

Making sense of diversity in agrarian and rural change outcomes of labor out-migration through comparative analysis: First lessons from China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand

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The AGRUMIG project undertook a comparative analysis of 19 rural regions in seven countries to identify the economic, institutional, cultural and agroecological

factors that shape the two-way relationship between labor mobility and changes in the agriculture and rural sectors.



First QCA workshop in Viena, Austria, June 2019 (photo: Raffaella Pagogna).



Why a comparative approach?

The AGRUMIG project adopted a comparative analytical approach for two reasons.

First, according to the literature, the impact or outcomes of migration on rural areas is highly diverse, bewilderingly even. Any impact or outcome one can realistically think of can be found somewhere in the world. A general pattern of the kind 'all in all, in most cases, migration does X to agrarian and rural change' would be a simplistic and unhelpful generalization. The diverse outcomes require some explanation. Under what conditions is outcome X found? Under what conditions does outcome Y occur? Under what conditions is outcome Z seen? What explains the structural differences in the role of migration in agrarian and rural change?

Second, there is a need to understand the diversity of outcomes in relation to labor out-migration in agrarian and rural change because it is highly significant for policy making and implementation. For example, the migration and development policy of the European Union (EU) and international organizations emphasizes that migrants can significantly contribute to development in their home region, through remittances and as return migrants for instance, and that such development can subsequently reduce migration to regions like Europe. It is important to understand whether that emphasis is warranted. The research conducted by the AGRUMIG project shows that sometimes it is, and sometimes it is not, depending on local/regional conditions. For policy making and

implementation, it is important to answer the 'it depends' question. On what exactly does it depend? In what situations can one expect a policy proposal to be a feasible approach, and in what situations is that an unrealistic expectation?

We sampled diversity by selecting 19 regions in seven countries for our comparison. The countries are Morocco, Moldova, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Thailand and China.

Which approach for the comparison?

Qualitative Comparative Analysis

What a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) approach¹ provides is a combinatorial way of thinking. It is how combinations of conditions are associated with particular outcomes. Rather than independent variables and factors with different weights, it is the particular combination of causes that matter in making sense of the diversity we observe. QCA is a set-theoretical approach (Figure 1).

QCA works on the premise that the same cause can be associated with different outcomes and the same outcome can have different causes. Some examples will help to illustrate this concept. In this research, one of the conditions or causes that shape the contribution of migration to agrarian-rural change is the proximity of the region to a city or a large market. However, this condition or cause can have two opposite effects or outcomes.

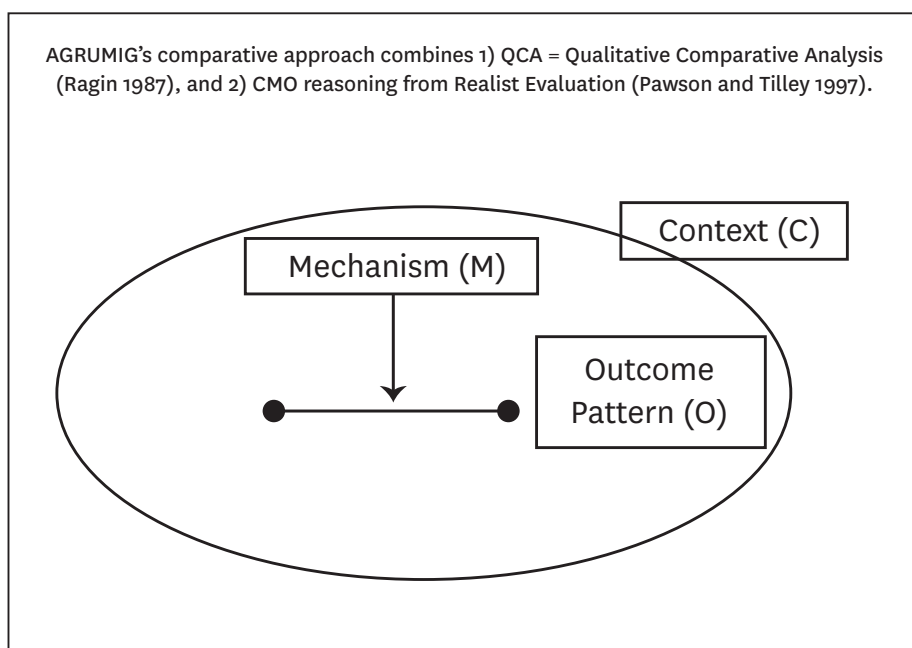


Figure 1. AGRUMIG comparative approach.

Source: Pawson 2008.

¹ For an introduction to QCA analysis, see, for example, Rihoux and Ragin 2008.

Proximity to a city and market can mean that left-behind household members are interested in investing financial remittances in productive activities. This might be intensive cultivation of cash crops for example, because there is a market nearby. Some migrants may even return to take up commercial agriculture to supply this market. Thus, a vibrant agricultural development process may be triggered. We find this causal pattern in several of the regions studied in this research.

The same proximity to a city and market may also mean there are ample nearby employment opportunities for the left behind. They have no interest in investing remittances in agricultural and rural development. Remittances may then go to consumptive purposes, such as housebuilding or education. No vibrant agrarian or rural change process is triggered.

It is the job of researchers to unravel what exactly ‘it depends on’ that certain outcomes occur. The general answer to this question is that it depends on the combination, that is, the configuration of the proximity condition with other conditions. When the combination or configuration is different, the outcome may be different.

The analysis becomes more complicated when we realize that the same outcome for instance, a vibrant agricultural development process triggered by remittance investment, can be caused by different conditions. It may well be that proximity to a city or market is not a relevant condition in some cases. An important condition may be that there is a government policy that doubles or triples the investment fund that migrant remittances generate. It may also be the case that proximity *and* supportive government policy are needed to trigger a vibrant agrarian-rural development process. That is the case in the central region of Moldova, for example.

The core idea of the QCA method is that the same cause can have different effects depending on the combination of conditions and the same effect or outcome can be generated

by different combinations of conditions. When we can identify these combinations, we can explain on what ‘it depends’.

The comparison allows us to distinguish between relevant and nonrelevant conditions. That’s why the AGRUMIG project researched 19 regions in seven countries. We tried to maximize diversity to make this finding of the relevant configurations easier.

Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) reasoning

What is referred to as ‘CMO reasoning’ in this case is taken from the realist evaluation literature.² This approach has an interest in explaining diverse outcomes in common with QCA, e.g., a single policy intervention implemented in multiple places.

CMO reasoning asks the following questions:

- What is the outcome?
- What mechanism produces it?
- What contextual conditions shape the working of the mechanism?

Realist evaluation puts greater emphasis on causal processes and causal pathways than QCA. It separates the immediate mechanism (causal process) that produces an outcome from the contextual conditions that make that mechanism express itself (or not).

The question to be answered

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the AGRUMIG QCA team identified six questions we wanted to answer in a project workshop in Kathmandu, Nepal, in December 2019 (Table 1).

Table 1. Six questions identified by the AGRUMIG QCA team.

Research topic	Comparative questions
1. Livelihood strategies and social differentiation	1. How does migration shape the socioeconomic differentiation of households and rural transformation, including social (in)equality?
2. Farming systems	2. How does migration differentially shape farming systems and the trajectory of agricultural change in a region?
3. (Dis)empowerment, gender, youth, elderly	3. How does migration impact the (dis)empowerment of the different genders and youth?
4. Village and community	4. How do migration and migrant strategies shape the functioning of local institutions and how does this affect the ‘vibrancy’ of local communities?
5. Public service provision	5. How does migration impact public service provision in terms of education, health and care for the elderly?
6. Rural-urban relations	6. How does migration shape the convergence or divergence or rural and urban development pathways?

² For an introduction to realist evaluation, see, for example, Pawson and Tilley (1997).

Over two years later when the data collection was finally finished, there was time to address a single question only: *What is the role of migration in regional-level agrarian and rural change?*

The objective of this question is to help understand to what extent and how labor out-migration is a recognizable causal factor in shaping agrarian and rural change in the research regions. The diverse outcome to be explained is thus the qualitatively different roles that labor out-migration can play in agrarian-rural change.

Analysis: The process

The QCA process envisaged in the project design had several steps. The first step was training on the QCA method that the AGRUMIG project sought to develop. This was attached to the project's first Project Meeting in Vienna, Austria, in June 2019.

During the second Project Meeting in Kathmandu, Nepal, in December 2019, the QCA research team decided that six questions would be addressed using the QCA/CMO approach. In months 12 to 18 of the project, intensive fieldwork was scheduled in all countries and regions to produce comparable datasets. A traveling postdoc had been appointed to the project to visit all the countries and regions in the study in order to work with the country team members. This was meant to increase the 'buy-in' into the comparative method by the different team members and to produce a common way of thinking on the topic, given that the participants had different disciplinary backgrounds. In this process, the first ideas for identifying relevant outcomes, mechanisms and contextual conditions across the seven countries and 19 regions could start to be articulated.

It was planned that after month 18 of the project the QCA analysis would be executed over a period of 18 months, in a strongly interactive and collaborative way, in a series of meetings of the QCA team (which comprised of eight postdocs, one in each country and one traveling, the QCA Principal Investigator and several interested others).

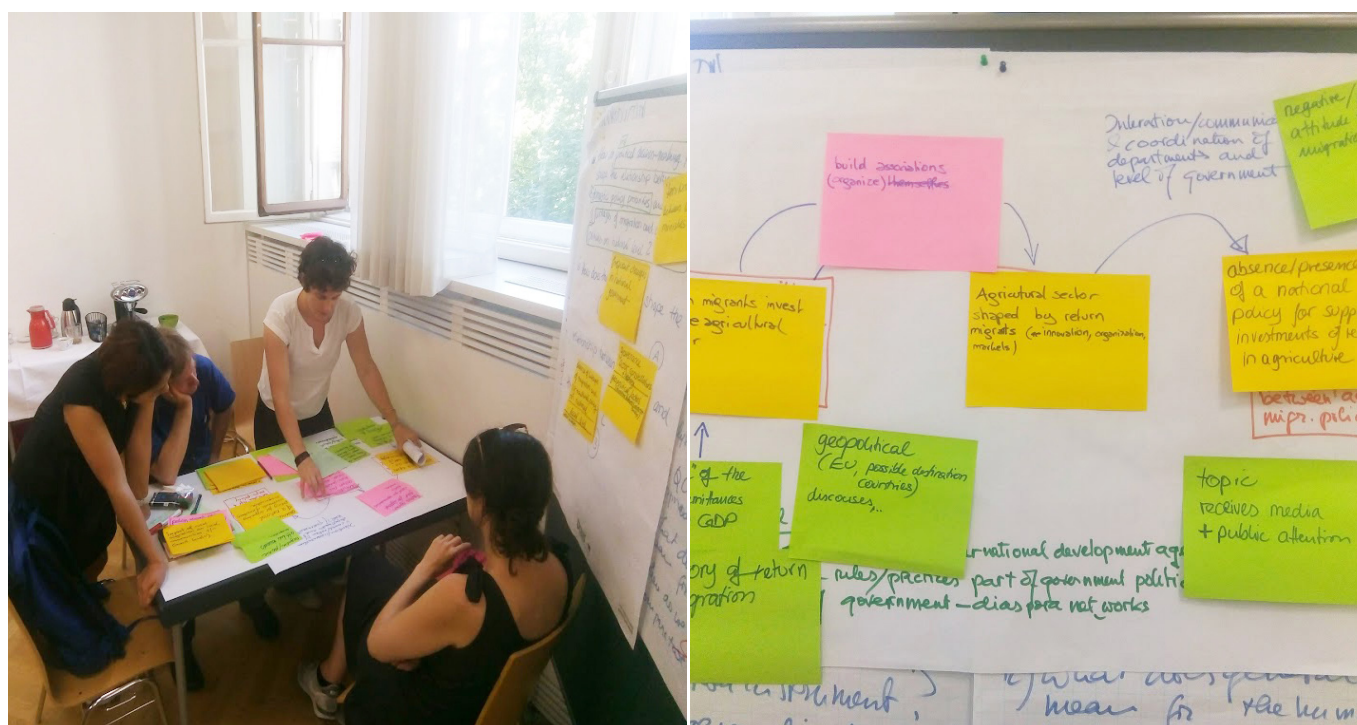
Due to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic which fell on the 13th month of the project, this plan and process could not be implemented, as the pandemic resulted in two years of severe mobility restrictions. The remaining time available for analysis was six months rather than 18 at the end of the project, during a period when many other project deliverables could finally be worked on. Thus, the ambitions of the QCA component of the project had to be scaled down considerably, notwithstanding an extra 10-day writing retreat in Morocco in October 2022. The findings in this policy brief are therefore interim and tentative. A first completed analysis is scheduled to be ready in mid-2023.

Analysis: Preliminary findings

Outcomes and mechanisms: Diversity confirmed

In the 19 regions investigated, the role that labor out-migration plays in agrarian-rural change was threefold. In Table 2, these have been labeled A) none (five regions), B) reproductive (nine regions), and C) transformative (five regions).

The B (reproductive) category is the most frequent among the 19 regions. In these regions, labor out-migration covers the running costs of households and farms, particularly through remittances. Sometimes this is a survival strategy that barely supports the household and farm, sometimes



First QCA workshop in Vienna, Austria, held in June 2019 (photos: Peter Mollinga).

it happens in a more ‘comfortable’ setting where some resources generated through migration are diverted to non-rural purposes. In terms of agrarian-rural dynamics, things stay more or less as they are. To see qualitative change, one would need a longer-term, generational perspective.

The C (transformative) category includes regions where labor out-migration plays a shaping role in agrarian-rural dynamics. This can be through remittance-based investments, through return migrants taking development roles and responsibilities, but also through positive feedback loops in the social and economic networks that migrants create and, more indirectly, through labor loss and agricultural extensification creating space for land concentration for new forms of commercial agriculture.

The finding that the transformative role of migration only occurs in some regions suggests the importance of explaining the diversity of outcomes. When transformation is the desired policy scenario, it is worth knowing what factors cause it.

This is strengthened by the finding that there is not only diversity across countries but also within countries. Morocco (MAR), Moldova (MOL), Kyrgyzstan (KYR), China (CHI) and Thailand (THA) are clear examples. Nepal (NEP) is the only country with four regions in one category. However, it is likely that in Nepal

regions belonging to other categories can be found. In Ethiopia (ETH), the research could be completed in only one region and it is likely regions are falling into other categories.

The policy relevance of this finding would suggest that standardized national policies to enhance the contribution of labor out-migration to agrarian-rural development are unlikely to have the same impact in all regions. Thinking through the regional specificity of policy measures thus makes good sense.

Conditions: A first shot

We believe the analysis of the diversity of the role of migration in agrarian-rural change is robust, but the analysis of the contextual conditions that shape the causal processes that generate these outcomes is still very much at the beginning and much more tentative. Table 3 is the first identification of 17 such conditions.

Notwithstanding its tentative and incomplete character, the list allows inferences. First, there are many conditions. Not all are relevant in all regions, and the relevant configurations for each region still need to be determined, but the likelihood of single-condition explanations of outcomes is low. Not a single region out of the 19 investigated exhibits such a single-condition situation.

Table 2. Preliminary outcomes and mechanisms for the 19 regions.

Outcome: Role of migration	Regions	Mechanism(s)
A – none (5) Migration has no particular causal role in regional rural/agrarian change: other dynamics/processes are (vastly) more important.	CHI-MAO CHI-XIN KYR-KOC MAR-HAO THA-MAC	<i>One or more of the following elements:</i> 1) Scale of migration too small. 2) Migration not central element to household livelihood strategies. 3a) Regional development dynamics overwhelmingly generated by other processes. 3b) Region is in a phase ‘beyond migration’.
B – reproductive (9) Migration primarily/dominantly serves to keep afloat smallholder agriculture and the households that practice it.	ETH-GAM KYR-BAT MOL-FNS MAR-TAP NEP-DHA NEP-DOT NEP-KIM NEP-SAB THA-BAN	1) Remittances predominantly go to ‘running expenses’ of households and their farms. Migration is key for households in the B category, but serves either as a coping strategy that contributes to reproduction only, or ‘expanded reproduction’ of the rural/agrarian activities of the left behind is not part of the livelihood strategy of the translocal household.
C – transformative (5) There is a discernible transformative regional rural/agrarian change dynamic related to migration.	CHI-NAN KYR-JAL MOL-CEN MAR-FIG MAR-TAI	<i>One or more of the following elements.</i> 1) ‘Productive’ use of remittances sufficiently large scale to make a difference at regional level. 2) Active role of return migrants in shaping agrarian/rural change. 3) Emergence of positive developmental feedback loops through migrants and migration. 4) Migration-related labor loss allowing for land concentration and scale enhancement of agricultural production.

Table 3. First listing of contextual conditions.

LANDAV		
Land availability	0 = Land is scarce, no land available for agricultural expansion	1 = Land is available for agricultural expansion
ENVCON		
Environmental conditions	0 = Environmental conditions constrain a contribution of migration to agrarian change	1 = Environmental conditions do not constrain a contribution of migration to agrarian change
REGCON		
Region's connectivity	0 = Poor regional connectivity hampers migration's contribution to agrarian change	1 = Good regional connectivity facilitates migration's contribution to agrarian change
COSMIG		
Cost of migration	0 = Costs of migration are high and hamper migration's contribution to agrarian change	1 = Costs of migration do not hamper migration's contribution to agrarian change
INSINF		
Institutional infrastructure for migration	0 = Institutional infrastructure for migration is poorly developed	1 = Institutional infrastructure for migration is well developed
ENDOW		
Household endowments and starting capital	0 = Low level of endowments/starting capital	1 = High level of endowments/starting capital
ENTRIS		
Entrepreneurial/risk taking disposition	0 = Low	1 = High
ATTACH		
Disposition/feeling of attachment to region	0 = Low	1 = High
REMINC		
Level and reliability of remittance income	0 = Low	1 = High
GOVERN		
State governance conditions	0 = Disabling	1 = Enabling
SKILLS		
Skills obtained in migration	0 = Not relevant	1 = Relevant
PUBSEV		
Level of public services in rural area	0 = Low/declining	1 = Satisfactory/good
TIMMIG		
Length of time that migration exists	0 = Migration is recent	1 = Migration is long-standing
LABDEM		
Labor availability and demography	0 = Low(er) labor availability, aging demography	1 = Labor availability is no constraint
CASH		
Commodification of livelihoods	0 = Low – relatively modest need for cash income	1 = High – increasing need for cash
AGRPRI		
Agricultural product prices/produce markets	0 = Unfavorable	1 = Favorable
REGEMP		
Remunerative regional employment opportunities	0 = Absent	1 = Present

Second, the conditions are diverse. Quite a few are economic, but there are also institutional, governance, cultural and environmental conditions. This confirms the need for an interdisciplinary analytical approach to the processes involved and for integrated policy involving different departments, ministries and other agencies crafting approaches that address the combinations of the most important factors in a specific region.

Conclusion

The summary of the comparative analysis above, incomplete as it still may be, allows the following conclusions on the two-way relationship between labor out-migration and agrarian-rural change in home-sending regions.

First, the role of migration in agrarian-rural change is diverse and can be categorized in a threefold typology of roles:

- Migration plays no role.
- Migration plays a reproductive role.
- Migration plays a transformative role.

Second, a diversity of roles is found across countries and significantly within countries. This underpins the need for regionally specific approaches to strengthen the role of migration in rural development.

Third, the contextual conditions that shape the role of migration are multiple and diverse. The implication of this is that enhancing the role of migration in rural development requires an integrated approach that brings together and

combines different agencies and organizations in jointly crafted strategies.

Fourth, the main mechanisms driving the transformative role that policy prefers to pursue are the following:

- The productive use of remittances (investment).
- An active role of return migrants in agrarian-rural development.
- The existence of positive migration-development feedback loops (e.g., trade networks).
- Land concentration through labor loss, facilitating agrarian transformation.

Policy recommendations

1. Develop and strengthen tertiary-level education programs in sending countries on migration, mobility and development that address the multidimensionality and complexity of migration-development relations in an interdisciplinary manner.
2. Develop and strengthen the policy research capacity in sending countries for mapping the regional diversity in the structural features of the two-way migration-rural development relationship to advise different levels of government on regionally specific policy approaches.
3. Ensure that databases on migration and mobility contain regionally specific information, rather than national statistics only.

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Field trip during the writing retreat in Marrakesh, Morocco, held in October 2022 (photo: Peter Mollinga).

AGRUMIG Policy Brief Series

This policy brief is one in a series of briefs produced as part of the AGRUMIG project.

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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.

Donor: European Union (EU) Horizon 2020 Framework Programme (H2020) under grant agreement number 822730

(Call: Towards forward-looking migration governance: Addressing the challenges, assessing capacities and designing future strategies)

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

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This project is part of the MARIS (Migration, Agriculture and Resilience: Initiative for Sustainability) network (<http://maris.iwmi.org>)

