



# SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT NOTES

ENVIRONMENTALLY AND SOCIALLY SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

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## Social Assessment in Tajikistan Brings Rural Realities to Urban Decisionmakers

A social assessment was done during the preparation of Tajikistan's Pilot Poverty Alleviation Project to answer several key questions: What are poor people's priority needs and wants? Why are they poor? What are their own strategies for improving their lives? And how can they be helped to improve their circumstances?

By answering these questions, the social assessment helped the project team incorporate poor people's priorities for poverty alleviation, identify nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) whose scaled-up programs would form part of the project, understand and address risks to project success, build local capacity to carry out participatory research, and influence the national dialogue on poverty and the potential role of small-scale, participatory microprojects for poverty alleviation. The Pilot Poverty Alleviation Project is designed to improve poor people's lives by scaling-up international NGO programs and financing small, participatory microprojects through the recently established Tajikistan Social Investment Fund.

### Why Social Assessment?

Tajikistan, one of the poorest former Soviet republics, has suffered prolonged macro-economic difficulties and civil conflict. As one response to the country's pressing development needs, the government and the World Bank are looking to small-scale projects and solutions. But project planners have found that problems

with inadequate basic data have been compounded by difficulties with in-country travel. As a result, a knowledge gap exists between urban decisionmakers and rural realities.

The project team used a social assessment to narrow this gap. It was implemented in several stages, including a desk study to review and summarize available information, a two-day in-country workshop to lay the basis for the social assessment and to conduct an initial poverty ranking, a five-week field study conducted by a consultant and a team of Tajik nationals, a review of the findings at a national workshop, a special field study undertaken by a lawyer and a human rights specialist of the problems of local harassment of poor people, and an ongoing survey of institutions that could help monitor and mitigate poverty.

### Initial Workshop

Nearly 60 senior civil servants and relief, rehabilitation, and development agency officials gave their perspectives on poverty at a two-day social assessment launch workshop in Dushanbe. Working in groups, these officials selected key poverty indicators (see Box 1), scaled and mapped them by district, and then used pairwise ranking (see Box 2) to order the districts by incidence of poverty. Workshop participants deliberately avoided comparing the country's four main regions because of prevailing sensitivities about regional disparities.

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### Box 1. Urban Decisionmakers' Wealth Indicators

Working in thematic groups, the social assessment workshop participants selected the following indicators and scales, which they then used to rank districts based on their expert knowledge. These indicators complement the community-derived indicators described in Box 5.

- Household income
- Infrastructure development
- Regional share of GDP
- Health
- Education services
- Female school attendance
- Birth rate
- Death rate
- Labor emigration

The final wealth ranking showed that the lowest-ranked districts shared at least one of three characteristics: remoteness from main centers, mountainous terrain, and prevalence of civil conflict. Although international NGO relief and rehabilitation efforts were concentrated in many of the poorest zones, a number of areas were needy but neglected. Workshop findings were used to design the qualitative field research on poverty, livelihood strategies, and project opportunities.

### The Field Study

A team of 11 Tajik nationals trained in participatory and rural appraisal techniques undertook the five-week field assessment of poverty. The team worked in seven areas selected on the basis of the workshop's poverty rankings; interviews with refugees allowed field teams to gather data on an eighth, war-affected zone in which field work was impossible.

The study's findings provided rich detail about different types of poverty and vulnerability, and greatly amplified or modified the workshop's conclusions and perceptions. The team found that the depth and incidence of poverty was particularly pronounced in rural areas and in the south—particularly in isolated areas and in areas experiencing insecurity and civil conflict. People urgently wanted peace, security, the rule of law, and a stronger civil society; improved ability to meet their basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, health, and education); and better access to productive assets to increase self-sufficiency and to produce tradable commodities. Some of the assessment's main findings include:

- Local priorities for poverty alleviation are (in order of importance) security, food,

### Box 2. Ranking Wealth Using Pairwise Ranking

Tajikistan's 54 districts were ranked on a wealth-poverty scale using pairwise ranking. The instrument used was the "round robin"—that is, every district was compared with every other district within the province—with a score of 2 entered in the better-off district's row and a score of 0 in the worse-off district's row (equally ranked districts scored 1-1). Thus all the "matches" had a score of 2-0, 1-1, or 0-2. This double-entry method is useful for error-checking, with the rows (points for) denoting relative wealth and the columns (points against) denoting relative poverty. Gorno-Badakhshan, the region with the fewest districts, illustrates the method (see table below).

Pairwise ranking is useful in cases where statistical data are fuzzy or insufficient, and helps to control bias. As a group exercise, it was readily understood by the participants, stimulating lively debate and generating final consensus. The method can be also be used to rank households within a village, or villages within a district. It can work equally well with high-level professionals (as here), with community members with little formal education, or with mixed groups.

Ranking poverty by district in the Gorno-Badakhshan region

	Kalayhumb	Ishkoshim	Murghab	Roshtkala	Rushan	Shugnan	Vanch	Wealth score	Wealth rank
Kalayhumb	—	2	2	2	2	2	2	12	1
Ishkoshim	0	—	1	1	0	0	0	2	5
Murghab	0	1	—	1	0	0	0	2	5
Roshtkala	0	1	1	—	0	0	0	2	5
Rushan	0	2	2	2	—	1	0	7	3
Shugnan	0	2	2	2	1	—	0	7	3
Vanch	0	2	2	2	2	2	—	10	2
Poverty score	0	10	10	10	5	5	2	42	
Poverty rank	7	1	1	1	4	4	6		

### Box 3. People's Survival Strategies Differ Depending on Where They Live

#### Isolated villages:

- Sell assets, especially cattle, to buy staples
- Consume home production (dairy products, bread, small amounts of fruits and vegetables)
- Collect hay and medicinal herbs for sale
- Work on rented land as hired hands or in exchange for fuel
- Steal produce, especially from collective farm or rented land

#### Villages near district center:

- Engage in home production for consumption and sale
- Market sales
- Rent land
- Salaries
- Beg or steal

#### Town/district center:

- Earn salaries from multiple forms of employment
- Earn supplementary, informal incomes
- Remittances
- Market sales
- Sell personal assets
- Rely on child labor

#### War-affected villages:

- Consume lower quality and quantity of food
- Sell products produced on household plots
- Sell personal assets, including cattle, construction materials, and household items (blankets, pillows)
- Work in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)
- Rely on humanitarian assistance

clothing, and shelter. Next on the list were health and education.

- Rural households without land, employment, or men are particularly vulnerable, especially where local harassment occurs.
- Depletion of assets has been dramatic and continuous, and is a major route by which vulnerable households of modest incomes have become impoverished.
- Access to land has become a dominant concern for poor rural households and

some urban ones. It is highly unequal, heavily influenced by local political connections, and a major basis of economic inequality.

- Sharp regional differences exist in the determinants of poverty, potential resources, and livelihood strategies (see Boxes 3 and 4).
- Local insecurity and harassment by soldiers, police, and local bullies seriously impede efforts by the poor to improve their circumstances.

### Box 4. Causes of Poverty and Sources of Opportunities and Resources, by Region

Region	Causes of poverty	Opportunities and resources
Kurgan Tyube	War (loss of assets and manpower) Insecurity, lawlessness Lack of male labor power	Access to markets Widely available irrigation Remittances
Gorno-Badakhshan	Historical dependence on outside food sources Insufficient land resources Limited access to markets	Humanitarian assistance Local leaders answerable to NGOs
Kuliab	Historic low levels of household asset accumulation Low level of social infrastructure Insufficient land for cattle and grain production Poor water supply	Labor power (especially men)
Ghram	Ongoing conflict Insecurity and absence of rule of law Loss of assets and male labor power Reduced access to markets	Cash crops Previously high level of assets Remittances
Leninabad	Unemployment Insufficient land in some areas Low levels of water supply Pockets of isolation in mountainous areas	Fertile land Highly industrialized Good access to markets
Dushanbe and Western RRS	Unemployment Low salaries and pensions Environmental degradation Absence of rule of law	Access to markets Access to bureaucracies, industries Industrialized Good land

- Households are interested in participatory projects aimed at alleviating poverty; local formal and informal institutions, if strengthened, could help counteract local abuses of official power.
- Locally selected poverty indicators (see Box 5) were much more specific and much more closely related to survival needs than the expert-derived indicators (see Box 1).

## Influence and Outcomes

The social assessment process and findings contributed to project preparation by identifying and describing poor people's priorities for poverty alleviation. These priorities were taken into account both in the selection of international NGO programs for support and in the location and identification of microprojects. The NGO programs selected for the project are shelter reconstruction, income-generating activities for female-headed households, group-guaranteed lending schemes, and agricultural reform. The social assessment also enabled project planners to:

- Use the same methodology in local poverty ranking workshops to identify priority regions for small-scale investments based on an improved understanding of poverty and opportunity in terms of social groupings, gender, geography, and ethnic differences

### Box 5. Local Wealth Indicators and Poverty Priorities

Local participants surveyed in the field study identified a set of indicators that were much more specific, and much more closely related to survival needs, than those that had been derived by the urban decisionmakers (see Box 1):

- Households' ability to provide for basic needs
- Male labor power availability at the household level
- Depletion of assets (cattle, personal property)
- Lack of access to productive assets
- Lack of employment
- Lack of ties to ruling local clans

- Start building stakeholder consensus on poverty alleviation efforts, which will shift from emphasizing social protection and transfers to working with communities for sustainable development and involving them in conceptualizing problems and finding solutions
- Provide a basis for subsequent quantitative studies that will contribute to a project impact evaluation baseline and a poverty assessment
- Avert risks that local elites might divert project benefits
- Contribute to the assessment of international NGO programs for possible inclusion in the project.

In addition to helping shape project preparation, the social assessment contributed to:

- Policy dialogue, by stimulating discussions of the potential role of small-scale, participatory microprojects
- Local capacity to undertake rapid appraisal
- Quantitative studies, now underway, that will enable a national assessment of poverty and an integrated evaluation of project impact.

Finally, the social assessment enabled the project team to identify major risks, such as local officials' unwillingness to admit the existence of poverty or prioritize the needs of the poor, the politicization of wealth and poverty, the vested interests of the new rural elites, discrimination against "foreigners" from other parts of the country and against people without influential local connections, and the difficulties of women, especially widows or unmarried women, in finding socially acceptable economic activities. These risks are now being taken into account in project design and in training programs.