

## **1. Introduction**

This policy brief is based on the qualitative study 'Migration as Adaptation or Distress? A Qualitative Study of Climate Impacts in Nepal's Hilly and Terai Regions', which investigated how climate change acts as a powerful driver of migration within Nepal's Hilly and Terai regions. Based on qualitative research on five districts (Sankhuwasabha, Bhojpur, Khotang, Sunsari, and Rupandehi), the study discovered that migration is driven by an intersection of environmental stressors, including extreme droughts, floods, and water scarcity, with deep-rooted socio-economic vulnerabilities. Central to this intersection is the reality that environmental degradation operates as a severe threat multiplier in these regions.<sup>1</sup> It rarely drives displacement in isolation. Instead, it compounds existing structural deficiencies, systemic poverty, weak local governance, and poor public services. While wealthy households can strategically deploy migration as a forward-looking adaptation tool, marginalized families are routinely forced into distress outmigration following the absolute collapse of resource-dependent rural livelihoods.

Addressal of this crisis is severely hampered by Policy gaps. National policy frameworks like the National Adaptation Plan (NAP 2021–2050) and the National Climate Change Policy (2019) reference environmental mobility, yet execution remains heavily fragmented. Institutional responsibilities between federal line ministries and municipal governments are largely uncoordinated. This lack of legal status leaves climate-displaced populations unrecognized and trapped in cycles of continuous hazard exposure. To transition migration from a forced survival mechanism to a dignified and voluntary choice, Nepal must shift from reactive disaster relief to an integrated, region-specific, and multi-dimensional governance framework.

## **2. Actionable Policy Framework**

### **A. Formal Legal Recognition and Durable Settlement Protections**

Climate-induced displacement completely lacks formal legal recognition within national statutory frameworks. Consequently, displaced households seeking refuge in the Terai are routinely forced to establish informal settlements on unregistered government land (*Ailani jaggā*)<sup>2</sup>, rendering them highly vulnerable to low social capital, environmental exposure, and recurring forced evictions. The participants claimed that migrants are deeply troubled by the insecurity of not owning a piece of land and they live under a collective

<sup>1</sup> See Britchenko (2025), Huntjens et al. (2015), and Mamshai (2023) for an extended discussion on environmental degradation acting as a socio-economic threat multiplier.

<sup>2</sup> Note: *Ailani jaggā* refers to unregistered, public, or state-owned land in Nepal widely utilized by landless or climate-displaced populations for informal settlements.

insecurity of being buried alive beneath a landslide or being swept away by unruly floods. Furthermore, cross-ministerial implementation remains disconnected and short-term. To mitigate these issues, key steps include:

- **The Policy Fix:** Nepal must formally integrate the status of “climate-displaced persons” into national legal frameworks. This baseline legal recognition must be utilized to guarantee secure land tenure, provide formal resettlement options, and establish durable housing solutions to break the cycle of land insecurity.
- **Institutional Alignment:** Local and federal authorities must operationalize the Kathmandu Declaration on the MECC Nexus<sup>3</sup> to ensure that planned relocations are entirely safe, inclusive, and rights based.
- **Legislative Action:** Parliament must speed up the enactment of the Groundwater Regulation and the Water Resources Bill 2025. This legislation must clearly codify resource governance jurisdictions across the three tiers of government while executing risk assessments and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms to eliminate transboundary resource conflicts.

## B. Topography-Specific Adaptation Plans and Municipal Data Investment

National interventions frequently collapse due to “one-size-fits-all” policy designs that completely ignore Nepal’s stark geographical heterogeneity. Hilly districts suffer from slow-onset environmental stressors, including acute drying of water springs, prolonged drought, and devastating wildlife conflicts with wild boars and monkeys, which drive extensive land abandonment and massive youth outmigration. Local agricultural systems are collapsing, as highlighted by farmers: *“The productivity of cardamom plants has decreased since the soil has lost its moisture. Likewise, orange trees are dying as the weather changes unpredictably”*. On the contrary, the flat Terai plains face sudden-onset hazards like flash floods, riverbank erosion, extreme thermal stress, and vector-borne outbreaks such as dengue. The environmental stress in the lowlands has even begun damaging secondary economic sectors like eco-tourism; participants noted that *“due to climate change, the tourism sector has also been impacted. Koshi Wildlife Reserve, famous for bird watching, is losing birds as they cannot withstand droughts.”* These differences in geographical vulnerability require a complete decoupling of uniform policy measures in favor of localized strategies:

- **The Policy Fix:** Federal ministries must mandate highly localized, municipality-level adaptation strategies that reflect unique topographical risks. Hilly interventions must prioritize environmental watershed restoration, the physical rejuvenation of drying springs, and defensive wildlife fencing. Terai strategies must focus on engineered flood-control infrastructure, robust municipal heatwave mitigation plans, and climate-resilient emergency sanitation networks.
- **Data Systemization:** Municipalities must build standardized climate recording systems. Government agencies should fund localized, subnational research that integrates local climate projections with migration modeling to direct forward-looking, place-based infrastructure investments.

<sup>3</sup> See Migration, environment and climate change nexus in Nepal: Policy brief (MECC Policy Brief), IOM Nepal (2025), <https://nepal.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11116/files/documents/2025-04/mecc-policy-brief-english-version.pdf> for more insights.

## C. Shock-Responsive Social Frameworks and Economic Reintegration

Local municipal financing is heavily biased toward post-disaster distribution rather than proactive, long-term resilience building. This structural neglect overlooks vital reverse-migration trends, where many families are actively returning to ancestral hilly villages to escape lowland heat stress, urban pollution, and socio-cultural alienation. Returning households are eager to re-engage with local opportunities, stating: *"If policies are developed and properly implemented in favor of farmers, there is a good possibility that we might return home"*. However, they encounter severe barriers upon arrival, including missing rural infrastructure, degraded soil fertility, and a total lack of financial capital. Without structural alternatives, rural communities become dangerously dependent on external cash flows, leading to the reflection from a Bhojpur resident: *"Now, sadly, it seems the whole village is running only on remittance"*. To transform these returnee patterns into sustainable economic drivers, Nepal should:

- **The Policy Fix:** Local governments must actively leverage the *Shock Responsive Social Protection and Relief Distribution Standard 2025*. This framework should be used to transition municipal budgets away from reactive relief checks and into anticipatory financial safety nets that secure climate-resilient livelihoods before displacement occurs.
- **Green Reintegration Packages:** Municipalities must formulate targeted financial incentives, specialized agricultural subsidies, and local entrepreneurship toolkits tailored for returnee migrants. These initiatives will capture returned social capital and effectively revitalize depopulated rural economies.

## D. Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Climate Agriculture

The study, through the field research, found that the massive outmigration of working-age men has triggered a rapid "feminization of agriculture" across rural hill and mountain communities. Women left behind face a double burden of household management and intensive physical farm labor, yet they remain systemically locked out of formal land titles, agricultural inputs, and institutional resource management decisions. This dynamic cuts across socio-cultural and demographic lines. For instance, a distinct caste trend shows high outmigration among Brahmin and Chhetri families, captured by the local phrase: *"Brahmins and Chhetris work hard throughout their lives only to spill their earnings in the plains of Terai"*. On the contrary, indigenous Rai and Tamang families show lower migration rates due to deep ancestral ties, meaning women in these communities are left to manage degraded landscapes with severely limited outside resources. Mitigating this structural vulnerability requires a deliberate, gender-transformative approach to resource allocation:

- **The Policy Fix:** Local governments must institutionalize mandatory quotas and formal leadership positions for women, Dalits, and smallholder farmers directly within municipal climate justice committees and local water user groups.
- **Extension Reorientation:** Agricultural extension offices must expand localized support specifically for women farmers. This includes targeted training in climate-smart technologies, the distribution of drought-resistant seed variants, and guaranteed access to small-scale irrigation infrastructure while legally securing independent female land tenure rights.

## E. Eco-Sensitive and Conflict-Sensitive Regional Infrastructure

Weak subnational institutional capabilities and uncoordinated local infrastructure planning, such as haphazard rural road construction and unmonitored resource extraction, actively increase local environmental fragility. This structural failure inadvertently institutionalizes deep social inequalities and triggers environmental conflicts over vital water and land resources. The participants gave a striking example of infrastructure and climate pressures occurred in 2075 BS, when an entire village, Thakle in Ram Prasad Rai Gaunpalika in Bhojpur, was forced to relocate due to severe water scarcity. When springwater sources depleted rapidly, municipal dependencies spiral out of control, causing deep infrastructure strain. A respondent noted that *“In Kharang (Sankhuwasabha), a single water tap now serves 25 households instead of seven, worsening shortages”*.

To ensure that physical development does not further undermine community climate resilience, infrastructure governance must adapt:

- **The Policy Fix:** Local and provincial planning bodies must mandate that all rural infrastructure projects, including roads, dams, and irrigation canals, undergo rigorous, independent Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) to prevent construction from amplifying natural hazard risks.
- **Conflict Mediation:** Municipalities must embed conflict-sensitive planning into their standard operating frameworks. Local authorities must implement transparent risk assessments and formal, equitable resource benefit-sharing mechanisms between upstream hilly zones and downstream Terai settlements to completely mitigate transboundary climate and resource tensions.



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