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Returning to Nepal is often imagined as the end of migration.

The airport doors open, the suitcase comes home, savings are converted into a house or business, and years spent abroad finally acquire their intended meaning.

But for some Nepalis, return is not the end of the migration story. It is an interval.

They come back with money, skills and a determination to stay. Months or years later, they leave again.

That second departure is easy to interpret as failure: the business did not work, the salary was too low, the bureaucracy was exhausting, or Nepal could not hold on to its own people.

Sometimes one of those explanations is true. Often the reality is more complicated.

Return migration is not simply a flight home. It is another economic, professional and psychological transition—and one that can fail when the life a migrant remembers no longer matches the life they return to.

Coming home does not restore the life you left

Migration changes both sides of the journey.

The person abroad changes through work, income, independence, exposure and habit. Nepal changes through urbanisation, prices, politics, technology, family transitions and the departure of other people.

A migrant may return to the same house but not the same household.

Parents are older. Friends have migrated. Siblings have married or moved. Children who grew up abroad may experience Nepal as a foreign country. The returnee may have become accustomed to workplace systems, public services or personal independence that once seemed unimportant.

The first surprise of return is therefore often simple: home remained emotionally familiar while becoming operationally different. The same tension runs through the question of what home means after decades abroad.

The salary shock is real

For professionals and skilled workers, one of the most immediate adjustments is income. Most returnees know they are unlikely to reproduce a Dubai, Sydney, London or Tokyo salary in Kathmandu. What can still surprise them is how quickly local costs absorb what looked like a respectable Nepal income.

Housing, schooling, transport, healthcare and the expectations built during years abroad do not automatically shrink with the salary. Savings accumulated overseas can soften that transition for a while, which is precisely why the underlying mismatch may take time to become visible.

A family can feel financially comfortable during its first year back while quietly spending capital to maintain everyday life. That does not make the return unsustainable, but it changes the question. The issue is no longer how much money the family brought home; it is whether the life being built can eventually support itself.

This is why household costs and long-term savings matter more than comparing two salaries.

“Start a business” is not a reintegration policy

Returnees are frequently encouraged to become entrepreneurs.

The logic sounds compelling. They have savings, overseas experience and perhaps technical skills. Instead of searching for a lower-paid job, they can create their own.

But Nepal’s own 2024 Labour Migration Report presents a sobering picture. Citing a survey of returnee migrant workers, it reports that **fewer than 3 percent had invested their earnings in a business after returning**. Identified barriers included inadequate capital, high interest rates on business loans, bureaucratic difficulties, limited markets and the broader difficulty of starting a business.

Entrepreneurship can be an excellent path for some returnees. It is not a universal substitute for a functioning labour market.

A worker who spent ten years as an electrician, chef, machine operator or supervisor abroad should not have to become a founder simply because Nepal cannot price their experience appropriately.

Skills acquired abroad do not automatically have a market at home

This is one of the central reintegration problems identified by the International Labour Organization and International Organization for Migration.

Returnees bring back skills, knowledge and experience. But reintegration depends on whether those capabilities are recognised and demanded in the local labour market.

A worker may have operated sophisticated equipment abroad that few Nepali firms use. A hospitality manager may return with international standards but find employers unwilling to pay for them. A professional accustomed to specialised roles may encounter smaller organisations where responsibilities are broader and compensation lower.

The skill has not disappeared. Its local market value has changed.

The workplace can feel more foreign than expected

Returnees sometimes discover that the difficult adjustment is not Nepal itself but work culture.

Someone accustomed to documented processes may struggle with informal decision-making. A manager used to clear accountability may find authority dependent on relationships. Others return from

highly hierarchical labour systems and prefer Nepal's relative flexibility.

Neither workplace culture is inherently superior in every respect.

The problem arises when returnees assume overseas experience will automatically translate into influence. Colleagues may interpret their comparisons as arrogance: "In Australia we did it this way," or "In Dubai this would never happen."

Experience becomes useful only when it can be adapted rather than merely imported.

Family expectations change after the return

Migration can freeze family roles in memory.

A person leaves Nepal at twenty-five and returns at forty. Abroad, they have managed a household, career and finances independently. Back home, relatives may still relate to them through the family hierarchy they left fifteen years earlier.

The returnee may also carry expectations of their own: parents will be grateful, children will love Nepal, relatives will help with the business and old friendships will resume.

When those expectations fail, disappointment can feel personal even when nobody has done anything wrong.

Children can turn a return into another migration

For children raised abroad, “moving back to Nepal” may be linguistically inaccurate.

They may never have lived there.

As explored in how migration changes a Nepali family across generations, parents and children can experience the same relocation differently. Parents are returning. Children may be immigrating.

School curricula, language, friendships, teaching styles and social expectations can all change simultaneously.

If the children are deeply unhappy, the family’s return plan can become unstable regardless of the parents’ financial calculation.

Healthcare and ageing parents pull in opposite directions

Ageing parents are one of the strongest reasons migrants consider coming home.

But returning does not eliminate every care problem. Good specialist treatment may still require travel or private expenditure. Meanwhile the returnee's own children may have educational or medical needs better supported elsewhere.

This creates a three-generation optimisation problem: grandparents need proximity, parents need work, and children need continuity.

Our examination of ageing parents left behind showed why money and physical presence solve different parts of care. Returning may improve one side of that equation while making another harder.

The returnee's social status can fall even when quality of life improves

Migration often changes how families and communities perceive economic success.

A person abroad may send remittances, arrive during holidays with gifts and appear financially secure. Returning makes ordinary finances visible.

The returnee now has local income, local bills and perhaps a struggling business.

This can create pressure to maintain a lifestyle associated with years abroad even when the new income cannot support it.

The psychological cost is easy to underestimate. A returnee may be objectively comfortable yet feel they are moving backwards because the comparison point is their former overseas income rather than their current needs.

Property can make return easier—and trap capital

Owning a home in Nepal can transform the return equation by eliminating rent.

But returnees sometimes commit too much capital to property too early.

A house is emotionally reassuring. It proves the migration years produced something permanent.

Yet NPR 10 million locked into a house cannot simultaneously fund three years of living expenses, a business and an emergency reserve.

Return planning therefore needs to distinguish **net worth** from **liquidity**.

A family can own substantial property and still run out of cash.

Why some businesses fail after the founder comes home

Foreign earnings can make a returnee unusually well-capitalised relative to a first-time local entrepreneur.

That advantage can become a weakness if capital substitutes for validation.

A returnee may open a restaurant because they worked in hospitality abroad, build apartments because property appears safe, or import a business concept because it succeeded elsewhere.

But Nepal's purchasing power, customer behaviour, regulation and competitive landscape differ.

The same principle used in our guide to building a Nepal business from abroad applies after return: uncertainty should decline before capital exposure rises.

Reintegration is bigger than employment

The ILO defines successful labour-market reintegration as a complex process requiring more than a job. It can depend on labour-market opportunities, infrastructure, policies, financial and non-financial services, access to assets, education and healthcare.

IOM's mapping of reintegration services in Nepal similarly identifies economic, social and psychosocial dimensions.

This explains why a returnee can have money and employment yet still struggle to stay.

Reintegration asks whether the person can build a sustainable life, not simply whether they crossed the border home.

Women can face a different return

Nepal's 2024 Labour Migration Report notes additional reintegration barriers for female migrant workers, including moralistic scrutiny and stigma within families and communities, particularly when women return involuntarily or without substantial savings.

That is an important corrective to the generic returnee story.

Migration can give women income, mobility and independence that are difficult to reproduce after return. Coming home can therefore mean not only lower earnings but a contraction of personal autonomy.

A sustainable reintegration policy has to recognise gendered social conditions, not merely offer entrepreneurship training.

The second departure can be rational

If a returnee discovers that their skills earn more abroad, the business is consuming savings, children are unhappy and the household cannot meet its financial goals, leaving again may be economically rational.

That does not automatically mean the first return was a mistake.

It may have provided years with ageing parents, allowed children to experience Nepal, tested a business idea or clarified what kind of life the family actually wants.

The problem is treating every second migration as evidence of personal failure.

But repeated migration has a cost

There is also a danger in treating every country as a reversible experiment.

Each move disrupts work, school, housing and relationships. Families pay for flights and deposits, replace possessions, navigate visas and rebuild routines. Careers can lose momentum during transitions, while children repeatedly have to enter new classrooms and friendship groups.

The largest cost may be psychological. If every difficult year in Nepal produces the thought that life abroad was better—and every

difficult year abroad revives the dream of returning—the family can remain permanently provisional.

Keeping options open is sensible. Living indefinitely as though the real life will begin after the next move is not.

A better return strategy is reversible at first

Returnees can reduce risk by avoiding irreversible decisions during the first year.

Rent before building or buying if location is uncertain. Test the job market before resigning abroad where possible. Pilot a business before investing most savings. Keep an emergency reserve outside the venture. Delay major lifestyle upgrades. Give children enough time to adjust before declaring the return successful or impossible.

The goal is not to remain psychologically half-abroad forever.

It is to recognise that evidence about the new life is more valuable than confidence about it.

When do returnees know it is not working?

There is rarely one decisive moment. More often, warning signs accumulate.

The family's savings keep covering ordinary living costs rather than emergencies or long-term goals. Work feels like professional stagnation rather than a new beginning. A spouse or child remains unhappy long after the expected adjustment period. Most accumulated wealth becomes trapped in a house or business that produces little cash. Daily conversations increasingly begin with comparisons to the country they left.

None of these signs automatically means the family should migrate again. But together they reveal something important: the return may be surviving on commitment rather than becoming sustainable.

That distinction matters. People can endure an enormous amount to prove that coming home was the right decision. Sometimes the more responsible choice is to admit that the experiment produced information the family did not have before.

Nepal also loses when reintegration fails

A returning migrant can bring capital, technical skills, management experience, professional networks and knowledge of foreign markets.

When that person leaves again because those assets cannot be productively used, the loss is not only personal.

Nepal loses another opportunity for knowledge transfer and domestic economic activity.

This is why reintegration policy should focus less on celebrating return and more on making return sustainable: skills recognition, labour-market matching, financing, business support, social protection and predictable public administration.

Homecoming is not a one-way door

The diaspora conversation often forces people into two identities: those who left and those who returned.

Modern migration is less tidy.

A Nepali may study in Australia, work in Dubai, return to Kathmandu, build a company, leave for Singapore and eventually retire in Pokhara. Their children may make entirely different choices.

The useful measure is not whether the person stayed permanently after the first return.

It is whether migration—outward, inward and perhaps outward again—ultimately created a more secure and meaningful life.

Coming home can be courageous. Leaving again can be rational.

The real failure is making either decision without understanding what the household is trying to optimise.

Research note: Reintegration evidence in this article draws on Nepal's Labour Migration Report 2024 and ILO/IOM research on returnee labour-market integration. Return experiences vary significantly by destination, occupation, gender, household structure and whether return was voluntary. Financial examples are illustrative scenarios, not estimates of typical returnee household costs.

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