

# Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction in Uzbekistan: Achievements and Challenges

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**Abstract:** *Uzbekistan's economy has doubled in recent years, contributing to poverty reduction. However, poverty remains high and is expected to rise due to factors such as climate change, the war in Ukraine and poor governance. This paper examines achievements and challenges in poverty reduction using secondary data from grey and academic literature. The study concludes that eliminating corruption and nepotism and reforming the education sector is crucial for poverty alleviation and sustainable economic growth, given ongoing issues such as rising inequality, dependence on remittances, regional disparities, and high unemployment. Overall, the article provides insights into Uzbekistan's economic growth and poverty reduction strategies, stressing the need for sustained efforts to address remaining challenges.*

**Keywords:** Uzbekistan, Central Asia, economic growth, poverty reduction

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## 1. Introduction

Poverty is a fundamental challenge in our contemporary world (Narayan et al., 2000; Sachs, 2005; Sen, 2000; UN, 2015). Currently, there are more than 700 million people who live below USD 2.15 per day globally (World Bank, 2023a), while about 1.1 billion people suffer from multidimensional poverty (UNDP and OPHI, 2023), with deprivations in health, economic opportunities, education and living standards. Additionally, over 114 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced by conflicts and violence (UNHCR, 2023), and a quarter of the world population is caught in 55 global conflicts (Obermeier, 2023). The numbers are expected to rise in the coming years mainly due to the existing or increasing number of conflicts worldwide, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Israel-Palestine war, increasing food and energy prices, and climate change.

About 20 million poor people exist in Central Asia, around 30% of Central Asia's total population (World Bank, 2022). Uzbekistan, located at the heart of Central Asia, is characterized as a poor country alongside its neighbours Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and among the fifteen poorest countries in Asia (IMF, 2023a). There is increasing concern that persistent poverty undermines regional stability by fueling political discontent, migration, and extremism, especially in economically fragile countries like Afghanistan. However, recent developments promise to strengthen regional integration and cooperation among Central Asian countries, improve the living standards of its people, and promote economic growth. Recent initiatives, such as the Central Asia Water and Energy Program (CAWEP) and the Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Program for Aral Sea Basin (CAMP4ASB), which are considered

regional integration projects under the patronage of the World Bank, aim to address energy and water challenges worsened by climate change and population growth (World Bank, 2023b). Coordinated action is needed to address poverty, which can worsen regional inequalities and threaten long-term stability in the region.

This research provides a comprehensive understanding of poverty in Uzbekistan, a country that has undertaken significant reforms since 2016. By exploring the Uzbek government's achievements and challenges in poverty alleviation, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of Central Asia, where few comprehensive studies have focused on this issue. The paper not only examines Uzbekistan's current state of poverty and economic performance but also assesses the government's strategies within the context of ongoing regional conflicts, highlighting the country's emerging role as a key partner for the West. The study concludes with policy implications, offering unique insights for both Uzbekistan and Central Asia's future.

## 2. Uzbekistan's development and socio-economic progress: human development and economic reforms

Uzbekistan is a double-landlocked country, which means even its neighbours have no access to the sea, and it is a lower-middle-income country with a population of over 36 million. Since its independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has been recognized for its efforts to reduce poverty substantially. According to reports, Uzbekistan has decreased poverty from 27.5% to 11% from 2001 to 2023 (ILO, 2023; World Bank, 2019). This decline has been associated mainly with economic growth, social protection programs and employment promotion measures. However, despite the decrease in the number of poor over 2 million, regional disparities persist and increase yearly. Additionally, the gap between poverty levels in urban and rural areas remains significant. As with any other country at the beginning of 2020, Uzbekistan has shown its vulnerability to external threats. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted Uzbekistan, resulting in an additional 1 million people falling into poverty (UNDP, 2022).

**Table 1: Poverty Overview in Uzbekistan**

2023	
11%	18.7%
The proportion of the Population Living below the National Poverty Line	The proportion of Employed Population below \$2.15 PPP a Day (Age 15+)
18.4%	13.7%
4.2 million People are Multidimensionally Poor (Adult Population)	The Proportion of Children Living in Households below the National Poverty Line
2%	2.9 Million People Brought Out of Poverty
Average Annual Population Growth Rate 2018-2023	2021-2023

Source: Asian Development Bank (2024), UNDP (2024), Center for Economic Research and Reforms (2024)

Uzbekistan's performance in the area of human development has been noteworthy, showing a year-on-year increase. According to the report published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Uzbekistan placed 106 among 193 countries in 2022 with a score of 0.727, which puts Uzbekistan third in Central Asia after Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and a little above Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. A closer look at the data indicates that from 2000 to 2022, there was a 20.6% change in Uzbekistan's human development index value (HDI). As indicated in Table 2, Uzbekistan has shown progress, such as improvement in life expectancy, reaching

71.7, and an increase in the expected duration of education, which is 11.9. Interestingly, there has been a rise in the per capita gross national income at purchasing power parity to USD 8.056 (UNDP, 2022). Despite improvements and being considered among those with high HDI, Uzbekistan lags behind global averages in critical areas. Therefore, targeted policy reforms are needed to expand access to quality healthcare to enhance life expectancy and education to improve years of schooling, particularly in remote areas.

**Table 2: Human Development Index (HDI) Overview**

Country	Indicators	Year	Value
Uzbekistan	HDI Rank	2022	106
	Human Development Index (value)		0.727
	Life Expectancy at Birth (years)		71.7
	Mean Years of Schooling (years)		11.9

Source: *Human Development Reports: Uzbekistan, UNDP, 2022*

Education remains one of the least reformed sectors in today's Uzbekistan, creating setbacks in building a more inclusive society, particularly for girls, low-income, and disabled students. Despite the government allocating over 20% of its budget to education and social welfare, schools in the regions remain overcrowded, and supplemental tutoring costs are unaffordable for families earning below minimum wage (Lake, 2023). Considering the fact that Uzbekistan has the youngest population in Central Asia, where almost 33% of the population is below the age of 17 and with an average age of 29 (stat.uz, 2022), access to preschool and higher education remains low, especially in rural areas. Previous studies have reported that investment in education, especially for women and girls, fosters skills development, enhances employment opportunities, reduces gender inequality, and lifts households out of poverty, thus driving long-term economic development and societal progress (UNESCO, 2024).

In 2022, The Uzbek economy's GDP grew by 5.7%, mainly led by remittances (21%), which indicates a notable economic dependence on migrant workers and exports and growing year-on-year consumption (World Bank, n.d.). Remarkably, there was over 20% growth in non-gold exports driven by textiles, fertilizers, non-ferrous metals and food. The development is primarily driven by high export volume to Russia, over 50%. Notably, services exports also increased substantially, with growth close to 53%, primarily in the tourism and transport sectors. Again, the increase in the tourism industry was associated with a three-fold rise in immigrants or tourists from Russia and a boost in tourism from neighbouring countries, mainly from Tajikistan and Kazakhstan (World Bank, n.d.).



**Figure 1: GDP Growth in Uzbekistan**  
 Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2023b)

In February 2024, Georgian TBC Capital Bank, based in Uzbekistan, published an economic report highlighting that GDP reached USD 90.8 billion and GDP per capita amounted to USD 2,495, representing 3.8% growth from 2022. According to the same report, inflation has been gradually declining and stood at 10%, while the unemployment rate was around 9%. Even though the Uzbek government provided significant incentives to support the tourism industry, starting from a compensation program for hotel construction costs to customs duty exemptions for essential equipment, the tourism industry offers the lowest-paid jobs in the country alongside the agricultural sector, placing it among the least attractive industries to work for. The impact of the tourism sector on the national economy is relatively slight at around 1.5%, and only 2% of the workforce is employed within the sector, with 29% serving in the food and drink industry and 24% involved in accommodation services (TBC Capital, 2024).

Institutional reforms such as the adoption of inflation targeting strategy and the liberalization of monetary policy allowing free-floating exchange rates and enabling companies to conduct international transactions have improved the country’s financial credibility and laid the foundation towards transparency in publishing data. Reforms by the new government have significantly enhanced its integration into the global markets and improved its relations with Western countries, leading to substantial growth in export and import volumes (EEAS, 2021). However, the traditionally existing autocracy, the weak justice system, extensive trade barriers, gender inequality and corruption hold back the Uzbek government from its moves towards being fully transparent and creating a thriving democracy.

### 3. Poverty in Uzbekistan

Modern Uzbek history can be divided into two parts (Babaev & Johnston, 2022), during the presidency of first president Islam Karimov, the country was largely closed to the outside world, heavily authoritarian, less transparent and had issues with freedom of speech. The second part is under the current presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who came into power in 2016 (following the death of the former President), posing himself as the founder of “New Uzbekistan”, improved relations with neighbouring countries, paved the way to free speech, transparency and gradually opened up to the outside world. In his address to the parliament in

2020 (President.uz, 2020b), the President, for the first time, acknowledged the existence of poverty in Uzbekistan, changing the rhetoric that has been used by the first President where instead of “poor”, the term “vulnerable” has been used.

The Uzbek government set the poverty benchmark line as earning less than UZS 648.000 (USD 50.80) a month or 21,600 UZS a day (USD 1.69) – a lower benchmark than the World Bank poverty line of USD 2.15 (UZS 26.660) a day. In 2022, president Shavkat Mirziyoyev announced that poverty had dropped from 17% to 14% and instructed relevant offices to take immediate action to reduce the number of poor people, which is over 5 million people currently living below the poverty line. Additionally, we need to question whether the official statistics published by the Statistics Agency under the President of Uzbekistan are to be taken at face value. For example, when the poverty line was set at UZS 568.000 for 2023, an increase of 14% compared to the previous year (stat.uz, 2023), the same period, the inflation rate was recorded at 16.1%, and the inflation rate for food was at 20.3%, respectively. It can be seen that, despite the official figures showing the decline in poverty, poor people became poorer in real terms, so the official numbers need to be revised.

**Table 3: Poverty rate and poverty line in Uzbekistan**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Poverty Rate</b>	<b>Poverty Line</b>	<b>Exchange Rate*</b>
2020	12-15%	N/A	10,055.8
2021	17%	N/A	10,610.0
2022	14%	UZS 498.000	11,051.2
2023	11%	UZS 568.000	11,737.2
2024 (Q1)	10% (target)	UZS 621.000	12,398.38
2024 (Q2)	10% (target)	UZS 648.000	12,686.96

\*US Dollar (USD) to Uzbekistan Som (UZS) Exchange rate history (average)

Source: Data collected by the author on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2024

According to the statistics published by the Center for Economic Research and Reforms (CERR) (Khakimov, 2023), vocational training and support in establishing entrepreneurship have helped lift over 1 million people out of poverty in the country. Furthermore, in one year alone, 200 thousand new businesses were created, 10 thousand others were expanded, and the capacity of 11 thousand enterprises was restored (Khakimov, 2023). The CERR and the Statistics Agency under the President of Uzbekistan assessed the well-being of the general population based on household budget survey data throughout the country for 2021-22. While approximately 10 thousand participated in the survey in 2021, this number significantly increased to over 14 thousand households in 2022. The participating households were grouped into ten different categories based on their level of expenditure, with the families with the lowest expenses (and incomes) being identified separately (UzDaily, 2023).

The population distribution shows a balanced demographic landscape, with 51% living in urban areas and 49% rural. The unemployment rate stood around 9% in 2022, making the agricultural sector dominant in workforce engagement (25%), followed by industry and construction, respectively, 13% and 10% (TBC Capital, 2024). Considering the fact that poverty is more concentrated in rural areas, approximately 1.4 million women and young people are officially unemployed, with rates of 13% among women and 15% among young people (Burgaz, 2020). Despite existing challenges, the Uzbek government has announced its plans to halve poverty by 2026 and, in 2030, to become an upper-middle-income country (UNDP, 2022). While indeed it is an ambitious goal, it remains unclear how the government will address the issues around income inequalities and the longevity of the state support that the President has announced.

#### **4. Uzbekistan's approach to poverty reduction**

Following the President's historic speech, Uzbekistan initiated multiple pilot projects in 2020 to address poverty by developing various mechanisms, including establishing the so-called "Uzbek model" of poverty alleviation. By the decree of the President, the Ministry of Economic Development has been transformed into the Ministry of Economic Development and Poverty Reduction (MEDPR) and a "New Uzbekistan Poverty Reduction Strategy 2022-2026" has been introduced to the public. Two years later, new reforms were introduced again to optimize the consolidation of government offices and decrease budget spending. The total number of ministries decreased from 25 to 21. As a result, the MEDPR was finished and transformed into two different ministries: the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction (President.uz, 2022).

Additionally, the creation of MEDPR allowed the creation of new institutions, such as "hokim yordamchisi" (assistant governor), for economic development and poverty reduction in the regional and district municipalities (Lex.uz, 2021). The National Reduction Strategy for 2022-26 outlines extensive measures aimed at increasing employment and supporting entrepreneurship, enhancing human capital by improving the quality of healthcare and education services, improving public infrastructure accessibility, and addressing environmental degradation (UNDP, 2022). In early 2022, over 9,000 assistant governors were recruited, the highest numbers being in Samarkand (1120), Ferghana (1055), and Tashkent province (1014) (Kallikhanova, 2022). Multiple reports suggested that employees of the financial and economic sectors were forcibly transferred to the assistant governor role. In case of refusal, candidates were threatened with dismissal on charges of betraying the President and going against his politics (Bobojon, 2021; Gazeta.uz, 2021).

#### **5. Poverty reduction strategies in Uzbekistan**

Inspired by China's efforts in eradicating absolute poverty, where the Chinese President announced reaching zero poverty target that has led to lifting over 750 million poor out of poverty in about 40 years (Reuters, 2020), Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has been keen on learning the "Chinese model of poverty eradication", and the two countries have established various initiatives and working groups at the ministerial level (Hashimova, 2020). Several initiatives were put forward by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in early 2019, such as "Measures to improve further the system of working with the problems of the population" (Lex.uz, 2019). Later, a "Temir Daftar" (Iron Book) was introduced to capture low-income families and provide targeted social, economic and legal support.

Identical to "Iron Book", another two, "Ayollar Daftari" (Women Book) and "Yoshlar Daftari" (Youth Book), have been introduced by the Uzbek government to speed up the efforts to reduce poverty throughout the country (President.uz, 2020a). These two initiatives were created to identify vulnerable women and youth needing support and those interested in entrepreneurship, as well as in education and vocational training. According to the report, between 2020-2021, about 600 thousand vulnerable families were added to the three lists mentioned above, and approximately 565 thousand families were removed after employment, educational and social welfare opportunities were provided (Yimeng, 2022). The Uzbek government has identified 25 types of assistance that could be provided to those who enter these books, and newly appointed women and youth leader roles were introduced in mahallas (local communities) to assist those on the list.

Later in the year, the President announced combining the very first three initiatives, "Iron Book", "Women Book", and "Youth Book", into a single unified system and issuing a digital passport to vulnerable families that are living below the poverty level. As explained, the purpose of unifying all three was to develop individual solutions for each family to lift them out of poverty. The next stage would involve organizing vocational training and entrepreneurship activities through microcenters in the districts and villages to create a platform for vulnerable families and individuals to get an education or learn new skills. The President has instructed relevant offices to develop business development programs that would allow local people to enhance their knowledge and financial literacy (Khakimov, 2023).

## **6. Rising poverty amid high growth: challenges in Uzbekistan and Central Asia**

Uzbekistan has improved its position in multiple internationally recognized indexes and shown few signs of democratization. However, the country remains an authoritarian state with high levels of corruption, abuse of power and nepotism deeply rooted in its system. The Uzbek government ranks 121st out of 180 countries in the corruption index (Myrzabekova & Prokic, 2024), the Freedom of the Press index ranked 137 among 180 nations (RSF, 2023), and the economic freedom index shows that the country ranked 103 out of 184 countries (Heritage.org, 2023). Uzbekistan has made significant improvements, especially in the last five years, in terms of gender equality, ranking 56th among 185 countries (OpenDataWatch, 2023). Additionally, Uzbekistan is increasingly characterized by significant regional disparities in living standards and economic performance, as reflected in health, education and income. If the capital Tashkent, Syrdarya, Jizzakh and Kashkadarya regions achieved the most significant reduction in the level of poverty—conversely, Ferghana, Navoi and Surkhandarya slightly improved in combating poverty (UzDaily, 2023).

With its abundant natural resources and strategic location, Central Asia has always attracted significant international attention from world powers such as Russia, China and the United States (D'Anieri & Herbst, 2023; Wishnick, 2009). However, the situation with poverty in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan, is alarming, and there are several reasons to consider. The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, the crisis in the neighboring countries, particularly in Afghanistan, border disputes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and recent protests in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have added to the geopolitical complexities of the region. With China's growing economic influence (Sharp, 2023; Yang, 2022), the isolation of Russia by the Western countries might put Central Asian countries on the edge of choice between financial stability and chaos as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan greatly benefit from remittances working in Russia (Batmanghelidj & Redjaboev, 2022; Murtazashvili, 2022). It is worth mentioning the atypical and unusual frequency of visits of European leaders to Central Asian countries and planned French President Emmanuel Macron's visit this year to Uzbekistan (European Council, 2022; The Tashkent Times, 2023). The strategic dynamics of the region are evolving rapidly.

## **7. Conclusion and policy implications**

The consensus view seems to be that it is evident that poverty in Uzbekistan remains a significant challenge. Although the Uzbek government has implemented several measures to reduce poverty, the chances of halving poverty by 2026 seem challenging and, at times, impossible. Despite this, the recent economic growth shows a sign of hope that the country is moving in the right direction and that the international institutions and Western governments have warmly welcomed economic and political reforms announced by President Mirziyoyev.

Interestingly, the increase in exports and tourism has contributed significantly to economic growth compared to during the first administration, and vocational training and entrepreneurship programs have lifted over a million people out of poverty. However, unemployment, regional disparities, and income inequalities remain the most significant challenges the Uzbek government will address in the coming years. The government must ensure that the state support announced by Shavkat Mirziyoyev is long-lasting and sustainable. While the poverty reduction strategies initiated by the President are commendable, more must be done to ensure that the most vulnerable members of society are not left behind.

This article holds significant implications for academics, policymakers, and non-governmental organizations in understanding Uzbekistan's current state of poverty. Addressing the region's concerns, poverty, and inequality is crucial for policymakers to develop sustainable and equitable growth strategies. More efforts are needed to ensure that more policies include job creation, infrastructure development, investment in education and skills development, combating corruption and expanding social protection programs. Moreover, policies to diversify the Uzbek economy away from over-reliance on natural resources and increase private sector involvement and tourism sector development can help boost economic growth in the long run. Policymakers should move away from copying the “Chinese model” because China's political and economic systems are markedly different from Uzbekistan’s. China's success has been driven by its highly centralized governance, where the state exercises strict control over budget allocations and ensures transparency at lower administrative levels through stringent anti-corruption measures. In contrast, Uzbekistan faces challenges related to underdeveloped institutions, widespread corruption, nepotism and a lack of transparency. Adopting China's model without addressing the systemic issues mentioned above could lead to ineffective outcomes, as the success of China's approach depends on governance mechanisms that are not fully developed in Uzbekistan. Instead, Uzbekistan should focus on improving the quality of governance, reducing corruption, and tailoring poverty reduction strategies to its unique socio-political context.

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