

Developing High Value-Added Products in Kyrgyz

—The “One Village One Product” Project

The One Village One Product project aims to revitalize regional communities by encouraging the development of specialty products that make use of local resources. While its roots are in Japan, it has now expanded internationally. To learn more about developments in the project in Central Asia, the Kyrgyz Republic in particular, we had an interview with a Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) expert. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

The Kyrgyz Republic is a mountainous country in Central Asia with over 90% of its land area covered by mountains. Even its capital, Bishkek, is located at an elevation of about 800 meters above sea level. After gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Kyrgyz government pursued reforms focused on establishing democracy and a market-oriented economy in the country. Nevertheless, the economy failed to develop because of increasing poverty in rural areas. Against this backdrop, JICA launched the One Village One Product (OVOP) project in 2007 with the aim of revitalizing local economies in

Kyrgyz. To learn more, we turned to JICA expert Hara-guchi Akihisa, who has taken part in all stages of the project, from the steps of proposing ideas for types of local specialty products through making them available for purchase.

“The first place we implemented the OVOP project in Kyrgyz was the Issyk-Kul lake region in the north-east of the country. This area has a nice assortment of raw materials with the potential to be made into local specialty products: high-quality wool, wild fruits and berries, honey, and more. However, the expertise and infrastructure needed to create products out of these



Needle-felted donkeys crafted with local wool in Kyrgyz



Photo: JICA

The OVOP Center in the capital city of Bishkek serves as a local-specialty shop as well. About 60% of visitors are local residents attracted by its selection of high-quality products.



Shearing sheep to harvest wool



Photos: JICA

Needle-felted sheep featuring the natural colors of wool



Photo: JICA


White honey made from the nectar of sainfoin (holy clover), a plant that grows at high elevations. It features a delightful white color with a look of translucence, as well as a sweet flavor that is delicate and mild, yet rich.

and market them was, in the beginning, severely lacking. Moreover, the export market had disappeared following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Through this project, we worked steadily to support local producers with things like market research and processing techniques required to create products with high added value, as well as securing distribution networks. This encouraged more and more product development, with a focus on utilizing local wool, herbs, berries, honey, and so on. A total of 632 products have now been developed. Also, shops highlighting these local products have popped up throughout the whole country, including in the capital city, Bishkek.”

Haraguchi took part in the technical training provided to the workers, most of whom are local women, who perform the production and processing work to make the products. The Japanese brand MUJI¹ also collaborated in developing Kyrgyz needle-felted items and now sells them in MUJI retail locations around the world. The cute, humorous felt animals—sheep, donkeys, and more—are popular products. “I made samples of needle-felted sheep at the beginning, joining in with the local residents and poking into some wool with a felting needle myself,” says Haraguchi.

So-called “white honey” is another popular product that Haraguchi helped to promote in addition to needle-felted items. “Honey is a specialty product in Kyrgyz produced in quantities of 7,000 tons per year to start out with,” he explains. “Limiting bees’ source of nectar to the blossoms of a plant called sainfoin or holy clover yielded a pure-white honey. It has received very positive reviews from restaurant chefs, not only for its distinctive color, but its delicious flavor as well.” Now even luxury grocery stores in Japan, far from the mountain meadows of Kyrgyz, offer this white colored

honey for sale.

Products made from sea buckthorn,² a type of berry that grows wild in Kyrgyz, are popular as well. Containing many compounds and nutrients considered good for the health, the berries are used in everything from food items to body care products, leaving nothing to waste. All high-quality, the products have been favorably received in European and US markets by health- and beauty-conscious consumers. “Most of the producers are local women. They understand that if they make high-quality products, the returns will eventually come back to them. So, our project has promoted their empowerment³ as well. Based on our successes in Kyrgyz, we are planning also to expand the OVOP project into other countries in the area,” Haraguchi tells us. We expect OVOP efforts in Kyrgyz to continue expanding as well. 



Photos: JICA

Left: Bottling sea buckthorn juice
Right: Sea buckthorn berries. Because of the thorns, the berries must be harvested by hand.

1. A brand established in 1980 by Ryohin Keikaku Co., Ltd., that offers a diverse range of products, including clothing, household goods, furniture, and food products. The brand features simple packaging and design, as well as affordable prices. MUJI stores are now found in 32 countries around the world.
2. The berry of a deciduous shrub in the oleaster family, *Elaeagnaceae*. Widely used in health food products due to high nutrient content. Also known as seaberry or saji.
3. The act of increasing the power and agency of a person or community. In the field of social welfare, this means supporting people in disadvantageous social positions to use their own strengths to improve their situation, so they can experience greater agency in their own lives.