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**How to Get It Wrong in Rural Uzbekistan:
An Ethnographic Critique of Household
Survey Categories**

by Deniz Kandiyoti

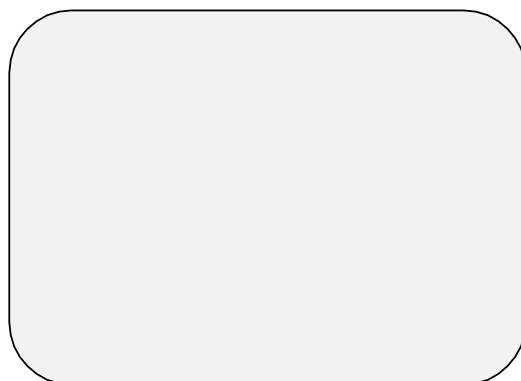
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◆ Summary / Résumé / Resumen

Summary

Post-Soviet transitions have prompted a search for new policy tools and methods of data collection. The shift from universal welfare provision under the Soviet system to targeted assistance and poverty monitoring has stimulated a new interest in the measurement of living standards and poverty lines.

This has promoted the use of quantitative techniques and sample surveys (household surveys, in particular) as privileged tools for the collection of policy-relevant information. This paper contends that survey techniques have particular limitations as research tools in an environment where local-level case studies are scarce and where a host of new socio-economic processes are creating fundamental shifts in the landscape of social provision, redistribution and employment. These limitations are illustrated by drawing upon a household survey conducted by the author in four villages from two regions (Andijan and Kashkadaryain) in Uzbekistan between October 1997 and August 1998. The ambiguities surrounding five basic concepts—household, employment, access to land, income and expenditure—are discussed in detail, as are the changes in their contents and meanings in the context of transition. The illustrations provided suggest that households identified on the basis of village records (the most commonly used sampling frame) do not necessarily correspond to self-contained budgeting and consumption units. The links between co-residence, budget control and household divisions of labour are complex and fluid. There is also a growing disjuncture between “official” occupations and wages and what people actually do to make a living. This disjuncture is reflected in the reporting of jobs and incomes in ways that make an evaluation of both employment status and household finances quite problematic. Likewise, the conditions of access to land are changing as agrarian reform policies unfold. Despite the fact that land privatization measures in Uzbekistan have been slow compared to neighbouring countries, even the piecemeal commoditization of land through the expansion of leasehold markets is creating new pressures on smallholder production. Finally, the reporting of household incomes and expenditures may be influenced not only by rapidly changing conditions of employment and social provision, but also by the fact that they may reflect different kinds of logic depending on the conditions of the region under study. For example, the tendency to calculate outlays such as animals or produce with reference to their market value was much less pronounced in a region with a lower overall degree of monetization. It may be that the expansion of a market economy produces a homogenizing effect on the deployment of these categories. The conclusion suggests that a more contextually sensitive approach to the mechanisms that generate new forms of vulnerability and the use of qualitative and longitudinal methodologies are essential to an adequate monitoring of further changes.

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Résumé

La transition post-soviétique a incité à rechercher de nouveaux instruments politiques et de nouvelles méthodes de collecte de données. Le passage de la protection sociale universelle qu'offrait le système soviétique à une assistance ciblée et au monitoring de la pauvreté a ravivé l'intérêt pour la façon dont sont mesurés les niveaux de vie et les seuils de pauvreté.

Cet intérêt a conduit à se servir des techniques quantitatives et des enquêtes auprès d'échantillons (de ménages en particulier) comme d'instruments privilégiés pour recueillir des informations. L'auteur explique que les techniques d'enquête ont leurs limites comme outils de recherche dans un milieu où les études de cas locales sont rares et où une multitude de processus socio-économiques nouveaux bouleversent le paysage de la protection sociale, de la redistribution et de l'emploi. Ces limites sont illustrées au moyen d'une enquête réalisée par l'auteur auprès des ménages de quatre villages de deux régions (Andijan et Kashkadaryain) en Ouzbékistan entre octobre 1997 et août 1998. Les ambiguïtés entourant cinq notions de base - ménage, emploi, accès à la terre, revenus et dépenses - sont exposées en détail, de même que les changements de contenu et de sens qu'elles ont subis dans le contexte de la transition. Les illustrations apportées portent à croire que les ménages recensés sur la base des registres d'état civil des villages (le cadre d'échantillonnage le plus couramment utilisé) ne correspondent pas nécessairement à des unités budgétaires et de consommation autonomes. Les rapports entre cohabitation, maîtrise du budget et division du travail à l'intérieur du ménage sont complexes et mouvants. Il existe aussi un décalage croissant entre les métiers et salaires "officiels" et ce que les gens font vraiment pour gagner leur vie. Ce décalage se retrouve dans la comptabilisation des emplois et des revenus qui rend très problématique une évaluation à la fois de la situation de l'emploi et des finances des ménages. De même, les conditions d'accès à la terre changent au gré des politiques de réforme agraire. Bien que la privatisation des terres ait été plus lente en Ouzbékistan que dans les pays voisins, même la marchandisation parcellaire des terres par l'expansion des locations à bail soumet la production des petits exploitants à de nouvelles pressions. Enfin, la comptabilisation des recettes et des dépenses des ménages peut être influencée non seulement par des conditions d'emploi et de protection sociale extrêmement changeantes mais aussi par le fait qu'elles peuvent traduire différentes logiques, selon l'état de la région étudiée. Par exemple, la tendance à calculer les dépenses en animaux et en produits par rapport à leur valeur marchande était beaucoup moins prononcée dans une région généralement peu monétisée. Il se peut que l'expansion de l'économie de marché ait pour effet d'homogénéiser ces diverses catégories. La conclusion laisse à penser que, si l'on veut suivre fidèlement les changements en cours, il est indispensable d'être plus attentif au contexte lorsqu'on aborde les mécanismes générateurs de formes nouvelles de vulnérabilité et d'appliquer des méthodes qualitatives et longitudinales.

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Resumen

Las transiciones postsoviéticas han impulsado la búsqueda de nuevas herramientas y métodos normativos para la recolección de datos. El cambio en las medidas de asistencia social desde un carácter universal bajo el régimen soviético, hacia una medida de asistencia designada o específica, más un seguimiento de la pobreza, ha estimulado nuevo interés en la medición de los estándares de vida y las líneas demarcatorias de la pobreza.

Esta disposición ha generado el uso de técnicas cuantitativas y encuestas por muestreo (encuestas domiciliarias, en particular) como herramientas privilegiadas para la recolección de información relacionada con la política en cuestión. Este documento sostiene que, como herramientas de investigación, las técnicas de encuesta contienen limitaciones distintivas en un entorno donde los estudios de caso locales son escasos, y donde una gran cantidad de nuevos procesos socioeconómicos están produciendo cambios fundamentales en el panorama de las disposiciones sociales, redistribución y empleo. Estas limitaciones se ilustran sirviéndose de una encuesta domiciliaria conducida por el autor en cuatro pueblos de dos regiones (Andijan y Kashkadaryain), en Uzbekistan, entre octubre de 1997 y agosto de 1998. Las ambigüedades que rodean los cinco conceptos básicos –unidad familiar, empleo, acceso a la tierra, ingresos y gastos- se examinan detenidamente, así como los cambios en sus contenidos y significados en el contexto de transición. Las ilustraciones provistas sugieren que las unidades familiares identificadas sobre la base de los registros del pueblo (el marco muestral más comúnmente utilizado) no corresponden necesariamente a una presupuestación independiente ni a unidades de consumo. Los vínculos entre el compartimiento de la residencia, el control del presupuesto y las divisiones de la mano de obra dentro de la unidad familiar son complejos e inciertos. También es creciente la disyunción entre las ocupaciones y salarios “oficiales” y lo que la gente realmente hace para ganarse la vida. Tal disyunción se refleja en la forma en que se declaran los trabajos y los ingresos, la que determina una evaluación bastante problemática tanto de la situación de empleo como de las finanzas familiares. Del mismo modo, las condiciones de acceso a la tierra están cambiando, a medida que las políticas de reforma agraria se desarrollan. Pese a que las medidas de privatización en Uzbekistan han sido lentas comparadas con los países vecinos, hasta la comercialización de la tierra como bien básico, mediante los mercados de arrendamiento, está imponiendo nuevas presiones sobre la producción de los minifundistas. Por último, las declaraciones de los ingresos y gastos por unidad familiar podrían verse influenciadas, no sólo por las condiciones rápidamente cambiantes de empleo y las disposiciones sociales, sino también porque podrían reflejar diferentes tipos de lógica, dependiendo de las condiciones de la región bajo estudio. Por ejemplo, la tendencia de calcular las inversiones tales como los animales o los productos con referencia a su valor en el mercado, era mucho menos pronunciada en una región con un grado general más bajo de monetización. Podría ser que la expansión de la economía de mercado produce un efecto homogenizador sobre la distribución de estas categorías. La conclusión sugiere que para llevar un seguimiento apropiado de los nuevos cambios, es esencial que el enfoque hacia los mecanismos que generan nuevas formas de vulnerabilidad se aplique con mayor sensibilidad contextual, y que se utilicen métodos longitudinales y cualitativos.

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INTRODUCTION

Transition to the market in the former Soviet Union has occasioned an extensive overhaul of the statistical and planning apparatuses inherited from the Soviet period in all the newly independent states, including the republics of Central Asia. The creation of a new informational infrastructure, prompted by the demands of major international donor and lending agencies, appears to be an intrinsic, if little noticed, element of market reforms. Part of the rationale behind these changes is to bring certain indices and measurements (of employment, prices, living standards and poverty, for example) into line with internationally agreed standards set by bodies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The shift from universal welfare provision under the Soviet system to “targeted” assistance and poverty monitoring also requires the development of new policy tools. Finally, the design and implementation of development projects funded by various donor agencies has created additional demand for social and economic data. As a consequence of these changing priorities, a significant amount of technical assistance is being directed to upgrading information-gathering techniques and creating the domestic capacity to sustain these efforts. The data collection tools inherited from the era of central planning (such as the Soviet Union Family Budget Survey) are being revised and modified while, simultaneously, a range of externally funded sample surveys are being carried out (see Falkingham and Micklewright, 1997, for details). The volume of social research conducted in the private and NGO sectors has also increased substantially. This has resulted in a proliferation of sample surveys, mainly based on closed-ended questionnaires and relying on quantitative techniques of data analysis. In particular, household surveys have emerged as a prime tool for generating policy-relevant information.

The main contention of this paper is that transition economies may present us with specific methodological challenges that need to be reflected adequately in research design. In the absence of an in-depth understanding of the local meanings attached to the categories that are most routinely employed in questionnaires and interview schedules, survey findings can be of limited utility, and may even be quite misleading. This is not to suggest that the sources of error and bias discussed in the remainder of this text are in any way unique to the post-Soviet context. I am arguing, however, that the limitations of survey methodologies may become even more apparent in contexts where there is a scarcity of local level case studies assist the analysis of socio-economic processes. The relatively modest compendium of ethnographic research produced during the Soviet period is not only outdated, but the drying-up of research funds since the break-up of the Union has meant that social science research — which was relatively weak in the Central Asian region — has come to a standstill. This vacuum is now being filled by surveys, mainly commissioned by external donors, in a context where local sociological and anthropological research has ground to a halt.

In what follows, I will attempt to show how the combination of Soviet categories of “official” registration, local cultural understandings, and recent changes introduced by agrarian reforms may foil the best-intentioned attempts at receiving meaningful answers to seemingly straightforward questions. My illustrations will be drawn from a household survey conducted in four villages from two regions of Uzbekistan, Andijan and Kashkadarya, between October 1997 and August 1998.¹

The survey was preceded by in-depth household case studies and detailed observations in order to avoid errors and biases stemming from the lack of adequate qualitative information. The dangers of such oversight were brought home to me by the results of the European University Institute/Essex Survey carried out in 1995 in three regions of Uzbekistan. This survey attempted, among other things, to estimate the incidence of private transfers among households, whether these take the form of gifts, exchanges or loans in cash or in kind (Couduel et al., 1997). This information was obtained by asking household heads or other persons answering the questionnaire whether they had received help from relatives or friends in the 30 days prior to the interview. Although the survey established that a substantial number of households had been involved in either making or receiving cash or in-kind transfers, it completely missed out on the most pervasive mechanism for private transfers, namely *gaps*. *Gaps* are social get-togethers functioning as rotating savings associations. All the members of a network pay in a fixed sum of money each month, and they receive a lump sum payment when it is their turn to hold a gathering at their own home. Since these networks are primarily presented—and experienced—as venues for recreation and sociability, there is no reason why they should have been reported in answer to the question posed. Yet *gaps* account for the largest volume of cash in circulation based on private transfers. These sums help to alleviate the shortage of ready cash and assist in making more important purchases or defraying expenses. However, the cultural embeddedness of *gaps* meant that their economic functions could escape detection altogether (Kandiyoti, 1998).

Despite a high level of awareness concerning the possibility of such errors, the household survey referred to throughout this text highlighted the intrinsic ambiguities of some of the categories employed and the limitations of the survey as a tool in a context where the meanings attached to many concepts are in a state of flux.² More specifically, I shall describe these difficulties in relation to five central concepts: *household*, *employment*, *access to land*, *income* and *expenditure*. I shall attempt to illustrate how the content of each of these categories is not only context-specific, but is also shifting in response to changes in rural Uzbekistan.

HOUSEHOLDS: ELUSIVE BOUNDARIES

The household (or domestic unit) generally refers to a group of co-resident persons who share most aspects of consumption and draw upon a common pool of resources for their livelihood. However, the sheer diversity of patterns of rural householding documented in ethnographic accounts makes this definition too

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