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INNOVATIVE TRAINING FOR POVERTY REDUCTION IN RURAL CENTRAL ASIA

This policy briefing examines the experience gained through an ETF-funded project focussing on vocational education and training (VET)-supported income generation activities. The approach to poverty alleviation builds on existing vocational training structures in rural areas of Central Asia. Community development approaches are used to enhance skills, while costly and donor-dominated interventions are avoided.

In many transition and developing countries the economic situation of the poor including their nutrition will remain unstable unless rural areas are able to produce sufficient products at affordable prices. This requires higher productivity and better food processing technologies – areas that are both linked to skills development, among other factors. Rural populations are,

for reasons of survival, often involved in a multitude of different economic activities and this frequently requires a multi-skilling approach. This puts vocational education and training in a very functional light - fostering the productive potential of individuals and enterprises in accordance with local demands.

The reasons for poverty and low productivity are many. Given the complex nature of the problems, standardised or single sector solutions in rural areas are often not suitable. In certain circumstances, the acquisition of new skills can play an important role for income generation and poverty alleviation. The rural regions of Central Asia are an example. The Kolkhoz of the former Soviet Union used to divide work according to narrow skill profiles, which are no longer appropriate in the

present context of small farming and self-subsistent rural households. The rural population in transition countries does by and large not yet possess the technical and business skills necessary to generate more income through self-employment and extended economic activities ●



Existing vocational training structures are used to train older workers

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THE BACKGROUND

Rural areas in Central Asia tended to be neglected in the past by both national policymakers and international donors. These areas were frequently left out of development plans, and no attention was paid to improving education and training services in remote regions, where the absence of investment is not conducive to enhancing employment opportunities. At the same time, education and training is key for addressing issues such as:

- Inadequate technical and business competences to diversify agricultural produce and engage in off-farm activities;
- The lack of, or inadequate, marketing concepts and business plans;
- Insufficient access to financial assistance (micro-credit schemes) and a poor credits management.

These difficulties concern a large proportion of the population. Donor interventions must deal with the complexity of these problems that are exacerbated by rural institutions which are in turn constrained by shortages of money, facilities and capacities, and perform poorly. Project interventions in such contexts are therefore often hampered by uncertainty as regards local capacity, while making firm assumptions about expected outcomes and impacts on socio-economic progress is almost impossible.

The lack of resources and capacity of rural institutions and organisations in Central Asia is not the only challenge. Donors must be aware of the specific socio-cultural patterns, the underlying traditions and attitudes of the people concerned. Donor interventions do not always take into account these realities, while at the same time, in many cases institutions are not open to innovation and change. People almost exclusively

use well-known and accepted routines as opposed to trying out new techniques and methods from outside the cultural context.

The weak institutional capacity and organisational performance of prevailing institutions make the effects of any interventions hard to predict. Activities become 'black boxes' with little transparency, structural inertia and uncertain outcomes and impact.

Moreover, in rural regions of these countries the private sector is not yet represented because the purchasing power of small farmers is highly limited. The export-oriented cotton production is still state-owned. Hence, private firms cannot be used to exert a positive, demand-led influence on rural workers. On the contrary, almost all rural networks, including farmers' groups, associations, business and marketing groups, etc. are fragile.

Other problems in rural areas include:

- The lack of infrastructure (energy, transport, water) and of an enabling socio-economic environment;
- Restricted access to farmland and overexploited farmland with consequences for turnover and profit;

- A lack of both political support and networks for social assistance;
- No transparency regarding national and international markets and scarce information on the development of rural products;
- Exclusion from technological progress or extension (advisory) services;
- Extreme dependence on the weather and a high proportion of post-harvest losses.

The reasons for rural poverty are therefore multi-dimensional. The complexity of these problems and fragile structures does not provide a favourable framework for huge donor interventions. No single line ministry in Central Asia is exclusively responsible for these problems and good governance is absent in many rural areas.

This is the background against which any kind of intervention has to operate, including that of the ETF in its projects for transforming the role of vocational education and training



STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

Complex development strategies in rural regions must automatically involve various ministries and other organisations. Interventions are mostly carried out on a multi-stakeholder basis, relying heavily during implementation on synergy between all the institutions involved (ministries, extension services, micro-credit institutions, training centres, local government and other authorities, business organisations etc.). However, these interventions are at risk, bearing in mind the weak performance of many rural institutions. The diversity of institutions and the complexity of institutional arrangements can jeopardise progress as well as the sustainability of the project.

The assumption however, that the higher the complexity, the more resources were necessary, did not prove correct. In fragile structures, modest low-cost interventions that promoted community-based ownership proved to be better at dealing with complexity and structural inertia. Examples include the identification of training needs by local experts, who also participated in the design of training programmes. As locals, they are able to maximise the use of local resources and know-how. Projects with 'soft approaches' systematically include learning opportunities based on solved and unsolved problems. Partners can constantly develop capacities for modest but sustainable change and innovation. Cross-cutting ex-post evaluations of vocational education and training projects indicate that successful interventions are mainly linked to the availability of a minimum of local resources, ownership and readiness for reform and capacity development through well-designed learning arrangements in local institutions. The ETF promoted such learning scenarios in its accompanying capacity building activities to reinforce the weak vocational training structures.

Vocational training for adults in rural areas that builds on existing infrastructure (schools, teachers and school managers) relies heavily on learning scenarios for change. Project objectives are formulated to use existing resources more efficiently and for additional tasks including non-formal adult training. Capacity development activities for vocational training experts and training centres are the necessary input for increasing the productivity of beneficiaries. Skills development for adults from rural regions is a soft intervention aimed at cultivating, processing and selling additional rural products in an attempt to optimise local resources rather than replacing them with unsustainable external ones.

The ETF's approach to vocational training and skills development for poverty reduction sought solutions to the following issues:

- Expertise: The key directions and inputs should come from the people in rural situations rather than from external experts. The relevance of external contributions must be discussed with local experts and rural development organisations or initiatives.
- Role of vocational training: For vocational training to be a relevant tool for skills development for poverty alleviation, it must rely on soundly identified local training needs, as well as existing vocational training premises and local staff (who may need further training).
- Local environment: Modest interventions must be designed and connected to local business and governance initiatives in a community development approach, because networking among partners is essential.
- Framework: National authorities must be strategically involved at several stages and levels, but the overall responsibility must lie with the locals, despite the fragile structures.
- Essential requirements: Learning scenarios and capacity building processes are essential elements of intervention, while evaluation should also be considered as learning.
- Role of donors: The ETF followed a 'strategy of absence', while keeping accountability and "pressure" on the locals ●



RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The ETF's project experience in Central Asia reveals that existing vocational training structures in rural regions can be successfully and systematically used for income generation and poverty alleviation.

National experts supported vocational schools to extend their traditional remit by training adults. Vocational schools must accept a new role in a local network which promotes business and self-employment opportunities rather than concentrating exclusively on traditional initial vocational training tasks. This required capacity development for the schools. At the same time a policy dialogue was established to foster systemic innovations. Based on the evidence of project results and best practice in the vocational schools, policymakers have to decide whether and how poverty alleviation can be included as a viable objective in overall VET reform. All in all, the project created enormous learning opportunities for all actors involved. Positive outcomes include better performing schools working together at a local level and an increase in the incomes of the beneficiaries.

Social systems and local actors in rural regions must initially determine their

own new strategies and objectives for economic development. This requires an analysis of the context and work-related problems that might be related to skill gaps. Experience from action learning reveals that even vulnerable groups are able to overcome the strongest barriers and constraints. With minimal assistance, most of them are able to develop strategies for improving their socio-economic standards. Self-organisation and learning play an important role in these approaches. The solutions identified need to fit the socio-economic framework and such 'contextualised' solutions imply that implementation requires the support of local resources (teachers and classrooms). Additional know-how can be obtained from local experts and business institutions, where available. Sound discussions on all issues emerging during the implementation of the project are essential to underpin the ownership and self-guided nature of the project and keep donor assistance to a minimum.

It is very important that the local stakeholders are able to formulate their interests and demands against the background of available resources, competences, social networks and

ownership. Fragile structures can only be well supported if moderate donor interventions rely strictly on the mobilisation of self-organised local or regional resources that promote proactive partnerships. This strategy means a switch from donor dominated interventions to responsive action and the accountability of local players.

Vocational training for rural development must therefore take into account the iterative nature of the policy and strategy behind development processes. Participatory monitoring and evaluation methods play an important role in these processes. The learning that occurs during such processes is used to understand emerging problems and priorities at all project stages and ensure the constant adjustment of activities. Ex-post evaluation approaches should be designed to suit the context of the specific type of intervention and should avoid standardised schemes. Evidence for successful projects can only be demonstrated if the evaluation policy sufficiently takes into account the specific characteristics of the actors and target groups involved ●



Students learn to produce a variety of products from milk

TRAINING EXAMPLES

Tajikistan – animal breeding and conservation of fruits:

- People use bee keeping as an effective source of additional income
- Women make agricultural produce to sell in the winter at local markets

Kyrgyzstan – seeding and animal breeding, and elaboration of business plans:

- Farmers breed other animals (cows) and sell milk products
- Farmers present business plans and use additional financial resources to increase the variety of products
- Train the trainer workshops extend rural training to other communities

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For other enquiries, please contact:
ETF Communication Unit
E info@etf.europa.eu
T +39 011 630 2222
F +39 011 630 2200

Prepared by Manfred Wallenborn, ETF

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