

**Help Age International Central Asia**

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# **The impact of migration on elderly people**

**Grandparent-headed households in Kyrgyzstan**

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## **Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

After the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, all Central Asian countries, including Kyrgyzstan, went through enormous by their significance transformations. The turbulence of the post-independent economic and political chaos has set in motion a great number of new processes shaking and changing economies, societies and cultures. One of these major metamorphoses was the process of migration. Like many other Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan has witnessed migration on a massive scale both to other countries, mainly to Russia and Kazakhstan, and internally to Chui province and the capital city of Bishkek. It is suggested that today nearly a million of our citizens work as labor migrants in Russian and Kazakh cities and even greater number of people are displaced internally. For a country with a population of only 5 mln people, this is huge. No wonder that migration in Kyrgyzstan started attracting the interests of many scholars and policy makers. Several studies have already been conducted that explore different sides of migration. However, this effort to understand migration processes in our country is only at the beginning stage; only the tip of the iceberg has been discovered, while its main body is still hidden and unknown.

One specific aspect of migration that remains under water is the effect of migration on those who remain behind. A legendary character from Central Asian fairy tales by the name of Hoja Nasritdin once said: When two people separate, the one who departs takes with him only a quarter of the sadness; three quarters remain with the one who stays behind. In the traditional scenario of contemporary Central Asian migration it is the young, or not so young, man who usually leaves his impoverished home village in the search of better economic opportunities for his family. After a couple of years, he might manage to take his wife with him and after another couple of years even some of his children. But there are two people who always would be waiting for him in his original home – his parents. The migrants' parents are the ones who always take the heaviest physical and emotional load of separation and disconnection caused by migration.

This project aims to understand the role that grandparents play in the migration processes in Kyrgyzstan and the full effect of these processes on their life. Our first research hypothesis suggests that their role in initiating and supporting migration is significantly underestimated and that they have one of the biggest contributions to the process of migration on a number of levels. Our second hypothesis suggests that at the same time, their life is also strongly affected by migration and unfortunately in a more negative way. We suggest that they might be sacrificing their own happiness towards an illusionary vision of paradise on the other side of the hill, where their children would live happily and in full satisfaction. The main question that the research asks is: Is this sacrifice really necessary and is it possible to find paradise for the whole family in their own village?

One particular concern of this study is related to the intergenerational dynamics of migration and to the role played by and for the generation of grandchildren. One task that many grandparents took on themselves to support children in migration is to help them raise grandchildren. But how good can grandparents be in the role of parents for their grandchildren? The research will analyze this question from multiple perspectives, including those of village administrators, teachers, doctors, etc.

Finally, the research aims to analyze and portray the life of elderly people in the poorest regions of the country. The ultimate goal of the research effort is to suggest policy recommendations for improving the life of the most marginalized and vulnerable layers of population in Kyrgyzstan.

Following these aims, the research report after describing the methodology is divided into three main parts: the first illustrates all settlements where the research was conducted, the second depicts the life of the elderly people in these settlements, and the third analyzes the links between migration and life of the elderly people.

As it develops, the research asks following questions: What are key problems that the older people experience in areas affected by migration? What coping mechanisms they develop to overcome these problems? How widespread are families where children are raised by grandparents? What challenges do older people face in such families? How do migrant parents take part in the grandchild upbringing? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such family typology for the wellbeing of the older person and for the child development? What help, advice or assistance is available for pensioners locally? With these and many other questions in mind the research brings you to the discussion of methods presented in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 2: METHODOLOGY**

The study included a quantitative component (a structured survey) and a qualitative component (participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions), which together provide a more comprehensive examination of the effect of migration on the wellbeing of elderly people in Kyrgyzstan. The data collection was implemented in the first two weeks of July 2008. The survey instrument, the interview guide, scenario for focus group discussion and participant observation were designed by the SRC researchers and approved by Help Age International.

### **2.1 Quantitative component**

The survey is the administration of standardized questionnaires to a sample of respondents in selected settlements. This quantitative method was used in the research to reveal:

- the scale and patterns of the migration, as well as the reasons and the effect of migration on the life of elderly people in selected households,
- the financial situation of pensioners: their main income sources and assets they own,
- the awareness about the social benefits entitlements,
- the nutrition, self-reported health status and evaluation of medical services available in the community,
- the child care responsibilities,
- the social status of elder people in the community, and
- the major household duties of pensioners during the day and around the year.

The structured interviews were carried out among 60 pensioners in Naryn and 60 pensioners in Batken provinces of Kyrgyzstan. Due to explorative nature of the current study, non-probability convenience (availability) sampling was used to recruit

respondents, therefore the research results cannot be generalized to the entire Kyrgyz population but reflect the experience of selected pensioners. Though the findings are not representative, they improve our understanding of regular patterns. The quota was set on type of settlement (urban vs. rural) and household structure (pensioners in grandparents-headed households and parents-headed households).

The questionnaire consisted of 45 closed-ended and 9 open-ended questions. The questionnaire was designed in English and translated into Russian and Kyrgyz. In general, the respondents were open and frank in their answers, and experienced no problems with the way the questions were formulated. In average, it took 15 minutes to complete the survey questionnaire.

## **2.2 Qualitative component**

While the qualitative nature of this research means that findings are not representative, the results do present us with rich insights around wellbeing of children and pensioners in the grandparent-headed households in Kyrgyzstan. Three qualitative techniques were used in the research: participant observation, focus group discussions and expert interviews.

### ***Participant observation***

Participant observation is the examination of everyday life of people in their natural environment. Participant observation involves observing, listening to, lots of informal talking – and taking part in activities elderly people in selected communities.

In this study, we used participant observation to find out the following:

- To get insights into the daily lives of the families where grandparents look after their grandchildren as parents
- To understand how migration affects old people and children in these and other families
- To find out more about the perspectives of different groups of people through observing/ participating in their activities

### ***Expert interviews***

Expert interviews were semi-structured conversations with open-ended questions that encouraged discussion and allowed researchers to probe for greater detail and more specific understanding of complex issues. Through a series of in-depth expert confidential interviews the research examined:

- the quality of life of elderly people in the communities,
- the scale, pattern and the reasons for out-migration,
- the prevalence of families where grandparents are raising grandchildren due to migration of the parents,
- the main livelihood strategies of elderly people who have grandchild care responsibility,
- the effects of migration on educational attainment, health, nutrition, likelihood of employment, quantity and quality of leisure time as well as emotional wellbeing and social behavior of children in grandparent-headed households, and

- the effect of migration on health, nutrition, work load, quantity and quality of leisure time and emotional wellbeing of grandparents who assumed parental responsibilities.

Interviews were conducted with 4 representatives of administration, 2 health care providers, 3 schoolteachers, 3 social and community workers and 2 militiamen. The interview guide was prepared in English and translated into Russian and Kyrgyz. The experts were recruited by the means of convenience (availability) sampling. Each interview lasted for at least 20 minutes. All discussions were audio taped and transcribed for the analysis. There were no problem with respondents' recruitment and interview guide.

### ***Focus group discussions***

Focus group discussion involves interview with a several informants simultaneously. The level of formalization of the discussion was semi-structured that allowed to develop new questions on the basis on the answers provided. Focus groups among various group of pensioners allowed learning:

- the challenges that elderly people face in their community, and
- the attitude of grandparents about their grandchildren rearing responsibilities due to migration of the parents.

Six focus group discussions were held with 32 participants recruited from five purposively selected communities. The focus group discussion was conducted with pensioners who are raising their grandchildren. The participants were selected by means of snowball sampling. Four focus groups were conducted with female and two with male pensioners. All discussions were audio taped and transcribed for the qualitative analysis. Each focus group discussion lasted for at least one hour.

## **Chapter 3: RESEARCHED SETTLEMENTS**

The research was conducted in three provinces of Kyrgyzstan: Chui, Naryn, and Batken. The choice of Naryn and Batken provinces was justified by the highest levels of poverty there. The choice of Chui province was the matter of convenience. It was a place for a pilot fieldwork. All together nine settlements were visited: two in the Kemin region of Chui province, two in Naryn and five in the Leilek region of Batken province. This chapter describes each settlement individually.

### **3.1 Ak-Tyuz village (Kemin region, Chui province)**

In the Soviet time Ak-Tyuz village was almost independent from the capital of the country. It was a strategic settlement often called "pochtovii yatchik" (post box) because of minerals (mostly zinc) excavated there. Today, it has become a ghost village. If during the Soviet time there were about 5,000 residents, today the number is 691 and half of these are elderly people. If previously villages like Ak-Tyuz were supported by the government, today when there are no jobs or support, many families migrate, but the least mobile layer of population is elders, who do not want to leave places they grew up and spent their whole life in. Findings from another study done on the effect of

environmental degradation and disasters on migration flows shows that even in the places of almost impossible living conditions, the elders have the strongest attachment to their homes and do not want to leave.

There were 15 households, where elderly people were living alone or with little grandchildren. The financial situation of elderly people in Ak-Tyuz is slightly better than in other regions, because the village is located in the high-mountainous zone and therefore elderly people get pensions of the 1<sup>st</sup> category – 1,700-2,000 som; while in regular villages it is about 900-1,000 som.

Families most heavily affected by the migration of children in Ak-Tyuz were Russian. There are several reasons for that. The main is that Russian people often forget about their parents when they leave. One woman left her daughter to a grandmother few years ago and has not come back for many years. The old lady wanted to change motherhood right to herself, so that she could get a bit more money from social services, but she could not do it without the girl's mother.

In Kyrgyz families, things are very different. Firstly, the importance of family, clan and Uru (tribe) has their effect. In the Soviet times the villages were shaped around clan structures; therefore until now all Kyrgyz residents of one small village are tied by clan relations based on reciprocity. Secondly, there is a great deal of respect towards elders in Kyrgyz community. This tradition finds roots in Kyrgyz culture. So, Kyrgyz elders are rarely left alone. There was one old Kyrgyz lady, whose relatives even sent their 12-year old daughter from completely different region to study in Ak-Tyuz and look after this old lady, because there was no one to do it. It is interesting that solidarity in the Kyrgyz community goes beyond ethnic lines. Kyrgyz residents help their Russian neighbors: they collect money, give some help at home, etc.

It was a bit sad to find out that this tradition of paying respect to elders started losing its strength. As some Russian elders said: in the past they always looked at Kyrgyz youth as an example of good manners in terms of treating the elders. But today, young Kyrgyz people are not like they used to be in the past; they show less respect.

Seasonal changes and winter are among the main factors worsening the life of the elderly in Ak-Tyuz. Coal is very expensive and wood is very hard for elders to collect and bring home. Life of the elders there is also strongly affected by the growing prices on food and commodities. The research team compared the consumption norms before and after the latest rise in prices. The results show reduction in consumption and also switch from more expensive to less expensive products. Elderly people developed some innovative surviving strategies. Through informal networking they exchange information on where to buy the cheapest food products. They also often organize themselves to go and buy products in bulk in order to negotiate discounts from sellers. However, many coping strategies are different for Kyrgyz and Russian elderly people.

In Ak-Tyuz elderly people are also less likely to participate in the social life of the village community. Traditionally, villagers used to bring some small gifts or money contribution for different kinds of getting together occasions. Today, many are excluded from participating in the social events because they cannot afford such gifts. This finding confirms the results of Dudwick and Kuenhast's study on the transformation of social networks, who suggested that the poor are excluded from many social activities because they can't afford "membership fees" in the form of gifts and contributions. In our case it is the elderly, who fall in to this category.

### **3.2 Orlovka village (Kemin region, Chui province)**

Orlovka has a much better developed infrastructure. It has two secondary schools, hospital, and five kindergartens, all built during the Soviet times. Nowadays, the village with more than 4600 people has succeeded to retain most of its social structure. But still the elderly people are one of the most vulnerable, especially Russian families living in the multiple-story buildings. They do not have any land and considering that factories are not longer working, have no other income besides pensions. According to the local administration there are a lot of people leaving for Russia and very few of them return. The migrants from Orlovka even established a kind of forum to discuss the life and problems in the village – [www.orlovka.ru](http://www.orlovka.ru)

Village has very active public life. There is an NGO established by the local activists under the leadership of Lidiya Fomova who has many times stood up to protect the rights of elderly people in Kyrgyzstan. She is quite effective in drawing public attention to the problems of elderly people and in defending their rights. She was successful in bringing even the Minister to Orlovka to talk to local pensioners about pensions and various problems they face.

Sadly, drinking is a big problem in the village. So much so, that even elderly people in these villages are sometimes abused and beaten by their drunken children. The police chief in one of the villages said that they don't arrest children in such cases because later parents come themselves with the request to release their abusers.

### **3.3 Aibike Village (Leilek region, Batken province)**

Aibike is a village in the mountains located about 30km from Isfana. It is only few kilometres off the main road. However this secondary road and all roads inside Aibike are in very poor condition. Recently the road was also significantly damaged by a flood and the day the research team came to this village, the Ministry of Emergency Situations tracks have also arrived to clean the road from the stones brought by that flood. Aibike is a village on a hill and one can have good overview of neighboring valleys from the edge of the village. Young local boys were very excited about our arrival and very interested in riding in our car. They were good guides and took us to many elderly people in the villages. Just one day before our arrival one elderly man has passed away and when we came many were attending the funeral ceremony.

Aibike was not the poorest village in the region – it had many relatively rich people. One reason for that is because it is a good place to grow apricots. We saw plenty of those. It was a harvesting season and many young men were on the trees using sticks to drop the apricots to the ground. Apricots were of different types and sizes. There were also plenty of apples. We were told that apricots are usually sold to some wholesale buyers who come to the village. The price of dried apricots was about 10-15 som per kilo. It is amazing that by the time these same apricots reach markets in Osh or Bishkek their price can grow ten times – up to 150-200 som per kilo. Apricots also make the significant part of the local diet. We saw many families relying on them in daily food intake. Many young boys were eating apricots and then breaking and eating the apricot seeds. Other main agricultural projects in this village are wheat, barley, and corn.

Almost all villagers have complained about the lack of water. Water comes to the village from the mountains and it is quite dirty. However, everyone still drinks it. There is

also another source of water – a *bulak* in the mountains, where water is very clean and tasty. Some suggested the possibility of bringing water from other places by the pipe and apparently couple of years ago the administration was collecting money – 200 som from family for that purpose, but nothing has been done.

People in the village differed by their economic status. Some whom we visited were quite wealthy: they had 3-4 hectares of land, while others only half a hectare. Some had meat three times a day, others only once or twice a year. Some had large quantities of animal stock, others had nothing. The life of elderly people has also varied according to the economic status of their families. Researchers got an impression that elderly people who had more of their children living with them were happier and wealthier than those whose children left to earn money in Bishkek or other countries. The financial help from those who left was quite rare. Migrant children do send or bring clothes and food. But in most of the cases the elderly say that they are happy as long as their children can provide for themselves over there. In the researchers' opinion no matter under what angle you look at it, the migration of children breaks the relationship and even if children send money, the life of the elderly is not fully satisfactory.

Most of the elderly people in Aibike were born in the same village; they have spent all of their life in it and they did not have any plans for leaving the place. It is amazing to imagine that so many people have lived their whole life in one place and never moved out. It means that everything in their life was related to the places they walked across from their birth to the very old ages. If we understand this perspective, we can understand how important the people's relationships are. All informants said that they never miss weddings, funerals and other celebrations and that they have good friends, who often meet and spend time together. However, as almost all agreed the relationships stop on the level of communication and do not go beyond it to offer help to each other. The most commonly expressed opinion was that in today's times nobody helps anybody, because everyone is concerned only about their own family.

### **3.4 Sulyuktu town (Leilek region, Batken province)**

Kosh-Bulak (former *Vostochnyi* – Eastern) village is officially a part of Sulyuktu town. Sulyuktu is a city built for coal miners during the Soviet time. The coal mined out in Suluktu in the Soviet time was sent to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Russia. It was produced in very large quantities and life in the city was boiling. The city was subsidized by Moscow and its population grew very fast. People were competing for apartments and construction was going very actively. People's life was happy. Streets were lit up. Young people were coming from many places in Russia.

Almost immediately after the break up of the Soviet Union things got worse. Mining has stopped and construction was frozen. The first thing researchers saw when they entered the village were unfinished construction and crane, which perhaps was standing there for last 17 years. Today the mines are working, but in a much smaller capacity. Mines are divided and privatized. New owners mine in their own territory in small brigades and then sell coal individually. Quite few young people were working in these mines. According to the Akim of the town, these young people received good salaries – 8-10,000 som. The perspective shared by the people themselves was quite different: miners had to work 24 hour shifts and all they received was about 1-2,000 som and lots of promises.

The city was in a dilapidating condition. The first thing that hits a visitor is the smell of human waste almost everywhere in the streets. For more than a decade the sewage system was not working. One old miner showed us the sewage pit right in front of his apartment building. The sewage was flowing from there straight into his vegetable garden. The smell was terrible and flies were all over the place. Such situation was common for the whole city. People said that the Village Council regularly collects money on repairing the sewage system, but nothing was done so far.

The council also collected money for water every month. And just like with sewage, water is a big problem. Water comes into the houses only once a week and only for an hour or two. People try to collect as much of it as they can. The first thing they do every morning is to run to the water-pump to see if there is water. If there is, they run to bring their buckets and get into the queue. The queue becomes long quickly, tens of people come along with to get water. However, water runs only for an hour or two and stops. Those who were late, go home with nothing.

The age distribution is similarly dilapidating. The majority of locals are elderly. One informant suggested a figure of 60%. The rest are boys and girls of the school age, often looked after by their grandparents, while the middle generation of their parents left the village in the search of better life in other parts of the country or abroad. Many elderly people are former coal miners. They have devoted 20-30 years of their life to these mines and they spent in this village most of their life. Now they don't want to move.

The migration is quite strong. It was difficult to obtain the exact figures and it was hard to rely on the words of the administration, who in the interview suggested that these days the situation is improving, that mines are working and that in fact there is immigration into the village rather than migration from it. People say contrary – almost every house has someone migrated and working in Bishkek, in Kazakhstan or Russia. Almost everyone considers this normal and looks at it positively. The main argument is: since there are no jobs here, no land or water for agriculture and no pastures for animals, why should young people sit in this dilapidating place? It is better for them to leave and work somewhere else. This way they themselves can live a better life and they can send some money or other types of material help to the village.

After conducting interviews and focus group discussions, the research team came to conclusion that the elderly population of such former industrial cities like Sulyuktu is perhaps the most disadvantageous in the republic. The main reason for such argument is that during the privatization in early 90-s, all members of collective farms were given land, while residents of towns, like Sulyuktu, got nothing. So, today, just like for some families in Orlovka, the elderly people there do not have any other sources of income besides their pensions.

One other factor is worth mentioning. During the Soviet times, miners' pension was the second in size after that of pilots. They were receiving 160 rubles, while everybody else's pension was about 70-90 rubles. Therefore, they worked their whole life in very dangerous conditions, losing their health, but hoping to spend their old age well provided by the generous pension. Today, however, their pension is almost the same as that of the cleaners or office workers. Miners, many of whom spent 30-40 years in the mines and many of whom were completely disabled considered such distribution as a great injustice and always requested researchers to bring this issue into the focus. All in all, the research team left Sulyuktu with very heavy residue in mind and sad feelings.

### **3.5 Andarak village (Leilek region, Batken province)**

Andarak is one of the farther Eastern settlements of Kyrgyzstan. With four other villages it makes the Sumbula Ayl Okmotu. Two villages are Kyrgyz, one is Uzbek and Andarak is a Tajik village. Almost all of its population is Tajik. Andarak village consists of about 1,220 households and 6,000 residents. There are few Tatar, Uzbek and Kyrgyz families, but the majority are Tajik. In the central office in Isfana we were told that these villages are some of the poorest. According to the village head presently 67% live under the poverty line (compared to 76% in 2002) and 22% from them live under the extreme poverty. In the appearance, though, things seemed not that bad. Although local people complained about the lack of water for their agriculture, we saw plenty of water. There were many trees, apples, apricots, and vegetable gardens. Many people owned animals: horses, cows, sheep and even yaks. There were quite few really rich families, who owned some 300-500 sheep.

Tajik people are known for their hard work. The researchers saw many young men working inside the village and many people working with the grass preparation outside in the field. Even very young boys and girls in the ages from 8 to 12 were riding donkeys and bringing wood or grass to the village.

Researchers were told that many young people these days leave the village to go and work in Russia: mostly to the Moscow or Samara provinces. It costs about 13,000 som (US\$380) to reach Russia and have some money for the first time. Nearly 700-800 young people from the village (about 13%) are currently away earning money. The most common type of migrant here is the one, who goes to work seasonally – for several months from spring to winter or for a couple of years. There are also those who leave with their families, but there are not so many of these. Migrants send remittances every month or every few months. They send them through banks and people here can receive money in the banks in Isfana. Generally, migration is looked upon quite positively and apparently many young people want their children to go and work abroad. However, because Tajiks have very large families, even if some migrate, there are still those who stay at home. That is why there were so many young people in the streets.

There were many elderly people who looked after their grandchildren, whose parents left looking for their fortunes. However, it was very rare for them to look after the kids totally by themselves. They still had other children either living with them or in the same village, who helped them look after grandchildren. The head of the village said that if children are raised by grandparents, it has effect on them on many sides, including their education, nutrition, health and behaviour. According to him, the situation is often dependent on the income of migrant parent(s). If they earn and send money, then the child has enough of clothes, food and stationary for school. Those children, whose parent(s) cannot earn money and are not present loose on both material and parenting side. In any way, it was suggested that no one can replace a father.

One unique thing about this village was that there were many disabled people, including the mentally disabled. We have visited one elderly man whose leg was amputated as a result of the diabetes. He was lying in bed for 9 years since then. Another old lady was paralyzed and could not move at all. The other elderly man was death and could not speak. Then we visited a family with two disabled brothers living together. One had paralysis; the other one was not very stable mentally. Yet, the second was looking after the first. There was very little brightness in their life. We were told that there were

about 15 death and dumb people in the village. During the Soviet time they all used to study in a special school in the neighboring village, but these days this school doesn't function anymore and they are simply left uneducated.

There is a good sense of community in the village. People celebrate weddings in the fall almost every day and sometimes there are two weddings per day. Elderly people were always invited. We could see the difference with the Vostochnyi village in Sulyukta, where elderly Russian people were invited only to the funerals and there were simply no weddings at all. However, people hardly help each other materially. Almost all informants said that these days every family is worried only for themselves, not for anybody else. So, there is almost no support, whether in terms of money, food or labor. In one case, however, a young man was helping an elderly childless couple to care for their vegetable garden and didn't ask for any compensation for his work. In one other case of a disabled old man, the mosque community used to collect money for him once a year during the fasting season.

### **3.6 Golbo Village (Leilek region, Batken province)**

The Golbo village is located south of Isfana. It was a Kyrgyz village with many elderly people. This village is a home to Gulnara Derbisheva – a deputy of the Kyrgyz Parliament. Village has 300 households and 1500 people. The head of the village is a young man by name Aldish-aba.

The main color of the village was brown. All houses were made of clay and roads were brown too. The village is located along the main road. On the other side there is a dried river and there are houses on both sides of this river. We saw water running from a water-pump, but we were told that water is the main problem for the village and that everything is drying because there is no water. People get water only one or two times a month and only for a couple of hours. This is not enough to grow vegetables and fruits.

Lack of water is the most common problem for most of the villages in the Leilek region. This is farthest and the driest part of Kyrgyzstan. Locals who travel to other provinces in the country say that those lands are like heaven compared to Leilek. For this reason Leilek has the poorest part of Kyrgyzstan's population and the highest rates of migration. Because of the high rates of migration, many lands and houses are left unused. This leads to the phenomenon of crawling migration. Tajik families from neighboring Tajikistan (where situation with water is even worse) come and occupy the lands and houses of the Kyrgyz who left. As a result the demography is slowly changing. Many elders complained about it. They said there is an urgent need to bring some jobs or water into the region. These two matters are the only matters that can stop the young from leaving. If people had places to work or if there was enough water for agriculture, they would stay.

The idea of bringing water from Sarken river is also very prominent here. Apparently the idea goes back to the Soviet times, when engineers wanted to make a tunnel in the mountains and change the direction of the Sarken river, which currently flows into Tajikistan, to turn its flow to Kyrgyzstan. They developed a project and were about to start, but had to stop because Tajik officials complained to the administration in Moscow about it. After independence, the Governor of Leilek region tried to implement this idea again. He found international sponsors. They built the road to the mountains, brought in electricity and even built houses for workers. Unfortunately for locals and

fortunately for Tajikistan, the Governor became a parliament deputy and the new governor did not continue with this initiative. So, for the last two-three years there was no development and the houses stand empty. It is hard to make judgements on this case. On one hand locals argue that this water belongs to Kyrgyzstan and it is not fair that when the whole region is suffering from the lack of water, all of it goes to neighbors. On the other hand, turning the river into Kyrgyzstan can lead to some very unpredictable consequences for people in Tajikistan and for the regional ecosystem.

There were many elderly people in this village and the migration figures were quite high. We were told that almost every household has someone working in Bishkek or abroad. According to the village head – nearly 700 people (almost a half of the existing population) have migrated. The cases when grandchildren are left with their grandparents are very common. They are accepted quite normally. The hardships and realities of present times make people adapt and change many of their perspectives on life and many family practices.

People in the village actively attend wedding celebrations and funerals. All of our informants said that they hardly miss the *toi-tamasha* opportunities. These are quite frequent in the village and elderly people do not feel isolated. One reason for a good social life is that almost all villagers were from one *byoksyo* tribe (uruk) and thus they are all related to some degree. This is quite important for the Kyrgyz. Just like in other villages, however no one expected help from neighbors, knowing that everyone is in the similar condition. The elderly people were also not willing to go and ask for help from the richer members of the community, saying that those were not approachable anyway.

Communal life also continues in the large mosque in the center of the village. Many informants told us that they pray there five times a day. The wives of some of these elderly men sometimes complained that this is all they do – go to mosque all day long. For men however, this seems like very good way to socialize and get the latest news update besides worshipping. When researchers approached the mosque in the time of the midday prayer, there were about ten elders sitting on the bench in front of the mosque and chatting. After the prayer they became our focus group for discussion.

### **3.7 Isfana town (Leilek region, Batken province)**

Isfana is the regional center of Leilek. Isfana is a traditionally Uzbek city and most of the population until present days is Uzbek. It has however quite strong Soviet heritage in the shape of its Central Square and building of the regional administration. Isfana has a not very big, but active bazaar, decent hotel, mosques and number of cafes/restaurants. While in Isfana, researchers had a chance to interview the officials: chiefs in the police department, doctor in the hospital, social worker and community worker from Babushka Adoption. Researchers also conducted a focus group with a group of elderly Uzbek on their way from the mosque and got several interviews with fairly drunk elderly in the local *chaikhona* (tea-house).

The comparison of two groups of people showed how different their approaches to life were. The first group – elders from the mosque – were quite constructive in their complaints. They have suggested what was wrong and how things could be improved. They answered all questions seriously and as it seemed – honestly. They suggested that the main problem in the city was the lack of control on prices in the market due-to the lack of competition. Obviously, the pension was not enough for elders to survive. When

asked about migration of younger generation, some people answered positively, while other remembered the cases when young men die there, many come disabled and many come cheated without any money. They also suggested that without reviving industries, it is impossible to keep the youngsters here.

Talking to the second group of elders was quite discouraging as they were quite drunk and were telling all kinds of things, arguing and fighting with each other. Researchers did realize that from the start and later it was difficult for them to escape. There were two tatars among them and the rest were Uzbek. The Uzbeks were complaining that it is impossible to get a job for them because Kyrgyz do not give them any positions and that if it continues this way, there is a possibility of revolt and ethnic conflict.

### **3.8 Ak-Kyia village (Naryn province)**

Ak-Kyia is a small rural settlement that is located in a twenty minutes drive from Naryn city. According to 1998 census, the population of the village was 673 people. Due to migration the size of the population has almost halved. One of the common reasons for migration is lack of job opportunities. People predominately migrate to Bishkek, many have also migrated to Russia and some to Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan became the least popular destination point after several cases of slavery, abuse and cheating by the employers.

The houses in the villages are usually constructed by clay bricks and consist of only two rooms. Each house has a stove that is stoked up by coal, wood and dried dung in winter times. None of the houses in the village has the access to drinking water. The nearest source of spring water is located in the outskirts of the village. Children are responsible for water supply in the household. They bring water to the house several times a day; often carrying heavy buckets under the burning sun. One of the major concerns is the problem with electricity. In July 2008, every day there was no electricity from about 9 am till 18 pm. Since the electricity was the major type energy for cooking, many families are now trying to rebuild their ovens.

Elderly people in the settlement are quite active. Females are usually engaged in household chores: housecleaning, cooking, laundry, milking the cows and taking care of vegetable garden. Males are responsible mainly for livestock rearing and land processing. People in Ak-Kyia grow vegetables for the household consumption and hay both for the household consumption and for sale. Many people complained that recent droughts have spoiled their harvest. Inhabitants were not able to irrigate their fields due to the shortage of water. Many people believed that the water was stolen by residents of another village that is located first in the irrigation system. The water quarrels happen often and sometimes lead to the conflicts between the people from several settlements.

There are two shops in the village that sell various types of food and hygienic goods. The owner of one of the shops informed us that she usually gives products in credit. People pay back at the beginning of a month, when pension is received. One of the major products for the villagers is flour. The nutrition in the village is deficient. The major food item is bread; therefore villages buy several kilos of flour or a sack of flour every month.

One of the major problems in the village is alcoholism. Many females in the focus group discussions complained that alcohol abuse among their husbands does not allow them to enhance their financial situation.

### **3.9 Naryn city (Naryn province)**

Naryn is the administrative center of the Naryn province in the central Kyrgyzstan, with a population of 52,300 people. It is located on both banks of the Naryn River. The population of Naryn province is 99% Kyrgyz. Today it is considered to be among the poorest regions in the country that has one of the highest rates of out-migration of young and middle-ages residents. After several days in the city, researchers had an impression that only elderly people and children are left in the city.

Despite the fact that Naryn is one of the poorest provinces in the Kyrgyz Republic, the residents of Naryn city are quite optimistic about their future perspectives. From Naryn, the main road leads to Torugart Pass and China. At present, this is the main transport link from Kyrgyzstan to China. The province administrators are planning to open a big market where the goods will be accumulated and then transported to other regions of the country and abroad. Such initiative will allow the development of small and medium entrepreneurship in the province and increase in the collection of taxes.

In addition, Naryn hosts one of three campuses of the University of Central Asia (UCA). The University was founded in 2000 by the governments of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, and His Highness the Aga Khan. It is the world's first internationally chartered institution of higher education. City dwellers hope that the construction of the campus will enhance the infrastructure of the city and create new jobs the city residents.

The description of nine settlements researched in this study portrays quite diverse contexts. All settlements had unique history and specific character that distinguished them from each other. The life of the elderly people in these villages has also varied extensively. However, all of them also had some major commonalities. The ones most interesting for the research team were shaped around the migration processes from these villages. The observations made by researchers, interviews with local elderly people and local administration, teachers, doctors and police officers, and the questionnaire survey conducted in Naryn and Leilek regions helped the researched to reveal some common patterns of the of the life of the elderly people and understand the role of migration processes in it. These findings are presented in the following chapters.

## **Chapter 4: LIFE OF THE ELDERLY PEOPLE IN THE POOREST REGIONS OF KYRGYZSTAN**

The research proceeds by looking at the main characteristics of the life of elderly people. If description of researched settlements in the previous chapter was mostly based on the observations and qualitative information, this chapter is built largely on the quantitative analysis drawn from the questionnaire survey. The description of the main characteristics of the respondents' group starts the chapter. It is followed by the analysis of various aspects of their life, such as livelihood, pension, diet, social life, etc.

## 4.1 Background

The average age of respondents in the questionnaire survey was 67 years. 44% were male and 56% female. 89% were Kyrgyz, 4% Uzbek, 4% Tajik and 3% Russian. The fairly homogenous ethnic composition of respondents allows us to develop the research arguments around the social, economic and cultural practices of the Kyrgyz.

The majority of elderly people had only primary (37%) and secondary (32%) school education. Only 15% had higher education and 11% secondary special. 57% were married, 40% widowed and 3% – divorced. Kyrgyz families are traditionally large. The average number of children in elders' families was 5.86. From them 20% of children lived with them, 31% lived separately in the same village and 59% have migrated. From children who migrated 38% have been sending some help (mostly sons – 48%, while daughters – 30%). The help came in the form of food (41%), money (35%), clothes (17%) and medicine (8%).

## 4.2 Livelihood

Pension is the main source of income for 83% of pensioners and secondary source for 15%. Very often pension is also the only source of income. All other sources of income are simply insignificant. With 92% of elders having their children migrated, remittances sent by them are not that important – only 24% of elders considered them as some source of income. Yet, remittances come second after the pensions. The third is the income that comes from livestock and it is almost twice as important as income that comes from agriculture. This tells us that Kyrgyz people, especially in the mountainous regions, are much more dependent on animal husbandry than on agriculture. The least significant are help of relatives (12%), salary (11%) and businesses (8%).

97% of elders received pension. Almost all (95%) received it in time and almost all (97%) received it in cash. This was something that all of pensioners were happy about and thankful to the President Kurmanbek Bakiev. In the past, pensions were often not given in time for months and then given not in cash but in some kinds of products. Latest enforcements are very much appreciated by the elders.

One could also expect the appreciation of several consequent rises in the pension size. However, if we take into consideration the much sharper increase in the market prices for food, the increase of pension becomes quite insignificant. The average size of pension in the survey was 1100 som. The range however was between 500 and 1600. No elder considered this pension sufficient. The most common argument used by elders was the cost of a sack of flour, which in Leilek for example costs about 1400 som. For one family one bag of flour is not enough for one month. What about all other necessary products. Imagine, what can a person with the pension of 500 som buy for this money if he or she doesn't have any other sources of income. No wonder that 97% of elders spent pension on food. 13% managed to buy some clothes on it, 18% - medicine and 17% - stationary for children.

It is common to think that elderly people live mostly as dependant family members who cannot work much and thus mostly live at the effort of the other household members. The present situation in rural Kyrgyzstan however is often quite contrary. In the households, where children have migrated, but do not send money for one or other reason, the only source of income becomes the pension of the elderly and often the whole

family is dependant on this pension. Therefore, the role of pensioners in the household budget is very significant.

### 4.3 Diet and health

The increase in food prices significantly affected the diet of almost all (91%) elders. The following table shows the types of products, which today elderly people lack in their diet. We can see the critical insufficiency in fruits and vegetables in Naryn and in meat and milk products in Leilek.

	Total	Naryn	Leilek
Fruits	63%	90%	33%
Vegetables	58%	85%	30%
Meat	68%	54%	83%
Milk products	32%	22%	43%

15% of respondents eat meat only once a week and 41% even less than once a week. Many elderly people said that they eat meat only when they are invited to toys or funerals.

3% of elders do not have hot meal even once a day. They live only on tea and bread. From the rest, 54% have hot meal only once a day, usually in the evening. Even then, the food mostly consists of the same potato or macaroni every day. There is not much diversity in the types of meals that families cook. Some quotes from elders' responses about the increase of prices, describe the harsh reality of their existence very vividly:

- *All products became expensive; we don't eat meals in time; we are in debt.*
- *Flour is very expensive. My pension is just enough to buy 50kg of flour. We barely buy other products.*
- *Now it is very difficult to live. Because of malnutrition I always feel dizzy.*
- *My grandchild was born in 1991. He is very short. I guess it is because of malnutrition.*
- *Last year we ate tomatoes; this year we haven't.*

High prices of food, small size of pension, lack of calories, proteins and vitamins in the diet, and poor frequency of eating hot meals all lead to the deterioration of health of the elders: 32% considered their health condition as bad, 44% as average and only 24% as good. The most important illness for the elders is that of their legs and feet – 19%. Equally significant were problems with blood pressure and heart (9% each) followed by illnesses of hands, head, lungs, liver and stomach (6% each). The list of illnesses also included diabetes, eyes problems, poor hearing, paralysis, hypertension, nerves, poliatrit, arteries, bladder., brutcelez, halisticids, hemorrhoid, and others.

73% of elders with medical problems tried to treat them, usually in the local hospitals. In 96% of cases there was a hospital or a medical center in the settlement where they lived and the quality of treatment there was either good (45%) or average (23%). Only 13% considered the quality as bad. However the cost of treatment was very expensive for 47% of ill elders.

#### 4.4 Income disparity

The research was conducted in the country's two poorest provinces. The comparison of these two regions shows that their lifestyle and poverty are quite different. In this section we will look at some of these differences.

The major difference is in the environmental conditions of two regions. Leilek region is much drier; there is a very strong shortage of water both for drinking and for irrigation. Naryn, on the contrary, receives plenty of rain; its pastures are green and its lands are irrigated. The study shows that in Leilek only 31% of land owned by the elderly people is irrigated, while in Naryn the figure is 69%. Because the majority of population in this region is involved in agriculture and animal husbandry, which are their main sources of income, we can conclude that Leilek is perhaps the most disadvantageous region of Kyrgyzstan. 45% of elders in Leilek identified the lack of water among the reasons of their children's migration. This is different from only 13% in Naryn.

The nature of poverty in two regions is also different. If we exclude some exceptional cases, the results show that in Leilek the wealth distribution is quite equal: everyone is equally poor. In Naryn, on the contrary, there is more income disparity: some are very rich and some are very poor. Following figures confirm that:

- 69% of elderly people in Leilek have land vs. only 47% in Naryn. However, average area of owned land in Leilek is only 1.4 hectares, while in Naryn it is 2.5 hectares. It is well known that Southern Kyrgyzstan is populated more densely and there is not enough land. 35% of elders in the survey also indicated that lack of land was among the reasons to migrate. In Naryn only 4% said this was the reason.
- 63% of elderly in Leilek own livestock vs. 48% in Naryn. The numbers of owned animals though are quite different. These are shown in the following table. We can see that people in Naryn have twice as many horses, sheep, goats and chicken. Leilek elders can only boast the number of donkeys, which is seven times higher than in Naryn.

**Average number of animals**

	Cows	Sheep	Horses	Donkeys	Goats	Chicken and turkey
Total average	1.5	4.3	0.5	0.3	1.6	3.5
Naryn average	1.49	5.4	0.6	0.06	2.3	4.5
Leilek average	1.44	3.2	0.3	0.4	0.9	2.7

We can use the cumulative causation theory of migration to suggest that larger income disparity can increase the tendency to migrate: 25% of elders in Naryn were planning to send more children as migrants vs. only 7% in Leilek. The bigger the gap between the rich and poor, the more incentives it creates for poorer people to shorten it through such means as migration.

Survey figures aside, the observations made by researchers show some extreme cases of poverty in both regions. Houses made of clay with few rugs and no furniture inside, sad eye balls of the elderly fallen into the sharp skulls, naked grandchildren running around without clothes, bread from the second sort flour offered to researchers as the only food in the house, dry vegetable gardens with nothing growing there, and tears

of the elderly women describing their life convey the current state of poverty in the villages of Naryn and Leilek much better than any figures shown above. All findings of the research confirm that large share of elderly people in these regions of Kyrgyzstan live from hand to mouth and struggle to survive from day to day. Given such harsh realities, it is often perceived that migration is an outcome of such poverty and in some way a method to overcome it. Is it really so? What really causes migration and what effect does migration have on the life of the village communities and in particular on the elderly population? The following chapter attempts to answer these questions.

## Chapter 5: MIGRATION AND ELDERLY PEOPLE

As we have seen from the description of settlements, migration was the number one issue for all of them. To fully understand the migration processes in rural Kyrgyzstan and their effects on the life of elderly people, the research applies several theories widely used by analysts studying migration today. These theories explain both the initiation and perpetuation of migration. They include neo-classical economics and new economics of migration that can be used to understand the individual micro-level decision-making and dual-labor market and world systems theories that can explain well the macro-level causes of migration from Kyrgyzstan. Social networks, institutional, cumulative causation and migration systems theories explain why migration perpetuates. These theories are not described separately, but rather used selectively to explain certain specific aspects of migration as the discussion progresses in the following sections.

The large-scale migration processes in Kyrgyzstan started almost immediately after the break-up of the Soviet Union and since then during last 17 years they have developed their own powerful internal dynamics, which are very hard to stop. This chapter starts with some research findings that add to the understanding of current patterns of migration and then proceeds to the analysis of migration on Kyrgyz culture and on the elderly people.

### 5.1 Patterns of migration

Mass media and also governmental and non-governmental organizations working on the migration issues in Kyrgyzstan have always placed more focus on the issues of external migration of Kyrgyz citizens to Russia and Kazakhstan, while the issues of the internal migration receive very little attention. The results of the study have revealed one important finding – the scale of internal migration is, in fact, much higher than the scale of external migration. The table below depicts the shares of migrants from Leilek and Naryn. It is also broken down by gender of migrants. The total of 369 migrants allows us to argue with confidence that this is quite representative picture of the overall situation.

		Russia	Kazakhstan	Bishkek	Chui and Issyk-Kol	In the near distance	Total
Leilek	Son	13%	0%	70%	3%	14%	100%
	Daughter	3%	5%	46%	3%	44%	100%
	Total	7%	3%	57%	3%	30%	100%
Naryn	Son	13%	5%	52%	4%	25%	100%
	Daughter	4%	3%	28%	23%	41%	100%

	Total	8%	4%	38%	15%	34%	100%
Total		7%	4%	43%	9%	36%	100%

If we focus on longer distance migration we can see that that the overall share of external migration to Russia and Kazakhstan is only 11%, while migration to Bishkek and Chui provinces is 51% - almost five times higher. Figures in Leilek show that internal migration is six times higher than the external. The main destination point for migrants is Bishkek – 43%. If we consider that almost a million of Kyrgyzstan citizens are currently working in Russia and Kazakhstan, then the figures of internal migrants must be just enormous.

Figures also show that long-distance migration is male dominated. Very few daughters migrate externally; their migration is mostly defined by their marriage into neighboring villages or migration to Bishkek. Few daughters however migrated to Russia and Kazakhstan.

These figures tell us that the processes of internal migration require much more attention than they currently receive. The explanation to large figures of internal migration is in the higher costs and risks associated with external migration: to migrate to Russia one needs at least \$400-500 and it has more dangers associated with Russian authorities, police, customs and racial violence. And though internal migration is also associated with discrimination by Bishkek’s employers, police, and social and medical services, in general moving to Bishkek is much cheaper and safer. Very often migrants go to Bishkek with the purpose of earning the money necessary for traveling to Russia.

The majority of migrants are seasonal workers: they travel in spring and come back in fall. They usually leave their families with grandparents to look after while they are making money. Not many migrants are successful. There are so many cases when migrants return with two fingers in their nose – meaning that they couldn’t earn anything: they couldn’t find job, were cheated by the employers or deported from the country. To return home without money is a looser case and one’s reputation depends significantly on his success as a migrant. That is why so many migrants try to return home with cars or build a bigger house in the village as prove of their success and some prefer not to return until they succeed.

The cumulative causation theory explains well how migration perpetuates. Before migration happens, all residents in the village are equally poor. Once few families send their children as migrants and start receiving money, building larger houses and buying cars, the income disparity in the village grows and then many more young people want to go. Kyrgyz people like to follow the trends and copy what other people do. For example, few years back *adidas* sportswear became so popular, that it was almost universal. Such practices can partly be explained by the very social lifestyle and importance of public opinion. From ancient times Kyrgyz people lived in very close tribal societies and relied on the group logics. This continues until present days and in many cases families might be sending their children as migrants just because everyone else does that. The universality of answers to the question why children have migrated, such as *no jobs* (69%) for example, suggests that there are already common justifications in place, which many people rely on and do not want to question.

In any study on migration in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia – poverty and unemployment are given as the main reason of migration. However, such theories like social networks theory, institutional theory and migration systems theory explain well

that economic reasons might be the original cause of some cases for migration, but very soon migration develops its own internal dynamics and does not need such push factors like poverty. The concept of poverty as we have seen turns more into a justification, while in reality, migration generates even more poverty and passive dependence on the remittances in the villages.

Migration has strong effect on the culture of migrants. They return to the village with different worldviews having seen large Russian cities or having tasted the urban life in Bishkek. Not many of them can go back to the life in the village after they developed new habits and new tastes. Upon return they spread the word and share their stories, thus inciting more young people to migrate. In this we witness how global economy and global culture comes into the rural areas and uproots local youth, leaving the elderly population alone or with grandchildren. This global influence however, often associated with transnational capital, with a passage of time becomes highly contextualized. It starts drawing its power on the existing traditions and practices as shown in the next section.

## **5.2 Contextualization of migration**

For example, one Kyrgyz tradition plays important role in fostering migration – the tradition of leaving the first children to grandparents. This tradition was practiced extensively during the Soviet times. Young families who migrated from rural areas to cities often sent their first one or even second child to grandparents. This was done for mutual benefits: young family had less home responsibilities and could spend more time establishing their careers, while grandparents had grandchildren, who in the very young age were a joy to their eyes and later helpers at home. Children in such cases were growing with a slightly confused notion of parenthood, as many called their grandparents as father and mother, while calling their own parents as uncles and aunts. One is tempted to conclude that in such a mutual agreement between parents and grandparents, it is the child who becomes a victim, for he/she being so little has no voice in decision making and who is detached from the biological parents against his/her will. It is true. However, considering that this has become a tradition, there is a culture that sets this practice in context, makes it acceptable by neighbors in the village and smoothens the effects of detachment.

In the harsh economic reality of the Post-Soviet period, this tradition becomes very handy, for rural-urban migration is not so much a choice, but more of the only solution (at least as it is perceived) for young families. Therefore, families can draw on this tradition and leave their children to grandparents, and not the only the first two, but many more.

Another Kyrgyz tradition fosters migration – the youngest son usually never leaves the house of his parents. While it is the responsibility of all sons to help parents in their old age, it is the youngest son's responsibility to live with them and look after them. As a result, grandparents in Kyrgyz families are hardly ever left alone. They have at least their youngest son and his wife living in the same house. Accordingly grandparents usually do not look after left to them grandchildren totally by themselves. They have the help of the youngest son and his wife in it. This tradition however is changing nowadays in two ways. First, if the youngest boy is very successful in his job as a migrant, parents might prefer to have another son, who might be less successful in the city, but more

attached to land, to live with them and have the more successful youngest son working and sending money. Secondly, as the study in the Naryn region has shown, more and more grandparents there are left without anyone to look after them or give them hand in looking after grandchildren.

The third Kyrgyz tradition is worth mentioning – that of a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. Usually it is seen as one of exploitation and keeping the *kelinchek* (daughter-in-law) disciplined. Father-in-law would hardly get involved in these kinds of talks, but the *kainene* (mother-in-law) is expected to make sure that daughters-in-law work hard. This is the role many elderly women often take on themselves – sort of a policewoman, who goes around all houses of her sons to scold her *kelins*. An old lady in the Ai-Bike described her morning in such way: “I wake up, pray, and then go to all of my sons’ houses [many of whom left the village as migrants] to yell at my daughters-in-law.”

We saw in these examples that migration is not only contextualized through the use of existing local traditions, but also that some of these traditions are also transformed. This leads to the next suggestion: besides changing the culture of migrants themselves, migration also has effect on the traditional values of the larger society. This research shows that such major transformations are quite evident in rural Kyrgyzstan. The next section looks closer at this question.

### **5.3 Reevaluation of values**

All processes in life are interrelated and interconnected. The Post-Soviet period of transformation has touched upon all aspects of life of Kyrgyzstan’s citizens. Economic change is usually always followed by cultural, psychological and social adaptations. The Post-Soviet economic crisis in Kyrgyzstan was of such a large scale that it has caused some major transformations in the lifestyle of Kyrgyzstanians and created new mental and cultural models, which drew on some existing traditions and accounted for harsh reality of the country-wide impoverishment. Migration in Kyrgyzstan as one of the most popular surviving strategies of local population created new values and new notions associated with such basic concepts as parental love, family life, respect in the society, success, love for a homeland, etc.

For example, we witness the process of the redistribution of tasks within a larger family aimed to maximize the productivity of each household member. Sons leave the house in the search of income, grandparents become child-carers and controllers of the multiple-household family, daughters-in-laws carry all the major household work, grandchildren as they grow take on the major male jobs in the house. This is a surviving strategy and flexibility is important for success.

Migration transforms traditional gender roles too. Kyrgyz parents when they become old, usually expect help from their sons, but not from their daughters. Once girls get married, they leave the house and they are not obliged to help their parents. The results of the current study confirm this: 48% of sons who migrated send some help vs. 30% of daughters. However, the figure of 30% is unusually high for Kyrgyz families. It tells us that more and more women take on the role of income earners as migrants and contribute to the well-being of their parents.

The traditional notion of parental love is also changing. Previously it could be noticed in the desire of grandparents to see their children and grandchildren more often

and having them living in the near distance. Today, many of the elderly say that they are happy for their children living far away as long as the later are happy and provided there, since there are not many opportunities for them in the village. This fact however is always stated with some sadness in the eyes. This is reevaluation that is not so much a choice, but a necessity, one has to live with. Here we come closer to the most important part of this chapter: what is migration for elderly people?

#### **5.4 Migration and elderly people**

Our main argument is that the link between migration and elderly people develops in both ways: migration has strong effects on the life of the elderly and that elderly people, although not migrating themselves, play a very important role in facilitating and supporting migration. They are the main agents behind the scenes. Their role as decision makers, as heads of migrants' households and as child-carers cannot be underestimated.

According the new economics of migration theory, migration is not an individual decision, but a family matter, which is always decided on a family council. Through migration a family can diversify its sources of income and reduce risks associated with the effect of unstable climate on agricultural production or of economic and political instability on their business. In the case of Leilek, this is related to frequent draughts, and in the cases of both Naryn and Leilek, this is also related to almost universal unemployment. Migration can become a surviving strategy for several families united under one major household – that is of migrants' father and mother. Considering the strength of Kyrgyz traditions in the rural areas and the role of grandparents as key decision makers, we understand that their contribution to migration flows is quite significant.

But what about the effect that migration has on the elderly? Does migration have more positive or negative effect on the life of elderly people in the regions? According to the elderly people themselves: 62% of respondents considered migration positive. On the question of what negative effects migration has on them 48% answered: No negative effects. Why is it so? Is it because of the remittances sent by migrants? Or is it because of happiness for children who might be better off in a city or in a foreign country?

Migrant usually starts migration process by himself as a seasonal worker. The family stays behind in the village to avoid extra costs of finding a house, putting kids to school, etc. especially if it is somewhere in Russia. Therefore, few years might pass before a migrant can put together a sufficient amount of capital to bring the family with him. While his family is in the village, he regularly sends money there to support them. It is usually a grandfather, who collects money from the bank and then distributes it among the family members, completing his role of a coordinator and organizer. There was on Uzbek man in Isfana, who had three of his sons were working in Russia. He was receiving money from all three of them and then distributing it among the daughters-in-law.

Once, however, a migrant manages to take the family with him to the city or abroad, nobody expects anymore regular help from him, because his main responsibility is to take care of his children. Additionally, his wife gets a better access to his income and she usually has very little interest in helping her parents-in-law. One could take a very pragmatic stand here to explain the situation and say that grandparents have personal interest in keeping grandchildren with them, for this way the migrants will keep sending

money. But there is more to this than just money. Grandchildren in such situation become connecting agents – their parents keep in touch by calling and visiting much more frequently. Therefore, we can see the development of new intergenerational connectedness as another adaptive strategy for elderly people.

After children take their families to the city or abroad with them, they also call and visit their parents less and less often. Researchers interviewed a migrant who was working in Novosibirsk for the last 15 years. He first traveled there by himself; then came to take the family. He visited his parents first, after one year, then after three years, then after ten years. Grandparents have no choice but to accept the weakened or almost lost relationship as normal.

32% of grandparents indicated loneliness as the effect of children's migration and 22% said they were missing their children. We also have to consider that 40% of elderly respondents in this survey were widowed. 13% also said that they worried about them. During the Soviet times, children usually remained in the cities if they got proper jobs there after completing the studies and parents would not be worried about them so much. These days, however, migration is associated with so many risks: difficulty of finding a job and a place to live, arrests by police, racial discrimination (such as by skinheads in Russian cities), etc. We were told a story of one young Uzbek man, who worked for three years in Russia and called one day to say proudly that he bought a car and plans to bring it home soon. In few days the family received a call about his death in the unknown circumstances. Another story described how two young men were escaping the police raid in the construction site they were working at; it was in winter; wooden logs they were running on were slippery and both of them fell from the sixth floor and died. News on Central Asian migrants in Russia are full of these kinds of tragedies: for example, some 18 Kyrgyz migrants were killed in an apartment in Moscow, etc. Such news, stories and rumors put a lot of emotional pressure on grandparents and significantly contribute to the deterioration of their health. All these factors taken together, now wonder that 10% of elderly people had illnesses related to heart and nerves condition. Following are some quotes expressing the elderly people's concerns for their children:

*When children migrate, we cannot sleep. We think about them all the time. What are they doing in foreign country, how are they living? Let God help them. I hope they are not beaten by local skinheads.* **Participant 13, male in Ak-Kyia village**

*Sometimes I cannot sleep because of thinking about them. I want them to be alive. It would be better if there was no migration. For example I don't like migration. ... we are reading newspapers and cannot sleep. We always read that there are skinheads in Russian who even kill migrants. So we become nervous. I am against migration.* **Participant 7, female in Ak-Kyia village**

Just like with poverty, the researchers didn't need the percentages to see the critical emotional conditions of elderly people whose children left as migrants. If Kyrgyz women were more or less strong in keeping their emotions, several elderly Uzbek and Tajik women started crying as soon as they were asked about their life. The harsh and sad reality of disconnection and impoverishment were so strong that the student researcher who also conducted interviews doubted his abilities to work in the future as an anthropologist because of the deep sadness, researchers come across in their work.

On the contrary, we once have interviewed a family, where none of the children have migrated. What a sharp contrast was there. The whole family was sitting and watching a new Kyrgyz movie on a DVD player. Only women were at home; all sons

were in the summer pastures with animals, while the grandfather was attending a funeral ceremony. The old lady was constantly joking and laughing, while the crowd of her daughters, daughters-in-law, grand and grand-grandchildren were helping her to understand our questions and making fun of her answers. One could notice that this state of happiness was a normal everyday thing in the house. The family also seemed to be doing very well economically; they ate hot food almost three times a day and didn't really lack any specific products in their diet. The pension of both elders was a good compliment to the income received from their animals, land and apricot trees. To the question whether she would like to send her children as migrants, the old lady said that she prefers to have them around. We left the house with very positive feelings.

Unfortunately, there were not many families where none of children have migrated. People and administration in all settlements we went to, suggested that young men have migrated from almost every single house. The results of our survey confirm it – migration was a case in 92% of families. Such large scales of migration bring along another concern – what for the grandchildren left with grandparents: how many grandchildren grow without one or even both their biological parents and how good are grandparents as parents? This question is analyzed in the next section.

## **5.5 Grandparents as parents to grandchildren**

In any culture children are coolness for the eyes of the elderly. In the evening of one's life a person likes to see its continuity and meaning. Grandchildren and grand-grandchildren provide elders with happy moments of simple joy and brighten their days. Here is an interesting quote:

*We get pleasure from being with our grandchildren. We kiss them and smell them. Without them it would be boring. When I hug them I forget my problems.*

**Participant 7, female in Ak-Kyia village**

This is another reason why grandparents like to keep grandchildren if children migrate. As the research shows, grandchildren count for 45% of an average household. The average age of a household is 24 years and average number of grandchildren living with elders is 2.5, which is one fifth of the overall number of grandchildren they have.

But can grandparents really replace the parents? The research has revealed two strongly expressed contrary views: one of the grandparents themselves and the other one of the experts: administrators, teachers, doctors and policemen. Almost all grandparents in the Leilek region in one voice were saying that they are good parents, even better than the biological ones. They say they love grandchildren more, they use old traditional methods of upbringing, and they have more time than parents. Their perspective is totally understandable given the explanations of the importance of grandchildren in their life described earlier. If grandchildren are also taken from them, their life might become totally miserable. The perspective of grandparents in Naryn was slightly different. Some of them expressed the opinion that it was very hard for them to look after grandkids. They perceive grandchildren rearing as a physically very difficult job and see it as a burden that makes their life even harsher. Many respondents complain that they physically are not able to take care of their grandchildren especially those who cannot walk yet.

*For me it is difficult, because he [grandchild] hasn't even started walking; he is crawling everywhere. And I need to work. I roll him in beshik and till the time I*

*return he is in it. Half of my health is spend on this child.* **Participant 9, female in Ak-Kyia village**

Aytolkun eje has been taken care of her 2 grandsons for 4.5 years. Her health is poor; she can hardly walk. Recently, doctors have detected stones in her gall-bladder and prescribed her a surgery. However, she cannot leave the house since none would take care of her children while she is in the hospital. Sometimes, parenting also results in the social isolation of grandparents. Being busy with their grandchildren, they do not have sufficient time socialize. The sense of isolation is especially evident in urban settlements since the kinship links are less strong there. With few other exceptions, the majority of grandparents, especially in Leilek, however think of themselves as quite good parents.

Contrary to them is a quite homogenous perspective of local administration, teachers, doctors and police. These in one voice say the opposite: grandparents can never replace parents. On one hand they love their grandchildren too much and thus do not beat them as their father would. They often avoid beating them fearing that grandchildren themselves or their mother will complain to the migrant-son and later will take children with him. Thus a child might grow spoiled because in a traditional Kyrgyz family, boys especially are beaten quite frequently. Following opinions expressed by experts explain in more details other drawback of grandparental parenting.

### ***Education***

Majority of teachers who participated in the study, have agreed that children who are raised by their grandparents are more likely to skip classes. This can be attributed to the number of reasons. First, grandparents are more likely to underestimate the importance of education on life chances of the child. Second, grandparents are less harsh with their grandchildren and do not insist when a child does not have a desire to study. Third, since there are more household responsibilities for an elderly people in such family typology, they just do not have sufficient time to check the school attendance of a grandchild.

*Children who live with their grandparents miss the school more in comparison to children living with their parents, because old people have a lot of work at home. On the other hand grandchildren became spoilt. Children say: "Grandpa I don't want to go to school". Grandpa says: "Honey, as you want". Parents would say, "No you must study and you will go". They are stricter.* **School teacher1 in Ak-Kyia village**

Children in the care of grandparents are also more likely to have poorer academic performance than children that are in care of their parents. Grandparents are less likely to attend the meeting with parents in the school and fail to cooperate frequently with schoolteachers. Elderly parents cannot help their grandchildren in their home assignments since the schools curricular changed drastically from the times when they studied. The fact that 37% of elderly respondents have not completed even secondary education and had only 4-5 classes of school, says it is impossible for them to help their grandchildren with school homework in more senior subjects. In addition, they are less aware about modern effective methods for child development. Here is one opinion expressed by one grandmother:

It is good to be raised by own parents. We can not tell them fairy-tales because of our health. They become detached from their parents. I wanted to give them to kindergarten, but it is expensive. If it were cheaper, I would give them. One year ago I gave one of my grandchildren to his parents in Bishkek. Now he is going to

kindergarten and in comparison to grandchildren I raise, he is more intelligent and broad-minded. His parents talk to him. ... they talk too much... **Participant 1, female in Naryn city**

### ***Health***

Many experts have pointed out that many children under the care of grandparents do not have proper access to medical services. Often, grandparents do not trust the official medicine and prefer to refer to traditional methods. Grandparents are less aware about the main symptoms of diseases and possible serious consequences of non-treatment or delayed treatment.

*Children who live with grandparent are more likely to get ill. They don't go to doctors; rather they use their own primitive methods. They don't appreciate current medicine. They make children smell smoke from Archa trees and say "Alas, Alas". Then they say: We don't need medicine.*

**School teacher1 in Ak-Kyia village**

### ***Leisure time and child labor***

Migration often means that children take a greater workload (Ablezova et.al. 2004). When parents migrate, children may take an adult role in household and agriculture. A number of experts have stated that children raised by grandparents are less likely to work than children who live with their parents.

*There are differences. Parents are more likely to send their children to camp. Grandparents do not send their grandchildren to camp, because they worry about their safety. Moreover, they need physical help. In general in our village most of the children do not have free time. They work in fields.*

**School teacher1 in Ak-Kyia village**

Jamilya eje is 104 years old. She lives in Ak-Kyia village with 2 grandsons who are 10 and 12 years old. Their father died several years ago and mother has migrated to Bishkek to work. The two children are responsible for all housework. They clean the house, cook, bake bread, do laundry, etc. They have little time left for games and communication with their peers.

### ***Emotional/psychological well-being***

Frequently, children who live with grandparents are challenged in terms of emotional deficits as they develop. Experts often mentioned that there is a big generation gap between grandparents and the grandchildren. Grandchildren are often shy to openly discuss the problems that they face with their grandparents and they think that grandparents do not understand their needs. Thus, grandparents do not understand how important it is for a child to have stylish jeans or a mobile. The things that grandparents consider as unnecessary might be of crucial importance for a child, for his/her self-esteem and relationship with the peers.

*Children who live with their parents are more open. But grandparents use their previous methods in raising children. Nowadays children want to talk on mobile, use computer. They want to have more money and live in cities. Grandparents make them cut the grass, look after livestock and do more drudgery. So children are tired of working.*

**Medical worker in Ak-Kyia village**

*- Yes there is difference. Children who live with grandparents are very emotional; they don't control their emotion.*

- Are there any cases when classmates tease them saying that they live with their grandparents but not with their parents?

- Yes there are cases. If we do not undertake some measures, they even can commit suicide.

**School teacher2 in Ak-Kyia village**

Many focus group participants indicated that parents keep in touch with the children left behind on a regular basis over the mobile phones. Many children miss their parents very much and could talk to them for hours. There are other cases though, when children do not communicate with their parents for years. Thus, one of the respondents in Naryn has been taking care of her grandchildren since they were babies and their mother had not visited them for three years. She arrived only when her grandson turned four. The boy did not even come closer to her and refused to call her “mother”.

They talk on a phone very often. But children only say: “Mummy how are you?”. For example my grandchild has already forgotten his parents. He does not know them. **Respondent 5, female in Naryn city**

*It is good to be raised by children’s own parents; otherwise they become distant from their parents since they do not see them everyday.* **Participant 2, female in Naryn city**

***Juvenile delinquency***

It is also suggested that children in grandparent-headed households are more prone to deviant behavior. Grandparents are hardly able to devote sufficient time and attention required for proper care. Therefore, children are often left on their own and easily come under the bad influence. Police department officer in Naryn city has indicated that parents are more effective educators than grandparents. He believes that the elderly people are too kind with their children and that they are not persistent in their upbringing; children pay little attention to what grandparents tell them.

Children who live with their grandparents are very stubborn. They do not listen to others. Their grandparents let them do what they want. They are always kind with them. **Medical worker in Ak-Kyia village**

On the other hand, these early difficulties and lessons of life that teach grandchildren to take the responsibilities, to work and to care about their elders, might on the contrary help them grow as more mature youth and prepare them better for future trials. There is no one case that evolves exactly like another. A lot depends on kids themselves and on particular grandparent.

Therefore, even after constituting all the drawbacks of parenting by grandparents, the research avoids making strong conclusions and criticizing the role of grandparents as child-carers. There are obviously certain parental qualities that grandparents might lack, but one should see things in a broader cultural and historical context to appreciate all the trade-offs. Well or not so well, grandparents do perform their child-caring duties while their sons and daughters are away earning money as migrants. This is a sacrifice that three generations are prepared to make in order to survive the harsh economic realities of present days. The full effects of this practice on the formation of family culture and on the psychology of growing grandchildren need deeper research. The scope of this study allows us to only constitute the facts and acknowledge the diversity of opinions about the role of grandparents as child-carers.

Such neutral stand of the researchers on the practice of leaving children with their grandparents is conditioned by the fact that presently it is perceived by local population as a necessity and has its equally significant positive and negative aspects if we take into consideration the interests of all three generations of villagers. Such position allows us to preserve the more or less unbiased perspective on the phenomenon of migration and develop some more significant conclusion and recommendations from the extensive analysis offered in three last chapters of this report. These conclusions are presented to the reader in the last chapter that follows.

## **Chapter 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The research has established two most significant conclusions: one is the confirmation of the extreme poverty conditions that elderly people in these two poorest regions of Kyrgyzstan find themselves and the second is about the questioning of migration as the strategy for coping with this poverty.

### **6.1 Regional poverty and elderly people**

Most importantly – the life of elderly people in these impoverished regions of our country is on the level of everyday struggle to survive often spent on the edge between existence and non-existence simply due to the strong shortages of food and water and lack of means to obtain them. The remoteness of these regions leaves them out of attention of governmental agencies, international organizations and media. But inside these impoverished regions, there are even more marginalized settlements and communities – real pits of poverty. These are former industrial, presently ghost-towns and some remote villages with no drinking or irrigation water, where elderly people have no any other sources of income besides their miserable pensions. We live in a civilized society that simply cannot close its eyes on their existence. If any new programs are to be designed to help elderly people in Kyrgyzstan, these should target these specific populations, who are in the most need of them.

### **6.2 Myth of migration**

The next major conclusion of this study is to disperse the myth of migration as the way out of poverty. The decision to migrate in Kyrgyz families is often defined not by the real need for it, but more by the common fashionable trend of migration and riches it promises. In reality, the number of successful migrants that manage to send good money is very small, while for the majority migration only helps family members to exist, while limiting their opportunities of making more money in their own villages, disconnecting families and negatively affecting the emotional and physical well-being of all three generations of family: grandparents, parents and grandchildren. The positive examples of families, where children have not migrated and which live much happier and economically better life, prove that it is possible to create a paradise garden in one's own backyard, rather than look for it behind many mountains.

Two recommendations evolve from these conclusions: one that deals mostly with the negative outcomes of migration and the second is the one that addresses causes. The first recommendation is to help in any possible ways elderly people, whose children have

migrated and who look after their grandchildren. It can be any sort of material help, psychological and social help through establishing interest groups, setting a way for them and their grandchildren to communicate inexpensively with migrant parents, organizing the volunteer or sponsored mobile brigades to help these elders with physical work at home, and organizing groups where grandchildren could get help with their homework, etc.

The second recommendation aims to address the causes of migration. The purpose here is to break the myth and to establish new positive trends. The work with successful families, whose children have not migrated, might be necessary to establish a new precedent. Such families can be supported in their work and used as a model of success. Incentives could be created for family businesses, where more members should be involved. The main target group here should be the elders themselves, as they are the key decision-makers. Various means, such as *aitysh* (competition of *akyns* (traditional singers)) on this topic for example can be used to convince them in the advantages of retaining more of their children at home.

### **6.3 Strategic plan for a future project**

On the basis of two main conclusions described above, the researchers have developed a new strategic plan for the next action oriented project to address the needs of the elders. The project would include following major steps:

1. Identifying the “pits of poverty” – the most disadvantageous settlements in the poorest regions of Kyrgyzstan (ghost-cities should be the priority)
2. Attracting donor support to these elderly communities to help them develop additional sources of income (craft-making enterprises, sewing factories, etc)
3. Developing programs to help grandparents look after their grandchildren while parents are away
4. Lobbying the well-deserved increase in pensions for the miners
5. Identifying families, whose children have not migrated and supporting their family work in order to strengthen the precedent of their success and to create incentives for others to follow
6. Developing a cultural/educational program to explain people the hidden drawbacks of migration process and its true nature and targeting the elderly community members as the key decision-makers.

Of course, it is impossible to stop the migration processes. But at least through dissolving the myth of migration, those who might not be well-prepared for such an important undertaking that strongly affects all members of the family will have more chances of making the right decision.