



# Assisting the Reintegration of Philippine Return Migrants through Mobile Technology

A Submission to the Geneva Challenge 2015

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This paper presents a proposed policy on the use of mobile technology to consolidate information and the needs of return migrants who have settled in the Philippines temporarily or for good. The Philippine government offers a number of programs aimed to facilitate the return of former overseas workers, although these are often disparate and uncoordinated, exacerbated by the lack of concrete information about return migrant population. Our project aims to address the gaps in information and services by providing integrated platforms through built-in USSD (unstructured supplementary service data) codes for cellphones and applications containing phone services and updates on pertinent information concerning return migrants. These technologies provide links between various entrepreneurial, employment and educational opportunities, which return migrants can use to improve their skills and/or capital.

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## 1. Introduction

The Philippines is one of the top labour exporting countries in the world, with overseas remittances amounting to 8.4% of its GDP (BSP, 2013), and with nearly 12 million overseas migrants. Socially, overseas migration is a phenomenon that has become so widespread in the Philippines that migrant workers have earned their own lexical entry: OFW (overseas Filipino worker). Since at least the 1980s, Philippine migration has been featured in several films, TV and radio programs that have thematized the trials and successes of OFWs, who are seen as the country's 'new heroes' (*bagong bayani*). The new discourse, however, belies the history of the Philippine government using labor exportation as a temporary economic substitute for decreasing rates of employment and the lack of job opportunities. A short overview of the situation of OFWs will serve as a necessary background to the challenges of return migration, as the conditions which migrants experience in their host countries are crucial to assessing the prospects for return migrants, which the UN defines as "persons returning to their country of citizenship after having been international migrants (whether short-term or long-term) in another country and who are intending to stay in their country for at least a year." (United Nations Statistics Division for Collecting Data on International Migration, 1998). In consideration of international mobility and transnational factors, the definition appears to be problematic. First, as Cassarino (2014) points out, the return to a country of citizenship is problematic, as it does not define the endpoint of all migratory activities. The country of citizenship can function as a stepping stone or temporary waiting zone before moving on to other migratory opportunities. Second, the available data on migration has not only failed to capture nuances of return migrants, such as circular migrants students or refugees, but also because there is a lack of available qualitative and quantitative data on return migrants. However, as labour migration is always seen as temporary in nature (Asis, 2008), a return journey is considered a natural step in the process.

To illustrate the growth in labor export migration in the Philippines, there were 125,000 workers in the 34-year period between 1912 and 1946 who were documented to have left for Hawaii mainly to satisfy demand from plantations (see Tigno, Rye & Macablog, 2004). This number increased however in the late seventies, amounting to nearly 400,000 documented migrants due to the high demand for labor in oil-rich, labor-poor economies in the Persian Gulf. It is under these circumstances that export migration came under the purview of the national government in 1974, when the Philippine Labor Code institutionalized three regulatory agencies to manage the outflow of workers: 1) the OEDB Overseas Employment Development Bureau, 2) The National Seamen Board (NDB), and 3) The Bureau of Employment Services (BES). Several structural responses to the outflow of labor were created to support both outgoing migration and return migration, such as The Overseas Workers Welfare Association or OWWA, which was created in 1977 as a fund to support workers who were already overseas.

The exodus of labor was viewed by the national government as a temporary measure to assuage high levels of unemployment in the Philippines, a belief that persisted into the revolutionary government of Corazon Aquino (Tigno, Rye & Macablog, 2004). The exodus of labor has long been associated with the accumulation of capital due to differences in wage, as theorized by neoclassical approaches to migration. Cerase's (1974), and Cassarino (2014) however, rightly point out diverse social and economic

factors for return migration such as circumstances in the host countries that affect the migrant (social or economic), the migrant worker's goals before leaving and their financial and mental preparedness upon return, in turn influencing their financial capabilities while living in their own countries. Despite increasing numbers of OFWs (POEA, 2013) their continuing employment abroad is highly dependent on global economic trends and the migration and labor policies of the host countries, making the achievement of their goals a tentative matter not always under their control, particularly when employment is not secure. The influence of the host country in the status of foreign laborers is one of the most potent push factors for return migrants (Rother, 2009).

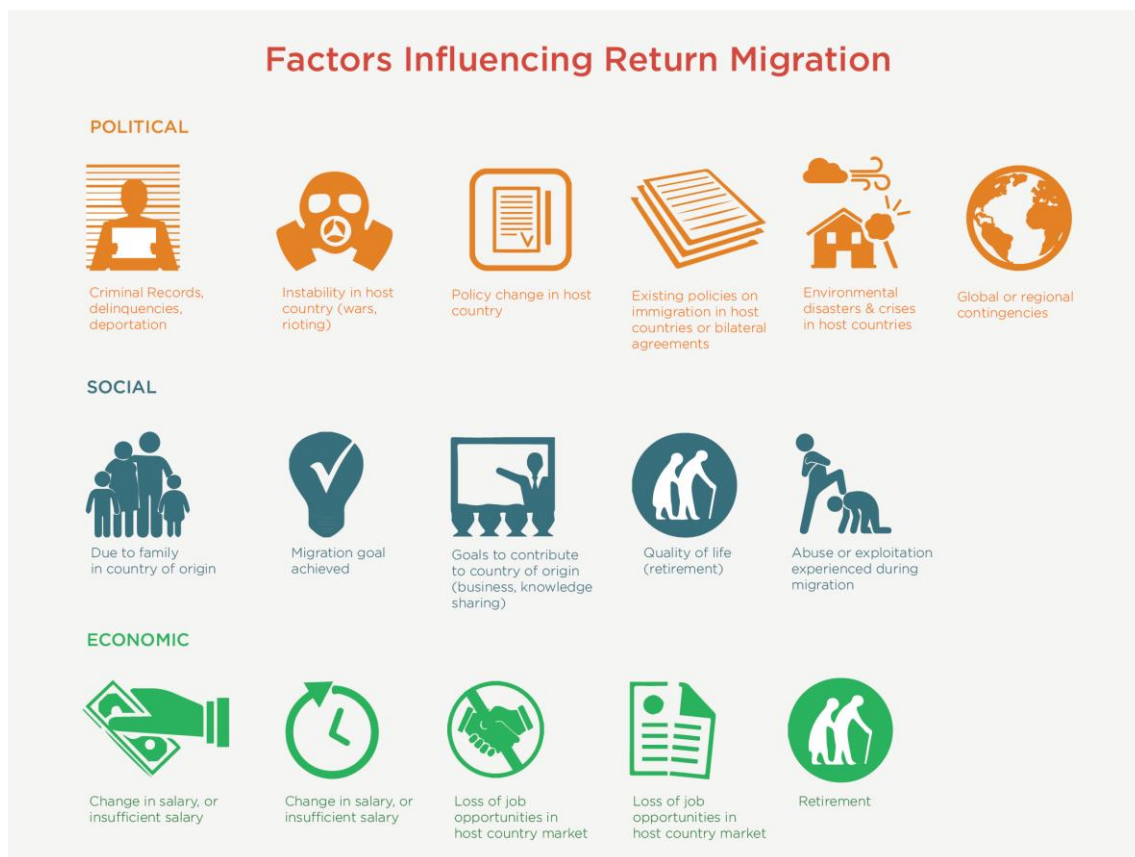
Rother's (2009) empirical study consists of interviews with return migrants formerly working as domestic helpers, and reveals that political factors, such as particular policies of the host country, and/or economic factors, such as the availability of employment opportunities, significantly influenced the decision of migrants to return. Furthermore, the data shows that a number of return migrants would once again seek jobs abroad once given the opportunity or changed circumstances, hinting at a tendency for circular migration. A rise of vulnerabilities, however, would indicate an influx of unskilled as well as skilled workers could increase in the future. Statistics for workers in the Middle East, for instance, reveal that due to strict government regulations on attaining citizenship or permanent residency, OFWs who work in the Middle East will inevitably return home to the Philippines or attempt migration to other destinations (see Sevilla, 2014). A change of employment policy could have massive ramifications for a Philippine economy that is partially reliant on migrant remittances with an already precarious employment situation and a migrant development policy that is based largely on deployment and not reintegration (Asis, 2008). In light of these imminent concerns, it is necessary to provide a strategic means by which return migrants can be profiled and linked to respective agencies which can utilize their skills. However, before attempting to utilize the return migration population for development, a number of characteristics of their return have to be taken into consideration.

### **1.1 The Situation of Return Migrants**

Cassarino's (2014) framework on return migrants emphasized two different dimensions of preparedness of return migrants: readiness and free will. He identifies readiness to return as a reflection of 'the extent to which migrants have been in a position to mobilise the adequate tangible (i.e. financial capital) and intangible (i.e. contacts, relationships, skills, acquaintances) resources needed to secure their return, whether it is temporary or permanent.' (p. 101), and free will is seen as 'the act of deciding or choosing on one's own initiative to return' (Cassarino, 2014, p.101).

To characterize the factors affecting preparation, it is further indicated that external factors such as administrative means, family constraints and/or conflict, discrimination, the failure to achieve objectives and the job market or employment situation influencing an incomplete cycle (see Diagram 1).

**Diagram 1: Push Factors for Return Migrants**



The difference between both categories is less a matter of circumstances but rather a matter of intent, as return migrants who actively desire a return home are likely to have more savings and the willingness to adapt, whereas those who do experienced unplanned return migration are likely to have less money and are not prepared psychologically for return. The distinction is important because these return migrants will have different needs and capabilities upon arriving back to their country. It is posited that skilled workers who are in retirement age and have accomplished their migration goals, are likely to have savings and a great deal of preparation, although it is unknown if they are willing to invest the time and money into creating their own businesses or investing in already existing stocks. Those who did not come back voluntarily are likely to search for opportunities to go abroad once more, unless they are physically or legally unable to do so. Asis (2001) recorded that the end of the contract, family problems and work-related problems accounted for 80% of the reasons of return, with accomplished goals accounting only for 6% of return migrants (Asis, 2001, quoted in ILO, 2012, p.15). In the context of the Filipino situation, migrants may also experience a deskilling process while abroad that affects their chosen profession directly. This is evidenced by a number of educated workers who do not find employment related to their expertise in other countries and choose to engage in other (often manual or service-related) professions that do not conform to their education or previous experience (see Siar, 2013). For deskilled workers who have since gained more experience doing other jobs, the job market in the Philippines may no longer hold any potential.

In addition, occupational abuses, vulnerability to human trafficking and conflict situations have been repeatedly emphasized as challenges to a return migrant policy (CFO, 2015). The psychological influence of the migration experience has not been overlooked, as there have been projects to provide psychological services to OFWs such as the OFW Online project by the Ateneo de Manila University, which provides free counselling to OFWs.

A return migration policy should therefore address a broad spectrum of factors, economic, social and psychological (ILO, 2012), which affect return migrants and also, link various stakeholders that aid and inform return migrants on educational, financial and reintegration concerns.

## **1.2 Challenges to Development Policies on Return Migrants**

Due to the challenges noted above, there is considerable speculation about the potential benefits return migrants could have on a development policy. The issue could be further heightened if the economic and political vulnerabilities increase in other parts of the world, as the Philippines will need the institutional foresight to prepare for the potential influx of thousands of Filipinos who may return permanently. Several logistical challenges present themselves.

First, the circularity of migration and the desire to finish migration goals could be a hindrance to achieving sustainable gains from the presence of return migrants. The situation calls for a re-formulation of return migration as development as a series of actions that continuously support a nation's development need despite his or her status in the country.

Secondly, there are heretofore ambiguous links between return migration and development. The literature suggests that the utilization of return migrants for skills training could be a potential avenue for development, but migrants who intend to stay for longer periods in the Philippines are sometimes retired and are no longer allowed to receive work permits due to age. Policies that hinder older citizens from work could be the very policies that prevent the employment of return migrants. Furthermore, as noted by scholars (Asis, 2008; Batistella 2004), the operationalization of return migrants or return migration is marred by gaps in knowledge. First, there is a lack of information and/or a difficulty in retrieving reliable information about return migrants. Definitional considerations about return migrants can also be included in this category, as return migrants may not stay long enough to achieve any development gains, if one year is the lower limit of the current return migrant definition. Second, there is a lack of consolidation efforts and integrated policies that cover return migrants, due to the lack of information and the prioritization of outgoing migrants. Development of the potential of migrant workers will thus be heavily dependent on available information on the needs and capacities of return migrants, as a purely economic perspective assumes that return migrants are also psychologically fit to work or engage in entrepreneurial activities.

We therefore propose in this study that technology is an ideal way by which return migrants, employers, the government, counselling and educational institutions can reach other easily. This assumes that the reintegration process is holistic, covering psycho-social, financial and educational needs, in order

to take advantage of the massive human capital returning with skills attained abroad. A short overview of the existing programs and information available on return migrants will be presented in the next section.

### 1.3 Existing Policies and Opportunities

This section will cover outreach tasks of existing agencies dealing with migrant workers. It is posited that the weaknesses of the data-gathering process and disparate nature of the migrant population contribute to the lack of concrete information on return migrant goals and emphasize the need to find a concrete strategy between linking these goals to development.

One can observe from the data-gathering scope of the various agencies such as the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, the Overseas Workers Welfare Association, the Commission on Filipinos Overseas and National Statistics Office that there are already numerous estimates and figures that detail how many Filipinos reside abroad, their status, sex, type of occupation, host country, previous residence in the Philippines, and their respective remittances. Yet, this data-gathering capacity only covers the pre-deployment stages of migration as well as the migration phase itself. It has been suggested that return migrants can be estimated by a more detailed version of the disembarkation card at the airport (Asis, 2008), or by working with present statistics to estimate the number of return workers, considering new hires and rehires (Batistella, 2004).

The prime government agency that is empowered to deal with return migrants is the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO). The center was established in 2009 by the Republic Act 1022, which envisioned that the center would promote local employment for return migrants and ‘tap their skills and potentials for national development’ (POEA, 2015). The law went on to recommend the promotion of entry into highly technical jobs, entrepreneurial activities, ‘better’ wage employment and management of savings as some of the development goals, and included the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority as a cooperation partner for the new agency, and empowers the NRCO to “[i]nstitute, in cooperation with other government agencies concerned, a computer-based information system on returning Filipino migrant workers shall be accessible to all local recruitment agencies and employers, both public and private;’ (Sec 18 c, 2009), although as of this date, this does not yet exist. Amongst other things, the RA 1022 encourages inter-departmental government co-operation on data gathering. However, enrolment in the various programs and seminars offered by the NRCO are done on a voluntary basis and do not appear to be part of an inter-agency effort to combine data on return migrants and streamline them into the employment-based NRCO program, instead relying on migrants who also voluntarily access the NRCO through its various regional branches.

In terms of services, there is a notable overlap in the types of programs provided for OFWs and/or return migrants in the Philippines. While the NRCO conducts major programs related to employment, such as the Enterprise Development Assistance Program, and the *Balik Pinay! Balik Hanapbuhay!*, there are similar programs being conducted by the OWWA, such as their in-country reintegration program, which involves financial literacy seminars, loan facilities, possible training components through the OWWA’s scholarship benefits, and in-country psycho-social counselling. The CFO also offers a wide array of services addressing OFW needs, including the Return and Reintegration



Program, which attempts to link service providers in fields ranging from health services, local government units and business consulting services, among others, to help reintegrate returning Filipinos. Additionally, the CFO has linkages with businesses and individuals that offer advice for entrepreneurs, and the *Balik-Turo* (return teaching) program that encourages educational exchange between Filipino educators in the diaspora and educational institutions within the Philippines. Many of these government initiatives are also supported by non-government institutions such as the Blas Ople Centre, Unlad-Kabayan and Atikha, among others, who conduct similar initiatives either in the Metro Manila area or in their respective provinces (Unlad-Kabayan has offices in Davao and Lanao, while Atikha operates in Laguna).

These various programs share one thing in common: return migrants are expected to voluntarily avail of them. It is incumbent to government policy to find a manner through which the needs and inquiries of migrant workers can be recorded and so that the various educational, economic and psycho-social needs of return migrants can be integrated into a platform that is easily accessible and mobile, in order to conform with the vast disparities in location, hard-to-reach areas, migration within the Philippines, and circular migration. Furthermore, many of the programs offered by these institutions require either a strong information campaign within their various constituencies and communities or regular access to the internet, which may not always be options available to return migrants. These challenges are believed to be partially alleviated by making use of the high penetration of ICT infrastructure, cellphones and use of mobile technology in the Philippines, especially considering that the mobile network is nation-wide and inquiries via mobile can be answered in real-time, without having to resort to going to a particular agency. Furthermore, there is potential in the anonymity of using mobile technology, which is crucial to psycho-social counselling that may involve highly sensitive information.

The uses of ICT and mobile technology to facilitate access to services will be covered in the next section, followed by a description of our proposed system.

## **2. Technology and Development**

The onset of Information and Communication Technology is viewed to have massive economic and social repercussions (Qubria et al 2002). A Working Paper by the Asian Development Bank (Quibria et al) posits that innovations in ICTs bring about a more seamless integration of the global market with possibilities of assisting in the eradication of absolute poverty because it allows countries to play out their comparative advantage. This is because different segments of production can be set out across varying countries. Other works affirm ICT's positive impact: Ochara and Mawela (2015) argued that ICT initiatives can be used as a tool for augmenting the limitations on government's delivery of social services while Digital Opportunity Task Force (in Tipton 2002) has hailed the entrance of ICTs because of its network building capacities that is hoped to usher in improvement of lives. It is therefore not surprising that governments in Southeast Asia have pushed for the integration of Information and Communication Technology deeper into the economy. Tipton (2002) pointed out Singapore's Infocomm 21 that encourages ICT partnerships between and among governments and industries. Moreover, Thailand sought to become a world leader in ICT as planned in IT 2010. Similar plans have been unveiled in Malaysia as

they try to become a “knowledge economy [in a] knowledge society” (Tipton 2002, p. 93). In all these countries, numerous government policies and agencies were set up to take in hand the task of integrating ICT in government and business processes. The results of the efforts of these Asian countries are mixed (Tipton 2002).

In particular, the Philippines have taken considerable measures to improve ICT in the country in relation to its development objectives. In 1999, the IT21: The National IT Action Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century was launched with the aim of attracting investments in IT and IT-enabled services. (Tipton 2002). Tipton narrates that the Philippines also sought to address e-commerce and online transactions by passing into law the Philippine Electronic Commerce Act in 2000. Today, ICT plays a major role in good governance. The Aquino administration identified as its major thrust in the promotion of good governance across the archipelago. Access to public services and process has been identified in the Philippine Development Plan (NEDA, 2011) as one of the major roadblocks to be addressed in its promotion of a more responsive government. These services include securing pertinent business permits, thwarting corruption and the prompt delivery of education, social safety nets or health benefits to citizens. To tackle this, measures have been proposed such as the professionalization of the bureaucracy, rationalization programs to deal with a bloated government and seeking certification from international bodies that ensure that services are delivered efficiently and effectively. More concretely, these plans can be realized through ICT initiatives. The PDP identifies innovations such as a virtual window for business, a single website for all government information and the institution of electronic bidding for public works as priority projects. It is seen that similar programs not only undertake improvement on the delivery of social services but also reduces costs by weaning dependence on print media or lessening personnel operations.

Just recently, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration through Memorandum Circular 1 Series of 2015 required overseas recruitment agencies to create and maintain a Facebook account to serve as communication link between the agency and their recruits. The usage of ICT for development is not limited the public sector. Some private sector members engaged in development has also begun to use ICT-based solutions. The Ateneo Innovation Center has developed an application that measures the oxygen level and turbidity in Lake Palakpakin in Laguna which connects to a database center in Metro Manila (Dela Cruz et al, 2013). This allows the engineers to notify the fisher folk when oxygen levels are dangerously low for their fish ponds.

Despite the potential of using ICT for furthering government services, one of the main concerns in the usage of ICT in governance is the Digital Divide or when populations are divided between those who have enough economic and political resources to access the internet and integrate into the knowledge economy and those that suffer from economic and political hardships that are unable to use these developments in ICTs (Ochara and Mawela, 2015; Tipton 2002; Quibria et al 2002). To illustrate, the work of Ochara and Mawela (2015) shows that despite the priority given by African nations to ICT development because of its supposed positive impact on citizen’s participation, the digital divide persists. The authors see that the pre-occupation with personal computers may be a contributing factor in the

promotion of the digital divide. What they propose as an alternative is the use of mobile technology which they believed is more widely used in the continent. In South Africa, for example, according to Ochara and Mawela (2015), 88% of the households have cellphones. However, difficulties still arise. Ochara and Mawela (2015) continue that despite the large presence of cellphones, less than half of the population has access to the internet. Of those with access to the internet, 16% use their cellphones to access the service. The data thus shows the benefits of mobile-based development initiatives because of its high usage rate but underscores that further work needs to be done to address the digital divide and provide access to the internet. Below, the ASA model of Ochara and Mawela (2015) is depicted in order to ground the proposal in ICT-based frameworks of development.

## 2.1 Models of Technology and Development

Ochara and Mawela (2015) and Qubria et al (2002) agree on how to attend to this digital divide. For the sake of brevity, I will use the diagram of presented by Ochara and Mawela. They proposed what they call is the ASA model to explain the conditions of possibility of ICT adoption. Below is a conceptual image of their model:

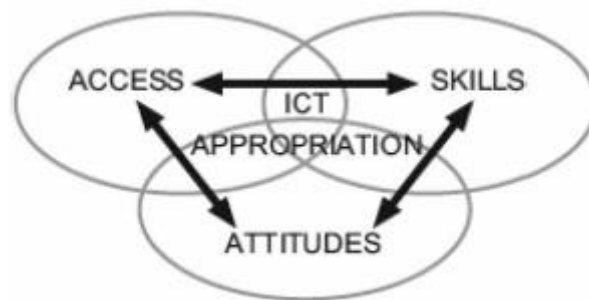


Image from Verdegem and Verhoest (2009) in Ochara and Mawela (2015, p. 212)

The most basic consideration for ICT adoption is access. The authors explained citing the World Economic Forum that as the world is increasingly seeing the prevalence of ICT access remains an issue. This is corroborated by Qubria et al (2002) when they explained that income and infrastructure are immense influence in ICT adoption. In other words, ICT adoption cannot happen if access to it is made difficult by the absence of reliable towers and related buildings and if remains expensive.

The same authors have identified skills as a defining factor in the adoption of ICT. They explain that the absence of skills allow the digital divide to persist. Van Deursen and Van Dij (as cited in Ochara and Mawela, 2015, p. 211) identify different set of skills regarding ICT. Operational skills are the skills to be able to operate or make us of the available devices. Knowledge skills are the capacity of an individual to make use of the knowledge base that is made possible by ICT and Strategic Skills is the ability to use this knowledge towards the desired end of the person.

In the view of the authors, the final pillar of the model, adds the social in the adoption of ICT. Ochara and Mawela (2015) cited various research that point to ease of use as a consistent factor to consider when talking about ICT. However, the authors echoed the sentiments of those interested in this field that there needs to be more research in this area to allow for a more detailed understanding. To sum,

what is pointed out in the model that they have outlined is that different factors need to be considered when looking at ICT adoption. Intuitively, that would include the infrastructure because these are the conditions of possibility for usage as well as income. But attending to this or simply providing the technology is insufficient, there needs to be capacity building to targeted users and these users must find that these technologies are easy to use for them to ultimately integrate it in their lives.

## 2.2 Return Migrants and Mobile Technology

In the Philippines, the Philippine Development Plan (NEDA 2011) have identified ICT infrastructure as a problem that has to be addressed if the communication problem is to be minimized. The lack of ICT infrastructure not only has negative effects on consumers, but business as well, because support services become difficult to access raising transactional costs. Moreover, population saturation of smartphones is low compared to the rest of Asia Pacific. In a survey done by Nielsen (2014), the growth of Smart Phone usage in the Asia Pacific has been steadily rising. However, the smart phone penetration in the Philippines is only at 15% compared to other countries like Thailand (49%) and Indonesia (23%). With a poverty incidence of 25.8% during the first semester of 2014 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015), the Philippine population may have to worry on subsistence before being able to adapt to smartphones.

Hellstrom (in Raja et al, 2012, p. 89) explains that the world is growing in its access to tablets and smart devices even while basic phones have already pervaded a majority of the population. Admittedly, the situation in the Philippines in relation to ICT is quite mixed. NEDA (2011) show that regulatory frameworks in government, infrastructure for ICT and e-government adoption still has challenges. For example, only 29% of public high schools in the Philippines have an internet connection while overall broadband subscription lags behind cellular mobile telephone service (CMTS). Nevertheless, data from NEDA (2011) drawing from COMELEC data show that CMTS has a 94.7% cover of municipalities in the Philippines<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, NEDA (2011) noted that the Philippines has been using CMTS coverage in such a high density that the number of Short Messaging Service (SMS) sent and received everyday reach up to 2 billion. The agency has also noted that Multi-Media Services (MMS) and 3G technology has been gaining momentum in the country since it was launched. The data thus shows that access to mobile technology in the Philippines has grown and is still growing and the potential of technology assisted governance is a viable reality to provide assistance to return migrants.

While there are challenges, the power of mobile technology in communication can no longer be denied. In fact, Kelly and Minges (2012) explaining a study commissioned by the World Bank noted that access to mobile phones has been supplanted as a major issue and the focus has shifted to what can be done with the phones. It is thus an imperative that policy makers and development practitioners make use of this available technology to assist returning migrants especially in countries of high overseas employment concentration such as the Philippines. It is in this light that this team propose an integration

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, however, the NEDA (2011) explains that this data may refer only to town centers and not the adjacent barangays. This data is based on the Commission on Elections' data on 2010 where only 5.26% have no CMTS coverage

of government services to available mobile technology to allow government to perform its role of taking care of its overseas worker. This team believes that the adoption of mobile technology fits within the framework proposed earlier which allows for a more effective delivery of services.

The prevalence of mobile technology will allow for manageable skills building in the usage of the application. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration holds Pre-Employment Orientation Seminar (PEOS). PEOS – which may be taken online – prepares the OFW from avoiding illegal recruiters, informs them of government services available to them, and trains them on country-specific etiquette and context (POEA n.d.). The strong government preparation and services that prepare OFWs from leaving may be used as opportunities to discuss the application to promote skill in using it. Moreover, the easy and intuitive interface will allow OFWs to learn it on their own.

Attitudes include a broader issue of social network and net utility over net cost of use. The application is easily downloadable for free from the Google Play Store or the Apple App Store. It is also accessible from basic phones through simple text instructions. Furthermore, it is hoped that are more return migrants use the application the rest of non-users will adopt as well.

Thus, the application is a versatile and adoptable solution for return migrants issues especially related to information access and the provision of government services.

### **3. The Project**

#### **3.1 Mobile Technology as E-Government**

Siddhartha, Melhem, Cruse, Goldstein, Maher, Minges and Surya (2012) devised a typology of e-government focusing on the usage of mobile technology, in which they outlined three primary functions: to supplement, expand and innovate already existing services through the utilizations of mobile technology (pp. 87-88, see Diagram 2). The application and mobile service that we propose squarely fits into the rubric of supplementing and expanding government services to return migrants and OFWs by consolidating the various programs offered by government agencies, linking these to NGOs, cooperatives or banks and then providing a platform by which these services can be disseminated or accessed by a larger populace as skills in mobile technology have already been attained by large sectors of the population. Through the application, the needs and inquiries of return migrants can be better understood, democratic access to services will be supplemented, and return migrant workers will have the opportunity to receive skills or education in order to be reintegrated into local employment, seek possible employment opportunities or engage with other return migrant workers to build cooperatives or businesses (see Diagram 2).

**Diagram 2: Mobile Technology, E-Government and Return Migrants**

<b>mGovernment</b>	<b>Supplementary</b>	<b>Expansion</b>
<b>Definition</b>	Mobile tools add a channel to existing e-government services and processes	Mobile tools allow conventional services to reach previously un- or underserved constituents
<b>Examples</b>	The mobile tool provides access to existing POEA, NRCO, OWWA services	The mobile tool provides access to telephone services and linkages to private services or NGOs
<b>Implications</b>	Marginal: related to being able to provide any related 'physical' services at the needed location and time	Moderate to significant: government capacity needs to grow to serve more citizens

Source: Raja, S., Melhem, S., Cruse, M., Goldstein, J., Maher, K., Minges, M. & Surya, P. (2012), p. 88

**Skills:**

Access to mobile technology in the Philippines is widespread, particularly among return migrants who often use mobile technology or ICT to keep in touch with their relatives at home.

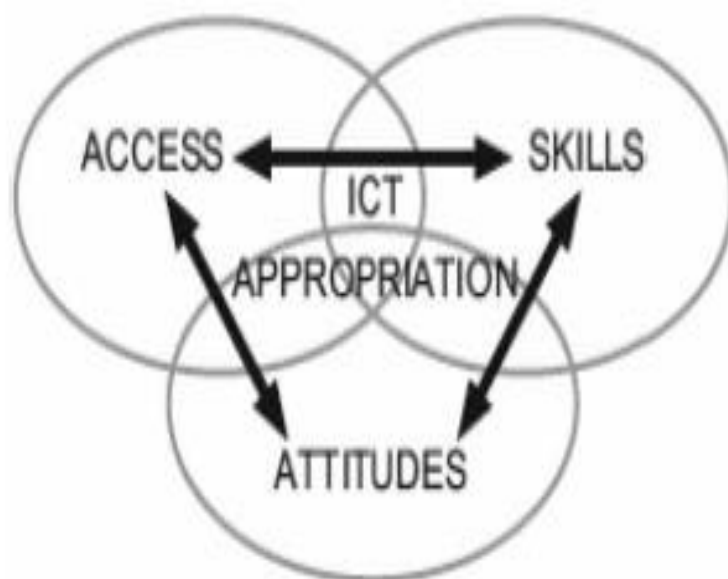


Image from Verdegem and Verhoest (2009) in Ochara and Mawela (2015, p. 212)

**Attitudes:**

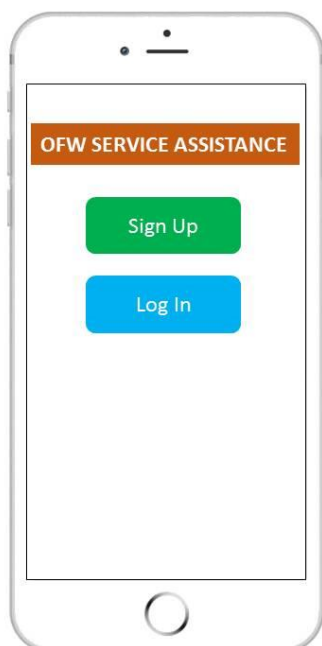
Attitudes of return migrants towards the mobile services of government will depend highly on their needs, as elaborated by Cassarino (2014). While the application or mobile service can be promoted, and even pre-installed on SIM cards, there is likely to be some resistance from return migrants who wish to go abroad again. However, for those who have returned home due to family reasons or who have already achieved their migration goal, links to aggregate government services along with employment opportunities and financial tips would help to incorporate these individuals for development goals.

### 3.2 Description of the Project

An infographic representing the various features of the application or USSD (unstructured supplementary service data) mobile code appears below. Apart from offering access to government/NGO/private training and employment services, it is envisioned that the application can appear in several languages (English, Filipino and the regional languages) and can be linked to free call services that offer psychological help to return migrants or OFWs.

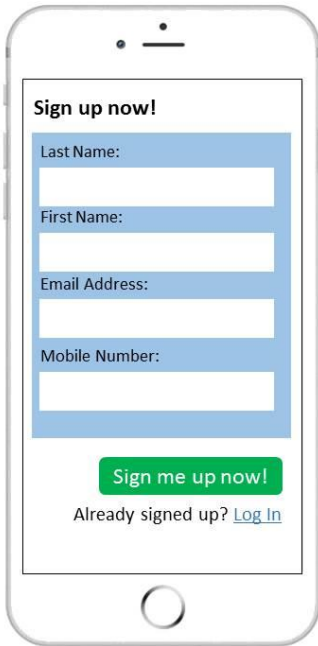
## Using the OFW Service Assistance Application

A mock up of the application that OFWs can download to access information and register for services



#### STEP 1

All users will be asked to sign up and log in before they can use the mobile application. This allows us to keep a database of all the users and inquiries. Users will be given to option to stay signed in so that they won't need to keep signing in upon opening the mobile application.



**STEP 2**

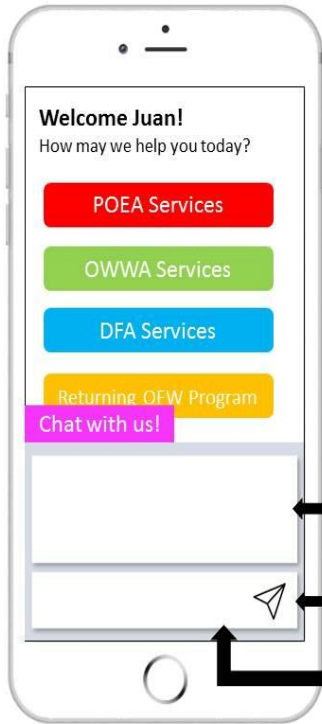
The sign up will require the user to enter their names and contact details. These details will be enough for us to be able to follow up with the users regarding their concerns and know their location through their mobile numbers.



**STEP 2**

Once signed in, they will be prompted to choose which kind of service they would like to inquire about. Should they have difficulty in selecting the type of service they would like to avail, they can open the chat box. Once they click on the service that they would like to avail, they will go to the allotted page of each of the office concerned. All the information and service available are derived from the respective offices.

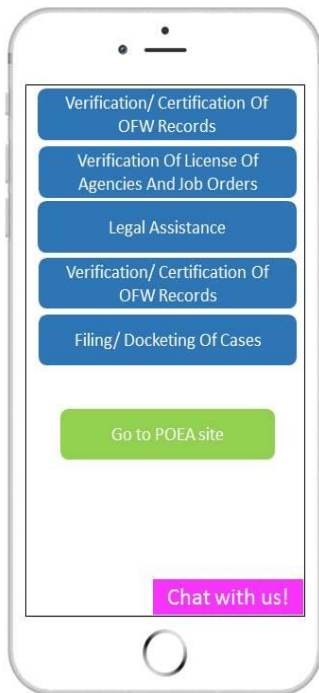




### Using the Chat Box

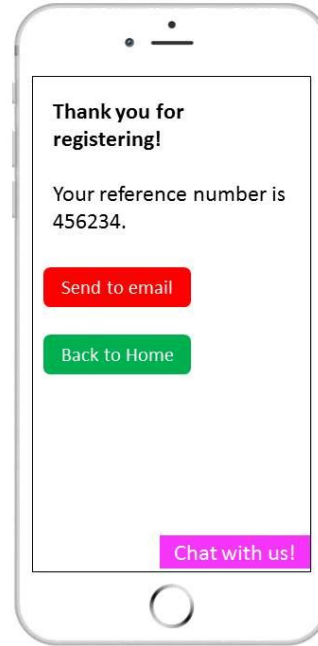
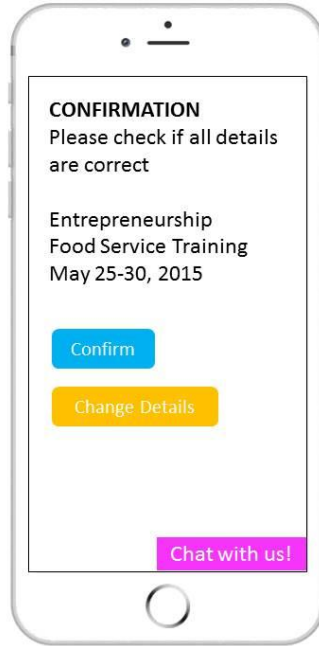
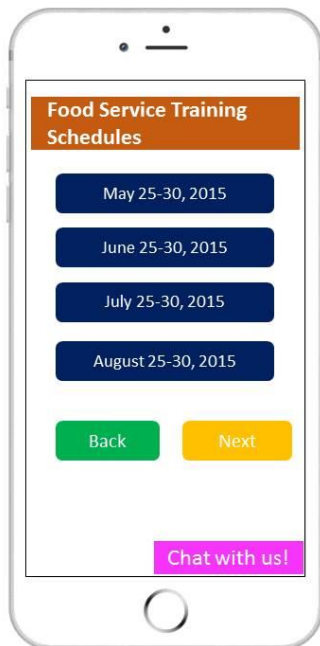
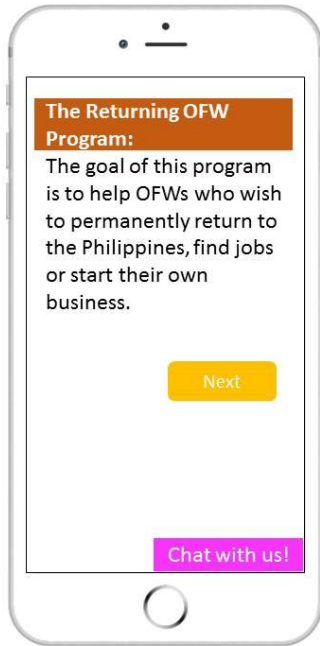
The chat box is very straightforward. Users simply input their concern and a representative will assist them in their concern. The chat functionality will appear in every step after this. This is to assist all users should they encounter any issues throughout their usage of the mobile application.

- The chat exchange will appear here
- Send button
- Users will type their concerns here



All the services of the respective office will be available. Once the users click on the button, they will be directed to the instructions page before proceeding to the actual application page. The application page will be linked to the respective offices' online application forms.

Source: <http://poea.gov.ph/>



# Accessing the Service through USSD Code

A mock up of the process for OFWs without a smartphone to access information and register for services

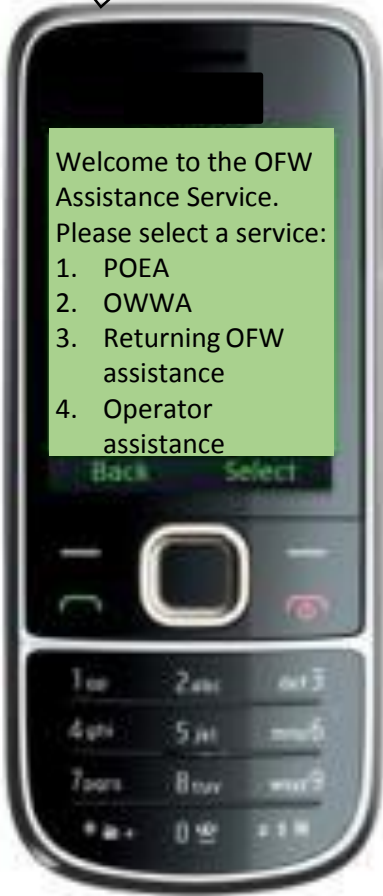
## The USSD Code

- The process flow of the service through the USSD code is similar to the process flow of the mobile application, the only difference is the way the service is accessed.
- The main difference is that confirmations will be sent via text.
- The USSD code can also be used through a smartphone should the user have no wifi connection.
- This will be achieved through the partnership with major telco service providers.

Step 1:  
Enter the code  
The code will vary per country and service provider. This will be disseminated through information campaigns



Step 2:  
Category Selection  
This will allow the OFW to select which servicing office they need. Should they be unsure of which to select, they can opt for the operator assistance where an operator will call them up.



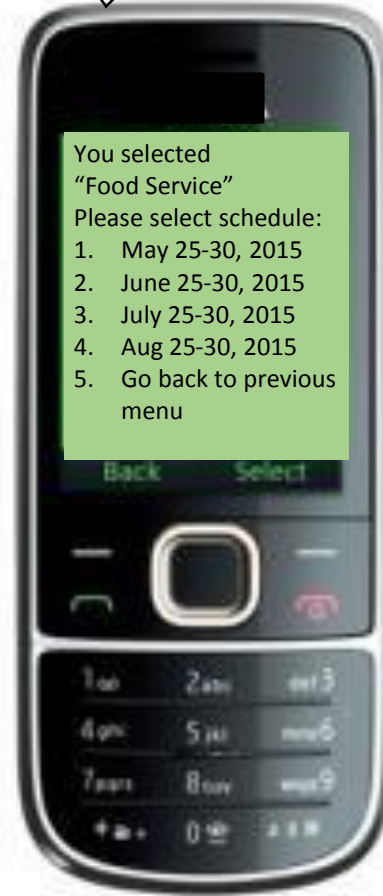
Step 3:  
Initial Service Selection  
The initial service selection categorizes the type of service that the OFW will need.



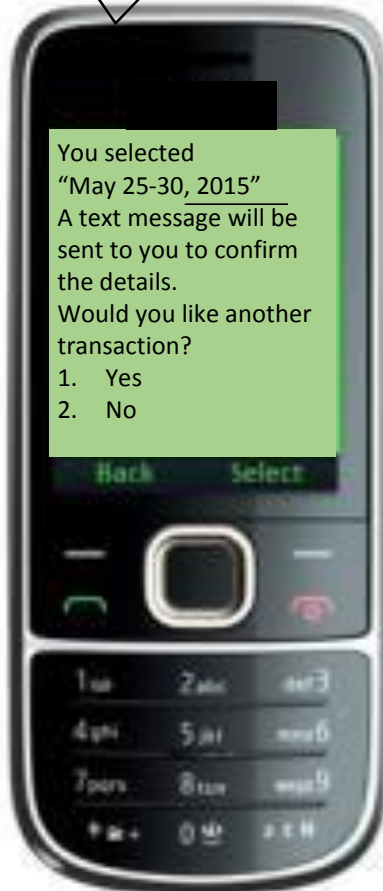
Step 4:  
Sub selection  
This will allow the OFW to choose exactly what type of service s/he will be needing. There could be more than 1 sub selection depending on the service the OFW needs.



Step 5:  
Schedule Selection  
This will allow the OFW to finalize his/her service inquiry and will allow the servicing office to manage all scheduling requirements faster.



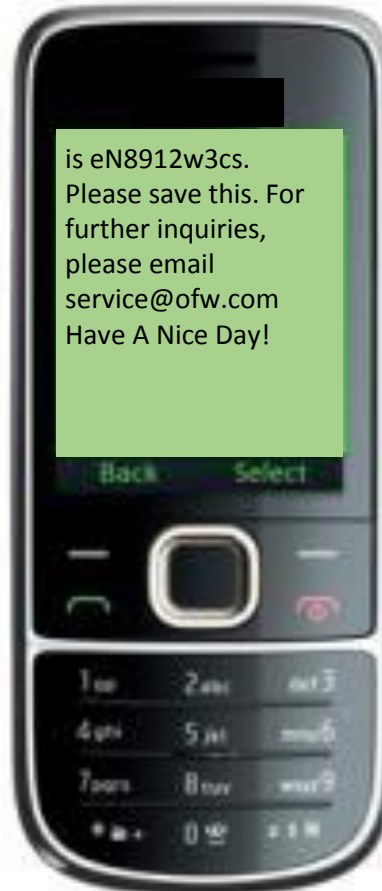
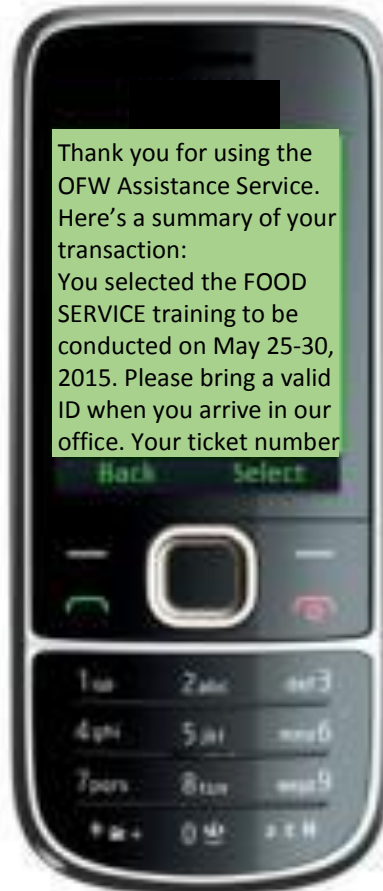
Step 6:  
Transaction Confirmation  
A text message will be sent to the mobile number to confirm the schedule and this step will give OFWs a chance to select another service or end the transaction



End Message:  
A ticket number will be given to the OFW to list down. Should they fail to receive a confirmation text, they can use this upon arriving at the respective office during their schedule.



## Confirmation Text



\*\*The USSD code access can also be used with a smartphone. Users will go through the same steps.

### 3.3 Implementation of the Project

The implementation of the project will need at least 10 steps. The first step will involve consultations with larger groups and associations of OFWs to further nuance their needs and refine the design. The group will take this opportunity to determine the media usage of the groups in order to best find out how to market the application. The group will then get in touch with government agencies that could support the applications, such as POEA, OWWA, NRCO and the DFA for permission to disseminate information about their programs through the app, meanwhile, OFW hotlines will be reached to secure a default help center for application users. After applying for initial funding for the programming phase, and talking to advertisers who may be interested in promoting property or bank loans (micro-finance and entrepreneurial loans, for instance), the group will contact programmers and SIM card providers with images of the application and system menu design and come up with a prototype that will be piloted in small return migrant groups and possibly small OFW communities. Information campaigns can be launched from various platforms, including through social media, informal networking, government websites and radio (see Table 1).

In order to reach the maximum numbers of the target population, the group aims to advertise the service during the POEA pre-departure seminars, within the affiliated agencies themselves, and in the airport, especially in the OFW or Balikbayan lanes. Due to the information page of the application, it is believed that the number of beneficiaries of the application can be used to estimate the number of return migrants who express an interest in the services of the government, and which services are needed the most (educational, financial, or employment-related). The data can reveal nuanced information about the target population that will allow the government and other private stakeholders to strategize about how challenges as a result of the homogeneity and differences in financial literacy and capability of return migrant workers can be utilized for national development goals. One of the possibilities that the mobile platform can offer is an educational campaign as to how to start mobile businesses or improve already existing businesses through a cellphone, which has worked well for farmers in India, a country that also has high cellphone penetration, a large agricultural base and a vast expanse of territory where access to central government is limited by transportation. This is true of the Philippines, whose archipelagic geography impedes access to certain government services, yet has made successful use of new technologies to search for information, increase a social networking presence and maintain contact with the  
homeland.

**Table 1: Implementation Timeline**

Order	Step	Time Frame (months)																				
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	continuous		
1	Refining the program through consultation with larger groups of OFWs	3-4 months																				
2	Modifying the application design accordingly	1 month																				
3	Establishing contact with various stakeholders such as concerned government agencies (OWWA, CFO, NCRO, POEA, DFA) and OFW hotlines with proposal for information sharing and consolidation	3-6 months																				
4	Modification of the application design according to results	1 month																				
5	Application of R&D grants, government support, to fund initial programming	continuous																				
6	Collaboration with programmers to make smart-phone and non-smart phone compatible versions of the application	upon receiving financing, estimated time of 6-months to 1																				

		year																	
7	Exploring possibilities for database collection	continuous (begins at step 6)																	
8	Piloting the program in a small community and possibly abroad. Contacting Smart and Globe, telecommunications networks, to make the system menu part of its SIM card offerings for OFWs	continuous (begins at step 6)																	
9	Increase information campaign on several platforms, maintenance of Facebook, Twitter and Information Website	3-4 months																	
10	Talking to POEA to add the app in their pre-departure seminar	1-2 months																	



#### **4. Conclusion**

The group's project involves the use of mobile technology to provide access to and supplement government programs by integrating information and disseminating these through a mobile platform. While considering the demographics and needs of return migrants, it is envisioned that return migrants who desire to remain in the country, or who are searching for employment opportunities after an their stay abroad, will be interested in downloading or accessing the application or USSD codes. The application/USSD code is user-friendly, builds upon skills that are already widespread in the Philippine context, and can be updated regularly to maintain lines of communication between return migrants and the government. Among the benefits of the application are its accessibility to disparate groups of migrants, who may live all over the archipelago, and its data collection potential for government and researchers, as data from the application can determine the number of users and registered participants in government or other services, and which services are needed or inquired about the most. This feature has the potential to supplement the scant data available on return migrants which has hampered government efforts to reach them.

In labor-exporting countries all over the world, there have been both government and private initiatives to reintegrate return migrants to counteract some of the effects of brain drain and to make use of their experiences abroad. It is our sincerest hope that the integration of already-existing employment, training and financial literacy programs through the utilization of e-government can strengthen information campaigns about these as well as reach the largest proportion of return migrants as possible.

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