



LIFE AFTER EUROPE: A FRESH START FOR MIGRANT WORKERS IN THEIR HOMELAND THE PHILIPPINES

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(Manila, Philippines) The main road leading from the commercial port of Manila is hot, congested and, as another container truck rumbles by, very dusty. None of that seems to bother shopkeeper Imelda Ignacio who sells soft drinks and cigarettes from a small roadside kiosk – indeed she views her small business as a breath of fresh air.

Ms. Ignacio opened “Imelda’s Store” three years ago after returning from an unfortunate experience as a migrant worker in Europe. While the Philippines is well known for its successful overseas workforce, each year thousands of migrants like Ms. Ignacio return home, counting themselves among the unlucky.

Ms. Ignacio and a group of other Filipina women had traveled to Romania to work in a garment factory. The women were recruited by Filipino job brokers in the Philippines and promised a monthly salary of 350 Euros (US\$ 450). But after arriving in Romania, and working for several weeks, their employer refused to pay the full amount – offering little more than half that figure.

“It wasn’t enough to cover our living expenses,” said Myra Geron, another of the returnees. Now operating her own small garment business in another part of Manila, Ms. Geron explains how she and the other women in the Romanian factory banded together and approached the Philippines Embassy for help. “We had decided to go home and, eventually, with the help of (Embassy) officials we were able to return home.”

The Government of the Philippines recognizes that many overseas workers sometimes need assistance. Aside from special consular services offered Filipino migrants via its foreign embassies, back home the government has for many years operated the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) – a special department to assist outbound migrants and, more recently, migrants returning home.

OWWA helped Ms. Ignacio and Ms. Geron and the other factory workers repatriate and is now working with them to assist in the rebuilding of their livelihoods in the Philippines. The International Labour Organization (ILO), the UN specialized agency dealing with work and work-related issues, with the support of the European Commission, has also been working with OWWA to help returning migrants regain decent work after they return – an area of intervention of increasing interest.

“Thanks to the support of the European Commission, this project has helped develop some good practices and examples of how women who’ve endured unfortunate experiences abroad are now leading productive and normal lives back in their own communities,” said Mitchel Duran, the ILO’s Manila-based National Project Coordinator. He points out that many returnees face not just financial hurdles but emotional ones as well. Rebuilding their self-confidence is also important.

In response to these challenges, OWWA and the ILO have helped the returnees from Romania form a co-operative. There are now 48 members.

“We decided among ourselves to create the Co-Op so we could help each other and help meet our needs,” said Marilou Maceda, Chairwoman of the Returning Migrant Workers Co-Op. “Our goal is to work together and help each other and also prepare for our needs in the future”.

“With the help of the ILO (the women) were able to start again,” said Vivien Tornea, Director of the National Reintegration Center for Overseas Foreign Workers (NRCO), which is run by OWWA. “It’s a success story which (the government is considering) as a possible approach to a sustainable return programme for other similarly situated women”.

The Co-Op has gone from strength to strength and its members – including Ms. Geron and Ms. Ignacio – are prospering.

“Since coming home, many things have changed,” said Ms. Geron. “Here we can start our own businesses and without the pressure of working for someone else. We are earning money for ourselves and it is much better for us,” adding that she’s now hired an additional eight workers to help in her own small garment factory.

For millions of people, the option to migrate can and has led to positive and profitable experiences. But it is just one option in a world of work with many possibilities. Returning home need not be the end of the road, merely another beginning.

As another truck rumbles by Imelda’s Store, Ms. Ignacio offers some encouraging advice to those whose overseas experiences haven’t been very profitable. “Don’t be afraid to come back here and start again. There are opportunities to start your own viable small business. Things may be slow at first. But you’ll be surprised that, in due time, your business will pick up.”

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