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'Long-term trajectories of return migration: Agrarian differentiation and class mobility in Nepal, Moldova, and Thailand'

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Abstract

While there is considerable research on return migration, it is disproportionately focused on the immediate moment of return, including decision making. There is an emerging interest, however, in the outcomes for returnees—a policy relevant question at a time when there is growing emphasis on harnessing migration to support rural development. However, limited research has explored the social structures which mediate return migration outcomes, particularly from rural migrant source communities which are facing growing agrarian stress and rising inequality. This article seeks to understand the long-term livelihood trajectories for returnees to rural communities in Nepal, Moldova, and Thailand. Looking at the entire cycle of migration from initial departure to the migration experience overseas, and the options open to returnees, it analyses how outcomes are mediated by ongoing patterns of agrarian differentiation. Drawing upon large surveys, combined with over 100 interviews with households experiencing international labour migration, the article finds that for most returnees, the structural conditions within which rural migrants work overseas, including the associated costs, mean that accumulated savings are rarely sufficient to support transformative change in livelihoods and accumulation of wealth on return. For some migrants, particularly those who are in a subordinate economic position before going overseas, deception or exploitation overseas can result in them returning in an even weaker financial situation, often culminating in a loss of assets. There are, nevertheless, a minority of returnees who have achieved upward mobility in the rural economy following their return. While again, this largely follows class lines with wealthier farmers securing better paid jobs and having less debt, there are a small subset who are able to rise the economic ladder through post-return investments. Effective mobilization of social networks, sustained long term migration and a supportive policy environment—have been cited as significant factors contributing to post-return success within these contexts.

Keywords: return migration; remittances; investment; Nepal; Thailand; Moldova.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, international labour migration has emerged as an important component of rural livelihoods in low- and middle-income countries. Set against an increasingly fragile agricultural resource base, dwindling landholdings and rising costs, remittances provide a much-needed source of cash to overcome production shortfalls, while also offering opportunities for accumulation, upward mobility and even 'exit' from agriculture (Jokisch 2002; Sunam 2020; Sugden et al., 2022).

It is widely acknowledged, however, that contemporary labour migration is not a one-way process and there is an established body of scholarship on 'return' migration to rural areas. While a large share of this is focused on *why* migrants return, there is an emerging body of research which looks beyond the decision-making process and also seeks to understand the different livelihood outcomes of returnees. However, there is a gap in knowledge with regards to how these often-divergent livelihood trajectories for returnees are embedded within ongoing process of agrarian change and class differentiation in rural areas. A more nuanced insight into livelihood outcomes for returnees requires one to look at the political economic processes embedded in the entire lifecycle of migration. This includes understanding the structures of inequality within which migrants were situated prior to going overseas, and how these mediate the migration experience and subsequently, their opportunities after return.

This article addresses these questions through case studies from remittance dependent rural regions in three countries—Nepal, Moldova, and Thailand. These countries offer valuable comparative perspectives given the varying levels of differentiation, and their unique political-institutional contexts and histories of migration. The article emphasizes that for a majority of returnees, their pre-migration socio-economic and class position shapes their livelihood trajectories on return. Most migrants who are from the small to medium farmer majority, are reintegrated into the same peasant livelihood they pursued before going overseas, with accumulated savings supporting the basic reproductive needs of households only, with some even pushed further into poverty. There are, nevertheless, a minority with significant savings who have been able to accumulate land and assets and make significant productive investments on return. While most of these 'success' stories are from households already well endowed with land and assets, a small minority are able achieve upward class mobility.

Understanding what lies behind these divergent outcomes is of critical importance at a time when there is growing policy interest not only in migration as a driver of development (IOM 2020), but in so called migrant 'success stories' and entrepreneurship (Spitzer 2016). While remittances, skills and knowledge of returnees can in some circumstances be mobilized to make investments in the rural economy (see for instance UN-JMDI 2017), this article offers a more nuanced analysis, highlighting how embedded social structures continue to shape the outcomes for households both before and after migration.

1.1 Conceptualizing return migration

Return migration is a well-established field of scholarship, although arguably a large share of research is focussed on decision-making. The early scholarship in the 1970s and 80s (see review by Cassarino 2004), came to polarized conclusions, viewing return as due to either 'success' or 'failure'. Cassarino (2004) and Constant and Massey (2002) suggest these divergent models are rooted in distinct conceptual frameworks. 'Neoclassical' approaches grounded in behavioural models (see for instance Todaro 1969) consider return migration as due to a 'failure' of the migrant to yield anticipated benefits. The 'New Economics of Labour Migration' approaches (see for instance, Stark and Bloom 1985), view return conversely, as a calculated strategy to diversify fragile livelihoods. As Cassarino (2004) notes, the implication is that once individuals have achieved their goals (i.e. 'success') in terms of accumulated savings, they return home.

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This 'success-failure paradigm' however, has been critiqued due to failure to account for the socio-political context in migrants' homes and the complex relationships into which returnees are integrated (Cassarino 2004). More recent scholarship has acknowledged this diversity, which is grounded in each migrant's individual experience and a range of aspirational and structural factors (De Haas and Fokkema 2011). These may include for instance, their longer-term aspirations prior to migration (Constant and Massey 2002),[1] the social and psychological ties the migrant cultivates with their destination vis-à-vis home country (De Haas and Fokkema 2011), or a combination of economic, social and family reasons, including discrimination faced in the host country (Ianioglo et al., 2021).

While return migration decisions are useful to understand, much the above literature focuses on the moment of return, conceptualized often as a single event. It is also important to look at the *longer-term* livelihood trajectories for migrants after initial decisions to return have been made. With a growing interest in the relationship between migration and rural development (de Haas 2006; Sunam and McCarthy 2016; Fischer, Martin, and Straubhaar 2021; Sugden et al., 2022), a more critical (albeit connected) question is what migrants actually do after return—outcomes which may, or may not, be connected to the initial decision to come home.

Set against this backdrop, there is an emerging literature on longer term livelihood trajectories for returnees, which offers a more balanced analysis. Spitzer (2016) for instance, looks at returnees to Indonesia and the Philippines who had started businesses. Spitzer's article observes that in spite of the lofty ambitions of development institutions which supported returnee investments, there were high levels of failure and insolvency for multiple reasons including debt, family financial responsibilities, and incompatibility of skills learned overseas with the local context at home. Similarly, Ianioglo et al. (2021) identify structural challenges faced by returnees to Moldova, including limited knowledge of support programmes and the challenging business environment of an import-based economy, where costs of inputs or raw materials are prohibitive. Set against such contexts, Spitzer (2016) offers a valid critique of the neoliberal ideology behind 'migration-for-development' programmes, which view the returnee as a rational entrepreneur who can invest financial and social remittances to unleash economic growth at home. This echoes a deeper ideology in grassroots development discourse since the 1990s, which expects citizens to lift themselves out of poverty through entrepreneurship (Rankin 2004; Sugden 2009).

One useful lesson which can be drawn from the earlier academic debate over 'success' and 'failure' in decision making when looking at longer term livelihood trajectories, is that return migration clearly has polarized livelihood outcomes for differently situated households. Junge, Diez, and Schätzl (2015) for instance, in the context of Thailand and Vietnam, suggest that migrants with lower earnings overseas are not only more likely have less education, but are also likely to be engaged in agriculture on their return, whereas better educated migrants are more likely to return not to the land, but to urban centres for non-farm employment. Within this latter group, a subset of returnees successfully fulfils the 'entrepreneurial' neo-liberal subject position, by returning explicitly to invest savings in an enterprise and capitalize on economic change at home.

Cassarino (2004) develops a conceptual framework to analyse divergent post-return outcomes, oriented around 'preparedness' to come home. 'Well-prepared' migrants for instance, are often those who were away for longer because of a favourable employment contract or residential status, and who have accumulated savings, skills and resources to return and invest. Less successful returnees are those who were away for shorter spells, have saved less, and had returned in the context of distress (e.g. due to deportation or financial crisis). While this focuses largely on the financial situation of migrants and the migration experience, Sunam (2020) through his study of Nepal, places a strong emphasis on asset ownership, highlighting that only a small set of households are able to invest savings to

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chart a successful a pathway out of poverty following return, with the majority of migrants lacking the land to make profitable investments in a largely agricultural economy.

1.2 Rethinking return migration in the context of agrarian differentiation

Sunam's (2020) focus on land is particularly important in the context of contemporary labour migration from low- and middle-income countries, where migration is part of a dual livelihood strategy—interlinked closely with agriculture. A significant share of migrants are not from cities but from rural areas.[2] Remittances supplement the fragile agricultural livelihoods of migrants' families, with the farm subsequently playing an important role in post-return livelihoods (Sugden et al., 2022). The importance of remittances for farmers is all the more important in the context of the unprecedented agricultural stresses brought about by climate change, and the rising costs of production following four decades of economic liberalization. Set against this growing agrarian stress is intensifying differentiation within the peasantry, as more marginal producers sell off land and assets due to debt and financial distress (Sugden 2017; Rousseau, Gautier, and Wardell 2019; Habibi 2021). This is all the more pertinent in regions with deep pre-existing inequalities such as South Asia (Sugden 2019; Shah and Lerche 2020).

A notable gap in knowledge in this context, is how the process of agrarian differentiation alongside pre-existing rural inequality in migrant 'source' communities, are mediating the migrants' highly divergent post-return outcomes. To address this lacuna, there is a need to build upon existing scholarship on post-return outcomes, and look at how the entire cycle of migration fits within the larger trajectory of agrarian change in source communities. This includes taking account firstly, of the migrants' position in the agrarian class structure before they go overseas and how this mediates the socio-economic stresses they experience; and secondly exploring how this goes on to impact the nature of work and remittances flows while abroad, and in turn, the opportunities and challenges they face on return. This raises the question as to whether returnee outcomes align to pre-existing inequalities and patterns of differentiation in an increasingly stressed agrarian economy or have the potential to reconfigure class relations through opening *limited* channels for upward mobility.

This article offers a comparative analysis of six remittance dependent rural regions across three countries, Moldova, Nepal and Thailand. It emphasizes that while there is a policy interest in harnessing the entrepreneurship of returnees, this overlooks the fact that for a majority of migrants, labour mobility is a structural necessity for families to meet their simple reproduction needs. As a result, the opportunities for post-return accumulation are limited, and for some, their economic situation is worse than before they migrated.

The article goes on to look at the few migrants who have been able to make significant post-return investments which support accumulation. It demonstrates how post-return success is heavily mediated by the migrants' access to land and assets prior to departure. Importantly though, the article also shows that migration can (in selective contexts) support upward mobility for more economically marginalized groups—particularly in Moldova where the extent of differentiation is more moderate, where targeted political, economic and institutional structures exist to support returnees, and where mobility is less constrained. Through an analysis of the prerequisites to success, and their grounding in both personal circumstance and the larger rural political economy and policy landscape of diverse national contexts, this latter group offers insights into the process of upward class mobility in remittance dependent rural communities.

The three countries, Nepal, Moldova, and Thailand, were chosen for the interesting comparative perspectives they offer on return migration. Overseas migration is a significant feature of rural livelihoods in all three countries, with remittances often providing the primary source of cash for farmers. Nepal is the eleventh most remittance-dependent country in the world in relation to the size of its GDP, while Moldova is twenty-first (World Bank 2023) and both are largely rural. While remittances in Thailand are lower in relation to

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GDP when compared to Nepal and Moldova due to its more diversified economy, it remains the thirteenth highest remittance-receiving country in the world. Furthermore, income from international migrants is crucial for peripheral regions such as the northeast where this study is focussed.

Importantly, the differences between the three countries themselves help one understand the longer-term outcomes of return migration. First, the three countries are differentially situated in terms of their economic development trajectory, with an impact on both mobility patterns, earnings and the decision making of migrants. Nepal is a low-income country that is peripheral within South Asia, with very limited industrial development and opportunities for large-scale off-farm employment. With a lack of alternative options and high migration cost, most mobility is to destinations which offer relatively low earnings, as agreed by the government through bilateral labour treaties. This includes predominantly the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Malaysia and to a lesser extent, India. Moldova is a middle-income country (recently transitioned from lower-middle to upper-middle), yet like Nepal, it is peripheral within the region (Eastern Europe) with very limited industrial development or off-farm employment. However, it benefits from proximity to the EU, and the opportunity to migrate to higher income destinations in Western Europe and Russia relatively easily at a low cost. Thailand by contrast has been an upper-middle income country since 2011 and compared to the other two countries, has a more export-oriented and industrialized economy. As a result, there is a mix of internal and overseas migration. For the latter, the government has (in contrast to Nepal) prioritized labour agreements with higher-earning destinations such as Japan, Taiwan, and Korea.

Second, the three countries capture differences in migration governance—with comparative lessons around the role of the state and supra-national institutions in mediating return migration outcomes. Migrants from Moldova can move relatively freely to high income countries due to agreements with the EU and Russia, whereas movement from Nepal and Thailand is heavily mediated by restrictive visa regimes, although Thai migrants have comparatively more opportunities than Nepalis to migrate to 'lucrative' destinations. The sites also capture differences in the levels of government support for returnees, with the Moldovan government in particular, making more systematic and concerted efforts to engage directly with returnees for investment.

Finally, the three countries offer important lessons on the role of inequality in shaping mobility outcomes. The nature of rural inequality differs between Nepal, Thailand and Moldova. In Nepal, inequality within the peasantry is acute, with high levels of exploitative tenancy relations and high levels of landlessness. In Moldova and Thailand, inequality within the subsistence-oriented farming population is only moderate, although there is a growing minority of larger commercially oriented farmers—and the socialist legacy in Moldova means that landlessness is rare.

2. Methodology

The research was carried out between 2020 and 2023 in six sites across the three countries as part of a much larger seven-country study on the impact of migration on agricultural change. Fieldwork was disrupted for 18 months due to the pandemic, with some flexibility required given the need to adhere to certain public health protocols, and thus while it spanned a relatively long period of time—it offered insights into the outcomes of post-pandemic return migration. The project underwent a full ethical review by the lead University's ethical review board, and additional measures were put in place given the pandemic context.

Initially, a survey was carried out. Selection was random, albeit with some variations in the method according to the local context. In Nepal, two sites made up of a cluster of villages, with high international out-migration were chosen in Dhanusha district in the

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Table 1. Field sites and interviews collected.

Country	Region/Site included in the HH survey and numbers	Districts where FGs/interviews were carried
Nepal	Dhanusha district (120 hhs)	Dhanusha district (20 interviews, 2 FGDs)
	Chirkhuwa valley, Bhojpur district (106 hhs)	Chirkhuwa valley, Bhojpur district (20 interviews, 2 FGDs)
Moldova	North/Site 1 (including 12 municipalities)	North Sîngerei (1 FG) Edineţ (1 FG) Soroca (1 FG) Donduşeni (1FG) Rîşcani (3 interviews)
	Centre/Site2 (including 13 municipalities)	Centre Călaraşi (1FG, 1interview) Nisporeni (1 FG) Orhei (3 interviews) Ungheni (1 FG) Hînceşti (4 interviews)
	South/Site3 (including 8 municipalities)	South (including the Autonomous region of Gagauzia) Comrat—Gagauzia (2 FGs) Cantemir (1 FG) Cahul (1 FG, 6 interviews)
Thailand	Ban Chai subdistrict of Udon Thani province (Northeast Thailand)	Ban Chai subdistrict (36 interviews and 2 FGDs)

eastern lowlands (122 households surveyed in 2021) and the Chirkhuwa valley of Bhojpur district in the eastern hills (106 households surveyed in early 2020) (see Table 1). Households were selected on the basis of their participation in an earlier study in 2013 and 2015 respectively.[3] This was to provide a longitudinal perspective. In Moldova, households were selected randomly from household lists across three regions—the North region (193 households sampled in 2021) Central region (250 households sampled in 2021), and the South region (165 households sampled in 2021).[4] In Thailand, 412 households from the north-eastern Ban Chai region were included in the survey, which took place in 2021. The sample was, like in the case of Nepal, based upon household participation in an earlier random sample collected in 2015 and 2018.

Selected households were approached to ask if they were willing to participate in the survey (or follow up survey in the case of Nepal and Thailand) and either oral or written consent was sought, depending on what was culturally appropriate. Questions covered a broad range of topics including asset ownership, current and historical migration status of the family, remittance in-flows and allocation of funds, and the livelihood status of returnees. Data on savings, and the buying and selling of assets over the last decade offered insights into the trajectory of change, and whether households were becoming 'wealthier' or 'poorer'.

In all three sites, a further sample of households was selected for follow up qualitative interviews, 93 of which were carried out.[5] In most cases, they were drawn from the survey, where respondents had agreed to participate in a follow up interview and had left contact details. They were approached again around six to eighteen months after the initial interview and a follow up meeting was arranged. Pandemic disruption meant it was not always possible to interview someone from the same household who was also involved in the survey, and thus a small number of respondents were selected with the help of key informants.

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As the interviews were part of a larger study on migration, having returnees in the family was not a perquisite for selection, but households were required to have some family history of migration, and thus, the majority had some returnees, including current migrants who had returned and then again gone oversees. We specifically selected households who represented different socio-economic backgrounds. In terms of who were interviewed, we could not be too selective due to the logistical challenges of working in remote areas, including pandemic-related disruption. Nevertheless, interviewees included a fair share of both returnees themselves and spouses or parents of returnees (including both men and women). This in fact enriched our data by offering insights into how the livelihoods of the entire household responds were affected by return migration. The interviews were focussed on capturing individual and household experiences of the entire mobility cycle including departure, the migration experience, the process of return, and their lives and livelihoods after return.

To supplement our interviews, we also selected a series of individuals for focus group discussions, the majority of whom were returnee migrants. Participants were selected with the support of local village leaders. Focus groups covered the same topics, but offered a 'community' perspective, as well as capturing some individual experiences, which were shared with the group. As shown in Table 1, we carried out a greater number of focus groups in Moldova, to compensate for the slightly smaller number of interviews (due to pandemic-related disruption).

In terms of how the data was analysed, a process of triangulation was used, whereby we combined the survey with in-depth scrutiny of interview/focus group transcripts. The survey alone offered insights into the current patterns of agrarian differentiation, levels of remittances by different 'wealth' groups and the trajectory of change in terms of accumulation of wealth and distress sales of assets. However, the in-depth interviews and focus groups, which formed the core of our dataset, offered insights into divergent migration experiences. From the interview transcripts, a number of themes were extracted on return migration experiences and outcomes. This included pre-migration options and the recruitment process, how this translated into different types of work overseas, and how these accumulated experiences shaped different post-return outcomes (in terms of livelihoods, investment, distress sales and future migration). For each interview we scrutinized how different experiences related to the economic status of the household—triangulating with the survey data for respondents who were included in the survey.[6] We also compiled multiple narratives from interviews and focus groups on how wealth connected to different migration and return trajectories in the community as a whole. Based upon our coded notes, we were able to identify three broad return migration outcomes, and the contexts behind them, which are covered in detail below.

2.1 On the study communities

2.1.1 Nepal

Nepal has a long history of migration, yet mobility has increased significantly since the 1990s. As of the 1981 census, there were 402,977 Nepalese household members classed as 'absentee', many of whom were in India. The 2021 census however, puts this figure at 2.1 m, with absentees being equivalent to 7.4 per cent of the population, with a large share in the Gulf states and Malaysia (MOLESS 2022). The Department of Foreign Employment has issued over 4.7 m new approvals for Nepali workers to take up overseas employment since 2008–9, while renewing over 1.8 m approvals since 2011–12 (ibid.).[7]

Two sites in Nepal were selected to capture the two main agro-ecological regions, the middle-hills, and lowland plains or Tarai-Madhesh. The plains site is a cluster of five villages in southeastern Dhanusha. The region is highly drought-prone, with poor irrigation infrastructure. This area has deep pre-existing inequalities and a large landless population, dating back to the nineteenth century feudal tax collection apparatus (Regmi 1976; Sugden

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2019). While many larger landlords have today sold off their estates, the primary beneficiaries were medium to large farmers, and there has been limited change for the large community of landless tenants (Sugden 2017). As of 2021, 28.93 per cent of the sample surveyed for this study have less than 0.05 ha of land (classified therefore as 'functionally' landless), out of which just over a third are engaged in exploitative tenancy relations—often sharecropping whereby half of the harvest is surrendered to the landlord. Others worked as agricultural labourers for richer farmers. The functionally landless share has increased from 24.79 per cent in 2013 (based upon panel data), suggesting inequality is increasing. This has been driven by rising costs, with growing indebtedness and distress sales of land (ibid.). A further 14.05 per cent of households own between 0.05 and 0.25 ha, around a third of whom are engaged in tenancy with others engaging in menial farm labour.

There is notable concentration of land with the 18 per cent of households in the sample with more than 1 ha owning a substantial 61.67 per cent of the land, an increase from 57.35 per cent in 2013. The majority of the landless households are from the Dalit community. Most larger farmers are from upper and middle castes, and as well as leasing-out their surplus land, some also act as money lenders, gaining additional income via high interest loans given out to poorer farmers—a phenomena closely linked to the migration economy, as will be discussed below.

The hill site is the Chirkhuwa valley of Bhojpur, in eastern Nepal. The valley was historically home to the indigenous Rai, and in later years the Tamang and Sherpa migrated to the higher altitude areas. Historically, the economic system was grounded in shifting cultivation and customary, clan-based ownership of land. Like in Dhanusha, the historic tax collection apparatus intensified rural differentiation, while the drive to increase revenue resulted in notable in-migration of sedentary cultivator upper castes (Gaenszle 2000; Sugden 2017). This culminated in the dissolution of customary tenure, and the cornering of the best valley land suitable for rice cultivation by incoming settlers with resources and technology to create new fields (Gaenszle 2000; Sugden, Seddon, and Raut 2018). Today, the valley has a complex pattern of inequality. In the upper two sampled villages (1,800–2,200 m) where most of the population are from the Sherpa or marginalized Tamang community, 13.3 per cent of households own <0.25 ha, with 10 per cent being functionally landless (they own <0.05). While a substantial 52 per cent own larger farms of between 0.25 and 1 ha, it is mostly marginal rainfed *bari* land, and agriculture is fragile and very vulnerable to climate stress.

In the rice-growing middle altitude village (1,200–1,400 m), and two lower altitude villages (<800 m), which is home mostly to the Rai community and Hindu upper castes, the land is fertile, with a climate which allows a much wider diversity of crops, including rice. However, land inequalities are more acute due to these lands being long sought after by upper caste settlers with capital and resources. In the middle altitude village, 33.33 per cent of households own less than 0.25 ha of land (with 16.67 per cent of households being functionally landless). Just over a third of households are richer farmers with >1 ha, yet this group own three quarters of the agricultural land. In the lower altitude villages, a large share of land belongs to upper caste absentee landlords and tenancy is widespread. In the sample, 30.7 per cent own less than 0.25 ha (12.82 per cent are functionally landless), 77 per cent of whom are engaged in tenancy. Meanwhile, 48.72 per cent own between 0.25 and 1 ha with 75 per cent engaged in tenancy. A quarter of households with >1 ha own 46.17 per cent of the land, with additional holdings owned by absentee landlords. It is worth noting that in both the sites in Nepal, the richer landowners are better characterized as rent-seeking landlords rather than profit-oriented capitalist farmers. In spite of the emergence of some cash crops, large-scale commercial production is rare.

Both Dhanusha and Bhojpur have a long history of migration. In Bhojpur it began during the nineteenth century, with migration of young men to work in the tea sector in India and the British army. In Dhanusha migration was historically dominated by seasonal

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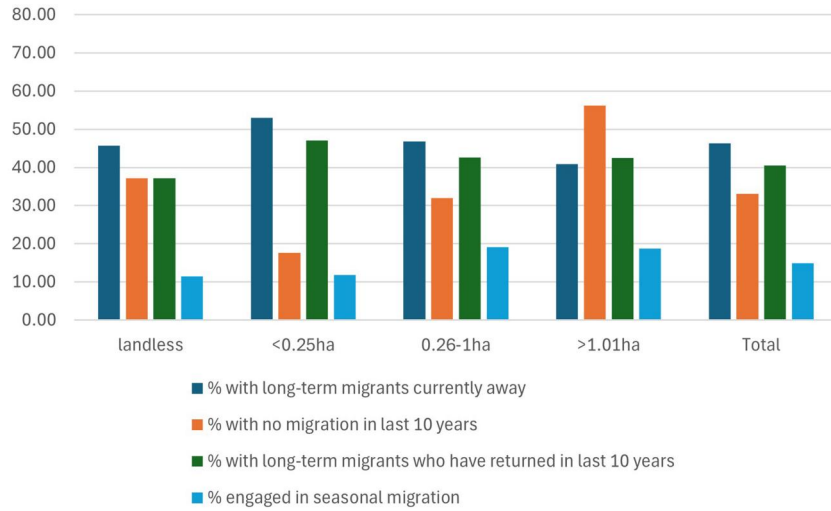

Figure 1. Percentage of household with different types of migrant over last 10 years by land ownership category in Bhojpur.

itinerant movement to India. However, today, in the context of limited employment opportunities and rising costs of living, including demand for cash to pay for education and healthcare, migration has increased exponentially—particularly following the opening up of overseas labour migration channels to the Gulf states after the 1990s.

In the Dhanusha sample, 46 per cent of households have a current migrant, 40.5 per cent have returnees, 14.88 per cent have seasonal migrants, while 33.06 per cent have no recent migration history. In Bhojpur, 66.02 per cent of households have a current migrant, 38.83 per cent have returnees, 7.77 per cent have seasonal migrants, and 27.18 per cent of households have no recent migration history (see Figs 1 and 2). Long term migration is a reality for all socio-economic groups. One may expect migration to be lower amongst better off farmers who have alternative income sources. However, using land ownership as a proxy of wealth, Figs 1 and 2 shows limited evidence that one's land ownership status has much influence over whether one's family has a current migrant—with the share lying at between 45 per cent and 53 per cent of households in Dhanusha and 61–75 per cent in Bhojpur, with no relationship to holding size. The only difference of note is with regards to the agro-ecological zone, whereby just under a quarter (73 per cent) those living in the more ecologically fragile upper altitude zone have migrants, when compared to 62 per cent for those living in the lower zone. Respondents suggested that migration had a longer history here due to the weaker agricultural resource base.

Given that mobility is cyclical, the presence of return migrants is also spread equally across land ownership groups (see Figs 1 and 2). In Bhojpur, there is slightly lower return migration for landless households (at 23 per cent versus 36–45 per cent for landowners). This may be because migration amongst the poorest farmers started more recently, with greater availability of credit locally to fund the agency fees. While overseas migration is today a phenomenon experienced by all wealth groups, as will be noted later, the types of work done by migrants, and the income streams are often vastly different.

GCC countries and Malaysia were the top destinations, which provided employment to over 90 per cent of the migrant workers from both case study sites. A small number of workers from both districts were engaged in long-term migration to India. In the case of Bhojpur, there were also a few long-term migrants working in Cyprus, Singapore, and South Korea.

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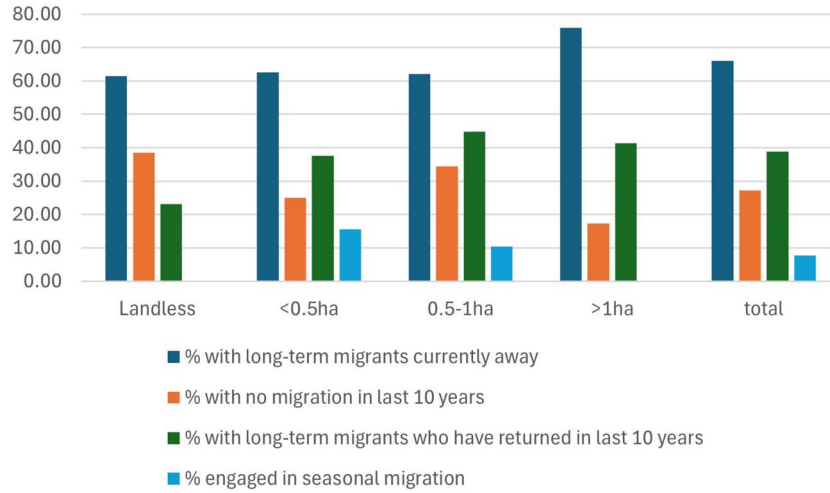

Figure 2. Percentage of household with different types of migrant over last 10 years by land ownership category in Dhanusha.

2.1.2 Moldova

Three regions of the Republic of Moldova, North, Central, and South were included in the sample. All three regions are rural, and while the country lacks the agricultural diversity of Nepal, there are some distinct features, with the north and centre being more fertile and suited to cash crops, while the south is drier and more irrigation dependent. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Moldova has experienced a transition towards a market economy including extensive privatization of state-owned cooperative farms. Farmland was redistributed among the former employees of collective farms (*sovkhoz* and *kolkhoz*), who became owner cultivators. After the implementation of the agrarian reform in the early 2000s, a small share of land (around 1 ha) was assigned to each rural household. The main goal was to promote the creation of self-sustained small and medium farms, oriented towards the market. In contrast to Nepal therefore, inequality has historically been more limited, although the possibility to purchase further land after the 2000s mean that a subset larger commercially oriented farms have emerged, who farm alongside a majority of 'peasant' producers.

In the sample, 41.59 per cent of households own <0.25 ha, which is a substantial number of marginal farms. However, in contrast to Nepal, functional landlessness (owning <0.05 ha) is rare, at just 4.7 per cent, and some of these households are in fact wealthier rural residents who have left agriculture. A sizeable 47.5 per cent of households own between 0.25 and 2 ha of land, and they own a proportionate 39.74 per cent of the land. A small minority (10.91 per cent) of larger commercial farmers own >2 ha, representing 54.57 per cent of the land. Only 9.28 per cent of households are engaged in tenancy, over half of whom are actually richer farmers leasing in additional holdings. Thus, while inequality is present, it is in different in nature from Nepal. Unlike the latter, Moldova does not have a large share of ultra-poor households without land, resources or political power, who are engaged in exploitative tenancy or usury relations—and there is just moderate inequality within the subsistence-oriented peasantry.

The dismantling of the socialist planned economy resulted in a huge loss of jobs in the off-farm sector, rising inflation and the inability of agriculture to support the rural population. This contributed to massive emigration (Görlich and Trebesch 2006; Mogildea 2017; Ianioglo et al., 2021). In 2016, Moldova was the eleventh nation in the world for

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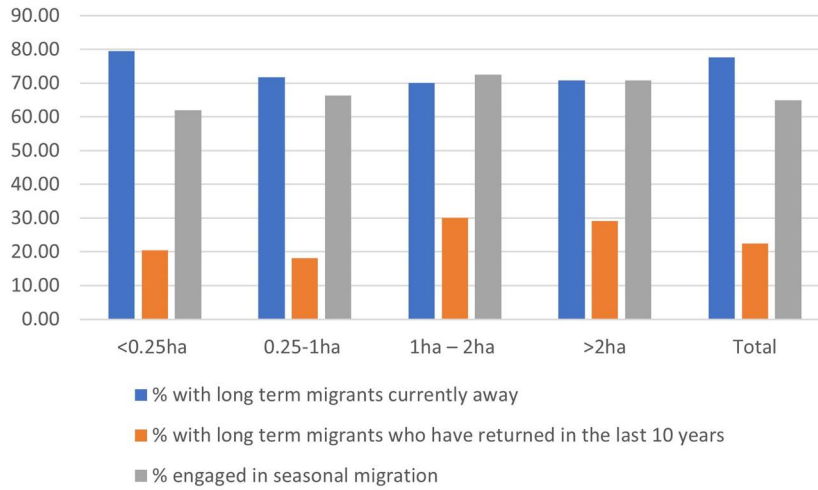

Figure 3. Percentage of household with different types of migrant over last 10 years by land ownership category in North Region.

emigration rates (Liller 2018). The UNDESA estimates the stock number of Moldovan emigrants in 2020 at 1.2 million people (IOM 2021). While the Russian Federation was previously the most common destination, in recent years, the migration flows have shifted towards western Europe. According to our survey, in the last decade, the most popular destinations were the EU (61 per cent), the Russian Federation (27.1 per cent); the UK (4.4 per cent); and Israel (3 per cent). New, less common destinations include the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Kuwait, South Korea and Australia (Drbohlav et al., 2017). In the sample, 32 per cent of households in the North, 50 per cent in the Centre and 47 per cent in the South had a current migrant, while 72 per cent, 49 per cent and 48 per cent, respectively, at least one returnee.

Like with Nepal, the wealth of the farming household (if one takes land ownership as a proxy) appears to have limited influence on the levels of long-term migration (see Fig. 3). Across all the sampled regions, 79.5 for the poorest farmers with <0.25 ha currently have a long-term migrant with 62 per cent having a seasonal migrant. For large farmers with <2 ha, many of whom are commercially oriented, 70.8 per cent of households have a long-term migrant, with exactly the same share having a seasonal migrant.[8] There are possibly slightly higher levels of return for better off households, perhaps due to the greater opportunities at home, a theme dealt with later on. While in the Centre and in the South, the difference between migrating female and male households' members is less pronounced, in the North migration is more a male phenomenon.

2.1.3 Thailand

The Northeast, or so-called Isan, is characterized by marginal soils and a long dry season. In the last decade, however, the Isan region has experienced rising market-oriented production (Rambo 2017). The production of cash crops such as cassava, sugarcane, and rubber has increased, but traditional subsistence farming, particularly glutinous rice, continues to play an important role (Le Mare, Promphaking, and Rigg 2015; Rockenbauch, Sakdapolrak, and Sterly 2019).

The study site includes nine villages in Ban Chai sub-district, in the province of Udon Thani, which is Thailand's top region for sending international workers and receiving remittances from abroad. While the majority of farmers are marginal peasant producers, since 2011 Ban Chai has seen a sharp increase in sugarcane plantations, at the expense of

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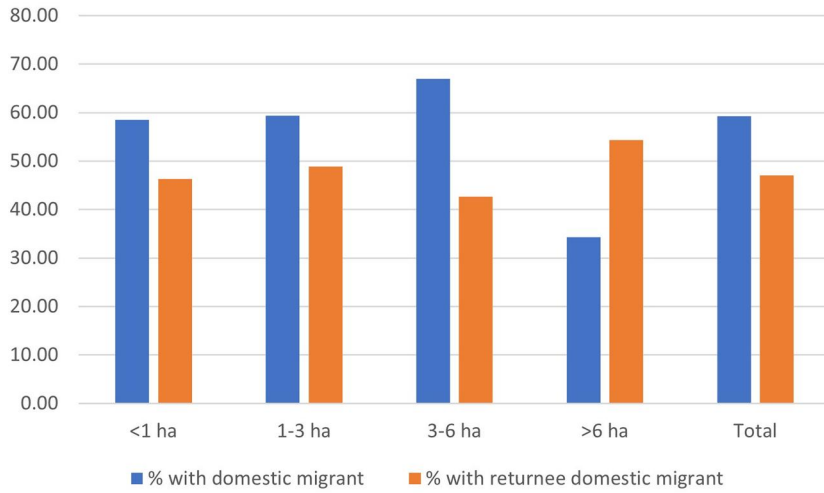

Figure 4. Percentage of households with domestic migrants and returnees over the last 10 years by land ownership category in Ban Chai, Thailand.

rice farming, grazing and forest land (Rockenbauch, Sakdapolrak, and Sterly 2019), changes which have brought about negative environmental and social consequences. The average size of land utilized for farming was approximately 17 Rai, (approximately 2.7 ha). While just under half of the households (47.09 per cent) had holdings between 1 and 3 ha, which are larger on average than Nepal and Moldova, productivity and soil fertility was poor, impaired by fragmented holdings and geological conditions (natural salt pan) and poor soil fertility (salty and sandy soils). The survey shows that 9.7 per cent of the sample is made up of larger farmers with >6 ha and there is moderate inequality in the distribution of these holdings, with the fourth quartile of the sample in terms of land ownership owning 54 per cent of the land. However, like in Moldova, tenancy and landlessness is uncommon and only 11.36 per cent of households own less than 1 ha.

As is taking place across Thailand, rural areas increasingly can no longer rely on agriculture alone in the context of rising expenditure for agricultural inputs, education and healthcare, and labour migration increasingly fills the gap, with only 9.14 per cent of households in the sample having no migration history in the last 10 year. In the Ban Chai sample, 59.28 per cent of households had a family member who was a domestic migrant, most of which was long term (see Fig. 4), with 47.09 per cent having a domestic returnee. Most had migrated to the Greater Bangkok metro area, the eastern seaboard, and tourist destinations in the south. Meanwhile, at the time of research 26.59 per cent of households had an international migrant—the type of mobility which is the focus of this article, with 29.92 per cent having a returnee from overseas (see Fig. 5).

The most popular destinations were South Korea, Taiwan, and Israel, followed by Singapore, Japan, and Australia. A large share of migrants are, like in the case of Nepal, recruited through legal migration programmes supported through bilateral treaties such as the Employment Permit System with South Korea, the IM-Japan programme, and the Thailand-Israel Cooperation. However, some migrants also bypass these formal channels because the recruitment process can be lengthy and cumbersome—and migrate irregularly, often travelling to their destination on tourist visas. The top three job sectors for international migrants are factory work, construction and agriculture. Migrants were both male and female.

Like in Nepal and Moldova, international migration takes place across all land ownership categories (see Figs 4 and 5). The only exception is with regards to domestic mobility, which is

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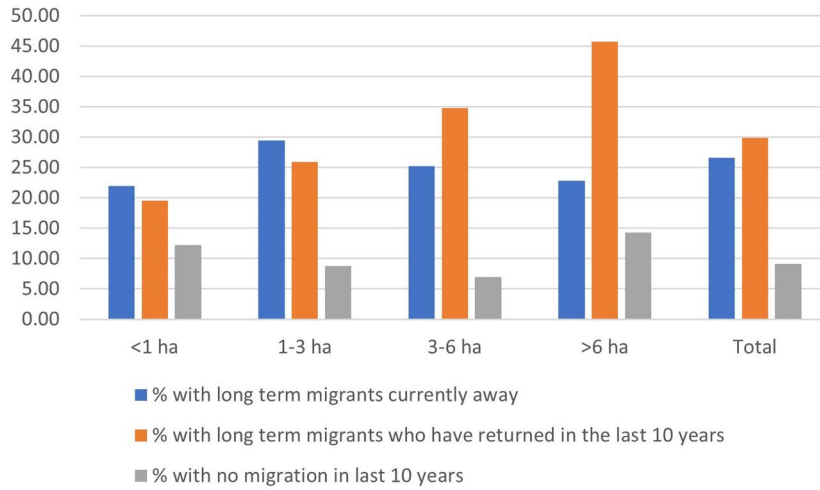

Figure 5. Percentage of household with international migrants and returnees over last 10 years by land ownership category in Ban Chai, Thailand.

notably lower amongst the richer farmers with >6 ha of land. Return migration is also widespread across all wealth groups, but like in Moldova, appears higher amongst the better off farmers (45.71 per cent as compared to an average of 29.92 per cent). This may be due to the opportunities being greater for this group—a core argument made later in this article.

2.2 Return migration and articulation between the peasant and capitalist sector

In all six sites, migration represents a classic 'articulation' between peasant farming and the capitalist sector. Meillassoux (1981) argued that during Europe's industrialization in the nineteenth century, the vast population flows to the cities represented a 'break' from the land, creating a stable proletariat whose labour power was produced, maintained and reproduced *within* domestic capitalism. He contrasts this with the post-war 'guest worker' model of migration to Europe, whereby workers would migrate (without taking dependent family members), and would maintain strong ties to their home community, where they would send money and return when they are no longer able to work due to poor health or retirement. This is arguably profitable for capitalism, as wages for migrants do not need to cover the costs of retirement, the living cost of the migrant during periods spent at home, or when they are unproductive due to illness. Wages also need not cover the longer-term costs of both bringing up and educating children who often stay at home (i.e. creating the new generation of workers), or caring for the elderly after they are no longer productive. These are provided as a 'rent' for capitalism by the peasant economy (Ibid.).

This kind of cyclical, temporary mobility which was experimented with in Europe in the postwar era, is increasingly the dominant pattern of labour migration one observes in low- and middle-income countries today (Sugden 2019; Shah and Lerche 2020). This also characterizes much of the international migration from the study sites analysed for this article.

Firstly, international migration by no means replaces farming or paves the way for 'exit' from agriculture, like with the guest workers to Europe described by Meillassoux. Migration instead represents a structurally embedded feature of agricultural livelihoods. The majority of farmers are effectively 'peasant' producers, using mostly family labour and consuming their own produce. The land provides households with all or part of their food needs, while remittances provide some or all of their cash needs—and for a large share of

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households neither remittances nor farm income is sufficient to meet their subsistence needs. For instance, in Dhanusha of Nepal, agricultural production is almost entirely subsistence oriented with few cash crops, and remittances represent the primary source of cash for the household. The net income from crop sales represents just 1.33 per cent of the income received from remittances. In Bhojpur of Nepal, there are a larger number of cash crops such as cardamom, fruits, and rudraksha, but income from remittances is still far higher, with income from crop sales representing just over a third of what was earned in remittances across the sample, and most of these earnings are from a small number of wealthier farmers.[9]

Similarly, in Moldova, 72 per cent of rural household did not sell any crops in the previous year, with agriculture largely oriented to meeting the household's food security needs. Results of the survey show that agricultural activities represent on average just 3.9 per cent of rural households' income, while off-farm work and remittances constitute the 71.8 per cent and the 24.3 per cent, respectively. The production of cash crops which includes corn (5 per cent of households) and grapes (4 per cent of households) is conducted mainly by the largest landowners, only a few of which are displaying 'capitalist' tendencies. In Thailand meanwhile, in spite of a rise in cash crop production, particularly sugarcane, the priority for most farmers is still the production of subsistence crops and most farms are dependent upon household labour. Thus while 80 per cent of farmers were cultivating sugarcane, it is only large farmers who are producing it extensively as a primary income source, with those owning over 50 rai of land (20 per cent of the sample) controlling 70 per cent of the sugarcane fields. Remittances provide a majority of farmers a vital source of cash, particularly for investments in education, health, and agricultural inputs.

Secondly, as also argued by Meillassoux, migration is fundamentally cyclical. Most migrants travel alone, or sometimes in Moldova and Thailand, as a couple. In Nepal and Thailand, long-term settlement overseas is challenging due to fixed contracts and visa regimes. In Moldova, settlement can be possible for those with Romanian passports, but the cost of bringing non-productive dependents and settling permanently overseas was often prohibitive. In this context, return migration was commonplace across all the six sites in all three countries—and an overall assessment of the qualitative testimonies suggests that the majority return at some point.

In Nepal, 38.83 per cent and 40.5 per cent, respectively, of sampled households in Bhojpur and Dhanusha had family members who had *returned* from long term migration overseas in the last ten years (see Figs 1 and 2). Most travelled out to the Gulf and Malaysia on fixed-term contracts, and while some could extend it, or take up a new job in the destination country, permanent settlement in any of the popular labour destinations was rare, with no recorded cases in our dataset.

In Udon Thani, Thailand, just under a third of households have a returnee from overseas with just under half having an internal returnee (see Figs 4 and 5). When it comes to the reasons for return, like in Nepal, the majority (26 per cent) of migrants returned due to contracts ending, although poor living and working conditions were also cited. The second most common reason was to take care of aging family members. This data clearly reflects Thailand's aging society and its tendency to hold on to the notion that children must care for elderly parents when the need arises. As noted above, the provision of elderly care not from migrants' wages but from the rural economy at home, represents one of the many ways through which the peasant economy 'subsidizes' migrant labour for capitalism. The reasons for returning also have a gendered component, with return to take care of elders being a common reason of return amongst female migrants.

In Moldova, international migration is generally for longer than in Thailand and Nepal. This is because immigration restrictions for Moldovans to western Europe—while by no means representing 'free' movement—have recently become less restrictive. In 2014, Moldova signed the European Neighborhood Policy, which has significantly eased the visa

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formalities for working in the EU. Many also migrated to the EU on Romanian passports[10] and thus were less likely to be obliged to come home after one's contract was over. There was a strong cyclical element to all migration from Moldova whereby migrants would return, work on the farm for some years, and then migrate again. Furthermore, a large share of migrants return after they reach retirement age. In the survey, 22.4 per cent of households had at least one current returnee from long-term migration overseas.

It is worth noting also, that in Nepal and Moldova, there was also some seasonal overseas migration where return is embedded in the very practice of migration. In Moldova, a substantial 65 per cent of households were engaged in short-term seasonal migration to Europe (see Fig. 3). In Nepal, there was some seasonal mobility, mostly to India. However, this was less common nowadays, at just 7.77 per cent in Bhojpur and 14.88 per cent in Dhanusha.[11]

It is important to emphasize that while across all three sites, there is a clear structural context within which return migration has some 'inevitability'—each individual's circumstances are unique, and one's decision to come home at a particular juncture (especially if it was prior to retirement or the end of a contract), usually stems from a combination of factors. These include employment related reasons, such as the loss of a job; economic reasons such as the realization that savings were less than expected, or conversely, sufficient to meet 'investment plans' at home; or familial obligations such as caring responsibilities or homesickness. Rather than attempt to explain return decisions, what this article seeks to do, is to understand the outcomes for household livelihoods *after* the migrant returns home. While each migrants' experience is complex and nuanced, an analysis of the qualitative testimonies revealed three common narratives around the outcomes of return, which will be dealt with below.

2.3 Return migration and simple reproductive needs

It is clear that for a majority of households, remittances from migration covers simple reproduction needs—in other words, they supplement agriculture to cover the cash component of subsistence costs including those related to covering food (what cannot be produced on the farm), accommodation and education. However, they do not support the accumulation of wealth or 'transformative' livelihood change at a household level. Narratives from interviews around the return of migrants to the community signal that for most households, the same agricultural livelihood that was pursued prior to migration is continued following the return of a migrant, albeit for some, with a modest improvement in living standards. In most cases, this is a livelihood grounded in peasant agriculture, oriented around subsistence farming with limited market-oriented production.

To begin, it is useful to understand how remittances are used. In Nepal, the majority of sampled farmers are either tenants or owners of small, marginal plots, and have very limited surplus cash left after covering day-to-day living costs. The survey found that in Dhanusha, food costs make up on average 19 per cent of estimated remittance expenditure over the last year, and a significant share went to meet the daily cash needs of households such as school fees (13 per cent), medical bills (8 per cent), and house repairs (11 per cent), not to mention family events such as weddings. In Bhojpur, food makes up an estimated 16 per cent of remittance expenditure, with 14 per cent going towards education, 12 per cent for medical bills, and 9 per cent for clothes, amongst other costs. The largest share, at 23 per cent on average, went towards paying off loans. Debt is widespread due to the high upfront costs of at least Rs200,000 (approx. $1,500) which is paid to overseas recruitment agents, and all but one household in the sample had financed migration through these loans. When households are able to accumulate savings, a first priority is often to upgrade one's house rather than to invest in 'productive' ventures.

The situation for Moldova somewhat reflects the Nepali context, with remittances not being a relevant source of wealth accumulation for a consistent share of households.

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However, the most frequent use of remittances over the last year was for house repairs or re-building, accounting for an estimated 23.8 per cent on average of the total remittances spent. This unfortunately has become a burden for some given the rise of prices for gas and electricity recently, particularly in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. The second most important allocation of remittances is on food (20.3 per cent), health services (16.1 per cent), and clothes (11.6 per cent). Investments in agricultural assets and services accounts for just 10.9 per cent, children's education makes up 6.8 per cent, and debt servicing makes up 2.5 per cent. Only 4.4 per cent on average is reported to have been 'saved' for future investments.

In Thailand, data on the percentage allocation of remittances was not available, although the survey did show that 69 per cent of households used remittances in the last 5 years to cover debt servicing, 66 per cent allocated them towards healthcare costs and 73 per cent used them to cover school fees. However, only 48 per cent of households reported allocating remittances to savings, and less than a quarter made high value productive investments in land, a business or agricultural equipment—a topic dealt with below.

Set against this context of limited savings during the migration process, interviews with over sixty households across the three countries, found that in most cases, the return of a migrant had a very limited impact on overall household livelihoods—which remained much the same as they did prior to them going overseas. There were only limited cases of returnees making investments which would support long term and sustained accumulation of wealth (a phenomena discussed below), and for many returnees, a future spell of migration was on the horizon. This does not mean that migration episodes do not bring tangible economic benefits. For instance, the investment in housing contributes to an enhanced standard of living, while migration savings may have also helped pay off a loan, cover costs of a cultural expense such as a wedding, or contributed to the education costs of the young. Such experiences are exemplified by one female return migrant to Thailand from South Korea. Her daily labour jobs were tough as she was an irregular migrant. During her stay, she met her husband, who worked in a factory as an authorized migrant worker. During the Covid 19 pandemic, there was an amnesty for irregular migrants and she returned to Thailand and gave birth to their first child. Her husband remained abroad and using his remittances, they paid off her debts and built a larger house in her husband's village, but had not been able to make any investments in land or productive assets.

In terms of tangible improvements in livelihoods after return, there was a subset of households who have been able to purchase at least some land. In Bhojpur of Nepal for instance, 40.2 per cent of households with current migrants had bought land in the last 20 years, and 46.85 per cent of families with returnees had purchased a plot. However, the amounts bought were small. About 47 per cent of returnees had bought less than 0.5 ha—which is far below what is needed for food security, and only 29 per cent had bought more than 1 ha—which would be considered a sizeable plot on which one could yield a surplus. In both Nepal sites, the continued concentration of land amongst large farmers and landlords, has made it more difficult for new entrants to the land market. The prices of land have risen considerably with the improvements in transportation, lowering the incentives for established large landowners to part from their holdings—and even if they move away from the area, most prefer to rent it out rather than sell it. In fact, many purchases appeared to have been from other small farmers selling off land due to financial distress. Investment in other assets such as agricultural machinery or livestock were negligible. In this context therefore, most investments by returnees simply support food security, but not longer-term 'accumulation' of wealth.

In Moldova meanwhile, only 8.7 per cent of households with current migrants acquired land in the last 20 year and the plots bought were also small, at just 0.66 ha on average, with 73.9 per cent of households that bought new plots of land investing in less than 1 ha. Out of households with returnees, just 6.8 per cent had bought land. The average size of

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acquired plots bought by families with returnees was 1.1 ha, while 69.6 per cent had bought less than 1 ha. Several participants in interviews and focus groups noted that the land price was increasing due to the growing interest of large producers in acquiring plots for market-oriented production. Even though there were returnees willing to buy land, farmers recounted that competition with commercialized farmers at the top of the agrarian structure made entry to the land market challenging—with prices for land spiralling. While many of these larger farmers also had migrants, they represented a minority, and large land purchases were out of reach for the medium-small farmer majority. The process whereby large areas of land were captured by enterprising farmers in the decades following decollectivization was noted by one respondent with reference to a local mayor:

> The whole land was privatized [after the agrarian reform] and given to people. The mayor thought that, if he could foster industrial development in his village, he could create jobs and so on. He needed money. He used all the wealth of the municipality as a collateral. People didn't want to sell their land as there was no price. The mayor proposed them 10 times the actual price in order for no one to refuse selling their land, and he managed to buy all the land around the village.

Compared to Nepal and Thailand, investments in non-land agricultural assets in Moldova were higher, yet still limited. Over the last five years, remittances were invested in household animals, followed by agricultural machinery such as tractors and combines, with only a small share having invested in land (see Table 2).

For many households, higher level investments in agriculture which could potentially support the accumulation of wealth such as large areas of land, agricultural equipment or the assets for an off-farm enterprise, are not only financially prohibitive, but they bear considerable risk, and incentives are low. One farmer in Bhojpur who had returned 15 years ago from the Gulf and was carrying out commercial farming, reflected on the situation for returnees:

> The environment (watawaran) and circumstances (paristhiti) are not favourable …. that is why many people are not engaging in entrepreneurship professionally, and the operation of enterprises is not smooth. I have planted some onions here …. I am not looking for profits as such; it doesn't look good if people see me working as wage labourer for someone else. So, if I grow onions in my own farm, I can also make 300-400 rupees from there.

In this context, agricultural investments after return have offered some income to replace the loss of remittances, but the respondent sees little scope for accumulation through these investments. If anything, their primary achievement is the dignity of being self-sufficient on one's own farm rather than working for others.

Table 2. Medium-term investments (over last 5 years) in agriculture by households with current migrants and returnees in Moldova.

Per cent of households that used remittances received in the last year for	Households with current returnees	Households with current migrants
Household animals	18.3%	22.7%
Agricultural machinery (2-weels and 4-weels tractor; combine)	8%	6.5%
Irrigation systems	0.8%	1.5%
Land	3%	3.8%

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In some cases, migrants who return make initial investments, for instance in land, yet then have to sell these resources later due to financial insecurity. In such cases, they eventually face the same compulsions they faced before they moved, as the following response from Dhanusha suggests:

> People who had gone for foreign employment earlier can purchase 5-10 katas [local land unit] with their earnings. Say, we are two brothers, my older brother is abroad and I am home. If I sell any land, my older brother would be willing to purchase it. Why? He has earning from abroad, and I don't. Such people are the ones purchasing who had gone abroad 2-4 years or more. Those who went abroad 20 years ago had made progress. But now that they are home, they are in need to sell their lands, and those who had migrated more recently, are the ones purchasing.

These sentiments were shared by another farmer in Dhanusha, who made it clear that for returnees, the success of a business is not guaranteed—and failure results in repeat migration:

> A positive aspect [of migration] is that people who are not sound economically can go abroad, and make some money. But with that earned income, you take an example, this is a small shop, they have invested 10-20,000 in this. In my view, they cannot even sell goods worth 200-500 rupees in day. How can they earn a living? Their savings from abroad get used up, and then then their option is to revert back to what they did earlier—go and work on others' farms to survive or go abroad.

Such experiences whereby businesses fail to offer long term accumulation, were picked up amongst research participants from Moldova also. For example, one returnee, a woman in her late fifties, established a museum and guesthouse using money earned as a caregiver in Italy. However, the profit was not regular enough to pay off the credit. She therefore had to return to work in Italy seasonally and providing administrative and digital media support to her business remotely while one of her family members was looking after the business at home.

In Moldova, with regards to agricultural investments, there was a perception that for the majority of farmers who had only modest holdings of less than 2 ha, any investment in agriculture would not be profitable and would not facilitate the accumulation of wealth. Only those with capital and a very large farm could invest in labour-saving technologies and large areas of land and yield a profit, as one returnee noted when asked about the lack of young people investing in agriculture:

> Maybe some would like to [invest in agriculture], but there is not that much land. Working on a few hectares is not profitable; you cannot invest in the equipment, which is very expensive. When the kolkhozes (collective farms) were abolished, there were some who managed to take ownership of the big chunks of land. Those young people with small plots will not be productive at all.

In Thailand also, respondents felt that opportunities for investment were limited for a majority of returnees. According to the survey, most returnees went back to farming (37 per cent), while others started small businesses such as shops or restaurants (15 per cent). While returnees had often gained new skills from their work overseas in agriculture, construction, and business/management, the precarious nature of their investments often hindered them from accumulating savings. In this context, many sought to migrate again. One female in her 30s who returned from South Korea after 5 years due to being deported, described her frustration on her return:

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> I want to be able to earn a big chunk of money to save. Right now back in Udon I earn enough money to get by through selling food at the local village market. I am searching Facebook every day about ways to get back to Korea.

The research team also met a woman who had a bachelor's degree in veterinary medicine and was working in a vet clinic in the community. Her mother, an undocumented worker in South Korea, supported her financially, enabling her to complete her degree. However, despite her education, she found that her earnings were much lower than her mother's wages in a factory in South Korea, which led her to migrate as well.

2.4 Return with weaker livelihoods

While the overall sentiment in interviews was that households see limited structural change in livelihoods after family members returned from overseas, there are some cases whereby return pushes the household into further economic insecurity—compelling them to sell land and assets. This was particularly widespread in Nepal, due to the high fees that migrants pay to employment agencies to secure their migration, for which households invariably need to take loans for. This means that failure to earn as much as was planned or a loss of income abroad, often forces a household into debt.

Indebtedness and loss of assets after return was most common when a migrant had been cheated or deceived overseas—a phenomena which is becoming particularly widespread in the Gulf states (see also Fernando and Lodermeier 2022). The vast majority of reports of fraud or deception across the three countries, were from the households of farmers in Nepal who were landless or land poor before they sent a family member overseas. Such households lacked social networks and were likely to be already in debt. To give some examples, a migrant from the Dalit community in Dhanusha was deceived over the type of job they would be doing and was made to do hard labour carrying sacks at a building site. After leaving the job, they were jailed for 6 months for breaking the terms of their visa (which dictates that a migrant's legal status in the country is tied to their employer), and returned home only after family members paid money. In another case from Bhojpur, a migrant (also from the Dalit community) had migrated to Saudi Arabia. After being underpaid and mistreated and being trapped in a job he had not signed up for, his family had to pay 400,000 rupees (approx. $3,100) to have him 'released'. Instances of distress after return were amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic, when many companies closed down. One family recounted how their son had migrated for just 10 months, but the company closed after the pandemic began. They had to come home with no savings, having only just been able to settle the debts he took prior to going abroad.

In cases such as this, the loss of earnings due to deception or exploitation meant that migration has contributed to a cycle of debt and further hardship on the migrants' return—often culminating in the sale of land. Notably, these stories of exploitation were rare amongst better off households, suggesting that poorer socio-economic groups, and particularly the Dalit community may even be specifically targeted by corrupt agents. In Dhanusha of Nepal for instance, 14.8 ha of land was reportedly lost over the last two decades, 87 per cent of which was due to 'distress' sales. This was over double the 6.21 ha which reportedly was acquired over the same period. Interviews suggested that a large share of these sales were related to unpaid migration debts.

In the case of Thailand, international labour migration is also largely dependent upon brokers and job agencies. Like in Nepal, there were anecdotal stories of similar incidents of deceit and cheating by agents, leading to cycles of debt or even loss of land as collateral. However, none of the interviewed households recounted such an experience. The overall levels of distress were likely lower due to the fact that the extremes of inequality, including landlessness and usury, and associated economic distress which makes one vulnerable to fraud, were not as acute when compared to Nepal. Cases of deception were not common in

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Moldova, where the majority of migrants do not need to engage with 'brokers' but look for jobs via informal channels, including family networks. Those with Romanian passports can freely work in any EU country. The visa-free regime with Russia also makes it a convenient migration destination.

2.5 Accumulation and upward mobility after return

It is clear thus far, that migrant wages, while higher than at home, are for a majority, rarely sufficient to allow returnees to make savings which can be used for large scale productive investments which support the long-term accumulation of wealth, or even an 'exit' from agriculture. Households require both migrant remittances *and* agriculture to survive—echoing the Marxian argument regarding the articulation between the peasant farm and capitalist sector outlined above. A majority of migrants are paid a wage which covers just *minimum* subsistence needs—yet the costs of labour reproduction—that is, bringing up the young, supporting dependents, retirement and healthcare, are provided for free by the agricultural sector. The fact that wages remain at a subsistence level means the risks associated with migration are high—and the high upfront costs associated with migration (in the case of Nepal and Thailand) mean that some households make a net loss on their return.

However, in spite of this, there are some instances whereby returnees are able to make substantial productive investments on return, which would allow them to produce a notable surplus from the land to increase productivity and profit—and support the household to actually accumulate wealth in the long run. Understanding the contexts whereby returnees do make a *successful* investment in productive assets is critical at a time when governments are seeking to 'harness' the skills and cashflows coming back from overseas migration. As will be seen, however—this is once again, aligns largely to pre-existing patterns of differentiation.

From reviewing the interview narratives, the primary cases of successful accumulation were due to investments in land—but not on small plots to enhance food security as discussed above, but substantial areas which are sufficient for the household to secure a surplus, and which can be used for the production of niche agricultural products—with accompanying investments in high value labour saving, irrigation, or agro-processing technology. Examples of successful returnee investments encountered by the research team in Moldova for instance, include plum orchards and vineyards (including drying machinery) or commercial plantations of fodder crops such as alfalfa. In the case of Thailand, investments included organic coffee plantations, as well as agroforestry. In the hills of Bhojpur in Nepal, rudraksha (a sacred bead from the stone of the tree *Elaeocarpus Ganitrus*) and cardamom, as well as agroforestry, were important uses of new land purchases which could be profitable. In the plains of Dhanusha in Nepal, commercially oriented dairies, poultry farms or pond fisheries were most common. The second form of investments were in non-agricultural enterprises. These included for instance beekeeping in Moldova, and agro-tourism in Moldova and Thailand.

In seeking to understand the prerequisites to successful investment and accumulation, prior wealth and asset ownership, savings, and lack of debt appeared from interviews to be by far the most important. Firstly, migrants from larger farmer households who already have food security from the land were in a much stronger position to make a large productive investments on return than those who were in chronic food insecurity. In fact, in most cases, the land and assets being bought, were sold by those poorer farmers who were making distress sales due to debt.

Larger farmer households will have been in a much stronger position to save remittance cash (rather than it being absorbed to cover food or other needs of the family back home). One participant in northern Moldova, when asked about post-return agricultural investments, highlighted the need for owned assets: 'There are no new people entering the sector as you need money, machinery, etc. You cannot ask for too big loans, you need owned

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resources'. In the case of Nepal and Thailand, where large debts were incurred to fund migration, those who already had relative livelihood security from the land were much more likely to have paid these off—and many had not even needed to take loans in the first place.

Importantly, the levels of remittances vary along class lines, and this also facilitated greater investment by returnees who had already been prosperous prior to migrating. This phenomena was particularly notable in Nepal, and to some extent, Thailand—due to dominance of middlemen in mediating access to overseas employment (see below). This has significant implications on the ability of households to save while overseas.

It is in Nepal, where there is both severe inequality *and* dependence on middlemen, that these differences were most notable between different overseas migrants. For instance, farmers with migrants owning <0.25 ha in Bhojpur were earning Rs105,846 ($800) on average from overseas remittances, compared to Rs334,615 ($2,500) for those owning 1–2 ha.[12] Similarly, in Dhanusha, Rs153,178 ($1,150) on average was earned by landless/tenant farming households, compared to Rs333,300 ($2,500) for those with 1–2 ha. One commonly cited reason for this divergence was because farmers who were in a stronger position economically could afford to migrate to the more lucrative destinations such as Korea or Romania, where the middleman fees were higher. However, as there were just a small handful of such migrants in the dataset, a more likely explanation was connected to the fact that that even for migration to the Gulf (which dominates international mobility), migrants could pay higher agent fees to secure higher status jobs. Also, those with higher levels of education and knowledge of English were more likely to access service sector jobs such as in supermarkets or offices, which carried opportunities for promotion. For instance, a wealthier family with a large landholding whom we interviewed had paid Rs 350,000 ($2,800) to send a son to Qatar. This was notably more than the 200,000 ($1,600) which most migrants would pay for menial jobs. The migrant worked in a petrol station and was earning Rs150,000 ($1,200) per month—significantly more than what was earned by construction workers in the same country (currently around Rs35,000 or $275), suggesting it was a management rather than menial labouring job. Construction work was considered the least lucrative, didn't require English language skills and had the lowest agent fees, and the vast majority of Dalit migrants from Dhanusha worked in this sector.

The role of prior wealth in shaping post-return success was exemplified in the panel data on land purchases which was collected for Dhanusha in Nepal between 2013 and 2021. Only 1 per cent of purchases were from the poorest households who had been landless as of 2013. Looking at the total transactions over the last 20 years, it appears that most of the larger transactions were from the richer farmers with >2 ha. The average purchased size of plot was 0.69 ha for this group—whereas it was low at just 0.16 ha for those in the 0.25-1ha category, and was just 0.03 ha for landholders with <0.25 ha. One richer farmer had bought up to 1.34 ha.

In the hill site of Bhojpur there was a similar trend whereby better off returnees had invested in land to increase *rudraksha* cultivation. While conducting fieldwork in 2015, a lot of returnees were investing in plantations, with a clear class dimension to the opportunities it offered. Most large investments in land were amongst families with migrants who already had larger plots of land, and the profits for returnees varied accordingly. During the study in 2015, out of those whose trees were mature, poorer farmers owning <0.25 ha were earning on average Rs27,000 ($200), a sum which was far less than the average remittance earnings for this group. This was an even higher, at Rs50,833 ($375) for those with 0.25–1 ha and Rs82,800 ($620) for those with 1-2 ha. However, the role of rudraksha as an area of investment could be numbered. Interviews in 2022 suggested that the trade was in decline due to the closure of the Chinese border due to the pandemic and competition from other regions—reminding one of the lingering risk of all such 'investments' in a

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liberalized global economy. While in 2015, Rs71,000 ($530) was earned on average by the trade, by 2020, the average income was just Rs 49,500 ($370).

2.5.1 Exceptions to the norm: upward class mobility following return migration

While we have shown that successful investment after return is heavily influenced by one's prior wealth and asset ownership—there are exceptions to the norm whereby migrants from poorer backgrounds have been able to move up the class ladder following return. To some extent, this may stem from luck—with several returnees from Nepal reporting that ending up with a supportive employer opened up opportunities for job progression. This phenomena of 'chance encounters' has been theorized by Gladkova and Mazzucato (2017). However, in most cases there were clear structural processes which shaped upward mobility.

In Moldova in particular (relative to Nepal and Thailand), we interviewed a greater number of returnees who had gone on to be successful entrepreneurs despite coming from relatively marginalized backgrounds. This in part is helped by the fact that inequalities were relatively lower, with even poorer farmers having at least a plot of land—in contrast to Nepal, where inequality was severe with many trapped in a cycle of debt. Also, given that migration channels didn't depend on middlemen and agencies, and migrants had relative freedom to pursue a range of employment opportunities overseas, households were less likely to return from overseas in debt.

Another notable factor in Moldova which facilities post return investment and accumulation is a relatively supportive policy environment for migrants and returnees, and in particular, post-return assistance—an important perquisite for successful reintegration as outlined in the literature (Ruben, van Houte, and Davids 2009; Haase and Honerath 2016). Since the late 2000s, the Moldovan Government has adopted a 'migration and development' approach, integrating migration policy into broader social policies. A key objective has been to attract migrant and diaspora capital to support the country's socio-economic development. Between 2009 and 2014, Moldova negotiated eleven bilateral agreements on social security and migrant protection, while in 2008 Moldova became one of the first countries to sign the Mobility Partnership Declaration with the EU and fifteen Member States, facilitating safe and regular migration, extending to migrant skilling and supporting entrepreneurship and the transfer of social security benefits. Importantly, they have established programmes specifically focused on supporting reinvestment by returnees. Key programmes include DAR 1 + 3 and PARE 1 + 1 (later renamed PARE 1 + 2). DAR 1 + 3 supports local development projects through a consortium model. The government funds a portion (1), while additional resources are provided by local authorities, diaspora contributions, and development partners (+3). The PARE programmes, provide state financing equal to the financial capital invested in enterprises by returnees or their first-degree relatives. A large share of the successful returnees interviewed had benefitted from such programmes to invest their earnings, as one respondent recounted:

> After university, I worked in construction in Moldova, and then I worked in Spain for 10 years, where I carried out manual work. Then, the program PARE 1 + 1 appeared, and I came back to Moldova, and I invested in machinery. In the tenth and last year, I used to tell everyone I didn't want money nor anything else, I only wanted to come back home (Male 55-60 North).

In Moldova, two female interviewees recounted how they had benefitted from these schemes. One of them had started a lavender business, and the other has set up a donkey farm, managing to enter a niche market of dairy products to be sold online and in local retail shops and markets. Circular migration of one family member (usually the partner) was still, however, a household strategy to strengthen the enterprise financially, as well as a

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resource to resort to in the case of shocks (e.g. losses, unexpected expenses, etc.). Nevertheless, starting a successful business in rural areas was depicted by informants as a paramount solution for those who want to come back or stay in their home country.

There were some similar schemes in Nepal such as the Reintegration of Returnee Migrant Workers (ReMi), a bilateral initiative of the governments of Nepal and Switzerland, in 2022, and a bilateral programme with the Republic Korea, only for workers returning from there. These programmes aimed for social and economic reintegration of migrant workers, providing them with psychosocial counselling services and support in entrepreneurship development and securing local employment. However, programmes such as this were limited in scope[13] when compared to their equivalents in Moldova, and oblivious to the larger contexts of inequality and a challenging investment environment. Most initiatives until now, including ReMi were focused on trainings and loans, unlike in Moldova which involved direct cash grants. With the poorest returnees often already in debt, the risks were simply too high.

In the case of Thailand, while some bilateral programmes with labour receiving countries such as Korea, Israel and Japan, had integrated pre-departure trainings,[14] legal counselling and limited reintegration initiatives, there remained a significant lack of comprehensive support for returnees. The few reintegration initiatives that did exist, like Nepal, were often constrained by limited budgets and only targeted a small subset of returnees. Furthermore, those who migrated irregularly outside these bilateral programmes received no reintegration support. In this context, a large number of returnees did not receive the necessary assistance to translate their overseas-acquired skills and remittances into sustainable local investment opportunities—unless they already had substantial land and assets at home.

As well as a supportive policy environment, the successful mobilization of social networks was one of the only remaining factors which could support returnees in making investments for those from a weaker socio-economic background. For instance, many return migrants that became successful rural entrepreneurs in Moldova provided advice to others who were seeking investments of remittances into agricultural related businesses—and those who were tied into these social networks benefited. As one of our participants, in her 50s, mentioned:

> Some young people are asking me about the business, they say that they are following me and they like what I do. And when some of them visit Moldova for the holidays, they buy flowers from me for their parents and families. Sometimes they ask me for advice if it is worth investing here. While some people say that it is better not to invest in a business here in Moldova, I am saying that it is worth it and send them all the information regarding available programs and grants. I want to encourage them.

Several successful returnees in Moldova had taken large areas of land on lease. The process of acquiring the lease requires some level of knowledge of the bureaucracy and is helped by access to relevant knowledge networks. The same applies to some of the returnee support programmes, where prior knowledge, which often comes through friends, and what is required to apply was often a perquisite to benefitting from them.

In the case of Nepal and Thailand, the few cases of households from a marginalized economic background successfully making investments after return were often linked to social networks, particularly when it came to navigating the paperwork necessary to benefit from government programmes or to lease land. A migrant to Qatar who had been from a landless family in Dhanusha learnt from friends back home about the process of bidding for a lucrative contract for a public pond to use for fisheries, which was successful. He described the process, which required considerable forward planning and engagement with the bureaucracy. The tender for the pond would only come out every five years and had been complicated by recent local government restructuring. The migrant in question consulted

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with a friend from overseas about the process, who in turn spoke to the *hakim* (chief administrator). He timed his return from overseas with the opening of the tender, and was able to put in a successful bid with his friend.

In contrast, lack of access to social networks was reportedly an impediment to successful investment or operation of an enterprise following return migration. One Dalit farmer for instance, voiced his frustration at his effort to set up a livestock business after his return:

> We heard there was some fund for 'ghar' (building construction of buffalo farm) of about 2.5 lakhs [250,000 Nepali rupees]—they provided no support to us. I had filled in the application for this but I did not get selected. They are providing such grants only to their party affiliates and those near to them.

The returnee in question was eventually able to secure a loan from the Agricultural Development Bank, yet in doing so had to leave his 0.5 ha of land as collateral.

A final factor which could support successful return, even for those who had been in a relatively weak economic position prior to migrating, was sustained long term migration, for up to a decade or longer. There were a number of migrants, who had been abroad for a considerable length of time, and had been able to climb the employment ladder—particularly for those who were lucky enough to find jobs in the service sector. The migrant above for instance from Dhanusha who had started the fisheries business had been away for two decades, worked in an office, first doing menial jobs, but had a supportive employer who offered him promotion to a management role, and thus was able to achieve some class mobility as a result of his migration experience.

Another respondent in Dhanusha of Nepal, who was a marginal farmer from the Dalit community, had returned just a year ago, and with his wife had started a successful clothing store in the village. However, he also had two decades of migration behind him, with several breaks in between. Initially, he did not save much as he lived in a large extended family, but when he split from his family it became easier. After the first phase of migration he had purchased 0.5 ha of land, which was leased out while he was away, offering sufficient food for the wife and family to subsist without agriculture, and allowing them to save.

Often repeat cycles of migration were necessary before such returnees were able to make large investments, and rise up the economic ladder at home. One returnee from Ban Chai, Thailand, had already migrated twice to Korea and wanted to establish an organic farming venture and settle at home. He was not supported by his family, as they were not open to taking up new farming practices. Having lived abroad helped him develop an entrepreneurial mindset, so he migrated once again to Taiwan to save some more money, and when he returned he was finally able to buy a plot of land and start his organic greenhouse farming business.

It is worth noting also, that even for successful returnees, the risk of falling back into financial insecurity and indebtedness was still high at a time of widespread agrarian stress, and this risk was particularly acute for those lacking substantial assets. One Dhanusha returnee who was a small landholder (<1 ha) who had been abroad for almost 20 years on and off and had started a business, noted that though they didn't plan to migrate again, they may be compelled to in the case of significant expenses such as dowry:

> Now I don't plan to migrate again … in Tarai, a daughter's wedding requires a lot of dowry. That is the biggest problem. You need at least 10 lakh [1 million] rupees to get a daughter married. You will need more actually. My daughters are small now, one is 9-10 years and the other is 8. The son is 5. There is time before their marriage, but I need to prepare for it beforehand. Otherwise I will have to take loan at the time of marriage, how

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else will I manage. It would be very difficult to repay the loan for me. I wouldn't be able to pay it by staying in Nepal, I would have to go abroad.

3. Conclusions

This article has shown that in the three study regions, migration is cyclical and return migration is a structurally embedded as part of household livelihood strategy, which is rooted in an articulation between the capitalist and peasant sectors. The important issue of interest, however, is the longer-term trajectory for migrants within agriculture and the rural economy after they return. In spite of efforts by governments and international development actors to harness the entrepreneurship and resources of return migrants, our interviews suggest this is an exception rather than the norm. For a majority, return to the community after a spell outside largely entails a reintegration into the peasant economy. For some this carries with it modest improvements in living standards such as a new house or slightly expanded farm—although rarely to the point that they are producing sizeable surplus and 'accumulating' wealth. In some contexts, return can result in a decline in living standards in the long term—a process driven by the fact that those who were already poor prior to migration were particularly vulnerable to deception and indebtedness during the migration process.

While return migration can result in transformative change in one's livelihood, this is to a large extent mediated by one's position in the rural class structure. Migrants whose families were better off prior to going overseas, with sizeable land and assets are less likely to have debt and are in a better position to save (as one would expect), yet they have also been shown to earn higher remittances as well. This puts them in a much stronger position to make large investments on return—suggesting there is a reproduction (rather than transformation) of rural class relations through the migration process.

There are, however, exceptions to the norm which are of particular interest. This includes a minority of migrants from poorer families, who have been able to achieve upward class mobility in the context of their return and subsequent investments. These are mediated to some extent by chance (e.g. a supportive employer who has allowed opportunities for promotion) but can also be facilitated by strong social networks, or by the migrant making significant social sacrifices by working for extended periods (e.g. a decade or more) overseas and away from families.

With regards to the minority who are able to achieve upward class mobility, Moldova, presents an interesting case due to a policy context which is more supportive of migrants. In the context of relatively unimpeded movement to the EU which doesn't depend on intermediaries, as well as lower levels of inequality due to past land reforms—opportunities for upward class mobility are higher. This is further enabled by policies which directly support returnees to make investments. By contrast, returnees from Nepal and Thailand, where costs of migration are higher and mobility more constrained—face greater barriers. There are higher levels of debt, particularly in Nepal with severe inequality and landlessness, and this is aggravated in both countries by dependence on middlemen for migration, and the absence of migration support programmes with meaningful scope and impact.

In terms of larger contributions to research on return migration, we have shown the importance of looking at the entire cycle of mobility to understand longer term outcomes post-return. This includes analysing the socio-economic situation of migrants before going overseas, how this shapes experiences working abroad, and finally, how this affects the options open to migrants on return. In synergy with this is a need to scrutinize the larger policy context in sending and host communities in terms of migration governance, which mediate the outcomes at each stage. We have also shown how when analysing return migration to rural areas, it is critical to understand the larger trajectory of agrarian change,

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including most importantly the pre-existing patterns of differentiation and livelihood stress in rural areas.

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None declared.

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Notes

1. Constant and Massey (2002), with regards to guest worker migration from Turkey, suggest that some migrants had always considered their stay in Germany as temporary, sent remittances regularly, and planned to return after achieving an earnings target, while others migrated with the intention of long-term settlement.
2. Rural regions send a significant share of international migrants, and receive 40 per cent of global remittances flows (FAO 2016), a figure which is likely to be significantly higher when accounting for informal cash transfers.
3. At the time of the earlier sample, for Dhanusha, each household was given a number, and 122 households (approximately 5 per cent of the total) were selected using a random number generator. For Bhojpur, as the population was much more spread out, we endeavoured to sample all households in five randomly selected villages.
4. A representative rather than clustered sample was carried out as migration was present across the country and the geographical and cultural diversity was more limited.
5. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the collection of focus group data was more challenging due to the challenges of getting large groups together—although we were able to successfully organize a handful of group discussions which were captured in Table 1.
6. For those not included in the survey, we tried through sensitive probing, to better understand the wealth status of the household.
7. These figures do not include unregulated movement to India, and thus the actual numbers are likely much higher.
8. Note that as some households have both seasonal and long-term migrants, the totals do not add up to 100 per cent.
9. Although even then, few could be considered 'capitalist'.
10. Many Moldovans have Romanian passports due to historical family links between the two countries.
11. When we discuss 'return' in the context of seasonal migration, we are referring to individuals who have settled permanently at home after a long spell of itinerant movement abroad.
12. The number of farmers with >2 ha in the sample was too small to make conclusions about average remittances.
13. For instance at present ReMi only operates in 20 rural municipalities, out of 753 across the country (Government of Nepal 2025).
14. Equivalent programmes existed in Nepal for migrants to Korea and Japan, although the proportion of rural migrants travelling to these destinations from Nepal was much lower compared to Thailand.

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