

## RETURNEE MIGRANTS' REINTEGRATION INTO AGRICULTURE IN NEPAL AFTER COVID-19 PANDAMIC

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to analyze the reintegration of returnee migrants into agriculture after COVID-19 in Nepal. The analysis is focused on how migration affects local economy and livelihoods of the people and what measures are taken by community and government to mitigate the effects of COVID -19 in reintegration of returnee migrants and engage them to revive the economy especially in agriculture sector. The economy of the world has been affected by COVID 19 pandemic outbreak since December 2019. Overarching effect of COVID -19 has impacted the multiple sectors along with migration, remittance, agriculture and food security systems of Nepal. The agriculture system impacted by outmigration of youths can be revived through engaging returnee migrants and remittances. People of all over the world are migrated globally and Nepalese young people are also the part of migrating in search of better opportunities abroad have been affected and returned to Nepal. The contribution of agriculture on rural economy of Nepal has been declining day by day due to outmigration of youth labour force and the lack of working manpower has created opportunity to rebound and strengthen taking as an opportunity. The major finding of this paper is that labor migrants, their livelihoods and food security were largely affected in the pandemic situation. There are high chances to reintegrate the returnee migrants in agriculture sector for better livelihood along with other sectors because agriculture is such a sector where mostly skilled and unskilled labour force can be absorbed. This article is primarily based on secondary sources of information along with direct observation and interaction of authors to different stakeholders related to present study.*

**Keywords:** Agriculture, food security, livelihood, migration, reintegration, remittance, pandemic.

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## **Introduction**

International Organization for Migration [IOM], (2008) defines a migrant as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of the person's legal status; whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; what the causes for the movement are; and what the length of the stay is (<https://www.un.org>). Labour migration is defined as the movement of persons from their home state to another state for the purpose of employment. Today, an estimated 86 million persons are working in a country other than their country of birth (IOM, 2008). International Labour Organization [ILO] Director-General Guy Ryder (2022) told that 'migrants make significant and essential contributions to the economic, social and cultural development of their host countries and their communities back home. But too often these contributions go unrecognized'. Both migration and labour are considered as an inherent part of human existence since the day of civilization. It does not only confine within the study of the movement of individuals between the different places due to job, landlessness, extreme poverty, loss of income, easy access to informal sectors in cities and joining families (Hossain, 2001; Sharma, Ray, Das, Susmita & Sarna, 2015; Mandal, Das, & Poddar, 2018; Paudel, 2020). Migration is also associated with the sets of three different factors- place of origin, place of destination, and intervening obstacles (Lee, 1966). Other factors like economic, environmental, socio-cultural, political and individual characteristics are important determining factors. With the increasing access to transportation and information and communications technology, people are also motivated to migration. These factors are known as 'drivers' of migration (Hossain, 2001).

Migration has been playing a significant role to flow remittances, exchange ideas, skills, knowledge and technologies in society. The migrants come back to their society with innovative skills, knowledge, experience and learning leads to change their existing livelihood patterns into more profitable options. Migrant workers contribute to growth and development in their countries of destination, while countries of origin greatly benefit from their remittances and the skills acquired during their migration experience (Subedi, 2006; Government of Nepal [GoN], 2020). However, labour migrants faced a lot of serious problems during the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic situation after the World War II. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the critical role migrants play as essential workers, including in healthcare, food supply and other key sectors. It has also exposed their vulnerability to the devastating health, economic and social impacts of the pandemic situation. A prolonged stay abroad often creates challenges for returnees to find employment opportunities, primarily due to the loss of contact

with prior networks in their home country (United Nation Development Program [UNDP], 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the critical role migrants play as essential workers, including in healthcare, food supply and other key sectors. It has also exposed their vulnerability to the devastating health, economic and social impacts of the pandemic. A prolonged stay abroad often creates challenges for returnees to find employment opportunities, primarily due to the loss of contact with prior networks in their home country (World Bank, 2020a; 2020b; ILO, 2022).

The Worldometer estimated that 24,665 active positive cases and 1298 deaths were recorded in Nepal in 2020 (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>). Labour migrants were also unable to reintegrate, principally due to the lack of institutional capacity, as well as human and financial resources. In addition, returnees may not have access to up to date information about employment services and current labour market situation. As a result, many returnees are concentrated in low-skilled informal employment or under-regulated sectors. This pandemic situation disrupted thousands of lives, jeopardizing farming systems, food security and job-placement of labour migrants (Adhikari, Timilsina, Khadka, Ghale & Ojha 2020). However, COVID positive cases were surge from 17,994 to 216,965 by within 4 months period (Ministry of Health and Population [MoHP], 2020). Thus, this paper seeks how reintegration of migrants into agriculture in post- COVID-19. The findings and suggestions of this paper would useful for policy making to reintegration of returnee migrants into more profitable livelihood options in Nepal in a pandemic situation.

## **Methods and materials**

The systematic review method was used for preparing this paper. The systematic review method proceeds from searching of literatures from books, articles, journals, published and unpublished reports (Zawacki-Richter, Kerres, Bedenlier, Bond, & Buntins, 2020). Thus, this paper is based on secondary sources (review) of information. About 81 articles, journals and reports related to labour migration were selected and only 42 articles given pace to impact of COVID-19 were included for review by using PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Item for Systematic Review and Meta-analyses) methods. These materials were collected form Google search, key words, websites and official records for the qualitative analysis.

## **Result and Discussion**

### ***Migration Trends in Nepal***

In Nepal, the history of mobility of people across the national border has been increasing since the unification period (1768). Indeed, the migration for employment purpose was started from the early 19th century. At that time, the tradition of going to Lahore seems to have started labour migration. After the Sugauli Treaty, thousands of Nepalese youths were recruited in British Gurkhas Regiment further increased the numbers of young Nepali men going abroad for work. Nepalese people were also migrated to work in the tea gardens in Darjeeling, to lumbering opportunities in Assam and later to extract coal and oil in the northeast of India and adjoining countries (Brown, 2017; IOM, 2020). Thousands of youths were also served the British-India in the First and Second World Wars by the signing of the British-Nepal Treaty of Friendship (Brown, 2017). The Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed between Nepal and India, in 1950 in recognition of the ancient ties and provided reciprocal rights to the nationals of India and Nepal in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other similar privileges started emigration further into Indian cities in search of employment and it is continued till the date (Subedi, 1991).

Subedi (2020) identified four types of cross-border movements: internal migration in the cities and other areas to work in industries, construction, transportation and service and informal sectors within country; migrants to the different cities of India as seasonal and permanent workers; migrants to Gulf countries, Malaysia, Afghanistan, Israel, Iraq, Cyprus, South Korea, Japan; and migrant to the USA, Europe, Australia and with student, tourist and working visa and staying there. In addition, thousands of refugees were arrived to Nepal from India, Tibet, Burma, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar due to political instability at indifferent periods. Indian citizens were also come here to settle in the Tarai after the Sugauli treaty.

Nowadays, around 20 percent of working age population involved in unskilled labour force in the foreign countries. They were seeking better employment opportunities in Gulf States and Malaysia after the activation of foreign employment act in 1985. This tendency was also increased after the restoration of democracy in 1990 when Nepal adopted new liberal policy. The new economic policy failed to create large-scale job opportunities in the market including agricultural sector. Thus, youth people were forced to labour migration due to contact of relatives, media and self-motives. They were seeking remittance as a reliable source of employment and income from Gulf countries and Malaysia (Sharma, 2011). In addition, South Korea, Japan, Afghanistan,

Israel, Iraq, Cyprus explored as new destinations for remittances (Subedi, 2020; Panta, 2006). Migration have even been among the frontline workers, who have been tested positive and even lost their life because of COVID-19. A new wave of labour migration varying, however, it is difficult to find actual number of transnational migration between Nepal and India due to open broader.

### **Contribution of Migration on agriculture and Livelihoods**

Migration impacts in both place of origin and destination at varying rates. In the country of origin, migrants were benefited from both socially and financially. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA] has estimated that about 3 percent population of the world migrated for remittances and it was contributing 9 percent of global gross domestic product in 2018. The World Bank (2019) has also estimated that Nepal was the fifth remittance receiver country after the Tango, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan and Haiti in the world. It was a largest labour sender country in South Asia (World Bank, 2019). Nepal earned 8.79 billion USD from remittance in 2018/19, and it was 2.54 billion USD in 2010/11 (GoN, 2018/19).

In Nepal, remittance is considered as a major source of GDP and foreign currency. It contributes 25.4 percent share of GDP in 2018/19 and it was 29.6 percent in 2016. Remittance is playing significant role to balance foreign trade as well as bedrock of Nepal's economy (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2016). Remittances has increased in household income and increased expenses on education, healthcare and other goods and services. The Living standard survey shows that fifty six percent households receive remittances in Nepal (NLSS, 2010/11) and contributing to bring down the poverty level from 30.85 percent in 2003/4 to 25.16 percent by 2010/11. Remittance has increased food security, households' services and living standard of people. However, it has also negative impacts on the health and welfare of workers in abroad, and the effect on families especially women, child and old-aged people left behind. It has decreased national productivity, produce demographic imbalances and land use patterns. There is also a correlation between remittance and disasters. Following the 2015 earthquake, remittances rose dramatically by 20.9 percent in 2015 versus 3.2 per cent in 2014. The pandemic situation, like COVID -19 has impacted to labour migrants who returned after lockdown especially in livelihoods and food security (Adhikari et al., 2020). The Economic Bulletin shows that the number of labour approval for foreign employment in 2020 was increased by 24.2 percent, but during that period, 99 percent working visa was stopped (Ministry of Finance [MoF], 2020). Meantime, the number of renewals of labour migration was also decreased by 34.7 percent and it was increased by 5.4

percent in the previous year. This situation creates that fluctuation in the number of labour migrants, decreasing flow of remittances at 29 percent in Nepal as compared to other Asian countries (ADB, 2020). For example, the amount of remittance increased by 1.8 percent before March and it was decrease by 4.9 percent on April to July in 2019/20 (MoF, 2020).

### **Returnee Migrants' and Reintegration**

The COVID-19 pandemic situation has also affected to the remittances, livelihoods, and food security of labour migrants. When thousands of labour migrants returned back to their home country from India and other aboard countries, then they were seeking new income-generation opportunities to compensate household income (Adhikari et al, 2020). A large number of labour forces of Karnali (73.6%) and Sudurpaschim (90.3%) Provinces were involved in seasonal migration in India. They have usually leaved for India during the off-season (January to June), and return to Nepal for planting and then harvesting crops. They were involved in the working of informal sector- restaurants, domestic work, guards, porters, and in brothels (IOM, 2020). It is a major source of income to bridge off-seasons' income for fulfilling their livelihoods (CBS, 2019; IOM, 2020; GoN, 2020). In addition, Nepalese labour forces were also selected to the Gulf countries and Malaysia as destination for returnees. Some Nepali workers, who migrated two years ago, were likely to return, because their work tenure was over and a large number of workers will return after losing their job due to the COVID pandemic. Tribhuvan International Airport [TIA] of Nepal press report mentioned 31, 2020 labour migrants arrived in TIA from Gulf, Malaysia, India and other countries from 18<sup>th</sup> June to 31<sup>th</sup> July of 2020 due to impact of COVID-19. The press reported that about 75 percent were returned from the Gulf countries, Malaysia (15%) and remaining from the other countries (TIA, 2020). The COVID-19 Assessments Capacities Projects [ACAPS] has also estimated that about 2.5 million labour forces were involved in the foreign employment especially in Gulf and Malaysia and about 0.5 million migrants were returned in COVID-19 (ACAPS, 2020).

This paper has also analyzed the reintegration of returnee migrants after post-COVID-19. This pandemic situation has impacted on the regular income and employment of returnee migrants. They required job to earn regular income source for the reintegration in society. They have also needed financial resources for adopting micro-enterprises and other profitable options. The governments should also be made an action plan to compensate the losses of remittances from returnee migrants. The findings show that majority of returnee migrants have given pace to agricultural sector for reintegration.

Agriculture as a prime sector which absorbed both labour force and skills of returnees for creating income and employment. This sector require low amount of financial resources, skills, and technology as compared other sectors. The Nepal Labour Force Survey 2017/18 revealed that only 44.2 percent returnee migrant were employed, 14.3 percent unemployed and 41.5 percent not participated in any labour forces (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2019). However, the figures of employed were varying from 26 to 56.7 percent by the provinces. The figure show that Bagmati Province have the largest employed numbers and least in Sudurpaschim Provinces. The figure also revealed that 26.9 percent returnees were involved in crafts and related works. It is followed by elementary occupations (23.6%), services and sales workers (21.4%), and skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers (14.3%). The finding shows that agriculture as a third sector to provide employment for returnee migrants.

The construction work was also a reliable source to generate employment for returnee migrants. This sector provides 28.4 percent employment for the returnee migrants. In addition, agriculture, forestry and fishery sectors provide 20 percent and wholesaling, retailing, repairing only for 14 percent employment. The figure also revealed that the returnee migrants have involved in agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors by different countries, such as India (28.6%), Malaysia (21.7%), Gulf countries (15.2%) and others (13.3%) (Government of Nepal [GoN], 2019). The findings shows that returnee migrants have given first reintegration priority to industrial and self-employment sectors, and second priority for agriculture sector. It can be said that agriculture, forestry and fishery are potential reintegration sector in post-COVID-19. However, it requires appropriate financial support mechanisms, and human resource training to strengthen households' incomes, livelihoods and food security.

The GoN (2020) reveals that the following programs would be targeted to reintegrate returnee migrants:

***Recognize prior learning:*** The Foreign Employment Board coordinated to the National Skill Development Board for helping certification of returnee migrants' skills and experience that acquired abroad on free of cost.

***Soft Loan to Returnee Migrant workers:*** The government of Nepal has also introduced a scheme for subsidizing interest rates for loans up to NRs 1 million for encouraging returnee migrants' entrepreneurship skills through Nepal Rastra Bank.

**Returnee targeted programs at provincial level:** The government has allocated sufficient budgets to facilitate returnee migrants for their entrepreneurship skill development. Province 1 allocated NRs 90 million for the development of agriculture and livestock sectors. Bagmati province announced that returnee will have access to agricultural loan at low interest rates in partnership with Agriculture Development Bank. Lumbini province has provisioned NRs 4.35 million for returnee migrant workers including skill training, awareness programs and investment promotion.

Migration Resource Center (MRCs) operated in support of development partners which were facilitating youth for safe migration in past are now facilitating reintegration of returnee migrants to response impact of COVID-19. The programs like skill training, financial literacy and reintegration centers are also initiated in many local levels (GoN, 2020).

### **Returnee Migrants and Agriculture**

Migration, livelihood and agriculture are interrelated in many developing countries like Nepal. Agriculture is a vital development tool for overcoming poverty, and increasing food-security. It is an important source of livelihood and main sty of majority of people. Thus, the governments of Nepal should be focused to increase agricultural product and productivity. Their priorities should be increasing cultivated land (estimated 30% of fallow land) to engage returnee migrants. The local level initiatives were also important to support returnee migrants for engaging in agriculture, forestry and fishery sectors. For examples, the federal government has provided NRs 0.5 billion to increase the productivity of off-season potatoes. Karnali Province government has also allocated budgets for increasing production of wheat and fallow land cultivation in Gandaki Province (Adhikari, Timilsina, Khadka, Ghale & Ojha 2020). The governments have also developed various measures to strengthen agriculture, forestry and fishery sectors after the incidence of COVID-19. These supports were insurance for selected crops and livestock; determining the minimum market prices of major crops; providing extension and advisory services; providing low interest rates of loans; and providing high-yielding varieties of seeds, fertilizers, and machines (Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development [MoALD], 2020).

Remittance is a major source of households' income, livelihoods and food security in Nepal. It provides 8.2 billion USD, equivalent of 28.4% of GDP, in 2019 (World Bank, 2020c). However, the pandemic situation of COVID-19 brought two major consequences in this sectors. The returnee migrants further demanded foods in the first and reduction in their households' income in the second. In this context, the finding



shows that majority of returnee migrants were engaged in agriculture sector to securing their livelihoods and to compensate household incomes. However, an average size of a family farm is of only 0.6 ha. These smallholders produce a wide range of foods, using mainly family labour and consume a major part of the production in family.

## Conclusion

This paper examines the reintegration of migrants into agriculture in post-COVID-19. The finding shows that migrants, their livelihoods and food security were largely affected in the pandemic situation. The largest numbers of labour migrants were forced to return their home country from foreign employment. They have lost their source of income and employment that is correlated to their agriculture activities and livelihoods, social services (health, education) and food security. Thus, returnee migrants require effective reintegration program to compensate losses of remittances, households' income and livelihoods. The figure indicates that agriculture would be a potential sector for reintegration of returnee migrants. It lies in the third priority of returnees' employment. Thus, the governments should focus to increase agricultural support services, training, and loan and market linkages. This paper concludes that the small holder farmer requires more support than large holders for creating employment in post-COVID-19.

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