

Overseas Filipino Workers in Belgium and their information needs¹

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Abstract: This essay will look into the historical roots of Philippine migration to Belgium and provide the status and mode of migration including the different types of migrant workers. A historical appreciation of Filipino migration allows the reader to fully appreciate and understand the basis of information requirements, needs and practices of overseas Filipina/o workers (OFWs) in Belgium.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of Philippine migration can be traced to four phases dating back to the 1900s, where the First Wave of Filipino migrants crossed the Pacific to the United States to work as plantation workers in the US territories of Guam and Hawaii. The Second Wave arrived in the United States, professionals mostly, doctors, teachers, graduate students. The Third Wave was an out migration of mostly male skilled and semi-skilled workers to work in the Middle East in light of the oil boom. The Fourth Wave in the 1990s witnessed an exodus of women and undocumented workers deployed in Asia, Middle East and Europe. It is therefore not surprising that since 1992, service and production workers have consistently topped deployment of OFWs abroad; likewise, there has been a steady increase of women migrant workers particularly in the service sector (ECMI n.d.).

DEFINITIONS, STATUS OF MIGRANTS, AND MODE OF MIGRATION

Definition

An Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) is categorised as a migrant worker who, as defined by the United Nations (UN) “is a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national” (ECMI 1995, PMRW 1997), for a temporary period of time (AMC and MFA 2000). Hence, an OFW as the term suggests, is a Filipina/o who moves across international borders specifically, for employment purposes.

Legal Status

From the perspective of governments and legal authorities, the legal status of migrants is classified as:

¹**Source:** del Rosario, Ma. Josefina C. (2001), “Information, ICTs and Migrant Workers: The Experience of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Belgium” unpublished dissertation, IDPM, University of Manchester.

Regular/legal migrants - those who travel with legal papers and have a valid visa and where their entry is authorised by the receiving country (AMC and MFA 2000).

Irregular/illegal migrants - those who travel without legal travel documents or valid visas, e.g. those who used forged travel documents and work under fake or illegally substituted or non-existent contracts. Receiving countries also refer to these migrants as illegal aliens or clandestine workers (AMC and MFA 2000).

Mode of Migration

Documented or contract migrant workers are those who go overseas through authorised channels for employment (AMC and MFA 2000). The same terminology is used to classify those who possess a work or residence permit obtained through an amnesty, as has been the case in Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, United States and most recently, the regularisation programme² in Belgium.

Undocumented migrants are those who:

- migrate through unauthorised channels
- originally have a visa to stay but subsequently decide to stay and/or work illegally
- originally had legal status in the host country but due to changes in policy or laws end up becoming unauthorised
- continue to stay beyond the visa or limit of stay and opted to remain in the host country without getting proper visa extension
- have children and family members of undocumented migrants
- are trafficked or smuggled persons (AMC and MFA 2000).

From hereon, the terms '*documented and undocumented worker*' will be used to describe those migrant workers with and without legal status in the receiving country, respectively.

Types of Overseas Filipino Workers

To distinguish the different types of Filipina/os working overseas, the Philippine Government categorised OFWs by skill or occupation groups, namely (POEA 1998, NSO 2001):

- Professional and technical
- Managerial
- Clerical
- Sales
- Service
- Agricultural
- Production

² Regularisation means to legalise the status of irregular and clandestine workers, as is the case in Belgium, which began in 1999.

- Others/Invalid category

Based on the figures provided by the *Philippine Overseas Employment Administration* (POEA)³, the three occupation groups which have consistently topped deployment of Filipinos overseas for the same period are (AMC and MFA 2000; NSO 2001; POEA 1998):

Service workers - those engaged in: domestic/housekeeping work; building caretakers, cleaners and related workers; hairdressers, barbers, beauticians and related workers; service workers (hotel/restaurant workers, drivers, etc.) and protective service workers (NSO 2001).

Production workers - those engaged in production and related work; equipment operators and labourers; transport equipment; construction, electrical, structural erectors and general maintenance; machinery and assembly; labourers, tailors, dressmakers and related workers; blacksmiths, toolmakers and machine operators and related workers; food and beverages processors; furniture makers and related workers; and stationary engine and related equipment operators (NSO 2001).

Professional and technical workers - those trained in the medical, dental and veterinary fields; architects, engineers and related technicians; composers and performing artists; aircraft and ships' officers; sculptors, painters, photographers and related creative artists; teachers; mathematicians, statisticians, IT professionals and related workers (NSO 2001).

Between 1992 to 1998, according to POEA figures, service and production workers interchangeably placed first and second in terms of largest occupation groups deployed during the seven-year period. In 1992, women migrant workers comprised 82% of the service sector while men made up 95% of production workers. While women migrant workers in the service sector continually increased over the seven-year period, reaching 91% in 1998, men in the production service had decreased to 79% during the same year. Interestingly, women migrant workers in the production sector steadily increased from a modest 5% in 1992 to 21% in 1998, while men migrant workers in the service sector decreased from 18% in 1992 to 9% in 1998.

Professional and technical workers constantly ranked third largest of OFWs deployment also for the period of 1992-1998. Except for the year 1996, women averaged 74%, while men 26%. Judging from these figures over the seven-year period, the proportion of women migrant workers has progressively increased giving credence to the “feminisation of Filipino migrant labour migration” (Go 1998 p.147).

PROFILE OF OFWS IN BELGIUM

Historical Background

³ Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) is one of three government agencies responsible for overseeing the government overseas employment programme.

“The first wave of OFWs to Belgium were nurses deployed in the region of Charleroi and only a handful of students and professionals in the late sixties...Some were later rejoined by their spouses. Together, they numbered less than a hundred” (Samahan 1994). “When the [Philippine] government launched its overseas employment programme in the 1970s, millions of Filipinos found themselves in some 130 countries all over the world (Tornea 1988)”. OFWs slowly began to surface on Belgian territory, a country and culture unknown to Filipinos. The diplomatic corps and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) personnel households, hotels, embassies, consulates and entertainment industry (i.e. clubs, bars) were primary sources of employment of these OFWs (Samahan 1994).

“According to the Belgian Statistics Bureau, as of 1991, of the 900,855 registered aliens (including EC nationals), legal Filipina/os including children numbered only 1,461 or 0.16%, of which 376 or 36% are male and 1,085 or 74% are female. As of 1994, the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs registered 1,500 Filipina/os working for the diplomatic corps as service staff personnel” (Samahan 1994). However in 1990 and 1992, the Samahan⁴---an independent association of migrant workers in Belgium---conducted two surveys to determine the number of Filipinos residing in Belgium.

Though the results are inconclusive given that only 410 responded of which the majority were documented OFWs, official figures furnished by the Belgian authorities, and the Samahan’s ‘guesstimate’ pegged the total of Filipina/os residing in Belgium at 4,000. A ratio of 50:50 documented to undocumented workers, and a gendered ratio of 70:30 women to men existed in 1994. Of the 4,000 OFWs, the overwhelming majority or 93% worked in the service and production sectors (Samahan 1994).

Between the period of 1996 to 2000, based on figures from the Belgian National Institute of Statistics (INS), there has been a steady increase of Filipinos (both genders) in Belgium. The number of men however, doubled from 1996 to 1997 while, women overwhelmingly make up at least 75% of the total Filipino population in Belgium. As of January 2000, there was a total of 3,074 in Belgium of which 75% are women and 25% are men (INS 2000). This figure includes students, those who came to join their Belgian spouses, and those directly hired by the private sector but does not include undocumented workers and their families. Therefore, the ‘guesstimated’ total number of Filipina/os in Belgium as of January 2000 would be around 6,000. Women outnumber men with a ratio of 75:25 women to men.

As in the previous years, the majority of Filipina/os in Belgium work in the service/domestic and production sectors.

About the Respondents

⁴ Samahan ng Manggagawang Pilipino sa Belgium referred to as Samahan, is an independent and democratic association of Filipina/o migrant workers. Established in 1983, the Samahan was the first and to date, most experienced of Filipino associations in Belgium on issues and welfare of migrant workers. Its membership is made up of OFWs in service, production, professional and technical sectors.

For this study, a survey was conducted among 48 OFWs who primarily came to Belgium for employment purposes. Others became migrant workers but started as students, while others joined their Belgian spouses (Samahan 1994).

From the sample of 48 respondents, 58% of respondents are women and 42% are men. The majority of the population is middle age and at least 73% are married. However, younger age groups that tend to be particularly heavy users of ICTs⁵ are underrepresented. This is an important factor in determining the ICT needs of migrant workers.

Regional and language groups

Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao are the three main islands of the Philippine, each comprising of several regions. Luzon, where the national capital region of Metro Manila is located, is the largest of the three islands in terms of population density and has the largest number of regions. It is not surprising then that 88% of respondents originated from Luzon while the remaining 12% come from the Visayas. There is no data for migrant workers originating from Mindanao.

While English is widely spoken in the Philippines, local or indigenous dialects are still spoken. Pilipino, which is based on the Tagalog language, remains to be the national language. However, there is usually one common dialect spoken among those belonging to the same region. From the sample of respondents, Pilipino or Tagalog (35%) only came second to Ilocano with 50% speakers. The remaining 15% from the Visayas speak at least 4 different dialects.

To date, the choice of Pilipino/Tagalog as the national language remains a controversy in Belgium, as there are more Ilocano and Visayan speakers than there are Tagalog speakers. Hence it is not surprising that 27% of the respondents chose English as their language of preference in oral and written form.

Legal Status

From the sample of 48 respondents, 71% are documented workers, 19% are undocumented workers, and the remaining 10% are naturalised Belgians. It should be noted that undocumented workers are underrepresented in this survey.

Sector

83% of surveyed migrants are service workers, 15% are professional and technical workers and the remaining 2% are production workers. Therefore, only three out of the

⁵ Information and communication technologies are defined as the electronic means of handling information such as capturing, processing, storing and communicating information (Heeks 2000b; Heeks and Duncombe 2001). "ICTs include telecommunications technologies, such as telephony, cable, satellite and radio, as well as digital technologies, such as computers, information networks and software" (CIDITG 2000).

eight skill categories mentioned above will be used throughout this essay, as these are most appropriate given the composition of OFWs in Belgium.

An exception is a husband and wife team among the service workers both of whom hold two jobs. While maintaining their status of service worker for legal purposes, the couple runs two very lucrative businesses in Brussels: a door-to-door air freight service to the Philippines and a small store selling Philippine products. Both are pioneer ventures in Belgium. This trend is increasingly becoming popular among OFWs who, in addition to regular jobs, are also engaged in very small entrepreneurial ventures such as private catering, door-to-door sales (i.e., jewellery, cosmetics), or moonlighting in related work, e.g., hairdressing, tailoring/dressmaking, and the like. These multiple occupations among migrants make sectoral categorisation of OFWs problematic.

Educational Background

The Philippines continues to boast of a highly educated workforce. OFWs in Belgium are no exception in that 71% of respondents have entered university. The high level of education among OFWs will likely have an influence on their information and communication behaviours, and on their relationship to ICTs.

Reasons for Migration

The Philippines is one of several countries with an outstanding policy to send workers abroad to curb unemployment and gain much needed foreign currency from the remittances of OFWs to pay for imports (Go 1998). Dubbed as the “modern-day heroes”, Filipina/os continue to be driven across international borders primarily to seek employment. Table 1 illustrates specific reasons cited by OFWs’ in Belgium.

Table 1. Reasons for Migrating to Belgium	Percentage
• Economic or employment reasons	68%
• Family and employment	8%
• Initially followed spouse or family member and eventually sought employment	6%
• Married Belgian fiancé and joined migrant labour force;	6%
• Opportunity to work (both are professional and technical sector)	4%
• Originally students who subsequently decided to stay and work	4%
• Adventure to live abroad	4%

Economics is still the main driver for migration⁶, in particular, the opportunity for migrants to send remittances back home to support the financial requirements of their families. 94% of respondents sent money to their families in the Philippines. 69% send remittances on a regular basis.

The Philippines has immensely benefited from its labour export industry in general and particularly from its remittances in alleviating economic problems of the country (AMC and MFA 2000).

Affiliation and Religion

Filipinos have been known to adopt and adjust to the living and working conditions of host countries particularly in the west and industrialised countries, largely due to the support of the community of Filipino migrant workers: a melange of civic, religious and regional groups. Of the respondents, only 23% did not belong to any group while 77% belonged to one or even have triple memberships.

When asked on the motives for joining a group, the respondents cited support and camaraderie and sense of belonging—all of which cuts through religious, civic and regional boundaries as primary reasons. However, an integral part of the Filipino identity is religion. Filipinos are a deeply religious people (ECMI n.d.), thus it is not surprising that a proportion of the OFWs in Belgium (36%) turned to religious groupings for spiritual guidance and assurance. Moreover, Filipinos abroad are constantly reminded of the proverb “[s/]he who does not look back to [her]/his origins cannot move forward”. It is no wonder that OFWs have a very strong sense of ‘giving back something’ or ‘taking care’ of the community s/he left behind in the Philippines, and more recently, an increasing consciousness to “preserve cultural and indigenous identity” among regional groups. Groups therefore play an important role in the lives of OFWs and therefore, influence OFWs information and communication practices.

THE ROLE OF INFORMATION

While the focus of this section will largely concentrate on ‘information’, it is nonetheless important to distinguish the difference between *data*, *information* and *knowledge*---three concepts that are erroneously believed to mean the same but are nonetheless related. To understand how these three concepts relate to each other and the generic role of information, a model illustrating how information leads to learning and decision-making will be presented.

Using the framework developed by Heeks and Duncombe (2001), this essay will discuss the importance of information to OFWs, as well as examine the content of information and how it is provided by organisations against the actual needs, sources and channels of information of OFWs. Further, this essay addresses two related issues, namely: Do

⁶ As will be discussed in the succeeding sections, OFWs’ reasons’ for migration determine their information requirements and practices.

organisations⁷---*information providers* meet the actual needs of the OFWs---*information recipients?*; and OFWs' use of formal and informal information.

Heeks Information Cycle Model

Information has no formal value or benefit for individuals and organisations if it does not result in decisions and actions. Heeks' model of how information is actually used in the real world (Heeks 2000a; 2000b) shows that data is initially captured from the real world then processed or shaped to become useful to the recipient. This processed data then becomes information. Once assimilated by the recipient, information is stored in the human mind and transformed into knowledge; thus a process of learning and discovery occurs. The end result of this process is where the recipient makes a choice (decision-making) and implements (action) (Heeks 2000a; 2000b).

WHY IS INFORMATION IMPORTANT TO OFWS AND WHERE IS IT CRITICAL?

Widely dispersed, isolated, de-skilled and marginalised are characteristic of the plight of OFWs. It is precisely for these reasons that OFWs lack or suffer from non-access and non-availability of information (Duncombe and Heeks 2001c; de Guzman 1996). Though not entirely their sole responsibility or fault, ignorance of the law, rights and responsibilities combined with the lack or absence of adequate information particularly on the realities of working abroad, these have partly contributed to the situation they find themselves in today as experienced by organisations that have been working with OFWs for a long time. These in turn result in bad decisions, making and/or repeating the same mistakes that could have been avoided. Consequently, learning does not take place thus leading to further isolation and marginalisation of individual OFWs.

One of the painful consequences of migration is the “de-skilling” of OFWs. OFWs themselves recognise that as a result of prolonged employment in the service/domestic sector and related work, they have become de-skilled, thus suffer from '*bobification*'⁸ which literally means '*dumbification*'. When learning does not take place, the de-skilling of OFWs is further accelerated.

Considering their precarious situation, OFWs therefore suffer from “information-poverty” (Heeks and Duncombe 2001) particularly those in the service/domestic and production sectors. Access to information means having the right information at the right time, knowing one's choices, rights and obligations that ensures informed decision-making and taking better control of one's life; it also means becoming better informed

⁷ Interviews were conducted with three organisations based in the Philippines that have a long working history with migrant workers and a survey of OFWs in Belgium. Refer to the section on methods in the Introduction.

⁸ '*Bobification*' a combination of Tagalog and English words popularly known as Taglish among Filipinos where the word 'bobo' literally means dumb. It is a term coined by Filipina/os describing OFWs who have been de-skilled as a direct result of working in the service/domestic sector, where one's academic qualification is not used; it describes the state when the intellect is out of practice.

citizens actively taking part in public processes so that the quality of life is improved (Fuchs 1998). Information therefore, is critical to the survival of OFWs not only in terms of learning and decision-making but also (re)connecting to the world they left behind and community-building in their adopted country.

OFWs' INFORMATION NEEDS, CHANNELS AND LANGUAGE

INFORMATION PROVIDERS

The three organisations interviewed in the Philippines were namely, people's organisation, church-based organisation, and a religious and charitable organisation based in the academe. All three provide direct services to departing and returning OFWs and their families and offer a wide range of services. Whilst these organisations are experienced and knowledgeable of the plight of OFWs, the nature of their organisations and their affiliations heavily influence the services they are able to provide to OFWs. However, they all consider OFWs/migrant workers, migrant workers' organisations, Church based organisations and Church groups, international organisations⁹ and NGOs, government agencies and media as their most important sources of information.

INFORMATION CONTENT

Types of Information seen to be needed by OFWs

The following are what the three Philippine-based organisations deemed as information requirements of OFWs:

Essential information

- *Pre-departure orientation*
 - rights of migrant workers and those related to laws governing foreign workers
 - contacts such as extended family system or network of OFWs such as groups and/or people to contact in case of emergency and places or centres where migrants/OFWs regularly meet, e.g., church, support groups
 - referral to reliable remittance office or bank
 - job opportunities

- *Reintegration programme for returning OFWs*
 - national situation
 - livelihood programmes
 - skills training
 - counselling

⁹ International organisations include United Nations and attached agencies, International Labour Organisation (ILO), International Organisation for Migration (IOM), International Catholic Migration Centre (ICMC) and the like including non-government organisations (NGOs).

Very important to know

- *Pre-departure*
 - contact details of Philippine embassy and consulate in the host country
 - culture, living and working conditions of host country
 - stories and experiences of other OFWs
 - gender issues and laws against discrimination

Where do OFWs lack the most information

Essential information

Ironically, despite numerous information packets, seminars and orientation sessions offered by organisations, OFWs are still unaware of the rights of migrant workers and laws governing foreign workers in the host country.

Culture, living and working conditions of the host country, stories and experiences of other OFWs particularly, negative incidents and gender issues and laws against discrimination are virtually unknown to OFWs prior to departure. Although the Philippine Government conducts pre-departure orientation for all contract and documented workers, these seminars are, according to the respondent organisations, too general and vague. Consequently, harsh realities are learned through first hand experience while living and working in the host country.

INFORMATION CHANNELS

ICTs are not the only information handlers (Duncombe and Heeks 1999; Heeks 1999). “ICTs are based on digital information held as 1s and 0s, and comprise of computer hardware, software and networks. Other types of information-handling technologies are:

- *Organic* technology based solely on the human body such as the brain and sound waves.
- *Intermediate* technology, still based largely on analogue information held as electromagnetic waves such as radio, television and telephone.
- *Literate* technology, based on information held as the written word such as books and newspapers” (Heeks 1999 p.3).

Findings suggest the following channels were deemed most effective by the three information providers referred to above:

- *Organic*: face-to-face meetings, seminars, consultations and word-of-mouth where OFWs themselves pass on the information to their fellow OFWs, friends and families
- *Intermediate*: video showing and radio programmes
- *Literate*: leaflets and brochures to include services offered by the organisations
- *Digital*: email and Web

Differences

Differences between organisations lie in their use of email and Websites, which are deemed ineffective by the church based and people's organisations for two reasons: first, high costs of Internet connection in the Philippines; and second, digital channel caters mainly to the IT-literate who are mostly the professional OFWs and not the OFWs in the service/domestic and production sectors. Both these organisations rated video and radio programmes as the two most effective channels of disseminating information to OFWs.

INFORMATION LANGUAGE

Language plays a definitive role in information gathering, dissemination, exchange and communication especially when catering to the needs of OFWs originating from 111 linguistic, cultural and indigenous groups in the Philippines speaking a total of 11 major dialects and 87 other dialects (St. Jaret n.d.). Since Tagalog is the second largest spoken dialect and English continues to be the language of business and government and medium of instruction, information materials are largely produced in English. Depending on the budget and content, organisations in the Philippines translate a selection of materials such as videos and leaflets into the major dialects. Taglish, a mixture of the Tagalog dialect and English language, is a very common form of informal communication.

While evidence seem to point to English as a workable medium for both information providers and recipients, actual practice with OFWs suggests Taglish as a more effective language for both official and personal matters whether Philippine or Belgian in origin. As an example, the survey of OFWs for this study was written solely in English but had to be explained to respondents in Taglish; other activities with OFWs in Belgium continue to be conducted in Taglish. Hence there seems to be a slight contradiction between what OFWs say as their preferred language against actual practice.

When analysing overall information needs of OFWs---content, sources, channel and language, findings strongly suggest a mismatch between what is being provided by organisations based in the Philippines against what actually happens on the ground and what OFWs say are their preferences. What OFWs say they prefer or need versus how they actually behave are two entirely different matters and should therefore be factored in any analysis of their information needs.

OFWs' INFORMATION SYSTEMS

From the survey of OFWs in Belgium, typically, information they require emanates from two principal sources namely, the country of origin and the adopted country, in this case the Philippines and Belgium, respectively. Hence, the content, source and channel will necessarily vary, but the *information recipients* are the same—OFWs of which the majority is in the service/domestic sector.

INFORMATION CONTENT**Philippines**

Five types of information needs originating from the Philippines were identified and ranked by importance followed by how often OFWs received the information, channel and language used. A summary of the ranking shown in Table 2 below is based on the average score¹⁰ of each the item, 5 being the highest and 1 as the least significant.

As far as *content* is concerned, there is no comparison between what organisations consider to be the information requirements of OFWs---laws, migrants' rights---and what OFWs regard as most important items of information---news from family and current events. Both are equally important pieces of information for OFWs. These types of information enable OFWs to make better informed decisions, which thus lead to actions that can improve the quality of their life. News about family and current events in the Philippines are more accessible to OFWs than information on the rights of migrant workers and laws governing foreign workers, which information providers are able to supply. Government initiatives¹¹ for OFWs and news about fellow migrant workers are least significant for OFWs, and a good number of the respondents felt the government has not done much for their welfare in spite of the fact OFWs are the single largest foreign currency earner of the country.

Table 2: Summary of Philippine based Information Items

PHILIPPINES					
Rank	Average Score	Information Item	Frequency	Channel	Language
1	4.4	News from family, friends and loved ones	46% weekly 23% daily	65% telephone 17% telephone and email	30% Tagalog 28% Ilocano
2	3.6	News/current events (political, social, economic affairs)	56% daily 25% weekly	33% television 21% Internet 15% news-papers	41% English 19% Taglish
3	2.6	Receipt of remittances	48% monthly 27% as needed	74% telephone	27% Tagalog 23% Ilocano
4	2.3	General news on OFWs	38% weekly 23% monthly	31% print media 28% groups and friends	40% English 21% Taglish
5	2.0	Government initiatives/ programmes for OFWs	31% weekly 27% monthly	31% print media 25% groups and friends	42% English

¹⁰ Each subsection namely, Information Content, Source of Information and Channel of Information has items which were ranked by respondents according to its importance or usefulness, 1 being the most important and 6 as the least important. Each rank was then assigned points with rank 1 receiving the highest score of 6 while rank 6 received the lowest score of 1. The total score of that rank was then multiplied by the number of respondents for that rank.

¹¹ Refer to Table 1, Reasons for migration.

Findings suggest that OFWs adapt the *language* they use to the type of information they need. For example, news and information about the family and friends are usually in the language or dialect they are accustomed to. Information that relates to the current events or more official in nature such rights of migrants and laws governing foreign workers are in English. While providers are consistent in their use of the English language, in 3 of the 5 information items mentioned above, OFWs cited Taglish (an innovation as it is a mixture of the national language Tagalog and English, which is fairly commonly used as it is in fact the *lingua franca* of the Philippines, ed.) as the language used.

Other than the Internet and solely for current events, there is a very low usage of *ICTs* (*information and communication technology*) among OFWs. Information providers however, claim that intermediate technology such as video and radio programme are the most effective media of information dissemination and communication with OFWs. However, the more ‘traditional’ means such as the telephone, television and print media are predominantly used by OFWs, thus a *mismatch* between what the information providers claim and actual practice of OFWs.

Findings clearly show OFWs’ reliance on *informal channels* such as the telephone and groups, family and friends rather than formal channels such as institutions and organisations. This is clearly the case for both personal and ‘official’ types of information where government agencies, NGOs and the like were not cited as channels of information in any of the 5 items above.

Belgium

As with information items originating from the Philippines, five types of information needs originating from Belgium were also identified and ranked according to the average score of each item, followed by how often OFWs received the information, channel and language they used.

With regard to *content*, the three Philippine-based organisations provide information on laws governing foreign workers. However, it is highly unlikely to include ways to legalise OFWs’ stay in the host country. Both OFWs and organisations considered jobs as an important piece of information however, what organisations provide are general trends and not specific job openings or vacancies, which OFWs actually seek. Hence, information provided by Philippine based organisations is still inadequate.

Table 3: Summary of Belgian based Information Items

BELGIUM					
Rank	Average Score	Information Item	Frequency	Channel	Language
1	4.2	Ways to legally stay in	44% monthly	46% groups	42% English

		Belgium	21% weekly	27% television 27% print media	19% Tagalog
2	4.2	Jobs	33% weekly 28% daily 23% monthly	47% groups 32% referrals from friends	38% English 21% Tagalog
3	2.8	Activities/events organised by groups/ associations	48% weekly 31% monthly	78% groups 12% Philippine Chaplaincy	35% Taglish 25% Tagalog 20% English
4	1.9	Currency exchange rate	42% monthly 25% daily	45% bureau de change 23% groups	51% English 21% Tagalog
5	1.6	Philippine Embassy procedures and fees	42% very rare 27% monthly	56% groups or friends 23% Philip- pine Embassy	42% Taglish 25% English

As with news and information relating to the Philippines, OFWs adapt the *language* they use to the type of information they require. For example, information about activities of groups is in Taglish or a dialect, while those pertaining to ways to legally reside in Belgium are in English. Taglish figured in 3 of the 5 information items.

The use of *ICTs* among OFWs in obtaining these types of information was virtually non-existent. Yet again, OFWs used the more ‘traditional’ channels. For example, 4 out of 5 information items were sourced through or obtained from friends and groups; only the item on ‘ways to legalise stay in Belgium’ were found out through the television and print media.

Findings indicate a strong dependence on *informal channels* (e.g., peer groups, family and friends) rather than formal channels, i.e., institutions and organisations. This is clearly the case for all of the 5 information items stated above. Hence, it is not surprising that information on activities or events organised by groups were ranked more important by OFWs than those coming from the Philippine government.

INFORMATION SOURCE

Six types of sources of information were identified namely:

- *Fellow OFW/migrant worker, friends and relatives*
- *Institutions* (Church, Philippine Chaplaincy, local and international NGOs)
- *Media* (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc.)
- *Philippine Embassy*
- *Internet*
- *Groups* (civic, religious and regional)

Respondents ranked each source, 1 being the most significant and 6 least important source in improving the quality of their life in Belgium. Below is a summary of their responses where the ranking is also based on average score for each item. Additionally, differences between the women and men and between age groups are noted below. It should be noted that of the respondents, 58% are women and 42% are men, of which the majority are middle age. Therefore, the difference in age groups is between those below and above 40 years old.

Overall, fellow OFWs/migrant workers, friends and relatives, and civic, religious and regional groups topped the list of OFWs most important sources of information, each garnering an average score of 4.1, as shown in Figure 2d below

Table 4: Overall OFWs’ Ranking of Sources of Information

Rank	Average Score	Sources
1	4.1	Fellow OFW/migrant workers, friends and relatives Groups (civic, religious and regional)
2	3.9	Institutions (Church, Philippine Chaplaincy, local and international NGOs)
3	3.8	Media (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc.)
4	2.6	Philippine Embassy Internet

While women ranked groups as the most important source of information, men ranked it second only. Men ranked fellow OFW/migrant worker, friends and relatives as the most important source while women ranked it second. Refer to Table 5 below. The same trend can be seen from the secondary sources where women’s ranking is the reverse of men’s ranking.

Table 5: Men and Women OFWs’ Ranking of Sources of Information

WOMEN			MEN		
Rank	Average Score	Source	Rank	Average score	Source
1	4.3	Groups	1	4	Fellow OFW/migrant worker, friends and relatives
2	4.1	Fellow OFW/migrant worker, friends and relatives	2	3.9	Groups
3	4.0	Institutions	3	3.7	Institutions Media
4	3.8	Media	4	3.1	Internet

5	2.6	Philippine Embassy	5	2.7	Philippine Embassy
6	2.3	Internet			

For respondents below 40 years old, their most important sources of information were fellow OFW/migrant worker, friends and relatives. In contrast, those over 40 years old ranked groups as the most important source of information. See Table 6 below. Also, respondents below 40 years old ranked both groups and institutions as second most important source while those over 40 years old, ranked both institutions and media as third most important source.

Table 6: OFWs' Age Groups' Ranking of Sources of Information

BELOW 40 YEARS OLD			OVER 40 YEARS OLD		
Rank	Average Score	Source	Rank	Average score	Source
1	4.1	Fellow OFW/migrant worker, friends and relatives	1	4.5	Groups
2	3.8	Groups Institutions	2	4.1	Fellow OFW/migrant worker, friends and relatives
3	3.6	Media	3	3.9	Institutions Media
4	3.1	Internet	4	2.6	Philippine Embassy
5	2.7	Philippine Embassy	5	2.3	Internet

Overall, there is no significant difference between women and men and between the age groups (below and over 40 years old) with respect to their sources of information. OFWs/migrant workers and groups consistently ranked the top 2 most important sources of information. Media and institutions likewise ranked third and fourth most important source of information. The Philippine Embassy and the Internet were the least important sources of information. However, those below 40 years old considered the Internet a more important source than the Philippine Embassy and men also gave the Internet a higher ranking as compared to women. Therefore, findings at least fit with more general findings that the Internet is more widely used by men than women, and by younger rather than older users. Overall though, it is not surprising that the Internet ranked least important source because the majority of respondents do not know how to use it. From the results, it is evident that informal networks such as groups and fellow OFWs, friends and relatives, are a key source of information.

INFORMATION CHANNELS

The channels of information and communication by which OFWs acquire news from the Philippines and information on matters relating to their daily life in Belgium were identified as follows: *organic, literate, intermediate and digital* (Heeks and Duncombe 2001). Below is an indication of OFWs preferred channel of communication where respondents were asked to rank them from 1 being the most useful and 4 as the least useful channel of information. As with the previous subsections, average scoring was applied.

Organic and intermediate channels are the top two most useful means of information and communication among the respondents and with only slight differences in the average scores. See Table 7 below.

Table 7: Overall OFWs’ Ranking of Channels of Information

Overall Rank	Average Score	Channel
1	2.9	Organic (word of mouth, face to face, meetings, seminars, etc.)
2	2.7	Intermediate (television, radio, telephone, fax)
3	2.5	Literate (print media)
4	1.9	Digital (Internet, email)

There is no difference between women and men in their ranking of organic and intermediate channels as their top 2 preferred means of information and communication other than in average score. Men however ranked both literate and digital as third preference while women ranked them third and fourth, respectively. See Table 8 below.

Table 8: Men and Women OFWs’ Ranking of Channels of Information

WOMEN			MEN		
Rank	Average Score	Channel	Rank	Average score	Channel
1	2.9	Organic	1	3.1	Organic
2	2.8	Intermediate	2	2.6	Intermediate
3	2.7	Literate	3	2.3	Literate
4	1.7	Digital			Digital

While both age groups ranked organic channels as their preferred means of information and communication, those below 40 years also gave intermediate channel equal ranking. On the other hand, those over 40 years old ranked intermediate and literate as second most useful channel. See Table 9 below.

Table 9: OFWs Ranking of Channels of Information according to Age Group

BELOW 40 YEARS OLD			OVER 40 YEARS OLD		
Rank	Average Score	Channel	Rank	Average score	Channel
1	2.8	Organic Intermediate	1	3.1	Organic
2	2.4	Literate	2	2.6	Intermediate Literate
3	2.3	Digital	3	1.7	Digital

Overall, there is not much difference in the ranking of the four channels of information. The organic channel has consistently topped as the most useful means of information and communication among women and men, and among those below and above 40 years old. Either intermediate or literate channel came a close second while digital channel consistently came last except for the men, who ranked both digital and literate channels third. It is not surprising that digital means came last considering that the majority of respondents have requested training in ICTs. As before, digital channels are rated more highly by men than women, and by younger rather than older respondents.

While information providers deem intermediate channels---video and radio programme as the most effective means for disseminating information, OFWs rated organic channels (word of mouth, face-to-face) as their preferred means of information and communication.

CONCLUSIONS

Provisions versus Actual Needs

Looking at the results above, there is evidently a mismatch between what and how organisations are providing information and the actual needs and behaviour of OFWs. While recognising the precarious situation of OFWs all over the world, it is not surprising that Philippine based organisations concentrate on informing OFWs principally of their rights and laws governing foreign workers in the receiving countries. Moreover, organisations have increased efforts in tailoring pre-departure orientations according to the country of destination of OFWs. However, evidence shows that job opportunities abroad and ways to legally stay in the host country are the primary concern of OFWs in Belgium. Information providers confirm this to be the case also for returning migrants who immediately seek ways of finding new employment abroad. Perhaps these are the only pieces of information that would in reality matter to OFWs.

Behaviour of OFWs

The majority of OFWs only begin to care or learn about basic information such as rights and laws by force of circumstances. “It is only when they get into trouble that they learn about migrants’ rights and laws in the host country” as observed by one organisation that has been working with migrants all over the world the past 45 years. It is a commonly held view not only by migrant organisations but also among OFWs in Belgium and elsewhere.

While there is a strong preference for English, it should be noted that this is partly due to the respondents’ comprehension of French, one of the official languages in Belgium in which 80% of respondents are only at basic or beginner level. It is not surprising then that when asked about which language OFWs prefer to receive information either from the Philippines or Belgium, 35% replied English, 29% Taglish, 19% combined English and their dialect and 15% Tagalog. While English seem to be the preferred medium, in practice, all seminars, announcements, meetings etc., are conducted in Taglish. At the same time, important pieces of information in English are always discussed with OFWs in Taglish. Therefore, the predominant use of the English language by information providers does not match OFWs’ actual practice of using Taglish.

Low Usage of ICTs

The low usage of ICTs among OFWs is not surprising. 96% of respondents expressed a need for hands on training in ICTs. OFWs, regardless of gender, prefer the organic channel as their preferred means of communication. Intermediate channel which was ranked second by respondents was deemed a highly effective channel of disseminating information as experienced by organisations working with migrants. Those giving the most favourable ratings to ICTs as both source and channel are young men, i.e., below 40 years old, thus suggesting that men below 40 years old will constitute the group to view ICTs in a positive light.

Formal versus Informal Information networks

Formal and informal information (Duncombe and Heeks 1999) are used by OFWs but findings strongly suggest that OFWs’ information practices are more informal in nature, as evidenced by preferences for information sources and channels (groups, friends, telephone), as well as type or content of information (news about family, jobs, ways to legalise stay in Belgium). For example, critical information such as jobs and ways to legally stay in Belgium is exchanged through informal networks such as individual OFWs, employers and groups. Additionally, news and information from family and loved ones in the Philippines deemed a priority among OFWs are exchanged mainly through the telephone.

Informal networks therefore play a crucial role for OFWs to survive in their adopted environment. However, it is difficult to determine the quality of “informally-provided information” (Duncombe and Heeks 1999) given that the OFWs network is “small, closed and knowledge-poor” (Barton 1997 in Duncombe and Heeks 1999). Just the same, these channels were rated highly by OFWs because informal networks are easier to approach and can impart information in a language that OFWs understand, hence making it easier to assimilate. Additionally, these informal networks take less time and have no ‘hidden agendas’ as compared to organisations or institutions. The methods used by organisations in disseminating information might be informal (e.g., seminars, one-on-one counselling, etc.) but the mere fact that they originate from formal institutions somehow puts OFWs off. Thus, OFWs consider fellow OFWs as a credible, trustworthy source because they are in ‘the same boat.’ Given their precarious situation, OFWs must trust the source and channel of the information. However, the information might not necessarily be complete, accurate and timely, which thus accounts for some of the bad decisions or a repeat of the same mistakes made by OFWs.

Not surprisingly, information and news on current affairs in the Philippines, government initiatives for OFWs and general news on OFWs elsewhere were obtained mainly through more traditional, formal channels such as print media and television and radio. This “formally-provided information” (Duncombe and Heeks 1999) is relatively easy to gauge in terms of quality since it is channelled through formal means.

This essay looked at the information requirements, sources and channels of information from the two perspectives: information providers based in the Philippines that have worked with migrant workers and OFWs themselves and from the established provisions versus actual needs of OFWs, as well as their use of formal and informal information. Whilst this essay does not offer any major new discoveries, it however proved the strength of informal networks and organic information systems that have worked and continue to work for OFWs, which are unfortunately undervalued by OFWs themselves.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AMC Asian Migrants’ Centre

AMY Asian Migrants Yearbook

ECMI Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant

People, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines

Empower Global Coalition for the Political Empowerment of Overseas Filipinos

EU European Union

ICMC International Catholic Migration Centre

ICTs Information and Communication Technologies

IDRC International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

ILO International Labour Organisation

INS Institut National de Statistiques / National Institute of Statistics in Belgium

IOM International Organisation for Migration

MFA Migrant Forum in Asia

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NGOs Non-government Organisations

NSO National Statistics Office of the Republic of the Philippines

OFW Overseas Filipina/o Workers

PC Personal Computer

PNB Philippine National Bank

Samahan Samahan ng Manggagawang Pilipino sa Belgium/Association of Filipina/o Migrant Workers in Belgium

UN United Nations

WCL World Confederation of Labour