

Hard Times in Tajikistan: Emergency Food Security at Work

Rahmonov Sobirkhon lives with his wife and six children in Gulisoi village of Vose district in the Khatlon region of Tajikistan. Life is never easy in this remote and mountainous region of the country, which regularly endures food and energy shortages. The winter of 2008 was unusually severe: Harsh cold was accompanied by record low water levels in the country's hydroelectric dam reservoirs, leaving much of the population without heat and electricity. Spring brought no let up. A severe drought resulted in water shortages for irrigation that damaged crops.

Prices for staple foods have increased as much as 130 percent, and many families are reducing the numbers and size of meals each day, with serious consequences for children's health and development.

To help households survive the winter, Save the Children's Emergency Food Security project is assisting many vulnerable families like the Sobirkhons in Khatlon. Together with partner agency Mercy Corps, the two agencies are distributing cash and bags of wheat seed for next spring's crops.



Providing cash and seeds to farming households helps reduce the temptation for families to eat or sell seed stock and save it for cultivation. Distributions began in November 2008 in the Kulob and Kurgan-Tube areas. Distributing cash rather than food itself is the fastest, most efficient way to get needed food to the poorest households – who then purchase food themselves on local markets, thus stimulating the local economy as well.

All told, Save the Children and Mercy Corps have supplied cash to 3,923 households and seeds to 3,432 households.

Khawaja Adeeb, Save the Children's deputy director of commodity management, assisted in the Kulob distribution.

"In my 30 years of humanitarian work, I've never seen people so grateful for assistance," Adeeb said. "People remained outside in freezing temperatures and heavy snowfall to repeatedly thank the staff."

With his 50 kilogram of wheat seed and 510 TJS (\$150), Rahmonov Sobirkhon plans to buy medicine for his sick children, pay back money borrowed to buy seed for last year's failed crops and purchase food and warm socks for his children

Save the Children also is doing direct food distributions, procuring food aid from neighboring countries. The latest shipments of wheat flour, lentils and vegetable oil have reached its warehouses in Tajikistan and monthly distribution to beneficiaries will take place in January, enabling 11,500 households to meet 70 percent of their food requirements this winter.