



WECF | Women in Europe for a Common Future

“I am hopeful now I see a potential for women’s movements back home”

Interview with Olga Djanaeva of ALGA

Olga Djanaeva is from Jerkazar village, Kyrgyzstan and the director and co-founder of the rural women’s association ALGA. She attended the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference Of the Parties (COP) 19 in Warsaw. Claire Greensfelder, senior Advisor on Climate and Energy for WECF, interviewed her on the accomplishments of ALGA and the knowledge she gained during the UNFCCC.

How did you become involved in ALGA?

“I have a background in sociology and back in the Soviet Times, I was a scientific worker. After the collapse of the USSR and after getting independence the usual life collapsed. It affected every family. Transportation and infrastructure were destroyed. The bus that I used to take to travel from my village to Bishkek, this route was discontinued. It became dangerous and costly to travel back and forth. I have two sons and at that time they were school boys. Together with my husband, we decided I would stay at home and be a housewife. I baked bread, I worked in the garden where I was growing vegetables and I thought it was my destiny and that it would stay like this forever. However, I was not happy. I wanted something more out of life.

I got some information about women’s organisations that were established in Kyrgyzstan after the Beijing Women’s conference and I read a story of how some African Rural Women’s organisations organised themselves. These women’s groups made efforts to change and improve their own lives.

There was a good cultural practice in the villages where women used to meet together to support each other and to share their problems. At that time there were three villages close to me, together there lived approximately 5000 people and already 1500 persons in my village alone. I discussed the story I had read with the women from our village. I said: “Why do we not try to organise a group and to start to do something?”. This was a very

difficult time for people, with great psychological stress as there were no jobs, so we started our small support group. We decided to choose a historical name for our group. There had been a cooperative named Alga and my father-in-law was the head of this co-op. He was very progressive and always thinking about how to improve conditions for women and children. We wanted to continue his philosophy and his ideas so we took the name “Alga”, which means ‘Moving Forward, Being Ahead’.”

What does ALGA do?

“Since 1995 we have been working at the grassroots level, on a comprehensive programme on Sustainable Livelihoods and recently we also started working at the national level. We are a total grassroots group: our mission is to improve the social and economic status of women through women’s empowerment. We work with women on their capacity for self-realisation so that they can contribute to the development. Young rural women are of special concern to us. We use many different approaches, we organise women’s meetings where we mobilise not only female farmers, but also rural teachers, medical workers and social workers. We are active in more than 30 villages in Kyrgyzstan, reaching communities that together have a total population of 80,000 people dispersed in villages of 2,000 to 10,000 people each. Rural areas in Kyrgyzstan differ from urban areas as the living conditions are harder. The majority of the families we work with do not have running water inside their homes. But despite the difficulties rural women are great actors in the process of development. Rural women have significant potential which help us to realise our programmes. After almost 20 years, we now have more than 200 women leader/activists from 30 villages who are our core members.”

What are some of the accomplishments of ALGA that you are proud of?

“One of our main achievements so far was that we managed to win victories for women’s land rights connected to the local agrarian reform. Single mothers, widows, single unmarried women; officially they had equal rights, but in practice this was not the case.

We also started a micro credit programme for women. We negotiated with the FINCA Financial Corporation to offer loans to rural women with very small enterprises as baking bread, buying chickens and selling eggs. The loans were only \$100 or \$200, but they really made a difference. We also provided training in developing a small business and writing a business plan. We began with ten women who each co-founded a business.

We started with these direct programmes to bring bread to children and raise dollars for families, but then we expanded our work into domestic violence. We had found out that sometimes after we taught economic and business skills to the women, the husbands would take their income and waste it on alcohol, drugs or cars. Our domestic violence programme helped to empower women to stand up for themselves. We also developed a programme of sustainable livelihoods based on the 5 capitals: human capital, physical capital, social capital, natural capital and financial capital.”

Has it been useful for you to attend the UNFCCC here in Warsaw?

“This is my first time at the UNFCCC COP. I am very happy to be here in Warsaw with WECF. It is an opportunity to build my personal capacity and obtain knowledge and

experience from women from other countries. I am especially interested in understanding the negotiations process on climate change. It also has been important for me to attend the Women and Gender Caucus at the COP to see what they can do and how women's issues and perspectives can be included in the UNFCCC agreements. I have really gotten a lot out of the experience here in Warsaw. But honestly, for me, it all seems to be a very slow process of agreement. There is less action than I expected, there is a real lack of political will to do something. It seems that some kind of game between countries is going on here.

It was extremely interesting to participate in the side events as the Women's Caucus and the Gender Workshops. I learned a lot from the side events that presented information on locally based work on climate change from around the world. There is clearly still a gap between the civil society and governments on these issues. I also listened to the interventions, statements made in the plenary of the negotiations, and I helped to develop an intervention that was given by the Women's Major Group.

The issue of climate change is also very interesting for me. There are some organisations in Kyrgyzstan working on climate change, but the public awareness is very low. Yet women are already experiencing the impacts of climate change at the local level. We have seen changes in the seasons and now women have to plant things later than usual and there are problems with the plants. It is too hot during the day and too cold at night. Some farmers have shifted from wheat to barley since barley is more resistant to temperature changes and our seasons have become drier with less water. The Kyrgyz government thinks that they have more important issues to deal with other than climate change. But when I get back home, I will check what is happening and see what can be done. I am actually the only NGO here in Warsaw from Kyrgyzstan.

The next time I come to one of these international meetings I will know what to do in order to be more prepared to participate. I would like to bring other women from Kyrgyzstan so that they can also learn about this.

As a result of being here I am more hopeful. I see that there really is a strong potential for building and increasing the capacity in women's movements back home. There is a kind of openness in women's organisations; everyone is quite helpful and supportive. It has been very important for me to be involved here. After almost twenty years of experience, we now better understand that everything is very interrelated. For example, sometimes we can influence the national and international level with what we are doing at the grassroots. We feel the consequences of international agreements that were made by our country and we can see how the decisions made at the top influences us."

What will you take home with you to Kyrgyzstan?

"I will take home a lot since I also participated in WECF's international women's leadership and empowerment training in Warsaw before the UNFCCC meeting. ALGA has been a member of WECF since 2004. We first joined at a conference in Budapest. It was a women's conference and we went to see the sites of sustainable farms in Hungary. It was there that I got to know Sascha Gabizon and her mother Marie Kranendonk, Marie

is really a great woman. We have continued to participate in regional meetings of the civil society organised by WECF and applied to be part of WECF's leadership programme training that was held here in Warsaw.

I will bring all the knowledge I learned in the programme to my community as well as my experience at the COP. As a part of the WECF training, I will then be mentoring four or five women back home. I will share with them my new knowledge on how to create leadership at the local level and how women can be more active and effective in influencing international processes. I think my experience in Warsaw will also be helpful and important in training women to work at the national level in Kyrgyzstan.

I now intend to take time to strengthen my work so that I can build a political leadership with women at the grassroots level. By building a political leadership we can empower them so that they are able to have more impact at the decision making level. This is one of the weak points in our work with women. We have managed to bring women into a local level of decision making; we call it a "rural council", but women still do not understand the process of how decisions are being made. They are not sure how decisions are organised and how they can negotiate and advocate for their concerns. I hope I will be able to strengthen their capacity and strengthen my own personal knowledge and capabilities when I go back home.

To WECF I would like to express deep gratitude. Though we were here for a relatively short time it was extremely useful. I got a lot from listening to other organisations. We now have a very good leadership team from Georgia, Uganda, Kazakhstan and Latin America in our WECF training group. We have established personal relationships and support. I have been inspired anew. I also have the determination to raise issues of climate change back in my home country."