

People-Centered: Migrant education programs in the Philippines

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Unlad Kabayan is a social entrepreneurship NGO linking migration to community development in the homeland. In Filipino language, ‘unlad’ means to develop, progress, or prosper, while ‘kabayan’ are fellow Filipinos abroad.

Hong Kong roots

Although we are based in the Philippines, our roots are actually in Hong Kong. In 1989, May-an Villalba, Unlad’s director, founded a regional NGO in Hong Kong called the Asian Migrant Center (AMC). It was a crisis intervention center not only for Filipino migrants but also Indonesians, Thais and Vietnamese who were largely domestic workers or entertainers. Counseling and legal assistance were provided to migrants in distress, and skill-building activities like culture and language lessons, and leadership training, among others.

In the course of her work, May-an discovered that if migrants had enough decent job opportunities back home, many of them would not go to work overseas. They would not want to be separated from their families and communities. But the reality was, many migrants in Hong Kong could not go home because they had not prepared for their return, they had no savings to show for it. They were constantly sending home a large part of their income to their families.

When a case of rape or physical assault was won by a migrant, May-an asked the woman what help she would need to return home. The migrant replied, “I will look for new employment, and God will help me find a kinder employer. I can’t go home. I have no money, no job waiting, no explanation to tell my husband about my sudden return.” Unless there would be enough decent jobs and livelihood in the Philippines, the cycle of labor migration would continue.

Migrant Savings for Alternative Investment

In 1994, through a program called Unlad Kabayan, this experience was validated through baseline research conducted in Malaysia, Hong Kong and the Philippines. In 1996, Unlad was founded in the Philippines as a separate NGO to pioneer the Migrant Savings for Alternative Investment (MSAI) program, initially as a reintegration strategy for migrant workers, but eventually as an alternative economic model.

Of course, it’s our human right to live and work wherever we wish. In Unlad, we recognize that labor migration and integration is there and the trend will continue. But it is also a reality that many overseas Filipinos will eventually come home, whether because of wars or conflict, problems with family members left behind, or because they wish to retire in the Philippines

eventually. We believe that when decent jobs and livelihood are created in the home country, going abroad to work can eventually become an option rather than a necessity for many Filipino families.

Philippine migration landscape

In 2006, there were around 8.2 million Filipinos overseas, including temporary workers, permanent immigrants and undocumented migrants. Around 10% of our population, or 25% of the total labor force, are spread out across 193 countries.¹ According to the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), more than 73% of newly deployed overseas Filipino workers are female, with the global labor demand for domestic workers, caregivers, nurses, entertainers and teachers. The International Organization on Migration (IOM) states that after China and India, the Philippines is the third largest migrant-sending country in the world.

Remittances have become a leading source of foreign exchange, an average of 9% of our gross national product (GNP) in the last five years and over 23% of export earnings.² The Central Bank of the Philippines reports that in 2006, remittances reached US\$ 12.8 billion, not including those sent through informal channels. Remittances are projected to reach US\$ 15 billion in 2007.³

Brief history of Philippine migration

Labor migration has long been a trend for Filipinos. In the early 20th century, Filipinos worked in sugar and fruit plantations in the US. There were those working as pineapple pickers in Hawaii or apple pickers in the Midwest. During World War II, Filipinos migrated as soldiers, and in the 1950s, as doctors and nurses.

In recent decades, the 1970s saw the rise of Filipino construction workers in the Middle East, while in the 1980s there were factory workers, entertainers and domestic workers in Taiwan and Japan. From the 1990s until the present, Filipinos went to destinations in all regions, as domestic workers, caregivers, nurses, IT (information technology) workers, teachers, and other professional and skilled workers.

Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar

To respond to the growing need to prepare for overseas work, migrant advocates and other NGOs developed education programs for migrants and their families. The Philippine government institutionalized these programs into a compulsory pre-departure orientation program for migrant workers. Since 1983, all overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) have been required to participate in the Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS).

From 1983 until 2003, the PDOS was implemented by the POEA. In 2003, the implementation of PDOS was transferred to the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA). The rationale was, while the POEA is tasked to manage Filipino labor migration, OWWA is the main agency tasked to promote and protect the welfare of overseas Filipinos and their families, which is managed through programs and services such as the PDOS.⁴

In its early stages, the PDOS was limited to six topics:

- Code of discipline, obligations (family responsibilities, taxes, remittances)
- Terms and conditions of employment (contract)
- The jobsite, or the vessel (for seafarers)
- Host country's social, religious, economic, legal and political background
- Government services for overseas workers
- Travel tips

Realities of labor migration

The content of the PDOS has since expanded to around 20 topics, reflecting the realities of labor migration. For instance, some PDOS providers introduced a gender perspective to the program to address the increasing feminization of migration. To promote reproductive health, others included an HIV/AIDS education component for the mobile population. After the Gulf War in 1991, topics on conflict, emergencies, repatriation and contingency measures were included.⁵

Generally, the PDOS takes four to six hours, featuring a multimedia presentation, lecture, and discussion. It is conducted by POEA and regional centers and extension units, POEA-accredited agencies, and as of 2004, six Manila-based NGOs. Participants sit down for the PDOS late in the migration stage, about two weeks or less before departure. Some PDOS providers charge a small fee (Php 100, about US\$ 2.50) for administrative costs, utilities, and materials. Resource persons from the academe, banks, government and NGOs are invited to speak on specialized topics of the PDOS.⁶

Assessment

Prospective and returned migrants participating in focus group discussions (FGDs) gave their assessment of government programs and services such as the PDOS.⁷

- Information is useful, albeit theoretical
- Lack of time allotted to discuss all topics
- Limited supply of print materials
- Many participants are inattentive during the PDOS, as they are usually excited or worried about the forthcoming departure

The lack of monitoring and enforcement of the PDOS outside the POEA has been noted, as accredited PDOS providers send monthly reports of names and numbers of participants only. Some migrants perceived the sessions as “too commercialized” – bank personnel discussing remittances and management, for instance, use up at least two hours of the PDOS. Migrants in the FGDs have observed that PDOS lecturers tend to let their individual point of view affect the delivery of the PDOS. The POEA and private recruitment agencies highlight their services and the benefits of working abroad. NGOs, meanwhile, emphasize the gaps in the law, contract provisions, migrant workers' rights, and the consequences of labor migration, which seem to discourage prospective migrants from leaving.⁸

Recommendations

Recommendations to improve the PDOS were gathered in FGDs and key informant interviews in the cities of Davao and Butuan, Philippines.⁹

- The POEA should encourage and accredit PDOS providers outside the National Capital Region to reduce travel costs of prospective overseas Filipino workers
- PDOS should also be conducted in the regional languages
- OFW family members should also be encouraged to attend PDOS and related education programs
- The seminars should be conducted over at least two days (16 hours)
- Work-site education can be more effective as a follow-up to the PDOS

The suggested topics for work-site education include values formation, and the impact of migration on OFWs and families (to encourage fidelity); health and HIV/AIDS prevention; migrant rights and coping mechanisms; managing one's income and savings; skills training and entrepreneurship.¹⁰

NGO initiatives

In 2001, the Asian South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE), together with migrant NGOs and networks around Asia, published "Clearing a Hurried Path: Study on education programs for migrant workers in six Asian countries." The working partners of the Philippine members of the Migrant Forum in Asia network answered the survey.

In mapping out education and training programs for migrant workers in the Philippines, the research determined that over 100 NGOs and people's organizations have been established to aid migrant workers and families. Thirty-three NGO and church programs responded to the survey. Of these, 22 focused on migrant workers, while the rest focused on women, children, health, and workers' issues. The respondents were NGOs, people's organizations, cooperatives, trade unions, professional organizations, the academic community, and associations (of nurses and employers).¹¹ The range of programs and services by the respondent groups were:

- 91% conduct education and awareness-raising
- 67% perform documentation and publications work
- 58% engage in campaigns and advocacy
- 52% organize migrants and communities
- 45% conduct entrepreneurship and livelihood development training
- 36% provide religious and cultural education
- 2.7% provide reintegration programs

Other awareness-raising programs were cited, such as television and radio programs dealing with problems of migrant workers (legal advice, illegal recruiters etc.).¹²

Unlad Kabayan's experience

Since it was founded in 1996, Unlad Kabayan has provided formal and informal adult education to migrant communities through NGO partners in destination countries. Migrant returnees, prospective migrants, their families, as well as migrant advocates have also received education and training. The seminars help popularize and mainstream Unlad's core program on Migrant Savings for Alternative Investment (MSAI), and highlight the role of migrants as partners in community development in the homeland. Themes include labor migration and its benefits and consequences, as well as savings, investment and social entrepreneurship.

Training modules are also used in Unlad Kabayan's education seminars:

1. Planning Your Re-Entry (three-day basic course)
2. Savings Mobilization and Financial Placement (four modules)
3. Entrepreneurship and Business Planning (five-day course)

"Planning Your Re-Entry" discusses the wisdom of why migrant workers should consider reintegration even as they are just preparing to work overseas. The risks and limitations of overseas jobs are discussed. The basic course gives migrants the means to plan their eventual return by developing the culture and practice of saving. "Savings Mobilization and Financial Placement" is addressed to migrant workers to help them understand the context, factors, costs and benefits of labor migration. "Entrepreneurship and Business Planning" helps the migrant worker understand and appreciate the role of entrepreneurs in local economic development.¹³

Assessment

The partnership of local and overseas NGOs serving migrants has made it possible for them to offer a wide range of programs and services. While immediate responses like crisis intervention and counseling are necessary and valued, responses from NGOs should also be holistic and geared towards meeting the comprehensive needs of migrants. Programs should not only address immediate problems, but also work towards long-term solutions, such as laws that genuinely protect migrants' welfare. While NGOs generally provide innovative, holistic, comprehensive and pro-active intervention, resources for NGOs and migrant associations are limited, although the need for comprehensive support is broad and deep.¹⁴

Recommendations

Migrant workers and advocates in FGDs recommended that there should be easier access to reintegration programs. Education programs for families left behind may help strengthen family ties. It would benefit prospective migrants to undergo training on mobilizing savings and enterprise development in the home country, even while he or she is preparing for overseas work.

NGOs are urged to provide multiple services. Beyond providing immediate responses, NGOs, together with migrants, should lobby the government to provide incentives for migrants to engage in business, such as tax holidays, protection from unfair competition from big business, product promotion, and an express lane for business registration.¹⁵

¹ Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, "Global Presences: A compendium of overseas employment statistics in 2006," (POEA, Mandaluyong City, 2006), 51-52.

² Ruth Gonzaga, "Overseas Filipino Workers' Remittances: Compilation practices and future challenges," paper presented at the conference of the International Association for Official Statistics, 2006.

³ Michelle Remo, "Cost of sending remittances to RP going down, says BSP," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 7, 2007.

⁴ Scalabrini Migration Center, "Pre-Departure Orientation Seminars: A positive joint venture between GOs and NGOs in the Philippines," 2004, 2-3.

⁵ See note 4 above.

⁶ See note 4 above, 5-6.

⁷ Maria Angela Villalba, "Philippines: Good practices for the protection of Filipino women migrant workers in vulnerable jobs," (International Labor Organization, Geneva, Switzerland, 2003), 29-30.

⁸ See note 7 above.

⁹ See note 7 above.

¹⁰ See note 7 above, 40.

¹¹ "Clearing a Hurried Path: Study on education programs for migrant workers in six Asian countries," (Asian Migrant Center, ASPBAE, and Migrant Forum in Asia, Hong Kong, 2001), 83.

¹² See note 11 above, 31.

¹³ "Report on the impact of Migrant Savings for Alternative Investment (MSAI) adult education program on poverty reduction," (ASPBAE, IIZ-DVV, Migrant Forum in Asia, 2004), 42-44.

¹⁴ See note 7 above, 35-36, 46.

¹⁵ See note 7 above, 46.