

## Kyrgyz Republic: Meeting Markets

A few miles can make a long way in the Ferghana Valley

Four years ago, Atyrkan Namyrzaeva was unemployed. Although she was promised an allotment of farmland from the disbanded collective farm she used to belong to, she did not know how to go about obtaining it. "We were supposed to form farmers' associations that would divide and allot the land, but nobody was telling us how." Land that should have become private farms was lying fallow.

"During privatization, people were unable to get a deed to their land," says Myrzabai Doranov, executive director of the Ulgu Public Union of Aksy Raion, a two-time Eurasia Foundation grantee. "We had to teach people how to win their rights of ownership. Once we did that, we had to teach people how to make their farms profitable."



With a series of consultations, pro-

fessional trainings, and legal assistance, Ulgu assisted farmers such as Atyrkan in establishing ownership of their land.

Now a successful private farmer, Atyrkan has planned for sustainability, opening a small café in the bazaar. "Instead of sitting jobless in the winter, my family and I work in our café, selling the food we've grown in the summer."

Founded in 1996 to help local farmers adapt to market conditions after the collapse of the collective and state farm systems, Ulgu has become the premier farmer support center in the Aksu district of Jalal-abad oblast, in the Ferghana Valley. "Under market conditions and new laws, people need to know their rights. They need to know how to survive and succeed if they don't want to lose their homes."

A 1997 Eurasia Foundation grant helped Ulgu set up an information center for farmers and start its legal education program to help farmers gain property rights. Since then, the organization has grown according to the strategic needs of the community. "Once people acquire the land, they need to know how to sell what's on it," Myrzabai explains.

A second grant in 2000 allowed them to offer agribusiness training for small landholders. Local trainers were certified to teach courses in farm management, budgeting and financing, accounting, and marketing. Courses used international models but were adapted to reflect local conditions.

"We use the tools we learned in these trainings to help plan our harvests," says farmer Bermet Jorobekova. "I don't just farm and then look for a market. I find the market first, research it, seek clients, and then plant what they need. I've been turning a profit for two years now, and can afford to make capital investments in my farm."

Similarly, Atyrkan used these tools to find a niche for her café. "We're using the profits to rebuild our house," she says. "When we're done I want to redo the café, make it nicer for the customers."

Since 2000, Ulgu has helped train over 200 farmers in business and management. Its impact goes beyond train-

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Duishan Imanaliev, agribusiness trainer

ings, however, as volunteers themselves gain valuable experience that they go on to use in other capacities. One volunteer trainer has since become a deputy mayor in Kerben; another works as a professional consultant on tax questions.

Ulgu is currently planning its next stage of development to help farmers find buyers beyond local borders through niche marketing for organically-grown products. Says Ulgu trainer Duishan Imanaliev: "We are basically organic farmers already. Nobody here can afford to buy any chemical fertilizers or pesticides anyway. Our current plan is to institutionalize what we're doing, research best practices, maybe introduce better strains and breeds, and make our organic farming sustainable, rather than a matter of circumstance."

The Ulgu staff has been attending seminars on organic farming and is searching for ways to find an appropriate market for its produce. One idea is to form voluntary farmers' collectives that would market directly to consumers, rather than going through a middleman.

Another avenue for expansion is directly over the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. Says Myrzabai, "We have produce, but we have a limited market. There's a market right across the border, but we can't get to it. Is this logical?"

The nearest town is just a few kilometers away, in Uzbekistan.

Kerben's farmers could go there to sell their produce, but disputes between the two nations' governments have made the border between them all but impassable.

"Customs regulations are confusing and arbitrary," Myrzabai continues. "The corruption at the border makes it worse. Most farmers don't know how to get a visa or what their rights are. We want to find an Uzbek partner to create a cross-border legal clinic so we can help our farmers get to Uzbek markets."

Ulgus has an opportunity to develop this project through the Eurasia Foundation's Ferghana Valley Initiative. This initiative works to prevent conflict and improve economic opportunity for residents of the Ferghana Valley by awarding linkage grants for coopera-

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Myrzabai Dorvanov, executive director of the Ulgus Public Union

tive, cross-border projects.

The Ulgus Public Union has shown good judgement and great creativity in solving problems brought on by post-

Soviet reforms. It has improved the lives of many people by teaching them how to solve problems themselves.

Myrzabai Dorvanov sees his work as similar to that of the Eurasia Foundation. "The Eurasia Foundation helps most in the development of the human mind," he says. "Other aid groups at first gave direct aid—food, clothes. That's good, but it goes away. The Eurasia Foundation provides information, which leads to knowledge and opportunity. This is more lasting, and the most helpful."