A recent research undertaken by the Scalabrini Migration Center documented Philippine migrant workers’ pre-migration experiences. One of the main focuses of the study was the assessment of the pre-departure orientation seminars (PDOS), a valuable initiative of cooperation between government agencies and NGOs, aiming to provide information and awareness to Philippine migrant workers before their deployment.

1. History and Background

Contract labor drew little attention in the Philippines until the early 1970s, when the lure of new job opportunities in the oil rich Middle East countries proved irresistible to large numbers of low paid or unemployed Filipino workers. The first flows were primarily male, by consisting mostly of construction and other production workforce. As overseas workers proliferated, the Philippine government recognized the benefits of labor migration as a temporary measure to ease unemployment and the foreign debt burden. With the Philippine Labor Code of 1974, the government took responsibility for carrying out the employment programs of all overseas workers, creating the Overseas Employment Development Board (OEDB) for landbased workers and the National Seamen Board (NSB) for seabased workers. By 1978 it was clear that the government alone could not handle the volume of workers. Under government supervision, private recruitment agencies were allowed to take over the recruitment of the great majority of overseas workers. In 1982, the OEDB and NSB were merged to form the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), the government agency now responsible for overseeing the overseas employment program. Enthusiasm over the economic benefits of labor migration was followed by concerns for workers’ welfare.

Counseling and information services for departing workers were among the early methods identified to prepare workers to cope with overseas employment. NGOs were among the first to respond with informal pre-departure orientations. As the serious effects of contract migration became more visible and widespread, such orientation programs were seen as increasingly important in addressing a variety of problems, ranging from recruitment procedures and abuses to exploitation by employers. In the late 1970s, the Association of Filipino Overseas Workers Inc. (AFOWI), the first labor NGO for overseas workers, advocated giving orientations to potential migrants to assist in their decision-making about overseas work. Instead, the government chose PDOS to be given shortly before departure. In the late 1970s, some form of PDOS was given to landbased overseas contract workers under the Overseas Employment Development Board.

In response to growing requests for information by migrant workers and their families, religious organizations and migrant NGOs developed orientation programs to help prepare migrant workers for the life that awaits them overseas. The Philippine Government later institutionalized these information-education programs into a mandatory pre-departure orientation program for migrant workers. Since 1983 all overseas Filipino workers are required to participate in the Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar.
(PDOS). PDOS is considered as the primary and most comprehensive response of the Philippine government to prepare migrant workers for their experiences abroad (Scalabrini Migration Center, 1997). This program has been replicated in other countries of origin to help prepare departing workers.

When PDOS was institutionalized, the government (through POEA) and industry associations were tasked to implement the program. Initially, the recruitment agencies opposed the requirement because they felt that this will just be another requirement and a hindrance to migrant workers. On the other hand, the participation of recruitment agencies was also criticized by the NGO community, which was concerned that recruitment agencies may not provide information that would not be beneficial to them. An evaluation of PDOS in 1997 by PDOS providers concurred that PDOS is a useful program for migrants. Up until 1992, POEA was responsible for PDOS for women.


a) Curriculum

In 1983, the content of PDOS was limited to six topics, as specified in Memorandum Circular No. 3, Series of 1983, namely:

1) Code of discipline and obligation of OFWs (family responsibilities, taxes, remittances, etc.)
2) Terms and Conditions of Employment (contract)
3) The jobsite or the vessel (for seabased)
4) The host country’s social, religious, economic, legal and political background
5) Government services to workers overseas
6) Travel tips

The content of PDOS has been expanded from six to 20-22 topics. The new topics are, to some extent, a reflection of the new realities that have surfaced about labor migration – e.g. the increasing number of migrant women called for the need to infuse a gender perspective or the Gulf War of 1991 highlighted the need to respond to emergency situations, hence the addition of repatriation and contingency measures. In practice, PDOS providers should modify the content and the treatment of the topics. Out of the 20-22 topics, providers choose only some topics to be covered in their PDOS (Scalabrini Migration Center, 1997).

b) PDOS Providers

POEA (and its Regional Centers and Regional Extension Units), accredited agencies and six Metro Manila-based NGOs provide PDOS to departing Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). POEA continues to conduct PDOS for multi-skilled OFWs, both name hires and government hires. Disadvantaged workers (that is, male and female household workers and related workers in the service sector) attend the PDOS given by NGOs while accredited agencies provide PDOS for agency hires. Entertainers are not part of the disadvantaged group. In the past they also had to go through PDOS but when the Artist Record Book (ARB) requirement was put in place in 1994, prospective entertainers have to undergo a rigorous system of training, testing and screening before they can be issued the ARB. The system was institutionalized to ensure that only bonafide entertainers leave the country; having gone through the rigorous process, these performing artists are presumed to be less vulnerable (Scalabrini Migration Center, 1997).
c) Assessment

In the 1992 study of the Scalabrini Migration Center on the Pre-Departure Information Programs for Filipina Migrant Workers, PDOS participants generally viewed the quality of PDOS as substandard. Many suspected that many departing workers do not attend PDOS; they simply pay the fee to obtain the certificate. Inadvertently, it has become an income-generating activity for accredited agencies. The effectiveness of PDOS as a preventive measure is also diminished by time constraints. The consensus view was that it comes late in the migration process to enable workers to protect themselves from recruitment-related abuses. Although migrant workers are supposed to take PDOS two weeks before their departure, this was not often possible. Thus, when migrant workers come to PDOS, their minds are either set on leaving or the last-minute things that they have to do before departure, or the excitement of going abroad. Also, the time allotted to the different sections is not sufficient. Given the perceived inadequacies of PDOS, most PDOS participants supported the idea of an information program which will be administered prior to deployment, which is prior to PDOS (Scalabrini Migration Center, 1992).

The 1997 study of the Scalabrini Migration Center probed into how PDOS providers and migrant workers assess the strengths and limitations of the program. PDOS providers concurred that PDOS is a useful program for migrant workers, although they pointed out that the existing program could be improved. PDOS provides information about the country of destination, available services and they are informed of their rights. The program’s strengths rest on the comprehensiveness of the module and the effectiveness of the PDOS trainers. However, the lack of inspection and monitoring of PDOS programs conducted outside POEA is a weakness. Once an organization has been accredited to provide PDOS, the coordination between POEA and the PDOS provider is limited to the latter providing POEA with monthly reports of the number and the names of participants who completed the PDOS. POEA also recognizes the limited supply of print materials for PDOS participants as another limitation of the program. PDOS participants in the regions generally regard PDOS as successful because it has helped in raising awareness about POEA and its activities. More people seek their office for verification or to inform them of illegal recruitment activities in their communities. The role of recruitment agencies as information providers to migrant workers continues to be regarded with suspicion by NGO providers. On the other hand, a key informant from the recruitment sector also expressed reservations about the kind of PDOS provided by NGOs. If NGOs suspect that recruitment agencies may be selling PDOS certificates, those from the industry also hold the same suspicion for NGO providers (Scalabrini Migration Center, 1997).

3. Implementation of PDOS under OWWA (2003-Present)

a) The transfer of PDOS to the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA)

The current policy directions from the Department of Labor (DOLE) include the transfer of PDOS from POEA to OWWA. Since the POEA is the government agency tasked to managed the migration of Filipino workers; implements Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS) as part of its mandate to help OFWs cope with the realities of foreign work environment and OWWA is the primary agency to promote and protect the welfare of OFWs and their families through programs and services; OWWA is in the process of enhancing its information and education program to further empower OFWs and their families, including the strengthening of its orientation scheme for deployable OFWs/OWWA Members. The two agencies signed a Memorandum of Agreement last August 1, 2002 and agreed to work together for the enhancement of PDOS and facilitate its transfer from POEA to OWWA.

In January 2003, the POEA-OWWA Joint Circular No. 04, Series of 2002 facilitated the transfer of all transactions pertaining to the Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar of agency-hired workers to OWWA. Hence, all concerns including the submission of PDOS monthly reports and amendments on PDOS
Certificates issued by the PDOS partner providers will be submitted to the Training Assistance Division, Plans and Programs Office, OWWA. PDOS providers are required to adopt the PDOS Report Form prescribed by OWWA. Presently, the PDOS providers are: POEA and registered PDOS providers, including recruitment agencies and NGOs, for the National Capital Region, and Regional OWWA Units (ROU) in all other regions.

b) Curriculum

OWWA introduced certain changes particularly in the over-all concept of PDOS to highlight the welfare perspective. In the past, PDOS was implemented in compliance with a regulation for overseas employment. Nevertheless, PDOS is intended to promote workers’ empowerment to enable them to make informed decisions. The PDOS is also meant to be a part of the workers’ key success factor in their overseas employment. OWWA made PDOS to be truly an orientation activity, intended to help workers cope with their first three to six months overseas. Many topics inserted in the objectives of PDOS before were eliminated. When it comes to learning flow, OWWA is now implementing something which would start from a motivational phase and later on progress to skills and information. OWWA is now limiting its PDOS to those topics which must aid the workers to cope.

OWWA encourages everyone to undertake PDOS because of the new directions or the new modules that they are implementing. There are pre-existing modules, whose content are more extensive. The module on reintegration is more extensive and intends to inculcate in the consciousness of migrants the need to prepare for their eventual reintegration. There is a new module for self-defense for women, health and security. As to the methodology, it is entirely a different one. Before it was a lecture type, it’s a six and half hours of lecture and discussions. At this time, every module includes a multimedia presentation. PDOS participants are asked to watch and react to what they have viewed; the lecturers or trainers simply act as facilitators for the discussion.

The PDOS providers are allowed to charge participants with a minimal fee. The fee is intended to cover administrative costs, utilities, and materials. The rate now for PDOS is PhP 100 (US$ 1.40) per participant.

c) Policy Directions: Implementing PDOS

1) PDOS shall be implemented from a welfare perspective. It shall be a component of OWWA’s information and education program for its members, and shall be regarded as an integral part of the government’s over-all program for the protection and welfare of OFWs.

2) PDOS shall be pursued in such a way that OFWs will appreciate their participation, not as mere compliance with a government regulation, but as a key factor towards their personal success in overseas employment. Program implementers must therefore optimize the use of motivational modes in the delivery of PDOS.

3) PDOS shall have a course design which addresses the basic needs of OFWs for orientation only. Overloading PDOS with too much information shall be avoided. Focus shall be on enabling an OFW cope with adjustment difficulties usually experienced by an OFW within the first six (6) months of work and stay at overseas jobsites.

4) Other broader and deeper OFW information and education concerns, which cannot be covered in an orientation scheme due to inherent need for longer time and progressive learning processes, shall be referred to implementers of pre-employment counseling programs, and/or other related OWWA
programs delivered during the other phases of an OFW employment, either on site, or upon return/reintegration to the country.

5) The primary responsibility of deploying agencies to provide PDOS to OFWs, about two weeks prior to deployment schedule, shall always be emphasized.

6) Recruitment and manning agencies may designate their industry associations and other registered providers for the PDOS of their recruits, subject to compliance with the policies, guidelines, systems and procedures hereto provided.

7) OWWA shall optimize the potentials of partnership with NGOs, the private sector, and other government institutions in pursuing the new visions for PDOS as indicated in the MOI No. 13.

8) Attendance in PDOS shall be free of charge on the part of the OFWs. Modest fees previously authorized by POEA may be allowed for program “maintenance and upkeep” purposes; provided that said fees shall be borne by the endorsing or sponsoring agency.

d) Assessment

Some migrant workers observed that PDOS has become “commercialized”. There are too many advertisements inserted in the seminar, i.e., banking institutions, pre-need plans, insurance companies and the like.

According to a GO official, before PDOS was transferred to OWWA, POEA had drawn up a reform plan but unfortunately it was not implemented because of the transfer to OWWA. The reforms recommended included the following: better-trained and better-equipped trainers, and more structured supervision of PDOS providers. Many irregularities in this sense have been reported.

As to the PDOS fee, some licensed agencies or sponsoring agencies pays for the PDOS of the migrant workers; some agencies pass it on to the workers. Since the agencies do not pay the NGO providers, the NGO providers are forced to collect from the workers. This is contrary to OWWA’s policy directions on PDOS implementation.

According to some NGO providers, since its transfer from POEA to OWWA, PDOS are just seen as a requirement and they often fail to deliver useful orientation. PDOS have deteriorated since nobody is monitoring the quality of PDOS for migrants. They also complaint about the length of the process required to get an accreditation from OWWA.

According to some other PDOS providers, PDOS for migrants in general is very helpful. It gives the migrants an overview on what they are going to do at the jobsite. In the entertainers’ case, PDOS is really helpful, but they have to make some adjustments when they implement it.

e) Good Practices of PDOS Providers

- Some NGO PDOS providers extend their program of information, orientation and assistance to the families left behind.

- Many NGO PDOS providers not only look into the documentary requirements but also the psychological aspect of migration.

- Many NGO PDOS providers also give para-legal counseling for domestic workers.
Some NGO PDOS providers stress in their programs the awareness of human rights, issues regarding sexuality and reproductive health care.

A group of NGO PDOS providers for vulnerable workers got together and formed the OFW Migrant NGO Forum. The group would meet regularly to identify problems concerning the welfare of workers.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

a) Conclusions

The idea of offering PDOS to departing migrants is undoubtedly opportune and wise. It has to be recognized that the Philippine Government took an enlightened decision to undertake such a project since the ‘70s and to involve NGOs as PDOS providers. The partnership between Philippine GOs and NGOS in PDOS provision could be catalogued as “good” so far.

The inclusion of NGOs in the PDOS provision has contributed to a more willing and active participation by departing migrants, who are reported to look with certain diffidence at the initiatives promoted by the government. On the other hand, the commitment of GOs has given a relevant institutional character to the seminars, whose mandatory quality contributes to the understanding of the necessity of preparation before every migration experience.

Several assessments of PDOS have been carried out by the Philippine Government during the last years, highlighting the gaps and problems in the program. Nevertheless, it seems that they did not produce a real improvement in the practice. Moreover, the transfer of the responsibility of PDOS from POEA to OWWA doesn’t seem to have caused substantial changes.

The assessments made by NGO providers usually differ from the official ones, stressing the lack of support, monitoring and available funding on the part of GOs. Some NGOs also complained about the inclusion of recruitment agencies as accredited PDOS providers, as they see a possible conflict of interests.

The contents of the PDOS programs are quite extensive and hardly reconcilable with the time constraints of a feasible proposal to departing migrants. All the essential aspects of the migration experience seem to be considered, but the methodology of presentation needs improvement. Extra curricular topics and activities seem to respond more to the peculiar interest of a specific NGO rather than to a common aspiration towards a real improvement of PDOS.

An increased rigorousness of GOs in the processes of accreditation and monitoring of PDOS provision seem to be needed. It is said that PDOS represent sometimes another way of “making money” out of OFWs.

b) Recommendations

The remarkable speedy mutation of conditions and trends in human mobility demands a continuous re-elaboration of PDOS programs. The analysis of the results of recent scientific studies on migration, together with frequent assessments of the common PDOS practices, should be helpful in this difficult
task. A special module on transnational implications of labor migration should be included in the program.

The objective of an enhanced transparency and effectiveness in the organization and provision of PDOS could be met with an improved coordination of efforts, which should be committed to the responsible GO. The innovative ideas inspiring the good practices of some particular NGOs should be collected and included in the programs for the benefit of all. Particular attention should be paid to the inclusion of OFWs families in the PDOS, with the elaboration of special modules on topics of interest to them.

The process of accreditation of PDOS providers should be undertaken by the responsible GO with more carefulness and rigorousness. Once a candidate is approved, eventual inadequate practices or failures in the requirements should result in the exclusion from the official list of providers. This underlines the need of a regular monitoring of PDOS provision.

Like any good partnership between GOs and NGOs, the PDOS provision should be understood in the line of “collaboration” and not “substitution”. The responsibility stays with the state, which remains fully accountable for the orientation of its labor migrants. Particular attention should be given to the financial aspect of PDOS provision; funding facilities should be sourced from available government resources.

The various assessments highlight the need to start the orientation process before the decision to migrate is taken; that’s the time when the delivery of precious information is more appropriate and opportune. The idea of “pre-employment orientation seminars” (PEOS) is not new, but it seems to meet with problems and has yet to be translated into reality.

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