



Information matters, let's get Central Asian farmers into the loop

Who has access to information and who doesn't makes a huge difference in the 21st Century. Those who have limited access to timely market information are facing challenges identifying market opportunities and finding sellers or buyers. This is especially true in agrarian economies such as in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan where more than half of the population lives in rural areas, with most working in the agricultural sector. Access to online market prices and information sharing are critical for the sustainable development of agricultural production.

The project background in three words

UNDP's 'Wider Europe: Aid for Trade for Central Asia, South Caucasus and Western CIS' project, funded by the Government of Finland, is supporting access to real time information for producers, processors, and suppliers in Batken (Kyrgyzstan) and in Khujand (Tajikistan) to improve market access, increase competitiveness, and attract buyers. UNDP helped to introduce web-based information platforms, an SMS information system, supported radio stations and printed updates for sharing market prices and information on agriculture. Web sites provide producers, processors, and suppliers with information on market prices of agricultural goods updated on a weekly basis, online advertisement spaces, business directories, and guides.

A simple but powerful solution

In Khujand (Tajikistan), the project supported, jointly with Helvetas, the establishment of the Agricultural Information Marketing System (AIMS). The AIMS allows rural farmers to easily access market price and other agricultural information, and to identify sales channels. The system currently offers the following services:

1. **A web-portal (www.agroinform.tj):** the website contains agri related information (research papers, forecast surveys, a market price information database updated on a weekly basis) and a dedicated advertisement space. The website also contains an agricultural map that identifies producers, the type of product and volume they sell. The website has had so far 21 004 unique users;
2. **Monthly agricultural newspapers:** the newspaper contains information around crops, animal husbandry, land reform, pest and disease control and other relevant information. It, furthermore, contains prices of 50 agri-products in the main markets and border markets of Tajikistan. In 2011, the newspaper had 842 paying subscribers;
3. **SMS-packages:** there are four different price modalities targeting the different needs of customers. In 2011, this service attracted 162 paying subscribers;
4. **Four electronic boards** in four district markets disseminating agri price information, with running costs partly financed by advertisements.

The AIMS went live in July 2010. By the end of 2011, the AIMS was able to cover 55% of its running cost. It is expected that with an increasing client base the system will achieve financial sustainability.



Information technologies and farmers work hand in hand

Nematboi Olimov Chairman of the "Chorku" farmers association of the Isfara district noted: "Our farm cultivates apricot orchards, and apple trees, as well as vegetables and cereals for over 25 years. Through the Agricultural Information Marketing system "Agroinform.Tj", which was created within the Aid for Trade project, our association had the opportunity to

promote our products. We regularly advertised our products in the “Marketplace” of the web-site “Agroinform.TJ». This system helped us to sell our products for an overall amount of 200,000 Tajik Somoni (around 45,000USD). We sold wheat seeds for 100,000 TJK, potatoes for 60,000 TJS, cabbage for 25,000 TJS and beets for 15,000 TJS.”

In Batken (Kyrgyzstan), the project supported the establishment of the Batken Market Information Center (BMIC). Activities in Batken are slightly different to those in Khujand as the different needs of the population needed to be considered. The BMIC provides the following services:

1. Web-portal (<http://batken.agroinfo.kg/>): the website contains information on agriculture (equipment, means of production, agricultural methodologies, etc.), and a list of producers and processors in the region;
2. An agricultural newspaper that is published every two weeks and contains general information on the agricultural sector, as well as market price information on 37 agricultural products from 10 different large markets;
3. Telephone service where farmers can phone-in for information;
4. Radio stations in three large markets of the Batken Oblast.



The BMIC is closely cooperating with local government structures, to be able to target even the most remote villages and establish a network to access information regardless where the client lives. First experiences with the information system went well, as the experiences below testify:

“People came from Batken city and took it all. Just like that, with no effort or cost I sold two tons of apples right away”, Emilbek Toktonazarov, a young farmer from Rabat village, delightfully remembers last year’s story. The farmer works hard and manages to get over four tons of harvest yearly. Emilbek sends all the harvest to Bishkek, which requires a lot of effort and involves costs for shipping, transportation, etc. He could not imagine being able to sell just like that [locally], with no [transportation] cost or effort, a large lot of apples! It was the first time in Emilbek’s ten-year farming experience and all he had to do was to go to the neighboring village of Ak-Tatyr and put an announcement in the newspaper!

Buunisa Toroeva collects announcements from her fellow villagers to be spread within the BIMC network. “There are almost 750 households in our village and each one has an orchard”. She has calculated that within two years over 50 persons having passed through her managed to improve their living standards. Buunisa Toroeva herself is a vivid example of the BIMC success: “Through the radio center at the Samarkandek market I sold 1200 kg of apricots, allowing me to buy a car for my son.”

Benefits that last

Considering the needs, the agricultural wealth and the overall potential in these two regions, improving demand-driven information systems might not be the first choice of intervention for many people. However, it is important to realise that the ability to access real time information allows producers to make more informed choices, get better deals by linking producers to markets. If we manage to make these systems sustainable, ultimately they will be able to support the self-development of the agricultural community.

On another note, as the experience has been so positive, the AIMS system is now being expanded to the Khatlon region in Southern Tajikistan – way to go!