

# Kyrgyzstan overview

Asel Murzakulova

## Context

Independence in 1991 created a new context for Kyrgyzstan's economic and social development. A traditionally agrarian country, after 1991 profound changes took place in particular during 1994–2001 when the government redistributed over one million hectares of land as land shares, comprising 75% of all arable land in the country. As a result, nearly 90% of rural residents became landholders, but accompanying this redistribution was a major decline in rural infrastructure, including irrigation canals, roads and rural machinery.

Having relied on agriculture to drive its economy, new forms of income generation came to the fore. The share of agriculture in gross domestic product (GDP) declined from 44% in 1996 to 12% in 2020, including the effect of mass

outmigration from the 2000s onwards toward the oil states of Russia and Kazakhstan. According to the Kyrgyz government, more than a million Kyrgyzstan citizens now live and work abroad with the Russian Federation accounting for over 95% of all migrants and the rest going to Turkey, Kazakhstan, EU countries and the USA (Mogilevsky 2022).

Between 2010 and 2017, the Kyrgyz Republic was consistently ranked among the top five countries in terms of the ratio of remittances to GDP. However, in 2022, the international sanctions regime against Russia led to a drop in migrant remittances. In the same year, for the first time, an agreement was signed with the UK to include Kyrgyzstan in its agricultural work program providing labor for fruit picking. It is now estimated that every fifth employable citizen has migrated from Kyrgyzstan.



Local seed market in Kyrgyzstan (photo: Asel Murzakulova).



Poverty rates have seen a steady decline from 34% of the population in 2010 to 25% in 2021, and the rural labor market is being actively transformed. Non-farm activities make up 40% of rural employment and account for 48% of working hours in rural areas (Atamanov and Van den Berg 2012). Local households have increased demand for mobile networks which now cover 98% of the country. There has been a noticeable monetarization of agricultural work in rural areas due to labor shortages and low mechanization rates, transforming cropping systems through a shift from food crops to forage crops.

At the same time, there have been important social implications of mass migration. The high social cost includes 277,000 children from migrant families being left without parental care. Mobility within the country is regionally diverse. The labor 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.

The insights presented in Table 1 are based on research conducted under the AGRUMIG project by the University of Central Asia between 2019 and 2022 in 16 villages in three regions: Batken, Jalal-Abad and Naryn. The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods.

**Table 1.** Study site and migration context.

Site	Features of an agricultural economy	Percentage of HHs with seasonal migrants (%)	Destination for seasonal migrants	Percentage of HHs with long-term migrants (%)	Destination for long-term migrants
Batken	Batken is a region with an arid climate, with altitudes varying between 500 m and 1,150 m above sea level. Livelihoods are supported by horticulture (e.g., apricot cultivation), cattle breeding and cultivation of black tobacco and mash/mung beans.	12%	Osh Bishkek	80%	Russia
Naryn	Inner Tien Shan and the mountainous and central parts of Kochkor Valley have mountain-steppe semi-desert landscapes with fields irrigated by water from the Chui River. The region is situated at an altitude of 2,000 m to 2,300 m above sea level. This area is characterized by the coldest and driest climate in the country. Major livelihoods include cattle breeding, and barley, potato and sainfoin (fodder legume) cultivation.	25%	Bishkek Tokmok	48%	Turkey, Sweden, Italy, UK, and Russia
Jalal-Abad	Lowlands and middle mountain villages of the Ferghana Ridge in the Kara-Darya River Basin are characterized by a subtropical climate that allows harvesting several times a year. The altitude in this area varies between 600 m and 900 m above sea level. The major crops are rice, sainfoin, tomatoes and corn.	7%	Jalal-Abad Osh Bishkek	73%	Russia

## Findings

Migration plays multiple roles in current rural dynamics with positive and negative outcomes. While labor migration may help rural households access capital through remittances (Table 2) and enable investment in agriculture through buying livestock, land, seeds and fertilizers, the very movement of people out of rural areas can precipitate labor shortages and lead households to withdraw altogether from the sector.

Two critical trends are discernible in Kyrgyzstan: declining agricultural production and a steady increase in remittances from different labor migration destinations. There is also an increasing role for the nonagricultural sector in the rural economy. These trends suggest that labor migration is having a transformative effect with remittances accounting for some 30% of the country's GDP. However, AGRUMIG research found that migration governance still focuses mainly on the rights and protection of migrants and does little to link actions and policies with sending communities and rural development policies. Arguably, the attractiveness of rural villages for return migration and the well-being of those left behind should be a major focus for policymakers because migration is a cross-cutting issue in rural development policy at all levels. For women participating in labor migration, especially divorced women, this enables their economic autonomy and supports their empowerment which would be more challenging had they stayed at home.

One key finding is that livestock herds have increased. This is because migrants to Russia invest in livestock which is considered a secure option. In regions coinciding with the focus area of the State Program for Irrigation Development of the Kyrgyz Republic (2017–2026), migrant households view agriculture as a complementary source of income with high uncertainty and risks. For example, the program is affected by quality control, and analytical and planning constraints. The program envisages improvement of some 100,000 ha. This is less than 10% of the current irrigated land area, but it is not clear how the government will increase employment in

agriculture by 55%, i.e., 245,000 new jobs according to the program if the irrigated area will increase by only 10%.

Results also indicate that seasonal migration was more common in Naryn, where almost 20% of households were involved in migration, compared to longer-term migration, which prevailed in Jalal-Abad and Batken, where about 70% of households were involved. The proportion of women in seasonal migration is 29%, slightly higher than that of long-term migration at 22%.

Over and above typical drivers of migration, including lack of opportunities, farm and off-farm income in rural areas, low agricultural productivity, climate variability, and personal and family debts, migration in Batken is also driven by security concerns. This is because of the ongoing militarization of the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan along the Ferghana Valley.

In Kyrgyzstan, there is a strong link between migration and livestock rearing in all three sites. As a common practice for migrant and non-migrant households, investment in livestock can increase wealth and provide a haven for their cash transfers. Livestock species reared vary with, for example, goats and cows more likely on Batken farms, while cows and rams dominated in Jalal-Abad, and horses, sheep, cows and yaks in Naryn.

One key finding is that migration could be a driver of rural stratification, especially where there are fewer pre-existing disparities in ownership of land and other assets. In this context, successful migration experiences could open doors for households to accumulate wealth and rise within the rural class hierarchy. For example, in Naryn, investments of remittances in livestock are most widespread among farmers with less land, as increasing the size of a herd can be a way to compensate for lower agricultural incomes. In Kyrgyzstan, the trend of investing remittances in livestock has increased pressure on pasturelands to the extent that, in recent years, land degradation has become a growing problem.

**Table 2.** Average remittances and percentage allocation by household.

Site	Average remittances received per household	Allocation (%)
Batken	USD 1,435.00	House construction or renovation 59%, food 14%, traditional events 8%, savings 3%, clothes 5%
Naryn	USD 881.00	House construction or renovation 39%, food 16%, traditional events 2%, savings 13%, clothes 10%
Jalal-Abad	USD 1,500.00	House construction or renovation 45%, food 21%, traditional events 14%, savings 3%, clothes 9%

## Policy issues

The attractiveness of rural villages for return migration and the well-being of those left behind should be a major focus of migration policy, along with the inclusion of migration as a cross-cutting issue in rural development policy at all levels.

In Kyrgyzstan, diaspora networks have played an important role in supporting local development and mobilizing funds to support communities during times of crisis, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Migration works in both directions: as a response to agrarian stress and as a way to mitigate it. Recognizing the multidimensional impact of migration will help enrich migration policy at different levels. Current policy formulation is on a sectoral basis, in which migration policy and agrarian policy are sectorally separate. In future, this requires a more holistically framed approach. For example, natural resource management institutions could establish feedback mechanisms with migrants under which they can raise awareness of environmental policy agendas and other matters.

## References

Atamanov, A.; Van den Berg, M. 2012. Heterogeneous effects of international migration and remittances on crop income: Evidence from the Kyrgyz Republic. *World Development* 40(3): 620-630. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2011.07.008>

Mogilevsky, R. 2022. *The economic situation of Kyrgyzstan. Labor migration from Kyrgyzstan to the Russian Federation: trends, problems and opportunities*. Moscow: Institute for Research and Expertise.



New orchards planted on slopes in Kyrgyzstan (photo: Asel Murzakulova).

### AGRUMIG Policy Brief Series

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

#### Author:

Asel Murzakulova, University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

### 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>

**For more information on the project, contact:** Angela Haynes, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK ([ah121@soas.ac.uk](mailto:ah121@soas.ac.uk))

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

