

DEVELOPMENT OF WELFARE FARMS IN POLAND AS AN INNOVATION IN SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE BEEN, OR ARE ON THE VERGE OF BEING SOCIALLY EXCLUDED

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Abstract

More than 15.2 million people live in rural areas in Poland, of which over 2.1 million are people over 65 years old. It is forecasted that by 2035 the number of these people will increase by almost 60%, to over 3.4 million, and their percentage to the general population from the current 14% to 22%. Thus, the aging of the rural society will be manifested both in the overall increase in the number of elderly people living in rural areas and in the increase in the proportion of seniors towards the general population. The scale of the phenomenon will have a significant impact on the image of the Polish countryside: more and more of its inhabitants will require support in their daily functioning and creation of a dedicated offer, both in the field of public services and services provided within the non-public sector. In view of the above data, which indicate that one of the main problems are demographic issues, an aging population and multifaceted problems of social exclusion, the full mobilization of human and social capital is extremely important. Solutions are sought, which will be the most effective in caring tasks, but also will strengthen the economic potential. In Western Europe, for several decades, the idea of social farms has been developing, whose operation is not only an interesting form of diversifying sources of farm income, but above all an effective form of counteracting the deepening of social exclusion of people who are unable to care for their basic needs (people with intellectual and physical disabilities, the elderly, and even people with a criminal history). The role

of the social farms is to create such conditions that would allow the return to society, the independence or remoteness of the moment when the care of a person is taken over by the institution of care (old age homes, nursing homes, hospitals). The aim of this article is to present the effects of participant observations carried out in pioneer care farms in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodeship covered by the substantive and financial support program by the Agricultural Advisory Center in Minikowo. The study used qualitative methods in the field of ethnography and sociology (participant observations and narrative interviews). The research was conducted from September 2016 to August 2017 in 10 social farms in the districts of: Brodnica, Mogilno, Świecie, Tuchola and Wąbrzeźno. The article, however, presents the results of observations from the farm, which was considered to be exemplary, and thus the work of this farm was deemed worthy of dissemination. This example also opens up a wide field for discussion (more on this in the main part of the article) around the problem of qualitative evaluation of the activities of social farms.

Keywords: *welfare farms, green welfare, quality study*

JEL classification: Q10, Q12, Q13

1 Introduction

Rural areas in Poland are inhabited by over 15.2m people, out of which 2.1m are 65 years old or over (CSO, 2016). It is estimated that by 2035 the number will increase by 60% to reach 3.4m, the growth from 14% to 22% of the whole population of the country (CSO, 2014). Ageing of the society in rural areas will manifest both in the general increase of the number of the elderly citizens as well as their quota within the whole population. The scale of the phenomenon will significantly shape the future image of the Polish countryside: the number of country dwellers who depend on support of others in everyday life will increase. A new dedicated offer aimed at helping such people in the public and non-public sectors will become more urgent. The statistical data indicates that the main problems are the current demography trends, the ageing of the society, and multidimensional problems of social exclusion. The most important factor which has the potential to remedy this unfavourable situation is full mobility of the human and the social capital.

According to Anthony, “social exclusion occurs when individuals are denied participation in the life of a society” (Giddens, 2006, p. 346). The term “social exclusion” is often replaced by scientists with “underclass” (Murray, 1996) or “the culture of poverty” (Lewis, 1966). Zygmunt Bauman illustrates the problem of social exclusion by using such pejorative terms as “discarded”, “junk”, or “spare” in

order to describe the people who fell victim of advancements in technology and economy, modernisation or, as in the case of Poland, the fundamental political changes (Bauman, 2004, p. 13). Bauman argues that the phenomenon of social exclusion is characterized by its inevitability and the global dimension, the two factors which render any attempts of finding local remedies even more difficult. The level of social exclusion can also be measured by the degree in which citizens engage in public life, participate in elections, take part in the life of certain civic organizations, or are involved in such basic activities as tourism, spending holidays or consumer behaviour. Developing relationships between community members is yet another measure of social participation, which manifests in the number of acquaintances one can depend on in emergency, the frequency of social meetings, and engaging in charities and matters not aimed at bringing material profit. As these forms of participation decrease and become more feeble, so do the contacts between citizens, which results in increasing social isolation.

Due to the fact that the European societies become increasingly “grey-haired”, they require more care and attention. Increased life expectancy and better general physical condition notwithstanding, sadly there are no prescriptions for alienation, which is the growing concern among the elderly. The current situation requires finding such solutions, which would effectively provide care for those who need it, while securing the economic growth of the country. Ideally, citizens should be entitled to free social welfare schemes provided by the National Health Service. However, the Polish citizens and those living in other states from the former Eastern Bloc can still remember the cruel reality of the socialist system. For the reasons mentioned above, contemporary welfare services tend to be allocated to non-government organizations belonging to the private sector, particularly those which operate locally, such as families who live with the elderly (Błędowski & Kubicki, 2009, 2009b, Mestheneos & Triantafillou, 2005). While the character of these sectors (informal – provided by a family, public, non-government, commercial) may differ from country to country, their foundation remains the informal character of care provided by a family (Mestheneos & Triantafillou, 2005, p. 14).

This model has been successfully developed in western Europe for decades. Farms offering family welfare schemes for the elderly are not only an interesting form of farmers’ diverse activity which generates additional income but, primarily, an effective way of overcoming the problem of social exclusion among those citizens who are unable to secure their basic needs (e.g. mentally or physically disabled people, the elderly, or even former inmates of correctional facilities). The role of welfare farms is to create such conditions, which would help their beneficiaries re-integrate with the society, become more independent, and postpone

the moment when a these people require institutional care (care centres, old people's homes, etc.).

First welfare farms were established over a hundred years ago, at the beginning of the 19th century, as asylums for mentally disabled people. Unfortunately, instead of providing care which those people needed, their role was to separate them from the rest of the society. Despite this apparent injustice, it was soon noticed that being surrounded by nature and the rural environment helped to soothe patients with disorders. Engaging in simple farming jobs proved to have beneficial effects for the patients who, to use simple terms, started to feel needed. The therapeutic effects of being surrounded by the "green space" was observed as long time ago as the Medieval Ages. Gardens were built next to prisons, hospitals or monasteries to help patients recover from their illnesses (Sempik et al., 2010, 13).

The 20th century brought rapid development of agriculture in Poland. Farms became large specialized plants producing and processing foods (Brown et al., 2005; van Zanten et al., 2014). Their successful operation depended on farmers' competence and professional know-how, having access to the latest information, and assistance of advisory centres (Prus, 2017; Prus & Drzazdzynska, 2017; van den Ban & Hawkins, 1996). When faced with such competition, smaller farms, which often passed from generation to generation, were forced to look for alternative sources income (Carter, 1998; Marcysiak & Prus, 2017). This led to the increased interest and importance of multifunctional development of rural areas in Poland (Prus, 2010, p. 15-16; Runowski & Ziętaara, 2011; Kalinowski, 2013; van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003), which started to adopt new economic and social functions. The change was fuelled further by the development of tourism (Bessière, 1998; Garrod et al., 2006; Getz & Carlsen, 2000), agritourism (Brandth & Haugen, 2011; Roman et al., 2017; Tew & Barbieri 2012), and eco-farming (Michelsen, 2001; Padel, 2001; Pugliese, 2001). This is how small farms were often transformed into welfare farms, whose owners looked for new and alternative sources of income, and were able to provide patients from different welfare institutions with new forms of individual care. The term "welfare farm" has several synonyms in professional literature: "green care farms", "social farming" or "therapeutic horticulture." It was the Dutch who pioneered the idea of using farms for therapeutic purposes. In Holland the number of green care farms increased from 75 in 1988 to over 800 today, which makes the country the European leader of welfare farming (Elings & Hassink, 2008, p. 310). Countries with only slightly lower number of welfare farms are Italy (almost 700), France (over 500), Norway and the Flanders region in northern Belgium (over 400) (Kamiński, 2015).

It is not merely the value of local assets which plays a key role in promoting welfare farms. Social background as well as well-established tradition, one in which people appreciate and understand the nature treating it not only as a resource but common good which serves generations, are also very important factors. For many people green care farms conjure up the images of homestead and peasants, strong family bonds and treating work on a farm not solely as a source of income. This view is especially popular among the Italians. Francesca Giarè, the Italian researcher from Istituto Nazionale di Economia Agraria, argues that social farming (*L'agricoltura sociale*) is a natural derivative of the Italian farming tradition, and should be treated as innovative for several reasons. Firstly, it is characterized by its ethical and social context and can quickly respond to consumer needs providing high-quality produce. Secondly, it adds a multifunctional dimension to farming, which can offer employment opportunities to the socially excluded. Thirdly, the work on a green care farm is an excellent way to complement the medical and care services provided by the state, having the potential to affect and redesign the existing system (Giarè, 2009, p. 5). Not long ago, in 2009, the idea of green farming was obscure in Italy, and the farmers who wanted to start providing welfare services did not know where to begin. The authors of the "Social farming" guidebook propose building strong relationships between the farmers and local non-government organizations such as schools, whole communities, volunteers and businesses. They argue that green farming can thrive especially when different institutions and environments are activated. The next step is to taking initiative, exchanging information, participating in training courses where farmers can exchange ideas, share experience and implement new solutions together (Giarè, 2009, p. 6).

The evolution of welfare farms throughout the years allowed European farmer to gain new valuable experience. They have learned that together with their farms, they need to be better prepared in order to face new challenges. They have come to realize that they can provide help not only for the people who cannot function in the society due to their physical disability or old age, but also for patients with disabilities resulting from mental disorders (Elings & Hassink, 2008, p. 310). As such, welfare farms fulfil their therapeutic task.

However, to quote the popular saying, it is "easier said than done". One must realize that adapting a farm to meet the new functions of the welfare farm is not an easy task, and not merely because of the cost of infrastructure. Sadly, contemporary farms ceased to be characterized by their cultural, mystic, and magical spirit. These values have become a commodity, and many farms are basically businesses that have lost their farming identity (Kocik, 2000, p. 58). On the positive side, the development and changes which are have been taking place are fuelled

by people with fresh approach, individuals with little or no farming background. These people often have new interesting ideas regarding the use of land, space and surroundings. They realize that apart from its production potential, nature offers numerous aesthetic and leisure opportunities (Gorlach, 2004, p. 155).

2 Data and Methods

The growing number of welfare farms requires constant monitoring from institutions, health service agencies and the government. The Dutch researchers advocate a combination of the quantitative assessment (focused or semi-structured interviews) and the qualitative assessment (surveys and questionnaires) (Elings & Hassink, 2008, p. 311). In the case of our study there is no need to use the quantitative assessment due to the simple fact that there are few welfare farms in Poland, whose main activities concentrate around diagnosing the clients' problems, assessing the amount of help needed by other welfare institutions and, most importantly, investigating the surroundings of the welfare farm (neighbour opinions, the degree of assistance, which might be obtained from other non-governmental organizations or the council).

The aim of this article is to present the effects of participant observations, which have been conducted among the pioneer welfare farms in the Kujawsko-pomorskie region. The farms were offered professional know-how as well as financial support and by the Agricultural Advisory Centre in Minikowo.

The research involved the qualitative methods used in ethnography and sociology (open participant observations and narrative interviews). The research was conducted between September 2016 and August 2017 in 10 welfare farms from the following districts: Brodnica, Mogilno, Świecie, Tuchola and Wąbrzeźno. For the purpose of this article the authors decided to limit the volume of data and only to include the main conclusions.

3 Results and Discussion

Ryszard Kamiński, the director of the Agricultural Advisory Centre for the Kujawy and Pomorze region (KPODR) based in Minikowo, is a keen supporter and enthusiast of developing welfare farms in Poland. Currently, the centre is introducing another project which aims at development of day care within the Operational Programme for 2014-2020 (Priority 9: Social Inclusion; Primary Goal 9.3: Development of Health and Social Services; Secondary Goal 9.3.2: Development of Social Services). In the autumn of 2016, 15 farms from the Brodnica, Mogilno, Świecie, Tuchola and Wąbrzeźno districts were authorized to provide welfare

services. After the carers had completed their training, and the farms had been adapted to meet the requirements of new clients, the farms started providing the services in January 2017 and will continue to do so until mid 2018. The participants of the programme are people who depend on others' help in everyday life. They will be able to benefit from support and therapy in groups consisting of 3 to 8 members, 8 hours a day, 5 days a week. Every person who is eligible for the scheme (225 people) is guaranteed to use the service for 6 months. The project provides farmers with assistance, facilitates the functioning of the welfare farms, helps to develop the range of services, and adjusts therapy to the needs of individual patients. Both carers and the cared have access to a psychologist at all times. Typically, the elderly in Poland can benefit from individual care for up to 8 hours a day. While this may seem enough, in fact they often suffer from loneliness, which may lead to different forms of mental disease. The project promotes group therapy, which helps to overcome this problem. The concept of the welfare farm scheme has been consulted with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The Agricultural Advisory Centre for the Kujawy and Pomorze in Minikowo together with the Agricultural Advisory Centre in Cracow have been working towards securing the official recognition and legal status for functioning of the welfare farms in Poland. The analysis of the empirical data obtained through the interviews and information obtained from participant observations allowed us to formulate numerous important conclusions. They can help us to evaluate the functioning of welfare farms which are taking part in the project.

At the moment the model farm achieving the best results is the "Kociewska Toskania" farm (the Kociewie Tuscany) farm run by Ms. Sara Valentini Pstrong and Mr. Arkadiusz Pstrong.

Surrounded by lush green forests, fertile fields and other arable land, the farm boasts perfect infrastructure for a welfare center. The owners keep horses but the farm specializes in rearing donkeys, which are not bred for sale or meat. Although the animals are not allowed in the house, they enjoy a special status nevertheless, and are treated as "co-workers." In fact, every creature living on the farm brings something into it. Other animal residents include dogs, cats, horses, geese, an alpaca, pigs, numerous swallows and even bats. The owners of the farms act as the carers and look after the patients. According to Mr. and Mrs. Pstrong, creating space where patients can spontaneously interact with the animals is very important and has therapeutic effect. Having said that, they stress that the safety of the patients' is paramount. The inmates do not like to be referred to as "patients." They are treated as guests in Sara and Arek's house, guests who may require extra attention, but guests nevertheless. The first effects of the therapy are very promising. Evidently, during their stay at the "Kociewie Tuscany", the patients have built

their self-esteem, started to engage in conversation and plan their daily activities, they have also become more confident when making decisions, which are not questioned by their carers. As they say, “We finally feel accepted. It is very important to us.” This positive change is also confirmed by other people, neighbours and friends, who noticed that the patients have become more confident, they leave the farm more often, walk or go shopping, etc. Another positive change is the increased awareness of the state of personal hygiene (now the patients change their clothes more often, comb their hair, shave and, above all, wash or take a shower). Interestingly, those patients who were reluctant to participate in group work, now assign themselves tasks which require them to remain in closer proximity to others. In other words, they still tend to work separately but, actually, they are nearer, keeping others in sight. Preparing meals together also helps to bring the patients together. They cook and share kitchen duties on a fair basis. They even vote for the menu for the following day. All this helps to increase one’s sense of being independent, and teaches how to be responsible for other members of the group.

As a scientist, I tend to remain sceptical with regards to research results. Unfortunately, in this case it is difficult to question the results of the observation since there is no control sample. It is not possible to compare conditions created by welfare farms with clinical conditions provided by hospitals. The only alternative is to monitor the evaluation methods and scrutinize the results. The research results prove that welfare farms in Poland are subject to constant scrutiny by the project co-ordinators from the Agricultural Advisory Centre for the Kujawy and Pomorze region (KPODR), who visit each farm at least twice a month and check if the owners follow the standards declared in the initial stage of the project. What is more, once a month the patients have a meeting with a representative from the co-ordinating team in Minikowo, and a psychologist. The main difference between welfare farms in Poland and their west European counterparts is that the former lack in the formal status. Welfare farms, such as the “Kociewie Tuscany”, can be found in Belgium and the Netherlands. They provide similar high-quality services.

4 Conclusion

Despite the fact welfare farms have a long tradition in Europe, they all seem to face similar problems. Due to the fact that the Dutch have considerable experience in this matter, their observations are particularly important. They argue that “green farms” have beneficial influence on “guest-patients” who improve their mental and physical state. The patients themselves claim that by staying on green farms they are fitter, feel needed again, and it helps them to regain their confidence and

self-esteem. These opinions were confirmed in the course of our research. The problem, for which the Dutch have not found a satisfactory answer yet, is what future awaits the welfare farms? The funds and programmes are bound to come to an end eventually. The patients will not be able to continue living on the farms any further because the farms were not meant to act as the final stop in their lives (Elings & Hassink, 2008, p. 320). Polish farmers are still learning about the nature and successful operation of welfare farms. There is one advantage, however, makes welfare farms in Poland different from the west-European counterparts: they are characterized by their communal character rather than being associations. While it may seem like an obstacle, especially with regards to the development of farming, it is actually a considerable benefit in the case of farms providing welfare services. To sum up, Poland has considerable potential, which may and should be used to combat social exclusion while bringing income for family-run farms.

Let us end this paper with a quotation from the co-owner of the “Kociewie Tuscany” welfare farm: “As far as I am concerned, [our activity] is just welcoming guests into our house and treating them with sincerity and respect they deserve. In my opinion, what they really need is the feeling of being accepted. By belonging to and participating in the life of an alternative social group they are given the opportunity to feel safe and find the long-gone joy of living.”

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