

26. Worldwide opportunities in organic farms: key drivers and research implications of unwaged work

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Abstract

In developed countries, the unwaged work provided by family workers is decreasing rapidly, replaced partly by the unwaged work of apprentices, interns, and volunteers from urban and suburban locations, compensated through a diverse mix of training, accommodation, and food. Our focus is on the Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF), an international network linking people who want to volunteer in organic farms with farmers who offer accommodation and food in exchange for work. To explore the WWOOF hosts, three main drivers are identified and based on recent academic literature, the major features of each dimension are discussed. Research implications are provided, including in-depth interpretation of unwaged farm work and identification of the elements that contribute to rendering organic farming a resilient agricultural system.

Keywords: WWOOF host, volunteering, organic farmer

26.1 Introduction

The unwaged work provided by family workers and farmers in exchange for another type of service has been a typical feature of family farms. In developed countries, a transformation has recently occurred in the nature and configuration of unwaged work on farms. Specifically, there has been a decline in the number of on-farm family workers and a growth in that of unwaged workers, represented by interns, apprentices, and volunteers from urban and suburban locations. Typically, the latter provide labour compensated with training through practical experience, accommodation, or food.

Among unwaged work exchange arrangements is 'work for food and accommodation', proposed by the Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF), a worldwide movement linking volunteers (WWOOF guests) with organic farmers and growers (WWOOF hosts) to promote educational and cultural experiences based on trust and non-profit exchange, thereby helping build a sustainable global community. In line with the 'organic philosophy', the WWOOF's approach incorporates values of environmentalism, sustainability, and social justice. At present the WWOOF International is a federation (FoWO) of 57 national WWOOF members, including Italy. At present, 24 of the 57 national

WWOOF are located in Europe, 13 in Asia-Pacific, 11 in North and South America, seven in Africa, and two in the Middle East. Furthermore, some countries have WWOOF hosts but do not have a national WWOOF group. While sharing the general principles of the FoWO, each national WWOOF is autonomous in defining its internal rules and structure, conditioned by their particular culture and laws. Founded in 1999, the Italian WWOOF is a recognised social-promotion association entered on the national register, in accordance with the newest non-profit sector code (dl n.117-2017).

Each national WWOOF defines its set of general rules and conventions that provide the reference framework for hosts and guests on how to engage in the work exchange programme and what to give and expect from it. Nothing about the WWOOF exchange programme is strictly standardised by the guidelines. It is the guests' responsibility to make direct contact with hosts and to arrange between them a mutually convenient visit. A multitude of organic farming styles can coexist among WWOOF hosts because it is expected that the hosts follow the organic principles of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, but they do not need to be attested by any certified organisation.

The WWOOF exchange programme is non-monetary and non-commercial, but it is not purely and unconditionally a social relationship without costs for the WWOOF guests and hosts. In this programme, the boundaries between public and private and between work (production) and leisure (consumption) cannot be exactly defined. Different levels of social relationships are possible, always deeply based on a working relationship with the WWOOF guest in a unique role, bordering between a worker and family member.

In the past, agricultural economists dealt extensively with the unwaged work provided by family workers, considering its effects on household farms and the path of agricultural development (for example, Van der Ploeg, 2013). However, the emergent forms of unwaged work are curiously a neglected topic in the agricultural economics literature, and that is especially true in Italy. That is not the case with researchers of economic geography, tourism economics, volunteering economics, and social sciences.

In this study, we mainly identify the key drivers of the choice to become a host and apply for unwaged work by examining the pattern of a WWOOF exchange.

Recognizing the key drivers is a preliminary step towards understanding how the WWOOF exchange programme can be linked to performances and to a development path for organic farms, as well as to the non-economic ambitions of organic farmers.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section summarises the main results of this study, which examines 'WWOOFing'. The key drivers of the choice to become a WWOOF host are discussed in Section 26.3. The last section discusses the implications of this study.

26.2 WWOOF network and the main views of scholars

The origin of the WWOOF experience dates back to the organic movement in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s. To contribute effectively to people, this movement reflects on

questions related to the environment and food production, with its priority being to reconnect consumers of organic products to farmers who adopt organic production methods.

Currently, a secondary purpose – to support the ‘slow travel experience’ – complements the original aim. Therefore, besides town dwellers who wish to experience life on a farm and know about organic growing methods, the WWOOF supports guests who are interested in experiences within a cultural context that is different from their own, assuring a deeper immersion in the local communities where such experiences take place (Lipman and Murphy, 2012). For organic farmers, this represents a double potential gain. The first is having extra helpers for farm activities, and the second (equally relevant) is reinforcing their network of personal relationships and enhancing knowledge exchanges with people outside their local community.

Although the WWOOF acronym has not changed, its meaning is not the same as that provided in 1971. While the initial meaning of the acronym was Working Weekends on Organic Farms, in the early 1980s, it was changed to Willing Workers on Organic Farms, and subsequently to Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms in the early 2000s. As noted by Yamamoto and Engelsted (2014), the need to modify the meaning is related both to the enrichment of the aims of the WWOOF and to avoid the risk of clashing with the labour and immigration regulations, preserving its special form as a non-monetary work exchange. Since it was founded in 1971, the WWOOF has grown steadily, and at present, FoWO is a worldwide network.

From the beginning of this century, the spread of the WWOOF has captured the attention of the scientific community, which in turn has become interested in this phenomenon from various perspectives.

In more detail, some authors considered the WWOOF as a genuine agritourism activity because of the volunteers’ experience in farms, including elements of personal meaningfulness and opportunity to learn. Other authors identified the WWOOF as an ecotourism experience because it is nature-based and is oriented towards the preservation of rural landscapes. Finally, the WWOOF has been considered a sustainable form of tourism because the longer stays imply both lower carbon footprints for travelling and sustainable lifestyles adopted by travellers.

Academic interest also focused on the motivations for using volunteers and the benefits that organic-farmer hosts receive through the WWOOF (Terry, 2014).

The support of the WWOOF community to organic farmers can produce many social and economic (sometimes conflicting) effects, especially relevant in the rural marginal areas with labour shortage. With reference to the farm work support of the volunteers, oftentimes, the WWOOF farm hosts consider their guests as the vital ‘muscle power’ needed to implement labour-intensive production methods or to carry out the most labour-intensive phases of the farm production processes. The extra support of unpaid workers is usually needed by the family-worker farms, where the old farmers’ families are without children at home or the young farmer’s families are still small. As such, the WWOOF programme can mitigate labour market failures with guests able to satisfy a local work demand that is not satisfied

by paid workers. As claimed by Terry (2014), the hosts can supply organic food at low cost, without resorting to the extra work of their farming family. In a more critical way Terry (2014) has considered the WWOOF programme 'as mitigating labour-market failures, rather than as contributing to the displacement of workers' (p. 106). Beyond the explicit desire of volunteers to create an alternative food production community, the priority goal of the farmers in hosting WWOOF guests could be to meet their requirements for manual labour. As suggested by Lans (2016), the volunteers' labour can increase farm profit but doesn't provide the farmers with tools to offer adequate wages. Briefly, in the words of Mostafanezhad *et al.* (2015), WWOOFing offers to hosts a short-term coping strategy, overcoming difficulties momentarily, without creating a lasting mechanism for solving their problems.

At the same time, the WWOOF is an example of a special kind of market synergy between tourism and development (Moscardo, 2008), such that tourists can be seen as more than just customers and instead, as representing extra human resources able to promote local development. The WWOOF network represents more than just extra labour for host farmers – it can provide support to the local community, thereby contributing to the public good, and social and cultural aims.

However, a general advise of the authors interested in the WWOOF is to conduct deep analyses that focus on the different aspects of this network and different geographical contexts, so as to understand better the WWOOF's contribution to the social and cultural aspects connected to these forms of unwaged work. Finally, certain authors recommend exploring how the WWOOF model may be useful in other industries, where the local labour supply is not adequate for the creation of innovative enterprises (Burns and Kondo, 2015; Ekers *et al.*, 2016; Tecco *et al.*, 2016).

26.3 Key drivers of the choice to become a WWOOF host

To explore the WWOOF hosts, three main drivers are identified as follows: host profile, farm profile, and motivations. The host and farm profiles are strictly interconnected, and both contribute to motivations. Based on recent academic literature, the major features of each dimension are identified and discussed as follows. Figure 26.1 synthesises all the key aspects useful for assessing the WWOOF hosts.

26.3.1 WWOOF host profile

A WWOOF exchange does not necessarily require the host to be a professional farmer. The roots of the WWOOF are in the manifold 'green' initiatives that arose since the 1970s (in the form of the organic food movement, slow food movement, and back-to-the-land movement). Many people, farmers and non-farmers alike, were driven to embrace sustainability efforts to conserve resources and maintain healthy ecosystems. Therefore, WWOOF hosts can vary quite markedly from a farmer engaged in commercial farming to a farmer implementing organic farming and gardening principles merely as a hobby (Ekers *et al.*, 2016).

Previous studies have found that the demographic profile of the host is well defined: they are typically aged between 40 and 59 years, with relatively higher educational attainment

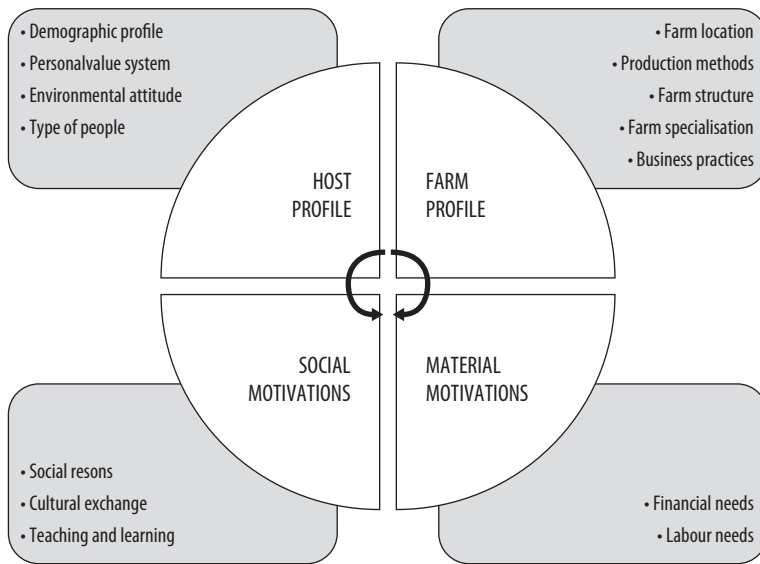


Figure 26.1. Key drivers of the choice to become a WWOOF host.

(tertiary level and postgraduates), and a higher percentage of women often responsible for the organic farming duties. Many of the hosts do not actually farm, and their off-farm employment is their main source of income.

The values held by the hosts and their attitude towards the environment deeply set the WWOOF exchange, matching the needs and values of guests and hosts, thereby minimising conflict, which also makes guests more aware of the consequences of their actions. These values give hosts reasons to look for solutions that are consistent with self-sufficiency and circular-economy principles.

It is also important to consider the type of people (individuals, couples, families, or communities). The decision to become a host or to become agricultural helpers is strongly motivated by the attributes of the family unit, such as the number of dependent children living at home, or at the other end, couples or families without children or young people at home (Terry, 2014).

26.3.2 WWOOF farm profile

A description of the farm properties is important to establish the nature, motivation, and characteristics of the WWOOF host. Studies on WWOOF location patterns showed a substantial deviation from those of other agricultural farms. A WWOOF is unlikely to emerge in conventional, rural, agricultural areas or near large urban centres. Typically, it thrives on the margins of dominant modern agriculture, focused on areas with subsistence agriculture or those based on a relatively small, local demand.

The agricultural activity is not limited to professional farm businesses. A multitude of ecologically oriented methods coexist (e.g. agroecological, biodynamic, permaculture, and organic farming), involving all production activities or only one of them realised by the host. Compared with other farms in the same rural areas, the proportion of certification of organic production is often higher (Ekers *et al.*, 2016).

The host farm can be a heterogeneous mix that consists of a professional farm (large or medium), small holding, house and garden, community living, community-supported agriculture scheme, allotment group, or community garden. Previous studies regularly stressed the small scale of the host farm (per agricultural area utilised), diverging from the average farms of the same rural areas (Yamamoto and Engelsted, 2014). Meanwhile, no relevant differences exist with respect to land ownership. Direct land ownership and family farms are greater than other organisational structures (Ekers *et al.*, 2016). Farm work is a challenge for the WWOOF host due to labour-intensive production processes, the small scale of production, and the difficulty of employing full-time workers, or a family composition without young children at home.

Studies on WWOOF farm specialisation found low specialisation replaced by combining a mix of crops, plantations, and a variety of animals. The main aim is to attain self-sufficiency in the production of on-farm compost and food eaten at home.

The main marketing policy of a WWOOF farm is direct selling (Ekers *et al.*, 2016). Selling direct to consumers is a perfect opportunity for small producers and low production units that do not meet the requirements of conventional channels. Direct selling includes many kinds of channels (co-operatives, farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, and sales to restaurants or delivery services). In addition, WWOOF farms can be engaged in a wide variety of activities finalised to augment the value-added products that are often combined with commercial hospitality.

26.3.3 WWOOF host motivations

Results of surveys on host motivations highlighted a large variety of factors. According to the classification elaborated by Alvares (2012), beyond environmental values and goals (main motivations), there are social and material motivations.

WWOOF hosts regularly show that motivations related to the social dimension of the WWOOF exchange can be quite varied. In general, the enriching of social relations and the cultural exchanges are highly valued by the WWOOF hosts who live in the most isolated areas (mountain and upland areas), those who are alone, or are in families with dependent children living at home. Being together with volunteers has been perceived by hosts as being with people of the same mind and motivations. They expect to interact with them by exchanging views, experiences, ideas, and in this way, build an international network. Volunteers represent a valuable opportunity to maintain an open mind, which hosts find beneficial to them and their children (Yamamoto and Engelsted, 2014).

The pressing needs of hosts can be related to two main and complementary necessities concerning financial constraints and the assistance with physical labour, especially during

the seasonal peak periods and growing seasons. Financial constraints are perhaps a major concern for WWOOF hosts because the return on the capital invested in agricultural activities is not always their main goal (Ekers *et al.*, 2016; Mostafanezhad *et al.*, 2015; Wengel *et al.*, 2018). The work that volunteers provide for free for organic farming, gardening, or other sustainable projects saves costs and alleviates the financial limitations with which hosts are confronted.

26.4 Research implications

In the course of the work it has been repeatedly stressed that WWOOFing is much more than a mere exchange of labour since it takes place in a context which we could consider as social innovation, where the players (WWOOF hosts and guests) develop interactions that seek out new rules of formality and informality based on mutual trust, respect, and interest in each other (Wengel *et al.*, 2018).

The WWOOF, being a strongly ethical movement, raises a series of practical issues, including the in-depth interpretation of unwaged farm work. Specifically:

- To what extent is this really volunteer work?
- How is the economic aspect distinguished from the non-economic one?

Regarding the first question, from a normative viewpoint, the existence of benefits for both participants (host and guest) makes it doubtful that it is not employment. However, from a theoretical viewpoint, the economic approach to volunteering could provide interesting reflections.

From a theoretical viewpoint, two aspects are particularly important in interpreting the phenomenon: (1) the decisional dimension of choosing to commit oneself in the WWOOFing sphere, mediating between a short-term involvement (leisure) and a longer term interest (which may involve personal growth; enriching the experience with technical know-how and/or relational factors); and (2) the relational nature of work commitment, which redefines the output of the production process, enriching the experience with non-material goods (Musella *et al.*, 2015).

With reference to the first aspect, the decision is based on the choice of employing one's time with an intangible asset (for example, spending time in the country for the guest, staying in the country for the host) for one's immediate well-being, or deciding to invest in one's human capital (for example, by learning the principles of organic farming for the guest, and by getting to know people from all over the world for the host) and thinking of the long-term benefits that one can reap from such experiences. With reference to the second aspect, owing to the availability of volunteer work, the output can assume the connotation of complex assets, such as material goods (e.g. agricultural products), meritorious goods (e.g. environmental education and the culture of non-waste), and relational goods (e.g. the creation of a community).

Regarding the second question, it is important to contextualise the study of unwaged farm work within the structure of the organic farming complex. This is not only because the wage

costs in organic farming are much higher than in conventional farming (Richards, 2012) but also because organic farming is both a philosophy of life and a method of production. In fact, it represents a holistic approach that does not primarily focus on only one factor (e.g. the profitability of an enterprise) but addresses complexity and integrates a long-term perspective (Milestad *et al.*, 2002).

The most important question one must ask oneself, as Ekers *et al.* (2016) suggest, is whether ecologically oriented farms can continue to sustain themselves and even grow by relying also on unwaged workers.

From this perspective, WWOOFing offers an opportunity to identify the elements that contribute to rendering organic farming a resilient agricultural system. With particular reference to the three characteristics of a resilient system, as specified by Carpenter *et al.* (2001), it would be interesting to understand how and to what extent WWOOFing contributes to a system's capacity for self-organisation, to its ability to build and increase the capacity for learning and adaptation, and to the capacity for learning and adaptation in the face of change. Finally, it would be interesting to fathom how important it may be to go beyond the existing regulatory systems of unwaged workers for building an 'alternative' agricultural sector and to support sustainable development through community engagement.

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