# NOTES

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## Migration of Filipino Workers and The Philippine Economy

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## INTRODUCTION

At no time in the history of the Philippines has the state been more actively involved in the migration process than now. In laying down the export of Filipino labor as policy integral to our economic development plans since the 1970s, the government has assumed a key role in its continued expansion. Conceived as a temporary measure in response to the unemployment problem, it has, through the years, become a permanent feature of our development strategy.

The multiple roles played by the government as both promoter and protector, regulatory body as well as a major beneficiary of the labor exporting industry puts it at the center of competing interests in which the state itself is inextricably linked. In 1982, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) was created and mandated to promote and develop overseas employment opportunities, afford protection to Filipino workers and their families, promote their interests and safeguard their welfare. The 1987 Constitution reiterates its pledge to provide "full protection to labor, local and overseas, organized and unorganized and promote full employment and equality of employment opportunities to all."

The government benefits from overseas migration through the workers' dollar remittances. Apart from their foreign exchange earnings which find their way back in the economy through consumption and reinvestment, government maintains a bureaucracy which charges fees for processing, accreditation, certification, licensing and pre-departure orientations, among a host of other services.

This paper is motivated by the need for a better understanding of international migration as a process. This liberating mobility is generally deemed inherent to the growth and advancement of the individual and the larger society of the individual's affiliation.

## International Migration

International migration has always been a counterpart of international income inequalities, and an important equilibrating mechanism. After reduction in transport costs in the mid-nineteenth century, large-scale migration was a characteristic of the international economy until the early 1930s. The main flows were from Western Europe to the Americas, but large numbers of Indians and Chinese also emigrated and areas of Africa, South East Asia and Australasia received immigrants.

Migration is generated by push and pull forces, and facilitated by reduced transport and communication costs. The decision to migrate is often complex and driven by many considerations (the push of religious persecution or political repression or a poor climate), but the large-scale migrations described in the above paragraph were driven by economic considerations. Migrants could enjoy higher incomes by moving from their heavily populated homeland to the more sparsely populated continents with abundant natural resources.

Migration may be hampered by uncertainty because of poor information. An important mechanism for overcoming this barrier is the recommendation of friends and relatives. One consequence is that migrants to a specific destination often come from a distinctive locality in the sending country. Another consequence is that the response to economic incentives to migrate may be initially slow and then accelerate after a time lag. The lack of information can, however, be exaggerated. Already at the start of this century much of the migration from Italy to Argentina was seasonal as rural workers crossed the Atlantic twice a year in response to the differing harvest seasons. Much of the labor movement from China and India was also temporary, as migrants were to work on the plantations, in the mines or on the railways on a time-bound contract. In these circumstances, the flow of information back to the sending country about the destination must have been good.

A striking omission from the post-war liberal international economic order is labor. The free flow of goods and capital is encouraged, but nothing is said about labor. The high income countries have policies of deploring restrictions on emigration by undemocratic countries, while they themselves impose restrictions on immigration. Political refugees are sometimes allowed to enter high income countries, but economic migrants are subject to scrutiny which is typically biased in favor of wealthy or skilled immigrants and against the poor and unskilled.

The economic reasons behind migration, and behind the introduction of immigration restrictions, can be illustrated by a two country model (Figure 1). The labor market is in equilibrium when the wage rate (w) is equal to the value of the marginal product of labor (VMP). Without migration, the wage rate in country A, whose labor force is $O_AQ$, will be $w_A$ and domestic output is measured by the area $O_ACDQ$. To include it in the same diagram, the labor force in country B is read from right to left along the horizontal axis and the origin $O_B$ is located such that the labor force in B is $O_BQ$ (so the total labor force in the two countries is $O_AO_B$); the wage rate in B is w and output is $O_BGFQ$. With international migration, workers move from A to B in search of higher wages. In equilibrium (point E), the VWP and wage rate are the same in both countries, and QQ* workers have moved from A to B. The two countries' combined output has increased by the shaded area DEF, because the migrants produce more in their new location than in the old one. Thus, when the marginal value product of labor differs in two locations, global output is increased by the movement of labor.

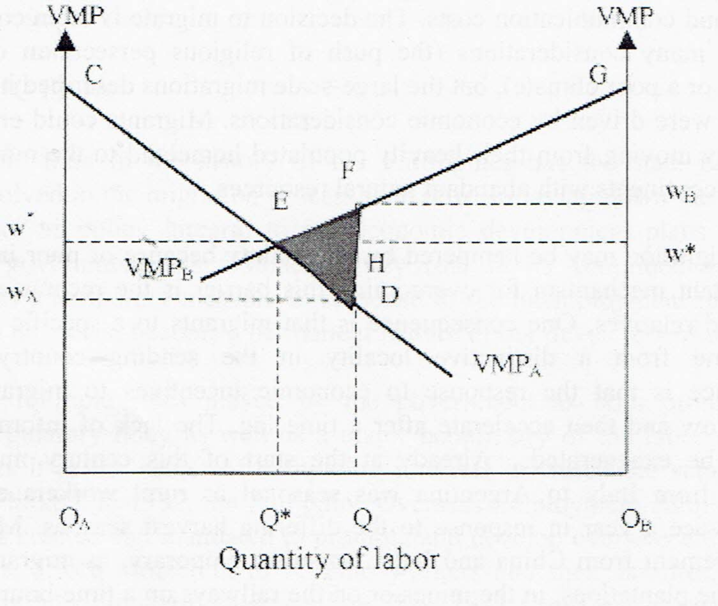


Figure 1. Wage determination in two countries.

In Figure 1 international migration has distributional effects. The migrants benefit, because they enjoy a higher wage. The workers left behind also benefit because the reduction in labor supply pushes up wages in the labor-abundant country (A). In the receiving country (B), however, workers lose out as the wage rate is bid down by the immigrants. The owners of other factors of production in B benefit (their income increases from $GFw_B$ to $Gew^*$ ), but if the country has a democratic political system the votes of domestic workers will likely ensure that immigration barriers are erected. The pressure to exclude immigrant labor will be even stronger during periods when unemployment is high, so it is unsurprising that the USA and other receiving countries closed their doors to immigrants during the early 1930s.

The heterogeneity of labor and the existence of social services in high income countries complicate the assessment of immigration. Some foreign labor may be complementary to domestic labor, thus welcomed (e.g. to do the 3Ds - dangerous, difficult or dirty work). The possibility that immigrants' net contribution to the government budget may be negative because of their use of social services is also used to justify immigration barriers, especially against the poor or unskilled. Opposition to immigration may also be fanned by xenophobia or racist appeals.

Nevertheless, economic forces are strong, and Figure 1 captures the essential elements. The major international flows are from low-income to high-income countries. Restrictions on immigration into Western Europe or the USA are more lax when unemployment is low. Substantial numbers moved from ex-colonies or from south-east Europe to north-west Europe during the 1 960s, and large numbers of Mexicans continue to enter the USA. The oil price increase in the 1970s led to a large demand for unskilled labor in the thinly populated Gulf States and large immigration first from Islamic countries and then from other Asian countries. In all of these cases, migration almost certainly increases global output and reduces income inequality, even if workers in the high income countries are adversely affected.

Assessment of international labor movements is more complex when it involves skilled labor. If the migrant's education were subsidized, then there is cost to his or her native country which loses the human capital in which taxpayers have invested. One solution is to offer higher rewards to train people in LDCs, but paying international-level salaries may not be possible if the workers' marginal product is less than it would be elsewhere, and it may be undesirable on equity grounds. Another proposal is for the high-income countries to levy a surtax on immigration from LDCs, the revenue from which would be redistributed to the county of origin or to United Nations development agencies. The issues arising from both of these solutions are the same: are they feasible and are they fair? There us a clear conflict between individual liberty and society's rights; the former consideration mandates freedom to live where one chooses, while the latter points to obligations towards the community into which one was born.

In the 1980s and I990s as economic differences widened in East Asia, international labor migration became important once again in that region. Reliable numbers do not exist, in part because many migrants work illegally and immigrants are difficult to separate from temporary visitors. The major destination countries are Japan, the newly industrialized economies and Malaysia. Malaysia had over half a million foreign workers in the early 1990s, about 10% of the county's labor force.

The biggest sending country is the Philippines, whose Government has encouraged overseas work as a safety valve for the unemployed since 1974. By the early 1990s official estimates were of 3.5 million Filipinos working overseas, and sending remittances of around $3 billion in 1994 (equivalent to over 10% of exports and the Country's largest single foreign exchange earner). Since much migration is unregulated and the official figures only count remittances passing through the banking system, these numbers are substantial underestimates.

For some open economies the labor force flows are more complex, reflecting a high degree of international interdependence, Thailand became a major labor exporter in the 1970s, and many semi-skilled Thais continue to work overseas (especially in the Middle East). The rapid growth of Japanese foreign investment in the second half of the 1980s brought many managerial and technical staff to work for Japanese multinationals' some 30,000 Japanese citizens were living and working in Thailand by the early 1990s. At the same time, unskilled labor from poor neighboring countries sought work in the booming Thai economy; much of this cross-border movement was unregulated, but al least 100,000 Laotians and 20,000 Burmese have joined the even larger number of Cambodian (many of whom had originally been refugees) working in Thailand.

The main intra-Asian migration flows are into labor-intensive non-traded activities such as construction, domestic service and entertainment. There appears to be some specialization as Indonesian crews provide the labor for Malaysia's construction boom, while Filipinas work as maids in Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore and bands from the Philippines play throughout the region.

## The Merits of International Transfers of Labour

In theory, international transfers of labour should provide a number of benefits. First, it is an opportunity to take advantage of the quantitative and qualitative complementarity of labour resources. This is particularly beneficial to the recipient economy, which could mitigate the problems of bottlenecks of labour resources or mismatches by importing the types of labour which is in short supply. This would contribute to increase of production and income of the recipient economy.

The second benefit relates to the revitalization of the workforce. By the supplementing able and vigorous workforce, the workforce of the recipient nation also is stimulated and revitalized. The United States is a good example. Though it has restricted immigration in recent yews, it is still one of the most accessible countries in the world for people with advanced skills and knowledge. Knowledge and technologies developed by these people and people working together with them are then fed back into the world.

The third benefit is economic assistance at the individual level. People from labour sending countries can earn higher incomes and acquire skill in the course of their work. The money they send supplements capital supplies of home, countries, and industrial skills they bring back may represent an important source of technology transfer. Employment of foreign workers can play the role of useful aid to labour sending countries.

Fourth is the reduction of unemployment and underemployment from the viewpoint of labour sending countries.

As the fifth benefit, one could cite the contribution to economic development at the broader regional level. The mutually complementary redistribution of labour force among different countries and regions will stimulate economic development of the broader region as a whole.

Yet another potential benefit is in the area of national security. To the extent that exchanges of labour strengthen the ties of inter-dependence, promote social openness, and improve mutual understanding, they can contribute to the economic and social stability of the countries involved and thereby enables them to enjoy a higher level of security.

In summary, the international movement of labour should be theoretically welcome for its potential to yield these and possibly other benefits for both the sending and host countries.

**The Demand and Supply of Migrant Workers**

The annual outflow of contract migrant workers (OCWs) from different Asian countries of origin is shown in appended Table 1. Philippines had increased its annual outflow to about 14 times from 47,800 in 1976 to 686,461 in 1992. Compared with other countries, Philippines had sent the greatest number of OCWs; about 2 to 4 times greater than India and Bangladesh, the next succeeding ranking labor exporting countries. Clearly this phenomenon reflects the working of both the demand ("pull") and supply ("push") forces of the labor market as shown in the labor dynamics diagram.

On the demand side ("pull"), the labor shortage resulting from the rapid growth of the receiving country's economy has increased the demand of foreign labor. Appended Table 1 also shows that these receiving countries have an average GDP growth more that 5 percent a year. Another is the shortage of labor in the receiving countries due to increased choosiness of these population in selecting jobs, which increases demand for labor in certain types of jobs. With increased levels of education and expected high incomes, especially under the current tight labor conditions, young workers from the receiving host countries are shunning jobs that they see as "demanding, dangerous or dirty/demeaning, (3Ds)."

On the supply side ("push"), the first key factor is the income gap between receiving countries and the sending countries. Since the level of income per capita of receiving country is several times the income levels of the sending countries, it is not surprising that people from sending countries who wish to work in these receiving countries expect to get large multipliers of their incomes at home. Another important factor is the economic development itself in these sending countries which has stimulated the desire to work in these high-income countries. The people who seek to work in this rich countries by no means come from the lowest strata in their home societies; rather they are people with some economic power and strong drive. They are not the people who leave home because they cannot get by in their own countries. This bring the case, supply side pressure may grow even stronger until these sending countries attain reasonably high levels of economic development.

## Conceptual Framework: International Labor Market

**"Push" Factors**
(Sending Countries)

- Unemployment and cheap wages
- Poverty, widening wealth disparities, rising cost of living
- Destruction of rural areas and communities, especially as a result of industrialization
- Government labor export policy

**Labor Migration**

**"Pull" Factors**
(Receiving Countries)

- De-industrialization (import cheap labor)
- Industrial restructuring (workers from developed countries moving away from 3D jobs)
- Changing roles of women when they increasingly join the work force in order to help support their families

In the case of the Philippines, over 50 percent of OCWs have attended college of education; of whom more than half are graduates. The number of deployed OCWs has remained more or less steady at 690,000 since 1992, while the number of new hires gradually decreased from 301,317 in 1991 to 206,670 in 1998 (POEA). Could this trend imply that the number of deployed OCWs is reaching saturation point so that equilibrium between labor supply and demand will soon be established? IBON (15 Jan 1998, p. 20) estimates that there are 1.6 million OCWs at any given time.

## Trends of Filipino Migration in the 1990s

One trend pertains to fluctuations of migration flows, in which the decade of the 90s has witnessed three major moments. First was the Gulf War of 1991 and the repatriation of approximately 30,000 workers, mainly from Kuwait. Such repatriation, however was quickly offseted by an increased deployment in the final months of 1991 and accounted for a sudden increase of 46 percent in total deployment over the previous year. Deployment of overseas workers reached its peak in 1994, with most of the increase was absorbed by Saudi Arabia. Second was the decline of deployment by 13 percent in 1995. This was mostly set off by the adverse climate towards overseas labor created by the public outcry over the hanging of Flor Contemplacion, a Filipina domestic helper found guilty of murder in Singapore. Third is the increase by 15 percent in 1997 (Table 1).

Table 1. Deployed Filipino Overseas Contract Workers, 1990-1997.

| Year | **Deployed** | **Land-based** | **New hires** | **Rehires** | **Sea-based** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1990 | 446,095 | 334,883 | 217,942 | 116,941 | 111,212 |
| 1991 | 615,019 | 489,260 | 301,317 | 187,943 | 125,759 |
| 1992 | 686,461 | 459,655 | 291,219 | 258,436 | 136,806 |
| 1993 | 696,630 | 550,872 | 274,305 | 276,567 | 145,758 |
| 1994 | 719,602 | 565,226 | 268,711 | 296,515 | 154,376 |
| 1995 | 654,022 | 488,621 | 219,018 | 269,603 | 165,401 |
| 1996 | 660,122 | 484,653 | 206,734 | 277,919 | 175,469 |
| 1997 | 747,696 | 559,227 | 222,139 | 337,088 | 188,469 |

(Source: Banistetla. Graziano. 1999)

Such an increase has occurred particularly in Asia, while the Middle East has continued to decline as a result of decreasing salaries and also of the preference-to-nationals policy. In 1997, Filipinos deployed in Asia for the first time outnumbered Filipinos deployed in the Middle East (Table 2).

Table. 2. Deployed Filipino Land-based Contract Workers, by Region, 1990-1997.

| Year | 1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Africa | 1,273 | 1,694 | 2,510 | 2,425 | 3,255 | 3,615 | 2,494 | 3,517 |
| Asia | 90,768 | 131,592 | 134,776 | 168,205 | 194,120 | 166,774 | 174,308 | 235,129 |
| Americas | 9,557 | 13,373 | 12,319 | 12,228 | 12,603 | 13,469 | 8,378 | 7,058 |
| Europe | 6,853 | 13,156 | 14,590 | 13,423 | 11,513 | 10,279 | 11,409 | 12,626 |
| Middle East | 218,110 | 302,825 | 340,604 | 302,975 | 286,387 | 234,310 | 221,224 | 221,047 |
| Oceania | 942 | 1,374 | 1,669 | 1,507 | 1,295 | 1,398 | 1,577 | 1,970 |
| Trust Territories | 7,380 | 11,409 | 11,164 | 8,890 | 8,489 | 7,039 | 4,859 | 5,280 |
| Total | 334,883 | 489,260 | 549,655 | 550,872 | 565,226 | 488,621 | 484,653 | 559,227 |

(Source: Battistella, Graziano. 1999)

Another trend, clearly visible through the 1990s, has been the constant decrease since 1991 of workers going abroad for the first time, and the constant increase of workers renewing their contracts. The small reversed trend in 1997, when newly hired migrants also increased (8 percent), remained at a lower magnitude then the increase of rehired workers (21 percent) (Table 1). In general this indicates that new job openings are not numerous. At the same time, it indicates that migrants are prolonging their time abroad, both because accumulation of savings takes longer, due to increasing migration costs and decreasing salaries, and because replacement of workers is expensive for employers.

Deployment to specific countries has also witnessed some dramatic changes. Saudi Arabia, although it remains the number one destination for Filipinos, absorbed only 100,000 Filipinos in 1997, which was less than in 1992. At the same time, Taiwan, which was not a destination country in the 1980s, has within a few years become the number three destination after Hong Kong. Anxieties over political changes in Hong Kong as well as the effects of economic crisis were reflected in exceptional deployment in the first months of 1997, and a sudden decline afterwards. Of the top ten countries of deployment, only two are currently from the Middle East and one European country is among the top ten.

The breakdown by occupation and gender, available only for the newly hired, reveals that the proportion of women over men is increasing. Although there are some variations along the years, it appears that Filipino migrants are employed mainly as laborers, service workers, and professionals. Bearing in mind that service workers are domestic workers and that entertainers normally constitute at least 50 percent of professional workers, a broad idea of the major jobs and skills Filipinos hold abroad are obtained (Table 3). Specifically, the migration of entertainers has picked up again, 'the decline in 1995, when ballet skills were imposed among the requirements to permission to go abroad. The reversal in 1997 can also be explained by the of exemptions from some requirements, particularly the waiver on the minimum of twenty-one.

A final trend that has emerged in the 1990s is the increase of remittances. The increase, which was already evident in 1994, the year of the highest deployment of migrants, experienced an unexpected surge in the following years. This surge is explained by the increase of people abroad or by the increase of salaries earned by migrants alone. Two other factors account for such increase: the improved capacity of banks to channel remittances home; and the increased confidence of Filipinos (not just migrants) abroad on the Philippine economy and the attractiveness of investments in the country.

**Current Economic Trend**

Exports and remittances from overseas Filipino workers contributed to salvage economic growth during the period 1997-1998.

Net factor income from abroad % FIA grew by as much as 18.6% during the third quarter to reach 12.2B in real peso terms. NFIA consists mostly of remitted earnings of overseas Filipino workers (OFS).

NFIA in the third quarter accounted for as much as 5.3% of GNP, enabling the country to offset the 0.1% contraction in domestic production and ending talks of a recession, for the time being.

The Philippine Labor Officers, however, reported that at least 2,300 OFWs in the Asian region were retrenched during the first half of 1998 as a result of the economic crunch. As of August 1, some 2,262 OFWs in Brunei were retrenched, while as much as 123 workers were retrenched or terminated in South Korea. OFWs from Malaysia, Indonesia, and South Korea were among the harder hit, and remaining OFWs have had to reduce salaries and benefits owing to the depreciation of their host country's

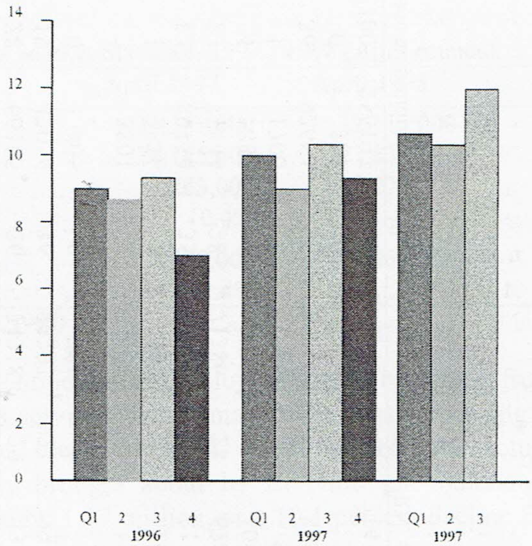


Figure 2. Net Factor Income from Abroad.
(Source: Jover, G. L. Remittances help boost GNP. Recent Economics Indicators. January 1999, p. 11)

## The Current Labor Market Situation

The labor force survey (April 1998 round) erosion of the gains so far achieved by earlier reforms in the Philippine labor market. From April 1997 to April 1998, total employment contracted by almost 1 percent, compared with the 2.38 percent growth of the labor force. The April 1998 employment rate of 86.7 percent is the lowest since April 1991(85.6%).

Table 3. Deployment of Overseas Filipino Workers, by Skill Category (new hires). 1992-1997.

| Skill Category | 1992 | | 1993 | | 1994 | | 1995 | | 1996 | | 1997 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| Professional | 72848 | 28 | 66105 | 26 | 74218 | 29 | 43976 | 21 | 36055 | 18 | 51228 | 23 |
| Entertainer | 49996 | 19 | 42056 | 16 | 53292 | 21 | 23434 | 11 | 18487 | 9 | 25636 | 12 |
| Administrative | 495 | 0 | 405 | 0 | 385 | 0 | 352 | 0 | 568 | 0 | 555 | 0 |
| Clerical | 4943 | 2 | 3801 | 1 | 3709 | 1 | 3386 | 2 | 3169 | 2 | 3534 | 2 |
| Sales | 2725 | 1 | 2576 | 1 | 2284 | 1 | 2090 | 1 | 1938 | 1 | 2560 | 1 |
| Service | 82440 | 32 | 89154 | 35 | 90967 | 35 | 81306 | 38 | 84745 | 41 | 76402 | 34 |
| Maid | 58700 | 23 | 71444 | 28 | 71386 | 28 | 62653 | 29 | 61986 | 30 | 47544 | 21 |
| Caretaker | 11399 | 4 | 7885 | 3 | 10088 | 4 | 10410 | 5 | 14695 | 7 | 19225 | 9 |
| Agricultural | 1920 | 1 | 1706 | 1 | 1204 | 0 | 972 | 0 | 822 | 0 | 538 | 0 |
| Laborer | 94525 | 36 | 92664 | 36 | 85816 | 33 | 81857 | 38 | 75683 | 37 | 83560 | 38 |
| Not Classified | 698 | 0 | 506 | 0 | 403 | 0 | 219 | 0 | 3345 | 2 | 3027 | 1 |
| TOTAL | 260594 | 100 | 256197 | 100 | 258986 | 100 | 214130 | 100 | 205791 | 100 | 221560 | 100 |

(Source: Battistela, G. 1999. Philippine migration policy: dilemmas of a crisis. SOJOURN. 14(1), p. 236)

Because of the contraction in demand, coupled with the fast growth of the labor supply, the unemployment rate increased from 10.4 percent in April 1997 to 13.3 percent in April 1998. This increase in the unemployment rate is translated to an increase of unemployed persons, from 3.26 million to 4.28 million. Surprisingly, the underemployment rate decreased from 23.4 percent to 21 percent during the same period, as the number of those employed who expressed some dissatisfaction with their current work decreased from 6.38 million to 5.84 million (Table 4).

Table 4. Summary Labor Market Statistics, 1997 - 1998 (April rounds).

| | April 1997 | April 1998 | % Growth |
|---|---|---|---|
| Labor Force | 31,368,000 | 32,113,000 | 2.38% |
| Employed | 28,105,000 | 27,835,000 | -0.98% |
| Unemployed | 3,263,000 | 4,278,000 | 31.33% |
| Unemployment Rate | 10.4% | 13.3% | |
| Underemployed | 6,577,000 | 5,837,000 | -11.25% |
| Underemployment Rate | 23.4% | 21.0% | |

(Source: Conferido, R. D. 1998)

The overall contraction in employment may be traced from the fact that while the industry and services sectors managed to post appeasing (lower) growth rates, the agriculture sector suffered from steeper and actual declines in employment, basically brought about by El Niño phenomenon. Agricultural employment decreased by 1.17 million, or a 10.1 percent decline from April 1997 to April 1998 (Table 5).

Table 5. Summary Employment Statistics, by Industry, 1997 - 1998 (January rounds).

| Industry | April 1997 | April 1998 | % Growth |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agriculture | 11,601,000 | 10,433,000 | -10.07% |
| Industry | 4,741,000 | 4,806,000 | 1.37% |
| Services | 11,756,000 | 12,587,000 | 7.07% |

(Source: Conferido, R. D. 1998)

**Policy Recommendation**

Overseas employment should be recognized as a legitimate option for workers within national development objectives, with government ensuring their protection and welfare. Ultimate protection of overseas Filipino workers must be a joint responsibility of the Philippines and the workers' host country. Hence, the forging of protective bilateral labor agreements should be high in our agenda.

As part of the commitments the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) should implement a package of interventions to address the needs of displaced workers, including OFWs. The guidelines for this package are contained in Department Order No. 6, signed by the Secretary of Labor and Employment on 18 March 1998.

The objectives of the program, as laid out in D.O. No.6, are the provision of employment facilitation assistance; training assistance; credit and marketing assistance. It basically consists of three sub-packages, namely; job watch, job link, and job loss prevention.

Assistance will be provided both at the OFW's job sites and in the Philippines, to facilitate their access to gainful employment. Assistance is provided to returning OFWs whose skills and qualifications match the requirements of local employers, through the Placement Assistance Division of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA). Meanwhile, the Philippine Overseas Labor Offices (POLOs) can make representations with prospective/new employers to facilitate the provision of alternative employment to displaced workers.

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