Introduction

When the International Year of Youth on 12 August 2010 was launched, the International Labour Organization reported that some 81 million of the 620 million economically active youngsters, aged 15-24 years old, were unemployed in 2008, further forecasted to worsen to 13.1 per cent in 2010 and usher a moderate decline of 12.7 per cent in 2011. The Global Financial Crisis pushed youth unemployment to its worst. This has significantly led to a disturbing mindset among young people: that a job abroad is the only way out of poverty and joblessness at home and that the earlier that one migrates for work, the better. The weak cognitive framework by which decisions are made by young migrants tend to attract the attention of unscrupulous persons and entities who ply their illegal trade over vulnerable young people, especially among the poor and the unschooled.

The odds are high for the youth to aim to land high paying jobs abroad, without education, skill possession and work experience. These are the key foundation for the protection of migrant workers. Employers’ preference for the educated, multi-skilled, highly experienced and productive labour migrants is anticipated to persist more strongly while illegal recruiters and traffickers will exploit the supply side for cheap labour and forced labour ends.

Amidst these fears and challenges, labour migration governance and policies remain without a strong “youth lens”. In many sending countries it is observed that the interest of most countries during tight market situations remain to be how to diversify or take bigger slice of the pie. There were past references when labour source countries have succumbed to the lure of on-the-job training and apprenticeship programmes for the youth, as disguised for cheap labour, engaging young apprentices under substandard working and training conditions. Focus on this objective will likely disadvantage the youth further.

The understanding of the nexus between youth concerns and migration needs to be strengthened. Recent hypothesis has been delivered by analysts that youth joblessness in a number of countries in the Middle East and Africa has been an important issue which has drawn their young population to support the offensives in dismantling the status quo. A migrant worker culture among the youth, however, is equally unproductive and likely to limit their conditioning into competitive, productive and progressive workers or entrepreneurs. Overdependence on the alleviating impact of labour migration on domestic employment situations and on remittances has stunted the development of the policy and market environment which could lead to the growth of industries, agricultural sector and enterprises leading to job growth. While the youth must be accorded with rights-based policy allowing their freedom of choice of employment and residence, an all-inclusive, integrated policy framework will assure that such right is substantiated with social preparations that will equip them with empowering knowledge and skills as the best option for their preventive protection.

Moderated by Ricardo R. Casco, Head of the Labour Migration Unit at the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Manila, Philippines, this online forum brought members together to share their thoughts and experiences on the effects of labour migration policies on young people. A synthesis of
the discussion is provided below. The original posts can also be viewed at: http://ap-youthnet.ilobkk.or.th/discussions/forums/the-effects-of-labour-migration-policies-on-young-people

Discussion points

Motivations for migration

Understanding the motivations for young people to migrate is key to implementing effective labour migration policies and programmes. Participants (some being youth themselves) shared what migration can mean to them and the different motivations. Common reasons included: serving as an alternative to a better paying job, searching for a better life for themselves and their families (i.e. remittances), a means to advance career or acquire skills through internships and further studies, a reunion with migrant parents, a consequence of inter-racial marriage, an adventure of life or a path to the pursuit of a mission.

With the growing youth unemployment trends prevalent in many countries across the region, migration for employment or international internship is considered a sensible option. For those who are affected by the tight pressure of the labour market at home may find it easier or more attractive to look elsewhere. A young participant from the Philippines said that he was inclined to work abroad because there are more opportunities in his field of Information Technology in neighboring countries. Furthermore, there are more prospects of earning a higher income coupled with the opportunity to gain international exposure and experience.

For those who obtained lesser levels of education at home, migration is seen as an opportunity for alternative, supplemental or advanced learning. Skill sets can often be gained from well-experienced experts when working abroad. A parallel analysis of rural to urban internal migration such as in China can be useful to observe patterns of behavior which drive the youth to leave home and address the consequent challenges to authorities in the place of destination in being able to provide essential social services and equal access to opportunities.

While young people can be vulnerable in taking quick decisions to migrate as an instinctive response to boost self-esteem or achieve a perceived state of prestige as articulated by an Indonesian discussion participant, their technological empowerment can lead them to youth-friendly modalities of data access, feedback and communication which, in turn, can lend as a gentle guide for more informed decisions, as exhibited by a Filipino blogger who is presently providing links on international internship opportunities for the youth.

Labour migration policies and programmes

Governments of both origin and destination countries must work bilaterally on mutually acceptable schemes in support of the unique purpose why youth migrate to ensure that the youth genuinely gain from the migration experience, especially of decent employment, improved levels of technical and life skills, career advancement and self-assessment. Participants shared many examples of labour migration policies and programmes implemented in various countries.

Vanuatu has been participating in a Recognized Seasonal employment programme (RSE) with New Zealand since 2007 that has allowed workers to obtain training on different skills (e.g. pruning fruit trees, driving tractors) and many gain promotion to supervisory positions within the factory or more technical roles. Although this has contributed to the brain drain problem in Vanuatu, it has allowed unskilled workers to have more exposure to different, and often times more technologically advanced farming environments. Furthermore, labour migration policy in Vanuatu is well defined and has a specifically drafted legislation. Vanuatu and the Melanesian region has very limited outlets for labour migration. The seasonal work programmes with New Zealand and Australia comprise almost all the workers who go overseas.
In Papua New Guinea (PNG), many young people migrate to cities because there are simply no opportunities available, particularly in the smaller islands. This internal migration has caused a lot of social issues as a result however. It has also become a factor in the proliferation of violence and spreading HIV/AIDS between cities and rural villages. In terms of international migration however, PNG has become an active participant in the Government of Australia’s initiative called the ‘Pacific Seasonal Workers Pilot Scheme’ where ten workers from PNG have left on a temporary work visa to farms in Queensland. Though the number of participants is small relative to PNG’s total population, this pilot could prove to be beneficial in the long run.

In the early 90’s, South Korea introduced its Alien Industrial Technology Training Programme (AITTP) where a number of migrant young people in their early 20’s came with trainee visas with the intention to acquire training-on-the-job in its industrial factories, under then Korean Federation of Small Business (KFSB). Because of what became a widespread violation of the rules of the AITTP (when worker-trainees were treated more as workers, not as trainees) by many host small businesses, young factory worker-trainees began running around on an irregular status and hopping from one small company or backyard business to another, hoping to recover the pre-deployment costs they incurred through a well-paying employment abroad.

In cases such as this, host governments with worker-training schemes must ensure a good monitoring system so that host employer-trainers do not commit abuses, almost drawing trainees to forced or substandard labour conditions. Governments of sending countries can introduce awareness-building modules that migrant employment is a technology and skills learning opportunity; a mechanism to certify the work experience of irregular workers can be offered to alleviate their situation. Workers need to be fully briefed prior to departure of what they should expect in the journey ahead.

In China, the trend for urban-rural migration has also lead young migrants returning to their hometowns and using their skill sets to start their own businesses which has been critical in stimulating rural development. Entrepreneurship initiatives are assisted by government policies in a number of rural areas that encourage migrant workers to return home to start a business (e.g. by offering entrepreneurship training, microfinance, simplifying administrative formalities for starting a business, etc).

In Cambodia and in the Greater Mekong sub-region (including Cambodia, Thailand, Laos PDR, Vietnam, Myanmar and Yunnan Province- China) the legal framework for labor migration is still weak, or better, in some countries there are efficient legislation but they are not implemented. Plans to address issues such as protection and return and reintegration of young migrants needs to be woven into the system at an early stage by sending countries. There is also the general lack of transparency and high costs of the legal recruitment system compared to informal recruiting channels as well as weak pre-departure training and widespread corruption.

Internship opportunities abroad must also be closely monitored. The Philippines Overseas Employment Administration has come across companies that appear to offer attractive internship arrangements only to end up with the interns realizing that they were drawn to pseudo-internships and have actually become cheaply paid migrant workers. Companies need to provide allowances and a decent work arrangement for internships as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility.

Concluding analysis

While there are many migration related laws and regulations, the governance framework within which to implement these effectively remains vague in a number of origin countries. The youth lens in migration governance in general remains weak. There is a tendency to emphasize attention only on the sending out of migrants and less on protection and return migration assistance. Closer linkages between and among stakeholders can harness the potentials of the youth as human capital and agents
of technology and skills transfer. It is however critical that effort is made to provide the basic social infrastructure so that entrepreneurship back home will be attractive to young migrant returnees.

The discussion was cautioned of the need to collect more data and build a body of evidence from which conclusive observations and consequent policy and programme responses can be based. There is need to promulgate new policies for youth migration in order to maximize the benefits from different types of youth movement such as among labour migrants, self-practicing professionals, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, rural to urban migrants, foreign students or interns, youth reuniting with their family or relatives abroad, as well as spouses in inter-racial marriages.

The time is ripe for discourses on youth and migration with the likelihood of heightening interest of young people on trying life of study, work or living in a foreign land not only due to burgeoning youth unemployment at home but for many other varied reasons. There is much need to sharpen the youth lens in migration governance, including the aspect on how the youth left behind by migrant parents are affected. The data gaps will emerge and once recognized, concerned State authorities will inevitably need to infuse reforms to make their data capture system more age-sensitive and proactively move their research agenda to accommodate more attention on youth and migration issues.

We could expect that new modes of policy and operational cooperation and coordination among sectors, stakeholders and support institutions would become compelling. There is much wisdom to loosen up representation from the youth sector and cultivate more vehicles through which they can be heard from their most untainted perspectives. The youth needs to be sensitized into analyzing the forces that lure them to migration. Champions for the youth cause must be identified.

National policies, development agenda and service programmes for the youth cannot miss out global issues such as migration. Technical assistance and development programmes offered by international bodies, the United Nations and donor organizations will need to be encouraged to come in from small pilot projects that could progressively build into larger medium term programmes.

Additional suggested resources by participants

Other resources which may be of interest include:

- Short film produced in 2008 by the European Commission and the International Organization for Migration, “Paano Ba Mangarap?” (How does one dream?)
- Global Migration Group: Migration and Youth: Harnessing Opportunities for Development
- Asia-Pacific Knowledge Network on Migration (APMagNet)
- World Bank, YouTHink website
Discussion statistics

Total number of subscribed members: 24
- ILO: 8
- Non-ILO: 16
- Male: 11
- Female: 12

Total number of contributions:
- Week #1: 11
- Week #2: 20

Acknowledgments

The APYouthNet Community would like to extend its sincere gratitude to the following individuals who made this discussion forum possible:

Moderator: Ricardo R. Casco

Forum participants:

- Abdul Fadil Akbar*
- Anna Lee Fos
- Bruno Maltoni*
- Christine Apikul
- Gian Carlo G. Bero*
- Gileka Geethani Abeysekara
- Goy Phumtim
- Guy Thijs
- Jenny Bjork
- Johan Arvling
- John Aries D. Tudla
- Lody Peng
- M. Reveillelex E. Lim*
- Manoj Rathnayake
- Matthieu Cognac*
- Min Ji Kim*
- Niwa Rahmad Dwitama
- Nolivienne C. Ermitano*
- Ricardo R. Casco*
- Shaun Kennedy*
- Sheela Daskara*
- Sophia Kagan*
- Steffi Jochim
- Thetis Mangahas*

* Participants contributing to the forum

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- For further information and raw data from this discussion forum, please visit: http://ap-youthnet.ilobkk.or.th/discussionsltk/or/th/discussions/forums/the-effects-of-labour-migration-policies-on-young-people