



## The poverty trap: economic inequality as a barrier to human rights in Kyrgyzstan

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**Abstract:** Poverty traps in Kyrgyzstan - driven by underfunded education, healthcare inequality, and informal labour – undermine human rights, especially for rural communities. This blog argues for structural reforms and equitable resource distribution to promote social justice and inclusive development.

A [poverty trap](#) is a cycle that prevents individuals from breaking free from hardship due to systemic barriers. It occurs when economic conditions demand a substantial amount of resources for financial stability. Yet, those in poverty struggle to accumulate such resources, creating a self-perpetuating cycle where escaping scarcity becomes increasingly difficult.

Various factors contribute to the persistence of poverty traps, including restricted access to credit and [capital markets](#), severe environmental degradation that diminishes agricultural productivity, weak governance and corruption, capital flight, inadequate education systems, the prevalence of disease, insufficient public healthcare, armed conflict and underdeveloped infrastructure. It is often argued that individuals need substantial support to accumulate the necessary resources for long-term financial stability to break free. This perspective [suggests](#) that aid programmes with

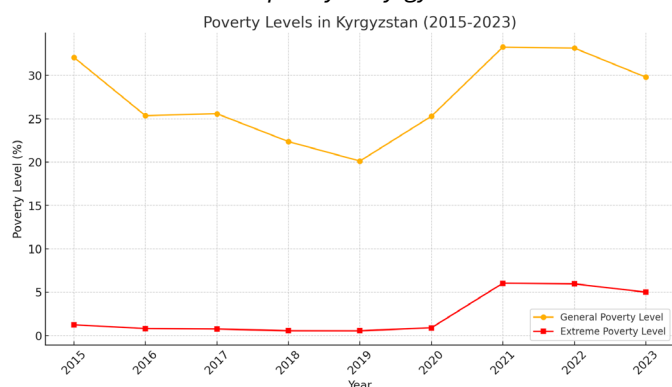
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insufficient assistance may fail to lift individuals out of poverty. Without acquiring a critical level of capital, people may remain reliant on aid indefinitely and risk falling back into poverty if support is withdrawn.

In Kyrgyzstan, the traditional model of aid and investment from developed countries has [failed](#) to generate sustainable growth. Development efforts such as privatisation, loans, grants, and technical assistance have often led to corruption, dependency and economic stagnation rather than genuine progress. The collapse of the [Soviet Union](#), the introduction of the market economy, and the implementation of neo-liberal policies left Kyrgyzstan with a [shattered economy](#), leading to a sharp decline in GDP and increased poverty, especially in rural areas. Despite high literacy rates, there is [low demand](#) for educated workers, causing wage suppression and [underemployment](#). Economic inequality is not just a financial disparity - it is a [fundamental barrier](#) to human rights. When wealth and resources are unevenly distributed, access to essential rights such as education, healthcare, decent work and political participation becomes severely limited.

Scale of economic inequality in Kyrgyzstan



Poverty levels in Kyrgyzstan (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2025)

The general poverty rate declined from 32.08 percent in 2015 to 20.12 percent in 2019. However, it rose sharply in 2020 and peaked at 33.26 percent in 2021, likely due to economic disruptions from the pandemic. In 2023, the rate remained high at 29.8 percent, indicating that recovery has been slow. Extreme poverty rates were below one percent before 2020 but spiked to 6.03 percent in 2021, suggesting that the most vulnerable populations were hit hardest. By 2023, extreme poverty slightly declined to five per cent but remains higher than pre-pandemic levels.

### Classroom inequality: when poverty writes the lesson plan

Economic inequality in Kyrgyzstan directly impacts access to quality education, creating a vicious cycle of poverty. Poor families often struggle to afford school supplies, transportation and other hidden costs of 'free' education. This leads to higher dropout rates, especially in rural areas where children sometimes leave school to work. In recent years, [about 6 percent](#) of Kyrgyz students (nearly 88,000 children) dropped out by the age of 15, with many citing no specific reason – effectively economic hardship – or left to seek work. Schools serving low-income communities are often underfunded and overcrowded. [As of 2022](#), 72 percent of public schools ran double shifts due to a lack of classrooms, and some even held lessons in hallways; only 21 percent of schools met basic sanitary space standards. There are also stark [regional disparities](#). Urban children are more likely to complete upper secondary education than rural children and educational quality lags in remote areas. In an international assessment, Kyrgyzstan [ranked lowest](#), with over 80 per

cent of 15-year-olds – especially rural students – failing to meet baseline proficiency in reading and science. This lack of quality education perpetuates poverty: young people without skills or diplomas face limited job opportunities. Indeed, [almost 22 percent](#) of Kyrgyz young people are NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training), reflecting how early school leavers struggle to find decent work.

### **Denied right to health**

Poverty also severely restricts access to healthcare in Kyrgyzstan, leading to inequality that can become life-threatening. Although the state provides a basic health service package, underfunding means patients must pay much of their care costs out of their own pockets. [Over half](#) of all health spending in Kyrgyzstan now comes directly from patients, a heavy burden that puts essential medical services out of reach for low-income families. Many rural and remote communities [lack adequate](#) healthcare facilities and staff. Villagers often have to travel long distances for doctors, and a shortage of medical supplies and trained personnel causes delays in treatment. This rural-urban divide in healthcare access is reflected in outcomes: Kyrgyzstan still has one of Central Asia's highest maternal [mortality rates](#), with an estimated 60–70 maternal deaths per 100,000 births. Poor, rural women are at greater risk due to limited prenatal care and emergency services. Child health is likewise affected. Malnutrition remains a concern among the poor – stunting (chronic malnutrition) affects [about 14 percent](#) of children nationwide but 16 per cent of children from the poorest households and up to 23 per cent in the least developed regions. Infant and [under-five mortality](#) rates are [higher](#) in impoverished communities, often due to preventable diseases and inadequate nutrition. These disparities point to human rights violations, as the right to healthcare is not enjoyed equally. The state's healthcare spending has actually [declined](#) in recent years, and [low salaries](#) drive health workers abroad or into private clinics, further weakening public health services.

### **Economically stranded; politically silenced**

Widespread poverty in Kyrgyzstan leads to economic disempowerment that also marginalises people politically. Simply put, struggling to meet basic needs leaves little time or resources for civic engagement. Many poor citizens feel disillusioned and underrepresented in politics, which is often dominated by well-funded elites. In recent elections, candidates with greater financial resources and connections held a clear advantage – for example, after the [2020 uprising](#), the leading presidential candidate enjoyed vastly more funding and media access than his rivals. Such uneven playing fields mean that low-income Kyrgyzstanis rarely see someone from their background in power. Meanwhile, economic pressures push a large portion of the population into the informal labour sector, where they lack legal protections and voice. [Over 70 percent](#) of Kyrgyz workers are employed informally with no contracts or social security. These include jobs like street vending, home-based garment work, and day labour – vital for survival, but offering little stability or rights. Workers in this shadow economy are vulnerable to exploitation, and without formal employment, they cannot unionise or influence labour policies. The absence of updated labour laws compounds the problem: no new occupational safety or worker protection conventions have been [ratified](#) by Kyrgyzstan since 2008.

## **Policy recommendations and solutions**

Addressing economic inequality in Kyrgyzstan requires a rights-based approach that treats access to housing, education, healthcare, and decent work not as privileges but as entitlements. Public control over essential resources such as land, energy, and natural wealth can ensure that the benefits are used to uphold collective rights, not private gain. Revenue from these sectors should be reinvested into guaranteeing universal access to healthcare, quality education and adequate housing, especially in rural and underserved areas. To fulfil the right to equality, the state must adopt progressive taxation policies that redistribute wealth fairly and fund social protections. Labour rights, including safe working conditions, fair wages and the right to organise unions, must be protected and extended to informal workers who currently operate outside the legal system. Access to legal aid and simplified registration processes are necessary to ensure these workers are not excluded from protection. Public services should be expanded and fully funded to eliminate barriers based on income or geography.

Finally, economic decisions should be shaped through democratic participation – communities must have a say in how public resources are managed, ensuring accountability and equity. These reforms are not ideological – they are necessary to meet the state’s obligations under international human rights law and to dismantle structural poverty. Unfortunately, there are currently no specific political figures who consistently and publicly raise this issue regularly, therefore, the topic remains significantly underrepresented in both public and political discourse, typically addressed only briefly or as isolated remarks without sustained follow-up or meaningful policy attention. While human rights organisations such as [Bir Duino Kyrgyzstan](#) occasionally advocate for economic justice within their broader human rights activities, their efforts remain limited in scope and lack sustained focus. Addressing this gap requires deeper structural reforms to gain lasting and comprehensive change.