

## Executive Brief: **Tajikistan (urban areas)** Emergency Food Security Assessment

### Overview

Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia with 64 percent of the population living below the poverty line of US\$2/person/day. It is a landlocked country, with few exports and limited domestic industry. The unemployment rate is estimated at 33 percent and remittance from labour migration is a major source of household income.

The country is affected by frequent natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and landslides. This year, an exceptionally harsh winter, coupled with an energy crisis resulting in shortages has further exacerbated the existing food insecurity and vulnerability situation.

Since the end of 2007 and early 2008, the prices of oil and wheat based products have doubled, mainly as a result of pass-through effects from the high prices of wheat and commodities in the international markets. The country is a net importer of wheat and other food commodities. The local production is not sufficient to cover the requirements of the population. The flows from rural to urban areas are also small, reflecting poor market integration (a consequence of weak transport infrastructure).

To understand the effects of the winter and of the rise in food and fuel prices on the population, and to update the existing information on the food security, livelihoods and nutrition situation in urban areas WFP, FAO and the Government of Tajikistan conducted an assessment in June and July 2008. It follows a similar in-depth assessment of the situation in rural areas conducted in April and May.

**How was the assessment done?** It is based on an analysis of primary information collected in seven towns, including the capital city Dushanbe, Khujand and Taboshar in Sughd region, Kulyab, Kurgan-Tuybe and Sarband in Khatlon region, and Khorog in Gorno-Badakhshan region, representing 75 percent of the total urban population. About 700 households were interviewed and the anthropometric data of 350 children under the age of 5 were collected. Focus groups discussions were organised and information on markets, supplies and prices was collected through interviews with 243 shop-keepers and traders.

### How many people are food insecure?<sup>1</sup>

**It is estimated that almost half a million people are food insecure in urban areas.**

**About 200,000 people are severely food insecure, representing 15 percent of the urban population.** Their diet diversity is poor (mainly bread, potatoes, pasta / little oil, sugar and vegetable / no pulses or animal products). Children eat twice a day and adults eat less than twice a day.

**About 300,000 people are moderately food insecure, representing 22 percent of the urban population.** Their diet is slightly better but still inadequate and entails risk of minerals and vitamin deficiencies on the short and medium term. Adults and children eat twice a day on average.

About 63 percent of the urban population is food secure. These figures of food insecure and food secure households are similar to the estimates in rural areas done in May 2008 at the peak of the lean season (11%, 23% and 66% respectively).

Acute and chronic malnutrition rates amongst under-5 children were indicative of a 'poor' situation according to international standards: **7.8 percent were wasted** and **20.5 percent stunted**. The acute malnutrition figure is higher than in rural areas (4.7%) while chronic malnutrition is lower (27.5%) but differences are not significant.

### Who are the food insecure people?

The socio-economic characteristics of the food insecure households are relatively comparable across towns.

#### **The severely food insecure households:**

- They cannot afford the cost of a basic food basket (wheat, oil and sugar). Bread, potatoes, oil and sugar are the main posts of food expenditures. Health is the main non-food expenditure (9% of total expenditures).
- Almost 30% depend on pensions/allowances as their main income source, 21% depend on remittances, 21% rely on day time/casual work, 20% receive government salaries. The rest combines these various sources which provide low and irregular earnings. Some 60% have **only 1 member able to earn an income**.

<sup>1</sup> The figures are an extrapolation from the percentages found in the seven sampled towns to the remaining towns, which represent 25% of the total urban population. A **rapid household survey focusing on the key characteristics of the food insecure households in the non-sampled towns is recommended to refine the estimates and for programming purposes**. In the sampled towns, about 21% of the households were severely food insecure, 34% moderately food insecure, and 45% food secure.

- They typically own **very few assets** and very few have any cash or savings. Most of them **do not have access to a home garden** and for the 15% who have, the average acreage cultivated is small (0.02 ha). Self-sufficiency in vegetables or fruits does not go beyond one month for most of them. Only 8% own some sheep/goats and a few poultry.
- Almost half of these households are **female-headed households**, twice as much as the food secure households. These households are also **smaller** (4.4 members versus 6 in other households).

#### **Moderately food insecure households:**

- They can just afford a basic food basket which includes only staples.
- About 64% have **only 1 member earning an income** and rely on just one source of income. Almost 40% receive **government salaries**, 32% depend on remittances, 10% rely on day time/casual work and the rest is engaged in petty trade, self-employment or combination of activities.
- The asset base remains low. Only 13% have cash or other savings. **Few have access to a home garden** (17%) and the acreage is small (0.022 ha). However, slightly more than half of them can secure 1 to 3 months of self-sufficiency in fruits, vegetables and/or potatoes. About 15% of them raise sheep, goats and/or poultry.
- **One third of the moderately food insecure are headed by a woman.**

#### **The food secure households:**

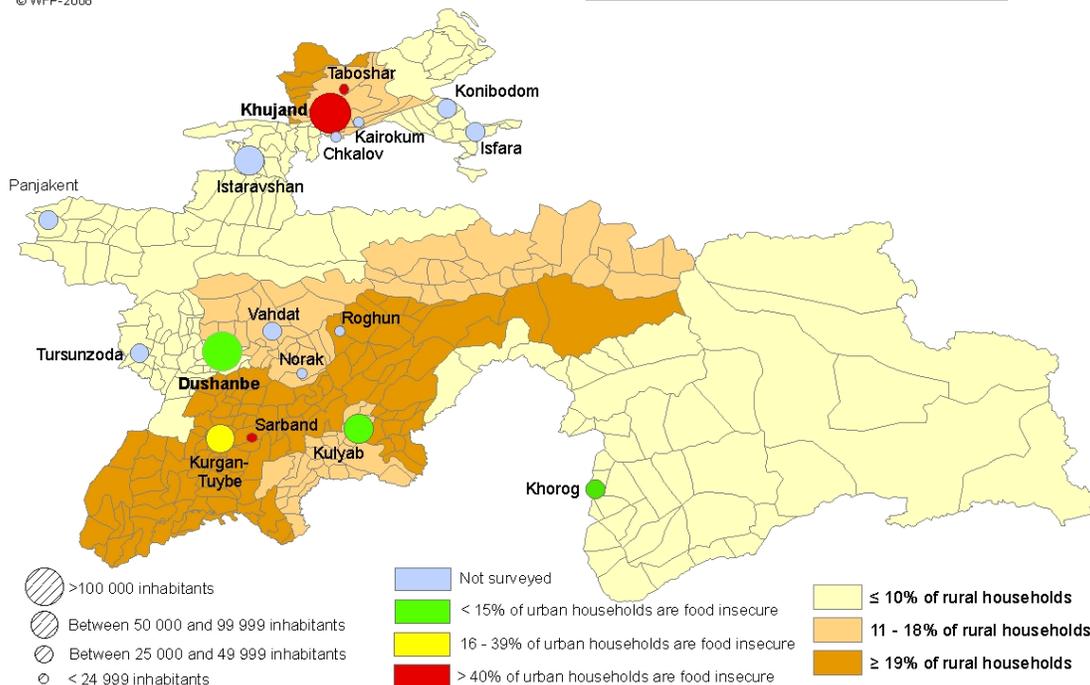
- They have **more income-earning members** (2 for almost half of these households) **and higher levels of incomes**, even so the activities are similar to the ones conducted by the food insecure households.
- Almost 30% have access to a home garden (twice as many as the other households). They cultivate a larger acreage (0.032 ha). More than 70% of them are self-sufficient in fruits/vegetables and/or potatoes for 1-3 months. Some 26% raise animals.

### **Where are the food insecure people?**

Note: The boundaries, the names shown and the designations used on the maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations

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#### **TAJIKISTAN: FOOD SECURITY SITUATION IN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS**



The highest proportions of total food insecure households were in Taboshar (89%), Khujand (82%), Sarband (71%) and Kurgan-Tuybe (58%).

The highest proportions of severely food insecure households were found in Khujand (45%) and Taboshar (46%) which are both in Sughd region. The highest proportions of moderately food insecure households were in Sarband (59%), Taboshar (43%), Kurgan-Tuybe (42%) and Khujand (37%).

### **Why are they food insecure?**

Food insecurity in Tajikistan is mainly due to a poor access to food. In urban areas, households are almost totally dependent on the markets to get food. Very few can produce their own food, and those who cultivate or raise animals do not cover their consumption requirements for more than a few months. Therefore the income

level determines the household's capacity to access markets. The general lack of employment opportunities and widespread poverty limit this capacity.

This chronic food insecurity and vulnerability situation has been exacerbated over the past year by increased food prices, electricity/gas cuts as a result of the harsh winter, and decreased employment and lower salaries.

The **severely food insecure households are mostly affected by structural factors, reflecting a chronic food insecurity situation** (lack of working-able members, poor income-earning activities, no access to credit or other capital for income-earning activities, old age, disease). **Amongst the moderately food insecure, about 80 percent are also considered to be chronically food insecure.** However, food prices rise has clearly worsened the situation of these chronically food insecure households, both severe and moderate.

**The remaining food insecure households** are considered transitorily food insecure, as they have the capacity to recover from the current crisis by themselves (often relying on new migration's remittance).

The majority of households dedicated on average two thirds of their expenses to food. There is little margin to further increase food expenditures unless decreasing other essential expenditure such as health, schooling, and heating fuel.

To respond to their increasing difficulties, households activated several **coping mechanisms**. The food insecure were more frequently engaged in strategies **which entail negative effects on health and livelihoods in the short or medium term**:

- almost 80% incurred new debts or credits in the previous 6 months essentially for food;
- at least 3/4<sup>th</sup> decreased the amount consumed at meals and/or reduced the number of meals eaten per day; a similar proportion borrowed food or relied on help from others;
- a staggering 40% of the severely food insecure spent entire days without eating, and 20% of the moderately food insecure;
- almost half decreased their health expenditures (compared to 1/4<sup>th</sup> of the food secure);
- some 10-12% took children out of school (versus 4% of the food secure).

Less damaging strategies such as assistance from relatives, migration or the search for alternative or additional jobs have been used but with for a limited number of households.

The combination of household food insecurity, inadequate complementary feeding practices and children's frequent sicknesses is a likely explanation for the high proportions of malnourished children.

## **Recommended response options**

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The most food insecure people include **female-headed households, pensioners, and households hosting sick members**. The **youngest and school-age children** living in these households are particularly at risk from a nutritional and educational point of view.

The situation of the **chronically food insecure households** (33% of total urban population, some 437,050 people) is unlikely to improve in the short or longer term unless prices decrease dramatically and/or pensions and wages are increased to reflect inflation and food price rises.

The following short term **interventions** are necessary:

- **Time-bound food/cash/ voucher (or combinations) transfers** to improve the very poor diet of the severely food insecure, and prevent a further degradation of the diet of the moderately food insecure;
- **Targeted supplementary feeding** linked with communication/sensitization activities, to restore the nutritional status of malnourished individuals;
- **School feeding and exemption of fees or cash/vouchers for health care and school expenses** targeted to the poorest households to stop the drop in the use of health care services and treatment and restore access;

At the same time, **parallel and longer-term interventions should take place**. It is recommended to:

- set up **safety nets** for the chronically food insecure with only one income-earner, using cash/vouchers transfers;
- advocate for an **adjustment of pensions, allowances** and of **casual labour wages**;
- support or launch **public works/employment** programmes (for the households with members actively looking for work);
- provide **start-up grants/credit** and **technical assistance** for small businesses.

For the estimated **moderately transitory food insecure** (4% of total population, about 59,070 people), whose situation is expected to improve with the receipt of new remittances, no interventions may be needed in the short term. Targeting these households is a challenge and self-targeting mechanisms or transfers subject to condition are options that should be explored.

### **For more information, contact:**

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