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Understanding Trends in Global Nutrition: Paradox of Hunger And Obesity

I was born in the Soviet Union in 1988 in the village Kamski Polyani within the Autonomic Republic of Tatarstan, which was part of the Russian Federation. In 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics formally dissolved into fifteen independent countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. My state of Tatarstan remains part of the new country called the Russian Federation.

This background is provided to easily understand that prior to 1991 the central government of the Soviet Union controlled all food production, food procurement, and food distribution including the transportation, disbursement, and/or sales to the Republics, merchants, and consumers. Since 1991, each of the now independent countries of the former Soviet Union has sole responsibility for food production, food procurement and distribution within their respective borders. Each of these countries has unique problems and factors impacting ability to feed their populations.

The 2004 "FAO Statistics Yearbook" (this is published by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations) shows the 2000-2002 undernourished populations of the Russian Federation on a par with the United States and Canada. The World Food Programme Interactive Hunger Map of 2003 shows the undernourished population of the Russian population at 3% as compared to the United States at 2.5%. Their representation of the Russian Federation are completely convoluted. Even though this is my introduction, it is difficult to avoid identifying this huge basic problem in recognizing the true magnitude of starvation and undernourishment in the world. The corruption behind this under-reporting is widespread and well recognized.

For my presentation I have selected a part of the former Soviet Union now known as the country of Tajikistan because United Nations statistics show its undernourished population at 60%, and it may arguably be much higher. Before continuing, it is appropriate to disclose that in addition to the references listed in my bibliography, I have an experienced and knowledgeable support group consisting: My mother who was a school psychologist and teacher in the Russian Federation; my father who traveled to many countries including Russia and the People's Republic of China spending time with government agricultural officials and farmers for the purpose of farm, crop, and mechanization development.

Tajikistan is located in the southeast area of the former Soviet Union, in Central Asia west of China, occupying an area of 143,100 square kilometers (slightly smaller than Wisconsin) with a population over 6,700,000. It has the lowest GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita among the 15 former Soviet Republics. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce and CIA World Fact Book, it is the poorest country in the region and is still impacted by its civil war between 1992 and 1997. The landscape is dominated by mountains and desert valleys which only provides about 7% arable land. Tajikistan is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, with frequent earthquakes, landslides, floods and avalanches.

A typical family lives in a rural area, has four children, and tries to subsist on less than \$1.00 per day probably earned from working on a cotton farm collective or in a mining operation. The children will probably range in age between 0 to 15 almost equally male and female and parents will be between 15 and 45. Life expectancy is about 62 for males and 67 for females born now, but this is based upon predictions of improving food availability and nutrition. People living below the poverty line are estimated at 87%,

and 17% or more are destitute (FAO, p.1, 2). Hunger is considered a problem that affects even those that are not hungry because hunger dulls the senses, reduces productivity, feeds hopelessness and spreads related disease and illnesses. Potable water is scarce due to lack of functional water treatment plants and access to the people.

It is difficult to write this report because all the references I found (mainly reports and studies of international aid organizations) unanimously coincide in portraying a country destroyed by natural disasters, five years of civil war, widespread political corruption and criminal activities such as human (sex slave) and drug trafficking. (If I listed the many references in each sentence I would have few paragraphs in this report.) So natural disasters such as severe drought in 2000 and 2001, the major destruction during the five year civil war ending in 1997 and political corruption at all levels, coupled with conflicts between Muslim factions (90% of the country is comprised of Muslims) all serve to impede rebuilding and establishing modern facilities and systems. This discussion cannot be avoided in a discussion of poverty and malnutrition as related to income level.

During Soviet control, Tajikistan exported cotton, aluminum, and hydroelectric power. Cotton is still being exported and production slowly increasing under the government control of agricultural collectives. The government channels irrigation, energy, and exploited low wage level human resources to cotton production to generate export income, but this income is not adequate to meet import food needs and rebuild the country's basic infrastructure needs for a potable water supply system, for adequate energy distribution, for adequate telephone and communications coverage, and adequate transportation system to support development of commerce and to rebuild and modernize the education system. Before independence and civil war, Tajikistan was recognized to have a very high literacy rate with up to 98% percent of adults able to read and write. Today the education system is shattered with ruined schools, few and outdated books, fewer teachers who are frustrated and on poverty level wages like cotton workers, and a high percentage of children are not attending beyond 5th grade level.

So cotton dominates in the export market since there is not enough grain grown such as wheat, barley, rice, and maize. According to the most recent data I was able to obtain (for 2002 by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) Tajikistan exported \$737 million of merchandise as compared to \$721 million of merchandise imports, a positive net result of \$16 million, but not significant enough to operate the country or pay on loans from aid agencies such as the World Bank or lenders such as Russia, the United States or European Economic Union. Agricultural product exports were \$141.9 million as compared to imports of \$133.9 million, an \$8.0 million surplus, which is 50% of the total, export income. Of agricultural exports, cotton lint and combed cotton was 88% of the total juice and fruit was 8%, dry onions and tobacco about 4%. There is a little doubt that the commercial and industrial sectors need as much development freedom and encouragement to privatize in order to attract investment capital as the agricultural sector. It appears that the government continues to maintain Soviet style systems and formats of economic organization such as farm collectives, which are historically unsuccessful under any form of government. The early American pilgrims tried the collective farming system, and it quickly failed for the usual reasons of lack of ownership and lack of reward for achievement and productivity. The collective system does not motivate performance and innovation, as there is no carrot and reward.

The central government's program to disburse .5 hectares of land (1.25 acres) to each rural family for a food garden has apparently been corrupted at the local rural government levels. It is my opinion that this program would not do much to alleviate poverty or malnutrition on a significant scale as the people are too poor to develop the gardens and probably lack the energy without the existence of cooperatives to help with resources such as finance, seed, and equipment such as small machines used in other Asian countries.

A central complaint throughout my readings is that there is inadequate accurate statistical data on real crop production, real crop exports, real crop imports, and individual food consumption information. It seems that the severity of food shortages in Tajikistan is worse than the government wants to disclose. Daily diet contains 33% grains 33% fruits, 11% protein, and 23% vegetables. On average a person consumes only about 40 grams of protein per day (454 grams per U.S. pound).

The government and political climate in Tajikistan under President Rakhmonov is one of corruption, suppression and fear. Freedom of expression is legal, but under threat in Tajikistan. Even though independent newspapers are popular, state-run publishing houses refuse to print them, making production difficult or impossible. The Tajikistan Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but government officials monitor them, interfere with their activities, and arrest religious antigovernment activists. The political climate has become very tense as President Rakhmonov attempts to consolidate power before the 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections. Opponents of Rakhmonov can be prosecuted on politically motivated charges. In 1997, a power sharing arrangement guaranteed opposition parties 30% of top government positions, but in January 2004, Rakhmonov replaced government opponents with members of his own party so that now there are only opponents in 5% of the top government positions.

Russia has been a large influence on Tajikistan's economy and military since 1991, and Russian soldiers are in residence under Moscow's control. In 2004 Putin and Rakhmonov negotiated partial withdrawal of Russian troops by 2006, and Putin agreed to a large debt reduction for Tajikistan in return for permanent rights to maintain a military base.

Tajikistan is also important to the U.S. since the 2001 military operation in Afghanistan. Under cooperation, the U.S. military provides technical assistance and training to Tajikistan armed forces and in 2004 provided \$50.7 million in assistance.

Tajikistan is a member of the World Bank, a member of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), cooperates with the United States and Russia, and on October 11, 2004 became the final Central Asian country to sign a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union. They have also applied for membership in the WTO (World Trade Organization). Although human rights violations have been an issue placed before Rakhmonov, he appears to be most occupied with retaining his power and control.

If Tajikistan is going to overcome poverty by rebuilding the country and its economic systems, it needs a stable government and a justice system, which treats people equally under the law. The government must set the example in eliminating corruption from its own ranks in order to progress against corruption at all.

Governments have not proven to be as effective and productive as private enterprise in agriculture, commerce or industry and countries which build on the backs of slave labor, do not survive the same political format. The international community should not allow that to happen in Tajikistan. Aid programs, whether loans, grants or charity, should have clear conditions, direct involvement in designing, planning, construction, monitoring and evaluating. There should be incentives and penalties tied to performance and infusions of money. Products or services should be targeted to specific government ministries with known and qualified government officials to be held accountable.

Private enterprise should be encouraged and utilized to the maximum degree. Internationally qualified and recognized enterprises should provide expertise, supervision, and even leadership whenever possible in order to utilize leading technologies, and train and develop the local work force while they earn realistic wages.

I am not yet familiar with all the international relief organizations which hopefully can aid Tajikistan with their food needs to at least eliminate starvation and reduce hunger through the next five years. It should be made clear that this cannot be maintained indefinitely, and to do so would result in a long-term welfare society continuing to fester in poverty.

Tajikistan needs loans, grants, and investment capital to build a new country, not rebuild old structures and systems that returns them to the 19th century. If I were a lender or investor, it would be my policy not to distribute to a state run enterprise or collective. My objective would be to invest in projects using only 21st century technologies and proven leadership records to guide, direct and supervise all project phases while using the Tajikistan labor force.

The Tajikistan mountains have great potential to supply potable and irrigation water to a large portion of Central Asia, while also providing hydroelectric power. Drinking water processing plants and distribution networks have to be a priority in conjunction with the overall design to include hydroelectric plants and irrigation distribution networks. A countrywide power grid must be built which also provides for power export. Wind and solar power may also be feasible. Agrarian land reform is vital. Private land ownership must be honestly allowed, encouraged and enabled through grants and long-term loans. The .5 hectare land give away should be expanded and amended to allow private small farmers to grow crops they can sell and to establish cooperatives to use volume purchasing economies of seed, fertilizer, machinery, and irrigation equipment and to benefit from consolidation of things such as marketing services.

Animal confinement operations could probably be established rapidly once water becomes more readily available and it becomes possibly to grow enough feed.

Fish farming could supply enormous amounts of sorely needed protein once water becomes available, or even can be extracted from deep wells if pumps can become accessible.

There are several new strains of algae which can be pond grown and cultivated. These algae are very high in protein and could be processed for animals and even human consumption.

On small parcels of land, hydroponics is another growing method, which can produce very high yields of salad and vegetable crops.

I also read that in some cases farmers are getting crop yields less than the value of the seeds planted. This could be due to high seed cost, lack of water, fertilizer, poor seed quality, etc. Assuming water and fertilizer can be adequate in the near future, there are seed varieties available for most climates.

The key to agricultural development is privatization and free competition along with available financing to jumpstart the process. Land reform and true support of private agriculture will do much to lift the rural and urban populations from hunger, starvation, and poverty if the government allows private enterprise free access to infrastructure development. Free competition in all economic sectors will result in more rapid development, more efficiency and productivity, more individual income more rapidly than any state run activity with the typical restraints and uncompetitive wages.

In concluding, it is pertinent to point out that Tajikistan joined the World Bank in 1993, and as of March 2003 the World Bank had made commitments of \$324 million for loans and grants. In May 2003 the World Bank approved the \$20 million Tajikistan Education Modernization Project. In February 2003 the World Bank approved its Country Assistance Strategy for Tajikistan for 2003 to 2005 focusing on three objectives (as quoted in the Strategy):

1. Improving community based support of public infrastructure and services. This aims to keep the basic community infrastructure functioning, and support schools, health facilities and other basic services that most affect the lives of the poor.
2. Fostering economic growth through private sector development. This includes the program of micro-and small credits, transferring land use rights to farmers, and lowering the cost of doing business.
3. Strengthening the institutions needed to promote a market economy. This includes a long-term program of institutional building, and continuing the Bank's focus on public sector management reform.

This one page news release did not say how much money was allocated of the \$324 million for this project period.

I do not know the details of how the World Bank will administer the loan and grant money for the these activities of this project period, but I hope they will closely supervise and approve only the involvement of qualified international enterprises who will employ Tajikistan citizens. Many people question the bureaucratic inefficiencies of the World Bank.

Even though the World Bank appears to be the lead player in fighting the poverty and hunger in Tajikistan, the amount the Bank has committed is very small in the face of the challenges and desperation in Tajikistan. I read estimates of destruction costs due to civil war and national disasters of between \$7 billion to \$10 billion.

I conclude that the Tajikistan people will have to claw their way out of this situation, and they can and will do so if the government proves to be wise enough to give the people the necessary tools such as freedom under just law, true land and economic reform which allows private ownership and private enterprise, a free market economy, and government oversight and protection instead of government suppression, corrupt restraint and destructive taxation.

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