



*“COVID-19 has not stopped anything”*  
**Migration practicalities post COVID-19  
and implication for Nepal’s migration  
policy?**

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**April 2021**

## **PROJECT SUMMARY**

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic migrant communities have become immobile—stuck in the destination countries, or unable to continue their journeys in transit or in origin countries. This project brings together a collection of essays that seek to spell out how migrant communities in the Global South, namely in Mexico, Nepal, Qatar and Zimbabwe, have been affected by, and reacted to the pandemic. Inspired by a mobility justice approach, we speak to the (changing) power relations inherent to mobility, as well as the intersectional nature of migration with inequalities mapped along a global geography of race and class, amongst others. We do this by acknowledging that long before COVID-19, migration and mobility were intrinsically embedded into a hierarchical globalized regime of asymmetric power, that largely determines who can move and under what conditions. The essays aim to not only re-centre the Global South, but also to view these cases as relational to each other and to the state of global affairs.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The project has received funding from the Ministry for Science, Research and the Arts of Baden-Württemberg and is led by Dilshad Muhammad and Franzisca Zanker at the Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institute. We thank Spencer Alexander, Diana Bribach, Aylin Himmetoglu, Magdalena Maier and Abdur Rehman Zafar for their help and assistance during the project.

## **ABSTRACT**

COVID-19's impact on migrants has now been well noted in Nepal, as well. This article starts with a discussion about whether/how the ongoing pandemic has altered trajectories and ambitions of current and aspiring migrants and their spouses who remain in Nepal. It then reflects on the pre-COVID migration policies of Nepal and analyses what policy/programme shifts might be needed to address the new situation. The essay is based on research in an ongoing part of a larger project funded by the UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund called "Migration, Inequality and Development" (MIDEQ). It uses a qualitative approach with interviews from key informants from the government, academia, (I)NGOs and key stakeholders involved in Nepal's migration ecosystem as well as Nepali migrants (returnees and aspiring), children of migrants and their spouses. The paper argues that despite the immobility imposed by the pandemic situation, Nepali migrants and their families continue to plan migration for a variety of social and economic reasons and that the current pandemic has reinforced the fact that while migration can be a personal decision, it is tied to and has strong family implications. The study finds that current migration policies and programmes should better link disaster and migration policies, address migrants in national disaster policies and include comprehensive orientations for migrants and their families if we are to harness the development potentials of migration.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Interview with  
aspiring  
migrant youth,  
20 years old,  
Saptari

*“COVID is not a problem. My uncle is working in Qatar and he is fine and working. No one here is going to stop [travelling for foreign employment] due to COVID-19. I am waiting for the call for my interview. As soon as I get the visa, I will go.”*

Interview,  
local agent,  
Saptari

*“Oh, no. COVID-19 has not stopped anything. There is a queue of people waiting for their visa. My recruitment agency got 40 visas for Qatar a few days ago and there are 250–300 applicants with me alone. The agency has over 10 agents like me all waiting for the agency to get “demand letters” (letters of job offers from employing company in the destination country). They are distributing the 40 visas equally among us.”*

Labour migration is an integral part of both the household and national economy of Nepal. Most people from Nepal migrate for employment (MoLESS 2019). For more than 55% of households in Nepal, remittances, particularly from the countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC hereafter) and Malaysia, are the main source of income. For the country itself, remittances form around 26% of the national GDP, and in 2019 amounted to over 35 times the Foreign Direct Investment and 5.5 times the Overseas Development Assistance, making them a critical source of external financing for the country (NRB 2020;). Moreover, the volume of remittances has increased steadily over the years, from 2.54 billion USD in 2010/11 to 8.79 billion USD in 2018/19 (MoLESS 2020), thus emphasising its importance in national development. Although remittances were expected to drop sharply<sup>1</sup> between mid-July and mid-September 2020, Nepalis overseas sent back 1.39 billion USD – a 2.6% increase compared to the same period in 2018 and 2019 (NRB 2020). While no specific study has investigated this, the increase in remittances can most probably be attributed to two main factors: first, despite the lockdown, essential sector work in the destination countries where Nepali workers are in the majority, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Oman, continued without break and thus workers continued to earn;

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<sup>1</sup> Nepal’s Central Bureau of Statistics predicted an 18% decrease, the Asian Development Bank a 28.7% decrease and the World Bank a 14% decrease.

and second, due to restrictions in mobility, formal channels for remittances were utilised, thus inflating the official figures for formal remittances.

The pandemic has had a significant negative impact on different kinds of migrants globally (Azhari 2020; Boatcă 2020; Collard 2020; Zanker and Moyo 2020; Reidy 2020). However, there has been less discussion of how the pandemic has affected migration aspirations for migrants, how this affects their family members and how this compares to the pre-COVID and post-COVID local economic and social realities. As discussed in the conceptual framework, the paper reflects on two themes. Firstly, it examines the relationship between mobility and privilege: unlike high-income workers who can choose to be (im)mobile, many lower-income workers are likely to choose to migrate regardless of pandemic conditions, or worse, because of personal, economic and social circumstances back home. Secondly, it reflects on the idea of “acts of subversion and resistance” by migrants and their families by discussing how migrants and their family members internalise new contexts in migration, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and make decisions amidst changing circumstances outside their own control.

This paper aims to discuss those issues and critically reflect on what policies could further improve migration outcomes for migrants, their families and for the origin and destination countries.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

The paper draws on research from an ongoing (2019–2024) Migration, Inequality and Development (MIDEQ) project that aims to understand relationships between migration, inequality and development.<sup>2</sup>

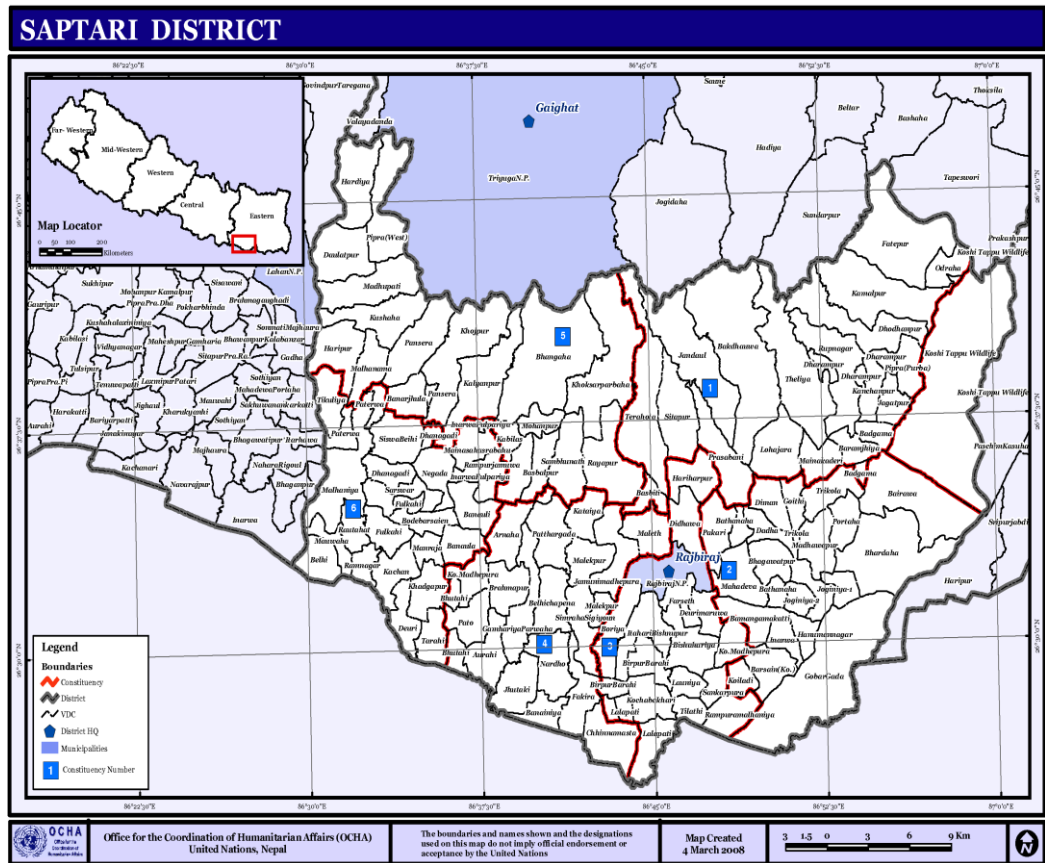
Fieldwork was done in the Saptari district of Nepal, one of the largest districts of origin for labour migrants from the country.

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<sup>2</sup> This work was funded by the UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund for MIDEQ [Grant Reference: ES/S007415/1].

Figure 1.

Map of Saptari district



Source: [www.ocha.org](http://www.ocha.org)

This fieldwork started in 2021 and is expected to continue until 2024. The aim is to understand the changes in trends of migration, push factors, migration aspirations and decisions involving migration and outcomes of migration. We also looked at the impact of COVID-19 on local realities and how these shape decisions about migration. This paper draws from 20 mini-workshops (five with girls and five with boys who are children of migrants, and five with girls and five with boys whose fathers have not migrated). Each group had 10–14 participants and each workshop included several exercises and lasted around three hours. The workshops included participatory tools such as mapping aspirations, support networks and challenges. In addition, we conducted 16 focus group discussions (eight groups with wives of migrants and eight groups with wives whose husbands have not migrated), eight in-depth interviews with returnee migrants, seven with aspiring migrants who had applied for migration documents and were waiting for a visa and ten key informant interviews with stakeholders who work on migration or are able to speak about the local realities of Saptari.

### **III. MIGRATION TRENDS FROM NEPAL**

The government of Nepal controls where the population may work and has approved 110 countries for labour migration. Nepali workers need labour permits from the government of Nepal to engage in foreign employment and except under special conditions, the process of getting a visa and the necessary permits has to be facilitated by registered recruitment agents. The government has, however, banned domestic work for foreign employers. The most common destinations apart from India are Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Malaysia (MoLESS 2019). Since 2008/09, when the government began keeping records of this phenomenon, 4 million people (out of a working age population of 20.73 million) have left for employment abroad. Despite a decline in the volume since 2013/14 (from over 500,000 in 2013/14 to 236,208 in 2018/19), this still forms the main livelihood strategy for the majority of Nepali households.

Due to social restrictions on mobility and a selective ban from the state because of its inability to protect women who largely seek domestic work not covered by labour laws, Nepali migrants are largely men. The law allows women to go abroad for employment other than domestic work, however. On average, Nepalis leave for foreign employment at a relatively young age and their career span in foreign employment is short. The mean age of migrant workers is 28 and men aged 25–35 make up the largest share of migrants, while those above 45 rarely stay in the destination country (MoLESS 2020). Given that the legal age for initial migration is 19 years, the career span is around 16 years. The majority of Nepali migrants (for example, 64% in 2017/18) are involved in low-skilled “elementary” occupations (cleaning, packaging and construction work) in the destination country and would have worked as wage labourers, in agriculture or in petty trade before they migrated (IOM 2020; MoLESS 2020).

Among the seven provinces in Nepal, Province 2 is one of the largest sources of labour migrants and Saptari district, located in Province 2, is the 7<sup>th</sup> largest migrant-sending district (among the 77 districts) in Nepal. A total of 97,988 people (379 females) have engaged in foreign employment since 2008, when the government started keeping records. According to key informants, more than 55% of first-time

migrants are between 14–18 years of age and migrate illegally with fake documents, as the government has banned migration before the age of 19. Those from the age group 25–35 are usually second-time migrants. Common destinations for people in Saptari are Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait. As noted above, more than 98% of migrants from Saptari are men.

#### **IV. THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON MIGRATION TRENDS IN NEPAL AND SAPTARI**

As of March 2021, in Nepal, 276,000 people had been infected and 3019 died of COVID-19 (MoHP 2021). Moreover, there have been secondary impacts, such as on the socio-economic circumstances of people (NRI and Care Nepal 2020), the economy of the country (World Bank 2020),<sup>3</sup> the impact on agriculture and food systems (Adhikari et al. 2021) and the impact on gender relations (NRI and Care Nepal 2020) among others.

For Nepali migrants, COVID-19 created challenges in access to services, physical insecurity, loss of employment, human rights violations in destination countries and challenges in return and reintegration (IOM 2020; ILO 2020; Bhattarai and Baniya 2020). While little was written about the impact on family members of migrants who were in Nepal, previous research with wives of migrants found that the lack of credible information, uncertainty about the whereabouts of their spouses, fear of potential stigmatisation on return and the inability to support their spouses placed a tremendous stress on wives (Dhungana and Ghimire 2020).

The Non-Resident Nepalis Association estimated that by 30 May 2020, over 10,000 Nepalis in the GCC countries and Malaysia, the main labour destinations, had tested positive for COVID.<sup>4</sup> Providing adequate protection and services to stranded migrants in the destination countries and managing their return were the biggest challenges for the government. As with most other South Asian migrant-sending

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<sup>3</sup> For example the [World Bank Report](#) (World Bank, 2020) suggests that Nepal's economy will grow by only 0.6 percent in 2021, inching up from an estimated 0.2 percent in 2020 as lockdowns caused by COVID-19 disrupt economic activity, especially tourism.

<sup>4</sup> <https://nepal24hours.com/128-non-resident-nepalese-dead-16-thousand-infected/>



countries, responses to migrants during COVID-19 were developed in an ad-hoc manner as circumstances in the destinations unfolded. Since it had never seen a health crisis of this scale, Nepal's disaster response policy – the National Policy for Disaster Risk Reduction 2018 (MoHA 2018) and the Nepal Disaster Risk and Management Act 2017 (MoHA 2017) – and foreign employment policies – Nepal Foreign Employment Policy 2010 (MoLFE 2010) and the Foreign Employment Act 2007 (MoLFE 2010) – lacked a guiding framework to deal with outcomes for migrants during the pandemic.

Around 600,000 migrant workers returned to Nepal when the Indian government imposed a lockdown on 25 March 2020 (Acaps, 2020). A total of 527,000 workers were expected to return during COVID-19 from other countries; 24% initially due to job losses and increased anxiety about their health, the remaining (around 400,000) migrants due to expiration and non-renewal of visas or as destination countries laid off workers.<sup>5</sup>

In order to protect its citizens abroad, the government arranged free rescue flights, sometimes alone (such as in the UAE) and at other times sponsored by the destination government (such as in Kuwait). Most returnees' work contracts had expired during the lockdown or they were forcibly laid off while a few others had returned due to health issues. According to government data, by 15 September 2020, 63,347 people had returned home via COVID-19 related rescue flights coordinated by the Government of Nepal, while a further 200,000 Nepalis had applied for return and were waiting for repatriation.<sup>6</sup>

While there are no return migrant figures specific to Saptari, Province 2 accounts for the return of the largest population of migrants from Malaysia and the 4<sup>th</sup> largest from GCC countries in normal times (MoLESS 2020). There are also no figures for returns

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<sup>5</sup> “Create employment opportunities for workers affected due to COVID-19 through the new budget say experts.” <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/05/02/create-employment-opportunities-for-workers-affected-due-to-covid19-through-new-budget-say-experts>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/05/21/at-least-500-000-migrant-workers-want-to-return-home-at-the-earliest-says-report>.

during COVID-19 for Saptari. Our qualitative work showed that people who had returned to Saptari on holiday just before the COVID-19 lockdown started in Nepal on 24 March 2020 were laid off while they were in Nepal. This was not accounted for in the figures above.

Interview,  
migrant on  
holiday from  
Dubai

*“I was here on a one-month holiday. My flight was supposed to be next Monday and the lockdown started on Saturday. So, I was stuck here. Then I called the company and they said they do not want me for a while now. So, I am here.”*

Others had returned to Saptari during COVID-19 as their contracts had come to an end. For many families, this often means a loss of the major source of household income. They might be able to manage for some time with savings, but in the long run, this will be a major economic challenge for households, particularly those with a family member who had been abroad only on the first contract. Such households will have to clear the debt they had incurred for migration and it usually takes one or two years to be able to pay off the loan.

Another strong impact of COVID-19 on migration patterns is a massive increase in “visit visas”, whereby instead of going on a labour visa for work, people apply for a “visit visa” and stay in the destination country to work illegally. While this was not altogether new, the numbers surged significantly during the COVID-19 period; for example, between September and December 2020 alone, 26,000 Nepalis went abroad on visit visas, 9000 only to the UAE, which is a working destination for Nepalis (Online Khabar 2021). Migrants were lured with promises of work in places like hospitals and brought in illegally under visit visas. When several groups of stranded migrants started registering complaints about being cheated by the brokers, the government decided to add mandatory English language communication skills and temporary insurance of 1–1.5 million NRS (8649–12,974 USD) minimum to the requirements for obtaining a visit visa.

## V. MIGRATION DECISIONS POST COVID-19

A study by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2020) finds that around 115,000 aspiring migrants who had obtained labour permits from the government for foreign employment were unable to depart for the destination countries due to COVID-19. The migration process of an additional 328,681 migrants who had received pre-approval was also halted due to COVID-19 (ibid). In total, this means that there were around 443,681 documented potential migrants in Nepal before the lockdown ended on 17 August 2020. Migrants had also come on holiday just before the lockdown started. All of these form part of the potential population who is forcibly immobile and will soon be deciding whether or not to re-attempt foreign employment, along with those who returned during COVID-19.

A pre-COVID study by the Nepalese government on remigration (migration after return) decisions of labour migrants who had been in India, the GCC countries and Malaysia finds that 60% of returnees are not willing to remigrate, as they want to try ventures in Nepal (MoLESS 2020). While there is no data disaggregated by age on returnees who do not want to migrate, our fieldwork in Saptari indicates that there is an age and household responsibility dimension; people who are above 40 and those who are the only sons in the household with old parents tend not to remigrate.

Interview,  
returnee  
migrant, Saptari

*“I am the only son in the house and now my father is old. I have lived abroad for over 10 years. I bought land and have an auto-rickshaw now. I also have a shop for my wife. So, we can earn here. I do not want to go there again. I have to look after my father and mother.”*

A nationwide study by IOM and the Nepal Institute for Development Studies (NIDS) (2020) during the COVID-19 pandemic found that 52% of current migrants wanted to return to Nepal, while another study by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) suggests that 77% of Nepali returnees who returned during COVID-19 are no longer willing to remigrate (IFAD ongoing). However, it is too early to say if the migrants will stick to their decisions or what consequences this might have in the long run.

Nevertheless, our qualitative fieldwork in Saptari after the lockdown finds that the momentum of migration has started again; returnees and people aspiring to migrate have started visiting local brokers, recruitment agencies and migration resources centres to inquire about the demand for labour and to the District Administration Office and the orientation centres to obtain passports and attend orientation sessions. Except for those who had set up businesses in Saptari, returnees shared that they had been maintaining contact with their employers to explore the possibility of remigration. According to local brokers and as shown in the quote in the introduction section, the demand for foreign companies for labour is lesser compared to the number of Nepalis seeking to go abroad. The fact that remigration is inevitable has also been demonstrated by the remigration of returnees who started going back to India as early as September 2020 after they ran out of savings (Khadka, 2020). Thus, despite enforced immobility, migrants are already taking migration as a way out, to cope with the situation of economic turmoil in their family life.

There are numerous factors that allow us to safely assume that labour migration will not decrease significantly due to COVID-19. The study finds the following reasons, which are interconnected but can be broadly categorised into social and economic factors:

#### **A. SOCIAL FACTORS**

- Family aspirations for migration
- Social norms around responsibilities of men
- Adolescents' migration aspirations
- Migration and upward social mobility
- Availability of loans for migration

#### **B. ECONOMIC FACTORS**

- Wage difference
- Tangible outcomes in migrant households
- Job opportunities and supportive environment for local entrepreneurship
- Low and irregular income sources in the place of origin

The social factors are traditional and are deeply entrenched in the society and related to people's day-to-day existence. Hence, they are likely to exert a strong push vis-à-vis COVID-19, which is a one-off factor. As this analysis is based on Saptari, the factors might not be generalisable to the country as a whole, but would exert significant pressure on people of similar caste, ethnic and geographical background. They are likely to push people to discount COVID-19 health risks and decide in favour of foreign employment rather than remaining at home.

Our research finds that family responsibility and aspirations act strongly to force people to ignore risks and migrate. Prior to migration, men largely lived in joint households and their parents and extended family members (elder siblings and paternal and maternal uncles) played an important role in migration decision-making. We found that parents of potential labour migrants are engaged either in agriculture or daily wage labour. They do not earn much cash, not only because of low wages in those sectors, but also because of the barter system in agriculture, where exchanges are also in kind and in labour. They see foreign employment, which yields much better income and provides the family with cash, as a success. Hence, they push their sons into foreign employment as soon as they become mature. Similarly, for such economically deprived parents, investing in children's education until they complete secondary school is difficult. Thus, many boys drop out of school after grade eight when admission fees become high. Once they drop out of school, parents prefer that their sons start contributing economically and push them towards foreign employment. This is one of the main reasons for illegal underage migration in Saptari. Due to the closure of schools for a year during COVID-19, the number of dropouts is expected to rise, leading to more boys entering the labour market, increasing migration.

Our discussions with current migrants' wives show that they would prefer to have their husbands working in Saptari after the experience of COVID-19 but are also mindful that migration might be the best option for the immediate future given the local employment situation. They pointed to the significance of remittances in education and health expenses as well as savings. The fact that wives are unaware of the challenges faced by husbands in destination countries also increases wives' aspirations for their husbands' migration.

The burden of financial responsibility for the family is another strong factor that leaves men and boys with little choice. Due to religious and social beliefs, households do not use a daughter's income for any expenses. Hence, men alone are expected to provide for the family. Men's responsibilities include not only taking care of basic needs, but also providing a "good life" for family members. This notion of a "good life" locally translates into providing better amenities in the household, such as mobile phones or refrigerators; increasing the standards of food, clothes and jewellery; relocating to urban areas, ensuring that dependent family members do not have to toil in the fields and, above all, sending children to English-medium private schools and obtaining substantial money for a dowry. Boys internalise such norms from a very young age and parents and the wider community expect this from sons (Ghimire and Samuels 2020; SaMi 2019). As will be discussed below, such aspirations are not possible with earnings in Saptari and thus boys are forced to seek employment abroad.

Migration aspiration at a young age is another factor that pushes boys into foreign employment despite COVID-19. The study finds that boys from migrant households develop aspirations to migrate, following in the footsteps of the older men in the households. While we find that those with higher skills aspire to migrate to countries that are considered better employers (in Saptari, for example, this meant migrating to Japan or Dubai instead of Saudi Arabia), foreign employment is still a top career choice among adolescents from poor families. According to key informants, by the time they reach higher secondary education, adolescent boys will have experienced considerable peer pressure to migrate. Some of their peers will have already returned from their first contractual job abroad. As they see the difference migration brings to their peers, including the capacity to provide for family members and the potential of earning status as a mature member of the family, aspirations to migrate increase among older adolescent boys.

The study finds that for general workers who form the majority of the labour migrant population from Nepal as well as from Saptari, there are observable differences between migrant and non-migrant households in terms of their living standards. This has provided upward social mobility to migrant households and, most importantly, has helped them break free from discriminatory class-based relationships, such as

between landowners and agricultural workers. Migration of a single family member in Saptari has often meant that remaining family members do not have to depend on the landowners for daily subsistence but can relocate to urban areas and thus break away from the exploitation and patronage of landowners. Moreover, migration has also helped families to build economic, cultural and social capital and thus move upward in local social circles. Another significant impact of migration is the capacity of households to evade/cope with natural disasters, as shown by the quote below:

Interview,  
NGO  
representative,  
Saptari

*“Before, seasonal fire would burn down the whole village every year as all the houses were thatched. Now, yearly fire has stopped in the villages. People have earned from foreign employment and thatched houses have been replaced by cement houses. So, they do not catch fire as easily.”*

In Saptari as well as in Nepal more broadly, loans for migration are usually taken from informal (such as local moneylenders or migrant households) or semi-formal (such as community-level women’s saving groups) lenders. The study finds that people are more likely to give out loans for migration due to reasons illustrated by the quote below:

Interview,  
returnee  
migrant,  
Saptari

*“If you say you are going for foreign employment and ask for a loan, people happily give it to you. They will think that you will be able to pay it as soon as you start working abroad. But if you ask for a loan for doing local business here they will never give you a loan.”*

Young people from poor households who enter the labour market often do not have the financial means for investments and do not get loans from the informal lenders for start-ups in Saptari. Hence, they first use loans to go abroad with the intention of earning from migration, even if it is to invest later in the business they have in mind. Hence, when this is coupled with other social and economic factors discussed above, the easy availability of a loan works as a strong motivation to take up foreign employment.

As suggested above, most of these factors are general situations. As shown by studies (NRI and Care Nepal 2020), discriminatory social norms and values tend to be

exacerbated during a pandemic and this might be the same for the social factors listed here. Hence, social norms and values will exert substantial pressure for migration.

Besides this, there are economic push factors. There is a considerable wage difference between Nepal and the GCC for the same kind of work. For example, our study finds that a worker involved in daily wage work outside agriculture would earn between 15,000 and 18,000 NPR per month (95–112 USD) in Saptari, while between 30,000 and 50,000 NPR (258–430 USD) per month from foreign employment. Comparisons on sources of income and remittance patterns in migrant households strongly show this gap. Given that this is not going to change due to COVID-19 or could worsen due to the excess of workers locally in Saptari, wage difference will continue to be an important driver for migration.

For the same social groups, there is a visible difference in living conditions between migrant and non-migrant households. By the first contract (which is usually two to three years), if things work out fine in the destination, migrants are more likely to upgrade their household from thatched huts to cement houses, move from rural and agriculture-based livelihoods to urban areas and send their children to private English-medium schools in urban areas, where education is expensive but of a better quality than that of Nepali-medium government schools in rural areas. Migrant households are also more likely to choose from a wider variety of food and clothing and other accessories than non-migrant households.

This economic affluence has the potential not only to change immediate outcomes in education for children but also to influence career aspirations amongst children. Parents from migrant households invest significantly in private tuition for children, which sometimes far exceeds the regular school fees. The belief that their parents can fund their education has given children from migrant households the confidence to have a broader planning horizon for careers than those from non-migrant households. Similarly, key informants in Saptari were of the opinion that migration of a father largely leads to girls facing less discrimination in educational investments and getting married into wealthier families.



According to a national survey, construction (28.4%), agriculture and animal husbandry (20%), wholesale and retail trade and mechanic jobs (13.9%) are the most common employments taken up by returnees (MoLESS 2020). Our interviews in Saptari also show that working in agriculture, opening a small grocery store and investing in small and medium enterprises are the three main sectors that returnees pursue upon return. About 50% of current migrants aspired to work in agriculture and 40% wanted to start their own business upon return (IOM 2020). However, 1.6 and 2.0 million jobs are likely to be either lost or have reduced working hours and wages due to COVID-19, with the most loss expected to be in construction, manufacturing and trade sectors, where returnees get absorbed (ILO 2020).

While there is an aspiration to move into agriculture, agricultural practices are still traditional and the lack of market and timely and quality agriculture inputs during COVID-19 has severely hit the sector, with the repercussions to reverberate for some time to come (CPAN 2020). Similarly, dairy, vegetables and poultry are seen as the most fragile sector for economic outputs post COVID-19 (UNDP 2020). Hence, realities of the sector might force workers to re-migrate. This is also reflected by the number of current migrants who do not see potential in returning or previous returnees thinking of remigration; more than 50% of the returnee migrants wanted to re-migrate due to lack of employment opportunities (57%), poverty (28%) and low income (10%) (IOM 2020).

A mapping of income sources between migrant and non-migrant households (Table 1) points to a stark difference between the amount and the reliability of income. It also shows that remittances provide financial resources for family members of the migrant households to invest in small ventures (such as in livestock and poultry in Saptari) and earn more from the same ventures than the non-migrant households.

Table 1.

Comparison of household income sources

Non-migrant households			Migrant households		
Income sources	Amount/period of time	Availability of the source	Income sources	Amount/period of time	Availability of the source
Daily wage labour, non-agriculture	500–800 Rs./day (highest in construction work)	Irregular	Remittances	15,000–45,000 Rs./month	Largely regular
Daily wage labour in agriculture	300–400 Rs./day	Seasonal	Seasonal wage labour in agriculture	300–500 Rs./day	Seasonal
Selling milk	3600–5000 Rs./month	Largely regular	Selling milk animals (poultry, goat, buffaloes)	3000–15,000 Rs./year	largely regular
Selling poultry and goats	2000–6000 Rs./year	Few times a year	Selling poultry, goats and buffaloes milk	1000–25,000 Rs./year 3000–15,000 Rs./time	Few times a year

Source: Fieldwork, 2021.

The economic factors shown in Table 1 are longstanding characteristics of Saptari. Thus, the post-pandemic era would be a continuation of these conditions, if they do not worsen. Hence, as in cases of social factors, people are likely to forgo risks and take the decision to migrate. Also, those left behind get limited information from formal sources. In general, migrants do not report difficulties and this has continued under COVID-19. They have been sending home money despite challenges. People left behind experience the economic problems of Saptari, while remaining unaware of the actual situation in the destination country. We found that despite deaths, infections, layoffs and the inhuman conditions and crackdown Nepali migrants faced in countries like Qatar and Malaysia, there is not much discussion about it in Saptari, both in the general community but also among aspiring migrants and spouses of migrants we interviewed. Hearing from friends and seeing that they are receiving remittances, they believe that economic conditions continue to remain much better in the destination country. This creates a strong push factor, as is already being seen in the number of people applying for jobs (please see quotes in the introduction).

Besides, as shown by Table 1, the main sources of income for non-migrant households are already fairly small compared to the remittances of migrants and are largely unstable and irregular. This creates a strong motivation for families to invest in the migration of at least one family member so that households can rely on a stable source of income.

## **VI. CONCLUSION AND SOME WAYS FORWARD**

Unlike high-income workers who can choose to be (im)mobile, many lower-income workers such as Nepali labour migrants are likely to choose to migrate in the same pre-pandemic conditions or worse because of personal, economic and social circumstances back home. Also, instead of directly submitting to or resisting changing circumstances, migrants and others in the migration ecosystem will find in-between ways to work with the new circumstances in migration brought by COVID-19 and make their migration decisions. While the circumstances for migration might be difficult, the study shows that migrants and their families use their agency to accomplish the goals they see as right (in this case migrating despite knowledge of new risks due to COVID-19).

Thus, the experience of COVID-19 alone will not have a significant impact on the rate of people seeking foreign employment from Nepal if jobs continue to be available in the destination country. This is because migration is as much influenced by family and community dynamics and by local economic contexts as it is by one-off crises such as the pandemic. Until the country generates jobs and wages competitive with those in destination countries, migration is likely to continue from Nepal if jobs are available elsewhere. In the face of immobility imposed by the COVID-19 situation, Nepalese migrants continue to look for options to emigrate. Hence, for the foreseeable future, managing migration will be the most viable alternative for Nepal. COVID-19 has shown that. The following section describes some of the areas for improving migration outcomes in Nepal.

**i. Better linking of migration and Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) policies**

DRRM plans and policies should incorporate health emergencies and link with migration policies to address the needs of the migrant population as well. For better coverage and timely action, the task of protecting migrants should be divided between the central and provincial government. Provincial and local governments should also be able to coordinate directly with embassies in the destinations, so they can reach out to migrants in time and so costs can be shared.

**ii. Scaling pre-employment orientations**

Several government and non-government organisations now run orientation centres that help potential migrants make informed choices and practice safe and beneficial migration. Due to limited resources, they do not reach all aspiring migrants. Further investments are required for such pre-employment orientations. Also, families do not take part in these orientations and thus remain unaware of the challenges and risks that migrants face. They are unable to support their migrant family members and unprepared to manage any crisis that migration might involve for families left behind. Current orientations should develop modules for families and make family orientation mandatory.

**iii. Providing orientations throughout the migration cycle**

Government and non-government organisations conducting orientation classes should design and implement post-arrival (upon arrival in the destination), pre-return (in destination, before return) and post-return orientations (in the home country, upon return) for migrants and their family members. Among other things, the modules should provide information on emergency services in the event of disasters, advice on local entrepreneurship and investment opportunities. Substantial resources need to be provided to the Nepali labour attaché offices in the destination countries to run such trainings.

**iv. Creating a policy environment to support entrepreneurship of migrant families and harness migrants' potential to increase exports and create local jobs**

Returnees are more likely to be engaged in entrepreneurship if a proper environment is provided by the government. Agro-business seems to be the current main business of choice and migrant families have better resources to invest in such enterprises. But due to a lack of support, they do not invest wisely (for example, only investing in traditional animal rearing). The government should make provisions to support migrants and their family members to use their money and knowledge to foster entrepreneurship, create more jobs locally and contribute to the country's national exports.

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## IMPRINT:

ABI Project  
“Pandemic (Im)mobility: COVID-19 and  
Migrant Communities in the Global South”

Edited by the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute.

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