

Research article

The cross-border movement of Nepali labour migrants amidst COVID-19: challenges for public health and reintegration

Hem Raj Neupane*, Philip Brown and Padam Simkhada
University of Huddersfield

Abstract

The migration of Nepali workers to India for labour is a long-standing tradition and a common pattern of life in the region. As poverty and unemployment have been the main causes of migration, migration for work has helped maintain a standard of living particularly for low-skilled and low-income migrants. However, the COVID-19 pandemic made visible a policy vacuum relating to the connections between the mobility of labour migrants, economic resilience and public health. In the absence of effective policy, returnees have posed challenges for the Nepali state and posed risks for individual workers, households and the communities more broadly as a result of a lack of adequate support and planning. This paper reviews what we know about the return of Nepali labour migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlights the impacts this policy vacuum has had on public health consequences within the established social structure of Nepal.

Keywords: COVID-19, labour migration, public health, reintegration, Nepal.

Background

In a rapidly globalising world workforce mobility plays the role of the artery of production in a global market. Often driven by domestic unemployment and poverty, low and semi-skilled migrants on low incomes routinely leave their countries to seek work beyond their borders. For Nepali labour migrants the main destinations for foreign employment are the Gulf countries, Malaysia and India (Adhikary and Teijlingen, 2019). Benefiting from an open and unregulated border, the migration of Nepali workers to India has taken place for decades. India remains a viable option to improve the earning potential of workers particularly for those people from rural areas, and the hinterlands of Nepal, due to cheap and relatively easy travel. Migration to India for Nepali labour migrants is mostly an essential means of survival rather than for saving and investment (Bashyal, 2020). The compounded experiences of landlessness, unemployment and poverty are major push factors for migration from Nepal whereas accessibility, low cost of travel and employment opportunities are the pull factors to India (Dhungana et al., 2019; Shrestha, 2019).

Though exact numbers remain unknown, in the absence of official figures, it is estimated that roughly two million Nepali labour migrants per year live in India (Regmi et al., 2019). As the majority of migrant workers come from very poor households, rarely in possession of educational qualifications or specific technical skills, they are mostly employed in informal sectors and in low skill jobs such as porters, gatekeepers or in various service sector roles, which yield a very low wage (O'Neill, 2021; Bashyal, 2020). With the money they can save, they contribute to attending to their familial responsibilities including paying off debts, arranging food provision and/or investing in their children's education (Gautam, 2017). Labour migration from Nepal to India is mostly seasonal and temporary and has become interwoven into both the labour market of India and the economy of Nepal (Sapkota, 2018). However, the ongoing cross-border mobility is far from harmonious and is often marked with complexities such as workplace safety, public provisioning, discrimination and insecure work (Rao et al., 2020).

These migration trajectories, however, undergo complexities at the time of crisis. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic Nepali migrant workers present in India were severely impacted due to restrictions on their mobility, a collapse of the export market, joblessness and the fear of infection (Bhandari et al., 2021). As India forced a strict lockdown with just four hours' notice (Harris, 2020) to curtail the spread of virus, the dilemmas facing labour migrants were further heightened (Rao et al., 2020). Consequently, thousands of Nepali migrant workers were obliged to return home. But the process of return was a major challenge in the absence of effective transportation, logistical difficulties in the provision of food and water and highly controlled border entry points (Shah et al., 2020).

The connections between migration and work in this context highlight how mobility is interwoven into the familial obligation in Nepal as within just a few months of their return to Nepal from India, labour migrants started to return to India despite the economic uncertainty and ongoing presence of COVID-19. From early May 2021, due to a subsequent wave of the virus, India experienced a massive impact with over three thousand deaths and over three hundred thousand new cases each day (ABC Premium News, 2021). Again, mobility restrictions were imposed, and life became further compromised. As a result, Nepali migrant workers started to return to Nepal again choosing their homeland against the uncertainties and risk in the labour market and to their health (Guha et al., 2021). However, against the backdrop of increasing COVID-19 transmission and growing political instability in Nepal, the return of the migrants, their reintegration and public health have seen significant challenges. Whilst Nepal has experienced a series of economic challenges from civil war to earthquakes, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fragility of the current socio-political structure and the connections between economic stability, public health and citizenship. This paper explores these connections and attempts to contribute new insights about how the [un]official framework for the management of labour migration from, and return to, Nepal has taken shape in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The main purpose of this article is to illustrate how the wellbeing of return migrants is inextricably linked to the social policies of the state and how, and in what ways, the impacts on health were amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so we draw on a range of evidence from the press, academic and policy literature. In so doing we hope to raise the profile of the situation of return migrants as they attempt to re-integrate into their country of origin and home.

'Existing' issues

The role of labour migrants in the context of the remittance supported economy of Nepal has remained significant to contribute to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country (Seddon et al., 2002). Given that more than a quarter of GDP is contributed by remittances (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Finance, 2020), critics argue that the Government of Nepal is more focused on exporting the labour force to source its GDP but it has not come up with concrete policy for their reintegration (Baniya et al, 2020). Equally, the challenges labour migrants face in their migration journey have often remained overlooked from a public policy perspective (Sapkota, 2015). Their plight begins from their home country as they face multiple challenges in the process of preparing documents and obtaining work permits. Quite often they are sandwiched between the prolonged bureaucratic procedures in the government offices and the unclear paperwork, false contracts and high migration costs of employment agencies (Kern and Müller-Böker, 2015; Liu, 2015). They then face further challenges in the country of destination in relation to employment contracts, working hours, wages and holiday entitlements (Thapa et al., 2019). As a result, migrants routinely face precarious working conditions (Adhikary and Teijlingen, 2019) and are compelled to live in poor-quality accommodation (Sharma, 2020) which impacts their health and human rights adversely. Subsequently, researchers have highlighted the poor health and wellbeing of Nepali labour migrants (for example, Adhikary et al., 2020; Dhungana et al., 2019; Regmi et al., 2019; Simkhada et al., 2018; Simkhada et al., 2017) both in the country of destination and in the country of origin upon their return. The presence of adverse health conditions experienced by the returnee not only impacts the individual but also has impacts on the wider family economically, psychologically and socially.

Whilst migration to India for Nepali migrant workers is different from other destination countries as visas, work permits and pre-departure contracts are not required, it is likely that their lived experiences of their temporary settlement remain the same.

Reintegration has been much debated phenomenon in relation to return migration and it has been interpreted in varied ways. In the section below a short review of various understandings on reintegration has been presented.

Understanding reintegration

The 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Regular and Orderly Migration, Objective 21 makes a commitment to create a congenial environment for the returnee migrants' personal safety, their economic empowerment, incorporation and social unity in communities. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) states that reintegration of the returnee migrants is a situation in which the returnees are re-included successfully in their day-to-day life, the labour market and social environment of their country of origin without having to face the challenges that triggered their first migration (IOM, 2017). A more comprehensive definition of reintegration, thus, appears to cover many aspects: economic, sociocultural and psychological dimensions of reintegration under which components like employment, income sources, property ownership, networks, personal position and memberships, belongingness, safety and security, access to amenities or services and absence of discriminations, hatred and stigmatization incorporate (Koser and Kushminder, 2015). Together, the cultural, political or structural factors may be closely interlinked with an individual's socioeconomic activities and productivity impacting their reintegration (Hunter, 2011).

The experience of migration, return migration and reintegration may vary according to the personal, familial, geographical, structural and situational contexts of the migrant. A study by Nisrane et al. (2017) on Ethiopian female returnee migrants shows that the money they had remitted was spent by their family members and they struggled economically after their arrival. The financial support they received from the Governmental Organizations (GOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) was not enough to sustain or start a small business. Parreñas et al. (2019), a study in the context of Filipino and Indonesian returnee migrant workers exposes that the returnee migrants did not find income generating opportunities in the country of origin and struggled to support their family. For the sake of economic sustainability of their family, they made decision to migrate again despite their experience of being exploited in the destination country. Ullah's (2013) mixed method study on returnee female migrants originated from South Asian countries reveals that the returnees regretted the loss of opportunity of getting married and bearing children. As the study shows, there was misunderstanding in the family; the returnees lost their skills and they had to suffer from social stigma associated with female migration. This shows the evidence that these returnees experienced reintegration problems in the family and in the community. David (2017), on the forced returnee migrants originated from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia indicates that there was problem of reintegration of the returnees in the labour market of the country of origin. However, Kureková and Žilinčíková's study (2018) on young returnee migrants in the context of Slovakia presents evidence that returnees were given more priority in the job market if they had foreign work experience in the West Europe (UK, Germany, Ireland) or America. Also, the returnees could earn more compared with the non-migrants. Flahaux (2020), a study based on the returnee migrants originated from Congo and Senegal demonstrates that migrants who were most prepared to return were well reintegrated after returning than those unprepared. Hagan et al's (2014) study in the context of Mexico reveals that migrants returned with the skills they had gained in the country of destination and applied those in the home country. These returnees became more productive and reintegrated economically as well as socially.

How Nepali migrant workers have reintegrated in their home community after arrival from their migration tenure remains largely under-explored. However, there are several studies worthy of particular attention. Liarteart et al. (2014) in their longitudinal study on irregular Nepali migrants returned from Belgium finds that these migrants experienced difficulty to reintegrate due to economic problem because they could not work in Belgium because of irregular status and could not find employment opportunities after returning. These migrants considered remigration to meet the previous migration cost as well as for financial security of their family. On the contrary, Bhandari and Pant (2019) on the basis of household survey from 31 districts of Nepal shows that returnee migrants were more likely to engage in agricultural business indicating that reintegration is mostly associated with their financial status. One of the themes of Korzenevica's (2020) study carried out in eastern hills of Nepal was identical with the finding that returnee migrants saw more scope in agricultural business, and they expressed their realization that they could live a decent life in the village living with family members rather than going for foreign employment. This kind of preparedness and realization may be taken as one of the indicators of successful reintegration.

In the context of cross-border mobility too, reintegration is understood in respect of the returnee's financial gains given that the primary factor of mobility is unemployment and poverty. However, due to work related obligations, peer pressure and the individual's unawareness, Nepali labour migrants normally do not tend to follow healthy lifestyles (Regmi et al., 2019). The issues of earnings and family finance may result in severe familial and psychosocial costs bringing health related problems to the individual migrant as well as to their family back home and often extending to the community. Poudel et al.

(2004) and Regmi et al. (2019) further highlight these issues in connection with the migrants' unhealthy lifestyle, low access or no access to health facilities, unsafe sexual relationship in India, and its consequences after returning home. In connection with these studies, Vaidya and Wu's (2011) study shows that the seasonal migrants not only were affected by HIV, but also transferred diseases in the community. This could have affected the returnee migrants for their reintegration due to the perceived stigma about the disease. Labour migrants' lifestyle, risky and unsafe work in destination countries thus appears to have adverse effect on their reintegration after returning home in addition to financial factors.

Cross-border mobility appears much more transitory and complex amidst COVID-19 pandemic. Even though the nature of seasonal migration mostly occurs during the agriculture-off seasons in Nepal, the weakened and imbalanced family financial situation due to the prolonged immobility and absence of economic support and employment opportunity during the first wave of the pandemic forced the returnee migrants to move to India again as soon as the restriction was lifted.

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

At the time of developing this paper (June 2022), COVID-19 has caused 6,947,192 deaths and affected 767,518,723 people worldwide (WHO, 2022). In addition to the impacts on health and daily lives, the pandemic will have a lasting effect on the world economy (International Labour Organisation, 2021). In the context of Asia, India was worst affected by the pandemic. The second wave of the pandemic impacted India with far greater intensity compared to the first wave. As of 9 June 2021, 22:14 GMT, the new death related to COVID in India was 6,138 and total death was 359,695 where total positive cases was recorded as 29,182,072 (Worldometer, 2021). A huge number of Nepali labour migrants staying and working in India were immensely affected due to the spread of the virus, a lack of access to health facilities and job loss. Staying in India would pose more threat both from financial and health point of view. As a result, they were obliged to return home as only option amidst the uncertainty of immediate recovery. However, their return was replete with challenges.

The financial resilience, health and day-to-day life of people tend to be impacted adversely when a major emergency in the broader societal context, such as a natural disaster, conflict or public health crisis occurs. Specifically labour migrants as well as their dependants undergo social and economic vulnerability in the time of crisis (Karim and Talukder, 2020). For example, the crisis of recession that appeared in the world economy in 2008 severely affected millions of migrant workers across the world. Hundreds of thousands of these migrant workers were obliged to return home to avoid further pressures on their cost of living. However, they faced further challenges to support their families in the absence of income generating opportunities in their home countries. Again, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has posed a significant challenge impacting the broader economy, health and other aspects of life. Fasani and Mazza (2021) report that labour migrants are likely to have been the most vulnerable group of workers during the pandemic due to the direct and indirect impacts it had on jobs, quality of life, housing and issues brought about as a result of displacement. Sharma (2020) argues that COVID-19 has particularly worsened the lives of labour migrants worldwide, especially those moving from low and middle-income countries (LMICs). In a Policy Brief by the Migration Policy Institute, Le Coz and Newland (2021) highlight the impacts of COVID-19 on various countries of the world and especially on LMICs like Armenia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Nepal and Uganda. The authors observe that labour migrants faced a number of challenges in the destination countries as well as in the

countries of origin upon their arrival. Because of the impact of COVID-19, millions of migrant workers worldwide lost their jobs and returned home. Regarding the return from India, by September 15, 2020, an estimated 76,048 Nepali labour migrants returned via the Nepalgunj border alone (Himalayan Times, 2020b). According to Asian News International (2020) more than 200,000 labour migrants had returned from India due to COVID-19. It is likely that this is an underestimate as other migrants are thought to have entered through 'inactive' border points to avoid the authority at the regular entry points (Republica, 2020a).

Return pathways and challenges

The return of large numbers of the Nepali diaspora as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has posed particular dilemmas. In the COVID-19 pandemic, the shortcomings of planning for return migration have been seemingly amplified. For example, migrant workers stranded in destination countries such as Gulf countries, Malaysia, and India, were hit hard by COVID-19 as they lost their jobs and were compelled to live without food, shelter and money (Bhattarai, 2020). They faced a range of challenges in the process of returning (Mandal, 2020a) with stories emerging of migrants stranded in the streets, airports and at the border between Nepal and India (Hashim, 2020; Mandal, 2020b; Shrestha, 2020). Furthermore, many migrant workers faced further challenges after entering their home country (Hashim, 2020; Shrestha, 2020). This shows a lack of coordinated efforts of the employers, the employment agencies, the diplomatic missions of Nepal as well as the Government of Nepal in their responsibilities as they appeared missing to take proactive steps to assist the migrant workers. The issues of returnees from India might pose added challenge as these returnees have remained absent in the existing policy of the government- both in the absence of data and framework of their financial as well as social security.

In April 2020, as the cases of COVID-19 started to rise in India, the Government of Nepal decided to seal the border as a preventive measure to curtail the spread of the virus (Basnet et al., 2020). Thousands of returning labour migrants remained stranded at the border (Shrestha, 2020) as the authority at the entry points prevented them from crossing. They had to wait for weeks to receive entry clearance from the authority. Issues of human dignity violation emerged (Dhungana, 2020) as the vulnerability of those returning was further exacerbated (Purna, et al., 2020). The returnees were reported to have been so desperate and frustrated by the situation that some of them risked their lives by jumping into the Mahakali River to swim across the border, away from surveillance of the authorities to cross the border (Baniya et al., 2020; Badu, 2020). After entering Nepal, the returnees faced further challenges when they were required to stay in the quarantines. The quarantines were reported as unhygienic, unsafe, poorly managed and overcrowded (Shah et al., 2020; ILO, 2020). Females were obliged to share the quarantine accommodation and facilities along with the males, where sexual violence on girls and women was reported (Dahal et al., 2020). Incidents of suicide and attempted suicide emerged, and some people ran away from quarantines due to perceived stigma towards the virus (Baniya et al., 2020). Those who managed to reach home after this period of quarantine, faced further challenges of integration in the community because these people also perceived the stigma (Keetie et al., 2020) with the fear that they were carrying and transmitting the virus in the community. Together with the fear of life imposed by the pandemic, the returnees struggled to support their family in the absence of income generating opportunities. Even though the Government of Nepal had formed the COVID-19 Crisis Management Committee, as a special body with authority to address the pandemic related issues, the efficiency of the committee in

taking immediate steps in the intervention was questioned. Literature shows that other LMICs also experienced identical problems in the management of the returnees during the crisis. For example, people ran away from the quarantine centres in Zimbabwe in the absence of basic provisions for life. Similarly, in Uganda, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the government kept holding the returnees because the reception centres were preoccupied and waited them to become empty (Le Coz and Newland, 2021). As the report adds, these countries faced budget crisis to arrange the required facilities in the quarantine centres as well as to mitigate the exceeding health crisis. However, according to the report, the management of the returnees in Kerala, India was exemplary because the state had maintained the data of the migrants and the returnees regularly and it helped them project the potential number of returnees and prepare for their management including setting up hospital beds and quarantine facilities as well as taking account of the migrants from other regions.

Post-return crisis

Even though returning home and reuniting with family becomes the primary concern for the returnee migrants in the time of crisis, post-return life is replete with challenges due to the presence of low household incomes (Bastia, 2011)). Economic reintegration thus emerges as a key problem for the returnee labour migrants. This is acute for low-income households in rural areas who rarely benefit from state interventions and social assistance (Ojha, 2021). Households in other LMICs also may have faced the similar challenges. For example, 87 percent of the returnee migrants faced significant challenge in the absence of source of income in Bangladesh (Dhaka Tribune (2020) and re-engaging with the domestic labour market was a major challenge for the returnee migrants in Cambodia (IOM, 2020). So, even in the case of Nepal, re-migration amidst the ongoing pandemic therefore becomes a difficult but rational choice for labour migrants who cannot sustain their families. That could be the reason that during the four weeks of September 2020, 22,000 Nepali labour migrants left for India via the Nepalgunj border point alone (Himalayan Times, 2020b). Republica (2020c) reported a number of testimonies including the following:

I came here four months ago. However, I couldn't withstand scarcity and starvation, ...I have no other option but to leave the country again merely to fulfil the basic needs.

You can't cheat your stomach. You have to feed yourself to survive.

We couldn't find any job to earn a living here. So, ultimately, we are returning to India.

But the second wave of the virus further exacerbated human health and the job market, impacting more workers. Once again, because of the likelihood of destitution, a return to Nepal was necessary (Jesline et al., 2021; Online Khabar, 2021), but once again a significant challenge (Shah et al., 2020). Thousands of Nepali migrants returned home as the second wave of virus caused a devastating impact in India. Records showed that 30,000 Nepali migrants returned via the Gauriphanta entry point alone during mid-March to mid-April 2021 (Deuba, 2021). Whilst returning further impacts individuals and households financially, there were reports that this was preferable to succumbing to the virus, as one returnee stated, *"I am lucky to be alive.... I managed to escape, and I am alive and safe"* (Sapkota and Khada, 2021). However, economic reintegration and health of the returnee migrants remained a major challenge while Nepal was undergoing

the crisis of the pandemic and even struggling to ensure the supply of oxygen to the patients (The Guardian, 2021a).

The second return marked leniency in the absence of standard checks and mandatory quarantine requirement. In the event of positive cases, there was no provision of contact tracing (Aryal and KC, 2021). Karnali Province stopped carrying out tests referring to the high number of entrants and low capacity to administer the programme. Similar withdrawals were in place in Rautahat and in most of the bordering districts, which were interpreted as the mismanagement of the returnees by the authorities (Jha, 2021), which indicated the possibility that the virus had already spread to the wider community. There was then, what was described as, a chaotic scene in most of the hospitals of the country and the government's announcement that bed availability in the hospitals was rare, underlined this (Poudel, 2021). This could be argued as the failure of institutional capacity as a result of the ineffectiveness of Crisis Management Committee (Aryal and KC, 2021). Also, in the scenario that 4500 migrant workers returning from India daily (Online Khabar, 2021), it can hardly be underestimated the plight of the returnee migrants during the pandemic where the lockdown might have further complicated their return and reintegration.

The mobility of people, like that of goods and money, has always posed problems for authorities (Jordan and Brown, 2007) and the COVID-19 pandemic has once again exacerbated the particular vulnerabilities faced by labour migrants where their agency, rights and voices appear missing from the public policy space (Rao et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fragility of internal migrants in India and how the policy vacuum leaves citizens adrift from accessing their basic rights of citizenship. Despite existing problems, migration to India, in the current global market, stands as an unavoidable phenomenon for most of the people of rural Nepal. The people who are obliged to cross the Indo-Nepal border can be seen as amongst the "poorest of the poor" and these people are highly vulnerable not only in the country of destination but also in their own country after return (The Guardian, 2021b). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated how fragile the status quo is and how the global market in labour and a weak welfare system can impact and exacerbate a global public health crisis. Migrants who have no means of income in their own regions and countries take the rational decision to move to improve their situation. This movement though presents risks and challenges to these individuals and the global health system as the virus moves. For the individual labour migrants, the COVID-19 pandemic has created multiple impacts from the both - the actual, and the fear of the infection as well as the stress of unemployment often termed as psychological morbidity (Dhungana et al., 2019). Discrimination, psychological stress, family obligations and financial hardship are common challenges faced by labour migrants at the time of crisis (Bhandari et al, 2021). In addition to the experience of discrimination in India (Adhikari et al., 2022), migrants face challenges at cross-border points and experience being "betwixt and between" citizenship and exclusion. The vulnerability of Nepali labour migrants in India could be far worse because many of these migrants have not possessed the mandatory document, known as *adhar card* to come within the framework of state welfare system in the scenario that the internal migrants of India who already are under the framework also have undergone severe challenges to find permanent employment and state facilities like access to health at the time of crisis.

In Nepal, despite acting proactively in the initial phase of the pandemic, the government struggled to cope with the high volume of returnee migrants both from air and land routes which illustrated a lack of depth in their emergency planning policies. Reintegrating [former] migrants in the community, delivering health services, support for labour market engagement or social assistance, and ensuring psycho-social support

were major challenges for the government in the absence of well-coordinated political and administrative structure. The public perception was that the political parties were more focused on political games at the expense of public health and economic resilience of the most vulnerable (The Kathmandu Post, 2020; People's Review, 2020). Insufficiency of planning, inadequate relief and assistance, inefficient bureaucracy and a lack of trust has been the assessment of returnees to the governmental response (Republica, 2020b; Seddon, 2021).

The accounts of returnee labour migrants as well as response of the authority and stakeholders' experiences draw our attention for policy overview. In the section below, existing plans, policies and gaps on reintegration have been overviewed.

Planning, policy and gaps

A great deal of attention has been afforded to ensuring that migrants from Nepal are best equipped to maximise their journey and that safeguards are implemented. This is largely because the remittances from migrant workers have made a major contribution to the GDP of Nepal. The Foreign Employment Policy of 2012 asserts that any would-be labour migrants are given adequate training and counselling before their departure for foreign employment (Department of Foreign Employment, Government of Nepal, 2012). Equally, it commits to liaise with the governments of destination countries to guarantee basic rights of the migrant workers including their safety, security, access to public health, safe working environment and holiday entitlements, together with the provision of their safe return. Likewise, the policy has envisioned the specific strategies for the reintegration of returnee migrants. For example, the policy stresses to incorporate the skills and technical knowledge of the returnees in the local context with a view to use their skills for the development of the nation by providing employment locally. For this, the government has stated the need to develop packages for social and economic reintegration. Likewise, the policy emphasized the need to set up psychological counselling centres and rehabilitation centres through the Foreign Employment Welfare Fund created by the government under Foreign Employment Board.

The Government has also set up contribution related insurance scheme for the returnee migrants. Plans and policies on migration and return migration exist in general, but the issues with the rights, safety and security of the labour migrants in relation to other countries also have not been solved. Very recently, there has been a call for amendments of the Foreign Employment Policy, 2012 stating that diplomacy should be the major goal of foreign employment to address the existing challenges (Himalayan news Service, 2022). However, in the light that Nepali migrant workers in India are not officially acknowledged, documented in Nepal, they do not have access to any of the privileges that the migrant workers to other destination are entitled to have. In fact, there is absence of policy on the issues of migrant workers in India till the date.

As an attempt to start decreasing unemployment, in February 2019, the government of Nepal brought Prime Minister's Employment Programme (PMEP) with a view to guarantee 100 days of paid work to the jobless Nepalis including the returnee migrants and called for registration with the supporting documents (Sapkota and Khadka, 2021). A total of 752,976 people registered claiming that they were unemployed and out of which only 78,678 were successful to receive employment opportunity for combined 843,042 days - about 11 days per person. Likewise, the Federal Government's budget of 2020 announced an ambitious mission of creating 700,000 jobs out of which 200,000 would be employed through PMEP (Thapa et al., 2020). The Provincial Government of Karnali launched Chief Minister's Employment Programme (CMEP) tuning

to PMEP with its aim to end poverty in the region (Katuwal, 2020). It planned to create 1,260,000 days of employment and pay Nepali Rupees 500 per person on daily basis. The Government recruited Employment Coordinators (EC) at the Local Level to identify the unemployed people and provide employment. However, the ECs could not extend their services proactively to cover the large number of people. The residents of rural villages are reported to have experienced the greatest information barrier about how they could benefit from the programmes (Sapkota and Khadka, 2021). Equally, a complex and unfriendly bureaucratic procedure often demotivated the rural people from accessing the assistance provided by the government (Baniya et. al. 2020). To mitigate the economic problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and support the people struggling with urgent financial need, the Government of Nepal created the COVID-19 Resilient Fund. However, a lack of coordination between the Provincial and Local Government (Ojha, 2021) posed an added challenge to supporting returnees with relief funds and creating self-employment opportunities (Republica, 2020c). Consecutively, the COVID-19 Resilient Fund and Prime Minister Employment Programmes created by the Government hardly reached the returnees in greatest need (Seddon, 2021). This indicates a gap in the structural level of the government in extending the services to the target population. Thus, in the absence of viable financial support and challenges of securing paid work, returnee labour migrants struggled to support their families and considered re-migration, particularly to India, despite the risks involved (Asian News International, 2020; Himalayan Times, 2020a).

Within Nepal, migration and return migration have been the subjects of great concern for communities and stakeholders (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, 2020) but measures that need to be brought in to address the problems within these are often ignored by policy (Thieme and Ghimire, 2014; Ghimire, 2019). In many cases, the programmes that have been launched appear 'populist' in nature and are not sustainable. Many of the programmes appear to be transitory as they discontinue along with discontinuation of a political regime. Also, there is general perception among the people that only those who have access to the political power can benefit from these programmes. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Country Profile of Nepal (2019) shows that there are limitations in data and information on migration in Nepal adding that these gaps may impact negatively in designing laws and policies and implementing them effectively. The report further states that Nepal has not been benefiting from the skill contribution of the returnee migrants and recommends that congenial business, investment and employment opportunities need to be created both for male and female returnee migrants. Equally, the report highlights the necessity in finding information and data on migration to India and irregular migration and update them periodically. A policy brief by Governance Monitoring Centre Nepal (GMC) (2022) a Nepal based organisation, points out that there was a lack of preparation from the part of the Government for emergency and crisis management in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. It also shows that there was a gap of cohesion among the departments of ministries while preparing, planning and implementing the programmes. Recent research of IOM (IOM, 2022) has highlighted the Government's achievements so far and the limitations and challenges that existed in the migration policies of Nepal. Based on findings, IOM has offered its ways forward for the effective reintegration of the returnee migrants in structural, community and individual level.

Discussion

Labour migration for low-income Nepali people to foreign countries has been a viable means of survival and resourceful channel for economic activities in the scenario that

Nepal has not been able to generate enough employment opportunities within the country. But there are issues often highlighted on health and wellbeing, social security, human right and wages. The government of Nepal has often framed plans and policies (e.g., Migration Act 2007, Foreign Employment Rules 2008, Reintegration Policy 2012), designed programmes and partnered with various agencies for safe migration and sustainable reintegration of the migrant workers after their return (United Nations Nepal, 2021; IOM, 2022). However, it is recognised that there exists a paucity of policy relating to how countries address reintegration in LMICs like Nepal (Liu, 2015). In the context of Nepal, the gaps in the policies exist mainly in the execution levels - such as information collection, documentation, implementation, and intervention. In many respects the challenges and issues with reintegration of returnee labour migrants of Nepal appear identical with those of ASEAN countries as documented in an ILO report (see Wickramasekara, 2019). However, the model of the Philippines is often taken as successful among the countries across the region. The policy stakeholders of Nepal also could take insight from the model of the Philippines (Himalayan News Service, 2022) in which there is significant contribution from the government bureaucracy from premigration period to reintegration upon return (Rocer, 2021).

Another crucial issue that possesses tension to the authority and migration stakeholders is about the cross-border mobility of labour migrants from Nepal to India. Even though India has remained a viable labour market for a large number of low-skilled Nepali migrant workers, the issues related with these migrant workers appears to have been missing in the policy. Work migration to India has not yet been acknowledged as foreign employment and there is no official record of the migrants and their employers. There exists a gap in policy that there has not been any bilateral agreement or policy amendments after the free mobility agreement of 1950 between the Governments of Nepal and India (Sharma and Thapa, 2013). It appears that neither of the countries has maintained an official record on how many Nepalis live and work in India. Hence the government of Nepal may require redefining these mobilities and bring them in its policy priority to guarantee the basic rights like safety, security, access to health and other public provisioning of labour migrants living and working in India (ILO, 2020). The government may consider bringing these migrant workers under an official framework and bring them under insurance schemes to ensure their social security as they do not have the provision like their fellow men who are in overseas employment. After moving to India, they are unlikely to have the provisions of economic and social security because majority of them work in informal sectors where contracts, guarantee of wages, and entitlements are often compromised (Mandal, 2020b). One of the main reasons for the migrants in India to be deprived of the basic provisions like health and social security in the absence of *Adhar card*, a fundamental document required to qualify for such privileges (Sharma and Thapa, 2013). Consequently, poor lifestyle, health, hygiene and the precarious nature of work poses serious physical and mental health problems for migrants (Saraswati et al., 2015). Temporary settlement of Nepali migrants in many respects share the common characteristics with the migrants from other neighboring countries in relation to lifestyles, work, health and hygiene, social integration, economic activities as well as the reasons for return (ibid.) This indicates that the issues with cross-border mobility may be of far complex nature. Evidence shows that there is prevalence of psychological morbidity, distress and poor health issues in the returnee migrants (Dhungana et al., 2019). All these factors are likely to impact their reintegration after returning home.

Intermittent cross-border (im)mobility of people amidst COVID- 19 may provide the policy stake holders retrospective lens to review the plans and policies. The untimely lockdown, lack of strategic measures, toughened border control without a prior notice were redundant issues experienced by the people. Lack of both human and logistic

resources were other factors that contributed to the spread of the virus. Most importantly, the psychological factor associated with COVID-19 and the stigma adhered with it had major impact on the community and the wider society. It shows that there was a lack of human resource for counselling during the pandemic. Another vital issue associated with risky mobility was the absence of opportunities for economic activities within the country (Le Coz and Newland, 2021). The Federal, Provincial and the Local government lacked coordination in disseminating the relief funds, services and packages to the most affected ones (Thapa et al., 2020). The effectiveness of the COVID Resilient Fund, Prime Minister Employment Programme and the Chief Minister Employment Programmes brought several questions as these programmes could not reach the needy people in time (Adhikari et al., 2022). Equally, the role of COVID Crisis Management Committee did not appear proactive enough to mobilise resources and mitigate the situation. Despite the involvement of various non-government agencies along with the government agencies to cater assistance and services to the vulnerable population, the situation could not come in control in time due to a lack of coordination in the government bureaucracy. Thus, the accounts above help us understand how the mobilities of the people took place during the COVID-19 under an (Un)official framework.

In order to address the issues which have existed for long, it is high time the government took initiation in the diplomatic level to facilitate employment in formal sectors and guarantee financial and social security. Even though it may appear challenging in respect with low skilled migrant workers, it could benefit the migrants as well as the governments of both the nations in the long run. It is also suggested that the government of India considered an effective management of the migrant workers to ensure that the workers' life is not further compromised and that they are not discriminated against or exploited (Weeraratne, 2020). The long existing problematic issues of these mobilities demand the government of Nepal for designing reintegration policy on the basis of the returnee population, their skills and their potential enrolment in the local job market. In addition, maintaining record of the migrants would help the government to make contingency plans at the time of crisis like COVID 19, to mitigate the pressure on health services, financial supports and employment (IOM, 2022). Together, the government could take the insights from the effective reintegration models like that of Kerala, India and the Philippines, as mentioned in the section above. Thus, return and reintegration draws strong policy attention specially in case of short term and temporary migration to support returnee migrants from facing multiple changes in the absence of specific framework of services (Wickramasekara, 2019).

Effective implementation of the reintegration tasks envisioned in the existing policies of Nepal may demand strong commitment and willpower of the authorities and efficient coordination between and among the departments of respective ministries. Equally, it is pivotal that there is presence of mutual understanding and agreement in regard to the shared responsibilities between the Federal, Provincial and Local governments. To reiterate, migration to India may need to be redefined and brought within the framework of foreign employment for the increased security of the migrant workers. Regarding reintegration, it has been admitted in Foreign Employment Policy document 2012 (Department of Foreign Employment, Government of Nepal, 2012) that there are many issues that have remained unaddressed adding that there are still challenges to overcome the issues of reintegration. However, these issues have remained unaddressed for over a decade. Consequently, health and wellbeing along with financial stability and social security of the returning population has long been jeopardised and it is further heightened within the context of COVID-19. In the absence of policy intervention in the making of welfare state with well-coordinated state mechanism, the destitution of these people is most likely to continue.

*Correspondence address: Hem Raj Neupane. Email: hemraj.neupane@hud.ac.uk

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