



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

USAID Advancing Nutrition

Formative Assessment: Families Experiencing Labor Migration,
Issyk-Kul Oblast, Kyrgyz Republic



About USAID Advancing Nutrition

USAID Advancing Nutrition is the Agency's flagship multi-sectoral nutrition project, led by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and a diverse group of experienced partners. Launched in September 2018, USAID Advancing Nutrition implements nutrition interventions across sectors and disciplines for USAID and its partners. The project's multi-sectoral approach draws together global nutrition experience to design, implement and evaluate programs that address the root causes of malnutrition. Committed to using a systems approach, USAID Advancing Nutrition strives to sustain positive outcomes by building local capacity, supporting behavior change and strengthening the enabling environment to save lives, improve health, build resilience, increase economic productivity and advance development.

Disclaimer

This document is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States government.

Recommended Citation

USAID Advancing Nutrition. 2023. *Formative Assessment: Families Experiencing Labor Migration, Issyk-Kul Oblast, Kyrgyz Republic*. Arlington, VA: USAID Advancing Nutrition.

Photo credit: Maxime Fossat for USAID Advancing Nutrition, 2022

USAID Advancing Nutrition

JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc.

2733 Crystal Drive

4th Floor

Arlington, VA 22202

Phone: 703-528-7474

Email: info@advancingnutrition.org

Web: advancingnutrition.org

Contents

- Acknowledgments iv
- Acronyms..... v
- Executive Summary vi
- Introduction 1
 - Context of Labor Migration..... 2
 - Context of the Project Area, Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyz Republic..... 3
- Purpose and Objectives of the Formative Assessment..... 4
- Methodology 6
 - Data Collection Methods..... 6
 - Ethical Considerations..... 6
 - Data processing and analysis..... 6
 - Sampling 6
 - Limitations 7
- Key Findings 9
 - Description of Migration..... 9
 - Reasons for Migration and Remittances..... 9
 - Migration Trends in the Last 2 Years 10
 - Effects of Migration on the Family 11
 - Use of Remittances 11
 - Decision-Making Power 12
- Discussion..... 14
- Recommendations..... 15
- References 17
- Annex I. Focus Group Discussion Guide..... 18

Acknowledgments

Aida Shambetova, SBC Specialist USAID Advancing Nutrition Kyrgyz Republic

Andrew Cunningham, SBC Advisor, USAID Advancing Nutrition

Nazgul Abazbetova, Chief of Party, USAID Advancing Nutrition Kyrgyz Republic

Acronyms

FGD	focus group discussion
SBC	social and behavior change
SPRING	Strengthening Partnerships, Results, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally project
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VHC	village health committee

Executive Summary

USAID Advancing Nutrition works to improve the nutritional status of women of reproductive age (ages 15–49) and children under five years in the Kyrgyz Republic, with a specific focus on the 1,000-day “window of opportunity.”

USAID Advancing Nutrition is building upon the success of the Strengthening Partnerships and Results in Nutrition Globally (SPRING) project implemented in the Kyrgyz Republic between late 2014 and July 2018, as well as the formative assessment carried out by this project March 10–21, 2020, in Batken oblast. This formative assessment focuses on the oblast of Issyk-Kul, into which the project has expanded for its final year of implementation. This assessment particularly focused on understanding of how labor migration (and its changes in recent history due to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine) has affected family dynamics and the family diet. These findings aim to inform project implementation in the final year of USAID Advancing Nutrition’s activities in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Introduction

USAID Advancing Nutrition works to improve the nutritional status of women of reproductive age (ages 15–49) and children under five years in the Kyrgyz Republic, with a specific focus on the first 1,000-day “window of opportunity.” USAID Advancing Nutrition is building upon the success of the Strengthening Partnerships and Results in Nutrition Globally (SPRING) project implemented in the Kyrgyz Republic between late 2014 and July 2018. USAID Advancing Nutrition conducted a formative assessment in Batken oblast. This rapid assessment complemented a full assessment conducted for the SPRING project in 2014 with exploration of gender roles in relation to nutrition and additional targeted questions ([LINK](#)). These findings, along with secondary data review and a gender analysis, were used to build the project’s Social and Behavior Change (SBC) Strategy. In fiscal year 2023, USAID Advancing Nutrition expanded its activities into Issyk-Kul oblast. Additionally, conflict between Russia and Ukraine, beginning in February 2022, has potentially caused ripple effects in neighboring countries in the broader region, particularly in regard to labor migration. As a result, USAID Advancing Nutrition conducted a short formative assessment in two areas of Issyk-Kul oblast with a particular focus on the recent changes in labor migration habits, as well as their potential effect on family nutrition.

Working in partnership with national and local governments, village health committees (VHCs), oblast and district-level health centers, and both local and international nongovernmental organizations, the project is promoting the uptake of 11 evidence-based practices:

Evidence Based Practices Promoted by USAID Advancing Nutrition

1. Pregnant women consume iron supplements in accordance with health guidelines during each pregnancy.
2. Pregnant and lactating women eat a variety of nutritious foods, with an emphasis on food sources of iron and foods that enhance iron absorption.
3. Caregivers feed their children 6–23 months old a variety of nutritious foods in their diet, with an emphasis on food sources of iron and vitamin A and foods that enhance iron absorption.
4. Caregivers feed their children 6–23 months old with optimal frequency.
5. Caregivers initiate breastfeeding of their child within 1 hour of birth.
6. Caregivers exclusively breastfeed their children from birth to 6 months.
7. Caregivers introduce appropriate complementary foods to their children at 6 months.
8. Caregivers reduce the consumption of foods of low nutrient value (junk food).
9. Pregnant women and young children go to the health center for presumptive treatment for helminth infections.
10. Caregivers wash their hands at four critical times (after using the latrine, after changing a diaper/cleaning a child, before preparing food, and before feeding a child).
11. Family members adopt safe methods for prolonged storage of nutrient dense produce in winter.

Building on the SPRING experience, and leveraging lessons learned during USAID Advancing Nutrition's gender analysis work in 2020, USAID Advancing Nutrition added an additional practice that would support gender transformative dynamics to achieve results in the above 11 practices.

12. Couples will communicate and make joint decisions for resources and actions related to nutrition and health of the family (e.g., in home budgeting).

Finally, in collaboration with USAID Advancing Nutrition's Early Childhood Development team, the Kyrgyz Republic was selected as a study site for their Responsive Care and Early Learning Addendum. As part of this study, two additional practices were integrated into community based SBC communication efforts to improve nurturing care in two ways:

13. Caregivers interact with their child in a responsive manner (e.g., responding to cues, feeding responsively).
14. Caregivers encourage early communication and learning through age appropriate engagement and play activities.

USAID Advancing Nutrition has promoted all practices in program areas through SBC approaches, including improved health services and health worker capacity, community mobilization and interpersonal communication at the community level, and mass media. At the national level, the project advocates for improved policies and resource allocation for nutrition services and work to strengthen local implementing partners, such as the Kyrgyz Association of Village Health Committees and the Kyrgyz Hospital Association.

Context of Labor Migration

Labor migration is a central component of the economy of the Kyrgyz Republic. Personal remittances sent back to the Kyrgyz Republic are equal to approximately 30 percent of Kyrgyz gross domestic product (GDP) (World Bank 2023). Of these remittances, 83 percent came from Russia in 2021 (Ratha and Kim 2022). Following the global effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, further disruptions in economic exchange between the Kyrgyz Republic and its economic partners can place the economic situation of

Kyrgyzstani people in peril. At the beginning of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the Kyrgyz National Bank predicted a 20 percent decrease in remittances (2022).

The reasons for these declines are myriad. The economic sanctions levied against Russia following the beginning of the conflict has led to some economic slowdown in the country. Scholars report that many migrants are returning due to lack of opportunities in Russia (Chi and Hofmann 2022). Additionally, since the beginning of the conflict Russia has used military service as a means to expedite Russian citizenship, which has reportedly resulted in Central Asians fighting in Ukraine. Some migrants report being strongly pressured into military contracts (Schenk 2023). Given the precarious situation with labor migration for the Kyrgyz Republic, it is necessary for the USAID Advancing Nutrition project to understand some of the effects these changing perceptions and realities of migration and its economic benefits may have on household economics in the Kyrgyz Republic, especially in terms of the family diet.

Context of the Project Area, Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyz Republic

According to secondary data sources, Issyk-Kul has some important differences from the oblasts where Advancing Nutrition previously implemented programming. Economic and geographic factors play a significant role in determining lifestyles and nutrition status of the population. Although the Issyk-Kul oblast is among the main tourist centers in the Kyrgyz Republic, three-fifths of its population lives in poverty (Statistical Committee of KR 2022). Members of the local population are engaged mostly in the tourism and agriculture sectors. Also, as with other regions of the Kyrgyz Republic, Issyk-Kul oblast is impacted by labor migration, especially during the winter season. Table 1 shows selected demographic data for project areas.

Table 1. Demographic Summary of Issyk-Kul Project Implementation Areas

Oblast	Jurisdiction or District	Total Population	Number of Women (14-49 years old)	Children under 5
Issyk-Kul	Issyk-Kul	61,997	20,689	3,448
	Tyup	51,031	12,247	2,041
	Ton	45,162	10,839	1,806
	Jeti-Oguz	64,628	15,511	2,585
	Ak-suu	50,873	12,210	2,035

Purpose and Objectives of the Formative Assessment

The design and objectives of this study build upon the formative assessment conducted by USAID Advancing Nutrition in Batken oblast in March 2020, which itself built upon formative research conducted by the SPRING project in 2014. Given that the community-centered approach of USAID Advancing Nutrition and the SPRING project has been implemented in both culturally “northern” and “southern” oblasts of the Kyrgyz Republic, the program has a high level of confidence in using the approach in Issyk-Kul, a “northern” oblast. As a result, the objectives and focus of this study are narrower than those of the previous two assessments. USAID Advancing Nutrition will conduct a formative assessment to test assumptions about priority nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific behaviors in Issyk-Kul, with a focus on families with a parent in current or recent labor migration. The findings of the formative assessment will help the USAID Advancing Nutrition team gain a deeper understanding of primary and influencing groups, as well as specific local barriers to and facilitators of key behaviors. Using a participatory assessment methodology, the project will conduct the formative assessment to better understand current household beliefs and dynamics related to household nutrition, child-feeding and caring practices, and enabling factors and barriers that affect diversified diet, feeding, handwashing, and health-seeking behaviors. It will also examine feasible ways to empower women and girls and opportunities for men and boys to support improved nutrition practices. Another learning question is about the impact of labor migration on the nutrition status of children under five. This question will be addressed by discovering norms and challenges of families with labor migrants, particularly in regard to challenges to managing incomes as well as making decisions around the family diet. The formative assessment will inform potential adjustments to our implementation plan in Issyk-Kul oblast, training for staff and partners, and continued reflection throughout the life of the project.

This rapid formative assessment has informed the project’s planning of SBC activities, which defines priority promoted practices related to project objectives and articulates how project activities will engage target groups, reduce barriers, and create an enabling environment to catalyze uptake of the priority practices.

Topics explored in the formative assessment:

- Barriers and enablers to use of improved practices, including family and social norms; food beliefs and preferences; gender roles within families and community; and physical, social, and economic access to resources, goods, or services
- Seasonal issues that impact access to food, health, water
- Impact of labor migration on nutritional status of children

Priority practices or behaviors explored in the formative assessment:

Below are priority areas that the formative assessment explored in terms of promoting specific, doable actions with different audiences. These areas are drawn from the USAID Advancing Nutrition workplan and from discussion with partners about the Issyk-Kul context.

Nutrition-Specific Behaviors as Clustered in Current Community Modules

- Module 1: Activist Mobilization, Mapping, and Action Planning
- Module 2: Exclusive Breastfeeding and Responsive Care

- Module 3: Complementary Feeding and Early Learning
- Module 4: Dietary Diversity for the Whole Family to Prevent Anemia
- Module 5: Home Budgeting
- Module 6: Food Storage

Nutrition-Sensitive Behavioral Areas

- The extent to which men and women discuss and make joint decisions about household resources, including income and expenditures
 - Improved women's decision-making and control over farm and household resources
 - Joint household budgeting, taking into account tradeoffs between prioritizing expenditures on health, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), healthy food, and care versus other expenditures and livelihood investments
- Impact of seasonal and continuous labor migration on nutrition of children under five
 - What portion of remittances is spent on food?
 - Is the quality of nutrition of children whose parents are migrating taken into consideration by the caretakers (grandparents/aunts/uncles/older siblings)?

Methodology

Data Collection Methods

USAID Advancing Nutrition used participatory qualitative assessment. For further details on the methods, see the formative assessment instruments. The section gives an overview of the methods.

As this formative assessment used qualitative methods, open-ended focus group discussion (FGD) questions and guides were developed to capture the information necessary to assess the nutritional behavior. Within each FGD, to the extent possible, the team aimed to ensure a cross section of different age groups. With participant consent, the team audio recorded data of all qualitative data collection activities and transcribed the data to summarize them by topic.

Ethical Considerations

As outlined above, the study population includes caregivers of children under two as well as individuals from various influencing groups. The data collection team will exclude anyone under the age of 18 from participating in the assessment for ethical reasons. This formative assessment was conducted in accordance with standard ethical assessment procedures and protected the privacy and welfare of the study population. Only the assessors and staff from USAID Advancing Nutrition and the Republican Center for Health Promotion had or will have access to the study data and any transcripts or recordings of the interviews and FGDs. No names or (identifying characteristics) are included in any reporting of the study. Before each of the FGDs, the participants were given information about the purpose of the study and given the opportunity to ask questions or verbally opt out of participating in the assessment. Consent was acquired in written form before participation in the study. Participants also gave additional consent in written form for recording of focus group discussions.

Data processing and analysis

USAID Advancing Nutrition developed data analysis matrices. Data collection teams processed and analyzed findings the same day or the next day. This was primarily to inform the team, to correct any issues for data collection for the next day. Once data collection was complete, the teams summarized the findings.

The final report of the findings was made available to the entire USAID Advancing Nutrition team to inform program implementation.

Sampling

USAID Advancing Nutrition leveraged its existing and newly formed networks in the relevant rayons in Issyk-Kul oblast to identify eligible participants for focus groups. Caregivers were selected if they fulfilled two criteria: 1) that they are caregivers of a child under five years; and 2) that someone in the family household is currently outside of the rayon for reasons of labor migration, or has returned from labor migration since January 2022 (Table 2). These criteria aim to a) include caregivers outside of mothers and fathers in cases where both parents are absent due to labor migration; and b) gain perspectives from families currently experiencing labor migration as well as capture any families where such opportunities have changed or been limited due to the Ukraine/Russia conflict.

Families were identified through project mobilizers with support from local health workers. Some participants may have volunteered, while others were identified and invited to the discussion due to community or health worker's knowledge of the family's situation of labor migration.

Table 2. Number of Focus Groups Proposed by Type of Participant and Location

Cohort	Issyk Kul Rayon	Jeti Oguz Rayon	Ak Suu Rayon	Total
Rural				
Caregivers of children under 5 (with a family member in labor migration)	1	1	1	3
Urban				
Caregivers of children under 5 (with a family member in labor migration)	1 (Cholpon-Ata)		1 (Karakol)	2
Total	2	1	1	5

With this segmentation plan for primary groups and types of villages, the study team conducted 5 FGDs in 5 communities. Focus groups included 74 mothers, 11 mothers-in-law, and 28 men.

Limitations

Qualitative methods such as FGDs use in-depth discussion and analysis of participants' opinions to make descriptive inferences about beliefs in the general population. They tend to be time- and labor-intensive compared to quantitative methods such as surveys in terms of cost per participant/respondent, so there are practical limits to the number of participants who can be included. Analysis of FGDs seeks to identify patterns of opinions and commonalities that occur during distinct complex discussions in which a very wide range of beliefs is expressed. FGD results are descriptive; they cannot be used to measure quantitative point estimates within confidence intervals, nor can they be used to measure levels of cross-sectional differences or longitudinal change. They can, however, provide detail on participants' experiences and perceptions that are necessary to designing SBC interventions. FGDs, as opposed to individual interviews, are well suited to gathering common perceptions in a community. In this study, the analysis will be limited to identifying patterns and related learning on what people believe about gender, women's empowerment and decision-making related to nutrition, why they hold those opinions, and how their beliefs and opinions are applied to behaviors related to nutrition.

There are several specific limitations or biases related to FGDs in any setting, which can affect the ability to identify findings accurately. In any FGD, there is always the risk that one or two people dominate the discussion, and if their views do not reflect the majority's opinions, results can be biased. There are also potential biases related to courtesy, social desirability, or conformity, where the participants give answers they think the facilitator or the project wants to hear, or they may avoid answers that they think could be embarrassing for them or that other participants (who may be from their same communities) might disagree with. Further, question wording and order may potentially lead to biased answers.

Another specific limitation to the study was in identifying a diversity of participants. The sampling criteria above was designed to a) include caregivers outside of mothers and fathers in the cases where both parents are absent due to labor migration; and b) gain perspectives from families currently experiencing labor migration as well as capture any families where such opportunities have changed or been limited due to the Ukraine/Russia conflict. However, at the time these FGDs were conducted, all participants

had a family member currently away for labor migration. In very few cases did the team have a participant who had recently returned from labor migration. Additionally, the participants skewed remarkably toward grandparents, because of both parents being abroad for labor migration. While it's not possible to determine whether this is representative of the labor migration situation in the oblast (and in any case, representativeness is not the purpose of qualitative research), it is worth discussing as a limitation, as the cohort was very different from what the study team had expected. One reason for this difference could have been incorrect expectations of the study team, not understanding that in fact most parents do migrate together as a couple, leaving grandparents to care for children. It may also be true that very few intended migrants have faced new difficulties for work abroad and returned. A different reason for this difference in the cohort may be a miscommunication between the study team and the recruiters for the focus groups.

Key Findings

Description of Migration

Participants were asked several questions about the characteristics of their family member's migration. Caregivers reported a variety of destinations for labor migration, including Turkey, Kazakhstan, China, Korea, and the United States. By far, the most-reported destination was Russia, with focus on Moscow and the Yakutsk region.

When asked about the duration of migration, group members noted a range of time spent abroad, varying from a 3–6-month period (seasonal migration) up to 17 years. In general, family members of this cohort reported longer stays not particularly sensitive to seasonal work. One caregiver, when asked about how often their family member returns (seasonally, yearly), simply responded, “If he comes, he comes” (Jeti-Oguz).

Across focus group locations, respondents indicated parents leaving when children were very young, with several reporting parents leaving within the first 6 months of a child's life, and even immediately after their birth. In many of these cases, both mothers and fathers are leaving for migration.

A large majority of focus group participants identified themselves as the grandparents of the children in their care. In a few instances, the respondent in the study identified herself as a mother. When asked about the family member in migration and their role, caregivers responded in large part that both of the children's parents were abroad. In the study's rural Ak-Suu discussion, 11 out of 12 families reported that both parents were in labor migration. When only one parent was abroad, caregivers reported nearly evenly between the child's mother and father. This is in line with reports that labor migration is rather evenly split, gender-wise. When asked about the family's preferences, all focus groups agreed that, given a choice between the two parents, it would be preferable for the father to emigrate rather than the mother. Respondents pointed to traditional gender roles of mothers being better equipped to care for children as the primary reason for this preference, but noted that in cases when the mother left for labor migration, the child's grandmother filled the role as primary caregiver.

Last, participants indicated that migration was very common. In the rural Ak-Suu discussion, participants claimed that their village of 2,200 had 300 registered emigrants (and that registration was required locally to leave).

Reasons for Migration and Remittances

When participants were asked about remittances, the different forms of labor migration became clearer. Some respondents describe regular remittance transfers to the family in Issyk-Kul, while others report never receiving anything. Focus group participants indicated that they do not ask family members for more money if there is not enough.

“When you need to go to the market, they send it, on demand.” —Study participant, Jeti-Oguz

“Once a year they send me 20–30 thousand soms, which is not enough for anything. We have three children, in 10th grade, 8th grade and 6th grade.” —Study participant, Cholpon-Ata

“We provide for ourselves, he is our only grandchild, so we don't ask her for money, and take care of our grandson ourselves.” —Study participant, Issyk-Kul, rural area

The different schemes of remittances (or lack thereof) may be connected to the family's reasons for labor migration. When describing motivations for labor migration, respondents were rather split on

whether income from labor migration was used for living expenses or for long-term investments (mainly building a house, but also purchasing a car or paying for education).

“The main thing is to be.” —Study participant, Issyk-Kul, rural

“The wages here are only enough to feed ourselves.” —Study participant, Ak-Suu, rural

“The most important thing is to build a house and get on your feet.” —Study participant, Ak-Suu, rural

“The money we earn here is only enough to buy food, and it's not enough for a good life, there is no extra money left. We are currently building a house and for this reason, my husband went abroad to work.” —Study participant, Issyk-Kul, rural

Across communities, respondents pointed to the lack of opportunities where they lived. Many respondents also cited the lack of work opportunities in the region, and low wages for those that do exist. This was common across all communities. In Cholpon-Ata, the group specifically discussed the tourism industry, but respondents described the economic benefits as limited in geography (in the most urban areas only) and season (only about 1.5 months). For the rest of the year, they stated that there were few opportunities.

Migration Trends in the Last 2 Years

The study team aimed to discuss the effects of the conflict in Ukraine on migration trends by asking how things have changed in the previous 2 years. Overall, respondents described increasing challenges, from multiple causes. From an earnings perspective, respondents claimed that wages for labor abroad are falling, although others described this as due to the falling exchange rate for the Russian ruble, or due to families feeling the pressure because of inflated prices in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Respondents also described several new challenges related to migration policy, mostly with Russia. Documentation needed for migration has become more difficult and more expensive to obtain, and some respondents described new requirements for non-citizens to leave Russia more frequently to renew, from once a year to every 3 months. This travel is expensive and eats into earnings made from labor migration.

Respondents disagreed about the availability of jobs abroad. Some said that it was more difficult to find work, while others countered that there are more opportunities since the COVID-19 pandemic, and have increased further in Russia because of the war, as many Russian citizens have emigrated to avoid conscription.

The trends are further complicated when Russian citizenship is involved. Some respondents noted that their family members had attained dual citizenship (with Russia) due to having worked there for so long, and as such, are able to avoid many documentation and migration policy barriers. However, this status has put them at risk of conscription into the war. For some, not having citizenship is seen as a protective factor against conscription.

“If he is not a citizen of Russia, no, they cannot take him away.” —Study participant, Karakol, urban

However, respondents in two focus groups volunteered their fears or prevalent rumors that non-citizens have been sent to Ukraine through deceptive contracts, or through prison conscription if their documentation is deemed invalid.

“There are a lot of difficulties, even here they lie about taking [workers] to the construction site and then selling [them] to Ukraine.” — Study participant, Jeti-Oguz

“There are cases when lies about people are taken not to Russia but to Ukraine for war. Those who are in prison are also sent to the war; there have already been cases when our people died there. [Officials] check their documents and if something is wrong they immediately send them to prison and from there to the war. We are worried about our children. It is difficult for men now.” —Study participant, Issyk-Kul, rural

Effects of Migration on the Family

Focus group participants were asked about the effect of having a family member in labor migration on the rest of the family, particularly on children. Study participants for the most part accepted labor migration as a necessary part of the economic system and were stoic in their role as caregivers, especially grandparents who pointed to their experience as caregivers.

“It would be nice if they didn't leave, but what can you do?” —Study participant, Ak-Suu, rural

“I tell my kids, ‘Take your children, I want to live in peace’ [laughs], and they move the conversation on.” —Study participant, Karakol, urban

Respondents indicated that having a parent (or parents) in labor migration is much harder for children, particularly young children, as they miss them very much. Others pointed to the difficulty of caring for young children and the weaning process, and the switch to infant formula in cases when the mother has left. While some families do aim to wait until newborns have grown, most respondents indicated that very few mothers were waiting until a child had reached 2 years before leaving for labor migration. Grandparents stated that they replaced breast milk with formula or cow's milk.

During focus groups, the team asked respondents if they noticed a difference in their children's health compared to those whose parents are both present, but very few indicated they noticed such a difference. Of those who did, some agreed that children who have a parent abroad seem to get sicker, while others claimed the opposite because they, as more experienced caregivers, cared for their grandchildren better than the child's parents would do.

Use of Remittances

When asked about the use of any remittance funds provided by the family member in migration, respondents across FGDs referred to everyday expenses, with a particular emphasis on food for the children. Even when pressed to imagine a scenario in which they received greater remittance funds than expected, the focus was on quality food, and next on educational expenses for children. During discussions about the use of remittance funds, no focus group brought up matters of long-term investments previously discussed (such as building a house), aside from purchasing cattle as an investment and saving for celebrations.

The FGDs focused more on food purchases; respondents indicated that when they had more money, they prioritized spending more of their grocery funds on meat, fish, chicken, and eggs. A few mentioned other nutritious foods, including apples, bananas, and cottage cheese, for the children in their care. The respondents (who across all groups were largely grandparents) stated that they gave children better and healthier food than their own children (the young children's parents) do. In the FGD in Karakol, many of the respondent grandparents agreed that parents had a tendency for “spoiling” their children when they are home with junk food, and that some parents abroad are ordering junk food online to be delivered to their children, as a means of connecting with them or appeasing them when they cannot be present at home.

Decision-Making Power

In matters of decision-making power, respondents mostly indicated there was a somewhat strong separation of decision-making between family members abroad and caregivers in the Kyrgyz Republic. While family members abroad seem interested in directing funds or giving input on how funds can be used, caregivers at home appear to have autonomy in deciding how to best spend funds for the family.

“If we spend money on something, they [the parents] ask us what for.” — Study participant, Ak-Suu, rural

“I tell my daughter, ‘Let's not buy junk food, I'd rather cook something healthier at home.’ ”

— Study participant, Cholpon-Ata, urban

“They're dependent on us, we're the ones who look after their kids.” — Study participant, Jeti-Oguz, rural

“Once a year they send me [money], who am I to consult? ” — Study participant, Cholpon-Ata, urban

The primary way that family members in labor migration exert control is through the amount of money they send. While some caregivers in the Kyrgyz Republic indicated that they were holding money for long-term projects, most respondents whose families were saving for such projects implied that the family members in migration retained those funds and only sent remittances for the daily expenses.

“I pay for all the child's expenses myself, since they are building a house and all the money goes there, but in case of shortage of funds I ask them to send.” — Study participant, Issyk-Kul, rural

“I make my own decisions, all the funds they transfer are strictly calculated, they initially distribute and say what needs to be spent.” — Study participant, Issyk-Kul, rural

In discussing making decisions about parenting and the care of children, different FGDs reached different consensus. In Cholpon-Ata, respondents agreed that parents' influence on care from abroad was very strong, and that many are forbidden from making care decisions themselves. They described themselves as the doers, but they respected their own children's requests as parents.

“We have no choice. We have to agree with them. We're just following their orders.”

— Study participant, Cholpon-Ata, urban

For the most part, the other FGDs came to other conclusions. In the rural focus group for Issyk-Kul rayon, caregivers agreed that all caregivers (grandparents) reached consensus with the parents who are in migration before making care decisions for children. For the remaining focus groups, in Karakol town and Ak-Suu rayon, in discussing care decisions, caregivers stated that they largely had control over care decisions and repeated that they know more and better care strategies than their adult children.

“They don't play any role [in caregiving], they just talk on the phone.” —Karakol, urban

Last, the project discussed the possibility of leveraging some of its learnings from virtual counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic to reach family members, birthparents in particular, abroad with project messaging and counseling, over a service such as WhatsApp. While this idea received positive feedback from many participants, it's important to mention that they had previously stressed that parents living abroad typically have limited involvement in deciding how money is used or in the daily care of their children. Instead, they often rely heavily on grandparents for these decisions. In such cases, it would be valuable to emphasize the significance of their active participation in their children's upbringing, even if certain caregiving responsibilities are primarily entrusted to grandparents. In Cholpon-Ata, respondents saw this approach as a potentially effective way to encourage parents abroad to contribute more financially.

“They also need to get them thinking and sending more money.” — Study participant, Cholpon-Ata, urban

Discussion

Through focus group discussions in urban and rural areas of Issyk-Kul oblast, caregivers of young children shared their family's situation and dynamics related to family roles, food, care practices, and factors that prevent or support these practices, all in the context of labor migration.

In general, there was very little difference between responses between FGDs. Neither the specific region nor the community's status as urban or rural seemed entailed distinct perspectives, which was true for nearly all topics.

Additionally, responses from caregivers about nutrition, care, and hygiene practices very closely mirrored responses received from caregivers in Batken oblast in 2020, and in Jalal-Abad and Naryn oblasts during the SPRING project. Finding repetition and redundancies, the project team focused more on understanding respondents' experiences in relation to labor migration, with the aim of considering quick adaptations for the project in its final year of implementation.

Overall, the landscape of labor migration is complex. Even absent the complications of recent history, labor migration creates a challenging dynamic that takes an emotional and practical toll on everyone in the family. For family members abroad, the responsibilities of providing care are as high as they are uncertain, and the distance from family members, including young children, largely excludes them from critical aspects of care. Of particular concern is the separation of a mother from young children while they should still be breastfeeding (before the second birthday, and even more critically, during the exclusive breastfeeding period from 0–6 months).

The length of time that parents spend apart from their children, and the uncertainty of being able to come back regularly, appear to engender a need for parents to make up for that absence through "spoiling." The project team should be careful not to make a definitive conclusion, as most of the information from these focus groups comes from the parents of the family members abroad (the young children's grandparents). Nevertheless, a prevalent opinion from respondents is that parents give in to requests for junk food and toys because the young parents want to make their own young children happy, and they have fewer parental skills because they don't have as much practice. The need for emotional connection may be a powerful factor in motivating certain care and nutrition behaviors (such as giving their children junk food).

For caregivers in the Kyrgyz Republic, the challenges are mirrored. With fewer quality employment opportunities at home, families are strongly dependent on their family members abroad, in many cases for everyday expenses, including food. Of particular concern is the somewhat common situation where a mother leaves for labor migration before the child's second birthday, resulting in the need for alternatives to breastfeeding.

For better or for worse, the absence of some family members due to labor migration somewhat "streamlines" decision-making powers within a family. The project has always been cognizant of the complex, multigenerational family dynamics common in Kyrgyz households, where young couples often share a home and budget with the husband's parents. The project has aimed to engage all adults in community-level, "whole of household" approaches, but this "streamlining" results in caregivers at home having nearly unilateral control over the use of accessible funds and care practices. While the idea of virtual counseling with parents abroad has been discussed, the pronounced streamlining of decision-making power casts doubt on the effectiveness of such an approach.

Recommendations

A large objective of this formative assessment was to identify potential changes in project implementation that can address the realities of labor migration in the Kyrgyz Republic, and to discover any particular issues in Issyk-Kul that may require adaptation.

In the matter of oblast-level adaptations, the project feels confident that the current strategy and objectives are appropriate for Issyk-Kul oblast. Given that the original strategy has been informed by both “northern” oblasts from the SPRING project and “southern” oblasts from USAID Advancing Nutrition, the responses from this assessment in regard to general nutrition and care practices confirm our approach.

In regard to matters of labor migration, some potential approaches might be useful to consider, to better respond to the realities of families:

- Consider approaches that discuss migration plans, particularly for expectant mothers, to try to delay their departure to accommodate breastfeeding for young children.
 - For USAID Advancing Nutrition’s community-based work, this may be difficult to achieve, as the primary cohort of families that activists work is much more focused on parents with children, and much less focused on working with pregnant women. Furthermore, it is evident that the economic factors that motivate labor migration are incredibly strong, and would require interventions that extend much further than the communication or counseling efforts that the project has provided. With such a short time available before the end of the project, it may not be feasible to design and mount such a multi-sectoral approach able to address some of the labor and economic challenges that spur migration in the first place.
- Consider virtual counseling for parents abroad with the specific aim of promoting remittance of additional funds for everyday expenses.
 - For the most part, respondents indicate a fair amount of autonomy in making decisions about family funds and care practices. However, there may be an opportunity to promote further prioritization of allocating funds for everyday expenses (that is, the family diet), just as the project does in its community-based counseling with household and family budgeting. When discussing this with the Kyrgyz project team, however, several doubts were raised about the appropriateness of such a request and how it may be received coming from activists calling or WhatsApping people abroad to discuss family finances. The project considers this an avenue with the potential for incremental exploration over a longer period of time, to test and iterate approaches that activists would feel comfortable with and that families would be receptive to. Given the current timeline, the project believes its counseling approach in household budgeting, which aims to support family members discussing nutrition, care, and budgeting decisions with family members, is probably the best and most appropriate way forward for USAID Advancing Nutrition to maintain through the end of the project.
- Consider counseling sessions focused on efficient food storage practices, aimed to empower families with strategies to stretch their resources and maintain access to nutritious foods during the winter months, when income sources are particularly limited.

Teaching families how to properly store and preserve food, helps them to reduce waste, lower their grocery expenses, and ensure a more stable food supply throughout the year. This approach aligns with the project's overarching goal of promoting nutrition, care, and budgeting decisions within households. When implementing this recommendation, it’s important to address any practical concerns, particularly those related to the types of products typically grown in the Issyk-Kul area. Ultimately, by combining

efforts to enhance family budgeting, promote remittances for everyday expenses, and introduce food storage counseling, USAID Advancing Nutrition can provide a comprehensive set of tools to support families in the Kyrgyz Republic, addressing both immediate needs and long-term resilience

Last, as the project considers how the always-complex matter of labor migration has grown increasingly precarious as a result of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the specific recommendations that USAID Advancing Nutrition can implement are limited. Given the ongoing nature of the conflict, the full effects of changing migration, opportunities, and remittances in the Kyrgyz Republic are not completely known. What is clear is that labor/migration experts and communities in the Kyrgyz Republic agree: the prospects are at best uncertain. More research and data are needed to understand how these economic changes are materially affecting the incomes and diets of Kyrgyz families, and this project strongly hypothesizes that significant, multi-sectoral efforts convening nutrition, health, labor, and migration policy experts must be made to mitigate the looming crisis, which has the potential to wipe out the creeping advancements in nutrition, care, and development that USAID Advancing Nutrition has supported in the Kyrgyz Republic.

References

- Chi, Guangqing, and Erin Hofmann. 2022. “The Russia-Ukraine War Will Hurt Millions in Central Asia.” Penn State Social Science Research Institute website. August 8. <https://ssri.psu.edu/news/russia-ukraine-war-will-hurt-millions-central-asia-heres-why>
- National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic. 2022. <https://www.nbkr.kg/DOC/06062022/00000000058603.pdf>
- National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyz Republic 2022.
<https://www.stat.kg/en/search/?news=1&pages=1&publications=1&statistics=1&vacancy=0&opendata=1&query=poverty>.
- Ratha, Dilip, and Eung Ju. Kim. 2022. *Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Implications for Remittance Flows to Ukraine and Central Asia*. Policy brief. Washington, DC: World Bank. https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/KNOMAD_Policy%20Brief%2017_Ukraine-Implications%20for%20Migration%20and%20Remittance%20flows_March%204_2022.pdf
- Schenk, Caress. 2023. “Post-Soviet Labor Migrants in Russia Face New Questions amid War in Ukraine.” Migration Policy Institute website. February 7. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/labor-migrants-russia-ukraine-war>
- SPRING. 2015. *SPRING/Kyrgyz Republic Formative Research Report*. Arlington, VA: The Strengthening Partnerships, Results, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally (SPRING) project.
- Wigle, Janna M., Nadia Akseer, Roman Mogilevskii, et al. 2020. “Drivers of Stunting Reduction in the Kyrgyz Republic: A Country Case Study.” *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 112 (2): 830–43.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcn/nqaa120>
- World Bank. 2023. “Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)—Kyrgyz Republic.” World Bank estimate.” World Bank IBRD-DA website. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=KG>

Annex I. Focus Group Discussion Guide

Purpose of the Focus Group Discussion (FDG):

To identify and explore barriers and opportunities to optimize priority nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific practices via USAID Advancing Nutrition interventions. The findings of the formative assessment will help the USAID AN team have a deeper understanding of primary and influencing groups or audiences, as well as the barriers and facilitators of key behaviors.

Date: _____ **Starting Time:** _____ **Ending Time:** _____

District: _____ **Block:** _____

Name of Community/Village: _____

Please fill out and attach the participant register.

Name of Facilitator: _____

Name of Note-Taker: _____

Name of Observer: _____

Note to the Facilitator:

Introduce yourself at the beginning of the session, explain who you work with, why you are here, and introduce everyone on the team who is with you observing, taking notes, taking photographs, or helping in any way.

Introduction: Hello, my name is _____ . I am working with _____ to help develop a health and nutrition program in this community. We are interested in getting your views and learning about food, water, nutrition, and health issues in your community. We would like to ask you some questions about daily life, food, and family health. We are interested in better understanding what is happening within families and communities in Batken. This should not take more than 90 minutes. Do not worry. There are NO right or wrong answers. Your ideas and answers to our questions are very important to us. You are free to join this group discussion, and free to answer or not to answer the questions we are going to ask. You should feel very free to express whatever you are thinking. We will not share your name outside of this group, and your responses will be anonymous. For these discussion groups, all participants must agree to keep the comments made in the group private and not to share them beyond the group.

To help us take notes, we would like to record our discussion so that we can listen back later. Once we have completed our notes, the recording will be destroyed. If any members of the group object to being recorded, we will not record the group. Before beginning this focus group discussion, you've all been given a form for informed consent. If you have not signed a consent form, please let us know so that this can be reviewed before we begin. Do we have your permission to continue?

Note to Note Taker: Try to capture the major ideas and something about the majority of participants agreeing or not agreeing. Always note the specific question that the facilitator and participants are referring to. If the facilitator asks a question that is not on the guide, note the question as it is asked and try to capture the answers. If you need more space, use the extra paper and note the name of the group and the corresponding number of the question.

Note to Observer: You can take notes about the answers also, but focus on the dynamics of the group and how people are reacting to the questions and to the discussion. If you can, make a note about who are the most active participants and/or any outliers so that we can follow up with them.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD) INSTRUMENT

Questions which are related to family relationships, caregiving, and health issues.

1. Please describe a good relationship between a husband and wife. (Probe: tell me more...)
2. When a woman is pregnant, who provides for her and is involved in caring for her?
3. When a woman is pregnant, what should she eat? Why? What shouldn't she eat? Why?
 - a. About how much she should eat? If more or less than usual, why?
 - b. About how much she should work: do you advise that she work as usual, less, or more than usual? Why?
4. Who knows when a baby should be given his/her first foods? When is that? Is it the same moment for all babies or does it differ?
 - a. Who usually prepares and feeds the child the first food, the mother, the grandmother, or someone else?
 - b. After the first food, who usually feeds young children?
5. With babies who don't want to eat, who has more experience getting them to eat?
 - a. What do people do if a child doesn't want to eat? Why?
6. One year ago, MOTHER 1 NAME and MOTHER 2 NAME gave birth on the same day and both had baby boys. Now after one year MOTHER 1's boy is 3 cm taller than MOTHER 2's boy. How can you explain this difference in the boys' heights?
7. Are there times of the year/different seasons when it is more difficult to feed children well in the community? Why? What makes it more difficult during those times?
 - a. What does a family in this community do if they are having trouble feeding their children well?

Questions Related to Migration

Do many households in this area have labor migrants?

- Where do migrant parents usually leave for employment?
- What period do their parents usually leave for? (Length of time and times of year if seasonal)
- Which of the parents usually leaves for employment? (within and outside the Kyrgyz Republic)
- Do these families receive anything (e.g., remittances) from the parent being abroad for employment?
- Ask one or two participants to share how their family came to the decision that a family member should migrate for labor, and why they did so. Ask other members to see if their feelings matched the first volunteer, or if they'd like to elaborate further.
- Has migration outside of Issyk-Kul changed as compared to 1 or 2 years ago? How? Why?

Let's discuss possible positive and negative effects of a parent migrating for employment

- How does migration impact the life of a spouse/caregiver? (decision-making, responsibility)
- How does migration affect the lives of other household members? (decision-making, responsibility)
- How does it affect the child:
 - The child's nutrition and diet? (focusing on children under five years)
 - The vulnerability of the child to illness?
 - The child's access to healthcare/treatment?
- How is this different when a mother is away vs a father?

What role do remittances play in households with children in the area?

- What does the increased income mean for the child's:
 - Health care needs
 - Nutrition and diet
- What role does the increased income mean for the nutrition and diet of the rest of the family at home?
- What other kinds of things does the family use the money sent home as remittances for?
- Who decides how the money is used? (spent or saved?)
 - When? (before migration, while family is separated, after family is reunited?)
 - Are other family members involved in the decision-making process?
 - What are common disagreements on how to spend money between family members? How do they get resolved?
- What would happen if the spending decisions of the family member away from home are not respected?
- How would the family (in particular a family's diet) be affected if the family intended to have a member migrate for employment but was not able to?

How does the family make decisions about budgets and the family's diet?

- Describe in more detail how families make decisions about the care of children (i.e., beyond the discussion above)
- How does this dynamic change when a family member is away for migration?
 - Probe—is it harder or easier to change behaviors when a family member is away? Why is it easier/harder?
- Imagine this scenario: While your spouse is abroad for employment, an activist from the VHC introduces you to a new practice regarding your child's nutrition that you'd like to try. Trying this new practice might take some extra money to do.
 - In this scenario, would you have to discuss this with your family member who is abroad? Under what circumstances?
 - What role, if any, would you like the activist to play in discussing this matter with your family member abroad? (providing resources, contacting through WhatsApp, etc.?)



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

USAID ADVANCING NUTRITION

Implemented by:
JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc.
2733 Crystal Drive
4th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202

Phone: 703 528 7474
Email: info@advancingnutrition.org
Web: advancingnutrition.org

October 2023

USAID Advancing Nutrition is the Agency's flagship multi sectoral nutrition project, addressing the root causes of malnutrition to save lives and enhance long term health and development.

This document is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States government.