

## Rural-to-Urban Migration in Nepal: Causes, Trends, and Effects on Rural Development

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### Abstract

Nepal's rural-to-urban migration has increased as a result of social, economic, and environmental issues, significantly affecting rural development. The main causes of this migration include declining agricultural productivity in rural areas, a lack of education, and a lack of employment opportunities. While rural areas experience socioeconomic difficulties and a labor shortage, the trend speeds up urban population growth, particularly in provinces like Bagmati. Increased remittances, altered income levels, lifestyle modifications, and dependence on urban infrastructure are some of the effects. Despite such barriers, migration is nevertheless an instrument for strengthening rural populations' overall standard of living. This study examines Nepal's causes, current migration trends, and socioeconomic effects, focusing on the relationship between urban and rural migration. The study emphasizes that in order to reduce negative consequences and promote balanced growth, integrated rural-urban development policies are necessary.

**Keywords:** Rural-to-urban migration, rural development, Nepal, socio-economic effects, remittance.

### Introduction

Over the past five years, one of South Asia's most significant demographic shifts has been rural-urban migration. The economic, social, and spatial landscapes of the area have been profoundly altered by the migration of people from rural to urban areas, creating both growth opportunities and obstacles (Mendiratta & Sidana, 2025). Migration is a fundamental aspect of human mobility, involving the movement of people from one place to another, either temporarily or permanently (Ghimire, 2025). Defined by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2019), migration is the process of changing one's usual place of residence. It is not merely the act of relocating individuals; migration also represents a significant component in altering the population dynamics of both the origin and destination areas. As Khatiwada (2023) states, "Migration is the process of change in usual place of residence, taking place both as internal and international with diverse short-term and long-term outcomes." Globally, the practice of migration from rural to urban or less opportunity areas to high opportunity areas (Bhattarai & Thapa, 2025). Additionally, over half of the world's population now resides in cities, a notable shift primarily caused by migration from rural-to-urban areas (Khanal, 2025).

The term Rural Development (RD) is a subset of the broader term "Development". RD is characterized by three fundamental components: freedom, self-respect, and basic necessities of life. The United Nations (UN) defined rural development as "a strategy designed to improve the economic and social life of a specific group of the rural poor. It involves extending the benefits of development to the poorest among those who seek a livelihood in the rural areas". People living in the rural part of Nepal are deprived of such elements, which is considered one of the main reasons for Nepalese to migrate to other parts of the country for a better livelihood.

Migration is not a new phenomenon in Nepal (Adhikari & Deshingkar, 2015). The nation had a clear pattern of movement, with both significant international outmigration and internal rural-to-urban migration (Mendiratta & Sidana, 2025). Nepal has experienced an increase in

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rural-to-urban migration, which has historically been caused by a lack of jobs in rural areas, poverty, growing desires for education, and improved social and health facilities in urban area (Prachhai, 2025). This trend has intensified sharply in recent years. Better lives are promised by urban areas, but there are drawbacks as well, such as overpopulation and a labor shortage in rural areas (UN Migration, 2025). Migration from rural to urban areas modifies rural economic activity and demographic dynamics, posing challenges such as labor shortages in agriculture as well as advantages through remittance flows that sustain rural households (Mendiratta & Sidana, 2025). The number of Nepali immigrants living abroad grew by roughly 3.48 times in the last 30 years. There are currently over 2.6 million Nepali immigrants living overseas, compared to 748,000 in 1990 (Wadood & Chowdhury, n.d.).

Nepal lacks a comprehensive migration policy that addresses internal migration specifically. However, the government has implemented various initiatives to support internal migration in its five-year development plans. There are some policies which are designed for internal migration to address the challenges and opportunities associated with the movement of people within a country. Prioritizing internal migration was not the main objective of Nepal's periodic plan before to 1990; instead, it concentrated on redistribution through resettlement projects, with the goal of relieving population pressure in the hills and mountains by moving people to the fertile Terai region. Following 1990, Nepal's periodic plan began to specifically address migration through urbanization and rural development methods. Following 2015, policies also concentrated on fostering sustainable urbanization, minimizing urban-rural inequities, and balancing regional and provincial (Internal Migration in Nepal, Thematic Report, 2021). This dynamic relationship between migration and rural development requires understanding to inform effective policy. Understanding these recent migration patterns and their socio-economic implications is vital for crafting rural development policies that address the dual challenges of rural decline and urban growth (Koirala et al., 2024). This research aims to examine how these factors influence the financial decisions and economic engagement of migrants in urban areas and its direct effects in rural development.

This research aims to investigate the complex dynamics of rural-to-urban migration in Nepal by analyzing its underlying causes, evolving trends, and systemic effects on rural development. To achieve this, the study first identifies the primary drivers such as economic necessity and seeking better services that influence migration patterns across the country. Furthermore, it assesses the socioeconomic impacts on rural households and communities, specifically looking at how the departure of individuals reshapes local labor markets, family structures, and community stability. Ultimately, the research seeks to explore critical policy implications to provide a roadmap for sustainable development that balances the needs of both burgeoning urban centers and the vital rural landscapes they leave behind.

### **Literature Review**

Mobility within the country has always been a key feature of migration in Nepal, and most of the historical literature on migration dealt with that phenomena (Bhattarai et al., 2023). Many developing nations have conducted in-depth research on rural-to-urban migration. According to scholars like Todaro (1969) and Lewis (1954), people migrate from rural to urban areas because of disparities in pay and work possibilities (Bhattacharya, 1993). In Nepal, several studies indicate that people frequently leave rural areas because of limited income, poor education, lack of healthcare, and small landholdings from farming. Rural communities face challenges due to these push factors, particularly in hilly areas. On the other hand, urban areas offer better job opportunities, healthcare, and educational opportunities, which draw migrants (Khanal, 2025).

Recently, the Rising Nepal newspaper reported that “Migration empties schools in Baitadi.” According to the article, communities that were once densely populated even during times of violence are rapidly becoming deserted as families lock up their houses and relocate to India

in search of employment. This trend shows that rising unemployment is pushing villagers to leave their hometowns with their children. As a result, 114 out of 534 basic-level community schools in the district have closed. Migration has had a major effect on education in the area (Dayal, 2025).

In Lumbini Province, 404 migrant households participated in a mixed-method study that used structured questionnaires and 33 in-depth interviews. Results highlighted that employment opportunities, lack of basic services, inadequate income sources, education facilities, and scarcity of land. According to the report, rural families with few employment options, low incomes, and inadequate facilities use migration as a means of coping and adapting strategy. Access to a variety of economic activities, including formal employment, business activities, and factory work, was made possible by moving to cities (Khanal, 2025).

The research study entitled “Cause of Rural to Urban Migration in Kirtipur” reveals several reasons for Kirtipur Municipality people for rural-to-urban migration. This study utilized both primary and secondary data for analysis. It stated that economic and political factors are the main drivers for migration. The research study has used various variables in order to justify its research objective, such as work, business, education, marriage, moving after to birth, and social and cultural factors. Findings showed that primary motive for migrants was education only, in which males show a higher percentage than females. However, this study has not been able to identify other factors for migration. This could be because of empirical gap, evidence gap and methodology gap (Pokharel, 2024).

A recent study conducted in the Dev Community in Biratnagar examined the reasons behind people's migration from rural Saptari district to Biratnagar Metropolitan City in Koshi Province, Nepal, and the effect that this has on their economic status. The researcher used a qualitative approach, selecting 33 households on purpose and interviewing them with semi-structured questionnaires. The main reasons for moving were to find better jobs and improve their quality of life. Most migrants reported higher incomes, with 66.67% earning 2,50,000 - 5,00,000 NPR per year, compared to what they earned before (Chaudhary, 2025). However, the study did not examine migration trends, which this research has address.

A descriptive study in Birendranagar Municipality explored migration trends, socio-economic impacts, and the underlying causes of in-migration. Field observations and questionnaires were used for collecting data. The study used the push-pull framework, which highlights both unfavorable conditions at the origin and attractive opportunities at the destination. Results revealed that 42% of migrants migrated from mountainous areas including Mugu, Humla, and Kalikot, while 56% came from nearby districts like Dailekh and Salayan. Lack of education (35%), unemployment (19%), unproductive soil (16%), and poor healthcare and transportation (16%) were the primary push reasons. Furthermore, the Maoist insurgency in their home regions forced 17% of migrants to relocate. Social services are under stress and the environment is deteriorating as a result of the migration wave. According to the study's findings, the majority of migrants did so in order to satisfy their fundamental requirements and pursue better prospects for a higher standard of living (Birendranagar, Surkhet, n.d.).

A research study was conducted among 67 in-migration households from 2070 to 2076 in Illam Municipality, using both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The study used both primary and secondary data from the site. The main focus was to analyze the causes and trends of internal migration. Findings showed push factors including lack of employment opportunities, education, health and transportation facilities, natural calamities, and low agricultural productivity. Similarly, educational facilities, physical facilities, business opportunities, purchase of land, security, presence of relatives, and marriage are key attractive factors for rural-to-urban migration in Illam Municipality. The study concluded that rural-to-urban migration has both positive and negative aspects within the municipality. Positive aspects include good income from agricultural products, increased business activities, shared culture,

and greater cooperation. However, negative aspects feature deforestation, overuse of resources, pollution, land fragmentation, and rising criminal or immoral activities (Adhikari, 2023).

A cross-sectional study was conducted in Karnali province, covering all 10 districts, among 400 people using quantitative techniques. The study was conducted by using simple random sampling techniques to select respondents. The main objective of this study was to identify the economic causes of rural-to-urban migration. The findings reveal the total mean score for economic causes of rural-to-urban migration is 3.9625, indicating that respondents perceive these factors as moderately to highly significant drivers of migration (Ban & Gangal, 2024).

The study used a post-positivist approach with both descriptive and exploratory research designs to examine how internal migration affects education in Aatharai Rural Municipality. Researchers relied on secondary data and gathered some information from key informants. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used, and the data were analyzed using percentages, averages, tables, and charts. The results show that out-migration is rising much faster than in-migration. While the number of students is increasing slightly, the teacher-student ratio is much lower than the national average. Many basic schools have fewer than 50 students (Bimali, 2025).

### **Methodology**

This study examines recent labor and migration reports from the Ministry of Labor (2023), secondary data from Nepal's National Population and Housing Census 2021 (CBS, 2021), and peer-reviewed research papers released between 2021 and 2025 (Prachhai, 2025). By evaluating each source's origin, data collection techniques, and completeness, data selection assured currency and dependability while giving priority to relevance to migration causes, trends, and socioeconomic effects on rural areas. Without using primary field surveys, this thorough research offers up-to-date insights into the possibilities and problems of migration-driven rural development (Chaudhary, 2025). In order to meet the goals of the study, the retrieved data included both quantitative statistics and qualitative information that were combined thematically as well as presented through figures and diagrams. Proper citation and respect to data use permits were ethical considerations. This method offered a thorough, economical way to examine migratory dynamics without gathering primary data, enabling a thorough comprehension of the socioeconomic effects and guiding policy recommendations for balanced rural and urban development.

### **Findings and Discussions**

#### **Major causes of Migration in Nepal:**

Nepal's rural-urban migration has many underlying causes, including economic disparities, agricultural hardship, a lack of job opportunities in rural areas, the effects of climate change, and desires for higher living conditions and social mobility (Mendiratta & Sidana, 2025). In 2021, 2,190,592 people were listed as living overseas and absent from the nation. Males make up 82.2% of the absentee population, far outnumbering females. Men are primarily looking for work overseas, and this gendered pattern of international movement follows labor migration trends (Prachhai, 2025). Lack of employment opportunities, critical infrastructure required to support robust economies, particularly in Nepal's rural areas, continues to be the major driver of international migration (Bhattarai et al., 2023).

Economic, demographic, social, cultural, psychological, political, and religious considerations are only a few of the many variables that impact migration. The five main factors are demographic, socio-cultural, economic, psychological, and political. Common causes include not enough food or facilities, poor infrastructure, and lack of jobs. These reasons fit into the pull-push framework of migration (Birendrnagar, Surkhet, n.d.).

Over time, there has been a significant shift in the causes behind migration. Five caused/factors -economic, agriculture, education, marriage and dependency-are the most common reported reasons despite the decline in the percentage.

**Table 1***Causes of Rural-to Urban Migration by sex, 1991-2021 Census*

Reasons for migration	Male				Change %	Female				Change %
	1981	2001	2011	2021		1981	2001	2011	2021	
<b>Economic migration</b>	22.8	29.7	30.1	36.6	13.8	12.1	6.5	6.9	13.1	1.0
<b>Agriculture</b>	36.3	22.8	19.6	2.3	-34.0	19.4	14.1	11.4	1.6	-17.8
<b>Education</b>	4.0	14.7	18.9	18.9	14.9	1.6	6.7	9.3	10.9	9.3
<b>Marriage</b>	1.0	0.0	0.9	0.9	-0.1	30.3	42.1	40.4	40.3	10.0
<b>Dependency / dependent</b>	Nil	Nil	19.0	28.2	28.2			21.4	24.4	3.0
<b>Conflict</b>	Nil	Nil	0.7	Nil				0.5		
<b>Returnee</b>				4.4					2.2	
<b>Natural disaster</b>				0.6					0.4	
<b>Others</b>		32.7	5.9	7.8			30.6	3.8	6.8	
<b>Not reported</b>	36.0		5.0			36.6		6.3		

*Source:* National Population and Housing Census 2021 (NPHC 2021), Internal Migration in Nepal),(Central Bureau of Statistic(2021), n.d.)

Table 1 shows that, among males, economic migration has increased from 22.8 per cent in 1981 to 36.6 per cent in 2021, pointing to the fact that males are inclined to move for better job prospects. While most women were travelling with their partners or joining them (marriage) in the past, data in recent years demonstrates that they have also been migrating on their own and for economic and educational reasons.

On the other hand, reporting of agricultural factors as reasons for migration has dropped drastically between the two periods, 1981 and 2021: from 36.3 to 2.3 per cent for males, and from 19.4 to 1.6 per cent for females. This decline indicates that people's attraction to agricultural factors has been decreasing at a tremendous rate. During this period (1981-2021), education has become a much more important factor for migration, growing from 4.0 to 18.9 per cent for males and from 1.6 to 10.9 per cent for females. Marriage as a primary reason for migration increased from 30.3 per cent in 1981 to 42.1 per cent in 2001, yet started slowly decreasing thereafter; however, the figure still remains high at a rate of 40.3 per cent in 2021. This indicates that current female migrants differ from the previous female migrants in the case of migration. Given the numbers of returnee migration, it is important to note that reporting of war in 2011 may have an impact on data in 2021.

### **Pull and Push factors**

In Nepal, migration from rural to urban regions has grown to be a significant demographic phenomenon driven by a variety of factors. In urban areas, where income disparities, a wide range of job alternatives, and easier access to services function as major pull factors, rural migrants typically look for improved economic chances (Mendiratta & Sidana, 2025).

### Push Factors of Migration

Leaving the origin (birthplace) is not easy task. People not only leave the land but also the relatives, friends, community, childhood memories, and so on. A lot of causes compel them to leave their birthplace. The migratory movements occur deliberately due to such causes.

### Pull Factors of Migration

Just like the push factors, pull factors also play a vital role in migration. Pull factors encourage people to migrate to a particular area. Better facilities and security are the attractions of the destination.

**Table 2**

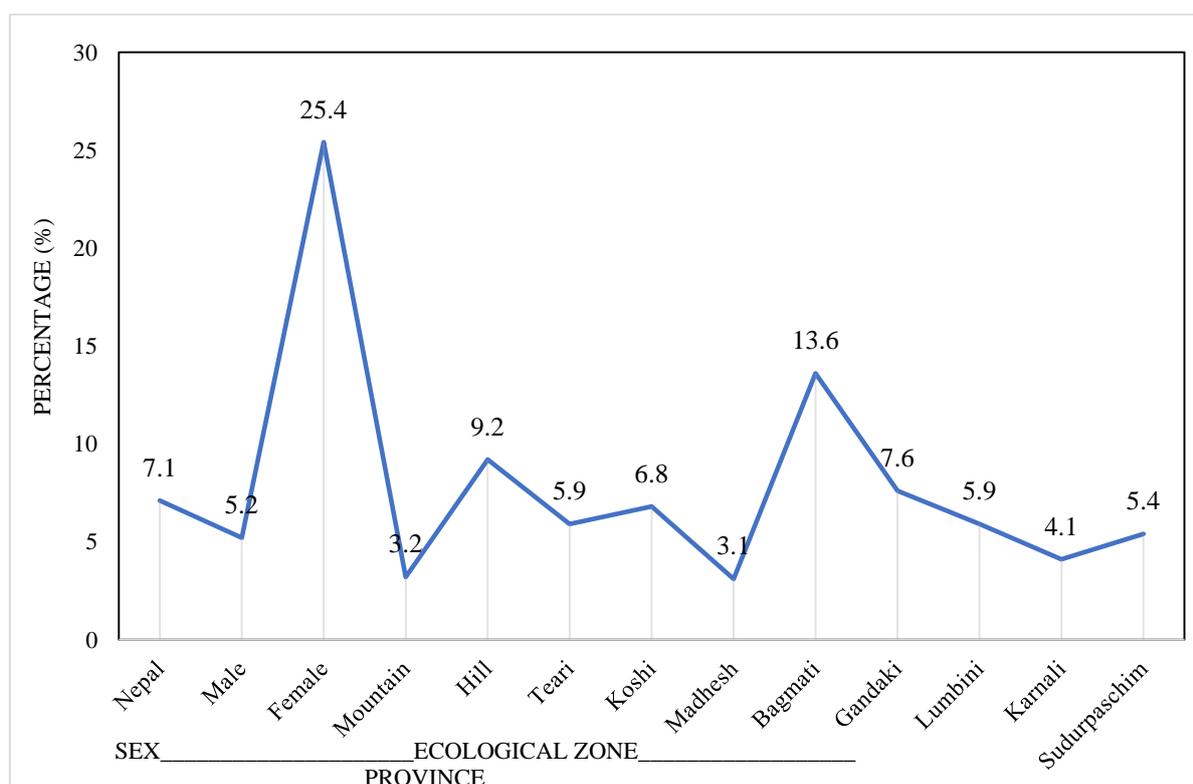
*The major push and pull factors of rural-to urban migration are listed below*

Push Factors	Pull Factors
→ Lack of education facilities	→ Education advancement
→ Lack of employment opportunities	→ Employment opportunities
→ Low productivity	→ Better land
→ Due to conflict and fear	→ Security
→ Lack of transportation and health facility	→ Better health and modern facility
→ Poverty	→ Urbanization and modernization
→ Rural loan	→ Advance technology
→ Domestic violence	→ Easier life cycle
→ Natural disaster	→ Facility
→ Geographical condition	→ Business facility
→ Socio-political condition	→ Infrastructure development

Sources: (Adhikari, 2023), and (Birendnagar, Surkhet, n.d.).

### Trends of Rural-to Urban Migration in Nepal:

Figure 1: Migration rates for rural-urban stream by sex, ecological zone, and province, NHPC 2021

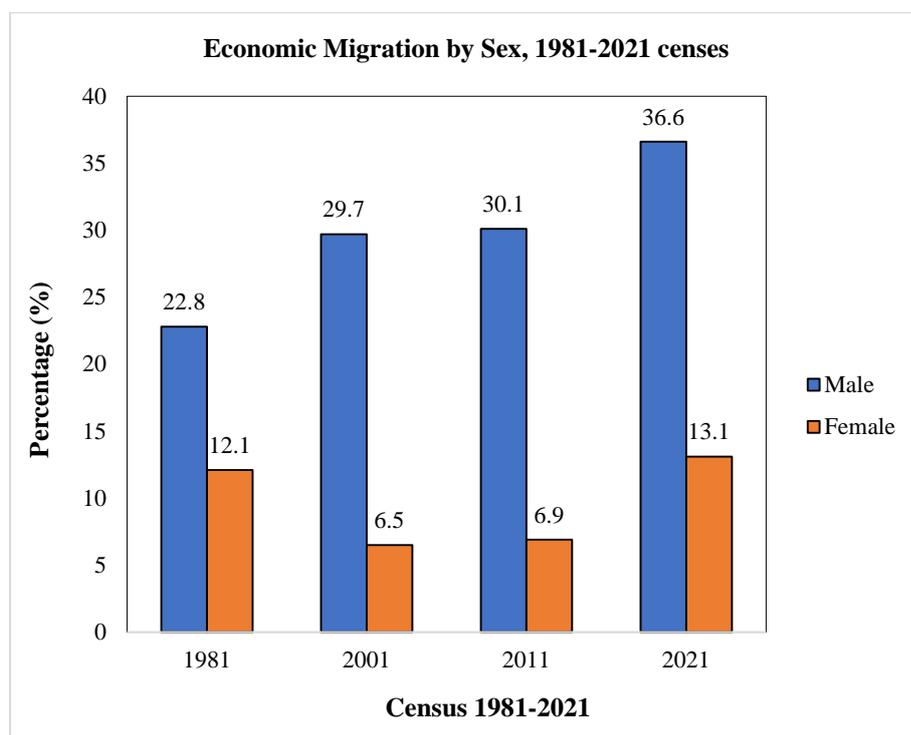


Source: National Population and Housing Census 2021 (NPHC 2021), Internal Migration in Nepal), (Internal Migration in Nepal, Thematic Report, 2021)

Figure 1 illustrates the significant differences in Nepal's rural-to-urban migration rates by province, ecological zone, and sex. In total, 7.1% of people have moved from rural to urban areas. There is a feminization of rural-urban migration, as seen by the significantly greater rate of female migration (9.2%) compared to male migration (5.2%).

The Hills have the largest migration rate (9.2%) among all ecological zones, followed by the Terai (5.9%), while the Mountain area has the lowest rate (3.2%). Bagmati has the greatest rate of rural-urban migration by province (13.6%), followed by Gandaki (7.6%) and Lumbini (5.9%) at intermediate levels and Karnali (4.1%). These trends imply that women, people living in hills, and those from more central and economically active provinces—especially Bagmati—are the main groups migrating from rural to urban areas.

Figure 2: Economic Migration by Sex, 1981-2021 censuses



*Source:* National Population and Housing Census 2021 (NPHC 2021), Internal Migration in Nepal)

Figure 2 illustrates that the economic migration in Nepal has increased over the period 1981–2021, with males consistently outnumbering females. The proportion of male economic migrants rose from 22.8% in 1981 to 36.6% in 2021, while female economic migrants changed from 12.1% to 13.1% over the same period. Although the level of female economic migration remains much lower than that of males, the 2021 census indicates a recent upturn in women's participation in economically motivated migration.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual diagram shows how migration from rural to urban areas has advantages as well as drawbacks on rural development. Positively, migration decreases population pressure in rural regions, increases household income through remittances, and can support rural development when migrants return with new knowledge and skills.

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On the other hand, the diagram draws attention to a number of negative consequences, such as persisting infrastructure gaps, population aging and gender inequality, and a decline or stagnation in agricultural productivity due to a lack of rural workers. Overall, the graph shows that although migration can boost rural livelihoods through remittances, it may also impede local economic and social development. This highlights the need for policies that increase benefits (income and skill transfer) and reduce labor and service losses in rural areas.

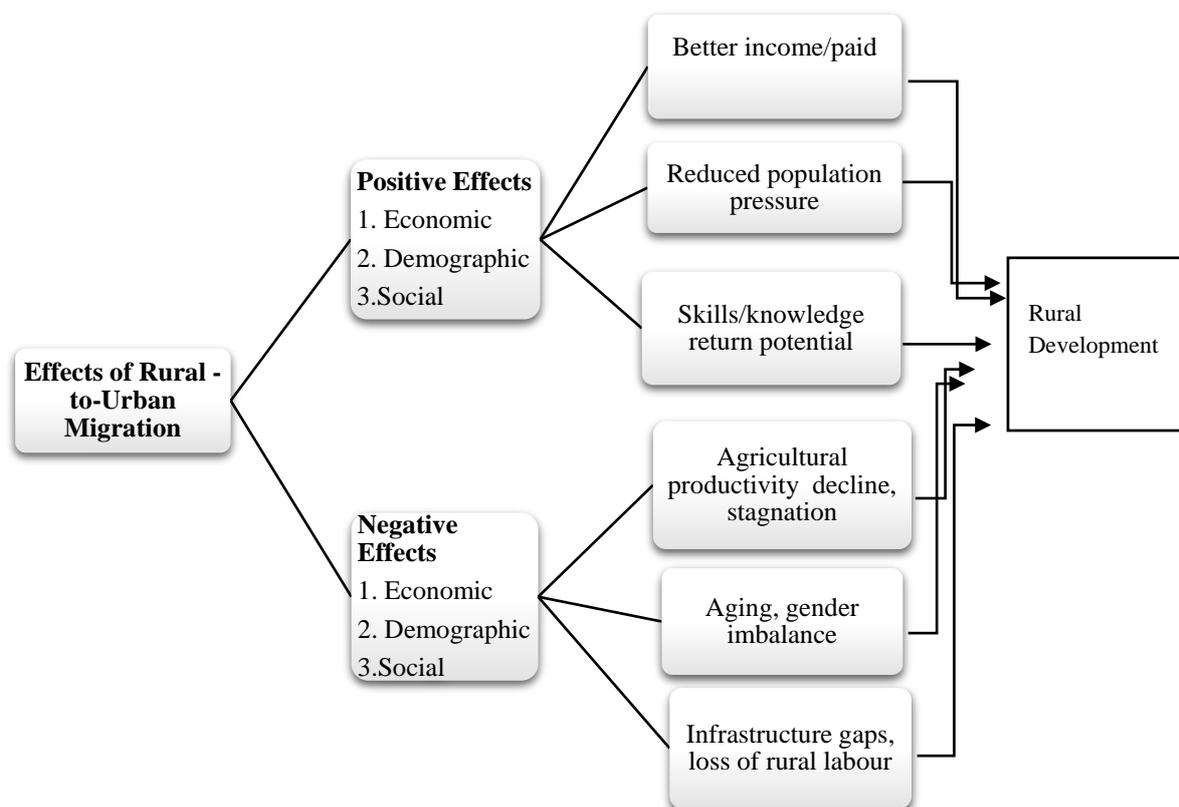


Figure 3: Conceptual Diagram on Effects of Rural-Urban Migration on Rural Development

### Effects of Rural-to Urban Migration on Rural Development

The necessity for migrant-focused policies that assist migrants and their families is highlighted by the fact that migration increases remittances but decreases domestic labor supply and socioeconomic development (Prachhai, 2025). Study has shown that, increase in rural-to-urban migration in the country has led to a shortage of agricultural labor in rural areas. Research has indicated that the nation's growing rural-to-urban migration has resulted in a scarcity of agricultural labor in rural regions. To compensate for labor loss, rural communities in some parts of Nepal employ agricultural customs such the "parma," a system of reciprocal labor exchange between households (UN Migration, 2025).

According to Ban and Gangal (2024), the economy is the motive for rural-urban migration and economic changes can be seen in migrant households in between before and after rural-urban migration (Chaudhary, 2025). Individual socioeconomic status is determined by their occupation, income, level of education, and other similar characteristics.

**Table 3***Socioeconomic Impact before and after rural-to-urban migration*

Variables	Categories	Before migration	Percentage (%)	After migration	Percentage (%)
<b>Occupation</b>	Agriculture	3	9.09	0	0.0
	Services	23	69.7	23	69.7
	Business	7	21.21	10	30.3
	Others	0	0.00	0	0.00
<b>Annual Income (NPR)</b>	<2,50,000	26	78.79	2	6.06
	2,50,000 - 5,00,000	7	21.21	22	66.67
	>5,00,000 - 8,00,000	0	0.00	6	18.18
	>8,00,000	0	0.00	3	9.09

Source: Field Data, 2023 (Chaudhary, 2025)

Table 3 shows before migration, most of migrants (69.70%) were already engaged in service jobs with similar proportions in agriculture (9.09%), and business (21.21%). However, after migration agriculture dropped to zero, and business rose to 30.3%, indicating a concentration in non-farm, especially service-sector work in urban areas.

Similarly, prior to migration, nearly four-fifths of households (78.79%) earned 2,50,000 annually, and none earned above NPR 8,00,000, reflecting predominately low-income rural livelihoods. After migration, only 6.06% remained in the lowest income group, while 66.67% moved into the NPR 2,50,000-5,00,000 range, 18.18% into NPR 5,00,000-8,00,000, and 0.09% above 8,00,000, suggesting market income mobility associated with urban employment opportunities.

### Conclusion

Rural to urban migration is predominant in Nepal and has been extensively scaled up in the recent period. Nepal's rural development environment is still significantly shaped by rural-to-urban migration. This study found that a high volume of migrants belongs to the Bagmati province, as Kathmandu Valley is the most attractive hub for migration. Additionally, it is the capital city located in the Hill ecological zone with three districts (Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur). It alone holds 10.4 percent of the total population of the country, with every three districts having high annual population growth. The Kathmandu Valley has seen a notable growth in population as a result of migration, according to the 2021 Nepal Census, underscoring its significance as a hub for both educational and economic opportunities in the area.

Better-paid income significantly contributes to socioeconomic improvement in rural areas, despite the fact that migration's workforce outflow undermines agricultural output. Policy frameworks should incorporate the creation of rural education programs targeted at improving literacy and skills, which will increase employment prospects in non-agricultural industries, in order to solve these issues. To increase market access for rural goods and services, infrastructure investments—especially in communication and transportation—are essential. Stabilizing rural economies can also be aided by the implementation of programs that promote diverse livelihoods, such as small-scale tourism and agriculture. In order to successfully adapt to changing migration trends, ongoing research and monitoring are advised.

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