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Regularities and Development Trends of Agricultural Cooperation in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

In this article the author attempts to give an idea of the today's progress in formation of agricultural cooperatives in the five countries of Central Asia. The study has shown that agriculture of the countries under consideration is dominated by small agricultural producers. However, the lack of market infrastructure does not allow them to become active players in the market. The results of the systemic analysis revealed that the development process of agricultural cooperatives is quite chaotic in nature, the level of cooperation is rather low, and the impact of agricultural cooperatives on national agribusiness is so far barely noticeable. Taking into account the feasibility and potential for the development of cooperatives in the countries of Central Asia, the author considers the main directions of encouragement of agricultural associations.

Keywords: Agricultural Cooperation, Service Cooperative, Production Cooperative, Collective Farming, Supporting Cooperative, Consumer Cooperation, Cooperative Legislation

JEL Classifications: Q120, Q130, R21, R22

1. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is a major sector in the economies of Central Asian countries. This includes production and export of cotton, mainly in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and to a lesser extent in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, expanding sector of grain crops in Kazakhstan, as well as the traditional cultivation of vegetables throughout the region (Peyrouse, 2009).

Five Central Asian countries of the former USSR have made tremendous progress in reforming the legal framework in terms of ownership and use of agricultural land, as well as in the transition from a traditional Soviet-style agriculture to a model based on market principles of management (Lerman, 2013).

Two out of five countries - Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan - today recognize private ownership of agricultural land and authorize the

transactions in the land market. Tajikistan retains state ownership of land, though nevertheless allows the transactions on the land market in the form of transfer of land use right. Only Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan retained the rigid Soviet-controlled state model of land relations. But even in these two countries the land use and agricultural production shifts from large collective farms to small rentallers.

Contemporary agriculture in Central Asia is based primarily on small producers - peasant farm enterprises and personal subsidiary plots. These small producers use major part of agricultural land and livestock, producing the majority of the gross agricultural production throughout the region.

At the same time, small farmers around the world face significant difficulties and restrictions when accessing market for services, and Central Asia is no exception in this regard. The main difficulties

which are faced by small landowners include the problems associated with the following (Serova, 1991):

- The access to distribution channels in products market
- The access to supply channels for farm production
- Purchase of farm machinery and transport equipment
- The access to information and advisory services that are needed to increase business productivity and efficiency
- Limited access to credit resources required for financing of short-term floating capital and long-term investment needs.

In combination, the above listed difficulties create what is sometimes called “the curse of breaking-up,” a trap, which does not allow small producers to make full use of existing production advantages due to barriers to market access.

Although, much still remains to be done in the area of land reform and farm restructuring in the Central Asian countries, the gap between command and market model of agriculture is gradually reduced, and the focus is shifting towards the measures designed to ensure the viability and profitability of small-scale farming units by counteracting the negative effects of small commodity production (IFAT. International Year of Cooperatives, 2012).

Proven tool for solving such problems and integrating small-scale farmers to markets is the development of agricultural cooperation, involving the consolidation of individual peasant farms in different types of production processes. Agricultural cooperatives play an important role in supporting small-scale farmers and allow them access to the markets providing a broad range of services, such as improving access to natural resources, information, communication, technology, crediting, training, and logistics (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UNFAO), 2012).

In the world, there are hundreds of thousands of cooperatives with hundreds of millions of farmer members. Agriculture of the Central Asian countries with numerous small family farms and lack of market channels development seems to be ripe for the emergence of service (or supporting) cooperatives, though their promotion is very slow and intermittent. Low economic viability of small agricultural business is one of the reasons of its unattractiveness, and, as a consequence, the weak development of the cooperative farms in rural areas. The concept of cooperative in the countries of Central Asia is automatically interpreted as “collective farm”, i.e. as a model of Soviet production cooperative.

2. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this article is to present the modern paradigm of cooperation and to explore the constraints for the accelerated development of agricultural cooperation in the countries of Central Asia. The study is based on a thorough analysis of the theoretical literature on the development of agricultural cooperation in the Central Asian region.

The methodological core of the current research is a combination of general logical methods (analysis, synthesis, and generalization), special methods (monographic and statistical techniques) and

methods of empirical research (observation, description, and measurement).

Legislative acts of the Central Asian countries served the informational background of the study together with statistical and analytical data of the national statistical offices and international companies, such as the UNFAO, the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), etc.

3. THE NATURE AND TYPES OF AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES

The ICA defines a cooperative as an autonomous association of members, who voluntarily unite to meet common economic, social and cultural needs through a jointly controlled property (International Cooperative Alliance, 2015).

As a rule, cooperatives in agriculture are established by the ordinary farmers to overcome failures in the market mechanisms that are manifested in the reluctance of private entrepreneurs to provide services in the areas that they regard as disadvantageous, or, alternatively, in situations, where private business unfairly exploits farmers through monopolistic practices (Csaki and Jambor, 2009).

A cooperative is a legal entity and in a determinate sense it is the counterpart of joint-stock company. However, there are some fundamental differences between the cooperative and the company, which are presented in Table 1.

Rather, the main difference between an agricultural cooperative and a joint-stock company lies in the goals of the organization: While business corporations seek to maximize their profits, cooperatives strive to maximize the benefits that members receive from participation in the cooperative, including lower prices for the purchase of materials and services, as well as higher prices for marketing of agricultural products.

The Western paradigm of cooperation distinguishes between the two types of agricultural cooperatives on the basis of their performance specification, namely production and service cooperatives.

Production cooperatives are associations, where the members are jointly involved in the production process, together cultivate the combined agricultural resources, such as farmland or use farm machinery, owned by cooperative. Collective farms in the former Soviet Union are good examples of agricultural production cooperatives.

Production cooperatives sell their products to outside customers, though their main function is to improve the welfare of own cooperative members by creating conditions for more efficient farming than individual farms could afford. The number of production cooperatives in the world among producers is rather insignificant. According to the ICA, the proportion of production cooperatives accounts for less than 5% of all cooperatives in the world (International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), 2014).

Table 1: Comparative analysis of an agricultural cooperative and a joint-stock company

Attributes	Agricultural cooperative	Joint-stock company
Owners	Members	Shareholders-investors
Targets of property owners	Use of the services provided by the cooperative	Acquisition of income
Intentions of the organization	To maximize the benefit of the cooperative members	To maximize profits
Voting authority	Each member has one vote regardless of shares	The number of votes is proportional to the number of shares (i.e., share participation)
Terms of the income distribution	The income is distributed between the members in proportion to their participation in the activities of the cooperative	The income is distributed between the shareholders in proportion to the number of shares they own

Service cooperatives are the most numerous and the most typical category of cooperatives in developed and emergent nations. These are the cooperatives, which provide services to their members - producers, continuing to conduct independently all production activities in their own land. In many countries, service cooperatives account for a significant proportion of economic transactions, particularly in agriculture.

Service cooperatives can use their members as employees, though most employees (and even most managers) are wage earners. Financial backing to purchase goods and services is carried out by equity contributions and borrowed proceeds, and then the goods are resold to the members of the cooperative at competitive prices.

Service cooperatives are functioning in various spheres of economic activity, but mostly in agriculture. As a rule, agricultural service cooperatives are divided into:

Sales (retail) cooperatives, which collect and prepare products of cooperative members for sale and delivery to market, as well as arrange the sale of products at higher prices exceeding the prices, which can be achieved by the farmers individually.

Processing cooperatives purchase products at fair prices from cooperative members for further processing;

Purchasing cooperatives take advantage of the purchase quantity of raw materials (fertilizers, chemicals, fuel, seed, feed, etc.) or specialized services (veterinary and artificial insemination).

Cooperatives for joint use of agricultural machinery are created in cases where buying and maintaining machinery by an individual farmer is too expensive or inefficient.

Cooperatives to disseminate agricultural knowledge and information offer services on upgrading the human capital of the cooperative membership through training, education, knowledge sharing and use of information technologies provided by professional employees.

4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF COOPERATIVE LEGISLATION IN THE COUNTRIES OF CENTRAL ASIA

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, five countries, i.e., Kazakhstan and the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia,

which today are known as the Central Asian countries, have gone through different path of transformation.

Legislative framework in all five countries of Central Asia includes a variety of laws on cooperation, inherited directly from the Soviet system (1991-1992), as well as the last efforts on localization of 11 western principles of cooperative legislation (Kyrgyzstan, the Law on Cooperatives, 2005; and Tajikistan, the Law on Cooperatives, 2013).

At present, almost all countries in Central Asia have adopted special cooperative laws. The only exception is Turkmenistan, where agricultural cooperatives are still associated exclusively with collective farms. The legislation of some countries of Central Asia still uses the term “consumer cooperative” (particularly, in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), while other countries (e.g., Kyrgyzstan) accepted the western term “service cooperative.”

At the moment the legislations of four of the five Central Asian countries (except Kyrgyzstan) have specific laws on the status of producing and service (consumer) cooperatives (Lerman and Sedik, 2014). Such practice is not recommended in the countries with market-oriented economies. The guidelines of International Labor Organization for the development of cooperative legislation recommended “single law for all types of cooperation, possibly with special sections/chapters for specific types of cooperatives” (Hagen, 2012). This approach reduces bureaucracy and prevents fragmentation of the cooperative system, which will inevitably weaken its capabilities for self-monitoring and lobbying of their interests.

The reform of agriculture in Turkmenistan began with the increase of the personal plot land-use areas and the number of subsidiary plots. Among the first legislative acts, which determined the critical transition to the land reform, was the Decree of the President of Turkmenistan dated February 2, 1993 “on the ownership right and use of land in Turkmenistan.” This decree opened the first page in the formation of private producers in the agricultural sector and laid the foundation for emergence in the country of Daikhan (farming) enterprises.

Almost a new direction in the agriculture reforming in Turkmenistan was set by the Presidential Decree “on the establishment of peasant associations - daikhanbirleshikleri” of June 15, 1995. According to this decree, the collective farms, state farms and other agricultural enterprises with collective farm-cooperative ownership, state and departmental property were dissolved, and a new business pattern,

namely peasant associations was organized on their basis (Stanchin and Lerman, 2003). The lands, property, funds and other assets of the abolished agricultural enterprises were transferred into newly formed business units.

The creation of new business patterns was legislated in the law “On peasant associations”, which provided a state property as a single legal framework for the property of all agricultural enterprises. With this act, collective farm-cooperative ownership was transformed and became a state property.

Kyrgyzstan was first to move to private land ownership. Kyrgyzstan was the only country in the Central Asian region, where the conversion of large Soviet farms was commenced guaranteeing the private-property right and creating the legal conditions for an open land market. The fact that small farms cannot be highly effective became clear in the beginning of the agrarian reforms, when the economy gradually began to become natural. As an alternative path of development Kyrgyzstan adopted in 1991 the law on cooperatives. Further certain changes were made and other legal acts relating to the organization and development of cooperatives were adopted. Though, cooperative movement has not received the serious development.

The year of 1998 can be considered the beginning of agricultural reforms in Uzbekistan, when the Parliament passed a series of land reform laws, including the Land Code, the Law on Agricultural Cooperative (shirkat), and the Farm Law. A special section of the Code deals with the basic requirements relating to agricultural lands. Under these provisions, from the legal point of view there are several types of agricultural producers, such as shirkats (cooperatives), farming enterprises and dekhan economies (small family farms).

In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan there are production cooperatives (profit making organizations) and consumer cooperatives (nonprofit organizations). In the Republic of Uzbekistan a special Law on agricultural cooperative (shirkat) was passed in 1998. This law defines the legal framework of creation, activity, reorganization and liquidation of shirkats, their rights and responsibilities, and their relationships with other legal entities and physical persons. The shirkats represent a legal entity, usually groups of families or shareholders. Farming enterprises and dekhan economies may also be established within the organizational structure of shirkats. Shirkats are given permanent position over only agricultural lands, which should be used without failure for agricultural purposes.

In the Republic of Tajikistan there are two separate laws defining the legal framework of consumer cooperation and cooperatives: The Law on Consumer Cooperation (The Act of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 583, 1992), and the Law on Cooperatives (The Act of the Republic of Tajikistan “On Cooperatives,” 2013).

In the Republic of Kazakhstan the activities of agricultural cooperatives of all types are regulated by five laws: “On Production Cooperatives” (1995), “On Rural Consumer Cooperation in the Republic of Kazakhstan” (1999, 2012), “On Agricultural Partnerships and their Associations (unions)” (2000), “On

Rural Consumer Cooperative of Water Users” (2003), and “On Consumer Cooperative” (2003).

5. THE RESULTS OF THE LAND REFORMS

Due to the fact that in the course of economic reforms in the 1990’s, the ownership of land turned out to be in the hands of private small farms, family farms have become the predominant source of agricultural production in the Central Asian region. Individualization of agriculture in the countries of Central Asia is largely due to the impressive pace of rehabilitation of agricultural production, which is observed in the region since 1997.

Thus, in 15 years the total agricultural output in five countries of Central Asia increased by 71.2%, (Table 2).

The adoption of national laws on agricultural cooperation in Central Asian countries had a positive impact on the growth in the number of agricultural cooperatives.

At the same time, it should be noted that the level of agricultural cooperation of the Central Asian countries is still very low. As is obvious from Table 3, for 2009-2012, the number of agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan decreased from 651 units in 2009 to 365 units in 2013, i.e. by 3.4 times. A similar trend is observed in other countries of Central Asia. Thus, for example, in the Republic of Kazakhstan over 14 years the number of cooperatives has halved, at that significant portion of existing production cooperatives are unprofitable.

The overwhelming majority of cooperatives registered in the national statistical authorities of the Central Asian countries are production cooperatives, whereas service cooperatives account for no more than 12%.

The proportion of peasant and farmer economies, who are members of cooperatives, in Kazakhstan is 1.33%, whereas in developed western countries this figure rises to 140% (according to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, and FAO, this figure is 100% in both the USA and France, 120% in Spain, and 140% in the Netherlands). (Theses to the Press Conference for the Presentation of the Draft Law “On Agricultural Cooperation,” 2014).

The reduction in the number of production cooperatives is associated primarily with low efficiency, as well as lack of financial resources for the development of production, low level of state support and encouragement of this form of cooperation. As a consequence, the above mentioned facts led to the bankruptcy of production cooperatives, their transformation into peasant economies, limited liability partnerships, rural consumer cooperatives and other associations.

The main reason for current situation is ignoring the basic principles of cooperation (voluntary membership, democratic management, generating income of cooperative members, etc.). The initiative to establish an agricultural cooperative must come “from below,” i.e. from agricultural producers on a voluntary

Table 2: The agricultural output and food production in the countries of Central Asia in the years of 1997-2012, million USD

Index	1997	2002	2007	2012	Change
					Million USD (%)
The agricultural output, million USD	15,880	19,261	24,530	27,193	11313 (71.2)
Including Kazakhstan	5549	6753	8345	8126	2577 (46.4)
Kyrgyzstan	1447	1728	1818	1900	453 (31.3)
Tajikistan	746	1027	1299	1778	1032 (138.3)
Turkmenistan	1299	2314	3198	2807	1508 (116.1)
Uzbekistan	6839	7439	9870	12,582	5743 (84.0)
Food production	13,459	16772	21,711	24,595	11136 (82.7)
Including Kazakhstan	5384	6551	8102	7810	2426 (45.1)
Kyrgyzstan	1348	1647	1732	1827	479 (35.5)
Tajikistan	574	780	1090	1592	1018 (177.4)
Turkmenistan	988	1927	2668	2446	1458 (147.6)
Uzbekistan	5165	5867	8119	10,920	5755 (111.4)

Table 3: Indicators of agricultural organizations development in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2009-2013 (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic)

Indicators	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Total number of the agents of agricultural economy	319,667	331,632	345,113	357,227	383,436
Communal households	781	509	556	525	497
Including collective farms	86	93	95	99	100
Agricultural cooperatives	651	374	417	384	365
Joint stock companies	44	42	44	42	40
Peasant (farmer's) economies	318,815	331,059	344,492	356,642	382,883

basis, with the preparatory phase of establishing pilot projects to test the mechanism of their formation and functioning, providing state and regional support, conducting information and advisory work among the population on the advantages of agricultural cooperatives for farmers and the main types of their activities (Golovina et al., 2012).

With regard to the development of service cooperatives in the countries of Central Asia, according to research conducted by the European Commission on Agriculture, there is a considerable lag in the development of agricultural service cooperatives in the Central Asian countries compared with other regions (38th Session of the European Commission on Agriculture, 2014).

Unfortunately, the available statistical information is limited: There are no data on land resources, the volume of sales or the size of agricultural cooperatives in the countries of Central Asia. To identify the functional information, it is necessary to conduct special studies in the future.

6. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Central Asian countries have created an impressive array of cooperative-specific laws. Most countries explicitly recognize the ICA principles of cooperation, though there still remain difficulties and challenges related to the practical differentiation between production and service cooperation, as well as taxation of cooperatives.

Within the framework of legal measures, a specific legislation on "rural consumer societies," inherited from the Soviet era, should be abolished, as these societies can be easily combined into a common cooperative legislation. However, this approach

will require political will to overcome the lobbying influence of surviving bureaucratic structures.

Because of the heritage of the socialist past, the countries of Central Asia need specific legislation on cooperatives, as well as reference regarding the specific features of cooperatives in civil and tax codes that will enable state to create a positive environment for the proper functioning of agricultural cooperatives. Probably, in order to analyze and revise the existing legislation, it will be useful to organize forums, where the government and heads of service cooperatives will be able to exchange views on legislation, favorable to the development of service cooperatives.

The specific mix of various forms and types of agricultural cooperatives in the countries of Central Asia also requires increasing awareness of the community with respect to differentiation of production and service cooperatives. It is necessary to join the efforts of state governments and the business community when explaining the advantages of the cooperative model of collaboration and its acceptability to the rural population of Epy Central Asian countries.

An example of cooperation between the state and the private sector, able to perform this task, are the Cooperative Development Centers in the United States. These development centers are nonprofit organizations at the state level, funded by the cooperatives and co-financed by the US Department of Agricultural (US Department of Agriculture (USDA) 2012). Their function is to explain the ideas of cooperation and specific benefits of cooperation, training of cooperatives management and providing business, legal and tax information necessary for the organization of cooperatives and their management. In addition, these centers offer personalized technical assistance of qualified specialists, the cost of which can

be covered by grants from the USDA, which are intended on the development of cooperatives.

Although the type of partnership between the state and the private sector, represented by the US Cooperative Development Centers, is a palmary example of an organization that promotes the development of cooperatives, nothing can substitute for enthusiasm of people, keen on the idea of cooperation, and the cooperative movement “from below.” Exactly due to this movement in various countries worldwide agricultural service cooperatives arose long before becoming part of state policy.

The issues on improvement of tax legislation and adapting the tax system to create a favorable tax environment for private landowners, who wish to create a service cooperative, require immediate attention of the authorities.

Often, tax policy in the Central Asian countries is unfriendly to the service cooperatives; this often entails double taxation of farmers who dared to engage in such a cooperative. The reason for this is not in some prejudice against cooperatives, intrinsic to the law; simply the fact is that the tax law generally treats cooperatives similarly like any other legal entity (corporation), not paying enough attention to their specific features.

Taxation of cooperatives includes two fundamentally different taxes:

- a. Value added tax (VAT); and
- b. Cooperative income tax.

In both cases, the western approach to the taxation of cooperatives is based on the understanding that the cooperatives act on behalf of their members as their agents. Given the close involvement of cooperative members into the decision-making process in the cooperative, as well as due to the unique nature of the transactions between the cooperative and its members, cooperatives can be considered as agents, acting on behalf of their members. This viewpoint assumes that the transactions of cooperatives with their members should not be subject to VAT and income tax. The tax burden should be shifted from cooperative (“agent”) to its members, acting as principals (Van der Sangen, 2012).

One of the barriers impeding the development of agricultural cooperation in Central Asian countries is the low access to credit. It is known that as a rule, at the start-up stage, cooperatives require seed funding to start their activities and create basic infrastructure.

These funds may come from government in the form of loans with reduced interest rates through financial institutions or from donors in the form of direct subsidies of money or assets.

To avoid wasteful allocation of subsidized credit, cooperatives should provide sufficient funds before obtaining low-interest credit. Besides, the right to receive credit must be strictly linked to the performance of the cooperative: Only active organizations with existing business operations may be eligible to receive preferential loans or other grants.

One may recommend to governments of Central Asian countries to establish national cooperative banks on the model of advanced economies (Japan, China, France, Germany, USA, etc.). These banks will ensure the successful implementation of the state programs on development of agricultural cooperation and support of small forms of association.

As it was shown by practice, the efforts of donors in providing assistance when establishing cooperatives in the most promising regions and areas often come to nothing due to the lack of cooperative institutions. Therefore, the most important is the challenge of formation and improvement of cooperative institutions - both formal and informal, as well as the creation and support of organizations able to establish such institutions, to influence them in order to achieve positive change.

Today the Central Asian countries lack the resource centers of cooperation in rural areas. Approaches to the development of agricultural cooperatives are often dependent on the level of problem understanding by the officials (in most cases this level is quite low and eclectic). Using lack of officials’ awareness, commercial entities claim themselves to be cooperatives for the purpose of receiving budget support or reducing taxation. Today the initiators of establishing cooperatives in the villages have no place to get professional advice and training. Therefore, the need for the establishment of the national center for advancement of agricultural cooperation, and primarily service cooperation, becomes extremely urgent challenge.

7. CONCLUSION

In general, in the Central Asian countries there are systemic problems in the development of agriculture, including the imperfection of tax legislation, small-scale commodity production, and underdevelopment of commercial and logistic infrastructure that contribute to the performance of many small players in the market and unreasonable increase in the production cost.

The conducted research allows concluding that in the context of disunity of agricultural producers and the availability of a large number of private subsidiary farming that is peculiar to agriculture in Central Asian countries, the most appropriate solution to the problem of small-scale commodity production is cooperation along with the creation of large industrial agricultural enterprises.

Legislation should be target-oriented at minimizing the interference in the affairs of cooperatives and promoting their autonomy, as well as taking into account the principles of the ICA.

To encourage further association of agricultural producers it is necessary to weaken the tax burden of cooperatives, to take measures towards increasing the availability of credit resources for agricultural cooperatives, as well as to develop targeted educational program to inform and educate farmers about the benefits of cooperatives.

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