

PODCAST 1 _ GROWTHCOOP (SPAIN)

Hello, welcome to the SoEngage Plus project, an Erasmus+ project funded by the European Commission. The overall objective of SoEngage Plus is to help farmers to learn about and participate in Social Farming and to promote its social services for the economic benefit and sustainability of the farm and the rural community.

I'm Javier Morales and I work for GrowthCoop as European Project Manager, welcome to the podcast of the SoEngage Plus project.

Today we will have a conversation with an expert in Social Farming about the present and the future of farmers in relation to Social Farming in Spain and Andalusia.

Good morning – today we are with Jose Salvador who is an expert in social agriculture.

JOSE – Good morning, Javier, thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this podcast.

Jose Salvador is Director of the Rural Development Unit of Huelva's Provincial Council and has extensive experience in the field of social agriculture in Spain and Andalusia.

Jose, we would like to discuss with you some important questions about the situation of social agriculture in Spain and Andalusia.

How is this concept understood in Andalusia and in Spain?

It has to be said that in Andalusia it is a fairly new concept and that few farmers are familiar with or involved in this type of activity.

As there is no support from the administration to publicise this type of agriculture, it is difficult for farmers to think about and adopt this type of practice on their farms. That is why any initiative in which we can see practices from other countries will make it possible to transfer them to our country.

Looking more or less intuitively at this idea of social agriculture, we can define social agriculture as encompassing agricultural, livestock and forestry activities with the priority of establishing social relations that contribute to the social health of the communities involved.

When we talk about health, we are talking about health in a broad sense of the word: social health means any activity that brings benefits to a society in a balanced and sustainable way. Therefore, we are talking about activities that have a positive impact on society by providing wellbeing to the citizen.

For example, let's think about a social garden like the one DISGENIL has, through an agricultural activity we promote the socialisation of the participants and at the same time we encourage them to feel more useful and happier. That is exactly what social agriculture is, through an agricultural activity, to encourage the person or group to receive a personal benefit in terms of improving their physical or mental health.

Therefore, we know that it is a broad and fruitful field. And as we have seen, it ranges from school gardens to social and therapeutic gardens, with projects for social inclusion and also open to anyone.

What new practices or new horizons are developing in Spain?

As we have already mentioned, there are not many practices in Andalusia because it is a very new subject.

We found other types of initiatives, for example, which are beginning to be planned and which we would highlight for being innovative. For example, there are olive tree or bee sponsorship programmes, for example – citizen support projects for farmers through conscious consumption or land stewardship initiatives: those in which society commits itself at different levels to the preservation of the landscape and biodiversity, beyond the production of food.

We are talking about a wide range of conservation activities and the promotion of people's relationship with nature, such as collective cleaning of the environment or the maintenance and signposting of trails.

But as we see it, for the countryside, Social Farming cannot be closed off and I am sure that in the coming years we will see more and more innovative practices.

From your experience, what values does Social Farming promote?

As we can see, social agriculture embodies the fusion of environmental values, perhaps the most recognised, and social values based on this encounter between people and the environment. It is a vision that emerges renewed from ecological agriculture, which is basically a manifestation of human values through the care of the environment.

We must understand that agriculture has progressively become industrial and is sometimes blinded and limited by the goal of economic profit. The vision of social agriculture tries to overcome these limits. Unfortunately, industrial agriculture often takes people off the land because human beings represent a cost of production. It also drives animals and plants out of the countryside when no attention is paid to the preservation of biodiversity and respect for a sustainable economy.

In Social Farming activities, the idea is to find a way – not always easy – for as many people as possible to participate in an agricultural environment, aiming to improve the health and sociability of people and their contribution to that environment.

The ultimate goal is to seek an agriculture that does not take people out of the countryside, but brings them closer to it, in order to stop the gradual abandonment of this necessary activity.

From what sources does Social Farming draw?

As I said, it is a broad concept, but there are many experiences in Europe, which are framed in the term Social Farming, projects such as SoEngage Plus or other initiatives of agricultural organisations, cooperatives, and public administrations in Spain, which have been working for years with a similar proposal of social agriculture. These include the aforementioned educational gardens and land stewardship. Now it is a question of moving from a phase of conception of this

idea to another of emergence, with the deployment of all its positive social potential.

The sources of social agriculture from a fundamental point of view would be none other than society's need to find tools that facilitate sustainability and balance with the agricultural environment and the health and socialisation of the individual. As we have seen, these practices range from the promotion of educational gardens to farmers who use their farms for social purposes, i.e., the aim is always to broaden and make the proposal more inclusive, benefiting the physical and mental health of the participants.

We could also understand that the idea of social agriculture would be that which takes the urban community out of the urban environment or from the vision of the city towards a broader vision and conception of the countryside. As we have seen, projects such as Agritectura work in this sense, which is none other than trying to get to know and touch the environment in order to obtain improvements in the individual and to promote respect and awareness of the rural environment.

In this way and lately we have found that the world of school, social, neighbourhood and urban naturalisation gardens has gained a lot of strength in recent years. But there is also the possibility of a mutual interest in the world of farmers – in the world of agriculture – who offer a space where people can learn, develop, or have fun and contribute to rural and environmentally beneficial work, such as preventing erosion through reforestation. In the end, healing the landscape is also a way of healing ourselves.

In other words, and in conclusion, we understand in this sense that communities create agriculture and agriculture creates communities, and this is where the importance of Social Farming lies.

What do you think the SoEngage Plus project can bring to the table as opposed to the previous SoEngage project, as facilitators for the promotion of Social Farming?

Well, the fundamental objective is to facilitate a network of relationships through an international map of people who work in social agriculture and who want to be known. In this way, it will provide a boost to the areas mentioned above while encouraging the promotion of Social Farming initiatives as an element of environmental education. It therefore maintains the space for the exchange of real experiences based on first-person collaborations.

In short, we are moving towards a deepening of the work we started in the SoEngage project. Towards an idea that opens up more space for our priority: to promote collaboration between people, because social is nothing more than bringing together diverse people, in this case with a common interest in enjoying and relating to nature.

Agriculture has the power to bring us together, so to speak. Because it's something that doesn't come about because someone thinks of doing something, but because communities organise themselves for instance to have surplus food and store it for when there is a shortage of a certain product. Agriculture creates communities and there are communities that create agriculture.

But this meeting is not only a moment of celebration, it also serves to generate direct relations between initiatives. In the previous SoEngage project, it has been very nice to see how, after the end of the project, agricultural associations and interested people have started collaborations and have been interested in all the activities in order to be able to carry out their own initiatives. In short, they have taken ideas to be able to transfer them.

With the proposal of social agriculture and our videos we want to go further and break down barriers of all kinds, between the economic and the social, between the city and the countryside, between a more limited life and a life full of relationships and breathing fresh air. We want to help naturalise the urban environment and bring people closer to the countryside.

Thank you very much Jose for your kind participation and for sharing your knowledge and experience with all listeners.

That's it for this episode!

Thank you for listening to the SOENGAGE PLUS podcast and remember, if you want to be part of this project follow us on Facebook SoEngage Plus.