



## **Sparks of Hope amid Climate Uncertainty: Migration and Changing Rural Landscapes in the Mid-hills of Nepal**

*This insightful short article from Nepal highlights a promising case study of voluntary 'migration as adaptation' to socio-environmental changes that has allowed rural villages to maintain their vitality in the face of slow-onset climatic hazards, staving off the displacement of entire village populations. Despite the loss of human resources in the villages, voluntary out-migration has helped reshape and revitalise previously faltering rural livelihoods, helping villages remain culturally vibrant and economically viable communities for older people and others who are unwilling or unable to migrate. Notably, in turn, the cultural vibrance of some rural villages compels many migrants to maintain strong ties to their home villages, creating translocal bonds that help support resilience in the face of environmental change.*

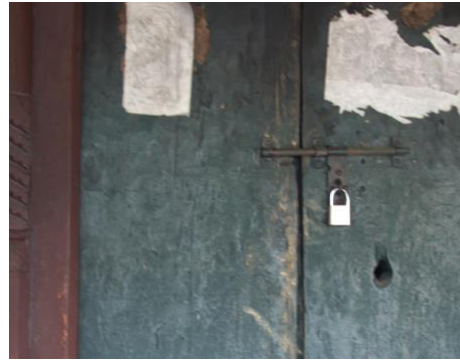
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As we, researchers at the Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies, a research institute in Nepal, walked through the rural village Khasur, two and a half hours from the closest town in western Nepal, we caught sight of an older man, in his late seventies, clearing grass (see Photo 1) around an abandoned house with a locked door (Photo 2). When we asked what he was doing, he smiled warmly and replied, “No one lives in my neighbor’s house, so I occasionally clear the grass to keep the yard tidy.”



*1. An older man is cleaning grass from a neighboring abandoned home.*



*2. A protected home.*



*3. Livestock shed now occupied by a motorbike.*

Nearby, we noticed something striking—the once-used cowshed had now become a parking space for a motorbike (see Photo 3) in a neighboring abandoned house.

When our research team visited the village, we saw very few young people, and only some older people and children were around. In the afternoon, the village felt very quiet. The schoolchildren and teachers were away at the nearby Besi region (the lowland area- Khasur Besi), leaving the settlement in complete silence.

Children from this and nearby villages typically walk 30 minutes to an hour or more daily to attend school in Besi. Although the village had its own primary school, it remains empty, with neither students nor teachers. Since children needed to attend secondary school after completing primary education, they prefer enrolling in the secondary

school located in Besi and in the nearby town. The teachers, too, have lost interest in teaching in the village. Interestingly, the most prominent figure in the village was the headmaster of the public secondary school in



*4. Way from village to Besi - and then to the city.*

Besi, commuting there regularly on his motorbike.

Compared to the village, Khasur Besi appears more vibrant. As the hub for schools, tea and snacks shops, small grocery stores, and offices, it has attracted many families who either migrated there permanently or rented homes to support their children's education. An hour away, another town, Besisahar, offered better prospects for employment, education, healthcare, and business opportunities. As a result, many villagers, along with people from other rural areas, moved to the town, driven by high aspirations for a better future. People also migrated further away to other cities, to the country's

capital, Kathmandu, and abroad. Most of the people from this area living abroad serve as members of foreign police forces or militaries, such as the British and Indian Armies, with families in the UK, India, Singapore and Hong Kong.

Similarly, in our conversations with the households, we noted that generally, more than one member of a household had migrated to other destinations. Migration choices—both internal and international—were closely tied to household capabilities, particularly socioeconomic status and education. Those with limited financial means often moved to nearby

areas like Besi, while those with better socioeconomic conditions relocated to other towns and beyond.

In terms of international migration, individuals from lower-income backgrounds with minimal education largely sought employment in Gulf countries such as Qatar, Dubai, and Saudi Arabia, and in Malaysia. In contrast, better-off families and educated youth pursued studies in destinations such as the US, Australia, Canada and Japan. Some, particularly migrating for employment, had returned home for a few months or years, only to leave again.

This reflects the story of most of the rural areas of Nepal, where out-migration is increasing. Recent data shows that more than 2.1 million Nepalese live and work abroad (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021), and more than half of the households have at least one member who has emigrated or returned from abroad.

### **Climate's role in shaping migration decisions?**

Even though climate change has impacted rural livelihoods, especially in agriculture, people did not mention climate as a decisive factor behind their migration decisions. Limited economic and employment opportunities in the rural villages, as well as education, health services and access to roads, are considered as primary drivers of rural-urban and international migration.

The villagers shared that engaging solely in farming is unreliable due to reduced or failing production. Evidence shows that there is an overall decline in agricultural production, which is caused by multiple factors, including climate change, a shortage of farm labour, and human-wildlife conflict. As a result, many households are compelled to pursue off-farm income-generating activities to sustain



*5. A school attracting nearby village children at Besi.*



their livelihoods and support their children's education. We found that diversifying livelihood strategies ranged from starting shops and businesses in nearby towns to migration to bigger towns in Nepal, India, the Gulf and other countries. Cash income security was the reason for migration, which they cannot expect in villages in Nepal, given the lack of employment opportunities and growing uncertainties in farming.

One of the migrant household members who had returned home for few days shared,

*I do not see any prospects in the village. I went to different Gulf countries and think going abroad is secure in terms of financial security and it leads to progress, though there we have to face domination. I do not see any hope in farming here. When I plant maize, there is an uncertain drought.*

People have observed shifts in weather patterns, including unpredictable rainfall, reduced winter precipitation, delayed monsoons, erratic rain, and prolonged drought, all of which have significantly affected farm-based livelihoods. They are witnessing intense rainfall during the monsoon months of Jestha/Ashad (June/July), with rainfall patterns having become highly unpredictable—with prolonged dry spells during winter and extreme heavy rainfall during the monsoon, often triggering disasters such as floods and landslides.

They reminisced about a time when winter rains, known as Pouse/Maghe Jhari, consistently fell during Poush and Magh (December/January), lasting 10-15 days and sustaining crops even during the winter. There is one popular saying among the farmers that, “if there is rainfall in Poush/Magh (Maghe Jhari-winter rainfall), then there will be good agricultural production in that year”. However, this once-reliable pattern has been almost absent in recent years, disrupting traditional farming practices.<sup>1</sup> People also observed that pest infestations worsen during periods of insufficient rainfall. While pests have always been a challenge, they noted that crops are more vulnerable when rainfall is scarce.

In the nearby village, located at approximately 1965 meters above sea level, the absence of timely snowfall and rising temperatures has led to a decline in local plant varieties and the disappearance of traditional crops, such as local cucumbers, lemons, and oranges, which once thrived in the region. Farmers have increasingly shifted to hybrid crops over the past 15 years due to declining yields; however, these crops are highly vulnerable to disease, posing a risk of total crop loss. Rising temperatures and harsher winters have further strained agriculture, resulting in the decline of once-thriving orange orchards. Additionally, villagers share their experiences that crops that previously grew at lower altitudes are now migrating to higher elevations, highlighting significant shifts in climate and farming conditions.

Although there is growing evidence that climate change is impacting rural livelihoods, particularly through declining agricultural productivity, the absence of climate change as an explicit reason for migration highlights the importance of aspirations for a better life outside of farming in shaping people's decisions. Migration is often framed less as an escape from environmental hardship and more as a step toward a better, more stable, and dignified life, especially among rural youths. Aspirations for improved socioeconomic standing, access to education, and non-farm employment are often central motivations. Thus, climate-related factors act as background pressures that exacerbate livelihood insecurity, but they are not always prominently mentioned when people explain their decisions to migrate.

### **Wildlife damage adding to farming insecurity**

Beyond declining agricultural productivity due to climate uncertainty, the rising incidence over the past four to five years of wildlife raiding crops—especially monkeys and porcupines—has also influenced migration decisions. During our time in the village, we were awakened early morning by the sounds of villagers trying to chase away monkeys attempting to steal maize stored in their house-yards. Most of the households we spoke with shared the story of *dukkha* (hardship) caused by monkeys. One of the farmers shared, “Monkeys, particularly the red

monkeys (Assam Macaque), are troubling us. They eat and uproot different crops. I have abandoned farming, and the condition of most of the villagers is the same.” Another frustrated farmer, in his early fifties, described, “my family is now able to harvest not more than 20-25 bhari<sup>2</sup> of maize where we used to harvest 60-70 bhari five years back”. In a group meeting at Khasurbesi, participants noted a striking shift: more than half of their land is left barren, while only half is cultivated, due to the monkey problem.



*6. Monkeys destroying crops and stealing stored grain.*

As more people are leaving the village and abandoning farming, once-cultivated lands are left fallow. Such phenomena, of leaving land fallow, as studies report,<sup>3</sup> appear widespread across Nepali mountain villages, allowing the forest to expand and creating habitat for wild animals. With fewer people remaining in the village, guarding crops has become increasingly difficult, making farms more vulnerable to wildlife damage. This shift is one of the changes happening in the villages.

## Sparks of hope with migrants' connections to rural livelihoods

Even as outmigration from the village continues to rise, sparks of hope remain in the village. It was interesting that many migrants maintain strong ties to their village through farming, cultural and religious events, festivals, and rituals. Some migrants, especially those who have moved to nearby cities, return home during planting and harvesting seasons. The village, rich in indigenous traditions, sees its members coming back to celebrate major festivals such as Lhosar, Dashain, and Tihar, as well as to participate in important life rituals such as the birth ceremony '*Putpute*' and the death ritual '*Argu*.' We were fortunate to witness and take part in some of these vibrant events during our visits to the village, experiencing the deep cultural and emotional ties that continue to connect migrants to their homeland.

Although the village has only a few residents, a group for single women, the "Progressive Women's Group," is actively fostering tourism by managing homestays and a restaurant. Elderly villagers expressed their gratitude, stating, "If it had not been for the single women group managing the visitors, no one would visit our village as we wouldn't be able to offer food and lodging." Their efforts have not only sustained the local economy but also supported older adults who have stayed behind and can perform rituals in place of those who are abroad.



*7. The Progressive Women's Group, bidding farewell to our research team.*



A handful of dedicated villagers, including the chair of the Community Forest User Group (CFUG), the headteacher, and some politically engaged members, remain committed to the village's well-being. Despite their work in the nearby city, they commute daily and actively promote village tourism. They are renovating the local *gumba* (monastery) with financial contributions from villagers living abroad and are working to establish a 'Peace Hill Trail' to attract visitors. Some youths have initiated ventures like cow farming and dragon fruit cultivation, yet they still rely on temporary outmigration to accumulate investment funds or repay loans. The community also acknowledges and honors the financial support provided by both internal and international migrants, whose contributions aid education, the monastery, and youth organizations, including football and social clubs.

Additionally, the older people shared with us that they love their ancestral place and hence do not want to migrate to the city or abroad at the request of their family members. They wish to spend the last years of their uncertain life peacefully in the village. While they occasionally stay in the city for medical treatment, they return as soon as possible. Though they miss their children and grandchildren, they find comfort in the cultural and traditional life of the village, choosing to stay where they feel most at home.

### **Key insights**

Based on these discussions, three key insights emerge.

*Firstly, despite significant climate change impacts on rural livelihoods, climate change is not cited as a key factor for household decisions of migration.* This means migration has been used as a proactive strategy for diversifying livelihoods. While disasters with rapid onset often dominate the debate on climate-migration literature due to their immediacy and visibility, more subtle, long-term environmental changes are quietly altering mobility patterns in ways that are closely intertwined with socioeconomic aspects, particularly aspirations of a better life

outside of farming. This requires reframing of the climate-migration debate, one that moves beyond simplistic causal relationships and instead centers on the context-specific lived experiences and aspirations shaping migration decisions.

*Secondly, we must look at more than just “people moving” to understand migration and its drivers.* Migration is not just about bodies moving, but also entails the other changes villages are experiencing, both before and after migration, in terms of land-use and forest-farming relations. These shifts are crucial to examine when assessing the broader impact of migration on rural landscapes.

*Thirdly, it is essential to recognize the deep-rooted connection migrants maintain with their land after leaving.* While outmigration is an important challenge to rural livelihoods, there are sparks of hope—in terms of connections to the place through farming, cultural and religious connections and local tourism. Despite relocating—whether within the country or abroad—many continue to uphold ties to their rural homes, engaging with farming, cultural traditions, and religious practices. This enduring connection holds significant implications for the future of rural livelihoods in the face of environmental and socioeconomic challenges.

*Photos courtesy of Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies (SIAS). The article is based on research from the project [CLIMIG - A new interdisciplinary framework for studying the relation between climate change and migration project](#) at [Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies \(SIAS\)](#).*

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<sup>1</sup> Further, disasters like floods and landslides are also experienced by the people.

<sup>2</sup> Bhari is a traditional local estimated unit of weight used in rural Nepal. It usually refers to the weight of load a person can carry at one time by hand or on their back. The weight of a bhari can vary and can be compared to “a load,” “a sack,” or “a bundle”.

<sup>3</sup> Khatri, D., Paudel, D., Poudyal, B.H., Khatri, S., Poudel, D.P. and Marquardt, K., 2024. Examining socio-ecological transitions and new human–wildlife relations in farming landscapes of the Nepal Himalaya. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 24(4), p.e12594.