

Social Work and Sustainable Living: Palmi Koinsep's Inspirational Journey

Emanuela Fato

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy

CORRESPONDENCE:

Emanuela Fato

e-mail: emanuela.fato@unicatt.it

Abstract

Nestled in the village of Messini, Greece, Palmi Koinsep embodies a profound mission uniting environmental awareness and social commitment. Founded by Margherita Bovicelli, Palmi thrives on her deep connection to the land and a vision of holistic sustainability. This article explores Palmi's genesis, its transformative impact on the community and its commitment to empowering marginalized individuals.

Palmi seeks to provide meaningful employment opportunities in sustainable agriculture, particularly for those with disabilities or social disadvantages. Initiatives like «Lisso's Garden» promote social inclusion and the responsible use of human resources.

At its core, Palmi redefines wealth by emphasizing the interconnectedness of environmental well-being, community development and individual fulfillment. It engages in innovative product marketing, making each purchase an investment in a more sustainable future.

Palmi's journey highlights the power of shared values and community in driving positive change. It serves as a beacon of hope, inspiring readers to join the quest for a more sustainable and compassionate world.

Keywords

Sustainability, social enterprise, environmental consciousness, community empowerment, inclusion.

Introduction

In recognizing the imperative to integrate environmental values into social work practice, the literature underscores the multifaceted challenges stemming from climate change and environmental degradation (Coates & Gray, 2012). As Coates and Gray emphasize the need for a broad knowledge base and collaboration with other professions, it becomes apparent that the urgency of this integration lies in our collective responsibility to address the dimensions of environmental crises. The evolution of personal environmental

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values and the unresolved value-action gap identified by Hards (2011) further highlight areas in social work practice that demand attention. Aligning with Peeters' assertion that social work plays a vital role in sustainable development and ecosocial practice, the profession is positioned as an essential contributor to mitigating environmental concerns (Peeters, 2011). Dominelli's emphasis on environmental justice becomes particularly relevant, given the contemporary challenges that social workers confront in the face of environmental crises (Dominelli, 2013).

Additionally, the scholarly significance of clarifying the relationship between environmental social work as a theoretical paradigm and as a research topic, as noted by Krings et al. (2020), underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of this integration. This introductory groundwork sets the stage for an exploration of Palmi Koinsep, a compelling embodiment of environmental awareness and social dedication within the framework of social work practice. As we delve into the story of Palmi, nestled in the heart of Messini, Greece, the aim is to uncover not just a narrative but a living example of the integration of environmental values in social work — an endeavor crucial for effective interventions, policy development, education within the profession, and addressing the pressing environmental challenges faced by individuals and communities. Palmi, as a social enterprise, serves as a testament to the possibilities when sustainability becomes an ingrained way of life, echoing the call for environmental consciousness within social work practice.

The Genesis of Palmi: A Journey Back to the Earth

Palmi Koinsep owes its existence to the vision and determination of its founder, Margherita Bovicelli. Her deep connection to the land, passed down through generations, forms the bedrock of Palmi's mission. Margherita's journey was not without challenges, including the delicate balance between tradition and innovation in Greek agriculture. Her ambition to manage the lands of her husband's family in Greece, despite initial resistance, laid the foundation for a remarkable transformation.

Margherita was born in Tuscany, into a family that has always put her in contact with working the land and taking care of animals. Since she was a child she spent her summers on a farm, where she began to embrace the values connected to the environment and the conservation of the world in which we live. The traditional imagination, which has always considered agricultural work as inferior and poorer than other productive activities, has never influenced Margherita, who has always been proud to be able to share her passion for the land, plants, and animals.

As she grew older, Margherita realized the urgency of addressing the social and environmental issues plaguing modern society. She saw firsthand the detrimental effects of industrial agriculture, such as soil degradation and loss of biodiversity, and recognized

the need for a more sustainable and holistic approach (Matthies, Peeters, Hirvilammi, & Stamm, 2020; Matthies, Ward, & Närhi, 2001). As this awareness became increasingly stronger in her, Margherita met Nico, at the time a young Greek medical student in Pisa, fell in love and they got married. The first times were not easy, Nico was forced to work two jobs to make ends meet, while Margherita immediately found work as a secretary in a large company, quickly reaching roles of responsibility. The workload did not allow the young couple to spend quality time together so, after long reflection, they made a clear decision: to move to Greece, Nico's homeland.

Nico expected to work as a doctor in his country, while Margherita's desire, right from the start, was to take over the management of her father-in-law's land and start it up for organic cultivation. And here began the confrontation with a complex cultural context still anchored to very limiting beliefs. Margherita's father-in-law, in fact, was reluctant to delegate the management of his lands to a woman, even a foreign one. However, Margherita's determination and passion for sustainable farming outweighed the initial resistance she faced and, after 10 years of negotiation, she finally gained control over the land and started her journey towards organic cultivation.

This journey was not an easy one, as Margherita faced several challenges along the way. First of all, she had to overcome the resistance and skepticism of the local community, who were not accustomed to organic farming practices and even considered them harmful to plants. Secondly, in the 1990s Greece went through the hardest economic phase in its history, which crushed many families and brought the country to the brink of bankruptcy. Despite these adversities, Margherita and Nico remained determined to pursue their dream of sustainable farming and, paradoxically, the dramatic situation in which Greece found itself created the possibility of enriching their vision by combining care for the environment with the promotion of social work (Schmitz, Matyók, Sloan, & James, 2012).

Empowering Youth and Fragile People: Tackling Greece's High Unemployment

Once again, the most fragile ones paid the highest price of the Greek economic crisis: young people, in particular those who came from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with disabilities, found themselves lost and with sad perspectives. These groups faced extreme difficulties in finding employment opportunities and were at risk of being marginalized in society as their only possibility was to return home to their families, to their isolated villages and dedicate themselves to the lands that every Greek family somehow owned. At the same time as reflecting on what could be done for young people in difficulty, in 2015 Margherita came into contact with CNCA, an Italian network of non-profit organizations committed to promoting social projects that arise from the bottom

and aimed at intercepting the needs of the local community. Recognizing the potential for combining her passion for sustainable farming to empower these vulnerable groups, Margherita saw an opportunity to create positive change by giving birth to Palmi Koinsep, a social enterprise based in Messini, a small village close to Kalamata, in the region of Peloponnese. Nothing in the creation of this reality is left to chance. The name Palmi, in addition to indicating, in the Italian language, the open palms of the hands, a symbol of openness and welcome, is also the acronym of the founding members who were the first to bet on the vision of a fairer world both for the environment and for people: Pariskais, Alessandro, Lefteri, Margherita and Ioannis. In addition to this, the Koinsep's headquarters, in line with the values of sustainability and no waste that it proposes, is entirely created and furnished with recycled materials: tables and chairs are recovered from the rubbish and renewed, old headboards are used as railings, disused cemetery headstones have become a beautiful marble floor. Thus began Palmi's adventure founded on a single, great ambition: to demonstrate that it is possible to create good, profitable work, starting from the land and people, without exploiting or impoverishing either one or the other, but rather strengthening and promoting all possible resources.

Environmental and Social Consciousness: A Vision of Transformation

Palmi's application of sustainability values transcends mere economics; it represents a holistic transformation that involves people, communities and land (Besthorn, 2012; Ungar, 2002). At the heart of Palmi Koinsep's mission is the belief that promoting sustainability goes hand in hand with social work, creating a symbiotic relationship between environmental responsibility and community empowerment (Boetto, Närhi, & Bowles, 2022). The Koinsep's perspective emphasizes an economy intrinsically respectful of the environment, reconnecting people to their rural roots and fostering a sense of belonging and purpose within the community. Their challenge is to shift mindsets, showing that a balance between economic prosperity and ecological preservation is possible (Matthies, Ward, & Närhi, 2001; Peeters, 2011; Schmitz et al., 2012). Margherita and Palmi communicate this perspective, demonstrating that a future of abundance is achievable by respecting the environment and investing in the community. In particular, as already mentioned, the Koinsep's focus is on creating employment opportunities for people who would otherwise be marginalized by society, primarily people with disabilities or social disadvantages. To promote this, Palmi has activated over time, also in collaboration with other organizations, some projects which are based on the job placement of these people, to promote a source of income and fundamental gratification for them.

One of these projects is called «Lisso's Garden» and is based on the collaboration between a local school for people with disabilities and an agricultural company. The school offers three-year courses aimed at teaching students the fundamentals of ag-

riculture through some theoretical lessons and many practical laboratories. At the end of the course, some students, subject to evaluation by the social worker, are offered an internship in the agricultural enterprise where, under the guidance of an agronomist, they are involved in organic cultivation. The Palmi Koinsep actively collaborates in the project by providing manpower. The civil service volunteers assigned to Palmi dedicate a few days a week to the «Lisso's Garden» during which they work side by side with the disabled people, supervising them and offering support to the agronomist, who without them would be the only operator. The overall aim of the «Lisso's Garden» project is to promote social inclusion and empower individuals with disabilities through meaningful employment opportunities in the agricultural sector in the belief that it is not only material and natural resources that should not be wasted, but also and above all human resources (Folgheraiter, 2014).

A Bold Vision for a Sustainable Future

Palmi Koinsep's commitment to sustainability and social work is commendable, as it challenges conventional mindsets and offers a vision of a future that balances economic development, environmental stewardship and social well-being. The Koinsep's focus on creating employment opportunities for marginalized individuals sets a strong precedent for inclusive and equitable practices in a country where disadvantaged groups often face significant barriers to integration and participation in the workforce. The Greek government's proposals to support and lift the families of disabled people are at a minimum, with very low investments and a widespread conception that it is the job of families and not of welfare to provide assistance and opportunities. Palmi's activities, as well as the inclusion projects such as the «Lisso's Garden», are all financed through the sale of agricultural products or thanks to private, mostly international, donors. For this reason, central to Palmi's mission is not just cultivating crops but also nurturing connections. Margherita and her fellow members at Palmi understand that sustainability extends beyond the fields. They recognize the importance of creating a support network that not only boosts their product sales but also bolsters the social capital surrounding Palmi (Folgheraiter, 2011).

In the landscapes of Messini, Palmi doesn't just farm; it weaves a tapestry of relationships with the wider community. Margherita's vision extends to fostering a web of supporters who share in Palmi's ethos of environmental stewardship and social responsibility. This isn't merely a marketing strategy; it's a genuine commitment to building a stronger, more sustainable future. The Koinsep actively engages with local but mostly Italian consumers, encouraging them to choose Palmi's organic produce. This isn't a hard sell; it's an invitation to become a part of something greater. When you purchase a Palmi product, you're not just getting fresh, ethically grown food; you're investing in a vision that respects the environment and uplifts the community. Through innovative

marketing campaigns and collateral initiatives, Palmi has transformed its products into symbols of sustainable living. Their olive oil isn't just a condiment; it's a commitment to protecting the land and the people who live there. Their organic vegetables aren't just ingredients; they're a testament to the power of responsible agriculture. By doing this, Palmi has successfully created a niche in the market for conscientious consumers who seek products that align with their values.

But Palmi goes beyond transactions. It's about forming lasting connections with individuals and businesses that believe in the Koinsep's mission. The Koinsep organizes events like tastings, art exhibitions and educational workshops to bring people closer to the land and to each other. These events not only showcase Palmi's products but also provide a platform for dialogue on sustainable living and community well-being.

In essence, Palmi is nurturing a community of advocates who amplify their message. When supporters share their Palmi experiences with friends and family, it sparks a ripple effect. This word-of-mouth promotion is incredibly powerful in a world saturated with advertising. It's a testament to the authenticity and impact of Palmi's work.

This support network isn't just about financial transactions; it's about strengthening the bonds of trust, empathy, and shared values. It's about tasting events proudly serving Palmi's produce, knowing they're contributing to a more sustainable food system. It's about individuals choosing Palmi's goods not just for their quality but also for their commitment to a greener, more equitable future.

In building this network, Palmi isn't just increasing its sales; it's expanding its social capital (Folgheraiter, 2011). It's creating a community of like-minded individuals and businesses who believe in the Koinsep's vision. This network becomes a powerful force, advocating for sustainability, fostering a sense of belonging and contributing to the resilience of the Koinsep.

In conclusion, Palmi Koinsep's commitment to promoting a support network is not just a business strategy; it's a reflection of its values. It's evidence of the belief that sustainable living is not achieved in isolation but through collaboration and shared purpose. Through nurturing connections and building a community of supporters, Palmi is sowing the seeds of a brighter, more sustainable future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of environmental values in social work practice takes tangible form in initiatives like Palmi social enterprise, serving as a beacon of hope within the Greek landscape. Building upon the theoretical foundations emphasized by scholars like Krings, Shaw and Dominelli, Palmi exemplifies the transformative potential when environmental consciousness converges with social commitment (Dominelli, 2013; Krings et al., 2020; Shaw, 2013). Margherita's visionary leadership and the collective dedication

of Palmi's members showcase the profound impact of incorporating ecological considerations into social work frameworks.

Palmi not only redefines prosperity by nurturing both the land and its people but also embodies the essence of green social work, providing a living example of a harmonious future where the well-being of the environment, community and individual are intricately interwoven. The enterprise stands as a testament to the power of holistic sustainability, where every action becomes a purposeful investment in a brighter, more inclusive future. As we depart from the inspiring journey at Palmi, we carry not only the emotional resonance of the experience but also a renewed belief in the transformative potential of individual actions.

Palmi's story serves as an invitation for others to embrace a sustainable and compassionate future, echoing the broader call for the integration of environmental values in social work practice to promote inclusionary social work, address environmental justice and contribute to sustainable development. Overall, the integration of environmental values in social work practice is essential for promoting inclusionary social work, addressing environmental justice, and contributing to sustainable development (Dominelli, 2012; Stamm, 2023).

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