

Coming of Age in Post-Soviet Central Asia

New Dilemmas and Challenges Facing Youth and Children

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In 1996, I was interviewing families in Kyrgyzstan about the impact of the country's economic changes on everyday life.¹ A conversation with an elderly Kyrgyz man named Bolot was particularly illustrative. Bolot asked me to sit down on a nearby stool. He fired a question at me: "What would happen if one of the legs [of the stool] were cut off?" Taken off guard by his forceful manner, I replied that most likely the stool, with me on it, would tip over. "*Tyra!*" (exactly) he exclaimed in Kyrgyz. "This is our predicament. The stool is like our family, and the leg that has been broken off is that of our children. We are building a new economy on the back of a broken society—broken because our children can't go to school, don't have enough food or clothing, and have no future."

As a cultural anthropologist working in Kyrgyzstan since 1990, I found Bolot's vivid portrayal of the current predicament facing his post-Soviet society in Central Asia a good starting point for asking several questions: Why is it important to consider children in our analysis of postsocialist transition? What does it mean to "come of age" in Central Asia during these highly uncertain times? And does Bolot's comparison of children to the broken leg on a chair also depict a "lost generation," an age cohort that belongs neither to the former era nor to a secure future? In this article I will attempt to address these questions by examining four issues confronting many children in Central Asia today: increasing poverty, a deteriorating educational system, diminishing access to health care, and increasing social exclusion.

Even though each of the five countries in Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—has its own unique issues concerning children, they all share the legacy of the Soviet period of socialism, when youth were valorized as the "Great State of the Future." Now they share a single fate in which the rapid rate of social deterioration far exceeds the slower momentum of economic development. For this reason and others, the post-

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Soviet transition process has exacted high social costs, especially for the younger generation. It is important to note that, with the ever-widening gap between the poor and rich, not all children living in Central Asia are poor. In fact, a minority of children has unprecedented access to wealth and opportunities, including studying abroad. Although this elite group will no doubt play an important role in the future politics and economies of their nascent countries, I will not focus on them. Instead, my intention here is to draw attention to the human crisis of the new century. For if in the 1990s the most literate population ever known in Central Asia have had great difficulty reforming their governments and creating more liberal economies, what will the first decade of the twenty-first century yield, with a population undoubtedly less educated and more burdened with poverty?

Why Study the Children of Transition?

According to sociologist Ann Foner, each generation “bears the stamp of the historical context through which it flows.”² Certainly, the younger generation that is coming of age in Central Asia today is a group that finds itself worlds apart from its Soviet-raised parents, and it bears the stamp of this unique and difficult transition. In less than a decade, the countries have politically, economically, and socially reconstituted themselves. Although remnants of Soviet-era values remain entrenched among their parents’ generation, the younger cohort is caught, in many ways, between two worlds. These young people know little about the once–highly centralized and socialized economy, and they have even less comprehension of how their newly decentralized governments and often corrupted new economies can offer any sort of future security for them. Yet they do recognize their own vulnerability and the vulnerability of their young Central Asian states. As an astute graduate student in sociology from Kyrgyz State University stated to me in 1994, “The most vulnerable group is our youth; and if we choose to ignore them, they will potentially incur the greatest social costs to the government and our culture.”

Although the Central Asian youth of today are independent of Soviet hegemony, they have fewer guarantees than their parents had during the Soviet period, when children enjoyed a relatively high degree of public financial support, considerable social protection, and fair living conditions. The Soviet system of social supports prevented extreme deprivation and promoted the physical, intellectual, and social development of children through the comprehensive provision of education and health services, preschool and afterschool care, youth groups, and the guarantee of lifetime employment. In spite of the many inadequacies of the Soviet system, health and education indicators for child development in Central Asia were high, especially when compared to other developing countries in the world.

It is now proving exceedingly difficult to maintain the same sort of commitment to the needs of children in the uncertain economic and political predicaments of Central Asia. Furthermore, with the collapse of central planning, many of the new states are having difficulty maintaining basic infrastructure, such as roads and public transportation. The energy sector is being privatized, resulting

in deregulated prices that are astronomically high. In rural areas, where nearly half of Central Asians reside, the repercussions are particularly devastating. As a result, many children have experienced an abrupt diminishment in the quality of their lives. They have also felt the trickle-down effect of economic crises in the increasing rate of school dropouts, the spread of debilitating communicable diseases (tuberculosis, syphilis, and hepatitis), malnutrition among younger children, unprecedented homelessness, and an increase in youth crimes, mental depression, and suicide among teen-agers.

Since the children of today are the workers and leaders of tomorrow, it is notable that the children of Central Asia also represent a sizable part of the population in these countries. Jane Falkingham estimates that there are currently over twenty-three million people who are under eighteen years of age living in the five Central Asian states. In other words, two out of every five people (40 percent) in Central Asia are children.³ This represents a very different scenario than the European republics of the former Soviet Union (FSU), where rapidly shrinking populations, as in Russia, are alarming, with communicable diseases, malnutrition, and extremely low birth rates threatening a fragile nation's future. As Murray Feshbach argues in a recent editorial, "If demography is destiny, then the destiny of Russia for the next 50 years is appalling."⁴ But I suggest here that just as it is important to recognize the negative repercussions of a shrinking population in Russia, it is also worth considering the high percentage of children growing up in poverty in Central Asia today. The demographics of Central Asia raise important considerations for international financial institutions and social policy organizations concerned with economic projections ten years down the line since, without fail, the problems of children today foreshadow the human development issues of tomorrow.

Poverty

Although Central Asia was considered among the poorest regions of the former Soviet Union, poverty tended to be mitigated by the social protection measures of state-owned and collective enterprises and trade unions, and by government agencies that provided extensive social services. With profound rapidity, however, poverty has surfaced as one of the major social issues confronting post-Soviet Central Asia. During the last decade, poverty has doubled in the best and worse cases.⁵ Among the five Central Asian states, Tajikistan is by far the most afflicted, with approximately 96 percent of its population living below the poverty line. A civil war and an unstable government have had a considerable impact, since ten years ago only 51 percent of the population were considered poor. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, has the lowest percentage of poverty in the region, with about 35 percent of its population living in poverty (compared with 16 percent a decade ago).⁶

Poverty is the main risk factor for the children of Central Asia. It affects every aspect of their present and future circumstances. It jeopardizes not only their physical health but also their psychological well-being. Poverty limits children's access to schools, as well as to medical care. Children living in poverty are more likely to have substandard housing and to be exposed to environmental hazards.

All of these effects are cumulative and contribute to other risk factors of children, including social alienation. In such cases, children often grow into politically and economically marginalized adults.⁷

In Tajikistan, where war and dislocation have compounded the impact of poverty, the postwar predicament is equally uncertain, leaving children and their families with not only inadequate food and clothing, lost property, no permanent housing or jobs, and unparalleled insecurity, but also with the psychosocial stress that results from exposure to war traumas. Although the psychological impact of poverty and war upon children tends to be underestimated, the implications of childhood deprivation on a society ten to fifteen years from now should be considered in the development plans of today.

What has previously been labeled “transitional poverty” is now beginning to resemble structural poverty, or a permanent condition.⁸ Few substantial economic opportunities have opened up for the majority of the population in Central Asia. In the early 1990s, economists had hoped that agriculture would become a mainstay of economic development in the region, but this simply has not panned out because of limited infrastructure, expensive transportation, and poor trade relations among the Central Asian countries and with Russia. Although subsistence agriculture continues to be the primary means of survival in the region, it has yet to prove to be a sustainable growth sector for the long term.

With the lack of economic opportunities, more and more people have had to resort to working in the informal economy, which at best is a makeshift situation with few legal protections, no guarantee of wages, and often semi-illegal practices. For some, the informal economy has expanded to include illegal drug and arms trafficking, especially in the Ferghana Valley. In a recent study on poverty in Kyrgyzstan, one interviewer summarized the relationship between crime and impoverishment in this manner:

[The] general consensus of interviewees is that poverty leads to a growing crime rate in their communities. Among the most common cases of crime they named were vandalism, petty thievery, and theft of livestock. In most cases, the poor commit crime out of desperation. As a result, poverty especially degrades the younger generation.⁹

Although Central Asia is by no means unaccustomed to poverty, the new wave of impoverishment has more insecurity and vulnerability associated with it. Government programs of social protection and social assistance that safeguard the poor are few in number and seem unable to keep pace with the new poor. The economic gap between the poor and the rich is increasing, just as the numbers of the poor are increasing. In addition, the social fabric of the family and extended family has begun to unravel, thus jeopardizing the last remnants of an informal social safety net. All of these issues call attention to the particular vulnerability of the growing number of poor young people.

Access to Education

In the context of increasing poverty, access to education has become increasingly difficult for many children in Central Asia. Because schools play an instru-

mental role in the social and intellectual development of a child, they can also mitigate some of the risks associated with poverty, ethnic conflict, dysfunctional families, or health problems. For these reasons, the rapid eradication of illiteracy through vast investments in education was one of the more remarkable achievements of the Soviet system. Central Asia's literacy rate was approaching 98 percent prior to 1991. This factor alone set the region apart from other developing countries and meant that the work force was fully literate. Education was given top priority within the socialist economy, and schools were located in nearly every community, rural enterprise, or collective farm, where small class size, free books, meals, and summer enrichment programs were standard. This is no longer the case, since state expenditures on education have been cut drastically. Children are not the only losers in this process; ultimately, the society and future labor market will have to answer to this deterioration.

With only a small portion of state budgets earmarked for educational spending, services and facilities once funded by state-held enterprises and farms, such as preschools, kindergartens, children's sanitariums, milk kitchens (a Soviet shop where milk was given free to children), summer camps, and afterschool facilities, have been shut down. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, between 1991 and 1996 approximately 50 percent of kindergartens were closed.¹⁰ UNICEF estimated that kindergarten attendance rates in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in 1997 were down 78 percent from 1991 figures.¹¹ Although basic education enrollment rates (for seven to fifteen year olds) are also decreasing, the most recent statistics show that the rate of change is considerably slower, between 3 and 12 percent. The fact that school enrollment rates have consistently decreased over the last decade, however, is a negative trend that requires more research about the factors that prevent Central Asian children these days from acquiring a basic education.

The closing of educational facilities is not the main hurdle that prevents children from attending school. One of the main reasons is that parents are unable to afford basic material goods for their children, including adequate clothing, shoes, and school supplies. In addition, with the new competitive prices for fuel, many local communities simply cannot afford the high cost to heat classrooms, which is a large departure from the Soviet period, when fuel for heating schools was provided at highly subsidized prices. Transport problems represent an equally difficult obstacle to children's attending school, as a result of the exorbitant cost of gasoline. Such high costs have created a divide between those who can afford to send their children to school and the poor, who simply cannot afford all of schooling's real and hidden expenses. In particular, children in rural areas face many more barriers than their urban counterparts to obtaining an education, including more family responsibilities for economic livelihood, more school closings as the result of heating shortages and transportation problems, inadequate clothing, and poor nutrition.¹²

Although the primary reasons for decreasing school attendance are economic, the psychological distress felt by many poor children and their families should also be added to the list. One older woman presented the daily dilemma in this way:

Yesterday wholesale traders came to buy our potatoes. My daughter-in-law wanted to sell five sacks to buy shoes for children, but my son didn't let her do so, because

if we sell too much, there will be nothing to plant. I think both my son and my daughter-in-law were right: children need shoes for spring, but we also need potatoes to plant. Here's what poverty effects are like.¹³

Humanitarian aid appears to carry a stigma. One mother from the Uchkun region in Kyrgyzstan relayed the story of how her daughter came home crying from school one day: "Somebody at school had called her a beggar, because she was wearing the jacket that we received as humanitarian aid. After that, she refused to go to school."¹⁴

Gender trends in education should also be noted, since in recent interviews with Kyrgyz families parents indicated that they often choose their male children to attend school rather than their female children. This decision is based more on the lack of transportation than any sort of religious or ideological orientation. Pragmatically speaking, parents do not want their girls walking long distances alone. One woman from Task Bulak village in Naryn explained it in this way:

"One of the bleakest health situations in Central Asia is in Tajikistan, where 40 percent of children are stunted due to malnutrition."

When our children were small, it was easier to take care of them. Now, they need to go to school, which means that they need clothes, shoes and school supplies. We don't have enough money, so only two of our children, two sons, attend school, and our daughters stay at home, because they have no shoes and the school is located very far from here, six kilometers. The boys walk this distance, and occasionally, some driver would pity them and give them a free ride.¹⁵

The choices parents are being forced to make as to which of their children can attend school are also dependent on the cost of the school. In some regions in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, where the government has not paid teachers' salaries for more than five months, families are required to contribute in cash or in kind to help both the teacher and the school cover their costs. The growing number of children who are unable to attend school not only is painful for many families, but it also conjures up a burden of shame. One older Kyrgyz man explained that during the Soviet period, when school attendance was nearly 100 percent, not to send your child to school was considered shirking one's responsibility to society.

Another reason school attendance is decreasing is that children are becoming more and more involved in the labor market as a means to contribute to the short-term survival of the family. In many instances, as fathers migrate to the city for work and mothers work at a handful of part-time jobs, parents depend more on their children both to generate income and to perform household duties formerly carried out by one or both parents. Children hold jobs such as selling at the bazaar or in kiosks, pumping gas, washing cars, or selling newspapers. Street begging by children has also begun to occur. With more and more children working to contribute to low family incomes, literacy rates are likely to continue to fall.

The costs to society will no doubt be felt in ten years, when a less than adequately educated work force reaches maturity.

Access to Health Care

During the Soviet era, the Central Asian republics benefited from a comprehensive system of health care, which included the monitoring of children's health—free of charge—through the school system. Immunizations, dental and vision care, nutritional meals, and other preventive measures were provided to children on a regular basis.¹⁶ The state and school managed most of a child's overall health care program, leaving little for the parents to worry about. But health care for children has greatly altered from the days of such socialist care. The privatization of many state enterprises and farms, the cutback in state allocations for health care, and the new, general fee-for-services approach have made access to health care difficult for many, especially the poor. Although in the Soviet health care system, people often attempted to improve their access to good doctors by gifts and bribes (candy, champagne, etc.), such practices now require sizable amounts of cash. Thus, the poor are unable to afford the new informal health care system, and their children are the first to suffer from it.

In Central Asia, tuberculosis, anemia (iron deficiency), and poor nutrition are the most prevalent health issues facing children five and under. Nearly 45 percent of the children in rural Kazakhstan suffer severe to moderate anemia; in Uzbekistan the rate of anemia is nearly 30 percent for both urban and rural regions.¹⁷ Malnutrition, especially for young children, is growing as the result of the increase in poverty and the reduced availability of meals at schools, as well as the closings of milk kitchens and preschools. One of the bleakest health situations in Central Asia is in Tajikistan, where 40 percent of children are stunted due to malnutrition. This compares with 16 percent in Kazakhstan and 25 percent in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁸

In Kyrgyzstan, one of the pressing health concerns is micronutrient deficiencies in children, especially iron, folic acid, and iodine. The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta reported the results from a study of eight hundred Kyrgyz children tested for various deficiencies. Forty-four percent exhibited iodine deficiency, a serious childhood problem because its effects are irreversible and contribute to a lower intelligence quotient (up to ten points below the norm).¹⁹ Even though UNICEF is providing enrichment equipment for three of the major flour mills in Kyrgyzstan, as well as instituting programs for iodization of salt, the process is slow and the need is high.

Health issues for adolescents and young adults are equally unsettling, especially with the enormous change in the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) between 1991 and 1996. For example, the incidence of syphilis is up 11,000 percent in Kazakhstan and 6,524 percent in Kyrgyzstan.²⁰ Some of the increase in STDs may be explained by the fact that prostitution is legal in both countries. Case studies indicate that many adolescents and young adults who have moved to urban regions for university have found themselves in a predicament where they cannot afford to go to school, or even live in the city. One sure way to make money is to become involved in prostitution.²¹ Whether prostitution alone

can explain the alarming increase in STDs needs much further research.²² But clearly, health education is not keeping pace with the changing sexual practices among the youth of Central Asia.

Increasing Social Exclusion

The fourth social concern affecting children in Central Asia is social exclusion, which is one of the greatest, long-term, detrimental effects of poverty. Social exclusion is the loss of a meaningful relationship to society, where everyday securities (shelter, food, health, and education) become more difficult to obtain, resulting in alienation from accepted social norms and values. In Central Asia, social exclusion has many different faces these days, including the emergence of street children; trafficking of adolescent girls and boys for prostitution; the increase in orphaned or “dropped-off” children in state institutions; and more crime and drug use among youth.

The period of adolescence is particularly difficult in societies where few opportunities are available and little sense of hope exists. Young people who are subject to poverty and unemployment and lack access to schools and health care are themselves in danger and pose a problem for society as a whole. The chances of high-risk adolescents aligning themselves with gangs, radical religious groups, antigovernment activities, or illegal drugs dramatically increase.

Due to economic demands on parents and the lack of state-run child care programs, the neglect of children is becoming a widespread problem in Central Asia. More and more, children are being left alone to care for themselves and younger siblings. With children being isolated at home, the number of abandoned or homeless children is growing as well. That state orphanages have doubled in size throughout the region is a testament to the increasing gap between the rich and the poor. Between 1991 and 1994, there was a 69 percent increase in the number of children in orphanages in Kyrgyzstan.²³ In many instances, children are being abandoned to such institutions because their parents are unable to provide them protection, food, or clothing. Even orphanage employees commented that, prior to independence, there were rarely Kyrgyz children in state orphanages, since the Kyrgyz extended family tended to take in their own. But with the increase in household poverty, even the Kyrgyz cannot afford to feed another relative's child. The situation in Kyrgyzstan was noted internationally when on 13 November 1997, NTV News in Moscow reported,

Representatives of an influential Danish human rights organization, Save the Children, discovered an orphanage in Kyrgyzstan where children are kept like inmates of a Nazi concentration camp. Staff show up in the orphanage once a day to bring the children their single meal, a meager bowl of rice soup. Apart from this, the children have no contact with the outside world. . . . The human rights activists arrived in Kyrgyzstan with U.S. president Bill Clinton's wife, Hillary Clinton, who brought \$2 million in humanitarian aid to the republic. The money will go towards buying medical equipment, but analysts say that the sum is a fraction of the amount necessary to meet Kyrgyzstan's needs.²⁴

I had visited this same orphanage three years earlier, on 8 March 1994. Even though the orphanage was a sad, unheated place to visit in the midst of winter, it

is not difficult to imagine, with decreasing funds and increasing numbers of children, the kind of situation described in the above news brief.

One of the most enigmatic trends in Central Asia is the increasing number of street children. It is remarkable not only because children are highly cherished in this predominantly Muslim region, but also because of the enormous emphasis that the Soviet regime placed on childhood, as evidenced by its highly developed social protection net and education system. Since independence, though, a sizeable number of homeless children have been identified in many urban regions, ranging from 55,000 refugee children without families in Dushanbe, to several thousand in Bishkek. In Tajikistan, the postwar situation has taken an enormous toll on children, where the economic distress of the country has trickled down to the family level, and the family is no longer able to absorb the shock. The situation in Kyrgyzstan reveals the stress of poverty on the rural family unit, since 74 percent of street children in urban areas are ethnic Kyrgyz from rural villages. Family financial problems are the most common reason given by street children for their migration to the city. But unfavorable family situations, including alcoholism of parents, violence, death of a parent, or hunger are also reasons why children leave their families. Most of the homeless children do not attend school and a majority are illiterate.²⁵ Street children turning to prostitution as a means of survival is purported to be fairly common in the urban regions of Almaty, Bishkek, Osh, and Dushanbe. In interviews during 1996 in Kyrgyzstan, numerous mothers of young children expressed concern about children being brought into prostitution—not only girls but also boys.²⁶ Further research is needed to determine the extent of child prostitution in Central Asia; nevertheless, such informal interviews could help formulate more quantitative measures by which to assess the situation.

In a 1999 poverty study in Kyrgyzstan, the trafficking of children also surfaced as a growing concern.²⁷ Children are being sold, pawned, or used as collateral in business transactions. One such example was given in 1999 in an interview with a Kyrgyz man named Usenbek, who told the interviewer a story about his acquaintance from the town of Naryn, who has business dealings in China.²⁸ Apparently the business of selling nonferrous metals to China is quite lucrative in the Naryn region. Chinese businessmen loan their Kyrgyz partners money to buy aluminum and copper wires (stripped from telephone wires in Kyrgyzstan); they are willing to pay between \$10,000 and \$20,000 for specified amounts of the metals. The Kyrgyz businessmen have to come up with collateral for the loan, but since most do not have valuable property, they use their children or relatives as collateral in the business deals.

Usenbek's friend left her daughter in China as collateral while she returned to Kyrgyzstan with the borrowed money so that she could purchase metals. The agreement was simply that she could take her daughter home when she returned to China with the metals. After Usenbek's friend returned to Kyrgyzstan, she began negotiating with a businessman for aluminum. They concluded a deal, but when she brought the metal back to China, it turned out that it was not aluminum, but an aluminum alloy, so she was unable to redeem her daughter. She returned

to Kyrgyzstan and began again buying aluminum and copper. It took her two years to collect enough metal to pay for her daughter, who meanwhile lived in a hotel in Urumchy. While in China, the daughter associated with others from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan who had also been left as collateral by relatives, friends, or parents. She told of how many of them had become alcoholics or prostitutes or had had psychological breakdowns. Whenever she saw somebody from Kyrgyzstan, she would ask about her mother. Businesswomen from Kyrgyzstan occasionally fed her or gave her money. But because the Chinese businessmen took away her passport, she could not escape her strange bondage, and instead had to wait for her mother to return. Although this sort of human rights abuse has come up only a few times in interviews, it nevertheless requires further examination as another form of human trafficking taking place in the former Soviet Union.

Not only are more crimes being committed against children now than occurred during Soviet times, more crimes are being committed *by* children. In a climate of family fragmentation, increasing school dropout rates, few economic opportunities, and increasing poverty, juvenile crime and delinquency are on the rise throughout the former Soviet Union and are notable in Central Asia. Between 1990 and 1994, youth crime nearly doubled in Kazakhstan.²⁹ Poverty-related crimes by youth include petty thievery, for example, stealing livestock or food from gardens. But gang-related crime and violence have also been noted in the Central Asian cities of Almaty and Bishkek, where drug-related concerns and other illegal activities are mentioned regularly in local newspapers. Since juvenile justice is nearly nonexistent in Central Asia, and treatment or behavior modification programs for juvenile offenders are simply not available, the long-term implications of inadequate legal and judicial programs are daunting. As juvenile crime increases in Central Asia, other postsocialist situations have also deteriorated. Recent reports by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, for example, cite increasing numbers of cases of ethnic violence in Kosovo committed by young males under the age of eighteen. Such statistics are worth noting as a reminder that a younger generation without economic opportunities, with increased poverty, and with few social and legal constraints can hugely affect society.³⁰

Childhood social exclusion can also lead to national security concerns. In a recent review of twelve qualitative World Bank studies on poverty in Europe and Central Asia, nearly every study brought up the heightened social concern about youth, particularly their unemployment, corruption, use of drugs and alcohol, violence, and general sense of aimlessness. In numerous interviews in Kyrgyzstan,³¹ the poor and nonpoor alike mentioned the problem of adolescent males and young men who are unemployed three-quarters of the year and have nothing else to do but get drunk.³² Some informants suggested that the high number of idle youth contributes to an increase in crime. But others, particularly in the southern Jalal Abad region, discussed young males in the context of illegal drug activity and potential subversive trade. Although it is difficult to predict outcomes, the training of a younger generation in economic survival tactics that include the production and trade of illegal drugs should raise concern, especially given the many

years and huge sums that the United States has spent combating the Colombian drug cartel, to no avail.³³

The exploitation of children and crimes committed by children require not only government action in the form of legal protections, judicial reforms, and social services, but also local and community involvement. In fact, there is more and more evidence in Central Asia that local action can have a more meaningful impact on the problems of children and youth than government intervention. Take, for example, the revitalization of the Uzbek *mahalla* (neighborhood committee) as an approach to address social problems at the local level. In the urban areas, a *mahalla* may consist of 350–400 households, and it has the power to settle domestic and land dis-

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putes, as well as to provide support to low-income households (although it should be noted that the more *mahallas* are used to channel money to a local community, the more likely it is that they may be co-opted by the state). Recently, a small village in the Talas region of Kyrgyzstan organized a council of young people to help deal with the mounting problems of

youth.³⁴ The concept of increasing local involvement and action, instead of continuing dependency on state intervention, is probably one of the more realistic options for the region. International development organizations are beginning to recognize, as well, that local interventions, especially as they pertain to the problems of youth and children, can yield real results. Likewise, communities need to know more about the ways in which they can help themselves, inasmuch as their governments most likely do not have the funds or the institutions to address these problems.

The Peaceful Transition?

The ideological and material shift away from socialism toward capitalism has been more difficult than any economist could have predicted in the early 1990s. Hidden within the economic approaches to post-Soviet transition in Central Asia lies the soft underbelly of this economic venture—that is, the manifest impoverishment of great numbers of children. The speed with which recent impoverishment has spread through the FSU has made children the invisible casualties in this so-called peaceful economic transition. Hungarian sociologist Laszlo Szamuely argued that the human toll in the first years of post-Soviet economic change is more comparable to that of a war than anything so euphemistically and simply termed “transition.”

Without a doubt, the demographic concern of twenty-three million children coming of age in Central Asia during the next five to fifteen years is daunting. Whether these children will have access to education, health care, and jobs will greatly determine the future political and economic terrain in the Central Asian states.

I began this article with Bolot's story of children in Central Asia being like the broken leg of a stool. His analogy offers both a warning and a remedy. The experience of other regions of the world clearly warns us that choosing to ignore the transitional problems of children could result in more precarious situations, including perhaps a more expansive and sophisticated drug cartel, further increase of uncontrolled communicable disease, worsening of ethnic relations, or interstate conflict. Repairing the leg of the stool, or in other words, focusing on the issues of children and youth, is indeed one of the best investments a young country can make as it moves toward economic and political autonomy.

NOTES

1. This article draws on twenty-two months of ethnographic fieldwork and extensive interviews in Kyrgyzstan between 1990 and 1999, as well as my research as a social scientist conducting studies on poverty for the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

2. Ann Foner, "Age Stratification and the Changing Family," *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (suppl.): S340-65.

3. Jane Falkingham, "Children in Transition: From Security to Uncertainty? The Impact of Economic Change on Child Welfare in Central Asia," London School of Economics, 1999, mimeographed, 1.

4. Murray Feshbach, "A Sick and Shrinking Nation," *Washington Post*, 24 October 1999.

5. Although drawing strict poverty comparisons between now and the former Soviet period is difficult since the standards of measurements are different, A. B. Atkinson and J. Micklewright developed a means of comparing the two periods. See Atkinson and Micklewright, *Economic Transition in Eastern Europe and the Distribution of Income* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

6. These figures are based on individual expenditures and not on income. See Jane Falkingham, "Welfare in Transition: Trends in Poverty and Well-Being in Central Asia," CASEpaper, CASE/20, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics, February 1999, 16.

7. Economist John Hobcraft asserts that childhood poverty is one of the four most powerful and consistent predictors of social exclusion in adulthood. The other factors are family disruption, contact with the police, and educational test scores. See John Hobcraft, "Childhood Experiences and the Risks of Social Exclusion in Adulthood," CASEbrief 8, London School of Economics, November 1998.

8. In a society dealing with rapidly increasing rates of poverty, it is important to examine not only household consumption patterns, employment trends, and expenditures, but also the qualitative impact of such transitions on individuals. Economic indicators or surveys alone are not sufficient to understand people's coping mechanisms or readiness to change, though these methods combined with participant observation offer a more complete view.

9. Counterpart Consortium, "Kyrgyz Republic: Consultations with the Poor," World Bank, 1999, 47.

10. Armin Bauer, et al., *A Generation at Risk: Children in the Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 1998), 45.

11. TransMONEE database, Unicef 1999.

12. Bauer, et al., *Generation at Risk*, 73-74.

13. From a series of interviews conducted by a team of social scientists trained by the author in the Kenesh village, Kyrgyzstan, for the World Bank study "Consultations with the Poor," March 1999.

14. From a series of interviews conducted by a team of social scientists trained by the author in the Uchkun village for the World Bank study "Consultations with the Poor,"

March 1999.

15. From a series of interviews conducted by a team of social scientists trained by the author in the Tash Bulak village for the World Bank study "Consultations with the Poor," March 1999.

16. Bauer, et al., *Generation at Risk*, 78.

17. Falkingham, "Children in Transition," 21.

18. Falkingham, "Children in Transition," 22.

19. Bauer, et al., *Generation at Risk*, 88.

20. Falkingham, "Welfare in Transition," 37.

21. For further discussion on the dilemmas of youth in Central Asia, see Kathleen Kuehnast, "From Pioneers to Entrepreneurs: Young Women, Consumerism, and the 'World Picture' in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 17, no. 4 (1998): 648–49.

22. United Nations Development Program, *National Human Development Report of the Kyrgyz Republic* (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 1997).

23. Bauer, et al., *Generation at Risk*, 110.

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27. From interviews conducted for the World Bank study "Consultations with the Poor: The Kyrgyz Republic," 1999.

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