

Youth Out-migration and Opportunities for Periurban Agriculture

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While out-migration and movement to cities or overseas has long been a fact of life in peripheral agricultural communities in the Global South, in recent decades migration emerged as a core component of many household livelihoods, with remittances often eclipsing what is earned from the rural sector. According to the International Organisation for Migration, worldwide 258 million people lived outside their country of birth as of 2017 – a figure which has risen by 69 % since 1990. Added to this are the FAO-estimated 740 million internal migrants, a large proportion of whom have moved from rural to urban areas.

Narratives of migration in rural Nepal and China

The causes for migration are increasingly complex, and the decision to migrate generally stems from a convergence of economic and cultural changes within communities. Nepal and China, although neighbours, appear vastly divergent when considering their recent path of agrarian and political-economic transformation. Nevertheless, the story from rural areas is remarkably similar when it comes to demographic shifts. The shared experiences described here were revealed through research carried out by South China Agricultural University and the International Water Management Institute ([Water, Land and Ecosystems](#) programme) between 2014 and 2018.

Both countries have seen extensive rural depopulation over 20 years, with youth at the forefront of this change. The agrarian sector in both regions has suffered from a labour crisis, an ageing agricultural workforce and a loss of agroecological knowledge. There are differences, most notably in the flows of labour itself. In China the majority of rural-urban migrants are bound for the coastal cities, while in Nepal migrants are more often bound for the Gulf States, as well as cities of India. In China, migration often includes both young men and women, while in Nepal – although this is slowly changing – it remains predominantly the domain of men.

In the research, however, similarities in the narratives regarding migration drivers became apparent. In the Chirkhuwa valley of Nepal's eastern hills, the inability to subsist from agriculture has been a challenge for generations, and with the added climatic pressures, the need for alternative sources of income was rising. There are also more

complex changes. The economy had been transformed with the expansion of the road network. In the wake of the expansion, farming families complained of a rising cost of living, including rising prices for food and commodities, as well as pressures on agriculture itself, such as an increasingly erratic climate and rising cost of fertiliser, diesel and other inputs. Other reasons included land scarcity, the need to pay for children's education, and payments for marriage and dowry. The rising culture of consumerism was also a factor, with the younger generation increasingly aspiring to spend more money on manufactured goods and luxuries such as imported clothes, factory-made liquor and mobile phone accessories.

In Gaozhou and Dianbai, in the gentle hills of China's Guangdong province, the responses were remarkably similar. Agrarian stress was cited as a key constraint encouraging migration, although – given the excellent irrigation infrastructure in this part of China – climate was not raised as such a significant concern. Instead, households, like in Nepal, were concerned with the spiralling cost of living in this increasingly monetised economy. Not only was the cost of agricultural inputs rising; with expanding markets there are changes in consumer behaviour and aspirations, especially for the youth. For example, households spoke of the burgeoning demand for consumer goods as well as the desire for a better house, and of the city "lifestyle" attracting young migrants. The rising cost of education and healthcare was also cited.

Migration, remittances and agriculture

While remittances are flowing back to the village, in Nepal's Chirkhuwa valley and the hills of Guangdong few migrants or recipients were diverting remittances into the agricultural sector. Only a handful of respondents in both locations noted that they had used migration as an opportunity to generate capital to invest in land (in the case of Nepal), agricultural equipment or other improvements to the land. This is in part rooted in the perceived lack of profitability of agriculture, and also in a cultural perception across the Global South: agriculture has been devalued as an occupation. This phenomenon has been aggravated by the media and the state education system, and due to growing aspirations for urban lifestyles. For migrants from Dianbai and Gaozhou a lot of the work in cities is menial and low wage, and accompanied by a spiralling urban cost of living. In Nepal's eastern hills, migrants to urban centres face similar challenges regarding the cost of living, and those who go overseas pay huge fees to manpower agencies. Debt servicing significantly eats into the remittance flows. As a result, in both regions there is often little cash left after basic food, healthcare and educational costs have been covered – and



Fruit farm in Zengcheng, in the periurban belt east of Guangzhou. While the urban market is significant, the capital investment is high.
Photo by Chen Fengbo

what little is left is invested in consumer goods.

Periurban agriculture as the way forward for migrant youth?

Approximately 500 km to the east of the Chirkhuwa valley, in the Kathmandu valley, between brick kilns, factories and housing colonies, the fields are scattered with intensive market-oriented vegetable and fruit production, often under poly houses, and also livestock farms; these all serve the twin cities of Kathmandu and Patan and the rapidly growing urban population. Similarly, six hours west of Maoming is the Pearl River Delta, China's industrial heartland. Here, on a vastly larger scale, in spite of the rapid urbanisation, the periurban belt between the cities of Guangzhou, Dongguan and Shenzhen includes rich and fertile agricultural lands – again, though, these are dominated by high-value and intensive agricultural production.

The remaining question in this context is whether periurban agriculture offers an opportunity for migrant youth. Investment in periurban agriculture could potentially create opportunities for independent and regular income generation among rural migrants, as an alternative to dependence upon insecure and casual labour for others. Periurban agriculture would offer these migrants the opportunity in the urban context to mobilise rich agroecological knowledge brought from rural areas, and at the same time they could take advantage of the huge and growing local urban consumer demand for agricultural produce. This is in stark contrast to many rural areas, where

the local market is small and transportation costs can be prohibitive for marketing produce further afield. Opportunities within periurban agriculture could offer youth in Nepal an alternative to risky and expensive overseas employment and could offer a pathway to upward mobility in China, where profits are potentially very high.

Considerable challenges remain, however. In the Kathmandu valley, land rent has skyrocketed in recent years. Many of the poly houses and other plantations on the urban fringe are already farmed by “migrants”, but many of these are wealthy entrepreneurs and skilled horticulturalists from other parts of Nepal who have leased land from the indigenous Newar of the valley. They bring with them capital, and also the capacity to bear risk and employ a large number of labourers. Similarly, in the Pearl River Delta, land use is heavily regulated, and many farms are larger-scale commercial plantations. Nevertheless, there are emerging opportunities on land leased from villages in the periurban fringe – which are being established by migrants from other provinces. In Zengcheng, 50 km away from Guangzhou, hilly land is being used to produce litchi, dragon fruit, green date and other crops, with high profits and turnover. Some are being sold by e-marketing to the city and to other parts of China. Some have diversified into agricultural tourism, and the local government has been offering financial support to these enterprises. Given that many of the original local residents in these periurban locales have better paid work in the city, migrant farmers from poorer places such as Guangxi province and North Guangdong have taken up this niche.



Agriculture is increasingly the domain of the older generation in the hills of eastern Guangdong, China. Photos by Fraser Sugden



Today, livelihoods in the Chirkhuwa valley in Nepal's Bhojpur district are heavily dependent on remittances.



Commercial floriculture is one of the many higher-value agro-enterprises engaged in by migrants to the Kathmandu valley in Nepal.



Niche enterprises serving the city markets, such as turtle farming, can offer significant profits to youth across China.

Again though, the capital investment is likely to be prohibitive for poorer migrants.

Periurban agriculture and the importance of smaller towns

If periurban agriculture is to offer potential for migrants, it is also important to look to smaller towns which are connected to transport arteries and have a growing local market, yet also have greater availability of land and lower rents. For example, in small towns around Maoming city in Guangdong, some returnees from the cities had invested in ultra-high-value “niche” enterprises, such as turtle farming. In Nepal, poultry farms are appearing across the countryside in lowland towns, mostly serving the local market. Again though, persistent challenges relate to the capital requirements for such ventures, which are likely to be beyond the means of many poorer migrants. In the future, the opportunity cost of periurban agriculture may decline with improved transportation links: then high-value produce can be produced within rural communities without needing to set up new farms close to where the market is. This is already evident in the villages of Guangdong, where agriculture is increasingly dominated by high-value commercial crops – with even more remote villages opening up to distant markets. This is occurring through the spread of e-business, often for the production of specialist fruits or products such as shrimps. In some lower communities of the Chirkhuwa valley, returnees have started producing rudraksha, a highly profitable seed used for ritual and decorative purposes in India and China.

For periurban agriculture to flourish, however, policies need to be in place to support rural-urban migrants – most notably by providing land, regulation of rents and appropriate training, and credit provisions to ensure investments are economically sustainable. Other opportunities, such as the development of collectives or joint investments, which offer groups of migrants economies of scale, may also offer a solution in the years ahead.

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More information

See the [MARIS network website](#) (Migration, Agriculture and Resilience: Initiative for Sustainability).