

4

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: ELEVATING SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR FILIPINO MIGRANTS THROUGH EVALUATION



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INTRODUCTION

Currently, there are more than 10 million Filipinos staying in 197 foreign countries and territories, making the Philippines one of the top sources of immigrants around the world. The rapid and large-scale international labour migration from the Philippines started five decades ago as a response to the demands of oil-rich Gulf countries for workers to carry out infrastructure development projects after the oil crisis in 1973. Reinforcing the outflow of migrants was the passage of the Labor Code of the Philippines in 1974, which established the Philippine Government's overseas employment programme. This opened employment opportunities abroad and prompted Filipinos to migrate in pursuit of better economic conditions and quality of life elsewhere.

While the economic benefits of migration through increased remittances are clearly substantial, the trade-off is that the safety and welfare of the Filipino migrants sending these remittances have been put at risk. Over the years, statistics showed that a considerable number of overseas Filipinos became distressed; many became victims of abuse, maltreatment and trafficking; some have lost their jobs due to economic downturns; others even face criminal charges and sentences.

In response to the social protection and welfare concerns of overseas Filipinos, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), being the lead government agency in the Philippines providing protection to vulnerable and disadvantaged Filipinos, started to implement the International Social Welfare Services for Filipino Nationals (ISWSFN) project in 2002 in countries with a high concentration of overseas Filipinos.

This paper describes the efforts of DSWD in elevating social protection for migrant Filipinos through evaluating the ISWSFN and examining the Philippine Government's approach to address the needs and issues of overseas Filipinos and their families. It also shares how evidence harvested from the evaluation was used to influence the legislature and policies and improve programme implementation.

SITUATION OF OVERSEAS FILIPINOS

The Philippines is known as a major source of global workers. Since the 1970s, the number of Filipinos migrating to work abroad has followed an upward trend. More than 1 million Filipino workers are deployed annually to about 197 countries and territories all over the world, who then work in thousands of different settings. In 2014, the Commission on Filipinos Overseas counted 10,238,614 overseas Filipinos in 197 countries and territories as of December 2013.

Meanwhile, in the 2017 Survey on Overseas Filipinos by the Philippine Statistics Authority, 2.34 million Filipinos were estimated to be working abroad at any time during the period April to September 2017. Fifty-seven percent of the overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) are concentrated in countries in the Middle East, led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with 25 percent of the total number of OFWs. However, according to the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), Malaysia has the greatest number of undocumented Filipinos with 448,450 persons, or 38 percent of all undocumented OFWs.

In the same 2017 Survey, it was revealed that women OFWs constitute almost 54 percent (53.7 percent) of total OFWs, and that they were generally younger than the male OFWs. Of these 2.34 million OFWs, 54 percent serve as labourers, unskilled workers and service workers. These types of employment offer minimal protection, exposing the OFWs further and making them, especially women, vulnerable to sexual exploitation, abuse and violence.

The combination of their vulnerability (female, unskilled, low level of education) and high likelihood of exposure (type of work, tenure and location of work) puts the welfare and safety of OFWs at risk. Over the years, statistics showed that many OFWs under these conditions suffered abuse, maltreatment, forced labour and exploitation, hence their need for special protection.

MEASURES IMPLEMENTED TO PROTECT OVERSEAS FILIPINOS

In 2002, prompted by the massive crackdown/deportation of Filipino nationals in Malaysia, the DSWD began posting Social Welfare Attaches (SWAtts) to help the Philippine Embassy uphold and protect the rights and welfare of OFWs, especially those who are undocumented and distressed.

In 2003, pursuant to its mandate to provide care and protection to vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals, the DSWD developed the ISWSFN as a guide for the proper delivery of social welfare services to overseas Filipinos.

In 2004, Executive Order No. 287 was signed by then President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, directing the deployment of SWAtts in countries with the highest concentration of OFWs as determined in coordination with the DFA, Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency.

Through the representation of the DFA and DOLE, SWAtts were posted in Hong Kong, Qatar, Saudi Arabia (Riyadh and Jeddah), Kuwait, Jordan, Italy and the Republic of Korea. As members of the One Country Team (OCT) in the Philippine Embassy, the SWAtts are helping migrant Filipinos and other overseas Filipino nationals who are in crisis situations and in need of special protection, such as victims of trafficking, illegal recruitment, abuse/exploitation, maltreatment by employers and even human-induced and natural disasters.

The SWAtts also provide services to prisoners/detainees, children in need of special protection such as those who have been abandoned, neglected, exploited and abused, children needing alternative placement, Filipinos experiencing marital and domestic problems, those in need of pre-marriage/marriage counselling and those with health problems, among others.

EVALUATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WELFARE SERVICES FOR FILIPINO NATIONALS PROJECT

Despite the efforts of Philippine embassies, consulates, Overseas Labor Offices, Workers Welfare Offices and the SWAtts, the surge of distressed OFWs continues. Since 2016, more than 22,000 distressed OFWs have been repatriated. This is indicative of the gravity of the problems besetting our OFWs, leading to the question, are our preventive and protective programmes for OFWs responsive and effective? This is also very timely to ask since, even with almost two decades of programme implementation, no evaluation study has been conducted to examine the extent of the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of the ISWSFN interventions.

In response, in 2017 the DSWD formed a team that conducted an assessment of the ISWSFN to: (1) determine the responsiveness and effectiveness of the social welfare services provided to distressed OFWs; and (2) ascertain the measures necessary to prevent exposure and protect vulnerable OFWs and other migrant Filipinos.

The team examined quantitative and qualitative information collected from distressed overseas Filipinos receiving ISWSFN services, various programme stakeholders and other relevant sources of data including members of the OCT in four selected countries where the assessment took place: Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait.

Resulting evidence from the assessment proved the continuing need for ISWSFN interventions in the foreseeable future. The relevance of social welfare services provided through ISWSFN was heightened given the high magnitude of distressed and vulnerable overseas Filipinos in the selected countries. In fact, the assessment team found thousands of distressed OFWs in the countries visited, with household service workers and undocumented overseas Filipinos comprising most of them.

The study revealed that the presence of SWAtts in the countries visited proved to be relevant in providing immediate response and continuing psychosocial interventions to overseas Filipinos in distress. Due to the complex nature of overseas Filipinos' cases, the

expertise and distinct role of SWAtts were highly recognized. Additionally, the SWAtt services are also crucial in providing an immediate response to the needs of individuals in crisis situations. Due to the limited number of SWAtts vis-à-vis the enormous number of distressed OFWs, including those in far-flung areas, only about 15 percent of OFWs assisted by the Philippine Embassies were served by the SWAtts. Despite the resource constraints, however, the effectiveness of ISWSFN was not compromised as evidenced by the clients' highly satisfied feedback.

One constraint is that despite the relevance and necessity of the SWAtts, Republic Act (RA) 10022 or "An Act Amending RA 8042 or the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995", does not include provisions on the role of DSWD in providing services to overseas Filipinos.

Given these findings, the assessment team made the following recommendations:

- Continue the deployment of SWAtts and increase manpower in the foreign posts to be able to serve more distressed overseas Filipinos and to cover those located in far-flung areas
- Despite having a Joint Manual of Operations, clearly delineate the roles and services of each OCT member agency and closely coordinate their services
- Review and revise the manual for the ISWSFN and clearly define the mechanisms and processes along the following components: (1) target clients and available services; (2) structure (local and at post); (3) qualification, selection and deployment of SWAtts; (4) benefits and incentives; (5) protocols in communication; (6) monitoring and evaluation system; and (7) information system
- Amend the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act to include DSWD and its role in the protection and promotion of the welfare of overseas Filipinos, particularly the undocumented and distressed

HOW THE EVALUATION INFLUENCED PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION, POLICIES AND THE LEGISLATURE

The success of evaluation studies relies heavily on their utilization for organizational learning and policymaking processes. As experienced by the Philippine Government, the evaluation study of the ISWSFN has been successful in fulfilling its purpose as it transformed evidence into results, in that the evidence it generated was essential in improving programme implementation, policy enhancement and legislative processes. Specifically, the evaluation study had the following impacts:

- **Deployment of SWAtts in foreign posts continued.** As mentioned earlier, the study aimed to determine whether the SWAtts are relevant in addressing the social welfare concerns of overseas Filipinos. Before the study was conducted, the DSWD management was considering discontinuing the deployment of

SWAtts given the high budgetary requirements this service incurs. However, evidence from the study highlighted the need for SWAtts in foreign posts. Thus, not long after the evaluation results were released, the DSWD decided to resume deployment and continue the SWAtt operations instead.

- **Development of more comprehensive social protection strategies.** The results of the study were used in the review and revision of the ISWSFN guidelines and manual of operations in consideration of the current and emerging issues prevailing in the overseas Filipinos' host countries.

The existing social protection services for overseas Filipinos are implemented and concentrated in diplomatic posts; hence little attention was paid to premigration and reintegration services. In consideration thereof, the DSWD is now accelerating its social protection strategies which will be reflected in the amended ISWSFN guidelines and manual.

- **Establishment of the Office for the Social Welfare Attaché signed into law.** One of the biggest impacts of the evaluation study was its contribution to the approval of Republic Act (RA) No. 11299, also known as "An Act Establishing the Office for the Social Welfare Attaché." Signed by the President on 17 April 2019, this law is aimed at strengthening the international social welfare services provided by DSWD.

The law amends Section 2 of RA No. 8042, or the "Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995" to include: (1) providing protection and assistance to Filipino migrant workers, especially workers vulnerable to physical, emotional and psychological stress or abuse and cases of abandoned or neglected children; and (2) establishing and maintaining a databank and documentation of OFWs and their families so that appropriate social welfare services can be more effectively provided. Further, the law tasks the DSWD, in coordination with DFA and DOLE, to deploy SWAtts to countries with large OFW populations.

The ISWSFN evaluation study was an integral document in providing stronger evidence towards the need for approval of the bill. It was disseminated to the national legislature of the Philippines and was primarily used by Senator Joel Villanueva, the principal author of the bill, to justify the creation of the Social Welfare Attaché Office.

With the enactment of RA 11299,³⁵ the deployment of SWAtts and appropriation of budgetary requirements for implementation of international social welfare services

35 The law emphasizes that the Philippine Government shall "provide adequate and timely social, economic and legal services to Filipino migrant workers, especially for workers who are vulnerable to physical, emotional, and psychological stress or abuse." It also mandates the Department of Social Welfare and Development to deploy social welfare attachés in countries where there are high concentrations of overseas Filipino workers.

have been institutionalized. The passage of this law and the new guidelines will help fulfil the DSWD commitment that Filipinos, even those overseas, will be properly provided with social protection services to ensure that no one will be left behind.

CONCLUSION, CHALLENGES AND WAYS FORWARD

The Philippine Government has already achieved gains in enhancing its social protection programmes and policies for Filipino migrants. Still, much remains to be done in addressing persistent and emerging migration issues.

New and complex vulnerabilities are emerging. Countries visited, except for the United Arab Emirates, had a high magnitude of undocumented child clients. These are cases of children born to undocumented parents, illegitimate children and those who are born out of wedlock, among others. These figures could be higher since not all overseas Filipinos seek assistance from Philippine embassies with regard to concerns of undocumented children. Apart from them, the numbers of distressed overseas Filipinos who are elderly and with disabilities are emerging. This would need wider social welfare services and stronger case management strategies under the ISWSFN.

Escaping poverty is the main reason for migration. The distressed overseas Filipinos wanted to have a “masaganang buhay” or “better quality of life” and they believed that working abroad would help them achieve this. Hence, poverty is still seen as the main reason behind Filipino migration.

This calls for stronger efforts from the whole of the Philippine Government to accelerate its efforts in comprehensively addressing poverty. Specifically, opportunities in the Philippines should be expanded to discourage international labour migration.

There is a need for a more convergent delivery of social protection services for migrant Filipinos. Although there are a Joint Manual of Operations and guidelines aimed at harmonizing service delivery, duplication of services and lack of clear delineation of roles among the Philippine government agencies remain persistent. The Philippine Government should take measures to strengthen inter-agency coordination to upgrade its services in addressing issues on the delivery of interventions to overseas Filipinos and their families.

Admittedly, Philippine government agencies face difficulties in combating risks associated with migration. But with the burgeoning appreciation of the importance of evaluation within the Government, opportunities for strengthening the country’s social protection system for Filipino migrants abound in the foreseeable future.