



# REINTEGRATION GOVERNANCE IN THE PHILIPPINES

## THE PHILIPPINES IS A GLOBAL LEADER IN REINTEGRATION GOVERNANCE

The Philippines has developed one of the world's most sophisticated reintegration governance systems since the 1970s, pioneering protection-based approaches including full-cycle reintegration and contributory welfare models. However, as a first mover without comparable international models, the country faces learning-by-doing challenges with uneven implementation and persistent gaps between policy sophistication and actual service delivery.

## MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE: FROM NATIONAL POLICY TO LOCAL INNOVATION

Reintegration governance operates through multi-level governance involving the Department of Migrant Workers, OWWA, provincial governments, local government units, and civil society organisations. This structure enables locally adapted interventions but creates significant variation, with high-capacity Local Government Units pioneering innovations while resource-constrained municipalities get left behind.

## THE IMPLEMENTATION GAP

Despite decades of policy development and comprehensive programs addressing economic, social, and psychosocial needs, the National Migration Survey, 96% of returnees reported receiving no government support. This gap stems from low awareness, documentary barriers, reactive “firefighting” mode, funding gaps and mismatches between program offerings and returnee needs.

## REINTEGRATION GOVERNANCE IN THE PHILIPPINES

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## REINTEGRATE



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## Reintegrate Project and Reintegration Governance

The Reintegrate Project aims to understand how reintegration is governed and how reintegration governance influences returnees' experiences. Many people do not have the right to stay in countries of migration and return to their countries of origin through different types of programs and policies; this return can be chosen, or it can be forced.

Little is known about how different countries govern the process of reintegration once people return and how return migrants experience their return and reintegration process. This study presents stakeholders' perspectives, alongside return migrants' experiences of return and reintegration in a comparative analysis across four case studies of Nepal, Nigeria, Serbia, and the Philippines. Reintegration is defined in this study as *"the process in which return migrants are supported in maintaining their cultural and social identities by the host society and the whole population acquires equal civil, social, political, human, and cultural rights"* (Kuschminder, 2017, p.43).

This definition considers various domains of reintegration and places emphasis on the duality of responsibility between both returnees and the receiving society in facilitating reintegration. A reintegration policy is defined *"as instruments intended to address the social, economic, and political needs of returnees to facilitate their reintegration into society"* (Kuschminder and Saguin, 2025). Reintegration policies are widely considered as implemented by different actors, reflecting different intentions and designs, and showing trade-offs between migrant protection and migration management objectives. Reintegration governance refers to *"the policies, practices, and institutions involved in the design, delivery, funding, implementation, and/or evaluation of processes to manage or support the returnees' transition into the household, community, and broader society of their country of origin"* (Kuschminder, 2024). Reintegration governance thus includes multiple actors and their associated policies to implement reintegration.

# Introduction

In the Philippines, the concept of reintegration has been integral to its overseas labour strategy since its inception in the 1970s. With the creation of the Office of Emigrant Affairs, the government recognised early on the risks associated with forced return, particularly given the nation's economic reliance on temporary labour migration. The contractual nature of overseas employment guarantees eventual return and highlights the need for reintegration. As the number of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) grew, so did reported cases of worker abuse, heightening the urgency to safeguard migrant workers' well-being.

While robust institutions and policies were established to support overseas employment, reintegration programs lagged behind, and its prioritisation is only secondary to the deployment of migrant workers. This disparity led to reintegration becoming the “*weakest link*” in the country's migration policy framework (Go, 2012; Ang et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the Philippines' long track record with reintegration policies has positioned it as having one of the most sophisticated approaches globally, despite ongoing challenges in implementation (Public Services International, 2015; Rashid & Ashraf, 2018).

The current reintegration policy regime features various instruments to address the complex needs of its returnees. Reintegration governance involves a diverse and influential set of state and non-state actors in the delivery of reintegration programs, creating a vibrant policy ecosystem. The earliest state-delivered programs sought to offer mutual support to returnees and their families through community organisation called the OFW Family Circle (OFC). These are locally initiated groups by Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) to ensure “*economic upliftment and good family relations*” (Melenio, 2007). Catalysed by similar programs introduced by non-governmental organisations, the government eventually adopted livelihood programs to provide a steady source of income for OFWs upon their return. These programs evolved and now centre around the OFC as a key node in this complex policy regime. Understanding how these policies matured is crucial to unlocking how reintegration became a key feature of labour migration governance in the Philippines.

Fifty years since the start of the overseas employment program, labour migration policy is at a crossroads. With the creation of the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), reintegration as a policy goal is envisioned to enjoy equal status with overseas deployment. By consolidating different migration institutions, DMW seeks to provide ‘*full migration-cycle*’ services: from regulation of private recruitment agencies up to the ‘*safe and productive*’ reintegration of OFWs. The strong policy attention given to reintegration, along with its complex policy regime, makes the Philippines a global model for reintegration policies.



This policy brief seeks to take stock of the current reintegration practices that make up this vibrant policy ecosystem. It will first examine how reintegration became a key priority of the government's labour migration regime. It will then elaborate on the complex portfolio of instruments introduced to address the multiple needs of returnees and the extent of involvement of various state and non-state actors in reintegration governance.

## Data Overview

This policy brief is based on data collected in two phases in 2023. The first phase involved elite interviews of key reintegration stakeholders at the national level. A total of 15 initial interviews were conducted between January-February 2024. The stakeholders included government officials, non-governmental organisations involved in conducting research and delivering reintegration programs, university researchers and international organisations. The second phase involved semi-structured interviews of migrant returnees, spouses, and local stakeholders in two provincial research sites – Iloilo and La Union – and one city government: Quezon City. A total of 109 interviews were conducted between August 2024 to January 2025: 61 migrant returnees, 22 spouses, and 26 local stakeholders. The local stakeholders included local government officials, regional offices of national government agencies, migrant desk frontline officers and civil society organisations (CSO). All interviews were transcribed and coded for analysis.

## Understanding Philippine Reintegration Policies

Migrant worker reintegration enjoys a central position in the government's agenda, but it was not necessarily borne out of a deliberate state strategy. The government had to face the realities of relying on international labour migration as an economic development strategy. Reintegration programs emerged largely as a response to a recognition of economic and geo-political uncertainties that threatened overseas employment and the ability of OFWs to remit money. Global and regional crises – like the oil crisis in 1970s, the gulf wars in the 1990s, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the 2006 Lebanon War, the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, Libyan and Syrian wars in 2011 – acted as focusing events that concretised the material harms of forced return not only to the OFW household but also to the society. However, rather than

being driven by these crises (see Asor and Cases 2024), changes to reintegration policies emerged incrementally because of the need to balance the demands of institutionalised overseas deployment and protection of migrant workers.

The Philippines' reintegration policies evolved through a protectionist logic that gradually shifted responsibility for managing return from families to government institutions, beginning with the establishment of the Welfare Fund for Overseas Workers (1980) and OWWA (1987), which embedded social safety net principles through OFW contributions rather than explicit reintegration programs. The government formally recognized families' role in 1983 through the OFC program offering group-based livelihood benefits, while in the early 1990s Gulf War-era experiments by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with pooled risk livelihood schemes served as precursors to government programs. The landmark Republic Act 8042 of 1995 created the Re-Placement and Monitoring Center specifically for reintegration, positioning returning Filipino workers' skills as contributing to national development, though the center was never fully operationalized and OWWA's reintegration programs remained largely piecemeal interventions. Despite these institutional developments, the government's approach during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis focused on encouraging migrant workers to remain abroad rather than facilitating their return, ultimately preventing policies from materializing into comprehensive reintegration support as the number of migrant workers continued to grow. This gap between legislative ambition and operational reality would become a defining characteristic of Philippine reintegration governance in subsequent decades.

## Creating categories of Returnees

Because these events led to sometimes large-scale repatriation efforts, the government needed to adopt a vocabulary to capture the different vulnerabilities faced by OFWs upon return. By default, a host of reintegration programs are offered to OWWA members. The different categories can open access to specific programs – both OWWA and non-OWWA – at different scales of governance and capture the complexity of return migration. Three categories of the target population are currently being used by national and local actors in distinguishing the various needs for reintegration of returnees: displaced, distressed and trafficking victim.

‘Displaced’ is the broadest category meant to capture workers who lost their job due to exogenous events like disasters and economic downturn. Since returnees are understood as involuntarily losing their jobs, this employment-related category is important for local government units (LGUs) to grant access to employment facilitation, livelihood programs and welfare grants that are offered domestically.

The category of ‘distressed’ worker is used extensively in policy documents and among national stakeholders. OFWs in distress<sup>1</sup> is a catch all term that grants individuals access to a set of services in the host country and the Philippines. These services include repatriation and other reintegration programs offered by migration government agencies like OWWA and Department of Migrant Workers (DMW).

The last category is ‘victim of human trafficking’ that allow access to more specific set of programs, including legal protection. While the legal aspect of the case management is handled through justice agencies, the recovery and reintegration of trafficked persons is handled by the Department of Social Welfare and Development, which includes a package of case management, shelter and direct service assistance.

These categories as practiced represent the spectrum of vulnerabilities that an OFW can face from economic, psycho-social and to legal – both in the host country and upon their return. They are crucial in managing the sheer scale and diversity of international migration from the Philippines. The country has been deploying over 2 million OFWs annually (except during the COVID19 pandemic) since 2010. OFWs are deployed across a wide range of countries and occupation but the concentration of OFWs is in elementary occupations like household service work and regions that do not offer permanent migration. Almost 30% of deployment in 2024 went to GCC countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Qatar, a region known for weak protection of labour rights. Whereas displaced workers can naturally occur during economic downturn, distressed workers are only meant to capture exceptional cases of abuse, contract violation and other forms labour rights violation.

## Current Reintegration Policies

The 2021 law consolidated much of the earlier reintegration efforts within the DMW. Many of the psycho-social and welfare interventions from DSWD was folded into DMW. NRCO programs now feature heavily as its own policy portfolio. But DMW’s programs are only a few in the whole constellation of reintegration programs in the Philippines. CSOs continue to provide capacity building interventions and livelihood programs. LGUs have been mobilised to provide employment facilitation and welfare assistance. The following discussion will not review all programs but will discuss the various needs that this constellation of programs seeks to address.

## Reintegration-specific policies

The full-cycle national reintegration program represents the adoption of a principle of embedding reintegration goals into all stages of the migration cycle. It involves the adoption of instruments throughout the migration cycle to ensure that reintegration is considered by the migrant worker from the very start up to their return. A reintegration-specific program can address multiple needs, but the programs can be divided into four types according to the needs it primarily addresses and its corresponding policy tool: capacity building, economic, social and welfare.

First, capacity building reintegration programs aim to build reintegration preparedness among migrant workers. With a full-cycle lens, these programs include orientation-seminars at various stages: pre-migration (PMOS), pre-departure (PDOS) and pre-employment (PEOS), as well as financial literacy trainings by CSOs and on-site upskilling and re-training programs by private training firms. The goal of capacity building for reintegration is to enhance the OFWs skills and competencies to make sound decisions – often financial and career-related – about their migration and return.

Second, through grants and subsidies, economic reintegration programs seek to build the productive capabilities of the returnees or in other words, to “*motivate migrant workers to plan for productive options*”. These programs can take the form of business grants for the

<sup>1</sup> Republic Act No. 11641 or DMW Act defines in distress as “Filipino, regardless of immigration status, who has a medical, psychosocial, or legal problem, or is experiencing abuse or exploitation, or whose human rights are being violated, or is in a country in actual or potential war, civil unrest, pandemic or other analogous circumstances and situations, and requires medical treatment, hospitalization, counseling, legal representation, rescue, repatriation, or any other kind of analogous intervention, including the repatriation of remains”

returnee and OFCs, employment facilitation services by Public Employment Service Office (PESOs) at the LGU level, and profession-specific facilitation of employment in the government. An example of the latter in Sa Pinang Ikaw ang Ma'am at Sir (SPIMS)<sup>2</sup> that seeks to encourage qualified teachers who took up work as domestic workers to return and be employed at the Department of Education.

Third, social reintegration programs rely on mutual support among the returnees and their families to mitigate the social cost of being away from the family. Since OFWs would typically orient their reintegration around a return to the family (Saguin, 2020), these programs are crucial in minimizing potential strained familial relations. LGUs actively organise OFCs as this is a requirement to be eligible for certain types of assistance. More recently, the OFW Children Circle (OCC) was also launched to address issues of estrangement, mental health and well-being among children left behind. It also offers psycho-social support, educational aid and community building for OWWA-member children. Like OFCs, OCCs also provided support services like stress debriefing and values orientation.

OFCs also serve as node to address other needs of an OFW. Through the partnership between OWWA and DOLE, OFCs can apply for the Tulong Puso one-time business grant of PhP 1 million. It can also serve the function of political representation. OFCs are often borne out of community organising and they can be confederated up to the regional level.

Fourth, welfare programs are often direct provision of one-time relief given to returnees. These kinds of grants became common during the COVID-19 pandemic although most of the financial assistance have been extended before the pandemic. Another form of welfare is a scholarship grant for 'deserving migrant' workers with the maximum amount of PhP 60,000 per year to take up courses in Science and Technology. One of the key requirements is having an annual family gross income of \$2,400 or PhP 76,000. This is significantly below the official poverty line in the Philippines at PhP 13,239 monthly household income (or PhP 158,868 annually).

## Reintegration-relevant policies

The increasing calls for 'whole-of-government' approach to reintegration lends focus on reintegration-relevant

programs. These programs are often widely available to the public but when accessed by returnees, it can facilitate reintegration. Various grants offered by the Department of Agriculture and Department of Science and Technology have been used towards providing returnees with access to starting capital. However, since policies create politics around the problem it seeks to solve, mainstreaming reintegration as part of this 'whole-of-government' approach runs the risk of erasing the policy public that DMW draws from. It is in the existence of reintegration-specific programs that allow the Philippine government to keep attention on reintegration high and achieve its twin-objective.

## Regional and Local Reintegration Policies

A remarkable sign of the maturity of reintegration governance in the country is the active involvement of subnational governments – regional, provincial, city, municipal and barangay levels. Our research sites were chosen to represent this complexity in regional and local reintegration governance. While this trend only emerged in the past 15 years, it is representative of the decentralised governance structure of the national agencies involved in reintegration. Both employment facilitation and social welfare are decentralised functions since 1991, but reintegration-specific programs have been scarce. All PESOs were mandated by law to offer reintegration services in 2000 but many LGUs fail to operationalise the mandate.

Quezon City Government is an exemplar in its early adoption of reintegration services at the city level. It introduced a Reintegration Service Section in 2012 and was subsequently converted into a Migrants Resource Center in 2016 meant to provide information to potential and existing migrants as well as returnees on the services they can avail. It was re-launched in 2022 with its own one-stop-shop to provide preliminary assessment, initial psycho-social first aid and referral services to other local and national services. The prioritisation of reintegration as a core issue at the city level has been partially attributed to local political leadership.

For many LGUs reintegration is folded into OFW Help Desks. In 2009, RA 10022 sought to create Help Desks in all LGUs to mainly provide assistance to potential victims of illegal recruitment. However, the adoption of the help

<sup>2</sup> Sa Pinang Ikaw ang Ma'am at Sir can be translated to "In the Philippines, You are the Ma'am and Sir" where ma'am and sir are used as terms of politeness and respect given to teachers.



desk has been slow and most adoption came just before or during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the Municipality of Oton passed Municipal Ordinance No. 2019-343 to create the Help Desk tasked to coordinate initiatives to address concerns of OFWs. Many LGUs followed a process of converting OFW Help Desks into Migrant Resource Centers because the delayed implementation of RA 10022 allowed LGUs to incorporate newer and broader policy agenda that include reintegration.

The existence of provincial-level reintegration policy also adds complexity to the already sophisticated reintegration governance structure of the country. With support from ILO and other international financing institutions, many LGUs, as in the case of La Union, adopted migration and development plans and to create migration and development councils in the 2010s, which included broad provisions for reintegration. In 2018, the La Union Provincial Government also passed a resolution to create a Migrant Resource and Development Center and to establish a loan assistance fund of Php 3 million. Similarly, the Iloilo provincial government allotted Php 21 million annually to offer Php 10,000 financial assistance to displaced OFWs through its Provincial Ordinance 2020-245. Help Desks from municipalities would often assist and refer returnees to avail of these provincial welfare schemes.

Although it took time, several LGUs have accepted the challenge of innovating on reintegration services. The incorporation of reintegration into migration and development plans places a heavy economic emphasis on the role of reintegration. Reintegration is only instrumental to the productive potential of returnees to contributing to the local economy. For instance, the La Union Migration and Development Strategic Plan that sought to upgrade PESO so it can operationalise the *“concept of ‘brain gain’ and optimizing financial gains resulting from the OFW phenomenon”* (p. 17). Thus, the over-riding logic of keeping migrant workers economically and socially active remains even in reintegration.

The innovative policymaking at the local level should only be seen as an exception instead of the rule. The introduction of a separate financial assistance program is contingent on the resources available and the prioritisation by elected leaders. Capacity constrained LGUs can only afford to set up a desk manned by a single officer. Thus, the potential list of reintegration services is constrained, and the help desk only serves as a referral office.

This turns reintegration governance at the local government level as mere compliance to national directives.

## Multi-Level Reintegration Governance

Reintegration governance is unique in the Philippines as it allows a wide array of actors to be involved in the design and delivery of programs. The government takes the steering role in the policy ecosystem, ensuring that private recruitment agencies are regulated to protect migrant worker’s well-being. Reintegration through the market is the most dominant approach, particularly since the employer through the private recruitment agencies are responsible for the safe and orderly return of migrant workers. Migrant workers are also asked to take out a repatriation insurance should their employer be unwilling to do so. The government is responsible for the return of distressed OFWs that cannot return by themselves or through their recruitment agencies.

Since government-sanctioned reintegration programs are catered primarily for those displaced, distressed and even trafficked returnees, the government’s priorities hold sway in its design and implementation. The institutionalisation of reintegration into DMW’s core mission makes it the most important actor in this complex policy ecosystem. DMW is the successor agency of the POEA, the lead agency for overseas deployment and its function consolidates the reintegration functions previously distributed among different national agencies. The creation of DMW addresses the fragmentation and the need for coordination that beset prior reintegration efforts.

Other equally important actors include OWWA, which continues to provide reintegration services to its members, and the PESO, which is lodged in local government units and provides LGU-specific services (if any) on top of their employment facilitation mandate. OFCs are where the work of OWWA and PESOs converge. Their existence is a requirement for receiving more OWWA assistance and allow for social mobilisation of the returnees.

A laudable feature of reintegration governance in the Philippines is the intensive involvement of on-site and domestic CSOs. The execution of Flor Contemplacion energised a social movement around the protection of migrant workers in the 1990s. The experience of on-site NGOs like Unlad Kabayan in Hong Kong in experimenting with savings schemes provided a basis for a collaborative

relationship with the government. NGOs test new ideas on reintegration while the government scales them up. An example of these ideas includes the PDOS that is seen as a global model of capacity building. Atikha is currently implementing a pilot of the PMOS. However, their involvement is contingent on the willingness of the government to collaborate and often borne out of advocacy work. Without formal institutionalised mechanisms to channel concerns from civil society, the position of reintegration in the government's policy agenda can be subjected to the whims of political leaders.

The engaged role of CSOs can be contrasted with the narrow involvement of international organisations like International Organization for Migration (IOM) and International Labour Organization (ILO), especially compared to other labour-sending countries. Their involvement remains largely at the strategic agenda-setting level. IOM's most recent projects involved the preparation of the Handbook for Reintegration Programming in the Philippines (IOM 2023) to highlight the best practices on reintegration of the country. ILO's project – Bridging Recruitment to Reintegration in Migration Governance: Philippines (BRIDGE) – helped activate migrant workers' desk at the local level and introduce the concept of '*reintegration advisors*', an online platform to facilitate the provision of services. While international organisations play an influential role in our other field sites, the government's historical steering role crowds out the need to rely on these actors.

National and local politicians do not necessarily prioritise reintegration, but they can easily shape how policies

are designed and implemented. OFWs have been represented in the House of Representatives through various party-list groups like ACTS-OFW, OFW Family and OFW. The Congress – at both houses – has specific committees for migrant affairs and actively introduced policies that shape reintegration outcomes. Through the efforts of these migrant worker party-list representatives, the DMW act was enacted. Congress also recently passed RA 12021 or the Magna Carta of Filipino Seafarers with a specific clause on reintegration and the recognition of equivalency for employment. Executive action can also fast-track the implementation of these laws or introduce new schemes because of the President's sensitivity to crisis situations. In 2008, former President Gloria-Macapagal Arroyo implored DOLE to improve reintegration through Administrative Order No. 249. In 2021, former President Rodrigo Duterte also signed an executive order to create the OFW Hospital that provides a whole range of health services to OFWs and their families, including a medical repatriation program.

While PESOs were mandated to offer reintegration services since 2000s, the COVID-19 pandemic turbo-charged the fulfilment of this mandate. National government through DOLE Local governments are also important as they set the direction for PESO and the extent of reintegration services they can offer. Higher OFW population within the locality correlates with more services (and budget) for reintegration. They tend to innovate and offer new services beyond employment facilitation like hospitalisation and burial grants.

# Promising Practices

## Full Cycle, Gender Responsive, Protection Based Reintegration Governance

The '*full cycle*' approach to reintegration is based on decades of practical experience managing overseas worker returns, with OWWA already implementing programs from pre-departure through post-return as early as 2011. This homegrown framework initiated by CSOs in the Philippines was formalized in the 2021 Department of Migrant Workers Act, which recognizes that effective

reintegration begins before departure and continues throughout the migration journey. The approach addresses economic, social, and psychological needs while paying particular attention to gender-specific vulnerabilities and protection concerns. The Philippines' incorporation of the Global Compact for Migration into law and additional technical support from UN agencies, has led to a comprehensive policy and approach to reintegration governance.



## Multi-Level Reintegration Governance

The Philippines' reintegration governance operates across national, regional, and local levels, with national government and OWWA policies being implemented at service desks in local government units across the country. At the same time, LGUs have developed innovative reintegration policies and locally led responses to support returnees and gaps in governance. This multi-tiered structure allows for both standardized national programs and locally-adapted interventions that respond to specific community contexts and needs. The involvement of multiple levels of government creates potential for coordination and resource-sharing, though implementation gaps remain a challenge.

## CSO-Government Cooperation

The Philippines has established mechanisms for collaboration between civil society organisations and government agencies in delivering reintegration services, drawing on CSOs' innovations and new programme development. The national government is able to take promising practices developed by CSOs and formalize them into national policy. CSOs are often then funded to deliver the programmes on behalf of the national government maintaining their involvement. This cooperation and respect between actors enable a unique cooperation between CSOs and government.

## Contributory Welfare Fund Model and OFW Family Circles

The OWWA contributory model creates a basis for a sustainable funding mechanism for reintegration programs for OWWA members through mandatory worker contributions. In addition, the OFW Family Circles program, established in 1983, pioneered a group-based approach to livelihood support that leverages social networks and collective risk-pooling to strengthen reintegration outcomes. The OFCs focus on the wider family versus only the returnee, and provide a strong basis for OWWA activities. These mechanisms embed reintegration support within a broader social safety net framework rather than treating return as an isolated event requiring emergency intervention.

## Challenges in Multi-level Reintegration Governance

- **First Mover Disadvantage** – As discussed, the policy challenges faced by the Philippines is one of a first-mover disadvantage. Reintegration espoused by other countries follow a dissimilar logic and adopts a different set of policy tools. For most labour sending countries, reintegration remains an uncharted land. The Philippines, as a major source of migrant workers, is leading the way in introducing protection-oriented reintegration policies. The novelty of the challenges of reintegration requires careful scoping of the needs of OFWs, a task difficult to undertake given that no other country is faced with similar challenges. What this means is that reintegration as a policy is borne out of learning-by-doing by the governance actors.
- **Uneven and Incremental Implementation** – Because of this learning-by-doing approach, reintegration policies will always be implemented incrementally. The slow process of adoption means that implementation will be uneven, particularly across different LGUs. High capacity LGUs like Quezon City and Iloilo Province can easily introduce and innovate on reintegration policies while low capacity LGUs require additional help to move beyond simply implementing a Help Desk. This pattern is reflective of the inherent inequalities in the highly decentralised structure of local governance in the Philippines. But such inequalities can be overcome through peer-to-peer learning. Quezon City learned from Legaspi City in setting up their Migrant Resource Center. The benefit of having close to 150 cities and over 1,400 municipalities is that a '*flying geese model*' of mutual learning can make the learning-by-doing process easier.
- **Scale of Reintegration Grants** – With Philippines acting as a pioneer in protectionist reintegration, its policies will always be refracted against existing practices and paradigms. Many observers bemoan the lack of sensitivity to the actual (and dynamic) needs of returnees (Ofreneo and Samonte 2005). For instance, OWWA's Balik-Pinas! Balik-Hanapbuhay! Program (BPBH) and DMW's mirror program particularly catering for female returnees offer PhP 20,000 (~290

EUR) as a start-up capital and as an immediate relief to returnees. The one-time grant is *'decoyed'* as an entrepreneurship development intervention while it truly aims to provide an immediate economic relief to returnees. Such decoy practices are consistent in a policy environment that views welfare as a *'residual'* of economic development, sceptical of beneficiaries being too dependent on government assistance (Banta and Saguin 2025). Since reintegration is a response to global uncertainty that can undermine overseas employment for OFWs, reintegration policies will remain in *'firefighting'* mode unless strategic and normative objectives are laid out.

- **Low Utilisation** – A natural consequence of firefighting is the programs' low utilisation. Out of the returnees recorded by the National Migration Survey, 96% reported not receiving any form of government support. For returnees affected by COVID-19, 46% did not seek or receive government reintegration assistance (IOM 2021). Part of the reason for this is the reactive nature of policies. Returnees must express the need for reintegration. But such expression of need requires awareness. A survey by Bernas (2016) among voluntary returnees, 54% were not aware that the service even existed. Even for those who are aware, a key challenge is collecting the documentary requirements to avail of the process. Business loans require the skills to develop business proposals, an entrepreneurial skill these returnees may not have. Some would view the programs offer to be unresponsive to their needs. Either the grant is too small for the effort required or government encourage a very narrow suite of businesses (e.g. setting up a grocer, laundromat or soap-making business).

## Recommendations

### Embed a National Comprehensive Reintegration Framework in the Philippine Development Plan

The incremental and crisis-responsiveness of reintegration can only be addressed through the development of a strategic framework for reintegration. While there had been existing approaches to define a national framework for reintegration (IOM 2023), much of it is focused on service delivery instead of identifying strategies policy

objectives. The House Bill 2713 on Bagong Balikbayan Act is a step towards this direction. However, several steps can further institutionalise reintegration into the policy agenda:

- Incorporate reintegration outcomes into the Philippine Development Plan and Philippine Population Development Plan of Action
- Identify strategic policy objectives of the reintegration program beyond economic reintegration
- Ensure *'full cycle'* orientation of HB 2713
- Establish coordination mechanism beyond identifying DMW as *'lead agency'* and consolidate roles of different actors like PESO, OWWA, etc.

### Further Support LGUs in implementing and development of local support structures for Reintegration Governance

As noted above, a central challenge is unequal implementation, and this is most acute between LGUs. Several steps can assist in improving this:

- Encourage and facilitate support to LGUs for developing and implementing reintegration governance.
- Create a LGU toolkit or road map that LGUs can follow for developing and implementing reintegration governance. This should include clear role definition between actors, processes for coordination and collaboration at the LGU level and multi-level governance coordination processes with the provincial and national level reintegration governance.
- Support LGU mentorship programmes and peer learning across LGUs.
- Provide additional technical and backstopping support to recognize differences in local needs for reintegration governance.

### Coordination of Reintegration Governance with Destination Countries

Destination countries and Philippines embassies abroad are vital partners for the implementation of *'Full Cycle'* reintegration governance. In continuing the vital support of the Department of Foreign Affairs to OFW, further employer collaborations and programmes to prepare for reintegration should be established. Further, reintegration

should be included in bi-lateral labour agreements with mechanisms such as end-of-service benefits that could be negotiated to assist returnees in preparing for their reintegration.

### Further Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Despite the decades of policy development and expertise on reintegration governance there has been little monitoring and evaluation of programmes. Given the empha-

sis and importance of reintegration in the Philippines, it is important to increase monitoring and evaluation of reintegration governance. This will enable further learning and programme development to identify best practices that can be replicated across the country. It is also important to establish metrics of success of reintegration, particularly anchoring on the need to establish the longer-term impact of reintegration programmes.

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