



COLLECTION OF LETTERS
“AYILDAN KELGEN KAT”
LETTERS FROM VILLAGERS



Education
for Community
Development



The “Operationalizing Good Governance for Social Justice” Project was launched in October 2011 and will be implemented for 36 months till October 2014. It increases and renders more equitable access for the citizenry, especially for vulnerable groups – women, youth and children – to public and municipal services in approximately 30 selected municipalities through improved local and national good governance processes. The project is implemented by UNICEF, UN WOMEN, UNESCO, and UNDP. The European Union cofunds the project in collaboration with the UN agencies above.

On the United Nations Secretary-General’s UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign.

Launched in 2008, the United Nations Secretary-General’s UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign aims to prevent and end all forms of violence against women and girls in all parts of the world. In Kyrgyzstan, the campaign started on March 8th, 2010. Not only is violence against women a gross violation of human rights but it also entails major social and economic costs and undermines women’s contribution to development, peace and security. Violence against women is a serious threat to achieving the internationally agreed development goals including the Millennium Development Goals.

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Collection of Letters “The Voices of Rural Women”

All names have been changed for the purpose of confidentiality

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Dear Friends!

Allow me to present a collection of letters sent by village residents as part of the Voices of Rural Women Initiative under the campaign **“UNiTE To End Violence against Women and Girls!”**



This work was published thanks to a joint EU/UN Project **“Operationalizing Good Governance for Social Justice”** aimed at increasing and rendering more equitable access for the public, especially for vulnerable groups – women, youth and children – to public and municipal services through improved local and national good governance processes.

Launched in 2008, **the United Nations Secretary-General’s UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign** aims to prevent and end all forms of violence against women and girls worldwide. The campaign in Kyrgyzstan began on March 8th 2010. Not only is violence against women a gross violation of human rights but it also entails major social and economic costs and undermines women’s contribution to development, peace and security.

The primary purpose of these letters is to build a dialogue between women and public and municipal institutions rendering services locally. Based on the analysis of the stories received, members of the movement TOGETHER traveled to village to run campaigns aimed at curbing discrimination and violence against women and girls with respect to their economic, political and social rights and access to health care services.

This initiative encourages the strengthening of rural women’s voices and allows them to be heard by local and central decision makers.

I encourage you to join the campaign and TOGETHER make every effort to protect and empower women and girls.

Dr. Sabine Machl

Representative for the Kyrgyz Republic
UN Women



One Cannot Live without Hope!

Our village of Bayetovo (Ak-Taly District of the Naryn Province) is located at altitude of 1,900-1,960 m above sea level, and therefore, we have a sharp continental climate. This is why our residents (around 11,850 in total) cannot do much other than engage in crop production and livestock farming.

Mostly, our villagers sow wheat and perennial herbs. A while ago, our village distributed 1,200 ha in the form of land parcels. A small portion of the 250 ha of land occupied by our household is used to grow as many vegetables as possible. However, this is difficult to accomplish since our locality experiences an acute shortage of irrigation water. In order to irrigate our lands, we mostly use water that flows to us from glaciers in spring. However, as the weather gets warmer, there is less and less water, and during the hottest period of summertime, the glacier water disappears. It is then that the population of our village starts engaging in conflicts – both minor and major – over the irrigation of land plots.

Concurrently with this problem, major difficulties with drinking water started emerging over the recent years. Due to the fact that wells went out of order, our village has been lacking clean drinking water for more than ten years. The shortage of drinking water started causing other problems, domestic and family-related ones. Lack of a clean drinking water resulted in an increase in prevalence

of infectious diseases in the village including Hepatitis, this especially effected children and youth.

Despite this, we, the residents of the Bayetovo village, specifically the women, are confident that this water problem can be resolved in our village. One cannot live without faith and hope. We tie our hopes to the rehabilitation of the currently out-of-order wells built during the Soviet times, both in our village of Bayetovo and on the southern side of the mountains adjacent to the *aiyl okmotu*. We believe that this is the only way to resolve our village's most pressing current concern. Our villagers are so interested in recovering these wells that they are willing to contribute anything, including money. However, we understand that these funds are likely to become insufficient, so we are looking forward to any outside assistance. Because water is the source of life.

When Water is the Cause of Diseases

The main problem within Kara-Chiy village (which holds 271 households) of the Jerge-Tal rural district of the Naryn District and Province is the lack of drinking water. Water from the nearby river On-Archa was deemed by a laboratory to be unfit for drinking. It is the destination of effluent discharges (including chemical) from the local Solton-Sary deposit. Despite this health hazard, our people are forced to draw water from this river. We have repeatedly approached the local sanitary authorities, to no avail, alas. Hence, us and our children continue to consume and use the polluted water.

We can state with utter authority that health of our villagers is deteriorating annually. The number of diseases and ailments including anemia, dysentery, Hepatitis, enteral infections, etc. is growing. Not to mention intestinal roundworm, tapeworm, and regular belly-worm – which unfortunately we have been forced to get used to as an everyday issue. Children are the ones most frequently sick. Their poor mothers spend hard-earned money on medications and treatment. Vulnerable groups suffer the most: out of 1652 residents of our village, 172 people are seniors, 421 people are children aged under 14, and 20 people are infants who are yet to reach the age of a year. Fifty families make the category of low-income households. Almost all of them find it impossible to break the vicious circle of contracting a disease from contaminated water, seeking medication and health

only to again resort to using contaminated water.

We, the people who render medical services to their village fellows, find it hard to accept that there is not much one can do. The local Medical and Obstetrical Station does not even have blood sugar and blood hemoglobin monitoring kits, let alone more complex tools. We have frequently raised the issue of clean drinking water and addressed the highest authorities, we have yet to see initiative on their side.

It should be noted that our village was not always in such a dire state. The Soviet-made water supply system functioned properly for a long time. After the collapse of the former USSR, the system started decaying. Recently, with the support of a Kyrgyz-Swiss medical project, our village built a sauna. However, even here our efforts in improving sanitary and hygiene conditions of our villagers were hindered by a lack of water. Pumping water from under the ground all the time was more than we could sustain: the electricity bills were just excruciating. Therefore, we only wash ourselves going to the sauna on holidays, while during wintertime we do not wash ourselves at all.

It is springtime now, which is when we restock our medical supplies. Our painful experiences suggests that the epidemiological situation in the village is soon to aggravate. Water in On-Archa contains sand, silt, and clay. These dirty impurities flow into the thawed water along four gigantic gorges. Water flows in irrigation channels too. We do not mind collecting water from the irrigation channels too, however it is still the same dirty water. After the water settles, it becomes turbid – yet, for us it is already clean: we can wash ourselves with it, we can wash our children, wash our dishes, clean our houses and even cook food after boiling it.

This letter was signed not only by medical officers but also ordinary rural women. Since women suffer especially when it comes to living without clean water. It is women who, risking their health, carry heavy canisters of water from the river to their homes. It is women who try to make their homes clean, feed their families, and wash their children all the while using the minimum volume of water possible. It is women who suffer most when their children suffer from diseases. It is women who want to be beautiful and attractive, healthy and clean, despite the harshest life situations and domestic conditions.



Our Craftswomen Need Long-Term Partners

Our Uchkun rural district of the Naryn District of the Naryn Province is plagued with several unresolved problems. For women, there are two major hardships: inability to secure benefits and employment.

We decided to resolve the issue of unemployment together. We created a women's organization for handicraft in order to make a living with our able hands. Amidst the living conditions in the Naryn Province, training sessions on processing the wool of domestic animals into ready-made handicraft garments are in high demand. The formation of our organization was facilitated by UNDP, and in 2010, it assisted us in purchasing wool-beating equipment. However, later we found that the wool-carder purchased for us was not fit for our wool. Nevertheless, we continued using it in our operations. Of course we heard that there is better, technologically advanced wool-processing equipment. If we were to possess one of these machines we would be able to manufacture even more unique wool products that people need.

Our craftswomen felt and dye wool on their own, and then make *ala-kiyiz* (decorative felt rugs), *shyrdak* (harsh felt rugs), felt footwear, runners, rugs, and souvenirs. In addition, we sew ethnic garments and floor mattresses. Our items are particularly valued by mothers who prepare dowry for their daughters. For full-fledged operations we need working capital, however we are currently unable to procure even the required quality raw materials. We started looking for other means and sources of revenue generation. We launched a textile (sewing) shop. We approached this initiative very responsibly: we passed special courses and paid KGS 5,000 for them (in the rural area this is a large amount). However, we faced many difficulties in the textile industry. First off, appropriate space is required for textile operations, which entails a spacious and well-lit room. We do not have such a room, and therefore our craftswomen work at home. Secondly, we lack the required equipment: several sewing machines and an ironing table.

Yet, our desire to work, make money and make our customers happy by producing new handicraft items overcomes the desire to give up when faced with difficult hurdles. Even though our organization lacks the appropriate sewing machinery, we established a collaboration with the Jolbar textile shop in the town of Naryn: they provide us with piece of fabric which we sew. Honestly though, we do not see much profit. For instance a pair of trousers sell for KGS 14.38, the prices means our basic costs are not covered. In addition, the transportation of the materials from Naryn to our village and then of our finished products back to Naryn costs alot of money. Many say that in Bishkek the orders are larger and so are the payments. It would be great to find partners in the capital! On our part, we can confidently guarantee quality in our products as we employ the most talented craftswomen. In conclusion, we would like to thank everyone who has read our letter and is willing to respond and help us.



Woman's Destiny: Seven Circles of Hell

I, Burul Kudaiberdiyeva, was born in the Bayetovo village in 1962. I currently reside in Kaiyndy-Bulak village. I am a mother of five.

Fate began testing as soon as I got married. In an attempt to somewhat improve our dire situation, my husband Zarylbek Eshmatov committed a crime and is now incarcerated. I was left alone, solely responsible for my five children. My personal tragedy occurred when, not only individuals and families but entire countries were fighting to survive, retain statehood and integrity. That included our Kyrgyzstan. However, for better or worse, we survived that time: both my country and my family persevered and I was able to raise my children.

At the time the government started distributing land parcels, my entire life revolved around feeding my children. This was back in 1997-1999. I lined up, application in hand, with my fellow villagers, who were hopeful and anxious, at the *aiyl okmotu* (rural local government body). While waiting I fantasized of how I would be harvesting my crop on my and my children's land parcels and our lives would finally get better. However, in the *aiyl okmotu*'s office I was told that they were missing information on my husband. As a result, neither my husband, nor I or my children received even a tiny piece of land. Looking back, I cannot fathom how I survived back then. Resentment and bitterness sank deep into my soul as they did not even care to explain why my children and I were refused a land plot. I did not dare approach anyone with a grievance against the abuse of my rights back then.

Later on I was informed by knowledgeable individuals that divorced single mothers are entitled to humanitarian assistance. Having heard this in 2003, I submitted an application for divorce to the *aiyl okmotu*. After the divorce was finalized, the *aiyl okmotu* still ruled against allocating a piece of land to me. As to the humanitarian assistance: I only received it twice and then one more time recently.

This is not the end of my misfortunes however. Another several years passed as I futilely struggled for survival. Only one thing consoled me over those years: my children were growing. Then, in February

2013, my husband returned from prison. He returned sick – he had liver cancer and was in the terminal stage. I will not be tell you what it's like to care for the terminally ill. Those who have experienced this will understand. After being tortured by this experience for a couple of months, my husband passed away. I now faced another problem organizing a funeral with all the corresponding expenditures and required documents. It turned out that securing proper papers required money (as my late husband lost his passport). To further complicate matters, the local authorities were in no position to ask the dying man about the circumstances of how he lost his passport.

Perhaps now that my children have lost a parent, they will finally give us some benefits! – It is exactly this mindset that I carried when I traveled to the district center after my husband's funeral. However, they rejected my application yet again claiming that divorced mothers are not entitled to benefits. I once again heard the word "NO." Now, I simply do not know who to address for help. I can't believe our state lacks people, organizations, institutions that can explain to women like me what rights we have and how to protect our children! Are we bound to only write letters hoping for the sympathy of good people?



Diseases Were Brought by Dirty Water

I, Altyn Kerimova, was born on 3 February 1970. Today, I live in Kaiyndy-Bulak raising five children.

The biggest problem in our village that I would like to describe in

my letter is the lack of clean drinking water. Our village has a well but it has long since ceased to be operational. I have to take trips to the irrigation channel that passes through about 3 km from our village.

As a wife and mother, I learned what the consequences of consuming water unfit for human consumption are back in 2008. In that year, my son was brought down by a bout of Echinococcosis, the diseases hit his lungs. We had to take him to undergo a complicated surgery. God forbid anyone has an experience like this. It would be easier, at least psychologically, if it were I who had gotten sick, instead of having to tend to my suffering son. In order to avoid the spread of this disease among other members of our family, we immediately called a veterinarian, inspected everything and treated our domestic animals, and killed our cats and dogs. Nevertheless, in 2010, my husband was diagnosed with Echinococcosis of the liver. I was still struggling with this when, in 2011, my youngest son had to undergo surgery. My heart, as a mother, was tested with my children's suffering! For that period I was so consumed with concern for my family I forgot about myself. I cannot recall how I slept and ate, what I did, with whom I talked. My life was entirely dedicated to my loved ones. The majority of our livestock and a better part of the revenues from farming were spent on treatment, rehabilitation, and food for my children and my husband.

In 2011, Echinococcosis was diagnosed in the family of our neighbors: a woman, the head of the household, and then another neighbor got sick. Then another couple of cases were noted in our village. We started investigating the source of the infection. Someone hypothesized that the root of the cause was dirty water. It turned out that the irrigation channel we drew water from was used as a dumpster for dead cats and dogs. Then, residents of our village gathered and cleared the mouth of the channel to the best of their ability. The situation has improved, but the question is for how long?

Today, my family is always fearful when we draw water from the irrigation channel. As much as I try to calm them, their fear persists. We had suffered too much from the contaminated water. Perhaps, major repairs to the well could improve the water situation in our village; however, my village fellows simply lack the money needed to make the required repairs.



Gulmaidan: It's All Only Starting!

Let me use this letter to tell you about the experience of our Public Foundation “Gulmaidan” that contributes to the improvement of quality of life in the Kenesh rural district of the Nookat District of the Osh Province.

The “Gulmaidan” Public Foundation was created by 22 women. We have been working since 5 March 1998. The Foundation’s goal is to facilitate the resolution of not only social but also economic problems of our village fellows. Therefore, our first activity was to arrange Self-Help Groups (SHG) whose members, mostly women, gained an opportunity to satisfy basic needs of their families.

As an example, I would like to tell you a story that I was involved in personally. In 1999, I organized 10 women of the Arbyn village into an SHG. We each chipped in KGS 100. In order for the resource management to be efficient and profitable, I suggested that we all pass a special training. Pursuant to the terms of our SHG, women took money from our joint cash box and returned it in within a month with a 10% interest. I personally made sure that the terms were not breached and our SHG had no differences of opinion. One day, one of the women approached me with a request: “I have nothing to feed my children with, I owe KGS *сoмoв*, please give me some money.” Indeed, back then, life was rather difficult and many families were going through tough times. Members of our SHG showed understanding for her situation and allocated KGS 1000 from our joint cash box. Having purchased some corn, she made and sold an ethnic drink called *bozo* for about a month. That way, not only was she able to feed her children, but also gained KGS 900 in net income and repaid KGS 1100 in time.

What looked like a relatively small amount changed the destiny of an entire family! The poor woman, thanks to the mutual assistance cash box, was able to survive through harsh times and dedicate the profits to continue the business she had started. As a result, her welfare and that of her family improved significantly.

And there are many examples like this. One small success spoke volumes: today, there are more than twenty SHG's like ours. Later, many people started uniting to pursue bigger projects: creating small business with new jobs and launching microcredit organizations that helped village residents meet their needs. Today, as far as I know, at least a hundred families purchased livestock thanks to loans from our "rural banks."

I can also assuredly say that women who were involved in our projects have become more aware! This process has been facilitated by educational and technical assistance rendered by international organizations such as UNDP and the Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation. UNDP helped launch a bakery in our village of Kuu-Maidan. Today, our women enthusiastically make bread, pastries, and cookies providing breakfast to children of four schools! In addition, women's groups dedicated to vegetable farming are being created.

Now that I have mentioned self-awareness of our women, I can't help but remember the Rural Public Self-Government Project, which was a product of cooperation between the Kuu-Maidain village and the UNDP Democratic Governance Program. Members of the Rural Public Self-Government (nine people, five of whom were women) arranged civil control of operations at the *aiyl okmotu* and engaged the community in direct participation in decision making that affected the socioeconomic situation of the village. Here is an outline of how it worked: on a monthly basis, meetings identified the most relevant and acute problems of the village, determined the degree of their priority, prepared appropriate reports that were then submitted to the *aiyl okmotu* for consideration and allocation of funds from the local budget. Here is a list of the needs of the villagers that were met: gravel for roads, floors for a kindergarten, lighting of one of the streets, repairs to a bridge – about ten such "people's" projects were implemented with funds of the *aiyl okmotu* between 2010 and 2011. I was glad to see that other villages were looking to us as an example. I am sure that soon all villages of our rural district will start to actively demonstrate their civil awareness.

However, we cannot assuredly say that we are using all the opportunities available to us. For instance, our fertile land gives

us decent harvests of apples, berries and potatoes. Yet, we settle for home-made stocked food. I wish we could sell our produce commercially but we do not have the funds to arrange the required operations. For instance, a piece of canned apple juice machinery costs KGS 300 thousand – we lack such money. It would have been great if we could gather 5-6 women and create an apple processing shop – this would create jobs for women and extra revenue for village residents. Each year we harvest excellent amounts of apples and just do not know what to do with them! We also want to launch a dairy shop: produce cheese, cottage cheese and yogurt. Yet, funding is once again an issue. Nevertheless, we do not despair as we know from experience that if one wants something badly, one can achieve anything. We have so many things to accomplish ahead of us!



Price of Water

One of the most pressing and protracted problems of the Kenesh rural district of the Nookat District of the Osh Province is a lack of clean drinking water. Water supply facilities built back in 1965 went out of order long time ago. As a result, only 9% out of 2,632 households have access to clean drinking water.

A particularly dire situation emerged in the villages of Arbyn and Shankol. For instance, 3,842 residents of the Arbyn are forced

to draw water from a river which is used as an area for watering livestock. The situation in spring is especially unbearable. Following annual spring showers and floods, the river water is filled with dirt and silt. Even settled water continues to be turbid, yet, local residents have no choice but to use the only water they have access to. As a result, prevalence of communicable diseases (such as Dysentery and Hepatitis) in our villages grow exponentially. We are particularly concerned at how rapidly diseases spread among our children.

Difficulties associated with a lack of access to clean drinking water especially affect women and children. Women need water most to cook food, clean houses, bathe their children. It is women and children who have to carry water from afar daily. Lifting and carrying heavy canisters filled with water certainly damages the fragile frames of women and children. But what can they do? They don't have much of a choice.

The village of Kuu-Maidan hosts 240 households, in addition to the problems above, there are also issues with the growing rate of people who need drinking water and drinking water delivery services. What the growing discontent of the people will lead to no one knows today...

Speaking objectively, women are the primary users of water in a family. Oftentimes, they are the ones who initiate a family's refusal to pay the water supply services. One can understand their mindset: they are not informed that they are charged for the delivery of water rather than for water itself. Amidst other pressing concerns, they do not find it necessary to pay for a nature's good – water. As a result, about 40% of residents of villages of our rural district are not members of the Water Users Association. Almost all of the villagers use water from wells dug on their own in their backyards. These self-made wells are not compliant with any sanitary and hygiene standards whatsoever and result in a major deterioration of their family members' health. Here, the district's sanitary and epidemiological authorities fail to control or inspect the quality of well-drawn water, while representatives of *aiyl okmotu* and Water Users Association fail to run explanatory awareness campaigns.

If you think that health issues only exist in villages that lack water, you are wildly mistaken. Since the villages of the Kenesh rural district are cluttered together in one area and residents are in regular contact with one another, diseases emerging in one village quickly spread to others.

We all hope that someday our villages will benefit from an

available supply of clean drinking water. Until that happens, I think one should run a comprehensive set of explanatory workshop. First of all, on issues of medical, sanitary and epidemiological prophylaxis; secondly, with respect to the need for the continuous and timely payment for servicing and maintenance of water supply systems. After all, even if one person demonstrates lack of responsibility and awareness in such issues, everyone else will suffer.

Without Water, Life is Like Death

Our village is one of six in the Shark rural district of the Kara-Suu District of the Osh Province. The village has been historically called “6 km MTF.”

Our village is not very big, it is made up of about 144 households comprising 360 women, 284 men and 412 children under 15 years of age. Every year, our village grows as new families emerge and are allocated land plots.

We are concerned that *aiyl okmotu* neglect domestic conditions of our village. We believe that our small village does not have the attention of local authorities. A lack of clean drinking water is one of the most relevant and painful problems. Residents of our village have approached so many different authorities! Yet, we saw now action on their part. And this is how it's been for many years, unfortunately.

There is a channel close to our village into which waters from all upstream farm fields flow. It is this water that we have to use. We drink this water as there is no other options. Due to the consumption of water that is unfit for drinking, our village residents' health has deteriorated significantly. In 2011-2012 alone, we have had 10 people fall ill with Typhoid, of whom four were children and six were women. We saw people contract Hepatitis – 39 people of whom 26 were children and 9 were women, and also saw 16 children suffer from Dysentery. As you can see, These women and children are suffering due to a lack of clean drinking water.

Trying to somehow protect our children from infectious diseases, our women started carrying water from the neighboring villages. It is understandable that it is difficult and dangerous for women's health. Over several months of 2013, three pregnant women of our village had miscarriages. Trying to help their mothers, children take trips to bring water having to carry heavy canisters and buckets. They have to miss school. It's easy to guess what consequences related to health and general development our children suffer from. We

stopped waiting for specific and required actions on part of the local authorities. We are only left with hope for other organizations, caring citizens, businesspeople and donors. Perhaps, they will show mercy and help resolve the problem of a lack of clean drinking water in our village. On our side, we are willing to help and facilitate the resolution of this problem. As people say, “hope dies last.”



Victims of Violence

On the 1st of February 2011, at six in the evening, a white foreign-manufactured car pulled up and the passengers within forced K, a 9th grader, into the car and left in an unidentified direction. The girl was 15 years old. Her mother, who witnessed the kidnapping, ran after the car for a good while but failed to catch up with it. She approached law enforcement bodies for help.

Officers in the Directorate of Internal Affairs for the Bakai-Ata District of the Talas Province first sympathized with the woman and even advised her on how to properly file charges. However later they, as if mocking the helpless woman, rejected her filing. As it turned out, there was a good reason for this, one of the young men who committed this crime was M.T., a son of the district's department of the country's Social Fund, another – his nephew. It is surprising that the police knew from the very beginning who committed violence against the young teenage girl. Nevertheless, they stated that: "they received an offer they were not able to reject," and as a result, the investigation of this criminal case was stalled.

The girl was found three days later in critical condition. Her clothes were all torn and she had been raped, beaten. God only knows what her parents had to go through over those three days .

The girls' father, an Afghan campaign veteran and a Group II person with disabilities, is a good person. The mother, who saw the rapists abduct her daughter with her very eyes, tries to stay positive by praising the Lord for keeping her daughter alive. All attempts to make waves and get the investigation to recommence were rejected by the girl herself: "Don't bring even more shame on me. I cannot take more of this pain." Since then, they had been living quietly, trying to hide the pain going through their hearts on a daily basis... until thunder struck again...

After several months the girl found that she was pregnant. The girl had figured this out late into pregnancy, her parents had to urgently send her to Bishkek where in due course a beautiful baby was born. He is now six months old, and his grandmother and grandfather are his closest and loved ones.

The rapists and their high-placed relatives continue living as if nothing happened. Today, as time passes, they don't even remember that three days after the crime they asked the girl to quit crying while offering her KGS 40 thousand. The police were able to somehow very quickly close this case.

By the way, the girl's parents found the strength to seek justice. They lack the money for an attorney so they approached the Ombudsman's representative for the Talas Province. The case was re-launched under public pressure. What will the outcome be? – Only God knows...



It's Time to Break Gender Stereotypes!

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, during the years when Kyrgyzstan, as other countries under a then superpower, started the difficult process of building an independent democratic state, all Kyrgyzstanis had to survive through tough times. Today, this is all part of history. Our lives have become more stable, and people are more or less better able to survive. It should be noted that women and youths played a major role in this process and have evolved into an active movement by these days that actually impact social development.

In the same manner, our Chymchyk village of the Yrys rural district of the Suzak District of the Jalal-Abad Province, just like in other places, has its own achievements and problems that affects the entire population. In fairness, one should note that it is us women who want changes most. It is also us who have the least opportunities to participate in the improvement of conditions of rural life. Perhaps our people's mindset is at fault, as they often claim: "a woman's place is in the kitchen." As a result, over many years, numerous socioeconomic and domestic problems have remained unresolved.

First off, there's the issue of a lack of clean drinking water which brings affects women the most. Then, there's the land issue that concerns women just as much. It is this issue that I want to elaborate

on...

Since a typical village has few jobs for women, we are forced to make a living by working in the fields. This is particularly true if you are a single mother. However, even here women are faced with several obstacles. For instance, single mothers are discriminated against in renting a land plot – because they are simply not trusted! Not only does mistrust originate from private land owners, but also from the *aiyl okmotu*, as women generally are trusted less than men. They say we are weak and incapable of engaging hard labor in land farming which has long been considered a man's trade. At least, this is the case in our village...

At the same time, everyone knows that we women are very serious about any job and honor our obligations well and in time. Knowing that her actions affect welfare of her children, a woman is capable of doing everything possible, and sometimes even impossible, to harvest a good crop! Not only does her family thrive thanks to her efforts, but also the society as a whole. Yet, the traditional male attitude remains unchanged and almost impossible to change...

Therefore, I think it's high time we united and broke this stereotype. We need support, and women can demonstrate their power and contribute significantly to the development of their families, villages and the society overall! We have everything we need to accomplish that.

Successes and Problems of Rural Women

The Mogol rural district of the Bazar-Korgon District of the Jalal-Abad Province is home to 6700 women. In our village of Oogan-Talaa, which is the center of this district, women make up 1600 of the inhabitants, about a half of whom are able-bodied individuals. In this letter, I wanted to tell you about our “female” successes and difficulties.

However, let's start with the good and talk about our successes first. I consider it a success that 112 women are employed in various state institutions. This means that 112 families have income! Many other women, uniting into associations, opened various small



enterprises. These include hairdresser's places, confectionery shops, textile shops, etc. The UNDP Poverty Reduction Program helps them immensely.

Now, onto our difficulties. The main of those is the lack of arable land and irrigation water. Problems with irrigation have been persistent in our area for more than 10 years. All these years, we have not been able to obtain a good yield off our fields due to problems with irrigation. Some of our people are trying to grow crops that do not require as much water (corn, sunflower), but none of us risk planting vegetables, fruit or berries as it is a useless and futile effort.

Since there's nothing that they own, women have to travel 40 km from their village to a market of the district center of Bazar-Korgon to purchase raw materials for domestic stocked foods. The quality of the purchased produce varies and on top of this it is not always easy to get purchases home in good condition. For this reason, canned food frequently goes bad and is unfit for human consumption.

Hence, if only we had irrigation water many of our problems would be solved. Perhaps, even the health of our villagers would improve as they would have eaten home-grown organic produce and its derivatives. That would impact our children's health as well!

I am sure that the water and land issues could be resolved if only local communities and local governments united for the cause. However so far, there are no positive changes in our lives. Therefore, it would be great if organizations emerged that could provide us with information that enabled us to make effective efforts in this area.

In addition, as I already noted there is a problem of unemployment among our women. I should also state that we need initiatives in getting women to unite into self-help groups. We believe it could help them secure low-interest loans.

So far, none of our calls for help have been answered...



Civil Activity as an Important Factor of Life Improvement

While the entire Nichke-Sai rural district of the Toktogul District of the Jalal-Abad Province has 818 households for a population of 3475 people, our native village of Chorgochu has 371 households and 1622 residents in total. In other words, our village accounts for more than a third of the entire Nichke-Sai rural district.

Here are some more figures for you. Our village has one secondary school, one Medical and Obstetrical Station, one part-time kindergarten, and not a single social/community entertainment establishment for young people! You be the judge – does this sound

like a sufficient base of social/community places for a village with our population?! The closest larger settlement – the district’s center located 100-110 away – is a very dubious consolation. Even the office of the *aiyl okmotu* is located 5-10 km away. The village primarily survives on livestock farming and plant farming. Domestic conditions are not very good, lots of families are in need of social assistance.

Many years passed before we realized that only we can make our lives easier. Today we see an increase in civil activity in our village!

In order to improve the living conditions of our village fellows, and especially women, we decided to develop a mechanism for the community’s involvement in issues that pertain to the socioeconomic development of our village. On 28 December 2012, we created and legally registered a Public Union “Chorgochu Self-Government.” Currently, we are ready to engage on a major scale and in a full-fledged manner, stakeholder organizations and donors. There is a popular saying: “Labor is the father of welfare, while land is its mother.” Without a revenue-generating land cultivation activity, economic development of our village is impossible. Therefore, first and foremost, we are seeking ways to work on land in an organized manner: by identifying what agricultural crops fit our village’s soil and climatic conditions best; how much sowing material (seeds) we need; how to estimate costs of equipment and other expenses; how to project future crops and expected net income, etc.

Women of our village have started to become more active and aware. By getting organized, they created a self-help group to resolve their problems. Such a group is being formed by women who work in the local Bakyt Kindergarten. Their goal is rather straightforward: “Help yourself by making your work on your land plot easier.”

I would like to briefly describe our “land” situation since we have many problems with this. The allocation of lands in the Nichke-Sai rural district is as follows: per capita, 0.16 ha of irrigated land and 0.08 of rain-fed land. 259 ha of irrigated land of our village is sustained by water from three channels.

One of them is a 7,563 meter long Kuron channel that feeds 63 ha of land owned by 80 newly created households. This is a ground canal type of channel lacking any special concrete trays and foundations whatsoever. Therefore, despite the fact that all families agreed to clean and, thus, sustain uninterrupted passability of water flow, due to the fact that gravel accumulates at the beginning of this channel,

most of the water does not reach consumers and disappears into the land. Another canal, Kyzyl-Charbam being 11 km long, was built properly using heavy equipment. It mostly feeds 230 ha of land of the Land Redistribution Fund (LRF) and 279 ha of land parcels.

Yet, there is not enough irrigation water, which results in much of the land being left untilled. Also, as a result of a major 1992 earthquake, there are large cracks in the soil where water escapes into which leads to major losses of harvests. The village does not have the money to manage the consequences of that earthquake.

There is another problem that only women tend to encounter. Women working in the fields have no day care center where they can leave their children. Sometimes, children left unattended end up electrocuted or drowned in the river. Poor women simply don't know whether to stay at home with their young children or go outside and seek subsistence for their older children. All of them are looking forward to seeing the local Bakyt kindergarten open its doors: remuneration of day-care assistants is expected to be resolved by next year. It would help create conditions for our women, many of whom want to work and make money for their families and participate in their village's social life.

Speaking of the fate of my fellow female villagers, I can't help but mention one "female" problem... Let me first explain to you that our village of Chorgochu consists of two parts. The first one— Uzun Kolot — 9 km long, and the second one, a relatively new part occupied by 80 households, housing the village's school. Now, this new part of our village lacks clean drinking water! In summertime, our residents use irrigation water, which results in an annual aggravation of infectious diseases such as typhoid, dysentery, intestinal disorders, etc. In wintertime, when irrigation water is unavailable, countless 4-5 km trips for water take place: heavy canisters are brought on donkeys, horses, makeshift carts, and sometimes even on foot. They say it's possible, from a technological standpoint, to pump water to the new part of our village from the river. However, due to lack of funds, this is only a dream goal for us...

That's how we live in Chorgochu. I am writing this letter hoping that there are people and organizations that are not indifferent to our lives and destinies and that they can help us create conditions for a normal life.



Water Is a Source of Life

Our rural district of Kyzyl-Tuu of the Suzak District of the Jalal-Abad Province is home to more than 25 thousand people, of whom 55% are women.

The district unites 20 villages. In only one of them, local residents have access to clean drinking water. In four of the remaining 19 villages, water is supplied for four hours a day, in two villages – for four hours a day every other day, with residents of five villages getting drinking water from remote springs while residents of eight villages have to purchase water for KGS 20 per canister...

People prepare for gathering water from the tank in advance. It is futile to organize a disciplined line, as there will be always fights, conflicts and standoff because water is never brought in sufficient volumes. The lucky few, who manage to buy water, also need to deliver their heavy cargo home even if that entails a several hundred-meter long walk. That's no longer as important – what matters is that a family has water for the day. And tomorrow, they will think about tomorrow...

Filling their canisters with water despite the hostile line, heavy weight, hundreds of meters of a bumpy village road – all these difficulties generally fall on women and children. Water gathered the hard way is only used for drinking. It's precious – it's stored for

several days gradually starting to smell bad. For domestic purposes, villagers use rainwater dripping from roofs and collected in drops in buckets and bowls. While in other places, people hide from rain under sheds, we get very wet running under the rain trying to use every opportunity and make every effort to collect as much vital liquid from the skies as we can. Each drop is of value so we don't do laundry or clean our houses unless completely necessary. There is no point discussing the generally accepted domestic hygiene norms. Our villages frequently see cases of infectious intestinal and skin diseases. Our *aiyl okmotu* (rural government) never has money to build an elevated water well.

Irrigation water creates just as many problems. River Kok-Art is the source of irrigation for five *aiyl okmotu*: Bagysh, Lenin, Tash-Bulak, Kyzyl-Tuu, and Suzak. During the high point of the irrigation season, there is never enough water which results in lost crops, limited harvests, and, consequently, less revenue. Without the required irrigation, we cannot grow vegetables in our backyards. Villagers are not rich enough to purchase vegetables, which means that our children do not get the sufficient intake of vitamins and young mothers are stricken with anemia and their pregnancy and delivery are always exposed to high avoidable risk.

That's the situation in our villages. We are tired of constantly feeling a deficit of money. There are no jobs for women in our area, therefore 99.5% of my female village fellows stay at home jobless. Women wish to work in the fields but those remain untilled due to a lack of irrigation water. In addition, fertilizers are so expensive that they are not affordable, definitely in case of families headed by single mothers.

This hopeless privation forces women to go to Russia, Kazakhstan and other countries situated near Kyrgyzstan. Many of them face problems, diseases and sometimes even slavery there... Grandmothers, forced to take care of their daughters' children in their absence, due to their age simply cannot provide the knowledge and life skills required today. Also, they are old already and caring for their grandchildren is a strain on their health...

We would very much appreciate any help and support: both from individuals and organizations, donors. Rural people, especially rural women who stoically take all the hardships and privations of their destinies, would be very grateful!



A Land Plot to Save a Young Family

I would like to tell you about one of the most burdensome problems in our village.

I live in the Kakyr village of the Uch-Korgon *aiyl aimak* (rural district) of the Kadamjai in the district of the Batken Province. Our village is home to 560 families and 3014 people. Historically, even after children grow up and create their own families, they continue living with their parents. Of course, parents try to let young couples live separately, however, they frequently are only able to do so within the limits of their general household's yard. Almost every household essentially consists of several families. Oftentimes, there are up to five families in a household – sometimes up to total 20 people and more. It is apparent that in such settings family disputes and differences of opinion are inevitable: between mothers-in-laws and daughters-in-laws, fathers and sons, brothers and daughters-in-law. As a result, the divorce rate in our village is growing.

Wishing to live separately, young families are willing to build their houses on their own. It doesn't matter where, as long as making it happen is possible. However, all their requests to appropriate

state bodies are met with the same answer: there are no land plots available for the construction of residential housing. Nor are there any hopes of them being available in the future.

Today, there are about 100 families in line for land plots. This figure grows every year – life goes on and young people create families and their families grow too. Many young people leave their villages seeking a better life while others are not so brave. The village's environment is full of grievance, hopelessness and despair...

Perhaps, this is not just our village's problem. I think it's the case in many other villages of the Batken Province. However, realizing this doesn't make me or my village fellows' lives easier. I don't want to leave Kakyr, especially not knowing how good life will be in a new place. So far, I have harbored a tiny hope that eventually our voices will be heard...

Pain of Migrants' Mother

My name is Jamilya Sultanova. I live in the Kara-Bak village of the Kara-Bak *aiyl okmotu* (rural district) of the Batken District of the Batken Province. I am 53 years old and am raising 4 sons on my own. My husband died in 1995 when my children were very young. I faced many difficulties as a young woman who was left without her husband's help and with youngsters and toddlers to care for. These difficulties were especially hard given that I was living in the conditions of a remote Batken Province – this is something that only a woman who went through similar trials and troubles is capable of understanding.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, just like all other Kyrgyzstani people, we started living our new lives with sincere joy and major hopes. In 1996, we were allocated land plots. On the basis of 0.17 ha per each member, my family got a total of 1.02 ha of land.

Nevertheless, due to a lack of irrigation water, as early as during the very first year of my working on that land, it became apparent that we should not expect a good harvest nor should we expect good revenues. We were not even able to recoup the funds we invested into the fieldwork. Having gone through these trials and tribulations for several years, all four of my sons had to travel to Russia to work. I am now alone again, this time with two daughters-in-law and three grandchildren on my hands in an old small house. Building a bigger



house, let alone a separate residence for my boys and their families, is not something we can afford.

This is how I live. Every time I hear about the difficult plight of Kyrgyz labor migrants in Russia on the news, my heart aches. Day and night my I worry: “how are my boys, all four of them in the vast land of that huge, foreign country”... Kyrgyz people have a saying: “Five steps away from your home, you are a vagrant.” Whatever they say, a mother’s heart can feel how difficult the life of her four sons away from home is.

Without a husband, all work – the domestic woman’s house chores and the hard man’s labor – as well as duties of upbringing fall square on a woman’s weak shoulders. While my children grew as orphans after their father died, many other children here are almost orphans despite their fathers being alive. I can’t help but feel the pain seeing how they are raised not being loved fully. My grandchildren and their mothers only see their fathers and their husbands once a year or even more rarely when my sons get an opportunity to return to Batken. The rest of the time, young women have to carry the tough burden of a difficult rural life on their own. Few people can understand how difficult it is for three families to live under the same roof...

Recently, the head of our Kara-Bak rural government notified us that the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic promised to resolve the ever-lasting problem of a lack of irrigation water. And that it might even start issuing land plots in the Burgondu residential area of the Kadamjai District to all those who wish to build residential houses. I took this news as a gift, and thought that fate was finally smiling upon me. Finally, my children and grandchildren will have hope for a better life! I now pray for my hope to come to life and for all of us to see better times...



“Hard” Rice

Our village of Ak-Suu is one of the most remote cross-border villages of the Batken Province. It is located 40 km away from the district’s center of Leilek and borders Tajikistan on two sides.

Outside of its borders, the Ak-Suu *aiyl okmotu* (rural district) of which our namesake Ak-Suu village is part, is renowned for its so-called *devzire* rice. When people happily buy this variety of rice, they can’t even imagine how difficult it is for us to harvest it. At the same time, for each family of our rural district, growing rice is the main source of income as not only is it the primary foodstuff for us, but also the primary commodity with proceeds from it used to cover expenditures incurred by the entire family. This is how our “economy” depends on rice...

At all stages of its growth and maturity, *devzire* rice requires so much water that the people even came up with a riddle: “Grows in water, matures in water, is cooked in water.” It is water, or, to be exact, irrigation water that our biggest problems are associated with. Let’s start with saying that in spring arable lands are frequently flooded by powerful mudslides and the water channels are clogged with silt and sand. This creates many problems for irrigation. The Ak-Suu river that breaks its banks floods germinated rice.

However, there is another major “water” problem – ongoing

conflicts over irrigation water. About 5-6 years ago, there was an incident in the Jar-Kyshtak village of our rural district. Then, after failing to arrange the sharing of water, a villager named Rizakul killed his village fellow, Otamurat, having carelessly hit him with a hose. As a result, both sides suffered. On one hand, Otamurat's widow and orphaned children, and on the other hand, grief and misfortune struck Rizakul's family who was sentenced to a lengthy prison term. The fight over irrigation water left two families without breadwinners and conflicts between their relatives have been ongoing ever since.

Things are just as dire in the Uluz section of the Ak-Suu village where for two years people have been unable to cultivate their parcels situated on 30 ha of irrigated land. Of that area, 5 ha are owned by the Land Redistribution Fund, with the remaining 25 belonging to villagers. In our village, each resident received 6.2 hundred square meters of land. Day and night, working on such a small piece of land, we provide for our families. Those who have plots in the Uluz section are deprived of even that. For such an area such as ours, where irrigated lands are scarce, untilled 30 ha represents an unaffordable luxury.

Just imagine the situation of people who live in a rural area and do not have an opportunity to receive harvests off their lands! Revenues drop significantly, families become poor, children fail to receive proper nutrition, women tend to become anemic and prone to other social diseases, 75-80% become labor migrants searching for work, and take care of chores and upbringing become purely women's responsibilities. As a result, families break up, the divorce rate skyrockets and poverty reaches 55-60% at the village level.

Things are further complicated by the fact that our village has become home to repatriate ethnic Kyrgyz people returning from Tajikistan and migrant Uzbek people coming from Uzbekistan whose parents used to be Ak-Suu residents and left our area some time ago. They are returning to the land of their ancestors with hopes for a better life. The reality is much grimmer, though, and they are now lacking even the smallest parcel that would have enabled them to generate some kind of income. Leaving the place they started calling home is not an option – they lack passports and obtaining such identification is no less of a difficult problem for them. Therefore, these poor fellows are forced to perform menial labor or work on a rented land to make ends meet.



Resolving the Land Problem to Help Reduce Rural Poverty

I am writing to you to share a problem that I am experiencing at this moment of my life. Perhaps, some of you may share your experience and give me a valuable piece of advice.

I live in a very remote villages of the Batken Province – the Ak-Suu village of the Leilek District. My name is Kunduz. I have a family, a daughter. My husband works in the village school. I too work in the school, but at the moment, I am on maternity leave.

I am writing to you because our young family has faced the notorious “land issue.” You all know that rural residents born before

1994 received land parcels, myself included. However, due to the insufficiency of irrigated land in our rural district, each resident only got 6.2 hundred sq.m of land.

Yet, even that is not the problem in itself. The problem is that the land plot of a daughter who gets married is retained by her parents. And, naturally, no rural girl will ever say to her parents: "Give me my land plot!" Of course, some conscientious parents offer a young couple their daughter's land to till. Yet, such relations are never solidified by any law.

My land parcel has been registered in my father's name too. I have been married for four years and my parents constantly offer that I till it on my own and, accordingly, take the entire harvest. My husband and I have been doing this for two years. However, with each year passing, we feel guilty. And every year, we hope that my father will again allow us to till that land plot.

My family's situation can be considered more or less well-off as my father chose exactly this attitude toward us. And even under this kind of arrangement, although both of us are working in our family, it is difficult to become self-sustainable without a help from outside. Yet, there are so many young families in our village in which no one is employed in any way or form! Now, whenever there's a case where such a family cannot, for any reason, use the wife's land, I can only imagine how difficult such a couple's life is...

That's not the end of it... Land plots also create another problem that mostly affects low-income vulnerable families. When girls from such families get married and their land parcels remain in the estate of their parents, subsequent accounting reveals that per-capita income of her parents exceeds the minimum threshold. That means that the remaining children automatically lose the right to benefits! Thus, the situation of families and parents of such newly married girls instantly deteriorates.

This is how welfare at the village level directly depends on land. That's why I am asking for help in resolving this problem.



One Cannot Be Too Careful...

My name is Gulfiya, I am a resident of the Chon-Aryk village of the Ketmen-Tobo rural district of the Toktogul District of the Jalal-Abad Province.

I married in 1987 and as early as the following year, in 1988, gave birth to our first child – our first son. Back then, our village, just like the whole country, saw tough times. There were no qualified medical services – no one explained to us, young mothers, what pregnancy was. We did not know how to give birth, how to care for a newborn, how to properly breast-feed, etc. We lacked specialists – obstetricians or gynecologists. In order to give birth or undergo gynecological treatment, we had to travel to the district's center of Terek-Suu situated rather far from our village. Now, those times are quite different from what we see today: there used to be only two cars in the entire village. When there was no transportation, women would give birth at home or on the way to Terek-Suu maternity clinic.

The situation somewhat improved these days. However, even today, in order to undergo ultrasound examination and get tested in the laboratory, we are still forced to travel to the district's center. Since the local hospital only has one gynecologist, we, who arrive from remote villages, have to spend a lot of time waiting in lines. After

delivery, medical examinations are limited to mandatory vaccinations. Whether our newborns' weight is within the norm, whether their blood is fine, whether or not there are any disorders we should be aware of – there is nobody to go to with all these questions since our village simply lacks appropriate specialists and conditions. All and any ailments are treated by the village's only nurse practitioner who helps people to the best of her ability and knowledge. Therefore, it is quite fair to say that our children are only “cared after by Lord” and we cannot be too careful...

I have two daughters and a son. Since I am stricken with anemia, all my children share this disease. Whenever possible, we visit doctors in Terek-Suu, Lord spread health onto them. We hope, though, that things will change for the better. That's the hope we live by.

How Much is a Human Life Worth?

My name is Anara and I am 34 years old. Some people might say that I am a young and healthy woman. And only those who actually know what health problems are will understand me. The list of diseases that doctors keep finding in my body is rather long: failing kidneys, hernia, anemia, mastopathy – the list goes on and on.

I have spent the majority of my latest years in various hospitals. I get one disease cured and get stricken by another. There are days when I can't get out of bed. Hospitals make me feel better for a while but not for long. I am just so tired. God save people from life like mine.

This year I intended to check into a hospital, but doctors in the hospital seem to have gotten tired of my endless visits and stays and said: “You come here and let me tell you – treat yourself at home. Everybody is sick, there are no healthy people. Watch your health so as not to get sick...” But aren't doctors the ones who should know how a sick person feels like?! Or am I supposed to get weak and bed-ridden in order to get their attention and mercy?! I had no other option but to get treatment in a private clinic, despite the huge cost of it. What could I have done – health is the most important thing!

By the way, speaking of health, residents of our village of Uchkun,

located in the Uchkun rural district of the Naryn District of the Naryn Province face a huge health problem – a lack of clean drinking water. The water we use is very harmful, in fact. Our kidneys feel it most. Also, it turned out that it contains many microbes that cause various intestinal diseases. After a scandal when many of our young children contracted Hepatitis, specialists from Bishkek came and concluded that such water was unfit for human consumption!

Our local authorizes had to promise us that they would supply water from a neighboring Kulanak village. However, it's been two years and we are yet to see water from Kulanak. We have to continue drinking hazardous water and pray for Lord's mercy...

The question is: When will the time come when human health and life will finally be truly valued?!



A Two-Letter Mistake That Changed a Person's Fate

Once I learned about the project TOGETHER, a collection of stories about ordinary rural women who have been in a difficult life situation, I decided to write to you about myself. I hope that my

painful experience will help someone to avoid my fate. Perhaps, it will serve as an incentive for the Ministry of Healthcare of the Kyrgyz Republic to improve doctors' professionalism in terms of developing a more caring, sensitive and merciful attitude towards their patients.

I am a resident of a remote piedmont village located in Nookan District of the Jalal-Abad Province. I am 53 years old and have a degree in library management.

My misfortune has manifested itself about a year ago, when I started feeling a strong depression and general weakness. About the same time, I noticed a lump in my underarm. Having all these symptoms, I visited a surgeon in the Jalal-Abad Province Hospital. After the examination, he said that it is an lymph node inflammation that is not difficult to remove. I doubted that such a lack of energy can be caused by a mere inflammation of lymphatic nodes and refused to have a surgery. A half a year passed and the lump was growing. Once my daughter-in-law, also a doctor, learned about my problem, she advised me to get reexamined. We traveled to the Osh Inter-District Center for Oncology.

In Osh, I had my mammary gland removed. A piece of biomaterial was taken for a histological assay. The results of that assay were supposed to be sent to my residence. However, due to someone's fault, my medical history contained a mistake – the address line said Nookat, but not Nookan District. Allegedly, they were not able to locate me due to this inaccuracy. In the meantime (half a year passed after the surgery), winter had arrived and the swelling returned and started growing viciously. Everyday I felt weaker. To ease my condition, I used a hot-water bag for a month. As turns out later, it never improved my condition, but worsened it instead - the skin around the swelling became purple. My daughter-in-law brought me to the Oncology Center again. The swelling scared even veteran oncologists. They found the assay report with a diagnosis of breast cancer, which never reached me. Wounds from the thermal burn, caused by the hot-water bag and surgery (mastectomy), would not heal for another 2.5 months! In addition, I was diagnosed with anemia. Despite all this, I was able to undergo a full course of chemotherapy.

God only knows what lies ahead of me. Hopefully, the worst and scariest things are behind. So far, I only want to say that if rural areas had professionals and better equipment, raised public awareness via various printed mass media, TV and radio PSAs, so many women –

mothers, wives, daughters – could be saved! So many family tragedies could be avoided! Only a healthy woman can create a healthy family, be a mother of healthy children, and thus become the beginning of a whole healthy society!



Road of Death

My name is Sharipa, I am a pensioner and live in the Chorgochu village of the Nichke-Sai rural district of the Toktogul District of the Jalal-Abad Province. Our village is one of the remotest ones in the district and borders with the Toguz-Toro District on the west. It is situated 100-110 km away from the district's center. Mostly, my village fellows farm livestock, working in the fields. There is only one school for a village with a population of fifteen hundred people, one non-

operational kindergarten, and one Medical and Obstetrical Station. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, our village, just like many other villages of our country, started encountering many difficulties. Yet, time has passed and while other villages saw their lives improve, ours is yet to see that...

Here is a sad example. The district's hospital with maternity ward is located in the neighboring village of Kyzyl-Ozgorush. The distance from our village to that maternity clinic is 17 km. The road is horrible, ambulance service does not work, and sometimes it is simply impossible to even "hitchhike" to the hospital. As a result, women in labor from our village find it very difficult to reach the necessary medical assistance. In winter, trying to walk to the maternity clinic, poor women had to give birth right there on the road. For many of them, that distance of 17 km became their last road to travel. Therefore, I can assuredly say that a maternity clinic for our rural district of Nichke-Sai is of vital importance and necessity!

I am not even talking about an uncontrolled and ever-growing and threatening situation with iodine deficit in men and women. It is understandable that the number of people suffering from thyroid disorders is growing. The government never attempted to run any awareness campaigns to combat this ailment.

Having waited for help enough and never seeing it materialize, the most active women of our village organized themselves and founded a Health Committee. First of all, the Committee started promoting a healthy lifestyle by eradicating iodine deficit in the local public, namely, it started explaining and promoting benefits and value of using iodine-containing salt.

After the Committee started working, one could observe an improvement in self-awareness among villagers as well as an improvement of the overall sanitary situation. Also, medical workers gained active voluntary assistants. This is how amidst a hopeless existence of a remote village, emergence of a Health Committee was perceived by the local public as a ray of hope for a better future. Let it be!

I am saying all this as a mother of five; as a woman who lost three daughters to diseases; as a community leader who had chaired the village school's Parents and Teachers Committee for five years.

Poor Nazgulya

This year Nazgulya turned 45. She was born on 19 April 1968. Her parents' family lived in harsh conditions and therefore Nazgulya married before she graduated from high school. She was only a tenth grader when she got married.

Her husband and she lived together for a year and had a baby girl named Meerim. It seemed that Nazgulya's life is set to be good. However, her destiny prepared another test for her – her husband was sentenced to 8 years in prison for rape. For 8 years, the poor woman and her daughter were making their quarters as they could, mostly staying with various relatives.

Later, life smiled at her – she met a good man and bound her life with him. Her second husband was Bolot of the Kok-Tokoi village. They lived together for 7 years and saw the birth of three boys. Then Bolot died. It turned out he had had bronchial asthma for many years.

There is a saying: "Misfortune never comes alone..." That is exactly what happened. As if she was not in enough grief, her son Kubanych got sick in 2007. Doctors diagnosed him with meningitis. The boy survived but, as people say, "is somewhat not right." And just as the poor mother's heart was able to suppress this pain deep inside itself, a new misfortune arrived: having failed to find happiness in her marriage, the eldest daughter Meerim returned to her parents' home with a baby daughter. Now, the constantly leaking roof of makeshift shed is home to 6 people that make the poor Nazgulya's family...

The family's current income consists of child benefits based on a loss of breadwinner worth KGS 1,800. Nazgulya has no permanent job: in summer she is hired to work in the fields, in winter she is peeling kidney beans. Still, she is always short on money, even for food. They cannot even entertain a slightest idea of buying clothes or repairing their rickety house.

By the age of 45, Nazgulya has accumulated many diseases: she always suffers from rheumatoid arthritis, anemia, vertigo, weakness, kidney pain. Yet, there is no time for her to be sick, nor can she really afford to be sick... Is there any light in this poor woman's life and destiny?



Woman of Spirit

The situation developed in such a way that this letter is written by us, officers of the Public Union Medio Bakai-Ata. We are writing to you because the heroine of the story Kanysh Osmonova is incapable of holding a pen in her hands. She has been bed-ridden since 2011.

Kanysh-eje and representatives Medio Bakai-Ata, an association that since 2009 has been helping widows, orphans and people with disabilities by rendering consultations to them, started in 2010. This is when she, a widow born in 1953, approached us for help and support. By that time, Kanysh-eje was suffering from 2nd degree idiopathic hypertension and needed crutches to move around. In several months, she had an ischemic stroke of a spinal artery which paralyzed her.

One can talk for hours about how Kanysh-eje would have been able to avoid such bad consequences if only she got proper medical attention and urgent professional assistance. However, right now the poor woman needs concrete help. The Osmonovs family that already is in a difficult financial situation spent KGS 30 thousand

this month alone – an unimaginable amount for a family lacking a male breadwinner! Today, Kanysh-eje needs expensive examination and treatment in neurological clinics of Bishkek, with a subsequent rehabilitation. She also needs a wheelchair that would have enabled her to lead a more or less tolerable life and eased her children's care for their ill mother. Our Union is work on it but we need help of compassionate people!

If you are interested in Kanysh-eje's opinion, she does not think about herself as much as she does about others around her. "As long as rural areas keep lacking access to early laboratory-based and equipment-generated diagnostics and until conditions needed for treatment are created, rural poverty will keep producing sick people like me," she says. It is obvious that she is bed-ridden due to the local hospital's lack of proper medical equipment and local doctors' inability to diagnose her accurately and in time and provide appropriate medical assistance afterwards...

Deprived of the Ultimate Woman's Happiness – Motherhood...

My name is Kerimakan. I was born on June 15, 1974, in the Uchkun village of the Naryn District of the Naryn Province. I got married at 17 in a neighboring Ak-Taly District. Two years later, I gave birth to a girl who died in the maternity clinic for reasons still unknown to me. A year later, I gave birth to a boy. Lord never gave me the happiness of being a mother again.

My husband divorced me for this reason. I approached doctors many times. They said it was a consequence of a major cold. Or, this is what they were treating. Everything was futile. I tried to get treatment in private clinics – not only in my district of residence but also in the capital city. In particular, I visited the Family & Health Clinic in 2006 – to no avail. However, as the saying goes: "Hope dies last." These days, I am undergoing treatment in the Naryn Province Hospital. I was given the same diagnosis and no improvement has been observed.

If one is to count the years I am fighting my fate, it's been about

20 years. In 2009, I remarried. At the moment, I once more time dream of the happy moment when I am able to hug my long-awaited newborn. One cannot imagine a bigger happiness for a woman on earth than the happiness of maternity!



How to Live without Water in a Water-Rich Country?

I am writing this letter out of desperation as I don't even know whom it will be addressed to. I simply wanted to tell you that I am a typical housewife and a mother of a one-year-old child who lives in a water-rich country and suffers from lack of water...

My name is Asel, and I am a resident of the Selektionnoye village

of the Sokuluk District of the Chui Province that used to be famous not only in Kyrgyzstan, but throughout the former Soviet Union for its major achievements in agriculture. My typical day starts with a burning question: will the vital liquid flow from the tap? Some people might find it ridiculous that in our 21st century, while some people travel to outer space commercially, residents of some villages pray for a regular water tap as if it were some kind of deity! We pray and continue believing that local and national officials will finally notice our misfortune and help us with establishing a proper water supply system! I am not a particularly picky person but without water, as the saying goes, “even gold does not matter.”

Recently, my son and I checked out of an infectious diseases hospital. My child, being happy that water started flowing from the tap, drank it and was hospitalized with an intestinal infection on the following day. My case is not a one-off one as almost half of our village suffered in the same manner!

Let me tell you how water arrives to our Seleksionnoye village... Drinking water required for normal human activity is supplied as per a schedule: once in three days. You can't even imagine what frenzy starts – people try to fill every single container available! During the cold time of the year, water can be stored, however in summertime, with our summers being so hot, water quickly goes bad and consuming it leads to many diseases, naturally. The sanitary situation is further exacerbated by the very water supply system – it's old and decayed... Thank God we have a Territorial Self-Governance Body (a local government) that monitors compliance with water supply schedule and rectifies system malfunctions and failures. We are lucky in that we are young and have husbands who would bring a canister or two of clean drinking water from the city. How about the single and old people, though?!

This mess has been occurring every summer for the past several years. Our pleas for help, requests and prayers are left unheeded. How to live without water – who can answer that question? I hope that perhaps my letter will be read and we will finally receive some assistance.



When Your Home Is Not Your Castle

I want to tell you a story and share my grief with people...

My name is Symbat, I am a single mother of two sons. I have lived in the Selektionnoye village of the Sokuluk District of the Chui Province since 1992. For almost 10 years, I made my quarters with children in a rented apartment. Finally, in 2000, the Orok *aiyl okmotu* (rural government) allocated to me a land parcel of 6 hundred sq.m. to build a house. In the same year, my elder son died in a car accident. For two years I was not able to think of any construction activities, and therefore I only started building my house in 2002. With my mother's assistance, we erected a small 2-roomed makeshift house. We never had the money to fence our territory and build auxiliary facilities. In 2010, my younger son got married and my grandchildren – a grandson and a granddaughter – were born. We all lived in a friendly and calm environment in our small house until a bolt from the blue...

In August 2011, a stranger came to our house and produced his title to my land plot. I first thought it was just a misunderstanding and calmly explained to him that the land parcel is mine, showed all the titles, etc. Yet, he too turned out to be in possession of title-confirming documents to the very same land plot issued in 2004 and signed by the same head of the Orok rural government. The man refused to listen to my pleas and returned regularly to fight and issue threats. He

then started sending prospective buyers to my land plot.

That's how my judicial odyssey started. The Sokuluk District Court and the Inter-District Court both rules in my favor. I am currently awaiting the ruling of the Chui Province Court.

My opponent – Alimbek – is a chief doctor of Bishkek City Polyclinic #19, who, as it turns out, has 3 apartments in the city, 2 mansions, and 2 land plots. A rather rich person, I can say, who apparently needs my land plot to finally be happy! A representative of the most humane profession, he sent young people to my house who arrived late at night and said: "While we are still kind, yield this land plot to us voluntarily." In addition to my court battles, I now have to worry about lives of my son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. My son is a peaceful intellectual who is currently studying in the National University aspiring to be a lawyer. I can't help but engage in bitter sarcasm saying to him that our house's story is his "life university."

On August 2, 2013, the Chui Province Court will run its session. I hope that it will uphold the fair and legal ruling which will decide whether or not my family will enrich the vast layer of homeless people. So far, all the courts and lawyers have consumed all the money that my daughter-in-law earns (until my son finishes his studies). As a result of all the emotional upset, my health deteriorated so much that I cannot work. I help my family by staying at home and raising grandchildren. I am glad that my friends and neighbors support me, just as members of the Orok *aiyl kenesh* (rural council) and many other people do. Their support and assistance help me make from a court session to a court session. Thank you!

Married to a Loser

I am a head of a Family Doctors Group (FDG) of the Nurjanov *aiyl okmotu* (rural district) but it's not my story I wish to tell here. As a doctor, I am concerned about the fate of one of our patients – Tolgonai.

Tolgonai, born in 1977, lives in the Jon-Aryk village of our rural district. By her age of 36, she has a whole bunch of maladies: anemia, polyarthritis, urinary and reproductive tract disorders, teeth. All of this stems from her harsh fate...

Tolgonai got married young – at the age of 17. Her husband was her peer. In less than 10 years, Tolgonai gave birth 7 times. Two



newborns died and today she is a mother of five.

All the years of her marriage, Tolgonai has been destitute. Her husband lacks a steady job and is forced to beachcomb. It's probably the despair that made him start drinking... Tolgonai herself stays at home with children. Her child benefits total KGS 1,300.

Her family lives in a small 2-roomed makeshift house that is decaying more aggressively with each year. Her family stopped purchasing coal in wintertime, so even during the harshest frosts her home is only heated with electrical heaters. That amidst the fact that her home is full of children of all ages – from school students to a newborn. There is no one to take care of the garden.

We, local medics, perfectly understand that Tolgonai's health is related to her living conditions. She lacks money even for proper food, let alone treatment. She has been on our special list due to being stricken with multiple illnesses. Yet, there is not much we can help her with. We can't even file for a 50% discount from the state out of the Mandatory Insurance Fund (MIF) as the poor woman hasn't worked anywhere and remains unemployed today.



Two Villages' Hopes Placed on a Family Doctor Group

The Kok-Tondu village of the Mogol rural district of the Bazar-Korgon District of the Jalal-Abad Province is home to 4,178 people. The entire village is served by a single Medical and Obstetrical Station (MOS) that employs 5 medical workers. None of them has higher medical education. Nevertheless, their load is quite high – they have to go to patients' homes, sometimes until late in the night. Our staffers find wintertime the most difficult season, since despite the freezing temperatures, they try to visit patients, administer injections, prescribe drugs, observe the condition of the sick, etc.

Looking at their work, one would think that a Family Doctors Group (FDG) would probably make more sense instead of our MOS. Then, the sick would be able to come to a full-time clinic and get appropriate treatment. It would also be easier for our medics to serve that many people. By the way, the MOS's facility is suitable to make such a reorganization. All that is needed is a dedicated medical personnel and equipment from the Bazar-Korgon District FDG and

the main problem of our village (and that of other villages) would have been solved. A half of residents of the Mogol rural district are represented by residents of the Kok-Tondu and Chkalov villages. Neither of the two villages is covered by proper medical service since the district's both FDGs are situated in the Oogan-Talaa village. As a result, whenever our people need help, they have to seek it in any other area but their own village.

Like I noted above, we have all the conditions to create an FDG as the current MOS is situated in a rather spacious facility. The arrival of professional doctors and required equipment would have eased up problems of pregnant women, young families, pensioners, etc.

Today, residents of the two villages are looking forward to the leadership of the Bazar-Korgon District and the district's FDG paying attention to their problem. We hope that they will look into the issue and make efforts to resolve it.



Anemia Is Our Curse

I would like to tell you about the “health” of the population of the Kerege-Tash section located in the Kojo-Aryk of the T. Kulatov rural district of the Nookat District of the Osh Province.

Our section consisting of 417 households is home to 2,089 people

of whom 986 are men and 1103 are women. Children aged 5 and under make up 299 of our residents, aged 6 to 17 – 505, adults aged 17 to 45 – 854, seniors aged 46 – 431. Fertile-age women number 589. Here, I would like to note that Kerege-Tash only has one Medical and Obstetrical Station (MOS) that employs just 3 people. We do not complain about their work, but how can they monitor the health of two thousand people?! And yet, they were able to prepare statistical data on the health of the section's residents that, unfortunately, are not so bright...

In September 2012, all 505 school-age children passed a medical examination that revealed that 80% of students suffer from anemia! Apparently it leads to children's inability to concentrate and read textbooks. In addition, 32 pregnant women are registered with the MOS and every single one of them has been diagnosed with anemia. Out of 56 babies born this year, 3 have disabilities and 2 have apparent signs of lack of physical development. 4 women failed to carry their pregnancies through. These awful statistics show that the overwhelming majority of our people suffer from anemia with many of them being women and children...

I call for organizations and people capable of changing the situation in our location to help us! We will be grateful for any assistance: awareness raising (especially among school-aged children and fertile-aged women), sanitary prophylaxis, provision of inexpensive medications helping the formation of proper nutrition skills, assistance to our medics, etc. Right now, we only care about improving the health of our children and women who determine the future of our village as a whole.

Our Rural and Obstetrical Station Works in a Perfunctory Manner

We, the residents of the Kyzyl-Jyldyz village of the Jerge-Tal *aiyl okmotu* (rural district) want to tell you a story about the conditions in which our Medical and Obstetrical Station (MOS) is forced to operate.

Let us first provide you with some statistics. Our village is home to 1,211 people of whom a half are women. Of those, 326 are of fertile

age. Children aged under 14 number 420, newborns under a year – 33. These figures clearly show that our village is quite interested in a full-fledged operations of an MOS.

Our MOS, though, only employs two people: a doctor's assistant and a nurse. That means that these two people alone carry the entire workload. Due to lack of funding, we cannot afford to fully staff our MOS. What difficulties does that entail? Well, you decide.

Firstly, since we have no pharmacist, the village (with a population of more than a thousand people!) lacks a pharmacy. If necessary, people cannot even buy needed drugs. They are forced to stock medications but how can one know what drug will be needed and when?! Amidst hazards to health, we are forced to take expired medication. Since the distance to the district's center is more than 30 km, many village fellows simply cannot afford to travel to the drugstore that offers a 50% discount (benefit). As a result, they are deprived even of that small right that is actually guaranteed by the state.

Secondly, due to lack of a nurse's aide and a security guard, repairing, cleaning and improving MOS's building and the surrounding area has become an additional duty for the doctor's assistant and the nurse. Together, they wash the floors, stand guard, and plant trees around the MOS. Sometimes, not so successfully, they live far from their work and, therefore, flowers sown by them are eaten by livestock, medical instruments are sometimes stolen, which results in these two poor chaps getting fined by the amount of the replacement cost of the medical property stolen.

In addition, performing extra duties outside of their medical responsibilities, MOS staffers are forced to spend more time at work. And since their MOS is something that the entire village needs, our residents are concerned that the staffers might burn out and leave. Therefore, our question is: Is it possible to open at least a part-time position of a nurse's aide and a security guard in our MOS?



Sometimes, Health Can Be Bought

I would like to tell you a story from my medical practice that has occurred and is affecting my very own life . Unfortunately this story could end on a very unhappy note.About a year ago, our Family Doctors Group (FDG) of the Jal village of the Sokuluk District of the Chui Province was approached by a young family concerned about the deterioration of health of their young daughter – Nazira (we changed her name as per request of her parents).

The girl grew and developed appropriately for her age until at around the age of 2.5 she started feeling bad: her body temperature was 40 °C, she lost appetite and developed unformed stool. The girl was prescribed treatment: fever suppressants, wide spectrum antibiotics, etc. However, in two days her condition worsened, the child became so weak she was no longer able to get up on her own. In the infectious diseases hospital Nazira was urgently sent to doctors who took x-rays, examined her and diagnosed her with multiple echinococcosis. Pursuant to the diagnosis, they recommended operative treatment. In 2-3-month breaks, they performed several surgeries on her as echinococcosis had to be removed from lungs, liver and spleen. As a result, the little patient's condition improved: her temperature became normal, she regained appetite and even gained weight. However, since February 2013, her symptoms have come back: rising temperature, her belly became like a ball due to the accumulation of gas, she has yet again lost appetite. Her parents returned to the clinic for medical assistance where they again were recommended operative treatment. However, due to her parents being unable to collect the money required for the surgery (KGS 60 000), Nazira was never operated on.

7 months has passed since then. The little girl underwent a treatment course but her condition is not improving and she gets weaker by the day. She will soon turn 5, but she looks to be 3 as she is

so frail. Her father's salary of about KGS 8 thousand is barely enough to pay for rent and food. Her mother is unemployed since she has to stay at home and care for her sick daughter. Nazira's family also has a son who will go to elementary school this year. Nazira never attended a kindergarten and she does not play games. She is incapable of preparing for elementary school on her own due to poor health.

As a doctor and a woman I feel so bad for the little girl and her parents who are being tried by their destiny at such a young age. I am therefore writing this letter hoping that somebody will read it and help us...



Victory of a Rural Health Committee

I chair the Health Committee of the Dobo village of the Osh Province. In this letter I would like to tell you about a case that I had to face as part of my job.

This case is related to my village fellow named Kerez, born in 1974. During her eighth pregnancy, she started feeling unwell, her temperature rose, and she had to stay in bed for about a week. All this time, her health was observed by a rural Family Doctors Group (FDG), in particular, by nurse Raikhan Darmanova who took extra care of Kerez. Kerez then started feeling better. Yet, later, after she came back from Osh where she traveled for personal business I saw that

her condition apparently had worsened. Without wasting time, she was delivered to an emergency room. Kerez didn't even understand how she got to the intensive care unit – according to the doctors there, she was in tough condition for a while as she was running a high fever, had poor appetite and low hemoglobin (40). ER doctors immediately warned her that without an urgent blood transfusion and medication-based treatment her condition would only continue to become worse...

Now we need to state that Kerez Mamatumarova's family is one with a low-income. Hoping for her relatives to find money to save her is like hoping for the impossible. Therefore, we, the village's Health Committee, approached the *aiyl okmotu* (rural government) for assistance, to the village head Khalima Usmanova personally. Financially, there wasn't much they could do for us. Usmanova contacted the head of the ER room Khuseinov and inquired about Kerez's condition and advised that we search for donors in our own village.

The subsequent actions were only made by the village's Health Committee. We visited all our village fellows and asked for help. We brought people in groups of 5-8 to the blood donation facility. Eventually, 29 people sympathetic of another person's misfortune donated blood. Since many drugs needed for the treatment were not available in the local drugstore, we had to bring them from afar.

I personally spent many sleepless nights worrying about Kerez. Thank God our efforts were not in vain – Kerez's condition was improving by the day. In due time, she gave birth to her eighth child. Today, nothing threatens the lives of a mother and her baby daughter ore.

Today, I can surely say that thanks to involvement and sympathy of caring people this story gained a happy end. There were so many ordinary good rural people! I want to thank all of them on behalf of Kerez, the people of the Dobo village and myself personally!

Does the State Need Public Health?

Does our state need healthy people? Recently, I have started doubting that. Let me share our case to explain why.

The Akman rural district of the Bazar-Korgon District of the Jalal-Abad Province has two Family Doctors Groups (FDG) and one Medical and Obstetrical Station (MOS). According to their information, recently, the able-bodied population shows a higher percentage of individuals suffering from hypertension, neurological, endocrinological, oncological, and cardiovascular diseases. Specialists say that such a negative situation is caused not only by medical but also social reasons. Today, many young people see no bright prospects in their lives. There is an army of the unemployed, many of whom are drowning in debt and loans as a result of their attempts to get out of that vicious circle. All this, undoubtedly, undermines their health and causes the diseases above.

In the meantime, rural areas simply lack conditions needed to render full-fledged medical assistance to such people. Village MOSs haven't seen renovations in a while. Annually, local MOSs are maintained and brought to a functional state by their own staff. There is no money for heating during wintertime – patients, in addition to being sick, have to wait in line in cold rooms. Instead of improving their health, people leave MOSs even sicker due to having stayed in a cold facility. Coal-heated MOSs are no better. In order to air rooms from the carbon monoxide, doors and windows are regularly opened. This is not helpful to the room temperature in wintertime. Equipping rural medical institutions with electrical or other alternative heating is naturally something that nobody cares about in this country...

In order to make a stand against the ever-growing number of sick people, rural health committees are being created that run various campaigns and activities. But can unfunded organizations really change the broad picture?!

I therefore think that it's time to toll all alarm bells and loudly state that medics alone are incapable of caring for the people's health today! We need all-around assistance from state bodies:

1. In the joint awareness raising to prevent diseases;
2. In the creation of jobs and conditions for farmers in the country's rural areas;
3. In the provision of benefits and preferences in taxation and preferential energy rates for small businesses (such as bakeries, textile shops, etc.).



Suggesting a Solution to the Problem

As a resident of the Chon-Toguzbai village of the Tyup District of the Issyk-Kul Province, observing my village fellows, I have recently started noticing more and more people going down with TB and brucellosis. I think Brucellosis is spreading because rural life revolves around livestock farming. However, cattle and sheep are rarely examined, people consume meat of sick animals, and sanitary and hygiene norms are never complied with during lambing. In addition, disease-carrying village fellows do not seek professional medical assistance in a timely manner.

And these diseases are so easy to cure! This is why it would have been great if diagnosing, treating and preventing them had been arranged on a consistent and systematic basis. In our village, almost all residents are unemployed, which means they lack the money to visit specialized institutions for medical checkups. Villages tend to lack specialized medical and laboratory equipment. This is why quite frequently villagers only get to the examination ward after the disease they were never aware of progressed too far. Time is lost and costs of

treatment automatically increase...

Recently, villages stopped seeing mandatory TB vaccines administered to school-age children!

I understand that today it is difficult for our state to equip and staff each village with proper medical devices and workers. Perhaps, the principle of unification of several villages located in a general proximity to one another would have been a realistic solution to this problem.

Hope Dies Last...

I am a resident of the Tasma village of the Tyup District of the Issyk-Kul Province. Our village is located 27 km away from the district's center and within 60 km of the province's center. Many of our health problems stem from this fact.

For instance, let me provide you with simple figures. In order to avoid unplanned pregnancy (install an IUD) or undergo gynecological treatment, our women have to travel to the district hospital or to the province's center of Karakol. Financially, it costs about KGS 200, and an additional KGS 200 to 1000, sometimes more, which represents the price of the examination and treatment, with extra time lost to traveling, which sometimes take more than a day, and waiting in lengthy lines in various medical institutions. Due to the living standards in the village, not all rural women, and unemployed ones in particular, can afford such a "luxury." Therefore, our village is "blooming" with unplanned pregnancies, delivery after too short a recuperation period from a previous pregnancy, deterioration of maternal health, birth of weak and sick children...

In addition, due to poor roads and harsh climate during wintertime which makes the already bad roads totally unpassable, pregnant women are forced to give birth at home or right on the way to maternity clinics not being able to reach hospitals in time. That could have been avoided if only we had a good village-based specialist capable of professionally observing and guiding pregnancies!

Other sad statistics include the following: over the past three years, eight people in our village died from cancer. Oncological diseases could have been avoided if the government sent medics to our village who would have diagnosed and prevented this horrible ailment at early enough stages. It is quite possible to arrange field visits of a medical

team once in 2-3 months to consist of a gynecologist, pediatrician and other specialists. Examinations, tests, and prophylactic activities would have brought so much health benefit to villagers!

I really hope that there will come time when such activities will be properly be set up by either the state or other groups. As the saying goes: "Hope dies last..."

Women's Initiative Safeguarding Public Health

Since 1998, Public Foundation "Gulmaidan" has been working to improve quality of life and economic conditions of residents of the Kenesh rural district. Yet, despite our ongoing efforts to prevent various contagious diseases, unfortunately their prevalence is not diminishing. We are particularly concerned that diseases spread among young people and women.

For instance, our analysis of the situation showed that over the past 5 years, 25 people contracted HIV, while the number of people with TB is growing. Anemia occurs in every third resident of the district, with reproductive-age women represented most on the medical register of this ailment. One should also mention the fact that the traditionally "female" disease of anemia has become prevalent among men too.

However, our Foundation does not lose heart and continues to run activities that are aimed to facilitate changes in such sad statistics. For instance, under the Disease Prevention and Health and Spirit Strengthening via Education Project funded by the Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation and Counterpart Consortium, we arranged 11 training workshops and 5 round tables at which 236 women gained knowledge on how to run prophylaxis of TB and anemia, what proper nutrition means, etc. To be exact, one could mention such TB prevention and treatment topics as: "What to do if you suspect having TB?", "TB and protective powers of your organism," "TB vaccines," "TB treatment," "What each TB carrier must know?", etc. Our local doctors acted as trainers.

I should also mention that all these activities were not of the one-off type but rather are continuously taking place. To this day, groups composed of 25 women each are active in the area. As a result, the



number of people contracting TB changed significantly. The women who completed our training became active members of the village health committees. We can be proud that our projects led to the construction and operation of 2 Medical and Obstetrical Stations. And this is only a beginning!

Improving Health to Improve Welfare

Kyzyl-Jyldyz is one of the smallest villages of the Naryn District of the Naryn Province. Probably, this is why social conditions, including health, are not very good. We, the members of the local village health committee, are making every effort to improve the health of our village fellows. However, oftentimes, our capacity and opportunities are limited.

The biggest problem in our village is a lack of clean drinking water. In summertime, we draw water from the channel, and in wintertime – from the On-Archa river. As a result, contagious diseases such as Hepatitis and dysentery are spreading.

Other health hazards to which livestock farmers are exposed



include echinococcosis and various skin diseases. We understand that the reason for that is failure to comply with rules of hygiene and sanitation. But what can we do if the only sauna (steam bathing facility) in the village is out of service and there is no water?

Our village also lacks an ambulance. This results in many pregnant women giving birth at home as they cannot make it to the maternity clinic. As a result, they and their newborns develop a whole set of maladies.

Of course, many difficulties could be avoided if we had money. But it is impossible to say that our village residents are in a decent economic situation, especially women. We tried producing wool items but our business stalled due to a lack of wool-beating equipment. Transporting wool for carding to Naryn is too complicated for women.

Therefore, we think that we could improve our lives if only we were able to master the manufacture of wool and felt items such as *ala-kiyiz* (decorative felt rugs), *shyrdak* (harsh felt rugs), bags, souvenirs, etc. We have the majority of the things needed to run such an activity.

Tolling All Alarm Bells

This is a letter from Janyl Saparova, a resident of the Chon-Aryk village of the Ketmen-Tobo rural district of the Toktogul District of the Jalal-Abad Province.

Just as many other villages of the Toktogul District, our village is located far from the major highway that connects the cities of Bishkek and Osh. This highway is a source of revenue for all the settlements located along it. We are also situated 40 km away from the district's center and the Bishkek-Osh Highway. For this reason, economic conditions in our area are rather harsh.

One major problem is medical service for the local public. We experience a severe lack of doctors. Many of my village fellows have to give birth on the road as it is too late to get to the hospital. They lack funds needed to pay for professional medical assistance (like I said, my village is not so rich and there are many poor families).

There are many villages like ours. We believe that the state treats us under the philosophy of "live as you can." In the meantime, village residents are expecting something from the state: mainly improvement and maintenance of health. Why did we discard the medical and organizational experience of the Soviet Union when graduates of universities were sent to remote areas and were only able to get their diplomas after having worked in their post of assignment for several years?! Why do local authorities fail to create proper conditions for young specialists, provide them with accommodation and at least try to retain them?! This is the best way to create better medical service for the local public and improve quality of village life. On the other hand, creating jobs for young specialists and keeping them in the profession which the state spent so much money to train them in would be beneficial. They would then decide against leaving the medical profession and would continue working for the good of the people...

By way of this letter, I am tolling all alarm bells so as to draw the public attention to the most pressing problems of rural people!

What Was Woman Made for?

My name is Akynkyz Tursunkulova, I am 57 years old. I currently work in a district division of the Social Fund. I have been elected to aiyl kenesh (local council) five times. For more than half a century, I was able to witness many events and go through many moments of happiness and grief. A routine, normal life of a typical rural woman.

Our village is located 318 km away from the country's capital, and 29 km away from the district's center. Since all social institutions



are located in other villages, our women lack opportunities to find employment as teachers, doctors, nurses, and even ordinary custodians. Therefore, almost all of women in my village work in the fields from spring through fall.

After an exhausting day of field work, poor women have to work as housewives after their shifts. Coming home to electricity is a pleasant surprise. Blackouts are frequent and cooking, cleaning and laundry need to be done under kerosene lamps fed by dried manure. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the village almost forgot what natural gas is. Gas, what gas? In many villages, days are spent in search for clean drinking water. Who apart from women actually knows what such hardships are about?!

Our village lacks other amenities that make women's life easier, such as wool-carding, spinning and other equipment. They say it's profitable to farm chickens, but then there is no opportunity to get professional assistance in the form of consultations and training: how to keep, feed, treat them, etc. Without the required knowledge, any business will result in losses...

Not seeing any prospects, women are forced to look for subsistence for their families overseas. If only they had jobs at home, even tough ones. They must go to a foreign land, far from their children, parents, and relatives? There is so much talk about this, but

few things in villages depend on ordinary people like me. Why do people in power fail to think about that?

As our great writer Chingiz Aitmatov rightly said: “One’s road to eternity originates in one’s home village.” Will there be people in Kyrgyzstan who, in order to satisfy interests of people other than themselves, care about lives of ordinary citizens? Will there be people caring about the fate of an ordinary rural woman? They say hope dies last. I wish our hopes persevere and transform into reality since these are the hopes of mothers, wives and daughters – women, who play the sacred role of bearers of humankind.

Bribery: To Become the Master of One’s Fate Rather than Its Slave!

One can judge how rampant bribery is in Kyrgyzstan by the fact that our people start facing this phenomenon as early as ... no, not even at school! – but kindergarten! At their tender age, small kids start learning the rule of adult life: “if you don’t grease it, you won’t ride it”. No wonder, as early as in secondary school, they already start confidently choosing future professions that are frequently associated with enrichment thanks to the money gained in illegal ways. Why do you think young people favor such professions as becoming a judge, prosecutor, *akim* (head of an administrative district), customs officer, tax officer? It’s because people have long since started associating them (and rightfully so) with bribery, an opportunity to get rich quick and easy!

As a result, we are facing a major substitution of values: good with evil, virtues with vices, public interest with personal greed. We are witnessing a sad reality – schools produce ready-made bribe-takers. Children see how their parents, seeing means to provide for their families, are forced to give bribes to secure employment. Parents’ behavior is an example for children. School-age children themselves offer bribes to teachers to miss classes. Those who do not want to, and cannot, live in compliance with the tacit rules and receive a shameful designation of *lokh* (loser) – a person who cannot find a comfortable place “under the sun.”

Oftentimes, it is the law that creates such a situation. An individual who stole a sheep is sentenced to 10 years in prison. An

area police officer, a head of a village club, a warehouse worker, a doctor – all of them fall victim to the same fate as they are forced to work for their abysmal salaries and take petty gifts. These are the people we hear about on TV daily. At the same time, people who sell public goods and the country's wealth – gold, oil, gas, water and land – and who steal millions in public money, i.e. money that belongs to taxpayers, are immune from liability. They use every single means available to them: money, connections, authority and status of their relatives, friends and hometown fellows. During court proceedings against the most openly criminal individuals, the court all of a sudden hears that they only committed good things – presented athletic gear and equipment to sport schools, donated rugs to mosques, organized popular festivities, etc. How can one accuse such “holy” people of bribery?! And even when it's impossible for them to bribe themselves out of a jail term, they are facing a fine or three years of probation at most. Their crimes are considered “non-aggravated” (not felonies, but misdemeanors) and their convictions are soon erased due to an amnesty. Trying to oppose such injustice is dangerous as one can go to jail for “libel.” That's our “Justice of Law...”

Should one look the other way when millions accumulated as a result of hard work of teachers, doctors and farmers, intended to make lives of disabled people, pensioners, and orphans are used by a narrow circle of people? What was the point of the last two revolutions? What did hundreds of heroes give up their lives for? Does the price of the tragedy amount to a mere piece of meat, cup of tea, glass of vodka, a hundred soms?

The conclusion here is that one must not just accept the situation! Therefore, we suggest that a law be drafted and passed that will provide for managers of companies in which the state has a 30% interest and more to be viewed as equal to public servants with their liability becoming more expressed. Perhaps then they will not be able to avoid punishment for stealing public goods despite all their wealth, connections and influence. As they say: “A thief is supposed to go to prison.”

In addition, I would like to draw your attention to another thing. Whenever we are talking about bribery cases, we somehow accuse those who take bribes. How about bribe givers? As a rule, they are considered victims, and the society sympathizes with them. However, it is them who force potential bribe takers into illegal actions: “I beg you, please take the money but fulfill my request!”

Unfortunately, as a socially negative phenomenon, bribery today



is not considered an aggravated crime. Rather, in the society, a bribe taker has a moral support as he/she is considered a person who tries to advance in life, his/her activity is shown as an example... That's why we see people talk about bribery that threatens the state but nobody likes to discuss specific cases!

Should we give up? I think combating bribery should start with changing yourself. However, one cannot fight this evil alone – results will only become tangible if we start doing this together. It's time to act!

Women in Governance: Time to Act!

I would like to express my opinion with respect to women's participation in the political life of the country, public governance at the decision making level important to improving the socioeconomic life of the society. Let me describe to you our village's *aiyl okmotu* as an example.

In our Oogan-Talaa village of the Mogol rural district of the Jalal-Abad Province, there are both employed women and unemployed ones. However, I can confidently state that the latter outnumber the former. All my female village fellows are busy farming livestock, managing their households, working in the fields and raising children. And while they are very cognizant in their daily routine, their awareness of their political rights is negligible. Working women are more aware, although it would still be a stretch to call their awareness good.

This kind of arrangement results in women being almost

unrepresented in the socio-political life of our village. Out of 23 members of the *aiyl kenesh* (rural council/legislature), only two are women. Even they tend to act in a concerted majority with their male counterparts, trying not to risk expressing their opinions. Female members of the rural legislature are incapable of advocating issues relevant to their village's female residents. In their own experience of working in the rural legislature, they know that "women's" issues tend to lack support on part of men.

Despite the fact that the state officially declared equality between men and women, the fact of the matter is the female candidates for the rural council seats are barely supported, with preference normally given to males. I think our village is still strongly run by a stereotype to the effect that: men work and put food on the table, women take care of the house and children. Overcoming this stereotype without additional measures is extremely difficult. However, even such a minute measure as the introduction of special quotas to maintain gender balance in local (rural) councils is not solidified in the law. The question is: Why what is considered good at the *Jogorku Kenesh* (national Supreme Council/Legislature) cannot be implemented at the rural level? I don't think many people would lose here since everyone knows that women, by nature, are more socially oriented and less prone to participate in corrupt practices.

It seems strange that introducing gender quotas to the village level is not a nationwide policy. The people are fair when they say: "Hiding a disease leads to a death." I am sure that many negative aspects of public governance at all levels – from bottom to top – could be avoided if only gender equality were in effect in this area.

Rural Council Election: Are Women Ready to Engage in Politics?

We hear a lot about gender balance in government bodies. However, in practice, the situation is far from a good one. Everyone knows about it. I personally had to face gender unfairness and, as proof of that, I wish to tell you a story from my life.

Back in 1998, we, 22 women of the Kenesh village of the Nookat District of the Osh Province, came up with an initiative to create our own public foundation. Back then, such associations were very rare,



not only in our district, but also throughout the country. According to our plan, our foundation was to support and create conditions needed to protect rights of low-income families, facilitate the recovery of destroyed plants and companies, and implement many other socially significant activities. Having mobilized our entire village and collected KGS 5 from each household, we were able to get registered and start our activities. I was elected as the chairperson of our foundation.

Without false modesty, I can say that over the years of our foundation's activities, in effect through this day, many good things have been accomplished. We have renovated and successfully operated kindergartens in three villages. Thanks to our efforts aimed at preventing the sale of people's property, in two villages, kindergartens remained property of local authorities. In the village of Kuu-Maidan, we helped to install a water supply pipeline, repair the road, and build a sauna. We consider it a major achievement that we arranged and ran several training workshops facilitating the improvement of self-awareness and activism of our women. Overall, we helped to raise more than KGS 12 million in investments.

Taking into consideration all our tireless work for the common good, we never expected a failure during the local *aiyl kenesh* (rural council) election. But let me start from the beginning. From our activists, including me, several people had been nominated for the election. Assuming the importance of my achievements as a leader of a locally well-known public foundation, I spent little time on campaigning

preferring to dedicate more time to campaign for other women. However, despite all our efforts it turned out that many villagers voted taking into account the gender of the candidates rather than that of the deeds and accomplishments they initiated/promised! In addition, relatives of some of the candidates managed to cast 10-15 ballots for their relative. As a result, the rural council was filled with men who never did anything for their municipality. Some newly elected members of the rural council did not even know what being a representative of people meant! I personally view this situation as an indicator of how negligible the role is that was assigned to local rural councils by the society. I cannot believe that such elected representatives, who were simply lucky to have an extended network of relatives, will now be handling local problems, expend the village's budget, and control performance of the local *aiyl okmotu* (rural government)!

I was particularly sad to see that we, women, are still very inactive in politics. There is no other reasonable explanation to the voters' behaviour, especially those of women (and there were many female voters) who sold their votes for KGS 100 to a rich candidate despite the common-sense need for a more socially useful person?! There were also things of a "purely women's" nature. While I was trying to promote as many women as possible and campaigned for everyone at once, it turned out that some candidates were quietly running personal campaigns of their own.

This story ends as follows: being naive to assume that people will appreciate my accomplishments without an extra effort in campaigning, I was not elected a member of the rural council. What is this: a clash of contemporary election technologies or an assessment of the women's role in politics?

Decision Making Level: Why So Few Women?

In our *aiyl kenesh* (rural council), women account for 1,5-3,5% of members. This shows how insignificant female involvement at the decision making level is in our area. I think there are many reasons for that.

1. The rural area lacks conditions in which women can develop:



- only certain villages have operational kindergartens. Those villages that lack them see the burden of a day-care (feeding, laundry, cleaning, etc.) fall on mothers' shoulders, which results in their lack of time even for their personal matters, let alone public ones;

- due to a lack of bakeries in the village, a lot of time is taken by the need for daily bread baking, which could have been spent on self-development;

- few villages can boast availability of public baths and other public amenities offered to the public. As a result, women have to care about the sanitary and hygiene aspect of their families, which is another source of time and energy expenditure.

As a result, women laden with domestic duties simply lacks time to participate in the publicly significant life of the village, attend meetings at which women's rights are explained, and find ways to ease their destinies.

2. Factors that are hindering women's activity include unemployment and poverty to which women become subjected first in village settings. If anything, which public activity can one talk about when children are not clothed or fed properly?!

3. Women's reluctance to be openly active is facilitated by the rural mindset. Thinking that a woman's place is in the kitchen, few people are willing support her candidacy during the local elections, consequently voting for men usually. In addition, young women, having married a man from a different area, have to spend a lot of time to become accepted in their husbands' villages and gain the right of voice and support in the new community.

4. It is also a factor that rural women tend to be less educated

then rural men. Perhaps, this is why rural elections rarely show the unity among women as they fail to support each other. Politically immature and inexperienced people are easy to confuse and manipulate. Often we, women, claim after elections that our rights had been violated without even realizing that protection of our rights is something that we ourselves can ensure.

5. Lack of awareness is another factor. Thinking that they are lacking full information anyway, women fail to properly regard the information they have, how to make use of it, etc.

These factors adversely impact women's participation in a rural public and political life. However, there are women who are capable of expressing their will and dedicating themselves to the resolution of their villages' problems. So as not to sound unfounded, let me give you a couple of examples from my personal experience. Getting elected to the local *aiyl kenesh* (rural council) four times, twice chairing it, I consider this achievement as an assessment of my contribution to the resolution of local problems, of my ability to work closely with the local public. The nongovernmental organization I had created worked hard to build a school, improve awareness, and render assistance to women, children, low-income families, and people with disabilities.

Unfortunately, there are not that many politically active women in rural areas. Therefore, I think involving women in the political and public aspects of rural life and nationwide political education of women is a very relevant objective at this stage.

Show Your ID!

The family of Konushbayevs of the Nichke-Sai village of the Toktogul District of the Jalal-Abad Province is like thousands of other families of Kyrgyzstan: they consist of a husband, a wife, and children. They have their typical family issues and needs, happiness and problems – just like all other families. There is one difference, though: not a single member of the family of Konushbayevs has a single ID.

Stalbek Konushbayev, born 1977, a resident of Nichke-Sai, married rather early – at the age of twenty – he married Venera Usakulova, b. 1979. Their children were born soon after: in 1998, their daughter Tattybubu was born, in 2002 their son Nurtilek was born, and in 2009 and 2012, their daughters Fatima and Aidana were



born, respectively. Today, Stalbek and Venera head a family of six. It's a big family. Only themselves and their relative seem to be aware of their family, while the state has no records of any of the members of this rather large family.

It all started with Stalbek failing to receive the main ID of a Kyrgyz citizen back in the past for reasons now unremembered. When he married his young wife, it turned out that she was lacking a passport as her parents died young and as a result of all the preparations for the funeral, she simply forgot to apply for a passport. The problems kept rolling on: no passports meant no marriage certificate and no birth certificates for the children. As a result, today the young couple cannot apply for the children's benefits. They are absent even from humanitarian aid dissemination lists. They simply do not exist for official purposes.

If only they had more money, perhaps, Stalbek and Venera would have secured an opportunity to "document" their own lives and those of their children. However, the Konushbayevs are a family of very modest means, barely making ends meet. The worst part is that the children will become carriers of an old unresolved problem. That's how they live: *de facto*, there is a Kyrgyz family of six, *de jure*, it does not exist.

It has been estimated that our country's population totals 5 million people. Nevertheless, how true is this figure? If one is to run an honest accounting, perhaps there are 6, 7 or 8 million Kyrgyz citizens? Are the Konushbayevs the only family of the Nichke-Sai village of the Jalal-Abad Province with respect to whom the state has

no records? One cannot be indifferent to such cases. One must toll all alarm bells so that we can collectively help such people become full-fledged members of our society.

... Once, a prominent politician offered to issue passports to livestock – cattle and sheep. It's a good idea, although, perhaps, we should first issue passports to all people?

COLLECTION OF LETTERS
“AYILDAN KELGEN KAT”
LETTERS FROM VILLAGERS