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IFPRI

RESEARCH PROGRAM MISSION

The research program on Food Policy Reforms in Central Asia seeks to identify policies and institutional arrangements that facilitate and speed up economic reforms in the food, agriculture, and natural resource sectors that will lead to economic development, poverty reduction, increased food security, and sustainable use of natural resources.

FOCUS COUNTRIES

- Kazakhstan
- Kyrgyzstan
- Tajikistan
- Turkmenistan
- Uzbekistan

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FOOD POLICY REFORMS in CENTRAL ASIA

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Food Policy Reforms in Central Asia: Setting the Research Priorities

SURESH BABU AND ALISHER TASHMATOV

Achieving food and nutrition security is at the forefront of the development objectives of the Central Asian Republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Since independence, the countries of the Central Asia region have undergone a series of transitions from centrally planned economies to market-orientated systems. Despite great efforts by these countries and external advice of international and bilateral agencies, policy reform has been frustratingly slow, and food insecurity and malnutrition remain at a high level. Unless efforts are made to jumpstart their economies, the Central Asian countries may face increased poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition, the social and political costs of which could be enormous.

One major constraint to deeper economic reform has been the lack of information on the impact of alternative policy options. Reforms continue to be externally designed without adequate policy analysis and without local ownership. This unfortunate situation is further compounded by several factors. First, the countries of Central Asia have not fully developed the institutional and human capacity for formulating and implementing policies in the short time since independence. Second, external advisers seem to have largely ignored political economy issues in designing and executing the policy reform packages. Third, fearing social unrest, the governments have taken a cautious approach to policy reforms. Fourth, policy reforms have lost their priority on the governments' development agendas, which are now focused on preventing further deterioration of

living conditions. And finally, the basic macro-economic framework fundamental to the success of sectoral policy reforms is largely missing in some of the Central Asian countries.

Generating momentum to reorient the nature, approach, and sequence of policy reform packages will require rethinking the policy reform process. Involving the local policy research community in identifying critical issues and challenges, setting priorities among them for food, agriculture, and natural resource policy research, and implementing joint research studies is the best way to build local capacity and to increase the ownership of policy package design and implementation. However, the analytical capacity is not well developed, and solid policy information remains scarce in this region.

Bringing Policy Research to the Forefront

In response to this need, and at the request of the Central Asian institutions involved in policy reform, IFPRI and the Tashkent State Agrarian University jointly organized a regional workshop on "Food, Agriculture, and Natural Resource Policy Research: Setting the Priorities," held July 19–21, 1999, in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. About 35 policy researchers and decisionmakers from the five Central Asian countries, as well as representatives from other CGIAR centers and several donor organizations, participated in the workshop. The goals of the workshop were: (1) to develop a regional understanding of and consen-

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sus on the problems of poverty, food insecurity, and deteriorating natural resources, and on the actions required to reduce them; (2) to identify the information gaps in the process of policy reform; and (3) to develop a set of priorities for food, agriculture, and natural resource policy research in Central Asia.

Setting a Research Agenda

The three-day workshop resulted in a set of priority issues on which information is urgently needed for speeding up the economic reform process in order to achieve food security in Central Asia. These priority policy research issues can be grouped under the following major themes:

1. **Market Reforms.** Policy issues related to pricing of outputs, marketing of agricultural products, determining exchange rates, formulating sectoral approaches to developing agricultural markets, and sequencing of policies needed to generate a dynamic agricultural sector in the Central Asian countries remain largely under-researched.
2. **Regional Trade.** There is an immediate need to examine the possibility of a regional trade arrangement among the region's countries and between the region and the rest of the world. Exchange rate and trade policies that enhance the free flow of food and agricultural commodities should be studied with an eye to achieving food security.
3. **Agribusiness and Postharvest Technology.** Research is needed to inform policymakers of the benefits of appropriate investment in processing and postharvest technologies. Such investments may result in increased income for farmers and the government through increased exports of processed foods.
4. **Food Security and Agricultural Diversification.** To meet local food demand, the production of cereal crops has taken precedence over the production of cash crops such as cotton. The issue of which direction these countries should follow to attain food security and

broad-based economic growth remains an issue for empirical investigation. Research is also needed on optimum allocations of land and water to crop production.

5. **Water Use Management.** All the countries of the region face serious natural resource problems related to water use efficiency. Generating rules for the allocation of water and the formation of water use associations remains the most fundamental need for managing irrigation water resources. Salinity, waterlogging, and drainage problems are also of crucial importance. Research is required on appropriate water pricing and water allocation mechanisms.
6. **Sustainable Use of Rangelands.** A large share of the rural inhabitants of Central Asia rely on livestock production for their livelihood. Reversing the trends toward rangeland degradation and erosion of traditional migratory systems will require policies that encourage sustainable use of rangelands, provide livelihoods for rural households, and reduce their migration to urban areas.

The papers in the volume accompanying this brief are based on the presentations made at the Central Asian workshop and the discussions that followed. The primary objective of these papers is to present the current status of issues, challenges, and constraints that the Central Asian countries face in achieving food security for their populations. Contributors to this volume include P. Pinstup-Andersen, R. Pandya-Lorch, and F. Goletti (IFPRI), E. Meng and J. Longmire (CIMMYT), M. Suleimenov (ICARDA), A. Juraev, R. Khusanov, and E. Gaziyants (Uzbekistan), N. Ibraimov and K. Kadirkulov (Kyrgyzstan), L. Mhrtychan (Turkmenistan), A. Baydildina (Kazakhstan), and B. Amirov (Tajikistan). ■

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ABOUT IFPRI

IFPRI's mission is to identify and analyze strategies for meeting food needs of the developing world, with particular emphasis on low-income countries and the poor.

IFPRI is a member of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

Any opinions expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of IFPRI.

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