HIMAP

CHAPTER 15 BRIEF

MIGRATION IN THE HINDU KUSH HIMALAYA: DRIVERS, CONSEQUENCES, AND GOVERNANCE

Migration has become an integral part of current global development processes. In the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH), migration continues to be a significant livelihood strategy. Population movement is widely perceived as a challenge in the HKH. However, there is a growing understanding that it can also open up new opportunities for development. This chapter attempts to understand the dynamics of internal and international labour migration in this region, consolidate the current state of knowledge on migration, and where possible, collate mountain-specific information on migration. It concentrates on three areas of migration research: drivers, consequences, and governance of labour migration. It explores the countries' overall migration experience and, where possible, highlights findings specific to mountain areas of the HKH.

KEY FINDINGS

○ Migration drives a broad range of economic, social, and political changes throughout the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH), while migration itself is determined by multiple factors.

○ Labour migration contributes significantly to poverty reduction in the HKH region, although this depends on who is able to move, and under what conditions.

○ Issues associated with internal migration remain peripheral to the policy discourse in most HKH countries, even though there are more than three times as many internal migrants compared to international migrants.

POLICY MESSAGES

○ Policy makers in HKH countries must approach migration not as a challenge, but instead seek ways to mainstream it into climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and policy processes and programmes related to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

○ Policy makers, researchers, and grassroots NGOs urgently need quality data on seasonal migration, remittances, and reintegration of returnee migrants.

○ Social protections — such as the right to access public amenities and services — should be made portable across administrative boundaries.

○ Measures to reduce migration costs and decentralize migration governance are required if low-income households are to benefit fully from migration.

LINKS TO

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

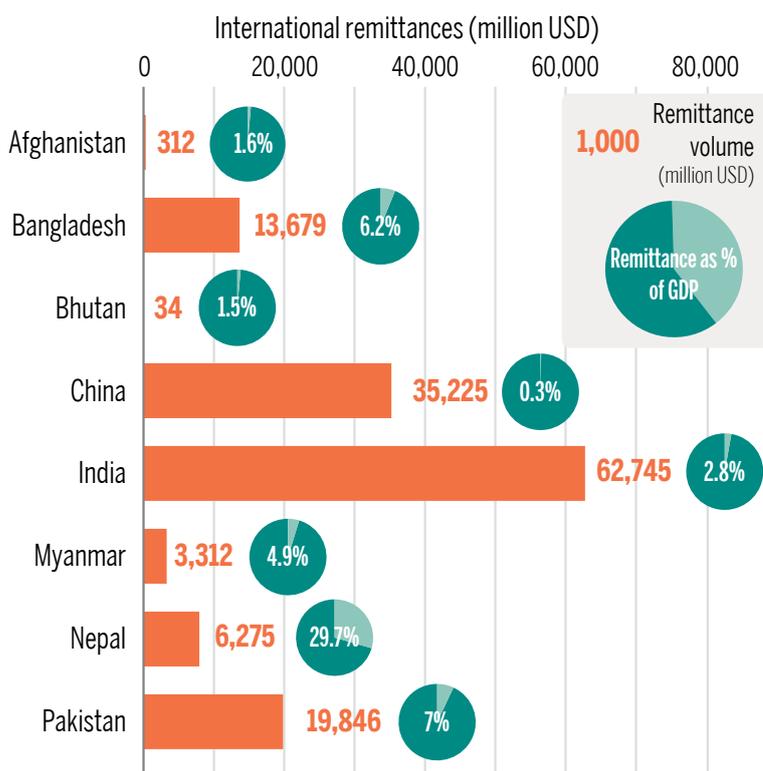8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

OBSERVATIONS AND TRENDS

MIGRATION REDUCES MOUNTAIN POVERTY AND CREATES NEW LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES

A majority of migrant-sending households, irrespective of whether they have internal, cross-border, or international migrant workers, benefit economically from their investment in migration. Migration increases livelihood and employment opportunities, and more importantly, their financial income. Migration can promote economic development—through decent wages for migrant labour, and through foreign exchange earnings. Migration is also seen as a strategy for climate change adaptation. Remittances sent by migrants are being used in disaster risk reduction. In order to facilitate international migration, some countries have undertaken measures to establish migration governance systems, reduce migration costs, streamline the remittance transfer process, assist the reintegration of returnee migrants, and engage the diaspora in national development.
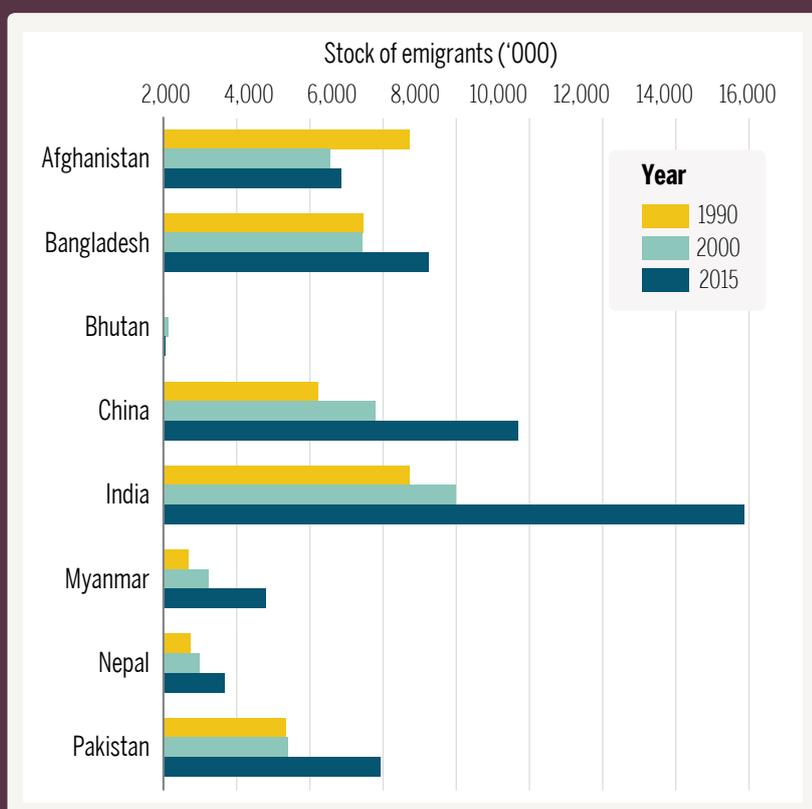
Households in the HKH adopt migration as a strategy to increase income, diversify livelihoods, and manage risks. Countries can unlock the potential of migration by reducing its risks and facilitating orderly, safe, and regular migration.

REMITTANCES CAN PROMOTE CLIMATE CHANGE RESILIENCE IF INVESTED IN AGRICULTURE, DISASTER RISK REDUCTION, AND CLIMATE ADAPTATION

International remittances (million USD)

Country	Remittances (million USD)	Remittance as % of GDP
Afghanistan	312	1.6%
Bangladesh	13,679	6.2%
Bhutan	34	1.5%
China	35,225	0.3%
India	62,745	2.8%
Myanmar	3,312	4.9%
Nepal	6,275	29.7%
Pakistan	19,846	7%

Remittance volume (million USD): 1,000

Remittance as % of GDP

POLITICS IN THE TIME OF INCREASING MIGRATION

Migration has contributed to increased political demands, including voting rights for migrants from HKH countries. Since 2008, Bhutan has permitted its overseas citizens to vote; Afghanistan has allowed it since 2004. Changes in electoral laws have been approved by the Government of India to permit non-resident Indians to cast their votes in state assembly and national parliamentary elections from overseas. At a public hearing, the National Election Commission of Bangladesh stated that it would explore a mechanism allowing absentee voting rights for those citizens who are residing outside the country for work. The Government of Nepal was ordered by the Supreme Court of Nepal to draft a law that enables Nepali migrants abroad to vote. However, irregular cross-border movement of people has become a major source of political tension in some HKH countries, with migrants being portrayed as a 'threat to national security', 'infiltrators', 'terrorists', 'weapon traffickers', 'demographic invaders', and 'criminals'.

Stock of emigrants ('000)

Legend — Year: 1990, 2000, 2015

Countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan

MIGRATION CAN INCREASE INEQUALITY, ESPECIALLY IF THERE ARE RESTRICTIONS

Earlier, international migration governance sought to manage recruitment and introduced restrictions on movements of certain categories of workers, like unskilled women, while some HKH countries criminalized irregular and undocumented migration. Protection mechanisms in both origin and destination countries remained weak.

Migration can increase inequality, especially if there are restrictions on who can migrate, and to where, as this can lead to 'capture' of profitable migration routes by wealthier groups, and/or limitation of migration benefits for the poor. In the past, mainly men migrated for work, and women were left behind, or accompanied the men as spouses. Since the beginning of the new millennium, an increasing number of women from the HKH have been participating in labour migration.

INTERNAL MIGRATION IS SEEN AS A CHALLENGE TO URBANIZATION AND PLANNING PROCESSES

Along with international migration, the HKH also experiences internal and cross-border migration. Urban centres are attractive to migrants due to access to employment opportunities, urban amenities, and services, as well as opportunities for participating in the market. On internal migration, most HKH countries have public policies that reflect a strong sedentary bias: migration is perceived as a challenge to urban development. Discussions on internal migration in the context of urban development mostly focus on measures to reduce migration from rural to urban areas. This negative attitude towards internal migrants is often supplemented by a 'sons of the soil' ideology. This attitude towards rural to urban migration is often not based on facts and hampers the potential of urbanization to be fully leveraged for development.

INTERNAL MIGRANTS FACE VARIOUS FORMS OF EXCLUSION

Internal migrants to urban areas of HKH countries—who are relatively less educated, less skilled, and employed in the informal sector—experience various kinds of exclusion. They do not enjoy social security such as access to food through the public distribution system, education and health care. Most importantly, they lack entitlement to housing at their migration destination, because they lack proof of identity and residence. In many cases they and their families end up living in informal settlements, with limited access to public amenities. These forms of exclusion limit the benefits and create new risks for internal migrants and their families. Accordingly, vulnerable internal migrants in HKH countries — who work in marginalized areas such as domestic work and construction, and as hawkers and security guards — should be supported with new social protection measures.

THE HKH HAS SEEN THE EXPANSION OF LAWS AND POLICIES AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN RECENT YEARS

A significant development for the HKH in recent years has been the expansion of laws and policies against human trafficking. Countries in the region have shifted away from a narrow definition of trafficking—limited to intended commercial sexual exploitation—to a broader interpretation that includes labour trafficking, slavery, bonded labour, organ trade, and drug trafficking. Laws in Bangladesh and Nepal have even enabled the creation of special funds to support victims. Although gaps remain in the implementation of these anti-trafficking laws and policies, these changes are welcome.

REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS ARE IMPORTANT FOR THE GOVERNANCE OF MIGRATION

Recently, major migrant-sending countries in the region — Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Nepal, and Pakistan — have joined regional consultative fora, such as the Colombo Process and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue. The 1990 UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and the Members of their Families (ICRMW) is the most comprehensive instrument relating to migrant workers. Multilateralism is important for protection of the rights of the migrant workers; unfortunately none of the countries of origin of the HKH region, except Bangladesh, have ratified the 1990 Convention, and nor has any destination country. Therefore, due to lack of ratification the rights assigned under the international instrument cannot be exercised.

CHALLENGES IN ANALYSING MIGRATION IN THE HKH REGION

A challenge to analyzing migration across the HKH is that certain countries in the region, such as Nepal and Afghanistan, are mostly mountainous, whereas others are not, thus limiting the scope for generalization. Absence of mountain specific data in nationally representative sample surveys is another challenge. Data that are generated at the country level are not gathered following common standardized definitions and methods. This limits the scope of cross-country comparisons. Besides, the available data on migration from country level censuses is unlikely to cover circular and temporary migration. Though the data on international remittances have been improving over the past decade, data on domestic remittances remain scarce and scattered in several HKH countries.
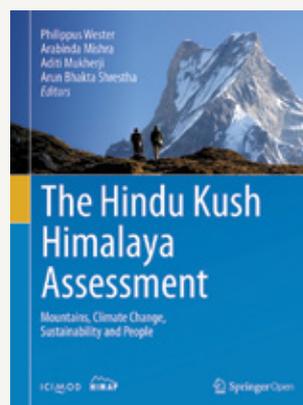
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