

GLOBAL FORUM ON MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT  
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Opening Statement  
By

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Ambassador Eva Akerma Börje, Excellencies, co-panelists, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon!

This afternoon, I would like to share with you our national experience mainstreaming migration with focus on social protection.

In the Philippines, social protection for our overseas countrymen has existed for quite some time. In fact, social protection is not only mainstreamed in our policies but are deeply entrenched in our legal and social frameworks.

First, allow me to enlighten you on our legal framework. Social protection is firmly enshrined at our fundamental law, the Philippine Constitution. One of the basic principles of the Philippine Constitution is that *the prime duty of the Government is to serve and protect the people*.

This legal framework is also found and is reinforced by the Philippine Labor Code and the Migrants Workers Act.

A marked emphasis on the welfare and protection of overseas workers surfaced during the enactment of the Migrants Workers Act. This law instituted the policies of overseas employment and established a higher standard of protection and promotion of the

welfare of migrant workers, their families and overseas Filipinos in distress.

This new law also established the office that I head, the Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers' Affairs, which is primarily responsible for the provision and over-all coordination of all Assistance to Nationals (ATN) and legal services to all overseas Filipinos in distress and their families.

The law provides a ready resource, that is, the Assistance to Nationals (ATN Fund) and the Legal Assistance Fund (LAF). The ATN Fund is used to cover the cost of assisting distressed Filipino migrants such as their need for repatriation, shipment of remains, hospitalization, temporary accommodation, food and basic supplies, and other similar expenses. On the other hand, the LAF is disbursed for Filipinos in distress and are in need of legal assistance and are unable or have no access to legal assistance in their host countries.

This law was later amended and strengthened with the provision of stricter and clearer criteria for the managed deployment of Filipinos abroad and stiffer penalties for violations of the social protection mechanisms, especially in the area of illegal recruitment. With this new law, the Philippines made it a policy that it will not allow its people to be deployed in areas where they could not be protected either by domestic laws or by international conventions.

Social protection also permeates on Foreign Service. Our Foreign Service Act makes one of the three pillars of our Foreign Policy the protection of the rights and promotion of the welfare and interests of overseas Filipinos. Our foreign missions abroad form a worldwide net of first responders for Filipinos in distress anywhere in the world.

We also act as one country team when we are abroad and pursue whole government approach domestically. Our social protection policies go through inter agency and other stakeholders consultation and actions are always done through inter- ministerial team coordination.

Ladies and gentlemen, there are currently approximately 10 Million overseas Filipinos, present in different countries around the world. Overseas Filipino Workers, or what we call “OFWs” in short, have always been considered as important development actors in our country’s development.

OFWs remit billions of dollars to their families in Philippines each year. Our country has consciously pursued a policy of encouraging them to invest their earnings in durable investments and for them and their families left behind to engage in entrepreneurship using the skills and knowledge acquired abroad, encouraging brain gain (as opposed to brain drain).

Our pre-departure seminars encourage OFWs to better manage their income while abroad. We also conduct outreach programs, which include financial literacy campaigns.

Going back to social protection, our government pursues programs for our OFWs at all stages of the circular migration. During the pre-employment phase, our OFWs undergo Pre-Departure and Pre-Employment Seminars.

Our missions abroad engage their host governments in order to ensure that the rights and welfare of the OFWs are protected. Programs of local institutions tailored to assist Filipinos have been brought closer to OFWs abroad. We have included our OFWs in the health insurance coverage of PhilHealth. For the first time, mandatory private insurance is required for overseas workers. We also have encouraged the establishment of Philippine Schools Overseas to cater to OFW families and educate their children through the Philippine curriculum while abroad so as to minimize adjustment tensions for the children when they return to the Philippines with their migrant parents.

The Philippines, in modest way, has prepared for reintegrating returning OFWs. They are assisted by the National Reintegration Center, skills training and upgrading are offered to them our Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) and Expatriate and Export Workers’ Livelihood Support Fund by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and OFW loan

facility of the Land Bank are made available to them. Lately, our Department of Agriculture and Department of Labor opened up a PHP 2 billion facility for returning OFWs who wishes to pursue agribusiness.

Since we are on the topic of social protection, I would like to inform you that the Philippines signed a historic agreement with Saudi Arabia last Sunday that would govern the deployment of Filipina household service workers (HSWs) in the Middle Eastern kingdom.

The said Agreement guarantees household service workers benefits such as a day off each week, while preventing their hiring costs from being deducted from their salary among other safeguards. Under the agreement, a complaint mechanism was set up starting with the establishment of a 24-hour hotline for dispute resolution. Around 60,000 household service workers in Saudi Arabia stand to benefit from this agreement.

Before I conclude, I just wish to share with you that our government is as committed to assist our countrymen who are trapped in crisis situations. For this purpose and to respond to these crises, the Philippine Government has established the Overseas Preparedness and Response Team (OPRT) which reports directly to our President through his Executive Secretary. We have also created Rapid Response Teams (RRTs). These RRTs are composed of crisis management experts from different agencies who have been trained and are ready to be deployed to crisis-hit areas to bring the Filipinos out of harm's way. Using the RRT, since 2011, thousands of Filipinos have been safely repatriated to the Philippines from crisis hit countries.

Ladies and gentlemen, managing and mainstreaming migration policies to benefit not only the large number of migrant Filipinos but the country as a whole, is a great challenge that we face. Concretely, like many sending countries, we are in search of solutions for unethical recruitment practices, the portability of insurance benefits, social integration, and lower remittance costs. We don't have ready solutions for these concerns. We, however, firmly believe that these will be solved with continuous engagement and constructive dialogue with stakeholders.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to impart my good wishes to the Swedish chair. I am confident that with the continued cooperation and active participation of all countries involved in this Forum, the GFMD will carry on as the primary government lead voluntary process for migration and development.

Thank you, and good afternoon to all!

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