capacity to overcome obstacles and to adapt to changing circumstances in order to take the first steps towards the idea’s implementation. Both initiatives under investigation were developed over a period of more than ten years, in which institutional barriers at higher levels have been removed, making further developments possible.

Resilience of the core group to overcome external influences proved to be decisive in Case Study A’s development, as shown by the high score of C1 (Table 2). In this case, study, the challenging factor was the initial low support given by the provincial farmers union to the idea developed by the women farmers’ network, and in turn blocking it from being promoted in the region. The organisation is male dominated and linked to a traditional model of farming, is well-established and has strong representation in the cultural and social context of farming in South Tyrol. In order to overcome this difficulty, the agency was willing to work independently on the development of the social innovation idea. They submitted a project proposal to the ESF (European Social Fund) and obtained funds to organise the childcare training course on the farm and to pay a project manager. In this way, the agency transformed the obstacle of not being supported into an opportunity for autonomously developing their social innovation idea. This resilience in overcoming the obstacle eventually turned into a self-empowerment process for the

agency, an increase in trust and change of attitude by the male farmers' union towards women's ability to create professionalising and well-thought opportunities for farms' income diversification. "The farmers' union had to watch how we independently submitted the project. For the women farmers' organisation it was a first" (A001). The increase in trust of the male farmers' union members in the agency's resilience is confirmed by the fact that eventually they appointed one of the directors of the union as a delegate to support the process of constitution with the social cooperative, and tangibly supported the improvement of contractual conditions for women farmers.

In Case Study B, the core group flexibly adapted green care activities on the farm in reaction to a changing regulation, and to changing support of partners (e.g., the regional farmers' care organisation and the municipality). According to the interviewees, the innovators had a clear vision in mind but the steps to be taken on the pathway towards implementation remained flexible, in order to adapt to possible changes. B007 described it as "[...] about watching every day how we're going to get it done as a team".

6.2.3. Capabilities

The quantitative indicator of this social innovation dimension has scored medium in both case studies. Different considerations can be made for the two cases based on qualitative information.

In Case Study A, a high level of capabilities by the agency in the development of the social innovation initiative was acknowledged by an interviewed expert: "and for that it needs competent forces. I see them in the innovator" (A017). An example of that is the response of the agency to the initial lack of availability of providers of the service of childcare on the farm: farmers, especially women, who did not believe that the service provision could constitute a real professionalising and diversifying opportunity for farms' income. The solution found by the agency was to also promote childcare provision beyond the initial network of women farmers. As a result, other rural women started to provide childcare in rural areas, demonstrating to sceptical women farmers the success of the business model. This shows the capability of the agency to create bridges with external actors and networks in order to overcome a lack of resources. Moreover, the initial lack of availability of childcare providers among women farmers resulted in the mainstreaming of the social innovation idea beyond the women farmers' network and resulted in an increased childcare service offer in rural areas. In the same case study, the agency also had to deal with the lack of trust from the demand side in the service of childcare on the farm: initially not many families turned to social farming for their children's pedagogy. This difficulty was tackled by the agency through promoting nature pedagogy and the innovative aspects of childcare service on the farm (bond with nature, rural lifestyle, food and care quality, community building) through marketing and communication strategies. In this way, the difficulty was turned into an opportunity for relaunching the farming sector and innovating the way it was communicated, focussing on the social aspect and the quality of the rural lifestyle.

In Case Study B, the capability of the core group to develop the social innovation initiative was regarded as high, and was expressed through qualitative answers in terms of managerial, communication and networking skills which contribute to the development of the initiative and the ability to involve actors with skills in social farming, with social innovation and with territorial knowledge. In the case study, there was an initial lack of knowledge by the agency about green care in farming, which was solved through cooperation with a regional health care organisation. This cooperation increased knowledge about social care for people with disabilities on the farm. The successful cooperation shows the capability of the agency to create bridges in order to involve the needed skills to develop the initiative. As a result, the quality of the services offered on the farm increased. However, a few years later (in 2012) this cooperation came to an end, followed by the change in health care regulation in 2015 and the reduction in the funding of care by half. This constituted a turning point for the social innovation initiative and for the agency itself. The agency tackled this difficulty by collaborating with the municipality and starting to network with a regional organisation which brings together all care farmers. Through the capability to create bridges with the organisation,

the agency received financial support for its activities through healthcare funds. Moreover, it increased its knowledge in the field of care, contractual conditions and quality management of green care. Finally, the initial financial difficulty was turned into an (indirect) capability by the agency to influence the decision-making process and bring political change: the regional organisation's involvement in the discussion of a social support act has made it possible to adapt it to municipal policies. The act led to the constitution of a consultation board in which the councillors of the municipality and health workers meet and discuss how the new contracts should be set.

6.2.4. Endogenous/Exogenous Drivers

Exogenous drivers refer both to the presence of newcomers in the region getting involved in the initiative and to the support of helpers that were external to the network. In both cases, none of the agents were a newcomer. All come from the region where the initiative has been developed, characterising the social innovation initiative as endogenous (E1, Table 2). In Case Study A, although the members of the network organised field visits to other social farms in Austria to inform development of the pedagogical offer of childcare service in South Tyrol, the idea and resources are locally based. "From the model of *Sommerfrische*, a period of long vacation in mountain or rural villages, traditionally taken by children as school finishes, we developed the childcare service", confirms the innovator (A001). In the same case study, a member of the agency has studied abroad. In both cases, the contribution of external helpers is perceived around the medium value, as shown by indicator E2 (Table 2). In Case Study B, the support of external helpers came from the organisation supporting the care farmers in maintaining quality of service provision, in planning, in monitoring and evaluating.

6.2.5. Leadership

The innovators' leadership and charisma were not the principal reason for agency members to decide to join the initiative in both cases, as shown by the minimum score of 0 of B1 (Table 2). The very low score of the indicator can be explained by the prominence of the interest in care farming as a reason to join the initiative over the leadership factor. This does not mean, however, that the core group was not able to motivate others to join the initiative. In fact, the slightly higher score of B2 than B1 (Table 2) in both cases shows the recognition of innovators' and followers' contribution to the result of the social innovation initiative, which is acknowledged to be higher (even if only slightly) compared to other factors.

From the qualitative information, more details can be retrieved about this dimension. Leadership has played a strong role in Case Study B, where the owner of the farm played a prominent role in the development of the social innovation initiative relating to social farming in the region. After the cooperation with the regional health care organisation came to an end in 2012, the agency decided to become an independent entrepreneur in care farming, to take an active role in the regional organisation which groups all care farmers and to collaborate with the municipality. This shows the relevance of the agency's leading capacity. The innovator played a central role in the regional organisation supporting farmers willing to develop social farming on their farms and he was often consulted for his knowledge of social innovation: "B003 and B004 are of course ultimately responsible" (B003) and "the role of the farmer and his wife, B003, B004 are the most important at the start of the social innovation" (B005).

In Case Study A, many respondents mentioned that the innovator was the driving force of the social innovation initiative and was the main factor behind its success. In the case study, a challenge was the high economic cost of the service provision on farm, which is closely linked with the political and financial dimension. The Province subsidised childcare service in the form of direct financial public support to families to reduce the fee of the service according to their level of income. Initially, only the childcare service offered in standard nurseries located in main villages was subsidised. The unbalanced situation reduced the competitiveness of the service provided on the farm in comparison with the nurseries. In order to overcome this, the agency lobbied at provincial level for the recognition of the services as an integrative service provision to the already existing structures. In this way, they obtained subsidies for families to cut the higher prices of the service provided on the farm. This also had a

secondary effect: the agency transformed the difficulty into an opportunity for women farmers to lobby in a political sector (agriculture) which is traditionally male dominated. It resulted in an increase in decision-making power of women in rural areas, in working standards and in quality of provision of services in rural areas. Hence, leadership was central for developing social care farming in both areas.

6.2.6. Preparatory Actions and Expertise

In Case Study A, the implementation of the idea was followed by an articulated process of preparatory actions: the building of the network, the conduction of a feasibility study for the business model by a provincial advisory body of social cooperatives and finally the submission and successful obtainment of the funding by the European Social Fund. The agency had deep knowledge of the region in which the idea was to be implemented (A001, A003, A004, A005), experience in childcare (A002) and technical expertise in the field of nature pedagogy (A006). The innovator strived to involve the director of a vocational school for households and agriculture in the network of the initiative, to build a training program focussed on organisational skills of women farmers, in order to teach them how to create synergies among their tasks and increase efficiency. This way the childminders were given tools to take a more rational decision and were more prepared to organise their new work activity.

In Case Study B, not many preparatory actions were conducted by the core group to develop the social innovation initiative, as shown by F1 (Table 2). The idea realisation followed a learning-by-doing path. B003 and B004 reported that the preparatory actions included: “construction of the idea and gathering information on preliminary analysis of similar initiatives; collection of data related to the local context and possible market”. They first worked to develop care farming activities and later they built a canteen to have a room for clients. The first client came to the farm accidentally. In a first stage, the agents developed the idea together with a health care organisation because “a normal learning pathway would cost too much time for the farm owners” (B003). There was not really a prototype of the current care farming. Therefore, they learned from other initiatives by talking to other farmers and members of the regional care farmers organisation. Civil society members play an important role in Case Study B, all as volunteers. However, their expertise was not perceived by themselves as a determining factor for their engagement in the social innovation, as shown by the value of F2, scoring 0 (Table 2).

Table 2. Scores of individual and composite indicators for the six dimensions of agency (Source: own elaboration by authors).

Code	Name of Individual Indicator	Composite Indicator	Case Study A	Case Study B
A1	Attractiveness of the social innovation idea		1.00	0.67
A2	Innovativeness of the social innovation idea in the region		0.89	0.89
	Social innovation idea		0.94	0.76
B1	Attractiveness of the leadership		0.00	0.00
B2	Innovators’ and followers’ contribution to the results of the social innovation initiative		0.12	0.13
	Leadership		0.06	0.07
C1	Perceptions of transformers of the resilience of innovators and followers		1.00	0.85
		Resilience	1.00	0.85
D1	Innovators’ and followers’ capabilities to develop the social innovation initiative		0.06	0.20
D2	Previous experience of the actors in the social innovation process		0.75	0.80
	Capabilities		0.41	0.50
E1	Role of newcomers in the social innovation process		0.00	0.00
E2	Perception of social innovation actors of the contribution of external helpers to the results of the social innovation initiative		0.63	0.48
	Exogenous drivers		0.32	0.24
F1	Preparatory actions developed by innovators and followers		0.71	0.29
F2	Expertise motivating the engagement of social innovation actors		1.00	0.00
	Preparatory actions, expertise knowledge		0.86	0.14

7. Discussion

The results of the analysis of the two case studies demonstrate the factors that make agency play an important role for social innovation to emerge and develop. Agency is able to respond to the difficulties of the socioeconomic and institutional context, and to implement social innovation initiatives in the field of social farming improving societal wellbeing of the region. Agency has the capacity to develop an idea that leverages the need to make agriculture multifunctional, and therefore is able to provide alternative forms of services that empower vulnerable groups in rural areas. In this section, we discuss the agency-related factors based on the results of the analysis (Sections 7.1–7.3) and contextualise them within the existing literature, by comparing them with supporting and diverging studies.

7.1. Agency and Social Innovation in the Field of Social Farming Through Idea and Embeddedness

The results show that in both cases the social innovation idea was the second most relevant dimension driving the agency's motivation to act: it deals with an activity combining the diversification of a characterising productive sector for rural areas, i.e., agriculture, with a new care function of the farm, determining integration, social inclusion, service quality and rural lifestyle promotion. The idea to transform a traditional farm into a social farm originated from and has been developed by the farmers themselves, characterising the agency with a high degree of embeddedness in the region. As shown in the literature on agency, social capital and endogenous development [88,89], in endogenous social innovation the agency must have deep knowledge of organisational culture and the ability to consciously break established organisational patterns and rituals. Agency in our empirical analysis can be described as the "ability of institutionally embedded actors to distance themselves from institutional pressures and to take strategic actions" [90]. From a different point of view, social innovation in marginal rural areas can also be defined as neo-endogenous: by shifting our perspective from local actors in separate rural areas towards a more fluid image of social innovation initiatives of social farming operating across places and beyond the local and rural, within a general trend [70]. This can be explained by the fact that social innovation agency tends to be locally rooted yet also globally connected [91]. Social innovation in fact "calls for a neo-endogenous approach to rural development that departs from the importance of reconnecting and binding together forces across space" [70]. Further studies on agency and social innovations in the field of social farming could focus on these two levels of relations to reflect on the connections of locally rooted initiatives.

7.2. Transformability of the Context Through Agency's Resilience

As defined, agency is the capability of actors to mobilise and transform an array of existing resources [22,62]. The concept is not confined to involved actors, but it has been conceptualised in a more relational and dispersed framework: it includes specific values, visions and trust, willingness to act, reflexivity and capacity for change [5]. This conceptualisation is coherent with the framework of transformative social innovation designed by Haxeltine et al. [19]. Our study has contributed to showing that social innovation initiatives emerge and develop through the agency's ability to transform (i.e., transformability) the context. Agency's transformability entails the overcoming of difficulties by transforming them into opportunities and having the flexibility adapt to changing circumstances. Transformability is a capacity linked to resilience, according to Folke et al. [22]. Our findings have showed that resilience is among the key elements that characterises the role of agency in the emergence, development and implementation of social innovations. In support of the findings, Haxeltine et al. [91] also state that agency is able to model new arrangements that better suit their own needs, in order to create the opportunity for social innovation to emerge and develop. Our findings on agency and resilience that strongly link agents to their context and its transformability have been comprehensively conceptualised by Cajaiba-Santana [23], who supports a bilateral connection between agency and context (or structure): "institutional practices shape human actions that, in turn, confirm or modify the institutional structure". The choice to focus on the role of agency for the emergence and development

of social innovations mostly in a unilateral manner was justified by the size of the initiative we have investigated. Certainly, further studies on agency and social innovations could focus on the bilateral interrelations and mutual transformability between agency and context.

7.3. Agency as Catalyst for Changes in the Social Structure (Empowerment)

Social innovation seeks to enhance outcomes on societal wellbeing and necessarily includes the engagement of civil society actors [39]. With respect to that, the key role of agency in developing and implementing the initiative is to improve the collective wellbeing. There is a strong tendency in public discourse to associate SI with initiatives that empower civil society, community, third sector and/or social entrepreneurship [54]. Empowerment refers to a conscious effort to include people who were previously outside social life (Kal, 2001 cit. in [92]).

As social innovation tends to involve multiple groups of people [54], there is no obvious distinction between groups of actors that should empower or be empowered. Our study has confirmed that in both cases, the agency has put emphasis on the empowerment aspect and benefiting not only service users (people with disabilities) but also other actors involved in the service provision (women farmers, volunteers, interns) to participate in society and stimulating their ability to control their own lives [93]. On care farms, as the Dutch case has shown, there is emphasis on the empowerment of clients in a spontaneous way, through participation in the productive activities of the farm, which in turn allows them to feel part of society and to build social networks [92]. The effort of empowerment is also directed towards people willing to engage in the initiative through the volunteering and internships possibilities that the agency was able create. The Italian case applies a feminist approach on empowerment to change power dynamics and gendered roles on the farm, as shown by the study conducted by Gramm et al. [9]. Through social farming, women become part of the decision-making process of the business strategy of the farm, redistribute responsibilities and receive economic income, which together empower women farmers and increase their autonomy.

8. Conclusions

Among the dimensions of agency explored and assessed in this paper, resilience linked to transformability was identified as the key dimension for the development and implementation of a social innovation idea into an initiative. The findings of this paper not only confirm the theoretical literature on agency in social innovation. They also reflect on specific and empirical aspects that characterise the very abstract concept of resilience. Thanks to the empirical research we conducted, following conclusions can be derived. Resilience emerged to be the capacity to transform the lack of support in reconfiguring of social practices into the awareness and autonomy to challenge the context (network, institutions, values and attitudes). From resilience derives the self-empowerment of agents involved in the process of emergence, development and implementation of social innovations. Resilience is the capacity to maintain the long-term vision of the social innovation initiative and at the same time flexibly adapting operational steps of its implementation to the changing circumstances. Our study showed resilience to be the relevant dimension when challenges at multiple scales, such as (economic) crises, demographic trends and changes in the welfare system increase the vulnerability of local systems. This is likely to be true in many other rural areas, not only in the case studies of our paper. In many other European rural areas, brain drain and depopulation have led to public and private spending reviews, which reduced the strength of welfare state in assuring social- and care services. According to our findings, in rural areas social innovation in the form of social farming can be a response to such challenges. It deals with linking sectors that have rarely been considered together, like farming and health/social services, creation of partnerships and shared responsibilities between private sector and public sector in delivering services. To reach this transformation, agency plays a role for its ability to turn challenges of the context into opportunities for innovation. In order to conceptualise agency in a more organic way, further investigations should look at bidirectional and mutual transformations between agency and context. Moreover, a richer ontology of agency,

locally rooted and globally connected rather than a well-demarcated entity, could enable a broader conceptualisation of the agency's fields of actions.

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Appendix A

The codes of the indicators in this paper have been modified for increasing clarity with respect to the codification used in Dijkshoorn-Dekker et al. (2019) and Dalla Torre et al. (2019) and that used in Secco et al. (2019b). The following table clarifies the relations among different codifications.

Table A1. Full information relating to codes, name, agency dimension, respondent type and scores of individual and composite indicators for the six dimensions of agency (Source: own elaboration by authors).

Code	Code in [73,74].	Code in [27].	Indicator's Name	Agency Dimension	Respondent Type	WOM	CAR	Range
A1	Ca1.	Ca1	Attractiveness of the social innovation idea	a. social innovation idea	Network members	1.00	0.67	[0–1]
A2	Ca2.	Ca2	Innovativeness of the social innovation idea in the region	a. social innovation idea	Core group; Network members	0.89	0.89	[0–1]
B1	Cb1.	Cb1	Attractiveness of the leadership	b. leadership	Network members	0.00	0.00 *	[0–1]
B2	Cb2.	Cb2	Innovators and Followers' contribution to the results of the Social innovation initiative	b. leadership	Core group; Network members	0.12	0.13	[0–1]
C1	Cd1.	Cc1	Perceptions of transformers of the resilience of Innovators and Followers	c. resilience	Network members	1.00	0.85	[0–1]
D1	Ce1.	Cd1	Capabilities to develop the social innovation initiative	d. capabilities	Core group; Network members	0.06	0.20	[0–1]
D2	Ce2.	Cd2	Previous experience of the actors in the social innovation process	d. capabilities	Core group; Network members	0.75	0.80	[0–1]
E1	Da1.	Da1	Role of newcomers in the social innovation process	e. exogenous drivers	Core group; Network members	0.00	0.00	[0–1]
E2	Da2.	Da2	Perception of social innovation actors of the contribution of external helpers to the results of the Social innovation initiative	e. exogenous drivers	Core group; Network members; Project partners	0.63	0.48	[0–1]
F1	Db1.	Db1	Preparatory actions developed by Innovators and Followers	f. preparatory actions	Core group	0.71	0.29	[0–1]
F2	Ed1.	Db3	Expertise motivating the engagement of social innovation actors	f. preparatory actions	Network members	1.00	0.00	[0–1]

Appendix B. Sampling and Sample Description for Case Studies

Table A2. Sampling of the interviewees in the case studies per type of interview tool (Source: own elaboration by authors).

Interview Tool	Focus Group		Semi-Structured:	Semi-Structured:	Structured: Core Group	Structured: Network	Structured: Project Partners					
			Internal to the Social Innovation	External Expert and Policy Maker			A		B ¹		A	
Sampling Case study	-		-	-	Census	Census	Non-probabilistic sampling (Judgement sampling)					
Pop. size	-		-	-	-	-	2	2	4	7	118	5
Sample Size	6	7	1	4	3	2	2	2	4	32	8	3
Interview codes	A001	B001		B003	A015	B001	A001	A003	B001	A007	B007	
	A002	B002		B004	A016	B002	A002	A004	B005	A008	B008	
	A005	B003		B005	A017			A005	B006	A009	B009	
	A018	B004		B006			B004	A006		A010		
	A019	B005	A001	B007			B003			A011		
	A020	B006								A012		
		B007								A013	A014	

¹ B002 also fits within this category but was not interviewed as network representative. ² For interviewing network, 7 persons were selected as potential respondents, while only three were interviewed, among them B005 and B006.

Appendix C. Profiles of the Interviewees

Appendix C.1. Case Study A—Social Cooperative of Women Farmers in Italy

Table A3. Interviewee code, role and profile of Case study A (Source: own elaboration by authors based on Secco et al. [29]).

Interviewee Code	Role in the Social Innovation	Profile
A001	Innovator	President of the social cooperative
A002	Follower	First baby minder willing to found and take part to the social cooperative, member of the board of the social cooperative
A003	Network member	Delegate of the farmers' union, member of the board of the social cooperative
A004	Network member	Officer of the women farmers association
A005	Network member	Current spokesperson women farmers association, member of the board of the social cooperative
A006	Network member	Director of the vocational school for agriculture
A007	Project partner	Coordinator of the childcare service of the social cooperative
A008	Project partner	Woman farmer associated to the social cooperative, child minder
A009	Project partner	Woman farmer associated to the social cooperative, child minder
A010	Project partner	Woman farmer associated to the social cooperative, child minder
A011	Project partner	Woman farmer associated to the social cooperative, child minder
A012	Project partner	Woman farmer associated to the social cooperative, child minder
A013	Project partner	Woman farmer associated to the social cooperative, child minder
A014	Project partner	Director of the social cooperative
A015	Policy maker	Member of the provincial government, agriculture and forests
A016	Policy maker	Director of the social department in the provincial government, member of the working group on the provincial law on social agriculture
A017	External expert	University professor, member of the working group on the provincial law on social agriculture
A018	External expert	Researcher at Eurac Research, member of the working group on the provincial law on social agriculture
A019	External expert	Stakeholder of social farming in South Tyrol
A020	Project partner	Woman farmer associated to the social cooperative, senior care provider
TOTAL	20	

Appendix C.2. Case Study B—Green Care Farm in The Netherlands

Table A4. Interviewee code, role and profile of Case study B (Source: own elaboration by authors based on Secco et al. [29]).

Interviewee Code	Role in the Social Innovation	Profile
B001	Network member/External expert	Regional care support association
B002	Network member /Policy maker	Municipality council member
B003	Innovator	Farmer starting the green care farm initiative
B004	Innovator	Farmer starting the green care farm initiative; partner of B003
B005	Network member	Volunteer at the green care farm
B006	Network member	Volunteer at the green care farm
B007	Project partner	Employee: care supervisor at the green care farm
B008	Project partner	Employee: care supervisor at the green care farm
B009	Project partner	Employee: care supervisor at the green care farm
TOTAL	9	

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