Lentamente Società Cooperativa Agricola has reclaimed and rehabilitated abandoned land and has established an urban social farm in the province of Benevento. Lentamente and its partners, including Coop La Solidarietà, use social farming as an innovative tool to respond to the socio-economic challenges faced by the local community.

The social farming project ensures the social inclusion of disadvantaged communities and provides them with education and employment benefits.

ILC COMMITMENTS

STRONG SMALL-SCALE FARMING SYSTEMS
COMPETENCIES

AREAS

SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

SKILLS

PROJECT DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT

KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

BACKGROUND

A farm in the city of Benevento in Campania had lain abandoned and neglected for over 20 years, and over time, the land had been used as an informal dumpsite. Plastic and other forms of garbage accumulated on it, creating environmental challenges often associated with vacant and abandoned urban land.

THE CHALLENGE

Abandoned land is difficult to reclaim without regeneration and revalorisation to make it usable again. While the regeneration of abandoned land presents great socio-economic and environmental benefits, it can be difficult as the land carries the stigma of contamination. Furthermore, it is often difficult to obtain the necessary permissions from local authorities to establish an urban farm on abandoned land.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGE

Lentamente Società Cooperativa Agricola has worked with the Benevento community to recover and reuse previously abandoned land. Working from a social perspective of the “common good”, Lentamente and its partner Coop La Solidarietà have established Orto di Casa Betania (the Social Gardens of Betania) and the Caffè dell’Orto, where families and associations manage vegetable gardens.

With an approach based on social inclusion, Lentamente is working with community members, including disadvantaged populations, disabled people, drug users and formerly incarcerated people to provide economic and social opportunities that allow them to function in society. Orto di Casa Betania and Caffè dell’Orto have a social centre, café and garden where they experiment with crop species, both ancient and new. The café and social centre serve as a space for the community to gather and to consume food that is prepared using vegetables produced organically in the social gardens.

MOVING TOWARDS PEOPLE-CENTRED LAND GOVERNANCE

Lentamente, Slow Food and Cooperativa la Solidarietà have reclaimed formerly abandoned land and established Orto di Casa Betania, an urban agricultural garden in Benevento dedicated to social farming projects for the benefit of disadvantaged people. The space includes organic vegetable gardens, play areas and a bar with a multi-purpose hall. Lentamente manages Caffè dell’Orto, while Cooperativa la Solidarietà and Slow Food manage production at Orto di Casa Betania.

The gardens have given disadvantaged community members, especially formerly incarcerated people and drug addicts, an opportunity to be part of the community. Through the social farming project, they have gained useful farming skills that include managing a vineyard pruning, beekeeping and general farm management, enabling them to use their skills to earn a living in a dignified manner.
SECURING THE LAND
Lentamente and Coop La Solidarietà conceived the idea of reclaiming abandoned land and converting it into a social farming project. The local community was amenable to the idea of establishing the social gardens and social bar of Betania, a space for organic farming projects, recreation, community collaboration and the sharing of farming knowledge. The municipality was equally enthusiastic about the project, which would reclaim abandoned land for social farming purposes.

PREPARING THE LAND AND SEEDS
Over a three-year period, Lentamente, Coop La Solidarietà, Slow Food and members of the community worked together to collect traditional seeds that the community of Benevento had preserved over time. With the aim of enhancing local biodiversity, they collected traditional seeds of, among other things, varieties of tomato, aubergine, pepper and courgette that had not been commercialised.

EXPERIENTIAL AND DIDACTIC TEACHING METHODOLOGY
A combination of experiential and didactic teaching methods is essential for interactive learning. Lentamente and its partners have used a "learn by doing" approach in order to encourage hands-on and experiential learning. Using a cyclical approach to learning whereby knowledge is created by transforming experiences, Lentamente has assisted participants to:
- get involved in urban farming projects;
- reflect on their experiences;
- conceptualise their experience; and
- use their newly gained knowledge to inform their farming activities.

ORGANIC FARMING
After clearing and dividing the land into beds of 30 square metres, the community used organic soil management techniques such as mulching to manage the garden. In order to prevent weeds from growing and the soil from compacting, as well as to save water, the farmers used a combination of mulching and drip irrigation. Cooperativa la Solidarietà is responsible for the overall management of Orto di Casa Betania and ensures its smooth operation.

SOCIAL EVENTS
The community often enjoys social events at Caffè dell’Orto, a café/bar that serves food prepared using vegetables produced in Orto di Casa Betania. Members of the community, young and old, come together to enjoy food prepared using additive- and preservative-free organic produce they have grown themselves. The social events also present the community with an opportunity to share important information about agriculture and encourage more members to get involved in urban agriculture.
LESSONS LEARNED

Social urban agriculture is important to the agro-food sector as it contributes to urban food and nutrition security. It also builds social capital and improves interpersonal relations and skills, benefits that are often ignored.

A lack of knowledge about urban agriculture has obscured its relevance in urban and peri-urban areas. Lentamente and its partners have explored some of the socio-cultural and economic benefits of urban agriculture, including the social inclusion of excluded and disadvantaged people, food security and the substitution of store-bought perishable food items with urban farming products.

Furthermore, urban agriculture has ecological benefits as it reduces illegal dumping in cities and improves urban biodiversity.
UNITED FOR LAND RIGHTS