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## **Poland**

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### **4H Clubs fulfill USDA's overseas objectives for rural communities**

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**Report Highlights:**

Just like the U.S. program, Polish 4-H clubs promote the importance of rural life and global citizenship, as well as folk traditions and Polish customs. Over 200 Polish children have paid their own way to visit the United States as part of youth exchanges with clubs in Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Pennsylvania. A group of 4H kids from Indiana will be in Poland next week. This relationship fosters a shared interest between the United States and Poland, with regards to climate change, and food safety and security issues, and is vital in an ever smaller global community. Part of FAS' strategic objective is to connect the rural communities of the United States to the international community, an effort the international 4H movement assists greatly.

**General Information:**

Poland has long been a friend and ally of the United States. One of this unique relationship's untold success stories is the development of 4-H clubs in Poland. 4-H is USDA's signature youth program. It is a key part of rural and community objectives of our University Extension Services. This report offers an introduction of the 4-H movement in Poland, including a background of its relationship to the United States. 4-H was introduced during the Polish/American Extension Project during the early 90s, financed in part by U.S. taxpayers and food aid grants, and has since grown to include 232 clubs with over 7000 active members across all of Poland. The activities and programs of 4-H in Poland are largely similar to those in American clubs. An integral part of 4-H Poland is its exchange programs with the U.S., which are few now that the National U.S. organization has left individual states to decide whether to keep such programs or not. Although interest in 4-H is growing steadily in Poland, the Foundation's capacity to facilitate it is inconsistent. A new system, involving greater focus and a better capacity to handle growth and adapt to essential changes is necessary for 4-H's future.



*Polish kids in Indiana 2008*

4-H clubs operate in more than 80 countries today. They have particularly strong followings in Scandinavia and the Baltic region, with over 150,000 active members in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Poland, Denmark, Latvia and Estonia. The present Finnish ambassador to Poland, H.E. Vesa Himanen, was a 4-H youth. Finland alone is home to 3,000 clubs and 80,000 members, the most outside the United States. Similar rural youth clubs can be found in almost every European country.

The concept of 4-H was introduced to Poland by a few individuals during the early 90s as a part of the Polish/American Extension Project. A smooth transition from a socialist to free market society was a top priority of the project. As a part of an investment in Poland's economic independence, Ag. Ministry Extension workers established personal relationships with these few fledgling clubs. The comprehensive system of non-formal education offered by 4-H was well received in Poland, as clubs customized 4-H to benefit communities at the local level<sup>[1]</sup>. At a time when Poland struggled to catch up to a modern, free-market society, 4-H was able to fill in gaps in the formal education system,



Exchange programs between the United States and Poland have been vital to the development of Poland's 4-H Foundation. International 4-H Youth Exchange (IFYE) has organized and sponsored exchanges between American and Polish youth since the 70s. Michigan and Indiana 4-H clubs have continued exchanges with the Świętokrzyskie Voivodship since the break up of nationally organized 4-H programs. Purdue, Michigan State and Penn State University have been able to extend their collegiate study abroad programs to the high school level with 4-H kids. This year, a group of 4-H kids from Poland will be travelling to Pennsylvania, while another group from Indiana will be travelling to Poland. Kids from Indiana, together with Finnish youth, will be visiting 4-H clubs in areas of Southern Poland devastated by recent flooding. Members of TALL (Texas Agricultural Lifetime Leadership) who are experts and leaders in Texas agriculture, recently travelled to Poland. Some have expressed interest in hosting exchanges. The group of 30 of Texas' VIPs of agriculture recalled that the highlight of their visit was buying handicrafts and playing with kids from a 4-H club. Agricultural visitors to Poland from Nebraska also expressed interest in exchanges, but cannot send kids to Poland due to its State institutions' doubts about liability issues. As well, Poland, Czech and the Baltic FAS offices and embassies have hosted almost 150 agricultural leaders on visits from farm states like Nebraska, Maryland, Texas, Illinois, Washington and others in recent years, leveraging these visits to draw new attention and resources to 4H here. Twenty seven U.S. states have agricultural leadership programs with international travel as a component of business leaders' training.

Michał Stepień, a 19 year old 4-H'er from Świętokrzyskie who has gone to Indiana and Michigan on separate exchanges, said this of them: "I met a lot of new people, friends. I was able to learn something about the US from a real point of view, not only from TV." Since going on his exchanges, Michał educates people about 4-H. He shares his 4-H experiences with younger members through radio interviews. One of the projects he has worked on was the creation of a science and nature trail with other 4-H members in his region. The things he enjoys about 4-H is "being together with other people and gaining new knowledge." Thanks to 4H Michał speaks perfect English and has a bright future. He plans to invest in his community and help the movement.



*Opening of a science and nature trail in Świętokrzyskie*



*Polish 4-H'ers taking part in a radio interview*

The Foreign Agriculture Service, along with the US Embassy in Warsaw and Consulate in Krakow, assists 4-H clubs in Poland through visa support, sponsorship and through contests and meetings with 4-H children and leaders. Vice Consul Wayne Schmidt of the American Consulate General in Krakow is a 4-H trainer and former agricultural extension services director from Nebraska. Now, a State Department Foreign Service Officer on a second career, Schmidt, along with USDA's Agricultural

Counselor for Central Europe and the Baltics, Eric Wenberg and the staff of the Foreign Agriculture Service in Warsaw, have been actively promoting 4-H. In Warsaw, Counselor Wenberg and his staff held a poster contest featuring contestants from across the country. FAS staff regularly attends 4-H events and meets with members of 4-H clubs as part of their regular duties for crop travel and tracking agriculture in the countryside. Embassy Warsaw has many 4H stars, Regional Security Officer John Davis is delighted to see 4-H's success in Poland. John was a 4-H member during his youth in North Carolina, and he credits 4-H with giving him the skills that led him to a successful life and career. When being interviewed, John had no idea of the breadth of the 4-H movement in Poland, and was glad to hear of its great accomplishments.

The US Embassy in Warsaw recently hosted a conference in January with 4-H Foundation and Embassy representatives in order to discuss the Foundation's future. Although 4-H clubs thrive in Poland, the Foundation has been struggling to facilitate its growth and the Embassy FAS office has stepped in to try to help the group develop new approaches and leadership. The Polish 4-H Foundation has provided leadership and coordination at the national level since 1993. For many years, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development funded the development of new clubs and the creation of the national 4-H Foundation. Recently, funding for the program was cut and the Foundation now operates as a non-profit NGO. Counselor Wenberg is proud of individual clubs resilience in 4-H exchange programs. "What I admire about these clubs is that no one is doing this for them. They're doing it for themselves," says Wenberg. "These kids in rural communities are coming up with money to travel to the US all on their own." To date almost 400 kids have travelled, paying their own way.



*Agricultural Counselor Eric Wenberg with Polish 4-H members*

In order to move ahead with sustained growth, the Polish 4-H Foundation needs to address several problems. The organization is poorly financed today and gets by barely. Another big problem is a

lack of professional youth development positions. Young 4-H members are not seriously inclined to continue with 4-H programs after they are old enough to begin their University education. Because of this, most 4-H leaders in Poland end up being teachers, and 4-H is treated as an extension of formal education. Although in many cases this may be an adequate role for 4-H clubs, their effectiveness could be maximized independently of existing organizations. A better system could be put in place to train Polish youth professionals that could bridge the gap between 4-H kids and educators. A career path that would encourage 4-H kids to work with 4-H their entire lives, as volunteer educators or as paid members of the national Foundation, would ensure the survival of the movement.

Another problem is the national structure of 4-H. Nearly half of Polish 4-H is concentrated in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodship, with 81 clubs. While Świętokrzyskie is a model of success for 4-H in Poland, 5 Voivodships have less than 10 clubs each, and 4 Voivodships have no clubs at all. A better relationship between clubs, national and provincial leaders will ensure that 4-H can move forward as a unified movement. To move ahead together, the Polish 4-H Foundation needs to build stronger links between clubs and pursue the creation of youth development positions.



*Polish-American Group in Bluffton, Indiana, 2007*

The benefits of 4-H worldwide are well documented. 4-H provides an outlet for children who grow up in rural communities. Through 4-H kids are given opportunities to become leaders in their communities, share with others about their experiences and grow into well-rounded citizens. Polish 4-H clubs promote the importance of rural life and global citizenship, as well as folk traditions and

Polish customs. Poland's 4-H clubs are vital to the education of Polish youth. They promote strong global relationships and harbor a significant link between Poland and the United States. Exchange programs will open up opportunities for the expansion of the 4-H Foundation, just as the partnership between US Extension workers and Poles in the 90s paved the way for a strong US/Polish relationship. This relationship fosters a shared interest between the United States and Poland, with regards to climate change, and food safety and security issues, and is vital in an ever smaller global community. Next up, FAS is working to promote the concepts of addressing poverty in the developing world with the kids and fostering vegetable garden projects across Poland.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Stanish, Lee. *The Role of the 4-H Club Program in Poland.*