

Labour Migration in the Himalayas

Opportunities and challenges

Michael Kollmair, Programme Manager, Sustainable Livelihoods and Poverty Reduction (SLPR), ICIMOD, mkollmair@icimod.org

Brigitte Hoermann, Action Area Team Leader, Innovative Livelihood Options, ICIMOD, bhoermann@icimod.org

Recent years have seen an enormous growth of interest in exploring the links between migration and development. At the international level, migration is no longer seen only from the risk perspective (e.g., security and human rights), but is increasingly recognised for its potential to deliver significant benefits for the development of sending and receiving countries and their inhabitants (UNDP 2009). Despite such attention, migration is still only negligibly integrated in development policy debate and day-to-day decision making in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) region.

In recent decades rapid socioeconomic and environmental changes have been taking place across the HKH region. Many of the more than 200 million inhabitants of the region still suffer from low incomes, lack of employment opportunities, lack of infrastructure, and lack of access to basic amenities. The specific characteristics of mountains – poor accessibility, fragility, and marginality – have contributed to the impact of the changes. At the same time, rapid economic development in the surrounding lowlands and economic centres of South and Southeast Asia and the Gulf countries has increased the demand for cheap and flexible labour.



Labour migration is now a core livelihood strategy of many rural households in the mountains of the HKH. As in other mountain areas of the world, it is not a new phenomenon. People have always been on the move to improve their lives and the lives of their families, to learn new skills, to gain new experiences, to find better jobs, and to flee insecurity, disaster, and famine (see articles by Seddon and Altamirano, this journal). But the increased awareness of opportunities elsewhere, better communication technologies, and falling transportation costs have enabled previously immobile mountain people to migrate at unprecedented rates.

Of the more than 200 million migrants worldwide, 15 per cent (30 million) are from the Hindu Kush-Himalayan countries. Bangladesh, China, India, and Pakistan, all of which have areas in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas, are among the largest sending countries in the world, and many of these migrants are from the mountain regions of these countries, although the exact number is not known.

"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 families and travel to another place and work like animals?"
Village Development Committee (VDC) Secretary, Dailekh district, Nepal (ICIMOD, unpublished)

Labour migration is one of the major livelihood strategies of mountain people. Growth rates of migration in the countries of the HKH are striking.

Case studies in the mountain areas of the Himalayas (e.g., Hoermann et al. 2010) show that labour migration has a significant impact on reducing poverty in the region. Internal, South-South, and male migration are particularly predominant in the region. Although the remittances by individual migrants are low in volume, they nevertheless make a significant contribution to household income in many areas.

The countries of the HKH region have the highest inflow of remittances of any region in the world. For many mountain families, remittances are the major or only source of income.

A significant determinant for migration is the influence of social networks such as migrant friends and relatives, closely followed by low agricultural productivity and a lack of interest in working in agriculture (see also Sharma, this issue). Lack of basic facilities in villages and better prospects (sometimes only anticipated) in cities are other reasons for migrating. Education has emerged as an important

"What is there in our village? There is not even proper medical care for the ill."
Villager from Tehri Garhwal district, Uttarakhand (ICIMOD, unpublished)

push factor among those disillusioned with rural life and 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.

"I'm glad I went to India and earned money, as well as learning skills. But there are plenty of opportunities here as well, although we do not see them. We think there is no other way besides migration." Ratan Bahadur Rawal (age 32) from Talhyum VDC in Jumla, Nepal, who went to work on an apple farm in Kinor, Himachal Pradesh, India when he was 13 years old. He soon learned different skills such as stem grafting and fruit grading and packing, and earned close to NPR 50,000 in six months. With the savings he bought land in his village and started planting apples on a small plot. Today, his farm has 28,000 plant seedlings of apples, walnuts, peaches, pomegranates, and lemons, which he sells to the Agriculture Office. He makes around NPR 200,000 a year, and is optimistic that he can make NPR 500,000 a year in the future. He has not gone to India since he started his own farm. (ICIMOD, unpublished)



Migration for development: social and financial remittances

Migration generates financial and human capital (skills and knowledge) which, if

leveraged for development, can reduce poverty. Results from macro-economic studies suggest that, on average, a 10 per cent increase in per capita official international remittances leads to a 3.5 per cent decline in the proportion of people living in poverty (Adams and Page 2005).

Remittances are increasingly becoming the most direct, immediate, and significant contribution to the livelihoods of the mountain poor in the western HKH. They provide a safety net for the large number of dependents left behind. Almost 35 per cent of households in the mountains and hills of Nepal receive remittances (HMGN 2004). Migration has become an effective strategy for livelihood adaptation in the HKH region.

Remittances are increasingly the most direct, immediate, and significant contribution to the livelihoods of the mountain poor (see for example Figure 4 in Hoermann et al., this issue). In Nepal, almost half of all hill households receive remittances, and the average contribution of remittances to these households' income is close to 35 per cent. Almost 70 per cent of wages earned by Afghans in Iran are sent back home. During the frequent natural, economic, or political crises in the HKH, remittances are a lifeline to the poor (see articles by Suleri and by Banerjee et al., this issue, and Banerjee et al. 2011). At a macro-economic level, remittances are a major source of external financing for most HKH countries. Even during the economic crisis in 2009, they continued to grow robustly and were much less volatile than other external financing flows (Hoermann et al., this issue).

"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 (ICIMOD, unpublished)

The benefits of remittances are not limited to recipient households, but have a wider impact on the receiving society as remittances are spent, generating consumer demand and jobs for local workers. Remittances improve living conditions, education, and health in the communities of origin and provide insurance against income shocks.

Migrants acquire new ideas, skills, perceptions, and technologies from the host communities, which they carry back to their place of origin. In this way migrants act as powerful agents for transformation and social change.

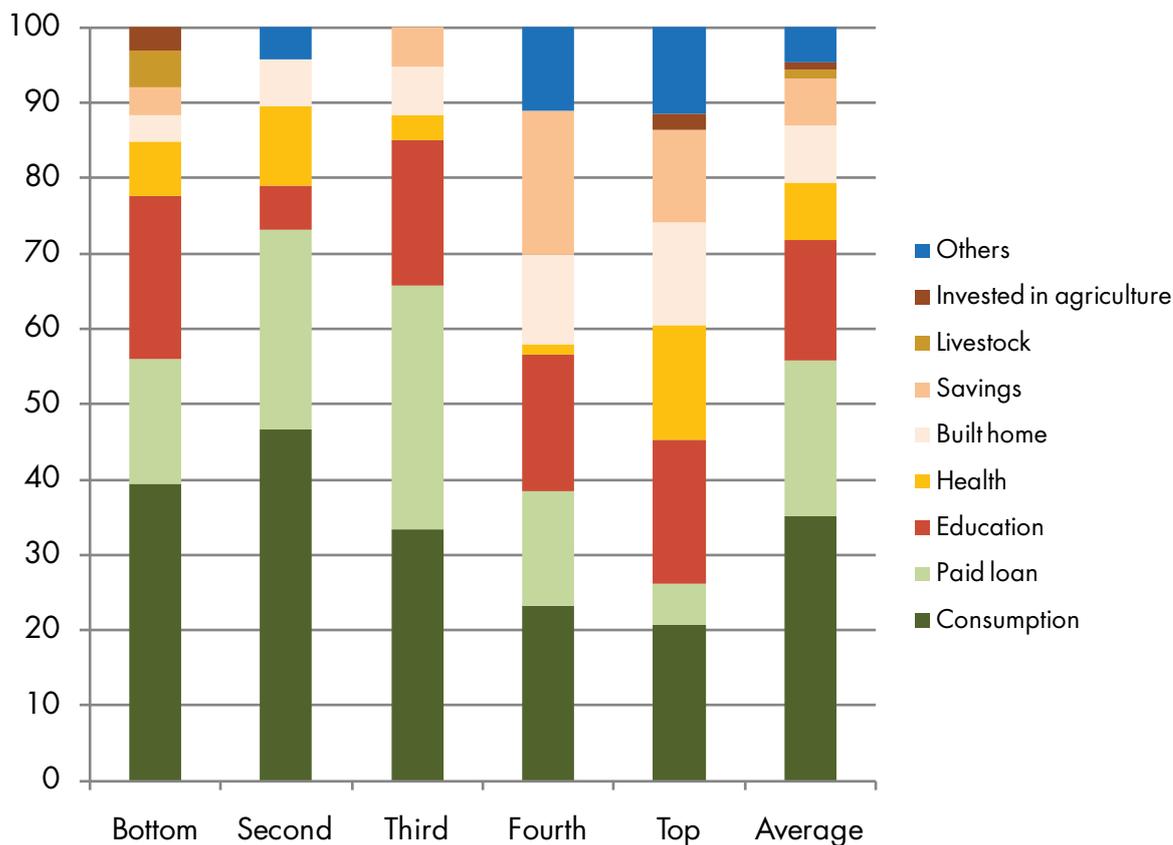
Empirical analysis in Pakistan proved a changed perception of households of migrants towards education. Enrolment rates for girls increased by 54 per cent and their dropout rate decreased by 55 per cent; the number of years of schooling increased by 1.5 years for girls and 1 year for boys (Mansuri 2007). A recent World Bank study in Nepal showed that among remittance-receiving households, the poorest households spent the highest proportion of their remittances on education (Ferrari 2007) (Figure 1). Health standards have also been observed to rise significantly among households of migrants. Children of Pakistani migrants have higher



Households of migrants set a priority on education. Particularly girls' enrolment rates increase substantially.

weight-for-age and higher height-for-age scores than children of non-migrants, and they sustain these gains as they grow older (Mansuri 2007).

Figure 1: Proportion of most recent remittances used on average by households in each spending quintile* for different purposes in Nepal in 2006



* Households divided into five quintiles according to total amount spent

Source: Ferrari et al. 2007

Risks of Labour Migration

Many risks are linked to labour migration. Migrants and their families and communities back home have high and not always realistic expectations of returning with 'a fortune'. Many migrants suffer from harsh physical working environments and unfamiliar and isolated living conditions, along with high peer pressure. Every year thousands of migrants from the HKH die abroad prematurely.

This poem on a chautara (roadside resting place) in Nepal, erected by the family of a deceased labour migrant, illustrates the sufferings in a poignant way.

Poem on a Chautara from the Kanchenjunga Region

Dreaming of a better life, you went to a foreign country
Thinking that with bags of money you would return

You went with the power and courage of youth to the foreign land
Your dreams vanished into the air and you even lost your life

Young life came to an end, after leaving to the foreign country
Friends returned back alone with your ashes

Oh my brother, you left this land of Earth
Leaving alone your sister, sister-in-law, and relatives

Don't go to foreign countries, oh young stars!
I call all to come back to their homeland!

We place this chautara on your ashes for remembrance

Documented by Michael Kollmair, 2003



Challenges and risks of migration

Migration entails high social and financial costs (see Box above). Migration requires substantial initial funding which has to be covered by large loans that must be paid back. Formal financial services are rarely available in the Himalayan mountains, and if aspirant migrants

need to borrow funds they generally take credit from money lenders which charge exorbitant rates of interest. Sending the remittances can also be expensive and inconvenient. For the recipients, microfinance products such as savings, investment, and insurance packages are rarely offered. However, a great part of remittances is used to repay loans (Figure 1).

Ultimately, the investment opportunities in rural areas are sparse, and funds are mostly diverted to the already crowded urban

centres. Lack of investment ideas, entrepreneurship, infrastructure, and access to markets all contribute to the lack of motivation of mountain communities to save, which in turn leads to lack of availability of financial capital once investment opportunities arise. International development organisations such as the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) have recognised these challenges and are trying to create opportunities using different approaches (see Rahman, this issue).

As throughout the world, migration in the Himalayas is a highly gendered process (Sharma, this issue). For the most part men leave

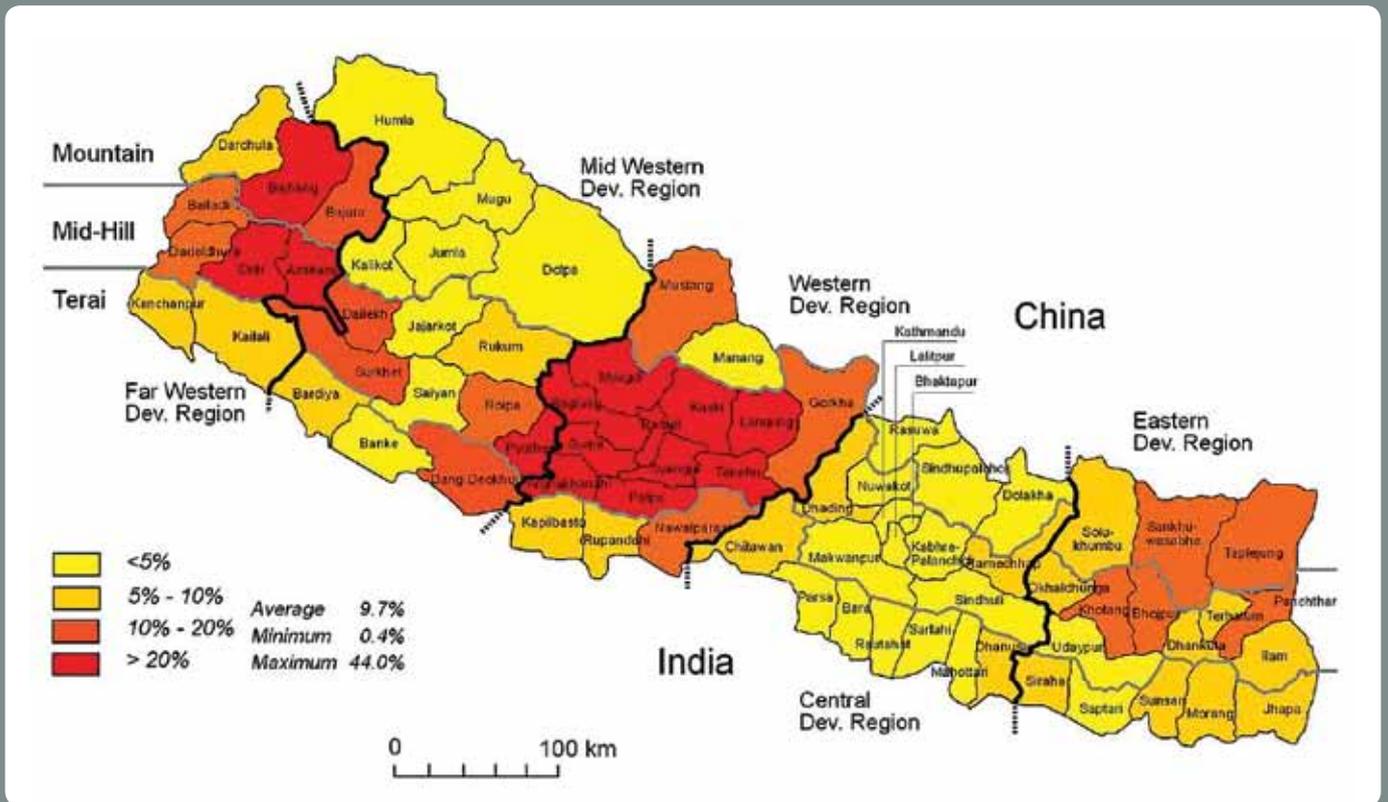
"While working in Hong Kong I experienced many things – the way people treat a dependent or independent woman. I have gained much experience and my confidence has grown. Now, I have a say in decision-making at home. My husband does not shout at me. I have bought a piece of land and four rickshaws and I am creating a means of livelihood for four other families...".
Sushila Rai, a Nepalese migrant domestic worker, describes her experience (Jolly and Reeves 2005)

"Since my husband has gone, I have to work in the field every day. I have no choice, I have to."
Gurung woman from Nepal (Kaspar 2005)

"We do not have a habit of saving and we have no awareness of the importance of saving".

34-year-old migrant from Bajhang, Nepal, who claimed to have worked 13 years in a hotel in India, earning a total of NPR 750,000, without saving anything.

Figure 2: Male population over 14 years of age absent abroad



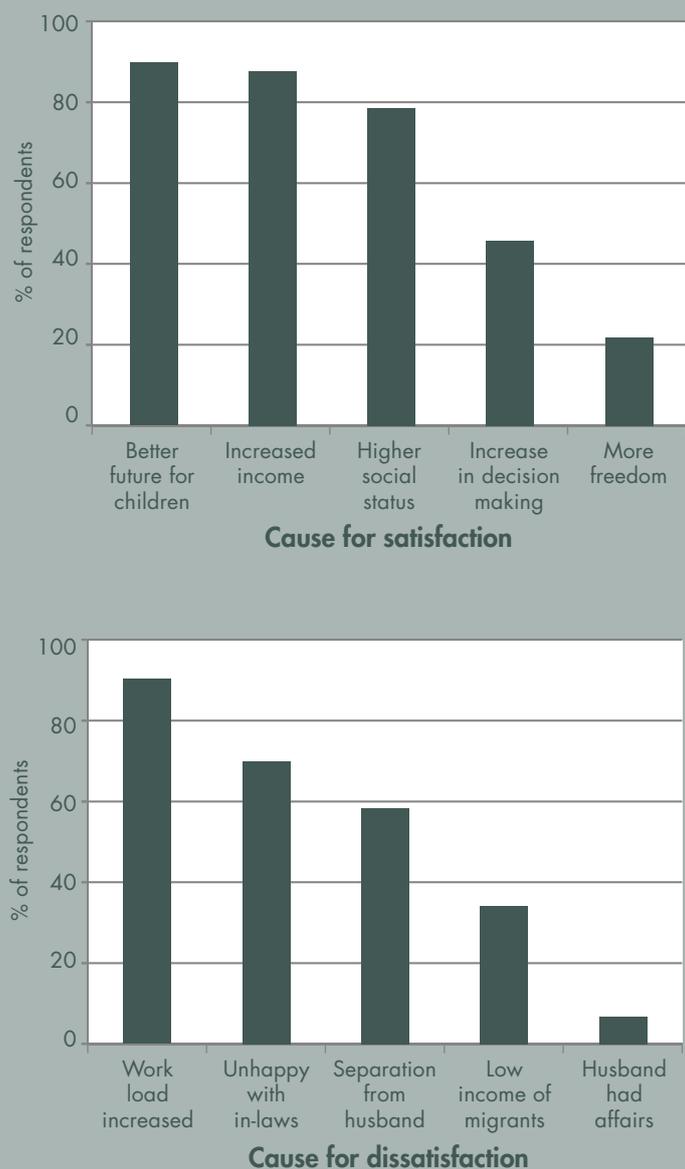
their villages and families, and women stay behind. In some areas up to 40 per cent of the men are absent (Figure 2). The absence of men leads to a feminisation of mountain economies, with women responsible for most economic activities as well as for their households. This trend poses both challenges and opportunities. The main problems for women are the substantially increased workload in a new social setting and power relations with their relatives (see Song and Vernooy, this issue). On the positive side are improved socioeconomic status and better outlook for their children (Figure 3).

"Many women and old people do not understand the policies and cannot sign, so they prefer not to use the banks to receive remittances. Women say that bank staff give them a lot of problems." Dechen Sherpa (ICIMOD, unpublished)

"I like to be the household head. I like to take my decisions on my own. When my husband was still in the village, I did not think about that." 29-year-old Dalit women from Nepal (Kaspar 2005)

Extensive male migration leads to a feminisation of mountain economies

Figure 3: Reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction of migrants' wives in Uttarakhand



Source: Hoermann et al. 2010

Conclusions

Labour migration entails both challenges and opportunities for the people, societies, and development of the HKH region. There is no doubt that in the coming decades, migration will persist in the region and in other mountain areas of the world, driven by globalisation, food insecurity, climate change, and escalating income disparities. The sheer magnitude of labour migration and remittance flows in the Himalayas currently represents a largely untapped development potential. Awareness of this potential and possible actions to exploit it remain weak, in large part because of the lack of information

and knowledge on migrants, their aims, and desires, and on ways to use and invest the financial and social remittances. As for many development questions, most of the relevant statistics are available only at the country level; this information is insufficient for understanding and addressing the specific dimensions of migration in the mountains of the HKH region.

Strategies to help people suffer less and benefit more from migration should be based on a better understanding of migration-related processes, from social networks and remittance flows and uses, to policy hurdles in the sending and receiving countries. This compilation of articles from regional and international migration scholars represents a first step in exploring aspects of migration in the mountains of the HKH, and advocates for integrating migration better into the mountain development agenda.

References

- Adams, RH; Page, J (2005) 'Do international migration and remittances reduce poverty in developing countries?' *World Development* 33(10): 1645–1669
- Banerjee, S; Gerlitz, JI; Hoermann, B (2011) *Labour Migration as a Response Strategy to Water Hazards in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas*. Kathmandu, Nepal: ICIMOD
- Ferrari, A; Jaffrin, G; Shrestha, SR (2007) *Access to financial services in Nepal*. Kathmandu, Nepal: World Bank, South Asia Region, Finance and Private Sector Development Unit
- HMGN (2004) *Nepal living standards survey: Statistical report, Volume 2*. Kathmandu, Nepal: His Majesty's Government of Nepal, Central Bureau of Statistics
- Hoermann, B; Banerjee, S; Kollmair, M (2010) *Labour Migration for Development in the Western Hindu Kush-Himalayas – Understanding a livelihood strategy in the context of socioeconomic and environmental change*. Kathmandu, Nepal: ICIMOD
- Jolly, S; Reeves, H (2005) *Gender and migration – Overview report*. Brighton, UK: Institute for Development Studies, University of Sussex (BRIDGE)
- Kaspar, H (2005) *I am the household head now! Gender aspects of out-migration for labour in Nepal*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Nepal Institute of Development Studies
- Mansuri, G (2007) *Migration, school attainment, and child labor*. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 4231. Washington DC: World Bank
- UNDP (2009) *Human Development Report 2009 – Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development*. New York, USA: United Nations Development Programme