

IO3 Podcast CPIP Romania

Hello. Welcome to the SoEngage Plus podcast, a project funded by Erasmus Plus and the European Commission. The overall goal of the SoEngage Plus project is to help farmers learn about social agriculture and develop new skills to promote their agricultural services for the benefit of the local, national economy and the sustainability of the farm and rural community.

My name is Ionuț Urzică, I am a project manager at the Centre for the Promotion of Lifelong Learning in Timișoara, partner in the SoEngage Plus project. Today with me we have Doru Cosei whom I ask to say a few words and introduce himself at the beginning of this episode.

Hello Ionut. Thanks for invitation! My name is Doru Cosei, I am a County Councillor within the Caras Severin County Council, the secretary of the Agriculture Commission.

Excellent Doru, thank you!

Thanks too.

I'll have a few short questions for you. I want it to be an open discussion about agriculture. I know that you, like me, grew up in a rural area and had contact with agriculture from a young age. I would like to see how we can bridge the gap between the classic agriculture we know and the social agriculture that is being promoted in the SoEngage Plus project. For starters, please tell me a few words about your experience with agriculture.

That's right. I grew up on my grandfather's farm, where he raised cattle, sheep, and a small vineyard. My grandfather did quite diverse farming. I learned to work the land, I learned to care for the animals by hand, I learned to mow.

Coming from the same area as you, I know that you are a skilled farmer and very involved in nature. I would like to ask you to tell us a few words about the area we are

part of, especially with a focus on Banatul Montan. It is an area with a great history and tradition in agriculture and I would like you to describe this area to us.

We come from a semi-urban area, Băile Herculane resort is surrounded by mountains and small farms. The people here have a very close connection with these mountains and the land. The agrotourism potential is enormous, I can say that I am very happy when I see this kind of initiatives and these kind of projects that we could successfully implement in our area.

I'm really glad to hear that and I have the same impression as you because there are a lot of small family-run farms in our area. It is not such a heavily industrialised area and I think it goes hand in hand with social agriculture.

Do you know what social agriculture is all about and I would like to ask you if you see any future in the region and in Romania, but especially in our region for social agriculture? What benefits do you think it could bring to people? Because this phenomenon is a bit at the beginning of the road in Romania, and even more so in our area. People, even if they work the land for a long time, have farms, but they are not used to a Social Farm and they are not used to hosting individuals to see what they do there and involve them in the agriculture work. So, I want to ask you, what do you think about the future of social agriculture in our region?

Yes, we can! The potential is enormous for this kind of social agriculture. The benefits would be primarily social when we think of people who need to be reintegrated into society or people who are marginalized or without opportunities. After that, there are the economic benefits that are enormous and with the proper development of these Social Farms we can develop rural areas and regions. With better communication in the rural area, with better information on the existing farmers, I think that miracles could be done in this direction.

All right. Let's tell the people listening, if they don't already know that our region is also an important tourist spot in the country. Do you think that social agriculture could be easily integrated into the tourist circuit? Do you think it could bring major benefits to tourism?

Of course! Organic farming and organic products would be very attractive for our tourists. Tour operators could buy products directly from these farms, which they will then sell in their guesthouses, restaurants, and hotels. So, I believe in a very close connection between Social Farms, organic farming with organic products, and economic agents in tourism.

I think people just need a push and an example of good practice to make this transition. I know that in our area there is someone who has a Social Farm and takes care of horses. I think promoting such examples would be very beneficial for others and would be an incentive to start such actions aimed at the social impact. The benefits of a Social Farm are not limited to the economic side and tourism. We know very well that people who need help, people from disadvantaged backgrounds can really benefit from these Social Farm initiatives.

Do you think that in our area there would be a Social Farm for the inclusion of people who receive social assistance or who are unemployed and cannot find jobs? Because I know very well in this context that in all market segments people do not find employees. Do you think that would be a major development on this side as well?

Yes, with better communication between the local government, and we now come with good experiences from the West that will help us more. The local government, County Council, specific NGO associations, the national social system in collaboration with small farmers can implement the Social Farming system. I think some great projects could come out. For young people who are not well integrated into society have health problems with disabilities or problems with addictions – we would actually support them, and they could do some kind of therapy in our farms in the area through agricultural work. Then they will come out much healthier and more integrated into society.

Sounds great and I think this would be a major benefit not only for our region but also for the country but still using us in the area we started talking about. I want to take advantage of the fact that you are part of the main governing body of the county, and I would like to realistically ask you what the support is from the local and county public administration in promoting agriculture in general. And if you think there are feasible things that can be done to help support farmers who want to start a Social Farm?

I think the most important support would be the education that the County Council could provide to specific town halls and agricultural associations. Further each farm must familiarise themselves and take information from the areas where they want to go. Various programs at the County Council near the town hall could be easily accessed. However, I believe that accessing European funds in particular would lead to a much more beneficial and harmonious development of farms.

Yes, of course. I agree that everything starts with good information and education because we know very well that in most cases farmers may not have such a high level of education and do not know where to find the necessary information. And it is often difficult for them to find consistent lines of funding that can help them. I am glad that the County Council and the City Hall are considering such initiatives and are concerned with promoting development opportunities for farmers.

Going back to our area we know that has strong tourist attraction, namely the Scărișoara - Inlet area, and its scenery automatically came to my mind when I thought of a Social Farm. The area there made me think of something that could very quickly mean a Social Farm even if there we have a community of farms with different houses and not organised in a common unit. I think we are very close to managing to do this there. It looks like a Social Farm because we already have a lot of tourists who go there and see how the animals are raised, eat local products. How much you think we could intervene there with support for the people in the area and how quickly? I think we could make the transition to be known as a very well-developed Social Farm area.

That's exactly where I thought of the scenery. People would go a long way in integrating individuals into society. The aging population there would have real support for these young people whom we would take to participate in these Social Farms. The production of organic products there is one hundred percent so I think no one would dispute the quality of these products that come from these farms. The potential is there in that area.

Yes, it's interesting. I don't know how open people are to working with marketing and getting a little promoted. But in recent years I know that they have been very open to the first tourists and the people in the area are used to being good hosts.

People are welcoming there. They even do some kind of trade or all sorts of so-called sales areas where they simply leave their products, which are just organic honey, fruits,

cheese, vegetables, and tourists pass by take what they want and leave the money there. They serve local products and put the money there. So, these products are for sale at no cost. You set the price as a tourist, and no one is watching over these products. So, it's a very open barter as I say very open. Very correct. It's a very interesting thing. I think it's unique in Romania.

I think this is actually the future of farms or social agriculture. In our area in particular it can be seen as a hybrid version of social agriculture. But in our country, if we look at the possibilities and the location of the farms in the area, most of them are interconnected by tourist routes and with their will or without their will, the tourists often end up in the land of the people. I don't think I know what you're saying about this, but I think that's the future of development and the way we look at things for the Social Farm in the Herculane Caras-Severin Banat Montan area. This is a good thing because I want to get people to know. You're a mountain man and you know it. I think a lot if not the whole area has tourist routes and I want you to tell us a little how many times you enter farms without wanting to mainly or even if you went to farms in the mountains that have tourists crossing through.

I think that the mountain area and the area around the farms have the potential, as I said before, of enormous and extraordinary therapeutic benefits.

I can see on tourists' faces that they are very happy with what they have seen from the locals who are in the area. I'm in that area and even tourists who have never been to the mountains or seen a farm animal. I can go there like going to a zoo and enjoy everything I see.

I'm glad you're saying that, and I think that's the real essence of Social Farming – to bring people back to nature. Because more and more people who live exclusively in urban areas, especially children, have great problems in seeing practically and in reality, where their products come from on the table, how an animal grows, how the earth works and so on.

Good. Before we finish, I have another short question for you as a conclusion. I would like you to tell me how you see the future of social agriculture, in the way we have discussed it, in the next five years in our area – maybe as well as how you see it in ten

years? And finally tell us if you have any advice for young people or even people of any age who are thinking of setting up a Social Farm.

I see the future very clearly. With good information and help from civil society, from the county councils of specific associations. Small farmers could develop much better and have economic benefits supporting these individuals who are not integrated into society. It would be a real help for their farms and that's how we see it. I know labour shortages mean we can no longer find professional farmers and we could integrate these young people. We could successfully integrate them into the farms that are already in our area. As we have discussed with other farmers, they would be happy to have this type of activity supported by a new workforce regardless of the degree of disability or the mental state of the worker. The farms in Caraş Severin really look good. People are working here in our area; people are doing their job and they have always benefited from this work of the land. You know all too well that they worked in the past. We were starving and the future is leading us back to agriculture. With the economic crisis and the expected food crisis – I think small and medium farms could save the future.

And from what you tell me, I like that I see you as being very optimistic about the ease with which the transition to social agriculture could be made. You yourself said that the farms look great, and people would only need personal motivation, not necessarily a lot of structural changes, to make the transition to Social Farming. Finally, if you have a few words of encouragement, I would like to say a few words of encouragement to young people or to all those who really want to start a journey. Let the Social Farmers get started!

In the post-communist period, most of the young people went to study in the city but grew up, as we say, in the village area. I guide them to go back home because the economic benefits are much greater if they are farming and helping their parents and grandparents on the farms and the farms will grow and have a very bright future. We will leave these farms as a legacy to our descendants and our descendants will work much better than we can and will have an experience that will help them to develop very well economically.

Very nicely said. In conclusion, I'm glad you summarised like this. I don't think I could add anything to improve our short episode today. I want to thank you for your openness

and for your participation in sharing your experience because you are truly a mountain man and more than that you are also involved in the administration. Thanks for sharing your knowledge with our listeners today and I would like to thank everyone for listening to us – follow our SoEngage Plus project on our Facebook page.

Thank you Doru for being our guest today!

Thank you very much too. I assure you of my full support and congratulations on the beautiful projects you are doing. Good luck.