

2 Drivers of Migration in the Western Hindu Kush-Himalayas

Why Do Mountain People Migrate?

Mountain people base their decision to migrate on a number of determinants. There are certain push factors, i.e., stresses and shocks at the place of origin, such as low productivity of agricultural production, lack of local investment and growth opportunities, and shocks from external and global process. Mountain factors like poor accessibility and marginality mean that in a time of general economic difficulty in a country, people in mountain areas can be affected more strongly, and have fewer resources to cope with problems like a downturn in employment opportunities and rise in commodity prices. Similarly, a changing and unpredictable climate, with floods and drought and unseasonal temperatures, can affect marginal and subsistence agriculture in the fragile mountain landscape to the point where not enough food is available. Food production in mountain areas is also limited by the fragility of the landscape and the need to maintain diversity to address yearly variations in climate, and cannot easily be intensified to fill the subsistence needs of an increasing population.

Pull factors such as the attractions of developing urban centres and aspirations for a better, different future are other strong determinants, enhanced by more awareness through improved technology and the widespread use of mobile phones, the radio, Internet, and television in mountain districts. The remoteness of mountain areas increases these attractions for a mountain population, and especially the young, who cannot easily travel to urban centres to enjoy the attractions on a short-term basis.

Migration is not just an outcome of 'push' or 'pull' factors, however. Individual, household, and community perceptions significantly influence the decision to migrate (Brown 2008). Network forces, generated by earlier migrants who supply information and support to new migrants, also strongly affect the decision to migrate (see Moore and Smith 1995; Ketel 2004; Reuveny 2005; Kniveton et al. 2008). Certain attributes such as age, education, marital status, occupation, and individual motivation also distinguish migrants from non-migrants at the place of origin.

Who Are the Migrants?

The studies showed that the majority of labour migrants in the western HKH are male, unmarried, young, and low skilled, and hold low paid jobs at their migration destination. There are few female labour migrants from the western HKH. Female migration is generally stigmatised due to the widespread incidence of human trafficking in the region. The low number of female labour migrants is also explained by conservative social norms, lack of education and exposure among women, and women's attachment to children and land. The average age of male migrants is around 21 years. In very poor areas, as in the Nepal case study, men start to migrate as early as 12 years of age. In Uttarakhand, the fairly high literacy rate is also reflected among the migrants from the state (Field Study India in Jain 2010). However, in Far Western and Mid Western development regions of Nepal, mainly unskilled people migrate as educated people have more job opportunities in the villages; although a few educated men migrate to neighbouring towns (Field Study Nepal Sherpa 2010).

Among other things, the research looked at whether the poorer segments of mountain communities migrate, in order to test the general assumption that the very poor are unable to migrate, for financial or other reasons. In Uttarakhand, there was a lower incidence of migration from economically and socially weaker sections of society. Youth from Rajput and Brahmin families, the socially dominant caste groups, have a greater tendency to migrate due to availability of funds for migration, better education, and better networks (Field Study India in Jain 2010). In Nepal, the study found that the community members with the lowest wealth ranking need to migrate to cover their basic consumption needs (Field Study Nepal in Sherpa 2010).

Internal and regional migration is high

Labour migration in the western HKH region is known to be mainly internal or south-south in nature. In Uttarakhand, migration is primarily internal, that is from remote rural areas to urban centres in the hills, or from the hills to the developed plains. About 71 per cent of the surveyed migrants from Uttarakhand were interstate migrants, while the remaining 22 per cent were intrastate (Field Study India in Jain 2010). A previous study for Pakistan reported that the predominant type of migration is from remote mountain districts to regional market towns and metropolitan cities within the country, and only a small number of migrants venture abroad (AKRSP 2002). Only in the Nepal case study was the transboundary migration rate high (70%), which is explained by the proximity to the open Indian border, as opposed to Nepali urban centres (Field Study Nepal in Sherpa 2010). International migration to Gulf countries and Southeast and East Asian countries is growing as earnings are higher. However, at the study sites, the numbers are still low as the cost of migrating internationally is extremely high.

The major determinants of labour migration from the western HKH are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Determinants of Migration

Decreasing agricultural productivity – A traditional determinant intensified by new factors

Mountain agriculture is predominantly subsistence in nature, and people from mountain areas, including the western HKH, have been migrating for centuries for cash to supplement household income. However, in recent years there has been a progressive decline in mountain agriculture in the western HKH region, increasing the need to migrate. Agriculture in this region is characterised by small and fragmented landholdings, lack of irrigation, shallow soil, and lack of mechanisation and technology; all of which contribute to limiting yield. In some areas, a growing lack of interest and incentive to work the fields has also been observed. With increasing climatic stresses, particularly erratic rainfall, and global food price volatility affecting even remote mountain communities, mountain agriculture is increasingly becoming a less reliable livelihood strategy.

In the Indian case study (Uttarakhand), the majority of respondents claimed that agricultural productivity is decreasing (see Table 1), and 47 per cent claimed this as a major reason for migration. In all the sites surveyed, communities indicated that traditional hill agriculture is practised on small and fragmented terraced fields, which are uneconomic to operate. The rapid increase in population has been accompanied by increased family size and the subdivision of landholdings. The same and even smaller landholdings must provide for an increasing number of people. Small landholdings are also characterised by lack of irrigation, resulting in low crop yields and limited options for cultivating cash crops. Many claim that they do not have sufficient food grain to support their family (Field Study India in Jain 2010). During focus group discussions in Uttarakhand, respondents said that, nowadays, agriculture fulfils their food grain requirements for 6 to 8 months a year, whereas earlier, they could fulfil the complete annual household demand.

Decreasing productivity is a cause of higher food insecurity. As many as five (out of six) districts in the Northern Areas (NA) of Pakistan and four (out of eight) in Azad Kashmir (AK) were found to have very low access to food (South Asia Partnership-Pakistan 2007). In terms of food availability, the analysis ranked NA and AK as two of the top three food insecure areas in Pakistan (Hunzai 2010). In some areas of the Far Western and Mid Western development regions of Nepal, agricultural produce is sufficient for only 1 to 2 months of the year (Field Study Nepal in Sherpa 2010). Respondents in Nepal compromise on their food intake; some consume only half of what they require. Members of most of these households migrate to cover their basic consumption needs (Field Study Nepal in Sherpa 2010).

"We are dependent on agriculture, which is totally dependent on good weather conditions. The biggest problem we face is food insecurity. If the weather was good, with timely rain and better food security, we would never opt to migrate. Why would we want to leave our family and travel to another place and work like animals?"

VDC Secretary, Dailekh district, Nepal

"I feel that it is cheaper to buy food grains than to actually grow them on our unirrigated lands."

Mr Singh from Tehri Garhwal District in Uttarakhand

Table 1: Perceived decline in productivity of agriculture in Uttarakhand (over past 2–4 years)

Perceived decline in productivity	Percentage of respondents
10 to 25%	57
25 to 50%	10
More than 50%	7
No change	23
Productivity increased	3

Source: Field Study India in Jain 2010

The inaccessibility of mountain areas hampers the spread of extension services, access to agricultural inputs, and access to markets. There is a growing awareness about the uneconomic agricultural practices among mountain farmers.

Lack of local opportunities; attractive prospects elsewhere

Lack of local opportunities is a strong factor in the rising migration numbers, particularly among mountain youth. Greater awareness of outside prospects through radio, television, and education are increasingly attracting mountain youth to migrate, as options for local growth and investment seem limited. A general fatigue with the hardship and lack of facilities in mountains was observed and an attraction to city life.

In Uttarakhand, lack of employment in villages emerged as the strongest motive for migration among the respondents (90%) (Field Study India in Jain 2010). Alternative employment opportunities are limited by the lack of industrial development in the hill and mountain areas of the western HKH. The influence of migrant friends and relatives is another significant determinant for migration (66%), closely followed by low agricultural productivity (47%), and a lack of interest in working in agriculture (43%). Several migrants complained of lack of basic facilities in villages (44%) and cited better prospects in cities (Field Study India in Jain 2010) as other reasons for migrating.

In Nepal, sometimes even unskilled youth migrate to work as porters in India due to lack of opportunities in the villages (Field Study Nepal in Sherpa 2010).

What is there in our village? There is not even proper medical care for the ill.

Villager from Tehri Garhwal district, Uttarakhand

The livelihood options available to us are either to pursue agriculture, work as wage labourers, or maybe become drivers.

Villager in Bageshwar district, Uttarakhand

Lack of interest in agricultural work

A growing lack of interest in agricultural work was observed at all of the survey sites. In Uttarakhand, 43 per cent indicated that they had no interest in working in agriculture and were looking for alternative livelihood opportunities (Field Study India in Jain 2010).

Education has emerged as an important push factor among those disillusioned with agricultural work. Even young people with only an intermediate education feel that there are better livelihood opportunities for them outside their villages and are reluctant to take up agricultural work.

There is also a strong feeling among young people that agriculture is not meant for the literate; it is seen as a 'demeaning' occupation, only pursued by illiterate and less educated people. This perception is a major accelerator for population shifts towards urban centres and the plains. Perhaps, the current societal value system and the educational system are partly responsible for this trend, in which agriculture is being tagged as a socially demeaning occupation.

Climate change

Mountain people see climate change as an indirect driver of labour migration due to decreased land productivity. The western HKH region is comprised of highly fragile ecosystems, which are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Agriculture in the hills and mountains, particularly in the western HKH region, is predominantly rainfed, depending heavily on weather conditions and rainfall.

After completing my studies, I worked with my father for some time, but I do not want to become a farmer, and as there was no job available here I had to migrate to Delhi.

Young migrant from Chamoli district, Uttarakhand

"After studying for so many years it is pointless to go back to agriculture. If I had to be a farmer there was no need to study so much."

Migrant from Bageshwar district, Uttarakhand

During the field studies, locals said that they had observed a significant decrease in agricultural productivity over the last decade, and perceive changes in climatic condition as a significant cause. Decreasing agricultural productivity in turn increases the need to migrate.

As early as the 1990s, the First Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that the greatest impact of climate change could be on human migration (IPCC 1990). Since then, several studies (Kritz 1990; Mcleman and Smit 2006; Stern 2007; Brown 2008; Kniveton et al. 2008; CARE 2009; ADB 2009) have indicated the potential for population redistribution, both internal and international, due to the effects of climate change. More recently, Working Group II of the Fourth Assessment Report of the IPCC recognised the potential of migration due to the impacts of climate change (IPCC 2007, p 18).

"We need rainfall during the winter [December to February], but there is very little rainfall then, while in March there are heavy showers, which is quite unusual."

Villager from Chamoli district in Uttarakhand, India

"We work on the farms for 12 months and, if the weather is favourable, the crops are enough for 5 months, but if not, there is hardly enough for 2 months. It has been very dry recently."

Villager from Bajhang district in Nepal

"Last winter, due to lack of rainfall, the winter crops were so poor that we were not even able to recover the cost of the seed."

Farmer from Takoli village of Tehri Garhwal in Uttarakhand, India

Respondents reported an erratic rainfall pattern during the past few years. Farmers in Uttarakhand and the Far Western and Mid Western development regions of Nepal complained about recent untimely and excessive rainfall, which damaged crops, leading to food insecurity in the region. Changes in the overall frequency and amount of rain and snowfall in the winter can cause significant damage to winter crops. The water flow in local springs in some villages has declined considerably; some now dry up during the summer. Rising temperatures can result in hotter summers and warmer winters. The elderly in the village said that earlier they used to wear warm clothes even during the summer months, but now they did not need them anymore.

Due to the changing climate, mountain farmers have shifted their cropping and migration patterns. Men now migrate for longer than they did 10 to 15 years ago, increasing the workload for women.

Policy Interventions to Retain Migrants for Local Development

The policy response to internal migration has been to discourage migration by increasing rural employment opportunities through livelihoods intervention programmes, such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (NREGP) in India and the Decentralised Rural Infrastructure and Livelihoods Project in Nepal. These livelihood intervention programmes usually guarantee wage employment to every rural household for a certain number of days in a year for local development. Migrants from Uttarakhand said that, while they could remit between INRs 7,200 to INRs. 12,000 per year if they migrated for work, with the NREGP they could earn INRs 10,000 in 100 days staying in their own village. The NREGP allows unskilled and less educated youth to earn by working in the vicinity of their village, while at the same time supplementing family income through agriculture and animal husbandry; together, the benefits of staying in the village are often higher than earnings generated through migration. These programmes have encouraged some people, who otherwise would have migrated, to stay in their villages. However, as the NREGP guarantees work for any one member of each household, it may not necessarily reduce migration.