



PHILIPPINE MIGRATION RESEARCH NETWORK **POLICY NOTES**

PMRN Policy Note 2023-02

POST-COVID-19: WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR ASIAN MIGRANTS?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian labor migrants cannot be overstated. This Policy Note delves into the critical issues illuminated during a webinar convened by the Philippine Migration Research Network (PMRN) and the Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC) as part of PMRN's General Assembly on 2 March 2021, conducted via Zoom. Given the escalating COVID-19 cases in the Philippines and globally in 2021, this Note underscores the imperative of safeguarding the rights and well-being of migrant workers across Asia and beyond. The Note not only elucidates the challenges that have surfaced but also highlights actionable strategies to amplify migrants' protection, welfare, and access to vital assistance within and beyond the pandemic context. Its insights trace back to a pivotal PMRN webinar, where a surge of valuable policy recommendations emerged. The crux of the webinar's discourse hinged on a comprehensive exploration of the future landscape of Asian labor migration. The deliberations were guided by a pivotal question, echoing across the spectrum of labor-sending and labor-receiving nations: (1) What enduring challenges will continue to confront nations in the wake of the pandemic? (2) How can the post-COVID era be shaped to foster an improved migration experience?

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, people have always sought new opportunities for a better life, whether securing a brighter future for their families or escaping conflicts and disasters, such as navigating the uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic's onset, the Asia-Pacific Region was already a dynamic hub of international migration, undergoing significant changes. From the 1990s, with 52 million migrants, the region witnessed a considerable rise to 65 million migrants by 2019. Within this movement, 7 percent were intraregional migrants, and a remarkable 106 million migrants hailed from Asia Pacific countries across the globe. This

overseas contribution equated to two percent of the entire regional population. Notably, female migration surged, constituting 51 percent of the international migrant demographic from the region. At the core of this migration wave was labor migration, primarily driven by the pursuit of better jobs and livelihoods. This quest for improvement became the central force guiding cross-border movement. The pandemic was a significant reset for migrants worldwide, signifying their need to adapt and seek new opportunities. This quest is not confined to the pandemic period; instead, the demand for public attention to their needs expands into the recovery stage of the pandemic.

PMRN GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2021
LOOKING BACK, THINKING FORWARD:
 STATUS AND FUTURE OF POST-PANDEMIC MIGRATION RESEARCH

1-2 March 2021 via Zoom

PANEL 3 | 2 March 2021, 9:00-9:50 a.m.
What Lies Ahead:
Asian Labour Migration Post-COVID

MR. REX MARLO VARONA
 National Project Coordinator, Safe and Fair Programme
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DR. STEFAN ROTHER
 Senior Researcher, Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institute
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Moderator:
MS. IMELDA M. NICOLAS
 Co-convenor, Metropolis Asia
 Former Chairperson, Commission on Filipinos Overseas

During the “What Lies Ahead: Asian Labour Migration Post-COVID” webinar on 2 March 2021, experts discussed key aspects of Asian labor migration, highlighting challenges and successful practices in safeguarding migrants’ rights globally.

- The first speaker, Mr. Rex Varona, is a seasoned expert in the field. Having spent two decades as a migrant worker in Hong Kong and later as the executive director of the Asian Migrant Center, he holds a wealth of experience. He initiated innovative programs to support overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) through community development and established significant migrant unions and cooperatives. His contributions span years of work within the migrants’ advocacy community.
- Dr. Stefan Rother, the second speaker, brings a rich academic perspective to the discussion. As a senior researcher and lecturer, he specializes in international migration, global governance, and social movements.
- Ms. Imelda M. Nicolas, former chairperson of the Commission on Filipinos Overseas, moderated the discussion. Ms. Nicolas has extensive experience in migration and integration and has been recognized for her contributions and leadership in advocating migrant rights and empowerment.

The webinar brought together migration experts to exchange insights and strategies for addressing the challenges faced by Asian labor migrants and promoting their well-being worldwide.

BACKGROUND

The Asian Development Bank’s (2022) report highlights the ongoing transformation of international migration and people’s mobility due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the global migrant population reached 280.6 million, with 93 million originating from Asia and the Pacific.

Amidst the continued disruptions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak in 2021, the Asia-Pacific region witnessed both challenges and signs of recovery. The year marked the initiation of recovery efforts, with significant strides made through vaccination programs that enabled governments to ease containment and mobility restrictions. While the region showed economic progress and improved mobility, several countries faced successive COVID-19 waves propelled by new variants in 2021. These outbreaks prompted governments to implement strict lockdowns to curb the spread of these variants. Similar to 2020, these measures impacted migration, mainly labor and internal movements. The pandemic also exacerbated vulnerabilities, exposing individuals to trafficking and exploitation while worsening the health, living conditions, and socioeconomic circumstances of countless migrants. Alarming, many migrants remained excluded from national recovery plans (IOM, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic inflicted unprecedented challenges on global employment, work permits, and work conditions. According to the [International Labour Organization](#) (2021), over 255 million equivalent full-time jobs were lost in the past year due to the coronavirus pandemic, a four-fold increase compared to the 2009 financial crisis. This severely impacted wages and job availability, with women experiencing disproportionate impacts. Furthermore, the deployment of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) witnessed a significant drop of over 65% in the last two years. This decline was attributed to restrictive measures imposed and countries abroad not accepting migrant workers. The webinar’s focus was a comprehensive exploration of the pandemic’s effects on Asian migrants and the forthcoming challenges and prospects for Asian labor migration.

WHAT LIES AHEAD, GENDERED IMPACT AND SOCIAL PROTECTION?

The pandemic exposed the gendered nature of labor migration. Traditionally, women comprise a substantial percentage of OFWs, primarily engaged in domestic and elementary occupations. This structural composition rendered women and female migrants more vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19, especially in sectors significantly impacted by the pandemic. Ensuring social protection for migrant workers emerged as a critical challenge, given that many OFWs dropped out of mandatory protection schemes such as PAGIBIG, PhilHealth, and SSS. Non-contributory schemes also excluded numerous migrants at home and abroad, exacerbating their vulnerability.

WHAT LIES AHEAD: HOUSING, REINTEGRATION, AND RE-MIGRATION CHALLENGES?

Overcrowded housing among migrants, particularly in dormitories, contributed to the spread of the virus. Singapore's experience illustrated this concern, revealing that crowded accommodations facilitated COVID-19 transmission. The return and reintegration of migrant workers, especially Filipinos, have also become a pressing issue. Nearly one million Filipinos returned as of last month, necessitating extensive efforts to assist them in finding work, livelihoods, or potential re-migration. Addressing recruitment challenges and potential re-migration of workers, compounded by insufficient reintegration opportunities, emerged as significant post-pandemic concerns.

WHAT LIES AHEAD GENDER-SPECIFIC CONCERNS AND BEST PRACTICES?

The pandemic amplified gender-specific issues for women migrant workers, especially in healthcare and domestic sectors. Many women facing heightened risks in caregiving roles saw a rise in health-related cases. However, existing reintegration and contingency policies often overlooked women's needs, calling for greater organic involvement of women in policy-making processes. The pandemic's exacerbation of trafficking, gender-based violence, and exploitation of Filipino women migrants underscores the need for improved protection mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Key players

Collaborative efforts are essential to promote the rights and well-being of Asian migrants on a global scale, necessitating a multi-sectoral approach. Leading this endeavor are prominent entities such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), International Labour Organization (ILO), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Civil Society Organizations, and the governments of both labor-sending and labor-receiving nations. To ensure comprehensive support for Asian migrants across the globe, adopting a whole-of-government strategy becomes imperative. This approach guarantees the effective delivery of services and protections to Asian migrants worldwide.

Emerging Best Practices

The response to the pandemic included diverse programs initiated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other organizations. Migrant Resource Centers and various projects targeting female migrants demonstrated notable initiatives at the local level. To make Asian labor migration better in the post-COVID world, addressing structural labor market disparities, promoting equal treatment, recognizing domestic workers' contributions, and strengthening labor migration governance are essential. Moreover, rethinking governance approaches to achieve gender-responsive policies, fair recruitment practices, and equitable access to healthcare and public services are pivotal to building back better.

Worldwide Alliance and Efforts for Migrants

1. The Global Compact on Migration. The Global Compact on Migration is a pivotal touchstone in the discourse. While non-binding, this document has the potential to exert substantial influence in the domain of migration governance. It holds the capacity to educate individuals across various sectors and sets standards for migration governance practices. In the wake of the pandemic, it's evident that global cooperation is indispensable. The Compact's provisions, aimed at reducing migration vulnerabilities, ensuring access to essential services, and addressing remittances, resonate significantly in the ongoing response to the pandemic and the journey towards recovery.

2. United Nations Network on Migration. The United Nations Network on Migration has emerged as a robust collective platform, uniting global institutions, including the International Labour Organization (ILO). Their proactive response during the pandemic underscores the urgency to protect all, including migrants with irregular statuses, from the repercussions of COVID-19. The role of champion countries, notably the Philippines, comes to the forefront, highlighting their endorsement of the Compact and their involvement in pilot programs, such as the Bridge initiative.

3. Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2020. In the Asia-Pacific region, the *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2020* offers crucial insights. The report underscores the significance of people-centered policies, international cooperation, gender responsiveness, and child sensitivity. Its recommendations reflect the regional imperative to achieve sustainable development, respect human rights, and recover from the pandemic's impact.

4. Regional Initiatives. The Abu Dhabi Dialogue and initiatives like the CIOP Process play a pivotal role at the regional level. Pilot projects that enhance pre-employment, pre-departure, and post-arrival orientations provide crucial guidance, even in countries with established orientation processes. The role of civil society comes into play here, advocating for justice and fairness, as exemplified by the migrants in Asia campaign against wage theft.

CHALLENGES

The challenges identified by the pool of experts in the webinar are diverse and need the commitment of relevant stakeholders to ensure that it truly addresses the concerns of Asian migrants on the move.

- Implementing international agreements like the Global Compact for Migration and Sustainable Development Goals requires practical governance approaches.
- Policies should establish equal treatment between migrant and local workers, robust social protection mechanisms, and opportunities for skill development.
- Recruitment, deployment, and return protocols need improvement to address post-pandemic challenges.

- Successful pandemic preparedness demands proactive planning, humane treatment of undocumented migrants, and gender-sensitive strategies.
- Migrant worker challenges during COVID-19 call for an inclusive response that addresses gender disparities, enhances social protection, and improves labor migration governance.
- Post-pandemic recovery efforts should prioritize migrant workers' rights, welfare, and gender-specific needs to create a more just and resilient labor migration landscape.

This policy note delved into global migration governance and its interplay with civil society, particularly in the context of post-pandemic recovery. Its emphasis lies on the multifaceted layers of migration governance and how they intersect to shape the trajectory of international migration policies. This policy note underscored that building back better after the pandemic demands a concerted effort across multiple levels of governance, with active involvement from civil society. As the global architecture of migration governance evolves, cooperation, inclusivity, and safeguarding the rights and well-being of migrants must remain at the forefront of policy agendas.

REFERENCES

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This policy note was written by Jayson B. Abad under the PMRN student internship program and with supervision from the PMRN Steering Committee members, Dr. Jean Encinas-Franco and Dr. Ma. Elissa J. Lao. Jayson is a BA Sociology student at Mindanao State University – Iligan Institute of Technology and serves as the Youth Mayor of Upi, Maguindanao del Norte. He is also a part-time Social Media Researcher at Internews.

This policy note is based on the content of the webinar (What Lies Ahead: Asian Labour Migration Post-COVID). The contents of this policy note is not necessarily the official position of the PMRN.