



# Strategies to Overcome Livelihood Uncertainty and Challenges: Policy Lessons from Northeast Reversed Migration during COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Background

Migrants are the most vulnerable people during crises (WHO, 2020; World Bank, 2020), thereby facing diverse livelihood uncertainty and challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic led to job loss affecting livelihood security (IOM, 2020a) even for the migrant workers from North-East (NE) India (Marchang, 2024). It induced immense economic uncertainty for migrants due to lockdowns, travel bans, and social distancing that brought global economic activities to a near standstill (World Bank, 2020) and impacted the livelihoods of migrants and their dependents (IOM, 2020a). In India, during the pandemic, over 1.06 crore migrant workers returned to their home states (PTI, 2021) due to job loss, fear of contraction of the COVID-19, non-availability of basic needs, pressure of family members to return home, and work-from home opportunities (Behera and Mishra, 2021). Migrants faced various challenges such as income loss, health-care insecurity, and uncertainty of employment (WHO, 2020). In India, as per Mohanty (2020), over one-third of the reversed migrants have endured joblessness affecting their livelihood security.

Most NE out-migrants were engaged in the unorganised private sector, wherein most of them did not have any job terms and conditions agreement between them and their employers, which was the major reason for their job insecurity (Marchang, 2022). Job insecurity and job loss during the pandemic lockdown are irrefutably due to the absence of job agreements. Furthermore, according to Marchang (2024), during the pandemic, migrant workers without

an agreement was severely affected through loss of job and income, uncertainty of getting back their lost jobs, and misery and uncertainty of livelihood means. It rendered reverse migration to their state of origin to secure a livelihood with the help of siblings and parents living there. The migrant workers have prudently adopted various strategies to secure and sustain their life and livelihood by using savings from their previous job, relying on free essential goods provisions distributed by various agencies, or miserably returning to their state of origin to overcome economic hardship and livelihood uncertainty. The Ministry of Labour and Employment (2021) has estimated that during the pandemic, over 5 lakh (or 4.3%) of India's 1.2 crore reversed migrant workers returned to the NE states by June 2020. Importantly, many reversed migrants wanted to return to the previous migration destination in India (Marchang, 2024), similar to those in Cambodia (IOM, 2020b), for work to secure their livelihood.

## Data and Method

Considering the aforementioned background and using primary data collected from Nagaland and Manipur, the study examines the various strategies employed by the NE reverse migrants to overcome livelihood uncertainty and challenges faced during the pandemic. Reverse migrants are persons who have returned to their state of origin from their previous migration destination. The process of returning is known as reverse migration. Livelihood refers to the means of economic support used to secure basic economic needs.

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As the population of the reverse migrants was unknown, social networks as well as 21 welfare societies, associations and student unions of the two NE states spread across the cities of Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Pune, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Goa, Rajasthan and Guwahati, were contacted to collect a contact list of 3233 reverse migrants to Nagaland and Manipur. Using a random sampling method, 205 reversed migrant workers were selected from the contact list of both Nagaland (50.2%) and Manipur (49.8%). Data was collected from March to May 2021 using a semi-structured questionnaire for the period after March 2020, capturing the causes of reverse migration and livelihood security strategies adopted by them during the pandemic. It was surveyed through a Google form questionnaire (56) and telephone (149). Then, the statistical results were analysed, and conclusions were drawn with few policy implications.

## Key Findings

The reversed migration of the NE migrant workers was primarily due to loss of job, quitting from job, non-receipt of salary, salary reduction, uncertainty of getting employment, and fear psychosis from the life-threatening COVID-19 pandemic that adversely affected the lives and livelihood security. Most reversed migrants had modest income and meagre amount of savings that was inadequate to secure and sustain a livelihood for a longer period during the pandemic. Their parents also wanted them to return home as the pandemic continued to threaten lives and livelihood impacting both their social and economic well-being. Moreover, reverse migration by migrants took place after losing their source of livelihood, finding it difficult to pay house rent, exhausting savings and social security money, and encountering trouble with the unsustainable free assistance and loan meant to secure livelihood.

The reversed migrants have confronted livelihood uncertainty and encountered a mixture of challenges to secure economic requirements for living at the migration destination, i.e., the place of last residence (POLR). Most of them were rendered jobless; however, few of them did not lose their jobs as their employment were in the corporate sector of POLR. The latter were working from home in their native states. The livelihood of most reversed migrants was supported and sustained by their social security, particularly the provident fund. At POLR,

most of the reversed migrants have found it difficult to pay house rent and hostel fees issues due to sudden joblessness. The reversed migrants have adopted various strategies to overcome such uncertainty and challenges at the POLR as well as native places. Most reversed migrants had obtained help from several agencies, namely the central government, state government, parents, NGOs, their own community, churches, friends and relatives, among others, for basic economic and livelihood security. Expectedly, the reversed migrants were mostly assisted by their parents, with others, to secure their children's social and economic well-being. Most migrants accepted the free assistance related to food, water, shelter, health and travel during the pandemic-induced lockdown, for around 24 days on average, chiefly due to joblessness and depletion of funds. At POLR, one of the most striking challenges the migrants faced was the pressure to maintain financial stability.

At the state of origin, most reversed migrants remained jobless, which has adversely affected their economic livelihood security. Merely, a quarter of the whole reversed migrants managed to engage in economic activity, including self-employment, to secure a livelihood through self-finance. Among the employed, one-fifth continued in the same job at POLR, and the remaining four-fifths, were placed in new jobs. Close to one-thirds of the workers adopted a strategy to secure a livelihood through business establishments, such as farming, restaurant, retail, salon and others. About two-thirds and one-third of the workers perceived that their income was sufficient and insufficient, respectively, to meet their monthly expenditure. Most of the reversed migrants, particularly the jobless, used their previous savings and social security to secure and sustain their livelihood. Most migrants curtailed their spending, essentially on basic commodities as a strategy to sustain for a longer period. Further, most migrants, especially the jobless, adopted a strategy to secure their livelihood and economic well-being, particularly by depending on parents, siblings and relatives. Nevertheless, all reversed migrants did not depend on others to secure their lives and livelihood. Interestingly, less than half of the reversed migrants have expressed their intention to out-migrate again, primarily for work, as a strategy to overcome joblessness and to secure their livelihood, but most of them intend to return after the pandemic problem is over.

## Policy Suggestions

Based on the above findings, the following are the few policy measures suggested to overcome livelihood uncertainty and insecurity at contingencies like the pandemic:

1. Inculcate and exhibit a regular savings (and/or investment) habit among the most vulnerable migrant workers to secure a livelihood during unanticipated contingencies and uncertainties like the pandemic. Have a concrete medium-term if not long-term financial investment and planning for the same.
2. The government may establish a provision to ensure compulsory contributory social security scheme such as provident fund by the employer to all migrant workers, irrespective of the income level, nature of employment, and sector and type of job, to have a secured source of livelihood financial support during contingencies such as the pandemic.
3. Establish a government-supported mechanism to monitor and prevent fear psychosis during a life-threatening disaster, particularly for the vulnerable (low education, low income, and unskilled) migrant workers. Also, constitute permanent, well-coordinated government institutions to provide services and livelihood support to the vulnerable migrants.
4. Promote work-from-home flexibility as much as possible to maintain economic stability and livelihood security during any disaster.
5. Enact and enforce a government law for having a compulsory legitimate wage and job contract between the employer and worker to ensure job and livelihood security for all types of employment and sectors for a specific period to secure income or jobs even during unpredictable eventualities like the pandemic.
6. Enact a government law to pay salary for three months (without any reduction) for any job lost due to closure of establishment for those who have a valid job agreement.
7. Enact and enforce a government provision to pay full salary for the total number of days worked within a week during any contingencies like the pandemic even if the establishment is closed, to provide livelihood relief and security.
8. The government may enact a provision to lay off persons from jobs with at least one month's notice in all private establishments.
9. Establish a stringent government policy to safeguard tenants from harassment by the house owner (or deferment of rent payment for a certain period) due to non-payment of rent during a disaster.
10. Create a conveniently accessible basic needs government facility centres during a disaster.
11. The government may generate adequate long-term and stable employment opportunities for reversed migrants, as many are reluctant to out-migrate again to harness their skills and knowledge. The government may promote entrepreneurship through financial support to venture into business or for self-employment to harness their skills and knowledge, thereby reducing joblessness problems of reversed migrants.
12. Establish suitable urban jobs for development, like the MGNREGA, for reversed migrants in urban areas. The government may need to secure and deliver livelihood schemes, like MGNREGA, to the return migrants in urban areas, who may wish to avail of those schemes, considering their joblessness.
13. Promote NGOs and welfare societies through government financial assistance, as they have immensely rendered priceless social and economic services to the migrants during the pandemic. This may encourage them to render improved welfare services in the future.

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