

Socio-economic Factors Contributing to Reverse Migration and Its Impacts on the Local Economy

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ABSTRACT

Reverse migration has turned out to be a major socio-economic phenomenon in Nepal, especially after world labour market shake up, increase in cost of living in overseas place and shifting individual and family priorities. Although research in the literature of migration has focused greatly on labor mobility towards the receiving country, very little is known about the motivations of such moves, experiences of reintegration and the effect that such a movement has on the local economy. This paper evaluates the reasons of backward migration which are socio-economic and analyses the presumed effects of the returning population on Kathmandu Valley economy.

The research design executed in the study is exploratory qualitative research. The 22 Nepal return migrants were interviewed using snowball sampling in semi-structured in-depth interview transforming the selected interviewee into the sample. The data was analyzed by themes to obtain the lived experiences of the returnees, the driving factors behind the reasons of returning, challenges of re-integration, and economic participation after returning. Results show that even though overseas migration provided career advancement and financial benefits, emotional loneliness, immigration regulations, insecurity in jobs, and family commitments influenced greatly the decision to move back. The returnees helped in the local economic activities, including entrepreneurship, creation of jobs, payment of taxes and transfer of skills.

The paper concludes that reverse migration in Nepal is a multidimensional phenomenon, which is defined by individual agency and structural conditions interaction. There should be policy interventions that recognize the skills of return migrants, re-integrate them, and help generate entrepreneurship to ensure that the developmental potential of the return migrants is maximized.

KEYWORDS

Entrepreneurship, Kathmandu, Local economy, Nepal, Returnees, Reverse migration, Socio-economic factors

INTRODUCTION

The process of migration has been of great socio-economic importance in Nepal since ancient days, which is characterized by the hopes of a good life, their livelihoods and income security. Conventionally, fiscal economy has been the driving force of international labour migration, specifically to the Gulf countries and Malaysia, caused by a low number of job opportunities and income disparity in the domestic economy (Baral, 2021). Concurrently, the rural to urban internal migration to cities including Kathmandu has been persuaded by the availability of education, healthcare, and jobs. But with the latest ten years of counter-trend

migratory patterns the so-called reverse migration, this has become a more and more noticeable pattern of migrations with migrants returning to the place of their residence out of either foreign jobs or urbanization. This trend has been conditioned by the increase in the cost of living in cities, alteration in the family structure, the shift of personal values, and loss of profit in overseas work (Adhikari et al., 2023). These personal motivations are significant, but reverse migration has to be considered in a more general structural framework based on the policies of a national economy, labor market, and the global migration regimes.

By definition, the concept of reverse migration includes such effects that individuals would start moving back to their home country after a certain duration of internal or international migration, usually in the form of reaction to economic crises or other socio-cultural displacement failures, or institutional restrictions in the host countries (El-Mallakh & Wahba, 2021). Reverse migration is often caused by some sudden or unexpected events, like economic crises, pandemics, legal limitations, or environmental disturbances unlike planned return migration which often implies a careful planning and strategy of reintegration (Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021; Diba et al., 2020). COVID-19 in specifics revealed how vulnerable migrant workers became regarding global labor market shocks, restrictive migration policies, and swift loss of jobs, especially in South Asia and Nepal in particular (Dandekar & Ghai, 2020). These processes suggest that reverse migration is not the result of personal choice but rather something that is entrenched within structure like policies on immigration to the host country, employment laws and economic ups and downs worldwide.

These processes can be explained with the help of a number of theoretical approaches. In the push-pull model suggested by Lee (1966), the role of poor conditions in the host countries, along with the perceived opportunities in the home countries, in defining the migration and return processes, is emphasized (Todaro & Smith, 2020). The social Network theory gives prominence to the use of migrant networks in the facilitation of migration and the reverse migration by exchanging information, emotional support and mobilizing resources (Boyd, 1989; Faist, 2000). Neo-classical Economic Theory posits migration as the rational reaction to wage disparities and the state of labor markets as a whole, whereas Migration Systems Theory places the concept of migrants returning to their home countries within more generalized historical, political, and economic connections between the home and the destination region (Kritz et al., 1992). The Mobility Transition Theory of Zelinsky (1971) also places migration and reentry in cycles of socio-economic changes related to development. Nevertheless, these theories can be used as crucial explanatory frameworks, but they have to be implemented with a lot of criticism because they can underestimate the influence of structural constraints in face of restrictive immigration policies, limited reintegration policies, and uneven development patterns, which determine the experiences of returns.

Empirical researches hold that return migrants are not only financial capital investor; they might also provide social remittances in terms of skills, ideas, and work practices learnt in the foreign country (Agergaard & Broegger, 2016). Meanwhile, reintegration remains a challenging task in most cases such as lack of work, stigma, and low levels of institutional assistance, and regulatory constraints. Return migration has often been linked with entrepreneurship, local

development programs, and farming innovations, but the success of each of them also largely relies on the policy conditions and resource access (Anghel et al., 2016). Gender aspects of returning to their homeland also make reintegration more difficult because women usually encounter more socio-cultural and financial restrictions (Dhungel, 2017; Korzenewica, 2020). According to the recent scholarship, external shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic, also exacerbated the conditions of return flows and pushed many returnees to reutilize the agricultural sphere, as well as informal ones, in circumstances of economic uncertainty (Paudel & Paudel, 2022).

Within the context of Nepalese opinion, the concept of reverse migration was gaining a new status during and after the COVID-19 pandemic as thousands of Nepali workers lost their jobs because of a massive layoff in foreign factories and construction, manufacturing, and hospitality industries (Kaysadu, 2023). The health risks, travel limitations, implementing stricter immigration policies in the countries of residence, and repatriation by the government also contributed to these returns (Khan, 2023). Some of the people who went back have since re-migrated, some have stayed back and invested in the agricultural sector, small and low-scale businesses as well as service-based business thus helping in the revival of the local economy. However, the consequences of the return migration are still determined by structural issues like a lack of access to finance, ineffective reintegration strategies, and irregular policy responses.

Although there is an increase in scholarly interest, a large number of research gaps exist. There is a lack of literature examining the joint impact of personal factors, as well as structural factors in the case of Nepal, which includes immigration policies, national labor regulations, and global economic changes, on reverse migration. In addition, as the individual reintegration stories are becoming more and more written, the global consequences to the local economic change, entrepreneurship, and development patterns have not been properly sought. Regional and long-term livelihood sustainability and gendered experiences also need to be addressed with more analytical complexity. Filling these gaps, the current work conceptualizes reverse migration as a multidimensional process which is influenced by interplay of individual desires, social relations, and structural factors, and thus helps to build a more holistic picture of reverse migration and its socio-economic consequences in the Nepal situation.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study adopted qualitative research of an exploratory nature. The main aim of the research was to examine the socioeconomic factors that were facilitating a reverse migration of people and the impact that reverse migration had created on the Kathmandu Valley local economy. The location of the area of study is Kathmandu valley because of its strategic political, economic as well as cultural position in Nepal. Previously, internal and international migrants used to come to the Valley and, within the past several years, they have started to come back and occupy the businesses, farms, and service sectors. The study is focused on Nepal migrants who voluntarily quit working in foreign countries and returned back to Kathmandu Valley. The participants ($N = 22$) were recruited using a snowball method because it is considered the appropriate approach to be used in the study because the sample was very elusive and in the present situation, complete sampling frame could not be obtained. The data collection process indicated that sample size of 22 was sufficient to achieve saturation of data as repeated patterns and themes began to emerge

towards the end of data collection process and also experienced diverse returns migration experiences working with different social backgrounds, countries of destination, and livelihood journeys. Under the assumption that data saturation has occurred when repeated interviews failed to generate any more substantively new codes and themes and similar patterns of motivations, challenges and post-return strategies were found. The final interviews did not add a great number of categories, but rather enhanced the different themes. Nevertheless, snowball sampling is also acknowledged to have such a limitation as it may introduce the aspect of sampling bias since, most of the time, the participants are recruited due to the interdependent of the social networks, which may give rise to a narrow down to the homogenizing of the opinions and may also deny the ability to use more differentiated or opposing experiences. Also, the sample size and the participants were saturated at Kathmandu Valley and therefore, the generated results cannot be statistically extrapolated to be used in the remaining areas of Nepal. Furthermore, the sample, which consists of the relatively well-educated majority and the majority of them having a degree or more; therefore, their sample is not needed to be representative of the living experience of low-skilled migrants employed in the construction, domestic, or agricultural areas. The specified educational profile demonstrates a specific issue of the research namely the skilled and semi-skilled returnees and their opportunities to make their contributions to the field of entrepreneurship, the skills transfer, and the domestic economic transformation in Kathmandu Valley. Similar to other qualitative techniques, this study, however, is more inclined to analytical, richness, context and richness of experience as opposed to representative and populous Ness of a population. In addition, the study does not use the quantitative economic variables, such as the employment creation rates, the change in income, or even survival rates of businesses. The assessment of local economic impacts is, therefore, anchored on lived experiences and perceptions of respondents and not on the results, which are measurable quantitatively. Process/ interpretive information on how the returnees are integrated into the local economic activity and not estimates of the causal effects or macro-economic effects are thus obtained in the results.

In order to gather data, the semi-structured interviews took place and the interviews were designed to examine the socio-economic background, the reasons of returning to their home countries to determine their strategies of survival after returning. There was also informed consent prior to the actual interview and analysis of the interviews by audio-taping and subsequent transcription of the interviews. Patterns that keep on reoccurring and other perceived higher-order themes that summarized the most vital aspects driving force, difficulties and consequent outcomes pertaining to reverse migration have been determined using thematic analysis. Throughout the research, the researchers adhered to the principles of research ethics; they made sure that the participants of their study are anonymous so as not to subject the research participants to any form of emotional or psychological trauma. To avoid reflexivity, the researchers were keen to the interpretation of the narratives and repeated revision of the themes generated. The given methodological orientation made it possible to explore the lived experiences of the returnees in a very delicate and meticulous way and enabled to explore the perceived contribution of the latter to the economic activity in the locality and their entrepreneurship growth in a comprehensive way. The researchers have identified that positionality framed the study joining the fact that these are the same scholars in Nepal, who were already engaged in research on migration and

rural development and has influenced their framing of the research questions and description of the narratives. The repetition of transcripts analysis by others, thereof theme-checking and close attention to divergent or contradicting reports in the study also supported reflexivity with the aim of minimizing the potential bias. The semi-structured interview guide was based on major thematic areas such as migration history, motivation to re-emigrate, reintegration experiences, livelihood adaptation, and perceived economic contributions, which was flexible to give freedom to the respondents to expound more on the areas that of greatest importance in their experiences.

Even though the qualitative research design provided the opportunity to explore in depth returnees lived experience, future researchers can consider using mixed-methods research design as it will involve conducting structured surveys to measure economic impact, employment, and reintegration challenges. This would enhance the empirical strength by using support with the experiential aspects by trying quantifiable reflection. The methodological improvements to be made in the future can involve the provision of interview protocols as supplement, elaborate descriptions of the coding processes, and elaboration of the reflexive commentaries on positionality of the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part gives a thematic exposition of the socio-economic experiences of returnees in terms of semi-structured interview. These results are categorized into four sets namely demographic profile of the participants, the opportunities and challenges that they encounter in the foreign countries, the most common reasons why they want to revert in addition to their contributions to entrepreneurship in Kathmandu.

The explanations given by the participants are related to the available literature to demonstrate how individual experiences relate to the broader trends within the socio-economic settings of Nepal. This method puts the views of returnees into the spotlight but at the same time in the context of migration and development discourse. Whereas the Social Network Theory focuses on the facilitating aspect of social ties in the act of migration and returning, the results of this paper give the indication of a less-than-ambivalent role of networks during the process of reintegration. Despite the family and community networks furnishing emotional returns decisions, they were also, at the same time, limiting post-return innovation, which strengthens traditional practices, institutional inertia, and resistance to ideas of foreign origin. The existence of this dual role suggests that social networks can both promote and prevent the economical reintegration, meaning that this approach needs more critical implementation in Nepalese context referred to as Social Network Theory.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Out of the 22 respondents, 15 were men (68.18) and 7 were women (31.82). Most of them (86.36) had obtained a master degree or higher. The ages of the respondents were between 24 and 41 years with majority of the respondents falling within the age group of 31-40 years. After returning, thirteen respondents (59.09) had started businesses and nine other respondents had not. Regarding origin, 59.09 and 40.91 were of rural municipalities and urban area respectively

(Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Information

Variables	Category	Number	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	7	31.82
Male	15	68.18	
Age group (in year)	Below 30	4	18.18
31 to 35	8	36.36	
36 to 40	7	31.82	
Above 40	3	13.64	
Municipality	Rural	13	59.09
Urban	9	40.91	
State business	Yes	13	59.09
No	9	40.9	

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The vast majority of respondents had spent between two and eight years living in the country where they were foreigners, the majority of those countries being Australia, the UK, the USA, Malaysia, Indonesia and Qatar. Migration started at the end of 1990s and persisted in the returns, up until 2023. A few of them underwent secondary migration (e.g. Malaysia to Indonesia), and majority of them remained in the foreign countries than five years.

The educational level will be high because it is a sign of skilled immigration, as high-level skills that equip individuals with international exposure in pursuit of personal and professional development (Agergaard & Broegger, 2016). The existence of knowledge and skills transfer on return also comes out clearly in this demographic composition as the foundation of entrepreneurial input in Nepal.

OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES ABROAD

Educational and Personal Growth

Migration is a great way to boost academic and personal growth. A large proportion of the participants received qualifications, including Cambridge A-levels, as well as became accustomed to disciplined and multicultural settings. As an illustration, one of the respondents replied that, "I have taken my A-levels in foreign country. Hard-working and polite culture transformed me to be more disciplined and respectful" (Male, 31). The results are consistent with the Push-Pull Theory that educational and self-development has the strongest pull factor (Lee, 1966). The results are consistent with other research results that have revealed that migrants gain competencies in foreign countries that help them build social and human capital in home countries (Agergaard & Broegger, 2016).

Professional and Economic Advancement

Majority of the good people (86.36) indicated enhanced employment chances, organized working conditions, punctual remuneration, as well as skill development. A number of employees changed their part time employment to full time jobs in the hospitality industry, IT, and beauty

industry. One respondent told me, "I began with a 20 hour campus position, followed by full time hospitality". The compensation was good and the system was organized (Female, 25). This coincides with the neoclassical economic theory which focuses on economic incentives as aspects that drive migration. The participation in organized formats of work in foreign countries does not only aid in the professional development but also equips the returnees with the ability to move back to Nepal with the aim of introducing improvements in the practice of organizations.

Cross-Cultural Social Integration

The fact that it was necessary to work with people of other nationalities, acquire intercultural skills, and expanded social networks was mentioned by approximately 45.45%. One reported that "the atmosphere became welcoming and helpful, and the other reported that the Chinese and Malaysian co-workers were friendly, but there was no other Nepali". Such experiences implement the concept of Social Network Theory, which describes how various social connections can enhance the social capital and intercultural competence. This is also exposure that prepares the returnees to initiate inclusive practices and collaboration in the local work places.

MOTIVATIONS FOR REVERSE MIGRATION

Family and Emotional Ties

The most important driving force was family (77.27%). They were influenced by emotional attachment, homesickness, and care giving demands. According to one of the participants, "my family was the primary incentive to come back without it, I would not have even thought of going back". These results can be explained by the Social Network Theory that focuses on the long-lasting status of interpersonal relationships as determinants of migration decisions. Cultural and emotional aspects tend to be more important than simple economic motives, which is emphasized by Crescenzi et al. (2017).

Personal Values and Purpose

About 31.82 per cent. came back because they felt purposeful like putting their learned skills to practice in Nepal. One of the respondents claimed that "I wanted to contribute my knowledge to my country". The Push-Pull framework used by Lee (1966) allows explaining the impact of intrinsic motivators, including the desire to contribute to the development of the nation on reverse migration. It proves that the process of return migration is rather a multidimensional process integrating both individual values and socio-economic factors.

Socioeconomic Realization and Opportunity

Others (36.36) knew that they would get ahead financially and personally in Nepal especially when supported by his family. One of the participants highlighted that "I could do and earn the same in Nepal, and seeing people doing well in the home country has had confidence in me" (Male, 41). It shows the view of the neoclassical view and also the consideration of the returnees who compare the opportunities in the foreign and the home settings and then determine whether to reintegrate there.

Although family attachment, personal values, emotional well-being and the perceived opportunities as individual motivations played major role in the decision to live back, the motivations were not created in vacuum. They were fully integrated in the larger structural

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circumstances in terms of immigration policies in host societies, labor market ambiguities and macroeconomic changes in the world and Nepal itself. Restrictive visa regimes, restricted avenues to permanent settlement, employment precarity and destination country policy revisions altered some of the return decisions, despite personal goals of long-term settlement. Simultaneously, the post-return livelihood decisions and economic participation were influenced by the domestic structural circumstances in Nepal, namely, a dearth of reintegration facilitation, the unequal access to finance, regulatory perforation, and a comparatively weak labor market. The disruptions of the global labor market especially during and post the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the returns further by revealing the vulnerability of migrant workers to the abrupt loss of jobs and restricted mobility. These structural drivers were combined with individual motivations and supported the decision to return and affect the process by which the returnee's used reintegration and entrepreneurship. Thus, the notion of reverse migration within the Nepalese experience can be viewed as multi-dimensional and as a consequence of agency and structural limitations e.g. HRD, and not as a voluntary or agency-based phenomenon.

Discomfort with Foreign Social Environment

The respondents explained emotional isolation, busy schedules, and depressing social interactions in foreign countries. One said, "life overseas was hectic and lonely... I lacked Nepali coziness and companionship" (Female, 34). This observation is important in highlighting the role of social and emotional motivation as pull factors of return migration which is complementary to the economic and education motivation inherent in the migration theory.

The problem of feminized sides of migration back home was implicit in the history of feminine participants. Women compared to male returnees emphasized on emotional isolation in the foreign land, issues of integrating paid work and the care giving roles and augmenting social strains against returning. Other ones included multiple female respondents who said they had limited autonomy in their decision-making upon getting back and experiencing a higher burden on following traditional gender roles. These findings show that reverse migration is not an economic transition process but social process among the genders that is conditioned by prevailing norms and expectations.

POST-RETURN ENGAGEMENT & CONTRIBUTIONS

Entrepreneurship and Economic Contribution

The returnees are able to provide economic growth of a local area by creating businesses, providing jobs and paying taxes. About 63.63 percent were entrepreneurs with 36.36 percent of them contributing to education and development of skills. One of the respondents told that, "paying direct tax and hiring people in family business studied in abroad. Such activities represent the movement of human and financial resources and prove how reverse migrants are the agents of local economic renewal". The results are consistent with the ones provided by Magar (2023) and Paudel & Paudel (2022), who noted that policy support should be provided to ensure that the developmental potential of the returned population is being fully utilized.

Application for Foreign-Acquired Skills

Majority (78%) used soft skills, management practices and industry-based practices in the local work environment. Nevertheless, challenges of adaptation have been posed about local

resistance. One of the participants said, "I attempted to employ as many methods as possible in my business, and most people turned out to become an impediment". This demonstrates that the contextual differences between the transfer of skills and knowledge are usually limiting and consistent with the Migration Systems Theory or the necessity to provide institutional backing to the integration of returnees.

Occupational Challenges

Systemic problems that returners incurred include low wages and corruption at workplace. One respondent said, "Not satisfied, internal politics and lower paid wages". Others were able to change using individual resistance and acculturation. These issues imply that it is not only the skills of migrants which determine their reintegration but also structural and organizational factors are also important in the host country. Social Network and Neo-Classical Theory are both theories of migration but can only be used with the insight into contexts.

Future Foreign Mobility

Through theoretical lens, although other theories of migration were formulated including Push-Pull theory, Social Network Theory, Neo-classical Economy Theory, Migration Systems theory and the Mobility transition theory by Zelinsky could be applied to compose the driving forces and trends of returning migration, the weaknesses and gaps adopted in these theories are also discovered in the findings of this study. Particularly, one may refer to the beneficial role of social ties on the migration and reentry but the empirical evidence, which is made available in the present study, can demonstrate that the same social ties can play the restraining role, as well. As much as the theory of Social Network cues upon the enabling necessity of social connections in the occurring migration, as well as migration return, the current findings of the study suggest a less conclusive role of networks throughout the reintegration process. Though the re-immigration process was stimulated by the family ties and the social connections, some of the returns refused to accept that the local actors were opposed to it, the society was not prepared to accept new ideas and the social norms could significantly hinder the positive usage of the skills and practices acquired abroad. This is why, family and community facilitated the emotional decision making of returning decision, nevertheless, this restricted post-return innovativeness due to the reinforcement of the past activities, institutional inertia, and resistance of foreign-acquired ideas. In this respect, social networks do not just offer emotional, informational support, they can even facilitate the traditional expectation, introduction of expectation practices and institutional inertia, according to which the reinstitution process can become a bit more challenging and the innovation of an entrepreneur more difficult.

As will be observed, this observation only exacerbates the already largely positive view at Social Network Theory of migration literature, and points to the fact that Social Network Theory must be put to the test by paying critical attention to both the reinforcing and inhibiting processes in the future. Such a duality role suggests that social networks are the cause and the obstacle of economic reintegration and, therefore, the implementation of the Social Network Theory in the Nepalese case should be considered more critically and specifically. According to this, the reversal decision actually, as described by Neo-classical and Push conditions and Push theories, the measure of economic rationality and relative opportunity structure, but the foundational

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processes of the life of the returned individual indicate that the sentiment of interconnectedness, connection, and acceptance are also true. It is such revelations that serve to enhance the point that the migration theories do not require to be applied as hard deterministic clarifications to explain a reality that is a complex and at times conflicting such as the once Nepal example of reverse migration and reintegration. A more rigorous use of the migration theories also assists in the explanation of divergent post-return results among the participants. Whereas a few of the returnees were able to use financial, social and human capital to open businesses, a number failed because institutions were rigid, social norms and lack of policy support. Such difference demonstrates the significance of the perception of migration theories as not a deterministic paradigm but as an adaptable scheme, which reacts to a context-dependent structural and social environment.

CONCLUSION

The authors in this study have mentioned that the reverse wave of Nepalese returnees is determined by the mixed emotions that are the combination of the cultural and economic factors. Despite some opportunities involve living abroad, such as personal level development, professional development and cross-cultural immersion, the migrants are faced with some issues such as language barriers, social alienation and not having their abilities recognized. The need to make a decision to return is alleviated by family bond, cultural identity, the need to serve the family back home as well as the absence of comfort over the new social practices in the foreign country. The foreign challenges were sometimes skill and confidence boosting as to some the foreign experience was difficult to transfer in Nepal. The Nepal returnees can contribute towards the local Nepal economy through entrepreneurship, creation of jobs, taxation, imparting skills and education and training. They applied foreign acquired skills and techniques in management, but they were not all the time effective because there was opposition locally, inhibitions in policies and politics in work places. Although this paper considered return migrants who had been living within Kathmandu Valley, a future study shall incorporate the returning migrants in other rural and semi-urban areas outside Kathmandu Valley since the process of reintegration may be very different in the latter. There would be a more encompassing understanding of the diverse population in Nepal of returnees to include the returnees with different levels of skills, especially the low skilled labor migrants who would be involved in construction, agriculture and domestic service.

Overall, the role of the reverse migrants on the economic and social development is important. Their value can be tapped fully by assisting them to fit in through attending to skill building, mentoring, as well as by having clear policies. The findings show that reverse migration is not merely the economic choice but the phenomenon that is multiple and the values of value that help it to occur include the values of persons and the willingness to do their part of the country development. Although this analysis and discussion express some of the gendered aspects of returns migration, a more delineated intersectional examination of age, ethnicity, classes, and localities would also help in the better analysis of various reintegration experiences. Future studies using an intersectionality prism may determine the ways in which intersecting social positions determine resource access, entrepreneurial prospects, and social approval upon return. Details of the findings ought to shift away or the general reintegration support to the more

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specific interventions like certification and recognition of foreign skill acquisition, offering startup finance and cheaper loans of the returning entrepreneurs, reintegration counseling services, and mentorship schemes between the returned and the local institutions. Another way of increasing the successful reintegration of returning migrants is to strengthen the cooperation between the migration authorities, the local governments, and the financial institutions.

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