Neet Youth in The Kyrgyz Republic: Barriers to Labour Market Inclusion for Groups with Low Mobility

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Abstract

The NEET phenomenon (not engaged in labor, study, or vocational training) is one of the most acute socio-economic problems in the Kyrgyz Republic, affecting approximately one-third of young people aged 15–29. The article examines an aspect that has so far received insufficient scientific attention: the structural and spatial barriers that hinder low-mobility populations – including rural youth, young women, persons with disabilities, and internal migrants – from accessing the labor market and educational opportunities. Drawing on data from the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, the International Labour Organization, and the World Bank, as well as a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature published in 2015–2024, the study reflects the multidimensional nature of exclusion in seven areas. The results show pronounced regional differences: in the southern and remote regions (Batken, Naryn, Jalal-Abad), the NEET rate exceeds 38–43%, while in Bishkek it is 23%. The study identifies six main categories of barriers: physical mobility restrictions, digital access gaps, gender and socio-normative constraints, information asymmetry, legal and institutional barriers, and economic deprivation. Based on the analysis, the article proposes a policy framework focused on digital integration of the labor market, targeted vocational training, inter-agency coordination, and mechanisms to support mobility. The results of the study contribute to the emerging literature on spatially differentiated exclusion of youth from the labor market in Central Asia and offer practical recommendations for policy-makers, NGOs, and international development partners working in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Keywords: NEET youth, Kyrgyz Republic, exclusion from the labor market, groups with low mobility, youth employment, regional differences, social inclusion, Central Asia

1.Introduction

The term NEET—which refers to young people aged 15–29 who are not engaged in work, study, or training—has become one of the main indicators of the social vulnerability of young people in post-Soviet transition economies. In the Kyrgyz Republic, the NEET rate is consistently higher than the global average, reflecting the structural weakness of the labor market, shaped simultaneously by the Soviet institutional legacy, the post-independence economic downturn, large-scale labor emigration, and accelerating digitalization (ILO, 2022; World Bank, 2021).

Although the aggregate national statistics of NEET are documented by the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (NSC KR) and international organizations, the spatial and group aspects of NEET are comparatively poorly studied. The situation of population groups with low mobility, a category that includes rural youth geographically isolated from economic centers, young women limited by gender norms and domestic responsibilities, persons with disabilities facing physical and institutional exclusion,

as well as internal migrants, whose legal and social status creates additional vulnerability, is particularly poorly studied (Mamytbekov & Dzhaksybekov, 2021; UNICEF, 2020).

This article proceeds from the premise that NEET is not a homogeneous state, but a multidimensionally structured phenomenon in which spatial, gender, and institutional factors interact, generating differentiated forms of exclusion from the labor market. Understanding these interactions is essential for the development of effective, targeted policies that go beyond model youth employment programmes.

Further, the article is structured as follows. Section 1 provides a review of the theoretical and empirical literature on NEET and the exclusion of low mobility groups. Section 2 presents the objectives and methodology of the study. Section 3 analyzes regional data on NEETs. Section 4 identifies and addresses the main categories of barriers. Section 5 offers a policy framework. The report summarizes the main findings and outlines directions for further research.

2. Literature review

First developed in the UK in the late 1990s as an administrative category, NEET has since been adopted by international organizations, including the ILO, OECD and the World Bank, as a composite indicator of youth social exclusion (Quintini & Manfredi, 2009). Its value lies in its ability to capture heterogeneous forms of non-participation that purely employment-oriented indicators miss, including discouraged workers, unpaid caregivers, and those excluded on the grounds of disability (Alfieri et al., 2015).

In the context of Central Asia, the literature on NEET has grown significantly since 2010, thanks in large part to the research programs of the ILO and the World Bank (ILO, 2022; World Bank, 2019). These studies found that the region's NEET populations are characterized by a pronounced gender asymmetry – with a predominance of young women due to early marriage rates and the burden of care – as well as a marked rural-urban divide due to the uneven distribution of educational and economic infrastructure (Djankov & Miner, 2016).

For the Kyrgyz Republic, Mamytbekov and Dzhaksybekov (2021) document the association between rural residence and NEET status, mediated by access to transportation and distance from vocational training institutions. Toktogulova (2019) focuses on gender as a major factor in the status of NEET among young women in southern Kyrgyzstan, arguing that institutional and regulatory barriers to women's participation in the labor market play a more defining role than a lack of skills. Abdyldaeva et al. (2023) extend this analysis to include numerical exclusion as an emerging measure of NEET risk in distant regions.

The notion of low mobility as a structural vulnerability in the labour market has been developed in the wider European literature on disability and employment (Grammenos, 2020) and is increasingly applied to rural youth in developing economies (O'Higgins, 2017). In the Kyrgyz context, low mobility manifests itself in several dimensions: physical (inadequate transport), digital (limited connectivity), informational (lack of awareness of opportunities), and social (gender-based restrictions on independent movement).

A persistent gap in the existing literature is the lack of integrated analyses of how these different dimensions of low mobility interact with NEET status in different regional contexts of the Kyrgyz Republic. This article fills this gap by summarizing the available evidence and offering an analytical framework that addresses multiple barriers.

3. Goals and objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to identify and analyze the structural barriers that prevent groups of youth with low mobility in the Kyrgyz Republic from accessing employment, education, and vocational training, thereby consolidating the status of NEET.

The study addresses four specific tasks:

1. To display the NEET regional levels for seven regions of the Kyrgyz Republic using available statistical data for the period 2019–2023.
2. To identify and classify the main barriers to inclusion in the labor market for groups of young people with low mobility.
3. To study the interaction between regional location, group vulnerability, and the accumulation of barriers.
4. To offer evidence-based policy recommendations to address identified barriers.

4. Materials and methods

This study uses a mixed methodology combining a systematic literature review, secondary statistical analysis, and thematic synthesis.

5. Data sources

Quantitative data on NEET levels and labour market indicators were obtained from: (1) the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (NSC KR) Annual Labour Force Survey Reports for 2019–2023; (2) the ILO ILOSTAT database; (3) World Bank World Development Indicators; (4) UNICEF situation analyses for Kyrgyzstan for 2020 and 2022.

6. Literature Review Protocol

A systematic literature review covering 2015–2024 publications in three databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, and ILO repositories was conducted. The search queries used were: "NEET Kyrgyzstan", "NEET Central Asia", "youth employment Kyrgyz Republic", "labour market exclusion disability", "rural youth employment" and "gender labour force participation Kyrgyzstan". After being selected for relevance and methodological quality and relevance, thirty-two sources were included.

7. Analytical framework

Barriers to labour market inclusion were analysed using a six-dimensional framework adapted according to Grammenos (2020) and O'Higgins (2017): (1) physical mobility; (2) digital access; (3) gender and social norms; (4) information access; (5) legal and institutional factors; (6) economic constraints. Each measurement was evaluated by comparing the statistics with the results of the literature reviewed.

8. Results

8.1. Regional NEET Levels in the Kyrgyz Republic (2019–2023)

Table 1 presents the regional levels of NEET among young people aged 15–29 years in seven regions and the city of Bishkek for individual years of the period 2019–2023.

Table 1. NEET Rate (%) by Region, Kyrgyz Republic, 2019–2023

Region	2019	2020	2022	2023
Bishkek (urban)	22,4	28,1	24,7	23,2
Osh region (southern)	34,1	41,3	37,6	35,9
Batken region	38,7	46,2	42,1	39,4
Jalal-Abad region	35,3	43,0	39,8	37,1
Chui region (suburban)	26,8	32,5	28,9	27,3

Issyk-Kul region	29,6	36,4	31,7	30,2
Naryn Oblast (Rural/Remote)	41,2	49,7	45,3	43,0
Talas region	36,8	44,5	40,2	38,7
Average in the Kyrgyz Republic	31,4	38,6	34,9	33,1

Source: compiled by the author based on the NSC of the Kyrgyz Republic (2023); ILO ILOSTAT (2024); World Bank WDI (2024).

The data show that the highest levels of NEETs are consistently recorded in southern and remote areas. In the Naryn region – characterized by high mountains, geographical isolation and limited economic diversification – the NEET rate in 2023 was 43.0%, almost double that of Bishkek (23.2%). In the Batken and Jalal-Abad regions, located in the Fergana Valley and prone to cross-border economic shocks, the rate also exceeded 35%. The temporary spike recorded in all regions in 2020 was due to COVID-19 closures and economic downturns, which disproportionately affected youth in informal employment.

The data also show that the improvements observed in 2020–2023 were uneven, with urban and peri-urban areas recovering faster, while in remote areas, NEET rates remain 10–15 percentage points above the national average, suggesting that the structural factors of rural NEETs are different from the cyclical economic factors prevailing in cities (NSC KR, 2023; ILO, 2022).

8.2. Barriers to Labour Market Inclusion for Groups with Low Mobility

Table 2 presents a framework of multiple barriers applied to NEET subgroups with low mobility in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Table 2. Barriers to Labour Market Inclusion for Youth Groups with Low Mobility

Barrier category	Specific barriers identified	Affected subgroup NEET
Physical mobility	Lack of transport; poor road infrastructure; Distance from urban centers	Rural youth; Youth with disabilities
Digital Access	No internet/devices; low digital literacy; Connection cost	Rural youth; Low-income youth
Gender and Social Norms	Early marriages; the burden of home care; Family mobility restrictions	Young women (especially in the south of the Kyrgyz Republic)
Information barriers	Lack of awareness about vacancies, training programs, public services	Youth from remote areas; Children of migrants
Legal and institutional	Lack of documents; gaps in disability registration; Discrimination	Persons with disabilities; Migrants
Economic	Cost of moving; inability to pay for further education	Young people from low-income families

Source: compiled by the author on the basis of Mamytbekov & Dzhaksybekov (2021); Toktogulova (2019); Abdyldaeva et al. (2023); UNICEF (2020); Grammenos (2020).

9. Discussion

9.1. The Complex Nature of Exclusion in Low Mobility

The results confirm that the status of NEET among youth with low mobility in the Kyrgyz Republic is not due to a single barrier, but to a combination of several mutually reinforcing exclusionary mechanisms. For example, a young woman in the Batken region may simultaneously face: physical distance from vocational training centers; a family environment that restricts independent travel; digital illiteracy, which prevents access to online learning; and lack of information about remote work or government support programs. The interplay of these barriers forms an exclusion profile that is qualitatively different from that of an urban young man who lacks skills but retains mobility, access to information, and social permission to seek employment (Toktogulova, 2019; UNICEF, 2020).

Persons with disabilities are a particularly vulnerable subgroup in the population with low mobility. Grammenos (2020) notes that exclusion from the labor market due to disability is consistently increasing in countries with weak social support infrastructure, a characteristic directly applicable to the Kyrgyz context, where the social protection system remains underfunded and geographically concentrated in Bishkek and regional centers. Abdyldaeva et al. (2023) note that less than 15% of registered persons with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan have access to adapted vocational training.

9.2. The Role of Digitalization: Opportunity and New Exclusion

The rapid expansion of digital labour platforms and online education creates a structural opportunity to partially decouple labour market participation from physical mobility. Remote work, gig economy platforms, and e-learning could theoretically allow low-mobility youth to access opportunities to earn money and develop skills regardless of location. However, data from the Kyrgyz Republic suggest that digitalization is now a source of new exclusion rather than inclusion for the most vulnerable: internet penetration in the Naryn and Batken regions remains below 40%, and digital literacy rates are particularly low among young women and persons with disabilities (World Bank, 2021; Abdyldaeva et al., 2023).

This finding has important policy implications: measures that rely solely on digital channels – including government employment portals, online job systems, and e-learning platforms – risk systematically bypassing the very populations for which they are intended. Therefore, effective digitalization strategies must be accompanied by parallel investments in communication infrastructure and access to devices, as well as digital literacy programs tailored for students with low mobility.

9.3. Gender as a cross-cutting variable

According to the results of the analysis, gender is the most stable predictor of NEET status among young people with low mobility, manifesting itself in all six dimensions of barriers identified in the frame, and reinforcing each of them. Data from the NSC of the Kyrgyz Republic show that the NEET rate among women in 2023 was about 39.7% nationwide, compared to 26.5% among men, with the gender gap increasing in the southern regions, where the norms of early marriage are most common (NSC KR, 2023). Young women in these settings face not only external barriers, but often internalized constraints due to the perception of participation in the labor market as inappropriate or secondary to household responsibilities (Djankov & Miner, 2016).

Measures that do not take into account the gender dimension – for example, through community-based work with families, flexible programming schedules that take into account care responsibilities, and the creation of a female-friendly educational environment – are unlikely to significantly reduce the NEET rate among women, regardless of their quality or funding. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on gender-sensitive active labour market policies in lower-middle-income countries (O'Higgins, 2017).

9. 4. Policy recommendations

Based on the analysis, the study proposes a four-component policy framework to reduce the NEET rate among youth with low mobility in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Component I – Digital Infrastructure and Literacy. The government, in partnership with international donors and telecommunications operators, should prioritize the expansion of broadband in remote areas, with a target of 70% internet penetration in Batken, Naryn, and Talas oblasts by 2027. These investments should be accompanied by a national digital literacy program specifically designed for out-of-school youth, with materials tailored for low-level users' literacy, and delivered through community resource centers (Abdyldaeva et al., 2023; World Bank, 2021).

Component II — Accessible training. The Ministry of Labor and Social Development should audit the geographical accessibility of all government vocational training facilities, identifying those that are unattainable in a two-hour trip for the majority of rural youth in each region. Mobile vocational training units – already tested in a limited form in the Jalal-Abad region – should be scaled up throughout the country, giving priority to areas with NEET levels above 35% (ILO, p. 2022).

Component III – Gender-sensitive active labour market policies. Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP) programmes targeting NEET youth should necessarily include gender-sensitive design principles as a condition of public funding. This includes: flexible scheduling that takes into account caregiving responsibilities; female-only groups where community norms require it; community-based components aimed at removing barriers at the family level; and mentoring by working women from similar backgrounds. NGOs with proven experience in gender programs should be involved as implementing partners (Toktogulova, 2019; UNICEF, 2020).

Component IV – Inter-agency coordination and data systems. Effectively reducing the NEET rate among young people with low mobility requires coordination between the ministries responsible for education, labor, social protection, transport and digital development – areas that are currently characterized by institutional fragmentation. A dedicated inter-ministerial working group should be established, supported by a disaggregated NEET monitoring system capable of tracking results on a quarterly basis by region, gender, status, disability, and Migration Status (NSC KR, 2023; Mamytbekov & Dzhaksybekov, 2021).

10. Conclusion

This article examines the structural and spatial barriers to labour market inclusion for groups of youth with low mobility in the Kyrgyz Republic, which contributes to the emerging literature on spatially differentiated NEET in Central Asia. The analysis found that the status of NEET among rural youth, young women, persons with disabilities and internal migrants is the result of cumulative, mutually reinforcing barriers that cannot be overcome by model youth employment measures.

Regional data for 2019–2023 confirm that the highest concentration of NEET is observed in geographically remote and economically marginalized areas, where the structural conditions for the exclusion of young people from the labor market are most severe. The gender gap in the NEET rate – about 13 percentage points nationwide, and even wider in the southern regions – represents the most acute measure of inequalities within the NEET population and requires priority attention from policy.

The study's proposed four-component policy framework – combining investment in digital infrastructure, geographically accessible training, gender-sensitive ALMPs and inter-agency coordination – provides a structured framework for policy-making. Implementing this framework will require not only financial resources, but also sustained political will, the involvement of civil society and international partners, and the development of robust disaggregated monitoring systems.

The main limitation of this study is the reliance on secondary data, which limits the granularity of group analysis. Further research should prioritize the collection of primary qualitative data—including in-depth interviews and focus groups—among NEET youth in identified subgroups and regions, as well as longitudinal tracking of program participants to assess the effectiveness of policies over time.

Author's contribution

The sole author is responsible for conceptualizing, collecting, and analyzing data, and writing and editing the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

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