

OFW Reintegration Loan Fund and Livelihood Programs: their Strengths and Weaknesses

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Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) returning home, either after fulfilling contracts or being forced to leave the country they were working in, begin assimilating themselves anew into society. The efforts of OFWs to adapt again to local culture is called reintegration. Recognizing that earning a stable income is one of the goals of reintegration, the government has two programs to help returning OFWs achieve this goal: the *Php 2 Billion Reintegration Program Loan Fund* and the *NRCO Livelihood Assistance Program*.

The objective of this paper is to assess the implementation of the two programs by identifying their strengths and weaknesses and to recommend measures to improve the implementation of the two reintegration programs.

This study looked into the strengths and weaknesses of the Reintegration loans and livelihood assistance programs: the *Php 2 Billion Reintegration Program Loan Fund* and the *Php 10,000 Livelihood Assistance Program* of DOLE-OWWA-NRCO for displaced or distressed workers, both implemented from 2011 through 2014 through OWWA Regional Welfare Offices. The study does not include availment of benefits or other programs implemented after May 2014.

The assessment of strengths and weaknesses was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Data analysis was conducted on (1) the NRCO Livelihood Assistance Program: Monitoring Results of the Livelihood Assistance Program (LDAP) Beneficiaries; and (2) the OWWA OFW Reintegration Program (OFW-RP) May 22, 2013 Summary of OFW-RP Beneficiaries of the *Php 2 Billion Reintegration Program Loan Fund*.

Feedback on the implementation of two programs was gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted in 2014 with avalees of the Livelihood Assistance Program in three regions with large numbers of OFWs. Any reintegration program should first and foremost assess the needs of the regions in which the OFW returnees will return, for example, local labor market needs. Second, it should consider the capabilities of the returnees. Third, infrastructure should be present in the home community of the returnee to allow sustainability. For instance, channels of cooperation between the returnee and public-private partners have to be established. The strengths and weaknesses of a reintegration program will be assessed focusing on the reintegration policy, program, resources, and availment.

The study found that the program has the following strengths:

The policy for the livelihood assistance program was clearly promulgated in 2011. Qualifications of beneficiaries, as well as implementing rules and regulations were set. The livelihood assistance program was a response to the immediate needs of distressed and displaced OFWs for livelihood. Funds were allocated for livelihood assistance projects, which were disbursed by the OWWA RWOs. Priority was given to distressed and displaced household service workers (HSWs), particularly victims repatriated due to war, illegal recruitment and trafficking.

The following are the weaknesses of the program:

Reintegration Policy. There was no articulation on how long-term needs of OFW returnees could be addressed. The policy also did not specify community-specific employment or enterprises that required training. Hence, the livelihoods developed could not respond to community needs. Neither did the policy include psychosocial services such as debriefing and counseling for distressed and displaced OFW returnees for whom the policy was intended.

Reintegration Program. Observable is the program delving more on responses to economic rather than psychosocial needs. Considering also that OFW returnees have acquired new skills, strategies for technology transfer were not specified in the program. There was no business mentoring provided after training. Monitoring was conducted after three years of implementation, and it was found that there were more failed than sustained businesses.

The DSWD was expected to provide debriefing, counseling or guidance services but the FGD participants admitted that there were none conducted.

Reintegration Resources. Reintegration assistance was limited to cash and capacity building through training for business start-up support. It did not include housing, education, healthcare / medical assistance, nor counseling and advisory services. Assistance for job placement was minimal.

Reintegration Program Availment and Job Creation. Most of the FGD participants learned about the Livelihood Assistance Program through their friends in the community.

Some of the training programs offered also did not match community needs and socio-economic structures. In one case, training in baking was conducted and the beneficiary was provided with a baking oven. However, there was no electricity in her community, hence the oven was passed on to a relative who lived in town and was connected to the grid. In addition, training programs provided were on setting up businesses or hands-on skills but without a marketing component. In many cases, there was no marketing assistance in the community so the products did not go beyond production stage and were left in storage.

Because the amount was only PhP 10,000, no pay back was expected. The amount was too small to expect sustainable businesses. In most cases, neither sustainable livelihoods nor stable local employment were created.