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**Working Paper**

## Why do rural people temporarily migrate to other rural areas? Insights from northern Bangladesh

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# ZEF-Discussion Papers on Development Policy No. 330

Sohel Rana and Matin Qaim

## **Why do rural people temporarily migrate to other rural areas? Insights from northern Bangladesh**

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## **Abstract**

Migration from rural to urban areas is common in many low- and middle-income countries. However, temporary migration from rural to other rural areas also occurs and is not well understood. We explore what drives rural people in Bangladesh to migrate temporarily to other rural areas, rather than to urban areas where wages are higher. Temporary migration is influenced by income shortfalls during agricultural lean periods and various other sociodemographic factors. The decision for rural destinations is influenced by a lack of skills diversity, social networks, comparative income-cost ratios, and urban negativity. The notion that migration is primarily a rural-urban move needs re-evaluation.

**Keywords:** Agricultural lean periods, Temporary migration, Income seasonality, Rural-rural migration

**JEL Codes:** R23, J43, Q18

# 1. Introduction

Migration is an effective strategy to offset income fluctuations and diversify income options for poor rural households (Banerjee and Duflo 2007; Bryan, Chowdhury, and Mobarak 2014; Khandker and Mahmud 2012; Pietrelli and Scaramozzino 2019; Stark and Bloom 1985; Sugden et al. 2022). Given widespread and severe rural labour market imperfections, migration of individual household members is often the preferred choice for income diversification (Khandker and Mahmud 2012; Mishra 2016a). Longer-term migration is typically driven by better income-earning opportunities elsewhere, but can also have other reasons, such as seeking better education and health facilities, better living environments, or marriage (Davin 1999; Fafchamps and Shilpi 2012; Lucas 2015; Rajan and Chyrmang 2016). In contrast, short-term temporary migration is made in most cases purely for economic reasons, typically as a response to income seasonality and poverty (Ahamad et al. 2011; Mishra 2016b; Shonchoy 2015). Hence, neoclassical economic theory would predict that temporary migration is mostly to urban destinations in search of jobs in more lucrative modern sectors. However, recent data from Bangladesh suggest that more than half of the temporary migrants choose rural destinations in search of agricultural employment (Bryan, Chowdhury, and Mobarak 2014; Meghir et al. 2022; RDRS 2018), regardless of an urban to rural wage ratio of 1.89 (Lagakos, Mobarak, and Waugh 2022).

This observation raises the question as to why rural people decide to migrate temporarily to other rural areas in search of agricultural employment, rather than migrating to cities with better job opportunities and higher wages. There are only a few studies that focus on understanding temporary migration in developing countries, and most of these studies focus on the impacts of migration on origin and destination societies<sup>1</sup>. Studies explaining the destination choice for temporary migration are rare. Temporary migration is mostly seen in the broader context of rural-urban migration, which often causes concern in developing countries. In Bangladesh, temporary migration is generally thought to lead to overcrowding and various social issues in cities (Afsar 2005; Shonchoy 2015), causing policymakers to hesitate in creating supportive policies. Hence, better understanding of destination choices for temporary migration cannot only address a knowledge gap in the academic literature, but also contribute to improved policymaking. Our study is an attempt in this direction.

In particular, we pursue two concrete research objectives, namely (1) to explore factors that influence the decision to migrate temporarily rather than for longer time periods and (2) to explore factors driving the decision to migrate temporarily to rural rather than urban destinations. Due to the lack of conceptual and empirical research on these particular issues,

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<sup>1</sup>See Ahamad et al. (2011), Bryan, Chowdhury, and Mobarak (2014), and Khandker, Khalily, and Samad (2012) in the Bangladesh context, Anupama et al. (2016) and Rogaly et al. (2002) in the Indian context, de Brauw and Harigaya (2007) in the Vietnamese context, Gibson and McKenzie (2014) in the New Zealand and Polynesian countries' context, and Wondimagegnhu (2012) in the Ethiopian context.

we use an inductive exploratory approach. Based on qualitative interviews with randomly selected rural households in northern Bangladesh, we analyse how rural people make their first migration decision, how their migration decisions evolve over time, and how their choices are influenced by individual-level, household-level, and contextual factors.



## 2. Literature review and conceptual framework

There is a large and further growing body of literature explaining rural people's motives for migration. The neoclassical economics of migration has tried to explain migration through the *dual sector model of development* (Lewis 1954), the *push-pull model* (Ravenstein 1885; Lee 1966), and the *expected income model* (Harris and Todaro 1970). In essence, these models place spatial and sectoral differences in wage at the centre of the decision-making process for rural-urban migration. The *human capital model* by Sjaastad (1962) emphasises human capital factors such as age, education, and market-based cost-benefit calculations in migration decision-making.

There are also some behavioural models that explain reasons for micro-level migration. One example is the *stress-threshold model* by Wolpert (1965), where individuals compare the costs and benefits of both their places of origin and potential destination to a "threshold level" in order to decide whether to migrate and to which destination. For example, when an individual reaches a threshold level of dissatisfaction with their place of origin, they might consider moving out of that place. Past and future "rewards" form the place utilities for the origin, whereas "anticipated rewards" for possible destinations (Hagen-Zanker 2008).

The *aspiration-capability framework* is a relatively recent framework that explains migration as a function and the combined outcome of "aspirations" and "capabilities" (Carling 2002; de Haas 2021). For example, poverty raises people's aspirations to migrate, however, it also lowers their capability to do so making them "involuntarily immobile" (Carling 2002). Capabilities are defined by de Haas (2021) as ranging from physical resources (e.g., financial means) and human capital (e.g., ideas, knowledge, and skills) to social capital (e.g., networks, state policy). Instead of focusing solely on why people migrate, this framework is remarkable for explaining when people do not or cannot do so.

However, all these models have largely focused on permanent or semi-permanent types of migration. When it comes to in-country temporary migration, particularly in the context of developing economies where this is more common, very little is known about the motives of decision-making. As stated by Shahriar et al. (2006), the characteristics of temporary migration are significantly different from those of semi/permanent migration in many ways. For example, temporary migration is mostly poverty-driven, which is not necessarily true for long-duration types of migration (Mishra 2016a). Moreover, as found by Lucas (2015), temporary migration is more driven by the wage availability at the destination than by wage differentials between the origin and destination.

A randomized controlled trial by Bryan, Chowdhury, and Mobarak (2014) found that temporary migration can help smoothing out income seasonality and reduce seasonal hunger by adding an extra daily meal with 550-700 calories per person during agricultural lean periods. In a survey of around half a million households in northern Bangladesh, about three-

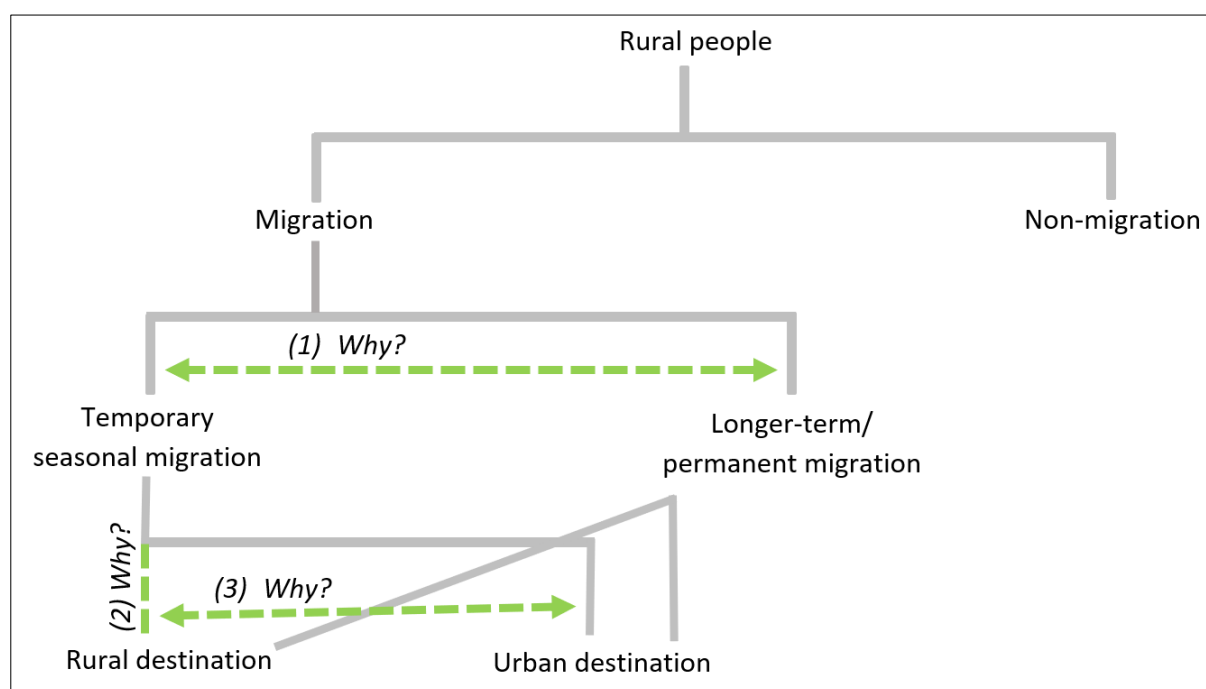
fourth of those with temporary migrants stated “hunger” to be the main reason, while others mentioned “earning opportunities” elsewhere to be particularly important (Khandker and Mahmud 2012). However, only 36% of all rural households were actually involved in temporary migration. Bryan, Chowdhury, and Mobarak (2014) attributed the non-migration of many of the rural poor to resource incapability and risk-aversion. Khandker and Mahmud (2012) and Khandker, Khalily, and Samad (2012) identified the cost of migration and the lack of networks as potential barriers to temporary migration. More generally, the literature suggests that individual and community networks act as a form of social capital that enhances the migration capability of the rural poor (Mishra 2016a; Stark and Bloom 1985).

In their study on temporary seasonal migration in Vietnam, de Brauw and Harigaya (2007) found temporary migrants to be relatively younger and better educated than non-migrants. Shahriar et al. (2006) conducted a study on seasonal migration in northern Bangladesh and found that temporary migration decisions are strongly linked to unemployment during agricultural lean periods, which aligns with the findings by Khandker and Mahmud (2012) and Bryan, Chowdhury, and Mobarak (2014). Additionally, Shahriar et al. (2006) found that individual factors such as prior migration experience, being in the age range of 20-40 years, being male, being engaged in farming, having primary education, and having relatives at the destination have a positive association with temporary migration during agricultural lean periods. Conversely, factors such as land ownership, membership in microcredit NGOs, and being married were found to be negatively associated with temporary migration. Khandker and Mahmud (2012) found similar effects of age, sex, land ownership, and access to microcredit institutions on temporary migration decisions. Additionally, they found positive associations of household size and living in ecologically vulnerable locations with temporary migration. However, in contrast to several other studies, Shonchoy (2015) and Mishra (2016b) found a negative association of education levels and a positive association of microcredit debts with temporary migration decision-making.

Existing studies on both long-term and temporary migration, thus, provide insights into the reasons why rural people choose to migrate or not. However, little is known about why rural people choose temporary over longer-term migration. For example, while research has shown that larger households are more likely to send migrants (Ahamad et al. 2011; Asefawu and Nedessa 2022; Khandker and Mahmud 2012; Shonchoy 2015; Tsegai 2005), the connection between household size and the choice between temporary and longer-term migration remains unclear. Additionally, the role of factors such as education and microcredit debt for temporary migration requires further investigation.

Additionally, previous research has mainly focused on rural-urban migration. Only very few studies looked at rural-rural migration. Chamberlin, Jayne, and Sitko (2020) analysed rural-rural migration in Zambia, discussing the relevance of agro-environmental factors at the origin, such as land availability and crop production opportunities, for longer-term migration decisions. Fafchamps and Shilpi (2012) studied the situation in Nepal and found a significant

influence of physical distance, population density, ethnic and cultural similarities, and comparative amenities on the destination decision for longer-term migration, mainly from rural to urban but partly also from rural to other rural areas. For temporary migration, which is different from longer-term migration, it remains unclear why a significant share of the rural poor chooses to migrate to rural instead of urban areas. We contribute to the existing literature, focusing especially on the underexplored questions highlighted with green dotted lines in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Rural people's decision-making for migration (Source: Authors)**

### 3. Materials and methods

#### 3.1 Data collection

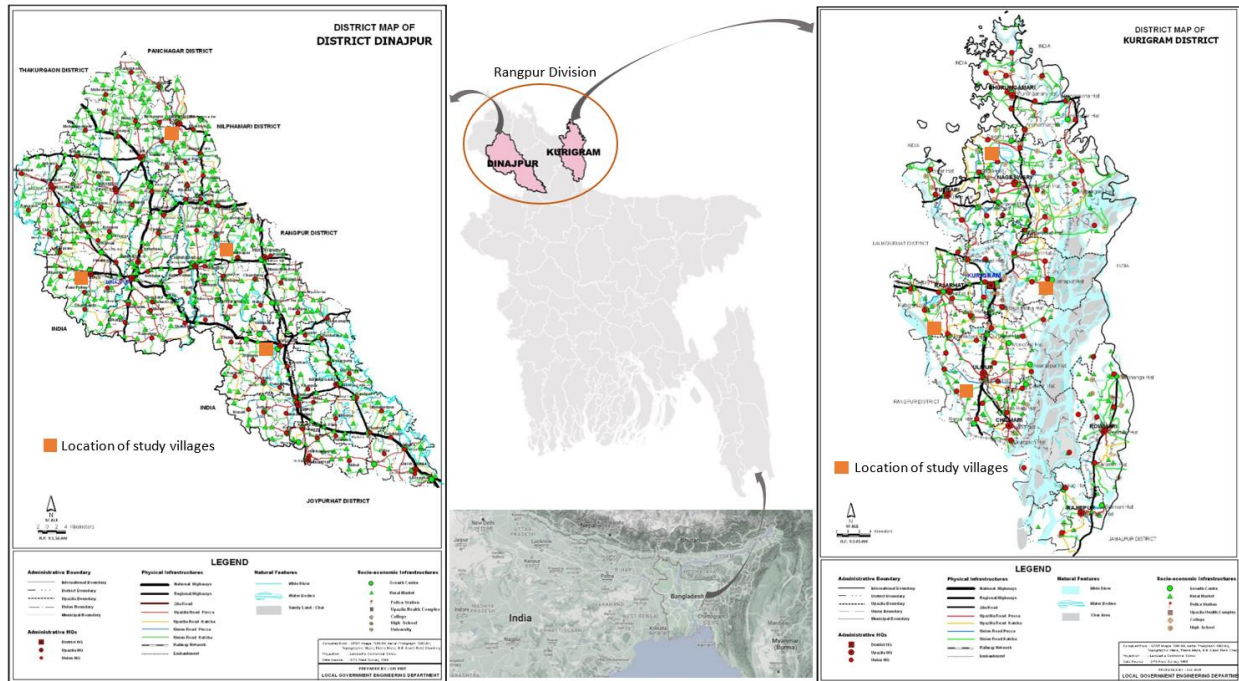
We conduct an empirical study to better understand migration decision-making among households in rural areas of northern Bangladesh, where temporary migration is common. Data were collected through personal interviews and group discussions. A *multi-stage random sampling* approach was employed for selecting study areas and participants. In the first stage, Rangpur division was purposively selected, which is the division in Bangladesh with the highest poverty rate (47.2% compared to the country's average of 24.3%) (Hossain and Hossen 2020, 18). In Rangpur division, the main crop cultivated is rice (paddy). Problems of seasonal hunger and poverty during agricultural lean periods are particularly pronounced in this division due to the lack of crop diversification (Khandker 2012; Mobarak & Reimão 2020).

According to the latest population census, Rangpur division is home to 10.7% of Bangladesh's total population (BBS 2022, 6). The division consists of eight administrative districts, out of which the poorest two were purposively selected in the second stage, namely Kurigram and Dinajpur. Kurigram and Dinajpur have poverty rates of 70.8% and 64.3%, respectively (Hossain and Hossen 2020, 42). In the third stage, four villages were randomly selected in each of the two districts, leading to a total of eight study villages, which are shown in Figure 2.

In the final stage, interview participants were also selected randomly. The field work took place during the *Aman* planting period in 2022, when most of the temporary migrants were present in their home villages. On every working day, we reached the village around 3:00 PM – slightly before the *Asar* prayer, as this is when the head or working members from rural households typically return from their work. After making a roughly one-hour-long transect walk through the village, we identified an entry point and then started conducting interviews with every 20<sup>th</sup> household on our right. This sampling approach allowed us to cover different *paras* (clusters) of the village. In total, 33 randomly selected households from the eight villages were interviewed. In addition, we conducted three group discussions with purposively selected diverse groups of rural people, ranging from landless farmers and agricultural and non-agricultural labour-based households to the so-called "affluent" farmers with own agricultural lands. Current and past migrants as well as non-migrants participated in each discussion.

We made sure to conduct the semi-structured interviews and group discussions with the heads or working members of households, using an inductive method where the topic of migration was approached without any preconceived notions. During the interviews and discussions, we refrained from introducing 'migration' to the participants and instead focused on understanding the timing, duration, and effects of agricultural lean periods. We let the participants bring up the topic of migration on their own and then delved deeper into it. Additionally, we asked the participants to share their life stories in a chronological order,

including the economic conditions of their households and any other relevant personal, family, or social events. Participants spontaneously described the situation that made them choose migration in the first place, and the process of changing their migration pattern over time.



Map source: Free maps from Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) Bangladesh, and google earth map

**Figure 2: Location of study districts and villages**

### 3.2 Data analysis

Data from the interviews and group discussions were analysed using a combination of inductive and deductive methods. Keeping the phenomena of interest (such as lean periods, migration, and destinations) in mind, features of these phenomena were explored from the qualitative data. In exploring these features inductively, the coding and categorization method was used. Moreover, given that coding is a cyclical act and the first cycle of coding rarely leads to a valid thematic pattern (Saldaña 2013), we completed three rounds of coding and re-coding. Simultaneously, emerging codes were categorized (and re-categorized) based on their trends and mutual relationships to generate thematic patterns of rural people's migration and destination decision-making.

### 3.3 Terminology

#### *Temporary and longer-term migration*

Both temporary and longer-term migration to other destinations within the country are common phenomena in Bangladesh. Temporary migration is defined as the movement of an individual to any other district outside of their own in search of income for a time period of between one week and three months for each stay (cf. Bryan, Chowdhury, and Mobarak

2014), after which they return to their own village and actively participate in the local labour market. In contrast, if a migrant migrates for more than three months in a single episode and/or does not participate in the origin's labour market in a complete calendar year, they are considered to be involved in longer-term migration. Longer-term migration also includes semi-permanent and permanent migration, where the migrants may visit their families at origin several times a year, but without participating in the origin's labour market.

In this research, we are primarily interested in migration that poor rural people make for earning income. We are not considering migration for education or other reasons, nor do we analyse migration in search of white-collar jobs that require higher/tertiary levels of education, as the factors influencing such other types of migration are different.

### ***Urban and rural destinations***

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), urban locations include five specific types of areas, namely areas within the jurisdictions of the city corporations, municipalities, *upazila* (sub-district) headquarters, cantonments, and the entire *mauza* areas of growth centres. All areas outside of these five types of urban areas are considered as rural (BBS 2022, 52). This definition is also used here to differentiate between urban and rural migration destinations.

## 4 Results

The findings from this research are discussed in two broader subsections. First, we look at agricultural and income seasonality in the study areas, and second, we analyse migration patterns and decision-making in more detail.

### 4.1 Agricultural and income seasonality

*“Kamla manush kam thakle babu, kam na thakle kabu (in English: If there are jobs, labourers are well-off, otherwise, they are off) ....”* A common Bengali saying from northern Bangladesh

In both study districts, Kurigram and Dinajpur, there are two major agricultural seasons per year, *Aman* and *Boro*. In both seasons, paddy is by far the main crop cultivated. *Aman* cultivation occurs from June/July to December, while *Boro* from December to May. In some highlands, a third crop – such as short-duration potato or vegetables – is cultivated between the early harvested *Aman* and the late planted *Boro*. During the *Boro* season, some farmers (mostly affluent ones) also grow other crops, such as winter vegetables, wheat, maize, potato, onion, mustard, or tobacco. The *Boro* period, therefore, is characterized by a slightly higher level of crop diversification than the *Aman*.

There are also two dominant lean periods. *Aman* lean (also known locally as *monga*<sup>2</sup>) occurs for 2-3 months between planting and harvesting *Aman* paddy, from mid-August to mid-November. *Boro* lean (also known as *mini-monga*) occurs for 1-2 months in February to March, between planting and harvesting *Boro* paddy.

During these lean periods, rural communities in northern Bangladesh, particularly those that rely on agricultural labour, face a severe shortage of income opportunities. This is due to the low labour demand during the paddy growing season, which cannot absorb the large number of agricultural labourers. Daily wages drop drastically, limiting the labourer’s ability to earn income in the local setting and purchase higher-value, protein-rich foods such as fish and meat. Additionally, prices for fresh seasonal foods, such as vegetables, tend to rise during these lean periods. These income and food price fluctuations have historically led to seasonal hunger, locally referred to as “*monga*,” during the lean periods in northern Bangladesh.

Improvements in agriculture, such as high-yielding and short-duration crop varieties, along with investments in rural infrastructure, microcredit schemes, social safety-net programs, and other risk management tools, have helped to alleviate seasonal hunger by reducing the duration and severity of the lean periods. Nevertheless, seasonality in income and poverty remains prevalent in northern Bangladesh due to a lack of daily wage opportunities during lean periods. As a result, marginal farmers and agricultural labour-based households are forced to cut back on food expenditures during lean periods. While outright hunger is less prevalent these days, nutrient deficiencies resulting from low-quality diets are common and

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<sup>2</sup>*Monga* is a regional Bengali word meaning “hunger/starvation.”

tend to increase during the lean periods (Raihan 2022). Additionally, during the lean periods, the rural poor often neglect minor health issues due to financial constraints, sometimes resulting in more serious longer-term health problems.

During the planting and harvesting seasons of *Aman* and *Boro* paddy, which last for a total of 4-8 months per year, agricultural labourers have the most opportunities for earning income in their villages. These months are known as the "normal periods", when local wage rates are quite similar to those in other rural areas of Bangladesh. The common timelines of major crops and lean periods in the study region are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Timeline of major crops and lean periods in northern Bangladesh (Source: Authors)**

Activity	Months	Lean period duration
<i>Boro</i> planting	December to January	
<i>Boro</i> lean	February to March	1.5- 2 months
<i>Boro</i> harvest	April to May	
<i>Aman</i> planting	June/July to mid-August	
<i>Aman</i> lean	Mid-August to mid-November	2-3 months
<i>Aman</i> harvest	Mid-November to December	

The diagram illustrates the annual cycle of Boro and Aman crops. Boro planting begins in January and continues into February, followed by a lean period in March. Boro harvest takes place in April and May. Aman planting starts in June and July, leading to a lean period in August and September. Aman harvest occurs in October and November, with Boro planting resuming in December.

The lean periods in the flood-prone lowlands and *Char* areas (river islands) of Kurigram district can last for over seven months a year. These areas mainly grow only one crop during the drier *Boro* period. During other months, agricultural lands are often flooded and not suitable for cultivation, prolonging the lean period from June/July to December (prolonged *Aman* lean).

The rural poor and seasonally poor adopt various strategies to cope with lean periods, including reducing expenses, migrating for income, taking out loans, and selling assets. Temporary migration for physical labour and daily wage-based jobs is a common tactic. Credit may be obtained from microcredit agencies, or informally from friends, relatives, or neighbours at varying interest rates. In case of informal borrowing, repayment may also involve providing cheaper labour to the lending farmers during normal periods. Selling stored food crops, livestock, or other assets can also help mitigate shocks, particularly idiosyncratic ones, during the lean periods.

## 4.2 Migration patterns

We now discuss the factors that influence rural people's choices for temporary versus longer-term migration and for rural versus urban destinations. It is important to note that the factors mentioned are not necessarily complete and conclusive. They are simply potential characteristics that may make individuals or households more or less prone to certain migration and destination decisions.



### 4.2.1 Temporary versus longer-term migration

*“Men work only long enough to acquire the cash needed to buy things which only cash can buy, and when they have earned enough, they leave employment and return to subsistence farms” (Elkan 1959, 191).*

Our findings show that the majority of the randomly selected households had completed at least one episode of economic migration during their lifetime. Among these migrants, about half primarily engaged in temporary migration, slightly more than a quarter engaged in longer-term migration, and the remainder engaged in both types of migration. We also find that temporary migration is often undertaken to find physical labour-intensive jobs with daily wages at the destination, whereas longer-term migration can be for both physical labour-intensive jobs as well as intellectual work or monthly salary-based jobs in places like garment factories or offices in cities. The factors that influence rural people's decision to engage in temporary versus longer-term migration are outlined in Figure 3 and discussed in the following.

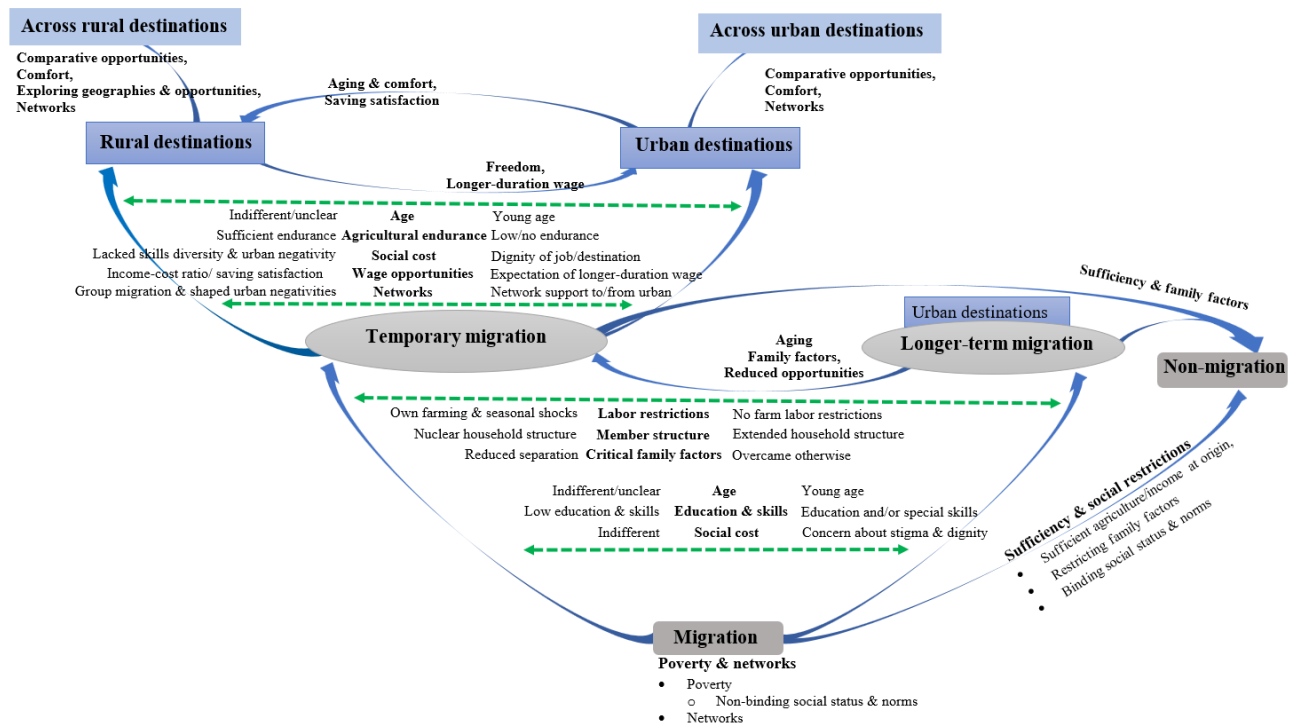


Figure 3: Temporary migration decision-making tree (Source: Authors)

### *Income seasonality, farm-labour restrictions, and household demographic structure*

The rural poor often turn to economic migration as a response to poverty and seasonal income fluctuations, as the literature suggests. However, to understand the choice between temporary and longer-term migration, we need to consider more than just income seasonality. Our results suggest that *farm labour restrictions* coupled with *household demographic structure* are crucial factors that can differentiate between households sending temporary and longer-term migrants.

Marginal farmers and agricultural labour-based households with subsistence farming, particularly those with a nuclear family structure<sup>3</sup>, are more likely to engage in temporary migration during the agricultural lean periods than in longer-term migration. These households grow crops mostly for own consumption and only partly for market sales. Due to their low cash earnings and thus limited ability to hire labour from the market, they rely heavily on their own family labour for all agricultural operations. Additionally, family labour is considered superior to hired labour in terms of productivity and quality. Therefore, the opportunity costs of migrating for a longer duration, especially during the labour-intensive planting and harvest seasons, are high for nuclear family households with subsistence farming. Temporary migration allows these households to smooth their income during lean periods while still maintaining their own farming, thus maximizing their expected utility. In contrast, extended households with a flexible member structure may be able to afford sending a member for longer-term migration. The same is true for households without own farming. For these types of households, the opportunity costs of longer-term migration are lower, whereas the opportunity costs of returning from migration to participate in the labour market at origin are higher.

All our randomly selected households with temporary migrants are engaged in subsistence farming at origin. This clearly suggests that farm-labour restrictions are an important factor in choosing temporary over longer-term migration. Also, most of the sample households are nuclear with one migrating member. Most of these nuclear households choose temporary migration; merely a quarter have longer-term migrants. Interestingly, all nuclear households with longer-term migrants do not have their own farming at origin or any critical family factors and responsibilities (discussed below).

Additionally, *debts*, particularly regular instalment-based microcredit loans, combined with seasonal income shortfalls, are found to induce temporary migration during lean periods<sup>4</sup>. Due to the seasonality-independent design of microcredit loan repayment systems, the rural poor often struggle to repay instalments during agricultural lean periods, inducing them to migrate temporarily during these periods to continue repayment.

### ***Critical family factors***

*Critical family factors*, such as taking care of elderly, disabled, or ill parents and children (especially adolescent daughters), homesickness, and marriage, can greatly influence a person's preference for temporary over longer-term migration. Such critical family factors can also be a common reason for not migrating at all, as they can have a negative impact on the person's psychological well-being during migration. For instance, the head of a nuclear household may suffer from persisting psychological anxiety while away from their family.

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<sup>3</sup>Households with spouse and minor/unmarried children where the spouse(s) is often the only working/earning member for the household.

<sup>4</sup>This finding supports the claim of Shonchoy (2015) in contrast to the claim of Khandker and Mahmud (2012) and Shahriar et al. (2006).

Additionally, leaving behind elderly, disabled, or ill parents, newlywed spouses, new-born kids, or adolescent daughters often triggers strong social bindings at the origin societies. However, economic needs may outweigh social bindings, leading to temporary migration choices with only short periods of separation from the family.

Critical family factors can also induce longer-term migrants to switch to temporary migration or to halt migration altogether. About a quarter of the longer-term migrants in our sample had switched to temporary migration at some point due to *aging, family responsibilities, and reduced opportunities* at destinations. As migrants get older, their family responsibilities tend to increase due to events such as the death of a parent or the birth of a child, or the need to care for children, adolescents, or elderly parents. Such increased family obligations may prompt longer-term migrants to stop migration if they have accumulated sufficient resources, or to switch to temporary migration, enabling them to spend most of the year with their family. Additionally, as migrants age, opportunities in daily wage and physical labour-intensive jobs usually decrease, whereas the cost of living in cities, where longer-term migrants are often headed to<sup>5</sup>, tend to increase.

**Case: Mr. M. Islam (40 years), Kurigram**

"I, my wife, and our 17-year-old son migrated to Dhaka to work in garments (longer-term migration). After two years, when our daughter was born there, I returned home with my wife and daughter, leaving our son there. I never returned to Dhaka anymore because I needed to take care of my family and farming here. Nowadays, I migrate temporarily during our lean periods because our son cannot earn enough to remit to us. Even I send some money to our son sometimes, especially when he gets sick, because his earning from the garment industry is scanty..... Several times I have asked him to return, but he has not because what would he do here (at origin) after return?"

***Age, education, skills, and social costs***

Many longer-term migrants possess *more than primary education* or have specialized *job skills* and begin their migration at *young age*, usually before turning 25. These migrants usually seek intellectual labour or monthly salary-based jobs in cities, such as those found in garment factories or other private companies. People with specific skills tend to avoid temporary migration, which often involves physically more demanding work and which may also be associated with *social costs* in the origin societies.

Temporary migration, characterized by physical labour-based jobs, is associated with social stigma and results in higher social costs at origin societies<sup>6</sup>. Young people, particularly those with some education and/or skills, have a stronger perception of these social costs and status. Despite the fact that their earnings from monthly salary-based longer-term migration may be

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<sup>5</sup>We found that longer-term migration is often targeted towards urban destinations in Bangladesh because rural destinations can hardly offer longer-duration employment to migrant labourers.

<sup>6</sup>The same is found by Srivastava (2020) in the Indian context as well.

meagre sometimes, this perception can prevent them from making physical labour-based migration, particularly temporary ones.

The social cost factor is particularly evident for female migrants. According to Hugo (1982, cited in Shonchoy 2015), women in Bangladesh are less likely to migrate than men due to the social custom of *purdah*<sup>7</sup>. Evertsen and van der Geest (2019) also found that this custom is strongly associated with social stigma that restricts women's migration. Our research reveals that physical labour-based temporary migration rarely allows female migrants to follow *purdah* at destinations, in addition to their possible lack of physical endurance and issues of personal security at destinations. On the other hand, the increasing availability of jobs in the garments industry in cities makes women more prone to longer-term migration to urban areas with relatively better social dignity.

### **Network support**

Our research shows that the support network of relatives, friends, and neighbours, referred to as "kin" in this paper, plays a significant role in the decision to migrate. Rural households typically only get engaged in migration once they have established a *functional network* of support. All the migrants in our sample reported seeking help from already migrated kin or *sardar*<sup>8</sup> at least in making their first migration. This assistance can include providing information or traveling support, but can also involve financial, accommodation, job arrangement, and psychological support at the destination. Longer-term migrants frequently require job arrangement support from their kin at the destination, while information support may sometimes suffice for temporary migrants. This network support can be crucial in offsetting people's risk-aversion towards migration, which was identified by Bryan, Chowdhury, and Mobarak (2014) as a significant factor for non-migration.

However, it is not so clear whether network support also plays a role in people's choices between temporary and longer-term migration. Factors such as individual and household characteristics are likely more relevant in making this decision. For instance, a household with farm labour and family restrictions is unlikely to pursue longer-term migration, even with support from a longer-term migrant kin staying in a city. Similarly, a household with no farm labour or family restrictions may choose longer-term migration, even if a good friend from the origin is involved in temporary migration.

Another important result from our research is that longer-term migration is more costly than temporary migration, both financially<sup>9</sup> and emotionally. However, the financial cost factor is often not decisive for the choice between temporary and longer-term migration. For example,

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<sup>7</sup>*Purdah* is the socio-religious-cultural custom of covering the full body of women by long clothes.

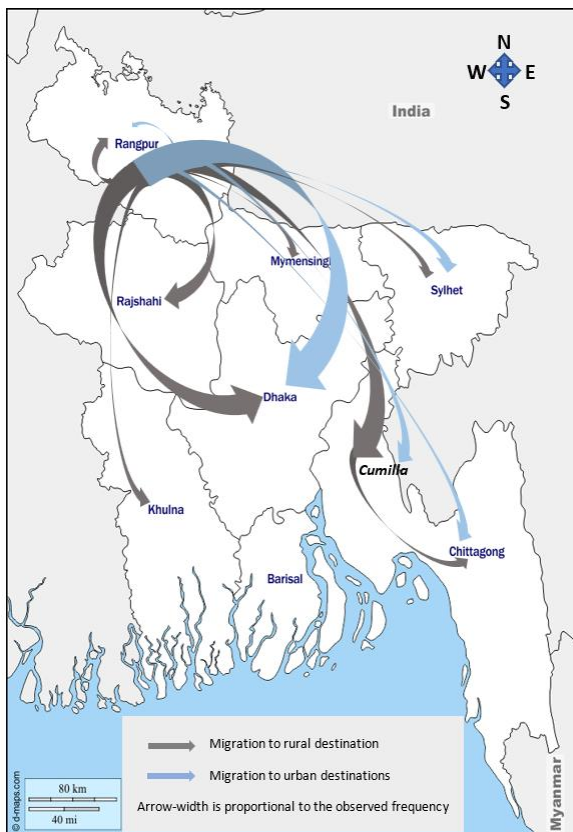
<sup>8</sup>*Sardar* (in Bengali) refers to a 'leader' from the origin who arranges jobs as well as transportation for migrants to destinations. The *sardar* keeps communication with potential employers and accordingly, provides them with migrant laborers. He could get a share from migrant laborers for arranging jobs and/or extra benefits from employers at destinations.

<sup>9</sup>This finding supports the argument of Lagakos, Mobarak, and Waugh (2022).

a poor rural household without any farm and family restrictions is more prone to choose longer-term migration and find ways to finance it, rather than choosing temporary migration solely based on cost concerns. *Network support* can play an important role here to pre-finance migration costs and facilitate the migration process.

#### 4.2.2 Rural over urban destination

Based on our interviews and group discussions, typical migration pathways have been mapped, as shown Figure 4. As can be seen, people from the study regions in northern Bangladesh migrate to both rural and urban destinations. Some migrants migrate within the same division of Rangpur. Yet, most migrate to other divisions in the country, with rural and urban destinations in Dhaka division being the main attraction points, followed by Cumilla and other district in Chittagong division. In fact, most migrants to urban destinations go to Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet divisions, mainly due to the larger urban agglomerations and better wage opportunities there, whereas migrants to rural destinations also go to Khulna and Rajshahi divisions. Interestingly, travel distance does not seem to be an important factor for migration, including temporary migration to rural areas.



Map source: Adapted from free maps from *d-maps.com* ([https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=2144&lang=en](https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=2144&lang=en))

**Figure 4: Pathways for in-country economic migration from northern Bangladesh**

Temporary migration is observed to both rural and urban destinations. However, more than half of the temporary migrants in our sample migrate to rural areas, where they typically find day-labour jobs in crop production, livestock, or fisheries. Job opportunities in rural areas of

Bangladesh vary temporally, with some regions offering work earlier or later in the year than others. For example, the paddy harvest in southern and eastern parts of Bangladesh occurs one month earlier than in the north. Additionally, the level of crop diversification varies across regions. As a result, rural areas in other parts of the country may provide agricultural employment opportunities for migrants during the northern lean periods. In urban areas, temporary migrants can find work throughout the year in jobs such as rickshaw-pulling, construction/masonry, street vending, brick kilning, etc. Our interviews and discussions revealed that rickshaw-pulling is the most popular type of work for temporary migrants to urban areas, followed by construction/masonry. Factors that influence the destination choice for temporary migration are listed in Figure 3 and discussed in the following.

### ***Age, agricultural endurance, and social costs***

At *young age*, rural people with *low or no endurance for agricultural jobs* tend to choose urban destinations when making temporary migration. *Endurance* can be defined as an individual's physical capability coupled with their skills and experiences. A rural individual may have skills or experiences in agriculture, but may have physical issues that prevent him/her from typical manual operations, such as continuously bending the waist for harvesting paddy or working all day in crop fields under the hot sun. Such low agricultural endurance can discourage migrants from choosing rural destinations.

It should be mentioned that facets of agricultural endurance may vary between rural places of origin and destination. Our research reveals that agricultural jobs in origin communities in northern Bangladesh often offer more flexibility or *freedom* in terms of working hours and days, which is not always the case in other rural destination areas. Therefore, people with adequate agricultural skills at home may still face reduced endurance at rural destinations, leading them to choose urban destinations in pursuit of more freedom. As mentioned, one common job for temporary migrants in urban areas is pulling rickshaws, which allows more freedom in terms of working hours than agricultural jobs in rural areas.

Migrants may also choose to migrate to urban areas due to the higher perceived respectability and societal acceptance of urban compared to rural jobs. Migration for agricultural jobs is often viewed as less respectable in origin societies, leading to a higher *social cost* for those who migrate to rural areas. This consideration of social costs is particularly pronounced among young migrants and those from previously well-off households. For very poor people with agricultural endurance and lack of skills diversity, considerations of social costs seem to be less important. Moreover, very poor and uneducated temporary migrants may not see cities as desirable destinations due to their lack of life-skills. In fact, they often view cities negatively, perceiving them as complex and potentially dangerous places. Nearly all rural-bound temporary migrants in our sample voiced a certain degree of negative perception of cities, mentioning concerns about safety, health hazards, traffic, and harassment. Such negative

perceptions of cities often outweigh social cost considerations associated with rural destinations.

*Age* can reduce the agricultural endurance of people, leading older people to prefer urban destinations for temporary migration in some situations, whereas older people may also care more about safety and *comfort* and less about social stigma, possibly contributing to stronger preferences for rural destinations. In other words, the influence of age is ambiguous and individual-specific. Indeed, we observe migrants migrating to rural and urban areas at any age.

It should also be mentioned that *endurance* and *comfort* are not always clear-cut reasons for rural versus urban destinations. Some may find rikshaw-pulling more physically demanding than harvesting paddy, while for others the opposite is true. Also, within the categories of rural and urban destinations, the conditions may vary. For example, paddy harvesting in lowland areas requires working in water and mud, while in highland areas, the job can be done in dry land with better physical comfort. Additionally, psychological comfort can play a significant role for the choice of destinations. For example, Bogra district is relatively nearby for migrants from northern Bangladesh and offers similar daily wages for paddy harvesting jobs as other parts of the country. Nevertheless, many temporary migrants in our sample shifted to farther rural destinations, such as Tangail, Cumilla, Feni, Noakhali, Jashore, and Faridpur, mainly because the employing farmers there treat the migrant workers kinder and offer better food and accommodation.

### ***Wage opportunities***

*Expectations of longer-duration wage opportunities* encourage rural people to prefer urban over rural destinations for their temporary migration. This is particularly true for the rural poor suffering from prolonged lean periods, such as those from flood-prone areas of Kurigram, and for households without own agricultural production that depend primarily on selling their labour. These households are also more likely to choose longer-term migration, but given the presence of restricting factors, they may opt for temporary migration, and in that case primarily to urban destinations.

Employment opportunities in rural areas, specifically in agriculture, are typically seasonal and last for a limited time, often only 15-30 days per season. However, there are temporal variations in job opportunities across different rural regions, as discussed above. To take advantage of such variations, migrants may need to travel frequently between rural areas, even within the same migration episode. Those with adequate agricultural endurance may be able to accommodate this frequent travel, but those without may not. Additionally, specific skills are not usually a requirement for daily wage and physical labour-based jobs in urban areas. Therefore, rural people with the expectation for longer-duration wage opportunities may prefer urban over rural destinations.

The *satisfaction of saving income*, in contrast, may encourage migrants to choose rural destinations over urban ones. While temporary urban jobs sometimes offer double (or even

more) the daily wage as rural jobs, around half of these earnings often have to be spent on living expenses in cities. In contrast, rural employers often provide free accommodation and meals for temporary labourers, making the net income similar to that in urban destinations. The higher income-cost ratio in rural areas may also give rural-bound migrants the satisfaction of saving most of their “hard-earned” income, similar to the concept of loss aversion<sup>10</sup>. This may contribute to preferences for rural destinations. In short, while *gross wage rates* are important in determining a destination for temporary migration, the comparative *income-cost ratio* and the *satisfaction of saving* may also play important roles for choosing between rural and urban destinations.

### **Network support**

Our research suggests that *network support* is also a crucial factor for destination choices. Rural households often decide on their first migration destination based on the migration experience of their kin or the presence of kin at the destination. Longer-term migrants, for instance, are often sent to their kin at the destination who can provide transport, accommodation, job assistance, or mere psychological support. Temporary migrants may also join their kin or *sardar* and choose the destination as a group.

Additionally, the network can *shape and reshape perceptions* about destination places among aspiring migrants. By providing information on migration experiences, the network generates and changes place-based perceptions. For example, an aspiring migrant with prior *urban negativity* could be persuaded by a close kin to migrate to an urban destination.

*Group migration* is particularly prominent for temporary migration to rural destinations for several reasons. Firstly, rural employers often prefer to hire a group of labourers to complete agricultural jobs in a timely manner. Secondly, it is common for rural-bound migrants to end up in different rural places or with different employers, even during one migration episode, which is less likely to happen for urban-bound migrants. Therefore, rural-bound migrants may have to shift locations frequently, which is easier to coordinate in a group. Group migration is also considered more pleasurable and less risky, which may lead to stronger preferences for rural destinations among risk-averse people. In contrast, urban-bound migrants may migrate alone, often with only a phone call to their kin or employer at the destination.

#### **Case: Mr. T. Ali (55 years), Dinajpur**

“I never migrate alone. Because you need at least someone to take care of you during any accident or sickness, or you need someone to gossip with during travel or in free time after work at destinations. Also, “*gerosthos*” (employing farmers) never search for only one labourer, they prefer a group of labourers to hire, so chances of getting hired will increase if I migrate there in a group...”

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<sup>10</sup>This concept states that “losses” have a greater impact on setting preferences than “gains” (Tversky and Kahneman 1991).



## 5 Conclusion

Migration from rural to urban areas is a common phenomenon in many low- and middle-income countries. However, temporary migration from rural to other rural areas also occurs and is so far not well understood. In this study, we have collected and used qualitative data from northern Bangladesh to explore what drives rural people to migrate temporarily to other rural areas, rather than to urban areas where job opportunities are usually better and wages are higher. We have also analyzed more generally what factors influence temporary versus longer-term migration decisions.

Our findings confirm that migration is a widely-pursued strategy among poor rural households to cope with income shortfalls at the place of origin. Temporary migration during agricultural lean periods is more common in northern Bangladesh than longer-term migration. The need to maintain the family farm and the availability of agricultural jobs at the origin during normal periods is an impeding factor for longer-term migration, which is consistent with earlier research (Bryan, Chowdhury, and Mobarak 2014; Zug 2006). *Income seasonality* is likely the most important factor for temporary migration decisions. In addition, we have shown that *farm labour restrictions*, *household demographic structure*, and *critical family factors* are important in explaining preferences for temporary over longer-term migration. Earlier studies have argued that migration is often proportional to household size, but our findings indicate that even small nuclear households are frequently involved in temporary migration.

Longer-term migration occurs almost exclusively to urban areas, whereas temporary migration occurs to both rural and urban destinations. In fact, temporary migration to rural areas is more common for rural people in northern Bangladesh. In rural areas, temporary migrants are mostly involved in agricultural jobs. Urban areas may offer higher wages for jobs that are sometimes physically less demanding. However, staying in urban areas is also costlier than staying in rural areas and is perceived by many as riskier. *Negative urban perceptions* are especially pronounced among people with low education and lack of skills diversity. More generally, the higher income-cost ratio in rural areas and the satisfaction to be able to save most of the “hard-earned” income seem to be important reasons for many to prefer temporary migration to rural destinations.

On the other hand, temporary migration to rural destinations can be associated with social stigma, which plays a role especially for aspiring young migrants with certain skills to prefer urban destinations. Yet, our research also revealed that migration preferences can change over the lifespan of people, depending on age, physical endurance, critical family factors, among other reasons. For instance, young people are more likely to be involved in longer-term migration but often switch to temporary migration when they age. Interestingly, physical distance, although mentioned as a relevant factor for migration decisions in the literature

(Lucas 2015), was not found to be important in our case, neither for the choice between temporary versus longer-term migration nor between rural versus urban destinations.

Another very critical factor in making decisions for migration in general, and migration destinations in particular, is the *social network* of people. A functional network can encourage and ease migration by offering information, financial, psychological, and job arrangement support, which is crucial, especially for longer-term, urban-bound migration. But also, for temporary migration, networks shape aspiring migrants' perceptions and provide various types of support. Especially for temporary migrants to other rural areas, it is common to migrate in groups from their origin, which is another reason for the widely-observed preference for rural destinations. Such *group migration* is not only pleasurable but also reduces the perceived risk of migration.

Our findings are in line with earlier studies in Bangladesh by Bryan, Chowdhury, and Mobarak (2014), Meghir et al. (2022), and RDRS (2018), which also showed that more than half of the temporary migrants prefer rural over urban destinations and that many urban-bound migrants eventually switch to rural destinations when they age. However, earlier studies hardly analysed the reasons for the choice of migration destinations, which is where our study offers novel insights. Whether similar patterns also occur in other low- and middle-income countries is not known and deserves further research. At least, there are indications in the literature that rural-rural migration is also observed in other parts of Asia and Africa (Christiaensen and Maertens 2022).

In any case, our findings suggest that traditional views of migration only occurring from rural to urban areas need to be re-evaluated in order to better understand development opportunities and constraints and design suitable policies to help rural people further improve their situation. Aspects such as group migration, social stigma, availability of wage information, the potential role of technological and institutional innovations, and cost-benefit considerations in different migration situations deserve further scrutiny in follow-up research.

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