

Self-help group from Arimjan village: We are glad that the donors found us!

We came to this remote village when it was nearly evening, as the sun gently plated the soft ears of maize with gold, and made the young shoots of cucumber, carrot and cabbage on the fields of the rural women unusually bright.

A total of 336 families live in Arimjan village, Jalalabad province. Forty of the village women, who by twists of fate have become the heads of their households, now meet more often than the other villagers. And today as well they all waited for us on their fields.

In Kyrgyzstan it is not done to call people poor or deprived. It is believed that if a person is thus called once, that person will be in need for the rest of a lifetime. Therefore the joint FAO and UN Women project, financed by the

UN's Delivering as One, is called "Agricultural Assistance to Vulnerable, Food Insecure Female-Headed Households."



Women armed with the new agro technologies got hope for better life.

Photo by Olga Grebennikova. FAO in the Kyrgyz Republic. 2012

"We are so glad that the donors found us," laugh the women. "Our village is considered remote, and guests seldom come here. UN Women brought us together, and the FAO specialists taught us how to care for the land and obtain good harvests."

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the number of families headed by women in Kyrgyzstan increased rapidly. In many families, men have migrated to Russia, Kazakhstan and other countries in search of work, and many families have lost their breadwinners. Of the 40 women beneficiaries of the FAO/UN Women project in Arimjan village, 16 are widows.

Not only do they have to bring up their children and perform all the housework or build careers: they have also to shoulder the heavy burden of cultivating the land themselves.

"We were not doing well," remembers Kumushay Salimjanova, the leader of the group in Arimjan village, and an English teacher in the local school. "We sowed cotton every year, and the yield kept falling. The middlemen gave us poor prices for the cotton we collected and we could hardly make ends meet."

By the time the donors came to them in spring 2012, already the women could hardly believe that they could change their lives. Nevertheless, they got together in a group, took up jotters in their hands and sat at desks. At integrated training events, specialists from FAO and UN Women taught them how to work together, how to care for the soil, how and when to correctly plant various crops, how to care for them and protect them from pests, and how to provide for their homes and sell the surplus.

In addition to the lessons, FAO provided them with high quality seeds from the Netherlands, mineral fertilisers, greenhouse materials and even agricultural equipment.

"This year, for the first time, we have violated the local tradition and instead of cotton planted vegetables," laughs a member of the self help group. And now all winter our children will eat fresh salads, made of the vegetables we have grown on our land."

They now do it all together – someone harvests the crop, someone takes the surplus to the bazaar, someone makes the necessary purchases. "We trust each other," say the women. "We're already like one family!"

As a result of project implementation, 2,200 vulnerable households in Osh, Jalalabad, Batken and Issyk Kul provinces of Kyrgyzstan have received knowledge and resources to increase their incomes and reduce the poverty



FAO National Consultant Matraim Jusupov continues to provide women's groups with support in growing maize.

Photo by Olga Grebennikova, FAO in the Kyrgyz Republic. 2012

rate. Bearing in mind the fact that every family has between two and eight children, the total number of beneficiaries exceeds 11,000. The important knowledge and skills in agricultural production that the women receive through project implementation stays with them forever.

In order to ensure sustainable results for the UN intervention, all the groups of beneficiaries are trained in how to create and manage their own funds at village level, in order that farmers can use working capital to purchase seeds, fertilisers, rent agricultural machinery and even modernise their irrigation networks independently, not waiting for donations from donors. In 39 villages in the four pilot provinces such funds have already been created and are working successfully.

“We have also sold our first crop of vegetables,” says Kumushay Salimjanova, “and now we have the funds to adequately prepare the children for school. And I will use the income from the second crop of cucumbers, which I will harvest this year, in the spring to buy quality seeds and fertilisers.”

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