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Introduction

Migration is one of the most important global opportunities and challenges of the 21st century. Since the 1970s, generations of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) have faced one form of crisis or another that interrupted their employment, endangered their lives and forced some of them to return home. Conflicts, economic downturns, natural disasters and health scares in destination countries or regions where OFWs are present have prompted the Philippine Government to craft policies and action plans to protect and, if needed, repatriate OFWs. The evacuation of OFWs to safety and the repatriation of close to 30,000 during the 1990–1991 Gulf War was the first and most massive such effort that the Philippines had undertaken (Asis, 2013), until COVID-19 occurred.

The Gulf War experience alerted the Philippine Government of the need to develop a response to assist OFWs in crisis situations. Since then, foreign employers and companies employing OFWs have been required to submit a contingency plan outlining how OFWs will be protected and repatriated to the Philippines, if needed. The extension of support and repatriation assistance to OFWs was further codified in the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 (Republic Act No. 8042, as amended by Republic Act No. 10022 in 2010). Section 15 of the law provides for the repatriation of OFWs, the allocation of emergency repatriation funds, and the designation of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) as the lead agency in the repatriation of OFWs. The law also mandates Philippine embassies and consulates to adopt the One Country Team Approach, with the ambassador as the lead, in coordinating efforts to respond to crisis situations (Section 28). In 2015, the Departments of Foreign Affairs, Labor and Employment, Social Welfare and Development, and Health, as well as the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) and OWWA, developed the *Joint Manual of Operations in Providing Assistance to Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos*. The manual aims to provide a “unified contingency plan that will safeguard overseas Filipinos in case of crises and other imminent danger” (DOLE, 2015). Through the various crises and emergencies, Filipino communities proved to be important partners of Philippine foreign missions in providing information and extending support to Filipino migrants. On the home front, OWWA is the lead agency for repatriation efforts, operating a hotline to respond to queries from families of OFWs, coordinating and responding to the needs of OFW arrivals, and facilitating the transfer of OFWs to their origin provinces (Asis, 2013). Thus, informed by experience, the Philippines has established a framework in responding to crisis situations.

Although OFWs have been exposed to several epidemics in the past – SARS, Ebola, MERS-CoV – the impacts were contained or limited. None of these previous health crises resulted in massive job losses, displacements, or OFWs being thrust into stranded situations. With the downturn in the global economy, employment prospects at home and overseas are bleak. The pandemic is not just a health crisis, but is also an economic, social, political and even a humanitarian crisis. Given the distribution of large numbers of overseas Filipinos throughout the world – 5.4 million, according to the stock estimate of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, or 10 million according to the Philippine Government – the Philippines is faced with the daunting challenge of attending to the needs of Filipino nationals outside the country. This paper provides an overview of the repatriation of OFWs under this current and continuing pandemic, noting the challenges encountered and highlighting emerging good practices.

Repatriation challenges

As of 7 June 2020, a total of 55,859 OFWs had returned to the Philippines, of whom 17,419 were land-based and 38,440 were sea-based (OneNews, 2020). By 23 June, the numbers had climbed to more than 59,000, with another 42,000 expected to return in the following weeks (Ramos, 2020). Moreover, in these coming weeks, more land-based than sea-based workers will be returning home. Previously, sea-based workers outnumbered land-based workers among repatriated OFWs, reflecting the displacement of OFWs working on cruise ships. Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III reported that 343,551 OFWs have been affected by the pandemic, but close to 200,000 are opting to remain overseas, hoping to find employment where they are once the situation improves (Ramos, 2020).

The repatriation of OFWs started with the arrival on 10 February of a group of 30 persons (including an infant) from Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, the epicentre of COVID-19 (Philippine News Agency, 2020). In the same month, two batches totalling more than 800 repatriated cruise ship personnel followed. The first batches of repatriates were accommodated in the Athletes' Village in Capas, Tarlac for the required 14-day quarantine.

The number of repatriated OFWs increased slowly until around April. Travel bans and strict global health protocols stalled migration and made repatriation efforts difficult. OFWs who want to return to the Philippines must secure migration and health clearances. The limited availability of international flights and the numerous flight cancellations have delayed the repatriation process. Repatriated OFWs who are able to return home must comply upon arrival in the Philippines with testing, quarantine, onward travel to their home provinces, and a sometimes reluctant welcome by their local communities.

As the number of arrivals increased, so did the problems and anxiety levels of OFWs. While many of the repatriated OFWs had lost their jobs, they also included those whose contracts had ended, distressed workers who were staying in shelters and those returning home for a vacation, as well as those who had opted to return home. In addition to those arriving on international flights, 21 foreign cruise ships with Filipino personnel were allowed in Manila Bay from 21 April. Filipino workers who tested negative and had completed their 14-day quarantine were allowed to land. Other sea-based workers who returned by air were housed in hotels and other accredited accommodation provided by manning agencies. The Government, through OWWA, provided free testing, accommodation, food packs and monitoring to OFWs. Non-OFWs had to shoulder all the costs attendant to testing and room and board while under quarantine.

Repatriated OFWs spent a lot of time waiting – for their turn to be tested, for the results of the test, to gather all the necessary documents that would allow them to return to their families, and to be able to travel to their home communities. Due to lack of capacity to test arriving OFWs, in May the Government had to close the international airport in Manila for a week to catch up with the testing. With the suspension of land, air and sea travel in the country, even those who had received their negative results and had completed their quarantine period could not return to their hometowns. Complaints by OFWs who had been stuck in Manila for a long period of time reached President Duterte. On 25 May, the President issued a one-week ultimatum stating that all 24,000 OFWs who remained in Manila at the time must be transported to their home communities. Moreover, local government units (LGUs) were told that they could not deny entry to returning OFWs (CNN Philippines, 2020). Some LGUs had barred the return of OFWs for fear that that OFWs might be carriers of the coronavirus. During this time, the country's “modern-day heroes” were sadly stigmatized as potential carriers of the dreaded virus.

Unlike previous repatriations, the current one involves not just a whole-of-government approach, but a whole-of-nation approach, which hinges on joint efforts between government and non-government entities. International organizations contributed to repatriations in the past, but this time, the process mostly comprises government efforts. Although OWWA is currently the designated agency for repatriation, the Office for the Undersecretary of Migrant Affairs of the Department of Foreign Affairs was at the helm in the transfer of OFWs from overseas to the Philippines. OWWA comes into the picture once the OFWs arrive in the Philippines. To meet the various needs of the arrivals, OWWA coordinates with the Philippine National Police, the Philippine Coast Guard, the Department of Health and the Department of the Interior and Local Government. OWWA shoulders the hotel and food costs of the OFWs during their stay in Manila.

The need for coordination between national and local government directives was highlighted in the onward repatriation from Manila to the home communities of OFWs. In the rush to meet the President's ultimatum to send cleared OFWs home within a week, some LGUs were not informed about the arrival of OFWs in their respective areas. As several local chief executives remarked, they were not blocking the return of OFWs; rather, they wanted to be sure that they had sufficient facilities to accommodate them. The hasty return of OFWs to their home provinces also coincided with two other government programmes, Balik Probinsiya (Back to the Province) and Hatid Probinsiya (Send Off to the Province), which added to the responsibilities of local government units. The former programme aims to encourage migrants to return to their home provinces in order to decongest Metro Manila and to spur regional development, while the latter is aimed at facilitating the return of locally stranded individuals. When news that some OFWs who were cleared had tested positive for COVID-19 upon arrival, concerns were raised over local transmissions. Those who tested negative still have to observe home quarantine and social distancing.

The impact of quarantine requirements has caused much anguish to OFWs. Sea-based workers, in particular, have undergone seemingly endless quarantine – while they were at sea, upon arrival in Manila, and another round of 14-day self-quarantine once they are back in their communities. OFWs who came home temporarily were also caught up by the various quarantine requirements, and in addition, they could be stranded in the Philippines pending the availability of flights back to their countries of employment. For some, the delay in reporting back to work could mean loss of employment. On the other hand, seafarers on international merchant vessels – who are supposed to return home after being at sea for 10 months – are forced to continue working, either because their replacements are stranded in the Philippines, or because travel restrictions do not allow them to travel back to the Philippines.

To date, information on the repatriated OFWs is mostly limited to the numbers that have arrived and whether they are land-based or sea-based workers (see, for example, OFW Help). Some important details, such as: gender distribution; home province/city to which OFWs are returning; reasons for repatriation; OWWA membership; and voluntary sharing of contact details (for possible recontact later) would be helpful to collect for the development of reintegration programmes, the next critical phase to be addressed in this untimely return of OFWs.

Data on how many OFWs are expected to be repatriated in the coming months would be helpful in planning for future arrivals. These estimates will have to be updated in light of a situation that is in great flux.

Emerging good practices

Amid the confusion and many problems, there are some bright spots in the handling of the repatriation of OFWs. Examples are the following:

1. Recruitment and manning agencies as partners in the repatriation of OFWs

Every year, some 90 per cent of legally deployed OFWs go through licensed private recruitment agencies (PRAs) or manning agencies for those recruiting and deploying sea-based workers. Under the system of agency hiring, accredited PRAs and manning agencies are allowed to recruit Filipinos for overseas employment, but this comes with responsibilities. Among others, PRAs and manning agencies bear responsibility for the repatriation of OFWs they have deployed and to monitor their conditions while they are onsite. According to Republic Act No. 8042, as amended by Republic Act No. 10022, “the repatriation of the worker and the transport of his [her] personal belongings shall be the primary responsibility of the agency which recruited or deployed the worker overseas” (Sec. 15).

On 26 March, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration issued Memorandum Circular No. 08, Series of 2020 with the reminder that “all Philippine recruitment agencies (PRAs) and licensed manning agencies (LMAs) are hereby required to closely monitor and report the status and condition of your deployed Filipino workers and to coordinate with the concerned Philippine Overseas Labor Office in extending the needed assistance to the affected workers.” The agencies were also required to provide assistance to newly hired OFWs and joining crew who were stranded in Metro Manila because of the enhanced community quarantine that was enforced as of 16 March.

2. The use of online and social media to provide information and support to repatriated OFWs

Particularly in the immediate period following their return to the Philippines, online and social platforms are the means by which Government agencies provide updates on arrivals and also in relaying information to repatriated OFWs as to where they can access support.

- OWWA launched OWWA Quarantine Operations, a Facebook page “dedicated to answer queries and provide assistance to displaced and affected Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) due to the COVID-19 pandemic.” This page also features information on updates and organizations providing psychosocial support and health-care queries (see www.facebook.com/OWWAQuarantineOps/). OWWA also put up the website <http://uwianna.owwa.gov.ph> (“*uwian na*” means going home) to fast-track transportation arrangements and facilitate the transportation needs of OFWs in returning to their intended destinations in the Philippines. OFWs have to register online.
- The Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs (OUMWA) in the Department of Foreign Affairs has used the Facebook page OFW Help, launched in September 2019, to reach out to OFWs in distress. The page aims to provide a platform for OFWs to reach out to OUMWA and vice versa on calls for emergency assistance, and is not intended for labour claims. During the pandemic, the page has provided updates on OFWs who have been repatriated. In addition, it has organized several online OFW Town Hall meetings featuring updates on the conditions of OFWs, as reported by Philippine embassies and consulates and Filipino community leaders (see www.facebook.com/pg/OFWHelpPH/).

OFWs also use social media to report problems and concerns, which are then disseminated further by other netizens or are picked up by traditional media. These platforms have therefore also become a grievance mechanism for OFWs.

3. Data collection

As of 11 June, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) launched OASIS (OFW Assistance Information System), a tracking system that aims to “facilitate an orderly and smooth repatriation, and assistance to the huge number of returning OFWs.” Jointly developed by DOLE, OWWA and POEA, the tracking system is expected to provide appropriate government assistance to OFWs who have lost their jobs. OASIS will help DOLE identify and classify arriving OFWs, and facilitate efficient swab testing and rapid pick-up and transfer to their hotels. OFWs will have to fill out a form to register online through <http://oasis.owwa.gov.ph> (DOLE, 2020).

Another data initiative that aims to collect relevant statistics on repatriated OFWs is under discussion between the International Organization for Migration Philippines and OWWA (IOM, 2020). The reintegration phase will be the next challenging arena for the Philippines. In this critical phase, the discussions will require more dialogue between the national agencies and local government units. This will also require the collection and use of data on repatriated OFWs at the local level.

Conclusion

Although the Philippines has established good practices and guidelines that have helped it respond to crisis situations in the past, these preparations were lacking in relation to the unprecedented and enormous challenges posed by COVID-19. The basic principle of getting OFWs out of harm’s way was not easy to accomplish in the face of travel restrictions and health protocols that required everyone to stay in place. While in the past, international organizations played a visible role in repatriation efforts, they have not been as prominent in the current efforts. Does the same situation apply elsewhere? Could this be because the pandemic’s impact is global, also affecting funding and support institutions?

While the capacity and reach of the Government to provide assistance has been restricted, the Internet has provided possibilities for communication between government agencies and OFWs, as well as access to some support and services for OFWs. This is promising on the one hand, but also worrying on the other, when we consider the population of OFWs that is not Internet-proficient or does not have access to information technology. The repatriation of OFWs under this pandemic also underscores the fact that support to OFWs is not only the responsibility of migration agencies, but is also the work of various Government agencies, the private sector, civil society organizations, academia, and the migrants themselves. The next phase, the reintegration of OFWs, will require a whole-of-society approach to help OFWs and their families build a life at home in the hoped-for post-pandemic world.

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