

Podcast no. 2 – interview with Iwona Cybulska

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 2. Today we will have a conversation with Iwona Cybulska, an expert in Social Farming, about the present and future for farmers in relation with Social Farming in Poland.

Good morning, please introduce yourself.

My name is Iwona Cybulska, we are on my farm located in Stary Sumin, commune Cekcyn, district Tuchola. Bory Tucholskie are the most beautiful region in Poland. We are in my farm, which is a social farm. It all started with ODER, with Mr Ryszard Kamiński, who is today the Deputy Minister. The project, which was set up at that time, lasted 1.5 years and concerned senior citizens. Today we have far fewer of them, and the situation varies, because that first project was financed in a completely different way, and today we have our own account, we have an association which we set up and we operate in a different way. We have also been slowed down by the pandemic, but we are trying to do things as well as possible. In the beginning, it was a kind of break from our farms for us. We live on very poor land, we don't have big farms here, farms of 1000 hectares each, and these are the ones that have the best chance of making a living. And we had an idea to subsidise these farms, but it turned out that it is a great way of creating something new, a different life, a new business. But we have to write projects ourselves and look for funding sources. Recently we finished one project, now we are going to write another one. Apart from that, we are thinking about starting a cooperative, or an organisation, because it gives you a lot more opportunities. Our seniors are very happy, they like what we offer them, they like coming here, they want more. It's important for them that they are together and that they don't have to walk, because for some people even 100 metres is a difficult distance to walk. And we're doing it all slowly, calmly.

And please tell us whether you run a social farm exclusively for seniors?

For now, yes, but we are thinking of working with other organisations. We will see how it will work out. It's very difficult to subsidise us as individuals, and we have to think how to solve this problem. I'm only doing this activity for seniors now, and my friend, for example, has a farm that also takes care of people with disabilities.

Tell us what a typical day on your farm is like.

We don't have typical days, it varies a lot. It used to happen that at the beginning of our activity the seniors didn't want to come in the morning, and nobody wanted to come alone. I

used to drive them around, starting around 9 a.m. There is no routine here, we always try to do something different and new. Our ritual starts with coffee and then we go for a walk. We have a lake nearby. Even people with less fitness can do it. After the walk there is time for a snack and a drink. The walk is not long in terms of distance, it's about a kilometre, but because there are older and weaker people with us, it takes much longer. Sometimes it is worth slowing down in life. Then comes the time to prepare dinner. I don't make it myself, we share the responsibilities here. Everyone is responsible for some activity. And after lunch there is a break, and then it is time for prayer and the rosary together. Not everyone was keen at first, but with time this became our ritual. Later on there was a period when we went to cemeteries, or to places with entertainment such as cinema, theatre, ice-cream or to the forest to walk in new places.

These are perhaps normal activities and you can do them with your own family. But family members very often work quite long hours and commute far, so they are home late and no longer have time for such activities. And sometimes someone needs a lift e.g. to the cemetery to visit the graves of loved ones. We walk a lot, we have a dog from the shelter. One group took him everywhere with them, they were very thirsty for animals even though we all live in the countryside. We do many activities depending on the season. Sometimes we work with preserves - we make jars of cucumbers, or other vegetables. Sometimes we collect flowers and ears of corn for wreaths. We do similar activities every year.

And how old are your pupils?

The youngest lady is 70 and the oldest is 85, but a person who is sadly no longer alive but used to belong to us was 95 and extremely fit, even more than me. The ladies who used to come to us were very sad and lost, they didn't know what to expect. But in a very short time, even after two weeks, they completely changed and smiled a lot. Each of these people has a family, but these families are very busy and often have very little time. There used to be a situation where one woman was very uncomfortable and didn't even want to wear a chain ornament, but now she wears beautiful beads, has her nails painted and thinks that anything is possible. That is the power of motivation. That is our aim. I myself would like to go to such places one day, because they bring a lot of good.

And please tell us how large your groups are?

It depends on the project, mainly it is 5 - 6 people. This is the optimal group, which is easy to lead. We have different activities, in winter the ladies made gloves, in summer we have other activities. But we have walks together all year round. We treat all the participants personally, so the number of people is also important here.

Such a typical day for you lasts from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.? Or does it look different?

It is rather different. The first project had 3 groups of 5 people and the classes were supposed to last 8 hours. But it lasted 10 hours, because before everything started and finished it took

some time. The next project is a bit different as it involves two days a week of classes. We also provide catering.

At the moment do you have one group or more?

At the moment we are done with the project, so I do everything on my own and on my own budget. We do work with the village hall, so some of the events are organised there. Unfortunately, the pandemic has limited us considerably, and now we are at the stage of looking for sources of funding.

Do you work here alone or are there other employees?

I am mainly helped by my sons and my husband, who also has his own separate job. We have a farm of only 15 hectares, so quite small. We have some animals, chickens or ducks. The animals also take part in the activities. We go and collect eggs from the turkeys and the hens, and then we make scrambled eggs or something else out of it. Sometimes I have the impression that the ladies who come here know more than I do about where things are and little things like that. They're also very close to my sons, they're interested when they go somewhere, they ask when they'll be back.

What plans do you have for the future of the farms?

We used to have a lot of pigs and I have only recently got a husband. When I was alone with the children I was the one who took care of everything, so it was completely different. Now we don't have pigs anymore because it's not profitable anymore. But there's a huge pigsty left and it would be nice to do something with it. I've got this idea to convert it into a place where we can hold events. I've already started working on it, but it would be good to get more money from other sources to get it going.

I can see that the demand for the kind of activities you offer is very high.

Yes, it's true, the senior citizens are very happy with what we have here for them. I don't know how it is elsewhere, but here it's the case that senior citizens can't afford to pay for these things. These are people who have worked all their lives and their pension is only PLN 1,000, so it's not even enough for the basics, let alone for additional attractions. That is why projects and various initiatives are so valuable to us. I will do everything in my power to ensure that everything goes in the right direction.

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: <https://www.soengage.eu/soengage-plus/>