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A reset for overseas migration? Recent developments in Filipinos' migration in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

International migration has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic recessions, massive job cuts and public health issues that ensued. Gamlen (2020) believes the age of migration preceding this pandemic was reversed: global travel screeched to a halt, international trade slowed down and demand for foreign labour coming from developed countries significantly dropped.

These global developments have tested the capacity and resilience of all States worldwide, including one of the top countries of origin of international migrants with a highly organized migration system, the Philippines. Just as the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic on 11 March 2021, and countries started instituting area lockdowns, Filipino migrant workers were immediately seen by the Philippines to be among those most adversely affected. It is not that the Philippines' migration management system is ill equipped to respond to natural and human-caused crises affecting overseas-based citizens; COVID-19 simply changed the game as to how countries handle overseas mobility, ensure their overseas migrants' safety and health, and attempt to cope economically. Even with migration agencies, policies and services in place for over three decades, the situation has raised challenges for the Philippines' migration system in terms of attending to the health and welfare needs of its overseas migrants and their families.

This paper explores some of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Filipino overseas migrants and the responses and measures adopted by the Philippines in 2020.

Migration management by the Philippines

The Philippines is well known for sending workers to overseas job markets. This facilitation of Filipino workers' overseas employment aspirations began in 1974 when the country enacted a national labour code containing policies on how to regulate labour export. In the years that followed, including some tragic episodes experienced by overseas Filipinos (e.g. the 1989 death of a female entertainer in Japan, the execution of a female domestic worker in Singapore in 1995), the Philippines refined and modified its policies, programmes and services for overseas migrants (Opiniano, 2021a).

National agencies were set up for migrant workers (temporary migrants) and emigrants (permanent migrants) in the late 1970s. The current national migration policy has been taking shape since 1995, following the execution of Singapore-based domestic worker Flor Contemplacion. Regulating overseas employment has helped facilitate safe and regular migration. Services for overseas migrants at all stages of the migration process, from pre-departure to return migration, have long been in place, including for those involved in domestic work and other low-skilled occupations. The country's overseas recruitment sector even grew to an estimated 1,500 licensed recruitment and staffing agencies as of 2014 (Blank, 2014). Repatriations of overseas Filipino workers, especially those affected by vulnerable labour conditions, natural and human-caused disasters and trafficking, continue annually.

As a matter of foreign policy, the Philippines' embassies and consulates have long been on the front lines for reaching out to compatriot Filipinos. The Philippines has also been active in contributing to the development and adoption of landmark international instruments such as the Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (ASEAN, 2017) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (UNGA, 2018).

According to the latest available data, as of 2013, the country had a stock estimate of 10,238,614 overseas Filipinos (Commission on Filipinos Overseas, 2014). Of these, some 4,207,018 were temporary migrants (or migrant workers), 4,869,766 were permanent migrants, and 1,161,830 were irregular migrants. The Philippines has continued receiving enormous amounts of remittances in the last decade, leading to a cumulative total of over USD 430 billion over 45 years (1975 to 2019). During the pandemic, in 2020, the Philippines received some USD 29.903 billion in international remittances, representing only 0.8 per cent less than the 2019 total of USD 30.133 billion (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, 2021).

Categories of overseas Filipinos

The Government of the Philippines defines three categories of overseas Filipinos for its stock estimate (currently under revision by the Inter-Agency Committee on Migration Statistics):

1. Permanent migrants include Filipino immigrants, legal permanent residents, and naturalized citizens of their host country.
2. Temporary migrants include the documented land-based and sea-based workers and others whose stay abroad is six month[s] or more, including their accompanying dependents. These migrants are popularly referred to as overseas Filipino workers or OFWs.
3. Irregular migrants are Filipinos who are without valid residence or work permits, or who may be overstaying workers or tourists in a foreign country.

See https://cfo.gov.ph/statistics-2/.

Challenges raised by the pandemic

Despite the country's long-standing and well-organized migration management system, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the Philippines and its overseas migrants. Starting with the first wave of migrant worker repatriations from Wuhan, China, in February 2020, repatriations have continued to flood the Philippines' international airports to this day. Suddenly, an entire government machinery[1] became first responders for Filipino migrants directly and indirectly affected by COVID-19.

In what follows, we explore some implications of the pandemic on Philippine migration, focusing on the period of 25 March 2020 to 24 March 2021 during which the Philippine Government specifically started monitoring Filipinos abroad who contracted COVID-19.

Assisting with repatriations and return migration

The Department of Foreign Affairs and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) have been in charge of facilitating repatriations of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who were stranded abroad and wanted to be repatriated. Since the beginning of the pandemic, repatriated migrant workers have been among those prioritized for entry at international airports in Manila, and ships have been allowed to change crews at Manila's international seaport since these vessels were bringing home Filipino seafarers. Overseas Filipinos also returned home when lockdowns and travel restrictions somewhat eased after mid-2020.

[1] It is worth noting that government response efforts to curb COVID-19 are under the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging and Infectious Diseases (IATF).

As of 31 December 2020, the Philippines had assisted the repatriation of 327,511 migrant workers. Among them, 231,537 were land-based migrant workers and 95,974 were seafarers, many from cruise ships (Republic of the Philippines, Department of Foreign Affairs, 2021a).

The OWWA, the world's largest migrant welfare fund, cooperated with relevant government agencies to form a National Task Force on the Management of Returning Overseas Filipinos. They brought repatriated workers to quarantine facilities and transported them to their communities of origin. The first few months of the pandemic were filled with news reports of returnees being placed in designated quarantine sites like hotels. Some repatriated OFWs originally from Philippine provinces became stranded in the Metro Manila area due to mobility restrictions within the country (Asis, 2020). In response, OWWA personnel provided these repatriated workers with food packs, hygiene kits, and free RT-PCR testing. All these forms of assistance were at no cost to repatriated OFWs.

At the same time, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) provided an economic stimulus package for both local and overseas workers. Overseas workers who were displaced from their work abroad, who contracted COVID-19 or who were unable to return given travel restrictions received USD 200 (PHP 10,000) in cash-based assistance. As of 4 April 2021, about 497,122 OFWs abroad and at home received this assistance through a programme called *Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong* or AKAP ("Help is within reach"; AKAP is the Filipino word for embrace).

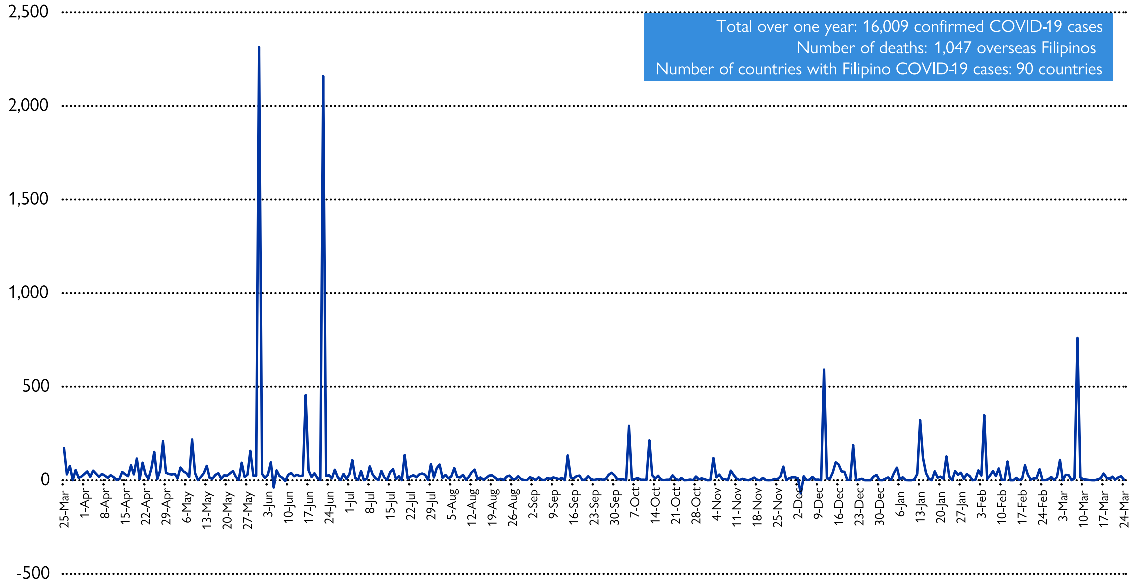
Overseas migrant workers repatriated by the Government were not the only ones who returned to the Philippines in 2020. Government authorities recorded a total of 784,736 returning overseas Filipinos (ROFs) in 2020, covering repatriated migrant workers (327,511), deported irregular migrants, and vacationing migrant workers and permanent migrants. These ROFs – 472,426 land-based migrants, 304,665 seafarers, and 1,986 deported migrant workers from Sabah, Malaysia – were quarantined. By 31 December 2020, about 12,238 returnees, among which 7,686 were land-based and 4,552 were seafarers, contracted COVID-19 (National Sub-Task Group on the Management of Returning Overseas Filipinos, 2021).

Some analysts predicted in April 2020 that around 300,000–400,000 OFWs would be affected by the pandemic, either because of losing their jobs, experiencing a decrease in their salaries, being repatriated or contracting COVID-19 (Ang and Opiniano, 2020a). The number of repatriated OFWs alone, or the beneficiaries of AKAP, well exceeded those projections.

Monitoring overseas Filipinos infected by COVID-19

In conformity with international health regulations (IHR) by the WHO, the Philippine Government has monitored overseas nationals who contracted COVID-19. While no disaggregated data exists on the number of migrant workers infected, year-long data since 25 March more generally accounts for some 16,009 overseas Filipinos in 90 countries who have been infected by COVID-19 (Republic of the Philippines, Department of Foreign Affairs, 2021b). About 1,047 of them died (see Figure 1). Just above half of confirmed cases and deaths were reported in the Middle East and Africa (8,884 confirmed cases and 673 deaths), highlighting the presence of the sizable Filipino migrant worker population in countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait. As of 31 December 2020, some 3,217 Filipinos in Europe, 901 Filipinos in the Americas, and 3,007 Filipinos in Asia and the Pacific contracted COVID-19 (Republic of the Philippines, Department of Foreign Affairs, 2021a). These numbers may be underestimated.

Figure 1. Overseas Filipinos confirmed to have contracted COVID-19 abroad, from 25 March 2020 to 24 March 2021



Source: Department of Foreign Affairs (through its daily infographics posted on Facebook).

Added pressures on families

Both non-migrant and migrant families experienced economic and psychosocial pressures due to the pandemic lockdowns and the numerous mobility and travel restrictions implemented worldwide. Migrant families experienced the economic shock of either receiving lower income or not receiving money in certain periods. There are even estimates that the pandemic reduced these Filipino migrant households' incomes by 23 to 32 per cent and their household spending per capita by 2.2 to 3.3 per cent (Murakami et al., 2020).

Overseas migrant workers' mental health has also been impacted by the pandemic. This is particularly the case for migrant workers who have been displaced away from their places of work, thus experiencing salary cuts; been stranded abroad, including on ocean-plying vessels; or stuck in quarantine facilities. International non-profit organizations serving seafarers, for example, have developed and delivered reading kits on coping with loneliness and have opened telephone and social media hotlines to provide support. Filipinos are among their leading clients by nationality (Opiniano, 2020c).

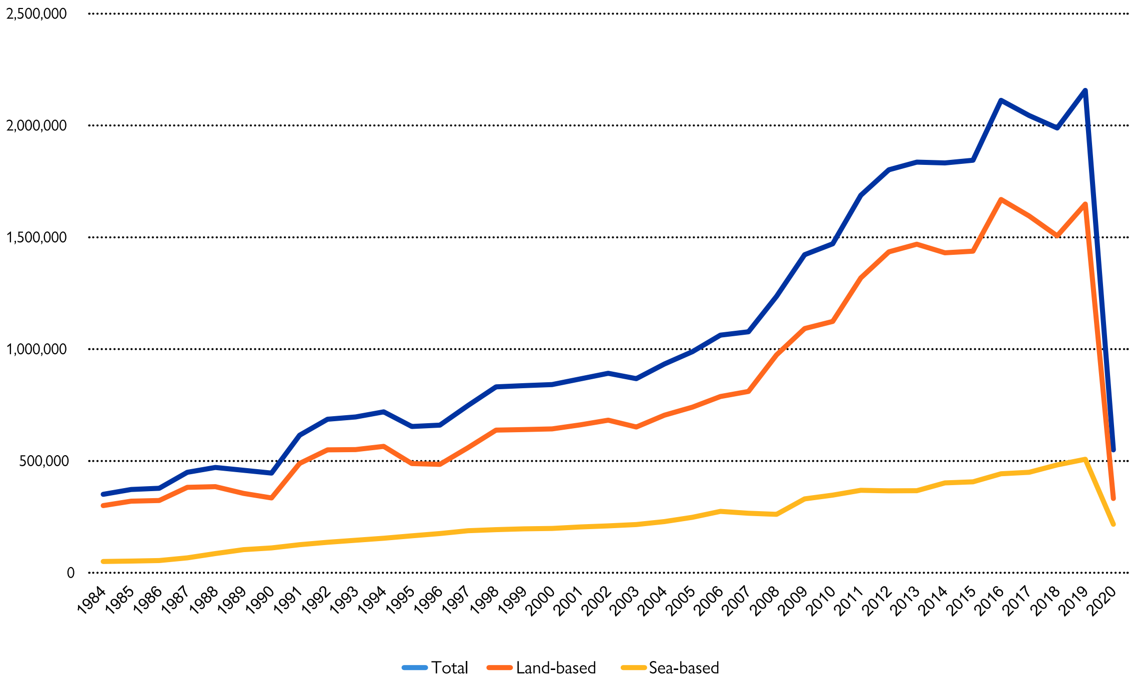
Although repatriations have raised concerns about potential spread of the virus, they have also eased the pressure on families, allowing them to be reunited. Families have tried to make up for previous periods of long-distance relationships with renewed moments of togetherness. Given the uncertainty of being able to migrate again any time soon, some returnees have opted for entrepreneurship, for example by setting up online businesses like many non-migrant Filipinos.

Decreasing overseas employment with the closure of recruitment agencies

Countries around the world have experienced increased rates of unemployment and business closures in 2020 (Gamlen, 2020). The pandemic and corresponding travel restrictions have also reduced the demand for foreign labour. These economic consequences have had important impacts on countries like the Philippines, which is a major sending country of migrant workers abroad.

Data recently released by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) showed only 549,841 land- and sea-based workers deployed in 2020 (POEA, 2021). That total is a sharp 74.5 per cent decline from the historic high of 2,156,742 OFWs (both newly hired and rehired OFWs) deployed in 2019 (see Figure 2). The 2020 figure is the lowest since the 446,095 OFWs deployed in 1990 (POEA, 2021).

Figure 2. Deployment of overseas Filipino workers, 1984 to 2020



Note: Annual flows of overseas workers cover both new hires and rehires.
Source: Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, 2021.

This significant decline in migrant worker deployment has affected the business operations of recruitment agencies. The recruitment sector reported to the POEA that around 600–700 recruitment agencies shut down their operations last year (Medenilla and Mercene, 2020). Compounding the predicament of the recruitment sector, the OWWA recently said that 601 recruitment and staffing agencies owe the Government some PHP 159.3 million (approximately USD 3.32 million) in repatriation expenses for the workers these agencies deployed.

Declining international remittances?

Since the pandemic lockdowns began worldwide, analysts looked at the most easily measurable impact on migration: international remittances. In April 2020, the World Bank initially predicted a 19.9 per cent decline in international remittances inflows to developing countries in the year 2020 (World Bank, 2020). In the case of the Philippines, some analysts predicted declines in the range of USD 3–6 billion in 2020 (Ang and Opiniano, 2020b). The COVID-19 pandemic, the fluctuating price of oil and the ensuing economic recession were all expected to significantly diminish international remittance flows (Ang and Opiniano, 2020a).

Surprisingly, the impact on overseas Filipinos' international remittances was ultimately limited to a 0.76 per cent decrease in 2020 (see Table 2). International remittance flows into the Philippines reached USD 29.903 billion in 2020, compared to USD 30.113 billion in 2019 (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, 2021). According to the World Bank (2021), in 2020, the Philippines remained among the top five recipient countries of international remittances. Some Filipino development analysts heaved a sigh of relief since remittances feed 40 per cent of consumption spending in the country – this being needed more than ever during economic crises (Ang and Opiniano, 2020a).

Table 2. Comparison of inflows of international remittances into the Philippines, 2019 and 2020

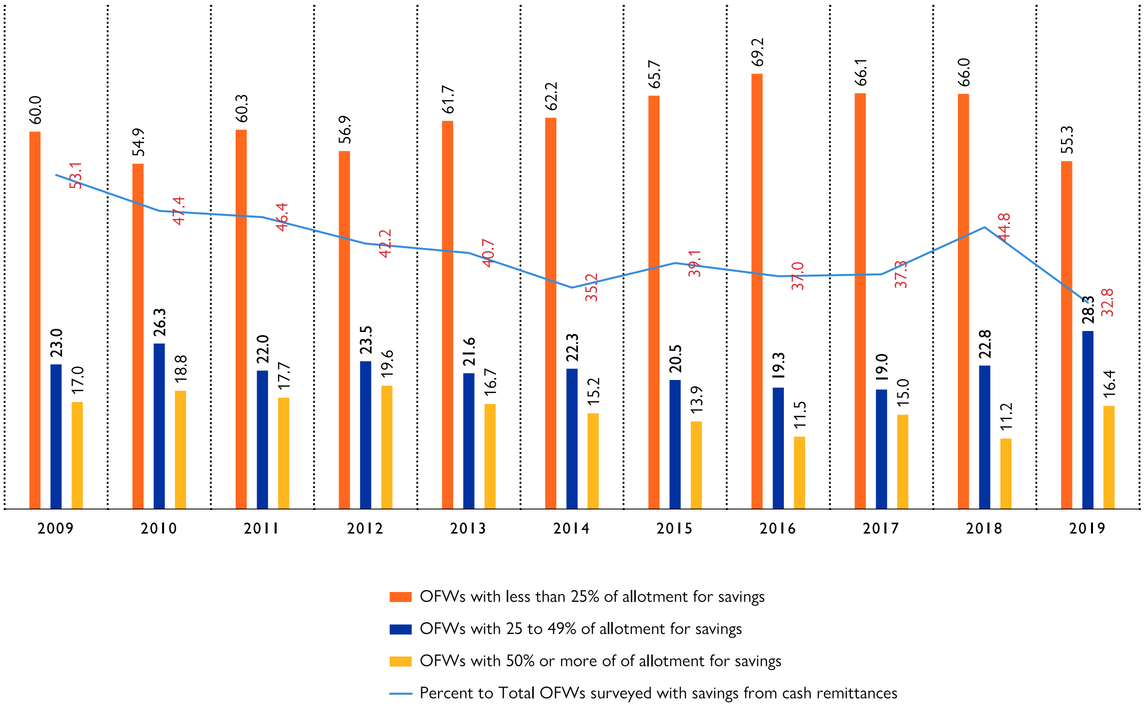
	Remittances (USD million)		Year-on-year growth (%)
	2019	2020	
January	2 483.62	2 648.02	6.62
February	2 300.80	2 357.90	2.48
March	2 514.25	2 396.62	-4.68
April	2 440.63	2 045.91	-16.17
May	2 609.47	2 105.65	-19.31
June	2 289.53	2 465.33	7.68
July	2 580.71	2 782.54	7.82
August	2 589.24	2 482.67	-4.12
September	2 379.04	2 601.26	9.34
October	2 671.20	2 747.46	2.85
November	2 372.40	2 379.47	0.30
December	2 902.42	2 890.41	-0.41
Total	**30 133.29**	**29 903.24**	**-0.76**

Note: Negative growth rates for foreign exchange indicate currency appreciation.
Source: Author's own elaboration based on data from Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, 2021.

Currency exchange rates have also impacted the level of international remittances migrants are able to send back home. Filipino migrants abroad tried to maintain 2019 remittance levels when the USD was at PHP 50. In 2020, Philippine currency appreciated to USD 48, forcing Filipinos abroad to send more in actual value so as to maintain the Philippine equivalent of income sent a year ago (Opiniano, 2021b).

The pandemic provided challenges for Filipino families dependent on international remittances as they had to adapt their way of handling their financial resources. From 2009 to 2019, the annual Survey on Overseas Filipinos of the Philippine Statistics Authority (2021) showed that only 32.8 per cent of migrant workers' households saved from their remittances – the lowest over that 11-year period (see Figure 3). That may be expected since health expenses and spending for emergencies, apart from health, are to be prioritized during these times (Ang and Opiniano, 2020b).

Figure 3. Overseas Filipino workers who save, 2009 to 2019



Source: Survey on Overseas Filipinos (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021), data compiled by the author.

However, factoring in the results of the Central Bank's quarterly Consumer Expectations Survey (CES), it seemed that families of OFWs maintained spending levels in 2020 compared to 2019 (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, 2020). Medical expenses rose, as expenses to repay debts declined. Purchases of durables declined slightly, but housing purchases declined visibly. Surprisingly, investment spending increased, perhaps because of the need to venture into self-employment (see Table 3).

Table 3. Usage of remittances by families of Overseas Filipino Workers (in percentage)

	2019				2020			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2*	Q3	Q4
Food and other household needs	95.5	96.4	96.1	97.3	93.9	-	97.2	96.6
Education	65.7	68.9	68.8	64.5	66.8	-	60.1	60.1
Medical expenses	46.3	49.8	54.8	44.6	51.0	-	49.4	53.8
Debt payments	21.4	23.1	23.6	20.1	17.2	-	18.4	15.9
Savings	33.0	33.9	37.3	38.5	44.7	-	31.6	33.4
Purchase of appliances/consumer durables	19.2	18.9	20.6	20.7	23.3	-	16.9	19.3
Purchase of house	10.2	11.7	11.4	9.3	13.6	-	7.1	4.8
Investment	3.8	7.6	7.9	5.1	6.1	-	6.4	6.2
Purchase of car/motor vehicle	10.2	7.8	6.5	9.3	5.9	-	2.8	6.2
Others	3.8	2.1	2.6	5.1	5.7	-	6.6	7.4

*No survey was done in Q2 of 2020 due to lockdowns in the Philippines.
Source: Author's own elaboration based on data in Consumer Expectations Survey (CES), Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, 2020.

A whole-of-government approach to assist OFWs

For every natural and human-caused crisis, the Philippine civil service provides immediate welfare and economic support to affected overseas workers. National laws (particularly Republic Act 10022, the amended Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act) and circulars issued by relevant migration agencies have mandated assistance during repatriations.

Asis (2020) noted the policy contained in the Republic Act 10022 that states that recruitment agencies are primarily responsible for the repatriation of the workers whom they recruited (section 15). A later circular from the POEA (Memorandum Circular 8) given the pandemic confirms Section 15 of RA 10022 (POEA, 2020). However, given the urgency of the situation at the onset of the pandemic, the Government decided to initially arrange and finance the repatriation flights with the OWWA, later issuing invoices to the recruitment agencies of the repatriated OFWs. Both the Government and the recruitment agency thus split the repatriation expenses per migrant worker.

The OWWA is otherwise responsible for OFWs repatriation and related costs, with a trust fund totaling some PHP 18 billion (USD 375 million) as of April 2021 (Cacdac, 2021). The costs covered by the OWWA include those related to quarantine facilities, testing and transport services for repatriated workers, as well as the USD 200 financial assistance provided to affected OFWs (current, returned and stranded at home). This substantial financial burden during the pandemic has led the OWWA to call on the national Government to help finance the assistance for OFWs in 2020. The national Government responded by including the needs of repatriated OFWs in two sets of laws providing for stimulus packages for affected Filipinos.[2] OWWA Administrator Hans Leo Cacdac expressed fear that the agency's funds will be depleted given the continued shouldering of expenses for repatriated OFWs (Nicolas and Medenilla, 2021; Ordinario and Medenilla, 2020). As of 4 April 2021, around 502,581 OFWs had been repatriated since the beginning of the year, and, as previously mentioned, around 497,122 OFWs had received the USD 200 financial assistance (*PTV-4 News*, 2021).

Transport services for returning/repatriated migrant workers have required deepened coordination between national government agencies and local government units (LGUs). OWWA's regional and provincial offices have been mobilized to assist repatriated migrant workers and coordinate with provincial, city and municipal governments through their migrant desk officers. Given the geographic spread of returning/repatriated migrant workers throughout the country, this coordination between OWWA, POEA and LGUs was active prior to the pandemic and has continued throughout.

Migrant workers' reintegration in the Philippines has become another paramount issue to be addressed by the Government. With repatriations not abating (even amid the current surge of new COVID-19 variants), the national Government had called on the help of relevant agencies (especially government-run financial institutions) to assist with the reintegration of migrant workers.

The Philippines' dedicated office for reintegration, the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO), housed under the OWWA, has worked with the OWWA to roll out various programmes for returnees. These include an entrepreneurial support programme for returning female domestic workers (*Balik 'Pinas, Balik Hanapbuhay*, or "return to the Philippines and work

[2] President Rodrigo Duterte signed two laws the national legislature enacted in response to the pandemic. These are Republic Act 11429 (*Bayanihan* to Heal as One Act 1; effectivity: 25 March–24 June, 2020), and Republic Act 11494 (*Bayanihan* to Heal as One Act 2; effectivity: 15 September 2020–30 June 2021). *Bayanihan* is a Filipino word for mutual help. These two republic acts (Government of the Republic of the Philippines, 2020a; 2020b) have budgeted repatriation and quarantine expenses for returning OFWs.

at home"), and a livelihood development programme for numerous returnees (Asis, 2020). These agencies also rolled out psychosocial services to returnees with the help of community-based OFW family groups nationwide. The NRCO launched an online entrepreneurial training course for aspiring returnee-entrepreneurs, and OWWA set up an online portal (OASIS) to register repatriated workers and determine their employment needs (Asis, 2020).

The DOLE and the OWWA have relied on the assistance of other relevant government agencies in their wide-ranging reintegration efforts. The Departments of: Trade and Industry; Agriculture; and Social Welfare and Development have offered entrepreneurial training and loan packages for returnees (Opiniano, 2021a). The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) offered free online training courses for workers, including some 86,100 overseas workers and returnees, to obtain national certifications (NCs) for various skill-development courses (TESDA, 2021). Some government-run financial institutions, such as the Landbank of the Philippines, the Development Bank of the Philippines, the Overseas Filipino Bank, and the Agricultural Credit Policy Council, have rolled out loan programmes for current and returning overseas workers, especially those wishing to embark on agricultural ventures (Arcalas and Opiniano, 2021).

As for social protection, OFWs benefit from membership programmes in the Social Security System (SSS), the Home Development Mutual Fund (HDMF), and the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth). These programmes have enabled OFWs to avail themselves of SSS unemployment benefit packages (PHP 20,000) (Dooc, 2020), medical insurance from PhilHealth, and multi-purpose and housing loans from the HDMF. However, workers' membership contributions to these agencies have increased during the pandemic, particularly PhilHealth and SSS contributions. This increase in contributions, especially for PhilHealth, raised financial issues even among overseas workers (Lopez, 2020).

The POEA, the regulating agency for overseas employment, has continued to monitor recruitment agencies. POEA has also been in charge of issuing labour migration bans concerning certain types of migrant workers, such as health professionals, and of offering online legal assistance to displaced OFWs (Patinio, 2020). With rising domestic unemployment and a high number of returned/repatriated OFWs at home, the POEA has continued to facilitate the search for overseas labour market opportunities. The country's army of labour attachés also helps workers in their search for job opportunities.

The Philippines' embassies and consulates, in addition to arranging repatriation services, have been actively providing legal assistance to OFWs (especially those who had their contract terminated during the pandemic). The Department of Foreign Affairs has even used social media to reach out to OFWs who needed and/or wished to be repatriated.

These interventions by Philippine Government agencies just reveals how assisting overseas Filipinos, especially in times of a global health crisis, has become a whole-of-government approach. Alongside the shared responsibility of the overseas recruitment sector, civil society groups have also been providing much-needed help to affected OFWs. An example is that of seafarers' centres, run by Christian church groups, that have assisted repatriated seafarers (Opiniano, 2020c).

Conclusion

This paper explores some of the impacts of COVID-19 on overseas Filipino workers one year after the pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization. The pandemic led to thousands of OFWs being repatriated due to job layoffs and income losses, contributing to lower volumes of remittances in 2020. Through a whole-of-government approach, the Philippines has nevertheless managed the repatriation of migrant workers and assisted with their economic reintegration in their communities of origin.

Amid the wide-ranging, multi-stakeholder efforts to help affected overseas Filipinos, the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially impacted the Philippine economy. The Philippine economy contracted by 9.6 per cent last year – the biggest economic decline since 1985. Unemployment and underemployment rates rose to 10.3 and 16.2 per cent respectively in 2020 (compared to rates of 5.1% and 13.8% respectively in 2019) (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021).

Countries are now focusing on eradicating the pandemic through massive vaccination programmes, while facing increasing case numbers due to new variants. At the time of writing, major geographic regions of the Philippines have returned to lockdowns since new variants have emerged.

At this stage, the question remains as to whether the reopening of foreign economies will signal the resumption of overseas labour migration and, in some cases, permanent settlement. Gamlen (2020) predicts that overseas labour demand will not immediately return to pre-pandemic levels. There may be some "spikes" in particular occupations such as agriculture or care services. The same spike of overseas labour demand, however, cannot be predicted for the time being for other economic sectors like tourism or manufacturing (ibid.). Although international labour migration is not expected to come to a complete halt, its scale and pace will only slow down (Mangahas and Ducanes, 2020). It may thus take time for labour migration from the Philippines to return to pre-pandemic levels.

In a "migration-oriented" country like the Philippines, migrant workers (including those grounded at home and awaiting to be deployed) wish that overseas job markets, as well as shipping companies, (re)open and resume operations. Families who still have loved ones abroad wish their breadwinners will be able to continue sending money.

Certain predictions for 2021 are rather promising. Development analysts indeed project an increase in international remittances from overseas Filipinos in 2021 compared to 2020. Should this be the case, the physical and mental health of compatriots abroad – returning to work and earning livelihoods – will continue to be a major migration-and-development issue in this pandemic era. Their overall well-being at this time should remain paramount (Ang and Opiniano, 2020b).

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