

THE WIDER PICTURE OF IGOROT OUT-MIGRATION

For the 7th Igorot International Consultation (IIC-7)
Banaue Hotel, Ifugao: April 12 – 15, 2008

Prepared by the Cordillera Peoples Alliance*

We are very glad that the IIC7 is being held again in the Cordillera, and particularly here in Ifugao. We would like to welcome fellow Igorots and friends attending the assembly; as we give life to the theme: “Nurturing our Culture and Resources to Chart and Secure our Destiny”.

We would like to relate with the issue of Igorot out-migration, as this is close to the heart of all of us attending this consultation.

We are often fond of saying that – “the Igorot has arrived”, that we have found our place in the wider global community, and that we’ve come a long way from the St. Louis Exposition of 1904 when dozens of our ancestors were shipped to the U.S. and displayed like a living diorama.

Today, indeed, we see a big number of fellow Cordillerans who have successfully transplanted their lives, their professions, their entire families even, to other countries all over the world. We see more and more highland folk from our region flocking to overseas destinations as long-term immigrants, as contractual workers, and as scholars.

Obviously, this out-migration to other countries is not merely a Cordillera phenomenon, but a long-term national trend. According to data culled by Migrant International, around 10 million Filipinos are living and working abroad in 184 countries; every day, an average of 3,500 Filipinos leave the country to become OFW’s.

Here in the Cordillera, the trend of out-migration had started even in earlier years, although most destinations were within the Philippines – sometimes close to home, such as Cagayan Valley and Central Luzon, and sometimes as far as Mindanao. In recent decades, however, the OFW bug has bitten us too.

In 2007 alone, POEA CAR recorded a total of 10,795 OFW departures from the region. About 80% are rehires, while 20% are new hires. An estimated 60% are women. Just look around Baguio City’s central business district, and we will not fail to see the proliferation of recruitment agencies and skills training centers that cater to overseas placement.

Clearly, we need to see the wider picture for us to understand the phenomenon.

A. The direct and immediate realities of Igorot out-migration

We don’t have to go into the details about the immediate benefits that surround the out-migration phenomenon.

Let us grant that our OFW folk do get paid at higher rates and usually get more benefits (otherwise, there's hardly any point in working abroad). In the case of skilled professionals, often, they can bring their spouses or entire families with them. As our OFW's gain experience in their host countries, they usually find more opportunities for professional, educational, and personal advancement, and end up becoming long-term immigrants and even citizens who expect to enjoy a much wider range and much higher levels of socio-economic benefits.

However, we do have to go into the details about the immediate employment (and pre-employment) problems faced by our OFW's.

1. Even before a Filipino takes the first step towards becoming an OFW, s/he already has to contend with the legal and financial requirements. According to Migrant Metro Baguio data, paperwork that require 76 signatures will already cost P7,600. If we include the minimum other requirements of passport, POEA fee (for new hires), OWWA fee, and Medicare/Philhealth, the amount goes up to P17,875 per applicant. Not surprisingly, Cordillera folk have had to sell or mortgage their farms just so they could process their placement and travel papers.
2. Many prospective OFW's fall victim to illegal recruiters, human-trafficking schemes, and other recruitment violations. At the end of the day, they end up losing money and not getting the overseas work they hoped for. The POEA CAR reported 92 illegal recruitment cases in 2007 alone; the real figure is surely much higher.
3. As OFW's, our compatriots suffer the so-called 3D types of work: "dirty, difficult, and dangerous." These are the types of working conditions that the citizens of the host countries often shirk from, and are paid relatively low wages. But we willingly take them because the wages and benefits are still much higher than what we could get here in the Philippines.
4. Many OFW's have to cope with employment contract violations, such as non-payment and underpayment, wage cuts, extended working hours, no overtime pay, no food allowance, no free medical services, contract substitution, and unjust pre-termination.
5. By now, we are already too familiar with the horror stories of employer abuse, from minor forms of maltreatment and sexual harassment to the worst cases of physical violence, rape, and murder.
6. In their attempts to fend off or escape such abuse, our poor OFW compatriots often turn to desperate measures such as fighting back or running away, which lead to legal complications. The irony is that the victimized OFW's are made out to be the offenders: they are locked up by their employer; they are fired from work; or, they are slapped with charges, arrested, and jailed by the host government.
7. Aside from employer abuse, OFW's typically encounter culture shock, limited rights as foreign workers, and even racism and discrimination, in the wider society of the country where they work.
8. Finally, OFW complaints of employer abuse often suffer neglect by Philippine diplomatic and labor authorities.

B. The wider and long-term realities of out-migration

The phenomenon of Filipino out-migration to other countries, which has also affected the Cordillera in a full-blown way, is clearly not a short-term and individualized trend, but has been part of our people's long-term and wider reality for many years now.

The Philippine government always harps on the positive aspects of the OFW phenomenon, dwelling for example on positive Filipino traits such as our excellent ability to adapt to foreign cultures, our supposed adventurous or ambitious nature, etc. Also, we are supposed to be the country's "modern-day heroes" who are sacrificing so much so we could bring a better life to our families.

We must always emphasize, however, the greatly negative realities that have pushed millions of our compatriots to become OFWs. Clearly, the situation that powers this trend is the chronically depressed socio-economic situation in the Philippines – the lack of sufficient employment and livelihood opportunities, and the low wages or incomes that come with the limited types of local employment and livelihood.

This socio-economic crisis situation has been our country's lot for many decades now – at least since the first peso devaluation under President Macapagal in the 1960's. Ultimately, it is the result of being so tightly tied up to global investments, trade, and the debt trap, which in turn prevents our country from adapting and finally achieving a comprehensive program of nationalist industrialization and comprehensive agrarian reform, including the full recognition of ancestral land rights among indigenous peoples such as here in the Cordillera.

True, the OFW's have become the single biggest source of foreign exchange, which keeps our dependent economy afloat. Estimates of annual remittances by OFW's range from USD 13 billion (according to the Central Bank) to USD 18 billion (according to the ILO). The president of the Phil-Am Chamber of Commerce noted that if OFW remittances were to stop for only three days, "the Philippine economy will immediately sink."

On top of the socio-economic crisis, there is also the displacement of entire communities, families, and individuals due to so-called "development" projects (such as mining, dams, logging) which violate our collective rights to our ancestral lands and self determination. By virtue of the Mining Act of 1995 and the Arroyo regime's mining agenda, the Cordillera region is practically offered for plunder and exploitation of local and transnational mining giants. It is alarming that 125 pending mining applications cover 1.2 million hectares or 66% of the region's total land area. Nine Mineral Sharing Agreements and four Exploration Permits were already approved despite community protests. If this will not be immediately confronted, it would be too late for us to claim we have a Cordillera Homeland and *ili* that have been fought in defense by our ancestors for our generation and more generations to come. The impacts of large-scale mining and dams have resulted to devastating environmental destruction and disasters as well as dislocation of our communities from their traditional livelihoods resulting to food insecurity. This development aggression and plunder comes with political persecution and militarization which has a particularly extreme impact on indigenous peoples and our fundamental human rights. Even the spate of extrajudicial killings have added to this tendency for some threatened individuals and their families to seek safe refuge outside the country.

The irony in this situation is that it is the government that is the biggest beneficiary in the OFW remittances since 40% of the foreign currency brought in by OFW's are used to pay our external debts and since the state and private agencies earn around so many billions of pesos yearly from the various

charges and fees paid by OFW applicants. For example, in 2005 alone, almost P18 billion was collected from around 1 million OFW's who paid fees to go abroad that year. Our OFWs and our people bear the brunt of external debts that did not actually benefit the majority of our people and the country's genuine progress. To stress this irony, we have a government that does not really serve and care for the democratic interest and welfare of the Filipino majority including our OFWs, in exchange of protecting the few ruling elite and foreign powers.

The double irony in this situation is that the massive amount of OFW earnings are not actively harnessed by the government, for example, to fund community-driven socio-economic programs and projects that can truly advance genuine industrialization, agrarian reform and rural development. Instead, the said earnings only serve to keep afloat, in a temporary way, the national economy where so much funds are wasted in corruption, and the domestic economies of the OFW's families.

The triple irony in this situation is that the OFW families and the nation at large are suffering the long-term social costs of massive out-migration. Let us mention the most obvious ones:

1. Family dislocations and marital problems due to the absence of one or both parents working abroad.
2. Health problems, which include an abnormally high incidence of mental disorders, disabilities, and sexually-transmitted diseases such as AIDS.
3. Loss of native language and other cultural heritage, especially among the children of migrants who were born and raised in other countries.
4. Brain drain. The country is fast losing its corps of professionals, which are a long-term need for comprehensive nation-building, faster than the educational system can produce new ones.
5. De-skilling is the degrading of professional skills among workers who accept lower-skilled jobs. We are witness to the irrational trend of our doctors going back to school to become nurses (because nurses can more easily get overseas jobs), nurses getting jobs as caregivers, and teachers becoming domestic helpers.

Even those Filipino individuals and families who have successfully crossed over from the status of migrant contractual worker to the more stable status of immigrant or naturalized citizen, as they themselves find out, will still need to undergo a difficult process of assimilation into the culture they have chosen to move into. Meanwhile, they continue to suffer incidents of racism, discrimination, and other violations of their human rights and as migrants.

C. Conclusion

We therefore call on our fellow Igorots who are now working and living overseas, the world over, to be more aware both of their situation as migrant workers or immigrants, and the general situation of our homeland that made them decide in the first place to leave and seek their fortunes elsewhere.

At the very least, we ask you fellow Cordilleras abroad, to keep in touch with your homeland and its people, to be updated about the social issues that involve our communities, and to keep our heritage as Filipinos and as indigenous peoples close to your hearts and minds, wherever in the world you may find yourself. Our indigenous home is here. "Gawis obpay nan kasin sumaa". While you are out there, trust that we are always here to keep the fire burning.

Ultimately, we ask you to be involved in achieving a deeper understanding of the basic problems that wrack our nation and how these affect our Cordillera homeland; in seeking for long-term solutions to these problems; and in building alternative models of development in the context of respecting our collective rights to our ancestral lands and self determination. You can harness the skills and resources that you have acquired as migrants to help build a truly just and prosperous Philippines, and defend a homeland that will welcome you back with open arms. ###

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