



# Migration, Food Security and Nutrition in the Kyrgyz Republic

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# Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Overview of migration profile .....</b>	<b>5</b>
EXTERNAL MIGRATION.....	5
INTERNAL MIGRATION .....	5
IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN .....	6
<b>2. Remittances and their role in ensuring food security and nutrition.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3. Government efforts on engaging migrants.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4. Impact of COVID-19 on Migration, Food Security and Nutrition .....</b>	<b>8</b>
IMPACT ON RETURNED AND INTERNAL MIGRANTS.....	8
IMPACT ON REMITTANCES.....	10
IMPLICATIONS FOR FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION .....	11
GOVERNMENT RESPONSE .....	12
<b>5. Problem-Solution Tree Analysis and further joint actions .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>15</b>

# Introduction

The Kyrgyz Republic is a landlocked country in Central Asia, with an economy heavily reliant on labour migration and remittances, which in turn impact the poverty and food security situation in the country through several channels. Besides remittances, migration contributes to communities' resilience and development, and is also an important strategy used by households to cope with income uncertainty and food insecurity risks.

A research on the socioeconomic effects of COVID-19 on returnees in The Kyrgyz Republic found that the COVID-19 pandemic has had negative impacts on migrants and their families with border closures and temporary business shutdowns, reducing their options for income-generation activities and therefore leaving them more food insecure.<sup>1</sup> It is evident that better management of remittances, providing livelihood opportunities for returned migrants and households dependent on remittances could contribute not only to immediate alleviation of poverty and food insecurity, but also to the sustainable livelihood and improved food security and nutrition of migrants and their families over the longer term.

This brief aims to shed light on the linkages between migration, food security and nutrition by highlighting the importance of remittances in relieving poverty and food insecurity and the impact on nutrition. Section 1 provides an overview of migration in the Kyrgyz Republic, including different impacts on women and children. In Section 2, the correlation between remittances, food security and nutrition is discussed, as remittances are a major contributor to poverty reduction in the Kyrgyz Republic. Section 3 discusses how the Kyrgyz government is engaging with the Kyrgyz migrants and diaspora. Section 4 demonstrates how the COVID-19 pandemic affected Kyrgyz migrants and their families, including migrants' return, loss of employment and access to social protection. Section 5 sums up previous discussions in problem/solution trees and suggests concrete further joint actions among different actors in the country, including IOM and WFP, to address issues relating to migration, food security and nutrition in the Kyrgyz Republic.



<sup>1</sup> IOM, Kyrgyzstan: Study on the Socioeconomic Effects of COVID-19 on Returnees, 2021, <https://publications.iom.int/books/kyrgyzstan-study-socioeconomic-effects-covid-19-returnees>

# 1. Migration in the Kyrgyz Republic

In the 20th century, before the fall of the Soviet Union, the Kyrgyz Republic received many migrants from its neighboring states, leading to today's multi-ethnic demographic profile. After independence, migration flow to the Kyrgyz Republic became ten times lower than in 1960 and migrating population from the Kyrgyz Republic to other countries became much higher than the population migrating to the Kyrgyz Republic.<sup>2</sup> The main driver (push factor) for both external and internal migration is the lack of employment opportunities at home, especially in rural areas and for youth, resulting in large international migration flows primarily to the Russian Federation, and internal rural-to-urban migration primarily towards Bishkek and Osh, and their surroundings. Over the past ten

years (2010-2019), on average 1 out of 4 people between 15-24 years old were neither employed nor in school or training.<sup>3</sup> This high level of unemployment resulted in continuous flow of migration abroad, even until today.

Seeking employment opportunities is the most common reason for migration in the Kyrgyz Republic. Through labour migration, migrants contribute to the development of the Kyrgyz Republic through remittances and diaspora skills and knowledge transfer. The issue at hand is how to render these contributions more sustainable so that labour migration follows a safe, regular and orderly migration route that protects the rights of migrants and maximizes the longer-term benefits of the migration experience for migrants, their families, and their communities at large.

## External Migration

The Kyrgyz Republic has a population of 6.6 million and, by 2020, 774,000 Kyrgyz citizens lived outside of the country.<sup>4</sup> Some 800,000 to 1,000,000 Kyrgyz citizens (about 40 percent of the country's labor force) regularly work abroad, with approximately 50,000 Kyrgyz leaving the country to work every year. They work in various sectors, including retail, hotels, restaurants, taxi services, construction, and agriculture.<sup>5</sup> About 76 percent are under 35 years old and 53 percent are women.<sup>6</sup> Women migrant workers are employed mostly in services, catering, clothes manufacturing, and as domestic workers.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the migrant workers head to the Russian Federation and, to a lesser extent, to Kazakhstan and Turkey. The main reasons for Russia and Kazakhstan being the preferred destinations (pull factors) are geographical proximity, language affinity, relatively less competition in employment, and strong diaspora networks.<sup>8</sup> The widespread uptake of informal employment practices put migrant workers at risk of exploitation and abuse, including human trafficking.

## Internal Migration

**Internal migration from rural to urban areas** is a popular risk management strategy for rural households, as agriculture is subject to fluctuations in production, income and employment due to climatic factors and its seasonal nature. Therefore, poor rural households often send one or more family members into cities to work in sectors other than agriculture such as trade, services, textile manufacturing, and construction,<sup>9</sup> in order to reduce their risk of poverty and to cope with possible adverse shocks.<sup>10</sup> In general, jobs in rural areas are often associated with low and insecure incomes, limited access to education, healthcare and social services, and gender inequalities in salaries and opportunities. Thus, migration to urban centers is seen as an escape from poverty and underemployment.

The popular destinations for internal migration are Bishkek and Osh. Internal migrants make up 35 percent of Bishkek's population.<sup>11</sup> Most of them live in informal settlements, meaning the numbers may be even higher than reported. Their access to health and social services is also hampered by the registration system, known as Propiska, requiring migrants to register to access urban public services such as healthcare, water, education,

2 Martin Schuler, "Migration Patterns of the Population in Kyrgyzstan", Les populations d'Asie centrale, 2007/1, paragraph 20. <https://journals.openedition.org/eps/1967#text>.

3 UNDP, Human Development Reports, July 2020, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/147906>. IOM, Migration Data Portal, Kyrgyzstan, 2019, [https://migrationdataportal.org/data?cm49=417&focus=profile+&i=stock\\_achange\\_&t=2019](https://migrationdataportal.org/data?cm49=417&focus=profile+&i=stock_achange_&t=2019).

4 IOM, Migration Data Portal, Kyrgyzstan, 2019, [https://migrationdataportal.org/data?cm49=417&focus=profile+&i=stock\\_achange\\_&t=2019](https://migrationdataportal.org/data?cm49=417&focus=profile+&i=stock_achange_&t=2019).

5 ADB and UNDP, COVID-19 in the Kyrgyz Republic: Socioeconomic and Vulnerability Impact Assessment and Policy Response, August 2020, <https://www.adb.org/documents/covid-19-kyrgyz-republic-socioeconomic-vulnerability-impact>.

6 State Department on Migration under the supervision of the Kyrgyz government, Joint Report on Migration in Republic of Kyrgyzstan. Bishkek, 2015, <http://rce.kg/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Edinyi-doklad-final.pdf>.

7 FIDH, Women and children from Kyrgyzstan affected by migration, September 2016, [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport\\_kyrgyzstan\\_uk-2-web2.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_kyrgyzstan_uk-2-web2.pdf).

8 WFP, Scoping study on social protection and safety nets for enhanced food security and nutrition in the Kyrgyz Republic, 2018, p. 16.

9 IOM, Internal Migration in Kyrgyzstan, 2018. <https://kyrgyzstan.iom.int/sites/kyrgyzstan/files/publication/Internal%20Migration%20in%20Kyrgyzstan.pdf>

10 IOM and WFP, Populations at risk: Implications of COVID-19 for hunger, migration and displacement, 2020

11 IOM, Internal Migration Kyrgyzstan Report, 2018

energy, etc. To get the city registration, migrants need to legalize their houses and do additional paperwork, which is an expensive and time-consuming process, especially in the light of unsteady, seasonal or part-time employment.

There is an increasing concern about the role of

## Impact of migration on women and children

**Within the context of migration, gender equality and women's empowerment play an important role.** The challenges women face in the Kyrgyz Republic create a strong incentive to migrate. Rural women face unequal access to productive assets, including the lack of protection of their rights to ownership of land and other resources, limited access to financial capital, a lower level of technical agricultural knowledge, thus limiting their ability to fully participate in agricultural activities. In 2019, only 40 percent of rural women were employed in agriculture compared to 72 percent of employed rural men.<sup>13</sup> For more educated and financially better-off urban women migrants, personal aspirations could be primary reasons for labour migration, as they seek better job employment opportunities and more satisfying social and cultural life. According to UN Women, women who migrated for personal reasons are more likely to benefit from the migration experience and gained longer term liberation in their everyday lives. For both rural and urban women, migration can offer an escape from gendered vulnerabilities at home, including forced marriage, domestic violence, bride kidnapping, etc.<sup>14</sup>

urbanization and migration on dietary changes. Urban settings lead to changes in sedentary lifestyle and provide access to more diverse diets, to “modern” foods and to eating out (e.g., street vendors), which in turn can increase the risk of overweight, obesity and diet non communicable diseases.<sup>12</sup>

### Migration and human capital development of children.

Mass migration can have negative effects on the development of human capital, since children remaining in Kyrgyzstan may not receive as much social and psychological care as they require during their development. These children are left in the care of relatives, placed with residential institutions or in informal foster care with friends or neighbors, sometimes without formalized guardianship arrangements. A recent research by UNICEF found that without proper registration of guardianship, children of migrants are at the risk of reduced access to educational, health, and social protection support.<sup>15</sup> According to estimates, based on official figures of the number of migrants who went abroad, about 200,000 children have been left without parental care and are often described in media as “social orphans.”<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, the Kyrgyz Republic remains a source, transit, and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labour, and for women and children subjected to sex trafficking. Destination countries for labour exploitation include Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkey. Sexual exploitation of Kyrgyz women and girls occurs in Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Kazakhstan and within the country.<sup>17</sup>



12 WFP, Heathy diets: leaving no one behind in Asia and the Pacific – internal paper. 2021.

13 National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, Женщины и мужчины Кыргызской Республики (Women and men of the Kyrgyz Republic) 2015-2019

14 UN Women, Women and Labour Migration – Kyrgyz Republic, October 2018, [gspms\\_migration\\_eng.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/en/regions/asia/kyrgyz-republic/publications/women-and-labour-migration-kyrgyz-republic) (unwomen.org)

15 UNICEF, Analysis Of Gaps In Access To Basic Services For Children Affected By Migration In Kyrgyzstan, 2020

16 Aziza Marat kizi, “Мигрантские дети составят целое поколение (Migrant children make up a whole generation), Gezitter.org, 31 May 2017, [https://www.gezitter.org/migranty/60351\\_migrantskie\\_deti\\_sostavyat\\_tseloe\\_pokolenie/](https://www.gezitter.org/migranty/60351_migrantskie_deti_sostavyat_tseloe_pokolenie/).

17 FIDH, Women and children from Kyrgyzstan affected by migration, September 2016, [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport\\_kyrgyzstan\\_uk-2-web2.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_kyrgyzstan_uk-2-web2.pdf).

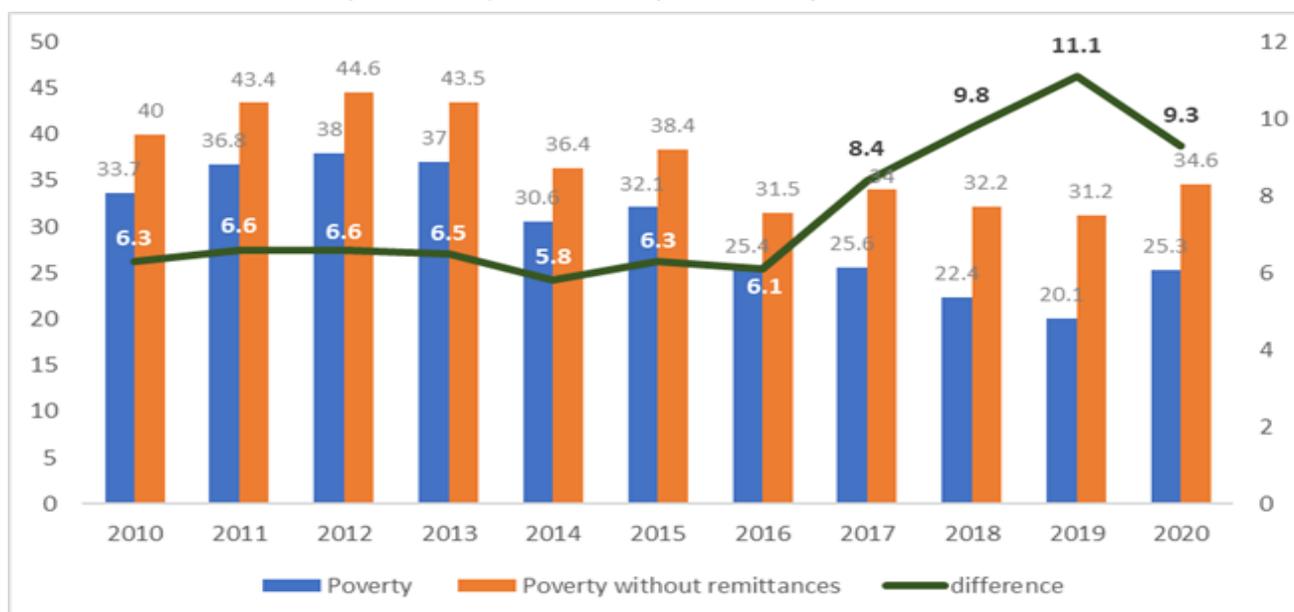
## 2. Remittances and their role in ensuring food security and nutrition

Remittances are one of the most important and tangible benefits of labour migration to the Kyrgyz Republic in terms of development and poverty reduction. The remittances that Kyrgyz migrant workers send home – USD 2.4 Billion in 2019 – make up almost 30 percent of the country's GDP. **Remittances are a vital safety net for families left behind, enabling them to remain out of poverty.** Indeed, many households rely on remittances to meet their immediate needs, including food. Globally, remittances also facilitate access to better nutrition, education and healthcare services for families of migrants,

yet further research on this positive correlation is needed in the Kyrgyz Republic.

The incidence of poverty has improved, and **remittances are playing an increasing role in poverty reduction in Kyrgyzstan**– meaning that a larger percentage of the population relies on remittances to remain out of poverty. According to the National Statistics Committee, in 2019 remittances contributed to reducing the national poverty rate by 11.1 percentage points (from 31.2 percent to 20.1 percent), indicating that 715,000 people rely on them to stay out of poverty (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Poverty Rates including and excluding remittances (%)



**Remittances allow households on the receiving end to increase their overall household income, as well as diversify their income sources, constituting an important buffer against economic shocks** such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as migrant households consume most of the remittances on essential goods, many are not prepared for emergency situations such as sudden loss of income. Lack of savings is a general characteristic of migrant households in the Kyrgyz Republic. Research on remittances spending demonstrates that most remittances are spent on everyday household consumption and other areas such as food, basic services, and purchase and

renovation of houses.<sup>18</sup> After everyday consumption, in order to accommodate other expenses, including for traditional celebrations, migrant families rely on loans or send another family member for employment abroad.<sup>19</sup> Such consumption habit is composed of social pressure and lack of financial inclusion of migrants. The Centre of Support for International Protection has reported that only 5 percent of Kyrgyz migrants save and make family budget planning, and **more than 90 percent of migrants and their families spend all their income on immediate consumption.**<sup>20</sup> **Lack of financial safety net puts migrants at the risk of food insecurity as well.**

18 FIDH, Women and children from Kyrgyzstan affected by migration, September 2016, [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport\\_kyrgyzstan\\_uk-2-web2.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_kyrgyzstan_uk-2-web2.pdf).

19 Asel Murzakulova, Rural Migration in Kyrgyzstan: Drivers, Impact and Governance, UCA, 2020.

20 OECD, Financial Literacy Needs of Migrants and their Families in the Commonwealth of Independent States, 2019, [www.oecd.org/daf/fin/financial-education/financial-education.htm](http://www.oecd.org/daf/fin/financial-education/financial-education.htm).

### 3. Government efforts on engaging migrants

The government could also improve its methods of attracting Kyrgyz diaspora to engage and invest in local sustainable development. In the face of these issues, the government is striving to leverage financial and human capital gained from migration towards national development. The Concept of the State Migration Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic 2021-2030 that has been approved in May 2021 by the Prime Minister outlines the importance of leveraging migration to lift many out of poverty and for the

sustainable development of the Kyrgyz Republic. Additionally, at the Meeting of the Council on Relations with Compatriots Abroad held in August 2019, participants discussed the concept of Migration Policy, the Meken-Card Initiative and the Mekenim program, which aim to create economic and financial instruments for the investment and participation of the Kyrgyz population living outside the country for the development of the country.<sup>21</sup>

### 4. Impact of COVID-19 on Migration, Food Security and Nutrition

Starting in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected Kyrgyz migrants and their livelihoods. The health crisis led to a profound and protracted economic slowdown in the Kyrgyz Republic which resulted in a GDP loss of 8.6 percent in 2020.<sup>22</sup> As elsewhere, the contraction in economic growth has led to a decline in the population's income and to an increase in the unemployment rate, leaving a large number of people unemployed and without sources of income. In 2021, GDP is forecasted to grow by 3.5 percent, thus suggesting a slow recovery.<sup>23</sup>

Food security of the returned migrants and their families without means of income is a serious issue. According to IOM and UNICEF's COVID-19 rapid assessment conducted in 2021, more than a third of families did not have any savings when the pandemic struck and another third of families had enough resources for less than a month. More than a third of family members that remain in the Kyrgyz Republic (38 percent) replied that they are in need of food and essential supplies.<sup>24</sup> Migrant workers and their families dependent on remittances are emerging as a new group at

#### Impact on returned and internal migrants

**Returned external migrants are facing difficulties integrating back into society due to rampant unemployment back home.** Income loss and unemployment have pushed many migrants to return home, as they have become unable to support themselves and their families. About two-thirds of migrants (63 percent) have reported losing their jobs,<sup>25</sup> and according to the Kyrgyz Embassy in the Russian Federation, more than 35,000 Kyrgyz migrants returned from Russia between March and August 2020 alone.<sup>26</sup> Although the exact number of returned migrants remains uncertain, it is beyond doubt that a large numbers of returns over a short time to an already-struggling economy and labour market will strain the socioeconomic fabric of the society, increase competition over resources (including food), increase poverty and unemployment. Among the reported challenges that the migrants were facing upon return were

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