

COVID-19 Community Foundations in Action



Poland - Offering hope



Iwona Olkowicz

The Covid-19 crisis hit Poland in the middle of yet another big crisis. A crisis of democracy. Since the national conservative party PiS took over the affairs of state in 2015, the country has been suffering under the authoritarian actions of its leaders, resulting among other things in a dramatically run-down healthcare system - deeply unprepared for the handling of a pandemic. “It was complete chaos,” Iwona Olkowicz recalls. Due to her work as a board member of Elk Community Foundation as well as a member of the management board of the Federation of Community Foundations in Poland, she is located in the northeast of the country, but most of her family and friends live in Warsaw. Her sister is working as a nurse in a hospital there and reported the circumstances of her workplace to Iwona: “They didn’t have any protection equipment for the medical staff. Only in the middle of April, the government bought equipment from China, but a few weeks later it turned out that the masks didn’t have certification.” To Iwona, it became clear very quickly, that there was also no long-term strategy of the government to fight the pandemic. She and her colleagues immediately rolled up their sleeves and got to work: “The citizens and foundations are now doing the work that the government should do.”

First, Iwona helped where support was needed most: “When I saw the announcement that the hospitals in my community were looking for volunteers to sew masks, I remembered that I had a sewing machine in my house somewhere.” So Iwona started to sew masks. “The next thing, me and my colleagues did, was forming a coalition with other stakeholders to support wherever we could.” A hotline was set up, involving some of the Federation’s board members, where elderly people could call if they needed help, for example to run errands: the social welfare centers were reviewing the calls, giving the numbers to local organisations which were looking for volunteers via social media. A true emergency coalition. The community foundations also supported people who were trying to find used computers and tablets for children to prepare them for homeschooling. From Iwona’s point of view, children are those hit the hardest by the current crisis: “Their worlds completely collapsed. They need physical contact with their peers.” That is why the community foundations in Poland are trying to arrange psychological services for children - and in the long run for all citizens in need. “That remains our main topic,” Iwona underlines, “We need to talk to our fellow citizens, and we need to find safe spaces for talking.” Video calls which have been useful for a lot



Volunteer sewing masks

of services during the Covid-19 crisis are not the solution to this problem. Since a lot of people don't own a computer, the services are concentrating on contacts via telephone. "We have to give the people hope, that's the only way to get through this crisis."

Iwona observes that the crisis led to a lot of extreme emotions: "On the one hand, they are very good and empathetic. On the other hand, there have been a lot of aggressive reactions towards medical staff - doctors and nurses that were asked to stay away from their fellow citizens because they were allegedly carrying the plague." This is where Iwona sees the main challenge for the community foundations in her country: "Of course we as community foundations are only a small part of society, but in the local communities we can be leaders, we can bring people together."



Volunteer shopping for isolated elderly

She is sure: "The world will never be the same again. This crisis is a big test for the civil movement."



Elk Community Foundation started its operation in 2015 as a part of a local grantmaking organisation. This year Elk Community Foundation will be registered as a separate foundation. The Foundation has no paid staff and is run by volunteers, 8 of them responsible as board members together with various other volunteers. The Foundation has no endowment and spends approximately €4,500 per year.

Elk Community Foundation is one of approximately 20 community foundations in Poland. The Federation of Polish Community Foundations is the membership organisation that helps solving problems of local community foundations. For more information follow [The Federation of Polish Community Foundations](#) on our website.