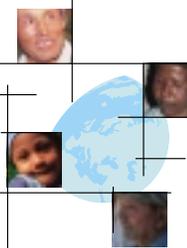


Building Self-reliance in Kyrgyzstan

BY LEILA SARALAEVA



BUILDING NETWORKS TO FIGHT POVERTY



But we're not going to listen to your stories."

For this is the one that they had been living:

A decade earlier, Ak-Jar had been a proud part of what was known as a Lenin

what were we supposed to do with it? We didn't have any machinery to process it, no seeds to plant, and no experience." For many, especially young people, the solution seemed to lie in escaping to the capital,



AK-JAR, KYRGYZSTAN

When Gzhegosh Kukharchik, a United Nations Volunteer (UNV), first came to this village southwest of the capital Bishkek several years ago what met his eye was no pretty picture. The land was mostly fallow. The residents, who had been allowed two cows per family under former communist rule, had for the most part sold them off. Alcoholism and drug abuse were rampant in what had deteriorated into being one of the poorest villages in this mountainous, sparsely populated nation.

Mr. Kukharchik had been sent here four years ago to talk to people about the possibility of a governmental agency lending them money and teaching them how to make their own business plans to lift themselves out of their economic misery. The villagers were less than impressed. "You won't deceive us," he recalls one telling him. "If you want to give us money, just do it.

The face of community pride.



Kolkhoz, a collective farm complex of a kind that had had a reputation in former times as the Soviet Union's most productive sort. Their workers enjoyed an abundance of meat, milk, fruit and vegetables; families of six children were commonplace. Meanwhile, the Soviet agriculture ministry officials made all key planning decisions.

Then the villagers suddenly found themselves bereft of the skills needed to run the collective farms on their own. "Our former communist masters privatized the best land and took it for themselves," says local farmer Ibraim Baratakunov. "Simple people like us were happy to get any land at all, but

Bishkek; high school students here graduated and left home only to end up trying to eke out a living working at the city's bazaars as street traders.

One group in Ak-Jar refused to give up. Despite salaries that had shrivelled to the equivalent of less than US\$20 a month, teachers kept on teaching, while searching for ways to keep the social fabric of their community from fraying further. They determined that what young people there really needed to lift their spirits, at least, was a community sports centre. "We

Agricultural land once part of Soviet collective farms is becoming productive again under private ownership.

Photos: Alexander Fedorov/UNDP



Beautiful but remote, economic progress in the northern reaches of Kyrgyzstan has been hampered by their inaccessibility.

understood that only sport could save them," recalls Tologon Abraliev, who at the time was the principal of Ak-Jar's high school. "So we gathered the villagers and persuaded them that only we could build it," he adds. "They agreed and everyone made a contribution. Somebody brought a couple of bricks, another brought logs, somebody slaughtered a sheep to feed the workers, and the rest actually did the building."

Learning new ways

Then Mr. Kukharchik arrived here as part of the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Participatory Poverty Alleviation Programme, which identified Ak-Jar as a priority target for assistance, under the Government of Kyrgyzstan's National Programme on Overcoming Poverty. UNDP had intervened at the government's request to

assist isolated communities that felt abandoned and lost as to how to rebuild themselves. UNDP is working with them on their own solutions to national development challenges.

Thanks to the support of an outspoken local farmer a micro-credit project quickly took hold. At first, "we had no idea how to write business plans, what the word 'credit' meant or how to make repayments," Mr. Baratakunov recalls. Today, he heads a 139-member group in Ak-Jar whose members borrow regularly from UNDP's national partner, the World Bank-supported Kyrgyz Agricultural Finance Corporation (AFC). "I still remember the first time each self-help group member received their money; it was in the schoolyard," says Mr. Baratakunov. "For my first loan of 8,000 Soms (about \$200) I bought a cow and seeds for planting. In a year of selling milk and potatoes, I paid it back with interest and kept the cow. And when we paid our first loans back on time, we were offered a second one—this time for 12,000 Soms (\$300) over two years."

Mr. Baratakunov now considers himself part of his country's nascent middle class. Besides having a profitable small farm with its cow, five sheep, a horse and a vegetable patch, he helps others develop their personal business plans. All here agree that four years after the UNDP-led programme started, the village looks markedly more prosperous, what with its mosque, hospital, telephone service and a watermill. An irrigation

canal is being restored. A steady stream of leaders from villages in the *oblast* or province of Talas passes through here to learn from Ak-Jar's experience.

Reliable partners, re-born dreams

According to Damira Bugubaeva, deputy governor of Talas, "if Ak-Jar's people have managed to organize the self-help groups and work so successfully, why shouldn't other villages?" Since 1998 the Kyrgyz AFC has assigned about \$450,000 to Ak-Jar and other Talas communities. "Each year we work with 300 self-help groups," says AFC credit expert Sergei Sedykh. "In Ak-Jar the loan repayment rate is 100 percent. They are such reliable partners that we have established a bank here."



High school graduation day has special meaning here. Getting a diploma is no longer an automatic reason to leave town.

Villages like Ak-Jar are targeted for assistance under the country's national poverty alleviation programme.





Communities that have benefited from the national poverty alleviation programme are more prosperous now.



“I dream that in a few years all the village will come to my lake and rest. I will arrange boats, and people can fish and swim here,” he says. ■

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If the statistics sound impressive, some of the individual testimonials come across as more so. Amid the social and economic strains of the new nation's birth, Buzurman Eshenaliev left Ak-Jar and ended up joining the ranks of the alcoholic homeless in Bishkek. After years of despair, he willed himself to repair his life and returned home, where his old classmate, Tologon Abraliev—the school-teacher—talked him into setting up a self-help group for reformed down-and-outs such as himself.

Mr. Eshenaliev applied for a plot of land and while all the choice ones had been distributed by then, there did remain a plot of land next to a marsh. He took it, cleared it, drained the marsh and then

stocked it with trout. Armed with a \$100 loan he bought four calves, and repaid his debt by selling two of them once they had matured. Then he took a second loan, bought a cow and another calf, and built a small house. He got married. He and his wife now have a son, Kolbay: the name means “rich lake.”



One family's success story: Micro-credit helped turn swampland into a profitable fish farm.