

Rapid Assessment of Nepali Migrant Workers' Situation in Major Destination Countries During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Nepal Policy Institute is a Netherlands based global Nepali diaspora think-tank and knowledge platform.

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Foreword

This Rapid Assessment Report was prepared at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing, the pandemic has claimed over 551,000 lives, and affected over 12 million individuals globally. The situation is especially grave in South Asia where the incidence of COVID-19 cases is increasing rapidly, with India leading the number of confirmed cases. The pandemic has created disruptions in health care systems, global supply chains, and human mobility. The closure of businesses in key economic sectors has led to job-losses that has disproportionately impacted millions, especially individuals in the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder such as migrant workers.

Hundreds of thousands of Nepali workers, primarily in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), India and East Asia, are desperately trying to return home mainly due to the real and perceived fear of infection given their sub-standard living conditions, loss of gainful employment, and the longing to be with family members. Many groups of such individuals have been pleading to be rescued and while there is no reliable data, the Government of Nepal estimates such potential returnees to range between 3 to 4 hundred thousand. While the numbers are subject to change given the rapidly evolving situation in the destination countries, it is evident that Nepal will see an unprecedented reverse migration in the near future. The influx of returnee migrants has begun, and will start to overwhelm local services and the economy. This trend will result in adverse socio-economic implications contributing to greater unemployment, poverty, food insecurity, violence and put further stress on the health care system, education services and socio-economic inequalities.

Given this evolving situation, Nepal Policy Institute and Migration Lab jointly conducted a rapid assessment survey in eight major destination countries to gauge the perspectives of migrant workers, their skill sets, intention to return, future aspirations, and expectations from the Government of Nepal. We believe it is incumbent upon the government to ensure their proper reintegration in the country. The Government should have paramount interest in migrant Nepali citizens who have contributed enormously to the nation's economy through financial remittances which has consistently been equivalent to over a quarter of Nepal's GDP for years. It constitutes a large portion of foreign currency receipts and has led to significant alleviation of poverty, malnutrition, and hunger in Nepal.

The rapid assessment survey broadly covers demographics, employment status, the impact of COVID-19, motivation to migrate and intentions to return, aspirations upon returning and expectations from the government for durable and sustainable reintegration into communities of origin should they decide to return. The sample population included 625 migrant workers in the Gulf countries, Malaysia and India, where majority of Nepali migrants are located. The discourse on migration from Nepal is largely focused on the major destination countries such as the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Malaysia. With regard to India, another important destination country for Nepali migrant workers, but one that is less studied, the massive return trend of Nepali workers has revealed that this overlooked corridor also merits equal policy attention.

The decision to return is rife with uncertainties for migrants as they consider the evolving situation in the destination countries, in Nepal as well as the condition of their employers. Our analysis supports the prevailing wisdom that smooth reintegration into local communities is likely to be challenging given the inherent social and economic ramifications and the disconnect between migrant expectations and the ground realities in Nepal. For example, even though the government has in place several self-employment schemes including soft loan programs, the survey reveals that majority of migrants are not aware of such programs nor have an idea on how to access them. Thus, developing pragmatic policy approaches, setting realistic program goal, and project planning will require a broader understanding of beneficiaries' core needs, motivations, future aspirations, and family situations. This rapid assessment survey is an initial attempt to gain this deeper perspective. The survey findings and analysis can be leveraged to articulate realistic reintegration policies, define support mechanisms and implementation procedures, and to plan for economic development in returnee-hosting-areas.

Nepal Policy Institute and Migration Lab are pleased to share this report, on migrant workers' perspectives and their initial intentions, to inform policymaking related to the smooth reintegration of Nepali migrant returnees.

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Executive Summary

As Nepal grapples with the dual challenges of dealing with a beleaguered health care system as well as the sudden economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also faced with a monumental challenge of managing the rescue and repatriation operation, and reintegration of a high volume of migrant workers. Nepali migrants are spread across the world, primarily in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Malaysia and India, and have experienced diverse set of impacts from the pandemic, owing to both the precarious nature of their jobs and less than desirable living conditions. Consequently, the anticipated and unprecedented reverse migration has put their social and economic reintegration in the spotlight. The success of the reintegration programs currently in consideration by the government —whether through wage-employment or self-employment— or how swiftly they are integrated into their communities rest on how well they reflect the aspirations, interests and experiences of the intended beneficiaries i.e., the migrants themselves.

This Rapid Assessment aims to capture the current situation of migrant workers to inform the Government's policymaking efforts as it braces for an unprecedented return of migrant workers. This report, largely based on phone surveys, captures the views of 625 migrants based in 8 primary destination countries (GCC countries, Malaysia and India), and is further enriched with focus group discussions and secondary data analysis. Migration to the aforementioned 8 countries is a temporary phenomenon. However, as described in this study, migrants report that they have put in inadequate effort in making their return plans, whether it is their return intentions or what to do upon return. Like rest of the world, they were largely unprepared for the shock and post-implications of COVID-19, which has compelled them to think prematurely about their return to Nepal.

On the one hand, a high share of migrants has thought about returning to Nepal while on the other, many seem conflicted about whether they should return, given the uncertainties about their employment prospects as well as the escalating cases of COVID-19 infection in Nepal. Returning to Nepal would mean navigating the complicated repatriation process, paying for the expensive airfare, spending two-weeks in poorly equipped quarantine centers and potentially facing further lockdowns in Nepal. Conversely, remaining abroad holds the possibility for

resumption of employment and mobility in the destination country despite the uncertainty of business and economy revival owing to market volatility, disruptions in international mobility and supply chains, and the cancelation or delays in large scale development projects or events.

The pandemic has revealed the sub-standard living and employment situation of migrants working abroad. A majority of the respondents (58%) were worried about getting infected due to their working conditions while a lesser proportion (17%) reported concerns about getting infected due to their living conditions. Workplace is considered more vulnerable, particularly because the number of individuals that migrant workers are exposed to is much higher in such situation, whether it is through colleagues who live in different camps, through customers in case of client-facing jobs (e.g. in supermarkets and security) or through the need to share public transport, and workplace canteens. The levels of exposure given the cramped and unhygienic conditions of the camps or shared rooms is still comparatively lower to individuals than similar situations in the workplaces.

While the volume of returnees is uncertain as it hinges on a number of factors, migrants report anxiety about their future. They report that a drop in remittance has direct bearings on their ability to cover their basic needs. In the absence of financial remittances, the inability to afford food, rent, children's education and loan repayment stood as the primary concerns among the respondents. A few of the respondents also alluded to the non-economic impact of the reduction in remittances such as its potential to contribute towards an increase in discrimination, domestic violence and other familial tensions, which was also echoed in focus group discussions.

There are also concerns about post-return plans. An overwhelmingly majority of migrants (~80%) reported that they are interested in engaging in self-employment, either in agriculture or non-agriculture if they return to Nepal. The remaining would prefer to engage in wage-employment either in agriculture or non-agriculture sectors. The combination of low earnings but high living costs makes wage employment opportunities in Nepal less attractive as per migrants in the focus group discussions. While the Government has prioritized policies and programs for returnees and, as announced in the proposed annual budget, it is evident from the survey that 70 percent of respondents are completely unaware about these programs, and only an extremely low (~2 %) minority knew how to get access to them.

Among respondents, a vast majority (80%) report that lack of finance is the major constraint in engaging in self-employment, given that much of their earnings abroad is spent on month-to-month sustenance for families back home. In addition, half of the migrants reported lack of skills/training as a major constraint, followed by lack of professional networks, insufficient information on the local context, and cumbersome administrative barriers as other constraints.

For the small share of returnees interested in wage employment, lack of skills, training and appropriate experience, lack of information regarding opportunities and lack of access to appropriate networks were reported as key obstacles. About a third of the respondents thought they were not able to apply for the job because of their inability to navigate the application process. Not surprisingly, respondents believed that the wages and benefits in Nepal are limited compared to the higher wages received for similar occupations abroad, which makes wage employment a less attractive option back home.

This study reveals that the plan and programs targeting returnees need to emphasize the implementation aspects starting with information dissemination on the kinds of programs that exist and clear instructions on how to access them. There is specific need to intensify the role of local governments that, according to the Local Governance Operations Act 2074 B.S., are mandated with the responsibilities of a number of foreign employment tasks including establishing a database of returnees and facilitating their social and economic reintegration.

For a successful re-integration of returnee migrants, the government must ensure that vulnerable groups such as undocumented migrant workers, which includes a high share of women, are rescued and not left out in the reintegration process and programs funded by the Foreign Employment Welfare Fund (FEWF). This issue is of importance as workers may have traveled irregularly without obtaining labour approvals or overstayed their visas abroad without renewing their labour approvals in a timely manner, but are now returning home and require support.

The planning for successful reintegration programs largely rests on good database and its ensuing objective analysis. Information of the returnee's social and capital remittances such as their acquired skills, experiences, work ethics, networks and know-how—when matched and mobilized productively with employment opportunities in Nepal is critical. Furthermore, an inclusive approach that ensures the participation of the target beneficiaries i.e., the returnees,

right from the planning stage of the reintegration programs, is necessary in the origin communities to ensure their ownership and success.

The sudden influx of reverse migration poses a singular challenge for the country. To mobilize returnees effectively in key priority sectors, design and implementation of innovative set of policies, strategies and programs that recognize migrants' social remittances and reflect their interests and aspirations may, in fact, turn out to be a favorable opportunity for Nepal that has long recognized the risks of its over-dependence on remittances.

Executive Summary (Nepali)

हाल नेपालले समस्याग्रस्त स्वास्थ्य सेवा प्रणालीका साथसाथै कोभिड-१९ माहामारीको कारण अचानक आइपरेको आर्थिक गतिरोधको दोहोरो चुनौतिका बीच ठूलो संख्यामा वैदेशिक रोजगारमा रहेका श्रमिकहरुको उद्धार, घरफिर्ता साथै पुर्नस्थापना गर्नुपर्ने गम्भीर चुनौतिको सामना गर्नु परिरहेको छ । नेपाली श्रमिकहरु विश्वभरनै छरिएका छन् । मुख्यत खाडी समन्वय परिषदका देशहरु(Gulf Cooperation Council),मलेसिया र भारतलगाएत देशमा असुरक्षित प्रकृतिको काम र एकदमै न्यून स्तरको जिवनयापनको कारणले गर्दा पनि नेपाली श्रमिकहरुले माहामारीका बहुपक्षीय असरको अनुभूति गरेका हुन् । फलस्वरूप पूर्वानुमान गरिएको स्वदेश फिर्ता र पुनर्आगमनआप्रवास (Reverse Migration)ले श्रमिकहरुको सामाजिक र आर्थिक पुनःएकिकरणलाई मुख्य केन्द्रमाराख्नु पर्ने अवस्थाआइपरेको छ । सरकारले स्वदेश फर्किने श्रमिकको पुनःएकिकरणका बारेमा छलफल/विमर्श गरिरहेको र केही रोजगार मूलक र आर्थिक पुनरुत्थानका कार्यक्रमहरुको विश्लेषण प्रारम्भ गरेको छ । यस्मा आप्रवासी श्रमिक आफैले जति धेरै आफ्नो समुदायमा स्वयंको रुचि र अनुभवहरुको आधारमा घुलमिल हुन सक्छन् त्यतिनै छिटो रोजगार वा स्वरोजगार हुन सक्छन् ।

यो द्रुतमूल्याङ्कन वैदेशिक रोजगारमा रहेका श्रमिकहरुको आवाजलाई सुन्ने र सरकारको नीति निर्माणको प्रयासमा उनिहरुको सरोकारबारे जानकारी गराउने तथा आकस्मिक र परिस्थिति बस फर्कनुपर्ने वैदेशिक रोजगारीमा रहेका श्रमिकहरुलाई सहजरूपमा घर फर्काउने प्रयासमा लक्षित छ । यो प्रतिवेदन(Report) मुख्य रूपमा फोन सर्वेक्षण, लक्षित समुह छलफल (Focus Group Discussion) र सेकेण्डरी डाटा विश्लेषणमा आधारित छ । यस अध्ययनमा आठ (८) प्राथमिक गन्तव्यका खाडी समन्वय परिषदका देशहरु, मलेसिया र भारतका ६२५ आप्रवासी श्रमिकका विचारहरुलाई प्रस्तुत गरिएको छ । यस अध्ययनमा श्रमिकहरुको स्वदेश फिर्ता प्रतिको विचार र फर्किसके पछिको योजनाहरु बनाउन गरिएको प्रयासहरु अपर्याप्त रहेको प्रष्ट देखिएको छ । विश्वका अन्य भागहरुमा जस्तै अध्ययन गरिएका गन्तव्य मुलुकमा रहेका नेपाली श्रमिकहरुपनि कोभिड-१९ को समस्यामा रहेको र त्यसपछिको अवस्थाकालागि ठोस प्रयास तथा तयारी नगरिएकोले उनिहरुलाई समय पूर्वनै नेपाल फर्कने बारेमा सोच्न बाध्य तुल्याएको छ ।

कोभिड-१९ का कारण एकातिर ठूलो संख्यामा आप्रवासी श्रमिकले नेपाल फर्किने सोच बनाएको देखिन्छ भने अर्कोतर्फ उनीहरुको रोजगारीको प्रत्याभूति र नेपालमा संक्रमणको बढ्दो अवस्थाका कारण धेरै श्रमिकहरु स्वदेश फर्कने कि नफर्कने भन्ने बारेमा द्विविधामा छन् । नेपाल फर्कने भनेको स्वदेश फर्कदाको जटिल प्रक्रिया,

महङ्गो हवाई-भाडा खर्च, दुई हप्ता गुणस्तरहिन क्वारेन्टाइनमा बस्नुपर्ने तथा थप खर्च, र नेपालमा बन्दाबन्दी(lockdown)को सामना गर्नु हो । तर यसको विपरित, विदेशमा देखिएकोबजार अस्थिरता, अन्तराष्ट्रिय गतिशिलता र आपूर्ति शृङ्खलामा अवरोध र ठूलो स्तरका विकाश परियोजनाहरु, रद्द हुने वा ढिलाई हुने भएता पनि गन्तव्यमुलुकमा रोजगार र गतिशिलता पुन सुरु हुने सम्भावनापनि रहेको छ ।

यस द्रुत मुल्यांकनले महामारीले गर्दा विदेशमा काम गरिरहेका आप्रवासी श्रमिकहरुको जीवन र रोजगारीको अवस्थाको निम्न स्तर (Sub-Standard) बारे जानकारी गराएको छ । उत्तरदाताहरु मध्ये ५८% कार्यस्थलको कारण संक्रमित हुन सक्ने बारे भयभित छन भने १७% ले उनीहरुको व्यक्तिगत जिवनशैलीका कारण संक्रमितहनसक्ने बारे चिन्ताव्यक्त गरेकाछन् । कार्यस्थलमा खासगरि बढी संख्यामा श्रमिकहरुको सम्पर्कमा आउने व्यक्तिहुने वा शिविरहरुमा बस्ने सहकर्मीहरुको माध्यमबाट होस् या कार्यस्थलमा ग्राहकहरुको प्रत्यक्ष सम्पर्क हुने (जस्तै सुपरमार्केट र सुरक्षाकर्मीको जागिर) वा सार्वजनिक यातायात तथा कार्यस्थलको चमेना गृह (Canteen) प्रयोगकर्ताहरु लाई बढि असुरक्षित बनाएको छ । यद्यपि कार्यस्थलमा भन्दा तुलनात्मक रुपमा अस्वस्थ र अव्यवस्थित शिविर वा सेयर गर्नु पर्ने साभ्ना कोठामा बस्दा संक्रमण जोखिम कम पाइएको छ ।

स्वदेश फर्कने आप्रवासी श्रमिकहरु अनिश्चितताका कारण भविष्य प्रति चिन्ता व्यक्त गरेकाछन । उनीहरुका अनुसार विप्रेषणमा आएको गिरावटको प्रत्यक्ष असर उनीहरुको दैनिक आधारभूत आवश्यकताहरु पूरा गर्ने क्षमतामा निर्भर हुनेगर्दछ । विप्रेषणको अभावमा उनीहरुका खाना, घर भाडा, बालबालिकाको शिक्षा र ऋण चुक्ता गर्ने क्षमता मुख्य चिन्ताको विषय बनेको छ । केही उत्तरदाताहरुले विप्रेषणमा हुने कटौतीले गैह्र आर्थिक प्रभावहरुलाई पनि संकेत गरेका छन् । जस अन्तर्गत विभेद, घरेलु हिंसा र अन्य पारिवारिक तनावमा वृद्धि हुन सक्ने उल्लेख गरेका छन् । लक्षित समूह छलफलमा पनि यस विषयलाई विशेष जोड दिइएको थियो ।

वैदेशिक रोजगारमा संलग्न आप्रवासी श्रमिकहरुको स्वदेश फिर्ती पश्चातका योजनाहरु(Post Return Plan)पनि अत्यन्त विचारणीय छन् । आप्रवासीहरु मध्ये ठूलो संख्या (८०%) ले नेपाल फर्किए पछि विशेष गरी कृषि अथवा गैकृषि क्षेत्रमा स्वरोजगार हुने रुचि प्रकट गरेका छन् । बाँकी रहेकाले कृषि तथा गैर कृषि क्षेत्रको ज्याला रोजगारी गर्ने चाहना राख्दछन् । वैदेशिक रोजगारमा संलग्न श्रमिकहरूसँग भएको लक्षित समुह छलफल अनुसार कम आम्दानी हुने तर उच्च जीवन लागतको (High Living Cost) कारण नेपालका रोजगारीका अवसरहरुलाई कम आकर्षण देखाएको छ । यद्यपि सरकारले स्वदेश फर्कने श्रमिकको प्राथमिकताको लागि नीति तथा कार्यक्रम त ल्याएको छ, तथापि वार्षिक बजेटमा घोषणा गरिएका यस्ता सरकारी कार्यक्रमको

बारेको सूचना ७० प्रतिशतले थाहानभएको, २८ प्रतिशतले आशिकरूपमाभएको र केवल २% ले मात्रथाहाभएको सर्वेक्षणले देखाएको छ ।

उत्तरदाताहरु मध्ये अधिकांशका (८०%) अनुसार विदेशमा श्रम गर्दा कमाएको धेरै पैसा घरपरिवारका महिनै पिच्छेको आवश्यकताहरु पूर्ति गर्नमा नै खर्चिएकाले स्वरोजगारमा संलग्नहुनुको प्रमुखअवरोध आर्थिक अभाव रहेको बताएका छन् । आधा आप्रवासीश्रमिकहरुले भने सीप/प्रशिक्षणको अभावलाई प्रमुख अवरोधका रूपमा स्वीकार गरेकाछन् । त्यसका साथसाथै व्यवसायिक संजाल (Network) को अभाव, स्थानिय सन्दर्भमा (Local Context) अपर्याप्त जानकारी, जटिल प्रशासनिक प्रक्रिया अन्य बाधा अवरोधहरुको रूपमा रहेको उल्लेख गरेका छन् ।

स्वदेश फर्कन चाहने मध्यको सानो हिस्सा मात्रै ज्याला रोजगारीमा रुची राख्दछन् । उनीहरुले थोरै ज्याला, सीपको अभाव, प्रशिक्षण र पर्याप्त अनुभवको अभाव, अवसरको बारेमा जानकारीको कमी र उपयुक्त सञ्जाल(Network)मा पहुँच नहुनु प्रमुख बाधाका रूपमा उल्लेख गरेका छन् । तीमध्ये एक तिहाई उत्तरदाताहरुका अनुसार उनीहरु रोजगारीकालागि आवश्यक आवेदन प्रकृयाको सही तरिका थाहा नपाउदा रोजगारी पाउन असमर्थ रहेको भन्ने छ । यसमा आश्चर्य मान्नु पर्ने कुनै कारण छैन किनकि नेपालमा ज्याला र सुविधाहरु अत्यन्तै सीमित छन् । विदेशमा सोही पेसा बाट प्राप्त हुने ज्याला बढी छ भन्ने कुरामा उत्तरदाताहरुले विश्वास व्यक्त गरेकाछन् । यसैले स्वदेशमा ज्यालादारी रोजगारीलाई कम आकर्षक विकल्प बनाएको छ ।

वैदेशिक रोजगारबाट फर्किएका व्यक्तिहरुलाई लक्षित योजना र कार्यक्रमहरुको कार्यान्वयन पक्षलाई जोड दिनका साथै यस सम्बन्धी सूचना र जानकारीमा उनीहरुको सहजपहुँच जरुरी छ भन्ने यो अध्ययनले देखाउँछ । स्थानीय सरकार सञ्चालन ऐन, २०७४ ले स्वदेश फर्किएका व्यक्तिहरुलाई लक्षित गरेर योजना र कार्यक्रमहरुको कार्यान्वयन गर्ने, विदेशबाट फर्किएका व्यक्तिहरुको तथ्यांक (Database) तयार पार्ने र उनीहरुको सामाजिक तथा आर्थिक पुनःएकीकरण गर्ने लगायतका धेरै वैदेशिक रोजगारी सम्बन्धी कार्यहरु स्थानीयतहको जिम्मेवारीमा समावेश गरेको छ, जसलाई अझ सफल बनाउन आवश्यक छ ।

वैदेशिक रोजगारबाट स्वदेश फर्केका व्यक्तिहरुको सफल पुनःएकीकरणका लागि, सरकारले जोखिममा रहेका समुदाय जस्तै आधिकारिक तथ्याङ्क भेटिएका, महिलावर्ग आदिलाई वैदेशिक रोजगार कल्याणकारी कोषबाट गरिने उद्धार तथा पुनःएकीकरण प्रक्रिया र कार्यक्रमहरुमा छुटाउने नहुने कुराको सुनिश्चितता गर्नुपर्दछ । श्रम स्वीकृति बिनै वैदेशिक रोजगारमा संलग्न वा भिषाको समयावधि समाप्त भएपनि समयमा श्रम स्वीकृतिको

नविकरण नगरेको श्रमिककालागि यो विषय निकै महत्वपूर्ण हुनसक्दछ । मुख्यत घर फर्किएका त्यस्ता श्रमिकहरुलाई सहयोग आवश्यक छ ।

पुर्नस्थापना कार्यक्रमहरुको सफलताका लागि बनाईने योजना सही तथ्यगत आधार र विशलेषणमा भर पर्दछ । पुर्नआगमनभएका श्रमिकहरुको सामाजिक विप्रेषणको जानकारी जस्तैउनिहरुले प्राप्त गरेको सीप, अनुभव,सामाजिक संजाल र बुझ्ने क्षमता लगाएतका विषयहरु अत्यन्त महत्वपूर्ण हुन्छ । त्यसैले पुर्नएकिकरण कार्यक्रमको योजना बनाउदा त्यस्को सफलता सुनिश्चित गर्न समुदायको स्वामित्व, समावेशी प्रणाली, तथा लक्षित लाभग्राहीको सहभागिता सुनिश्चित गर्न सक्नु पर्दछ ।

अहिले आकस्मिक रुपमा आइपरेको पुनर्आगमन आप्रवास(Reverse Migration) एक मुख्य चुनौतीको रुपमा देखिएको छ । तापनि श्रमिकहरुलाई राज्यले निर्दिष्ट गरेका मुख्य प्राथमिकताका क्षेत्रहरुमा प्रभावकारी रुपमा परिचालन गर्न स्वदेश फर्किएका व्यक्तिहरुले हांसिल गरेका सामाजिक विप्रेषण (Social Remittance)को पहिचान गरी उनीहरुको रुची र आकांक्षा भत्काउन सक्ने उपयुक्त नीति, रणनिति र कार्यक्रमहरु भएमा नेपाल जस्तो विप्रेषणमा अत्याधिक निर्भर रहेको देशकालागि यो एक अनुकूल अवसरको रुपमा परिणत हुन सक्नेछ ।

Chapter 1: Overview

1. Background

Temporary overseas employment has been a defining feature of Nepal's socioeconomic landscape from the mid-eighties, and especially since the early 2000s. In 2018/19, Nepal received remittances of USD 8.79 billion, equivalent to over a quarter of the GDP, and placing it in the top five countries in terms of remittance-to-GDP equivalence. Migration from Nepal has been a largely male phenomena, with majority between the ages of 18-35, engaged primarily in semi-skilled and low-skilled categories in the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) and Malaysia. It is estimated that over 56 per cent of Nepali households rely on remittances. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic and healthcare systems of countries across the world are overwhelmed, which has disproportionately impacted migrant workers including Nepalis, propelling an unprecedented reverse migration back home to Nepal.

To enable the Government of Nepal to better prepare for this phenomenon of unprecedented return, this Rapid Assessment aims to provide sound data and analysis of the current situation of migrant workers and document their future aspirations. The analysis is aimed at providing evidence-based findings for the design, development, and implementation of rescue, repatriation and reintegration policies, strategies and realistic programs at the national, province and local levels. This study emphasizes the perspectives and aspirations of migrant workers to ensure that the welfare and rights of those who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic are duly considered.

While the government has built a database on the outflow of migrant workers who obtain labour approvals, the collection of data on returnee workers is still at its nascent stages. Moreover, the administrative databases do not capture information regarding the aspirations, experiences, intents and perceptions of these workers and their realities including the impact of the current pandemic. The survey was designed with the intention of capturing, as accurately as possible, the

voices of the migrants, and is complemented by focus group discussions and secondary data to provide an in-depth understanding about their situations and their aspirations upon returning. An overview of the programs targeting migrant workers, especially returnees, is also provided, as the country braces for an unprecedented reverse migration of individuals of an economically active age group, along with challenges in their implementation and lessons for the future. It is expected that insights from this analysis will be useful to inform the successful management of the phenomena and their re-integration, including effective implementation of the employment policies and programs of the Government of Nepal.

With significant reduction of remittances as a source of revenue due to the loss of jobs of migrant workers overseas, the nation is bracing for an economic shock though the size of the impact remains uncertain. Migrants are also returning with some social remittances (e.g. skills, experiences, technological know-how, new networks) which could be an opportunity for governments at the federal, provinces and municipalities to harness for socio-economic development at all levels. The long-term goal of addressing Nepal's economic challenge will be to adopt pragmatic strategies to diversify economic opportunities that will help make migration a more informed choice, an economy that is less dependent on remittances, and consequently less vulnerable to volatilities in the global business environment, trading, geopolitics and crises like the current COVID-19 pandemic.

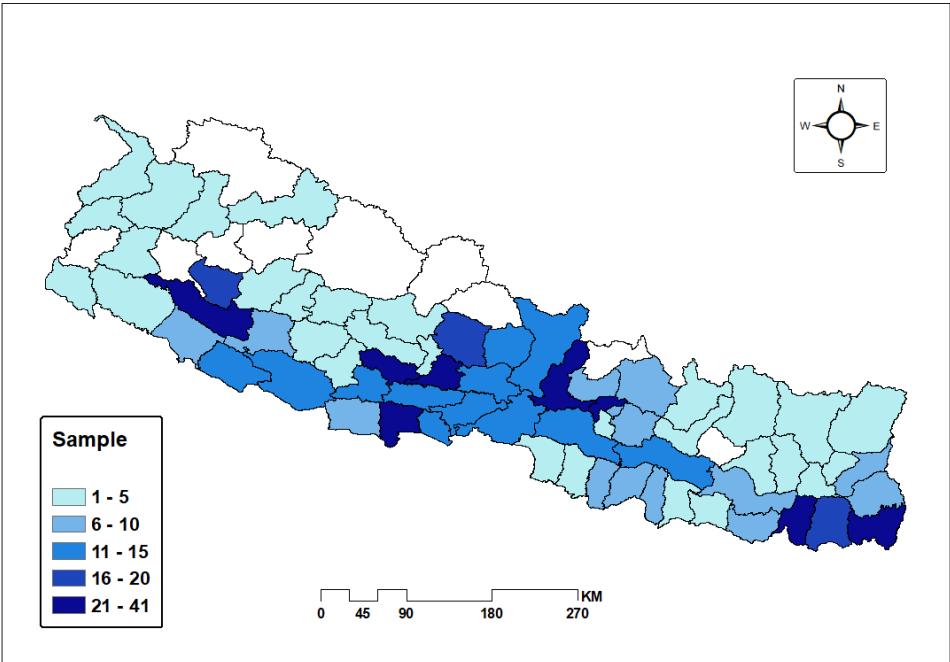
2. Methodology

The objective of the methodological design for this rapid assessment was to ensure a rich and insightful information on the aspirations, motivations and situations of migrant workers. We drew insights from 625 Nepali migrant workers across 8 countries primarily through surveys. The questionnaire for the survey covered variables related to employment status, impact of the pandemic, reasons for outmigration, aspirations upon return, skills gained, post COVID 19 experience, and demographic information. Conducted from 14th to 24th May, 2020, this primary data was collected via telephone surveys. We also conducted focus group discussions, and analyzed secondary data.

As identified by the Government of Nepal’s Labour Migration Report 2020, we prioritized the top destination countries for migrant workers including Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Malaysia. As per this Report, the top five destination countries that comprised of over 92 per cent of the labour approvals received in 2018/19 were for Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait (GCC) and Malaysia, all of which are covered in this rapid assessment. In addition, while unrecorded and unregulated with no labour approvals required, India is a significant destination country for Nepali workers which has received greater visibility after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, owing to the influx of India-based migrants. For this survey, 20 per cent of the sample was from India, 15 per cent from Malaysia and the rest from the GCC countries.

The survey was based on snow-ball sampling, a survey technique used when respondents recruit other participants, and the sample respondents are not randomly selected. While the sampling was not nationally representative the survey was conducted to ensure wide coverage of major destination countries and included Nepali migrants from all 7 provinces, and 68 out of the 77 districts of Nepal.

Figure 1 Home Districts of Migrants Interviewed



Methodologically, given the time constraints, unprecedented logistic challenges of the pandemic that limited our ability to carry out a more representative sampling of the destination countries as well as the cross-border nature of data collection, these surveys were conducted over the phone.

As mentioned earlier, in-depth focus group discussions were also carried out with migrant workers to gauge their return intentions before and after the pandemic as well as their motivations and aspirations upon arriving in Nepal. A case study informed by discussions with officials from Province 2 which looks into the preparedness of this high migrant Province to manage a high reverse migration, is presented in this report. Together, the survey, focus group discussions and secondary data analysis allowed for a broader understanding of the perspectives and situations of the workers, beyond what is captured by administrative databases of government agencies. Details of the focus group discussions are included in Annex 1.

3. Repatriation

As per Nepal's Foreign Employment Board, the government agency responsible for the welfare of migrant workers, 127,000 Nepali migrants are expected to return immediately.¹ The repatriation of migrant workers has begun, predominantly comprising of migrant workers returning by land from India. It is expected that the reverse migration will further intensify once the travel restrictions and lockdowns are lifted.

A detailed situational analysis of the backgrounds of migrant workers has shown that far from being homogeneous entities, the profile and situation of migrants are diverse and need to be adequately addressed. As an example, the legal status is an important indicator of the vulnerability of workers. Migrant workers can be documented or undocumented, working on visas and/or contracts that are current or expired, currently unemployed, working in sectors banned by the Nepal Government such as domestic work, and/or facing health issues due to the pandemic or other pre-existing ailments. Similarly, the diverse policies of the destination country have implications on the vulnerability of workers. As an example, undocumented workers in

¹These numbers are estimated based on coordination with Nepali missions and in consultation with labour experts. The NAFEA estimates that over 300000 workers will likely return.

Kuwait have been provided amnesty and the country also sponsors their tickets back home. However, undocumented workers in Malaysia have been unfortunately, targeted, raided and arrested in the midst of the pandemic.

Realizing the heterogeneity of Nepali returnees impacted by the COVID 19 pandemic, the government has identified 17 categories of returnee profiles ranging from migrant workers, students, family members visiting abroad, to business people and professionals.

The phased repatriation by the Government of Nepal, that estimates bringing back 2500-3000 workers on a daily basis, has prioritized the most vulnerable returnees as those who are pregnant women, those with health issues, and those who have lost family members or jobs.² Against the challenges of a strained health care system including rising infection cases and inadequate quarantine facilities, managing a well-coordinated repatriation with strictly adhered to protocols on quarantine, testing and internal transport to home districts, is and will be a challenge. With lockdowns and travel restrictions being further prolonged, it is expected that the number of repatriates will simultaneously rise as more workers lose jobs, and undocumented migrants file for amnesty in the host countries in order to come back to Nepal.

4. Reintegration

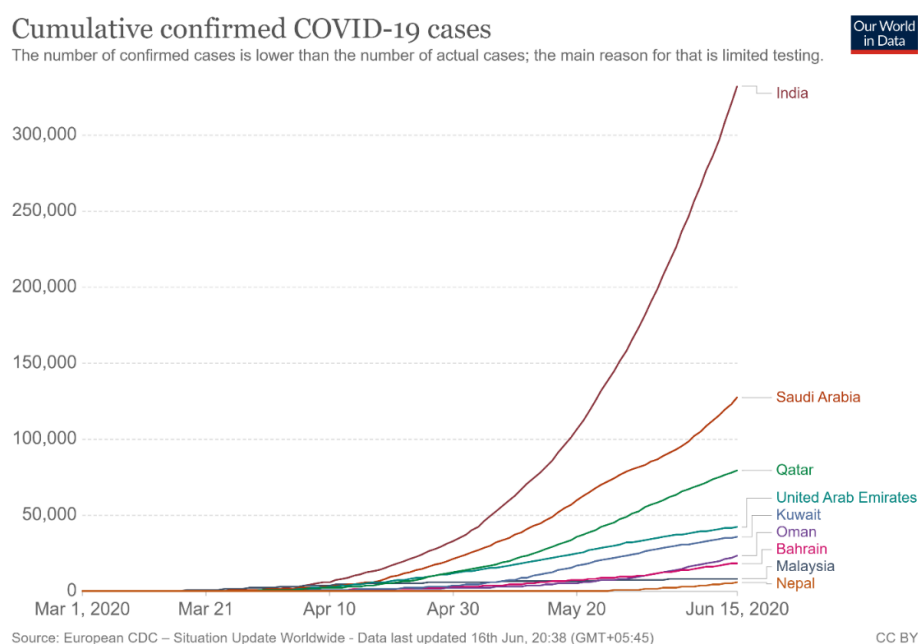
At the initial stages of repatriation, as discussed above, rescue of migrant workers has taken precedence to ensure that those affected by the pandemic are brought home with humanitarian consideration. However, this work will be followed by bigger challenges of economic and social reintegration of returnee workers, which has also taken precedence in the government's recent policymaking efforts. Given the temporary nature of foreign employment, hundreds of Nepali migrants have been returning on a daily basis even prior to the pandemic. The government estimates that over 1,500 contracts of workers expire daily and they can be expected to return

²The Government has constitutional and legal obligation as outlined by the Constitution of Nepal and the Foreign Employment Act of 2007 to bring back workers in times of great stress and danger such as war and the current pandemic. The Supreme Court's verdict to bring back workers to Nepal has put further pressure to expedite the return of stranded citizens.

but it is unclear how many of them would actually immediately return afterwards. In a normal situation about 60 per cent of the workers return at the end of their work tenure.

As the destination countries grapple with the rising cases of COVID-19 and businesses shut down and likely bankruptcy adversely impacting and disrupting key sectors like hospitality and services industries, trade and global supply chains and cross-border travel, the migrant population are confronted with uncertainty and fear, further exacerbated by incidences of racism and xenophobia. To this group, the government needs to add those who are compelled to return due to other reasons that could be job loss related or not. Groups could also be returning because their two-year visa or work contract has naturally expired. All returning migrant Nepali citizens (men and women) should be treated with equal dignity, respect and rights and be provided full access to government-funded programs and services in the destination country and upon their return, without any discrimination.

Figure 2 Rising Cases of COVID-19 in Nepal and the 8 Destination Countries Covered by the Survey



With reverse migration in the spotlight, a number of positive initiatives are being taken. The Government has announced budgetary allocations in its annual fiscal budget for year 2020/21 for jobs creation as well as self-employment:

- Allocation of NRs. 11.6 billion to mobilize youth across the country in all 753 local units through the Prime Minister's Employment Program that aims to provide 200,000 jobs this year.
- Allocation of NRs.1 billion to facilitate employment creation of 50,000 individuals through skills-based training and NRs.4.34 billion to facilitate employment of 75,000 individuals by strengthening relevant organizations, 40,000 jobs through small farmers credit, 1,79,000 jobs through Youth and Small Entrepreneur Self Employment Fund, and 50,000 jobs through the private sector.
- In the process of preparing a "labour bank" that includes information on jobseekers and employers, to facilitate matching of skills and jobs.

The Foreign Employment Board is also in the process of launching a pilot reintegration program targeting returnee migrant workers and continuing the soft-loan program that provides NRs.10 lakh to returning enterprising migrant workers. On paper, these are praiseworthy initiatives envisioned to gainfully employ Nepali youth, but its implementation remains the bigger concern as it requires effective coordination across all the tiers of government with periodic objective monitoring.

A key priority in the implementation of these programs is to ensure that they reflect the aspirations and interests of migrant workers and involve them from the initial stages of the program design to ensure ownership of such initiatives. Past examples of such programs have not been successful partly because of this disconnect driven by a top-down planning approach with little consultations with the direct beneficiary communities and related stakeholders including from the private sector. It was also assumed that returnees would seamlessly integrate into entrepreneurial initiatives with just simple interventions such as subsidized loans. New initiatives to enable social and economic reintegration of migrant workers needs to take a wider consideration of the institutional capacity of the authorities in charge of implementation, the cooperation among the multifaceted stakeholders from different sectors, and the aspirations and interests of migrant workers themselves.

As the country faces the double whammy of containing the pandemic as well as managing its subsequent economic repercussions, repatriation logistics of migrant workers, their rehabilitation and reintegration in the community will be a monumental task. But with an enabling environment and well-designed reintegration policies and programs, there is also the possibility of transitioning reverse migration into an opportunity by mobilizing the skills, experiences and know-how of returnee migrants that can contribute to the advancement of the economy. With this view, this rapid assessment, as an initial guide, aims to capture the situation and aspirations of migrant workers from the destination countries to inform the design and plan for effective implementation of reintegration strategies.

The rest of the report is structured as follows: Chapter 1 sets the stage for this rapid assessment; Chapter 2 describes the survey and the findings; and Chapter 3 provides recommendations based on the analysis and insights from the preceding chapters.

Chapter 2: Survey Results

1. Migrant Worker Demographics

In Nepal, outmigration is a largely male dominated phenomenon. The share of female migrant workers has historically been low and remained below 10 percent annually. Several factors in the recent past has affected the flow of female migrants. For instance, the Nepali Government has instituted a series of bans in the last decade on the domestic work sector to the Gulf countries, which is a sector that is occupied disproportionately by female workers. Nonetheless, women continue to migrate for work through both formal and informal channels. In this survey, close to 7 percent of the respondents were female, and the overwhelming majority (87%) were married.

The 625 respondents interviewed were between the ages of 18 to 59 years. More specifically, about a third were between the ages of 20 and 30 years, while 44 per cent were in the 30 to 40 age range, reflecting the high share of young and economically active migrants working abroad. The vast majority of respondents had acquired some level of formal schooling. Almost half of the respondents had completed upto SLC (grade ten), whereas a quarter had completed their intermediate degree and 12 per cent of respondents had a Bachelor's degree and above. Those that reported having completed schooling upto grade five amounted to about 13 per cent. (Annex 2)

2. Foreign Employment Status

For most of the migrants (69%) surveyed their current employment was their first foreign employment experience (Table 1). Additionally, most (45%) had been working in their current employment for more than 5 years (Table 1).

Table 1 Foreign Employment Status of Migrants

# of yrs. working abroad prior to current employment	% of workers*	# of yrs. in current employment	% of workers*
1st time	69%	5+	45%
<3 years	13%	2 to 5 years	24%
3-5 years	10%	1 to 2 years	13%
5+ years	8%	<1	18%

*Percentages may not add to 100 given rounding errors.

As evident in Figure 3, the largest proportion of migrants surveyed were employed at hotels and restaurants (26%), followed by construction (14%) and driving (9%). Nepali migrants working in retail and security, in cleaning and transportation/warehouse were relatively lower. Manufacturing, domestic work and agriculture accounted for the remainder of employment. The low level of employment in the agricultural sector is particularly striking given that, in Nepal prior to departure, over a third of the migrants were engaged in this sector.

Workers in construction and restaurants/hotels comprised the highest share of migrants. When comparing India to other destination countries, a notable difference was that the share of workers employed in hotels and restaurants in India was substantially higher (53%) than GCC and Malaysia (19%). Construction work featured more prominently in the GCC and Malaysia (17%), while security work appears to be comparably popular across all countries. The large percentage of migrants employed in the hospitality industry is a cause of concern as it is one of the sectors most impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. This points to increased migrant worker vulnerability both in terms of health and economic wellbeing. At the same time, migrants are also engaged in sectors that have emerged as being “essential” during the pandemic such as domestic work, security and cleaning. A cloud schematic profile in Figure 4 illustrates the highly heterogeneous nature of occupations that migrant workers are currently engaged in. The three most common occupation titles for migrant workers include labourer/helper, cooks, and supervisors.

Figure 3 Sector of Work of Respondents in Destination Countries

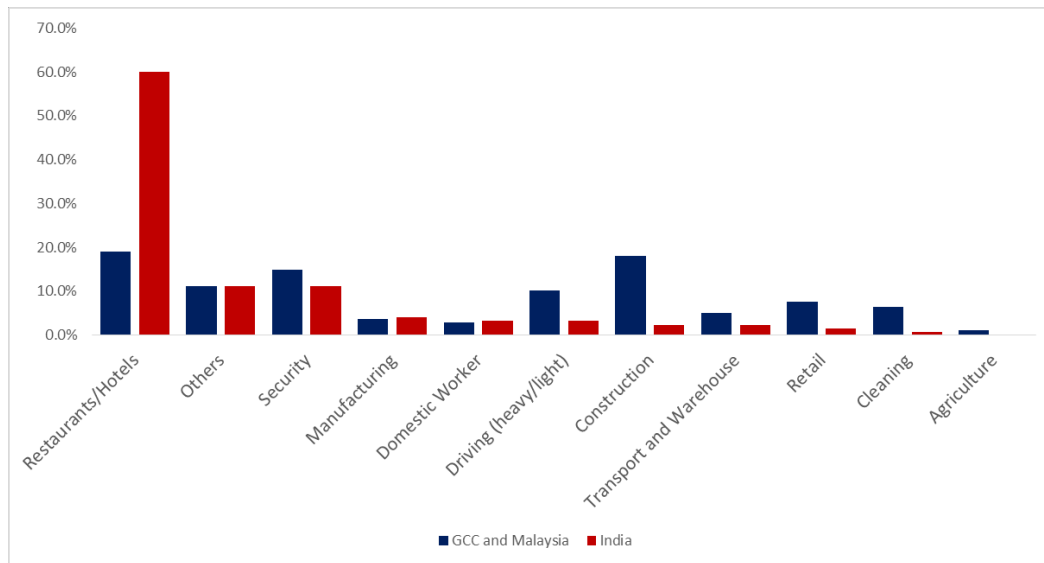
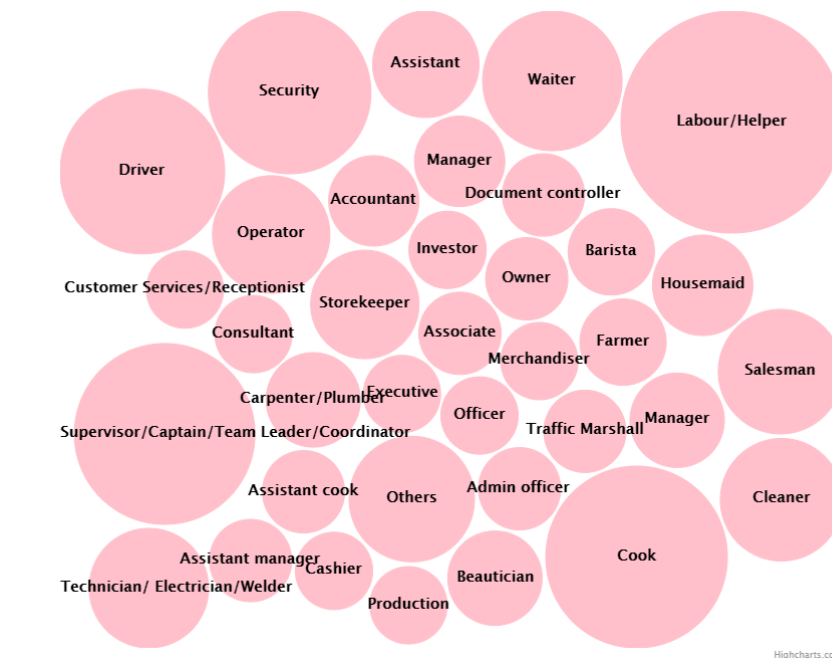


Figure 4 Common Occupations of Respondents



Migrant workers are employed by a diverse range of employers that include national and multinational organizations, and supply companies. The largest share of migrants is employed by

local/national employers (50%), followed by supply companies (28%). Multinational organizations employ a relatively small proportion (14%) of the migrants surveyed.

Legal documentation such as valid visas and contracts determine the status of the workers in destination countries. The lack of proper documentation increases worker vulnerability particularly during a pandemic as it may prevent the worker from accessing crucial government public health services. It is, therefore, concerning that among the GCC and Malaysia based workers, only three quarters of the migrants reported having valid documents whereas a quarter reported not having valid visas. Among the undocumented workers, majority were located in Saudi Arabia (45%) followed by the UAE (23%) and Malaysia (11%), and the vast majority (94%) were male. It is important to pay attention to the added vulnerabilities of undocumented workers during both repatriation and reintegration in Nepal. For example, undocumented workers are the more precarious group who are the first to let go from their jobs, and hence, the employer often bears no responsibility towards them whether it is for their room and board or their flights back home. Similarly, given that they do not have valid labour approvals and may not have contributed to the Foreign Employment Welfare Fund, they are precluded from its programs. Addressing this problematic issue during a pandemic is key to ensuring that this vulnerable group benefits from social and economic reintegration programs funded by the Board.

Highlight

Undocumented women migrant workers

The discussion of undocumented migrant workers is strongly coupled with the issue of undocumented domestic workers, who are predominantly women. Women domestic workers are an invisible workforce, whose journeys to the destination country are often covert because of the ban on domestic workers by the Government of Nepal, which propels them to travel through irregular channels. Given that they are not registered with the Government, their exact number is unknown, but is assumed to be significant. For example, in a recent amnesty for undocumented workers provided by the Government of Kuwait, over 1300 beneficiaries were women, mostly domestic workers. As undocumented workers return to Nepal in droves, a major concern is their eligibility for programs designed with returnees in mind, and one that is funded by the Foreign Employment Board's Foreign Employment Welfare Fund despite being important remittance contributors even with their undocumented status abroad.

3. Drivers of Migration

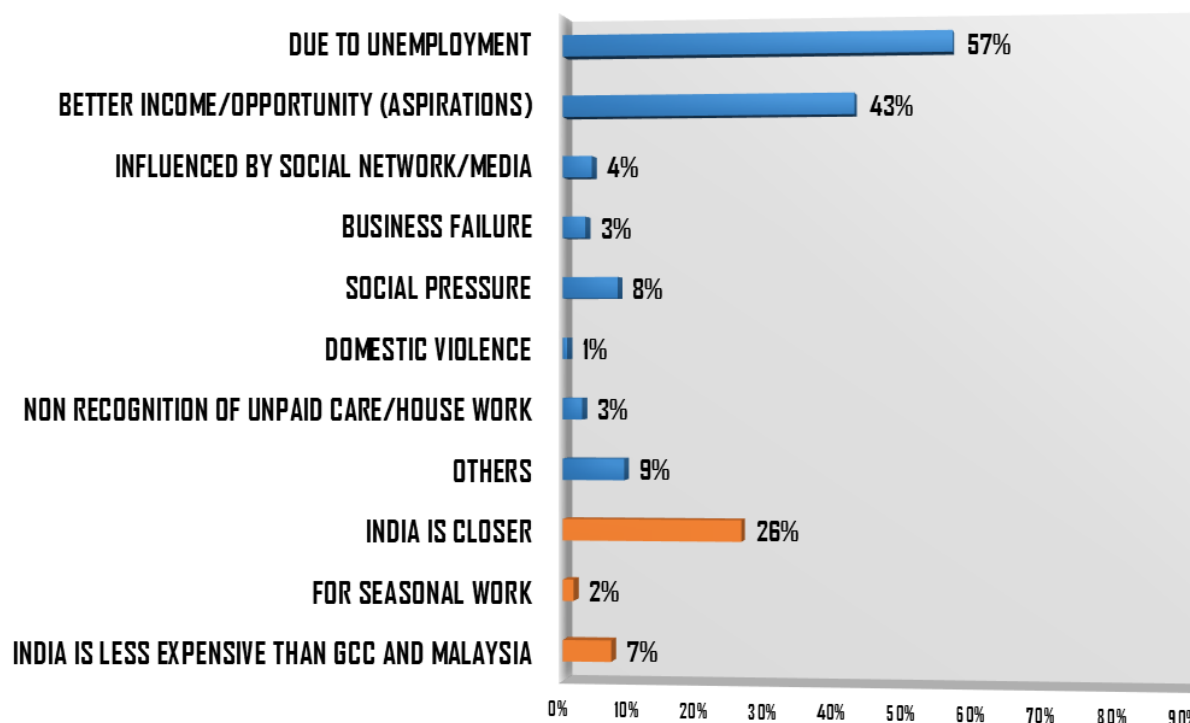
In order to better understand the current scenario of migrant workers, it is important to understand their motivation to migrate overseas for work in the first place. It is widely known that migration is an outcome of a combination of push and pull factors. Commonly cited push factors include unemployment and societal pressure to migrate, while pull factors into destination countries include higher wages, better employment opportunities and social networks abroad. There are also women specific factors influencing outmigration, such as the lack of recognition of unpaid care work and domestic violence. Beyond individual drivers of migration, there are growing evidence that suggests that migration is a household decision whereby family members pool resources to send a member abroad.

Among those surveyed, unemployment/lack of decent employment opportunities featured as the primary reason for migration (57%), followed by hopes for better income and opportunities abroad (42%). Other factors behind the decision to move abroad for employment included the influence of social networks/media, social pressure, business failure, and non-recognition of unpaid care/housework (each <5%).

Due to an open border policy, outmigration from Nepal to India differs from that to other countries. Historical, cultural and geographic ties between the two nations has meant that migrants from Nepal do not have to go through a formal process of migrating and can work without documentation in India. This fact coupled with the proximity between the two nations has worked to incentivize short-term seasonal migration by citizens of both nations. To gain a better understanding of the drivers of this specific type of migration, additional questions were asked of India-based respondents. Not surprisingly, a higher proportion (26%) reported that they chose India due to its proximity and a smaller percentage (7%) cited lack of adequate finances to travel to other destination countries as their primary reason.

Prior to migrating, close to a quarter of the workers surveyed had been unemployed. Of those who had been employed, most were self-employed in agriculture (32%), a sizable proportion were students (21%), some were wage employed in the non-agriculture sector (13%) and the remainder were employed in agriculture or self-employed in a non-agriculture sector. (See Figure 5).

Figure 5 Factors Motivating Return Migration (Pre-COVID-19)



*Multiple answers allowed, orange for India only.

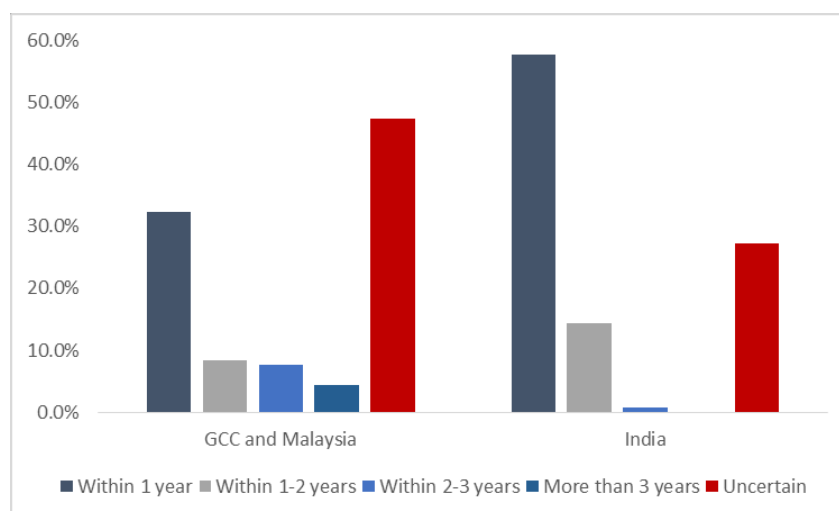
With the onset of the pandemic, it is important to consider how both the push and pull factors of migration are affected by the dual crisis of COVID-19 and the consequent economic downturn. Recent studies also paint a grim picture of the impact of the pandemic on trade, tourism, remittance and the Nepali economy at large. The study projects that the pre-COVID-19 estimated growth rate of 8.5 per cent will fall below 2.5 per cent in 2019/20 while constraining its rebound in 2020/21 (IIDS, 2020). Job losses have also disproportionately affected more women (41%) than men (28%). While these effects of the pandemic will likely serve to increase the impetus to migrate, aspiring Nepali migrants will simultaneously face a shrunken job market as destination countries themselves struggle to recover. For example, a recent study by Oxford Economics predicts that employment in the GCC could fall by as much as 13 per cent, with job-losses in the UAE estimated to be 900,000 and in Saudi Arabia as much as 1.7 million. Nepal's strategies to diversify beyond the GCC and Malaysia to newer economies which are facing worker shortages due to aging societies, especially in East Asia and Europe, will also be affected by the crisis.

Consequently, it is imperative that push and pull factors of migration and the future of labour mobility from Nepal be reviewed within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Motivation to Return

Migration to the GCC, Malaysia, and India has generally tended to be temporary in nature. GCC countries and Malaysia do not have provisions for employment based permanent residency, and most migrant employment contracts are for a duration of two years. In fact, in 2018/19, 95 per cent of the contracts obtained by Nepali workers were of a two-year duration.³As evident in Figure 6, prior to the onset of the pandemic, most migrant workers expressed uncertainty about their intention to return (>47%), followed by those who intended to return within a year (37%) and the rest within a longer time frame. Noticeably, the percentage of those with plans to return within a year is considerably higher among India-based migrant workers (58%), which is understandable given the proximity of the country.

Figure 6 Pre-Pandemic Return Plans

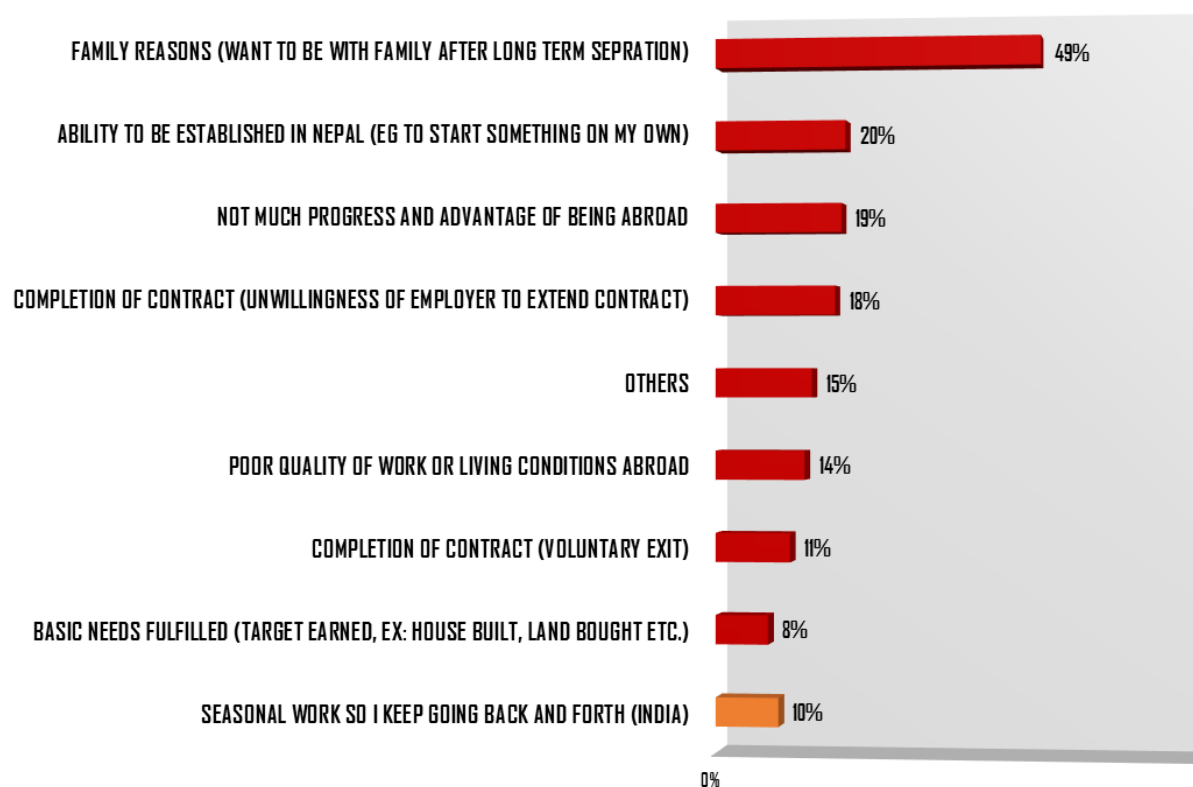


Given the temporary nature of labour migration, this survey delved into factors that influence an individual's decision to return in normal circumstances. As illustrated in Figure 7 an overwhelming majority (~50%) of the migrants reported family as the primary reason to return

³Nepal Labour Migration Report 2020

home—which is not surprising because overseas workers with temporary contracts seldom travel with their families, and long separation for family members can be stressful. Other motivation for returning included: 1) completion of contract and unwillingness to renew it (29%); 2) confidence to start up own business in Nepal (20%); and 3) fulfillment of basic needs (such as building house, marriage of children) for target remittance earners (8 %). There were also some negative factors that were reported as motivation for returning to Nepal. For instance, about a fifth of respondents (19%) listed foreign employment failing to meet expectations and not leading to improvements in their lives and others (14%) listed poor quality of working and living conditions abroad as factors that could motivate migrants to return.

Figure 7 Factors Affecting Decision to Return



*Multiple answers allowed, orange is India only

Focus group discussions were able to provide further insights into the complex and interrelated factors that influence a labour migrant's decision to return. Migrants revealed that although they are acutely aware that foreign employment is temporary, they often do not have plans for what

they might do after the completion of their contracts. One important reason for the lack of long-term planning appears to be that the income from foreign employment is largely spent on meeting the basic needs of the family. While cash remittances have helped improve standards of living and increased ability to spend, migrants do not have sufficient savings to even begin thinking about investment plans upon return. It appears to often be the case that migrants postpone their return plans in favor of a sustained and stable source of income to continue with the improvements in standard of living of their family members back home. The general perception among the migrant workers seem to be that there are not many viable employment options in Nepal. Coupled with the political instability the lack of employment opportunities means that returning increases their financial risk which then motivates them to continue working in the destination country.

However, due to the pandemic, migrants have been compelled to rethink their return to Nepal either voluntarily or involuntarily. Discussions with migrants as well as information collected in the survey reveal that the unanticipated return comes as a massive financial shock for the migrants and their families. Many migrants have had to seriously consider returning prematurely due to the economic consequences of the pandemic. In fact, of those surveyed, only a small fraction reported that they were not thinking about returning at all (9%). Approximately, a quarter of them stated that they are unsure and it depended on the situation of the employers. The rest, however, have considered returning for a number of reasons including the impact on their job (32%), family reasons either because of the pressure from the family (13%) or because their priorities are family over job considerations (27%), and because the situation is worsening in the destination country with both the dual pressure of COVID-19 and the uncertainties in the economy (24 %). Due to the higher risk of exposure to the virus and loneliness due to imposition of lockdown measures in destination countries, many migrants expressed a desire to return just to be with their families during these trying times.

Despite considering their return due to these reasons, migrants continued to be unsure of whether they will actually be able to return, thereby highlighting the issue that translating the desire and intention to return into actual decision to do so has been complicated by the pandemic.

The focus group discussions with Qatar-based migrants revealed that their perception of the disease had changed after seeing other workers including Nepalis get infected and recovering

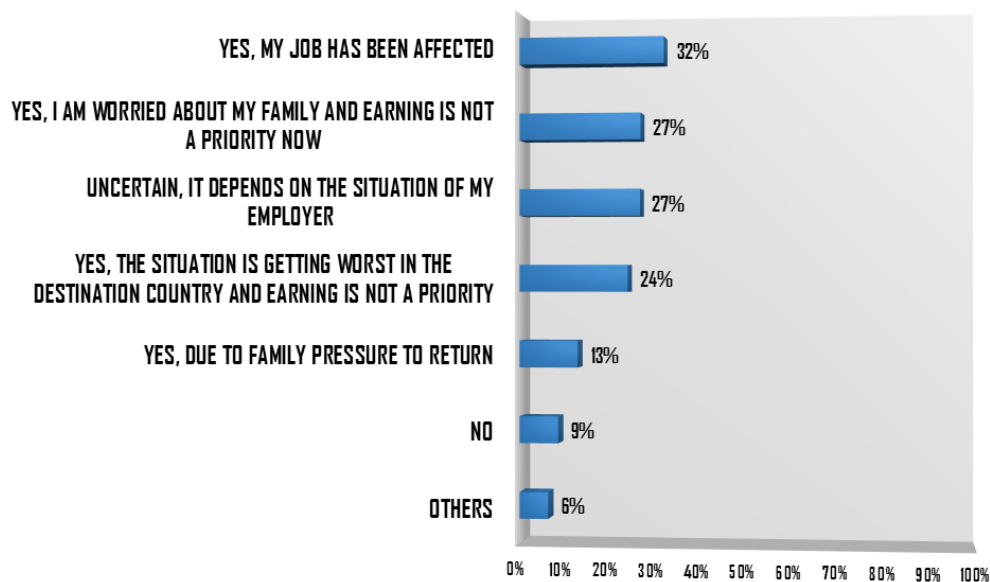
after receiving adequate treatment. Unlike in the past when they equated COVID-19 with certain mortality, they have come to the realization that COVID-19 can infect with less severity and may be accompanied by higher rates of recovery. Consequently, the share of workers wanting to return out of panic has been declining. Furthermore, migrants are reconsidering their decisions in light of the deteriorating situation in Nepal as there has been a rise in the number of COVID-19 cases making it potentially riskier for them to return.

Many seem conflicted about whether they should return. Returning to Nepal would mean navigating the complicated repatriation process, paying for the expensive flight, spending two-weeks in quarantine in poorly equipped quarantine centers and potentially facing further lockdowns in Nepal. In contrast, staying abroad holds the possibility for resumption of employment and mobility in the destination country. Moreover, for some returning to Nepal immediately and abruptly would mean giving up the lucrative gratuity they would receive upon completion of their contract.

Some migrants are even reluctant to return to Nepal for vacation. They are being discouraged by the travel restrictions, prioritized repatriation, convoluted quarantine requirements, the high price of tickets in chartered flights and the uncertainty about being allowed back to the destination country to resume employment after their vacation is over.

Therefore, there is much uncertainty about the volume of workers who want to return as there are undetermined factors, external and internal, that may come into play except in cases where migrants are returning by compulsion rather than choice. One silver lining worth noting is that undocumented workers have been able to take this as an opportunity to return and are getting the opportunity to avoid the penalties of overstaying including fines. For example, in Kuwait, workers received amnesty that also covered their airfare home. Of the 2,998 who benefited from the amnesty program, 1,303 were female, 1686 were male whereas 9 were children.

Figure 8 Consideration of Returning to Nepal among Migrant Workers After COVID-19



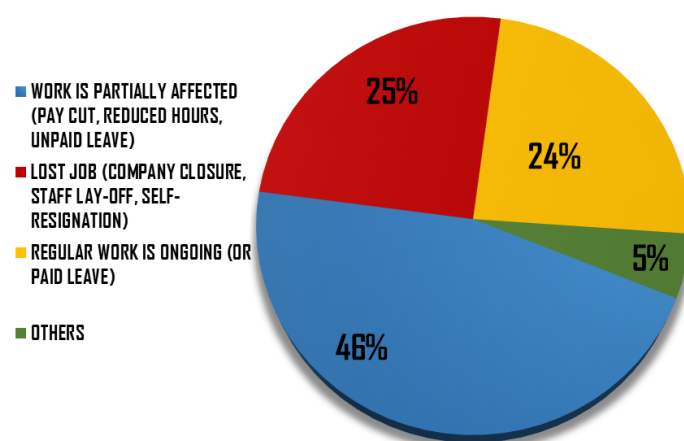
*Multiple answers allowed

Given that the pandemic has impacted economies of destination countries, there is a lot of uncertainty about the future employment of migrant workers. Plummeting oil prices, disruptions in international mobility and supply chains, the cancelation or delays in large scale development projects or events have left thousands of migrant workers in the lurch. On the one hand, the impact of the pandemic is heterogeneous with regard to the jobs of migrant workers as businesses employing them have been hit hard—temporarily or longer-term, with uncertainties about their recovery. On the other hand, given that migrant workers occupy job categories that locals are uninterested in due to the nature of the work and their higher reservation wages, the demand for workers in essential sectors may remain steady during and especially post-recovery.

Needless to say, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the employment of migrants. As can be seen in Figure 9 with regard to employment, almost half of the workers reported that their work was partially affected with reduced hours, reduced pay or unpaid leaves, while a quarter of them reported losing jobs either due to lay-off or company closure or staff reduction. Close to a quarter (24%) reported working regular hours. This heterogeneity in the employment and the impacts of the pandemic show that while some workers are engaged in essential work that

requires them to continue despite the lockdowns, others are in more vulnerable sectors (e.g. hospitality, retail and travel) that have been adversely impacted during the pandemic.

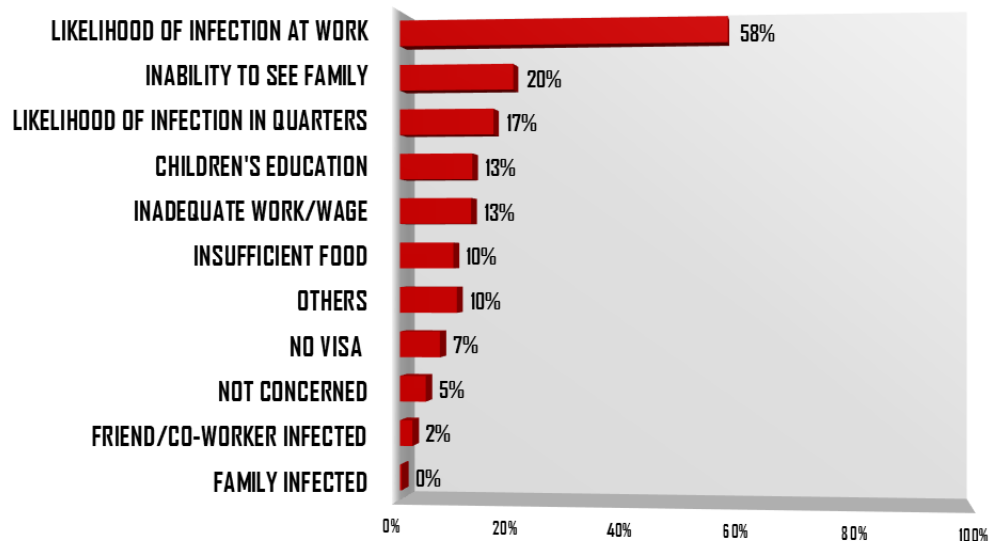
Figure 9 Impact of COVID-19 on Employment of Migrant Workers (GCC and Malaysia)



5. COVID 19 Infection Concerns

Individual respondents have specific concerns, given the high number of COVID-19 infections in the destination countries, the deteriorating situation in Nepal and their own lackluster living and working conditions. A majority of the respondents (58%) expressed worry about getting infected due to the working conditions while a lesser proportion (17%) reported concerns about getting infected due to their living condition. Workplace is considered more vulnerable, particularly because the number of individuals that migrant workers are exposed to is much higher, whether it is through colleagues who live in different camps, through customers in case of client-facing jobs (in supermarkets, security) or through the need to share public transport, and workplace canteens. While workers' camps or shared rooms are cramped and unhygienic with higher levels of exposure, the latter is comparatively lower than in workplaces. For some workers, inability to be with their family due to travel restrictions, or their undocumented status precluding them benefiting from the Government's schemes seem to be of more concern. Respondents expressed concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on their socioeconomic conditions including children's education, insufficient food, and insufficient wages. For details see Figure 10.

Figure 10 Concerns Regarding COVID-19



*Multiple answers allowed

6. Financial and Social Remittances

The unexpected blow to the economy resulting from the complete shut-down of countries in an effort to control the spread of the pandemic will have dire consequences on remittances, a lifeline for families across Nepal. The World Bank estimates that remittances to Nepal will fall by 14 per cent in 2020. Migrant households have already started feeling the impact of reduced to no remittances. According to the respondents, the reduction in remittances has direct bearings on their ability to cover their basic needs. In the absence of remittances, almost half were concerned about their families not being able to afford food, almost a quarter about paying rent and over half were concerned about paying for their children's education. One in every two migrant surveyed was worried about being able to repay loans, and a majority reported that their ongoing work would be disrupted.

Highlight

Cost of Migration and Loans

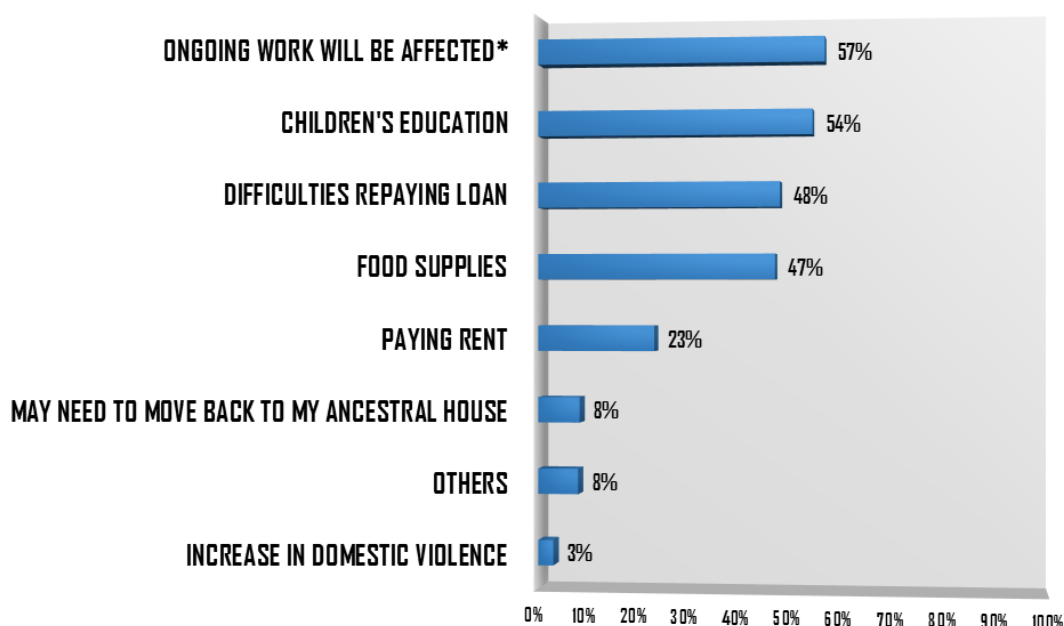
Migrants incur high upfront costs to migrate as it is viewed as a form of an investment. Thus, the decision to return and the consequences of unplanned return is linked with these loans and costs. When migrants first weigh the costs and benefits of migration, the decision to pay the recruitment costs are made with the expectations of returns gained via relatively high wages over the duration of the work contract. However, with the onset of the crisis, it is likely that many migrants will have to return prematurely. This means that they will be unlikely to be able to repay the loans incurred resulting in a long-lasting detrimental impact on their well-being.

Among those surveyed, a third, comprising exclusively of India-based migrants, reported having spent less than NRs.50,000 to migrate. Similarly, among GCC and Malaysia-based respondents, one third reported having paid between 1 and 2 lakhs, while 6 per cent stated that they paid more than 2 lakhs. Further, 3 in every 4 of the migrants reported financing the recruitment costs through loans borrowed from informal sources. It is a well-documented fact that migrant workers typically required some sort of financial assistance either from individual/family saving, loans (formal and informal), and selling the assets they owned to cover the cost of recruitment for foreign employment. Among the respondents, over 70 per cent reported having paid the recruitment costs in their entirety at the time of the survey.

Some of the respondents alluded to the non-economic impact of the reduction in remittances such as its potential to contribute towards a higher incidence of domestic violence and mental stress. The implication of a drop in remittances beyond finances was also echoed in the focus group discussions, especially with regards to its potential incite familial tensions. Migrants reported that the decline in remittances will mean that their dependent families will be seeing a substantial reduction in their standard of living. Migrants with families that have moved to cities from the villages were particularly concerned about not being able to afford the cost of living in urban centers. For those who were sending children to private schools, there were concerns of readjustment and fear about their future. All the while, families who were dependent on this predictable inflow of revenue assumed that they would likely face additional stress with potentially increase of familial tensions. Almost a quarter of the respondents reported that they would have to consider moving back to their ancestral homes in the village. They expressed concerns about readjustments that may have to be made, particularly after spending years abroad

in countries where law and order is maintained and where they have grown accustomed to a different way of thinking, including their reliance on systems and their expectations from the state.

Figure 11 Possible Impact of Decline in Remittances



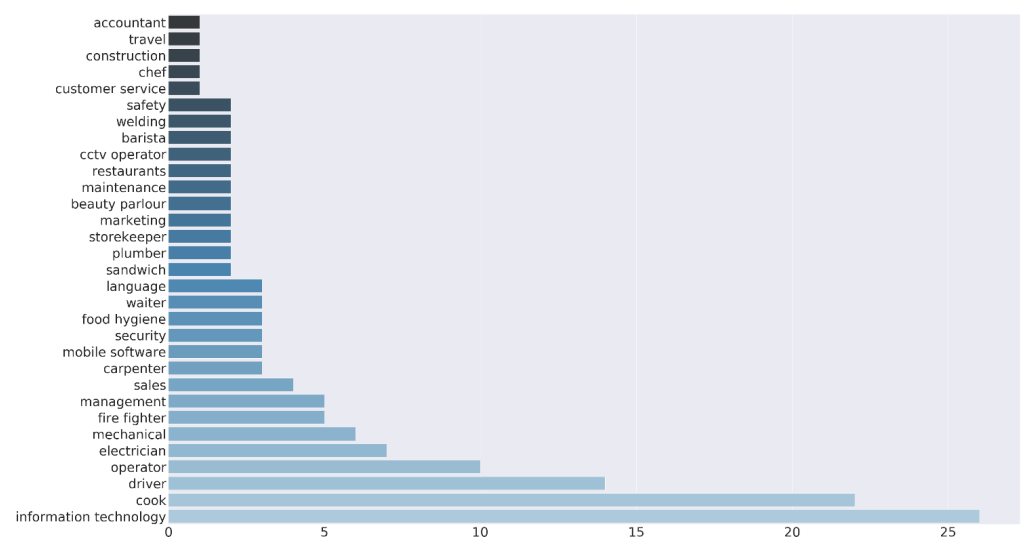
**Example, ongoing construction work of houses or self-employment activities such as hotels/shops that are under preparation; multiple answers allowed*

7. Skills, Training and Social Remittance

Social remittances are an important benefit of labour migration. Migrant workers acquire various types of skills over the course of their employment abroad. Over a third of the respondents reported benefiting from technical training courses provided by their employers. However, there are fewer respondents (13%) who got access to training programs in India. Furthermore, 38 per cent of the respondents in the GCC and Malaysia had acquired soft skills abroad and 24 per cent of the respondents reported learning technical skills.

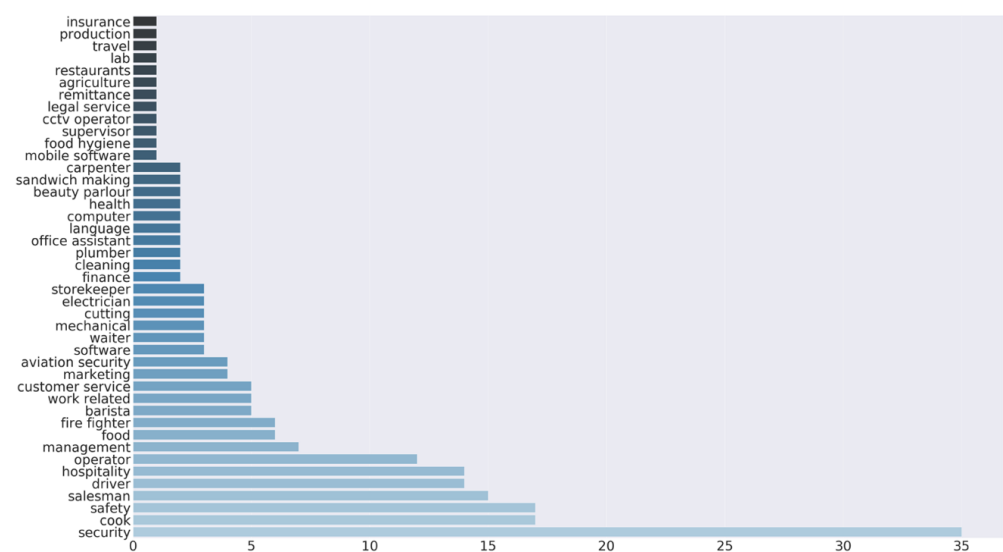
Training received from Company: The three major types of training received were related with the computer usage, cooking and driving.

Figure 12 Training Received at the Company



Technical skills learnt from working abroad: Workers reported learning different skills at work including those related with security, safety, cooking, sales and driving.

Figure 13 Skills Learnt On-the-Job Abroad



Roughly one in every three respondents stated that they would receive a letter certifying their work experience from the employer upon the termination or completion of their contract.

However, another third expressed that they would not receive such a letter or were uncertain about it in general. Such inconsistencies in obtaining proof of work experience points to the need for formalizing skills certification in Nepal as part of the reintegration strategy.

8. Reintegration

Return migration is an important part of the migration cycle that has not received the attention it deserves despite policies recognizing the importance of the social remittances that migrants bring back with them. In the context of this pandemic, there are numerous factors that might influence a migrant's decision to return. There is also much uncertainty regarding the volume of migrants who will do so, though it is highly likely that they will potentially be returning in large volume.

In Focus Group discussions, migrants expressed the sentiment that the mass reverse migration could be taken as an opportunity in which the country could harness and benefit from the social remittances that they will return with. They were of the view that the cost of missing this opportunity would be heavy. It would mean losing out on development and deprive society of an opportunity to strengthen the changed social fabric that mass outmigration had brought about, even as migrants would be reunited with their families.

In the context of this pandemic and its adverse impact on the economy, reintegration will be a challenge. Majority of migrants (~80%) reported that they are interested in engaging in self-employment, either in agriculture or non-agriculture if they return to Nepal. The remaining would prefer to engage in wage-employment either in agriculture or non-agriculture sectors. In focus group discussions, migrants reported having little faith in being able to find good employment opportunities at home. There is more interest in self-employment in agriculture and livestock farming relative to finding employment, given reservation wages are high among migrants who are earning comparatively more than what they would have in Nepal. Their view is that the combination of low earnings but high living costs makes employment opportunities in Nepal less attractive.

Disaggregation by country-groups (GCC & Malaysia versus India) shows a notable difference in the share of migrants interested in engaging in self-employment in agriculture. In particular, a much higher percentage of India-based migrants (45%) are interested in self-employment in agriculture in comparison to migrants based in GCC and Malaysia (21%). Conversely, a larger share of migrants (57%) in the GCC and Malaysia expressed interest in self-employment in non-agricultural enterprise. During focus group discussions, migrants shared that although they have higher preferences for investment in non-agriculture sectors (such as tourism, hospitality, retail), the current situation is making agriculture seem like a safer option. However, for agriculture to become a more attractive option, they report that more incentives need to be put in place. For example, a guaranteed market for the produce, proper warehouses and cold-storages would serve as a significant incentive because the high incidence of post-harvest loss and unprofitability discourages youth from engaging in this sector in the first place. Therefore, discussants urged the Government to consider implementing strong agriculture related incentive policies.

9. Challenges in Self- and Wage-Employment:

Self-Employment: The major constraint that migrant workers face in engaging in self-employment is the lack of finance. In fact, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (80%) indicated that lack of finance is a major challenge to engaging in self-employment. This was also echoed in the focus group discussions when migrants reported that majority of the earnings abroad is spent on month-to-month sustenance of their families back home, that leaves very little savings to make productive investment in Nepal. These findings are consistent across the two country groups, with three-quarter of GCC and Malaysia-based migrants and 90 per cent of India-based migrants reporting lack of finances as a major hindrance to self-employment. Almost half of these respondents reported lack of skills or training as crucial, while a third indicated that lack of professional networks and information about the local context as barriers to engaging in self-employment.

When disaggregated along countries, a large portion of India-based migrants(46%) reported lack of information on administrative procedures such as registration, as a challenge compared to only a quarter of the GCC and Malaysia based migrants who felt so with regard to the local context.

Other hindrances reported by respondents were related to the regulatory and compliance requirements, geography and market, and difficulties in finding the right inputs and staff.

Table 2 Migrants' Perspectives on Challenges in Self Employment in Nepal

Answer	GCC_Malaysia	India	Total
Lack of information on the local context registration etc	26%	46%	30%
Lack of skills, training or experience	46%	50%	47%
Lack of networks and access	38%	20%	34%
Lack of finance	77%	90%	80%
Lack of business development skills	22%	18%	21%
Geography, transportation- lack of buyers or users of my services	9%	13%	10%
Don't know what type of business to start	13%	10%	12%
No idea about support organizations	18%	18%	18%
Lack of qualified staff	7%	0%	6%
Hassles in process (taxes, registrations)	17%	0%	13%
Others	7%	4%	6%
N	500	125	625

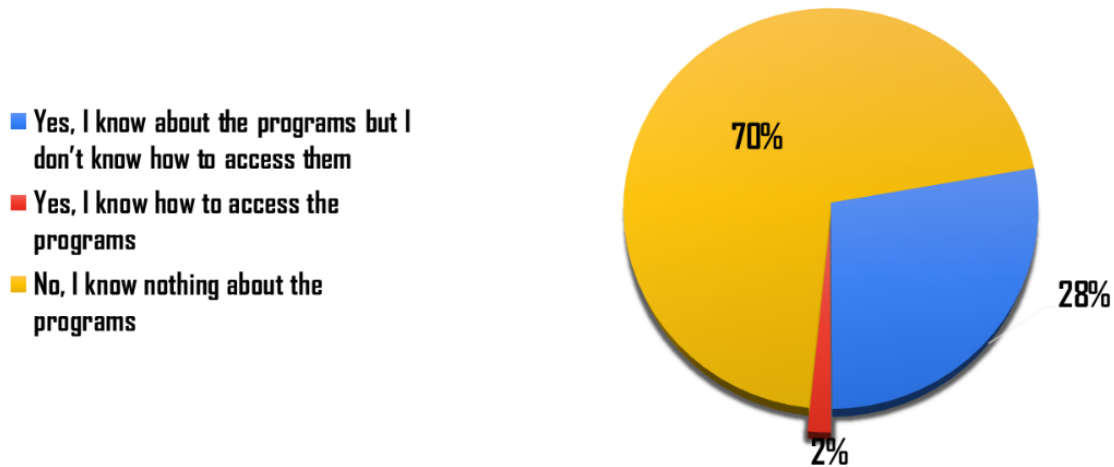
Table 3 Provincial Level Analysis

Challenges in Self Employment	Province 1	Province 2	Bagmati	Gandaki	Province 5	Karnali	Sudurpashim
Lack of information on the local context registration	25%	47%	23%	27%	32%	46%	47%
Lack of skills, training or experience	44%	78%	33%	45%	49%	54%	65%
Lack of networks and access	33%	56%	28%	47%	24%	30%	41%
Lack of finance	77%	89%	77%	80%	79%	91%	60%
Lack of business development skills	18%	18%	17%	26%	26%	18%	29%
Geography, transportation- lack of buyers or users of my services	11%	4%	12%	10%	8%	9%	12%

Don't know what type of business to start	12%	9%	9%	15%	15%	9%	6%
No idea about helping organizations	18%	7%	18%	20%	16%	21%	35%
Lack of qualified staff	10%	2%	6%	8%	3%	0%	6%
Hassles in process (taxes, registrations)	17%	18%	15%	15%	11%	2%	18%
Others	12%	2%	9%	4%	5%	4%	0%

Migrants argued that administrative barriers need to be eased and resources made more accessible at the local level. In the considerations for eligibility for soft loan programs, there should be an appreciation of migrant ability and work experience, which will make them feel welcomed and appreciated after spending much of their young lives abroad. In focus group discussions, migrants reported coming to Nepal multiple times over the course of their time abroad to start something on their own but were propelled to go back given the incompatible situation and their inexperience in Nepal. They expressed that hearing anecdotal stories about experiences of other returnees whose businesses failed in Nepal makes them nervous about investing. Due to the mismatch between opportunities available in Nepal and the kind of work they were engaged in while abroad, many expressed the need to also provide demand-based skills-based training, especially agriculture related courses. Such trainings combined with grants are important. While the government has self-employment, programs aided by soft loan programs, the awareness level of these programs, among migrants, is very low. In the survey, a vast majority (70%) of respondents expressed that they did not know anything about the Government's soft loan programs while a tiny minority (2%) knew how to get access to them. The remaining (28%) know about the soft loan programs but not about how to get access to them. See Figure 14.

Figure 14 Awareness about the Soft Loan Programs in Nepal



Wage Employment: The anticipated challenges for migrants in wage employment are multifold. As mentioned earlier, among these challenges are that the majority of migrants reported lack of skills, training, or experience required for employment, followed by lack of information on available opportunities and lack of network and access as being key. About a third (29%) of the respondents thought they would not be able to apply for the job due to lack of information on the application process. Respondents believed that the skills required, monetary value (wages), and benefits in exchange for a job are limited in Nepal, especially after having worked abroad for comparatively higher wages. See Table 4.

Table 4 Migrants' Perspectives on Challenges in Wage Employment in Nepal

	GCC_Malaysia	India	All
Lack of information on available opportunities	37%	65%	43%
Lack of skills, training or experience	45%	58%	47%
Lack of networks and access	40%	37%	39%
Lack of know-how to apply for jobs	28%	33%	29%
Geography, mobility and living expenses constraints	27%	28%	27%
Lack of Decent work	16%	31%	19%
No Idea about support organizations	21%	14%	20%
Low Salary & limited facilities	29%	0%	23%
Not found suitable job of personal interest	20%	0%	16%
Others	9%	4%	8%

Table 5 Provincial Level Analysis

Answer	Province 1	Province 2	Bagmati	Gandaki	Province 5	Karnali	Sudurpaschim
Lack of information on available opportunities	39%	51%	32%	39%	47%	57%	65%
Lack of skills, training or experience	38%	67%	33%	47%	54%	63%	65%
Lack of networks and access	30%	67%	31%	50%	35%	46%	35%
Lack of know-how to apply for jobs	24%	51%	18%	37%	30%	27%	29%
Geography, mobility and living expenses constraints	27%	29%	23%	33%	26%	27%	18%
Lack of Decent work	20%	4%	15%	19%	20%	34%	24%
No Idea about support organizations	15%	20%	22%	24%	18%	16%	29%
Low Salary & limited facilities	35%	31%	26%	26%	15%	2%	12%

Not found suitable job of personal interest	27%	7%	21%	15%	12%	2%	18%
Others	12%	2%	13%	9%	4%	2%	0%

*Percentages may not add up to 100 given rounding errors.

An enormous majority (89%) of migrants in the GCC and Malaysia reported that they expect to be provided with subsidized loan to run their own business. This preference is consistent across migrants from all provinces. This is followed by half (51%) of them expecting short-term trainings. Over a third (36%) expected to receive counseling related to their business and a little over a quarter (26%) wanted to be informed about different employment opportunities. Among migrants to Malaysia, about a fifth (19%) expected information regarding job vacancies after their return to Nepal, and others (12%) wanted networking support especially for collective businesses. While analyzing the expectations among the migrants to India, a staggering majority (94%) of them expect to have subsidized loan to fund their business, over a third (36%) expect to have counseling related programs, a similar percentage (35%) want information regarding employment/ business opportunities, followed by about the same number (33%) who expect short term training related to their preference of employment. Over one fifth (21%) expect to get information about the job vacancies and were willing to engage themselves in wage employment.

Table 6 Support Expected from the Government

Responses	GCC_Malaysia	India
Information on different employment/business opportunities	26%	35%
Counseling	36%	36%
Short-term training	51%	33%
Subsidized loans	89%	94%
Networking support especially for collective business	12%	2%
Information on job vacancies	19%	21%
Others	5%	4%

Provincial Level Analysis

Support Requested from the Government	Province 1	Province 2	Bagmati	Gandaki	Province 5	Karnali	Sudurpaschim
Information on different business opportunities	30%	18%	23%	34%	23%	32%	53%
Counseling/orientation on self- and wage-employment	32%	40%	38%	40%	38%	30%	29%
Short-term skills training	53%	67%	36%	57%	48%	29%	29%
Subsidized loans	88%	93%	89%	93%	87%	98%	77%
Networking support especially for collective business	9%	11%	12%	12%	8%	5%	12%
Information on job vacancies	26%	9%	16%	25%	16%	20%	18%
Others	10%	0%	5%	3%	4%	2%	6%

Highlight

Case Study of Province 2 based on focus group discussions

The Terai communities of Province 2 has been increasingly reliant on foreign employment. There is anxiety that the impending loss of jobs will lead to a surge in poverty as remittance had served as a major source of revenue for families. Social fallouts from loss of remittance could also lead to escalation of domestic violence, violence against women, and theft due to unemployment. Still, local authorities see opportunities in the reintegration of migrant returnees, and are prioritizing infrastructure and agriculture projects to provide employment for returnees. However, there are cultural and institutional barriers for a successful implementation of such programs.

Impediments in Agriculture sector

Agriculture is a traditional occupation but faces roadblocks in its expansion given the cultural stigma and stereotype related with it. Manual labour associated with agriculture deters young people from engaging in it substantially. Agriculture has traditionally not been considered profitable as farmers are not assured of guaranteed return for their inputs and efforts. Therefore, the push for commercial farming should be implemented with care as it faces structural and cultural barriers.

Farming requires land, so most near landless communities in Province 2 traditionally rent land to cultivate to make ends meet. Nepal has instituted land reforms but outcomes have been mixed. For example, subsidies in agriculture is based on land ownership certificate (*laal purja*). Those who do not own land but farm on leased lands are deprived of these subsidies as they do not have proof of

ownership. Fraud is rampant as the procedure for leasing land is not systematic nor transparent. In 2072 BS, the Ministry of Agriculture issued procedure of leasing land, whereby the government would allow those who wanted to lease government land for farming for a fee and impose tax upon those who kept the land barren, a proposal that has not yet been implemented. These institutional issues, coupled with need for irrigation and support to minimize post-harvest loss in Province 2, make venturing into commercial agriculture a complex process. Clearer federal and provincial government policies and plans and investment in agricultural technologies are also necessary. For example, some rural municipalities have provided subsidized machines to disseminate pesticides and seedlings but such programs have been limited due to lack of effective and transparent distribution mechanism. For Province 2, its border with India makes marketing a prominent issue. For these farmers, who do not receive subsidies from the government, producing cash crops along the border of Bihar is a lost cause as their Indian neighbors have a comparative advantage with the subsidy they receive from theirs. Seeds and pesticides are also more affordable in the Indian market (~Rs.100 to Rs.150 cheaper). People can be attracted to agriculture-based employment only if local government can guarantee a set of non-farm factors and initiatives such as flexible loans, distribution of fertilizers and seedlings, pest treatments, well managed irrigation and guaranteed market access within provinces. Concessional rates and robust extension services are also steps in the right direction.

Impediments in Non-agricultural sector

Given the growing interest in non-agriculture jobs, there is a need for database that matches the skills and nature of the work returnees have done in the destination countries with employment opportunities at the local level, which currently does not exist. Saptari has had limited industries for years. Moreover, seasonal workers from India provide competition in sectors like brick kilns as they work at cheaper rates than their Nepali counterparts, and are preferred by the local industries and contractors. Traditionally, Indian workers are engaged in activities such as making quilt and mattresses, hawking vegetables as well as scrap metals which Nepali workers shun. Employers have also expressed challenges in retaining Nepali workers, as many quit jobs either due to family reasons or because they find other opportunities.

At the local level, employing only local workers in construction and development related activities have been entertained. The implementation of such ideas may not be simple, however. Historically, workers who work in the brick kilns or in the construction sector come from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and work for less wages. For example, 500 Indians who work in 10 brick kilns in Brahmapuri Municipality of Sarlahi get paid lower wages than the locals, and are preferred by the owners. Similarly, in road constructions,

Indian workers are employed for cheaper wages (i.e. Indian workers are paid NRs 800/day and Nepali workers NRs1000/day for the same work).

Still opportunity for newer occupations related to community and household repairs are emerging as the population transitions into a more modern way of living. With the widespread use of electricity and new concrete homes equipped with TVs, gas-stoves for cooking, ubiquitous use of mobile and smartphones, and/or generators to power pumps for water and electricity, enabled through remittance from oversea workers, have opened up the need for skills and occupations to install, repair and maintain such technologies, something that did not exist before.

Programs such the Prime Minister's Self-Employment Program to help poorer farmers are designed to create more employment opportunities. But these programs are facing roadblocks at the implementation level given their limited scope. For example, people who are trained for an occupation or follow traditional profession still lack skills to write or fill out documents and contracts that ensures their ability to management issues that garner larger profit. If people learn skills related with management, contracts and procurement, they can obtain the contract themselves, without a middle person. For example, Birgunj Municipality called for contracts worth over NRs. 800 million for waste management which was awarded to companies in Kathmandu. Of the 400 families traditionally doing this sort of work in Birgunj, 245 were employed to work as contract employees. If these families were otherwise trained to process the contract themselves then they would have likely reaped the benefits of higher salaries and profits for themselves. Such as an example exist in the case of Shahid Nagar Municipality of Dhanusha.

10. Women Migrants

During focus group discussions, women shared additional issues and concerns about finding adequate employment opportunities in Nepal. For example, cleaning and domestic work are common occupations among female migrants. This job allows women to save NRs.20 to 30,000 a month, which is quite a significant amount especially for those without significant marketable skills or considering that majority of women in Nepal are engaged in unpaid house work and in informal sector that pays below the Nepali Government mandated minimum wage. It goes without saying that if women had similar earning opportunity at home, it would allow them to remain and work in Nepal. However, finding jobs in Nepal is not easy, especially for women.

Consequently, according to Focus Group Discussions, efforts in the past to return to Nepal have been temporary especially if they could not find decent jobs, which propelled them to migrate again.

In focus group discussions, migrants stressed the importance of ensuring that the skills learnt abroad need to be well documented through good administrative database. Skills profile at each local level will facilitate job matching would be the first step to ensure proper utilization of skills. They report a sense of alienation and detachment when they first return to Nepal, pointing to the need to build self-confidence and optimism among migrant communities, and to make them feel welcomed, especially during the current crisis. Discussants pointed out that local governments especially have an important role to play in ensuring migrant workers are well oriented to the needs of the local communities and to identify ways in which returnees can contribute. They expressed that migration especially among those who seek labour approval elicits a negative image about workers being vulnerable, sick or cheated, whereas there is a high proportion of migrants who have had a good experience abroad and who possess skills that need to be recognized. Many migrants are returning with managerial and organizational skills and have had worked in professional settings which they may not have had an opportunity to do so back home, so it is imperative to mobilize them in Nepal as well and leverage such experiences.

Highlight

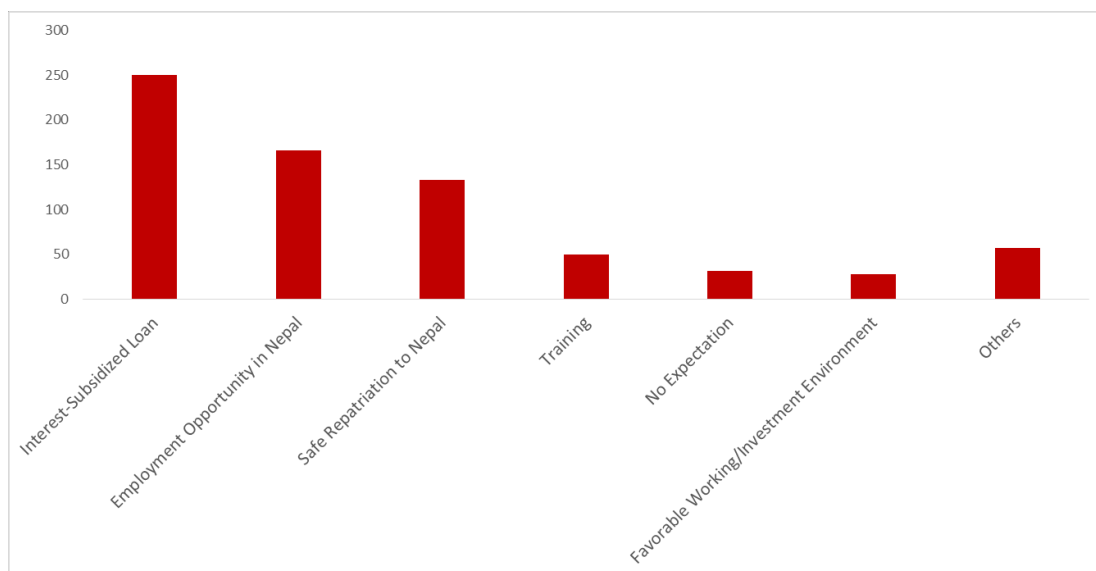
Domestic workers

In focus group discussions with domestic workers, they revealed that even prior to the quarantine and lockdown, they were facing travel restrictions due to the ban by the Government on Nepal on domestic workers. This meant that even when employers were willing to pay for round-trip tickets every two years, domestic workers did not get to travel to Nepal, which caused them great stress and uncertainty. In 2019, the Government lifted the ban on current domestic workers who could furnish documents showing that they had good employers to ensure renewal of labour approvals and to be granted permission to travel back and forth. However, the ban on new workers has still not been lifted and has been subject to a lot of debate given that it has not achieved the desired result of ensuring their safety, but has instead driven the recruitment of potential domestic workers underground, which puts them further at risk. They reveal that paid domestic work provides them with independence and ability to

spend on family, and especially children's education, although it comes with the trade-off of having to leave behind children in the hands of other family members such as grandparents. However, the Government views the whole sector as unsafe where domestic workers, especially women are vulnerable, and can potentially be abused. Anecdotal evidence appears to show that there is a higher share of women who are treated like family members in their employers' house and provided adequate lodging and food. With the onset of the crisis, unlike many other sectors, domestic workers report that their work has increased tremendously as children, and male family members are at home at all times. Women report that while the crisis itself has not spurred return migration among them, they are facing the repercussions of the domestic worker ban which needs to be revised and allow them to register legally with the Government. As return migration becomes more prominent, they believe that it would allow them to benefit from various schemes and programs. Indeed, the high share of women benefiting from the pandemic induced amnesty in Kuwait has given over 1,300 women an opportunity to return home without paying overstay fines, and majority of whom are domestic workers. Having arrived through irregular channels to Kuwait due to the domestic work ban, many report that being undocumented was the only option when their original employers did not turn out to be well-meaning and if their agent did not cooperate in helping them switch employers. In such a scenario, becoming irregular and working in the shadows becomes the preferable option for many. Being irregular and working part-time shifts in multiple houses as domestic workers or in small offices such as beauty parlors or restaurants have proven to be precarious especially during the current crisis. Consequently, many are taking advantage of amnesties. Women in Kuwait's amnesty program report being disconnected from the realities of their communities after having lived away for long, not knowing the kind of opportunities available to them in the proximity of their homes nor who they could ask help from. Currently, given their irregular status, they maybe even deprived from the schemes by the Foreign Employment Board targeting returnees.

Every migrant worker who planned to return has some expectations that the government will support them. Migrant workers either planned to start their own business or look for employment. Those who plan to be self-employed are seeking subsidized loans, financial support, training and development, and business support from the government. In contrast, people who want to look for employment stated that they expect the government to create employment opportunities in Nepal, and provide training and development for the required skill set. The respondents stressed that obtaining loans or getting jobs needs to be made more accessible and prevailing nepotism as a barrier to access needs to be addressed. See Figure 15.

Figure 15 Open-ended Questions on Expectations from the Government



Chapter 3: Recommendations and Way Forward

The unprecedented challenge brought by the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted Nepali migrant workers. As described in the preceding chapters, the onset of the crisis will spur return migration of an unprecedented scale. While the immediate challenge will be on the rescue and rehabilitation of migrant workers to ensure their dignified and properly organized repatriation, returnee integration is also a policy priority that merits full attention. While the sudden influx of reverse migration poses a singular challenge for the country, the right set of policies, strategies and programs to mobilize them effectively in key priority sectors, that recognize the social remittances of migrants and reflect their interests and aspirations, may in fact turn out to be a favorable opportunity for a country that has long recognized the risks of its over-dependence on remittances. The Government has been formulating policies and programs targeting returnee workers, as has been reflected in the recent budget (2020-21). However, it is also equally important that the aspirations of migrants be incorporated in policies and planning to ensure a more robust reintegration strategy, and which is the primary goal of this study. Based on the survey analysis, discussions with migrant workers and secondary data analysis, the study makes the following recommendations.

1. Governance of Migration

i. Local Governance and Migration⁴

The study provides the rationale and aftermath of a possibility of a large influx of migrant workers back to Nepal in the coming months or year, and the need for an effective plan for rescue, repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration of the returnee population, pointing to the need to focus on the robust economic development and service provision in the migrant origin communities. Federal government of Nepal has given local governments several foreign employment related mandate through its Local Governance Operations Act 2074 B.S. including data collection of workers including those in foreign employment, skilling and reintegration of

⁴ Nepal Labour Migration Report, 2020

returnees, its implementation, however, has remained weak. In fact, the onus of managing the unprecedented return of migrants, especially from India, has been entirely on local governments. To ensure the effective implementation of LGOA, the following initiatives need to be prioritized:

- **Orientation and training of local governments with regard to their foreign employment related mandate** along with clear Standard Operations Procedure (SOPs) and standardized database of migrant profile, skills, aspirations, situations and aspirations while respecting their privacy, where applicable (such as in case of data collection).
 - **Allocation of sufficient funds and resources** to ensure local governments have the capacity to carry out their mandate. This could include contributions from their own budget, from Foreign Employment Welfare Fund and support from related development partners.
 - **Strengthening of capacity**, and clarification of mandate and responsibilities of Employment Service Centers and Migration Resource Centers to support the local governments in carrying out their foreign employment mandate as well as enforcement of regular accountability of the mandate and deliverables of these agencies.
 - **Stronger and robust coordination** among the three tiers of the government so local governments can more seamlessly ensure socio-economic reintegration of the returnees.
 - **Preparation and maintenance of records of returnee migrant workers by local governments** including their skills, work experiences and employment preferences as elaborated in (B).
 - **Emphasis of accountability**, coordination, monitoring, and implementation mechanisms among the three tiers of government so that local governments can ensure effective reintegration of the returnees in the hosting communities.
 - **Consideration of the aspirations and preferences of the target beneficiaries, including the most vulnerable such as women returnees and previously undocumented migrant workers.** Ensure in-depth consultations with target beneficiaries from the planning stage of reintegration programs to ensure their ownership and success.
2. Standardization of Migrant Database

ii. Database on Returnees

- Data on returnees needs to be collected and compiled in a comprehensive and systematic manner. In particular, it is important to capture information on the skills and experience of migrant workers, their areas of interest (self-employment versus wage-employment, sector

of employment), and ensure that they are mobilized in productive sectors in Nepal to match their experience and skills for optimal outcomes as much as possible.

- Local government have started collecting data on returnees. At the same time, data is also being collected at the quarantine centers. In order to allow for meaningful comparisons and to collate the data, it is important that a flexible but standardized format be approved by the central government that can be utilized at all levels. A standardized system of database that is compatible at all levels of government data gathering is necessary at the earliest.

iii. India Migration Corridor

- Migration to India has always been overlooked, owing to the historical and unregulated open borders between the two countries. However, the pandemic has provided important lessons on the consequence of this oversight. It is imperative to have a data-tracking system to ensure that there is at least a record of the movement of migrants between the two countries. This information will be useful for planning for development of relevant areas as well. The local governments are best placed to keep record of outflow to India.

2. Reintegration Strategy

- **Returnee Package for Migrant Workers:** It is expected that the Foreign Employment Welfare Fund (FEWF) will be directed towards reintegration programs. The Foreign Employment Board has developed a reintegration package, but the Directive is yet to be approved. This approval needs to be expedited and emphasis needs to be given for its full-fledged implementation. It is important to mobilize development partners, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector in line with the whole-of-society approach to engage in inclusive returnee programs to ensure that it is coordinated and implemented at scale.
- **Community-level Dynamics of Social and Capital Remittances:** The situation of the returnee migrants and how that influences reintegration outcomes, especially given their social and cultural settings, are generally less understood. The relationship between non-financial remittances of migrants and their contributions to behavioral and institutional changes is important as this understanding can potentially allow for the emergence of respect and dignity of migrant worker values along with their experience of foreign employment, and

produce positive shifts in societal misconception around work ethics and labour. This is because social remittances generally shake up societal challenges with regard to dignity of labour, gender sensitivity, and can highlight generational gaps.

- **Eligibility:** The Foreign Employment Board will initiate reintegration programs for returnee workers. However, if workers do not have valid labour approvals, it is likely that they will be excluded from benefiting from the program. To ensure that the Board recognizes these undocumented returnees or those who have been on tourist visas, they need to have a similar version of the program for undocumented returnees and mobilize fund other than the FEWF so that no one is left vulnerable during hard times. The current policy disproportionately impacts women workers who are employed as domestic workers and are irregular in their employment due to the ban on domestic workers, pointing to the need to take necessary actions to ensure that reintegration programs are inclusive regardless of previous legal status of the migrant.
- **Focus on Information Dissemination:** It is evident from the surveys and focus group discussions that awareness about the government programs on reintegration of any kind is very low, especially with regards to how to access them. A clearer and widely disseminated communication strategy is necessary to ensure that the understanding about the program is more widespread and individuals know exactly what the eligibility criteria are and how to access the programs. The role of provincial and local governments will be crucial to ensure their wider dissemination. Areas of trade deficit or comparative advantages and unexplored potential of municipalities needs to be explored to identify potential areas where migrants could engage productively especially if their experiences and skills can be optimally matched with them.
- **Skills Certification:** A high share of migrants reported that they did not expect to be given certificates or experience letters at the end of their tenure of employment in their destination countries. It is therefore necessary to focus on skills testing and certification of returnees. Two aspects of such skills certification programs need to be specially prioritized: first, they should be easily accessible to workers in their geographic proximity; and second, the skills certification should be part of a bigger package on reintegration that involves other interventions to increase employment opportunities for returnees such as job fairs, job

matching websites, counselling and training so that there is a direct match between having formal certification and employment outcomes of migrant returnees.

- **Soft Loans:** The study reveals the high demand for soft loan programs for returnees interested in self-employment, pointing to the need to the effective implementation of the soft loan programs:
 - **Soft Loans for Returnees:** The initial experience of soft loan for returnees' program has been rife with challenges. For example, despite 18,000 returnees applying for the program, less than 100 received the soft loans. It is important to ensure that failures in the first phase of the program are adequately addressed and attention is paid to the following:
 - Address the lukewarm response of the private sector towards this program by building on a sense of partnership for such initiatives.
 - Address the non-bankable aspects of business plans that were generated for such collateral-free loans with banking partners.
 - Address more streamlined mechanism to set up loan applications by the municipalities.
 - Loans should be interest free or minimal to returnee migrants for a certain period of time until they become self-sustainable and able to repay their debts.
 - Loan facility and enterprise/business development intervention in partnership with banks to support business/enterprise development among the returnees and their families should also be an important part of reintegration program.
 - **General Soft loan program:** While soft loans for returnees is one alternate, the Government has a number of other soft loan programs (e.g. agriculture related, youth related, women-focused) that can be explored. Ensuring that the returnees have access to this information and are well-informed are important but only the first steps in optimal utilization of these soft loans, particularly if returnees do not have experiences in running their own businesses.
 - **Group Guaranteed Loan Schemes,** with minimal or no interest, for micro, small and medium enterprises especially family headed by single parent, woman-headed family and members of marginalized groups should be considered in places of origin.

- **Reintegration Program Strategy:** As a way of mainstreaming returnee Nepali migrant into society the government should consider providing services like value creation through reintegration preparedness, financial literacy, entrepreneurial development skills and capacity building, business counseling, job referral and networking with support institutions.
- **Immediate Social Relief Package:** Provision of immediate relief for distressed or displaced individuals in the form of cash grants as start-up or additional capital for the livelihood project can be important motivation.
- **Provision of Livelihood Skills Training and Distribution of Start-ups:** This provision will produce enabling environment for migrant women returnees and other groups to re-start livelihood activities for self-employment. Priority should be given to women migrant workers who have been displaced by family conflicts, have been victims of illegal recruitment and trafficking, or are distressed and displaced women household service workers. Such provision could be a strategic way to assist vulnerable women, including women-headed households.
- **Wage Employment:** The return of foreign workers in Nepal, primarily from India, has led to labour shortages in sectors such as construction, agriculture and manufacturing and has created the space to productively engage Nepali workers including returnees. An updated and dynamic mapping/assessment at the municipality level of the employment opportunities in key sectors and skills requirement in close coordination with employers will ensure a better understanding of available demand and facilitate job placements.
- **Network Building:** Given that migrant workers have spent time away from Nepal, and recognizing the resulting disconnectedness of returnees with the local political context, it is important to help reacquaint them with the local situation. In addition to proper dissemination of information, as discussed above, it is important to help them build networks so like-minded individuals can engage in collective investments in commercial and mechanized agriculture, small scale industry and hospitality services that are prioritized by the government for reintegration programs.
- **Dignity of Work and Respect for Migrant Workers:** The culture of disparaging manual labour and the stigma associated with manual labour means that opportunities in the sectors that employ such type of work remain unfulfilled. A fundamental social and cultural

change with regards to work and labour is necessary in Nepal. A comprehensive Media Campaigns focusing on dignity of labour for all kinds of work needs to be emphasized so workers/families are willing to engage in all sectors of work and occupations. Furthermore, to remove the stigma associated with migrant workers including returnees, the government needs to widely acknowledge the significant contributions of migrant workers to Nepal's economy and accord them with this well-deserved accolade irrespective of their skills, gender, occupation, and place of origin.

- **Right to information:** The study reveals that a vast majority of migrants are unaware of the government's schemes on reintegration and employment related programs. Despite policies and programs in place targeting migrant workers at all stages of the migration cycle, migrants and their families remain largely uninformed and unaware about many of these provisions in place. Therefore, it is necessary to make information on current programs and policies including on repatriation and reintegration easily and widely accessible.
- **Enable Embassies and Diplomatic Missions of Government of Nepal:** In major labor destination countries, this rapid assessment indicates that to deal with the extraordinary mental, legal, and financial challenges faced by migrant workers, the ordinary services of Embassies of Nepal are not adequate. They need to be supported with additional staff and financial resources to help mitigate this crisis and provide services to needy migrants and their family members during the pandemic period prior to their probable return to Nepal.

3. Future of Migration

- Undocumented workers as one of the most vulnerable groups of migrant workers are the most negatively impacted during times of crisis. Besides the short-term implications of addressing their plight, it is essential to delve into the drivers of their undocumented status. Vulnerabilities faced by migrants start at home including the high recruitment costs or the ban on domestic workers that influences them to opt for irregular channels of work. As outmigration resumes, policies and practices that inadvertently increases vulnerabilities

of migrants are addressed through careful coordination with employment agencies, law enforcement, and advocacy groups.

- A one-time opportunity to regularize the status of undocumented workers by allowing them to obtain or renew their labour approvals via Diplomatic Missions needs to be explored.
- Migrants have expressed uncertainty about returning home, and one of the major causes of this uncertainty is related with the situation with their respective employers. In coordination with the governments of the destination countries, it may be a possibility to design voluntary redeployment programs so workers who want to remain have the option of finding employment with other employers without repercussions with regard to their legal status.
- The economic fallout due to slump in demand for oil and falling prices with market volatility, restrictions on air travel, and disruptions in global supply chains, business environment, among other global events, may negatively impact the demand for workers in certain sectors such as construction or the hospitality industry. At the same time, there may be a rise in demand in other sectors such as production of food commodities, caregiving, warehousing, and agriculture. Proactively exploring opportunities for job demand during the current and post-pandemic periods is not only important but also essential, and direct diplomatic efforts towards identifying suitable opportunities for Nepali workers through the Nepali missions and through the appropriate ministries should continue to be explored.
- The government should negotiate with manpower employment agencies to mandatorily include social protection provisions in work contracts with safety nets to cover unforeseen calamities like the current pandemic affecting destination and source countries. Such provisions could also ensure financial incentives to those who may have lost jobs during the crisis.
- The government should negotiate with the governments of migrant destination countries and the employers, through bilateral agreements, regarding contractual provisions of guarantee on providing employment protection to migrant workers in the event of loss of employment due to unforeseen events. Such provision could include ensuring financial compensations on premature loss of employment.

- The government and related agencies should be stepping up and ensuring provision for managing psycho-social counselling, stress-reducing, mental and health services to all migrants and returnees, including women and other vulnerable groups in a safe and dignified manner.

4. Dignified and Safe Return

- Migrant workers have undergone difficult time abroad, and in many cases, that has propelled them to return prematurely. Many have had a difficult repatriation experience. On humanitarian grounds, upon their return, the Government of Nepal needs to ensure that they have access to proper health care services. Even prior to the pandemic, initiatives to address the incidence of mental health issues among migrant workers was low. With the fallout of the pandemic, mental health issues have risen dramatically globally and especially among migrant workers. To ensure that they have access to proper mental health care services in their geographic proximity with psychosocial counselors or via tele-health counseling is not just an important consideration but will ensure healthier workforce participants for the reintegration programs. The quarantine centers of returnees, where they are placed for 14 days, are potentially points of intervention where mental health services can be provided.
- Due to previous experiences of imported positive cases, the risk of returnees being linked to COVID-19 are high, leading to stigmatization and discriminatory behavior by their neighbors and community members. Local governments should play an active and positive role through initiatives such as Public Service Announcements to reassure the large community that returnees are not threat to public health as they have undergone the required quarantine and testing to be free of COVID-19 virus.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Details of the Focus Group Discussions

Details of the Focus Group Discussion			
	Details of Participants	Date:	Questions Asked:
Focus Group Discussion 1:	# of Returnees: 6;	1 June, 2020	Experiences with the PMEP, Returnee Soft Loan Program,
Returnees	Country of Return: Qatar and UAE		Aspirations prior to returning versus reality; Expectations from Government
Focus Group Discussion 2:	# of Returnees: 3;2 Male (Qatar, UAE), 1 Female (Israel)		All three had applied for the Government of Nepal's soft loan for returnees.
Returnees			Topics discussed: experience applying to the program, challenges preparing the business proposal, outcomes, and advice for such initiatives for the future.
Case Study: Province 2	Binod Shah: Chairperson, Bramhapuri Gaunpalika, Sarlahi		Experiences of Returnees, Preparedness for Mass Reverse Migration, Challenges in Self- and Wage-Employment in Province 2, Potential Opportunities
	Chandra Kishor: researcher and journalist, Parsha		
	Ramadhin Mahaoto: Farmer, Kanchanrup Municipality-7, Saptari		
	Bhola Paswan: Dalait activist and researcher, Saptari		

	<p>Manish Suman: Parliamentarian, President of finance committee, Province-2</p> <p>Udaya Barbariya: Mayor, Sahidnagar Municipality, Dhanusha</p>		
Focus Group Discussion 3: Qatar	<p>Qatar;</p> <p>Conducted via Zoom.</p> <p># of Migrants: 9</p>	2-Jun-20	<p>Aspirations for return, immediate plans versus longer term plans focusing on employment, impact of COVID-19 in the destination country with an emphasis on their employment/living conditions, expectations from Government, anticipated readjustments without remittances and way forward.</p>
Focus Group Discussion 4: UAE	<p>UAE</p> <p>Conducted via Zoom.</p> <p># of Migrants: 7</p>	5-Jun-20	
Focus Group Discussions 5: Domestic Workers	<p>Conducted in Zoom.</p> <p>#of Migrants: 3</p> <p>Countries: UAE, Kuwait and Iraq</p>	10 June, 2020	

Annex 2: Survey Results

(Note: % may not add up due to rounding errors.)

Table 1 Gender

Gender	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Female	36	7%	4	3%
Male	464	93%	121	97%

Table 2 Provincial Breakdown

Province Name	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Province 1	117	23%	0	0%
Province 2	42	8%	3	2%
Bagmati	116	23%	13	10%
Gandaki	106	21%	11	9%
Province 5	99	20%	45	36%
Karnali	11	2%	45	36%
Sudurpashchim	9	2%	8	6%

Table 3 Marital Status

Marital Status	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Divorced	5	1%	0	0%
Married	433	87%	110	88%
Single	60	12%	14	11%
Widowed	2	0%	1	1%

Table 4 Education Levels

Education levels	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Masters	5	1%	1	1%
Bachelor	56	11%	8	6%
Upto Class 10	238	48%	58	46%
Upto Class 12	136	27%	16	13%
Upto Class 5	46	9%	37	30%
Never attended school	7	1%	3	2%
Some non-formal literacy classes	9	2%	1	1%
Technical/Vocational training	2	<1%	1	1%

Table 5 Activity Prior to Migration in Nepal

Activity before Migration	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Studying	100	20%	29	23%
Wage employed (agriculture)	10	2%	2	2%
Wage employed (non-agriculture)	71	22%	12	14%
Self-employed (agriculture)	143	29%	60	48%
Self-employed (non-agriculture)	15	3%	4	3%
Unemployed	132	26%	26	21%
Others	70	5%	8	5%

Table 6 Drivers of Migration

Drivers of Migration	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Due to unemployment/Lack of favorable opportunities	295	59%	62	50%
Better income/Opportunity/Aspirations	218	44%	50	40%
Influenced by others	8	2%	19	15%
Business failure	18	4%	3	2%
Social pressure	43	9%	8	6%
Domestic violence	2	0%	2	2%
Non-recognition of unpaid care/house work	15	3%	3	2%
Others	33	7%	24	19%
Seasonal work (only India)	0	0%	2	2%
Not enough budget to go other countries (only India)	0	0%	9	7%
India nearby Nepal (only India)	0	0%	33	26%

Table 7 Recruitment Costs

Recruitment Costs (Financing)	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Loans (formal)	35	7%	2	2%
Loans (informal)	403	81%	47	38%
Savings	59	12%	92	74%
Selling Assets	6	1%	2	2%
Others	6	1%	2	2%

Table 8 Amount of Recruitment Costs Paid Off

Amount of Recruitment Costs Repaid	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Less than 50 %	67	13%	11	9%
More than 50 %	64	13%	5	4%
Repaid 100 % (or used savings originally)	369	72%	109	87%
Refused to answer	10	2%		

Table 9 Type of Employer

Type of Employer	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Household/Non-Formal (House, Agriculture)	0	0%	5	4%
Local/National	215	43%	84	67%
Multinational	78	16%	13	10%
Others/Unsure	37	7%	17	14%
Supply Company	170	34%	6	5%

Table 10 Prior Foreign Employment Experience

Worked anywhere before this country	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
No	318	64%	111	90%
Yes, for less than 3 years	70	14%	0	0%
Yes, for 3 years	0	0%	9	7%
Yes, for 3-5 years	63	13%	1	1%
Yes, more than 5 years	49	10%	3	2%

Table 11 Documentation Status

Status of Passport / Visa	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Yes, both passport and visa valid	379	76%		
Yes, I have passport but my visa is not valid	119	24%		
Yes, I have visa but no passport	2	0%		

Table 12 Living Situation in the Destination Country

Living Condition	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Others	15	3%	13	10%
Place managed by Company	0	0%	55	44%
Place managed by Embassy	1	0%	1	1%
Quarantine	2	0%	0	0%
Room in Labour Camp	370	74%	0	0%
Rented room (own/shared)	112	22%	56	45%

Table 13 Duration in the Current Destination Country

Duration in Current Destination Country	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
1-2 years	65	13%	16	13%
2-5 years	132	26%	20	16%
6 month - 1 year	56	11%	20	16%
Within 6 months	25	5%	0	0%
above 5 years	222	44%	59	47%
below 6 months	0	0%	10	8%

Table 14 Type of Work in Destination Work

Current Work Abroad	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Agriculture	6	1%	0	
Cleaning	32	6%	1	<1%
Construction	90	18%	3	2%
Domestic Worker	14	3%	4	3%
Driving (heavy/light)	51	10%	4	3%
Manufacturing	18	4%	5	11%
Others	56	11%	14	11%
Restaurants/Hotels	95	19%	75	60%
Retail	38	8%	2	2%
Security	75	15%	14	11%
Transport and Warehouse	25	5%	3	2%

Table 15 Technical Training Obtained Abroad

Technical training obtained abroad	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
No	320	64%	109	87%
Yes	180	36%	16	13%

Table 16 Technical Skills On-the-Job

Technical skills learnt abroad	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
No	379	76%	106	85%
Yes	121	24%	19	15%

Table 17 Soft Skills Acquired Abroad

Soft skills learnt abroad	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
No	251	50%	81	65%
Yes	249	47%	44	35%

Table 18 Pre-COVID-19 Return Plans

Plan to Return (pre-COVID-19)	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
1-2 years	42	8%	18	14%
3- 6 months	20	4%	8	6%
Within 3 months	89	18%	25	20%
In 6 months - 1 year	52	10%	39	31%
More than 3 years	22	4%	0	0%
Uncertain	237	47%	34	27%
Within 2-3 years	38	8%	1	1%

Table 19 Factors Influencing Pre-COVID-19 Return Plans

Aspects that Influence Return of Workers (normal times)	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Seasonal Work/Proximity so back and forth common	0	0%	12	10%
Family reasons (want to be with family after long-term separation)	229	46%	79	63%
Completion of contract (voluntary exit)	68	14%	3	2%
Completion of contract (employer's unwilling to extend contract)	112	22%	2	2%
Ability to be established in Nepal to start something on own.	102	20%	22	18%
Not much progress and advantage of being abroad (over-estimated the foreign dream)	95	19%	25	20%
Basic needs fulfilled (target earners, example house built or bought land)	45	9%	5	4%
Quality of working or living conditions	58	12%	27	22%
Others	78	16%	14	11%

Table 20 Skills Applicable in Nepal

Do you see the prospect of using the skill you learnt here?	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
No	184	37%	67	54%
Yes	316	63%	58	46%

Table 21 Preference upon Return

Preference after Return to Nepal	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Self-employed (agriculture)	104	21%	56	45%
Self-employed (non-agriculture)	283	57%	48	38%
Wage employed (agriculture)	18	4%	6	5%
Wage employed (non-agriculture)	95	19%	14	11%

Table 22 Awareness about Government's Soft Loan Programs

Awareness about Government's Employment Programs	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
No, I haven't heard about them	340	68%	101	81%
Yes, I have heard about them and know how to access them	7	1%	4	3%
Yes, I have heard about them but unsure about how to access them	153	31%	20	16%

Table 23 Intention to Re-migrate

Probability of Re-migrating	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Likely	44	9%	16	13%
Neither likely nor unlikely	251	50%	51	41%
Unlikely	152	30%	57	46%
Very likely	53	11%	1	1%

Table 24 Certificate from Employer

Experience Letter from Employer	GCC_Malaysia		India	
	N		N	
Don't know	168	34%	19	15%
No	129	26%	82	66%
Yes	203	41%	24	19%

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