

VII. PERSPECTIVES AND CONCLUSIONS

For Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, the social costs of the transition period following independence from the Soviet Union have been high. An unprecedented depression of economic output and a concurrent fiscal crisis have engendered a widespread increase in the incidence of poverty. Problems such as unemployment, banished from the everyday concerns in the Soviet Union, are now a fact of life for people, especially the young.

The difficult transition is reversing much of the progress made under Soviet socialism in the social sectors. Literacy was a norm not a goal and even in remote or rural areas there was considerable access to health care. The more egregious aspects of poverty were alleviated by transfers especially for the family to provide support for children. Social services were provided by the public sector. Citizens had broad access to schools and health centers. The schools incorporated a wide range of facilities, including kindergartens and preschools, as well as those enjoyed by the wider community including canteens and cultural and sports centers. In addition, services such as housing, transportation, and utilities (including heating, electricity, and water) were provided on a highly subsidized basis.

The extensive, social support system was inherently unsustainable; due in large part to the nearly complete lack of incentives to encourage the productive use of resources. Thus, with independence and the end to subsidies and central planning directives, the system has fallen apart. The clear choice of the two countries has been to replace the command society with democratic and market institutions. In time, the collapse of communism is likely to be seen as having created clear welfare gains as a result of emerging incentives to increase the efficient use of resources. In the short-term however, to borrow from Anatole France, the new economic freedoms have meant only that the newly poor may now decide for themselves which bridge

to sleep under. There is, however, no way back; the former Soviet Union cannot be recreated.

This book has documented the particular costs that have been borne by children during transition. Central Asian society has always valued children. The concern for children's welfare was rooted in the indigenous nomadic culture, and by the values implicit in Soviet socialism. Given the grave economic difficulties, it has been difficult for the present Governments to heed this underlying concern for children.

The economic and social problems emerging with independence have profoundly effected the demographic structure in Central Asia. The considerable emigration and falling rates of marriage and fertility have altered demographic balances. However, 30 percent of the population is younger than 15 years.

It is this group of people who must face the brunt of transition. They are seeing unprecedented economic, political, and social freedom being given to adults. At the same time the family and society have far fewer resources to devote to their care and development than was given to the last generation. In real terms, public spending on social services has declined by approximately one half since independence. Support for the poor through social protection or social assistance has also fallen. Family income has similarly plummeted. As noted in this book, some of the negative developments that closely concern children are:

- The incidence of poverty has increased with children in large families and those with special needs facing particularly desperate circumstances. Household poverty has been exacerbated by the decline in social and infrastructure services that hitherto cushioned the impact of relatively low incomes in the Soviet Union.
- Labor markets are developing, however, reflecting the five-year depression, there is only weak labor demand. Older firms need to retrench and new firms have yet to establish a significant presence. Unemployment, unknown in these countries before independence, has emerged as a serious problem, particularly for young people.

- The collapse of central planning meant a cessation in the subsidies that had previously supported social infrastructure ranging from child-care facilities to transportation systems to municipal services including district heating. A sharp deterioration in this extensive infrastructure has occurred with failing service provision and increased costs. These changes exacerbate the impact of other economic problems, particularly increasing the impact of poverty on families and children.
- The education system is faltering: kindergartens and preschool facilities are closing; and school systems lack financial resources to pay staff and teacher salaries, to conduct routine maintenance, and to make investments in new curriculum to deal with the emerging needs of the new economic system.
- Children have lost previous social support mechanisms such as free school meals. Coupled with growing household poverty, hunger is becoming a recurring problem among the countries' poor, especially in remote areas.
- The health system too is deteriorating. Hospitals and health care suffer from a lack of financial support, and medicines and other supplies are often unavailable. As a direct consequence of reduced health care, increased poverty, and less healthy living conditions infectious diseases such as tuberculosis have reappeared, especially among children and their mothers. Malnutrition is becoming more widespread. The deteriorating conditions in the health sectors sharply affect children and mothers. Child and mother mortality rates have been increasing.
- The social safety net, including social protection and social insurance payments, which once provided widespread support for families, has fallen apart. The declining real value of public transfer payments to families has had a particularly serious impact on the living standards of children.

Alongside the collapse of the economy, the social order has changed. The increasing number of suicides among young people

reflects the sense of hopelessness among Central Asian young people. Substance abuse problems including particularly alcoholism and drug abuse contribute to this; threatening not only the user but often also the family. Growing crime rates, especially for crime involving young people are problems related to the crumbling social fabric.

These social problems and economic distress have had a severe impact on particular groups of children. Shrinking public funds have meant a collapse in support for those children without family support such as those in orphanages. The lack of a public safety net alongside the weakening family system has left some children without a secure environment and there are now children living on the streets in Central Asia.

Unfortunately the challenges to a successful program to support the interests of children are formidable. The governments, non-governmental organizations, and the international community are committed to improving the situation for children, however, the limited funds for programs directed towards children are an underlying basic problem. There is some scope, sector by sector, for improved resource mobilization, but limited public support is a fact of life that must be accepted. Real progress is unlikely until the basic economy proves capable of sustaining real income growth. Relaxing the severe public resource constraints is important. Within the context of limited funds, there is a clear need to increase the efficiency of service provision and resources used in the social sectors. Newly established NGOs that focus on child protection provide some assistance and the establishment of special national government committees to address issues concerning children is encouraging.

Overall, however, there are the conceptual problems of integrating child-sensitive development policies into national and private programs of action and completing the substantial unfinished reform agenda in each sector. Among the more important items on the unfinished policy agenda are:

- In education, (i) restore the systems for child care and kindergartens, (ii) maintain access to general education for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and (iii) provide the young generation with new opportunities for entering the labor force through restructuring vocational education.

- In health, (i) continue the introduction of medical insurance to ensure access to the health system, particularly for children of poor families and (ii) more forcefully reverse the health problems associated with the environmental catastrophes plaguing the regions.
- In social protection, concentrate resources for the truly needy, in particular disadvantaged children including the homeless and orphans in state institutions.
- In employment policies integrate public assistance to small businesses with a restructured vocational education system that provides credible skills development.
- In local governments (responsible for much of the provision of services in the social sector) strengthening, thorough reform, and institutional capacity building are required.

The unfinished agenda is large. Moreover, governments have skirted the issues relating to the deteriorating social fabric of increasing crime and fragmentation of the family. The problems may indeed become worse and the risks for this current generation of children increase.

The hope implicit in this book is that, as the commitment of the people of Central Asia, the governments, and the international community is strong, energies will be channeled more precisely towards improving the condition of children.

Photo 19: Children

