

The Heart of the OFW Issue

The export of our people as an answer to the economic woes of our country dates back to the mid-1970s, when Marcos bluntly stated the purpose of his labor export policy as such: “...overseas employment addresses two major problems: unemployment and the balance-of-payments position.” Further, he said: “... If these problems are met or at least partly resolved by contract migration, we also expect an increase in national savings and investment levels.”

More than thirty years later, 15% of our country’s labor force are employed overseas, and one out of every three households in Metro Manila has a member who is abroad. What was said to be a temporary economic solution has become a permanent and entrenched phenomenon.

In fact, the economic function of our labor exports has gone well beyond employment and income. Remittances from those employed overseas account for around one-fifth of export earnings. This makes labor export a key source of the foreign reserves required to pay our external debt. We also rely on remittances to prop up the peso in times of global financial uncertainty, like the Asian financial crisis and, more recently, the global recession.

For this reason, our government and the Philippine media laud our overseas workers as “modern day heroes”. The dominant aspiration of our young people is now to work abroad, making money to enable more comfortable lives for themselves and loved ones at home, and if at all possible, to immigrate to a more developed country.

What may have been perceived at first as a temporary economic solution, has become a permanent phenomenon. Our economic planning and development paradigms have been based on this.

But all this boils down to one question: is it worth it? The labor export industry is not an ordinary business. At its heart are living, breathing, feeling, dreaming people who do not exist in isolation but whose lives are interrelated and interconnected with a very intricate network of families and communities. These are people with strengths, capabilities and unique potential whose energy and creativity are not invested in our own development. Most get de-skilled when they start again in another country, and end up wasting their training and expertise doing low-level jobs.

Moreover, its consequences are far-reaching, more long-term than we can ever imagine. Besides stories of horrendous abuse, it has deeply fractured our families, and altered the socio-psychological, cultural and moral make-up of our country.

Is this the kind of nation that we want for ourselves and for our children? Let us not deceive ourselves when we ask: Will the OFW phenomenon ultimately better our society? If the answer is no, then may we find the courage as a people to turn away from the lures of the wide road to tread the narrow, more difficult path.

The Scriptures reminds us that “there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” (Proverbs 14:12)”

This editorial is adapted from the original article entitled “Taking the OCW Phenomenon at its Roots” by Lucy Arboleda. Lucy is a contributing writer of ISACC.

