

# Frontlines in Migration Governance

A study on the response of the Philippine Overseas Labor Offices during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Table of Contents

### Chapter 1 - Introduction

Background of the Study.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	5
Objectives of the Study.....	6
Scope and Limitations of the Study.....	7
Review of Related Literature.....	8

### Chapter 2 - Research Framework and Methodology

Research Framework.....	13
Research Methodology.....	15

### Chapter 3 - Results and Discussion

Policies and Programs.....	18
POLO Implementation.....	22
Key Lessons.....	32
Compared to OFW experiences.....	33
Analysis of Results.....	35

### Chapter 4 - Recommendations ..... 38





## CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

### I. Background of the Study

In December 2019, an outbreak of pneumonia of unknown cause was in Wuhan, China was reported to the World Health Organization (WHO).<sup>1</sup> Later on, medical experts discover a novel coronavirus which we would come to know now as SARS-CoV-2. The novel coronavirus or SARS-CoV-2 causes the disease, COVID-19 which can be mild, moderate or severe.<sup>2</sup> Because of the newness of the disease, there was relatively little information that could be used to guide government action to prevent and mitigate the consequences of the spread of the virus. By March 2020, the WHO had characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic. The virus had spread to several other countries and the world as we know it drastically changed. Countries started restricting mobility, implementing physical distancing measures, placing cities in strict lockdowns, and closing borders. As healthcare systems struggled to keep up with the growing number of infections, economies had to step back and close down temporarily to keep people at home.

The impact of COVID-19 is far-reaching and unprecedented. It is a global crisis, one that affects everyone across the globe. In crises of such great scale, it is apparent that migrant workers are among the most vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic. Migrant workers comprise significantly larger shares of the working force in many countries. They serve at the frontlines, carrying out essential jobs in healthcare, transport, services, construction, and agriculture and agro-processing.<sup>3</sup> According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) reports of “discrimination and xenophobia against migrants and in some cases food insecurity, layoffs, worsening working conditions including reduction or non-payment of wages,

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, *Pneumonia of unknown cause – China*, Emergencies preparedness, response, World Health Organization, 5 January 2020, <https://www.who.int/csr/don/05-january-2020-pneumonia-of-unknown-cause-china/en/>

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization, *Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)*, World Health Organization, 12 October 2020, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19>

<sup>3</sup> OECD/ILO (2018), *How Immigrants Contribute to Developing Countries' Economies*, ILO, Geneva/OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264288737-en>.



cramped or inadequate living conditions, and increase restrictions on movements or forced returns (where they may be stigmatized as carriers of the virus).<sup>4</sup>

Amidst a global pandemic, support for migrant workers are still largely inaccessible if not nonexistent. They were the first ones to get laid off and furloughed with their wages unpaid. They are exposed to high-risk environments which increases their chances of getting infected with COVID-19 compounded by the fact that they lack access to affordable healthcare in their countries of destination. Further, their vulnerability is intersectional. They suffer different layers of abuse and exploitation and the COVID-19 pandemic did more than expose all these layers of discrimination, abuse, and exploitation. It has even exacerbated and worsened the situation of migrant workers around the world.

#### *Overseas Filipino Workers and the Pandemic*

Pre-pandemic, over 2 million Filipinos were employed overseas at any given year in the past decade and their remittances account for almost 10% of the country's gross domestic product.<sup>5</sup> Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) have been hailed as the modern heroes of the country for steadily keeping the Philippine economy afloat. The Philippine government denies institutionalizing labor migration as a policy for development and asserts that it's framework for migration governance is geared towards one objective: securing the rights and protection of the welfare of OFWs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the first response of the Philippine government was to arrange for the mass repatriation of OFWs back to the Philippines. Immediate relief in the form of financial assistance amounting to \$200 for OFWs affected by the pandemic was provided for by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). Aside from this, the Philippine government is continuing to facilitate the return, isolation, and quarantine of returning OFWs into the country.

OFWs and their families find themselves in precarious situations during the COVID-19 pandemic with their main source of income--remittances--

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<sup>4</sup> International Labor Organization, *Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic*, Policy Brief, International Labor Organization, 30 April 2020, [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS\\_743268/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS_743268/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>5</sup> World Bank, *Personal remittances, received (% of GDP) - Philippines, 2019*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=PH>



gone. As of September, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) has repatriated 195,224 Filipinos, 67,484 (34.6 percent) are sea-based workers, while 127,740 (65.4 percent) are land-based. The efforts to repatriate Filipinos affected by the pandemic are continuous and steadfast according to the DFA.<sup>6</sup> However, those who still remain overseas continuously face several vulnerabilities and risks.

For those who have returned to the Philippines through government-sponsored chartered flights, an immediate concern is augmentation of the income they have lost because of the pandemic. They now join the 7.3 million Filipinos in the country who are now unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>7</sup> For many of them, working abroad has brought a steady source of income to better their family's lives despite difficult situations. Now that they are home, many find themselves just as vulnerable as when they were abroad – if not more so.

#### *Philippine Government Response to COVID-19*

By January 2020, the Department of Health (DOH) has ordered tighter checks on inbound passengers as reports of an unknown illness spreads in China.<sup>8</sup> Despite growing concern and demands for a ban on travellers from China, the Philippine government had only issued a travel ban on China on February 2, 2020.<sup>9</sup>

After Malacañang announced the travel ban on incoming travellers from China, the DOH had announced that a 44-year old man from Wuhan, China, the second recorded case in the country, had died of pneumonia. This is the first recorded death in the country due to COVID-19.<sup>10</sup> On February 10,

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<sup>6</sup> Recto Mercene, *Repatriated OFWs nearing 200k with latest batches from Saudi, Lebanon – DFA*, Business Mirror, 27 September 2020, <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2020/09/27/repatriated-ofws-nearing-200k-with-latest-batches-from-saudi-lebanon-dfa/>

<sup>7</sup> Philippine Statistics Authority, April 2020. <https://psa.gov.ph/content/employment-situation-april-2020#:~:text=Unemployment%20rate%20rose%20to%202017.7,to%20the%20Philippine%20labor%20market.>

<sup>8</sup> CNN Philippines, *DOH orders tighter checks on travelers to PH as mysterious pneumonia spreads in China*, CNN Philippines, 5 January 2020, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/1/5/DOH-checks-travel-China-pneumonia.html>

<sup>9</sup> The Inquirer Staff, *Duterte orders travel ban, as PH records 1<sup>st</sup> virus death*, Inquirer, 3 February 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1223104/duterte-orders-travel-ban-as-ph-records-1st-virus-death>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



the country records its first ever COVID-19 recovery.<sup>11</sup> Several warnings and advisories are then issued by the Philippine government to Filipinos to avoid crowded places, large gatherings and festivities. It was only on March 08, 2020 when the government declared a state of public health emergency. By this time, evidence of local transmission of the virus had surfaced.<sup>12</sup> A few days after the declaration of state of emergency, the government started imposing strict lockdown procedures for the island of Luzon, and eventually for the whole Philippines. As of the writing of this paper in October 2020, several parts of the country is still in quarantine with varying levels of strictness.

As previously mentioned, mass repatriation of OFWs has been the most widely reported effort of the Philippine government regarding migration governance. Apart from this, an immediate financial aid of \$200 is distributed to OFWs both in and out of the country who have been affected by the pandemic. The DFA has been constantly posting public advisories regarding COVID-19 on its website and the different foreign posts have been disseminating information in their own information channels such as Facebook, etc.<sup>13</sup> The Philippine embassies, consulates and the several Philippine Overseas Labor Offices (POLO) serve as migration governance frontliners during the COVID-19 pandemic. They cater directly to Filipinos overseas who need assistance and information. The Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) have also been consistently providing aid for OFWs and their families through financial assistance, educational assistance, and repatriation assistance. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) has also been active in assisting OFWs who are repatriated to the Philippines. There are several programs and services available for Filipinos once they have returned to the country. While this is commendable and deserves much credit, the frontline services, programs, policies need to be noted as well.

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<sup>11</sup> CNN Philippines, *First coronavirus patient in PH recovers, discharged from hospital-DOH*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/2/10/Philippines-novel-coronavirus-first-case-recovers-discharged.html>

<sup>12</sup> CNN Philippines, *Duterte declares public health emergency due to coronavirus – spokesperson*, 8 March 2020, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/3/8/Philippines-public-health-emergency.html>

<sup>13</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs, *COVID-19 advisories, 2020*, <https://www.dfa.gov.ph/covid-19-advisories>



The frontliners of migration governance during a pandemic are your Philippine foreign posts. These are the Philippine embassies, consulates, and overseas labor offices. They directly cater to Filipinos while they are abroad and they are the primary duty bearers. While they are tasked with ensuring that Filipinos overseas are protected and assisted, they are not immune to the risks and effects of COVID-19. They are at the forefront, the line of fire, during the fight against COVID-19 together with healthcare workers and other essential workers. The environment they work in, the risks they take and the challenges they face in implementing government policies and programs need to be taken into consideration in further improving and addressing the many growing concerns of Filipinos during and post-pandemic. It is important to document the programs and policies, the issues and challenges of implementation, and the many lessons learned from this crisis ensure that we are more prepared the next time a crisis in the same scale as the COVID-19 pandemic affects Filipinos all around the world.

It is in the interest of not only the Philippine government but as well civil society and the private sector to look into the crisis-management and response mechanisms of the government at the countries of destination to better further the whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach to migration governance. Migration governance, at the end of the day, is not a responsibility solely and exclusively to be borne by the government. Government is the primary duty bearer of the task of protecting the rights and welfare of our OFWs but it is up to the whole of society to ensure that such task is carried out properly, sustainably, and humanely.

## II. Statement of the Problem

OFWs are among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. The year 2020 for some of them was a new chance to bring better lives for their families through seeking greener pastures abroad, instead they found themselves stuck in a foreign nation, unemployed, unpaid, and in danger. For OFWs abroad, their first recourse would be the Philippine foreign posts in their countries of destination. These are the Philippine embassies, consulates, and POLOs. These are institutions that are mandated to provide assistance to Filipino nationals abroad regardless of their migration status.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, these offices have been at the forefront of assisting OFWs with their concerns and problems, repatriation, etc. These agencies themselves are composed of Filipinos who are vulnerable as well to COVID-19, but their responsibility to cater to overseas Filipinos cannot fade into the background. It is during crises like this that their role in protecting OFWs are needed more than ever. To learn from the experience of the POLOs, during a global health crisis, is an important task to make sure that OFWs are better served and assisted in the event that a crisis of the same scale occurs in the future.

This study aims to assist in the task of documenting successes, challenges, and learnings in migration governance during a public health crisis. In particular, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What policies, programs, and services were implemented by the POLOs in relation to crisis-preparedness and management in the time of COVID-19?
2. What are the challenges that the POLOs encountered in performing their roles as frontliner of migration governance in assisting OFWs in the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What are the key learnings from the experiences of the POLOs from the COVID-19 pandemic?

### III. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To document the programs, policies, and services provided for by the POLOs to the OFWs in preparation, during, and after the pandemic;
2. To provide initial analysis on the implementation of such documented programs, policies and services provided by the POLOs to OFWs in preparation, during, and after the pandemic; and
3. To document key learnings and recommendations for post-pandemic policies to improve crisis-preparedness and management.



#### IV. Significance of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health crisis that seeped into every aspect of modern human life. The ramifications of government policy to respond to, undeniably, will last for decades more to come.<sup>14</sup> It is then imperative for societies to evaluate and learn from the experience of handling this crisis. This is especially important to do now, where the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented change into the world. While the world is starting to slowly adapt to these changes, there is still much that is unknown and uncovered with how the pandemic will play out in the future.

The findings of this study hope to add clarity and to the growing literature on COVID-19. It shall provide analysis to help guide future policy decision making of the Philippine government based on evidence and on-the-ground experiences of POLOs. The study primarily aims to document the experiences of OFWs and the POLOs in the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic so that the successes may be replicated, and challenges and issues resolved.

#### V. Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study only deals with information gathered from the POLOs during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 up to September 2020. More recent developments on the COVID-19 pandemic may not be reflected in the paper. The information will be gathered from interviews from pertinent government officials and employees regarding their experiences in policy planning and implementation. This shall be coupled with additional information from events-based surveillance of media reports. As much as there is a need for a global study on government response to the pandemic regarding migrant workers, this study only focuses on the experience of the Philippines and OFWs.

This study is part of a 3-year project of the Center for Migrant Advocacy (CMA) entitled, “Strengthening Capacities of Filipino Migrant

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<sup>14</sup> The Brussels Times, *Effects of the pandemic will be felt for decades says WHO*, 01 August 2020, <https://www.brusselstimes.com/news/124505/coronavirus-pandemics-effects-will-be-felt-for-decades-says-who/>



Domestic Workers and their Families.” The project is supported by AWO international, a German foundation.

## VI. Review of Related Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented change to the lives of OFWs. More than ever, they face exacerbated vulnerabilities compounded with restrictions on mobility that hinder access to programs and services. Some of the pressing issues and concerns that OFWs, and migrant workers of all nationalities face are high risks of infection, job displacement, loss of income, etc. The response of the Philippine government to the pandemic in the country itself had affected the situation of OFWs abroad.

### Exposure to COVID-19

For OFWs remaining overseas as they keep their employment in various host countries, they are vulnerable to the health dangers of COVID-19, with so far close to 10,000 OFWs so far testing positive and almost 200,000 having returned back to their home provinces.<sup>15</sup> Around 37% of OFWs have work classified as low-income, with a substantial proportion deployed to the healthcare sector due to the rising trend of Filipinos as a source of registered nurses.<sup>16</sup> For those working in informal sectors, they are more at risk with crowded living conditions and inadequate access to healthcare as social distancing is a privilege they do not have. Most workers are dependent on every part of their daily wage and cannot afford time off, therefore needing to remain attending work. If they intend to stay home, their living spaces are primarily informal accommodation spaces, if they do not have an employer responsible.<sup>17</sup> Although OFWs have been exposed to several epidemics in the

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<sup>15</sup> Jaymalin, M., 2020. Close To 7,000 Ofws Test Positive For COVID-19; 180,000 Now Back In Their Provinces. One News, [online] Available at: <<https://www.onenews.ph/close-to-7-000-ofws-test-positive-for-covid-19-180-000-now-back-in-their-province>>

<sup>16</sup> Manlangit, Mary, "The Hurting Heroes: The COVID-19 Crisis And Overseas Filipino Workers" The Diplomat (2020) <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/the-hurting-heroes-the-covid-19-crisis-and-overseas-filipino-workers/>>

<sup>17</sup> *Migrant-Rights.Org*, 2020. GCC Covid-19 Policies Need To Better Protect Migrant Workers From Infections And Other Related Vulnerabilities. Available at: <<https://www.migrant-rights.org/2020/03/gcc-covid-19-policies-need-to-better-protect-migrant-workers-from-infections-and-other-related-vulnerabilities/>> [Accessed 1 October 2020].



past, including SARS, Ebola, and MERS-CoV, the effects were limited in their reach with lower infection rates. This has led to a fear amongst Filipino permanent residents that OFWs are carriers for the virus, changing the way the country sees previous “modern-day heroes”.<sup>18</sup> To minimise the impacts of the disease around the world, OFWs cannot be expected to do this alone, and require high support for rent relief, hygiene and basic needs, as well as quarantining facilities.<sup>19</sup>

### Increasing Rates of Repatriation

In the week starting the 3rd of May, the Philippine government imposed a moratorium on flights in response to the large numbers of repatriates coming back into the country. The National Task Force Chief stated this was in interest of ramping up nationwide capacity to handle this influx.<sup>20</sup> The total number of repatriating citizens by May 6 was approaching 23,000, most of which were Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who had become unemployed as a result of the pandemic. Globally, there are 10 million Filipinos abroad and approximately 1 million leave the country each year for overseas employment, which is roughly 10 percent of the population, who are leaving in the promise of higher wages and better access to opportunity.<sup>21</sup> In May, Manila’s international airport was overwhelmed in their testing capacity, blocking flights temporarily to recover the backlog. While a dozen cruise ships were docked in Manila for several weeks, the workers were forced to quarantine onboard.<sup>22</sup> In early August, it was confirmed by the Department of Foreign Affairs that almost 125,000 repatriates had returned home, and in mid-September that number had reached almost 200,000.<sup>23</sup> In their statement the DFA said they “remained unwavering in its commitment to

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<sup>18</sup> Asis, Maruja, *Repatriating Filipino Migrant Workers In The Time Of The Pandemic* (ION UN Migration, 2020) <<https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mrs-63.pdf>>

<sup>19</sup> *Migrants-Rights.Org*, 2020. *Supra*.

<sup>20</sup> Manlangit (2020). *Supra*.

<sup>21</sup> Ilo.org. 2020. *Labour Migration In The Philippines (ILO In The Philippines)*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.ilo.org/manila/areasofwork/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm>> [Accessed 1 October 2020].

<sup>22</sup> Almendral, A., 2020. Crucial Yet Forgotten: The Filipino Workers Stranded By Coronaviru. *Nikkei Asian Review*, [online] Available at: <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/Crucial-yet-forgotten-the-Filipino-workers-stranded-by-coronavirus>> [Accessed 2 September 2020].

<sup>23</sup> Jaymalin, 2020. *Supra*.



bringing home our distressed national abroad wherever they are in the world".<sup>24</sup>

### **Economic Consequences**

While usually economic impacts in one area of the world are usually mitigated by the stability in others, this pandemic is a world-wide event and has impacted large geographic regions with disproportionate effects on certain industries.<sup>25</sup> This freeze in activity has made it clear how dependent the global economy is on migrant labor, however the response from host countries has been minimal despite the important role they will play around the world in rebuilding economic activity.<sup>26</sup> As the pandemic made its way around the world, the industries Filipino workers have gravitated to, such as cruising, tourism, and hospitality, have been the hardest hit without travel and social activities.<sup>27</sup> The flow of income into the country from OFWs forms a substantial amount of GDP, approximately 10 percent, and 35% of total financial flow into the Philippines. With such dependence on OFWs in the work around the world, and with 12 percent of households dependent individually on the income from OFWs, this will impact severely on the government's ability to respond with the necessary resources to assist those living around the world.<sup>28</sup> Additionally with large repatriation rates, there are limited jobs within the country and limited financial assistance from the state. The Labour Ministry reported in late August that OFWs seeking assistance had reached 600,000, including 106,200 that had repatriated. With increasing rates of infection this will only rise exponentially.<sup>29</sup>

### **Lack of Financial Resources**

In an effort by the Philippines government to support the Overseas Filipino Workers who could not afford to repatriate, the government provided

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<sup>24</sup> Ramos, C., 2020. Over 124,000 Overseas Filipinos Flown Home Amid COVID-19 Pandemic - DFA. *Inquirer.Net*, [online] Available at: <<https://globalnation.inquirer.net/190171/over-124000-overseas-filipinos-flown-home-amid-covid-19-pandemic-dfa>> [Accessed 6 October 2020].

<sup>25</sup> Almendral, 2020. *Supra*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> Manlangit, 2020. *Supra*.

<sup>29</sup> Bansigan, Jeff, "Commentary: Philippines' Returning Workers Are Heroes. Yet Many Are Stranded, Competing With Countrymen For Jobs In Manila" *Channel News Asia* (2020)



a one-time subsidy of a total of USD200.<sup>30</sup> This was granted to each individual OFW in April 2020 and has been the only Filipino government provision for those who remain overseas. The major issue surrounding this provision, or the lack thereof, is the disparity between the amount of money OFWs provide to the Philippines and the amount of funding the OFWs are obtaining from the government during this crisis. As mentioned in paragraphs above, these workers provide approximately ten percent of the Philippines GDP, and it is a feeling by many that their significant contribution to the Philippines economy is not being recognised in this time of crisis.<sup>31</sup> The OFWs who are entitled to this subsidy are those who live and work in what the Philippines government have deemed “priority” nations, such as the United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia and the United Kingdom; in total, there are twenty-nine nations on this list for eligible OFW payments.<sup>32</sup> To further this frustration, OFWs who have been placed under a “no work, no pay” schemes are not entitled to this subsidy<sup>33</sup>; essentially meaning, only those who are “regular or documented OFWs are those who possess a valid passport and appropriate visa or permit to stay and work in the receiving country, and whose contract of employment has been processed by the POEA or the POLO” have or will receive the payment.<sup>34</sup>

For those who have the funds to return to the Philippines, the testing and all-related expenses of OFWs, both land-based and sea-based migrant workers, are to be covered by the government; non-OFWs, including the families of returning OFWs, however, are to shoulder their accommodation costs.<sup>35</sup> These costs to the OFWs proving the USD200 subsidy may not be sufficient enough to justify the extent to which some workers must take to return home. To further this, many of those OFWs who have returned to the Philippines and endured the fourteen-day quarantine have made clear their

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<sup>30</sup> Department of Labor and Employment (2020) *advisory on dole akap cash assistance* accessible at: <http://www.nrco.dole.gov.ph/index.php/announcement/386-advisory-on-dole-akap-cash-assistance>

<sup>31</sup> Lorenzo, M., 2020. Commentary: Worst Time Ever To Be An Overseas Filipino Worker. *Channel News Asia*, [online]

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Filipino Times, 2020. No work, no pay' OFWs not qualified for Php10,000 cash assistance—DOLE. [online] Available at: <<https://filipinotimes.net/uncategorized/2020/04/09/no-work-no-pay-ofws-not-qualified-for-php10000-cash-assistance-dole/>>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Manlangit, 2020. *Supra*.



disappointment in the lack of organisation by the Philippines government and execution of the program, which will be addressed further below.

### **Global Crises impacting the International Communities**

These payments to OFWs are still being processed, as applications for the subsidy continue to accumulate, though the Labor Department has already disbursed assistance to some 86,000 OFWs.<sup>36</sup> It has become apparent that the money allocated to OFWs is not sufficient, and the Labor department is requesting for a higher allocation from the national government after receiving over 230,000 applications.<sup>37</sup> Adding further strain to repatriation or payment of OFWs, the explosion that occurred in Beirut, Lebanon in August 2020, which killed over 200 people, including 47 Filipinos, has affected the efficiency at which the Philippine government has been able to implement the repatriation or subsidization programs.<sup>38</sup> This is as a result of over two million workers living in the Middle East, and many of the areas resources now being allocated to aiding the recovery of the blast, the Philippines has now directed the majority of their focus towards repatriating the dead and injured migrants within that region, hindering the repatriation or support of migrant workers.<sup>39</sup> Further, it is assumed that given the intensity of the explosion, there will be an increase in affected OFWs in Beirut and surrounds.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> The Manila Times, 2020. Repatriation of OFWs is a national obligation. [online] Available at: <<https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/08/11/opinion/editorial/repatriation-of-ofws-is-a-national-obligation/753655/>>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



## CHAPTER 2 – RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

### I. Research Framework

In 2014, the US Government and the Philippine Government convened the international community through the Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) Initiative to address issues arising from the Libyan uprising as well as the floods in Thailand, and later Hurricane, each affecting hundreds of thousands of migrants.<sup>41</sup> In this process, several stakeholders were able to discuss and identify the different layers of struggles migrants have to face in times of crisis. As a result of this process, the Guidelines to Protect Migrants in Countries Affected by Conflict or Natural Disaster (MICIC Guidelines) was developed. While

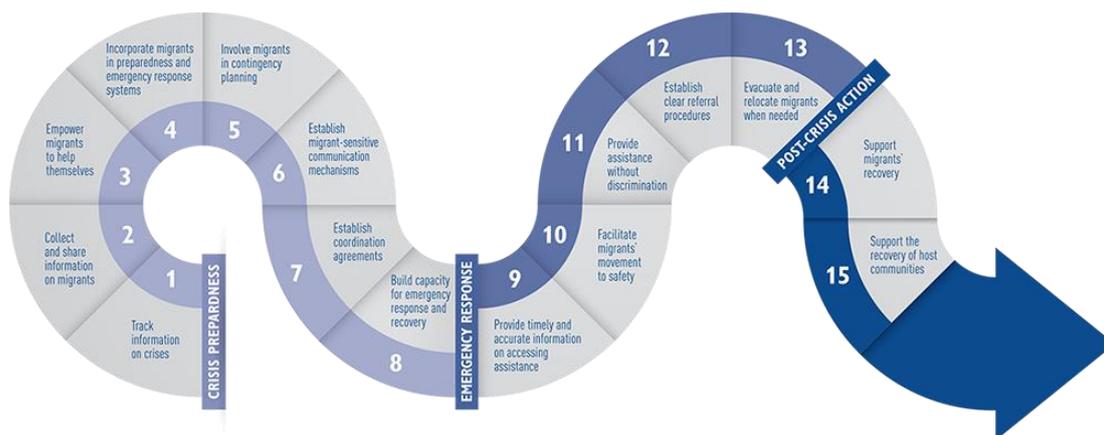


Figure 1. MICIC Guidelines

the MICIC Guidelines were primarily developed as a roadmap for conflicts and natural disasters, the principles, recommendations and practices outline and address obstacles migrants now face due to COVID-19.

The MICIC Guidelines lay down principles, guidelines, and practices that apply in a country experiencing a conflict or natural

<sup>41</sup> Labovitz J. *Protection of Migrants in Crisis is More Relevant Than Ever in the Face of COVID-19*. International Organization on Migration. (9 July 2020). <https://weblog.iom.int/protection-migrants-crisis-more-relevant-ever-face-covid-19>



disaster. They relate to crisis preparedness, emergency response, and post-crisis action. For the purpose of this study, these principles, guidelines, and practices serve as basis and framework for analyzing the Philippine government, specifically the POLO's, response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fifteen guidelines are targeted suggestions, organized by crisis phase and theme, that identify in broad terms the types of actions needed to better protect migrants. These guidelines are:

#### *Crisis preparedness*

1. Track information on conflicts and natural disasters, and the potential impact on migrants
2. Collect and share information on migrants, subject to privacy, confidentiality, and the security and safety of migrants
3. Empower migrants to help themselves, their families, and communities during and in the aftermath of crises
4. Incorporate migrants in prevention, preparedness, and emergency response systems
5. Involve migrants in contingency planning and integrate their needs and capacities
6. Communicate effectively with migrants
7. Establish coordination agreements in advance to leverage strengths and foster trust
8. Build capacity and learn lessons for emergency response and post-crisis action

#### *Emergency Response*

9. Communicate widely, effectively, and often with migrants on evolving crises and how to access help
10. Facilitate migrant's ability to move safely
11. Provide humanitarian assistance to migrants without discrimination
12. Establish clear referral procedures among stakeholders
13. Relocate and evacuate migrants when needed

#### *Post-Crisis Action*

14. Address migrants' immediate needs and support migrants to rebuild lives



## 15. Support migrants' host communities

### II. Research Methodology

#### A. Research Design

This study conducted a descriptive and exploratory approach to the subject matter. The COVID-19 pandemic, a relatively new phenomenon, has brought about unprecedented change that challenged many aspects of modern human life. Among the modern institutions that have been greatly affected are migration governance systems around the world. What this study has sought to do is to zoom in to the experiences of the Philippines, particularly the Philippine Overseas Labor Offices (POLOs), to describe, enumerate, document their experiences in responding to the needs of OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Focusing on the documentation of programs, practices, and experiences of the POLOs, this study employed an exploratory research design to identify key experiences that affected POLO's service delivery to OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### B. Data Collection Method

To achieve the goal of documenting the POLOs' experiences during COVID-19 pandemic, the research team conducted key informant interviews with 25 out of 35 Labor Attaches from October 2020 - November 2020. The interviews were conducted online either through Zoom Meetings or Google Meet. 2 out of the 25 interviews were conducted through a questionnaire as per the labor attache's requests. It is important to note that this study was conducted while the COVID-19 pandemic is still on-going. The 11 POLOs that were not interviewed had failed to respond to our requests for an interview.

*Table 1. Distribution of POLOs interviewed*

Region/Area	No. of POLO reps interviewed
Asia	9
Middle East	7



Americas & Trust Territories	2
Europe	7

Apart from the key informant interviews, the research team had also conducted media monitoring from November 2019 - July 2020 where the team searched the internet for news and other media reports on the situation of OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the team was also enlisted to gather information on official policy documents from official government channels or websites. A literature review was also conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the issues and concerns of OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To further substantiate information on the issues and concerns of OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research team conducted focused group discussions

OBJECTIVE	METHOD	SOURCE
Identify key issues and concerns of OFWs during the COVID-19 Pandemic	Primary data gathering - focused group discussions	Identified repatriated OFWs during the COVID-19 Pandemic
	Secondary data/documentary gathering	Media reports, journal articles
Identify COVID-19 policies directed to providing assistance to OFWs	Primary data gathering	DOLE issuances, DFA issuances
	Key informant interviews	POLO offices
Document difference implementation practices, challenges,	Primary data gathering - key informant interviews	POLO Offices



and best practices of POLOs		
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#### C. Method of Data Analysis

This study used descriptive analysis to describe the basic features of the policies to address the issues and concerns of OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The policies, programs, and services shall be listed down and enumerated to identify how the POLOs provided assistance to OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the purposes of this study, the responses of POLOs through the interviews will be generalized among all informants. Specific answers will only be attributed to specific POLOs for relevant points.

A comparative analysis was done to compare the implementation of policies and programs by the POLOs to the actual experiences of repatriated OFWs. A comparison shall be made between the data gathered from the key informant interviews with the POLO and the data obtained from the OFWs through the focused group discussions. Through this, the gaps and the points of convergence shall be listed and identified to formulate recommendations to improve pandemic response in a system of migration governance.

#### D. Ethical Considerations

All respondents were provided with an informed consent form specifying the purposes of the study and clause for confidentiality. The interviews and focused-group discussions that were conducted in the conduct of this study shall only be used for the purpose of this research and will not be distributed for any other purpose. Participants in the study consented either in writing (through the consent form) or gave their recorded verbal consent to take part in the study after being oriented on the purpose of the study.

The researcher declares no conflict of interest and commits to protect the reputation of public institutions and agents involved. All data gathered will not be used for purposes unrelated to the research matter. Data collected will be stored electronically in a universal serial



bus (USB) device that will be used only for the purpose of storing encoded data. Finally, transparency in terms of use of documents, gathered data, and records will be assured by sharing all useful insights gained from the study. Data sharing will be administered through a formal written data sharing agreement in compliance to the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

## CHAPTER 3 – RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### I. Presentation of Results

#### *Policies and Programs during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

##### 1. One-Country Team Approach

The country-team approach was formally adopted by Executive Order No. 74 in 1993. The executive order mandates “that all officers, representatives and personnel of the Philippine government posted abroad, including but not limited to Trade Commissioners, Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) attaches, trade, information, labor, military and cultural attaches, shall, on a per country basis, act as one country-team with a mission under the leadership of the Ambassador, who shall act as team leaders.”<sup>42</sup> This approach is further embodied in the Joint Manual of Operations in Providing Assistance to Migrant Workers and Other Filipinos between the DOLE, DFA, DSWD, and DOH. The Joint Manual of Operations enumerates the services available to overseas Filipinos such as: basic assistance to nationals and legal services of the DFA; labor services of the DOLE; social welfare services of the DSWD; and health services of the DOH.<sup>43</sup>

Under the Joint Manual, every post will have an emergency strategy, which it requires to modify every six months, or as the necessity

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<sup>42</sup> Executive Order No. 74, 1993. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1993/03/29/executive-order-no-74-s-1993/>

<sup>43</sup> Department of Labor and Employment, *Joint Manual of Operations in Providing Assistance to Migrant Workers and Other Filipinos a guidepost on government services – Baldoz*, 18 August 2015, <https://www.dole.gov.ph/news/joint-manual-of-operations-in-providing-assistance-to-migrant-workers-and-other-filipinos-a-guidepost-on-government-services-baldoz/>



develops. Additionally, the emergency plan will reply to the need for the evacuation of Filipinos to safety zones for temporary relocation, or until their repatriation to the Philippines.<sup>44</sup> It should include, among others, an outline of the nation; political and security condition; existing political climate, incorporating threats to political constancy; data and profile of the Filipino society; area directors with contact information; application details of the scheme; moving and evacuation centers; exit points and alternative evacuation ways; arrangement of the Crisis Management and Security Committee, involving contact data of Post's officers and personnel; support network; registration system; resource inventory; and budget requirements.<sup>45</sup>

## 2. Situation Monitoring

The DOLE through its Labor Attaches stationed at the 35 POLOs around the globe has been monitoring the situation of OFWs closely. The POLOs are required to report daily to the home office through the International Labor Affairs Bureau. These reports include the number of OFWs that were displaced or unemployed, the number of Filipinos who have tested positive, and the number of beneficiaries of the DOLE-AKAP.<sup>46</sup>

## 3. DOLE-AKAP

On 9th of April 2020, the DOLE issued Department Order No. 212 which provided the guidelines for the provision of financial assistance for displaced land-based and sea-based OFWs.<sup>47</sup> The program is a one-time financial assistance worth USD200.00 or Php10,000.00. It covers both Regular/Documented OFWs as well as Undocumented OFWs who experienced job displacement due to lockdowns imposed by their respective host countries or have been infected with COVID-19. *Balik-*

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Department of Labor and Employment, *DOLE monitors COVID cases overseas, assures aid to OFWs*, 29 September 2020, <https://www.dole.gov.ph/news/dole-monitors-covid-cases-overseas-assures-aid-to-ofws/>

<sup>47</sup> Department of Labor and Employment, Department Order No. 212, series of 2020. <https://www.dole.gov.ph/news/department-order-no-212-series-of-2020-prescribing-guidelines-on-the-provision-of-financial-assistance-for-displaced-landbased-and-seabased-filipino-workers-due-to-the-corona-virus-covid-2019-d/>



*Manggagawa* workers are covered so long as they were not able to return to their host country due to lockdowns. Qualified OFWs may apply and submit the required documents so long as they have not received any financial support/assistance from the receiving countries/employers. The application process was made online due to the constraints imposed by COVID-19 prevention measures.

As of 15th of August 272,000 requests have been approved (CNN Philippines, 2020) of 604, 403 applications. This is up from approximately 160,250 of 250,00 applications on the 23th of June (ABS CBN, 2020). This high demand for support has necessitated additional funding to cover the program, amounting to 1 billion PHP in addition to an initial 1.5 billion (GMA News 2020). Further funding was granted in August after President Rodrigo Duterte approved 5 billion Pesos of which much went to the DOLE-AKAP.

#### 4. OWWA Assistance

As of November 15, 2020, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) had provided 2,298 COVID-19 positive OFWs financial assistance worth USD200.00 or Php10,000.00. This is distinct and separate from the financial assistance provided under the DOLE-AKAP which targets displaced OFWs. The OWWA Assistance is directed to assist OWWA member OFWs who contracted the virus while they are abroad. The P10,000 cash assistance, drawn from the OWWA Trust Fund of member-OFWs, was given to each stranded OWWA member-OFW.<sup>48</sup>

#### 5. OFW Assistance Information System (OASIS)

The DOLE launched an online platform where OFWs may register to ease monitoring and delivery of service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through registering to the OFW Assistance Information System (OASIS), an OFW provides necessary information to the DOLE, POLO, OWWA and POEA which intends to enable the said offices to respond to the OFWs concerns and provide appropriate services in view of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>48</sup> Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, *OWWA cash aid to OFWs affected by travel ban reached P81M*, 20 February 2020, <https://owwa.gov.ph/index.php/news/central/83-owwa-cash-aid-to-ofws-affected-by-travel-ban-reached-p81m>



Among these services are repatriation, testing, quarantine, and transportation.

OASIS was activated in June 2020 as a tracking system for all OFWs who intended to return to the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to DOLE Secretary Silvestre Bello III, “an oasis symbolizes hope in a desert of trials. The system that we created aims to give our OFWs a ray of hope by ensuring that we provide them efficient and timely assistance to ease their anxieties when returning home in the midst of this pandemic.”<sup>49</sup> It is important to note, however, that while the OASIS is a great mechanism for OFW monitoring, there are discrepancies with the numbers recorded in OASIS which is largely due to underreporting of returned OFWs, and over registration of potential repatriated OFWs.

## 6. Repatriation

The repatriation of OFWs started with a group of 45 Filipinos from Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, the epicentre of COVID-19 in February 2020.<sup>50</sup> In the same month, two consignments summing more than 800 repatriated cruise ship personnel followed. The first batches of repatriates were accommodated in the Athletes’ Village in Capas, Tarlac for the compulsory 14-day quarantine.<sup>51</sup>

The number of repatriated OFWs expanded gradually until around April. Travel bans and the challenging world-wide health practices slowed down migration and made repatriation efforts hard. OFWs who need to go back to the Philippines must make sure health and migration clearances.<sup>52</sup> The restricted accessibility of global flights and the various flight cancellations have deferred the repatriation cycle. Furthermore, repatriated OFWs who can get home must agree before arrival in the Philippines with testing, self-isolate, ahead travel to their home territories, and an occasionally reluctant welcome by their local societies (Asis, 2013).

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<sup>49</sup> Department of Labor and Employment, *Tracking system on for returning OFWs*, 11 June 2020. <https://www.dole.gov.ph/news/tracking-system-on-for-returning-ofws/3221123213>

<sup>50</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs, *DFA repatriation team arrives in Wuhan; prepares to bring home Filipinos in China*, 06 February 2020, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/dfa-releasesupdate/25867-dfa-repatriation-team-arrives-in-wuhan-prepare-to-bring-home-filipinos-in-china>

<sup>51</sup> Asis, Maruja, *Repatriating Filipino Migrant Workers In The Time Of The Pandemic* (ION UN Migration, 2020) <<https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mrs-63.pdf>>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



As the quantity of arrivals expanded, so did the issues and concern levels of OFWs. Though a considerable number of the repatriated OFWs had lost their occupations, they additionally incorporated those whose agreements had finished. Stressed employees were remaining in shelters and those getting back for a get-away, just as the individuals who decided to get back to their home country.

According to the DFA, 204,4481 Filipinos have been repatriated as of October 4, 2020.<sup>53</sup> Repatriation of overseas Filipinos are shouldered by either the Philippine government, the employers/placement agencies of the workers, or the workers themselves. On the part of the Philippine government, the chartered flights were paid for through the DFA Assistance-to-Nationals Fund.<sup>54</sup>

## A. POLO Implementation

### 1. Preparation

Through the one-country-team approach, the POLOs prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic in collaboration with their heads of mission--whether it be the Ambassador or Consul General. The initial preparations and meetings to address the then unknown impact of the COVID-19 to overseas Filipinos in general had started to pick up around February 2020 - April 2020. During this period, the different Philippine missions convened meetings with the different offices under their jurisdictions to map out contingency plans for COVID-19. While news of an unknown disease had broken out in Wuhan, China in November 2019, the different posts had responded to this threat upon the discovery of COVID patients in their areas of jurisdiction. Majority of POLOs interviewed started setting out contingency plans for COVID-19 once news of a COVID patient had been discovered in their area of jurisdiction.

However, it is worth noting that all of the POLOs interviewed have been closely monitoring the progression of the outbreak in China as early as

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<sup>53</sup> Consuelo Marquez, *DFA repatriated more than 200,000 OFWs during pandemic*, *Inquirer*, 04 October 2020, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/191403/dfa-repatriated-more-than-200k-filipinos-overseas-during-pandemic>

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*



November 2019. The DOLE had been consistent in sending advisories to the different POLOs to ensure that they are up-to-date with the developments of the outbreak. Issuances regarding taking precautionary measures were also sent to the POLOs. Labor Secretary Bello also sent instructions to monitor the situation in the host countries. Apart from this, upon the classification of COVID-19 as a pandemic, the DOLE had asked for the POLOs to come up with a projection regarding the number of displaced OFWs. The POLOs were asked to estimate how many land based OFWs may lose their jobs either temporarily or permanently.

Overall, POLOs affirm that the policies in place regarding crisis management which are embedded in the Joint Manual of Operations. Although the different POLOs are more prepared to handle other types of crises (ie. natural disasters, political conflicts, terrorist attacks, etc.), basic contingency plans work as a starting point for POLOs. For example, POLO Libya, where the country has been in a state of civil war since 2014, has shared that since they have been adapting to the crisis in Libya, there are several mechanisms that they have that are applicable to COVID response. POLO Dubai, Singapore, POLO Hongkong and the MECOs in Taiwan attest that the previous experiences of their host governments in responding to previous private health crises such as SARS and MERS-CoV had aided in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous experience in dealing with infectious diseases previously gave some POLOs a headstart on the first steps to take such as limiting personal interactions, procuring hygiene kits, coordinating with the host government, etc.

As to the matter of preparing OFWs themselves in cases of emergency crisis situations, the research looked into the conduct of the Post-arrival Orientation Seminar (PAOS) at the POLO. Majority of POLOs conduct the PAOS. However, as what has been noted before by many others, there is difficulty in gathering OFWs once they arrive in the host country for the conduct of PAOS. This is especially difficult in countries where Filipinos enter the country through other modes (ie. family reunification) in which cases, they do not go through the POLO upon arrival. There are posts, such as the POLO Dubai, that conduct PAOS monthly pre-COVID. The PAOS contains general information on the culture and tradition of the host



country. Most POLOs admit that the PAOS, in general, aims for adjustment and not necessarily crisis preparedness. What is given during the PAOS are reminders to be updated with the issuances of the POLO/Embassy and the contact numbers which will be important in an emergency. It is worth noting that there are POLOs that incorporate financial literacy and values into the curriculum of PAOS. This is emphasized in most of the interviews as crucial especially during a time of a pandemic where OFWs are displaced for a substantial amount of time without pay.

## 2. Emergency Response

### a. COVID-19 prevention measures

Most, if not all, of the interviewed POLOs employed either an alternative working scheme or a work-from-home arrangement to lessen the risk of infections within their ranks. It was important for the POLOs to ensure that their staff and officers will be healthy and available to attend to the clientele of the POLOs--the OFWs. For the POLOs, they cannot risk themselves because precisely they work at the frontlines for OFWs. If the POLO is shut down, serious setbacks in the delivery of immediate assistance to OFWs will occur.

The interviewed POLOs also had to shift the delivery of most services from a personal, face-to-face approach to a digital and mostly online interaction. There are instances where the OFWs would really prefer to visit the POLO (when restrictions have been lifted/eased) but POLOs highly encouraged for OFWs to set an appointment, if possible, or to reach the POLOs through their social media accounts (Facebook, Whatsapp, email, etc.)

For POLOs who also had shelter facilities that housed distressed OFWs, additional and stricter COVID-19 prevention measures needed to be implemented. For POLO Dubai, the people in the shelter had to undergo swab tests. Like other POLOs, they also distributed vitamins and hygiene kits to OFWs. In POLO Oman, where the shelter had COVID-19 positive OFWs, effectively managed the situation by contacting proper



authorities in the host government. Fortunately, everyone recovered. POLO Jeddah relay that during the pandemic, OFWs still kept coming to the shelter. Because of this, the POLO had to implement strict quarantine measures for incoming OFWs to the shelter. Fortunately, the number of OFWs in the shelter has greatly decreased as repatriation operations resumed.

a. Financial assistance distribution

Both the DOLE and OWWA provided for a one-time financial assistance to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to OFWs. Among the identified challenges that were encountered by the POLOs include the difficulty of online applications for OFWs, screening of thousands of applicants, and the distribution process to grantees.

OFWs are said to be very adept with using online platforms such as social media. Technology and the internet have eased in increasing connectivity of Filipinos around the world. For the DOLE-AKAP, applications are online and the requirements to be submitted are done through email correspondence. It is revealed by some POLOs, especially where the OFW population is relatively older and are employed in elementary occupations, that OFWs faced challenges in submitting applications online. The POLO staff needed to guide OFWs in the step-by-step process of uploading required documents through email. There are instances where the OFW would request if the documents may be sent through Whatsapp or Messenger. This took up most of the time of POLO staff handling the applications for DOLE AKAP.

It is worth mentioning that the number of applicants per POLO varies. POLO Dubai had granted 21,661 beneficiaries out of almost 98,000 applicants (some applications are still pending). POLO Qatar relays that they have granted 14,492 beneficiaries out of 26,532 applicants. POLO Jeddah reports an estimate of 10,000 beneficiaries of the DOLE-AKAP in their jurisdiction. POLO Oman reports 9,602 beneficiaries. POLO Bahrain reports that they have distributed the DOLE AKAP to 7,978 OFWs. POLO Milan has distributed the DOLE AKAP to 6,830 beneficiaries. POLO Rome distributed to less than 2,500 beneficiaries. POLO Hongkong has distributed the DOLE AKAP to around 2,100 beneficiaries. POLO Madrid has



distributed to more than 1,000 beneficiaries POLO Singapore has around 1,800 DOLE AKAP beneficiaries. POLO Toronto distributed the program to 694 approved applicants out of 752 who applied. MECO Kaohsiung had granted 75 applications as of October 26, 2020.<sup>55</sup> The enumeration of beneficiaries in this paper is not exhaustive.

The amount of applications that POLOs receive have also affected the office's staff. Due to the demand and the urgency of the program, the staff needed to focus and log more hours on the distribution of the assistance programs. It is worth noting that some POLOs received additional manpower support to assist them in the distribution of the program. Some POLOs also enlisted the help of Filipino Community leaders to assist OFWs who were having a hard time applying for the DOLE-AKAP.

The actual distribution of the money to the beneficiaries also proved to be a challenge especially for POLOs with large areas of jurisdiction. The DOLE-AKAP was distributed either through bank-to-bank transactions, remittance centers, personal distribution, and other modes of distribution. The mobility restrictions of COVID-19 regulations proved to be a challenge in the distribution. POLO Dubai partnered with remittance centers in their jurisdiction so that beneficiaries would not need to travel hours just to reach the POLO. It also reduced physical interaction between the POLOs and the OFWs. POLO Geneva raised the issue of distributing the program to beneficiaries who did not have personal bank accounts. Since their beneficiaries were spread through their areas of jurisdiction, namely Czech Republic, Poland, and Switzerland, it was difficult to personally distribute it to everyone. They resolved the issue through allowing the beneficiaries to receive it through other channels that they trusted (i.e. employers' or friends' bank accounts). POLO Israel also encountered the same issue. POLO Jeddah had also encountered difficulty in distribution due to the large land area under their jurisdiction. POLO Libya, on the other hand, encountered problems with the flow of the funds for the DOLE-AKAP since the banks are situated outside of the country. Despite these difficulties, the POLOs were able to distribute the program to OFWs under their jurisdiction and they continue to do so.

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<sup>55</sup> Interviews with different POLO Representatives from October 2020 – December 2020.



Regarding the implementation of both the DOLE AKAP and the OWWA COVID-19 financial assistance program, it seems that there is no uniform regulations as to the availability of both programs to OFWs. While there are POLOs who affirm that an OFW can avail of both the DOLE AKAP and the OWWA COVID-19 financial assistance program, there are POLOs that maintain a rule that if an OFW has availed of the DOLE-AKAP, they are no longer eligible for the OWWA COVID-19 financial assistance program. Upon further research, the research team was not able to find any issuance from OWWA regarding the guidelines of its financial assistance program.

#### b. Displacement monitoring

There are a handful of POLOs who utilized online surveys to monitor the situation of OFWs in their areas of jurisdiction. POLO Rome, Madrid, Libya and Milan were some of the offices that implemented a dedicated survey that is distinct and separate from the DOLE-AKAP. Some POLOs inquired and surveyed Filipino Communities informally to assess the situation of OFWs in their jurisdictions. There also are POLOs which gather information on the situation of OFWs from the foreign recruitment agencies, foreign employers, and manning agencies. To get a clearer snapshot of the situation of OFWs in terms of employment, POLOs maximize the channels of communication available to them.

### 3. Communication strategies

#### *To OFWs*

POLOs have learned to maximize the use of social media to spread information on host country COVID-19 policies and regulations, COVID-19 situation in the Philippines, and the available programs and services of the Philippine government. The POLOs utilize the Facebook Pages of the Philippine Embassies or Consulates. The POLOs who have their own dedicated Facebook pages also utilize this platform to reach more OFWs.



Apart from the utilization of social media platforms, POLOs are able to communicate with OFWs through the several Filipino Community Organizations in the areas of jurisdiction. Most POLO have established strong networks and partnerships with the Filipino community in their jurisdictions. Some hold regular Zoom meetings with the Filipino Community leaders, while others keep in touch with OFWs through online webinars through Facebook. The online webinar topics span from *Kamustahans*, financial literacy, skills learning, etc. POLO Geneva, for one, engages with OFWs on the topic of financial literacy through recording “talk-show” format webinars.

The POLOs also endeavor to personally reach OFWs through calls and messages when possible. All POLOs have kept their hotlines open 24/7 and have received a consistent slew of queries from OFWs.

#### *To coordinating agencies and departments*

Regarding the referral mechanisms, POLOs did not encounter any issues with communication with the home office and other national government agencies in the Philippines. POLOs are requested to report daily to the DOLE as to the situation of Filipinos and the developments in their countries of destination. There are also reported regular meetings with the DOLE to ensure that all issues and requests are met.

It was noted by some POLOs that there are only noticeable delays when the Philippine office/agency they are coordinating with have been ordered to suspend operations temporarily because of a COVID-19 patient in the office. This was something that had been expected since everyone was affected by the pandemic.

#### *To host country counterparts*

Bilateral labor agreements, generally, do not provide a crisis-response system in collaboration with the host countries. No formal and official agreement has been made with any host country regarding a pandemic response. However, POLOs report that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the host governments have been consistent in relaying information regarding policies, regulations and COVID-19



cases in the country. While there are some countries such as Canada, that protect the privacy of the COVID-19 patients, there are host countries that voluntarily inform the Embassy/Consul General whenever a Filipino worker has tested positive for COVID-19. There are also POLOs that have linkages with their host government counterparts.

Information sharing between governments is key to effectively assist migrant workers during a crisis. One of the identified challenges in information sharing are the data privacy laws of certain host countries. The identities and nationalities of COVID-19 patients are often not shared by governments in pursuance with their data privacy laws. This is pronounced in the countries of Canada and Australia, among others. For POLOs who encountered strict data privacy laws, tracking and monitoring OFWs who contracted COVID-19 was done through self-reporting by OFWs, the Filipino community organizations, or by their foreign employers/agencies.

#### 4. Labor complaints and conciliation mechanisms

During the COVID-19 pandemic, while cities were on lockdowns, labor violations and complaints continue. Most POLOs relay that while at some time during the initial lockdowns in their countries of destination, they continue to attend to labor complaints of OFWs. The manner of resolving labor complaints however, did not drastically change as prior to the pandemic, the POLOs have already utilized online and phone calls to the employer or agency in the host country. The POLOs note that video-conferencing is now being commonly used to conciliate.

Labor complaints that are being reported to the POLOs are mostly on reduced working hours or reduced pay, temporary or permanent termination of employment, no food or accommodation, and non-payment of wages/termination pay. The POLOs' goal, especially during these times, is job preservation. As much as possible, the POLO balances the interests of the employer and the worker. In cases of temporary unemployment or reduce pay and working hours, the POLO tries to explain to the worker that such circumstances are brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, POLOs still



reiterate to the employers their responsibilities under the signed employment contracts with the OFWs.

#### 5. Psychosocial Services

The COVID-19 pandemic did not only affect physiological health of people but it also had ramifications on mental health. OFWs in particular experience anxiety over many things—they worry about the uncertainty of their situation and the situation of their families back in the Philippines. There are several media reports on suicides committed by OFWs while in isolation. In response to the anxiety brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, the POLOs assist OFWs personally through taking the time to listen and talk to them. Welfare officers in the POLO are primarily tasked to attend to these concerns. If there is a need for professional help most POLOs have partners and networks to non-government organizations within the host country. The POLOs also share that Filipino health professionals have extended a hand in accommodating mental health concerns of OFWs.

For the POLO staff, not much has been shared regarding how the POLOs systematically take care of their own mental health wellness. Some POLOs implement a buddy system to ensure that even if they are working from home, staff are not left alone and are checked upon by other staff.

#### 6. Undocumented workers

The POLOs categorize undocumented workers further in the context of the regulations in the host countries. Singapore, for example, does not have any undocumented workers in the strict sense that the host country does not recognize the existence of such workers. There are POLOs however, that find there are documented workers in a sense that these people have adequate documentation required by the host government but did not go through the Philippine system for overseas employment, ie. POEA. Generally, undocumented workers are referred to the Assistance to Nationals component of the DFA. However, there are still several programs that some of the POLOs provide for undocumented OFWs. There are POLOs



that deem them still eligible for the DOLE AKAP provided that they are able to submit the required documentation such as proof of employment, etc.

## 7. Notable Practices

Given that one of the huge impediments to distributing assistance to OFWs are the mobility restrictions and limited manpower, the POLOs sought to be creative in order to deliver aid to OFWs in their respective jurisdictions. POLO jurisdictions span several miles of land (and sea) that house thousands of Filipinos. Personal deliveries and distribution of food and financial assistance to OFWs is not viable and would render the POLO inefficient.

POLO Madrid in Spain made use of cashless transaction technology to provide food assistance to OFWs. Instead of the POLO procuring, packing and delivering the food items themselves, they partnered with Filipino stores in Madrid. They distributed food vouchers to OFWs through online communication. The vouchers were codes that OFWs can use to buy food items that they need in the Filipino grocery stores that the POLO has partnered with. A similar thing was practiced by POLO Canberra in Australia. In Canberra, where the POLO is tasked to serve OFWs in the whole of Australia, the POLO instead of distributing food items, provided for food cards. The food cards were prepaid by the POLO to enable OFWs to buy the food items they needed. To resolve mobility issues and limited manpower, POLO Jeddah enlisted the assistance of their “area coordinators”<sup>56</sup> to distribute food packages to OFWs around their jurisdiction. Since the POLO is not able to travel and deliver the food packs themselves, Filipinos who had vehicles of their own volunteered to help and assist the POLO.

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<sup>56</sup> Area coordinators are Filipino community leaders/point persons in Jeddah. They are officially called area coordinators because technically associations are not allowed in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Freedom to organize and associate is limited in Saudi Arabia.



## B. Key Lessons

The POLOs were also asked about the key lessons they think are important to be considered in rethinking and reevaluating a migration pandemic response. Among the key insights of POLO are:

- Digitization of services is necessary and feasible

For the longest time, governance has been trying to achieve paperless transactions and to start digitization of all migration-related service. It has been recognized that digitization is key to make migration governance accessible to OFWs given the global nature of migration. However, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic there had been several issues surrounding digitization. The move to shift to online services has been slow but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the POLOs were forced to shift to digital or e-governance. The POLOs had to make use of information technology, the internet and social media platforms to reach their primary clients. The POLOs had to get Zoom Meetings subscriptions to enable video-enabled communication with stakeholders and partners at a time where physical conferences and meetings were not possible. New and creative ways of delivering assistance had to be made to ensure that the POLO's operations are not severely crippled by the lockdowns in the areas of their jurisdiction.

- Support from host government is crucial

The host governments are usually non-discriminatory in catering to COVID-19 positive OFWs. Even if they are migrant workers, so long as they are residing in the host country, they are provided with essential medical support for their recovery. It is important as well that the host government is transparent and open to sharing information with the POLOs regarding the situation of OFWs in the country. It is to be noted that where host governments have effectively managed the virus, the POLOs encountered few challenges and interruptions in service delivery.

- Clear and consistent directives



Most POLOs also point out that there must be clear and consistent directive and information both from the host country's government and also from the Philippine government. They note that during a public health crisis, it is very important to underscore first the health and safety of people through listening to medical field experts.

- Documentation of experiences from previous public health crises

There are POLOs who are assigned in countries that had already experienced a public health crisis albeit much smaller in scale than the current COVID-19 pandemic. In 2003 and 2012, SARS<sup>57</sup> and MERS-COV<sup>58</sup> both affected several countries, respectively. Both SARS and MERS-COV were highly infectious diseases that also cause much alarm in the migration sector. However, when asked about whether the POLO's experiences then had helped them now, no definite answer was given. The POLOs highlight the need to document their experiences to further inform POLOs in the future.

### C. Compared to OFW experiences

#### *Information*

Apart from the key informant interviews, the research team also gathered information on the actual experiences of returned OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked about where the returned OFWs sourced information on the COVID-19 situation and government programs and services, OFWs affirm that their primary source of information is social media—more specifically, Facebook. Facebook sourced information are often from the shared posts of friends and family. Most of the participants, however, did not get information from the official accounts of the embassy, consulate or POLOs.

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<sup>57</sup> The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was first identified in 2003 in China. [https://www.who.int/health-topics/severe-acute-respiratory-syndrome#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/severe-acute-respiratory-syndrome#tab=tab_1)

<sup>58</sup> The Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV) was first identified in Saudi Arabia in 2012. [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/middle-east-respiratory-syndrome-coronavirus-\(mers-cov\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/middle-east-respiratory-syndrome-coronavirus-(mers-cov))



Apart from friends and family, the participant OFWs also acquired information on the COVID-19 pandemic through their employers and the host government through mainstream news outlets. However, one participant shared that the POLO was able to personally visit their workplace to inform them. Information materials that they can keep or go back to were not given.

#### *Relief and Assistance*

The participant OFWs also said that they learned about DOLE AKAP from their co-OFWs and social media accounts of their friends that shared information about it. Most of the participants only applied for the DOLE AKAP upon returning to the Philippines. Although most of them availed of the program, only few were able to receive cash assistance despite them being eligible. It is either that they do not receive a reply at all, or they are informed that the DOLE-AKAP funds have been exhausted already. While others said that they are still waiting for reply about the status of their application and still looking forward to receive any assistance from the government. As for food assistance, there are participants that have received food packs from the POLOs and from Filipino communities abroad.

#### *Repatriation*

Repatriation for the participant OFWs were mostly shouldered by their employers. If it were not covered by their employers, participants had to pay for their flights back home out of their own pockets. One participant said that they were able to secure a flight, but it took them 7 months with no work.

#### *Recommendations of participant OFWs*

Participant OFWs relay that they think the POLO should do more efforts on information dissemination. They should also do monitoring so they can easily locate and communicate with OFWs especially at times like this. Mediums that are more readily accessible to OFWs should be utilized. Not only should information be disseminated but it must be designed to be user-friendly and should be easily understood by target audiences (i.e. OFWs). Social media accounts of POLO can



be better maximized if staff are replying to the inquiries of OFWs. Participants also recommend adding more staff specially to countries with significant number of deployment so they can easily monitor, connect, and assist.

Participants also recommend that the POLOs should be able to connect and empathize with all OFWs they encounter. The precarity and uncertainty of the crisis affects everyone differently. Communication with OFWs must be transparent, clear and accommodating. A participant relays an incident where an OFW witnessed that a staff of POLO is shouting or not treating OFWs properly especially those in the elementary job category like MDWs.

## II. Analysis of Results

The COVID-19 pandemic affected all aspects of migration governance. The newness of such crisis to most systems triggered a series of changes needed to ensure that essential services to migrants while complying with health and safety protocols. After all, no one is immune to the virus—compliance with health and safety protocols for COVID-19 prevention is essential both for service providers and the service beneficiaries. The series of changes that were identified early impacted situation of OFWs greatly. In sum, the study of the information gathered provides basis for the following analysis:

- *Full preparedness for a global public health crisis was not anticipated due to the unprecedented changes the COVID-19 pandemic brought.*

Nobody was expected to be fully prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. The POLO's orientation on crisis-management for different kinds of crisis were not rendered inoperable in a public health crisis. Several aspects of other crisis-response systems proved to be useful such as communication strategies, repatriation mechanisms, and contingency planning.

- *The POLO's response largely depended on host government response to the COVID-19 pandemic.*



The POLOs operate in different legal systems, health system capacities, political landscape, etc. The COVID-19 also hit the different countries at different times. It was not expected for all POLOs to have a one-size-fits-all response given the different contexts in which they are obliged to adapt in. Where the host government has clearly and transparently provided information to everyone in their territories, the POLOs also receive clear and transparent information that guided them to better assist OFWs. Where lockdowns were strictly imposed, POLOs had to recalibrate and restructure working arrangements. This was not true for POLOs who were stationed in countries that never imposed a lockdown such as South Korea, and Taiwan. The crisis response systems of the POLOs had to consider the different policies and protocols that are implemented by the host government in their jurisdictions. POLOs that cover more than one country had to face a difficult challenge of catering to the peculiarities of all OFWs in the different countries of destination under their jurisdiction.

- *Not everyone was ready for the digitization of POLO services and programs.*

It is important to underscore that digitization is a process that has to be accessible and efficient not only to the service providers, but it has to be accessible as well to the people they are intended to help—OFWs. A big challenge to most POLOs was in assisting OFWs who were not as adept in online interactions with the POLOs. This was highlighted in the applications for the DOLE AKAP.

- *Immediate relief and assistance took over, normal operations and mandate of the POLO had to be pushed back.*

Normal operations of the POLOs such as the verification of employment contracts, which is also an important role assumed by the POLOs, had to take a step back. While deployment and entry of migrant workers were halted, it has started to resume slowly in some countries. Because of the sheer volume of applications to financial assistance programs and the still on-going spread of COVID-19 around the globe, most energies have been focused on providing immediate relief to OFWs.



- *Strong coordination and communication with the national government and home office was crucial to attending to the needs of OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

The role of the Philippine national government more than ever is crucial in delivering services to OFWs, especially since the POLO is an office directly attached to the DOLE. Communication and clear directives were key to enable POLOs to ensure that OFWs are assisted. The availability of online communication directly to the DOLE office in Manila had impacted greatly the implementation of policies and programs by the POLOs. The differences in the interpretation of the regulations and guidelines of the programs have to be clarified and streamlined by the DOLE to further ensure that OFWs' expectations are reasonable and understandable.

- *Filipino community organizations and networks were crucial to communicate and deliver services to OFWs.*

Given the limited manpower capacity of the POLO compared to the scope of the areas of their jurisdiction, the OFW communities provided crucial help to reach other Filipinos. While visibility of the POLOs was low from the information given by FGD participants, the Filipino community groups were able to relay essential information to OFWs. The POLOs who had established networks with OFW groups and communities impacted their information and service delivery greatly.



## Chapter 4 – Recommendations

As discussed at length in the previous sections of this paper, the POLOs acquired rich and varied experiences in responding to a public health crisis. While the scope of this paper is to document what has occurred as of writing, there is no doubt that there will be much more to add while COVID-19 is still present and uncontained. The nuances and peculiarities of the context in which POLOs had to adapt in provides numerous insights that, unfortunately, cannot be exhaustively presented in this endeavor. To further inform and contribute to the growing literature on migration governance and pandemic response, this research recommends that focused studies zeroing in on the experience of the not only the POLOs but the Embassies or Consulates as well is recommended. Separate studies should be made for each POLO or country where OFWs are present in. This would provide a starting point for a blueprint on pandemic response in the context of labor migration.

Secondly, on the perspective of public policy, it is recommended that the Philippine government to seriously revisit crisis-management systems to include a pandemic response plan. The Joint Manual of Operations, which covers the mandates of the POLOs should be revisited and revised to include a specific pandemic response plan. An independent and more expansive study on the experience of Philippine posts abroad should be conducted by the government. Each post is recommended to provide a comprehensive and detailed account of the structures and systems that were implemented to provide future officers and staff guidance in case another pandemic occurs. While this time is characterized by great struggles and challenges, it is also a great time to learn about what works and what doesn't. The different contexts and environment where each POLO is situated in, must be taken in consideration in the crafting of a baseline plan for pandemic response. The pandemic response plan must be flexible enough to allow POLOs wiggle room to adapt the plan into the different contexts of their host countries. A general plan may be laid down for all POLOs but there is a need to provide country-specific guidelines as well.

The pandemic response plan should highlight the need for clear internal protocols within the Embassies, Consulates or POLOs in the instance of a public health crisis, whether it be global or national. A system to ensure the protection of the POLO staff must be outlined as well. As frontliners of migration governance, there



is a need to ensure that the staff are well equipped and protected as not to hamper essential services to OFWs.

Thirdly, this study emphasizes the need for a robust institutionalized data system that is accurate and timely. This aids greatly in resource allocation and program implementation on the ground. Data systems would cure the issues in fund management, communication, and needs identification. Time and time again, several studies on migration governance prove that dearth of a uniform information on OFWs that is comprehensive and detailed lead to mismanagement of resources, programs and policies. It is recommended that the DOLE take action to operationalize the Shared Government Information System for Migration (SGISM) provided for the Republic Act No. 8042, as amended by Republic Act No. 10022.

Fourth, the findings of this research also emphasize the importance of strengthening the digital capacities of both service providers and beneficiaries. What this crisis has revealed is that the government can manage a shift to digital services. There is a need to capacitate not only the government but as well as OFWs. It is recommended for orientation seminars such as the PDOS, PAOS, and the Comprehensive Pre-departure Education Program (CPDEP) of OWWA include basic orientation on digital services available to OFWs especially in occupations or locations where demographics of OFWs are shown to not to be as adept in online interactions with the government. The design of online services must also be reconsidered to provide ease of access to OFWs. It is not enough that the government has a website, infographics, or a mobile application. Its design must be human-centered and targeted to ensure that it is understandable and that there is ease of usage of OFWs.

Fifth, the POLO must establish and maintain good relations with Filipino communities and the private sector in their areas of jurisdiction. As what the POLOs have relayed, Filipino community organizations were crucial in the distribution of information, programs and services of the POLOs especially at a time where mobility is restricted. It must be said, however, that the POLOs have to be mindful that not all OFWs are part of Filipino Communities. They must cater to all regardless of membership in a Filipino Community Organization. The private sector also comes into play as information channels not only to OFWs but as well as to the POLOs themselves. Companies, employers, and private agencies may be asked by the POLO to report the instances of COVID-19 infections to aid in the monitoring of OFWs.



Sixth, the immediate availability of emergency funds for the POLOs will greatly enhance their capacity to support immediate relief to OFWs. While the communication between the home office and the POLOs are smooth and efficient, the presence of an on-hand fund strictly to be used for emergencies will be crucial especially for matters that make the difference between life-and-death of OFWs. The presence of logistical concerns on transferring funds, etc. pose significant delay on resolution of such matters.

Seventh, the rationalization of manpower support to the POLOs must be reevaluated in consideration with the reciprocity principle with the host governments. While a big factor that affects this issue is the regulations of the host government as to the entry of Filipino staff in the foreign missions, the Philippine government is recommended to strengthen negotiations as to this issue. The reciprocity principle does not work well in ensuring that the services given to Filipinos abroad are efficiently delivered. For instance, the number of Singaporeans in the Philippines pale in comparison to the number of Filipinos in Singapore, hence while Singaporean staff in their missions here in the Philippines can function well in few numbers, it would be difficult to do so for Philippine missions in Singapore to function efficiently to serve thousands of Filipinos.

In terms of governance structure, with the passage of the Department of OFWs Bill in the House of Representatives, these experiences of POLOs during the COVID-19 pandemic should be taken with all seriousness. It is noted that the Department of OFWs may have created higher expectations as to the delivery of services and programs to assist OFWs. However, there still are several issues that needs to be resolved within the present system of migration governance. It is still not clear, as no comprehensive structural and needs analysis has been conducted by the government, that a single consolidated Department of OFWs will resolve these issues. A substantial link must be made as to the necessity of the proposed department and the solutions needed to the current issues of the current system of migrant governance. No substantial and rational link has been provided by any of the proponents of the bill.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic greatly shows the need for a comprehensive, sustainable and human-centered reintegration plan for returning OFWs. Aside from a financial literacy program that underscores the need for OFWs to effectively save and spend their hard-earned money, the Philippine government has to institute mechanisms that would enable them to do so. Complementary programs such as



a national provident savings program, stronger social protection mechanisms, and opportunities in the country are needed to ensure that OFWs are reintegrated back in Philippine society. Financial literacy programs is only part of the solution and there are many other aspects of reintegration that the government has to revisit and seriously consider.

