

Podcast no. 1 – interview with Elżbieta Augustyńska

Hi! Welcome to SOENGAGE, an Erasmus+ project funded by the European Commission. The overall objective of SoEngage Plus is to support farmers learn about and engage in social farming and to promote their social farm services for the economic benefit and sustainability of the farm and the rural community. Hi this is Maciej Dymacz and I work for ARID Association.

SOENGAGE PLUS PODCAST EPISODE number 1. Today we will have a conversation with Elżbieta Augustyńska, an expert in Social Farming, about the present and future for farmers in relation with Social Farming in Poland.

Welcome! To begin with, please introduce yourself and the farm we are in.

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, we are at a social farm, in the Tuchola Forest area, in Tuchola to be precise. I am Elżbieta Augustyńska, I am the owner of a 47-hectare farm, and a social farm that was established in 2017 through the initiative of Mr Ryszard Kamiński, the current minister in charge of agriculture, in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Province. The first project we did was called "Green Care", it lasted 1.5 years. There were 19 people involved in the project. It was for seniors 55+, but our average age was 79. It is a beautiful age.

Please tell us what you are doing at the moment? How does the farm operate?

The farm has changed since then - I no longer have a breeding farm. And the breeding was quite big because it amounted to 1000 animals. Currently, I am involved in a project supervised by Kapolder in Minikowo, which belongs to PCPR Tuchola. It is a project for people with intellectual disabilities, we have a group of five participants. The classes are about preparing these people to be independent, relieving families who are struggling with the problems of their children in everyday life, but not only that. These are the people we are supposed to activate, because the age of the participants starts at 18, and the oldest participant is 60.

What do we do here? The people who came to us had different levels of skills, some could not peel potatoes, some could not tie their shoes, manual activities were a problem for them. They couldn't write, they couldn't count. Today we can see huge progress. We have changed our lives, we have changed our diet to healthier products and we have added gymnastics. We have adopted the motto "First work, then pleasure", so we also work. The participants chose their own activities, took care of the animals we had: geese, ducks, chickens, turkeys and horses. They also take care of the garden, the vegetable garden, and the flowers. Everyone is responsible for something. We also do culinary training, and every day someone else is assigned to work in the kitchen. Of course the participants help each other, they exchange their duties. Today they can prepare breakfast, different dishes, they know what to do. There was also a participant who didn't know what a broom was for, didn't know how to hold it, and now he is doing great. We learn a lot of things here: washing windows, cleaning, kitchen work, preparing dough, or even something very simple like boiling eggs.

Is this the only group of disabled people you have in your household?

No, not only. I am very emotionally attached to people who have been with us before. Sometimes we meet, they come to us. These are seniors who have been with us before, we have integration meetings, feasts. We cook something together and then we eat it. We organise dancing parties. I always say that they are our family, but they say that they come to their other home. If someone has a name day or a birthday, we celebrate it and make cards, flowers, little gifts.

As far as manual work is concerned, we also make decorations for the graves of our nearest and dearest, but I also distribute the surplus decorations to other seniors who also take them to cemeteries and use them.

We also meet with other groups, because before I worked in these projects I used to work with kids from foster families and from children's homes, so we often host them here. It is a form of cooperation and sharing experiences and memories. Young people like to hear stories about what used to be, but more from older people.

Tell us about a typical day at your centre. How does it start, how does the day go for those people who are in your farm?

I think it's good to start the day by moving. Then you have more energy to act, so we start at 7 and go for a morning workout, often a walk. In winter, it was difficult because of the low temperatures, but we had less work on the farm so we could do something more interesting, like walking with poles, and that was a longer route. Later we return to the farm, and it is time to look after the animals. Thorough cleaning is compulsory once a week, and on the other days as much as is needed. Those in charge of the kitchen do their work. We remember about hygiene issues, washing hands, teeth, disinfection. We prepare meals with the products we have from our farm. Sometimes we go shopping, buy the necessary things for the next dinners.

Then comes the time for workshops. Sometimes it is floriculture, wood knitting, and so on. Apart from that, we have the school and study part. Then there is homework or other activities that are required for school.

Later we have a joint outing to the court. This is around 11 a.m., after coffee and tea. Depending on the season, it is recreational or not. We have a garden, an orchard, a field, and during spring and summer it needs a lot of work, so that's when we do it. We pick fruit or vegetables, we take care of everything. The busiest time is May and June because we collect herbs and flowers to dry for the winter, such as nettle, pine leaves, dandelions, rosehips, lemon balm and so on. From this we later make syrups or tea. Nothing goes to waste. We come back and start preparing dinner. We have a two-course dinner, plus often a compote of ripening fruit like strawberries or cherries. After dinner, there is a common time for cleaning, and if we finish quickly, we have some time to play a game. My group is specific, sometimes they don't know how to count or write and we teach them. However, this requires long exercises and repetitions to consolidate these skills. This is how the day slowly ends. Sometimes we also have other activities, we live close to nature and the earth, so our cycle depends on the seasons. When there is a harvest, we mainly do that.

It is a joy to work. And you can see it in everyone. It also brings great effects. We have great specialists, I choose them depending on the needs. We have a dietician, because we needed

such services to change our eating habits into healthier ones. We also have psychologists and addiction therapists, who are very much needed in many cases. We also have a physiotherapist who comes to us for 12 hours a month. That is how the day goes.

What are your future plans for the social farm?

I have a comparison - a farm when there were seniors and a farm when there is a group of mentally ill people. It is certainly easier for seniors because it is a homogenous age group. On the other hand, the disabled are very diverse. There is someone who is single, someone who is divorced, someone who is in a relationship. Each of them has his or her own problem which they bring here and try to solve alone or together. I like these people very much, but there is a very high degree of non-personality. Sometimes people call in the middle of the night, early in the morning, they remember something, they make a big alarm or start to panic and a short time later it turns out that nothing like that happened. They are very absorbing. Seniors do not need so much work. But it's not so bad either, because this is a group which is already practiced. Once we went on a four-day trip and it was great, very well organised. The group is also very well coordinated. You can say: one for all and all for one. They are very worried when someone is absent for a long time, when someone does not answer the phone. If someone doesn't come, their duties are quickly taken over. I'm one of those people who need to have a lot of people around them, something has to happen. This is my sense of life. Just like flowers, they take a lot of time, sometimes you have to go and water them at night, but I like it and I like working with people.

Thank you very much for the interview.

I also thank you.

That's all for this episode! Thanks for listening to SOENGAGE PLUS podcast and remember, if you want to be a part this project follow us on Facebook or visit our website:

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