Policy Brief

Addressing Socio-Economic Inequality: Decent Work in CAREC'S Green and Digital Transitions

in Tajikistan

Mubinzhon Abduvaliev,
Kuat Akizhanov, *and*
Ilhom Abdulloev

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Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Institute
21st Floor, Commercial Building Block 8, Vanke Metropolitan,
No. 66 Longteng Road, Shuimogou District, Urumqi, Xinjiang, the PRC, 830028
f: +86-991-8891151
LinkedIn: carec-institute
km@carecinstitute.org
www.carecinstitute.org

Executive Summary

As Tajikistan embarks on a new phase of development, it is leveraging its abundant hydropower and digital innovations to promote sustainable development. In the past 25 years, the country has achieved significant milestones, including a 27.9% increase in its Human Development Index since 1993 and a leadership position in renewable energy, with 90% of its electricity generated by hydropower.

There are several key initiatives, such as the Green Economy Strategy, which aims to achieve net-zero emissions by 2037, as well as the declaration of 2025-2030 as the "Years of Digital Economy and Innovation Development," which will include projects such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the e-Governance platform eHukumat. According to the Energy Transition Index (ETI), Tajikistan ranks 71st globally, reflecting a high level of progress among post-Soviet states.

There are, however, challenges such as rural-urban disparities, youth unemployment, informal labor, seasonal energy shortages, and uneven internet access that require specific solutions. As part of its comprehensive economic development strategy, Tajikistan should focus on decentralized renewable energy, climate-smart agriculture, broadband expansion at an affordable price, digital literacy (such as for women and rural communities), and vocational training aligned with the needs of the country's green and technology sectors.

Cooperation among CAREC regions, human capital investment, and adaptive policies will be crucial in maximizing the benefits of Tajikistan's green and digital transitions.

Introduction and Background

The CAREC region faces a momentous transition toward a greener, more digital economy, providing the opportunity to reduce socio-economic disparities and promote sustainable development. As a result of uneven asset distribution during market reforms, wealth disparities persist despite economic growth since the post-Soviet era. As part of the CAREC Strategy 2030, the region will collaborate on sustainable infrastructure, trade, and investment, leveraging digitalization to create jobs and improve efficiency, and addressing regulatory challenges such as artificial intelligence. The green transition aims to shift to renewables and cleaner technologies, but requires careful management to reduce fossil fuel dependence. Both transitions hinge on labor market reforms to ensure equitable access to decent work and opportunities.

Tajikistan is a good example of economic growth among CAREC countries, having increased its Human Development Index (HDI) by 27.9% since 1993. As the country continues to progress, it is actively addressing crucial areas for future growth, such as closing development gaps between regions, generating more opportunities for youth, and improving energy resilience. These initiatives highlight Tajikistan's strong commitment to sustainable and equitable development, establishing it as a leader in the region's transformational journey.

Tajikistan has emerged as a regional leader in renewable energy and digital innovation, with ambitious policies such as the Green Economy Development Strategy up to 2027 (ADB, 2024a, 2024b) and the National AI Strategy (for more details see: AI Council of Tajikistan Under the Ministry of Industry and New Technologies, 2025) aiming to position the country as a hub for sustainable and technological advancement.

This policy brief is motivated by the urgent need to ensure that digital and green transitions foster inclusive growth because, without targeted investments in education, vocational training, and social protections, vulnerable people may fall behind, exacerbating inequities. By examining socioeconomic gaps and labor market trends in the CAREC region, the policy brief provides policymakers with actionable insights to ensure equitable development. According to the theory of change, strategic investments in human capital, inclusive policies, and regional cooperation can transform structural challenges into opportunities for shared prosperity, thereby fostering economic growth, reducing inequalities, empowering vulnerable populations, and building resilient economies in the CAREC region.

Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods approach to analyze Tajikistan's progress in green and digital transitions, decent work, and socio-economic inequality. The research consisted of three phases: policy analysis, quantitative data collection, and qualitative research. First, the policy analysis assessed Tajikistan's compliance with international labor standards (e.g., International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions) and examined national policies to identify gaps in green and digital transition strategies. Next, quantitative data from sources like the Social Progress Index (SPI), Human Development Index (HDI), World Inequality Database (WID), and ILO Decent Work Indicators were analyzed, though limited data availability for some indices (e.g., Network Readiness Index (NRI) and ETI restricted full analysis.

Qualitative insights were gathered through 8 key informant interviews and 2 focus group discussions, involving stakeholders from government, civil society, and international organizations. However, findings were sometimes constrained by sector-specific expertise rather than broader national perspectives.

Despite data limitations, the study provided a comprehensive assessment of Tajikistan’s challenges and opportunities. The findings highlight the need for improved data systems and further regional comparisons to strengthen policy recommendations.

Literature Review

Tajikistan’s development since independence in 1991 has been influenced by its post-Soviet transition, civil conflict, and geographic and demographic factors. The country faces challenges including reliance on remittances contributing over 30% of GDP (World Bank, 2024a) and an informal economy (ILO, 2018). However, recent academic discussions highlight opportunities from the green and digital transitions, which could help reduce structural inequalities, though they also pose risks of deepening disparities if not managed effectively.

Despite these challenges, Tajikistan has shown progress in its development efforts. The Gini coefficient of around 36.1 in 2024 (World Bank, 2026) indicates a commitment to balanced growth, and the government continues to prioritize socio-economic inclusion. Tajikistan has the potential to further reduce inequalities and strengthen shared prosperity.

Key obstacles remain, particularly the economy’s dependence on remittances, which distorts labor markets and creates dependency. Additionally, informal employment, especially among women in agriculture, leaves many without fair wages or social protections, worsening gender inequality (ILO,

2021). Addressing these issues will be crucial for Tajikistan to achieve more inclusive and sustainable growth in the future.

Policy Context

Tajikistan is experiencing significant economic and social transformations, driven primarily by the dual goals of green and digital transformation. As part of its comprehensive efforts to address inequality, improve labor conditions, and leverage technology and sustainability, the government has introduced a number of policies. Several key policy areas are being addressed, each with its own set of interventions, benefits, and challenges.

As part of Tajikistan's National Development Strategy (NDS) 2030, the country is focusing on education, health care, and rural development in order to address socio-economic disparities. In spite of funding constraints and cultural obstacles, initiatives such as infrastructure investments and gender-responsive programs are aimed at bridging the urban-rural divide. With regard to labor markets, Tajikistan's Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP) is designed to formalize jobs and provide vocational training to youth and migrants.

A balance must be struck between short-term needs and long-term sustainability when determining Tajikistan's policy decisions. Expansion of social programs can alleviate poverty immediately, but at the same time, place a strain on the budget, whereas infrastructure investments can provide growth in the future despite their high costs. Diversifying renewable energy sources reduces climate risks, but requires foreign investment, while upgrading grid infrastructure improves efficiency, but poses technical challenges. In order to maximize the impact of its initiatives, Tajikistan should incorporate green and digital initiatives, such as AI-driven agriculture, and strengthen regional cooperation in order to facilitate energy trade and labor mobility. Mobilizing international and private funding is crucial for high-cost projects like solar microgrids, alongside robust monitoring to ensure equitable outcomes. Providing viable employment opportunities is necessary in order to curb the dependence of local talent stemming from labor migration. Creating tangible advancements requires effective policy implementation through institutional changes and active tripartite dialogues.

Tajikistan’s shift to green energy largely depends on hydropower, which accounts for 90% of the nation’s electricity production (International Energy Agency, 2022). Advocates emphasize its capacity to increase renewable energy exports, such as through the CASA-1000 initiative, and to lower carbon emissions. The World Bank (2024) acknowledges progress in Tajikistan’s Energy Transition Index (ETI). The country’s Strategy for Green Economy Development for 2023-2037 seeks to balance these factors but overlooks critical issues, including the economic effects on communities reliant on fossil fuels. A significant concern is the aluminum sector, which uses 40% of the country’s electricity (ADB, 2024a), raising questions about fair energy allocation and sustainable industrial methods. Without definitive strategies to handle transition costs or to diversify energy sources, Tajikistan’s green energy shift may worsen current inequalities and environmental risks.

Tajikistan has made eminent strides in digitalization, especially since propelling its spearheading AI in 2021. Key accomplishments incorporate the extension of e-government administrations, such as the eHukumat stage, which serves over 1.5 million clients, and far-reaching portable network at 85% entrance (Government Portal, 2025).

Table 1. Tajikistan's roadmap for digital economy and sustainable green development

Digitalization	Green Economy
Mid-Term State Program for the Digital Economy Development for the period 2021-2025	Green Economy Development in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2023–2037
Concept of Digital Economy of the Republic of Tajikistan	National Strategy for the Development of Statistics of the Republic of Tajikistan for the Period Until 2030
Concept for the formation of E-Government in the Republic of Tajikistan	Greening the Republic of Tajikistan for the period up to 2040
State Program on E-Commerce in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2025-2029	Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan on the accession of the Republic of Tajikistan to the Agreement on the Establishment of the Global Green Development Institute
Concept of Transition to Digital Education in the Republic of Tajikistan for the period up to 2042	By the resolution of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan, the "State Institution Scientific and Research Institute of Sustainable Development and "Green" Economy
2025-2030, the "Years of Development of the Digital Economy and Innovation"	State Environmental Program of the Republic of Tajikistan for the period 2023-2028
Strategy for the Development of Artificial Intelligence in the Republic of Tajikistan for the period up to 2040	Order on the Procedure for Establishing and Approving the Amount of Payments for Environmental Pollution and Waste Placement
Law of the Republic of Tajikistan "On Electronic documents and electronic signatures"	Law of the Republic of Tajikistan "On Environmental Impact Assessment"
Law of the Republic of Tajikistan "On Technological Park"	Tajikistan's Engagement CAREC Energy Strategy 2030.
Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan in the field of science and technology for 2011-2015	Following an initiative put forth by the President of the Republic of Tajikistan at the UN General Assembly, 2003 declared the "*International Year of Clean Water*", 2005-2015 the International Decade of Action "*Water for Life*", 2013 the "*International Year of Cooperation*" in the Water sector ", 2018-2028 declared the International Decade of Action" Water for Sustainable *Development*", and finally 2025 as the year of "*International Year for Glaciers' Preservation*"
Concept of transition to digital education in the Republic of Tajikistan for the period up to 2042	National Water Strategy 2040, dated November 2024, No 627
Development and Implementation of Information and Communication Technologies in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2014-2017	National Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change of the Republic of Tajikistan for the period up to 2030 and 2024-2026
Concept of innovative development of the agro-industrial complex of the Republic of Tajikistan	Voluntary National Review entitled on "Green Development for Common Prosperity"
Rules for the Optimization and Automation of State Services	State Program for Greening the Republic of Tajikistan for the period until 2040
National Strategy for the Development of Statistics of the Republic of Tajikistan for the Period Until 2030	Voluntery National Review "Green Development for Shared and Sustainable Prosperity"
Law on Innovation Activity	National Water Strategy for the period up to 2040
State Targeted Program for the Development of Mathematical, Exact, and Natural Sciences for 2021–2025	Program for the development of the agro-food system and sustainable agriculture for the period up to 2030

Key Research Gaps and Unresolved Debates

The research explores the case of transitions green and digital in Tajikistan with the specific consideration of their intersectional implications for vulnerable segments, particularly female migrants and geographically remote communities, alongside addressing the unresolved question of whether digital economies on the whole serve to formalize economic activity or to deepen informalization. It is distinctive in its comprehensive dual transitions analysis with the inclusion of synergy examples such as the AI-powered management of hydropower plants and uses mixed methods to evaluate the impact on inequality and decent work, a hitherto unexamined angle. Furthermore, this study analyzes the governance gaps in the national planning documents (NDS 2030 and AI Strategy) to inform inclusive policymaking in low-resource environments and provide tailored recommendations to the CAREC regional framework to support just and sustainable development.

Findings

Tajikistan has made notable advancements in human development, evidenced by a 27.9% augmentation in its Human Development Index (HDI) since 1993, attributable to enhancements in life expectancy, educational attainment, and economic expansion propelled by remittances and hydropower resources. Nonetheless, disparities between urban and rural regions remain pervasive, as rural populations encounter significant limitations in access to energy sources and internet connection. Additionally, gaps related to gender and disability further intensify social inequality, while the nation's Social Progress Index (SPI) score of 57.45 underscores the existence of unmet needs pertaining to equity and sustainability. Policy measures, including the National Strategy for Education Development and specific social protection initiatives, are designed to tackle these pressing issues; however, they necessitate more robust implementation, particularly within marginalized communities.

The labor market encounters challenges, including elevated levels of informal employment, youth unemployment rate. Initiatives such as NDS 2030 and DWCP endeavor to formalize employment opportunities, synchronize skills training with market requirements, and generate employment within the hydropower and tourism sectors. With 90% of its electricity coming from hydropower, Tajikistan is at the forefront of green transition initiatives. The Green Economy Strategy seeks to diversify into solar and wind energy to achieve net-zero emissions by 2037 (World Bank, 2024c).

Tajikistan is progressing digitally through e-governance, an AI strategy that aims to contribute 5% of GDP by 2040, and the expansion of e-commerce (World Bank, 2024b). However, development is hampered, especially in rural regions, by gaps in digital literacy and internet penetration. Priorities must include increasing cybersecurity, connectivity, and AI instruction in vocational training.

Case Studies and Best Practices

Case Study 1: Commerce and Youth Employment in the Digital Economy

Tajikistan's National E-Commerce Program (2025-2029) aims to capitalize on its young population by expanding digital markets, aided by the Law on Electronic Commerce (2024) and IT training, while rural internet limits pose hurdles. Microloans, digital payments, rural digital hubs, youth incubators with mentorship, and harmonized regional legislation are all effective techniques for increasing cross-border trade. Key takeaways focus on bridging infrastructural gaps while supporting innovation, with CAREC-wide proposals for integrated digital-green policy, equitable finance, and real-time data monitoring. Tajikistan's experience demonstrates adaptive, collaborative techniques that balance scalability with equity, providing a model for changing economies.

Case Study 2: Digital Transformation via eHukumat and AI Strategy

Tajikistan has progressed its digital transformation with the 2022 National AI Strategy, which aims for AI to contribute 5% of GDP by 2040. Key takeaways include the significance of localized solutions such as Tajik-language AI tools for accessibility, ongoing rural digital literacy gaps despite infrastructural improvements, and increased cybersecurity threats from fast digitization. Best practices recommend prioritizing language-centric design for inclusivity, phased rollouts of high-impact services such as healthcare and education to foster trust, and ethical AI governance through decentralized, sector-specific regulations to prevent bias and misuse, providing a model for inclusive and secure global digital transformation.

Case Study 3: DWCP and Migrant Reintegration

Tajikistan's DWCP (2020-2024) aimed to formalize the labor market and aid returning migrants by implementing skills certifications, such as acknowledgment of prior learning, in line with the SDGs and the NDS 2030. Labor market informality posed a challenge, but migrant reintegration was successful when vocational training was combined with employer partnerships, although gender inequalities in rural areas persisted. Effective strategies included tripartite collaboration (government, employers, and unions) for inclusive policies, recognition of prior learning systems for skill validation, and gender-responsive measures such as childcare-linked social protections to increase women's employment, providing important lessons for future labor reforms in Tajikistan and similar economies.

Case Study 4: Renewable Energy Initiatives

Tajikistan's goal is to increase energy security and regional exports, while decentralized alternatives such as micro-hydro and solar mini-grids solve rural shortages. Best practices recommend hybrid approaches that combine large and small-scale renewables with climate adaptation methods such as sediment control and glacial monitoring to maintain grid stability, rural access, and long-term sustainability.

Policy Options and Recommendations

- CAREC countries face socio-economic inequalities, including rural-urban and gender imbalances. Tajikistan has made gains in human development, but still has unequal access to education, healthcare, and infrastructure. To address these difficulties, the following main recommendations have been proposed:
- Social protection programs should be enhanced by expanding targeted safety nets, such as conditional cash transfers linked to school attendance or healthcare access, to aid rural households and vulnerable groups, while improving education and healthcare requires investments in infrastructure, especially in remote areas through digital solutions like distance learning and telemedicine, alongside scholarships and subsidies for marginalized communities to bridge disparities.
- Gender-responsive policies are crucial for expanding women's representation in formal employment and leadership positions. Quotas, incentives, and awareness campaigns can all assist in breaking down cultural barriers.
- Developing inclusive infrastructure in underserved areas, including improved roads, energy, and internet access, can connect underprivileged populations to economic opportunities and promote equitable growth.
- Enhancing labor market information systems through real-time data platforms is crucial for aligning skills training with employer demands in key sectors like agriculture, construction, renewable energy, and ICT, while expanding vocational education and apprenticeships through industry-education collaboration can tailor curricula to labor market needs, particularly in high-growth areas such as green energy and digital services.
- Tajikistan's digital transformation faces hurdles such as inadequate internet affordability, rural connection, and digital literacy, despite the economic potential of AI and e-commerce projects. To address these gaps, recommendations include increasing affordable rural internet access through subsidies and private partnerships, incorporating digital skills into school curricula, providing targeted adult training, particularly for women and rural communities, and improving e-governance platforms, such as eHukumat.tj, to streamline public services and reduce bureaucratic barriers.
- To improve access to electricity, Tajikistan should diversify into solar and wind energy, particularly in rural areas. It should also improve agricultural resilience through drought-tolerant crops, efficient irrigation, and farmer training. Improved trash management (recycling, extended collection) is required to reduce environmental damage. Integrating green skills into education can prepare workers for sustainable industries such as renewables, eco-tourism, and green building, thereby promoting both economic growth and environmental sustainability.
- Regional energy cooperation, like CASA-1000, can enhance renewable energy sharing and reduce fossil fuel dependence. Strengthening information exchange among CAREC members on digital and green transitions leveraging Tajikistan’s AI and hydropower expertise could advance regional sustainability

Way Forward: Implementation and Next Steps

Tajikistan should pursue a dual strategy: enhancing its labor market through vocational training, the formalization of informal employment, and youth entrepreneurship programs; and promoting sustainable development via renewable energy, climate-smart agriculture, and waste management. Regional cooperation frameworks, such as Green Central Asia and the Regional AI Center, along with

improved protections for migrant workers, are integral to this approach. The implementation follows a phased timeline: policy finalization and pilot projects, scaling initiatives like broadband expansion, and establishing Tajikistan as a leader in the green economy. Inclusive growth, underpinned by gender-responsive policies and targeted support for marginalized groups, is a core objective.

Consulting Mechanism: Engaging Stakeholders to Refine and Implement Recommendations

To ensure the recommendations for Tajikistan's socio-economic development, decent work, digital, and green transitions are practical, inclusive, and actionable, a structured consulting mechanism is essential. This mechanism will facilitate dialogue with stakeholders, incorporate diverse perspectives, and adapt strategies based on feedback. Below is a proposed framework:

- An identification and engagement plan identifies key stakeholders, including government entities, international organizations, the private sector, civil society, academia, and local community groups. In order to increase engagement, national workshops are conducted on key topics, regional roundtables are organized to address rural disparities, public consultations are conducted through digital platforms and private sector dialogue is conducted to align training with market needs. These efforts aim to ensure inclusive participation and collaboration across sectors.
- The process involves a phased approach, starting with pilot testing of small-scale projects like solar microgrids or AI-driven agriculture advisories to assess outcomes. Stakeholder feedback on these pilots is then used to refine scalability plans. Revised policy drafts, such as updates to the Decent Work Country Programme, integrate this feedback. Collaboration is facilitated through online platforms like the CAREC Digital Strategy portal and Tajikistan’s eHukumat, alongside working groups such as the Green Transition Task Force, ensuring cross-sector representation.
- The framework focuses on tracking progress through key metrics: rural internet access and e-commerce adoption for digital transition, renewable energy growth and green job creation for sustainability, and reduced youth unemployment and formalized jobs for decent work. Accountability is ensured through annual SDG-aligned reports and independent audits by organizations like the ILO to evaluate labor reforms.
- Tajikistan can enhance its development by fostering regional and international synergies, such as collaborating with CAREC to share its AI and hydropower expertise with neighboring nations. Additionally, partnerships with financial institutions like the ADB and World Bank can help secure funding for scalable initiatives, including vocational training centers, to drive sustainable growth.

Conclusion

The policy brief emphasizes a critical moment for CAREC countries, especially Tajikistan, as they shift toward greener and more digital economies. The research aims to tackle socio-economic inequalities and labor market issues by providing practical recommendations to make these transitions inclusive and sustainable. By adopting digital and green opportunities, CAREC nations can reduce inequality, generate decent jobs, and build long-term resilience.

Labor markets are at risk of fragmentation if investments are not made in education, vocational training, and social safety nets, with some workers flourishing in emerging industries while others remain in informal or unstable employment. A lack of attention to energy poverty or digital gaps in Tajikistan may

increase rural-urban divides and slow economic growth, while weak labor policies may contribute to continued exploitation and instability. Conversely, adopting the suggested strategies could lead to significant benefits. Focusing on inclusive green and digital transitions can drive economic growth, create jobs, and promote environmental sustainability. For Tajikistan, utilizing hydropower and expanding renewable energy sources can improve energy security, while digital tools like AI and e-commerce can help small businesses and include marginalized groups. Strengthening labor protections and social policies will ensure fair distribution of benefits, reduce poverty, and support decent work. To build a prosperous and fair future for all, the brief calls for CAREC leaders to take action now by aligning policies with vulnerable groups' needs, investing in human capital, and strengthening regional cooperation.

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