



Migration, Food Security and Nutrition in the Kyrgyz Republic

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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.¹ 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.



¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ About 76 percent are under 35 years old and 53 percent are women.⁶ Women migrant workers are employed mostly in services, catering, clothes manufacturing, and as domestic workers.⁷

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.⁸ 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,⁹ in order to reduce their risk of poverty and to cope with possible adverse shocks.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.

4 IOM, Migration Data Portal, Kyrgyzstan, 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.

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹²

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.¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶

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.¹⁷



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, [gsps_migration_eng.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/en/stories/2018/10/gender-equality-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/.

17 FIDH, Women and children from Kyrgyzstan affected by migration, September 2016, https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_kyrgyzstan_uk-2-web2.pdf.

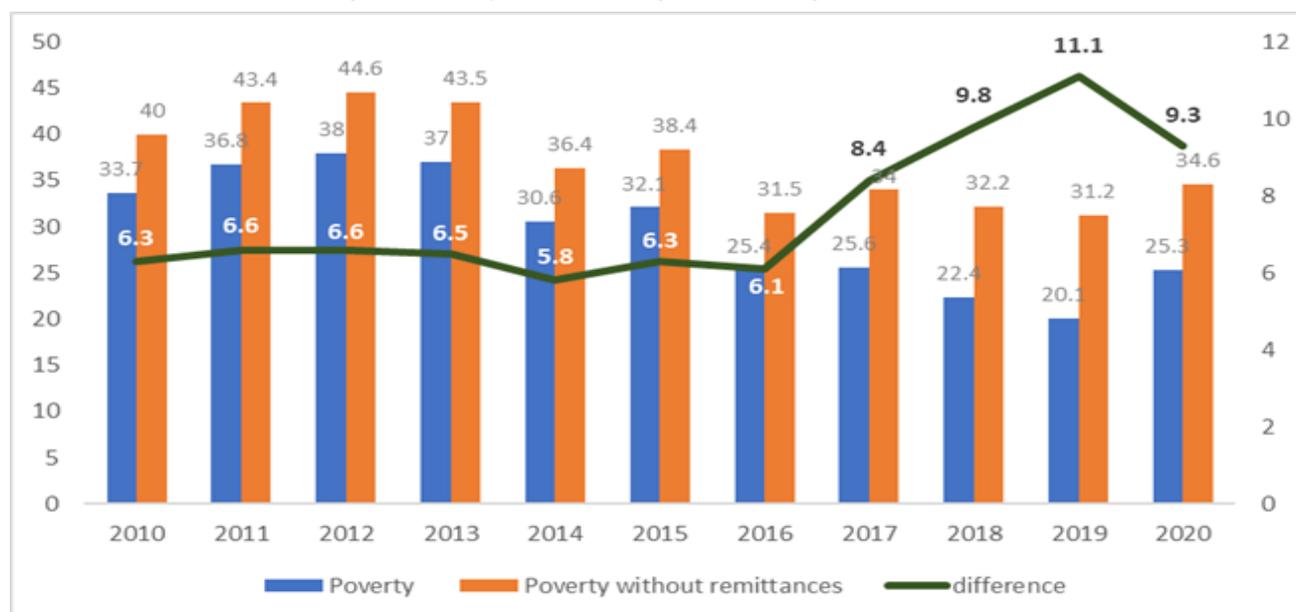
2. Remittances and their role in ensuring food security and nutrition

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.**²⁰ **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.

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.

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.²¹

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 2020.²² 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.²³

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.²⁴ Migrant workers and their families dependent on remittances are emerging as a new group at increased risk of food insecurity due to loss or reduction of income and lack of access to safety nets, which exacerbates their existing vulnerability.

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,²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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 finding jobs and housing in the Kyrgyz Republic, impossibility to migrate despite their willingness to migrate again, and repayment of debts.²⁷ In regard to employment, the data shows that 65 percent of returned migrants are not working, with finding employment upon return being more challenging for female returnees compared to their

21 Kabar, "Bishkek to host first meeting of Council on Relations with Compatriots Abroad", Kabar, 31 July 2019, <http://kabar.kg/eng/news/bishkek-to-host-first-meeting-of-council-on-relations-with-compatriots-abroad/>.

22 The Ministry of Economy of the Kyrgyz Republic, <http://mineconom.gov.kg/en>.

23 ADB, GDP Growth in Asia and the Pacific, Asian Development Outlook Update 2021 – September 2021, 2021, <https://data.adb.org/dataset/gdp-growth-asia-and-pacific-asian-development-outlook>.

24 IOM and UNICEF, Rapid needs assessment of the challenges facing migrant workers and their families impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak – internal document, 2021. 25 Ibid.

26 Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Russian Federation, Информационное сообщение от 25 августа 2020 года относительно возвращения граждан Кыргызской Республики из Российской Федерации (Information message dated August 25, 2020 regarding the return of citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic from the Russian Federation), no date, <https://mfa.gov.kg/en/dm/posolstvo-kyrgyzskoy-respubliki-v-rossiyskoy-federacii/news/8170>.

27 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>

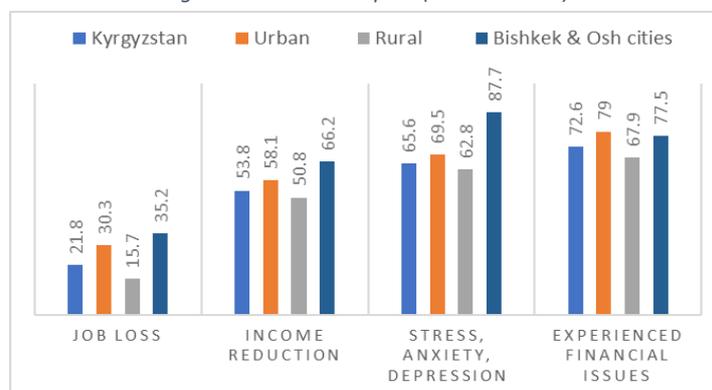


male counterparts (14 percentage point difference) and for migrants that returned to Osh city compared to Bishkek (19 percentage point difference).

Returned migrants are at risk of becoming food insecure as they have not only reduced their food consumption, but also compromised on food quality.²⁸ As a coping mechanism, 86 percent of returned migrants from Bishkek and Osh had to reduce food intake during the pandemic (83 percent in Bishkek and 89 percent in Osh). Of these, 34 percent reduced their food consumption quantities often/very often, while 39 percent did so sometimes and only 13 percent did so rarely. 82 percent of returned migrants have compromised on food quality (79 percent in Bishkek and 85 percent in Osh). Among the 82 percent of respondents that did so, 30 percent reduced their food consumption qualities often/very often, while 32 percent did so sometimes and 20 percent did so rarely.

Urban areas, in particular Bishkek and Osh cities – popular destinations for internal migration - have been most harshly hit by the crisis. Over 30 percent of urban households reported a member losing their job, while in rural areas this share was only 15.7 percent (Figure 2). Income reduction was more severe in urban areas, particularly in Bishkek and Osh, compared to rural areas. Indeed, the regional breakdown provides evidence of growing urban vulnerability in Bishkek and Osh cities, as they suffered the most from job loss (35.2 percent of compared to 21.8 percent nationally), income reduction (66.2 percent compared to 53.8 percent nationally) and had a higher percent of households experiencing financial issues (77.5 percent compared to 72.6 percent nationally).²⁹

Figure 2 COVID-19 Impact (% households)



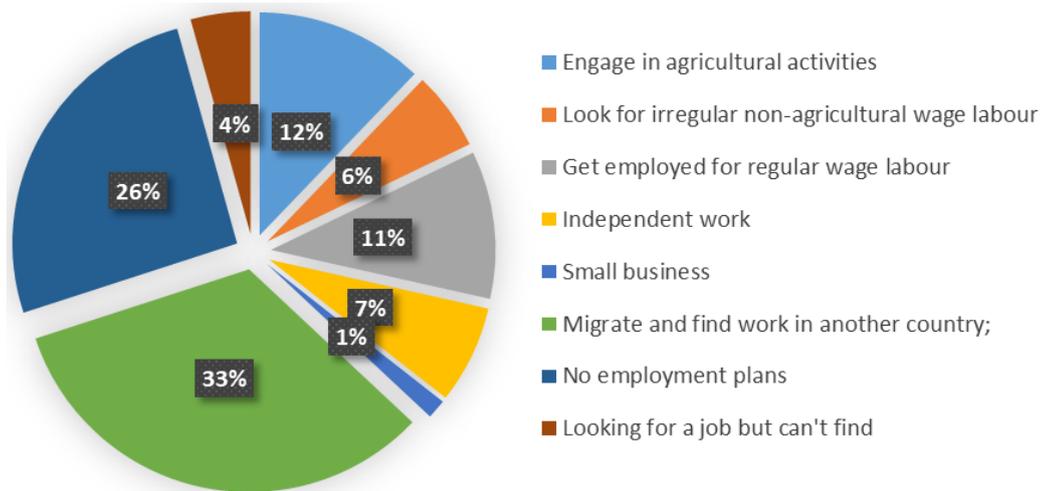
²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ National Statistics Committee, On the results of the sample survey "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on households, 2020, <http://stat.kg/ru/publications/vliyanie-pandemii-covid-19-na-domashnie-hozyajstva/>.

WFP's assessment in June 2021 in the seven oblast of the country complements the study of IOM on returned migrants in Bishkek and Osh. Around 35 percent of households have members in economic migration - 22 percent have just one member in migration, while 8 percent have 2 members and 3 percent have 3 members in migration - and 8 percent have reported that at least one member has returned within the last 12 months. Among those who have returned, 86 percent

did not manage to find work upon their return, 13 percent were employed informally and only 1 percent managed to find a stable job. However, even for those who found employment, 48 percent reported a significantly lower income. Looking at returnees' employment plans, the majority would like to migrate again to find work in another country.³⁰

Figure 4 Returned Migrants' employment plans



Impact on remittances

As shown in Figure 1, remittances in 2020 have contributed to a reduction of poverty rate by 9.3 percent³¹ – lower than the previous year, meaning that 613,800 people rely on them to remain out of poverty. With remittances needed primarily to cover basic consumption needs, many families have limited or no savings to cushion the shocks triggered by a fall in or the cessation of remittances. This will in its turn affect consumption patterns and households' capacities to meet food, health, and education needs.

IOM survey of Kyrgyz migrants in the Russian Federation found that 55 percent of respondents had stopped sending remittances between April and June 2020 (the first three months of the pandemic's impact in the Russian Federation) and an additional 31 percent had sent remittances but a lower amount than usual. 52 percent of respondents also noted that their family situation had deteriorated somewhat as a result of the pandemic with an additional 17 percent stating that their family situation had greatly deteriorated.³²

Loss of income due to halted transfer of remittances is a major concern for migrants and their families. In 2020, a decrease in volume of remittances was experienced by 85 percent of families receiving remittances from a family member abroad.³³ Yet, in 2020 compared to 2019, official statistics from the National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic (NKBR) showed only a minor decrease in the inflow of remittances (-1.63 percentage points) and even a marginal increase (+1.2 percentage points) when the net inflow was considered, due to a considerable decrease in outflows in 2020 compared to 2019. The exact amount of loss of remittances due to the pandemic, however, is difficult to capture in formal statistics as remittances that were sent 'informally' before are now sent through formal channels or money transfers. From January to July 2021, the net inflow of remittances from individuals increased by 31.1 percent, amounting to USD 1.1 billion compared to the same period last year.³⁴ Given the shift towards formal transfer channels, official statistics might not be able to truly reflect changes in remittance patterns. The partial recovery could also indicate the resilience of migrants and their determination to continue to support their families back home, which would mean that they may be using their savings or compromising their consumption, which is not sustainable in the medium to long run.

30 WFP Food Security Outcome Monitoring, 2021.

31 National Statistics Committee, Poverty Report, 2021.

32 From an unpublished dataset within an IOM project, Mitigating the Socio-Economic Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migrants & Communities in the Russian Federation and Central Asia, 2021.

33 IOM and UNICEF, Rapid Needs Assessment of the Challenges Facing Migrant Workers and their Families Impacted by the COVID-19 Outbreak, 2020.

34 National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic

Implications for food security and nutrition

Globally, it has been demonstrated that **income declines, including due to lower remittances, not only reduce demand for food but also induce shifts in the mix of products consumed, notably resulting in less consumption of more nutrient-rich foods** (such as fruits, vegetables, and animal-sourced foods) and relatively more of calorie-rich foods (such as basic grains and sugar).³⁵

WFP's '*Poverty, Food Security and Nutrition Analysis in the context of COVID-19 and the role of Social Protection in the Kyrgyz Republic*' (2021), also revealed a deterioration in consumption patterns compared to the pre-COVID data, confirming the global finding that reduction in income have led to a shift in consumption towards less nutritious food. As an adequate diet is vital for all-round growth and

development, the effects of these coping mechanisms have direct negative consequences to the nutritional, health and productivity status and are difficult to reverse in future perpetuating the cycle of poverty and vulnerability.

Looking at **coping strategies related to food**, WFP's assessment confirms that attention should be devoted to the food security of households with members currently in migration and with returned migrants. Indeed, possibly due to the reliance on and the decreased inflow of remittances, households with members in migration are limiting their food consumption by reducing the number of meals and size of portion the most compared to other households. Out of the three categories, perhaps due to the additional member(s) now present in the household, a larger number of families with returned migrants shifted their consumption towards less desirable and less expensive food and are taking on loans or relying on the help of others to meet their consumptions.

Table 1 Food related coping strategies (% of households)

Food related coping	Use less desirable / less expensive food	Take food in loan, relying on the help of friends / relatives	Reduce number of meals per day	Limit the size of food portions	Restrict food consumption by adults for children enough eating
HHs with no migrant abroad and no returned migrants	33.2%	39.2%	22.8%	18%	12.7%
HHs with returned migrants	35.7%	41.3%	22.1%	18.5%	13.6%
HHs with members currently in migration	30.7%	38.6%	30.7%	22.3%	20%

In regard to asset-related coping strategies (Table 2), households with returned migrants are applying crisis³⁶ and emergency coping strategies³⁷ the most (40.6 percent). Moreover, households with members in migration or with returned migrants are overrepresented in applying stress coping strategies³⁸ compared to households with no members currently in migration or returned migrants.

The increase and use of stress coping strategies over prolonged periods increases the risk of food insecurity in the household.

Further research is needed to better understand the impact of migration on nutrition, especially given the lower remittances experienced in the last year.

Table 2 Asset related coping strategies (% of households)

Asset related coping strategies	Stress coping	Crisis coping	Emergency coping
HHs with no migrant abroad and no returned migrants	51.6%	20.8%	11.3%
HHs with returned migrants	65.7%	30.1%	10.5%
HHs with members currently in migration	63.6%	31.3%	3.6%

35 David Laborde, W. Martin, and R. Vos, Impacts of COVID-19 on global poverty, food security, and diets: Insights from global model scenario analysis, 2021, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/agec.12624>

36 selling productive assets or means of transport, selling livestock more than usual, reducing essential non-food expenditures (health care/ education costs)

37 Selling of a house or land and selling the last cattle

38 Migration of household member in search of income, borrow money to meet food needs, reduction of agriculture expenses, using savings

Government Response

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of the Kyrgyz Republic, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aided returning migrants. The government primarily provided food and shelter with the assistance of IOM and committed 188,000 USD to assist migrants abroad, especially in the Russian Federation and United Arab Emirates. Additionally, the president issued an order to support the return of citizens residing abroad due to the temporary border closures, flight suspensions, and quarantines through charter flights and buses. However, the embassies also emphasized that those who returned will not be able to return to the host countries until the borders reopen. Kyrgyz diaspora organizations in host countries also played a significant role in assisting Kyrgyz migrants affected by COVID-19 and the most vulnerable cohorts of the population.³⁹ For example, complementing the efforts of the Ministry of Emergency Situation, the generous support of the “Kyrgyz Birimdigi Diaspora-Leilek Koomu” contributed to ensure that children of Maksat school are served hot meals from the beginning of the school year.

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the gap in social protection coverage of migrants and their families, as many informal migrant workers did not have access to social protection schemes upon job or income loss.⁴⁰ The lack of a unified registration mechanism could be among the reasons for migrants and their families’ hindered access to social protection schemes. Indeed, due to largely informal nature of migration (both external and internal) and bureaucratic processes, migrants and their families fail to register their changing residence and status, which would allow them to be visible to the institutions. Expanding the quantity and quality of data collected on migration will significantly improve analysis and our understanding and promote good policy interventions.⁴¹ Without accurate migrant population data, the government is not adequately equipped to create evidence-based and data-driven social protection policies for migrants and their families, especially children.



39 Irina Kuznetova, et al., Migration and COVID-19: Challenges and Policy Responses in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia Program Paper No.247, 1 December 2020 <https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Final-CAP-Paper-247.pdf>

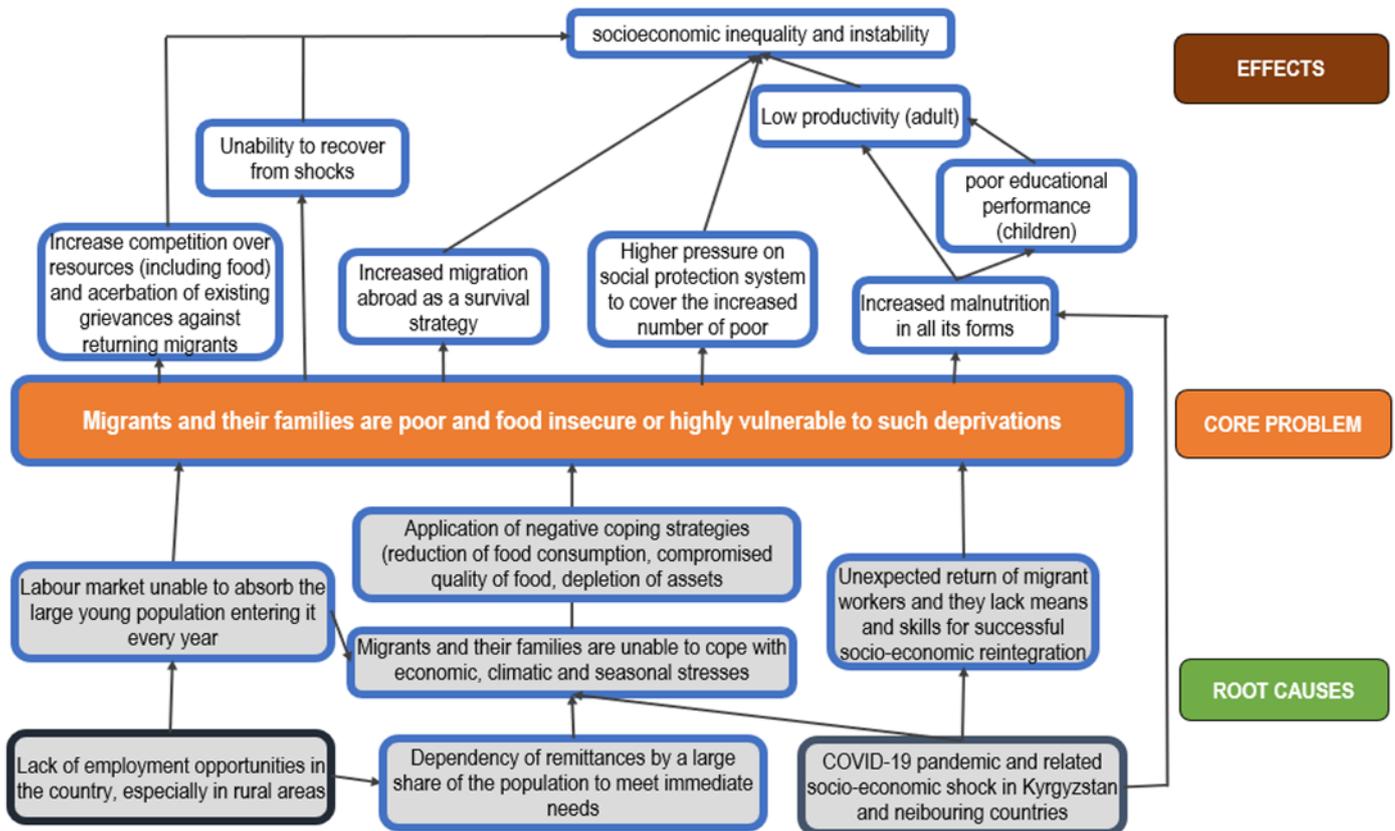
40 ILO, Rapid assessment of the employment impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kyrgyzstan, October 2020, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-moscow/documents/publication/wcms_761673.pdf.

41 FAO, IFAD, IOM and WFP, The Linkages between Migration, Agriculture, Food Security and Rural Development., 2018, <http://www.fao.org/3/ca0922en/ca0922en.pdf>.

5. Problem-Solution Tree Analysis and further joint actions

To better understand the complexity and interconnectedness of migration, food security and nutrition, the problem/solution analytical tool was applied. The **problem tree** (Figure 3) helps us map out key root causes and effects of migrants' and their families' poverty and food insecurity.

Figure 3 Problem Tree



As explained in Sections 1 and 2, the lack of employment opportunities in the country, the reliance on remittances and the socio-economic shocks induced by the pandemic are the main drivers of migrants and their families' poverty, food insecurity, and overall vulnerability. These can have a severe impact on their nutrition and their ability to recover from further shocks, making them reliant on social protection systems of the country, which at the moment does not have sufficient capacity to fully support migrants and their families (i.e., no registry for returned migrants). Moreover, this vulnerability can translate into an increased (i) need to search for livelihoods elsewhere, leading to a potential rise in irregular survival migration and (ii) competition over resources in country, exacerbating grievances against returned migrants.

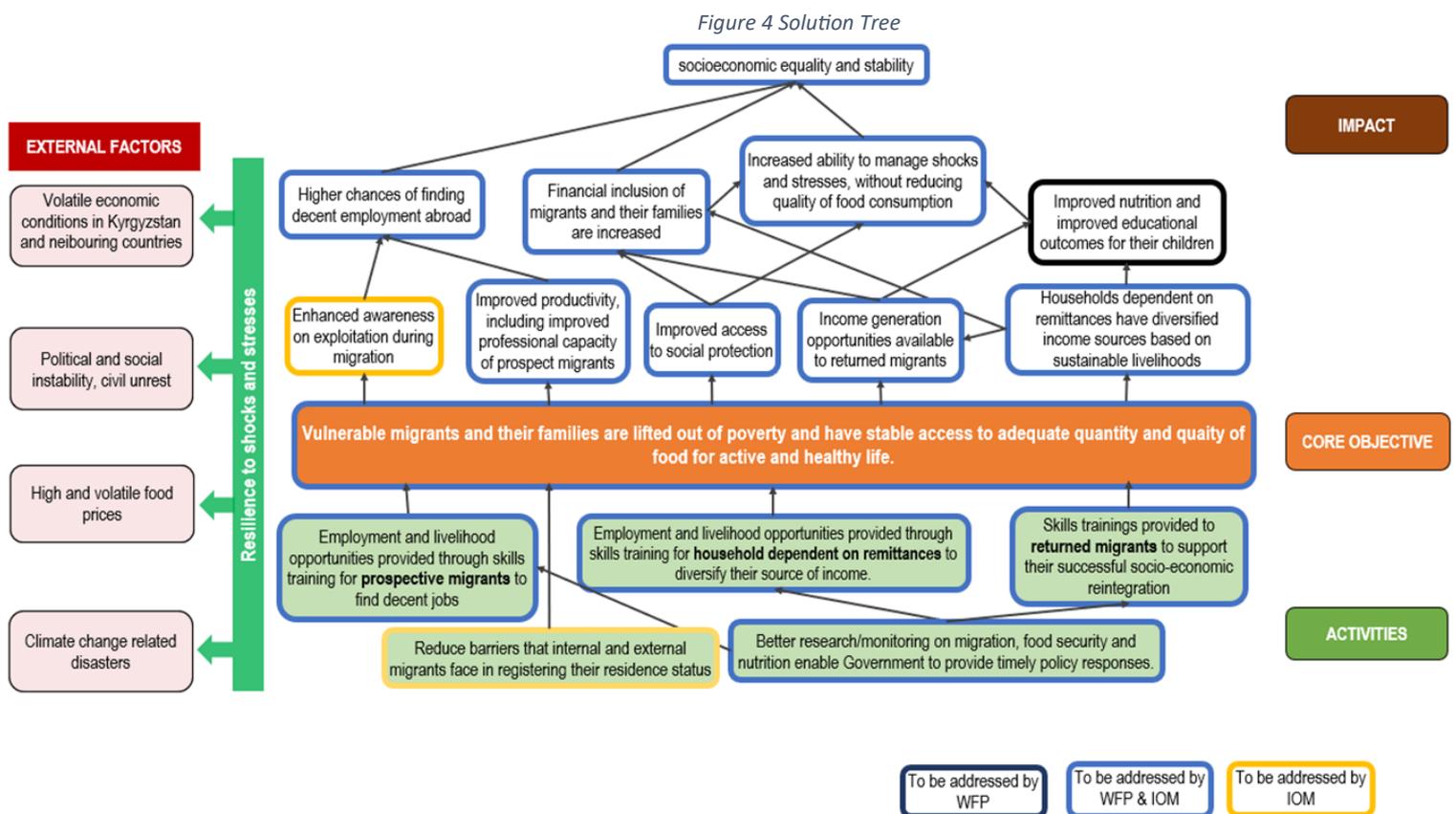
IOM and WFP are leading UN agencies in the areas of migration and food security and nutrition, respectively. In the Kyrgyz Republic, for more than a decade, IOM and WFP both have extensively carried out activities to assist the

vulnerable population through various direct assistance programmes and trainings, including food and cash distributions, reintegration assistance, and skills training. The combined efforts of IOM and WFP will be able to create synergies in tackling root causes of food insecurity among migrants and their families such as poverty and lack of systematic inclusion. Therefore, IOM and WFP are joining forces to address the specific vulnerabilities of returned migrants and families of migrants (Figure 4). Areas of work may include:

- 1) Providing reintegration support for returned migrants, including support to improve their skills to have better opportunities of employment abroad;
- 2) Creating new income-generating opportunities for households dependent on remittances to improve their livelihood opportunities and resilience to shocks, including the halt or decline of remittances;

- 3) Increasing financial inclusion of migrants and their families and investing remittances in sustainable agriculture, rural development, climate change adaptation and resilient livelihoods could also address the adverse drivers of migration from rural areas (i.e. rural poverty, food insecurity, lack of decent job opportunities, inequality, natural resource depletion and climate change);
- 4) Increasing migrants' accessibility to social protection by reducing barriers that prevent migrants from registering their residence status and by promoting the digitalization of social passport (currently paper-based and used as a

- social registry). The digitalization of the social registry could improve overall outreach of social protection system to migrants and their families;
- 5) Better research and data collection on migration, food security and nutrition to better understand the impact of migration on the latter can inform government policy responses to address migrants and their families' vulnerabilities promptly and comprehensively, including through nutrition sensitive activities to ensure migrants and their households have access to a healthy diet.



Conclusion

This brief explores the linkages between migration, food security and nutrition in the Kyrgyz Republic in an attempt to inspire potential joint actions among different actors in the country to address the outlined vulnerabilities of migrants and their families, including between WFP and IOM.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, labour migration, both external and internal, is a popular risk management strategy and income-generating activity for many. Remittances are a top contributor to the country's economic development and a vital safety net for families left behind, thus substantially contributing to poverty alleviation and food security although not always channeled into sustainable development and livelihoods. Social protection of migrants and migrant families, especially children, often become precarious because migration routes are often informal and/or irregular and the registration system for migrants is not well established. Moreover, there is an important information gap on the impact of migration on the nutrition outcomes of migrants and their families that will need to be addressed.

Adding to the existing risks, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected migrants and their families' socio-economic status, placing them under the increased risk of food insecurity due to loss or reduction of income and lack of access to safety nets.

In response, IOM and WFP see opportunities for catalytic cooperation to improve food security of migrants and their families and lift them out of poverty as well as to ensure that the migration experience contributes towards longer term livelihood development and food security. Through better employment opportunities, skills training, and financial inclusion of migrants and their families and through regular research and monitoring on migration, food security and nutrition, IOM and WFP together envision socioeconomic stability and prosperity in the Kyrgyz Republic.

For additional information on the brief, please contact the authors:

[Elisabetta D'Amico](mailto:elisabetta.damico@wfp.org) (WFP Kyrgyzstan - Head of Vulnerability, Analysis and Mapping Unit) at elisabetta.damico@wfp.org and [Hyo Jeong Jung](mailto:hjjung@iom.int) (IOM Kyrgyzstan - Labour and Human Mobility Consultant) at hjjung@iom.int.



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World Food Programme

720040 Kyrgyz Republic,
Bishkek, Orozbekova 52-54 - T +996 312 660033

wfp.org/countries/kyrgyzstan

International Organization for Migration

Mission in the Kyrgyz Republic

720021, Bishkek, 103 Ibraimov St. Business Center
Victory, 6th floor - T+996 312 988011

www.kyrgyzstan.iom.int

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