

THE SOCIAL FARMING ACROSS BORDERS PROJECT (2011-2014)



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SoFAB Conference 10th September 2014: *SOCIAL FARMING - CONNECTING PEOPLE, IMPROVING LIVES: THE SOFAB EXPERIENCE*

Outline

Overview of what has happened in the project – in 10 minutes!



Social Farming in Practice

*THE FARM IS NOT A SPECIALISED
TREATMENT FARM; RATHER IT
REMAINS A TYPICAL WORKING
FARM WHERE PEOPLE IN NEED OF
SUPPORT CAN BENEFIT FROM
PARTICIPATION IN FARM ACTIVITIES
IN A NON- CLINICAL ENVIRONMENT.*

SOFAB WEBSITE



A Year of Living Mindfully: 25

Tony
Bates



Nature can release us from mental turmoil

This week I spent a day in the country with people who are real pros at living in the now. Being in their company, I slowed down and found it easy to be mindful.

I spoke to a conference on social farming in the border counties but before I did, I wanted to experience it firsthand. I visited one of the 20 farms that welcome adults with special needs and mental health difficulties into their family life. These people all have labels but when they step on to these farms, they leave their labels at the gate.

I pulled into the driveway feeling slightly apprehensive. Would I feel awkward in their company? Would they feel awkward in mine? Would I say something stupid and spoil the party?

I walked around the back of the house and found everyone sitting at a kitchen table that they had carried outside into the sun.

It was one of those perfect days, where the sun warms your bones and beautiful fragrances grab hold of your senses.

I was welcomed with smiles and handshakes and everyone seemed to take my

joining in as no big deal.

We sat around drinking tea and coffee and we feasted on warm scones the farmer, Vincent Coyle, and the "participants" had baked earlier. A glass butter churn was passed around and we each took turns to rotate the handle with its silky smooth action.

Time to listen

We spoke about things that mattered: "My sister got married, I have some pictures." "Look at that white smoke in the sky. That's a jet on its way to Lourdes." "I miss my Da, he died last year."

There was time to listen and time to hear what people were saying underneath their words.

The day was not crowded with pre-programmed activities, but I can't recall any day that felt so full. We moved at a slow gentle pace.

We collected eggs, we sunk our hands into the soil and pulled out food for the dinner; we visited the cow and the donkey and Vincent guided us in how to touch and brush down these animals.

For those of us who live our lives

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Late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers. Little we see in nature that is ours; we have given our hearts away . . .

between concrete and brick there is something spine-tingling about touching an animal in the flesh.

I watched my new friends overcome their natural caution as they reached out to the animals. As they stroked and brushed down these animals, their faces lit up.

Complete trust

The animals returned the kindness in quiet appreciation and complete trust.

What struck me was the way these participants were able to be completely themselves, without anyone making them feel they were lacking in any way. To the animals they were perfect, exactly as they were.

After a life of being at the receiving end of other people's giving, these men found they now had something to give.

Farming can be a lonely business because it can isolate a person with their worries and sorrows. Welcoming others, whose lives are so removed from nature, into what feels like a "secret garden", breaks open their isolation.

With social farming, reciprocity is the

key. Everyone brings something to the table, be it their expertise or an open sensitive heart; people are nourished by each other's company.

"The world is too much with us." Those lines of Wordsworth we learned in school came back to me. "Late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers. Little we see in nature that is ours; we have given our hearts away . . ."

Social farming earths us back into contact with nature, where our hearts are waiting for us to pick them up again. It offers us a chance to feel connected to the cycles of nature that move slowly and unperceptively. Without taking time, the white blooms of hawthorn bush can come and go without us even noticing.

Nature is a great mindfulness teacher. It can release us from our mental turmoil, and remind us that, whatever we may be feeling, whatever is happening in our lives, we too are part of a amazing cycle of change.

Tony Bates is founding director of Headstrong - The National Centre for Youth Mental Health

'I visited one of the 20 farms that welcome adults with special needs and mental health difficulties into their family life. These people all have labels but when they step on these farms, they leave their labels at the gate'

Recognition at EU level

- *Social farming is an innovative approach that brings together two concepts: multipurpose farming and social services/health care at local level. It makes a contribution in the ambit of agricultural production to the well-being and the social integration of people with particular needs.*
- **EU Economic and Social Committee (Dec. 2012)**

Social Farming Across Borders Project (2011-14)

EU INTERREG IVA Programme

Priority 2: Cooperation for a more sustainable cross-border region

- **Duration:** 3 years – Oct. 2011 to Sept. 2014
- **Partners:**
 - University College Dublin (Lead)
 - Queen's University Belfast
 - Leitrim Development Company
- **Grant:** €689,826



Social Farming Across Borders Project (2011-14)

- *Built on experience of:*
 - *IMPACT Project (1999-2003)* - an EU Research Project examined the impact of EU RD Policies
 - *SoFAR Project (2006-8)* an EU Research Project which involved 7 EU states incl. Ireland
 - *European Research Network (2007-10)* – an EU Cost Action Project
 - *Community of Practice Group (2009 to date)*

Mission and Logo

We promote Social Farming as a viable option for achieving improved quality of life for people who use health and social services and for farm families, through enhancing social inclusion and connecting farmers with their communities.

New Opportunities Connecting People



Improving Lives

Activities of the Project

- Awareness raising
- Networking
- Piloting
- Training
- Dissemination



New Opportunities + Connecting People + Improving Lives

NEWSLETTER

Spring 2013 | Edition 3

Social Farming Newsletter – Issue No. 3

Awareness Raising

- Attended and exhibited at Agricultural Shows, services workshops etc.
- Presentations at relevant events
- Media coverage – press, radio and TV
- Newsletters
- Website incl. Facebook and Twitter
- One-to-one dialogue with service providers



NEWSLETTER

Spring 2013 | Edition 3

Social Farming Newsletter – Issue No. 3

Networking

- Network events (meetings) x 8
- Network visits to social farming in RoI (April 2013) and UK (April 2014)
- Website – online discussion forum
- Pilot Farms hosting Open Days (over 500 visitors)
- Emergence of a proposed Association for Social Farming



Piloting – the farmers

- Initial Expressions of Interest from 144 Farm households
- Project call for interested farmers yielded 59 applications
- Selection based on objective criteria and farm-based interviews which identified 20 pilot farms located around the region



Piloting – the participants

- Identification of 66 service users (participants):
 - 37 adults with special needs and 29 adults who had mental health difficulties
- Selection based on *dialogue with care service organisations*
- Identified those interested in the *farming experience*
- *Matched up* clients and farms
- *Individual Support Plan* developed for each service user



Piloting – the practice

- Service users spent on average 24 days (1 day/ week) on the farm (April 2013 - June 2014) = 1,600 persons days of social farming experience
- Average attendance rate = 83%
- Accompanied by care worker in some cases
- Travel to and from farms organised through range of means e.g. family, taxis, rural transport
- Modest capital investments to prepare farm for piloting (max grant of €2,500 provided)
- Insurance packages discussed and developed for social farming with FBD and NFU Mutual



Training

- Training of Pilot Farmers (8 days/ farmer)
- Developed and delivered a 10 weeks training programme for potential social farmers and care workers x 61 people based on lessons learnt (June-August 2014)
- Development of *SoFAB: Guidelines for Social Farming* publication (forthcoming)



Dissemination

- SoFAB Website
- National and Local shows/ events
- Two National Conferences
 - 200 attended Carrick-on-Shannon, June 2013
 - Conference in Belfast, Sept. 2014
- Short videos produced (4 x 6-7 mins) to share experiences of piloting (farmers, users and service agencies)
- Media – press/ TV



SoFAB Conference #1: June 2013: Living an Ordinary Life



Is the SoFAB project worth the effort?

- Initial position by the 3 partners was to acknowledge the *value to society* of social farming and its potential to *connect people and improve lives*
- Experience of service users, providers and care agencies reinforce worthwhileness of this initiative to date and the potential it offers for new opportunities in the future

