

Moving forward: from OFWs to donors and investors
By Perla Aragon-Choudhury

Of the close to 200 countries and territories where Filipinos have ventured into, Italy and Spain rank among the more hospitable places for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). Unlike most countries temporarily hosting OFWs, Italy and Spain offer the possibility of long-term residence and eventually citizenship to migrants. More importantly, legal residents in these two countries may be joined by parents, spouses and minor children. After more than four decades of migration from the Philippines, Filipino communities are now very much a part of the social landscape in Italy and Spain.

The migration of Filipino workers to Italy and Spain was pioneered by women who took up domestic work. The state was not involved in organizing their migration, not like the large-scale and organized labor migration to the Middle East that started at around the same time. Until about the 1990s, Filipino communities in Italy and Spain were highly feminized. Since then, the demographics of the Filipino population now include a sizable male population, the second-generation, and an emerging cohort of elderly.

Although many migrants and their families have prospered, time and time again, migrants' rights advocates have stressed that migration policies must go beyond the deployment of workers, and that migration has development potentials beyond remittances.

These twin concerns are among the reasons for a study done last year in these two host countries and in the Philippines by the Scalabrini Migration Center (SMC). The research was the main activity of the Migrants' Associations and Philippine Institutions for Development (MAPID) Project in 2008, an initiative supported by the European Union's Aeneas Programme.

SMC directs and coordinates the MAPID Project and partners with the Commission on Filipinos Overseas in the Philippines, the Fondazione ISMU (Fondazione per le Iniziative e gli Studi sulla Multietnicità) in Italy, and the University of Valencia in Spain in carrying out this three-country project to build and strengthen the partnership between migrant communities (particularly through migrants' associations) and government institutions in the Philippines. In Italy and Spain, the study looked into the concern of Filipino workers for their homeland, their intent to invest in the Philippines, and the potentials of their associations to help Filipinos in the host country and to develop their home country.

The research findings of the MAPID study in Italy and Spain were presented by Dr. Fabio Baggio, Director of the SMC, at a dissemination forum held on May 22, 2009. Highlights from the research in the Philippines were also presented in the forum.

In attendance were representatives of government agencies, nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and international organizations, including the Delegation of the European Commission in Manila.

The respondents

In both Italy and Spain, a total of 200 migrants were interviewed in each country. In Italy, Laura Zanfrini of Fondazione ISMU directed the conduct of the MAPID study in Milan and Rome, where many Filipinos live and work. The Italy-based respondents are from 30 to 49 years old; 69 percent women, 56 percent married, mainly with Filipinos; 74% with children in the Philippines and in Italy.

Some 60 percent of these workers are college-educated or graduates in the Philippines. They are mostly employed in domestic work. They are all regular migrants, mostly first generation, and 84 percent are Catholics.

In Spain, the University of Valencia research team headed by Edelia Villaroya conducted the survey in Madrid and Barcelona, home to the largest concentration of Filipinos in the country. Most of them are around 40 years old; 66 percent women; and largely first generation Filipinos.

Half of the interviewees are married, mainly to Filipinos; 63 percent have children (mostly born in Spain). Half either started or completed college in the Philippines; and are employed in domestic work mostly.

All the interviewees are regular migrants in the sense of being documented, many hold Spanish passports; and majority are Catholics.

Remitting but not yet fully investing

A main finding stresses the close ties between migrant workers and their families. “In both Italy and in Spain, their main objective is to help their family and to earn more,” Baggio reported. “Their main transnational practice is sending remittances regularly.”

In addition, many of the Filipino workers in Spain dream of putting put up a business in the Philippines, the researchers documented. This appears feasible with their household income of EUR 1,000- 3,000 – an amount seen by most respondents as enough for their expenses and to help their relatives back home.

The same dream was verbalized to the researchers by migrant workers in Italy, who normally own or rent houses and have a household income of EUR 2,000-3,000 and who (one in every four) also aspire to have a business in the Philippines.

Helping the Philippines develop

And so, how prepared are Filipino workers in Spain to help their home country? Baggio described at the forum how they have a strong wish to help via philanthropy and support to community projects.

“There may be very little investment in the Philippines but there is some collaboration in local projects - mainly disaster relief,” he said.

And how about Italy? Filipino workers there have very little investments back home but some collaboration (10 percent) in local development projects.

But are there factors to facilitate and coordinate these projects? To find out, researchers from the University of Valencia also interviewed four directors of Filipino migrants’ associations in Madrid and six in Barcelona (six), as well as 40 key informants.

Informants included Filipino diplomats in Spain; Filipinos who are pioneers, religious leaders, community leaders and professionals in Madrid and Barcelona; representatives of Spanish institutions working with Filipinos; representatives of NGOs and associations; and teachers and health professionals with links to Filipinos.

MAPID documented how Filipinos in Spain generally tend to remain in Filipino groups, do not participate in Spanish associations; tend to rely more on NGOs, especially the Church, for help; and generally do not avail of government-provided assistance.

Can Filipino migrants’ associations in Spain become agents of change? This is not among the declared objectives of any such group but solidarity with the Philippines is a founding element of many of them.

Also, the groups have very little contact with Spanish institutions; little information on funding possibilities; and a reliance on membership fees which cannot possibly support development projects.

“They have problems too of internal management and group management skills,” Baggio reported.

But even then, half of Filipino immigrants in Spain say that their migrants’ associations can cooperate in the development of their country of origin.

In Italy, Fondazione ISMU identified and interviewed 20 Filipino associations in Rome and 20 more in Milan, with many officers declaring involvement with solidarity and relief projects back home.

Fondazione ISMU also interviewed Filipino diplomats in Italy; Filipino pioneers, religious leaders, community leaders and professionals and artists in Rome and Milan, and representatives of Italian agencies working with Filipino communities there.

Similar to Spain, Filipino migrant workers in Italy have a low level of integrating with the larger society – becoming what Baggio called an invisible community, intent on not creating problems and surviving as self-supporting groups.

But on the whole, interviewees from Filipino migrants’ associations in Italy are interested in investments that will benefit family and relatives in the Philippines. In fact, 30 percent of these groups have been asked to support community projects here, and 40 percent have done so.

“There is a great potential for future engagements,” Baggio concluded.

What’s next

MAPID takes heart in what Deputy Head of Operations for the Delegation of the European Commission in Manila Camilla Hagstrom described at the forum as Europe’s acknowledgement of the benefits derived from migration.

MAPID will use the research findings to design training programs and materials for leaders and active members of migrants’ associations in Spain and Italy, with a view to tapping the potentials of migrants’ associations as change agents. Most migrants’ associations were formed primarily to promote solidarity and provide support to their members. With information and awareness raising, migrants’ associations can be agents of change which can promote the participation of Filipinos in their host societies and as development partners of their home country.#