

# Coming Home? Patterns and Characteristics of Return Migration in Kyrgyzstan

Susan Thieme\*

## ABSTRACT

Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Kazakhstan are all major destinations for labour migrants from rural areas of southern Kyrgyzstan. Along with searching for better income, younger men and women also migrate for educational purposes; children and elderly people stay behind. While older migrants often regard this separation from their families as temporary, younger people start to put down roots in places other than their homes and this has long-term consequences for development in rural areas. The paper therefore looks into families' multi-local settings and why young migrants fail to return home. It also considers the potential impact on rural development including remittance dependency, an increasing shortage of qualified labour and new conditions of social care. The paper concludes with an assessment of the policy implications.

## INTRODUCTION

Every year large numbers of migrants seek better economic and political circumstances abroad. Many of them leave with the hope that they will eventually return to their home country. Emigration and return are not isolated acts and might well be repeated several times. However, in many cases, a definitive return to the home country is regarded as concluding a phase of migration (Ghosh, 2000). Migrants have different conceptions and ways of expressing their intention to return (Moran-Taylor and Menjívar, 2005) and their reasons for returning might be professional, societal or personal (Alberts and Hazen, 2005). However, re-migration is not always an easy task and might involve many of the features of first-time migration, such as personal, emotional and social difficulties (Tannenbaum, 2007). As well as migrants' individual interpretations of return, different types of migrants can make different contributions to their home countries, some through their skills, education and professional experience, others of a financial nature (Thomas-Hope, 1999). At the same time, the return of migrants might also decrease remittances and conflict with a remittance-driven migration policy (Logan, 2009). However, social, political and economic conditions in the country itself and returnees' confidence in their homeland are crucial to making effective use of migrant's skills (e.g., Nair, 1999; Diatta and Mbow, 1999).

---

\* University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland.

But where do people actually return to? In times of economic recession, do people still wish to return to their home country? If so, where exactly do people wish to go back to? How do they prepare their return? If people do not return to their place of origin, what are the implications for all the people involved? What are the consequences of living in different localities for the investment of remittances, for care provision within the family and also for the rural workforce? These questions form the focus of this paper.

Despite an increasing number of studies on the subject of return migration, return migrants are treated as national aggregate flows with no indication of their precise destinations. Hence, little is known about the varying mechanisms and consequences of migrants who either return to their specific community of origin or resettle elsewhere within their home country (Gosh, 2000). The paper at hand tackles this unexplored dimension of return by considering the process by which they resettle in their home country but elsewhere than their specific community of origin and the possible consequences of this, not only for the returnees but also for their families that remain in rural areas. Examples are taken from research in Kyrgyzstan where up to 20 per cent of the population is seeking better economic opportunities in Russia and Kazakhstan, sending back remittances that account for 30 per cent of GDP (Sadowskaja, 2008). Fundamental political, social and economic changes and new forms of uncertainty and vulnerability are making people cautious when it comes to predicting their own future perspectives and plans. Nevertheless, nearly two decades on from independence, labour migration is no longer a recent phenomenon and a second generation is already on the move. Migration has become part of many people's lives. Labour migration by the young population is still regarded as a temporary solution and successful migration is expected to conclude with return. However, migrants only return under certain circumstances and not necessarily to the rural areas from which they originally set out. This has consequences for rural development including remittance dependency, an increased shortage of labour and new conditions of social care.

This paper therefore has three aims, which are reflected in its structure. After an introduction to the theoretical and methodological framework and the case study area, I first shed some light on different generations of male and female migrants and their non-migrating family members and how they intend to return – or have already returned – to urban areas rather than rural ones. A return to their home country Kyrgyzstan is born of socio-economic necessity and is not a single-stage relocation. A return requires medium- and long-term planning as well as continued access to the return migrants' wider international professional, social and economic networks, which are the main components of the current multi-locality of people's livelihoods. Secondly, I discuss the meaning of remittances, which are a major marker of people's multi-local lives and networks, and their influence on when and where people return. Thirdly, I discuss the lack of skilled labour in rural areas as well as new social care arrangements for the elderly and children. These new care arrangements are initially caused by international labour migration but are consolidated when the younger generation fails to return to rural areas. The paper concludes by outlining some of the policy implications.

## DEFINING RETURN, MULTI-LOCALITY AND DEVELOPMENT

This paper deals with themes of return migration, multi-locality and development.

As a conceptual point of departure, I take King's (2000) broad definition of return migration as

... the process whereby people return to their country or place of origin after a significant period in another country or region. (...) Clearly, return migration must be related to the emigration which preceded it; furthermore return may be the prelude to further episodes of spatial mobility (King, 2000:8).

The fact that return might lead to further migration is indeed an important point for the paper. I shall argue that in order to enable migrants to return permanently to their home country, returnees need to retain their movement to Kazakhstan or Russia and within their own country (also Black and King, 2004). I therefore use 'return' in this paper firstly for people who intend to return and have started to buy a house or land in Kyrgyzstan, but are still living and working mainly in Russia and/or Kazakhstan; and secondly to people who have already returned to Kyrgyzstan, reside and work mainly in their home country, but in many cases still need to maintain their professional linkages to Russia and/or Kazakhstan. In most cases, they plan to return to Kyrgyzstan at least in the medium term, but to make their home in urban centres such as the capital Bishkek rather than their rural place of origin. Overall, settling in urban destinations is a process that may take many years because most migrants do not have sufficient financial capital to invest in land and housing straight away. Investments are done on a step-by-step basis. Debts to build a house or land for example must be repaid and there are still major migration links between the place(s) of work in neighbouring countries and the person's village of origin. A definitive return to the rural place of birth is only likely upon retirement. Thus people gradually establish a multi-local setup of their livelihoods, with responsibilities in different places – initial international migration for work, then the gradual establishment of a new home in urban areas of Kyrgyzstan, coupled with a long-term intention to return to the countryside upon retirement (Thieme, 2008a) – and strong interlinking of internal and international migration (Skeldon, 2000). Family members live and work in different places, take care of their children and elderly from a distance, earn money in one place and invest it in a different one. Migrants' and non-migrants' lives and responsibilities within and outside their families are (re)negotiated and (re)organised in the context of multi-local systems.

As well as voluntary and planned return, return can also come about unexpectedly due to illness, disappointment or deportation. In such cases, the connection to the place of origin counters or reduces "...the risks and uncertainty inherent to an international mobility strategy, because it offers a return option as a fallback strategy" (Conway, 2005: 267).

One of my research questions looks at the characteristics of multi-local livelihoods and a return of migrants to places other than where they originally come from and the consequences of this for rural development. The relationship between migration and development – understood as broader processes of social and economic changes – is a heterogeneous and reciprocal one (e.g., Nyberg-Sørensen et al., 2002). Moreover, social change can be in multiple directions, making it difficult to assess the linkages between migration and development. However, adverse socio-economic or political developments do cause migration. Therefore, positive development aims to reduce poverty, increase well-being and initiate enriching changes for the population by creating employment or investment in education, for example. Development also includes people's more subjective evaluations about whether consider themselves better off than they were before (cp. Ammassari, 2004, Tiemoko, 2004) – a major driving force behind migration in general. Assessments of social and economic changes also include more critical consequences for one's own family and also the wider community. For example, migrants send remittances, but their absence might cause labour shortages and jeopardise professional services in their communities of origin.

## METHODOLOGY

The empirical examples are based on research work conducted over four months in 2006 (April to July) with a one-month follow-up study in June 2007, which focused on labour migration and multi-locality in Central Asia. A case study was carried out in a rural municipality (*aiyl okmotu*) of Osh *oblast* (province) in southern Kyrgyzstan, focusing on qualitative research but including quantitative data in the form of a list of the village's absentees. The municipality is about a three-hour car drive away from the *oblast* capital of Osh and, in 2006, had a total of 9,911 inhabitants. The local council realised during the mayoral elections at the beginning of 2006 that many people were missing and it therefore produced a list of those who had missed the elections (with their name, year of birth and in most cases their new place of residence). The author updated this list by checking how many people were absent with council leaders and then conducting a self-selected random sample of households in order to complete the data. The results revealed that people work mainly in either the capital Bishkek in northern Kyrgyzstan or else in Russia and Kazakhstan. Following Kandiyoti (1999: 521), the survey data was supplemented by in-depth studies, which are particularly important in such a rapidly changing context as far as income generation, social provision and redistribution go. Using a theoretical sampling approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1969; Straus and Corbin, 1996), the selection of in-depth studies was not pre-defined but decided during the research process. To explore the multi-local household settings, for instance, I chose five households with the widest possible range of migration patterns (household members only within Kyrgyzstan, only in Kazakhstan, only in Russia, or a combination of the three). Firstly, I interviewed the household members who had not migrated and, as a second step, I followed the routes of the household members who had migrated and interviewed them in Bishkek, Almaty, Kazakhstan and Moscow (Russia). To close the cycle, I then returned to the place of origin and discussed the experiences again with the non-migrants. In most cases, returning to the home country Kyrgyzstan was an inherent part of our discussions about their future plans. Once I had a good idea of the migrants' different ideas of where they would return to, I widened the sample. I talked to other family members (who were not necessarily part of the same household) as well as friends and co-workers at the different research sites. By the end of the cycle, I had interviewed 68 women and 90 men, all of them ethnic Kyrgyz. Furthermore, I carried out interviews and group discussions with key people from the village of origin, including the mayor, teachers and social workers. In two schools, I interviewed both the teachers and the pupils in group discussions.

In June 2007, I went back to talk to the interviewees once more (except for Moscow), focusing this time on the members of the five selected households. Another outcome of the research in 2007 was the 30-minute documentary "The Other Silk Road" (2008) about people's migration experiences. In the section on remittances and brain drain, I shall refer particularly to Schoch (2008) and Schoch et al. (2010), which was designed as a follow-up study to the author's research and carried out under the author's supervision.

## RELEVANCE OF MIGRATION TO KYRGYZSTAN

The collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991 caused fundamental political, economic and social change in Kyrgyzstan. The breakdown of the complex economic linkages between the member republics of the former Soviet Union resulted in a huge economic crisis with drastically reduced output and company closures, leading to mass unemployment. There was therefore a

sharp increase in poverty after Kyrgyzstan gained its independence (Howell, 1996; Ronsijn, 2006).

The southern part of the country (Osh, Batken, Jalalabad *oblasts*) has a different demographic and economic structure from the north; it is more rural and has the lowest Human Development Indicators. However, although the south is generally perceived as being less developed than the north, poverty varies from one region to the next. Poverty is widespread in rural areas, particularly mountainous ones, and also exists in other *oblasts* such as Talas and Naryn. Bishkek in the north is Kyrgyzstan's centre of modern economic and cultural life, as well as a major destination for migrants from the south. The city of Osh, in the south of the country, is the second most important city with regard to its economic, technical and cultural infrastructure (UNDP, 2002). The role of the state has changed dramatically since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, which was responsible for a wide range of basic needs such as schooling, childcare and health provision. These services were quickly discontinued after the collapse of the USSR, affecting women in their societal roles as income-earners, mothers, wives and caretakers of the family even more than men (Thieme, 2008b).

Although Central Asia's history has always been characterised by movements of people, the disintegration of the USSR and the shift from a socialist economic system to a market economy led to a particularly sharp economic decline (Schmidt and Sagynbekova, 2008). Official numbers suggest that almost one-sixth of Kyrgyzstan's inhabitants left the country between 1989 and 1999. Along with the repatriation of Russians, Uzbek, Kazakh, Ukrainians and Germans who had been forced to settle in the Kyrgyz Republic during the Soviet era, high unemployment and the sharp decline in living standards was one of the chief reasons for this emigration. Many of those emigrants were highly qualified and will definitely not return. This brain drain caused a major shortage of skilled labour, thus worsening the hardships of the transition period (Schmidt and Sagynbekova, 2008). Apart from that wave of repatriation, other people also began moving in search of work (UNDP, 2002; Schuler, 2004). Most migrants who have left to seek better economic opportunities outside Kyrgyzstan find work in Russia and Kazakhstan, but the capital Bishkek is also an important place for work opportunities. The south of the country is particularly affected by emigration flows. The representative of the Kyrgyz State Committee in Moscow in 2006 officially registered 153,886 Kyrgyz citizens in the Russian Federation, of whom 32,536 possessed official work permits (Schmidt and Sagynbekova, 2008: 117). However, unofficial sources in both Russia and Kyrgyzstan put the number somewhere between 200,000 and 500,000, with the higher number equivalent to almost 10 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's total population or one-third of the economically active population (UNDP, 2005; Schmidt and Sagynbekova, 2008). Other sources suggest that, in the summer, up to 20 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's population go abroad for seasonal work. The difference between the official and estimated numbers illustrates the fact that a large proportion of migration activities are undocumented and irregular (Ruget and Usmanalieva, 2008), which is one reason why detailed return migration statistics do not exist. Overall, the proportion of returning migrants who go back to their specific community of origin, as opposed to those who resettle elsewhere within their country, is unknown.

While remittances make up about 30 per cent of the country's GDP, more than 75 per cent of the remittances transmitted to Kyrgyzstan flow into rural areas (World Bank, 2007).

Internal migration, particularly from the south of the country to the capital Bishkek, is an equally important feature. Out of a total population of 5.4 million, about 1.5 million people live in the capital Bishkek and there has been noticeable and rapid urban sprawl in recent years. More than 30 migrant settlements – so called self-help housing districts – with 2,500 to 7,000 households each have grown up in the last few years. Many of these migrants conduct their various micro-businesses informally, paying neither taxes nor fees (Jeenbaeva, 2008).

## MIGRATION PATTERNS AND DIMENSIONS OF RETURN

The author's survey of one municipality in southern Kyrgyzstan showed that out of 9,911 inhabitants, 19 per cent were absent during the year 2006. Sixty-four per cent of the migrants were male and 36 per cent female; their average age was 32. Migrants are young and middle-aged men and women, who either move alone or as a couple, leaving their children with their parents or parents-in-law. Internal migration is almost as important as international migration. About 45 per cent of absentees migrated internally, mainly from the south to the north – to the capital Bishkek and its suburbs, with a small number heading for Osh, the biggest city in the southern part of the country. Another 41 per cent of the migrants work in Russia; in this case, Moscow has been the predominant destination, followed by cities like St. Petersburg and Tomsk. Kazakhstan is a destination for 12 per cent of migrants, who mainly work in Almaty. These numbers indicate that migration is both a very important livelihood strategy and a gendered process, which has also been confirmed by further case studies in the Kyrgyzstan's southern *oblasts* (provinces) of Batken (Bichsel et al., 2005; Rohner 2007) and Jalalabad (Schmid and Sagynbekova, 2008).

The qualitative research revealed that most interviewed families have family members who do not work in one city. They either work in several places around Russia and Kazakhstan and/or in Bishkek; or else they have worked at different places by themselves. In addition, women always, without exception, moved into their husband's home after marriage and their husbands' place of residence became their home. The four family portraits below exemplify this.

Family 1: Mr Saliev was born in the case study area. Mrs Salieva was born in the neighbouring village, but moved to her husband's house after marrying. She works as a teacher in the village of her birth. He was an agronomist during Soviet times but lost his job and has no permanent income even now. They have one son and two daughters. The son studied Economics in the southern city of Osh, but did not find a job and now works in Moscow as a construction worker. He is not yet married. Both daughters have trained as teachers, but do not work in their profession. The younger daughter got divorced and moved back to her parents' house in the case study area. The older daughter lives with her husband in Almaty, where they are both engaged in petty trade.

Family 2: After marriage Mrs Kubatbekova moved to her husband's village. Mr Kubatbekov worked as an engineer in Soviet times and Mrs Kubatbekova as an accountant. Both lost their jobs but had to take care of their two small children. So he went into business and started trading in Russia in 1991. They sold all their livestock to finance the seed capital needed for trading. The wife and two small children stayed in the south of Kyrgyzstan with her parents-in-law. In 1994 he stopped trading in Russia and moved to Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, where he bought a house and invested in a market stall. Soon after, his family followed him there from the south of Kyrgyzstan. The family now runs two clothing stalls in Osh Bazaar, one of the biggest wholesale markets in Bishkek. Their daughter (16 years old in 2007) is still at school in Bishkek and helps her parents part-time. The parents plan to send her to medical college in Bishkek. Their son (20 years old in 2007) is studying in Bishkek. In 2007 he spent his summer holidays working on a construction site in Kazakhstan to earn some extra income.

Family 3: Mrs Abdieva originally hails from the case study area. After marrying, she moved in with her husband and parents-in-law whose house was about an hour away by car. She studied part-time at a business college in Osh (a 2-hours drive away). Until 1999 she and her husband run a shop in the village, but they could not earn a living. They therefore decided to go to Almaty and trade. They have four daughters and one son. Until recently

she and her husband worked in Almaty, while the children stayed with her parents-in-law in the village in Kyrgyzstan. After her father-in-law died, they decided that the husband would stay in the village to support his mother. The four daughters stayed in the village in Kyrgyzstan and they are still at school. Only the son (the youngest child of the family) moved to his mother in Almaty, where he now goes to school. Mrs Abdieva said that she does not have enough money or space to accommodate their daughters. Moreover, the daughters do not speak Russian and would therefore find it difficult in a Kazakh school. During the school holidays, the daughters sometimes visit Almaty and help their mother on the market. Mrs Abdieva also visits her husband and children in Kyrgyzstan at least twice a year, but she also makes the most of these occasions to visit her own parents in the neighbouring village.

Family 4: Mr Osmonov and Mrs Osmonova grew up in the same place. During Soviet times Mr. Osmonov was employed as driver for the *kolkhoz* (collective farm), while his wife took care of household and brought up their four sons and two daughters. Three of their sons work in Shymkent (Kazakhstan), mainly in trading. Two of them have children, who live in the village with Mr and Mrs Osmonov. The two married daughters and the second oldest son are in Bishkek, but all of them have previously worked in Russia or Kazakhstan.

## WHERE DO PEOPLE RETURN TO?

In the following section, I will look at people's desire to return to their home country, Kyrgyzstan, and their explanations for the fact that return does not necessarily mean returning to their place of origin.

Using King's typology (King et al., 1983: 18–21 in King, 2000: 11), all interviewees could be described as "target migrants" (King, 2000: 11). Target migrants move abroad with a specific aim in mind. They not only have the intention to return but do in fact return – at least as far as can be foreseen. The mayor of the municipality and migrants from the case study area exemplify this.

Migrants bring a lot of money here. I think that they will only leave temporarily. They are not going to settle down there [Russia and Kazakhstan]. They are just working abroad for the money. They will come back in two to three years (Mayor, 50 years, 2007)

Migrants have a similar perception and intend to return to Kyrgyzstan once they have accumulated a certain sum of money:

We are not staying here [Russia] permanently. We just need time to earn enough money. We'll definitely go back to Kyrgyzstan. But we don't know when. Maybe in five, ten or even one or two years, it depends on how quickly we earn enough money. (Worker in Moscow, 25 years old, 2006)

The timescale is not yet clear and migrants are realistic enough to admit that it could take many more years for them to earn enough money. For most of them, it appears obvious that they will return to their home country, but policymakers and researchers rarely discuss where exactly migrants want to return to. While elderly people mainly express the wish to return to their home villages, younger people increasingly see their identity and their future prospects in urban areas rather than in the village of their birth. The main places for investment are Bishkek and its suburbs, and sometimes Osh or Jalalabad in the south. Such investments enable people to gradually set up a new home. They will, for example, buy a house in Bishkek, but then have to pay off their debts by working in Russia or Kazakhstan. They thus add Bishkek to the

existing multi-local setup of their place of origin and their workplace in Russia or Kazakhstan. This is summarised in Figure 1.

For example, Satirbek was born and raised in the same municipality. In 1991, he graduated from technical college but could not make a living, and thus first went trading to Russia and later on moved to Almaty in Kazakhstan. He now sees himself as an established businessman.

Satirbek: “My younger sister trades in Almaty and so do I. We bought two houses in Bishkek. In the long run, I am going to live in Bishkek.”

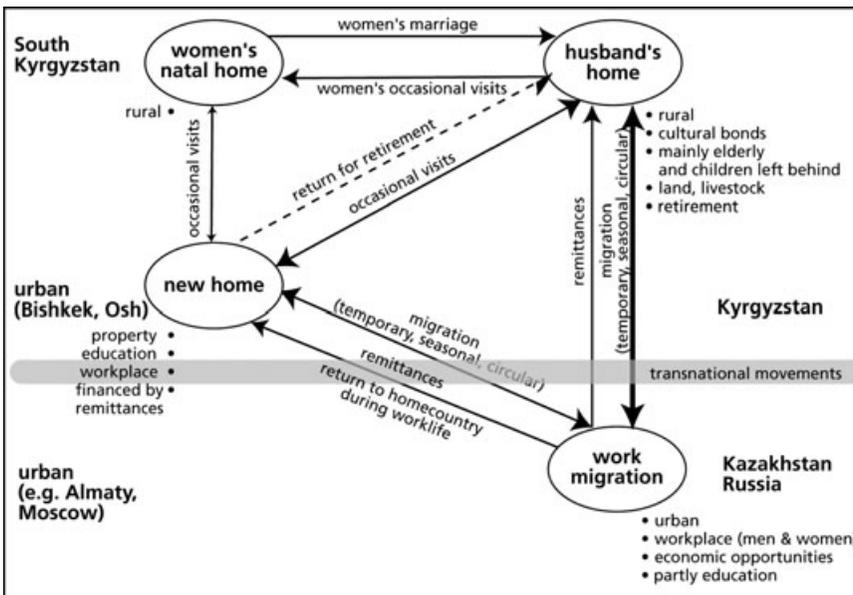
Author: “Will young people like you return to your village one day?”

Satirbek: “No, they won’t until jobs are created. Right now we don’t have any jobs in the village. For example, if you want to work in the fields, there is no water. If that continues, there won’t be any young people left in the village. They will not return because there are no jobs.” (Satirbek, 33 years old, trader in Almaty, 2006)

The other dimension of return reflects the experiences of migrants when they go back to their rural homes for shorter visits, as shown by the following quote:

I want to go to the village. I miss it. But every time I go there, I want to come back to Bishkek. Because we are young. In the village, there are no young people of my age. All my friends are here. So it’s difficult to stay in the village alone. I go to the village, meet my parents, stay 10 days and then I return. There aren’t any young people. Only three to four of my friends stayed. They would like to leave too, but they have to look after their parents. (Male trader, 2007, 25 years old. At the age of 17 he finished school and went to Almaty to trade. Three years ago he moved to Bishkek, but he visits Almaty regularly on business.)

FIGURE 1  
MULTI-LOCAL LIVELIHOODS AND STAGES OF RETURN



Source: Own draft, 2009.

When they visit, migrants experience a range of ambivalent feelings – from wishful thoughts of not remaining a migrant for the rest of their lives and dreams of returning home permanently to a rural life through to a certainty that they will never again be able to live in the countryside. The link to home and the family, however, can also reduce the risks of mobility and might provide a “fall-back strategy” (Conway, 2005: 267), as described by the family in portrait 1. The younger daughter of the family lives with her husband in Almaty. Both do some irregular petty trading. In many cases, migrants who live in urban areas provide networks through which other family members can get access to medical care. Nevertheless, as long as migrants work and live illegally, access to good medical care can be risky and requires bribes. Therefore, when the younger daughter became pregnant in 2007, she returned temporarily to her parents’ house in southern Kyrgyzstan and stayed there for the birth and pre- and post-natal care. She then moved back to Almaty, but her mother was worried about her daughter and newborn grandchild. Although she had never been to Almaty herself, she knew about her daughter and son-in-law’s precarious living and working conditions.

They pay their rent but cannot live freely. There is always control. They can only keep the light and gas on for a short period of time. They pay the rent but the owner always comes and tells them to switch it off. He dictates what they can do and what they can’t. My daughter asks me how she’s supposed to live there, now that she has a baby and needs a warmer house and electricity and gas. They pay money, but this owner always comes and tells them to switch it off, to do this and don’t do that. (Southern Kyrgyzstan, 2007)

The family had long discussions about whether the newborn child should be with his mother and father in Almaty or would be better staying with its grandparents in southern Kyrgyzstan. Finally the daughter decided to take her child to Almaty. The grandparents work too and would not have time to take care of the child.

Most migrants can only imagine returning to their rural place of birth when they reach retirement age; it is therefore crucial that they remain in contact with their original home to keep this option open. One example is the family described in family portrait number 2. After trading in Russia, the family settled in Bishkek. As their son and daughter grow older, the parents are starting to think about the future and about whether they should return to the village or not.

We still have cattle and livestock there. (...) I would love to go, but my children don’t want to. I will go of course, but only after all my kids have got married. We will return. We have a house and cattle there. We have a nice house there. We have kept it in a very good state. It is the best house in the village. (Mr Kubatbekov, 45 years old, Bishkek, 2007)

But there are also examples, such as family portrait number 3, where people do not have enough money to invest in urban areas in Kyrgyzstan and will have to work for as long as possible in Kazakhstan and Russia to finance the needs of their families. Mrs Abdieva lives with her son in Almaty. For financial reasons, her four daughters (school age) and her husband have stayed in the village in southern Kyrgyzstan. Two years ago her father became very ill and they managed to bring him to Almaty for treatment. Because of her irregular status she had to pay large bribes to make sure he received good medical treatment, but she did eventually managed to pay for it. She is often ill and feels exhausted from working long hours on the markets all year round. Her precarious working conditions are a source of additional insecurity and provoke strong feelings of attachment towards her home country of Kyrgyzstan.

You feel so free and you have independence. It is a paradise in the village; you feel so independent and by yourself. You do whatever you want because it is your place of birth. Here (in Almaty) you keep your mouth closed, you are as silent as possible. You are afraid and you do not have any freedom in this foreign place. (...) When I cross the border and I am on Kyrgyz territory I feel so relieved and I am so happy. (Mrs Abdieva, family portrait no. 3, selling bread in a market in Almaty, 2006)

During the interviews, she clearly saw her future at her husband's village of birth. By "place of birth" she meant the rural south of Kyrgyzstan in particular. Mrs Abdieva thought about returning to her husband's village in Kyrgyzstan and establishing a small business.

There is nothing in the village to attract young people – no wonder all of them leave. During the last years I toyed with so many ideas about what I could do back home. I would like to open a school buffet serving breakfast and lunch for schoolchildren. The place could also be used as a café for the whole village, somewhere we could screen movies and celebrate weddings or birthday parties. I could train my daughters to run the business with me and they could stay in the village. (Almaty, 2006)

However, from short-term visits back home she felt that she might not have enough capital to open such a place. Furthermore, she didn't know where to look for support to discuss her plans. Therefore Mrs Abdieva thought it more likely that she would stay in Almaty until her children have finished school. Her son should complete his education in Almaty and her older daughters would have the possibility of learning a profession or studying in Bishkek.

The examples have shown that most younger and middle-aged migrants wish to return to Kyrgyzstan, but their reasons for not returning from Kazakhstan or Russia (like in family portrait number 3) or for first returning to urban rather than rural areas of Kyrgyzstan include lower salaries and fewer economic opportunities, their concerns about corruption, the lack of social, medical and training services, shopping facilities and technical infrastructure. They also fear that they will not have sufficient savings to be able to return and invest in consumer items and production in rural areas.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MULTI-LOCAL LIVES

The medium-term orientation of migrants towards urban centres sustains the financial flows between urban and rural areas, but it also causes brain drain and new family constellations, which will be discussed in the following section.

### Importance of remittances

The vast majority of households rely on remittances. On average, households receive per month US\$ 50–100, which tallies with the results of a World Bank study (World Bank, 2006) in which 14 per cent of the respondents had an average monthly income of less than US\$ 50, 31 per cent earned US\$ 50–100, about 30 per cent up to US\$ 200, and another 20 per cent even more.

The mayor pointed out: "Last year we calculated that 20 million Som were sent back to Y. You might have noticed the new fences. People can feed themselves again and with the rest of the money they build fences and houses. Last year people brought 65 new cars and 61 new houses were built." (Mayor of the municipality, South Kyrgyzstan, 2007).

The high dependency on remittances in rural areas also puts pressure on the migrants responsible for earning them. “It is difficult. Even when you are sick, you have to work and earn money. You try to earn money even when you are sick. You realise that your family and your children expect your support. There is no way out – you have to work”. (Mrs Abdieva, family portrait no. 3, sells bread on a market in Almaty, 2006.)

Money is primarily spent on daily survival and secondly on life-cycle events, cars, housing, cattle, land and an increasing number of social events such as seasonal festivities. Marriages are important life-cycle events. Traditionally, parents are expected to pay for their children’s weddings and for their sons’ houses. Nowadays, migrants of marrying age increasingly pay for their weddings and houses themselves – and they increasingly build their houses in Bishkek or smaller urban centres nearby such as Osh or Jalalabad.

Livestock is an investment with multiple dimensions. Many younger migrants generate their main income from trading and wage labour and cannot imagine living in the countryside in the medium or short term. However, they do still invest in livestock. Despite the growing importance of houses and cars as symbols of successful migration, livestock remains a sign of wealth. In addition, livestock represents stability and Kyrgyz tradition by binding people to the pastures of home. Migrants live off their memories of these (*jailoos*). They associate *jailoos* with clean air, freedom and a place to relax and recuperate, even if they do not go there on a regular basis and the actual work on the pastures is harsh, especially for women.

In a follow-up study in the same municipality focusing on the links between livestock farming and migration, Schoch (2008, also Schoch et al., 2010) found that after a sharp decrease in livestock after 1990, the number of livestock has once more been on the up since 2000. Villagers describe the increase of livestock as a direct effect of migration. On the one hand, people directly invest remittances in livestock to increase the number; on the other, daily expenses are covered by remittances and people can stop selling livestock to cover these expenses (Schoch, 2008).

Investments in cattle, land and a house in rural areas become a fallback strategy for the migrants themselves and provide a safety net when they later retire. What is true of all major investments – as illustrated in the previous section when Mr. Kubatbekov emphasises his house (family portrait no. 2) – is that they are symbolic of the returnee’s social status and serve to demonstrate that the returnees have been successful – that they have made it (also Conway 2005).

Aside from one mosque, no remittances have as yet been invested in community development or larger private businesses. Despite frequent complaints about a shortage of water, technical infrastructure and employment opportunities, everybody involved regard their remittances as only being sufficient to cover their private needs. The state is still seen as the main provider of infrastructure and services and as overwhelmingly responsible for job creation.

### **Shortages of labour and qualified people in rural areas**

Besides remittances, one important aspect of migration is the absence of family members and labour in the community, which entails a new organisation of roles and tasks within families and the community.

Most of the households supplement their income from migration with stockbreeding and agriculture. Thus households feel the labour shortages most in the summer months when they have to tend to their livestock, make hay and cultivate the fields (Schoch, 2008). Those families that move to the pastures with their livestock during the summer find it impossible to

cultivate their fields at the same time. Due to the absence of household members, people increasingly ask relatives and friends to look after their livestock or pay professional herders to do this. *Ashar*, a system of mutual help among friends and relatives, is coming back into fashion for haymaking and cultivation. In addition, day labourers (mainly male teenagers from the village) are employed and paid out of remittances. Other villagers have reacted to labour shortages by ceasing to cultivate their fields. Although very few people actually completely stopped cultivation, most families reduced their agricultural production to self-sufficiency levels. Nevertheless, remittances exceed the expense of paid labour or the losses incurred by not cultivating land (Schoch, 2008).

As well as the labour shortage at household level, there is a lack of well-trained people in all sectors in rural areas. For example, people were worried that despite an increasing number of livestock, a lack of professionals might endanger the future of livestock production. Most households practice livestock farming at their own discretion, leading to poor pasture management and low output and productivity (Schoch, 2008). During interviews at the school and the local hospital, it was a common occurrence to see teachers, nurses and doctors taking extended leave to go and work abroad. Also, the Central Asia Human Development Report (UNDP and CIS, 2005) warns that many qualified Kyrgyz teachers have migrated to Russia and Kazakhstan; educational standards have fallen as a result.

Thus migration has led to a lack of labour in every sector of employment in the source region. Although it is often argued that migrants will return with new ideas and skills, people's reasons for working abroad are overwhelmingly economic and they are generally not that interested in learning new skills or starting a new profession. Moreover, apart from a few lucky exceptions, young and middle-aged skilled migrants such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, clerks and nurses (men and women) are prepared to undertake work far below their skill level in the hardest and most draining jobs on construction sites, factories, markets and in restaurants. This has also been confirmed by other researchers (Bichsel et al., 2005; Rohner, 2006; Schmidt and Sagynbekova, 2008; Ruget and Usmanalieva, 2008). Remittances are partly spent on children's education. Although parents know from experience that a good education no longer offers a secure path to economic security and upward social mobility, they work as hard as possible to give their children the best education. At the same time, young internal migrants of school and university age try to reduce the financial burden on their parents by working during their studies in Bishkek. However, my interviews and observations in rural schools revealed paradoxical situations whereby pupils put working abroad above further education:

Once parents start sending money to their children, their behaviour and habits change. Depending on where parents work, children also visit their parents. Once they have experienced money and seen the city, they don't care anymore about their family, home or education. Children become spoiled. (Schoolteacher, southern Kyrgyzstan, 2007)

However, many younger people in their twenties were also seen to interrupt their education simply because they need to earn money to survive and intend to invest their savings in their own education later on. Anyway, it is unlikely that young people will find any well-paid employment in their rural homes. They would rather stay in Bishkek or, in many cases, end up returning to Russia or Kazakhstan to work.

### **Social protection and caring from a distance**

Social protection refers to the range of public, private, formal and informal measures that address an actor's vulnerability to incidents that have a negative effect on their well-being

(Sabates-Wheeler and Maclausan 2007). People's need to sustain their income, secure their livelihood and thus ensure their social protection is often the major driving force behind migration. At the same time, there are various points during the migration process when social protection is required (Sabates-Wheeler and Maclausan, 2007). Although migrants also lack social protection, the focus of the following section is on non-migrants in rural areas and their care arrangements as one aspect of social protection. Young and middle-aged men and women who migrate to Russia or Kazakhstan leave their children with their parents or parents-in-law. It is the older and the very young members of the population who do not migrate.

Once they grow up, their parents will take them with them – and then I will take care of the next generation of children. (...) Right now they are calling us father and mother, but soon they will understand that we are their grandparents. (...) I keep explaining to them who their father and mother are and who their grandparents are. (Grandmother, family portrait no. 4, South Kyrgyzstan. Her sons and daughters work in Bishkek and Kazakhstan; she and her husband take care of their grandchildren, 2007.)

It is not an entirely new phenomenon for the youngest generation to grow up with their grandparents while their parents are busy studying and working. However, respondents felt that the general situation has been changing. Parents stay away for longer periods of time and further away from home under uncertain conditions. Irregular migration regimes make it hard for parents to stay in contact with other family members and children back home or to bring their children to their places of work. Those migration patterns have changed the structure of the family care constellation. Distance caring involves a reliance on older children, grandparents and relatives while the parents are absent for longer periods of time.

All my children are in different places. It's not a normal family anymore. I would love to bring my children up, but because of the bad economic situation I don't have any choice. I am their mother and I know best how to treat my children. (...) My two-year-old girl couldn't stay with my mother-in-law because she is too difficult and too young for my old mother-in-law, but for my middle daughter it was OK. My youngest daughter now lives with one of my aunts. (Gulja, 30 years, Almaty, 2006)

In Kyrgyzstan, no long-term studies have yet been conducted into the impact of family separation on children. In the interviews, remittances were seen as a positive opportunity to invest in good nutrition and education for children – and therefore a better future. The flip-side mentioned by parents, grandparents and teachers is the greater likelihood of a drop in school enrolment and performance, greater need for medical care and also the general psychological consequences. For many countries affected by emigration, the impact on the families and especially children left behind has become a serious concern. Research in the Philippines (Scalabrini Migration Center, 2003/04) for example, on children that had been left behind, showed that parental absence creates displacement, disruption and changes in care arrangements. However, despite the emotional displacement, the children of migrants are not disadvantaged compared to children of non-migrants as far as many aspects of their well-being is concerned. On the contrary, the economic advantages of migration appear to provide the children of migrants with other advantages like enrolment in better schools and a greater likelihood of participation in extra-curricular activities. Thus, when the family is stable, it can withstand the separation imposed by migration (Scalabrini Migration Center, 2003/04). Whenever parents manage to maintain a base in Bishkek, they also relocate their children of school-going age to the capital. If parents cannot be with them in Bishkek

full-time because they work in Kazakhstan or Russia, other extended family members provide shelter for the children.

A further concern if the younger generation settles down in urban areas is to decide who will care for the elderly in the long run, especially if the traditional set-up also declines whereby the youngest son and his wife live with his parents. In many families, those rules are challenged and often renegotiated. In some cases, the son who was least interested in migration has taken on the entire responsibility for his parents, independently of his age and position in the family. In other cases, parents required their sons to return whenever they could afford to financially, or at the very least his wife (their daughter-in-law) had to remain with the elderly and shoulder the main burden of the housework. It is also not yet clear whether having full responsibility for their parents and elderly family members may hinder the younger generation from investing in their own children, family and businesses.

## CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Migration in Kyrgyzstan is characterised by internal rural to urban north-south migration as well as international migration to Kazakhstan and Russia. This mobility mostly only involves migration by some family members and, as a result, people's livelihoods take on a multi-local dimension. Many migrants to Russia and Kazakhstan feel a strong attachment to Kyrgyzstan and fully intend to return home. However, while the elderly often expect the younger generation to return to their home villages, younger people in particular increasingly situate their identities and their future prospects in urban places rather than in their home village. They could imagine returning to their rural place of birth when they have reached retirement age. People's reasons for staying in urban rather than rural areas include the poorer economic opportunities in the countryside, the lack of services and infrastructure, and an urban lifestyle that leaves more scope for individual freedom. In addition, migrant parents want to see their children complete their education and get married. Migrants' return to Kyrgyzstan therefore frequently involves a further migration step – namely moving first to an urban area (especially the capital Bishkek) and only later, upon retirement, back to the rural area. People will derive the necessary income to sustain or establish the new urban home in Kyrgyzstan by working in Kazakhstan or Russia. Hence they must keep up their transnational and national rural-urban linkages to make it possible to return to the urban centres in their homeland and to potentially allow themselves to retire to the countryside.

International and internal migrants alike sustain their non-migrating family members through remittances. They also provide networks of access to medical care and education in urban areas, as well as jobs for following migrants. Non-migrating family members on the other hand take care of children, livestock and personal belongings. They also maintain the emotional base of the home and to a certain extent reduce the risks and uncertainty inherent in international mobility. This is illustrated by the fact that pregnant women prefer to stay in safety with their parents rather than endure precarious living conditions in Kazakhstan.

Overall, migration is generally seen in a positive light, since remittances have significantly improved the economic situation of the migrating, as well as the non-migrating, members of the households. However, there are several critical side effects of migration. Labour migration to Russia and Kazakhstan and the failure of migrants to return to rural areas in the medium term exacerbates the lack of qualified personnel in the service sectors there – and only lends more weight to people's reasons for migrating or not returning. The shortage of family workforce is made up for by mutual help between relatives or by paying temporary wage labourers out of remittances. However, the impact of long-distance childcare and the

responsibilities of looking after the elderly in the future remain unclear. Furthermore, should the flow of cash transfers be interrupted because the migrant falls ill or loses his/her job, for instance, this could disturb the delicate balance of debt and repayment for households with hardly any access to other sources of cash income.

As far as the policy implications go, the findings point to a number of questions.

A large number of rural migrants work in urban areas in Russia and Kazakhstan or finally converge on Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Those migrants have had a major impact on the urban environment. Can national and international policy help to shift the view of rural migrants as rural, “backward”, dependent immigrants who work in the informal sector to a perception of them as active entrepreneurs and consumers? Legalising migrants’ economic activities would turn their migrant labour into entrepreneurial activities, providing stability and predictability (cp. Jeenbaeva, 2008) and helping to integrate them into city life without the need for state social support. Then their mobility could be seen as a resource that strengthens economic rural-urban inter-linkages, both within Kyrgyzstan and internationally. If combined with better social and economic service provision in rural areas, not only is it more likely that migrants would return to rural areas, but it would also give non-migrants access to healthcare, childcare and education.

This leads on to a second question. Can policy encourage specific vocational education schemes to raise rural income levels? People have to gain the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be in a position to manage private farms and other businesses, and this will help to raise incomes in rural areas. Given the resurgence in livestock farming, appropriate structures and organisations are needed, as are better farming techniques to improve soil fertility, solve irrigation problems and address the lack of technical infrastructure. There is also a recognition that the processing industry is pivotal. Meat, milk and wool could be processed and sold on local and even export markets (cp. Schoch, 2008). Last but not least, how can migrants, who are absent for most of the year, be integrated into decision-making and training in areas in which they continue to invest and are keen to return to? So far, a large proportion of the population that represents the country’s future is absent from the process of training, capacity building and creating infrastructure in rural areas.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research received support from the National Centre of Competence in Research North-South (NCCR North-South), with financial assistance from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). I thank Martina Locher and my other colleagues from the University of Zurich for critical comments and Mahabat Sultanbekova, Arslan Karagulov and Zarina Osorova for research assistance.

## REFERENCES

- Alberts, H., and Hazen, H.D.  
 2005 “There are always two voices: international students’ intentions to stay in the United States or return to their home countries”, *International Migration*, 43(3): 131–154.
- Ammassari, S.  
 2004 “From nation-building to entrepreneurship: the impact of elite return migrants in Cote d’Ivoire and Ghana”, *Population, Space and Place*, 10(2): 133–154.

- Bichsel, C., S. Hostettler, and B. Strasser  
 2005 "Should I buy a cow or a TV? Reflections on the conceptual framework of the NCCR North-South based on a comparative study of international labour migration in Mexico, India and Kyrgyzstan", *Working Paper NCCR North-South Dialogue*, NCCR North-South Berne.
- Black, R., and R. King  
 2004 "Editorial introduction: migration, return and development in West Africa", *Population, Space and Place*, 10(2): 75–83.
- Conway, D.  
 2005 "Transnationalism and return: 'home' as an enduring fixture and 'anchor'", in R.B. Potter, D. Conway, and J. Phillips (Eds), *Experiences of Return: Caribbean Perspectives*, Ashgate, London: 263–281.
- Diatta, M.A., and N. Mbow  
 1999 "Releasing the development potential of return migration: the case of Senegal", *International Migration*, 37(1): 243–266.
- Ghosh, B.  
 2000 *Return Migration: Journey of Hope or Despair?*, International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nations (UN), Geneva.
- Glaser, B., and A.L. Strauss  
 1967 *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Aldine, New York.
- Howell, J.  
 1996 "Coping with transition: Insights from Kyrgyzstan", *Third World Quarterly*, 17(1): 53–68.
- Jeenbaeva, J.  
 2008 "Intersectoral policy making in creating the new middle class: a case study of internal migrants of Bishkek engaged in the informal sector", in Social Research Center American University of Central Asia (Ed.), *Kyrgyzstan Today: Policy Briefs on Civil Society, Migration, Islam and Corruption*, AUCA, Bishkek: 38–45.
- Kandiyoti, D.  
 1999 "Poverty in transition: an ethnographic critique of household surveys in post-Soviet Central Asia", *Development and Change*, 30, 1999: 499–524.
- King, R.  
 2000 "Generalizations from the history of return migration", in B. Ghosh (Ed.), *Return Migration: Journey of Hope or Despair?* International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nations (UN), Geneva: 7–56.
- Logan, B.I.  
 2009 "The reverse and return transfer of technology (RRTT): towards a comprehensive model of the migration of African experts", *International Migration*, 47(4): 93–127.
- Nair, G.P.R.  
 1999 "Return of overseas contract workers and their rehabilitation and development in Kerala (India)", *International Migration*, 37(1): 209–242.
- Moran-Taylor, M., and C. Menjívar  
 2005 "Unpacking longings to return: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Phoenix, Arizona", *International Migration*, 43(4): 91–114.
- Nyberg-Sørensen, N., N. Van Hear, and P. Engberg-Pedersen  
 2002 "The migration-development nexus: evidence and policy options", *International Migration*, 40 (5): 49–73.
- Rohner, I.  
 2007 "National and international labour migration: a case study in the province of Batken, Kyrgyzstan", *NCCR North-South Dialogue Working Paper No. 8*, NCCR North-South, Berne.
- Ronsijn, W.  
 2006 "Coping during transition in rural areas: the case of post-Soviet southern Kyrgyzstan", *Conflict Research Group Working Paper 4*, CRG Ghent University, Ghent.
- Ruget, V., and B. Usmanalieva  
 2008 "Citizenship, migration and loyalty towards the state: a case study of the Kyrgyzstani migrants working in Russia and Kazakhstan", *Central Asia Survey*, 27(2): 129–141.

- Sabates-Wheeler, R., and I. Macauslan  
2007 "Migration and social protection: exposing problems of access", *Development*, 50(4): 26–32.
- Sadowskaja, J.  
2008 "Regionalisation and globalisation: recent trends in labour migration in Central Asia", *Zentralasien Analysen (Central Asia Analysis)*, 3:2–6.
- Scalabrini Migration Center (SMC),  
2003/04 *Hearts Apart: Migration in the Eyes of Filipino Children*, SMC, Manila, <http://www.smc.org.ph/heartsapart/index.html> (accessed 28 October 2008).
- Schoch, N.  
2008 *Impacts of Labour Migration on Livestock Farming in Rural Kyrgyzstan*, Master Thesis, University of Zurich, Switzerland.
- Schoch, N., B. Steimann, and S. Thieme  
2010 "Migration and animal husbandry – competing or complementary livelihood strategies: evidence from Kyrgyzstan", *Natural Resources Forum*, 34(3): 211–221.
- Schmidt, M., and L. Sagynbekova  
2008 "Migration past and present: changing patterns in Kyrgyzstan", *Central Asian Survey*, 27(2): 11–127.
- Schuler, M., and Z.I. Kudabaev  
2004 "Migration patterns of the population in Kyrgyzstan". in Z. Kudabaev, M. Guillot and M. Denisenko (Eds), *Naselenije Kirgistan (Population of Kyrgyzstan)*, National Statistical Committee, Bishkek: 281–302.
- Skeldon, R.  
2006 "Interlinkages between internal and international migration and development in Asian Region", *Population, Space and Place*, 12(1): 15–30.
- Straus, A.L., and J. Corbin  
1996 *Grounded Theory: Grundlagen qualitativer Sozialforschung*, Beltz Psychologie Verlags Union, Weinheim.
- Tannenbaum, M.  
2007 "Back and forth: immigrants' stories of migration and return", *International Migration*, 45(5): 147–174.
- Thomas-Hope, E.  
1999 "Return migration to Jamaica and its development potential", *International Migration*, 37(1): 183–207.
- Thieme, S.  
2008a "Sustaining livelihoods in multi-local settings: possible theoretical linkages between transnational migration and livelihood studies", *Mobilities*, 1(3): 51–71.  
2008b "Living in transition: how Kyrgyz women juggle their different roles in a multi-local setting", *Gender, Technology and Development*, 12(3): 325–345.
- Tiemoko, R.  
2004 "Migration, return and socio-economic change in West Africa: the role of family", *Population, Space and Place*, 10(2): 155–174.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)  
2002 *Human Development Report in Mountain Regions in Kyrgyzstan: National Human Development Report 2002*, UNDP, Bishkek.  
2005 *National Human Development Report Kyrgyzstan: The Influence of Civil Society on the Human Development Process in Kyrgyzstan*, UNDP, Bishkek.
- United Nations Development Programme and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)  
2005 *Central Asia Human Development Report 2005*, UNDP, Bratislava.
- World Bank  
2006 *Migration and Remittances: Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, World Bank, Washington, DC.