EQUATOR INITIATIVE

UNDP

BIO-KG FEDERATION OF ORGANIC DEVELOPMENT

Kyrgyz Republic

Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

UNDP EQUATOR INITIATIVE CASE STUDY SERIES

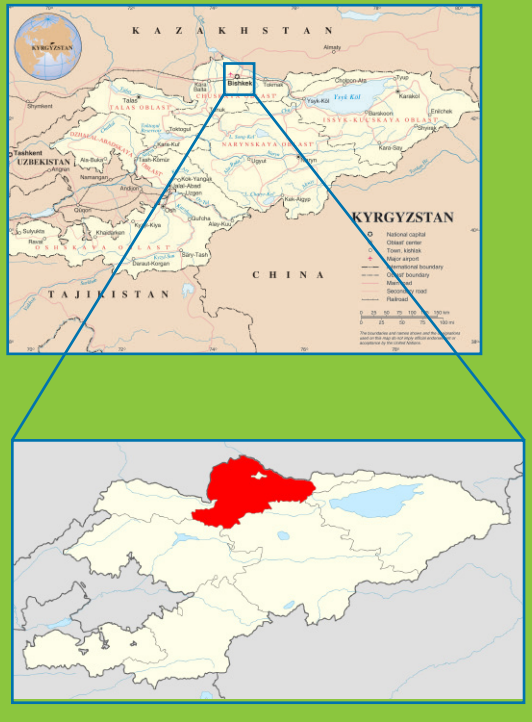
Local and Indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative. The Equator Initiative aims to fill that gap.

The **UNDP Equator Initiative**, supported by generous funding from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), awarded the Equator Prize in 2021 to 10 outstanding Indigenous and local communities from 9 countries. The winning organizations showcase innovative, nature-based solutions for tackling biodiversity loss and climate change. Selected from a pool of over 600 nominations from 126 countries, the winners were celebrated at a high-profile event, held virtually, on October 4th, in the lead up to climate change and biodiversity negotiations at COP26 and COP15. The event was part of the **Nature for Life Hub**, a three-day series of virtual events designed to raise ambition for nature-based solutions in global biodiversity and climate policy. The winners are sustainably protecting, restoring, and managing forests, farms, wetlands, marine ecosystems, and biodiversity to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, help communities adapt to climate change, and create a green new economy.

The following case study is one in a growing series that describes vetted and peer-reviewed best practices intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to scale nature-based solutions essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

PROJECT SUMMARY

Spearheading the concept of the organic *aimak*, or district, BIO-KG Federation of Organic Development has promoted the transition of agriculture in rural and mountain communities to organic-only production in a landscape-level approach. In the face of depleted soils, this community organization in the Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan) has inspired bottom-up processes leading to village decisions to form organic districts, revitalizing the connection with Mother Earth. These districts support the removal of chemical fertilisers, use of Traditional Knowledge and practices, farmer-to-farmer field schools, and saving of seed varieties suitable for variable climatic conditions. More than 1,000 farmers have been certified as growers of organic produce. Ten organic *aimaks* have been created, six of which are led by women. The model has taken root in Kyrgyzstan, with BIO-KG playing an instrumental role in the government's commitment to transition to organic agriculture nationwide within a decade.



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KEY FACTS

Equator Prize winner

2021

Founded

2012

Location

Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan)

Beneficiaries

4,500 direct beneficiaries; 50,000 indirect beneficiaries

Thematic areas

Sustainable agriculture and food security; Sustainable livelihoods; Natural climate solutions

Fields of work

Policy, regulatory, or legal advocacy; Climate-smart agriculture; Mountains

Sustainable Development Goals addressed

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

EQUATOR PRIZE 2021 WINNER FILM

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The UNDP Equator Prize is a recognition of Bio-KG's efforts on establishing a model of sustainable development for rural communities. It shows that our efforts of creating favourable legal conditions for farmers by lobbying for organic agriculture in Kyrgyzstan have been accepted and recognised. [The prize] motivates us to work harder. It is a motivation for our organic farmers, as it shows that they are moving forward in a prosperous direction. It is a step towards preserving the environment and land in the condition in which we inherited it from our ancestors.

— Asan Alymkulov, BIO-KG Project Coordinator

The farmers in our organic aimak have strong ties that have developed over the years of working together between farmers. Agriculture has always been something that unites people, and I am happy that we are united by organic and healthy farming. I like farming organically. First and foremost, it is my respect for Nature and my concern for the health of my family. It is not without reason that people say: 'Health is the first wealth.

— Imanalieva Asyl, Mobilizer & Farmer of Taldy-Bulak Organic Aimak, Talas District

Nestled in the mountains of central Asia, the Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan) is home to 32 Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) and corridors prioritised by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF). This unique biodiversity hotspot hosts extreme ecosystems, including whitecapped mountains as high as 7,000 metres in elevation, vast alpine meadows, distinctive fruit-nut forests, high mountain lakes, and desert basins. More than 90 percent of the country sits above 1,000 metres, dominated by 158 mountain ranges, including the prominent Tien Shan. Glacial mountains provide freshwater for communities across the central Asia region and shelter rare and threatened animals, such as the spiritually and culturally significant snow leopard (Panthera uncia). High-altitude meadows flanking Kyrgyzstan's mountain peaks provide habitat for diverse endemic plants, wild relatives of cultivated crops, and vital grazing pastures. Despite its small size, Kyrgyzstan has high plant and animal species richness. Nearly 1 percent of all known species reside here, in just 0.13 percent of the world's landmass.

Kyrgyz livelihoods are closely linked to nature, with more than half of people living in rural areas and directly dependent on agricultural and pastoral activities. Many species, including more than 600 medicinal plants, are used directly by households for subsistence and commercial sales. Likewise, natural habitats, such as highland meadows and abundant glacial streams, provide vital grazing grounds, supporting a longstanding tradition of pastoralism, or the herding of livestock.

Today, Kyrgyzstan's unique mountain ecoclimates are highly vulnerable to climate change and degradation from human-caused pressures. During the last 50 years, national economic upheaval in Kyrgyzstan forced new pressure on natural ecosystems, increasing deforestation and decreasing many species populations. Active chemical fertiliser use and intensive agricultural methods have played a role in degrading soil health and accelerating erosion on steep landscapes. Warming temperatures continue to increase glacial melting at unprecedented speeds.

"In the past, when there were collective farms, chemical fertilisers, such as saltpetre, were actively used, which led us to some kind of soil disaster. Our crops did not grow. That was the reason we joined the organic aimak project."

Muhtarbek Eshaliev, Organic Farmer

Origin and structure

In response to Kyrgyzstan's ecological challenges, the BIO-KG Federation of Organic Development launched in 2012. The community-based organization's mission is to restore the principles of health, ecology, integrity, and care in agricultural policy, while protecting the nation's unique biodiverse ecosystems and communities. BIO-KG's bold plan aims to transform the trajectory of land degradation and climate change impacts by transitioning communities to organic and regenerative agricultural practices.

BIO-KG's strategy is to assist communities in passing policies to establish organic *aimaks* or districts. *Aimaks* support the transition to organic standards for all farms in the district. In this process, organic *aimaks* foster the preservation of biocultural diversity and heritage seeds, the development of organic markets, and the achievement of food and environmental safety. Organic production has also become an economic driver, creating profitable business opportunities for farmers and an opportunity for Kyrgyzstan to become a global leader in organic agriculture.

BIO-KG is a non-governmental organization with 24 member organizations. Since its founding, the association has grown to provide jobs for 20 employees and facilitate the participation of 52 volunteers. Led by an Executive Director and Board of Directors, BIO-KG encourages the full participation of member organizations in annual meetings and elections. Decision-making within organic *aimaks* is led by community members. BIO-KG has assisted 10 communities establish organic *aimaks* across the nation, while 32 organic *aimak* community members have become commercial producers, earning consistent wages through organic agricultural production. More than 15,000 men, women, and children benefit from these *aimaks* and the many initiatives of BIO-KG in training and education.

LOCAL CHALLENGES

Governance context

Since gaining independence in 1991, the Kyrgyz Republic has undergone a difficult transition process characterized by complex social, economic, and political changes. Corruption and nepotism led to public discontent resulting in upheavals and government changes in 2005, 2010, and again in 2020. Since independence, the Kyrgyz Republic has experienced presidential systems of governance and parliamentary democracy. The competitive 2020 parliamentary elections triggered political turmoil. This led to a constitutional referendum, transition of electoral and legal systems, government restructuring, and renewed parliamentary elections in 2021, which concluded with the presidential system of governance. Current priorities include continued institutional capacity development, sustained reforms in state structures focusing on strengthening inter-agency coordination and collaboration at all levels, enhancing shared and inclusive national identity that recognizes the country's multidimensional diversity, and widening civic engagement and participation.

Climate change

Kyrgyzstan is a mountainous country containing the Tian Shan system of mountain ranges. Its climate has cold winters, warm summers, and varied microclimates across a range of altitudes. Kyrgyzstan's delicate mountain ecosystems are experiencing climatic changes associated with global warming. Rural communities are particularly vulnerable, with livelihoods dependent on the most climate-sensitive sectors, including agriculture, fishing, forestry, harvesting, and water and sanitation.

This landlocked nation is often referred to as the 'water tower of Asia' because of its significant role in providing 30 percent of the freshwater resources for the central Asia region, including for its four neighbouring countries. However, glacial melting and the risk of glacial lake overflow are threatening the reliability of the water cycle and water supply in Kyrgyz communities, as well as in neighbouring nations fed by transnational rivers. Agriculture, the dominant economic livelihood, could also suffer. Crops depend on snow-packed mountains to regenerate water sources and regenerate the associated alpine meadows where 85 percent of agricultural lands are located.

Higher temperatures and reduced water supply also drive land conversion from productive land to a harming biodiverse ecosystems and shrinking available agricultural lands. Dryer seasons and increasingly unpredictable water cycles will cause problems for irrigation during the growing season and could affect harvests. BIO-KG has observed and confirmed that these climatic changes have occurred in recent years.

"Smallholder farmers are feeding most of the population. And they are the first to face climate change which is becoming erratic. In intersection with traditional knowledge and best modern agro technologies, all present opportunities for organic agriculture leads the way in reducing energy consumption and mitigating the negative effects of energy emissions. Organic agriculture provides management practices that can help farmers adapt to climate change through strengthening agro ecosystems, diversifying crop and livestock production, and building farmers' knowledge base to best prevent and confront changes in climate."

Asan Alymkulov, BIO-KG Project Coordinator

Soil erosion

All agricultural lands in Kyrgyzstan are considered vulnerable to soil erosion and degradation, and half of those lands are already seeing wind and water erosion impacts. Such impacts are triggered by overstocking land areas with large quantities of livestock, leading to overgrazing of grasslands and soil compaction. Other agricultural practices, such as aggressive tilling, chemical use, and leaving fields bare between harvests, also aggravate soil structure and set the stage for erosion. Water and wind erosion can be particularly problematic on the nation's many steep slopes. Lastly, unpredictable and intensifying weather events due to climate change escalate erosion issues.

Without agricultural practices that regenerate, protect, and restore soils, erosion will continue to lead to significant land degradation and desertification. Land desertification leads to the loss of land's biological productivity and water carrying capacity. Erosion and desertification are severe threats to the natural and agricultural environments and the food supply and resources supplied by those environments.

Plastic pollution

According to BIO-KG, even in remote mountain villages, the problem of plastic is overwhelming. Challenges include a lack of recycling processes, businesses, and infrastructure, along with a lack of social awareness about separating plastics. Cities and towns need specified procedures and collection bins for plastics, and citizens must be informed on collection points. Despite the environmental costs, the cheap supply of plastic bags and single-use plastics encourages their daily use for groceries and packaging. Shopkeepers have become accustomed to insisting customers take a bag even with a single purchase. Consumers awareness about the long lifespan of plastic bags is thought to be low, as plastic bags are routinely left in the street or countryside fields. Banning plastic bags and other single-use plastic products is a policy challenge.

LOCAL RESPONSES

Organic *aimak* model

An organic *aimak*, or district, is a well-defined area where all farmers agree to follow the same high-reaching organic standards, prioritising healthy soil, water, and food. These changes protect drinking water from toxic chemical contamination, reduce energy previously used for the transport and production of agrochemicals, protect soil health, and drive place-based and cost-effective innovations. Traditional ecological practices, including crop rotations and companion planting, maximise the use of existing agricultural lands, thus reducing demand to expand the agricultural frontier into forests and other natural ecosystems.

To create an organic *aimak*, community members declare their collective commitment to transitioning farms in their community to organic as a means for holistic development. The first organic *aimak* launched in the highlands of the Talas Province, in the mountain community of Kopuro-Bazar. Community members have strong social capital, cohesion, and historical pride in organic farming. They voted to develop an organic district at their general meeting. Their request was later submitted to the local government, where it was approved and signed into policy, making history as the first organic district in Kyrgyzstan. In 2013, the first *aimak* harvest, including potatoes, beets, and carrots, was sold at the National Organic Trade Fair. This annual fair, which attracted more than 10,000 visitors in 2021, has become one of the leading tools to promote organic products.

Kopuro-Bazar community members feel that organic *aimaks* offer them the opportunity to preserve the environment for future generations and safeguard the wellbeing and health of families. *Aimak* communities recognise that human health is connected to soil, food, and water health. Organic and regenerative practices are also firmly rooted in Kyrgyzstan's Traditional Knowledge and values and provide a way for communities to return to those values. The *aimak* structure helps communities support one another in organic production, participate in training and capacity-building, and share innovations. Together, *aimaks* grow in their understanding of organic agriculture's climate and ecosystem benefits, adopt seed-saving practices, restore agrobiodiversity, and become stewards of the land.

Since launching, BIO-KG has established 10 organic *aimaks* covering 3,127 hectares and assisting 32 community members in launching commercial organic operations. Across these 10 *aimaks*, 1,056 farmers work on farms. Farmers within organic districts follow the rules of organic farming not only for growing fruits and vegetables but also for flowers and handicrafts. These practices result in many ecological and human health benefits. Each *aimak* is home to 4,000 to 13,000 people, making the total population of organic *aimaks* 68,532 people.

KEY IMPACTS

Organic *aimak* model

- BIO-KG initiated 10 organic *aimaks* with 1,056 farmers.
- During 2020, *aimaks* protected 3,127 hectares from chemicals.
- *Aimaks* provide a healthier living environment for 68,532 people.
- Commercial organic operations have been launched at 32 farms.
- The 2021 Organic Trade Fair attracted 10,000 visitors.

"For example, I will sow sainfoin here for three to four years. Then, using the crop rotation method, I will sow oats and potatoes for the next two years, then sanfoin again, followed by grain and again potatoes. The sainfoin feeds the soil. The oats make it softer and that all together increases the harvest of potatoes."

Kanybek Altymyshov, Organic Farmer

Participatory planning and education

Organic *aimaks* are built from the ground up through dialogue with farmers, pastoralists, Elder councils, women's committees, and youth clubs. Community members from all spheres within the town unite voluntarily to identify their community, food, and environmental priorities and present ideas to BIO-KG. Together, they develop a plan for the long-term conservation and use of their natural resources and build an exciting vision for their future. Being at the centre of their own community development, communities lead and carry forward their vision with vigour. This participatory, community-led foundation of the organic *aimak* model motivates ownership, action, and long-term achievement. It also creates space for people to grow, learn, critique, innovate, and lead within the context of their own development.

BIO-KG creates and perpetuates farmer training opportunities and place-based ecological education. Annually, BIO-KG provides 20 training sessions on the rules, methods, and equipment of organic farming, and hosts 12 roundtable discussions on innovations, technologies, and marketing. BIO-KG also presents the results and outcomes of the past year in four large seminars each year. These seminars are important spaces for discussion and learning. Farmers also host important opportunities for exchange and learning. Fields Days occur three times per year at various *aimaks*, offering farmers the chance to exchange opinions, experiences, and advice. *Aimak* schools have also implemented eco-classes that awaken cultural memory, renew spiritual and cultural values about respecting the land, and increase awareness about ecological farming.

Through participatory planning and action, communities and BIO-KG are paving the way for Kyrgyzstan to become a global model for sustainable development that prioritizes communities and nature.

KEY IMPACTS

Participatory planning and education

- BIO-KG hosts four annual large seminars.
- Annually, BIO-KG employees provide 20 training sessions on organic farming.
- BIO-KG hosts 12 roundtables each year.
- *Aimaks* host three Field Days annually.
- Eco-classes have been created at 10 schools.
- About 3,000 people participate in training activities.

Women's empowerment

Women's empowerment constitutes a critical dimension of BIO-KG's work. In an effort to build equitable pathways for women and men, BIO-KG has had to consider that women in the region often face disproportionately low decision-making power, access to resources, and control over their lives inside and outside the home. With this knowledge and with the goal of making women core to organic *aimaks*, the organization established three essential focus areas for women's empowerment: learning, labour, and leadership. Each organic *aimak* initiative offers women unique opportunities to learn skills. These learning opportunities allow women to participate powerfully in farming, production, marketing, and management within the *aimaks*, culminating in many women becoming *aimak* leaders.

Today, 64 percent of certified organic farmers producing farm crops for sale are women. Likewise, 6 of BIO-KG's 10 organic *aimaks* nationwide are managed by women. Managers mobilize farmers for meetings, training, and action. Women also take the lead in decision-making. In 2021, after BIO-KG was announced as an Equator Prize winner, the organization conducted several discussions on using prize funds effectively. Jointly, *aimaks* decided to focus these funds on investments for women and youth, including expanding these groups' capacity-building and leadership skills. Several businesswomen have been invited to be mentors for capacity-building activities. In this role, women mentors will lead in-field face-to-face meetings to share about the path they took and the obstacles they overcame. Five women from each organic *aimak* will also be invited to a series of workshops featuring women mentors teaching how to implement women's innovations and ideas.

KEY IMPACTS

Women's empowerment

5 GENDER EQUALITY

- Women lead 6 of 10 *aimaks*.
- Women represent 64 percent of all *aimak* producers.
- Women hold 11 of 20 BIO-KG jobs.

POLICY IMPACTS

National policy impacts

The dialogues, campaigns, and validations provided by BIO-KG on the benefits of organic *aimaks* have impacted policy at every level. First, locally, organic *aimaks* set new policy precedents, requiring farming according to organic standards across the entire municipality. Second, national recognition followed as the *aimak* model demonstrated success and BIO-KG grew to 10 *aimaks*. Subsequently, organic agriculture has become a vital part of the national climate change mitigation and adaptation strategy. The government cites organic agriculture as one of its pathways to reduce environmental impacts and greenhouse gas emissions. Even more, in 2021, the nation made a bold commitment to transition to organic agriculture nationwide within a decade. Through consulting with BIO-KG, the Ministry of the Environment has already supported four new organic *aimaks* in addition to the 10 *aimaks* launched by BIO-KG.

Contributions to the global agenda

Globally, BIO-KG supports the implementation of several important multilateral agreements, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda). BIO-KG's work contributes to Kyrgyzstan's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to UNFCCC global climate goals. This strategy includes greenhouse gas (GHG) reductions in the agricultural sector achieved through "expanding the area of cultivated organic crop farming lands." The work of BIO-KG contributes to the achievement of numerous Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. For example, by supporting landscape-level changes that remove toxic chemicals from foodsheds, BIO-KG supports the goals of clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), and life on land (SDG 15). Importantly, BIO-KG takes action on the global goal of gender equality (SDG 5) through their effective support for women's ownership and management in organic farming.

The organization is a member of a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) working group on the technical requirements for organic products and provides consulting on designing interstate law on organic production and processing. BIO-KG also initiated a EuroAsia members' group of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), consisting of 11 member countries. Jointly, this group is developing mutual recognition of organic standards across these 11 member countries.

"The nature is a legacy from our ancestors – and we must inherit [it]."

Asan Alymkulov, BIO-KG Project Coordinator

REPLICATION, SCALABILITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Replication

Through education and communication about the proven benefits of organic *aimaks*, a single pilot village has now been replicated across 10 villages operating as organic *aimaks*. Training on organic farming methods continues to be well received from community members who want to return to the diversity of traditionally grown crops and medicinal plants.

Scalability

BIO-KG's organic *aimak* model is in the process of scaling to the national level. In 2016, the case for a national organic *aimaks* programme was presented to the Kyrgyzstan national government. The national organic *aimaks* programme concept was later included in the 2017-2022 strategic plan for sustainable development.

In 2020, BIO-KG partnered with scientists in Kyrgyzstan to monitor and document environmental changes in the territories before and after becoming organic *aimaks*. One of the main goals of the organic *aimak* is the support of biodiversity. Since climates are often harsh, BIO-KG helps farmers create favourable conditions for crop varieties and monitors how this changes the biodiversity of the *aimak* over time. They also monitor impacts on community attitudes towards the environment. The monitoring results are posted on an *aimak* atlas showing their geographic location. Through this scientific monitoring, BIO-KG and its partners could build a strong case for organic food production nationally and beyond.

BIO-KG has begun working with the national government to launch new organic *aimaks*. BIO-KG will continue cooperating with the government to promote already existing organic *aimaks* and create new ones to support Kyrgyzstan in becoming completely organic.

BIO-KG is presently assisting the government in developing criteria and requirements for selecting pilot villages for the programme. Together, under this plan, the Ministry of Agriculture launched four new organic *aimaks*, growing the national number of organic *aimaks* to 14.

The model could also benefit neighbouring nations experiencing similar challenges. In neighbouring Kazakhstan, the Kazakhstan Federation of Organic Agricultural Movement (KazFOAM) is interested in adapting the BIO-KG programme. They took the first steps to select communities and train community members in 2021. National level support for organic districts could help achieve many Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to reduce GHG emissions and adapt to climate change impacts, safeguard food and nutrition for communities, and improve participation in community-based biodiversity conservation.

Sustainability

Participatory, community-led decision-making has contributed to a high level of ownership and community buy-in across organic *aimaks*. Support from BIO-KG, local and national government agencies, and external organizations also contributes to keeping organic *aimak* ecosystems alive and well. Importantly, the organic *aimak* model of farming regenerates soil, combatting degradation and land conversion, yielding long-term environmental sustainability and preserving soil fertility for future generations. In support of long-term community health, the system protects water systems and encourages growing highly nutritious and diverse crops. Economically, the approach safeguards the agricultural sector, both the most significant economic sector and a sector relied upon heavily by communities, with ecologically sensitive practices. Policy-level changes, like the inclusion of organic *aimaks* in the national sustainable development strategic plan, are ushering in new support structures from government ministries.

FUTURE PLANS

BIO-KG will continue to support a thriving network of organic *aimaks*, with the aim of each *aimak* becoming a self-sustainable entity capable of innovation and leadership within the network. The near-term focus is on raising awareness about the nutritional and environmental benefits of organic food landscapes and encouraging consumer demand for sustainably sourced organic foods. BIO-KG will also provide education and build government and public awareness about organic *aimaks*.

PARTNERS

- ***Bio Service:*** Consulting service supporting organic production, certification, training, and marketing.
- ***Civil Alliance:*** Alliance of 50 organizations advancing nutrition and food safety to the national government.
- ***Department of Organic Agriculture under the Ministry of Agriculture:*** Decision makers responsible for adopting organic agriculture policies.
- ***GIZ Kyrgyzstan:*** Partner on sustainable economic development activities throughout the country.
- ***Green Alliance:*** Alliance of more than 40 organizations supporting the national government to adopt green policies.
- ***Helvetas Kyrgyzstan:*** Partner on improving irrigation systems in Kyrgyzstan.
- ***International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM):*** Partner assisting BIO-KG with capacity-building, awareness-raising, and technical issues on organic requirements.
- ***International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) Asia:*** Member organization providing organic agriculture network in Asia and support for organic practice and policy.

SOURCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

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"One day we received some potato 'Actress' seeds for sowing from the BIO-KG. It turned out to be an excellent variety in terms of its properties, such as its taste and the way it stores in the cellar. I sowed 15 hectares of land and received a harvest of 3000 kg. I was happy with it. And it sells well at the market. What I like about BIO-KG is that they teach you how to generate income from the garden at minimal cost, and the land is also left undamaged because their organization is against the use of chemicals."

Kenjebek Nuradilov, Farmer of Ortok Organic Aimak

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Equator Initiative
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The Equator Initiative brings together the United Nations, governments, civil society, businesses and grassroots organizations to recognize and advance local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities.