

# UNU-CRIS

## WORKING PAPER SERIES

#09  
December  
2020

# Exploring Return Migration Infrastructures in the Philippines

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and may not represent the position of the UN, UNU or UNU-CRIS.*

## Abstract

Dubbed as the *bagong bayani* or new heroes, Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) significantly contribute to the economic growth of the Philippines but are often subjected to various abuses and vulnerabilities. It is always relevant to examine and re-examine various mechanisms that both supports and excludes migrant workers across the pre-migration, migration, and return phases. The country has already in place a structured and well-organized migration infrastructure. Albeit a fast-growing interest in academe globally, the visibility of returning OFWs sadly remains underdiscussed and undervalued which cascades to a lack of effective return and reintegration. This working paper aims to explore and understand return migration in the Philippines by analyzing the existing academic landscape reinforced by global reports, grey literature, data derived from Philippines agencies and offices, and an online questionnaire of OFWs. Thus, five key messages were crafted. First, information on return and reintegration should go beyond the numbers. Secondly, expanding definitions and revisiting framings may contribute to streamlined classifications or typologies of OFWs that includes the ignored and the unlabeled. Thirdly, amplifying support structures that considers the long-term development of permanent or temporary returnees can improve their quality of life. Fourthly, a more responsive reintegration program must go beyond economic aspects but should also consider the political, social, psycho-social/mental, and cultural aspects. Finally, the country must boost its domestic economy and minimize reliance on the global labor market. Providing strong return and reintegration of OFWs means the government can effectively utilize their skills and expertise in improving the quality of life in the country. Ultimately, a good quality of life in the Philippines can encourage OFWs to return and stay.

**Key words:** return migration, Philippines, returnees, reintegration, migration governance

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## 1. Introduction

Migrant workers are essential to the economic growth of both the receiving and origin countries (OECD, 2014). In a single decade, migrants contributed to a significant workforce rise in OECD countries like the United States (47%) and Europe (70%). In these countries, migrants often take up low-income niches, contribute to taxes and social contributions, improve the human capital development, and contribute to technological advancement. Recently, there is an observed rise of younger and high-skilled labour migration from African nations although India, China, and Philippines remain as top labour exporters to the region (OECD, 2020).

Well documented and well-studied, migrants' workers experience various abuses and vulnerabilities. For example, they are exposed to various health risks with having limited access to health care and infrastructures due to a multitude of factors such as legal status, cultural and linguistic barriers and restrictive policies (Moyce & Schenker, 2018; Noor & Shaker, 2017). Women migrant workers are also a center of much-needed attention as they are often more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation compared to men migrant workers (Piper & Lee, 2013; ILO, 2018).

In a dissonant world that heavily relies on labor migration but establishes migrant-exclusive policies - bordering on xenophobia dressed in the guise of nationalism or patriotism - it is necessary to examine and re-examine various mechanisms that supports or excludes migrant workers. This must include the pre-migration, migration, and return and reintegration phases.

The Philippines is a major player in terms of global labour workforce hence there is an extensive discussion on the migration cycle of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Albeit the growing academic interest on return and reintegration globally, it is sadly still severely underdiscussed and understudied and the return experiences of migrant workers are significantly undermined (Fransen & Bilgili, 2018). The same can be said for the Philippines. Ruiz's (2018) brief under World Bank, *Managing Migration: Lessons from the Philippines*, presented five key lessons other origin countries could learn from the Philippines. Unfortunately, return and reintegration was not discussed perhaps due to the lack of attention, knowledge building, or information.

This serious gap in the visibility of the OFWs' return experiences is dissonant to the fact that the country reputedly has one of the best machineries on international migration management and policy (Battistella, 2004; Bakunda & Walusimbi Mpanga, 2011). Other nations like Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka are following in the footsteps of the Philippines' migration infrastructure (Ray, Sinha, & Chaudhuri, 2007). This disconnect must be reconciled so that the Philippine government is fully aware of the extent of return migration and reintegration. Consequently, this will not only inform and improve return and reintegration programs but re-examine the relevance of migration policies and frameworks in the Philippines (Saguin, 2020).

This paper then aims to contribute to this discussion within the Philippine context by exploring the current return mechanism in the country. First, we investigate and dissect the current condition and discourse on the Philippine's return migration infrastructure i.e. policies, agencies, actors, and programs. Secondly, we extract gaps in the existing return infrastructure while also examining the nuances of return experiences of different types of OFWs. Finally, key messages are crafted that hopefully will contribute to a more responsive and durable return and reintegration infrastructure in the country.

Focusing on qualitative methods, this paper selected and analyzed academic research. This is further reinforced by global reports, data and information derived from government web sites, and grey literature (e.g. online news articles, editorials, opinion pieces). Academic databases were searched using key terms like “Philippine labor migration”, “return migration”, and “return and reintegration” with a timeframe of 2000-2018. The first screening resulted to 86 papers wherein relevant details (e.g. title, authors, abstract) were then encoded in MS Excel. After a title and abstract review and a simple content analysis on the relevance to this paper’s topic, the number was trimmed down to 51. Papers focussing on topics such as trauma, mobilities of non-Filipino nationals or elites, assimilation processes, deportation and internal migration were excluded.

Global reports and grey literature were selected purposively that helped in reinforcing the arguments, key points, and key messages of the paper. There were also relevant in providing relevant facts and figures. An online questionnaire<sup>1</sup> filled in by OFWs was conducted to supplement the discussion. The questions revolved around their deployment, preparation for return, and the return process.

This working paper is divided into three sections. Section 2 gives an overview of labour migration and the Philippines: from the global context (2.1); to a brief history (2.2); to the well-established labour migration mechanism in the country (2.3); and a proposed typology of migrant workers (2.4). The next section (Section 3) discusses return migration from international and regional frameworks relevant to the country (3.1), the national infrastructure on return and reintegration (3.2), the potential differences in return experiences of the typologies presented (3.3), and an offshoot section on the recent COVID-19 impacts. Gaps, weaknesses, and strengths were embedded in these sections. Finally, section 4 wraps up the paper by presenting five key messages towards a more durable return and reintegration infrastructure in the Philippines.

## **2. Human Resources - The Biggest Export of the Philippines**

Filipinos are known to emigrate as they would often seek higher wages in the pursuit of a better quality of life (Bernas, 2016), observed to follow a neoclassical model of migration: moving from a poor country to a richer country with full knowledge of opportunities in destination (Castles & Miller, 2009; Vilog & Ballesteros, 2015). It is a running inside joke that Filipinos can be found anywhere in the world are they are considered globetrotters tending to dominate East Asian countries (Hong Kong, China, Japan), while also preferring OECD countries such as the USA and Canada, and oil-rich Middle Eastern nations (World Bank Group & ADB, 2018). Presented as an option by the government, migration for labor is not seen as an official development strategy.

Owing to the limited opportunities and a volatile economic situation in the Philippines, seeking greener pastures internationally remains true for many Filipinos. In 2013, there were 10 million migrant Filipinos: 4.9 million permanent settlers; 4.2 million temporary migrants; and approximately 1.2 illegal migrants as classified by the Commission of Filipinos Overseas<sup>2</sup> (Asis, 2017). Some experts argue that Filipinos would still migrate

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<sup>1</sup> Google Docs was used in crafting the online survey. Individuals were personally contacted and sent the link so that they can fill in the form which is accessible in the following link: <https://forms.gle/AazUnhDPsK1pRwtr8>. There were seven respondents that ranged from low-skilled OFWs, professional architects, and seafarers.

<sup>2</sup> The Commission of Filipinos Overseas generally handles permanent and long-term Filipino migrants e.g. dual nationalities, married a foreigner, or Filipinos with green cards abroad.



because of the global demand even if the Philippines' gain an economic foothold, the numbers barely affected by domestic economic trends (Martin et al, 2004). Current estimates remain the same although range of destination countries has expanded allowing for a natural hedge against localized recessions (Mapa, 2020).

Famously, the remittances of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) have a significant positive impact to the Philippines' economy. The year 2019 saw a rise of 3.1% in remittances, mostly from USA, amounting to USD 28.9 billion albeit slowing in the last decade (Flores, 2019). This accounts for 9.7% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and 8.1% of the gross national income (GNI), making it a significant driver of the domestic consumption (BSP, 2019). Beyond economic impacts, the remittances may have socio-economic consequences like the development of the social capital of households and communities or the potential of social change in the Philippines (Advincula-Lopez, 2005; Rahman & Fee, 2012). Remittances are also seen as political since OFWs coming from restrictive but wealthy countries might have shifted democratic attitudes (Rother, 2009). Regardless of nuances, the immense contributions of the OFWs is a point of interest for both the national government and the global labour market. The Philippines thus is seen to be taking a proactive approach in its migration policies (Malit, Jr., 2018).

Examining the 2019 Survey on Overseas Filipinos by the Philippine Statistics Authority<sup>3</sup>, the government generally distinguishes between land-based and seafaring. Females account for more than half of the total OFWs number. A quarter of the population are from ages 30 and above. The same trend is seen when you compare male and female OFWs. Elementary occupations account for 39.6% of the total workforce. More than 20% of OFWs come from Region 1V-A of the country (CALABARZON) followed by Central Luzon (13.3%) and the National Capital Region (9.7). Western Asia remains a popular destination for most OFWs followed by East Asia. Australia, Europe, and the Americas only account for 17.9% of the migrant workers share. In terms of destination countries, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are on the top.

## 2.1 The Philippine Migration - A Well-Oiled Machinery

The progress in the establishment of a well-oiled migration machinery in the Philippines can be attributed to the international attention on the vulnerability and abuse of OFWs especially women migrant workers. In 1995, Contemplacion was hanged in Singapore under a highly contested trial highlighting modern slavery in the island state (Talabong, 2019). On another continent in UAE, Balabagan stabbed her employer to death after rape allegations but persistent diplomatic missions and personal pleas reduced her sentence from death via firing squad down to a public whipping and a hefty fine. (ABS-CBN, 2016). These are but a couple cases that helped shape the current infrastructures for OFWs in the Philippines. Research further shows that overseas Filipino workers face various issues like breakdown of marriage family relations, homesickness leading to declining psychological and social well-being, psycho-social dysfunction and trauma, various social and welfare issues, brain drain, exploitative work conditions, inadequate support and protection, lack of opportunities for returnees, lack of savings, among many others (Gonzales III & Holmes, 1996; Ofreneo & Samonte, 2005). The Philippine government compelled two key departments to oversee their protection and welfare: The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). Two specific sub-offices

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<sup>3</sup> Data can be accessed in <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/survey/labor-force/sof-index>.

under the latter directly interacts with OFWs: The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) dealing with manning, placement, and employment while the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) provides protection and other support mechanisms.

### 2.1.1 Legal Frameworks

Republic Act 8042 (RA 8042) dubbed as the *Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995* was crafted to “afford full protection to labor, local and overseas, organized and unorganized, and promote full employment and equality of employment opportunities for all” by providing “adequate and timely social, economic and legal services to Filipino migrant workers.” (p.1) This law technically established the OWWA. Fourteen years later, RA 8042 was amended by Republic Act 10022. Table 1 below details relevant laws, policies, and guidelines from key agencies.

NO. (YEAR)	FULL NAME	DESCRIPTION	KEY AGENCY	SUPPORT
<b>CORE DOCUMENTS</b>				
RA 8042 (1995)	<i>An Act to Institute the Policies of Overseas Employment and Establish a Higher Standard of Protection and Promotion of the Welfare of Migrant Workers Their Families and Overseas Filipinos in Distress, and for other Purposes</i>	Also known as the <i>Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995</i> . The first key policy governing migrant workers in the Philippines. Established the OWWA under the DOLE.	DFA DOLE Under DOLE: POEA and OWWA	DOST; TESDA; Department of Tourism (DOT); Department of Justice (DOJ); Bureau of Immigration; NBI; NSO
RA 10022 (2009)	<i>An Act Amending Republic Act. No 8042, Otherwise Known as the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995, as Amended, Further Improving the Standards of Protection and Promotion of the Welfare of Migrant Workers, Their Families and Overseas Filipinos in Distress, and for Other Purposes</i>	Updated all sections including the definition for OFW. Included detailed conditions for insurance and the consideration for the Labor Code of the Philippines. Establishes the National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers. Included the establishment of a shared government information system for migration. Fine for agencies hiring underage workers. Legal Assistance Fund was also established. Exempted OFWs from travel tax, and other fees. Oversight Committee.	DFA DOLE	Same as above plus NTC, Commission on Information and Comm. Tech., National Computer Center, National Statistical and Coordination Board, DOH.
<b>SECONDARY DOCUMENTS AND AGENCY-SPECIFIC GUIDELINES</b>				



PD 442 (1974)	<i>The Labor Code of the Philippines - A Decree Instituting a Labor Code Thereby Revising and Consolidating Labor and Social Laws to Afford Protection to Labor, Promote Employment and Human Resourced Development and Ensure Industrial Peace Based on Social Justice</i>	Protects workers in the Philippines. Amended based on 7 recently enacted laws: RA 10911 (2016) <i>Anti-Age Discrimination in Employment Act</i> ; RA 10917 (2016) <i>Special Program for Employment of Student</i> ; RA 10741 (2016) <i>An Act Strengthening the Operations of the National Labor relations Commission</i> ; RA 10757 (2016) <i>An Act Reducing the Retirement Age of Surface Mine Workers from 60 to 50 Years</i> ; RA 10801 <i>OWWA Act</i> ; RA 10706 <i>Seafarers Protection Act</i> ; RA 10691 <i>PESO Act of 1999</i>	DOLE	-
<b>Under the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA)</b>				
Memorandum Circular No. 06 Series of 2008	<i>Guidelines on the Recruitment and Deployment of OFWs to Canada</i>	An agreement between the DOLE and the provincial authorities in Canada.	POEA (DOLE)	-
Dept. Order No. 106 Series of 2010	<i>Guidelines on the Implementation of JITCO Program</i>	Guidelines specifically for Japan International Training Cooperation Organization technical interns.	POEA (DOLE)	-
(2010)	<i>Guidelines on Insurance Coverage</i>	Crafted in compliance to RA 8042 and RA 10022; provide specific conditions compulsory insurance contracts with the recruitment/manning agency and the OFWs.	POEA (DOLE)	Insurance Commission; National Labor Relations Commission
(2002)	<i>Revised Rules and Regulations Governing Overseas Employment of Landbased Workers</i>	Provides specifics and amendments on licensing, inspection, advertisement of overseas jobs, skills test, medical examination, registration, accreditation, vacation and leave conditions, welfare services, legal assistance and enforcement, and adjudication.	POEA	-
(2003)	<i>Rules and Regulations Governing Recruitment and Employment of Seafarers</i>	Specific for Seafarers, details conditions for manning agencies, license issuance, inspection and quality control, among many others. Also includes various sanctions against illegal recruitment.	POEA	-

RA 9422 (2006)	<i>An Act to Strengthen the Regulatory Functions of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), Amending for this Purpose Republic Act No. 8042, Otherwise Known as the "Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995."</i>	Amends participation of private sectors in the recruitment and overseas placement of workers. This law repealed section 29 and 30 of RA 8042.	POEA	-
Department Order No. 130 Series of 2013	<i>Rules and Regulations on the Employment of Filipino Seafarers Onboard Philippine Registered Ships Engaged in International Voyage</i>	Specific for Philippine Registered Ships plying international waters. The document details minimum requirements for work, employment conditions, occupational safety, and health, as well as enforcement of rules.	POEA	-
(2016)	<i>Revised POEA Rules and Regulations Governing the Recruitment and Employment of Seafarers</i>	Updated, amended, and revised the 2003 document.	POEA	-
(2016)	<i>Revised POEA Rules and Regulations Governing the Recruitment and Employment of Landbased Overseas Filipino Workers of 2016</i>	Updated, amended, and revised a similar 2002 document.	POEA	-
<b>Under the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA)</b>				
Letter of Instruction No. 537 <sup>4</sup> (1977)	<i>Welfare and Training Fund for Overseas Workers</i>	Forebearer of documents mandating the provision of social and welfare services to OFWs which includes "insurance coverage, social work assistance, legal assistance, placement assistance, cultural services, remittance services, and the like (OWWA, n.d.)"	-	-
Presidential Decree No. 1694 (1980)	<i>Organization and Administration of the Welfare Fund for Overseas Workers</i>	Formalized LOI No. 537 creating the Welfare Fund for Overseas Workers (Welfund) to protect overseas workers given the volatile situation in host/destination countries.	-	-
PD No. 1809 (1981)	<i>Amending Certain Provisions of Presidential Decree 1694, Creating the "Welfare Fund for Overseas Workers".</i>	Funds will be deposited in government banks, Board of Trustees growing from 7 to 11, and creation of a Secretariat for fund administration.	-	-
Executive Order No. 126 (1987) <sup>5</sup>	<i>Reorganizing the Ministry of Labor and Employment and For Other Purposes</i>	After the People Power Revolution in 1986, there was a need to reorganize critical government infrastructure. Creation of DOLE. Welfund was renamed into OWWA.	OWWA (DOLE)	-

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the actual document could not be found in any site of the agencies in the Philippines.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the OWWA web site stated 1982 while the actual law stated it was enacted in 1987.

RA No. 7111 (1991)	<i>An Act Establishing the Overseas Workers' Investment Fund to Provide Incentives to Overseas Workers, Reduce the Foreign Debt Burden, and for Other Purposes</i>	Recognized the economic benefits of remittances thus it was mandated to streamline the process of sending back money to their relatives. This includes a timeframe, the charges, and fees, as well as campaigns to promote the remittance services.	DOLE; Department of Finance, Central Bank of the Philippines, POEA.	-
EO No. 195 (1994)	<i>Providing a Medical Care Program to Filipino Overseas Contract Workers and Their Dependents and Prescribing the Mechanism Therefore</i>	Back then the Social Security System governed the medical insurance of Filipinos and overseas workers were not included thus the creation of this law.	Philippine Medical Care Commission <sup>6</sup> ; OWWA & POEA (DOLE), DFA, SSS	-
OWWA Resolution No. 038 (2003)	OWWA Omnibus Policies	Promulgated and codified the policies, rules and regulations, and other details on the functions of OWWA	OWWA	
EO No. 446 (2005)	<i>Tasking the Secretary of Labor and Employment to Oversee and Coordinate the Implementation of Various Initiatives for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)</i>	Emphasized remittances as a "critical flow of foreign currency" into the country's economy. A Technical Working Group was established to oversee and coordinate the various initiatives for OFWs.	DOLE	

Table 1: Relevant Laws, Policies, and Guidelines on Migrant Workers in the Philippines

Based on the timeline of the crafting of laws, it is safe to assume that the protection of the welfare of OFWs came first before the actual guidelines were established on the manning, placement, and deployment. Social services and health insurance existed since 1977 but it was in 1995 that an actual law was passed that strengthens protection of OFWs. Moreover, the DFA has a critical role of promoting and protecting the country's interests in the global landscape (DFA, n.d.). They are identified as a key department within RA 8042 since they provide the passports, and more importantly, deal with the foreign and diplomatic affairs of the country. It also houses the Overseas Absentee Voting Secretariat (OAVS) that provides means for migrant Filipinos to exercise their right to vote<sup>7</sup>. Even with this strong and structured legislative framework & support mechanism, the implementation and monitoring remain underwhelming (Barber & Bryan, 2017).

### 2.1.2 Support Government Institutions and Offices

In addition to key agencies mentioned, other relevant departments, agencies, and offices are also compelled to support OFWs. The following list, although not exhaustive, are based on the mandate of RA 8042 and RA 10022. These were also identified based on their presence (as official links) in the official government web sites of DOLE and DFA.

- 1. Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO)** - Supporting the consulates and embassies<sup>8</sup> operating in 62 countries under the Department of Foreign Affairs, the

<sup>6</sup> Eventually becoming the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth)

<sup>7</sup> This is only limited to national positions i.e. President, Vice-President, Senators, and Party-List representatives.

<sup>8</sup> This information was retrieved from the official website of the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines (<https://www.dfa.gov.ph/index.php/2013-03-21-05-48-17>). Accessed at 01/10/2020 at 12:24 AM (JST).

POLOs operate under the DOLE. Currently at 34 POLOs globally, they “act as the operating arm of DOLE” and the representative of the POEA in the respective countries. The POLO also provides the DOLE information on labor trends, fluctuations, and issues to inform policies, decisions, and strategies for OFWs.<sup>9</sup> Since OFWs often have limited access to Philippine authorities abroad (Bernas, 2016), POLOs are essentially frontline infrastructures enforcing Philippine labour regulations on both the destination and Philippine-based agencies/employers (Malit, Jr., 2018).

2. **Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA)** - The TESDA is “tasked to manage and supervise technical education and skills development in the Philippines”. A result of Republic Act 7796 (RA 7796), its mission aims “towards a quality-assured and inclusive technical education and skills development and certification system<sup>10</sup>.” They are often tapped for the training of returning OFWs further discussed in Section 3. Generally, they provide Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) that aims to expand the skilled workforce of the country based on local and global labor market. Targeted at young people who choose not to or do not have the capacity to pursue higher education, they provide a National Certificate (NC) quite comparable to the noncredit education for workforce training of community colleges in the USA. It should be noted that TVET is only effective based on the national government and the TESDA’s “policies and plans on education, poverty alleviation, and employment generation” (Budhrani et al, 2018, p. 713).
3. **Department of Health (DOH)** - The DOH is the key health agency of the Philippines that aims to create “a productive, resilient, equitable and people-centered health system.”<sup>11</sup> This department is especially relevant for returning and repatriated OFWs (refer to Section 3). Unfortunately, the lack of a synchronized and comprehensive data collection, reporting system, and database on the various abuses and distress experienced by OFWs means there is a lack of concrete and durable support for OFWs. This is made more apparent in the passing of the Mental Health Act (RA 11036) in 2018 wherein the OFWs who often severe mental health issues like psycho-social trauma and depression, still lack access to proper care and attention (Zarsuelo, 2018).
4. **Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)** - With its first iteration in 1915, the DSWD aids the national government in formulating policies and plans towards the development and delivery of social welfare and development services. They closely coordinate with local government units (LGUs) since the Local Government Code of 1991 (RA 7160) devolved the role of the department to the LGUs. Thus, you will find city and regional offices focused on social welfare and development<sup>12</sup>. The department can aid repatriated OFWs or illegal recruitment victims by offering referral letters for educational assistance, transportation expenses, and financial assistance<sup>13</sup>. On a grim note, they offer assistance of the return of the bodies of OFWs, burial assistance, and other social services to the

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<sup>9</sup> This information sourced from the official web site of the POLO in Athens, Greece. Retrieved from <https://athenspe.dfa.gov.ph/philippine-overseas-labor-office-polo-at-1/10/2020> (1:04 AM JST).

<sup>10</sup> From their official website: <https://www.tesda.gov.ph/About/TESDA/11>.

<sup>11</sup> From their official website: <https://www.doh.gov.ph/mission-vision>.

<sup>12</sup> Summarized from the official government website of DSWD (<https://www.dswd.gov.ph/>) accessed 1/10/2020 (1:28 AM JST).

<sup>13</sup> Based on DSWD’s article *DSWD assists repatriated OFWs, illegal recruitment victims* retrieved from <https://www.dswd.gov.ph/dswd-assists-repatriated-ofws-illegal-recruitment-victims/> (Accessed 1/10/2020 at 2:00 AM JST).

victim's family<sup>14</sup>. This may seem like some band-aid solutions as OFWs and their families may need support beyond tangible needs. Tarroja and Fernando (2013) has argued that children of OFWs are vulnerable to negative psychological impacts of the prolonged separation from their parents. Purposeful school-based and family-focused psychological services are necessary to help the children and families of OFWs. Is this the sole responsibility of DSWD or is there a need to engage DOH and the Department of Education?

- 5. Other social protection and social security offices** - Mostly voluntary, the Philippine government established other social protection and social security agencies recognizing the volatile nature of the domestic & global market and the need to strengthen and enhance these systems for OFWs and their families (Spitzer & Piper, 2014). The PhilHealth is the health insurance system of the country and OFWs can voluntarily contribute to access the services once they are back home<sup>15</sup>. Recently reinforced by the country's Universal Health Care Act (RA 1123), the decision of the government to increase the annual contributions of OFWs to 3% monthly while also compelling them to pay drew ire. Originally at a flat fee of 47 USD annually, this can go up to 500 USD annually on a 1,400 USD average monthly salary<sup>16</sup>. The backlash led to the national government halting the collection (Robles, 2020). This negative perception was further heightened when allegations of corruption among top-ranked PhilHealth officials came to light (Robles, 2020; Malindog-Uy, 2020).

In terms of social security and pensions, the Social Security System (SSS) is the government agency catering to private individuals like OFWs on contrast with the Government Social Insurance System (GSIS)<sup>17</sup>. The Pag-IBIG Fund or the Home Development Mutual Fund runs on a national savings program and financing for cheap housing for Filipinos. It is open both for locally and foreign-employed Filipinos. Loans can also be access specifically for housing.<sup>18</sup> It is required for OFWs to be a member of Pag-IBIG before they receive their Overseas Employment Certificate (OEC).<sup>19</sup>

These support agencies show a highly organized mechanism and support infrastructure of OFWs. Mainly for pre-migration and migration/deployment, some return and reintegration programs (e.g. DOH and DSWD) exist although these are often only offered on the onset of the return and are short-term.

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<sup>14</sup> Based on DSWD's article *DSWD assists OFWs from Kuwait; extends burial assistance, other social services to family of Joanna Demafelis* retrieved from <https://www.dswd.gov.ph/dswd-assists-ofws-from-kuwait-extends-burial-assistance-other-social-services-to-family-of-joanna-demafelis/> (Accessed 1/10/2020 2:05 JST).

<sup>15</sup> Information from PhilHealth's official website ([https://www.philhealth.gov.ph/about\\_us/#gsc.tab=0](https://www.philhealth.gov.ph/about_us/#gsc.tab=0)). Accessed 1/10/2020 at 2:40 PM.

<sup>16</sup> Based on the estimate OFWs think is acceptable according to the Philippine Institute for Development Studies [PIDS] (Ordinario, C., 17 April 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Based on the SSS official website (<https://www.sss.gov.ph/sss/>) and the documents available in the portal. Accessed on 1/10/2020 at 2:58 PM JST.

<sup>18</sup> Based on Pag-IBIG Fund's official web site (<https://www.pagibigfund.gov.ph/missionvisionvalues.html>). Accessed 1/10/2020 at 3:20 PM JST.

<sup>19</sup> Based on a government news article in <https://www.philippine-embassy.org.sg/labor/pag-ibig/mandatory/>. Accessed 1/10/2020 at 3:22 PM JST.

### 2.1.3 *Private Entities, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)*

The private sector plays an important role in supporting OFWs. Recruitment and manning agencies help place workers and serve as an intermediary support between the foreign employers and potential OFW. As of the writing, there are 395 licensed agencies out of 844 recorded agencies listed in the POEA<sup>20</sup>. The figures show that more than half of listed agencies are unlicensed, illegal, or may be non-existent. Even with the various laws and legalistic frameworks, there is a constant tension between these agencies and the government over licensing, requirements, fees, and the like (Blank, n.d.).

There is also a current stigma and perception of recruitment agencies in the country as predatory. Issues like OFWs not getting the stated pay in the contract are common. Recruitment fees are also exorbitant ranging from a thousand to five thousand USD depending on the salary of the OFW. This leads to immense debt that forces OFW to resort to forced labor and trafficking. There are cases wherein the agency would “connect” itself with a lending agency that results into debt bondage locking the OFW in a vicious cycle of loan payments and rising interest rates (Santos, 2016). Illegal recruitment also remains a huge problem in the country. Often common in rural areas, the lack of documentation and the knowledge of the law on the victim’s side means they have no opportunities to pursue legal action. When caught in the destination country, illegal OFWs are fined heavily and often imprisoned (Gonzalez III & Holmes, 1996). The current Philippine President, Rodrigo Duterte, was extremely vocal against illegal recruiters tasking the DOLE with the DSWD to tackle the issue threatening to transfer recruitment under the government citing the perpetual malpractice of private firms (Merez, 2019).

After the government and private entities, the next critical support institution for OFWs are non-government organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs). There is an estimated 60,000 registered NGOs in the country based on a 2009 survey under the Philippine Council for NGO Certification (Moshman, 2009). Unfortunately, current figures are hard to estimate, and information is lacking. As of writing, the web site of PCNC is currently being revamped. It is consequently harder to sift the actual number of registered NGOs dealing with issues and providing support for NGOs in the Philippines.

The functions and support offered by NGOs vary greatly. Orbeta et al (2019) divided NGOs into four categories based on this. First, there are NGOs that provide legal and paralegal services dealing with illegal recruitment, contract violations, and other labor abuses. The second type provides economic services like financial support for micro-finance and small business enterprises. The third type provides psycho-social services usually relevant when OFWs experience abuse. The last one is considered as other auxiliary services e.g. NGOs assisting OFWs in the actual migration process, offering repatriation support especially for domestic transfers, or assistance for the return of the deceased OFW to their families. These entities are also useful in pushing for better policies that improve the welfare of OFWs. In the context of women migrants, NGOs and CSO can bring their voice into the international scenes and allows for revisiting of gender-blind and gender-neutral approaches to migration governance (Hennebry et al, 2018).

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<sup>20</sup> <http://poea.gov.ph/cgi-bin/agList.asp?mode=allSB>



## 2.2 Types of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)

There have been various attempts to categorize and develop a typology of OFWs. Currently the POEA<sup>21</sup> divides OFWs based on general type of destination: land based or seafaring while the Institute of Labour Studies classifies them by return preparedness (complete migration, temporary migration, and interrupted migration). For this paper, we present four typologies of Filipino migrants based on skills/profession thus expanding the POEA classification. The first three directly relate to labor migration while the fourth are international students. We argue that return preparedness can be embedded within the skills/profession classification to further explore on the nuances and intricacies of the return experience.

### 2.2.1 Low-Skilled Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)

Low-skilled OFWs a.k.a. migrant workers under elementary occupations, accounts for 37.6% of total OFWs in 2017 growing to 39.65% by 2019.<sup>22</sup> Elementary occupations as defined by the ILO<sup>23</sup> contain three major classifications namely: a) sales and services elementary occupations; b) agricultural, fishery and related labourers, and c) labourers in mining, construction, manufacturing and transport. For the first classification, specific occupations include street vendors, domestic helpers, and cleaners, building caretakers, sweepers, and messengers to name a few. The second includes farmhands, forestry labourers, and fishermen.

If we follow the ILO definition, the percentage of low-skilled migrant workers of the country should then exceed the 39.6% share in 2019 PSA Survey. Knowing the exact share of low-skilled/unskilled OFWs is crucial since they are more prone to abuse and exploitation compared to highly skilled counterparts OFWs. For example, the lack knowledge of the language of the host country of most low-skilled/unskilled may lead to the lack of full understanding of contract terms and their rights (Building Responsibility, 2019). Given all these issues and challenges low-skilled OFWs face, what happens then when they have to return or are forced back home?

### 2.2.2 Professional and Highly Skilled Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)

In the same 2019 PSA survey, more that 60% of OFW fall under the skilled and professional category. In Singapore, skilled workers are exceeding low-skilled OFW wherein 60% of the 180,000 OFWs are considered professionals or skilled workers (Rocamora, 2018). As raised in the previous, there remains a question on how to differentiate between highly skilled and low-skilled in the Philippine context. Whose definitions are acceptable or more relevant? Is there a need to revisit and reviews these classifications?

Professionals are clearly defined though by Philippine law as someone “registered and licensed to practice a regulated profession in the Philippines and who holds a valid

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<sup>21</sup> From their official web site: <http://www.poea.gov.ph/>

<sup>22</sup> The survey and accompanying documents are accessible in <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/survey/labor-and-employment/survey-overseas-filipinos>.

<sup>23</sup> The information is available in the following websites: Warwick Institute for Employment Research (<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/research/classification/isco88/english/groups/g9/>), and; ILO (<https://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/intro.htm>).

Certificate of Registration and Professional Identification Card" (Philippines, 2016, Section 3.t.) Oftentimes, these are individuals who pursued tertiary education and passed a licensure examination. On a global level though, highly skilled is being equated with STEM workers (Chiswick, 2011)

In essence, this group are preferred as they are considered as better contributors to a host country's economy (Cranston, 2017). They are often seen as the "good migrant" hence often referred to as the "expatriate". This raises issues on privilege, access to better services, better work conditions and terms, and the like in contrast to low-skilled OFWs. Professionals are often expected to return with the assumption that they have the capacity and privilege.

Professionals also face issues on professional recognition in the destination country. Is their license recognized in the host country? Considering the time spent pursuing higher education and their license, non-recognition means the need to undertake additional training and certifications. Professional regulation and assessment in host countries may demand higher investments and time pushing professionals to take out loans for additional education or resort to lesser-paying jobs (Thompson & Walton-Roberts, 2018). In Canada, Filipino nurses and doctors must undertake "necessary Canadian certification, licensing or authorization" to be able to work in the country (CIC News, 2013). Their education must be verified, and they must become a member of the relevant professional organization in the country. This implies a significant amount of capital to navigate the requirements. Since the educational system between Canada and the Philippines is dissimilar, the aspiring professional might need to take more units or further training on top of other issues like restrictive policies and racial discrimination.

Additionally, these professionals may opt not to tap the services of DOLE and OWWA in getting hired. In the online questionnaire, a respondent said that they personally contacted an architectural firm in Singapore who then arranged all the necessary technicalities for her to be able to migrate. Another respondent mentioned that she first applied for a tourist visa to Singapore and then personally applied for jobs there. Taking a local number and address, she submitted CVs to potential employers and upon hiring, the company helped in the application for a working visa. One professional respondent though mentioned that she tapped OWWA and DOLE to avail of their services, especially in their return. This is in high contrast to the treatment low-skilled migrants experience.

### *2.2.3 Filipino Seafarers*

Also considered as highly skilled and professional, seafarers are often segregated especially within OWWA definitions of land-based and sea-based OFWs. Seafarers visa are often very flexible as they visit various international ports during deployment. They can be considered as having the most organized and structured employment, return, and protection in the Philippines. Beyond the typical government agencies like DOLE, OWWA, and POEA, seafarers have their own dedication agencies and organizations. This makes sense as global maritime trade is expected to have an annual compound growth of 3.8% from 2018 to 2023 (UNCTAD, 2018). Although this trend is being challenged by the global pandemic with an expected dive of 4.1% in 2020 while successive waves can threaten supply chains and impeding industry growth (UNCTAD, 2020). The United Nations even has a specific arm for this: International Maritime Organization (IMO).

Under the Department of Transportation and Communications (DOTC), the Maritime Industry Authority of the Philippines (MARINA) was specifically established just to assist

seafarers. Covering both local and international seafarers, MARINA helps in processing the documents of seafarers, conducting exams and certifications (in partnership with the PRC) for various ranks and promotions. In general, they have jurisdiction over shipping including building, designing, manufacturing, acquisition, and operation<sup>24</sup>.

Considered a labor union, the Associated Marine Officers' and Seamen's Union of the Philippines (AMOSUP) had its roots since the 1960s in order to protect the social, legal, and moral rights of Filipino seafarers in the domestic and international waters. AMOSUP is affiliated with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). The union pushes for the continuing skills development of Filipino seafarers coupled with just compensation and necessary benefits towards a decent life.<sup>25</sup> With this, registered seafarers are often automatically inducted into the union. This allows them to have access to medical and dental plans for their families, education and training for the seafarer, and other social services. This is on top of the typical services and benefits they receive from DOLE and OWWA.

Seafarers also have access to various support facilities like a Seaman's Hospital. AMUSOP has five dedicated medical facilities scattered across the Philippine archipelago. Given the transitory and contractual nature of this occupation, it is not difficult to find transient housing or dormitories for seafarers, especially in the capital. Filipino seafarers working for Japanese companies can enjoy free accommodations in one of AMUSOP's Sailor's Home built in partnership with the All Japan Seaman's Union<sup>26</sup>. They even have a museum and sports complex fitted with a basketball court and a swimming pool. Established in 2008, the Mariners Safehouse Seaman's Dormitory<sup>27</sup> offers cheap room rates for other seafarers. These are benefits that most low-skilled and other highly skilled migrant workers do not have access to.

#### 2.2.4 *International Students - Irregular Labourers in Destination Countries*

International students are on a certain level of precarity. Neither a labor migrant nor a permanent migrant, an international student can be considered as in a sort of limbo. A Filipino scholar returning from Japan during the pandemic mentioned that the team handling the quarantine could not figure out what to do with an international student. Thus, she was treated more as a returning tourist rather than an OFW. It can be argued that as a student, she should have the same benefit as the latter.

The Philippines lacks a census on the specific number of international students. There is no specific governing body monitoring this. The Commission on Higher Education<sup>28</sup> (CHED) of the country fails to provide any information. Unsurprisingly, most Filipino international students choose North American and Western European countries where most leading educational institutions are located (Kritz, 2015). The process, treatment, and experience of Filipino International Students (FIS) is highly dependent on destination country, type of program, and funding type (self-financed or scholarship).

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<sup>24</sup> Based on the MARINA web site: <https://marina.gov.ph/>.

<sup>25</sup> From their official website: <http://www.amosup.org.ph/>.

<sup>26</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.shipping-news.co.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/20150126e.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> From their official website: <https://www.marinersseamansdormitory.ph/>.

<sup>28</sup> The official website is <https://ched.gov.ph/>.

Obtaining a student visa though is easier than a worker's visa especially for self-funded studies since are expected to bring in the money. Unfortunately, this open opportunities for abuse on many levels. It is being used as a pathway for recruiters and manning agencies to cheaply bring in labour migrants. In Japan, issues on foreigners coming in as technical interns but eventually disappearing or being subjected to poor working conditions and other abuse has plagued their immigration system (Oda, 2020). There have been cases of suicides by foreign students who fall into depression after finding it hard to pay off their debts.

International students often take part-time or irregular jobs to support living costs. This irregular employment is often rife with abuse and dismal wages. In Japan, 40% of jobs are already irregular as hiring and termination is easier compared to permanent employment while simultaneously, reducing manpower expenses (The Japan Times, 2016). In the United States, part-time work leads to a significant cost for the workers as wages are often lower, pension and health benefits are inaccessible, lack of promotion opportunities, and generally limited access to industries offering higher wages (Wenger, 2001). In fact, the wage gap between a part-time worker and a regular employee is even bigger when the difference in benefits is considered (EPI, 2020).

Who should be accountable for international students in the Philippines? Is it the sending country who might benefit from the knowledge these students gained? Is it the responsibility of the destination country under their general immigration policies? Is it the university or institution the student is enrolled in? In the Philippines, should it be under the CHED or should the DFA take responsibility? Is there a need to establish a different monitoring body or agency dedicated for international students?

### **3. Return Migration in the Philippines**

Migrant workers often rely on contracts making their situation quite volatile. In the Philippines, there are five reasons as to why OFWs return (Unlad Kabayan, n.d.). An economic recession, whether regional or global, can lead to OFWs losing their jobs and having their contracts prematurely terminated. The contractual nature of most OFW jobs means their deployment and return becomes cyclical. Long-term migration can be costly thus they return to reunite with families. Some OFWs also return because of various incidents of abuses and exploitation. Finally, returning to pre-emptively avoid repatriation or deportation in cases of wars and conflict

To better understand the nuances in returning migrants, Bernas (2016) profiled and crafted a typology of returning OFWs based on their preparedness and capacity to return, including their willingness to be involved with the Philippine economy e.g. start a business or be employed locally. There are five categories shown below:

1. M0 - undocumented OFWs; possibility of spill over to other categories as OFW may not admit status; may initially have a contract and license but eventually turned "illegal" due to various issues.
2. M1 - unfinished contract, breached contract, sudden termination, experience labor exploitation; with a possibility of returning to the destination country; often returning women domestic workers; considered as OFWs struggling to be reintegrated.

3. M2 - finished contract and aware of their time and mode of return; generally prepared and has decided to stay home but lacks economic activity; disengaged from reintegration.
4. M3 - like M2; has a desire to be redeployed; considered as the typical migration cycle; they are undecided to be reintegrated.
5. M4 - finished contact and has permanently returned; considered having a high level of preparedness and often engaged to be reintegrated; has plans to be active economically.

### 3.1 International and Regional Institutions and Organizations

On the global landscape, the non-legally binding Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), officially adopted on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2018 by 152 nations in favor including the Philippines, recognizes the need to protect the rights and wellbeing of migrants. With its 23 objectives, it has been criticized for fixating on the “narrowly defined places” of the home/origin and host/destination societies. This rigid definition of home and host entities completely ignores the dynamic mobility pathways OFWs often undertake to maintain a consistent employment. After leaving their home (the Philippines), they do not necessarily stay long in the host country and might seek alternative countries trying to overcome structural restraints in the process. This is considered a resilient response to reach their ideals of a successful migration thus having the ability to return home (Parrenas, 2020). Additionally, Guild et al argues that although GCM “asserts the human rights of migrants”, it still recognizes state sovereignty and is at the mercy of the nation’s political will and legal mechanisms.

Within the framing of return migration, the GCM (2018) specifically states as Objective 21 to “cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration” (p.7). Other considerations on return include the ease of accessibility of information to returnees (Points 19.6 & 28.e), legal identity upon return (Point 20), climate change and extreme weather events impacts (Points 21.g and 21.h), humane detention and deportation (Point 29), and utilization of their skills upon return (Point 34). Thus, host/destination countries are tasked to develop national and regional practices.

Within the Southeast Asia, the ASEAN has the potential of becoming a regional migration policy hub through strong regional integration frameworks that results in comprehensive approaches to intra-regional migration (Lavenex, 2018). The ASEAN and its Member States crafted the *Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers* in March 2018, after being criticized as failing to protect low-skilled migrants from exploitation, abuse, and enslavement in the region (Sciortino, 2016). Pursuing a “stronger political-security, economic and social-cultural pillars” (p.7) of the ASEAN, the consensus recognizes the fundamental rights of migrant workers in accordance with international and regional treaties the member states are parties too. The document is divided into eight chapters, specifying the fundamental and specific rights of migrant workers and their families, the obligation of sending and receiving member states, and the commitments of the ten signatories.

In terms of return and reintegration, these are generally stated in the document. Sending states are obligated to craft policies and procedures that include repatriation and reintegration (p.42) for the migrant worker and their families (p.16), considering their skills and expertise. This reflects a recommendation by Khoo & McDonald (2009) that host

countries like the Philippines must ensure that there are opportunities and incentives for them to use their skills and overseas experience in their home country. More importantly, the document encourages the establishment of associations by returned migrants, involvement in the policy making, and access to services based on national laws (p. 17).

Even though return is well documented, reintegration remains a blind spot within the ASEAN as government often focus on the contributions of deployed migrants rather than the potential contributions of returning nationals (Bacalla, n.d.). A report for the ASEAN by Wickramasekara (2019), identified eleven issues and challenges on return and reintegration in the region: a) Lack of data on returnees and their patterns of reintegration; b) Lack of proper laws, policies, and institutions governing return and reintegration; c) Stagnant home economic situations; d) Inadequate and ineffective employment services; e) Lack of information on available services and programmes; f) Absence of provisions for skills certification and skills recognition; g) Poor social protection coverage; h) Lack of coordination and awareness among different ministries and agencies and key stakeholders; i) Stigmatization, and; j) resource constraints. Like Bernas' classification for return at the beginning of this section, the document presented three typologies or migration cycles - complete migration which implied a high level of preparedness, incomplete migration means a low level of return preparedness, and the interrupted migration meaning no return preparedness.

### 3.2 National Mechanisms for Return Migration

The RA 8054, as mentioned in section 2.3.1 discusses return and repatriation. It outlines the repatriation of workers where it specifically says that the concerned manning agency bears the full financial burden of the process. It also compels concerned agencies to repatriate underage migrant works via the DFA. Along with other government agencies, TESDA is tasked in providing training and other livelihood development programs for the returnees.

As an update, the RA 10022, introduced the National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers under DOLE mainly to promote, develop, and utilize OFWs and their potentials. A computer-based information system and an internet-based communication system for online registration and interaction was also lined up for development. This was further strengthened by RA 10801 *An Act Governing the Operations and Administration of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration*. They offer a reintegration package with the following programs<sup>29</sup>:

- a) **psycho-social support** through stress debriefing, counseling, values formation et al;
- b) **livelihood programs** - *Balik-Pinas, Balik-Hanapbuhay Program* (for OFWs displaced by conflicts, subjected to illegal recruitment and human trafficking); *Balik-Pinay, Balik-Hanapbuhay Program* (focused on equipping women OFWs); *Financial Awareness Seminar & Small Business Management Training*; *Livelihood Development Assistance Program* (for undocumented returnees thru a livelihood starter kit).
- c) **education** - *Education and livelihood Assistance Program* (a scholarship for the eldest child of the OFW).

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<sup>29</sup> Information can be found in <https://www.dole.gov.ph/reintegration-services-for-overseas-filipino-workers/>.



Additionally, DOLE also has the OWWA Expanded Livelihood Development Program<sup>30</sup>. This allows OFWs to access loans from 200,000 Php (individual) 1 million Php although requirements are more extensive with the need for business permits, a debt to equity ratio of 84:15, a business plan or feasibility study, among many others.

In parallel to Section 2.3.2, other agencies offer support for the return and reintegration of OFWs. Unfortunately, the POLOs are not involved nor prioritize reintegration focusing on enforcing labour regulations. The TESDA on the other hand is essential in providing training for returning migrants. Although most of their programs are equipping potential OFWs, they offer programs and training for returning OFWs. They have free skills training for the returnee and the family members especially those affected by crisis. The aim is to improve employment chances of OFW both here and abroad (TESDA, 2017). Recently, they launched an online platform to improve access and registration of returning and former OFWs. Downloadable from Google Play and the App Store, the online registration form collects the existing skills and the target skills of the OFW (TESDA, 2020; Nazario, 2020). TESDA also expanded access of the free training by offering online modules of up to 68 programs on agriculture, automotive, electrical, entrepreneurship, among many others (Agoot & Dennis, 2020).

The DOLE in partnership with the DOH, established a hospital dedicated for OFWs. Construction started last February 2020 with an expected completion on May 2021 although the main purpose of the facility is for securing medical certificates for deployment. It will benefit returnees if the hospital expands free medical services for OFWs and their family (DOLE, 2020). Often active during crisis, the DSWD offers cash assistance, travel allowance, on top of setting up help desks in airports for returning OFWs and their families (Palicte, 2020; Luic-Atienza, 2020). The Social Security System (SSS) on the other hand established the OFW Flexi-Fund<sup>31</sup> wherein the OFW can voluntarily invest their savings with a higher return in comparison to a commercial bank. In 2017, the program grew by 9.87 percent in one year with a total members' equity of 732.05 million Php. Approximately 12.75 million Php went straight to the members as guaranteed earnings (PIA, 2018).

Private entities also play a role in assisting returnees. Recruitment agencies have the mandate and responsibility to bear the cost of OFW return e.g. transportation, return of remains in case of death (Prieto, 2009). Non-profit organizations (NGOs and CSOs) also have programs helping OFWs. The Overseas Filipino Workers Watch<sup>32</sup> launched a mobile phone app OFWs can use in time of distress (Tejano, 2018). The International Organization for Migration also has a local office in the Philippines although they have been highly criticized on focusing on deployment, pandering on the neoliberal aspect of global migration and fueling capitalism and its insatiable need for labour and markets (Barber & Bryan, 2017).

### 3.3 Return Migration vis-à-vis Typologies

It is expected that the different typologies presented in Section 2.4 of this paper will have varying experiences, issues, and challenges upon return and reintegration. Different skill sets, different social networks, varying laws, and policies governing the occupation, to

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<sup>30</sup> Information of the program can be found here: <https://centerformigrantadvocacy.com/resources/owwa-livelihood-development-program-for-ofws/>.

<sup>31</sup> From the official website: <https://www.sss.gov.ph/>.

<sup>32</sup> Official website: <https://www.ofwwatch.com/>.

name a few contribute to these nuances. Synthesizing the discussion from the previous sections, we propose a possible ranking of return and reintegration capacity based on the typologies.

- 1. Highly-skilled and professional migrants** - Highly-skilled and professional migrants are better equipped in terms of skills, education, coping mechanisms, and other capacities. As mentioned in the law, most professionals are linked to a professional organization that might prove useful upon return and reintegration in terms of finding jobs and opportunities. Most of the time, the profession they practiced in the host country might also be valuable and relevant going back home e.g. nurses, architects, engineers. This may not hold true for all professions. For example, returning Filipino scientists have less motivation to stay longer in the country's institutes or universities even with the DOST's *Balik-Scientist Program* ideally fostering knowledge transfer (Scalabrini Migration Center, 2010). A significant issue is the lack of government funding, support, and prioritization on research and development (Julve, 2018), leading to a declined motivation to undertake research and competency improvement in universities (Calma, 2010).
- 2.** In comparison to low-skilled OFWs, professional and highly skilled OFWs are still more attractive for local employees giving them a better chance in reintegrating and contributing to the country's growth. This absorption into the domestic economy can only be threatened by the instability of the country's economy. The lack of stability makes them less capable of transferring knowledge because knowledge transfer requires not just intellectual capital but also social and economic capital (Siar, 2011).
- 3. Seafarers** - Salary-wise, seafarers have one of the highest compensations and support financial infrastructures compared to the other typologies although their occupation is significantly tougher than other industry workers facing danger and isolation from family can offset these benefits (Dickinson, 2018). It can be argued that they are tied with the first typology. Return is certainly easy for seafarers as attested by a respondent. The company pays most of the travel cost. They get hotel stays and monetary compensation in case of delays. They can easily tap the resources of MARINA and AMOSUP upon arriving in the capital on top of the services offered by DOLE. Reintegration might be a bit trickier as their profession is obviously not transferrable in the local shipping industry. A respondent mentioned that he instead invests in private financial institutions (e.g. PruLife UK, Sunlife) to prepare for return. He mentioned that oftentimes their contracts are short term - 3 to 6 months - thus the need for good financial literacy. In fact, in a news article interview with Capt. Morales of the Integrated Seafarer of the Philippines, 50 percent of retired Filipino seafarers end up broke based on standards of preparedness (Depasupil, 2018). Entrepreneurship is also seen as a possible alternative for seafarers - or any other returning migrant workers - but this is challenged by Spitzer and Piper (2014). A neoliberal approach for reintegration is ironic since the volatile national and local economy is a major driver for the migration in the first place.
- 4. Low-skilled migrants** - perhaps the most vulnerable among the three typologies, low-skilled migrants have generally lesser capacities and skills than the first two. Two respondents, OFWs in Japan, admitted that they only finished high school (secondary) hence the decision to migrate. The lack of a degree made it difficult for them to find permanent jobs in the Philippines. As most jobs available for them in Japan are skills-based, they found it easier to earn a living. Most low-skilled migrants already come from low income families in the Philippines meaning they often take out loans as initial capital for the migration exposing them to dubious loan schemes

and falling prey to loan sharks (Daquio, 2016). Bernas (2016) argued that most OFWs already lack the savings and investments for return as they spend most of their income in paying for their debts, building a house, and paying for their children's education. They often have no clear plan for future employment or any economic activity upon returning home. Return may be easier as the government has a solid infrastructure to assist them, but their reintegration may also be harder. Also applicable to professionals, highly skilled, and seafarers, the industry they come from may not be available or as advanced when returning (Ortiga, 2020). There are instances that they are also unwilling to be involved in the same industry upon return (Bernas, 2017).

- 5. International Students (IS)** – Their precarious status brings this group at the bottom of the list. We say precarious because international students are often given a conditional residence visa/permit in host countries with numerous limitations (as in the case of Japan). The actual return of international students may be stress-free especially under a scholarship as most offer a return flight back home. The reintegration may prove to be challenging if their degree proves dissonant to the opportunities back home. Thus, it is more likely that international students would embark on another migration cycle in pursuit of either financial or professional development.

We also propose that the typology or classification based on preparedness by Bernas (2016) and Wickramasekara (2018) be embedded in each of these typologies to explore and complexities and intertwining drivers of migration, return, and reintegration. This would imply the need for a more comprehensive research on the experiences of migrant workers especially after reintegration. We echo ASEAN's findings that there is a gap on returnee data especially on their reintegration

## 4. The COVID-19 Impact on Migrant Labor

The importance of migrant workers has especially been highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Singaporean business and trade groups have expressed concern over stricter policies limiting the numbers of migrant workers. The culling of migrant workers can lead to the decline in manufacturing output and higher construction costs (Zhang, 27 May 2020).

Adding up to the political and economic instability experienced by receiving nations (e.g. US-China trade tensions), the reliance on remittances is being severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated by the Philippines' Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) that remittances will drop by up to 40% (USD 13 billion) in 2020 (Ramos, 2020) although positive outlooks put it at 6.9% (Mapa, 2020).

The pandemic led to significant job losses for OFWs globally. This meant a massive need for repatriation of stranded migrant workers. Fortunately, the presence of POLOs, consulates, and embassies of the government led to a swift return of OFWs to the capital. As of 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, 124,717 OFWs have been repatriated amid the COVID-19 pandemic according to the DFA. Around 60 percent of the repatriated are land-based while 39.8% are seafarers (Ramos, 09 August 2020). Unfortunately, this is without any issues and challenges. Poor coordination meant that some of the OFWs who still needs to travel to their provinces became stranded. These locally stranded individuals (LSIs) became more vulnerable to the virus with their finances dwindling as they remained stranded in the capital.

Last July, the national government was lambasted for its mishandling of LSIs when 8000 individuals were packed in the Rizal Memorial stadium with little to no social distancing (CNN Philippines, 2020). Tests showed that 8 of the LSIs were positive for coronavirus potential bringing the virus to their provinces (Gonzales, 2020). Thankfully, the government has established protocols and programs to support OFWs on the onset. Financial incentives, transportation allowance, free medical check-up, and the like were provided. The challenge now is on the long-term impacts of the pandemic to the OFWs. Almost all these OFWs can be considered as interrupted return based on Wickramasekara (2018). It can be assumed then that they are not prepared financially to return. With the common practice of taking out loans as capital for migration we now have a huge population of migrant workers in debt and facing job insecurity. The pandemic has shown the need of a better return and reintegration infrastructure in the country that looks beyond the immediate needs of OFWs.

When this pandemic is over - a vaccine or antiviral drug is developed - OFWs may continue to find themselves in a precarious situation. The world is seen to be highly dependent on "cheap, exploitable labour" and it is projected that in the bid to rebound from the financial shocks of the pandemic, the need for cheap migrant labour will amplify (Hansen, 2020). The Philippine government must now be more vigilant to protect the welfare and rights of its OFWs as it can invariably affect the country's economy in the long run.

## 5. Towards Strengthened Return and Reintegration Infrastructure

The economy of the Philippines is without any doubt reliant on its labour migration. The annual remittances boost the economy as well as provide a step up for the OFWs' families. Although there is a growing literature and attention on return and reintegration, the country is facing numerous gaps in understanding and consequently providing durable strategies, programs, and policies for smoother return and reintegration. Thus, we present five key messages towards improved return and reintegration infrastructures in the Philippines.

1. **Information on return and reintegration should go beyond the numbers.** Generally, the government must pursue policies, programs, and strategies that effectively monitor and collect comprehensive statistics on international migration to properly assess its impacts to the country (Agbola & Acupan, 2010). In terms of return, it is not effectively monitored (Asis, 2008). Numbers may exist by using the disembarkation cards filled up by OFWs upon disembarkation but this not enough to understand the nuances of their return. Improving research and database building is necessary to inform policies, strategies, and systems. The government, ideally, may tap various institutions like universities, research institute, private entities (e.g. manning and recruitment agencies), NGOs, and CSOs. International and intra-regional (ASEAN) collaboration and knowledge sharing should also be amplified to fully capture the migration cycle.
2. **Expanding definitions and revisiting framings may contribute to streamlined classifications and typologies of OFWs that includes the ignored and unlabeled.** The global labour migration demands, needs, and trends often evolve along with technological advances. Classifications and typologies must be able to keep up with these changes to avoid a growing population of unlabeled migrants. The case of permanent and long-term migrants (PTLs) and international students are good examples. For example, PTLs who are repatriated due to a crisis in the host country might have trouble reintegrating because of the time spent away from the

Philippines. Most employers value location-specific human capital and this deteriorates with time spent away from domestic economy (Abarcar, 2016). Beyond government programs, return and reintegration programs should extend to all types of OFWs (Aldaba & Opiniano, 2008). This implies to need for a comprehensive profiling that must be updated, monitored, and verified. Consequently, this can also inform the programs for returnees on the current skills and strengths of the returnee pool. This also frames excluded and ignored migrants as part of the labour force as proper framing can lead to proper policy interventions (Lopez-Wui & Delias, 2015).

3. **Amplifying support structures that considers the long-term development of permanent or temporary returnees can improve their quality of life.** Returning OFWs often faces various challenges upon return. OFWs often have the inability to manage their income and lack the necessary savings to safely return home (Ofreneo & Samonte, 2005; Bernas, 2016). The government needs to improve its promotion and information campaign on financial literacy and social protection services as most OFWs and their families think of the remittances as their insurance hence the lack of willingness to access social insurance (Cruz, Tan, & Yonaha, 2015; Reyes, Tabuga, & Asis, 2018).
4. They need medical support, livelihood, job placements and the like especially for permanent returnees. As discussed in the previous sections, the DOLE, and other relevant agencies, have programs for returnees. Unfortunately, most OFWs have a low awareness and understanding of these programs. Oftentimes, these programs are in the form of financial incentives. A reliance on financial incentives can be counterproductive as it might rather encourage OFWs on a cyclical migration and return process (Abarcar, 2016). Beyond programs, the government can tap into other stakeholders to strengthen the support of returning migrants, especially those that were interrupted due to a crisis or calamity.
5. Access is also an issue most of these programs are voluntary (Cruz et al, 2015). A lack of information campaign, without effectively using all possible media platforms and communications strategies, means potentially leaving out some OFWs. For example, OWWA is pushing for online registration and transactions but the lack of good internet access or a reliable smartphone can limit access of returning OFWs to services. How about bringing the services to returning OFWs to the city level?
6. **A more responsive reintegration program must go beyond economic aspects but should consider the political, social, psycho-social/mental, and cultural aspects** (Soco, 2008; Cruz et al, 2015). OFWs do not only bring financial remittances as an economic analysis of migration patterns is insufficient since there are other non-economic motives (Haug, 2008). They bring political, cultural, social, and other forms of remittances (Rother, 2009). The impacts of remittances should go beyond financial/economic and surface issues (Orbeta, 2008). In the same thread, return and reintegration must consider all these facets.
7. Return can be seen as political i.e. when corruption is a major dissuading factor for the lack of investments by returnees resulting to a weak preparedness (Aldaba & Opiniano, 2008). If political instability is the reason for their migration in the first place, returnees might be hesitant to participate in any of the programs (Agbola & Acupan, 2010). Return can also be to social phenomenon as OFWs may have experienced issues such as broken marriages, racial or ethnic discrimination, weakened family ties, and a narrowing social network (Opiniano, 2004; Belanger & Silvery, 2019). Returning OFWs may also face issues of cosmopolitanism wherein their acquired Western, elitist views may threaten social cohesioin in their

communities widening gaps between class divisions (Soco, 2008). Gender also plays a part as most women migrant workers face reintegration problems (Ofreneo & Samonte, 2005).

8. It is suggested that reintegration should involve both home and host countries meaning sharing of technologies and knowledge (Bernas, 2017; Saguin, 2020). Return and reintegration should be effective enough that the OFWs believe it to be a real choice and option rather than a disruption in their migration cycle (Asis & Baggio, 2008). On the other hand, Saguin emphasized return is now being challenged as the end of the migration cycle due to the rise of temporary labour migration thus looking at return and reintegration as a continuous process (2020).
9. **Ultimately, the Philippines must boost the domestic economy - from the national level to local communities.** Labour migration is a temporary boost to the domestic economy thus the need to improve and strengthen the Philippine economy (Opiniano, 2004; Agbola & Acupan, 2010). An unstable domestic economy, coupled with ineffective and piecemeal approach to return and reintegration runs the risk of losing talented OFWs - especially highly-skilled and professionals - to destination countries (Siar, 2011). This creates a negative feedback loop wherein the lack of skilled Filipinos in the country may lead to slow development of industries, technologies, research, and development which ultimately affects economic growth. The Philippine government should realize that return migration is a brain gain (Asis, 2008).
10. Although mentioned in the beginning that migration rate barely affected by domestic economy trends, OFWs are more likely to return home if there are better employment opportunities to return to and if the social and economic conditions at home are conducive to return (Khoo & McDonald, 2009). The government must then ensure that there are opportunities and incentives for them to use their skills and overseas experience domestically. Oftentimes, returnees may seem like a threat to local aspirants if the job pool is severely limited (Akanle, 2018).

Filipino migrant workers have always been lauded as the "*bagong bayani*" - a new breed of heroes that significantly contributes to the growth of the country. The label recognizes the challenges they face abroad but this framing can also be counterproductive. It implies that OFWs are doing this out of passion and desire to do good. It implies that OFWs are willing to suffer through various abuses and exploitation because they are heroes. This is extremely flawed and brings various problems into the discourse. It transfers the accountability and responsibility from the government to the OFWs. It fails to consider the multi-faceted nature driving the migration and return cycle. They deserve better protection and support both abroad and when they return home.

The Philippines must rethink its reliance on international labour migration and economic remittances. The COVID pandemic proved the volatile nature of relying on the global labour market. The sudden loss of jobs of OFWs led to a significant reduction in remittances that contributed to the steep drop of the country's GDP. The country is now faced with a large pool of OFW returnees with no immediate possibility of being hired and deployed soon. Providing strong return and reintegration of OFWs means the government can effectively utilize their skills and expertise in improving the quality of life in the country. Ultimately, a good quality of life in the Philippines can encourage OFWs to return and stay (Schiele, 2020).



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