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Beyond Business as Usual: Philippine Labor Outmigration and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Jorge V. Tigno¹

Key Points

- (1) Since early 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more migrant-destination areas are instituting stringent regulations and restrictions on the entry of travelers from the Philippines, particularly overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). Global mobility has been severely hampered by the pandemic, and now made extremely costly both financially and, more importantly, in human terms.
- (2) Over a million Filipinos overseas have returned to the Philippines because of the pandemic, a substantial number of them being returned or repatriated OFWs, many of whom lost their jobs permanently, their contracts abruptly terminated. The Philippines has effectively lost its comparative advantage in the migrant labor market because of the pandemic.
- (3) A return to at least a semblance of (pre-pandemic) normalcy will not happen overnight. Restrictions on the entry of Filipino

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travelers to key destinations will continue for the foreseeable future. Destination countries would need to be convinced of the resolve of the Philippines not to deploy its OFWs at the expense of making them unwitting vectors of the COVID-19 virus or any other contagious diseases for that matter.

- (4) The Philippines needs labor migration to weather through future economic crises, as well as to address the socio economic issues caused by the pandemic. In the absence of significant foreign direct investments entering the economy, the overseas employment program represents the only viable economic strategy the country has for some time to come.
- (5) The current situation offers the authorities the opportunity to reexamine the Philippine labor migration program as a cornerstone of the government's strategic development policy outlook toward making it safe, orderly, regular, and humane. How fast can the country return to its premier status as a labor-exporting country? What are the labor migration challenges the government needs to face in order to return to a semblance of normalcy?

Introduction: A Most Serious Shock to Philippine Migration

The COVID-19 pandemic has plunged the world into a global migration crisis. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines a migration crisis as a serious emergency that causes “complex and large-scale” movements of human beings (IOM 2012, 1–2). This migration crisis invariably leads to (and even magnifies persistent) vulnerabilities of individual migrants and communities. It can also trigger acute and long-term migration management problems, especially for authorities.

The Philippines has experienced few migration crises in the past enough to significantly affect the deployment of migrant workers. Up to the COVID-19 pandemic, its most serious migration crisis occurred during the first Gulf War (1990–1991). During that time, around 30,000 OFWs were evacuated from the areas of conflict in Kuwait and surrounding areas. Eventually, many evacuees repatriated to the

Philippines or to safer areas in the region. This was the first and most massive repatriation effort the country had undertaken up to that time (Vilog and Ballesteros 2015; Asis 2020). Migration crises caused by armed conflicts, while having widespread regional effect, are usually quickly contained—leaving its effects limited to a particular area. The end of the first Gulf War in 1991 saw a lot of Filipino migrant workers returning to their jobs in the region. Although armed conflicts continue in the Gulf region, these have been largely contained in specific zones that are officially off-limits to migrant workers.

Previous pandemics (SARS, Ebola, and MERS-CoV) had only limited adverse effects on the country's labor out migration patterns. These were quickly contained and largely confined within a specific global region or area. Under such circumstances, the immediate response of labor-receiving countries was to temporarily suspend the hiring of migrant workers. At the same time, vigilance and quick reaction by Philippine authorities at the time, combined with assistance from the World Health Organization (WHO), led to the immediate containment of the SARS epidemic in the Philippines in the early 2000s.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the first of its kind since the Spanish flu pandemic (1918–1920) to have a profoundly adverse global effect. It is the most serious migration crisis that the world has had in modern times, as millions of migrants become infected or are at high risk of being infected.

Since the start of the pandemic, much has been written on the impacts and implications of the COVID-19 on migrants in particular (especially women) and migration in general. These writings are mostly produced by international development agencies and pertain mainly to the broad experiences of migrants and the dynamics of mobility (see AEO 2020; ADB 2020; Foley and Piper 2020; UNESCWA 2020; Gamlen 2020; Ahmed et al. 2020). It is undeniable from these writings that the pandemic has not only reinforced but also magnified the numerous and varied vulnerabilities of migrants and other cross-

border travelers. Of critical concern to countries like the Philippines is the impact of the pandemic on the future of labor migration, a key driving force for economic growth.

Undeniably, “movements of people are a crucial element in global integration” (Castles 2013, 122). It would be hard to imagine a world without migration and migrant labor. Source and destination countries rely heavily on migrant labor. For many migrants, labor migration represents a way out of poverty. The World Bank says migration is “the most effective way to reduce poverty and share prosperity” (World Bank 2018, 1).

Labor migration from the Philippines is of immense strategic importance. It has been an essential asset of the country and somewhat a comparative advantage, historically. Migrant remittances account for a substantial portion of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP). Millions of Filipinos employed abroad are a bulwark against social unrest. In particular, labor migration provides Filipinos with an option to make a better life for themselves and their families. Over the last four decades, the Philippines has capitalized on the export of its surplus human resources. With a relatively better educated workforce, sufficient knowledge of the English language, and existence of an established institutional apparatus that allows for the massive systematic deployment of its workers, the Philippines has managed to corner a lucrative share of the market for labor migrants ranging from seafarers, domestic workers, healthcare providers, and factory, as well as, construction workers, among many others.

All that changed after March 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that affected virtually every country in the world. Within a year, the Philippines appears to have lost its comparative advantage in labor migrants. Its labor migration apparatus has come to a near standstill. According to Khalid Hassan, the Philippine Office Director of the International Labor Organization (ILO), during the first four months of 2020, for instance, the deployment of OFWs dropped by almost 40 percent compared to the same period during the previous year (Hassan 2020).

One year later, prospects appear to be reopening for labor migrants, as governments in various countries start to roll out their respective COVID-19 vaccination programs and begin to ease (albeit slowly) their travel restrictions, frantically put in place in early 2020.

This discussion paper examines the extent to which labor migration from the Philippines will change in the wake of COVID-19. How has the pandemic impacted the overseas employment program? What will the so-called “new normal” look like in the specific case of labor migration from the Philippines in the foreseeable future? How will the policies and their accompanying labor migration apparatus adapt to this new situation? What considerations ought to be taken by the Philippine government to make migration in the wake of the pandemic more humane, safe, and regular?

A Changed Situation: A Problem of Pandemic Proportions

For over forty years, the Philippine government’s operative business model on labor migration has always been to “Send, Send, Send” in a manner of speaking. The country has now become a major labor exporter to the world next only to China, India, and Mexico.

In 2019, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), there were 2.2 million OFWs, majority of them female. More than half (57 percent) are employed in so-called “elementary occupations and services” jobs that belong to the low-skilled category, such as household service work and construction work) (see Figure 1). Moreover, a substantial proportion of women are employed in elementary occupations more than the men (62.5 percent for women and 10.5 percent for men (see Figure 2).

Based on 2019 figures, half of the OFWs worked in West Asia or the Middle East, notably in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and Qatar. Meanwhile, about one-third of the OFWs (27.9 percent) worked in different parts of East and Southeast Asia, particularly in Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan.

FIGURE 1. Percentage of OFWs by major occupation group (total) (PSA, 2019a).

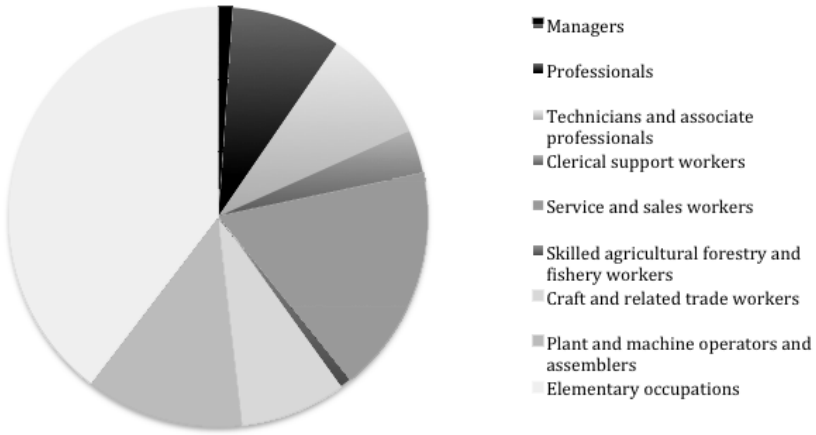
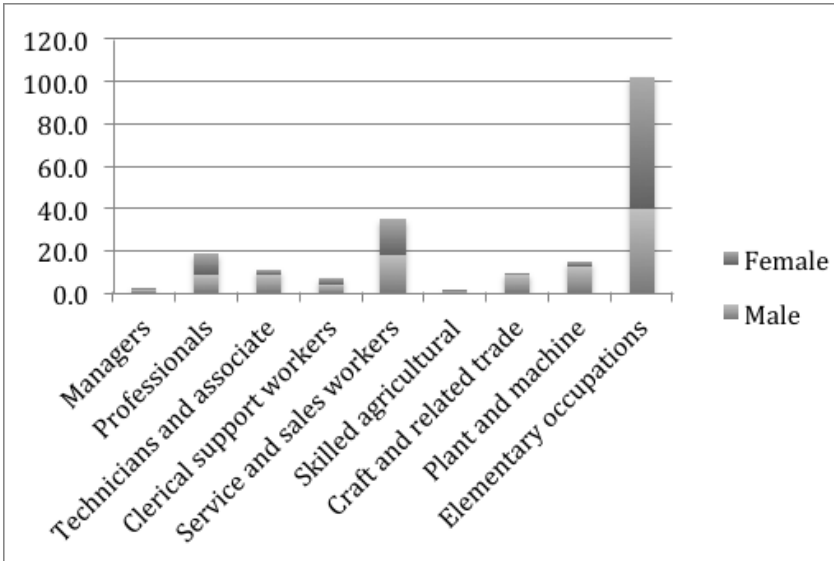


FIGURE 2. Percentage of OFWs by major occupation (male versus female) (PSA, 2019b).



The Philippine labor migration program faces its most serious challenge because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Past conflicts and other crises have not significantly reduced the annual labor deployments from the Philippines until March 2020. Since that time, annual deployments have been cut back substantially. Moreover, over a million overseas Filipinos have been repatriated to the Philippines since March 2020. Within a year, migrant worker mobility has nearly stopped altogether. This changed situation exposes the vulnerability of the official labor migration policy of the Philippines and its lack of strategic sustainability.

The pandemic has seriously impacted the country's economy and magnified the factors that drove people to leave. Based on PSA figures, the national economy contracted 9.5 percent in 2020 compared to the previous year. This is the country's sharpest decline since 1946 (Manuel 2021). Based on a March 2021 PSA report, the country's unemployment rate rose sharply in 2020 at 10.3 percent or approximately 4.5 million Filipinos (Tirona 2021). The unemployment rate in 2019 was only 5.1 percent. The high unemployment rate continues to intensify the "push factors" that compel many to go abroad.

Despite gloomy predictions by some expert analysts (Ang and Opiniano 2020), personal cash remittances by Filipinos overseas declined only slightly (0.8 percent) in 2020 compared to the previous year, according to the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) (Rivas 2021b). The BSP, based on their February 2021 report, states that remittances for the whole of 2020 reached USD 33.194 billion down by less than one percent from 2019 (USD 33.467 billion). OFW remittances continue to be a major and indispensable source of the country's foreign exchange inflows representing 9.2 percent of GDP and 8.5 percent of gross national income (GNI) (BSP 2021).

OFW Challenges in the Time of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic severely affected economies worldwide. However, some economic sectors are hurt more than others. The

International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that workers in certain sectors have been hit hardest by the pandemic. They include those in retail and sales, hospitality and recreation, manufacturing, and food service (ILO 2020). Many of these sectors employ migrant workers.

When governments were starting to acknowledge the COVID-19 pandemic in early March 2020, only Kuwait had a total restriction in place on the entry of passengers arriving from the Philippines, according to IOM data (IOM n.d.). At the time, only a handful of countries had started to put travel restrictions in place. Saudi Arabia was the only major labor-receiving country that imposed a partial restriction for travelers coming from the Philippines.

However, as the seriousness of the pandemic began to sink in, more and more countries began to put severe travel restrictions. As of March 2021, most countries has instituted either total or partial restrictions on the entry of travelers including the Philippines (IOM n.d.). Travelers from the Philippines had restricted entry into the major labor-receiving countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and Taiwan, among many others.

The current travel norm requires the individual to show at least one negative test result for COVID-19 before entry. Key destinations of Filipino migrant labor, such as Japan, Malaysia, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, the UAEs, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, now require travelers from the Philippines to undergo a test for COVID-19 between 72 to 96 hours prior to departure or upon arrival, or both.

Restricted travel can also take the form of “isolating new arrivals” over a period of time, ranging from seven to fourteen days in a government- specified quarantine facility in the country of destination, such as Saudi Arabia and Taiwan. Violators of these restrictions will incur severe penalties. In December 2020, Taiwanese authorities fined a Filipino migrant worker with an equivalent of PHP 170,000. The Filipino migrant worker was caught breaking quarantine rules for a

mere eight seconds (ABS-CBN News 2020). One observer notes that it is now the worst time to be an OFW (Lorenzo 2020).

According to the April 30, 2021 report of the National Task Force on COVID-19 under the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC), a total of 1,057,585 overseas Filipinos have returned to the Philippines since February 2020 (NDRRMC 2021), about one-third of whom were repatriated by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA 2021). Undoubtedly, a significant portion of this were OFWs. Among the returnees, 15,272 were confirmed to be positive for COVID-19. Of those infected, ten are reported to have died.

How has the pandemic impacted the many destination areas for OFWs? The pandemic has caused a series of lockdowns from various sectors, particularly in labor-receiving areas, leading to the closure of many businesses and other manufacturing establishments. Many destination countries are now experiencing significant economic slowdown—severely hampering their capacity to hire migrant workers. The global economy is estimated to have been contracted by 4.3 percent in 2020 (World Bank 2021). The pandemic caused a heavy death toll, pushed the healthcare sector to its absolute limit, plunged millions in poverty, and depressed economic activity worldwide. Economic recovery efforts are going to be hampered, until the authorities can effectively and sustainably put the pandemic in check.

How has the pandemic affected the OFWs themselves? Every major group of migrant workers has been hit hard by the pandemic. Filipino migrant workers abroad are faced with hard and limited choices—to endure or to return. Either way, the outcomes are not good. Returning to the Philippines would result in loss of income for the migrant and their family. Not a few migrants have to pay off debts incurred in their recruitment and deployment, as well as pay for the continuing immediate needs of their families. Returning to the Philippines also raises mobility costs and leads to opportunity costs, as the prospects of landing an overseas job remain uncertain. Moreover,

repatriated migrants have to endure weeks (sometimes, even months) of isolation in specified quarantine sites (Gotinga and Tomacruz 2020).

The Philippines is a major source of healthcare workers, particularly nurses. Many of these nurses are going to the United States and the United Kingdom. Healthcare professionals (particularly nurses) in the Philippines are not paid enough for them to stay. This is the reason why many Filipinos take up nursing—in order to land a lucrative job overseas (see Castro-Palaganas et al. 2017). The outward movement of healthcare providers and the shortage of qualified and trained healthcare professionals in the Philippines have exacerbated the challenges that the country has to face with the onset of the pandemic. Local healthcare facilities continue to be chronically understaffed. Healthcare professionals who choose to remain in the Philippines are severely underpaid and overworked.

The number of Filipino migrant nurses has been growing over the past several decades. Filipinos make up more than a quarter of all migrant nurses in the United States (Constante 2020). Overseas Filipino nurses (particularly involving the elderly and childcare) face the stark reality of the pandemic as frontliners. Filipino migrant nurses have become an indispensable part of the healthcare systems of these countries. In the United Kingdom, for instance, concerns have been raised on the high rates of infections and deaths among Filipino nurses compared to local healthcare providers (Ford 2020). It is said that more Filipino healthcare workers have died of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom, which is more than any other ethnic group, according to the Filipino Nurses Association UK (Caufield 2020). As of March 2019, Filipinos working in the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom make up the largest single ethnic group.

Many Filipino migrant domestic workers abroad continue to endure long hours of work, and physical abuse. Suffering from the economic recession, many employers have had to cut the salaries of their migrant domestic workers or lay them off entirely (Redfern 2021). The pandemic has also left many migrant domestic workers

constantly exposed to the risk of COVID-19 infection. Many are asked to perform work that increases their risk of infection, such as taking the dog outside, going to the market or grocery, or having to take care of a family member with comorbidities. Those who refuse are likely to be laid off. In many cases, cramped housing in the destination has exacerbated exposure to the virus, as migrant domestic workers have had to live in extremely close proximity with other members of the household.

Another seriously affected migrant group are Filipino seafarers or sea-based OFWs. The Philippines is the top supplier of seafarers to the world. Prior to the pandemic, it is estimated that there were over half a million Filipino seafarers worldwide, including those who are working in cruise ships, cargo container ships, tankers for oil, gas, chemicals, and tugboats, among others. Filipino sea-based workers remitted no less than USD 6.14 billion to the Philippines in 2018 (Talabong 2019)—nearly one-fifth of total remittances for that year. Although remittances by sea-based workers declined during the first half of 2020 (Lucas 2020), toward the end of the year, sea-based remittances actually increased compared to 2019, despite the decline in seafarer deployments (BSP 2021).

Since the onset of the pandemic, a substantial majority of these seafarers are either back in the Philippines or are languishing in isolation on empty cruise ships off-shore. A high growth sector among seafarers is the cruise industry. Filipinos used to represent the largest portion of international crew on cruise ships, particularly around one-third. Since the cruise industry has been badly hit by the pandemic, cruise ships have yet to secure permission to operate and accept passengers.

Recently, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) reports that there has been an improvement in the deployment prospects of sea-based workers. Notably, the sector is seen to be going “back to normal” following the travel restrictions brought about by the pandemic (Medenilla 2020). However, this might be a premature

statement, as cruise ships continue to be grounded and will be so in the foreseeable future. The cruise industry continues to be in limbo with the authorities still unable to grant the cruise lines permission to set sail and accept passengers (Street 2021). Additionally, it remains to be seen what leisure cruise trips will be like in the wake of the pandemic even as countries are rushing the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines and mass testing. With the recent spate of second-wave infections hitting Europe, authorities are not certain if the world is ready for leisure cruise travel.

The COVID-19 outbreak has led to the closure of many shops and manufacturing industries. Further, it has brought an abrupt end to construction projects in many destination countries. With much of the world economy suffering from global recession and series of lockdowns, Filipino migrant workers in the construction and manufacturing sectors find themselves, with fewer and fewer options. It is undeniable that some have been laid off and decided to go back to the Philippines and wait for better circumstances to arise in the destination countries. Others continue to work on-site, particularly in the Gulf countries where construction projects continue despite lockdown and other travel restrictions being imposed by the authorities. With their continued employment in these construction projects in West Asia, Filipino migrants continue to live in constant danger of infection. They are at risk of infection in their dormitories—where physical distancing and other necessary health protocols are difficult, if not impossible, to observe.

The Shape of Things to Come

Notwithstanding the pandemic, migration forces and pressures will continue. If anything, the pandemic will greatly intensify these migration pressures even more. Many Filipinos will continue to find ways to acquire gainful employment overseas. Previously, there was pressure to increase the overseas deployment of Filipino healthcare workers—a much needed resource in countries hit hard by the pandemic. In June 2021, a group of Filipino nurses called

on the government to lift the government-imposed restriction on nurses and other healthcare workers leaving the country (Bordey and Ornedo 2021). It is up to the country's crisis managers, policymakers, and authorities to see to it that the pandemic's adverse effects are sufficiently managed to ensure a safe, orderly, and regular migration.

The Philippines is heavily dependent on its overseas employment program to address the many persistent and emerging socioeconomic problems besetting the country. Overseas employment represents the only working strategy the country has for the foreseeable future—to address the serious lack of foreign direct investments (FDIs). In fact, remittances sent by migrants have always been greater than the amount of FDIs entering the country.

The country's mounting debts to address the COVID-19 pandemic is another cause of concern. In 2020 alone, the Philippines borrowed a total of Php 2.74 trillion to fight the health and socioeconomic challenges brought by the pandemic (De Vera 2021). As early as October 2020, financial experts predict that the Philippines is most likely to face a debt shock (Rivas 2020).

Moreover, assessments of the future of the local employment and poverty situation in the midst of the pandemic are not so optimistic—with little to no end in sight, at least until 2022 (Rivas 2021a). Nearly half (48 percent) of Filipino families feel that they are poor, according to a November 2020 survey by Social Weather Stations (SWS) (Lalu 2020). At the same time, the continuous yearlong lockdowns and quarantine measures have not helped businesses to keep their workforce and hire more workers locally. High unemployment and underemployment rates continue to hound the private sector. This dire situation can only be seen as another strong reason for the government to quickly resume their massive deployment of Filipino labor overseas.

Health Is Wealth

Restrictions on the entry of Filipino travelers to key destinations will continue for the foreseeable future. It is likely that OFWs in

the future may be required to strictly follow health protocols in light of COVID-19 and the prospects of future contagious diseases. A relaxation of such stringent travel restrictions is likely to take place if Philippine authorities are able to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus locally. Destination countries would need to be convinced of the resolve of the Philippines not to deploy its OFWs at the expense of making them unwitting vectors of the COVID-19 virus or any other contagious diseases for that matter. In not a few instances, migrants have unjustifiably been perceived as virus carriers (Beech 2020). Regrettably at the moment, the imposition of “super draconian” lockdowns and so-called quarantine “bubbles” in the Philippines has not only forced countless Filipinos to suffer through such distress and inconvenience, but has also not led to any significant amount of virus “containment benefit,” as observed by Aaditya Mattoo, chief economist for East Asia and the Pacific at the World Bank (Jamrisko 2021).

Avoid Draconian Lockdowns

How will labor migration policies shift after the pandemic? Containment of the virus is key to the full resumption of the decades-old overseas employment program. However, the COVID-19 virus is likely to be present over the long term. Recently, as vaccines become more accessible, it has become a possibility for a certain number of OFW returnees to go abroad once again. What may be problematic in the case of the Philippines are the lockdown swings that have characterized the government’s pandemic response. In particular, this refers to alternating between strict lockdowns and loosening the restrictions without the necessary contact tracing, testing, and vaccinations being done, which are key to effectively addressing the pandemic. Also, even if vaccines are to be made popularly available as to bring about herd immunity, governments in receiving countries will now be more sensitive to the threat of pandemics that can once again wreak havoc on the lives and economies of people. Countries are now more likely to insist on stringent health protocols to be followed by all

travelers, especially migrant workers from the Philippines—given the spotty (at best) success of the country’s vaccination and contact tracing programs.

Cash Assistance of Minimal Consequence

To mitigate the shock caused by their abrupt return, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) distributed a total of PHP 4.27 billion as an immediate cash assistance to returning OFWs, as well as those displaced overseas in 2020 (Patinio 2021). Through its *Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong* (AKAP) initiative, DOLE gave PHP 10,000 cash aid to 427,000 OFWs. However, cash assistance given to returning OFWs, while appreciated by many, is not a sustainable government initiative to undertake in the long run. At the same time, there is also the question of the insufficiency of the amount of subsidy given to each repatriated or displaced OFW (the equivalent of around USD 200) to provide for the needs of their family. If anything, such cash assistance only promotes mendicancy and patronage among the people. Government would be better off to use the money to provide for vaccines, testing kits, and other essential health and safety equipment to returning migrants and their families.

Hate Crimes to Linger On

Whether or not it would be a factor that the COVID-19 virus was thought to originate in China, hate crimes against Asians are escalating, particularly in the United States. A research report, released by a civic organization in the United States, said that hate crimes against Asian people in 2020 rose by nearly 150 percent compared to the previous year with most of the victims being women (Yam 2021). A recent case was that of a 65-year-old Filipino-American woman who suffered severe injuries after an unprovoked attack in New York City in late March 2021 (Suansing 2021). These hate crimes are likely to become commonplace in destination countries.

Maintain Multilateral Initiatives

Labor migration is a complex phenomenon that requires a comprehensive, multilateral, and multipronged approach. The Philippine government would benefit well from a multisectoral national consultation summit on the question of what the future of labor migration will be in the wake of the pandemic. All major stakeholders and actors should be invited to attend this summit to include migrant workers, civil society organizations, media organizations, intergovernmental organizations, private labor recruiters, academics, trade unions, and local governments, among others.

This national multisectoral approach should be combined with a multilateral and intergovernmental initiative at the regional and global levels to deal with the pandemic. This is as well to maximize the gains from overseas employment. The Philippines has always been a key player in intergovernmental and multisectoral initiatives, such as the Global Compact on Migration. Intergovernmental undertakings provide a space for dialogue between and among labor migration actors and stakeholders. These should be maintained and encouraged. The advent of online virtual platforms, resulting from the pandemic, provides opportunities for meetings and conversations to take place without having to deal with the problem of face-to-face gatherings.

The Philippines is a leading voice in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The country spearheaded efforts for ASEAN to formalize its Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (2007) and Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (2017). These documents form the foundation for a migrants' rights regime in the region. Although they are not legally binding, the Philippines can use these documents as a basis for a normative framework for the treatment of migrant workers during emergency crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rethink the Labor Migration Policy

The Philippines can place itself in a unique position in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current situation offers authorities to reexamine the Philippine labor migration program as a cornerstone of the government's strategic policy outlook. As the government's attention and resources are focused on dealing with the pandemic, the planned department of OFWs should be placed on the backburner. This can be an opportune time for lawmakers to review the logic and need behind the proposed measure. There is really not much sense in creating another bureaucratic layer to perform tasks already being performed by existing bureaucratic organizations. Moreover, policy makers should instead focus their attention and resources on effectively utilizing the migration and development (M&D) framework. The M&D framework not only allows the expansion of the labor market, but also protects the rights and promotes the welfare of migrant workers and their families. The Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) is a platform where the Philippines has been able to share and generate lessons and best practices on ways to better manage migration for development. This platform should not be set aside.

A Shared Information System on Migration Needed

The pandemic and its effects have laid down a strong argument for the need for an effective and extensive shared information system on migration. Despite the fact that a law has been in existence since 1995, to provide for a shared government information system on migration, the Philippines has yet to take concrete steps to harmonize its databases on Filipino OFWs, immigrants, and other overseas Filipinos. The pandemic is a wakeup call for policy makers and bureaucrats to institute concrete steps to use relevant and reliable data, and to initiate and reshape government programs and policies on labor migration. Similarly, the government should also encourage studies on best country practices to learn from the successes and mistakes of other labor-sending and labor-receiving areas.

Work for Better Conditions for Migrants

The pandemic has worsened the already vulnerable situations of labor migrants. Not only has the pandemic impacted on the health of migrants, but it has also underscored their poor living and working conditions. Many migrants live in unsanitary and overcrowded dormitories. It is also vital to point out that not all migrants are able to enjoy the benefits due to them, such as insurance coverage for health care, unemployment, and legal procedures, among others. These have been crucial factors that worsened their situation when the pandemic struck. Government negotiators can raise these issues, as they bargain for better living and working conditions through institutionalized working arrangements and bilateral agreements. At the same time, government authorities can also institute measures that will encourage private recruitment entities to engage in ethical practices that follow warranted health and safety protocols to prevent another pandemic. It is important that the costs for additional protocols need not be carried entirely by the OFWs.

Migrants Are Not Pawns

In December 2020, the government deliberately slowed down the rate of deployment of Filipino nurses to Europe (Patinio 2020). This is presumably to protect the migrants from the dangers of COVID-19 infection. However, in February 2021, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) is reported to be negotiating to secure COVID-19 vaccines from the United Kingdom and Germany in exchange for sending OFW healthcare workers to these countries (Jaymalin 2021). Fortunately, representatives from the German and United Kingdom governments have stated their desire not to link the Philippines' intent to obtain vaccines in exchange for sending Filipino healthcare workers (Mercene and Medenilla 2021). Such a reported offer might as well be considered as a sign of desperation on the part of the Philippine labor authorities. Migration is supposed to be a choice of the migrant and not a state imperative. Although the Philippines may still have its migrant workforce as a potential comparative

advantage, migrant workers should not be used as bargaining chips for political negotiations.

Finally, a quick return to a semblance of normalcy overnight is extremely unlikely. Not all countries are responding to the pandemic in the same way and, certainly, are not getting the same successful outcomes in terms of controlling the spread of COVID-19. As some countries experience second or third wave surges of infections, stringent health protocols are expected to remain in place for cross-border travelers. These protocols can put a damper on any attempts to restart the overseas employment program.

Filipinos already employed abroad are likely to keep their heads down and huddle in their respective workplaces, until the pandemic passes over or until vaccines become readily available to less priority segments of the population. The Philippine government would need to assure its migrants that it continues to uphold and protect their rights and welfare as Filipino nationals. Embassies and consulates are expected to provide on-site assistance to nationals, especially those whose rights continue to be violated by unscrupulous employers, recruiters, and brokers.

As far as the overseas employment program is concerned, the Philippines will still find it difficult, at least in the next two years, to achieve pre-pandemic levels of labor deployments. In the final analysis, Philippine policy makers need to reject the false policy dilemma of choosing between opening the economy (and continuing the overseas employment program) and sacrificing the health of the people.

Philippine authorities must now place all their efforts and resources on effectively and efficiently dealing with the pandemic—by reducing infections, successfully isolating and treating those who are already infected so that their conditions do not worsen, and assuring the public that the government is doing its best to deal with the problem by showing concrete, positive, and improving results. Government officials need to place their trust more on science and medical expertise

and less on draconian and policing tactics. The sooner the pandemic is put in check, the sooner the economy can get back to normal, and the sooner Filipinos going abroad can be assured that it is safe for them to do so.

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