



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DEVELOPMENT
Mountain Societies Research Institute



Rural Migration in Kyrgyzstan: Drivers, Impact and Governance

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Abstract:

The development of Kyrgyzstan reveals two important trends: declining agricultural production and a steady increase of remittances from labor migration. These trends suggest a transformative effect of migration, negating an overly simplistic investment effect of financial remittances on long standing livelihood activities. Although many studies agree that labor migration contributes to poverty reduction in rural Kyrgyzstan, only little attention has been paid so far to the question: What effect does migration have on rural development? This research paper is based on a desk study that focused on investigation of the state of knowledge about migration, rural change and migration policy in modern Kyrgyzstan, and suggests recommendations of prominent areas for future studies.

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Keywords: migration, migration governance, migration drivers, migration impacts, rural change, Kyrgyzstan.

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List of Acronyms

CLIMIG	Migration, Climate Change and the Environment bibliographic database
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
EACH-FOR.....	Environmental Change and Forced Migration Scenarios research project of the European Commission
EAEU.....	Eurasian Economic Union
FIDH	International Federation for Human Rights
IOM.....	International Organization for Migration
NDSOS	State Agency for Environmental Protection and Forestry under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic
NOODU	National Assessment of the Educational Achievements 4 grad school students
NSC.....	National Statistic Comity
OECD.....	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
UNDP.....	United Nations Development Program
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund

1. Introduction

The profound reforms that took place in Kyrgyzstan after gaining independence in 1991 formed a new context for the economic and social development of the country. Liberalization of the market, privatization of the state estate, land and water reform, and the emergence of thousands of farmers with private land plots has led to a deep transformation. Following these reforms, the contribution of agriculture to GDP in this agricultural republic has dramatically decreased from 43.9% in 1996 to 12.3% in 2017 (Mogilevskii et al., 2017; NSC, 2017). The percentage of the working population employed declined from 60.1% in 2006 to 55.9% in 2017 in all sectors. While the population increased by 16% during the last decade, employment grew by only 7.6% due to limited opportunities caused by the slow development of the national economy (Tilekeyev et al., 2019).

Landlocked Kyrgyzstan is completely dependent on the transport system of neighboring states for agricultural exports, with most of the country's agricultural exports going to Kazakhstan and Russia. Limited access to foreign markets, along with the difficulties of meeting international quality standards, make it difficult for Kyrgyzstan's farmers to sell their products abroad. Because of this situation, migration has become an important adaptation strategy for farmers facing these agricultural problems. As a result, Kyrgyzstan has seen a steady decline in employment in agriculture, which peaked in 2000 at 52.4% of the population of the working age but dropped to 29.3% in 2015. This decrease in employment in the agricultural sector can be attributed to the migration of labor to the small-medium enterprise sector and abroad (Mogilevskii et al., 2017).

Rural residents, who account for 65% of the country's population, began to actively develop external labor markets. The oil boom that began in Russia in the early 2000s created and supported demand for external labor in the construction and services sector, in which labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan began to work in 2000¹. Labor migration from Kyrgyzstan was caused by both 'push' factors (e.g., the socio-economic crises) and 'pull' factors (e.g., the growing labor demand in oil-rich Russia and Kazakhstan).

According to the State Migration Service under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 740,500 Kyrgyzstan citizens were registered as migrants in 2018². The main destination countries for migrants are Russia, hosting 640,000 people; Kazakhstan: 35,000; Turkey: 30,000; USA: 15,000; Italy: 5500; Korea: 5000; Germany: 5000; UAE: 3000; and Great Britain: 2000. The main migration flow is legal, as there is no visa requirement between the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. However, in Russia and Kazakhstan, migrants who were already in these countries and who did not pass official registration procedures are recognized as 'illegal' (Reeves, 2013; Davé, 2014). These aspects are covered in more detail in the Migration Governance and Policy section of this paper.

It should be noted that the vast majority of sources considered in this paper are based on the study of labor migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia, and only a small number of studies focus on labor migration to Kazakhstan. Research on labor migration to other countries remains virtually nonexistent, and there is a lack of research on illegal migration to non-CIS countries.

1 In this review, I do not touch upon the history of migration and emigration in the territory of modern Kyrgyzstan, which was traditionally a large-scale phenomenon in the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods. I do also not consider permanent migration with ethnic roots (Russians emigrating to Russia, Germans emigrating to Germany etc.). I focus on the phenomenon of mass labor migration taking shape after 2000. For the history of migration processes and ethnic migration phenomenon more detail can be found in Schmidt, M., & Sagynbekova, L. (2008). Migration past and present: changing patterns in Kyrgyzstan. *Central Asian Survey*, 27(2), 111-127.

2 It should be noted that statistics on the number of migrants by the state bodies of Kyrgyzstan are usually based on data from the host countries. The data of the State Migration Service (statistics section) is available via this link: <http://ssm.gov.kg/>

During 2000 to 2017, several trends were identified in the flow of labor migration. Single men predominantly migrated in the early 2000s, while after 2011-2012 there was a trend toward family migration (Reeves, 2012; Sagynbekova, 2016) and female migration. Between 2016 and 2019, of all migrants (including family members) from Kyrgyzstan in Russia, about 40% are women and 18% are children (FIDH, 2016). In the early stages following independence, migration played the role of an additional source of income to supplement farming, migration has since gradually become the main source of income for households sending migrants (Lukashova & Makenbaeva, 2009; Sagynbekova, 2016). The seasonal migration of the 2000's began to transform into long, non-return migration, if migrants and members of their family received citizenship in their host country (Ibraeva & Ablezova, 2016). A trend towards diversification of destination countries occurred during 2016-2017. For example, in 2016, 27% of migrants did not follow the traditional destination of Russia: half these people went to Kazakhstan for work, and the remainder to Turkey, South Korea, and other countries (IOM, 2017).

Since the beginning of mass migration in the 2000's, the main migrant-sending regions have been those in the south of Kyrgyzstan - Batken, Jalal-Abad and Osh provinces³. The mobility of the northern regions - Chui, Issyk-Kul and Naryn provinces - became apparent only after 2010⁴. Migrant-sending regions are agrarian and characterized by low industrial revenue (share in the total industrial output of the Republic: 1.5% in Batken province, 1.6% in Osh province, 9.4% in Jalal-Abad province, and 0.85% in Naryn province (Koichuev & Koichuev 2011). The basis of agriculture is animal husbandry and crop production. Talas province which also has a low share of industrial activities 0.4% is an exception in the flow of external mobility. It has almost no external migrants, but rather participates in internal migration. Tilekeyev (2013), found that farmers in Talas province managed to establish a steady foreign market for beans, particularly in Turkey, and employment in agriculture remains stable and high compared to other regions of the country (Mogilevski et al., 2017).

Migration from villages to cities within Kyrgyzstan (internal migration) is a characteristic of all regions, the rural-rural migration (agricultural and construction labor) mostly from Batken, Jalal-Abad and Osh to Chui province. The main host cities are Bishkek, the capital, and Osh, the largest city in southern Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, small towns whose development was supported by Soviet industrial activities fell into decay after the collapse of the USSR. According to Kyrgyzstan's National Statistics Committee, urbanization has not exhibited a growth trend since independence with the exception of Bishkek and Osh. Meanwhile, the countryside has been actively transformed. Trans-local households have become the norm for rural areas: life in two countries, between rural and urban spaces, has not only affected rural regions with developed transport infrastructure, but also isolated mountain villages (Sagynbekova, 2017; Reeves, 2011)

Kyrgyzstan's poverty level remains high (see Appendix 1) and stood at 22.4% in 2018. Poverty and corruption in government agencies that provide social services make it difficult for the most vulnerable groups to access support (OECD, 2018). Access to social services is higher in cities than in rural areas, which in turn also stimulates internal migration (Chekirova, 2018). At the same time, chronic underfunding of institutions providing social services has led to their deplorable condition. For example, staff physician positions in primary health care were only 74% filled in 2005 and this declined to 53% in 2018,

3 Naryn province inhabitants were very active in internal migration; more on this can be found in Sarygulov (2000) *Sovremennaya demograficheskaya situatsia i formirovanie novykh tendentsii v razvitiu narodonaseleniya Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki*.

4 On April 7, 2010, a coup d'état took place in Kyrgyzstan, followed by an inter-ethnic conflict in Osh and Jalal-Abad oblasts. Political crises have a significant impact on decisions to migrate. For more details, refer to Ismailbekova, A. (2013). Coping strategies: public avoidance, migration, and marriage in the aftermath of the Osh conflict, *Fergana Valley. Nationalities Papers*, 41(1), 109-127.

of which 79% were of pre-retirement or retirement age⁵. The education sector is also experiencing an acute shortage of teachers. According to the Ministry of Education, in 2018 almost half (49%) of primary school teaching positions were not filled⁶. The decline in the quality of education leads to high levels of student failure in school. As shown in the findings of the 2017 stratified National Survey conducted by the Ministry of Education (NOODU), among primary school students, one in four students does not understand much of what they read and it is difficult for them to read for longer than a few minutes; one-third of fourth graders reads “slowly”; 60% of students do not understand the subject of geography (Rodinovedenie – in Russian; Tabiyat tanuu sabagy in Kyrgyz); and more than half of students do not understand math lessons (NOODU 2017, p.139). These results largely agree (with slight improvements in some parameters) with the results of NOODU obtained in 2007, 2009, and 2014.

Long-term deterioration in the quality of human resources and agrarian changes pose new challenges for Kyrgyzstan’s development policies. It is obvious that migration patterns in the country are deeply connected to development pathways. The purpose of this study is to synthesize the state of knowledge on migration, rural change and migration policy in Kyrgyzstan based on research after 2010⁷ and suggest an improved research and policy agenda for all interested stakeholders. This report covers the following: Migration drivers; Migration Impact; Migration Governance and Policy; Migration Government and National Development; and is guided by two main research questions.

1. Which economic, institutional, cultural and agro-environmental factors shape the two-sided interaction between migration on the one hand, and agricultural and rural change on the other?
2. Which governance interventions and contexts can harness migration to stimulate sustainable and gender equitable growth in agriculture, and reduce distress associated with the migration process?

2. Migration Drivers

2.1. Climate and Environmental Change

Kyrgyzstan is a mountainous country, which poses challenges for farming. Early frosts, long winters, spring floods, droughts, soil salinization, and the high risk of natural hazards are common stressors for the country’s agricultural sector (Mirzabaev, 2013; Bobojonov Aw-Hassan, 2014; Mogilevskii et al., 2017). This situation is further aggravated by the deterioration of irrigation and drainage networks and other Soviet-era agricultural infrastructures, and lack of investment in this sector. In this context, labor migration acts as a strategy to minimize risks in conditions of high uncertainty around agricultural income, but does not automatically generate sustainable agriculture practices (Sagynbekova, 2017a; Mogilevskii et al., 2017).

Climatic shocks have caused significant stress in agriculture over the past 20 years. The years 2000-2001 and 2007-2008 were the driest in the past 30 years in Central Asia (Bobojonov Aw-Hassan, 2014), leading to negative socio-economic consequences such as crop loss, food vulnerability of poor households, and increased prices of agricultural produce (Liobimtseva and Henebry, 2009). No data are available that directly link drought with migration, and the potential connection is mentioned only in few papers (Sagynbekova 2017a; Chandonnet et al., 2016).

5 Data of the Government of KR for 2018. Available at: <http://www.gov.kg/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Informatsiya.pdf>

6 Data of the Ministry of Education for 2018. Available at: <https://edu.gov.kg/ru/>

7 Earlier works were also included based on the degree of relevance.

Using the example of the village of Dobolu in Naryn province, Sagynbekova (2017a) found that 60% of the 55 surveyed households had experienced a crop failure within the past five years due to early cold snap and snowfall, drought, water shortage, intensive rainfall, land degradation. In that study, farmers pointed to environmental factors, lack of agricultural mechanization, and barriers to acquiring seeds and fertilizers as significant limitations to agriculture income in these mountainous areas (Sagynbekova, 2017a).

Studying the impact of climate change on agricultural income in Central Asia, Bobojonov and Aw-Hassan (2014) conclude that the impact will be diverse and will depend on agro-environmental and socio-economic factors. In their modeling of the impact of climate change on agricultural income in Kyrgyzstan, they conclude that producers in Kyrgyzstan may expect higher revenues, but also higher income volatilities in the future (Bobojonov Aw-Hassan, 2014, p. 254).

Migration in Kyrgyzstan is rarely considered in the context of climate and environmental change. Most migration studies in Kyrgyzstan believe that external labor migration is economically determined due to the meager labor market, demographic growth (40% of the population are young people), and low agricultural productivity. After a global analysis of 300 articles in the CLIMIG database on environmental displacement and migration, Blondin (2018) found only two articles about Kyrgyzstan. Data analysis in SCOPUS also confirmed the lack of literature on this issue. This study also demonstrated that there is virtually no academic research on this issue in local languages (Kyrgyz and Russian). Attention to the link between climate change and migration primarily focuses on environmental issues in reports of international organizations (IOM, UNDP) and development projects (EACH-FOR). The lack of data on the issue, and the difficulties in obtaining such data, are largely responsible for the lack of research⁸.

One of the latest surveys on environmental migration was conducted by the IOM in 2016 and covered 500 rural residents across Naryn, Issyk-Kul, Batken, Chui, and Jalal-Abad provinces. This analysis found that certain environmental conditions or events could influence the decision to migrate. Nine percent of respondents named floods (mudflows and high water), 11% drought, and 12% landslides as the reason for their decision to migrate. According to the respondents' opinion, land degradation (4%), industrial pollution (4%) and the impact of climate change (3%) are also significant factors in determining the decision to migrate. Among social and economic factors, unemployment (27%), family-related reasons (9%), and poverty (3%) were listed most often, while political factors such as community conflicts (0.8%) or religious conflicts (0.4%) comprised a minor role in the decision to migrate (Chandonnet, et al., 2016).

Available data indicate the important role that natural factors play in the decision to migrate, although it is still difficult to state whether the data define them as a trigger or as the root cause that produces migration (structural cause). In the aforementioned survey, the authors indicate that the "connection with the land of the ancestors" was stated as the main reason given by residents who refuse to leave their homes and move from areas that are under real threat from natural disasters (landslides and debris flows). Further studies of the regional impacts of environmental change are needed to understand the weight of environmental factors in current rural-urban and rural-rural migration.

2.2. Social Networks

The main pathways to recruit migrants are through social networks based on family/kin ties, job searches in the host country, and emergency assistance in the case of health problems and other contingencies in

⁸ The Agency for Hydrometeorology is chronically short of budget, which has led to the destruction of equipment at meteorological stations and to severe deterioration of equipment. Furthermore, data collected before the mid-2000s remains on paper and requires expensive manual processing to digitize it.

the host country. In a survey of 100 Kyrgyz migrants conducted in Russia in 2011, Sagynbekova (2016) found that 65% already had experience in engaging members of their household in work in Russia and 41% expressed a desire to engage more of their relatives in migration. Furthermore, 97% of the migrants surveyed indicated that their relatives and friends had helped them find a place to live and work in Russia (Sagynbekova, 2016).

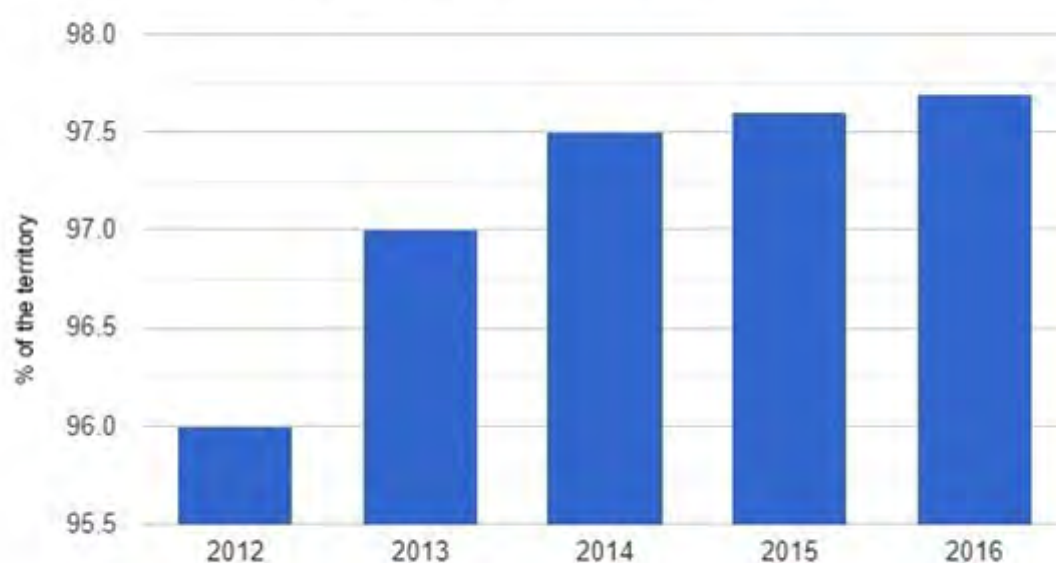
However, as noted by Aitieva (2015), it is important to account for the actual diversity of pro-migration support networks through which people migrate, not only with the support of relatives, but also from support of acquaintances (e.g., neighbors, classmates, colleagues). Migration appeared to foster non-kin commitments, as migrants increasingly avoided monetary relations with kin (Aitieva 2015, p. 85), based on an ethnographic study of kin networks from Naryn; however, it is not supported by findings from Batken (Reeves, 2012) or Jalal-Abad (Sagynbekova, 2016). It is widely documented that migrants from one village collectively work at the same construction sites, companies, and services industries, occupying economic niches⁹ in certain regions of the host country (Ekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Sakhalin, Moscow, and St. Petersburg in Russia; Almaty, South Kazakhstan region, and Nur-Sultan (Astana) in Kazakhstan).

An important aspect in the decision-making process around migration is also the decision on who should stay home. A study of migration in Sokh and Batken districts places the decision-making mechanism on migration in the context of the transformation of patriarchal norms and shows how the mobility of one family member affects the decision on the immobility of another family member (Reeves, 2011). Thus, the migration decision-making process has consequences arising from relational mobility. This decision is collectively made at a household level according to Ismailbekova (2014). It exposes power relationships within the household and is structured according to the prevailing gender norms of rural communities.

The role of online social media in determining migration in Kyrgyzstan remains poorly documented, although it is clear that social media are important given the emergence of trans-local households and the fact that internet access is growing. In 2019 Kyrgyzstan was ranked second globally for low cost mobile internet and mobile network coverage is growing steadily across the country (CABLE, 2019).

9 The anti-migrant crisis in Yakutia, Russia, in March 2019 is demonstrative in this regard, when, in the wake of protests against migrants from Central Asia, municipal transport was practically paralyzed for several days, as migrants occupying a niche of urban transport drivers in the capital of Yakutia did not go to work. More details are available here: https://rus.azattyk.org/a/russia_yakutsk_anti_migrants_protests/29831375.html

Figure 1. Kyrgyzstan Mobile network coverage



Source: *The Global Economy Telecommunication Union.*

https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Kyrgyzstan/Mobile_network_coverage/

Social media are also clearly used as tools for intimidating women migrants and stimulating trans-local discussions about “traditional values” and violence (Ibraeva et al., 2015). Against the background of the growth in female migration to Russia in 2011-2012, videos of violence against women migrants by the so-called “Patriots”, a group made up of male migrants from Kyrgyzstan, were uploaded to YouTube. The videos resonated widely¹⁰ in Kyrgyz society, and a member of parliament, Yrgal Kadyralieva, developed an initiative to ban women and girls under 22 from leaving to work without parental permission; however, this initiative was not supported in parliament and not accepted. In their study of social media discourse around this issue, Ibraeva et al. (2015) note that media discourses on the topic of violence against female migrants thus became the backbone for a new legitimization of violence against women in migration and locally (Ibraeva et al., 2015, p. 25). In the 2016 national representative study “Gender Perception in Society”, more than half of respondents indicated that they supported the actions of nationalist and violent groups including the “Patriots” against the so-called “bad behavior” of migrant women (UNFPA, 2016). This shows how social media can mobilize trans-local debates among diasporas, non-migrants, and local authorities, as well as exposing the burning issues of social marginalization of women migrants.

2.3. Culture and Changing Youth Aspirations

More than 65% of Kyrgyzstan’s population lives in rural areas, and 40% of the total population are young people whose main source of employment is agriculture (Tilekeyev, 2019). In addition to the obvious economic factors that push young people to migrate, studies diagnose a ‘fashion for migration’, where work experience in Russia is seen as the initiation of adolescent boys into adulthood (Reeves, 2012; Kikuta, 2016). In a study of female migration in Central Asia, Kikuta (2016) shows how the culture of mass consumption (wearing beautiful clothes, visiting beauty salons, and spending holidays eating in

¹⁰ Eleanor Beishenbek kyzy Operation Sapargul began. Azattyk September 18, 2012 // https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_patriots/24711728.html
Deputies deal with the “patriots.” Azattyk. June 10, 2012 // <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-migrants-of-russia-24609363.html>

restaurants) has significantly transformed traditional rural communities. This is illustrated in the case of makhalya (neighborhood) and shows how these changed norms influence the desire of young girls to leave for migration (Kikuta, 2016). A study in southern Kyrgyzstan notes that young people are experimenting with various global and regional cultural trends, demonstrating how their choices manifest in a kind of “marketplace for styles and identities” and “[are] also framed by a specific geographical and historical context” (Kirmse, 2010. p. 400).

Studies indicate that while adult and older migrants intend to, and do, return to villages, young migrants see their future in an urban rather than a rural environment (Thieme, 2014). The lack of employment opportunities in the rural labor market means that young people are usually employed in low-paid seasonal agricultural work, work that is unattractive to most, and, as a rule, young people are not motivated to connect their lives with agriculture, but are striving to become part of the middle class in cities (Roberts, 2010).

In their study of the rural labor market, Tilekeyev et al (2019) notes that young people, in fact, have only two choices: low-paid labor in agriculture or labor migration. Furthermore, rural areas in Kyrgyzstan’s southern provinces were found to provide fewer youth employment opportunities than rural areas in the north (Tilekeyev et al, 2019). However, young people are largely responsible for promoting small and medium-sized enterprises, an important sector for Kyrgyzstan, which is rapidly developing in the national economy (Tilekeyev et al., 2019). Businesses account for 40% of the country’s GDP and cover both small and medium-sized enterprises, individual entrepreneurs, and farmers.

Available ethnographic studies show that educational migration can become a point of entry into youth labor migration. Kyrgyz students in Russia consider this as a transit destination to future labor migration to China, Turkey, or the USA (Schröder & Stephan-Emmrich, 2016). On a more national wide representative scale, a different trend has been observed. Kyrgyz migrants invest a small part of their income in their own education or in the education of members of their household (Muktarbek kyzy et al., 2015). According to the 2011 study “Life in Kyrgyzstan”, which surveyed 1633 people representing youth of working age, the migration of one or more members of the household forces young people who have stayed in the family to become unpaid family workers. This phenomenon may reflect the need to replace a migrant worker in the household and has a more negative effect on female youth (Dávalos et al. 2017), essentially removing them from the wider workforce.

Most migrants from rural areas in Kyrgyzstan work in construction, trade, and services in Russian and Kazakhstani cities. They do not accumulate skills that could be applied in agriculture, but at the same time, they can bring back new economic niches to villages that did not exist before, such as cell phone repair, hairdressing salons, trade services, transport services, and carpentry shops (Sagynbekova, 2016).

There were no available studies concerning choices made by young people in employment among agriculture, migration, and education. Research into this topic would be especially relevant in the new migration context created by Kyrgyzstan’s entry into the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015. As noted by DeYoung (2010), in Kyrgyzstan, “a clear distinction is now drawn between those who are able to become ‘students’ versus those less fortunate who must work alongside their parents in agriculture, sell in the bazaar or migrate”. This raises a significant question as to what extent do youth studies help us understand the various employment strategies that are practiced in rural, urban, and trans-local contexts.

3. Migration Impacts

3.1. Livelihood Decision-making

Migration has a heterogeneous impact on livelihoods in the rural sector. Against the background of a growth in financial remittances and a relative decline in agricultural production, nonfarm activities are responsible for a growing proportion of the rural economy, which, according to researchers, provides 40% of rural employment and accounts for 48% of working time in rural areas (Atamanov van den Berg, 2012c). Many of these nonfarm activities are trade and services linked to agriculture.

Sagynbekova (2016) studied trans-local households in Jalal-Abad province located within the Arslanbob walnut forests and concluded that labor migration is a complementary source of income for households that otherwise rely on forestry, animal husbandry, and non-agricultural activities. The choice of sources of income is directly determined by the availability of pastureland. Environmental context plays a significant role in the migration strategy. The study noted natural shocks, such as a non-productive year or drought, as push factors (Sagynbekova, 2016). Availability of unoccupied economic niches in the village was also important for returnee migrants and their investment strategy for non-agricultural activities which in the study villages included transportation services, furniture making, and small-scale trading (Sagynbekova, 2016).

Researchers note the importance of specifying the impact of different types of migration (seasonal or permanent) on decisions about livelihood. Based on data analysis of a representative study conducted by the Asian Development Bank in 2008, Atamanov and van den Berg (2012b) concluded that educated villagers owning larger plots of land than others chose permanent or seasonal migration or switched from farming to non-farm activities. Meanwhile, poor households with lower levels of education and less land were more likely to move from farming to non-farm activities, as migration was an expensive strategy for them (Atamanov & Van den Berg, 2012b). These authors also argued that migration can have a positive financial effect on crop income for households with seasonal migrants and a small plot of land (0.05 ha per capita), but it has a negative financial effect for households with large plots of land (0.69 ha per capita) and permanent migrants. The long absence of a household member is only partially compensated by remittances from wage labor.

A study by Zunusova and Herrmann (2018) on data from the Life in Kyrgyzstan panel study shows a more expanded heterogeneous effect of migration on income. According to the analysis, the cumulative effect of international migration was negative on crop income, but positive on livestock income and mixed for nonagricultural income. Explaining the positive effect of transfers on nonagricultural income, the authors support the statement that "...migration can promote diversification of rural household's income sources. This in turn is associated with less income uncertainty and risk in the future and can provide a positive contribution to the economic development of a migrant-sending community" (Zunusova and Herrmann, 2018, p.889).

The findings of these studies show the diversity of effects that migration has on the choice of income sources for rural dwellers. Important variables are the level of education of rural residents, the size of land they own, and the type of migration. At the same time, these studies highlight the general trend of Kyrgyzstan's rural economy - a shift in employment from agricultural activities to nonfarm activities, as well as a certain passivity of migrant households with large land plots in extracting income from farming.

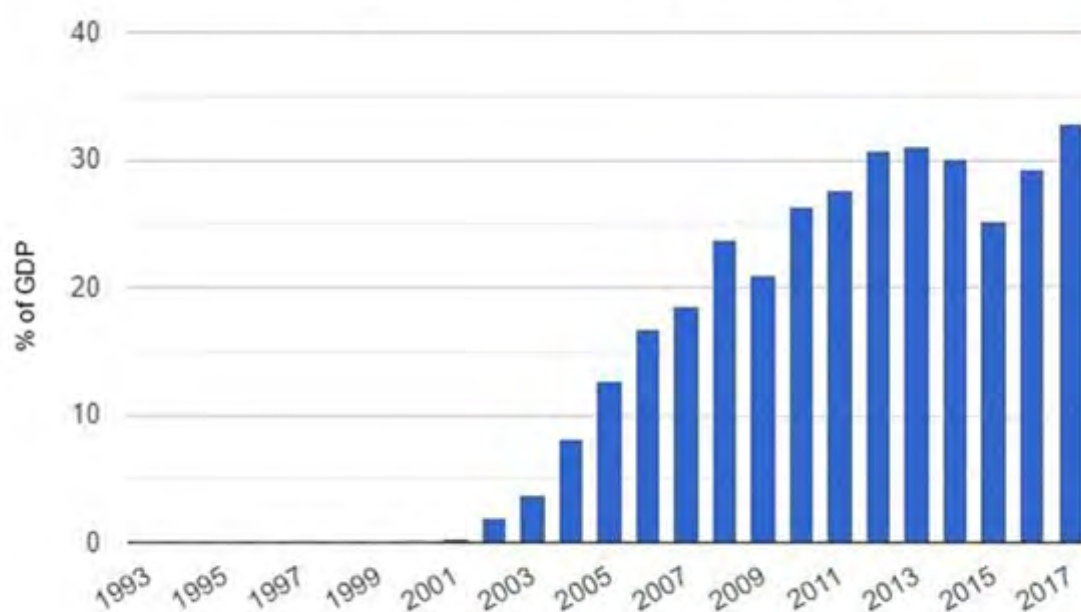
3.2. Remittances and Investment (or lack of investment)

Kyrgyzstan consistently ranks among the top five countries in the world in terms of the ratio of money remittances to GDP during the period of 2010-2017. World Bank data show that remittances have been

growing steadily in Kyrgyzstan since 2000, with a slight drop due to external economic shocks in 2008 and 2014. Various studies on the budget of migrant households agree that remittances reduce poverty and have a positive effect on consumption and imports. Thus, money remittances increase dependence on imports, which leads to a decrease in domestic investment including agriculture, making exports less competitive in the long run.

It should be noted that literature does not cover internal money transfers, making it impossible to assess more closely the influence of internal migration and remittances.

Figure 2. Kyrgyzstan – Remittance (present in GDP)



Source: World Bank

The main pool of macroeconomic studies is focused on the study of the structure of incomes and expenditures within the budget of migrant households. Studies agree that the bulk of remittances is spent on everyday household consumption and is invested in economic areas such as trade, services, and agriculture (Ukueva, 2010; Atamanov & Van den Berg, 2012a; Atabaev et al., 2014; Muktarbek kyzy et al., 2015; Eurasian Development Bank, 2015; Zhunusova, & Herrmann, 2018). Remittances are also actively invested in the construction, purchase, and repair of housing. This can be observed both in the countryside and in cities (Muktarbek kyzy et al., 2015; Nasritdinov, 2015).

Sagynbekova (2016) notes that the dynamics of using monetary remittances in rural areas is linked to periods of agricultural activity: spring field work (buying seeds, buying gasoline for farm machines) and the harvest season (paid labor/equipment). In agriculture, the main investments are made by purchasing livestock, the only liquid asset in many villages in Kyrgyzstan (Atamanov & Van den Berg, M. 2012a; Schoch et al., 2010). Nonetheless, there is no evidence that remittances are widely investing into the agriculture sector and agrarian crisis is partly due to this situation. The increasingly dilapidated irrigation and drainage systems pose high risk for agriculture and may be a reason that migrants choose not to invest in this sector (Mogilevski et al., 2017).

A special feature of remittance spending in Kyrgyzstan occurs within the framework of the economy of traditions. Migrants invest their transfers into paying for luxurious traditional celebrations such as weddings, funeral etc. Despite these burdensome expenses, migrant families often take out loans to cover such expenses or are forced to send additional family members for migration. Thus, rituals can be a symbolic and economic rational investment, reflecting desires to maintain social presence in conditions of trans-local life (Reeves, 2012), as well as a way to enter into new (or support existing) clan and patronage networks that play a key role in accessing economic benefits and which also serve as social security (Kapalova, 2014; Isabaeva, 2011; Aitieva, 2015). In response to the economic efficiency development discourse that criticizes such investments, Reeves argues that “calls to live “modestly,” to conduct ceremonies “by the clock,” to invest remittances in education or businesses rather than on life-cycle ceremonies, or to reduce the bride-price or the size of a young woman’s dowry are, [...] often undermined by social pressures that demand that those who have had a successful season “in town” invest their money in affirming social presence at home.” (Reeves, 2012, p.133).

The economy of traditions of Kyrgyz villages relies on remittances from migrants. In his study of the traditional (or *toi*) economy, Rubinov (2014) shows how migrant remittances support the gift economy, the goal of which is the development of kinship and wider social ties, while families of non-migrants with low incomes can be excluded from the networks built by migrant households, negatively affecting their social capital in the long term. An important gap in the study of money remittances is the question of what factors determine the different use patterns of transfers and what determines the change in behavior towards creating savings. It is also not clear what influence gender relations have in these processes.

3.3. Returnees’ Role in the Non-Farm Sector of Rural Economy, Rural-Urban Migration, and (Re)shaping Gender Relations

Case studies conducted in Kyrgyzstan’s southern and northern provinces show that returning migrants can be successfully involved in small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) (Sagynbekova, 2016; Schoch et al., 2010; Kapalova, 2014). The sector of small and medium-sized business is actively expanding in Kyrgyzstan, accounting for 40% of the country’s GDP and 37.7% of total employment (NSC, 2018). The sector is represented by small and medium-sized enterprises, individual entrepreneurs, and peasant farmers. As noted by Tilekeyev et al. (2019), growth in the SME sector has been spurred on by the activities of hundreds of thousands of business entities operating at a peasant farm level, as well as by the emergence of home-based micro-businesses. A successful migration strategy is the ability of migrants to accumulate funds to support themselves and their households with income-generating activities (Sagynbekova, 2016). Generally, these are small retail outlets, or taxi services. Regarding the latter, the use of remittances or savings of migrants to purchase cars can be considered both as a luxury and as an investment in an income-generating activity.

Meanwhile, another strategy widely employed by returning rural migrants is to move to cities (Thieme, 2014). This is because small and medium-sized enterprises are more developed in cities and migrants have greater opportunities to extract stable incomes from these activities than from agriculture, which is inherently risky. Migrants return to the villages if the male migrant is the youngest child in the family and, according to tradition, stay in the parental home and look after elderly parents (Ismailbekova, 2014). But as Thieme (2012, p.14) noted, in some cases this tradition can be negotiated among trans-local households and “the son who was least interested in migration has taken on the entire responsibility for his parents, independently of his age and position in the family”. Also, according to the observations by Sagynbekova (2016), returning migrants who remain in the villages generally do so because they have not accumulated sufficient funds to move to a city.

The social and cultural stresses experienced by returning migrants remain poorly studied. Psychological stress and health issues are the main difficulties experienced by returning migrants. Available data draw attention to the gender specificity of this matter. Communities stigmatize unmarried female migrants, who are seen as less attractive candidates for marriage (UNFPA, 2016; Reeves, 2011). Additionally, migration can have a positive effect on divorced women via opening economic possibility to separate their household from the extended parental household (UNFPA, 2016; Sagynbekova, 2016).

3.4. Pasture Degradation, Natural Resource Management, and the Migration Nexus

Migration appears to have an ambivalent effect on natural resources, but has not been thoroughly studied and is difficult to disentangle from other causes. On the one hand, there is an outflow of the population from employment in agriculture due to permanent migration, leading to a decrease in the load on arable land (Atamanov, A., & Van den Berg, M. 2012a). The other hand, the impact of migration on pastures remains controversial (Schoch et al., 2010; Shigaeva et al., 2016).

Although researchers point to a link between an increase in livestock numbers and pasture degradation (Schoch et al., 2010), the situation is more complex. Pasture degradation in Kyrgyzstan remains the focus of academic debate, since pasture is the main land resource. Only 12.1% of Kyrgyzstan's territory is arable land, but pastures cover 40% of the country and occupy 85% of the agricultural land structure (NDSOS, 2016). There is strong evidence that pasture degradation is the result of poor governance amid a series of deep and incomplete agricultural reforms (Liechti, 2012; Murzabekov, 2017). An acute problem observed in many regions that send migrants overseas is overgrazing on winter pastures located in close proximity to villages, and the absence of use of distant summer pastures. Often this is the result of a decline in rural infrastructure and also clustering of grazing pressure near streams causing channel degradation and downstream consequences (Allan, Castillo, 2007). The most frequently named contributing factors are dilapidated and destroyed bridges and roads resulting from natural hazards or a lack of finances at local levels, which prevents maintaining infrastructure in good working condition, and poor management of the local Pasture Committees (Shigaeva et al., 2016).

An equally important aspect, which has only recently surfaced in Kyrgyzstan, is how climate change affects pasture degradation in regions with high labor migration (Kulikov et al., 2016). Thus, it seems problematic to insist on a linear relationship between growth in livestock numbers and pasture degradation, since pasture degradation is the result of a set of interrelated factors, and there is insufficient evidence to suggest that one of them prevails. Additionally, the following question remains: how do migration and the trans-locality of households affect the natural resource management system? Working on the dynamics of natural resource management in border villages of Batken province, Murzakulova & Mestre (2016) found that community-based natural resource management institutions such as pasture committees (PCs) and water user associations (WUAs) function sporadically when a migrant, usually playing the role of chairman of such an association, returns to the village. Thus, community-based natural resource management institutions play the role of organizations on demand and experience a "brain drain" from regions with a high outflow of the local population to migration.

3.5. Changing Gender and Generational Roles

Migration appears to have an ambivalent effect on gender norms and generational roles in communities. Social anthropologists note that labor migration is extremely important for articulating the social norms of masculinity and femininity in a patriarchal society (Ismailbekova, 2014; Reeves, 2011; Aitieva, 2015). It is expressed through the fact that migrants, as 'real men', must take care of the material well-being of their family and provide material support to their parents, and migrant wives 'must' be the guardians of the family wellbeing by staying at home. But as these studies show, migration has an ambivalent effect on

the patriarchal gender order: by supporting this system migration also transforms norms. Reeves (2011), using the case of male labor migration from Sokh (an Uzbek enclave in Kyrgyzstan), shows that the clash between local gender norms, which require women to stay at home, and the economic reality, which requires economic activity from women, contributes to a transformation of patriarchal gender norms. Norms regarding the understanding of femininity and female ethics in rural areas are rapidly changing. The wives of male migrants can practice greater mobility outside their community, start earning money outside their homes, and engage in social public activities. At the same time, however, the young wives of migrants who do not have children are subjected to greater control by the relatives of their husbands, and their mobility within the community is limited as it is only possible if accompanied by a relative of their husband (Reeves, 2012). Although the context of Sokh is specific due to the isolation of this community, based on field visits it is largely applicable to similar places in the Batken region.

Ismailbekova (2014) describes the diversity of roles that young wives of migrants can play in their husband's family, depending on what position their spouse occupies in the family hierarchy. In this ethnographic study of migrant families, Ismailbekova showed that the wives of elder sons can occupy a central position in kinship and clan networks to enjoy honor despite their young age. In this regard, the husband's social position can allow a young wife to challenge generational hierarchies. However, if the husband is the youngest child in the family, the main burden of managing the household and caring for his parents rests entirely on the shoulders of his young wife (Ismailbekova, 2014).

In a study of female labor migration, Thieme (2008) notes that in addition to economic determinants, labor migration is a strategy to avoid forced marriage (*alakachuu*)¹¹ for rural girls and women aged 16–25. This is confirmed by the data of the study “Gender in the perception of society” conducted by UN-Women in 2016¹². At the same time, for middle-aged women (40–50 years old), external labor migration was accompanied by an acute marginalization of their social status. As a rule, middle-aged women received their education during the Soviet period and are trained engineers, teachers, and doctors, but due to the sharp decline of the income of their households, they were forced to work abroad, becoming janitors, dishwashers, or sellers at markets (Thieme, 2008). Despite the fact that some female labor migrants now have the status of chief bread-winner for their family, and the fact that these changes were widely accepted by the patriarchal society, it did not lead to a revision of their role within the family, or to negotiations on equal rights within migrant households (Thieme, 2008; Isabaeva, 2011; Kikuta, 2016).

Traditionally, parents cover the wedding expenses of their sons and the costs of their housing. However, young migrants of marriageable age virtually always bear these costs themselves. Nevertheless, this does not guarantee them the freedom to choose their bride, the list of wedding guests, or the event venue. As a rule, the financial independence of both male and female migrants does not equate to the redistribution of power or transformation of generational hierarchies in trans-local households, and these households continue to be structured according to patriarchal norms (Ismailbekova, 2014; Reeves, 2011; Aitieva, 2015).

Although the role of the older generation (grandparents) in trans-local households has been widely documented in the grey literature, academic research into this area is lacking. It is clear that the migration of one or both parents puts a strain on the older generation, which takes responsibility for the grandchildren (Thieme, 2014; Isabaeva, 2011; Kikuta, 2016).

11 For more information on this topic, see Kleinbach, R., & Salimjanova, L. (2007). *Kyz ala kachuu and adat: non-consensual bride kidnapping and tradition in Kyrgyzstan*. *Central Asian Survey*, 26(2), 217–233.

12 Qualitative data from this study are available upon request.

3.6. Changing Inequalities

As a result of land reform in Kyrgyzstan, almost every adult household member received an allotment of land and property during the privatization period. In this regard, inequality based on land ownership should not be an important variable for a country study, but rather the size of the land owned. There is a substantial difference between regions. In the south Kyrgyzstan, the size of arable land per capita is three times less than that in the north (Atamanov & van den Berg, 2012b, p.621).

Various sources agree that money transfers reduce absolute poverty in the country (Eurasian Development Bank, 2015; Murodova, 2018). Despite this, the direct correlation between the reduction of poverty in Kyrgyzstan due to the direct impact of remittances should be treated with caution (see section on Migration and Management: Remittances and the EAEU Migration Regime). Clearly, decreases in poverty during the past 25 years (see Appendix 1) is occurring against a background of stable growth in remittances. However, no studies were available on the impact of transfers on relative poverty in the country, an indicator that could give a more detailed picture of the relationship among migration, remittances, and inequality in Kyrgyzstan.

At the same time, the impact of migration on inequality extends beyond remittances. For example, the social effects of migration can translate into negative impacts on human capital of certain household members and lead to a subsequent inequality of opportunities for these individuals. As shown in the NOODU study, children with both two parents in migration have significantly lower academic scores than those who have at least one parent at home (NOODU, 2017). A 2016 FIDH study report noted: “Children left in Kyrgyzstan tend to have more responsibilities in the households in which they live. For example, they often assume the responsibilities of the elderly, if the elderly are no longer capable. They also do agricultural work. As a result, children often skip school, especially during the spring and fall agricultural seasons” (FIDH, 2016, p. 50).

4. Migration Governance and Policy

4.1. National Legislation:

The first wave of legislative activity affecting Kyrgyzstan migration policy, characterized by reforms made from 2000 to 2013, included the development of fundamental legal regulation of the migration processes and initiated with the adoption of the “Concept of State Demographic and Migration Policy” in 2000. Four years later, against the backdrop of increasing migration to Russia, the “Concept of the Migration Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic until 2010” was adopted. The main message conveyed by this Concept was that the government considered labor migration capable of solving the problems of the domestic labor market and labor excess through foreign markets (Government Conception, 2004). The subsequent Law on External Labor Migration was adopted in 2009, and the Program for the Promotion of Employment and Regulation of Internal and External Labor Migration until 2020 (Programma, 2013) focused on the need for professional training for migrants and improving the educational system at all levels to achieve this.

The subsequent wave of legislative activity focused on the Kyrgyz diasporas: The Law on the Basics of State Policy for the Support of Compatriots Abroad was adopted in 2013 and the Council for Relations with Compatriots under the Government was established in 2015. In 2018, the Mekenim Pilot Program for Supporting Migrant Workers and Their Families for 2019-2020 was submitted to the Parliament for consideration. According to the program, compatriots holding the citizenship of another country would be able to stay in Kyrgyzstan without a visa or registration and have the right to purchase real estate.

Government with support from IOM established two consultation platforms: the first for promoting Policy related to diaspora – the Council for Relations with Compatriots Abroad under the Government in 2015. The second the Coordination Council on Migration Issues under the Government in 2016. The Council’s task is to coordinate the activities of State organs, and social and international organizations, and to prepare policy recommendations relating to migration.

The discussion of the new Concept for migration policy, designed to regulate migration until 2040, has been taking place since 2016. According to the draft document, the government continues to consider foreign labor markets as an opportunity to solve the problem of labor excess in Kyrgyzstan. The Concept draft prioritizes the diversification of migration flow, the protection of the rights of migrants in host countries and the promotion of their legal employment, the development of a cluster economy, and the growth of the urban population. Immigration policy aimed at kayrilmans, ethnic Kyrgyz, who have settled or want to settle in Kyrgyzstan, remains unchanged and retains simplified citizenship and social benefits for this group.

An important advance for migration policy, as demonstrated in the National Development Strategy of Kyrgyzstan for 2018-2040 years, is the call for maintaining the ethno-cultural identity of migrant workers and facilitating the process of voluntary re/settlement of ethnic Kyrgyz people in the Kyrgyz Republic (Strategiya, 2018). Although, as before, the topic of migration not considered as part of economic policy, it should be noted that for the first time it has been articulated in the context of the development of “diasporal culture”, while previous country development documents had generally ignored the topic of migration altogether.

In 2017, the government adopted two documents aimed at stimulating regional development and agriculture, which were linked to the migration processes occurring in the country: The Concept of Regional Policy for the period 2018-2022 and the State Program for Irrigation Development of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2017-2026. The Concept document assumes the development of processing enterprises in order to reduce unemployment and, as a result, reduce migration from the southern provinces, with a special focus on Batken province (Government Conception, 2017). The Program document states that the development of irrigation infrastructure is a solution for local food security issues caused by migration from rural areas, and a tool to alleviate poverty (Programma, 2017).

An important step towards improving coordination among government bodies and statistical records of migration processes in Kyrgyzstan was the introduction of the Unified System of Registration for External Migration in 2017. Before that, migration statistics were based on data from host countries, and scattered data from public institutions in Kyrgyzstan and the National Statistical Committee. However, the new system is coordinated by the State Security Committee, and its data are not publicly available and, as such, it is not possible to use these data for research purposes or to evaluate their quality. The issue of registration of internal migration remains unresolved and there are sparse reliable data on the structure of internal movements, the age of internal migrants, ethnic demographics, or the spatial features of migration.

Between 2013 and 2019, urgent requests were made by experts for the government to adopt a new migration concept¹³ (the previous concept had been designed for the period until 2010). The main criticism

13 For example, see the Report of the National Institute for Strategic Studies Development of the Concept of migration policy of Kyrgyzstan. Available at: https://www.auca.kg/uploads/Migration_Database/Publications/18_migrac_report.pdf; and expert opinion by Anar Musabaeva “The concepts of migration policy in Kyrgyzstan: are they changing?” Available at: <https://cabar.asia/ru/kontseptsii-migratsionnoj-politiki-v-kyrgyzstane-menyayutsya-li-oni/>

of the approach was that migration policy continued to be emphasized by the Government in utilitarian tones, such as how to use monetary remittances for investment purposes, and in ideological tones that focused on strengthening ties with diasporas. The social consequences of migration, weak economic growth, and a drop in human development index scores were not recognized as part of the same process. In general, it can be concluded that the legislative initiatives discussed previously, retrospectively accompanied migration processes and did not provide mechanisms for managing these processes. The first attempts to link migration policy with rural development were made in 2017, although migration policy is still not considered in the context of the country's economic, social, and demographic context and dynamics.

4.2. Bilateral Agreements and Regional Initiatives to Control Migration Processes:

The focus of bilateral agreements is on protecting the rights of migrants in the host country and providing them with social services. Kyrgyzstan has a number of bilateral agreements with Russia, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan¹⁴ on the protection of the rights of labor migrants and their families. Currently, the government is working on a bilateral agreement with Russia on the organized recruitment of Kyrgyzstani citizens for temporary work. There are also Memorandums with South Korea and Japan.

Kyrgyzstan has joined the Almaty Process, which is a regional consultative process for the protection of refugees and international migrants in Central Asia. This platform aims at improving regional cooperation and coordination on mixed migration and refugee protection.¹⁵

The migration policy of Russian Federation has major influences on migration processes in Kyrgyzstan, as well as in most former Soviet countries. The migration corridor between Russia and former Soviet countries ranks second worldwide to the migration between the United States and Latin America (Ryazantsev et al., 2017). A program for the voluntary resettlement of compatriots (ethnic Russians) has been running in Russia since 2006, but it has not been very effective and only 800,000 people have received citizenship under the program from a total of 25 million of the possible beneficiaries¹⁶. The acute problem of depopulation in Russia is addressed within the new State Concept of Migration Policy until 2025, which was adopted in 2018. Although the previous concept (adopted in 2012) was also designed to be in force until 2025, the severity of the problem required more rapid solutions and approaches. The new Concept explicitly states that migration is a source of replenishment of Russia's population (Ukaz, 2018, p. 15). Russian migration policy aims to create conditions for attracting more qualified migrants from former Soviet countries, providing a facilitated regime of Russian citizenship and social support.

The factors attracting migrants from Kyrgyzstan to Russia remain the same: lack of employment in Kyrgyzstan, agricultural changes, the desire to make incomes more sustainable through their diversification, low cost of migration to Russia compare to EU, Gulf countries, USA or South Korea. Furthermore, the fact that Russia has declared education, healthcare, and agriculture specialists as priority professions for employment in Russia will continue to have a major influence on the decision of these specialists to leave their own countries for employment in Russia.

In 2015, Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), members which include Russia,

14 There is active seasonal migration in the border areas between Kyrgyzstan (Batken province) and Tajikistan (Sughd province) in which mostly Kyrgyz farmers hire Tajik migrants for agricultural work. Seasonal migration was also widespread in the border areas between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, but the militarization of the border has since led to a break in this practice. For further details see Murzakulova & Mestre (2018).

15 More details about the Almaty process can be found on the official website: <https://unhcr.kz/rus/almatyprocess/>

16 For more details of the discussion see: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4031954>

Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Armenia. Membership in the EAEU grants the following rights to Kyrgyz migrants as citizens of the union: (1) in member countries they can be hired outside the quotas established for foreign citizens; (2) they do not need to obtain a work permit; (3) a migrant worker and his/her family members are exempted from registration within 30 days from the date of entry if they have an employment contract; (4) documents on education issued by educational institutions of Kyrgyzstan are recognized without additional procedures, with the exception of documents on education for teaching, law, medical and pharmaceutical activities; and (5) the employee tenure is counted in the overall employee tenure for social security purposes, except for pensions, in accordance with the legislation of the country of employment.

Pension provision remains a topic of hot discussion within the EAEU, since each member country has a different pension system. Member governments continue to search for a compromise to create an integrated pension system.

One of the important provisions of the EAEU is social guarantees for migrant families, under which, children of migrants have the right to attend preschool and to receive education in accordance with the legislation of the host country. EAEU Member States also provide workers and their family members with the right to receive free emergency medical care, the same as member state citizens, regardless of whether a certificate of medical insurance is presented.

Although joining the EAEU has not brought significant economic benefits to Kyrgyzstan, for migrant workers, EAEU membership has greatly facilitated their stay in Russia and given them a competitive advantage when compared to migrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. However, despite these advantages, there is no movement of labor migrants from low-paid areas of employment (Sagynbekova, 2017a) and invisible labor market barriers remain (Ulanova, 2017; Nasritdinov & Kozhoeva, 2017).

4.3. The Impact of the Regulation of International Migration on Livelihoods in Sending Regions

The issue of the impact of migration policy on monetary remittances has interesting dimensions. Remittances to Kyrgyzstan had been growing steadily during 2011-2013 of a strict migration policy in Russia. For example, in 2012, to obtain a work permit, migrants needed to pass tests in Russian language and culture, purchase an expensive work permit, and register with local authorities within seven days (prior to 2011 the deadline for registration was even shorter: 3 days). Remittances continued to grow when Russia's migration policy towards migrants from Kyrgyzstan became less strict following Kyrgyzstan's entry into the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 (Table 2). While the question of the correlation between the growth and/or decline of remittances and changes in migration regimes of host countries remains unresolved in the literature, the negative impact on the volume of remittances is widely supported during the international economic crisis of 2008 and the currency crisis in Russia in 2014 (Lukashova & Makenbaeva, 2009; Smith & Swain, 2010; Sagynbekova, 2017b; Mogilevski et al., 2018).

Kyrgyzstan's entry into the EAEU took place against the backdrop of the currency crisis in Russia caused by the sanctions imposed by Western countries following the conflict in Ukraine. The Russian Ruble lost about 40% of its value in 2014¹⁷, leading to a sharp devaluation of the earnings of labor migrants. The situation particularly impacted migrants employed in low-paid sectors, where the majority of labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan were working (Beishenaly et al., 2013). A study by Sagynbaeva (2017b) in

17 More details about currency crisis in Russia: <https://www.forbes.ru/mneniya-column/makroekonomika/309219-devalvatsiya-2014-kakim-mog-byt-mekhanizm-padeniya-rublya>

Moscow and the Moscow Region in 2016 showed how the devaluation of the Ruble caused Kyrgyz labor migrants to develop several adaptation strategies. A majority of the study participants significantly reduced their expenses and stopped sending remittances home, and very few decided to return to their homeland. During that period, the volume of remittances to Kyrgyzstan fell from 30.3% of GDP in 2014 to 25.7% in 2015 (World Bank, 2019). At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that this fall was also due to the fact that in the wake of the fight against illegal migration in 2014-2015, Russia introduced a so-called 'black list' of migrants. Migrants violating the rules of stay in Russia were detained, deported, and banned from re-entering Russia. The duration of the re-entry ban varied depending on the type of offense. In 2015, 180,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan were blacklisted; in 2017, 110,000; in 2018, 77,000¹⁸; and, as of 1 January 2019, the number stood at 51,000 (IOM, 2018).

The economic crisis in Russia, as well as the introduction of a ban on re-entry of blacklisted migrants negatively affected households in regions with high poverty levels: Batken, Jalal-Abad, Osh and Naryn (IOM, 2017). Studies have documented the negative social impacts of these processes on migrant-sending communities in 2014-2015. Households in which adult family members were blacklisted tended to send minors (the household children) to Russia (Omurkulova-Ozerska & Kiyizbaeva, 2018). No detailed studies or analyses of these processes in sending communities are available, most likely because the situation changed dramatically one year later.

The Kyrgyzstan entry into the EAEU in 2015 mitigated the consequences of the Russian economic crisis and of Russia's migrant 'black list'. The extension of registration of migrants from 5 to 30 days, the abolition of work permits for citizens of EAEU member states, and the consistent removal of migrants from Kyrgyzstan from the 'black list' contributed to the next influx of migrants (Nasritdinov & Kozhoeva, 2017). In January 2014, 560,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan were registered in Russia. By January 2015 this number decreased to 502,000, a decline of about 10%, but in February 2016 (after Kyrgyzstan's entry into the EAEU) the number had risen to 550,000 (Sagynbekova, 2017b).

It is important to note that the impacts of Kyrgyzstan joining the EAEU was, for both rural residents and Kyrgyzstan's economy, not limited only to the change of Russia's migration regime, but also the subsequent influence on remittances. An important nuance in discussions around money transfers is that these transfers include income from trade business between Kyrgyz and Russian individual entrepreneurs who specialize on informal re-export of Chinese goods¹⁹ - i.e. income from non-migrants. As a result, in 2018 Russia imposed a ban on money transfers above 100,000 rubles (approx. USD 1,500) to a number of countries, including Kyrgyzstan.

The informal re-export of Chinese goods was an important part of Kyrgyzstan's economy not only in terms of the volume of remittances, but also in terms of the labor market within Kyrgyzstan. The wholesale markets of Chinese goods in the Dordoi and Madina markets employ more than 40,000 people, and a significant number of these have jobs due to the multiplier effect that these markets produce (Nasritdinov & Kozhoeva, 2017). Joining the EAEU has significantly reduced this economic niche, as customs tariffs on imports from China have increased, and Kyrgyzstan is gradually losing its advantage over Kazakhstan as a transit country between China and the Central Asian and Russian markets (Mogilevskii, 2012). No data were available to better understand how many people have left this niche, and how the reduction

18 The numbers are taken from: The figure of the day. 77,000 Kyrgyz remain on the black list of the FMS of Russia. Available at: https://kaktus.media/doc/371544_cifra_dnia_77_tysiach_kyrgyzstancsev_ostautsia_v_chernom_spiske_fms_rossii.html. Accessed 9 September 2019.

19 Informal re-export of Chinese goods is an important part of Kyrgyzstan's economy. According to some research it amounted to 3.3 billion US dollars in 2011. For more details see Mogilevskii et al., 2018.

of this niche has influenced the decision around external labor migration and the choice of destination country. Similarly, further research is needed to study the dynamics of the rural economy in the context of a reduction of the informal re-export of Chinese goods. For example, for local residents of the Savai ayil aimak (municipality) in Osh province, which hosts the largest wholesale market of Chinese goods in southern Kyrgyzstan, these changes could affect the structure of income sources, possibly causing a redistribution from nonfarm income to migration and on-farm income.

Migrants adapt to economic and regulatory dynamics in the host country. Of particular research interest is how the economic uncertainty in 2014, following the Russian currency crisis, stimulated interest in new employment sectors and how new players, such as employment agencies, reacted to these shifts.

Recruitment agencies are a relatively new phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan since the bulk of migrants travel to Russia and Kazakhstan without the need for visas and use their kinship or social networks to obtain employment. At the same time, the government is making efforts to diversify destination countries and, with this aim, to regulate the activities of private employment agencies, of which 131 were registered as of August 2019. These agencies are officially accredited and recruit workers to countries such as South Korea (agricultural work, construction), Gulf countries (service sphere), Turkey (services, tourism, trade), Poland, and the Czech Republic (truck drivers, agricultural workers, services)²⁰. The program of action of the State Migration Service of the Kyrgyz Republic indicates that the country is in the process of negotiating with Russia on the organised recruitment of Kyrgyzstan's citizens for work in various regions of Russia. However, it is difficult to determine at this stage if such programs will be utilized by labor migrants who traditionally rely on their own social networks in all matters regarding employment and life in Russia. A literature search found no studies focused on the role and effectiveness of recruitment agencies' activities.

4.4. Internal Migration Impacts

Kyrgyzstan has retained the system of registration, in which citizens are registered at their place of residence as practiced during the Soviet period (Hatcher & Thieme, 2016), but with new economic and political realities, the system became more flexible. Following criticism of the registration system by non-governmental organizations, the process of registration has become easier, the number of documents required for registration has decreased, and the introduction of an electronic registration system is being considered. The latter does not require citizens to be present in the State Registration Service to become registered (Ibraeva & Ablezova, 2016).

Legally, the key problem for the current registration system in Kyrgyzstan is the contradiction between national legislation and the rules of registration. For example, the constitution establishes the right of all citizens to education, while the registration system restricts the rights of internal migrant²¹ children to primary education, because school enrolment requires children to be registered in their place of residence (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2012). The same practice applies to access to medical services. To receive medical services, one must register at a clinic with a document of registration or temporary registration at the place of residence.

Serious barriers exist preventing internal migrants from registering in rental housing because of provisions in the law on inheritance. This law states that all citizens registered at an address have the right to claim a share of that property within 6 months of the death of the legal owner. Thus, owners are often

²⁰ The data of the State Migration Service (recruitment agencies section) is available via this link: <http://ssm.gov.kg/>

²¹ Rural residents who move to Bishkek or another urban area of Kyrgyzstan for employment.

reticent to allow renters to legally register themselves at their location of residence, creating a significant barrier to the registration of internal migrants (Chekirova, 2018). This rule is a significant barrier to the registration of migrants in rented apartments at the place of actual residence.

It should be highlighted that internal migrants are predominantly concentrated in new settlements around Bishkek and to a lesser extent around Osh. Before independence, these areas were agricultural, however, following mass internal migration these lands were periodically subject to unauthorized seizures. In response to the massive seizure of agricultural land, the government introduced a moratorium on the transformation of agricultural land to other types of land in 2009. Nevertheless, the moratorium could not stop the process of unauthorized land seizures. As a result, the first new settlements of internal migrants, such as Ak-Orgo in south of Bishkek, became recognized as an official part of the city, and urban services were extended to the area. For other new illegally settled areas that emerged later, the problem of their unofficial status persists. The Bishkek city administration and neighboring rural municipalities in Chui province refuse to recognize these settlements or accept them in their administrative boundaries. Thus, housing that was built in new settlements on former agricultural lands does not have an official status, and migrants cannot register in their new homes or access social services within these new settlements.

Since the moratorium made it impossible to legally sell agricultural land for individual construction, large landowners used illegal transformation, bypassing the laws, and subdivided their large agricultural plots to sell. This spawned an illegal land market²². As a result, dozens of new settlements grew around Bishkek.

As the problems of new illegal settlements grew, the government showed little interest in a solution. Civilian pressure intensified, and residents of several new settlements joined together in the “Transformation” movement, demanding authorities to quickly resolve issues of new settlement legality. As a result, in 2018, the Parliament adopted a law authorizing the transformation of agricultural land into a category of land for individual construction, while maintaining a number of restrictions: the law allows the transformation of lands that had actually been taken out of circulation before the introduction of the 2009 moratorium. Lands with hazards (e.g., toxic burial dumps or high-voltage electric lines) do not fall under the jurisdiction of this law.

Most studies on new settlements and internal migration note the marginal status of internal migrants (Flynn & Kosmarskaya, 2012) and describe in detail the discriminatory practices (Chekirova, 2018; Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2012; Nasritdinov et al., 2012). Remaining questions include: How did internal migration influence the development of Bishkek? What new social practices and economic niches have supported Bishkek’s development? Similarly, there is no research on internal mobility to Osh and cities in Chui province (Kara-Balta, Tokmok, Kant).

5. Migration Governance and National Development

There are no specialized government programs in Kyrgyzstan that support migrant families that are left behind. However, many projects delivered by international and civil society organizations aim at mitigating the social consequences of migration. The Partnership Civil Platform Central Asia in Motion, which

22 The most revealing example of this can be taken from the Birimdik-Kut new settlement. For more details see Residents of the Birimdik-Kut new settlement demand clarification of the situation with Samakov’s land. Available at: <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27277192.html>; and Residents of the Birimdik Kut new settlement: One hand gives us land, the other hand takes it away. Available at: https://24.kg/obschestvo/20416_jiteli_jilmasiva_birimdik_kut_odnoy_rukoy_nam_dayut_zemli_drugoy_otnimayut/

unites more than 30 NGOs in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, has created Small Community Councils²³ at the local level in Kyrgyzstan, which bring together representatives of local authorities, social and medical workers, women's and youth committees, and active local actors. The Council's tasks include identifying migrant families and providing legal support locally, monitoring the situation of migrant workers families in Kyrgyzstan, and building the capacity of potential migrant families through information provision, training, and seminars. In 2012, this group facilitated the creation of the Major Public Council, which aims to promote and protect the rights of residual members of migrant families at the national level.

I found no information that could help analyze the influence or effectiveness of the Major Public Council structure. Perhaps its work is unnoticed due to the local nature of network's activities and remains absent in the reports of international organizations focused on the national picture.

The social structure of Kyrgyz society is represented by an extended family where parents leave their children in the care of their grandparents (Thieme, 2012). However, the emergence of a new type of trans-local migrant families challenges and renegotiates this practice. As noted by Isabaeva (2011), migrant parents are leaving their children for longer periods of time causing increased loads on the elderly. Another study noted increases in agricultural work and increases in family members caring for female of the family that were left behind (Karymshakov & Sulaimanova, 2017).

According to UNICEF, 119,000 children in Kyrgyzstan were left by their migrant parents in the care of relatives or in shelters in 2018 (UNICEF, 2019). In 2014, after a number of cases of violence against these children left by migrants in the care of their relatives, the government introduced the practice of registering the children of migrants as students in schools and created local monitoring groups to prevent child abuse. In 2019, UNICEF issued a statement²⁴ calling for the adoption of a law on mandatory custody of migrant children, but the government is yet to support this initiative. The adoption of this law is aimed at ensuring that relatives are legally liable for children left behind.

5.1. Skill Development for Migrants

In 2018, Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Economy outlined the Mekenim program to help migrants invest money in private business projects in their homeland. The program, which is yet to begin, will provide citizens an opportunity to receive a soft loan of up to 1 million som (14,500\$) for a period of up to 36 months based on the "1 + 1" principle. For each Kyrgyz som from remittances invested by a labor migrant, the program will also put one som into the initiative. Commercial banks will provide the soft loans, while the government will subsidize interest rates. The interest rates that migrants will be able to obtain on loans remains a subject of discussion. The program does not provide special incentives for business projects related to agriculture. Currently, the government is still negotiating with donors to secure the funds necessary to launch and implement the program²⁵.

For several years IOM has been implementing projects aimed at improving the professional skills of migrants from Kyrgyzstan. However, the organization has not yet implemented a long-term program focusing on this activity and currently it is difficult to analyze the specific effect of these projects on send-

23 As of September 2019, 35 small councils have been created. More information about the movement is available on the website: http://camplatform.org/?page_id=3435

24 The statement is available at: UNICEF calls for mandatory guardianship for migrant children: <https://www.unicef.org/kyrgyzstan/ru>. Accessed 10.09.2019.

25 For more details see: On the need for further cooperation of the Ministry of Economy of the Kyrgyz Republic and the OSCE Program Office in Bishkek. Available at <http://mineconom.gov.kg/ru/post/5879>. Accessed 10.10.2019.

ing communities. In 2019, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH (German Society for International Cooperation) launched a pilot project called “Skills for Reintegration”, in which migrants²⁶ were supported to reintegrate into the domestic labor market through self-employment by opening businesses and starting to work because of additional skills acquired through the project’s training programs and workshops. According to the new EU strategy in Central Asia, adopted on 17 June 2019, migration is not a priority area of cooperation²⁷. In this regard, projects aimed at supporting migrant families or the reintegration of returning migrants will probably experience a decline in future funding.

5.2. Policies Which Seek to Support ‘Returnees’

An important nuance in discussions about returning migrants is the definition of ‘returnee’. There are three approaches to determining the category of returnees in Kyrgyzstan. The government has identified ethnic Kyrgyz with foreign citizenship who apply for Kyrgyzstan citizenship as returnees, whose rights are regulated under the Kayrylman program and the Law on Repatriates adopted in 2007. Forty-three thousand ethnic Kyrgyz people received citizenship of Kyrgyzstan under this program, and this number is comprised mainly of people who “returned” to Kyrgyzstan from the neighboring countries of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. This group is mainly settled in rural areas in Chui, Jalal-Abad and Batken provinces²⁸.

Kayrylman status can also be applied to those labor migrants who renounced citizenship of Kyrgyzstan upon obtaining Russian citizenship. About 570,000 Kyrgyzstan citizens received Russian citizenship²⁹ since independence. This number includes citizens who renounced their citizenship of the Kyrgyz Republic and those who did not renounce it. People could remain dual citizens until 2014 when Russia passed a rule on the mandatory renunciation of previous citizenship under the Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens. This creates a paradox: Russia and Kyrgyzstan do not have an international agreement recognizing dual citizenship, but do not prohibit their citizens from actually being citizens of both countries.

The second approach recognizes “returnees” as former citizens of Kyrgyzstan who no longer have citizenship but who regularly visit the country. The so-called Meken Card has been developed for this category - a compatriot certificate that allows individuals to stay in Kyrgyzstan without registration and recognizes their right to purchase real estate.

The third approach focuses on labor migrants who are citizens of Kyrgyzstan working abroad and returning to Kyrgyzstan for an indefinite period. This definition is very vague. For example, migrants who defined their status as “returning forever” (not returning to Russia) during interviews, but then return back to Russia after one year based on a follow-up interviews (Sagynbekova, 2016). Atamanov and van den Berg (2012b) separate seasonal migrants who return to villages every year during winter from permanent migrants who return once every few years.

Thus, we can conclude that the use of the concept ‘returnee’ is largely determined by the migration context. At the same time, a new category is emerging in the literature: ‘non-returnees to Kyrgyzstan’. Those

26 It should be noted that the coverage of such projects is very small (less than 100 participants), and the main initiatives are concentrated in Bishkek and Jalal-Abad.

27 For more details see: The European Council approved the new European Union Strategy for the Central Asian region. Available at <https://eeas.europa.eu/>. Accessed 10.09.2019

28 For more details see: Murzakulova (2016) Kayrylmans: a review of public policy and social challenges of integration

29 For more details see: Over half a year, more than 4000 Kyrgyz citizens received Russian citizenship <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/29387750.html>. Accessed 11.09.2019

who have stable and growing incomes are already interested in investing their funds in the country in which they work (Omurkulova-Ozerska & Kiyizbaeva, 2018).

6. Conclusion

Kyrgyzstan historically is an agrarian country. However, as this study shows, the contribution of agriculture to the country's GDP has dramatically decreased from 43.9% in 1996 to 12.3% in 2017, while employment in agriculture has also steadily declined, peaking at 52.4% in 2000, but dropping to 29.3% in 2015 (Mogilevskii et al., 2017; NSC, 2017). Transformative economic trends suggest that Kyrgyzstan has already ceased to be agrarian, but remains rural, and as shown here, it is now strategically important to ask the following: How does migration shape rural development?

This study shows that the ongoing scientific debate on migration and rural development in Kyrgyzstan follows along two main trajectories. First, there are those who claim there is a development effect, but that it is insignificant for rural development. Secondly, there are those who postulate that social remittances (e.g., skills, knowledge, worldview) make migrants important agents of rural development in their home communities. Last idea stands in contrast with the associated effects of 'brain drain', the reluctance of young migrants to return to their communities, and the reorientation of rural residents from agricultural production to labor migration as the main source of income. This synthesis shows that we do not know what practical effects migration has on the farming system in Kyrgyzstan. This knowledge gap can help develop a more context-specific policy at the local level.

This paper shows that migration transforms rural regions from the local periphery to territories that are deeply interconnected with global processes, as well as extremely vulnerable to external economic shocks. On the one hand, migration helps to diversify the incomes of rural residents, contributes to the development of the non-agricultural sector of the rural economy, and helps people find more profitable income sources. On the other hand, migration can marginalize certain groups of migrants. In addition, it can come with high health risks and can lead to an outflow of investment to cities, rather than rural villages.

This analysis shows that we do not yet know what practical mechanisms connect migration with a diverse set of outcomes for those left behind. As shown by several researchers (Sagynbekova 2016; Atamanov & Van den Berg, 2012; Sagynbekova, 2016; Isabaeva, 2011), among those left behind, some were able to turn migration into a sustainable source of income and self-employment for members of their household who were struggling to cope despite the presence of migrants in the family; whereas, for some, migration has been a complete fiasco. To date, we still know little about what kind of transformations are taking place among family members left behind or how they deal with trans-locality challenges.

Another significant gap is the lack of knowledge of local community-based practices to support migrant families or to regulate community migration. The available information today relates to the activities of international organizations/NGOs, but no such information touches on how communities deal with all aspects of migration.

When this report was being prepared for publication, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning, leading to the closure of borders and a migration crisis in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, migrants planning to leave for work remained in the country, and those who were outside Kyrgyzstan were unable to return and for the most part lost their jobs with restrictions in their host countries, which will lead to a rapid decrease in remittances. This context poses completely new challenges for the formation of an adequate migration policy for the country. This review indicates the existence of an important gap in the current

migration policy, namely that the state and all interested parties still only consider migration through the prism of protecting the rights of migrants and providing them with the most liberal regime of stay in the host country by joining various international unions. At the same time, migrants are not at all regarded as agents of rural development.

New questions raised by the COVID-19 pandemic include the following: What primary measures can be taken to sustain rural employment? How are these measures to be arranged so that they have a long-term developmental effect? Such issues require not only primary research but also, and more importantly, action.

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Appendix 1. Poverty rate National Statistic Comity data:

Poverty rate (percent)													
Items	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Kyrgyz Republic	39.9	35.0	31.7	31.7	33.7	36.8	38.0	37.0	30.6	32.1	25.4	25.6	22.4
Batken oblast	50.9	40.4	20.7	31.5	33.6	35.6	34.2	53.9	40.7	41.2	37.0	40.5	33.8
Jalal-Abat oblast	58.3	53.0	40.1	36.9	44.7	45.3	55.7	46.4	46.4	45.1	32.2	32.6	32.2
Yssyk-Kul oblast	43.9	38.6	52.2	46.1	38.0	29.5	28.1	39.5	26.0	28.9	24.7	24.2	21.5
Naryn oblast	49.3	45.2	42.7	44.1	53.5	49.9	39.9	43.8	30.6	38.0	37.8	29.2	30.6
Osh oblast (until 2012 y. including Osh city)	52.1	46.6	37.5	38.3	41.9	44.7	51.4	43.4	31.7	28.9	22.0	14.3	14.8
Talas oblast	40.0	35.3	43.0	33.0	42.3	50.2	39.6	23.1	19.0	21.5	18.1	20.7	22.1
Chui oblast	20.1	15.0	15.8	21.2	21.9	28.6	16.6	23.6	21.6	24.8	30.3	33.3	15.6
Bishkek city	5.5	5.0	15.2	13.2	7.9	18.4	21.4	20.4	17.6	23.5	9.8	15.9	15.4
Osh city	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	40.9	33.4	38.3	24.6	33.5	35.5

