



Moving Forward: The OFW Dilemma

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INTRODUCTION

The Filipinos leave for work abroad products of a deeply rooted and pervasive culture that views overseas work as an acceptable and desirable option to have a better life. Because of this, the Philippines is one of the largest exporters of labor in the world (Asis, 2017). Approximately ten million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) are currently in a situation where they are faced with the global spread of COVID-19 (Ang and Opiniano, 2020). In the present, this “new normal” has seen situations such as lockdowns, quarantines, temporary to permanent closures of different businesses, and travel restrictions to contain the spread of the virus. The shutdown of economic activities has consequently led to widespread job losses in which foreign workers in destination economies were not spared from (ADB, 2020). These measures have forced our OFWs to come home, bringing with them uncertainties brought about by losing

their main source of income. Thus, for our OFWs to get back on track, the National Government must help them successfully transition to new work destinations both internationally and locally.

REPATRIATION AND GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

The return of the OFWs has put a strain in the National Government's capacity to help them. The National Government has directed local government units (LGUs) to implement additional safety measures to ensure that repatriated OFWs are free from the virus when returning to their communities (Parrocha, 2020). They have also implemented several programs (Patinio, 2020). Case in point, the “Hatid-Sundo” is a free transportation service by OWWA, to

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and from NAIA. The OWWA Administrator has also said that the allotment and cash allocation released last June by the Department of Budget and Management was utilized for food, accommodation, and transport of the repatriated OFWs (Torregoza, 2020). OWWA also shoulders the cost of COVID tests, food, and accommodation in hotels while awaiting test results, and the transport to home provinces once tested negative. Further, DOLE (2020) stated that President Duterte has approved the additional P5 billion release of the repatriation and assistance to OFWs.



Image obtained from *Business Mirror*.

With the job losses from host countries, the anticipated decline of remittances is pegged at \$6.7 billion to \$10 billion (Mogato, 2020). This loss of livelihood for OFWs equates to the loss of remittances, which Filipino families rely on, making them vulnerable in these times (Takenaka et al., 2020). Murakami et al. (2020) conducted in heavily remittance-dependent regions in the Philippines, which showed that

remittance inflow would decrease by 23-32%, and household spending per capita will decline by 2.2-3.3% one year as a result of the pandemic. Its impact from one individual quadruple as it directly affects the 12% of households dependent that are on an OFW family member (PSA, 2020). Without continuous remittance flows, these households can fall into poverty or have difficulty acquiring the basic essential needs as well as access education and health services. Remittances sent to families in their home countries directly become part of household budgets or savings (Ang et al. 2009). The inability to send remittances will heavily affect the well-being of households and communities of their home country (Ang and Serrano, 2020). The economic recession brought by this COVID-19 pandemic is a threat to the job security and well-being of over 91 million international migrants from Asia and the Pacific (Takenaka et al., 2020).

LIVELIHOOD PROGRAMS

The need to resolve the OFW problem has pushed the Department of Labor and Employment in preparing alternative sources of livelihood for the returning OFWs. The government allots more than \$29.6 million OFW cash aid to 150,000 affected Filipinos. The *Balik Pilipinas, Balik Hanapbuhay Livelihood Program*, is a livelihood assistance package with a maximum amount of PHP 20,000 as a start-up or additional capital. An extension of this program is a "group livelihood" assistance program would grant loans amounting from PHP 150,000 to P1 million to OFWs who

would form groups for a business venture to help them cope with their displacement (Terrazola, 2020). While the "*Ikaw ang Ma'am at Sir*" program, teachers who worked as OFWs are encouraged to return to and continue practicing their profession in the country. DOLE has also been giving one-time P10,000 cash aid under AKAP to on-site or stranded pandemic-affected OFWs. Further, the Labor Secretary directed the Philippine Overseas Labor Offices to accelerate the assistance processing so that a greater number of OFWs will benefit soonest from the aid coming from the government (Aquino and Mabasa, 2020).

COORDINATED NATIONAL RESPONSE

Approaching this pandemic calls for a coordinated national response. The government needs to act swiftly to contain the displacement of workers from overseas. On the economic front, the pandemic has plunged the world economy into a recession accompanied by consequences and historic unemployment and deprivation (Kujur, 2020). Human security makes a comeback a policy alternative since it is expanded to economic, educational, food, and health security (Kujur, 2020). Thus, helping our OFWs by starting their own business is an excellent program since this pandemic has significantly shown how unsustainable it is to over-rely on remittance as a means of survival. It also encourages them to have alternative sources beyond

labor migration. Finally, this would help our OFWs and their families by providing them the means to survive, adjust, and adapt to this pandemic's impacts.

The government could also make arrangements on *education* to cash assistance they receive from the government could be spent entirely on their necessities. They could do the process through the OFW Assistance Information System (OASIS), an online platform intended to facilitate better service delivery, particularly for the displaced workers and by registering. The OFWs' necessary information will enable DOLE, POLO, OWWA, and POEA to respond to their concerns and appropriate services to collaborate with the Department of Education.

Strengthening coordination with LGUs would be a great approach. One possible way is to require them to set up permanent help desks for OFWs and their families in their localities to provide them assistance. Collaboration with the DILG or LGUs in the OASIS could be a great way for a faster evaluation of qualified applicants for the cash grants and other programs.

In a country where migration as a livelihood strategy is long-established, those migrants who have lost their jobs and returned to the home country have hopes to leave again as soon as possible (Custodio and Ang, 2012). Yet, human

mobility would create significant health risks in both home and destination countries (Chia and Poh, 2020). The OFWs who were considered as "heroes" before the pandemic is now treated as "enemies" because they might be carrying the virus, thus making them unwelcome in communities (de Silva, 2020). Hence, facilitating diseases require international cooperation (Peterson, 2002). It is something the Philippine government can take advantage of. According to the Labor Secretary, since many foreign governments have started to ease restrictions, their industries are almost fully operational leading to those countries recalling our OFWs anytime (DOLE, 2020). If this does happen, the DOLE would be committed to providing the assistance required by OFWs.

However, the continuous rise of cases in the Philippines may affect host countries' confidence to take them back. CNN reported that as of September 9, 2020, *COVID-19, cases in the country rose to 245,143, after the Department of Health detected over 3,000 more infections*. Diseases are tremendous threats to the national security of countries (Singh, 2019). However, the Labor Secretary has said that the government can work with foreign governments for new policies on migrant workers about safety and health measures. Moreover, they will

meet and provide whatever more requirements they might require from OFWs like government certifications to prove they are not a threat to their people's health and safety. The Labor Secretary could coordinate with LGUs through the help desks and OASIS in this process. These LGUs could manage and process all the requirements and certifications in line with the new public health measures to prepare OFWs to leave the country when possible.

In a crisis, it is essential to promote other government levels in national recovery plans to prevent further complications. The OECD (2020) highlighted that the subnational governments are responsible for critical aspects of containment measures, putting them at the front line of crisis management because such responsibilities are shared among government levels. Thus, a coordinated effort is critical. Existing multi-level coordination bodies that bring national and subnational government representatives together need to be activated to minimize the risk of fragmented crisis response and avoid disjointed responses. Coordinated planning creates better working relationships and ensures all emergency needs are addressed by understanding each other's roles, resources, and limitations. In times like these, everyone needs all the help and support they could get.

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