

Food Security in Central Asia

A PUBLIC POLICY CHALLENGE

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Central Asian public policies often tend to assert that an increase of GDP mechanically ensures better food security. This is a problematic assumption, however, as food security mainly affects pauperized populations for which per capita GDP does not increase at the same rate as national GDP. Existing programs for countering food insecurity are often superficial measures that do not get at the root of the problem and almost never take into account the quality of nutrition, which has a long-term impact on the health of younger generations. More importantly, the central plank of the fight against food insecurity has to be a fight against rural poverty. This means that states must address issues such as water management and energy access. In addition, public policies in agrarian states like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are centered on patronal practices. Centralized cotton or—to a lesser extent—wheat production—are necessary to the functioning of the ruling regime’s political system; diversified agricultural production for domestic markets does not offer rents to ruling elites.

This memo argues that food insecurity in Central Asia is not a challenge related to difficult environmental conditions—even if such must be taken into account—but a public policy issue. It discusses the main reasons behind the growing food insecurities in the region, in particular the patterns of extensive production, and ill-calibrated import and subsidy policies.

Food Security and Food Safety: Some Data

More than 850 million individuals in the world face malnutrition: a majority of them live in developing countries, and 28 million are in post-Soviet Eurasia. In Central Asia, more than 5 million individuals out of a population of about 62 million have no access to staple food products. In Central Asia, as elsewhere, food insecurity mainly affects rural populations and marginalized populations of urban centers, especially the youth and women, who are often malnourished. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development, Central Asia’s dependence on a single commodity—wheat—is

considerably higher than in other regions of the world that are vulnerable to food insecurity.

Food insecurity affects all Central Asian states, if to varying degrees. Tajikistan is able to cover only 31 percent of its food consumption needs, while Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan cover around 50 percent of theirs. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are the focus of particular concern: according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 30 percent of Tajiks and 27 percent of Kyrgyz have difficulty feeding themselves. In 2009, the United Nations announced that more than two million Tajiks and one million Kyrgyz were in a state of food insecurity, and 800,000 Tajiks were directly threatened by famine. Since the onset of the global economic crisis of 2008, about 60 percent of Tajik homes claim to have reduced their food consumption. In Kyrgyzstan, chronic insecurity has been aggravated by the severe political and social troubles of 2010, during which the country experienced the highest rise in wheat prices in the world (54 percent).

Although they have greater agricultural and hydrocarbon resources, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have not been spared. It is estimated that more than 30 percent of the Uzbek population subsists below the food poverty level. This is a particularly acute problem in regions far removed from the major fertile areas and from the capital, for example in the provinces of Khorezm and Karakalpakstan. In Turkmenistan, the Tashauz region is one of the most fragile in terms of food security.

The stakes of food safety – malnutrition or undernutrition – are just as important as that of food security (typically defined as having “access” to food). About 8 percent of all children in Tajikistan and 11 percent in Turkmenistan are malnourished to the point of being underweight and 15 percent to the point that their growth is stunted. A greater number of women have diets deficient in proteins and fundamental microelements such as iodine, A vitamins, and iron. According to the World Bank’s Living Standards Assessment, many Central Asians will not attain an average of 3,000 calories/day until 2030, or even 2050. These forecasts contradict official data on living standards, a telltale sign of the inflated character of national GDPs.

The macroeconomic givens of the states of Central Asia are often skewed, making it impossible to measure the real living standards of households. Poverty is clearly one of the major causes of food insecurity. The share of household expenditure devoted to food remains very high: 80 percent in Uzbekistan and in Tajikistan, 58 percent in Kyrgyzstan, and as much as 42 percent in Kazakhstan (an unparalleled share for a country with decent macroeconomic indicators).

Most of the remittances Central Asian migrants in Russia send to their families are earmarked for the purchase of food, thus showing a strong connection between rural poverty and food insecurity.

The regular inflation affecting Central Asian currencies has consequences on nutrition in not only quantitative but also qualitative terms. In every state in the region except Kazakhstan, the quality of wheat is so low that it is used mostly as animal feed, while higher quality wheat is imported. In all global peak periods of wheat prices, Tajik

and Kyrgyz populations tend to revert to local wheat, which is less expensive but also less nutritious.

Paradoxical Public Policy Responses

In responding to this situation, Central Asian governments have adopted a range of public policies, from extensive development of agricultural production and promotion of food self-sufficiency to subsidy programs designed to facilitate the import of staple products. The strategies chosen in many cases overstep the food stakes and highlight the political practices prevalent in the region. For the authorities, food security is more a symbol of state sovereignty and economic success than a human security challenge. Moreover, in regimes mired in neo-patrimonial practices, agricultural policy pertains essentially to financial and power interests, the objective being to ensure the survival of the political regime through the bolstering of the elite's financial manna.

Central Asian public policies, moreover, suffer from both the Soviet legacy (a preference given to extensive over intensive/quality methods) and its abandonment (lack of infrastructure maintenance). The degradation of agricultural installations and materials that have not been modernized for two decades has profoundly affected agricultural production, and livestock farming has suffered unprecedented decreases. Moreover, tariff fluctuations for material inputs (like fertilizers and insecticides) have considerably limited utilization of the latter. Finally, the whole region is subject to soil degradation: more than 60 percent of irrigated lands in Central Asia are affected by salination. In Kazakhstan, a brutal drop in wheat production—from 3,000 kg per hectare in 2011 to 800 in 2012—is not only the consequence of drought but also a result of the poor quality of seeds used, as well as of poor management of the land, which is polluted and has high salinity.

The Soviet-inspired choice of extensive production

The concentration on cotton and wheat production, which uses up to 80 percent of cultivated lands in Uzbekistan, raises the difficult question of diversification, which the relevant public policies do not seek to promote.

In all Central Asian states, and Uzbekistan in particular, the private farmers or *dehqan*, largely in the minority in terms of surface areas farmed, contribute to the production of more than one-third of food produce and almost all livestock farming. The productivity of the *dehqan* has increased more rapidly than that of the large private or collective farms. This has had a positive effect on food availability but means that the latter remains in the hands of a still delicate private sector, not state-run public policy.

In the name of food self-sufficiency as a symbol of state sovereignty, public policies have led to a considerable increase of surface area for the exploitation of wheat, for example from 488,000 to 1.5 million hectares between 1991 and 2006 in Uzbekistan. This policy has enabled Tashkent to produce more flour and hence provide the population with better access to staple foods. Turkmenistan has also made land available for cereal harvesting. However, the choice of extensive harvests required for food self-sufficiency is the cause of much debate. The famous “green revolution,” which

permitted significant technological innovations in the agribusiness sector (new types of seed, modernization of agricultural machines, massive use of fertilizers and pesticides, and investments in mechanization) is criticized for its lack of sustainability. In fact, if extensive agriculture leads to a clear increase in production, this is often followed by stagnation or even decline as a result of a drop in soil fertility. Hence, Kazakhstan has increased its total planted area by almost 42 percent since 2001; however, the wheat yield has declined by 30 percent over the last ten years.

The practice of developing wheat harvests at any price also leads to a considerable extension of farming areas in regions that are sometimes ill-suited to it. Thus, in Uzbekistan, only three out of fifteen provinces—Andijon, Bukhara, and Ferghana—manage a yield of five tons per hectare, whereas others such as Karakalpakstan and Djizzak are limited to 2.5 tons, a low figure for irrigated areas. Despite this low productivity, the harvest areas for wheat have continued to be extended. This leads to immense misuse, both in terms of harvested areas and water consumption.

Moreover, policies of extensive production bear social risk. The increase of crop yields induces a fall in the sale prices of agricultural products but simultaneously causes those of material inputs to skyrocket, the upshot of which is a reduction of farmers' profit margins and, as a result, their standard of living.

The question of debt of Central Asian farmers is a recurrent one throughout all the states, Tajikistan in particular. In order to protect consumer interests, governments have tried to set ceiling tariffs or limits to rising prices, but this has once again contributed to diminishing the revenues of local producers. In the end, efforts at extensive production do not contribute to the sustainability of the farming profession and thus are directly implicated in the rural population's massive labor migration abroad.

The importing/subsidizing strategy and its limits

Despite policies designed to increase production, of the five states in Central Asia only Kazakhstan has been able to meet its own cereal needs. The other four states have no choice but to import massively. Kyrgyzstan has to import 43 percent of its wheat. Tajikistan buys more than 50 percent of its cereals from abroad, as well as 30 percent of its beef, 80 percent of its poultry, three quarters of its vegetable oils, and nearly all its sugar.

Some states, such as Uzbekistan, have opted for increased protectionism, which safeguards the domestic market from international fluctuations. However, this policy produces price rises in the domestic market and thus reduces the choice of available products, further affecting underprivileged sectors of the population. Protectionism thus contributes in many cases to developing what is termed "hidden hunger"—access to better quality products, replete with the necessary nutritional elements, solely to the more privileged sectors of the population while depriving growing numbers of food safety.

States also use customs barriers, which have parallel consequences in the shadow economy. Restrictions on wheat imports in Uzbekistan have provoked a major increase in trafficking: if in 2005, after Uzbekistan enforced strict customs barriers, only 200,000 tons of flour were allegedly imported into Uzbek territory, it is estimated that 800,000 tons more entered the country clandestinely. The cost of Kazakh flour through trafficking (\$120-160 per ton) remains more appealing than the official route, which incurs accumulated costs of insurance, transport, and customs duties (\$210).

Subsidy programs for products of first necessity accompanying isolationist policies have been pursued in the states that are most reticent to reform, such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Although consumer subsidies can stabilize and control the cost of food items and prevent a political backlash, these programs are somewhat ineffective given their high economic cost. Moreover, subsidies for wheat and flour do not prioritize assistance to the neediest populations but urban populations instead. International organizations, on the contrary, privilege “targeted food assistance programs,” which aim to ensure the food security of specific groups of the population, as well as provide better redistribution to the neediest.

Conclusion

Food security has been a steadily growing concern for many citizens in Central Asia, the social and economic strains of which have political ramifications. Compared to post-WWII Soviet times, food access has deteriorated in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as in certain regions of the neighboring Central Asian states. Government policies on the matter have often been flawed, both regarding domestic food production projects and an ongoing and detrimental reliance on food staple imports.

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