Farming with care: the evolution of care farming in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe and understand the evolution of the care farming sector in one of its pioneering countries, the Netherlands. Care farms combine agricultural production with health and social services. Care farming is a phenomenon that faces specific challenges associated with connecting two different domains. Organizational ecology, social movement theory and the multi-level perspective are helpful concepts in interpreting and contextualizing the developments that have taken place. Organizational ecology explains how the number of care farms, and the legitimacy and diversity of the care farming sector, have increased rapidly over time. Strategic actions of dedicated boundary spanners have played an important role in the development of the sector. Social movement theory explains the impact of collaborative action in the pioneering and later stages. The multi-level perspective explains changes in the care regime, like the introduction of the personal budget of patients and the liberalization of the Dutch health care sector, helping to provide access of foundations of care farms to the collective health insurance for the costs of long-term care. Media exposure, contacts with ministries and politicians and the development of a quality system have contributed to the legitimacy of the sector. Changes in the care regime and collective action promoted a further expansion of the sector and provided direction to the ways the sector developed qualitatively, especially in terms of the emergence of structures aimed at facilitating existing and promoting new care farming practices. Our framework sheds light on changes in agriculture and transsectoral collaboration.

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1. Introduction

European agriculture has undergone significant changes in the past century. Due to economies of scale and in order to remain economically profitable, farmers increased farm size, efficiency and external inputs, while minimizing labor use per hectare. Environmental problems, homogenization of the landscape, outbreaks of contagious animal diseases and reduced animal welfare resulted in a poor image of the agricultural sector [1]. The growing concern for nature conservation and environment and the increasing competition from new functions such as housing and recreation put pressure on the sector [2,3]. Increasing pressure on the agricultural sector and changing demands from society changed the focus of an increasing number of farmers in the Netherlands. It generated an increasing interest in innovative practices such as environmental co-operatives, organic farming and multi-functional agriculture [4–6]. Multifunctional agriculture integrates new activities around the core of agricultural production [1,7]. Various case studies have analysed diversification activities, such as recreation, food processing/direct marketing and agroforestry [8,9]. In this study, we describe and analyse the development of the care farming sector in the Netherlands. Care farming is an interesting example of multifunctional agriculture that faces the challenge of connecting and bridging two different domains, namely agriculture and health care. In pre-industrial society, agriculture and health care were closely linked to local and small-scale communities, but the two sectors drifted apart with the emergence of modern society. From the 1990s onwards, the agricultural sector has been increasingly involved in the offering of health care and social services to different patient groups [10]. Also, health care professionals and organizations began to approach farmers to offer all kinds of services to people with a mental illness, intellectual disabilities, elderly persons, children, drug addicts, and long-term unemployed persons.

As such, care farming is an example of multifunctional agriculture that has received little scientific attention so far. Care farms combine agricultural production with health and social services. They offer day care, assisted workplaces and/or residential places for clients with a variety of disabilities [11]. Care farms can be considered examples of innovative community-based service
providers that can improve people’s quality of life [12]. The combination of personal and dedicated attitude on the part of the farmer, often assisted by the farmer’s wife, the carrying out of useful activities, and an informal and open setting within a green environment turn care farms into an appealing facility for various client groups [12]. The perceived benefits of care farms are improved physical, mental and social well-being. The mental health benefits consist of improved self-esteem and well-being, and an improved disposition. Examples of social benefits are independence, the formation of work habits and the development of personal responsibility and social skills [13].

While care farming has now been adopted by a multitude of other European countries [10], the focus in this article is on the Netherlands, one of its pioneering countries [11]. The number of care farms in the Netherlands has increased rapidly, from 75 in 1998 to more than 1000 in 2009 (www.landbouwzorg.nl). In 2005, the sector catered to 10,000 clients in the Netherlands, with average annual revenues of € 73 000 per farm [14]. Although care farming is seen as a successful and innovative sector [10,11], various weaknesses and challenges were identified. The main challenges included: bridging the gap between the agricultural and care sector, developing professional organizations of care farmers and creating sustainable financing structures [15].

Understanding structural change and innovation is the centre of many studies focusing on rural communities and the role of agriculture in recent decades [16,17]. Burton and Wilson [18] argue that, in mapping and analysing changes in agricultural regimes, the focus has largely been on exogenous factors. They suggest incorporating the structure-agency concepts into theorisations of agricultural change. Wolff [16] argued that development of new professional structures are important for agricultural innovation. Previous studies dealing with innovative practices in the Netherlands like organic farming and environmental co-operatives have focussed on their development and challenges [5,6], rather than contributing to a better understanding of agricultural change.

The aim of this paper is to describe and understand the development of the care farming sector in the Netherlands and contribute to the discussion on how to understand agricultural change [18]. Studying the development of the care farming sector can increase our understanding of agricultural change. Like other examples of diversification (e.g. recreation, education) it faces the challenge of connecting and bridging agriculture with another sector. Challenges associated with connecting two different sectors have not received much attention so far. We focus on describing and understanding changes in the number and diversity of care farms, organizational structures and interaction with the environment. In this paper, we describe the endogenous development of the sector by zooming in on the organizations that have played a role in shaping it, the development and role of new organizational structures and the key events and turning points in the emergence and early growth of this new sector. Due to the fact that this is the first attempt at describing the developments in this sector, it is an exploratory study. Before outlining our methods for the acquisition, analysis and integration of data, we discuss selected theories that may help us understand the development of this new sector.

Previous studies identified legitimacy, knowledge development, agency-structure interactions and collective action as important issues in understanding the development of innovative practices [5,6,19]. So as to identify an overarching theory, we seek to integrate three theories that each comprise and interrelate several of these issues. Organizational ecology may help gain insight in the development of a sector, as described by the evolution of organizational populations. It emphasizes the need for legitimation and knowledge development during the emergence and evolution of a new industry and sector. Social movement theory identifies the importance of collective action and its role in developing influence.

Transition studies, and in particular the multi-level perspective, captures the essence of agency and structure shaping each other and acknowledges the need for boundary spanning and strategic agency. It adds insight on the impact of regimes in the care and agricultural sectors. Thus far, these three different theories have not been connected.

2. Theoretical framework

The theories we have selected to help us understand the development of the care farming sector are: a) organizational ecology, b) social movement theory and c) multi-level perspective.

2.1. Organizational ecology

Ecological theories are concerned with the birth, growth and transformation of firms and industries, or communities of organizations, or formulated more specifically how populations of organizations change over time through demographic processes of selective replacement, organizational founding, mortality and growth [20]. Key elements in their conceptual frameworks are blind and intended variation and experimentation processes by (populations) of organisations, selection and competition in the environment, and retention and institutionalization processes over time [21]. Also the concepts of entry mode and survival are relevant for understanding the ecological approach to organizations. Firms can enter an industry as new ventures, so-called de novo firms, or as existing organizations diversifying away from another industry, in the case of de alio firms [20]. While some of the firms succeed and grow, roughly half of these firms do not succeed and willingly or unwillingly exit the industry they entered a couple years before. So smaller and younger organizations, facing the liabilities of newness and smallness, usually do not survive and die young.

Founders of ventures in a new population are operating in a situation with few if any precedents. While operating under conditions of ignorance and uncertainty these entrepreneurs must learn about new markets and develop the organizational knowledge and the external legitimacy to exploit them. They must seize a new market, learn new skills and tricks, raise capital from sceptical investors, recruit untrained employees, and cope with other difficulties stemming from their embryonic status. New organizations must also establish ties with an environment that might not understand or acknowledge their existence. Aldrich and Fiol [22] draw a distinction between cognitive and socio-political legitimacy. Acceptance of a new kind of organization or sector by the environment is referred to as cognitive legitimacy. To overcome this legitimacy barrier, network actors must inform the larger community and establish partnerships to create a wider understanding of the new concept or approach. Socio-political legitimacy refers to the extent to which key stakeholders accept the sector as proper and conforming to accepted rules and standards. An important obstacle for new organizational communities is the lack of effective organizational knowledge [23]. New organizations must discover effective routines and competences under conditions of ignorance and uncertainty. They must also establish ties with an environment that may not understand or acknowledge their existence. Pioneer- ing ventures in new populations also face the problem of collective agreement on standards and designs that turns the population into reality that is taken for granted. Without accepted standards and designs, population boundaries will be ambiguous and organizational knowledge fleeting. Failure to agree on common standards leaves a new population vulnerable to illegal and unethical acts by some of its members and may jeopardize the legitimacy of the entire population [23].
Generally speaking, the long-term evolution of a population of organizations follows a general pattern: initial slow and erratic increases in density, a subsequent period of rapid growth and then a levelling-off and decline [24]. Organizational ecologists have developed a model of density-dependent legitimation and competition that identifies two major forces affecting the evolution of organizational populations: legitimation and competition. In young and small populations, founding rates are low and disbanding rates high. A low level of legitimation implies that organizing is difficult: capital sources are hard to come by, suppliers and customers need to be educated, employees may be hard to find and recruit and, in many instances, and hostile institutional rules must be changed [21]. This early stage shows an underdeveloped organizational form, which is not able yet to generate a legitimate signal, with the emerging industry failing to attract sufficient resources and institutional approval. When legitimation is on the rise, entrepreneurs seize opportunities and organizations find it easier to attract capital, suppliers, customers and employees. They also face fewer institutional obstacles [21]. An increase in density causes large increases in legitimacy and small increases in competition. As populations grow, founding rates increase and disbanding rates decrease. In more mature populations, an increase in density causes small increases in legitimacy and large increases in competition [21].

In addition to the underlying variation, selection, retention models of explanation, two other relevant concepts are niches and carrying capacity [23]. Organizational communities consist of diverse populations of organizations that occupy different niches. Organizations within populations tend to segregate by resource niche and geographical location [23]. The carrying capacity is the maximum numbers of organizations that can be supported by the environment at a particular point in time [25]. The development paths of organizations are highly affected by the selection environment, which consists of competitors, customers, suppliers, investors and policy-makers that exert a strong influence on the evolution. Thus, organizational changes must be linked to particular environmental conditions [26]. External events interact with an organization’s own actions. Aspects of society that shape the environment are cultural values and governmental and political activities and public policies.

2.2. Social movement theory

While organizational ecology emphasizes chance and necessity and downplays purpose, social movement theory exalts intention. Social movement theory accentuates the struggle for innovation and change in societal systems, the entry of new actors and groups searching for emerging organizational forms and appropriate collaboration and collective action strategies and contentious politics about problematic issues and situations and possible solutions for them [27–29]. Social movements are collective endeavours of people to initiate societal change, reframing and politicizing sensitive issues and organise political action [30]. Social movements arise when there is a socio-political opportunity motivating actors to seek change, available structures and mechanisms to mobilize supporters and transforming the larger public into sympathizers and frames that articulate how (latent) problems are defined, where the blame for them is located, and how solutions for attaining them are defined. Social movements create new identities for the actors and groups involved and underlie the emergence of new sectors, new niches in mature markets and new cultural styles in markets for creative arts [30]. Besides advocating change, social movements also can arise to protect inundated identities and constrain markets by pushing for new legislation and opposing socio-political and technological innovation.

Social movement organizations are a case of industry (re)creation with new organizations trying to obtain external support for their policy issue or case for change and find avenues for collaborative action facilitating both learning and legitimacy building [31]. In this respect, Rao [32] refers to activists (‘market rebels’) who defy authority and convention and joining hands with their recruiters and supporters, who subsequently succeed by constructing hot causes that arouse intense emotions and exploit cool mobilization triggering radical innovation and new behaviours and beliefs.

A collective action frame - systems of shared beliefs and concerns about serious issues - must emerge to justify the existence of social movements. Such new organizational forms can only become cognitively legitimate and effective when activists succeed in framing them as valid and reliable [33]. Four general types of resources need to be accumulated for collective action to occur: leadership and cadre, expertise or prior expertise, financial and information resources, and legitimacy [28].

Social movements are important in securing resources that will support the formation of a shared identity which will increase the carrying capacity of a new organisational form [26]. A central focus of social movements is the creation of a collective consciousness, identity and boundaries [34]. Shared identity building is crucial to the success of a social movement and is constructed through interaction with non-members, counter-movements and media portrayal [35,36]. Joint experiences and feelings of solidarity and authenticity are important contributors for the shaping of a collective identity among the activists within the social movement. In order for institutional activism to be effective, the movement’s leaders also have to use a strategy of claim-making to establish their necessity, reliability and usefulness [30,37]. Adopting accepted procedures (best practices), conferences, trade shows, certification contests and demonstration events are examples of identity claim-making, aimed at legitimizing new industries or alternative ways of living [32]. Summing up, the challenge for social movements is to develop a collective identity among activists and mobilize internal and external support by articulating a hot cause that arouses emotion and motivates them to act. Subsequently, a community of members is created relying on cool mobilization that signals the identity of its members, sustains their commitment and seeks to have socio-political impact [30].

2.3. Transition theory and multi-level perspective

Environmental conditions affect the direction of the evolutionary process. Transition studies and its multi-level perspective (MLP), are helpful in understanding the interplay between existing structure and agency, and thus in addressing the often articulated need (see above) to better understand structural change for care farming and its relation to everyday practice. MLP is rooted in evolutionary theories, and it focuses on the mutual interdependency of structure and agency, and systems theory [38]. Transitions are fundamental changes in the structure, culture and practices of societal systems [39] that take place through the interaction of processes, activities and events at different levels. MLP distinguishes three levels: niche, regime and landscape [40]. Niches form the micro-level where radical novelties emerge, protecting the latter against mainstream market selection [41]. Niche innovations are carried out by dedicated actors, often outside the fringe of actors [40]. The regime refers to shared rules, resources and routines and is a conglomerate of structure (institutional setting), culture (prevailing perspective) and practice (rules, routines and habits). The regime’s cognitive, normative and regulative institutions act to establish and reinforce the stability and cohesion of societal systems, but they also limit innovation to localized, incremental improvements [42]. The socio-technical landscape forms an exogenous environment beyond the direct influence of niche and regime actors (macro-economics, deep
cultural patterns, macro-political developments). Changes at the landscape level usually take place slowly (decades).

The multi-level perspective captures the essence of transitions as a process of mutually reinforcing changes at the three levels. It is compatible with the basic idea from social theory [43] in which agency and structure shape each other under the influence of exogenous developments [44]. Transitions come about through interactions between processes at these three levels: a) niche-innovations build up internal momentum, through learning processes, price/performance improvements, and support from powerful groups, b) changes at the landscape level create pressure on the regime and c) regime changes create opportunities for niche innovations. It requires strategic action in the sense of creating linkages by smartly connecting dynamics at the three levels [44].

Care farming relates to both the agricultural and the care regime. Neither regime as such may offer a proper structural embedding for such hybrid practices as care farms. In the best of circumstances, multi-regime dynamics can be beneficial when a niche innovation is able to draw on selected elements in both regimes. Conversely, however, each regime may obviously also imply problems and uncertainties [45]. Previous studies have shown the importance of dedicated and influential boundary spanners on the interfaces at which contact is non-existent or dysfunctional [46].

2.4. Summary

Organizational ecology may help explain the development of care farming in terms of competition and legitimacy as major forces of influence, and emphasizes the need to generate supportive knowledge, especially with regard to the early stages of development. Social movement literature is helpful, as it indicates the importance of collective action and strategies of claim-making and generating a collective identity. The MLP adds insight into the relationship between novel practices and the emergence and creation of new structures, and focuses our attention on the opportunities and risks implied by the fact that care farming is embedded in two incumbent regimes (care and agriculture). We propose that integrating the three different theories as illustrated in Fig. 1, will increase our understanding of the development of the sector agriculture and care.

3. Methods and data collection

The aim of this paper is to describe and understand the development of the care farming sector according to the topics that are raised by our selected theories. Based on organizational ecology we determined changes in the number and variation of care farms and entry and disbanding rates. Based on MLP we determined regime characteristics like evolving organizations and changes in regulations. Based on social movement theory we studied the development and actions of the National Support Centre Agriculture and Care.

In our study, we use different types of inventories and databases. To monitor the number and diversity of care farms, we used two databases. The National Support Center Agriculture and Care registers all care farms that have registered as such since 1998. In principle, this database includes all care farms. This database includes information about the characteristics of the care farms, like the dominant financing mechanism for the care services, the openness to specific client groups and the method of agricultural production (biological or conventional).

The Dutch agricultural census registers all (care) farms with an economic size larger than three Dutch Size Units (DSU). The DSU is a unit of economic size based on standard gross margin. This database does not include care farms that were set up by (former employees of) care institutions. The Dutch agricultural census includes data about the type of agricultural holding and the disbanding rate. From these databases, founding and disbanding rates and diversity of care farms can be extracted as core notions of organizational ecology.

Information about new organizations in the care farming sector (examples of structural changes and collective action) was derived from various sources. Information about the objectives, activities and results of the National Support Center was obtained from available documents (e.g. strategic plans) and by interviewing all former directors and a board member of the national support center and representatives of the ministries of agriculture and health, welfare and sports. Interview items were the activities, goals and strategies of the national support center. Information about regional organizations of care farms was obtained from an inventory held in 2003 [47] and in 2009 [48]. Information regarding initiatives of

![Fig. 1. Integrated multi-level framework combining social movement theory, organizational ecology and the multi-level perspective.](image-url)
collaboration between care institutions and farmers was obtained by contacting all regional organizations of care farms. Information about the existing initiatives was collected by interviewing the project leaders. Information about changing regulations and conditions at a national level was obtained from an earlier study [49], while provincial policies for agriculture and care (examples of changes at regime level) was obtained from various reports [50,51] and policy documents of the provinces.

4. Developments of the care farming sector

4.1. Number and diversity of care farms

According to the National Support Centre Agriculture and Care, 40 care farms were initiated between 1949 and 1995. The average growth was one care farm per year. From 1995 onwards, the number of care farms increased rapidly, from 75 in 1998 to almost 1100 in 2009. The steep increase between 1998 and 2001 slowed down between 2002 and 2004. From 2004 onwards, there was a sharp increase in the number of care farms (Fig. 2). From 2003 onwards, the difference between both databases grew to more than 350 in 2009. According to the agricultural census database, a considerable number of care farms stopped providing care. The disbanding rate decreased over time. Between 1999 and 2003, 61% of the initial care farms stopped providing care services and continued farming, while 11% discontinued both activities. Between 2003 and 2007, the disbanding rate decreased to 29% for care services only, while 25% of the care farmers discontinued both activities. The number of entrants increased over time: 106% between 1999 and 2003 and 115% between 2003 and 2007. Next, we discuss various aspects of the development of the sector in a more qualitative way.

According to the support center database, the characteristics of the care farming sector changed in time. In 1998, 32% of the care farms were part of an institution with an AWBZ accreditation and 16% had its own AWBZ accreditation. AWBZ is the collective health insurance for the costs of long-term care in the Netherlands. Most of the existing care farms were working and living communities. In the following years, this situation changed radically. The percentage of institution based care farms and AWBZ accredited care farms decreased in time. The increase in the number of care farms was completely due to the increase of independent (private) family care farms that made subcontracting arrangements with care institutions or made use of the personal budgets of clients. Most of these new family care farms offered day care facilities. The preference for specific client groups also changed over time. In 2001, most care farms were open for clients with intellectual disability and a smaller percentage for clients with mental illness. Other client groups were hardly present on care farms. In the years 2006–2009, an increasing number of care farms focused on new client groups like elderly and youth (see Table 1).

Care services appear to be most common among the non-intensive animal husbandries. According to the agricultural census, the growth in the number of care farms is almost completely due to the increasing number of dairy and other grassland grazed farmers that started with care activities. The number of arable farms and horticultural farms with care services remained constant between 1999 and 2008. In 1998, more than 80% of the care farms had an organic production method. This percentage had dropped to less than 40% in 2009. This shows that, in the first decade of this century, mainly conventional farmers started care activities on their farm.

Percentages of care farms with revenues from main financing sources and percentage of care farms open for a specific client group (based on census of the National Support Centre Agriculture and Care; as most care farms are open to various client groups, rows do not add up to 100%).

4.2. Initiatives at the national level

4.2.1. Organizations

Before 1997, care farming was not a topic that generated interest at a national level [52]. From 1997 onwards, there were regular national meetings and publications about care farming, initiated by Omslag, an anthroposophist organization with a mission to link agriculture, care and craftsmanship. This organization represented the anthroposophist care farms. Anthroposophist care farmers strongly opposed the mainstream practices in both agriculture and health and social care. The activities of these pioneering care farmers triggered societal awareness. The national farmers’ organization (LTO), a Christian organization for youth care with a long history in community care (Rudolphstichting) and the anthroposophist organization (Omslag) collaborated in organizing political support for the development of the new sector. This resulted in the initiation of the National Support Center Agriculture and Care in 1999. This support center was subsidized by the Ministry of agriculture and the Ministry of health, welfare and sports for a period of three years. The objectives of the support center were development and support of care farms, development of quality system, embedding agriculture

Fig. 2. Development in number of care farms in the Netherlands according to the database of the National Support Centre Agriculture and Care (Support C.) and the Agricultural Census (Agric. C.).
Table 1
Percentages of care farms with revenues from main financing sources and percentage of care farms open for a specific client group (based on census of the National Support Centre Agriculture and Care; as most care farms are open to various client groups, rows do not add up to 100%).

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<th>Organization and financing care</th>
<th>Care farms open for specific client group</th>
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<td>Part of Care institution (%)</td>
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and care in society and policy, and exchanging information, experience and knowledge. The support center developed a website, a national database, a quality system and a handbook for starting care farmers. In 2001, the support center managed to obtain dispensation for care-bound sales tax exemption for individual farmers. The representatives of the supporting ministries we interviewed stated that the support center had very good contacts with politicians and key civil servants. Due to these contacts, care farms remained on the political agenda and the support center managed to prolong the financial support for a total of ten years. According to all interviewees, crucial factors were the focus on the familiarization of care farms and the positive public image of combining farming and health care provision. This was stimulated by visits of the Queen, ministers and other decision-makers, by articles in newspapers, open days and television programs.

When government subsidies stopped, the support center stopped its activities in December 2008, after which it then became apparent that a drawback of the support had been that care farms had not been stimulated to pursue an entrepreneurial approach and to set up a market-oriented organization. The Ministries of Agriculture and Health, Welfare and Sports pressed the sector to take responsibility and to establish a national association that would represent the care farming sector as a whole. Such an organization had to be financed by the care farmers themselves. This resulted in the national federation of care farms. The federation struggled to obtain support from the regional organizations of care farms. A critical moment was the first negative item on television about care farms in 2010. Clients and their family expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of the care on two locations classified as care farms. This urged the national federation of care farms to speed up its efforts to develop an up-to-date quality system.

4.2.2. Regulations

A major challenge for care farmers was to find funding for the care services they provide [49]. Before the 1990’s, pioneers found creative ways to obtain sufficient finances. They used various regime elements like labour integration funds, social assistance regulations, healthcare innovation funds and regulations for family replacement homes. From 1995 care farms became funded by a new regime element, the AWBZ, the collective health insurance for the costs of long-term care in the Netherlands, which implied that care services were only reimbursable when provided by institutions with an AWBZ accreditation. Since then, the most common way for care farmers to organize financing for the care services provided, was to find care institutions with an AWBZ accreditation that accepted them as subcontractors. More specifically, under the influence of client organizations and reflecting longer standing ‘landscape’ tendencies of individualization and diversification of lifestyles, the AWBZ was changed in 1995, to include the so-called Personal Budget (PGB) for clients with an intellectual disability. The aim of the PGB is to strengthen the position of clients by giving them a budget which they can spend according to their own needs. In 2003, a new style PGB was introduced, making it available to a much larger group of clients: in addition to clients with mental illness, ageing people and youth with multiple problems were included as well. Another trend in the institutional landscape, liberalization of the health care sector, offered opportunities for new suppliers to obtain an AWBZ accreditation.

4.3. Developments at a regional level

4.3.1. Regulations

Triggered by the support at national level from 1999 onwards, provinces started to support care farming activities. Initially, provinces provided financial support to individuals for adaptations on their farms. Some provinces set up provincial support centers to raise interest in care farming and select farms that were eligible for financial support. At a later stage, the aim of the provinces was to develop a self-supporting sector, to which end they supported the development of regional and provincial networks and regional organizations of care farmers.

4.3.2. Organizations

Before 2000, interactions between care farms were limited. From 2000 onwards, care farmers started to organize themselves at a regional level. Initially, this resulted in study clubs of care farmers. The main objective of the study clubs and associations is the exchange of information. In five regions, foundations of care farmers were established that applied for AWBZ accreditation. The reason for choosing the organizational structure of a foundation is that a foundation is an accepted organizational structure in the health sector. Two different types of foundations emerged:

foundations run and owned by the care farmers. The existing care farms organized themselves in a foundation. Individual farms maintain contacts with interested clients. The central office is limited and restricted to administrating the AWBZ finances, and

foundations started by rural entrepreneurs with the concept of a strong and professional organization that matches demand and supply at a regional level. In this case, clients do not contact individual farms, but the central office. This concept was initiated in the western part of the country. After obtaining the AWBZ accreditation, the initiators invited farmers to become a subcontractor of the foundation. The director of the largest foundation estimates that 75% of the care farmers would not have started the care activities without the support of the organization.
Another development is the initiative by some care institutions to work together with a group of farmers in their region. In a survey conducted in 2009, three initiatives were identified where farmers were invited by care institutions to start small-scale care services on their farm in collaboration with the care institution [48]. These farmers would not have started care services without the support of the care institution. Based on the support center database in 2000 and the survey held in 2009 [48], we estimate that, in 2000, 30% of the care farms were part of an institution. The remainder of the sample was independent of the organizations described above. In 2009, only 5% of the care farms was part of a care institution; 10% of the farmers started small-scale care activities after they were invited by a care institution to collaborate, 34% was member of one of the types of foundations and 30% was member of an association or study club of care farms. We estimate that 22% of the care farmers did not fall into any of these categories (Fig. 3). This indicates that the level of organization increased over time. It is interesting to note that, in regions where farmer’s associations have a strong position, care farmers organized themselves in study clubs and associations, under supervision of the union. The professionalized foundations appeared in the regions that have a long history with broadening activities and experience with the agricultural nature organizations. The foundations decided to become independent from their mother organizations and develop a new structure.

Based on the data, we can conclude that the characteristics of care farmers changed over time. It appears that different orders of entry of care farmers evolve. In the last century, institutional care farms (30%) and idealistic biological dynamic living/working communities were the majority. The pioneers were young people with an alternative vision on health care, agriculture and society [47]. During the late 1990s, some agricultural initiatives on family farms started, in many cases biological farmers concerned with the environment and looking for alternatives to intensification. When care farming became better known, many conventional farmers initiated care services on their farm. The increasing difference between the number of care farms in the agricultural census and the database of the National Support Centre points to the development of a new group of care farmers during the last five years. An increasing number of former employees of the care sector buy a farm and start a care farm. Board members of organizations of care farmers estimated that 10–45% of their members fall into this category. Other new groups of care farmers that have emerged are conventional farmers who have been invited by care institutions and foundations with a strong central office, as indicated above. All these developments described have led to a very diverse sector.

5. Understanding the developments

The aim of this paper is to understand the development of the care farming sector and contribute to the discussion on how to understand agricultural change. We now explore how and to what extent the perspectives from organizational ecology, transition studies and social movement theory are helpful in this respect.

5.1. Organizational ecology

The development of the sector follows a general pattern that is characteristic of new populations: initially slow and erratic increases in density, followed by a subsequent period of rapid growth. The leveling off and decline phases have not yet been reached. As organizational ecology claims, during the initial stages, growth hardly gave rise to increased competition; this was further reinforced by regime changes that created an increased demand, like the broadening of the personal budget and access to the AWBZ. After personal budgets became more widely available in 2003, an increasing number of care farmers used the personal budgets of clients to finance the care services they provided (Table 2), which made them less dependent on the willingness of care institutions to collaborate and accept them as subcontractors. This confirms the claim by Ruef [25] that the carrying capacity of the sector is not fixed and that it is affected by changes in attention to the sector. As stated before, new communities of organizations face two main problems: a lack of legitimacy for the new activity and a lack of effective
organizational knowledge. The pioneers faced a lack of legitimacy and institutional obstacles. Examples are barriers to make use of health care funds and major banks in agricultural business that were not willing to finance investments of care farms [52]. The successful efforts to obtain support from two ministries to initiate a national agriculture and care support center was an important milestone that contributed to the legitimacy of care farms. At that time, competition between initiatives did not occur and at this stage, the support center was important for the development of the sector in ways we will elaborate in the section on social movement theory. In line with evolutionary theory, we observed that disappearing rates decreased and founding rates increased over time. At present, we do not know whether the high initial disappearing rates are due to lack of additional capital, legitimacy, organizational knowledge and/or competences, as suggested by Aldrich and Ruef [23].

Although the sector started organizing itself, developing effective support organizations proved a challenge. There was a continuous debate between the National Support Centre and regional groups of care farms about the desired organizational structure. In most regions, collaboration between individual care farms began informally and developed gradually. In some regions, but not others, the collaboration developed into strong foundations. The only exception where collaboration did not start informally and gradually is the western part of the Netherlands, where the number of care farms was limited. An entrepreneur initiated a regional foundation to match supply and demand, transforming it into an efficient foundation without major involvement on the part of the care farmers. He invited farmers to do business with the foundation. We think that the presence of an institutional entrepreneur is a crucial factor for the development of strong organizations. We observed an increasing diversity of organizations and care farms. During the last decade the diversity of client groups, the diversity of financing arrangements and the diversity of initiators increased. Aldrich [53] argues that the degree of diversity depends on resource scarcity. Homogenization will particularly be strong in competitively saturated environments with finite resources. Competitors will then seek to outcompete each other and reduce opportunities for local niches to persist. When competition is more relaxed, greater variety is allowed. The increase in diversity after personal budgets became more widely available indicates that care farmers were able to find different niches with different types of resources, which in turn indicates that the sector has not reached the situation of a competitively saturated environment. It would appear that competition is not yet a major force in the development of the care farming sector, which is in line with previous findings. Care institutions estimated that the potential demand for care farms is between 5.5–6.5% for different client groups [54]. At that time the percentage of youth clients and elderly in nursing homes making use of the care farm was only 0.6%. Since that time we observed a strong increase in the number of youth and elderly clients on the care farm. This growth was facilitated by the availability of the personal budget for these client groups. The experience of many care farmers is that only the market of care farms for clients with intellectual disabilities approaches saturation. In 2005, 3.7% of the clients with intellectual disabilities made use of a care farm [12].

The results indicate that stored knowledge and routines affect regional developments. In regions where farmers have a long history with broadening activities and agricultural nature organizations foundations emerged from these already existing organizations of farmers. These regions may have benefited from a longer history of cooperation and organizational knowledge. In these regions, the farmers’ association does not play an important role anymore. The wait and see attitude of care farmers in other parts of the Netherlands with respect to initiating regional organizations, relates to the position of the farmers’ association. Most care farmers wait for initiatives of the association. The National Support Centre contributed to the storage and exchange of information and routines.

5.2. Transition theory and the multi-level perspective (MLP): changes in landscape and regime

As we have just seen, changes in the care regime, especially regarding funding (bringing care farms under the AWBZ, the introduction and broadening of the PGB and openness for new suppliers due to liberalization) were crucial in understanding the development of the sector. Not only did it promote expansion, in ways which organizational ecology has helped us understand. Also, in line with the way MLP portrays structuration [38,44], these structural provisions gave direction to the ways the sector developed in qualitative terms: it influenced the relative share of client groups; and it led to an increase in the share of individual farms at the cost of the initiatives of care institutions. A clear example is how the broad availability of the PGB enabled the fast increase of new client groups and of care farms initiated by former employees of the care sector (Table 1; Fig. 2).

The concept of multi-level perspective also appears to be helpful in understanding how these structural changes came about. At landscape level, liberalization and socialization of care and empowerment of clients are important developments [55]. This led to the introduction of the personal budget of clients and access for new suppliers to obtain an AWBZ accreditation. Also, legislation and policies changed and offered space for new care providers to manoeuvre. As we discuss in the next section, it helped that care farmers and their national and regional organizations were proactive in making use of the opportunities on offer.

Simultaneously, there were incentives in the agricultural domain. Intensified competition and decreasing prices of agrarian products [56], changing demands in society, are increasingly undermining conventional agriculture [57]. This stimulated the development of new social, economic, environmental activities and associate regime elements under the framework of multifunctional agriculture [58]. The search for alternative sources of income for farmers and the desired socialization of care were major reasons for the ministries of agriculture and of health, welfare and sports, respectively to support the sector and the initiation of the National Support Centre.

To summarize, the MLP helps us understand how changes in the care and agriculture regime came about, and helped promote care farming. The latter required a multi-spanning innovation. A diversity of boundary-spanning organizations and individuals were instrumental in developing bridges between the two domains. Examples are the National Support Centre, employees of care institutions realizing collaboration with farmers, former employees of the care sector starting their own care farm and foundations of care farms with their own AWBZ accreditation. MLP argues that structure (existing regime) and actions shape each other, that structure is both medium and outcome of action and that actors are not only affected by the context but also change the context [59]. Examples are the national agriculture and care support center and the regional foundations of care farms. Both developed a strong structure at national and regional level that supported farmers in developing care farms. Both organizations affected the direction in which the sector developed. The handbook and quality system developed by the support center showed new care farmers how to develop their care business. Due to the support of regional foundations, a new group of care farmers who did not have the ambition to develop the care business themselves, entered the sector.
5.3. Care farming as a social movement

The care farming sector can be seen as a social movement. The first pioneers started mobilizing demand for change in society. For collective action to be possible, systems of shared beliefs, identity, consciousness and boundaries must emerge [34] through diagnostic and prognostic framing. The first generation of care farmers, united in foundation Omslag was a relatively homogeneous group. They were very critical about mainstream agriculture and mainstream care. The first pioneers were able to attract a large number of volunteers, employees and clients. They were attracted by the enthusiasm and vision of the initiators. The volunteers invested time, energy and money to turn the initiatives into a success. The National Support Centre helped to secure resources. It also stimulated regional collaboration of care farms and the availability of regional resources for the further development of the sector. The support center contributed to the legitimacy of the sector. The support center generated much publicity for the sector, initiated links with client organizations and care institutions at a national level and developed a quality system.

These activities and the fact that the sector was supported by two ministries increased cognitive and socio-political legitimacy, which resulted in additional support at a provincial level and the development of regional organizations of care farmers and collaboration of care institutions with care farmers, which is in line with the earlier finding that, if a new industry is to succeed, somebody has to act to legitimize the new activity [60] and alliances with large organizations with legitimacy can help mitigate the problems of newcomers [61]. In line with previous studies [34], discussions about the identity and boundaries of the sector started. There were discussions about the definition of a care farm, whether care farmers should restrict themselves to clients with intellectual disabilities, whether care-oriented care farms were as good as agriculture-oriented care farms, whether it was necessary to set up education and use a quality system, whether the sector could be represented by the farmers’ association and whether care institutions were colleagues or competitors.

Social movements can develop normative pressure on existing regimes through three main processes: a) the framing process, b) resource mobilization and c) political opportunity structure [62]. The framing process seemed to be important in attracting support during the pioneering phase; the National Support Centre helped secure resources and created political opportunities. Framing was initially focused as a counter-culture, as an alternative way of life. Nowadays, care farms argue that they contribute to the normalization and socialization of clients, focusing on their individual potential instead of their limitations. The support center operated very strategically, realizing that political support was important for the development of the sector. Media coverage and direct links with members of parliament were important in securing continued support from the ministries. Other factors that increased the legitimacy of the sector are the development of a quality system for care farms, the positive experiences of clients and employees of care institutions with care farms and the view that care farms fit the desired socialization of care and contribute to the empowerment and rehabilitation of different client groups [12]. Our experiences that dealing with power issues, framing and the ability to empower people are import topics, are in line with observations from food movements [e.g. 63]. In line with other social movements, the care farming sector adopted organizational forms with cadre and staff.

5.4. Integration of theories

Integration of the three types of theories for understanding the development of the care farming sector shows that they reinforce each other.

Organizational ecology describes the evolutionary process of the care farming sector, in terms of the fit between different types of care farms and the environment. Also, the increases in legitimacy and variation can be explained by this theory: as the quest for legitimacy and competition are seen as the main drivers of the development of the sector.

The multi-level perspective contextualizes these driving processes in the wider institutional context. Changes in the care regime, like the broadening of the personal budget of clients and liberalization of the care sector, simplified access to funding for care farmers and enabled foundations of care farmers to become AWBZ accredited care institutions. Such regime changes strengthened especially the position of care farmers that are not part of care organizations and contributed to increasing numbers and variation of care farms and opening to new client groups as is illustrated by the sharp increase in the number of care farms from 2004 onwards in Fig. 2. The multi-level perspective also points at the opportunities and challenges to operate in the agricultural and care regimes.

Fig. 4. Integrated multi-level framework illustrating the main developments of the care farming sector.
Social movement theory gives additional insight in the process and impact of collaborative action and strategies of care farms and organizations for support. It explains how in the first stage pioneers with critique on the care and agricultural sector mobilized demands from society and how at a later stage the National Support Centre increased legitimacy for the sector, secured resources and made use of political opportunities; e.g. the dispensation of care-bound sales tax for care farmers. It shows how strategic actions like implementing a quality system increased the legitimacy of care farms and resulted in a degree of normalization and encapsulation by the care sector. The main developments of the care farming sector in relation to the three theories used is illustrated in Fig. 4.

We can conclude that the development of the sector was a process of mutually reinforcing actions of strategic boundary-spanning agencies and changes in the structure of the care regime favouring the legitimacy and the development of the care farming sector.

6. Conclusion

We have shown how the different theories relate to each other in understanding the dynamics of the care farming sector. Organizational ecology helps us understand how legitimation and knowledge helped speed up the expansion of the sector, which was further enabled by the fact that carrying capacity appeared not be fixed. Changes in the care regime affected the care farming sector to a large extent and together with collaborative action affected also the direction of the evolution of the sector. How the Support Centre made use of the windows of opportunity resulting from changes in the care regime may be well understood on basis of social movement theory. Changes in the care regime and collective action promoted expansion of the sector and gave direction to the ways the sector developed in qualitative terms.

When we put it in a broader perspective, we think that our framework may contribute to our understanding of changes in rural communities and agriculture and, more specifically, to sustainable connection and bridging agriculture with other domains as is often an important challenge of diversification [e.g. 64]. Several studies have shown the relevance of ecological and evolutionary approaches [e.g. 65], the structure-agency concepts [e.g. 18] and social movement theory [e.g. 66] to understand changes in rural areas. To our knowledge, this is the first attempt to integrate these complementary perspectives in the field of multi-functional agriculture.

References

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