PAPER 1

Uncertain Homecoming: Challenges Faced by Returned Overseas Filipino Workers

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FINDINGS

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives and employment prospects of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) and their families. The combination of health scare, economic slump and the closure of borders directly affected migrants – aspiring migrants were unable to migrate, vacationing migrants were stranded in the Philippines, and OFWs who were already deployed were displaced or lost their jobs. The Philippine government carried out the largest repatriation of OFWs, starting with bringing home Filipinos from Wuhan, China in February 2020, which intensified over the next months (Asis, 2020), before slowing down in 2022. As of February 2022, 923,652 OFWs have returned to the Philippines since the start of the pandemic-related repatriation in 2020 (Fernandez, 2022). The government extended various forms of assistance to OFWs affected by the pandemic. Upon arrival in the Philippines, OFW returnees were provided free COVID-19 testing, accommodation and meals during the required quarantine period, and onward travel assistance to their home provinces. On 24 May 2022, the National Capital Region and other areas in the country eased into Alert Level 1 status (IATF, 2022), which lifts restrictions on mobility.[1] With the relaxation of requirements for arriving international travelers, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) announced the suspension of transportation and accommodation assistance to returning OFWs beginning on 1 June 2022 (OWWA, 2022).

At the height of the health crisis in 2020, the International Organization for Migration conducted a survey of returned OFWs in late 2020, with generous funding from the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany. In May 2021, the results of the study were released in the report, COVID-19 Impact Assessment on Returned Overseas Filipino Workers (IOM, 2021). The report provides a comprehensive picture of the profile of returned OFWs, their experience at all stages of migration (from recruitment and preparation for migration, experiences abroad, and return), their current situation, and future plans.

The big picture, however, may mask regional differences. A sub-national analysis of the reintegration experiences of returned OFWs is useful because, among others, the communities OFWs return to have varying levels of development. Moreover, when it comes to attending to the needs of returned OFWs, the institutions, policies and programs that are well-established at the national level are not widely replicated in the regions and local governments (e.g., see Asis and Roma, 2010). Although efforts to "localize" migration institutions, policies and programs have started, the local turn in migration governance needs to be strengthened in different parts of the country to link programs and services closer to migrants and their families.

This policy brief aims to "unpack" the national picture by exploring four key questions according to the three major island groupings in the country—Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao.[2]

- What are the characteristics of the OFWs who returned to their home regions?
- What were the experiences of returned OFWs while they were working abroad?
- What were the conditions and experiences of the returned OFWs in their home regions?
- Looking into their immediate future, what are the plans of the returned OFWs?

These questions are examined using data from the telephone survey conducted by the International Organization for Migration in September-December 2020 (hereafter, the 2020 survey). The OFWs covered by the survey are "Filipino citizens who reside in another country for the purpose of employment" and "who returned to the Philippines after 16 March 2020" (IOM, 2021).

The 2020 survey conducted interviews with 8,332 OFW returnees. Survey respondents were recruited through the anonymized database of the OWWA, IOM's list of beneficiaries in their transportation assistance program, and advertisements

[1] The Interagency Task Force for the Management of Infectious Diseases (IATF) developed a four-level COVID-19 Alert System to determine the necessity for quarantine and other measures to manage and minimize the risk of the transmission of the disease. Areas placed under Alert Level 1 refer to areas "wherein case transmission is low and decreasing, total bed utilization rate, and intensive care unit utilization rate is low" (IATF, 2022). Alert Level 1 also means that services and industries are in full operation capacity.

[2] Unless otherwise stated, regions refer to the three major island groupings, Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao.

in social media, quarantine facilities, and airports. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous (IOM, 2021).

After data editing and processing, the dataset used for the secondary analysis was trimmed to 8,206 cases. Respondents who were non-Filipinos (n=19) and those whose purpose of stay abroad was not for employment (n=107) were dropped from the dataset. Since the 2020 survey was designed for specific purposes, the dataset may not have information on questions that are of interest to other studies. The 2020 survey was not based on probability sampling, hence, the results of the study cannot be generalized to the population of OFWs who returned to the country during the pandemic.

Profile of returned OFWs by region

The 2020 survey data on the home regions where OFWs returned to generally mirror the home regions of OFWs based abroad. In the 2020 survey, most returnees (61.3 per cent) returned to Luzon; Mindanao received 26.7 per cent, and the rest, 12 per cent, returned to the Visayas. Data from the Philippine Statistics Authority's 2019 Survey on Overseas Filipinos (SOF) show that most OFWs originate from Luzon (66.1 per cent); those coming from Mindanao and Visayas have about the same share (17.9 per cent vs. 16.1 per cent) (PSA, 2020). In the 2020 SOF, the percentage distribution of the home regions where OFWs come from changed slightly: those from Luzon declined to 62.4 per cent, the percentage distribution of OFWs from the Visayas was about the same (16.7 per cent), while that for Mindanao slightly went up to 20.7 per cent (PSA, 2021).

The top ten provinces in each region account for the overwhelming majority of OFWs (Figures1-3): 61.6 per cent in Luzon, 91.6 per cent in the Visayas, and 74.1 per cent in Mindanao.

Figure 2. Top 10 Home Provinces of OFWs: Luzon

National Capital Region	18.1%	1
Cavite	7.1%	2
Laguna	6.3%	3
Batangas	6.2%	4
Bulacan	5.6%	5
Pangasinan	3.9%	6
Isabela	3.8%	7
Pampanga	3.7%	8
Oriental Mindoro	3.5%	9
Rizal	3.5%	10

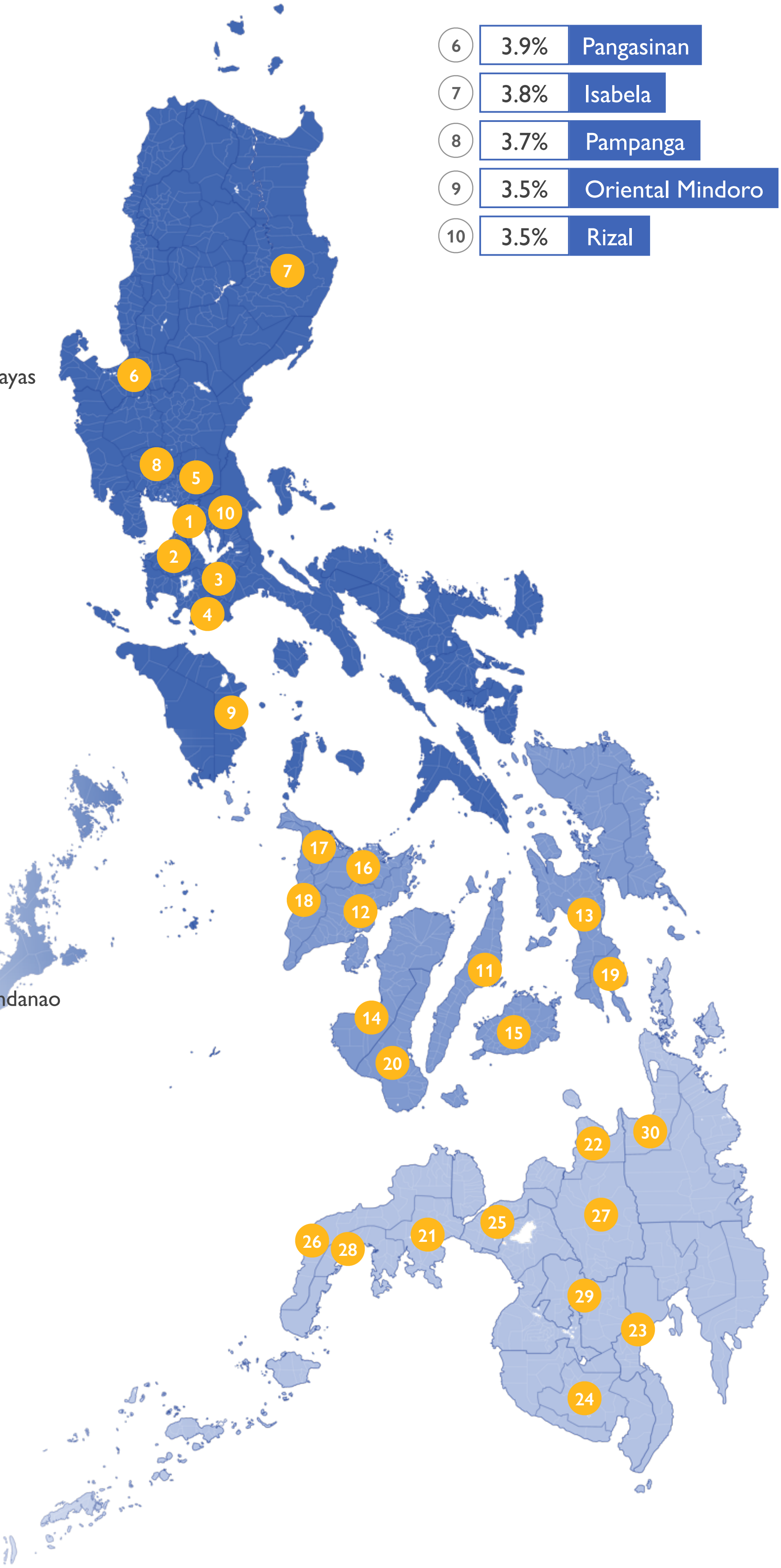


Figure 3. Top 10 Home Provinces of OFWs: Visayas

Cebu	21.6%	11
Iloilo	17.7%	12
Leyte	15.3%	13
Negros Occidental	13.9%	14
Bohol	6.2%	15
Capiz	3.9%	16
Aklan	3.4%	17
Antique	3.4%	18
Southern Leyte	3.3%	19
Negros Oriental	2.9%	20

Figure 4. Top 10 Home Provinces of OFWs: Mindanao

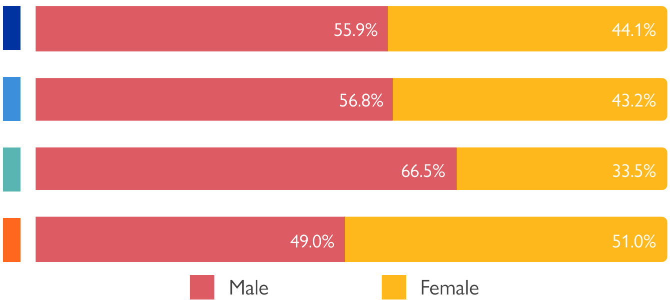
Zamboanga del Sur	18.4%	21
Misamis Oriental	12.6%	22
Davao del Sur	8.0%	23
South Cotabato	6.4%	24
Lanao del Norte	6.2%	25
Zamboanga del Norte	5.2%	26
Bukidnon	4.6%	27
Zamboanga Sibugay	4.4%	28
North Cotabato	4.2%	29
Agusan del Norte	4.1%	30

Interestingly, the gender distribution of returned OFWs (Figure 4) departs from the profile of OFWs based abroad. More males comprise the returned OFWs (55.9 per cent for all OFWs), unlike the greater share of women among OFWs in the 2019 (55.4 per cent) and 2020 SOF (59.4 per cent) (PSA, 2022a).[3] Mindanao's OFW returnees are evenly divided between men and women, while men are the majority in Luzon (56.8 per cent), and especially in the Visayas (66.5 per cent).

LEGEND

Philippines Luzon Visayas Mindanao

Figure 4. Gender Distribution of Returned OFWs by Region

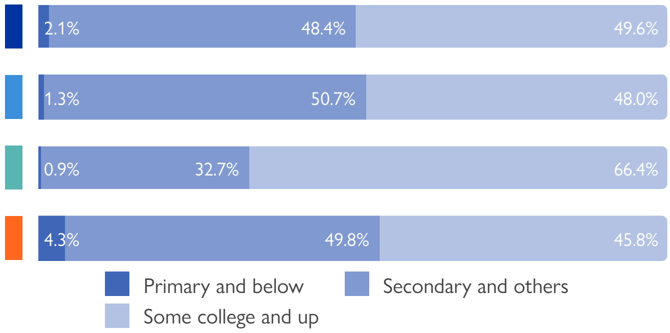


The mean age of all returned OFWs is 36.6 years; by region, the mean age for Luzon is 37.04 years, 36.12 years for the Visayas, and 35.81 years for Mindanao. Their mean age suggests that OFWs are in their economically active years.

More than half of the returned OFWs are married. Among the regions, Luzon has the largest share of married OFWs (56 per cent) compared with Visayas (52.1 per cent) and Mindanao (51.1 per cent) (Figure 2). About two-thirds of OFWs have children; the mean number of children for all OFWs is 1.39; the figure is 1.42 for Luzon; 1.30 in the Visayas; and 1.35 in Mindanao. The mean household size of all OFWs stands at 5.17 persons—this is higher compared to the average household size of 4.4 persons based on the 2015 Census of Population and Housing (PSA, 2016).

Almost all OFWs had completed at least high school education. By region, Visayas has the highest share of OFWs who had completed some college and higher education – 66.4 per cent of OFWs (Figure 5). The large share of OFWs with college education may be associated with the Visayas being a major source region of seafarers. Filipino seafarers must meet educational and training requirements to secure employment onboard international vessels (see also Paper 2).

Figure 5. Highest Education Completed of Returned OFWs by Region



Note: "Secondary and others" include vocational, technical education, diploma and any certificate courses.

> **The high level of unemployment coupled with precarious employment (i.e., daily wage or contractual workers) suggests the salience of push factors in driving the search for overseas employment, especially in the Visayas and Mindanao.**

Pre-migration to return migration experiences

Before they left the country to work overseas, the percentage who were employed ranged from a low of 36 per cent in Mindanao to a high of 53 per cent in the Visayas (Figure 6). The high level of unemployment coupled with precarious employment (i.e., daily wage or contractual workers) suggests the salience of push factors in driving the search for overseas employment, especially in the Visayas and Mindanao. Very few engaged in self-employment before leaving for overseas employment (3.7 per cent for the Philippines, and by region, 5.1 per cent in Luzon, 4.4 per cent in Mindanao, and 1.7 per cent in the Visayas). Prior experience in self-employment is an important detail to consider in envisioning the economic

[3] Since the 1990s, POEA data on the annual deployment of OFWs show women comprising the majority among the new hires land-based OFWs (IOM and SMC, 2013).

prospects of OFWs when they return to the Philippines. Before they left the Philippines to work abroad, OFWs worked mostly in the hotel industry, accommodation and restaurant sector, office work, and health and social work. By region, Luzon OFWs were also in similar industries, while the transportation and construction industries employed many OFWs from the Visayas and Mindanao, respectively (Table 1).

Eighty per cent of the returned OFWs were land-based workers and the remaining 20 per cent were sea-based OFWs. This distribution has characterized the profile of OFWs for decades. The Visayas stands out in having a much larger share of sea-based workers (35.7 per cent) compared to Luzon and Mindanao (Figure 7).

Data on the destination country where they last worked show the continuing dominance of Gulf countries for OFWs nationally and across all regions (Figure 8). The top three destinations were the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the topmost destination for all OFWs; one-third of OFWs from Mindanao last worked in this country. For Luzon OFWs, KSA was the second-ranked country after the UAE.

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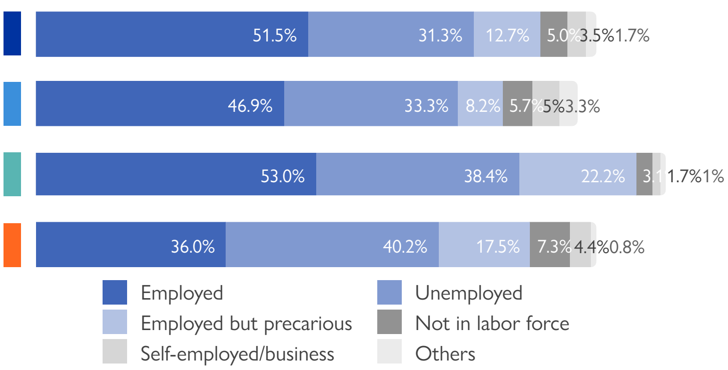
Philippines Luzon Visayas Mindanao

Figure 6. Employment Status Prior to Migration by Region



Notes:

1) This is a multiple response item, thus, percentages do not total 100.

2) Persons not in the labor force refer to those aged 15 and over who are neither employed nor unemployed. These include homemakers, full-time students and retirees. Unemployed persons are defined as "persons in the labor force who are reported as (1) without work; and (2) currently available for work; and (3) seeking work or not seeking work because of the belief that no work is available, or awaiting results of previous job application, or because of temporary illness or disability, bad weather or waiting for rehire or job recall" (PSA, n.d.a).

Top 3 Destinations


Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)


United Arab Emirates (UAE)


Qatar

Figure 7. Distribution of Land- and Sea-Based Returned OFWs by Region

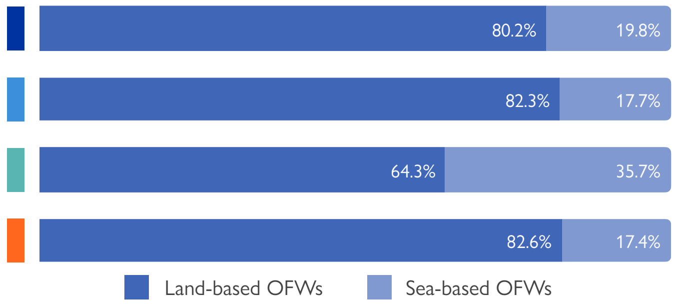


Figure 8. Top 6 Destination Countries/Territories Where Returned OFWs Last Worked

	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	23%	20%	23%	33%
	United Arab Emirates	20.3%	21.9%	14%	19.7%
	Qatar	5.7%	5.8%	3.8%	6.4%
	Kuwait	4.2%	3.6%	3.1%	6%
	Hong Kong	4.1%	4.4%	4.4%	3.3%
	Singapore	4%	4%	6.2%	3.1%

Table 1. Top Three Industries of OFW Employment Prior to Migration by Region

Region	Industry	Share
Luzon	Hotel, accommodation, etc.	19.5%
	Office work	14.0%
	Health & social work	7.7%
Visayas	Transportation	29.3%
	Hotel, accommodation, etc.	17.1%
	Office work	14.6%
Mindanao	Construction	13.8%
	Transportation	12.1%
	Office work	10.3%
Philippines	Hotel, accommodation, etc.	16.7%
	Office work	12.8%
	Health & social work	6.8%

The top five industries where OFWs were last employed abroad are summarized in Table 2. Nationally and across all regions, a quarter of OFW returnees (and higher in the Visayas) were domestic workers; services and sales workers ranked second. Four other industries employed OFWs as plant and machine operators, craft and related workers, transportation workers, and hotel and accommodation workers. A comparison of Tables 1 and 2 shows striking differences in the occupational profiles/trajectories before migration and while they worked abroad. Prior to deployment, domestic work was not a major occupation among OFWs, but this was the topmost occupation of OFWs while they were overseas.

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While they were employed overseas, more than half of OFWs had a monthly income of PHP 20,001-50,000. Around 25 per cent earned at least PHP 50,001-75,000. At the other extreme are the 20 per cent of OFWs with monthly income of PHP 20,000 and below (Figure 9).

Regardless of their occupation or monthly income, almost all OFWs (96 per cent) sent remittances to the Philippines; differences in remitting behavior of OFWs in the three regions are negligible: 95.3 per cent for Luzon OFWs, 96.6 per cent for those from the Visayas, and 97.1 per cent Mindanao-based OFWs. Around two-thirds of OFWs sent monthly remittances in the range of PHP 10,000-25,000 (Figure 10). With a poverty threshold at PHP 12,082 per month for a family of five,[4] the monthly remittances of OFWs are a significant contribution to their households.

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[4] From the Philippine Statistics Authority, see https://psa.gov.ph/poverty-press-releases/nid/165535

Table 2. Top Five Industries of OFW Employment in Last Destination Country by Region (Land-Based Only)

Luzon

Domestic workers	23.5%
Services & sales	13.9%
Hotel, accommodation, etc.	10.5%
Craft & related	10.0%
Plant & machine	9.8%

Mindanao

Domestic workers	26.2%
Services & sales	13.4%
Craft & related	12.3%
Plant & machine	11.4%
Transportation	7.9%

Visayas

Domestic workers	27.7%
Services & sales	16.4%
Plant & machine	12.3%
Transportation	11.3%
Craft & related	8.2%

Philippines

Domestic workers	24.6%
Services & sales	13.4%
Craft & related	10.4%
Plant & machine	10.4%
Hotel, accommodation, etc.	8.7%

Notes:
1) Based on 2,106 cases land-based OFWs.
2) Domestic workers are classified under elementary occupations but given their significant share in annual deployment and policy concerns about this group, domestic workers are highlighted in this policy brief. They comprise the largest number of workers in the elementary occupations category.

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Philippines | Luzon | Visayas | Mindanao

Figure 9. Monthly Income (in PHP) in the Last Country of Employment

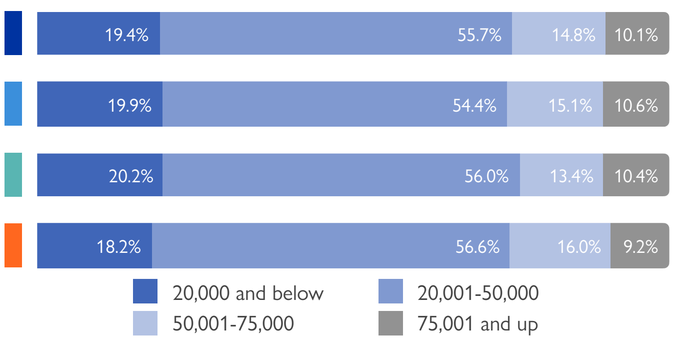
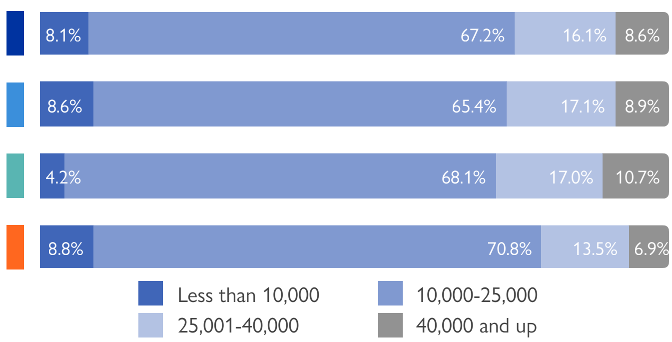


Figure 10. Monthly Remittances (in PHP) Sent by Returned OFWs by Region



> **According to data presented in Figure 11, more than half of returnees returned home due to COVID-19 reasons.**

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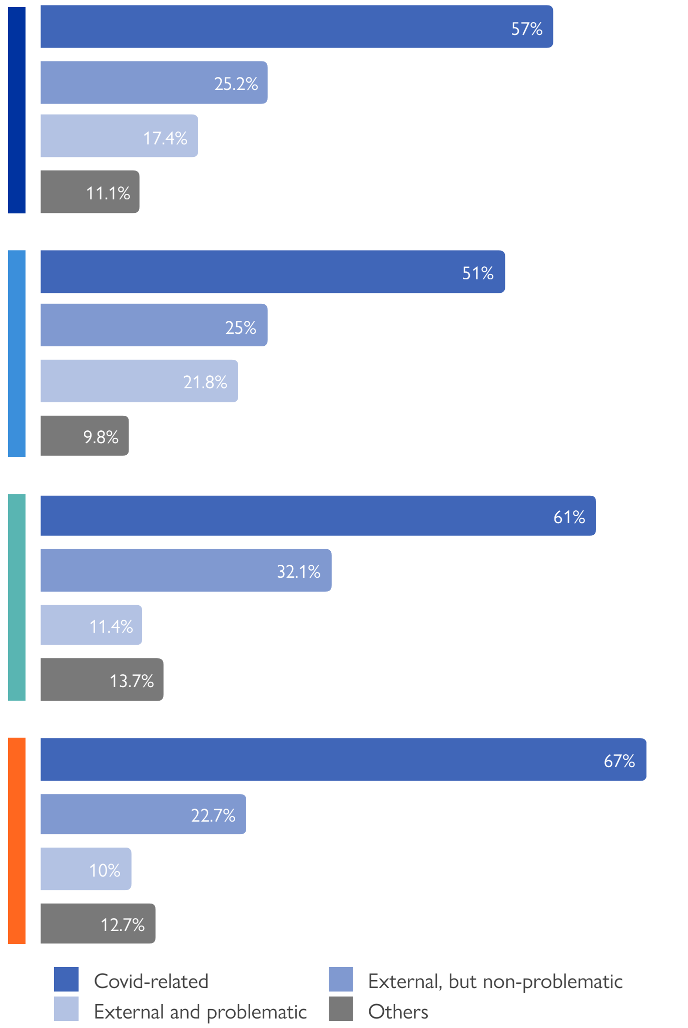
Philippines | Luzon | Visayas | Mindanao

Figure 11. Reasons for Return to the Philippines by Region



Note: This is a multiple response item to the question "Why did you return?" The percentages do not add up to 100. The percentages reflect the number of times a response category was reflected in the answers; a respondent may give more than one reason.

Following the declaration of the World Health Organization of COVID-19 as a pandemic, countries immediately closed their borders to contain the spread of the virus. This led to the shutdown of the global economy which translated into lay-offs and job losses, resulting in the unexpected return of many OFWs. Fears about the pandemic on the part of the OFWs and/or their families in the Philippines also played a role in the decision to return to the Philippines for some OFWs. However, reasons external to the pandemic were also at work.[5] According to data presented in Figure 11, more than half of returnees returned home due to COVID-19 reasons, and these reasons were more pronounced for Visayas and Mindanao OFWs. As Figure 12 also shows, there were other drivers of OFWs' return to the Philippines. Although a far second, a quarter of all OFWs, and ranging between 23 per cent and 32 per cent of OFWs across the three regions returned neither because of pandemic-related concerns nor other problems encountered while employed abroad. For this group, their return to the Philippines was motivated by positive factors, such as having sufficient savings, and their return coincided with the timing of the pandemic. It is important to note that 17.4 per cent of all OFWs – and ranging from 10 per cent of Mindanao OFWs to 21.8 per cent of Luzon OFWs – encountered problems (not related to COVID-19) which prompted their return home. In general, it can be said that the large share of OFWs who returned home due to the pandemic or problems encountered while abroad are likely to be less prepared for their return, compared to OFWs whose return was planned or expected.

> **It is important to note that 17.4 per cent of all OFWs – and ranging from 10 per cent of Mindanao OFWs to 21.8 per cent of Luzon OFWs – encountered problems (not related to COVID-19) which prompted their return home.**

[5] The response options to the question on intention to return were recoded. COVID-19-related reasons include the following: already scheduled to return when COVID-19 restriction took effect, was told that the border was closing, was told by employer to leave because of COVID-19, worried about COVID-19, contract ended and was not renewed due to COVID-19, family wanted respondent to return because of COVID-19, and my family wanted me to come back; external reasons (not due to COVID-19) that were not problematic include the following: end of visa or work permit (no mention of COVID-19), found work at home, saved enough money, to get married; problematic reasons (but not related to COVID-19) include: deportation, could not find work, life was not as expected, lost job; other reasons were those that did not fall under the specific response categories.

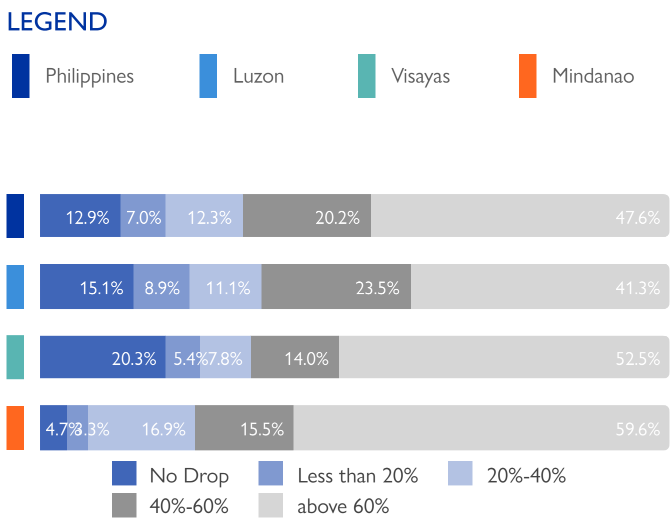
Conditions and experiences in their home regions

OFWs who lost their jobs due to the pandemic came home to a Philippines grappling with an unemployment rate of 10.3 per cent in 2020 (double the 5.1 per cent in 2019) (Tirona, 2021). Many businesses closed or downsized due to the lockdowns, quarantine measures and physical distancing regulations that were implemented since March 2020. In 2020, the Philippine economy registered a 9.5 per cent decline in economic growth, which peaked at 16.9 per cent in the second quarter, and later slowed down to 8.3 per cent in the last three months of 2020 (Tirona, 2021). In 2021, with the general improvement in the response to counter COVID-19 and the resumption of economic activities, unemployment in December 2021 was down to 6.6 per cent (PSA, 2022b).

With this background, understandably, many returned OFWs encountered or expected to experience challenges upon their return to the Philippines in 2020.

- Finding a job or income-generating activity is the topmost challenge cited by 82.5 per cent of all OFWs. Fewer returnees in Luzon ranked this as the number one challenge (77.8 per cent) compared to 82.3 per cent among the Visayas OFWs. Mindanao returnees (93.9 per cent) had the highest share of those who foresaw this as the number one challenge. Note that even in non-pandemic times, finding employment was the most cited challenge mentioned by 70 per cent of returned migrants (PSA and UPPI, 2019: 126).
- Figure 12 displays the OFWs' expected percentage drop in their household income upon their return. Only a minority expected no reduction in household income—12 .9 per cent for all OFWs. In the regions, more OFWs in Luzon (15.1 per cent) and the Visayas (20.3 per cent) did not expect a drop in their household income, but for OFWs in Mindanao, this proportion is a very small minority, 4.7 per cent. It is concerning to note that nationally and in all the three regions, the largest percentage refers to OFWs who are expecting more than 60 per cent decline in their household income. Given the contribution of remittances in shoring up household resources, the interruption in overseas employment during the time of the pandemic adversely affects the economic well-being of households.
- The employment status of returned OFWs is bleak with an overwhelming 83.8 per cent reporting being unemployed at the time of the survey (Figure 13), a situation which helps explain the significant drop in household income. Self-employment as an alternative to paid employment is negligible.

Figure 12. Expected Per Cent Drop in Household Income by Region



Half of the returned OFWs, except for those in the Visayas (38 per cent), said their households were registered or eligible to receive any form of assistance from the government. Should they receive cash assistance, except for Mindanao OFWs (47.8 per cent), more than half planned to use this to meet basic needs. Interestingly, a significant percentage of Mindanao OFWs (44.4 per cent) mentioned using the cash assistance for business/livelihood purposes.

A subsample of survey respondents was asked whether they had received government assistance. Twenty-five per cent reported they had received assistance and another 25 per cent did not apply for assistance. The large share of respondents who filed a claim but were waiting to receive government support at the time of the survey (around 40 per cent) indicates a gap in service delivery. Some 10 per cent of respondents were not aware about government support or the process to apply for it (Figure 14).

Figure 13. Employment Status After Return by Region[6]

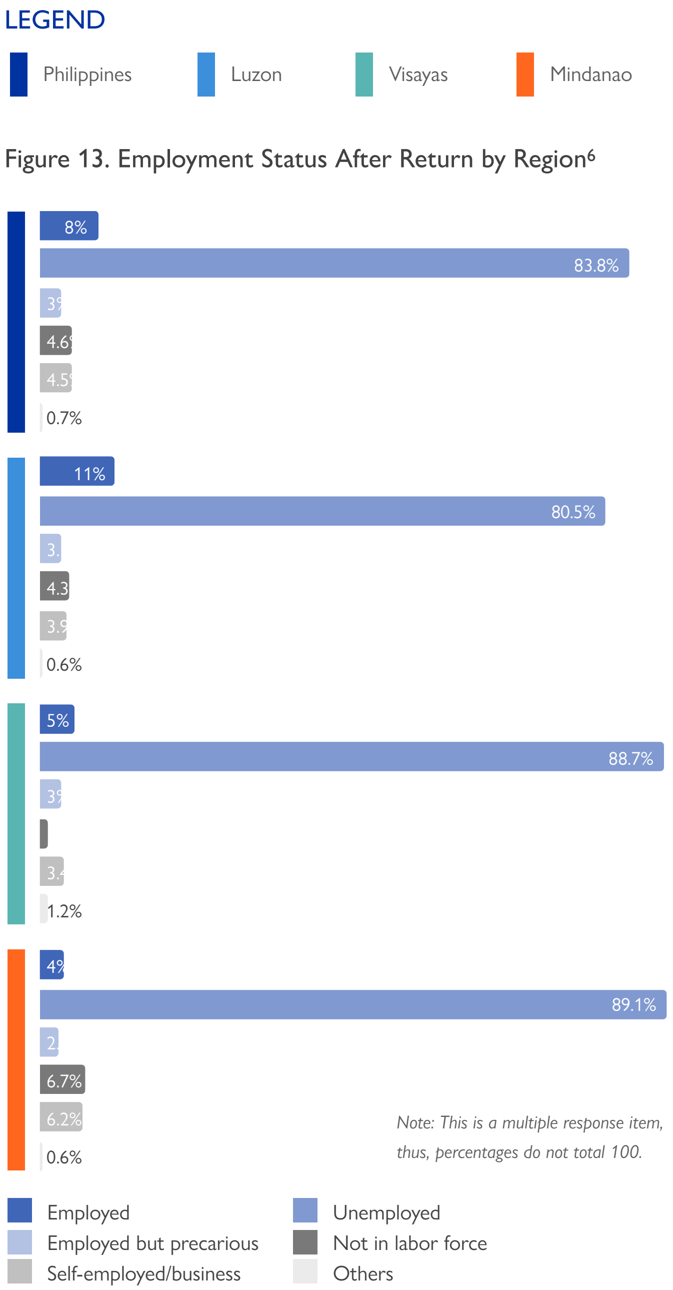
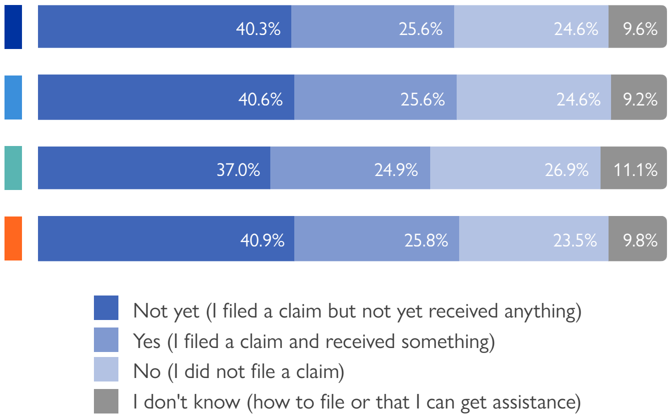


Figure 14. Status of Assistance From the Government by Region



Close to half of all OFWs (48.1 per cent) had the intention to re-migrate, and this was highest among OFW returnees from Luzon (51.4 per cent) compared with those from the Visayas (40.5 per cent) and Mindanao (43.9 per cent).

Future plans

As mentioned earlier, the return to the Philippines of most OFWs was linked to COVID-19. For them, returning home was an interruption of their plans, and they are thus likely to be unprepared for their homecoming. The same holds true for returnees who encountered difficulties abroad (i.e., problems not directly related to the pandemic), who returned home without meeting their goals. These circumstances could shape OFWs' decision whether to re-migrate or to remain in the country. In the context of returning home during a very challenging period, Figure 15 reveals that close to half of all OFWs (48.1 per cent) had the intention to re-migrate, and this was highest among OFW returnees from Luzon (51.4 per cent) compared with those from the Visayas (40.5 per cent) and Mindanao (43.9 per cent). At least a third of all OFWs and those in the different regions were thinking of staying (although whether this is "for good" is not clear). The undecided comprise a sizable share in the Visayas (24.1 per cent) and Mindanao (19 per cent) regions.

Until the sharp drop in deployment levels during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of OFWs legally deployed every year generally show an upward trend (IOM and SMC, 2013: 60; NEDA, n.d.: 374). Various crises, such as the 1990-1991 Gulf War, the 1997 financial crisis in Asia, the global recession in

[6] Persons in the labor force refer to the "population 15 years old and over who contribute to the production of goods and services in the country. It comprises the employed and unemployed" whereas those not in the labor force are persons 15 years old and over who are neither employed nor unemployed (PSA, n.d.a) See the notes in Figure 6 for the definition of persons not in the labor force.

2008-2010, and the civil war in Libya in 2011, did not significantly affect the outmigration of OFWs recorded by POEA.[7] Based on data from POEA, more than 60 per cent of OFWs deployed annually are rehires (IOM and SMC, 2013: 60; NEDA, n.d.: 374), suggesting significant re-migration. Looking for overseas jobs was part of the plans of newly arrived OFW returnees in the next three months (Asis, 2021a).[8]

In terms of plans for income-generating activities in the coming months, half of all OFWs (51.1 per cent) had an intention to start a business; 38.4 per cent of all OFWs were considering paid employment and 18.4 per cent had no idea what to pursue. In contrast to OFWs from the Visayas who were more inclined towards finding paid employment, more OFWs from Luzon and Mindanao were considering self-employment (Figure 16). Since this question allowed for multiple responses, some OFWs may have reported an interest in both self-employment and paid employment. Interest in self-employment was very high among Mindanao OFWs (61.7 per cent). Also, compared to Luzon and Visayas OFWs, it appears that Mindanao OFWs had given thought to income- generating activities—they have the lowest percentage of those who replied, "I do not know" to the question on plans for income-generating activities in the coming months. In general, the percentage of OFWs who

> **For the OFWs who had no intention to re-migrate, the top three industries of interest to all OFWs are: food and processing, 25.5 per cent; wholesale and retail trade, 13.9 per cent; and agriculture, 10.7 per cent.**

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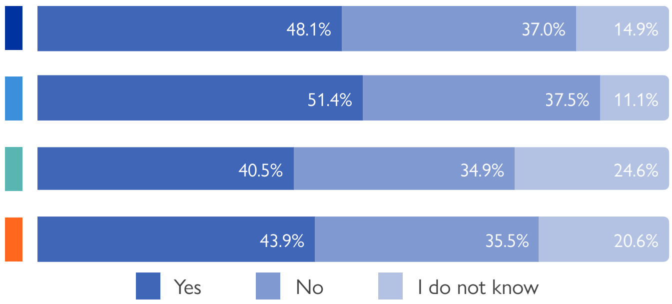
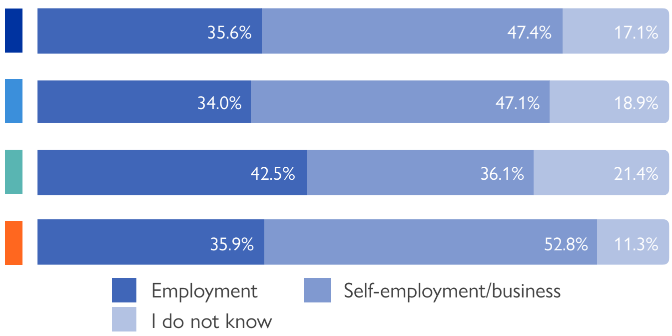
Philippines | Luzon | Visayas | Mindanao

Figure 15. Intention To Re-Migrate by Region



> **Half of all OFWs (51.1 per cent) had an intention to start a business; 38.4 per cent of all OFWs were considering paid employment and 18.4 per cent had no idea what to pursue.**

Figure 16. Plans for Income-Generating Activities in the Coming Months by Region



Note: This item allowed for multiple responses, thus, the totals do not add up to 100 per cent. Responses apply to OFWs with intention to re-migrate, to remain in the Philippines, and the undecided.

[7] An examination of data on the number of OFWs (with or without work contracts) and overseas contract workers or OCWs (which specifically refer to those with work contracts) based on the yearly Survey on Overseas Filipinos (SOF) also generally show a pattern of increase over the years. The most notable drop was in 2020. Before the pandemic, in 2019, there were 2.18 million OFWs and 2.11 million OCWs. In 2020 the numbers declined to 1.77 million OFWs and 1.71 million OCWs (PSA, 2022a). Note that estimates of OFWs and OCWs in the SOF refer to those who left for abroad to work during the period April 1 to September 30 (PSA, n.d.b). In contrast, deployment data from the POEA are flow statistics which refer to the number deployed each year.

[8] According to representatives of local government units (LGUs), Public Employment Service Offices (PESOs) and Migration Resource Centers, most OFW returnees in their localities would prefer to return to work abroad (shared at a consultation on 24 November 2021).

were interested in or intended to go into self-employment represents a sharp rise when compared with those who were in self-employment prior to migration.

Of those eyeing self-employment, the majority lacked capital for their business ventures. Only 26 per cent of all OFWs said they had ready capital. By region, fewer Visayas OFWs (20.1 per cent) and Luzon OFWs (24.3 per cent) had ready capital compared with Mindanao OFWs (30.6 per cent). When asked how they will raise the needed capital, about 50 per cent of all OFWs did not know where to secure capital. By region, more OFWs from Luzon (52.7 per cent) and the Visayas (76.6 per cent) had no knowledge of where they can secure capital compared with their counterparts from Mindanao (35.7 per cent). Mindanao OFWs accounted for the largest share (44.4 per cent) of those who have taken a loan.

For the OFWs who had no intention to re-migrate, the top three industries of interest to all OFWs are: food and processing, 25.5 per cent; wholesale and retail trade, 13.9 per cent; and agriculture, 10.7 per cent. As Table 4 shows, interest in food and processing is common to OFWs in all three regions; the second- and third-ranked vary by region. The interest in agriculture among OFWs in Mindanao is an encouraging sign; it is a sector that holds much potential for OFW investment that may have broader development contributions (OECD and SMC, 2017). Based on a closer look at the 2020 survey data, prior to their overseas employment, very few OFWs were in agriculture. Thus, the interest shown in agriculture by returned OFWs, especially among the Mindanao OFWs, is a welcome development.

The lockdowns during the pandemic forced the closure of many businesses that require physical stores. During the pandemic, e-commerce adoption in the Philippines rose to 76 per cent in 2020 (from 70 per cent in 2019) and 80.2 per cent in October 2021, spurred by the decision of businesses to go online. Online retail, delivery services, online entertainment, telehealth and digital payments were among the businesses that fueled the surge of e-commerce (Gonzales, 2021; Business Mirror, 2021). Studies among returned OFWs found returnees turning to the gig economy, online retail (e.g., sale of face masks, cosmetics) and food businesses, among others, as alternative sources of income (Liao, 2022; Asis, 2021b; Delerio, Dumalaog and Mansal, 2021; see also Austria, 2020; Reyes, 2020). Food-related businesses rank high among the business prospects of OFWs. However, for most returnees, returning to work abroad was still the preferred option (Liao, 2022; Asis, 2021b; Delerio, Dumalaog and Mansal, 2021). Thus, it seems that going into business during the pandemic was viewed mainly as a temporary income-generating activity rather than as a long-term economic project.

Table 4. Top Three Industries of Interest to OFWs by Region

Luzon		Visayas		Mindanao	
Food & processing	29.5%	Food & processing	15.9%	Food & processing	19.6%
Wholesale & retail	13.1%	Transportation	14.5%	Agriculture	18.0%
Construction	9.4%	Domestic work	13.2%	Transportation	17.9%

The top three industries OFWs are interested in are aligned, to some extent, with the key employment generators (KEGs). For the country as a whole, the JobsFit Labor Market Information Report identified the following sectors as KEGs for the period 2020-2022: Information Technology-Business Process Management, Wholesale and Retail, Transport and Logistics, Manufacturing, Construction, Agribusinesss, Banking and Finance, Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism, Education, and Health and Wellness (BLES, 2022: 2). The same report also has region-focused KEGs, which are helpful as points of reference in considering the industries of interest to OFW returnees. OFWs across the three regions all mentioned food and processing, a sector which was not mentioned by the JobsFit report, or it may be subsumed in the other sectors (e.g., Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism). The two other industries of interest to Luzon OFWs (Wholesale and retail; Construction) are among the KEGs identified for the various Luzon sub-regions. For the Visayas OFWs, Transportation is a KEG for the region, but not domestic work whereas for the Mindanao OFWs, Agribusiness/Agriculture and Transportation and Logistics are KEGs for Region XII (the SOCCSKSARGEN Region). (BLES, 2022: 2). Manufacturing is a KEG for several regions in

Mindanao (Regions IX, X, XI and XII), but this did not figure among the industries of interest to Mindanao OFWs. This suggests the need to share labor market information to returnees for their guidance, a task that may be carried out by regional offices of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO), Public Service Employment Offices (PESOs) and Migration Resource Centers or MRCs (where they are available).

About 50 per cent of returnees were interested in skills upgrading, and almost all expressed interest in training programs, especially in training programs offered by the Technical Education Skills Development Authority (TESDA). Fewer Visayas-based OFWs expressed interest in training programs in general and TESDA programs in specific, even as they were as interested in skills upgrading. This may be due to sea-based OFWs (many are from the Visayas) being required to undergo training programs in accredited seafarers' training centers. The sharing of labor market information, including information on current and prospective skills in demand, can be used by TESDA as a guide in developing training programs. TESDA can also guide OFWs in making decisions on training programs that enhance their skills set and employability in the

CONCLUSION

In recent years, the return and reintegration phase of the migration cycle has been elaborated as a multidimensional process and includes the possibility of re-migration as part of migrants' strategies to re-incorporate in their home communities (for an overview, see IOM, 2017; Wickmasekjara, 2019; OECD, 2020). The concept of sustainable reintegration was developed from this process of reflection. Sustainable reintegration is a condition "when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity" (IOM, 2017: 3). A returnee who has achieved sustainable reintegration is some who has achieved economic reintegration (sustainable livelihood); social and cultural reintegration (the returnee belongs to and participates in the receiving community); and political-security reintegration (the returnee can access safety and justice) (Wickmasekara, 2019: 4).

Indeed, the pandemic disrupted the OFWs' pursuit of better economic prospects overseas, but in some ways, it simply brought into sharp relief existing conditions which have not been fully addressed. The lack of decent work opportunities continues to drive temporary labor migration from the Philippines, resulting in sustained migration rather than sustainable reintegration.

The COVID-19 crisis has compelled the Philippine government and migration stakeholders to take a long hard look at return and reintegration challenges. The focus on emergency response and repatriation in the early months of the crisis increasingly turned to addressing the reintegration needs of the huge numbers of returned OFWs. While return migration is integral to the Philippines' comprehensive framework of migration governance, the return migration policies and programs needed to go through a long phase of review and improvement (IOM and SMC, 2013; Battistella, 2018; Asis, 2020; Liao, 2020). Also, while the Philippines has a wealth of experience in extending support to OFWs in destination countries undergoing conflicts or natural disasters, the scale and complexity of the COVID-19 crisis called for new approaches. OWWA and NRCO added new programs earmarked for returned OFWs during the pandemic. Furthermore, the whole-of-government approach adopted by the Philippine government brought in non-migration government agencies, such as the Small Business Corporation (an attached agency of the Department of Trade and Industry) and the Agriculture Credit Policy Council of the Department of Agriculture, as partners in promoting sustainable reintegration (Asis, 2020).

The renewed focus on reintegration is supported by the Updated Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022, which, for the first time, includes a chapter dedicated to migration: "Protecting the rights, promoting the welfare, and expanding opportunities for Overseas Filipinos" (Chapter 21). This is a significant step which builds on the momentum of promoting the integration of migration in national development planning (NEDA, n.d.). The plan was updated in 2020 in the context of the pandemic. The chapter on migration articulated the need for enhanced government support to repatriated and displaced OFWs and to promote the socioeconomic reintegration of overseas Filipinos and their families. It mentions the implementation of the Comprehensive OFW Reintegration Program with due attention to gender-responsive approaches, different reintegration pathways for different segments of the Overseas Filipino population, and convergence of the reintegration programs of different government agencies (NEDA, n.d.). Chapter 21 of the Updated Philippine Development Plan provides the national roadmap for reintegration programs and policies which, in turn, is guided by and is in line with objective 21 of the Global Compact for Migration which enjoins states to "[c]ooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration."

The recommendations from Chapter 21 and the Philippines' actual experience in responding to the impact of COVID-19 on Filipino migrants have been duly considered in the formulation of the National Action Plan on Sustainable, Gender-responsive

Return and Reintegration[9] (NAP-RR). It puts forward seven strategic objectives and the corresponding action plans to help migrants achieve sustainable reintegration. The National Action Plan is supported by the the Bridging Recruitment to Reintegration in Migration Governance (BRIDGE) Programme. The formulation of the plan was facilitated by the International Organization for Migration as part of the BRIDGE Programme, in consultation with government agencies, CSOs, academe, private sector, and international organizations involved in return and reintegration processes. Another notable reference is the development of a reintegration framework cognizant of the different circumstances of return (e.g., Battistella, 2018), supported by BRIDGE and another joint program, the Safe and Fair: Realizing Women Migrant Workers' Rights and Opportunities in the ASEAN Region. The framework identifies six different pathways and appropriate interventions that would facilitate the reintegration or remigration of OFWs. Guidance to help OFW returnees navigate their options will be provided by the online service, Reintegration Advisor (ILO in the Philippines, n.d.).

Following are some insights from the regional analysis that could contribute to ongoing efforts to improve and strengthen the country's reintegration programs and policies:

- **Recommendation 1: Acknowledging OFWs' remigration plans in crisis and non-crisis situations, including promotion of transfer of knowledge and expertise.** The mean age of returned OFWs (36 years old) is within the range of the economically productive years, and thus, the search for economic opportunities, whether in the Philippines or overseas, will be part of returnees' priorities. As the study has shown, the interest to re-migrate for overseas employment is significant and acknowledging OFWs' remigration plans in crisis and non-crisis situations will contribute to improve migration governance. Sea-based workers tend to have a higher interest (as well more opportunities) for re-migration compared to land-based workers (see also Papers 2 and 3). The acknowledgment of seafarers as essential workers in global trade can be used to secure better working conditions for Filipino seafarers. Programs to prepare seafarers for sustainable reintegration may target families in the Philippines since they can be easily reached. Given the long years of experience of Filipinos in international seafaring, efforts must be undertaken to promote the transfer of knowledge and expertise to benefit domestic shipping and the maritime industry, not just to produce the next generation of seafarers for the global maritime industry. The Visayas has a large share of sea-based workers and pilot projects concerning this sector may be initially implemented in the region.

- **Recommendation 2: Creating opportunities for generating domestic employment and energizing businesses will continue to be a priority in building better in the post-pandemic times.** The foremost challenge of OFWs who returned during the pandemic was finding employment (or other income-generating activities), and this was especially pronounced among Mindanao OFWs. The challenge is not limited to those returning in times of crisis. OFWs who return home in non-crisis situations also face the same issue (PSA and UPPI, 2020; OECD and SMC, 2017). Thus, regardless of the driver of the return of OFWs, returning OFWs, especially those in their economically active ages, need viable income-generating activities. Creating opportunities for generating domestic employment and energizing businesses will continue to be a priority in building better in the post-pandemic times. It is important to promote the creation of a sustainable business among returnees and their families rather than as a temporary source of income while waiting for another opportunity for overseas-based employment. Even if OFWs may decide to work abroad again, the business may be continued by other family members which, in the long run, may become a feasible alternative to overseas employment. For support agencies, such as NRCO, MRCs and PESOs, this suggests the necessity of mentoring OFW enterprises beyond the initial stage.

- **Recommendation 3: Information on accessing capital, eligibility and application requirements should be part of the financial education programs and business development programs offered by various organizations.** Interest in self-employment is high among the returned OFWs (many OFWs aspire to have a business upon their return), and this is especially high among the Mindanao-based OFWs. However, many lack capital, and many of those lacking capital did not know where and how they can access capital. Information on accessing capital, eligibility and application requirements should be part of the financial education programs and business development programs offered by various organizations.

[8] In December 2021, DOLE, through OWWA, adopted the National Action Plan on Sustainable, Gender-responsive Return and Reintegration, available at https://philippines.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1651/files/documents/national-action-plan-on-sustainable-gender-responsive-return-and-reintegration-final.pdf

The interest of many returnees from Mindanao to start a business as well as their interest in agriculture suggest amplifying programs to support these ventures. OFW returnees also tend to have higher unemployment, and this may be one of the driving forces to consider self-employment as an option. Closer coordination and cooperation between OWWA, NRCO, the regional offices of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Agriculture, and the LGUs in the sub-regions of Mindanao is needed for the targeted delivery of assistance and support.

- Recommendation 4: Studies to review public-private partnership in reintegration programs, particularly in contributing to more sustainable businesses among OFWs, will be useful for future policymaking. During the pandemic, OWWA partnered with the private sector, specifically big business, to support entrepreneurship among OFWs. OWWA has partnered with Coca Cola Philippines in the latter's OFW- Re-Integration through Skills and Entrepreneurship Program (RISE) Program. Aside from OWWA, other cooperating government agencies are Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), and the Philippine Trade Training Center (PTTC) of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). Under this program, returned OFWs were provided training to prepare their own business plan and would have information on how to access livelihood grants and micro-finance loans to start their own business. The partnership with Coca-Cola provides OFWs the opportunity to become distributors, wholesalers, or resellers of Coca Cola's beverage products. (Rappler, 2020). Another pathway for returned OFWs to realize their dreams of starting a business is through franchising. The NRCO has partnered with the Association of Filipino Franchisers, Inc. (AFFI) to connect OFWs with successful franchise businesses (NRCO, n.d.). Studies to review public-private partnership in reintegration programs, particularly in contributing to more sustainable businesses among OFWs, will be useful for future policymaking.

- Recommendation 5: TESDA and training providers could take a more proactive role in providing training guidance, especially for OFWs whose work experience abroad may be mismatched with current and prospective job opportunities in the country. Many returned OFWs also expressed interest in skills upgrading and attending training programs. TESDA and other agencies providing skills development or upgrading programs could expand their programs by including information and guidance on current and prospective labor market information, indicating skills that are in demand. TESDA and training providers could take a more proactive role in providing training guidance, especially for OFWs whose work experience abroad may be mismatched with current and prospective job opportunities in the country. In the 2020 survey, domestic work and services and sales were the top industries or sectors that land-based OFW returnees had worked in. In the Philippines, the top industries which recorded the highest number of vacancies in January-November 2021 (when economic activities resumed) across all regions were in business process outsourcing, ICT, government jobs, sales, banking and services, human resource and management, and healthcare (BLES, 2021: 5). Among the top ten occupations with the highest number of vacancies in January-November 2021 were production worker, office clerk, domestic worker and call center agent (BLES, 2021: 5).

- Recommendation 6: The discussion on sustainable return and reintegration shoould include relevant information about employment prospects, investments and business opportunities in the regions and provinces of OFWs come from. Recommendation 7: The role of family members as partners towards sustainable reintegration is a core message that needs to be directed to the families left behind. The discussion on sustainable return and reintegration in pre-departure orientation seminars and post-arrival orientation seminars and training programs while migrants are in destination countries should include relevant information about employment prospects, investments and business opportunities in the regions and provinces OFWs come from. Programs on financial literacy and the importance of enrolling and maintaining active membership in social protection programs, such as SSS, PhilHealth and PAG-IBIG, need to be integrated in these educational efforts. The role of family members as partners towards sustainable reintegration is a core message that needs to be directed to the families left behind.

- Recommendation 8: Local policy discussions should include OFWs' reintegration experiences. To date, the local context of the OFWs' reintegration experiences has not received as much attention in policy discussions in the Philippines. Some LGUs which have started to integrate migration in their local structures and policies shared examples of cooperation with national government agencies in delivering programs to returned OFWs. Also, some LGUs provided support to returned

OFWs and through services provided by Migrant Resource Centers or MRCs (where they exist) and Public Employment Service Offices (PESOs). Examples are the coordination between OWWA and LGUs, PESOs or MRCs in ensuring the onward transfer of OFWs returnees to their municipalities, co-organizing training programs with TESDA and providing additional cash assistance.[10]

- **Recommendation 9: The coordination and synergy forged between national government agencies and local government units during the pandemic must be sustained in the post-pandemic times.** This is an objective that can be pursued further by the newly created Department of Migrant Workers. The pandemic highlighted the need to synchronize national and local policies and programs. During the early phase of the return of OFWs from Metro Manila to their home provinces, the lack of coordination between the national government agencies and local government units hampered the onward transfer of OFWs from Metro Manila and their reception in the local communities (Asis, 2020; Liao, 2020). Subsequent efforts at coordination and communication between the national-level Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) and local government units (LGUs) improved the facilitation of the return of OFWs to their home communities. The coordination and synergy forged between national government agencies and local government units during the pandemic must be sustained in the post-pandemic times.

[10] This was shared during the consultation with representatives of LGUs, PESOs and MRCs on 24 November 2021.

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