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Mainstreaming the needs of migrant children and sending communities into the rural schools development agenda in Kyrgyzstan

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Executive summary

Many studies indicate that labor migration is the main economic survival strategy for all population groups in Kyrgyzstan, but especially young people. Migration affects rural schools in several ways. Young people are not interested in fully completing their secondary education, and after the 9th grade, many drop out of school and start looking for jobs. This problem is compounded by the shortage of school teachers in the country. According to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic, teaching vacancies in subjects such as computer science, English, biology, chemistry, mathematics and physical education have not been filled for years in many schools. Recent university graduates are not interested in filling these vacancies as labor migration offers a more favorable way of entering the labor market.

This migration of the working age population can, however, have a negative impact on left-behind children, worsening their academic performance. National Assessment of the Educational Achievements for grad school students (NOODU) data show that students' performance at schools differs markedly between children whose parents are labour migrants outside of the country and their peers whose parents remain with them. The former often have the worst performances in schools. This is mostly because left behind children, mostly teens, have to fill the labour shortage in the household.

The multidimensional impacts of labor mobility are therefore closely intertwined and reflected in problems felt within the school system (lack of teachers and poor academic performance of migrant children). This can cause long-term negative impacts on education. However, despite the scale of labor migration, very little has been done to understand how rural schools cope with these challenges. This policy brief aims to raise stakeholder awareness of the impact of labor migration on the institution of secondary education in rural communities with active migration outflows, and offers key recommendations for further actions and interventions.

The policy challenge

Labor migration is considered an important source of income for the majority of the working-age population of Kyrgyzstan. For ten years in a row, remittances from migrants contributed around 30% of the country's GDP, indicating a very strong involvement by Kyrgyzstan in the transnational labor market, especially from the regions of Batken, Jalal-Abad and Osh.

Systemic problems in the country's education system resulting from incomplete reforms after independence, have today been exacerbated by the dynamics of population mobility. External labor migration began to increase after the 2000s and by 2022 had officially reached around one million working-age citizens (Center for Employment of Citizens Abroad under the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, 2022), with the result, according to UNICEF, that around 11% of children under the age of 17 in the country now have at least one migrant parent.

In parallel with migration processes, the situation in secondary schools in the country has been characterized by a period of post-Soviet transformation. Part of this heritage is a high percentage of school enrollment. Nevertheless, more recently, there has been a growing tendency for children not to attend schools. According to data for 2021, 2,500 children (Presidential Decree No. 561, 2021) did not attend schools. This is the highest figure for the entire period of independence of the country. Generally accepted problems of secondary education are underfunding, lack of textbooks, poor quality of school management and low-skilled teachers.



Photo 1: Bas-relief in a rural school. "Every citizen of Kyrgyzstan has the right to education", Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic. Photo by Asel Murzakulova

If examined in more depth, however, many of the existent problems in rural schools arise from stresses caused by external labor migration. Most outmigration comes from rural areas, where over 80% of schools are concentrated and some 65% of the population resides. In order to identify the main problems experienced by rural schools, as part of

the AGRUMIG study, from 2019-2022 the University of Central Asia interviewed school teachers and school principals in 16 villages, located in Batken, Jalal-Abad and Naryn regions. Based on this study, the following issues of external labor migration have been identified as key stressors in rural schools:

- There is a growing public demand for teachers in rural schools from sending communities to also play a more parenting role in raising the children of migrants. This means, for example, in addition to more traditional teaching roles, middle and high school teachers increasingly equipping students with behavioral, cultural, and communication skills. They are also obligated to monitor their safety and take a lead in overcoming stressful life situations that children encounter.
- The study has also found that migrant parents have poor or almost nonexistent communication with schools. Thus, there are no joint efforts to develop the potential of migrant children. Teachers have no choice but to take on additional responsibilities for the children of migrants, even outside school hours, since migrant parents are less likely to be involved in the daily life of their children. The parents' awareness of their children's progress at school is purely based on the information provided by children themselves and

the relatives and family members with whom the children are left. As a result, there can be misunderstanding about the role of schools between migrant parents and the school and teachers, which weakens the responsibility of all parties to act in the best interests of children.

- Rural schools in communities with high migration outflows experience greater challenges in maintaining their infrastructure compared to urban schools or rural schools in regions with fewer migration flows. Despite the fact that, according to 2021 data, Kyrgyzstan spends about 7% of its GDP on the education sector, which is one of highest in the world, resources available to schools are woefully inadequate. In many ways, existing resources in the education system are used inefficiently and cover only part of required expenditure, requiring parents to cover the costs of textbooks, repairing school infrastructure, purchasing equipment and other services not covered by a school's budget. The participation of migrant parents in maintaining school infrastructure is low, however, for various reasons, resulting in schools of outmigration regions failing to maintain their infrastructure in comparison to other regions.

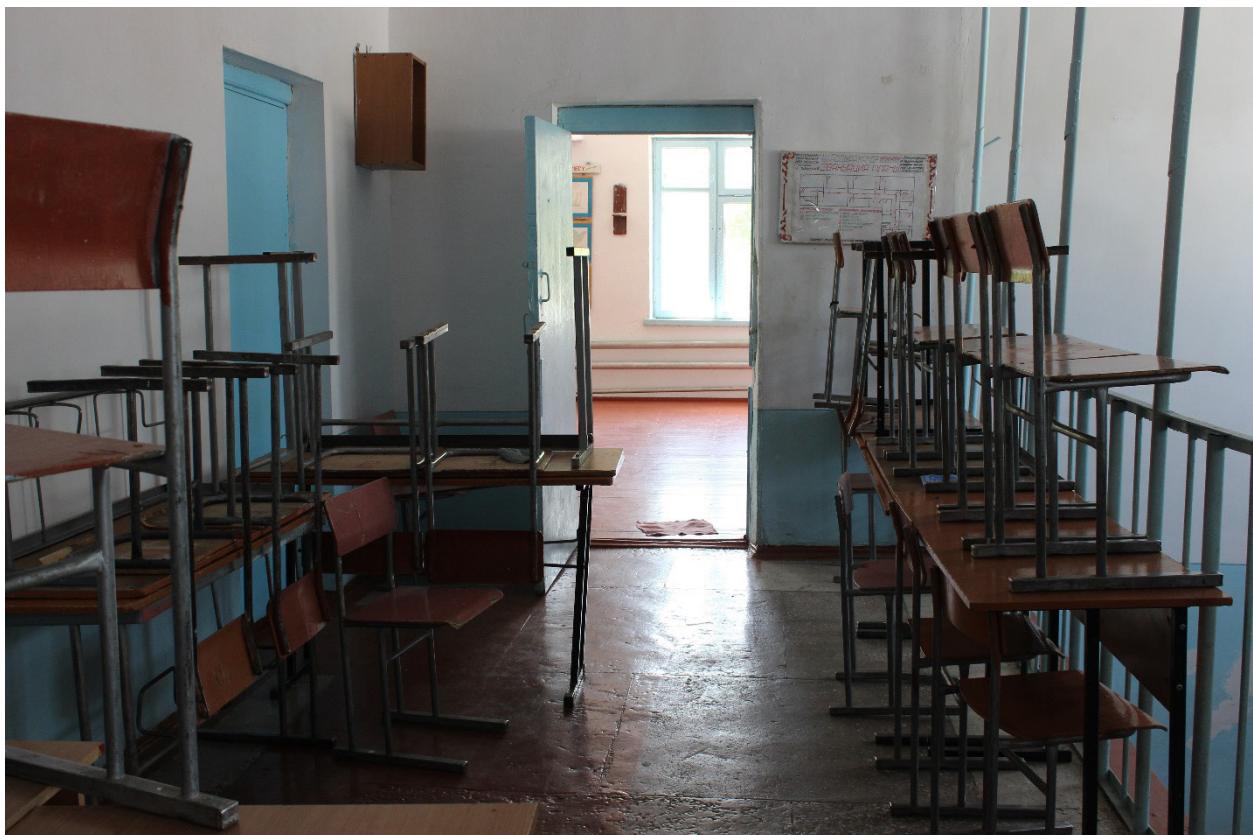


Photo 2: A rural school in Suzak region, where school teachers make annual repairs on their own. Most parents of schoolchildren are migrants. Photo by Asel Murzakulova

Policy change on the horizon

The impact of large-scale labor migration processes is rarely recognized in discussions about education at higher governmental levels. This is partly due to the weak and marginalized position of rural schools in promoting their

voices nationally. Most of the discussions on this topic take place around the capital and concentrate on the problem of increasing internal migration, and the catastrophic lack of school infrastructure and new buildings in Bishkek (locally referred to as *novostroika* (new settlements)). The Government of the Kyrgyz Republic approved the Concept of Migration Policy 2021–2030. The Concept's goal is to

normalize migration processes through the implementation of state programs meant to mitigate the negative effects of migration and create conditions for effective migration governance that would benefit both migrants and the socioeconomic progress of the Kyrgyz Republic. The Concept recognizes that the secondary education system in Kyrgyzstan is experiencing difficulties due to increased internal migration. However, this document does not consider external labor migration as a factor contributing to the vulnerability of the education system. If there is any discussion, then it mostly focuses on deteriorating social infrastructure and the outflow of rural teachers from specific border villages, and the low level of human security.

The school system is the main institution shaping the economic prospects of the country through the preparation of competent citizens and competitive participants in the labor market. The current situation of schools in sending communities suggests that a continued status quo will lead to long-term reproduction of outmigration flows from sending communities. If there is a strong desire to reverse this situation, then a support package and development program for schools in sending communities is required. A starting point should be to facilitate discussion of needs of rural schools in regions with active outmigration, including a wide range of stakeholders from school teachers and administrators, to migrant parents, family members left behind, local authorities and migrant organizations; and high school students themselves should also become active participants in these discussions.

A system for monitoring migration processes at the local level is a key step. At present, the monitoring of migration is in its early stages. In terms of recording the number of left-behind children of migrants, this is usually carried out by educational institutions (teachers) and local social workers. The creation of an integrated system for monitoring migration processes, considering adult migrants and children left behind in the care of relatives, would help promote the safety of left behind children and navigate a more precise distribution of limited funds.

The school services and methodological system of training and advanced training for staff, administrators and teachers in rural schools from sending communities should be adapted to the needs of left-behind children. Mental health among them is one of the acute issues that requires urgent attention. The prolonged absence of parents from children's lives who are left with distant relatives and elderly grandparents creates a range of stresses for left-behind children. Their abuse, violence and neglect by care givers are common, high suicide rates among teens whose parents are migrating remain high. While teachers should have some skills in psycho-social work the introduction of school psychologists in rural schools is a necessity, including providing important 'mentoring' functions. Above all, the creation of a support program for teachers and schools in sending communities will have a positive impact on their resilience to the challenges associated with migrant parents.

Along with this, school administrations should become proactive participants in the dialogue with migrant parents, finding and expanding their involvement through digital platforms and through the moderation of a sustainable feedback channel beyond the traditionally accepted information exchange about the child's academic progress. Additional services such as schools conducting trainings with family members left behind in order to involve them in the school processes (e.g. in management issues), or increasing their capacity to understand the stages of psychological development of a child in a certain group, could assist in reducing stresses amongst children.

Key recommendations:

All stakeholders

- All stakeholders need to focus on adapting to changes in the educational environment caused by migration processes through the formation of an educational school system that is sensitive to the needs of left-behind children, their migrant parents and sending communities;

Civil society institutes and the Ministry of Education and Science of the KR

- New *bridging* mechanisms of interests across different stakeholders in migrant sending countries should include activities that facilitate dialogue between stakeholders to formulate an action plan at both local and national levels to support and develop schools in sending communities;

Higher Education Institutions

- Universities and institutes which offer degrees in psychology should consider sending their students to complete internships in rural schools where they can gain extra credits and field experience in working with left-behind children and families/relatives;

Mass Media

- Media institutions need to develop and promote a wider discourse on the importance and value of completing secondary education (Year 11) as an integral component in entering the labor market, including by showing role models among the Kyrgyz diaspora abroad;

School Administrators

- School administrations need to develop their capacity to use digital platforms to develop practices that involve migrant parents and left-behind family members in the development of the school environment;

Migrant Charity Associations/Wealthy Business Owners

- Charity-oriented stakeholders should help build child- or schools-friendly infrastructure, including improving sports infrastructure in rural communities to help prevent

problems among left-behind children including those related to alcohol abuse and other anti-social behavior.

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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>

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

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