



# Priorities of the People

HARDSHIP IN THE MARSHALL  
ISLANDS

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Asian Development Bank

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# Introduction

In the Marshall Islands, abject poverty or destitution (*jeramwil*) does not exist since the poor are not starving and most have access to land and other natural resources. However, many people are poor and facing hardship, and the problem seems to be getting worse. The 1999 Pacific Human Development Report ranked the Marshall Islands 8<sup>th</sup> out of 12 Pacific developing countries, which represents a downgrading from the country's position as 5<sup>th</sup> in 1994. It is estimated that, in 1999, two thirds of outer island households fell below the poverty line of \$1 a day.

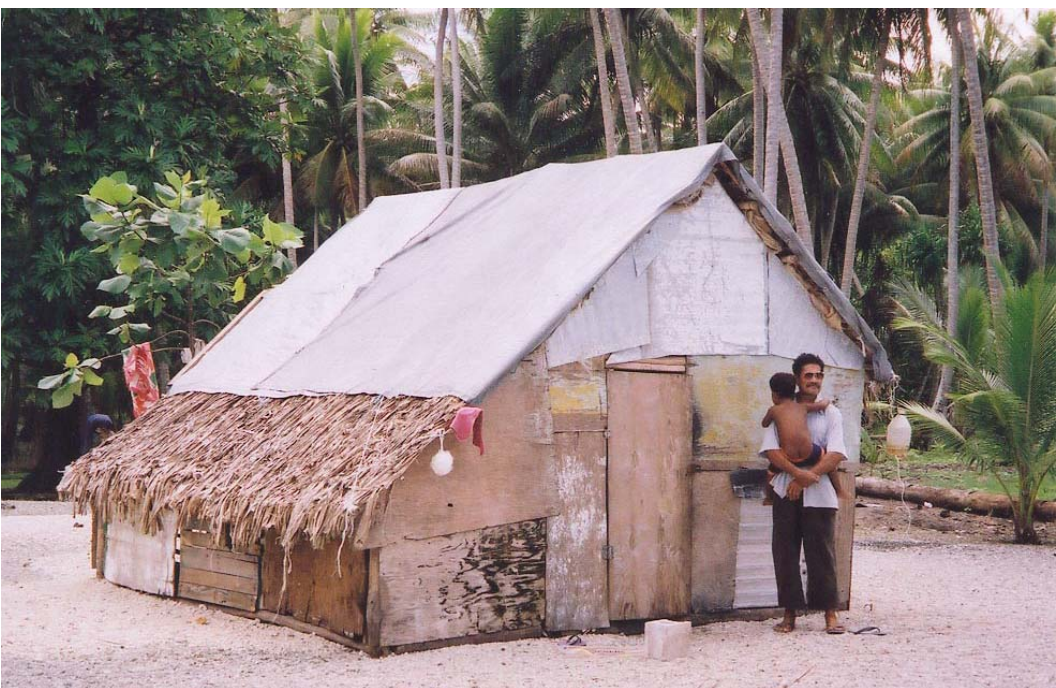
The Marshall Islands is one of the most urbanized countries in the Pacific with almost 70% of the population living either on Majuro or Ebeye. The high population density on these two islands, combined with economic decline in rural areas, are the cause of many of the problems being experienced.

There have been recent improvements, particularly in the areas of infant mortality, immunization, and the incidence of underweight children, but the government recognizes that it needs to better understand the nature of hardship in the country and develop ways to address it. In 2002, the government led a "Participatory Assessment on Hardship" to find out the needs, views, and hopes of communities living throughout the country, especially the disadvantaged and poor themselves.

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**Two thirds of  
outer-islanders  
live on less  
than \$1 a day**

**A house made  
of scrap  
materials**



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## Discussions

**were held with  
people in 10  
communities**

Ten sample communities were selected to represent both rural and urban areas and differing levels of access to services: four outer island communities on Ailinglaplap and Arno Atolls, three urban neighborhoods on Ebeye Island, and three communities on Majuro Atoll. One-on-one interviews, small group discussions, questionnaires, and case studies were used during the assessment to gather information from people in these communities, and discussions were held with government representatives and social, religious, and nongovernment organizations. A national workshop was held to discuss the assessment findings and formulate strategies and recommendations. The assessment was funded by the Asian Development Bank.

# Is Hardship Really a Problem in the Marshall Islands?

**T**he individuals and families consulted during the assessment said that poverty and hardship are experienced throughout the Marshall Islands. During the discussions,



## Working Mother, 31 Years Old

She lives with her husband in a one-room house in Rita. They have five children from 7 to 14 years old, but only two live with them. The eldest lives on Majuro and two others were adopted by non-Marshallese parents in the United States. Her husband has not worked for a long time. He left school when he met her and she became pregnant. Their house is made of cement bricks with a cement floor and tin roof. However, parts of the wall have collapsed and there are plywood screens hiding a gaping hole. They have no water catchments or electricity.

She started working at the fish factory on Majuro about 2 months ago and earns \$100 a fortnight including overtime. Her husband said the economic situation is really bad because there are

not enough jobs and the rate of pay is not enough for one family. He said that lots of children go around looking for food and sometimes all they have to eat is coconut meat with salt.

She spoke about the stress women feel due to problems with their husbands and the heavy burden placed on working mothers. She said she often suffers from headaches and grumpiness as a result. She acknowledges that things are difficult, but says that they have enough to get by. She says their economic situation has always been a struggle and she has not seen any changes over time. Speaking about the difference between the levels of hardship found on Majuro and the outer islands, she said, "There is no difference. We are all struggling."

some argued that abject poverty does not exist, while others said the vast majority of Marshallese are poor when international standard of living levels are considered. Most people favored a middle position that recognizes the relative disadvantage of certain groups within the Marshall Islands, as well as acknowledging the country's relative disadvantage compared to more developed countries. There is also a growing gap between rich and poor due to the concentration of highly paid public servants on the urban islands of Majuro and Ebeye; US Compact and federal funding that largely benefit urban areas, and nuclear compensation and lease payments that benefit communities on certain islands; the continuing decline in the price of copra (the economic mainstay of the outer islands); and a lack of low-skilled jobs in both urban and rural areas.

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**Not having**

**enough to meet**

**basic needs**

## What is Hardship?

**T**he primary goal of the assessment was to identify the people's perceptions of poverty and hardship by talking to key community leaders (chiefs, elders, church leaders),

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**Hardship has  
worsened over  
the last 5 years**

women, youth, and people who were identified as suffering from poverty and hardship. Most people consulted defined poverty and hardship as *ben mour* (not having enough money to meet one's daily needs or not having enough resources to get by) and *jerata* (in need or not having one's basic needs met).

In an increasingly cash-based economy, many families without enough income from the sale of goods such as copra or jobs are facing hardship. There was general agreement that they face hardship if they lack reliable utilities such as power and water, and services such as health and education.

There was a consensus among the communities consulted that hardship has worsened over the last 5 years. Although there have been some improvements, people felt that these improvements had probably not reached the more disadvantaged members of society. So, for example, while more children are going to college and university, they are mostly the children of the middle classes and the elite, and not the majority. During one group discussion, people agreed that health indicators had improved, but identified the following negative trends:

- An increase in the number of school dropouts, and increasing numbers of children in urban areas who have never been to school;
- More teenage pregnancies (despite the increased availability of family planning advice),
- An increase in the number of attempted suicides;

**Teenage pregnancy  
was cited as a  
problem**





- More alcohol abuse; and
- Parents face increasing difficulty in dealing with the conflicting financial demands of church, school, and their children's other needs.

Most thought the situation on Majuro had improved a little, particularly the growth of the retail sector and improved services such as roads, water, electricity, and sanitation. However, the consensus was that on the outer atolls conditions had definitely worsened, primarily because of the low price of copra and the resulting reduction in field trips (visits by large ships to the outer islands to buy and sell copra and other goods) and outer island economic activities.

**People on the  
outer islands  
are suffering**

## Who is Facing Hardship?

**M**ost people consulted during the assessment identified **most** people on the outer islands as experiencing the greatest levels of poverty and hardship. In outer island communities, there was a general consensus that “we are all poor here” (male, aged 42).

### Female Copra and Handicrafts Producer, 40 Years Old

She is a divorcee with 8 children and 7 grandchildren. Four of her children live on Majuro and two are in the United States. She lives on Ailinglaplap with her two youngest children. They live in a very small, one-room house and have two smaller thatch huts and a sitting area. They have two water catchments but no solar power. Although her former husband is a recipient of Section 177, he does not support her or their children.

She says that her life is a struggle and she is exhausted by all the hard work of producing copra: “Life is very complicated without any helper by my side.” When she has time, she makes handicrafts. Sometimes her parents help out, but at the moment they are on Majuro.

She would like a job, but there are no jobs on the island. If she had help, she could concentrate on handicrafts, which

pay more than copra. However, there is no outlet to sell handicrafts on her island. So, unlike copra, she cannot exchange her handicrafts for credit from the store to buy food and other basic items. Secondly, she produces handicrafts as part of a women's club, so the profit is shared amongst members and some is retained by the club. Yet she relies on the club to bring in orders and arrange distribution and sales.

In terms of her personal ambitions, she believes a handicraft workshop on the island could provide her with the support she needs to make and sell her own handicrafts. For her children, she wants them to finish school. She says she preaches to them all the time to do well at school and hopes that “seeing me struggle should be enough for them to realize the importance of school.”



Although Majuro's per capita income and household incomes are relatively high compared to that of the outer islands, there are still a number of poor and disadvantaged people who live on Majuro. Residents without jobs were seen as those most likely to be living in poverty and hardship. Children whose parents do not work were seen as most vulnerable. Some go hungry, while others lack school supplies and clothes. Low salaries were also identified as a reason why families could not meet their needs.

Some Ebeye residents nominated Ebeye as having the greatest level of poverty and hardship due to the lack of land and overcrowding in households.

## What Causes Hardship?

**T**he major causes of hardship in both urban and rural areas identified during the community consultations and national workshop were

- Inadequate health and/or education support for children;
- Poor basic service provision, especially safe drinking water and electricity;

### Girl, 7 Years Old

A 7-year-old girl was raped by a friend of her father's who was about 23 years old. Her father was a construction worker, and one evening he came home with some of his work mates and started drinking. The family lived in a very small house. There were about six small children in the family ranging from 1–7 years old and the family often found it hard to make ends meet.

The stepmother got angry with the father over his drinking and left the house. The father got drunk and passed out. His friend took the little girl to his own house sometime during the night. He raped the girl, who then passed out. When he woke up in the morning, he noticed that she was bleeding from her

vagina. He took her to the emergency department of the hospital, left her at the entrance, and ran away. The little girl wouldn't talk or answer any questions until later in that evening, when she finally gave her name and the name of the man who had raped her. The hospital got in touch with the stepmother.

When the father was brought to the hospital and told the story, he broke down crying in great shame. The man who raped the little girl was sentenced to jail. When asked how he came to do such a thing, he said that he didn't mean to do it and didn't think it would cause any real damage.

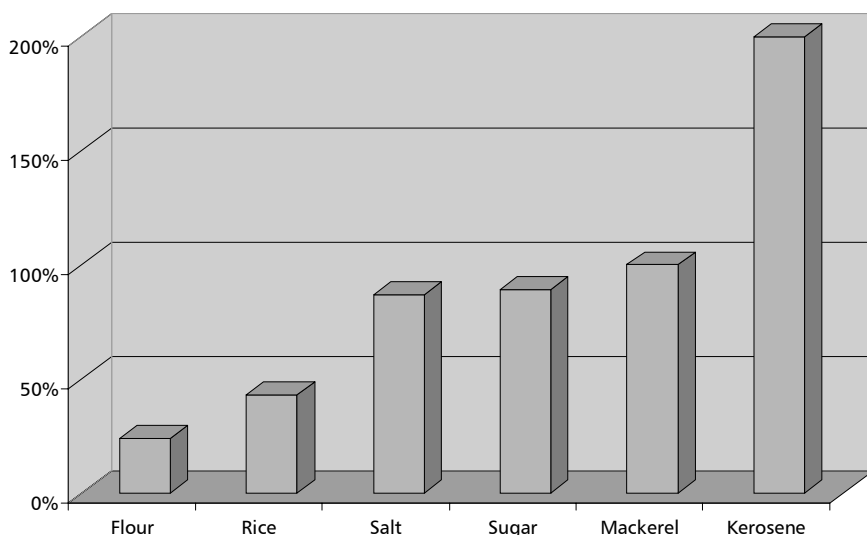
- Overcrowding and low quality housing on Majuro and Ebeye;
- Lack of regular and frequent field trips;
- A range of child- and youth-related problems, including school dropouts, youth “idleness,” joblessness, alcohol abuse, and teenage pregnancy;
- Limited jobs and ways to earn cash;
- Low levels of education and not enough training opportunities for youth who wish to return to school; and
- Increasingly stressed gender relations and women’s increased workloads.

Causes specific to the outer islands were also cited: the lack of field trips, low price of copra, lack of electricity, and higher costs and lack of supplies compared to Majuro and Ebeye. A price comparison conducted during the assessment revealed that the cost of 17 basic food and household goods on Jeh, Ailinglaplap Atoll was on average 47% higher than on Delap, Majuro Atoll (see figure below for a sample of the price differences).

The decline in the frequency and regularity of field trips, which is closely related to the decline in the copra industry, and other ship transport to the outer islands has greatly reduced trade and income opportunities.

**The decline in field trips has greatly reduced trade and incomes**

**Higher Prices on Ailinglaplap Compared to Majuro**



Three groups were identified as especially affected by hardship: children, the youth and women.

## Children

Child poverty and child neglect in urban areas was seen as leading to problems of malnourishment and increasing numbers of school dropouts. In many large extended families, children do not receive the individual care they need, and some teenage and young mothers do not know how to raise children properly. Cramped, crowded living conditions on Majuro and Ebeye also contribute to problems of child abuse and neglect.

In the outer islands, poverty-related issues affecting children include lack of school supplies, lack of transportation to and from school, lack of food (at times), and lack of clothes.

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**Many youth  
problems stem  
from cultural  
change**

## Youth

The Marshall Islands has one of the youngest populations in the Pacific. About two thirds of the population was below 24 years old in 1999, and the youth population is growing at one of the highest rates in the region. Individuals and families consulted during the assessment were concerned about the pressures faced by young people regarding school and jobs, and social issues such as youth idleness, alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, school dropouts and loafing, and youth suicide. Youth-to-Youth in Health volunteers said many of these problems stem from a loss of culture due to rapid cultural change and influence from American culture. They argued that the fast pace of cultural change had resulted in a loss of identity.

Low educational attainment of youth was seen as a pressing problem in the urban areas of Majuro and Ebeye, but also by parents on the outer islands who wished to see their children complete high school. Concerns included the rate of school dropouts, students' failure to gain a place at high school, few vocational training opportunities, and limited re-entry schemes for young people who wish to return to school.

There was also a general perception that there were not sufficient jobs, particularly for those young people who did not complete high school. However, there was some disagreement among people from Ebeye and Majuro as to whether youth unemployment was really due to the lack of jobs or to youth idleness.

## Women

A trend observed during the assessment was the increasing evidence of unhappy families due to strained relationships (often related to alcohol abuse), women's increasing share of income-related activities, and a perceived decline in women's status in the family and the community stemming from cultural change.

Both male and female respondents said women on the outer islands have larger workloads as a result of women's increasing participation in income generating activities, including copra and handicraft production and fundraising activities, as well as their continued involvement in household tasks such as cleaning, food preparation, and childcare. In some cases, women were the sole economic provider of their family either due to male unemployment or an unwillingness of former partners to support their children.

On Majuro and Ebeye, women reported feeling stressed by men's drinking, cheating, and violence. Domestic violence and sexual abuse are not easily discussed in public. Women who are victims of such abuse may prefer to keep these matters to themselves rather than bring shame on the family. In many cases, this violence is related to alcohol abuse, cramped living conditions, and the pressures of unemployment.

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**Women face**

**increased**

**workloads and**

**a decline in**

**status**



Women's declining influence in the family and community was commented on during the assessment. "In the past, your grandmother would tell boys what to do and they would obey. Now they don't listen" (female, aged 46). The loss of respect for women was tied to a general loss of respect for elders and chiefs: "In the past, women enjoyed more influence, but that was in the days when the *Eroij* still commanded respect" (female, over 40 years old).

**Lack of water,  
power, and  
transport are  
causing hard-  
ship**

## **Poor Service Delivery**

The delivery of basic services was fundamental to people's view of the level of poverty and hardship they experience. The people consulted were in agreement that hardship results when there is

- Lack of safe drinking water for those without water catchments on the outer islands, or piped drinking water in the urban areas of Ebeye and Majuro;
- Lack of electricity for those without solar power on the outer islands;
- Lack of transportation to and from schools, particularly on the outer islands. This was seen as a disincentive for many students particularly in hot or rainy weather. This was compounded in schools that had no safe drinking water or toilet facilities;

### **Fisherman, 66 Years Old**

He is a fisherman from Bikarej on Arno Atoll. He recently went to Arno in his wooden boat with fish that he and other fishermen from Bikarej had caught. He took the boat from the fishing base to Majuro to sell their catch. (The boat goes three times a week on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.) Unfortunately, inefficient administration at the point of sale on Majuro (operated by the Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority or MIMRA) meant that he was unable to get paid for the fish—and this is not the first time, he said.

He had no choice but to return to Arno for two nights and wait until Friday when the boat makes a return trip to Majuro so he could collect their pay-

ment. If all goes well, he will be able to cash the check on Majuro, take the boat back to Arno, and finally return to Bikarej to distribute the money.

His story highlights the difficulty faced by small fisherman due to a lack of transport and facilities. In terms of his opportunity costs, the delay in payment cost him at least 3 days work. More generally, the lack of transportation to the outer atolls is an issue in terms of the lack of food and other products available in the stores and the irregularity of copra shipments. While there was an interest in the community to be involved more in agriculture, they lacked the necessary tools and resources.



**On Ailinglaplap, the health assistant sits with his entire stock of supplies**

- Overcrowding and low quality housing on Majuro and Ebeye; and,
- Infrequent and irregular field trips to the outer islands.

### **Ailinglaplap Atoll**

In the outer islands of Ailinglaplap Atoll, the residents expressed a pressing need for more regular and frequent field trips to sell their copra and prevent local stores from running out of food, fuel and other supplies. The lack of electricity was also an issue for those residents without solar panels. Fuel for kerosene lamps and refrigeration was seen as expensive, particularly compared with the cost of solar power. The lack of safe drinking water was a further concern for residents without water catchments. Many houses still have a traditional thatched roof, which is inexpensive but impractical for collecting rain water.

School was mentioned as an important community priority, reflected in high student enrollment. Critical comments about the low quality of education included not enough teachers, students being sent home because of teacher absenteeism, lack of school supplies, and the lack of transport to and from school.

The lack of a health dispensary was a matter of great concern. On Jeh Island, residents said they had been waiting 3 years for the government to repair the abandoned dispensary. "We badly need a clinic and better supplies" (female, aged 34).



## Ebeye

The services seen as most pressing on Ebeye were improved education and training facilities and better housing. For those without piped water, a safe water supply was also an issue. Most commented that the electricity supply had improved since American Samoa Power Authority took it over in 2000. However, a few weeks after the assessment was conducted one of the main generators went off-line, causing a loss of power on Ebeye.

Many of the houses on Ebeye were built as typhoon relief accommodation, particularly in the Dump Town area. Most now need a considerable amount of maintenance work. Landowners were seen as not caring for property and not allowing householders to renovate their houses even when the lessees offered to pay for the renovations. Many residents also commented on the lack of land and overcrowding within houses.

Education was viewed as the single most important factor in children's future lives and livelihoods. Parents unanimously endorsed the view that children should be encouraged to complete high school. Some parents were involved as Parent-Teacher Association members for this reason. There was, however, a level of general community dissatisfaction with educational and training services. The public elementary school was judged to be "worsening" due to

**Water catchments are needed by those without piped water**





not enough supplies and not enough teachers. People commented on the very poor pass rate for students seeking entry into the public high school system (only 1 student out of 97 passed this year).

### **Majuro Atoll**

Most informants rated the quality of services as good. The two exceptions were households that lacked a safe water supply or electricity. Furthermore, while there were some critical comments made about the cost of education and poor quality, most Majuro residents consulted did not see that there were problems with access as in other places. This can be explained by the greater range of both public and private elementary and high schools available on Majuro.

As with Ebeye, there was also a concern over the physical condition of housing. A number of respondents expressed a desire to improve their houses or build new houses if there was some form of public fund available to assist them.

## What Can Be Done?

**A**fter listening to the stories of the poor and understanding the nature and causes of hardship, what can be done to address it? Working together with those facing hardship to plan, prioritize, and implement solutions has a good chance of leading to successful, lasting initiatives.

During the assessment, people suggested the following proposed solutions.

### **People's Priorities**

Most discussion centered on the need for agricultural and fishing-related development on the outer islands, as long as it is supported by greatly improved and expanded transportation services. There was also considerable interest in agricultural extension programs, particularly on islands close to urban areas.

Sales and marketing assistance to support individual handicraft producers was repeatedly mentioned. In particular, the establishment of handicraft centers with good links to traders on Majuro and elsewhere was seen as a way to promote this form of income generation.

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**Work with  
those facing  
hardship to  
plan and  
prioritize  
action**

A range of other economic activities were also mentioned, including fish-based and aquaculture products as important avenues for income generation on the outer islands.

Increased educational and training opportunities were another high priority, including more places at high school, vocational courses, and re-entry programs such as the General Education Diploma.

### Unemployed Housewife, 25 Years Old

She left school because she got pregnant. She blames peer pressure and the lack of information about teenage pregnancy at the time. She said the situation has only become worse with girls as young as 13 and 14 getting pregnant. She now has five children aged 8, 6, 3, 2, and 7 months. Her husband works at the Laura Farm Technical Mission.

Five nearby households draw on their well for water, because this water is not safe to drink, they must get drinking water from houses further away. They live in a one-room house with a small outhouse for cooking. She wishes they had a bigger and better house, with power, a water catchment, and a bathroom.

She said that there was no difference between the poverty and hardship experienced on Majuro and other parts of the country. In giving her reasons, she pointed to the daily hardships she faces living with five children in their small, very run-down house without water catchments and electricity.

She said that if she had some sort of talent or skill then maybe she could earn some money for the family to improve their house. For this reason, she has been learning handicrafts from some neighbors. Her main priority is her children. She wants a better home for their sake and also wants them to have a good education. She stresses the

word “good” because she believes that the quality of education and teaching needs to be improved. She pushes her older children to go to school regularly and on time.

She also expressed concern about the number of young men who do not have jobs and stay at home all day doing nothing and drinking alcohol. She thought there should be programs or jobs to help people make better use of their time. The problem, she said, is that when you have nothing to do, you tend to sit at home feeling bored and frustrated, and then you start picking on your children and other family members. This leads to fights and unhappiness. It’s hard to be respectful of others, she said, when you know you could be doing something better with your time, only you can’t.

Youth organizations are also badly needed to provide more information about teenage pregnancy and activities for young people, so they don’t get caught up in peer pressure and stealing and drinking. She points to recent improvements due to the new basketball court in Laura and says that they need more sporting facilities and programs for youth. She also wants new educational opportunities and training programs for young men and women who dropped out of high school, but now realize the importance of education in terms of getting a good job.



In all discussions of youth and child-related issues, the range of proposed solutions was similar, and included suggestions along the following lines:

- Increase the number of sporting facilities;
- Establish more youth organizations to keep young people occupied and limit the extent of idleness, drinking, stealing, and teenage pregnancy; and
- Focus on education and information dissemination regarding how to deal with peer group pressure and how to handle sex-related issues responsibly.

The need to improve services and infrastructure was identified as a major community priority during the assessment. There is a need to ensure the provision of basic services, such as solar power and water catchments, to all communities. Continued investment in public education and health services was also seen as a pressing community priority in most communities.

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**Improved  
education and  
training are  
high priorities**

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