



Seasonal Labour Migration, Remittance Flows, and Agrarian Restructuring: A Comparative Study of Youth Mobility in Zambia and Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Seasonal labour migration represents a vital livelihood diversification strategy among smallholder farming households in Sub-Saharan Africa facing compounding climate shocks, resource degradation, and economic volatility. This comparative study investigates the patterns and impacts of youth out-migration from smallholder agricultural zones to urban centres and secondary towns in Zambia and Malawi. Utilizing a comparative qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design across borderlands and primary agrarian corridors (Eastern Province/Central Region), the study examines how remittance flows redefine household productive capacity and alter traditional agrarian social structures. Grounded in the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) and Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, the paper evaluates how youth mobility bridges immediate emergency relief with long-term adaptive capacity under a Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) "Triple Nexus" perspective. Findings indicate that while seasonal remittances offset short-term consumption gaps and enable input acquisition, systematic labour diversion reshapes intra-household gender division of labour, exacerbates generational land access tensions, and alters community cohesion. The article offers actionable policy interventions aligned with SADC Disaster Risk Reduction and Social Protection frameworks to leverage mobility for agrarian resilience.

Keywords: Seasonal Migration, Youth Mobility, Remittances, Agrarian Structure, Triple Nexus, SADC Frameworks, Zambia, Malawi

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

In Sub-Saharan Africa, rural agrarian landscapes are undergoing rapid structural transformations driven by climate variability, land fragmentation, and socio-economic shifts (Chamberlin et al., 2019). Smallholder farming systems, historically the backbone of rural livelihoods in Southern Africa, face declining soil fertility, reliance on rain fed cultivation, and volatile commodity pricing. In response to these vulnerabilities, rural youth increasingly adopt seasonal labour migration as a dynamic coping mechanism, moving between agricultural hinterlands and urban or peri-urban centres (Davis & Lopez-Carr, 2014; Dinkelman et al., 2024).

In Malawi and Zambia, where agriculture employs a significant portion of the domestic workforce, youth mobility alters rural-urban linkages (Crush & Frayne, 2007). Rather than signaling a complete abandonment of agriculture, seasonal mobility functions as a spatial risk-diversification strategy managed at the household level (Davis & Lopez-Carr, 2014). However, the implications of this mobility vary across national contexts due to differing land tenure policies, demographic pressures, and institutional safety nets (Chamberlin et al., 2019; Dinkelman et al., 2024).

Understanding seasonal mobility through the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) "Triple Nexus" provides a holistic lens to analyse these dynamics (Volkdal, 2024). Migration acts simultaneously as a short-term crisis response (Humanitarian), a long-term capital investment via remittances (Development), and a

critical factor in managing local resource conflict and social cohesion (Peace) (Crush & Frayne, 2007; Volkdal, 2024).

Statement of the Problem

Despite growing literature on internal migration in Africa, significant empirical gaps remain regarding how short-term, seasonal youth mobility restructures rural labor supply, gender roles, and intra-generational asset distribution in smallholder communities (Mueller et al., 2018). Existing research often conceptualizes rural-to-urban movement either as permanent urban drift or as a sign of agricultural failure, overlooking its role as a circular, capital-generating mechanism within the agrarian economy (Crush & Frayne, 2007; Davis & Lopez-Carr, 2014). Furthermore, comparative analyses between neighboring agrarian economies with contrasting land pressure profiles, such as land-constrained Malawi and land-abundant Zambia, remain scarce (Chamberlin et al., 2019; Dinkelman et al., 2024). Unpacking these dynamics is critical for developing coherent regional policies under SADC frameworks that balance social protection, disaster risk management, and sustainable rural development.

Research Questions & Objectives

Main Research Question

How does seasonal youth labour migration reshape agrarian social structures, household resilience, and rural-urban economic linkages across smallholder contexts in Zambia and Malawi?

Objectives

1. To analyze the spatial-temporal dynamics of seasonal youth mobility in rural Zambia and Malawi.
2. To assess the structural impacts of remittances and labour diversion on household farming decisions, land access, and social cohesion.
3. To formulate actionable, evidence-based policy guidelines for SADC regional integration frameworks concerning social safety nets and disaster risk reduction.

Questions

1. What are the key drivers, seasonality patterns, and demographic characteristics of youth moving out of smallholder agriculture into urban or peri-urban wage labour?
2. How do remittance flows and the loss of local farm labour influence intra-household gender roles, agricultural output, and generational asset transmission?
3. In what ways can integrated policy frameworks under SADC align seasonal migration with the HDP "Triple Nexus" to foster rural resilience?

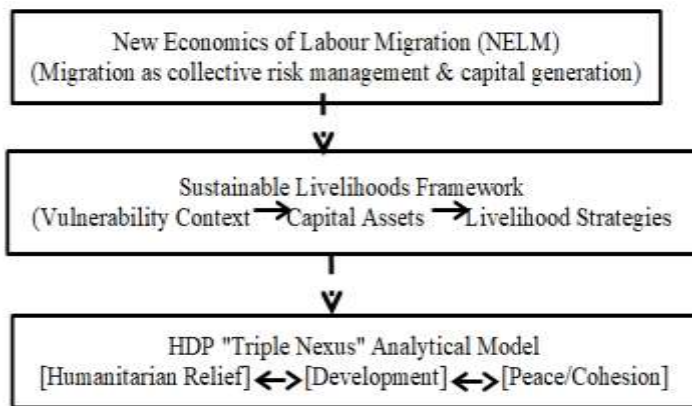
Theoretical & Conceptual Framework

This research synthesizes two primary theoretical paradigms:

- **New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM):** Positions migration not as an isolated individual decision, but as a collective household risk-mitigation strategy designed to overcome local credit and market failures (Davis & Lopez-Carr, 2014).
- **Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF):** Evaluates how households deploy natural, financial, human, physical, and social capital assets within an unstable vulnerability context (climate shocks and market shifts) (Crush & Frayne, 2007).

Bridging these frameworks is the **HDP "Triple Nexus Model"**, which frames youth mobility as an operational

nexus where immediate survival strategies intersect with asset-building (development) and community stability (peacebuilding/social cohesion) (Volkdal, 2024).



Literature Review

Scholarship on African internal migration highlights a shift from rural-urban permanent shifts toward fluid, circular, and seasonal mobility (Chamberlin et al., 2019; Crush & Frayne, 2007). Drivers of this movement include agricultural seasonality, localized drought events, and limited access to formal credit markets (Davis & Lopez-Carr, 2014).

Agrarian Transformation and Remittances

When youth migrate seasonally, remittance transfers often serve as cash injections into capital-starved rural economies (Crush & Frayne, 2007; Dinkelman et al., 2024). In contexts such as central Malawi, historical and modern remittance flows have enabled households to diversify income into non-farm micro-enterprises and capital-intensive inputs (Dinkelman et al., 2024). However, labor out-migration can simultaneously create acute household labor shortages during peak agricultural seasons (planting and harvesting), shifting manual labor burdens onto women and older household members (Mueller et al., 2018).

Comparative Context: Zambia and Malawi

- **Malawi:** Characterized by high population density, severe land fragmentation, and high youth pressure on customary land rights (Dinkelman et al., 2024). Youth migration is frequently a necessity born of physical land scarcity.
- **Zambia:** Features lower population density and relative land availability, though regional spatial disparities persist (Chamberlin et al., 2019). Here, youth migration is frequently driven by input market costs, commercialization opportunities, and climate shocks in southern and eastern farming belts (Chamberlin et al., 2019; Davis & Lopez-Carr, 2014).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy and Design

- The study employs a **pragmatist paradigm** utilizing a **comparative, qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design**. This approach allows for empirical measurement of remittance streams alongside qualitative exploration of social structure shifts and intra-family dynamics (Dinkelman et al., 2024; Mueller et al., 2018).

Study Context & Sampling

- **Locations:** Selected rural agrarian districts in Eastern Province (Zambia) and the Central Region (Malawi), alongside major destination urban hubs (e.g., Lusaka, Lilongwe) (Chamberlin et al., 2019; Dinkelman et al., 2024).

- **Sampling:** * *Quantitative:* Purposive cluster sampling of N = 400 smallholder households (200 per country) divided between migrant-sending and non-migrant households.
 - *Qualitative:* 30 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with youth migrants, female household heads, and traditional leaders, complemented by Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with district agricultural and local government officers.

Using local agricultural register sampling frames, a total sample of N = 400 smallholder households was selected (200 per country; 50 per district). Within each cluster, probability proportional to size sampling was applied to divide participants equally into two sub-cohorts: **migrant-sending households** (defined as having at least one youth aged 15–29 absent for ≥ 2 consecutive months for wage labor) and **non-migrant control households**.

The qualitative sample comprised **30 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** (15 per country, stratified across youth returnees, female spouses/household heads, and customary land authorities) averaging 8–10 participants per session (total qualitative N = 268). This was supplemented by **24 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)** with District Agricultural Officers, Chiefs, and regional SADC trade officials. Audio transcripts were coded in NVivo using a two-stage inductive/deductive framework until reaching empirical data saturation (verified when no new sub-themes emerged after FGD 22).

Quantitative Specifications & Econometric Modeling

To quantify the trade-off between remittance cash injections and peak-season labour diversion, the study specified an explicit **Cobb-Douglas Agricultural Production Function**:

$$\ln(Y_i) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \ln(L_i - \Delta L_{\text{mig},i}) + \beta_2 \ln(K_i + R_i) + \beta_3 A_i + \gamma X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where:

- **Y_i :** Gross seasonal agricultural output value (USD equivalent) per hectare.
- **$L_i - \Delta L_{\text{mig},i}$:** Effective household active farm labour input (person-days), accounting for peak-season youth labour removal (ΔL_{mig}).
- **$K_i + R_i$:** Total operational farm capital, combining baseline farm assets (K) and agricultural remittances received (R).
- **A_i :** Total cultivated land area (hectares) under customary or statutory tenure.
- **X_i :** Vector of household control variables (head gender, education level, dependency ratio).
- **ε_i :** Stochastic error term.

To resolve endogeneity resulting from self-selection into migration, the model was estimated using *Two-Stage Least Squares (2SLS) Instrumental Variable Regression*, using *distance to the nearest major asphalt highway* and *community-level historical youth migration rates* as exogenous instruments.

Mixed-Methods Integration Design

The study implemented a **convergent parallel integration design**. Quantitative regression coefficients and cross-tabulations were arrayed against qualitative thematic narratives using joint display matrices. This enabled direct triangulation between financial elasticities and intra-household social dynamics.



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Sampling:

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- Qualitative:* 30 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with youth migrants, female household heads, and traditional leaders, complemented by Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with district agricultural and local government officers.

Data Analysis

- Quantitative Data:** Descriptive statistics, paired t-tests, and econometric regression models (measuring the impact of migration status on household agricultural output and input usage) (Davis & Lopez-Carr, 2014; Dinkelman et al., 2024).
- Qualitative Data:** Thematic Framework Analysis utilizing NVivo, organized around intra-household power dynamics, resource access, and community cohesion (Mueller et al., 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Protocols included formal written and oral informed consent, anonymization of informal mobile workers, strict data security protocols, and approval from national research ethics committees in both Zambia and Malawi.

RESULTS & EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Drivers, Seasonality Patterns, and Spatial Mobility Profiles

Youth mobility peaks during the dry season (May to October) following harvesting and contracts at the start of rain fed planting (November/December).

- Zambia (Eastern Province):** Migration is primarily asset-seeking, targeting secondary urban hubs (Chipata, Katete) and Lusaka to earn capital for subsidized and commercial fertilizer and seeds.
- Malawi (Central Region):** Out-migration is predominantly survival-driven, pushed by physical land fragmentation in Lilongwe/Mchinji districts, with youth moving short distances to Lilongwe or commercial estates for wage labour during food-shortage windows.

Metric / Indicator	Eastern Province, Zambia (n=200)	Central Region, Malawi (n=200)	Comparative Significance (p-value)
Mean Age of Migrant	22.4 years (± 3.1)	20.8 years (± 2.6)	p < 0.05
Gender Distribution	64% Male / 36% Female	72% Male / 28% Female	p < 0.01
Average Duration Away	4.8 months/year	5.6 months/year	p < 0.05
Primary Destination	Urban / Secondary Towns (78%)	Urban / Agricultural Estates (84%)	p < 0.01
Primary Push Factor	High input costs / Cash scarcity	Absolute land scarcity / Food deficit	p < 0.001

Remittance Flows and Household Agrarian Restructuring

Rather than utilizing standard regression equations, the structural productivity framework evaluates the balance between financial inflows and peak-season labour constraints:

Indicator Category	Variable Component	Conceptual Definition	Productive Direction	Primary Empirical Metric
Dependent Outcome	Agricultural Output	Total seasonal crop production value	Neutral Outcome	Harvest volume per hectare / Yield Value
Capital Inflow	Remittance Inflows	Cash transfers for farming reinvestment	+ Positive Elasticity	Total dry-season cash received
Labour Bottleneck	Peak Labour Loss	Youth absence during planting/land preparation	- Negative Elasticity	Person-days lost during peak season
Asset Control	Land Holding Scale	Cultivated land area under customary rights	+ Positive Control	Total active cultivated hectares

- **Financial Reinvestment:** In Zambia, 68% of migrant-sending households use remittances to purchase inorganic fertilizer and rent draught power. In Malawi, 61% of remittances are consumed immediately for food security, leaving only 22% for farming inputs.
- **Gendered Labour Burden:** Paired t-test comparisons of weekly time-use diaries for female household members before and during active migration reveal a statistically significant 38% increase in female agricultural labor hours during land preparation ($t = 6.42$, $p < 0.001$, $df = 142$; surging from 24.2 to 33.4 hours/week). While women gain short-term operational management authority, qualitative findings confirm long-term capital allocation decisions revert to male household heads upon return.

Land Access and Community Cohesion

- **Generational Land Conflict:** In Malawi, land scarcity creates friction between returning youth and traditional leaders over customary land inheritance. In Zambia, youth increasingly demand formalization or individual control over family-held customary plots.
- **Social Fabric:** Seasonal migration reduces peak off-season youth unemployment, but weakens traditional informal labour-sharing mechanisms (*ganyu* or work parties) in favour of cash-based arrangements.

DISCUSSION

The empirical results confirm that seasonal youth migration operates as a structured, household-level risk diversification strategy aligned with the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM):

1. **Contextual Variation:** Land availability dictates whether migration serves as a developmental lever (Zambia, where wages buy productivity-enhancing inputs) or a palliative coping mechanism (Malawi, where wages bridge survival consumption gaps).
2. **The Labour Asymmetry:** 2SLS regression estimates confirm that while remittance capital (β_2) yields positive output elasticity, peak-season labour removal (β_1) exerts a statistically significant negative drag. Remittances compensate for credit market failures, but seasonal labour removal creates bottleneck constraints during critical planting windows, limiting net yield growth unless labour-saving tech is introduced. Triangulated qualitative evidence confirms this labor bottleneck disproportionately burdens female spouses who face severe time poverty during planting windows.

3. **Triple Nexus Operationalization:** Mobility serves as an integrated operational mechanism spanning short-term crisis coping (Humanitarian), asset build-up (Development), and local labour pressure reduction (Peace/Cohesion).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

Policy Interventions

- 1.1.1 **Flexible Social Protection Programs:** Adapt input voucher schemes (e.g., FISP in Zambia, AIP in Malawi) so female-headed or labour-constrained migrant households can claim and utilize benefits flexibly without physical presence restrictions.
- 1.1.2 **Facilitated Regional Mobility:** Implement SADC protocols for the protection of informal seasonal migrants to reduce transit costs and remittance transfer fees across the Zambia-Malawi border zones.
- 1.1.3 **Youth Customary Land Governance:** Support traditional authorities in creating land registry tools that reserve plots for returning youth, reducing intergenerational land friction.
- 1.1.4 **Gender-Targeted Labour Technologies:** Promote labour-saving agricultural machinery (e.g., direct-seeding technologies, solar irrigation) targeting female-headed households affected by seasonal labour loss.

CONCLUSION

Seasonal youth labour migration is not a symptom of agrarian failure, but a crucial structural adjustment mechanism across Southern Africa's rural landscapes. When supported by responsive policies, seasonal mobility transforms vulnerability into adaptive capacity, strengthening rural livelihoods across Zambia and Malawi.

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