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## STANDING ON ONE'S OWN TWO FEET – RURAL EDUCATION IN KYRGYZSTAN

### Impact study of the Skills Training in Rural Areas programme (STAR)

HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation has been implementing the Skills Training in Rural Areas (STAR) programme in the Kyrgyz Republic since 2001. The programme was based in vocational schools and aimed to improve the employment and income situation of the young rural population by enhancing their agriculture production and commercialisation skills. The study (2013) shows that people in the Naryn and Chui regions were able to upgrade their knowledge, apply the know-how they acquired in training courses linked to practical work and planning, and change their attitudes: they feel nowadays that they have greater options in life and increasingly rely on their own initiative. This reflects a major change for the better from the depressing situation directly after the Soviet collapse, with its many political and economic uncertainties.

## CONTEXT

Kyrgyzstan is a mountainous country with a predominant agricultural sector. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new Kyrgyz state could not maintain the large-scale, centrally planned investments, infrastructure, production and export schemes. With the disintegration of the collective and state farms, many farm workers were released from their jobs and faced unemployment. To mitigate the effects of this, the new republic distributed land and allowed citizens and unemployed workers from the rural and industrial sectors to engage in their own agricultural activities.

Today about 55% of the people living in Kyrgyzstan are involved in agriculture and animal husbandry. Farms mainly produce wheat, potatoes, sugar beet and vegetables. The cash crops produced in southern Kyrgyzstan include tobacco and cotton. Yet small-scale production systems prevail, and over 300,000 farms share 84% of the agricultural land. In addition, some 900,000 small households have access to very small plots of land for so-called kitchen gardens (mainly for vegetables). But these citizens usually lack technical knowledge as well as the requisite skills to farm and herd, and to process and market agricultural products.

The budget for vocational schools was cut in half after 1991, while at the same time many new, inexperienced farmers started to enter vocational education and training institutions. The upshot was that vocational schools could not provide sufficient courses of an adequate standard. Starting in 2001, the Helvetas STAR programme aimed to build vocational schools' capacity to provide practical and theoretical courses linked to the ongoing process of introducing and expanding the market economy and shared governance for education and training. The overall goal was to enhance employment and income opportunities for the rural population through improved rural development generated by better-trained farmers.

## AVEP AND A-STAR

The first phase (2001–2005) of the programme was called AVEP (Agricultural and Rural Vocational Education Project) and aimed to help local partners to implement a three-year formal education system for farmers. This involved: developing a new curriculum in a participatory and comprehensive way; delivering curricula, module descriptions, experimental classes and textbooks; and upgrading teachers and school managers for a more practice-oriented, situational and interactive involvement in rural education. For the second phase (2006–2009) the project changed its name to "Agricultural Skills Training in Rural Areas (A-STAR)". It made considerable efforts to link training providers, employers and students in a more efficient and effective way, and fostered the in-

roduction of shorter educational and training offers (one to two year courses, instead of three years). One core element of this link between communities and vocational schools is a newly developed funding mechanism: the KOJOs (see Box 1).

### BOX 1: KOJO

Helvetas strives to mobilise the local community and its vocational school to create a Local Training Governance NGO and register it as a fund under Kyrgyz law with the name of KOJO. KOJO stands for Кесиптик Окутуунун Жергиликтүү Органы (Local Vocational Training Body). "KOJO" is also used in the sense of the Kyrgyz word "owner" or "host". The potential members are all sections of the local community with an interest in vocational education for local youth (such as school representatives, farmers and parents, representatives of the local administration), the government, and contributors to the fund (such as companies, local and national sponsors, as well as international donors).

KOJO's functions are to:

- Raise funds to fully finance the training course by contracting financiers
- Decide on training fees
- Contract the vocational school to provide the training
- Monitor the training delivery

KOJOs are responsible for ensuring training governance by assessing the community's and employers' training needs; they are also actively involved in fund-raising and co-financing training courses, and help to ensure good-quality, practice-oriented education by commissioning the teachers and trainers. In 2009, this approach was extended to vocational training in the hospitality sector (through the T-STAR project of Helvetas).



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Linkages between theoretical education ...

## BOX 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In 2013 Helvetas commissioned an external Impact Assessment by the School of Agricultural, Forest and Food Science (HAFL) of Berne University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland, to complement the findings of tracer studies undertaken in previous years, and to add to the quantitative data perceptions and observations of the targeted stakeholders. The methodology is based on interviews with key persons and on focus group discussions, which ask stakeholders to comment on a) major social and economic changes in recent years, b) the relevance of the changes, and c) eventual links to project activities. The interviewers wished to understand the interviewees' explanations for the changes to their livelihood situation and to assess the impact of the project activities in terms of relevant and lasting changes.

194 interviewees were selected by stratified random sampling. This was by project region (Naryn for AVEP and Chui for A-STAR), with two vocational schools in each region, as well as a random selection of graduates, teachers and trainers. In addition, employers, local authorities, members of co-financing institutions (KOJOs) and representatives from the State Agency for Vocational Education and Training all shared their experiences. The findings were analysed and interpreted by a team of four Kyrgyz social scientists and one Swiss one.

## EMPLOYMENT IMPROVES LIVELIHOODS

All the graduates, teachers and employers report that overall they have increased their capacities and their opportunities to participate actively and successfully in the rural sector. They also say that they have improved their livelihood situation (e.g. more varied food and increased income). This applies to women and men, both old and young, and to graduates of long-term and short-term courses alike. All the interviewees attributed some of these changes to project activities, and in particular to AVEP, which was quite a unique external support in the Vocational Education and Training sector at the time. These positive changes were also supported by other Helvetas' departments, such as Rural Advisory Services.

Nearly all of the graduate interviewees from the new farmer-entrepreneur course in Naryn and Chui oblast are now experienced farmers and herders, applying new agricultural and animal husbandry techniques (e.g. crop rotation, diversification of crops, artificial insemination). Some only practise in their kitchen gardens and are dedicated entrepreneurs in other professions, most of them linked to the agricultural sector. Many interviewees extended their agricultural business to side-businesses

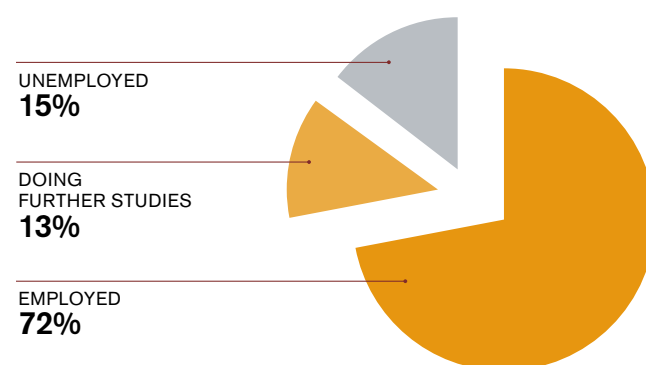


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... and practical classes (here poultry vaccination)

(e.g. food processing, training, marketing) and created jobs for family members and neighbours. As Figure 1 shows, 74% of 1,200 graduates found employment after attending a course.

**Figure 1: Status of graduates after training**



Employment and unemployment of graduates in 25 schools (n=1,200 graduates). Source: Helvetas (2011)

## INNOVATIVE TEACHING METHODS AND MIGRATION CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGED ATTITUDES

All the teachers interviewed appreciate the interactive teaching methods and the linkages between theoretical and practical classes. Some teachers who could not deal with the more demanding teaching standards left the vocational schools. Since the teachers are mostly part-time farmers and herders, too, they also benefit from the new contents and methods introduced by the project and were able to improve their income, satisfaction and self-assurance.

Beyond the knowledge and skills they acquired through trainings, many graduates and teachers spontaneously highlight a change of attitude. They feel confident that

they will be able to meet emerging challenges in a permanently changing and challenging context. They have the firm conviction that they now “stand on their own two feet”, which means being responsible and capable of addressing new situations with their own means and capacities. The improvement in the livelihood conditions for men and women is reported in very similar terms. Still, women more often regret that they lack the time to use their new skills, as they are more involved in care work.

Migration is prominent in the region. The official education certificates allow the graduates to have access to legal and better-paid work in Kazakhstan and Russia as well. Some key persons who were interviewed have the impression that most of the migrants come back after one working season abroad and invest their salaries in their own land. One employer states that even when these graduates migrate and leave the region, they still contribute to the growth of the country, as they do skilled work in a different place, spreading knowledge, skills and attitudes to a wider community.

## OWNERSHIP LEADS TO SUSTAINABILITY

One crucial issue for the sustainability of vocational education and training is the issue of financing. A-STAR therefore introduced a KOJO co-funding mechanism, which allows the community and employers to order training courses and modules from the vocational schools. All four KOJOs that were assessed were able to obtain considerable funds, which currently secure support for students, teachers and teaching material for the next five years. School directors, employers and KOJO steering committee members who were interviewed (21 persons) are convinced that shared ownership and educational governance benefits the entire rural community.

## CONCLUSIONS AND CHALLENGES

The AVEP and A-STAR projects contributed to the rural development of Naryn and Chui through a development approach that focused on strengthening vocational schools, first by improving course quality (teaching methods and materials), then by enhancing the course offer's relevance and practice orientation (with private sector involvement) and establishing an alternative financing model (KOJO). This evolution and adaptation of the programme, combined with its long engagement (trust) and the comprehensive, analytical and focussed approach were identified as key success factors. The programme



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Finally able to address emerging situations with their own means and capacities.

contributed to positive behavioural change (self-esteem) and fostered the acquisition of professional skills and knowledge (outcome), as well as improving the livelihoods of graduates and teachers (impact). The project also led to a more sustainable system for vocational schools, especially regarding financing.

Still, there are questions as to how to involve more effectively the private sector in vocational training, how to guarantee permanent update of know-how on technical issues of the fast-evolving agricultural sector, and how to prepare students – specifically female students – for the negative side-effects of joining the market economy.

## REFERENCES AND MORE INFORMATION

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- Liechtensteinischer Entwicklungsdienst LED, Liechtenstein, [www.led.li](http://www.led.li), [info@led.li](mailto:info@led.li), Tel. + 423 232 09 75
- Berner Fachhochschule, Hochschule für Agrar-, Forst- und Lebensmittelwissenschaften HAFL, Zollikofen, [www.hafl.bfh.ch](http://www.hafl.bfh.ch), [office.hafl@bfh.ch](mailto:office.hafl@bfh.ch), Tel. +41 (0)31 910 21 11

HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation

Weinbergstr. 22a, PO Box 3130, CH-8021 Zurich  
Maulbeerstr. 10, PO Box 6724, CH-3001 Bern  
[info@helvetas.org](mailto:info@helvetas.org), [www.helvetas.org](http://www.helvetas.org)