

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND MIGRATION PERCEPTIONS AMONG RURAL YOUTH IN ALBANIA

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Abstract: *The relationship between social capital and migration perceptions among rural youth in Albania, a country strongly affected by emigration since the 1990s, is investigated in this study. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining a purposive survey of 197 respondents with 15 semi-structured interviews to assess whether community cooperation, neighbourly assistance, and psychological well-being influence perceptions of migration. Due to survey design limitations, the perceived impact of emigration on local economic development was used as a proxy for migration intentions. Descriptive results indicate that moderate levels of migration perceptions ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.17$) and social capital indicators (community cooperation $M = 2.67$; neighbourly assistance $M = 2.79$; psychological well-being $M = 3.19$) were observed. Quantitative analyses, including OLS regression with robust standard errors and ordinal logistic checks, revealed no statistically significant effects of social capital on migration perceptions. Nevertheless, qualitative findings highlighted a paradox: informational and emotional costs of migration were reduced by local networks, while community cohesion was simultaneously reinforced. These findings suggest that structural constraints, such as unemployment, institutional weakness, and rural underdevelopment, may overshadow the role of social capital in shaping migration attitudes. Empirical evidence from Albania is provided, and policy implications, including diaspora engagement, rural youth support, and the potential use of social networks as tools for both migration and local development, are discussed.*

Keywords: Social capital; migration perceptions; rural development; Albania; youth mobility; remittances.

1. Introduction

Migration has long been one of Albania's defining socio-economic realities. Since the collapse of communism in the early 1990s, nearly one-third of Albanians have emigrated, making the country one of the most migration-dependent in Europe (King, 2005; Vullnetari, 2012). Remittances have consistently played a stabilizing role, contributing between 9–15% of GDP in recent years (World Bank, n.d.-b; Bank of Albania, 2018). In rural areas, where employment opportunities remain limited and agriculture fragmented, emigration is often the primary household strategy for income generation (Labrianidis & Kazazi, 2006; Cela, 2021).

Within this context, the role of social capital—defined as the trust, norms, and networks that facilitate collective action (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000)—deserves particular attention. Social networks are often assumed to be a critical driver of migration by reducing risks and providing information (Granovetter, 1985; Haug, 2008).

Recent studies confirm that migration decisions are shaped by the strength of ties within transnational communities (Blumenstock et al., 2025; Vollmer, 2023). Yet, the dynamics are complex: while networks may encourage migration, they can also anchor individuals by providing local support (Portes, 1998; Levitt, 1998).

This paradox is particularly visible in Albania, where networks are simultaneously a source of migration facilitation and of resilience within rural communities (Muco, 2021; Kokkali, 2024). As Carling and Schewel (2018) argue in their aspiration–ability framework, migration outcomes depend on both desires and the resources to realize them. In the Albanian case, social capital may increase aspiration by showing opportunities abroad, while also influencing ability through shared resources or, conversely, reinforcing local attachments.

Against this backdrop, our paper investigates whether higher levels of local social capital—measured through community cooperation, neighbourly assistance, and psychological well-being—are associated with more positive perceptions of migration’s impact. Surprisingly, the statistical evidence shows no significant effects, even though qualitative data reveal subtle mechanisms. This contrast contributes to a growing body of work on the limits of social capital in contexts marked by structural constraints, institutional weakness, and mass emigration (de Haas, 2010; King & Gëdeshi, 2023; World Bank, 2025).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Social capital and its role in migration

The concept of social capital has been widely debated across sociology, political science, and economics. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes social capital as the sum of resources linked to durable networks of institutionalized relationships. Coleman (1988) stresses its role in the creation of human capital, while Putnam (2000) distinguishes between bonding and bridging forms of social capital, emphasizing their implications for civic engagement. Portes (1998) adds a critical perspective, noting both positive and negative externalities of social ties. In the Albanian context, several studies demonstrate its value across different sectors. In this vein, Kokthi, Guri, and Muco (2021) apply a social capital lens to assess the applicability of geographical indications, indicating that the success of such collective quality schemes depends on trust, networks, and local norms of reciprocity. Similarly, Kaçani et al. (2024) show that social tipping toward climate action is contingent upon the availability of social capital, which reduces the gap between awareness and action where institutional support is limited.

In migration studies, social capital is closely tied to the role of networks. Granovetter’s (1985) concept of embeddedness underlines how economic actions, including migration, are structured by social relations. Empirical research confirms that networks reduce informational and financial costs of migration, making movement more feasible (Haug, 2008). More recently, Blumenstock, Chi, and Tan (2025) provide rigorous evidence that networks significantly increase the probability of migration by lowering barriers, while Vollmer (2023) shows how returnees rely on networks for social (im)mobility in Albania.

Yet, social capital does not always function as a unidirectional driver of migration. Levitt (1998) introduced the idea of social remittances, i.e., the transfer of norms, practices, and identities between migrants and their communities of origin, later elaborated with Lamba-Nieves (2011). These flows suggest that networks may both encourage outmigration and strengthen local development. Lacroix (2016) similarly highlights the ambivalent role of social remittances in the Western Balkans.

2.2 Migration-development nexus

Debates on migration and development have evolved over decades. Faist (2000, 2008) conceptualizes migrants as transnational development agents, while de Haas (2010) cautions against overly deterministic assumptions, proposing that migration’s impact depends on

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND MIGRATION PERCEPTIONS AMONG RURAL YOUTH IN ALBANIA

broader structural contexts. Castles (2010) calls for a social transformation perspective, situating migration within political, economic, and institutional change. Vertovec (2004) links transnationalism to modes of transformation in origin societies, while Carling and Schewel's (2018) aspiration–ability model reframes migration decisions as the outcome of desires to migrate and the capacity to do so.

In the Western Balkans, migration has been both a safety valve and a development constraint. Petreski et al. (2017) demonstrate the size and effects of emigration and remittances across the region, while the OECD (2022) maps migration challenges and opportunities for the Western Balkans. The World Bank (2025) emphasizes migration's dual potential to support growth while also generating risks of dependency and demographic decline.

2.3 Albania as a migration laboratory

Albania has often been described as a “laboratory” for migration studies (King, 2005; Vullnetari, 2012). Emigration since the 1990s has reshaped every dimension of society, from demography to politics. King and Gëdeshi (2023) highlight new trends in Albanian and regional migration, while Vullnetari and King (2011) detail the gendered dynamics of remittances and social change. Remittances remain central, contributing a significant share of GDP (World Bank, n.d.-b; Bank of Albania, 2018), with Cela (2021) showing their macroeconomic relevance.

At the micro level, research illustrates both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Labrianidis and Kazazi (2006) demonstrate how remittances can spur regional development but also deepen inequalities. Gëdeshi, King, and Ceka (2024) document the emigration of medical doctors, warning of brain drain, while Kokkali (2024) shows how rural youth migration interacts with local development trajectories. Vollmer (2023) and Xhaho and Fetahu (2022) provide evidence of return migration and reintegration, highlighting how networks shape re-entry into the labor market.

2.4 Policy frameworks and diaspora engagement

Policymakers have increasingly sought to harness migration for development. The Albanian National Diaspora Strategy 2021–2025 (AKD, 2021) positions diaspora as a driver of innovation, investment, and rural development. Similar approaches exist in the region: Kosovo's DEED program (Multi-Partner Trust Fund/UNDP, n.d.), North Macedonia's GCM Review (Ministry of Interior, 2022), and Bosnia and Herzegovina's migration profile (Ministry of Security, 2022). International organizations, including IOM (2023) and UNDP (2021), stress inclusive governance and “leave no one behind” principles.

Comparative evidence from Kosovo and other Balkan states (Dushi & Berila, 2025; Central Bank of Kosovo, 2025; Trading Economics, n.d.) shows how remittances constitute vital lifelines, with flows reaching 10–15% of GDP. The World Bank (n.d.-a; n.d.-b) datasets illustrate cross-country differences, underscoring Albania's continued dependence.

2.5 Conceptual model and hypotheses

Based on the literature, we treat social capital as a key explanatory factor for migration perceptions. We operationalize social capital through three dimensions: (a) community cooperation (bonding ties), (b) neighbourly assistance (informal support), and (c) psychological well-being (subjective resilience; Saar & Nase, 2021). We expect higher levels on these dimensions to be associated with more positive evaluations of emigration's local impact. Accordingly, we test:

H1 (Community cooperation): Higher perceived community cooperation is associated with more positive perceptions of emigration's impact.

H2 (Neighbourly assistance): Greater frequency of neighbourly assistance is associated with more positive perceptions of emigration's impact.

H3 (Psychological well-being): Higher self-reported psychological well-being is associated with more positive perceptions of emigration's impact.

H4 (Moderation by demographics): The relationships in H1–H3 are moderated by demographic factors (age, gender, education); specifically, we expect stronger associations among younger respondents and those with higher education.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study employs a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative semi-structured interviews. The rationale is twofold: (1) surveys enable the measurement of relationships between social capital, migration intentions, and community well-being of rural youth in Albania (2) interviews capture nuanced insights into how individuals interpret these dynamics in everyday life. Mixed-methods approaches are particularly suited to contexts such as migration, where statistical indicators often fail to capture the complexity of lived experiences (Faist, 2008; Castles, 2010).

3.2. Sampling and Data Collection

Participants (N = 197) were recruited using a purposive sampling technique to attract rural youth who had direct experience with migration. The eligibility requirements were: aged 18-35 years; currently residing in selected rural municipalities that were reported by the media to have migration histories; and have at least one of the following: a family member abroad, a personal migration history, or were actively involved in local community organizations.

The sample was predominantly young (80.71% aged 18 - 25) and from rural municipalities, with a slight male bias (52.28% male; 47.72% female). The majority of respondents indicated an education of secondary (41.12%) or bachelor's degree (36.55%). In terms of income, they mainly disclosed lower income ranges: 45.18% indicated monthly salaries of less than 40,000 ALL (400 euro) and 31.47% in the range of 40,001 to 80,000 ALL (800 euro). The survey was conducted in the period from January until March 2025.

To complement the survey, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with local residents, including both migrants' family members and community leaders. This number aligns with methodological guidance suggesting that between 12–20 interviews are often sufficient to reach thematic saturation in qualitative research (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

3.3 Measures and variables

The study operationalizes key concepts as follows:

Dependent variable: *Perceived impact of emigration on local economic development*, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very negative, 5 = very positive). This serves as a proxy for migration perceptions. While it does not directly measure migration intentions, it provides an indirect indicator of how respondents evaluate migration as a development factor in their communities.

Independent variables (social capital dimensions):

- Community cooperation: perceptions of local collective action and trust in community projects.
- Neighbourly assistance: frequency of mutual help between neighbours, reflecting informal social support.
- Psychological well-being: self-reported life satisfaction and optimism, conceptualized as a dimension of social resilience (Saar & Nase, 2021).

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND MIGRATION PERCEPTIONS AMONG RURAL YOUTH IN ALBANIA

Control variables: demographic factors (age, gender, education) were included to account for variation in migration perceptions.

All items were coded on Likert-type scales and aggregated where applicable. Descriptive statistics, correlations, and regression models were used to analyze the data.

3.4 Analytical strategy

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics provided an overview of central tendencies and distributions across all variables. Second, Spearman correlations tested bivariate relationships between social capital indicators and migration perceptions. Third, multivariate analysis was conducted using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression with heteroskedasticity-consistent (robust) standard errors (DV treated as continuous). OLS estimates are reported with coefficients, robust standard errors, p-values and 95% confidence intervals; the primary model specification is:

$$DVi = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{CommunityCoopi} + \beta_2 \text{NeighbourHelpi} + \beta_3 \text{WellBeingi} + \sum \gamma \text{Controlsi} + \epsilon_i$$

To respect the ordinal nature of the dependent variable, ordered logistic regression (ordered logit) was run as a robustness check and results are presented alongside the OLS findings. Moderation hypotheses (H4) were tested by including interaction terms between each social capital measure and demographic moderators (age group, gender, education); predictors used in interactions were mean-centered and significant interactions are interpreted via simple slopes / marginal effects. Diagnostics included Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) for multicollinearity, the Breusch–Pagan test for heteroskedasticity, and Cook's D for influential observations. As additional robustness checks we report bootstrap standard errors (1,000 replications) for key estimates and, where item missingness exceeded 5% or appeared non-random, multiple imputation ($m = 20$ chained imputations) was applied and pooled following Rubin's rules.

Qualitative interview transcripts were analysed using thematic coding (iterative codebook) focusing on perceptions of migration, the role of networks, and community cooperation; qualitative evidence is used to triangulate and interpret the quantitative results (Saar & Nase, 2021; Vollmer, 2023).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

All participation in survey and interviews was voluntary (participants/respondents were informed about the research study), and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, and their right to disengage from participation at any time without consequence. All possible confidentiality and anonymity was ensured during the entire study process, such that all personal identifiers were removed, and participant responses were stored securely.

Some language editing and stylistic suggestions were provided with the assistance of AI tools. All research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation were conducted solely by the authors.

3.6 Limitations of design

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the survey design did not directly measure migration intentions, requiring the use of a proxy variable. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits causal inference, meaning the study can only assess associations rather than direct effects. Third, the sample size ($N = 197$) provides indicative patterns but restricts the generalizability of results. Finally, while interviews provide valuable context, the small number and purposive sampling limit their representativeness.

Despite these constraints, the study offers one of the few empirical attempts to link social capital and migration perceptions in rural Albania, contributing both methodologically and substantively to migration scholarship in the Western Balkans.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for the main variables. Respondents show moderate average evaluations of emigration's local impact and mid-range values on social-capital indicators.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of main study variables (N = 197)

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Perceived impact of emigration (DV)	2.57	1.17	1	5
Community cooperation	2.67	1.06	1	5
Neighbourly assistance	2.79	1.05	1	5
Psychological well-being	3.19	1.04	1	5

Source: Authors' survey, 2025.

On average, respondents neither see emigration as strongly positive nor strongly negative for local development; social capital measures cluster around the mid-points of their scales, indicating moderate perceived cooperation, assistance and well-being.

4.2 Correlations

Table 2 displays Spearman rank correlations among the key variables. Social capital dimensions are intercorrelated (as theory expects), but their bivariate correlations with the DV are weak.

Table 2. Spearman correlations among dependent and independent variables

Variables	1. DV	2. Community cooperation	3. Neighbourly assistance	4. Psychological well- being
1. Perceived impact (DV)	1.00	0.12	0.07	0.13
2. Community cooperation		1.00	0.48***	0.38***
3. Neighbourly assistance			1.00	0.35***
4. Psychological well- being				1.00

*Source: Authors' survey, 2025. Note: Spearman's ρ reported. *** $p < 0.001$.*

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND MIGRATION PERCEPTIONS AMONG RURAL YOUTH IN ALBANIA

Community cooperation, neighbourly assistance and psychological well-being are positively correlated with one another (moderate to strong correlations among the social capital measures). Their correlations with perceived impact of emigration are positive but small ($\rho \approx 0.07\text{--}0.13$), indicating only weak bivariate associations.

4.3 Regression analysis

OLS regressions were estimated with heteroskedasticity-consistent (robust) standard errors as the primary specification, and ordered logistic models as robustness checks. All models include demographic controls (age group, gender, education) and report two-sided tests.

Table 3. OLS regression results (robust SE, N = 194)

Variable	Coef.	Robust SE	p-value	95% CI
Constant	1.823	0.303	<0.001	[1.229, 2.417]
Community cooperation	0.108	0.106	0.312	[−0.100, 0.316]
Neighbourly assistance	0.061	0.101	0.545	[−0.138, 0.260]
Psychological well-being	0.120	0.108	0.265	[−0.092, 0.332]

Source: Authors' survey, 2025. DV treated as continuous. OLS with heteroskedasticity-consistent (robust) standard errors. 95% confidence intervals in brackets.

All three social-capital predictors have *positive* point estimates (directionally consistent with theory), but none reach conventional statistical significance (all $p > .05$). Confidence intervals for the predictors include zero and are relatively wide, indicating uncertainty around the point estimates and limited empirical support for a meaningful effect in this sample. Ordered logistic (ordinal) models were estimated as a robustness check; results are concordant with OLS: predictors are positive in sign but not statistically significant. Thus, the null finding is robust to model choice.

4.4 Multicollinearity checks

A range of diagnostic procedures was performed to assess the robustness of the regression estimates. Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) for the predictors were low (community cooperation = 1.44; neighbourly assistance = 1.44; psychological well-being = 1.25), all well below the common threshold of 5, confirming that multicollinearity is not a concern (Table 4).

Breusch–Pagan tests indicated the presence of heteroskedasticity in the raw OLS residuals; accordingly, all models were estimated with heteroskedasticity-consistent (robust) standard errors. Cook's D statistics identified no individual observation exerting undue influence on the coefficients. Bootstrap confidence intervals, based on 500–2,000 replications, confirmed the stability of results, consistently including zero for the main predictors. Missing data were minimal, and complete-case analysis was applied for the main models. Supplementary multiple imputation ($m = 20$) produced substantively similar estimates, indicating that the inference is not sensitive to missingness.

Table 4. Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) for predictors

Variable	VIF
Community cooperation	1.44
Neighbourly assistance	1.44
Psychological well-being	1.25

Source: Authors' survey, 2025. Note: All VIF values < 2, indicating no multicollinearity concerns.

Overall, these diagnostic checks confirm that the null results are robust and cannot be explained by multicollinearity, heteroskedasticity, influential cases, or missing-data bias.

4.5 Qualitative insights

Qualitative interviews (n = 15) provide mechanisms and contextual nuance absent from the cross-sectional survey:

- Migration as family survival strategy: *“Many of us are planning to leave, not because we want to, but because we are helping our family back home by leaving”* (Interview #12).
- Social capital mobilized to exit in face of corruption and blocked opportunities: *“Even if we are here, opportunities are blocked through nepotism and corruption”* (Interview #9).
- Remittances sustain households but rarely catalyse village-wide development: *“Money comes in, but it does not help the village expand. It does help families remain”* (Interview #15).
- Institutional failure and reliance on family networks: *“Institutions do not serve youth needs, but rather turn to family networks”* (Interview #5).

Demographic patterns: migration intentions were reported higher among males, younger respondents, and those with higher education (interview-based pattern confirmed by survey distributions).

These interview excerpts make two points clear: (1) social capital operates instrumentally (to facilitate migration) and protectively (to support household survival); (2) structural and institutional blockages (corruption, lack of jobs, weak services) are repeatedly invoked as the root causes shaping both attitudes and behaviour.

4.6 Additional findings: challenges, priorities, information sources (survey frequencies)

From the survey responses (multiple-choice and ranking items), the study identified the most frequently reported problems and priorities among rural youth:

- Key issues reported: labour loss (n = 153), weakening of family connections (n = 104), dependence on remittances (n = 42).
- Top priorities for youth: employment opportunities (n = 137), physical infrastructure improvements (n = 115), access to health services (n = 105).

Structural economic and service needs (employment, infrastructure, health) consistently outranked social capital concerns when respondents listed priorities — suggesting that material constraints take precedence over network effects in shaping perceptions and decisions.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpreting a “non-finding”: why the absence of statistically significant effects matters

The core quantitative finding of this study is parsimonious: community cooperation, neighbourly assistance and self-reported psychological well-being are not statistically significant predictors of rural youth’s perceptions of emigration’s impact in our cross-sectional models. Rather than treating this as a nullity, the mixed-methods evidence indicates that the absence of clear quantitative effects is itself informative. In contexts of entrenched out-migration and weak local economies, micro-level network resources may be insufficient to alter the broader calculus that drives migration attitudes and behaviours (de Haas, 2010; Carling & Schewel, 2018). In short, social capital exists, but its power to shape migration perceptions is constrained by macro-structural forces (economic opportunity, governance quality, labour market structure). This interpretation resonates with theoretical work cautioning against universalist expectations about network effects in low-opportunity settings (Castles, 2010; Portes, 1998).

5.2 Qualitative mechanisms: ambivalence, exit and anchoring

The qualitative interviews clarify mechanisms that the survey could not resolve. Interviewees repeatedly presented social ties as ambivalent: simultaneously enabling exit and providing protection. For example, one respondent summarized the moral economy underpinning departure: *“Many of us are planning to leave, not because we want to, but because we are helping our family back home by leaving”* (Interview #12). Other respondents described networks being mobilized as an exit resource in the face of corruption and blocked opportunity structures: *“Even if we are here, opportunities are blocked through nepotism and corruption”* (Interview #9). At the same time, remittances and neighbourly help provide immediate household resilience — *“Money comes in, but it does not help the village expand. It does help families remain”* (Interview #15) — revealing that social capital and remittances cushion families but do not necessarily foster community-level transformation.

This functional duality (networks as both exit enablers and social buffers) helps explain why cross-sectional estimates show little net directional effect: the same ties may raise both the aspiration and the anchoring incentives, producing offsetting effects on a single survey measure of perceived impact.

5.3 Institutional and demographic mediators

Interview evidence also highlights important mediators. Institutional deficiencies — real or perceived — operate as a key intervening factor. *“Institutions do not serve youth needs, but rather turn to family networks”* (Interview #5). When formal institutions fail to deliver employment, services or fair access, social capital is rerouted into private safety nets or exit strategies rather than collective public investment (AKD, 2021; OECD, 2022). Demographically, migration intentions and readiness were higher among younger respondents, males and those with higher education — patterns consistent with regional studies on youth mobility and brain drain (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024; Gëdeshi, King, & Ceka, 2024). These mediating factors suggest that social capital effects are contingent on governance quality and the availability of viable local alternatives.

5.4 Comparative and policy-relevant perspective: what the region teaches us

The comparative snapshot (see Table 5) indicates that remittance intensity and institutional arrangements vary across the Western Balkans. Kosovo’s stronger institutionalised diaspora engagement (e.g., DEED/UNDP initiatives) appears to convert

remittances and linking social capital into targeted local projects more successfully than in Albania or Bosnia & Herzegovina (Dushi & Berila, 2025; Multi-Partner Trust Fund/UNDP). This suggests that the policy architecture — not social capital per se — conditions whether remittances and networks translate into structural rural development. Thus, Albania’s challenge is less about building social capital (bonding ties are typically strong) and more about strengthening linking capital through transparent, accessible institutional channels (AKD, 2021; World Bank, 2025).

5.5 Theoretical and methodological contributions

Theoretically, the study refines the aspiration–ability framing by showing that networks’ influence on aspiration can be counterbalanced by structural constraints on ability; consequently, attitudes measured cross-sectionally may display weak net associations. Methodologically, the mixed-methods design demonstrates the importance of combining survey analysis with interviews: what appears as a “no effect” quantitatively can yield rich causal hypotheses and policy insights when complemented by qualitative data. Finally, by documenting empirical evidence from rural Albania — a key case in migration literature — the paper expands comparative knowledge about how social capital operates in high-emigration settings.

6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

To transform the potential of social capital and remittances into sustainable rural development, policies must pair diaspora engagement with domestic reforms that address structural constraints (employment, governance, infrastructure). Below are targeted, actionable recommendations grounded in our mixed-methods findings and regional practice.

6.1 Build institutional channels that convert remittances into productive, communal investments (strengthen linking capital)

- Create a Rural Diaspora Investment Facility (pilot in high-migration municipalities: Tirana rural districts, Fier/Lushnje/Berat). The facility should offer matched public co-funding, streamlined project approval, and transparent reporting to attract pooled remittance investments (AKD, 2021; DEED/UNDP practices).
- Design diaspora bonds / micro-matching grants for community infrastructure (irrigation, roads, local processing units), with clear anti-corruption safeguards and community governance mechanisms. These instruments should be simple, low-barrier and monitored for local employment outcomes (World Bank, 2025).

6.2 Prioritise youth employment and local economic activation

- Launch a Rural Youth Employment Package combining wage subsidies, apprenticeships tied to local value chains (agro-processing, eco-tourism), and entrepreneurship seed grants conditional on job creation. Survey priorities (n = 137) show employment is the top youth demand; programming should respond directly.
- Incentivise returnee entrepreneurship with tax breaks, mentoring and market linkages; couple incentives with requirements for job creation or community reinvestment.

6.3 Channel remittances into collective goods and governance of pooled funds

- Promote community remittance pooling models (village savings & loan associations, cooperative funds) with municipal matching for clearly defined public goods projects. This addresses the interview insight that “*money helps families remain*” but rarely funds village expansion (Interview #15).

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND MIGRATION PERCEPTIONS AMONG RURAL YOUTH IN ALBANIA

- Strengthen transparency & participatory decision-making in managing pooled remittance funds to reduce capture by patronage networks (Interview #9).

6.4 Strengthen service delivery, anti-corruption measures and youth-facing institutions

- Implement municipal ‘Youth Service Desks’ to coordinate training, job referrals, and small grant applications, increasing youth trust in public institutions (Interview #5; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024).
- Apply targeted governance reforms (merit-based hiring, open procurement, grievance mechanisms) in pilot districts to reduce nepotistic blockages that push networks toward exit strategies.

6.5 Evidence-based program design and evaluation (use mixed methods)

- Require M&E packages for diaspora investment pilots that include quantitative outcome metrics (jobs created, investment leveraged) and qualitative community perception measures, enabling iterative learning and scaling (OECD, 2022; World Bank, 2025).
- Fund experimental pilots that test remittance-matching, youth employment packages and community governance models, using randomized or phased roll-out designs to establish causality.

7. CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods study of rural Albanian youth finds that commonly held expectations about social capital and migration do not translate straightforwardly into measurable positive associations in cross-sectional survey models. Yet the story is far from trivial: qualitative evidence reveals that social ties are deeply consequential — they both enable departure by reducing costs and insulate households through remittances — while structural drivers (lack of jobs, institutional weakness, corruption) shape whether networks result in migration, resilience, or local transformation.

Policy responses should therefore focus less on building bonding capital (which is often present) and more on creating linking mechanisms that channel diaspora resources and social ties into productive, accountable rural development. Practical measures include a Rural Diaspora Investment Facility, youth employment packages, pooled remittance funds for community goods, and institutional reforms to reduce corruption and improve service delivery. These interventions must be designed, piloted and evaluated with rigorous, mixed-methods approaches to ensure they address both the social and structural dimensions of migration and development.

Limitations should be acknowledged: the dependent variable is a perceptual proxy rather than a direct measure of migration intention; the sample was purposive and cross-sectional; and the number of interviews, while sufficient for thematic saturation, limits broader generalization. Future research should pursue representative and longitudinal data, experimental policy pilots, and deeper comparative work across the Western Balkans to test which institutional designs most effectively convert social capital and remittances into sustained rural development.

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SOCIAL CAPITAL AND MIGRATION PERCEPTIONS AMONG RURAL YOUTH IN ALBANIA

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SOCIAL CAPITAL AND MIGRATION PERCEPTIONS AMONG RURAL YOUTH IN ALBANIA

Operationalization table (Appendix)

Variable	Survey code	Scale	Model treatment
Perceived impact (DV)	S3_13	1–5 Likert	OLS (primary), Ordered logit (robustness)
Community cooperation	S5_24	1–5 Likert	Predictor (mean-centered for interactions)
Neighbourly assistance	S2_7	1–5 Likert	Predictor (mean-centered)
Psychological well-being	S4_21	1–5 Likert	Predictor (mean-centered)
Age	age_cat	categorical	control & moderator
Gender	gender	binary	control & moderator
Education	edu_cat	categorical	control & moderator

Table 5. Comparative overview (Western Balkans): Social capital, diaspora engagement and rural development

Country	Remittances (% of GDP)	Social capital (Bonding Bridging Linking)	Diaspora engagement	Migration pressure	Rural development outcomes	Notes
Albania	8.4% (2024)	Bonding: High; Bridging: Moderate; Linking: Low–Moderate	Limited institutional channels to convert remittances into productive investment (AKD, 2021)	High persistent youth emigration, brain drain	— Moderate remittances support consumption but weak structural investment	Author’s survey (2025) + national reports; confidence Medium–High
Kosovo	17.5% (2023)	Bonding: Moderate; Bridging: Moderate; Linking: Moderate–High	High — structured programmes (DEED/UNDP) mobilise diaspora funds	Moderate sustained emigration but active engagement in locales	— High in targeted cases — diaspora institutionalisation catalyses rural projects	Program reports (UNDP/DEED); national statistics; confidence High
North Macedonia	3.1% (2023)	Bonding: Moderate; Bridging: Moderate; Linking: Moderate	Medium diaspora cooperation education initiatives	— Moderate youth & emigration persists	— Moderate — selective projects; systemic change	National policy docs + regional reports; confidence Medium–High
Bosnia & Herzegovina	11.0% (2024)	Bonding: Moderate; Bridging: Low–Moderate; Linking: Low	Low–Medium reliance on passive remittances; limited national channels	— High longstanding emigration and large diaspora	— Low–Moderate remittances cushion households but weak structural outcomes	

(Sources: World Bank, UNDP, AKD, DEED/UNDP reports, national documents, author’s survey and interviews)