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## Nuts for Education

### A Qualitative Case Study of Challenges of Educational Investments in Kyrgyzstan

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to add to the understanding of how context specific factors may lead to challenges for parents to make investments in their children's education. This is done by conducting a case study in the rural village of Kyzyl Unkur, Kyrgyzstan. Semi structured interviews were used in order to explore challenges faced by parents. The main challenges found were: family farming and walnut harvest; the labor market and migration; low education quality; corruption; and practices based on gender norms. The study was furthermore aimed at problematizing these challenges in the context of national education policies, by answering the question of whose realities are represented in the policies. The study identified discrepancies between respondent's realities and the education policies, and analyzing these by using concepts from the participatory development approach. Two of the main challenges faced by parents were not addressed by the policies; hence they failed to fully represent the context in which respondents lived. Additionally, many of the policy measures were found to be failing to represent the complexity of the challenges faced by parent in Kyzyl Unkur.

**Key words:** challenges of educational investments, human capital theory, participatory development, education policy

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## Abbreviations

APED	Action Plan for Education Development
EDS	Education Development Strategy
EFA	Education for All
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Gross National Income
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science
NFC	National Framework Curriculum
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
OOSC	Out of School Children
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

## Definitions

*Out of School Children* are, for the purpose of this study, children of compulsory school age who are not enrolled and/or are absent from school for a period of 30 days, or longer, without a valid reason such as suspension or illness (UNICEF, 2012b: 8-7).

*Children at risk of drop-out* include children with low attendance rates, children with learning difficulties, low performing children, children with behavioral and discipline issues, disabled children, over aged children, and children with disadvantaged family background (Antiniwicz and Sainazarov, 2013).

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## Introduction

*“In this case we admit our fault. But this is life, we have to pick the nuts. Education is important, but the nuts are also important! It’s only once a year!”* (Respondent, interview 3)

In the village of Kyzyl Unkur, located in southern Kyrgyzstan, the conditions of everyday life influence parents<sup>1</sup> ability to send their children to school. As in most of rural Kyrgyzstan the main source of livelihood is agriculture (IFAD; World Bank, 2012: 5). For the people of Kyzyl Unkur, this includes leaving the village every fall to a nearby walnut forest, in order to collect the annual yield of nuts. During this period, which usually lasts six to eight weeks, the village shuts down. The school is closed and children miss out on a substantial amount of classes. When returned to life in the village, most of households are dependent on livestock breeding and farming to sustain themselves.

Located in one of the poorest regions in Kyrgyzstan, the socioeconomic situation of inhabitants in Kyzyl Unkur is often strained (World Bank, 2014a). Labor migration is a way for many to increase otherwise scarce financial resources. Almost every household has one or more members working in Russia, sometimes including children (NGO respondent).

The features of life in Kyzyl Unkur influence children's schooling, some of them with low attendance rates and poor learning as a result. This study will explore the challenges faced by parents when attempting to invest in their children's education. It will do so by analyzing parents' perceptions of their situation, and within it, the role of education. The study will, furthermore, position these experienced challenges to educational investments in the context of national education policies in order to explore possible discrepancies.

Since 2007, almost no progress has been made in reducing the number of out of school children in the world. Approximately 58 million children between the age of six and eleven years are not attending school. As this figure does not include children with high absence rates, the number of children at risk of dropping out are likely to be even higher (UNESCO IS and UNICEF, 2015: 7). Most of these children are found in developing countries where poverty and scarce provision of

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<sup>1</sup> : Parents may for the purpose of this study include grandparents as they were sometimes found to be children's main caregivers and as such influencing educational investments.

social services often poses great challenges to include all children in school (Sabates et al., 2010; Banerjee and Duflo, 2011).

This is the situation for children around the world despite a long time of global consensus on the importance of education that is found throughout the wide range of actors involved in designing and implementing education policies. Education is declared a human right and as such is a goal in itself, but it is also perceived to have fundamental impact on the provision of other human rights (UNESCO, 2014). Research shows that educational attainments lead to increased health status of individuals, strengthened democratic participation, the containment of violence and reduced socioeconomic inequalities (Almendarez, 2013; OECD, 2013).

Countless initiatives have been introduced in order to increase the number of children attending school. Most notably are the global initiatives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Education for All (EFA), targeted at every child in the world completing full primary education by the end of 2015. Although the goals are unlikely to be met, they have contributed to allowing more children to attend school world wide. Since 2000, the number of out of school children has decreased by around 45 per cent (UNESCO IS and UNICEF, 2015).

Many policy initiatives have been aimed at ensuring sufficiency on the supply side of education, including abolition of school fees and increased provision of buildings and teaching resources (Lay, 2012: 74). However, even where access to school is provided, challenges for children to attend school may still be present. Factors such as gender structures, low quality of schools and the need for child labor are found to hinder parents in sending their children to school (UNESCO IS and UNICEF, 2015:14). Educational choices are often made within a complex interaction of several factors originating from the individual as well as the societal level. Hence, children with low attendee rates are usually found in circumstances where a variety of factors work jointly to ultimately cause school drop out (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011; Sabates et al., 2010: 20).

In order to facilitate access to education for these children, both system-wide reforms and targeted responses need to be adopted. Targeted responses are especially important in order to include the hardest to reach children, as their circumstances often are affected by a highly context specific mixture of factors (UNESCO IS and UNICEF, 2015). Reaching these children often requires more complex solutions based on evidence drawn from a wide range of sources including information about households and schools, as well as parents, teachers and children. Based on context specific information, insights about the challenges faced by parents and how they lead to lesser educational

investments may be gained (Lincove, 2015; Karoly, 2000).

## Purpose and Research Questions

The research problem of this study is that parents, especially in developing countries, often are faced with challenges of making investments in their children's education. For the purpose of this study, investments are referred to as the time and resources spent on facilitating children's schooling. These investments may lead to a variety of outcomes such as actual school attendance, but also time allocated for children to do homework. The children of interest for this study are children of primary general education and basic general education age, i.e seven to fifteen years.

The purpose of the study is to add to the understanding of how context specific factors may lead to challenges for parents to make investments in their children's education. Furthermore, the study aims at problematizing the challenges faced by parents in the context of national education policies.

Based on this purpose, the following two research questions will guide the study:

- *What are some principle challenges for parents in Kyzyl Unkur to invest in their children's education?*
- *Whose realities are represented in the education policies of Kyrgyzstan, considering the challenges revealed by parents in Kyzyl Unkur?*

## Disposition

In the following chapter, a contextual overview of the situation in Kyrgyzstan will be provided, including the socioeconomic context and the education sector, with special attention given to barriers to education and current education policies. The third chapter outlines the methodology of the study, including ethical considerations, validity and reliability. In the fourth chapter, the conceptual framework and the study's intended application of it will be presented. The fifth chapter provides an overview of existing research of challenges for educational investments faced by parents. In chapter seven, an analysis of findings will be presented and finally a conclusion of findings and implications will be provided.

## Contextual Insight

In this chapter, an overview of the socioeconomic situation in Kyrgyzstan will be provided. Subsequently, the education sector will be presented with special attention given to the policies regulating the sector.

## Socioeconomic Situation

Following independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan experienced almost a decade of economic decline, resulting in increased poverty rates and decreased quality of life for the population (McLean, 2013: 7; Malanchuk, 2009). By the turn of the century the trend changed and annual growth has since been about 4 per cent. A significant reduction of poverty rates has been achieved, from 62 per cent in the year 2000 to 38 per cent in 2012 (McLean, 2013: 7; UNDP, 2014).

Although Kyrgyzstan was classified as a lower middle income country in 2014, based on a GNI of 1,200 USD per capita in 2013, the country is still ranked as one of the poorest nations in the region of Europe and Central Asia (The World Bank, 2014c; The World Bank, 2012: 5). The national economy suffers from a high budget deficit, which is mostly covered by international donors such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014: 21).

The provision of social services and infrastructure lacks sufficient investment and is unevenly distributed throughout Kyrgyzstan, partly due to the economic challenges described above. The rural and mountainous regions are where coverage and quality are lowest (UNICEF, 2011:14). These areas are also the most populated; around 75 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's 5.4 million inhabitants live in rural areas and have livestock breeding as the main source of livelihood. Furthermore, people of the rural and mountainous areas are the ones most affected by poverty; approximately three quarters of Kyrgyzstan's poor population live in these areas (IFAD; World Bank, 2012: 5). A political and cultural division between the north and the south regions of the country is also present, with the south being traditionally agricultural and poorer than the north (Cummings, 2013: 52; UNICEF, 2012a: 11).

Due to the fragmented government supply of social services, poverty programs provided by international donors, as well as remittances from labor migrants, are crucial in order to meet the needs of the people. Almost one fifth of the population work as labor migrants, and remittances constitutes roughly 30 per cent of the GDP, making Kyrgyzstan one of the most remittance dependent countries in the world (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014:16-18; UNDP, 2014).

The uneven economic and social development, in combination with a weak state systems and widespread corruption has led to increased social stress and a loss of confidence in the government (DP, 2012; UNDP, 2014). These frustrations, exacerbated by ethnic tension, culminated in 2010 in the civil unrest in the southern regions of Osh and JalalAbad, resulting in over 400 dead people and 90,000 people being displaced (McLean, 2013: 7; IFRC, 2011).

## Education Sector

The education sector underwent dramatic changes following independence. Public spending on the sector declined and the responsibility for financing public primary and higher education was shifted to local governments. Parents became required to purchase or rent textbooks, formerly provided for free (UNICEF 2008: 63; Bruck and Esenaliev, 2013: 3-5).

Government spending on the education sector is relatively high counted in share of public expenditure, in 2010 it constituted about 15 per cent. However, due to the low GDP, in absolute terms the investments are relatively low in absolute terms (ADB, 2014: 102). The education expenditures are furthermore highly debt dependent and there is a low efficiency of spending within the sector (McLean, 2013: 8; World Bank, 2014a: 1). These challenges, combined with widespread corruption throughout the sector have resulted in Kyrgyz education quality remaining below its potential compared with other states at the same level of economic development. Kyrgyzstan was, in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey of 2009, found among the lowest ranked countries. As many as 80 per cent of all 15 year old students scored “functionally illiterate” (Martini, 2013; World Bank, 2014a:1- 10).

Quality of education varies substantially within the country. The Kyrgyz education sector is a fragmented system and most management and financing of schools is de-centralized. The Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) does however not sufficiently monitor quality of education and do not manage to hold local authorities accountable. This has led to differences in use of public funds and unequal learning opportunities (World Bank, 2014a:1). Lack of teaching materials, difficulties to recruit qualified teachers and low quality of school buildings are problems mostly affecting rural areas (OECD, 2010: 199- 200: 1 ADB, 2014: 102). Households are often needed to pay for learning materials themselves in order to compensate for lack of government provision. This is, however, often not possible for poorer households and further increases the inequalities (ADB, 2014: 104). Location of study has thus become one of the main determinants of learning

opportunities (World Bank, 2014a: 1).

A growing number of private institutions and non-governmental education organizations are working in the country in order to provide the population with needed education and training (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014: 18; World Bank, 2008: 26).

### **Barriers to Education**

In 2010, approximately 63.000 Kyrgyz school aged children were out of school. About one third of these were of primary school age and two thirds of lower secondary school age. As such, 4,7 per cent of children eligible for primary school and 8,2 per cent eligible for lower secondary school were out of school (UNICEF, 2012a: 18). The numbers of out of school children are generally higher in rural areas than in the cities, just over 70 per cent of all out of school children are living in rural areas (UNICEF 2011: 25-26). The highest dropout rates are found in the southern province of JalalAbad were 6,5 per cent of school aged children drop out early (OECD, 2010: 198; UNICEF, 2008: 13-5).

Even though primary education is free, lack of finances is one of the main obstacles for children in Kyrgyzstan to attend school. Costs for textbooks and other supplies as well as transport often hinder poorer households to send their children to school (Antiniwicz and Sainazarov, 2013: 12; UNICEF 2008: 14). Low income households are also often dependent on their children to work, either within the household or outside, to earn additional income. The need for children to work is found to be one of the most common reasons for children to be out of school (UNICEF, 2012a). According to data from the International Labour Organization (ILO), Kyrgyzstan has a relatively high rate of working children, especially among young ones. In 2007, more than 25 per cent of children in the age range of 5 to 14 years were engaged in child labor (ILO and NSC, 2008). In Kyrgyzstan, the majority of the work conducted by children is unpaid family work within the household, only a small portion found among older children works outside the home (UNICEF, 2012:a 32; Antiniwicz and Sainazarov, 2013: 12). Children from minority groups are often extra vulnerable to the risk of school drop out due to poverty because of marginalization (UNICEF, 2012a: 12-13).

High migration rates in Kyrgyzstan furthermore causes many parents to be less able or willing to support their children's educational endeavors. Children to labour migrants are thus at higher risk of school absenteeism and drop out (UNICEF, 2011:15).

In 2008, 43 per cent of all Kyrgyz children with a disability were excluded from school (UNICEF, 2012a: 30). Due to low accessibility of schools and the cultural perception of disability as something shameful, many parents are unable or unwilling to send their children to school (Antiniwicz and Sainazarov, 2013: 13).

Gender rates are generally balanced in Kyrgyz schools, although disaggregated statistics indicates higher attendance for rural boys than girls, while girls are more likely than boys to attend school in the cities (UNICEF 2011: 25).

Yet another factor decreasing community demand for education is the reduced value of education, as more people seem to doubt the chances of educational attainments leading to a well paid job (Eversmann, 2000: 12; UNICEF 2008: 17).

Finally, supply factors such as teacher shortage, low quality of education, bullying and unequal treatment of students also has an influence on educational choices made. Lacking infrastructure and transportation costs are also critical obstacles for attendance, especially in rural and mountainous areas, where people sometimes live far away from the nearest school (Antiniwicz and Sainazarov, 2013: 12).

## **Education Policy Overview**

The Kyrgyz education sector is regulated by a number of documents including: the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic; the Education Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2012-2020; the Law on Education; the Law on the Status of Teachers; the Children's Code of the Kyrgyz Republic; and the National Strategy of Sustainable Development of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2013-2017 (Hasanov, 2013: 29).

The Education Development Strategy (EDS) is the primary guiding document for the sector, outlining main objectives and priorities for the period of 2012-2020. This document is thus also the main policy document of focus for the purpose of this study. Where other documents are of relevance these will be included.

For every three year period there is an Action Plan for Education Development (APED), in which indicators and financing are outlined in detail. The EDS is based on the aim of reaching the global education goals of the MDGs and EFA initiative. The reform outlined in the strategy is also partly

triggered by the low achievements in the PISA surveys of 2006 and 2009 and the recommendations connected to the survey.

The EDS encompasses a sector wide approach, including all sections from pre-primary education to vocational and higher education, as well as adult and informal education. The focus of the following policy overview will be on primary general education (grade 1-4) and basic general education (grade 5-9), as these are the grades of interest for this study.

All the measures included in the EDS are aimed at the overall goal of ensuring quality education to all people no matter their ethnic or religious background, place of residence, intellectual and physical development, social-economic status, gender or age.

A main component in the EDS is the introduction of “minimal regulations of the process, and strict monitoring and evaluation of the result” (GoK, 2009: 4). This component is aimed to steer the sector away from a top-down approach and to increase local responsibility. Much attention is in accordance to this component devoted to increasing and improving monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. These changes will furthermore facilitate the introduction of results based management and strategic planning, which will in turn inform and improve the decision making process.

Within the aim to improve sector management, the objective to determine functions of authorities and organizations is also found. Furthermore, transparency and accountability will be increased through the creation of boards of trustees, public councils and public hearings of budget planning and execution. These measures will also include the increased number of schools with public-state structures.

Improved education quality is of main concern for the EDS. The strategy outlined to enhance quality is mainly focused on implementation of new curriculum; improved assessment mechanisms; increased teacher effectiveness; and provision of teaching resources and sufficient facilities.

The EDS intend to continue the implementation of the National Framework Curriculum (NFC), developed in 2009. The aim of the NFC is to promote individual learning and to introduce a competence based approach for general secondary education. In addition, new subject curricula were developed for all grades. As the PISA evaluation highlighted the relative high workload of Kyrgyz, the EDS further aims at reducing the academic load for students.

By introducing new and improved assessments for student achievement, the EDS aims at increasing a result-oriented mode. This will be done, for example, through the introduction of standardized tests at critical stages of education (after 4th, 9th and 11th grade). An incentive grant to increase teacher performance will also be introduced. These interventions build on the logic that monitoring and subsequent rewarding of results will increase initiatives at the school level and ensure a gradual increase of quality.

Teacher effectiveness is a key issue in EDS within the aim of improving education quality. Much attention is given to this component in the strategy and several tasks are devoted to it in the APED. A problem analysis is provided pointing out the low status of the teaching profession, lack of educational staff, inadequate qualifications and poor salaries as main challenges for teacher effectiveness.

In order to address these challenges, the strategy includes the following objectives: an increased number of pedagogical students becoming teachers, as well as the number of teachers continuing after the initial working year; enhancement of teacher pedagogical practices in line with the new curricula; improved teacher performance assessment and management; reform of the in-service training system; and new certification requirements for employees within the sector.

Finally, the EDS address quality of teaching through interventions aimed at reducing the lack of textbooks and computers as well as improving the quality of buildings. The EDS also aims at creating conditions for the information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure.

A main objective of the EDS is to ensure equal access to education for all citizens. The issue of exclusion of disabled children is addressed by improving and continuing the current provision of inclusive services. However, no objective to include more children with special needs in mainstream education exists in the EDS. Multicultural and multilingual education will be strengthened through the introduction of 12 pilot projects on which recommendations for expansion will be made. Furthermore, access to schooling for children from low income families will be ensured through targeted, rather than universal support, and special attention is given to rural areas. These supportive interventions undertaken are the provision of financial support, catering services, and free textbooks for children from low income families.

## Method

### Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative case study design. A case can be defined by a bound time and activity (Creswell, 2014: 241). For the purpose of this study, time refers to the present and activity to parents' perceptions of educational investments made for their children. Case studies enable an in depth understanding of a certain event or phenomena of scientific interest and provide a detailed analysis of the causal mechanisms at work. As such, it is a well suited approach, considering the aim of the study. The strength of a case study lies in the allowance for contextual sensitivity. Variables in the social world do not interact in a vacuum, but rather take on context specific roles as they relate to each other in a particular case. Case studies allow for an account of the fullness of these interactions (Cecchini et al. 2014: 13-14; George & Bennett 2005: 21; Ragin 1987:35).

Furthermore, qualitative research allows for, and even requires a flexible approach that allows for adjustments according to the findings that appear throughout the research process (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008: 43-45). Thus, the study adopts an emergent and open-ended approach that enables discovery of unexpected answers and identification of new variables (Yin, 2014: 76; George and Bennett, 2005: 20-1).

In contrast to quantitative variable driven studies, cases studies do not allow for analysis of correlation between variables. Conclusions on how much particular variables affect outcomes can therefore not be drawn based on this study (Cecchini et al. 2014: 14; George and Bennett, 2005: 25). Furthermore, being a qualitative study, findings cannot be generalized, as they only represent one specific group of people and their realities (Mikkelsen 2005: 92).

### Sampling

The choice of conducting the study in Kyzyl Unkur was based on the variety of factors influencing educational investments present in the village. The fact that all children are absent from school during the walnut harvest, as well as other attributes of rural life in Kyrgyzstan, makes it an interesting case of parental school investment. Furthermore, accessibility to the village provided through contacts at InterActive, a local NGO working in the village, further strengthened the reason for selection.

For interview sampling, the study adopted a combination of convenience sampling and snow ball sampling (Patton, 1990). Some interviews were selected based only on their availability and willingness to participate. Other respondents were identified by asking people to introduce individuals that would be able to provide information regarding specific aspects of school investments. The only criteria used for sampling was that respondents would be one of the main caregivers for at least one school aged child. Most respondents were thus parents, although a few grandparents were also interviewed.

In qualitative research, validity, meaningfulness and insights generated from the data are dependent on the richness of the gathered information rather than on the number of interviews. The sample size was therefore not determined before entering the field, and redundancy was the primary criteria for knowing when a sufficient number was attained. When no more new information was appearing from new interviews, the data collection was stopped (Patton, 1990: 184-5; Creswell, 2014: 189).

## Interviews

As the aim of data collection was to explore people's understanding and perceptions of a certain matter, in depth semi-structured interviews were used. Semi-structured interviews were being used in order to ensure that answers are adequately provided for a set of questions that are essential. Yet open-ended questions in a semi-structured form allows for additional information to be retrieved as respondents elaborate (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011: 122-3). Individual interviews were the main method of conducting interviews. In addition, group interviews were conducted, enabling dynamic information rich discussions (Mack et al., 2005: 30). (See Appendix 2 for interview guide).

Access to interviewees was gained through InterActive and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and interviews were conducted in the beginning of January 2015. As wintertime is low season in Kyzyl Unkur, many people were able, and even seemed to appreciate, taking some time to talk about the topic of the study. Interviews were conducted during two visits to the village, three and one day long respectively, with a week in between. A sufficient time period between interviews may help to adjust questions and strategies according to findings (Creswell, 2014: 209) and the time between the visits provided an opportunity to do so.

In total, 26 interviews were conducted, out of which four were group interviews (see Appendix X for a detailed record of interviews). About half of the interviews were conducted in people's homes while the rest were conducted in the school and on the streets during walks in the village. Interviews

varied from 10 to 50 minutes. Interviews were recorded with consent given by interviewees.

As I don't speak any Kyrgyz, a translator was used for all interviews. Hence I only received a summarized version of answers, and significant nuances to respondents' thoughts may have been missed. This was especially true for group interviews where the pace of discussion generally was faster. The possible negative effects of lack of language skills were however mitigated by letting the translator transcribe about half of the interviews conducted. The presence of the translator, however, may have also brought some positive effects. Being a Kyrgyz woman, familiar with the Kyrgyz culture, she could help me understand cultural nuances to the answers, as well as provide guidance in how to act in during the interviews. Her presence also helped create a relaxed atmosphere, in which respondents could feel comfortable and talk more openly.

In addition to the interviews conducted with parents and grandparents, three interviews were conducted with UNICEF staff as well with staff from InterActive. These interviews were conducted in order to enhance understanding regarding educational policies and the implementation of the same.

## **Data Analysis**

Following Creswell's (2014: 197-8) approach for qualitative data analysis, respondents' answers were analyzed in six steps: organizing and preparing data; reading through all the data; coding of data; identification of major themes and descriptions; determining representation of data; and interpretation of findings. Although presented here as a linear process, the steps were applied in an interrelated manner, not always in the mentioned order. To make findings as concrete as soon as possible, data was reviewed concurrent with the interviews, on evenings during field visits as well as during the time between the visits (Creswell, 2014: 195-6).

Transcription of interviews were made manually, analyzing was, however, done using Nvivo. Themes were categorized in accordance to human capital theory, and were identified as: direct costs; family farming; walnut harvest; labor market and migration; quality of education; corruption; attitudes of children; ability to influence; and gender norms.

Policies were analyzed by conducting an alignment analysis, whereby the experiences of respondents were compared with the content in the policies, in order to identify eventual discrepancies (Case et al., 2004). This analysis was done using mainly the EDS, but other relevant

regulatory documents as well as secondary sources were also used. Finally, the identified discrepancies were analyzed using concepts from the participatory development approach as described by Chambers.

## **Reliability & Validity**

In order to ensure reliability of the data, transcripts were checked for mistakes. This was achieved by listening to the recordings of interviews again and comparing with the transcript as well as asking the translator if a fuller understanding were needed. Furthermore, the consistency in the use of coding was checked through systematically compare codes with the data (Creswell 2014: 203). As most data is based on respondents' subjective understanding of a matter, there are a number of possible biases that may have affected respondents' answers and the findings and conclusions drawn from them. Respondents' answers may be altered by the specific circumstances they find themselves in or how they perceive their situation in comparison to someone else's. Furthermore, the possibility of respondents being inclined to adjust answers according to what is found to be socially acceptable may not be ruled out (Ravallion, 2012; Lincove, 2015). In order to reduce possible effects of these biases and to increase validity of findings, a number of procedures were undertaken. Rich, thick descriptions were used in order to provide a realistic account and allow the readers' own interpretation of the data. Furthermore, both positive and negative information provided by respondents is presented in the analysis in order to provide a more realistic and valid account of their views. Triangulation of findings regarding the policy situation was achieved using several sources; interviews, policy documents and reports. Finally, group supervision and peer debriefing was utilized as a means to increase the accuracy of the study (Mikkelsen 2005:197; Creswell, 2014: 202).

## **Ethical Considerations**

The following measures were taken during fieldwork and subsequent data analysis in order to protect respondents from any negative affects due to their involvement in the study. Firstly, the research was conducted with approval from the principal of the village school. Furthermore, care was taken to ensure sensitivity towards respondents and not to invade their privacy or pressure them to take part in interviews or answering questions they felt uncomfortable with. Respondents were informed about the intended use of the information they provided and recordings were done after receiving consent. In order to ensure the anonymity of respondents, no names will be mentioned in the presentation of findings, and specific circumstances that could reveal respondents identity will

be excluded (Creswell, 2009: 90-91; Mikkelsen, 2005: 342-3).

## **Conceptual Framework**

This chapter will present the conceptual framework used to analyze the data and answer the study's research questions. Concepts from two different theoretical frameworks will be applied: human capital theory and the participatory development approach. In order to identify and present challenges to educational investments according to respondents, human capital theory's conceptualization of obstacles to educational investments will be applied. The policy context will be analyzed using concepts from the participatory development approach, mainly as described by Chambers (1997).

## **Human Capital Theory**

Formal education is, according to human capital theory, vital for the accumulation of a person's human capital, which consists of knowledge, skills, social abilities and personal attributes (OECD, 2001: 17-19; Simona, 2014: 270). The theory has its roots in neoclassical economics, in which people are expected to act as rational, profit seeking actors only undertaking education when it is expected to be the most profitable option. The accumulation of human capital leads, according to the theory, to an increased individual wealth as well as national growth (Becker, 1975; Tan, 2014). The theory has received critique of portraying a too simplistic view of this process, and not adequately taking into account the more complex system of social structures in which individual choices are made and outcomes are produced (Tan, 2014). Furthermore, human capital theory has been accused of leading to a misconception that education can solve any problem, and therefore contributing to attention being taken away from the need of economic and social reforms (Coffield, 1999). Human capital theory has, since its origin, become more complex and scholars within the field acknowledge that the straightforward and linear process predicted by the theory does not always correspond with reality. Social, political and cultural factors need to be accounted for when anticipating outcomes of educational investments, both on an individual and aggregated level (Pritchett, 2001). Furthermore, investments in human capital are acknowledged to lead to positive effects other than economic ones, such as improved health status, reduced income inequality, increased political and community participation (Lincove, 2015: 70; OECD, 2001). Later trends within human capital theory have also highlighted the crucial role of early childhood development and pay particular attention to that later acquirement of human capital builds on the base shaped during the earliest years of life (Heckman, 2006). Heckman (2006) also points out the importance of

family environment as the major factor affecting a person's human capital.

For the purpose of this study, the most relevant aspect of human capital theory is its conceptualization of obstacles to investments in human capital in the form of formal education. Traditionally, human capital theory has divided these obstacles into three categories: direct costs; indirect costs; and low perceived benefits (Lincove, 2015; Leech, 1998). In order to account for the social structures which might effect individuals' choices, a fourth category will be added: social obstacles (Pritchett, 2001).

- Directs costs are expenses for education such as tuition fees. Even where primary education is officially free, expenditures for transportation or equipment such as books or uniforms may be required in order to access school (Becker, 1975).

- Indirect costs are those foregone investments that are made impossible due to the investments in education. The time spent on schooling might eliminate the possibility to work, or reduce the time spent on leisure. When money is invested in education it might mean that investments in other areas have to be cancelled (Leech, 1998; Becker, 1975).

- Low perceived benefits is the belief that education will not yield sufficient returns in order to be worth the investment. In reality, returns of education depend on a number of factors, including the overall development of the country. As such, this factor is hard for individuals to calculate and is mostly based on generalizations made from one's own experiences (Emeson and Knabb, 2013).

- Social obstacles include culturally and norm based reasons for not investing in children's schooling, such as discrimination against girls or disabled children (UNESCO IS and UNICEF, 2015).

## **Participatory Development Approach**

By actively involving target communities in development projects, participatory development aims to create a voice for marginalized people and allowing them to have more control over development processes. Moreover, as priorities are elicited directly from beneficiaries information, errors are seen to be reduced (Mansuri and Rao, 2004; Cornwall, 2003).

One of the most influential names within participatory development is Robert Chambers. Chambers

(1997) claims that most development policies and initiatives fail to allow the meaningful inclusion of local people's experience and knowledge. Hence, such development projects ultimately fail to represent the realities of the intended beneficiaries. Chambers finds three interdependent mechanisms, which combined with vested interests, causes this problem: professionalism; distance; and power.

## **Professionalism**

The concept of professionalism is concerned with knowledge; what and how we learn, analyze and prescribe within development. Chambers claims that in development processes, learning is likely to come from above or laterally, and follow certain ideologies and fashions (Chambers, 1997: 31-38). He argues that development professionals usually make out a heterogeneous group, consisting of highly educated people, and that strong social structures within this group reinforces dominant values and beliefs (Chambers, 1997: 31). One of the most pervasive values among development professionals is measurability, the demand to define social change and results by numbers. This results in complex and varied realities being simplified and reduced to numbers and standards. Chambers claims that most often it is not suitable to design interventions based on this methodology, as it most likely will lead to failing to represent the local, complex, diverse, dynamic and unpredictable realities of the poor (Chambers, 1997: 32).

## **Distance**

According to Chambers (1997), development professionals are often situated on a distance, far from the realities they are analyzing, planning and prescribing for. Distances take on different forms. It is often physical as policy makers usually are found in cities far away from beneficiaries. Organizationally, planners and target communities normally have very different norms and routines. There are also social distances, as the two groups usually have different cultures and ways of life. Finally, the distance often is cognitive, as life is seen through different sets of categories, criteria, values and life experiences. Due to these distances, professionals are required to rely on secondary data, i.e. transferred realities, and make assumptions based on these (ibid).

## **Power**

Development implementers and development beneficiaries are two distinct groups. Implementers, usually a small group of people qualified by professional authority, control of funds or position in a hierarchy, are the ones possessing power to decide over development processes (Chambers, 1997).

It is the realities of these people that tend to dominate the meanings and concepts presented in development discourse, and as such both reflect and influence what is done (Chamber, 2004: iii). Power relations can, according to Chambers (1997), therefore be a source of error, as the ruling norms and fashions predict what will be learnt. Chambers claims that in order for development enterprises to be more effective, the powerful need to disempower themselves and learn from the people they are intending to assist (ibid).

Furthermore, Chambers claims that there are two types of power centers within the development sector: national governments in the South, and the global network of influence, with the Bretton Woods institutions in the forefront. These two centers work jointly, although the global network is the most powerful of the two (ibid).

It is for this notion of power dichotomy that Chambers has received most critique. Critics claim that this rather simplistic view is failing to address the dynamic power relations within a group. This might have severe implications, as development projects might be dominated by powerful groups within the target community, resulting in vulnerable groups still being voiceless and without control (Rollin, J. 1999; Cornwall, 2003).

## **Existing Research**

This chapter will present an overview of challenges parents may face when aiming to invest in children's education, as identified by existing research.

## **Poverty and Labor**

Poverty is one of the main reasons for children around the world to be out of school or at risk of dropping out (Sabates et al., 2010, Hunt, 2008; Castillo et al., 2014). In a comparative study of 63 countries, Hattori (2014) found that the average number of out of school children was 22 per cent among the poorest household quintile. For the richest household quintile, the corresponding number was 6 per cent.

Poverty restricts poor households from paying school fees or other direct costs for education, such as transportation and procurement of learning materials. It may also lead to an increased need for child labor, either within the household or outside in order to increase family income. In countries

with highest absenteeism and dropout rates, the financial costs of school fees, informal fees paid to schools and teachers, or loss of income from a child's work the main barrier to education (UNESCO IS and UNICEF, 2015: 42; Lincove, 2015). Children in rural areas are more likely to concurrently be involved in work and school, while urban children are more likely to do either or (Andvig et al, n.d.).

Poverty is furthermore often seen in combination with other features related to socially disadvantaged groups, such as migrants, orphans, minority groups and other marginalized groups, that further decreases the demand for education (Hunt, 2008: 52; Lewin, 2007).

## **Conflict**

Data on out of school children show that the likelihood of the children living in fragile or conflict afflicted areas being out of school is almost three times higher than for children living in other areas of the developing world (World Bank, 2011). Other than through the displacement of people and closing down of schools, conflicts may cut down the demand for education by reducing the chances of a good job in the future or making it unsafe to send children to school (Shemyakina, 2011; Chamarbagwala and Moran, 2009; UNICEF, 2008).

## **Gender**

Social practices based on gender norms shape parents' educational decisions and create different attendance patterns for girls and boys (Thakre et al., 2011). At a regional level, gender differences in dropout rates are mainly found throughout the African continent, where girls are often absent from school, and in Latin America and the Caribbean, where boys are more at risk of dropping out early (UNESCO IS, 2014; Cid and Stokes, 2013). Generally, school safety seems to be important in order to increase girls' attendance rates, while boys' absenteeism seems to be more affected by the need of labor (Colclough et al., 2000; Leach et al., 2003).

## **Disability**

Disabled children are also less likely to be attending school. In many societies, disability is perceived as shameful and may cause parents to keep their children at home. The stigma connected with disability also causes the children to be underrepresented in official statistics (Kayama and Haight, 2013; UNESCO, 2013). Some parents' belief that disabled children have limited ability to

learn might also hinder them from attending school. These perceptions often work in tandem with the inaccessibility of schools (Filmer, 2005; Antiniwicz and Sainazarov, 2013).

## **Health Issues**

If a parent falls ill, it often leads to parents being less able to support their children's schooling, and thus leads to absenteeism and school dropout. Furthermore, children are often required to stay home as care givers due to sickness, especially girls in poorer households (Case & Ardington, 2004; Batbaatar, et al, 2006).

## **Migration**

When parent migrate, both negative and positive effects have been found on the children's attendance rates. Remittances sent back to the family may be invested in education and increase attendance rates (Hashim, 2005; Mansuri, 2006). A study conducted in Pakistan showed that children in migrant households have higher attendance rates and are more likely to remain in school, but educational benefits from migration are dependent on the size of the income and that it interacts with household structure and thus affects girls and boys differently (Mansuri, 2006). Other studies have, however, shown how the decreased parental support due to migration can lead to lesser investments in schooling (Nasritdinov and Schenkkan, 2012).

## **Supply Side Barriers**

Many governments are still unwilling or unable to provide access to school for all children. Reoccurring problems in these countries are lack of classrooms and teachers (Lincove, 2015; Sabates et al., 2010: 18). Poor quality of teaching, long distances to school, inadequate facilities and inappropriate language of instruction further decreases children's learning opportunities (Colclough, et al. 2000; Hunt, 2008). Parents' perceptions of how education will affect children's lifestyle and job opportunities have been seen to affect attendance rates. If the quality of education is perceived to be low, parents may be less motivated to invest in education. Additionally, children's academic potential and the availability of access to secondary schooling may further affect parents' willingness to invest in education (Sabates et al., 2010: 13; UNESCO IS and UNICEF, 2015).

This overview indicates that many challenges are found to be present in many parts of the world. Research does, however, also indicate that factors affecting educational choices may be highly

context specific. They may have different roots, and the ways in which they lead to lesser investments in education might vary widely, depending on the context. As such, studies such as this, which aim at exploring local contexts, are needed in order to fully understand specific mechanisms of low education investments made by parents (Lincove, 2015; UNESCO IS and UNICEF, 2015: 40, 43).

## Analysis

In the following chapter, an analysis of the findings will be presented. Parents' perceptions will be analyzed and presented in accordance to the four concepts of obstacles to educational investments provided by human capital theory: direct costs; indirect costs; low perceived benefits; and social obstacles. For each section, relevant policy responses, or the lack of responses, will be presented. Concepts from the participatory development approach, as presented by Chambers (1997; 2004; 2014), will be applied throughout the analysis in order to explore whose realities are represented in the policies.

## Direct Costs

According to human capital theory, the direct costs of schooling may pose barriers for parents to invest in their children's education (Lincove, 2015). When discussing educational choices with parents in Kyzyl Unkur, many mentioned the challenge of lack of finances related to educational investment. However, although Kyzyl Unkur is a community where socioeconomic problems are widespread, none of the respondents mentioned lack of finances as a direct hindrance for their children to attend classes at school<sup>2</sup>. Finances were seen by respondents only to hinder attendance indirectly, as children were needed for labor. This will be discussed in the next section.

Some respondents did, however, mention that lack of finances hindered them from being able to provide the conditions necessary to facilitate an optimal learning environment for their children. The conditions included things like a good study environment at home and provision of books and computers.

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<sup>2</sup> Some respondents found the chance of sending their children to university in the future as small, due to the high costs associated with entering a good university. In order to increase equality of university access, a national scholarship test by which students may access higher education regardless of geographical or social background, was introduced by the government in 2004 (CEATM, 2004). Respondents knew about this test and saw it as a possible way for their children to gain access to university. They did however claim that there was too little information available to them about this opportunity.

*“Whether or not a child succeeds in school depends on teachers, but first of all on the home, on the parents ... They should give everything, provide all the conditions for the child to study at home. But we can't, we haven't the possibility to make all the conditions, because of lack of money.”* (Respondent, interview 11)

The issue of direct costs is addressed in EDS through interventions directed at children at risk of absenteeism due to lack of finances. These interventions include providing targeted financial support, catering services, and free textbooks for children from low income families.

Some respondents were hindered to move their children from the village school to a better school located in town due to lack of finances. Transferring children to a better school was seen by these respondents as the only way of ensuring that they would receive education of good quality. The issue of education quality will, however, be discussed under the section of perceived future benefits as it relates to the expected returns of investing in education.

## **Indirect Costs**

The following section presents the indirect costs of education as expressed by parents. These are educational investments that would require a decrease in investments in other areas of life (Leech, 1998: 293). Two major themes were brought up by respondents: the need for children to help with the everyday workload of farm life; and the walnut harvest. Although both are related to agricultural activities, the situation surrounding them and affecting educational choices are diverse, and they are therefore presented in separate sections.

## **Family Farming**

Parents in Kyzyl Unkur are dependent on children's help to manage the everyday workload of farm life. Tasks performed by children include working in the fields, taking care of animals and doing household chores. The affects are that the children sometimes are required to miss classes, but also the reduction of time available for homework. Respondents report that the workload is particularly intense during spring when fields are prepared and crops are planted; during this period school attendance is especially low.

*“During the spring all work starts. Digging the ground, planting potatoes, sunflowers, grain, etc. Shortly, in the village, there is always work. One or two people can't manage with all that, so parents ask for help from their children”* (Respondent, interview 4)

*“My children miss school 1-2 days a week. They miss school when they get ill, and when there are some work at home”* (Respondent, interview 19)

Respondents did, however, to a varying extent, seem able to combine the need for children to help with the practice of sending them to school and to allow time for homework. Some parents reported that their children, on a weekly basis, missed days in school, while others claimed to ensure that household chores did not inflict on school attendance. The choice to let children work instead of attending school was, according to respondents, not always motivated by an indispensable need for the children to work. Depending on how parents viewed other issues, such as future plans, quality of school and children's attitudes towards school, there seemed to be flexibility for how much children were required to work.

*“My husband always tries to make the children look after the sheep instead of going to school because he always says that they can make their lives by looking after the sheep”* (Respondent, interview 14)

*“Parents make children stay home and work, instead of going to school because they are not satisfied with the education in the school. They think their children won't learn something there, and they think teachers won't conduct good classes anyway. So it's better stay home and do some work when needed”* (Respondent, interview 4)

## Walnut Harvest

The walnut harvest is the main source of income for people in Kyzyl Unkur. Although concentrated to a few weeks during the fall, the harvest is the largest workload for households. The centrality of the walnuts makes the harvest a dominant theme for life in the village. Every person talked to agreed that it is an indispensable part of life.

*“The harvest is a life condition. We have no income except nuts. We all go; the kids cannot stay home alone by themselves so we take them with us”* (Respondent, interview 11)

*“It's our life. What to do? It's only 10-20 days. If we will find a good job in future, maybe then we won't go to pick the nuts”* (Respondent, interview 5)

During the harvest season, as all families move to the forest, children are not able to attend school. When discussing the effects of the harvest on children's education, various views were expressed. Some respondents claimed that there are no negative affects since the school provides extra classes during spring and winter break. They claimed that children are able to catch up for the missed classes. For these people, the decision to bring their children to the forest was easy. Others experienced feeling stuck in the tradeoff between the income from walnuts and the negative affects the harvest had on their children's schooling. Some regretted sending their children to the forest and saw the harvest as the main reason for low student achievements in Kyzyl Unkur. They reported

that since the curriculum is not adapted for the missed time, students are left with big knowledge gaps due to the harvest. Parents also claimed that students become overloaded with work when trying to catch up.

*“There are two variants. One: going to school and not skipping classes, it's good. Two: picking nuts, it's also good. But we have to choose picking nuts. It's us parents' fault for taking children to pick nuts instead of going to school. But without nuts, it would be very hard for us and for our kids”* (Respondent, interview 6)

*“I regret sending the children to pick nuts, but what to do? They have to go there. Everybody is going there, even the school is closed”* (Respondent, interview 1)

Some parents tried to compensate the missed classes by bringing books to the forest as well as teaching their children themselves. Others expressed hopelessness as they didn't see any way to possibly compensate for the missed classes.

As with the need for children to help with family farming, parents were reasoning differently regarding the necessity of bringing children to the forest. Some parents felt they could spare the assistance of their children if it would be possible to let them attend school during the harvest. But the school was closed and there was no one there to care for their children. Some respondents said that, if the school was open, it would be possible to let their children stay in the village in the care of grandparents during the harvest. Respondents also mentioned the possibility of sending their children to boarding schools as a way of preventing them from missing school.

*“Our children go with us because nobody is here in the village, in the school ... As long as I know, school never worked during the harvest season. It is open, but no teachers and students are there. It is impossible to change something.”* (Respondent, interview 21)

*“If the school was open during harvest, I would keep my children here. For me, my children's education is more important than nuts. Nuts are just a temporary help, but education will help them in their whole life ... My children are always with us, that's why I'm relaxed. I always think that my kids will help me. But if they are away, I won't be very relaxed. I'll try hard, work more. My children will get a good education, and that will motivate me.”* (Respondent, interview 4)

Other respondents said that it would be impossible to not have their children with them during the harvest. This was in part because the children needed to be cared for, and in part because the children were needed in order to manage the harvest. For some families, children were the ones carrying the biggest workload, and they were especially needed in the face of competition from other families.

*“Yes, the harvest has bad effects, children will miss classes. But picking nuts is good for us, for parents, for family budget. It is impossible to leave the children. Children do the most work, and without nuts we can’t maintain ourselves. I told you education is good, everybody needs education, but it’s a harvest season. We have to work during the harvest season and then we can buy to our kids all the equipment like books, copybook, pen, clothes etc.”* (Respondent, interview 6)

*“If my kids don't pick the nuts, someone else's will”* (Respondent, interview 26)

## **Policy Response – Agricultural Activities**

The EDS does not address the issue of absenteeism due to agricultural activities. This is a foundational discrepancy between the experiences of the respondents and the policies since agricultural activities is a central feature of respondents' lives.

A main objective for the EDS is to ensure equal access to quality education, regardless of place of residence, and the EDS acknowledges that a critical area of inequality is the difference between rural and urban students. Family farming has further been reported as a common reason for rural children to be out of school (UNICEF, 2008). Despite these facts, no specific measures are taken in order to address these particular needs of rural children. It is thus likely that the policies, in this regard, fail to represent not only the realities of people in Kyzyl Unkur, but most likely many people in the rural parts of the country.

Furthermore, the circumstances around the walnut harvest indicate a lack of political will to actually implement adopted policies. According to informants at UNICEF and InterActive, the government is unwilling to address the issue. For instance, efforts to adapt the semester according to the harvest has been avoided as it would be an inconvenient process. The only initiative to address the negative effects of the harvest is initiated from the school level, with support from InterActive. Together, they train teachers and conduct additional classes during spring and winter break. These classes are, however, not utilized fully by all students and it is questionable if they are enough to compensate for the missed time. The classes are furthermore done unofficially, as the schedule, according to the current regulations, cannot be changed (UNICEF/NGO respondent).

According to Chambers (1997; 2014), this is a common phenomenon within development work; government policies of developing countries are designed and adopted based on other motivations than the actual will to implement them. He claims that accountability often is directed upwards due to the power relations between donor organizations and aid receiving countries. This might lead to

policies being designed in accordance to the right words and concepts, rather than an accurate account of beneficiaries' realities.

International organizations and donors have played an important role in the development of the EDS (McLean, 2013; DP, 2012). The EDS starts off with declaring that the strategy is aimed at reaching the global educational goals of the MDGs and the EFA initiative. Furthermore, OECD has, through the PISA surveys, been influential in the process of developing the policies. The results of the surveys of 2006 and 2009, as well as the connected evaluation, have to a large extent been the base of the education reform in Kyrgyzstan (GoK, 2009). Secondary sources further point to the centrality of donor involvement in the policy design. McLean (2013) points out that Kyrgyzstan's education sector has had a steady policy direction since 2007 and he claims that it is partly due to the continuing influence of international donors. Furthermore, he points out that the development of the EDS was primarily driven by external actors and that it was based on insufficient needs assessments and situation analyses (McLean, 2013). Also, in an evaluation of international donor involvement in the Kyrgyz education sector, Steiner-Khamsi and Chankiani (2008) found the risk that given former experiences of donor involvement within the sector, the process of the EDS would be donor-driven.

Based on these findings, one might conclude that the EDS does not properly represent the realities of the people in Kyzyl Unkur regarding the issue of absenteeism due to agricultural activities and that they even seem to, to some extent, represent the realities of international actors involved in the Kyrgyz education sector.

The government's ability to properly account for the rural realities may, according to Chambers (1997), be restrained further by the distance between policy makers and the people in the village. The distance between Kyzyl Unkur and the seat of government in Bishkek is not only far in geographical terms, the political and socioeconomic fraction between the north and the south further adds to the differences in mentality. The main distance might, however, be due to the significant variance in lifestyles between rural agricultural life and life in Bishkek (Cummings, 2013: 52). The fact that fundamental aspects of life in rural Kyrgyzstan are the ones omitted might therefore not come as a surprise, as these aspects are likely to be less relevant for people in the government in Bishkek.

## Low Perceived Benefits

How the future is perceived by parents is, according to human capital theory, a factor influencing investments in education. Whether or not education is seen to be a beneficial investment affects investments made (Emeson and Knabb, 2013; Leech, 1998: 293). This connection was indicated also by respondents in Kyzyl Unkur. Many respondents mentioned plans for their children that included qualified jobs such as lawyers, doctors and teachers, and saw investments in education as a crucial investment. Others wanted their children to stay in the village and earn their living through farming and saw less need of educating their children. Two main factors were found to influence the perceived future benefits of education: the situation of the Kyrgyz labor market and the quality of education in the village.

## Labor Market and Migration

A substantial number of respondents mentioned high unemployment rates as a factor influencing how much they valued education. Some found educational investments unnecessary, as they saw that they wouldn't necessarily lead to a job, especially if you intended to stay in Kyzyl Unkur. Respondents with university diplomas mentioned how they themselves struggled to get a job. Furthermore, respondents claimed that even if education would lead to a job, the jobs available were often under paid and salaries too low to actually survive on.

*“I graduate teacher’s training collage ... Since I came here, I’ve been trying to get a job in this school, but they don’t have a place. So there are no jobs here! And even if people are educated and they have diplomas, the salary is so small”* (Respondent, interview 18)

*“Even if somebody has a high education it’s impossible in our country to build a good life because there are no good, well paid jobs. Instead of getting high education, sometimes we say that it is good to stay here to make honey, to pick nuts, to plant some potatoes. In this way people could make their life”* (Respondent, interview 14)

Respondents also mentioned that people are able to make money without any education. By making a career through trade, sports, or taking care of animals, people can earn more money than they would with a job requiring higher education. As such, the desire to have children live a financially rich life could, for some respondents, lead to reduced investments in education.

*“My husband always tries to make the children look after the sheep instead of going to school because he always says that they can make their lives by looking after the sheep... He doesn't have higher degree. His family was rich and he always looked after sheep. My parents made me marry him; they said that 'you will never be hungry with him'”* (Respondent, interview 14)

As in Kyrgyzstan in general, many people in Kyzyl Unkur see migration as a solution to the socioeconomic problems they are facing (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014:18). Almost all households in the village have at least one family member that has migrated. For respondents, it meant going there themselves occasionally, while others had sent or wanted to send their children, including school aged ones, to work or study. While many respondents saw migration to Russia as a way to get a better life, some mentioned the negative effects it had on their children's education.

*“Sending my daughter to Russia was good because she learnt Russian and she got used to life in a city, now she knows that life. But I am also a bit regretful because she missed school I thought she would catch up, but she had lost interest and has a hard time to catch up now.”* (Respondent, interview 21)

*“When we build a house or in such situations when we need more money, of course, we send our kids to Russia to make more money. But we also think it would be good for them to find a permanent job here and to work. But we have to make a choice, and we choose Russia.”* (Respondent, interview 18)

The possibility of sending children to Russia seems to have varying effects on educational choices. Some respondents expressed that investments in education are meaningless if you are going to move to Russia and work as unqualified labor. Other respondents wanted their children to go to Russia to continue their studies, or to get a job requiring higher education. They needed their children to study well while in Kyrgyzstan. There were also respondents saying that educational investments was a way for people to be able to understand the Russian society better and stand up for themselves while they were there. As such, education was a valuable investment even if you were going to work as unqualified labor.

*“We want our children to study well, to be well educated, to go abroad and study there. In Kyrgyzstan we don't have any good jobs... If they study well, if they learn foreign languages, if they try hard, maybe they will go”* (Respondent, interview 5).

When parents themselves migrate to Russia, they are less able to control their children and often become less involved in their children's lives (UNICEF, 2011:15). Respondents in Kyzyl Unkur also noticed a decrease in parent's ability and motivation to be involved in their children lives due to migration. Parents left their children in the care of family members or relatives, and as such also the responsibility of assuring that the children went to school.

*“Since my grandkids parents came back I'm telling them everything... I'm asking them to take the responsibility of their children now. I ask them go to school and check their children's studies, meet with teachers. But they will not.... Both of them are thinking*

*about going back to Russia. But I'm against it... I think I have to make them to stay here from Russia. I think only then, they will think more"* (Respondent, interview 2)

## **Policy Response – Labor Market and Migration**

These findings concerning the labor market call attention to the fact that the educational sector cannot by itself respond to the challenges faced by parents. Other sectors of society all have a role to play in facilitating children's education, as educational investments are influenced by factors outside the realm of the education sector (Antiniwicz and Sainazarov, 2013: 15). The EDS does, however, acknowledge these aspects of the respondents' realities. A great part of the education policy reform is aimed at adapting the education system to be in line with the job market. Almost all levels of education are affected by the changes. Profile schooling will be implemented for grades 10-11 and career guidance activities will be introduced. The labor market compliance of vocational training schools will be ensured through cooperation with enterprises and organizations on the basis of bilateral agreements. Higher education will also be adopted according to analyses of the labor market. The EDS also aims to reduce migration by developing the social infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan. Through investments in libraries, out-patient clinics, educational organizations and the introduction of ICT, people are expected to be less pushed to leave their local areas.

## **Quality of Education**

The quality of the school in Kyzyl Unkur was brought up by many respondents as a factor influencing perceived future earnings of education and thus affects the demand for education (Emeson and Knabb, 2013). Although some respondents considered the school quality to be of a satisfactory level or higher, others were worried since they found the teaching conducted at the school to be substandard.

*"My grandkid's education level is low. My level is bad, I can say. But even for me their level feels bad."* (Respondent, interview 2)

*"Now our children are studying here. But when they enter college or university we don't know how they will study. We are afraid of how they will study in college, because the education level is bad here"* (Respondent, interview 6)

Respondents expressed that they thought education would be more important if the quality was higher. For some, the low quality of the school worked as a disincentive to invest in education. The standard of the teaching made them question the use of sending their children to school when the efforts made wouldn't lead to a good education.

*“In town I used to get grade 2 or 3, 4 was rare. When we moved here, I became an excellent student, even if I didn’t make an effort. Then I told myself it’s not necessary to go to school and to study. There was no result.”* (Respondent, interview 21)

As a result of the low quality of schooling, respondents expressed feelings of hopelessness and worry concerning their children's future education opportunities and the possibility of getting a good job. Some assumed that as they themselves attended the school, their children will end up in the same life situation as they are in. And as they didn't have jobs, they wish something else for their children. Some considered moving their children to another better school located in the town, while this was not a viable option for others.

*“We studied here, so what’s the result? We don’t have any job, we don’t have anything ... People don’t care much, because they can’t change things. Bad teachers, bad quality, people don’t care. Everybody knows they are sending their kids to a bad education. But what to do?”* (Respondent, interview 4)

The main area of concern brought up by respondents regarding the quality of education was teacher competency. Many respondents believed that some teachers, especially among the younger ones, weren't qualified for their position and thus undermined the quality of the teaching provided. English and Russian teachers' abilities were perceived to particularly be of unacceptable standard.

*“There are two variants of teachers; old teachers are qualified, they know their subject well. Young teachers are not qualified, because they didn’t study. They are worse than students. They are zeros”* (Respondent, interview 18)

*“There are a lot of teacher, who graduated as part-time students. And then, they came here and are teaching children. They don’t know anything. It would be better, if I teach them... We don’t have good English and Russian language teachers ... The children don’t even learn new words. There were two or three good language teachers, but they left and now the teachers don’t even know foreign language letters”* (Respondent, interview 6)

Another area of concern to some respondents was the belief that some teachers working in the school had bought their diplomas, and thus was unqualified to work as teachers. It's a small village and people see that young people, without necessarily leaving the village or attending university, can get a diploma and start working as teachers.

*“80 per cent of the teachers bought their diplomas. They never face university and now they are teaching, so what kind of students are they upbringing?”* (Respondent, interview 4)

*“I can guarantee 100 percent that many teachers are not highly educated. I know a lot of teachers, they were always here, picking nuts, but now they are teachers. It means they bought their diplomas.”* (Respondent, interview 21)

Respondents were also concerned about the attitudes of the teachers working at the school. By talking to their children, they received the impression that some teachers were unmotivated and not sufficiently engaged in the teaching activities and the learning of students. Some respondents also wished that teachers would be stricter, as they thought students could do as they wanted to in school, without any consequences. Another concern brought up was that one teacher sometimes teaches a number of subjects, including subjects outside of their area of competency. Also, the fact that one teacher sometimes looks after three classes at one time is seen as a negative influence on quality.

*“During their period it was very strict and they were afraid of their teachers. Students aren't afraid of teachers; they argue and do what they want. The strict is good. Teachers were strict and students afraid that's why they teach all the time and the learn all the time”* (Respondent, interview 13)

*“If there is some party, all the teachers go there. They just leave students alone in school, sometimes only one teacher can look after 3-4 classes... My daughter tells us every day, what they did. Every day teachers tell them to read a book and leave until 5 minutes before the bell”* (Respondent, interview 4)

In addition to low teacher quality, lack of books and computers were mentioned by respondents when discussing the quality of school. Although the lack was not seen to have as severe consequences as the lack of qualified teachers, respondents saw it as an improvement that could increase the quality of the school.

### **Policy Response - Quality of Education**

In line with experiences expressed by respondents in Kyzyl Unkur, the EDS recognize quality of teaching as an area in need of improvement. The EDS addresses the issues of insufficient supply of textbooks and computers, and acknowledges that the unequal distribution favors urban areas of the country. Much effort has been put in to providing books to all students and the aim of EDS is to gradually increase the number of students with access to a computer throughout the country.

Furthermore, the strategy outlines teacher effectiveness as a key component and much attention is given to it in the strategy, and several tasks are devoted to it in the APED. A problem analysis is provided, pointing out lack of staff, low status of the profession, inadequate qualifications and poor salaries as main challenges.

In order to address these needs, the EDS aims at increasing the number of pedagogical students becoming teachers and the number of teachers that continue working after the first year of employment. Assessment, management and motivation systems for teachers will be improved and pedagogical practices will be enhanced. A reform of the in-service training system and new certification requirements for employees of educational institutions will be introduced.

Special attention is given to the fact that lack of qualified teachers is higher in rural parts of the country. According to the law, rural teachers are entitled to benefits from local governments as well as support for transportation and utilities. However, monitoring of the implementation shows that most local governments do not create the conditions for teachers they are obliged to (GoK, 2009: 12).

Although the EDS deal with the issue of teacher efficiency, the measures are not complete in comparison to respondents' experiences. According to respondents, corruption is one of the main reasons for the lack of competent teachers. The possibility for Kyrgyz university students to buy their diplomas is further confirmed by secondary sources (Martini, 2013). In accordance to Chambers (1997), this points to policy solutions based on a simplified version of reality, missing probably one of the main underlying causes to the low quality of teaching. The policy response is based on measurable activities such as increasing the number of university student within pedagogical institutes. However, even if these goals are met the measures will be ineffective if a number of graduates yearly have bought their diplomas.

The EDS also lacks a clear strategy of how teachers will be motivated and mobilized to contribute to an increased teaching quality. In this point the EDS also seem to neglect a more dynamic approach in favor of measurability. This might also be the result of professionalism, and its inherent need to conceptualize results and change as something measurable (Chambers 1997).

The EDS partly represents the realities of the respondents concerning the low quality of education as it addresses the lack of qualified teachers, especially in rural areas. From a perspective based on Chambers' (1997) thoughts, the EDS does, however, seem to be influenced by professionalism, whereby measurability is a central feature and leads to rather simplistic measures.

## Corruption

In addition to the issues of unqualified teachers and lack of resources, corruption was seen as a factor further influencing respondents perception of the quality of school. Hence it is seen as a phenomenon affecting the perceived future benefits and decreases the demand for education (Emeson and Knabb, 2013). Respondents reported that parents could bribe teachers in order to get good marks for their children and that teachers irrespective of academic achievement give higher grades to students from rich families.

*“Some students miss school all the time, but teachers give them grade 5, because they are from a rich family. This is usual in our village ... When students graduate, they can change a grade three to a grade five, you only need to organize a little party for the teachers. Teachers teach equally, but during the exams, a kid from rich family gets higher scores than the poor. They don’t consider knowledge, they consider money.”*  
(Respondent, interview 4)

According to respondents, the possibility of bribing your way through school and to a career was present in the minds of students, teachers and parents. As in the case of the quality of school, some respondents expressed hopelessness over the situation. Even though they are aware of the injustices taking place, most people talked to felt that there wasn't anything they could do or say to change the situation.

The suspicion of bribery and teachers who had bought their diplomas furthermore effected some parents confidence and trust in teachers and school. Some felt hopelessness as they felt couldn't do anything to change the situation.

*“Teachers realize their own degree, but they won’t do anything because they don’t want to lose their job and their salary. Of course, the community knows of the bad quality, but they don’t speak. And of course, teachers hide everything”* (Respondent, interview 2)

*“There could be a little offense inside of us but theres nothing to say or do about it. We just go to the parent meetings and teachers tell us the problems and they ask us to attend the classes. We just go and listen, the level of influence is not very high”*  
(Respondent, interview 13)

Furthermore, a number of respondents mention that they were asked to contribute financially when the school needed resources to finance needs such as repairs of buildings. Although primary education is supposed to be free in Kyrgyzstan, the issue of so called public funds is a well-known phenomenon in Kyrgyz schools (Sultanov, 2012). Most respondents talked about the phenomena with acceptance and did not seem to view it as a problem. Others did however express some distrust

towards the school's way of handling their money.

*“When the school needs some money they call for parent meetings. They talk about school repair, that they need money for that, about upbringing and they invite us to attend our children’s classes, so we can see with own eyes what’s going on... This is my personal opinion, if one good teacher will come to our village and will teach my children for money, I would pay directly to that teacher, not to the school”* (Respondent, interview 4)

## **Policy Response – Corruption**

The issue of corruption is explicitly only mentioned briefly in the EDS, when recounted as one of many risks and challenges that might affect implementation of the strategy. Here a low level of academic honesty is also mentioned. In addition, the EDS include measures addressed at increasing transparency, such as the creation of boards of trustees, public councils and public hearings of budget planning and execution. Also the increased measures of monitoring may have positive impacts on the practice of corruption.

The EDS, furthermore, acknowledges that a quarter of costs in an average school are paid by student households and the strategy is aimed at increasing the transparency, accountability and targeting of the practice rather than decreasing it. This will be done through increased public scrutiny and budget hearings. The aim is that by the end of 2020 50 per cent of all schools in the country will have a functioning board of trustees.

Although the EDS address the issue of corruption to a certain degree, according to respondents and other sources the problem still exists in practice throughout the Kyrgyz education and is described as a problem with deep roots (Martini, 2013). The measures taken within the education policy might thus, according to Chambers (1997), be seen as quite simplistic in relation to the complexity of the problem. Whereas the need is for initiatives directed at the core of the problem, the measures outlined in the EDS might not be sufficient. The widely accepted culture of corruption probably has a great chance of also infiltrating the boards of trustees and public councils that will be established. As such, a rather simplified version of respondents' realities can be said to be represented.

## **Attitudes of Children**

As identified by human capital theory, the low perceived benefits seemed to result in a lesser demand for education (Emeson and Knabb, 2013). It thus appeared that the motivation for some

parents to send their children to school was to some extent determined by children's attitudes towards school. In these households, the decision to invest or not in children's education is highly influenced by children's willingness and motivation to study. If children are interested and want to study, parents were found to be supporting. But if children are unmotivated, parents are not very strict in trying to get their children to attend school every day or do homework.

*“My kids don’t have a big interest in school. They go to school just to play a volleyball or something else. But my daughter study well. If they would have more interest in school, maybe then I would value it higher. But they like games more than school.”*  
(Respondent, interview 19)

*“I think it depends on children. If their children are interested in school, if they study well they care. If teachers tell them, that their children are studying well and then they will think more, pay more attention. If their kid doesn’t study, they don’t care.”*  
(Respondent, interview 6)

Respondents also reported a connection between how well children are performing in school and the investments they make in education. If parents hear from teachers that their children are doing well in school, this will work as an incentive to be more involved and pay more attention to how the children are doing. On the other hand, if a child is not performing well in school, this might work as a disincentive for investments.

*“One of my children, he doesn't studies very good. It's hard for him to communicate with people so I said to him, just stay home because it's going to be very hard for you to get high education, to communicate with them.”* (Respondent, Interview 14)

## **Social Obstacles**

Choices affecting investments in schooling are many times influenced by cultural beliefs and practices (UNICEF, 2012: 38). In Kyzyl Unkur, respondents frequently mentioned practices relating to gender structures as the basis for educational choices made.

### **Practices Based on Gender Norms**

The main difference in attitudes towards investments in girls and boys were based on the fact that many girls are married off at an early age. Parents expressed that the incentives to invest in daughters’ education therefore might be smaller than for sons.

*“We plan to get our daughter married after graduation. So what's the point of education for girls then? Education is good for boys not for girls, because girls going to*

*get married and if their husband doesn't want them to work, it's just wasting time. Boys are going to be the ones who will provide for their families.”* (Respondent, interview 23)

Some respondents did, however, mention that even if they plan to marry their daughter off, there is a value in investing in her education as she, through education, can get a higher status within the new family. It was also seen by some as better for girls if they gain knowledge and learn how to make money, even if they will get married in the future.

Other differences between investments made in boys and in girls were mentioned in connection to labor. Boys were said to be required to help more during spring season with planting, leading to seasonally lower attendance rates for them. On the other hand, girls were mentioned more than boys in relation to helping with chores at home.

### **Policy Responses – Practices Based on Gender Norms**

No specific interventions are aimed at addressing social obstacles such as the ones mentioned by respondents. The EDS aims at developing a strategic management system, in which planning will be informed by statistics, including gender disaggregated data. This may, according to Chambers (1997), be another example of where the reliance on numbers and measurability leads to simplistic policies. One aim of the EDS is to ensure equal access to education regardless of gender. In Kyrgyzstan, gender parity is almost achieved in terms of attendance rates and school dropout (UNICEF, 2012). As the goal of gender equality as measured in enrollment is basically met, policy measures to further address gender issues might be considered less important. The perceptions expressed by informants did, however, indicate that different attitudes towards schooling for boys and girls exist, and other sources confirm that these attitudes are prevalent in other parts of the country (UNICEF, 2011: 25). Although such attitudes do not always result in different attendance rates, norms and social structures might work to decrease girls or boys learning opportunities in different ways. The reliance on measurability may lead to a mindset that concludes that as long as specific goals are attained, the problem related to the goal is solved, while missing the more complex and dynamic reality in need of more complex and dynamic responses (Verger et al., 2012: 25; Chambers, 1997).

### **Parents' Involvement in School**

According to participatory development approach, one of the ways in which the realities of beneficiaries should be represented, is through the active involvement of them in policy design and

implementation. This is a crucial component in order to most efficiently achieve a successful intervention (Mansuri and Rao, 2004). They are the ones that know the realities in which they live and can therefore provide invaluable insights to the planning and implementation of projects and policies (Chambers, 1997). It is also confirmed by studies that a high level of support and involvement of parents and community in school is often significant for school effectiveness. Community involvement has furthermore been seen to decrease dropout rates and absenteeism (Heneveld, 2007: 643; Antiniwicz and Sainazarov, 2013: 25).

Although a number of respondents claimed to have an open and well-functioning communication with the school, a substantial number of respondents felt that the level of parental influence over school decisions wasn't very high. Respondents mentioned that people in the community don't speak up about concerns regarding their children's schooling. One reason given was that people might feel worried that their children will be treated badly if they speak up about concerns. Furthermore, respondents expressed the need for parents and school to work more together, especially regarding the situation concerning the walnut harvest.

*“Of course, the community knows of the bad quality, but they don't speak. And of course, teachers hide everything... If there are 100 parents, only 3-5 parents want to speak up”* (Respondent, interview 2)

*“There could be a little offense inside of us but there is nothing to say and nothing to do about it. We just go to the parent meetings and teachers tell us the problems and they ask us to attend the classes. We just go and listen, the level of influence is not very high”* (Respondent, interview 13)

*“Parents have to go to school, attend their kid's classes and tell to teaching staff about bad teachers. But parents are afraid to do that! They think teachers will treat their kids bad after that. And not a lot of parents go and attend classes. Parents and teachers need to work together!”* (Respondent, interview 18)

### **Policy Response – Parents' Involvement in School**

The EDS aims at increasing local responsibility through decreased regulations of processes. It furthermore aims at increasing the number of school with organizations, such as boards of trustees and parent's committees, operating. The goal is to by 2020 have such organizations established in more than 50 per cent of all schools in Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, training of administration and parents in the principles of state-public management and organization.

The measures are mainly focused on increasing the amount of schools with organizations facilitating community involvement. Although the establishment of practical functions for

community-school relationship is crucial for parent involvement, it might not be sufficient. As indicated by respondents in Kyzyl Unkur, the existence of a parent committee do not necessarily mean that it functions efficiently to enhance ownership and involvement of parents. Secondary sources identifies that the role of civil society has been overlooked by both donor agencies and the government, in the policy process of the EDS (DP, 2012). According to Chambers (2014) there would be a need for more complex policy measures not only aimed at the establishment of structures but also directed to more important, yet hard to measure concepts, such as sustainability and ownership.

## Conclusion

Parents in Kyzyl Unkur experienced a number of challenges to make investments in their children's education. The main challenges brought up by respondents were: family farming; the walnut harvest; the labor market and migration; low education quality; corruption; and practices based on gender norms. These challenges were also seen to work interactively to decrease the demand for education. A representation of most challenges faced by parents exists to some extent in the Kyrgyz education policies. However two fundamental features of life in the village are not acknowledged by the policies; family farming and the walnut harvest. By not addressing these essential features, the policies are failing to fully represent the realities of the intended beneficiaries. As such they are also failing to facilitate parents' investments in their children's education.

Furthermore, the issues surrounding the walnut harvest point to the government's lack of political will to implement adopted policies. This can according to Chambers (2004) be explained by the influence of global power centers over policy processes in aid receiving, developing countries such Kyrgyzstan. The motivation to adopt policies that are in accordance with global development discourse becomes the driving force, rather than the will to actually implement sound policies. Hence, the policies can be said to somewhat represent the realities of international actors involved in the education sector, rather than the realities of the beneficiaries.

In addition, many of the measures included in the policies, and aimed at addressing issues brought up also by respondents, were found to be rather simplistic. They were not justly representing the complexity of the situations leading to parent's lesser educational investments. Many of the measures, for example the ones directed toward corruption and gender equality, were found to be focused on measurable results and thus missing underlying non measurable mechanisms. This is

according to Chambers a result of professionalism, whereby focus is on results in the form of numbers.

Although the education policies are aimed at increasing the involvement of civil society, a substantial number of respondents mentioned that the level of influence they experienced to have over school procedures wasn't very high. This is a crucial area of improvement according to participatory development in order to ensure that beneficiaries' realities are represented in the implementation of education policies.

To conclude, findings reveal that the education policies of Kyrgyzstan fail to fairly represent the realities of the people in Kyzyl Unkur and that they to some extent represents the realities of international actors involved in the education sector of Kyrgyzstan. As such this study highlights the need for education policies to better represent the realities of the people they are intended to assist, with especial attention to the often complex interaction of factors effecting educational investments.

The above-mentioned findings suggest a need for further research to examine the possibilities of improving educational quality in remote and poverty-stricken areas. This could for instance involve looking at measures to attract qualified teachers to areas where there is a high prevalence of out of school children and children at risk of drop out.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Record of Respondents

No	Date	Type of Interview	Characteristics	No. of Respondents
1	2015-01-07	Informal	InterActive staff	1
2	2015-01-14	Informal	UNICEF staff	1
3	2015-01-16	Semi structured	Grandmother	1
4	2015-01-16	Semi structured	Grandparent	1
5	2015-01-16	Semi structured	Parent	1
6	2015-01-16	Semi structured	Parent	1
7	2015-01-16	Semi structured	Parent	1
8	2015-01-16	Semi structured	Parent/grandparent	3
9	2015-01-17	Semi structured	Parent	1
10	2015-01-17	Semi structured	Parent	1
11	2015-01-17	Semi structured	Parent	1
12	2015-01-17	Semi structured	Parent	2
13	2015-01-17	Semi structured	Parent	1
14	2015-01-17	Semi structured	Parent	1
15	2015-01-17	Semi structured	Parent/grandparent	3
16	2015-01-17	Semi structured	Parent	1
17	2015-01-17	Semi structured	Parent	1
18	2015-01-17	Semi structured	Parent	1
19	2015-01-18	Semi structured	Parent	1
20	2015-01-18	Semi structured	Parent	6
21	2015-01-18	Semi structured	Parent	1
22	2015-01-18	Semi structured	Parent	1
23	2015-01-18	Semi structured	Parent/grandparent	4
24	2015-01-22	Semi structured	Parent	1
25	2015-01-22	Semi structured	Parent	1
26	2015-01-22	Semi structured	Parent	2
27	2015-01-22	Semi structured	Parent	1

## Appendix 2: Interview Guide for Parents

1. How important on a scale from 1 to 10 is education for your child's future? Can you elaborate on the reasons for the rating.

- For future carrier?
- For surviving economically?
- For social development?
- For personal development?
- Other areas in your child's life were education matter?

2. What would need to change in order for the number to be higher?

4. What do you think about the quality of the school in Kyzyl-Unkur? Level of satisfaction. What changes do you think could be made to improve the quality?

5. What part could you take in seeing these improvements come to pass?

6. Does all your children attend school?

- if no: tell me why.
- if yes: If you didn't have the possibility of providing school for all your children, how would you think?

6. If your child sometimes miss classes, what could be the reason? How does this effect your child's schooling do you think?

7. Who influences decisions about your children's education? Father, mother, grandparents, the children themselves?

8. In what ways are you involved in your children's education? How much?

9. Do you attend parent meetings at school? Why/why not? How would you describe your relationship with the school/teachers? Level of influence.

9. Are there any stages of education that are more or less important than others? E.g. is secondary education as important as primary, or vice verse?

10. What effects a child's chances of succeeding through the educational system? How much does these factors influence?

11. What do you think is the general view of education in Kyrgyzstan? Is it different among different people?