



Nepal—Tom Van Cakenberghe

HARNESSING THE DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL OF LABOR MIGRATION

Challenging the Dominant Paradigm of “Development In-Place”

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Acronyms

AFD	Agence Française de Développement
EC	European Commission
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
EUTF	European Union Emergency Trust Fund
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IME	International Monetary Exchange
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LMICs	Low- and Middle-Income Countries
RFAs	Requests for Applications
RFIs	Requests for Information
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

Executive Summary

An incoherent approach: The movement of people in search of better economic opportunities is a common and enduring livelihood strategy. Indeed, 90% of international migration is considered to be economic migration.¹ At the national and household level, research demonstrates that migration and remittances can lead to positive socioeconomic and development outcomes, including improvements in living conditions, investments in children’s education, improved food security, accumulation of assets, and reductions in poverty. Despite its important role in development, key foreign assistance actors fail to recognize and harness the potential of economic migration to meet development outcomes. Instead, many government donors continue to frame migration (especially across borders) as a problem rather than an opportunity to enhance individual, household, and community socioeconomic well-being. This approach runs contrary to emerging principles adopted by global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the United Nations Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration and to evidence on the positive relationship between migration and development.² The status quo development approach is not only a missed opportunity — it also perpetuates cycles of development programs that are often ineffective in stemming migration.

This paper draws on qualitative and quantitative evidence, including case studies from Nepal and Niger, to explain why aid actors continue to focus on keeping migrants at home and to highlight the socioeconomic implications of this missed opportunity. It concludes with recommendations for policymakers, aid actors, and donors on how to better harness the development potential of economic migration.



Niger—Sean Sheridan for Mercy Corps

1 Ratha et al. (2020).

2 UN General Assembly (2015) & *Global Compact for Safe, Regular, and Orderly Migration* (2018).

Why does this bias persist?

Economic migration remains politically sensitive in many donor countries

Domestic political pressures to curb immigration drive foreign policies and assistance directed at migrant-sending countries. While anti-immigration sentiments are not necessarily the predominant view, they are still prevalent — notably in Europe and the United States.³ Numerous studies have documented the fiscal benefits for countries receiving migrants and shown that immigrants typically do not drive down local wages.⁴ Nonetheless, fear of socioeconomic and cultural changes resulting from migration continues to persist, and shapes foreign assistance decisions even toward countries like Nepal and Niger, where migration tends to be regional or internal.

The international development paradigm is not conducive to supporting people on the move

Two key features of aid programs and strategies contribute to this bias toward in-place development. First, the large majority of aid programs are geographically targeted. Program success is measured against impact at a defined locality, often at a country or sub-national level (e.g. a village), which does not align with the reality that people are typically on the move from one place to another. Relatedly, supporting people on the move is often seen as a risky and complex endeavor, especially those who are moving across international borders. In these cases, diverse legal frameworks come into play that require responsible development actors to ensure participants have the proper documentation, permissions, and support to move abroad.

Development practitioners and the institutions they work in operate with a flawed understanding of migration

Despite a large body of scholarship on the connections between migration and development, in practice there is little overlap between these two policy spheres, as “development practitioners often view migration as a failure of development.”⁵ Consequently, the primary focus of development policies and programs vis-a-vis migration is to prevent it by improving local economic conditions, even though research and experience indicate that this approach is unlikely to be effective. The disconnect between these two policy areas is further reflected in the institutional structures that implement development and migration policies, which often work in silos. The absence of an overarching coordination mechanism that connects migration and development policies across some donor government agencies presents a serious challenge to policy coherence.

What are the ways forward?

1. Reconsider economic migration as a choice and an opportunity, which has both benefits and risks that must be proactively managed (Figure 1). It is not donors’ or aid actors’ place to dictate whether or not households choose to migrate, nor where they decide to seek economic opportunities. As migration trends increase, it will behoove donors and aid actors to focus efforts on supporting legal, safe, and productive migration opportunities.

3 Krogstad (2015).

4 Clemens (2017).

5 Key informant interview with migration policy expert, November 13, 2019.

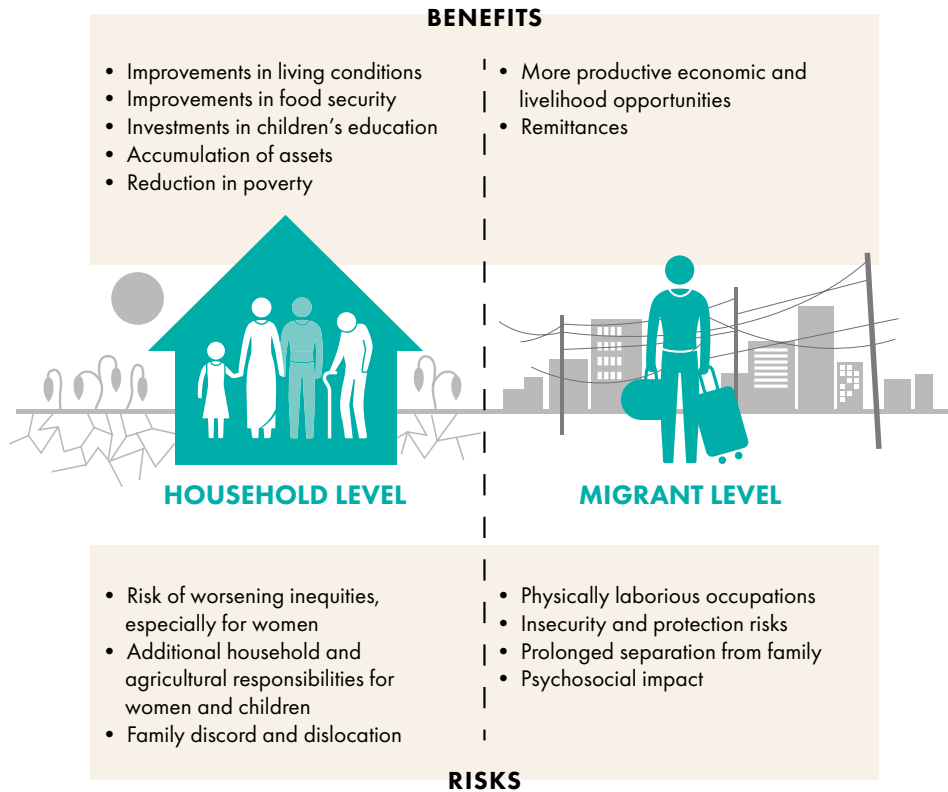


FIGURE 1: Benefits and risks of labor migration

While migration brings challenges and risks for migrants and their sending household, it also allows households to meet their essential needs and improve their socioeconomic conditions in contexts affected by climate change, rapid population growth, and limited livelihood opportunities.

2. Integrate economic migration as a key component of development strategies and investments.

Despite the growing body of research showcasing the positive contributions labor mobility can make toward development outcomes, donor governments and national governments often take a siloed approach to economic migration and development. The failure to integrate economic migration as a key component of development strategies and investments is a missed opportunity for governments.

3. Pilot, test, and scale programs that support people on the move and those who stay behind.

Even when there is interest and political will to support productive migration, a limited understanding of how this can be done and how interventions can be designed to overcome the associated risks and sensitivities demands that aid actors start small. By beginning with programs that are viewed as pilots, development actors can test approaches that go beyond the traditional limits, including more regional approaches to development aid that connect programs across national borders. A detailed list of program recommendations can be found at the end of this report.

A new approach is necessary now more than ever in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and climate crisis, both of which have profound effects on global mobility and development. Donors must be frank about the shortcomings of the way foreign policies and assistance have long thought about and dealt with migration from low-income countries, where trends like climate change are leading to a growing number of economic migrants. We hope that this time of crisis will be a moment of reckoning — an opportunity for donors to deeply question their assumptions about migration and development and explore a more coherent way forward.



Niger—Sean Sheridan for Mercy Corps

Introduction

Migration can be a powerful catalyst for development, with potential to shape societies, fuel economies, and improve the lives of innumerable migrants and their families. In 2019 alone, migrants sent over \$550 billion in remittances to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), a figure that surpasses all foreign direct investment and far exceeds official development aid invested in these countries.⁶

Despite such transformative potential for international development, migration is often portrayed as a challenge rather than an opportunity. Certainly, migration can give rise to challenges, including the risk of exploitation of migrant workers and the potential to exacerbate inequality.⁷ It is also a contentious issue in the domestic politics of many of the world's largest donors. However, policy tools, including development aid, that implicitly aim to reduce migration and root people in their communities of origin lack an understanding and appreciation of how migration shapes and is shaped by development.⁸ Not only is this a missed opportunity, but it perpetuates flawed and ineffective policies and programs.

⁶ Ratha et al. (2019).

⁷ Costa & Martin (2018); Sunam & McCarthy (2016).

⁸ For example, the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum proposes to use development assistance to address a number of economic and political challenges facing sending countries, so that “people feel that their future lies at home.” European Commission (2020).

This modus operandi among donors in response to migration reveals two trends. First, while migration is a complex phenomenon that takes on different forms, serves different purposes, and is a response to different factors, policies and development programs tend to see it in a negative light and respond to it in a monolithic way. Considerations of the fact that the large majority of migration tends to be South-South, intra-regional, or internal, for example, do not typically inform donors’ policies on migration, which are often focused on deterring immigration to their countries. Second, despite the growing body of research showcasing the positive contributions labor mobility can make toward development outcomes, donor governments and national governments often take a siloed approach to economic migration and development. If, as research indicates, migration increases with development and development increases with migration, then investing in local development in order to deter migration is set to fail. A more coherent approach which takes into account the growing evidence base on development and migration linkages would instead simultaneously seek to invest in local development and to improve safe, orderly, and productive migration opportunities.

Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data, this report highlights the tendency of the international development sector to prioritize in-place development over supporting safe and productive migration. We use two illustrative case studies from countries with historically high rates of labor migration, Niger and Nepal, to investigate why this bias exists, and argue for an approach that recognizes and amplifies the positive contributions of migration to development. We then discuss the political and institutional constraints to adopting an approach that sees migration as an opportunity rather than a failure of development. In conclusion, we offer tangible actions for charting a way toward a coherent dual-approach that focuses on both local development and safe and productive migration.



Nepal—Sanjay Gurung, Mercy Corps



Niger—Maria Finch, Mercy Corps

MIGRATION DEFINITIONS AND TRENDS

Migration can take many forms, including forced displacement, human trafficking, and economic migration. This report focuses on **economic migration**, defined as **“the movement of persons from one State to another or within their own country of residences for the purpose of employment.”**⁹

Economic migration, also referred to as labor mobility, can take place in various forms (i.e. circular/seasonal or permanent) and by various means (i.e. regular or irregular). In sheer numbers, economic migration is far more significant than other forms of migration. Ninety percent of the estimated 266 million international migrants in 2019 were considered economic migrants.¹⁰



FIGURE 2: Global migration flows 2005-2010 by region
(Sander, Abel and Bauer, n.d.)

As a percent of the global population, the rate of international migration has remained consistently around 3%, with the total number of migrants increasing from 102 million in 1980, to 173 million in 2000, to over 265 million in 2018.¹¹ A vast majority of international migration remains internal and intra-continental (**Figure 2**). For example, at least 80% of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa remain on the continent.¹² While the intensity, spread, and distance of migration has remained consistent at the global level, some key trends are likely to increase migration in the near future.¹³ Chief among these trends is the loss of agricultural and pastoralist livelihoods as a result of the depletion of natural resources, compounded by the effects of slow-onset climatic changes. Though projections vary, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) predicts that environmental factors will push up to 200 million people to migrate by 2050.¹⁴ In addition to climate change, rapid population growth and urbanization are indicators of increasingly mobile populations in some parts of the world. These trends will make migration an increasingly important political and development issue, particularly in countries of origin and in destination countries.

⁹ *Key Migration Terms* (2015).

¹⁰ While less data are available on internal migration, its magnitude is estimated to be 2.5 times greater than international migration. Ratha et al. (2020).

¹¹ Vidal & Tjaden (2018).

¹² United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017).

¹³ Czaika & de Haas (2014).

¹⁴ Kamal (2017); Estimates by the World Bank suggest the large majority of those displaced by environmental factors will likely remain in their own countries. *Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration* (2018).

The status quo approach and its shortcomings

In 2015, when the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, international migration was recognized as an integral part of global sustainable development. Migration is relevant to 11 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, including, most directly, target 10.7 to “facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.”¹⁵ The 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration further attempts to lay out a common approach to “optimize the overall benefits of migration, while addressing its risks and challenges.”¹⁶ Central to these frameworks is the understanding that sending and receiving countries must develop policies that recognize the potential of migration to improve development outcomes along with the risks of poorly-managed migration.

Scholars have similarly demonstrated the important role that migration can play in development. At the household level, research shows migration and remittances can lead to positive socioeconomic and development outcomes, including improvements in living conditions, investments in children’s education, improved food security, accumulation of assets, and reductions in poverty.¹⁷ Remittances boost household income, which can be used for immediate needs and to build assets and diversify risks.¹⁸ At a macro-level, remittances play a significant role in development and poverty alleviation. One study finds that a 10% increase in per capita official international remittances leads to a 3.5% decline in the share of people living in poverty.¹⁹ Migration may also help relieve unemployment and boost income for those who remain in the country by reducing competition in domestic labor markets.²⁰ Conversely, a concern for migrant-sending countries is that the emigration of skilled labor will lead to a “brain drain,” but overall, evidence on the economic impacts of migration indicates that it is generally positive for countries of origin.²¹

Many donor foreign assistance strategies tend to ignore the positive aspects of migration. Instead they focus on rooting people in their communities by investing in more local development — even though research indicates that this is unlikely to work. This approach is underpinned by the view that migration is a threat and a failure of development. As a prime example, following the 2015 migration crisis in Europe, during which over 1 million migrants and refugees arrived on the shores of Greece and Italy,²² European leaders proposed to address the “root causes of irregular migration” by pledging close to €5 billion in economic development projects focused on key sending countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.²³ While claiming to have created tens of thousands of jobs and improved basic services (positive outcomes in their own right), this approach

15 Vidal & Tjaden (2018).

16 *Global Compact for Migration* (2017).

17 Dhungana (2012); Duryea, Lopez-Cordova, & Olmedo (2005); *Impact Evaluation of Remittances: A Case Study of Dhanusha District* (2012); Panter-Brick (1992); Quisumbing (2003); Thomas (1990); Zezza et al. (2011).

18 Zezza et al. (2011).

19 Adams & Page (2005).

20 Asch (1994); *International Migration Policies* (2019).

21 *Global Economic Prospects* (2006).

22 The large majority of arrivals in 2015 were from countries in conflict, including Syria and Afghanistan, though the period also saw large numbers of economic immigrants from countries such as Nigeria and Gambia, as irregular migration routes via Libya connecting Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe became increasingly affordable during this time. Tinti & Reitano (2016).

23 *EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa* (n.d.).



Niger—Thatcher Cook for Mercy Corps

to preventing economic migration rested on an assumption that in the short term, modest development improvements in Africa coupled with improved security and border management would lead to fewer migrants to Europe. The literature on migration and development, however, challenges this assumption: Economic improvements are typically associated with increases in migration in LMICs, until gross domestic product (GDP) per capita reaches about \$8,000-\$10,000, principally because households tend to invest disposable income in migration.²⁴

These types of donor development and migration policies should be understood as operating against a backdrop of domestic preferences in receiving countries. Critics of migration raise concerns about the negative effects of immigrants on local wages. However, research indicates that it is more likely there are labor market complementarities — that immigrants usually occupy jobs that natives do not, and do not drive down wages of native workers.²⁵ Other studies indicate that the fiscal impact of migrants can be positive, with immigrants “contributing far more in taxes than they consume in public benefits.”²⁶ Despite this evidence, anti-immigration sentiments are still prevalent, particularly in Europe and the U.S., though not necessarily the dominant view.²⁷ Anti-immigration views may stem more from cultural differences rather than economic considerations.²⁸ These public perceptions, in turn, shape donors’ development investments and strategies, often toward disincentivizing migration that could contribute to local development, and even when migration is predominantly internal or to neighboring countries.

24 de Haas (2007); Clemens & Postel (2018); Clemens (2014); Angelucci (2015); Bazzi (2017).

25 Borjas (1995); Clemens (2017).

26 Orrenius (2017).

27 Krogstad (2015).

28 Research examining support for immigration policies in Switzerland finds that “the share of culturally different immigrants is a significant and sizable determinant of anti-immigration votes, while the presence of culturally similar immigrants does not affect natives’ voting behavior.” Brunner & Kuhn (2018).

A new approach is necessary now more than ever in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and climate crisis, both of which have profound effects on global mobility and development. In 2020, restrictions on travel between and within countries hurt those who rely on migrant remittances; the World Bank estimates that remittances to LMICs declined by 7% last year.²⁹ Though significant, this is likely far less severe than the downturn in private investor capital, indicating that global remittances are more resilient than other forms of development investments. Nonetheless, the impact on many households has been negative, reducing household income while also increasing household consumption needs by adding another mouth to feed.³⁰ While easing migration restrictions in the midst of a global pandemic presents risks, policymakers and donors must weigh the costs of not doing so and, at the least, find short-term solutions to mitigate the devastating impact on migrants and their families and communities. At the same time, with growing recognition of the link between climate change and increasing migration, the need to evaluate and adapt immigration and migration management strategies is gaining momentum.³¹ To meet this challenge, donors must be frank about the shortcomings of the way foreign policies and assistance have long thought about and dealt with migration from low-income countries, where increasing climate stress is leading to a growing number of economic migrants. We hope that this time of crisis will be a moment of reckoning — an opportunity for donors to deeply question their assumptions about migration and development and explore a more coherent way forward.



Nepal—Miguel Samper for Mercy Corps

29 Barton & Harrison (2021).

30 COVID-19 Rapid Market Impact Report (2020).

31 Exec. Order No. 14013 (2021).



Nepal—Vassiliki Lembesis, Mercy Corps

Methods

This report showcases the opportunity for donor strategies and investments to better recognize and amplify the positive contributions of migration to international development. We focus our analysis and discussion around case studies from Nepal and Niger — two countries with historically high rates of labor migration — to examine the following three questions (**Figure 3**):



FIGURE 3: Research questions by data sources

In order to address these questions, we analyzed two types of data sources: (1) interviews and discussions, and (2) national and donor development strategy documents. We brought together these distinct yet complementary sources to examine the labor mobility experience and the opportunities and challenges of investing in safe, orderly, and productive migration from different perspectives. We capture the viewpoints of experts and policymakers who are familiar with and inform the development policies and approaches and of migrants and their families in Nepal and Niger who experience the benefits and risks of migration firsthand. We also reference strategy documents and calls for proposals which signal donor investment priorities in Nepal and Niger.

Interviews and discussions

First, we drew on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions previously conducted by the lead authors in Nepal and Niger. In both contexts, interviews and discussions focused on households' experiences with migration, the effects of labor mobility on sending households, and opportunities to better harness the development potential for migration.

In Nepal, 47 interviews and 23 discussions were conducted with 152 respondents on two visits (in October 2016 and February 2017). In the Bajhang District of Far West Nepal, a site selected given its history of food insecurity, isolation, vulnerability to various environmental shocks, and high rates of migration to India, respondents were purposively sampled by household migration status, caste, and gender.³²

In Niger, 50 interviews were conducted on two visits (in July 2018 and December 2018). Respondents included unemployed young men and former migrants as well as families of current migrants in Tillabéri, a region known for seasonal and long-term migration to urban areas and neighboring countries. Twenty additional interviews were conducted with migrants in Niamey, the capital city.

Second, we conducted seven semi-structured key informant interviews with international development experts and policymakers. Respondents included current or former government officials and donor representatives from the U.S. and the European region, academics, development actors, and migration experts from think tanks. Interviews took place in 2019 and focused on the political and institutional contexts that have shaped migration and development policies of key institutional donors. In particular, key informants were asked to speak to the role of migration in development policies, the challenges of considering migration as part of development strategies in countries of origin, and the ways in which these challenges may be overcome. While the focus of these interviews was global in scope, the discussion narrowed in on Nepal and Niger whenever possible.

All interviews and discussion notes were transcribed and analyzed to identify emergent themes, which were then linked to show patterns, relationships, and explanations.

32 Kim, Stites, Webb, Constan, & Maxwell (2019).

National and donor development strategy documents

In addition to interviews and focus group discussions, we reviewed contemporary national and donor development strategy documents from Nepal (13) and Niger (11) to identify development priorities and to examine if and how labor mobility was understood and accounted for in the broader strategy.

134 USAID and EC documents for Nepal and Niger were reviewed for study.

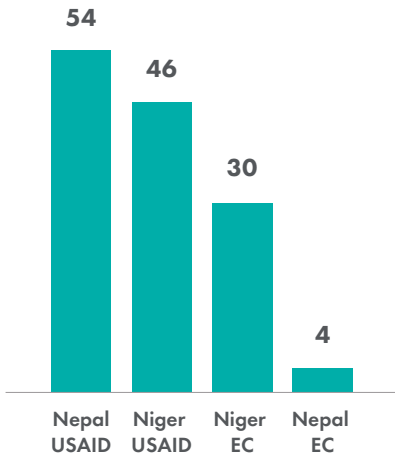


FIGURE 4: Number of USAID and EC solicitations collected for Nepal and Niger 2014-2020

Since aid programs and budgets reflect donor policy priorities, we collected and analyzed a total of 134 USAID Requests for Applications (RFAs),³³ Requests for Information (RFIs), and European Commission (EC) Action Documents (hereinafter documents or solicitations) for Nepal and Niger (all dated between 2014 and 2020). Of these 134 documents, 58 were for Nepal (54 by USAID, four by the EC) and 76 were for Niger (46 by USAID, 30 by the EC) (Figure 4). We selected USAID and the EC for review given their substantial investments in our two case study countries. Each of the identified documents were coded, with a goal of understanding the ways in which migration is mentioned and framed in development solicitations.

Limitations

This report collates and analyzes multiple sources of data to corroborate findings and reduce the risk of chance results and systematic bias of relying solely on one approach. However, there are some limitations to note. First, our analysis and corresponding argument is based on case studies from two countries (Nepal and Niger) and an examination of strategies of two bilateral donors (USAID and the EC). Additional case studies and review of other donor strategies will be necessary in order to gauge the extent to which our insights can be generalized. Second, we relied on publicly available and accessible documents from USAID and the EC, which employ different knowledge management strategies for previous solicitations. In turn, our analyses of these documents and the emergent trends we discuss in this report may not be wholly representative of archived solicitations. In spite of these limitations, our analysis strongly highlights the need for international development actors to question their assumptions about migration and development linkages and to recognize and amplify the positive contribution of labor mobility toward local development gains.

33 In order to identify relevant solicitations, we searched through hundreds of donor solicitations on [grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov), the EC websites, EU Trust Fund, and EC Single Electronic Data Interchange Area.



Niger—Vassiliki Lembesis, Mercy Corps

Case Studies: Migration and Development Linkages in Nepal and Niger

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- › In Nepal and Niger, migration and development are inexorably linked. Labor mobility is a central economic reality with deep historical roots for many Nepalese and Nigerien households. While migration brings challenges and risks for migrants and their sending households, it also allows them to meet their essential needs in contexts affected by climate change, rapid population growth, and limited livelihood opportunities.
- › The Nepalese and Nigerien national policies and legislations fail to see migration as an opportunity for advancing development plans, despite the noted contribution of migration and remittances to the countries' development and the opportunity to facilitate safer, more productive labor migration experiences.

In this section, we provide a brief overview of the migration and development linkages in Nepal and Niger (**Figure 5**) in order to highlight the opportunity for international aid actors to better harness the development potential of labor mobility in these contexts. In order to contextualize these broader discussions, we also present findings from interviews and focus group discussions conducted in rural Nepal and Niger in which we heard from individuals and their families who experience the benefits and risks of labor mobility firsthand. We then describe how migration is framed by national governments in development strategies and action plans. Our analysis reveals a bias toward in-place development strategies that either overlook or actively seek to discourage labor migration in Niger and Nepal.

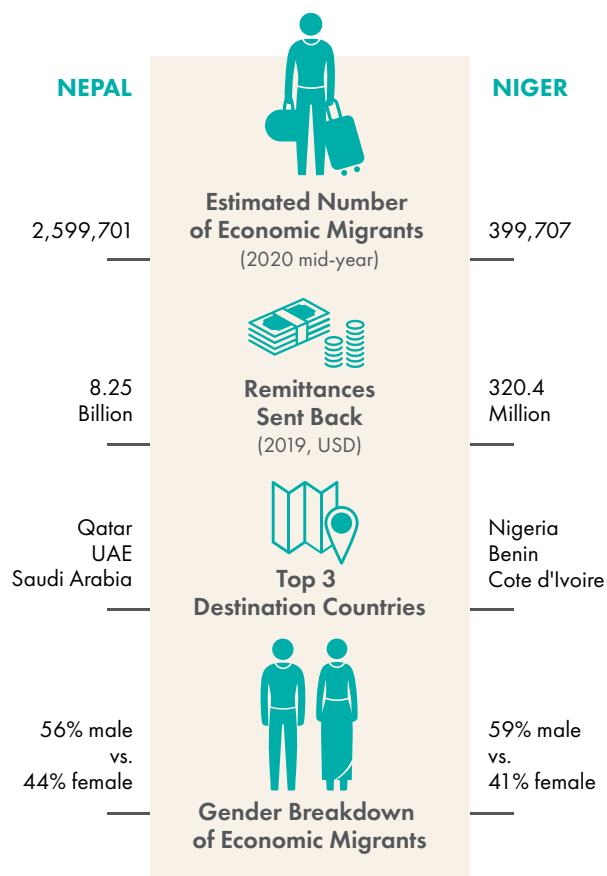


FIGURE 5: Statistics on labor mobility in Nepal and Niger³⁴

Migration and development context in Nepal

Nepal has a long history of migration, both within the country as well as internationally.³⁵ Migration is primarily economically motivated, driven largely by the search for higher salaries (84%) and the lack of employment opportunities (73%).³⁶ The majority of international Nepalese migrant workers are concentrated in a few select countries; India is seen as a country of low cost but low return, and Malaysia and the Persian Gulf are seen as destinations of high cost but high return.³⁷ Remittances from labor migration are a substantial component of household income and Nepal’s overall economy.³⁸ There has been much research attributing Nepal’s development gains to labor migration, with remittances making up anywhere from 38 to 62% of income for over half of Nepalese households.³⁹ Labor migration also has a considerable economic impact on a national scale: remittances constitute one-fifth of Nepal’s total GDP.⁴⁰

Migration can also have negative consequences for those who stay behind — especially women — and can run the risk of worsening inequality without supportive policy in place.⁴¹ There are substantial rural-urban and gender disparities in migration trends — 61% of long-term labor migration originate from rural areas and 93% of all migrants are male⁴² — which have important development and policy implications. Rural Nepalese women who stay behind take on greater roles in household agriculture,⁴³ resulting in a phenomenon known as “the feminization of agriculture.” While this can contribute to women’s increased role in household and community decision-making, it can also be a burden by increasing their workload and adding to their many existing responsibilities.⁴⁴ Furthermore, some evidence suggests that migration can exacerbate inequality in rural Nepal, as more affluent Nepalese emigrate to earn higher incomes and invest in more land back home, further dispossessing the rural poor from land.⁴⁵ Coupled with the fact that migration due to climate-induced environmental change is likely to increase in coming years, these issues warrant a more cohesive policy for productive, safe migration that advances development goals.

34 Figure 5 summarizes official statistics on economic migration in Nepal and Niger. In turn, the figures likely underestimate the scale of labor mobility and remittances, and are unable to provide the full account of the economic migration experience in these countries. The Nepalese statistics, for example, do not account for migration to India — a top destination for many migrants — given the porous borders. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020); World Bank (n.d.); Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, Government of Nepa (n.d.).

35 Sunam & McCarthy (2016).

36 de Zwager & Sintov (2017).

37 Shrestha (2017).

38 de Zwager & Sintov (2017).

39 de Zwager & Sintov (2017); Sunam & McCarthy (2016).

40 Shrestha (2017).

41 Upreti et al. (2018); Sunam & McCarthy (2016).

42 de Zwager & Sintov (2017).

43 Shrestha (2017); Upreti et al. (2018).

44 Upreti et al. (2018)

45 Sunam & McCarthy (2016).

MAULALI, NEPAL

Migration is a central economic fact for households in Maulali, an isolated village in the Bajhang District of Far West Nepal.

Transnational opportunities for unskilled wage labor and education, particularly across the border in Indian cities, attract migrants from Maulali, while ecological and economic risks push people out of the area (risks like soil erosion, drought, landslides, and flooding, weak markets for labor and agricultural inputs and outputs, poor transportation infrastructure and consequent price volatility). Migration from Maulali is highly gendered, with many men migrating alone and leaving their families behind. In Maulali and much of rural Nepal, chain migration dictates where men migrate.⁴⁶ Migrants follow their friends and family members, moving to locations in India where their social contacts already reside. Nearly half of all migrants from Maulali (45.6%) travel nearly 2,500 kilometers to the south Indian city of Bangalore, where a Nepali community from Bajhang is well-established.⁴⁷ All of our respondents in Maulali shared that they migrated without any concrete knowledge about job opportunities, salary expectations, or work conditions. Respondents noted that low-skilled jobs were often informally “sold” between contacts (for example, a neighborhood watch position would be transferred between contacts for a price). The most common job for migrants is as a security guard.

In Maulali, many families rely heavily on money from migrants in India to make ends meet. Households use remittances to pay for basic necessities and daily needs including food, clothing, and school fees, or to pay back loans. But remittance flows are unstable and infrequent, and thus the balance between coping and being food insecure is precarious. Moreover, remittance amounts appear to be



Nepal—Kristin Lambert, Mercy Corps

too insufficient to contribute to longer-term productivity through savings or investments in assets. The frequency and amount of remittances is dictated by a migrant’s earnings and ability to save — not the situation back home. Most remittances are sent back by hand (by the household member themselves or through their contacts) but respondents shared that they are increasingly using the international monetary exchange (IME) in nearby villages. While IME offers a more secure option to transfer remittances back to Maulali, some respondents noted that it was challenging for women to collect the remittances on their own, as they are usually financially illiterate and inexperienced in navigating such a system. Women described having to rely on the

IME staff to fill out the paperwork on their behalf. Moreover, there is a fee for migrants to remit via IME, which, though small, diminishes the already small amount migrants are able to send back home.

The limited financial benefit from migration comes at a high cost. Once in India, many migrants join the ranks of a large and transitory group of low-paid workers that provide “cheap, disposable labor for various employers.”⁴⁸ Some respondents reported that it can take up to three months to find jobs and even longer before they can send remittances back home. The physical risks of working in India are perceived to be high. Respondents often felt as if they were “living on the edge of the sword” in India, as their supervisors frequently failed to pay them and their wages fluctuated. Moreover, the mass migration of males from Maulali appears to come at substantial educational and social costs for the children, women, and elderly household members left behind, and perpetuates inequitable intra-household identity roles.

46 Seddon, Adhikari, & Gurung (2002).

47 The qualitative study briefly described in this report was conducted as a part of a larger study for Mercy Corps’ Promoting Agriculture, Health, and Alternative Livelihoods initiative by the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University. Quantitative insights on migration experience in Maulali are drawn from the census conducted in the context as part of the larger study. Kim, Stites, Webb, Conostas, and Maxwell (2019); Dahal et al. (2018).

48 Maycock (2017), p. 186.

Nepal national government strategies

The government of Nepal recognizes that migration is a crucial factor shaping the country’s demographic trends and future.⁴⁹ In its long-term development strategy documents, however, Nepal’s government views migration as largely negative for the country. Nepal’s Sustainable Development Goals Roadmap 2016-2030 considers migration to hurt economic growth, as it shrinks the labor force and the base for taxation. On the one hand, the government recognizes that remittances from relatives working in India, the Middle East, or other places are a crucial part of coping strategies for people in Nepal, and were critical for keeping people afloat during Nepal’s civil war.⁵⁰ Yet, on the other hand, the difficulty of regulatory oversight and ability to tax remittances meant that these resources did not contribute much to public goods.⁵¹ Policy documents further highlight other downsides of migration, arguing that the negative social costs of migration (“family discord and dislocation”) are so severe they require a policy response.⁵²

This framing of migration by the government of Nepal may be underpinned by the assumption that migration is primarily a reaction to economic or ecological disaster rather than a livelihood strategy in and of itself. As such, the government has endorsed plans for risk mitigation and livelihood diversification by promoting the growth of different crops and by providing training in non-agricultural livelihoods in order to reduce migration.⁵³ The country’s national development plan involves facilitating higher productivity agriculture, promoting a high-quality services industry, and expanding its role in international production chains (specifically those linked to China). These efforts are, in part, meant to influence migrants’ return to the country and to prevent more Nepali citizens from emigrating.⁵⁴ Despite the noted contribution of migration and remittances to the country’s development, the national policies and legislations fail to see migration as an opportunity for advancing its development plans.



Nepal—Miguel Samper for Mercy Corps

49 Government of Nepal, National Planning Commission, & UNICEF (2017).
50 *Post Flood Recovery Needs Assessment* (2017).
51 *Sustainable Development Goals Status and Roadmap: 2016-2030* (2018).
52 Ibid.
53 *Post Flood Recovery Needs Assessment* (2017).
54 *Sustainable Development Goals Status and Roadmap: 2016-2030* (2018).



Niger—Sean Sheridan for Mercy Corps

Migration and development context in Niger

As the country with the lowest ranking on the 2020 Human Development Index, Niger faces great socioeconomic and development challenges.⁵⁵ It also has one of the highest fertility rates in the world, but limited livelihoods opportunities to accommodate its growing population. As a result, the youth unemployment rate in Niger is among the highest in the world.⁵⁶ The World Bank estimates that 500,000 youth enter the labor market in Niger each year, yet less than half of them have work and many more are underemployed.⁵⁷ While a growing number of youth do not wish to work in agriculture, Niger's economy remains heavily reliant upon agricultural activities such as subsistence farming and livestock.⁵⁸ Furthermore, climate-related trends such as soil degradation, increasing drought, and decreasing water quality and quantity act to limit livelihood opportunities, particularly in rural areas.⁵⁹ More recently, the increased presence of violent extremist groups along the Mali-Niger border has led the government to enact a state of emergency.⁶⁰ This insecurity and the ensuing law enforcement measures have hindered movement and market activities in affected areas, leading to more people seeking opportunities elsewhere.

55 *Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2020 Statistical Update* (2020).

56 *IOM Niger* (n.d.); Gado, von der Goltz, Saidi, & Soumaila (2019).

57 *Ibid.*

58 Afifi (2011).

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Niger: State of Emergency in the West Extended for Three Months* (2017).

In this context, circular or seasonal migration continues to be a prominent feature of Nigerien society. Data from the Nigerien Institute of Statistics indicate that across Niger, at least 70% of households have had at least one individual migrate for more than six months in the past five years, predominately to urban areas in Niger or to other countries in the region.⁶¹ Men typically migrate from rural areas during the lean season or between planting and harvesting periods. According to Rain, this movement is a long-standing adaptation strategy to conditions in the Sahel, which has not been well understood by international development actors:

*Surviving in the Sahel requires strategies of low place-based investments, portable livelihoods, economic interests that are spatially dispersed, and, most broadly, the use of mobility to exploit spatial variation in precipitation and natural resources. Yet despite the rationality of this culture of movement, development strategies have been informed by the idea that persuading peasants to stay put and to invest in their villages better prepares them against drought and famine.*⁶²

In addition to seasonal migration, longer-term, more permanent emigration from Niger is becoming more common — a response to internal instability and conflict, drought and other climate impacts, and the lack of livelihood opportunities.⁶³ The Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) Free Movement Protocols facilitates the ability of Nigeriens to move across borders in search of economic opportunities, with many Nigeriens opting to move to coastal countries like Nigeria, Benin, and Côte D'Ivoire.⁶⁴ Niger is also well known as a country of transit for migrants traveling from West Africa to other regions within the continent as well as to Europe.⁶⁵ This is due to its “strategic location within the trans Saharan irregular migration corridor.”⁶⁶ An estimated 100,000 people have migrated through Niger each year since 2000.⁶⁷

In turn, migration in Niger has become a source of benefits as well as risks. Migration provides significant income in towns along migration routes, and many argue that it has driven economic development internally and in the greater ECOWAS region.⁶⁸ However, international donors focus predominantly on the challenges associated with irregular migration and migrant smuggling, paying little attention to migration within the country and across the region.⁶⁹ While these forms of labor mobility remain an important lifeline for many migrants and their families, international development actors continue to have a limited understanding and appreciation of the critical role they play.



Niger—Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

61 Institut National de la Statistique (INS) [Niger] & ICF International (2013).

62 Rain (1999), p. xiv.

63 Afifi (2011); IOM Niger (n.d.); Veronese, Pepe, & Vigliarone (2019)

64 Labor migration to non-ECOWAS countries in Northern Africa (notably Libya and Algeria) is also common among Nigeriens, though government expulsion and exploitation by militant groups have made migration to these countries increasingly risky. Adepoju, Boulton, & Levin (2010).

65 IOM Niger (n.d.).

66 Molenaar (2017), p. 4.

67 Molenaar (2017).

68 IOM Niger (n.d.); Molenaar (2017).

69 Tinti & Reitano (2016).

TILLABÉRI REGION, NIGER

According to migrants and family members from Tillabéri, a quintessential region in Niger that relies on labor migration, migration is an essential household livelihood strategy. Migration decisions, including who migrates and to where, are made by the household. It is usually men who migrate, while remaining household members, including women, assume additional household responsibilities. The choice of destination is often influenced by two factors: (1) the amount of available capital or resources to invest in migration, and (2) the presence of family or community members who can initially support the migrant. Respondents indicated that if close contacts and resources are available, the preference is often to move to another country in the region, as many perceive that one could earn more by going abroad. Though Niamey, the capital, is more accessible for most rural migrants, migrants who move here face a unique set of challenges, including limited opportunities given the city's relatively small economy compared to larger cities in West African coastal countries. Migrants also discussed cultural taboos that discourage them from engaging in certain occupations (e.g. cleaning streets, emptying septic tanks, etc.) in Niger, which would not apply if they were farther away from home.

Though migration may be a necessary or appealing option, the experience tends to be challenging for many. Migrants face a number of risks and hurdles while en route to their destinations and once they have arrived. Rural migrants from Niger often lack formal education and training or skills that may be useful in destinations. Consequently, many of these migrants, whether they travel internally or abroad, end up in low-skilled jobs, as security guards, domestic workers, porters, or hawkers.



Niger—Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

The key appeal for migrating to take up such jobs is the potential for higher incomes given wage differences between locales (between home villages and chosen destinations). Additionally, because people rely primarily on social networks for information about their destinations, which can be unreliable or limited, migrants can face unexpected difficulties integrating. Challenges mentioned by respondents included finding a place to stay, finding work, and not having enough money to support oneself and send money back home. Individuals who are able to send money back home largely rely on the hawala system (prevalent across West Africa) or physically send it through known individuals. Despite awareness of the risks of physically holding and sending money, very few migrants interviewed in Niamey sent money electronically or were banked, due to a lack of trust in such services and their providers.

According to interviews with Nigerian migrants and their families, the return on investment for migration is mixed, despite the great potential benefits. Family members left behind, primarily wives and dependents, can experience difficulties when a household member migrates. Many women expressed that they would often lose touch with their husbands and not receive any financial support. Remittances are typically sent to parents rather than spouses, who distribute resources as they see fit. Some migrants and their families benefit significantly, particularly through repeat migration: when a migrant builds social capital over time and expands his (or her) opportunities in specific destinations over several trips. Despite the risks and challenges, families routinely invest in migration. While some truly have no other option, many

believe that the short-term challenges are outweighed by the long-term pay-offs.

Niger national government strategies

Nigerien government policy documents typically describe migration as a dangerous and illicit activity, as the primary focus on migration in recent years has shifted toward the movement of people from other countries through Niger, destined primarily for Europe. Regional migration within ECOWAS, though far more common than migration to Europe, has become less of a priority for the Nigerien government. Rather, seemingly in response to growing concern among its major European donors, Niger's development and migration policies increasingly focus on deterring cross-border movement. Noting that emigration from and through Niger to Algeria and Libya has increased in the past years, government planning documents condemn smugglers and human traffickers exploiting migrants.⁷⁰ The issue has been considered a serious security threat prompting law enforcement responses. For example, in cooperation with the EU, Niger passed legislation to criminalize migrant smuggling in 2015, including activities such as transporting and accommodating migrants, as increasing numbers of migrants transited through the northern Nigerien town of Agadez. Yet many have argued that the law has had adverse effects on the local economy and failed to eradicate smuggling, only making it more clandestine and dangerous.⁷¹

Migration is not a core component of the Nigerien government's approach to development. Concern with a growing youth population and lack of adequate employment opportunities are front and center of the government's forward-looking development plans. In this context, the government acknowledges a rural exodus attributed to weak agricultural revenues, a lack of infrastructure, and poor services in rural areas, which impedes the development of a dynamic rural economy. Major risks of increasing migration, as perceived by the Nigerien government, are the collapse of rural economies and unsustainable growth in cities.⁷² Hence, like in Nepal, labor migration in Niger is thought of as a development problem. National planning documents describe Niger's efforts to lessen migration as part of sweeping and ambitious attempts at modernization and rapid development of the country's private sector and services economy. Creating jobs for young people will limit migration.⁷³ Again, this conceptualization fails to recognize the important role that migration plays in supporting and sustaining rural communities, and overlooks it as an opportunity for economic development.



Niger—Jeremy Barnicle, Mercy Corps

70 *Economic and Social Development Plan (ESDP) 2017-2021* (2017).

71 Moser (2020).

72 *Niger 2035: Un Pays et un Peuple Prospères* (2017).

73 *Economic and Social Development Plan (ESDP) 2017-2021* (2017).



Nepal—Tom Van Cakenberghe

Assessing USAID and EC Strategies and Responses to Migration

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- › An analysis of 134 USAID Requests for Applications, Requests for Information, and EC Action Documents from 2014 to 2020 for Nepal and Niger showcases a bias toward in-place development strategies and limited appreciation for and investment in migration.
- › When migration is considered, the focus remains more on illicit and coercive forms of migration (e.g. displacement and irregular migration) than labor migration.
- › In the few solicitations for migration programming, donors seek to invest in programs that manage, contain, or prevent labor mobility.

While the importance of migration and its historical precedent in Nepal and Niger is evident, key institutional donors fail to conceptualize its linkages to development in strategies and programs. This section examines the focus of USAID and the EC in the two countries. Our analysis reveals that donor strategies on development and migration and their aid investments exhibit a misalignment in objectives. This misalignment leads to an emphasis on curbing mobility at the expense of supporting development through productive labor migration.

USAID and EC strategies for Nepal

One of the major international development donors to Nepal, USAID does not center migration in its development strategies.⁷⁴ Only in minor documents about post-2016 earthquake recovery plans has the agency recognized that the path to recovery will be more difficult in communities with high levels of migration, where many men are unable to assist in reconstruction.⁷⁵ EU strategy documents for Nepal, on the other hand, frame migration as being detrimental to development. Aligned with those of Nepal's government, EU strategies highlight the negative effects of labor mobility, flagging labor shortages in agriculture and other sectors and its consequences on women and children.⁷⁶ To mitigate the negative impacts of migration, the EU's development agency calls for special efforts to support women who have become the head of household and responsible for managing agricultural activities as a result of outmigration.⁷⁷ According to the EU's development agency, programming should limit outmigration by diversifying agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods in rural areas. Agribusiness will be of particular benefit to landless laborers, decreasing the pressure to migrate.⁷⁸ Strategy documents also stress the importance of exclusion along social, economic, and political lines in driving migration and call for all interventions in the rural development sector to address social exclusion in order to limit social conflict and migration pressures. The agency also suggests that programming support migrants in returning home by helping them find employment in Nepal.⁷⁹

USAID and EC strategies for Niger

A key bilateral donor, USAID recognizes the importance of migration in Niger, but the general view is that migration patterns and urbanization across West Africa have tremendous negative impacts on food security and its broader development. The agency considers returning migrants from Libya to be a destabilizing influence,⁸⁰ and states that shrinking migration opportunities abroad have contributed to violent extremist recruitment.⁸¹ In order to improve the region's food security, USAID flags a need to focus on keeping youth in agriculture and natural resource management sectors, often by focusing on value addition.⁸² Nonetheless, USAID also acknowledges that migration is a way of life and may be "part of the solution,"⁸³ stressing the role of remittances in helping households cope with shocks and stressors.⁸⁴ Despite such relatively recent instances highlighting the important role of migration, inconsistent with the broader focus on preventing youth from migrating, the overarching U.S. government strategy has become increasingly concerned with the spread of violent extremism in the Sahel. In this regard, the strategy focuses predominantly on in-place development as a means of improving the economic conditions, such as unemployment, which are believed to drive recruitment in armed groups.

74 *Country Development Cooperation Strategic Summary* (2020).

75 *Annex 1 to the Country Development Cooperation Strategy Transition Objective approved December 5, 2016.* (2016).

76 *Multinational Indicative Programme (MIP) 2014-2020 Nepal* (2014).

77 EC (2017).

78 *Ibid.*

79 *Multinational Indicative Programme (MIP) 2014-2020 Nepal* (2014).

80 *Ibid.*

81 *Global Food Security Strategy (GFSS) Niger Country Plan* (2018).

82 *USAID/West Africa Regional Development Cooperation Strategy* (2015).

83 *Sahel Youth Analysis: Building Resilience to Shocks and Stresses and Promoting Alternatives to Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso and Niger* (2018).

84 *Global Food Security Strategy (GFSS) Niger Country Plan* (2018).

In contrast, Niger’s relationship with Europe, and by extension the EC,⁸⁵ centers firmly around migration management. Under the Valletta Action Plan, Niger and the EU set forth actions focused on deterring migration routes and reintegrating returned migrants, with the aim of curbing migration that flowed through Niger. This process also established the EU Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa, which focuses on addressing the root causes of irregular migration through development investments.⁸⁶ It is worth noting that while migration is a key focus of EC engagement in Niger, this seems to only be the case because Niger is a key transit country for migrants traveling toward Europe; considerations for the more common labor migration that takes place among West Africans to neighboring countries is largely ignored yet subject to the same broader migration management strategies. For example, the 2015 law to counter migrant smuggling in Niger creates obstacles for intra-regional migration. As analysts have noted, the law, which was enacted to appease European demands on the Nigerien government to deter illicit migration flows, in effect violates ECOWAS residents’ rights to enter and travel within Niger.”⁸⁷

Findings from USAID and EC program solicitations content analysis

In order to understand the ways in which migration may feature in development programs and to compare donors’ strategies to their investments, we collected and analyzed a total of 134 documents and solicitations for Nepal and Niger, dated between 2014 and 2020.

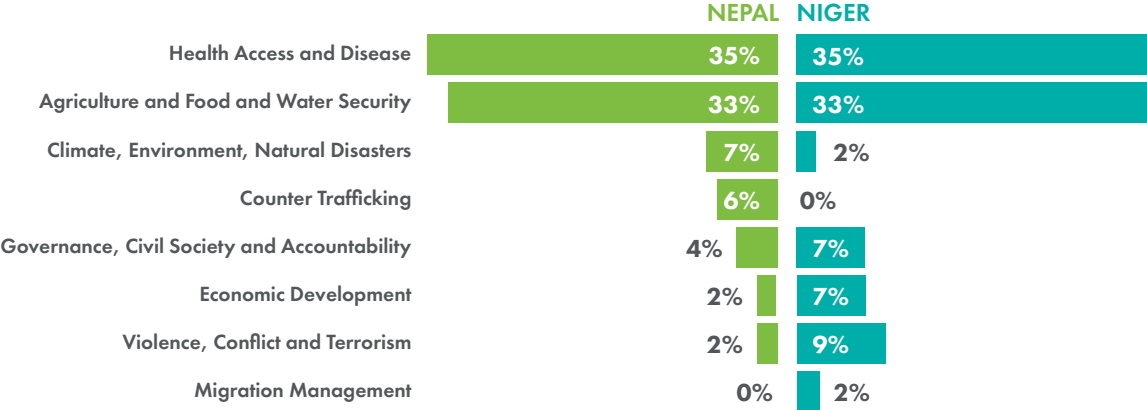


FIGURE 6: Breakdown of program type for Nepal and Niger USAID solicitations

85 The EC “helps to shape the EU’s overall strategy, proposes new EU laws and policies, monitors their implementation and manages the EU budget. It also plays a significant role in supporting international development and delivering aid.” *What the European Commission Does* (n.d.).

86 Through this mechanism alone, the EC has invested close to €300 million in projects focused on (a) the protection of migrants and return and reintegration; (b) the creation of economic opportunities in areas that rely economically on the illicit smuggling of migrants; (c) anti-trafficking, border management, and law enforcement support to deter criminal activities linked to migration; and (d) support to forcibly displaced populations, particularly in the Diffa region near northeastern Nigeria. EC (n.d.).

87 Tubiana, Warin, & Saeneen (2018).

USAID solicitations for both Nepal and Niger center primarily around health, agriculture, and food and water security. Programs with an explicit focus on migration (referred to as “migration management” programs) make up only 2% of USAID solicitations for Niger; there are none in Nepal (**Figure 6**).

Unlike USAID solicitations, EC documents for Nepal and Niger vary greatly in area of focus. While only four EC documents were identified for Nepal, half of them focus on health — none on migration management. In contrast, 33% of EC Niger documents center on migration management, and another 34% target economic development or governance, civil society, and accountability (**Figure 7**).



FIGURE 7: Breakdown of program type for Nepal and Niger EC solicitations

Overall, development donors tend to be preoccupied more with illicit and coercive forms of migration than labor migration, though the latter tends to be much more pervasive in Nepal and Niger. Of the 134 documents identified, 75 solicitations (56%) mention migration or related words such as refugee, displacement, movement, mobility, or flow. These terms are most frequently used in EC documents for Niger. Seventy percent of EC solicitations for Niger referenced migration or a related term. Both donors are primarily focused on displacement (32%) and irregular migration (23%). Labor and economic migration was the third-most common focus (23%), followed by a comparable level of emphasis on human trafficking (19%).

Moreover, as seen in **Figure 8**, when we examined the 75 USAID and EC solicitations that mentioned migration, only 8% of mentions described migration as an “opportunity or asset.” On the contrary, donors frequently viewed migration as something that needed to be “managed” (18%) and “contained or prevented” (12%). Migration was often framed in the context of illicit activities (12%), danger (8%), and instability (7%). Eleven documents linked migration to state or regional fragility, with all but one of these programs focusing on Niger. Although migration was referenced less often in USAID than EC solicitations, the majority of solicitations that link migration to “State or Regional Fragility” for Niger were from USAID.

Despite this predilection, there are a few examples where programs frame migration as a potential source of development and resilience. One salient example is from a 2019 USAID Notice of Funding Opportunity for

Niger, which acknowledges that “migration is a common livelihood strategy for youth, yet most programming does not address the reality of migration or support migration strategies.”⁸⁸ However, the same document stipulates that USAID’s aim is to “halt the spread of violent extremist groups, avert costly humanitarian crises, and stem the flow of destabilizing migration,” and opts to focus on developing economic opportunities in rural communities of origin. In practice, the U.S. government’s concern with preventing instability and violent extremism overshadows the possibility of thinking differently about migration in development programs.

Over a third of solicitations frame migration as a phenomenon to be managed, contained, or prevented. Many connect it to illicit activities or disease.

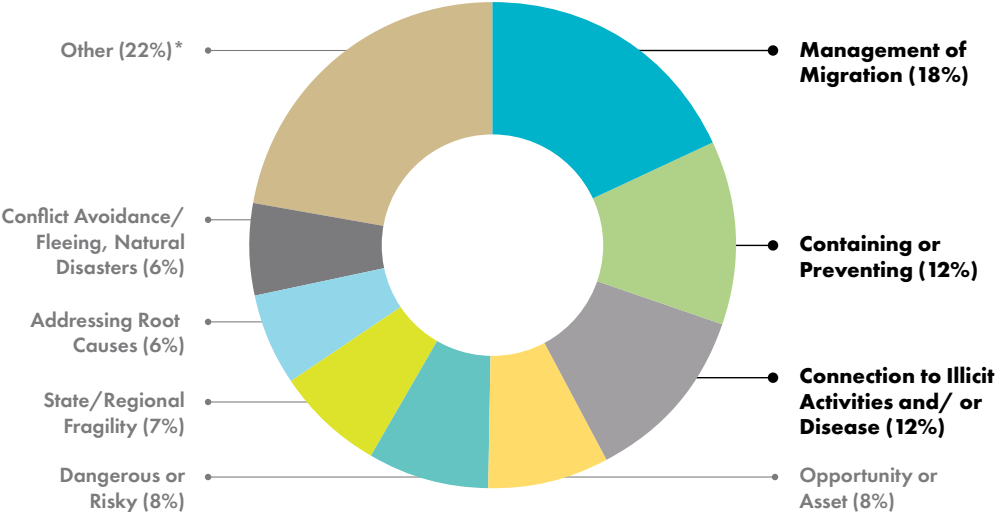


FIGURE 8: Framing of migration in USAID and EC solicitations

*Other framing of migration include references to household aspirations, gender roles, brain drain, and cultural exchange.

88 Bridge Youth Connect (BYC) Activity (2020).



Niger—Sean Sheridan for Mercy Corps

Institutional and Political Challenges to New Migration-Development Approaches

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- › Economic migration remains a politically sensitive issue in many donor countries, challenging efforts to integrate migration in development programs and investments.
- › Working off of a flawed understanding of migration, development practitioners and institutions fail to recognize the role migration can play in international development.
- › The current international development paradigm is not conducive to supporting people on the move.

Our analysis of national government and donor strategy documents confirms that while migration is an important livelihood strategy for households in places like Nepal and Niger, it is largely ignored or viewed negatively in development practice. To identify ways in which this bias can be addressed requires a better understanding of the constraints that have thus far prevented migration from being more central in development work. Interviews with migration and development experts including donor representatives from USAID, the United Nations, and Agence Française de Développement (AFD) shed light on some of the missed opportunities as well as promising avenues for improving coherence between migration and development policies in the future. These interviews point to the following three key hurdles that impede the integration of economic migration into development strategies and investments.

Economic migration remains politically sensitive in many donor countries

First and foremost, domestic political pressures to curb immigration drive foreign policies and assistance directed at migrant-sending countries. Foreign policy, including aid, is inherently tied to domestic agendas, especially when it comes to economic migration. While anti-immigration sentiments are not necessarily the predominant view, they are prevalent — notably in Europe and the U.S.⁸⁹ In turn, development policies and investments directed at countries of origin often reflect the domestic pressures in donor countries to curb migration. Numerous studies have documented the fiscal benefits of countries receiving migrants and shown that immigrants typically do not drive down local wages.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, fear of socioeconomic and cultural changes resulting from migration continues to persist, and shapes foreign assistance decisions even toward countries like Nepal and Niger, where migration tends to be regional or internal.



Nepal—Miguel Samper for Mercy Corps

Niger, for example, began to receive increased attention and aid following the 2015 European migration crisis. According to a migration expert, in Niger, the “language of migration has been hijacked by preventing the trans-Saharan caravan,” referring to the movement of people via the Central Mediterranean route from Sub-Saharan Africa to Italy through Niger.⁹¹ Even though most migration from Sub-Saharan Africa remains regional or domestic, the primary objective behind development aid to Niger, from the EU, in particular, is to dissuade people from migrating. The U.S. government cuts to aid targeting the Northern Triangle in 2019 is another example of how development aid policies can be a reaction to

domestic issues, the cuts a measure to pressure national governments to do more to prevent migration to the U.S. As such, politics remain a critical challenge to supporting development opportunities to facilitate safe, productive, and legal labor migration outcomes.

It is important to acknowledge that not all institutions face this same pressure or have the same agenda. While key informants were primarily referring to assistance from the U.S. and EU, particularly after recent waves of immigration (2014 in the U.S. and 2015 in the EU), they also pointed out that in some cases international organizations and some bilateral donors have been better at integrating migration within development strategies. For example, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation has developed a four year Global Programme Migration and Development Strategic Framework focused on “improving framework conditions to unlock migrants’ potential to contribute to sustainable development and inclusive

89 Krogstad (2015).

90 Clemens (2017).

91 Key informant interview with migration policy expert, December 4, 2019.

growth,” which includes strengthening the coherence between migration and development policies.⁹² Similarly, the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum recognizes the benefits of migration and puts forth proposals to support economic mobility, including increasing legal pathways for migration.⁹³ Such propositions to facilitate economic migration have been made in the past by the EU, including through the EUTF for Africa, but only 1.5% of the total investment actually went toward facilitating labor migration between African countries or between Africa and the EU.⁹⁴ Past experiences indicate that such proposals may remain on the margins as long as domestic pressures to curb migration outweigh the political will to implement progressive migration policies that support development.

The international development paradigm is not conducive to supporting people on the move

Aid programs overwhelmingly tend to focus on in-place development. Such programs consider and invest in solutions to underdevelopment and poverty that are limited to improving local contexts and conditions. In order to address rural poverty, for example, there is a bias toward agricultural development among aid programs, and relatively fewer programs that try to identify opportunities outside of rural agricultural livelihoods.⁹⁵ The problem, however, is that despite the important role of agriculture in many developing countries, trends like climate change, population growth, and youth drawn to urban areas make a focus on agricultural development insufficient in meeting the needs of a growing number of unemployed youth and their families. This framing also largely overlooks the desire of many young people and their families to pursue non-agricultural livelihood opportunities.

In spite of growing recognition of this changing reality, development programs and policies have been relatively slow to adapt due to specific features of development work. First, the large majority of aid programs are geographically targeted. Existing management structures of most implementing agencies and donors are based largely on offices, strategies, and budgets for specific countries, which works against cross-border programming. Rarely do programs focus on an ecosystem in which individuals are migrating from one place to another (for example, across borders, but also within borders). As the success of aid programs is measured against impact at a defined locality (e.g. a village or a province), institutional incentives, such as meeting expected outcomes at a country or sub-national level, do not currently support programs with people who are on the move from one place to another.⁹⁶ Current monitoring systems meant to ensure programs are reaching intended targets are particularly challenged by the task of tracking mobile program participants.

In addition to challenging the modus operandi of development programs, supporting people on the move is often seen as a risky and complex endeavor, especially for people moving across international borders. In these cases, diverse legal frameworks come into play that require responsible development actors to

⁹² *Global Programme Migration and Development: Strategic Framework 2018-2021* (2018).

⁹³ *New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Questions and Answers* (2020).

⁹⁴ Raty & Shilhove (2020).

⁹⁵ From our analysis of RFAs/solicitations: 16 solicitations/RFAs/RFIs etc. for Niger by USAID focused on Agriculture & Food/Water Security (35%); 18 solicitations/RFAs/RFIs etc. for Nepal by USAID focused on Agriculture & Food/Water Security (33%).

⁹⁶ Key informant interview with youth livelihoods and development expert, November 6, 2019.

ensure participants have the proper documentation, permissions, and support to move abroad.⁹⁷ Even when focused on supporting only regular (i.e. legal) migration, implementing partners and donors fear that they have limited oversight as to where and how people migrate. Related to this, the inability to track and provide support to participants in new, diverse destinations raises questions about the ethical obligations of implementing partners and donors to migrants. The lack of clarity around ethical and legal issues associated with facilitating migration makes such programs seem too risky, leaving the ethical implications of not creating safe migration options often overlooked.

Development practitioners and the institutions they work in operate with a flawed understanding of migration

A striking observation among experts interviewed is that despite a large body of scholarship on the connections between migration and development, there is little overlap between the two spheres in international development. Respondents attributed this disconnect to a lack of understanding among development actors about migration (including the role it plays in development). As one expert mentioned, “development practitioners often view migration as a failure of development and [believe] that development can be a cure for migration. If development is going well, people wouldn’t choose to emigrate. With development people, there is still this prejudice.”⁹⁸ As a result, the primary focus of development policies and programs vis-a-vis migration is to improve local economic conditions in order to prevent it, despite the research and experience that indicates this is likely to be ineffective.



Nepal—Miguel Samper for Mercy Corps

97 While this challenge is not negligible, international actors face similar challenges with regards to regional trade programs and have made greater progress coordinating among diverse legal frameworks in this sector. Acknowledging the important differences between international trade and international migration, this example indicates there are ways to overcome these challenges.

98 Key informant interview with migration policy expert, November 13, 2019.

The disconnect between these two policy areas is further reflected in the institutional structures that lead development and migration policies, which often work in silos. For example, a former senior U.S. government official in the State Department admitted that the department’s focus on economic migration was minor compared to its work around refugees and displacement, mainly because of a lack of clarity on its mandate since “migration cuts across all the issue areas and policies.”⁹⁹ The mandate touches on the high-level engagement on international migration and support that the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration provides to bodies like the United Nations, and the development programs that its sister agency, USAID, implements. It also touches on the data and expertise retained in the Department of Labor as well as immigration policies emanating from the Department of Homeland Security. However, no interagency body exists to coordinate policies and investments across all of these agencies.¹⁰⁰ USAID, in particular, has paid little attention to migration, despite its overarching focus on poverty and underdevelopment. Even in recent years, with the growing international focus on improving policies that address migration and opportunities for more engagement around migration and development vis-a-vis the Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Compact on Migration, “people were very frank about [migration] not being a priority [within USAID].”¹⁰¹

Other bilateral donors have brought together their international migration and development priorities under the mandate of one agency. In the case of France, beginning in 2016, migration shifted from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to AFD, which now aims to address migration through the lens of development. While this move to align efforts has been a positive development, an AFD official disclosed that public opinion at home still largely influenced policymakers in government to seek approaches that curb migration.¹⁰²



Niger—Sean Sheridan for Mercy Corps

99 Key informant interview with senior U.S. State Department official, November 20, 2019.

100 Ibid.

101 Key informant interview with senior U.S. State Department official, November 20, 2019. This was further corroborated in an interview with USAID staff who expressed that despite migration coming up as an issue at times with different leaders, it has not been a consistent focus, particularly in contexts like Sub-Saharan Africa.

102 Key informant interview with migration and development expert, January 6, 2020.



Nepal—Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

Ways Forward: Policy and Program Recommendations

The disconnect between economic migration and development is a critical gap within international development. It results in missed opportunities to help shape migration experiences from being increasingly irregular and exploitative to safer and more productive. While a number of political, institutional, and conceptual challenges have shaped the current context, a more supportive approach that focuses on maximizing the potential benefits and minimizing the potential risks associated with migration is possible. The following key principles and recommendations can help address some of these challenges and chart a new approach.

Reconsider economic migration as a choice and an opportunity, which has both benefits and risks that must be proactively managed. The predominant focus on preventing migration paints labor mobility as a consequence of failed development. In turn, migration is considered to be inherently bad. This framing also incorrectly assumes that investment in in-place development will lead to a reduction in migration toward donor countries such as the U.S. and those in the EU. On the contrary, global trends related to climate change and its consequences for livelihood opportunities, rapid demographic growth, and development trajectories of LMICs suggest that populations will be increasingly on the move for economic opportunities. It is not donors' or aid actors' place to dictate whether or not households choose to migrate, nor where they decide to seek economic opportunities. However, their support of legal, safe, and productive migration opportunities is likely the best approach to addressing irregular migration flows.

Integrate economic migration as a key component of development strategies and investments.

Despite the growing body of research showcasing the positive contributions labor mobility can make toward development outcomes, both donor governments and national governments often take a siloed approach to economic migration and development. For example, within USAID, there is no dedicated migration bureau or office. Instead, migration policy tends to be diffused among a number of government agencies, including the Department of State and Department of Labor. This failure to integrate economic migration as a key component of development strategies and investments is a missed opportunity for both national and donor governments.

Pilot, test, and scale programs that support people on the move and those who stay behind.

As more development actors, policymakers, and donors begin to recognize the link between migration and development, there may be a growing interest in supporting forms of safe and legal migration for productive outcomes. However, even when interest and willingness exist, a general lack of understanding of how this can be done and how to effectively overcome the associated risks and political sensitivities demands that we start small. Beginning with programs that are viewed as pilots, with an intentional aim of learning and innovating, can help development actors test approaches that go beyond the traditional limits, including trans-border programming that works with economic migrants on the move.

One prominent example of this is the “No Lean Season” program in Bangladesh, which provided a travel subsidy to poor rural laborers so that they could send a family member to a nearby city to find a job during the period between planting and harvesting.¹⁰³ Future projects can draw on lessons from such programs to test new approaches. These projects can be small in scope and size but should invest heavily in evaluation and research to ensure that best practices or impactful activities are rigorously evaluated. The growing body of evidence can serve as advocacy tools for additional investments and to inform future programming.

Based upon our analysis, we propose the following specific areas of focus for future development programs, advocacy, and investments:

a. Work toward regional approaches to development: A significant barrier to integrating migration into development programming is its country or locality-specific approach. A more regional approach to development that connects economic development programs across national borders will facilitate opportunities to pilot, test, and scale programs that support people on the move and those who stay behind.

b. Focus on improving opportunities and conditions for migration:

- › **Provide information:** Provide people with relevant and timely information so they can make informed decisions on migration. Useful information could include insights on legal requirements, key factors for successful migration, job opportunities in destinations, dangers associated with irregular migration, emergency service providers, and so on.
- › **Improve work conditions for migrations:** Strengthen labor rights and protections for economic migrations in key migrant destinations through advocacy, legal support, and emergency services.

¹⁰³ No Lean Season (n.d.).



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- › **Provide tailored skills training for migrants:** Focus on providing both technical and soft or transferable skills that match the labor markets in migrants' choice destinations. This will help facilitate higher returns on households' decision and investment to migrate.
- › **Increase legal pathways:** Open up mobility opportunities that meet the interests of both receiving and sending countries.

c. Improve economic and social outcomes for migrants and their families:

- › **Facilitate remittance transfers:** Provide information and training on low-cost fintech options for transferring money, especially for women. Work at the institutional level to help reduce costs of remitting.
- › **Boost local development:** Work to channel remittances from diaspora communities into productive investments at home.
- › **Provide support to those who remain behind:** Ensure that women have agency in household migration decision-making and access to resources that support their in-place migration experience.
- › **Decouple local development and migration deterrence:** Donors have routinely pegged the success of aid investments to be contingent on migration reduction. Donors should support local development while acknowledging that such efforts may not necessarily reduce migration in the short to medium term.

d. Invest more in development programs that support migrants at their destinations, particularly when migrants move to urban areas:

- › **Strengthen municipal governance in urban areas:** Urbanization as a result of migration can take a toll on existing infrastructure and services in densely populated areas, which are often times already overstretched. Supporting local municipal governments in areas facing these pressures can help better manage and respond to shifting demographic trends.
- › **Increase services for migrants in destinations:** Aid investments can improve migration experiences by filling gaps in critical services for migrants in destinations, including support accessing housing, financial services, healthcare, education, and jobs.
- › **Mitigate anti-migrant sentiments by fostering social cohesion:** Migrants remain socially excluded and perceived in hostile ways in many destinations. Social cohesion campaigns and interventions that intentionally seek to bring communities together, similar to those focused on refugee integration in host countries, can foster better migrant-host dynamics and build trust.¹⁰⁴ Collectively these efforts can help reduce the cultural and social friction.



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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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