

# Well-being of the ‘new pastoralists’ in the Eastern Pamirs of Tajikistan<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

This paper deals with the economic well-being of the inhabitants in the peripheral and economically disadvantaged high mountain region of the Pamirs in Tajikistan. Here, as in most transition countries, all forms of well-being declined dramatically after the Soviet dissolution. As one of the poorest republics in the Soviet Union, the decline in welfare was even further amplified as a consequence of the Tajik civil war (Falkingham 2000, Reissner 2000).

For decades, indicators measuring the economic activity of national economies have been equated with the well-being of the countries’ citizens. Assessments were focused on growth via which all development countries would catch-up with the developed ‘first world’. The main goal was to increase the average GDP per capita. Since the 1970s, social inequalities as well as indicators for non-economic well-being were taken into perspective when the focus shifted to the satisfaction of basic needs eventually including human capabilities (1990s), and universal rights approaches in the 2000s. This understanding of well-being goes beyond mere economic parameters and makes it possible to determine a threshold between well-being and poverty. Consequently, during the last two decades, the changing definitions of well-being consisted of economic as well as non-economic components (Sumner 2004).

As such, the endowment of individuals with assets and capabilities as well as their entitlements and the income of poor people can be measured, if basic levels are defined. A variety of composite indicators for development or poverty were designed during the last two decades in order to express the advanced understanding of well-being. Well known examples are the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, Sen and Anand 1994) or the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative {OPHI `,\Alkire, 2011 #1181}.

Human well-being is thus a combination of economic and non-economic components. However, in this paper we will focus mainly on its economic dimension in a resource-poor area with limited income opportunities. One of the goals of our research in the Pamirs was to

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understand how peoples' livelihoods in the district centre of Murghab were challenged by the effects of the post-Soviet transformation processes. After in Soviet times being mostly employed as specialists in non-agrarian sectors, people faced the dissolution of state organisations that have been their former employers as well as the breakdown of external supply systems they were heavily dependent upon. Livelihoods suffered from an economic crisis, as salaries were missing and household savings were devaluated by inflation. Households were in a desperate situation, because after witnessing five decades of social security in the Soviet Union they had no prior experience of how to cope with this severe economic crisis. Subsistence economy and out-migration were two appropriate options to sustain a livelihood.

In the following, the present-day livelihoods of the Kyrgyz and Pamiri communities in the Eastern Pamirs will be described and interpreted with respect to changes in the socio-economic set-up. Outcomes of applied livelihood strategies in terms of economic well-being of households will be discussed. The presentation of evidence is guided by the following lead questions: How did households cope or adapt to changing political and-economic frame conditions in order to sustain their livelihoods and a certain degree of economic well-being? How is the socio-economic structure of the local population affected, and what are the current trends?

### **Research area & historical context**

The Eastern Pamirs, a high mountain desert of Central Asia, are located in the easternmost part of Tajikistan. Two characteristics mark this region. First, after the colonisation by the Russian Empire the region experienced significant geopolitical changes. Since the 1930s under Soviet power the area became a borderland that was closed, detrimentally affecting regional mobility and exchange patterns (Kreutzmann 2009, Kraudzun 2011). Second, the combination of a sparse vegetation cover (Walter and Breckle 1986, Vanselow 2011) and its peripheral location contributes to limited choices for livelihoods based on local resources. Pastoralism seems to be a prime adapted strategy.

Nowadays Murghab District is bound in the east by the autonomous province of Xinjiang in China, in the south by Afghan Badakhshan, and the northern boundary was established after the dissolution of the Soviet Union between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Eastern Pamirs comprise the major part of the Pamir plateau and are widely congruent with Murghab district, which is part of the autonomous province of Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan (cf. Fig. 1).

For centuries the high mountain plateau has been used by members of two different communities. Combined mountain farmers of Pamiri ethno-linguistic groups originating from the deeply incised Western Pamir valleys cultivated food crops on irrigated terraces,

and drove their cattle herds to the Eastern Pamir pastures during summers. The second group of people inhabiting the Eastern Pamirs consisted of Kyrgyz pastoralists. They evacuated from conflict-prone regions of the Ferghana Valley to the remote Pamirs (cf. Stankevič 1904, Maanaev and Ploskich 1983).

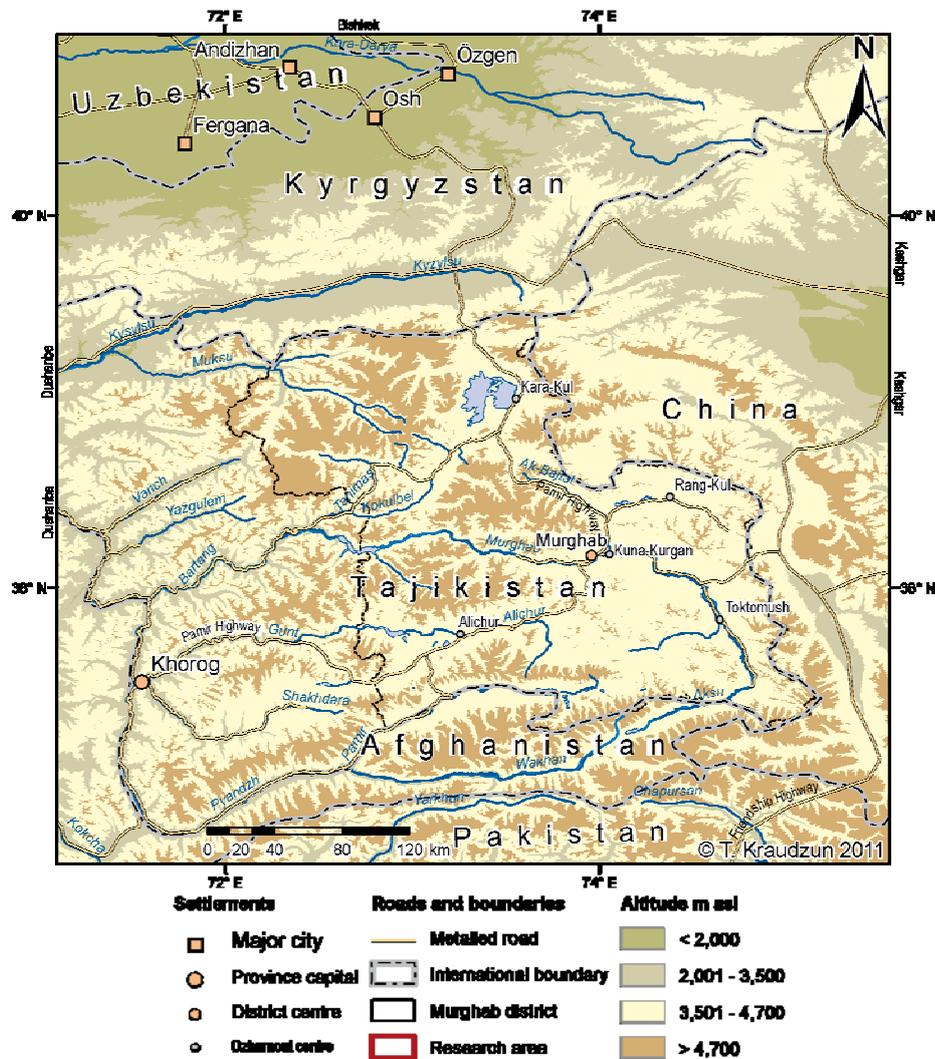


Figure 1: Case Study Murghab in the Eastern Pamirs of Tajikistan

In former times, the pastoralists depended on the exchange of their livestock surplus with basic foodstuff and other goods in agricultural markets such as Kashgar and Osh. Furthermore, their pastures were spread over a wide range of the Pamirs. They generated additional income through guiding-services offered to the caravans crossing the Pamirs on previous Silk Road tracks. Beginning with the establishment of the Russian administration the trans-boundary mobility of the pastoralists was increasingly constrained. After establishing Soviet power, every endeavour was made to improve the supply with foods and goods. The main rationale for these efforts was based in the geopolitical significance of the long external boundary shared with China and Afghanistan. In order to gain the pastoralists'

loyalty, a modern economy with high living standards was established. The region was in need of a variety of professions so many young specialists came to work in the administrative centre of Murghab. They were attracted by above-average wages combined with a rich provisioning with consumer goods. The livelihoods during this period were supported by the Soviet Union (cf. Masov 1985, Kraudzun 2012).

With the dissolution of the USSR and the independence of Tajikistan in 1991, all subsidies ceased and livestock was privatised to the 'new livestock breeders' formerly employed as herders, bookkeepers and teachers. As their previous experience was guided by a strong dominance of Soviet geopolitical interests that ensured high levels of supply for livestock production and their well-being, independent decision-making has been a major challenge to them. In this context it is of high interest how well-being is constituted nowadays and which factors influence today's livelihoods (Kreczi 2011, Kraudzun 2012).

### **Methodological questions**

The results on economic well-being in Murgab presented below are based on a livelihood survey among 500 households in the district capital Murghab, carried out in 2008, and among 280 livestock breeding households throughout the district, interviewed between 2007 and 2009. Another sample of 70 households was selected to record their life histories, where information was collected about their perceptions, experiences, livelihood decisions, their rationales and outcomes during the phases of change in the Eastern Pamirs.

During the Murghab livelihood survey, whose results are presented in more detail in Kreczi (Kreczi 2011), we asked household-members about household demographics, as well as their regular and irregular monetary income including migrants' remittances. In addition, people were asked how they assess the activities of development organisations from the perspective of an improvement of their well-being. Quantitative data gathered with standardised, pre-tested questionnaires were supplemented by problem-centred interviews with selected interview partners to gather contextual information. Meeting the respondents at home turned out to be a practical problem, as many households during the summer season care for their animals on remote pastures.

In order to understand how pastures as a crucial natural resource are used and to scrutinise the economy of mobile livestock herding, the livestock breeding households were visited and interviewed repeatedly in their seasonal pasture camps. Data on the present-day use were gathered by standardised and problem-centred interviews.

All information from the surveys was supplemented by data on the livelihoods and the livestock economy during the Soviet era and the subsequent transition period, collected in

topic-specific interviews with key and knowledgeable informants and derived from the selected household biographies.

In order to understand the socio-economic stratification in the context of the living conditions in the Eastern Pamirs, income data were compared with economic needs. For this reason, typical consumer baskets of local households<sup>2</sup> of different wealth were calculated based on different sources. Official consumption data for Tajikistan (AgentStat 2010) were refined with available official statistical information on the local level and with our own samples enquiring household consumption in Murghab. The result were three consumer baskets that were taken as threshold between *poor*, *medium*, *wealthy* and *very wealthy* households (cf. tab. 1). The vast majority of foods and dry goods have to be imported from outside. Only locally produced goods and raw materials extracted from nature can be substituted through workforce and support networks, if available. Corresponding to observations among households of different socio-economic groups, the respective costs are omitted from the consumer baskets of the *poor* and the *medium* households. Only the consumer basket of *wealthy* and *very wealthy* households includes monetary expenses for animal products and energy.

Table 1: Income groups in relation to model consumer baskets, in Tajik Somoni (TJS)<sup>3</sup>

Income group	Limit of consumer basket (in TJS per household and month)	Included expenses	Not included expenses
<i>poor</i>	< 400 TJS	foods, consumer goods, services	energy, animal products
<i>medium</i>	< 1,000 TJS	foods, consumer goods, services	energy, animal products
<i>wealthy</i>	< 2,000 TJS	foods, consumer goods, services, energy, animal products	increasingly: energy, animal products
<i>very wealthy</i>	< 2,000 TJS	everything	

However, the gathering of quantitative data implicated some methodological challenges. Ambiguities remained when assigning people to a respective household or beyond it. Due to the data aggregation at household level, all intra-household workload differences and variations of well-being are masked. Distinguishing between formal and informal jobs and especially the monetarising of irregular incomes were often difficult for the respondents. Furthermore, monetary data for the livestock economy was difficult to enquire. The limited

<sup>2</sup> The constructed model household consists of 2 children (< 18 years), 3 adults (18-50 years) and 0.8 elderly people (> 50 years) – altogether 5.8 persons.

<sup>3</sup> The calculation of the three limiting consumer baskets started from calculations of the Tajik Agency for Statistics (AgentStat 2010). It quantifies a medium consumption for the poorest and the wealthiest 10 % of the population, subdivided by urban and rural populations, of which we took the latter value. We adapted the nation-wide amounts of consumed foods, consumer goods and services to our own samples enquiring household consumption in Murghab that were checked against metabolic rates.

time during the Murghab survey made it difficult to gather plausible data on pastoralism-related expenses and on income from animal products.

## Results

Before looking at the micro level data of well-being in Murghab, it might be helpful to locate Tajikistan and the neighbouring countries within the poverty world rankings. The life-expectancy- and education-focused Human Development Index (HDI) shows similar values for Tajikistan and the other Central Asian Countries without Kazakhstan (Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Consequently, all these countries occur in the same group of countries of 'medium development'. This is in contrast to the post-Soviet republics in the north like Kazakhstan and Russia, which are in the country group of 'high development', and to the southern neighbours Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are ranked as countries of 'low development' (cf. UNDP 2011). These similarities can be interpreted with the achievements of the Soviet social policy in Central Asia.

However, significant differences in the abundance of poverty between the Central Asian Republics are visible in the comparison of the countries' Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) that builds on different education and health measures and takes into account standard of living indicators. In Tajikistan poverty is most widespread with the highest MPI of 0.068, clearly separated from Kyrgyzstan (0.019) and Uzbekistan {0.008; \UNDP, 2011 #1098}. However, within Tajikistan not in the difficult to access Gorno-Badakhshan province (0.068), but in the Southern province Khatlon (0.092) poverty is most widespread (OPHI 2011). These significant differences between the countries can be interpreted with their unlike starting position at the moment of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the unequal development achievements during their transition due to strengths like Uzbekistan's industry and mineral resources vs. obstacles like the Tajik Civil War.

A closer look at the labour market data on the district level demonstrates the difficulties related to people's income. Today, only one third of the working age people are employed formally, of which 68 % are engaged in the state sector. Official statistics show a share of employment of only 15 % in the villages, whereas in the district centre 45 % of the working age population are employed (Statotdel Murgab 2008).

Our own sample shows similar figures. About 17 % of the households supplement their livelihoods with informal jobs and 21 % receive remittances from household members who out-migrated in order to seek employment (cf. fig. 2). In sum, these resources combine to an average of 450 TJS per household, but the income is distributed very unequally. More than two thirds of the Murghab households can spend only less than the 400 TJS – or 1.25 PPP\$ a

day<sup>4</sup> – necessary for minimal needs, ten percent with at least 1,000 TJS can afford sufficient amounts of consumer goods, and only three percent of the population, with more than 2,000 TJS, can purchase everything they desire (fig. 2). Interpreting these figures in comparison with the previously mentioned minimum needs level we might conclude that some additional livelihood sources are still missing in our discussion.

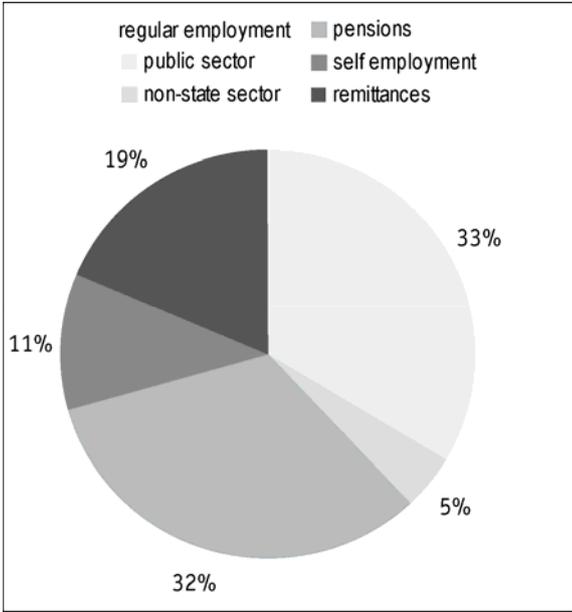


Figure 2: Occurrence of monetary income sources 2008 (n=1035)

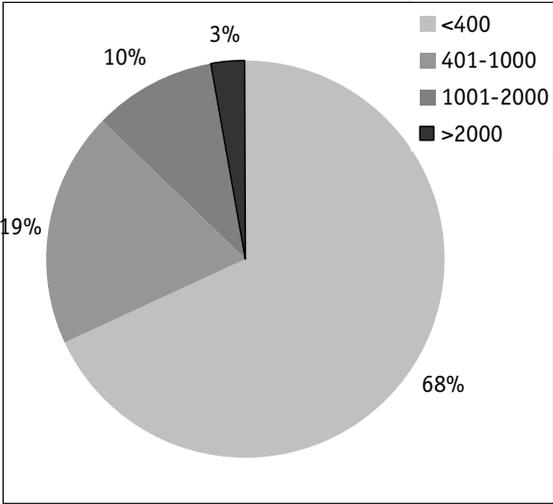


Figure 3: Distribution of total income in Murghab 2008 (in TJS per household and month, n=328)

<sup>4</sup> 400 TJS correspond to the global poverty line of 1.25 PPP\$ /person/ month. The number of 59 PPP\$-2005/ capita/ month being an adapted 1.25PPP\$-measure for Tajikistan (Ravallion et al. 2008) converts to 93 TJS/ capita/ month. This international poverty line corresponds to the resulting value of 90 TJS/ capita/ month of the limiting consumer basket for 'poor' model households of our Murghab survey (400 TJS; 67 TJS/ p/ M), after it has been adapted to the local prices, which are 50 % above the prices at the supplying markets .

The answers of respondents show that households find ways to obtain the share of foods and energy, which they can not afford by their monetary income. However, it is often difficult to track where the resources come from. In the following, different kinds of informal incomes are presented with respect to the local livelihoods and the methodological problems of gathering information: irregular monetary income, non-monetary forms like barter and livestock-related income.

Virtually every employer-employee-relationship in the private sector seems to be of an informal nature, so that the boundary between formal employment and informal jobs remains vague. Forms of informal monetary income are often irregular and therefore not counted as reliable income by the households. This seems not astonishing after five decades of Soviet experiences of secure livelihoods. Therefore they often remain unaccounted for in the interview responses. In order to understand the local setting, the contribution of informal activities to the livelihoods should be illustrated with some examples.

The category 'informal job' includes activities like harvesting dwarf shrubs for energy purposes, handiworks, shop assistant, construction worker, driver and herdsman. Some examples demonstrate the vague boundaries confining the category 'informal job': If a household member (mostly men) spends his day by harvesting dwarf shrubs for the household's cooking and heating needs, it is not perceived a job, although he usually collects more than the family needs and will sell what's left to the neighbour. Or, whenever somebody would drive with his own car to the next centres of Osh or Khorog he would try not to leave any seat free. And because fuel is an expensive and scarce resource every passenger will have to pay for the ride. Nevertheless, the driving person will not see himself as a professional driver. Finally, the illegal status of some activities is another reason not to state it.

The most popular example in Murghab is collecting gemstones: local people know about the position of abandoned Soviet exploration sites and other places where they extract precious stones, especially ruby, as well as gold, silver and other mineral resources, which is prohibited by law. Even the chief of the local branch of the Tajik Security Service, who is traditionally more responsible than the police to fight such illegal activities, seems to have capitulated: "Almost all *Murghabi* are smugglers. [. . .] I can not lock away the whole town. They just want to survive. I think it would be better here to create jobs." (Personal communication, 08.04.2009) Partly the used technologies of this illegal ore mining in the winter resemble those of the official companies operating in the same mines during the summer season. The quality of the extracted resources varies widely and the trade routes are complex. Low quality gemstones are usually sold to mobile traders and increasingly to tourists, but true precious stones are sold via Tajik middleman to businessmen from Iran, the Arab countries or Afghanistan. Although illegal mining seems to be a common activity among

the people in Murghab, only very few people talked about it. Certainly, trust in the relation between researcher and local people plays a significant role.

A recurring impression during the interviews seemed to be influenced by the historical context. After the Soviet experience and a steady supply of humanitarian aid during a period of eleven years it is the perception of the local people of being first and foremost dependent on external support. Therefore they tried to support this narrative of neediness through understating and probably hiding of additional income sources in the interviews.

Furthermore, bartering is the second prime source of informal incomes and complements the livelihoods to a large extent. Most often, animal products are bartered, but this economic practice includes all kinds of workforce and services in demand. Again, the boundaries between informal trade, barter and gifts are blurred. Goods and services are often paid partly with cash and partly with goods and services in exchange. Sometimes they just reciprocate a previous favour or serve to stabilise or expand social networks. The latter in turn can serve as a kind of 'insurance' in times of need. It is difficult to operationalise information about this kind of exchange. Hence, data about income and expenses via non-monetary exchange is not included in this survey.

Finally, for many households, livestock is the main productive asset that generates a surplus beyond their limited monetary income. Moreover, animals serve as the main household savings. In our sample, an average household owns 19 small livestock and three yaks for subsistence and barter. The official statistics report only 7.7 small livestock and 1.4 yaks per household (Statotdel Murgab n.d.). The administration seems to face the same difficulties to obtain reliable data due to the understating of livestock ownership by the people.

Our assumption is that the households with monetary incomes that are insufficient for their livelihoods are significantly supplemented by a surplus contributed by livestock breeding. In order to prove it monetary income is confronted with the number of private livestock in fig. 4. It is clearly visible that most poor households also own few animals. Additionally, two groups with a certain degree of wealth can be identified. The first are households with a sufficient monetary income, but insignificant livestock numbers. Members of this group obtain their high incomes mainly from trading activities at the Murghab bazaar and from well-paid positions in the district administration. Most of them are not engaged in large-scale livestock breeding. There are few exceptions that have diversified their successful business with significant activities in livestock breeding. The second wealth group consists of households with comparably big herds, but allegedly no monetary income. They are active in the breeding and commercial trading of livestock. According to the methodological problem mentioned above, the stated zero monetary income corresponds to their perception of the livestock economy, but not to the reality. Additionally, there are more households of this category, but due to their mobility most of them were not available for an interview.

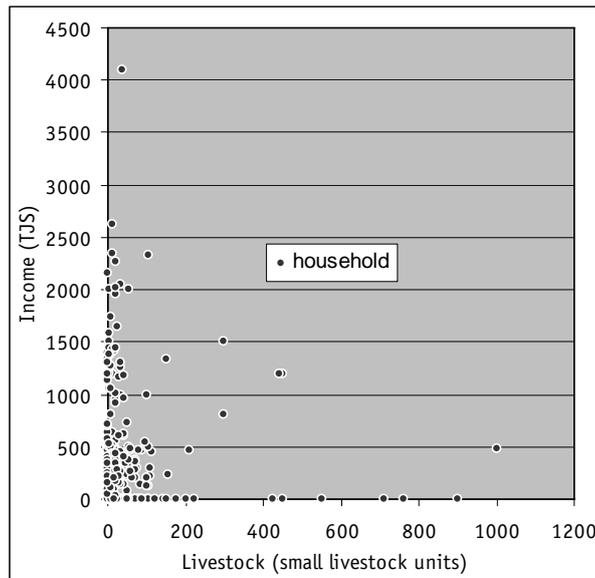


Figure 4: Income vs. livestock per household (n=500)

The similar figure is presented if we look at the distribution of livestock ownership among Murghab's inhabitants. 71 % of the households own fewer animals as it would be necessary to ensure the supply with the amount of livestock products absolutely necessary for nutrition. Another fifth of the households can barely amend their nutrition and only 9 % of the population can use their herds for subsistence plus monetary income and can keep enough animals to withstand economic shocks (cf. fig. 5).

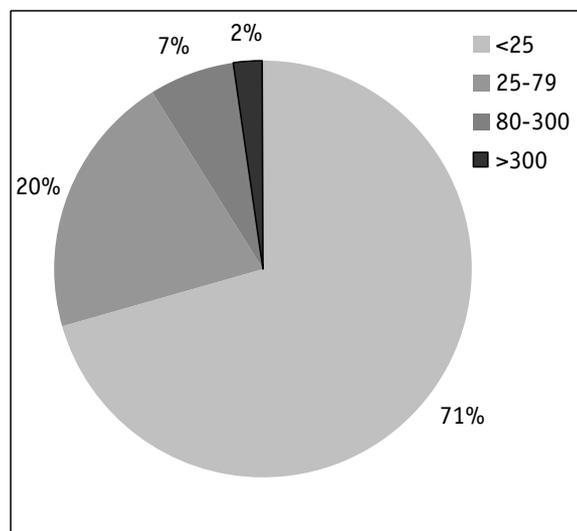


Figure 5: Livestock per household (in small livestock units, n=500)<sup>5</sup>

The diversity of factors necessary for livestock breeding can serve to explain the limited success of most new livestock breeders. To maintain their herd productivity, households need

<sup>5</sup> A small livestock unit corresponds to 0.2 yak or cattle; 1 sheep or goat

experience, a set of yielding seasonal pastures, good relations to a knowledgeable herder and/or sufficient disposable work force. Therefore it is not surprising that most households in Murghab were not successful in starting animal breeding activities.

## **Conclusion**

Today, people are challenged by the new economic situation after their previous experience was guided by a strong dominance of Soviet geopolitical interests that ensured high levels of external supply. Livelihoods were secure and levels of economic well-being were high, given the region's peripheral location, and especially in comparison with neighbouring countries.

After the independency in 1991 and delayed transformation processes due to the times of civil war only some households were successful in re-establishing high levels of economic well-being. The vast majority of the local people did not take the appropriate economic steps and has still difficulties to earn a livelihood sufficient to meet even basic needs. More than two thirds of the people in Murghab fall below the internationally acknowledged poverty line of 1.25 PPP\$ per capita per day. This is accompanied on the other end of the society by a small group (3 %) of comparably wealthy households whose members can spend more than seven PPP\$ per day. They are now engaged in diverse successful businesses including livestock breeding and economically 'taking off' secured by large herds. This results in a proceeding segregation of the society into a vast majority of extreme poor people and a small minority of economically vibrant wealthy households.

The local economy consists of a prominent state sector which is fostered by large-scale subsidies for the local administration from the national level and where most people with regular incomes are employed. This is complemented by a slowly developing livestock economy as the only option for agricultural activities and trans-border trade as the vast majority of goods need to be imported. Remittances of labour migrants play a minor role as compared to other regions in Tajikistan and neighbouring Central Asian Republics.

The majority of the Murghab people seem to be discouraged by the realities of the economic crisis, including their limited success as 'new livestock breeders' after the privatisation of the collective farms. Many of them share the perception of being first and foremost dependent on external support. As the livestock economy seems to be an option for few engaged breeders, the current trend of the young generation to out-migrate in order to seek education might lead to more labour migration in the long term. This could open up opportunities for the households' future livelihoods as well as it has the potential to improve the people's economic and non-economic well-being.

## Acknowledgements

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