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# KOSOVO NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR AGRICULTURE PROGRAM

## GHERKINS PRODUCTION TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE



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# GHERKIN PRODUCTION TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

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## **DISCLAIMER**

This report was prepared by the New Opportunities for Agriculture project team of Tetra Tech ARD based on a Final Report prepared by Short Term Technical Advisor, Dr. C. Bruce Williams, a Farmer to Farmer volunteer. The authors' views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

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# BACKGROUND

USAID supports economic growth in Kosovo through programs that strengthen and improve competitiveness of Kosovo agribusinesses, improve the business environment, and encourage local economic development. Accordingly, USAID/Kosovo has awarded Tetra Tech ARD the task order for the New Opportunities in Agriculture in Kosovo Program.

The goal of the program is to increase economic growth in Kosovo through expanded, environmentally sustainable production and sales of value-added agricultural products by enabling producers and processors to compete regionally and globally. The program has the following components:

1. Products and farmers linked with markets;
2. Agriculture products diversified and increased;
3. Food quality and safety improved;
4. Increased affordable and accessible credits;
5. Improved coordination with the agriculture sector.

One of the crops recommended for development in Kosovo in USAID's Agricultural Strategy, the AgStrat report dated 2009, were cucumbers/gherkins. The potential for increased commercial processing of gherkins was identified. Accordingly, the Program has sought technical assistance to promote and train farmers in improved farming practices for this crop.

# PURPOSE OF ASSIGNMENT

The purpose of this assignment was to monitor gherkin demonstration plots already established by the Program to test and demonstrate modern open field production technologies to reduce the costs of production and increase the quality of gherkins produced. This assignment would contribute to the development of Program Component 2, Agricultural Products Diversified and Increased.

In Kosovo, gherkins are being produced in greenhouses as a second crop targeting the processor markets, i.e., supplying processors with raw material. However, very often, due to the lack of coordination between farmers and processors, farmers sell their gherkins in retail markets that target families that make their own pickles. Production of gherkins in greenhouses increases the costs of production and reduces the possibilities for broad-based value chain expansion due to the higher investment required for the establishment of greenhouses.

A gherkin is an immature fruit of the cucumber plant used primarily for processing into pickles. Gherkins are a component of fruit yield of normal cucumber harvest. The smaller size (3-9 cm) fruits require increased labor for harvest but return the highest prices from processors. A typical harvest of “pickling type” cucumber cultivars will grade only 20-40% (by weight) gherkins (less than 9 cm) of the total harvest.

The primary objective is to achieve higher profits, increased yields, better quality and sustainable production of field grown pickling cucumbers. This assignment provided technical assistance in support of gherkin production, assisted with variety demonstration plots, communicated modern field production technologies, suggested strategies to achieve improved cucumber yield and quality, and developed tactics to enhance the overall profitability (to the small farmer) of cucumber production in Kosovo.

Following good practices in developed countries two types of technologies were tested with the support of the Farmer-to-Farmer volunteer:

A gherkin production system using the trellis support system. The trellis system is built by wooden or concrete posts set every 4 to 5 m in the row, a plastic net fixed on the posts with wire on the top and bottom. The system will create better ventilation and sunlight on the cucumber plants thus producing less presence of fungus diseases and pests, leading to higher yields and quality. In addition, the trellis system offers the possibility of an easier harvest and better quality raw product. The trellis system is being tested on four demo plots totaling 2 hectares.

Moreover, a gherkin system without using the trellis support system is being tested on four demo plots totaling 2 hectares. This system is less costly and requires less investment and labor; but lower yields are expected. Both of these two technologies will be used to demonstrate four new gherkin varieties and will use plastic mulch and drip irrigation.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this assignment is to provide technical assistance in support of gherkin production, assist with variety demonstration plots, communicate modern field production technologies, suggest strategies to achieve improved cucumber yield and quality, and develop tactics to enhance the overall profitability (to the small farmer) of cucumber production in Kosovo.

Field visits were made to a diverse group of stakeholders to include farmers, processors, distributors, retail supermarkets, local green markets, high school agriculture instructors, University research horticulturists, undergraduate and graduate students. A production guideline for gherkins was developed and a presentation given at a field day to 45 people (29 farmers). Additionally, coverage from Kosovo television RTV established a beginning for a gherkins education program to build upon. Awareness of the project was generated.

Farmers are using gherkin production as a income supplement to existing agricultural and animal production practices. Most farmers are barely above subsistence level although some did have vegetable cooling chambers and specialized agricultural equipment. Most are small and usually less than 2 hectares, but one operation of 6 hectares was visited. The 6 hectare operation was having problems with finding adequate labor to properly harvest the crop.

Cucumbers are being grown using plasticulture techniques adapted to local conditions. Seedlings are being raised in controlled environment plastic covered quonset type or A-frame greenhouses. Seedlings are grown in flats typical of those used in the USA (please note, USA cucumber farmers do not normally produce cucumber seedling in a containers prior to transplanting in the field). The crop is harvested by hand labor, placed in sacks or containers, and transported directly to the processor or grader/buyer. Cucumbers are sorted into three size classes based upon length (3-6 cm, 6-9 cm, 9-12cm). Highest price is paid for smaller sizes.

Field gherkin production is a labor intensive venture. From growing seedlings in the greenhouse to harvesting fields 3 or more time per week for up to 4 weeks, growing cucumbers is hard work. For each harvest, 60 hours labor (more or less) is needed per hectare and the crop should be harvested 3 times per week. In the USA, cost of labor (for harvest alone) may exceed 50% of total production income. Farmers keep virtually no records and few understand basic agronomic or financial management issues. In order to have rapid growth and development of this market segment, producers, input suppliers, and processor will need to work in concert to become educated on a profitable means of production.

Educational, structural, financial, and regulatory infrastructure are essential to the success of gherkin production in Kosovo, The challenges are numerous and the solutions are complex. Solutions involve the education of farmers and the cooperation of processors, input suppliers, and governmental entities. These issues, critical agronomic practices, and suggestions for market improvement are detailed in this document.

# FIELD ACTIVITIES TO ACHIEVE PURPOSES

A meeting with Brian Fahey, USAID Senior Agricultural Advisor, and Besa Ilazi, USAID COTR, was held on Wednesday August 3 at 9:30am at NOA offices in Pristina. Topics were discussed related to the demonstration plots, gherkins production, the planned Field Day on August 10, and the television interaction/media exposure. They welcomed me to Kosovo.

Field visits were made to a diverse group of stakeholders to include farmers, processors, distributors, retail supermarkets, local green markets, high school agriculture instructors, University research horticulturists, undergraduate and graduate students. Farmers were using gherkin production as an income supplement to existing agricultural production. Small acreages, usually less than 2 hectares, were involved but one operation of 6 hectares was visited. The 6 hectare operation was having problems with finding sufficient labor to properly harvest the crop. A detailed itinerary of field visits is in Annex III.

Most crops were being produced using modern plasticulture techniques adapted to the local conditions. Seedlings were being raised in controlled environment plastic covered quonset type or A-frame greenhouses. Seedlings were grown in flats typical of those used in the USA (please note, USA cucumber farmers do not normally produce cucumber seedling in a containers prior to transplanting in the field). The crop was harvested by hand labor, placed in sacks or containers, and transported directly to the processor or grader/buyer. Cucumbers were sorted into three size classes based upon length (3-6 cm, 6-9 cm, 9-12cm). Highest price was paid to the smaller sizes. At the time of my visit, processors were paying around 0.40 euro, 0.30 euro, and 0.25 euro per kilogram of weight, respectively.

Based upon my observations, a summary of recommended production techniques was developed and handed out at the seminar and field day. Since plasticulture production appeared entrenched, suggestions and modifications on their production scheme were suggested. Especially pertinent is the cultivar selection, plant density, plant sanitation, irrigation water quality, crop rotation, plant protection details, and harvest efficiency. For small growers, overall production and profitability could be increased using these recommendations.

# TASK FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following tasks were derived from the Scope of Work provided by CNFA/USAID's Farmer-to-Farmer Program and with conversations with NOA staff working on the project.

**Task #1.** Provide recommendations of open field, trellising, and plasticulture production options for gherkins production to include best management practices, cultural practices, plant protection, irrigation, fertility and postharvest processing.

**Task #2.** Provide recommendations for appropriate testing of cultivars for processing cucumbers with emphasis on gherkins.

**Task #3.** Evaluate and assess current production processes to include, seedling production, cultural practices, fertilization, irrigation, and postharvest treatment.

**Task #4.** Interact with processors to determine demand, supply, and quality of production. Make any recommendations that would improve the relationship with producers and processors.

**Task #5.** Determine the economic viability of gherkin production in Kosovo.

**Task #6.** Prepare a list of action items needed to increase gherkin production in Kosovo.

**Task #7.** Assist and provide input in the development of strategies for promoting gherkin production in the future.

**Task #8.** Help establish contacts and provide pictures, slides or other AV of operations, equipment, or harvesting. Quality of product, cost of production, value chain information, and food safety standards transfer would be useful.

## **Task Findings**

**Task #1:** Trellis production or greenhouse production is not used in the USA for processing cucumbers. In general, either greenhouse or trellis type production demands a higher revenue generating crop and is not used for processing cucumbers due to economic considerations. I do not consider the trellis or greenhouse gherkin systems sustainable for processing cucumber production except for a short period of time under unique environment and economic conditions. Field production or plasticulture production is most likely to be profitable and sustainable for most farmers in Kosovo.

A production guideline was developed to produce gherkins on plastic using drip irrigation. Details of this production plan and can be reviewed in the annex. A powerpoint presentation was developed and used in a presentation in Suhareka attended by 45 individuals, 29 of which identified themselves as farmers. Favorable comments were received regarding the presentation.

**Task #2:** Eight popular cucumber hybrid cultivars (1000 seed per cultivar) were donated by Seminis and Harris Moran Seed Companies. Variety testing in the USA is usually done by using replicated small plantings with multiple locations. The use of relatively small plots (10m x 1m) are typically used to determine cultivars best suited for local conditions with minimum seed cost and labor inputs. Dr. Mentor Thaqi was given responsibility for evaluating the seed. Cultivars are listed below.

Arabian (batch 0090132452)	Seminis
Excursion 88% Sire 12%	Seminis
Expedition 88% Sire 12%	Seminis
Vlaspik (Batch 01102298154)	Seminis
General Lee/G4 F1	Harris Moran Seeds
Sassy/81 F1	Harris Moran Seeds
Stonewall/G4 F1	Harris Moran Seeds
Wealthy/82 F1	Harris Moran Seeds

**Task #3:** Numerous gherkin growers and cucumber processors were visited (see Annex III for visitation list). Most growers are growing out seedlings in the greenhouse, plants are grown to the first true leaf stage in a peat-based media, removed from small 12x24 trays, and directly planted into the field. I observed problems with hypocotyl extension on seedlings, which often leads to poor yielding, diseased susceptible, or slow growing transplants. This is a common seedling problem due to excessive water use and high temperature exposure.

Plant spacing on plastic mulch varied by grower and location but most strive to have 3 mature plants per square meter. Higher plant density would improve gherkin yields. Plastic mulch was typically laid on flat ground but farmers can reduce disease and harvest problems by bedding or ridging of soil prior to laying plastic mulch.

Farmers have little concept of the quantity of fertilizer being used on the crop. Fertigation techniques need improvement through better technique and timing of fertilizer applications. Tissue testing for nitrogen and potassium should be considered for the future and especially for larger producers.

One of the greatest deterrents to profitability occurs at harvest. Labor must be trained, encouraged, and reminded to remove all cucumbers from the vine with a diameter of greater than 1cm. If cucumbers are left to mature, basal fruit will retard growth of more apically oriented fruit. No standard grading system is in place for processing cucumbers. Industry and producers need to consider standardizing a common grade system for processing.

**Task #4:** Five processors or collectors were visited. Most were not happy with the quality or supply of product being delivered by farmers but demand for gherkins was good. Gherkins less than 6cm brought the highest price and demand was high. Demand by neighboring countries (Albania) for gherkins indicate a potential to export the gherkins.

Processor and producer need a better relationship. One processor complained that farmers did not honor contract obligations. Farmers felt the processor was out to cheat them of their hard earned money. A late winter/early spring educational event sponsored by the processor would be an excellent means to connect growers and processor. The event could be used by USAID to educate farmers about the best cultivars to plant, new cultivation techniques, soil testing, and other developments related to crop production.

**Task #5:** Profitability of gherkin production hinges upon the availability of inexpensive labor, mechanization, environmental conditions, demand by processors, and other factors.

**Task #6: Action items**

**Short Term:**

1. Develop a standard production training in fertigation, irrigation, and plasticulture techniques. Simple production publication is all that is needed.
2. Develop a publication or brief training for those harvesting cucumbers, a simple card or demonstration mechanism.
3. Set up a coordinated regional cultivar trials and field day. Choose farmers willing to cooperate, provide them a scale for weighing harvest, and ensure that other farmers can visit field during production periods.
4. Encourage farmers to plant a “portfolio” of good cultivars and NOT rely on just one cultivar for all production.
5. Encourage “staged planting”\* of the gherkin crop. This will reduce production risk and spread out harvest and production activities.

\*Staged planting means to plant a portion of your total crop over a period of time. For example, planting a .25ha every two weeks, to achieve a 1.0 hectare planting.

6. Crop rotation will be a problem. Set up profitable crop rotation schemes and promote to gherkin producers.
7. Develop corporate relationships with seed suppliers, processor, and other input stakeholders. Encourage these individuals to finance and train farmers in modern production techniques.
8. Coordinate sponsorship of a “Preplant Field Day” by one of the local processors. Provide the educational content and trainers for cultivar selection, soil fertility, and harvest.
9. Introduce modern farm management accounting tools and techniques to farmers.

**Long Term:**

1. Encourage the development of cucumber quality standards for processors, buyers, and producers based upon economics of demand.
2. Set up soil and tissue testing laboratories with the Universities or Agriculture Department.
3. Establish soil and tissue testing standards for field cucumber production.
4. Set up financial incentives to export products to neighboring countries.
5. Encourage consumption of fresh and pickled cucumbers.
6. Set up a “model” farm in representative growing areas using modern farm management accounting tools, production techniques, and equipment.

**Task #7:** Development strategies for the future.

1. Set up, coordinate, and fund a “core” group of production educators at local high schools, vocational schools and universities. Coordinate educational materials

development, distribution, and implementation with these individuals. They are the respected agricultural professionals in their respective communities.

2. Establish linkages between these educational stakeholders and Kosovo farmers with parallel stakeholders in the USA. Encourage interaction and information exchange.
3. Work to set up standards of quality at the national level for product production, processing, soil testing standards, tissue testing, and postharvest treatment.

**Task #8:** A simple production guide, presentation, and some other educational materials were prepared, presented and discussed. These materials were left with the Kosovo Program office.

One processor/producer (Fitimi) told me that he began processing his crop to improve profitability. He was growing 3 hectares of cucumbers and processing all of his crop and would be buying the production of his neighbors this year. He shared with me that he could sell all the pickles produced and could realize a gross profit of over 20%. But specifics were not shared and judging from the scope of his production facility I doubt overhead, equipment, facilities costs, and other fixed costs were being adequately represented. Most farmers had no idea how much it cost them to grow the crop. If they did, they did not feel free to share that information.

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTIVITY

The objectives of this assignment were to provide technical assistance in support of gherkin production, assist with variety demonstration plots, communicate modern field production technologies, suggest strategies to achieve improved cucumber yield and quality, and develop tactics to enhance the overall profitability (to the small farmer) of cucumber production in Kosovo. Farms, processors, markets, universities, and other stakeholders in the cucumber value chain were visited and recommendations for the improvement of the industry presented. A presentation was made to 45 people (29 farmers). Additionally, coverage from Kosovo television RTK station establishes a good base for a gherkins education program to build upon. Awareness of the project has been created.

Soils, climate, and culture favor the production of cucumbers in Kosovo. Production of cucumbers for processing (gherkins) are presently being grown using a combination of plasticulture and greenhouse production techniques. A presentation and basic guideline for gherkins production was developed as a part of this project. Both should be expanded and modified to better suit the needs of Kosovo.

Field gherkin production is a labor intensive venture. From growing seedlings in the greenhouse to harvesting fields 3 or more time per week for up to 4 weeks, growing cucumbers is hard work. For each harvest, 60 hours labor (more or less) is needed per hectare and the crop should be harvested 3 times per week. In the USA, cost of labor (for harvest alone) may exceed 50% of total production income. Farmers in Kosovo keep virtually no records and few understand basic agronomic or financial management issues. In order to have rapid growth and development of this market segment, producers, input suppliers, and processor will need to work in concert.

To achieve this rapid development, growth, and profitability in the field production of processing cucumbers the following items should be addressed.

- Develop a “standard production training” in fertigation, irrigation, and plasticulture techniques. Simple production publication is all that is needed.
- Develop a publication or brief training for those harvesting cucumbers, a simple card or demonstration mechanism.
- Set up a coordinated regional cultivar trials and field day. Choose farmers willing to cooperate, provide them a scale for weighing harvest, and ensure that other farmers can visit field during production periods.
- Encourage farmers to plant a “portfolio” of good cultivars and NOT rely on just one cultivar for all production.
- Encourage “staged planting”\* of the gherkin crop. This will reduce production risk and spread out harvest and production activities.

\*Staged planting means to plant a portion of your total crop over a period of time. For example, planting 0.25ha every two weeks, to achieve a 1.0 hectare planting.

- Crop rotation will be a problem. Set up profitable crop rotation schemes and promote to gherkin producers.
- Develop corporate relationships with seed suppliers, processor, and other input stakeholders. Encourage these individuals to finance and train farmers in modern production techniques.
- Coordinate sponsorship of a “Preplant Field Day” by one of the local processors. Provide the educational content and trainers for cultivar selection, soil fertility, and harvest.
- Work with processors and input providers (seed and fertilizer sellers) to set up a train-the-trainer program.
- Introduce modern farm management accounting tools and techniques to farmers.
- Encourage the development of cucumber quality standards for processors, buyers, and producers based upon economics of demand.
- Set up soil and tissue testing laboratories with the Universities or Agriculture Department.
- Establish soil and tissue testing standards for field cucumber production.
- Set up financial incentives to export products to neighboring countries.
- Encourage consumption of fresh and pickled cucumbers
- Set up a “model” farm in representative growing areas using modern farm management accounting tools, production techniques, and equipment.

# ANNEXES

Annex 1: Summary of Activities

Annex II: Gherkin/Cucumber Production Plan

Annex III: List of Contacts

# ANNEX I – SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES

- 01/08/2011** Arrival. Received overall project review from Greg Vaut, Michael Kimes, and met briefly with Fehim of Agrocelina.
- 02/08/2011** Visited the “ETC” Supermarket in Prishtina to see the market/prices for the fresh consumption of gherkins/cucumber as well as pickled.  
Visited the High School of Agriculture in Prishtina and MIB Trade in Obiliq, farmer Mr. Bedri Shabani, and also visited the vegetable processor “Fitimi” in Drenas.
- 03/08/2011** Visited the farms AgroShala farmer Mr. Feim Shala in Suhareka and Mr. Nehat Taq in Mamusha. Mehmet Shala of “Eurofood” in Prizren was also visited. Observed the unloading of the Crocus corms to be used in the saffron production.
- 04/08/2011** Visited Agro Alba farmer Mr. Adem Durmishi in Bardhosh and Etlinger Processors in Shtime. Company manager was confrontational and unfriendly. Good luck on working with this guy.
- 05/08/2011** Visited Dr. Skender Kaqiu the professor in Faculty of Agriculture in Prishtina (Chief of Vegetable Division), and the meeting with Mr. Ilir Binakaj the television journalist of RTK television.
- 08/08/2011** Visited Mark Wood the chief of KPEP.
- 09/08/2011** Visited the owner of Abi Progress & ELIF processing company Mr. Irfan Fusha in Prizren. Excellent conversation and potential future cooperator. Company being sold or taken over or restructured by another entity.
- 10/08/2011** Conducted a seminar and field day on gherkin production systems in Suhareka. Visited the farm of Feim Shala for trellising demonstration plots and field education. Forty five individuals attended (twenty nine were farmers and processors) attended the 3-hour educational event.
- 11/08/2011** Visited with Richard Ince (InterSilva) and Sami Kryeziu (Agrovet Development) at the CNFA office. Remainder of the day doing reports.
- 12/08/2011** Debriefing with staff, recommendations, and future strategies.
- 15/08/2011** depart

# ANNEX II – GHERKIN / CUCUMBER PRODUCTION PLAN

## **Kosovo: Summary Gherkin/Cucumber Production Plan**

### **Cultivar Selection**

1. Yield.
2. Consider using 2 or more cultivars for production. Exclusive use of only one cultivar can lead to crop failure during years of heavy disease or insect pressure.
3. Fruit quality, size, and shape.
4. Adaptability to existing conditions. Consider planting 4-6 new cultivars in very small plots to evaluate performance along side your existing plantings.
5. Pest resistance. Use cultivars that have genetic resistance to disease and insect pests. Pesticides costs will often be reduced.
6. Pollination issues (monoecious vs gynoecious types). If female lines are used, ensure sufficient pollen is available for pollination and good fruit set.

### **Site Selection and Soil Preparation**

1. Select a field that has not grown cucumbers, watermelons, cantaloupes, pumpkins, or squash for two to three years. The field should be fertile, well drained, and uniform.
2. Note major weed species and check for root-knot nematode presence.
3. Take soil samples for assay and fertilizer recommendations. A pH of 6.0 to 6.5 is optimum.
4. Apply dolomitic lime and incorporate, if recommended.
5. Determine type of cultivation: bare ground or plastic mulch.
6. Have soil turned and disked as necessary to cover plant refuse.
7. Begin planting seed in flats in greenhouse for seedlings.
8. Broadcast recommended fertilizer and disk in. Use a minimum of 26 kg/ha preplant incorporated balanced NPK fertilizer.
9. Prepare drip irrigation in the field and spread plastic. Ensure that beds covered with plastic have a slight slope and drain water. A bed height of 20 to 25 cm is optimum.

### **Planting**

1. Plant seedlings in field when first true leaves fully emerge and all danger of frost is past. Cucumbers will not grow with average temperatures below 15C. Optimum temperatures for growth when temperature averages range between 20-24C.
2. Plant populations of 50,000 to 75,000 plants per hectare are common. Use double row planting on plastic mulch. Space plants at 20-30 cm in row. Between plant rows on plastic allow 50 cm. Allow space between mulched rows for harvest and plant growth. A distance of 0.75 to 1.25 m is usually adequate.
3. Initiate drip irrigation with 0.4 kg/ha/day actual nitrogen and potassium for the first three weeks of growth.

# ANNEX III – LIST OF CONTACTS

<b><u>Name</u></b>	<b><u>Company</u></b>	<b><u>Contact Information</u></b>
Adem Durmishi	farmer, Bardhosh	
Basri Pulaj	InterCooperation	<a href="mailto:basri.pulaj@intercoopkos.org">basri.pulaj@intercoopkos.org</a>
Bedri Shabani	MIB Trade	
Fehim	AgroCelina	
Feim Shala	farmer, Suhareka	
Fitimi	Fitimi Processing	<a href="mailto:dpz-fitimi@hotmail.com">dpz-fitimi@hotmail.com</a>
Gani Hajzeri	Agro Serra	<a href="mailto:ganihajzeri7@hotmail.com">ganihajzeri7@hotmail.com</a>
Illir Binakaj	television host	
Irfan Fusha	ABI Center	<a href="mailto:irfan.fusha@abi-center.com">irfan.fusha@abi-center.com</a>
Mark Wood	Kosovo PEP	<a href="mailto:mwood@usaidkpep.org">mwood@usaidkpep.org</a>
Mehmet Shala	EuroFood	<a href="mailto:mtsshala@hotmail.com">mtsshala@hotmail.com</a>
Mentor Thaqi	RDC	
Professor	Skender Kaciu	<a href="mailto:skender.kaciu@uni-pr.edu">skender.kaciu@uni-pr.edu</a>
Richard Ince	InterSilva	<a href="mailto:richard.ince@intersilva.org">richard.ince@intersilva.org</a>
Sami Kryeziu	Agrovet	<a href="mailto:sami.k@intersilva.org">sami.k@intersilva.org</a>

\*this represents only a small number of the people visited. Due to language barrier, time restraints, my bad memory, and other barriers so often found in the field, many names were not reported. It should be noted that many students from the university were encountered on these visits. Most students were those of Mentor Thaqi.