

Program Script for Changemaker Nazmi Ilıcalı (Aired on 11 October 2009)

Category: Economic Development
Location: Eastern Turkey (Erzurum)

For years, Erzurum represents cold and distantness in Turkey. The weather is always 'as cold as Erzurum' at its worse and distances are always 'as far away as Erzurum'.

Once we start walking in the streets of Erzurum, we could not see the cold reflect in people's faces. Although the sorrow of distance and of being left out far away hits us in the face.

Among 81 cities in Turkey, Erzurum ranks 60th in economic development. In other words, it is one of the 20 least developed cities in Turkey.

In this city of 2000m of altitude, the lack of industrialization due to rough winter conditions reflects in the unemployment figures. 34% of the population are agricultural workers, and Erzurum ranks 34th in Turkey among cities with the highest unemployment figures.

Although figures speak for themselves, streets of Erzurum display the most painful scenes of unemployment.

The lack of industrialization creates a destiny of agriculture for everyone. Although Erzurum has very fertile fields where many crops can grow, inadequate agricultural methods have lowered productivity of the land.

Interview with Farmer

Interviewer: How is the harvest this year?

Farmer: The harvest this year, as you see, is fairly well. It is not the best though. It is not much.

Interviewer: The season is not great right?

Farmer: No it is not. The potatoes are a little late. We cannot sell any.

Interviewer: What did you sow this year?

Farmer: Cabbage, potato, spinach, carrot, onions, parsley..

Interviewer: So you sow a lot?

Farmer: Yes we do but we cannot get much in return for what we sow.

Interview with Farmer

Farmer: These lands are very fertile actually. You can grow any crop in 40 days. This cannot happen in many other places, but here it can. This type of land is very precious.

Interviewer: Is there a lot of migration?

Farmer: Yes of course.

Interviewer: To where mostly?

Farmer: Ankara, İstanbul, İzmit...

Interviewer: Why do they migrate?

Farmer: Because they can make a better living out there. There are no people left here. We cannot find workers. I cannot find someone to work for me. We abandoned everything because of this.

Although the cold that lasts for 8 months in Erzurum does not look like it will change, a new project is changing the ill fate of farmers day by day.

Nazmi Ilıcalı is a retired literature teacher. Ilıcalı, born in Erzurum in 1953, worked in many cities of Anatolia. For the last 20 years, he has been living in Erzurum with his two university-graduate working children.

Nazmi, while educating thousands of students in Erzurum, also continued to farm the land he inherited from his father. Without drifting apart from the land or the villagers, he tried to be productive in his small land.

Upon retiring from teaching, he dedicated all his energy to his land in Erzurum. He was using methods inherited from his grandfather and working long hours for a small return. But one day, his farming life changed when he was introduced to organic farming.

Nazmi Ilıcalı: "In 1999, here in Erzurum, other farmers and I had a surplus of potatoes that we could not sell. I went to Ankara that year for the 1st Agricultural Summit. I was hoping to find buyers for my potatoes there. And I found buyers. That year, Germans came to Turkey to buy potatoes. We met in the lobby of the hotel. They said they were looking to buy organic potatoes. That was the first time I heard of the concept of organic potatoes and organic farming. Right away, I did research on the topic. And this is how I was introduced to organic farming in 1999."

Nazmi Ilıcalı started shaping his future according to organic farming, which he has heard for the first time that day.

He started doing research on the feasibility of organic farming without using any pesticides or chemical fertilizers in Erzurum. And he realized that the cold of Erzurum that was considered its ill fate, was actually its biggest luck.

Nazmi Ilıcalı: "Erzurum is at 2000m altitude and is subject to continental climate. In this geography, the entire population complains about poverty and the cold. Coal has been very expensive and that has reflected poorly in agricultural production. So, the farmer was right in complaining about poverty and the cold. But, in my research, I found out that this poverty turned out to be a fortune for the farmers in Erzurum. The poor farmers of Erzurum could not buy chemical fertilizers. I am not saying they did not, I am saying they could afford to buy it. And therefore they could not use it on their lands. There were also pests that would leave

their eggs in our fields. And more pests would come out of these eggs. However, at minus 50 degrees Celsius, all of these eggs would be destroyed."

Producing organically is not enough to take a share in a market who's estimated value is 50 billion Euros globally. Like everywhere else in the world, one has to obtain a certificate from the Ministry of Agriculture for organically produced products.

Following an application to the Ministry, an independent inspection company starts an investigation. The land gets inspected, the products get tested in laboratories and if the entire production process is considered organic, you are eligible to obtain a certificate.

After being successful in implementing organic farming in his land, he decided to help change the lives of hundreds of farmers around him. He went from village to village with his own means trying to convince other farmers to implement organic farming.

And in 2003, he gathered 633 farmers to establish the 'Eastern Anatolian Farmers and Breeders Association'. His goal was to do organic farming with the 633 farmers he convinced.

However, as the farmers were unable to put together enough money for obtaining organic farming certificates, Nazmi Ilıcalı found the solution in applying to the United Nations.

Nazmi Ilıcalı: "In order to develop this region, we implemented our first project in 2003 with the support of United Nations Development Program (UNDP). UNDP agreed to pay for the organic farming registration fees of farmers who were unable to afford it. This is how we started organic farming in Erzurum with 633 farmers in 2003. At the time, the Mayor of Erzurum, Mustafa Malay gave us a lot of support. And in Erzurum, we were able to implement organic farming successfully."

The project Nazmi Ilıcalı started in 2003 along with 633 farmers grew day by day. Other farmers who saw that organic farming methods are more efficient started joining the association and changing their farming methods. This change was reflected positively in the farmers' incomes.

Interview with Farmer

Farmer: Before organic farming, we could get one third of what we produce from this crop. Now it is much better. Our products are cleaner and of higher quality.

Interviewer: Are you more conscious now?

Farmer: Yes

Interviewer: What type of mistakes were you making?

Farmer: We did not know how to sow properly. We were unable to calculate the proper distance between two potatoes. We did not know much about the seeds. We did not know

when and how to use fertilizers. We did not know the right time to irrigate. But now, thanks to our teacher, we know all of these.

Farmer: For instance, most of our potatoes used to rot. But after implementing organic farming, they do not anymore.

Interview with Farmer

Farmer: If you do farming consciously everything goes well. If we were not introduced to organic farming, we would not know what we are doing. We could not make any benefit. Maybe we could only take care of our animals, but that's it.

Interviewer: If we were to compare, how much would this bale of hay cost if it was organic or not?

Farmer: Hay is very cheap this year. One ton of hay is sold for 130 liras. However, our organic hay goes for more than 200 liras.

This system that Nazmi Ilıcalı initiated with many challenges, was rewarded by a proposal they received from the Istanbul Municipality.

Nazmi Ilıcalı: "At the time, the Municipality of Istanbul wanted to start producing organic products. This is very important. They wanted to produce organic bread. They sent letters to the Agricultural Boards of 81 cities of Turkey, asking for a list of organic good producers. 80 villages responded negatively, saying they do not have anyone. Only Erzurum said that the Eastern Anatolian Farmers and Breeders Association have their organic production certificates and are producing organically. This is how we started our 5-year project with the Municipality of Istanbul."

The association founded in 2003 by 633 farmers managed to build their own factory with the help of their success in organic farming. Farmers transform the organic wheat they produce into organic flour in a factory that was built with the help of UN funding. The factory has 20 workers and can produce 10 tons of wheat per hour.

Interview with Agricultural Engineer

Engineer: The crops that come to the factory first get sifted in order to eliminate harmful weeds and insects. After these weeds and insects are eliminated, the crops are taken to our storage rooms. Then they are grinded in grindstones and finally put in packages.

Interviewer: How much flour do you produce in the factory?

Engineer: 10 tons of flour per hour.

Today, the Eastern Anatolian Farmers and Breeders Association, that was established by Nazmi Ilıcalı with the ambition of organic farming, has 3000 members in 12 cities across Turkey. Thousands of farmers in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia now share Nazmi Ilıcalı's dream.

Organic wheat, barley, potato, cabbage, cereals and legume produced in a total of 200 million square meters of land find many buyers in the organic goods market, especially in Istanbul. The farmers are advised on what to produce every year and they receive their money as soon as the product is sold.

Nazmi Ilıcalı: " We are not industrialists, we are not merchants, we do not own corporations. But we realized that branding is very important. Our mission was to make organic bread for the people of Turkey. Our mission was to provide healthier food for a healthier population. This was our priority. We created the UFKUM (means horizon in English) brand. Behind this brand are farmers, there are no merchants involved. We registered our brand. We are doing our own packaging and marketing."

Farmers are very content with the way their lives changed with the help of Nazmi, who is now known as 'Organic Nazmi'.

However, Nazmi Ilıcalı's dreams are not limited by this. Nazmi is trying to finish setting up an organic milk factory, where they will use organically fed cows. With the realization of this project, he believes that organic animal breeding will also reach high levels. Once he realizes a dream of his, he moves on to another one.

Nazmi Ilıcalı: "It all starts with loving people. If people love one another, there is nothing not to be achieved. I did this in Erzurum, but we are active in 12 cities. This is achievable everywhere. Everybody can do this as long as they do not forget that they are responsible to this land where they were born and fed."

Nazmi Ilıcalı's success story which was realized in the yellow fields of Erzurum under the shadow of the Palandöken Mountain is now being praised all around the world. He is the person who got the most UN funding in Turkey and he was named an Ashoka Fellow by the US-based Ashoka Social Entrepreneurship Foundation.

However, the biggest reward for him was to change the lives of people around him. He did not succumb to the fate of the land he lived on and touched the lives of people in his environment with his own efforts, without expecting anything in return. He dedicated his days to this cause and made a difference in the lives of thousands of farmers.