

Headline: Political ecology of migration and climate change

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The record-breaking severity of the recent natural disasters in the Philippines demonstrates the economic and humanitarian consequences of climate change. Though the country's physical geography—its location in the Pacific Ring of Fire and the typhoon belt—contributes to the risk factors associated with living in the Philippines, social factors also add to these natural crises. For instance, much of the built environment in urban and rural areas (buildings, infrastructures, etc.) cannot withstand increasingly violent storms and severe quakes. As a result, thousands of Filipinos end up displaced from their homes, many suffer disability and disease, and scores end up dead.

We could assume that—since the Philippines certifies thousands of construction workers through the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (Tesda) and graduates many more nurses and engineers—the country could easily manage and mitigate these crises by mobilizing fleets of professionals to affected areas. Our construction workers and engineers could improve roads and buildings so that they become impervious to natural disasters, and our medical professionals could treat individuals with ailments as well as those with injuries.

Unfortunately, the Philippines does not have the labor infrastructure for these national imperatives. The country suffers from the migration curse—a shortage of professionals, particularly in high-risk areas such as rural provinces, remote areas and ultra-dense urban neighborhoods, makes disaster response difficult and unevenly distributed. Failing to get absorbed into their profession of choice, nurses, engineers and construction workers emigrate, causing a brain drain. Even if they get hired into their desired position, their pay and benefits are a pittance compared to the promises of employment abroad.

Since our public officials invest in exporting professionals and overlook the demands of the domestic labor market, remittances have produced a vicious cycle of educating Filipinos for emigration. With little real or perceived opportunities coupled with competitive offers overseas, graduates and professionals aspire to move abroad—all of them propelled by encouragement from their relatives, friends and even the Philippine government.

Admittedly, labor migration has produced massive financial benefits for Filipinos. The remittances sent by migrants have certainly buoyed the country's economy and have assisted in disaster relief efforts. However, situated in the context of climate change, the hollowing-out of professionals presents humanitarian implications. A shortage of medical professionals makes access to health care difficult in the aftermath of disasters, and fewer engineers and construction workers mean compromised infrastructure across the Philippines—and these are just three occupational categories required to remedy crises. Urban planners, architects and agricultural experts are just a few professions needed to address natural disasters, yet they are also affected by the Philippines' brain drain.

We cannot keep throwing money into the problem. As the country has witnessed over the decades, systemic corruption results in over-funded proposals, yet under-funded projects. In effect, our structural, health and environmental problems linger as we fail to prevent disabilities, deaths and diseases during natural crises.

Instead of relying on remittances and foreign aid, the Philippines must develop its own human capacity to mitigate and manage natural crises. This requires a transformation of the Philippines'

labor market from an export-oriented model to one that develops a robust domestic labor economy. Creating competitive jobs that reduce unemployment and underemployment should function in tandem with initiatives to improve infrastructure and health care in the country. In other words, curb migration and expand domestic opportunities while simultaneously investing in better roads, sturdier buildings and a healthier population.

The Philippines already has the capacity to accomplish this feat. Every year, the country trains thousands of professionals who would rather stay with their loved ones at home than leave for foreign lands if only the domestic opportunities were more attractive. Only political will stands in the way of improving the Philippines' domestic labor market, our health care system and our physical infrastructures. Migration proponents have such powerful connections that even in moments of crises, migration is seen as part of the solution and not as part of the problem.

Migration is a defining trait of Filipino culture—one that is unlikely to depart soon due to its remarkable financial benefits. Yet, natural disasters and environmental hazards are also prevalent in the Philippines, and the increasingly severe effects of climate change compel us to rethink our national priorities. We must consider ways to derive greater economic and humanitarian outcomes by keeping our best professionals at home. Remittances and aid are wasted on short-term remedies such as road patches, shabby architecture and unsanitary health facilities. These are no substitute for long-term investments such as improved city planning, quality health care and sturdier buildings. Amid the economic and environmental challenges of our time, an independent and proactive Philippines is a better image than a vulnerable and nomadic community constantly looking for greener pastures beyond its borders.

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