

“Women’s village”

The story of the most remote village under the program. The collective portrait. Labour migration increases the burden on women; women have to perform men’s work.

“Your own but somebody else’s garden”

The story shows the scale of migration. A family of 9 people – Jeenbekova Raihan – uses a neighbor’s garden – a migrant worker who had abandoned his house. The story also illustrates the approaches to the implementation of the program.

“Musa and Byusulu”

Labour migration as a test of strength for the family. The story of the Kushanovs family: Byusulu and Musa. One of the largest families (8 children) under the program. The program gave the family a hope for getting out of poverty.

Locomotive from Jygach-Korgon”

The collective portrait of the self help groups (SHGs). The story of social partnership with the local self governing bodies (SGBs). It illustrates a program activist’s work.

“Meerkan apa’s kindergarten”

The story of the most aged family under the program. It illustrates the international character of the SHGs. SHG’s role in strengthening inter-ethnic relations is stressed out.

“Farida’s five mothers-in-law”



The story shows the vulnerability of a young family, breaking the practice of traditional lifestyle of the family. Farida married at the age of 17, she was left alone with four children without a husband and a mother in law. Participation in the program gave Farida a possibility for economic independence. It has shown a social role of SHG as a kind of support for young families of migrants and as inter-ethnic harmony.

“Sartbay’s hope”



Labour migration breaking the traditional way of life. A man, a member of SHG whose wife is in labor migration, was left with his three children. A project has given him a hope for a family reunification.

Women’s village



"When I go early in the morning to my rice field, every time I look back and see that behind me there’s nobody but only women and children who walk to their fields with hoes, – sadly shaking her head, tells Matlyuba Razykova, – all men of our village have left their homes in search of earnings. In our village boys grow up just to finish school and leave right after their fathers and elder brothers. They all have the only one perspective – to become a labor migrant. Just this spring, and I remember the date –that is April 5th – when 48 young boys from our village went to Russia by bus. Among them there were two of my sons ... "

Listening to the sad Matlyuba's story and other women – members of the Association of of Self Help Groups "Aksu ayil fondusu" gathered in the classroom of a local school, I could not deny the feeling as if I hear stories of wives and mothers who saw their husbands and sons off to the front of the Second World War, which we only know about from history lessons at school and Soviet films. Each of them has her own story, but they are all about one thing – how they have to survive without men's support ...

If you speak the language of statistics, the village of Ak-Suu in the district of Leilek of Batken Region is a populated settlement of Kyrgyzstan, where the density of the labor migration among men of working age is 100%, with the share of migration abroad at the level of 70% and internal migration being 30%.

For the residents of Aksu, these dry figures mean that the majority of the male population of the village managed to find a way and means to go to Russia and Kazakhstan in search of work. And those who could not get money for the trip, have to work in shifts at the mines of Sulukta.

The village is located in the geographical Aksu "impasse". On three sides it is surrounded by high mountains, behind which lies the territory of Tajikistan. And you can get there by a road from Isfana, which is a single, lifeless road broken by frequent floods.

"They say that in our village all the houses are old, and how can new ones appear, if there's no money, and most importantly there is no one to build them" – complain the women.

And indeed, compared to other villages of the region where the so-called "newly constructed buildings" are mushrooming, all the houses in Aksuu were mostly built of adobe long time ago. Even fences are almost all identical, composed of rounded lumps of clay, which, as I noticed, have the size of a woman's fist.

"Yes, we do repair fences and build constructions and not only that on our own. We, women, still have to handle our rice fields, standing knee-deep in cold water, and building up dams to save the village from frequent floods common here and have other man's work to perform, – say women, – these cause all our sicknesses, while young people still have to give birth to children".

To my naive remark that they could simply hire workers for heavy work rather than working themselves, they replied that they could not afford it. But what about the money transfer?

It turned out that almost all of it is used for the repayment of loans taken from banks at high interest rates, and spent for ensuring that their husbands and sons could get to the place and settle there, as well as to obtain the necessary permits and documents.

Therefore, the families of these migrant workers have to rely on their own strength and that their relatives will be able immediately upon arrival to find work and to justify the investment. Unfortunately, these hopes are often not justified ...

Also, loans for "toi" (celebrations) have become part of everyday life of villagers who use them for weddings, birth of child, circumcision rituals – the traditional and obligatory festivals, which is customary to celebrate on a grand scale, inviting a large number of relatives and guests. It is often the need for such occasions which is pushing people into forced labor migration, especially young people who leave immediately after the marriage to work, to "repay a loan for a wedding". Being hostages of traditions, such young families just originated, have serious financial and psychological burden, and fall into the category of vulnerable and poor families, which often leads to conflict and more frequent divorces, a phenomenon unthinkable a few years ago in the south, which has always had strong patriarchal foundations of the family.

"When we developed the "Poverty Pyramid of migrants' families"¹, to all of the questions women had the only one answer - "Ilyama ilya"², – says Matlyuba laughing, the answer given by the young and those who are older. In the local shopping kiosk the debt book is already swollen with debt records. That's why as far as this program, we grasped it, like a drowning man clutches at a straw – no one had to be convinced of that. We formed six self-help groups, and even registered the "Aksu ayil fondusu" Association of SHGs.

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Contrary to the well-known expression "first is worst", the results of the first year of the program exceeded all expectations – all women of SHGs collected a good harvest of vegetables and received good income. In no small measure this was achieved thanks to high-quality varieties of vegetables allocated by the program and training sessions as part of the program, where women mastered the necessary skills of vegetable growers. And yet, according to the women themselves, "a great desire" to get out of poverty helped them a lot.

"We are 38 women in the Association of SHGs – and this is a strength. Collectively, we can solve many problems. Again, the registered social organization enjoys different attitude and easier efforts to get equipment and organize training and attract projects to the village" - say SHS members.

"We have yet to open our own office, – says Matlyuba Razykova, – our association would acquire its own premises. And so far we, as the homeless, have to get together at school, and my being a part of the school staff makes it easier".

¹ "Poverty pyramid of migrants' families" is designed to determine the criteria of poverty in the pilot village of the program by interviewing migrants' family members on a special questionnaire.

² "Ilyama Ilya" – sustained expression in the local language with its meaning close to the saying "about to fall apart"

Apart from opening of our own office the Association has come up with many other plans for the next year. They're going to plant other crops such as onions, and establish trade relations with neighboring Tajik villages. Most importantly, they believe, the program reached out a helping hand, which helped them to "get up from their knees", and now they will be able to move forward independently.

Looking at the results they have achieved, in the village there's a growing number of people willing to participate in the program for the next year and get support from the Community Fund. This means that the Association will be replenished with new members, and more families of migrant workers in Aksuu will be able to improve their family budget.



Photo: Matlyuba Razykova: "These are our so-called "internal migrant workers" who do a seasonal work or work in shifts at the mine. Many of them are my disciples"

Dilbar Saitova, a member of the SHG "Lola":



"My old tandyr (an oven) became worthless – the bread is not baked as it should. And to buy a new one, you need a lot of money, the market price of it is 1500 soms (\$ 45 – Ed.). I had to build one on my own for myself, although we consider it a purely men's affair. I puddled and molded the clay myself, and to make sure the surface is smooth and without cracks, I beat out the walls using the old antiquated method – rubber galoshes..."

Photo facts



“The mass migration of young men with weak technical capabilities in agriculture leads to the spread and intensification of the inefficient and much labor-consuming work done by children and women. This, in turn, contributes to deterioration of the quality of labor resources in the future and adversely affects food production in the mountainous regions”.

K. Almakuchukov, “Labor Migration from Kyrgyzstan, potential social and economic effects”.



Gulbyubyu Babaeva within one season collected one ton of select cucumbers from three acres of her homestead plot of land. To get a good harvest, she used the skills gained during training in agricultural techniques of vegetable production, supported by information from textbooks developed as part of the program.

In the photo: *Gulbyubyu Babaeva* (left) and *Kymyzay Sattarova*, members of the SHG “Yntymak”: “We have tried to strictly follow all the advice given in the “Book on the cultivation of cucumbers”.



Mohichehra Muratova, a member of the SHG “Lola” (right), as well as her sister-in-law are young wives of migrant workers. Through participation in the program, Mohichehra gained the skills that helped her get her own source of income and economic independence in the husband’s family.



Markhamat Hamrakulova, a member of the SHG “Lola” in the market of Isfana town: “I don’t have to do my trade for long in the market, my tomatoes are bought up quickly, as they are favorably different in terms of their look and quality from local varieties of tomatoes”.

Your own but somebody else's garden

“Come, I'll show you how good tomatoes I grow in my garden”, with these words, Raihan Jeenbekova led us outside and went ... to the neighboring house.

“This is my neighbor's house, he and his family left for work and asked me to look after the farm, and in gratitude he allowed me to use his garden, – she explains, – in our village everyone has small areas, houses with utility premises, and that's it, there's almost no space left for a garden or orchard. That's why we have to plant crops in somebody else's garden, which is good for our neighbor as his house is watched, and the garden is watered. Still, the neighbors will come back home anyway in the future, as people don't want to live for ages in a foreign land ...”



Raihan Jeenbekova, the leader of the SHG “Jashtyk”, lives in the village of Chimgen, Leilek district of Batken region. Half of the 21 houses on her street, that is 9 buildings, are empty because the owners and their families have left in search of a job. The other 12 houses also have migrant workers, some have their husbands abroad, some have children, other have both husbands and children who left their home in search of work.

“That's such a sad statistics, – sums up Raihan, – My son a year ago went to Russia. He just turned 20 years old. He writes that he can not find a permanent job and has housing problems all the time, and doesn't really earn. It would be better to have no labor migration at all ...”

There are 9 people living in the house of the Jeenbekovs. Raihan's husband works as a driver for Ambulance Service in Sulukta, and the whole extended family has lived until recently, but rather, has survived on his modest salary. “Until recently”, this is before the family budget started getting positively affected by the results of Raikhan's participation in the program.

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The decision to participate in the program was not made immediately. By this time the village had already had three self help groups (SHGs) which united 18 women in the first year of the program.

“At my school there was a meeting where these SHGs told about the Community Fund, and about how to create teams, how they were trained and arranged their first greenhouses. And most importantly, they talked about how much they could earn by participating in the program. That convinced me and others to follow their example”, – says Raihan.

“In the second year of the program five more SHGs were created in Chimge, whose members were supplemented with 31 women. This became possible because the first year teams completed on time the repayment of funds received from the Community Fund at its inception stage” – joins in the conversation Mubarak Kadyrova, a local program activist. – “By this time they have gained a certain independence, and in the second year they managed to buy seeds and seedlings already for their own money generated as income of the first year”.

Raihan did not even have to go to the market to sell the harvest. In rural areas, where due to lack of irrigation water, vegetables are almost not grown, Raihan’s tomatoes are selling like hot cakes. “For my tomatoes a long queue builds up, – proudly says Raihan, – neighbors in the area buy it up, especially now, during the period of vegetable preservation”.

Raihan herself solved the problem with the irrigation water in quite a simple way. A neighbor bought a powerful water pump, and Raihan agreed with him that one day a week she will use his pump to water her garden. However, for this she had to dig a ditch down to her site. “A way-out is always there you just need to make a little effort. I pay my neighbor 100 soms per hour for watering once a week. And this is enough to water the tomatoes and the trees in the garden. Fortunately, the sort of tomato is very good, it does not require much water, which is perfectly friendly to our arid region, – says Raihan, – and yields in a good crop harvest. My children and I collect up to 30 kg a week”.

This small family business for the large family of Jeenbekovs has become a good support for their modest family budget. “Only my husband works, the eldest son can not find a job and lives with his wife and a child with us, we can not even make him live separately, because we have no money for that. To feed a large family of 9 people, as you know, is not easy, and the tomatoes have not just come to our rescue, they feed us. That’s why such programs are needed and first of all for those like us, families with many children”,- says Raihan.

Indeed, the program has helped many families with many children in Chimgen. As Mubarak Kadyrova, told us, the Community Fund which is established under the Program has become for many women the first step toward economic self-sufficiency: “For example, one of the SHG members Bermet Turanova opened a small dressmaking and tailoring workshop (atelier) in the village, she had this idea for a long time, but didn’t have funds for the procurement of fabrics. Our fund has helped her to carry out the long-held dream”.

According to Mubarak, in the second year of the program there were many who wished to participate in it, but unfortunately the Community Fund’s budget did not make it possible to cover them all. Therefore, the activists of the program together with members of the created SHGs are planning for the next year not only to increase the area of crops, but also to open new vectors of economic activity in rural areas.

“I urge women to open a small facility in the village for food preservation. Thanks to the program, there certainly won’t be any problems with raw materials”,- says Mubarak sharing her plans. “To do this, we are planning to organize training for SHG members. Still, I think, we need to develop animal husbandry. You can breed goats, and calves. And currently, we are collecting applications from teams for the next year: someone wants to plant cauliflower, someone needs some seeds of cucumber and tomatoes, and we will try to provide the best seeds to all of them”.



Photo: A Program activist, Mubarak Kadyrova (left) studies the SHG’s stock-tracking book records, maintained by each SHG.

MUSA and BYUSULU

“There’s not anyone else such as my Byusulu across the Batken Region”, – looking tenderly at his wife, says Musa Kushanov, a resident of the village of Chet-Kyzyl in the Leylek district. I got convinced of the truth of his words after visiting their hospitable home for several hours, completely forgetting about my business trip schedule specified with every minute. Sitting at the dostarkan (extemporaneous table with meal) with a cup of fragrant green tea and most delicious home made bread with freshly whipped salty butter, I listened to the story of their life lived together, and never ceased to wonder at the firmness of character and wisdom of this ordinary country woman. She managed to endure the brunt of all the tests, the cause of which was a forced labor migration of her husband...



Musa and Byusulu live together for 30 years already. After the seven daughters they gave birth to a long-awaited son. The house in a quiet green street and a well-kept fertile garden seemed to be all they had for a happy family life. However, a few years ago, Musa had to leave his native village first to faraway Bishkek to find a job and ensure a decent living for his family. And then, in 2004, Musa joined half a million³ of the Kyrgyzstanis, migrant workers who went to Russia in search of work. For this Byusulu had to sell the only cow. Then it seemed to them that Musa with his experience of the builder wouldn’t have a hard time to make good and fast money, and he could return home within a year. But the separation dragged on for five years...

When remittances and phone calls from Musa stopped coming, Byusulu realized that her husband had difficulties and decided to go for him. Deciding to act this way was not easy. “Only men used to leave the village. I was the first woman in the village who went to Russia. Of course, neighbors couldn’t do without gossiping, and there were disturbing concerns about the children as they would be left quite alone, – says Byusulu, – but there was no way out, and I knew that I would have to assume full responsibility for this step. It’s always more difficult for women, regardless of whether they are wives of migrants or migrants themselves”.

Byusulu borrowed some money for the trip and flew to Moscow. She found her husband in Novosibirsk, and brought him to the capital, having arranged him all the necessary work permits. The migrants worked together at a farm in Domodedovo, but in spite of hard work, they were getting twice as less than local workers.

³ According to the Ministry of Labour of KR, the vast majority of labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan, which is nearly 500 thousand are working in Russia. However, according to unofficial statistics, the number may exceed the official figures several times as much.

Unfortunately, discrimination in the payment of migrant workers is common, despite the availability of necessary work permits. “When I worked in construction, in our team there worked both Russians and Kyrgyz. So, the Russian workers were given 30 thousand rubles, while we used to receive only 15 thousands. The employer explained the inequality in payments by the fact that we were not included in the labor quotas for foreign workers”, – says Musa.

Not surprisingly, many of our citizens by hook or by crook try to get the Russian citizenship, at that not planning to move there for permanent residence. After receiving the Russian citizenship, migrants from Kyrgyzstan are no longer subject to immigration quotas and not exposed to the threat of deportation for illegal presence in a foreign land and illegal labor.

Hard work and harsh climate have affected the health of Musa exacerbating a chronic illness, and he was getting worse. The couple decided to return home. In addition, their children insisted on his return: “Every time we called home, the children were crying and telling us: “We do not want your money – just come home!”,- tells Byusulu, – the heart was breaking of anxiety for them ...”

After returning home Byusulu came in for a lot of new concerns, as due to the illness, Musa could not work, besides, he needed regular courses of treatment and a special diet. Despite the difficulties, Byusulu did not lose heart, she was taking on any job, working as a nurse in Batken, working in a bakery, and selling bread in the market. She tried to prevent her husband from any physical activity, putting all the cares for the family on her shoulders. And as far as Russia, it was their eldest daughter who went there as a labor migrant replacing her parents.

When Zuura Sultanova, whom they had known while working at a collective farm, told her about the program, in which she worked, Byusulu without hesitation agreed to participate. She gathered people such as herself, namely women with many children from migrant families, organized a self help group “Ariet” and became its leader.

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All the family cares were in addition supplemented by the responsibility for others as it was necessary to organize women in groups for the program trainings, to distribute the seeds from the Community Fund, to monitor the work of the group and keep records of cash flow in the internal fund of SHG.

But Byusulu is everywhere in time for all of that. Moreover, she manages to gather a good harvest of tomatoes and cucumbers from her four acres of infield. “For the whole family a job is found, my husband does watering, children help to weed out and gather vegetables, – says Byusulu – every two days, we collect up to 75 kg of vegetables from garden beds, which I sell in Batken. I've got my regular customers, hospitals and shops, to whom I deliver”

The growth of family income first of all made it possible to improve the meals. “We started buying meat. We can now buy watermelons and melons for our children. All this was once a luxury we couldn't afford, – says Byusulu, – thanks to God, on the table there is always fresh airan (fermented sour cream) and bread”.

And, like any other woman, Byusulu could not but indulge in new purchases: “In memory of the very first income received in the program, I bought a new home cookware, – pointing at the shelves with boxes, said Byusulu, – and besides I carried out my old dream, I bought a juicer, so I will be making fresh fruit juice for my husband and children every day”.

To my question about what helped her survive the difficulties of labor migration, which often cause disintegration of family relationships, Byusulu replied that the main thing is a mutual understanding and openness of relations: “We do everything together, we make all the decisions together, supporting each other in all, that's why we have lived in harmony with each other for 30 years and have raised our children in a strong family!”



Photo: Byusulu Kushanova (in center): “For the whole family a job is found, my husband does watering, children help to weed out and gather vegetables, – says Byusulu – every two days, we collect up to 75 kg of vegetables from garden beds..”



Photo: Musa Kushanov: "There's not anyone else such as my Byusulu across the Batken Region"



Photo: Byusulu Kushanova: "I carried out my old dream, I bought a juicer, so I will be making fresh fruit juice for my husband and children every day".

Locomotive from Jygach-Korgon

“If you always sit in the office, the investments will not come, while they are very important to our villages with high levels of migration and poverty”, – says Cholponbek Murzakanov, head of the Leninsky ayil district authority in Suzak District of Jalal-Abad Region. “That’s why I often go to Jygachkorgon to monitor and support implementation of the program. I firmly believe that the Community Fund is the “locomotive” that will pull one village after another out of poverty. Both the program, and local authorities have the same goals, and the development of such a social partnership is of strategic importance for our ayil district ...”.



Arriving early in the morning at the building of local administration, we did not find Cholponbek Ismailovich in the workplace, as it turned out, he had previously gone to the village of Zhygachkorgon, where he was scheduled to meet with local mutual aid teams, for which the Ayil Okmotu (AO, village authority) allocated office space in a local club .

Opening an office is a large and important event for the SHGs. According to Baktygul Anarbaeva, a program activist, it will be a center where SHG members and other villagers will be able to obtain the necessary information on rural projects and programs, and where it will be possible to conduct training and provide the necessary advice. “The village is asleep, and it should be woken up, – believes Baktygul, – we need new knowledge for the villagers to solve their problems independently, without setting hopes on the mercy of the authorities. Instead of standing still fearing mistakes, it’s better to make mistakes, but to go ahead. Here's a few days ago, legal professionals, specialists in land and passport issues were brought from the regional center for providing free consultation⁴ to villagers, as it is because of lack of knowledge about their rights and lack of documentation, people have accumulated a lot of problems. We have many plans as far as training and small business development in rural areas. And AO supports us in everything”.

⁴ Free legal consultations are organized as part of the UN Women Program on peace building and reconciliation

Personal active position of the heads of local authorities plays an important role in the successful implementation of programs in rural areas, and an example of this is the experience of Leninski Ayil District. As Baktygul described, there were also opportunities earlier to attract smaller investment in the village through projects, but due to lack of necessary input from local authorities, a developed project proposal was not supported by donors. After Murzakanov was elected the head of ayil district, the situation changed, any initiative of rural activists invariably gets a necessary support from him.

Murzakanov himself explains this with simple strategic intentions: “Look, these 50 people of the SHGs in Jygachkorgon who participate in the program are from the most vulnerable migrant families who need assistance from local authorities in resolving their economic and social problems. Through the program, they gained economic independence, and thereby removed the 50 “headaches” they had with AO. Moreover, SHGs are also attracting investments through the Community Fund and annually increase the number of such teams, involving them in the program. Now they grow vegetables, tomorrow they will open a facility for their processing. New jobs will become available, and this means a flow of tax payments to the local budget. The benefits of such cooperation are evident, which is why we plan to disseminate the experience of Jygachkorgon in other villages of our district”.

By the way, a sufficiently original way is chosen to share the experience by holding a “Harvest Festival” in the Ayil District. The joint action of SHG and AO, which was conceived by organizers, will not only clearly demonstrate the results of the program and involve other villages in its activities, but also revive the social life of the district.

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Aiyl okmotu (AO) supports the program not only in word but in deed. In addition to office space, SHGs received five acres of land, diesel fuel at discounted prices from material reserves, as well as a ton of fertilizer allocated through the grant program. “We see the practical results of the program, and therefore we render all possible assistance to the SHGs. Revenue from the harvest of the five acres will be accumulated in the Community Fund, and we hope that in the future SHGs will be able to lease through the Fund some agricultural equipment, which our district desperately needs”, – shares his thoughts Cholponbek Ismailovich.



During the meeting in the new SHG office in Jygachkorgon I witnessed the birth of a new idea for a joint business project. Five women, members of the SHGs, returned from Bishkek, where they participated in the national training in modern technologies of production and marketing of felt products, organized by UN Women. On this occasion, the office was scheduled to host a meeting for all village SHGs to exchange experience. Women, with pleasure, were demonstrating their products and certificates, and were telling about what they learned in the capital. Murzakanov immediately suggested the production of national yurtas be organized: “For a variety of activities the AO needs yurtas and we normally order them in other areas. Why not organizing their production at home?

And of course we will help you in this”.

Other plans were also discussed for the next year, namely what to plant in the selected five acres: corn or wheat, and how to process grown vegetables.

Everyone agreed that it is necessary to develop new projects and look for investors.

It was this way the program in Jygachkorgon became the impetus for other large projects, which, its residents hope, will lead to the bygone prosperity of the village, which in Soviet times was a millionaire State Farm.

We have people saying: “Jalgyz darak bak bolboyt” (One tree doesn’t make a forest), – says Baktygul, – the wisdom of this saying is what we confirmed by the experience of our program. Combined efforts and resources of partners bring the benefit to them and everyone else around”.



Photo: Baktygul Anarbayeva (left), an activist of the program: “The villagers need new skills to be able to solve their problems on their own, without setting hopes upon the mercy of the authorities”.



Ismailova Suyunbu member of the SHG “Oomat”, the village of Jygachkorgon: “These tomatoes and cucumbers grown for the funds allocated from the Community Fund, saved my life indeed. Out of the proceeds from the sale I was able to pay for an expensive surgery and treatment ...”



Photo: Bazarbay Kypchakbaev, SHG “Kurmandjan”, village of Jygachkorgon: “I am the only man in the SHG of our village. My friends made fun of me saying that being the only man among women is not a men’s business. And this year, seeing the results of the program, those “jokers” not only stopped joking, but now they are willing to join our SHG...”

Meerkan apa’s kindergarten

When we were approaching Meerkan Suyurkulova’s house, leader of the SHG “Oomat” in the village of Jashashasyn, Suzak District we could hear loud hip-hop style music resounding out of wide open doors and windows. Meerkan-apa surrounded by a dozen of children of various ages met us in the yard and hospitably invited into the house. “Turn off the music, guests arrived”, – she snapped at someone in the room and the music immediately subsided. Apparently, Meerkan-apa got long ago accustomed to the musical preferences of her grandchildren, and if it were not us, she would continue to bustle about the household with the rhythms of “hip hop”...



“Well, right here there are six grandchildren of mine, the rest of kids are those of neighbors”, – responds Meerkan-apa to my question about the children in her house and the yard, and laughingly adds: “And as neighbors are in my group, and I am leader of the SHG, it turns out that I’m in charge of SHG’s kindergarten”.

One can only envy the vitality of this cheery woman, she does not fit into conventional ideas of the pensioner. “And what to do? We have to be most active. My children are in Russia and so are my daughters, and sons, daughters-in-law. They come home only to give birth to another child and leave it to me, – Meerkan-apa bursts into a catching laughter, – that's how I mess around with them – the eldest of them is eight, the youngest is one and a half years old”.

“I care for everything: the house and the field, and children. While I’m healthy, I will continue working. You can’t survive for a pension of 2000 soms (40\$ – Ed.) and I don’t get any children's benefits either, so I don’t have to stay idle. That’s why when the activists of the program carried out advocacy and promotion in the village and spoke about the program and its Community Fund, I never for a moment gave way to any doubt, I gathered my neighbors at my place and persuaded to join a self help group, as required by the conditions of the program”, – says Meerkan-apa.

Background of the program:

Central Asia Regional Migration Program is being implemented jointly with IOM, the UN Women and the World Bank, and supported by the UK Government. The Implementing Partner of the program in Kyrgyzstan is the Community Development Alliance (CDA).

Central Asia Regional Migration Program aims to increase the economic independence of families of migrant workers, to help them conduct income-generating activities.

This program is being implemented in partnership with the Agricultural Projects Implementation Unit of the Ministry of Agriculture of KR (under the “Agricultural Investments and Services” Project with financial support from the World Bank), as well as the UN World Food Program.

The program conducts social mobilization in pilot villages, facilitates the creation and development of self help groups (SHGs) out of vulnerable families and their associations (Community Funds). For effective agricultural activities, the program provides training and advice to members of SHGs in agro-technical technologies. Subsequently, SHG receive the seeds of improved varieties for a certain amount subject to repayment to the Community Fund at the end of agricultural season. In the second year the program is to create new SHGs and give them under the same conditions some seeds of agricultural crops, but out of repayable funds from Community Fund. Also, vulnerable families are provided with food aid until the harvest. The program pays special attention to the involvement of rural women from vulnerable migrant families.

“Although apa is older than all of us, she will give odds to any of us, the young people, – enters into conversation Altynai Ermekova, – so we chose her to be our group leader. No one even had any doubts about that. And her house became our peculiar office. Here we solve our current problems, make plans together, and even conduct training sessions in the backyard of her house. And our children are playing here all day, they can be hardly dragged back home”.

Altynai, like other members of the SHG “Oomat” lives in the neighborhood. She has five children. Her husband, like many men in the village, went to work in Russia. His meager remittances are barely enough to make ends meet. According to her, now her family makes its living with three hundred square meters of land on which she planted vegetables, for which she received the seeds from a Community Fund program. Improved varieties of vegetables gave a good harvest, which sufficed also for sale, and for preservation, made it possible to provide children with some clothing by the school time, good food, and vitamin supplies for the winter. And most importantly the constant sense of anxiety gave way to confidence and belief in her own strength.



Photo: Altynai Ermekova

This sense of self-confidence is largely reinforced by the ability to use resources of the SHG’s savings Fund consisting of mandatory monthly contributions from members of the SHG. A small “trickle” of monthly fees of 50 som (just over U.S. \$ 1 – Ed.), which is the amount feasible even for a poor family, eventually turns into a good overall cash flow, which serves for women as the “safety cushion” in critical situations. And not only as that: according to members of the SHG, for some women, these funds have become a start-up capital for small businesses and increased family income. All decisions as far as fixing the amount contributed and the flow of funds are taken together at regular meetings of the SHG, as women themselves define it “decisions based on the principles of democracy”.

In addition to the allocation of loans, the fund's money is spent on the most necessary needs of the SHG. For example, pest control products have been purchased, and for the next planting season, women are already planning to buy some seeds on their own and to expand the sown area after they have settled accounts with the Community Fund.

The experience of SHG "Oomat" and that of other similar groups showed that the establishment of such community-based institution as the Community Fund, allows to efficiently solve everyday problems of migrant families, and as it develops, provides a basis for their economic viability even after the program is completed. Besides, the working capital of the Community Fund creates conditions for the emergence of new SHGs in the following year, thus, increasing every year exponentially the number of migrant families who receive the necessary assistance.

The social aspect is also an essential factor in SHG activities. For instance Altynay Ermekova states that working in SHGs is not just a way of earning some extra money but also an opportunity of gaining moral and psychological support and not feeling lonely. "Getting together in Meerkan-apa's house we share our problems, advice one another on day-to-day issues and we're just socializing, although we are all of various ages", – says Altynay.

"And we are not only of various ages, – Meerkan-apa supports her, – we are also of different ethnic origins. For instance, Altynay is Uzbek, her husband is a Turk, and I am Kyrgyz, our village is multi-national. The problems are the same, including migration and poverty. Being together and friendly we can overcome difficulties. You can't rely on any assistance from the Government. Let just our government keep peace in the country, that's more important. We also wish we had in our village more good programs like yours, then, we could pull our families and the village out of poverty..."



Photo: Meerkan Suyurkulova (in center): "SHG leader and myself, and director of the kindergarten"

Farida's five mothers-in-law

A teenage girl with a baby in her arms is walking in the street of the village followed by running kids – one smaller than the other. “This is Farida, a member of our self help group, – she is introduced to me, – she leads children everywhere she goes”

“To get water from the spring we go there in a chain like this – I’m going in front with a baby in my arm and a bucket in the other hand, and the other children are walking in single file behind me lined up by height, – smiles Farida, – I don’t leave them alone at home, as there’s no one to leave them with...”



Photo: Farida Kamildzhan kyzy and her children

Looking at this frail girl with luminous eyes, it's hard to imagine that at her 18 years of age she had to become the head of a large family.

“You can get used to everything. I had no idea of many things in the past and I couldn’t do them, – says Farida, – in the village people do not buy bread, everyone bakes bread in tandyr (a traditional oven). I did not succeed at first, only burning my hands. Just looking out for, whether there is any neighbor coming up with some dough to tandyr, then I would immediately ran to her: “Teach me!” Now my bread does not get worse, children love it.. Now I want to have a cow, and learn how to milk, and yet I’m learning on the neighbor's cow...”

A year ago, just after finishing school, Farida, an Uzbek woman at her incomplete 17 years of age married Nurbek, a Kyrgyz guy, and moved from the town of Jalal-Abad to his place in the village of “Jashasyn” in Suzak District. Having lived with his young wife less than half a year, an unemployed husband had gone to Russia to work following his mother and elder brother. Young Farida had to care of her husband’s younger sisters and then also her own newly-born child. Farida, who grew up in the city, had to get used to a lot of things, to the rural way of life, and the new responsibilities for household management, and parenting. Since there was no mother-in-law, she had to approach her neighbors for any advice as they are older and never refuse any help. The hardest was the financial issue, when virtually everything that the family earned in Russia was invested in the construction of a cattle shed with hopes to expand the family business after their return from migration.

When neighbors set up a self help group “Oomat” and began involved into UN Women program, Farida at the beginning watched them with curiosity and then she asked to join the group. Despite her young age, she learned to plant tomatoes and cucumbers along with other women, mastering new technologies of agronomy at the trainings organized by the CDA, to sell her first harvest.

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Juzumkan Chakieva, a village activist of the program, recalls: "When the training was conducted, Farida was pregnant. I remember her sitting on a garden bed with a big belly, carefully examining every bush, looking for pests, always bombarding the agronomist with questions. It's good of her. She's persistent!"

For the proceeds from the sale of vegetables Farida bought products, and excessive vegetables were used for preservation, again this was what women in the group taught me. Her mother-in-law who came from Russia was genuinely surprised by her daughter-in-law who had not been only coping with the household and children, but still managing to earn money.

“For me, participation in the program was a real “school of life”, – says Farida, – I learned a lot, I earned first money in my life. And besides, we can take the money from the created SHG Fund, if necessary. And most importantly when working together in a team, we are united as one family, and I get support here, which is necessary for me now. I have five mothers-in-law now, all of different ethnic nationalities, – laughs Farida, – and all the five watch over me as a child of their own helping me both by word and deed, not only under the program but when necessary, and they look after children and teach me tricks of the household...”



According to the custom, after the wedding the young couple lives with their parents until they find their own home. During this period of time, the young daughter-in-law must undergo a kind of “school of marriage” and receive training from her mother-in-law, who helps her settle into her new family and teaches the skills of homemaking.

Forced migration breaks the centuries-long traditional foundations of building a young family, thereby making migrants’ wives vulnerable young women, due to the lack of life experience and the necessary psychological support.

The legal insecurity makes them more vulnerable. As practice shows, in view of the custom commonly spread in the south, when the girls forced for a marriage at an early age, the official registration of marriage is postponed until the bride comes of age and limited to a religious wedding ceremony, “nicke”. However, this does not happen, because a high level of migration of these girls almost immediately makes them find themselves in a situation of female migrant workers, who stay for years outside the country, and are not able to register a marriage for one reason or another. Moreover, these vulnerable groups are increased in number due to children being born in such marriages.

As it turned out, Farida is no exception. Kanymbu Orumbaeva, coordinator of the CDA in the Jalal-Abad region, asked during an interview with Farida, what was the progress about her documents as she got married before she could get a passport, and her marriage with her husband was not registered so far, because he was still in the migration in Russia. Therefore she does not receive child benefits. It was found out that the registration of necessary documents is what her mother takes care of. Once again, reminding what risks might expect Farida and her child in case of such carelessness, Kanymbu-eje strictly secured her promise to expedite a passport and other necessary documents for the child.

Kanymbu Orumbaeva says, that unfortunately, such a situation is common in families of migrants, that’s why in addition to support in their economic activities, the program also offers them legal advice.

Young Farida was lucky, she found the support and assistance from her older friends, and learned a lot during the first year of participation in the program. According to her, she has big plans for the next year, she and her older friends from SHG are going to expand the area under crop and increase a revolving fund of her team. And most importantly, Farida has gained hope that soon she will be able to buy a cow much needed for the farm, she still has a few lessons to take from her neighbor to learn how to milk professionally...

Sartbay's hope

Over the past twenty years, labor migration has made many changes in the traditional way of life in remote rural areas of the country. Wives and mothers of migrants independently bringing up children and grandchildren, who have not seen their fathers for years, have become an everyday occurrence. Recently, another changing tradition has been “feminization of migration” as “hearth-keepers” are forced to leave their families in search of work. Thus, men have been increasingly exchanging the role of primary getter and breadwinner with women...



Satarbay Uzakbaev, a resident of the village Jashasyn in Suzak district of Jalal-Abad region, is raising three children on his own. His wife took a loan at interest, went to Moscow a year ago, having her husband to take care of three children, the eldest of whom at that time was four years old and the youngest was six months.

“It’s easier for women to find a job. – says Satarbay, – my wife had to be the first one to go there. I would also go, but there is no one to leave the children with, my mother is old, although she helps me to look after them, she is not able to cope with them alone”.

We met with Sartbay in the center of Jashasyn village, attended by many members of the SHG, hearing of the arrival of the journalist. Seeing several men in a crowd, I asked a program activist Juzumkan Chakieva who they were and what they were doing here. “They belong to the SHG of migrant families, like the women. In our eight teams we have seven men”,- she replied.

I was surprised, because before that, all the SHGs, with whom I have met during the trip, were purely women.

“Yes, it so happened that the members of self help groups are primarily women, – says Juzumkan – and there’s a quite understandable reason for that, the majority of migrant workers are men. But there are many families where women go to work, leaving children to their husbands. And because the program works with the families of migrant workers, so men could participate in the program equally with women”.

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After the meeting I asked Satarbay for his inviting me to his place. I was curious to see how he copes with the household and children in the absence of his wife. When we arrived at his house, I saw that around the entire perimeter of the yard and the fence there were baby clothes drying – obviously, the day before there was a large laundry in his house.

I asked Satarbay who were engaged in the laundry? My question caught him off guard, and it was evident that he did not want to answer it. However, I strongly tried to find out whether he himself washes clothes for children by any chance. "No, it's not me, it's a washing machine ...", – he said in hesitation. And then I realized my blunder, and all the tactlessness of my question. According to traditions, a man as head of the family, ought not to do household works, which are the prerogative of women. That's why it was not easy for Satarbay to admit in the presence of strangers, that he has to perform women's work around the house.

Trying to smooth out the awkwardness, I started talking about children. It turned out that their grandmother took them to be her guests, and at home there were only two elder children.

I offered to call them to take pictures of them with their dad. While shooting, I and others asked the children to smile, but however hard we all tried, smiles didn't appear on their faces. Satarbay also tried to shake them up: "Well, smile! – he encouraged his sons, – we will send this photo to your mother in Moscow, you want that?"

"Still, it's better for children to be with their mother" – recognized Satarbay without hiding his sadness, – they go to kindergarten, and also their grandmother looks after them, but they still do miss their mother".

I ask him to talk about what led him into the program and a self help group.

"Lack of funds, – answers Satarbay, – my wife in Moscow during the first six months only worked out to pay off the credit taken for the trip. Moreover I have to pay 600 soms for the kindergarten, plus for clothing, food, it's a lot of expenses. And at a meeting of the village I heard that the program provides interest-free seeds, and even trainings free of charge how to plant and do the processing, I just decided I can not miss this opportunity ..."

Satarbay didn't have to deal with vegetable production, so the skills and knowledge acquired from training sessions were useful for him to grow a good harvest of cucumbers and tomatoes on his six acres. The resulting income helps him to solve many everyday issues concerning payment for kindergarten, food, and getting his eldest son prepared for school.

Interest in the program is growing in the village, and more and more villagers, including men, want to participate. There are no jobs, and although all have plots of land, rising prices for fuel and fertilizer make their cultivation non profitable.

Participation in the program allows you to collectively solve problems that you can not afford to solve on your own, says Satarbay.

And most importantly, he said, the program has given a hope that his children will soon not miss their mom. SHGs are expecting that Community Fund will increase its speed, and in the near future, the village will create new jobs. "It is said that the cooperatives would be open, so would a pastry shop, equipment is going to be taken on lease. So it means, we, the men will have jobs. Here again, it would be nice if a sewing shop is made available, my wife is a seamstress by profession, and then she could get a job here and come back home..."



Photo: Juzumkan Chakieva, an activist of the program (far left): "Our SHGs have both women and men"

Stories and photos prepared by Alma Karsymbek