

Implications of Shrines for Rural Development in Azerbaijan

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Executive Summary

Poverty in Azerbaijan is largely a rural problem, increasingly faced by female-headed households. While more than 18% of Azerbaijan's 4.5 million rural citizens of both genders live below the poverty line, many choose to spend scarce financial resources on making pilgrimages to and maintaining religious shrines. My Title VIII sponsored field experience in 2012 highlighted the social welfare issues related to shrine expenditures, clarifying the rationality of investing in pilgrimages and shrine structures. Shrines serve as sites for locally controlled redistribution of wealth and as locations of public engagement for women. Efforts to raise the standard of living and empower women in the countryside should build upon the work already being done at shrines.

Background

- Nearly every rural settlement in Azerbaijan has a shrine or pilgrimage site, some dating back hundreds of years. These shrines survived and even flourished during the Soviet period when rural Azeris had greater access to material resources.
- Upon gaining independence, Azerbaijan privatized all collective farms in 1996 resulting in a drastic decrease in the rural standard of living.

Key Findings

- Many rural Azeris' identities as Muslims are tied to visiting shrines for prayers and the observance of holidays. Most Azeris in the countryside also believe that shrines have significant spiritual power and can grant wishes.
- The strength of this belief is reflected in the fact that many Azeris allocate significant portions of their income to maintain and expand shrine complexes.
- Shrines often serve as locally controlled sites for the redistribution of wealth given as alms.
- Shrines are disproportionately visited and maintained by women. For many rural women shrines play an important role in their public lives. They are sites for interaction and debate beyond the circle of close kin.

Policy Recommendations

- Anti-poverty programs should build upon the significant wealth that is redistributed through almsgiving and shrine maintenance. They should encourage local, democratic control over and transparency in this redistribution.
- Development projects designed to encourage market-oriented economic activity should not discourage shrine pilgrimage or maintenance. Shrines provide an important incentive for rural citizens to increase their overall productivity.
- Projects designed to empower rural women should utilize the largely female-controlled public space of shrine complexes to encourage discussion and to locate women leaders.

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