

Education in Central Asia

Context

Impact of the economic crisis

The Central Asian nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were each affected by the international economic crisis. The GDP real growth in each nation declined between 2007 and 2009 as a result of the economic downturn. The greatest real GDP decline was in Kazakhstan, which went from 8.9 per cent growth in 2007 to 1 per cent growth in 2009. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were severely impacted, as labour markets plummeted and remittances dropped. Demands for exports fell across the subregion and foreign investors pulled out. The industrial sector shrunk and national deficits increased. In Kyrgyzstan, social instability surfaced as a major concern.

Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan were also impacted by the economic downturn, but the effects were less dramatic. Turkmenistan was protected from much of the economic crisis due to its isolation from the global market. Its GDP real growth declined from 11.6 per cent to 6.1 per cent, and it had a reduction in exports. Kazakhstan felt the initial shock, evident by its decline in GDP real growth, but the government responded with anti-crisis measures that included job creation, training programmes and social assistance. This stimulus buffered Kazakhstan's economy from a spiralling downturn (see Figure 1).

The social sector in each nation was also affected by the global international crisis. Unemployment and poverty levels increased. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, 60 per cent of people live in poverty. Drop-out and out-of-school rates remain high as children beg and seek employment to make money. Some social programmes supported by governments to aid families were terminated, leaving less of a social safety net to protect children. Inflation is another side effect, resulting in an increase in the number of families vulnerable to malnutrition.

Education reforms

Each country in the Central Asian subregion is committed to improving its national educational system. Visions and strategies for improvement differ between national contexts, but there are some overarching themes:



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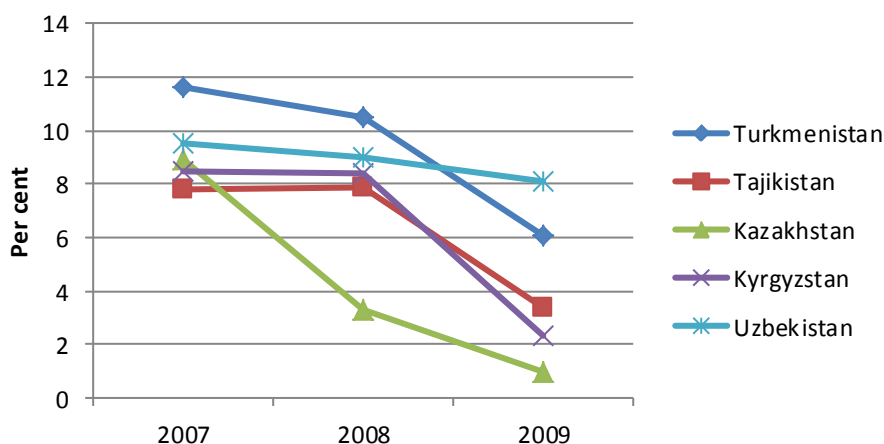
- Education is recognized as a national priority
- Revised curricula and improved quality are priorities
- New structures, such as child-friendly schools, youth services and online trainings are emerging to improve school quality and instruction
- Improving access to education is a priority
- Educational expenditures are being monitored
- New approaches to content delivery and instruction are being implemented
- Achieving Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDG) are national objectives

Access to education

Early childhood education

Access to early childhood education remains bleak across the Central Asian subregion. In all five nations, less than 40 per cent of children enrol in early childhood education. Kazakhstan is the leader in net preschool enrolment, reporting 39 per cent of its early learners are registered for pre-primary education. Turkmenistan has the next highest pre-primary access, with 24 per cent enrolment

Figure 1. Real GDP Growth 2007-2009



in preschool. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan report 21 per cent and 13 per cent of preschool-age children attend early childhood education, respectively. Tajikistan has the lowest pre-primary enrolment rate, at 7 per cent (see Figure 2).

Disaggregating the preschool enrolment figures by geographical location reveals a disparity between urban and rural enrolment. Overwhelmingly, urban children in all of the Central Asian countries are more likely to attend pre-primary education than their rural peers. In Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, rural early childhood enrolment drops as low as 5 per cent and 1 per cent, respectively.

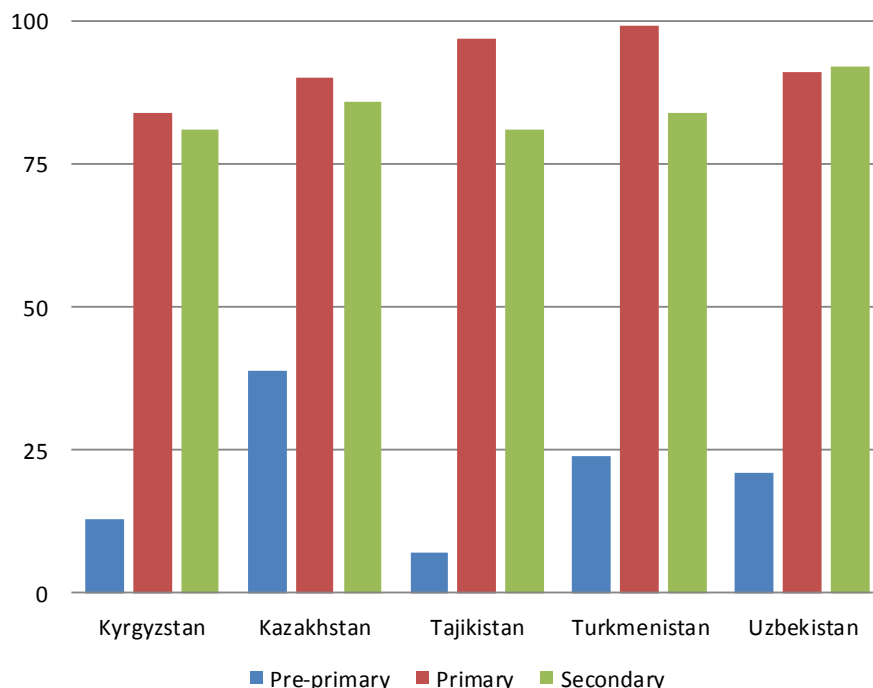
Primary and secondary net enrolment rates (NER) are high in the Central Asia subregion. The subregional average is 92.2 per cent enrolment for primary education, and 84.8 per cent for secondary. Turkmenistan has the highest primary school enrolment at 99 per cent, and Kyrgyzstan has the lowest, with an NER of 84 per cent. In secondary education, Uzbekistan has the highest enrolment figure at 92 per cent, and Kyrgyzstan again has the lowest at 81 per cent. Retention rates across the region are also notable. For example, in Uzbekistan, there is almost a seamless transition between primary and secondary enrolment (91 per cent in primary and 92 per cent in secondary). Turkmenistan does not, however, share the same success. Its enrolment figures drop from 99 per cent in primary school to 84 per cent at the secondary level, a 15 per cent decline.

Children with disabilities

A range of strategies to support children with disabilities are pursued in Central Asia. Some nations are shifting towards inclusive education, while others are insisting that specialized schools are more equipped to support children with disabilities. Historically, people with disabilities were marginalized by society, so efforts to advocate for equal treatment are still necessary across the subregion.

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are shifting towards inclusive education even though special schools and institutions remain a popular option. Uzbekistan's MoE developed evaluation methods to assess each individual child and identify their best educational environment (inclusive or alternative arrangements). Uzbekistan reports that 55 per cent of students with disabilities are educated in mainstream schools. The Kyrgyz government is committed to the principles of social inclusion as well, but many young people there are still segre-

Figure 2. Pre-primary, primary and secondary net enrolment rates (NER) in Central Asia



gated into specialized schools; the exception is in the south, where there are fewer institutions, so integration into community schools is higher (53.3 per cent).

Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan continue to educate special needs students primarily in institutions or special schools. A common belief is that regular schools are not prepared to accommodate special education students. In Tajikistan, the few children with disabilities who do attend regular schools do not receive any accommodations or support, unless their own parent decides to attend school with the child and personally care for him or her.

Educational challenges facing adolescents and youth

Central Asian adolescents and youth face multiple challenges. Across the subregion, young people are aware and concerned about the economic realities that are resulting in fewer job opportunities. Child labour, family pressure and financial strains are contributing factors behind drop-out rates in the subregion. Increasingly, youngsters are turning to migration to find work opportunities; this is particularly notable in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In Uzbekistan, inadequate protection of youth has resulted in higher child trafficking.

Across the five countries, increasing numbers of youth are engaging in risky behaviours, such as drug use and crime. HIV and AIDS are also concerns. All nations in this subregion report establishing in-school programming or youth centres aimed at informing youngsters about the harsh realities associated with risky behaviours. Other

programmes, such as the No Child Out Campaign in Uzbekistan, advocate for young people's rights. Kazakhstan is establishing programming and policies aimed at encouraging youth participation in local communities.

The youth in Central Asia also face in-school challenges. Many adolescents are concerned about the overall quality of their educational system and the benefits of graduating. For instance, some youth in Tajikistan feel there are only limited long-term employment rewards for remaining in school past primary education. The same frustration is heard in other Central Asian nations. Youth must also cope with the high pressure to succeed in school. Entrance into tertiary education often requires a high mark on a qualifying exam, putting pressure on youth throughout this subregion.

Equity

A variety of equity issues emerge in the Central Asian subregion. The greatest inequalities exist around rural and urban access. For example, children living in remote rural areas of Uzbekistan continue to face serious access issues due to increased travel and accommodation costs incurred for school. The same problem exists in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. In Ashgabat, the capital city of Turkmenistan, enrolment rates are as high as 67 per cent; however, in the rural region of Lebap, enrolment rates drop as low as 11 per cent. In Kyrgyzstan, urban preschool children are three times more likely to attend preschool than their rural peers.

Other equity issues, such as gender parity, ethnic inequalities and rich/poor disparities surface in pockets around the subregion. For instance, girls are underrepresented in secondary schools in Tajikistan and in tertiary education in Uzbekistan. Ethnic discrimination against minority groups, such as the Turkmens in Uzbekistan, or the Kazakhs, Russians and Uzbeks in Turkmenistan, also are a concern. Gaps between rich and poor students in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are ongoing issues. For example, a rural child in Kyrgyzstan is more likely to underperform compared to an urban peer, suggesting that the quality of instruction in remote areas is a concern.



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Educational quality

Both large assessments and informal proxy measures affirm that greater effort is needed to improve the quality of education in Central Asia.

Large-scale international and national assessments offer some insights into the quality of education in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan's overall score on PISA 2006 earned it a last place ranking out of the 57 participating countries in reading, mathematics and science. It performed particularly poorly in reading, where it ranked third to last, and almost 200 points behind the regional average. Kazakhstan's performance on the same assessment, by contrast, suggests impressive primary school outcomes, but national indicators reveal that only three fourths of students are proficient in reading and mathematics.

In other Central Asian nations, proxy indicators are used to monitor educational quality. Proxy measures include student data, teacher competency and school resources. These proxy measures confirm that educational quality throughout this subregion is subpar. In Tajikistan, for example, districts struggle to find qualified teachers, have limited textbooks and worn-out furniture. Challenges in Turkmenistan include the prevalence of traditional rote teaching methodologies and limited student engagement, which affects students' attainment and retention of knowledge. Kazakhstan faces problems with the retention of teachers as a result of low salaries and the limited engagement of students in classes.

Educational priorities in Central Asia

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan all have educational priorities specific to their context, but some overarching themes emerge across the nations, including the following priorities:

- Increase enrolment of children living in remote areas and/or marginalized groups
- Update and improve curriculum, classroom instruction and overall student outcomes
- Enhance the quality of basic and secondary education
- Increase attendance at pre-primary education, and reduce drop-out and non-attendance rates