

Gender Inequality in Educational System in Post-Soviet Central Asian States

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ABSTRACT

Education not only imparts knowledge and skills enabling people to realize their full potential but also acts as a catalyst for development goals so much so that there is a global recognition of education being a fundamental human right. Moreover, educating girls, in particular, is quintessential for accomplishing a just and developed society. Also, for education to truly empower and lead to development goals, it has to be of standard quality and sufficient duration. Statistical data supports the role of education in existence of social equality. Thus skilled manpower isn't the only output from education. It stabilizes economic growth and helps in development of the society overall. The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 presented many challenges for which the new Central Asian countries were hardly prepared. These nations have highly divergent demographic profiles, socioeconomic factors has ensured that each one traverses its own path of recovery. International agencies have played a role as well but eventually long term planning with right vision and priorities would lead to a stable economy and social development for all. Present study is an attempt to understand the educational scenario in Central Asian countries and the challenges therein.

Keywords: Central Asia, Gender parity, Growth, Higher Education, Population, Primary Education

I. INTRODUCTION

The six goals listed in education for all initiative by UNESCO to be achieved by 2015 included Early childhood care and education; Universal primary education; Youth and adult skills; Adult literacy, Gender parity and equality; and Quality of education. [1,2,3] Though none of these goals have been achieved globally but the initiative did provide with a much needed framework required for uniform education parameters and quality worldwide. Even the best placed countries are working towards having policies in place to sustain and improve the educational quality.

The uniqueness of challenges of education in Central Asia lay in its political origin as in these countries had almost universal access to high standard education as part of Soviet Union. However, following the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to an economic crisis which enforced the new governments to cut expenditures and sadly, education and social services bore the major brunt of it. An expected outcome of the same was drastic deterioration in the reach and quality of education. [4] In the mid-90s, the governments undertook a number of reforms aimed at the commitment to achieve the UNESCO-Education for All standards. Some of the measures that were taken included decentralization of education, diversification in education funding and developing innovative syllabi. These steps yielded mixed results with the greatest challenge being to provide for universal access to education and ascertain jobs for the educated. Thus there was an emergence of Ministries of Education and update of education programs as per the needs of the global economy in all Central Asian countries, which were partly successful, primarily due to economic limitations [5].

Economic disparity eventually does lead to gender disparity. Not only was there was a lack of qualified teachers, textbooks and school facilities but also school attendance, particularly of girls showed a marked decline. Education is a tool to transmit cultural values, to promote tolerance, democracy and equality. The declining state of education was therefore a major concern. The challenges for these Central Asian countries were enormous. Economic performances were lacklustre, political structures were rigid and lacked the willpower to develop regional co-operation, rapidly growing populations with ever increasing unemployment levels and falling healthcare facilities [6, 7].

Education programs are required to be flexible with focus on concepts rather than memorizing facts. Vocational training of generic skills for broad occupational specializations is essential and would go a long way in solving unemployment. Education should provide for more opportunities for the educated and this can't be possible without the right teachers. Communication skills, information technology use and expertise is a must to keep pace with the global economy and market. Higher education has to be flexible at entry and to offer easier transfer opportunities. The overall

education improvement for Central Asian countries would require an involvement of different aspects like demographical attributes, education coverage from primary to higher levels and gender equality/disparity across various sections of the society as discussed in coming sections [8, 9, 10]

II. DEMOGRAPHY

The five Central Asian countries, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have a varied demographic profile since their inception which has been summarized in Figs 1-4. To begin with we summarize the overall population size wherein Uzbekistan is the most populous followed by Kazakhstan whereas Turkmenistan is the least populous (Fig. 1). However these absolute figures neither reveal the actual status nor the challenges it poses. In terms of education policies, it's quintessential to know the youth constituent of the total population as to understand how many require to be inculcated in education system, which has been represented in Fig. 2. Interestingly, Tajikistan which is the middle placed country in terms of population has the highest percentage of child population (36%). To frame the economic policies what is also required is to have an idea about the elderly population, who may not be a part of the active work force but need to be taken care of through social programs. As represented in Fig. 3, Kazakhstan has the highest percentage (6%) of elderly people which may also be representative of longer life expectancy. Also, this gives an approximation for what percentage of the population constitutes the active work force.

The fact that whether they are skilled or not has been discussed later. Finally, for a country to have sound economic planning, it not only needs to cater to the present but also plan for the future. Hence we looked at the growth rate for these countries (Fig. 4) wherein Tajikistan is the fastest growing country (and hence most challenging) while Kazakhstan is the only country to have recorded negative growth rate at any point of time. The population growth is immensely important as it is not only suggestive of the education infrastructure required but also indicates the number of manpower that would be added after completion of education. A successful government and economy would be one which can plan and provide for both. This would also aid the economy as productive economy would be healthy economy. Further, in case the governments feel its not in a position to create the required number of jobs, it should tweak the education curricula and tenure such that the people coming out from the system can contribute to the global work force.

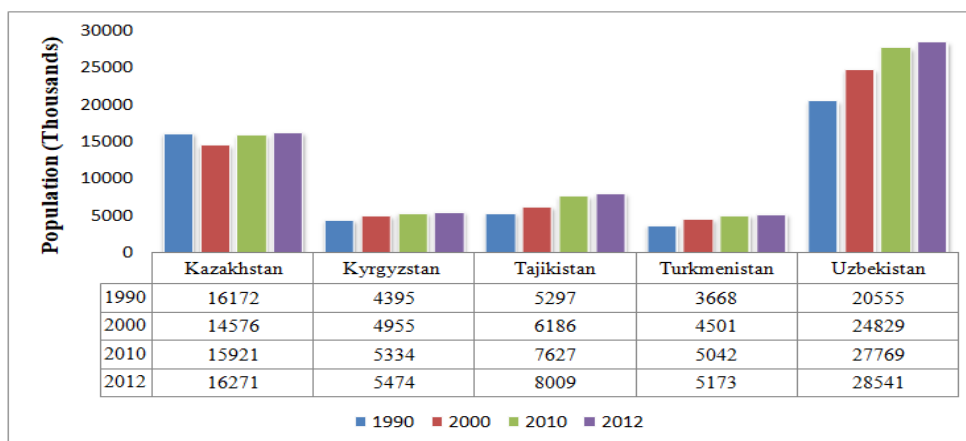


Figure 1: Population size of Central Asian countries [11-13]

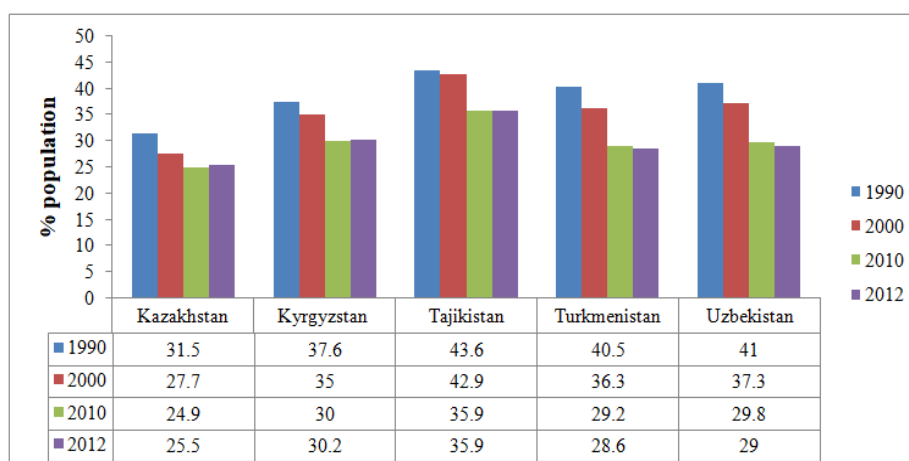


Figure 2: Child population size of Central Asian countries [11-13]

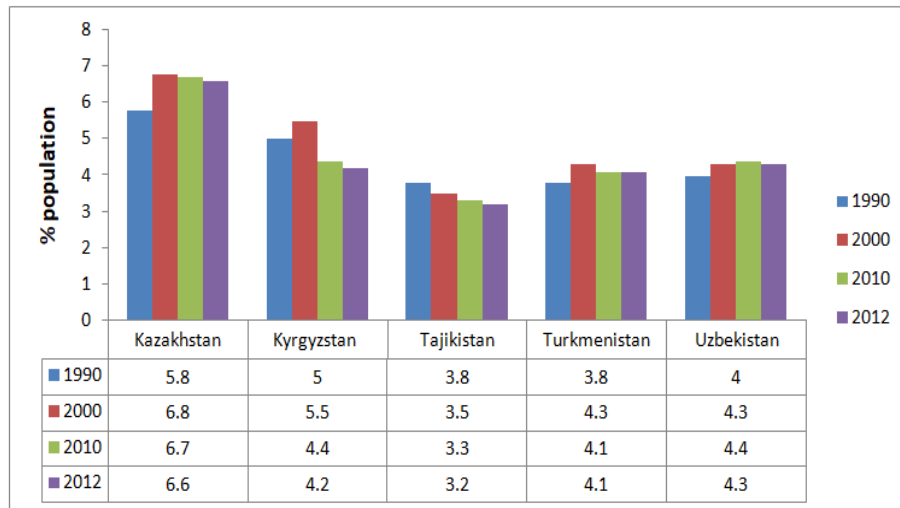


Figure 3: Elderly population size of Central Asian countries [11-13]

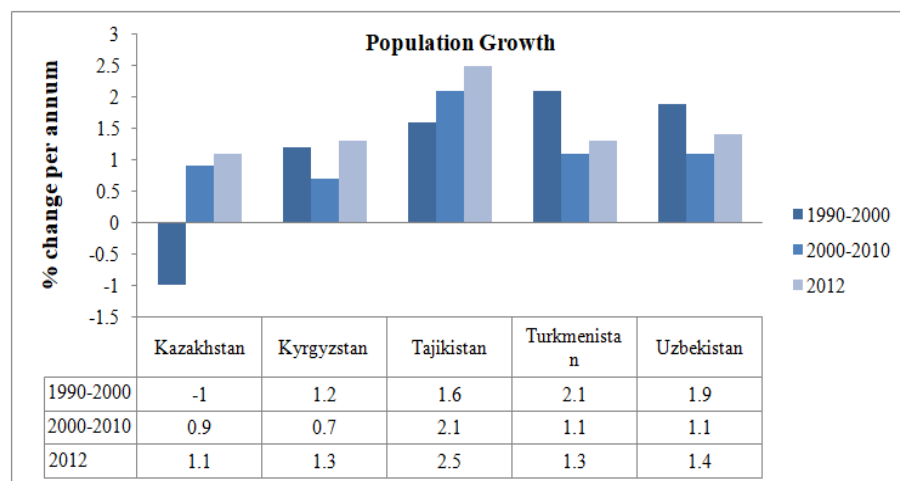


Figure 4: Population growth rate in Central Asian countries [11-13]

III. EDUCATION COVERAGE

In order to understand the challenges faced by Central Asian countries for education, one needs to now assess the educational coverage and infrastructure available. The fact that data for Turkmenistan is not available is a challenge in itself as lack of documentation can never be the platform for good planning. Hereon we would focus our discussion the remaining four countries. The data for the same has been summarized in Figs 5-8 and range from pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary education respectively. All the places in these figures where zero is mentioned represent data not available. Though the numbers may vary for these four countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, interestingly, all of them follow the same pattern across different levels of education. The pattern is a low or reducing enrolment for pre primary education, almost absolute enrolment for primary education and reduction in secondary and tertiary (reduction is much more steep) education (Figs. 4-8).

What is this pattern suggestive of? First and foremost, the fact that there are close to hundred percent of children present for primary education clearly indicates the willingness of the people to have their child educated. Secondly, a low level of enrolment for pre-primary education might be due to financial constraints or lack of schools. Thirdly, the reduction in secondary education might again be associated with the same reasons viz, financial or lack of infrastructure. Lastly, though the percentage of students opting for tertiary education is lesser than secondary, the fact that there has been a significant increase in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, almost constant in Tajikistan and declining in Uzbekistan (Fig. 8) is indicative of differential planning, resources and skilled manpower therein. A fraction of population may be employed after secondary education as well, as it indeed happens globally, but for the sustained growth of an economy and for it to act as source for manpower for other countries, the percentage of students completing tertiary education has to be significantly higher than what it is.

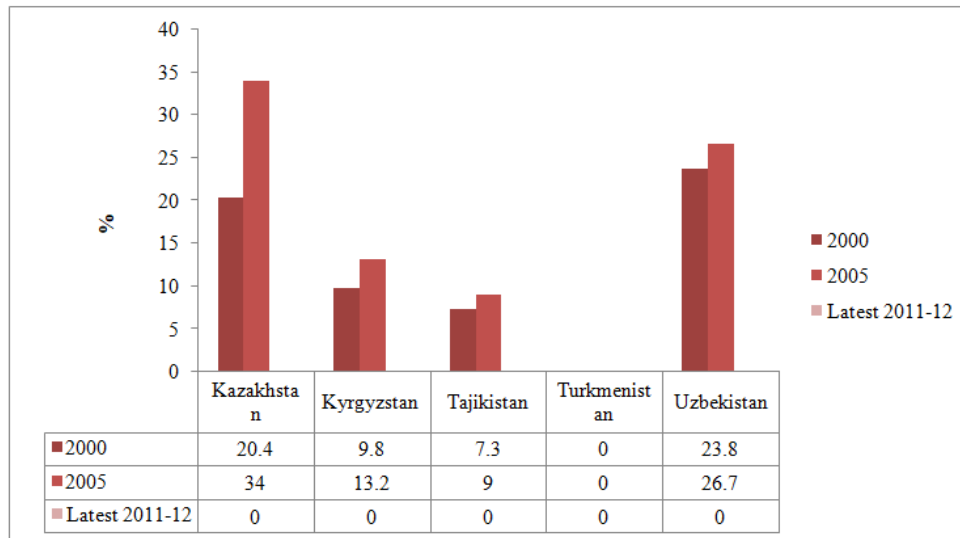


Figure 5: Pre-primary education in Central Asian countries [11-13]

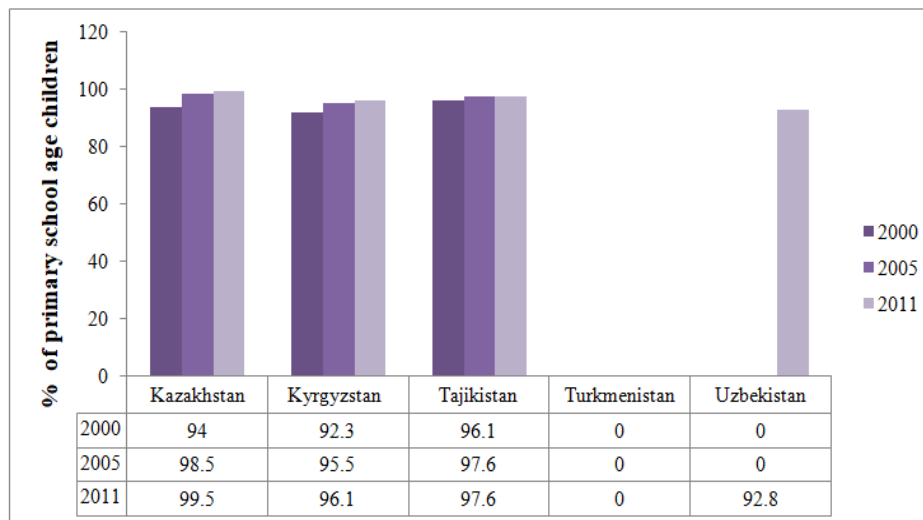


Figure 6: Primary education in Central Asian countries [11-13]

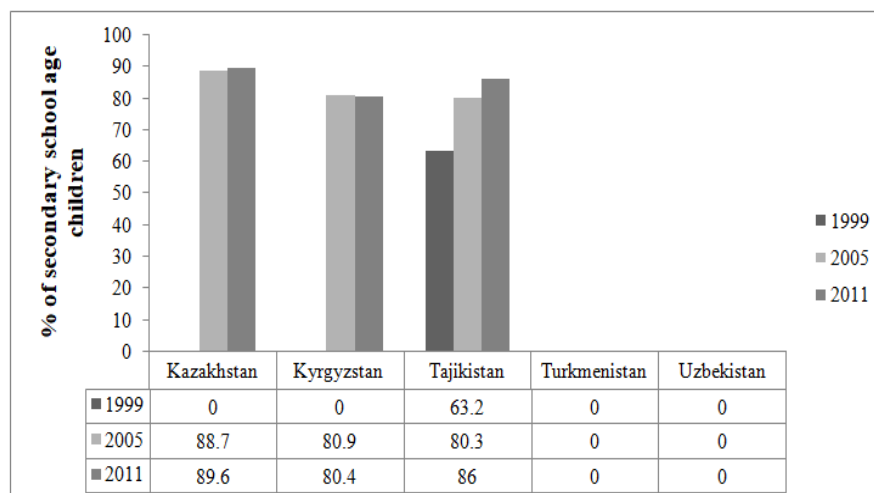


Figure 7: Secondary education in Central Asian countries [11-13]

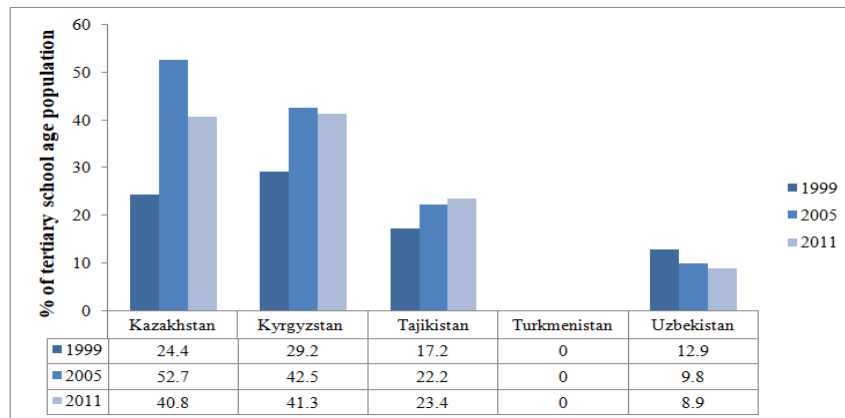


Figure 8: Tertiary education in Central Asian countries [11-13]

IV. GENDER EQUALITY/DISPARITY IN EDUCATION

The analysis so far was restricted to society and population as a whole which is never the case in reality. To have a glimpse of social equality, we looked into the gender parity aspect of education. Our primary motive was to ascertain whether the decline in enrolment in higher education (previous section) is primarily due to females being deprived or is it happening in a gender neutral manner. The gender parity index for primary, secondary and tertiary education has been represented in Figs. 9-11 respectively. Though Tajikistan fares slightly lower in parity as compared to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Fig. 9) in terms of net primary enrolment, what's alarming is the rate at which this disparity grows in secondary and tertiary education (0.9 and 0.5 respectively) as shown in Fig 10 and 11. The most promising aspect is observed from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan wherein ratio is favorable for the female population (Figs 9-11). In order to assess the equality in terms of educational quality, we further looked into the number of years of education for males and females as shown in Fig. 12. As evident, and in further corroboration of the earlier data, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan which had the highest population of females entering tertiary education, but they are taking more time (approx one year) for the same. The value is closer to two years for Tajikistan and almost the same for Uzbekistan (Fig. 12). The difference in data might be attributed to some break in studies in case of females due to personal, social or medical reasons. This data suggests a highly variant socioeconomic aspect present in these countries clearly indicative of a need for diverse planning.

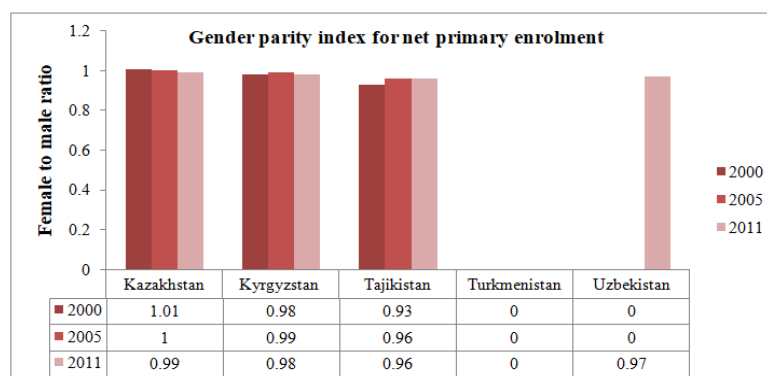


Figure 9: Gender Disparity in Primary Education in Central Asian countries [11-13]

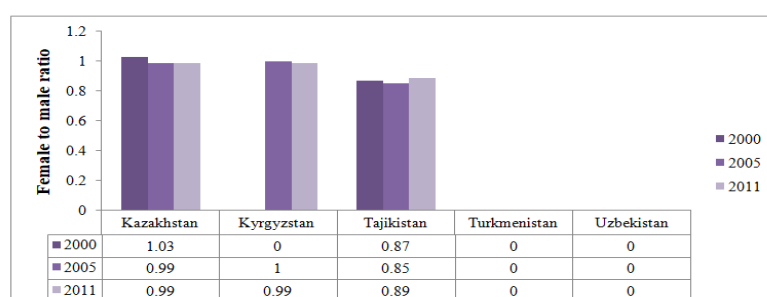


Figure 10: Gender Disparity in Secondary Education in Central Asian countries [11-13]

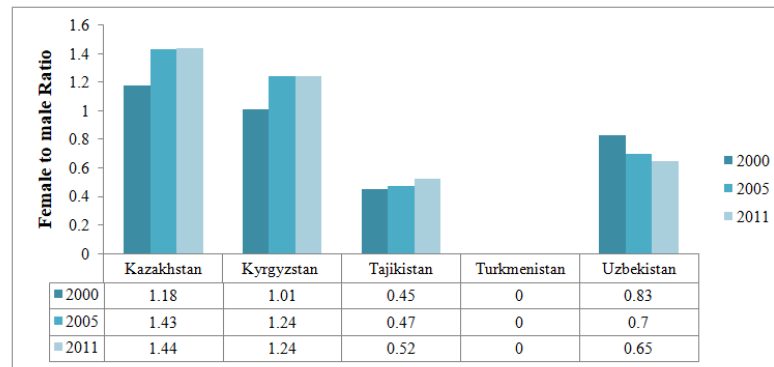


Figure 11: Gender Disparity in Tertiary Education in Central Asian countries [11-13]

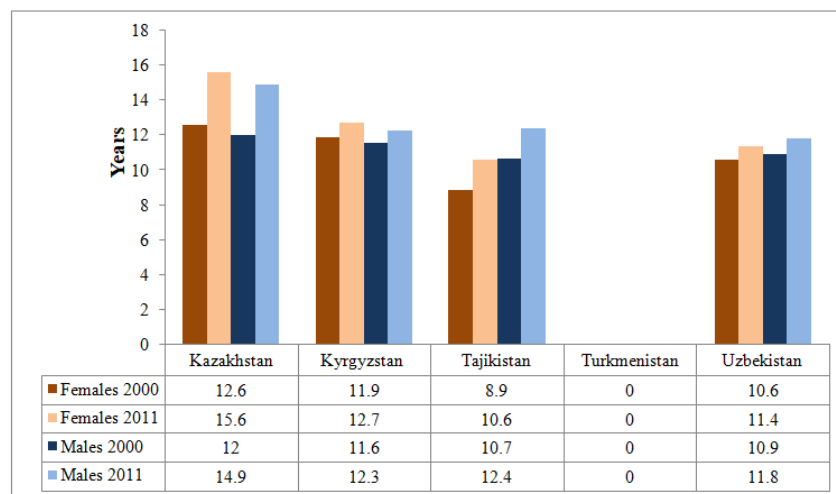


Figure 12: Gender Disparity in expected duration from primary to tertiary education in Central Asian countries [11-13]

CONCLUSIONS

As part of Soviet Union, not only the education systems of the Central Asian Soviet republics had been guided and provisioned from Moscow but also it provided for ample employment opportunities. The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 presented many challenges for which these new Central Asian countries were hardly prepared. Though, the scenario after 25 years of their existence has surely improved but not to the same extent. True, that these nations faced similar challenges at the same point of time but the fact that they have highly divergent demographic profiles, socioeconomic factors has ensured that each one traverses its own path of recovery. International agencies have played a role in this as well [14-16] but eventually long term planning with right vision and priorities would lead to a stable economy and social development for all.

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