

Socio-Economic Effects of *Gungtong* on Rural Communities: A Case Study of Bartsham and Kengkhar Gewogs in Eastern Bhutan

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ABSTRACT

In Bhutan, the phenomenon of vacant or abandoned homes, locally known as 'gungtong,' has become increasingly prevalent, reflecting the rapid urbanization of the country's rural villages. The 2017 Population and Housing Census of Bhutan (PHCB) recorded over 4,800 unoccupied or abandoned dwellings in rural areas, highlighting the growing trend of deserted rural properties and its multifaceted implications for the socio-economic and environmental well-being of local communities. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the effects of gungtong on Bhutan's rural population, with a specific focus on both its underlying causes and resulting consequences.

The study centers its examination on the communities of Kengkhar in Mongar and Bartsham in Trashigang, strategically chosen due to their substantial concentration of gungtong. Employing purposive sampling, respondents from these regions were selected for participation, and data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews. The collected qualitative data underwent rigorous thematic analysis to discern key patterns and insights.

The findings reveal that the primary causes of gungtong are closely intertwined with educational and employment factors. Young individuals exhibit diminished interest in pursuing traditional agricultural livelihoods, often leading to their

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migration away from rural areas either as dependent family members or due to marriage-related factors. The ramifications experienced by rural communities due to gungtong encompass financial strain on those left behind, agricultural crop damage caused by wildlife, labour shortages, and a decline in overall community vibrancy. Additionally, the research sheds light on the various coping strategies employed by rural residents and their perspectives on the potential for return migration.

Keywords: Community Vitality; Employment and Education; Gungtong, Migration, Wild Life Conflict

INTRODUCTION

Humanity has been a migratory species throughout history, with people moving for various reasons such as seeking better economic opportunities, reuniting with family, pursuing education, escaping danger, or responding to environmental challenges (United Nations, 2022). Global migration has become a significant force that reshapes nation-states and group identities (Castles & Miller, 2005). The number of international migrants has surged in recent years, with approximately 3.6 of the world's population living abroad according to the United Nations (2020), and around 281 million international migrants estimated by the International Organization for Migration in 2022 (2022).

This phenomenon is not limited to international migration; internal migration within countries has also seen an upsurge. Rural-to-urban migration, in particular, has fuelled rapid urbanization in many parts of the world. Bhutan, a country experiencing urbanization, faces significant internal migration. The Bhutanese population is highly migratory, with 40% of its citizens having moved between districts since birth (National Statistical Bureau, 2017). The shift towards urban living has resulted in service shortages and overcrowding in cities while rural areas experience an increase in abandoned homes known as *gungtong* (National Statistical Bureau, 2018).

The term *gungtong* originates from the amalgamation of two Dzongkha linguistic components, specifically *gung* (Wylie: gung), signifying household, and *tong* (Wylie: stong), denoting empty (DDC, n.d.). Consequently, it conventionally conveys the concept of unoccupied residences. Nevertheless, it is imperative to note that *gungtong* lacks a universally acknowledged and unambiguous definition, a contention underscored by Wangchuk (2023). Furthermore, Wangchuk posits that the interpretation of *gungtong* as a matter of concern, raised by various entities, including the media, can exhibit divergent connotations, thereby compromising the accuracy of data. Notwithstanding the divergent interpretations of the terminology in question, within the context of this research endeavour, *gungtong* is operationally defined as signifying vacant households in alignment with the etymological derivation of the constituent terms.

The issue of *gungtong* in Bhutan has become a critical problem as the rural population dwindles due to migration. This trend adversely affects the social, economic, and environmental well-being of the locals, especially the elderly who are left behind to tend to fields and cattle, causing a severe labour shortage (Tshedrup, 2017). Developmental activities in rural areas suffer due to the lack of participants, and the weakened local economy leads to difficulties in earning a living (Namgyal, 2022). Traditional values of lending helping hand during difficult times in the community erode, family bonds weaken, and administrative and tax collection issues arise as a consequence of *gungtong*. In an interview with a *Kuensel* reporter in 2018, the Kengkhar Gup, Pema Chedrup, articulated the manifold adverse consequences associated with *gungtong*. These repercussions encompassed the notable dearth of participants at monthly and annual events and gatherings, alongside the attendant challenges pertaining to tax collection and the provisioning of social services (Namgyal, 2022).

Despite the government's efforts to address *gungtong*, it continues to worsen each year, posing significant social and economic challenges for the affected communities. Dema (2023) reported that the rural-urban migration leading to *gungtong* is felt more in the eastern Dzongkhags and some Dzongkhags are seeing an increasing trend. As a result, the

research aims to investigate the socioeconomic effects of gungtong on rural communities in Eastern Bhutan. Therefore, this research explores to answer

- the socioeconomic effects of gungtong faced by the rural communities in Eastern Bhutan.
- the factors causing gungtong.

The specific objectives are to:

- analyse the impacts of gungtong on the socio-economic conditions in rural areas;
- identify the factors causing gungtong; and
- propose strategies to mitigate their effects on the rural community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global migration is a widespread phenomenon, occurring at various scales from local to international (Vero & Odyuo, 2021). This migration has led to diverse livelihood patterns in rural areas due to both internal and external migration (IFAD, 2008). Developing countries have experienced significant internal migration, with approximately 800 million people moving from rural to urban areas over the past 50 years (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2008). This influx of migrants has reshaped the socioeconomic structures of rural societies, necessitating a comprehensive examination of these changing dynamics to address poverty and promote rural development (Farah, Khan & Maan, 2018).

Urbanization is a primary driver of migration in many countries, including Bhutan (Gazdar, 2003). As a result, policymakers and planners have become increasingly focused on addressing demographic distribution challenges, particularly rural-to-urban migration. This migration has led to depopulation in remote rural areas and strained resources and the environment in urban areas (National Statistical Bureau, 2018). In Bhutan, this rural-to-urban migration is exemplified

by the gungtong phenomenon, where entire households vacate rural areas.

The causes of gungtong in Bhutan have significant socioeconomic implications, with internal migration driven by factors such as employment opportunities, family dependency, education, and marriage (National Statistical Bureau, 2018). Disparities in rural-urban resource availability also influence migration, as do better job prospects, higher living standards, and less labour-intensive work in urban areas (Kanwal, Naveed, & Khan, 2015). Inadequate communication and transportation infrastructure also contribute to migration, particularly among younger generations (Humtsoe & Ovung, 2020).

The impacts of gungtong on rural communities are multifaceted. A labour shortage in rural areas results from a declining working-age population, affecting property maintenance and community responsibilities (National Statistical Bureau, 2018). This labour scarcity also impacts agricultural output, exacerbating the effects of wildlife conflicts that arise from fallow lands (National Statistical Bureau, 2018).

Gungtong also hinder rural development by reducing the chances of receiving government development grants and limiting resources for development projects (National Statistical Bureau, 2018). Furthermore, they weaken the social fabric of villages, diminishing participation in cultural activities and festivals (National Statistical Bureau, 2018).

From a Gross National Happiness perspective, the increasing prevalence of gungtong in rural areas significantly affects community vitality, reducing social support networks and willingness to contribute to the community (Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies, 2016). Further,

In conclusion, gungtong pose a significant challenge to rural households and communities in Bhutan due to the ongoing trend of rural-to-urban migration. The consequences of gungtong include labour shortages, wildlife conflicts, hindered rural development, weakened social fabric, and declining community vitality (National Statistical Bureau, 2018). Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies to promote sustainable rural development while preserving

Bhutan's cultural heritage and sense of community (National Statistical Bureau, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

In pursuit of the research objectives, a qualitative approach, specifically adopting a case study design, is employed. The choice of a case study design is predicated on its inherent suitability for conducting flexible and open-ended data collection and analysis techniques. This design proves particularly advantageous when investigating domains characterized by limited pre-existing knowledge, facilitating the attainment of a holistic comprehension of the subject matter (Yin, 2013). Moreover, the case study design aligns with the research's overarching emphasis on exploration and understanding as opposed to confirmation and quantification (Cohen et al., 2011).

The data collection process encompasses both primary and secondary sources. Primary data is procured through the medium of semi-structured interviews, while secondary data is gleaned from various governmental reports, press releases, and media sources. The selection of semi-structured interviews as a primary data collection method is predicated on the desire to garner first hand narratives and observations from rural communities, affording participants the latitude to provide open-ended responses and facilitating a comprehensive exploration of their experiences.

To facilitate the data collection process, a meticulously crafted semi-structured interview guide serves as a research instrument. This guide encompasses a diverse array of topics for discussion with the research participants, ensuring an exhaustive coverage of the research domains and permitting the inclusion of supplementary questions as deemed necessary.

Ethical considerations assume paramount importance throughout the research endeavour, with strict adherence to the fundamental principles of research ethics elucidated in The Belmont Report 1979. These foundational ethical principles encompass the notions of respect

for persons, beneficence, and justice, collectively serving to safeguard the well-being and rights of the research participants.

In summation, the research design and methodology are tailored towards achieving a comprehensive comprehension of the ramifications of gungtong on rural communities in Bhutan. This is realized through an in-depth qualitative inquiry and analysis rooted in first-hand accounts and observations, thus ensuring a nuanced exploration of the subject matter.

Study Areas

This paper presents a case study conducted in the eastern region of Bhutan, with a specific focus on the localities of Kengkhar in Mongar and Bartsham in Trashigang. While the phenomenon of gungtong is observed across various districts in Bhutan, it is noteworthy that Trashigang and Mongar Dzongkhags exhibit a particularly high incidence of gungtong, as indicated by Gyelmo (2020). This selection of research locales is corroborated by information sourced from media reports, which consistently highlight Mongar Kengkhar and Trashigang Bartsham as areas characterized by a significantly elevated prevalence of gungtong.

Kengkhar

Mongar Dzongkhag has a total size of 1,954 Km² with elevations ranging between 400 and 4,000 meters above sea level (Mongar Dzongkhag Administration, 2022). There are 17 Gewogs in the Dzongkhag. About 5,000 households are present. Mongar Dzongkhag had 37,158 residents as of May 30, 2017 (National Statistical Bureau, 2017). Up until 2017, 19,800 people moved from Mongar to other Dzongkhag/Thromdes. The percentage of rural-to-urban migrants in Mongar Dzongkhag is 17.0', and the percentage of rural-to-rural migrants is 10.7' (National Statistical Bureau, 2017). With a 100 km² size, Kengkhar is one of the most isolated Gewogs in Mongar Dzongkhag (Choden, et al., 2018). In addition to sharing boundaries with Pemagatshel Dzongkhag,

Kengkhar Gewog is situated in the southwest of Thangrong, south of Drepung, southeast of Saleng, and east of Journey. Although maize and rice are produced in large quantities, citrus fruits, vegetables, dairy, and chicken products are increasingly major sources of revenue for the locals. It has six Chiwogs with a total of 503 households and a population of 3989 (Kengkhar Gewog Administration, 2022). The Gewog has a total of 81 gungtong.

Bartsham

Trashigang is one of the largest Dzongkhags in the country. Trashigang Dzongkhag shares its border with Mongar Dzongkhag in the west, Samdrup Jongkhar and Pemagatshel Dzongkhag in the South, Trashi Yangtse Dzongkhag in the north, and the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh in the east. Trashigang Dzongkhag has a total area of 2204.5 Km² (Trashigang Dzongkhag Administration, 2022). It has a total of 8,610 households. The total population of Trashigang Dzongkhag as of 30 May 2017 is 45,527 persons (National Statistical Bureau, 2017). A total of 31,930 persons have migrated out of Trashigang to other Dzongkhags/ Thromdes. For Trashigang, the percentage of rural-to-urban migrants is 13.3 percent, and for rural-to-rural migrants is 13.8 percent (National Statistical Bureau, 2017)).

Bartsham Gewog is located in the north of Samkhar, west of Bidung, and east of Yangneer Gewog and has borders with Ramjar, Jamkhar, and Yalang Gewogs of Trashi Yangtse Dzongkhag.

Bartsham Gewog is an agriculturally dependent community, with vegetable growing providing the majority of its income. Five vegetable farming groups and three community forest groups make up the Gewog. Only four of the five groups—the vegetable farmers—are connected to the Bartsham Central School and Bartsham Primary School for the delivery of dairy and vegetable products (Trashigang Dzongkhag Administration, 2022). The Gewog has a total population of 3891. The Gewog is made up of five Chiwogs, with 16 major settlements and a further 30 minor villages (Bartsham Gewog Administration, 2022). The Gewog has 522 households with 132 gungtong.

Sample Selection

For the composition of the research sample, a non-probabilistic sampling technique, specifically purposive sampling, also recognized as judgment sampling, has been employed. This method entails the deliberate selection of respondents who possess a wealth of pertinent information and can offer valuable insights to address the research inquiries, as opposed to striving for a predetermined sample size. The criteria for inclusion encompass individuals who actively engage in community activities and possess literacy skills. A total of nine residents within the age bracket of 25 to 50 were chosen for interviews, with five selected from Mongar Kengkhar and four from Trashigang Bartsham.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographic Profile of Gungtong in Two Gewogs

This section of the analysis consists of the approximate number of households and gungtong in the study area. The number was collected from the participants of the study.

Table 1

Number of gungtong in the study area

Research Area	Chiwog	Households	Gungtong
Khenkhar, Mongar	Tongla Zi Tsibi	76	7
	Kyidpari Yuldari	46	6
	Phosothang Shingchong	131	29
	Neykorlog	87	16
	Warongborang		
	Olokid Tsalabi	57	15
	Dogtang Mooroong	106	16
Total		503	89
Bartsham, Trashigang	Dzongthung	84	17
	Kumung	125	47
	Muktangkhar	71	17
	Nangkhar	118	47
	Tashang	124	45
Total		522	173

Migration Profile of the Two Gewogs

The findings of the 2017 PHCB broadly match the characteristics of migrants as indicated by the respondents of the study. The majority of migrants are young individuals, although older people also have their reasons for moving, most commonly to follow and be with their children. The respondents commonly described the educated young population as the most mobile population that eventually influenced the move of other family members which ultimately led to the abandonment of village houses. According to the United Nations Global Migration Database (UNGMD), migrants in their early twenties make up the majority of the population.

A respondent from Muktangkar Chiwog in Bartsham remarked:

Gungtong keep increasing as our educated young population keeps moving away for better economic opportunities in urban areas.

The elderly parents in their community experience loneliness as their children relocate elsewhere. As they get older, they anticipate or are already in need of care and help from their kids because they can't physically take care of themselves. Being physically close to their children is the only solution they can find to ease the challenges they face during the aging process. Therefore, they follow their children to urban areas and settle with them. A respondent from Kengkar Gewog mentioned:

When the young children migrate away, the parents either move away with their children or remain back in the village. The left-behind parents however at some point have to move away with their children because of their inability to sustain themselves, due to their old age. So, they also migrate away and live with the children leaving the houses behind.

As the young and fit population of the Gewog migrate away, it is mostly the elderly people caring for the crops and cattle. One of the respondents of Bartsham Gewog remarked:

The population right now in my Chiwog is mostly elderly parents whose ages range between the 60s-90s. Their children have mostly settled in Thimphu. We don't have any young people here in the village who are working on

agricultural lands. It's mostly the older people who are left and working in the fields.

Reasons for Gungtong

One recurrent theme elucidated by respondents pertains to the dwindling youth population within rural communities, a phenomenon inexorably linked to the prevalence of gungtong. As an increasing number of young individuals embark on migratory journeys, rural locales experience a pronounced demographic decline. Subsequently, parents of these migrants, over time, opt to relocate to urban centres, forsaking their rural homes. Conversely, some elderly residents, left in isolation as their offspring reside far from the village, succumb to loneliness in their deserted abodes. This ongoing diminishment in Gewog population fundamentally underpins the emergence of gungtong.

An exemplification of this demographic shift is provided by a respondent from Bartsham Gewog, who emphasizes the substantial disparity between the registered household count and active community participation. In practical terms, while Bartsham Gewog boasts an inventory of over 500 registered households, only approximately 200 households engage actively in community services, tax contributions, and meetings. Remarkably, the number of Bartsham residents residing in Thimphu, an urban centre, eclipses the population residing within the Gewog itself. A stark illustration of this demographic shift is observed in the fact that, of the roughly 3,900 registered residents of Bartsham Gewog, approximately 1,000 presently reside within the confines of Bartsham Gewog in Trashigang.

The catalysts for migration, as elucidated by respondents, gravitate predominantly toward factors related to employment opportunities, dependency on family members, educational pursuits, and, to a lesser extent, marriage. It is noteworthy that rural regions' resource constraints propel individuals to migrate toward urban centres in quest of enhanced prospects (Ajaero & Onokala, 2011).

The articulated reasons for migration encompass the following facets:

- **Disinclination Towards Traditional Farming:** The younger generation exhibits minimal interest in adhering to the traditional farming lifestyle, which they perceive as unproductive and unrewarding. Instead, they seek more promising employment opportunities elsewhere.
- **Lack of Agricultural Markets:** The absence of a viable commercial market for agricultural outputs hinders farmers from realizing optimal returns on their farming endeavours, contributing to disillusionment.
- **Wildlife Crop Damage:** The scourge of wild animals ravaging crops constitutes a formidable deterrent to agricultural pursuits, exacerbating migration tendencies.
- **Irrigation Water Scarcity:** Inadequate access to irrigation water impedes crop cultivation, curbing overall crop production and discouraging agricultural engagement.
- **Paucity of Non-Agricultural Economic Activities:** The dearth of non-agricultural economic activities within the Gewog restricts livelihood options, compelling the populace to seek alternative avenues.
- **Economic Support for the Elderly:** The elderly, often unable to sustain themselves independently, rely on support from their offspring, many of whom have migrated, leaving their parents in precarious circumstances.

Education emerges as a pivotal factor in shaping migration decisions, as educated youths perceive the utility of their qualifications in securing employment or establishing entrepreneurial ventures. The laborious nature of traditional farming further dissuades the younger generation from pursuing agricultural livelihoods. Instead, they gravitate toward alternative economic pursuits and migrate to urban centres, driven by the prospect of more promising opportunities. The limited scope for diverse economic activities within the Gewog accentuates this migratory inclination.

A respondent from Nangkhar Chiwog underscores the absence of substantial urban centres or employment hubs within the Dzongkhag, compelling educated youths to seek opportunities in urban areas, where

they anticipate their educational achievements will find meaningful application.

We do not have any major towns, job centres, or companies in the Dzongkhag. So, after completing education young people migrate to urban places with economic opportunities as they would feel education would go to waste if they don't get employed.

Similar sentiments are echoed by another respondent from Olokid Chiwog, who emphasizes the dearth of economic prospects in rural settings and posits that the trend of gungtong will persist unless addressed.

...from what I see, many jobs are available only in urban centres, be it private or government jobs. On the other hand, economic opportunities in rural areas are limited. If this continues, gungtong will keep increasing.

Agricultural activity holds a central position in the economic landscape of rural Gewogs; however, it is not a career path that resonates with the aspirations of the younger populace. Respondents uniformly expressed a noticeable disinterest among the youth in pursuing agricultural livelihoods, preferring alternative opportunities offering improved living standards. A prominent factor dissuading youth from agriculture is the growing challenge of securing a viable income from farming.

As highlighted by the 2015 GNH Survey, farmers, constituting a substantial portion of the population, registered as the least content occupational group in both the 2010 and 2015 surveys (Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies, 2016). This discontent is exacerbated by the absence of a commercial agricultural market, which constrains farmers from realizing the full potential of their agricultural endeavours. As exemplified by a respondent from Bartsham Gewog, the dearth of market access and the ensuing low returns on agricultural produce serve as demotivating factors, driving individuals away from farming and toward non-agricultural pursuits.

Whether it's growing potatoes or any other crops, firstly we don't have a market for it and secondly, we don't fetch good prices for it. Despite the hard work and large production, the lack of a market and the lower prices is a demotivating factor. This discourages all the manual hard work we put in.

Thus, people prefer working in non-agricultural and then migrate away. I have observed how our younger educated people show no interest in holding a spade and working in fields.

The persistent issue of human-wildlife conflict compounds the challenges faced by rural farmers, jeopardizing their livelihoods. As expressed by a respondent from Kengkhar, the toil invested by farmers can be swiftly nullified by marauding wildlife, leading to profound despondency.

Life as a farmer is difficult. It gets worse when our annual hard work is wasted overnight. Wild animals damaging our crops makes us extremely sad.

This enduring conflict further discourages youth from embracing farming as a sustainable occupation.

The consequences of these circumstances manifest in rural Bhutanese communities, where the younger generation is increasingly disengaging from traditional agricultural practices in pursuit of opportunities elsewhere. The 2015 GNH Survey reported a notable portion of Bhutanese individuals reporting unhappiness, with a significant majority hailing from rural areas, and a substantial portion of these unhappier individuals identifying as farmers (Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies, 2016). The struggles recounted by respondents resonate with the elevated dissatisfaction levels observed among rural farmers.

Moreover, water scarcity, a shared concern in both Gewogs, compounds the challenges of farming, as adequate water resources are imperative for crop cultivation. The insufficient water supply hampers overall crop production, forcing farmers to seek alternative income sources. The shortage of water has prompted some individuals to migrate in search of better conditions, as elucidated by respondents in Nanarik Chiwog and Bartsham Gewog.

Furthermore, the migration of children from rural areas leaves aging parents behind, often compelling the elderly to relocate as well or, in some unfortunate cases, face isolation and demise in the village. Such rural-to-urban migration patterns are driven by the ambitions of the younger population seeking employment in urban centres offering broader job markets and superior financial, educational, and social

prospects. The absence of essential amenities and elevated unemployment rates in rural areas stand as formidable deterrents against rural residency (Kummitha, Toth-kaszas, Keller, & Birkner, 2020).

In summary, the trajectory of rural-to-urban migration in Bhutan is intrinsically linked to the evolving preferences and challenges faced by its populace. While agriculture remains foundational to rural life, it grapples with myriad issues that make it an increasingly unattractive pursuit for the youth. This departure from traditional livelihoods, coupled with external factors such as water scarcity and human-wildlife conflict, underscores the complex dynamics of rural migration trends and their underlying drivers.

Effects on Rural Community

The repercussions of rural-urban migration, colloquially referred to as "gungtong," are acutely felt in remote and isolated rural regions. While empirical quantification of this phenomenon remains a challenge, insights gleaned from respondents illuminate its multifaceted consequences on rural communities. It is noteworthy that while gungtong has diminished in frequency, its lingering impact remains substantial. Some of the notable effects of Gungtong on the remaining households are:

Financial Strain on Remaining Residents: Gungtong exerts a financial toll on those who remain in rural communities, particularly concerning tax obligations and community services. The departure of individuals has translated into a disproportionate burden on the remaining residents, as they grapple with increased tax liabilities and participate in Chiwog/Gewog services, while the departed are exempted. An elected member of Kengkhar Gewog articulates the financial strain incurred by personally paying house taxes for abandoned households, indicative of the financial ramifications faced by the community.

Before Gungtong, collection of taxes was so much easier and convenient but as gungtong increased yearly, the taxes for those who have left have fallen upon those left behind. This has created inconvenience. Even to this day we have to contribute labour for Chiwog/ Gewog services and during this time, only those

who are left behind have to take the burden and those who have left are exempted.

Similarly, a local government official from Bartsham Gewog shared:

... We have to pay taxes for the abandoned households that we are unable to contact. This leads to a financial burden on us. For instance, I have been paying the house tax for 10 Gungtong households for the last three years which amounts to approximately Nu. 250 annually.

Agricultural Disruption Caused by Wildlife: A salient and frequently reported consequence of gungtong is the encroachment of wildlife on fallow, overgrown land. Abandoned properties, left untended, become overgrown with vegetation, attracting a variety of wild animals such as monkeys, boars, deer, and porcupines. A respondent of Bartsham Gewog noted:

When people move away, locking their houses and abandoning their land, these lands are left as forests. When forests emerge, wildlife conflict increases. As a resident, despite the hard work, when wild animals damage our crops, thoughts of abandoning farming and opting for some other source of income in urban areas often occur to us as well.

These animals subsequently damage cultivated land, leading to human-wildlife conflicts and the attrition of agricultural productivity. The transformation of arable land into dense undergrowth exacerbates rural out-migration.

Aesthetic Transformation of Villages: The proliferation of abandoned lands within Gewogs manifests as unsightly overgrown areas. The emergence of these neglected areas, often described as "forests" within villages, diminishes the visual appeal of the rural landscape, as noted by a respondent from Kengkhar Gewog.

... The abandoned lands of Gungtong households have turned into bushes. Forests within the villages are a very common scene here in the Chiwog... However, I would like to mention that the abandoned houses and the emergence of a forest in between the settlements in the village are visually not pleasing.

Labour Shortages and Impeded Development: The departure of residents from gungtong residences results in a diminishment of the local

workforce, impeding various community activities, particularly agriculture. This labour deficit, coupled with a reduction in population due to gungtong, impacts the allocation of government development grants, diminishing the economic prospects of the affected areas. The scarcity of labour and its impact on agricultural productivity is underscored by a respondent from Bartsham.

... In terms of working, the progress is slow, for instance, sowing maize in the field takes us half of the day. The developed countries that are advanced in technology get their work done through machinery even in the presence of a very a smaller number of people. Our country is different, we are technologically backward, and so when we are left with fewer people, our production is greatly hampered.

Additionally, gungtong frequently impede the overall development of Gewogs. Each Gewog receives a certain amount of development aid based on its population. Since fewer people now reside in the village as a result of residents moving, they have a lower likelihood of being awarded a government development grant. A key respondent from the Muktangkhar Chiwog expressed their concern over this:

In times of water generation and construction of farm roads, there is a specific requirement of the end user that is the number of households. So, in places where there is a high number of gungtong, we are not able to bring this development thus hindering the economic development of that place

Diminished Community Vitality: Gungtong has led to a decline in community support and participation in communal activities, potentially imperilling the preservation of cultural traditions and practices. Reduced contributions from a diminishing population have made it challenging to sustain customary events and activities. Furthermore, declining participation in Gewog meetings and related endeavours reflects a decline in social support—a fundamental component of Gross National Happiness (GNH)—and underscores its erosion as gungtong intensifies. Gungtong makes it difficult to maintain the village's culture and traditional ways of life. A key informant of Kengkhar Gewog remarked:

There are a lot of traditions and events that our wise ancestors have introduced in the Gewog. For instance, we have the ongoing Di Za in the 9th

month. For these important traditions, we have to collect contributions from the local community only. When there are more gungtong the contributions are becoming lesser. Conducting these traditional activities is not within the capacity of a single person or a household, we have to do this as a community. Due to a lack of support from the huge number of gungtong, conducting these traditions becomes very difficult.

In conclusion, gungtong has a profound and multifaceted impact on rural communities, encompassing financial, agricultural, aesthetic, and social dimensions. The repercussions extend beyond individual households, affecting the broader social fabric and cultural heritage of these communities. The interplay of these factors underscores the complexity of gungtong's consequences and its implications for the well-being and vitality of rural populations. The prevalence of gungtong in Gewogs within the Trashigang region, coupled with reported declines in community well-being, further emphasizes the need for a comprehensive examination of this phenomenon and targeted interventions to mitigate its adverse effects.

Coping Strategies

People have been known to have a variety of coping skills, especially when faced with challenges in life. The respondents had a variety of coping mechanisms that they had developed to use to deal with the difficulties brought on by the gungtong presence in the neighbourhood. Strategies such as exemption from certain benefits in times of failure to pay taxes, monetary compensation for not contributing to community service, and imposing fines on Gungtong households are some strategies shared by respondents from the two Gewogs. A respondent from Kengkhar Gewog noted:

There might not be any national laws as such but we as a community have decided that if taxes are not paid, the out-migrants are exempted from getting benefits such as financial support when a family member dies (exempted from receiving semso).

A respondent from Bartsham Gewog noted:

In times of need for woola, for instance, like creating water sources with support from the government, we need to produce labour from our community

itself. So, during that, we do make it a point to inform the out-migrants that we are doing this activity in the Gewog that requires labour and if they are not able to come, they can compensate in monetary forms. We discussed it with them and they have been cooperative until now and made payments when they are not able to come in person. So, through this discussion, we have had no inconveniences in this regard.

Hopes for Return Migration

Return migration, a phenomenon often characterized by its impulsive and unrecorded nature, presents a multifaceted challenge in terms of quantification and understanding. The decision-making process underlying return migration is intricate, influenced by a spectrum of factors encompassing local conditions in the place of origin, individual and societal determinants, and, to a lesser extent, national policies (OECD, 2022).

Amidst this complexity, the prevailing sentiment among the majority of respondents in our study casts doubt on the feasibility of return migration. An inhabitant of Kengkhar Gewog expressed scepticism, asserting that the act of resettling in urban areas renders the prospect of returning to the village a seemingly insurmountable endeavour.

In terms of return migration, it depends on the individual but as an observer, I feel once you have settled in urban places, returning to the village seems quite impossible. I feel they won't be willing to return no matter what kind of solutions we try to adopt.

This perspective reflects a prevailing belief that individuals, once settled in urban locales, exhibit a diminished inclination to return, irrespective of the measures implemented to facilitate such a transition.

A respondent hailing from Bartsham Gewog echoed these concerns, underscoring the substantial investments made by migrants in urban areas, including property ownership, housing, and employment. The respondent further elucidated that some had even altered their census records, underscoring the profound nature of their commitment to urban living.

In terms of return migration, I don't see much possibility. This is because those who have migrated away to urban areas have now settled there with land,

house, and job. Some of them have even shifted their census from here. In my opinion, gungtong will only keep increasing. More so I see a danger of our community becoming empty within the next 5 to 6 years because the only population left behind right now are aged people that are physically incapable. Sooner or later, they will have to move away as well, so I see a danger of our community becoming empty very soon.

Consequently, the respondent posited that the phenomenon of gungtong, or rural depopulation, would persist and potentially intensify. Furthermore, there was apprehension regarding the declining population of the rural community, with the remaining inhabitants predominantly comprising elderly individuals whose physical capabilities would, in due course, necessitate their relocation, thereby exacerbating the impending vacuum within the community.

Another respondent from Bartsham Gewog articulated a disheartening perspective, contending that the probability of return migration was exceedingly minimal.

To share my observations, people from my village migrate to Thimphu mostly, and if not to Phuntsholing. And those who migrated to Thimphu slowly move to either Australia, USA or the UK.

Drawing a connection between internal migration and emigration to third countries, this respondent observed that individuals from their village predominantly migrated to urban centres such as Thimphu or Phuntsholing. Furthermore, a pattern emerged whereby those who initially migrated to urban Bhutanese locales eventually ventured to countries such as Australia, the United States, or the United Kingdom, indicating a trajectory away from rural life.

However, amidst these narratives of doubt and despondency, some respondents voiced optimism regarding the potential for return migration. One respondent maintained that if the prevailing "gewog setbacks" were effectively addressed, return migration could emerge as a viable prospect.

In my opinion, if these issues (gewog setbacks) are resolved, I see return migration as a possibility. I am in touch with around 5 to 6 migrants who

enquire about the water and road conditions and have said that they would like to return someday. Therefore, we do hope they will return one day.

Citing personal interactions with approximately five to six migrants who had inquired about the status of essential amenities, such as water and road infrastructure, this respondent expressed hope that these individuals might contemplate a return to their village of origin. This optimism, albeit tempered, encapsulated the belief that, with the resolution of key challenges, the allure of rural life could potentially outweigh the attractions of urbanity, paving the way for a resurgence of the rural population.

In sum, return migration in the context of rural Bhutan remains a subject of intricate dynamics, wherein doubts regarding its feasibility coexist with glimmers of hope, contingent upon the resolution of critical issues and the recalibration of individual aspirations within the broader societal landscape.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Bhutan is currently undergoing a significant transition, characterized by a shift from a predominantly rural society to an increasingly urban one, coupled with a transformation of its economy from agriculture-centric to industry and services-oriented. This transition is closely intertwined with the phenomenon of rural-urban migration, where both processes exert mutual influence.

The study's qualitative findings emphasize that while a majority of migrants are young individuals, older members of the population also engage in migration, often motivated by a desire to be closer to their children. Notably, the migration of educated young individuals plays a pivotal role in prompting the relocation of other family members and the abandonment of village homes. The underlying factors contributing to gungtong, or empty households, are diverse and encompass the absence of a viable market for agricultural products, wildlife-induced crop damages, water scarcity, limited non-agricultural economic

opportunities in rural areas, and the inability of the elderly population to sustain themselves. Additionally, the waning interest of younger generations in traditional farming practices contributes to the prevalence of gungtong.

The adverse consequences of rural-urban migration are most acutely felt in remote rural communities. The study identifies that gungtong place financial and social burdens on local residents, particularly concerning tax collection and the provision of community services. Crop damage by wild animals emerges as a significant consequence of gungtong, as wildlife is attracted to abandoned and overgrown lands.

Furthermore, the research reveals that gungtong exacerbate labour shortages and lead to a decline in local social support networks, impeding rural development efforts. However, the study also highlights some coping strategies employed by communities to address the challenges posed by gungtong. These strategies include implementing penalties on Gungtong households, providing financial compensation for failure to participate in community service, and withholding certain benefits in cases of tax evasion.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings and respondent input, two sets of recommendations have been formulated. Firstly, to address the adverse impacts of gungtong:

- **Land Maintenance and Utilization:** In cases of abandoned land, rampant bush growth poses a threat to agricultural development. To safeguard the public interest, it is advisable to make it obligatory for Gungtong households to maintain their properties in a clean condition or consider leasing or selling if the land remains unused. Households failing to meet these obligations may face financial penalties, with the collected fines allocated to employ local workers for property maintenance.
- **Enhanced Tax Traceability:** Improve tax payment traceability by establishing a robust resident registration system for better tracking of individuals' locations. Additionally, enforce mandatory tax payments for those migrating out of their designated areas,

imposing fines for non-compliance. To enhance the effectiveness of this initiative, it is recommended to implement it at the state level rather than solely as a Gewog initiative. The successful implementation of recently approved property taxes can also contribute significantly to mitigating the negative effects of gungtong experienced by local communities.

Secondly, the recommendations for reducing gungtong in rural communities, as suggested by respondents, are as follows:

- Access to Essential Services: Ensure that vital services such as internet connectivity, electricity, clean water supply, well-maintained roads, quality education, and healthcare are readily available in rural areas.
- Market Access Improvement: Invest in upgrading the network of agricultural roads to year-round highways, facilitating easier transportation of agricultural products to nearby markets and access to services that may not be available in rural areas.
- Agricultural Advancement: Promote automation and the dissemination of modern agricultural techniques through extension services. Additionally, explore financial alternatives and insurance schemes to safeguard farmers from risks associated with their livelihoods.
- Diversification of Livelihoods: Foster rural development initiatives aimed at creating diverse economic and educational opportunities within rural Bhutan. This approach aims to prevent rural residents from migrating to urban areas in search of such opportunities, ultimately reducing the incidence of gungtong.

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