

”Local Market Has an Aroma of Dried Fruits”

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Since 2006 AWHHE NGO has been working in 6 villages of Armenia.

The main goals of the projects are: expansion of biodiversity and preservation of sustainability of agro ecosystems by using methods of alternative farming, as well as studying the possibilities of passing to organic farming in Armenian villages in frame of the joint project. One of the main directions of NGO’s activities is the promotion of the development of the organic domestic market. For that reason in 2008 AWHHE has conducted a “Case study on Potential and Development Perspectives of Organic Dried Fruit Production and Realization in the Village Dzoraghbyur”.

The goal of the study was to investigate and find out the existing potential and possible perspectives of development of dried fruit production in Armenia, particularly in the village Dzoraghbyur, the opinions and approaches of specialists and local gardeners towards this issue, as well as to use this study as a guide for gardeners willing to engage in dried fruit production.

The study was carried out for finding out data about current situation in dried fruit production, possible trends of development in Armenia and the potential to start an organic agriculture and organic dried fruit production. In case study is presented the history of fruit drying, general information about dried fruits and the experience of Armenia in the field of fruit drying.

In the study are presented data about fruit drying industry in Armenia and producers of dried fruit, their potential and possibilities, as well as data on import and export of dried fruit. Also are described the perspectives of organic agriculture development in the republic and the interest of gardeners from the village Dzoraghbyur to start organic production of dried fruits.

In Armenia solar drying units started developing in the 1990s. In those days, it was critical that a unit use as little gas and energy as possible - solar drying units were the best solution in those conditions. In the Soviet years of planned economic development, Armenia was left out of the fruit drying industry because that area was handed to the Central Asian republics. But the reforms that occurred in the agriculture sector in the 1990s independent Armenia, especially the privatization of land, provided new perspectives for the fruit drying industry.

Although the makers of dried fruit in Armenia constantly assure that this field is developing here, the volume of imported dried fruit is increasing every year while the volume of their export is declining.

There are large, medium-sized and small producers of dried food in Armenia, but the description “large” has a much relative sense here. Based on the data of 2006 (Source: Association of Dried Food Producers of Armenia), small producers are approximately 5500 and produce up to 0.5 tons annually. There are 100 medium-sized producers with annual production volumes of 1 – 5 tons, and 21 large producers with annual production of above 5 tons.

Dzoraghbyur Community is located in Abovyan region of Kotayk marz(province) of the Republic of Armenia. The administrative territory is 2454 ha, population is 2270, out of which 51.01% are men and 48.99 % are women. The agricultural lands make up 1325 ha, out of which 63% are arable lands, and 3% (40 ha) are fruit-orchards.

Below are presented only the most important results of questioning of gardeners of the village Dzoraghbyur. The questionnaire consists of both quantitative and qualitative questions. The analyses are given separately by types of questions.

Respondent demographics

The sixty percent of respondents are male persons and forty percent are female persons. This speaks about the fact that men, nevertheless, are more engaged in agricultural activities, though it is not a secret that the main burden of work is laid on women's shoulders.

Types of grown fruits

The analysis of the answers to the question as "What fruits do you grow? The covered area, types of fruits" showed that the biggest area (30%) among the total area are covered by apricot-orchards, 21% are covered by apple-orchards.

Realization of harvest

In order to have an idea about the realization of harvest, the gardeners were given the following question "How do you manage your harvest? The 85% sell the fresh fruits, use them for own needs, make cans or dry them. Only 15 % of respondents excluded the sale due to scarcity of harvest and lack of access to a market.

Use of dried fruit

In order to clear up the purpose of usage of dried fruit the respondents were given the following question "What do you use the dried fruit for? It becomes clear from the answers that only 5% of respondents produce dried fruit for selling purpose, and 50% respondents produce both for sale and own need, only 5% of respondents mention that they give it to neighbors and relatives. Out of respondents who chose the answer "for own need" 5 respondents also mentioned the option of giving dried fruit to their children, grandchildren and relatives

Drying fruit for production purposes

AWHHE NGO tried to find out whether the gardeners of this village were interested or wanted to engage in drying fruit for production purposes, and 20% answered that they had no willing to do it.

What will change in case there is a drying room in the village?

AWHHE found it more advisable to give also the following question "Suppose there is a drying room in the village. Would you like to dry your fruit there?"

The analysis of the answers showed that 75 % respondents answered "yes" to the question, 10% respondents gave negative answers and mentioned that they would like to have their own drying room, 15% gardeners could not answer the question.

The amount of fruit to be dried and the production amount underwent cross study: If the maximum amount of fruits (200 kg and more) were dried by 15% respondents, then 10% of respondents were

ready to produce 1 ton and more. In the first case the minimum amount was 0-50 kg and such amount was dried by 30% respondents, while in the second case the minimum amount was (0-200 kg) and 10% respondents answered they could produce that amount of dried fruit.

Organic agriculture

In almost all countries of the world, as well in Armenia has started a great movement towards the transition into organic farming by the involvement of scientists, broad sections of the public, political, state and public figures, farmers, workers of agricultural production.

As a result of analyzing the answers it was cleared up those 80% respondents were familiar with organic agriculture, 20% are not aware of it.

Organic produce

An attempt was made to find out the readiness of gardeners to engage in organic fruit and dried fruit production. For that purpose the gardeners were asked "Would you like to produce organic fruit and dried fruit?" The analysis of answers showed that 55% respondents expressed a wish to engage in organic agriculture, 35% gardeners could not answer, because they had no idea about it, and 10% respondents gave a negative answer

Money for Certification

The general picture is rather interesting. 55% respondents said that they wanted to start organic production, while money for certification was affordable for 10%. This points that the product first of all should be of demand in market, so that the gardener with firmness of purpose moves towards the certification of production.

The solution to the problems connected with branding is of great importance and can be considered as a recommendation from case study, because much of the imported dried fruits are sold as domestic produce with the same prices. It is also important to present branding as Armenian dried fruit. So organically grown and certified dried food production can be one of the main directions for the development of drying industry.

Nevertheless, as drying industry is complicate and needs capital investments, it can be achieved by stages promoting the small-scale and middle-sized domestic productions.

With regard to the community of Dzoraghbyur the studies carried out by AWHHE NGO show that in this village there are all prerequisites for starting organic production. Moreover, AWHHE supports some local farmers to grow organic fruits. The villager produces high quality harvest but there is not an appropriate market for the realization. Instead the villager can dry them and get additional income. But the villager is not able to start a production by himself, to have it certified and realize the produce. Here task-oriented subsidies can probably be helpful.

The results of study show that 75 % gardeners have expressed a wish to have a solar drying room in the village and have possibilities for drying their fruits there. In this case they predict that the amount of dried fruit produced by them will increase 50 times. It can be a source of income for the villagers.

Thus, the building of solar drying room, its exploitation, the packaging and the realization of produce will improve the socio-economic state of the villagers.