September 2015—as a shareholder of Bakhtiyor-1 Farm in Khatlon province, Tajikistan, Abdurakhmon Safarov worked his farm for many years. But due to dwindling profits, Safarov decided to leave for Russia in May 2009, to earn money and better provide for his family and returned back home in May 2010.

He is not alone. Many Tajik farmers who own shares in community farms are compelled to find work in Russia to bolster their incomes. But if their land is not being used, the head of a farm might independently seek to terminate that person’s land rights and distribute his share among other members of the farm.

Such was the case for Safarov. When the head of his farm learned that Safarov left for Russia, he illegally terminated Safarov’s land rights and confiscated his land share.

Abdurahmon has a big family in Tajikistan and when he earned some money, he returned back to his family in May 2010. He wanted to create his own farm, invest in land in order to get more crop or better off of his family. Unexpectedly he found out that he was excluded from the farm and his land was distributed between other shareholders.

For nearly four years, starting from May 2010 till June 2014, Safarov tried unsuccessfully to reclaim his land rights and have his property returned to him. Safarov applied his claim to the local authorities of Rumi distrct, as well as approached the head of Khatlon district to assist in settling his land dispute, but all efforts were in vain.

In June 2014, his wife Gulnora participated in a training on land use rights organized by the USAID-supported legal aid center Navzamin (which means “new land” in Tajik) in their district.

Gulnora told her husband about what she learned and together they approached Navzamin for legal counsel regarding their land dispute.

The lawyers from the legal aid center provided advice, assisted in writing and submitting a legal claim, and defended the family’s interests and rights in the district court.

The lawyers proved that the farm’s general council never met regarding Safarov’s land share although they are required to do so when terminating a farmer’s land rights. They were also able to prove that the decision to terminate not only Abdurakhmon’s land rights, but those of six other farmers, was falsificated . While Safarov was in Russia, the head of dehkan farm illegally wrote and signed a petition for Abdurahmon, where Abdurahmon allegedly refused his right to land and agreed his land plot distributed between other shareholders.

On Aug. 12, 2014, the Regional Economical Court of Khatlon canceled the falsified decision to terminate farmers’ land rights and restored the land use rights of the seven shareholders at Bakhtiyor-1 Farm. Safarov and the other six shareholders returned to farming their 7.14 hectares of irrigated land.

“My family is very thankful to the USAID Land Reform and Farm Restructuring Project and the great efforts the project makes to protect our land rights, inform us about our land rights, especially through educational events. If my wife didn’t participate in that training, I and another six people had no chance to restore our land rights and return to our share—the source of employment, food and income for me and many rural men in Tajikistan,” said Safarov.

The USAID Land Reform and Farm Restructuring Project provides funding to 12 legal aid centers in Khatlon province as part of the U.S. Government’s global hunger and food security initiative, Feed the Future. The project runs from October 2013 to September 2016.