

Weathering the crisis by sticking to organic cotton

The much cited Silk Road runs through mountainous Kirgizstan. It is not silk but organic cotton that farmers grow in this Islamic country right in the middle of Central Asia. They are members of a cooperative which embarked on ecologising its agriculture in 2007. Despite a difficult economic situation, these farmers are determined to further pursue their venture.

“He курить – No smoking!” the signboard warns in front of the shed in which the gins separate the cotton fibres from the seeds, leaves and stems, making a deafening noise. They are well-worn machines from Turkey which operate round the clock during the harvest. Pyramids of freshly harvested, carefully stacked cotton tower outside the shed, on the site of a former Soviet kolkhoz in the community of Bazar-Korgon in western Kirgizstan – ten piles of 100 tons each. Although it is already October, the sun still glares brightly. Under his kalpak, the traditional Kirgiz headwear, beads of sweat are running down Nadir Yunussaliev’s weathered brow. Bouncing on a heap of cotton, Nadir skilfully spreads out the white fibres with a special fork whose handle stands at a right angle to its prongs, giving a good grip on the white woolly mass. He calmly carries on working as new loads of fresh, raw produce are driven onto the site. Each load is weighed on arrival and simultaneously undergoes an obligatory test checking whether the produce really is free of genetically engineered material. Staff carry out the brief test in a small room next to the time-honoured scales.

Cotton picking is up to women

In a cotton field close to the village of Jash Lenin, a dozen women are picking cotton. Colourful scarves protect them from the mountain sun at 1,000 metres above sea level. The carrier bags the Muslima have hung over their shoulders are quickly filled. The women are paid a piecework wage. They get twelve SOM (the equivalent of 12 euro cents) per harvested kilogram. Just like her colleagues, Iyldyz starts at seven o’clock in the morning, finishing at seven p.m., shortly before sunset. Meals are eaten directly in the fields. A raffia mat has been spread out on the ground and has bread, honey, dried fruit and tea standing on it. An experienced picker can manage up to 150 kilograms a day. In the evening, Koshmatov Suyunbek, the commissioning farmer, hands out the day’s wages, which immediately go into the pickers’ family cash boxes, and with which day-to-day expenses are covered. As a cotton grower, Suyunbek is a member of the Agricultural Commodity and Service Cooper-



Nadir Yunussaliev spreading out the cotton fibres.

Photos: Jörg Böthling

ative (ACSC). He owns four hectares of cropland which used to be part of a large kolkhoz in Soviet days. Suyunbek also coordinates crop-growing among 20 further cooperatively organised bio cotton growers in his village. He says that he has been working in accordance with ecological standards for four years. “Our cupboard used to be full of chemicals,” he notes, taking a critical look back. But now, resorting to the poison cupboard is once and for all a thing of the past. Instead, things like soil health, organic fertiliser, crop rotation, biological pest control and reliable water supply are now important. Suyunbek leaves no doubt as to how important cotton is for him as a cash crop. “We generate half of our income with cotton,” he stresses.

Labour hard to come by

Manap Yusupov is sitting happily on the edge of the field. A father of four children, he cultivates 1.5 hectares in the village of Arkalyk, together with his family. Out of this area, 1.3 hectares has been planted with cotton, and the rest with maize. In addition to his crops, Yu-

supov owns 40 sheep, six cows, a small flock of chickens and a horse. In all, the cows provide roughly 30 litres of milk a day which the family use for their own needs as well as selling some of it on local markets. “We are organic farmers,” 64-year-old Yusupov notes, “because we first of all take care of ourselves. We want to eat healthy food, and we want to live in a healthy environment.” However, working organically requires a considerable effort. “Not only does harvesting cost much in wages, weed control with four rounds of hoeing also has to be paid for,” he explains. “That’s why we need at least 80 to 90 SOM (80-90 euro cents) per kilogram to really be able to cover the costs. But unfortunately, this is the third year in a row in which we have been scoring relatively modest prices. This year, we are at 67 SOM, and that is definitely too little,” complains Yusupov, without having giving up organic cultivating in mind. Rather, he demands that Kirgiz cotton be processed at home more than it has been in the past. “We need spinners, and we need weavers. Then value added could be retained in Kirgizstan,” Yusupov maintains. The farmer recalls Soviet days, when he was working in the kolkhoz



The cotton pickers are paid piece wages.



Nurbek Kannazarov is chairman of the ACSC.



Koshmatov Suyunbek organises cotton growing in his village.



Each cotton delivery is checked for GMOs.

“Frunse”, which farmed 5,000 hectares of land and had a 1,000-strong staff. In the best times, the cotton, which was not grown particularly sustainably then, matured in an area of 200,000 hectares and was picked by machine. In contrast, today, there is only one single machine cotton harvester in the entire Kirgiz cotton world. The rest is purely manual labour. Finding the labourers required for the task is not always easy. “Sometimes, the women coming to do the picking live in villages 15 kilometres away,” Yusupov says. In fact, the lack of available labour is a much bigger problem he has to cope with than certification. While the latter is laborious, it can be managed. He would therefore be happy to see modern harvesting machines available everywhere in future. Yusupov also notes that better seed is urgently needed for more robust and higher yielding plants.

Пакта (Pachta) – as cotton is called in Kirgiz – is based on an age-old tradition in the region and in the valleys around the city of Jalal-Abad, and reaching across the border to the endless expanse of neighbouring Uzbekistan. Long before the Soviet Union came to be, the fibrous plant was cultivated in this Central Asian region and processed into various textiles. Kirgiz and Uzbek cotton was already brought to Europe via the Silk Road. In fact, this is still the case today. The organic cotton produced by the “organic farmers” of the ACSC is transported across Kazakhstan and Russia to the Latvian capital of Riga. There, it is put in intermediate storage by the most important buyers, the textiles company Elmer & Zweifel from Bempflingen, in Baden-Württemberg in southern Germany, then spun in the Czech Republic and later on processed into several organic textile products and brought on the market under the Cotonea brand.

The ACSC was founded in 2007, with the financial support of the Swiss aid organisation Helvetas. The intention was clearly defined: producing organic cotton in accordance with international standards. Part of the time, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) was also involved in this pioneering project. The cooperative now has around 400 producers farming a total of 600

hectares – only about half of which is being used for cotton this year. In good years, up to five tons of cotton is harvested per hectare, while the average over the last few years has been at roughly 3.5 tons. The cooperative’s office is accommodated in a new building on the outskirts of Jalal-Abad. Nurbek Kannazarov, the cooperative’s chairman, does not deny that, at the moment, the economic situation is tense. “In 2022, we only cultivated around 1,000 hectares, and while the harvest was good, we were unable to sell these quantities in the organic segment,” he sighs, conceding that this shook his faith in the organic approach. “The war in Ukraine and the earthquake in Türkiye have also had a lasting negative impact on our business. And it has to be borne in mind that we as a cooperative pay our members organic prices, whereas, owing to the lack of sales in the currently flagging European market, we have to sell at conventional prices.” Nurbek fully accepts the concept of the Organic Global Trade Standards (GOTS). However, he maintains that in relation to the overall gains, they are too expensive with regard to the certification process. “It is simply very difficult to observe European standards here in Kirgizstan, especially given that they then have no impact in Türkiye or Russia because there, nobody is interested in them. Quite the contrary – the prices of organic cotton are in fact lower than those of conventional produce,” Nurbek explains.

Difficult sales

Despite the tense overall conditions, Nurbek and his five staff do not wish to be deterred from the organic approach they have opted for. This is in spite of the fact that the cooperative farmers operating in the three districts of Bezirken Suzak, Bazar-Korgon and Nooken only account for three percentage points of total Kirgiz cotton growing (2024: 13,000 hectares). All in all, around 7,000 farmers are involved in cultivation. By comparison, in good years, the area under cultivation grows to around 30,000 hectares. This clearly shows that the sales situation has worsened throughout the entire branch, also because of the negative impact the Ukraine war has had. In

particular, food and energy prices have risen enormously.

Irrespective of the difficult economic situation, the farmers in the Jalal-Abad region have to cope with sharp changes in the climate. “Our summers are getting hotter and hotter. This summer, temperatures rose to more than 40 degrees Celsius,” Nurbek says at lunch. “And in the winter, there is less and less snow, although we still often have temperatures below minus 20 degrees Celsius.” As he speaks, outside, right in front of the restaurant, cars are constantly rushing around the roundabout, and many people are visiting the neighbourhood mosque. “Because of the heat-waves, we are also having problems with water supply. Although the irrigation system from Soviet times still works, many areas are only insufficiently linked to it,” Nurbek explains. “They urgently need to be additionally irrigated if they are to produce moderately acceptable yields.”

There can be no doubt that many substantial challenges have to be tackled. But interestingly, the cooperative is backed by many in the ranks of Kirgiz politics. “Our government supports organic production, whether it be in construction, in power generation or in agriculture. Perhaps subsidies will be provided for our cooperative in future in order to further backing our ecologisation approach, so that we can continue to grow,” Nurbek notes, pleased about support from far-off Bishkek. However, in the streets of the rapidly growing capital, one will not find any products made of organic cotton either.

But things can change – just like the notion discussed in Parliament some years ago to ecologise agriculture by law throughout the country, like in Bhutan. “A great idea, but we’re obviously not yet ready for that in Kirgizstan,” says Nurbek. Even so, he would wish to already have such a regulation now.

Dierk Jensen is a freelance journalist based in Hamburg, Germany.

Contact: dierk.jensen@gmx.de