

The Role of Return Migration in Revitalizing Rural Economies in Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

The concept of return migration is progressively becoming an integral enabler of the revitalization of rural economies. To understand the impact of this solution in the unique setting of Lebanon, this study attempts to assess the economic and social implications of returnees using a mixed-methods approach, with a quantitative survey targeting 100 Lebanese returnees and qualitative semi-structured interviews with eight Lebanese returnees' entrepreneurs. The findings confirmed the imperative role of return migration on local revitalization, economic growth, job creation, and entrepreneurship support. Nevertheless, the findings highlighted key barriers that hinder maximized integration, including restricted access to capital, absence of formal institutional support programs, bureaucratic and infrastructural barriers. This study implies that rural revitalization is achievable through return migration, on the condition that there are collaborative efforts between returnees, their communities, and governmental bodies.

Keywords: Return migration, rural development, Lebanon, economic reintegration, community support.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Emigration occupies a significant part of Lebanon's history. The persistent economic downfalls that have been affecting the country served as a "push factor" for Lebanese citizens to leave the country in different emigration waves. According to Haddad et al. (2022), Lebanon has known large waves of emigration, making the Lebanese diaspora across the world one of the largest, now at numbers larger than the country's population itself. As explained by Haddad et al. (2022), Lebanon has experienced three major waves of emigration: up to 10,000 emigrants during the years between 1945 and 1975, almost up to 990,000 (40% of the total population) during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1989), and the last wave that started in 2019 and is still ongoing, recording an all-time high of almost 80,000 emigrants just in 2021 alone. However, even with the significant numbers of Lebanese citizens leaving the country, the recent years have experienced a trend of return migration. With this ongoing trend, researchers like Zhu et al. (2023) acknowledged a potential of rural revitalization and local economic growth, focusing on rural areas and their potential development.

One of the most commonly used definitions of rural in Lebanon is featured in a government strategy by Obeid (2019), characterized as geographic locations outside of cities and town, known for their low population density and low concentration of infrastructure. As specified by Obeid (2019), 12% of Lebanon's population is estimated to be rural, and 20-25% of Lebanon's active population is characterized as rural. Rural areas in Lebanon such as the Bekaa Valley, Akkar, the South, the North, and Baalbek-Hermel are known for having dominant poverty with the majority of the labor consisting of agriculture, wage laborers, and fishermen. Coupled with underdevelopment and limited infrastructure, career opportunities are limited, creating a major gap between urban and rural regions

in the country. Compounded by the economic and financial crisis in Lebanon, rural Lebanon is threatened and faces both economic recession and demographic decline.

In the face of these challenges, return migration emerges as a potential solution, not only bringing financial capital but also human and social assets like expertise, skills, and connections (Lara et al., 2021). These well-established assets can serve the underdeveloped areas in Lebanon and contribute to the local economy by reinvesting in local businesses, the infrastructure, and social initiatives. Through these endeavors, the UNESCWA (2020) suggests that the rural areas in Lebanon can be supported, leading to sustainable rural development that creates job opportunities, encourage the youth in the region, and attract investments in the region.

From a global perspective, researchers have highlighted the impact of return migrants on the local economy. For example, Alabi et al. (2025) stated that return migration is a key enabler for local business development, development of skills, and social innovation. However, to yield profitable economic growth, academics Deng and Lyu (2024) emphasized the importance of having solid local conditions like availability of resources, governmental support, and access to capital. In context with limited local support, return migration might not be able to yield the desirable outcomes expected on a short-term basis.

In the Lebanese context, the topic of return migration has become more prevalent than ever, especially with the global economic and political tensions that affected the Lebanese diaspora and prompted a new wave of returnees to the country. Therefore, it is essential to study how these Lebanese citizens who lived years abroad can reintegrate the Lebanese economy and become active members of their society again. Understanding their impact on the local economy and especially their role in rural development is key to maximize their potential and contribute to the Lebanese economy. Despite the growing relevance of return migration in theory and in practice, empirical evidence related to its significance in rural development in Lebanon remains underexplored and limited. For these reasons, this study seeks to fill this gap by addressing the impact of Lebanese return migrants on rural rebuilding, covering key economic, social, and institutional perspectives.

Significance of the Study

This study is highly significant, contributing to several theoretical and practical implications. First, the study enriches the current literature related to the relationship between return migration and local development, especially in the unique case of Lebanon. With the significant size of the Lebanese diaspora, it is essential to understand the impact of their return on the economy and policy reforms, an area in the literature that has not been addressed yet.

The study is also practically significant for rural revitalization and economic planning. The rural area in Lebanon is in urgent need for investments in its infrastructure, covering agricultural production, construction, and even basic needs like water and electricity. With the increasing return of migrants, this area has a chance to be revived, with the skills and experience brought-by migrants. By aligning the added assets to the local economies, relevant stakeholders like policymakers and business owners can capitalize on this opportunity and contribute to the development of rural areas more effectively.

This is a significant study because it also contributes to community-building. Away from the economic benefits of the return of migrants, their presence can help local communities reconnect and foster a collaborative environment where all members are invited to contribute to the rebuilding of the economy and benefit from the outcomes. With the culture in Lebanon that is solidly built on close relationships, familial ties, cooperation, and community support, the integration of returning migrants can help improve the local community.

Last but not least, the findings generated from this study contribute to development organizations such as NGOs or United Nations-related organizations that seek to invest in Lebanese rural areas and work on the potential of return migration in these regions. With the growing importance of return migration in practice, these organizations are looking for opportunities to capitalize on in developing economies. This study therefore highlights the key realities generated, serving as a reliable reference for these actors.

Research Questions

With the contextualization of the topic at hand, this study is therefore guided by the following main research question:

Main Research Question: What role does return migration play in revitalizing rural economies in Lebanon?

To cover all aspects of this main research question, this study created the following sub-questions:

Table 1- Research Sub-Questions

Research Question	Focus / Purpose
1. How do the skills, knowledge, and financial resources acquired abroad contribute to local economic activities upon return?	To understand how returnees use their experiences and capital gained abroad to support businesses, farming, or community projects in their hometowns.
2. To what extent do return migrants create or support new job opportunities and entrepreneurial ventures in rural communities?	To examine whether returnees are starting new businesses, creating jobs, or helping others develop local enterprises.
3. How do local community attitudes and government support mechanisms influence the successful reintegration of return migrants?	To assess how community acceptance, local trust, and government programs affect the ability of returnees to settle back and contribute economically.
4. What barriers or challenges do return migrants face in contributing to rural development?	To identify the main economic, social, or institutional difficulties that limit the positive impact of return migration.

Study Aims and Objectives

Building on the established research questions, this study's ultimate aim is to evaluate the impact of return migration on rural development in Lebanon, focusing on the role of return migrants in contributing to their local economies in rural areas in the country to facilitate development.

To do so, this study acknowledges the following objectives:

Table 2- Research Objectives

No.	Study Objective
1	To assess the contributions of return migrants to local economic development, including investment, entrepreneurship, and job creation in rural Lebanon.
2	To explore how skills and experiences acquired abroad are transferred and applied within local contexts after return.
3	To evaluate the influence of community and institutional support, including local authorities, NGOs, and social networks on the reintegration and impact of returnees.
4	To identify key challenges and opportunities that affect the ability of return migrants to drive sustainable rural revitalization.
5	To provide policy recommendations for national and local stakeholders on how to maximize the developmental potential of return migration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section of the study, key concepts and themes related to migration and its impact on rural development are synthesized from the literature, also focusing on other key considerations like challenges, opportunities, and the specific scope of Lebanon.

Return Migration and Local Economic Development

To begin with, the majority of the literature links return migration to local economic development. For example, the study by Langroodi et al. (2011) aimed at assessing the impact of return migration on rural livelihood stability. The authors revealed that the return migration of rural youngsters is the "most important strategy adopted towards life management in the region", showing that after returning, the rural areas are positively affected by their gained experience and skills. Their return was highlighted as a key enabler for different crucial outcomes, including improved incomes, better social welfare, reduced vulnerability, improved food security, and local economic development.

Similarly, the study by Sinatti (2018) addressed the impact of the return of businessmen in Senegal, highlighting that in recent year, the increasing prominence of return migration has shifted African policies from labor-export policies to what is known as "diaspora policies". The author emphasized the significance of migration as key instrument to stimulate development in local economies, on the condition that these businessmen are met with sustainable relationships. The study suggests that through transnational collaborations and innovative ideas, they are capable of triggering local economic development and sustain long-term profit in the region.

Nevertheless, the more recent study by Alene (2023) attempted to establish a link between return migration and self-employment in the context of Ethiopia, particularly from the perspective of Gondar city youth returnees. The study found that there is no association between self-employment and return migrants, showing that the sectoral and occupational experienced gained from abroad did help the youth returnees establish new businesses.

However, this result was mainly linked to unresolved challenges in the region, especially lack of governmental support.

Therefore, these studies show that the majority of the literature suggests that return migrants are positively linked to local economy development, considering that they are well supported and have the appropriate resources to work with. As a result, their return can help create more jobs, contribute to the economy, and achieve rural development.

Skills, Knowledge, Financial Resources: Transfer and Use

Nevertheless, researchers highlight a major issue in returnees' skills, knowledge and financial resources, which is their transfer and use. In other words, researchers Hajdari et al. (2023) found that the education of migration returnees and knowledge transfer are positively linked to business development, while their simple presence abroad did not yield a statistically significant moderation impact on business development. These findings imply that to achieve successful business development, returnees are expected to successfully transfer their knowledge and use it appropriately. This means adapting to the local settings, teaching locals about their newly-gained skills, and fostering a collaborative approach when introducing a new concept.

Another key study by Xhaho et al. (2024) highlight that reverse migration is only successful in building local economies when returnees are again able to participate in the "the social, economic, cultural, and political life of their country of origin". Focusing on three different geographical areas of Albania, the authors revealed that returnees' social capital in the form of their ability to form social relationships and their human capital in the form of work experience together helped their re-establishment in their home country, driving their entrepreneurial activities. Similarly, the study by Xhaho et al. (2024) further reinforced this argument, stating that returnees who were able to capitalize on their new experiences and skills were able to introduce a new work culture in their home country, offering a higher quality work and more job opportunities compared to local competitors.

These findings therefore suggest that returnees' ability to efficiently transfer their knowledge through solid social networks and effective use of new skills can enhance the levels of trust in the local community, contributing to the development of the economy.

Institutional and Community Support

Another key argument that needs to be highlighted is the importance of institutional and community support to cement the positive repercussions brought-by returnees. For example, an influential report by the OECD (2020) emphasized the importance of assisted return and reintegration programs for returning migrants. The report stated that these support systems largely help in facilitating the return and re-establishment in the country of origin with improved economic, political, and humanitarian outcomes.

Another example is given by Cromartie et al. (2015), who adopted the case of the United States, and revealed that family ties, community support, increased opportunities for outdoor recreation for the whole family, and increased involvement in local sports are key factors that encourage migrants to return to their rural areas. The study highlighted that return migration to rural areas plays an integral part in slowing population loss, rejuvenating the population base, creating new job opportunities, and contributing to human, social, and financial capital.

In addition, a later publication by the OECD (2022) further emphasized that both migration and return migration can address the economical gaps in the country and reduce existing inequalities only when they are supported by the proper infrastructure, and the right policies and institutional regulations. For example, the report highlighted that countries with poor road infrastructure or weak governance benefit less than other countries with better conditions.

What the Literature Says about Lebanon

In the Lebanese setting, the literature features very few empirical evidence linking return migration to rural rehabilitation and revitalization. The majority of the existing studies focus on the social impact of emigration on the Lebanese economy and the emigration process in general, without a direct focus on the potential contributions of returnees.

One particular study was conducted by Hourani (2019), conducted to assess the return of Lebanese who left during the civil war (1975-1990) and who have since returned in the post-war phase. The study was conducted to determine three major outcomes: a) the factors that motivated social mobility, b) the effect of life abroad on people's pre- and post-return conditions, and c) the different perspectives and conditions of return migration. While the study did not focus on the impact of return migration on rural economies specifically, the results showed

that the lack of governmental and institutional support in Lebanon hinders the full potential of returnees, necessitating urgent initiatives to help them settle back home and become active members of their society.

Other key findings were provided by Chibani (2021), who addressed internal return migration, from urban to rural areas within Lebanon. The author emphasized the impact of the economic crisis on the working class in Lebanon, which cause unemployment, the closure of companies, and the rapid deterioration of general services. As a result, thousands of families have chosen to return to their villages, where living costs are cheaper and job opportunities may exist in small-scale industries like agriculture or sales. This internal return migration is increasingly become more prominent in the region, necessitating urgent structural reforms to ensure that families are well situated in their villages.

Overall, existing studies address the concept of return migration in Lebanon but fail to provide a focused view on its impact on job creation, entrepreneurship, and revitalization of rural areas in the country.

Gaps in the Literature and Hypotheses Development

The existing literature concerning the impact of return migration on rural development in Lebanon is still underexplored. The available evidence tackles components of this relationship in isolation, focusing on elements like return migration or rural development as independent elements, lacking a focused view of the relationship between both variables. Nevertheless, it is evident that the concept of return migration is growing in Lebanon, and it is imperative to understand its effect on rural development to highlight potential opportunities in entrepreneurship and community-building. Therefore, this study aims at addressing these gaps in the literature, focusing on the specific impact of return migration on rural revitalization in Lebanon.

Based on the arguments above, this study attempts to address the following hypotheses:

Table 3- Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Description / Focus
H1	Return migration has a positive impact on local economic development in rural Lebanon.
H2	Return migrants contribute to job creation and entrepreneurship in their home communities.
H3	Support from local authorities and communities enhances the economic reintegration of return migrants.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

To answer the established research questions, this study adopted a mixed-methods research design, leveraging a quantitative survey and qualitative semi-structured interviews. This research design was also chosen due to its ability to generate complementary data, powered by statistically relevance and in-depth perspectives provided by the chosen participants.

Target Population and Sampling Strategy

For the quantitative aspect of this study, 100 returnees from rural regions in Lebanon such as the North, Bekaa, South, Baalbek were surveyed. As for the qualitative aspect of the study, 8 returnees who were living abroad and chose to come back to their villages in Lebanon were interviewed to capture their experiences in more depth.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit the participants, to ensure that the participants are relevant to the topic chosen and have the experiences needed that can serve this study and the generated outcomes.

Data Collection Tool and Variables Measured

Quantitative Data Collection

The quantitative survey featured two major sections: Section A for demographics and Section B for return experience and local impact. The Likert-scale survey targeted four major variables:

Table 4- Quantitative Variables

Category	Variables Included	Reason for Use
1. Economic Contribution of Return Migrants	Skills and knowledge transfer, job creation and entrepreneurship, investment and local development	To assess how return migrants' human and financial capital contribute to local economies and rural revitalization.
2. Support and Reintegration Environment	Community support, government and institutional support	To evaluate how social acceptance and institutional backing influence successful reintegration and economic contribution.
3. Overall Perceptions and Impact	Perceived economic impact, perceived role of return migration	To capture returnees' overall views on their role in fostering sustainable rural development in Lebanon.

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data collection using semi-structured interviews was also used to complement the quantitative data, targeting eight Lebanese returnees living in rural areas. Each interview lasted around fifteen minutes in person or online based on personal preferences, recorded with the consent of participants and featuring the following questions:

Table 5- Interview Questions

Interview Questions
1. How has your experience abroad influenced your contribution to your local community or business?
2. What challenges or barriers have you faced since returning to your rural hometown?
3. How do you perceive the role of local communities and authorities in supporting return migrants like yourself?

Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the surveys was analyzed using the statistical tool SPSS to either validate or reject the established hypotheses using descriptive and inferential statistics. As for the qualitative insights, they underwent a thematic analysis to generate recurrent themes and patterns, complementing the statistical findings.

Ethical Considerations

Since this study deals with human participants, the highest ethical considerations were applied. To begin with, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation. Also, all data was anonymized to maintain confidentiality and participants were made aware of the study's purpose, intervention, and ability to withdraw at any point without facing consequences.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

In this section of the analysis, the quantitative and qualitative findings are reported and analyzed.

Quantitative Findings*Descriptive Statistics*

To begin with, descriptive statistics were carried out to understand the role of Lebanese migrants in rural development (Table 6).

Table 6- Descriptive Statistics Summary (N = 100)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Skills Contribution	2.0	5.0	4.02	0.71
Job Creation	2.0	5.0	3.99	0.78
Investment Local Development	2.0	5.0	4.05	0.73
Encouraged Initiatives	2.0	5.0	3.79	0.70
Community Support	2.0	5.0	3.58	0.71
Government Support	1.0	5.0	3.41	0.75
Reintegration Acceptance	1.0	5.0	3.74	0.71
Perceived Economic Impact	2.0	5.0	3.23	0.55
Overall Role Rural Revitalization	2.0	5.0	3.19	0.65
Economic Difficulty	1.0	4.0	2.19	0.72
Institutional Limitation	1.0	4.0	2.33	0.75
Bureaucratic Challenge	1.0	4.0	2.06	0.69
Access to Capital Limitation	1.0	4.0	2.23	0.75
Total: Economic Contribution (4 items)	11.0	20.0	15.85	2.33
Total: Community/Institutional Support (3 items)	5.0	15.0	10.73	1.76
Total: Overall Perceived Impact (2 items)	4.0	9.0	6.42	1.02
Total: Barriers/Challenges (4 items)	4.0	16.0	8.81	2.29

The descriptive statistics show that Lebanese return migrants are implicated in the economic and social aspect of rural development. The results emphasize “Investment in Local Development” (M=4.05) and “Skills Contribution” (M=4.02) as the two highest mean scores, implying that the surveyed returnees are seen as core contributors to rural economy development mainly through their acquired skills and capital.

However, Table 6 shows that there are moderate levels of community and government support observed (3.79 and 3.41 respectively), while barriers like access to capital, institutional limitations, and bureaucratic challenges were mildly impacting factors (means ranging between 2.0 and 2.3). These results therefore suggest that while returnees have a strong potential in contributing to rural revitalization, they can maximize this potential by acquiring institutional and governmental support.

Reliability

Next, as seen in Table 6 below, the reliability statistics confirm that all scales are acceptable, showing good internal consistency across their items (ranging from 0.741 to 0.806). While the reliability score of “Overall Impact” is recorded at slightly below the recommended 0.7 threshold ($\alpha = .611$), it is still considered acceptable considering the limited number of items ($n=2$) under this scale.

Table 7- Reliability Scores

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Economic Contribution	0.806	4
Community Support Index	0.741	3
Barriers	0.790	4
Overall Impact	0.611	2

Factor Analysis

Table 8 below details the factor analysis results obtained for all scales. The results confirm the construct validity of the tested model, with acceptable ranges for KMO values (ranging from 0.5 to 0.784) that indicate acceptable sampling adequacy. Also, the Bartlett's Test result are all statistically significant ($p<0.001$), further confirming validity. In addition, the findings showed that each scale had one dominant factor, with percentage of variance ranging between 61% to 72%, confirming unidimensionality.

Table 8- Factor Analysis Scores

Scale	KMO	Bartlett's Test (Sig.)	No. of Factors Extracted	% Variance Explained
All Variables (Overall)	0.740	0.000	3	62.10%
Economic Contribution	0.784	0.000	1	63.51%
Community Support	0.677	0.000	1	65.84%
Overall Impact	0.500	0.000	1	72.29%
Barriers	0.768	0.000	1	61.43%

Correlational Findings

Next, the correlation analyses carried out revealed that the “Overall Perceived Impact” of returnees on rural development is statistically correlated with “Economic Contribution” ($r = 0.488$, $p < .01$) and **Community/Institutional Support** ($r = 0.278$, $p < .01$). These findings suggest that the higher the economic contributions and the higher the support, the greater the perceived impact of return migration on rural revitalization in Lebanon (Table 9).

The correlational findings also revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between “Barriers/Challenges” and “Overall Perceived Impact” ($r = -0.283$, $p < .01$), implying that the more barriers or challenges are present, the lower the overall perceived impact of returnees on rural development in Lebanon.

Table 9- Correlational Results (N=100)

Variables	1. Economic Contribution	2. Community/Institutional Support	3. Barriers/Challenges	4. Overall Perceived Impact
1. Economic Contribution	1	-0.103	0.088	0.488**
2. Community/Institutional Support	-0.103	1	0.085	0.278**
3. Barriers/Challenges	0.088	0.085	1	-0.283**
4. Overall Perceived Impact	0.488**	0.278**	-0.283**	1

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Regression Findings

Last but not least, this study carried out a regression analysis to further clarify the relationship between the studied variables. First, as seen in Table 10, the regression model was statistically significant, with $F(3, 96) = 29.07$, $p < .001$, and explained 47.6% of the variance ($R^2 = .476$) in Overall Perceived Impact.

Table 10- Regression Model Summary

Model Summary	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F (3,96)	Sig.
Model 1	0.690	0.476	0.460	29.07	.000

Next, the regression findings detailed in Table 11 showed that **Economic Contribution** ($\beta = .557$, $p < .001$) and **Community/Institutional Support** ($\beta = .366$, $p < .001$) both positively predict perceived impact, while **Barriers/Challenges** ($\beta = -.362$, $p < .001$) negatively predict it. These findings suggest that the more there is an economic engagement and the stronger the institutional support, the better is the perceived impact of returnees while the presence of barriers and challenges diminish this perception.

Table 11- Key Regression Results for Predicting Overall Perceived Impact (N = 100)

Predictor Variable	Standardized Beta (β)	t-value	Sig. (p)	Effect Direction
Economic Contribution	0.557	7.47	.000	Positive
Community/Institutional Support	0.366	4.91	.000	Positive
Barriers/Challenges	-0.362	-4.87	.000	Negative

Lastly, different diagnostic tests were carried out to confirm different assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, outliers, and descriptive indicators. The results showed that residuals are normally distributed (Shapiro–Wilk = .983, $p = .244$), with no extreme outliers (range -2.28 to 2.52). The residual scatterplot indicated no discernible pattern, suggesting homoscedasticity of errors (Table 12).

Table 12- Regression Diagnostic Tests

Assumption Tested	Test/Indicator	Key Statistics	Result	Interpretation
Normality of residuals	Shapiro–Wilk test	$W = .983, p = .244$	Not significant	Residuals are normally distributed
Linearity	Residuals vs. Predicted Scatterplot	—	Significant	No curved or systematic pattern observed
Homoscedasticity	Residuals vs. Predicted Scatterplot	—	Significant	Variance of residuals appears constant
Outliers	Standardized residuals	Range = -2.28 to 2.52	Significant, Within ± 3	No extreme outliers detected
Descriptive indicators	Skewness = .374, Kurtosis = .002	Mean ≈ 0 , SD ≈ 1	Significant	Residuals approximately symmetric

Qualitative Findings

The subjective data obtained from the eight Lebanese returnees who reside in rural areas in Lebanon added depth to the statistical findings, highlighting three major themes: contribution, barriers and challenges, and community or institutional support.

First, all participants expressed that their experience abroad has allowed them to build the skills needed to economically and socially contribute to their villages in Lebanon. One particular answer that stood out was the following: “I truly believe that the hardships of leaving my home country and starting from zero in an unknown culture has allowed me to develop discipline and planning. Upon my return to Lebanon and to my village, I was able to apply these skills to my family’s small business and develop it”. This idea was also reverberated by another participant who returned from Saudi Arabia after ten years: “My time abroad and my profession have allowed me to develop particular technological skills that were highly useful to my new business that I launched here in the Bekaa. These skills were directly applied in the strategic operations that I created for the business and have highly served the purpose of the business”. Other than technical skills, one participant highlighted the financial aspect of contribution: “I was able to save the needed funds to start my own business in my village back home in Lebanon. I truly believe that this was an opportunity for me to get the financial funds needed to launch a business that serves farmers in the South”. These testimonials therefore reinforce the link between international experience and contribution to rural development, further supporting the argument that economic contribution is a key enabler of a positive perceived impact of return migration.

Second, another common theme across the qualitative findings revolves around barriers and challenges. Structural and economic challenges were among the most commonly cited type of limitations: “my problem was with obtaining the needed permits and licenses to launch my business. Governmental offices are non-existent in the Bekaa and going to the capital every time I needed a document was a lengthy and frustrating process”. Another challenge that was highlighted by a returnee entrepreneur was access to funds: “even if you have innovative ideas, obtaining the needed funds is very challenging, especially in rural areas where investors are very scarce”. Another participant noted the problem of having outdated infrastructure in the region: “we suffer from constant cuts in electricity, internet, and water in the North. This has made the process of launching a new business or investing in a new idea challenging because you have to account for different factors beyond the simple creation of the business”. These experiences therefore highlight that despite their willingness to become active members in the economy again, returnees still face systemic and social challenges.

Last but not least, the interviews revealed mixed perspectives when it comes to community and institutional support. The majority of participants highlighted the presence of informal support in their respective villages, which is common in a country that values collaboration and community ties: “my local community has been a major pillar in my attempt to launch a new business in the village. Specifically, my neighbors, friends, and family have been a major source of support, helping me practically and morally to successfully become an active member of the village again”, said one participant. However, when asked about formal support frameworks, all participants expressed that they are either weak or non-existent. For example, one participant highlighted: “while I can attest to the creation of few businesses, the region still lacks a proper program of assistance launched by either the government alone or in collaboration with respective municipalities and NGOs”.

All in all, the qualitative findings highlight the multilayered process of return migration and its impact on rural development in Lebanon.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Validation/Rejection of Hypotheses

This study revolved around three major hypotheses: (H1) return migration's impact on local economic development, (H2) return migrants' contribution to job creation and entrepreneurship, and (H3) the role of community and institutional support in enhancing economic reintegration. In this section of the analysis, a critical examination is carried out to either validate or reject the hypotheses, generated nuanced perspectives regarding the impact of return migration on rural revitalization in Lebanon.

Hypothesis 1: Return migration has a positive impact on local economic development (H1).

The quantitative findings strongly support H1, with economic contribution highlighted as the strongest statistically significant predictor of overall perceived impact ($\beta = 0.557$, $p < .001$). The descriptive data further support H1, as skills contribution ($M=4.02$) and local development ($M=4.05$) showed high mean scores that confirm the importance of returnees in economic development of rural areas in Lebanon. The qualitative findings further confirmed these results, suggesting that technical skills, experience, funds, and learned practices are key contributors by returnees to trigger local economic development. These findings are also aligned with the literature, especially the empirical evidence provided by Langroodi et al. (2011) and Sinatti (2018) on the positive impact of returnees on enhanced living conditions in rural areas. Therefore, these combined insights lead to the **validation of H1**.

Hypothesis 2: Return migrants contribute to job creation and entrepreneurship (H2).

Next, the quantitative findings concluded moderate but acceptable mean scores for both job creation ($M=3.99$) and encouraged initiatives ($M=3.79$), suggesting that return migration can be perceived as a key enabler for local employment and new business ideas, despite being not as strong as economic contribution. In addition, the correlation results showed a statistically significant and positive relationship between economic contribution and overall perceived impact ($r = 0.488$, $p < .01$), revealing that the launch of new businesses and entrepreneurial activities are key pillars in the perceived economic impact. The qualitative findings further confirmed these findings, with participants asserting that despite the need for added governmental and institutional support, return migration is a potential solution that can indirectly create new job opportunities. These findings are aligned with the empirical evidence provided by Cromartie et al. (2015) and OECD (2020; 2022), which suggest that while returnees constitute a major solution for rural revitalization in countries like Lebanon, institutional and community support are needed. This therefore **validates H2**, adding this type of support as a condition for full success.

Hypothesis 3: Support from local authorities and communities enhances economic reintegration (H3).

For H3, the quantitative and qualitative findings also showed compelling evidence in its favor. Starting with the quantitative results, the statistical evidence showed that community/institutional support was concluded as a positive predictor of overall perceived impact ($\beta = 0.366$, $p < .001$), with correlational results showing that there is also a positive relationship recorded with perceived impact ($r = 0.278$, $p < .01$). The qualitative interviews further confirm this argument, with participants acknowledging the presence of informal support networks provided by their local community but still lacking formal support programs by governments to facilitate reintegration and maximize the potential of returnees in their local economies. Therefore, **H3 is validated**, highlighting that targeted assistance frameworks are needed to maximize the potential of returnees in their respective villages.

5.2. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study can be linked to various implications for policy and practice. First, the strong impact of economic contribution on the overall perceived impact implies that with effective planning and execution of acquired skills and investments provided by returned migrants, their presence can be a catalyst for rural economic development and the launch of new businesses in this area that can contribute to economic stabilization in the region.

Second, the findings imply that access to financial and technical resources is a key mission to be adopted by relevant policymakers and governmental entities, as they are key to diminish the perceived institutional obstacles that are hindering returnees from unlocking their full potential in their rural regions.

Third, the findings imply that return migration can be a potential solution for unemployment in rural regions in Lebanon, especially with found moderating relationship with job creation. This can also contribute to the development of these rural areas, as returnees can become active members of their society through new professional opportunities.

Last but not least, the findings highlighted the need for formal institutional and governmental support initiatives that facilitate the reintegration of returnees in their communities. These initiatives can be supported by local collaborations with municipalities and NGOs, involving mentorship programs, training workshop, and targeted guidance.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings

To conclude, this study aimed at understanding the impact of return migration on the rural revitalization in Lebanon, focusing on key aspects like economic contribution, institutional and community support, as well as the perceived challenges and barriers. By triangulating quantitative and qualitative findings with existing empirical evidence, the study concluded that returnees are key enablers for economic development in rural areas in Lebanon, mainly through their technical skills, experience, and investment abilities. The study found that economic contribution is a strong predictor of the overall perceived impact of return migration, with a strong condition attributed to the presence of institutional and community support. Structural and social barriers like limited formal support programs, limited access to capital, and outdated infrastructure were highlighted, concluding that without direct and targeted interventions, the full potential of return migration cannot be achieved.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the thoroughness of this analysis, limitations remain. The study's reliance on rural areas in Lebanon only with a relatively small sample size (hundred survey respondents and eight interviewed participants) can limit the widespread application of the findings and its generalizability across different settings. Response bias is another significant limitation, especially with participants potentially wanting to answer in a socially accepted way. Lastly, this study relies on cross-sectional data collection, preventing it from capturing long-term trends that can generate reliable conclusions on the long-term impact of return migration.

Future Research

Building on the limitations, future research ought to recruit a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings and their applications in different comparable settings. Future studies can also benefit from comparative evaluations across similar or structurally different regions to generate specific recommendations and generalizable results. Other key variables that can also be evaluated as moderating factors are gender, age, and education, chosen to generate more specific insights on the drivers and barriers of rural development by returned migrants.

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