



Diaspora engagement for health system resilience in Nepal: policy framework, engagement pathways, contributions and a way forward

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Key messages

- Nepal's health system is strained by recurrent disasters, political instability, financing challenges and outmigration of human resources.
- The Nepali diaspora has grown as an important but under-recognized resource, with contributions centered on remittances, emergency responses, sporadic additional financing, and knowledge transfer, particularly during crises.
- Although legal and constitutional provisions have recognized diaspora engagement, the diaspora continues to largely channel its contribution through personal ties and informal networks.
- Weak institutional mechanisms and fragmented coordination hinder effective and sustained diaspora engagement, limiting the potential for health system strengthening.
- Clear engagement frameworks to address barriers and leverage enablers could enhance the diaspora's contribution to resilience.

Background

The Nepali diaspora is rapidly expanding, increasingly diverse, and widely dispersed across regions. Migration patterns are evolving beyond short-term labor mobility to include higher education and state-facilitated overseas employment. Recent trends show a sustained rise in outmigration. Close to one million Nepalis leave the country each year. In 2024, 839,266 individuals obtained permits for foreign employment, while 112,968 students received clearance to study abroad in 2025. This trajectory is expected to continue [2, 3]. The scale and diversity of this diaspora position it as a strategic resource for Nepal's development.

Nepali diaspora is stratified by skill level and occupation, with the majority engaged in low- and semi-skilled employment in construction, manufacturing, domestic work, and security services. A small but increasingly visible segment is health professionals. The number of medical graduates receiving good standing certificates from a regulatory authority (a proxy indicator of outmigration) was 2,582 in 2023, with an annual average increase of 34% during 2020-23 [4]. Outmigration of nurses is even higher, with an estimated 8,259 nurses migrating in 2024 and an average annual outmigration rate of 27.7% during 2021-24 [5]. Given most nurses are female, this increase represents a growing proportion of the diaspora who are both health professionals and women. The government's recent approach to migration management, particularly facilitating overseas employment through bilateral agreements, such as with the United Kingdom, signals a likely continuation, and possible acceleration, of health workforce outmigration [6].

Methods

This case study was undertaken as part of a wider ReBUILD study on the role of the diaspora in supporting health system resilience. A qualitative exploratory research method was applied for the primary study of diaspora engagement mechanisms. This policy brief is prepared from the synthesis of document and literature review, and primary data collection from twelve participants connected with diaspora, migration and health-related initiatives. Interviewees included government officials, experts, returnee diaspora, diaspora members-academics and researchers, all of Nepali origin.

Policy framework

Nepal has made gradual policy progress in recognizing and engaging with diaspora (Figure 1). A key milestone came in 2008 with formal legal recognition and economic rights. The 2015 Constitution further expanded these provisions to include property ownership, investment, and cultural participation. More recently, the policy landscape has evolved to include individual migrant welfare and legal frameworks, such as the health insurance and social security schemes, which are beginning to address family and community well-being. Institutional efforts, such as establishment of the Brain Gain Center, which aims to connect diaspora expertise with national actors, have also emerged, however with limited effectiveness in practice.

Evolution of Nepal's diaspora engagement landscape

Policy and institutional development timeline (2003-24)



Figure I: Key legal and institutional arrangements concerning the Nepali diaspora

Contributions of diaspora

Diaspora contributions are primarily driven by individual initiative, rooted in family ties and personal networks, rather than formal or structured channels. Among labor migrants, engagement is shaped largely by household responsibilities, community ties, and business interests, with remittances being a central channel. Links with health sector actors similarly depend on personal connections and mutual support. Professional networks have emerged organically from these individual efforts, gradually acting as informal bridges, connecting domestic institutions.

Gradually, diaspora engagement has leveraged institutional linkages, mainly through the Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA), which functions as the primary diaspora body, with nearly one-third of diaspora respondents to the study reporting their affiliation. However, internal power dynamics, leadership contests, and symbolic visibility within the diaspora community were reported as drivers of NRNA's engagement, rather than technical expertise or sectoral priorities. Decision-making was seen as politically mediated, limiting its effectiveness as a platform for strategic health sector engagement.

Major diaspora contributions comprise financial and human capital contributions, mediated through social capital development. During COVID-19, diasporas mobilized financial, technical, and logistical support from host countries, complementing formal response mechanisms and enhancing absorptive capacity through rapid resource mobilization.

Financial contributions from the diaspora take three main forms:

- **Remittances** represent the most visible and sustained flow, providing regular support to households and local communities. They accounted for 26.2% of gross domestic product in 2024, are part of income for 35.6% of households in Nepal, and 41.7% of remittance recipients use them to finance healthcare services.
- **Philanthropic contributions** are typically mobilized during crises, offering targeted assistance such as medical supplies, emergency relief, and infrastructure support, helping to supplement overstretched health systems.
- **Investment** is primarily driven by business interests and focuses on economic opportunities that connect the diaspora with development and growth in Nepal. Despite being potentially a more sustained channel for diaspora engagement, it remains limited in scale.

Human capital development is an evolving area for diaspora contribution, primarily through the transfer of knowledge, technical skills, and professional expertise. These inputs, delivered via training, research, fellowships and knowledge exchange, position diaspora as a bridge between global health practice and domestic system needs. Such engagements, often initiated through diaspora platforms and implemented with academic institutions and sub-national governments, support both adaptive responses during shocks and longer-term system strengthening, underscoring the potential of practice-oriented research that combines global expertise with local context. Diaspora engagement in research ranges from individual projects to community organizations and international collaborations. Nepal offers opportunities to leverage diaspora expertise for establishing small, high-quality research hubs with local partners and contributing to spread of knowledge and visibility of their contribution.

Social capital constitutes a critical dimension of diaspora contribution. Interviewees emphasized that trust, networks, shared norms and cultural engagement sustain connections, motivate continued involvement, and enable collective action. By fostering environments conducive to coordination and mutual support, both in Nepal and host countries, diaspora social capital underpins the development of financial and human capital and facilitates policy advocacy. It also helps overcome engagement barriers, creating an enabling environment that amplifies the impact of other forms of diaspora contribution.

Political commitments for promoting diaspora engagement and contributions

In recent years, diaspora engagement has also gained prominence in Nepal's political sphere, closely linked to broader economic development. Major political parties explicitly included diaspora-focused agendas in their 2026 election commitments. These pledges ranged from creating an enabling environment for diaspora engagement to implementing instruments that strengthen financial, human, and social capital. Diaspora engagements are explicitly committed by ensuring rights, interests, and entitlements, including voting rights for Non-Resident Nepalis and through policy adoption to utilize their knowledge, skills, and earnings in nation-building. Commitment includes encouraging financial contributions by positioning the diaspora as organic investors and providing tax incentives in priority sectors and safeguarding their property rights. These commitments further advocate for strengthening human capital by establishing a national knowledge bank and a knowledge innovation center to harness diaspora expertise and skills. Promoting long-term engagement under the slogan 'once a Nepali, always a Nepali,' and recognizing Non-Resident Nepalis as Nepal's goodwill ambassadors in the international community contribute to the social commitment made by the political parties in their 2026 election manifestoes.

Barriers to diaspora engagement

Though diaspora contribute to Nepal in different forms and have been increasingly recognized, there are various barriers to engagement, the elimination of which is necessary to create opportunities for greater contributions. Nepali diaspora engagement is primarily hindered by bureaucratic hurdles, weak institutional structures, and limited trust within the system. Complex and lengthy administrative processes, poor coordination, and fragmented decision-making discourage participation, while existing engagement mechanisms lack operational clarity. Engagement is often person- rather than system-driven, making it vulnerable to discontinuity and political shifts. An individual's gender and social profile also matter in diaspora engagement, making it more challenging for women or those without visible profile. Limited trust, low receptiveness from local actors, and perceived professional and political tensions are other barriers, particularly around financial transparency, further undermining collaboration. Additionally, sustainability concerns, including dependency on charity-driven approaches and unpredictability of diaspora support, limit long-term planning and alignment with national health priorities.

Policy messages: Facilitating diaspora engagement and contributions

Strengthen the policy framework

- Strengthen the enabling policy environment by moving beyond broad commitments and providing clear operational guidance for diaspora engagement across health sectors
- Develop a national guiding framework to facilitate structured partnerships between diaspora groups and local governments, institutions, and civil society organizations

Build coordinated mechanisms for diaspora engagement

- Establish a streamlined engagement platform that reduces bureaucratic barriers, clarifies procedures, and creates predictable, structured pathways for diaspora collaboration

- Support institutionalization of engagement by encouraging formal networks and sustained institutional linkages with government bodies, professional councils, and academic institutions, alongside supportive avenues for investment
- Strengthen and mobilize existing diaspora groups through professional networks and offer scalable platforms for coordinated knowledge transfer

Develop accountability and enhance transparency and trust

- Institutionalize mechanisms to track, document, and recognize diaspora contributions, fostering transparency
- Create an enabling environment to complement national and local development efforts, such as creating institutional interfaces and arrangements for co-financing in priority areas

Mobilize skill and knowledge transfer

- Create structured pathways to harness returnees' skills and expertise, technical placements, mentorship, and knowledge-transfer mechanisms
- Enable returnee diaspora integration into national systems through think tanks and advisory supports

Support diaspora well-being and sustainable engagement

- Prioritize the health and well-being of diaspora communities, including stronger support through diplomatic missions and targeted reintegration assistance for returnees
- Acknowledge the contribution of diaspora through provision of basic reintegration facilities
- Formal acknowledgement of diaspora participation through institutionalization of recognition and incentive mechanisms
- Establish potential institutional platforms to facilitate diaspora engagement for the health sector and beyond ensuring sustainability
- Establish formal coordination platforms and convert fragmented, ad hoc engagement into strategic, system-aligned contributions

Conclusion

The Nepali diaspora has a widening potential for strengthening health system resilience through financial, human, and social capital contributions. However, that strength remains underutilized due to fragmented and sporadic engagement mechanisms. A structured, transparent, and coordinated operational framework for engagement and contribution can transform diaspora involvement into a sustainable driver for health systems resilience and wider development as the nation transitions away from the list of least developed countries.

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This brief is one of a series on diaspora produced by ReBUILD for Resilience. Find others and further information on this study - the role of the diaspora in supporting health system resilience in fragile and shock-prone settings - on the ReBUILD website.

<https://www.rebuildconsortium.com/projects/diaspora-health-system-resilience/>

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