

# Stories of RURAL WOMEN





This publication was developed as a part of the second phase of the "Agricultural Assistance to Vulnerable, Food Insecure Female-Headed Household's" project.

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## Opening Remarks

I am pleased to present to you ten narratives which were published in "Stories of Rural Women". In these accounts women from rural areas of southern Kyrgyzstan talk about their experiences in the Agricultural Assistance to Vulnerable, Food Insecure Female-Headed Household's project.

Through the prism of these personal stories we can see the effective results of the joint project by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which was implemented in Kyrgyzstan in partnership with the Community Development Alliance (CDA) from March to November of 2012 as a part of One UN Programme (Delivering As One - DAO). This publication clearly demonstrates that the active participation of women in income-generating activities enhances their economic rights and empowerment. Therefore, the main task before us during the development of the project was to improve food security through support for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable women householders.

Women from 10 ten selected villages of the Osh, Batken and Jalal-Abad regions participated in the Mutual Aid Groups (MAGs) which improved their quality of life. Despite the fact that this publication presents the life stories of only 10 of the women, the results of the project are much broader. We are really speaking of a successful experience in establishing the capacity to reduce the impact of the global economic, energy and food crisis on the most vulnerable segments of the population, which in turn, helps to increase economic self-reliance and active income generation of rural women.

We hope that this initiative will serve as a model for conducting economic activities at the village level for the rural population of this republic, and that the women involved will not be forced into economic migration to work in other countries and cities, but rather contribute to the welfare of their own country.

Dr. Sabine Machl,  
UN Women  
Representative  
in Kyrgyzstan





## Information about the Project



To date, women in Kyrgyzstan, especially in rural areas, represent the poorest and most vulnerable segment of society. From the very moment of its independence, the number of women householders in Kyrgyzstan has been on the increase. In many families husbands have migrated to Russia and Kazakhstan in search of work, resulting in an amplified burden on women, and a marked increase in gender inequality. The status of women further deteriorated in 2007-2008, when the prices of food products increased in Kyrgyzstan, there were increases in agricultural costs, and decreases in harvest rates. Adding to that, the energy crisis of 2010 further complicated the situation in the agriculture sector. In 2009 the United Nations System formulated the One UN Programme (DAO). This was the response of the UN System to reduce the impact of the global economic, energy and food crisis on the most vulnerable segments of society.

The FAO and UN Women jointly implement the second phase of the Agricultural Assistance to Vulnerable, Food Insecure Female-Headed Household's project as part of the One UN Programme, (the first phase was carried out in 2010). This joint project of UN Women and the FAO aims to improve food security through support for the most vulnerable women householders who own small plots of land in the regions of Jalalabad, Osh and Batken.

The activities carried out under the joint FAO and UN Women project have been closely associated with the undertakings of other UN Women projects on the level of supporting poor families in rural areas. This approach has allowed us to strengthen the results of the project, which ultimately ensures the efficiency and sustainability of the support provided to rural women living in poverty.

In order to energize the poorest and most vulnerable segments of society and build cooperation between the community and local authorities, the UN Women has implemented the concept of social mobilization by forming Self-Help Groups (SHG) among the most vulnerable families. These groups have been strengthened by establishing Agriculture Funds (AF) at the village level.

Under this project UN Women conducts social mobilization through the Community Development Alliance (CDA) – a non-governmental organization.

The United Nations FAO gives technical support to the beneficiaries of the project by providing vegetable seeds (carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, and cauliflower), fertilizers, mini greenhouses and sprayers. Additionally they offer training in agricultural technologies and home based vegetable processing.





## AGRICULTURE FUND – A SCHOOL OF LEADERSHIP

"48 women – that's 48 distinct characters, and so we must find an individual approach to each one, taking into account their age, unique upbringing and mentality." Sayida Sadirova, head of the "Dostuk" Agricultural Fund of Bujum village in the district of Batken shared from her experience in human resource management. "An equal, objective attitude and transparency in the management of the business of the fund – these are the main principles that should guide the leader ". The 48 women whom she refers to are members of eight Mutual Aid Groups (MAGs), created as part of the project in March 2012, and brought together through the Agriculture Fund.

According to Sayida, the project has brought a lot of changes to their habitual way of life in their large village, and it was truly an "eye opening experience" for the women who participated:

"Take my own humble example – before the project I was an ordinary housewife. Even though I had studied Medicine I couldn't find any sufficiently paying job in the village. Like many other women, I just stayed at home, and never attended the village assemblies, because I believed that my little opinion couldn't solve anything. Now, as an activist in the village, I manage the Agriculture Fund, which helps many families – especially those who need it the most – to get back on their feet again."

The change from a housewife with a passive attitude towards the social life of the village to “Sayida the activist” who is now stopped on the street by strangers asking how to get into the project, was a change that took months of painstaking personal effort – grasping the material in the trainings and overcoming the fear of “what if it doesn’t work” – all the time spurred on by a sense of responsibility and the promise that she had made six months prior. That was when the village organized an assembly to announce the goals and objectives of the project, and she was nominated to work with the women’s groups. “I’ll try,” said Sayida – but even then she had decided that there was no turning back: “How can you convince others to follow you, if you yourself are afraid to go forward? You just have to buckle up and do it. You never know what you can do till you try – and so I just started. When we began working with UN Women on social mobilization, the task of starting Mutual Aid Groups (MAG’s) went forward with difficulty – some doubted their own abilities and others lacked faith in the project itself. The women were especially wary about taking on collective responsibility in the MAG and making monthly contributions to the internal fund. Time and time again I had to convince them that the strength of the whole project lies exactly in our ability to join forces for the common good.” Of those who took the step of faith to believe in the MAG, none of them left. Moreover, through their hard work, these women have proved to their fellow villagers that you can grow excellent crops on a small plot of land and receive a decent income. And yet only recently their families had been categorized as low income based on the “Pyramid of Poverty” analysis<sup>1</sup>.

Sayida considers the Agriculture Fund to be “a charter, which also guarantees the stability of the Mutual Aid Groups”. Since the provisions of the charter are developed and approved by all members of the fund, this common effort results in shared obligation and collective responsibility. And for Mrs. Sadirova herself, the Agriculture Fund became a real school of leadership:

“I learned to work with people, developing my self-confidence, and growing in my leadership qualities”, shared Sayida. “And I am also thankful to my husband Ashim, who has supported me in everything and rejoices together with me in the success of our group and of the fund”

The “Dostuk” Agriculture Fund has already reached 100,000 KGS (over \$2,000) collected from the member contributions in which each MAG should match 30% of amount of

assistance provided by the project This money goes to further the development of the groups themselves. As a result, starting next year the MAG will have the ability to provide seeds from its own funds. Together with the manager, a secretary and treasurer work diligently to ensure stable operation of the fund. All members receive regular cash flow statements – everything is transparent and open, otherwise you could easily lose the confidence of members. “We are already receiving requests from members of the group to add corn and potatoes to the repertoire, in addition to vegetables”, says Sayida. “And now we have been approached by 17 other villagers, who have been observing the success of the project and are asking us to start MAG’s with them. So we have a lot of work ahead of us. We are just rejoicing in it all and happy to share from our experience.”

Hadicha Murzakulova, leader of the “Aigul” SHG:  
“One small handful of 150 grams of carrot seeds which I received from FAO brought me KGS 12,000 (USD 255) in income. For my large family this was a very significant help...”



<sup>1</sup>Pyramid of poverty - a technique of corporate analysis of village needs and assessment of household conditions



In a joint project of UN Women and the FAO / UN WFP – "Agricultural Assistance to Vulnerable, Food Insecure Female-Headed Household's", 400 households were mobilized in three regions, 6 districts and 10 villages. This project has reached 160 households in Osh and Jalal-Abad, and 80 households in Batken. All together 60 Mutual Aid Groups were established.  
CDA report









## FLOWER BALLS FROM BATKEN

Gulbara Nazhieva, Head of the “Polotxan” Agriculture Fund was telling me about Busaida Usenova as we drove down the winding streets of to visit her in the village of Oxna in the Kadam-Jaiski region of Batken: “You can always tell a good homemaker by the way she keeps her garden. In the garden of Busaida all of her plants are standing even and straight like well-trained soldiers. It’s no wonder that her group has the highest ratings of any village in the area. One can only envy her energy and initiative. And how on earth can she manage this, being a mother of many children and a grandmother as well?”

The results from the Uchkun MAG, which is led by Busaida Usenov are truly impressive. The terms of the project stipulate that each member must have 10 Ares (1/10 of a hectare) and each receives 150 grams of carrot seed, 6 grams of tomato seed, 4 grams of cauliflower seed, 20 grams of cucumber seed and thirty seeds of greenhouse cucumbers. During the course of one season, this MAG collectively gathered a bountiful harvest of 9 tons of tomatoes, 7 tons of carrots, 3 tons of cucumbers and 500 large cauliflowers (weighing one ton) from the 8/10 of a hectare that they together worked. This formed a very significant addition to the family budgets of the women involved.

Busaida confirms that this project brings great benefit for families, especially large families like her own:

“I have 6 children and 8 grandchildren. Thanks to the income generated by the sale of vegetables grown, we have been able to resolve many pressing issues in the daily life of our family: we were hosted a family gathering; the children got new clothing and shoes for the school year; we bought coal and flour to get us through the winter, and all this is in addition to the canning we did. And most importantly, my children ate fresh vegetables from the garden all summer long. Like the carrots, for example – before, we only used carrots for Plov (a rice dish), now we have started eating carrot salads because we don’t have to buy them any more – delicious and healthy! And this is only the first year of the project for us. Next year, given the experience that we have now, we hope to get an

even higher yield from our land, and therefore more revenue."

Before the project, women typically supported their families by growing and selling raspberries – for which the village of Oxna gets its reputation as "the birthplace of raspberries". They are planted in every yard and practically every available field. Vegetables are imported from neighboring Uzbekistan since there are almost none grown locally in the village. Even though the market price of raspberries is still high, Busaida has decided to abandon that in favor of growing vegetables for the next year. She explains that the cultivation of raspberries has a negative impact on women's health, because the bushes have to be abundantly watered daily, and so your feet are wet all the time, while vegetables do not require frequent watering, and besides, they bring more income.

Most of all, the members of the MAG are happy with the harvest of the "Flower Balls" – which is what the local women in the district call cauliflower in their local dialect. As it turned out, this exotic vegetable is not only new to growers in these parts, but most people have never even tasted it before. The women were initially afraid that they would not be able to sell there "Flower Balls" at the market. Busaida Usenov shared her marketing secrets:

"At first nobody bought it – they just asked, 'What is it?' and 'How do you cook it?'. Then one day I prepared a large bowl of cauliflower cooked in batter, just like we were taught in the training,<sup>2</sup> and brought it to the market. I let people try it out and I spoke about its qualities and health benefits. And I shared recipes. And you know - it worked! People like it, demand increased and we started selling them individually at 70-80 KGS each (about \$1.60).

The women have high hopes for the following year, because they have now been fully prepared, having gone through the training and first year of practical experience. Their confidence in the future is augmented by a financial reserve in the amount of 30% of the aid received by the project, which the MAG members have invested in Agricultural Fund. According to Gulbara Nazhieva, the funds will be spent not only for the purchase of seeds for the next harvest, but also the implementation of social projects:

"Our biggest dream is to create a children's garden. We have a lot of large families, and if our village will have a garden, women will be able to work there, and thereby improve their welfare. And thanks to the accumulation of financial resources in our fund, in addition to the project activities, we

will be able to make our own contributions. There are other plans as well, like opening shops for processing wool and also for vegetables. Local residents could work there. We hope that some of those who have emigrated might come back if they can find jobs in their home village."

And what is more, Gulbara Nazhieva believes that rural women should become more involved in village life, because no one knows the problems of women better than they do. That is why, having gained experience in project Gulbara has decided to run for a position in the village council in next year's elections.

"Women are underrepresented in local government."

Decisions made at the local level are primarily made by men, who make up the bulk of the village government and local ministries. I want to become a council member in order to advance our interests – the interests of rural women in the village – so that as much as possible we can attract projects such as yours that help improve our lives and the lives of our children."

Busaida Usenova:

"Next year my 'Flower Balls' are going to weigh not less than 5kg each".



<sup>2</sup> As a part of the project, specialists from FAO offered training in canning and preserving vegetables for the members of the MSG's.



Of the 400 Mutual Aid Group members 374 are women (93.5%). Of these, 25% are heads of their households. Of the 10 Agriculture Funds, 9 are headed by women.

CDA report











## THE GODDESS- MOTHER OF SEYDYKUM VILLAGE

When we arrived at the home of Adina Abdrakhmanova, a resident of the village of Seydykum in the Bazar Korgon district, we were met at the gate by a cheerful crowd of kids who turned out to be her grandchildren. Adina herself was under a canopy in the courtyard washing cucumbers and preparing them for canning. We glanced into a nearby shed and there before our eyes were straight rows of numerous canning jars.

"This year, my six children and six grandchildren are receiving all the vitamins they need until spring time. Anything that does not sell, we pack up in our canning jars", laughed Adina with her wide smile. "Thanks to what we learned in this project, we even preserved bell peppers – which we had never canned before."

She cordially invited us into the house. The hostess could not stop bursting out in laughter, enthusiastically talking about her involvement in the project, which has been like the many-armed Hindu goddess Mariamman<sup>3</sup> - always doing several things at once. Paying no attention to our protests, she ran back and forth from the room to the porch, laying out the mats and a table cloth on the "Tapkan" (traditional sitting table) magically producing jar after jar from the diversity of her preserves, giving orders to the kids and grandkids all the while. In this cycle of events I could hardly keep up with recording her words in my notebook. I had to finally persuade her to stop fussing about and just sit down with us. Adina obeyed, but still impatiently eyeing her cell phone which had never left her hand.

"This morning my daughter was taken to the hospital – I'm awaiting news about the new addition to our family – so you'd better keep some money ready in your pocket for the 'Suyunchu' (friends give a gift of some money when they hear the "Announcement!" of a birth). And the room was once again filled with her gregarious laughter.

Looking at this energetic and cheerful woman, it's hard to believe that she has gone through so many difficulties in her life. Seven years ago, after her husband died, she was left with six children plus the grandchildren in her arms. Even with her husband, who



worked as an engineer, they lived a modest life, but now, as a widow, things were quite tight. You couldn't call it a life – they just barely survived. Adina explained:

"I grabbed any job I could – I picked cotton from morning till night, I threw myself into the fields and into my garden, working the land as best I could, but still sinking into debt, and trying to do what I could so that the children would not be affected by the absence of their father."

Despite all her efforts, the land gave her only a meager harvest each year, which was barely enough to make ends meet.

"In the past there were agronomists who watched after the fertility of the land in the state farms and collective farms. Now people just do whatever they can think of, and so the land has become miserable", says Adina.

Thus, when the CDA associates arrived in Seydykum and began explaining the FAO / WFP UN Women project, she was among the first who had now doubts about participating in the program. Not only that, she announced that she was ready to organize 40 women in the village to create MAGs. What attracted her most of all to the project was that the groups would be receiving vegetable seed, and that they would also have the chance to study what she had always longed to learn – modern agricultural technology:

"We have a saying: 'What you seek for in heaven, find in the land' – in this project I have found what I have long been searching for – the knowledge needed to work the land so that it becomes a breadwinner. This project is for the people, for the common people, because it teaches the likes of me to overcome poverty. And just recently we were given flour and oil because of our participation in the project<sup>4</sup>. Since the collapse of the collective farms nobody has cared for us in that way."

Some might think it's naive and strange, but for Adina, a woman who basically stayed at home and never ventured out, even the exchange trip to nearby Nookan district was a big event in her life:

"For me it was like being on vacation at Issyk Kul (a popular tourist spot in the far north of Kyrgyzstan)," she admitted, "I saw how other people live, I learned a lot and met people on the project who actually cared about my life, who wanted to help me and my family. This is so inspiring and it lifts my spirit!"

Adina also shares that working together in the Mutual Aid Group not only raises the morale of the women, but also strengthens inter-ethnic friendships, "We named our group 'Yntymak' (friendship). We are working together – both Uzbeks and Kyrgyz women like me. Before the project began we would

just nod our heads at each other in greetings on the street. Now we hug each other as if we were family, asking how things are going and what's the latest news. It's all because this project has united us, and we have common interests. I think that all the people in the whole village should be combined into MAG's so that by working together we could become closer; and then there will never be any conflicts between us!"

When we were getting ready to leave the hospitable home Adina, she finally got a call from the hospital, and was told that she had a new granddaughter. Her joy knew no bounds, and we were pleased to have witnessed her happiness – especially since she has promised to name her newborn granddaughter in my honor 'Almahan':

"May she grow up to be a journalist like you, telling everyone about such good projects for the village folk. May our children and grandchildren live better than we have, and may there be peace and prosperity in our land". This was the blessing that we heard as we departed – a motherly blessing of Adina Abdrakhmanova, this laboring woman and the mother-goddess of her large and happy family.

Mushtari loves to count the canning jars that her grandmother Adina has prepared.



<sup>4</sup>Each MSG member was allocated 200 kg of flour and 16 liters of oil for their participation in the project via the "Food for Work" project of the UN World Food Programme.







Ainura Atabekova CDA  
coordinator for the Jalal-Abad  
region:

"Women are the source of life on earth, and so peacemakers by their very nature. Each mother is concerned above all for the peace, harmony and prosperity in her family, on her street, in her village and in the country as a whole. During the events of June 2010, our Women's Peace Committee went out on the streets to hand out free bread, and not weapons. They called on the people to maintain peace for the future of their children. Gathering people from different nationalities to this common task contributes not only to improving the economic well-being of vulnerable families in our villages, but also to the restoration of peace in the south of Kyrgyzstan."



## THE FLOOD OF TRIALS

Nature itself had to face up to the strong character of five Mutual Aid Groups in the village of Abduraimova in the Bazar Korgon district. Destructive floods rolled through the village not once, not twice, but seven times, with waves knocking down both crops and homes. These women, however, did not give up; they did not retreat in the face of terrible disaster, and they were able to defend their crops. We heard about this from Buzayna and Suvransa Mamatov – the wives of two brothers living on the same street.

"The shoots had just begun to rise when the muddy waters washed everything away – the shoots as well as the top soil. We had to replant everything. Because of the floods there was no irrigation water. We had to lug the water from a far off well and irrigate with watering cans. Why didn't we quit? Well, what can you do? I had starting this project, and so I needed to go on to the end – to the bitter end, or the people would be let down, especially to those who initially did not believe in the project." says Buzayna Mamatov, leader of the "Bereke" MAG.

Social mobilization in our village proceeded with great difficulty. People were suspicious of what was said at the meetings because prior to this there was a well-known case of fraud in which people were lured into a scheme with attractive financial prospects and then cheated. As Buzayna shared, she herself did not immediately agree to the terms of the program:

"Before the project I, like most people in the village, had not worked with a garden. I had never grown vegetables. I earned a living by doing embroidery. I was told about the project by Ainura Atabekova, whom I knew from the Women's Peace Committees, for which I am a cell leader in the village district of our region. It was Ainura who invited me to participate in social mobilization. I was



unsure of my ability to organize people for these meeting, and not sure it would work at all. I had a lot of doubts in my mind. But, in the end, I agreed. The most difficult part was to get people to enter the MAG. I had to visit with some people up to four times to convince them."

But all the efforts have paid off – despite the challenges and difficulties, no one left the MAG that we formed, or the Agriculture Fund. As a reward for their work, the women have had a good harvest, resulting in a substantial increase in their income.

Savrunsa Mamatov, a member of the "Dostuk" MAG recognizes that the project has made life much easier for these needy families because even during the summer the participants were receiving their first cash profits from the crops:

"Before, everyone would be waiting for the autumn, when you could bring in the harvest from your field, and during the summer nobody ever had an extra penny in their wallets. But with this project, in June we already started selling vegetables, up to 20 kg per day. Electricity bills were paid on time, we were able to buy more meat, and of course we never had to buy an ounce of produce at the market during the summer. We always had cucumbers and tomatoes on the table from our 1/10 hectare."

Savrunsa stated that participation in the project also had a positive impact on her health. Every summer she is tormented with various health issues, but this year she was so enthralled with the friendly competition in her group that she completely forgot about her ailments:

"Early in the morning, I get up, and go out to my field, caring for each tender shoot as if for a small child. I try to apply all that we have been taught in the training. We had a very knowledgeable coach – Toychu Mamytov was his name. All his tips were useful – how to build a greenhouse, what fertilizer to apply... Just yesterday I attended another session – each group was given a pesticide sprayer and chemicals from the FAO and taught how to use them."

According to the women, this project teaches people an appreciation for every bit of land, and it has changed old habits set in stone by villagers in the past. Until now, people have not paid much attention to working in their own vegetable gardens. They only worked in the big fields and they bought vegetables in the market; but now, seeing what kinds of results the MAG has achieved, villagers are starting to wonder where you can get the same seed, and how to grow these same vegetables which are distinct from the local

varieties.

More interest and surprise on the part of the villagers appeared when the MAG members were each given 200 kg of flour and 16 liters of oil. At the comments of villagers the women humbly replied: "What is it to you? This is the incentive that we get for working and not just sitting lazy in our homes like you did when this project came to town. We went out and formed our group and we are working together!"

Now that they understand how the project works, and have enjoyed all of its benefits, the members of the "Bereke" MAG have decided to increase the area of their crops in the year to come. The women believe that a garden is good, but a whole field of vegetables will be better, and so the MAG plans to rent more than a hectare of land. And they also have plans to start new groups in the village – especially since they no longer have to persuade anyone – the villagers have seen with their own eyes the benefits of being involved in such projects.

Buzaina Mamatova:

"so far we have started the project- now we have to go forward- we have to win..."





According to the analysis of profiles of the 400 vulnerable and low-income households selected for the project, about 10% of them live in extreme poverty. They have no home, no livestock, no privately owned fields and no form of assistance reaches them.

CDA report







## WORKING TOGETHER – A FAMILY TREASURE

"To be honest, I was opposed to Zaripa's decision to participate in the project. We grow cotton and barley just like our ancestors always did – and that is our livelihood. Although it's customary for a wife to always follow the demands of her husband, I saw her great desire and decided not to stand in the way, because the welfare of a family depends on the common ground between the spouses and the support that they provide for each other." This is what Sharip Mamyrasulov, a resident of Birdik Nooken area shared about his wife, Zaripa Nurdinova, a member of the "Primogen" MAG.

Leaning on his crutches, Sharip led us out to the area where Zaripa had planted the vegetable seeds that she received through the project. While we waited for the hostess, who left early in the morning to pick cotton, he told us about his wife's success in the project and about the main lessons they have learned from it:

"We realized that 1/10 hectare of vegetables will yield more profit than one hectare of cotton - because the expenses are a lot less. After all, we have to invest KGS 30-40 thousand (USD 640 to USD 850) in our cotton field and it often happens that the harvest of cotton doesn't even cover those expenses, so instead of profits sometimes some we are stuck with debts. And as you know, you can't raise a family on a stack of debts."

Zaripa and Sharip have four children. Their eldest daughter recently married, on the eve of our arrival, she was greeting guests, and arranging a big family event. The dowry received was no worse than others – just as it should be in a rural community. In



many ways, all of these major life events have been carried out by the family thanks to the money received from the sale of vegetables, because the cotton fields are only started to be harvested:

"The cucumbers were particularly successful, and the tomatoes were not bad either. And now that we have harvested them and brought them to market, the cauliflower is starting to come in, so thanks to this project our family purse never empties", smiled Sharip.

By this time Zaripa herself returned from the cotton fields. While we sat on the garden table and spoke with Zaripa her 10 year old daughter Altynai bustled about the house, carrying water from the well and bringing out some food. "My first assistant!" laughed Zaripa, looking at her daughter. "We call her 'Koichu' (shepherdess), because, while I work in the field and at our project site she looks after our lambs and goats all by herself."

In response to the question of what prompted her to participate in the project, Zaripa said that it was her children – or rather the need to raise them and provide them with everything that parents should give their children. It takes a lot of effort and money, and it's just not possible to find work without migrating out to other places, closer to the major centers.

We saw for ourselves how far the village of Birdik is from the district center – driving on the bumpy dirt roads all the way here. It turns out that hardly any regular busses service this village and practically no taxis. Therefore it's out of the question to try to commute to the district center for work. And being a disabled person, Sharip has had all the more difficulty finding a job. It was up to Zaripa to look for ways to make money and bring up the children, to give them an education. "The field – that's all we have for income", she says.

As it turned out, Zaripa had never taken on a project of this sort before, so it didn't all work out right away: "When you start a new business is always difficult," she admits. "But the most valuable thing about this project is that work is done in a group. Women can always come to the aid of each other. The final outcome depends on the contribution of each member of the group. Such collective responsibility rallies the women to help, and makes it easier to overcome the difficulties of their initial experience." And this experience for Zaripa, like other members of the MAG, was very important, opening up possibilities that she never knew before. According to Zaripa, working in a group

with others who were at her same level gave her confidence in her abilities. What she studied during the trainings gave her the skills needed to earn a good income from the crops sold.

But work in the MAG doesn't only bring financial benefit. Another important aspect of working in a group is that it brings rural women closer together and improves their daily lives by giving them a chance to share with their friends about everyday problems. They get valuable advice and it serves as a sort psychological aid.

In times of need the MAG can also provide financial support. This is why each group has an internal fund, to which the women pay a small monthly fee in the amount that they themselves determine based on their financial capacity. The members of the group can then be given a no-interest loan, which serves as a "magic wand" to help the women resolve the various minor domestic issues that arise.

"I am not alone, and I can always get help" – this is how the women participating in the MAG come to think.

"The Little Shepherdess" Altynai caring for livestock, while her mother Zaripa is weeding the vegetable rows.



According to the analysis of profiles of the 400 vulnerable and low-income households selected for the project, about 10% of them live in extreme poverty. They have no home, no livestock, no privately owned fields and no form of assistance reaches them.  
CDA report











## DON'T FEED THE FURNACE, FEED THE FIELD

For Aijan Marajapov from the village of Arimzhan in the Nookan region the old Russian proverb “Don't feed the furnace, feed the field” came true. In the years prior to her participation in the project she earned a living baking flat bread, which she would take to sell at the market in Kochkor-Ata. “You wouldn't call it easy work”, acknowledged Aijan. She only got 2-3 hours of sleep at night. In the evening she kneaded the dough and the baking began early in the morning. Even so, there was little money to be earned. The hard physical labor and constant exposure to the acrid smoke of the open oven undermined her health and especially affected her eyesight. But after transportation costs rose, even this small business had become unprofitable for Aijan. Her husband worked odd jobs, the oldest of her five children was forced to leave for work in Russia, but the meager funds which he was able to wire home were barely enough to live on. That's how they lived until a project that brought many positive changes came into the village: “As for me, I was accustomed to hard work, so the work in the MAG didn't seem so difficult. On the contrary, thanks to the project, I had a lot of free time, which came at no sacrifice to the family budget. I came out to the field early in the morning before the sun



rose, or in the evening at sunset, and that's it. You can spend the entire day on other activities. While you are selling cucumbers, the tomatoes are already ripening, and there to replace the tomatoes, the carrots are coming in. It's all about gathering and selling."

This work was made easier by the fact that two Support Groups "Ak Niet" and "Nooruz" rented one big plot and divided it up according to the conditions of the project so that each woman had 1/10 hectare. So, the plots were in close proximity and the work was not only done together, but if necessary, the women could fill in for one another. When irrigating, the whole field was watered, not just your own site. And weeding was also no problem because the women took turns weeding for one another. As the saying goes, "a single bee can only carry a tiny bit of honey", so these women work in the MAG like bees in a hive. It makes the whole project run with smoothly and with good relationships. They reap the benefits from it both individually and collectively. It was this "personal touch" that helped these two MAG's to overcome the difficulties that they encountered while implementing the project. The women shared about how difficult it was to get to the point of harvesting: hail beat down on the crop; a mudslide washed through; the scorching sun dried everything up; and the irrigation ditches went totally dry, forcing them to carry water from a well that is located a few kilometers away from the field. But they achieved their goal – their beds of vegetables became green and red as planned, just as they were taught in the FAO training. And to remember all the steps and strictly comply with the recommendations of the agronomists, each member of the MAG carried a special record book provided by the project which carefully tracks all the data – planting schedules, watering, expected times of first budding, expenses and of course, profits.

All of these statistics will be useful to them during the next year and should result in even more vegetables, especially as women plan to take on not one, but two crops in their fields. Also, each MAG's created in the village is planning to take an additional hectare to plant. In order to spur themselves on, the women decided to have a competition to name the most effective Mutual Aid Group.

In general, this project has demonstrated that vegetable growing, with the proper use of agricultural technologies and good seeds, is more profitable than the traditional cotton growing done in these places. According to members of the MAG, with 1/10 hectare it is quite possible to earn at least 30

thousand KGS (\$640) in a season. As for cotton, with the existing low purchase price and high expenses, this is unlikely.

The women explained that their plans are not just designed to bring an increase in their financial wellbeing. In the first year after the project the MAG will contribute 30% of the amount of project assistance to their Agriculture Fund to buy seeds for the following year. They plan to get other women of the village involved in the project and to create new MAG's and pass on their experience to them. Thus, every year the number of MAG's in the village will increase, and accordingly, the fund will also grow. Then they will be also able to take on the task of starting small businesses and creating new jobs. Such are the strategic goals that these hard working women have set before them. They have full confidence in their ability to do just what they plan because this project has already helped them to take the first and most difficult step.

The members of the "Ak Niet" and "Nooruz" MAG's carry out all of their work on the same field and when needed they fill in for one another, and so, these women have more free time.









Development must encompass rural women's long-term needs and aspirations, their decision-making power, and their access to and control of critical resources such as land and their own labour.

"Gender Equity in Agriculture and Rural Development" FAO.



## A HOUSE FOR XIMIYA

This year Ximiya Arziyeva, a resident of Uchkun village in the Karasu district of Osh, finally solved one of the most important issues of her large family – she renovated the house. For the past years, each spring they would bring their livestock up in to the high summer pastures in traditional nomadic lifestyle. The house was always left empty with no supervision, and when they returned in late autumn from their pastoral migrations the weather was too cold to do anything with the house. Lack of time wasn't the only reason why fixing the house up had been postponed year after year. For the Arzieva family, repairing the house was still a luxury they could not afford because raising livestock didn't bring much income, and they had barely enough for daily expenses.

And so, participation in this project seemed like just what Ximiya needed. In the first place, this project allowed them to remain in the village, which suited both her and her husband just fine, as well as their five children and three grandchildren. The long summer migrations not only separated the parents from their older children, who were often left in the village, but separated the whole family from relatives and fellow villagers isolating them from the social life of the community. Secondly, Ximiya had the chance to earn good money, which in addition to the repairs, allowed them to handle a number of other everyday problems. Ximiya explained her situation: "How could I even think about fixing up the house? I never even had time to do canning for the winter. By the time we would bring the animals down from the mountains, the crops would all be harvested and sold off to wholesalers. Market prices at that time are enough to kill you, so we frequently ran out of supplies during the winter. But this year, canning for the winter cost me almost nothing because the vegetables were all our own. In addition, we learned to preserve new kinds of canned food at the trainings, which we have never done before, so that we will now have a wide variety of food on our table this winter."

This project helped to reveal another problem that the family had – the existence of which they were still unaware. The fact is that while they were grazing their livestock in the mountains each year, neighbors were quietly taking over their land – shifting the property lines bit by bit. As a result of these 'expansions' the usable area of their land had been significantly reduced. Ximiya found out about this only



after entering the project and starting work with the MAG, cultivating the land and sowing the seeds provided by FAO. She had to fight to get her land back.

There were seven MAG's established in the village of Uchkun with a total of 54 women. Many of them, like Ximiya were previously engaged in animal husbandry, and so they had little contact with each other, living confined to their homes.

Working together in a group to create their own internal fund, and participating in the trainings and exchange tours brought these women together and created a society in which every woman now feels its relevance and complicity to their purpose: "We have learned a lot of new things working on this project. And this new knowledge has brought us not only income but also a sense of pride in ourselves and for the group as a whole", says Ximiya. "Our fellow villagers have been watching us and thinking – wondering if it would really work out for us to work together – or if we would just run away from each other. We have proven with the results of this project that there is true strength in work with the MAG. Now, we can't get away from the crowds of villagers who want to start these kinds of groups."

The MAG members from "Uchkun" do not intend to stop with what has already been achieved. Next year they plan to lease a field in order to expand the area of their crops. This is also more profitable because they are able negotiate rent as a single unit, which in this case results in better terms:

"The cost of rent per hectare on average is 8000 som. If we divide it by 7 people, then it's not too expensive for any one of us, and during one season we will be able to make a profit far and above those costs," says Ximiya.

Now the main task of the Mutual Aid Groups is to contribute 30% of the amount of received aid into the Agriculture Fund. But the women in this project have made the task easier for themselves because instead of waiting for the autumn harvest they have begun making payments to the fund during the summer. Fortunately, vegetables started coming to maturity in late spring, and all summer long the members of the group had cash on hand from the proceeds of vegetable sales.

In answer to my question of whether there were any negative experiences in the project Ximiya did not know what to answer. She was surprised at my question:

"How could there be anything negative in the face of such selfless giving?" she said. "We can't even classify this as charity because we were given the opportunity to make money, and to help not only ourselves but also other needy villagers. We, the 54 participants of this project were the first to receive this

assistance; we were provided with good seed, instructed on creating an MAG, trained in new technologies – and now it is our task to pass on this experience to other villagers. Gradually, in a cycle of helping one another, the whole village can be pulled out of poverty and need."

And then Ximiya shared her plans for the next year. She and her husband decided not to roam the high pastures in the spring, but to stay in the village to pursue a new business activity – raising vegetables. Pasturing the animals is expensive: renting a truck to transport the household goods, buying medicines for the animals, getting food supplies and more. But here they can and grow vegetables for sale, and develop deeper friendships with other members of the MAG. And most importantly, they will not have to be away from the children for six months or leave their home, which has now become such a beautiful and cozy place after the renovation.

Ximiya Arzieva: We, the 54 participants of this project were the first to receive this assistance; we were provided with good seed, instructed on creating an MAG, trained in new technologies – and now it is our task to pass on this experience to other villagers.



To ensure sustainability of the project 10 Agriculture Funds were established in 10 villages. These funds will subsequently provide residents with quality seed. The total amount of accumulated funds as of November 1, 2012 is over 884,300 KGS, or \$18,815 U.S. dollars.  
CDA report









"Don't you remember back in Soviet times when it was in vogue to start women's brigades at the collective farms? I was once the youngest girl on one of those in our beloved 'Lenin' farm collective. Oh, how we worked together in the cotton fields and then we would head home with songs and joking. Work was not a burden then – it was a joy. We need to revive this tradition," says Salamatxan Ergeshova leader "Azattyk" MAG from the village of Kyzyl-Kyshtak in the Karasu district of Osh region.

Kandalat Mamaev, leader of the "Nur" MAG agrees with her opinion and so does fellow activist Parizat Madazimova who added that the main advantages of working together are support and mutual assistance.

And working together strengthens friendship, assured the woman. This is especially important for a village, which is populated with several nationalities:

"Our Kyzyl Kyshtak is a village of five nationalities", says Salamatxan. "And so, our five MAG's are international in composition. We work together, we attend the trainings together, we go to the meetings together, in short, this project has united us in strong friendship. And in order to further strengthen our friendship, we decided to organize a "Sherin" (hosting by turn) among ourselves – each of us will in turn invite the others to their home for a lady's party. The meetings that we have are already mini-holidays with a table full of goodies and lots of tea drinking. In a word, we get together not only for business but also for the soul." But it certainly wasn't that smooth at the start of the project. When they began social mobilization, the people did not believe that



the project was really intending to help them, and they asserted: "In the spring they will give us the seeds, and in the fall they will come and take away the entire harvest, making off with what they didn't work for – and we will be left with nothing."

We had to organize meetings again and again, and visit people in their homes to convince them that the project will bring them benefit and not losses. "Those who did not believe us then are now sorry about that," says Kandalat Mamaev.

It was her dire need that forced Kandalat to believe in the project. She was widowed a couple of years back and left with three sons, three daughters in law and three grandchildren all living under the same roof with her and only one son had been able to find a job. So she set out to organize the MAG and became its leader – without hesitation – knowing that she had to seize every opportunity to earn money for her family, for which she became the head after the death of her husband.

Both Kandalat and Salamatxan believe that the work of a leader is a serious job that requires full commitment. You have to find time to work on your own 1/10 hectare as well as monitoring the field work of all the other members of the MAG, keeping track of the finances of the internal fund of the MAG, collecting and distributing money for the Agriculture Fund, holding meetings and reporting back to everyone... planning, organizing – in short you have to be a true leader. They learned to cope with these many aspects of leadership thanks to the skills learned at the workshops and meetings organized by FAO / WFP UN Women for the leaders of the MAG. The regular monitoring visits of the projects throughout the year are a great help for the women and allow them to get advice from the visiting experts. And the women are particularly grateful to the project for the high quality seeds, which are better than those traditionally used by the villagers:

"We usually buy seeds in the market and there is no guarantee of their quality – it's like a bag of surprises – you never know which of them will actually grow. Sometimes it happens that we have to re-seed and because they don't germinate at all or the plants are sickly. But the seeds that we have received from the FAO, grow great vegetables, juicy and big – our vegetables are in high demand at the market." It's not surprising that quality seeds, combined with the modern agricultural techniques which the members of the MAG received helped these women to significantly improve

their financial situation.

For example, Kandalat Mamatova now provides work for all of her children, who are working with her, increasing their family income. Participation in the project has helped to resolve their need for food, which is the most important thing for a large family. They bought 17 chicks that have grown over the summer, and now the grandchildren will be provided with both meat and eggs. Products that they previously could not afford are now within their budget. And they no longer have to save money for fresh vegetables, which are now supplied from their garden and from the preserves they prepared for winter.

Now the members of the MAG want to help other needy villagers:

"We have families who have no income and no allotment of fields. Our idea is to create an MAG among them, so that they can get together and at least grow vegetables in their gardens. We are ready to share with them the experience and knowledge we have gained in the project."

We work together, we attend the trainings together, we go to the meetings together, in short, this project has united us in strong friendship.









Another growing trend is outmigration of poor rural men in search of employment, which leaves women with sole responsibility for food and cash crop production, as well as raising children.

"Gender Equity in Agriculture and Rural Development" FAO



## IODINE IN THE CAULIFLOWER

"We like her – she has settled in well." "She loves the cool weather; and so she and the Alay region have fallen in love – we have more cold months here than hot. But when it gets hot we wrap her up in her leaves like a sissy" "She has become a sensation in these parts – people mistook her for mushroom or fish – they didn't believe she was a vegetable." These are just a few of the interesting remarks that I heard about cauliflower in the village of Arpa Tektir in the Alay district of Osh region from Kuluypa Payzieva, a member of "Zhashtyk" MAG and from village activist Kanyshay Amatovoya.

The surprise and delight of the local residents is quite understandable, because in this remote village, where people are traditionally engaged in animal husbandry, even growing tomatoes and cucumbers is not very common, so there is much to say about this exotic vegetable.

Notwithstanding, the first year of experience for the five pilot MAG's in Arpa Tektir was successful. Moreover, according to the women who participated, it brings not only profits, but also health benefits:

"Did you know that in our southern region 70% of the women and children suffer from iodine deficiency?" asked Kuluypa. "It shows up as goiters, impaired memory, and fatigue in children. In my class, for example, many of the students sitting in the classroom are sluggish, and can barely stay awake until the bell rings. What kind of performance can we ever expect here? Therefore, ever since I learned that cauliflower is high in iodine, I began to urge parents to be sure to include this valuable vegetable in their diet. Through the work of our Mutual Aid Group, this project has made cauliflower, along with other useful vegetables all the more accessible. So now, beneficial vitamins are readily available for the villagers."

Kuluypa herself has four children. The eldest is in college and the others still school age. In Arpa Tektir the family lives with relatives because it would be too far for them to commute to the school where she works in the neighboring village. Her husband, like many men in the village, is sitting at home with no job. The MAG is designed to address the needs of the most vulnerable women, so in answer to my question of why a teacher would be a part of this group, she responded that her family is also in that category:



"Just because teachers are paid does not mean that they have a livable salary. Not only is it so tiny – frequently it's not paid on time at all. Teachers don't have the option of working in the fields or grazing livestock – who would then teach the kids? In this project, however, the main work is done during the summer break. In addition, teachers, by virtue of their profession, are more responsible and active, so they do their work well, and this is a drawing card for others."

Kuluypa not only works as a school teacher, and juggles teaching with participation in the project as part of their Mutual Aid Group; she is also the treasurer of the Agriculture Fund for the village. Kanyshay Amatova believes that Kuluypa's experience working with NGO's and her active civic attitude both have helped her successfully deal with all of these responsibilities. It's no wonder that Mrs. Payzieva was selected for the women's delegation from Kyrgyzstan, which participated in the leadership program "Open World" and in the international conference "Women of the Mountains" in the U.S. in 2010.

"Our village is kept together by the activity of such a women, as our Kuluypa" - says Kanyshay.

Kuluypa herself believes that non-governmental organizations play a major role in the development of rural communities. Therefore, when the project staff arrived at the village to meet with the local authorities, and discuss the proposal to launch the project in their village, Kuluypa was one of the first to support this idea:

"I knew immediately what benefits this project would bring to the villagers. After all, the basic principle of this project can be summarized as follows: "I will give you KGS 100, you invest KGS 1, and earn KGS 1000." At the time there was nobody in the offices of the village council, but I insisted that the project organizers not leave. I organized a meeting of local residents in one of the classrooms at the school, arguing to them that I was a member of the village council and therefore represented the local authorities. "

Not everyone in the village shared the enthusiasm and faith that Kuluypa had in the project, so the social mobilization work took place with great difficulty. There were misunderstandings and some resentment. There were some who left from the MAG, unable to uphold the requirements of collective responsibility:

"We had two who left the MAG. There were also those who did not want to pay their dues on time; who shirked their general responsibilities and did not come to the meetings. It's not without reason that they say, 'Don't count your chickens

before they are hatched'. But everything fell into place as soon as the MAG gathered its first harvest, and received its first profit. Now, those who left are asking to come back in, and we have decided to part with those who have not worked in good faith. Our decision was to separate from them and to recruit others who really want to work."

Such rigor is justified, according one of the women. Indeed, the strategy of the Agriculture Fund in rural Arpa Tektir is to create a strong network of Mutual Aid Groups in the village, which will be able not only to provide economic welfare for their families, but also address the needs of the village. Among the plans of the Fund are a project to buy a powerful motor to provide irrigation water and also a plan to restore an abandoned building and build a kindergarten on its foundation, and more. And there is a confidence that these plans are feasible. This is not hard to believe when people with a strong sense of civic responsibility like Kuluypa Payzieva are behind the plans.

"A true women will first of all try to make her home comfortable. Kuluypa used a portion of the money received through this project for home repairs, and she also bought sitting mats for guests, an electric heater, an electric kettle and a set of cookware."



If women had the same access to productive agricultural resources and services as men, they could significantly increase yields on their farms.

FAO Report – The State of Food and Agriculture









## WOMEN HOLD THE VILLAGE TOGETHER

When Gulmira Chomueva arrived in Osh for the training together with her three year old grandson the project staff members were quite surprised – this is not the usual practice. But what could we do? Gulmira had come all the way from the distant region of Alay. We just had to deal with it. And so, little Emir, sitting there at the desk next to his grandmother “studied” at the training and received all of the knowledge and skills needed to become head of the Agriculture Fund.

“There was no one to leave him with, and I couldn’t just skip the training – how would I be able to lead the work in the village?” explained Gulmira.

Mrs. Chomueva told us that in her native village of Zhar-Kshtak in the Alay district of the Osh region it is usually the grandparents who are bringing up the children. Most of the young people, especially the men, migrate to Russia in search of work, leaving their children in the care of the grandparents, or with the young wives. It turns out that many households are headed by women, forced themselves to both work on the farm and raise the children:

“Our village is held together by women”, said Gulmira. “In fact, it’s like that in many other villages of our region as well.”

The “Daanyshman” Agriculture Fund, which she directs, is made up of 40 of these women, selected according to their status in the “pyramid of poverty” and gathered into six Mutual Aid Groups. The youngest of them is 21 years old, and the oldest is 56.

Gulmira Chomueva explains: “It’s hardest for the young women. Young families typically do not have their own home, or a job, and



they are lacking in the life experience needed to handle all of the initial difficulties of starting a family. In the MAG they receive not only work, but also the help of older friends, it is no wonder they are called Mutual Aid Groups."

Gulmira – who has five children of her own and five grandchildren – had a house and job in Bishkek, but she returned to her village to look after her elderly mother in law, as tradition requires. No regrets though – she sums it up by saying that the air is easier to breathe in her native land and that she has a role in raising the village up, living and working in it. An Agriculture Fund is the first step to improving the life of the village:

"We could accomplish more if the village had more projects like this one. All of the women in our MAG have been able to improve their economic well-being with the newly acquired experience and knowledge from the training. They have learned not only to produce goods and sell them; with the money they buy cows and sheep for meat and milk production, repair and insulate their homes and pay for the education of their children. And even more impressive is the fact that they are investing in the Agriculture Fund. In this way they are working for the future strength and stability of their own and new MAG's"

As Gulmira explained, the women in the project started to take on more initiative – they are doing market research in order to profitably sell their locally grown products. For example, to find buyers for cauliflower they traveled to Osh, avoided the markets and arranged direct deliveries. Because of this, they managed to establish permanent sales channels. Especially because Alai cauliflower outdoes the competition coming from Uzbekistan to Osh and Bishkek – this cauliflower is fresher and better looking.

From our further conversation with Gulmira we found out that as the head of Agriculture Fund, she did not receive any seeds or other assistance that the MAG members received. Her only reward for the work was the joy of organizing the fund itself.

And so I asked, what then is her motivation to participate in this project? She replied:

"The work of our MAG is my work. The fruits of their labor represent my success. Our MAG members are among the poorest people in the village, and through working together they are improving each other's financial situation. Joining together with the Agriculture Fund, these MAG's have already created other groups, and are returning the aid which they themselves have received from the project. Thus, the aid is

multiplying, and moving from one to another. If everyone just thought of themselves, they would be 'cooking in their own stew' and the village would never get out of poverty"

Kurmanbek son Ainura Kamchybekova of the "Bai-Tushum" MAG, rejoicing at the good harvest at their site – especially the cauliflower, which he had never seen before.



“Empowering rural women is crucial for ending hunger and poverty. By denying women rights and opportunities, we deny their children and societies a better future.”

“The world has increasingly recognized the vital role that women play in building peace, justice and democracy. As we approach the 2015 deadline for achieving the Millennium Development Goals, it is time to invest more in rural women, protect their rights, and improve their status.”

From Secretary General Ban Ki-moon,  
Message on International Day of Rural  
Women, October 15, 2012









The structure of the UN Women program utilizes social mobilization as a strategy for implementing development programs aimed at meeting the needs of the most vulnerable segments of society.

