Bio Kishovarz Co-operative, Tajikistan: Achieving Independence

The story starts...

Tajikistan, officially the Republic of Tajikistan, claimed independence in 1997. Since then the country has grown in stability and is building a trade economy, partly with the help of foreign aid.

Sherzod Abdurakhmano, OVCD Project Manager, Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, tells us how a group of organic farmers have undergone their own ‘independence’ and moved from NGO assistance (and donor funding) in their early days to, just this year, establishing their own stand-alone co-operative.

A land right for organic agriculture

Tajikistan is an agrarian country, three quarters of the total population lives in rural areas and the agricultural sector dominates the national economy. Agriculture is the most important sector in Tajikistan, providing the population with food, industrial raw materials, and jobs. The Republic is mainly engaged in growing grains and crops such as cotton, potatoes, vegetables, melons, grapes and other fruits. The government is encouraging ‘value adding’ within the country rather than the direct sales of raw materials and farm commodities out of Tajikistan.

The growing conditions are favourable for agriculture and the quality of the produce is greatly improved by the climate. A hot - and most importantly - dry climate in Tajikistan drives up the sugar content of fruits and vegetables so it is much higher than similar products from other countries. Tajik fruits and vegetables are becoming recognized as being particularly sweet.
Establishing a co-operative

The Bio Kishovarz Co-operative started life as the ‘Organic Value Chain Development Project’ (OVCD) an initiative of the Interchurch Organisation for Co-operation Development (ICCO) & Kerk in Actie, and HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation.

“Organic farming is new for Tajikistan. When the project started most of the farmers couldn’t understand it. We put a lot effort into introducing farmers to organic agriculture and its benefits. OVCD played the role of facilitator and mediator between operators, supporters and influencers of a chain. OVCD linked farmers with international buyers as well. Today many people know about it and are expressing an interest in growing organic products”. Sherzod Abdurakhmanov, OVCD Project Manager, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, Tajikistan.

The objective of the project was always to enable autonomy amongst the Tajik farmers. NGO and donor support was intended to catalyse a ‘system change’ in the Tajik farming sector (particularly in cotton), allowing farmers to increase their incomes and improve livelihoods in a sustainable way through alternative value chains. For more information on the OVCD project principles see here

The new season started with very good news for the organic farmers in Tajikistan. As of 10 February 2012, the ‘Bio-Kishovarz’ Co-operative was officially registered. The Co-op was originally made up of 189 bio (organic) farmers. The biggest motivation for the farmers to form a co-operative was the opportunity to share problems and solve them together. Another reason is the fast growing organic sector in the Republic. Over the course of the year, the newly established Bio Kishovarz Co-op is expecting to grow by 400 farmers. So by the end of the year the total number of farmers will be 589.

Cotton is central

Cotton has always been one of Tajikistan’s most important export products. For this reason, cotton has always occupied pride of place among all other crops. Tajik cotton fiber is characteristically long and strong. There are seven species of cotton being grown in the country. Three belong to the filamentary breed, bred from Gossypium Barbadense L. The other four species are derived from Gossypium Brisutum L., selected in the Soviet Union.

The Bio Kishovarz Co-operative produces medium to long fiber cotton, and is certified according to the European standards (EC) No 834/2007.

Diversification

Other crops grown in rotation with the cotton and as part of the farm system are: alfalfa, maize, safflower, sorghum, tomatoes, and wheat. Farmers, inspired by this year’s visit to the big organic trade show ‘Biofach’ in Nuremberg and discussions with potential buyers, are planning to introduce new crops including: mung beans, chick peas, peanuts and soybeans.

They are now at the stage of researching the technical and organoleptic features of these crops. Studies are being carried out to determine the qualities the products might exhibit compared to products from other countries; and to determine their competitive advantage for the export market.

Partnership is Key

The Bio Kishovarz Co-operative is proof of how much can be achieved in partnership. ICCO and HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation started the ball rolling, but the Tajik farmers have embraced the opportunity and look forward to an independent, co-operative future in charge of their own destiny.
Textile Exchange inspires and equips people to accelerate sustainable practices in the textile value chain. We focus on minimizing the harmful impacts and maximizing the positive effects of the global textile industry. Our signature program focuses on organic cotton value chains; improving lives for farmers, stimulating markets, and supporting best practice.

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