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POST-PANDEMIC REINTEGRATION EFFORTS FOR OVERSEAS FILIPINO WORKERS

What Prospects Abound?

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ANALYSIS

Imprint

Publisher

Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit
Truman Haus
Karl-Marx-Straße 2
14482 Potsdam-Babelsberg
Germany



/freiheit.org



/FriedrichNaumannStiftungFreiheit



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[September 2023]

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Table of contents

Executive Summary	3
1. Introduction	4
2. Migration reintegration during the COVID-19 pandemic	6
3. A 'generation' of Philippine migrant reintegration	8
Bureaucratic shifts for migrant reintegration	10
4. Reviewing current-day migrant reintegration approaches	12
5. Conclusions and recommendations	13
Programmatic recommendations	13
Mainstreaming migrant reintegration in overall Philippine development efforts	14
Final words	16

Executive Summary

The Philippines has been handling the return migration and socio-economic reintegration of overseas workers for almost four decades now. These interventions were given more emphasis during the COVID-19 pandemic where over-two million migrant workers returned home. The completing element of the migration cycle, migration analysts refer to reintegration as the “weakest link” in the Philippines’ migration management. Yet the pandemic saw the government responding to the needs of these returning overseas Filipino workers (OFWs).

With the magnitude and size of reintegration due to the pandemic, this government strategy has effectively entered a new phase. This phase sees the newly operational Department of Migrant Workers tasked to institutionalize what it calls “full cycle reintegration.” This is coming from a recently concluded United Nations program had provided backstop support to further improve the Philippines’ migrant reintegration measures.

Amidst this background, this policy research took stock of previous and prevailing efforts at migrant reintegration given the pandemic, the creation of the Department of Migrant Workers, and sluggish global recovery that may impact on Filipino workers’ migration. We have conducted documentary analysis, key informant interviews and participant

observation of migrant reintegration-related activities to gather data.

It is observed that the Philippine migrant reintegration system is hampered by organizational constraints, program implementation and program impact concerns; by stunted efforts at inter-agency coordination to make reintegration a broader mandate; and by the absence of data that can aid in the overall reintegration effort. Yet the Philippine bureaucracy and its civil servants did best-effort measures to cement the place of migrant reintegration. However, this task has become a broader development mandate that requires multi-stakeholder, inter-agency efforts. Migrant reintegration remains lodged within migration management agencies.

The Philippines has reached the point that the overall migrant reintegration effort must unleash its fullest potential. Previous experiences of within-agency reintegration programs or one-off inter-agency cooperation arrest the growth of migrant reintegration as a development intervention for the Philippines. Migrant reintegration must operationally expand, essay better inter-government agency coordination, and entice broader multi-sectoral effort. If migrant reintegration gets framed as social protection, these broad forms of cooperation can happen.

1. Introduction

In this third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippines had managed the handling the return migrations and repatriations by overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). *At least* 2,348,098 land- and sea-based migrant workers returned during the first two years of the pandemic, beginning March 2020 (says data from the Task Group on Management of Returning Overseas Filipinos [see *Table 1*]). The Philippine government had laid out the support services for these returnees —ranging from mandatory transportation services to the offering of reintegration services such as entrepreneurial loans, business kits, psychosocial services, and skills development training (Opiniano, 2021a; Opiniano, 2021b).

The context remains though that reintegration by migrant workers is observed to be the “weakest link” in Philippine migration governance (Go, 2012). That is even if the Philippines’ migration management agencies implemented the very first reintegration-oriented program in 1983 (Manzala, 2007). However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting interventions by government agencies within and outside of the migrant sector may slowly —and perhaps finally— make migrant reintegration more institutionalized in Philippine migration management. The pandemic had seen Philippine migration policy pivot to reintegration and return migration (Opiniano, 2021b). In a situation where foreign labour markets slowly opening themselves up to foreign workers (Ang & Opiniano, 2022), migrant deployment remains below pre-pandemic levels. That leaves returnees with no choice but to earn a living at home and retool their skills in anticipation of repeating as migrant workers. It is also possible that the pandemic has hastened the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), allowing for lesser demand for foreign labour by developed countries (Ang & Opiniano, 2022).

This policy research seeks to take stock of prevailing efforts at migrant reintegration given the direct impact of the pandemic and sluggish global recovery that may lead to future return migrations. We then ascertain the

immediate future of migrant reintegration that accounts for: a) The newly-operational Department of Migrant Workers; b) The 2023-2028 Philippine Development Plan; c) The full implementation of a national action plan on sustainable and gender-responsive reintegration (by the United Nations in the Philippines); d) The reintegration efforts done during this COVID-19 pandemic; and e) Thirty nine years of Philippine programs and policies directly and indirectly linked to migrant reintegration.

This policy research sought to answer the central question What prospects await Philippine migrant reintegration efforts be operationalized under a new migration management structure? This comes in the coattails of marking an entire generation (i.e., 40 years) of running migrant reintegration programs and rolling out a broader framework for return migrants, what is called full cycle reintegration.

Data from researchers who conducted various data gathering methods from September 2022 to January 2023: extensive documentary analysis (Tight, 2019) of previous and current efforts at migrant reintegration, key informant interviews, and participant observation of a series of activities related to the National Action Plan on Sustainable and Gender Responsive Reintegration (a program by the United Nations in the Philippines) are instructive in this regard.

The paper is organized as follows. Preceding this introduction, Section 2 describes the government’s pandemic response for migrants and the reintegration system that responded to returnees’ needs. Section 3 rekindles Philippine reintegration programs before and during the pandemic, to see how current efforts represent a “systematized” effort by the origin country. Section 4 presents prevailing and prospective approaches to migrant reintegration under the newly created Department of Migrant Workers. The paper ends by providing assessments and policy prescriptions on migrant reintegration.

Table 1. Profiles of Returning Overseas Filipinos during COVID-19's first two years

Confirmed COVID-19 cases among overseas Filipinos, running totals (reported from Philippine embassies and consulates using guidelines under the WHO's International Health Regulations)	Year 1 of the pandemic (as of 15 Mar. 2021)	Year 2 of the pandemic (as of 28 Feb. 2022)
	Number of cases	15,881
Deaths	1,043	1,462
Countries with cases	88	107

Number of returning overseas Filipinos (including OFWs) received by the Task Group on the Management of Returning Overseas Filipinos (TG-MROF)	Year 1 of the pandemic (as of 14 Mar. 2021)	Year 2 of the pandemic (as of 14 Mar. 2022)
	* OFWs	759,733
- Land-based	446,524	1,054,761
- Sea-based	313,209	706,088
* Non-OFWs (including permanent residents and vacationing overseas Filipinos)	175,402	570,865
* Deceased OFWs	2,947	6,027
- Covid-19 deaths	409	636
- Non Covid-19 deaths	2,538	5,391

Source: Institute for Migration and Development Issues (Data Sheet no. 1 – March 2022), citing government data

2. Migrant reintegration during the COVID-19 pandemic

Since the declaration of the first lockdown (“enhanced community quarantine”) by the Philippine government in mid-March 2020, the country had received numbers of returnee OFWs. Meanwhile, the inter-agency Task Sub-Group on the Management of Returning Overseas Filipinos noted a 132% increase of returning OFWs who are land based and 125% for those sea-based workers. With returning overseas Filipinos (including OFWs and permanent migrants) more than doubling in the two-year period, more efficient and collaborative government assistance became urgent (Asis, 2020a).

The Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and the National Reintegration Centre for OFWs (NRCO) – both under the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE)– shouldered a significant part of economic and psychosocial reintegration services. These agencies’ efforts on migrant reintegration and COVID-19 mitigation were then matched by various agencies and programs outside of the migration management bureaucracy. These agencies include Land Bank of the Philippines, Small Business Corporation (SB Corp.), the Agricultural Credit Policy Council (ACPC), the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), and the Department of Science and Technology (DOST). Most of the assistance from these non-migration agencies consisted of entrepreneurial loans, business development services (training and business start-up kits), and free online vocational-technical education.

We can assume that returnee and current OFWs have availed more than one of these loan, grant, psychosocial and technical assistance interventions from various Philippine government agencies. With a caveat of a possible double counting of beneficiaries, and in consideration of the 1,835,866 returnee OFWs who went home during the first two pandemic years, at least 728,826 returnees and current OFWs benefited from the above-mentioned programs and services [see *Table 2*]. The total

beneficiaries make up at least 39.69 percent of those OFWs who returned from March 16, 2020 to March 15, 2022. With labour markets abroad still closed at that time, and when those droves of returnees visibly dwarfed national, regional and local-level migrant service providers, it is no wonder that Philippine migration and development policy pivoted to return migration and reintegration (Opiniano, 2021).

Amid these reintegration interventions for returnees, the question begs: *will these returnees stay or re-migrate?* During the first two years of the pandemic, host country labour markets were trying to recover given the impacts of their economic recessions. Travel bans and border closures lasted for over a year in many countries. Cruise ships lost thousands of seafarers due to the spread of SARS-CoV-2. Filipino migrant worker returnees were exploring opportunities that they can remigrate, even if they got some support from the government to work in the country.

Garabiles and Asis (2022) employed hierarchical bivariate logistic regression to determine why some returnees – surveyed by the International Organization for Migration (N = over-8,300 returnees)– want to remigrate and others want to stay. They employed three explanatory variables – migration variables, individual characteristics, and return conditions– to provide some explanations. Their results reflect that remigration is among the options considered by returnees (especially by seafarers), by those unprepared to return, by those still young for retirement, and by those who find employment in the Philippines challenging. For returnees intending to stay at home, going into business is associated with land-based returning OFWs. We can get the sense that these returnees may find overseas migration necessary to recoup their lost incomes and to move forward from how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their overseas work.

Table 2. Two-year economic reintegration assistance provided by Philippine government agencies to returnee and current OFWs

Form of assistance	Beneficiaries (N)
Entrepreneurial credit ¹	2,550
Cash grants ²	575,607
Skills training ³	5,984
Vocational-technical education ⁴	98,893
Education support (basic, higher education) ⁵	45,972
Total of assisted OFWs (returnees and still abroad)	728,826
Number of returnee OFWs (two years since the first Philippine lockdown)	1,835,866
% of OFWs (returnees, still abroad) who availed of the specified forms of assistance above	At least 39.7% of returnees

This table did not include meals, transport and hotel quarantine support (coming from OWWA), as well as loans availed by returnee OFWs from the Social Security System and the Home Development Mutual Fund.

Sources of data:

¹ – Entrepreneurial credit came from Landbank of the Philippines, Small Business Corp., the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA data were as of 31 October 2021), Agricultural Credit Policy Council, and the Department of Science and Technology

² – Grants came from the Department of Labor and Employment, OWWA and the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (the latter two agencies through their various programs)

³ – Skills training support, including business skills training, came from OWWA, the NRCO and DOST.

⁴ – The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) primarily provided online vocational-technical education courses. OWWA also provided some vocational-technical education assistance to returnees.

⁵ – Education support came from OWWA Data collected by the Institute for Migration and Development Issues (IMDI) from various government agencies.

3. A 'generation' of Philippine migrant reintegration

The reintegration efforts done during the pandemic reflect how sophisticated the Philippines' reintegration initiatives for returnee overseas workers are. That sophistication *emanates* from a 39-year history of migrant reintegration efforts by the Philippine government, handled by agencies both within and outside of the migration management bureaucracy.

These present and previous reintegration efforts help demonstrate why the Philippines has long been remarked as among the global models of migration management by an origin country (IOM, 2005). A historical account of migrant reintegration efforts matters because issues of the past continue to prevail now that the well-developed Philippine migration management bureaucracy encountered a global pandemic. Note that some migration analysts remark that migrant reintegration is the "weakest component" in the Philippines' overall migration management effort (Go, 2012: 12).

Not many know that the Philippine government first implemented a migrant reintegration program in 1983 when OWWA was then called the Welfare Fund. That 1983 program on organizing migrant worker family circles (Manzala, 2007) provided the first response to the challenge of initiating a migrant reintegration program. The argument here is that challenges surrounding the implementation of migrant reintegration have withstood the test of time and have come back as reminders to improve reintegration approaches during and after this COVID-19 pandemic. In the old days, the work of some migration agencies (e.g., OWWA, DOLE) were labelled as part of measures called "social safety nets" (Subarao, Ahmed & Teklu, 1996) or "micro interventions for poverty alleviation" (Orbeta & Sanchez-Robielos, 1996), to the current-day nomenclature called "social protection" (DSWD, 2021; Orbeta, 2010; Tabuga, Vargas & Mondeza, 2021). For a long time, these economic interventions for vulnerable Filipinos were labelled as "livelihood" programs. Prior to the mid-1990s, Filipino workers abroad were then called overseas contract workers (OCWs). Prior to the new millennium, reintegration was called "re-entry program".

Table 3 provides a timeline of psychosocial and economic reintegration efforts by the Philippine government, involving those agencies within and outside of the migration management bureaucracy. After that first documented migrant reintegration program organizing migrant worker family circles) in 1983 (Manzala, 2007: slide 7), livelihood programs and credit assistance followed. These first two migrant reintegration programs run by the government paved the way to nearly a generation of state-led efforts on migrant reintegration – be it done by migration management agencies, by

agencies outside of the migrant sector, and between and among government agencies within and outside of the migrant sector.

We can also say that over-three decades of migrant reintegration efforts by the Philippines carry the following observations:

- 1) OWWA mostly rolled out the livelihood / entrepreneurial credit and family-directed psychosocial assistance programs;
- 2) Inter-agency cooperation to roll out economic reintegration programs occurred by a migrant-related and non-migration government agency;
- 3) Migrant repatriation and reintegration assistance happened during man-made (e.g., civil strife, economic slowdown, war) and natural crises, as well as during distressed situations affecting overseas workers (e.g., labor and welfare issues, piracy of seafarers, trafficking and illegal recruitment);
- 4) National policies and specific government agencies related to overseas workers had particular provisions on return migration and reintegration; and
- 5) The United Nations agencies with operations in the Philippines helped the country improve its migrant reintegration efforts.

These efforts spanning the past 39 years (1983-2022) all but helped establish the Philippines' migrant reintegration effort. These efforts did have their fits of inefficiencies. For example, numerous evaluations of entrepreneurial credit interventions revealed observations that reintegration by returnees-cum-loan avalees "rarely happened" (Orbeta & Sanchez, 1996: p. 29); that "sustainable incomes were not achieved" (Subbarao et al., 1996: p. 41); that marginalized migrant returnees may have not benefitted from these loan programs given the financing guidelines of partner government banks (e.g., credit standing, ownership of collateral such as real property) (Borja in Böhning, 1999: p. 10); and delays in handing out cheques representing returnees' entrepreneurial loans (Böhning, 1999) and even grants (Development Action for Women Network, 2021).

Table 3. Summary – 39 years of state-initiated migrant reintegration programs vis-à-vis migration-related trends and crises

Year	Labor migration and remittances			Migrant worker reintegration				Migration-related crises
	Deployed overseas Filipino workers (OFWs)	Cash remittances (US\$ million)	US\$-PhP exchange rate (end-year)	Migration reintegration program, project, or related law / policy that was instituted				Crises linked to return migration and reintegration
				Migration-related agency		Inter-agency and/or non-migration agency plus civil society		
				Economic	Psycho-social	Economic	Psycho-social	
1983	434,207	944.45	14.00		✓			
1984	350,982	658.89	19.76	✓				First recorded OCW HIV case
1986	378,214	680.44	20.53	✓	✓		✓	
1987	449,271	791.91	20.80			✓		
1988	471,030	856.81	21.34	✓				
1989	458,626	973.02	22.44	✓	✓	✓		
1990	446,095	1,181.07	28.00	✓	✓			Gulf War & migrant repatriations
1991	615,019	1,500.29	26.65	✓				Death of Maricris Sioson (Japan)
1992	686,461	2,202.38	25.10	✓				Release of Sarah Balabagan (United Arab Emirates)
1994	718,407	2,630.11	24.82	✓				
1995	653,574	4,877.51	26.21					Execution of Flor Contemplacion (Singapore)
1996	660,122	4,306.64	26.29	✓		✓		
1997	747,696	5,741.84	39.98	✓				Asian financial crisis
1998	831,643	7,367.99	39.06	✓	✓			
1999	837,020	6,794.55	40.31					
2000	841,628	6,050.45	50.00	✓	✓			
2002	891,908	6,886.16	53.10			✓	✓	Malaysia's massive crackdown on irregular migrants
2003	867,969	7,578.46	55.57	✓		✓		SARS epidemic leading to
2004	933,588	8,550.37	56.27		✓			Hostage taking and repatriation of Angelo dela Cruz (Iraq)
2005	981,677	10,689.00	53.07				✓	
2006	1,062,567	12,761.30	49.13					Civil strife in Lebanon led to repatriation of domestic workers
2007	1,077,623	14,449.92	41.40	✓	✓			Global financial crisis that led to job losses and return migrations
2009	1,422,586	17,348.05	46.36	✓		✓		
2010	1,470,826	18,762.98	43.89	✓				Arab Spring uprisings in MENA countries
2011	1,687,831	20,116.99	43.93	✓				
2012	1,802,031	21,391.33	41.19				✓	MERS-CoV epidemic
2013	1,836,345	22,984.03	44.41				✓	
2014	1,832,668	24,628.05	44.62	✓	✓		✓	
2015	1,844,406	25,606.83	47.17	✓			✓	
2016	2,112,331	26,899.84	49.81	✓	✓		✓	Financial losses by world's major shipping companies
2017	2,044,877	28,059.78	49.92	✓	✓			
2018	1,988,980	28,943.11	52.72					
2019	2,156,742	30,133.30	50.74					Murder of Joanna Demafelis (Kuwait) Highest annual number of OFW cases with HIV in history
2020	549,841	29,903.25	48.04	✓	✓	✓	✓	COVID-19 pandemic and massive return migrations; Global, national recessions
2021	675,567	31,417.61	50.77	✓	✓			

Bureaucratic shifts for migrant reintegration

During these 39 years of migrant reintegration efforts, organizational changes have perhaps stifled efforts to make reintegration a broader Philippine development effort [see Table 4]. OWWA first handled reintegration-related efforts, which were mandated by Republic Act 8042 (the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act) in 1995. That mandate was for the Philippines to open a “Re-Placement and Monitoring Centre” or RPMC) to assist returnees, but this Centre’s formation in 1998 was left unfunded.

Technical assistance by the Philippine Office of IOM in 2007 focused on reintegration. That intervention led the Philippine government to formally open the NRCO (created through DOLE Department Order 79-07). Technically, the NRCO now serves as the RPMC. From 2007 to 2022 however, the NRCO underwent a series of organizational transitions that stifled its fullest potential to make migrant reintegration a broader development effort (not just by agencies within the migrant sector). These transitions [refer Table 4] also revealed that migrant reintegration is a mandate that did not get steady organizational and resource backing from relevant government agencies.

Table 4. Organizational transitions for migrant reintegration by the national government

Year	Development	Relevant Policies
1977	Fund allotments for the Welfare and Training Fund for Overseas Workers (WelFund) from the OEDB, NSB and BES	Letter of Instruction 537 (1 May)
1980	Creation of the WelFund	Presidential Decree 1694 (1 May)
1982	Formal opening of the WelFund Secretariat	
1986	Opening of the Center for Family Assistance and Services (CFAS) under the WelFund	
1987	Reorganization; Ministry to Department of Labor and Employment, WelFund to the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA)	Executive Order 126 (30 January)
1988	CFAS of OWWA now renamed the Reintegration Program Department	
1995	Mandate to open a Re-Placement and Monitoring Center (RPMC)	Republic Act 8042 (7 June)
1998	Formal creation of the RPMC, though unbudgeted	
2000	Appointment of a DOLE Undersecretary for Reintegration	
2007	Establishment of the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO), placed under the DOLE Office of the Secretary	Department Order 79 (16 February)
2010	Giving of a formal mandate to the NRCO, with the agency placed under OWWA	Republic Act 10022 (8 July)
2013	First full plantilla items given to the NRCO Secretariat	
2015	“Strengthening of the Operations” of the NRCO, whose supervision was reverted to the DOLE Office of the Secretary	Department Order 142 (15 April)
2016	Designation of reintegration officers in the DOLE regions	
2016	NRCO became an “attached office” of OWWA given the passage of the OWWA Act	Republic Act 10801 (10 May 2016)
2021	NRCO became one of even agencies merged to create the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW); set to become fully budgeted and operational by 2023	Republic Act 11641 (30 December 2021)
2021	Appointment of an Assistant Secretary for Reintegration	

Sources: Borja in Bohning (1999); Manzala (2007); OWWA (2017); key informant interviews

Packaged by the Institute for Migration and Development issues (IMDI)

The NRCO had rolled out reintegration programs since 2007, but full manpower and dedicated resources became issues in the first six years [key informant interview]. The NRCO gained ground and launched multiple reintegration programs in the 2010s apart from what OWWA and DOLE have. It helped that Republic Act 10022 (which amended RA 8042) gave a formal mandate to the NRCO. For this entire decade up to the first two years of the pandemic, NRCO ran livelihood programs (for agricultural and non-agricultural ventures), business management training, cash grant programs for distressed female migrant workers and for teachers, and a business plan competition for seafarers. However, DOLE department orders and national laws —promulgated and enacted from 2013 to 2022— saw the NRCO experience organizational challenges.

Note also that civil society groups for OFWs pressed the action and called for migrant reintegration reforms. The most significant reform measure done was the introduction of a framework, called the Comprehensive

OFW Reintegration Program (CORP). This framework sees reintegration happen prior to the OFW's first departure; operationalized in all the stages of migration; involve the migrant and her/his family back home; and elicit inter-sectoral involvement and contributions (government, private sector, civil society). NRCO and DOLE then adopted the CORP framework in the 2010s, with some civil society groups demonstrating their reintegration programs for government agencies to learn from.

Notwithstanding the challenges surrounding migrant reintegration, the national government's 2017-2022 Philippine Development Plan devoted an entire chapter (Chapter 21) to overseas Filipinos —and had reintegration as an explicit mandate (NEDA, 2019). The implication of the PDP is that migrant reintegration became integrated in broader macro-economic development policy, yet the efforts by relevant agencies do not broaden reintegration efforts by the entire Philippine government.

4. Reviewing current-day migrant reintegration approaches

The past 39 years of migrant reintegration programs ran side-by-side with the nearly 50 years of the Philippines' overseas employment program. Reintegration efforts also ran alongside with rising waves of permanent migration to some destination countries; with steady recruitment of temporary migrant workers in major East Asian and Middle East countries; with continued confrontations with the social costs of migration faced by OFW families; and with a decade of pre-pandemic economic growth that overseas remittances helped fuel.

These contexts provide the ground for current-day migrant reintegration in the Philippines. CORP was adopted by government. Meanwhile, IOM had run a previous program called ERPO (Enhanced Reintegration Program for OFWs) that sought to improve the NRCO's work and chart a strategy for Philippine migrant reintegration through a master plan in 2017. Just recently, IOM and colleague organizations within the United Nations Family (i.e., International Labor Organisation and United Nations Women) finished implementing a program that links recruitment and reintegration.

Called BRIDGE (Bridging Recruitment and Reintegration), the UN Family had provided the Philippines with two national action plans (NAPs) on ethical recruitment (component one) and on sustainable, gender-responsive reintegration (component two). If ethical recruitment is observed and OFWs face decent work conditions, these developments set the stage for planning their reintegration. And when migrant workers face workplace issues, OFWs will be directed to mechanisms so that their labour-related grievances are addressed, and then eventually to migrant reintegration services. BRIDGE's two components ensured that labour migration in general is rights-based –thus assuring that migrant reintegration gets dovetailed with ethical recruitment. BRIDGE also operates within the framework of the 2018 Global Compact on Migration (GCM), with Objective 21 of the GCM focusing on return migration and reintegration.

When BRIDGE ended in June 2023, the UN Family even produced an online "OFW Reintegration Advisor" that guides six types of returnee migrant workers with information that can be helpful to their economic and social reintegration. These six sets of information list down the government agencies that can assist returnees in specific areas of reintegration activity: entrepreneurship (self-employment), savings and investment, re-employment in the homeland labour market, retirement, and psychosocial and economic reintegration assistance for distressed returnees.

The Philippines government had also released its latest national development plan (2023-2028). Migrant reintegration was made part in sub-chapter titled *Strengthen Social Protection*. The mandate given by government to relevant agencies is to "Develop a comprehensive pathway for returning OFWs," with the Department of Migrant Workers tasked to "create a 'one-stop-shop' that will guide returning OFWs in their choice" of either resettling in the country, retiring, rejoining the Philippine labour force, or running enterprises (National Economic and Development Authority, 2023: 92).

Finally, the Department of Migrant Workers got its first full budget in 2023. This budget (PhP4.174 billion, or €68.721 million [Department of Budget and Management, 2024]) now allows the DMW to finalize its revitalized approach to migrant reintegration –learning from previous lessons and dovetailing with the BRIDGE programme. DMW, says its officials and civil servants, will soon operationalize what Republic Act 11641 (which created the department) mandated the agency to do: full-cycle reintegration. This new framework builds from the CORP, as this new framework will be tentatively anchored on the following: skills inventory of returnee workers, data collection to profile returnee OFWs, entrepreneurial credit and skills training, information collection on investment-worthy projects for OFWs, e-commerce for current OFW entrepreneurs, and networking of reintegration stakeholders (government, private sector, civil society).

We can thus say that these past and current efforts helped migrant reintegration evolve and grow into a broader development need. This "elephant in the room" called migrant reintegration has emerged to be a major function of the Philippine migration management system. However, organizational transitions hamper the fuller and coordinated implementation of programs and services on migrant reintegration. There are also threats surrounding program implementation: monitoring performance by beneficiaries (e.g., repayment, business growth), beneficiary outreach, determining the actual impact on beneficiaries, and possible program redundancies by migrant reintegration-oriented agencies.

5. Conclusions and recommendations: Broadening the sphere of migrant reintegration

This paper has reviewed 39 years of migrant reintegration by the Philippines, including efforts given massive return migrations that the COVID-19 pandemic had wrought. Part of this historical retrace is the observation that reintegration is the “weakest component” in the government’s overall migration management system (Go, 2012: 12). Given past and current reintegration efforts, we think the Philippine migrant reintegration system is hampered by organizational constraints; program implementation and program impact concerns; by stunted efforts at inter-agency coordination to make reintegration a broader mandate; and perhaps by the absence of data (especially the number of returnees) that can aid in the overall reintegration effort. To say, however, that the Philippine government did not have a deliberative migrant reintegration effort may not do justice to the nearly four decades of migrant reintegration initiatives by Filipino civil servants. Implementing reintegration programs for that long a time even comes way ahead of international organizations’ efforts to institutionalize reintegration among origin-country governments.

The Philippines has now come to the point, however, that the overall migrant reintegration effort must work to its fullest potential. Previous experiences of within-agency reintegration programs or one-off inter-agency cooperation stunt the growth of migrant reintegration as a development intervention for the Philippines. Migrant reintegration must operationally expand, must essay better inter-government agency coordination, and must entice broader multi-sectoral effort.

Programmatic recommendations

Surely, the planned approaches of the BRIDGE Program and the DMW will lead to better strategies and sets of migrant reintegration programs. The “OFW Reintegration Advisor” of the BRIDGE programme will hopefully convey the message that individual returnees and current OFWs will approach these migrant and non-migrant government agencies for assistance. At the same time, however, the challenge for the DMW is to steer relevant government agencies and attract more deliberate and sustained inter-agency efforts for migrant reintegration.

The DMW has recently piloted its full-cycle reintegration framework. Under the DMW, the National Reintegration Centre for OFWs will be a full-fledged, operational migrant reintegration unit of the entire bureaucracy. Dovetailing these efforts by the concerned agencies, we thus recommend the following:

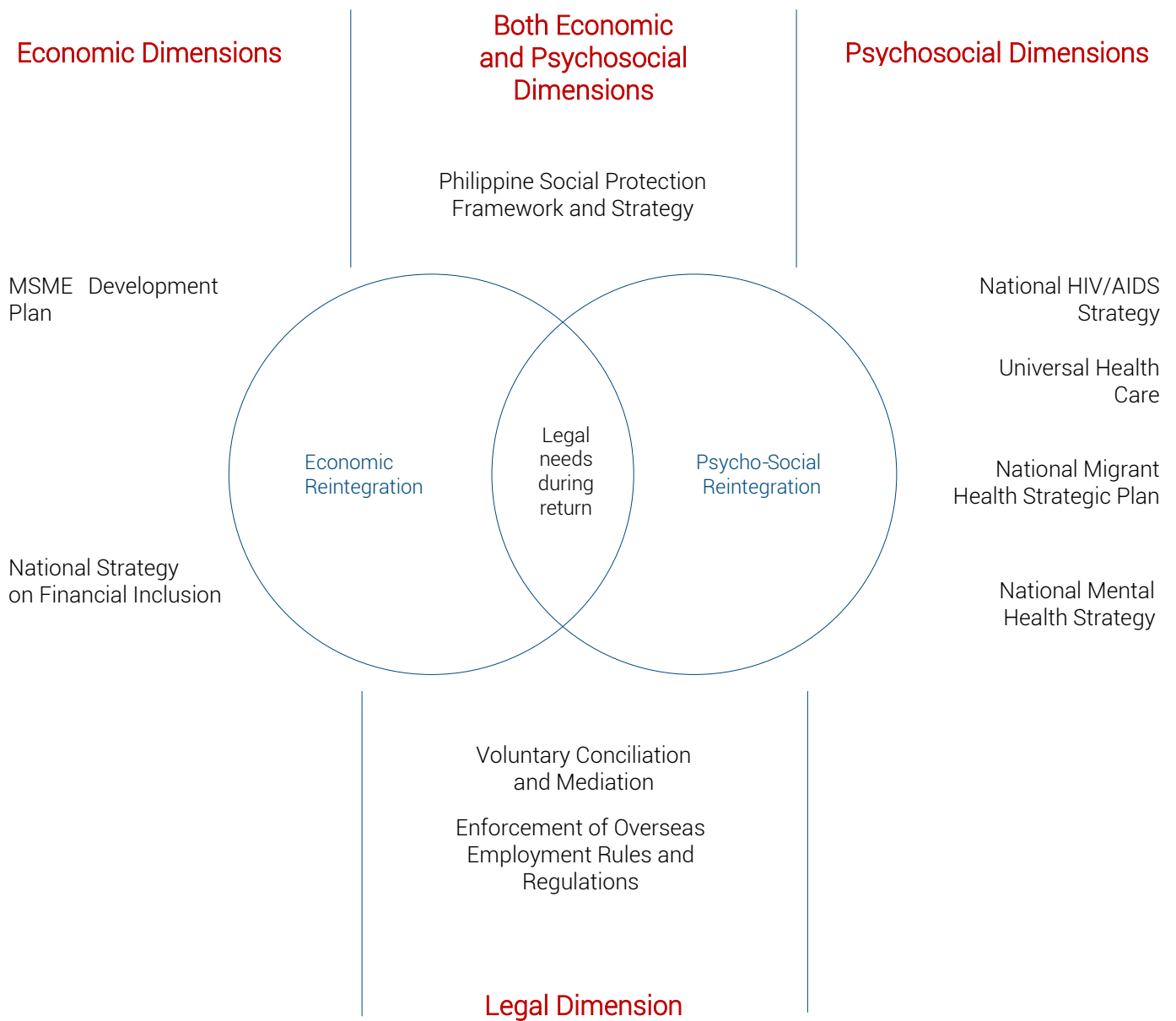
- ***Economic reintegration programs must be carefully implemented***, especially if cash grants and entrepreneurial credit provisions continue. This recommendation surfaces given the lessons of previous livelihood programs’ weaknesses (Bot, 1994; CAPS, 1993, Borja in Bohning, 1993) —not just particular to migrant reintegration but to the overall livelihood / social safety net / social protection programs of the Philippine government (Subbarao, Ahmed & Teklu, 1996; DAP, 2009; Manansan, 2009). Credit and grants remain urgent programmatic interventions at this time, yet program implementers must watch out for loan non-repayment, likely diversions of credit received, and difficulties faced by returnees to try becoming entrepreneurs.
- ***More social reintegration programs may have to be rolled out***. The history of migrant reintegration programs shows that social reintegration interventions may have been left behind, may be tied to usual “welfare” services, and are provided upon the return of distressed OFWs. Social reintegration may be migration reintegration’s weakest link in terms of program implementation. The situation may warrant more involvement from social workers and psychologists, even as the country does not have as much of these development professionals across the archipelago. Yet deeply determining the social reintegration needs of returnees may help program implementers of existing and newer social reintegration programs.
- ***Making reintegration regional and local is the way to go***. DMW’s planned delegation of regional reintegration officers is set this 2024. Coupled with the formation of local migration-and-development councils and local migrant resource centres, and effecting localized inter-agency, all these forms of multi-stakeholder coordination help further mainstream migrant reintegration. Reintegration in this respect becomes part of a locality’s overall migration-and-development plan or strategy. Some local governments, for example, have developed local migration-and-development plans that include returnee OFWs as target beneficiaries and even development partners. Localizing migrant reintegration recognizes the reality that the development potential of international migration primarily occurs in OFWs’ communities of origin (Ang and Opiniano, 2016).

- **Migrant reintegration should involve current migrant workers and returnees.** This observation is seen in the OFW Reintegration Advisor, where there are six types of returnees (including those who re-immigrate and those still overseas). Assisting remigration aspirations by returnees may be necessary (Garabiles & Asis, 2022) for as long as these remigrating OFWs pass through the usual pre-departure procedures and requirements. Meanwhile, current migrant workers – even while abroad – emerge as prospective returnees-cum-retirees. Their reintegration aspirations must be provided with easy, reliable information and perhaps digitized services from varied government agencies in the homeland.
- **Data related to return migration becomes important especially as a tool for labour market interventions in the home country.** The Philippines remains shortchanged in terms of still not having a reliable set of data on returning migrants until the pandemic came and returnees were being recorded by authorities. Returnees, particularly with university degrees, complain that their skills are not harnessed at home. Apart from the usual salary differentials between their overseas pay and salaries in the Philippines, returnees complain that there is limited-to-nil information of job opportunities locally should they wish for wage employment [key informant 3]. Migrant reintegration implementers may have to work with the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) to link migrant data with current labour market information and data in the domestic economy. Once returnees know these local job opportunities (with the aid of job facilitation efforts by national and local government agencies), returnee OFWs can therefore take that wage employment route and employ skills acquired and honed abroad.
- **Business and economic data should be presented publicly to help guide investment and entrepreneurial decisions by returnees.** Government may also want to collect, utilize and share data on major economic trends and developments surrounding entrepreneurship. An example is presenting periodic, time series data on inflation rates (Philippine Statistics Authority), enterprises opened (Department of Trade and Industry), and business confidence (surveys of firms by the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas). If targeting local entrepreneurship, information such as steps in business registration and the portfolio of business opportunities. These kinds of data matter since businesses and investors monitor running developments while everyone is trying to resume business activity during this ongoing pandemic. Another example is presenting how many days it takes to apply for new / renewal of business permits, and if such procedures can be done digitally and/or manually in OFWs' birthplace communities.
- **Migrant reintegration initiatives by the private sector and civil society, particularly touching on the economic / financial dimensions of reintegration, must expand.** Such expansion, from national to local levels (or even in the host countries of migrants), will give overseas Filipinos, their families, their Family Circle groups in the Philippines, and their organizations abroad (e.g., hometown associations) a wider range of options on where best to invest their remittances. While providing this wider range of options, the Philippine government may have to watch over their compliance with the regulations of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the Cooperative Development Authority (CDA), the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP), and other regulatory agencies. Note that financial scammers still proliferate, continuing to victimize overseas Filipinos and their households. Nevertheless, businesses, financial institutions and migrant and non-migrant civil society organizations will have to be further encouraged to help the overseas migrant sector so that they offer reliable, trustworthy financial and investment products and entrepreneurial support services.
- **Revisit and update the 2017 National Master Plan on Reintegration.** The IOM's ERPO program ("Enhancing the Reintegration Program for OFWs") had already produced a master plan on reintegration. It may make sense to revisit that plan, determine its outcomes, and dovetail such a master plan to the National Action Plan for reintegration under the BRIDGE program. That Master Plan may have to be packaged as a policy document to guide the actions of stakeholder and the DMW and the NRCO.

**The major recommendation:
Mainstreaming migrant reintegration
in overall Philippines development efforts**

Researchers present this broader recommendation because migration-and-development stakeholders may have to be made aware of initiatives by other (non-migration) government agencies that directly and indirectly relate to migrant reintegration. These initiatives by other government agencies have even existed for more than a decade. We refer here to the following corollary efforts by other government agencies [see Figure 1] by thematic area:

Figure 1. Mainstreaming migrant reintegration in varied Philippine development efforts (a schematic and operational diagram)



- **Covering both economic and psychosocial reintegration.** The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) has already mainstreamed the *Philippine Social Protection Operational Framework and Strategy*. To address various possible risks, the country's Social Protection Operational Framework and Strategy has identified four social protection "program responses" that covers labor market interventions, social assistance, social insurance and social safety nets (DSWD, 2020).
- **Covering psychosocial reintegration.** Four prevailing national strategies may cover psychosocial reintegration. One is the *National HIV/AIDS Plan*, even if particularly covering returnee OFWs who are living with HIV/AIDS. For more than two decades, HIV and migration has been an active intervention since at least a tenth of the country's current HIV case count are sea- and land-based OFWs. Another is the young *National Migrant Health Plan and Strategy*, with the DOH steering efforts to implement a government-wide response on migrant health. Migrant health obviously matters during this pandemic. On overall health, the passage of the *Universal Health Care Law (Republic Act 11223)* in 2019 now embraces the provision of health services and health insurance membership to all Filipinos, including Filipinos abroad. Meanwhile, a young *National Mental Health Plan* provides a detailed response to the country's implementation of the National Mental Health Law (Republic Act 11036). Especially during this pandemic, mental health became a prominent issue for returnees and current OFWs.
- **Covering economic reintegration.** Entrepreneurship and investment matter in economic reintegration initiatives. Two ongoing strategies have long included overseas Filipinos owing to their economic potential. The Department of Trade and Industry, since 2004, has released the *Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME) Development Plan* in every administration. Interestingly, the 2011-2016 MSME Development Plan included overseas Filipinos as one of four thematic areas for interventions. The latest MSME Development Plan now caters to all Filipino entrepreneurs, regardless if receiving overseas remittances or not.
- **Covering the legal dimensions of return migration.** Legal concerns upon return have yet to be included in discussions surrounding migrant reintegration. However, it has been observed that returnees with cases against former employers, and even money claims, do need legal assistance during their reintegration. These legal concerns exacerbate the social costs of migration while requiring some monetary expenses that could have been used for income-generating purposes upon return. Addressing legal issues admittedly becomes a disturbance to returnees' reintegration, to the point that settlements between recruiters and OFWs become common.

All these relevant policies and national strategies, plans and operational frameworks *matter* for migrant reintegration's economic, psychosocial and legal dimensions. Researchers thus recommend that migrant reintegration **be mainstreamed into these prevailing efforts**. Mainstreaming here sees the inclusion of OFWs / returnee OFWs into these varied national strategies and plans. Once these national strategies and plans integrate OFWs, no matter their specific focuses (e.g., migrant health, financial inclusion, enterprise development, mental health, broader social protection), these insertions **contribute to the overall migrant reintegration effort** and to the efforts of these agencies.

Final words

Philippine migrant reintegration has evolved into a broad-ranging migration-and-development intervention that covers multiple dimensions, and that is inextricably linked to varied areas of Philippine socio-economic development. For nearly a generation, migrant reintegration is lodged in a cocoon –within the migration management bureaucracy– that inhibits its growth and its fullest potential for Philippine development. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided such an overall lesson for migrant reintegration as a long-standing migration-and-development issue that cannot be contained anymore within migration management.

When the world reaches the endemicity of COVID-19, it is hoped that the Philippines will finally implement what is perhaps the most extensive approach on migrant reintegration to date. Mainstreaming migrant reintegration into other corollary and related areas of Philippine development will see returnees and current overseas Filipinos feel the care of an entire homeland government that addresses their reintegration and their other socio-economic development needs.

Given also the relevance of financial inclusion to add in economic development, the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas has developed the *National Strategy for Financial Inclusion (NSFI)*. Now on its second run, the NSFI is a comprehensive document whose aim is that Filipinos have "effective access to a wide range of financial products and services" (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, 2015: 2). Financial inclusion not only covers the financial services and products of bank and non-bank financial institutions, but also accelerates financial literacy by Filipinos (including those overseas).

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