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Tajikistan, Factor 18: International Trade

## **Tajikistan: Increasing Food Security through Urbanization of Cities and Encouragement of Private Investment and International Trade**

*"Hunger is not an issue of charity. It is an issue of justice."*

*--Jacques Diouf, Food and Agricultural Organization Director-General*

According to Merriam Webster's dictionary, poverty is the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions. Merriam Webster's also medically defines poverty as debility due to malnutrition. Poverty and hunger go hand in hand. Over one billion people live in extreme poverty, more than a sixth of the world's population. So what does this mean? It means that more than one billion people live on less than two dollars a day. Just two dollars to pay the bills. Just two dollars to fill a stomach. In Central Asia, there is a small country that you would have to look very closely to find on a map. Tajikistan is a mountainous, landlocked country bordered by China, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. This is a country of 55,251 square miles that houses over seven million people (World Factbook: Tajikistan). In the past, the mountainous geography has benefitted Tajikistan. It has helped keep them shielded from adverse weather. In ancient times, the mountains kept them safe from invaders. Now, the mountains are not much of an asset. The land has been depleted due to poor farming techniques and therefore, harder to farm, especially in Eastern Tajikistan where 90% of the country is covered in mountain ranges, including the Pamirs Range, which joins the Himalayas. Tajikistan is one of the least known Central Asian countries, but one that is in need of the most help. In 1990, there was no data on Tajikistan's Global Hunger Index, but by 2013, it had skyrocketed to over sixteen points with a "serious" rating, meaning that the food security was, and still is, a major issue for the country (2013 GHI Map). Part of Tajikistan's problem with food security stems from their separation from the Soviet Union and the outsourcing of jobs to other countries. Many families in this country live on less than two dollars a day. By keeping jobs in the country, Tajikistan's food security problem would shrink over time and increase productivity within the nation.

A typical Tajik family is not very different from a conventional Muslim family in other parts of Central Asia or the Middle East, and it is very possible that they are Muslim as over ninety-nine percent of the population practice the faith (Islam in Tajikistan). The family unit usually consists of a mother, father and two or more children. The household is patriarchal, meaning the father is the head of the household. The mother is expected to care for the home and her husband. A typical Tajik family would not eat very well, as eighty percent of Tajik people are below the poverty line (Tajikistan-AFS-USA). Breakfast for a farm family would consist of hot tea and bread. Many times, soups containing potatoes, carrots, onions and meat from a soup bone are served for dinner. When affordable, families enjoy osh, a traditional rice dish which also includes carrots, onion and meat. Muslim faith prevents them from consuming pork, but Tajik families like beef and onion pastries and cucumber and tomato salads. Families take a traditional round of fatir flatbread with every meal (Tajikistan-AFS-USA).

In Tajikistan, the education system is broken down into five different levels. Primary school is first and children of ages seven to eleven typically attend for four years. If children decide to move on, they then go to middle school for five years in which children ages eleven to sixteen attend. In recent years, middle schools have seen a decline in attendance due to poverty. Though school is free until a student reaches seventeen years of age, many will drop out before reaching the end of middle school in order to find work

and help support their families (Education System). The good thing about the children staying in school for at least nine years, is that the country's literacy rate is about 99.7%, as of 2010 (Tajikistan-Literacy Rate, Adult). If the student completes middle school, they would then move on to secondary school, which prepares the child for tertiary education or vocational schools. In past years, Tajikistan had many vocational schools but many of them are nonoperational now (Education System). Colleges and universities in Tajikistan are excellent, but lack students to teach. The health care system is one that has been struggling for many years. After their separation from Russia, formerly the Soviet Union, in 1991, Tajikistan had many economic problems. This made it difficult to invest in government-run health care. Following a civil war from 1991 to 1993, the government did not follow through completely and there were even more complications concerning the health care system. Even today, many families do not have health care. The cost of health care is not congruent to the Gross National Income per capita, which is about \$860 US dollars (Data:Tajikistan). Many individuals find it difficult to afford health care on such a low salary. The system has been severely neglected and there is a shortage of doctors and physicians to cater to individuals who may need health care.

In Tajikistan, over 73.5% of the population lives in rural, non-urbanized areas (IFAD). To put this staggering number into perspective, there were approximately 7.9 million people living in Tajikistan as of July 2013, but of those 7.9 million, only 704,000 were living in Dushanbe, the capital city of Tajikistan. That is only 11% of the population living in the capital (World Factbook: Tajikistan). This illustrates the point that Tajikistan is a country that relies heavily on its rural areas and farms. The most common type of farm in Tajikistan is a dehkan farm. There are 25,000 of these farms in Tajikistan which control 60% of the arable land in the country (Number of Dehkan Farms, Tajikistan). Dehkan farms are mid-sized peasant farms that became part of the agriculture system in 1992 after Soviet-Era commercial farms disbanded. Many Tajik families are part of a dehkan farm, as they are common. Each one of these farms is responsible for about 20 hectares of land (Number of Dehkan Farms, Tajikistan). Prevalent crops grown on these farms include cotton, wheat, grapes and fruit trees, though cotton is the main agricultural product of the country, accounting for over 60% of the harvest. Many farms also raise livestock such as chickens, cows, sheep and goats but the driving force of these farms are the crops they raise. In Tajikistan, many farms rely on irrigation to produce crops due to its volatile climate. Over 70% of the country's farmland is irrigated through series of systems dependent on the farm size and quality (World Bank Press Service). Many farms use modern irrigation systems, but because of poor river regulation, there are water shortages throughout the country.

For an ordinary Tajik farm family, there are many obstacles to overcome when faced with agricultural productivity. In the country, there is limited farm technology for small farms to utilize. The amount of tractor use has declined drastically since 1991 for many of the smallholder farms. Many cannot afford to use tractors or do not have the finances to apply for a loan for a tractor (Increasing Access to Finance and Technology for Smallholder Farmers in Tajikistan). Farmers who may own tractors find that they are in disrepair or outdated. This is a tremendous problem for these farmers because many of them are responsible for 20 hectares of land or more (Number of Dehkan Farms, Tajikistan). To put this into perspective, about 2 American football fields would fit inside a hectare of land. That's about 40 football fields for a farmer to harvest without the use of modern machinery. This means that these farmers are incapable of harvesting their crops on a mass scale. Not having the proper technology for farming severely decreases the productivity of the small farms.

In Tajikistan, employment is a large issue. Many of the population are farmers and those who do look for work in the cities find it hard to come by. Oftentimes, they are not qualified for the jobs they apply for and Tajikistan's monthly minimum wage is 200.00 Tajik Somoni, or 41.50 US dollars, a month (Minimum wage rises 2.5 times in Tajikistan). This amount is after the country raised the monthly minimum

wage. Before 2012 the wage used to be 80.00 Tajik Somoni, which amounts to 16.60 US Dollars (Minimum wage rises 2.5 times in Tajikistan). Much of the population struggled to live on such a low wage, which they only received once a month. Even now, there are still many barriers for a family to overcome when trying to find employment at a living wage. The cost of living in Tajikistan is expensive compared to the amount of money many families make. A Tajik family of six would expect to spend 223.51 USD a month in basic costs such as housing, transportation and utilities (Cost of Living in Tajikistan). This does not include food, clothing and miscellaneous expenses. For these families, it is hard to cover costs and many of them never do.

Many Tajik families, especially women and children, find it difficult to receive adequate nutrition on a daily basis. Because the crops grown on small farms go to the markets for sale, there is not usually enough left to feed the family. The impoverished state of the country directly correlates to the malnourishment of these families. Due to malnourishment, there are high rates of disease, such as hepatitis A and Typhoid fever, especially in rural parts of Tajikistan (World Factbook: Tajikistan). Furthermore, 40 to 60% of Tajikistan's population wants for adequate drinking water (Tajikistan Fact Sheet). The biggest reason why many Tajik families face inadequate nutrition is because of resource deficiency. Since most of the crops are being exported, they are not available in local markets. When there are crops in the rural markets, they are sold at inflated prices. Families find they have to buy food in the cities, if they live near one, at high prices in order to fill their stomachs, but oftentimes they cannot afford the high cost of food, so they go without. This is a vicious cycle which is hard to be broken.

Many problems in Tajikistan stem from their separation from the Soviet Union-now Russia-in 1991, including their economic instability. One current situation in Tajikistan is migrant workers leaving the country to find work elsewhere, primarily in Russia. The main reason many leave is because jobs are few and far between in the cities and farmers are finding it more and more difficult to maintain an appropriate living wage off of their crops. When people leave Tajikistan, they contribute to the decline in jobs because then there are not enough people to work in the different occupations, Tajikistan outsources them to other countries, again, adding to the decline in economy. Oftentimes, it is the men in the family that leave to go find work and provide for their children and wives. This leaves the women to take care of the farms and children tend to stay home from school to help with the farming. Sometimes, the mother cannot take care of the children on her own and sends them to orphanages or children homes. In fact, 80% of all orphans in children homes are not truly orphaned. They have been placed there by parents unable to support them or going abroad to find work (Ashurmamadova). Recently, Tajik migrant workers have been detained in Russia. Many of the people crossed over to Russia before the 2014 Winter Olympics to help build hotels and courses for the games. When the workers got to Russia they were given work and promised pay by contractors. The Tajik migrants often worked twelve hours a day or more, were fined if they missed days of work and were not taught basic construction safety (Russia: Migrant Olympic Workers Cheated, Exploited). After construction was complete, many of the Tajik workers were detained by the Russian government after said contractors informed the government that these workers were in the country illegally. Now, many Tajik people are still in Russia, without pay, hoping they will be able to return home. These people have been exploited for their willingness to help their families. Currently, there are thought to be an estimated one million migrant workers leaving Tajikistan for work abroad, specifically in Russia (Amir, and Berry).

The Tajik government needs to address the problem of migrant workers and food security within the country. Firstly, the government needs to realize that many of their people are leaving and entering countries illegally. This detains many of their citizens in other countries, such as Russia, with no way to bring them back to Tajikistan. In order to combat this problem, the national government should give the Tajik people a reason to stay in the nation. Tajikistan should invest in the urbanization of its cities and towns to produce jobs. With jobs in the country, the government would likely see a decrease in the number of mi-

grant Tajik workers. Urbanization is good not only for the people, but for the country's economy.

Tajikistan's current gross domestic product is \$6.972 billion dollars compared to Tajikistan's western neighbor, Uzbekistan, which has a gross domestic product of \$51.11 billion dollars (Data:Tajikistan) (Uzbekistan). If able to urbanize the country, Tajikistan would see a thriving economy with continuing growth. In order to begin urbanization though, the government and the people need to be in favor of the change. Private investors and outside funding would help Tajikistan on the right track to more jobs and a better economy. To get people to invest though, Tajikistan would need to show the investors that the country has great potential for growth and development with their help.

For Tajikistan to improve its financial situation, the country must first be open to expanding international trade. As of right now, Tajikistan trades with the countries surrounding it: Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, China and Kyrgyzstan. These countries exploit Tajikistan's economic instability by implementing unfair trade practices. It does not look as if this will be improving any time in the near future, but if Tajikistan were to trade with countries besides those few, it would open itself to new opportunities for growth and development. There are many other factors that influence the country, including lack of education and good governance. These factors all continue to affect Tajikistan and add to the problems they face. The Tajik government also needs to be reformed for real solutions to occur. In Tajikistan, the government is deeply corrupted by drug trafficking (Kucera) and though there are elections, the races are not close and the current President, Emomali Rahmon, won re-election in late 2013. Rahmon has been in power since 1992 (Tajikistan-European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity). It is hard to reform an entire government though, and Tajikistan is one that would take time to rectify.

In order for Tajikistan to combat its food security issues, they need to become educated on modern farming practices. Many of the Tajik people have not completed any schooling past the eighth grade and are not aware of the modern technology and practices that are now used in farming to create more efficiency (Education System). Without new technology and the knowledge to use it, many of the Tajik people will continue to leave the country for different work, believing they can't farm any longer because of the outdated machinery and practices they believe to be standard. Local communities in Tajikistan can move towards food security by opening themselves up to new ways of farming. Allowing private investors and humanitarian groups to invest in farm machinery and teach the people how to use it in their towns and villages can dramatically increase farm productivity and lead to more prosperous farms in the future, causing fewer people to leave the country in search of work. For this to happen though, the rural areas of Tajikistan must be open to change. Classes need to be offered to educate them on new farming techniques. Farmers must be open to modern farming and be willing to pursue education in order for farming productivity to increase.

Local communities in Tajikistan can play a part to help address food security by encouraging people to stay in Tajikistan. When the people leave, they in turn create more problems and do not help the food security plight. In the long term, staying in the country can help the growth of job markets in the cities and bring people to the cities for work, expanding urbanization in Tajikistan's mostly rural country. Tajikistan would also benefit from the urbanization of its larger cities, and even some of its smaller towns, because there would be more job opportunities. Tajikistan would be able to increase its income as a country because they would be exporting goods as well as producing their own and not having to import many products. Tajikistan could become more self-reliant.

For Tajikistan to combat its severe poverty and food security problems, education and investing are the keys to success. Without the help of outside corporations and investors, it will be difficult for Tajikistan

to help create better lives for its citizens. Though it may be difficult, migrant workers must try to find work in Tajikistan, even if it means going to Dushanbe or uprooting their families. Economies will not thrive if people leave the country in search of work. In order to keep citizens in Tajikistan, the country must find help from private investors and outside funding to urbanize their major cities and towns. They need to find a beneficial way to keep the people in Tajikistan. Opening themselves to fair trade internationally can help growth and development in Tajikistan. Tajikistan has made some progress on its Millennium Development Goals, including their first, eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. The country has seen progress in reaching their goal to be at 41.5% for the number of people under the poverty line, although it will not be reached by 2015 (Millennium Development Goals). The country has made good strides overall with their goals though, and improvement is being seen throughout Tajikistan. With over 50 percent of Tajikistan's population being ages 0-24, it is entirely possible to see change within the country (Tajikistan Age Structure). The young age of the population means the younger generation will be able to help usher in the changes that are needed to bring Tajikistan into the modern world. Before the change can occur though, the people must be open to the new possibilities that lie ahead.

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