



INTERVIEW – HEFACS

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Building bridges between Tajikistan and Latvia

On August 28-30, 2017 a group of higher education and food production and processing experts from Latvia visited Tajikistan. Why the visit was organised? What is idea behind?

In order to explain, I should go a little bit back in history. Four years ago Latvia University of Agriculture started cooperation with several Tajikistan's universities in order to extend scope and to improve quality of higher education in area of food quality and safety in your country. We – seven partners, of whom four are from Tajikistan – jointly developed and introduced new master level study programme at Tajik Agrarian University. It was done with financial support of EU Tempus programme.

These activities were noticed by Umed Aslanov, regional coordinator of *Hilfswerk Austria International* representation in Tajikistan, who addressed us and highlighted need for higher education programmes, preparing professionals having competencies to develop, introduce and sustain quality systems in food production and processing enterprises. Concretely - Global agricultural practices (GAP) and Hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP).

The meeting was productive and finally led to development of a new project, submitted to EU Erasmus+ programme. Grant was assigned and the project currently is under implementation. It aims to develop and introduce new study modules, covering GAP and HACCP aspects, into existing study programmes at Khujand Polytechnic Institute, Tajik Agrarian University, and two universities in Kyrgyzstan.

How universities know, what industries need?

Very good question. Higher education, if it does not respond to needs of industries, is of little value. How universities can get to know needs of their direct stakeholders? Key measure is communication: negotiations, discussions, sharing of views, mutual learning, setting joint targets and plans for their implementation. Purposefully, regularly, and with respect to each other. This is hard task, because sometimes these two groups are talking to each other in “different languages”, even they have the same mother tongue.

Starting the first project in 2014, we realised, how weak is link between universities and companies in Tajikistan. This is not to criticize, just observation. Weakness and importance of these links was emphasised in EU and particularly Latvia very recently also.

Therefore we are very pleased, that three regional associations: Hilfswerk Austria International representation in Tajikistan, National Association of Small & Medium Business of the Republic of Tajikistan and Association of Fruit and Vegetable Enterprises of Kyrgyzstan are represented in Erasmus+ project. They are "relevance litmus", supporting universities in courses development process and hopefully later in teaching process as well.

But we have to come back to the visit and its purpose. Saying shortly – the aim is to support your food production and processing enterprises. We cannot do it financially, but we can share our experience, knowledge, ideas, what sometimes is even more significant than funding with no vision. Visits are tool, which provides possibility to share and exchange know how on cooperation, technologies, methods, etc.

Who were experts visiting our country?

Delegation included seven Latvian experts from different areas – entrepreneurs producing dairy, vegetable and fruit products, an expert in quality standards development and introduction in food enterprises, Latvian high quality and healthy food cluster manager, having experience in bringing together companies, universities, researchers, teaching staff, dealing with education programmes related to food. What was our task? To listen and hear, to see and discern needs, interests of your stakeholders, in order to make a short term plan - good study visit programme for your delegations, responding to expressed interests and needs; in long term – proposals for another joint initiatives, which can be developed between two or several stakeholders.

What are your observations and impressions?

I can say on behalf of the whole group – we are impressed. Social and economic environment of your country is growing very fast. Every 8-10 months I come, there are better and better infrastructures. If spirit and achievements of universities and companies are growing the same speed, you will be able to achieve national targets.

During the visit in Tajikistan we had possibility to meet entrepreneurs from northern part of the country: „Oro Isfara”, „Golden Fruit”, „Isfara Food”, producing dried fruits; to visit dairy factory „Fabrikai Shiri Saodat”, holding „Rudaki Plaza”, agricultural enterprise „Somon”, producing fruits and berries, as well grape yards of company Our impression – companies are fast growing and very targeted, they have defined interests they have with regard to possible cooperation between our countries.

At the same time we heard and saw, that companies are facing challenges in implementation of food production and processing standards, what is their key to external markets. Two main reasons are causing it – lack of knowledge and insufficient financial resources. Universities and associations are working for improvement of the situation with regard to the first one. Your national bodies can make impact on reduction of the second reason. It can be done through support programmes for improvement of production environment, reduction of taxes for companies, introducing quality system, etc.

Our disenchantment was inability to meet with national bodies (ministries and bodies working under their supervision, dealing with food issues), due to long coordination and approval

procedures of such visit, even the request for the meeting was sent by Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia to Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan.

What will be the next steps?

The visit in Central Asia helped us to define, what we have to show, to tell, to present while your stakeholders: associations, entrepreneurs, academic staff will be Latvia, as well raised ideas for future projects, mutual activities between them on all sides – Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Latvia. For example. You have marvellous fruits; we have technologies for their processing into high added value products. If a food production/processing company get GAP or HACCP and can offer reasonable price, deal is possible. But this is not the only, what can be done. There are plenty of opportunities! We have to “roll up sleeves” and be ready for hard work.

Both visits – our to Central Asia and your delegations’ to Latvia is complementary activity to Erasmus+ project – we wrote application and received a small grant from the programme, managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia. It means – from resources of our national budget. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are among three (!) Central Asia countries, being eligible for participation in 2017 call. The instrument is given. It is up to us, how we will explore it.