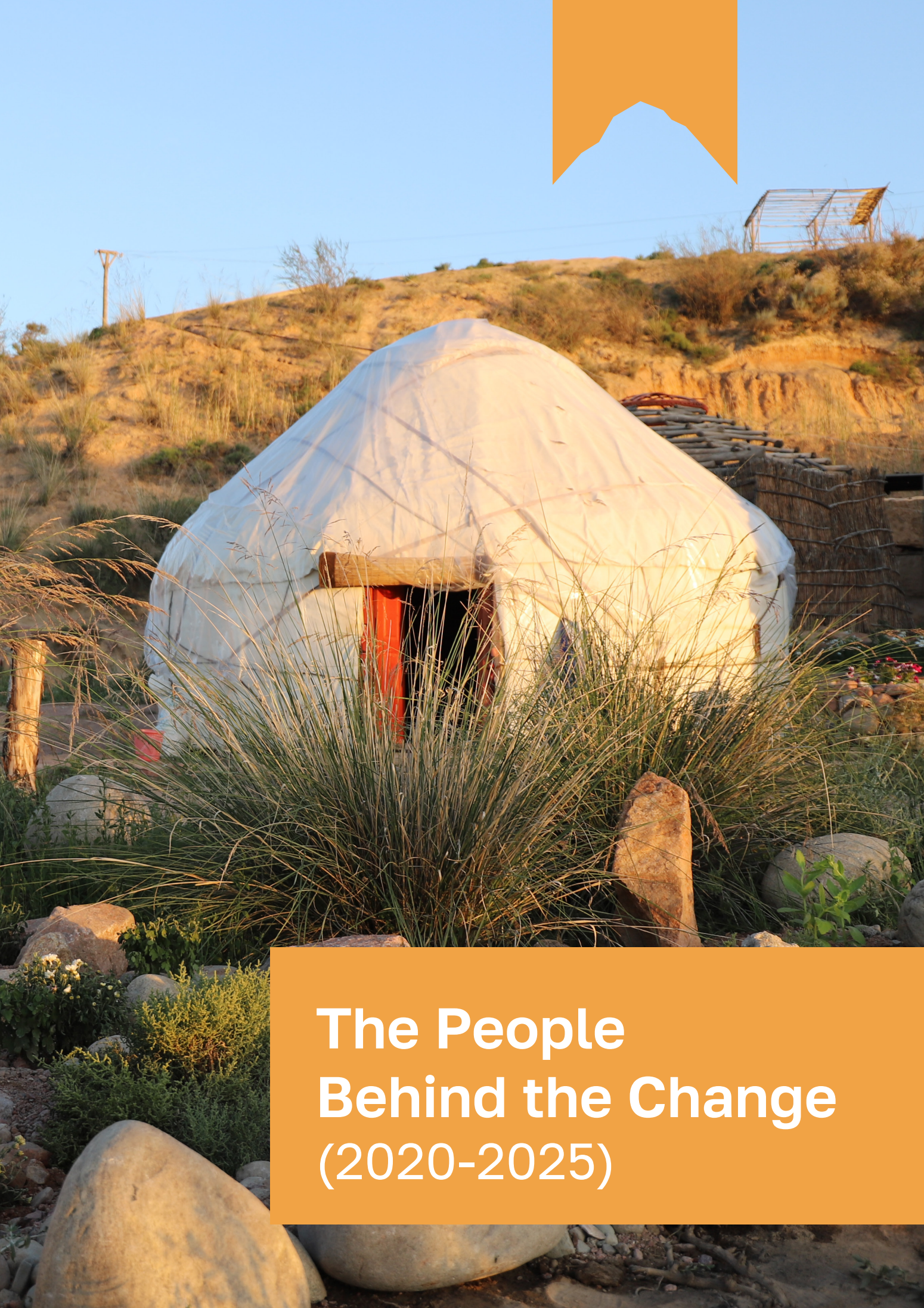


The People Behind the Change (2020-2025)

Gratitude

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the organizations that have walked alongside us throughout this journey. We are especially thankful to Centralasiengrupperna (Central Asia Solidarity Groups), our long-term partner from Sweden, for trusting in our vision, supporting our institutional development, and helping mobilize resources for community initiatives. We are also deeply grateful to ForumCiv, Sida, SIANI, and the U.S. Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic for believing in the power of local communities and supporting innovative ideas that promote environmental stewardship, sustainable livelihoods, and community resilience.

Their support has enabled communities to experiment, learn, and pursue opportunities that might otherwise have remained unrealized. Beyond financial assistance, they have provided something equally valuable, confidence in local people, respect for community knowledge, and a shared belief that lasting change begins from within communities themselves.

We thank them for their partnership and for helping create the conditions in which the stories in this book could unfold.

Dear Reader,

Every change begins with a person.

Sometimes it is a woman who decides to turn a piece of abandoned land into a productive garden. Sometimes it is a farmer who decides to collect flood water for irrigation. Sometimes it is a young man who decides to protect the habitat of 80,000 birds. What begins as one person's idea can gradually inspire a family, a neighbourhood, or even an entire community.

This book is a collection of such stories.

The people featured here are not famous environmentalists, politicians, or business leaders. They are farmers, community activists, nurses, mothers, and students from the Issyk-Kul and Naryn regions of Kyrgyzstan. They are our neighbours, friends, colleagues, and community members. Each of them has found their own way to respond to challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, limited economic opportunities, and the loss of traditional knowledge.

The Public Foundation El-Too, based in Bokonbaevo, has worked alongside communities since 2001 to support environmental conservation, sustainable livelihoods, ecological awareness, and community-led development. Our work is guided by a simple belief: people and nature do not have to compete with one another. The most lasting solutions emerge when communities find ways to improve their livelihoods while restoring and protecting the natural systems on which they depend.

In this book, we would like to share the stories of people we have encountered over the last five years. During this period, we worked with communities across the Issyk-Kul and Naryn regions to promote permaculture and climate adaptation, support women and youth initiatives, encourage ecological tourism and income diversification, establish community-led micro-reserves for endangered species, and create opportunities for learning through research, arts, and environmental education. We worked in 15 communities and, together with local residents, contributed to initiatives ranging from the establishment of the Ak-Bulung Bird Reserve to the Kyzyl-Örük Festival, which celebrates local products, culture, and sustainable livelihoods while creating alternative income opportunities for more than 500 families.

Yet this book is not about El-Too's projects.

It is about the people behind the change.

The stories in these pages show what becomes possible when local knowledge, determination, and community action come together. Our role has often been to provide knowledge, encouragement, connections, or opportunities at the right moment. The real work was carried out by the individuals and communities who chose to act.

We are grateful to everyone who has shared this journey with us over the years. Their experiences remind us that meaningful change rarely happens all at once. It grows gradually through conversations, experiments, cooperation, and the courage to try something different.

We invite you to meet the people in these pages. We hope their stories will inspire you as much as they have inspired us.

The El-Too Team

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Section 1.

Permaculture and Working with Nature

1.1. How Bakytbek Built a Gabion DAM to Hold the Floodwater of Issyk-Kul

Most people view floods as a destructive force. Especially in recent years, with increasingly unpredictable weather conditions, we often hear stories about floods washing away roads, damaging fields, and destroying livelihoods. However, Bakytbek never viewed floods as destructive. Neither did the El-Too team, who believe that there are no destructive forces in nature, only opportunities to learn how to cooperate with nature.

Bakytbek had watched floods rush through the Manjyly area his entire life. For almost ten years, he quietly carried a question that no one else seemed interested in asking: What if that water could be captured and used for agriculture?

Bakytbek grew up in a kashar, a seasonal livestock settlement in the Manjyly hills. His father worked as a mechanic from the 1940s until his retirement in 1971, maintaining the diesel-powered pumps that supplied water across the dry terrain of Kyzyl-Bulak, a canyon locals called “Mars” because of its rust-coloured, otherworldly landscape.

After his father passed away, Bakytbek began dreaming about him.

In one dream that stayed with him for years, Bakytbek was digging a well alone under the midday sun. He was exhausted, thirsty, and his hands were raw from work. His father appeared beside him and offered him kumis and boorsok, the traditional drink and bread. Bakytbek accepted the offering. Then, as if something in the earth had been awakened, water suddenly burst from the well and the dry flowers around him bloomed.

He woke with a feeling he could not shake. He wanted to make the semi-desert bloom again, but there was one problem — water. The Soviet-built pumps had long since broken down, and the Manjyly hills were becoming drier every year.

For nearly a decade, Bakytbek observed floodwater the way another person might study a difficult text. He watched how different channels carried different volumes of water. He noticed how bushes and vegetation slowed the flow and helped filter sediments. He observed where soil accumulated and where it was washed away. He followed the behaviour of mudflows through small ravines and gradually learned their patterns.





At the same time, members of the El-Too team, including Nuraiym, visited Sweden through a learning exchange organized by CAG to study permaculture practices. There they were inspired by the story of Jonna and Etta, an artist and permaculture family who had transformed four hectares of dry, sandy land into a walnut forest within ten years using only rainwater harvested from the roofs of their buildings.

What impressed the team was the simplicity of the approach. Water was collected in a modest structure built from local stone, while plants growing around the reservoir naturally filtered and cleaned the water.

The idea travelled back to Kyrgyzstan. And in the Manjyly hills, it found a man who had already spent years wondering how to keep water from disappearing. These two seemingly crazy ideas came together.

With project support and his own labour, Bakytbek eventually constructed a small gabion dam from locally sourced materials — wire mesh baskets filled with stone and anchored to the canyon walls.

As he laid the first stones, doubts remained. Would the water fill the dam or destroy it? Yet the dream about his father gave him hope that everything would work out.

The structure is modest by engineering standards. By the standards of the semi-desert around Issyk-Kul, however, it is something close to transformative.

When the first rain came and the reservoir filled, Bakytbek danced. He was as happy as a child seeing a rainbow for the first time. For him, the dam was not only a source of water. It was also a way of honouring his father and fulfilling a promise to bring life back to the semi-desert.



Rather than allowing floodwater to rush unchecked downhill, the system divides the flow into four controlled sections. As the water slows, sediment settles naturally. Cleaner water then moves into storage basins designed to reduce seepage and evaporation.

During periods of strong rainfall, the dam can capture up to 200 tons of water within a matter of hours. A single heavy 30-minute downpour can fill the reservoir completely.

“The water used to disappear immediately,” Bakytbek explains. “Now we can hold part of it, filter it naturally, and use it later.”

Today, the stored water supports around 25 people (6-7 families) who have established garden plots below the canyon, ground that was effectively useless before the dam existed.

But Bakytbek will tell you the dam is not finished. It never quite is. The same force that fills the reservoir that heavy, fast water rushing down from the hills — also chips away at the gabion walls. After strong rains, he walks the structure looking for damage, pressing stones back into mesh, reinforcing sections the current has loosened. It is unglamorous work. He does it anyway, because he understands now that cooperating with nature is not a single act but an ongoing negotiation.

When visitors come and they do come now, farmers and development workers curious about what they’ve heard Bakytbek brings them straight to the dam and walks them through it stone by stone. He was alone with this idea for nearly a decade. He has no interest in keeping it to himself any longer.

The semi-desert around Issyk-Kul is not blooming yet. But in the Manjyly hills, in one small canyon that locals once called Mars, water stays now where it never stayed before. And a man who grew up watching it vanish has learned, slowly and through years of watching, how to ask it to remain.

1.2. Small Infrastructure Project That Protects Soil

Spring is the busiest season for Jenish, the irrigation manager of Toguz-Bulak village. His phone rings constantly as farmers call about irrigation water, while his hands skillfully shape the flow of water along the canal with a spade.

“There are many problems now,” Jenish says. “Glaciers are declining, there is less water, but more agricultural fields demanding irrigation.”

For years, another problem quietly damaged the village’s soil. To redirect irrigation water, local farmers had no proper sluices along the canals. Every time they needed to block the water flow, people had to dig out large amounts of topsoil by hand and pile it into the canal.

Each time one section was closed, around 200–300 square meters of topsoil could be disturbed. Over time, deep erosion scars and small canyon-like formations started appearing near the irrigation routes. Eventually, people even began bringing fertile soil from nearby agricultural land, sometimes up to 20 sacks at a time, simply to stop and redirect water.

“It was destroying the soil little by little,” Jenish explains. “And we needed a lot of labour. Around 20 people were needed to redistribute water along five or six canal points, simply to dig soil and carry sacks. Nowadays, I can manage most of this work myself.”

Since these temporary blocks were used several times a year across six canal points, the damage gradually became severe. In one year alone, an estimated area of up to one hectare of topsoil could be disturbed simply to redirect irrigation water across five to six irrigation points.





Three years ago, the local water users association approached El-Too for support. Toguz-Bulak had already been involved as one of the focus communities in El-Too’s permaculture activities, and irrigation had become one of the village’s most urgent concerns.

With support of around 1,500 USD, El-Too helped purchase materials and install sluices at six key irrigation distribution points.

Today, Jenish smiles when he looks at the areas around the canals.

“One good thing is that the soil has started to recover,” he says.

The work went beyond infrastructure improvements. Local duty bearers joined El-Too’s activities from the planning stage and helped organise a community ashar to install additional sluices and discuss wider environmental challenges affecting the area.

The gathering brought together water associations, pasture committees, local government representatives, deputies, youth, religious leaders, and the court of elders. While working side by side, community members discussed soil degradation, the declining condition of the Aidyn-Kol wetlands, overgrazing, the loss of pasture rotation systems, and the growing pressure on natural resources.

For Jenish, the event showed that irrigation is not only a technical issue, but part of a much larger environmental problem.

Still, many challenges remain. Around 90 percent of irrigation canals in the area are still blocked manually using topsoil.

Recently, irrigation management was transferred to a state environmental management department under the Ministry of Agriculture. Previously, the system had been managed by local water users associations that relied mostly on small user fees.

Jenish hopes the new system will bring larger investment into irrigation infrastructure and soil protection.

“Before, we knew there was not enough budget and little hope,” he says. “Now, with state support, we hope more sluices can be restored. We will keep raising this issue again and again, because this is not only about water, it is also about protecting our soil.”

1.3. A Chicken Coop and Greenhouse Under One Roof: Upa's Journey to Restore Her Father's Land

When Upa first walked the piece of land that had once belonged to her grandfather, she was standing in a rubbish dump. Locals had been throwing their waste on the abandoned plot for years. Plastic, debris, the accumulated discard of a community that had forgotten it ever belonged to anyone.

She and her sister bought it back anyway.

"It was our brother's and sister's dream to restore the land of our father," she says. "We bought it back, cleaned it up, built a house, and started a garden."

Upa had returned to Bokonbaevo after several years working in Russia. Health problems forced her to come back home, and she was unsure what to do next. Restoring the family land gave her a new purpose.

The beginning was not easy. The soil was sandy and mixed with clay. In the dry climate of Tong, it lost moisture quickly, and the berry bushes and fruit trees she planted struggled to survive.

A turning point came when she joined a permaculture training organised by El-Too.

There she learned permaculture principles, including the lasagne method, where layers of straw, sheep wool, manure and other organic materials are placed on top of each other and slowly decompose, creating fertile soil. For Upa, whose land had poor soil and little moisture, the method changed everything.

After the training she continued learning on her own. She read books, watched videos and experimented with permaculture. One idea caught her attention: what if a chicken coop and a greenhouse could work together?



Today, on the edge of her garden, a single structure serves both purposes.

On one side are chickens. On the other is a greenhouse. The warmth produced by the birds helps heat the greenhouse during the colder months without electricity or fuel. The chicken manure improves the soil, while plant residues and kitchen scraps can be fed back to the chickens. Nothing goes to waste.

“I read and watched videos of people combining a chicken coop and greenhouse,” Upa says. “I did not want to heat the greenhouse with electricity or a stove, so the idea of the chickens heating it themselves seemed like a great idea. I decided to experiment.”

When El-Too announced a small grants competition for farmers applying permaculture principles, Upa submitted her idea and received a grant of 1,000 USD. She used it to build the combined greenhouse and chicken coop.

The structure soon became the heart of her homestead. The greenhouse allows her to germinate seedlings, which she sells to neighbours and at the Bokonbaevo market. Her vegetable beds, improved through the lasagne method and supported by rainwater collection, now provide two harvests each year. Fresh produce is sold during the season, while the rest is preserved for winter.

The vegetables also supply her guesthouse. After participating in El-Too’s tourism training, she registered the guesthouse on Booking.com and now hosts visitors from different countries. During a successful season, she can welcome up to 150 guests.









After supplying her family and guests with fresh produce, she earns between 60,000 and 70,000 KGS from vegetable and seedling sales each year.

The project has also taught her lessons that no book could provide.

“At the beginning I did not think about the smell from the chickens,” she says. “Later I realised it needs good ventilation. In the summer it gets too hot in the coop, so there needs to be enough air circulation.”

Over time, the initiative became more than a personal project. Upa involved socially vulnerable families in construction work and chicken care and shared her experience with young women interested in poultry farming.

What started as an abandoned piece of family land has become a productive homestead, a source of income, and a place for learning.

“The garden keeps me healthy,” Upa says. “When I get to the garden I can forget all my problems. My health and mood improve.”

She looks around the garden she helped create from what was once a rubbish dump.

“I think this is the lifestyle I was looking for.”

1.4. Ermek, Who Protected 80,000 Birds on His Home Peninsula

On a winter morning on the Ak-Bulung Peninsula, the lake surface seems to disappear beneath wings. Up to 80,000 birds gather here each year, swans gliding across the water alongside 12 to 14 species of ducks. Today, birdwatchers travel from across Kyrgyzstan to witness the spectacle. But not long ago, this place faced a very different future.

During the Soviet period, Ak-Bulung was part of a protected reserve. After independence, that status disappeared. The peninsula gradually became a place for winter grazing, poaching, and seasonal burning of reeds to encourage fresh grass growth. What had once been a safe haven for migratory birds became increasingly vulnerable.

In August 2019, three people sat together in a microbus on the edge of Kara-Talaa village and decided to change that.

One of them was Ermek Shabykeev. He had spent his childhood on this peninsula, helping his parents host foreign visitors and learning early that this landscape held something special. Later, while working in tourism, he regularly brought ornithologists and nature enthusiasts to Issyk-Kul together with Nuraiym from El-Too. In each visit Ermek was thinking this place deserved protection.

For years, Ermek had watched the peninsula remain unprotected. Hunters came freely, and the birds had nowhere to hide. He was waiting for the right support and the right people to help turn an idea into reality.



фото: © Karen Campo



“When birdwatchers and bloggers started visiting to photograph the birds, people would come to me and say, ‘What a beautiful place we have.’ They thanked us for preserving it.”

фото: © Karen Campo

The other two passengers that day were Nuraiym from El-Too and Bakyt, both experienced in tourism and conservation. They had crossed paths professionally before, but something became clear during that conversation. By the time they stepped out of the microbus, the idea of creating a community-managed reserve at Ak-Bulung had transformed from a hope into a plan.

The challenges were considerable. The peninsula had long been used as a winter grazing area by local residents. Any proposal for a reserve risked being seen as a threat to livelihoods.

Instead of arriving with ready-made solutions, El-Too, with support from the U.S. Embassy in Kyrgyzstan, began by listening. A community research project explored how local people used the wetlands, what benefits they derived from them, and what concerns they had about birds and conservation. Each conversation became an opportunity for Ermek to explain why protecting the area mattered.

“As a result of this research, we found that the area proposed for the reserve was not heavily used by villagers,” Ermek recalls. “The marshy land was difficult for livestock, they used to get stuck. But it was ideal habitat for birds.”

At the same time, change was beginning in the local school.

El-Too organized birdwatching workshops for 30 children, introducing them to the species that spent their winters on the peninsula. The children learned to identify birds, joined observation trips, and discovered the beauty of birds and landscape many had previously taken for granted. When they returned home, they shared their excitement with their families. Parents who had never attended a community meeting suddenly found themselves listening to stories about swans, ducks, and the importance of protecting them.

Public discussions followed. El-Too brought together local authorities, representatives of the Issyk-Kul Reserve, scientists, lawyers, and civil society organizations. Meanwhile, the newly formed Ak-Bulung Eco community organization, led by Ermek, began building the knowledge and partnerships needed to formally propose a reserve. Throughout the process, Bakyt provided guidance on legal procedures, helping Ermek in working with government institutions, and navigating the complex approval process.

Progress was not always easy.



фото: © Karen Campo

“People did not understand at first and even argued with me,” Ermek remembers. “They asked why I was trying to establish a reserve. Later, when they understood its importance, they became proud to live here.”

That transformation from skepticism to pride did not happen at once. It emerged through hundreds of conversations, through children’s enthusiasm, and through a growing realization that something extraordinary arrived on their peninsula every winter.

“Later, when birdwatchers and bloggers started visiting to photograph the birds, people would come to me and say, ‘What a beautiful place we have.’ They thanked us for preserving it,” says Ermek.

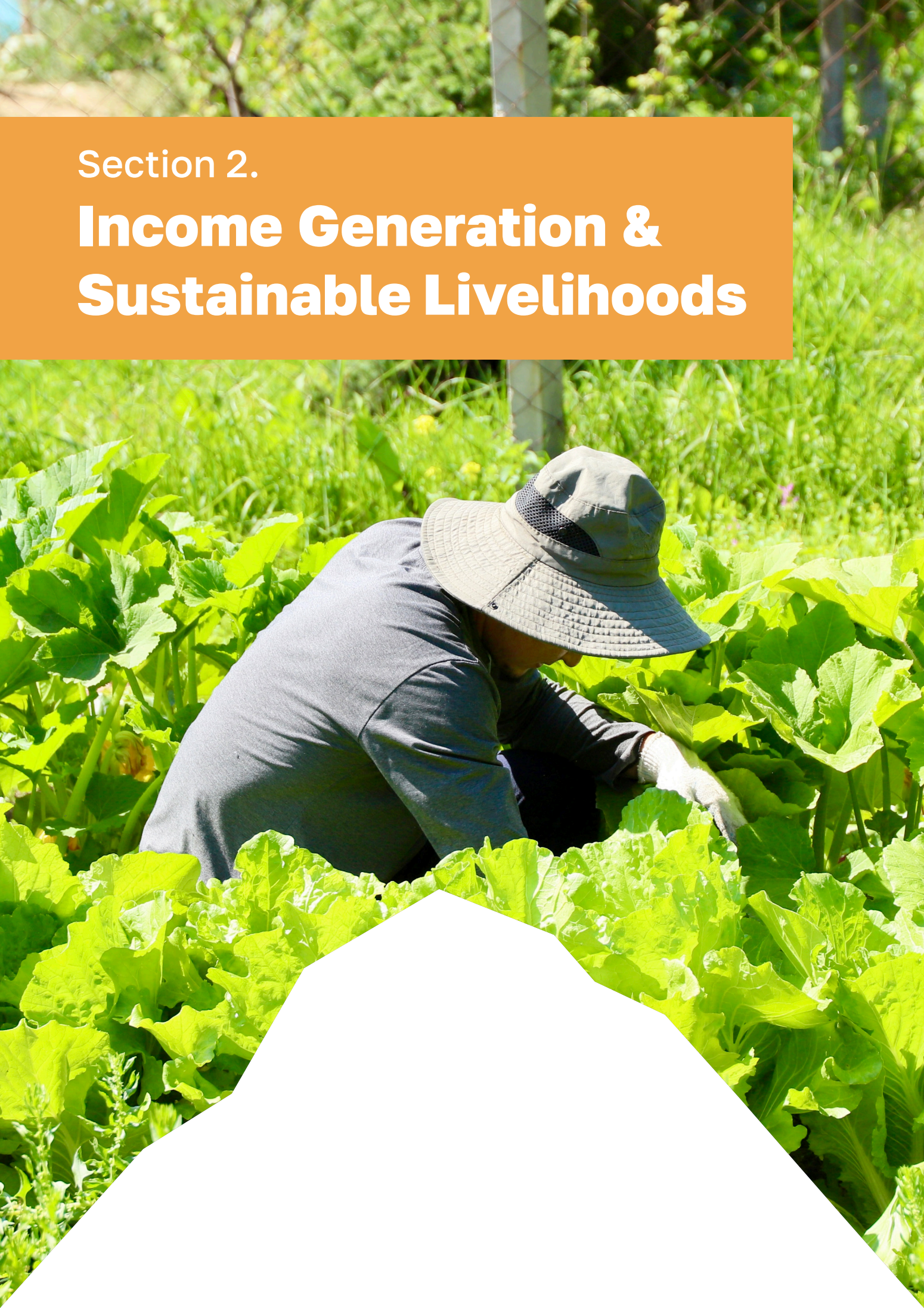
Although El-Too’s initial funding was not sufficient to support the entire process, the momentum continued. Ermek’s persistence helped carry the work through to the final stages. He applied for additional grants and opportunities and played a major role in securing the legal status of the area. Meanwhile El-Too continued providing institutional support and consultations whenever needed. Together, these efforts eventually led to the establishment of a 380-hectare community reserve.

Today, the Ak-Bulung Community Micro-Reserve covers 380 hectares, including 150 hectares of the peninsula. An observation tower overlooks the shoreline, offering visitors panoramic views of the wetlands and the thousands of birds that gather there. Hunting, fishing, and motorboat activities are prohibited. Instead, visitors are encouraged to photograph wildlife, walk through the reserve, and experience one of Issyk-Kul’s most remarkable natural spectacles.

The Ak-Bulung Eco community organizes a migratory bird festival, celebrating the seasonal visitors that have connected the community around a shared purpose. What began as a conservation effort has also become an opportunity for community tourism. Nature-loving travelers increasingly stop in Kara-Talaa, creating new opportunities for local residents while strengthening appreciation for the landscape around them.

Section 2.

Income Generation & Sustainable Livelihoods



2.1. We Were Afraid to Begin: Mahabat's Journey of Opening a Guesthouse for Travelers

Mahabat (50 years old) used to drive her bus or hitchhike along a rough, bumpy road that had been under reconstruction for several years. Every day, she traveled to the central village of Bokonbaevo for work. In her village, there were few employment opportunities beyond farming, and like many rural families along the southern shore of Issyk-Kul, her family searched for additional ways to earn an income.

For years, Mahabat dreamed of opening a guesthouse for travelers. Surrounded by dramatic canyons and the quiet beauty of village life, her family believed their home had potential. Still, they did not know where to begin.

"We used to say that everything is already here — the mountains, the nature, the peaceful atmosphere. Maybe we should simply start welcoming guests," Mahabat recalls.

But for nearly six years, the idea remained only a dream. Before entering tourism, Mahabat worked in a café in Bokonbaevo, where she learned how to communicate with customers and provide good service. Although she felt comfortable working with people, hosting foreign tourists inside her own home felt unfamiliar and intimidating.

Without support and guidance, the guesthouse might have remained only an idea. For rural women, entering tourism often requires more than an empty room, it requires confidence, digital skills, and the willingness to open private family life to strangers from around the world.

The turning point came when Mahabat saw an announcement from El-Too about training on community tourism and promoting guesthouses through digital platforms. At first, both she and her family hesitated. They worried that their facilities would not meet tourists' expectations.







Still, Mahabat decided to participate. During the training, organized by El-Too, guesthouse owners and trainers shared practical knowledge about hospitality, guest relations, and online booking platforms. Participants visited local guesthouses and saw that tourism businesses could begin in ordinary family homes, even with very modest resources and traditional floor bedding.

The trainers explained how to welcome tourists, organize accommodation, and create a warm and comfortable atmosphere for guests.

“The training gave me confidence,” Mahabat says. “Before, we were afraid to start, but the El-Too team was very supportive. They took photos of our house to upload to Booking.com and Google Maps. They encouraged us to begin, learn, and adapt as the process went on.”

During the training period, Mahabat and her son even chose a name for their future guesthouse together. The family learned how to use digital tools such as Booking.com and Google Maps so travelers could find their location and make reservations online.

Their first real opportunity came unexpectedly after the Shamal Festival in the Ak-Say canyons. Another guesthouse owner who had attended the same El-Too training ran out of available rooms and referred several tourists to Mahabat’s home.

“At first, I was nervous,” she remembers. “The guests arrived late at night without reservations, and I worried whether everything would be good enough.”

Still, she welcomed them. The following morning, more visitors arrived. Soon, both booked and unannounced travelers continued coming throughout the tourism season. By the end of October, Mahabat's family had hosted around 80 to 90 guests through Booking.com, Google Maps, and word-of-mouth recommendations.

Some visitors stayed for several days and gradually became almost like family members. Guests shared meals with the household, spent evenings talking together, and even joined daily village activities.

"They helped us pick raspberries, apricots, and fruit from the garden," Mahabat says with a smile. "They wanted to experience our lifestyle."

One of the things guests appreciated most was the homemade food and fresh produce from the family's garden. Mahabat regularly served raspberries, cucumbers, tomatoes, homemade honey, fresh butter, and potatoes harvested directly from their garden.

Her previous experience working in a café also became valuable. She already understood the basics of customer service and knew how to make people feel comfortable. Although she speaks only simple English phrases, she uses them confidently to communicate with visitors.

"I know basic things such as 'Where are you from?', 'How old are you?', and 'How was your trip?'" she says. "Even small words help create a connection."

As the number of guests increased, new challenges also appeared. Last season, the family had only one toilet and one shower, which often created long queues when many visitors stayed at once. In response, Mahabat's family has already started expanding their facilities. They are currently building two A-frame guest cabins in their garden and improving the infrastructure before the next tourism season.

Today, the guesthouse has become an important source of additional income and motivation for the family. With improved infrastructure, Mahabat and her family are now looking forward to the next tourism season.



2.2. Young Families Experiment With Vegetables in Uchkun



Mirbek has attended many seminars.

In Uchkun, a village located 40 kilometres from Naryn town, there are few young families remaining. Jobs are limited, infrastructure is minimal, and most people rely on livestock breeding and farming. Whenever an NGO project, government initiative, or training took place, the local municipality usually sent Mirbek to participate.

“I am a sociable person. If there was any seminar, I was the person they sent,” he says. “After some years, I became a kind of ‘seminar man.’”

So when El-Too invited villagers to join a permaculture training, he expected another long seminar with certificates and very little practical change.

Instead, the training gave several young families in Uchkun something they had almost stopped imagining, the possibility to experiment with agriculture and rethink what village life could offer.

Mirbek knows Uchkun’s conditions well. The valley is known for its heavy white clay soil, which gave the area its name. Although Naryn is associated with cold weather, summers in Uchkun are surprisingly hot.

“The older people used to joke that even watermelons could grow here,” Mirbek says. “But nobody ever seriously tried.”

Most families traditionally grew fodder crops and potatoes. Many young people had already left for Bishkek or Russia. Some later returned, but opportunities in the village remained limited.

The permaculture training felt different because it focused on practice rather than theory. Participants learned about greenhouse construction, soil preparation and building, crop diversity, and water-efficient agriculture.

Slowly, people started experimenting. For many women in the village, the training introduced vegetables they had previously only seen in supermarkets or cafés, broccoli, cauliflower, leafy greens, and salads.

“We were honestly surprised when broccoli grew successfully here,” Mirbek says with a smile.

“We grew so many salads and did not even know how to eat them.”

Families began planting vegetables in their gardens, exchanging seeds, and trying recipes they found on YouTube.

Then another opportunity appeared unexpectedly.

Through El-Too, several families hosted visitors connected to tourism activities in Naryn. Guests stayed in village homes, ate fresh vegetables from the gardens, and repeatedly commented on the quality of the homemade food.

One tourism partner mentioned that fresh vegetables were often difficult to find in Naryn’s markets, especially during tourism season.

“That conversation stayed in our minds,” Mirbek says. “We realised maybe our village could produce something that was actually needed.”

In 2023, Mirbek and six other families created the Baichik cooperative. Today, seven households grow carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, broccoli, cabbage, and other crops together. With a small grant from El-Too, they purchased a motor block to help cultivate smaller plots more efficiently.









"I do my best to motivate everyone, but people have their own households, children, and daily responsibilities. Sometimes, keeping everyone working toward the same goal is the biggest challenge."

The work, however, remains difficult. The clay soil requires constant improvement with animal manure brought down from mountain pastures, while transporting fertiliser often depends on manual labour and borrowed equipment.

"It is not easy," Mirbek says honestly. "Sometimes the vegetables bring good income, sometimes they do not. And as the head of the cooperative, I have many responsibilities. I do my best to motivate everyone, but people have their own households, children, and daily responsibilities. Sometimes, keeping everyone working toward the same goal is the biggest challenge."

Still, the cooperative continues experimenting. Crops such as carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, beetroot, and eggplants proved profitable enough to continue expanding. Initially, the cooperative sold vegetables in Naryn town, but today there is already enough demand inside the village itself, where residents queue to buy vegetables for winter preservation.

More importantly, other villagers have started approaching cooperative members with questions about vegetables, soil, and whether small gardens could become a source of additional income.

For Mirbek, this shift matters deeply. In a village where many young people continue leaving because they see little future, the cooperative gave several families a reason to stay, experiment, and build something together instead of searching for opportunities outside.

2.3. The Sustainable Homestead: How One Family Changed What People Believed Could Grow in Toguz-Bulak

“Apricots from Toguz-Bulak sound like nonsense,” the truck drivers laugh while buying apricots from Venera’s garden. But for her family, it has already become reality.

Toguz-Bulak is located at 2,200 meters above sea level. The village is known for its cold climate, late springs, and early autumn frosts. For generations, people believed that very little could grow there.

Most families used their gardens mainly for potatoes, hay storage, and livestock. Livestock breeding was traditionally the main livelihood. Fruit trees were considered almost impossible.

Venera worked for many years as a medical nurse. She remembers joking that children in Toguz-Bulak often got stomach problems in autumn because that was the only season when fresh fruits and vegetables finally reached the village.

“To buy fresh vegetables, people usually had to drive to Bokonbaevo,” she says. “So access to fresh food was always limited.”

When El-Too started working in the village, Venera volunteered as a community leader, helping gather and mobilise villagers for different activities. At first, her family simply fenced half of their garden to stop livestock from entering. Even then, she still doubted whether anything would truly grow there.

“I was worried the fruit trees would freeze,” she says.





Together with El-Too, the family created a small demonstration garden where they began experimenting with unfamiliar crops and organic methods. They planted spinach, broccoli, flax, berries, and fruit trees. They also started producing biohumus using Californian worms.

Slowly, the garden began changing not only their household, but also people's perceptions. What surprised villagers most were the cucumbers and apricots.

Venera's greenhouse cucumbers became so popular that local people started queueing in autumn to buy them for pickling and winter preservation.

"They say my cucumbers stay crispy and preserve well," she laughs.

Later, when her apricot trees finally matured, even traders were surprised.

"Usually apricots come from the warmer lakeshore villages," Venera says. "When traders arrived to buy apricots for export to Russia, they laughed and said, 'Apricots from Toguz-Bulak sound like nonsense.'

The challenges, however, still remain. Frosts can already arrive in the first half of September, but the family's small greenhouse helps extend the growing season and keeps cucumbers producing longer.

Nowadays, the garden has also become a place where Venera rests and spends time for herself.

"I enjoy working in my garden," she says. "Every year I discover some new flower or plant. Working in the garden keeps me healthy."

Today, the small two-acre garden provides the family with additional income from vegetable, apricot, and biohumus sales, while also serving as an important source of fresh food for the household.

“This year, my daughter and son-in-law started their own fruit garden,” Venera says proudly. “I sent them 20 sacks of biohumus to encourage them to use organic fertilisers.”

The family’s experiments gradually expanded beyond agriculture alone. Venera also joined tourism training organised through El-Too and later opened a guesthouse called Hidden Valley. Before the project, her family hosted tourists only a few times a year through occasional contacts with travel companies. After registering the guesthouse on Booking.com, Google Maps, and 2GIS, the number of visitors increased significantly, including during winter.

The family improved the house, bought beds, and redesigned the yard to make it more comfortable for guests.

At the same time, they continued working toward making the household more self-sufficient.

With support from El-Too, the family started collecting rainwater from their roof.

“It is always challenging to get irrigation water for gardens,” Venera explains. “So we started collecting rainwater. We collected one ton of water in only six hours of rain from two sides of the roof. If we connected all the roofs, it would be much more.”

Looking around her garden today, Venera believes the biggest change was not only in harvests, but in perception. From her observation, village people plant more fruit trees and berries and try to experiment with vegetables.



2.4. Gulaiym's 300-Square-Meter Garden Became a Source of Income, Healthy Food, and Inspiration

Every morning, before most of her neighbors are awake, Gulaiym from Bokonbaevo steps into her garden.

The first thing she sees is her greenhouse, standing just outside her front door. Built from old glass windows collected from neighbors who were replacing them with plastic frames, it is now filled with seedlings of tomatoes, cucumbers, capsicum, medicinal herbs, and other vegetables. She takes a few photographs of young seedlings and sends them to WhatsApp groups in her village and to the network of permaculture practitioners connected through El-Too. Often, orders arrive the same day.

Then she begins her daily round. She checks vegetables growing beneath fruit trees, visits berry bushes, and stops by the biohumus beds where thousands of Californian worms quietly transform household waste and manure into organic fertilizer biohumus. Finally, she reaches a row of broccoli.

The broccoli still makes her smile.

"A few years ago, I thought broccoli grew somewhere tropical, or in some faraway country," she says. "I never imagined I could grow it in my own garden."



Today, customers from Karakol town, nearly 200 kilometers away, contact her hoping to buy it.

Looking around the garden now, it is difficult to imagine that just a few years ago the entire plot was considered too small to produce much of anything.

The family's garden measures only about 300 square meters. There were a few apple trees, some black currants, and little expectation that the space could provide more than that.

Everything changed when permaculture entered Gulaiym's life. When El-Too first organized permaculture training in her village, Gulaiym was too busy to attend. Instead, she sent her daughter.

But the stories her daughter brought home sparked her curiosity. Participants were learning about soil health, composting, crop diversity, and a simple but powerful idea, what people often call waste can become one of their most valuable resources.

By the third training session, which focused on biohumus production, Gulaiym decided to participate herself.

"I was fascinated by the idea that organic waste could become something useful," she recalls. "I came home and immediately started persuading my husband that we should try it."

Her husband was not convinced.

"Our garden is already very small," he told her. "Where will we put all this?"





But Gulaiym persisted. Eventually, they purchased Californian worms for just 2,000 Kyrgyz soms and introduced them into 800 kilograms of cow manure. Most people saw little value in the manure. Sold as it was, it would generate almost no income. Spread on fields, it would barely cover a small area.

Six to eight months later, the family harvested around 600 kilograms of biohumus. They sold it for approximately 55,000 soms.

Today, biohumus production remains one of the family’s most reliable additional income streams. She markets the product through social media and supplies customers throughout the region. Before permaculture, kitchen scraps accumulated until the weekly rubbish collection arrived. Some leftovers could be fed to chickens, but much of it simply sat and spoiled.

“The waste became smelly and unpleasant,” Gulaiym remembers. Now, almost nothing organic leaves the property.

Kitchen scraps become compost. Fallen leaves become mulch. Animal manure becomes biohumus. Wool, plant residues, and other materials that were once discarded now serve a purpose.

3 years ago, Gulaiym visited the farm of permaculture practitioner Andrei Kiashko, who had spent more than a decade experimenting with ecological design and reusing old materials. She was inspired by how he transformed discarded items into useful structures. Returning home, she noticed neighbors replacing wooden windows with plastic ones. Instead of letting the old frames go to waste, she collected them and built a greenhouse.

While biohumus created new income opportunities, healthy food remains Gulaiym’s greatest motivation.

“The most important thing for me is knowing what my children are eating,” she says.

Through the training, she learned how to improve soil fertility naturally, combine crops that support each other, protect plants using environmentally friendly methods, and grow vegetables without chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

Her small garden now produces tomatoes, cucumbers, salad greens, berries, medicinal herbs, fruit, and broccoli. Vegetables grow beneath fruit trees, maximizing every available square meter.

“I learned that even a small area can produce a lot if you work with nature,” she says.

These days, people rarely pass Gulaiym’s home without stopping to look. Visitors often ask how she managed to transform such a small plot into a thriving garden.

“They ask me, ‘How did you do this? What is your secret?’”

She is always happy to share what she has learned. Over the years, she has taught relatives, neighbors, and friends how to compost, produce biohumus, and organize their gardens more effectively. Many have started applying permaculture principles on their own land. Some have even achieved results that surpass hers.

Rather than feeling competitive, Gulaiym feels proud. “When I see other people succeeding because of something I shared, it makes me happy,” she says. “That is the best result.”



Section 3.

Youth, Arts and Creativity



3.1. Bringing Art to the Countryside: Designer Students from Kasym Tynystanov University create soil installation in Issyk-Kul

Heavy rain and strong wind kept shaking the exhibition tent beside Issyk-Kul Lake. Every few minutes, students rushed to hold the structure together and protect the installations from getting soaked. Some artworks had already started collapsing under the rain, but nobody wanted to stop.

Aliya, while helping fix the tent, watched her students run between ropes, fabric, wood, and wet exhibition pieces. Despite the chaos, she smiled.

For her, this moment represented much more than an exhibition.

Aliya has worked for many years as a professor and art curator at Kasym Tynystanov University in Karakol. Unlike universities in Bishkek, regional universities often receive fewer opportunities for creative programmes, workshops, and international collaborations. Most of her students come from villages across Issyk-Kul region, where contemporary art exhibitions are still uncommon.

So when El-Too invited the university to participate in an environmental art exhibition connected to soil research and ecology, the idea immediately felt exciting.

“At first, the students did not fully understand what installation art was,” Aliya recalls. “For them, exhibitions mainly meant hanging paintings or displaying costumes.”





“This project helped bring art to rural areas and small communities. That made us feel our work mattered.”

The project challenged that understanding completely.

Through a three-day art camp, students learned not only about contemporary art and exhibition design, but also about soil degradation, agriculture, and environmental issues. Agronomists and soil scientists spoke about soil health and ecosystems, while artists and curators introduced students to installations, conceptual art, and the idea that art can carry social and environmental messages.

Suddenly, students who were used to canvas and fabric began working with soil, recycled materials, and natural objects. What was planned as two weeks of preparation slowly turned into a month of experimenting, failing, rebuilding, and trying again.

“It was difficult because none of us really knew how long installation work takes,” Aliya says. “The students were working with completely unfamiliar materials. They kept coming to me with questions, and together we searched for ideas and solutions.”

Still, for Aliya, the process became one of the most meaningful experiences she had seen among her second-year students, many of whom were only beginning to think seriously about their future in art.

Slowly, students began thinking not only about aesthetics, but also about meaning.

“Now they ask different questions,” Aliya says. “What message does this artwork carry? What should people feel or think when they see it?”

For Aliya and her students, the project also changed how they thought about environmental problems themselves.

“One of the lectures by the agronomist affected me personally,” Aliya says. “Now I use mulch and try to grow plants without chemical fertilisers.”



Students say the project also changed how they think about food, ecology, and everyday habits.

“It made me reflect on how connected people are to nature and soil,” one participant explains. “I think this understanding will stay with me for life.”

The exhibitions later traveled to Tong Fest, the Naryn Art Gallery, and a youth forum organised by the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports and Youth Policy. An estimated 1,500–2,000 people visited the exhibitions, including farmers, students, activists, civic activists, and local officials from rural areas.

For Aliya, however, the most memorable moment remains the rainy exhibition day beside the lake.

“It was difficult, cold, and exhausting,” she remembers. “But at the same time, everybody was happy.”

Looking back, she believes the project gave students something more important than technical artistic skills alone. It showed them that art can become a way to discuss social issues, environmental problems, and life outside large cities.

Later, the students applied their new skills to another exhibition competition organised by the Ministry of Internal Affairs on the topic of corruption.

“As soon as we heard about the competition, my students immediately said, ‘We are going to prepare an exhibition similar to Mother Earth that we created with El-Too,’” Aliya says proudly. “We succeeded, and our work was recognised by the Ministry. Some of the girls even received watches as prizes.”

For Aliya, the project also carried another important meaning.

“In most cases, cultural events stay concentrated in Bishkek or other big cities,” she says. “But this project helped bring art to rural areas and small communities. That made us feel our work mattered.”

3.2. Choosing a Career Path: The Story of an Anthropology Student Who Chose to Explore Rural Areas

Sezimai is once again driving through the countryside. Today, she works for an international Norwegian organisation providing mobile medical services to rural communities across Kyrgyzstan. As the car moves past quiet villages and open landscapes, she remembers another journey she took a year earlier — one that changed how she understood her country, research, and her own future.

Around this time, Sezimai was finishing her anthropology degree at the American University of Central Asia. Like many graduating students, she felt uncertain about what to do next. Should she immediately apply for a master's degree, or first gain practical experience?

At this time she came across El-Too's announcement inviting students to join a participatory research project on soil and land management practices in the Issyk-Kul and Naryn regions. The topic immediately resonated with her, especially as her family had recently started renting agricultural land.

Before entering the field, students from several universities received training in qualitative research, interviewing, focus group facilitation, ethics, and data analysis. The programme, organised by El-Too together with its Swedish partner organisation, CAG, prepared students not only to collect information, but to conduct fieldwork responsibly and professionally.



During the fieldwork, students interviewed farmers, soil scientists, local government officials, lawyers, NGO workers, and artists across remote mountain communities. Together, they explored how soil is understood, managed, and valued by people whose everyday lives depend on it.

For Sezimai, the experience became far more than academic practice.

“When I arrived in the mountain villages, I experienced a kind of cultural immersion,” she recalls. “Even though I am Kyrgyz, I began rethinking my own culture and way of life.”

One meeting especially stayed with her. An elderly farmer named Sovetbek spoke not only about agriculture, but also about the spiritual relationship between people, plants, and nature.

“Through meeting Sovetbek, I could feel his authentic connection to nature, something we have lost,” she says.

What she also remembers vividly is the atmosphere of the villages themselves. The homes they visited had little noise, few distractions, and no unnecessary clutter. Conversations felt direct, calm, and unhurried. The environment carried a sense of intentionality that urban professional life often lacks.

“That setting reminded me that there was something inherent there,” she reflects. “Something that should probably be more common in people’s lives.”

The fieldwork also gave her practical skills she continues to use today, including data analysis through MAXQDA, facilitating focus group discussions, and working within a structured research team. Just as importantly, it helped her better understand the direction she wanted to take professionally.

Today, Sezimai still believes more young professionals should spend time in rural communities.

“Many professionals stay only in cities and become disconnected from the real problems communities face,” she says.

For organisations working in research, policy, and development, her experience highlights the importance of participatory fieldwork that helps young researchers connect academic knowledge with community realities.

Sezimai says the project also changed how she thinks about soil itself, not simply as land to be managed, but as something deeply connected to people, memory, and life.



3.3. Turning Soil into Poetry: An Unusual Partnership Between Researchers and Akyns

"There were poems about water.
There were poems about the wind.
But nobody sang about soil."

— Temirbek Matybaev



Akyn Temirbek Matybaev performing ‘terme’. Still from a video created by the Aytish Public Foundation and El-Too.

For most of his life, Temirbek Matybaev has stood on stages with a komuz in his hands, turning ideas into verse.

He first discovered aitysh when he was just eleven years old. Sitting in front of a television and later scrolling through videos on social media, he became fascinated by the quick wit and powerful messages of Kyrgyz akyns. Determined to learn, he searched for an aitysh school and began competing in contests.

"I was inspired by the famous akyns I watched," he recalls. "But perhaps poetry was also in my blood. My great-grandfather on my mother's side, Alabash, was a well-known akyn in his area."

Years later, Temirbek and several fellow akyns received an unusual proposal. Public Foundation El-Too was conducting research on soil health, collecting stories from farmers, documenting traditional knowledge, and working with scientists to better understand the challenges facing Kyrgyzstan's soils. The organization wanted to share these findings with people—not through reports or presentations, but through traditional poetry.

At first, the idea seemed unexpected.



"When we first heard about creating aitysh about soil, we sat together and discussed whether it was possible," Temirbek says. "The first things that came to our minds were Jenijok's famous poems about flowing water and Barpy's verses about the wind. We knew nature had always inspired poets. But soil? That was something new."

The akyns accepted the challenge. Together with colleagues Asylbek Maratov, Munduzbek Boronchuev, Shailoobek Otunchuev, Elmirbek Imanaliev, and Elmirbek Beishenaliev, Temirbek immersed himself in research findings, interview transcripts, and folkloric materials gathered through El-Too's study. The group held several meetings with researchers who explained local perceptions of soil and the ecological threats it faces.

For an akyn, improvisation comes naturally. Traditional aitysh is usually performed without preparation, with poets responding spontaneously to one another in verse. But this project required something different.

The team decided to create both aitysh performances and terme—didactic poetic pieces designed to teach and convey knowledge.

"Terme requires much more preparation," Temirbek explains. "You have to think carefully about the beginning, the development, and the ending. We revised the texts several times because many of the scientific concepts were unfamiliar to us."

The learning process was not always easy.

"Soil microorganisms, nematodes, mycorrhizae—these were difficult concepts for me at first," he says with a laugh. "But they were fascinating. I had never really thought about the hidden life beneath our feet."

To find inspiration, the akyns travelled into the mountains. Surrounded by landscapes that had inspired generations of Kyrgyz poets, they refined their verses, filmed videos, and later spent long hours in recording studios perfecting their performances.

Temirbek chose to focus on a message that felt deeply relevant to Kyrgyzstan.

"I wanted people to see soil as a treasure," he says. "It contains so many minerals and valuable elements. But I also wanted to speak about restraint. We should not always dig deeper in search of gold. Sometimes the real treasure is the living soil itself."

The resulting performances transformed scientific concepts into stories and images that audiences could connect with. Soil degradation became a warning. Soil organisms became invisible workers. Fertile land became a living community rather than a lifeless resource.

The response surprised even the poets.

Among Kyrgyzstan's community of approximately sixty professional tokmo akyns, the initiative received widespread praise.

"Many told us they had never heard poetry about soil before," Temirbek says. "There had been songs about water, wind, mountains, and many other subjects, but not soil."

Business leaders, cultural figures, and ordinary listeners also responded positively. Many supported the idea that poets should not only comment on politics but should also help society reflect on nature, environmental responsibility, and the future.

Social media audiences echoed the sentiment. Comments poured in on YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. People encouraged the akyns to continue creating poetry about environmental themes and suggested future topics such as mountains, rivers, forests, and biodiversity.

For Temirbek, the project achieved something even more important.

"It reminded us of an old tradition," he says. "Kyrgyz poets have always sung about nature and people's relationship with it. Through this work, we remembered that legacy."

Today, he believes environmental themes may become a lasting part of contemporary Kyrgyz poetry.

The project began as an experiment, could scientific research about soil be transformed into traditional oral poetry?

The answer, it seems, was yes. In the hands of Kyrgyz akyns, soil found a voice.

All recordings of the aytish and terme performances can be found on El-Too's social media pages.



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