

Climate Change and Migration in Nepal

An exploration of the links, mechanisms, and hidden pathways

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About CSC

Centre for Social Change (CSC) is a non-profit making social think-tank based in Kathmandu, Nepal. CSC works to bring positive transformation in the socio-political dynamics of Nepali society through various involvements in the fields of research, development practice, education, advocacy, and community mobilization. CSC's current works are focused on issues surrounding conflict transformation, peacebuilding, democracy, governance, migration, labor and employment, civic space, civil society development, public policy, climate change, and social development.

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INTRODUCTION

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) had published as early as the late 1980's that the greatest impact of climate change could be felt on human mobility. This phenomenon manifests in two ways: through displacement caused by the effects of climate change and through intentional migration triggered by factors caused by climate change. In the past few decades, Nepal's domestic and international migration flows have multiplied manifold due to a variety of reasons – including economic liberalization, rapid urbanization, rise of affordable travel, supportive treaties, etc. However, the exact footprint of anthropogenic climate change on this increase of migration volumes is largely unknown.

Centre for Social Change (CSC) has thus conducted a short study through the Governance Monitoring Centre (GMC) initiative on the current state of the climate change and migration nexus. Through GMC's prior work, it was observed that climate change resilience is a growing migration governance concern across Nepal's diverse geographical profile. There have been increases recorded in volumes of migration and displacement caused fully or partially by extreme weather events such as floods and landslides, soil aridity, and unreliable harvest due to irregular rainfalls. Furthermore, economic shocks caused by environmental factors have also been posited as a push factor encouraging citizens to migrate.

The pages enclosed in this report summarize GMC's findings on the current academic and policy landscape, governance challenges, potential solutions, and expert recommendations relevant to pertinent issues surrounding the intersection between the topics of climate change, environmental degradation, migration, and displacement in Nepal.

METHODOLOGY

This accelerated study was conducted during a six-week period between November 2022 and January 2023 with a mixed-methods approach. Elements of both statistical quantitative tools as well as in-depth qualitative research methods were employed in the exploration of the state, challenges, and potential solutions relevant to the nexus between climate change and migration within the Nepali context.

Analysis was carried out in two stages:

1. Desk Review

CSC began this analysis by thoroughly reviewing Nepal's currently governing environmental and migration policies. Given that there is no body that acts as the effective central authority on migration, this study has relied on information provided by official government communications and various reliable national and international sources to gauge the current state of migration governance in Nepal. GMC Nepal also conducted a thorough academic literature review and conducted real-time media monitoring throughout the course of this research project for supplemental findings.

2. Expert Consultations

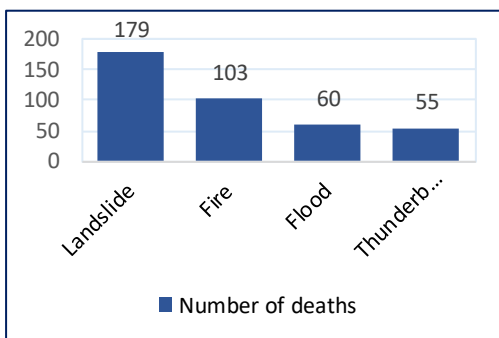
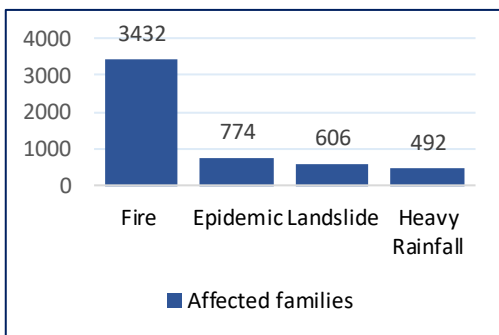
CSC also conducted thorough, in-depth interviews with eleven anonymous experts actively working at the intersection of climate change and migration governance in Nepal. This roster included government officials, policymakers, academicians, researchers, development practitioners, disaster risk reduction specialists, activists, and media personnel. Each consultation meeting was carried out in two stages: firstly through a 30-45 minute in-depth informant interview producing qualitative findings, and secondly through a 5-10 minute survey aiming to quantitatively gauge the consultants' standings on key relevant issues. Findings from the latter are presented as visualized survey results throughout the remainder of this report.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Over the last few decades, Nepal has recorded large surges in volumes of domestic and international migration. Studies have attributed these unprecedented increases to several factors, including economic liberalization, rise of affordable travel, and growing transnational governance opening the doors to supportive policies and treaties, especially among migrant workers seeking employment in urban centers within Nepal and Malaysia/Gulf-Cooperation Council countries. After the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution, which saw the establishment of a three-tier federal governance framework, a spotlight has been cast on the problems faced by Nepali migrants to identify potential policy interventions. Commonly faced issues include lack of localized migration management, predatory recruitment agencies, human rights violations, and unsafe working conditions. Disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic have also contributed to boost migration governance as a prominent topic of national discourse.

Survey Question:
 On a scale of 1-5, how aware do you think the average Nepali citizen is about the country's environmental vulnerabilities and the increasing threats associated with the effects of anthropogenic climate change?

On the other hand, Nepal's geographical profile is marked by its diversity. Even with a relatively small surface area, the country's territory contains five different ecological zones: tropical, dry, temperate, continental, and polar. Each of these climate classifications have their own unique environmental vulnerabilities associated with the effects of anthropogenic climate change. Social problems such as chronic poverty, development challenges, political instability, social inequities, and limited government reach in rural areas have been reported to exacerbate these vulnerabilities. These problems make Nepal exceptionally susceptible to climate-related impacts, with some studies ranking it as the fourth most climate-change vulnerable country in the world. Over the last few decades, there have been increases in instances of extreme weather and natural disasters that experts have attributed to climate change, including floods, landslides, glacial outbursts, droughts, and dry spells. The Asian Development Bank has suggested that Nepal faces the prospect of losing 2.2% of its annual GDP due to climate change impacts by 2050. The Nepal government has singled out the country's energy sector, agriculture, water resources, forestry, biodiversity, and health sectors as the most at risk in its official communications.



Source: Nepal Disaster Risk Reduction Portal, 2021

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Studies around the world examining the links between the environment, climate change, and migration have found a proportional heterogenous relationship. The larger the magnitude of environmental degradation, the larger the corresponding effect observed in human mobility. In the Nepali context, a large portion of this effect has been observed and studied in relation to natural disaster and extreme weather triggered displacement. The bar graphs shown alongside present the relative number of families reported to have been affected and number of deaths associated with climate-events in 2021. However, there are still links, mechanisms, and hidden pathways that have yet been left uncovered due to a lack of research at this intersection. The remainder of this report presents findings from GMC Nepal's attempt to understand these links.

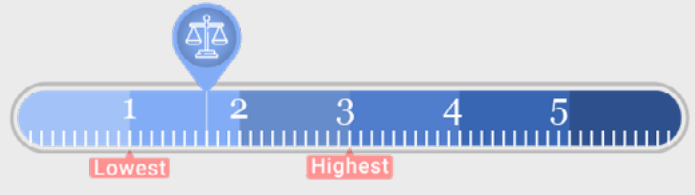
FINDINGS

1. The Current State of Environmental Governance in Nepal

The topic of environmental governance has been the subject of much controversy and discourse within the Nepal development and policy circles in the past few years. Just a few months before the commencement of this study, media outlets and independent influential voices widely condemned the country's latest fiscal year budget speech, which announced the legalization of riverbed sandmining to potentially alleviate the national trade deficit created by the effects of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, increases in seasonal wildfires air pollution in urban centers (catalyzed by winter-inversion atmospheric conditions) have also brought added controversy to environmental governance in the previous years.

Survey Question:

On a scale of 1-5, how satisfactory do you find Nepal's current climate change policies and their implementation?



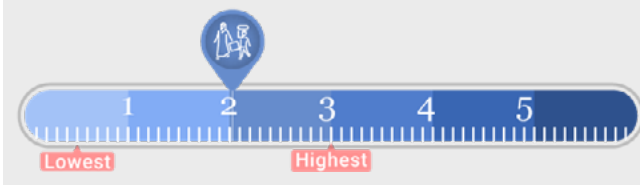
There was overwhelming consensus observed among the experts consulted for this study that Nepal's environmental policies were adequately written and appropriate given the size and scale of the threats afforded by anthropogenic climate change. However, it is the implementation of the policies, provisions, plans, and laws that many felt have been unsatisfactory and thus have contributed to undermine Nepal's environmental vulnerabilities. Most of the experts underlined the opportunity within Nepal's federal governance framework as a potential to assuage this concern. The government should prioritize the involvement and activation of stakeholders across the three federal tiers – especially the local government units – to help form environmental policies, monitor their local applicability given Nepal's geographical diversity, and ensure their efficient and satisfactory implementation.

2. Climate Change as a Migration Factor

In both the academic literature on the nexus between climate change and migration and the findings obtained from our expert consultations, there is no doubt that climate change effects are a significant determining factor of Nepal's migration flows. In most of the cases, migration occurs either from rural to urban centers within the country (generally moving South-wards due to the environmental vulnerabilities of the Himalayan region), or as push factors encouraging citizens to seek international migration.

Survey Question:

On a scale of 1-5, how strong a factor do you think the effects of climate change are in determining currently observed domestic and international migration flows?



However, the scale of environmental factors is difficult to determine. Experts opine that the primary reason for citizens to migrate are economic. While there are increasing numbers of cases of residential displacement caused by natural disasters and extreme weather, consequently triggering migration towards urban areas or abroad, a large majority of migration decisions are still made primarily in search of better economic and lifestyle opportunities. Still, there are some hidden pathways determined by environmental factors that directly and indirectly affect these opportunities, such as unpredictable

farming harvests and unreliable infrastructure. The size and scale of these mechanisms, however, are unknown. Thus, they present an important and pertinent frontier for future research.

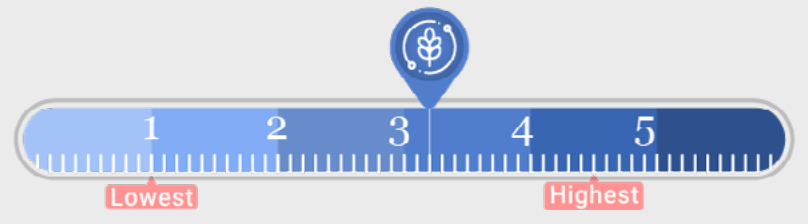
FINDINGS

3. Agricultural Impacts of Climate Change

A commonly cited mechanism that links anthropogenic climate change and migration in the Nepali context suggests that rise in extreme weather events and increasingly unpredictability of nature contributes to discouraging citizens to engage in agricultural work. Many Nepalis involved in the agricultural sector, full-time or otherwise, rely on ancient agricultural technologies and processes that have been passed down from several generations. Due to the lack of economic empowerment and purchasing power increase, newer farming technologies have only been adapted in large farming enterprises or in urban centers. Thus, given the unpredictability of natural systems and processes, it is believed that citizens prefer to opt for employment in urban areas or abroad in search of a more reliable income stream. Studies have shown this mechanism has strongly played a role in the increasing role of remittance flows in Nepal's national GDP.

Survey Question:

On a scale of 1-5, how strong do you think the role of climate change effects has been played to encourage citizens active in the agricultural sector to seek employment in urban centers or abroad?



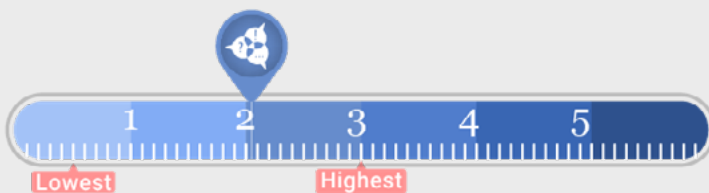
Although many academics and experts cite this mechanism, others argue that further study is needed to determine its exact size in relation to other national push-factors. In some rare anecdotal cases, even a reverse effect is noted. For example – one of the experts recounted a group of citizens who had migrated and worked in the Hong Kong agricultural sector for ten years, and then moved back to Nepal and used the tunnel farming technology they learned abroad to build resistance against climate change effects at home.

4. Environmental Justice

The term 'Climate justice' or 'environmental justice' has come into widespread use in the past few years. It refers to the concept that aims to address the ethical dimensions of climate change by introducing the concepts of social, political, and ethical justice of different social communities into the climate change discourse. It posits that social inequities found across societal domains such as gender, ethnicity, caste, economic standing, indigenous status, and landlessness, are further widened and exacerbated by the climate crisis.

Survey Question:

On a scale of 1-5, how well do you think Nepal's current environmental policies address concerns related to climate justice?



In the Nepali context, the conversation around environmental justice generally manifests in one of two ways. The first frames Nepal as a victim of the crisis, given that it is disproportionately vulnerable despite being a negligible contributor of carbon emissions – 0.02% proportion of the world's volume according to some estimates. The second observes the inordinate climate change effects faced by historically marginalized groups, including women, indigenous groups, the landless, and the Dalit community.

While some experts have opined that this inequity is also observed in one's ability to migrate by choice, thus limiting the scope of migration for certain privileged groups irrespective of environmental vulnerabilities, further study is needed to determine exact mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the importance and urgency associated with addressing Nepal's increasing climate change related challenges, CSC surveyed the experts consulted for this study on their key suggestions for solutions and pertinent sectoral recommendations. The following paragraphs summarize the most frequently cited recommendations, organized and presented by four distinct sectors of Nepali society in an effort to reflect on the role each plays to combat the problems faced at the nexus of climate change and migration.

Government and Policymakers

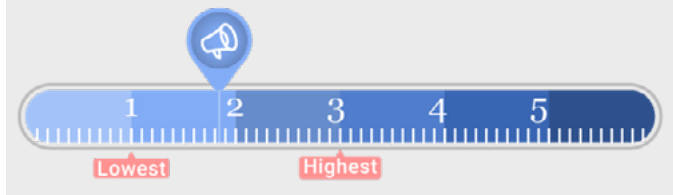
Despite the onus of social responsibility often falling primarily to policymakers, it was observed that experts in the field generally found Nepal's environmental policies to be satisfactory. However, the implementation and monitoring of existing environmental protection laws, policies, and provisions were cited as the main current governance challenge. Due to the lack of a single migration governance body, migrant concerns such as predatory recruitment agencies, systemic corruption, unsafe working conditions, etc. are rife in Nepal and abroad. Similarly, due to geographic difficulties, lack of scientific capacity, and Covid-19 disruptions, environmental policy implementation and monitoring has also been falling behind. While research studies do call for new avenues to be explored in terms of environmental and migration policymaking, experts believe that the administration's priority should be to build capacity to enforce existing laws. The three-tier federal framework can potentially be used here by activating locally enforced monitoring guidelines through increased budgetary and technical support.

Media

The media plays a significant role in determining Nepal's climate action trajectory. Experts believe that although coverage of both environmental and migration-related issues have increased in recent times, their potential penetration capacity is still lacking compared to entertainment and politics-based stories. In addition to keeping government authorities accountable and bringing information to the public, the media should also promote extreme weather and disaster resilience measures, especially in rural areas through locally distributed newspapers and popular FM radio channels.

Survey Question:

On a scale of 1-5, how well do you think the Nepali media is doing to satisfactorily amplify and encourage necessary discourse on key issues surrounding climate change?



Civil Society

Civil Society actors such as NGOs, INGOs, independent research organizations, and social impact communities occupy a distinct position in social movements and revolutions. There are hundreds of organizations currently active in the spaces of both climate change and migration in Nepal. Their roles as facilitators between government actors and the public are often seen in the form of organized activism as well as administrative service delivery support. However, many organizations often work on a limited project-period basis and lack in the creation and support of long-term infrastructure. Thus, an often-cited recommendation made to civil society groups is to ensure the creation of long-term sustainable pathways to positive change by engaging local stakeholders and building capacity.

Private Sector and Individual Citizens

Disaster risk reduction studies have often found that localized communities are always the true first-responders during periods of extreme weather and natural disasters. It is thus crucially important for efficient pathways to be created within localities for emergency action preparedness and crisis-time delegation. On the other hand, the private sector has comparatively lagged in claiming responsibility for environmental harm they have created or facilitated over the years, especially pollution and waste management. Experts believe that corporations should take more responsibility beyond mandated social responsibility measures to ensure their impacts remain positive not just for environmental protection, but also for the sake of their own long-term survival in the age of transparent information.

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CONCLUSION

Despite the rapidly increasing spotlight being shared by both environmental/climate-change governance as well as migration governance in Nepal and abroad, this study has found that there is still a large body of research yet to be conducted to develop a deeper understanding of the intersectional pathways that exist between the two phenomena.

The most often cited mechanism is the increased likelihood of human displacement, often amplified at scale to include entire villages and settlements, caused by climate change-induced extreme weather events and natural disasters. However, while this proposed pathway explains recorded increases in human mobility with relation to climate change impacts, it does not provide a complete picture of how the two phenomena are connected. Experts consulted by GMC Nepal have posited a few different ways in which other pathways manifest, with the most frequently mentioned one citing increasing economic discouragement faced by citizens in the agricultural sector due to the rising unpredictability of natural systems upon which farming practices are based. Similarly, the role of social inequities was also identified as being a key factor in the determination of climate-change induced migration. Experts hypothesize that while all communities within a given geographical territory face the same environmental vulnerabilities, differences within social dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, caste, landlessness, economic standing, and access to education determine who is able to migrate and who is not. Generally, members of historically marginalized communities are less likely to have the economic, social, or political ability to choose to migrate due to any reasons – environmental or otherwise.

The sector-based recommendations outlined in the previous section summarizes the roles that government actors and policymakers, the media, civil society organizations, and the private sector can take to support resilient, inclusive, and effective governance within the intersection of climate change and migration. However, the examination of the exact links and mechanisms between climate change effects and observed migration flows is still largely understood, and thus present a research frontier with significant scope and potential for social transformation.

