What causes labour migration? The case of the Philippines

A Filipino construction worker in Doha, Qatar

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This article takes a detailed look at the infrastructure which supports and promotes labour migration from the Philippines to the rest of the world

EXAM LINKS

- AQA: Population and the environment
- Edexcel: Population, identity, sovereignty
- OCR: Global migration
- WJEC/EDUQAS: Global governance

The United Nations estimates that in 2019, there were 169 million migrant workers around the world. While the Covid-19 pandemic slowed migrant labour flows, it is likely that this number will continue to increase. Those migrant workers represent about 5% of the total global workforce, but in many places they are a much larger share of the local labour market. In the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, for example, over 80% of the workforce comprises temporary labour migrants. While a small number of migrant workers are well-paid 'expats', the vast majority are in low-paid and low-status jobs in farms, factories, resorts, homes, ships and construction sites. Over 40% of labour migrants globally are women — many employed as domestic workers.

A migration infrastructure

Labour migrants are usually motivated by a desire to support their families back home. That desire outweighs both the painful separation from loved ones and the risks of mistreatment while working in a foreign place with fewer rights than local citizens. It is easy, then, to assume that migration for work is an individual process in which migrants hear about opportunities, make a decision to leave, and then set out for their job overseas. Certainly, when migration is discussed, it is often the motivations and experiences of individual migrants that are the focus.

But labour migration doesn't happen as an individual endeavour. Even in 'normal' situations (as opposed to extremes like droughts, which can force people to migrate) it is facilitated by an array of institutions and actors, which together form a network that recruits, prepares and deploys workers for their contracts abroad. We can think of this network as a 'migration infrastructure', which has been described by researchers as 'the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions and actors that facilitate and condition mobility' (Xiang and Lindquist 2014).

Migration infrastructure in the Philippines

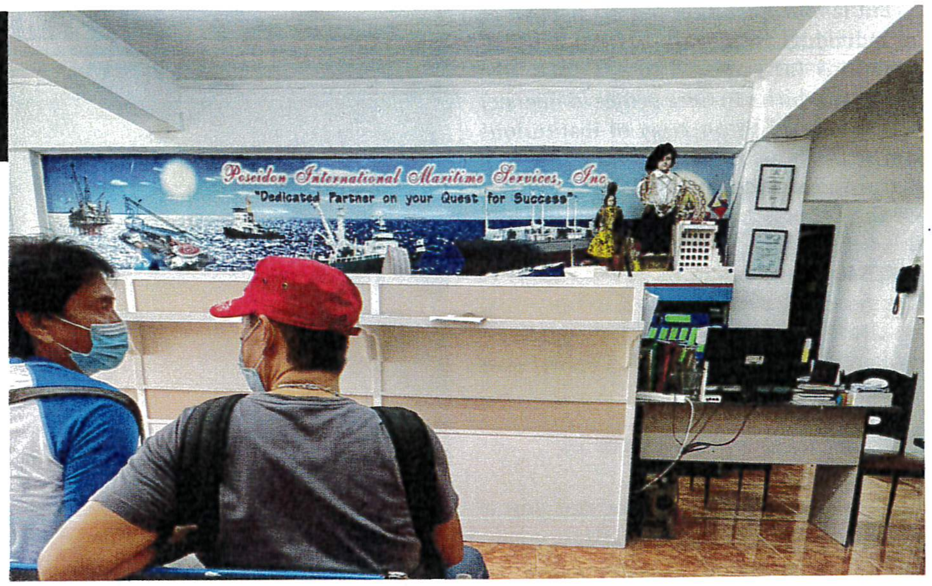
Every country with a major outward flow of migrant workers has such an infrastructure, but one of the most highly developed and visible is in the Philippines. See Figure 1. In December 2021, the Philippine government finalised plans to create a Department of Migrant Workers — a cabinet-level bureaucracy that will take responsibility for the marketing, deployment and protection of migrant Filipino workers. But the creation of this new ministry is just a rearrangement of several longstanding government institutions that have overseen the export of Filipino workers for many decades.

As far back as 1974, government agencies were created to organise the recruitment and placement of workers overseas. In 1982, several agencies were amalgamated into the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration. This remains the key player in a web of governmental units involved in labour migration, from the Office of the President to the Central Bank.

Over time, the government's role has shifted from direct placement of workers to the regulation and licensing of private recruitment agencies, which have expanded rapidly. Other roles for government officials include: marketing of Filipino workers to overseas employers; signing government-to-government recruitment agreements with other countries; occasional bans on migrant worker deployments to specific places; providing compulsory pre-departure orientations or inductions for labour migrants; extending assistance to overseas workers through officials located in embassies and consulates around the world. From the government's point of view, this infrastructure has been very successful — around 10% of the country's GDP comes

Figure 1 Map of the Philippines

The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration in Manila is a key part of the country's migration infrastructure.
PHOTO CREDIT: RIA DUCUSIN



Two Filipino seafarers await appointments at the manning agency in Manila that will deploy them to ocean-going vessels such as tankers, cargo ships or cruise liners. Photo credit: Ria Ducusin

from money sent home by migrant workers (referred to as remittances).

The role of private businesses in migration

Government agencies are, however, only part of the picture. Training for overseas work is a major area for private entrepreneurship and business in the Philippines. Nursing schools, seafarer academies and training institutes for caregivers and support workers (and many other occupations) are commonplace across the country. Nearly all are very clearly oriented towards the needs of the global labour market. Their numbers, and focus, tend to grow and decline depending on global demand for a particular type of worker.

The actual recruitment and placement of workers is also largely conducted by private-sector businesses. There are hundreds of recruitment agencies, mainly in Manila but also in provincial towns and cities. They provide the link to employers overseas, often via a corresponding agency in the host country. In 2022, there were 842 recruitment agencies licensed to operate in the Philippines, all of them deploying labour migrants to other countries. A further 390 'manning' agencies were licensed to send sea-based workers for employment on cargo ships, tankers, cruise liners and fishing vessels.

Once abroad, labour migrants usually live transnational lives, staying connected socially and economically with family members back home. In many major destinations, companies have emerged to facilitate these transnational connections for overseas Filipinos. Specialised agencies will arrange the transfer of money from overseas migrants back to family members. Remittance agencies may also facilitate the sending of gift parcels known as *balikbayan* boxes (*balikbayan* literally means 'return to the homeland'). In the Philippines too, the needs of overseas workers are attended to, with everything from designated lounges in shopping malls for returning overseas workers, to e-burial services so that overseas workers can attend the funerals of relatives online.

NGOs and migrant support

The web of institutions in the migration infrastructure also includes non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which assist migrant workers needing help, or lobby governments to pay closer attention to the welfare of migrants. Some are NGOs based in the Philippines with chapters located around the world. An example is Migrante International — a global migrant rights organisation founded in 1996 after the execution of a Filipina domestic worker in Singapore. Another example is Stella Maris — a Catholic charity, founded in Glasgow, which provides care to seafarers in ports around the world.

A culture of migration

A final, and less tangible, element of the migration infrastructure in the Philippines is the 'discursive' environment for migration. This refers to the messaging or 'discourse' that goes out through various forms of media and communication to highlight for potential migrants the significance and attractiveness of overseas work. Such messaging emphasises the economic benefits of migration, but also the ways in which overseas employment represents a way of being a 'good' parent or sibling, conforms to particular notions of masculinity or femininity, and offers the glamour of global travel.

In this way, potential migrants live in an environment in which migrant work is discussed, expected and even glorified. It is hard to avoid the message that says, if you want to get ahead and be successful, then migration overseas is the way to achieve that. This has led some researchers in the Philippines to talk of the country's 'culture of migration'.

Filipina migrant domestic workers in the crowded central district of Hong Kong, preparing *balikbayan* boxes to send home to family members. Photo credit: Philip Kelly

Filipino migration, by numbers

In the Philippine case, this multi-faceted migration infrastructure has been hugely effective. By 2019, official data counted 2.11 million Filipinos working overseas (about 2% of the country's population). A majority (60%) of this number are women — reflecting the large numbers of Filipinas employed as domestic workers and caregivers around the world.

In reality, the actual number of migrant workers is probably significantly higher, as many workers depart without being documented. The official number dropped to 1.77 million in 2020 due to pandemic restrictions and economic recession, but in 2021 outward migration picked up again. Remittances reflected this trend, reaching an all-time high of US$31.4 billion in 2021.

The magnitude of this flow of funds into the Philippine economy explains why the Philippine government gives so much attention to the role of its migrant workers.

Why is the Philippines such a major source of labour migrants?

The question often arises of why there are so many Filipino workers in varied jobs all over the world — from nurses in the UK, to construction workers in the Gulf region, to domestic workers in Singapore. Of course, a part of the answer must relate to underdevelopment and a lack of opportunities and investment back home. Another part relates to the Philippines' history of colonialism (including long periods under Spanish and American regimes), which left a legacy of English language education and a long history of overseas work. But a big part of any explanation must also take note of the elaborate migration infrastructure that the Philippines has developed to motivate, market, train and deploy its people all over the world. It's a government-led process in so many ways.

Thinking critically about migration infrastructures

As geographers interested in the specificity of places, and the ways in which global spaces are connected, we need to understand this infrastructure. But we also need to ask some critical questions. Why, for example, has overseas migration, rather than local employment development, been so heavily promoted, especially given the human costs associated with family separation and the vulnerability of migrant workers? Does the migration infrastructure support the needs of migrant workers, or is the system set up to facilitate those who make money from the deployment of migrant workers? And, finally, is there a future in which places like the Philippines don't need to export millions of workers each year so that they can support their families?

Question for discussion

What are your thoughts on the questions posed in the concluding section of this article?

KEY POINTS

- Labour migration is often presented in terms of the decisions and experiences of *individual* migrants who are working temporarily outside of their home country.
- However, this article suggests that we need to look at the wider 'infrastructure' that facilitates and drives the flows of migrant workers around the world.

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