



LEGISLATIVE AND
POLICY REVIEW ON
**THE IMPACT
OF COVID-19
ON YOUTH IN
TAJKISTAN**



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Special Review for APDA

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CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS	iv
1. INTRODUCTION: YOUTH IN TAJIKISTAN	1
1.1 Methodology for the review	2
2. YOUTH AND THE PREVENTION OF THE SPREAD OF COVID-19	4
2.1 Volunteering	7
2.2 Access to economic support	9
2.3 Online schooling	12
3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	13
REFERENCES	15

Abbreviations and acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AFPPD	Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development
APDA	Asian Population and Development Association
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ILO	International Labour Organization
NDS	National Development Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan up to 2030
NGO	non-governmental organization
PHC	Primary health care
PoA	Programme of Action
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRH	sexual and reproductive health
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

1. INTRODUCTION

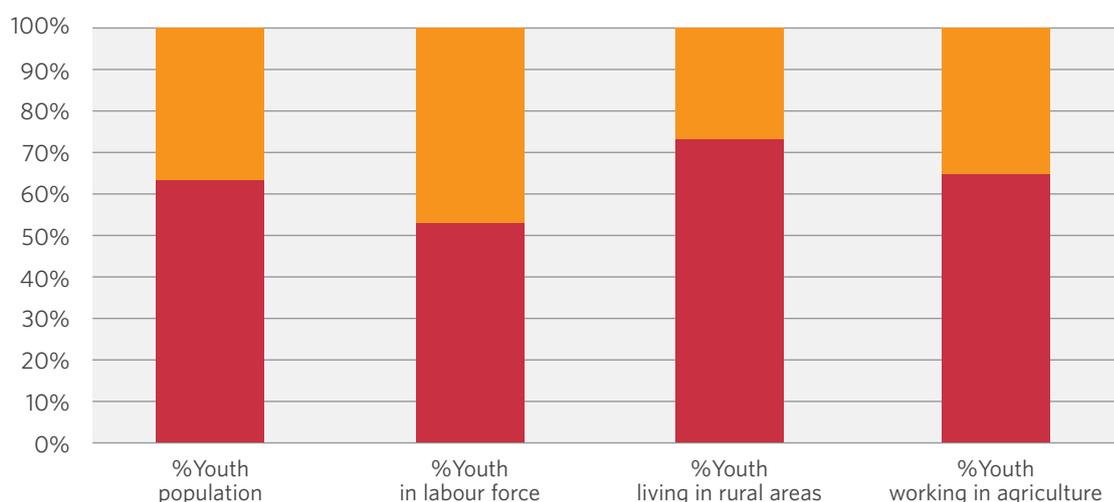
Tajikistan's population is predominantly young. Young people younger than 30 years old make up approximately 63 per cent of the 9 million people of the population of Tajikistan.¹ The average age of the population is about 24 years. The majority of young people (73 per cent) live in rural areas. Most of them attend general secondary school, and only a small proportion join secondary vocational schools after graduation.²

The share of youth aged 15–24 years in the working-age population is 35.5 per cent. By adding young people aged 24–29 to this group, the share of youth in the total labour force grows to 53 per cent.³ The youth unemployment rate is very high, so active involvement of young people in working life is one of the Government's priorities.

The President of Tajikistan, in his congratulatory speech on the occasion of Youth Day, 23 May 2020, spoke of the need for additional measures to be taken by the government to increase the percentage of the workforce formed by youth.⁴

The agricultural sector is the major employer for both young people and adults (65 per cent of young people are employed in agriculture, despite the relatively low wages in this sector). In terms of youth employment, the weak agricultural sector and the underdevelopment of other sectors of the economy hinder the creation of new employment opportunities,⁵ and this is the reason for the growing active labour migration abroad.

Youth in Tajikistan



¹ The World Bank: Tajikistan Socio-Economic Resilience Strengthening Program, 30 May 2019, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/pt/283841561341752653/pdf/Tajikistan-Socio-Economic-Resilience-Strengthening-Project.pdf>

² Youth of Central Asia. Tajikistan: Based on a sociological survey, under scientific supervision of Prof. Klaus Hurelmann and Peer Teschendorf (Germany, Berlin), Almaty, 2017.

³ Peer Review of Youth Employment Policies in the Republic of Tajikistan, Synthesis Report, ILO Decent Work Technical Support Team and Country Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Moscow: ILO, 2015.

⁴ Rahmon congratulated Tajiks on Youth Day, 23 May 2020, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/country/20200522/1031281560/Rahmon-den-molodezhi-pozdravleniya.html>.

⁵ Youth of Central Asia. Tajikistan: Based on a sociological survey, under scientific supervision of prof. Klaus Hurelmann and Peer Teschendorf (Germany, Berlin) - Almaty, 2017.

The situation is particularly difficult for young women, especially in rural areas. Deteriorating access to quality education and vocational training in the 1990s has had a more lasting effect on young women than on men. Among those with only basic general education or those who drop out are mostly young women. Low levels of education together with the lack of opportunities to engage in economic activities due to the high birth rates largely explain the fact that in the Republic of Tajikistan, labour force participation of women is significantly lower than that of men (the share of economically active women and men are 39% and 72% respectively). Young women with children are normally unemployed or occupy low-skilled positions. In addition, women hardly participate in the migration processes and have to assume the role of the head of household often for a long period of time, which also affects women's position in the labour market and their vulnerability to economic downturns.⁶

The Government of Tajikistan recognizes the severity of youth problems in the country. In the area of youth employment, it is working actively to address this issue by developing appropriate legislation, policies and programmes. The main legal and regulatory frameworks governing youth employment include laws on employment promotion and on public youth policy. Among the main regulatory documents are the **Law of the Republic of Tajikistan "On Youth and Public Youth Policy"** dated 15 July 2004, and the **Law of the Republic of Tajikistan "On Volunteer Activities"** dated 19 September 2013. At the policy level, there is the **State Strategy for Development of the Youth Policy** that was in effect until 2020, the **State Program for Promoting Patriotism and Strengthening the National Mentality of Youth in Tajikistan for 2018-2022**, the **National Program for Youth Social Development in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2019-2021**, the **State Strategy of the Youth Policy in the Republic of Tajikistan**, and the **State Program on Population Employment Promotion**.⁷ The main strategy on youth development is well reflected in the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan for the period up to 2030, in which the strategic priorities for youth development are outlined.

With most of the national policies aimed at youth development having or about to expire, there is a strong need for updating them with consideration of the challenges faced during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also suggested to revise and amend the valid policies and regulatory documents with the consideration of the lessons learned during the pandemic to enable the Government and decision makers to adequately respond to the crisis situations.

1.1 Methodology of review

This review was developed based on an assessment of Tajikistan's approach to youth policy and ensuring decent living conditions for young people, as well as an understanding of the general policies and legal acts adopted in Tajikistan in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In preparing this review, primary and secondary data collection methods were applied. Secondary data collection included desk reviews and the analysis of the official data made publicly available by the Government and non-government

⁶ Peer Review of Youth Employment Policy in the Republic of Tajikistan, Synthesis Report, ILO Decent Work Technical Support Team and Country Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Moscow: ILO, 2015

⁷ Although some of these policies technically expired in 2020, we assume they are still guiding the Government and will be replaced once the difficulties of COVID-19 have lessened.

organizations (NGOs). For the primary data collection, face-to-face and online interviews, and personal meetings with the representatives of the Parliament of Tajikistan, UNFPA Project Officers in Tajikistan, and representatives of the Committee on Youth Affairs and Sport under the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan were held. Additional information on organizing youth involvement in managing the impact of COVID-19 was received from competent state authorities, and representatives of non-governmental and international organizations. Although preparation of the review was focused on the actions of the country's parliament, as prompt response is the prerogative of the executive authorities, the data presented in the review primarily describe actions and decisions taken by the country's executive authorities. Engagement of youth as volunteers in managing the impact of COVID-19 is also separately outlined.

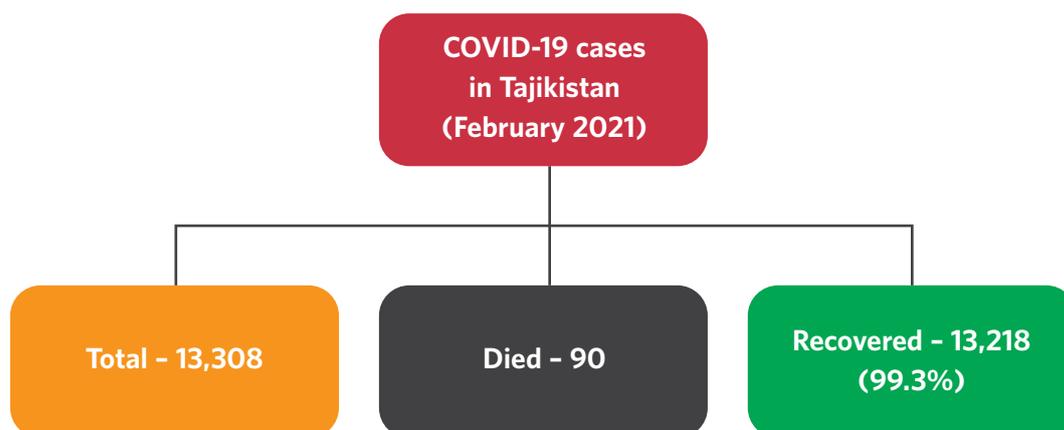
Initially, the review was considered to cover the period from late 2019 through to February 2021. However, after the presentation of the findings made at the Online Seminar on the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Youth, held on 24 September 2021, it was suggested to update the report to cover March–August 2021. The need for the update is due to the fact that the additional measures undertaken by the Government and international partners with youth engagement were not fully reflected in the review. The review process has, therefore, been conducted in two stages, with the first stage covering the period from late 2019–February 2021, and the second stage covering March–August 2021.



2. YOUTH AND PREVENTION OF THE SPREAD OF COVID-19

While the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the outbreak of the COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020, when the disease spread to more than 100 countries. At this time, Tajikistan still did not have officially detected cases among its own citizens. However, with the first news on the spread of a new virus around the world, Tajikistan started taking isolation measures, and in mid-March, the country completely ceased air flights and imposed travel restrictions with other countries. The Government then had hoped that it would be possible to isolate the country from the outside world and prevent COVID-19 from entering the country. The measures were not, however, sufficient, and on 29 April 2020, the country's health ministry announced the first detected case of COVID-19 infection in Tajikistan.

While the COVID-19 pandemic was still spreading in many countries at the end of January 2021, Tajikistan began to cautiously declare the eradication of COVID-19 in the country.⁸ As of the end of February 2021, a total of 13,308 cases of the disease were registered, and 90 people had reportedly died from COVID-19 in Tajikistan.⁹ This had marked the end of the 'first wave' of COVID-19 in Tajikistan.

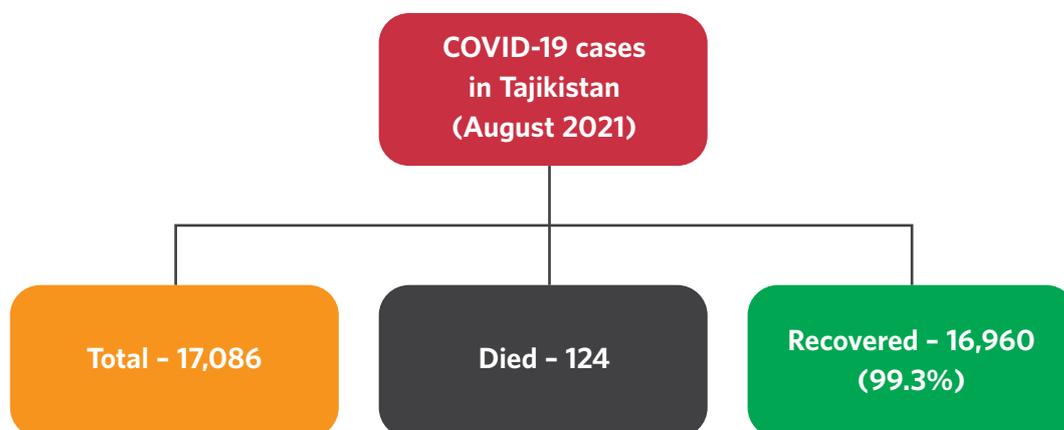


The 'second wave' of COVID-19 was officially recognized by Tajikistan Government in mid-June 2021, followed by the introduction of restrictions and recommendations on taking preventive measures to contain the infection.

⁸ Leader of the Nation Emomali Rahmon: "Infectious disease COVID-19 has been eradicated in our country", <https://khovar.tj/2021/01/peshvoi-millat-emomal-ra-mon-dar-kishvaramon-bemorii-siroyatii-kovid-19-az-bajnraftaast/>.

⁹ According to data by Johns Hopkins University.

The number of officially infected was 17,086, with 16,960 recovered and 124 dead as of August 2021. It is important to mention that the Government has officially reported that no new cases of COVID-19 were registered after 30 August 2021.¹⁰



At the end of January 2020, an Operational Headquarters for Prevention of COVID-19 was established in Tajikistan to prevent the penetration and spread of new coronavirus infections. The Headquarters team consists of the heads of the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Sciences, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Republican committees for emergency situations. By the decision of the Operational Headquarters, starting from February 2020, the sanitary, quarantine and migration controls were strengthened at all border checkpoints, and 24-hour medical and quarantine points were set up at all checkpoints to test the citizens arriving from the People’s Republic of China for COVID-19 symptoms.

No separate document or regulation specifically aimed at protecting young people from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and supporting young people during the pandemic has been adopted. However, most of the measures taken by the government to protect citizens from the impacts of COVID-19 include young people, as no restrictions either by age or gender are made in any of these documents.

The Minister of Health and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan has signed orders on “High level of preparedness in the work of institutions of the healthcare system and social protection of the population of the Republic of Tajikistan to prevent the transmission and spread of the new coronavirus (COVID-19)”, and “Additional sanitary and anti-epidemic measures to prevent the penetration and spread of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) in the Republic of Tajikistan”. In addition, an “Action Plan of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan to strengthen anti-epidemic measures during the period of a new coronavirus infection (COVID-19)” and “Guidelines for medical, sanitary and social servicing for suspected and infected patients” were developed and adopted.¹¹

¹⁰ During the preparation of the report, new cases of Covid-19 were registered in October 2021, hence the Government has confirmed new cases of the Delta variant and urged the population to get vaccinated.

¹¹ Review of best efforts taken by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states to counter the spread of COVID-19, The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2020.

Islam is the dominant religion among the population of Tajikistan, and the majority of youth regularly attend mosques for prayers. According to the decision of the Ulema Council, a ban on holding collective prayers – five daily prayers, Friday and *taraweeh* prayers in mosques and prayer houses in the country – was introduced from 18 April 2020. The Ulema Council specifically called for strict adherence to the recommendations of doctors and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population, as well as WHO, during fasting and other ceremonies.¹² Although some speculation arose as to whether youth would follow this mandate, the majority of the younger citizens respected and commended this decision, especially in the larger towns.

The first document directly related to the fight against COVID-19 in Tajikistan was the **Decree of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan No. RP-1378** of 1 May 2020, “On additional payments of allowances equivalent to a monthly salary of healthcare and social protection of the population workers directly involved in the process of diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19 in medical and quarantine institutions during three months”. Many of the medical personnel receiving financial assistance in accordance with the Decree were young specialists.

The Parliament, according to its mandate, exercises control over the implementation of the decisions taken by the Operational Headquarters for prevention of entry and spread of the new COVID-19 infection. Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, the Parliament has held a series of sessions to ensure proper control over government actions during the pandemic. On 4 July 2020, the Parliament adopted **amendments to the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan “On the Adoption and Implementation of the Code of the Republic of Tajikistan on Administrative Offenses.”**¹³ The objectives of these amendments are to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to protect public health, and hold liable to legal punishment those violating the sanitary and anti-epidemic regulations, including restrictive quarantine measures.

With the arrival of first doses of vaccines (Covishield from India), provided by the COVAX facility, the vaccination campaign in Tajikistan started in the third week of March 2021. Due to low vaccination rates and unwillingness of the population to be vaccinated, the Operational Headquarters for Prevention of COVID-19, chaired by the Vice Prime Minister, issued a Government Decree on mandatory vaccination adopted in early July 2021. This measure and the active participation of youth and NGOs, as well as the government organizations, in campaigns aimed at awareness raising on the benefits of vaccination led to significant results. As of 31 August 2021, over 21 per cent of the population had received at least one dose of a vaccine, and people who had received both doses reached 8.4 per cent or 798,000 people.¹⁴ While the vaccination campaign is still on going, and the variety of vaccines provided through the COVAX facility and donated by the United States, European Union, China and Russia offers a choice types of vaccines to the population, as the speculations over the effectiveness of vaccines is still largely disputed.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ <https://khovar.tj/2020/07/onuni-um-urii-to-ikiston-dar-borai-vorid-namudani-ta-jiru-ilova-o-ba-kodeksi-u-uvajronkunii-mamurii-um-urii-to-ikiston/>.

¹⁴ <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=TJK>

2.1 Volunteering

During the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Tajikistan, youth involvement in fighting the spread and preventing the disease has been increasing. Young people were involved in both organized volunteer movements and personal initiatives. Volunteers in Northern Tajikistan have been working to help curb the spread of the virus in various ways. One group of adolescents set up a “radio programme” on the basics of COVID-19 prevention that was broadcast over a school intercom during breaks. Another group performed shows for younger children and their parents in which they demonstrated proper ways of washing hands using water and soap. Adolescent volunteers also shared pamphlets and DVDs (developed by UNICEF and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection) on COVID-19 prevention in their communities.

To address the rising need for protective equipment and access to masks, volunteers from Dushanbe produced reusable masks, and distributed these along with antiseptics to children and teachers. Beneficiaries included those studying and working at specialized schools for children with visual impairments and for children in closed institutions held in custody for crime.¹⁵ University students, along with other volunteers, distributed educational posters about the symptoms of COVID-19 and precautions against the virus. For example, at the University of Central Asia in Khorog, a Solidarity Fund was established to fight COVID-19. From donations, much needed food and medicine were purchased for local residents and hospitals during the pandemic. The University of Central Asia also established a 50-bed observation room within the Khorog campus to help prevent the spread of the virus. At the peak of the pandemic outbreak in Tajikistan (May–July 2020), volunteers from Khorog conducted one of the largest COVID-19 campaigns in the region. They assisted in the procurement, packaging and delivery of 3,600 kg of food, 67 pieces of medical equipment, 84 high-quality hospital beds, essential medication and other vital supplies worth more than USD 22,000. Food, equipment and basic medicines were distributed in the remote mountain settlements of the country.¹⁶

With the increase in the number of cases of COVID-19 in Tajikistan, adolescents have also been confronted with the issues of anxiety and the health of their peers whose lives have been impacted by COVID-19. Adolescents extensively used a variety of platforms to share thoughts and to consult each other on ways to effectively cope with spending more time at home in isolation, studying at home, and staying healthy while maintaining mental wellbeing.¹⁷ Medical students in the country were actively involved in volunteer activities. While most of the senior students went to help medical workers in hospitals throughout the country and conducted explanatory work through social networks, first-year students helped mainly in city polyclinics, making door-to-door rounds and receiving primary information on the state of the health of citizens. They also carried out explanatory work on protection measures against the spread of COVID-19.

¹⁵ Pandemic participation: adolescent volunteers in Tajikistan fight back against COVID-19, <https://www.unicef.org/tajikistan/stories/pandemic-participation-adolescent-volunteers-tajikistan-fight-back-against-covid-19>.

¹⁶ Local volunteers contain COVID-19 outbreak in Khorog, <https://www.akdn.org/ru/проект/местные-волонтеры-сдержали-вспышку-covid-19-в-хороге>.

¹⁷ Pandemic participation: adolescent volunteers in Tajikistan fight back against COVID-19, <https://www.unicef.org/tajikistan/stories/pandemic-participation-adolescent-volunteers-tajikistan-fight-back-against-covid-19>.

Some young people from China and Tajikistan voluntarily formed a self-help group to fight against the spread of the pandemic. Remotely via Internet, the group began the translation of scientific documents and articles on combating the pandemic from Chinese into Tajik. The self-help group gradually expanded: students, researchers, journalists, professional translators and doctors from China and Tajikistan, totalling more than 60 people, joined the group of translators and have translated articles posting them on a specially created Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Muborizabokoronavirus/>).¹⁸

In addition, on the order of the Operational Headquarters for Prevention of COVID-19 and on the basis of the order of the Chairman of the Committee on Youth Affairs and Sports, internal headquarters were established to carry out preventive and explanatory work in all institutions and departments under the Committee during the spread of COVID-19. The Committee developed and adopted an action plan for a number of awareness-raising activities that were carried out among the population, particularly for youth. To implement the action plan and to ensure that the population complied with universally adopted preventive measures, such as wearing masks, social distancing, using antiseptics at work and in public places (including in passenger terminals and in public transport, on the streets and in markets, and in neighbourhoods, parks and other public places), the activities and explanatory work were carried out on "district-by-district", "street-by-street", "house-by-house" and "face-to-face" principles.

In various regions of the country, volunteer consulting and service centres for the prevention and control of COVID-19 were created. These provide 24-hour consulting services to the population through a hotline and social networks. Collective youth forums and information campaigns under the motto "Healthy lifestyle is the choice of young people!", as well as flash mobs in public places aimed at informing the population on the prevention of COVID-19, were conducted throughout the country.

Youth volunteers also supported lonely and homeless elderly citizens, who are the most vulnerable to impacts of COVID-19, through various programmes. The "Khayr" volunteers have been visiting elderly people and providing them with food, as well as explaining the importance of staying home during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁹



¹⁸ Volunteers from China and Tajikistan set up a self-help group to fight coronavirus, July 29, 2020, Avesta, <http://avesta.tj/2020/07/29/volontery-iz-kitaya-i-tadzhikistana-sozdali-gruppu-vzaimopomoshhi-po-borbe-skoronavirusom/>.

¹⁹ https://halva.tj/articles/our_people/nuzhno_prosto_zakhotet_koordinator_proekta_khayr_o_volonterakh_v_tadzhik_istane_/.

The volunteers' actions were provided on pro-bono basis that aimed at awakening the social activism of young people. Appreciation and gratitude were expressed to the volunteers from those whom they supported, and from ordinary citizens and socially responsible companies. For example, some companies started to offer assistance to volunteers. A number of taxi companies provided them free transport services, mobile companies offered free communication and Internet packages, and some companies supplied personal protection equipment.

During the vaccination campaign that started in March 2021, young activists and volunteer groups, supported by the Government and NGOs, distributed leaflets, aired promotional materials on local TV channels and posted information on social media platforms about the necessity of vaccination. These measures helped significantly to raise the awareness and get more people vaccinated, thus keeping the spread of the virus low.

2.2 Access to economic support

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a negative impact on the global economy, including in Tajikistan. In this context, Tajikistan took a number of operational measures to moderate the consequences of the crisis and support the country's economy. The government increased the financing of the social sector. In particular, 1.6 billion somoni of additional funds were allocated from the state budget to the health sector for purchasing medicines and medical equipment, establishing temporary hospitals and supporting health workers. For full and timely recovery of people infected with COVID-19 in the country, more than 30 hospitals with 7,000 beds were used, and 5,400 doctors and medical workers were mobilized. Additionally, 16,000 beds were installed in 92 medical institutions.

Also, to support vulnerable groups and private entrepreneurs, the tax and credit benefits, privileges, and compensation payments were provided for a total of more than 450 million somoni. In 2020, to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic, the country's credit institutions provided incentives through low interest loans in the amount of 2.3 billion somoni for 260,000 clients, while the industrial sector was provided with loans of over 4 billion somoni. To improve the social conditions of the population, as of 1 September 2020, pensions, wages of public sector workers, and stipends were increased by 15 per cent, wages of law enforcement officers and military personnel were increased by 10 per cent, and pensions of the various groups of people with disabilities increased by 20 per cent to 50 per cent.

In 2020, the country's economic growth slowed to 4.5 per cent, which is less than the 7.5 per cent growth in 2019. With COVID-19, the country's production industries also suffered. However, Tajikistan's economy has been experiencing a fast recovery, as the real gross domestic product (GDP) grew at a rate of 8.7 per cent in the first six months of 2021, mostly owing to the export of precious metals.²⁰

²⁰ "Tajikistan Economic Update – Summer 2021"; World Bank, September 2021; <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tajikistan/publication/economic-update-summer-2021>

Considering the slowing of economy in 2020, the Government put effort toward supporting the population by taking some important measures. During this period, more than 193,000 permanent and seasonal jobs were created, and the monetary income of the population increased by 10 per cent.²¹ Seasonal work in agriculture grew, and many new jobs were created in the construction sector. This was especially important for the so-called 'seasonal migrants', who annually had been involved in the seasonal migration in Russia, but who, due to travel restrictions, could not return to their jobs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while a large number of youth suffered from job losses, for some it was an opportunity to start new businesses and receive employment opportunities, securing earnings in a difficult period.

At the same time, there has been an increase in social and economic inequality in Tajikistan. Women and youth were found to be the most vulnerable in the face of the problem of long-term unemployment. Domestic employment is dominated by men, while women and young people are at a high risk of facing long-term unemployment, which is one of the many consequences of COVID-19. The pandemic could also adversely affected mobility, and education and skills of women and youth, making these groups even more vulnerable. The population as a whole suffered both socially and economically, as remittances, the main source of income, continued to decline. Vulnerable citizens will have to find new means of survival, possibly falling into debt if they have no savings, loans are not repaid or if families have household members with chronic diseases.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has led to a situation in which the incomes of self-employed citizens, labour migrants and non-registered employees of enterprises have dropped sharply and significantly. About 63 per cent of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) reported that they were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Enterprises operating in rural areas are in the least favourable position, as they do not have access to markets and business advisory services. Eighty-five per cent of respondents reported a decrease in the volume of sales of goods and services, and 25 per cent were forced to temporarily suspend their activities as a result of the pandemic. The largest wage cuts were seen in small firms, in which the most affected were young workers and those who worked without registration in the informal sector. The number of women employed in the informal sector is disproportionately high, such that women and young people became the most at risk of losing income.²²

Although a part of the country's population gets support from migrant labour remittances, the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed migration. There is large group of young people who are in need of medical and financial support among migrant labourers. For example, in June 2020, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) helped over 600 Tajik migrants who were stuck at the Kazakh-Uzbek border return home safely. The returnees, including women, children and students, began their journey home at the Zhibek-Zholy border crossing in Kazakhstan and returned to Tajikistan transiting through Uzbekistan. This assistance was closely

²¹ Message of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Leader of the Nation, respected Emomali Rahmon Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan "On the main directions of domestic and foreign policy of the republic", January 26, 2021, http://www.narodnaya.tj/index.php?option=com_jalendar&view=articles&year=2021&month=1&day=28.

²² "Impact of COVID-19 on Lives, Livelihoods and Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) in Tajikistan", UNDP, October 2020.

coordinated by the governments of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.²³ At the same time, more than 40,000 Tajik students were studying outside the country. They also found themselves in a difficult situation due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of them managed to return home, but faced problems with distance education from home. Some were stuck in their host countries while no universities/institutions were operating and with lack of state support while remaining abroad.

Given these circumstances, the Government of Tajikistan, together with partners, is developing a strategy to minimize the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Already, by the end of June 2020, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a grant of USD 30 million for Tajikistan to improve the skills of youth, women and migrant labourers in the country in order to improve their employment and wages, as well as expand the opportunities of employment agencies and migration offices. This grant, supported by an additional grant of USD 1.5 million from the Japan Fund for Information and Communication Technology,²⁴ is administered by the ADB. The project will help retrain affected workers and protect Tajikistan from the severe impacts of COVID-19 on human capital. The project will build and equip three new migration service centres in Khujand, Bokhtar and Vose as universal centres for outgoing and returning migrants. The centres will offer migration orientation programmes, language courses and initial employment skills training to help migrants find better jobs and safer living conditions in their destination countries. The centres will also provide financial literacy training for the secure transfer of remittances and ICT training to facilitate access to social information. The project plans to establish and equip three new exemplary “work centres” in Dushanbe for tourism, in Roghun for energy, and in Danghara for agriculture. The work centres will provide skills development, childcare facilities, a pilot scholarship programme for women job seekers, a pilot programme for new and more focused soft skills training, advice on aligning interests and skills with potential jobs, and training on ICT skills by sector.²⁵

In addition, the Government of the Russian Federation has allocated USD 2 million for the implementation of a new project “Assisting in the elimination of the economic consequences of COVID-19 by improving welfare, employment opportunities and regional cooperation in the Fergana Valley”. This project, designed for 2021–2023, is aimed at improving living conditions and doing business in rural areas of the Fergana Valley of Tajikistan, including through increasing cross-border cooperation with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the exchange of best practices between Central Asian countries.²⁶

The situation started to dramatically improve with Russia lifting the restrictions on travel for the migrant labourers in June 2021. A massive exodus of Tajik migrant labourers to Russia was recorded, which raised hopes for the Tajik families who could not find decent jobs in their home country. The gradual opening of air traffic with Russia stimulated the inflow of migrant remittances and supported the recovery of household consumption. However, according to the World Bank, “the economic recovery considerably depends on the availability and efficiency of vaccines and the resilience of the global economy in the face of new waves of the pandemic. Potential outbreaks of COVID-19 and delays in vaccination may trigger new lockdown measures and subdue economic activity in Tajikistan.”

²³ US government and IOM helped over 600 Tajik migrants to return home from Kazakhstan, <https://www.usaid.gov/ru/tajikistan/press-releases/jun-22-2020-us-government-and-iom-support-600-stranded-tajikmigrants>.

²⁴ The Japan Fund for Information and Communication Technology was established in 2001 initially for a 3-year period to harness the potential of information and communication technology (ICT) and bridge the growing digital divide in Asia and the Pacific. The fund was originally scheduled to close by July 2004 but was extended to accommodate new proposals.

²⁵ \$30 million grant from ADB to support labour migrants, youth and women in Tajikistan, <https://www.adb.org/ru/news/adbs-30-million-grant-support-labor-migrants-youth-and-women-tajikistan>.

²⁶ UNDP launched a project in Tajikistan to eliminate the economic consequences of COVID-19, <http://avesta.tj/2020/12/17/proon-zapustila-v-tadzhikistane-proekt-po-ustranenyu-ekonomicheskikh-posledstvijcovid-19/>.

2.3 Online schooling

COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a number of problems in the country's crisis preparedness. While due to the pandemic, most of the social facilities had been either closed or had restricted access, some countries had introduced distant work and education as options. This decision was also taken in Tajikistan but the country was not ready to make a swift transition due to the lack of an adaptation plan and less developed IT infrastructure in education establishments coupled with the high cost of Internet and low coverage in rural areas. The underdeveloped electronic infrastructure, including access to Internet and computers, has created difficulties for effective utilization of online measures. Tajik students that were studying abroad had to adjust to new realities and continue their education online, but this was not the case for the students studying domestically. Schools started closing before the official closing period with no alternative education means provided. This affected high school and university students the most. According to UNFPA, students did not absorb about 10 per cent of the education programme.

With the support from international organizations, including the United Nations and European Union, the Ministry of Education worked to ensure quality and inclusive uninterrupted learning for children, parents and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included developing online learning mechanisms, equipping schools with computers and Internet access, and training teachers to deliver online education. However, these measures were not sufficient, and the percentage of coverage at the national scale was very low.



3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, it is important to stress that the impacts of COVID-19 have undermined the timely implementation of the ICPD25 commitments and the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. At the same time, the Government should take the quick and necessary actions to recover the economy and wellbeing of citizens. Young people should be more involved in the process. As shown, young people can take leading roles and contribute in the development of Tajikistan's society. While many strategic documents and policies have either expired or are about to expire, the Government of Tajikistan has a chance to develop adapted policy and strategic papers with consideration of the gaps and limitations the pandemic has revealed. For example, electronic governance, adapted distance education curriculum, improvement of IT facilities in schools (in both urban and rural areas) and access to the Internet need to be considered.

Recommendation 1

Understanding the immediate, medium- and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the lives and livelihoods of the population of Tajikistan, as well as on businesses and the informal sector of the economy, in all regions of the country, is essential for taking informed and targeted measures to rebuild the country. The government should conduct a comprehensive analysis and develop a post-COVID recovery plan for the country.

Recommendation 2

To assign COVID-19 oversight to a parliamentary committee authorized to monitor, assess and report on the Government's delegated powers.

Recommendation 3

COVID-19 had a negative impact on many social and economic spheres and has revealed a number of shortages in regulations, approaches and coordination between state institutions, and in the preparedness of the country to operate under a lockdown. One of the affected areas was the education system and the readiness of education establishments to move to remote education. It appears no adaptation plan exists to act in crisis situations to ensure uninterrupted education, and adapted education programmes that could be provided at a distance through IT systems are lacking.

Recommendation 4

To adapt youth support policies to the situation in the country, including special support for young girls, where applicable.

Recommendation 5

The IT infrastructure is least developed in education establishments, and youth at large do not have the means to study and operate at a distance due to lack of access to the internet and technology needed, especially in rural areas. Due to this situation and the lockdown measures (isolation), students and pupils did not absorb a certain percentage of the annual education curriculum.

Recommendation 6

Another segment of the population that was affected by the pandemic is people with disabilities, who are protected legally, but this support focuses mostly on infrastructure. There is a need for equal access to services. For example, people with disabilities have lower chances of receiving loans at banks in comparison to people without disabilities. This right to financial services should be supported and protected by the Government. During the pandemic, young people with disabilities were among the most vulnerable. There is a need to work on legislation and develop unified support to people with disabilities, which would include the provision of universal access to loans and support in crisis situations. Currently, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has initiated a project to address this issue.

Recommendation 7

In the Global Report on Gender Inequality for 2018, Tajikistan was ranked 123rd out of 149 countries. There is a growing trend towards the strengthening of traditional gender roles, which prevents women from fully enjoying their rights and achieving gender equality. This aggravates economic dependence, reinforces gender stereotypes, justifies violence against women, and prevents women from participating in political and socio-economic activities. Social norms and traditions exacerbate the vulnerability of women. Gender inequality fuels high levels of violence against women and girls, which is one of the most common human rights violations in Tajikistan. Nearly a quarter of women aged 19 to 49 years in Tajikistan reported being physically or sexually abused.

COVID-19 exacerbated gender inequality and increased the risk of domestic violence. During times of crisis, such as an outbreak of an infectious disease, women and girls may find themselves in a more precarious situation, in which they are exposed to intimate partner violence and other forms of domestic violence due to isolation, when tensions rise in households and when victims cannot easily contact or access support services. Girls and women also face an increased risk of other forms of gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse. Women are also actively involved in caring for the sick, including being in direct contact with patients and medical workers, so are highly susceptible to exposure to COVID-19 infection.

Efforts should be made to improve access to justice, including during crises, with a focus on women and youth, in particular through alternative ways of providing free legal aid and engaging with civil society organizations. In addition, there should be a continuous hotline for reporting cases of domestic violence. In the context of the pandemic and in view of the changes in the institutions providing assistance, it is necessary to update the referral mechanisms to specialists on gender-based violence. Additional investment is needed to build shelters for victims of domestic violence. The capacity of government institutions must also be strengthened to effectively respond to domestic violence.

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