

# Coming Home? Patterns and

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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 “nancial na92..r2M.3(e0.39(welt•upce,)-443.919997.)-4159(At,)-445.4oth.

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

*f* the process whereby people return to their country or place of origin after a significant period in another country or region. (*f* ) 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

## 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 cap-

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

## 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 is71(family)71(f8vt.)-348chstae

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.

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 “rst 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 “elds, 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 re”ects 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 dif”cult 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



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. *f* ) 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 manage 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



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

(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

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 life-

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 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.

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