

Upgrading Our OFWs

Since the 1970's when President Marcos started to send construction workers to the Middle East, our country has been exporting a million workers overseas per year, for a total of about 10 million, in spite of the troubles in the Arab world and Japan today. They constitute about 10% of our population!

Our nationalist and pastoral bent compels us to discourage the deployment of more overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). This is to minimize the social costs, especially of broken homes, and maximize the potential of our people for local economic development.

Yet the fact remains that we live in a globalized world, and our talents and skills are world-class. Our brain drain and muscle drain have benefitted the world, helping in the progress and prosperity of the countries who welcome our labor force. Our OFWs are considered modern heroes and heroines for taking on the risks and enduring the hardships of migration in order to help their families and the economic growth of our nation.

But there is a pressing need to upgrade their professional skills. Almost 30% have migrated to the West, yet about 70% of our *diaspora* or scattered people are temporary contractual workers in various parts of the world. They work as managers, translators and engineers in multi-national companies; doctors, nurses and aides in medical centers; seamen, chefs and entertainers in ships; domestic helpers, cooks and drivers of businessmen, sheiks and sultans; and teachers and tutors in different levels of education, especially in Asia and the Middle East. But if we are to continue deploying our people overseas, we need to improve the quality of labor through better education and vocational training that fit the global market.

Also, we need to upgrade their financial literacy. Though our OFWs have contributed significantly to the growth of our economy, their hopes for the upward mobility of their family, especially of their children through getting higher education, have been half-fulfilled. Their remittances have helped them to acquire real estates and better educational and professional advancement for their families. Yet these have not been maximized. The hopes of past administrations to encourage them to become overseas Filipino investors (OFIs) have yet to be realized.

This calls for our NEDA, DTI and DOLE to work out an honest-to-goodness plan for nation's long-term economic development. Our Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) and Overseas Workers' Welfare Administration (OWWA) must have excellent financial management modules incorporated into pre-employment and pre-departure seminars (PEOS & PDOS). Above all, our secondary and tertiary levels of education must train our people to think and work entrepreneurially and even multiply small businesses and social enterprises, so that any capital that can be formed, especially through OFW remittances can generate more wealth for their families and our economy.

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