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Migration and its two-way relationship with rural change: Lessons from China, Ethiopia, Moldova, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco and Thailand

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The AGRUMIG project was a comparative analysis of experiences from Europe, Asia and Africa, and explored the impact of migration on the trajectory of agricultural change in rural areas. This brief reviews the findings of our seven-country study. The research focused on nineteen remittance-dependent communities in seven countries: China, Ethiopia, Moldova, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco and Thailand.

Cattle herding in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan. Migrants have invested remittances to increase their herds, but this has increased ecological pressure on pasturelands *photo*: Fraser Sugden).

The overarching finding was that migration is rarely the main driver of agriculture or rural change and, in some contexts, migration is the product of this change. Other factors are the growing agrarian stresses in the context of economic liberalization, rural monetization and climate change. In most regions we studied, migration facilitates the reproduction of rural livelihoods, offering an escape valve at a time of increasing livelihood uncertainty, but it is just one factor driving change. This resonates with the existing literature on migration and rural change (Adhikari and Hobley 2011; de Haas 2006; Sugden et al. 2022; Maharjan et al. 2013; Fischer et al. 2021; Warner and Afifi 2014). There are instances of remittances being channeled into investments that support the accumulation of wealth, but these are often isolated and strongly structured by the existing axes of differentiation.

Migration drivers: Lessons from seven countries

Migration has increased substantially in all 19 sites studied. Some sites, such as Figuig in Morocco, have a long history of out-migration dating to before the start of the 20th Century during the French colonial occupation. However, in most other study sites, there were low levels of migration in earlier decades and the increase was most notable after the 1990s. In the case of the post-socialist states (Moldova and Kyrgyzstan), this period saw the collapse of the Soviet Union, followed by political and economic upheavals, including removing restrictions on mobility. In China, it saw the liberalization of the Chinese economy, the de-collectivization and the relaxation of the *Hukou* system, which regulated internal movement. In Nepal, Ethiopia, Morocco and Thailand, the post-1990s period saw waves of economic liberalization.

The post-1990s period was also marked by a rise in labor demand in Europe and regional centers of growth, such as the Gulf states, Malaysia, Russia, Taiwan, Korea and Japan. Over the last three decades, all seven countries have experienced a growing rift between rapidly expanding cities supporting a burgeoning middle class on the one hand, and a countryside experiencing growing agrarian distress, primarily in the form of weakening terms of trade for agriculture and climate change.

While individual decisions over whether to migrate, where to go, and the long-term plans of migrants may be complex and mediated by personal circumstances, these decisions take place against the backdrop of agrarian distress associated with globalization, rising demands for cash, climate change, and changing cultural values attached to farming. In this context, migration is very much part of a dual livelihood strategy whereby agriculture and migration-associated livelihoods are interdependent (Shah and Lerche 2020; Sugden 2019; Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013). These structural processes, within which a dual livelihood becomes a necessity, are outlined below.

An abandoned house (on the left), a common site in out-migration, and a commercial greenhouse cultivation (on the right). Some returnees are able to make profitable investments (*photo*: Fraser Sugden).

In the villages of Dhanusha in Nepal, migrants incur large debts to go overseas. A negative migration experience can push a household to sell land or assets (*photo:* Fraser Sugden).

Rising demand for cash: Globalization and expansion of markets have increased the demand for cash. This has three components: First, the costs associated with agriculture have risen. The entire agricultural economy has been placed under stress due to the increase in fuel prices. Rising diesel costs also impact the cost of tube well irrigation, and the operation of tractors and other forms of mechanization, which are becoming more important. Across the seven countries, farmers also complained about fertilizer prices.

Second, households experienced increased costs for post-liberalization public services. While healthcare facilities have improved, the growing dominance of private healthcare at the expense of the public sector comes at a huge financial cost. Similarly, there is growing pressure to send children to private schools or better-quality government schools in towns. This is driven in part by middle class aspirations but also the struggle for more reliable, salaried forms of employment. The private sector fills the void in Morocco and Nepal due to weak public health and education services. However, the disparities are huge and are not only between cities and the countryside.

Third, there has been a rise in living costs associated with a change in consumption patterns. The demand for cash is connected to a larger process of monetization and expanding markets. Households with relatively limited involvement in capitalist markets until the 1980s now have access to a wide range of imported consumer goods, for which demand has surged. This transformation is especially notable in countries such as China, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova, which have undergone post-socialist transitions, and in the two hill sites in Nepal where road building has facilitated an unprecedented expansion of markets.

Access to land: Shortage of land is a significant driver of agrarian stress and tends to make migration a necessity. This takes several forms. For instance, in Ethiopia, where children depend on their parents for access to land, a large number of youths do not have access to any landholdings. Hence, many migrate, thereby helping to support their family while also achieving financial independence (Sugden et al. 2022). In Nepal, a more significant challenge is the size of household plots, which dwindles as land is divided within families over decades. The persistence of unequal landlord-tenant relations has aggravated this, with large tracts of land in the Dhanusha and Bhojpur sites belonging to absentee landlords. In Morocco too, sharing inherited land leads to fragmentation, and plots become small and unsuitable for cultivation. In the oasis of Figuig on the Tadla Plain, micro plots are no longer usable for agriculture and are abandoned or used to build a house.

Insufficient jobs and unemployment in rural areas: In Ethiopia, Morocco, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal and Moldova, historical patterns of uneven regional development have resulted in skewed patterns of industrialization. Within this context, local industries have been unable to compete against more powerful neighbors, and the rural economy cannot absorb the surplus labor released when agricultural livelihoods fail. In upper middle-income countries such as China and Thailand, regional underdevelopment creates circumstances whereby surplus labor, particularly in urban areas, needs to look outside the country for work. As the research in Kyrgyzstan and Nepal demonstrated, existing vocational training in rural areas rarely provides up-to-date knowledge and transferable skills, making migration a more desirable option.

Youth aspirations and cultural drivers: Migration has a significant cultural aspect beyond simple economic drivers. For instance, it appears that in all sites, migration has become a rite of passage to some extent as young people enter adulthood (Conrad Suso 2020; Altin 2021). There is also intense peer pressure to migrate, which is perpetuated by social media that shows glamorized overseas lifestyles, even if this is far removed from the reality of migrant workers.

In Nepal and Kyrgyzstan, there is often limited knowledge of overseas working conditions. In Morocco, the work of nongovernmental organizations and the stories of returnee migrant workers means there is widespread awareness of the challenges faced by migrants. Yet, this has not stopped younger generations from wanting to experience migration. Cultural drivers to migrate do not mean the material imperatives to migrate are insufficient. Economic and ecological distress sets the structural context against which migration becomes a necessary feature of the rural economy. However, young people have agency and make their own choices.

For example, in Nepal and Morocco, there was no clear relationship between the level of migration and a person's wealth. Young men from households that appear to be better off and with secure access to land and other productive assets still migrate, even if they already have livelihood security at home. Local industries have been undermined due to imported produce and goods which were once procured through the barter economy or traditional exchange networks which are now purchased using cash. Households also have access to mobile phones, electricity, and other facilities which they did not have two to three decades ago, and with this there is a need for cash.

Climate change: Climate is an important driver of agrarian stress across the communities studied. Vulnerability varies according to the local agroecological context as well as the infrastructure, which can mitigate the pressures of climatic extremes and the abilities of states to support farmers. Reported stresses include an increased frequency of flooding and droughts, all of which can be damaging to crops. It was often extreme events characterized by a lack (or excess) of rainfall which was a challenge for farmers. A message which came across frequently was the increased unpredictability of the climate, including creeping changes in rainfall patterns.

Migration and the impact on rural and agricultural change

Labor management and cropping practices

One of the most evident changes across all countries is the availability of labor. Labor shortages for key tasks in the agricultural cycle such as paddy transplanting, harvesting,

Bhojpuri Bazaar in Nepal in 2008 (*photo*: Fraser Sugden).

Bhojpuri Bazaar in Nepal in 2022. The economy was transformed after the construction of a road to the town. A previously isolated region has been integrated into the market economy. This has improved living standards but significantly increased the cost of living (*photo*: Fraser Sugden).

collecting, growing fodder, and tending livestock were some of the most critical stresses facing rural households amidst an increase in labor mobility. However, there are considerable differences in the coping strategies households mobilize.

Mechanization has been one way households cope with the stress of labor shortages. Land preparation and harvesting are increasingly mechanized in China, Moldova and Thailand. In Nepal, transplanting is still done by hand, although plowing is increasingly done by tractors where local topography allows. However, technology alone is not a solution to labor shortages. There were three challenges to mechanization identified in the study. The first barrier is cost. Mechanization can considerably increase the cost of production, particularly at a time of rising fuel costs, and thus poorer households are often more likely to use traditional labor-intensive methods. The second barrier is the geophysical context. For instance, in upland areas dominated by terraced farming, using simple two-wheel tractors is difficult on all but the largest plots. The third challenge is that some types of agriculture (e.g., commercial fruit and vegetable production) cannot be mechanized easily. Because of these barriers and the labor availability shortage, households often need to hire labor. This inevitably increases the cost of production and leads to leasing land that cannot be easily cultivated.

Some households have shifted their strategies for coping with labor shortages. For example, in China and Thailand, direct seeding of rice rather than transplanting is becoming more common. In Kyrgyzstan, many households are shifting from food crops to lower-labor fodder crops. In Nepal, China and Thailand, agroforestry is becoming more common as it offers good returns and requires less labor. In the Gamo Highlands of Ethiopia, farmers were minimizing barley production (a major food crop) as it requires too much labor and are moving to less labor-intensive crops such as potatoes.

Livestock use has declined in some sites. In Nepal, for example, there has been a decline in livestock ownership as women increasingly take control of farm production and do not have the time to look after animals while also managing the fields. There is also evidence of a decline in livestock herds in Morocco. However, this trend is not straightforward and in Kyrgyzstan, livestock herds have actually increased as it is considered a secure investment of remittances. For wealthier households, the labor burden of increased numbers of animals can be addressed by handing them over to herders who look after several family herds at once.

Remittances, investment patterns and inequality: To understand how migration shapes the rural economy, one question to ask is how remittances are used and invested. Remittances from migrants have the potential to support transformative change in rural livelihoods. Each community has migrant success stories, including those who have channeled remittances into investments in land and productive assets. The scope for this is notably higher in some sites than others. While remittances often succeed in keeping households afloat and improving food security, the amount invested productively in agriculture or rural enterprises can be modest. There appear to be three broad outcomes in terms of investment and the broader impact of remittances on household livelihood security.

Staying afloat: The first and most common outcome for households with a migrant family member is for the family to use remittances to 'stay afloat' by covering day-to-day living costs, debt servicing, and the cost of agricultural inputs. However, this has not helped them accumulate any significant wealth. While remittances have increased the financial security of households and have allowed modest improvements in living standards, there is no evidence of transformative change. By this we mean the use of remittances for investments in productive assets, such as large areas of land which can support the production of a surplus, or a new technology (e.g., irrigation systems), which may support more intensive cultivation. Across all seven countries, the risk of investing in land, livestock, or agricultural equipment is considered too high, particularly at a time of agrarian stresses. If there are savings, it is often considered more important for households to invest in a new or improved house.

Accumulation of wealth and assets: The second outcome for households with a migrant family member is the archetypical success story. This includes households with migrants who have been able to save remittances and make large-scale investments in productive assets such as land or agricultural equipment to expand or intensify production, thereby yielding a surplus and a profit rather than simply engaging in agriculture to meet household food needs (Box 1).

While there is significant policy interest in returnee migrant success stories across all study sites, they are in the minority and success is frequently linked to prior wealth (Spitzer 2016). First, households that already have a large area of land and livelihood security are less likely to be in debt and are less likely to need remittances to meet basic food needs. As a result, a more significant share of remittances can be saved. Second, the land and assets of such households can be put toward productive use, which means that startup costs are likely to be lower. Third, there is a tendency in some countries such as Nepal and Thailand, for migrants to be better off and secure better-paid jobs overseas. This can be due to higher levels of education, improved social networks, or the ability to pay to secure passage to a more lucrative destination.

Migration distress and loss of assets: The third outcome of having a migrant family member is households that have actually become poorer. This happens when migrants have made large up-front payments to migrate. This is common among overseas migrants from Nepal and Thailand, who often migrate through agencies. However, during shock periods, return migration on a distress basis can occur across the seven countries. This came to the fore during the Covid-19 pandemic (Murzakulova et al. 2021) when many migrants from the seven countries lost their jobs. Also, during the 2008 financial crisis, there was a notable return of migrants from Morocco, many of whom were in debt.

By far, the largest number of distress stories came from Nepal. This stems from factors including i) the high fees paid to migrate, which results in most migrants being in debt before departure; ii) the low wages received by migrants in the Gulf

Box 1. Where do successful returnees make investments?

The most common investments are buying land, particularly in Nepal, or securing a lease for a large area of land for commercial production, which is more common in Moldova and China. In Morocco, irrigation is central to agricultural intensification and remittances support such investments among returnees along with purchases of land.

In the Tadla Plain, returnee commercial farmers often live in the town and operate farms using drip irrigation in the rural hinterland. In the Figuig Oasis, some returnees have bought former rangelands outside the oasis and converted these for cultivation using irrigation. However, the investment requires substantial capital.

Commercial agroforestry is an important investment area in Thailand, Morocco, and Nepal. Trees can yield large profits and require minimal labor. In Moldova, a number of returnees invested in orchards, and some made investments in fruit processing operations (e.g., producing raisins or plums).

In Kyrgyzstan, it was common for households to use migrant remittances to invest in livestock. In the Gamo Highlands of Ethiopia as well, households with migrants, particularly those with higher remittance inflows, have invested in livestock such as cows, oxen, sheep, goats, and horses.

Other agro-enterprises which involved significant investment by returnees included beekeeping in Moldova, aquaculture in China, and agro-tourism in Moldova and Thailand.

states and Malaysia, which are far below what migrants to the European Union would receive; and iii) restrictive employment visas, which means employees can be easily deported if they lose their jobs. The most notable driver of distress for migrants in Nepal is the opaque chain of intermediaries who mediate access to employment and the weak enforcement of migrant rights. The lack of clear lines of accountability and information asymmetry between migrants, employers, and agents means that cases of deception or employee exploitation are rife. Some workers had been deceived over the type of work they would be doing or the salary they would receive. Some were unpaid, and some migrants were punished by immigration authorities for incorrect paperwork (including deportation) that was issued by employers or agents. In many of these cases, migrants have been compelled to return with little or no savings or were in debt.

Other reasons for distress include poor health or a workplace accident. This was reported in all the sites, particularly when migrants have limited access to healthcare in destination regions due to high costs or a lack of entitlement to medical services. In many of these cases, the migrant has little choice but to return home. However, even for internal migrants, going home is often unavoidable. For example, if a debilitating injury impedes their ability to earn, they can no longer afford to live in the city. For example, 18% of returnees in Nanxian, China, had come home from cities due to poor health or illness. While return migration for internal migrants can have significant financial implications for households, these are not severe compared to international returnees, who may have paid significant sums to go overseas and often return with substantial medical bills and debts to clear. In Nepal, this has driven distress sales of land and assets.

As successful migration outcomes were more common among households who already had land and assets, losing assets after migration appeared to be disproportionately common among the poorer households. Such households were already more likely to be in debt before migrating and were less likely to have savings. These households are at risk of being rapidly pushed into financial distress should the migrant face any difficulties. In Nepal, there was clear evidence that this subset of migrants were also the ones in lower-paid jobs overseas, often due to lower levels of education and weaker social networks.

Reproduction or reconfiguration of inequality?

There is evidence across all sites that migration affects inequality in complex ways. Divergent migration experiences means there were 'winners' and 'losers' in all 19 sites, with some households in a position much better than others to mobilize their earnings to make profitable investments. Whether these divergent outcomes were a reproduction of old inequalities or new patterns of stratification varied from site to site. In the study sites in Nepal, which have a long history of severe inequalities, and to a lesser extent in Thailand and Morocco, there is evidence that the ability to accumulate wealth following migration or the likelihood of falling into poverty is strongly connected to a household's economic position. However, in post-socialist contexts such as China, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan, where preexisting disparities in ownership of land and assets are less extreme, migration was a driver of rural stratification. A successful migration experience often opened doors for households to accumulate wealth and move up the social hierarchy.

For instance in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan, the use of remittances to invest in livestock is widespread among farmers with less land because increasing the size of one's herd is one way to compensate for a low agricultural income. In Moldova, there was less evidence that successful investments were restricted to those with prior wealth. Interviews identified a large number of agro-entrepreneurs who had used their earnings to elevate their position in the rural agrarian structure. For instance, many returnee migrants previously had small or marginal farms but invested their earnings in a successful agribusiness such as orchards, livestock farms, agro-processing and agro-tourism. This was facilitated by government support schemes such as the Programme for Attracting Remittances to the Economy (PARE 1+1), which targets returnee migrants and offers to match funds up to 50% of any investments. Moldova is probably one of the only countries where widespread program uptake is targeted explicitly at returnee migrants to catalyze investment.

Even in areas of high inequality, such as Nepal, there were exceptions to the norm in patterns of accumulation. Some farmers who had been in a subordinate position in the land ownership structure before migration achieved transformative change following their return through high-value investments and land purchases. Usually, the migrant in question had secured passage to a lucrative destination such as Japan, Korea or Romania, which offer opportunities to save albeit often at considerable initial costs with agency fees up to four times the cost of that charged for migration to Gulf states.

In other cases, success can be seen in lower-paid destinations such as the Persian Gulf if a migrant secured a job with a more supportive employer that offered opportunities for upward mobility. However, these cases were rare and were restricted to the service sector (e.g., office jobs). Stories of promotion were uncommon among construction laborers, which appeared to be the most common type of work carried out by migrants.

Social remittance investments

As well as financial remittances, many households also bring back 'social' remittances. These most often take the form of skills and knowledge that can be applied at home, even if the cash invested in agriculture is modest. This includes the introduction of new crops acquired overseas or new agricultural skills. For example, in Moldova, some migrants work in agriculture jobs in European countries. Some respondents reported on the opportunities they had to learn how to handle advanced agricultural equipment and new production techniques.

While this may be relevant when migrants move somewhere with agroecological similarities to their home community and are employed in the agriculture sector, for those working outside agriculture in urban areas and countries vastly different from their own, this transfer of skills loses relevance. For example, early migrants from Bhojpur, Nepal, to Sikkim, India, brought back techniques in cardamom cultivation. However, most migrants from the region do unskilled work in the service sector in the Gulf states. There is also limited scope to apply learned skills in the rural economy back home. In Thailand, while some migrants bring back agricultural knowledge such as irrigation techniques from Israel or farm management from Japan, the majority of skills and knowledge migrants acquire during their migration experience are highly specialized (e.g., in electronics manufacturing).

Migration and changes to the rural landscape

Contrary to what is sometimes assumed or stated, land abandonment because of migration does not appear to be a significant issue in the communities studied. There are cases of land in isolated or unproductive areas being left fallow. Most land in the surveyed communities is used in the context of land scarcity, dwindling holdings, and rising inequality. The only time when land is left fallow is on a seasonal basis, such as in monsoonal agricultural systems in Nepal and northern Thailand, where land without irrigation may remain uncultivated during the dry months. This is generally due to the high cost of irrigating rather than migration. Households with remittances may have fewer incentives to invest in irrigation as they already have alternative income sources to make up for shortfalls in food production. In Ethiopia, households often stopped cultivating certain crops due to a labor shortage, but the land was not actually abandoned. Instead, it was used for other purposes, such as growing grass for livestock.

There have also been ecological impacts from out-migration. In Bhojpur, Nepal, migration has resulted in some degree of ecological regeneration as evidenced by an increase in forest cover. This is because returnee migrants are investing in agroforestry and reducing the number of livestock, thereby reducing pressure on resources.

In Kyrgyzstan, the trend for investing remittances in livestock has had the opposite effect of increasing pressure on pasturelands. However, while migration has encouraged an increase in the size of herds, the reasons for pastureland degradation are more complex, for example, poor management by pasture committees and breakdowns in rural infrastructure which encourages increased grazing close to villages.

Two-wheel tractors, such as the one shown in Hunan, China, are widespread across the seven countries (*photo*: Fraser Sugden).

Changes in rural gender and intergenerational relations

Migration is associated with substantial changes in gender relations, echoing the wealth of literature on the topic (de Haas and van Rooij 2010; Hadi 2001; Paris et al. 2005; Adhikari and Hobley 2011). The gender breakdown of migration varies. In Nepal, there were no women migrants in the sample, although this is increasing in other parts of the country. In other sites, it was mixed, although there was a larger proportion of men than women migrants. In China and Thailand, it was around two-thirds men.

In the context of men's migration, women who stay home have experienced some empowerment due to access to remittances and increased farm control. In several sites, women reported receiving remittances directly from their husbands and thus had some control over how it was used. However, improvements in communication technologies mean that 'left behind women' often make major decisions in consultation with their husbands rather than independently. However, this is often offset in contexts where in-laws are present in the household and sometimes have a disproportionate control over the income. In Morocco, it was common for in-laws to receive and control the remittances sent by male family members.

Even when women have increased control over the farm and income, this results in an increased workload for women. This impact is felt particularly acutely by poorer women-headed households who are less likely to employ labor or invest in mechanization to reduce the labor burden.

In terms of female migration, this significantly impacts gender relations. Migration offers women an opportunity for economic empowerment and independence during the migration process. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, divorced women participating in labor migration can obtain economic autonomy and thus be empowered. This would have been more challenging had they stayed at home. Many participants from Moldova benefited from the grants designed for women entrepreneurs, enabling them to open a business on return.

In terms of intergenerational change, migration has brought a range of challenges. Across all the sites, there is a rise in skipped-generation households, where children grow up being looked after by their grandparents. This was common in countries where male and female migration is widespread, such as China, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Thailand. Older adults have significant caring responsibilities plus daily work. This has led to several social problems including emotional burnout and exhaustion and complex power relations within the household with regard to authority and upbringing. In China, interviews suggested there has been a decline in the quality of life for the elderly. Not only do they face the hazards of living alone, but many also struggle to take care of children if they fall sick and experience a decline in physical fitness. There is also a decline in the intergenerational transfer of agricultural knowledge, as children have limited engagement in agriculture, and the traditional transfer of skills from parents to children has significantly weakened.

As pensions do not cover basic needs and there are no affordable care facilities for the elderly, aging without the support of children becomes challenging for many households. Our research demonstrated that returning migrants who reach retirement age often experience health issues due to overwork and stressful living conditions, while some suffer the legacy of a lack of access to healthcare while they are abroad, affecting mental health. Few policy interventions observed in the study sites could address these issues.

Rural institutions

Migration is associated with changes in governance arrangements in rural areas. In Kyrgyzstan, diaspora networks have played an important role in supporting local development and mobilizing funds to support communities during times of crisis, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic. In Thailand, returnee migrants tend to stay in the same community and contribute to strengthening local institutions. In Morocco, diaspora associations are active in the study sites, some playing a role in supporting care for older people who were experiencing the challenge of a lost generation or investing in health facilities. In Figuig, an association made up of women, some of whom are retired, take care of this task, with costs partly covered by remittances from migrants. In Moldova, some return migrants join village farming associations providing peer-to-peer consultation and support.

However, the impact of migration on local institutions is not always positive. In Nepal, migration has contributed to a hollowing out of local institutions such as irrigation user committees. The outflow of young people due to migration from some villages in Kyrgyzstan and Moldova led to weakening social ties and local institutions.

Conclusions and learnings

- Migration has supported livelihood security, particularly at a time of rising economic stress and spiraling demands for cash. However, just as agricultural livelihoods are insufficient on their own to support a family, migrant earnings are not sufficient to draw significant populations out of agriculture. For most farming households, migrant labor is a survival strategy. It has kept food insecurity under control and has supported the rising demand for cash and modest improvements in living standards.

- There is limited evidence to show that remittances catalyze transformative change in rural agrarian relations or development trajectories. While there have been many cases of successful returnee entrepreneurs, accumulation of wealth from migration appears to be the exception rather than the rule. In some cases, success is rooted in prior wealth. Some have achieved upward mobility within the rural economy through migrant earnings, and this offers important policy lessons for the future. Lamba et al. (2023) deals with these aspects in more detail.

- Labor shortages have led to transformations in cropping patterns, land use, and engagement with the livestock economy. These changes are often quite different depending on the economic, cultural and ecological context.

- There have been transformations in gender relations in agriculture that can be both empowering and disempowering for women. Shifts in intergenerational relations and the well-being of 'left behind' elders is likely to be a growing social challenge in the years ahead.

- Migration has contradictory impacts on the environment and landscapes. In some contexts, it has supported regeneration of landscapes and ecosystems, while in other locales, increased livestock herds due to investment of remittances in animals may have worsened degradation.

- Diaspora organizations are playing an important role in supporting local development in some sites, such as Moldova, Kyrgyzstan and Morocco.

Policy recommendations

- Migrant labor is structurally intertwined with the agriculture sector at home, which in effect subsidizes migrant wages. It has been shown that greater empowerment and training of migrants, enhanced freedom of movement (which lowers the costs of migration), and reduced structural inequalities in home communities (which reduces the distress behind migration) impacts the financial security of migrants. Workers who were in a stronger financial situation before migrating will be less vulnerable to exploitation when abroad, while skill development will allow them to take up better paid and more secure jobs.

- There is a need for integration in migration and agricultural policy whereby programs to support migrants (training and sensitization) go hand in hand with agricultural development strategy. Improved remittances and greater job security for migrants will translate into greater reinvestments back into the rural sector, while improved premigration training will increase the flow of social remittances through new knowledge and skills.

- Support programs for returnee migrants need to address the barriers preventing migrants from investing in the agriculture and larger rural sector. Given the huge risks associated with agricultural investment, direct grants such as those offered in Moldova are more likely to succeed than loans.

- Governments in migrant-sending countries and migrant-receiving countries need to work together to improve job security for migrants and support longer-term employment, which will allow migrants to save while also accumulating skills and knowledge.

- Strong regulation of migration intermediaries is critical to lower migration costs and the associated risk of financial distress or migrants returning in a position weaker than before leaving.

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Terraced agriculture in Arun Valley, Bhojpur, Nepal. The scope for mechanization is limited given the difficult terrain (*photo*: Fraser Sugden).

AGRUMIG Policy Brief Series

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AGRUMIG Project
The project titled **AGRUMIG** ***'Leaving something behind' - Migration governance and agricultural & rural change in 'home' communities: Comparative experience from Europe, Asia and Africa*** proposes an integrated approach to migration governance to address the two-way relationship between labor mobility and changes in agriculture and the rural sector. Migration creates challenges for rural 'sending' communities in low- and middle-income countries, yet it can also be transformative. The project engages in a comparative analysis of seven countries (China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand) to identify the economic, institutional, cultural and agroecological factors which shape these relationships. It will identify the range of governance interventions that can harness migration to stimulate sustainable, gender equitable growth in agriculture, and reduce the distress associated with migration.

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Project website: http://agrumig.iwmi.org

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