

# COVID-19 AND OVERSEAS FILIPINO WORKERS

RETURN MIGRATION AND REINTEGRATION  
INTO THE HOME COUNTRY—THE PHILIPPINE CASE

*Jong Woo Kang and Ma. Concepcion G. Latoja*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper profiles the return migration and reintegration of returning overseas workers into the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As a major migrant-sending and remittance-receiving economy, the emigration of workers has been part of the Philippines' development narrative. The unprecedented return of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) has posed growing challenges, particularly the implications for remittances, income, and employment. The paper gives an account of these economic dimensions of returning OFWs and examines how the nature of reintegration programs for OFW returnees and circumstances surrounding their return could impact reintegration outcomes. The study also suggests policy insights to improve and strengthen the pool of return and reintegration strategies to better leverage the country's outmigration propensity as a tool for economic transformation.

Keywords: migrants, OFW, overseas Filipino workers, return migration, reintegration

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

ILO International Labour Organization

IOM International Organization for Migration

# I. INTRODUCTION

1. The United Nations (1998) defines returning migrants as “persons returning to their country of citizenship after having been international migrants (whether short-term or long-term) in another country and who are intending to stay in their own country for at least a year.” In 2020, an unprecedented number of working migrants returned to Asian countries due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Global crises have caused migrants to return home before, but COVID-19 is different in both scale and scope—it impacted economies across the globe and lowered global gross domestic product (GDP); put global employment and job prospects at risk; and led to state-directed controls on trade, mobility of people, and travel. Relative to other health crises, the COVID-19 pandemic also exposed migrant workers to far greater health risks (ADBI, OECD, and ILO 2021).

2. Typically, migrant-sending countries have protocols for facilitating the flow of returning migrants. But this time, the exodus of migrant workers back to origin countries has overwhelmed many home governments, and this unexpectedly large number of returning migrants has added new challenges to emergency arrivals management (Le Coz and Newland 2021).

3. In the Philippines, such return migration has created recurring challenges and issues on remittances, income, and employment against a backdrop of general economic downturn.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, it has widened the spotlight to include migration mechanisms facilitating the safe return of migrants and support for the reintegration of returnees into their societies of origin.

4. This paper profiles the return migration and reintegration of returning overseas workers into the Philippines amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As a major migrant-sending and remittance-receiving economy, the emigration of Filipino workers has been part of the country’s development narrative. The paper aims to answer several questions: What was returnees’ return and reception experience? What awaits those who return and stay for good? What reintegration strategies are in place—what are their objectives? what factors impinge on their effectiveness? how can they be improved?

5. The paper is structured as follows. Section II discusses theories and concepts in return migration and the implications for reintegration. Section III reviews the stock of Philippine migrants; the characteristics of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs); and migrant-related mandates, offices, and roles. Section IV illustrates how return migration was carried during the pandemic and the nature of reintegration programs for returnees. Given the pandemic-induced return of Filipino working migrants, Section V enumerates and analyzes major issues on return migration and its potential effects on reintegration outcomes. Section VI presents policy insights and suggestions to improve and strengthen reintegration strategies to better leverage the Philippines’ outmigration propensity as a tool for economic transformation. Section VII concludes the paper.

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<sup>1</sup> The Asian Development Bank (2021a) indicates that the Philippine economy contracted 9.6% in 2020, the biggest drop in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, while unemployment was 10.2%. ADB estimates that the Philippine GDP growth will likely bounce back to 4.5% in 2021.



## II. THEORIES AND CONCEPTS OF RETURN MIGRATION

6. Migration theories and conceptual frameworks have different approaches for framing why migrants return, and these views have implications for reintegration strategies. Cassarino (2004) identifies these as: (i) neoclassical theory, (ii) new economics of labor migration, (iii) structuralist approach, (iv) transnationalism, and (v) social network theory. The neoclassical theory posits that substantial wage differences between destination and origin countries drive outmigration and compel migrants to stay abroad until target income and savings levels have been achieved (Sjastaad 1962; Harris and Todaro 1970). Migrants stay overseas because the marginal benefit of higher savings overseas (or capital accumulation) outstrips the marginal utility cost of overseas work (Yang 2006). Migrants return because they have failed to achieve migration goals related to earnings, employment, and duration of stay overseas. The new economics of labor migration, on the other hand, views return migration as part of a calculated strategy migrants make together with their households. That is, migrants go abroad for a period that allows them to achieve their income goals and returning home is but a logical consequence. Although both theories emphasize the accumulation of financial resources as a central objective, no reference is made as to the kind of home, social, and political environment to which migrants return, which makes return migration bear little correlation to reintegration.

7. More contemporary approaches to return migration have evolved. The structural approach views a returning migrant as neither a success nor failure but as someone who brings back savings to the home country and readjusts his/her return expectations based on the structural context of power relations, traditions, and values in the home country. Returning migrants are assumed to have no influence over existing economic and power structures and imbalances, rendering migrants' savings, remittances, and skills acquired abroad as having no impact on the development of their origin country.

8. Transnationalism views return migration as part of the migration linkages between sending and receiving countries. This back-and-forth movement of migrants across borders helps them prepare for reintegration back home through regular visits to their home countries and by sending remittances regularly to their households. Migrants return once they have accumulated enough financial and informational resources and return conditions back home are favorable. Transnationalism views return migration in a positive light—the improved human capital of returning migrants is considered a vehicle for their upward mobility, making successful reintegration feasible. The social network theory, on the other hand, considers return migration in the context of cross-border networks of economic and social relationships the migrant has accumulated. Migrants gather information about context and opportunities prior to returning. By considering the social, economic, and institutional opportunities available when one returns, migrants mobilize remittances, savings, and human skills acquired abroad to ensure their successful return and reintegration.

9. There is no universally agreed classification of return migration (ILO 2019a). Return behavior varies and different categories exist of return against a spectrum of voluntary and involuntary reasons (Wahba 2014; Haase and Honerath 2016). There are migrants who return voluntarily after having achieved goals related to savings, skills acquisition, higher education, and networking. Retirement is also part of the economic, social, and/or family-related reasons for return migration. In developing countries, the family is often the core reason migrants return. Return migration is also part of temporary labor migration—those whose contracts have ended return home temporarily while waiting for a new contract to make re-emigration possible. Return migration may also be voluntary but unavoidable as in the case of failed migration and integration experiences, or due to regulations that could block family reunification in the destination country. Migrants who return involuntarily are those without legal residency status in the country of destination, those with failed economic and social integration, and those deported

back home. Crises and situations involving vulnerable groups could also result in return migration, as in the case of voluntary repatriation of refugees, internationally displaced persons, war victims, human trafficking victims, and unaccompanied minors.

10. Several elements affect migrants' probability of return and their post-return contribution to their home countries. Higher education levels encourage return, as in the case of graduate students abroad who return home. Migrants who succeed in achieving their financial accumulation targets in the host country are more likely to return—successful reintegration also enables these returnees to contribute to the local economy through domestic employment and business ventures. An adverse unemployment situation in host countries could also induce return migration. An age can also determine whether a return migrant still participates in the labor market—retirees may no longer contribute to productive capacity relative to working-age returnees.

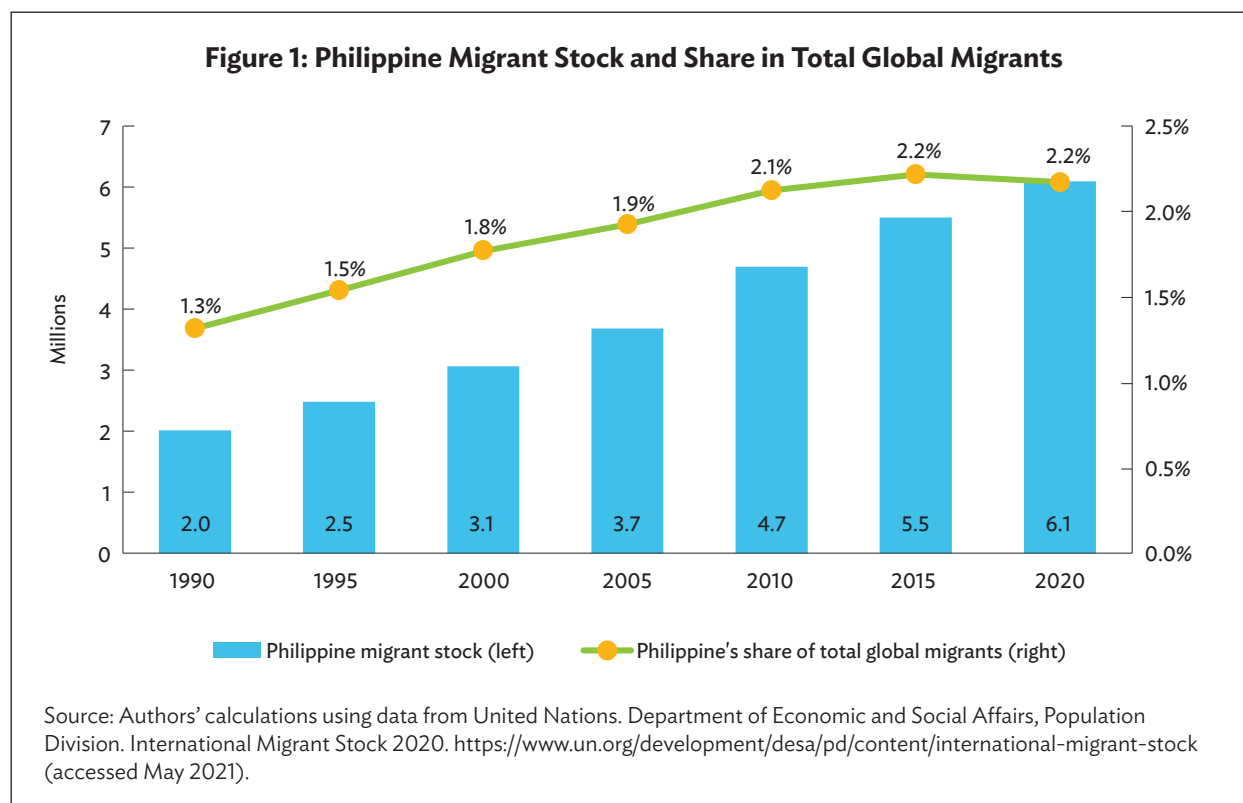
11. Just as working overseas creates positive externalities to the home country through remittances, easing of pressures on the labor market, and skills accumulation among the migrants—return migration also brings benefits to origin countries. Migrants can invest their savings, transfer accumulated skills, and apply their “social remittances”—new ideas, behaviors, knowledge, and personal experiences—to productive endeavors (Yuniarto 2018). These positive externalities also tend to spillover beyond the returnee's household and into the community and local economy. However, tapping these effects can depend on the reintegration systems in place, the relevance of acquired skills in the local labor market, and the legislative, economic, and social conditions in the home country (Go 2012). Labor markets that primarily operate formally and have reliable skills-matching programs could help return migrants ease back into the local job market (Haase and Honerath 2016). Lack of access to credit or tax incentives for local businesses could hamper return migrants' entrepreneurship. Reintegration is not straightforward and reintegration activities can also involve adjustment costs, delays, and mismatches in skills, thus lowering the probability of successful reintegration.

12. A lack of comprehensive return migration data is a dominant constraint on the study of return migration, preventing straightforward macroeconomic assessment of the impact on origin and destination economies. The lack of a standardized template for capturing return migration information, even among major migrant-sending countries, limits the potential for cross-country comparisons using different socioeconomic variables associated with return. Most reintegration programs focus on individual migrants and tend to be short-lived. Limited data on return migrants' experiences also make it challenging to benchmark the performance of reintegration programs.

### **III. PHILIPPINE MIGRANT STOCK AND OVERSEAS FILIPINO WORKERS**

#### **A. Philippine Migrants**

13. In 2020, Filipino outmigrants were estimated to number 6.1 million, nearly triple the 1990 figure of 2.0 million (Figure 1). Since 2000, the Philippines has been among the top sources of global migrants. On average, at least 50% of Filipino migrants have been in North America and about 18% in Asia. In the Middle East, the share of Filipino migrants had risen to 27.7% in 2020 from 20.1% in 1990. However, even if the absolute number of Filipino migrants has been rising, the Philippine's share of total global migrants has declined since 2015.



14. Majority of Filipino migrants move to destinations outside the region (Table 1), a common trend among migrants from Asia and the Pacific who prefer extraregional migration routes (ADB 2021b). The United States has been the top destination country, while Canada has been among the top three since 1990. Five countries in the Middle East (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates) were also among the top extraregional destinations and together hosted around 20% of Filipino migrants in 2020. This trend is consistent with the results of the 2018 National Migration Survey which reported that one in three Filipinos expressed the desire to migrate to another country—17% to the United States; 14% to Saudi Arabia; 13% to Canada; and 13% to the United Arab Emirates.

15. The number of Filipino migrants in European economies had tripled to 578,805 by 2020 from 176,299 in 1990. Three European economies (Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom) have been among the preferred destinations of Filipino migrants—Italy and the United Kingdom have seen at least a doubling, while, in Germany, the number had risen by almost sevenfold since 1990.

16. Among Asian and Pacific economies, the top intraregional host of Filipino migrants had changed from Malaysia in the 1990s to Australia in recent years. Hong Kong, China; Japan; and New Zealand also figure prominently among the top intraregional destinations.

## B. Overseas Filipino Workers

17. The term “overseas Filipino worker” refers to a Filipino migrant worker temporarily residing in another country for employment. Filipinos have moved across borders for employment for centuries, but the first large-scale migration on record occurred between 1906 and 1934 when over 100,000 Filipinos were sent to the United States to work in Hawaii’s pineapple plantations and Alaska’s canning factories (Center for Migrant Advocacy 2021). By the 1970s, what began as a temporary overseas employment policy measure gained traction as emerging countries in the Middle East increased their

**Table 1: Top Destinations of Filipino Migrants**

Extraregional Destinations	2020		1990	
	No. of Migrants	Share of Total (%)	No. of Migrants	Share of Total (%)
United States	2,061,178	33.8%	912,674	45.4%
Saudi Arabia	644,828	10.6%	239,551	11.9%
Canada	633,547	10.4%	118,304	5.9%
United Arab Emirates	564,769	9.3%	60,107	3.0%
Kuwait	196,910	3.2%	49,207	2.4%
Qatar	170,052	2.8%	37,462	1.9%
Italy	151,520	2.5%	65,197	3.2%
United Kingdom	141,722	2.3%	21,328	1.1%
Germany	62,408	1.0%	22,895	1.1%
Bahrain	59,391	1.0%	7,934	0.4%
<b>Intraregional Destinations</b>				
Australia	286,303	4.7%	90,580	4.5%
Japan	275,252	4.5%	49,106	2.4%
Hong Kong, China	123,056	2.0%	79,010	3.9%
Malaysia	117,990	1.9%	104,730	5.2%
New Zealand	70,412	1.2%	4,379	0.2%
<b>Stock of Filipino Migrants</b>	<b>6,094,307</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2,012,499</b>	<b>100%</b>

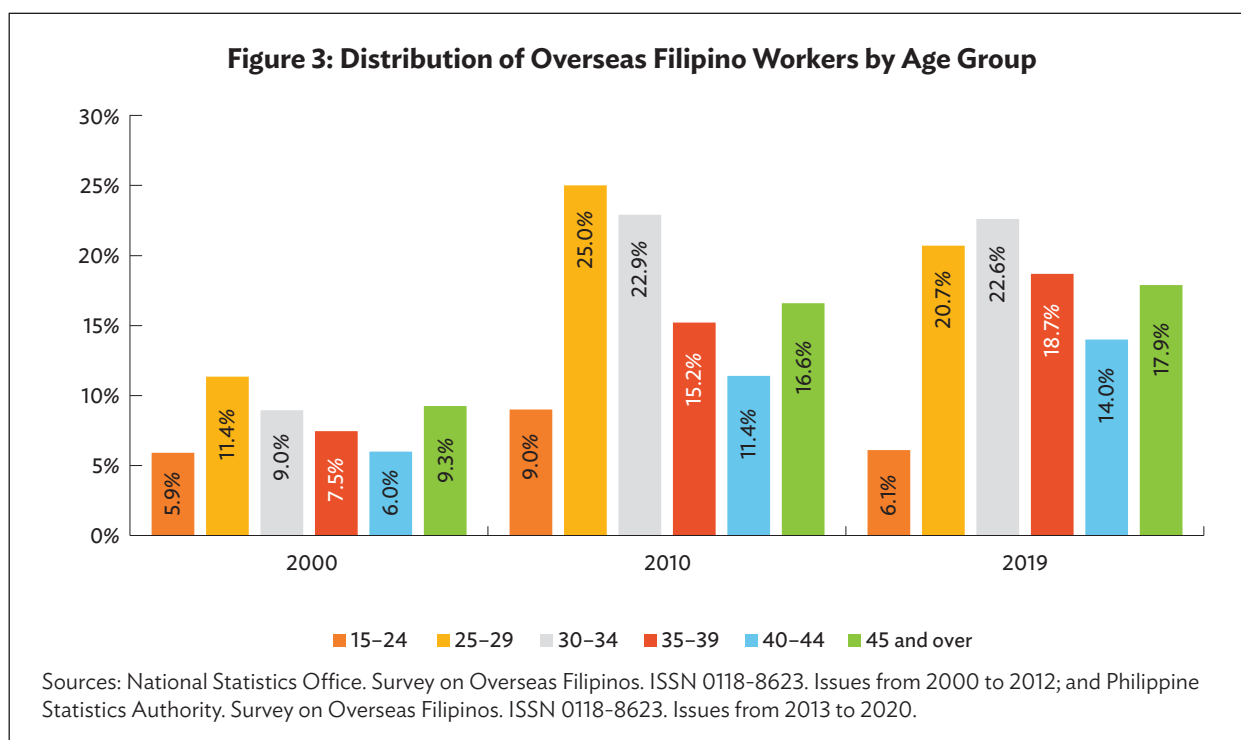
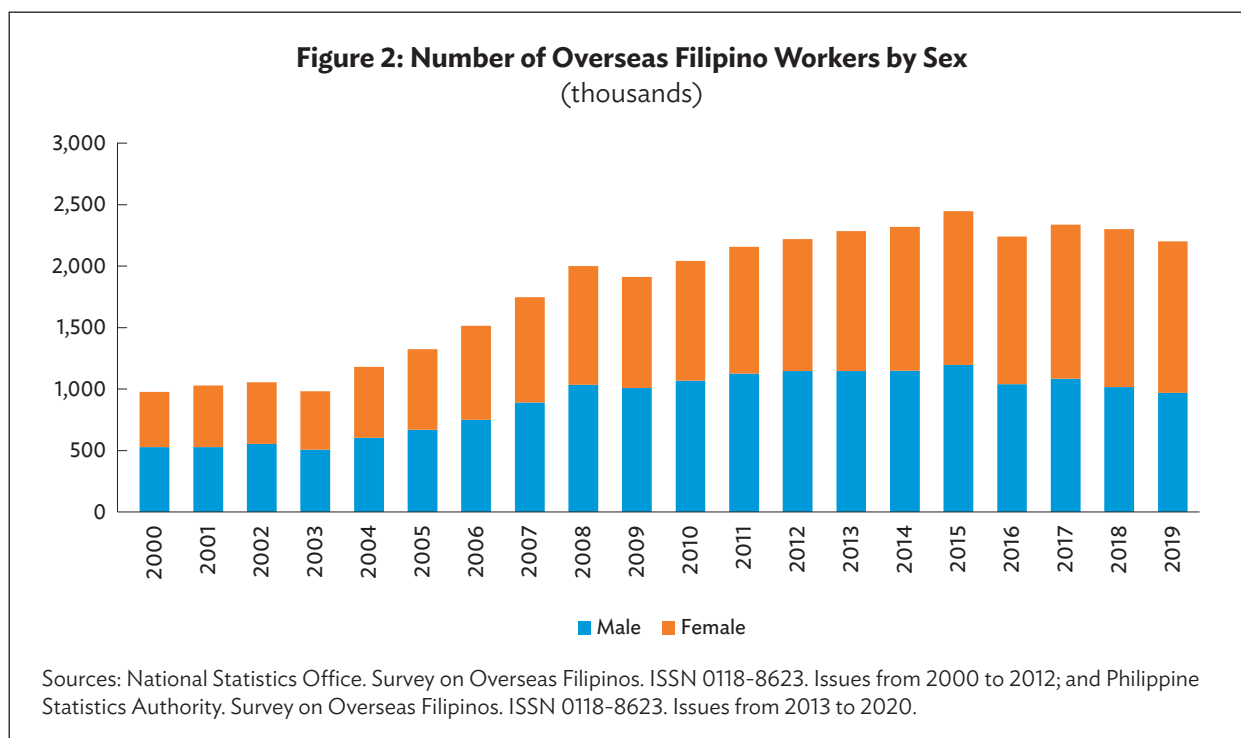
Note: From 1990 to 2005, Guam has been among the top-10 extraregional hosts, but was overtaken by Bahrain since 2010.

Source: Authors' calculations using data from United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. International Migrant Stock 2020. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock> (accessed May 2021).

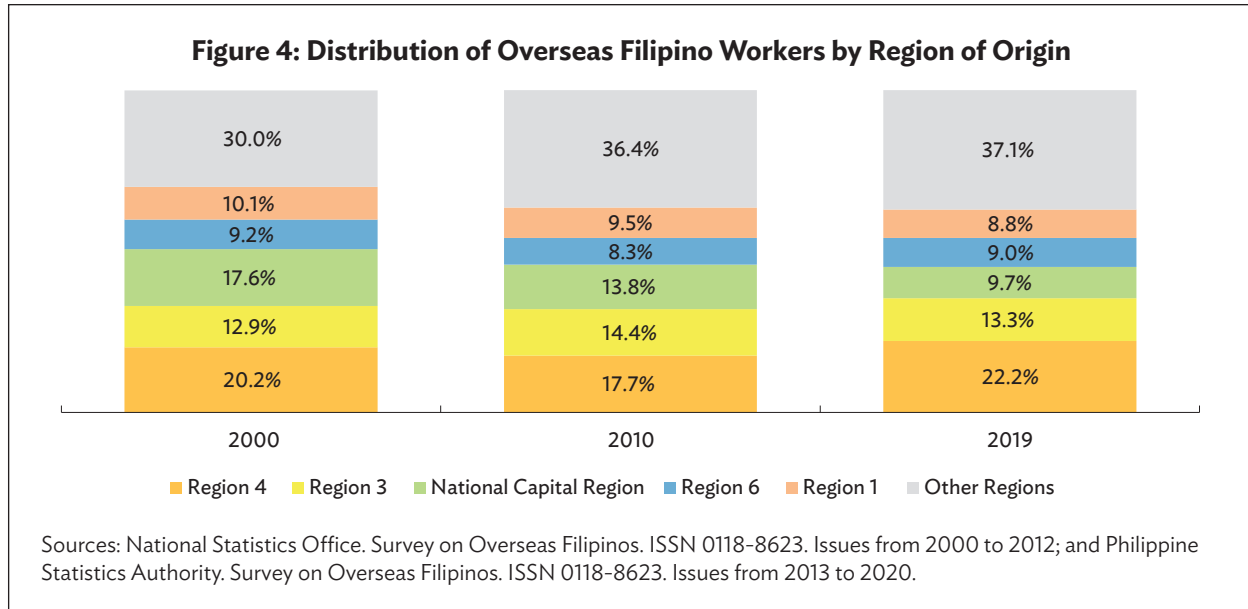
demand for foreign labor to realize their large-scale infrastructure development goals. Subsequently, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand also eased their immigration policies, which allowed entry for more Filipino migrants. Exporting labor became one of the avenues to address the country's unemployment problem. Wage differentials between the Philippines and major destination countries also made working overseas attractive to educated manpower looking for major returns on their skills and as a way out of poverty among average- and low-skilled workers. By the year 2000, the number of OFWs was around 978,000 and continued increasing in succeeding years.<sup>2</sup> Despite good macroeconomic performance during 2003–2010, when economic growth averaged 5.2% annually, outmigration persisted, partly suggesting labor absorption issues in the domestic labor market and a lack of relevant and sustainable work opportunities. Eventually, migration governance became part of the country's medium-term development plans.

18. The 2019 survey on overseas Filipinos reported 2.2 million OFWs in that year, 7.8% more than in 2010, and twice as many as the 978,000 reported in 2000 (Figure 2). Male OFWs generally outnumbered female but the trend had reversed since 2014—56% of OFWs were women in 2019. In the younger age groups, female OFWs also outnumbered male, although the reverse was true in the older age groups (Figure 3).

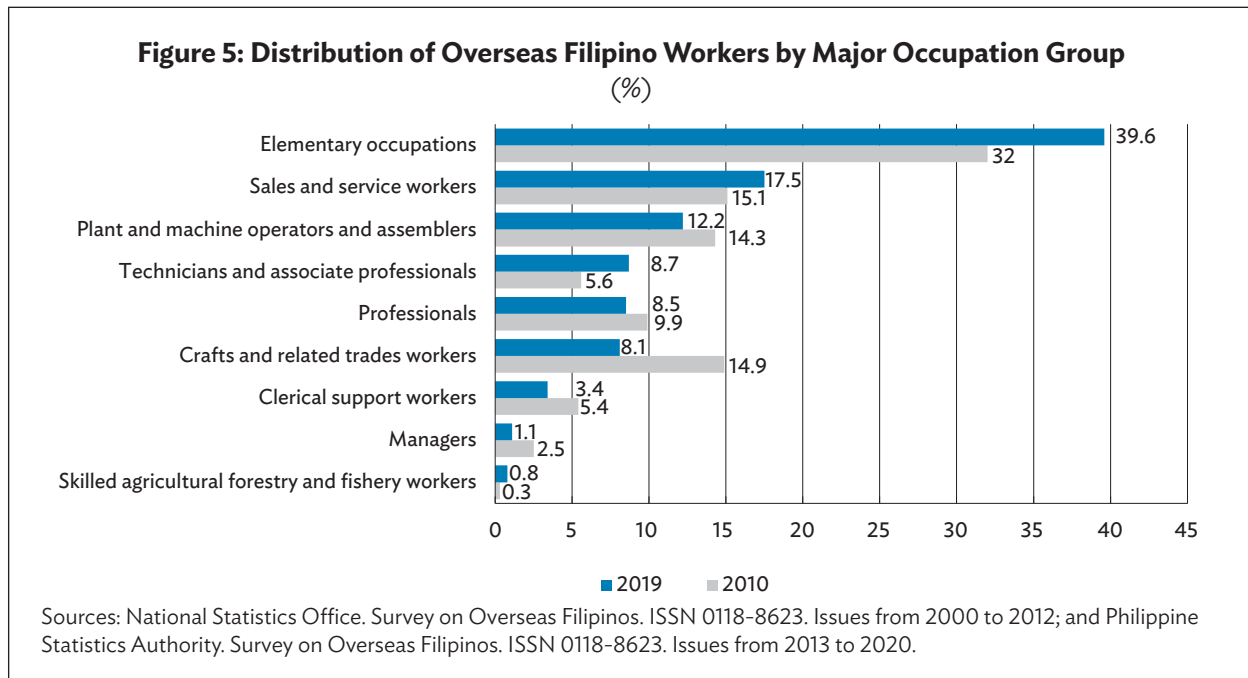
<sup>2</sup> National Statistics Office. Survey on Overseas Filipinos. ISSN 0118-8623. Issues from 2000 to 2012; and Philippine Statistics Authority. Survey on Overseas Filipinos. ISSN 0118-8623. Issues from 2013 to 2020.



19. On average, among Philippine regions, around 47% of OFWs came from Region 3 (Central Luzon), Region 4 (particularly CALABARZON), the National Capital Region, Region 6 (Western Visayas), and Region 1 (Ilocos Region), out of 16 regions nationwide (Figure 4). In April 2020, when the Philippines recorded 17.6% unemployment rate, OFWs who returned to these primary migrant-sending regions were met with double-digit unemployment rates—27.3% in Region 3; 16.7% in CALABARZON; 12.5% in MIMAROPA; 12.3% in the National Capital Region; 13.7% in Region 6; and 22.3% for Region 1.

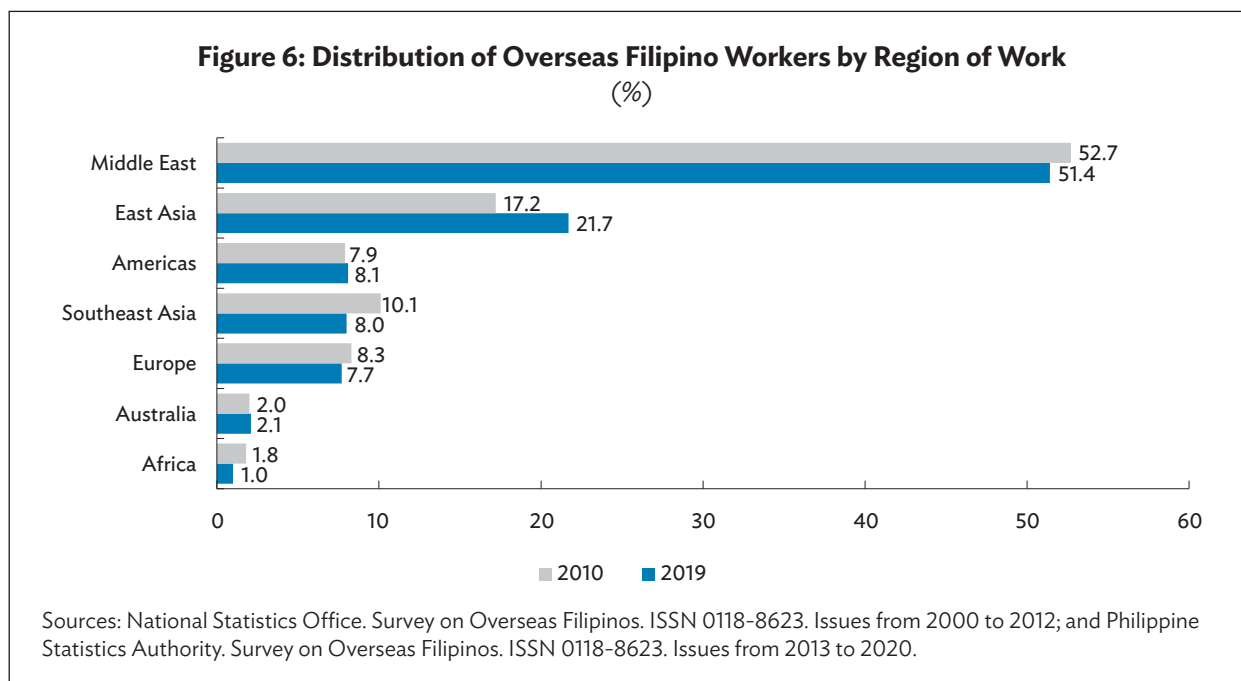


20. Approximately 70% of OFWs were sales and service workers (17.5%), plant and machine operators (12.2%), and laborers or unskilled workers (39.6%) (Figure 5). Crafts and trades workers, which in 2010 comprised 14.9% of OFW occupations, had declined to 8.9% in 2019. Relative to 2010, there were also lower percentage shares of professionals, managers, and clerical support workers in 2019.

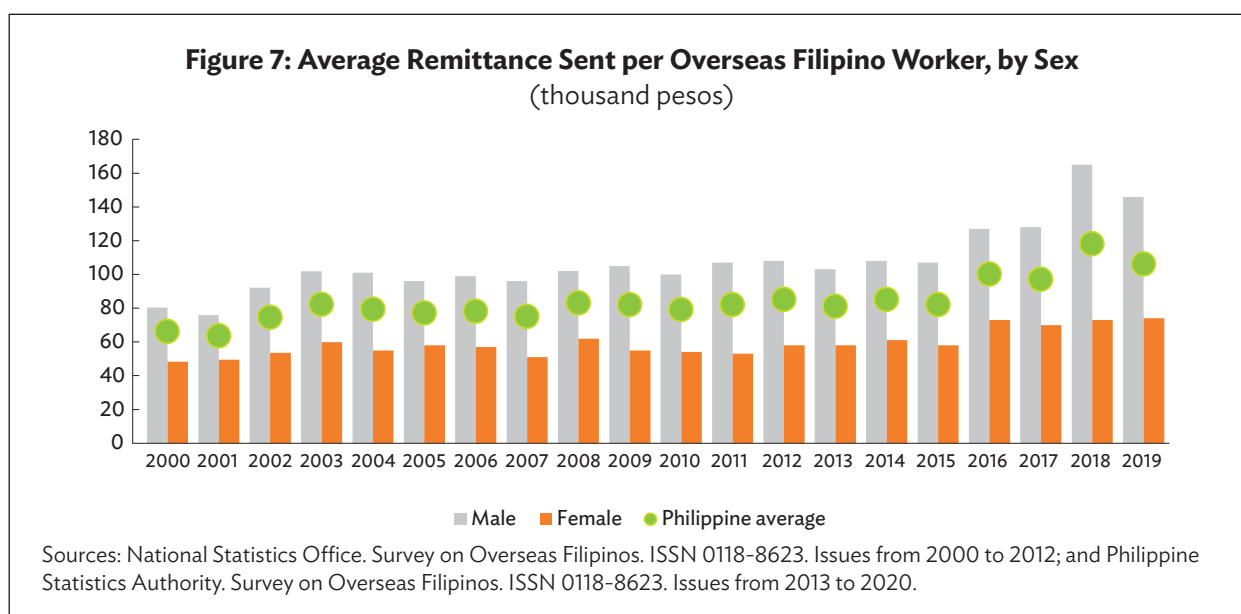


21. At least 50% of OFWs were working in the Middle East, such as in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (Figure 6). Close to 30% were working in various parts of Asia while the Americas and Europe each accounted for less than 10% of OFWs. The incomes earned from working in these places benefited around 12.4% of Philippine households—13.3% of urban households and 11.6% of rural households (Philippine Statistics Authority 2019). In 2019, workers sent an average remittance of

₱106,000—notably, the average sent by men OFWs (₱146,000) was twice the average amount sent by women (₱74,000) (Figure 7). Among men, the highest average cash remittances were sent by those working in the Middle East (₱192,000), followed by Australia (₱153,000) and Europe (₱138,000). Female OFWs sent an average of ₱59,000, the highest of which came from those in Europe (₱78,000), the Americas (₱78,000), and Australia (₱75,000).



22. The difference in average cash remittances sent by male and female OFWs is significant across occupation groups. Male managers, technicians, and associate professionals remitted amounts 70% higher than those of their female counterparts. Male craft and trade workers and plant and machine operators sent cash remittances 80% higher than those sent by female OFWs with the same occupation.



### C. Migrant-Related Mandates, Organizations, and Roles

23. The Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 (Republic Act No. 8042) is the law establishing migration governance in the Philippines, the core of which mandates the provision of “adequate and timely social, economic, and legal services to Filipino migrant workers” (Congress of the Philippines 1995). This law also covers deployment, illegal recruitment, repatriation, replacement, and legal assistance in settling conflicts between migrant workers and their employers. It tasks Philippine embassies in major OFW-host economies to provide resource centers for overseas Filipinos. Various organizations were also mandated by the law to support OFWs:

- The Department of Foreign Affairs offices is mandated to protect the rights of migrant workers and other overseas Filipinos and extend immediate assistance, including the repatriation of distressed overseas Filipinos.
- Regulation of private sector participation in the recruitment and placement of Filipino migrant workers is the mandate of the Philippine Overseas and Employment Agency.
- The Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, created to administer welfare services to OFWs, is mandated to coordinate with appropriate international agencies to repatriate workers in case of war, epidemic, natural or man-made disaster or calamity, and similar events.
- The Department of Labor and Employment is mandated to exercise fair application of labor and social welfare laws to OFWs and provide them legal assistance. Department of Labor and Employment also provides mechanisms for returning OFWs, primarily by serving as a promotion base for employment.
- Together with the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration and the Philippine Overseas and Employment Agency, Department of Labor and Employment is tasked to formulate programs that would encourage return migrants to pursue highly technical jobs and entrepreneurial activities for “better wage employment and investment of savings.”
- The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, the Technology Livelihood Resource Center, and other government agencies are tapped to provide training and livelihood development programs.

24. In July 2009, Republic Act No. 10022 amended Republic Act 8042, and improved the protection and welfare provisions for migrants, their families, and overseas Filipinos in distress (Congress of the Philippines 2009). In 2016, an amendment in the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration charter (via Republic Act 10801) provided it with a regular budget from the national government to help expand its range of programs and services. It also put the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration at the center of migrant reintegration programs, a function shifted away from the Department of Labor and Employment.

25. Another office related to migrants is the Commission on Filipinos Overseas which oversees predeparture orientation seminars to emigrants; promotes technology, material; and financial contributions from overseas for development projects; and provides younger Filipinos abroad with learning opportunities on Philippine history and culture.

26. In 2016, the Committee on Migration and Development under the National Economic Development Authority established two subcommittees (one for overseas migration and another for internal migration) tasked to coordinate the formulation, implementation, monitoring, assessment, and evaluation of plans, policies, programs, and projects related to overseas and internal migration.<sup>3</sup> Part of its function is to help regional line agencies and local government units establish a migration database.

<sup>3</sup> National Economic and Development Authority, Committee on Migration and Development. <https://calabarzon.neda.gov.ph/committee-on-migration-and-development/> (accessed May 2021).



27. Meanwhile, the data on international migration are produced by the following offices: Department of Foreign Affairs; Commission on Filipinos Overseas; Philippine Overseas and Employment Agency; Bureau of Immigration; Department of Labor and Employment; and the Philippine Statistics Authority (Philippine Statistics Authority and Commission on Filipinos Overseas 2017).

## **IV. RETURN MIGRATION AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS IN THE PHILIPPINES**

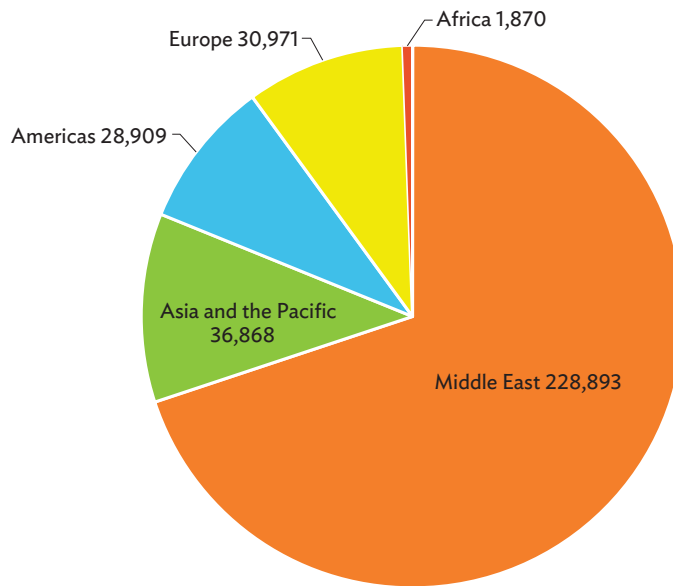
### **A. Return Migration in the Pandemic: Repatriation through the Department of Foreign Affairs**

28. Return migration is often associated with “going back to one’s own culture, family and home” (IOM 2019). It occurs when migrants return to the country of origin for a variety of voluntary and involuntary reasons. For many OFWs during the pandemic, return was facilitated by the Department of Foreign Affairs’ repatriation program since the circumstances involved a global crisis and repatriation was the government’s foremost crisis management response (Delerio 2017). In a 2018 memorandum, the Philippine Overseas and Employment Agency specified that repatriation was the primary responsibility of the employer or agency that recruited the OFW abroad (POEA 2018). But in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, returning OFWs had a more direct hand in the process and were advised to go through a specific number of steps which also involved other government agencies such as the Department of Health, Department of Labor and Employment, Philippine Coast Guard, and the Office for Transportation Security (Box 1).

29. Through the Department of Foreign Affairs, the first group of 30 Filipinos from Wuhan, People’s Republic of China were repatriated in February 2020. Within the same month, seafarers aboard a cruise ship in Haneda, Japan were also brought home. As global stringency measures escalated, so did the Philippine government’s repatriation endeavors. In April 2020, when mobility measures peaked across the globe, more than 21,000 OFWs were repatriated, mostly sea-based workers. From June 2020, OFWs were returning by the tens of thousands per month. By the end of December 2020, the Department of Foreign Affairs had repatriated 327,511 OFWs (Figure 8). The majority (71%) of these OFWs were land-based workers (231,537) and 29% were sea-based workers (95,974). Almost 70% of OFW returnees were from the Middle East.

30. Upon OFWs’ arrival, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration provided them with free testing, food, and accommodation in Metro Manila. To help monitor OFWs, the administration also coordinated with the police, the coast guard, the Department of Health, and the Department of Interior and Local Government. Free shuttle services from the international airport to any point in Luzon were offered to returning migrants, but were suspended when a rising number of new COVID-19 cases prompted the national government to impose lockdowns (OWWA 2020). Overseas Workers Welfare Administration members who had contracted the COVID-19 virus were entitled to ₱10,000 cash assistance, apart from the one-time \$200 assistance from Department of Labor and Employment. The initial budget of ₱1.5 billion for this endeavor was raised by ₱5.0 billion in July 2020. The 14-day quarantine costs the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration about ₱3,000 per day per OFW. With only ₱1.4 billion left of its ₱11 billion budget for quarantine assistance as of April 2021, the administration needed ₱9.8 billion for its OFW assistance fund (Kabiling 2021).

**Figure 8: Number of Overseas Filipino Workers by Major Region of Repatriation**



Source: Department of Foreign Affairs (2021a).

**Box: Heading Home—Repatriation Guidelines for Overseas Filipino Workers in 2020**

In 2020, overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who wanted to go home through the government repatriation program were advised to follow these steps:

- (i) request a repatriation flight through the Philippine embassy, consulate, or Philippine Overseas Labor Office;
- (ii) book their quarantine accommodations in Department of Health-accredited hotels;
- (iii) register in the electronic case investigation form of the Philippine Red Cross and the Department of Labor and Employment’s OFW Assistance Information System which allows the government to track, identify, and classify returning OFWs, and provide faster assistance with testing, accommodation, and transport;
- (iv) upon arrival, attend the mandatory quarantine briefing by the Philippine Coast Guard and the Office for Transportation Security;
- (v) get a swab test, (vi) an immigration clearance, and (vii) head to the assigned quarantine facility where the OFW will stay until he/she (viii) gets the COVID-19 test result.
- (ix) upon getting a negative test result, request for quarantine certificate from the Bureau of Quarantine Verification System; and
- (x) coordinate with Overseas Workers Welfare Administration for onward travel to one’s hometown/province.

Source: Zoleta (2020).

31. To mitigate the effect of the pandemic, the Department of Labor and Employment and Overseas Workers Welfare Administration launched the *Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong* program, a one-time financial assistance of \$200 for every displaced on-site OFW or ₱10,000 for every repatriated OFW or one who was not able to return to her or his employer abroad due to the lockdown (DOLE 2020). As part of its post-COVID-19 recovery plan, the Department of Labor and Employment provided employment and livelihood opportunities to OFW returnees. Under the *Bayanihan* to Recover as One Act (also known as *Bayanihan 2*), the department received ₱16 billion, allocated among three target groups displaced by the pandemic—formal workers (₱7.4 billion), informal workers (₱4.9 billion), and OFWs (₱1.8 billion). This benefited 1.25 million formal workers, at least 1 million informal workers, and 500,000 OFWs (CNN Philippines 2021). Since the pandemic began, government units tasked with migrant welfare had helped around 540,000 OFWs to return to their hometowns and over 500,000 have benefited from the government’s one-time cash assistance program (Patinio 2021).

32. What were the characteristics of OFWs who returned? A snapshot based on a survey by the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2021) involving 8,332 OFWs who returned in 2020 revealed key features:<sup>4</sup>

- For 70% of returned OFWs, the pandemic resulted in work termination or nonrenewal of contracts or their employers asking them to leave, and they thus returned.
- Approximately 65% of OFW returnees were in the 25–39 age range—on average, 35 years old for women and 37 years old for men.
- OFWs returned home to relatively large-sized households of around 5.1 members, higher than the national average household size of 4.4 members. At least half of OFWs returned to households with 5 to 8 members.
- Around 45% of returnees were either from Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. Qatar, Kuwait, and Hong Kong, China were also major sources of returns.
- 82% reported having finished at least high school. Among those with higher educational attainment, the courses taken were about marine studies (21%), information technology (14%), and food and hospitality (13%). Female OFWs who reported finishing high school were mostly employed as domestic help.
- 20% of female OFWs (and 13% of male) had to shoulder the full costs of their return journey. Women were disproportionately affected by the cost burden of returning home since they were more likely to be in the lower wage brackets than men. Female OFWs were also less likely to receive overall repatriation support than male.

## B. Reintegration Programs in the Philippines

33. Reintegration is the re-inclusion or reincorporation of a migrant into the society of her/his country of return (Haase and Honerath 2016). The success or failure of the reintegration process largely depends on the migrant’s willingness and readiness to return. Ideally, return and reintegration must be considered in the context of the entire migration process. That is, the plan to earn money for income, savings, and investment goals, including the plan to return, must be discussed by OFWs with their families even before their journey abroad.

34. Reintegration programs in the Philippines are overseen by the Department of Labor and Employment and are implemented primarily by the National Reintegration Center for OFWs, regional offices of the Department of Labor and Employment, and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration.

<sup>4</sup> According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), it applied non-probability sampling method in collecting the data hence the sample is not necessarily representative of the OFW population—seafarers and OFWs bound for Visayas may have been underrepresented.

These packages of interventions and mechanisms aimed at facilitating the productive return of OFWs are composed of (i) services which help mitigate the impact and psychological costs of having to return such as psychosocial counseling, stress debriefing, values formation, and OFW family circles; and (ii) services to better equip return migrants in responding to their material needs and economic goals such as finding paid employment or starting an enterprise.

35. For migrant returnees, successful reintegration hinges on the ability to generate income. Hence, finding employment or venturing into business can be an overriding goal (Table 2). Various support services to this end also include counseling on reentry options to the labor market; literacy programs such as financial awareness seminars; skills training for retooling and skills upgrade (small business management training); wage employment; livelihood and enterprise development support programs; and loan Implementing agencies have also partnered with Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, banks, nongovernment organizations, and private companies to help deliver these programs.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2: Livelihood-Oriented Reintegration Programs**

<i>Balik-Pinay, Balik-Hanapbuhay Program</i>	Livelihood and skills training program for returnees that provides starter kits to enable female Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) undertake livelihood and self-employment activities. Priority is given to female OFWs who are displaced by the hostilities and conflicts in their host country, or victims of illegal recruitment and trafficking and other distressed and displaced female household service workers.
OFW Re-integration Through Skills and Entrepreneurship (OFW RISE)	Online entrepreneurship training program for return OFWs created through the collaboration of Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, Department of Trade and Industry-Philippine Trade Training Center, Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, and Coca-Cola Philippines.
<i>Balik-Pinas, Balik-Hanapbuhay Program</i>	An Overseas Workers Welfare Administration livelihood support/assistance package that provides returning member-OFWs (distressed/displaced) of up to ₱20,000 as start-up or additional capital for the livelihood project.
The Livelihood Development Assistance Program	Grants for livelihood assistance of undocumented migrant returnees.
Overseas Filipino Workers – Enterprise Development and Loan Program	An enterprise development intervention and loan facility of Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, in partnership with the Land Bank of the Philippines and the Development Bank of the Philippines. Individual borrowers could loan from ₱100,000 to ₱2 million while group borrowers could loan up to ₱5 million.
<i>Tulong Pangkabuhayan sa Pag-unlad ng Samahang OFWs (Tulong PUSO)</i>	A one-time grant assistance (of up to ₱1 million) in the form of raw materials, equipment, tools, and other support services for OFW groups engaged in livelihood projects.
Helping the Economy Recover through OFW Enterprise Start-ups (HEROES Program)	A loan facility of the Small Business Corporation for repatriated and return OFWs who may avail of a non-collateral loan of up to ₱100,000.

Sources: Department of Labor and Employment. <https://www.dole.gov.ph/reintegration-services-for-overseas-filipino-workers/>; and Overseas Workers Welfare Administration. [https://owwa.gov.ph/?page\\_id=1437](https://owwa.gov.ph/?page_id=1437) (both accessed May 2021).

36. At least 50% of OFW returnees in 2020 registered for reintegration, and while 58% indicated they needed financial help to support their basic needs, only 26% of returnees had received government support by December 2020 (IOM 2021). Many OFWs returned to communities strained by the socioeconomic costs of the pandemic and lockdown measures. Such an environment made it challenging

<sup>5</sup> In addition, dependents of OFWs (who were active OWWA members at the time of death) may avail of scholarship thru the Education and Livelihood Assistance Program (ELAP).

to effectively conduct reintegration measures connecting returnees with training opportunities and livelihood, especially with the recession crippling industries and curtailing the operations of many micro- and small enterprises.

## V. ISSUES RELATED TO OFW RETURN MIGRATION AND REINTEGRATION

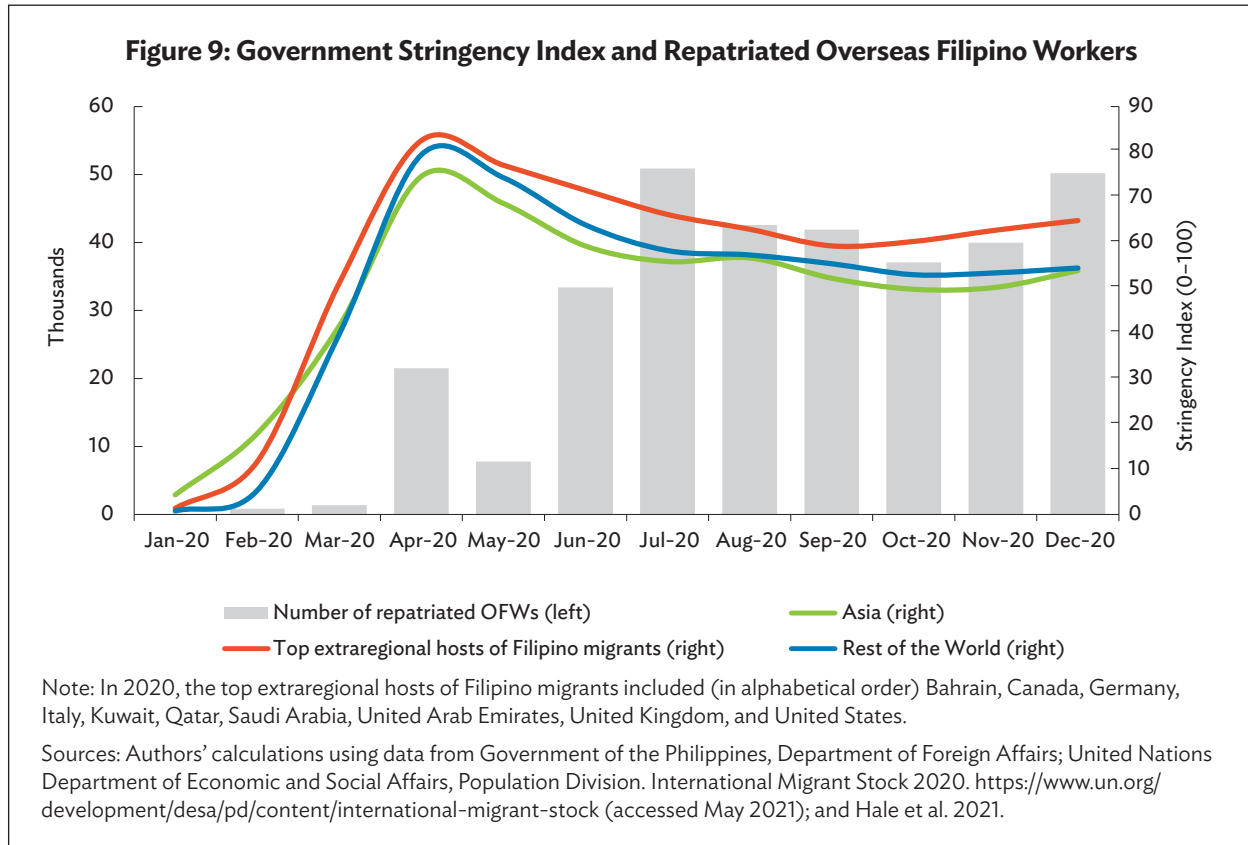
### A. Reception Conditions for OFW Returnees

37. To contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, global health protocols, border control measures, and travel restrictions were imposed, stalling the movement of people. Migrant workers, many of whom were already rendered vulnerable by lockdowns and quarantine measures, were disproportionately impacted by these measures. For low-skilled migrants working in hazardous environments and living in cramped quarters with poor sanitation infrastructure, maintaining hygiene and adhering to social distancing requirements were next to impossible (Agenzia Fides 2020; Bismonte 2020; Gavlak 2020; Migrant Forum in Asia 2020; Ratcliffe 2020). As a result of not being able to go anywhere because of government-mandated mobility measures, the IOM (2020) estimated that, as of July 2020, around 2.75 million migrants were stranded, mostly in Asia (36%) and the Middle East and North Africa (46%).

38. OFWs suffered similar hardship, if not more, since mobility measures were stricter among the top ten extraregional economies hosting Filipino migrants (Figure 9). Among these top hosts, only Germany, Italy, and Canada entitle migrants to receive unemployment benefits and social security benefits (KNOMAD 2020). This meant OFWs who lost their jobs in other top host countries had to rely on their personal savings while firming up plans to fly home. Accessing health services was also limited for OFWs working in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, hosts to 28.6% of Filipino migrants in 2019. OFWs let go by their companies or employers had no assurance of getting back their jobs. Some opted to stay in their host countries to ride out the pandemic; others had no choice but to go home. The Department of Foreign Affairs assisted these OFWs who had to or wanted to come home through repatriation, and provided emergency supplies, medicines, food, and accommodation to those affected.

39. For some of return migrants, quarantine requirements could have been distressing, especially to seafarers and cruise workers who were subjected to long periods of accumulated quarantine. Only seafarers who completed the required quarantine period and tested negative for COVID-19 could disembark. Others were housed in hotels and related accommodations by their employment agencies. Returnees also had to deal with internal mobility restrictions. Despite completing the required 14-day quarantine period, the suspension of land, sea, and air travel prevented OFWs from returning to their home provinces. In some cases, those who succeeded in returning to their provinces were either disallowed entry or subjected to another round of quarantine by respective local government units.

40. A negative test result is a requirement before OFW returnees can finally leave for their respective hometowns. But the strain on testing facilities resulted in a massive backlog of COVID-19 test results in May 2020 and led to a long waiting period for about 24,000 OFWs, many of whom were housed in temporary shelters. Some complained of enduring an extended quarantine beyond the 14-day requirement, sometimes reaching up to 1 to 2 months. After the presidential order to release the results of 24,000 OFWs remaining in quarantine facilities, the government mobilized resources to transport OFWs to their respective hometowns through the *Hatid Probinsya* Program.



41. Meanwhile, OFWs abroad tend to find the \$200 one-time cash assistance insufficient (Center for Migrant Advocacy 2020). Although the government shouldered OFW repatriation costs, OFWs themselves bore the costs of repatriating family members, and hence the \$200 assistance seemed not enough.

42. Notwithstanding the number of OFW beneficiaries from the government’s cash assistance program, some stakeholders find the total amount disbursed by the Department of Labor and Employment and Overseas Workers Welfare Administration for the *Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong* program to be small relative to the huge wave of migrant remittance inflows, which averaged \$32.5 billion in 2015–2019 and reached \$34.9 billion in 2020 (Center for Migrant Advocacy 2020).<sup>6</sup>

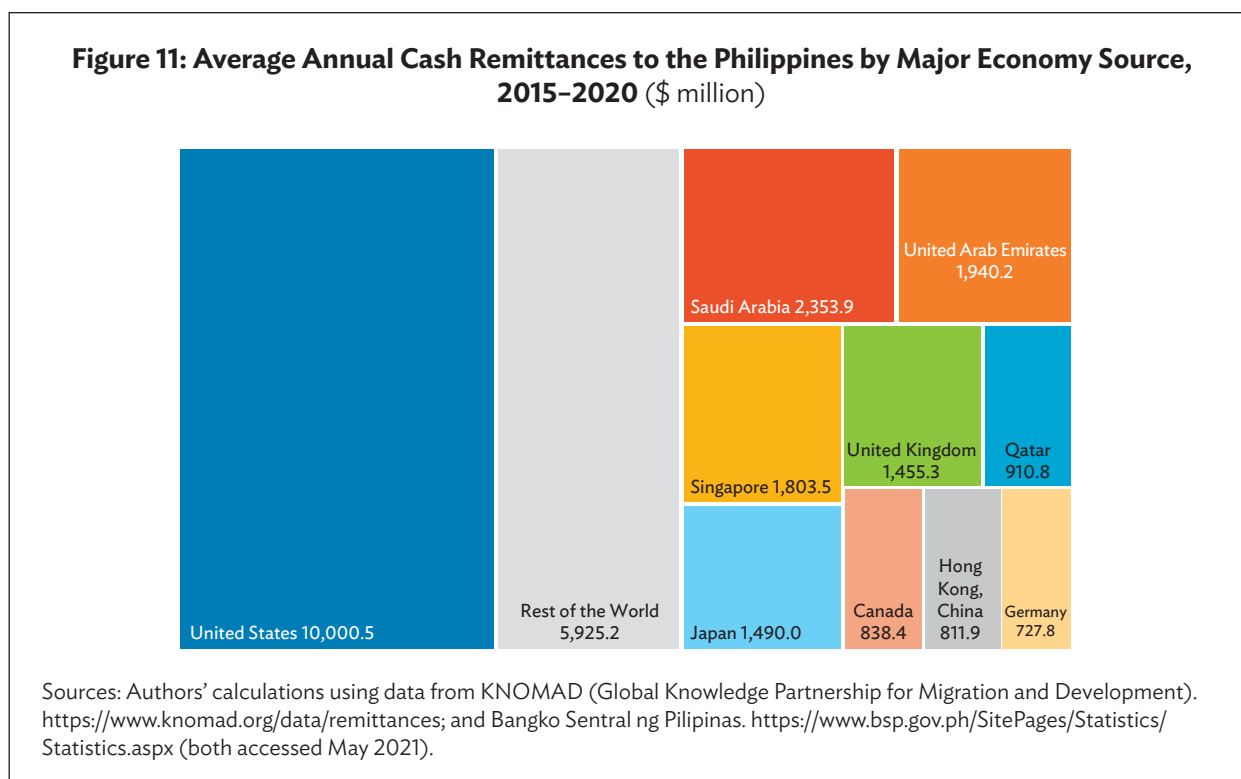
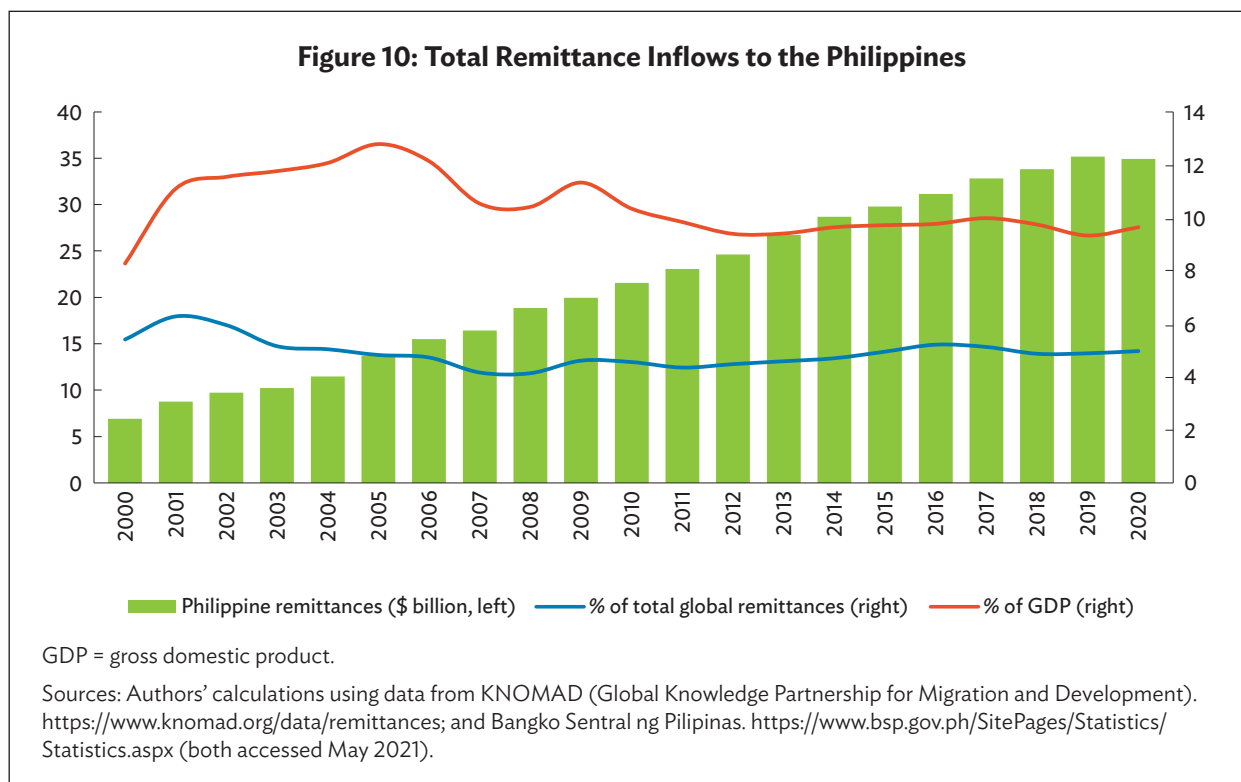
**B. Potential Reduction in Remittances**

43. As a major migrant-sending country, the Philippines is among the top remittance-receiving economies in absolute (\$34.9 billion) and per capita terms (\$325). Remittance inflows in 2020 amounted to around 9.6% of GDP, hence when migrants returned en masse during the pandemic, it was initially feared this might compromise the sustainability of remittance inflows.

44. Historically, the trend in remittances mirrored the rising number of Filipinos working overseas (Figure 10). From \$1.5 billion in 1990, remittances peaked at \$35.2 billion in 2019. Although inflows contracted by almost 25% in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, the country’s remittances enjoyed

<sup>6</sup> Remittance figure was sourced from KNOMAD (Global Knowledge Partnership for Migration and Development). <https://www.knomad.org/data/remittances> (accessed May 2021).

uninterrupted growth from 1999 to 2019, averaging 9.6% annually. Among the cash remittance corridors, North America and the Middle East accounted for an average of 62% during 2015–2020 (Figure 11). An estimated 35% of inflows came from the United States while other major country sources included Saudi Arabia (8.3%), the United Arab Emirates (6.9%), and the United Kingdom (5.2%). In Asia, Singapore (6.4%) and Japan (5.3%) stood out as prime sources of cash remittances.



45. Although remittance inflows were initially estimated to decline by 5.2% or \$1.8 billion in 2020, data from the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas indicate that remittance inflows totaled \$33.2 billion, or about \$274 million less than in 2019 (down only 0.82%).<sup>7</sup> Remittances have once again displayed significant resilience in the face of crisis and this appears to have continued well into 2021—from January to July, monthly remittance inflows rose an average of 6.4% relative to the same period in 2020 and by 3.4% relative to 2019. Sustaining remittance resilience until the global economy settles into a post-pandemic “normal” would depend on several factors, including global recovery, particularly in major countries of destination of OFWs; the success of vaccination programs and related COVID-19-variant-management measures; and the easing of travel restrictions.

46. Remittance inflows are not a direct component of GDP but its effect on consumption affects final output through the remittance multiplier effect—the proportional amount of increase (or decrease) in final output that results from remittance transfers into the receiving economy. Estimates of the impact of remittances through the multiplier effect have been explored in literature.<sup>8</sup> A more recent study by Oxford Economics (2021) reports that remittances multiply through a nation’s economy by contributing \$0.40 to GDP for every \$1.0 of inflow. The \$0.40 multiplier is comparable to or higher than some multiplier estimates for foreign direct investment or official development assistance. The \$274 million contraction in remittance inflows to the Philippines in 2020 therefore could translate into an initial output loss of about \$109.6 million. These effects, however, are mostly short-term and do not include other benefits from remittance spending allocated to education, health, and other investments which manifest their full-time economic benefits only in the long run.

### C. Reduced Incomes of Migrant Returnees

47. Although aggregate figures indicate that in 2020, remittance inflows to the Philippines declined much less than initially anticipated, implications of this decline could differ and might even be severe for some households, depending upon their income and financial conditions. When OFW returnees were still working abroad, 55% reported having a monthly income between ₱20,000–₱50,000 and 19% earned between ₱5,000–₱20,000. One-third of male and 17% of female OFW returnees earned over ₱50,000 per month. For these return migrants, the pandemic put an end to this inflow. Circumstances surrounding their return weighed on the amount of funds OFW returnees brought home—around 17% of those whose contracts were terminated did not receive their final wages, while 11.4% whose contracts were terminated early did not receive separation or compensation pay. This implies that return migrants affected could bring home less funds to support themselves and their families. Data also suggest that terminated female OFWs (66%) were less likely of to get separation or compensation pay than terminated male OFWs (59%).

48. On top of the filial obligation to provide, returnees must deal with social/cultural pressure to show something for their time as OFWs, and the personal sense of embarrassment (and guilt) they feel for not quite being an economic success (ILO 2015). Hence getting a job or engaging in any income-generating activity mattered most to 78% of returnees. With more than half of return OFWs belonging to larger-than-average household size, the responsibility for providing for their families was imperative for these breadwinners. The other major concern was repaying debts (24%), most of which were related to costs of recruitment and getting deployed abroad. Against these considerations, it is

<sup>7</sup> KNOMAD (Global Knowledge Partnership for Migration and Development). <https://www.knomad.org/data/remittances> (accessed October 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Using data for Greece, Glytsos (1993) found that a \$1 million increase in remittances generated a \$1.7 million increase in total gross output. Tested using data for Nigeria, these inflows not only improved the consumption of remittance-recipient households, but also resulted in raised incomes of non-recipient households through multiplier effects (Etowa 2016). In Asia, an ADB study reported that a 10% increase in remittances as a share of GDP leads to a 0.9%–1.2% increase in GDP growth (Vargas-Silva, Jha, and Sugiyarto 2009).



alarming to find that 83% of return migrants were still unemployed 3 months after arrival, and that for 48% of returnees, household income had dropped 60%.

#### **D. Reduced Consumption and Savings Possibilities among OFW Households**

49. As remittance senders, return migration could impact OFW households' consumption and savings significantly. Philippine households spend substantial portions of remittances on food, education, and medical expenditures (Philippine Statistics Authority 2019). Among households receiving less than ₱20,000 in cash remittance, almost half (49.3%) were able to save less than 25% of their remittance receipts. At least half of OFW returnees in 2020 reported remitting amounts ranging from ₱10,000 to ₱20,000 monthly. Now that these remittance senders are back home and the majority are without regular employment, the loss in remittance receipts threatens the consumption and savings of households in this remittance category. It is also possible that remittance-recipient households on the lower end of the income scale could risk sliding back into poverty.

#### **E. Difficulty in Finding Employment**

50. The combination of large-scale returns and recession made finding local employment challenging for return migrants. OFWs who returned in April 2020 came home to a national unemployment rate of 17.6%, not an inspiring figure for those facing a relentless job search. By region to which most OFWs returned, 16% headed to the CALABARZON region, where unemployment was at 16.7%. National Capital Region-based return migrants (11%) were confronted with a 12.3% unemployment rate. In Central Luzon, home to 11% of returnees, the unemployment rate was 27.3%. During this period, global recession and uncertainty loomed large in the domestic labor market's performance.

51. While the government aimed for return migrants to find suitable employment as quickly as possible to make their return viable and sustainable, the domestic labor market struggled due to the pandemic. Some firms impacted by loss of sales after months of strict mobility restrictions had to shut down. Businesses which could not adapt to alternative work arrangements had to lay off workers or temporarily cease operations. Although there is a Department of Labor and Employment skills registration system that maps labor capacity across the country and an internet-based job and skills matching system for jobseekers and employers, this type of platform may not be sufficiently dynamic and robust in efficiently mapping and matching training opportunities and jobseekers, particularly for OFWs who may have already lost their local network of employment contacts. There is room to improve existing systems that match the supply of skills with job prospects to encourage OFW returnees to apply the competencies they acquired abroad in their local occupations. IOM's survey found that most OFW returnees in 2020 held low-skilled, low-wage jobs when they were abroad and now had to compete for job opportunities occupied by a third of local workers. Another study (Center for Migrant Advocacy 2021) on OFW returnees and jobs in the local health sector found that even if returnees had comparable skills to local applicants, firms preferred hiring existing local applicants before considering "external" applicants such as return migrants.

52. The tight condition of the domestic labor market has not boded well for OFW returnees. Three months after arrival, 48% of returnees indicated wanting to re-emigrate while only 2% wanted to migrate internally; 35% preferred to just stay home, while 15% were undecided about their re-emigration intentions. Male and sea-based worker returnees were also keener to migrate internationally.

#### **F. Capacity and Resource Issues in the Provision of Migrant Support**

53. The range of the Philippine government measures to respond to the needs of OFWs was within the context of Republic Act (RA) 11469 (*Bayanihan to Heal as One Act*), signed on 23 March 2020. It declared

a national health emergency across the country due to COVID-19 and gave the president temporary special powers to effectively deal with the health crisis. In July 2020, the Philippine Senate extended the validity of appropriations under RA 11469, and ₱165.5 billion were allocated to enhance the government's COVID-19 response and support sectors hit hard by the pandemic, including returning OFWs.

54. The unprecedented number of returnees tested the capacity of government agencies handling return migrants and exposed them to serious financial constraints. Although various government agencies on migrant concerns have their respective budgets, dealing with a pandemic while managing the safe return of migrants has proved to be a tricky, costly endeavor. In August 2020, cash assistance programs of Department of Labor and Employment and Overseas Workers Welfare Administration nearly depleted their budget and additional funding had to be made. This raised the issue of affordability and the challenge of having to constantly replenish funds for migrant assistance. In April 2021, Overseas Workers Welfare Administration announced that its budget may last only until May 2021 (Quismorio 2021), which prompted the government to request Filipino migrants to postpone their nonessential travel back to the Philippines (Calonzo 2021).

55. The pandemic is an opportunity to rethink the need for the stable and sustainable funding for migrant programs. Just as migrants must prepare for their return, the Philippine government needs to be prepared to handle, finance, and manage their return and reintegration effectively. Having greater financial capacity could also address the gaps in reintegration at the community level and empower reintegration service providers for better program delivery.

## **G. Lack of Comprehensive Migrant Information Infrastructure**

56. The pervasive lack of reliable, harmonized, and shareable data from relevant agencies on OFWs; the lack of comprehensive information on permanently returning Filipino migrants; the lack of regular and reliable estimates about irregular migrants; and the absence of a shared government information system on migration are just some of the information infrastructure challenges that pervade Philippine migration systems. These persistent data gaps and the challenges they bring hinder the development of streamlined approaches to return migration and reintegration management.

57. The Migrant Workers Act has a provision for a shared government information system on migration but, to date, such system has yet to operate. Instead, different agencies on migrants began developing their own websites and software applications for migrant registration, monitoring, and information portals. Since the pandemic, there have been more online-based and digital platforms for tracking OFWs, collecting OFW information, disseminating migrant-relevant information, offering training and related knowledge products on livelihood and entrepreneurship, among others. And while these various platforms have increased the online presence of offices handling migrant affairs and encouraged OFWs to tap social media sources, there is no single overarching information infrastructure dedicated to containing, assessing, analyzing, managing, and maintaining migrant data for better management of migrant movement (especially during crises) and for supporting policy.

## **VI. POLICY CONSIDERATIONS**

58. Repatriating OFWs safely is just one aspect of the challenges of bringing migrants back home. Others include economic and social needs, costs, and adjustments which accompany OFWs when they return, as well as adaptation to the economic and social landscape of families and hometowns to which they return

and which could easily spill over to the domestic economy. Navigating these issues and challenges should be foremost considerations in reforming mechanisms governing return migration and reintegration programs.

59. The pandemic-induced return of OFWs offered a wealth of insight into emergency management and reception for returnees, coordination among stakeholders, and return migration and reintegration dynamics which can help reform and refine policies. “Building back better” depends predominantly on the power of policies to target return migration and reintegration outcomes using data-informed, evidence-based, actionable strategies, and solutions to issues confronting return migration and reintegration mechanisms.

### **A. Value of Preparedness to Return among OFWs**

60. A major determinant of the success of reintegration programs is the degree of preparedness of OFWs to return. Preparedness can influence and contribute to the reintegration process. The more prepared and ready OFWs are to return, the greater the probability that their reintegration experience will not be fraught with overwhelming stress and failure. Ideally, predeparture seminars should emphasize the importance of return preparedness to inculcate “preparedness consciousness” among outbound OFWs. Emigration bureaus and offices on migrant welfare could also ramp up their information drive to highlight the benefits to OFWs of discussing various aspects of preparedness with their families such as migration goals, savings plans, eventual return, and reintegration possibilities. While abroad, Philippine labor offices and overseas migrant resource centers could complement the readiness promotion initiatives of their Philippine-based counterparts by offering OFWs knowledge products on savings and investment, business climate reports, and labor market performance to induce OFWs to keep their preparedness strategy on track.

### **B. Reorienting Return Migration and Reintegration Systems Toward Sustainability**

61. Return migration does not occur in a vacuum. As part of the overall migration cycle, return migration systems must be just as dynamic and outcome oriented as the systems that make outmigration work well for the Philippine economy. The pandemic exposed the extent to which emergency response and return mechanisms could be reformed on various levels using an all-of-society approach. Strengthening existing mechanisms for returning OFWs and helping them reintegrate into their communities of origin requires regular funding from assured sources. Hence it is imperative to make financial resources available to ensure reform measures are not compromised.

62. Transforming reintegration programs into active (rather than reactive) measures implies that these programs go beyond being just a series of modules catering to the adjustment needs of OFW returnees to becoming tools for change that promote self-sufficiency and resilience. Reintegration programs must be refocused toward sustainability to better leverage the influence of return preparedness. Tilting reintegration mechanisms toward sustainability means they must be recalibrated to allow for the multidimensional processes and stakeholders involved in helping OFW returnees reestablish their economic self-sufficiency and social stability while promoting their psychosocial welfare.

63. Being sustainability-oriented also means doing away with the one-size-fits-all approach to reintegration and designing new programs which incorporate the diversity of migrants’ needs, interest, capabilities, and aspirations. Crises often disproportionately impact women and children, hence existing reintegration programs may be refined on the back of principles on gender sensitivity, gender responsiveness, and attention to vulnerable groups and expand existing platforms for psychosocial and mental health support. On livelihoods, most reintegration programs are biased toward enterprise-creation

for OFW returnees but not all OFWs have the capability, drive, and experience to establish and grow a business. Only 12.2% of OFW returnees in 2020 have the interest and financial means to venture into business while 15.5% are interested in setting up their own enterprises but do not know how to finance them. Only 14% prefer reintegration support in the form of business assistance—75% of returnees prefer to receive reintegration support in the form of cash assistance to help cover the cost of basic needs.

64. Moving forward, reintegration initiatives must emphasize the role of health and social security through information and awareness campaigns, data collection on returnees' health, and assisting OFWs in registering with public health care and social security systems. Spreading knowledge about products on savings, investment, insurance, retirement funds, and asset accumulation would not only boost the financial literacy of return migrants but could also influence their financial behavior. Communities of OFW returnees must also ensure that physical, institutional, health, and knowledge infrastructures are equipped to contribute to the reintegration of OFW returnees.

### **C. Accelerating the Establishment of Migrant Information Infrastructure**

65. Times are ripe for accelerating plans for extensive migrant information data collection, designing a standardized migration information template, consolidating initiatives to build an integrated migrant information system, and promoting responsive programming of return and reintegration systems. Establishing an information system on return migrants that captures the diversity of migrant returnees (their backgrounds, work experiences, skills, competencies, social networks, and objectives and expectations upon return) could energize existing reintegration programs with dimensions to make the programs more nuanced (i.e., gender-sensitive), more targeted (i.e., labor market counseling for potential employees versus business seminars for would-be entrepreneurs), and therefore, more responsive to the needs of return OFWs. Information infrastructure on migrants could also empower program providers to regularly monitor return OFWs, use data in assessing their reintegration progress, and leverage evidence-based recommendations for better policy making. OFW returnees and various migration stakeholders stand to benefit from accurate, reliable, timely, and shareable information. Policy makers stand to gain from transparency of migration information, data-informed policy making, and evidence-based assessment.

### **D. Committing to Developing Human Capital Amid Remittance Reliance**

66. By exporting labor resources, remittances have benefited the Philippines on many levels. Allowing Filipinos to work internationally helped ease problems in the domestic labor market. But there are social costs to exporting labor. Whether these costs are sufficiently made up for by the inflow of migrant earnings would make an interesting area of research collaboration between remittance scholars and development experts. What sustains progress is human capital development. Regardless of how long or short outmigration will be used for development gains, the Philippines should not falter in its commitment to scale up investments in human capital—by assuring resource availability for quality education and training, by promoting skills diversification, by reinforcing workplace adaptability, by inculcating responsiveness to labor market changes—and reinforcing the infrastructure needed to increase work opportunities and widen its accessibility.

67. Reintegration programs can be improved to serve as channels of development for OFWs who return with different levels of skills, competencies, and experiences. Aside from promoting skills development, reintegration modules may be developed to harness the skills to OFW returnees to help their communities transition to more self-reliant microeconomies. Among the OFW returnees surveyed by IOM, 52% expressed their interest in upgrading their skill sets through training.

68. Upgrading existing technologies for mapping the skills OFWs have learned and accumulated abroad relative to the education they attained in the Philippines (prior to becoming an OFW) could generate updated insights on the skills gap. These insights are relevant to authorities in education and skills training in adjusting the human capital development benchmark of outbound Filipinos relative to domestic workers.

### **E. Leveraging Technology to Narrow Migrant Information Gaps and Boost Migrant Welfare**

69. Although still in its nascent stages, “migtech” or migration technology (technology that assists and empowers migrants) is evolving to create various software applications and digital portals which incorporate elements of accuracy, safety, efficiency, and transparency in facilitating labor mobility (ADB, OECD, and ILO 2021). A variety of applications of migration technology are available, include providing information, and support services for migrants prior to departure and in their countries of destination. Migration technology can also be used to monitor the return of migrant workers and may be tapped to facilitate appropriate reception conditions for returnees. One such example is the OFW Assistance Information System, which the government launched to manage repatriation, testing, quarantine, and transport of migrant returnees. Access to migrant welfare services is also easily expanded using digital platforms.

70. At the reintegration phase, migration technology that facilitates the matching of jobs and skills is useful for migrant returnees seeking paid employment opportunities while online skills development and digital entrepreneurship training will benefit returnees with entrepreneurship aspirations. Online and digital platforms on managing income, savings, and investments could help returnees deal with their finances with more confidence even if they are no longer remittance senders.

71. Leveraging migrant technology also means supporting digital infrastructure through increased investments in information and communication technology and promoting measures for better, faster, and more equitable internet access.

### **F. Enhancing Cooperation on Program Design, Execution, and Monitoring Toward Best International Practice**

72. The pandemic underscored the need for both origin and destination countries to strengthen their partnerships and be better prepared for upheavals in migrant flows. Regional initiatives could help promote common guidelines for predeparture screenings, emergency repatriation procedures, and enhancement of reception infrastructure for migrant returnees. Coordination agreements, especially in established migration corridors, can improve crisis response strategies and can be included in bilateral labor agreements and memorandums of understanding.

73. Tapping into the regional cooperation and integration network could also assist in managing return migration episodes more effectively, while harnessing bilateral and multilateral relationships could encourage greater exchange of best practices in return migration and reintegration programs. Given the cross-border nature of international migration, facilitating policy alignment and inter-government collaboration platforms using shared migrant information systems could help address common policy challenges involving return migration. A good example of regional cooperation enhanced by the pandemic was a set of guidelines established by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that seeks to promote principles, actionable commitments, and best practices on return and reintegration (ASEAN Secretariat 2020).

## VIII. CONCLUSION

74. By December 2020, the Department of Foreign Affairs had repatriated 327,511 OFWs. By 15 September 2021, this number had risen to 421,676 OFWs (Department of Foreign Affairs 2021b). Migrant workers who return and decide to stay for good or for an extended period, both voluntarily and involuntarily, must come to terms with the reality of the pandemic and the challenges it has brought to them and to the country. OFW returnees must be ready with skills and patience in navigating income opportunities in the domestic market. Various economic, psychosocial, and legal government support measures in place to help returning migrants establish their economic and social standing to successfully reintegrate into their origin communities. But there is room to improve the diversity, design, data collection methods on migrants, data capture of reintegration outcomes, and monitoring of reintegration programs to better profile their effectiveness. Current return and reintegration mechanisms can benefit from the establishment of a comprehensive migrant information infrastructure, assured funding to support reforms, and enhanced regional cooperation and stronger partnership with major destination countries of OFWs.

75. Return migration and reintegration are part of the overall migration cycle. Promoting better policies can help returning migrants overcome the psychosocial challenges of returning; help cultivate opportunities for gainful employment, entrepreneurship, and other income-generating activities; and empower migrants to be viable instruments of transformation and development. These outcomes, in turn, could strengthen the economic and social fabric of their communities, which could only be good for the Philippine macroeconomy.

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## **COVID-19 and Overseas Filipino Workers**

### *Return Migration and Reintegration into the Home Country—the Philippine Case*

As a major migrant-sending and remittance-receiving economy, the emigration of workers has been part of the Philippines' development narrative. The unprecedented return of overseas Filipino workers has posed growing challenges during the pandemic. Various economic, psychosocial, and legal government support measures can help returning migrants establish their economic and social standing to successfully reintegrate into their origin communities. Promoting better policies can help returning migrants overcome the psychosocial challenges of returning; help cultivate opportunities for gainful employment, entrepreneurship, and other income-generating activities; and empower migrants to be viable instruments of transformation and development.

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