In Central Asia, addressing poverty and unemployment among women and youth is essential to creating inclusive food systems. The share of working-age people in the region’s population has been gradually increasing over several decades (Figure 1), and today a large cohort of young people and women cannot find employment and earn adequate income in their own countries. For example, in 2019, the unemployment rate for women in Uzbekistan stood at 12.8 percent, and the unemployment rate for youth (between the ages of 20 and 30) stood at 15 percent.¹ In Central Asia’s rural areas, rates of unemployment for women and youth are significantly higher, which is reflected in high rural poverty rates. In the rural mountainous region of Naryn Province in Kyrgyzstan, for instance, youth (ages 15 to 29) unemployment stood at 22 percent in 2018, and for young women it was above 40 percent.² Similar unemployment rates for youth and women are observed in rural areas of other Central Asian countries. Across the region, youth (ages 15 to 29) currently make up about 25 to 30 percent of the population, and this share is expected to remain high for the foreseeable future.

**FIGURE 1** Working-age population (20–59 years old) in Central Asian countries, as share of total population

EMPLOYMENT, MIGRATION, AND INCLUSION

Creating employment opportunities for youth and especially for young women will be essential to improving the inclusiveness of food systems, including increasing the income, equity, and nutrition benefits of food systems for rural people. Promoting high-value agrifood sectors, such as horticulture, livestock, food processing, and business activities along related value chains, such as logistics and storage infrastructure, may help to create employment opportunities, particularly in densely populated rural areas. Development of the horticulture sector has added benefits, including a significant positive impact on food access and nutrition outcomes—empirical evidence suggests positive linkages between crop diversity and dietary diversity in Tajikistan and between crop diversity and agricultural productivity in Kyrgyzstan.{}

The lack of jobs at home forces Central Asian workers, especially young men, to seek employment in Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and elsewhere. Migration from labor-abundant countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) became a major socioeconomic phenomenon over the past two decades. Labor remittances, which are slowly rebounding from the low levels experienced in 2015 and 2016 (Figure 2), are a critical source of foreign exchange in these countries. The inflow of remittances, primarily from Russia, contributes to macroeconomic stability, increased incomes, poverty reduction, and macro- and household-level food security in the region. However, evidence suggests that remittances tend to support consumption rather than providing capital for economic development, and can therefore have some unintended and negative consequences for structural transformation of remittance-receiving economies.{}

Labor migration has two notable impacts on the inclusiveness of Central Asia’s food systems. First, labor remittances can improve household welfare and access to food. For example, according to a recent IFPRI survey, about 40 percent of households in Tajikistan have at least one family member working abroad (usually in Russia) and receive remittances. For families that receive remittances, food amounts to about 50 percent of their expenditures, whereas for households not receiving remittances, nearly 55 percent of their expenditures are on food.{}

FIGURE 2 Total remittance inflows from Russia (2010–2019, quarters 1–3)

Second, labor migration from Central Asia tends to be predominantly male and rural, which leads to the “feminization” of agricultural labor (see Chapter 4). This can have both positive and negative outcomes: while earnings from remittances and increases in women’s decision-making power can improve rural economies, men’s migration can also contribute to agricultural labor shortages and create social issues. This trend also highlights some of the institutional challenges related to inclusion in Central Asia’s rural areas. For example, dehkan\(^8\) farms in Tajikistan headed by women are often unable to access male-led water-users’ associations, and consequently miss out on economic opportunities. Some projects, such as the FAO’s Promoting Inclusive Economic Growth Through Matching Grants initiative in Tajikistan, make a direct link between labor migration and agriculture in the migrant-sending countries by mobilizing the earnings and skills that migrants gained overseas for use in local agriculture and agribusiness.\(^9\)

**LOOKING FORWARD**

Central Asia will continue to face global and regional risks related to climate change and commodity price uncertainties in the medium term. In addition, external vulnerabilities associated with political, economic, and trade conditions in the region’s main trading partners (Russia and China) will have significant impacts on economic growth prospects as well as food and nutrition security. Because most of the region’s agrifood sector exports are currently sent to Russia, diversification of export markets will be essential to improving the stability of Central Asia’s economies and the development of food systems in the region.

The region’s largest country, Uzbekistan, is considering joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and applying for WTO membership in the near future. These steps will have important implications for transforming food systems in Uzbekistan and throughout the region. WTO membership could help harmonize national legislation and standards with international practices, increase predictability and transparency of the trade regime, and improve Uzbekistan’s business and investment climate. It may also ease trade conditions with Uzbekistan’s neighbors, which are already WTO members.

Membership in the EAEU would entail both risks and opportunities. First, it could improve employment opportunities in the Russian labor market for Uzbekistan’s migrants, as they would not need to obtain and pay for work permits and other employment-related certification. Labor remittances could increase by up to 20 percent, and more than 2 million migrant laborers and their families (about 30 percent of Uzbekistan’s population) could potentially benefit from these changes. In addition, the EAEU already accounts for about 30 percent of Uzbekistan’s international trade. Uzbekistan’s accession could create additional trade opportunities with EAEU members by harmonizing tariffs, removing customs controls at the borders with EAEU member countries, unifying transport and logistics regulations, strengthening coordination in the implementation of sanitary and phytosanitary measures, and synchronizing regional digital connectivity initiatives, including traceability of products and technology transfers. However, there is a risk that accession could lead to trade diversion effects by redirecting Uzbekistan’s trade with non-EAEU countries toward EAEU markets and reducing the competitiveness of its exports in non-EAEU markets. Thus a careful assessment of potential impacts of membership in the EAEU and WTO on trade, household welfare, and economic growth would be necessary.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan recently updated their national development strategies, and Uzbekistan adopted a new agrifood sector development strategy for 2020–2030. These policy documents aim to transform food systems, promote nutrition-sensitive value chains, encourage private incentives and investments in the agrifood sector, and extend employment opportunities, especially for women and youth. The successful implementation of these strategies and policies requires the establishment of rigorous ex ante and ex post impact assessment frameworks, which will help identify policy and institutional constraints down the road and develop evidence-based policy solutions for promoting inclusive food systems in the region.
Notes


3 Data from the national statistical agencies of Central Asian countries suggest that the food processing sector’s contribution to GDP is significantly lower than that of agriculture.


8 The dehkan (peasant) farms are private farms that emerged during the 1990s when former state and collective farms were dismantled and the land was allocated to member farmers. For more information, see K. Akramov and G. Shreedhar, Economic Development, External Shocks, and Food Security in Tajikistan, IFPRI Discussion Paper 1163 (IFPRI, Washington, DC, 2012).


FOOD SYSTEMS ARE EVOLVING QUICKLY TO MEET GROWING AND CHANGING DEMAND, BUT THEY ARE NOT SERVING EVERYONE’S NEEDS. As we modernize food systems to make them climate-smart, healthy, and sustainable, we must also strive to make them inclusive of smallholders, youth, women, conflict-affected people, and other poor and marginalized people. IFPRI’s flagship report examines the obstacles and opportunities for inclusion, looks at the growing range of tools and technologies that can enhance inclusiveness, and considers the key role that food system policies can play in making food systems work for everyone. Drawing on recent findings, IFPRI researchers and other distinguished food policy experts consider critical aspects of building inclusive food systems:

- How can inclusive food systems help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, hunger, and malnutrition?
- What can be done to strengthen the midstream of food value chains—transporters, distributors, processors, and retailers—to give smallholders and rural people better access to markets and services?
- Will Africa’s food systems generate sufficient jobs for the region’s rapidly growing youth population?
- How can women be empowered within food system processes, such as household decision-making, negotiations with market actors, research decisions, and policymaking?
- Can conflict-affected people and refugees be integrated into food systems—either in their new homes or the places they fled—to help them rebuild their lives?
- How can national food system transformations contribute to improvements in dietary diversity, food safety, and food quality for all?
- What major trends will affect food security, nutrition, and inclusion of disadvantaged peoples across the globe in 2020?

The 2020 Global Food Policy Report also presents interesting trends revealed by several key food policy indicators, including country-level data on agricultural spending and research investment, productivity in agriculture, and projections for future agricultural production and consumption.

For more information about the 2020 Global Food Policy Report: gfpr.ifpri.info