

February 8, 2007
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Public Speaker Series

Social Research Center (www.src.auca.kg)
American University – Central Asia

Summary of Bermet Moldobaeva's speech
External and Internal Migration Processes in Kyrgyzstan: Recent Trends

Bermet Moldobaeva is the IOM National Coordinator

Bermet Moldobaeva spoke about IOM activities in Kyrgyzstan, migration as a global phenomenon, and various aspects of domestic and foreign migration in Kyrgyzstan.

In particular, Bermet Moldobaeva talked about the fact that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is an international organization comprising 120 member states and has 280 representative offices around the globe. The organization emerged after World War 2 with its mission being to assist the masses of displaced people who had been forced to leave their homes during the war, mostly in Europe. Later, IOM became a global organization with a wider mandate and various institutional directions of operations. There are several leading programmes including combating human trafficking, migration policies, labour migration, etc. Migration problems are particularly widespread as evidenced by the fact that today about 175 million people are in the process of migrating. This represents about 3% of the globe's total population in other words every 35th person participates in this process in one way or another.

According to Ms. Moldobaeva, studying migration on a global level started relatively recently. Well-known scholars in this area believe that about 25 years from the 1970-90's, were lost or wasted, as no significant steps to handle migration issues were made during that period. Today many governments are paying attention to migration issues, including both nations that send migrants and those that accept them. Taking into consideration the global scale of outbound migration, Kyrgyzstan has created a State Committee on Migration and Employment.

Ms. Moldobaeva expressed interest in cooperating with AUCA saying that the IOM Bishkek Office already cooperates with several universities in the country. For instance, a migration centre has been founded in the Kyrgyz National University and a series of lectures on migration have been held in the Bishkek Humanitarian University and the OSCE Academy.

The speaker then stressed that migration issues in Kyrgyzstan cannot be discussed in a context detached from the regional context as the very word migration means the movement of people from one area to another. IOM's mandate is to help governments handle migration in the best possible way, i.e. to obtain the maximum benefit for both sending and accepting countries and the migrants themselves. This is the ideal formula we strive for. Unfortunately, today there are almost no examples where this formula has worked perfectly. One of the sides still loses. For example, today the Russian government perceives the vast number of migrants as a problem. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan as a country from which qualified and even unskilled labour departs is experiencing a brain drain and for it migration is just as bad a problem. According to the

statistics, about 10% of the population has migrated. The numbers are huge. Migrants experience a wide range of problems as well. Their rights are routinely infringed, they are dissatisfied with their salaries, are not socially protected, lack access to medical services, and face great dangers and difficulties in foreign countries.

Unfortunately, not everything depends on governments. Currently, another important player participates in the migration processes - the private sector, with multinational companies that are the main “consumers” of migration processes. Of the 175 million migrating people the majority are individuals on the move seeking a better job. Huge multinational companies are changing their manufacturing locations and opening their manufacturing facilities where they can, and are allowed to, make the highest profits. Migration flows tend to follow them.

According to Ms. Moldobaeva, governments understand that migration issues cannot be ignored since they can face the possible loss of tools for protecting the rights of their citizens. Being restricted by human rights to freedom of movement, nations try to utilize various institutions of migration control including imposing visa controls, establishing border protection areas and border patrols, and setting quotas for foreign labour. The situation is further complicated by the existence of various types of migration, e.g. internal migration, migration of returnees, migration of displaced individuals, labour migration, immigration and emigration and different approaches are needed to mitigate the existing problems at different levels.

After 9/11, it is no longer possible to view migration to the United States outside of the security context. It is impossible to consider migration issues outside of the development context either. Many states cannot get by without attracting additional labour and attempt to find a balance between security, economic interests and social issues. Migration problems are a big global mess and a solution to all the problems has yet to be found.

There are global trends that affect migration, including demographic factors, which directly pertain to Russia. An aging population, scarcity of labour, and a possible collapse of the social services system have prompted the Russian government to issue a decree whereby President Putin offered all Russian nationals living in CIS nations Russian citizenship. This is the reaction of a state to an emerging problem, an attempt to find a way out of the situation, a search for the needed solution.

Other global factors of migration include economic disparity between developed and developing nations. It is easy to provide examples here – where do our migrants go? To more dynamically developing Kazakhstan and Russia where they can earn more than in Kyrgyzstan.

The speaker put special emphasis in her speech on the migration of healthcare workers and IT specialists. Transnational migration is typical for these professions. The issue is relevant for Kyrgyzstan too. It is common knowledge that many physicians have left the country and there are very few practicing specialists left, e.g. oncologists. Nevertheless, so far no one has tried to draw a link between the departure of qualified medical personnel and development issues. The data of the National Statistical Committee say that the birth rate in the country has increased but the infant mortality rate has increased too. It is certain that there is a relationship between the lack of medical personnel and infant mortality. There are statistics that prove this. There are 20 medical officers for every 10,000 people on the African continent with the average life expectancy being 56. In Norway, though, there are 2,000 medical specialists for every 10,000 people with an average life expectancy approaching 80. This speaks volumes. A vast number of African doctors migrate to other nations where they can expect a better salary, better opportunities for career growth, and better living standards; and that is their inherent right.

During a world conference, several African nations complained to the nations that accept their doctors demanding restitution. They reasoned that African states spend about \$20,000 to train a doctor but then lose this investment when the doctors leave seeking higher salaries. The conference participants failed to find an answer to this question. Every state is primarily concerned about its own interests.

In our country such issues are discussed at government level. The seemingly easiest solution is to increase salaries. However, the national budget is limited. Raise the number of medical students? This will not guarantee any results, as in the healthcare sector human resources cannot be replenished easily. It takes 15 years to get a good doctor taking into account all the years of training, practice, and experience, whereas welders can be trained in 6 months. The conclusions are obvious. Speaking of IT specialists, this is a profession that is in high demand in the global economy and these professionals are often given special migration treatment and this category is better protected, as IT people are frequently recruited by multinational corporations that provide jobs and social guarantees.

Ms. Moldobaeva specifically touched on internal migrants in Kyrgyzstan. She believes that major causes of domestic migration include economic difficulties. Lack of jobs in the periphery prompt people to leave for the cities where they can find at least some source of income. People leave the country to earn more, while internal migrants leave for other parts of this country to earn money to put on the table. There are also statistics on internal migrants turning into external ones. Data for 2006 gives a clear understanding of the current trends. In 2006 alone 3,400 individuals arrived in Kyrgyzstan, while 34,000 departed.

Then the speaker talked about migration statistics not being reliable regarding migrants leaving for Kazakhstan and Russia. Kyrgyzstan maintains a visa-free border regime with these nations and it is not always possible to properly account for migrants at the borders. The State Committee on Migrants and Employment has received information about the Kyrgyz Diasporas in Russia, according to which, at least 253,000 individuals, excluding their families and children live in Russia. This number only takes into account those that have not received Russian citizenship. Last year, The State Committee conducted in-depth research, making literally house-to-house visits, whereby it was able to obtain approximate data about the unemployment level. It turned out that the official statistics do not reflect reality, with at least every fifth able-bodied individual in our country being jobless (16- 18 %).

The speaker then spoke about the cooperation between the IOM and the State Committee. In particular, the two organizations are jointly working on developing a state migration policy concept. The existing joint and several system of pension accrual needs to be revised, as the government needs to switch to a savings-based system. What will the government do if migrants who have not paid taxes to the Social Fund for years start claiming their pensions when they get old?

Kyrgyzstan has already faced the problem of of Kyrgyz citizens being deported from Russia. About 10,000 to 15,000 people who worked in Russian markets have been deported. Kyrgyzstan responded to that with a similar decree pursuant to which foreigners will be deported from the country to free up jobs for the returnees. In addition, negotiations are being held with the Russian Government to handle the issues at a bilateral level.

Ms. Moldobaeva shared her views with respect to the two Russian decrees on migration. She strongly believes that the second decree is Russia's attempt to prompt CIS migrants to adopt Russian citizenship. This may represent a problem for Kyrgyzstan as estimates indicate that migrants' remittances amount to about \$780,000,000. However, once an individual gains

Russian citizenship he/she will most likely take his/her family to the country where he/she works. Naturally, this flow of remittances will cease or diminish.

Whenever awareness campaigns are conducted, one is always asked what the way out of the situation is. For instance, they say there are no jobs. However, it is paradoxical that the nation actually does offer jobs but lacks qualified workers, e.g. construction workers who can work with new construction technologies and state-of-the-art equipment. The system of vocational training has been lost while many of the existing vocational schools have been transformed into legal and banking colleges and their property has been privatized. The state needs to take action. Recently, an agreement was signed with ADB for \$40,000,000 to support the system of vocational education. Perhaps, this will help initiate changes in this area. It is also important that over the past 15 years people's behaviour has changed and discipline has been lost: people have simply lost the habit of going to work, paying taxes, receiving their salary once a month, etc.

Another important problem is that the nation lacks analytical and research capacity in migration issues, fails to conduct any serious study and establish analytical centres that could be used by politicians in decision-making. There are no reliable statistics and no competent specialists.

Ms. Moldobaeva expressed her hope that students would be interested in the migration problem and mentioned that IOM was willing to cooperate with universities.

Question 1: Recently, Kyrgyzstan adopted a new Constitution that allows Kyrgyz citizens to have dual citizenship. How will Russia respond to that? Will it recognize such an arrangement?

Response: this is an extremely complex issue for Kyrgyzstan. In Europe this might not be a problem as the nations that are members of the EU all have largely harmonized legislation. In the case of Russia and Kyrgyzstan, there is no such harmony and many issues remain unresolved. E.g., in which armed services will such dual-citizenship individuals serve? Such serious issues cannot be resolved unilaterally. So far, this is a mere declaration in our Constitution that one should understand as a permissive measure aimed at dual citizenship mainly to prevent the loss of people departing in pursuit of jobs. However, nobody is yet talking about Russia recognizing such a step.

Question 2: You mentioned that Kyrgyzstan is currently developing a state programme on migration. How is it being done taking into account that you yourself said that there are no reliable statistics and no one is doing any proper analysis. What is the basis that this programme is being developed?

Response: As of now, this program is being developed based on data concerning the problems of labour migrants in Russia. Detailed data will be required to actually implement the programme. The programme will consist of several elements and first and foremost, will be the legislative part. The problem is there is a rather well developed primary legislative framework, however, appropriate supportive bylaws are lacking. Harmonizing the legislative framework is a complex and challenging task, which is often neglected. In addition, any programme not supported by proper resources is doomed to failure and will remain a mere declarative tool.

Therefore, in collaboration with the State Committee, we are trying to develop such a programme that our organization will fund. It will comprise a part dedicated to research and a part aimed at developing proper legislation.

Question 3: Is your organization involved in the issue of single-parent (incomplete) families due to the migration of one or both parents?

Response: We work with the Underage Children's Adaptation and Rehabilitation Centre in Osh. It is a former juvenile detention facility. There is also an adaptation programme for homeless and abandoned children. This is a preventive measure aimed at preventing the possibility of such children becoming victims of human trafficking. The centre renders psychological assistance, elder children are taught on various courses and we attempt to locate their parents.

Question 4: Recently, the President met with businessmen and touched on personnel issues in his speech. Is your organization involved in employment issues, do you cooperate with state bodies on this issue?

Response: We are an international organization and hope to render maximum assistance regarding this issue. However, it is a national problem in reality. Today, the State Committee is attempting to implement several programmes. We are jointly creating a network of information centres, e.g. in Bishkek at the intersection of Molodaya Gvardiya and Toktogul streets. Our lawyers work in this centre. The state is compiling a database of vacancies. We are trying to implement awareness campaigns to encourage prospective migrants to learn about the opportunities, rights, and possibilities of legal employment. A total of 14 companies handling legal employment have been set up in Kyrgyzstan and many people could become victims of swindlers. If the state is unable to stop the flow of migrants, it can at least channel this flow in the right direction. We help victims of human trafficking return home. However, these are reactive activities even though they help prevent such cases. We also conduct awareness campaigns. Last year 104 people were returned of whom 92 individuals were Kyrgyz citizens. Of these individuals, 60 victims had been sexually exploited, 37 had been exploited as forced labor and some of them had suffered both sexual and labour exploitation. People were returned from Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Uzbekistan, China and two people were victims of internal trafficking. Behind every number in these statistics is a personal tragedy. Our organization, is the only one dealing with this category of people. Not only do we help these people return home, but we also conduct rehabilitative measures, educate the victims and attempt to train them so they can gain a profession.

Question 5: what will the consequences of migration mean for Kyrgyzstan in 20-50 years from now? Can you give examples of countries comparable to Kyrgyzstan that have been significantly affected by migration?

Response: It is difficult to make projections. There is a well-known economic law under which as GDP grows by 4 % and more, migration tends to cease. If there is no economic growth, migration continues. In addition, political instability and conflicts of various kinds can aggravate migration outflows, as was the case after the Batken events.

Question 6: There is a forecast that the number of Chinese migrants will increase annually and a time will come when the Chinese will become the third largest ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan. Just how serious is this problem?

Response: We maintain a visa regime with China. Kyrgyzstan has established quotas for foreign workers. According to the official statistics, there are about 10,000 Chinese people working in our markets. I don't think this is a problem. So far these are trade relations and one also needs to admit that in addition to the Chinese we have foreign workers from other countries as well.

Question 7: Some analysts claim that currently the only source of Kyrgyzstan's economic growth is exporting workers. Do you view labour migrants as a way out of the economic situation or a problem that will eventually result in Kyrgyzstan ceasing to exist?

Response: On a global level, the leading exporters of labour are China, Bangladesh and the Philippines. These are countries that have a huge population and labour is replenished easily. Will we be able to achieve such a replenishment rate? In Kyrgyzstan the situation is totally different and for us this kind of labour export can become a one-off thing. The Philippines, for instance, has been able to organize exports of its labour resources. They initially estimated how many jobs could be created in the country and decided to determinedly export excess workers by training them in the more popular and demanded specialties. E.g., Philippine seamen are much sought after. The government also organizes legal migration and protects the rights of their migrants.

Question 8: In what way do you find the Philippines experience useful for Kyrgyzstan that only has a population of 5 million?

Response: The thing is that most of our migrants are young people from rural areas that go to work on construction sites where the latest technologies are used and where equipment-handling skills are required. Our young men lack such skills, and therefore, they have to carry sacks of cement. However, there are different experiences as well. There are construction teams that Russian employers contract for seasonal jobs and pay their travel and accommodation expenses. This is a question of what choices the state makes.

Question 9: Recently, the State Committee initiated reactive measures to reduce the number of foreign workers in our markets. Could you please comment on this action?

Response: Each state tries to protect its citizens. Due to President Putin's decree, our state is attempting to adequately respond and prepare jobs for the returnees.

Question 10: What role can trade unions of migrant workers play?

Response: There are no such trade unions outside Kyrgyzstan. So far, only Kyrgyz Diasporas have emerged with about 40 of them. However, the issue of trade unions is complex and at this stage we still have to get employers to sign legal contracts with migrant workers. It is often rather difficult, as employers prefer to avoid dealing with state bodies and prefer to hire migrant labour on a non-contract basis.