

## MIGRATION ASPIRATIONS, LABOR MARKETS AND STATE POLICIES: RESEARCH AND POLICY HIGHLIGHTS FROM ASPIRE-PHILIPPINES

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### **The AspirE Project**

#### *Research questions and methodology*

AspirE—Asian prospects in (re)migration to/within the EU—is a three-year research project (2023–2025) that sought to examine the decision-making of aspiring (re)migrants from five Asian countries (Hong Kong, China, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam) to and within six EU member countries (Belgium the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Italy and Portugal).

All the country teams explored the same research questions: (1) How do migration regimes in the countries of origin and destination consider (aspiring) (re)migrants' behavior in their policies? (2) Why do people decide to (re)migrate or to stay? and (3) When do individuals' migration decisions evolve? To address these questions, the consortium used various qualitative methods of collecting data at the macro, meso and micro levels that shape and interact with individuals' migration decision-making. Primary data collection was conducted between July 2023 and December 2024.

#### *The European turn*

The timing of AspirE coincides with the European turn in the Philippines' continuing international labor migration. The European turn, which commenced around the 2010s, has some distinctive characteristics: bilateral discussions between the Philippines and destination countries, employment prospects in skilled sectors (which could signal better and more gender-balanced employment opportunities), and potential pathway for residence. The AspirE study was able capture the little-known, developing cooperation between the Philippines and EU destinations.

#### *The Philippines and EU destinations*

Filipinos are present in all the AspirE EU countries, with Italy hosting the largest Filipino population, and Portugal, the smallest. Using a migration corridor approach, the Philippines was initially paired with Italy, but since the aspiring migrants were interested in other destination countries and in light of increasing labor migration to Europe, the case study extended to other destinations, notably, the Czech Republic, Finland and Germany.



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## **Key Findings**

### *Mobility and migration policies are state-centric*

As an origin country, exit requirements from the Philippines focus on the national interest to promote safe, orderly and regular migration. Concerns over Filipinos falling into irregular migration and trafficking in persons have resulted in various laws, policies and measures to regulate the movement of Filipinos leaving as workers and marriage migrants. Further checks are conducted at point of exit prior to being allowed to leave.

The visa application for EU countries requires the submission of various documents to show proof of eligibility for any of the following categories: tourist, student, marriage/family reunification, or employment. Applying for a visa is a costly and time-consuming process. In general, applicants must provide documents to establish their identity, human capital, financial capacity, or relationship to an EU national (for family reunification and marriage migration). In general, short-term visa holders (tourist or visitor visa) cannot adjust to another visa category in the destination country while long-term visa holders have the possibility to do so (e.g., from student visa to work permit).

In the face of population aging and population decline, EU countries are engaging origin countries such as the Philippines to recruit much-needed workers. At the least, bilateral discussions provide a framework for cooperation and promote understanding of each other's processes. These discussions are necessary because both parties are engaging as new partners: the Philippines built its architecture of labor migration governance based on its experience with the Gulf and Asian countries while for the EU countries, discussing labor migration with non-EU countries is new terrain.

### *Social networks are prominent in the Philippines-Italy migration corridor*

Bilateral discussions on worker recruitment are more evident between the Philippines and the Czech Republic, Finland and Germany. In the case of Germany, bilateral discussions have expanded from the triple win agreement on sustainable nurse recruitment signed in 2013 to the participation of the private sector in 2016, the introduction of Global Skills Partnership in 2020, and discussions on skills training with the Technical Skills Development Authority.

The lack of bilateral discussions between the Philippines and Italy has created information gaps and ambiguities which are addressed by various intermediaries (including unscrupulous ones). After arrival in Italy, social networks play an important role in Filipinos' incorporation in Italian society. In part, this has contributed to the concentration of Filipinos in domestic work.

### *Migration aspirations are part of understanding migration drivers*

The sample of 31 aspiring migrants in this study are not representative of aspiring Filipino migrants: they are predominantly young (below 30 years old), highly educated, urban and all but six have had international travels. The main motivation to go to Europe was more about pursuing further studies and travel/tourism and was less about labor migration, although if the opportunity for employment comes up, this would be welcomed. Europe was prized as a cultural and artistic destination.

Given their profile, migration to Europe for this sample was not a necessity but was more related to lifestyle factors, especially among the young (under 30 years old).

Migration aspirations are multidimensional and are fluid: their timeline, purpose or destination may change. Except for two participants who were about to leave for Germany and the Czech Republic within days after the interviews, the rest of the participants did not indicate a target date to migrate.

Having intentions to migrate does not predict actual migration in the future. Migration aspirations do not unfold into a time-bound, linear progression of steps leading to actual migration to a specific

destination. The desire, intent or plan to migrate is not necessarily predictive of migration. While the intention to migrate remains, they can decide not to migrate or postpone their migration plans to pursue other endeavors in the home country.

### **Policy Recommendations**

1. The state-level dialogues between the Philippines and Germany, the Czech Republic and Finland are important in setting the framework and terms of cooperation between origin and destination countries. To date, these dialogues are limited to technical working groups, composed mostly of government representatives. The participation of other stakeholders—migrants, employers, the migration industry, civil society organizations, academe, local governments—can perspectives that can better inform policymaking. Moreover, policy dialogues should also expand the discussion on how the different parties can reduce costs, address online hiring and its perils, facilitate skills recognition, and enhance cooperation to mitigate brain drain.

2. As part of promoting safe, regular and orderly migration, both the Philippines and EU destination countries are urged to consider streamlining the requirements and procedures for exit clearance (the Philippines) and visa application (for EU countries). The use of technology may be considered to ease the documentation and verification process. For EU countries, the use of electronic travel authority (ETA) may be considered. An example is Canada’s issuance of ETA to those who had been issued a non-immigrant visa to Canada within the last five years. This filter distinguishes first-time applicants from ever-applicants and streamlines documentation and processing. For the Philippines, streamlining the documentation and contract verification process can reduce time and financial costs for applicants and employers.

3. The importance of language to access employment opportunities and better incorporation in destination countries cannot be overemphasized. In the absence of language centers teaching some European languages, online or other modes of basic language training must be provided before migration. This preparation needs to be augmented by employer-provided language training and cultural orientation as part of post-arrival and integration services in destination countries.

4. Pursuing further studies in Europe was a significant motivation for migration. The study found that returnees from Europe helped promote linkages and knowledge exchange between their home institutions and their networks in Europe. Student mobility is under-researched in the Philippines; basic data on the scale and profile of Filipinos leaving abroad for higher education abroad are needed. Programs to engage with students, encourage return, and develop support systems that promote sustainable knowledge transfer.

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