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The COVID-19 and Filipino Migrant Workers: Looking into the Philippine Government's Post-COVID-19 Support Mechanism

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and Madeleine Louise S. Baiño*



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Abstract

The COVID-19 was an unprecedented event that tested the capacity of the Philippine government in keeping migrant workers and their families protected and secured. It was not only a matter of simple repatriation process, but this also entailed a multi-dimensional system that encompasses repatriation, health interventions (e.g., testing for COVID-19, treatment, and health monitoring), accommodation and logistical support for quarantine, and economic interventions in the form of financial grants to eligible workers, among others. Existing policy frameworks have guided government response whenever applicable, however nothing has prepared the system for the scale of effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought. Thus, managing the influx of returning overseas migrants in the tens and even hundreds of thousands required no less than a whole-of-nation approach. Government agencies involved were forced to expand their networks, innovate their systems, and adapt to the changing events. This entailed a range of interrelated activities and programs that were facilitated by close collaboration and consistent communication among various actors. Based on the findings of the paper, it is crucial to build on the existing digital systems created during this period, strengthen newly formed and existing partnerships, reexamine OFW's insurance and social protection coverage, and consider the creation of, or expansion of existing, contingency fund to address future events of similar nature and magnitude.

Keywords: overseas Filipino workers, COVID-19 response, migration policy, crisis management

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The COVID-19 and Filipino Migrant Workers: Looking into the Philippine Government's Post-COVID-19 Support Mechanism

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 was an unprecedented event that tested the capacity of the Philippine government, as with the rest of the world, in addressing the effects of a crisis of enormous magnitude. Apart from the challenges experienced locally, the return of hundreds of thousands of pandemic-affected overseas Filipinos by the end of 2020 put so much pressure on the government's ability and resources for repatriation and quarantine. Apart from the free repatriation services provided to those who were in need, the Philippine government also provided free testing and medical care, quarantine, and transport services to returning overseas Filipino workers (OFWs).

The range of support services provided for returning overseas Filipinos was essential. A great proportion of OFWs hold elementary occupations in the service and sales sectors. It is expected that their earnings are meant to address basic needs. Their access to social protection also needs improvement. Based on the 2018 National Migration Survey, less than half of migrant workers (47%) are active member of a social security and pension plan, while around two-thirds (69%) have health insurance coverage (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA] 2019). With a huge influx of OFWs unprepared for their return, the Philippine government also implemented a one-time financial aid program for the displaced overseas workers. In other words, the support provided to OFWs was not only a matter of simple repatriation program, it entailed a multi-dimensional system that encompasses repatriation, health interventions (e.g., testing for COVID-19, treatment, and health monitoring), accommodation and logistical support for quarantine, and economic interventions in the form of financial grants to eligible workers, among others.

While the government's migration infrastructure consisting of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Overseas Worker's Welfare Administration, and Department of Labor and Employment, have worked together and in partnership with various other organizations to deliver the much-needed programs and services, numerous challenges surfaced simply because of the enormity of the task. Reports of overcrowded quarantine facilities, delays in testing, and OFWs' inability to return to their homes are only among the long list of problems. It is important to note that prior to the pandemic, the country's past experience with huge repatriation involved merely around 30,000 workers during the Gulf war in the early 1990s. In 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 600,000 OFWs returned. In July 2020 alone, nearly 160,000 OFWs returned. These numbers are way above what the country has ever experienced in terms of returning workers. It is therefore important to examine how various state and non-state actors came together to provide such a package of interventions to such a huge number of beneficiaries.

This paper examines the following research questions: What are the key interventions/programs which the Philippine government carried out to support migrant workers due to the pandemic? How are the operations carried out in terms of processes, mechanisms, and resources? What lessons can be learned from these interventions and the overall experience from the pandemic as far as assisting migrant workers are concerned? The study aims to document and examine the government's COVID-19 support mechanisms. Ultimately, it intends to identify valuable insights and potential best practices that can be adapted at the national and/or local level. It is important to ensure that Filipino migrant workers are given adequate protection and assistance, thus the paper aims to help the government prepare for future public health emergencies and other shocks of similar nature by identifying existing gaps in past responses.

2. Objectives

The study aims to document and examine the COVID-19 support mechanism implemented by the Philippine government for returning migrant workers. Specifically, the paper - 1) identifies the set of interventions or support which the Philippine government provided to Overseas Filipino Workers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) examines the key processes and mechanisms of operation and coordination among various entities from the government and non-government bodies; 3) discusses the financial and human resources utilized, 4) examines the challenges encountered, and 5) draws lessons and insights that can be learned from the experience. Ultimately, it proposes some recommendations for purposes of improving programs and operations with respect to the repatriation and return of overseas migrant workers.

3. Methodology

3.1. *Conceptual Framework*

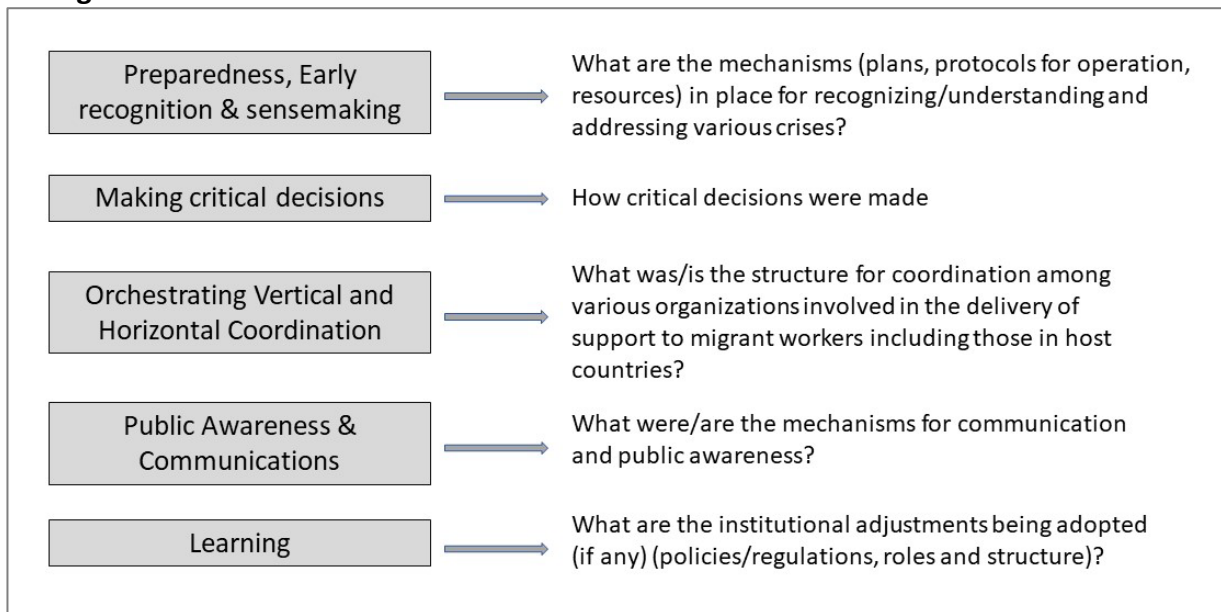
The key framework for assessing the government's support system comes from the literature of crisis management¹ including those which are provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The analysis implemented a leadership lens to examine aspects that include preparedness, decision-making, coordination, communication, and learning (see Figure 1). This is because the paper focuses on the public administration of supporting migrant workers under the context of a global crisis.

The framework has five components – 1) preparedness, early recognition and sensemaking, 2) critical decision-making, 3) vertical and horizontal coordination, 4) public awareness and communications, and 5) learning. Under preparedness, the plans and protocols of operations as well as resources in place for both recognizing and addressing the crisis are discussed. In critical decision-making, the framework used by the government in making key decisions is examined. In coordination, the structure of organizational set-up for the delivery of programs and services is analyzed. Under communications, the platforms and avenues for information dissemination and gathering feedback are discussed. And in learning, the institutional adjustments that arose from the experience and challenges are examined.

Through key informant interviews complemented with literature review, these aspects are elaborated in terms of operational processes, challenges encountered, and timeline of implementation. For purposes of data triangulation, especially in the analysis of promptness of response, news articles and other online information will complement the information gathered as these may have captured the events as they unfolded.

¹ See Boin, Kuipers and Overdijk (2013), McGroarty and Khutsishvil (2020), WHO (2019)

Figure 1. Framework for assessing the Philippine government’s post-COVID-19 support mechanism for migrant workers



Source: Author’s compilation from Boin, Kuipers and Overdijk (2013), McGroarty and Khutsishvil (2020), WHO (2019)

3.2. Research Design

The main approach of analysis is descriptive, narrative, and qualitative. Ultimately, the intention is to extract insights that can inform policies and programs in the promotion of migrants’ welfare and in enhancing government mechanisms for addressing the effects of such crises. The study documented and analyzed the experience of assisting the Filipino migrant workers from the perspective of the Philippine government.

Detailed discussions with three (3) representatives from the frontline implementer of migrant support services – the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) was crucial in identifying and elucidating the mechanisms and processes as well as challenges. Other data were gathered from various online sources including government administrative data and records (such as the daily situational report of the National Task Force), scholarly works, news article, and other online sources.

The data gathered included plans and protocols of operations, operation and coordination mechanisms, resources utilized, challenges encountered, best practices, and lessons learned such as adjustments in the policies emanating from the COVID-19 experience. The inquiry on the abovementioned elements focused on direct interventions such as repatriation and post-repatriation assistance including quarantine accommodation and transport assistance (for those returning to their home provinces and cities). In some instances, the mapping tool used in systems thinking was utilized to expound on the relationships of concepts/issues and organizations. Such a tool does not only highlight multiple dimensions but is also useful for illustrative purposes. The UCINET software package was used for such analysis.

To proceed with the analysis, the information gathered was then organized based on the analytical framework on crisis management. Other available scholarly work regarding past repatriation experience and challenges encountered by returning OFWs were also used for purposes of understanding how one can learn from the recent pandemic experience.

4. Policy framework

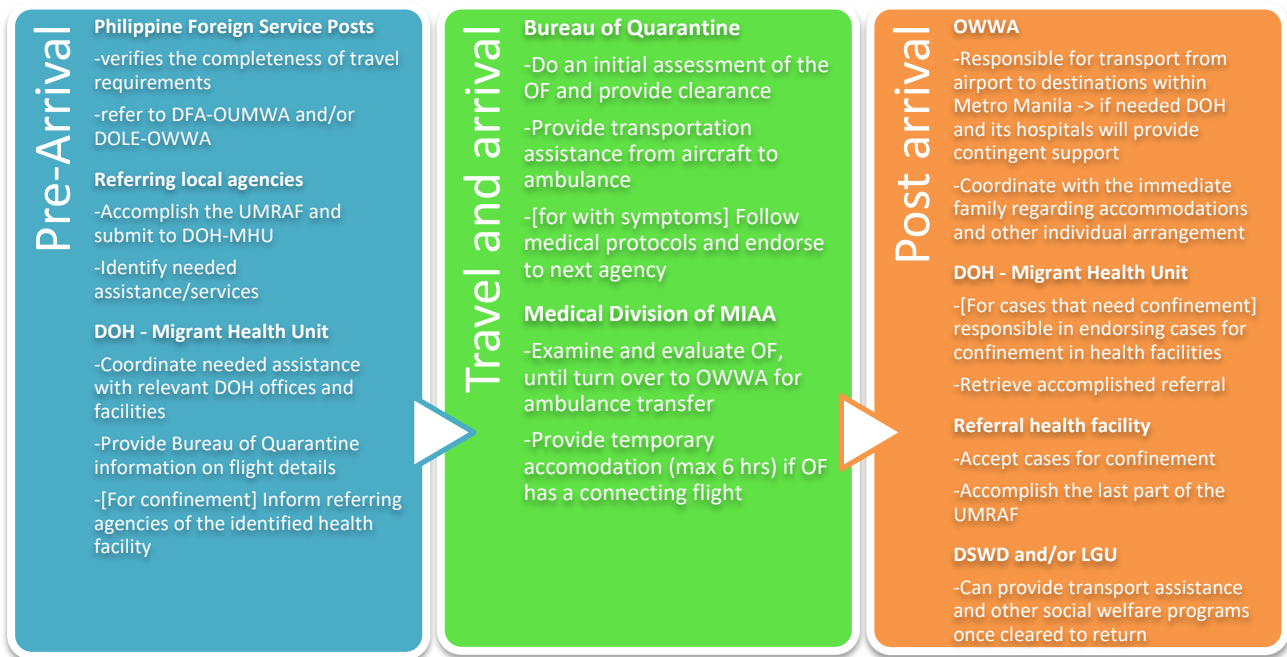
Recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and armed conflict overseas, have greatly challenged the capacity of the national government to protect and secure the safety of Filipino migrants. This was the case even with the presence of a policy framework aimed at addressing such events. The current policies in place are said to have been informed by past experience particularly starting with the repatriation of nearly 30,000 workers during the Gulf war in 1990-1991 (Asis 2020).

One of the policies that came out of the Gulf War experience is the requirement for foreign employers and companies employing Filipino workers to submit, if needed, a contingency plan that specifies how our workers will be protected and repatriated to the country. In 2010, Section 15 of Republic Act No. 10022 (a law that has amended the 1995 Republic Act No. 8042) provides for the repatriation of OFWs, the allocation of emergency repatriation fund of PHP 100 million, and designation of OWWA as the lead agency in OFW repatriation. In the same national policy, Section 28 provides for the organizational set-up to be followed in such circumstances wherein Philippine embassies and consulates adopt the One Country Team Approach, with the ambassador as the lead, in coordinating efforts to respond to crisis situations. In 2015, the Joint Manual of Operations in Providing Assistance to Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos was formulated presenting a “unified contingency plan that will safeguard overseas Filipinos” during times of crisis and other threats (DOLE, 2015).

In addition, there are existing manuals for mass repatriation that contains medical, mental, and security dimensions (in the case of war, accidents) such as the Inter-agency Medical Repatriation Assistance Program (IMRAP) for overseas Filipinos which came from Joint Memorandum Circular No. 2017-0001 promulgated in June 2017. This was implemented due to concerns over diseases with pandemic potential such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) among others, that could cause mass medical repatriation of Filipinos abroad. The IMRAP was a joint undertaking by multiple agencies namely, DFA, DOH, DOLE (OWWA and POEA), DSWD, DILG, Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO), and Manila International Airport Authority (MIAA) which aims to coordinate response, remove duplication of functions, and streamline process of receiving overseas Filipinos (OFs) with medical condition (JMC 2017-0001).

The Migrant Health Unit (MHU) under the DOH, is the central coordinating body of the IMRAP and is tasked to maintain the database of OFs that were received through medical repatriation. The information consolidated comes from the Unified Medical Repatriation Assistance Form (UMRAF) which is accomplished and passed down from agency to agency during the medical repatriation process (see Figure 2). In comparison to the emergency repatriation process detailed in the 2015 Joint Manual of Operations in Providing Assistance to Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos, the IMRAP presented a specialized process for medical cases that required stricter border control measure reducing the potential risk of infectious diseases. In addition, this also provided a way to consolidate information critical in monitoring communicable cases coming from overseas.

Figure 2. IMRAP guidelines on medical repatriation based on phases of management



Note: Process for Coordinated Medical Repatriation; UMRAF- Unified Medical Repatriation Assistance Form
Source: Joint Memorandum Circular 2017-0001 (2017)

Despite these frameworks, nothing has prepared the system for the scale of effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought. Past crisis interventions were concentrated in a few areas and only requires the assistance of the DFA, Philippine Embassy, and consulates to act together with POLO (Philippine Overseas Labor Office, the on-site implementer under DOLE) and OWWA.² Compared to the PHP 100 million emergency repatriation fund of OWWA, the COVID-19 pandemic was a PHP 23 billion intervention that addressed comprehensive challenges because the Philippine government provided for almost all the expenses on repatriation and medical support. The support provided by the legislative branch in terms of allocating funds was crucial in the operations of the repatriation and medical support provided to OFWs.

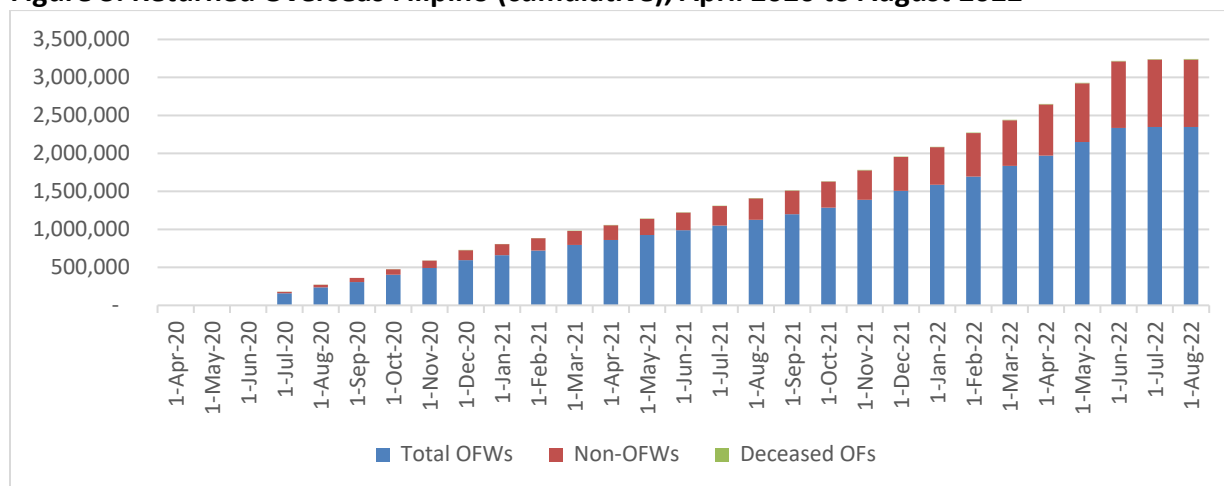
Owing to its pandemic experience, OWWA is currently drafting a new manual that documents what happened and in preparation for future events of similar nature. In its COVID-19 responses, its system of operations was guided by the IATF (Inter-agency Task Force on COVID-19) although some responses required some experimentation, an OWWA official noted. One of the things learned from that experience is that “guidelines and requirements should be relaxed for policies and programs to be responsive” as mentioned during a KII. Some of the requirements (eligibility criteria) for programs do not work in a pandemic setting, making it less responsive. For example, the *Balik Pinas* program was reengineered to accommodate the needs of returnees. Also, to augment personnel in a crisis situation, the OWWA, for instance, was able to get its needed manpower via job order hiring. It also helped that the Bayanihan Act enabled fast procurement – allowing the agency to bypass the regular, and likely tedious, regular process of procurement.

² OWWA Official during a key informant interview, November 15, 2022.

5. COVID crisis management and government practice

Managing the influx of returning overseas migrants in the tens and even hundreds of thousands required no less than a whole-of-nation approach. The Philippines saw an unprecedented number of repatriations of Overseas Filipinos. In 2020, an average of 72,883 OFWs per month have been repatriated to the Philippines. This average increased to 102,453 per month in 2021. As of August 29, 2022, a total of 3,242,202 Returning Overseas Filipinos (ROFs)³ have arrived in the Philippines (see Figure 3) of which, a total of 2,348,098 are OFWs: 1,517,437 are land-based and 830,661 are sea-based (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. Returned Overseas Filipino (cumulative), April 2020 to August 2022

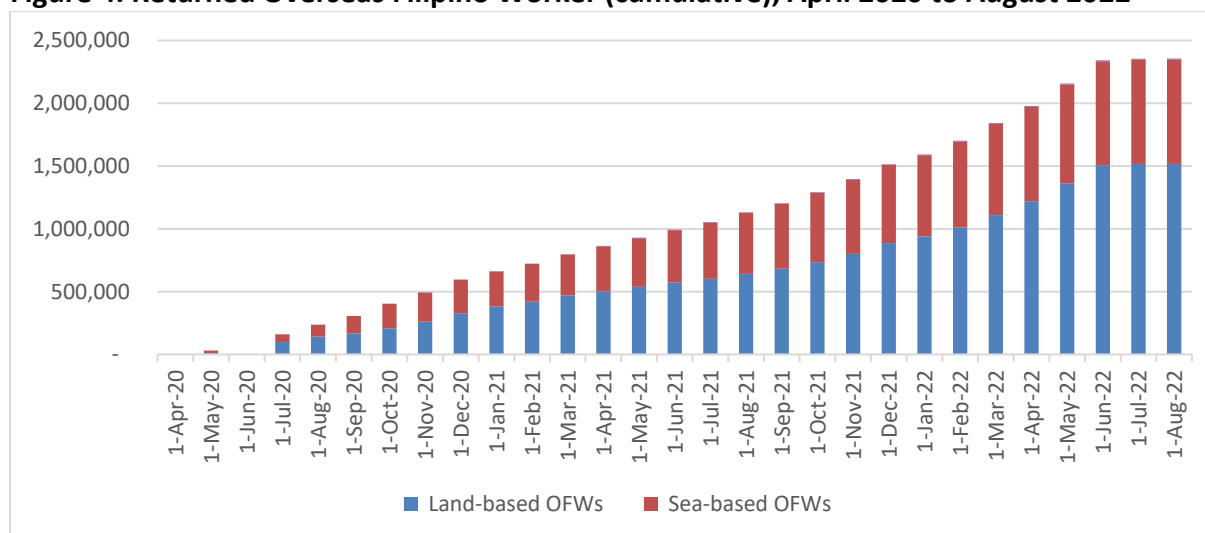


Note: Data was taken from the situational report of the end for each month;

Returned Overseas Filipinos = Total OFWs+ non-OFWs + Deceased OFs

Source: NDRRCM (2020; 2021; 2022)

Figure 4. Returned Overseas Filipino Worker (cumulative), April 2020 to August 2022



Note: Data was taken from the situational report of the end for each month

Source: NDRRCM (2020; 2021; 2022)

³ Total returning overseas Filipinos was computed by adding the total number of OFWs, non-OFWs, and returning deceased overseas Filipinos.

The Philippine government issued directives and advisories in response to the events in early 2020. On January 31, 2020, the DFA issued a public advisory encouraging Filipinos in Hubei, China to voluntarily be repatriated. The first repatriation of Filipinos happened on February 10, 2020, wherein a group of 30 persons were transported from Wuhan, Hubei Province, China.

On March 8, 2020, the government declared a State of Public Health Emergency. In the same month, DOLE issued Department Order No. 211, s.2020 to set the guidelines for the provision of hotel accommodation for distressed OFWs during the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) or the OWWA Project CARE. On March 26, 2020, the POEA released Memorandum Circular No. 8, s.2020 mandating “all Philippine recruitment agencies (PRAs) and licensed manning agencies (LMAs) to monitor and report the status and condition of the deployed Filipino workers and to coordinate with the concerned Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO) in extending the needed assistance to the affected workers” (par. 1).

By April 8, 2020, the DOLE issued guidelines⁴ on the provision of financial assistance for displaced OFWs via the program, “DOLE-AKAP⁵ for OFWs”. Under this program, eligible OFWs affected by the pandemic can apply to receive a one-time financial assistance of PHP 10,000 or its equivalent in the local currency of the country where they are working. Both documented and undocumented OFWs are eligible for this subsidy.

It wasn’t until April 16, 2020, that the DFA released a public advisory informing that returned OFWs, whether sea-based or land-based, are subjected to a mandatory 14-day quarantine upon their arrival to the country. Moreover, the advisory also allowed the foreign cruise ships carrying Filipino crews to dock in ports in Manila and serve as quarantine facilities for the Filipino crew members.

With the influx of returning OFs, the quarantine facilities were beginning to fill up. To decongest the quarantine facilities, the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) temporarily closed, and commercial flights to and from NAIA were suspended from May 3-10, 2020 (Rappler 2020). Former Pres. Rodrigo Duterte also issued an ultimatum on May 25, 2020, to rush the release of COVID-19 tests results of over 24,000 returning OFWs in quarantine facilities (CNN Philippines Staff 2020).

By the end of 2021, over half a million OFWs (540,876) received the government’s financial grant through DOLE’s *Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong Program* (AKAP) for a total of PHP 5.4 billion. Thousands also benefited from OWWA’s various reintegration programs (see Table 1).

Table 1. Status of select assistance programs

Agency	Program	Beneficiaries		Total amount
		End-2020	End-2021	
DOLE	Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong Program (AKAP)	460,471	540,876	PHP 5.4 billion
OWWA	Balik Pinas, Balik Hanapbuhay	15,097	14,997*	PHP 283.21 million
	Balik Pinay! Balik Hanapbuhay	1,421	477*	PHP 6.46 million
	Skills for Employment Scholarship Program (SESP)	1,661	1,604	PHP 122.58 million
	Seafarers’ Upgrading Program	3,996	3,970	PHP 19.86 million

⁴ DOLE Department Order No. 212, s.2020

⁵ Department of Labor and Employment – *Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong* (DOLE-AKAP)

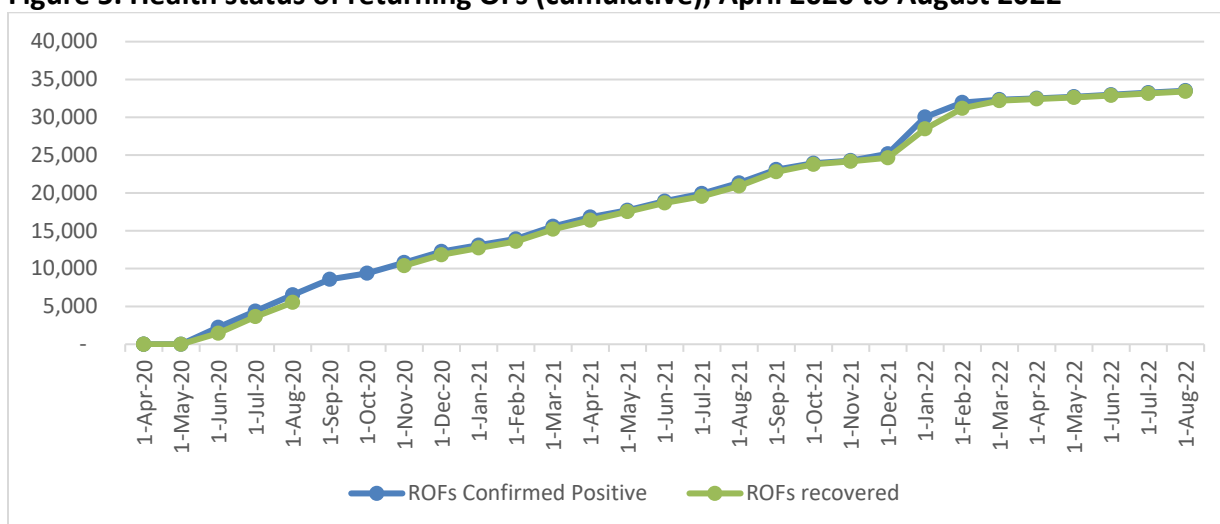
Uwian Na Program: Collective Assistance and Restoration for Emergency (CARE)	367,287	374,534	..
TABANG OFW	3,840	17,461	..
Information Technology Training Program (ITTP)	9,613	5,573	PHP 9.69 million

Note: *As of end October 2021

Source: Institute for Migration and Development Issues (2022)

In terms of medical status of returning Overseas Filipinos (ROFs), an average of 500 ROFs per month were admitted for treatment in 2020 upon return. However, improvements were observed in 2021 with only 300 cases per month. This is contradictory to the amount of confirmed positive ROFs, wherein there were lower positive cases in 2020 compared to 2021. This can be attributed to many factors such as the discovery of a vaccine, less severity of variants, or increased knowledge of treatments ultimately leading to less people being admitted in later years.

Figure 5. Health status of returning OFs (cumulative), April 2020 to August 2022



Note: Data was taken from the situational report of the end for each month

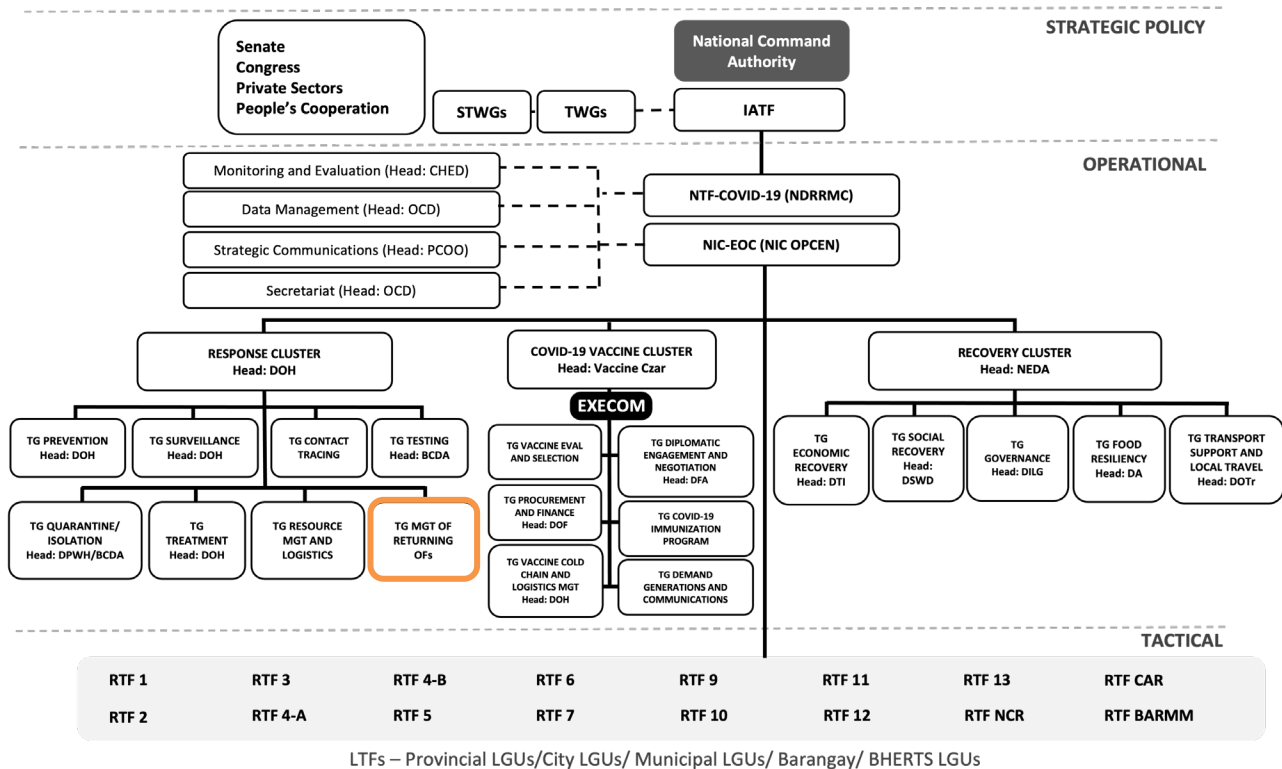
Source: NDRRMC (2020; 2021; 2022)

5.1 Orchestrating horizontal and vertical coordination

Managing repatriation of hundreds of thousands of returnees entailed a range of interrelated activities and programs that was facilitated by close collaboration among various actors and was aided by technology.

The organizational structure of the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) is illustrative of the whole-of-government approach that was implemented in the process of managing the effects of the crisis including the management of returning overseas Filipinos (ROFs). The structure has three parts – 1) the strategic policy making bodies, 2) the operational level, and 3) the tactical level (see Figure 6). The strategic policy level sets the framework and overall policy directions. This is comprised of the IATF and its technical working groups. The operational level consists of various clusters of operation namely – response cluster, vaccine cluster, and recovery cluster. Note that the Task Group on the Management of Returning Overseas Filipinos (OFs) is just among the eight (8) task groups under the response cluster which is headed by the Department of Health.

Figure 6. Inter-agency Task Force (IATF) expanded organizational structure



Note: IATF-EID = Inter-agency Task Force; TWG = technical working group; STWG = Sub-technical working group; NTF = national task force; NIC-EOC = National Incident Command Emergency Operations Center; OPCEN = operations center; TG = task group; LSI = locally stranded individual; STRATCOM = strategic communication; ROF = returning overseas Filipino; RTF = regional task force; H&QF = home and quarantine facilities; OF = overseas Filipinos; BCDA = Bases Conversion and Development Authority; LTF = local task force; LGUs = local government units; BHERTS = Barangay Health Emergency Response Teams
 Source: Reyes (2022, p. 64)

In the repatriation efforts, OWWA and other government agencies worked with PRAs to repatriate OFWs. Normally, the Philippine Recruitment Agencies (PRAs) are responsible for the repatriation of land based OFWs. As such POEA, through Memorandum Circular No. 8 s. 2020, reminded all Philippine recruitment agencies (PRAs) and licensed manning agencies (LMAs) to help in monitoring the condition of deployed Filipino workers (by sending a report) and to assist in coordinating with the concerned POLO in the distribution of assistance. However, not all PRAs were able to repatriate due to mobility constraints during the lockdown. The PRAs depended on OWWA to help them repatriate the OFWs. There were PRAs, especially those who handle sea based OFWs, who actively worked with the government in the One Stop Shop, a government initiative to handle operations in airports and seaports. These PRAs, according to OWWA, were willing to do their share in repatriating the seafarers.

Philippine organization overseas, multilateral institutions (i.e., ILO, IOM), and CSOs and NGOs in the PH that have representatives abroad helped OWWA in locating OFWs. Locating OFWs was difficult, especially those that cannot be directly contacted and where the government does not have a physical post. The above organizations helped OWWA in the mobilization of their resources to help OFWs.

DOLE monitors the whereabouts of OFWs intending to return to the Philippines. Monitoring OFWs who were intending to return to the Philippines were becoming a challenge as they continue to increase. To remedy this, the labor department activated a tracking system called OFW Assistance Information System (OASIS) on June 11, 2020. OASIS monitors the whereabouts of OFWs intending to return to the Philippines, moreover, information gathered by OASIS helped facilitate the repatriation process of incoming OFWs especially in organizing their arrival, preparing COVID tests, and managing transportation needs (DOLE-CAR n.d.).

Interactions within and with other government agencies were done on a regular basis. These include meetings and sub meetings for setting the reporting, direction, and instructions. Through DOLE secretary, OWWA was able to provide their inputs to the IATF.

OWWA's network has expanded to better assist OFWs. For example, the following organizations/agencies were added in their immediate networks - Department of Health, Bureau of Quarantine, the Coast Guard, LGUs, Provincial Health Offices in the regions, Philippine Airlines and other airlines, bus companies, PITX, 2Go, and other partners from the private sector.⁶

The Bureau of Quarantine (BOQ) created a system (the One Health Pass) which was used in terms of managing arrivals during the pandemic. This was later revised into the e-arrival. At the start of the pandemic, the release of quarantine certificates was done manually, OWWA suggested to the BOQ for the development of an online system which was linked to the OWWA app so that transmittal of certificate can be done electronically.⁷

The return of overseas Filipinos as supported by OWWA covered airport assistance, quarantine accommodation and monitoring, and transportation. IATF established a set of protocols to follow for returning overseas Filipinos known as the OWWA OFW Quarantine Operations (see Figure 7). Upon the arrival in the Philippines, the OFWs will undergo a health check by the Bureau of Quarantine (BOQ). The BOQ set up thermal scanners to monitor arriving OFs and weed out those who are physically showing signs of illness. At the same time, care kits and *Malasakit health kits* will be given out by the Department of Tourism (DOT), the Department of Transportation (DOTr), and the Manila International Airport Authority (MIAA).

To prepare the OFWs in mandatory quarantine, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and Office for Transportation Security (OTS) will give a mandatory quarantine briefing. The PCG facilitated data encoding, interviews, and rapid testing. The Bureau of Immigration (BI) will then oversee checking of the travel documents. After which, the OFWs will be required to proceed to the OWWA counter to enlist and direct them to their designated quarantine facility. The Licensed Manning Agencies (LMAs) and Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA) also assist in booking OFs in quarantine facilities. Information gathered by the OWWA will be recorded under the *Uwian na* database for monitoring.

Transporting OFWs to their designated quarantine facility and checking them in are facilitated by OWWA officers, with the support of LMA, OWWA, DOTr, and PCG. For the start of their mandatory quarantine, OFWs will spend five days in isolation before they will be administered swab testing by the BOQ through the PCG medical teams. These quarantine facilities are manned

⁶ OWWA Official during a key informant interview, November 15, 2022.

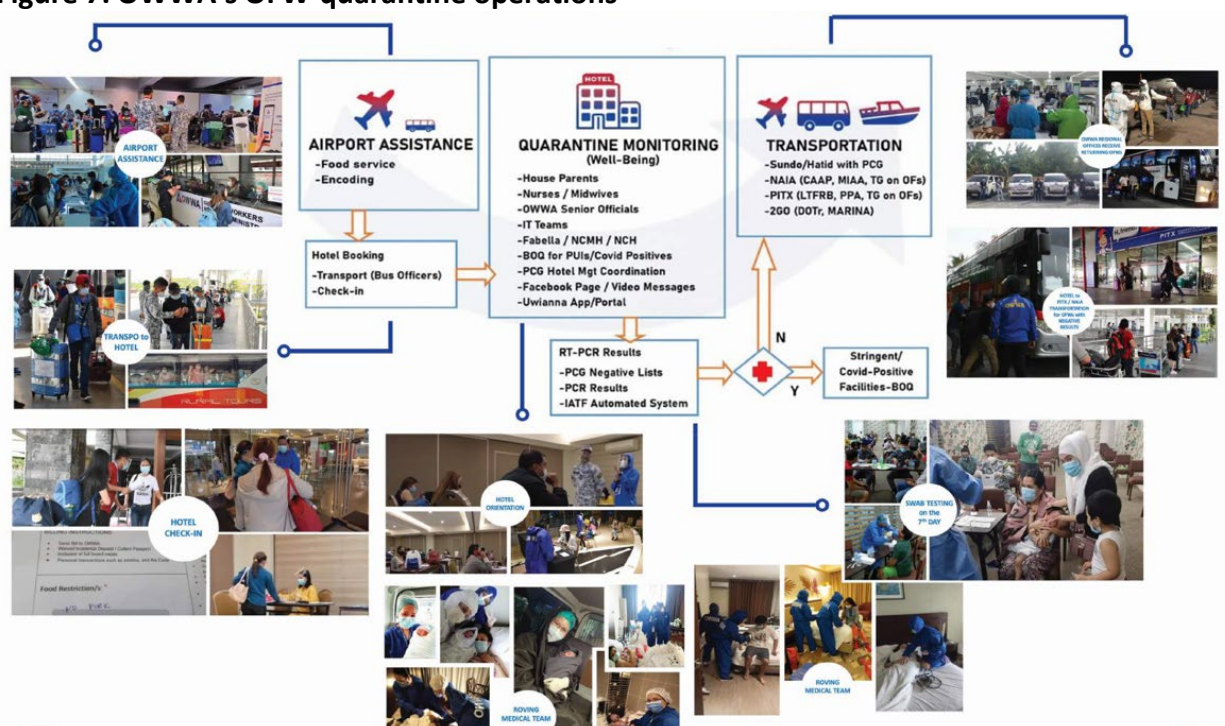
⁷ OWWA Official during a key informant interview, November 15, 2022.

with house parents to monitor and assess OFWs with concern about their necessities. Roving OWWA medical personnel are also present for OFWs with medical conditions. OWWA partnered with Fabella Hospital, National Children's Hospital, and the National Center for Mental Health to remedy any urgent medical emergencies.

During the mandatory quarantine of the OFWs, information was made accessible to them through the OWWA quarantine Operations Facebook page, OWWA official Facebook page, OWWA website, and the *Uwian na* app or portal. Moreover, RT-PCR test results are released directly to the OFW's via the IATF automated system for OFWs with COVID-19 positive results. They will be endorsed to the BOQ for stringent facilities for further medical protocol.

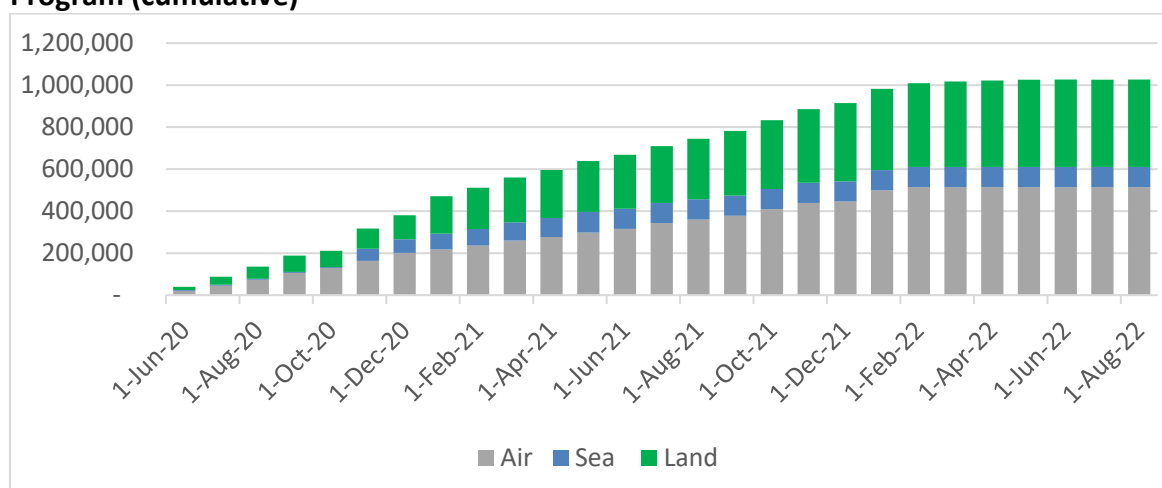
OWWA, with the support of LMA, PCG, and DOTr, transported OFWs who have completed the mandatory quarantine and have tested negative of COVID to terminals or ports, depending on their homebound destination. For Visayas and Mindanao bound OFWs, they will be transported to NAIA Terminal One for OWWA domestic chartered flights. For Luzon-bound OFWs they will be transported to the Parañaque Integrated Terminal Exchange or PITX for OWWA chartered buses bound to any point in Luzon, whereas those who would be going home via seaports will be endorsed to the DOTr and MARINA for sea travel. As of August 31, 2022, a total of 1,026,182 ROFs have been assisted through the *Hatid Probinsya/OSS-MROF Balik Probinsya* and *Uwian Na* program (see Figure 8).

Figure 7. OWWA's OFW-quarantine operations



Source: OWWA (2020)

Figure 8. Total returning Overseas Filipinos assisted by OSS-MROF Balik Probinsya and Uwian na Program (cumulative)



Note: Data was taken from the situational report of the end for each month
Source: NDRRMC (2020; 2021; 2022)

In terms of resources, the total amount utilized by DOLE and OWWA for COVID-19 response amounted to PHP 19 billion as of end December 2021 (see Table 2). Costs of COVID tests, food, and hotel accommodation of OFWs during mandatory quarantine, and transportation to their respective provinces and cities were also shouldered by the Philippine government (DOLE 2021). The mandatory 14-day quarantine costs OWWA about PHP 3,000 per day per OFW on hotel accommodation alone according to a report by Patinio (2021).

In 2020 alone, OWWA hired a total of 1,093 personnel for manpower support. Based on a key informant interview conducted in November 2022, the total amount utilized totaled to PHP 23 billion.

Table 2. DOLE and OWWA Total Funds Utilized for COVID-19 Response

	Allotment (in million PHP)	Disbursement (in million PHP)	Utilization Rate (in %)
Bayanihan 1			
DOLE Office of the Secretary ¹	2,500	2,459	98.38
DOLE-OWWA ²	5,145	5,134	99.78
Bayanihan II			
DOLE-OWWA ²	5,495	5,495	100.00
Regular funds			
DOLE-OWWA ²	6,166	6,128	99.38
TOTAL FUNDS	19,306	19,216	99.53

Note:

1/ For the implementation of the Covid-19 Adjustment Measures Program (CAMP) for the OFWs;

2/ To cover the funding requirements for the implementation of the Emergency Repatriation Program.

Source: COVID-19 Budget Utilization Report – Bayanihan I and Bayanihan II (as of Dec. 31, 2021), DBM

Data sharing and coordination with host countries is important to help identify Overseas Filipinos in need of assistance. Host countries that have incorporated migrants into their pandemic response plan were easier to coordinate with when it comes to assisting Overseas Filipinos. According to Veen (2021), this is observed to be stronger with receiving countries who had already experienced a similar crisis, as they were able to facilitate the transfer of vital

information on migrants at the beginning. In turn, the Philippines can better understand the impact of the pandemic on migrant workers and be able to rapidly allocate the necessary resources for their assistance.

5.2. *Public Awareness and communication*

Communication and public interaction were essential in managing the return of overseas Filipinos in the pandemic era. Based on the systematic review of the available literature and information from the KIIs, main forms of communication observed were the following: 1) communication within the government (government to government); 2) information dissemination and provision of assistance to the people and public (government to people); and 3) feedback of services and needs from the people (people to government).

5.2.1. Government to government communication

Close communication for on-site government agencies

Although this may vary per Philippine post by country, common set up for government agencies on site tend to be located in close proximity. For example, the Embassy in Riyadh housed OWWA, POLO and the Assistance to Nationals Unit of the Embassy (Veen 2021). Social capital is also easily developed given that coordination is regular and there is easy access to each other.

Regular communication between on-site and home offices

Communication is easily opened between onsite posts to their counterparts in the Philippines with the help of digital services (e.g., Zoom, WebEx, Viber). Vital information like those in need of repatriation and other OFs concerns were relayed to the Philippines, while local offices can communicate decisions on COVID response and guidelines. This enables the immediate response of concerned authorities and preparation can be made before the arrival of repatriated OFs.

Multi-agency initiative in the repatriation of OFs

Under the guidance of the Inter-Agency Task Force, response to the pandemic required close cooperation among various government agencies. This translated to regular inter-agency and internal meetings, daily presentation of accomplishment reports, and consistent review of guidelines.

5.2.2. Government to people communication

Use of migration technology or “migtech” in closing information gaps

Migtech is a technology that assist migrants in the form of software applications and digital portals which incorporate “elements of accuracy, safety, efficiency, and transparency in facilitating labor mobility” (Kang and Latoja 2022, p. 22). According to Kang and Latoja (2022) this can be used in the entire migration process (from departure to return), for example: 1) to monitor the return of migrant workers; 2) to facilitate appropriate reception conditions for returnees; 3) facilitates the matching of jobs and skills. A local example of this is the DOLE’s OFW Assistance Information System (OASIS), a tracking system to monitor the whereabouts of OFWs intending to return to the Philippines, to facilitate organized arrival at the airport, efficient swab testing, and rapid pick up and transport to their respective hotels and homes and other necessary processes.

Another example is the application released by OWWA namely the *Uwian na* app. Members were encouraged to register before returning to the country to have an idea of where they are and to help provide transportation and accommodation assistance. According to OWWA, they have also developed another application that shows hotel location, date for swab testing, result of test,

medical condition, food and water request, medical request.⁸ Transport information can be recorded in the application such as flight number, bus, date, moreover, if they were received by the regional office this will also be reflected in the system.

Information dissemination using social media

Government agencies now heavily use online platforms like social media to disseminate information regarding COVID-19 policies, data, and available assistance, such as repatriation flights. During the pandemic, officials from DFA also hosts “OFW Help Live!”, a Facebook online video stream, to provide the latest news and updates of the Department’s efforts related to the COVID pandemic (Katigbak 2020).

Communication of quarantine protocols to OFWs

Since quarantine protocols changes frequently, OWWA communicates with the OFWs in several ways: 1) house parents - OWWA representatives that handles the concern of returned OFWs located in quarantine facilities; 2) *Uwian na* application – mobile application used by returning OFWs; and 3) through the Philippine Recruitment Agencies (PRAs); and 4) social media (Veen 2021). Other government agencies also disseminate information on latest protocols in their websites and social media pages.

5.2.3. People to Government

Dedicated communication platforms for OFWs concerns

It is important to set up a dedicated platform for Filipino migrant workers where they can be directed to available support services. The Department of Foreign Affairs and OWWA created their own Facebook page, OFW Help PH and OWWA Quarantine Operations respectively, to provide assistance and answer questions of displaced and affected OFWs.

This can reach a wider audience; however, this is only available to users of the platform with access to internet and digital devices. For onsite concerns, some posts abroad have created a 24/7 emergency response platform for OFWs concern through phone, email, Facebook, and/or other forms of communication (Veen 2021).

Easier to provide feedback due to heavy digitalization

Social media has been used by OFs to share their complaints in relation to the repatriation process. The *Uwian Na* app also provides users with a platform to air out their grievances. This is important in knowing and addressing gaps in the system that in turn can help make the entire process more efficient.

5.3. Challenges

The challenges brought by the pandemic in relation to assisting returning overseas Filipinos emanated from the sheer scale of the operations needed and the huge resources required. In the course of repatriation, news of depleting resources surfaced from the DFA, OWWA, and POLOs operating on-site. For instance, the POLO in Bahrain reported that requests for assistance overwhelmed its limited manpower (Veen 2021).

⁸ OWWA Official during a key informant interview, November 15, 2022.

The slow process of repatriation and return is due to various factors. These included airport closures, absence of flights, restriction to flight entry, and to some extent the uncertainty about who will shoulder the cost of repatriation. Regular operations of government offices on-site and in the country were also disrupted by the pandemic. To lessen the risk of transmission, flexible work arrangements were implemented such as shortened workday and remote work. Despite the precautions, there are instances of infection leading to sanitation of office premises, thus face to face appointment were also interrupted. These scenarios made accessing services and assistance more difficult for overseas Filipinos in immediate need of help. This also affected agency-to-agency coordination, according to a POLO in Singapore, documents at times needed more time to be approved due to COVID-related problems (Veen 2021).

An important concern noted by key informants of this study is wage theft or unpaid salaries and end-of-service benefits. Due to the quick process of mass repatriation, many OFWs did not obtain these benefits prior to their return to the country. Through the Single-Entry Approach (SEnA), an intervention of OWWA, some conciliation between OFWs in the Philippines and their agency were achieved.

Some remains of OFs were not returned to their family due to cultural differences. For instance, it is a practice in Saudi Arabia to bury the dead bodies before sunset. Through the intervention of OWWA and the embassy, some remains were brought home. Other, however, were already buried overseas.

Returnees experience stigma, mental health issues, isolation, and depression. The stigma emanated from the experience that some LGUs and even OFWs' own families refuse to accept the returning member due to fear of getting infected by the disease. Depression and isolation have also led to suicide and substance abuse during the time of the pandemic.

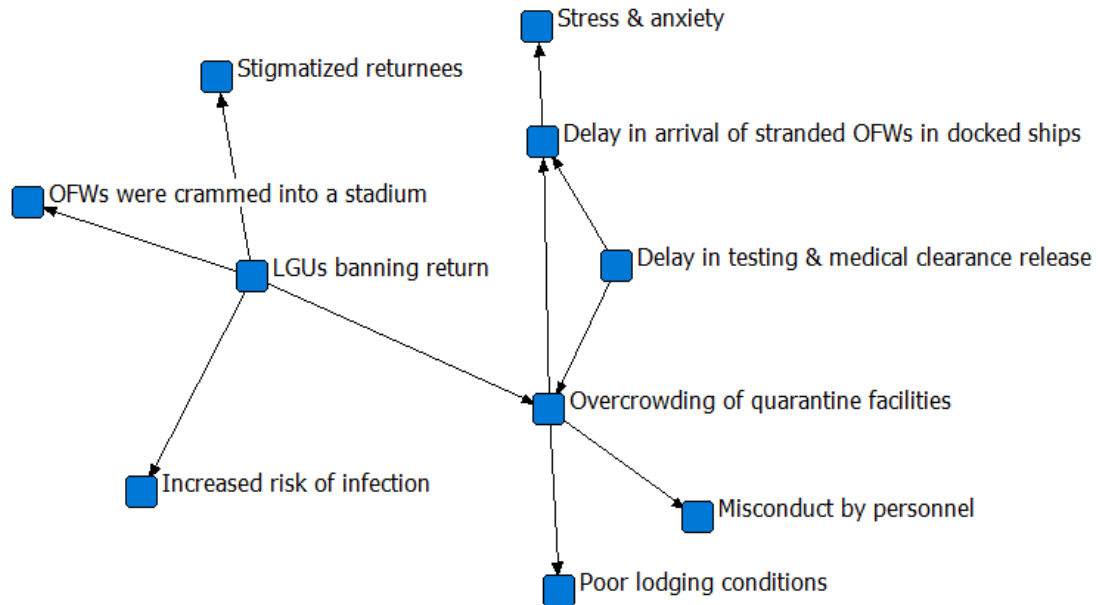
Effective repatriation intervention is not a one-size-fits-all program. In the process of managing repatriation and return, gender-differentiated needs have been observed which call for differentiated actions and policies. There was also no specific guideline about who to assist unaccompanied minors who were repatriated. It was not clear whether it should be OWWA or DSWD.

Reliance on digital dissemination of information can leave vulnerable migrants behind

The use of digital platforms for information dissemination is promising but it can also exclude those who are not proficient in the use of information technology and in accessing the Internet (IOM 2020). On the other hand, heavy digitalization of communication can miss some vulnerable groups, namely migrant domestic workers, because of the isolated nature of their work wherein there is low or no access to a digital device and/or internet connection (Veen 2021).

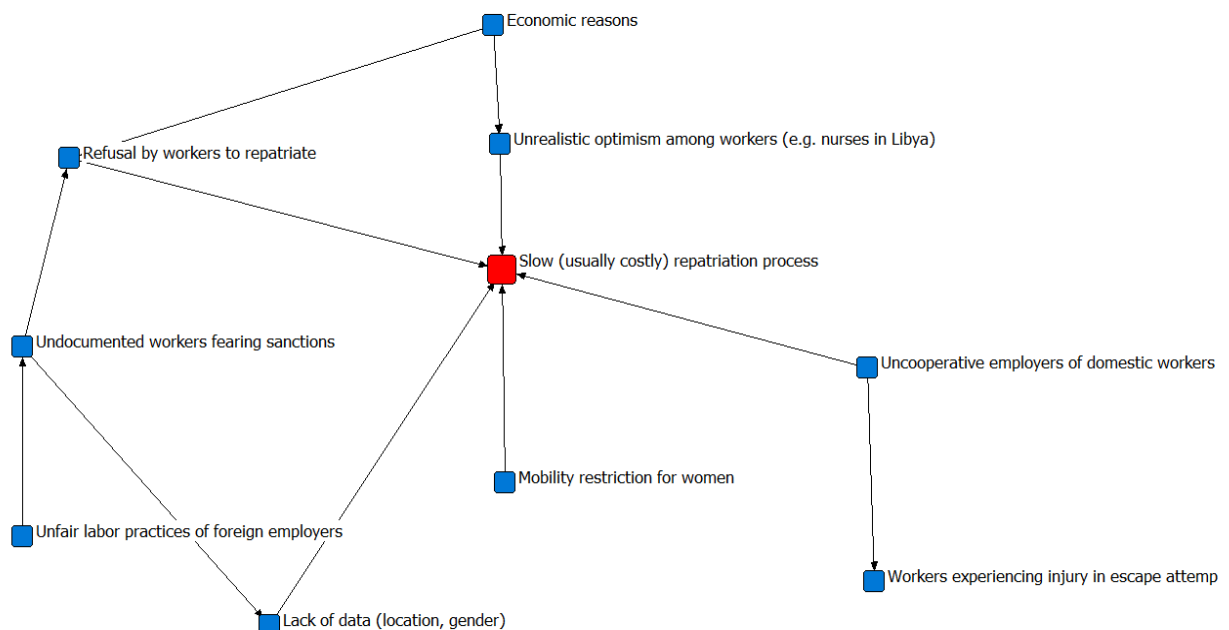
A great deal of post-arrival challenges was said to be attributed to delays in testing and release of medical clearance. This led in part to overcrowding of quarantine facilities and delay in the arrival of stranded sea-based OFWs in docked ships. Problems also arose as some LGUs refused to receive their constituents, thereby causing more overcrowding of facilities with people extending their stays because they could not return home right away. These problems caused more problems such as poor lodging conditions, stress, and anxiety (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Post arrival challenges during the pandemic



There were challenges encountered with respect to lack of access to data about migrant returnees. The records of OFWs are either incomplete or not up to date. In the COVID-19 efforts, OWWA relied on POEA data but also resorted to unconventional sources like Facebook because OFWs who are OWWA members do not regularly update OWWA about their exact locations. Information is not available for non-OWWA members. This problem has already been experienced in past repatriation efforts where locations of OFWs are not known by Philippine authorities making the effort more challenging. In the repatriation efforts during the 2011 Arab spring as well as in the 2006 Lebanon-Israel conflict, the lack of data on location and gender proved to be a major blunder in the speedy repatriation process. The large number of undocumented workers in these areas also challenged the process.

Figure 10. On-site challenges in repatriation based on past experience: Arab Spring (2011), Lebanon-Israel Conflict (2006)



6. Lessons learned

The only way to tackle the many challenges brought by the pandemic is through a whole-of-government, if not whole-of-society approach. The immediate impacts of the phenomenon are health-related and work-related, necessitating the on-site provision of immediate support to the workers. But the bulk of the challenges faced by the Philippine government and its partners rested on the many works associated with repatriation. These works include repatriating and receiving hundreds of thousands of migrant workers in such a short period of time, administering the health tests at the points of entry, managing the assignment in quarantine facilities, addressing their basic needs while in quarantine, and providing them transport to their homes. Such activities require effective and cohesive systems of planning, decision-making and operations. The IATF organizational structure within which the Task Group on the Management of Returning Overseas Filipinos is embedded in shows the coordinative mechanisms in place. One public manager in this group noted that – “what made us survive this is the whole-of-government approach, and of course the support of the legislative branch.” The coordination has also been manifested in the use of technology in data gathering and sharing among the agencies. Furthermore, the collaboration between state actors with non-state actors on-site and well as their coordination with recruitment and manning agencies have facilitated the repatriation processes. The policy and operational structures that were built and tested during the pandemic can serve as the template for addressing any future emergencies concerning the influx of returnees.

Repatriation does not only entail the act of facilitating the return but rather a system that relies on numerous inter-related factors. In the COVID-19 experience, these elements proved to be crucial for speedy return - adequate facilities for testing/ medical care, available and unhampered flights and entry into the country, functional embassies/consulates, adequate accommodation/ temporary shelters (both on-site, upon arrival while waiting for transport going to provinces/residences), and cooperation of local government units in receiving their constituents. On the other hand, the on-site aspect of the repatriation relies on the following factors – the presence of effective communication/feedback platform or system, cooperation of migrant workers and their employers, efficient system for logistics, close coordination between government and migrant organizations (and other organizations and non-state actors that support migrants), and workers’ affiliation to groups that support migrants that are based on-site. In any type of emergency, repatriation efforts must be made into systems-oriented ones to account for all the vital nuances.

The use of digitalized platforms and other technology has been fast-tracked because of the COVID-19 experience. For instance, OWWA shifted to a highly digitalized platform, with the application process and release of financial support happening online. It was noted by a key informant that more than fifty systems were built to aid in various aspects such as gathering information on and monitoring returning overseas Filipinos, identifying their origin, their reintegration needs, and their assigned quarantine accommodation. The “Uwian Na” application was used to streamline the matching of the results of the antigen test with the OFWs. This matching was previously done manually, with thousands of boxes of results which was difficult to do given that the returnees were quarantined in different hotels. This app which helped in the critical operations of the OWWA was developed in such a short time and was given an award by Microsoft. The system(s) developed for online application process such as that for gaining financial support and for tracking OFWs who have successfully returned will aid in any future efforts of supporting returnees.

The enormity of the whole operations and challenges required huge financial resources; budget realignment was essential for funding the COVID-19 assistance programs. Effective management of resources played a vital role to ensure that resources are available for addressing urgent needs. OWWA, for instance, used more resources to fund scholarship programs through the budget supposedly allocated for other activities which did not proceed due to the heightened restrictions. Again, these lessons learned on budget realignments can provide a precedent on how challenges in the future can be tackled.

It is important to consider putting up a contingency fund in the General Appropriations Act especially for crises of this scale. Although OWWA has its own budget for emergency repatriation, it eventually needed additional resources from the national government for its operations simply because of the enormous magnitude of the returnees requiring support from the government. The government may also consider reviewing the Emergency Repatriation Fund of the OWWA on whether it must be augmented or whether there is a need to set up another type of fund for addressing various needs (including those for reintegration and post-repatriation).

Having quick access to updated OFs information is vital for successful and quick repatriation efforts in the future. This is an important lesson brought not only by the pandemic but also past experiences of the country in terms of repatriation. A system must be put in place to ensure that OWWA and the embassies which carry out the repatriation are able to either collect or access information collected through other means like in the process of obtaining the Overseas Employment Certificate.

Repatriation needs may vary depending on the nature of the crisis or event, as well as the profile of the returnees. In any case, gender-specific needs must be accounted for in the design of protocols. For instance, pregnant women, and children have special needs different from other groups. Mass repatriation efforts including accommodation in shelter must be designed to cater for such differentiated needs. In the COVID-19 experience, all pregnant women were sheltered under one accommodation for convenience of addressing their needs. There were also children who returned home unaccompanied. Key informants noted the policy gap in dealing with unaccompanied minors and stateless children. In the COVID-19 experience, OWWA took responsibility (especially if one of the parents is an OFW). It must be made clear as to what government agency should look after their needs. In any type of emergency, pandemic-related or not, it is important to assess various repatriation needs and to install systems for addressing such varying needs.

Improving access to social protection is a must. It is useful for the government to explore a government-managed insurance scheme for OFWs that can cushion them in case of mandatory or unprepared repatriation or return apart from the financial grant that the government usually provides. Furthermore, it is important to review policies relating to insurance. Force majeure is often not included in the insurance coverage. However, with unprepared repatriation, it is crucial that OFWs gain other ways to remedy their situation. The pandemic situation was just another reminder of a long overdue need for effective social protection among migrant workers and their families.

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