

There are Worse Projects Than this One!

Interview with Walter Schläppi (LBL) about Vocational Training in Kyrgyzstan

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The queer title is part of the philosophy – I found out during the interview. Most people would like to get a checklist that guarantees the success of their projects. If you belong to this kind of people, stop wasting your precious time reading this article. If you are trying to get here and there helpful information to improve the proceeding in your very specific context and situation, and if you know by experience that the only contribution from outside consists in a choice of ideas, local people can choose from, then reading on you will find a couple of them.

BN: What is the general situation of the project?

WS: The project is located in Kyrgyzstan in the Naryn Oblast and it operates in the area around two vocational schools. It is implemented by Helvetas a Swiss NGO and it started two years ago.

BN: What is it all about?

WS: When the Soviet order broke down, the huge agricultural production lots were distributed to the rural population according to the size of the family. So the former employees of the Kolchos System had to get acquainted with a much broader knowledge than they had as a mechanic, driver or herdsman only. The farming family needed to know how to run a small size farm as a whole.

The vocational schools existed during Soviet times, satisfying the needs of the state farms run by a team of specialists. It meant, that the curriculum of the training had to be adapted to the changed situation.

BN: What are the expected results?

WS: In the former system the successful students seldom started working in the trade since vocational education had a low reputation. They considered their training as a preparation for further studies and left. The new vocational school should provide the fe/male

students with the knowledge they need to run their own farm and make a living out of it. The training vision is based on three steps. During the first training step the students get the practical competence (as compared to a one year apprenticeship in Switzerland). After the second step the students should be able to run their farm as they exist today. And at the end of the third training step they should have the capacities of rural business people, being successful rural entrepreneurs looking actively for new business opportunities.

After finishing their first year the students have the opportunity to get a credit of 2000 Som (40 US\$) for a project of their own. They will be able to apply practically what they learnt and start investing in a business of their own.

BN: Now, why do you think the project had a promising start?

WS: First: the project is run by a local committee. It consists of representatives of local authorities, the vocational schools, parents and progressive farmers. Second: ordinary local people call it a good project. They just have the feeling of taking part in a promising activity. Of course people with a scientific background would go on asking: what makes ordinary people say “it is a good project”. Unfortunately farmers don’t slice reality in small bits, in criteria, in simple cause – effect and the answers wouldn’t reflect ordinary peoples feelings – or just very partially.

BN: So, lets try another approach: how did you get there?

WS: A first activity consisted in forming agricultural advisers. But soon the local director of the vocational school and the extensionists found, that this was not enough. A more solid basic training for young men and women was needed.

From the beginning it was clear, that the project had to be run from within local structures and the running costs should not augment more than 50%. It should be possible to run the training with existing local means.

BN: What were the individual steps?

WS: Well, I shall try to give you a sequence, although some of the activities were conducted simultaneously.

- People involved in the extension project thought that extension was not enough.
- A student analysed the situation of the vocational schools, their structures and their administration.¹
- The local owners discussed the findings of the study.
- Helvetas invited and facilitated a larger group of stakeholders (including representatives from the ministry of labour and social protection).
- A selected group from Kyrgystan participated at the CIEA Workshop (Centre International d'Etudes Agricoles). Taking advantage of their visit to Switzerland they had a close look at the training of young Swiss farmers.
- They found the basic idea good and they elaborated several options for their own context.
- Representatives of the schools, the parents and the apprentices discussed the options.
- Helvetas agreed to accept a planning document which left room for future adaptations.

BN: Please don't feel offended, but what you just told me sounds so very trivial. Weren't there special lucky circumstances?

WS: I should rather call it social competence. It means: bringing the right people at the right time together and being able to work on good ideas and put the most suitable into practice. Among those "lucky" circumstances, as you call them were:

- A couple of people willing to go ahead: the director of the vocational school in Koshkor, the director of the Naryn office, the responsible person at the ministry, the desk officer at Helvetas.
- The CIEA Workshop taking place at the right moment, being a convincing argument for the tour to Switzerland.

- Helvetas working in the area for quite a while; they knew the stakeholders and were able to bring them together.

BN: Does that mean, that your key message would be: Even though you have a brilliant idea, wait until you found the right people who are able and willing to carry the project forward.

WS: Well, I've heard worse conclusions.

¹ see the article «Rural Transition and Agricultural Vocational Education in the Context of post-socialist Transformation; A regional study from Kyrgystan» by Matthias Rufer, BeraterInnen News, 1/2001