

Migration and labour mobility dynamics in Pakistan: key patterns and determinants

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1. Introduction

The key labour migration destination (such as Global North and Gulf Cooperation Council) countries consistently formulate and implement restrictive migration policies¹, which are driven by concerns over how migration trends are influenced by factors such as climate change, security issues, inequality, poverty, and economic downturn, resulting in high income loss and food inflation in the countries of origin. This, in turn, increases the risks of mass migration, refugee influx and asylum seekers. The International Organization for Migration's (IOM) 2022 report indicates that climate driven factors may potentially initiate the internal migration of 40 to 113 million people, a situation that also affects international migration patterns.

Notably, populations migrating under these circumstances often face resource constraints and possess low human capital, leading to limited skills and education (IOM and SEI, 2023), which is less suitable for countries of destination. Parallel to this, such environmentally triggered forced displacement linked to issues of social or political fragility, conflict, and violence. For instance, since 2015 around 1 million Syrians and Iraqis fled without proper documentations to Europe due to war. Likewise, EU has recently received over 6 million Ukrainian refugees after Russian invasion.²

Such developments underscore the complexities of the migration issues, ranging from political, social, environmental, and humanitarian dimensions surrounding the immigration debate in countries of destinations as well as origin. This has raised serious questions on the accomplishment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; target 10.7) at the global scale where migration is considered as an important development tool, especially for developing countries (see also World Bank, 2016).

In this regard, a crucial understanding of the relationship between internal and international migration is essential. At some level, how both are shaped by rapid changes in environmental and climate indicators and may also confluence with each other in varied ways with development indicators at national scale.

With this backdrop, this article primarily focuses on recent trends and patterns of internal and international migration in Pakistan. For instance, internal migration, driven by various factors such as climate change-induced displacement and rising aspirations among rural youth for seeking better

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/migration-asylum-eu-pact-reform-4c7ff7d75f728593b7708150201693e0>
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/20/eu-migration-deal/?utm_source=alert&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=wp_news_alert_revere&location=alert

² <https://apnews.com/article/eu-migration-crisis-regulation-asylum-pact-df5841c41a60d559ed56df6a5a0bf9d2>

livelihoods, education, and lifestyle in urban areas, is crucial to examine. This is particularly important to understand how mobility trends may culminate in international (labor) migration.

2. Internal Migration in Pakistan:

The current assessment of internal migration varies between 11-14%, as indicated by different nationally representative surveys, with the most significant movements being rural to urban (51.6%) (NIPS and ICF, 2019; GoP, 2021). Contrary to the prior dominance of rural-to-urban internal migration, recent years have witnessed a declining trend across Pakistan, the most recent statistics reveal a significant decrease in rural-to-urban migration in Pakistan (GoP, 2021). As depicted in Figure 1, this rate plummeted from 26.2% in 2012-13 to 11.7% in 2020-21 with the decline being most notable in the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan.

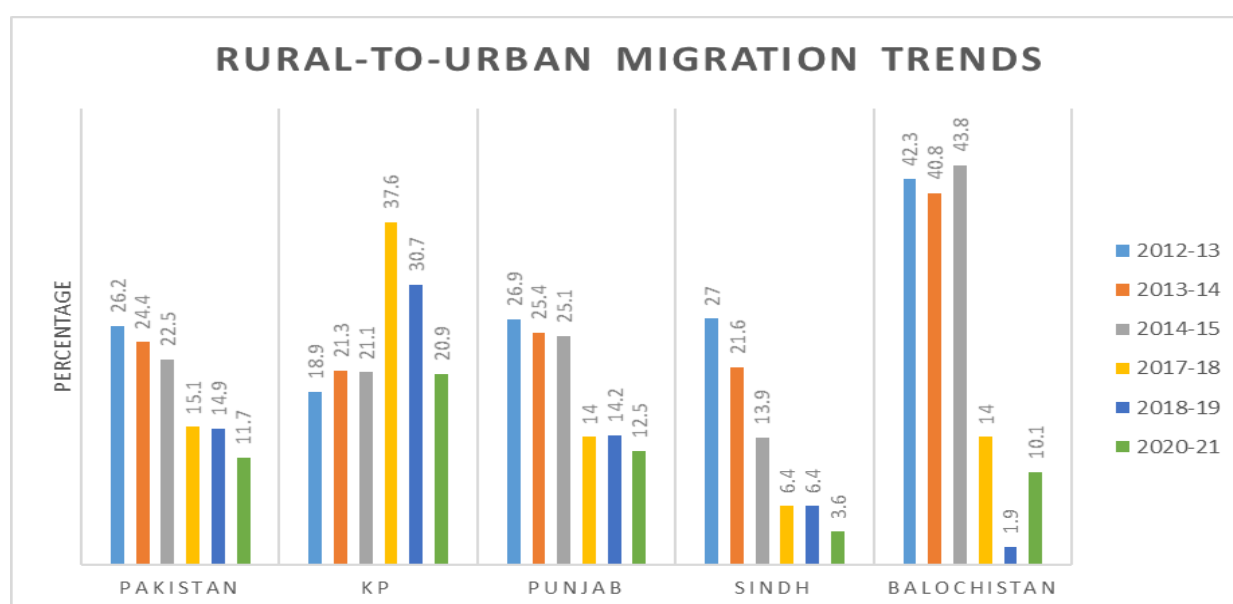


Figure 1: Rural-to-Urban migration trends in Pakistan.³

Data source: Labour Force Survey (for multiple years) (GoP, 2013; 2014; 2015; 2018; 2019; 2021)

It is pertinent to mention here that national surveys do not deliberate on the reasons behind the observed decrease in rural-to-urban migration across provinces over the years signifying a gap in research (GoP, 2021; NIPS and ICF, 2013 and 2019). In my understanding, significant contributing factors to this decline include the country's continued economic stagnation over the years and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2018 to 2021.

Below, I briefly describe how climate change impacting internal migration and what are key factors that potentially linked to international migration for Pakistan.

³ KP denotes Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Climate change: Over the years, Pakistani rural society has experienced significant effects from both slow- and fast-onset climate change events. Box 1 provides a timeline detailing key climate extremes in Pakistan, while Map 1 (Box 1) illustrates the scale and magnitude of two mega floods in 2010 and 2022. The loss and damage during the 2022 flood were devastating. It left 33 million people affected and 7.9 million displaced. The total economic loss to the economy was estimated at 40 billion USD (UNOCHA, 2022).

Against this backdrop, we conducted research studies to understand climate-induced displacement and migration from the flood affected areas across Pakistan (Salik et al., 2020; Salik et al. 2024- In press). Relevant to this article, these studies find the following. First, rural households, especially those in agriculture, face livelihood losses and declining productivity due to floods and slow-onset climate change. The most vulnerable are landless farm laborers, sharecroppers, and small landholding households, often becoming frontline climate migrants (see also Muller et al. 2014).

Second, kinship-based social and migrant networks play a crucial role, facilitating connections for financial and emotional support during displacement. Rural-to-rural and rural-to-urban migration is common among the rural poor, but long-distance intra-provincial migration is mostly based on social network support. Circular or seasonal migration is typical for landless farm laborers, while sharecroppers and small landholders tend to be permanent migrants. Lack of affordable urban housing often forces returns to villages, limiting the chances of mass migration to urban settlements.

Third, not all social networks support migration, but they aid in in-situ relocation during floods, creating a trapped population in vulnerable areas. However, large, and wealthy rural households have been seen to migrate using their networks for long-distance and international moves.

In summary, rural poor affected by climate change are migrating internally identifies climate change-induced migration as an adaptation strategy, with sharecroppers and small farmers leaving agriculture due to crop failures, and wealthy households sending members to abroad to mitigate climate impacts. However, migration primarily favors the wealthiest families, while poor farmers and laborers experience less-rewarding outcomes as a survival strategy.

Box 1: Climate extremes in Pakistan: 173 events since 2000 – 2019
(~ 9 events/year) (Eckstein et al. 2021)

For example

Droughts: 1997 to 2004 and in 2013-14

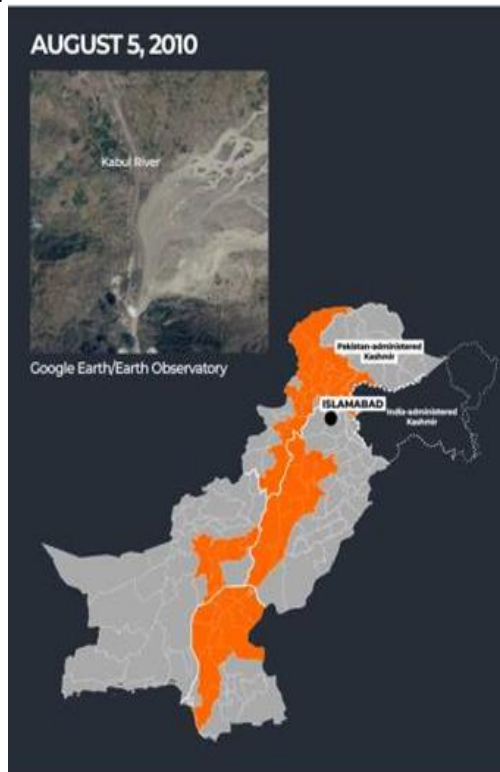
Heavy rains and floods: 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014, 2022

Heavy snowfall: 2005 to 2013, 2021

Heat waves: 2010, 2013, 2022

Cyclone: 2007, 2023

Map 1: Flood 2010



Flood 2022



Note: Areas under floods in orange shade.

3. International Migration in Pakistan:

International migration in Pakistan has been shaped by various historical events and occurred in different streams (CIDOB, 2012; Mehriar et al., 2021; Siddikoglu & Sağiroğlu, 2023). The important international migration was during the 1960s and 1970s, when migrant workers went to the Middle East post 1973 oil boom which created employment opportunities for unskilled to semi-skilled workers, as a result 96 percent of Pakistani workers are concentrated in GCC countries⁴, while migration flows to the

⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org/islamabad/areasofwork/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm>

Global North countries consist mainly of educated and professional Pakistanis. According to the Overseas Pakistani Foundation, there are around 10 million Pakistan's currently living abroad⁵ not including irregular immigrants which are not registered with any government agency. Figure 2 below illustrates the top 10 most labour categories that have migrated from Pakistan, particularly to GCC region countries, during 1971-2010.

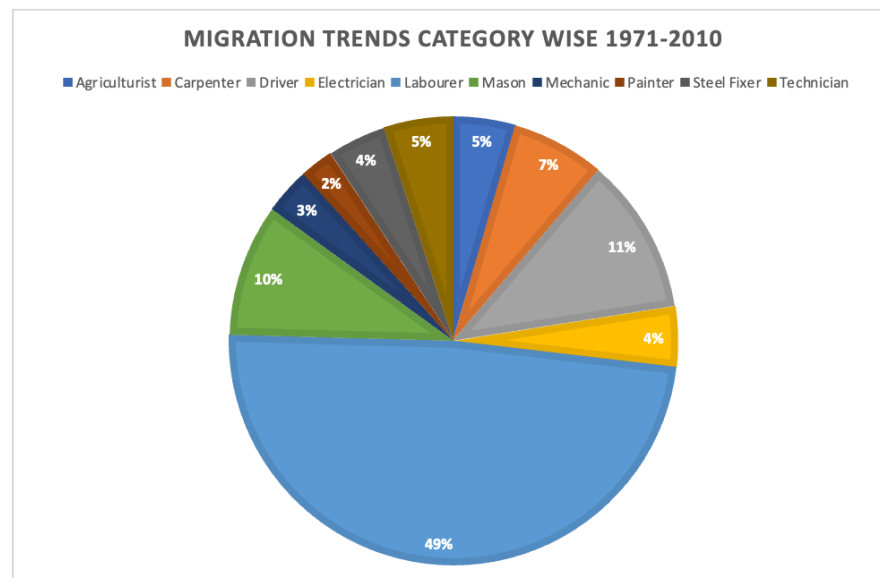


Figure 2: Historical labour migration trends Source: Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment

Looking at more recent data from 2011 to 2023 (Figure 3) for categories such as drivers and labourers which show a consistently high number of emigrants, also suggests that there is a sustained demand for these roles in the international market. From 2015 to 2023 there is a significant variation across several categories signifying changing market needs and possible policy changes in both Pakistan and destination countries. The years 2020-2021 show an overall slowdown in emigration which could be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic however, the data for 2023 (up to November) clearly indicates a robust recovery in some sectors and denoting reopening of international borders and industries.

⁵ Data retrieved from

<https://www.opf.org.pk/#:~:text=Services&text=There%20are%20approximately%209%20million%20Overseas%20Pakistanis%20living%20around%20the%20globe.>

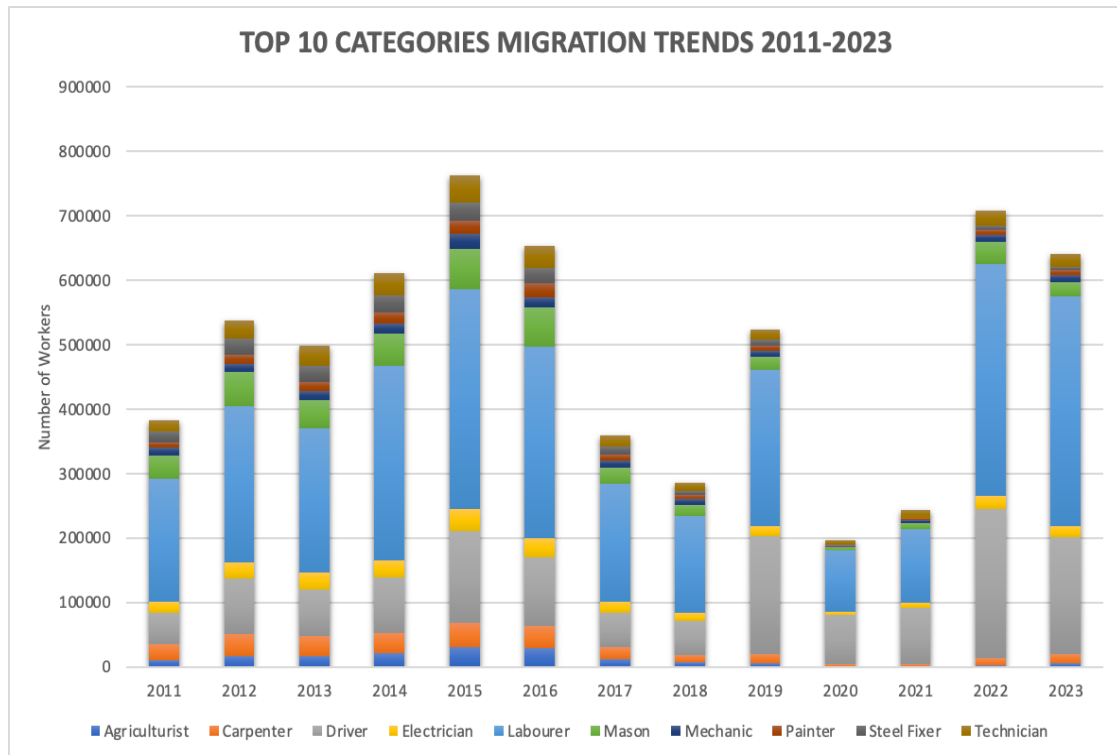


Figure 3: Labour migrant categories. Source: Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment (2023 Data up to November)

A province-wise analysis of international migration (Figure 4; below) depicts Punjab consistently registering the highest number of workers seeking employment abroad, peaking around 2015 and subsequently declining. This is possibly due to its larger population and established networks resulting in increased opportunities for overseas employment. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's pattern is similar but more pronounced with an increase in emigration beginning in the mid – 2000s. On the other hand, regions like Azad Kashmir, Sindh, and Baluchistan exhibit low and fluctuating emigration patterns. Regional income inequality, impact of terrorism, political instability, are directly correlated to out-migration from Pakistan stressing upon the influence of social and political factors on migration trends (Feroz & Yasmin, 2021).

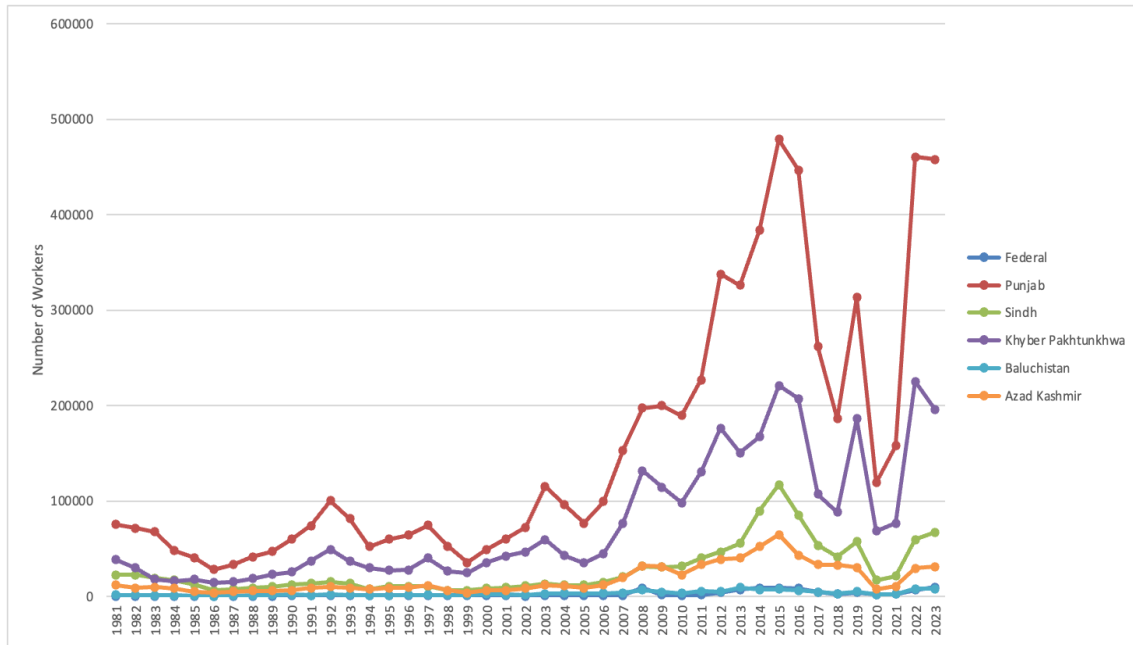


Figure 4: Province-wise migration trends. Source: Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment (2023 Data up to November)

Moreover, kinship networks and migration culture play a significant role in international labour migration trends in Pakistan. Kinship networks, which are made up of family members and relatives, serve as a support mechanism for migrants, providing them with information, financial assistance, and social connections in the destination country (see Shah and Alkazi, 2023). This has led to the development of a culture of migration, which helps to facilitate the migration process. This may also link to the recent study, which revealed that 37 percent of Pakistan's population has a desire to leave the country, with this percentage increasing to 62 percent among youth aged 15-24 (PIDE, 2022).

4. Conclusion:

Pakistani society is grappling with multiple challenges, with the most critical being sluggish economic growth and the escalating impacts of climate change. People aspirations and needs are largely unmet and current lives and livelihoods are vulnerable, particularly due to climate extremes such as floods. Displacement, driven by climate change has forced the rural population to migrate as an adaptation.

Migration patterns exhibit variation, with short-distance rural-to-rural and rural-to-urban movements being common among the rural poor. Conversely, long-distance intra-provincial and international migration relies on kinship and social network support, predominantly favouring the wealthiest rural households. Two important inferences can be drawn from these outcomes. Firstly, there is a limited large influx of internal migration to urban settlements by the rural poor due to financial constraints, preventing them from affording urban housing during and after displacement. Consequently, only men out-migrate, leaving other family members behind to return to the village, creating a trapped population in vulnerable areas. Secondly, climate change has heightened aspirations for international migration

among the wealthiest or landholding rural classes, considering it as an adaptation strategy. This has the potential to increase trends in both regular and irregular international migration in Pakistan.

At the same time, when international labour migration is mainly dominated by unskilled or semi-skilled workers, there is little scope for the improvement of human capital among aspiring migrants hailing from these vulnerable rural areas of Pakistan. The migration culture that has developed and persists in key migrating areas of Pakistan continues to rely on less rewarding low-skilled jobs, particularly in migrating to GCC region countries. High aspirations and a youth bulge in rural settings, coupled with limited education and skills, may lead to an increase in irregular migration in the coming years. Based on this discussion, three important recommendations are as follows:

1. Enhance local livelihoods opportunities:

Develop plans and investments aimed at diversifying livelihood opportunities and promoting local economic development in rural areas. This may involve the training and implementation of climate-smart agricultural technologies, support for local small businesses, and the provision of off-farm income opportunities for rural youth, particularly for women and rural poor.

2. Promote education and skill development:

Improve the limited education and skills of (rural) youth to enhance the human capital and employability. The goal is to facilitate better integration and improve well-being, not only within the local job market but also create better prospects for employment, both locally and internationally following the migration.

3. The role of destination countries:

Collaborate with countries of origin to ensure the alignment of education and skill development programmes, addressing the critical human capital needs identified by destination countries for their economies. This may involve joint initiatives such as design and support training modules in local vocational institutes, language and communication skills, exchange programs, and information-sharing to better understand and address the specific needs of migrant workers.

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