

## **Maximizing the Gains and Minimizing Social Costs of Migration: The Atikha Experience**

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Warm greetings from the Philippines!

It is indeed a great opportunity for me to be here and share with you our experiences in addressing the social costs of international migration of Filipinos.

Atikha Overseas Workers and Communities Initiatives, Inc. is a community-based Philippine NGO. It was established in 1996 to help minimize the social costs and maximize the development potential of overseas migration.

For more than four decades now, Filipinos and Filipinas have migrated to about 220 countries around the world. It is estimated that there are 10.5 million Filipinos living and working outside the Philippines. In addition, there is also a marked feminization of migration, i.e. more and more Filipino women are leaving their home country and consequently, leaving their families and children behind. UNICEF estimated in 2010 that there were more than 9 million Filipino children left behind by their migrant parents.

The remittances of overseas Filipinos keep the Philippine economy afloat and raised the financial capacity and standard of living of families of Filipino migrants. But the international migration has also its negative consequences. It has engendered problems and incurred costs to Filipino families and communities.

Migration has made families and in many cases, extended families entirely dependent on migrant remittances. There are also numerous cases of extravagant spending, mismanaged funds and failed business endeavours which have drained migrant earnings and savings.

The physical separation between migrant parents and their children have also taken its toll on children left behind in the Philippines. Some have become resilient and have adapted well with the separation with their parents but for many children, migration has its dire consequences. The absence of parents turned many children into vices, to lose interest in school and higher education, and in some cases, to undergo untimely pregnancies and early marriages.

The elderly had to take on second-time parenting as guardians of children left behind. This can mean care deficit for children, with surrogate parents being aged and challenged in raising children of entirely new and different generation. This is also mean care deficit to elderly who is about to enjoy their retirement with less responsibilities but continue rearing the youngsters.

Moreover, the prolonged separation caused by overseas employment also leads to communication gap between family members. For some families, the communication gap leads to estrangement of relations, separation of spouses and worst, to family break-ups.

International migration is a cross-cutting issue and concern. Atikha, thus, engages in various social and economic interventions and currently works with partners in the government and in the private sector to address the needs of migrants and their families.

Atikha assists in setting up One Stop Resource Migration Centers in areas with high concentration of overseas Filipinos. In these centers, various economic, psychosocial and development programs and services of Atikha and partners are lodged and offered. We have assisted in the establishment of migration centers in five provinces and currently working in establishing migration centers in five more provinces. Aside from establishing provincial migration centers, we also help in making municipal migration offices operational.

To help run the programs and services of one-stop migration centers, Atikha establishes multi-stakeholder Migration and Development Councils at the sub national and provincial levels. This is to engage the government, private sector, academe, civil society organizations, migrant associations and other stakeholders in program planning and implementation. We provide various capacity building activities to stakeholders and partners in order to sustain our migration and development initiatives.

Atikha has a school-based program for children of migrants. It conducts Training of Teachers on Values Formation and Capacity Building Seminar for Children. We capacitate elementary and high school teachers with creative and fun methodologies in conveying the realities and effects of migration and discussing coping strategies that are applicable for youngsters. Atikha has trained more than 500 teachers and the program is currently being implemented in 40 schools in three provinces.

To guide migrants and their families in planning for their long-term development and to prepare migrants for their eventual return to the Philippines, Atikha has ladderized a Financial Education Course. We conduct trainings on financial literacy among Filipino migrants in top destination countries and hold the same trainings to their families in the Philippines. We have conducted more than 40 trainings of trainers and reached thousands of overseas Filipinos and their families in eight provinces and six countries.

Atikha is also organizing families in communities of origin and overseas Filipinos in countries of destination. We are also organizing children into youth savers club. There are more than 1,000 children enrollees in the program with pooled savings of about five million pesos or 117,000 US dollars.

The long history and alarming stories brought by overseas Filipino migration prompted Atikha to come up with innovative reintegration program so that overseas Filipinos can prepare for their retirement or eventual return to the Philippines. Atikha has mobilized overseas Filipinos' investments of almost 18 million pesos or 420,000 US dollars to the biggest agriculture-based cooperative in the Philippines. We also engage other partners to help build social enterprises, provide investment opportunities in eco-tourism, and conduct business and skills training for migrants and their families.

These Atikha initiatives and interventions are documented in published training manuals and reference materials.

In our 18 years of experience in the field of migration, we realized that migration is not a priority of most Philippine government agencies. We also recognized the increasing need on values formation and capacity building programs for overseas Filipinos and their families. We found out that these interventions are most effective when they are conducted using the family approach and implemented at both sides of migration corridor (i.e. in migrant host countries and in the Philippines).

What still needs to be done?

Atikha needs to develop a system for data collection, monitoring of initiatives and evaluation of their impact. We should continuously work on innovative and responsive reintegration programs and services. But the more challenging work lies in the sustained implementation of concrete initiatives in the light of changing political dynamics and priorities.

Atikha believes that in implementing a comprehensive program and delivering services for migrants and families, an established and operational multi-stakeholder partnership is the key to success. Atikha knows that partnership building is easier said than done. Trust on the capacity and respect of the limitations of partners, commitment of different players and well-crafted strategies are necessary.

In forging multi-stakeholder partnership, it is important to identify champions in national and local government agencies and in NGOs and migrant organizations. It is important to build the capacities of government and local partners for the sustainability of programs and services. Policies and structures are not enough; migration players must know what they are supposed to do.

There is also a need to strengthen NGOs, migrant and family associations and provide them with much needed capacity building and resources to become effective partners of local and national governments. The government should not consider migrant NGOs and associations as competitors but as partners in development. NGOs should also enhance their skills and capacities and be open to new partnerships to implement innovative interventions.

There is also a need for long-term funding assistance for strategic engagement and capacity building of NGOs, migrant and family associations. More development agencies should provide assistance not only to governments but also to migrant NGOs and associations.

Building trust, bridging the gap and forging multi-stakeholder partnerships are never easy endeavors. But only in working for their attainment can we become effective in minimizing the social costs and maximizing the gains of international migration.

Prepared and Presented by:  
Aileen Constantino- Penas  
Deputy Executive Director  
Atikha Overseas Workers and Communities Initiative, Inc.  
The Philippines