Future Farmers of Turkmenistan: A Multi-Functional Agricultural Youth Organization

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Abstract

Recently the Central Asian country of Turkmenistan has undertaken the task of organizing an agricultural youth leadership organization patterned after the National FFA (formerly the Future Farmers of America) Organization from the United States of America. This agricultural youth organization has been entitled the Future Farmers of Turkmenistan or FFT.

The tasks or goals of this fledgling youth leadership organization have been primarily focused on securing the necessary permissions from the appropriate governmental agencies, namely the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Education, at the local, Velayat or State, and National levels. Once the approvals were obtained the selection of the FFT clubs was another task to be undertaken. Winrock International, the NGO charged with the development of the FFT through a contract with the USAID, initiated the development of these first clubs in locales where it had consulting offices or subcontractors that could serve as advisors to the fledgling clubs.

This paper will seek to describe the process used to introduce the concept of agricultural youth leadership organizations to the various stakeholders in Turkmenistan. Further, it will detail the development of the first FFT club and the subsequent organization of other clubs throughout the country.
Introduction

The Turkmen empire dates back over five thousand years to the Parthian and Seleucid empires of Central Asia. This region, stretching from Iran and Afghanistan on the south to the Caspian Sea on the West, was inhabited by various tribes and nomads and was never really a distinct country until 1991. Early in its history, Turkmenistan was a birthplace of early civilization, spawning the ancient city of Merv, a popular stop on the Silk Road some 2000 years ago and once the second city of Islam.

However, it was not until Joseph Stalin took the region by force in the early part of the twentieth century that Turkmenistan established its present day borders. Occupation by the Soviets had significant cultural impact ranging from religious to agricultural, from its language to architecture. After some initial fierce fighting, the Turkmen people came to accept the Soviet occupation and adopted the Russian language and many of its culture and customs.

With the fall of the Soviet empire, Turkmenistan became an independent country in 1991. The former communist party leader, Saparmurat Niyasov, was elected president and the Turkmen parliament appointed him president for life shortly thereafter. President Niyasov now goes by the title Turkmenbashi (Head of all Turkmen). While generally pleased with the president, the Turkmen people have not enjoyed the full measure of democratic freedoms that other New Independent State (NIS) countries have. All press is controlled by the government and opposition points of view are not permitted.

Still, the country is striving to pull itself into the 21st century and, due in large part to foreign aid and assistance, has managed in 2001 and 2002 to increase its GDP by 18% and 13% respectively (USAID Country Profile, 2002). This has come mainly from the rich oil and natural gas reserves that the country is trying to rebuild and modernize since the Soviet pullout in 1990. Next to its petroleum reserves, the agricultural sector is responsible for the largest contribution to the GDP and employs the largest percentage of the population.

According to the United State Agency for International Development (USAID) report “Agriculture consists of forced cotton and wheat production, state profiteering and wasteful water use” (USAID Country Profile, 2002). The vast majority of land is state owned with very little privatization taking place. As such, during the fall cotton harvest school age children (10 – 18 years old) as well as their teachers are released from school and required to harvest cotton by hand during the two-month harvest season. While urban children may be spared this plight, their teachers are not (unless they are able to “buy” a replacement worker) this causes the educational system to grind to a halt each fall.
Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the events leading to the development of the Future Farmers of Turkmenistan (FFT) program. These developments reflect the current mission of the Winrock International FFT project to introduce concepts of leadership and self empowerment to the agricultural youth of Turkmenistan.

During the 17th Annual Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE) Conference in Baton Rouge, Louisiana on April 4-7, 2001, AIAEE member and Winrock International Country Director, Joe Dale, contacted the researcher about his interest in initiating a program in Turkmenistan which would loosely mirror the US’s FFA organization. Contacts were made and dates set for a late September assignment. When the events of September 11, 2001 occurred, plans for this development project were put on hold. It wasn’t until March 18, 2002 that this project was undertaken. Since that time subsequent visits have been made to establish FFT chapters, train chapter advisors, and to organize a national FFT camp for chapter representatives and chapter advisors. The second visit was initiated October 21, 2002 with several new FFT groups who had expressed interest in the program. The most recent visit included the organization of a national FFT leadership training camp. This camp was completed in August 2003 with the help of the US Embassy in Ashgabat, Peace Corp volunteers, USAID, Winrock International, and New Mexico State University’s Department of Agricultural and Extension Education.

Turkmenistan Politics

Turkmenistan is governed by President-for-life Saparmurat Niyasov who appoints ministers and cabinet members at his discretion. Likewise, the “Governors” or Hakims for each Velayat or “state” are appointed by the President. Because this project involved both agriculture and education, permission was needed from both the Minister of Education and the Minister of Agriculture and the corresponding Hakim from each Velayat in which we wanted to work. In the months preceding the first assignment, the apple cart was overturned, with several government ministers being replaced as well as the Hakims of the two principle Velayats we had targeted for introduction of the FFT program.

The result of this shake up was to confine our initial consulting visit solely to the capital city of Ashgabat in the Akhal Velayat. It also limited us to working with a bio-chemistry (biocheshme) student club at Turkmen State University. This, however, turned out to be a blessing in disguise due to the maturity and academic levels of the students. Turkmen State University has no agricultural program on its curriculum. Turkmen Agricultural University does provide instruction and training in the agricultural sciences, but due to the labor intensive and state regulated nature of agriculture in Turkmenistan, these career paths generally do not attract the students with the highest placement scores on the mandated college entrance exams. Additionally, Turkmen State University is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Turkmen Agricultural University is directed through the Ministry of Agriculture; truly a case of the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing.
Club Formation

Initially, the Future Farmers of Turkmenistan (FFT) concept was designed to closely mirror the United States’ National FFA Organization. Programs were designed for implementation into the Turkmen equivalent of junior and senior high schools in rural towns throughout the country. Agriculture as subject matter is taught in various schools, especially in the cotton-rich Velayats and several other schools teach ecology and natural resources as well.

Because of the limitation of being able to only work with the students at Turkmen State University, and due to the extracurricular nature of the biocheshme club, meetings were held to introduce the concepts of an agricultural youth organization to the students. The guiding principles of the National FFA Organization were presented and team-building activities conducted to highlight some of the benefits of leadership development and the entrepreneurial concepts of the organization.

What resulted was a group of students focused on interacting with the English speaking volunteers and learning more about new and different teaching methods. The educational system in Turkmenistan is still very Soviet-like, utilizing a strict lecture format, rote-memorization, and very little interaction between student and teacher. Teaching methodologies employing small group discussion, role playing and brain-storming were received especially well by the students and the university supervisors and professors present at the group meetings.

At the conclusion of five days of meetings, presentations and retreats, a request was made for club officer elections. A democratic process was initiated with little success, and club officers were installed by the professor in charge of the biocheshme club. These officers then officially formed the first FFT club in Turkmenistan, the Biocheshme FFT Club.

Replication

After the initial club formation and due in part to the assistance of USAID and the United States Ambassador to Turkmenistan, Laura Kennedy, permission was obtained to visit the Bairamaly Farm School in the district of Mary. This is a middle school with an extensive school farm and small animal production facilities. Ambassador Kennedy was completing a promotional tour of agricultural enterprises in the region, and the FFT project was selected for demonstration. We explained some of the basic premises of FFT as it was adopted and adapted by the Biocheshme FFT Club at Turkmen State University, we also engaged the youth in several team building activities, much to the photographic delight of the Ambassador’s staff.

Since the initial project began, more than six FFT clubs have been initiated throughout the country with members ranging from 8 years old to forty-five years of age. FFT clubs have been sponsored by local producers groups, agribusiness consulting groups,
interested adult agriculturalists, and two educational institutions. The Winrock staff has organized additional clubs since the conclusion of the last assignment. In each instance, unique problems and solutions have arisen concerning the formation and oversight of these clubs. Subsequent assignments have and will include establishment of national norms and standards and a reward and evaluation system for agricultural project assessments.

**Results and Implications**

While many of the results of this project will not be seen or known for many years, the immediate impact has been one of personal empowerment and self confidence. Several FFT chapters have undertaken entrepreneurial activities leading to the generation of valuable funds for future agricultural development within the local area. Land has been leased, animals bought, strains of mycelium purchased for mushroom production and computer technology utilized in the development of business plans and record keeping.

Plans are underway to organize a “National Convention” which will standardize the FFT Clubs and hopefully establish a national leadership team. Without the full support of the government of Turkmenistan as well as financial backing, the sustainability of this project could very well lie in the hands of the Winrock staff, US consultants, and Peace Corp volunteers. A quick internet search for “Future Farmers of Turkmenistan” yields several interesting biographies of how this project has touched the lives of these individuals. An equally quick survey of the smiles, tears, and hope on the faces of the Turkmen children involved in the first FFT Clubs, confirm its impact.

The United States ambassador to Turkmenistan, Laura Kennedy, said it best when she was asked about her thoughts on the formation of the FFT. She said “we make very little progress working with 60 year old farmers. Our best utilization of resources is the youth of Turkmenistan…” Just as the National FFA Organization is dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of young people by developing their potential for leadership, personal growth and career success, the Future Farmers of Turkmenistan is striving to elevate agricultural opportunities and its related responsibilities among the youth of this Central Asian country.
Literature Cited


L. E. Kennedy (personal communication, March 26, 2002)