

How the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Land-Based and Sea-Based Overseas Filipino Workers

Maruja MB Asis,
Scalabrini Migration Center

How the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Land-Based and Sea-Based Overseas Filipino Workers

Acknowledgments:

This report was written by Maruja MB Asis from the Scalabrini Migration Center. Mary Con Kimberly Juanillo provided valuable research assistance. The comments of colleagues from the International Organization for Migration Philippines on earlier drafts are gratefully acknowledged.

The opinions expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout the report do not imply expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IOM concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning its frontiers or boundaries.

This publication was supported by IOM's Corporate Responsibility in Eliminate Slavery and Trafficking (CREST) initiative, funded by Sweden through the Strategy for Regional Development Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific Region.

IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental organization, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration; advance understanding of migration issues; encourage social and economic development through migration; and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

Publisher: International Organization for Migration
Philippines Country Office
28th Floor, BDO Towers Valero Condominium
Paseo de Roxas, Makati City, Philippines

Tel: +63.2.8230. 1999

E-mail: iomphilippines@iom.int

Web: www.iom.int

INTRODUCTION

International labor migration from the Philippines consists of migrant workers in two key sectors: land-based and sea-based. In the early years of overseas employment, there were more sea-based workers (known then as seamen) than land-based workers, but from the mid-1970s, land-based workers had outnumbered seafarers (IOM and SMC, 2013).¹ Since then, the annual deployment of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) comprised about 80 per cent land-based and 20 per cent sea-based workers. Unlike other origin countries, data on labor migration from the Philippines cover both types of workers. The governance of labor migration also considers the specific features of the nature of work and labor market in these two sectors.²

When the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, Filipinos working on cruise ships were among the first OFWs who lost their jobs, and they comprised the large share of sea-based workers who returned home between March and mid-June 2020.³ Afterwards, land-based workers dominated the share of OFWs who returned to the country during the pandemic (Asis, 2020: 3). In previous crisis-related return migration, it was mostly land-based workers who were repatriated to the Philippines (Asis, 2013). The pandemic saw large numbers of sea-based workers among the returned OFWs.⁴

This policy brief discusses the experiences of land-based and sea-based OFWs in navigating their return and reintegration in their home communities. It aims to shed light on how land-based and sea-based workers have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, their immediate conditions upon their return, and their plans. These were examined using data from the telephone survey of returned OFWs, i.e., “Filipino migrant workers or Filipino citizens who reside in another country for the purpose of employment” and “who returned to the Philippines after 16 March 2020” (IOM, 2021: 6). An analysis of

the reintegration experiences of returned OFWs by sector is warranted because land-based and sea-based OFWs have different experiences throughout the migration cycle and are covered by different legal and policy frameworks. At the recruitment stage, sea-based workers do not pay a placement fee (in contrast to land-based workers, from whom it is legally allowed to charge placement fees up to an equivalent of one month of their salary *except* in the case of household service workers). In terms of their work contract, sea-based workers typically have a contract for 10 months at most, while land-based workers usually have a two-year contract. The promotion and protection of seafarers’ rights are provided by the 2006 Maritime Labour Convention (MLC 2006) which consolidates existing Conventions and Recommendations concerning the protection of seafarers (ILO, n.d.)⁵

The telephone survey was conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in September-December 2020 (hereafter, the 2020 survey), with generous funding from the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany. The survey completed interviews with 8,332 OFWs. Survey respondents were recruited through the anonymized database of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), IOM’s list of beneficiaries in their transportation assistance program, and advertisements 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. The survey was not based on probability sampling, hence, the findings cannot be generalized to the total population of OFWs who returned home during the pandemic.

¹ Sea-based workers refer to OFWs working in any international fishing/passenger/cargo vessels and those working with a shipping company based abroad.

² The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration’s (POEA) has rules and regulations specific to the recruitment and employment of OFW land-based workers and seafarers.

³ To bring displaced cruise workers home, the Philippine government allowed cruise ships employing Filipinos to dock in Manila Bay. In June 2020, there were 26 cruise ships docked in Manila Bay carrying more than 8,000 Filipino staff. After completing the quarantine period, Filipinos can disembark to return to their homes. Crew members of other nationalities and passengers were also allowed to disembark for their connecting flights to their destinations. Delays in the testing and release of results caused anxiety to workers stuck in their cruise ships (Heinrich Boell Foundation Southeast Asia, 2020).

⁴ Meanwhile, seafarers working on merchant ships faced a different problem during the pandemic. Due to border controls, crew change became difficult, resulting in replacement crew unable to board ship, while those on-board were forced to extend their contract. Seafarers on merchant ships are less affected by the pandemic than cruise line workers. With some 80-90 per cent of the world’s goods and equipment being transported by sea, merchant seafarers are essential workers at any time, hence, the demand for such seafarers is stable (Asis, 2021a and b).

⁵ There is also C188 - Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188). The Philippines is a State party to MLC 2006, but not to C188.

As of 10 February 2022, 923,652 OFWs have returned to the Philippines since the start of the pandemic-related repatriation in 2020 (Fernandez, 2022). Data from OWWA and from OFW Help indicate that four in five returned OFWs are land-based.⁶ The same distribution is suggested by data from the 2020 survey. Of the returned OFWs who participated in the survey, 80.1 per cent and 19.1 per cent were land-based and sea-based OFWs, respectively.

Land-based and sea-based OFW returnees share some similarities and exhibit notable differences.

What are the similarities?

- The mean age of both land-based and sea-based OFWs was around 36 years.
- The majority in both groups (65.3 per cent) have children: 65.7 per cent among the land-based OFWs compared with 64.1 per cent for the sea-based OFWs, although land-based OFWs had slightly more children than sea-based OFWs (1.42 vs 1.27, respectively).
- The mean household size was 5.17 for both groups, with a slightly larger mean for the land-based compared with the sea-based OFWs (5.21 vs. 5.03).

What are the differences?

- By gender, land-based OFWs are about evenly distributed between males and females; on the other hand, nine in 10 sea-based OFWs are male (Figure 1). Although women have joined the ranks of sea-based workers, most of whom work in the cruise line industry, the sea-based sector continues to be largely male.
- Both Luzon and Mindanao have higher share of land-based than sea-based OFWs while the Visayas has more sea-based than land-based OFWs.
- In terms of marital status, more sea-based OFWs are married compared to land-based OFWs (Figure 2).
- For both sectors, the overwhelming majority had completed some high school education (48.4 per cent) and higher education (49.6 per cent). The sea-based OFWs stand out for the very large share of having completed some college education and higher (77.9 per cent) compared with 42.6 per cent among the land-based OFWs.⁷ (partly related to regulatory requirements: a high school diploma, at the minimum, is required to become a seafarer.)

LEGEND



Figure 1. Gender Distribution of OFWs

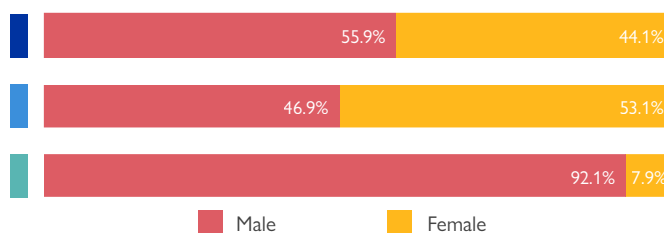


Figure 2. Marital Status of OFWs

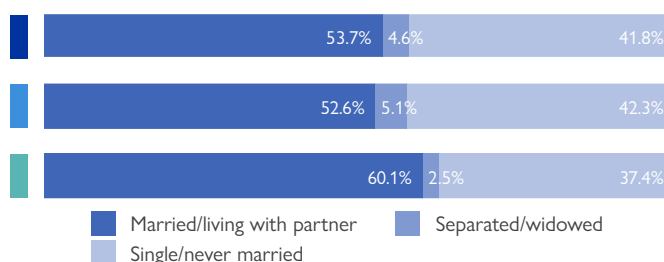


Figure 3. Region of Origin of OFWs

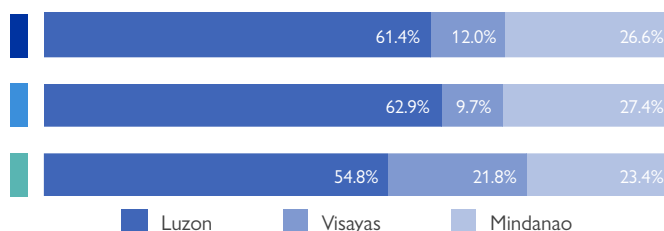
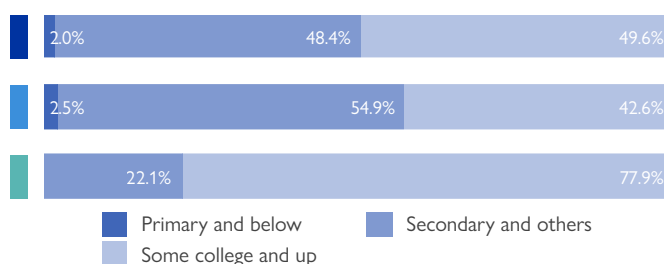


Figure 4. Educational Attainment of OFWs



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

⁶ According to the repatriation update of OFW Help, DFA-facilitated repatriations as of 28 January 2022, 456,642 totaled 456,642, of whom 105,619 (23.1 per cent) were seafarers and 351,023 were land-based overseas Filipinos (76.9 per cent) (<https://www.facebook.com/OFWHelpPH>, accessed 6 February 2022)

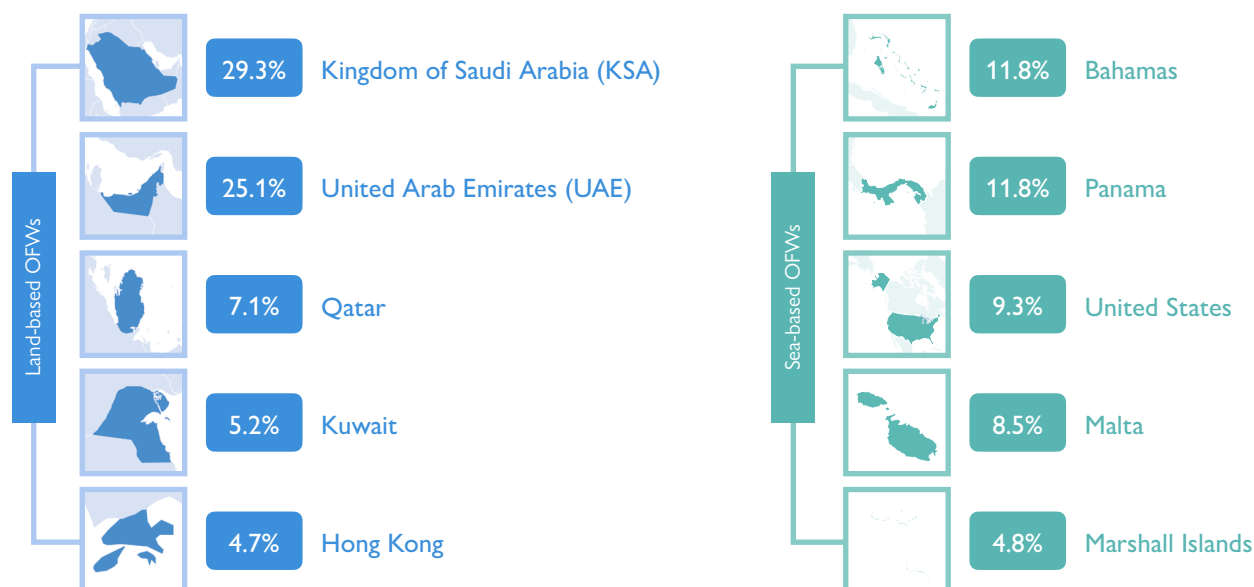
⁷ The high education of sea-based workers is partly explained by regulatory requirements. Filipino sea-based workers must secure the Seafarer's Identification Record Book to work onboard a foreign flagged vessel. Filipinos aspiring to work on merchant vessels enroll in either a Bachelor of Science in Marine Transportation (BSMT) or Bachelor of Science in Marine Engineering (BSME). Having or completing a maritime education enhances employment chances on merchant vessels. Other sea-based workers (cruise ship personnel and fishers) need not have a maritime-related educational background. All sea-based workers for foreign-flagged vessels must complete the Basic Safety Training as prescribed by the 1978 STWC (Standards on Training, Watchkeeping and Certification for Seafarers) Convention (MARINA, 2009).

FINDINGS

Before the Pandemic: Experiences as OFWs

The top five major destination countries where land-based OFWs last worked in and the top five flag States of vessels that employed sea-based workers are shown in Table 1. Almost three-fourths of land-based OFWs were concentrated in five countries, with just two countries – the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – as the key destination countries of more than half (54.4 per cent) of OFWs. Among sea-based workers, 44.2 per cent were employed in vessels carrying flags of the top five flag States.⁸

Table 1. Top Destination Countries and Flag States



Land-based OFWs work across a wide range of occupations, but many are concentrated in three occupational groups.⁹ Data for 2017-2019 indicate that the top three occupational groups where OFWs work are: elementary occupations, which include domestic workers (37-40 per cent), service and sales workers (18-19 per cent), and plant and machine operators and assemblers (12-14 per cent) (House of Representatives, 2021).¹⁰ Annual deployment data from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) suggest similar trends. Domestic workers or household service workers (HSWs, the term used by POEA) make up the largest group among the top ten skills of *new hires* among the *land-based* workers. In 2015 and 2016, HSWs made up 37.8 per cent and 47.2 per cent, respectively, of the top ten occupations of newly hired land-based workers (POEA, n.d.).

Only about a third of respondents answered the question concerning their monthly income in the last country or vessel they worked in, indicating much reluctance on the part of respondents in disclosing this information. According to Table 3, more than half of

⁸ The flag State is the state where a ship is registered. To avoid complying with strict regulations on working conditions, wages, registration fees and taxes, among others, companies resort to registering their ships in states with minimal standards rather than the state of company ownership or domicile. For example, a vessel flying the flag of the Bahamas or Panama does not mean that the ship-owning company is based in these states but is registered under the said states for convenience. The term flag of convenience refers to the practice where the state of registry is not the state of ship ownership. The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) calls for "a 'genuine link' between the real owner of a vessel and the flag the vessel flies, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). FOC registries make it more difficult for unions, industry stakeholders and the public to hold ship owners to account" (<https://www.itfglobal.org/en/sector/seafarers/flags-of-convenience>).

⁹ Data on the occupations of respondents in the 2020 survey were not collected for all respondents. Information on the occupation of sea-based workers was missing, especially information on the type of vessel and their position onboard.

¹⁰ Data on the occupational background of OFWs were culled from the 2017-2019 rounds of the Survey of Overseas Filipinos conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority.

OFWs had a monthly income in the range of PHP20,001-50,000. That sea-based workers earn more than land-based workers is suggested by more sea-based OFWs than land-based OFWs earning at least PHP50,001 a month (27.6 per cent vs. 24.7 per cent).

OFWs are high remitters (e.g., Asis, 2015), a pattern that is confirmed in the 2020 survey where 96 per cent of both land- and sea-based OFWs reported regularly sending remittances to their families. Remittances from OFWs are important contributions to remittance-receiving households. As shown in Table 4, most OFWs sent monthly remittances amounting to PHP10,000-25,000. Sea-based workers remitted larger amounts; about half (51.2 per cent) sent PHP25,001 and higher; the gap between the two groups is striking among those remitting PHP40,001 and higher. The larger remittances by sea-based OFWs reflect their larger income compared to land-based OFWs. Also, seafarers are required to remit at least 80 per cent of their salaries to their allottees in the Philippines (Gorecho, 2022).



More than half of OFWs cited COVID-19-related reasons for their homecoming

The return of OFWs to the Philippines in 2020 was not entirely due to COVID-19. The related reasons were combined and the list of 17 responses were reduced into four major reasons.¹¹ As presented in Figure 5, more than half of OFWs cited COVID-19-related reasons for their homecoming, suggesting the extent of unexpected return due to the pandemic. In general, Figure 5 underscores that there were reasons other than the pandemic which influenced the return of OFWs in 2020. The return of a quarter of all OFWs was scheduled or expected, and significantly, this included OFWs who returned because they had met their migration goals (e.g., saved enough money). More sea-based OFWs cited this reason compared with land-based OFWs (36.6 per cent vs. 22.5 per cent).¹²

¹¹ 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 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 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.

¹² Seafarers on merchant vessels earn more than many land-based workers and if they are officers, they earn much more. Based on the life stories shared by seafarers and their families, seafarers who find a good company can be assured of continuous employment. Seafarers tend to continue working either until retirement or when their goals have been reached – an important goal is the completion of their children's studies (Asis, 2021a). One exception is a seafarer who is not yet of retirement age but decided to return home for good when COVID-19 happened. He has some agricultural assets and he decided to focus on farming instead (Asis, 2021a).

Table 2. Top 3 Occupations of Land-Based OFWs in Last Destination Country



LEGEND



Table 3. Monthly Income of OFWs Abroad (in PHP) by Sector

	All participants	Land-based OFWs	Sea-based OFWs
5,001-20,000	19.5%	19.8%	18.4%
20,001-50,000	55.2%	55.5%	54.1%
50,001-75,000	15.2%	14.7%	16.8%
75,001-100,000	6.9%	6.6%	8.0%
More than 100,000	3.3%	3.4%	2.8%

Table 4. Monthly Remittances Sent Home by Land-Based and Sea-Based OFWs

	All participants	Land-based OFWs	Sea-based OFWs
Less than 10,000	8.1%	9.5%	2.5%
10,000-25,000	67.2%	72.3%	46.3%
25,001-40,000	16.1%	13.1%	28.3%
40,001 and up	8.6%	5.1%	22.9%

Another 17.4 per cent of all OFWs returned because they encountered problems, and the share was higher among the land-based than sea-based OFWs (19.5 per cent vs. 8.9 per cent). For this sub-set of returnees, the pandemic exacerbated their pre-existing problems. The different reasons suggest different degrees of OFWs' preparedness for returning home. A closer look at the circumstances surrounding the return of domestic workers is discussed in Box 1.

After Repatriation: Conditions at Home

Data from the 2020 survey convey the worrying conditions OFWs find themselves in and their expectations of what awaits them.

“

Domestic workers were as vulnerable to displacement and job loss as other workers.



Box 1: Spotlight on Returned Domestic Workers

Among the survey respondents, a total of 518 former domestic workers returned to the Philippines during the pandemic, comprising 20 per cent of all returned OFWs and 25 per cent of the land-based sector who were surveyed.

Migrant domestic workers are mostly female, but interestingly, the 2020 survey also uncovered a sizable share of male domestic workers among the returnee OFWs (57.5 per cent female vs. 42.5 per cent male). Male workers who are employed as gardeners or family drivers by households are classified as domestic workers;¹³ they perform different tasks from females. Female domestic workers mostly provide childcare and perform tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and the like.

The domestic work sector is relatively stable and is less affected by the ups and downs of the economy. For example, during the financial crisis in Asia in 1997 or the recession in 2008-2010, there was no massive displacement and repatriation of migrant domestic workers. The 20 per cent share of domestic workers among the returnees during the pandemic suggests that this time, domestic workers were as vulnerable to displacement and job loss as other workers.

Probing the reasons for their return to the Philippines during the pandemic disclosed some interesting details. More male domestic workers returned to the Philippines because their contracts ended and were not renewed by their employers.

Returned domestic workers were about equally divided in their intentions to re-migrate (44 per cent) or to remain in the Philippines (44 per cent); 12 per cent were undecided. By gender, more men than women intended to re-migrate (47.4 per cent vs. 38.2 per cent).

For former domestic workers, returning to domestic work in the Philippines may not be a viable option, most likely because of the low salary. As of May 2022, the minimum monthly salary for domestic workers ranges from a low of PHP2,000 in “other municipalities” in Region XI to a high of PHP 5,000 in the National Capital Region (NWPC, n.d.).¹⁴ Thus, **in terms of preparing migrant domestic workers for reintegration to the local labor market, support for skills upgrading would prepare them to enter other sectors.** Information and guidance on job opportunities in the domestic labor market should be provided as well. Training programs on business development and management would be helpful for those interested in starting a business.

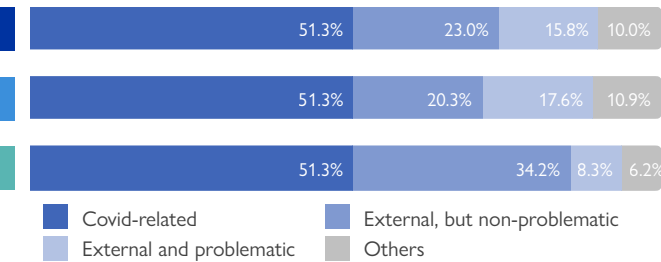
¹³ Studies on Filipino transnational domestic workers almost exclusively focus on women. Little to nothing is known about male OFWs in domestic work. They figure in POEA's deployment statistics, but they are far fewer in numbers compared to women. Most of the male domestic workers go to KSA. Around two million male migrants (many are from South Asia) work as personal drivers in KSA. Personal drivers are in high demand in KSA because it was only in 2018 that Saudi women were allowed to drive. Work visas for male domestic workers did not drop but even increased sharply after 2018. It is possible that employers may be hiring male workers using the domestic worker visa to save on work permit fees and/or employers are hiring personal drivers to run errands for them as well (Jaffery, 2020).

¹⁴ In an earlier study of domestic workers who returned to the Philippines under a non-crisis situation, respondents did not consider domestic work as occupational option in the Philippines. Instead, they planned or started a business, or when this did not prosper, they thought of or were in the process of remigrating (Asis, 2001).

LEGEND



Figure 5. Reasons for Return to the Philippines by Sector



When asked about the top three challenges they expected upon their return, finding a job or an income-generating activity was mentioned as the topmost challenge by about 83 per cent of OFWs. By comparison, a smaller percentage of sea-based OFWs (78 per cent) considered this as the foremost challenge. Eighty per cent expected a reduction of 20 per cent or higher in their income upon their return to the Philippines. In general, slightly more land-based OFWs expected a steeper reduction in their income compared to their sea-based counterparts. Close to 50 per cent (47.6 per cent) of all OFWs expected a 60 per cent drop in income; the figures for land-based and sea-based are 48 per cent and 46 per cent, respectively. Despite the higher income of sea-based workers (except fishers), there was not much difference in the expected drop in income between them and land-based workers. It must be noted that seafarers' contracts are shorter (they can range from 4-10 months), and families must be prepared to manage the lack or drop in income between contracts. In-depth interviews of seafarers and their families suggest that the financial contributions of spouses or other family members are essential not only as supplemental source of income, but also in meeting family needs when seafarers are not working (Asis, 2021a).

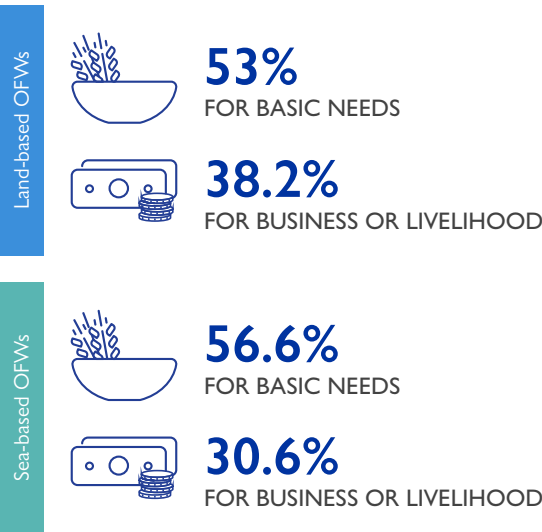
The expected loss in income can be related to the employment status of respondents at the time of interview (Table 5). More than 80 per cent (83.8 per cent for all OFWs, 83.2 per cent among the land-based, and 86 per cent among the sea-based) of the returned OFWs who were surveyed were unemployed. Only 10 per cent were employed, and an even smaller percentage started self-employment (4.5 per cent for all OFWs, 4.8 per cent among the land-based, 3 per cent among the sea-based). The paid employment and self-employment situation of OFWs in the first three months of their return in 2020 reflect the particularly difficult conditions in 2020 because of the hard lockdown in the country which suspended economic activities. During the pandemic, some of the returned cruise workers

Table 5. Employment Status at Time of Interview by Sector

	All participants	Land-based OFWs	Sea-based OFWs
Employed	8.3%	7.9%	9.5%
Employed but precarious (daily wage, contractual)	3.0%	3.0%	2.9%
Self-employed	4.5%	4.8%	3.0%
Unemployed	83.8%	83.2%	86.0%
Not in the labor force	4.6%	5.0%	3.0%
Others	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%

- 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.).

Use of Cash Assistance by Sector



tried to start a business or worked in call centers, but these were not viable. They tried online businesses selling clothes, baked goods and sundries, financed by their own savings. By late 2021, many opted to return to the cruise line industry when openings came up (Liao, 2022; see also Ortiga, 2020).

A measure of the economic precarity of the households of returned OFWs may be suggested by whether their households are eligible to receive any form of assistance from the government.¹⁵ About half of land-based OFWs and slightly more among sea-based OFWs (53.2 per cent) said they were

¹⁵ The questions about eligibility to register for government assistance and how they will use cash assistance were asked only for about a quarter of the original sample. The smaller sample was recontacted to respond to additional questions.

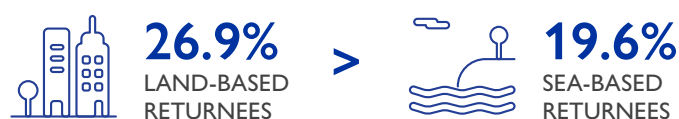
registered or were eligible to receive government assistance. Should they be eligible to receive cash assistance, the first choice on how the cash assistance will be used is to address basic needs – this was mentioned by 53.7 per cent of all respondents, 53 per cent by land-based OFWs, and 56.6 per cent by sea-based OFWs. Using the cash assistance for business or livelihood was mentioned by 38.2 per cent of land-based OFWs and a lower 30.6 per cent of sea-based workers. For 80-90 per cent of returned OFWs, using the cash assistance for meeting basic needs and for business or livelihood were the top choices. Using the cash assistance for accommodation, education/training, employment, health needs, and other purposes ranked very low in the respondents' priorities.

Only a quarter of all returned OFWs received government assistance after arriving in the Philippines; by sector, more land-based OFWs (26.9 per cent) had received such assistance than sea-based OFWs (19.6 per cent). The rest were waiting to receive assistance (40.4 per cent), did not file a claim (24.6 per cent), or did not know how to file or whether they can file a claim (9.5 per cent). There were modest differences in these responses between land-based and sea-based OFWs. The waiting time between the filing of the claim and receipt of assistance is the main issue. According to a study of returned cruise workers, availing of the PHP 10,000 cash assistance under the AKAP Program of the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) entailed providing many supporting documents. It took about five months for them to receive the financial support from the time that they submitted all the requirements (Liao, 2021). Findings from the 2020 survey show that lack of awareness about government assistance is less of a



Only a quarter of all returned OFWs received government assistance after arriving in the Philippines.

More Land-Based OFWs Received Assistance vs. Sea-Based OFWs



problem for the returned OFWs. By comparison, lack of information about government programs and services for return migrants was higher among respondents in the 2018 National Migration Survey. In the said survey, only a quarter of return migrants were aware of government programs and services, and a very low 2 per cent were members of migrant networks or organizations which are vehicles for accessing information and services (PSA and UPPI, 2019: 216). The higher awareness of government assistance by the 2020 survey respondents may be due to the multi-media information dissemination addressing OFWs. In particular, the use of online-based information services not only increased access to information, but it also allowed OFWs to contact government agencies more easily.

Plans and Options

In the face of high unemployment at home and lack of employment prospects overseas, how do returned OFWs see their options? In previous crises and unscheduled returns, OFWs also considered whether to re-migrate or to stay. For example, during the 1990-91 Gulf War, some 30,000 OFWs returned to the Philippines. When the conflict was resolved, Filipinos returned to avail of employment opportunities in the Gulf countries. During the 1997 financial crisis in Asia, many OFWs who returned to the Philippines did not return home for good; when the economy bounced back, OFWs left again to work overseas. When a crisis interrupts OFWs' employment, some come back to the Philippines (many remain abroad), wait out the crisis, and return abroad when the situation improves.¹⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic, however, is different because the crisis is global, and the end of the pandemic is indeterminable. During the long wait, plans to re-migrate or remain may change.

The 2020 survey asked about remigration ("Do you want to re-migrate after returning home") which provides indications on those who intend to re-migrate and those who are thinking of remaining in the Philippines.¹⁷ For all OFWs, 48.1 per cent reported having intentions to re-migrate, a sizable 37 per cent intend to remain in the Philippines, and the remaining 14.9 per cent were undecided at

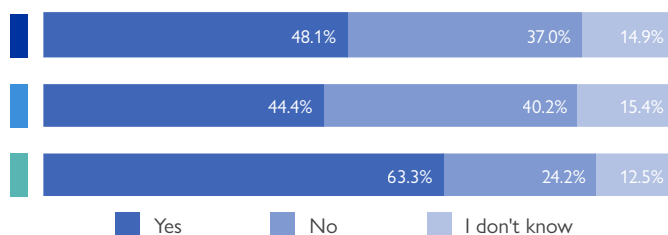
¹⁶ During the pandemic, many displaced OFWs opted to remain abroad in the hope of finding better prospects rather than return home (Aguilar, 2020). Despite being caught in crisis situations, OFWs tend to ignore or even defy the Philippine government's call for repatriation, including the imposition of mandatory evacuation in life-threatening situations, such as conflict or war in destination countries (Asis, 2013).

¹⁷ For the reanalysis, the response, "Yes, internal (inside the Philippines)," was recoded under "No" [to remain in the Philippines]; the intention to re-migrate refers specifically to those intending to migrate to work abroad.

LEGEND



Figure 6. Intention To Re-Migrate by Sector



the time of the survey. As displayed in Figure 6, more sea-based OFWs expressed the intention to re-migrate compared to land-based OFWs (63.3 per cent vs. 44.4 per cent); the rest were undecided.¹⁸ While the demand for many skills went down due to the global recession, merchant seafarers continued to be in high demand, affirming their role as essential workers in the global economy (Asis, 2021b). In 2020, the year when COVID-19 struck, POEA data on deployment of OFWs declined by 74.5 per cent compared to 2019; for sea-based

workers, the decline was 57.2 per cent in 2020 relative to 2019 (Bacilig, 2021; see also IOM, 2021; Asis, 2021b).

Many OFWs planning to engage in income-generating activities in the coming months were considering self-employment or starting a business; more land-based than sea-based OFWs (58.3 per cent vs. 47.7 per cent, respectively) mentioned this. However, the majority of OFWs did not have capital to initiate self-employment ventures: only a quarter (24.7 per cent) of land-based OFWs and a third (33 per cent) of sea-based OFWs answered affirmatively that they had capital to start a business. For those without ready capital, it is striking to note that half of all OFWs (52.4 per cent vs. 47.9 per cent for land-based- and sea-based OFWs, respectively) did not know how or where to go to raise the capital needed to initiate a business. About a third mentioned taking out a loan.

Focusing on the returnees who have no plans of remigrating, the income-generating activities OFWs had in mind are activities in food and processing, wholesale and retail, and agriculture. Sea-based OFWs showed interest in income-generating activities in transportation and hospitality including hotels, accommodation and restaurants (Table 6).

Table 6. Top Three Industries of Interest to OFWs by Sector

	Food and Processing	25.5%
	Wholesale and Retail	13.9%
	Agriculture	10.8%
	Food and Processing	25.9%
	Wholesale and Retail	14.8%
	Agriculture	11.4%
	Transportation	20.4%
	Hotels and Accommodation	13.2%

The Technical Education Skills Development Authority (TESDA), the government agency mandated to offer technical-vocational training programs as well as competency assessment and certification, amplified its training programs for OFWs who returned during the pandemic. In the regions, TESDA cooperated with the Public Employment Service Offices (PESOs) and/or local governments to offer training programs for returned OFWs to equip them with new skills or for skills upgrading. Such initiatives help address the interest in training programs of repatriated OFWs. Half of all OFWs (52.5 per cent among the land-based and 49.9 per cent among the sea-based) said they were interested in upgrading their skills set, and of those interested, nine in 10 had plans to enroll in training programs for skills upgrading. Seventy-one per cent of all OFWs mentioned an interest in taking TESDA training; the interest was slightly higher among land-based OFWs (74.1 per cent) and was markedly lower among sea-based OFWs (56 per cent). The lower interest in taking TESDA training among sea-based OFWs may be due to specific training requirements for seafarers which can only be obtained from maritime training centers. Almost all OFWs (98 per cent) who were interested in training programs aimed to receive a training certificate.¹⁹

¹⁸ In a survey of 1,272 seafarers conducted by Stella Maris-Manila, 64 per cent expressed the wish to apply for onboard employment; only 36 per cent wanted to return to their hometowns (Heinrich Boell Foundation Southeast Asia, 2020).

¹⁹ Since the "TESDA Abot Lahat ang OFWs Program" (TESDA Reaches Out to All OFWs) was launched in June 2020 as a response to the massive return of OFWs, a total of 99,711 OFWs and their dependents registered in the TESDA Online Program (TOP) and around 31,435 have completed their courses under the said program (see <https://www.tesda.gov.ph/News/Details/19991>).

CONCLUSION

The 2020 survey was conducted at a very difficult time: it was a year marked by the return of large numbers of OFWs amid a very difficult economic climate and high numbers of infections and deaths. This bleak context not only affected the objective conditions of returned OFWs but also their views and expectations of their current situation and prospects. Among the key differences between land-based and sea-based OFWs are the following: more land-based workers expected more than 60 per cent drop in income, more land-based OFWs were employed at the time of interview, but more sea-based workers had intentions to re-migrate. The plans for re-migration for sea-based workers and for remaining in the Philippines for land-based workers are shaped by the different dynamics of the land-based and sea-based labor markets.

As the previous discussion indicated, land-based OFWs are concentrated in a few countries and in specific industries or sectors. Although some destination countries cautiously and slowly reopened starting in mid-2020, OFW deployment has remained modest. The top destination countries where OFWs last worked in (as reported in the 2020 survey) were the same destinations where OFWs were deployed to in 2020. Deployment levels in 2020, however, were down by 70-90 per cent relative to 2019 (Asis, 2021: 7). Also, the sectors where OFWs were working in prior to the pandemic – domestic work, service and sales, plant and machine, and crafts and related sectors – were hard-hit by the economic fallout. These are not the skills or occupations that are likely to be in demand in the short term. POEA sees employment prospects restricted to essential workers, such as health workers, transport and logistics workers, and technology-based talents and professionals (Asis, 2021: 6). In comparison, the prospects are better for sea-based workers working on vessels transporting raw materials, food, and other essential goods. As essential workers in the global economy, there will be a certain level of demand for such workers (Asis, 2021).

The different overseas employment prospects for land-based and sea-based OFWs imply different emphases: reintegration support that will provide alternatives to overseas employment for the returned land-based OFWs, and re-migration support to sea-based workers to enhance access to decent employment. Ongoing discussions on reintegration are already veering away from the one-size-fits-all approach and are

“

The different overseas employment prospects for land-based and sea-based OFWs imply different emphases: reintegration support that will provide alternatives to overseas employment for the returned land-based OFWs, and re-migration support to sea-based workers to enhance access to decent employment.

recognizing different reintegration pathways. The launch of the National Action Plan on Sustainable, Gender-responsive Return and Reintegration (NAP-RR)—an initiative facilitated by the International Organization for Migration as part of the Bridging Recruitment to Reintegration in Migration Governance (BRIDGE) Programme, supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs and adopted by the Department of Labor and Employment—marks an important development in finetuning the Philippines' return and reintegration policies and programs. The NAP consists of 7-point strategic objectives which aim to: (1) ensure safe and dignified return and readmission of migrants and their families, with attention to the needs of vulnerable migrants, trafficking victims and refugees; (2) develop and maintain accurate, reliable and harmonized database of Filipino migrants in the origin and destination; (3) optimize the use of digital technology, social media and traditional media to disseminate information to Filipinos in destination countries and those repatriated at home; (4) disseminate and use the gender-responsive reintegration framework to identify the appropriate reintegration pathway for returnees and the services needed to support the reintegration of returnees; (5) improve policies and programs on employment, skills and development at the municipal, provincial and regional levels; (6) strengthen the financial inclusion of migrant workers, especially women

migrants, in the destination countries and in the Philippines; and (7) improve the coordination of all stakeholders involved in reintegration from the local to the national levels. Each of the objectives is further elaborated into action points.

The recommendations from the current study build on, add some details or support the broad objectives of NAP:

- **Recommendation 1: The enrollment of OFWs in the Social Security System (SSS), Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (Philhealth) and Home Development Mutual Fund (PAGIBIG) must be promoted.** The crisis highlighted the exclusion of many migrant workers from social protection programs in either the origin or destination country. For most OFWs, OWWA is the lone source of support in times of crisis. Moreover, the support provided to OFWs, such as the USD 200 or PHP 10,000 cash assistance under the AKAP Program, is more of an emergency support rather than a safety net for affected OFWs (Tabuga, Vargas and Mondez, 2021). The enrollment of OFWs in the Social Security System (SSS), Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (Philhealth) and Home Development Mutual Fund (PAGIBIG) must be promoted, especially among the migrant workers in elementary occupations who have the lowest enrollment rates in these programs (Tabuga, Vargas and Mondez, 2021). The rationale, benefits, terms of membership and member responsibilities should be part of continuing information and education programs for OFWs and their families. Beyond enrollment, OFWs need to maintain active membership in these programs to be able to avail of support for emergency purposes and for long-term benefits such as financial support for home construction and pension.
- **Recommendation 2: Government agencies need to streamline the requirements and the process to ensure the timeliness of the delivery of assistance.** Although the Philippine government has various assistance programs for returned OFWs, the list of requirements and the process discouraged or made it difficult for OFWs to access support. Findings from the 2020 survey show that only about a quarter of OFWs had received cash assistance from the government while 40 per cent had filed but were waiting to receive the cash assistance. Government agencies need to streamline the requirements and the process to ensure the timeliness of the delivery of assistance.



Links between these institutions with OFW Family Circles and migrants' associations should be encouraged not only as conduits of information but also to make space for their participation.

- **Recommendation 3: Information on where to source capital as well as details on eligibility and requirements would help returnees navigate the application process.** As noted earlier, more land-based returnees with no intention to re-migrate are interested in self-employment than paid employment. However, as the 2020 survey reveals, many do not have capital. Information on where to source capital as well as details on eligibility and requirements would help returnees navigate the application process. This information support can be part of the envisaged Reintegration Advisor²⁰ which can be a potential channel for this purpose. Migrant Resource Centers and Public Employment Service Offices may also be invited as partners to guide migrant applicants through the whole process. Links between these institutions with OFW Family Circles and migrants' associations should be encouraged not only as conduits of information but also to make space for their participation.
- **Recommendation 4: Policies and programs are informed by lessons learned during the pandemic.** Remigration is part of the plans of many returnees. The newly established Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) will have to work out policies and programs informed by lessons learned during the pandemic. As the global economy transitions towards a post-pandemic landscape, **DMW would do well to undertake a systematic study to identify safe and enabling destinations for Filipino workers.** To date, sea-based workers, especially seafarers on merchant vessels, have recorded higher deployment levels compared to land-based workers. Close attention to factors that may threaten employment opportunities of

²⁰ Supported by the Safe and Fair and BRIDGE Programmes, an online service called Reintegration Advisor is being developed. It aims to help OFWs and their families identify the most suitable pathway for reintegration in their respective communities. The reintegration framework identifies six pathways based on the circumstances and motivations of return, the needs and resources of returnees, and their return (whether temporary or permanent) and re-migration plans. Each pathway is associated with services to support OFWs (ILO in the Philippines, n.d.).



The issue of nurse migration cannot be solely addressed by migration governance but must be approached as a health system issue.

Filipino seafarers in the future must be considered. Among others, if the Philippines is found non-compliant in the final audit of the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA)—i.e., whether the Philippines has met the minimum global standards for maritime education, training and certification – this can affect the employability of Filipino seafarers in EU-flagged vessels (Galam, 2022). From an industry perspective, it is said that global shipping companies are turning to other nationals because of ambulance chasing (i.e., the practice of lawyers to persuade someone to file claims from a shipping company/employer for injury) and the Philippines' mishandling of these claims (Baguilat, 2022). The steady decline of the market share of Filipinos in global shipping—from 28 per cent in 2000 to 14 per cent in 2020—is attributed to this factor (Baguilat, 2022).

- **Recommendation 5: Reintegration programs for sea-based workers must taken into consideration that they are constantly on the move.** For sea-based workers whose work in global shipping entails migration, their pathway is re-migration rather than permanent return,

especially for those in economically active age groups. The acknowledgment of seafarers as essential workers may be used as leverage in securing better terms and conditions for their contracts. **Reintegration programs for sea-based workers cannot be easily implemented because they are constantly on the move.** Preparation for reintegration for this sector can be integrated in the Pre-Departure Orientation Seminars and reinforced through continuing programs on financial education, business planning and related topics. Cooperation with crewing agencies, shipping companies and seafarers' centers (such as the Stella Maris network) could facilitate the delivery of reintegration planning and preparedness programs targeting seafarers. These can be supplemented by parallel programs aimed at the left-behind families to enhance their participation in building a future of sustainable return and reintegration. Seafarers and their families need to consider the period between contracts when seafarers do not earn income (Asis, 2021), as well as the growing preference of shipping companies not to hire seafarers above age 55 (Baguilat, 2022).

- **Recommendation 6: The issue of nurse migration cannot be solely addressed by migration governance but must be approached as a health system issue.** Among land-based workers, health care workers are likely to be in demand. During the pandemic, the Philippine government imposed a moratorium on the deployment of newly hired nurses and other health care workers until the national state of emergency is lifted and until travel restrictions are lifted in destination countries (POEA Governing Board Resolution No. 9, Series of 2020). Later resolutions lifted the moratorium on the deployment of newly hired nurses



– but with a cap of 5,000 in January 2021, which was increased to 6,500 in June 2021, and to 7,000 in December 2021 (BLES, 2021: 6). The moratorium has had adverse impacts on nurses who had invested time and resources in securing employment overseas. Moreover, despite the moratorium, nurses were discouraged to work in local hospitals because of low pay and dangerous conditions (Ortiga, 2021). In the post-pandemic future, a possible rise in the migration of nurses and other health care professionals is likely. Although the Philippines has a large pool of nurses, the migration of nurses will cause a dent in the country's healthcare capacities due to loss of experienced nurses. The issue of nurse migration cannot be solely addressed by migration governance but must be approached as a health system issue.

- **Recommendation 7: The experiences, pitfalls and lessons learned in the past years need to be documented and evaluated for their implications for policymaking.** The unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic and the responses to the challenges are materials for research. A documentation of good practices can be a rich source of insights for pilot projects, upscaling or replication. It would be interesting to know about good practices introduced by stakeholders—recruitment agencies and crewing agencies, OFW Family Circles, local government units, and others. The drastic reduction in OFW deployment, especially in the land-based sector, has led to the suspension of operations or closure of some recruitment and crewing agencies. Whether this signals a temporary or permanent change in labor migration

patterns still remains to be seen. How the overseas employment sector is bracing for the changed landscape of transnational labor migration post-COVID as well as the new migration governance context under the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) will help in understanding labor migration prospects. Migration has been instrumental in promoting and cementing the Philippines' rise as a source country of workers for the global labor market. The strategies and underlying principles that worked in the past may require new approaches in the post-COVID period.

The return of OFWs during the COVID-19 crisis called for emergency measures and interventions to address urgent concerns, but reactive measures are not sufficient (e.g., Battistella, 2019; Kang and Latoja, 2022). The shift to reintegration programs after the emergency phase was necessary towards (re)building livelihoods for sustainable reintegration. The innovations, synergies, initiatives and new thinking that developed in recent years, including the ones that surfaced during the pandemic, should be part of renewed and sustained stocktaking to establish, evaluate and strengthen sustainable reintegration policies and programs. Periodic summits focused on specific themes – e.g., generating decent jobs at home, business opportunities in the agriculture sector, incentives for local investors, support programs for distressed returnees, decent job opportunities overseas, among others – may be organized at the national, regional and local levels to make sure that important issues are addressed, and no one is left behind.

Aguilar, Krissy

- 2021a DOLE: Almost 200k displaced OFWs refuse to return to PH, Inquirer, 2 June. Available from <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/188079/dole-almost-200k-displaced-ofws-refuse-to-return-to-ph#ixzz7WH6wGTXQ>

Asis, Maruja M.B. (ed.)

- 2021a Stella Maris in the Philippines: Caring for Seafarers, Fishers and Their Families. Quezon City: Scalabrini Migration Center.

Asis, Maruja M.B.

- 2021b Overseas Employment Prospects and Trends in the Short Term: What Lies Ahead? Migration and COVID-19 Watch No. 3. International Organization for Migration. Available from
- 2020 Repatriating Filipino migrant workers in the time of the pandemic. Migration Research Series N° 63. International Organization for Migration (IOM). Geneva. Available from <https://publications.iom.int/books/mrs-no-63-repatriating-filipino-migrant-workers-time-pandemic>
- 2015 “All in the family: Family, remittances and public policies in the Philippines.” In Women, Gender, Remittances and Development in the Global South, edited by Ton van Naerssen, Lothar Smith, Tine Davids and Marianne H. Marchand. Farnham: Ashgate. Pp. 141-154.
- 2013 Gender runs through it: Displacement and repatriation of Filipino migrant workers from Libya and Syria. Paper presented at the 27th International Conference of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, Busan, Korea, 27-31 August.
- 2001 The return migration of Filipino women migrants: Home, but not for good? In Female Labour Migration in South-East Asia: Change and Continuity. Edited by Christina Wille and Basia Passl. Pp. 23-93. Bangkok: Asian Research Centre for Migration, Chulalongkorn University.

Bacilig, Cristina Eloisa

- 2021 OFW departures pick up, shows need for jobs defies COVID, Inquirer, 11 November. Available from <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1513675/ofw-departures-pick-up-shows-need-for-jobs-defy-covid>

Baguilat, Iris

- 2022 Ambulance chasing threat to seafaring, Manila Times, 25 May. Available from <https://www.manilatimes.net/2022/05/25/business/maritime/ambulance-chasing-threat-to-seafaring/1844848>

Bureau of Labor Employment Services, Department of Labor and Employment (BLES)

- 2021 JobsFit COVID-19 Labor Market Information: Road to Recovery. Available from <http://www.ble.dole.gov.ph/downloads/Publications/JobsFit/JobsFit%20LMI%20Report%20-%20Road%20to%20Recovery.pdf>

Fernandez I, Muyot J, Pangilinan A and Quijano N

- 2020 A Hero's Welcome? Repatriated Overseas Filipino Workers and COVID-19. London School of Economics and Political Science. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/seac/2020/10/08/a-heros-welcome-repatriated-overseas-filipino-workers-and-covid-19/>

Galam, Roderick Guerrero

- 2022 The skills debate: The EMSA audit and employability of Filipino seafarers, Rappler, 28 March. Available from <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/opinion-skills-debate-emsa-audit-employability-filipino-seafarers/>

Gorecho, Dennis

2022 Philippines still a top supplier of seafarers, Business Mirror, 25 March. Available from <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2022/03/25/Philippines-still-a-top-supplier-of-seafarers/>

Heinrich Boell Foundation Southeast Asia

2020 Filipino Seafarers Find Their Future, and Lives, Adrift. Reporting ASEAN. Available from <https://www.reportingasean.net/filipino-seafarers-find-future-lives-adrift/>

House of Representatives

2021 Facts in figures. Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department, House of Representatives. January 2021 (No. 05). Available from https://cpbrd.congress.gov.ph/images/PDF%20Attachments/Facts%20in%20Figures/FF2021-05_OFVs.pdf

International Labour Organization (ILO)

n.d. MLC, 2006 – Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC, 2006). Available from https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C186

International Labour Organization in the Philippines (ILO in the Philippines)

n.d. Reintegration Advisor Diagram. Available from http://www.oit.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-manila/documents/genericdocument/wcms_832454.pdf

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

2021 COVID-19 Impact Assessment of Returned Overseas Filipino Workers. Makati City: International Organization for Migration. Available from https://philippines.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1326/files/documents/COVID-19%20Impact%20Assessment%20on%20Returned%20Overseas%20Filipino%20Workers_1.pdf

International Organization for Migration and Scalabrini Migration Center (IOM and SMC)

2013 Country Migration Report: The Philippines 2013. Makati City: IOM

Jaffery, Rabiya

2020 Driven to despair: Male domestic workers in Saudi, 19 July. Available from <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2020/07/driven-to-despair-male-domestic-workers-in-saudi/>

Liao, Karen

2022 COVID-19: the costs of strandedness for repatriated Filipino migrant workers. 22 April. Available from https://www.newmandala.org/covid-19-the-costs-of-strandedness-for-repatriated-filipino-migrantworkers/?fbclid=IwAR2v25FHxxFiGZ8CmGXSM2Utcx3AUzFaYrH6YMfXtnT7KI_5CN_S-O64giE

Kang, Jong Woo and Ma. Concepcion G. Latoja

2022 COVID-19 and Overseas Filipino Workers Return Migration and Reintegration into the Home Country—the Philippine Case. ADB Southeast Asia Working Paper Series, No. 21. February. Available from <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/767846/sewp-021-covid-19-ofws-return-migration-reintegration.pdf>

Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA)

2009 Revised rules on the issuance of enhanced Seafarer's Identification and Record Book (SIRB). Memorandum Circular No. 10, Series of 2009. Available from <https://marina.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/MC-2009-10.pdf>

National Wages and Productivity Commission, Department of Labor and Employment (NWPC)

n.d. Current Monthly Minimum Wage for Domestic Workers. May 2022. Available from <https://nwpc.dole.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/1-Current-Monthly-MW-for-DW-May-2022.pdf>

Ortiga, Yasmin

2020 Commentary: Cruise workers would rather be onboard ships in a pandemic than home, Channel News Asia, 28 October. Available from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/cruise-migrant-workers-home-finding-work-philippines-stuck-ships-1298541>

Patinio, Ferdinand

2022 2 regional minimum wage hikes OK'd. Philippine News Agency. 21 May. Available from <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1175024#:~:text=in%20the%20region.,Under%20Wage%20Order%20No.,under%20the%20previous%20Wage%20Order>

Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA)

n.d. Philippine Overseas Employment Administration Overseas Employment Statistics Deployed Overseas Filipino Workers 2016 vs 2015. Available from <https://poea.gov.ph/ofwstat/compendium/2015-2016%20OES%201.pdf> (accessed on 21 February 2022)

Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA)

n.d. Technical Notes on the Labor Force Survey. Available from <https://psa.gov.ph/article/technical-notes-labor-force-survey2012-08-16-1659>

Tabuga, Audrey D., Anna Rita P. Vargas and Maria Blesilda D. Mondez

2021 Analyzing Filipino Migrant Workers' Access to Social Protection. Discussion Paper 2021-38. Philippine Institute for Development Studies. Available from <https://serp-p.pidsgov.ph/publication/public/view?slug=analyzing-filipino-migrant-workers-access-to-social-protection>



For more
information
please contact:

Troy Dooley
Officer in Charge
IOM Philippines
tdooley@iom.int

Yuko Tomita
Programme Manager
IOM Philippines
ytomita@iom.int