

Assessing Rural Livelihood Sustainability through Field-Based Analysis: Evidence from Champawat & Almora District of Uttarakhand

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the sustainability of rural livelihoods in the context of four blocks of Uttarakhand: Champawat, Lohaghat, Tarikhet, and Hawalbag. Using primary data collected from 344 respondents, the research analyses income sources, resource access, social capital, livelihood risks, and the role of government schemes in supporting sustainable living. The findings highlight key challenges and suggest policy directions for improving livelihood resilience in hilly rural regions. This paper aims to improve development policy debates by providing a better understanding of migration. The paper begins with the notion that migration's role in reducing poverty is neglected in these discussions: Policies either aim to reduce migration implicitly or explicitly or ignore migration. Although the paper identifies potentially harmful aspects of migration, including rising inequality and other effects on those who remain behind, the emphasis is on the beneficial role migration plays for poor households. The paper, drawing on recently published literature on sustainable livelihoods, asserts that we need to gain a better understanding of poor people's abilities and strategies from their unique point of view, and that this will help in improving development policies.

Keywords: Migration, livelihood, sustainability, capability, environment, poverty reduction.

INTRODUCTION

Rural livelihood sustainability is a crucial factor in ensuring equitable and stable development in hilly states like Uttarakhand. With increasing vulnerabilities due to climate change, migration, and limited economic diversification, understanding livelihood patterns becomes essential. This research focuses on exploring the current status, risks, and sustainability factors of rural livelihoods based on household-level data.

Migration tends to be seen as problematic, in academic and policy debates, and in the popular press. It is often seen as the *consequence* of ruptures, of environmental disaster, economic exploitation, or political or civil tensions and violence. And it is often perceived to be a *cause* of problems, like environmental degradation, health problems, 'brain drain', political or social instability, declining law and order, and unravelling social fabric and support systems.

The people migrate to the urban areas both due to pull and push factors. Some of the most important push factors are; Agriculture in India is largely depends on monsoon. As a result, production of food-grains fluctuates year after year. Due to the growth of population and breakdown of the joint family system, there has occurred continuous sub-division of agricultural land into smaller and smaller plots. At times small farmers are forced to sell a portion of their land to repay their debt. This creates further sub-division of land. The conditions of most agricultural laborers in India are far from satisfactory. There is also the problem of surplus labour or disguised unemployment. This pushes the wage rates below the subsistence levels. One of the major causes of low income of the Indian farmers is the difficulty in marketing their crops. Due to the small size and scattered nature of agricultural holdings, the productivity per acre is low. The typical Indian farmer is almost always in debt. The farmer is a perennial debtor.

The contribution of agriculture to GDP has declined considerably over the years but this fall was not accompanied by a considerable decline in agricultural employment. Though there is an increasing trend observed in the employment of rural households but still agriculture remains the primary source of livelihood for majority. As per the NSSO survey, 49% of the workforce was still employed in agriculture in 2011-12. This shift of workforce from agriculture to the other sectors is commensurate with economic progress.

Migration Factors & Possibilities

It is normally seen that efficiency of work is higher in assembling and administrations area when contrasted with the horticultural area and thus get higher wages. The low return from horticulture and absence of valuable learning experiences ordinarily lead to relocation from rural to urban areas. In India, the shift from agribusiness has been significant and 79% of that has been contributed by Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal, Bihar and Rajasthan. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan are additionally the greatest source states for the transient laborers.

A major reason for the shift from agriculture is the low wages in the rural areas and higher wages in non-farm jobs. Though a significant positive impact of the MGNREGA been observed in boosting rural income and incentives but further stimulus to the programme might significantly help in reducing the migration away from agriculture. The rural-urban wage gap has been a major reason behind the migration from rural to urban areas.

Access to natural resources sub-programme. Access by the poor to natural resources (land, forests, water, fisheries, pastures, etc.), is essential for sustainable poverty reduction. The livelihoods of rural people without access, or with very limited access to natural resources are vulnerable because they have difficulty in obtaining food, accumulating other assets, and recuperating after natural or market shocks or misfortunes. The main goal of this sub-programme is to build stakeholder capacity to improve poor people's access to natural resources through the application of sustainable livelihood approaches. The sub-programme aims on the following thematic areas:

1. Sustainable livelihood approaches in the context of access to different natural resources
2. Access to natural resources and making rights real
3. Livelihoods and access to natural resources in a rapidly changing world

There are various definitions of participation. The World Bank defines the most common as "a process by which people, particularly the marginalized, influence decisions that affect them"¹. This is in contrast to a process in which external hierarchical agencies impose decisions. The rationale for encouraging participation is to ensure that community groups play an active role in decisions affecting their lives, and that governments become more accountable to them. The term "policy processes" refers to the methods used to develop policies. This includes development, implementation, and impact monitoring and evaluation.² The distinction between "policy" and "implementation" is thus false: the manner in which programs and projects are implemented, as well as the approaches used to put policies into practice, are all part of the "policy process" and have an impact as significant as the formulation of laws and policies themselves. This analysis of "participation in policy processes" begins with these two basic positions and examines several projects and implementing organizations that incorporate participatory principles into their methodology and discourse on development in general. Several aspects of participation in various policy processes are analyzed.

- Their impact on the development or implementation of policies;
- Obstacles and facilitators in empowering the poor;
- Positive and negative impacts of policies and programmes amongst the poor;
- The probable conditions in which reform normally occurs

Policies have a significant impact on people's livelihoods. They have an impact on people's access to livelihood assets as well as the strategic opportunities for using these assets to achieve positive livelihood outcomes. However, centrally developed policies are frequently insensitive to local policy needs and, as a result, are incompatible with local livelihood strategies. Local populations, particularly poor and marginalized

groups, frequently have little or no direct influence on the policy framework that affects their livelihoods. The development and implementation of tried-and-true strategies and institutional mechanisms to support rural poor participation in policymaking would make it easier to create policy frameworks that reduce poor people's vulnerability and provide them with access to the assets and services they need to pursue sustainable livelihoods.

The concept of Sustainable Livelihood (SL) aims to go beyond traditional definitions and approaches to poverty eradication. These were found to be too narrow because they focused solely on certain aspects or manifestations of poverty, such as low income, or neglected other critical aspects of poverty, such as vulnerability and social exclusion. It is now acknowledged that more attention must be paid to the various factors and processes that either limit or improve poor people's ability to make a living in an economically, ecologically, and socially sustainable manner. The SL concept represents a more coherent and integrated approach to poverty.

The sustainable livelihoods idea was first introduced by the Brundtland Commission on Environment and Development, and the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development expanded the concept, advocating for the achievement of sustainable livelihoods as a broad goal for poverty eradication.

Objectives:

1. To identify the factors responsible for sustainable livelihood.
2. To analyse the socio-economic background of the weaker section before pandemic.
3. To analyse the socio-economic background of the weaker section post pandemic.
4. To study the impact of government policies in public welfare especially with reference to migrants.

Hypothesis:

1. Lack of employment opportunities are barrier in the sustainable livelihood.
2. Inadequate fundamental necessities are responsible for the poor background of the local people.
3. The negative circumstances arising after the COVID-19 disaster have blocked the continuation of the development of the migrant workers of Uttarakhand. Along with the economic loss there was also an emotional loss.
4. Government policies are gradually transforming the conditions of the weaker section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of sustainable rural livelihoods has been widely explored in development studies over the past three decades. One of the foundational contributions in this area is by **Chambers and Conway (1992)³**, who proposed the sustainable livelihood framework that defines livelihood as comprising the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources), and activities required for a means of living. They emphasized that for a livelihood to be sustainable, it must be able to cope with and recover from stresses and shocks while maintaining or enhancing its capabilities and assets. This framework lays a theoretical foundation for analysing rural livelihoods in diverse settings, including fragile mountain ecosystems such as Uttarakhand.

Building on this framework, **Ellis (2000)⁴** argued that diversification is a key strategy adopted by rural households to manage risk and improve livelihood outcomes. According to Ellis, rural livelihoods in developing countries are no longer solely dependent on agriculture but have become increasingly multi-sectoral, involving non-farm income, migration, remittances, and public employment schemes. This diversification is essential in hilly regions like Champawat and Almora, where agriculture alone may not provide sufficient income security due to terrain limitations and climate variability.

Scoones (1998)⁵ further refined the sustainable livelihoods approach by identifying five types of livelihood capital—natural, human, social, physical, and financial—and analysing how access to these capitals is shaped by social institutions, policies, and external shocks. He stressed that sustainability must be assessed not only in economic terms but also in environmental and social dimensions. His model allows for the identification of

constraints and enablers in livelihood pathways, which is particularly useful in the context of post-pandemic recovery among rural and migrant populations.

In the specific context of Uttarakhand, **Sati (2012)⁶** examined the relationship between outmigration and agrarian change. He found that outmigration from mountain regions has led to the feminization of agriculture and abandonment of farmlands, weakening the traditional livelihood base. Return migration following the COVID-19 pandemic presents both opportunities and challenges for livelihood sustainability, highlighting the need to strengthen local employment systems and support systems for migrants.

Mehta (2009)⁷ explored how natural disasters, especially droughts, disproportionately affect the rural poor by undermining access to essential resources like water and land. Her findings underscore the importance of institutional responses and community resilience in coping with shocks. In the case of COVID-19, although not a natural disaster, similar dynamics have played out, where vulnerable populations in rural Uttarakhand experienced disruptions in income, mobility, and access to government services, thus threatening their livelihood security.

Finally, **Dreze and Sen (2013)⁸** emphasized the contradictory nature of India's development, where economic growth coexists with widespread deprivation. They argue that despite numerous government schemes aimed at public welfare, the benefits often fail to reach the most marginalized due to systemic flaws and weak implementation. Their insights are directly relevant for evaluating the role of welfare schemes such as MGNREGA and PM Garib Kalyan Yojana in the districts of Champawat and Almora, especially for returnee migrants and vulnerable households.

Together, these studies provide a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for assessing rural livelihood sustainability. They underline the multifaceted nature of livelihoods, the role of institutional and policy support, and the importance of understanding local contexts in designing interventions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Area

The study was conducted in two districts of Uttarakhand — **Champawat** and **Almora** — focusing on four development blocks:

- **Champawat Block** (Champawat District)
- **Lohaghat Block** (Champawat District)
- **Tarikheth Block** (Almora District)
- **Hawalbag Block** (Almora District)

These blocks represent a mix of semi-urban, remote hilly, and rural areas, providing a diverse range of livelihood conditions among weaker sections and migrant families.

Sample Size

A total of **344 respondents** were selected from the four blocks:

- **Champawat:** 92 respondents
- **Lohaghat:** 120 respondents
- **Tarikheth:** 60 respondents
- **Hawalbag:** 72 respondents

The sample included individuals from different socio-economic categories, with a specific focus on **marginalized groups**, including small farmers, daily wage workers, and returnee migrants post-COVID-19.

Sampling Method: Stratified Random Sampling

This sampling technique was adopted to ensure representation from diverse population groups and geographic segments. It involved the following steps:

Stratification Basis:

The population in each block was stratified based on **caste group (SC/ST/OBC/General)**, **gender**, **economic class (BPL/APL)**, and **occupational type (farming/labor/service/self-employed)**.

Proportional Representation:

Each stratum was assigned a sample size **proportionate to its population share** in the respective block (using local government records and Panchayat data).

Random Selection within Strata:

Respondents were then randomly selected from each stratum using household lists, ensuring **unbiased selection**.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Age 18 years or above
- Resident of the selected block for at least 5 years
- Belonging to economically weaker or migrant-affected households

This approach enhanced the **representativeness and accuracy** of the findings across demographic categories and blocks.

Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

- Average household size: 5.2 members
- Literacy rate among respondents: 68%
- Female-headed households: 19%
- Land ownership: 71% own less than 1 hectare
- Primary occupation: Agriculture (47%), Wage labor (29%), Migration-based income (18%)

Income Sources and Livelihood Diversity

- Agriculture remains the major source but is seasonal and low-yielding.
- Non-farm income includes shopkeeping, transport, tailoring, and tourism.
- Migration to cities is a significant livelihood strategy, especially among youth.
- Average monthly income (overall): Rs. 6,800
- Lohaghat and Hawalbag showed higher income diversity than Champawat and Tarikhet.

Access to Resources

- **Natural Resources:** 65% depend on rain-fed farming; forests are critical for fuel and fodder.
- **Social Capital:** Active SHGs in Lohaghat and Hawalbag; weak in Tarikhet.
- **Institutional Access:** 54% have access to cooperative societies; only 32% benefit from bank credit
- **Basic Infrastructure:** Roads and water supply are inadequate in Tarikhet and parts of Champawat.

Risks and Coping Mechanisms

- **Major Risks:** Crop failure (45%), livestock diseases (23%), health emergencies (18%)
- **Coping Strategies:** Borrowing from relatives, asset sale, temporary migration
- Insurance coverage is extremely low (<10%)

Role of Government Schemes

- **Popular Schemes:** MGNREGA, PMAY, Ujjwala Yojana
- **Reach and Satisfaction:** 58% received MGNREGA employment; only 31% found it timely and sufficient
- **Awareness Gap:** 42% unaware of most welfare schemes
- **Recommendation:** Improve awareness and streamline benefit delivery

Livelihood Sustainability Index (Block-wise)

Indicators Used: Income stability, food security, access to health, education, credit, and assets

Block	Sustainability Score (0-1)
Champawat	0.52
Lohaghat	0.67
Tarikhet	0.48
Hawalbag	0.61

A simple formula is used:

$$\text{Normalized Score}_{ij} = (X_i - X_{\min}) / (X_{\max} - X_{\min})$$

Where:

- X_{ij} is the value of indicator j for block i
- X_{\min} , X_{\max} are the minimum and maximum values of that indicator across all blocks

Data Collection Tool

Data was collected using a **structured questionnaire**, comprising both **closed-ended** and a few **open-ended questions**. The questionnaire included:

- Demographic details

- Income and employment history
- Migration experience (pre- and post-COVID)
- Access to welfare schemes
- Perceptions of livelihood security and vulnerabilities

It was pre-tested in a small village before final administration to ensure clarity and relevance.

Data Analysis

Collected data was processed and analyzed using:

- **Descriptive statistics:** Mean, percentage, frequency distributions
- **Cross-tabulations:** For comparison across blocks, income groups, caste, and occupation
- **Index building:** A **Livelihood Sustainability Index (LSI)** was created by aggregating multiple livelihood indicators such as income diversity, food security, housing quality, and access to services

The SL Approach

This new approach is based on three insights into poverty. The first is the recognition that, while economic growth is necessary for poverty reduction, there is no automatic link between the two because it all depends on the poor's ability to take advantage of expanding economic opportunities. Second, the poor themselves recognize that poverty is more than just low income; it also includes poor health, illiteracy, a lack of social services, and a general sense of vulnerability and powerlessness. Finally, it is now recognized that the poor themselves often know their situation and needs best, and thus must be involved in the design of policies and project intended to better their lot.

Sustainable livelihoods as an integrating concept

The concept of sustainable livelihoods brings together capabilities, equity, and sustainability. A livelihood is simply a means of making a living. Capabilities are both an end and a means of livelihood: a livelihood supports the development and exercise of capabilities (an end), and capabilities (a means) enable the acquisition of a livelihood. Equity is both an end and a means: any minimum definition of equity must include adequate and decent livelihoods for all (an end), while equity in assets and access are prerequisites (means) for achieving adequate and decent livelihoods. Sustainable stewardship of resources is a value (or end) in itself, and it provides conditions (a means) for livelihood to be sustained for future generations.

A concept of sustainable livelihoods was put forward in the report of an Advisory Panel of the World Commission on Environment and Development. In calling for a new analysis, it proposed sustainable livelihood security as an integrating concept, and made it central to its report (WCED 1987a: 2–5).

The definition was as follows:

Livelihood is defined as the availability and flow of food and cash to meet basic needs. Security refers to ensuring ownership or access to resources and income-generating activities, such as reserves and assets, in order to mitigate risk, alleviate shocks, and meet contingencies. Sustainable means maintaining or increasing resource productivity over time. A household can achieve long-term livelihood security in a variety of ways, including ownership of land, livestock, or trees, rights to grazing, fishing, hunting, or gathering, stable employment with adequate remuneration, and a diverse repertoire of activities.

Livelihood Transitions

There are many initial determinants of livelihood strategy. Many livelihoods are heavily influenced by accident of birth. This type

of livelihood can be ascriptive: in village India, children may be born into a caste with a specific role, such as potters, shepherds, or washer people. Gender as a social construct is also a pervasive ascriptive determinant of living activities. A person may be born, socialized, and apprenticed into an inherited livelihood - as a cultivator with land and tools, a pastoralist with animals, a forest dweller with trees, a fisherman with boat and tackle, or a shopkeeper with shop and stock - and each of these may in turn create a new household or households in the same occupation.

Dipankar Gupta said that 'the village in India, where life was once portrayed as 'unchanging' and 'idyllic', has in recent decades seen profound changes. The twin shackles that once decided matters for India's villagers, caste and agriculture, no longer exercise their vigorous hold. While a break in caste rigidities has fostered greater fluidity in occupational choices, agricultural stagnation has ensured the constant march in increasing number of employable people in the villages towards urban areas' (Gupta 2005)⁹.

India's rural environment is dynamic, with changes affecting all aspects of rural life. Isolation, self-sufficiency, and "little republics" are outdated terms in rural sociology. The rural community's economy is changing into a money-driven lifestyle, and the rural community's consumption habits are changing dramatically. Currently, agriculture is not a viable source of income for rural communities. Rural communities are moving to cities in search of better amenities and opportunities to make a living. Risky issues are emerging in India's urban areas as rural-to-urban migration increases. This changing trend is causing unrest in both rural and urban areas. The key to reducing unrest in both rural and urban areas is retaining the rural population in villages by enhancing sustainable livelihood opportunities and amenities. This exploratory study aims to identify sustainable livelihood opportunities in Indian villages.

It is a given that villages all over the world are not the same because of the different geographical elements. A country's villages are not all the same. According to Desai (1990), "rural society is divided into a number of regional rural societies" in a nation like India¹⁰. "There were also different kinds of villages in different parts of the country," Jodhka stated. Not all villages were alike, even within a particular region of the country (Jodhka, 2005). There is variation among regions in terms of social, economic, political, cultural, and geographical factors. Due to differences in geography, rural settlements vary worldwide, and villages each developed their own way of life over time.¹¹

India is a land of villages, and rural life was the country's lifeblood. Villages are where the culture that has gained global recognition originated. Despite the fact that anthropologists and sociologists have made numerous efforts to grasp the wide open, comprehend the rustic situation in general, identify the issues that are undermining country life, and envision solutions to address such issues in order to strengthen provincial life, our country studies have lagged. We have extensive experience reproducing fiction about rural life that is far from the truth. To shift our mindset from irrationality to reality, we must urgently internalize the changing rural life.

Empirical studies show that migration reduces the uncertainty of a family income, provides investment funds, and livelihoods for those with small plots. A.C. Knowles in his research on Bihari migrants in Calcutta showed that income from migration has for generations provided an inseparable part of households that remain based in rural areas. Even though poor households have less access to opportunities, income from migration may form a *more* important part of their income than that of the better-off, as research in Kenya showed.¹² Returns are often hidden as well, as they may go straight into paying-off debts, or spent during annual festivals like Meskel in southern Ethiopia.

Migration helps to reduce poverty, but it does not always significantly improve living conditions. However, because access to opportunities is not random, it may contribute to increased inequality. The research in Kenya cited above does not contradict this: while remittances are less important for the wealthy, they may still contribute to rising inequality. In the case of Indian rural to urban migration, it has been emphasized that better-off migrants are 'pulled' towards better job prospects, while the poor are 'pushed': 'push' and 'pull' migration are twin children of inequality in the same type of village; however, they are also sources of new inequality.¹³ Research in Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Philippines indicates that international migration increases inequality, whereas internal migration is more likely to reduce it.¹⁴

Capabilities

Material gains are only a part of what migrants obtain and bring back, and only one of the reasons - though usually the main one - why people leave. Education is a very common motive for migration, but many labour migrants come back with some newly acquired skills as well.

In the livelihoods' framework (as adopted by DFID), 'social capital' is one of the five types of assets, and much debate has been generated around its meaning. The term captures the idea that social bonds and social norms are an important part of the basis of people's livelihoods. If it is recognized that the material gains from this form of 'capital' is only one aspect of what matters in social relationships, this can be a useful metaphor.

Environment

In recent years, there has been a greater emphasis on environmental refugees, or those who have been displaced due to environmental change. Some argue that the number of environmental refugees outnumbers the number of war refugees. In contrast, the environment is a concern for a large number of refugees who have been labelled as "exceptional resource degraders." Indeed, large-scale refugee movements may have serious environmental consequences, such as decreased vegetation near refugee camps, changes in soil and water balances, and so on. However, recent publications have shown that this notion is flawed, and that refugees, like others, pursue long-term sustainable strategies.

DISCUSSION & RESULTS

Hypothesis 1: Lack of employment opportunities is a barrier to sustainable livelihood.

The survey data from the four blocks reveal that **nearly 64% of respondents (approx. 220 out of 344)** were either unemployed or engaged in irregular wage labor, mainly as agricultural helpers, construction workers, or seasonal labourers. Particularly in **Tarikhet and Hawalbag**, which are more remote, formal employment opportunities were minimal. The

scarcity of industrial hubs, limited government employment, and a lack of vocational training contributed to a fragile livelihood structure.

This aligns with Ellis (2000), who argued that sustainable rural livelihoods now depend on diversified non-farm employment. The absence of local job avenues compels youth to migrate, thereby affecting community stability and sustainability.

Hypothesis 2: Inadequate fundamental necessities are responsible for the poor background of the local people.

Survey data shows that:

- **47% of respondents** lacked access to clean drinking water year-round.
- **Nearly 39%** reported no nearby functional health facility.
- **About 52%** lived in kutchra or semi-pucca houses without sanitation.
- Education levels were low, with **only 21% having completed secondary education**.

This supports Scoones' (1998) classification that human and physical capital are fundamental to livelihood building. In blocks like **Champawat and Lohaghat**, where infrastructure was comparatively better, households reported greater resilience. Thus, basic services play a direct role in determining the socio-economic background of families.

Hypothesis 3: The negative circumstances arising after the COVID-19 disaster blocked the continuation of migrant workers' development. Along with economic loss, there was emotional loss.

Field data indicated that **approximately 38% of the total respondents (about 130 individuals)** had at least one family member who returned home due to job loss in urban centers during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Of these:

- **74% reported no local employment post-return**, pushing them into debt or dependency on subsistence agriculture.
- **61% expressed emotional or mental distress** due to stigma, family stress, or uncertainty about the future.

The pandemic interrupted income, education, and access to welfare, particularly for those working in hospitality, transport, and daily-wage sectors in cities. This is consistent with findings from the ILO (2021) and Mehta (2009) on how disasters deepen rural vulnerability, not only economically but psychosocially.

Hypothesis 4: Government policies are gradually transforming the conditions of the weaker section.

Despite challenges, government interventions showed **partial success**:

- **56% of families received ration support under PM Garib Kalyan Yojana.**
- **Nearly 34% of rural women** benefited from free LPG refills under the Ujjwala scheme.
- **About 41%** of the households had at least one member employed under **MGNREGA** during the past year.
- **Housing support under PM Awas Yojana** was reported by **28%**, mostly in Champawat and Lohaghat.

While awareness and coverage remain uneven, especially in Tarikhet, these schemes offered critical support during and after the pandemic. This validates Drèze and Sen's (2013) argument that effective welfare policy can gradually uplift marginalized communities if implemented inclusively.

KEY FINDINGS

Lohaghat Exhibits the Highest Livelihood Diversity and SHG Activity

Among the four studied blocks, **Lohaghat (n=120)** demonstrates notable livelihood diversification. Respondents were engaged in agriculture, dairy, horticulture, small trade, and wage labor. **Self-Help Groups (SHGs)** were more prevalent and active here, leading to better financial inclusion for women and improved access to microcredit. This diversity reflects both a response to risk and a sign of institutional development. The greater participation in cooperative structures suggests that the community is more organized compared to the other blocks.

Tarikhet Lags Behind in Infrastructure and Institutional Support Tarikhet block (n=60), being relatively remote and hilly, showed poor indicators in infrastructure such as road connectivity, irrigation, and market access. Respondents reported difficulty accessing public services like health care, banking, and agricultural extension services. Lack of local offices for government schemes also limited awareness and participation. As a result, livelihood activities remained largely subsistence-based, with minimal exposure to technology or market linkages.

Migration Remains a Coping Mechanism, not a Proactive Strategy Migration to urban areas was found to be **distress-driven**, especially among younger and landless households. **Approximately 38%** of the total respondents had at least one migrant family member. However, the return migration during the COVID-19

pandemic revealed the vulnerability of this strategy. Most returnees lacked local reintegration support and were unemployed, leading to increased household dependency ratios. This points to the urgent need to create sustainable rural employment rather than relying on migration as a temporary escape.

Government Schemes Need Better Targeting and Local Adaptation While most households were aware of at least one government scheme (e.g., MGNREGA, PMAY, Ujjwala, Jan Dhan), only **46% reported consistent access or full benefits**. In blocks like Hawalbag and Tarikhet, the gaps were due to either lack of awareness or administrative delays. Poor targeting and a ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy framework fail to address the block-specific challenges. Schemes need to be more adaptive to local contexts and implemented with greater transparency and accountability.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Promote Agro-Based Enterprises and Skill Development for Non-Farm Income:

Livelihood diversification can be strengthened by **developing agro-based enterprises** like food processing, beekeeping, medicinal plant cultivation, and poultry farming. **Skill training** in trades like carpentry, plumbing, tailoring, and IT should be integrated through block-level training centers and CSR partnerships to promote rural entrepreneurship, especially for return migrants and youth.

Expand Credit Access through SHGs and Cooperative Banks:

Financial empowerment remains critical. **Microfinance through SHGs**, women’s federations, and **block-level cooperative banks** should be expanded to allow access to credit without collateral. Credit literacy programs must be introduced to build confidence among first-time borrowers.

Improve Infrastructure in Remote Blocks:

Investment in **all-weather roads, cold storage, rural godowns, and irrigation** facilities is vital. These infrastructure assets not only reduce post-harvest losses but also improve market connectivity. **Tarikhet** and parts of **Hawalbag** require special focus under backward-region funding programs.

Strengthen Block-Level Awareness Drives About Welfare Schemes:

Awareness campaigns using local dialects and media (radio, pamphlets, mobile vans) should be organized by **Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)** in collaboration with NGOs. Special camps should assist people with scheme registration, grievance redressal, and digital application processes.

Introduce Local Insurance Schemes for Agriculture and Health:

Promote **weather-based crop insurance**, livestock insurance, and **low-cost health insurance** tailored for rural populations. These can be implemented via SHGs and Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS). This will reduce livelihood shocks from crop failure, accidents, or disease.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the role of migration may aid in making policies more relevant to people's livelihood strategies and more aware of the negative consequences of certain measures. Borders, which are obviously necessary for the establishment and identity formation of nation states, may cut migrants off from some of their sources of income. Expulsion of migrant workers clearly accomplishes the same. The provision of opportunities at home will benefit people who would otherwise migrate for unskilled and uncertain jobs elsewhere, reducing migration by that particular group. However, as evidenced in this paper, development is unlikely to reduce migration, even if it does change its composition. It is critical that livelihoods approaches incorporate an understanding of the contributions and opportunities of migration for livelihoods, and that development or poverty reduction programmes do not aim to reduce migration for its own sake, or see reduction of migration as an indicator of success.

The research concludes that while rural households in Uttarakhand exhibit resilience, structural issues in agriculture, weak institutional support, and inadequate policy implementation hinder sustainable livelihoods. Strengthening localized livelihood systems with inclusive planning can enhance long-term sustainability.

The present research on rural livelihood sustainability across four blocks of **Champawat and Almora districts** reveals a complex mix of resilience and vulnerability. While communities have developed coping mechanisms like migration and SHGs, **systemic issues such as poor infrastructure, weak institutional outreach, and limited employment opportunities** continue to hinder sustainable development.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** exposed structural fragilities, especially for return migrants and daily wage earners. However, the resilience observed in places like **Lohaghat**—through livelihood diversity and social capital—indicates the potential of **localized and inclusive approaches**.

To achieve sustainable rural livelihoods, **policy interventions must be place-specific, participatory, and equity-driven**. Emphasis should be laid on strengthening **local capacities**, promoting **non-farm employment**, and **making state welfare more accessible and accountable**. Only then can rural Uttarakhand achieve self-reliance, social equity, and long-term sustainability in livelihoods.

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