

Increasing rural-urban migration: Policy Briefs¹ on rural depopulation and urbanization in Bhutan.

Abstract

This brief aims to brief the policy responses of relevant decision makers of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forest (MOAF), Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) and Ministry of Labour and Human Resources (MOLHR) towards the attainment of National Population Policy in Bhutan, 2018 and goals of Bhutan Vision 2020 on growing concern of Rural-Urban migration in Bhutan. Through concise findings, the write-up justifies issues of rural and urban migration as pressure on urban centres thus, leading to depopulation in rural communities in Bhutan. Having said that, intervening with right actions will result in balanced equitable socio-economic development and regional balance thus, social problems and population imbalance in the places.

Keywords: *Rural depopulation & urban pressure, factors, and recommendations.*

Introduction

1. Summary of controversial issues

Rural-urban migration is one such reason for unreal institutional factors that have long been a matter of hot discussion. Migration could be a change of place of usual residence from one area to a different and thereby crossing administrative borders as defined by National Statistics Bureau (NSB) cited by Gyelmo, D. (2020). Rural-urban migration, popularly referred to as internal migration, is defined simply as movement of people from the countryside to the city in a given country over a specific period of time (Wangchuk, K, 2017).

Since the 1960s, migration in Bhutan, was dominantly within the type of rural to urban migration with 21.7% of the agricultural population having moved to urban areas (Population and Housing Census of Bhutan, 2017). Moreover, Pem, D. (2016) finds that rural-urban migration is turning into common among the country whereby rural areas are left nearly empty whereas urban areas become full with an associated increasing population. The

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National Statistics Bureau's latest study illustrates that the western region is gaining quickly on the population of the working-age cluster, whereas other parts of the country, mainly eastern region, are left with more aged people, adding to the dependency ratio ("Our Last", 2020).

As a first-hand response to rural-urban migration, the Royal Government of Bhutan has introduced a National Population Policy of Bhutan, 2018 that aims to attain a viable population for socio-economic development despite migration and dynamism of increase. This policy is more guided by Bhutan Vision 2020 that mandates to attain balanced and equitable socio-economic development and to manage rural-urban migration. In particular, for citizens largely in rural Bhutan, every once in a while, His Majesty the King grants thousands of acres of land as Kidu to the farming communities in the villages, and yet, the incidence of empty houses is on the increase (Dorji, Y, 2015).

But reality is otherwise despite the policy in situation. Dorji, Y. (January 24, 2015) speculates that the mass movement of human population from the villages to the urban centers demonstrates the abject failure and utter indifference of the policy makers to be alerted to the dynamical realities within the remote villages. According to Population and Housing Census of Bhutan (2017), the number of empty houses across the country is at around 4,800 and with more than 1,400 empty houses (Goongtongs), the district of Trashigang in eastern Bhutan has the highest number of empty houses (Goongtongs). Dorji, Y. (January 24, 2015) describes that "Goongtong" is a term derived from the combination of two independent words; "Goong" meaning household, and "Tong" meaning empty: empty household.

Rinzin, C. Y. (February 28, 2020) points out that 47,000 people moved from rural to urban areas within the 5 years preceding the 2017 census. This has created issues in urban areas similarly. This is often clearer as between 2005 and 2017, Bhutan's urban population inflated from 30.9% to 37.8% (Population and Housing Census of Bhutan, 2017). Penjor, U. (January 4, 2020) highlights that with 114,551 individuals as of 2017 in Thimphu alone, the capital town is crowded. In a way, there's drama that the speedy urban growth and therefore the ungoverned rural urban migration have already created severe pressures on services like water, sanitation and waste. Such a trend would produce a haul in community advance because of environmental conditions. Till the 2017 census, Nima (2018) reports that Trashigang suffered a large population loss with the highest population loss of 23,612 against 48,214 population gain for Thimphu.

2. Key findings and Policy challenge

In terms of impact, ungoverned rural-urban migration has caused complicated issues that can't even begin to fathom. Some rising issues of falling food production, quantum jump in food imports, delinquency, habit, state and deteriorating urban crimes, have resulted in an increase in rural population abandoning their fields and ancestral homes (Dorji, Y, 2015). Additionally, Walcot. S. (2009) stresses that population pressure exacerbates inadequate infrastructure, notably moving poorer elements of cities and intensifying tensions among groups. Wangchuk, K. (2017) confirms that congestion in urban areas rises with growth of youth population. Though it's not a trend, according to Ranjan, A. (2020, p.2), high youth unemployment in the country has been one of the causes for increasing crime rates, mainly in the cities. Bhutan's capital, Thimphu, saw the rate rise from 921 in 2016 to 2,409 in 2017, a surprising 161 percent increase. In 2017, it had been calculated that 41 percent of all reported crimes in Bhutan took place in Thimphu. This is often because of failure of policy in avoiding urban importance, whereby large cities drain national resources.

As far as the National Statistics Bureau (2018) is concerned, the burden on the urban sector to absorb an ever increasing part of the population is going to continue given the inequalities between rural and urban areas owing to the extended education facility of younger generations and restructuring of the rural economy to enhance productivity. Wangdi, S, & Norbu, N. et.al. (2018) also have similar views that out-migration from rural areas has created a significant demographic shift, whereby generally the young, working-age population migrates and older-aged individuals stay behind. This demographic shift in the rural villages has a significant impact on individual households and the community as it means there are less people to perform labour in those areas. This is evident as reported in ("Harnessing Demographic Dividend", 2018), the share of the working-age population in eastern region which was 26.2% in 2005 will decline to 12.8% by 2047. Further, Wangchuk, K. (2017) holds a view that difficulty of human capital in farm works and social obligations such as labour contribution are dominant problems.

2.1. Policy lagged factors

According to Wangdi, S, & Norbu, N. et.al. (2018), the wildlife encroachment was the first push factor for rural-urban migration in Bhutan. Moreover, Walcot. S. (2009) admits that wild animals destroying crops and endangering lives in rural villages is responsible for migration to urban cities. On the opposite hand, Gyelmo, D. (2020) agrees that poverty in rural villages is responsible for migration leading to empty homes. It is exacerbated by the fact that a lot of farm products are often pillaged by wild boars, bears, deer and monkeys.

Penjor, U. (January 4, 2020) perceives that lack of innovation, commercialisation (deterred by topography) in agriculture and the promise of better lives attracted people, young and old to the towns. Apart from some farmers' cooperatives and youth teams outside Thimphu, the interest remains in urban areas for the wish of market and opportunities. For Walcot. S. (2009), the education-induced migration pull reveals the aspiration for government jobs. Half of the employees within the largest town and capital, Thimphu and a quarter mile in Phuentsholing, the second-largest town, occupy government official's jobs, the most employment aspiration in Asian countries.

3. Policy Recommendations

Generally, the stories of rural and urban migration are covered in a number of news reports by the media but the government seems to take it as a natural phenomenon and unavoidable issues. This is because when every local government person speaks of rural Goontoong, they blame the government for policies that have created imbalance due to lack of facilities such as educational centres, farm machinery tools and other development and modern infrastructures. The use of language is very clear that it is not powerfully manifested and helpful to call for the attention of the concerned authority. The response in return has been less likely to act because their notion of treating these unemployment issues is bent towards the reluctance of youths to take up the blue-collar jobs. There is a metaphor in the issue in terms of implementation of the policies from the policy makers that has been unheard or remained silent. Thus, a stronger tone of language has to be used through broadcasting services and campaigns.

Addressing the root causes of out-migration includes tackling the shortages of water, creating sufficient farming jobs, ensuring a market for the agricultural and livestock produce and adequate roads and/ or transportation that create year-round connections (Walcott, S, 2009).

Walcott, S, (2009) offers a different approach through land properties to disallow an entire household to migrate to urban areas. Land that is not used should be sold or be kept clear for public usage, obligatory against the present authoritarian system in which it is compulsory that one person occupies the house at all times. Financial compensation or fines could be imposed if households do not meet their obligations.

Dorji, Y. (January 24, 2015) determines that wild animals destroying farm products is a result of the unchecked increase in the population of wildlife, an imbalance that has been created because primarily our laws give complete protection to the wildlife. The government and the

concerned agencies need to revisit its laws and acts that have so far given complete and total protection to the animals – thereby upsetting the rules of co-habitation between humans and animals. On the other hand, Walcott, S, (2009) recommends that to mute the pull of cities in western Bhutan, promoting alternate urban centers close to areas with the greatest population loss and in commercially more viable settings.

It is going to be much harder, in the first place, if concerned authorities like education sectors come up with any rural development curriculums in schools followed by career programs so that youths can make the right choices of the streams and pursue it in their villages. The mind set of youths to stop migrating to urban places will be futile if there are no strong driving curricula from the education sector as youths are largely influenced by education mind set and reluctance to stay back for agricultural works. So, some of the programs such as agricultural internships, entrepreneurship programs, and employability skills should be taught at the school level.

The system of availing the soft loans for those aspiring people to set up small and medium industries in rural villages should be given preference and made easy. This is lagging in current policy programs as there are limited financial opportunities from the ministry which leaves many youths demotivated. There is no doubt that if the Ministry of Agriculture and Forest starts rural agricultural programs through funding policies to cultivate fallow lands, many people will return to their villages. This is probable because people already know and bear the brunt of urban congestion and social problems given the minimal source of income they earn. But policy has not been taking such measures so far.

Conclusion

In particular, expanding Eco-tourism in remote rural areas, with farm-house accommodation, hiking facilities, and nature- and cultural education is never attempted to address this issue.

It is now equally important that the relevant stakeholders need to change their focus by bringing up most infrastructure developments and facilities in rural communities to encourage people to start their own business and agricultural farming. There is a need to review policy to solve the rural depopulation and create a regional balance in the country.

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