Nepal on the Move: Conflict, Migration and Stability

Policy dialogue on migration. Workshop held on 14 March 2016

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Research Communication

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The project: *Nepal on the Move: Conflict, Migration and Stability* (NeMO) has been carried out in a partnership between four universities in three countries: Kathmandu University, Nepal, North Eastern Hill University, India, Aarhus University and University of Copenhagen, Denmark, during 2011-16. The overall objective of the NeMO research project was to explore migration practices related to different types and forms of migration and societal implications from a migrant/bottom up perspective. Seven case studies have been developed to cover various types of migration, including internal and transnational migration; and labour- educational and military migration. The purpose of this research communication is to stimulate policy dialogue regarding the social implications of increased migration.

We have identified five topics that we consider of general interest across the case studies and where the case studies point to issues of general importance. The five topics are:

1. Place-based rights and mobility
2. Migration and diaspora - network dynamics
3. Future making - spatial and social mobility
4. Mobility and identity transformation
5. Inequity and mobility

1. Place-based rights and mobility

With the term ‘rights’ we seek to capture issues related to people’s ability to access resources necessary for fulfilling everyday needs, and in doing so it refers to a continuum of formal and informal opportunity structures. This comprehension is closely related to the idea of universal citizenship rights and responsibilities of members of nation state communities – more or less independent of their specific location of residence. One important outcome of the NEMO case studies is that mobile people (individuals, groups and families) experience that rights are less

universally related to national citizenship and more fluid and dependent on place of registration and dwelling.

The importance, functioning and implications of such place-based rights' systems stands out clearly in the case study of rural-'urban' migration in one eastern district of Nepal (Bhojpur) and in the case study of migration governance practices related to Nepalese labour migration to the Gulf countries.

Rural-'urban' migration

For the past decades, Bhojpur District has experienced dramatic demographic changes that have resulted in both 'permanent' immigration and emigration to the district, increasing labour mobility to the Gulf countries, and migration from rural villages to the growing bazar town of the district. What a closer look at the latter migration-settlement changes reveals is that new dwellers in the bazar town are experiencing barriers as how they can access community group resources, such as firewood, loans, and water etc. – all channels of resources that are important for people who do not have resources to buy alternatives. However, barriers also include formal sector employment, micro-credit schemes and banking facilities, registration of births, marriage, death and migration, property transaction, government benefits and allowances, voting rights and many more. Such types of barriers also apply to former Bhojpur residents now dwelling in Kathmandu and other places from where they cannot access these resources.

But why can new town dwellers in Bhojpur not access such resources? The short answer is that they are not eligible to these as long as they have not changed their place of residence, through obtaining a formal migration certificate (basai serai) – and one of the central prerequisites for changing legal place of residence is that a family unit has become landowners in the new location of dwelling. Thus, physical affiliation to a particular territory as formalized when you are receiving your birth certificate (for females also when they are married and become members of their husband's families) is still the single most important criterion for individual legal identity and citizenship claims. Accordingly, people who are changing place of residence are not guaranteed access to the basic benefits of society.

Governing migration to the Gulf

Migration of Nepalese workers to the Gulf has increased almost exponentially since the early 2000s and brings rather different rights-based issues to the fore. The Nepalese government has been quite active in bringing new laws, rules, structures and policies in order not only to regulate labor migration but also to secure the rights of migrant workers who experience harm during recruitment and throughout the migration process. In this context, the 2007 Foreign Labour Act as well as the Foreign Employment Policy from 2012 are important landmarks. However, many more legal amendments and institutional structures have been put in place. The official rationale for these government initiatives is that by easing migration they will improve the safety migrants going abroad for work. However, case study data document that migrant workers, particularly those in lower-wage industries, often encounter exploitative behavior at each and every step of the recruitment and migration process, in Nepal as well as abroad. Migration governance is just one among a plethora of governance challenges in Nepal after the initiation of the constitution process in 2006. Thus, some of the challenges that migrant workers are facing cannot be

disassociated from the overall governance environment of Nepal. Looking at migration governance from a migrant worker perspective, three rights-related issues come out strongly.

Firstly, most migrants have difficulties in acknowledging how the governance system should act to their benefit. This can be explained by the limited involvement of migrants in designing the governance system; more importantly, it creates a governance gap between providers of governance services for migration and migrants themselves.

Secondly, the role of manpower companies that according to the 2007 act shall function as the entry point for migrant workers is problemaatic. Here, migrant workers experience that far from all companies are providing reliable services. And since government surveillance of the companies is weak, potential migrant workers struggle hard to find the right service that they can afford. In many cases they lose money and protection throughout the migration process.

Thirdly, the visa acquisition process that migrants have to navigate at both ends of the migration chain is complex if changes in employment occur and when migrants return to Nepal for visits or are between contracts. Here, migrants experience that they have to bribe officers to avoid delay in the processing of visas that could lead to loss of employment. That Nepalese migrant workers to the Gulf are facing serious rights and protection problems is continuously documented in media, human rights reports etc. The present study shows that solutions to this dire situation is not only to be found in changes of the legal system but need to be considered as a governance issue.

2. Transnational pathways of migration and diaspora

Transnational migration out of Nepal has mostly been of two types, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive: labour migration and educational migration. They may be distinguished by formal purpose – whether to pursue salaried employment, often with the purpose of generating economic remittances; or to pursue a formal education, thereby creating the possibility of cultural remittances in the form of training and recognized educational capacities; by contrasting two of the NeMo cases we can highlight some of the differences and similarities.

Labour migration typically rests on individual or family-level decision-making. Scarcity of resources and work opportunities in Nepal is a widely acknowledged driver of mobility, both internally (rural-urban, hills-plains) and transnationally. The case of Nepalese migrant labourers working in the coal mines in Meghalaya, India, illustrates this well. The recruitment is often network-based, with groups of migrant workers originating from the same villages and social networks in Nepal. Hence, a degree of replication of these habitation patterns can be found in the mining areas, with labour camps imitating villages, even if they are not recognized as such by the state and therefore much more vulnerable in terms of basic rights and human security. While they earn more than in Nepal, many spend a part of the income locally on leisure activities, compensating for the hardship in the mines; others bring their family or establish new families through local marriage. These patterns establish a dynamic of circular migration co-existing with a diasporic Nepalese community: some end up staying in the coal mines for decades, spanning several generations, while others are seasonal migrant workers who may or may not return on a yearly basis. While remittances are sent to the villages of origin in Nepal, the work in the coal mines is dangerous and uncertain, and it is difficult to satisfy the hope of returning home with sufficient means to generate upward social mobility. Still, some manage to

to earn well within a short span of time, and the returns contribute not just to sustaining economic needs back home but also to increased social status over time, which may occasionally facilitate internal migration from the villages to the plains and cities inside Nepal.

Perhaps exempting, to some degree, manual labour migration across the open border to India, both transnational labour migration and educational migration require paper work, and much of this is managed through middlemen and agencies that have become sufficiently numerous to be labelled as a local migration industry, with formal and informal players. But the papers required are different, and therefore access to these two kinds of migration also differ substantially, separating the lower classes from the middle and upper class migrants. Generally, not much attention has been paid to female migration, partly because most Nepali migrants are male. However, Nepali women increasingly take part in these movements, either as accompanying relatives or as independent migrants. One avenue for young women of the middle- and upper classes is that of international education. Some women travel on their own with a deliberate purpose of studying, whereas others migrate for other reasons and enter educational programs later during their stay abroad. As we saw in the case of labour migration in the coal mines in India, the dynamics between migration and existing diasporic communities abroad is complex in the field of educational migration as well, with diasporic communities linking newcomers to educational opportunities spread across Europe and the US. One of the NeMo case studies focus on women who have migrated for education and who have eventually returned to Nepal, either temporarily planning to move on to other destinations or with a purpose of resettling on a permanent basis. Whereas they may not often be in a position to generate financial remittances, they bring what may be termed social remittances in the form of significant transnational social ties that also place them in new social relations to other educational returnees in Nepal; and they bring cultural remittances, understood as exposure to new knowledge, norms, values and social practices that differ from dominant middle and upper caste values in Nepal, especially regarding gender roles. They may often find restrictions both in terms of translating their educational qualifications from abroad into jobs in the domestic labour market and in terms of negotiating the space for independent behaviour in the domestic sphere.

Nepalese transnational student migration of this kind is a distinctly middle-class phenomenon, but is embedded within structural global inequalities and therefore occasionally becomes an avenue for low-skilled labor in blurred zones between legality and illegality. This is the case when Nepalese students abroad have to work, often in the service sector in order to make a living and to pay study fees. Thus, Nepalese students abroad have to strike a balance between a middle-class identity and a temporary position as low-skilled workers. As one of the sub-studies has found one way for Nepalese students abroad to lay claim to a middle-class status is by engaging in more or less institutionalized transnational networks through which they come to represent themselves as an educated youth and the future of the nation.

3. Future making in the field of spatial and social mobility

Shifting of residence and mobility and migration over short periods of time is an essential part of youth life in Nepal. Comparatively, young people (between 16 and 30) is the most mobile group in society. For the youth, future making is fuelled not only by their ambitions for improving their opportunities and/or position, but also by more mundane needs linked to making a living. Hence, even though social mobility and spatial mobility are closely connected, young people’s

moving for either employment or education as modes of meaningful future making, physical mobility is also about fulfilling parents' expectations and contributing to household livelihoods.

These dynamics become evident from the case of migration and livelihood trajectories in rural communities of the far east of Nepal. Here, it is shown how young people are increasingly on the move. Youth are simultaneously on the move and staying home, hence it is difficult to identify who are the "migrants" and who are the "stayers". Most young people aspire to move either for education or for labour, but they need to negotiate it with other household members, mainly their siblings in order to keep the household functioning. Therefore they are going through different stages of movement and staying: waiting for movement, returning home temporarily to help with urgent issues, staying at home to allow other siblings to migrate etc. This household setting and being on the move, or rather, being "in-between" affects young people's ability to participate in community development but also impact on how they are included by older people, who generally are less mobile.

Thus, even though this is often interpreted as if young people are not interested in developing their home areas, research shows that many young people actually do have interests and commitments for local development. However, in the situation of scarce human resources in the household due to constant moving and staying, many young people will not be able to take part in local development on a continuous basis - either because they are absent from their home area or they are busy to take up household livelihood roles to make up for their own previous absence or their siblings' current absence.

How young people depend on their siblings for their mobility either for fulfilling their ambitions for social mobility and/or for gaining a position locally and participation in local development can be illustrated in at least three ways: 1) young unmarried women usually both continue household chores and prioritize their education where their participation in education depends on their flexibility in taking over household chores. This normally does not allow for them to participate in local community work. 2) young men are absent from most developmental meetings as well, because they are often in-between migration and presence and when they are back home, their local contribution is mostly scheduled to be practical, e.g. bringing electrical poles and arranging them. 3) both young men and young women even while being outside the village are returning to the village frequently (at the expense of their education or work) in order to facilitate development, either by themselves (through participation) or by taking other tasks/works of the household in order to allow someone else to participate.

Thus, future making for young people is a complex process that rests on siblings' interdependence regarding their respective room of maneuver. Also, young people's future making depends on gender; not only due to differences in household related to gender specific obligations whether being part of your paternal family unit or for women upon marriage on your 'new' family unit - but it also depends on the opportunities to engage in migration for labour purposes, where women are facing strong legal restrictions on participation in international labour migration. Young people's complex future making in relation to migration is also illustrated by the case study on how young Gurung men are preparing for recruitment in the British Gurkha regiments.

Admission to the Gurkha regiments depends on hard physical and mental training before you can participate in the actual selection process. For many rural Gurung men, soldiering as a future livelihood strategy is tempting, as they obtain an income immediately after recruitment and are able to support their family. This is an advantageous possibility compared to many alternative opportunities for young rural youth to aspire for income and betterment of their social situation. Firstly, because the up front investment in training and the time it takes before you start to receive an income is much less compared to many educational endeavours. Secondly, enrollment in the Gurkha regiment is traditionally seen as a highly respected avenue for young men, which provide not only income and status to himself, but also to his family living in rural hill settings.

However, many of the young aspirants are meeting a less expedient road to recruitment. Competition for admission has increased dramatically during the past decade and changes in recruitment procedures has made opened for commercialization of the preparatory phase. The physical and mental training is now provided by a large number of private companies, and the young men and their families have to navigate the often unclear market of training. Even more importantly is the high rate of failure among the young men at various stages of the selection processes, and college dropout rates are particularly high for those who attempt recruitment for several consecutive years. Accordingly, pursuing this professional career has become increasingly precarious, although expectations stay high. The case study shows that this paradox seems to hit the young aspirants hard when they have face their family and local community after failing recruitment.

4. Mobility and identity transformations

The case of the Gurkha tradition is unique not only as a distinct form of migration; it is unique because of the special status in the UK compared to other migrants. Overall, the legislative changes in the UK have resulted in an increase in the Nepalese population in the UK from around 6,000 individuals in 2001 to an estimated 80,000 in 2012 and probably around one lakh now, though these numbers are not officially confirmed. However, the NeMo case study has primarily focused on the impact in Nepal of the related changes in migration patterns, especially with a focus on the Gurung (Tamu), who as as an ethnic group is the largest contributor of British Gurkha recruits. The sudden large-scale migration to the UK has been felt dramatically in Nepal in the Gurung community, who has felt the disappearance of resourceful families. Ex-Gurkhas have traditionally contributed substantially to development of local communities, and as organizers of and contributors to religious and other social activities deemed essential for cultural continuity, whether in the Buddhist or Bön-practicing communities. Earlier, Gurkhas would typically follow a circular route of migration, from Nepal to the former Gurkha Headquarters in Hong Kong, followed by a period of service in Brunei, and then returning to Nepal to spend the rest of the life here. This pattern encouraged investments in Nepal. In contrast, the changed pattern of migration, where ex-Gurkhas are likely to join the Nepalese diasporic community in the UK, encourage investments in the UK, and the direction of remittances has systematically changed. Among some of the Gurung who continue to live in Nepal, this has contributed to a sense of cultural crisis, and cultural organisations seek to protect and revive what is considered as traditional culture. Conversely, in the UK, among Gurung and other ethnic minorities from Nepal, it is difficult to sustain traditional cultural

activities and impossible to pass on ethnic languages such as Tamu to the nect generation. At the same time, ritual specialists increasingly commute between the two countries, in particular in connection with death rituals.

Contrasting this scenario with that of the Tamang illustrates that different ethnic communities find themselves in quite different situations when it comes to migration and mobility patterns. While many factors have influenced mobility from villages toward the big cities in Nepal in recent decades, for the Tamang, specific religious and ethnic factors also contribute. These factors result from the presence of Tibetan exiles in Kathmandu since the 1960s and the cultural connections, especially religion and ethnicity, the Tamang share with Tibetans.

Beginning in 1959, 20,000 Tibetans fled the Tibetan plateau into exile in Nepal. Among those exiles were Buddhist lamas, monks, and nuns. Tibetan lamas slowly rebuilt their monasteries with support from the monarchy, the Tamang community near Boudha. In the 1980s, the rate of monastery construction increased substantially, but they quickly outstripped the supply of Tibetan children who could fill them. The Tibetan population of Nepal has been in demographic decline for around thirty years, as tight security at the border hinder the arrival of new refugees. Their political and economic conditions are not favorable, which has encouraged further migration to India, Europe, and North America. With demographic decline, Buddhist lamas began seeking out Tamang children to fill their vacancies. By 2013, the majority of the 2000 Buddhist monks in Tibetan monasteries in Nepal were from the Tamang community, so religion became a factor motivating internal migration of Tamangs in Nepal alongside other types of education, better medical facilities, infrastructure, and economic opportunity. In time, new institutions, religious practices, and social structures have emerged among the Tamang. For example, instead of simply participating in Tibetan institutions, Tamang religious leaders have founded their own organizations, such as the Namgyal Foundation, which has adopted certain practices from Tibetan institutions. Tamang lamas also go on fundraising tours of SE Asia, but rather than use the funds to build in Kathmandu, increasingly the Tamang are building prayer halls, shrines, and even full-fledged monasteries and education centers in Tamang villages throughout central Nepal. They host educational seminars on agricultural practices in villages, and seminars on liturgical practice for village lamas in Kathmandu. Therefore, there is a constant flow of people and ideas between Boudha and Tamang villages with the stated goal of attempting to bring development, in both economic and religious terms, from the center to the periphery. Tamang lamas even go on tours of Tamang communities in the United States and the UK in order to offer religious instruction and knit together the far-flung Tamang diaspora.

Inequity and mobility

Above, we have provided some insights into selected topics that we consider of general importance for the discussion of migration and mobility in Nepal. We make no claim that this list of topics is exhaustive or that the cases we have sketched are representative of all typs of migration in and out of Nepal. We fully acknowledge that we have selected them out of the very rich material produced by the NeMo project with a view to provide some nuances and point to some of the variation and complexity that characterize each topic. However, when it comes to the topic of inequity and migration – often perceived as an opportunity not only for spatial mobility but also for social mobility – all the NeMo case studies contribute to our understanding.

In what follows, we shall focus on two expressions of inequity: socioeconomic inequity as expressed in class structure; and gender inequity.

A quest for social and socio-economic mobility is arguably the single most important contributing motivational factor for migration in Nepal, whether it is rural-urban, hill-plain, or transnational labour migration, but the socio-economic point of departure differs greatly. For the vast majority it is poverty - expressed as the structural violence of insurmountable debt, loss of land ownership, unemployment, and poor access to education and healthcare. However, here, we suggest to move beyond this general observation by way of a number of reflections on the basis of the case studies.

Firstly, we wish to point to the highly dynamic relationship between socio-economic standing and migration. To migrate requires some kind of surplus that can be invested in the travel, in the processing of documents, and in various other kinds of preparatory activities. Whether this investment is based on savings or creation of debt, it implies an expectation of profitable returns. The implication of this is that not all forms of migration are equally accessible across class and caste. The social structures that tend to keep certain groups at the bottom of society while protecting the privileges of other groups tend to be reproduced in migration patterns. Even if, in the larger picture, remittances contribute very substantially to the Nepalese economy, upward social mobility for the individual migrant family is in no way a certain outcome; a low level of education increases migrants' dependency on those who profit from their attempt to create a better future for themselves and their families and make them easy prey. For example, Nepalese migrants working in the Middle East may return as poor as when they left because of exploitation of immigrant workers that may result in debt rather than savings as well as lack of basic rights.

For middle class migrants, even if they have to move through similar processes to overcome administrative barriers, they are better positioned both in terms of educational background, financial resources to invest in the migratory project, and existing linkages to transnational networks in Europe and the US. Because of their background, they may be able to access additional resources in support of educational migration, such as grant schemes. On the other hand, they may underestimate the living costs in the countries they migrate to and find themselves having to accept lowly paid jobs in addition to studies; or, in some cases, educational migration is considered a short-cut to labour migration in Europe.

The point, we wish to make here is that, by and large, while migration is often pursued as a potential road to upward social mobility, it is more likely that the migration patterns in most cases reproduce existing social inequities along the faultlines of class and caste.

With regard to gender, all forms of migration are highly gendered but in very different ways. The most extreme case is probably Gurkha recruitment. Even if, on paper, it is open to female recruits, this has so far remained a purely hypothetical option, thereby influencing the family patterns of Gurkha families in distinctive ways. Similarly, many forms of manual labour – e.g. working in the coal mines in Meghalaya and construction work in the Middle East – are clearly skewed in the direction of men. In this project, we have not focused on human trafficking for the sex trade, but leaving that aside in the current discussion, there has been a substantial increase in the number of female migrants, including for manual labour, occasionally spurring heated

discussions in Nepal regarding the nature of this work and the obligation to ensure a minimum of security for the women and at the same time respect their right to freedom of movement.

For middle class women returning after educational migration, as we saw, the issue of gender roles in relation to migration and mobility tends to play out differently, giving rise to tensions and discussions within families and social networks over the restrictions on women's movements and behaviour dictated by traditional views on gender.

Invitation to policy dialogue

In this presentation, we have addressed migration in relation to five themes that stand out from the NeMo research. These may be perceived as dynamic relations between *migration or mobility* and each of the following: 1) place-based rights; 2) diaspora; 3) future-making; 4) identity transformation; and 5) class and gender inequities. These suggest tensions that are inherent in Nepalese society today. We believe that these tensions may be understood as societal change agents in Nepal's social transformation with potential implications for current debates on public policies, governance practices and national and local politics. Thus, the big discussions in Nepal today that you are all part of – regarding the new Constitution, regarding ethnic politics, regarding citizenship, regarding social inclusion and regarding gender could positively benefit from the insights from the NeMo research.

With this overview, we wish to invite you as policy and governance practitioners to engage in dialogue. This discussion – based on the combined knowledge in the room – could possibly lead to recommendations on how to address some of the identified tensions for the benefit of the people and communities who are directly involved in mobility and societal change, and for the Nepalese society more broadly With this, we would like to open the floor for discussion.