CENTER FOR MIGRANT ADVOCACY

15 Years of Protecting Rights, Promoting Welfare, and Ensuring Voice

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Through the book we remember the support and cooperation of the friends of CMA from the past and present: people we met, befriended, and served, the activities and programs we planned and implemented together, the joys and sorrows we’ve shared, the challenges we’ve all faced and the lessons learned. Thank you comrades, colleagues and friends for the seemingly endless discussions, brainstorming and workshops to confirm if there is a space for a CMA in the world of migrant workers in the Philippines: Rene Raya, Rene Nachura, Sixto Carlos, Jr., Malu Padilla, Noel Esquela, Mike Bolos, Jr., Daphne Ceniza, Concepcion ‘Chat’ Garcia, Renato ‘Boyet’ Mabunga, Marlon Quesada, Lisa Garcia, and Carmel ‘Melay’ Abao.
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- To the memory of Dr. Lydia Jose of WGM and Martin “Kulot” Babiano, with fondness in our hearts.

Finally, for the friendship, the deep sense of commitment, the camaraderie – thank you big time to the CMA staff – Hazel, Irynn, Anna and Ellene—all of whom have been the pillars of what CMA has become. The work is far from over thus we warmly welcome our new colleagues in the office as we continue the journey onwards.

This anniversary book is about CMA and the people behind it and how we tried to fulfill the pledge we made 15 years ago to contribute in making things better, fairer and just for the migrant workers and their families. We dedicate this book to you -- the OFWs and families.

The Center for Migrant Advocacy Philippines, Inc. (CMA)
January 2019.

About the Authors

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Chapter One

The Center for Migrant Advocacy after Fifteen Years of Service

Ellene A. Sana
The Center for Migrant Advocacy (CMA) in December 2002 was born out of a series of conversations, consultations and workshops with like-minded friends (among them, current CMA officers Ellene Sana, Irynn Abano, Hazel Cotoner and Ana Navarro who were then also working on migration related issues) in both local and international human rights and migrant rights groups. The discussion revolved around deciding whether they should continue their involvement in civil society organizations (CSOs), also more commonly referred to as non-government organizations (NGOs). The political climate seemed right due to momentum in Philippine Congress (House of Representatives and Senate) to enact an Overseas Absentee Voting (OAV) law in time for the 2004 Presidential elections.

Focused consultation and workshops were organized to answer the following questions:

- is there space for another migration related NGO?
- what thrusts and programs should the new organization pursue?
- how would these thrusts and programs be framed?

In the course of these activities, it was found that, through consultations with the existing NGOs involved in migration, there was still space for a new migration related NGO. It helped that the CMA’s founders were deeply immersed in migration work and had established their niches in the field.

The founders brought with them a good, working knowledge of migration issues and advocacies. In particular, two areas emerged in the consultations – policy advocacy and facilitating assistance to distressed migrant workers.
The Center for Migrant Advocacy after Fifteen Years of Service

While the importance of organizing the migrant sector was discussed at length, it was agreed that organizing was not their area of expertise and therefore it was best to focus on interventions where they were good at – i.e. policy advocacy and case management. To cast away any doubts that it was the right choice, a scoping exercise of existing migrant groups in the country in order to identify their program areas was conducted.

With regards to case management, several groups were engaging in this line of work but more in the context of providing interventions for OFWs formerly in distress situations. The two programs complemented each other. Policy advocacy is important in institutionalizing rights-based interventions for migrants while facilitating assistance to distressed migrants will serve as the barometer to gauge the effectiveness of the policies.

The fledgling organization put first and foremost on their agenda firm support for the enactment of the Overseas Absentee Voting Law which would enable Filipinos overseas to finally exercise their right of suffrage.

The CMA Vision

What followed was a series of workshops and discussions on the CMA ideology, its vision, mission and goals as cited in the current context of labor migration and needs of Filipino migrant workers:

The Center for Migrant Advocacy – Philippines is an advocacy group that promotes the rights of overseas Filipinos, land or sea based migrant workers, Filipino immigrants and their families. The center helps to improve the economic, social and political conditions of migrant Filipino families everywhere through policy advocacy, information dissemination, networking, capability-building and direct assistance.

The CMA’s vision is of a society where justice, good governance, equal opportunity and gender equality prevails. It is one where migrants enjoy equal rights and protection regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, occupation or residency status.
The Center for Migrant Advocacy after Fifteen Years of Service

The way the newly formed group saw migration, then and now, is that it is a necessity for many, particularly for those coming from the Philippines and similarly-situated countries of origin where decent job opportunities are not enough for those who seek it. It is one where many of the workers, particularly women migrant workers are in low-waged job categories and where women workers overwhelmingly make up the care economy of caregivers and domestic workers. CMA saw a phenomenon of labor migration in the Philippines and Asia that has a significant presence of private recruitment agencies and where the outstanding issues that haunt the migrants are debt bondage, abusive and exploitative working and living conditions, unequal treatment and discrimination on various grounds. It is a phenomenon that puts disproportionately the burden of promotion, protection and fulfillment of their human and labor rights on the countries of origin and very little on the countries of destination even if migration takes place largely in a regular way and where there is a clear demand for various types of workers from the countries of destination.

CMA’s ideology is one that affirms that all migrant workers have basic human rights, regardless of their legal status and that labor rights of migrant workers are indivisible as they are universal and interrelated. CMA believes that the right to mobility is a basic human right, just as the right to stay in the country of origin is a human right. The organization does not subscribe to State policies that intend to restrict mobility on grounds that are discriminatory. Moreover, it is recognized that migration has the potential to contribute to development but only if and when it is approached from a human development framework.

CMA also recognizes the role of governments as the principal duty bearers and commits to critically work and cooperate with them on the common agenda to promote, protect and fulfil the human and labor rights of the migrant workers and their families. CMA values networking, partnership and solidarity in the country and abroad. Further, the organization recognizes the important role of trade unions as well as other civil society organizations in this endeavor.

Building the CMA Organization

Once it was decided that an organization was needed to cater to the policy advocacy and direct assistance needs of migrant workers and their families, the next logical step was to create a name for it. There had been a play with words and phrases and finally, the name “Center for Migrant Advocacy” was agreed upon. The name effectively highlights the organization’s focus of work—policy advocacy. Then “Philippines” was added to the name – Center for Migrant Advocacy Philippines—to indicate at the outset that this is an advocacy NGO that caters to, and based in, the Philippines.

Apart from the 4 initial founders of CMA, the journey started with other individuals from around the globe who were involved in social development work (Mr. Rene Raya and Mr. Rene Nachura), human rights work (Dr. Renato Mabunga), women’s rights work (Ms. Malou Padilla and Ms. Concepcion Chat Garcia), labor rights’ work (Mr. Marlon Quesada), and of course, migrants’ rights workers (Ms. Daphne Ceniza, Mr. Mike Bolos Jr., Mr. Sixto Carlos, Jr., Ms. Edna Pugeda, Mr. David Ryan Quin, Mr. Noel Esquela and Atty. Henry Rojas, Mr. Joel Anonuevo, Ms. Wilma Rojas, Ms. Grace Santelices, Ms. Lori de Lara and Mr. Martin Babiano.

On the CMA governance, seven of the founding members agreed to be members of the Board of Directors of CMA. The others committed to help in other ways. The Board is the highest policy-making body and approves the budget. The day to day work will be the task of a Secretariat Team which started with only a team of two. The Secretariat however was able to manage the work because of the invaluable assistance of our post-graduate interns from the Canada-based Centre for Asia Pacific Initiatives (CAPI) and other tertiary schools overseas and in the Philippines who stayed with CMA for a minimum of 200 hours to a maximum of 6 months. In the later years, the CMA would also host volunteers from the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) who stayed for more than 6 months.
At its creation, a fellow NGO—People’s Global Exchange—welcomed CMA and gave a portion of their space to serve as CMA’s office. Another important date in the history of CMA is its registration as an NGO with the Securities and Exchange Commission on December 5, 2002.

The Center’s work covered for the most part issues of women migrant workers particularly in domestic and care work, but also included other low-waged migrant workers. CMA was also able to call attention to situations particularly in geographic regions foremost of which was the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab countries and Israel and also countries of destination in South East and East Asia. Major issues surrounding seafarers and fishermen especially those vulnerable to forced labor and trafficking was also an area of engagement. Organized discussions around the families left behind and the children in the context of migration was conducted in lieu of recognizing the social cost of migration. To a limited extent, the Center addresses other types of migrants such as marriage migrants and au pairs in Europe.

From a staff of 2, the team grew and is now comprised of 7, plus the Center’s volunteers and interns. Apart from the German foundation Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (www.fes-philippines.org), CMA gets fund support from France-based CCFD-Solitaire (www.ccfid-terresolidaire.org), Open Society Foundations (www.opensocietyfoundations.org) and AWO International (www.awo-southasia.org) apart from past projects with UN Women, South East Asia Committee on Advocacy (SEACA), International Organization for Migration (IOM) Manila Office, Embassy of the Netherlands, the United Nations Development Programme-Commission on Human Rights (UNDP-CHR) and Verite South East Asia. The Center also has partner groups across the globe to help in advocacy and in facilitating cases of distressed OFWs. Formally, in the Philippines, the Center is a member of the Philippine Migrants Rights Watch (PMRW), the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA) and campaign networks such as the World March of Women Pilipinas and Right to Know Right Now Coalition. In Asia, CMA is a member of the Migrant Forum in Asia and served as Chair of its executive committee for several years.
As CMA moves forward, it reaffirms its commitment to promote, protect, fulfill the human and labor rights of migrant workers, particularly that of OFWs and their families. The road ahead remains rough and dangerous particularly for people on the move, because of the prolonged global economic crises coupled with outbreaks of wars and conflicts and climate change, but we remain committed and as passionate as we were 15 years ago in working for the rights and dignity of the OFWs and their families.

For CMA, migration governance, at any level – local, national or global – must be coherent and rights-based as it is gender-sensitive and responsive and must be State-led but should not be the responsibility of States alone. There should be room for the productive participation of non-State actors united in the advocacy to make labor migration one of free informed choice and not out of necessity. More importantly, CMA believes that migration should contribute to an empowering experience of the migrant workers and their families, their communities and societies as a whole.
“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

– United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Much of the work of the Center for Migrant Advocacy (CMA) in its first fifteen years of existence entailed bringing to life this very fundamental principle found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was adopted by the international community in 1948. For CMA, migrant workers do not – and should not – lose rights as human beings as they move across borders to seek work.

The breadth and depth of CMA’s involvement in protecting migrant workers’ rights and promoting their dignity and welfare are discussed in this chapter. The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section describes how CMA has been facilitating assistance for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in distress – in situations of abuse by employers and government officials and in situations of societal conflicts, especially armed conflict. The second section explains how CMA has been facilitating welfare provisions for migrant workers and their families. It also shows CMA’s work in engaging government institutions that deal with welfare and repatriation.

This chapter exhibits CMA’s wholistic approach to assisting OFWs: throughout the migration cycle (pre-departure, on-site and upon return), addressing concerns in the immediate term (moments of crisis) and long-term (re-integration), and even assisting OFW families in their service provision and advocacy work.

In essence, CMA ‘shadows’ what government does for OFWs. Like the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), CMA does ‘preventive’ and ‘remedial’ work -- it focuses on monitoring recruitment agencies, informing OFWs about legal vs. illegal recruitment, and, assisting OFWs faced with abuse by either employers or recruiters. Like the DFA, particularly the Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO), CMA assists

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1 The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Mariz Castañeda in the research and writing of this chapter.
OFWs in distress in destination countries. Like the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), CMA assists OFWs and their families seek welfare entitlements from government. And finally, like the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO), CMA assists returning migrants especially those who want to reintegrate in Philippine society. Perhaps, the only thing that CMA does not do is the actual deployment of migrant workers as this is solely government’s mandate and not part of CMA’s mission as a non-governmental organization.

In shadowing government, CMA also engages and seeks to reform it. For the past fifteen years and until today, CMA has been relentless in pushing government to implement laws mandating government to provide assistance to OFWs in distress. In some instances, CMA had to respond to distress calls regarding abuse of OFWs, not just by employers or recruiters but also by government personnel.

This work of shadowing and engaging government to assist OFWs here and abroad and their families is the realization of CMA’s belief that ‘access to justice’ is

“a fundamental right in itself and essential for the protection and promotion of all other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. For example, access to justice is essential to battling the root causes of poverty, as impoverished persons are more vulnerable to criminal and illegal acts such as economic exploitation; access to justice ensures that everyone, including the impoverished, can participate in justice systems and have tools for redress. Therefore, access to justice is one factor among many needed to provide the resources, capabilities, and power necessary to enjoy the entire range of human rights.” (CMA internal paper, 2013)

This chapter seeks to capture what the CMA has done in the past fifteen years to ensure that OFWs gain access to justice, towards the protection and promotion of their human rights.

Facilitating Assistance for OFWs in Distress

The year CMA was born was also the year when ‘illegal recruitment’ gained intense public visibility alongside the Arroyo administration’s policy of encouraging migration for work. At the time, many Filipinos in Italy, Israel and Malaysia were revealed as “illegal workers” and consequently deported back to the Philippines (Montesano, 2003). The Malaysian case was especially alarming since it involved tens of thousands of Muslim Filipinos sent back to Mindanao by the Malaysian government. Filipinos left behind in Sabah, Malaysia, meanwhile, were reported to have been raped in detention centers by Malaysian police. Then-Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo had to request then-Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad to temporarily stop the repatriation of the migrants. She sent an eight-person team to assess the living conditions in Malaysia’s detention centers to assist in the deportation procedures and to ensure the well-being of the deportees (Franco, 2006).

The cases of illegal recruitment raised awareness and concerns about the dangers that Filipinos face when abroad. In June 2002, POEA released the Revised Rules and Regulations Governing Overseas Employment of Land-Based Workers. These rules focused on the legitimacy of recruitment agencies and of foreign employers, projects, and principals. They contained rules concerning licensures of recruitment agencies, inspections of their premises, advertisement of Filipinos for employment abroad, skills test and medical examinations, proper documentation of workers by POEA, assistance for OFWs in distress, and verification and accreditation of foreign employers, projects and principals. In addition, the POEA rules cited the legal assistance and enforcement measures that must be taken in case of illegal recruitment. The POEA also developed preventive and reactive programs to eradicate illegal recruitment (POEA, 2002)
In December 2002, CMA was established. CMA was thus born within the context of growing concern for illegal recruitment and the vulnerability of migrant workers to fall prey to such practice.

**CASES OF DISTRESS**

The Numbers

According to Ellene Sana, CMA Executive Director (2003 to present), even before the official establishment of CMA, its founders especially its founding secretariat members, were already taking on individual cases of OFWs in distress. It thus became a natural consequence for CMA to include ‘case management’ as one of its main programs. CMA was envisioned to assist migrants in a more direct way through the facilitation of responses to situations of distress, here and abroad.

From the years 2004 to 2017, CMA received and responded to 3,483 complaints from OFWs.

Table 1 (p. 17) shows the number of complaints or “cases” that CMA had to respond to yearly. The table shows that the most number of cases were received in the years 2006 and 2007 – understandably so because 2006 was the year that CMA’s helpline or ‘SOS SMS’ was established (please see succeeding section for details on the SOS SMS).

Table 2 (p. 17) reveals that most of the complainants were women. Women complainants constituted 52.7% of all complainants while men constituted only 36.5% (note: data does not show sex of 10.7% of complainants).

Table 3 (p. 18) shows that majority of the complaints came from OFWs in the Middle East particularly Saudi Arabia (34.3% of all cases) and from the Philippines (16.1% of all cases).
## Table 3
Cases, by Location of Complainants

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<p>| MIDDLE EAST    |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |        |
| Saudi          | 12   | 20   | 135  | 61   | 174  | 128  | 83   | 136  | 122  | 34   | 40   | 76   | 93   | 81   | 1195   |
| Jordan         | 1    | 2    | 5    | 1    | 13   | 4    | 1    | 3    | 2    | 4    | 5    | 3    | 2    | 4    | 41     |
| Israel         | 2    | 7    | 2    | 3    | 3    | 6    | 4    | 3    |      |      |      |      |      |      | 30     |
| Bahrain        | 1    | 2    | 2    | 4    | 2    | 1    | 1    | 3    | 1    | 2    | 2    |      |      |      | 23     |
| Lebanon        | 1    | 1    | 8    | 6    | 11   | 1    | 1    | 1    |      |      |      |      |      |      | 15     |
| Libya          |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      | 1      |
| Kuwait         | 1    | 3    | 14   | 7    | 12   | 3    | 8    | 4    | 9    | 4    | 2    | 11   | 10   | 5    | 93     |
| UAE            | 3    | 18   | 11   | 21   | 5    | 10   | 14   | 11   | 9    | 10   | 12   | 12   | 9    | 145    |
| Qatar          | 2    | 1    | 3    | 8    | 2    | 5    | 8    | 5    | 11   | 7    | 6    | 6    | 5    | 3      | 67     |
| Oman           | 2    | 2    | 3    | 1    |      |      |      |      |      | 4    |      |      | 2    |      | 15     |
| Syria          | 8    | 1    | 2    | 1    | 2    | 3    |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      | 17     |
| Iraq           | 1    |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      | 39     |
| Morocco        |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      | 6      |
| Egypt          |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      | 1      |
| Total Middle East | 18  | 33   | 200  | 97   | 253  | 140  | 121  | 172  | 164  | 60   | 66   | 111  | 137  | 107  | 1754   |</p>
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Table 4 (p. 24), meanwhile, shows the type of complaints that CMA receives from OFWs and reveals that the following are the most prevalent complaints:

1. Non-payment/Delayed/Illegal Deduction of Salary
2. Request Repatriation
3. Maltreatment/Physical/Verbal Abuse
4. Detention
5. Overworked
6. Death and Health
7. Contract Substitution
8. Work permit/iqama/visa problem
9. Illegal Recruitment/Trafficking
10. Sexual Abuse/Harassment/Rape
Table 4
Cases, by Type of Complaints

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Death and Health

| Death and Health               | 2    | 4    | 20   | 15   | 18   | 14   | 14   | 13   | 9    | 2    | 9    | 3    | 17   | 4    |
| Whereabouts/Missing           | 2    | 4    | 12   | 8    | 8    | 2    | 7    | 6    | 3    | 2    | 2    | 3    | 1    |
| Abandonment/Family Support    | 2    | 3    | 1    | 4    | 8    | 10   | 3    | 5    | 3    |      |      |      |      |
| Illegal Recruitment/          |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Trafficking                   | 20   | 6    | 15   | 16   | 9    | 12   | 3    | 4    | 3    | 7    | 1    |      |      |      |
| Illegal Collection of         | 1    | 12   | 1    | 13   | 2    | 2    | 3    |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Fees                          |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Run away                      | 5    | 3    | 31   | 7    | 7    | 11   | 4    | 4    | 3    | 4    | 5    |      |      |      |
| Accused of Stealing           | 10   | 8    | 5    | 2    | 4    | 1    | 1    |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Accident                      | 5    | 1    | 1    | 2    | 5    | 2    |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Repatriation of Remains       |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Contract Substitution         | 47   | 4    | 12   | 8    | 2    | 21   | 1    | 6    | 3    | 8    | 13   | 11   |      |      |
Table 5 shows that only half (54%) of the complaints received were successfully resolved, 34% were open/ongoing and a little over 10% needed updating.
The abovementioned tables reveal that complaints and calls for assistance came mostly from women OFWs living in the Middle East and related to violations of varying rights: social, economic and political.

**The Stories**

CMA staff members have many stories to tell about the cases that they have responded to. According to Anna Navarro, CMA’s case worker, most of the cases do come from the Middle East and are mostly about “labor problems” especially non-payment or underpayment of wages. Navarro also observes that many of the cases involve domestic workers. CMA, she adds, has had to respond as well to cases relating to death sentences and said responses ranged from facilitating ‘forgiveness’ and/or ‘raising blood money’ to assuage concerned employers to locating the families of OFWs on death row or those of the victims.

One of the most celebrated cases is that of OFW Joseph Urbiztondo, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for allegedly killing a Bangladeshi national and is now considered “Kuwait’s longest serving Pinoy inmate” after having served 20 years of jail time in Kuwait -- from 1996 to 2016. Urbiztondo was released from prison when the Amir of Kuwait HH Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah granted him pardon. In one news report, Urbiztondo “also thanked Philippine Consul General to Bangladesh Pendosina Lomondot, Ellene Sana of the Center for Migrant Advocacy and other NGOs and advocacy groups and government officials in Bangladesh for helping find the victim’s next of kin in Dhaka, Bangladesh.” (See http://news.abs-cbn.com/global-filipino/01/27/16/kuwait-amir-pardons-longest-serving-pinoy-inmate)

There are many other alarming OFW stories in Kuwait, especially among domestic workers since the country has the highest proportion of domestic workers in the world, with more than 90% of households hiring a domestic worker (CMA and PAHRA, 2015). From 2010 to 2012, over 10,000 Filipinos ran away from their employers, with 7,391 of them seeking refuge in the Kuwait-based Filipino Workers Resource Center. From January 2011 to December 2012, there were 12,445 complaints of abuse and exploitation. In 2012, 202 cases of rape and sexual harassment were reported to the POLO in Kuwait (CMA and PAHRA, 2015)

Another case in the Middle East was that of a domestic worker in Jordan who reported to the Philippine embassy in 2009 that she was not being paid for her labor. When CMA pressured the POLO to repatriate her, she asked CMA to help five other OFWs who were staying at the Filipino Workers’ Resource Center (Abano, 2010).

In Abu Dhabi, a Filipino domestic worker contacted CMA to help her escape her abusive employer. Her work hours per day extended to 22 hours, leaving her only 2 hours of sleep
per night; she was allowed to eat only twice a day and was not being paid wages due her; her health deteriorated but she could not leave because her employer kept her passport. She had contacted the Philippine Post in Abu Dhabi for assistance but did not receive any response. It was only after CMA exerted pressure that the Philippine post assisted and repatriated this Filipina domestic worker (CMA, 2014).

In 2011, from January 9-11, the Committee on Overseas Workers’ Affairs (COWA) of the House of Representatives went on an investigative mission to Saudi Arabia. According to Dr. Walden Bello, former COWA Chairperson, then-Akbayan Party List Representative, the mission was deemed important by COWA to “get a first-hand acquaintance of the conditions faced by OFWs in a very controversial deployment area”. CMA’s Ellene Sana was “asked to join the mission as a consultant” because she was “an experienced hand in migrant affairs”. The COWA released the mission’s report on February 9, 2011. Several pages of said report were devoted to complaints about sexual abuse and rape of Filipina domestic workers and cases of OFWs in death row. (Note: for full report, see https://centerformigrantadvocacy.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/report-of-congress-mission-to-saudi-arabia-on-the-ofw-condition.pdf)

Despite the increased awareness of the plight of OFWs in Saudi Arabia, CMA continued to receive complaints from OFWs in distress. In 2014, CMA worked with the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) and other Philippine authorities to locate and rescue a Filipina who was raped and abused by her employers in Riyadh (Piquero-Ballescas, 2014).

One of the main problems of migrant workers in the Middle East is the Kafala sponsorship system. Under this system, migrant workers are bound to their employers who serve as their “kafeels” or “sponsors”. These workers are not allowed to transfer to another employer or leave the country without the permission of their kafeels. CMA, along with other civil society groups in the human rights’ movement, have called for the overhaul if not the total elimination of this Kafala system which they believe brings about forced labor.

When the Abusers are Government Officials

Aside from experiencing abuse by their employers in countries of destination, OFWs have experienced abuse at the hands of government officials mandated to protect them from abuse. CMA has had to deal with at least two sets of cases: the sex-for-flight scandal in the Middle East in 2013 and the abuse of domestic workers by government personnel in Philippine posts abroad.

The sex-for-flight scandal was labelled a ‘scandal’ because it involved widespread cases of Filipina migrant workers in distress being offered plane tickets home by labor attaches in exchange for sexual favors. Inappropriate language was also used by such government personnel (CMA, 2014). The scandal went through investigations by both the Executive and Legislative branches of government. All throughout these investigations, CMA, along with some other NGOs, helped in keeping the OFW victims-informants safe. The end-resolution, unfortunately, entailed only the ‘suspension’ of concerned government officials (see http://globalnation.inquirer.net/94621/exec-in-sex-for-flight-scandal-suspended). No criminal charges were filed.

CMA has also helped a number of OFW-domestic workers who experienced abuse at the hands of Filipino diplomats and personnel of Philippine posts abroad. One celebrated case is that of the domestic worker who worked for and experienced abuse under Atty. Manuel A.J. Teehankee, then-Philippine Permanent Representative to the World Trade.
Organization in Geneva, Switzerland. Undersecretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). In 2016, pending his appointment as Undersecretary for International Economic Relations of the Department of Foreign Affairs, CMA, along with migrant groups especially those based in Geneva where the abuse took place, went as far as writing an open letter appealing to the Philippine President to dismiss said diplomat. In this open letter, the migrant groups said “Mr. President, if you retain him as DFA Undersecretary you will be sending the wrong and dangerous message that it is acceptable for Filipinos to exploit other Filipinos especially those deemed inferior in social status – just because they (the abusers) are “needed” in government. We appeal to you to send this public message instead: Filipino domestic workers, here and abroad, are human beings and are our most important resource, not commodities, and that we – government and citizens – have to treat these workers with respect and dignity”. Unfortunately, this appeal fell on deaf ears. Teehankee was not only retained, he was later promoted to his previous post as Ambassador to the World Trade Organization. (CMA, 2016).

CASE MANAGEMENT: PROCESSES AND CONCERNS

CMA’s management process starts with migrants lodging a complaint or appeal for assistance. Informing CMA comes in various modes: face-to-face, email, SOS helpline and social media platforms such as Facebook.

According to Ms. Sana, since its beginnings in 2002, CMA had always ‘opened its doors’ to OFWs needing assistance and that, in fact, ‘some go straight to the CMA office when they come home to the Philippines” and “report to CMA even before reporting to their families”. Since 2006, however, CMA has been receiving and managing more cases through the SOS SMS System for Distressed OFWs. This was a 24/7 helpline that was formulated by a group of OFWs in Saudi Arabia as a quick reporting tool for OFWs in distress. The system eventually developed into a version beyond what the creators initially designed. Aside from being a reporting tool, it evolved into a “fast communication link, a data bank, a research tool and a device to get quick responses from concerned government agencies in addressing problems of distressed OFWs (Gorgonio, 2007).

Before the advent of social media particularly Facebook, CMA had the mobile phone-based OFW SOS SMS Hotline that was developed by partner OFWs in Saudi Arabia with support from friends who are IT-experts from the Philippines and Australia. It was a mobile phone-based system that utilized SMS technology to send urgent/emergency messages for help and CMA and its partner OFW groups receive these messages in real time so help may be dispatched ASAP. The phone-based system to get help for distressed migrants was featured in the UN Joint Migration and Development Initiative’s Knowledge fair in Brussels in 2008. It was also replicated by trade union partner BWI (Building and Woodworkers International) and Gefont in Malaysia for migrant workers from Nepal.

Ana Navarro recalls that the idea of a helpline first came from Patnubay, CMA’s partner organization based in Saudi Arabia. This was in 2005, Navarro explains, where armed conflicts were happening in the Middle East. In this context, a ‘text message’ was deemed the most convenient way to seek help. When OFWs experienced sending text messages to government personnel and not getting any replies, asking an NGO to receive and respond to these messages became the most logical next step. CMA readily agreed to do this for its partners in the Middle East and soon enough, it was able to help even those in detention who asked friends in jail to contact the CMA SOS helpline. One heartwarming moment for CMA was when a group of OFWs in Saudi Arabia initiated a campaign in the Kingdom calling on OFWs to donate a cell card to CMA. This was their way to help CMA with the costs of communications when they had to attend to cases of distressed migrants. This was especially appreciated when their phone-based OFW SOS SMS Help Line was still quite active before the advent of social media.

As seen in Table 1, OFW cases ballooned from 52 in 2005 to 668 in 2006. To a very large measure, this sharp increase was due to the SOS Helpline. Still according to Ana Navarro, the help line was effective because it was “fast”: CMA had a policy to respond within 24 hours. According to Hazel Cotoner, CMA finance officer, CMA also made sure that the system would
be affordable. OFWs only had to pay regular rates for text messages.

Of late, OFWs have taken to social media platforms such as Facebook to ventilate their issues. In response, CMA has developed a Facebook page to make public announcements and to receive messages, including appeals for assistance, from OFWs.

Receiving calls or SMS or social media messages is only the start of what is usually a long and tedious process of case management. Aside from responding to these messages within 24 hours, CMA also has to immediately find ways to verify and contextualize the appeal so that it can forward the case to the appropriate government agency. CMA has to be “responsible when it comes to prompting concerned government agencies”, explains Ellene Sana. CMA has to be equipped with enough evidence, so to speak, when approaching government.

Moreover, CMA does not offer prescriptions to OFWs in distress. Rather, it provides OFWs with options. Case management, thus, entails an interactive relationship between CMA and the OFWs in distress. It also requires an iterative process – there is constant back and forth until the OFW decides on what option to take. In essence, CMA’s case management program is about “helping OFWs to help themselves especially in times of crisis”.

Prompting Philippine government offices in the country is obviously much easier than prompting Philippine government offices overseas. In the past 15 years, CMA has built relationships with government personnel in Philippine offices managing migration and addressing cases often means simply referring OFWs to these personnel and making sure they respond. In some instances, for example, CMA’s task has been to give out names and phone numbers of regional offices that OFWs can use.

CMA has also developed a network with government personnel and civil society groups overseas. Whenever abroad, CMA staff would make it a point to visit Philippine posts and introduce their group to government personnel there. On the side of civil society, CMA has developed several close links with OFW groups such as Patnubay in Saudi Arabia, Babaylan in France and Netherlands, Kasapi in Greece and the PLUDW in Hong Kong. According to Rhodora Abano, “in so many instances, these CMA partners are able to respond better to cases as they are based in the countries of destination and therefore in closer proximity to the OFWs. These partners, Abano claims, are able to rescue OFWs in distress, translate for them when necessary and assist them in a more immediate manner.”

CASES INFORMING ADVOCACY

CMA’s advocacy work and its case management programs feed on each other. The cases serve as input for CMA’s advocacy. At the same time, results of CMA’s advocacy impact significantly on the prevention of cases/problems as well as on the availability of options/solutions for OFWs. Evidently, there is synergy between these two CMA main programs and this synergy, at times, brings about new norms not just new policies or laws.

Take for example CMA’s work on “illegal” migrant workers. Because of CMA’s handling of cases of such workers, it has come to realize that these
Facilitating Welfare Assistance for OFWs and their Families

As shown in Table 2 in the previous section, 52% of the cases that CMA manages come from women. This is an understandable figure given the general trend of the feminization of migrant work. (see graph on OFW Distribution by Sex) More and more women are now part of the migrant workforce.

Furthermore, there are jobs that are typically viewed as ‘for women only’ (e.g. domestic work or caregiving work). In other words, there is an increase in both the demand and supply of women migrant workers.

For CMA, migrant work can simultaneously be empowering and disempowering for women. Filipino women who leave the country for work are often able to build self-confidence. At the same time, this level of empowerment is sometimes cancelled out by the disempowering effect of workers were not really “illegal”, they were just “undocumented” – especially when they moved from one contract-based job to another. For CMA, non-documentation is an administrative issue and not a criminal one, hence, it stopped using the term “illegal worker” and used instead the terms “irregular” or “undocumented” workers. Along with global civil society, CMA has been advocating for the use of alternative terms that argue for the recognition of the human rights of migrants. According to Ellene Sana, “even the United Nations now has a resolution encouraging UN member states to refer to those without proper documents or without proper legal status in countries of destination as migrants in irregular situations or undocumented migrants”. Still according to Sana, the POEA issued a similar resolution urging people to in government to refer to OFWs without status or with irregular status as “undocumented” and not as “illegals”.

In the same manner, CMA has been advocating for the use of the term “domestic workers” instead of domestic “helpers” or “maids” – thus, there are “local domestic workers” and “migrant domestic workers”. Still according to Sana, “referring to these migrant workers as “workers” help to elevate their status and give dignity to their work”.

For CMA, migrant work can simultaneously be empowering and disempowering for women. Filipino women who leave the country for work are often able to build self-confidence. At the same time, this level of empowerment is sometimes cancelled out by the disempowering effect of
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their work, most especially the abusive treatment of employers. Moreover, even as Filipino women are able to leave traditional roles when they leave for abroad, many still have to face the consequences of mothering-in-absentia. Thus, while migration brings positive economic benefits for migrants and their families, it also puts pressure on families left behind.

As early as 2007, CMA’s Rhodora Abano already told Philippine media that “an undetermined number of families are breaking up due to a spouse taking on another partner while the husband or wife is away. Likewise, most children of OFWs have become more ‘materialistic’ asking for more money to compensate for the emotional absence of one or both parents. Some of the OFW children have also dropped out of school as they find the school strict or boring, or have resorted to early marriages because of teenage promiscuity or bore children out of wedlock. Worst problem for OFW children is when they fall into drug addiction, gambling or other vices.” (2007) However, there are no conclusive findings from studies conducted so far.

CMA has especially been concerned with the plight of children of OFWs. It has partnered with some schools like the St. Mary’s Academy in Pasay City, Philippines where almost 30% of the school population are children of migrant workers. CMA helps the school, particularly the guidance office, conduct workshops for these children and their parents and guardians to raise awareness regarding the realities of migration.

CMA has also partnered with some LGUs to facilitate the access of OFW families to government welfare programs such as scholarships, housing, and skills training. At one point, CMA facilitated entrepreneurship trainings for OFW women who wanted to come home for good. Moreover, CMA has brainstormed with other NGOs and some friends in government regarding the concept of a “Migrant Workers’ Bank”.

For Ana Navarro, CMA has helped OFW families by holding grassroots training programs in different parts of the country that have produced “local case workers”. Because they are local, they are more accessible and cases of OFWs and their families are addressed in faster ways.

Ellene Sana claims that CMA utilizes various platforms of the United Nations to take the Philippines and the Countries of destination to task with regard international human rights obligations. These platforms include the Treaty Bodies, Universal Periodic Review Mechanism, Special Procedures and the Office of the UN Secretary General. Moreover, in its participation in international conferences and dialogues on the ‘global compact for migration’, CMA has been emphasizing the need to address concerns of “children left behind”, not just “children on the move’. In the Asian context, Sana explains, most workers migrate to the Middle East and leave their children and families behind because most OFWs do not have the financial means to bring their families along, where bringing children along are not allowed. Sana also shares that she has encountered some children of OFWs who do not want to leave the country to be with their parents – for various reasons. The main challenge, she says, is to address the ‘social costs’ of migration, most especially the cost of “children growing up with one or both parents missing”.

REPATRIATING OFWS AND REFORMING THE OWWA

As mentioned earlier, CMA assists migrant workers in the entire migration cycle. Part of this cycle is returning home, temporarily or permanently.

CMA has assisted migrants who were repatriated because of abuses in the workplace or conflicts in countries of destination or because of global economic crises. According to Rhodora Abano, it is the government, not CMA, that does the repatriation. According to her, it is only the government who has the mandate and the resources to do this. “CMA’s job is to ensure that government does its job”, Abano explains. In operational terms, this means CMA has to push government to ensure that OFWs in distress are provided with plane tickets and that OWWA has a helpdesk at the airport and temporary lodging for the OFWs upon arrival. CMA also helps educate OFWs especially those who have fallen prey to abusive employers about their entitlements such as money claims, even as they have already been repatriated.
CMA has been witness to several crisis moments in countries of destination. Crises in the Middle East have been particularly alarming: the war in Lebanon in 2006, the Arab Spring in 2010, the wars in Libya and Syrian in 2011, and tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2016.

The crisis in Libya and Syria has been especially impactful on the repatriation capabilities of the Philippine government. During the Libyan crisis, the government had to repatriate 10,000 out of 30,000 OFWs. After the Syrian crisis, it turned out that only 800 of the 17,000 Filipino workers in Syria were documented workers. It was thus difficult for government to locate these workers. Moreover, there had to be negotiations with Syrian employers to allow for the repatriation of their employees. (Sevilla, 2013)

The Philippines is expected to be hardest hit by the recent “Saudization” program of the Saudi Arabian government in the wake of an oil crisis. In said program, migrant workers, OFWs included, are to be replaced by Saudi nationals and the expatriate population was to be kept at only 20%. Because of this, thousands of OFWs are likely to be affected because almost a million Filipinos now work in Saudi Arabia. According to Rhodora Abano, thousands of OFWs especially in the construction sector have already been affected by the oil-price crisis. Many of these construction workers work for government-funded projects which later on became bankrupt or closed down because of the removal of government subsidies. This, together with the implementation of the Saudization program, can drastically reduce the number of OFWs in Saudi Arabia. There is a need, Abano argues, for the Philippine government to have ‘an immediate and a long-term strategy’ on how to absorb the potential returning migrants. CMA, she says, has been pushing both Congress and the Executive branch especially the Department of Labor to look into this issue seriously.

CMA has also been working relentlessly to reform the OWWA so said institution can be of better service to OFWs. Since 2003, when the OWWA
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CMA’s direct assistance program in the last fifteen years is a testament to its commitment to pursue its mission to protect migrant workers and promote their welfare and dignity.

Omnibus Policies were promulgated by the OWWA Board, CMA has been insisting on the insufficiency of these policies and that in fact, OWWA should have a legislated charter. CMA has also been at the forefront of questioning OWWA’s limited service and focus on OFWs paying the $25 OWWA fees.

In 2016, after more than a decade of lobbying and advocacy, CMA finally saw the passage of the OWWA Law which directs, among others, that the national government allocate sufficient funds to cover personnel and operations of the OWWA so that the welfare fund can be solely disbursed for projects that will directly benefit the OFWs and their families.

Conclusion

CMA’s direct assistance program in the last fifteen years is a testament to its commitment to pursue its mission to protect migrant workers and promote their welfare and dignity. Despite its limited resources, CMA has been able to assist thousands of OFWs in distress, through its case management program.

CMA’s Program on Direct Assistance to Distressed Migrants addresses the issue of social justice to migrant workers and it has resulted in unpaid wages and other benefits being paid the workers who were unjustly terminated; to many of them being repatriated and reunited with their loved ones finally after being stranded and distressed for an indefinite period of time. It means detained OFWs being released or pardoned and repatriated home; it means being spared from the death row or a life sentence being commuted. It means exploring other bilateral arrangements such as the exchange of persons agreements with Hong Kong as prompted by a case CMA attended to in Hong Kong involving a Filipino woman in detention. It means the application of the money claims provision in RA8042 as amended by RA10022. It means invoking the provisions of the mandatory insurance coverage of RA10022 for those who need it. It means facilitating access to the Legal Assistance Fund and the Assistance to Nationals Fund as well as the various programs and services of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration for the member OFWs and their families. It means finding justice for the country’s female migrants who were raped and suffered other forms of gender-based violence. It also means that children are being provided financial support by their OFW parents.

For said program, CMA has had to build cooperative relationships not just with migrant workers but also with their families, with migrant groups, with civil society groups – here at home and in countries of destination. Moreover, CMA has had to establish friendly relations with government while keeping its independence. The past fifteen years has seen CMA cooperating with government as well as being critical of government. In
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all of these engagements, CMA has kept the interests, needs and rights of Filipino migrant workers paramount.

REFERENCES


Chapter Three
Ensuring Voice in a Changing Migration Context

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The CMA has built a wide-ranging portfolio of strategies to bring key advocacies into the formal policy making arena. These strategies can be viewed as a broad body of work that spans a continuum of actions from confrontation and cooperation at different levels of governance, comprising a truly global response to the multifaceted, multilevel issue of labor migration.

CMA has lobbied strongly for international labor agreements (both bilateral and multilateral) that better the living and working status of Filipino workers here and abroad such as the ILO Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers (ILO Convention 189). It has also advocated for particular changes in national policies such as Overseas Absentee Voting (OAV) and more importantly, it has followed through on the implementation of such policy. Finally, CMA has worked directly with migrants and their families, sometimes serving as a crucial lifeline between an OFW in distress abroad and the government agencies tasked to protect these workers while they are abroad.

The scope of such endeavors brings to the fore an important lesson in policy advocacy and through engagement with different stakeholders: that critical engagement is necessary and must be sustained through the policy process. This critical engagement is one that understands that credibility is built not just by cooperating with government functionaries but also by providing an objective and evidence based critique of policies and programs from the stages of inception to the implementation of such programs.

Groups that provide this kind of engagement, such as the CMA, stay above the radar and when necessary, directly communicate their opinions to as many stakeholders as possible via fora and consultations, the writing of policy briefs and monographs, seeking audience with concerned government
officials or creating programs either in cooperation with government or through their own networks.

In doing so, the organization creates not just the substantive input needed to deepen engagement towards policy but also opens up the necessary political space that draws in a multitude of stakeholders, including the migrants themselves, towards a discourse that promotes a more just and equitable situation for Filipino migrant workers and their families.

This chapter will provide key examples of how the CMA ensured that the voices of migrant workers and their families remained heard. The sections will be divided into the following key strategies for engagement: (1) informing and educating OFWs and other migration stakeholders (2) Advancing political participation of OFWs (3) Advocating the Protection of Vulnerable Sectors (4) advocating for fair international and bilateral treaties.

Informing and Educating OFWs and Other Migration Stakeholders

Constant communication with stakeholders in an issue area such as labor migration is a challenging yet important task. These discussions serve as conduits for public and therefore transparent discussions that carry the sentiments of various stakeholders as part of agenda setting for future government policies and provide neutral ground for the debate on contentious issues that need immediate attention.

CMA has utilized the forum format with different co-sponsors, thus broadening the network for migration reform issues through speakers, reactors and a varied audience. In recent years, these forums have been situated in government agencies such as the Commission on Human Rights, schools and Universities such as the Ateneo de Manila University and most recently, online through round table discussions (RTDs) via Rappler.com.

Topics of forums have also reflected the key issues of the day: those, which affect policies that in turn affect the lives of migrant workers abroad. These include OAV, protection of migrant workers in different contexts, migration and development, return and reintegration, and the feminization of migration.

Recommendations towards reform are encapsulated in proceedings that are transformed into short articles, monographs and other materials that can be disseminated to a wider audience.
DR. ALFREDO GANAPIN ADVOCACY FORUM SERIES
(AJGAFS)

One strategy for bringing stakeholders to the discussion table and bringing to the surface issues in a neutral setting is through co-sponsored fora. One such sustained effort is the Dr. Alfredo J. Ganapin Advocacy Forum Series (AJGAFS) created in 2004 and organized by the Center for Migrant Advocacy and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) to foster dialogue among the government, migrants’ rights advocates, OFWs, and their families on issues concerning migration. The quarterly forum was formally launched in 2005 (CMA and FES, 2009).

The Ganapin series, named in honor of the late Dr. Alfredo Ganapin a migrant advocate who was able to personally reach many stakeholders, was envisioned as policy dialogue between government, civil society and migrants to make sure there was a continued and concerted effort towards migration policy reform. Organizers later on realized that input from the other related groups such as the private sector was also needed.

Families of migrant workers also contributed to the policy debate and were regularly consulted in multi stakeholder fora with some focusing on their plight such as the “Round table Discussion on Practical and Legal Remedies to Address the Needs of Families Abandoned by Overseas Filipino Workers.” These fora shed light on the issue of family abandonment brought about by labor migration, the existing approaches of government agencies to address the problem, the gaps in current policies and practices concerning migrant family abandonment and financial support, and to recommend solutions and programs especially for women left behind (2009).

The AJGAFS' first event, “A Round Table Discussion: Defend and Amend the OAV Law,” brought together migrants, advocacy groups, and the executive and the legislative government to talk about their experiences and provide feedback on the first overseas absentee voting exercise. The forum also aimed to generate recommendations for the following elections. The discussion ended with recommendations addressed to the Philippine Commission on Elections (COMELEC) to improve information dissemination on the candidates and the procedures, and to facilitate the electoral processes better and more efficiently. Recommendations to Congress were to remove the section disqualifying Filipino immigrants and permanent residents from voting and to allow the voter a choice between postal or personal voting (CMA, 2009).

Subsequent AJGAFS fora, such as the “Overseas Filipinos Agenda Building Conference” brought together a larger number of co-sponsors that broadened the network attached to the conference. Organized by the CMA and FES, it also drew in other organizations that similarly work in the migration field. This forum served as an avenue for OFWs, their dependents, and advocacy groups to forward their agenda to Congress including the bid to enact Republic Act 9442, which revoked the deregulatory sections of RA 8042 and reinforced the regulatory powers of the POEA (CMA and FES, 2009).

The AJGAFS also highlighted particular issues during milestones in Philippine migration. In the case of the 2006 forum, which coincided with the celebration of the Centennial of the first Filipino Migrants in Hawaii, it focused on the costs and the impacts of going overseas. The AJGAFS 2006 forum called “Ganito Tayo Ngayon, Paano Tayo Bukas? Prospects of Filipino Labor Migration and Philippine Development” reflected on the status of the Philippines one of the top migrant-sending nations (CMA and FES, 2009). Several stakeholders in Philippine labor migration shared ideas about working for a sustainable and pro-people development platform and the Philippine government’s commitment to upholding the rights of migrants, especially in relation to its policies on labor exportation and on development (CMA and FES, 2009).

The fora also supported key regional declarations such as “ASEAN Declaration for the Protection and Promotion of Migrant Workers: What’s Next?” that aimed to provide an understanding of the significance of the ASEAN Declaration and how it can be used to influence policies concerning migrants’ rights (CMA and FES, 2009).
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However, the forums often return to the protection of OFWs, particularly those in vulnerable situations: the kidnapping of Angelo de la Cruz raised concerns about the safety of Overseas Filipinos and the protective measures and mechanisms implemented by the government. Organized in partnership with the UP Asian Center, the “How Safe are Pinoys Overseas? a Forum on On-site Protection for Migrant Filipinos” aimed to identify existing measures and mechanisms that work for the safety of migrants, to find their gaps and recommend ways for improvement, and to share the best practices and new approaches, especially with non-State actors (CMA and FES, 2009). It was recommended that the approaches be multidimensional, since protection of OFWs looks at safety in terms of the personal, legal, occupational, and political aspects (CMA, and FES, 2009).

The feminization of migration and the accompanying vulnerabilities of marriage migration is another key theme that is often discussed in fora. CMA, for example, has partnered with the Commission on Filipinos Overseas on “Filipino Women in Intercultural Relationships: The Case of Filipino-Australian Marriages.” This particular forum featured an in-depth discussion on issues that Filipinas face in marriages with Australians such as adjustment, difference in cultural values, and difficulties in employment. It also identified areas where intervention is needed (Abano, 2006).

LINKAGES WITH SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES

CMA has ably reached different audiences via schools. For example, a partnership with St. Mary’s Academy in Pasay connects them with families of OFWs through workshops to raise awareness on the realities of migration and the rights of families of OFWs. Engagements like this allow CMA to directly connect with young children and in many cases, their guardians who care for them in the absence of both parents working abroad.

Universities provide neutral ground for the discussion of contentious, and often complex issues that require participation of most if not all stakeholders. Ateneo de Manila University, through the Department of Political Science’ Working Group on Migration has sponsored a number of RTD and fora on campus that allows for a wide ranging group of participants from all sectors to contribute to the development of recommendations in the migrant rights agenda.

One such agenda was to define the effects of Migration and Development. This led to a series of RTDs in 2012 on (1) Protecting OFWS (2) Migration for Development? (3) Developing the Local Economy alongside Migration, which brought together participants from the private sector, civil society, governmental agencies and the migrants themselves and highlighted the need for long term development planning and importance of return and reintegration policies. The series also published the proceedings of the RTDs, which were distributed to stakeholders and policymakers.

The RTD also unearthed new issues that were discussed in subsequent RTDs and fora held in the Ateneo de Manila campus. One of the most notable was 2017’s “Global Migration Trends” which utilized its Global Classroom in order to reach stakeholders abroad. This innovative forum was divided into two sessions, to capture two different time zones: the morning session connected with stakeholders from North America and the afternoon session which included conversations with stakeholders from the Middle East and the United Kingdom. Participants were able to provide real time feedback on questions from participants in the Ateneo forum on issues such as the current migrant crisis in Europe, the looming Brexit and the difficulties of Filipinos in the Middle East at the height of the “sex for flight” issue.
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MAINTAINING ONLINE PRESENCE

Similarly, CMA and the Ateneo Political Science WGM collaborated with Rappler.com on the virtual RTD #OFWRights: Duterte’s Migration Policy(https://www.rappler.com/move-ph/180117-ofw-rights-roundtable-discussion-duterte-migration-policy) which brought together representatives from the different government agencies, the academe and civil society to discuss the shifts in Migration Policy a year after Rodrigo Duterte took office in 2016. Opportunities such as the Ateneo Global Classroom engagement and the Rappler.com RTD enabled the participation of additional resource persons from embassies abroad and migrants themselves through the use of technology.

ADVANCING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF OFWS

The beginnings of CMA can be traced back to the initial lobby with other migrant groups for the passage of the Overseas Absentee Voting Law. Since this development, CMA has not only consistently pushed for a better quality of overseas absentee voting experience for Filipinos Overseas but has also pushed for better representation of these Filipinos in policy making and implementing bodies of government.

OVERSEAS ABSENTEE VOTING

CMA’s participation in the Overseas Absentee Voting campaign came largely after the initial push for OAV. Nevertheless, it sustained its non-partisan participation in promoting and safeguarding overseas voting as a form of political participation by Filipinos abroad.

With CMA registered, the immediate agenda was to continue the advocacy campaign to restore the right of suffrage of overseas Filipinos through the passage of an Overseas Absentee Voting Law by Philippine Congress. Time was of the essence because the 2004 Presidential elections was fast approaching. Finally, after 16 years of lobby work in Congress by various Filipino migrant groups and advocates, the law was passed on February 13, 2003 as Republic Act 9189 or the Overseas Absentee Voting Law (OAVL) of 2003. CMA was the focal group that coordinated with Congress for the CSO attendance in Malacañang for the signing of the law by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. The law paved the way for the preparations for the first conduct of the OAVL.

It was through solidarity and partnership on the OAV campaign that CMA successfully gathered the resources needed to sustain the advocacy campaign for the bill’s passage in Congress. This was made possible through the support of the UNDP under the auspices of the Consortium for Electoral Reforms (CER) and a bridge fund from the Christian World Service in New Zealand. The succeeding campaign on information and education on the OAVL in time for its implementation in 2004 was made possible through the pooling of resources from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), Commission on Filipinos Overseas and individual migrants rights advocates abroad.

Advocating for Overseas Absentee Voting (OAV) aligned with other agendas to protect migrant workers through the strengthening of policies. Along with the protection of migrant workers came the challenge of ensuring that they were able to exercise the political right to vote after the passage of the OAVL or RA 9189 in 2003.

In fact, it continued to lobby for the improvement of the law after its passage: one provision there which migrants wanted revised was the disqualification of Filipinos abroad who were permanent residents or green card holders in their countries of destination. Legislators contended that this was because the migrants were already on the road to becoming a citizen of another country and therefore should be disqualified from voting in Philippine elections.

CMA and other OAV advocates held that as long as one retained a Philippine passport, they should be accorded all the rights and entitlements as a Filipino national including the right to participate in Philippine elections just like any other qualified Filipino overseas. The contentious provision was deleted in 2013, the very first time the law on overseas voting was amended. Since
then, the lobbying for reforms on the other administrative aspects of the implementation of the law has continued.

While improvements to the law were lobbied for and considered, other aspects of OAV were being screened for possible revision. Ellene Sana described the early challenges of not just informing migrants of the new law but also assisting them in the voting process, particularly in areas with challenging requirements as in the Middle East:

“…it would not be so easy for our overseas workers even if we already have the law because like the domestic workers, especially in the Gulf, where their mobility was quite limited, you know they cannot just go in and out of the house, you know, go to the embassy. These are actually very challenging issues, how they can go to the embassy and register, how they can convince (their employers) that it’s worth (it), it’s a worthwhile thing to be involved (in), to remain involved even if they are already overseas.”

CMA has continued to monitor Overseas Absentee Voting in areas with a high concentration of Filipinos. It released the assessment: “Post-2010 OAV Elections” which observed the following issues related to OAV particularly Hong Kong and Singapore:

- Overseas absentee voter turnout was 24%, which was less than half of COMELEC’s expected 50%. This was because the problems found in the two previous overseas voting exercises were not addressed and resolved in time for the 2010 elections.
- One of the improvements seen was that in the 2010 elections, automated counting of overseas votes was introduced in Hong Kong and Singapore.
- Given that there was only an increase of 8% from the previous elections, the theory that presidential elections would produce more interest and consequently a higher overseas voter turnout was proven false.
- Filipinos abroad were discouraged from voting then because they were mandated to permanently return to the Philippines within 3 years following voter registration and participation. Failure to return had consequences: permanent disqualification from voting, stamping the passport with “not allowed to vote”, and criminal prosecution.
- Millions of OFWs were also undocumented and refused to go to a Philippine embassy or consulate to vote or for other needs.
- Sea-based workers have difficulties in registering and voting.
- Voter education and information dissemination was not prioritized.

The 2010 elections also indicated an increasing apathy and cynicism among Filipino migrants. These challenges have the CMA continuing to advocate for reforms for OAV implementation, including the need for more resources and technology to support the conduct of overseas elections with full confidence in the protection of the sanctity of the ballot and better representation for the issues of Filipino citizens abroad.

REPRESENTATION IN POLICY MAKING

Key to CMA strategy is to work with government, providing input into proposed policy and implementation strategies. CMA has done work in different policy areas such as insisting on the filling of slots meant for OFWs in the governing boards of the POEA, OWWA and other migration-related agencies and ensuring that the selection process should be open and in accordance with qualifications required.

CMA has likewise pushed for Amendments to OFW related policies, most notably the repeal of Sections 29 and 30 on the deregulation of labor migration under RA8042 and advocates for reforms in OAVL implementation.

Of late, CMA has also closely monitored the most recent iteration of the Magna Carta for Migrant Workers, RA 10022, with respect to the issue of mandatory insurance, and the section on money claims.

Their work has also shifted into other areas such as participatory performance assessments of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) that involves services to migrants and a similar assessment with the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) a year after. Activities
such as this require a higher level of trust and engagement alongside an existing relationship between the government agency and CMA. Ellene Sana believes that it is for the better: “it doesn’t stop us at the same time, from remaining critical when we need to be critical, but then we need to also give them a pat on the shoulder, and we are not also madamot sa pagbibigay nun.”

In engaging in this type of work, CMA has realized that being more effective means being objective in their view of government efforts and having more trust in government agencies. Ellene Sana put it in the context of lessons learned in engaging with government:

“Young young (That’s the) lesson that we learned for the last 15 years. We actually are becoming the facilitator or the bridge. For us to, not only for us to restoring our trust in government or we have to take them with us, they are the duty, how do you say duty bearers? As we are the rights holders. We are not here to take over their jobs, so the most that we could do is to always remind them do their jobs and do it properly, yeah and do it with empathy especially for the migrants, because what we are seeing is they sometimes act on it because ‘oh well this is my job, or I don’t want to be you know, blamed.’ You have to do it by heart, you have to do it, with, yeah, cliché as it may sound, we have to do it with a lot of empathy.”

ADVOCATING FOR THE PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE SECTORS

CMA has taken strategic stands in the protection of vulnerable sectors within the labor migration community. In doing so, the organization examines the domestic and international context prior to advocating reforms that potentially will have long term effects on the welfare of these vulnerable sectors which include domestic workers, those who are undocumented or “irregular,” or possibly disadvantaged because of the difficulties specific to their line of work.

You have to do it by heart, as cliché as it may sound, we have to do it with a lot of empathy.

Domestic Workers
(HSW reform to ILO 189 to Kasambahay Law)

CMA has lobbied for international conventions such as the Domestic Workers Convention. (“It’s Time for Decent Work for Domestic Workers!” 2011). This Convention would later be voted on at the 2011 International Labor Conference.

In returning to the rationale of supporting the International Convention CMA reiterates that it is important not just to have temporary bans on deployment because it does not address the vulnerable nature of the job. In pushing for convention 189 of the ILO in 2011 CMA thus promotes the message of “domestic workers
are workers and that domestic work is work.” It addresses, in a proper way, the vulnerability, the low status of Philippine domestic workers because as Sana put it “it’s very unfair to stop somebody from going abroad when you are not offering any viable alternative to the contrary” and such conventions will greatly support their protection while they are abroad.

Protection of Seafarers

While much of the advocacy is on land-based OFWs, CMA participated in awareness-raising of the Maritime Labor Convention in 2006. They also looked into the pending Magna Carta for seafarers in Congress and the blacklisting of agencies in violation of seafarers rights. CMA still sees a need to advocate for seafarers rights, despite a large well-organized lobby from the seafaring industry in general.

The Center was also the first group, globally, to organize a public forum on the Maritime Labor Convention (MLC) immediately after its adoption by the International Labor Organization on February 2006. The forum was co-organized by Rotterdam-based Philippine Seamen’s Assistance Program (PSAP) and was held in Cebu City and participated in by international experts on seafarers’ rights. Apart from looking into the situation of seafarers, CMA, in its advocacy for sea-based workers also take into consideration the plight of non-marine OFWs on board the vessel. Moreover, CMA also started to probe into the situation of the more vulnerable sea-based sector—the fishermen who are largely recruited informally.

ADVOCATING FOR FAIR INTERNATIONAL AND BILATERAL AGREEMENTS

The concerted efforts between government and civil society continue into CMA’s advocacy for fair international and bilateral agreements. In promoting these arrangements, CMA has gained a deeper understanding of the context of the need for constructive engagement between government and civil society, the importance of networks, and the emerging role of local governments.

CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY

This theme is picked up from the previous section, which highlights the importance of existing relationships and trust between civil society groups such as the CMA and key government agencies. This requirement is carried over into the international dimension where there may be a need to negotiate as a team with foreign governments. Ellene Sana reiterated, “In this respect you have to continue working with our own government to ensure that they do their job, so that they will be able to negotiate more effectively with other governments…”

She acknowledges that because of this international dimension of migration, there is a constant need to be aware of what is happening outside the country’s borders and to seek out platforms that offer avenues for civil society to engage not only with the Philippine government (because CMA can easily do that) but governments of countries of destination. The challenge remains not just in calling the attention of the countries of destination but also in the constant monitoring of unfolding international developments and “how these developments or opportunities will be seized by groups like the CMA to forward the (OFW) agenda.”

For example, CMA took the lead in the NGO engagement in 2008-2009 with the UN Committee on Migrant Workers (UN CMW) for the first validation of the Philippine government as a State Party to the International Migrant Workers Convention. This was followed by its second reporting in 2014 where CMA again took the leadership in the NGO engagement with the UN CMW. CMA also engaged other UN Treaty Bodies like the CEDAW Committee for the rights of migrant workers as well as the other mechanisms of the UN like the Universal Periodic Review and Special Procedures which we found useful in taking to task countries of destinations. CMA worked with the UN Office of the Secretary General in the advocacy for the abolition of death penalty. Their engagements with the UN were supported by the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines (CHR). From the
This is important for us because then it gives you a sense of whether your contribution to civil society is worthwhile. You know that the committee really sees it as we see it.

engagements with CMW, two publications were produced—a handbook for NGOs in engaging the CMW and the other was a CMW Treaty Handbook for the CHR. From the engagements with CEDAW, a compilation of various reports including CMA’s and other migrant NGOs’ that address women migrant workers’ rights.

In doing so, CMA reacquainted themselves with the provisions of the conventions, and how these can be used to further take the Philippine government to task. As a result many of the recommendations that were submitted in parallel or shadow reports to the committee were actually reflected in their recommendations. Sana remarked that: “This is important for us because then it gives you a sense of whether your contribution to civil society is worthwhile. You know that the committee really sees it as we see it.”

On the regional level, similar experiences were described with platforms like the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, and the Colombo Process and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with the same challenge of civil society engagement. The Colombo Process and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, the latter being an initiative of the GCC (Gulf Cooperating Council) countries particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia were important to CMA as most of our workers go to these countries. Visibility here was key.

CMA, as part of the regional network of the Migrant Forum Asia (MFA), managed to participate in the first Abu Dhabi Dialogue public forum in 2008.

According to Sana, it was a good occasion also to be working side by side with the Philippine government team in pushing forward issues related to the protection of migrant domestic workers. Irynn Abano also commented on the need to take advantage of the space given to NGOs in these types of fora: “Minsan they give space for NGOs, minsan they don’t. Whenever there is space, we participate or else we advocate outside with the different governments.”

Together with the MFA, CMA organized the Philippine-based Manila CSO Consultation on the Global Forum on Migration and Development.
2008 (GFMD '08) which was hosted by the Philippine government. The objective of this consultation was to adequately prepare CSOs (civil society organizations) for the GFMD to be held in Manila. In this consultation, several groups and foundations discussed relevant migration issues and gave recommendations for the 2008 forum.

CMA is an active participant to the yearly Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) and was allowed by the Philippine government to lead the process of selecting the 30 Philippine-based NGO participants to the 2008 GFMD held in the Philippines.

For the ongoing process on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, CMA also participates quite actively in various consultations and as observers during the series of negotiations. In the fifth and last interactive informal forum in May 2018 at the United Nations in New York, CMA was invited as panel speaker by the UN President of the General Assembly to speak about CMA activities on the ground.

She realized that there is a lot of complementarity in their work at the international level: “we can be very critical of each other within the context of national policies but when you are outside the country, you can actually complement each other’s work. And that’s how we’ve been doing it, not only in the Abu Dhabi but also in the Colombo process as well as in ASEAN.”

At the ASEAN level, CMA was the first group that organized a public forum on the 2007 ASEAN Declaration on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers. This was followed by CMA convening of a national consultation under the auspices of the Task Force on ASEAN Migrant Workers to input on the ASEAN Protection Instrument, the recommendations of which were submitted to the Philippine government and formed part of the consolidated TFAMW submission to the ASEAN. CMA was also the migrant NGO tapped for a project on ASEAN repository of migrant laws and policies for the Philippines which was undertaken by the Hawaii-based East-West Center as a support to ASEAN.

The Center for Migrant Advocacy has also been keen on pushing for bilateral labor agreements and social security agreements. Its report on this issue presented an analysis of the challenges the country faced in creating these agreements with other states, and forwards recommendations to overcome the challenges brought about by these agreements. CMA notes that the Philippines does not have bilateral agreements with all the states of employment and not all BLAs that have been signed are in force (2010). As of 2010, Social Security Agreements have become a priority for the government. This is because there is an expected steady flow of retirees composed of the OFWs who started overseas work more than 40 years ago (CMA, 2010). Challenges to crafting SSAs are “the incompatibility of the national legal frameworks and social security infrastructures of the states of origin and states of employment; lack of recognition or prioritization of migrant workers’ right to social security; limited social security benefits; exclusion of seafarers, self-employed and undocumented migrants; lack of gender perspective in accessing social security benefits; low level of awareness about social security among migrant workers; uneven utilization of benefits; lack of specific data and documentation on utilization of benefits; lack of clear guidelines on stakeholder participation; limited staff capacity of government agencies to implement its functions; and the lengthy period for the agreement to be developed, negotiated, and implemented.” (CMA, 2010)

The report also states that while BLAs and SSAs aim to protect the rights and the welfare of migrant workers, the same cannot be said for trade and investment agreements such as Free Trade Agreements and Economic Partnership Agreements (CMA, 2010).

One such example is CMA joining a Philippine Congress delegation to Saudi Arabia in 2011 to look into the situation of the OFWs in Saudi Arabia. CMA was also in several CSO delegations to the Gulf Cooperating Council Countries under the auspices of the Migrant Forum in Asia, the last one of which was in February 2018 on the invitation of the UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiritization (MOHRE).
THE IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKS

CMA has a broad spectrum of partners abroad especially in the Gulf and Arab countries. They consciously forge partnerships or linkages with organizations of migrants themselves: from Filipino organizations, or organization of other nationalities of migrants. In Lebanon, for example, they partner with INSAN, a Lebanese NGO with a special focus on the rights of children. On a bilateral basis, there are partners with Filipino or Filipino linked groups for example in Saudi, Qatar and Oman. In Europe, CMA has partners in Greece, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain among others and in North America as well.

These networks and partnerships are not only with government bodies but non-government organizations as well. These may also be with individuals, church based groups or other similar NGOs, according to Hazel Cotoner. CMA also understands the importance of reaching out to Philippine embassies, consulates and labor offices. Oftentimes, CMA travels abroad to meet members of the Diplomatic core by making courtesy calls and visits. This helps in prompting action when assistance is needed. A connection made via email or telephone call is facilitated when a personal connection has already been made. In meeting embassy staff, CMA becomes more aware of the needs of migrant workers and lobbies for changes in the structure and processes at post. Recently, one point that has been lobbied for in this respect is for the additional deployment of social welfare attaches in posts abroad where there are large concentrations of domestic workers. According to CMA’s Irynn Abano: “kasi malaki ang naitutulong ng social welfare attaché. Siyempre sila yung mas alam paano maghandle ng for example, psychosocial debriefing.”

Alongside these efforts, CMA has worked closely to improve conditions in various host countries with large numbers ofFilipino migrants or migrant workers. It has done so through various means:

CMA was one of the endorsers of the letter of protest to the South Korean Government on its treatment of migrant workers affiliated with the Migrants Trade Union. The representatives of migrants’ advocacy groups and labor unions came together under the Philippine Solidarity for Migrants Trade Union in Korea (PS-MTUK) to release this letter. The targeted and selective arrest, detention, and deportation of some members of MTU, including its president, were called a “blatant violation of the labor and human rights” (CMA, 2007). The letter called for the South Korean government to stop its crackdown on members of MTU.

CMA created a policy brief on the challenges faced by the Philippine government on repatriation during the Syrian Crisis. The objective of this policy brief is to influence policy formulation and implementation on the handling of Filipinos in conflicted areas (CMA, 2014). Comparing the operations with repatriation efforts from Libya in 2011, CMA noted that the Filipino community was highly organized
and the migrants were registered with the Philippine government. The private sector also played a big role in the evacuations. Most of the Filipino migrants possessed high-level skills and were employed in large multinational companies. The MNCs had more capacity to implement contingency plans than the individual employers in Syria (CMA, 2014).

In response to the previous years’ reports of exploitation and abuse of au pairs in Europe, CMA conducted a research on au pair migration policies and programs in Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Based on the findings of the research, recommendations given by CMA included Philippine and European governments reviewing their au pair programs, monitoring tools, and complaint systems, and fostering dialogue and coordination, especially when it comes to mainstream au pair issues such as illegal recruitment and human trafficking (CMA, 2014).

THE EMERGING ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Finally, CMA has taken to various localities to address specific concerns such as illegal recruitment, which may well be better addressed at the local level:

• The persistence of illegal recruitment is another reminder to remain committed to migrant protection. “A Call to Action: Know Your Rights, No to Illegal Recruitment and Trafficking” was held in Baguio City in 2007, and its purpose was to address migration specifically in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR). Aside from being an OFW-rich region, CAR also had thousands of citizens who became victims of illegal recruitment (CMA and FES, 2009). This forum aimed to discuss overseas migration in the region, the vulnerability of the citizens, especially women, to illegal recruitment, and ways institutions in the area can address the problem.

• Responding to “backdoor” illegal recruitment and human trafficking, and since migration must be handled not only at the national level but at the local level as well, CMA took the “OFWs, Irregular Migration, and Trafficking forum” out of Manila and had it in Zamboanga City. The goals of the forum were to address overseas migration specifically in Mindanao, identify the concerns on the area’s women migrants in relation to their rights and vulnerability to abuses such as illegal recruitment, irregular migration and human trafficking, and to give recommendations to regional and local governments and to NGOs on ways to protect Mindanao’s OFWs better.

CMA tries to raise resources and reach out to the local governments as the latter’s role becomes more prominent with RA 10022 in protecting current and potential migrant workers from illegal recruitment, human trafficking and the other pitfalls of seeking work abroad. One strategy is to invite local officials, barangay level or municipality level or city level to take part in the training for migrant rights advocates. According to Irynn Abano: “Kasi alam din namin na hindi nila alam halimbawa ang magna carta for migrant workers.” When there are opportunities to go to the provinces or countryside, CMA tries to maximize the engagement not only for migrant right advocates but also for local officials. LGUs provide venues and other means of support for training as counterpart for the training received.
Conclusion

Through the years, CMA has engaged key stakeholders in Philippine labor migration through strategies such as advocating via multi-stakeholder forums and maintaining an online presence, lobbying for policy reforms and capacitating the overseas Filipino citizen, and advocating fair bilateral and international agreements that consider critical and constructive engagement with governmental and non-governmental sectors, and international, national and local stakeholders in the protection of Filipino migrant workers abroad.

These sustained efforts through its 15 years of existence have contributed to the changing of the labor migration landscape both here and abroad by providing better protection and more equitable treatment for our overseas Filipino workers.

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CMA’s 15 years have charted the organization’s three main directions: policy advocacy (including effectively communicating its policy positions to the broad public in general and to specific stakeholders in particular and further improving stakeholding), direct assistance to distressed OFWs and their families and organizational development efforts to sustain and further grow its strengths and minimize if not eliminate its weaknesses.

**Strengthening Policy Advocacy**

CMA strives to better and systematically communicate its position on issues affecting migrant workers and their families on policy making and implementing stakeholders. For example, CMA continues to systematically submit CMA’s positions on priority bills to all relevant committees in the House and in the Senate as well as in the relevant government departments or agencies. This will also make known CMA and its work to more OFWs and their families – which is important in terms of providing them with another option to tap for assistance, especially when they encounter problems during their migration.

**THE ROLE OF MEDIA**

CMA also pro-actively channels its policy positions to the traditional media to magnify outreach to the broad public, including those thinking of or are in the process of applying for jobs abroad, OFW’s onsite and their families left behind as well as those who are in the country as balikbayan or have returned for good, willingly or not. Media can effectively prevent migrant rights’ violations but also promote their rights at any of the different
What is also important is for OFWs to realize that they can invoke the law, not only here but also abroad, to assert their rights and there is help that they can tap to do this, including from civil society.

stages of migration, including providing information on the government programs and services that they are eligible to receive. In the future, CMA will seek to more programmatically pursue media programs especially regularly provide them copies of its policy positions and information packages. While TV and New Media are steadfast partners for CMA’s information dissemination efforts, even radio continues to be useful, especially in the countryside, to those who are targets of illegal recruiters and traffickers.

On its own, CMA has also started work to improve its online channels, like its website, its Facebook and Twitter accounts so these can be maximized in disseminating its policy positions. Its partners’ websites are also potential channels for its policy positions to reach different stakeholders.

In addition, CMA will continue to hold public fora or round table discussions as well as use those of other organizations to ventilate its policy positions. Its dialogues with government officials as well as training sessions it conducts in different parts of the country likewise are channels of its policy advocacy.
NEW STAKEHOLDERS

CMA still needs greater stakeholding by relevant parties (be they individual legislators, political or partylist organizations, migrant organizations not only in Metro Manila but also abroad and in the countryside). This means responding to CMA requests for their position or at least relevant information and other inputs to advocate for or against policies on the table. CMA will continue to raise migrant stakeholding to strengthen migrants’ voice vis-à-vis the government. Their experiences and sentiments will continue to be systematically gathered from complaints and stories shared with CMA, thru interactions with them here and abroad or thru its online media channels. A newer network of OFW family organizations also contribute via activities like round table discussions, public fora and trainings. Such activities raise their political awareness and confidence towards increasing their voice and representation in policymaking.

Another key stakeholder in migration is the trade unions. While CMA continues to partner with several Philippine trade unions and federations, it has to work more to raise the awareness and commitment of trade unions and federations to also work for the rights and welfare of Filipino Migrant Workers. CMA also seeks to pursue joint activities with intergovernmental organizations like the ILO in its continuing work for the betterment of migrant workers globally.

KEY ISSUES

CMA also continues to engage the Philippine government and the global community on the SDGs. It is important to give the SDG discourse a migrant/family perspective because they make up a substantial community although sometimes dispersed in many communities. In particular, the SDGs can serve as the take off point in terms of addressing motherhood statements like there should be full employment as provided for by the 1987 Constitution.

CMA remains constant in addressing health and education and social protection issues that are relevant to Filipino migrants. So far, it has been actively involved with the Philippine Migrant Health Network and has recently taken part in brainstorming how OFWs and their families should benefit from the new Philippine Mental Health Law that is in the process of coming out with its IRR.

CMA has also begun lobbying for social protection in relation to negotiating social security agreements with destination counties as well as in relation to the lobby for a National Social Protection Law. This is given that most Filipino migrants come home when they are old, ill or disabled and often without any health or social insurance. Lobbying for such a law will provide especially returning or reintegrating migrant workers support as well as incentivize more OFWs, especially in their old, ill or disabled years, to return to the country.
Strengthening Direct Assistance to Distressed OFWs and Their Families

CMA strives to systematically hold accountable Philippine government offices, officials and frontline personnel, in the county or abroad, who violate the rights of OFWs, thereby contributing to the development of a human rights-based Philippine justice system. Likewise, its lobby and monitoring activities extend to the PH government abroad (POLO, DFA/embassies/consulates, executive agencies, local government units) to ensure that they effectively take task foreign employers and relevant foreign governments and/or its relevant offices for violating the rights of Filipino migrant workers. CMA has yet to systematize country specific information campaigns to help Filipino workers know their rights and how to assert these rights as per international treaties and laws of our country and their host country. This requires that the CMA study such laws, especially where there are concentrations of OFWs, particularly low skilled workers like domestic workers. It is important to determine what is just to a distressed OFW and compare what he/she gets to determine if he/she was fairly treated towards more effectively advocating social justice for all, including OFWs and their families. What is also important is for OFWs to realize that they can invoke the law, not only here but also abroad, to assert their rights and there is help that they can tap to do this, including from civil society.

CMA aims to raise the bar in case management in particular in terms of concrete gains for distressed OFWs, including just money claims and fair and timely benefits due them as well as OFW and the family realization they can in fact gain political points and build their self-esteem that will contribute to their empowerment. In CMA’s experience, migrant workers who share their stories have the ability to inspire other OFWs and their families and will help other distressed OFWs/families to also pursue their complaints and claims or file cases. It is important for OFWs to realize that they can win their cases and realize their claims, including justice. CMA will continue to ensure that case management is more than for OFWs and their families; that it is a joint learning experience in particular how to promote and protect their rights so that they will pursue their rights. CMA will capacitate and perhaps inspire distressed OFWs/families to help promote and protect the rights of other OFWs and their families and provide concrete support to distressed OFWs.

CMA puts a premium on growing networks and nurturing partner organizations and individuals e.g. to strengthen links with lawyers groups abroad, like the Lawyers Beyond Borders, and other migrant organizations, like the Patnubay and PLUDWHK and other friendly organizations abroad, to address the challenges of accessing and claiming justice for distressed and wronged OFWs.

Likewise, it will pursue capacity building for local partner organizations, including migrant communities and pro-migrant local governments in the communities. This will enable CMA to develop local partners in case management (and advocacy too) and help more OFWs and their families.
Sustaining Organizational Development

CMA has reviewed its human resources and available knowledge and skill sets vis-à-vis its requirements from the last three years up to 2020. It has also reviewed its organizational systems and revised or introduced new ones, including how to maximize existing apps to facilitate organizational processes. The board has brainstormed how to update its structure and hire a successor generation according to the identified organizational needs.

Through its internship and volunteer program, CMA has started looking at how to maximize the regular flow of both interns and volunteers with mutual learning and benefit in mind. Partnerships such as the one with the PACE of McQuarie University of Sydney, Australia has further given the organization insight into the sustainability and growth of these programs.

The Center has also started to review its existing networks and partners, here and abroad, particularly in terms of stakeholding in policy advocacy and in accessing and claiming justice for wronged OFWs. It needs to systematize the nurturing of its relations with these networks and partners towards mutually learning and beneficial partnership and empowerment of OFWs and their families, here or abroad.

Finally, in terms of financial sustainability, it has reviewed how material resources are being handled and maintained and how financial sustainability is being addressed. While CMA has met its financial obligations and has expanded its funding partners, it still has to work towards financial sustainability.

The Road Ahead

The terrain of Philippine migration is never set, and new obstacles and challenges are expected of a country whose 10% live and work abroad. CMA intends to hold steady and continue to work on its key strengths, regardless of the changing political, social or economic landscape, for the benefit of the main stakeholders in Philippine migration: The Overseas Filipino Worker and their families.

It is to the millions of Filipinos abroad that this book, and the past and future work of CMA is dedicated.