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This is our idea in practice - giving full information to urban consumers and at the same time supporting small-scale farmers - says Madina Sadirdinova from Agency for Development Initiatives from Kyrgyzstan in an interview with Barbara Kurek from Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation from Poland.

Barbara Kurek, Agro-Perma-Lab Foundation, Poland: Madina, I co-created a food cooperative and Community Supported Agriculture as a consumer. In my city, a group of farmers run a small shop where locals can buy food directly from them twice a week. So I am really curious about your organisation's initiative Sebet Farmers' Market in Bishkek! When did you start running the farm shop?

Madina Sadirdinova, Agency for Development Initiatives (ADI), Kyrgyzstan: We founded and started the farm shop in January 2022. Whenever I talk about the market, I always mention the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, because I observe a kind of trend here, and at the moment we can name many shops that are considered organic or healthy food markets.

But apart from Sebet Market, there is no other shop or market in Bishkek that works with the concept of products straight from farmers. So, for now, we are the only market that presents agricultural products to urban consumers that focuses on small-scale women farmers.

That is interesting. Do you focus on women farmers?

I mean we try to focus on women farmers, but of course, we also have all the other small-scale farmers and young start-ups.

Women and the young are essential in agroecology. It seems to me extremely valuable that The Sebet Market supports them and cooperates. Could you share with us what the market situation in Kyrgyzstan looks like for farmers? How can they sell all their products? Do farmers usually sell their harvests to the big buyers or sell more directly to consumers in models like food cooperatives and Community Supported Agriculture or traditional marketplace? Which model is the most popular?

The most popular model in Kyrgyzstan is selling small-scale farmers' products to big intermediaries, and big buyers who supply various types of shops and bazaars. The thing is farmers get a minimum amount for their produce, what they have grown. So that was the point at which the Sebet Market concept came up so that small-scale farmers who are food producers get paid fairly and satisfactorily. On the other side are urban consumers, because our concept sees both sides of this market.

Urban consumers in markets and bazaars can never know where vegetables and other crops have been produced. Who the producer is and what the production process was like. Nobody can give a guarantee. Food passes through many intermediaries' hands, so we can never be sure of the product's origin. This is another reason why the Sebet Market works with the idea of direct sales from small-scale farmers without big intermediaries in the market. We provide full information and we guarantee quality to urban consumers. Going back to what I said at the beginning, now there are a lot of shops and markets which are trying to offer available, even organic products. Probably if we worked with the concept of Sebet Market even two years ago, it would be a little bit new. But still, none of these shops and markets work the concept of gathering small-scale farmers, and their products and supporting and motivating farmers to continue working and growing. Firstly, we always try not to bargain on price. The price really has to be very fair to the farmer, but also to the consumer. For example, let's say I'm selling dried food that costs \$2 in a big bazaar, which means the farmer was paid a lot less because of course the middlemen also want to make money. We work differently, I ask the farmer for a price that takes into account his effort and investment in the crop. Sometimes this fair price and a margin to cover the Sebet Market's living costs are slightly higher than the bazaar price.

Shortening the supply chain in Kyrgyzstan

Interview with Madina Sadirdinova, Agency for Development Initiatives

Do your consumers share with you their impressions of the prices of products at the Sebet Market?

Our customers are willing to pay fair because they know what they are paying for, which is exceptional quality and fair payment for the farmers. What I like about our shop is that we sell products sourced from small gardens where the farmers control the growing processes and we can guarantee that our products are free of agricultural chemicals. Farmers process food by keeping an eye on standards that preserve as many nutrients as possible and do not contain chemical additives that harm health. For me, it is also important that I can always name the producer and tell something more about the farm. Our customers have their tastes and preferences so after trying, for example, honey from different beekeepers, they come back for that one favourite. And I have to say that we sell unique mountain honey. This is our idea in practice - giving full information to urban consumers and at the same time supporting small-scale farmers.

I suppose this pricing policy is quite challenging when I think about it. I guess you have the purpose to make prices fair for farmers, but at the same time, you try to promote this food and the idea of buying from small-scale farmers among urban consumers. Most organic food in all these specialised shops is more expensive. For example, in Poland, prices in organic shops are higher. I believe this is one reason why the idea of organic food doesn't spread so fast. For me, this is interesting what you said about your pricing policy.

Organic food is expensive all over the world, including in Kyrgyzstan. Other organic food shops I mentioned at the beginning, their products are equally expensive. They can place other products as long as they fit their concept and criteria.



PHOTO THE SEBET MARKET

We focus on working only with small Kyrgyz farmers, only made in Kyrgyzstan, and the prices have to be fair for them. On the other hand, we also have one of our beliefs that healthy and good quality food must be accessible to most people. We do not like the idea that good quality food is for certain sections of society, never for the majority.

This kind of food is usually for rich people.

It is why we try to make it as available as possible. Some of our products are slightly more expensive than in the "normal" bazaar but some are at the same price or even cheaper. But we always get a lot of comments, and feedback from our consumers that we are never overpriced. That's what I value because I try to maintain the price.

Shortening supply chains helps achieve a balance between farmers' income and consumer spending.

There is another thing that helps us to maintain prices. Our farmers work without organic certificates because it is expensive to obtain them in Kyrgyzstan. This is one of the factors that has caused food prices to be very high. Our farmers work with PGS certificates, which are much cheaper.

Can you explain what the PGS certificate is?

Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) is the alternative to organic certificates. In this system, all farmers can guarantee each other's products and they have to renew it once a year. Every year they have to collect a team who visits each other's gardens to check the growing process. PGS helps us not to raise prices.

And what criteria do you use to choose the farmers who you cooperate with?

We intend to work with farmers who certify with PGS. In our case they are women from the seed-saving network Dyikan Muras, probably you have heard about them. Our first intention was to work with them. But of course, the number of farmers and products was not enough to respond to customer needs. It was a reason why we started cooperating with small-scale farmers from other sources also. The main criteria are working on the trust, so farmers never come from the outside, they are always from the community of farmers which we know and recommended by somebody. We also support young start-ups from our community. Trust is the key, but we still check the crops and the food processing. Only after such checking and making sure everything is transparent and clean can we introduce the products into the Sebet Market.

How many farmers do you currently work with?

In the beginning, it was close to 20 farmers, but now it is about 50 small farmers and start-ups. However, it depends on the season.

Do you have any shop-assistant or farmers selling their products? What does it look like in practice in the Sebet Market?

The Sebet Market is in the capital city. Exactly in the city center and our farmers are from various regions of Kyrgyzstan, closer and farther from Bishkek. They physically cannot be in the capital city, because they have a lot of work with their crops and livestock. Physically Sebet Market is a shop corner inside a coffee shop, which is our partner. This coffee shop works with a similar concept selling local food products. This is why we have a collaboration. The coffee shop's staff help us, whenever I am not around, they sell and assist our consumers.

How did this idea of a farmer's shop start? Where did it come from?

The idea came after our seed project Dyikan Muras. They were seed producers every year. Let's say they have a tomato, which they get seeds from, but the rest of this tomato is needless, and they have to throw it. The idea came from there, the non-refuse production. They can save seeds from a tomato, and from the rest of the tomato, they can make tomato products like sauces and juices. They started doing this. Unfortunately, they didn't have a place to sell it. We realized that our small-scale farmers need a dedicated marketplace to sell from farmer to consumer directly. They cannot sell for export or on big markets, because there are always bigger players.

It actually started as an online shop launched with the support of the Agroecology Fund. Unfortunately, it didn't work well because people prefer to taste, smell and touch the food before purchasing. That's why the online shop didn't work out and we realized that we need a physical shop. That's how the physical shop started.

How did you find the place? Do you have to pay rent?

As I mentioned, the common idea connected us with this place. Local farmer's shop inside the coffee shop highlights their support for local farmers and producers. For us, getting an independent premise is too expensive. So for both of us, this collaboration is beneficial. Of course, we have to pay rent, but this is a really good deal and we can afford it. We also pay a small fee for their staff to sell our products.

Is this shop self-sufficient or do you support it financially all the time?

In the beginning, the NGO was supporting it, but now we are already covering expenses from the shop's income. Like I said earlier we are adding to the price a small margin. And this money we spend on logistics, transport, rent, salaries and marketing. It is becoming profitable, but it was hard to cover all expenses for a long time.

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How many clients does the shop have? What do the reactions of local people and customers look like?

Getting loyal clients and consumers was difficult at the beginning. This kind of idea was something new to the citizens of Bishkek. Delivering this idea of what is the difference from the rest of the markets was challenging and took a lot of time. Maybe we don't have a huge amount of consumers yet, but we are working on it every day. Now I can say we have returning clients who like our products. And most of them give us nice feedback. They like our idea and they want to support local farmers. The number of consumers is growing every month and I can see that sales are up and followers on Instagram increase.

It's important that you have regular customers who trust your products and support the idea. Have there been any challenges which surprised you during this year of running the Sebet Market?

Let me think about it. We had a lot of challenges and most of them I expected. I wouldn't say that something was surprising. When we started we were aware that we will have to work hard on gathering farmers and loyal clients. It doesn't work one way only. Without small-scale farmers who trust this concept, it doesn't work. Big intermediaries buy products cheaper but they pay with cash on the same day. When it comes to us we cannot give that cash immediately. First, we have to sell products. When you work with us, you deliver the product and wait for the money. Some kinds of products are expensive and not for daily use, so we need more time to sell them. Of course, we try to coordinate payments, but at the end of the day, there is no money at the same time as delivering products. Also, we have additional requirements like cleanliness and double checking of everything.



PHOTO THE SEBET MARKET

Sometimes we ask to deliver only a small amount because we don't have a warehouse and keep storage. Selling to big intermediaries is easier, farmers sell the whole harvest and have money the same day. Working with us they have to put in more effort, but they earn more. There are always pros and cons in both ways. Back to consumers for me, the hardest was spreading our concept. Saying this is from a local farmer is not enough, you have to prove it. You have to show pictures of farmers, share their history, tell why they are farmers and why they are engaged in agriculture, tell how they run their farms, and what kind of life they have. Until now I cannot say that I have delivered the concept 100%. So storytelling was the most challenging. I believe that we are doing it slowly and now more and more people know what we are doing. Of course, there is still a lot of work with highlighting and emphasizing farmers' work.

What does motivate you to keep going with this idea?

I'm not from a farming background. I joined ADI by chance and I was thinking that I'll just help for a couple of months. Then I stayed because I just fell in love with what farmers are doing. The thing is I grew up in the city, didn't live in a village and never had personal experience with gardening, agriculture, growing vegetables and processing it. Until I was 26 years old, I never had this kind of knowledge and experience, even an image of what kind of work is behind this one potato or one tomato. I remember when I first visited our farmers. We drove from the city, went to meet our farmers, take some pictures and check one of the women farmers who grow tomatoes. She was talking about biohumus and compost. She showed me her garden and it was so beautiful, totally different from all the gardens I've seen in my life. It was so well organised and even when you were there for the first time you could know where which plant grows. She shared with me the whole process what she did and what her next steps would be. It was an incredible amount of work to do.

After this visit, I promised myself that I will never complain about food prices. She works a lot and I'm hanging around the shop complaining about how expensive it is. Never again since that time. Yes, I fell in love with farmers' work. Unfortunately, people don't know what is behind each product. Kyrgyzstan people don't even know that 98% of the food products are produced by small-scale farmers. This country is a small-scale farmers' country. So yes, I love the idea of the Sebet Market and I love doing it.

This is true, deep love! My story is quite similar to yours. Just one difference is I had my grandparents in the countryside, so I used to spend holidays in the countryside.

Just like me! I also have grandparents in the countryside and I used to spend my summer holidays there. But I don't know why I had never participated in the garden work. I never realized the amount of work, because when I was there I only saw the beautiful garden with raspberries and apricots. It was a pleasure to go there, just pick fruit and eat. I was not aware of how valuable it was.

Do you have any advice for someone who would like to set up this kind of shop? What is crucial at the beginning?

First, you shall find farmers who believe in this idea and want to support your work. Second, I advise delivering the market concept very clearly, working hard with consumers to highlight and explain the uniqueness of the idea. Customers must understand how our shop is different from others. Third, you need to research and know consumers' tastes and preferences. There was a lot of hustle at the beginning of the Sebet Market because we didn't know what consumers preferred.

Later with experience, we realized that every product should be divided into small portions and packed in a convenient way to take away. For example, we used to put rice in a beautiful basket and put it on the shelves. We assumed that we would measure out to customers the quantities they needed. We thought it was an excellent idea, but it didn't work well. Clients in a hurry don't want to wait in lines for you to measure everything. Now almost 100% of products in the Sebet Market are packed. These are the kinds of things it is necessary to check: what kind of products, portions and packages consumers prefer. Because consumers in each country are different, and their demands are diverse. Then they will learn and grow in running a better and more successful shop.

I think you share relevant advice. I have one last question. If you could turn back time, would you take up the task again and open the Sebet Market?

Definitely yes! We want to continue. A lot of work has been done already. A lot of farmers and consumers are with us, they trust us. Probably, we would have done something in a different way, but we would have done it again. And even now I'm dreaming that we will have a separate physical shop. The big one.

I'm keeping my fingers crossed that the dream will come true! Thank you for sharing all the information. I think the Sebet Market is an unusual place. ♦

Madina Sadirdinova works at the Agency for Development Initiatives, where she coordinates the development of the Sebet market, which allows farmers to sell their produce directly to urban people in Bishkek.

