

7.4 Dilemmas for emigration countries: the Philippines

Since the 1970s, successive Philippine governments have encouraged emigration of workers. Millions have gone to the Gulf oil countries or the fast growing economies of other Asian countries. Women from the Philippines are important as domestic workers, nurses and other service employees in many parts of the world. Filipino men work as seafarers under many flags. Millions of others have moved as long-term permanent emigrants to the USA, Canada or Australia. The Philippines have developed a strong culture of emigration, and overseas Filipinos are now seen as part of the nation. But has emigration done much to overcome economic backwardness and achieve development?

Today, the Philippines is the world's labour exporter par excellence (rather like Italy fifty years ago). Eight million Filipinos are abroad, roughly 10 per cent of the country's 85 million people. Remittances grew from US\$103 million in 1975 to 12.8 billion in 2006 (CBP, 2007). In 2004, remittances were equivalent to 11.8 per cent of the Philippines' GDP (World Bank, 2006). The state has hailed overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) as the country's new heroes (*bagong bayani*) (Asis, 2008). But for many this degree of dependence on emigration is problematic: not migration *for* development, but migration *instead of* development.

Filipinos are found all over the world. Permanent settlement in the USA, Canada and Australia grew from the 1960s. Under the Marcos martial law regime of the 1970s, export of labour became a key element of economic policy. Since then, ever-increasing numbers of OFWs have been officially deployed overseas on a temporary basis: first to the Gulf states and then to other Asian countries. Filipinos also have an increasing presence in Europe, particularly in Italy and Spain. Emigration has become part of normal life for millions of Filipinos and their communities, leading to the emergence of a culture of migration, in which even 10-12 year-old children have the expectation of working abroad (Asis, 2008).

In December 2005, the overseas Filipinos fell into three groups: 3.4 million permanent settlers, 3.7 million OFWs, and 0.9 million undocumented workers (Asis, 2008). The permanent settlers are mainly in the USA, Canada and Australia. Most of them have brought in dependents or formed families in host countries, and obtained

permanent residence rights or citizenship. They form a diaspora with personal, cultural and economic links to the homeland.

The OFWs are the result of government labour-export policies designed to make Philippines 'the producer of workers for the world'. An official target was to improve 'marketing' of Filipino labour to the point where 1 million would be deployed overseas each year. Annual deployment increased from 36 035 in 1975 through 446 095 in 1990 to 841 628 in 2000. The 1 million mark was reached in 2006 'leading to much jubilation at the Department of Labour and Employment' (Asis, 2008). Filipino workers are respected for their good education and skills, and have established some specific niches. The majority of OFWs are women and they are in demand as domestic workers, nurses and as entertainers, both in the Gulf and East Asia. Many of the men are seafarers: 247 000 of them in 2005. A quarter of the world's seafarers are Filipinos, and they work on ships of many flags, with crews stratified on the basis of nationality and race.

The quite large share of undocumented workers among Filipino migrants is noteworthy, in view of the Philippine Government's strong migration institutions. Much migration is demand-driven by overseas employers and organized by private agents, who may find it more profitable to circumvent official channels. Migrants themselves may prefer undocumented movement, to avoid bureaucracy, long delays, or to reach destinations not otherwise available (compare Hugo, 2005, 21-7; IOM, 2005, 110-12).

The Philippine Government takes an active role in migration management. Prospective migrants have to register with the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), established in 1982 within the Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE). POEA recruits and selects OFWs, and processes their documents and contracts. It is also responsible for licensing recruitment agencies. The Overseas Workers' Welfare Administration (OWWA) was established in 1977 to foster the welfare of migrants and their families left at home. It sends welfare officers to destination countries, and is responsible for reintegration programmes and workers' education. The Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) was established in 1980 and is primarily concerned with permanent emigrants. Its purpose is to nurture the ties between emigrants and the Philippines. It also provides courses for departing emigrants, especially for women migrating as wives or fiancées of foreign nationals.

Measures taken in 2003 to maintain links with the diaspora include the right to vote in national elections for Filipinos abroad and the right of Filipinos who have acquired another citizenship to reacquire or retain their Filipino citizenship (Asis, 2008).

DOLE is responsible for sending labour attachés to the 34 Philippines Overseas Labour Offices attached to Philippines consulates abroad (Asis, 2008). Together with the OWWA welfare officers they are meant to respond to the needs of millions of OFWs (compare also Lim and Oishi, 1996: 120). However, Philippine officials often find themselves powerless against unscrupulous agents and abusive employers, who may have the backing of the police and other authorities in receiving countries.

Such difficulties in protecting vulnerable workers led to a politicization of migration policy in 1995, when a Filipina domestic worker, Flor Contemplacion, was hanged for murder in Singapore, after allegedly killing a fellow Filipino and her employer's child (Gonzalez, 1998; Wong, 1996). The case appeared as the culmination of a long series of humiliations suffered by OFWs in Singapore and elsewhere. There was large-scale mobilization by opposition parties, church associations, women's groups, labour unions and OCW organizations. The Ramos Administration was forced to act. Migration of domestic workers to Singapore was suspended, albeit temporarily and ineffectively. In June 1995, the Philippine Parliament passed the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act - the 'OFWs' Magna Carta'. This Act claimed to represent a shift in philosophy away from the primacy of economic goals, in favour of protecting the dignity and human rights of Filipinos. Specific policies included selective deployment favouring certain occupations and destinations; measures to improve information for prospective migrants; and a 'country-team approach' to improve cooperation between government agencies (Go, 1998).

As Asis points out, the passing of the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act 'is important for what it signified rather than for what it has actually achieved' (Asis, 2008). There is no evidence of dramatically reduced migration of female entertainers or domestic workers, nor of substantial improvement in the conditions of Filipino OFWs. A major difficulty is the unwillingness of many labour-recruiting countries to cooperate by entering into bilateral agreements with the Philippines, or by adhering to multilateral instruments such as ILO Conventions and the 1990 UN

Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. Philippine labour force growth remains rapid, while economic development is slow.

The Philippines is an important test case: 30 years of large-scale planned labour export is sometimes portrayed as a success story. The Philippines has become a primary source of workers and skilled personnel in the global labour market. Remittances have improved the lives of many poor families and communities. But there is little sign of significant developmental impacts. Indeed the Philippines has fallen behind other countries that were economically comparable a generation ago, like Korea, Thailand and Malaysia. Long-term – and indeed deepening – dependence on labour export and remittances is not a recipe for sustainable economic and social development. As Asis states: ‘None of the Asian countries that had made the transition from country of origin to country of destination made it on the strength of deployment and/or remittances’ (Asis, 2008).

References

- Asis, M., M. B. (2008) 'How international migration can support development: a challenge for the Philippines' in Castles, S. and Delgado Wise, R. (eds.) *Migration and Development: Perspectives from the South*, (Geneva: International Organization for Migration).
- CBP (2007) *External Accounts: OFW Remittances 2006*. (Manila: Central Bank of the Philippines) http://www.bsp.gov.ph/statistics/statistics_online.asp, accessed 20 June, 2007.
- Go, S. (1998) 'The Philippines: a Look into the Migration Scenario in the Nineties' in OECD (ed.) *Migration and Regional Economic Integration in Asia*, (Paris: OECD) 145-54.
- Gonzalez, J.L.I. (1998) *Philippine Labour Migration: Critical Dimensions of Public Policy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies).
- Hugo, G. (2005) *Migration in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Geneva: Global Commission on International Migration). http://www.gcim.org/en/ir_experts.html.
- IOM (2005) *World Migration 2005: Costs and Benefits of International Migration* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration).
- Lim, L.L. and Oishi, N. (1996) 'International labor migration of Asian women: distinctive characteristics and policy concerns'. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, vol. 5:no. 1, 85–116.
- Wong, D. (1996) 'Foreign domestic workers in Singapore'. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 5:1, 117–38.
- World Bank (2006) *Global Economic Prospects 2006: Economic Implications of Remittances and Migration* (Washington DC: World Bank).