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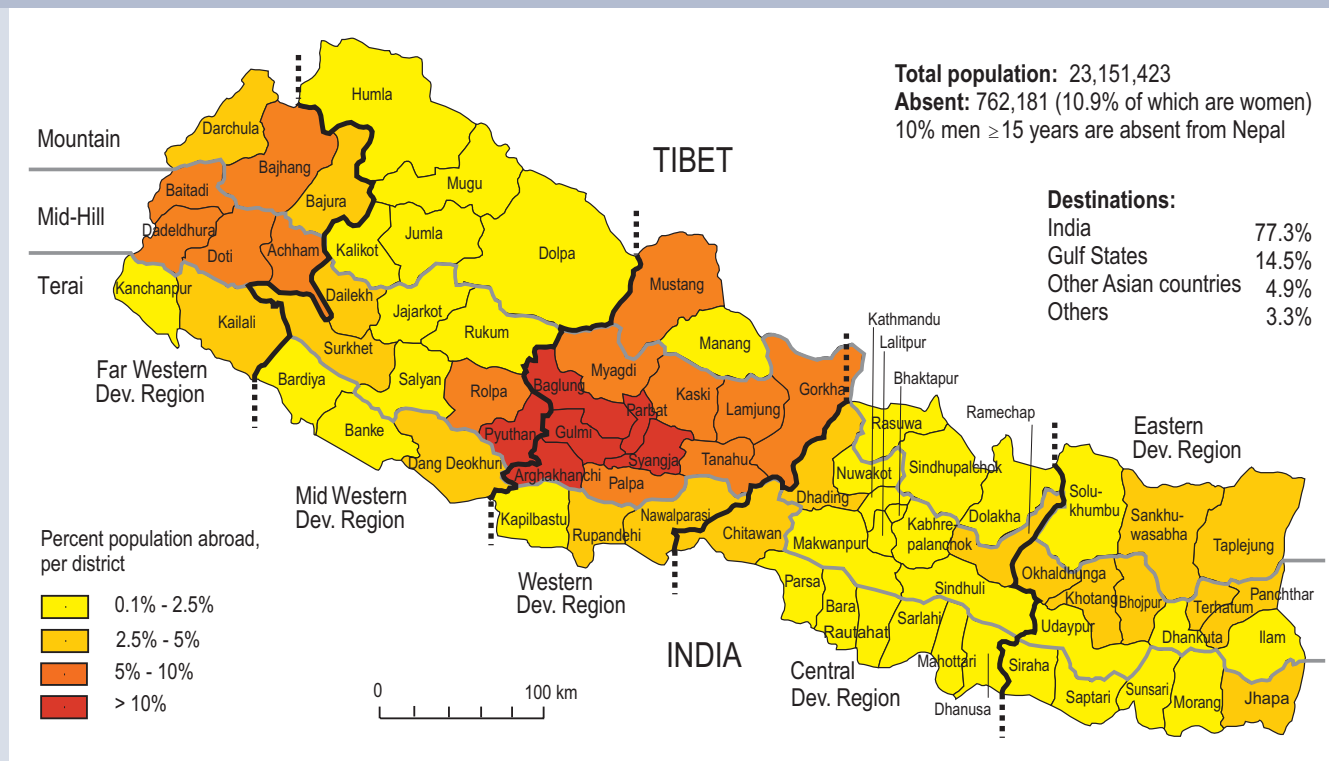
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# Addressing the Needs of Nepalese Migrant Workers in Nepal and in Delhi, India

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International labor migration is an increasingly important livelihood strategy in Nepal. There is little documentation of the movements of migrant workers or of their remittances. It is estimated that Nepalese migrants send remittances equivalent to about one quarter of Nepal's gross national product. Migrants and their families lack information about safe migration procedures, host countries, their

rights as migrants, and awareness about HIV/AIDS. The present article examines two projects that address these migrants' needs in their home country and in one destination. The first project is a Nepal-wide radio program based in Kathmandu that provides information on migration issues. The second is a community outreach project based in Delhi, India, focusing on education of migrants.



## Migration: problems and opportunities

Nepal is one of the world's least developed countries. About 85% of the population lives from subsistence agriculture in rural areas, coping with great disparities of caste, gender, and geography. Poverty, unemployment, declining natural resources, and more recently the Maoist insurgency are major reasons why international labor migration is an increasingly important source of income. For younger people it is also a way to experience the wider world.

International migration patterns are diverse. Labor migration is found throughout Nepal, but the majority of

migrants are from the western and far-western Mid-Hills. The major destination, for about 77% of the migrants, is India (Figure 1). Because migration to India has a long history and Nepalese and Indians cross the border freely, migration between India and Nepal is largely undocumented. There are an estimated 1.3 to 3 million Nepalese in India, 2 to 5 times higher than official statistics show. The Gulf States have become another important destination since the 1990s. Migration to these countries or to other Asian and European countries requires resources far beyond the means of most migrants. They lack education, information about recruiting procedures, and the financial means to contract recruiting

**FIGURE 1** Origins and destinations of migrants from Nepal. (Map by M. Kollmair and E. Lindberg)



**FIGURE 2** Broadcasting a radio program for migrants. (Photo courtesy of Paurakhi, 2004)

agencies. Their only chance is to go to nearby India. Although it is usually the men who migrate, women are increasingly seeking work abroad. Women migrate less owing to patriarchal household structures and cultural values. Moreover, the law curtails migration of women to the Gulf States. Women migrate nevertheless, through illegal channels.

Despite a diversity of migration patterns, (potential) Nepalese migrants have many things in common. Most come from rural areas and have little education or vocational training. They lack knowledge about job opportunities outside Nepal, and recruiting procedures are susceptible to fraud committed by brokers and employers. Migrants work primarily in low-paid and unskilled jobs and must cope with unsafe and inadequate means of remittance transfer. Most people migrate alone and temporarily, and retain links with family members left behind. Hence their families in Nepal are also vulnerable to the problems of migration, among which a major one is transmission of diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

Research carried out by the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North–South program indicates an urgent need to provide migrants with information and assistance before departure, at their destinations, and on their return to Nepal. Unfortunately, there are no coherent and coordinated national or international policies to manage migration. Recruiting agencies fail to provide effective and reliable service. The 2 NCCR North–South projects described below address the needs of these migrant workers.

### The Paurakhi Radio Program

The media play a key role in shaping public perceptions. In collaboration with the Nepal Institute for Development Studies (NIDS), an association of Nepalese migrant women workers has been broadcasting a radio program based in Kathmandu since February 2004. Known as *paurakhi* (“entrepreneur”), the program acknowledges the contributions of migrants to Nepal’s economy. Intended for people interested in and concerned with foreign employment, it is aired every Friday from 8:15 to 8:30 pm by Radio Nepal, which broadcasts countrywide. A regional station in Pokhara (Kaski District) has also been broadcasting this program since July 2004. The main target group is youths in rural areas. They are not the poorest of the poor, but they lack access to newspapers and television to get information about jobs abroad and migration procedures (Figure 2).

The main areas covered by the radio program are (see also Box):

- Weekly news of foreign labor migration;
- Opportunities of the week (job vacancies abroad that appear in the newspapers);
- Need to know (information on required travel documents, migrants’ rights, health issues, language, culture, religion, labor policy, destinations, utilization of remittances);
- Experiences shared by returning migrant workers;
- Interviews with policymakers and others concerned with foreign labor migration.

## Extracts from a broadcast by Radio Paurakhi

*Namaskar,*

Radio Program PAURAKHI, conducted with the aim of providing information on foreign employment, welcomes you all to today's program. (...)

### Let us start with the news:

Nepal has just opened an Embassy in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where 75,000 Nepalese are working. Madhuwan Paudael, Secretary of the Foreign Ministry, has been appointed as the acting Chief of Diplomatic Commission of this good office. (...) The Nepalese Embassy in UAE was felt to be necessary, in order to facilitate the process of visa renewal. (...) The Nepalese Embassy in UAE is situated at Abu Dhabi, 1st floor of Bin Sultan Aldhaheti Building of Madina Jayathe Road. (...)

### Must-know things:

Once you have decided what kind of job you'd like, you must know and understand the things stated in the agreement paper. In this paper the following should be clearly mentioned:

- Detailed description of the post and work;
- Salary per month;
- Available facilities such as holidays, overtime charge, etc;
- Working hours;
- Regarding food and lodging (who will bear the cost of these);
- Working environment;
- Security situation in the working place;
- How the work agreement is concluded;
- Duration of probation period;
- What are the conditions considered as breach of contract;
- Compensation in case of injury, broken limbs, or death. (...)

### Now, let us read out the letters sent by our listeners:

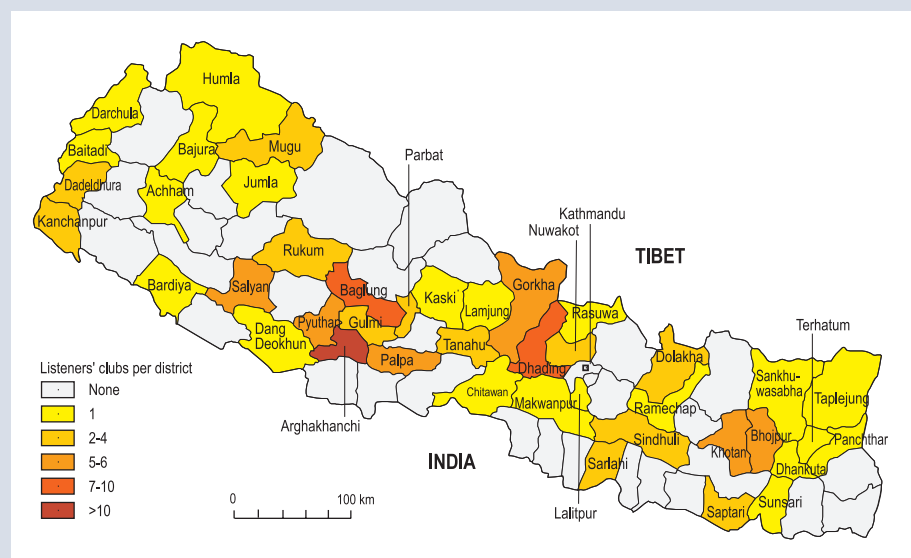
Lal Bahadur Katuwal of Kotawana -2, Chaprabhari, Jhapa writes:

"This program broadcasted by Radio Nepal is very relevant. On the one hand there is increasing attraction towards foreign employment while on the other it has become a platform for making money by agencies and brokers. Due to lack of awareness and knowledge there have been many cases where ignorant rural youths have been cheated. As a program of this kind helps to eradicate such malpractices, it needs to be expanded and more information needs to be included. My good wishes are with you." (...)

To date, 50 broadcasts have been made and the response from listeners has been overwhelming. Radio Paurakhi gets about 10 calls per day and has already received about 300 letters praising the program and expressing hope for its continuation. Under the guidance of Radio Paurakhi, enthusiastic listeners have already established more than 130 listeners' clubs. These have been established in different parts of rural Nepal (Figure 3). Members are returnees, potential migrants, and their families. They disseminate information that has been broadcast, while returnees share their experiences and play a vital role in determining program content.

Despite the growing number of women migrants, Paurakhi receives very few calls from female listeners. Just a handful of women are members of listen-

FIGURE 3 Distribution of Radio Paurakhi listeners' clubs in Nepal. (Map by M. Kollmair and E. Lindberg)



**FIGURE 4** Meeting of a women's credit association in Delhi. (Photo by Susan Thieme, 2003)



ers' clubs, and only one club has a woman president. This is primarily because women are fearful of disclosing their identity as migrant workers, owing to social stigma and government policy.

The program gained popularity among rural youths within a short time. In the absence of a mechanism to provide accurate information to migrant workers, Radio Paurakhi plays a vital role. The program has helped rural youths to understand the pros and cons of foreign employment, enabling them to make their own decisions about working abroad.

#### **Challenges in running the program**

Despite the success of the program, the organizers are aware of various drawbacks. As the program runs for only 15 minutes a week, it does not cover all relevant issues concerned with foreign migration. So far, the primary beneficiaries have been migrants going to the Gulf countries and Malaysia. Little information on India is included, owing to the different migration patterns involved and lack of time to collect information. Moreover, it is generally difficult to obtain facts about migration. Government officials and recruiting agencies are not very cooperative in providing

information, which affects the quality of the program to some extent. Furthermore, people in the capital rarely tune in to Radio Nepal. It is thus difficult for the program to reach policymakers (a majority of whom are city dwellers) to allow them to hear the voices of migrant workers.

#### **Economic literacy, labor rights, and organizing migrants in Delhi, India**

Along with media campaigns, community outreach programs in host countries can reduce the vulnerability of migrant workers. Delhi is a major destination in India, with about 200,000 Nepalese living there. An NGO called the South Asia Study Centre (SASC) has been focusing on migrants in Delhi since 2003.

The target group are migrants coming from the Far-western Development Region of Nepal, where research was done by the NCCR North-South. The source region is characterized by physical remoteness and the lowest human development and gender equity indices in Nepal. Migration (especially to Delhi) has been practiced for generations and migration networks have been developed. It is common for men to seek work abroad, leaving their families behind. Women go to Delhi for shorter periods of time, especially for medical treatment and childbirth. A few of them earn some money by housekeeping. Men work mainly as watchmen and car cleaners.

Migrants in Delhi have found social and economic niches, but they become even more marginalized within these niches. They do not learn new skills, remain in the same sector for generations, and often incur even greater debt as a result of poorly run financial self-help groups, gambling, and drinking, instead of sending remittances home. At the same time there are men, as well as some women, who run successful financial self-help groups and invest in development of their home villages (Figure 5).

Hence the main objective of the project is to build on migrants' capacities and improve the conditions under which they live. Because of the open border agreement between India and Nepal, there is only scanty knowledge about the numbers of Nepalese in Delhi and where they live.

SASC collects data about migrants to provide more accurate statistics about Nepalese migrants in Delhi.

#### Information and education

Nepalese migrants live throughout the city of Delhi. They have tight and varied time schedules and return to Nepal temporarily. Providing information about migrants requires creativity, and is time-consuming and labor intensive. SASC offers a combination of regular courses for migrants and cultural events like street theater, which is used to disseminate information about such topics as:

- Delhi as a place of residence, including the addresses of the Royal Nepalese Embassy, police stations, existing migrant associations, and public health and transport facilities;
- Labor rights;
- Health issues such as alcohol abuse and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS;
- Economic literacy, including management of salaries and debts, safe operation of financial self-help groups, and the problem of gambling;
- Safe remittance transfer from India to Nepal;
- Investment of remittances in Nepal.

Cultural events include concerted actions with other Delhi-based NGOs. For example, at the International Migrants Day, the film “Woman by Woman” was screened, with about 50 migrant women on hand. The Oscar-winning US-based filmmaker Dorothy Fadiman led a discussion about the movie. Another event was a street play about migration and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS on International AIDS Day. At cultural events migrants also get in touch with people outside their daily circle of interaction, and they can share their concerns with others. All events are followed up by regular visits to migrants.

#### Lobbying and networking

At roundtable meetings SASC brought Indian and Nepalese policy representatives, trade unions, and NGOs together to address migration issues at the policy level. In coordination with Nepalese immigrant associations, SASC also raises critical



issues such as harassment of migrants at work in the Royal Nepalese Embassy and police stations in Delhi.

SASC was involved in negotiations for better banking facilities for Nepalese living in Delhi (Figure 4). One sign of success is a joint venture between the Nepal-based Everest Bank and the Punjab National Bank in India that began in 2004. Migrants can now open a bank account with their Nepalese identification card and remit money to Nepal.

As a result of a regular provision of information to migrants and public awareness of their needs, male migrants have been motivated to form their own registered organization of watchmen. They want to enhance their public negotiating power and gain confidence in handling their daily problems with employers and the police. SASC is assisting them in this endeavor.

#### Lessons learned and challenges encountered

Although the work of SASC was planned in a participatory way, it has had to deal with several objections. First, due to the political situation in Nepal, migrants feel

**FIGURE 5** A poster reading: “Money in the bank: safety, benefits, stress-free”. (Draft: SASC, 2003)

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caught between the Maoists and the Royal Army or police in their home country. Even in India, they still fear persecution and worry about their families in Nepal. It therefore took time to win people over to the project. Second, the migrants' way of life makes outreach programs time-consuming and labor intensive.

Moreover, patriarchy hampers work with women, since they are often not allowed to talk freely or attend courses alone. This was addressed by a gender-balanced staff who convinced male relatives that women also benefited from such projects, and organized events to specifically address women's and men's needs.

The major lesson learned is that participation is the key to a successful project. But it requires time, and results cannot be quantified at the beginning. Participants may lose interest, and it is the task of the project staff to adapt to migrants' needs and motivate participants. A third major obstacle is the general unavailability of sources about migrants' rights and the legal aspects of informal labor.

**The need for partnership**

International labor migration is a form of highland–lowland interaction, as many migrants come from the hills and mountains to work in the lowlands; as such, it therefore has an influence on the lives of the people who stay back home. However, neither human development indicators nor the number of migrants in Nepal follow the topographical gradient of the country. Migration cannot be explained only by socioeconomic background. Rather, the long history of migration in certain regions has led to development of networks that facilitate migration, allow-

ing it to become an integral part of the lives of many Nepalese. Open border agreements such as that between Nepal and India also ease migration.

Migration involves people in Nepal, in host countries, and those who remain behind, and must be so understood by societies and governments. People involved in the migration process require easy access to information in accordance with their specific needs, as a majority are illiterate, poorly educated, and unskilled. Remittances are an important asset for Nepal's economy. Migrants must therefore have easy access to safe remittance transfer and re-integration services to ensure that their earnings are safeguarded and wisely invested (Figure 5).

Projects run by NGOs such as SASC or Radio Paurakhi have been actively involved in responding to the needs and problems of migrant workers. Both projects also have helped to improve the skills of the respective NGOs and the researchers involved in dealing with migration issues. Their experiences show that innovative information campaigns and advocacy effectively reach migrant workers and also benefit their families.

Nevertheless, governments and civil society need to take greater responsibility. Many problems faced by migrants are caused by a lack of laws or insufficient law enforcement on the part of the Nepalese government and the governments of the migrants' destinations. Individual countries can do a great deal to ensure that policies and programs that meet migrants' needs are implemented. It is important to note that a country cannot protect its migrants without the cooperation of the host country. Thus partnerships are essential in addressing migration issues.

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