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Tajikistan: A People Built on Dependency

Within the mountainous regions of Central Asia lies Tajikistan, a small country boasting a population of 9.2 million. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the once practical lives of the people living under the country's borders have crumbled, and today, Tajikistan and many of its citizens struggle daily to keep from falling victim to poverty. Despite efforts, forty-seven percent of Tajik citizens still fall below the poverty line, and following suit, thirty percent are considered malnourished (World Food Program USA). Poverty is one of the most infamous factors in food insecurity, as it prevents people and their families from being able to afford or access various basic goods and services. In Tajikistan's case, its ongoing struggles against poverty are precisely why the country suffers from food insecurity.

With an urban population of only twenty-eight percent, most of Tajikistan's citizens live in rural areas outside of major cities (ProQuest). Compounds known as qishlags are among the most common living arrangements and feature anywhere from two to seven hundred single-family households living together near an available water source under the leadership of a senior male. (Allworth, Smith, Hambly & Sinor). Within the larger compound, families live in small mud brick houses with around three to five children as well as various generations of individuals inside (ProQuest).

Conditions for rural families are often primitive, with water being gathered from a well and boiled before consumption and little to no access to electricity or heating. Within Tajikistan's cities, Soviet-era apartments are most popular, giving possibility to the limited access of electricity. Unfortunately, running water is still exceedingly scarce, and even when present, water pressure issues still leave most households to also have to boil their water before use. Dietary choices of Tajikistan's urban citizens include a variety of choices among vegetables, fruits, and any meats besides pork. However, these choices are limited among rural peoples, and due to a lack of nutritious foods in rural communities, stunting in child growth is a common issue (ProQuest).

While Tajikistan's government requires education for at least nine years, it is difficult to enforce this rule for rural populations, and children often do not attend school long enough to meet this requirement. This happens most commonly as children are either pulled out of school at young ages to help out on farms or around the house or because women are still held to traditional gender roles in Tajikistan, and education is not deemed important in this setting (ProQuest). While a more prevalent issue within rural communities, Tajikistan as a whole also suffers a lack of teachers. After the fall of the U.S.S.R, Tajikistan's economy suffered greatly, leading to little to no funding or attention being directed towards education or schooling. This has caused an unusual situation in which older people are more educated than younger generations, and as older generations retire, fewer and fewer qualified teachers are available. (Allworth et al.)

Tajikistan's government consists of a president, prime minister, and the legislative, judicial, and executive branches. This form of government was established in 1994 by the newly written constitution, which replaced a formerly Soviet constitution in favor of the branches (Allworth et al.). Despite this, many Tajik citizens still remain bitter and distrustful of their government, with most regarding the system as corrupt, providing little to no support to those struggling in rural areas (ProQuest).

In 2003, an amendment was signed by Tajikistan's government that prohibited citizens access to free healthcare. Since then, the use of healthcare services has declined by most of the population, but even further neglected by those in poverty-stricken, rural compounds and houses. On top of the cost, a great deal of Tajik people do not seek healthcare due to the distance needed to reach hospitals and other businesses, which are few and far between and typically only available in larger urban cities. A lack of trained, qualified doctors, nurses, and other professionals also greatly impacts not only access to quality healthcare but also the effectiveness of treatment. Those greatly affected by healthcare limitations have been mothers and infants, and as such, maternal and infant mortality rates have remained relatively high (ProQuest).

With an average elevation of 10,000 feet above sea level, it is no surprise that Tajikistan's diverse climate is not particularly in favor of habitation (Allworth et al.). The land's steep variation of altitude leads to extreme changes in environment, from polar tundras to semi-desert conditions, and showcases extreme temperature variations as well (2023 FAO/WFP Assessment Mission). While the soil within the country is nutrient rich, it is exceptionally difficult to find, as shingle, rock, and ice cover over two-thirds of the land's surface. (Allworth et al.)

Alongside its terrain, Tajikistan also lies on top of an active seismic belt and is prone to damage from earthquakes and other natural disasters. The majority of the country also receives little rainfall annually, with deserts and polar tundras averaging around seventy to one-hundred-sixty millimeters a year, while central Tajikistan experiences upwards of 1,800 millimeters of rainfall a year (Climate Change Knowledge Portal). Rainfall most commonly occurs during the winter months, peaking in October and November. Temperatures also vary among regions but average at sixteen to seventeen degrees celsius, reaching a high of forty-eight degrees celsius in July and a low of negative forty-nine degrees celsius in January (2023 FAO/WFP Assessment Mission).

Despite seemingly unfavorable conditions, Tajikistan's overwhelming rural population has shown their resilience, and agriculture remains the country's biggest employment field. An estimated forty-three percent of Tajik people work in agriculture, cultivating various goods from traditional crops, cotton, silk, or producing hydroelectric power (ProQuest). In total, agriculture accounts for twenty-two percent of the total GDP as well as nineteen percent of exports, making the wellbeing of not only those within the field but also the economy itself incredibly reliant on farming (Sevimli & Jungbluth). Backyard farms are not the only powers involved, however, and total agricultural output also relies on industrial enterprises and more formal farms known as dehkans (2023 FAO/WFP Assessment Mission).

It is estimated that only twenty-four percent of Tajikistan's rural population is food insecure, and of the remaining seventy-six percent, fifty percent of those individuals are marginally secure (World Food Program USA). The overwhelming issue bringing the country to this state is poverty, but there are numerous factors associated with why Tajik people may not be financially insecure, and even more as to why the country struggles with food insecurity. One of the most prominent factors in this situation is the state of the country's economy and its interactions with surrounding countries.

Due to a lack of job diversity and available goods, Tajikistan is required to import most of its goods from nearby countries like Russia, China, and Kazakhstan. Most Tajik citizens largely prefer Russian products, despite the fact that the prices of these products, particularly petroleum and timber, have been driven up greatly from 2021. Economic expert Nur Safarov also explains that, "While in 2020 a 5-litre bottle of Oleina vegetable oil cost about 60 somonis (Tajik currency), in 2021 the same 5-litre bottle already cost 95 somonis, and in December 2022 it cost 144 somonis." In other words, the growth rate of prices from 2020 increased by roughly one hundred forty percent from 2020 to 2022 alone and likely has since increased today (Mamadshoev).

Many citizens also report a disappearance of Russian products on shelves, with imported goods from Russia reporting decreased import rates of two times what they used to be, and thus many people are forced to resort to often more expensive choices from other countries as a result. Reasons for increased prices as well as smaller import rates likely stem from conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and the war is blamed for a majority of economic shocks and shortages in surrounding countries as well as those immediately affected. In general, Nur Safarov states, "Tajikistan is heavily dependent on imports of food products and energy resources, and all price fluctuations are reflected in the final cost of goods in Tajikistan. Often significantly upwards" (Mamadshoev). In other words, Tajikistan's dependence on other countries and their imports will likely remain high unless major changes occur, and until this happens, increased prices will continue to attack the already struggling people within the country.

In regards to food insecurity, a survey sent out in 2023 showed the harsh reality that sixteen percent of the survey's respondents were struggling with insecurity, despite spending anywhere from seventy to eighty percent of their income on food alone. Based on these numbers, roughly thirteen in every fifty thousand people surveyed indicated that they were struggling. Even among those who did not deem themselves battling food insecurity, nearly half of the participants still spent around sixty-seven percent of their total income on food products, leading to the inference that most people in Tajikistan do not prioritize or simply can not afford to prioritize items unrelated to food. In general, forty-eight percent of households said that whether they are currently secure or not, they still do have financial concerns in their daily lives, with twenty percent expressing food to be their biggest concern. Many families are thus faced with resorting to various coping strategies in order to prioritize different aspects of their lives that they deem important (2023 FAO/WFP Assessment Mission).

Those responding to the survey sent out in regards to the Food Security Assessment Mission were asked to report any and all food-related coping strategies they had used within the last week prior to the survey, and in response fifty-eight percent of respondents gave insight into the struggles in their lives. The most popular way to cope with insecurity was to purchase and consume food that was either more affordable or was, in general, not preferred by the household, with just over forty percent of families saying this was most common for them. Additionally, around twenty percent stated that they limit portion sizes in hopes of cutting total costs, leading to concerns that whether or not struggling people are receiving adequately nutritious meals and whether or not health concerns may also be a result of the aforementioned coping strategy. Sadly, twenty percent also reported they are forced to rely upon relatives and friends to provide them with extra food, and sixteen percent stated they cut back on their own food intake to allow their children the opportunity to eat enough. The state of all the replying households sheds an alarming light on not only the state of the country but also the state of the people at the mercy of food insecurity (2023 FAO/WFP Assessment Mission).

However, one of the factors holding Tajikistan and its opportunity back the most is its staggering dependency on migrant remittances. Roughly one fourth of the population within Tajikistan is dependent on remittances as their main source of income. Alongside this, nearly half of Tajik households reported at least one family member participating in migration in 2023 for the purpose of sending remittances home. An unhealthy dependence on outside powers leaves not only the economy but also the already struggling people vulnerable to outside shocks and conflict (2023 FAO/WFP Assessment Mission).

About one-third of the average GDP comes from remittances from immigrants in Russia alone, which has led to negative shocks and backlash for Tajikistan's economy. In late February through March of 2014, Russian officials surrounded and seized control over the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea (Walker). Subsequently, in 2016, Tajikistan faced a banking crisis due to sanctions placed on Russia due to the invasion two years prior (Allworth et. al). These sanctions lessened deposit checks sent from remittances, and poor loan performance led to a cash crisis in some of the country's largest banks, like Tojikstodirobtbank and Agroinvestbank, which were forced to limit consumer withdrawals. Tajikistan is

prone to crisis again if conditions in Russia worsen, putting thousands of already food-insecure households even further at risk. Russia's economic outlook is expected to continue to worsen in the coming years in the same way it did from 2014 to 2016, largely due to similar conflicts. This will once again cut off remittance flow, and the same incidents recorded in the past banking crisis may ensue.

Remittances are also harmful in the way that they do not directly benefit or help to grow Tajikistan's economy as a whole. While remittances are a source of income, they often are used solely to power citizens' private lives and are typically spent on individual needs. While seemingly beneficial, the use of remittances provides no long-term aid and slows down the country's potential, as it is crucial for any economy that the money used by the people is directly funneled back for big-picture growth. A healthy, growing economy may be exactly what Tajikistan needs in order to thrive (Lemon).

In November of 2024, Firdavs Tolibzoda, chairman of Tajikistan's National Bank as well as the Coordination Council, noted that improved access to high quality service can be done through financial inclusion. He stresses the necessity of improving both banking and financial sectors overall as well as strengthening the private sector. Tolibzoda also mentioned growing and improving the business environment, which is often deemed as corrupt and manipulated by the government (Contify Banking News).

An emphasis on raising the quality of living substantially for all Tajik citizens and supporting social rights and protections was also stressed by Tolibzoda, with a focus on improving and supporting large-scale sectors being a way to make this possible. All of these focuses and improvement strategies are expected to fall under the National Financial Inclusion Strategy Act of the Republic of Tajikistan, which is to be implemented and carried out from 2022 to 2026 (Contify Banking News).

The World Bank has also expressed willingness to work with Tajikistan to improve their financial situation by focusing on projects that will help move along the country's development while also being "green", or maintaining natural resources at the same time. The exact ideas of which projects the World Bank intends to follow through with will likely involve complete structural reform of Tajikistan's economy and a focus on improving the investment system (Contify Banking News).

Tajikistan's young and quickly growing population gives it an immense potential for growth. Alongside this, its location and access to snowmelt gives it immense opportunities in hydroelectric power so long as climate change remains under control. The terrain and mountains also offer the possibility of tourism as a different income stream for the country. Despite its struggles, Tajikistan has a myriad of positive outlooks and opportunities that may be used to greatly improve the state the country currently lies in (World Bank Group).

A crucial step towards saving Tajikistan is strongly promoting households to lessen their dependence on migrant family members and encourage them to invest their time and effort into local agriculture and business (2023 FAO/WFP Assessment Mission). Remittances do not need to be cut off entirely right away, but rather eased away over time in order to allow dependent families a chance to find new sources of reliable income.

At this time, it is critical that Tajikistan's government is open and willing to support these people through money, food, or other material needs. As of December 2023, only eight percent of struggling households reported receiving any government assistance in the last three months, with four percent receiving cash as support, three percent receiving food, and the rest receiving other material products (2023 FAO/WFP Assessment Mission). Unfortunately, this is simply not a high enough average to encourage people to detach themselves from the safety net of remittances and take the first step towards a resilient, independent income.

Education also needs to be further developed and enforced, particularly in rural areas. By mentoring and educating younger people, more job opportunities within their own country come about, further encouraging people to center their lives and their income within a local job. It is also possible to make it more accessible for people to become entrepreneurs and start their own local companies, providing both themselves and their communities with job opportunities and goods. However, while remittances can be used as investments into these properties, the current government and business outlook does not favor using remittances for this purpose, making it difficult for Tajik citizens to feel they have a chance at starting up a business. It is also found that the business sector itself is considered to be deeply corrupted and dominated by members of the president's family who use their power to benefit only themselves (Lemon).

Due to the tough conditions currently faced by locals in the business sector, it may also be imperative to create and enforce peaceful work and labor unions to give workers a way to have their voices heard. By participating in a union, people are more likely to receive raises, and benefits and take part in safer workplace practices by having their thoughts and ideas backed up by their coworkers (AFL-CIO).

An emerging opportunity which may benefit Tajikistan not only for employment opportunity and union implementation but also the country's overall infrastructure. China, as of recently, has been implementing the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan. In this initiative China makes investments on projects within the selected countries as a way not only to grow their infrastructure but also as a way to incorporate trade by engaging the local community in the workforce efforts. For Tajikistan, this could mean a way to expand global trade by taking advantage of financial aid from a willing country (Taliga).

However, the BRI has encountered complications and issues already within its relatively short implementation period. "Trade unions are in a relatively weak position when negotiating collective agreements for a variety of reasons" (Taliga). While union institutions like the ITUC are present in Tajikistan, Chinese employers that run BIR projects are reluctant to welcome or accept trade unions in their workplace. In turn, employees are often unsure about joining the initiative as concerns on abuse of standards, pay and vacation are all taken into account. Despite this, the potential for trade unions to form in the area are high and work is currently being done to ensure their implementation (Taliga).

To some Chinese employers, work unions are too different and bring uncertainty to their idea of employment. In China, workers have no guarantee of their rights, and similarly most employers carry this idea well within the country they are placed in. In an effort to introduce familiarity, there is work currently being done to translate, outline, and clarify the benefits of workplace unions for Tajik citizens. It is vital that Chinese employers accept these unions as they encourage Tajik workers to undertake employment in helping move along the BIR (Taliga).

There are improvements which are expected to be encouraged and put in place by the Tajik governments and subsequent unions as well, however. It is currently advised authorities implement a set and standards called the Core Labour Standards to all Chinese employers within the country. Once set in place, it is the responsibility of the authorities and government to ensure that these standards are being rightfully upheld within the workplace. For emerging unions in Tajikistan it is recommended to make an attempt at cooperation and connection between unions among various levels in an effort to build the capacity for unions to properly negotiate and organize in the face of employers (Taliga).

The BIR offers great promise for Tajikistan, by giving citizens a means to work locally within their community while actively helping to improve and grow their country. Only one project has currently been launched within Tajikistan, but the possibility of road and bridge construction remains a high possibility

due to its ability to promote and encourage trade. As a whole, the collapse of the Soviet Union left Tajikistan severely underdeveloped and without the resources to continue its own growth. The aid and initiative offered by China holds great promise in helping to construct a new version of the current country by expanding trade, economy and visitation for the area. By pushing the continuation of work done by the BIR, Tajikistan and its people can not only increase their formal GDP and employment but also strengthen the infrastructure of their own country.

Promoting unions will not necessarily overtake the rule of the employer or business but rather simply be a medium for employees to express their needs and wants safely and effectively. Unions should and will not allow workers to become lazy but rather encourage others to work harder in response to feeling as if they have a say in what happens in their organization (AFL-CIO). By increasing outreach to workers to join unions and stating their benefits, people will be encouraged to reach out and fulfill job opportunities and, in turn, remit money back into their economy by participating in local business, projects, and growth.

These ideas and recommendations are just a few ways to lessen dependence on other country's economies and remittances from migrant workers. By putting itself out there as a beautiful, independent country with a driving workforce, Tajikistan can also hope to attract new citizens and workers, which can help fuel small, local businesses and invest money into properties and farming areas in uncultivated areas. Currently it is imperative that the Tajik government prioritizes advocating for the continuation of work done by the Belt and Road Initiative within the country. The benefits of such work benefit not only the country and its people but also the Chinese employers searching to profit from the increased trade networking and economic growth as well. Once several more projects are confirmed it is also vital that the government as well as the ITUC secures trade unions within the workplace and upholds the terms set by these unions for the benefit of the workers, thus promoting the growth of the workforce.

Tajikistan as a country is one of the many around the world that struggle with food insecurity among its people. Despite housing an inhospitable environment and little farmland, agriculture is the country's biggest export and generates most of the country's GDP. However, another large portion of this income is through remittances, which, despite looking like a much-needed extra source of income, harms the economy in the long run. To improve, Tajikistan's government and its people need to work on supporting and taking advantage of local employment opportunities and businesses, which will help strengthen the economy and provide stable, reliable income to struggling families. Additionally, education needs to be improved and enforced even at a rural level, which will aid in helping an overwhelmingly young population become prepared and qualified for jobs in their adult lives.

Overall, Tajikistan hosts a myriad of opportunities to grow and transform itself into a thriving, healthy country and break its long-held title of the poorest country in Central Asia. The country's struggle with food insecurity, however, is rooted in poverty, which keeps the people and the government from being able to properly provide for themselves without the help of other countries or organizations. Hopefully one day, by taking into account recommendations from this paper as well as keeping in mind the best interests of its people, Tajikistan promises itself an extremely promising future; one without poverty.

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