

Second Meeting of the Global Forum on Migration and Development

Remarks of the Hon. Noli de Castro

Vice President

Closing Session

Second Meeting of the Global Forum on Migration and Development

PICC, Roxas Blvd, Manila

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ladies and gentlemen:

Now we mark the culmination of this year's global forum on migration and development --- and we are all ready to go back home.

A productive forum

I am impressed with the discussions over the past four days. The frank exchange of ideas, the open flow of communication, the desire to accommodate new approaches in solving age-old problems --- all these made this conference truly interesting and productive. The importance of this meeting is further highlighted by the dynamism of the activities and the involvement of many sectors --- both inside and outside of this convention hall.

I was not here for the entire duration of the conference but I assure you, however, that I was listening all the time.

No, I am not referring to the tapes of your roundtable debates. That would not be necessary because this forum is perhaps one of the most transparent international meetings held in the Philippines.

Rather, I have been receiving regular reports from the department of foreign affairs, the department of labor and employment, and my own staff since day one of this conference. Philippine media has also developed a keen interest in this forum and every now and then, some news items come up on radio, television, or broadsheet.

Indeed, everybody should take a close look at what has been discussed here. The topics covered will form part of the continuing research agenda and consultations needed for an updated body of knowledge on migration and development that can guide policy-makers.

Take-out themes

I understand that the secretariat of this conference made sure that you are fully occupied with meetings during your entire stay in the Philippines. Too bad you did not have enough time to check out the many beautiful places in our country.

But if you had a chance to buy food from our local fast food restaurants, you will notice that the servers will ask if you want your food "dine-in" or "take-out". In the United States, where many of these fast food chains originated, it is "dine-in" or "to-go".

“Take-out” is the Filipino way of describing the process of getting what is inside and sharing it with family-members at home. It usually refers to food, but it can be used to relate to anything.

In a sense, that is what we will do when we return to our respective countries. We will take the insights from this conference and bring them out to policy-makers.

Allow me then to start this process of taking out. In the case of the Philippines, there are certain themes that we intend to strengthen as part of our existing governance framework.

Integrating migration and development policy

First, we have long adopted the position that migration policy can no longer be made in isolation from other major policies of government. This is very important for the Philippines, where time and again, the steady flow of remittances from overseas Filipino workers (or OFWs) served as our economy’s safety valve in the face of global shocks.

This year, for example, the remittances of Filipino workers from abroad reached 10.9 billion dollars. This translates into a growth of 17% compared to the same period last year, way above the 10% target initially set by the government.

As of December 2007, there are approximately 8.7 million Filipinos living abroad, of which 4.1 million are classified as temporary residents or those whose stay are employment-based and who are expected to return to the Philippines after the end of their contracts.

A significant proportion of contract workers are in Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. Together, these two countries account for a combined share of more than one-third of overseas Filipino workers. Among the permanent residents, more than two-thirds are in the United States.

But other than the economic relevance of overseas Filipino workers, our government also recognizes that the of phenomenon has far-reaching implications on Philippine society. As we advocate for a strong international effort to protect migrants, we also recognize the need for government-civil society collaboration to help of families adjust to the difficulties of separation from family.

We are also implementing programs that will help prepare migrant Filipinos for their lives abroad, so that they can be positive agents of development in their host countries.

Recognizing shared responsibilities

Second, migration and development are shared responsibilities of the countries of origin and destination. We know that one of the more tricky aspects of managing migration is the need for coordination between two governments.

Let me, therefore, digress a bit and point you to recent events in the global economy. The turmoil created by the sub-prime lending problem and the subsequent ripple effects felt in markets all over the world have forced our policy-makers to re-think the way we should design policies in the future.

Of course, describing the impact as mere ripples is an understatement. In some areas, financial waves of tidal proportion would be a more appropriate description.

But if there is anything good that may come out of this global problem, it is this: that today, more than ever, decision-makers all over the world realize that we need to work together; that policy actions should be coordinated; and, that timing of responses should be made in consultation with everyone else.

We have entered the era of shared responsibilities in stabilizing the financial sector and preventing its total meltdown.

The same is true in the migration and development nexus.

In almost all round-table discussions, the importance of collaboration at an international level was often raised, as is the need for a strong non-government component.

This is the other aspect of the paradigm of shared responsibility that we in the Philippines are working on: the cooperation between government and civil society.

Such perspective has worked well for the housing sector, of which I am most familiar with.

Through a strong collaborative effort, we in the Philippine government housing sector were able to pursue a relocation program that is beneficiary-led and private-sector supported.

So far, the approach has enabled us to implement the most massive relocation program in the country in contemporary Philippine history, where more than 55 thousand families were moved out of danger areas along railroad tracks north and south of metro manila in a span of three years, paving the way for current and future development of the railway system itself.

Thus, in order to create an environment that will protect and empower migrants for development, the level of networking should not only be between countries and governments, or even among government agencies of different countries, but also between institutions of the state and civil society.

We should be able to engage non-government actors in all stages of the migration life-cycle.

We should work with them to address the many challenges of migration and development and in setting-up support programs for migrants and their families, such as access to information abroad, skills upgrading, and livelihood assistance.

Let me at this point express my support to the recommendations of the no community as presented in plenary yesterday.

I join them in making the call for governments to seriously undertake measures that will protect, support and empower migrant workers abroad.

In this regard, let me also reiterate our government's commitment to the manila call to action in the recently concluded international conference on gender, migration and development.

In particular, we intend to continue working towards the implementation of the following: gender-sensitive information dissemination and pre-departure programs for migrants, complete socio-economic and psychosocial reintegration of women migrants, legal protection for domestic workers, sex-disaggregated data on remittances, and stronger implementation of anti-trafficking laws.

We urge other countries to do the same.

What I have shared with you is the new outlook of Philippine policy-makers. As president arroyo mentioned during her opening statement, we are looking at policy from the standpoint of the three D's: demography, development, and democracy.

The multi-faceted nature of migration and development requires that we view migration and development from several dimensions simultaneously, and avoid the linear thinking that dominated the ways of the past.

Learning from best practices

And third, this year's conference provided a platform for the sharing of best practices among the participants. We have gone beyond the "what's" and the "why's" of mainstreaming migration policy. That has been firmly established when the major players in global migration policy decided to pursue this global forum.

Today, we are more interested in the "how's" --- how to include migration in national and local development strategies. How to circulate the skills of migrant workers back to the source countries. How to measure the effectiveness of international efforts to protect migrant workers, and so on.

When the preparations for this global forum were discussed at the cabinet, one of the expected outcomes mentioned was the development of practical models, tool kits, and adaptable formula from best practices that are emerging all over the world.

I hope you will agree with me when I say that we are definitely moving in that direction.

We have shifted our focus from the realm of public policy to governance, from macro plans to specific programs and projects that can be seen on the ground and felt by our people.

Let us now move one step further and ensure that programs for migrants are properly and sufficiently funded. Now let us move from the realm of policy design and advocacy towards resource generation.

In the future, we will use the lessons from best practices to forge expanded partnership agreements so that we can effectively address the needs of migrant workers, protect their rights, manage temporary contractual mobility, and improve remittance policies.

I assure you, you will hear from us.

Passing on the torch

Before I end this statement, allow me to extend my best wishes to the government and people of Greece, who will carry the torch of migration and development as the next chairman of the forum. Let me also thank the outgoing chair, Belgium, for bringing us to where we are today.

I am confident that the future of this forum remains bright. We look forward to another fruitful conference in Athens in 2009.

In the meantime, it is "back to work" for all of us.

Thank you. Good evening and mabuhay!

