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**METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF ETHNIC
MINORITY LIFE CONDITIONS ASSESSMENT**

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Methodological Principles of Ethnic Minority Life Conditions Assessment

Konstantin KLOKOV¹

Abstract

The transition to the post-industrial society is connected with revaluation of non-material values which become cultural resources acquiring their social and economic measurement. The purpose of the research has been to find new methodological approach for better evaluation of positive and negative results of rapid social changes in local communities of small-numbered ethnic groups in remote areas of Siberia. Up to the present many of these communities have been keeping very specific subsistence economy connected with nomadic pastoralism, hunting and gathering. Now, their traditional values and way of life are endangered by rapid social changes caused mostly by industrial encroachment. The transdisciplinary research made a synthesis of social, economic and ecological approaches and was based on several case-studies.

The new methodology for assessment of traditional ethnic groups' life conditions takes into account that their living space emerged on the intersection of several semiotic systems routed in different value perspectives. The first one is a commonly used value system which includes income level, availability of the community services and other common living-standard criteria. The second one is a traditional value system based on internal ethnic criteria. Assessment of living conditions from external and internal standpoints may differ greatly. Author suggest to assess indigenous minorities life conditions using two scales simultaneously, one of which corresponds to universal assessment criteria, and the other – to ethno-specific criteria characteristic of a specific traditional culture.

The new approach advocates for cautious decision making in regional politics and helps to reinforce active cultural security of indigenous minorities, i.e. to raise the ability of the cultural system itself to oppose different kinds of arising challenges.

Keywords:

indigenous community; traditional way of life; social changes; acculturation; cultural security.

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1. Background

More than a half of the territory of Russia is covered by vast Taiga and Tundra areas sparsely populated by indigenous ethnic minorities. Up to the present many of their communities have kept a very specific way of life including nomadic reindeer pastoralism, fishing, subsistence hunting, and gathering connected with traditional culture. These communities have valuable cultural heritage, rich professional experience and creative potential. However, the main part of their territories is at the same time the most important strategic area, abundant of oil, gas, gold and other mineral resources. Actually traditional values and way of life of many small-numbered ethnic groups in Northern Eurasia are endangered by rapid social changes caused mostly by industrial encroachment.

The sustainable development of remote areas in Northern Eurasia means the focus on the community inner resources to solve their problems of unemployment and poverty, but not passive expectation for external help from the state and sponsors.

In this regard, there is a necessity to assess social impacts on ethnic minority life conditions and traditional nature management especially in the regions of mineral resources mining and transport communications construction. Legal term of such examination was introduced by Federal Law of the Russian Federation № 82 dated 30.04.1999 “On the guarantee of the small-numbered indigenous peoples’ rights in the Russian Federation”. However, a methodology of such examination has not been elaborated yet, because traditional values of indigenous ethnic minorities are not often compatible with the priorities of regional development.

2. The purpose of the research

The purpose of our research has been to enhance methodological approaches for assessment of positive and negative impacts of rapid social changes upon local communities of small-numbered indigenous ethnic groups and to ensure their cultural security in remote areas of Siberia.

3. Methodology of case studies

This paper presents some results of the multidisciplinary research accomplished in the framework of two international ethno-ecological

projects (“Arctic Domus” and “Tundra”), as well as several applied researches made for oil and gas companies and focused on the assessment of the industrial impact upon local communities. Case studies in 18 local communities of northern ethnic minorities comprised formal and informal interviews, participant and non-participant observations, photo and video recordings. The carried out examination was of qualitative kind that is it was aimed at clarifying and evaluation of main tendencies in the change of the indigenous people’s mode of life and it did not seek out quantitative assessment.

4. Results of case studies

The changes in the local communities’ mode of life during the implementation of large-scale industrial projects (oil and gas extraction, large hydro power stations construction, pipe-lines laying, roads construction etc.) included social processes of different orientation. Firstly, ethnic minorities acculturation took place, mainly when part of small villages inhabitants moved to larger settlements (towns). Also families of nomadic reindeer herders moved there. Such migration added positive results for some families and negative consequences for others.

Secondly, those who stayed at the same place of residence suffered the transformation of the traditional mode of life under the changing circumstances. As well, the results were both positive (innovations in local husbandry and life sustainment) and negative: fragmentation and reindeer pastures degradation, traditional husbandry income decrease, etc.

Thus, in Yamal area several families which formerly kept nomadic mode of life with reindeer herds or lived in small seasonal settlements in fishing places have changed their mode of life for sedentary and moved to villages and towns. These families have been intensively accultured. Other reindeer herders’ families keep nomadic way of life in tundra with their reindeer herds and come to villages only for short periods of time. Many of them have a house or an apartment (part of a house) in one of the villages, where they may stay during their coming there.

Two polar groups of families were identified among people who moved from tundra to villages or towns, depending on how the acculturation affected them. People who have successfully adapted to the sedentary life and got permanent and well-paid job, a comfortable

apartment, having broken the connection with traditional culture and mode of life, refer to one pole. Those for whom the break-off with the traditional mode of life was painful and who cannot adapt to the new conditions refer to the other, opposite one. They take a marginal position in respect to the main part of the population. Most often they have low level of income, or do not have permanent work, live in old houses in a critical condition. Alcoholism is wide-spread among them. Although most of the accultured families having taken the sedentary mode of life are in the medium position between the two poles, each of them gravitates to one of the poles.

Among indigenous population keeping to traditional culture and mode of life there are also two polar groups: one with good living conditions, the other with bad. In the regions of developed tundra reindeer husbandry comparatively small part of rich reindeer herders' families, owning large stock of reindeer (about 500 and more animals for a family) gain persistently high income. In their nomadic husbandry modern technical equipment is used: Japanese snowmobiles, mobile power stations, sat-phones and TV-sets. Besides traditional mobile dwellings (conic tents named "chums") they have their own houses in villages where they can stay when they come back from tundra.

The opposite group consists of poor families of reindeer herders who do not have houses in a village, with low level of nomadic husbandry technical equipment, old Russian snowmobiles, and who do not get sufficient medical care and other social services.

5. Discussion

Indigenous ethnic communities' life quality assessment is one of the key points for the search of best ways for their sustainable development and to the compensation of negative impacts caused by industrialization. Indigenous people's life is not to change for the worse in the result of commercial exploitation of oil, gas, gold and other natural resources, and inevitable negative impact must be compensated with special measures. However, these measures may be directed at traditional basis support of indigenous peoples' mode of life or, on the contrary, accelerate their acculturation and assimilation. To evaluate the sufficiency of such measures it is necessary have objective criteria making it possible to give a comparative assessment of the life quality before and after the implementation of each specific project and compensational measures.

The main difficulty of such an assessment is that universal (over-cultural) criteria of quality and mode of life assessment, widely used in World Banks and United Nations official documents (World Development Indicators, 2014; Human Development Report, 2014) do not take into consideration specific traditional culture values. Thus, Human Development Index (HDI) – a tool developed by the United Nations to measure and rank countries' levels of social and economic development – is based on four criteria: life expectancy at birth, mean years of schooling, expected years of schooling and gross national income per capita. The HDI makes it possible to track changes in development levels over time and to compare development levels in different countries. However, HDI does not make it possible to assess the degree of preserving their traditional culture and ethnic specific character by a particular group of population.

For example, the Nenets herders' traditional wealth measure is not the amount of money or valuable things but the number of owned reindeer. The quality of living environment is estimated by them firstly by its usability for reindeer herding and season nomadic existence. A typical example was the answer of a young Nenets reindeer herder from the Kanin Peninsula to the question whether he wanted to be rich and to buy more useful things for his nomadic household. The herder replied that he did not mean to have many things as too many reindeer sledges would be required to transport them and it would make migrations difficult.

Thus, social programs based on the universal criteria for life quality assessment aim at levelling of ethno-cultural differences and, as a result, indigenous ethnic minorities assimilation. On the other hand, assessment focused only on preservation of traditional culture will impede their social inclusion and their access to amenities of modern life.

The mentioned contradiction is a particular case of a well-known opposition between modernism and traditionalism. It may be overcome by searching for sensible compromise solutions in the framework of the approach called “neotraditionalism” (Ziker, 2002: 16; Habeck, 2005: 165-166).

During recent years two works dedicated to life quality assessment that are worth mentioning in the given context have appeared in Russia. These are, firstly, a thesis by K.A. Kholodilova (2010), on the life quality assessment in Yamal-Nenets Autonomous

District where the majority of nomadic reindeer herders and a half of the stock of all domesticated reindeer in Russia are concentrated; and secondly – a brochure by N.I. Novikova and V.V. Stepanov (2010), on the methodology of North indigenous peoples' life quality assessment. Both works included informative reviews of different points of view on the notion "life quality" and methods of its quantitative assessment.

K.A. Kholodilova (2010: 116-124) carried out the assessment of the life quality for the countryside people of Yamal-Nenets Autonomous District on the basis of universal criteria which included the data of population income, social inequality (poverty level), unemployment level, population migration balance, primary disease incidence, basic services availability (including housing), natural environmental comfort, and transport accessibility of the village or town. The use of universal criteria resulted in the underestimate of the interests of population groups keeping traditional mode of life, especially families engaged in reindeer husbandry. The result made the author to come to a conclusion that it is necessary to analyze the natives' mode of life quality taking into account priorities of traditional way of life preservation. The natives' life quality indices, to her mind, may such data as the area of reindeer pastures, the number of reindeer for 1 nomadic household, the number of the natives speaking their mother-tongue, the number of the population having the basic knowledge in traditional subsistence activities.

N.I. Novikova and V.V. Stepanov considered the life quality indices as a combination of objective and subjective data, characterizing the wealth of indigenous minorities (Novikova & Stepanov, 2010: 4). In this definition an accent on the subjective aspect is important as it is evident that traditional culture representatives may have their own, quite different from majority's standards, idea of good or bad life.

N.I. Novikova and V.V. Stepanov (2010: 35-37) developed an abundant system of indices especially for the life quality assessment of indigenous ethnic minorities of Sakhalin Island. Together with universal criteria (wealth indicator, demographic, employment, housing, medical care availability factors) it includes special ethnic indicators for polyethnicity, ethnical comfort, traditional way of life, local community and ethnic minorities NGO development level.

However, we think that this approach also has significant drawbacks. Firstly, the acquired assessments of the indigenous mode of life cannot be compared with the life quality assessment of non-native

groups of population. Secondly, it doesn't allow to evaluate the direction and quality of the going on transformations of the indigenous ethnic minorities' way of life. For example, the indices of housing includes only three factors, two of which – having a house and/or an apartment and the housing comfort level (living area and utilities availability) – show the housing quality according to the standards of the prevailing part of population, and the third one – having a cabin for hunting and fishing or a mobile dwelling – characterizes the life quality from the point of view of traditional culture. If in the result of mode of life transformation the cabin disappears and an apartment size and/or utilities availability grows – the final assessment of life quality won't change, though the mode of life singularity will lack which leads to the loss of traditional culture. Thus, including a number of indices showing the condition of the traditional constituent of the indigenous people's mode of life and culture into the summary index of life quality doesn't solve the main problem – the use of such assessment is still aimed at levelling of ethno-cultural differences, that is at the loss of the indigenous people's traditional community singularity. The way out, from our point of view, may be not mixing but successive separation of indices, referring to the accepted standards of the dominant society and indices characterizing the status of the traditional way of life and ethnic culture.

For this we suggest to assess life quality using two scales (instead of one linear scale) simultaneously, one of which corresponds to universal assessment criteria, and the other – to ethno-specific criteria characteristic of a specific traditional culture. With such assessment all the indigenous population may be divided into four groups from the point of view of life quality and cultural security (table 1). The changes in the indigenous population's mode of life are expressed by the transition of its part from one group to another. Thus:

Transition to group D from any other group is negative in all cases.

Transitions from group D to C can be perceived as positive one, as well as transition from groups B and C to group A.

Transition from B to C can be perceived as acceptable, but not preferable.

Transitions from C to B as well as from D to A and B are not realistic.

Table 1. The scheme of the natives' mode of life quality assessment using two scales of values

Traditional indigenous values	Commonly used values	
	High	Low
High	A. Communities with good living conditions by both commonly used and traditional criteria (i. e. high income and good community services as well as good possibility to keep traditional values)	B. Communities with relatively bad living conditions by commonly used criteria but good possibility to keep traditional values
Low	C. Communities with relatively good living conditions by commonly used criteria but without possibility to keep traditional way of life	D. Communities with bad living conditions by both commonly used and traditional criteria (i. e. low income, bad community services and bad possibility to keep traditional values)

The described approach was used for working out the proposals on indigenous people's interests consideration while oil and gas resources development in the North of Western Siberia, particularly in Yamal area. It corresponds to the concept of cultural security, which is here understood as the capacity of indigenous communities to maintain its specific character in spite of changing conditions, real and virtual threats (Weaver, 1993; Forrest, 2004). This approach also complies with the World Bank policy, which stresses the necessity of the evaluation of quality of transformations taking place in the life of local population, including the total of social and cultural processes, and the importance of participation of local communities in decision making (Hall & Patrinos, 2012; World Bank, 2014).

A durable cultural sustainability is not so much culture protection against threats as the creation of conditions for its secure growth and development according to its own laws (Forrest, 2004). Two different approaches can be used to enhance the cultural security. The first one is to

ensure the conservative security, i.e. to reveal external challenges and to search for the ways to protect culture against them. The second one is to reinforce active security, i.e. to raise the ability of the cultural system itself to oppose different kinds of arising challenges.

Conservative approach is convenient mostly for assessment of negative impact on ethno-cultural environment. For this purpose we worked out “risks matrixes”. Risks matrix is a table the lines of which contain the list of components of ethno-cultural environment and its columns include negative impact sources. Each table cell contains negative changes degree or assessment of probability of negative impacts.

It is much more difficult to give an assessment of active security. It is possible to judge on the adaptation capability of ethnic communities by revealing how they use their traditional skills and technologies under new conditions. We used photo and video recording to document traditional skills and their modifications. We divided them into 4 groups (Klokov, 2011):

- Non-modified (almost unchangeable) traditional skills.
- Traditional skills adapted to a large extent to modern conditions. For example, Nenets actually make items for reindeer harness from plastic instead of reindeer horn which they used in the past.
- Non-traditional (borrowed) skills that are recently adapted to the traditional way of life. For example, nomadic reindeer herders had borrowed the technology of baking bread and adopted it to specific conditions of nomadic camps in tundra. Also some of them repurposed snowmobiles to transport goods in grass tundra during summer season.
- Completely new traditional skills. For example, Komies and Nenets’ community on Kanin Peninsula invented a completely new type of mobile dwelling which can be constructed or deconstructed in 20 minutes. This dwelling is used instead of traditional conic tent (“chum”).

All these categories of traditional skills are important for the traditional community culture to survive. Their combination makes it steady in the changeable regional environment and allows to transfer past experience to future generations and to ensure their cultural security.

6. Conclusion

The indigenous ethnic minorities of Northern Eurasia are the creators and keepers of valuable human cultures heritage that is an important part of modern world civilization. They will remain the bearers of life support adaptation systems in the local natural environment, of unique folk knowledge and peculiar mental values. Their traditional skills and technologies can be considered as cultural and historic values that must be protected and as a kind of ethno-cultural “capital” which can be demanded for as a resource for sustainable development.

The new methodology for assessment of traditional ethnic groups’ life conditions takes into account that their living space emerged on the intersection of several semiotic systems routed in different value perspectives. The value of environment can change depending on the cultural context in which it is considered because small ethnic communities are simultaneously included into two different value systems. The first one which is based on the income level and common living-standard criteria pertains to the dominant society. The second is based on internal ethnic criteria of indigenous minorities. It comprises the capability to keep traditional way of life, to be engaged on reindeer herding, fishing or hunting, to have close contact with motherland and access to sacred sites, to practice subsistence activities to get traditional local food, to speak mother language, etc. Assessment of living conditions from external and internal standpoints may differ greatly.

The new methodological approach advocates for cautious decision making in regional politics and helps to avoid losses of cultural heritage connected with acculturation process.

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