FROM THEIR LENS: SKILLED MIGRANTS ON THE IMPACTS OF INTERNATIONAL SKILLED MIGRATION ON HOME-COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

There is an already established knowledge on the impacts of migration from an economic, financial and national development standpoint. Despite the current abundance of discourse on the topic, there is a source of information that remains relatively untapped—the migrants themselves. With the expertise and knowledge about the experience of migration, migrants become good sources of information and perspectives that can contribute to the existing body of knowledge. This paper explores the understandings of Filipino migrant educators on the impacts that high-skilled international migration has on the individuals, families, local and national communities in the home-country, as well as on the wider global community. Data was collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews with three Filipino migrant educators in Darwin, Australia. A thematic analysis was used to identify two things: (1) the impacts of migration on the home-country that Filipino migrant educators know about, and (2) the similarities and differences between the impacts of migration identified in literature and those identified by the migrants. Key findings indicate that the migrants are familiar with some of the impacts of migration on the home-country as in existing literature. The data further reveals that the migrants also recognise other areas affected by migration that are not outlined in the literature reviewed in the study. There are aspects wherein the literature and the migrant educator stories have some similarities and differences. This indicates that while there are some alignments between the two sources, there is still a gap in what is already known about the topic and that further investigations are needed to provide a full representation of the impacts of migration on home-countries. Given that international migration is a global phenomenon, this paper can provide a window to further understand how both home-countries and host-countries can create responsible and conscientious migration policies that may maximise the benefits to both parties.

INTRODUCTION

Through history, Filipinos have been migrating to different parts of the world (International Organisation for Migration [IOM], 2013a). As of 2013, there is approximately 10.5 million Filipinos living abroad placing them second in the world’s largest population living abroad (IOM, 2013b). Among those who have left are professionals who have completed tertiary education, who are already in the work force, with significant work experience, or hold key professional, technical, managerial, administrative and executive positions (Alburo and Abella, 2002; and Commission on Filipinos Overseas [CFO], 2014b). These migrants are mostly within
the age group of 25-59 (48.01%)—generally considered as the productive years of which a person can contribute most to the economy (IOM, 2013a). A substantial 29.94% of these emigrants have completed tertiary education or higher (CFO, 2014c). This educated population could constitute the human capital essential for governance, innovation, and production in the country. However, the Philippine government supports this trend in migration. Current migration policies in the Philippines are focused on the deployment (and protection) of Filipinos abroad, informally dubbed the labour export policy. Former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was once quoted saying “Jobs here are difficult to find and we are depending on people outside the country. If you can find work there and send money to your relatives here, then perhaps you should stay there” (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2001).

The emigration of this considerably large fraction of high-skilled and highly educated individuals raises some concerns on the social welfare of those left in developing and transition home countries such as the Philippines. The direct impact is a deterioration of capacity and quality in the delivery of social services such as from the health and education sectors (Wescott and Brinkerhoff, 2006). Also, the nation loses the tax payments of high-skilled Filipinos that could otherwise support social welfare in the home country (Wilson, 2005). This is where the notion of brain drain becomes an area of discussion for the government and policy makers. Brain drain is “the cross-border movement of highly skilled persons who stay abroad for a longer period of time” (IOM, 2003, p. 215, para. 6). One sector that experiences this brain drain is education. The Philippine Overseas Employment Authority [POEA] in the 2006 Manpower Summit states,

In Philippine education, brain drain is said to be evident in both the public and the private school system, though more felt in the former. The fields most vulnerable are special education, and elementary and secondary science and mathematics education. Those leaving for teaching jobs abroad are generally with better credentials. Finding suitable replacements for them is not easy (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], 2009, p. 22, para. 5).

From 2001 to 2010 alone, there were 8, 951 teachers who emigrated as new recruits to other nations (POEA, 2014). Among them are professionals from higher education, special education, primary and secondary education, and others not classified. This figure is on top of the number of all the other educators who have left prior to 2001, those who go back abroad with renewed contracts, and those who have permanently stayed overseas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a dimension of globalisation, there is an increase in international migration among highly-educated and high-skilled individuals, including professional educators (Lowell and Findlay, 2002; and Wickramasekara, 2013). This is happening at a rapid pace and on a scale that brain drain is becoming a serious concern, especially for sending countries like the Philippines. This issue is more prevalent than ever that there has been plenty of literature made around the topic.
Migration as Brain Drain

There is literature wherein migration is likened to *brain drain*. *Brain drain* is understood as “the emigration of high-skilled people with university-level education” (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2012, p. VIII). It is also described as “the departure of the most skillful experts at noticeable and alarming rates” (Johnson, 1965 as cited in Ngoma and Ismail, 2013, p. 747, para. 1). This migration is seen as something that negatively affects the sending countries’ human capital stock, which further affects its vital sectors like health and education. The education sector, for instance, has suffered from the “on-going aggressive recruitment of Science and Math teachers to the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc., even from countries like the Philippines which already has a severe shortage of qualified teachers” (Bernido, 2012 in Bianx Basilio, 2012). The already apparent shortage of qualified teachers for these subjects in the country is even worsened by as developed countries bid for the same professionals. Furthermore, there is already a remarkably uneven ratio between the number of students and teachers. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] reports that in 2009, the Philippines had a pupil-teacher ratio [PTR] measuring at 31 in primary and 35 in secondary (The World Bank, 2014a, 2014 b). It is lagging behind its neighbouring Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia with 13 for primary and 14 for secondary, Indonesia with 17 for primary and 13 for secondary, and Singapore with 17 for primary and 15 for secondary. Consequently, the quality of teaching and learning suffers. For example, some public schools implement a shifting scheme for the classes of up to four shifts, with the earliest scheduled from 6:00 a.m. This is designed to accommodate the enormous amount of number of students (AFT, 2009).

Furthermore, the education and training of these skilled migrants are shouldered by the sending governments as part of their public investment (Faini, 2003; and Wescott and Brinkerhoff, 2006). Philippines has investments on public elementary and secondary education, government-sponsored scholarships like the DOST [Department of Science and Technology] Scholarships, and government-subsidised tertiary education like those provided by the state universities such as the University of the Philippines [UP] and the Philippine Normal University [PNU]. These will not be fully productive, and in some cases even counterproductive, with these heavily subsidised scholars leaving the country in favour of migration. As a consequence, migration is ultimately considered as detrimental to the sending country.

Migration’s Beneficial Potentials

While migration as synonymous to *brain drain* is a compelling notion, there is also literature that posits migration’s beneficial potentials especially to countries of origin. Remittance is one of the positive outcomes of international skilled migration (Ang, Sugiyarto and Jha, 2009; Faini, 2003; IOM, 2013a; Kell, Cameron, Joyce and Wallace, 2013; and Wescott and Brinkerhoff, 2006). First, it provides receiving households purchasing capabilities for both productive investments (e.g. education, health and real estate) and conspicuous consumption (e.g. jewellery and other luxury items). Second, remittances also foster an increase in the demand and supply of consumer products and services. Remittances stimulate spending for consumers which increases demand for goods and services. Businesses increase
production and in the process, increase a demand for labour and job creation. Lastly, remittances also increase a country’s gross international reserves. The value of the Philippine peso appreciates against other currencies. This means that international debts payable in foreign currency can be eased.

Another positive outcome from migration is the improved education in the sending-countries due to the prospects of migration (Beine, Docquier, Rapoport, 2008; Commander, Kangasniemi and Winters, 2004; Faini, 2003; and UNCTAD, 2012). The contention is that with the possibilities of working abroad, more people participate in gaining further education than without the prospects. The country “end up with more educated individuals in total despite the brain drain” (Fan and Stark, 2007, p. 86, para. 5).

Migration also addresses the unemployment rate in the country (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2007). Tertiary educated individuals who cannot find work within the home country can take up employment abroad where there is a labour shortage. This subsequently assists in poverty reduction given that the income difference and remittance sent home can improve household economies. Also, wages in local labour markets rise in countries with high emigration rates such as the Philippines (Dayton-Johnson, Pfeiffer, Schuettler, and Schwinn, 2009). With the departure of low-skilled individuals, employers adjust to the emigration pressure of raising local wages to fill the vacancies and to match the newly acquired higher qualifications of the prospect local employees.

Diaspora networks facilitate movements of knowledge and skills acquired from host-countries to home-countries through extending professionals services (e.g. conduction of lectures and training). Aid is also channelled in the form of financial assistance (e.g. scholarships, donations, and money lending) and material assistance (e.g. medical equipment and school supplies). These networks can also help forge trade and investments (e.g. import and export of cultural goods) and exchange or circulation of awareness of different cultural norms.

A Different Source

These discussions show that there is already an established knowledge on migration and its effects, largely from an economic, financial and national development standpoint. However, there is a source of information that is relatively untapped—the migrants themselves. Since migrants are on the forefront of migration, they have expertise and knowledge about the experience of migration. They become good sources of information and their perspectives can contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

METHODS

The aim of this study was to contribute information coming from the perspective of the migrants which may be useful in informing well-rounded migration policies. This research explored the perspectives Filipino migrant educators have on the impacts of migration. Specifically, the study aimed to inquire on (1) the impacts of migration on the home-country that Filipino migrant educators know about, and (2) the
similarities and differences between the impacts of migration identified in literature and those identified by the migrants.

The study was conducted among Filipino migrant educators who are currently residing and working in the Northern Territory, Australia. From snowball sampling, three participants voluntarily agreed to be part of the research project. There were two males and one female participant. In the analysis, they were assigned the pseudonyms Anthony, Ben and Carmela, respectively. The participants are from the age group of 30-35 years. They are all from the Visayas, a group of islands located in central Philippines. All of the participants had been international students at Charles Darwin University [CDU] in Australia. They arrived in country as students in order to acquire qualifications that would enable them to teach in Australia.

In the Philippines, Anthony taught Arts in the tertiary level for six years. He left the Philippines because he felt like he is not well-compensated in his work and that his salary is low. He was also frustrated with how the Philippine government is not supportive of his field of profession. He also moved because of the prospect of broadening his knowledge and skills, becoming more educated and mature and learning other cultures. He also wanted to be able to financially support his family. At the time of the interview, he had been in Australia for over a year and a half. Anthony is single and he lives with his older sister and her family. Anthony’s siblings and mother are in the Philippines.

Ben lived and worked as a teacher in three other countries since 1995 prior to moving to Australia in 2008. Ben left his home-country as a means to search for his identity and to have some adventure. He also wanted to provide a better life for mother who is a single parent. He had been in Darwin for six years. Ben lives with his wife and two school-age children. Ben’s mother is also in the Philippines.

Carmela taught in the primary level for nine years in the Philippines. She left the Philippines for the reason that she wanted to give herself and her family more financial capabilities. She wanted to give comfort, security and small luxuries to her parents. She had stayed in Darwin for four years. Carmela is also single and she shares a building unit with her partner. Both her parents are in the Philippines.

To get a full understanding of the migrants’ perspectives on the impacts of migration and to elicit a more flexible and candid set of responses, a semi-structured, open-ended individual interview was used with the research participants (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, 2012). The parameters of the interview was set by asking the general question, “What impacts does migration have on individuals, families, local communities, home-county, and the global community?” This broadly invited the migrants to talk about their observation and experience with migration. The question is phrased without giving clues as to what either the popular discourse on migration say or what the researcher perceives of the topic area. This is so that the interview can yield new and additional information on the topic. Thematic analysis is used to analyse the data collected from the interview. It is described as a method for identifying and analysing patterns of meaning in a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006 as cited in Joffe, 2012). Events that kept repeating, similar key phrases that participants used, responses that matched with the other participants, and meanings
and understandings that emerged from the data are categorised according to prevalent themes.

**FINDINGS**

**Themes**

There are three major themes that emerged from the interviews with the migrant educators. Their responses covered education, being in the world and economics.

**Education**

As educators, the participants discussed impacts of migration that are related to teaching and learning. They pointed out a difference in the attitude of schooling among Filipino migrant children as an impact. They perceive that the children are not as motivated and diligent in pursuing academic excellence as they would have been in the Philippines. Another impact that was identified was how schools and students in the home-country are financially, scholastically and emotionally affected by the high turnover of teaching staff. Teacher migration involves training costs, time, effort and money, and students frequently need to adjust to having new teachers. It was also recognised that that if all the good teachers go abroad, there will be very few left in the country. To the participants, this means the loss of experienced teaching professionals who would be instrumental in the training of new educators. The participants also highlighted that from their migration, they are able to grow professionally by receiving opportunities to expand their expertise in the field, acquire new knowledge and practices, and hone their skills and abilities. Access to and use of high education technology, professional development sessions and trainings are some of the opportunities that the migrant educators able to take advantage of.

**Being in the world**

The physical distance between the migrants and their families and peers is one noticeable aspect of migration according to the participants. This has resulted to the two parties keeping a virtual connection through the use of technological advancements in communication. The migrant educators use technology to keep in touch and maintain a presence with his colleagues back in the Philippines, as a means to check up on one’s wellbeing, successes and progress in Australia, and as a medium to channel the provision of assistance in times of disasters like that of the super typhoon, *Haiyan*. This distance is also perceived to have made changes in behaviours and personality traits. In some cases, the participants believe that they are more resilient, responsible and independent. In others, the distance has yielded negative effects such as the loss of established traditional family morals among family members in the Philippines. Despite these observations, a positive impact is identified. The participants recognise that the migration of individuals can pave the way for the migration of their extended families. The participants themselves have first-hand experience on this.

The other impacts of migration that were identified by the participants pertain to culture and identity. Knowing persons from diverse cultural backgrounds is believed
to have made an improvement in one’s character, behaviour and understanding of cultures outside of one’s own. On the other hand, the migration is also seen as a cause for the loss of the Filipino identity especially among migrant children. The participants observed that they don’t seem to be keen on identifying with Filipino values and culture. As a result, the participants make efforts in preserving their culture and identity by practicing Filipino traditions such as organising and attending Filipino social gatherings and speaking in Filipino. Because they are educators, the participants also share Filipino knowledges and encourage the Filipino style and attitude towards learning.

**Macro and micro economics**

In the interviews, different issues of economic nature emerged from the discussion of the participants’ global engagement. First, with their better financial capabilities, they send monetary support to their families in the home-country to show care and gratitude. They also recognise that their remittance can help the Philippines’ economy but admit that this may not be well-managed by the Philippine government and is susceptible to fall into the wrongs hands through corruption. The participants have also observed that with the new financial capabilities, migrants and their families develop materialistic behaviours. The same has also caused reduced time spent with family members. Another observation made is that there is an assumption by the people in the home-country that because an individual works abroad, that individual is financially wealthy. There is a sense of fear from the interviewed participants that the migrants’ situation in Australia is gravely misunderstood as living in luxury when in fact, that may not necessarily be the case. The last impact observed is how there is now more people who fall victim to various migration scams. It was brought up that because people are victimised, some individuals and families are burdened with complications such as illegal recruitment, visa fraud and debts from supposed migration expenses.

**Comparison and Contrast**

There are several areas wherein a comparison and contrast between what the participants say about migration and what the literature says about it can be drawn upon. The impacts that the migrants experienced and witnessed are also in line with those reflected in the literature used in this study. For example, it is identified that at the rate of which professional teachers migrate, *brain drain* can take place. It should be noted that from the interviews, the migrant educators made no explicit mention of the term *brain drain*, rather only a brief comment on its very basic concept. Also, in literature, *brain drain* is discussed with respect to the economic risks it poses to the home-country whereas from the interviews, the participants’ concern with the professionals’ migration was not focused on the loss of human capital, rather on the social costs of such. The migrant accounts show a great deal of attention on how students are emotionally and scholastically affected with the high turnover of teaching professionals. They were more concerned on how schools are financially affected by the constant turnover of staff and on the need to employ and train new ones.

Remittance was also identified by the interviewees and the literature. It is perceived as a beneficial impact of migration that affects the Philippines on different levels.
However, there is a big difference between the nature of how remittance is discussed in the literature and by the migrants. The former places emphasis on how it affects the whole country and contributes to national development. The migrants, on the other hand, talk about remittance at a more personal level—how it can help provide for basic needs, comfort and luxuries for families in the home country. The migrant educators also show a narrow awareness that remittance can help the country’s economy but there is no elaboration on how exactly remittance can do so. The concern was more on how remittance is very susceptible to corruption by Philippine government officials.

Activities in relation to Filipinos and the Philippines outlined in the literature and participated in by the migrants have some similarities as well. The migrant educators participate in diaspora activities like giving donations particularly to calamity-stricken groups of people. They also maintain a professional connection with their colleagues in the Philippines. However, while both the literature and the migrants talk about diaspora networks, the former is focused on the facilitating the movement of knowledge and skills whereas the latter is more about the acquisition of these knowledge and skills. The migrants did not talk about what they do about the knowledge and skills after having acquired them. They also keep a connection with their colleagues in the Philippines but the communications are not about, for example, extending professional services or the training of counterparts in the country. The communications are more of a personal nature such as about the wellbeing of the migrant and updates about general day to day living. Awareness of different Filipino organisations that facilitate diaspora activities could be one factor as to which activities the migrants participate in. The participants helped the Haiyan victims in the manner that they did because the Filipino organisation they are connected to organised an activity on that. If the Filipino organisations the participants belong to have programs such as raising funds for scholarships or entrepreneurial training, these migrants are likely to participate in them as well. The migrant educators’ financial capabilities also play a role in their participation in these activities. Migrants aspire to work abroad to afford comfort and leisure for their families so when they get financially settled in the host country, their priority is to send money to their main intended recipients. The migrants in this study have not yet worked a substantial amount of time as professional educators in Australia. They have each stayed in Australia under ten years and they spent at least two years of that studying for an Australian qualification. The length of their work experience in the host-country has not yet strengthened their financial capabilities enough to consistently participate in diaspora activities. It is also possible that their participation in diaspora activities are limited because they have not yet established partners in the Philippines that can assist with the movement of knowledge, skills and resources. They may be aware of the different ways to help but they have not created a channel to allow for movement of human and material resources to be shared.

There are other aspects though, that are specific only to the literature and more others specific only to the migrant stories. For instance, the development of a lack of value for education among migrant school-age children is an impact of migration not identified in the literature. Instead, what the literature talks about is how migration increases the participation in higher education among Filipinos in the home country (Beine, et al., 2008; Commander, et al., 2004; Faini, 2003; and UNCTAD, 2012).
is evident here that migration affects people differently especially when putting into context their location and environment. Another impact not identified is the strain that migration can bring to families. In the literature, family relations are only brought up when discussing remittances—that they are the recipients of the money being sent. The migrants, on the other hand, have also expressed that migration has changed their family dynamics, causing tension. The loss of the migrants’ Filipino identity, along with the promotion of the Filipino culture in the host country, is also an impact of migration that was not accounted for in the literature. It shows that the culture and identity aspect is viewed as significant by the migrants but not as much from an economic, financial and national development point of view. Even the acquisition of knowledge about other cultures and the increase of extended families being able to migrate are not outlined as an impact of migration. High technology, specifically the use of the internet, is also reported by the migrants as the main means to communicate with their families and friends. Technology has always been embedded in the lives of Filipino migrants. In the past, the medium of communication were written letters and cassette tape recordings from loved ones. Now, migrants are aided by mobile phones and real-time communication software applications like Skype and Google Hangouts. With the help of these technological advancements, communication is now more timely and cost-efficient.

The migrants too, passed over some aspects that the literature pointed out. The notion that migration is a response to the issue of unemployment rates in the Philippines was not brought up by the migrant educators. This result could be because at the time when the migrants left, they were not unemployed as an outcome of the job scarcity the country. Two participants were fully employed and the other had just left the seminary at that time. Their situations did not lead them to think that migration can be used to respond to the nation’s unemployment. Migration as an answer to the country’s alarming unemployment problems is one that is defined from a national economic standpoint.

**Discussion**

Overall, it can be understood that the two points of view, the migrants’ and the research literature, have several areas where they differ. In saying that, it should be considered that the objectives of the journals and organizations from which the information in the literature was sourced are very different to that of the goals of the migrants which are more of a personal nature. For example, *The Economic Journal* from which the information on the impacts of migration was taken, aims to promote “the advancement of economic knowledge” (Royal Economic Society, 2012, para. 2). *The Journal of Development Economics*, where more information on the impacts were taken from, aims on publishing works focused on the “aspects of economic development—from immediate policy concerns to structural problems of underdevelopment” (Elsevier, 2014, para. 1). *The International Journal of Social Economics* from which a description of brain drain was drawn upon, emphasises on “the impact of economic activity on individuals in community, and its wider social meanings and consequences” (Emerald Group Publishing, n.d., para 1). The IOM, which produced a country migration report on the Philippines, generally aims to help ensure the orderly and humane management of migration, to promote international cooperation on migration issues, to assist in the search for
practical solutions to migration problems and to provide humanitarian assistance to migrants in need, including refugees and internally displaced people (IOM, n.d., para. 3).

The UNCTAD, which also provided information on the impacts of migration, deals with development issues, especially about international trade which they consider is the main driver of development (UNCTAD, 2013). The Asian Development Bank [ABD] aims to improve people’s lives in Asia and the Pacific by helping in eliminating poverty and promoting sustainable growth (ADB, 2014). It has published works like on how to maximise remittances sent to the Philippines. The OECD, which has also outlined the impacts of migration, aims to “promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world” (OECD, n.d., para. 1).

If one looks at the objectives of all these sources, it will be observed that they do not have an individualistic orientation and there is a sense of consideration and attention for the greater population especially in terms of economic development. It is a responsibility that these organisations have taken and so it is only expected that their endeavours align with the same trajectory as their missions—that they are for the benefit of the general public. The migrants, on the other hand, have responsibilities and goals of a smaller scope. Perhaps their initial goal is to look after themselves and the ones they care about. Also, the context of the migrants in this study may be very different from the context of the migrants from which the information in the literature was based upon. The latter is based on broad samples which had wide representations of the population whereas this study has a narrow sample with the participants having been recruited through snowball sampling. One of the limitations of such method of recruitment is the high risk of sampling bias. This research may have recruited participants with the same behaviour traits and characteristics. Indeed, the migrants in this study share some similar characteristics such as having left the Philippines as single adults, having studied in CDU, and they have all just moved to Darwin within the past 10 years. Similarities like these affect the information that can be taken from interviews. This goes to say that the themes that emerged from the data are very specific to the context of the participants.

CONCLUSION

The interviews reveal that the migrant educators have a wide knowledge of the experience of migration. The impacts they identified covered the topic areas of education, communication, culture and identity, and micro-economics. These identified impacts are based on their personal experiences and observations of other Filipino migrants.

In this study, these impacts are juxtaposed against the impacts outlined in the literature that was reviewed. There are areas that both the literature and the migrant accounts share the same themes but these are specifics discussed differently. There are also impacts that were recognised only from either sources. These dissimilarities are due to the difference in objectives of the two sources and the similar profiles of the participants.

The findings suggest that the literature used for this paper does not provide a full representation of the impacts of migration. The migrant stories take into account
their specific contexts that is commonly generalised in investigating the impacts of migration. Their account also includes the social aspect of migration which has a separate literature of its own. A limitation of this study lies on the idea that the migration of high-skilled Filipinos has caused worries about brain drain. Brain drain is an economic concept pertaining to the loss of human capital due to migration. Naturally, the discussion on migration were sourced mainly from an economic, financial and national development standpoint. The social aspect of migration has not been included in the review of literature. Another limitation is on the small sample size. Having three participants does not give a full representation of the experience of migration of Filipino migrants. Perhaps this study has an exploratory nature in the sense that it can be used to “test the feasibility of a more careful study, or develop the methods to be used in a more careful study” (Allen Rubin and Babbie, 2009). Perhaps in future studies this will also be taken into account so as to see better if the migrants’ perspectives are already well-represented in existing literature or if indeed there is new information that they can contribute to the body of knowledge. However, the findings of this should not be dismissed as on its own, it already provide insights of the experience of migrants and their understanding of migration.

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