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Tajikistan, Factor 15: Human Rights

Tajikistan: Adopting democratic principles to improve gender equality and food security

The country of Tajikistan is a low-income, food-deficit country facing many challenges. To improve Tajikistan's food security and poverty, the country must guarantee human rights for its people including education, gender and class equality, and separation of church and state. Basic civil rights and gender equality do not exist for the people of Tajikistan. Human rights affect agricultural productivity, employment opportunities, household income, and food availability and quality.

Tajikistan became an independent country on September 9, 1991, shortly after the Soviet Union broke apart. Just a year later, Tajikistan experienced a five year long civil war, until 1997 (Central Asia: Tajikistan). In the first years after independence, many people emigrated because of Tajik being named the official language, a poor standard of living, and fear of political violence (Peterson). Tajikistan is the most poverty-stricken country out of all the former Soviet republics, and has been since the country's civil war (Central Asia: Tajikistan).

Tajikistan's geography affects its ability to feed itself. Tajikistan is a mountainous, land-locked country located in Central Asia, west of China and south of Kyrgyzstan. Tajikistan's area of 143,100 square feet is slightly smaller than Wisconsin (Central Asia: Tajikistan.) As of 2011, 6,976,958 people lived in Tajikistan (World Bank). In comparison, Wisconsin's 2011 census concluded that 5,711,767 people live in the state (U.S. Census Bureau). Just more than 50 percent of Wisconsin's land is arable, while less than 6 percent of Tajikistan's land is arable (Central Asia: Tajikistan). More than 90 percent of the country is covered in mountains (The Condition of Higher Education in Tajikistan). Tajikistan is known for its scorching summers and long, frigid winters. The country experiences temperatures below freezing for more than 100 days most years (Peterson). Natural hazards like earthquakes and floods are regular threats to Tajikistanis (Central Asia: Tajikistan).

A typical subsistence farm family living in rural Tajikistan will be the focus of this paper. The family is dirt poor and struggles to get access to food. In fact, a third of the population lacks food security and nearly 40 percent of Tajikistan's people live below the poverty line (Central Asia: Tajikistan). This family subsists on less than the U.S. equivalent of \$1.33 per day (*World Food Programme*), and family members are considered part of the country's lowest social class (Peterson). They live in a rural area, as 75 percent of Tajikistan's people do (*World Food Programme*). The family lives on one of the country's 25,000 or so peasant (or dehkan) farms that are considered mid-sized at between seven and seventeen acres. These mid-sized farms are now the most common type of farm in the country, controlling 60 percent of arable land. The efficiency of these farms is relatively low. The family's farm is very close to other farms, since farm land is so scarce and in-demand in Tajikistan.

Since the father of this family is the youngest son of his parents, his family lives with his parents in their farmhouse. The family takes care of the grandparents in their old age, and will eventually inherit their property (Peterson). Even though family size has been declining in recent years, large, extended families in one household are still very common. It is very unlikely that the parents will ever get a divorce, because divorce is very uncommon in Tajikistan and the country has the highest percentage of people living in families vs. on their own, in the former U.S.S.R. (Curtis). The grandparents are in debt, because of the high cost of their modest farmland.

Urban families spend up to 80 percent of their breadwinner's income on food, while rural families live off of only the food they produce themselves (*World Food Programme*). The family focuses on growing

fruits and vegetables to sustain themselves. They raise chickens, cattle, sheep, goats and horses. The mother prepares and serves two meals daily to her family. There is a morning meal and an evening meal. For the morning meal, only tea and bread is served. For the evening meal, a soup of carrots, onions and potatoes is eaten with flatbread. Up to three times a week, the family eats a special dinner called Osh (a rice dish made with carrots, onions and meat.) There is no pork or alcohol in the farmhouse because these are strictly forbidden by Islamic law (Peterson).

Like most Tajikistanis, the family blames declining agricultural production on the country's civil war. However, many other factors are at fault. One problem is that the government controls the growth, production and sale of cotton, Tajikistan's most important crop. A recent decrease in grain production has brought a new wave of hunger across Tajikistan, especially since grains make up the majority of Tajikistanis' calories. Uzbekistan caused Tajikistan's food costs to reach their highest in almost a decade, because of Uzbekistan's numerous rail transport tolls and shutting down of railroads into Tajikistan. Since Tajikistan receives all but ten percent of its food imports by rail and imports over half its food, Uzbekistan's tolls and closures also caused many Southern Tajikistanis to go hungry (Central Asia: Tajikistan). The recent global financial crisis has resulted in a swift decline of appeal for Tajikistan's exports, especially cotton and aluminum. Tajikistan's craggy highlands make travel and transport difficult, especially in the frigid, natural disaster-prone winter months. When travel and transport is limited, so is Tajikistan's food (*World Food Programme*).

The family is also contributing to Tajikistan's declining agricultural production with their common farming practices. The farmers in the family have a habit of spraying excessive amounts of pesticides on their crops (Central Asia: Tajikistan). The members of the family are using manure for cooking fuel, instead of using the manure as a soil fertilizer. Unknowingly, the family is decreasing the amount of fertile soil in the country, and on their own farm, by participating in this practice. The family relies on irrigation to sustain their crops. High and rapidly increasing levels of salt have been found in Tajikistan's soil (Central Asia: Tajikistan) and pose an additional challenge for farmers.

The children in this family are underweight and have been for most of their lives (Central Asia: Tajikistan). The sons will get an education through middle school. Even if the sons are part of the scant 25 percent of middle school graduates that continue their education by attending high school, they will still probably not attend college (Peterson). They have heard that the country's few universities and institutes lack up-to-date resources, like textbooks, computers, internet and dependable electricity (The Condition of Higher Education in Tajikistan). While higher education for males is valued in their society, the family can't afford a college education for their sons (Peterson).

The women in the family have it much worse. Females in Tajikistan are greatly limited in education and employment opportunities, from a young age. The daughters will only attend elementary school because only wealthy parents are able to bribe their way into a higher education for their daughters (Peterson). That is, if the children are not forced into child labor, like ten percent of Tajikistan's children (Central Asia: Tajikistan). Then, they would not go to school at all.

There is a strong division of labor by gender in Tajikistan, even though the country's constitution guarantees equal employment opportunity for both men and women. If a daughter would get lucky and receive the rare privilege of a higher education, she would still struggle to find employment. And, even if she was lucky and her search for employment was successful, she would make only 66 percent of the salary of a man in the same position. She would also never be able to have a high-paying leadership position in politics or religion, because those important jobs are set aside exclusively for men by Islamic law (Peterson). The mother, like her daughter, only attended elementary school. She rarely leaves the farm and has never worked outside of the home. The daughter, like her mother, will also most likely not be allowed to pursue an education or career beyond the perimeter of the family farm via her husband's orders (Peterson).

Since most medical professionals and doctors have left the country, access to any kind of health care is rare and too expensive for a typical rural family like this to afford. This shortage of medical personnel is even more prominent in rural areas, so the family would have to travel to an urban area, to one of the country's few hospitals, to get medical attention. These urban hospitals lack adequate medication, equipment, staff and sanitation. These conditions make Tajikistan prone to epidemics and also contribute to Tajikistan's decreasing life expectancy, as well as the country's status of having one of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the former Soviet Union. Because of these shortages and risks as well as the fact that any and all hospital treatments require cash up front, this option doesn't seem worthwhile, convenient or feasible for the rural family. Instead, the mother prepares traditional medicine and herbs to cure illnesses and treat injuries ailing her kin (Peterson).

The father's brother works in Russia because employment opportunities are so limited and pay is so low in Tajikistan. He sends money to his family back in Tajikistan. This is the family's main source of income, since they don't make any profit from the food they grow because they eat it. Nearly 55 percent of rural families in Tajikistan are reliant on income from family members working in Russia. These remittances make up almost 50 percent of Tajikistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (*World Food Programme*). Most jobs in Tajikistan pay so little that most people who do work in Tajikistan have to work multiple side and part-time jobs (if they can find a job, in the first place) to be able to provide for their families (Peterson). Over a million Tajikistanis work outside of the country, mostly in Russia, for the same reasons the father's brother does (Central Asia: Tajikistan).

This rural family is Muslim, like 90 percent of the population. All the family members belong to the country's largest ethnic group, Tajik, (making up almost 80 percent of the population) and speak Tajikistan's official language, which is also called Tajik (Central Asia: Tajikistan).

In urban areas, even bigger problems affect these poor rural families. Tajikistan's still fragile economy is caused by the country's extremely high external debt (\$3.439 billion), routine power loss, corruption (drug traffickers control most of economic activity), and failure to follow through with the implementation of structural reforms (Central Asia: Tajikistan). Economic recovery in Tajikistan is greatly limited by the lack of skilled laborers and functioning equipment, in all industries. Unemployment is Tajikistan's greatest economic struggle. Tajikistan has a workforce of 2.1 million (Peterson). The majority of Tajikistan's population is considered working age. Tajikistanis ages 25 to 54 make up almost 40 percent of the population. About 50 percent of the labor force works in agriculture (Central Asia: Tajikistan). Most people have no specialized skills. Most specialists were Russian and left after independence. The emigration of skilled workers has led to the closing of most factories (Peterson).

Many of the United Nations' (U.N.) Millennium Development Goals would be great goals for Tajikistan. The Millennium Development Goals 1, 3 and 8, are the most relevant to the problems Tajikistan is facing. Goal 1 is to "eradicate extreme poverty and hunger." Under this goal, one of the United Nations' specific targets is to "halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1.25 a day." This target was met internationally, in 2010. Unfortunately, Tajikistan falls far behind this accomplishment. Another one of the U.N.'s targets to "eradicate extreme poverty and hunger," is to "achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women." Finally, the last target is to "halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger." (We Can End Poverty).

Goal 3 is also very important. Goal 3 is to "promote gender equality and empower women." If Tajikistan implements Goal 3, Goal 1 will fall into place. The first and only relevant target under Goal 3 is to "eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education by no later than 2015." This target has most definitely not been met in Tajikistan. It's crunch time. (We Can End Poverty).

The U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Director-General Jose Graziano da Silva emphasized the importance of gender equality in eliminating hunger, "Much of the future of global food security depends on their realization of their untapped potential. Rural women are an important part of this, not just as farmers but also in processing and preparing food, and local food markets," in March 2014 (Doering).

The final Millennium Goal selected was goal 8, which is to "develop a global partnership for development." The first target is to "develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system." The second target is to "address the special needs of least developed countries." The third target is to "address the special needs of landlocked developing countries." The fourth target is to "deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries." The fifth, and final, target is to "in cooperation with the private sector, make available benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications." All of these specific goals are so fitting for Tajikistan because of the issues discussed above. (We Can End Poverty).

Improving human rights in Tajikistan would increase the amount and quality of food available to poor, rural families. Gender equality and the separation of church and state should be the focus. They go hand in hand, because Islamic law (the law of the land in Tajikistan) limits women's rights and societal worth. If women were more respected and valued in society there would be less wife-beating, rape, and abduction (Peterson). It's also important to remember that Tajikistan's caste system and improper school funding are also violations of human rights. The caste system makes the rural poor the lowest social class. Tajikistan spends only 3.9 percent of its GDP on education. In comparison, the United States spent 7.3 percent of its GDP on education in 2010. If Tajikistan got rid of the caste system, poor and middle class people would have a better chance at an education, as well as a high paying, non-farming job (Central Asia: Tajikistan).

Islamic law, or any kind of religious law, is a violation of human rights, limiting freedom of religion and separation of church and state guaranteed in the Tajikistan constitution and contributing to the lower societal worth of women in society. We, as Westerners, cannot force the end of Islamic law, and we must respect the religious beliefs of all Tajikistani people. However, the U.N., U.S., and other governments can do things to encourage Tajikistan to adopt democratic principles and human rights. This goes back to Millennium Development Goal 8 and the need to create partnerships internationally. These partnerships can provide Tajikistan economic incentives – such as loans, training and other development assistance -- to respect human rights and gender equality and reform the financial system. Also, international groups can support the work of human rights groups like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and other organizations working in Tajikistan.

Another international group that could help Tajikistan's environment and people is the Snow Leopard Trust. Its unique Snow Leopard Enterprises program promotes conservation of snow leopards through the sale of handmade woolen items by local women. This program, already in place in China and Kyrgyzstan, has increased household incomes by up to 40% per year. Snow Leopard Enterprises should expand to Tajikistan and offer the same opportunities to women in this country (Snow Leopard Enterprises).

These partnerships can, step by step, encourage the country to embrace religious freedom and gender equality. More girls would be encouraged to go to school, and the government may put more money into education. Some of this school funding could be in the form of financial aid and the creation of free and reduced-lunch and breakfast programs, which would encourage parents to send their children, especially girls, to school. This would also reduce malnutrition. This increase in school funding would result in more girls and students overall attending school. Once these children get a basic education, they would be prepared to attend an institute or university where they could acquire the knowledge necessary to become skilled workers.

When women are denied an education and are unlikely to be hired, fewer jobs are created. When women have employment opportunities outside of the farm house, it encourages urbanization. When more people move to the cities, there will be a need for more businesses and jobs outside of agriculture. If women were offered urban jobs, their husbands and families would move to urban areas with them. Then, there would be more people living in urban areas, less living in the overpopulated rural areas and less competition over farm land. The country's economy could improve, with all the new products and business because of a more diverse working class. Jobs could also exist that would be available to people who are physically incapable of farming because of injury, disability or age. The country's natural resources would be more efficiently and widely used.

With more people living in urban areas, markets, grocery stores, etc., would be created. There will also be more consumers because city-dwelling Tajikistanis will (eventually) have access to these storefronts and products. With their only income coming from family members working in Russia, being far away from urban stores and markets, and lacking safe transportation, rural families currently have very little incentive to contribute to the economy through consumerism. People could access these markets, even when the weather isn't ideal. There would be a more steady and dependable source of food for many people. When women can also be employed outside of the home, the family income will most likely be twice as much. When a family makes more money, they can buy enough or more food. People who still live in rural areas would make more money because they now have the opportunity to sell to wealthier urban residents. There would also be more farmland available, if people moved to cities. Fewer farmers and the same amount of farmland provides the possibility of larger farms. With more land, a farmer could grow and sell more food as well as make more money. Then, fewer people and families will go hungry.

With the return of a skilled workforce in Tajikistan, there would be a lower unemployment rate, a higher national literacy rate, improved gender equality and a more stable economy. These gender equality and separation of church and state human rights resolutions and improvements could also result in environmental preservation. When there are less farmers fighting over the little farm land available in Tajikistan, there is less competition and incentive to use pesticides to get ahead (more specifically: reduce pests for higher yields and more attractive crops). The concept of organic farming may even be embraced, when urban residents catch on to the "organic trend" in developed countries.

Without outside help, Tajikistan may never be able to feed itself because of its geographic challenges. The key is in improving the country's economy. We first must address this by providing more education and opportunity for women and the poor. To do so, international groups must support democratic change and human rights.

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