

## Executive Brief: **Tajikistan (rural areas)**

### Emergency Food Security Assessment

Joint Food Security, Livelihoods, Agriculture and Nutrition Assessment

#### Overview

Tajikistan is a mountainous, landlocked and food-deficit country. It is the poorest in Central Asia with 64 percent of the population living below the poverty line. The country has relatively few exports and limited domestic industry. 33 percent of the population is unemployed and remittances sent by migrants are a major source of household income. Basic health, education and social services are poor and still being rebuilt, after the civil war ended in 1997. The country is affected by severe winter conditions and frequent natural disasters.

In the last two years, Tajikistan has experienced a variety of economic (higher food and fuel prices) and natural shocks (hail storms, droughts and locust invasions) that have contributed to a deterioration of the food security situation, stretching the capacities of households and leading to increased migration.

This year an extraordinary long and harsh winter, coupled with an unprecedented energy crisis has triggered a real crisis. Crops, seed stocks and livestock have been lost. Water and electricity systems have been damaged. The shortage of energy supplies and higher fuel prices has had a knock on effect on food supplies and prices.

The consecutive poor harvests, the consequences of the acute winter crisis, combined with doubling food prices since the end of 2007, have directly affected an already vulnerable rural population and left them with few remaining coping strategies. In addition, the country usually experiences recurrent flash floods and landslides in the spring.

In this context, WFP, FAO, UNICEF and the Government of Tajikistan decided to conduct a joint assessment to update the knowledge of the food security, agriculture and nutritional situation in rural areas at household level. Data collection took place in end of April/early May 2008. The assessment was conducted at the peak of the difficult season, just before the winter wheat and potato harvests.

**How was the study done?** It is based on a secondary data review and analysis of data collected at village and households level. The team conducted discussions with key informants and focus groups (men and women) in 113 villages. A total of 798 households were interviewed and the anthropometric data of 559 children under 5 years of age from these households was collected. Information on markets, supplies and prices was collected through interviews with 126 shop-keepers and traders, and information on the agricultural situation was obtained from 295 collective farms (Dekhan).

#### How many people are food insecure?

**About 1.68 million people were food insecure at time of the assessment, representing 34% of the rural population.**

**About 540,000 people were severely food insecure, representing 11% of the rural households.**

They have a poor diet which does not provide the necessary minerals and vitamins for a healthy life and does not cover the energy requirements of growing children, pregnant and lactating women.

**About 1.14 million were moderately food insecure, representing 23 % of the rural households.**

Their diet is more varied but it still fails to cover the nutritional requirements of vulnerable household members, contributing to increased risk of disease and malnutrition.

While the nutritional status of under-5 children is not alarming (4.7% global acute malnutrition, 27.5% global chronic malnutrition), it has not improved since the last nation-wide survey of rural areas in 2005. This lack of changes tends to indicate that children have indeed been affected by the recent adverse food, health and care conditions. In addition, the significant association of chronic malnutrition with food insecurity confirms the role played by long-lasting poor economic conditions on nutritional status in rural areas.

#### Who are the food insecure people?

**Severely food insecure households: almost 30% of them rely either on self-employed activities or on remittances** for their income. About 20% depend on agricultural wage labour, 15% on pensions/allowances and 10% on non-agricultural wage labour. Most of these sources do not provide large income and are irregular throughout the year.

**Moderately food insecure households: almost 40% of them obtain their main income from remittances.** Less than 20% rely on self-employed activities, 14% on the sales of wheat/potato and 13% on agricultural wage labour. For this group, remittances are likely to be more regular and in higher amounts than for the severely food insecure.

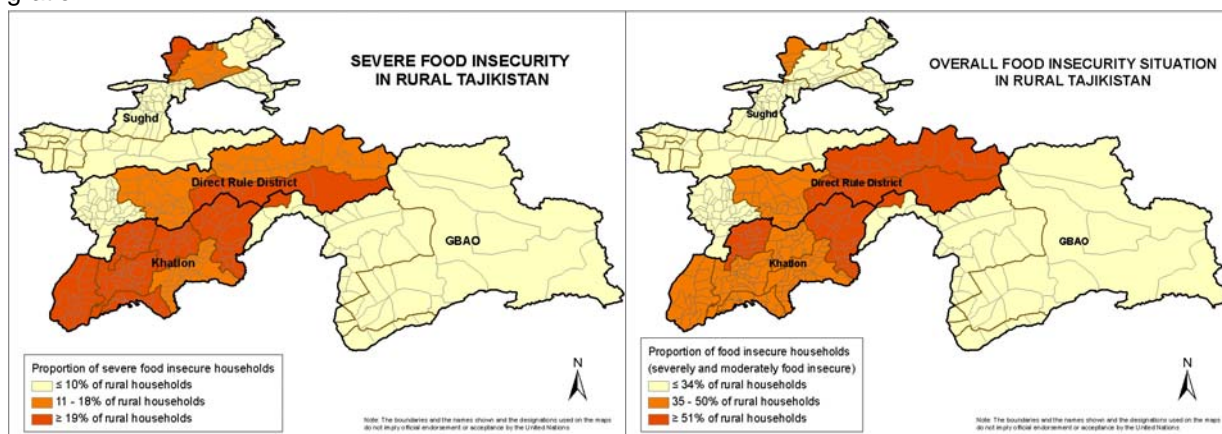
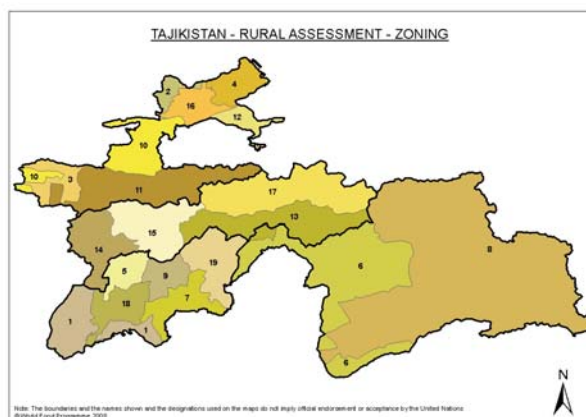
**40% of the food secure households also depend on remittances.** The level and frequency of remittances are expected to be much better than for the other groups. About 14% of the food secure households rely on **government salaries** and 7% on the sales of animals/products.

## Where are the food insecure people?

The assessment defined Zones to regroup sub-districts (*jamoats*) into areas presenting homogeneous characteristics. 19 homogeneous zones were defined using four key indicators that influence livelihoods: agro-climatic characteristics, elevation, slopes and risk of natural disaster (avalanches, flash floods, mudslides).

The larger proportions of food insecure people (severely and moderately) are in 3 zones of the Direct Rules District region and in two zones in the Khatlon region with more than 51% of food insecure.

The highest concentrations of severely food insecure people are in the region of **Khatlon**, with three zones presenting a high proportion of severely food insecure people (20-22%). One zone in the region of **Sughd** and in the **Direct Rules District** also included more than 19 % of severely food insecure people. While food insecurity did not stand out in the region of GBAO, the region is plagued by long-standing poverty and high levels of out-migration.



## Why are they food insecure?

Food insecurity in Tajikistan is mainly due to **a poor access to food**. The vast majority of households cannot cover their requirements with their own crops and rely on the markets to purchase most of their food. Lack of employment opportunities and widespread poverty limit the possibility to buy food.

This year, the situation has been exacerbated by the loss of crops and livestock due to the harsh winter, electricity and water cuts, the rise of food and fuel prices, and a dry spring which further affected the prospects for the upcoming wheat, potato and orchards harvests.

**Food availability:** It is estimated that about 30 % of the winter wheat harvest has been lost. Assuming that the second and third harvest will achieve the average annual yield, the production gap for the 2007/08 season still be of 18%. The drop in potato production is estimated at 25 to 30%. The vegetables and fruits production dropped by 20% and 40 % respectively, reducing households' consumption, sales and income. Due to the cold winter, households have also reported losing on average 1 or 2 cows, 1 or 2 sheep/goat and 2 or 3 poultry, further affecting their diet and the income generated by sales.

**Access to food:** As a result of low self-sufficiency, **households spend a large part of expenditures dedicated to the coverage of basic needs** (food, health, energy, education, transportation) **on food purchase** (81%). However, food expenditure during the week preceding the survey were low (*20 somoni/capita/week*)<sup>1</sup>, meaning that very small resources were left to cover non-food requirements.

While the level of indebtedness has not increased in the past 6 months, the main reason for incurring any debt in the previous 12 months was to buy food, particularly for the food insecure households.

<sup>1</sup> As of April 2008: 1 US\$ = 3.43 somoni (20 somoni = US\$5.8)

**Coping strategies:** Over the past 6 months, most households have reverted to **severe coping strategies**. **They have decreased their food expenditures and the amount of food consumed**, increasing the risks of malnutrition and disease in the short term, and affecting livelihoods in the short-and medium term.

- up to 13% have spent entire days without eating,
- In 6 households out of 10, adults have restricted their own consumption in order for small children to eat
- Seed stocks have been consumed by a third of the households,
- 15% have sold more animals than usual and 12% have decreased expenditures on agricultural inputs
- 8% have taken children out of school.

**Food insecure households are more likely to adopt strategies that jeopardize their nutritional status, health and future livelihoods.** 25 percent of them spent entire days without eating. Virtually all of them limit the portion size and reduce the number of meals (about 80% of the moderately food insecure).

**Markets:** Prices have significantly increased since 2007, mainly due to the higher costs of food at the source and transportation costs. At the time of the survey, sales were reported about 25 percent less than in normal years. Decreased sales affect especially imported wheat (minus 35%). Food supplies in local shops and markets are mainly sugar, oil and processed foods. A majority of shop-keepers/traders mentioned an **increase in the number of customers asking for credit**.

### **How is the situation likely to evolve?**

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It is unlikely that households will recover from the losses of crops, seeds and sales of animals incurred this year. As a result, their access to food will not improve, with increased risk of deterioration of the health and nutritional situation next winter.

The current trend of higher food prices is likely to continue and prices will further increase when food stocks and casual labour opportunities dry up in the autumn. Cold temperatures will resume, and it is likely that the price of energy will continue to go up, contributing to higher costs of food, agricultural inputs and basic goods.

### **Response options**

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The purpose of the assistance to food insecure households is to (i) prevent a further degradation of the food security and nutritional situation when stocks are finished, and opportunities for casual labour decrease and (ii) protect and strengthen livelihoods.<sup>2</sup> The following responses are recommended:

#### ***In the short-term***

- **Direct assistance with food, cash or a combination** is required urgently to improve and protect food consumption of the most food insecure (particularly the vulnerable groups).<sup>3</sup> *The **forecast duration of the current households' wheat stocks** for their own consumption is **2.5 months**, slightly less than "usual" (3 months), and 3 months for the current potato harvest.*
- **School feeding** should continue and be extended to the zones with the highest prevalence of food insecure households.
- **Agricultural support** is needed to facilitate access to seeds and other inputs and increase the level of next harvests (hoping for favourable climatic conditions).
- **Interventions to address micronutrient (minerals and vitamins) deficiencies** brought up by a poorly diversified diet should be implemented.
- **Preparedness measures for next winter** should also be launched to mitigate the impact of future cold temperatures including provision for food and energy supplies.

#### ***In the medium-term***

The **main causes of food insecurity are chronic** rather than transitory. However, the recent crisis and anticipated continuing food and fuel price increases require priority actions to prevent further increases of the numbers and severity of chronic food insecurity.

- **Employment and increased skills** (capacity building including in food processing and activities that can be implemented in rural areas) are needed to address the lack of regular and reliable sources of income.
- The level of **social assistance** to individuals unable to work (pensioners, chronically sick, families lacking a sufficient number of working-able members) needs to be indexed to the increased cost of living.
- **Micro-credit** could also support many food insecure households engaged in self-employment activities.
- **Health services** and **schools** in rural areas, especially the most remote also need upgrading especially to prevent interruption of use during winter times

**For more information, contact:** Zlatan Milisic, Country Director, [zlatan.milisic@wfp.org](mailto:zlatan.milisic@wfp.org)  
Agnès Dhur, Senior Food Security Specialist, HQ, team leader, [agnes.dhur@wfp.org](mailto:agnes.dhur@wfp.org)

<sup>2</sup> The UN launched a Flash Appeal in February 2008 in response to the crisis, recommending an increase in food supplies through direct assistance and a support to economic means to acquire food.

<sup>3</sup> If cash or vouchers are envisaged, traders' capacity to increase wheat and potato supplies despite high transportation costs needs to be checked