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How Does Transnational Labour Migration Shape Food Security and Food Sovereignty? Insights from Nepal

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Abstract

Achieving food security has become a critical development issue. It is more so for Nepal, a country facing serious social and economic problems. In recent years, Nepal has seen rising temporary-work migration of people to foreign countries with implications for food security, even in distant rural places. In this article, we examine differential effects of transnational labour migration on food security and food sovereignty in migrant-sending rural areas. In so

doing, we draw on the fresh insights gained from case studies carried out in villages representing two distinct geographical regions of Nepal – Tarai (Plains) and Hills. Findings show complex and contradictory effects of transnational labour migration; while remittances and migration-induced rural employment benefited both migrant and non-migrant households, a growing speculative land market and subsequent conversion of arable land into non-agricultural uses pose critical threats to access to food for all, especially the poor. We conclude that migration and remittances have led to improved food security on a short-term basis, but have caused erosion in food sovereignty through generating adverse effects on local food production, and thus resulting in growing dependence on food imports. Rather than considering food security and food sovereignty as rival frameworks, this paper suggests that combining the two concepts offer rich and broader understandings of the impacts of migration on rural people's access to food.

Keywords: dispossession, food sovereignty, labour migration, remittances, South Asia

Introduction

Nepal has been marked by an unprecedented rise in transnational labour migration in the last couple of decades, affecting economy and society in profound ways. Labour migration has become a way of life for many households necessitated not just by economic hardships, but also by cultural beliefs and social reasons (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011; Sunam 2014). With rising outmigration, discourses on migration and remittances in relation to economic growth, and wider socio-cultural changes have proliferated within Nepal and outside. Numerous positive and negative impacts of labour migration are realised not just by migrant families, but also by non-migrants, including people living in villages, local towns, and across the whole country. In this article, we examine the effects of migration on food security and food sovereignty in broader terms. Food security here indicates the ability to access food either from one's own production, trade, or social supports received from the state and non-state actors. This concept, however, does give little priority to improved food production systems and local resource-based livelihoods. Food sovereignty, on the other hand, focuses on local control over the food system with emphasis on strengthening local food production and livelihood systems, so that all people, especially poorer people and peasants, continue to gain food through proper use of resources such as land, livestock, water and forests, even if there is a market failure to supply food (Edelman 2014; Ingram 2011).

As the scale and impacts of transnational labour migration have increased, numerous studies have examined different facets of such migration in relation to its contribution to remittances (Kollmair et al. 2006; Seddon, Adhikari and Gurung 2002), working conditions in destination countries (Bruslé 2012), and rural livelihoods (Poertner, Junginger and Müller-Böker 2011). However, few studies have considered the questions of land, farming and the nature of food

production activities in the home communities of migrants (Adhikari and Hobley 2015; Maharjan et al. 2013; Sunam and McCarthy 2016).

Labour migration, particularly the remittance it generates, is largely held responsible for Nepal's achievement in reducing poverty from 42 percent in 1996 to 25 percent in 2011 (Adhikari and Hobley 2015, 1; Lokshin, Bontch-Osmolovski and Glinskaya 2007, 2). Some researchers even argue that labour migration has saved the country from serious economic crisis (Blaikie et al. 2002). Currently, Nepal has become the largest remittance-receiving country in South Asia and the third largest in the world when the share of remittances to GDP is considered (World Bank 2014, 4). Reportedly, nearly three million Nepali workers, one-third of the total working male population, have left the country for foreign employment. Remittances sent back home by these migrants have facilitated numerous socio-economic changes. What do all these figures mean for the ways people farm, access land and gain employment in order to attain food security? What have the impacts been on non-migrants, particularly on the poor and landless, following the migration of their fellow villagers? This article addresses these critical questions, which are particularly important because about two-thirds of the population still depends on farming as their major occupation, although the share of farm income has declined to approximately one third of the GDP. This indicates that poverty has been concentrated among farmers and farm workers. In addition, there is also a problem of landlessness in agriculture. An estimated 20 percent of households in Nepal are landless (CSRC 2011). Ironically, an increasing amount of land has been left under-used across the country (Paudel et al. 2014). Imports of food continue to rise at an unprecedented rate in a once food self-sufficient country (Adhikari and Hobley 2015; Bhatta 2011). In the light of these macro pictures, it has become essential to examine the impacts of migration on agrarian and food economy at the local level in rural communities.

A review of migration literature reveals that outmigration has adversely affected local food production in general. This outcome mainly results from the under-investment of remittances in agriculture and the absence of a male labour force. Households receiving remittances actually spend less at the margin on consumption and tend to spend a larger amount of remittances on investment goods, in particular education and housing, as in the case of Guatemala (Adams 2005). Furthermore, expenditure on house construction through remittances can stimulate local building enterprises, creating demands for services and labour. As a result, one can observe 'remittance multipliers' on local income and employment that spread from migrant households to non-migrant households (Lucas 2005). However, these employment opportunities are temporary. There would have been much greater multiplier impacts in the local economy if remittances were invested in farming (IFAD 2013).

On the other hand, an increase in income is not automatically translated into improved food security. For instance, an increased flow of remittances has led to a surge in the price of food in the absence of local food production; thus, people become less food secure. The impact of market failure in facilitating food availability would put many, especially poor people, at risk as they cannot generally store food for a long time. A majority of Nepali families still

produce some food. Even this small-scale food production at household level appears to be quite useful to cope with fluctuations in food supplies and prices. The 2008 global food crisis is a case in point. Given such practice of local level food production, Nepali cities did not witness food riots, as were experienced by cities in many countries from Africa, the Middle East and Asia including Bangladesh, Pakistan and Indonesia (Bush 2010; Schneider 2008). However, Nepal may not have the same luxury if a similar recession is repeated, which could even lead to riots and conflicts for access to food because of loss of control over 'food' given increased dependence on the market, especially the international market for food supply.

Another effect of migration is decline in production caused by its relation to farm labour. The outmigration overseas for work has reduced the availability of farm labour, especially males in rural areas. This has led to the feminisation of farm work and general scarcity of labour in Nepal (Jha 2010; Maharjan et al. 2013). Maharjan et al. (2013) found that remittances are rarely used to purchase capital inputs in agriculture. It is estimated that some 10 to 15 percent of agricultural land in Nepal is left uncultivated, while some 20 to 25 percent is partially used (Jha 2010). In the light of these macro studies, this article examines rural villages, representing two distinct geographical zones, namely Hill and Tarai (plain) regions. Although every Hill and Tarai district is unique, representing two main geographical zones provides a wider picture of the changes that have occurred in rural Nepal. This study represents a 'microcosm' reflecting many factors, processes and mechanisms, which can also be identified in other parts of the country in qualitative terms, if not in numbers.

National Context: Migration Trends and Remittances

Outmigration has a long history in Nepal. Many studies have described the practice of Nepalis going abroad to become Indian and British *lahures* (soldiers) and to work as wage labourers (Thieme and Wyss 2005; Adhikari and Gurung 2010). Given its geographical and cultural proximity, India has long been one of the major destinations for Nepalis, particularly for the poor from both the Hills and Tarai regions. Not only do Nepalis go to India as *lahures*, but the vast majority work as labourers in different parts of India, such as New Delhi, Mumbai, Mizoram and Punjab. More recently, Nepalis have found new destinations for labour migration in the Gulf States, Malaysia and South Korea. As the migration to these countries is qualitatively different from that to India in many respects, the coming into being of the 'new *lahures*', in the terms of Seddon, Adhikari and Gurung (2001), has produced new discourses around impacts it has on the Nepali economy and society.

The number of Nepali workers going abroad has continuously increased. Today over 1700 Nepalis leave the country every day in search of work in foreign lands. Consequently, the inflow of remittances has also risen, and estimated \$5.2 billion was sent to Nepal in 2013 (World Bank 2014) – equivalent to one-fourth of the country's GDP. Although working and living conditions in foreign countries are substandard and largely precarious (Bruslé 2012, 19; *The Guardian* 2013; Rigg 2015; Rigg et al. 2016), new *lahures* are remitting money and goods back home, although there remains an unequal access to and benefits of such migration

(Thieme and Ghimire 2014). Over 55 percent of the total households in Nepal receive remittances according to the recent Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS) (CBS 2011).

As migration has increased, so has food insecurity at the national level, particularly for poor people. Nepal is now a food insecure country. It has gone from being a net-exporter of food until the mid-1980s to being a net importer of food since the early 1990s. Nepal spends almost all of its remittance earnings in importing goods and commodities, particularly food. In recent years, the import of food items was worth more than NRs 137.2 billion in the fiscal year 2014-15, i.e., about one-fourth of the total remittances, and half of the external remittances (Adhikari 2016). Despite the import of food, the national undernourishment rate of 42 percent, and even as high as 50 percent in the Hills and mountain areas, indicates an exceptional level of malnutrition and food insecurity (CBS 2011). Stunting rates in children are estimated to be as high as 60 percent in the Mid- and Far-Western regions, and acute malnutrition rates of children at nearly 18 percent in the Tarai (CBS 2011, 119).

With such a grim national picture, a compelling question arises as to how transnational labour migration has affected the livelihoods of the migrant families, as well as non-migrant families in rural Nepal. According to the NLSS 2011, about 79 percent of the total remittance is spent on food consumption (CBS 2011). Looking at the patterns of the use of remittances, migrant households must have seen an improvement in their food security or at least they have not been experiencing hunger. Other indirect effects of migration and remittances could have influenced food security through altering land, labour and other socio-economic relations. At the national level, discourses focus on remittances with limited attention to the issues of labour shortage, farming, rural employment, food imports, and the possibility of non-availability of food to import due to global food shortages or market failures. While newspaper articles have highlighted these issues, systematic village studies are largely lacking. In the next section, we address these under-explored effects of migration, illustrating the cases of two villages.

Understanding Patterns and Processes of Migration Impacts

Here we describe two cases of rural villages to examine the effects of foreign migration on land, farming and food security. As the focus of this paper is on the migration-food security-food sovereignty nexus, we do not dwell here on the minutiae of migration, such as who migrates, how they migrate, the value of remittances sent back, and so forth (for this, see Adhikari and Holey 2015; Sunam and McCarthy 2016).

For collecting empirical data for this research, in-depth studies were conducted in villages from Tarai and Hill districts using household surveys, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The main purpose of this article is not to provide quantitative measures of change, but rather to conceptually identify patterns and processes that have been observed in the villages.

Tarai Village: 'Plotting' and Land Dispossession

A case study in the Tarai region was conducted in the Varampur village^[1] of Sunsari district. This village is located near Itahari and Dharan – both major towns in the district. The village is connected to many local towns where local people go to work and to trade goods. About 386 households reside in the village representing different caste groups, including Bahun, Chhetri, Rai, Tharu and Musahar. People in this village are involved in different occupations. The main occupation, in terms of the number of people engaged, is farming, followed by labour migration. Livestock keeping and off-farm occupations, including wage labouring in the village and local towns, are also important livelihood activities. Rice, maize, wheat, potato and mustard are some of the major crops grown in the village.

Our fieldwork in Varampur village highlights varied social and economic effects triggered by migration. In the most part, the effects are complex, and at times contradictory. First, the village has seen a reduction in the number of mouths to be fed in the village as an increasing number of people are working abroad. This effect of outmigration is not much discussed in everyday discourse, although it is intuitively apparent. Over half of the total 170 households surveyed had at least one family member involved in foreign migration. Migrants from Varampur village have mostly gone to the Gulf States such as UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as to Malaysia for employment.

Second, the migrants have sent home remittances ranging from NRs^[2] 5,000 to 50,000 per month, which their family members have used to buy food and cover other household expenses. As a result, the members of migrant families go to food markets in the village to buy food items for household consumption. Although the chronic poor may not benefit in relative terms, those involved in foreign migration have been able to afford *mitho khana* [delicious food]. According to the respondents during focus group discussions and interviews, remittances are mainly spent on food in this village. This reinforces findings of the national surveys (CBS 2011). However, migrant households seemed reluctant to invest in farming because farming was hardly profitable. According to them, the reasons that rendered agriculture unprofitable were beyond farmers' control. Major reasons reported include lack of subsidies, no provision of minimum support prices, cheap Indian rice coming to the village, increased wages for agricultural labour, expensive chemical inputs such as fertiliser and insecticides, and shortage of labour, mainly male, within the village as a result of the outmigration of youths. In addition, they also reported the agricultural land has also become less productive because of the reduction in the production of livestock manure, as the livestock population has declined rapidly in the village. The lack of manure combined with shortage of people involved in soil and water management has led to poor productivity.

Third, the exodus of people from the village to foreign countries has benefited non-migrants, staying in the village. Non-migrant households, including the landless, have been able to

¹ The real name of the study village has been disguised to protect the identities of research participants.

² NRs = Nepali Rupees. US\$1 = NRs 90 as of 10 August 2012.

access land for *adhiya* (sharecropping^[3]). Ex-sharecroppers and many farmers who were cultivating their own land have become migrants now. Because they received remittances and thus were not much worried about food and other household expenses, the members of migrant households considered farming a less attractive occupation. For this reason, some landowning migrant households have given land to the landless for sharecropping. Also, some ex-sharecropping households have given up farming. As a result, it is much easier now than before to lease land for sharecropping from which many non-migrant poor and the landless have benefited. The sharecroppers said, '*khanako lagi chinta chhaina*' [no worries about food]. However, not all poor households can pursue sharecropping profitably given the rising costs of labour and farm inputs, such as fertilisers and seeds. At the same time, the trend and scale of land 'plotting', which we will describe later, has reduced the availability of land for farming.

For those who live from labouring, the wage rate in farming has sharply increased, primarily because of the decline of the labour pool in the village. Five years ago, the daily female wage was NRs 60 and the male wage was NRs 100. Now the wage rates have risen to NRs 200 and NRs 450 for females and males respectively. The amount of work available in the village has also increased due to the shortage of male labour, as over 80 percent of the migrants are male. With remittances coming to the local economy, non-farm work opportunities have become increasingly available. As migrant households have often built new houses or repaired existing ones, many local people have been employed as labourers. Incomes from such employment have helped the poor to buy food when they require it. During the fieldwork in the Varampur village, we observed many people going to local towns for work on their bicycle; we would call them 'cycle commuters'. That said, the poor and landless have experienced better lives compared to their past, but it does not mean that their lives are now comfortable and secure. In the focus group discussions, workers unequivocally said that farm and even off-farm work are irregular, casual and poorly protected by laws and government actions. They also said that they may be hired and fired from work at any time at the mercy of local contractors or employers.

However, some of the positive changes previously discussed are possible only at significant economic and social costs. A large area of arable land has been converted into housing plots, locally called 'plotting', targeted mainly by the migrant households. Many migrant households have purchased such small residential plots. This is essentially 'land real-estate' business. A few rich villagers and investors from local towns or cities are the drivers of this business. They have been buying village land located near roads or where roads are planned. They divide land into small parcels suitable for building houses, which they sell at handsome profits. But this leads to fragmentation, and conversion of land into non-agricultural use. Interviews with the members of migrant households revealed that their purpose in buying housing plots was in most cases not for building houses but for speculative investment on

³ Sharecropping in this village refers to farming arrangements between landowners and tenants in which both parties share harvests equally, but costs of farming are usually borne by the tenants.

land. They have seen other people earning considerable money by buying land and selling it later. Most people, if not all, in the village echoed the view that *'jaggako vaau akasiyako chha'* ('land price has skyrocketed'). With increased buyers, land has become so expensive that genuine farmers who want land for farming cannot afford it. This has become a real barrier to agricultural extensification. The reason seems straightforward for rural people: because farming is not profitable, speculative land purchase sounds a better deal for many. Keeping land idle and selling it after a few years may produce more profit than net income from farming. Thus, 'plotting' has led not just to the decline in arable land, but has also discouraged rural people from expanding their farming.

Land dispossession is another unexpected outcome of 'plotting'. When landowners engage in plotting or sell their land for plotting, the land set aside for this purpose is often left uncultivated or is withdrawn from cultivation. This means tenants can no longer work the land once it is designated for plotting; as a result, they become dispossessed from that land, taking away their means for self-provisioning of food. This process of dispossession hits the poor and the landless hard in a context where off-farm employment in the village is irregular and insecure, and foreign migration favours those who are already well-off. Some households in the village have also become dispossessed from land when they have failed in migration processes – either not being able to earn enough to send remittances to pay back loans or being unable to leave the country for health reasons or being cheated by migration agents, called 'manpower agencies'. They become indebted and eventually sell land to clear their debts.

Overseas migration also speeds up the process of rural-urban migration, migration from villages to local towns, leading to further decline in agricultural production in the village. During the fieldwork, different patterns of local migration were observed. Those migrant households receiving a huge amount of remittances have moved to large local towns where they have bought new houses or built their own new houses. These households are usually large landowners in the village. Households with fewer remittances and little land have migrated to small local towns. Such movement of households does not stop here. Even left-behind family members of the migrants have moved to towns, where they live in rented rooms for educating their children at private schools, where the quality of education is perceived to be better than in the government-run schools. In this way, the rural area has seen the expansion of old towns and the creation of new ones. In all forms of movement, the settlers in local towns often exit farming, relying on remittances sent by their family members. Some completely sell their village land, while most of these rural-urban migrants lease out land to tenants; some even leave land uncultivated. In addition, their movement to local towns has further aggravated labour shortages in the villages.

Here we presented impacts of labour migration on the ways people farm and access land and employment in Tarai region. The ensuing section illustrates similar stories from the Hill region.

Hill Village: 'Everyone is Leaving: Who Will Sow Our Fields'

This case study focused on two villages in Khotang, a Hill district in eastern Nepal (see for details Adhikari and Hobley 2015). This is a remote district, until recently lacking even a road connection to district headquarters. The major occupations of the people in Khotang are farming and livestock keeping, although transnational labour migration has been increasingly accessible to them in recent years. In this district, there are still few economic and employment opportunities outside agriculture.

Of the total 320 households surveyed in the study villages, about 60 percent of them had someone working abroad. This indicates how important and attractive a choice outmigration has become for the people living in the hinterland. Here we first describe positive effects of migration on the livelihoods of local people, in particular, on food security.

In the study villages, remittances have enabled migrant households to purchase food when needed. The amount of remittances each migrant household receives ranges from NRs 6,000 to NRs 100,000 every month. Even non-migrant landless and poor households have opportunities to cultivate other people's land under sharecropping mechanisms. Terms and conditions of sharecropping now favour tenants. Tenants have become choosier now than before, as they do not take *pakho bari* (marginal land) for sharecropping; rather, they rent *khet* (fertile irrigated land) where they can produce rice and a variety of cereal crops. Using remittances, one third of former landless or near-landless households, mainly Dalits^[4], have bought arable land. This change became possible due to Dalits' involvement in international migration. This is considered unusual for many in the village because non-Dalits (higher castes) tend to stigmatise Dalits, referring to their caste and enervating poverty. As in the Tarai district, with many males going abroad, a similar shortage of male labour has occurred. This has inflated wage rates, benefiting the labouring class. Daily wage rates in farming, which were NRs 30 for males and NRs 20 for females a decade ago, have now risen to about NRs 400 and NRs 200 respectively. As in the Tarai village, wage rates for males increased at a higher rate because of the scarcity of male labour, as a growing number of men are migrating out of the village, searching for employment. Since migrant households have either built new houses or refurbished their old ones, many workers have found non-farm employment in their own village. Incomes from such employment have certainly improved their food purchasing capacity.

Nevertheless, numerous negative effects of migration on farming have also been identified. Migration has led to a decline in food production in the village in many ways. Due to the shortage of labour, arable land has increasingly been left fallow or uncultivated as in other villages. Tenants prefer fertile and *khet* land, where paddy can be grown. Tenants who were interviewed echoed that they were not interested in marginal and poor quality lands. Further, tenants and landowners have not looked after land well – there has been no mending of

⁴ Dalits represent a marginalised group in Nepal who have been oppressed because of their low caste status in the Hindu caste hierarchy. In the past, they used to be called '*achhut*' (untouchables).

landslide-affected farmlands and even no maintenance of terraces and bunds. These land improvement activities are important for enhancing the fertility of land. In addition, foreign migration has pushed local migration of people from villages to local towns and to Tarai. Migrant households that have accumulated more than half a million Nepali Rupees (US\$ 5,000) have shifted to Tarai, while less successful migrants have moved to local towns. This rural-urban migration has also created labour shortage, as well as constrained farming in the village. Such local migrants have left their village land uncultivated or planted trees on it.

Despite increased availability of land for sharecropping, farming has not been attractive to non-migrants households for various reasons, which have inflated farming costs. First, local wage rates have sharply increased in the last decade, mainly in response to labour shortage, as noted earlier. Due to high labour costs, farmers consider farming an unprofitable occupation in the village. While many believe that increased wage rates have benefited the labouring class, interviews with farmers revealed that they switched to different farming strategies for reducing demand for hired labour. They have revived *parma*, a reciprocal labour exchange system. They are planting trees or perennial crops on their land rather than cultivating cereal crops, which have shorter rotation. Some have left land *bajho* (idle) instead of growing crops. Another strategy for some farmers is to lease out land to the landless or land-poor for sharecropping.

Second, the prices of chemical fertilisers have increased, as elsewhere in the country, deterring farmers from using such fertilisers. Again largely due to labour shortage, migrant households have reduced the number of livestock, which means less supply of organic fertilisers in the farms. Third, even if farmers produce a surplus, there is limited access to market and prices of hill cereal crops have declined. Maize price plummeted from NRs 34/kg to NRs 17/kg in two years in the village. Rice from Tarai or India is cheaper and connotes higher social status than the rice grown in the Hills. In the past, people did not eat much rice, and they were happy with maize and millet because rice was expensive in the Hills due to high transportation costs. However, now with improved access to road transport, the availability of rice for purchase has increased. Many farmers interviewed said that they have reduced cropping intensity, since surplus is not worth producing. They used to cultivate maize twice a year. Now they just do a single maize crop a year for household consumption only. Overall, farmers, both owner cultivators and sharecroppers, seemed to engage in farming for the purpose of self-provisioning, not for surplus production and sale.

Differentiating Impacts in Tarai and Hill Regions

We here discuss differential impacts in Tarai and Hill regions of Nepal, engaging with the concepts of food security and food sovereignty. As the case studies in Tarai and Hill villages of Nepal show, some effects of migration are similar in both places, while others are different due to their geographical and socio-economic specificities (see Table 1). Also, some positively presented effects may not be so positive for some households, since rural households are differentiated along lines of economic class, caste, and gender. For instance,

increased wages may be a positive change for wage workers. At the same time, it may impact negatively on farmers who hire labour.

Regarding food security, migrant households receiving remittances have been able to feed their members. When they run out of food, they have used remittances to purchase food items in the nearby groceries; these foods are mainly imported from India thanks to increased road connectivity. Although foreign migration is class biased, some poor households have been able to engage in foreign migration, for instance, Dalits from Khotang, a Hill district. In this district, some landless households, mainly Dalits, have purchased land with remittances, reconstructing their social identities of being the landless and ‘untouchable’, although such cases are still rare in the Tarai village. These social groups, the landless and Dalits, represent highly marginalised and socially excluded groups in Nepal. Nevertheless, not all households have become successful, and there are households failing to pursue migration or generate remittances even if they engage in migration. Such households have become indebted and landless, constraining their capabilities to regain access to land and food (Sunam 2015).

Poor households, mostly in the Tarai village, enhanced their capacity to purchase food through income generated from increased non-agricultural employment, such as construction-labouring opportunities. Such labouring work was created when migrant households built new houses or refurbished old houses in the village and local towns. However, in both regions, village workers experienced limited farm work opportunities, as farmers tended to avoid hired labour due to labour shortage, increased farm wages, and the cost of chemical farm inputs.

Table 1. Differential effects of labour migration on food security and food sovereignty

Food security related effects	Tendencies in	
	Tarai	Hills
Increased household incomes through remittances	√	√
Rise in wages	√	√
Increased non-farm work	High	Low
Decreased farm employment	High	Low
Indebtedness due to failed migration	High	Low
Rise in food imports	High	High
Food sovereignty related effects		
Increased access to land for sharecropping	Low	High
Increased agricultural land purchases by Dalits or poor migrants	Low	High
Increased fallow/idle land (land abandonment)	Low	High
Dispossession of farmers from land	High	Low
Conversion of agricultural land into non-agricultural uses (plotting)	High	Low
Rising land price	High	Low
High labour shortage	√	√

Reduced livestock	√	√
Decreased crop intensity	√	√
Decline in land productivity	√	√
Decline in local food production	√	√

In terms of food sovereignty, positive effects will be highlighted first. Some poor people have gained access to land for sharecropping in both regions. In the Hills, terms of sharecropping have become more favourable for the tenants. This is not so in Tarai, perhaps due to the fact that there are many landless and chronically poor people, such as Musahars who are in dire need of land for sharecropping (see Sunam and McCarthy 2016). However, only households that can supply their own family labour are involved in sharecropping because of increased wages that are, in fact, the outcomes of migration itself. Otherwise, sharecropping is not worth doing for poor households, as illustrated earlier. Particularly in the Hill region, the landless and Dalits have transformed their identities from being the landless to the landowner. However, following the rising trend of outmigration local food production has declined both in Hills and Tarai villages, as indicated by the plausible qualitative reasons elaborated previously. Even households still farming are not doing it in the way they previously did – now they are cultivating a single crop a year or just paddy as opposed to producing at least two crops a year – and thus arable land has been under-used. Surveying the migrant households in the western Hills of Nepal, Maharjan et al. (2013) also found a negative impact of migration on the production of cereals.

Several critical factors, triggered by migration, led to a decline in local food production. As evident in both study villages, a shortage of workers, in some cases, has been experienced following the outmigration of local people, mainly male, and the rural-urban migration mainly facilitated by remittances. Due largely to the labour shortage, wage rates have increased, leading to high farming costs compared to low cereal prices. The labour shortage has compelled households to reduce the number of livestock; thus they have available less organic fertilizers supply and even less supply of meat and dairy products. Particularly in Tarai, ‘plotting’ has consumed arable land and exacerbated land fragmentation and the subsequent dispossession of poor farmers from the land. Gartaula et al. (2012) also warn of the negative implications of the reduction of arable land in Tarai on the total food production in the country. Similarly, as other studies also highlight (Paudel et al. 2014), fallow land has increased in the Hills, since landowning farmers and tenants have left some of their land, mainly marginal and *pakho* land, uncultivated.

Conclusions: Deteriorating Food Sovereignty

This paper has examined how migration affects food security and food sovereignty, drawing on the case of Nepal. Based on the discussion of findings from two villages, we distil two key conclusions here. First, transnational labour migration has improved *food security* for

successful migrants and some wage workers in the short term. As we saw, remittances have helped them to purchase food in the market. This holds true for those households who were able to receive high remittances. A few wage workers also benefited from increased wage labour opportunities, which were mainly created by the migrants' investment of remittances in the construction of houses in the village or local towns.

Second, while labour migration has facilitated poor people's access to land for sharecropping, improving their access to food, it has led to the deterioration of *food sovereignty* given the decline of food production due mainly to rising trends of the commodification of land and attendant dispossession of poor people from land and thus farming. Non-migrants, mainly the landless and poor, have an opportunity for sharecropping, as many ex-sharecroppers or landowners have gone abroad for foreign employment; the harvest share they received from sharecropping has improved their food security. As the case studies revealed, migration has, however, led to many detrimental consequences in the use of land and household assets such as livestock, and on food systems within the village, including the ability to be self-sufficient, especially in the Tarai village. Consequently, the local resiliency of the village food economy has been gradually eroded. Another negative effect on non-migrating farmers is that they cannot expand their farmlands because land has been so expensive with the inflow of remittances that they cannot buy it from their village incomes; agricultural extensification has become a distant dream for them.

As a result, food imports have continued to rise in Nepal. With the growing dependence on external food, especially in the international market, there are questions about the continued supply of such food when there is production and market failure globally. Then, international politics and the interests of large multinational food corporations shape rural people's access to food. It leads to a continuous erosion of food sovereignty for all. Considered important to have quality food and secure local resource-based livelihoods at the time of adversity, losing food sovereignty also suggests future vulnerability to food insecurity, even for those who secure food in shorter term. In a situation when the demand for migrant workers dries up, everyone will be adversely affected, as it takes an extended period of time and massive resources to rebuild food systems once land and local resources are put to non-agricultural uses.

The two case studies here suggest that migration and remittances failed to reinvigorate agriculture in Nepal. We found that migration and remittances discouraged local food production. Why remittances are not invested in farming or why are farm households not engaging in 'serious' agriculture? As discussed earlier, migration has created a labour shortage inflating wage rates which, coupled with a global rise in the prices of chemical fertilizers, has rendered farming less beneficial, leading to the processes of 'deactivation' (van der Ploeg 2008, 7). Even if farmers produce surpluses, farm-gate prices of cereal crops are not lucrative. Their produce has to compete with cheap food from India, where agriculture has been subsidized (Pritchard 2013) as compared to Nepal. There are no supportive policies in Nepal, such as minimum support prices, and other kinds of substantive subsidies that could

provide farmers with strong incentives to produce more. The argument here is that the problem of poor farming is not just due to migration and remittances. Rather there are also other structural and policy issues that go beyond the control of individual farmers.

While every part of the country varies in its socio-economic and geographical terms, we see parallels of such processes occurring across many parts of the country, since labour migration is not uniquely practiced in a few villages in Tarai and Hills, rather, it is a widespread phenomenon. At the village level, a decline in food production has increased net-food buyer households. At the national level, food imports have surpassed food exports. Foreign migration is very likely to take the form of an intergenerational pathway to overcome economic stresses, as such a tendency has been observed in many countries having a long history of international migration (Martin et al. 2006). Such negative spirals would present broader political and social implications in the future that can hardly be positive if issues around food, land and farming are not addressed in a democratic and equitable manner.

This paper has, we hope, expanded our understanding of impacts of transnational labour migration on food sovereignty and food security in the places of migrants' origin. Over-reliance on the analysis of remittances in several migration studies precludes us from observing changing critical social and economic relations which profoundly underpin rural economy and food security. While some studies emphasise the importance of migration for farming and food security (Davis et al. 2010; de Janvry et al. 2005; Rigg 2006), we should be wary about highlighting linear effects of migration, since our paper, employing the concepts of food security and food sovereignty, reveals several contradictory effects on rural people's access to food. Thus, this paper suggests that these concepts together offer a complementary (opposed to binary) framework for understanding the labour migration-food sovereignty-food security nexus.

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