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## **Poverty in the Armenian Countryside**

Kharatyan H. 2007 *Life is very sad (Poverty in Armenia)*, Yerevan: Hazarashen  
– Armenian Centre for Ethnological Studies NGO, pp. 112.

Armenia regained independence in 1991. Once the wealthiest, yet smallest republic in the USSR (the world's oldest Christian nation which accepted Christianity in 301) it is gradually struggling its way out of the chaos brought about by the war for Northern Karabach and the economic blockade. In conflict with its neighbours – Turkey and Azerbaijan – it is currently the poorest Transcaucasian republic. There is still an enormous disproportion between the standard of living of the capital, Yerevan (of the approximately 3.5 million population almost a third live in Yerevan) and the poor, mostly rural countryside.

Hranush Kharatyan's<sup>1</sup> book *Life is very sad (Poverty in Armenia)* which is a collection of commentaries to statistical data, enriched with quality information based on field research is partly devoted to poverty in the Armenian countryside. This little book consists of six chapters each with a conclusion, of which we are presenting those which could be of particular interest to EEC readers.

In the *Foreword* the author introduces us to rather general issues, arguing with the official opinion that the scale of poverty in Armenia has been diminishing in recent years. Figures are provided: between 2002 and 2004 poverty in towns dropped from 52.8% to 38%, whereas in rural areas it dropped from 47.55% to 40.7%. In 2005 it was estimated that 29% of the

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<sup>1</sup> An ethnologist, President Koczarian's former advisor on national minorities, who resigned from her post in March 2008 as a sign of protest against the introduction of martial law.

population lived in poverty. However, the author asks how such optimistic trends can be matched with the fact that the number of children not attending school has been growing (in 2004 this figure rose fourfold in comparison with the previous year), indicating that the clarification of these phenomena was the reason for Armenian ethnologists undertaking quality research, the results of which are presented in this book.

The chapter entitled *The Social Picture of the Armenian Countryside* – which is of particular interest to us – takes up almost a quarter of the book and provides much quantity data, pointing out the income problems of rural families stemming from the quality of agricultural land depending on its position in relation to the sea level, the structure of Armenian GDP and the slowly advancing process of privatisation of former kolkhozes. Of far greater importance are the conclusions resulting from these analyses which show that although it was possible to stop the process of poverty in the urban population, the rural population continues to live in poverty. Kharatyan states that the minimal income of an agricultural family – assuming a functioning system of agricultural products for private family consumption, sufficient for the children's education and winter heating as well as suitable clothing – requires 200–250 USD monthly, whereas her research shows that the income of most families is no more than 130 USD (35 USD in the case of retired people's families). It is, therefore, not surprising that migrant labour is of fundamental importance for economic reasons which is reflected in the next two chapters: *Poverty and Emigration* and *Emigration and Migrant Labour*. It emerges that in 1996 (according to a family household survey) approximately 1.1 million Armenians earned a living outside Armenia, mainly in the Commonwealth of Independent States, Russia in particular. According to Kharatyan earning money abroad can be considered as the main means of ensuring survival for the poorest sector of the population. Consequently, it is more and more common to come across almost depopulated villages in Armenia. One such village, Azatamut whose inhabitants go to either Yerevan or Russia *not wanting to spend their entire days simply eating greens and corn*. A similar exodus, mainly seasonal, is noted in the region of Ararat where periodical migration begins in March and April and departures are mainly in the direction of Spain. Kharatyan emphasises that the majority of interviewed families are dissatisfied with the effects of their work, particularly in Russia. After losing their jobs they sometimes do not have enough money to return to Armenia which causes further frustration and tension *There is no future in Armenia. The authorities do not think about people. The only solution is to take your family and leave in*

*search of bread. I will go alone, make the necessary preparations, find some place to live and then take my family there* – such comments are made although the emigrants often either return empty-handed or do not return at all.

This reviewed work focuses on the poor rural family, whose model and specificity – clearly different from the European model – is portrayed in the chapter on *The Social and Family Environment of the Poor*. A typical family in the Armenian countryside is multi-generational, close-knit and consists of many members, whose ties were reinforced during the economic crisis in the early nineties. Mutual help and powerful ties between neighbours are even typical in urban families. Kharatyan describes the strength of the moral duty to help others: *A poor person? That is a person who cannot help another*. Attempts at escaping poverty through marriage rarely succeed. Relations between spouses change, women becoming the family breadwinners because they are more active. Battling with hunger, cold, their own illnesses as well as their children's, the author describes those women as being "heroic". Poverty has its inevitable correlation with the situation of the children who are deprived of love, teenagers have to go out to work which often means they are subjected to exploitation and beating<sup>2</sup>.

As in other parts of the world the *Programmes of Social Assistance for the Poor* which are analysed in the next chapter offer very little since as everywhere else they have limited funds.

The book ends with an attempt at answering the question: Is the number of poor people in Armenia dropping? According to the author the areas of hunger have decreased – the words "hunger" and "hungry" are less frequently used in Armenia. However, poverty remains a part of daily life and *the number of poor people increases as does the number of shops which we shall never enter because we have no money*.

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<sup>2</sup> What Kharatyan writes about closely corresponds with my own experience from field research carried out in Armenia in Autumn 2001. In the late evening we reached a goatherds' camp close to a major road. The hosts living in shelters, provisional patched metal huts and portakabins welcomed us lost strangers with exceptional hospitality: they fed us with whatever they had – cold vegetable soup served in metal bowls, bread and vodka. It was not until the next day that we realized what their camp actually looked like. One of the inhabitants, a veteran of the Great Patriotic War angrily pointed his stick across the road: "Look! during communist times plenty of wheat grew there. What have they done? Look!" – he said pointing at the adolescents hanging about – "they should be at school instead of grazing cattle. And now what? We can't even afford to buy shoes".

