

Coping with climate change through labour migration

The districts of Bajhang, Dailekh, and Jumla (in the Far-West and Mid Western Development regions of Nepal) are highly prone to food insecurity. Agricultural production is subsistence and barely enough to cover people's needs for six months of the year. There is very little cultivable land, and what there is is divided into small landholdings.

"We are dependent on agriculture, which is totally dependent on good weather conditions. The biggest problem we face is food insecurity. If there was good weather, timely rain, and food security, we would never migrate. Why do we want to leave our family and travel to another place to work like animals?"

Moti Ram Khadka, VDC Secretary, Chheudi, Dailekh

Development has not yet reached the Far-West and Mid Western Development regions of Nepal. Infrastructure is weak and the Government's reach is not strong. Consequently, there is a lack of farming technology and irrigation facilities, making farming labour intensive and costly. This lack of technical knowledge contributes to the low agricultural production.

"We work on the farms for 12 months. If the weather is favourable, the crops are enough for 5 months, if not, then there is hardly enough for 2 months. It has been very dry recently."

A villager in Bajhang

Climate change is worsening this already difficult situation. Although not yet confirmed, the preliminary results of new studies indicate that agricultural production has been badly affected by unpredictable weather conditions over the last five years. Untimely and excessive rainfall can damage crops, and was cited as the main cause of food insecurity in both Dailekh and Jumla. Farmers are poorly prepared for these changes, increasing their vulnerability to climate change. Decreases in production are now compelling people, especially men, to migrate in search of better and more stable opportunities.

Farmers have started trying to adapt to the changes by shifting their cropping patterns and migrating for longer periods, coming back in time to spread seed and plough the fields. Previously labour migration was from mid-December to mid-March, and then again from mid-June to mid-September. Now it is one continuous stretch from mid-November to mid-June. Thus migration of men has become a strategy for coping with climate change, with remittances guaranteeing survival of the women and children left behind, but increasing the burden on women, who are now responsible for almost all the agricultural labour, as well as all other domestic tasks.

Source: Dechen Sherpa and Brigitte Hoermann <bhoermann@icimod.org>. Field notes from a survey on labour migration and remittances in Mid-Western Nepal for the IFAD project WUPAP (Western Upland Poverty Alleviation Project), June 2009
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