

AGRUMIG Policy Brief Series No. 9

Applying a Rural Development Lens  
to Migration Policy in Kyrgyzstan

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## Executive summary

Development trends in Kyrgyzstan include declining agricultural production, a steady increase in remittances to rural areas from labor migration and an increasing role for the non-agricultural sector in the rural economy. These trends suggest that labor migration is having a transformative effect, with significant opportunities for rural development, but also challenges ahead. Even though migration has a huge impact on the country's economy (remittances account for some 30% of the country's GDP), to date migration governance focuses mainly on the rights protection of migrants and does nothing about sending communities and rural development policy. The attractiveness of rural villages for return migration and the well-being of those left-behind should be a major focus for migration policy along with the inclusion of migration as cross-cutting issue in rural development policy at all levels.

## Policy challenge

Profound reforms that occurred in Kyrgyzstan after independence in 1991 created a new context for the country's economic and social development. For a traditionally agrarian country, labor mobility was superimposed on an agrarian crisis caused by, amongst other things, land redistribution from the state to individuals. From 1994-2001, the government redistributed just over one million hectares of land as land shares, which comprises about 75% of all arable land in the country. As a result, nearly 90% of rural residents became landholders. However, 'de-collectivization' was also accompanied by a catastrophic decline in rural infrastructure including irrigation canals, roads and rural machinery.

Undertaking a series of rapid reforms, the state was unable to subsidize agriculture leaving farmers to tackle their production problems alone. Agriculture in Kyrgyzstan is already a risky activity with uncertainty surrounding environmental shocks such as late frosts and droughts, as well as animal diseases. Together with other factors, this prompted many

rural residents to look for sources of income beyond agriculture – and many migrated abroad. According government figures, more than one million Kyrgyzstan citizens now live and work abroad (CECA, 2022), the vast majority of whom (about 95%) live in the Russian Federation. Other, though significant destinations, include Turkey, Kazakhstan, European Union countries and the United States of America (Mogilevskii, 2022).

Migration can play multiple roles in current rural dynamics, with both positive and negative outcomes. While labor migration may help rural households access capital and be able to continue to invest in agriculture through purchasing livestock, land, seeds and fertilizers etc., at the same time the very movement of people out of rural areas can precipitate labor shortages and lead household's to withdraw all together from the sector.

Mobility within Kyrgyzstan is regionally diverse. The labour mobility of southern regions, like Batken, Jalal-Abad and Osh, started earlier when compared to the Yssyk-Köl, Talas and Naryn regions. Chui region is an area that both sends and receives migrants. Differences among regions and mobility dynamics are explained mainly through the demographic characteristics of territories and the availability of land allotments. Atamanov and Van den Berg (2012) mention that land plots in the southern regions are several times smaller compared to the north, which explains why farmers in the north migrate less or prefer internal migration.

From 2012-2021 Kyrgyzstan was ranked as one of the country's most dependent on global remittances (WB, 2022). Nevertheless, in spite of their importance, little of the role played by remittances in poverty reduction is known about and many questions regarding migration and changes in agricultural development and rural life remain unanswered. Some national statistics provide a sense of the magnitude of the relationship, however:

- Every second employable citizen has migrated from Kyrgyzstan according to 2022 data (CECA, 2022).
- Financial remittances grew from 1.9% of

GDP in 2002 to 31% in 2020.

- Poverty rates declined from 34% of the country population leaving under poverty line in 2010 to 25% in 2022.
- The high social cost of migration includes 277,000 children from migrant families according UNISEF being left without parental care.
- Rural labor markets are actively transforming. Non-farm activities provide 40% of rural employment and account for 48% of working time in rural areas.
- Trans-local households push the development of the country mobile network. For mountainous Kyrgyzstan current network coverage exceed 98% of the territory.

Despite this profound migration influence on sending rural communities current migration policy does not focus on these kinds of dynamics (see the [Concept of Migration Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2021-2030](#)). The major policy challenge, therefore, is to formulate a more holistic approach that links the well-being of sending communities with rural development programming.

## Policy changes proposed

We suggest a new approach to policy that redefines place-based migration and rural development programs. This approach would meet the needs and opportunities of sending rural regions, but requires important changes in how policies are formulated and implemented, including introducing a cross-cutting and multi-level governance approach. The hierarchical administrative structures which currently the Government is trying to implement<sup>1</sup> are likely to be inadequate to administer these kinds of programs effectively due a lack of partnership between government, private and civic sectors. Local government de-centralization is one of the key components along with imposing

migration as a cross-cutting issue in already existing rural development programs.

Early attempts to bridge rural development with migration policy were made by the government via the State Program for Irrigation Development of the Kyrgyz Republic from 2017-2026. The Program assumes that development of irrigation networks will reduce unemployment in rural area and, as a result, limit out-migration. The Program also states that the development of irrigation infrastructure is a solution for local food insecurity issues caused by migration from rural areas, as well as providing a tool to alleviate poverty (Program 2017-2026). The new program succeeded the 2011 State Program for Water Facilities Construction and New Irrigated Land Development for 2011-2015. The old program called for the construction of 22 water facilities. However, by 2016 only one had been constructed due to lack of financing, with only 763 million out of a required 4,928 million KGS having been allocated (Politmer, 2017; Government Decree, 2017).



*Photo 1. Residents of the Zhany-Zher village in the Batken district, with a high outflow of residents in labor migration, are experiencing acute water stress. The lack of drinking water leads to a high burden on women and children, who are forced to provide households with water by carrying it in containers from a standpipe to their homes. Part of the income of labor migrants in the past two years began to be directed to drilling wells, thereby improving access to water at the household level.*

Although the intervention declares a focus on

<sup>1</sup> The move from a policy of decentralization to a policy of 'verticality' of local self-governance was finalized with the adoption of the Law No. 123 of the Kyrgyz Republic of October 20, 2021 "On Local State Administration and Local Self-Government Bodies".

reducing the outflow of migrants from villages through job creation, what exactly is meant by these jobs? The government considers every rural resident of working age *a priori* self-employed if s/he has a land plot. The creation of jobs, in reality, therefore means expanding the self-employment of villagers on their own land (or leased from the local authority). By expanding irrigation, the government believes that this will automatically lead to more villagers being brought into agriculture. Becoming “self-employed in agriculture” therefore relates more to available land shares than real economic activity.



*Photo 2: Driving cattle to summer pastures in the Suzak region. The main investment of labor migrants in agriculture is the purchase of livestock. Increasing livestock is both an opportunity for capital accumulation, but at the same time an environmentally unsustainable strategy as it leads to overgrazing and pasture degradation.*

The geography of interventions also raises questions about the criteria for selection of interventions and communities under the new Irrigation Program. Thus, 9 out of 46 sites are in regions where there is no high migration outflow of the population: 5 sites in Issyk-Kul region and 4 in Talas region (Agency of Economic News, 2017). This may indicate the intention of the Government to evenly distribute its interventions throughout the country, or that there is only weak linkage to the migration profile of selected territories.

According to Government the selection of

facilities was based on their importance for the development of the rural economy (FOR, 2019; Government Decree, 2017). The AGRUMIG team, however, found no data that shed light on the criteria and indicators guiding inclusion of selected facilities in the program. Undoubtedly, improving irrigation is an important direction for rural development, but improving irrigation alone will not change rural migration outflows by improving potential growth in agricultural employment alone.

The development of rural regions and the well-being of their inhabitants should be central to a migration policy that fully engages with rural development policy (in effect building a kind of “New rural paradigm”, see OECD, 2016). In this context, the government needs to understand better the sub-migration profiles of rural regions. These should then be used to help formulate place-based approaches to rural development policy that focus on local specificities and seek out ways of exploring specific regional advantages including in environmental resources and agricultural systems.

## Recommendations:

- Migration works in both directions: as a response to agrarian stress and as a way to mitigate it. Recognizing the multidimensional impacts of migration will help enrich migration policy at different levels.
- The current approach to policy formulation on a sectoral basis, in which migration policy and agrarian policy are somewhat siloed, requires a rethink towards a more holistic approach.
- Having resources, especially at local level, is key to the success of policies. Returning to a more decentralized local governance approach is needed.
- Often considered by national government from a financial point of view only (migrants as income providers), there now needs to be a broader view of migrants and migration in which they are seen as key agents of rural change.

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## **AGRUMIG Policy Brief Series**

This policy brief is one in a series of briefs produced as part of the AGRUMIG project.

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## **AGRUMIG Project**

The project titled AGRUMIG 'Leaving something behind' - Migration governance and agricultural & rural change in 'home' communities: Comparative experience from Europe, Asia and Africa proposes an integrated approach to migration governance to address the two-way relationship between labor mobility and changes in agriculture and the rural sector. Migration creates challenges for rural 'sending' communities in low- and middle-income countries, yet it can also be transformative. The project engages in a comparative analysis of seven countries (China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand) to identify the economic, institutional, cultural and agroecological factors which shape these relationships. It will identify the range of governance interventions that can harness migration to stimulate sustainable, gender equitable growth in agriculture, and reduce the distress associated with migration.

**Donor:** European Union (EU) Horizon 2020 Framework Programme (H2020) under grant agreement number 822730



(Call: Towards forward-looking migration governance: Addressing the challenges, assessing capacities and designing future strategies)

**Project website:** <http://agrumig.iwmi.org>

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This project is part of the MARIS (Migration, Agriculture and Resilience: Initiative for Sustainability) network (<http://maris.iwmi.org>).