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Breaking the Chains: Unraveling the Intricate Interplay Between Labor Export and Food Import Dynamics in Nepal

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Abstract

Labor exports and food imports are two current Nepalese phenomena that are pertinent and have academic value in discussions. Although Nepal is well known for being an agricultural nation, recent years have seen a rise in labor shortages, underutilization of agricultural land, and food shortages. In this consideration, the aim of this paper is to examine the scenario of labor migration in relation to the food import dynamics in Nepal. Secondary data served as the basis for the examination. To explain the quantitative and qualitative data, a mixed method has been employed for the study. There is a direct correlation between the increasing proportion of labor exported from Nepal and the parallel decline in agricultural production and growing Nepal's food import. The state's economy always suffers when agricultural products are imported from other nations. In Nepal, the establishment of an independent economy is imperative. In order to create employment opportunities and optimize resource utilization, labor management is essential. Cereal and food imports indicate a potential economic crisis by indicating the outflow of national currency. Proper land use, commercialization, market access, technology transfer, and agricultural policies could all contribute to the country's sustainable economic growth. It is urgent to break through the vicious circle of importing foods and exporting labour to revive the national economy of Nepal.

Keywords: Labour export, food import, chain, agriculture production, labour management.

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Introduction

It is not a recent occurrence for individuals to move about in search of food and safety. According to International Labour Organization [ILO] (2013), individuals have been moving from developing to developed nations in search of employment opportunities and income. Labor migration is an ongoing phenomenon both within and across borders. Due to its size and low level of industrialization, Nepal offers less opportunities for job. A sizable population migrates, as a result, positive impact in remittance income and downfalls national production. Remittance has been a major factor in social and economic progress of Nepal over the decades especially after restoration of democracy. Nepal has been experiencing a significant loss of human capital as well as agriculture production. Most of the agricultural lands left barren. According to Ministry of Labour and Employment [MoLE] (2016), following 2000, there was a significant change in the ratio of the quantity of remittance received and labor migrants. Labor migration has been a significant source of revenue, particularly in Nepal's rural areas. Kollmair (2006) explained that the labor force is pushed toward rural areas by poverty and low-income potential.

Today, labor migration significantly affects Nepal's economy and society. The country's economy and the structure of household and livelihoods have been changed by force labour migration and the social and financial remittances that follow (Adhikari, 2021). World Bank (2019) presented that Nepal received remittances totaling about \$8.3 billion, or almost 30 percent of its GDP. Since the late 1990s, both the number of migration and the remittances inflow have been growing in an accelerated speed, notwithstanding occasional minor fluctuations. The share of households receiving remittances has also significantly increased. For instance, in 1995-96, just 23.4 percent of households received remittances; by 2010-11, that had risen to 55.8 percent (CBS, 2012). Over the past 20 years, remittance-receiver households have also significantly increased; per household remittance was Rs 15,160 (per recipient home annually) in 1995/96 and increased to Rs 204,782 in 2016, an increase of about 14 times (WB, 2019).

Furthermore, remittances represented 26.6 percent of household income in 1995–1996; by 2016, that percentage had increased to 62 percent (Adhikari et al., 2023; IMF, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic forced many migrants working in Malaysia, the Gulf countries, and India to return home; as a result, Nepal's overall migratory pattern appears to have changed significantly. A sizeable portion of these migrants experienced discrimination at work when they returned to Nepal and reintegrated into their communities (Adhikari et al., 2022). In addition, remittance inflows increased to Rs. 1007.31 billion in 2021/22, up 4.8 percent from the previous year's 9.8 percent. In the year, remittance inflows increased by 2.2 percent to 8.33 billion US dollars, up from an 8.2 percent increase in the previous year (NRB, 2022).

The decreasing ratio of job opportunities in Nepal, and potential salary and better
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options in destination nation drive many Nepalese to migrate. Every day, around 1,700 Nepalese leave the nation. According to national census of 2021, around 2.2 million Nepalese are living overseas, with 81.28 percent of them are men and 18.72 percent are female. As of 2020, the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) has approved labor migration to 111 countries, which broaden the sphere of issuance of labor licenses. Continuous downfalls of domestic job opportunities and lack of appropriate policy to stop the youth of Nepal within its sphere, the averaging 20 to 25 years of youth leaving Nepal which is alarming. Although there are certain economic advantages of migration, if the nation properly grasps the effects. Both individuals and the nation shall be considerable to take benefit of it. The implications and forceful cause of migration affects both micro and macro levels in the national economy.

Adhikari et al. (2023) present the case of foreign labor migration in Nepal over a roughly 250-years and reshaped the theoretical concept of migration. He demonstrates unequivocally that more than one theory is needed to explain either the historical pattern of migration or its modern nature. Additionally, a sizable portion of job opportunities are lost. That is 15 percent of people who are new in the labour market, and around 30 percent of them have lost their jobs. As a result of the labor migration contraction, remittances income has been decreased and the crisis of foreign exchange is imminent (NRB, 2021). These developments could have a lasting impact on national economy.

There is limited study and few literatures are available on the effects of foreign employment on the domestic economy, particularly in agriculture. Pant (2008) argues that remittances can generate a positive effect on the economy through various activities such as savings, investment, growth, consumption, and poverty and income distribution. Similarly, remittances also contribute significantly to GDP and to stability of the economy by lowering the probability of current account reversals (Pant, 2008). It has multiplier effects in the domestic economy, by producing employment opportunities and burgeoning new economic and social infrastructure and services. Infrastructures and new institutions can be established through direct remittances inflow. ILO (2024) stated that a 1.6 percent decrease in the number of people living in poverty follow a 10 percent rise in labor migration. As estimated, country's GDP might decrease by 1.2 percent every year which pursue 10 percent rise in remittances.

This information primarily focuses on the positive aspects of remittances, as their contribution to GDP, poverty reduction, and stability by overlooking the potential negative repercussions on the domestic agriculture sector. Recent empirical data pertaining to agricultural output and efficiency does not indicate a satisfactory outcome in the context of Nepal (Khatri & Timsina, 2023). The recent surge in food imports, coupled with a decline in domestic agricultural production, raises critical questions about the sustainability and security of Nepal's food supply. The historical, socio-economic, political, and cultural

drivers are behind this growing dependency on food imports. There are insufficient to examine the comprehensive understanding of the issue. Despite the extensive research on labor migration and its economic implications in Nepal, there exists a significant gap in the literature regarding the intricate relationship between labor migration/export, food imports, and their cumulative impact on the nation's agricultural sector. Previous studies acknowledge the surge in remittances and its influence on the overall economy, there is limited exploration into the consequential effects on agriculture. A sector which is historically fundamental to Nepal's economy has been lost. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the labour export/migration in relation to the food import dynamics in Nepal.

Research Methodology

The aim of the study is to discuss the current scenario of labour export and food import. The study is based on secondary sources of information. The secondary data were employed from research reports, articles, and newspapers using various search engines regarding export labour and importing food or cereals. The periodical data from Department of Labour and Employment, Nepal Rastra Bank, National Statistics Office, International Labour Organization, World Bank etc. on labour migration and importing food items has been mostly used.

Results and Discussion

Scenario of Labour Migration in Nepal

Adhikari (2021) states that approximately 0.5 million young people enter the labour market every year. The job market of Nepal is limited. There is also a significant number of people in mess who are losing their jobs. The only alternative to them is labour migration. So, the people looking for job opportunities has been growing, the phenomenon of across migration has been strong, especially after the restoration of democracy. The Labor Law of 1985 proved useful in promoting international employment and creating opportunities for the private sector.

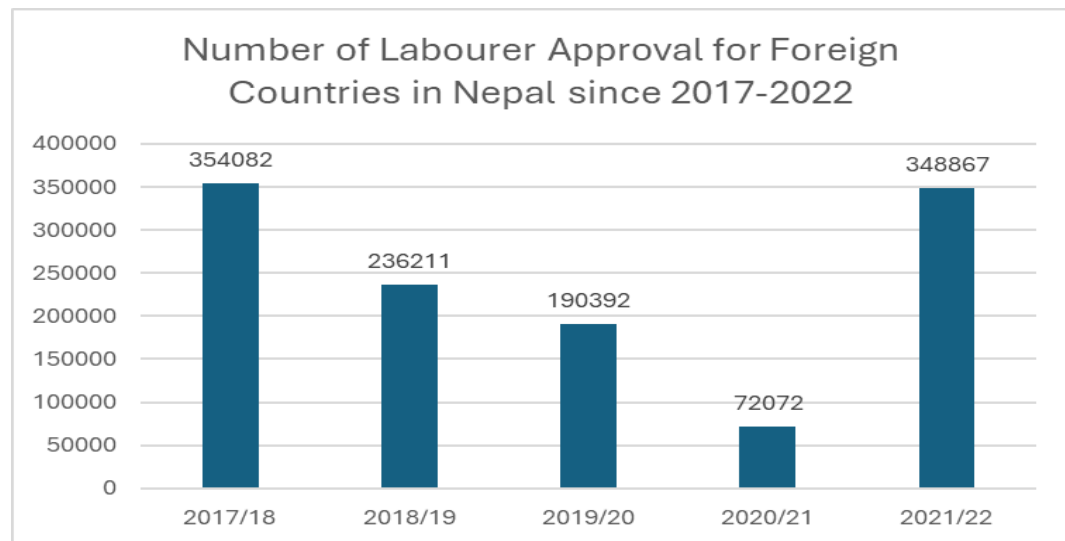
Additionally, the Foreign Employment Act of 1985 and regional development agencies plan to issue passports to potential migrant workers due to increased demand for labour in the Persian Gulf. This led to the migration of Nepalese outside India, especially to the Persian Gulf. Although the ratio to the Gulf has gradually decreased since 2010, the demand for temporary workers and seasonal migration in key destinations such as the GCC, Malaysia, Japan and South Korea is not likely to decrease in the near future. The economic outlook for these countries looks positive as their post-Covid-19 economic recovery plans seems promising. According to Mishra (2023), Qatar is a popular destination for migrant workers from Nepal. It was predicted that would start to decline after the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. As per MoDPS (2018), Qatar is presently engaged in several ongoing projects, such as Qatar Vision 2030 and the Asian Games in 2030, which necessi-

tate modern infrastructure such as stadiums, metro, and administrative preparedness.

Thus, migrant labor would still be required to finish these kinds of projects. Additionally, Fouad (2024) mention that the GCC countries are currently working to reduce their reliance on oil and are establishing contemporary industries like tourism, manufacturing, and innovation. In this sense, an increase in the need for skilled and qualified migrant laborers is expected. Furthermore, as South Korea's and Japan's labor forces rapidly age, they will become increasingly dependent on migrant labor in industries like construction, manufacturing, and horticulture. For these reasons, opportunities for Nepalese workers may increase in the future. According to William et al. (2020), there are three main streams of Nepalese migrant workers: those who go to India, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Malaysia, and other Asian countries. The following indicates the migrant worker's labour approval status.

Figure 1

Number of Labourer Approval for Foreign Countries in Nepal since 2017-2022



Source: MoLESS, 2022

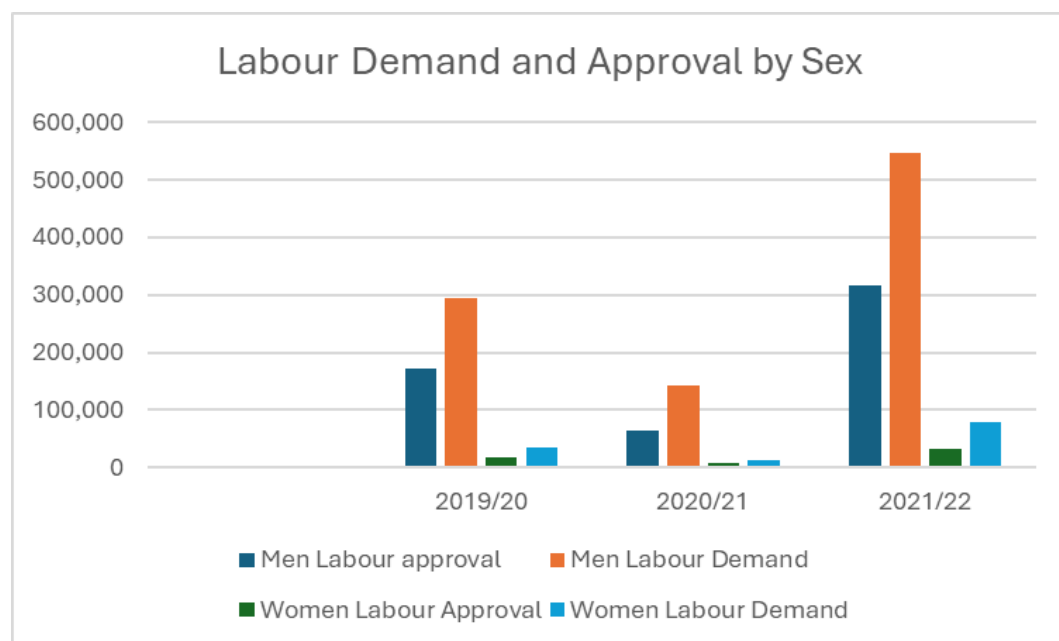
Nepalese labor migration has been erratic over the last five years, both during and after COVID-19. Soon after the lockdown in Nepal it was lifted, more migrant laborers relocated to India. When “new entry” or renewed labor permits were made available following the first and second waves of the pandemic, some people left and moved abroad, primarily to countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Malaysia. In the fiscal year 2021-022, MoF (2022) presented that the country's economic dependence on remittance was high as compared to the previous year (22.5% of GDP). Because of that, Nepal seemed to be a remittance-based country with remittance inflows accounting for more than 25 percent of GDP that has been contributing for the reduction of rural poverty.

Labour Approval Ratio by Sex

Nepal has seen a sharp increase in out-migration of labour to other destinations during the last ten years. Significant number of people desire to go abroad for foreign employment. Less than one-third of the labour permits issued in 2018/19 and 2019/20 to Nepalese workers under the “new entry” category in 2020–2021 (DOFE 2019, 2021). The Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies (NAFEA) has provided informal estimates indicating that 348867 Nepalese people were approved for labor migration by August 2021/22. More than half of these were returnees from India (35%) and other nations (20%). According to NRB (2022), there were 282,453 Nepalese workers (Renew entry) approved for foreign employment in the review year, a 198.5 percent increase. That had dropped by 46.8 percent the year before. According to HRM (2022), during the previous fiscal year, there was 3.68 times increase in the quantity of work permits issued. For Nepalese women migrant workers, Saudi Arabia was the most desired labour destination in FY 2021/22, with the United Arab Emirates being the top choice. According to DoFE (2024), on July 1 of the current fiscal year, 2022–2023 which ends on July 16 roughly 750,000 people received labor permits, up from roughly 650,000 the previous year.

Figure 2

Number of Labour Demand and Approved by Sex in Nepal since 2019-2022



Source: MoLESS, 2022

According to the report, there has been decrease in approval and an increase in demand for both male and female labor during the review period. In FY 2019–20, women’s *Scholars’ Journal, Volume 6, December 2023, 1-14*

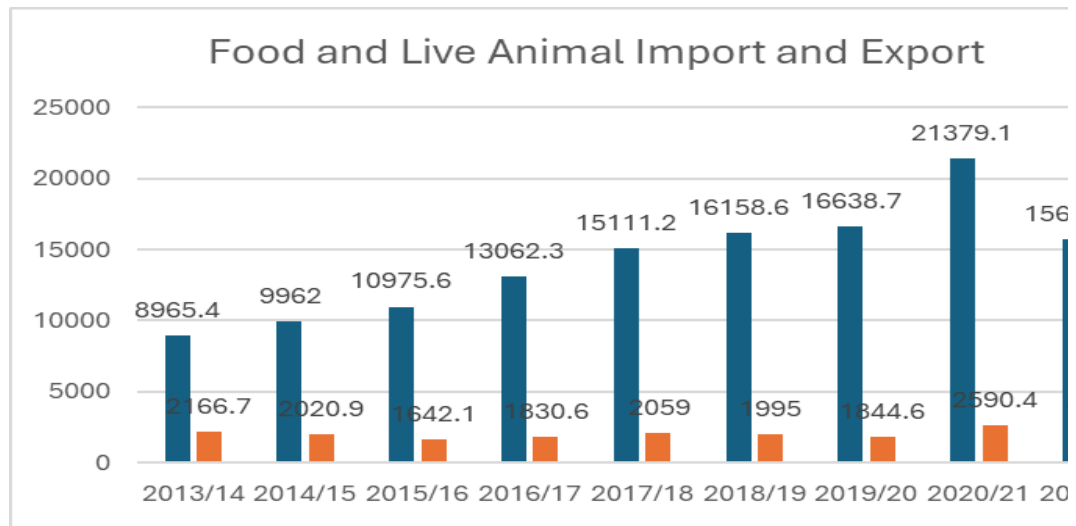
labor demand is 34,550 and approval is 18,202, while men’s labor demand is 294,131 and labor approval is 172,19. Similarly, women’s labor demand is 13,366 and approval is 7,178 in FY 2020–2021, men’s labor demand is 142,627 and labor approval is 64,894. Men’s labor demand is 545,909 in FY 2021/22, and their labor approval is 3,15805; women’s labor demand is 77,932 and their approval is 33062. This indicates that the working group has no desire to stay in the nation. It poses significant challenges going forward. Eventually, Nepal would face the biggest labour crisis in near future.

Food Import Pattern in Nepal

Imports of food items contributes to the fulfilment of the domestic needs and helps to suffice food deficiency of Nepal. Nepal is known for agriculture product in the past though it has been gradually ranked in the food dependent country. The contribution of the non-agricultural sector to the economy has increased and agriculture sector is being declining. MoF (2021/022) presented that, in fiscal years 2020/21, the contribution of the agriculture sector is estimated to be 25.8 percent and the non-agricultural sector 74.2 percent. In fiscal year 2019/20, such contribution was 26.2 percent and 73.8 percent respectively. The scenario of import and export in food and agriculture products has changed drastically.

Figure 3

Food and Livestock Import and Export in Rs10 Million



Source: NRB, 2023

Nepal is mostly dependent on imported food supplies to meet domestic demand. Numerous factors, including population growth, changing dietary preferences, insufficient domestic production capacity, widespread labor migration overseas, and climate

change-related issues that impact agriculture, are responsible for the rise in food imports. Data from Nepal Rastra Bank (2023) shows that in July of that year, imports of food and live animals from Nepal were valued at Rs. 13,991.818 million. Despite the fact that the data was only available for eight months, this indicates a decrease from the previous estimate of Rs. 15,699.2 million in 2022. It has been reported that in 2020–2021, Nepal spent the large proportion of its funds on importing food and livestock. Livestock and food products importation rise from 2013 to 2023 of about sixteen times over ten years.

Subsistence farming has been decreasing nevertheless, the commercialization of agriculture has accelerated. The majority of agricultural businesses, 55.3 percent, are thought to be subsistence farmers, with only 44.7 percent being considered commercial in nature (MAD, 2014). Agriculture performance is not up to par even with ample financial and technical support from the government. The agriculture sector is dominated by marginal and less than one-hectare farms, which operate at low economies of scale (CBS, 2011). The land is fragmented as a result of the custom and parents passing down land to their offspring. The majority of agricultural activity takes place in rural areas, where it is very difficult to access markets. There is a labour shortage and a feminization of agriculture. There is a growing trend in Nepal of farmers turning to commercialized and high-value crops (HVCs) due to input constraints, particularly those related to irrigation and land, low economies of scale, and low net returns per unit of land from traditional crops (CBS, 2011).

Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that rising urbanization, dietary changes, and rising per capita income are to blame for the pattern of food demand shifting from cereal to high-value and processed foods. Nepal exports a variety of agricultural products, such as coffee, tea, spices, and medicinal herbs. The aforementioned data illustrates how various factors, such as regional production levels, quality benchmarks, market accessibility, and worldwide demand, can impact the export of agricultural products, such as food and livestock. Livestock farming is an important sector of Nepalese agriculture industry. The national economy can be strengthened by such products made from animals, such as dairy and leather. The problems with infrastructure, disease control, and market accessibility may affect these potentiality.

Breaking the Chains

The above data and literature regarding food import and labour export presented the enormous challenge to the social, economic, and political development of Nepal. The vicious circle of importing foods and exporting labor in Nepal has been a longstanding challenge for the country, contributing to economic imbalances, food insecurity, and dependency on foreign employment. However, breaking this cycle requires a multi-faceted approach addressing various socio-economic factors. Here is a potential challenge to

tackle this issue. This cycle refers to the situation where Nepal relies heavily on importing food to meet its domestic needs while simultaneously exporting a significant portion of its labor force abroad in search of employment opportunities.

The interconnected problem of the vicious circle of importing food and exporting labor from Nepal represents a complex issue with various economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

Importing food: Nepal faces challenges in agricultural productivity due to factors such as land fragmentation, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to modern technology, and adverse weather conditions. As a result, the country relies heavily on food imports to meet its domestic consumption needs. Importing food can strain the country's foreign exchange reserves, especially if it heavily depends on imports for staple foods like rice and wheat.

Exporting labor: Nepal has a significant portion of its population working abroad, primarily in countries like India, the Gulf States, Malaysia, and South Korea. This trend has been driven by factors such as limited employment opportunities domestically, low wages, political instability, and lack of adequate social infrastructure. Although remittances from Nepalese workers abroad contribute significantly to the country's economy, there are downsides such as brain drain, social disruption due to family separation, and dependency on foreign employment.

Vicious circle dynamics: The relationship between importing food and exporting labor creates a reinforcing cycle. Limited job opportunities and low wages push people to seek employment abroad. This, in turn, reduces the agricultural workforce and productivity. The reliance on remittances to sustain livelihoods further perpetuates the cycle by disincentivizing investments in domestic industries and agriculture.

Effect on development: The cycle impedes to the overall progress of development. An excessive dependence on food imports jeopardizes agricultural self-sufficiency and food security. Meanwhile, the labor export hinders the growth of domestic products and reliance on the insecure source of income. It is only the temporary source to alleviate financial hardship and less sustainable through remittances.

Breaking the vicious circle of labor migration shall address the root cause of migration. Individuals who migrate for work by creating conditions shall encourage them to stay in their home countries or migrate voluntarily under fair terms. Breaking the cycle of importing food and exporting labor requires a multifaceted approach that addresses underlying economic, social, and developmental challenges.

On the basis of above discussions, there are several strategies that Nepal could consider breaking this cycle.

Investment in agriculture: A significant part of a country's economy is agriculture. It made up 25.8 percent of the country's GDP, compared to the manufacturing sector's

13.1 percent (Mishra, 2023). Over two thirds of the population rely on agriculture as their primary source of income, employment, and subsistence. According to Desai (2013), Nepalese agriculture is lacking entrepreneurship and suitable technology to change the country's traditional farming. Nepal might invest in irrigation systems, technology, research and development, and agricultural infrastructure. The capacity to produce food can also be increased by assisting small farmers by providing them with access to capital, training, and market connections.

Diversification of agriculture: One practical strategy for enhancing small farmers is agricultural diversification. High-value crops is a strategy that is gaining popularity in emerging nations with weak economies (Barghouti et al. 2004). Nepal can maximize its agricultural potential and opportunities for rural communities by promoting diversification into high-value crops, organic farming, and agro-processing industries.

Value addition and market access: Promoting value addition along the agricultural value chain and improving market access for agricultural products can enhance competitiveness and create employment opportunities within the country.

Skill development and vocational training: By funding these initiatives, Nepalese workers can acquire the training required for higher-value sectors, which will lessen their reliance on low-skilled labor migration.

Supporting the expansion of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in a variety of industries, such as manufacturing, tourism, and agro-processing, can encourage economic diversification, generate employment opportunities, and lessen dependency on remittances from foreign employment.

Balanced infrastructure development: Lack of infrastructure development is the pushing factor of labour migration. Development occurs as a result of balanced structural transformation. Transportation, electricity, communication, water supply, irrigation, skill-oriented education, health facilities are the cornerstone of economy. Availability of these focuses on industrialization and commercialization of agriculture. This can be a long-term goal of the country. That can be a co-relation between the local and national economy.

Policy changes and institutional fortification: The Nepalese government must implement policy changes to enhance the business environment, streamline regulations, and bolster institutions in order to encourage innovation, entrepreneurship, and the expansion of the private sector.

Programs for social protection and reducing poverty: Enhanced food security, livelihood resilience, and reduced susceptibility to climate change risks can be achieved by promoting natural resource management, climate-resilient agriculture practices, and environmental sustainability. By pursuing a comprehensive strategy that addresses these interconnected issues, Nepal can break the cycle of importing food and exporting labor,

achieve sustainable economic development, and improve the well-being of its people.

Development of technical and skilled manpower: Access to training and high-quality education equips individuals to find meaningful employment opportunities in their own nation. This reduces the requirement for migration to be the main force behind economic expansion.

Job security and treatment: Preserving workers' rights, ensuring fair salaries, and providing respectable working conditions might help to reduce labor migration. Migrant workers are shielded against exploitation and abuse by the enforcement of labor laws and the promotion of fair employment practices.

Promoting entrepreneurship and microfinance: Supporting entrepreneurship and providing access to microfinance initiatives enable individuals to start businesses and create employment opportunities in their communities.

Family and community support programs: Strengthening family and community support systems can help provide individuals with the necessary social and emotional support they need to cope with economic challenges without resorting to migration.

Awareness and empowerment: Empowering individuals with information about their rights, available resources, and alternative livelihood options can help them make informed decisions about migration and explore opportunities for economic advancement within their own communities.

By addressing the above underlying factors and implementing comprehensive strategies, it is possible to break the vicious circle of labor migration and create sustainable solutions that benefit individuals, communities, and economies alike.

Conclusion

Over a decade Nepalese economy has been trapped in the vicious circle of migration and imports. Establishment of new industries is almost nil and production level decreasing day by day. The study has been highlighted the trend, patten, problem, challenges, and possible solution to have breakthrough vicious circle of labour migration and import of goods. Although labour migration contributed a lot for remittance income which is supported to social and economic development of a nation, the shortage of youth and energetic manpower has been seen everywhere especially in agriculture sector. Labour migration increases (inflow) remittance income however imports of food items continuously outflow the national economy. The literature shows that over the past decade, the number of work permits issued increased by 3.68 times in the last fiscal year whereas 16 times increased the food import. The phenomenon has led to the dependency on food and employment opportunities abroad rather than the national potentiality. Although the continuous raising of imports and export of food and labour contributes to the demand and supply of market, the sustainability of a state economy would be the question mark.

It is not disputable that food imports or labor migration are synonymous in Nepalese context because of its unique situation. The constitution of Nepal has guaranteed the labour right of an individual. It is not wise to stop individual going abroad. The best alternative is to give them opportunity within the nation. Equal importance is given to remittances in a country's socio-economic development. The nation to be resilient and sustainable, it needs to break the vicious cycle of importing and exporting labor and food. A large-scale allocation of public funds to agricultural research and development, market expansion, and industrial sector integration could potentially lower the amount of food importation. Expanding the service and industrial sectors while making effective use of public resources may lead to job opportunities within the nation without forcing laborers abroad. Thus, breaking the cycle of importing food and exporting labor will require a long-term political vision for industrialization, infrastructure development, and agricultural commercialization.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

Not applicable

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