

The Times They Are a-Changin’’: The Long-Term Dynamics of Livelihoods and Institutions in Kyrgyzstan

Keynote Speech at the Third Annual Life in Kyrgyzstan Conference

The spoken word applies.

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Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen,

please permit me to start this lecture with a tribute to a Nobel Prize winner. As much as I appreciate the contributions of, for example, Richard Thaler, a Chicago-based economist who won the Nobel Prize in economics just this Monday, I would like to reflect for a moment on the contributions by another Nobel Prize winner, who has much to say about the wind of change that is blowing through Kyrgyzstan these days.

As you may have guessed from the title of my lecture, I mean last year’s winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Bob Dylan. Let us hear his song “The Times They Are a-Changin’” now. (You will find the English text and the Russian translation on a handout at your seat.)

<https://youtu.be/JxvVk-r9ut8>

More than fifty years ago, in 1964, Bob Dylan wrote this song, which today still captures people’s imagination the world over. It is a song of protest, of anger, but also one of observing societal changes and revolving institutions. “The Times They Are a-Changin’” challenges the established order and calls for the young

generation to take the helm, to get a chance to do things differently. It is also a song about opportunity and about inequality. Of course, in the 1960s in the United States these topics had a particular meaning, with the civil rights movement gaining strength, racial segregation ending that year in the US officially, and the economically successful but morally stagnant and hypocritical 1950s and 1960s slowly drawing to an end.

Yet the song also addresses universal themes of power and generational change; themes of chance and adaptation; themes of perceptions and of the feeling of being left behind.

My Hypotheses

Now you may wonder: what does all this have to do with Kyrgyzstan? Well, my first hypothesis is that today, in 2017, we are observing similarly radical change in Kyrgyzstan as Bob Dylan did in the United States in 1964 – and as we do in many other countries the world over, both then and now. In other words, societies the world over are experiencing, and have to deal with, an increasing rate of pace of change imposed on them. At the top-level, at the macro level, there are changes which people cannot influence – but which influence people.

My second hypothesis is that people in Kyrgyzstan (and elsewhere in the world) adopt various strategies for coping with these changes, for protecting their livelihoods and for achieving their welfare. Studying these strategies is interesting in their own right – but it may also help us to identify those policies which best support people.

But between these macro-level, exogenous changes and the micro-level outcomes is another layer of analysis, which is harder to track and yet critical for development. My third hypothesis hence is that all sorts of institutions likewise respond to these exogenous changes – and to the coping strategies that people adopt. In that sense, informal institutions in particular are the mediating buffer between people and the changing world around them. Importantly, these

institutions are both adaptable and adapting, they are both responding to and themselves shaping the socio-economic outcomes we observe at the micro-level. Or to put it in the parlour of economics: local level, informal institutions are endogenous. People are shaped by institutions but they also shape them.

In summary, I then propose that we must not only account for how the world is shaping Kyrgyzstan at the macro-level or for how people manage these rapid changes – but also we must also account for what role informal institutions play in these processes. In the remainder of my presentation, I would like to review these three levels of analyses, surveying the dynamics of change that Kyrgyzstan has experienced and emphasising their interdependencies.

Recent Macro-level Trends in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is a particularly interesting case where to study large scale, fundamental societal transformation, as many forces of change have hit your beautiful country in a very short period of time – and yet with Kyrgyz society proving very resilient and adaptable in the face of such change. In that sense, Kyrgyzstan may be a role model for other small open economies trying to get by during hard times.

I do not want to spend much time reviewing the big picture, as I believe we probably share a common understanding of which external forces shape Kyrgyzstan today. Like the rest of the world, Kyrgyzstan is faced with:

- globalisation, shaping flows of goods and services, physical and financial capital, and indeed also the international flow of people;
- technological change, which mostly involves the dramatic fall in the cost of information as well as travel and the digitalisation of workflows and consumption patterns;
- climate change, with its stress on natural resources and the hugely increased variability of environmental events;

- geo-politics, where Kyrgyzstan (due to its small population size) is a minor player for the leading powers of the world; and
- religious fundamentalism, which is also spreading its wings in Central Asia.

These five challenges offers some opportunities – but also many downsides. How easy would life be if we had none of these challenges to contend with! But, in all fairness, how boring such life would be as well! I would probably not be here today were it not for geo-politics, globalisation and technological change conspiring to turn me into a student of Kyrgyz society. So let us acknowledge that these challenges exist, that they shape Kyrgyzstan (for better or for worse) and that we can do relatively little about their existence, at least at an individual level, or in the short-term.

Institutions

Moving down one level of aggregation, I would like to review briefly what I mean by the term “institution” in this context. In the spirit of yet another Nobel prize winner, this time Elinor Ostrom, the only woman to date ever to have won a Nobel Prize in Economics, institutions are much more than formal government agencies or legally registered businesses. Sure, both the central bank of a country and its commercial banks are important institutions. But so are the set of rules, customs and expectations which shape how people deal with each other. Driving on the right-hand side of the road is a very useful institution, for example, as is saying “thank you” when receiving a gift.

In the context of Kyrgyzstan, we can observe three interesting stylized facts about institutions.

First, and looking at the macro-level, many external observers judge the sum of all of these institutions to be somewhat lacking. On many counts, Kyrgyzstan has been viewed as a fragile country, especially in the context of the 2010 political violence. Since then, the macro-level fragility indicators have improved though some indicators are a lot better (such as public services and dealing with internally

displaced people) than others (such as group grievances and factionalised elites) as measured by the Fragile States Index. Today, Kyrgyzstan ranks as the 65th most fragile country in the world out of a total 178 countries, so almost among the top third of most fragile countries.

Second, Kyrgyzstan is commonly considered one of the post-Soviet so-called “transition” countries. “Transition” of course refers to the change from a centrally-planned to a market-based economy. But in a larger sense, “transition” then denotes a rapidly changing institutional framework, where, for example, formal property rights were reallocated and community life was re-organised on a large scale and within an incredibly short period of time. This has introduced a fluidity in institutional development that may help explain why Kyrgyzstan is often considered a fragile country – but also why local and informal institutions may adapt more rapidly than in richer and hence more static societies.

Third, more informal, local institutions are very much alive and kicking, forming an important part of people’s lives and livelihoods all over the country. It thus appears as if weak overall institutions may not be an obstacle to having effective local-level institutions. Or, in fact, that local, informal institutions can actually compensate for what may be missing in the formal sector or on the aggregate level. In a moment, I will review in more detail examples of such institutions and how they contribute to people’s livelihoods in Kyrgyzstan.

The Life in Kyrgyzstan Study

First, permit me to explain the source of much of my evidence at the micro-level. I will draw on a unique source of data that we have available in Kyrgyzstan. It is the “Life in Kyrgyzstan Study”, which is an academically-led, knowledge-infrastructure project unique in Central Asia, and which I have had the honour and pleasure to found and lead since 2009, jointly with my esteemed colleagues here in Bishkek and in Europe and the United States.

The Life in Kyrgyzstan Study tracks over 8000 individuals in 3000 households across all oblasts in Kyrgyzstan, asking them about their families and how they work and live, what they think and plan. We collected the first wave in 2010 and have since re-visited the same people in 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2016. We hence have up to five observations for the same individuals over a period of seven years (from 2010 till 2016), which is an amazing opportunity for socio-economic research!

The Life in Kyrgyzstan Study is the most detailed and comprehensive national study of living conditions in any Central Asian country, ever, and all this valuable information is available for academic research and policy analysis online at www.lifeinkyrgyzstan.org. In fact, the Life in Kyrgyzstan Study data can be used to track practically all dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals since 2010.

The Life in Kyrgyzstan Study has been generously supported by various donors over the years, including the German Volkswagen Foundation, the Department for International Development in the United Kingdom, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, the International Food Policy Research Institute, the University of Central Asia, the ISDC – International Security and Development Center, and the Leibniz Institute of Vegetable and Ornamental Crops. Many thanks to all of them for making this project possible.

Livelihoods in Kyrgyzstan

I now turn to livelihoods in Kyrgyzstan. I will review briefly some recent evidence on migration and entrepreneurship, on poverty, on educational mobility, and on child health. These are examples of well-studied livelihood strategies and welfare outcomes. They also illustrate well how macro-level challenges play out at the micro-level, and are more or less mediated by informal institutions.

Migration and Entrepreneurship

Migration is a key aspect of globalisation for Kyrgyzstan – and institutions both formal and informal clearly regulate the flows of migrants. In on-going work with Clotilde Mahé and Wim Naudé (which will be presented in detail tomorrow), we assess whether temporary migration has lasting implications for origin communities' economic development, by examining if return migrants and non-migrants differ in their likelihood to enter into self-employment, and to thrive over time. We specifically examine the relations between return migration, entry into self-employment (occupational choice) and survival of entrepreneurial activities (persistence in self-employment or exit). These two dimensions have been either analysed separately or not specifically modelled in the literature.

Our results show that having temporarily migrated is positively correlated with entry into self-employment. The relationship with persistence in self-employment may be negative. We also show that temporary migration somehow disrupts self-employment trajectories as those self-employed before migrating are significantly less likely to be self-employed upon return, in the short term.

Overall, our evidence questions discourses with high expectations for return migrants' role in their home country's development. Temporary migration might disrupt entrepreneurship trajectories.

Self-employment may serve multiple functions: Either it is a means to escape unemployment before migrating. Or self-employment is also a way to learn about one's own preferences between wage- and self-employment upon return from migration.

Our results point to the limitations of Kyrgyzstan's economic and labour market structure, explaining both why people migrate, and why those self-employed before leaving do not persist in entrepreneurship. Unless better market-supporting institutions and business conditions for the survival of entrepreneurs are

developed in Kyrgyzstan, the potential benefits of return migration may not be harnessed, and emigration actually encouraged.

In addition, I wonder if the information available to possible migrants is optimal. It may deserve further attention to study how information flows shape migration decisions – and the decision to become self-employed.

Finally, a culture of migration has clearly emerged in Kyrgyzstan. Many people I speak to in Kyrgyzstan report wanting to try migration – to see if the grass on the other side of the border really is greener. It seems it often is not. For an economist, it is strange that people would keep trying nevertheless, but even bad habits may not die quickly.

Poverty

Kyrgyzstan started the process of institutional transition with high and rising poverty rates. My collaborators on the Life in Kyrgyzstan Study (including Susan Steiner and Damir Esenaliev) and I documented these issues in a paper in 2014 for the “Journal of Comparative Economics”. We noted that the poverty headcount in Kyrgyzstan increased from 40% in 1993 before the earnest start of transition to 55% in 1998, before falling back to 37% in 2011 (Brück et al, 2014), if we can trust the data and comparisons over time (cf. Brück et al, 2010).

Satisfaction to household income increased from 2010 till 2016 according to Life in Kyrgyzstan data from 5.4 to 6.7 on a scale from 0 to 10.

In the early 1990s, poverty was more likely for female-headed households, households headed by a pensioner, and households with many children (Ackland and Falkingham, 1997). By the mid-1990s, the determinants of household consumption expenditure, another welfare measure, included education, location of the household, ethnicity, and household size (Anderson and Pomfret, 2000). These results are not that different from studies of other countries at similar levels of economic development.

And yet we have a true knowledge gap in Kyrgyzstan about the long-term dynamics of consumption generally and poverty specifically– and we lack information on the dynamics of alternative welfare measures such as life satisfaction or multidimensional poverty indicators. We do not understand very well either which informal institutions may help buffer against adverse shocks. With the Life in Kyrgyzstan Study data, we plan to address these knowledge gaps in the years to come – so please watch this space!

An exception to the rule, a puzzle piece in the study of poverty dynamics is the paper by Bierbaum and Gassmann (2012) who find substantial economic mobility in their study of chronic and transitory poverty in Kyrgyzstan for the period 2005-2010. They also find that chronic poverty is particularly high in rural and mountainous regions, for large households, and for households with heads that have no tertiary education and that work in the informal sector.

Of course, high poverty rates are no obstacle to high rates of transition out of poverty. They would imply, however, that there are likewise high transitions into poverty. With the determinants of chronic and transient poverty being very different, there is a strong need to better understand these consumption dynamics across the whole welfare distribution – and to find policies and build institutions which can reduce both transient and chronic poverty. The necessary policy responses to transient and to chronic poverty and their respective targeting strategies are likely to be very different (Brück et al, 2014).

Educational Mobility

Given that, for example, Anderson and Pomfret (2000) find that tertiary education in particular had become a determinant of household well-being in the 1990s, I now turn to this issue, looking at the trends in educational mobility in Kyrgyzstan over time. This is joint work with Damir Esenaliev, which was published recently in the journal “Economics of Transition”.

The early transition years saw a devastating effect on income in a number of transition countries, resulting in high poverty and inequality (Atkinson and Micklewright, 1992; Brück et al., 2010; Milanovic, 1999). Decline of income might have forced poor families to reduce investments in the education of their children, especially at the tertiary level (World Bank, 2000a). This assumption is found to be true by a study on Russia (Gerber, 2000), which documents a growing educational stratification due to declining enrolment in tertiary education of children of parents with lower educational background. Compared to children of more educated parents, a higher share of young people with poorer backgrounds opt to enter the labour market earlier due to the worsening living standards and economic hardship associated with the transition. As lower educational achievement is usually associated with a higher level of poverty, polarization of incomes in transition countries may lead to a widening educational gap over generations. A multi-country study by Andrews and Leigh (2009) finds a negative link between inequality and intergenerational mobility: individuals in countries with higher levels of income inequality experienced less mobility. The liberalization of the educational system in the transition context may drive poorer students out of the market for tertiary education, highlighting the importance of the regulation of formal institutions such as universities.

Unlike other transition countries, the Kyrgyz government maintained its pre-transition share of public spending on education (World Bank, 2004). This prevented a closure of schools and a decline in enrolment, except for pre-school institutions, which dramatically declined in numbers (Anderson and Heyneman, 2005; Falkingham, 2005; Mogilevsky, 2011). However, public expenses on education mainly covered wages of teachers, while other important components of learning, such as textbooks, school infrastructure and teacher training, were underfinanced (Mertaugh, 2004). These factors, along with a shortage of teachers of important subjects, are thought to be the main causes of deterioration in the quality of education. Despite the perceived decline in the quality of education, enrolment rates at the tertiary level doubled in 20 years after 1991, driven mainly

by expanded private universities. The deregulation of the tertiary education system led to an increased number of private universities, and, correspondingly, students. There were 33 public and 23 private universities in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 – compared to only nine in the Soviet era (NSC and UNICEF, 2014). As a result, gross enrolments in higher education institutions increased from 10 percent of the corresponding age cohort in the beginning of the 1990s to approximately 48 percent in mid-2000s (OECD, 2010b).

This high level of university enrolment seems to be driven by aspirations for a higher social status and expectations of a greater earnings return from education (Roberts et al., 2009). Yet, a university diploma is not the guarantee of employment, as there is clearly an excess supply of university graduates in the labour market (DeYoung, 2011) with skills that do not meet the needs of the prospective employers (World Bank, 2012). Given this mismatch, the youth unemployment rate is the highest in the Kyrgyz labour market (NSC, 2009a, 2012).

In our study, we find that overall Kyrgyzstan maintained strong educational mobility, comparable to levels during the Soviet era.

Our data indicates the increasing educational attainment in Kyrgyzstan over time. For example, the share of university educated among the young group of aged 25–34 doubled, increasing from around 13–14 percent of the total in 1993 and 1998 to 27 percent in the 2011 Life in Kyrgyzstan sample.

We argue that the expansion of tertiary educational institutions between 1993 and 2004 is a reason for this high mobility, proving wrong the fears articulated just now. However, consistent with similar studies based on countries in Eastern Europe, we also find a sharp increase in the educational association between parents and children in the 2011 data for the population aged 25–34, the generation for whom schooling and employment experience was most affected by the transition. This indicates that higher parental socio-economic status may play

a more prominent role in children's post-secondary education enrolment, while children of less educated parents realized fewer educational opportunities. This raises concerns for rising and persistent long-term inequalities in socio-economic outcomes. This points to the important role of informal institutional capital held by the parents who had access in the socialist times to information and assets and which they carried over into the transition period (Saar and Helemae, 2017).

Finally, we note that the young population of non-Kyrgyz ethnic groups seem to lag behind in schooling compared to the Kyrgyz, and it would potentially indicate the existence of some forms of discrimination in segments of the labour market where tertiary education is demanded. In addition, the inequality in education between groups, so-called horizontal inequalities, might have serious implications for a potential inter-group conflict as in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 (Esenaliev and Steiner, 2014).

On the other hand, satisfaction with children's education in general increased from 2010 till 2016 according to Life in Kyrgyzstan data from 5.6 to 7.1 on a scale from 0 to 10.

Child Health

While the rising and now high levels of educational attainment in general and of tertiary education in particular are in part a productive legacy of the Soviet system (and the informal institutions that this yielded), another concern in recent years has emerged in Kyrgyzstan, which focuses on the physical well-being of young children. This is joint, on-going work with Anastasia Aladysheva from Stockholm, in which we study the nutritional status of young children in Kyrgyzstan.

Here informal institutions matter a lot, especially as food allocation in the family is often related to gender roles and intra-household bargaining. At the same time, globalisation and climate change shape child health to the extent that food prices can vary a lot with changing trade regimes and weather conditions.

Overall, we study 2,178 children under age of five. On average, the panel follows a child for two waves (unbalanced panel) and a household typically has two children. We use two indicators of malnutrition (HAZ and MUAC) but focus here on stunting for boys and girls aged 0-60 months.

Other surveys have repeatedly found large rates of stunting among young children in Kyrgyzstan. The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) indicate stunting rates of 25% in 1997 and 18% in 2012 while the UNICEF MICS data suggests stunting rates between 14% in 2006 and 13% in 2014. Our data, from the Life in Kyrgyzstan Study, suggests an average rate of stunting of 34% for 2010-13 for boys and girls. What differs between our analysis and those using other survey data from Kyrgyzstan is that we track the same children over time, therefore controlling for unobservable effects that may also determine child nutrition outcomes.

We then check which factors help explain the outcomes we observe. Interestingly, we find that very cold weather, especially in autumn and winter, worsens child nutrition significantly. This demonstrates that the big, macro-level forces we noted in passing earlier have real effects for children and their families on the ground. And looking more closely, it is the households that farm actively, that produce food for their own consumption, that are most at risk from adverse weather shocks. This then implies that there is an acute lack of social protection institutions to help those farming households with young children protect themselves from the lottery of poor weather. In fact, the poor weather appears to worsen the dietary diversity for affected households. It may be that it is not only the quantity of food that is lacking but also the quality of the diets. Owning land in itself does not help much. But being reliant on the land for a living does seem to pose a risk for the well-being of the farmers' children, which is not a very happy story.

Institutions in Kyrgyzstan

In the last part of my lecture, I would like to move on to review how informal institutions play out in Kyrgyzstan, using Life in Kyrgyzstan Study data wherever possible.

Youth Attitudes and Actions to Peace

As you all know, Kyrgyzstan experienced a series of interethnic violent clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in 2010, mostly in the southern part of the country, that led to more than 400 people being killed, over 400 000 civilians being temporarily displaced and severe infrastructural damage with negative implications for the local economy. While the root causes of the conflict can be debated, it is evident that young people played a significant part in committing the violence. Following the clashes, there have been many peacebuilding interventions to restore trust, respect and cooperation between these two ethnic groups, and especially between young people from both sides of the conflict.

One such programme is a school-based peacebuilding educational training programme called “LivingSideBySide” implemented in 2014 and 2015 in southern Kyrgyzstan by Legacy International and Center Interbilim, two non-governmental organisations. They implemented a pilot programme with over 700 secondary school students in 10 treatment schools in southern Kyrgyzstan. Each student participated in a training programme with 18 weekly sessions for 6 to 8 weeks. This programme in Kyrgyzstan is the first to be evaluated using a rigorous experimental design and an extensive set of quantitative and qualitative instruments to assess the programme’s impact on promoting peace in southern Kyrgyzstan.

Together with Damir Esenaliev, Anastasia Aladysheva, Lonneke Nillesen and further co-authors, we studied the impact of such peace building programme among Kyrgyz youth. The preliminary findings of this research were presented at this Conference last year – I will only briefly recap them here. The results are an

interesting insights into informal institutions in the country – and into the power, or lack of power, of outsiders to change prevailing social norms.

The rationale for the intervention was that increased, structured and positive interactions between individuals of different groups can help people to increase their knowledge and to reduce their anxiety and their perception of threats. In addition, the programme tries for participants to increase their empathy towards others. This broadly relates to Allport's intergroup contact theory (1954), where under certain 'optimal' conditions increased contact between members of different groups reduces prejudice.

We do find some empirical support for this idea from our quantitative research. Participation in the programme is robustly associated with increased levels of trust towards "seeing people for the first time". In this sense, the programme succeeds in teaching young people to have an open mind towards anyone that may be of a different ethnic, religious or cultural origin.

At the same time, however, participants also reported feeling "less at home in Kyrgyzstan" than those in the control group. As the intervention also taught individuals to reflect on themselves and their environment and to think about their own identity and that of others, this result suggests that the intervention "stirred up" something and made young people much more aware of ethnic salience in everyday life and of the potential challenges of dealing with this constructively.

Interestingly, some outcomes seem gender-specific. The programme's efforts to teach participants to become more reflective, take perspective and increase empathy may have been more effective for girls, making them realize how hard "being tolerant" really is.

Our results from the analysis of the pilot intervention suggest that a 6 to 8-week peacebuilding programme is able to induce some intended impact among young people, leading them to reflect more on their own identity and that of others. However, the programme may be too short to induce comprehensive and

sustained changes in deeply held attitudes and behaviour. It is likely that such beliefs and attitudes are so deeply entrenched in children's upbringing, cultural and social norms, that they are less amenable to being changed by a short, school-based intervention. Addressing norm formation in the family, through the media and through teachers, for example, seems to be a useful complementary activity when seeking to influence the attitudes and behaviour of young people.

Moreover, the programme seems to affect certain groups differently. Although the data does not permit us to investigate the underlying channels in depth, we posit that to make a large and sustained impact the programme needs to be targeted at specific vulnerable individuals that feel marginalised and may be particularly susceptible to intolerant behaviour. This suggests that the students who arguably stand to gain the most from a programme on peacebuilding – to become more self-confident, learn about others and thus lower their grievances towards other groups – were the least likely to be served in this trial. Incorporating the programme into the standard (national) curriculum may be one way to overcome some of these challenges.

Also note that the general trend in Kyrgyzstan on perceptions of peacefulness is rather negative. The share of people in Kyrgyzstan who find their neighbourhood very peaceful dropped from 56% in 2010 to only 40% in 2016, according to our data.

Social Cohesion

I would now like to move from the individual to the village level. In fact, if it takes a village to raise a child, what does it take to build a village? Or, more accurately, what does it take to strengthen informal institutions such as social cohesion in Kyrgyz villages and communities? This is, loosely speaking, the research question of a project that will present its interim findings right after the coffee break here at this conference. With my colleagues Damir Esenaliev, Kanat Tilekeyev, Gulzhan Asylbek kyzy, Aida Bolotbekova and others, we analysed

social cohesion across Kyrgyzstan in general – and the impact of a community driven development programme on social cohesion specifically.

In line with the literature in sociology, we define social cohesion to contain three domains, namely social relations, connectedness and focus on the common good. Each of these domains has multiple indicators which can be collected at the individuals level using surveys like Life in Kyrgyzstan Study. We also collected additional data to estimate the impact of a World Bank co-funded community driven development project in Southern Kyrgyzstan.

Some part of this work is still in progress – but the data collected so far suggest that levels of social cohesion vary quite substantially across communities in Kyrgyzstan. On average, economics and shocks matter significantly for social cohesion: higher unemployment rates and a higher number of shocks experienced by households both correlate with lower levels of social cohesion. The level of mental distress, a new variable included in the 2016 Life in Kyrgyzstan Study, is one of the strongest but negative correlates of social cohesion.

What is a really fascinating result is that reading across all five waves of Life in Kyrgyzstan data, “trust in institutions” (a component of social cohesion) has steadily increased over time, from 4.3 in 2010 to 5.8 in 2016. This is encouraging, though it is too early to know why this trust has improved so steadily and clearly.

Furthermore, our Life in Kyrgyzstan data reveal that people really have started to appreciate the current political system. We started asking about preferences for political systems in 2011 and we asked again in 2016. Over that five-year period, support for the old Soviet or current Russian system dropped from 51% to 33%, that is from half to one-third, while support for the current Kyrgyz system increased from one-tenth to one-third. That is quite an astonishing rate of change in such a short period of time – and bodes well for the elections on Sunday.

Likewise, we do not yet know (but will find out soon) if changing social cohesion at the community level is feasible or not. I wonder if perhaps this is akin to the

challenge of changing peacefulness among young people, as just discussed. It may be that changing village-level institutions is even harder than changing the attitudes of young people.

Outlook and Implications

In conclusion, I hope I could demonstrate that Kyrgyzstan is indeed “a’changing”, in the words of Bob Dylan. And that people – and institutions – in Kyrgyzstan are responding to these changes, for better or worse.

Having reviewed recent evidence from the Life in Kyrgyzstan Study, what lessons can we draw? What is all this evidence telling us?

For me as an academic, I am not sure if I should be impressed by how much we learnt about Kyrgyzstan in recent years as a result of our big push to invest in high quality data?

Or should I feel overwhelmed by the many knowledge gaps that remain and that deserve to be addressed?

We still need to know more about inequality in Kyrgyzstan, about how coping strategies and welfare outcomes interact, about the deep, underlying drivers of people’s life stories, and about how best to help people in Kyrgyzstan live happy, healthy and meaningful lives. Most importantly, we have only started to measure the delicate informal institutions that underpin Kyrgyz society - and that are critical for economic growth to flourish, for people to be able to develop, to express themselves, to feel secure in their beliefs and their identity, and for society to grow resilient in the face of adversity and to remain free and at peace.

However, for all this knowledge to have a purpose, we – you – have to learn to use it as well. It is little use if academics in Kyrgyzstan or abroad conduct all this research if the findings then are not disseminated and the lessons not learnt. Many public policies can be based on research findings – and much learning can be conducted in the context of new policies. So for research to have an impact – and

for policies to be effective – it is important that the academic and policy communities come together and talk to each other.

I am confident that the Third Annual Life in Kyrgyzstan Conference is an excellent place to start doing just that.

Thank you for your attention!