

2022-2023

VICTIM IDENTIFICATION AND ASSISTANCE IN THE PHILIPPINES-TO- EUROPE MIGRATION CORRIDOR: IMPACT REPORT

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OVERVIEW OF MIGRASIA

Migrasia is a tax-exempt social enterprise incubator dedicated to addressing migration-related challenges in Asia. Our focus encompasses a wide range of issues, including unethical labor migration, modern slavery, and human trafficking. At Migrasia, we harness technology, innovative legal strategies, and knowledge sharing to drive transformation within the labor migration industry as a whole. In partnership with the Global Migration Legal Clinic, a part of The University of Hong Kong's Faculty of Law, we have been able to reach millions of current, former, and prospective migrant workers through our Migration Support System. By implementing our programs, we have directly aided thousands of migrant workers in various countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe.

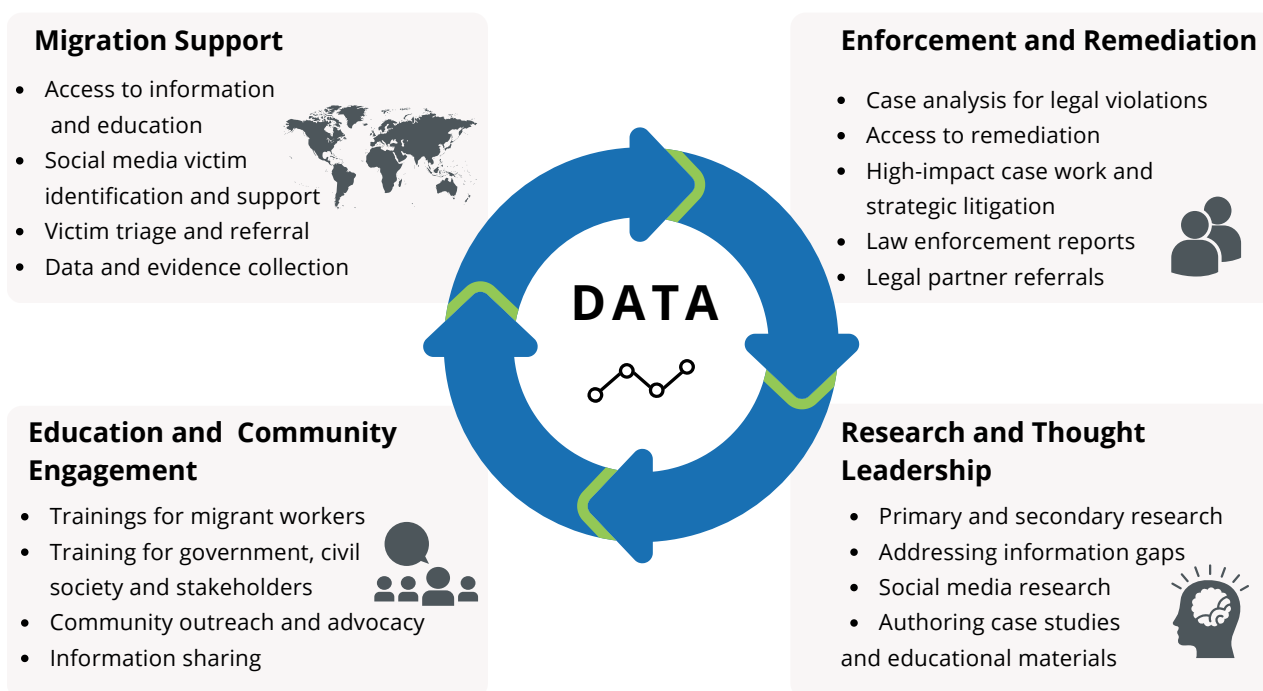
Context

Every year, migrant workers across Asia confront information asymmetry and structural disadvantages that expose them to the risk of labor abuse. The process commences with recruitment agencies, which frequently enjoy a monopoly over a worker's migration journey due to the administrative and legislative burdens associated with working abroad. This situation creates systemic vulnerability among migrant workers, making them susceptible to labor exploitation and abuse. Consequently, numerous instances arise where working conditions resemble forced labor, with excessive fees incurred during the migration journey leading to debt bondage. Additionally, ineffective complaint and grievance procedures, restrictions on freedom of movement, isolation, and limited access to justice further compound the challenges faced by these workers.

Mission

Migrasia aims to eradicate the widespread and systematic exploitation of migrant workers worldwide. To accomplish this mission, Migrasia employs the following strategies: (i) providing direct client support to victims of human trafficking and debt bondage primarily through social media channels, as well as through our in-person clinic in Hong Kong; (ii) enforcing anti-trafficking laws and conducting investigations into unethical migration intermediaries; and (iii) conducting primary research on anti-trafficking interventions and migration solutions. Data aggregation and analysis are essential components of our core programs, providing crucial evidence-based insights that drive program activities. The clinical work and observations serve as the basis for Migrasia's thought leadership and community engagement within the migration field. This includes promoting education, knowledge sharing, and collaborative solutions as outlined in the chart on the following page.

Migrasia's Cyclical System



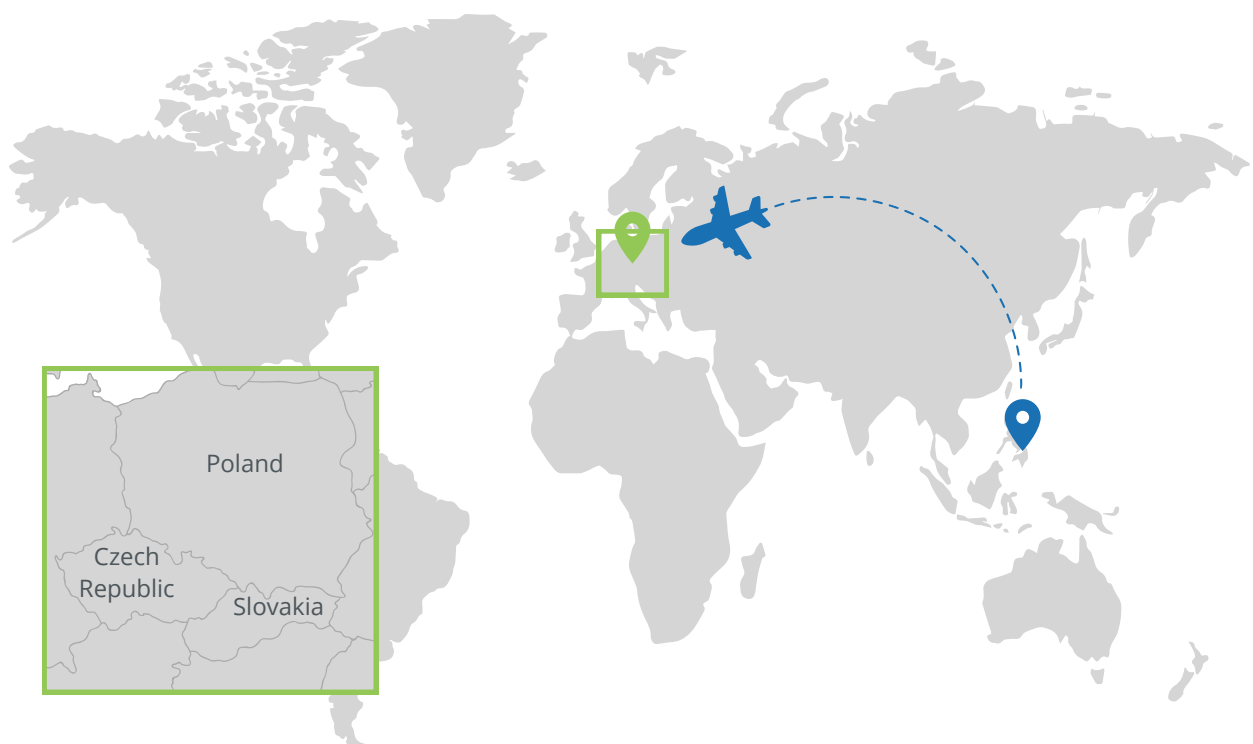
Migrasia achieves its mission through a cyclical system that combines four main, interrelated components, which form the basis of our Theory of Change:

- 1** The **mass identification of potential victims through social media** and other advanced data techniques, such as network mapping of recruitment agencies and their subsidiaries.
- 2** **Providing support to the victims identified**, both online and in-person through the Global Migration Legal Clinic, referral of cases to legal partners and law enforcement agencies.
- 3** **Collecting and documenting information** about the experiences of our clients and **publishing research** on our findings.
- 4** **Engaging the community through education** and by **presenting our findings** to key stakeholders in government and other NGOs, to improve the support services offered to migrant workers.

This cyclical system is unique within the migrant worker industry, particularly in terms of how we use data and social media to identify and empower victims, triage cases and engage the target groups. The process has been designed as a positive feedback loop between the four components, and allows us to leverage all of our partnerships and expertise to the fullest extent.

PHILIPPINES- EUROPE MIGRATION CORRIDOR

Focus on Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia as destination countries for Overseas Filipino Workers in Europe



We started to expand our social media informational campaigns, victim identification efforts, and client support to Europe in 2022. The initial identification by Migrasia of migrant workers, predominantly Filipino nationals, who had been deceived into paying exorbitant placement fees to secure employment in several countries in Central and Eastern Europe, prompted us to prioritize Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia for an exploratory extension of our Migration Support System.

Leveraging insights from desk-based research and our experience in other migration corridors, we employ a comprehensive approach to educate Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) on safe migration pathways for European employment and assist those who have fallen victim to scams in seeking redress. Our ultimate objective is to bring about a transformation in the recruitment practices of migrant workers.

Desk-Based Research

We first conducted secondary research to make sure to tailor our Migration Support System to the specific requirements and needs of current or potential OFWs in Europe, with a particular focus on those working in Poland or planning to move there. Specifically, we aimed to gather more information regarding the following three areas:



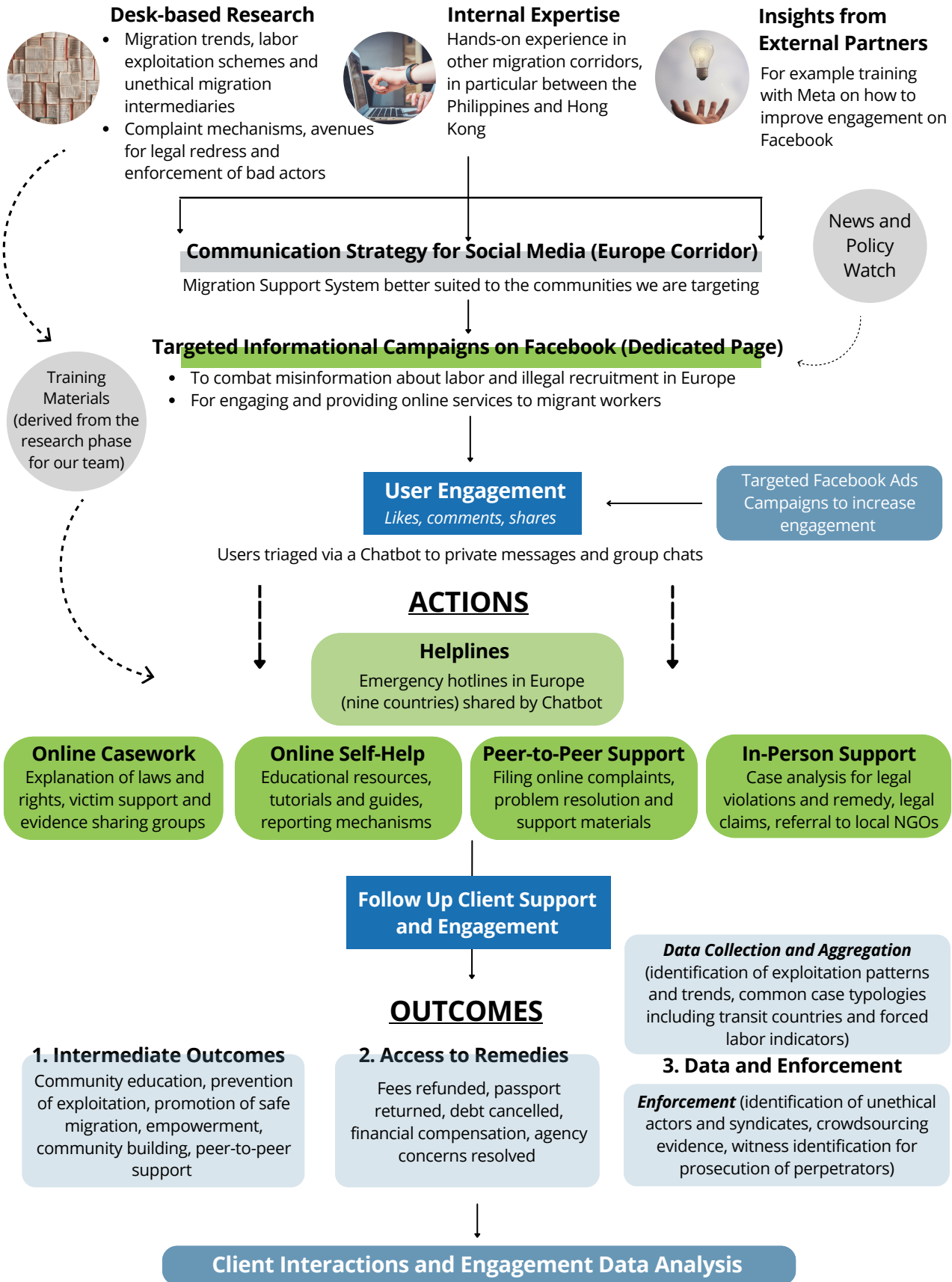
The research primarily involved conducting a comprehensive review of various reports, papers, news articles, databases, websites, press releases, leaflets, and other relevant documentation related to the situation of foreign workers in Europe, with a specific emphasis on Filipino workers in Poland. We examined literature pertaining to migrant workers in Europe and Poland, as well as documentation focusing on undocumented workers and victims of human trafficking, in order to identify references to Filipino nationals and OFWs. To assess the official presence of Filipino citizens in Europe, we utilized data published by Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union. Additionally, we submitted Freedom of Information requests to various government agencies in the Philippines and Poland to address gaps in the available data. Furthermore, we conducted an online survey to gather information on the migration and recruitment experiences of OFWs in Europe. All of this data was incorporated into our online support system to ensure its alignment with the needs and expectations of the targeted beneficiaries.

In Focus: Service Providers and Law Enforcement in Poland



MIGRATION SUPPORT SYSTEM

In the Philippines-to-Europe migration corridor



We primarily utilize social media platforms as our key communication channels to engage with beneficiaries within the Philippines-to-Europe migration corridor. This involves leveraging a dedicated Facebook Page and Group, and Messenger chats. Through our online client assistance program, we strive to empower victims and potential victims of trafficking and debt bondage by providing them with actionable information to prevent exploitation while travelling to or residing in Europe. This comprehensive support includes guidance on accessing redress mechanisms in both the Philippines and focus European countries, as well as written and video support guides. When necessary, we also provide referrals to our in-person clinic in Hong Kong (for Filipino workers based there) or connect individuals with relevant civil society organizations in the Philippines or Europe for personalized assistance. Similar to our approach in other migration corridors, our victim identification and triage process in the Philippines-to-Europe corridor is driven by the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries, with Migration Specialists who possess hands-on experience in assisting OFWs managing our social media operations.

We have developed and currently manage our system within the Philippines-Europe migration corridor, employing a robust methodology that facilitates consistent data collection and analysis. Initially, our team established a dedicated Facebook Page and employed effective methods to expand its audience. These strategies include posting engaging content related to recurring challenges faced by OFWs, actively responding to comments and messages to enhance visibility on the platform, inviting individuals who interacted via comments or private messages to like the page, and cross-posting, among others. Furthermore, we conduct targeted experiments to specifically reach Filipino workers actively seeking employment in Europe or OFWs currently based there. These experiments involve the following approaches:

- Sharing posts in other Facebook groups that target OFWs in Europe, using similar pages and groups as benchmarks.
- Inviting active users from these groups, particularly those who engage with job advertisements in Europe, to follow our page.
- Utilizing social media analytics to inform content decisions.
- Tracking interactions between beneficiaries and our team to customize online post content, considering factors such as the reasons clients contacted us, the types of issues they encountered, and their geographic locations.
- Selecting a catchy name with relevant keywords for our Facebook Page, enhancing discoverability on the platform for OFWs.
- Publishing content in Tagalog to facilitate communication and build client trust more effectively.
- Designing and launching paid promotions to drive increased engagement and expand our client base, allowing for greater data collection and evidence gathering.

In turn, client interactions and engagement data analysis feed our Migration Support System in a virtuous circle, as illustrated in the chart page 6.



DATA-DRIVEN APPROACH

We utilize digital tools at each step to gather data and gain a better understanding of the individuals we assist. The collected data also aids in identifying dubious recruiters, collaborating with law enforcement, and increasing successful outcomes for victims.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

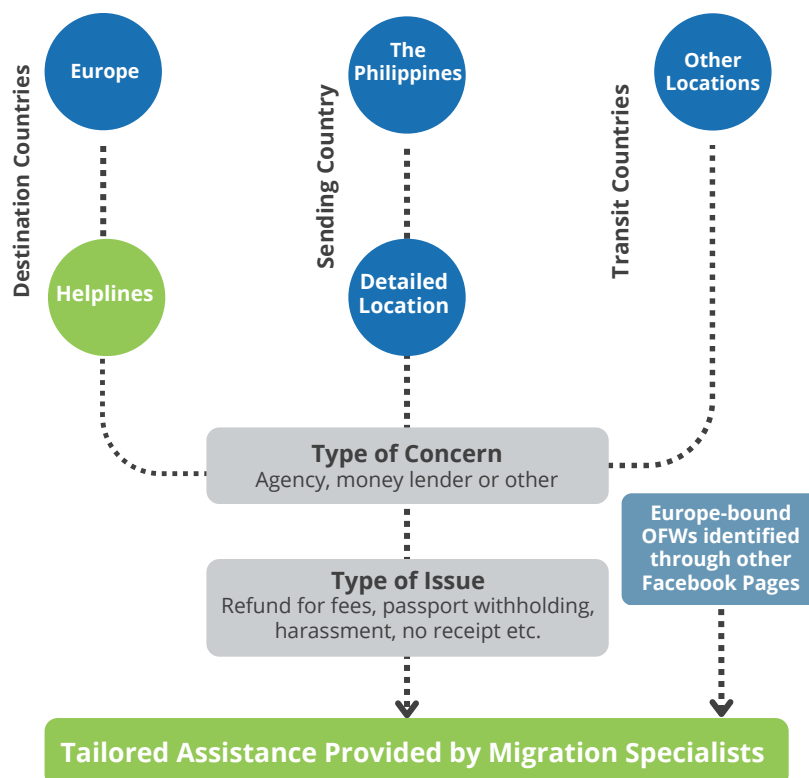
We employ a range of tools and methods to engage with Europe-bound OFWs after they discover us through social media or hear about us from friends or relatives who have encountered similar issues.

Automated Online Client Support

We ensure that OFWs who have already arrived in Europe and wish to seek redress for abusive recruitment practices they have experienced can easily access assistance. To achieve this, we have expanded the capabilities of our Chatbot. It now includes the phone numbers of key helplines for migrant workers and victims of human trafficking in multiple European countries. By providing their location and other basic information, workers can also connect with a Migration Specialist who can offer tailored assistance, as outlined in the Chatbot flow below.

Furthermore, our team receives alerts when workers who have interacted with other Facebook Pages mentioned European destination countries. This allows us to promptly mobilize the necessary resources when needed. This system also serves as a potent tool for Migration Specialists to stay proactive and informed about the activities of malicious employment agencies operating online.

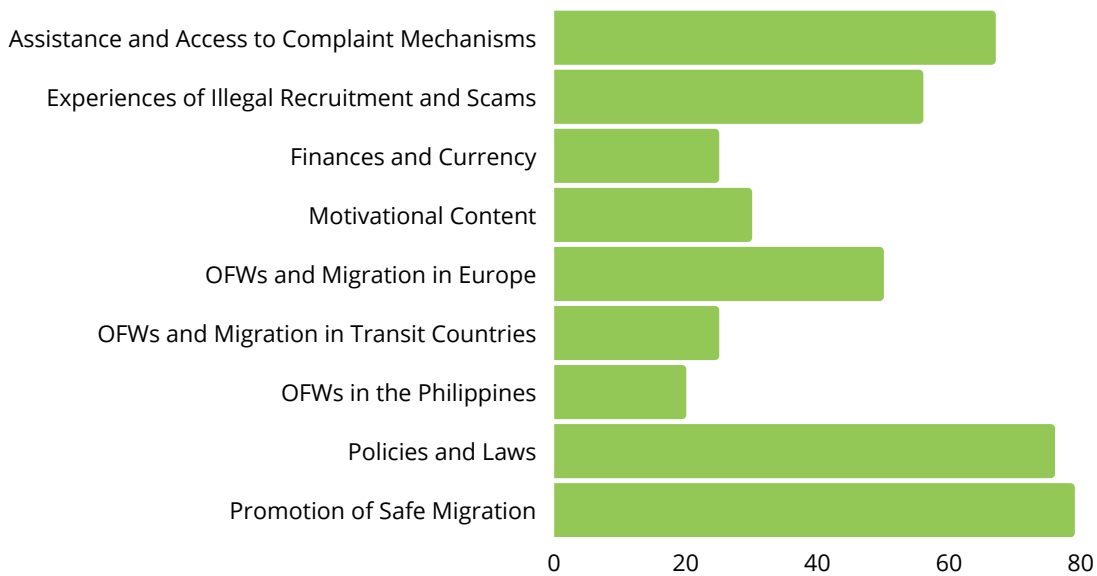
Chatbot Flow: Assistance in the Philippines-to-Europe Migration Corridor



Informational Campaigns

Our Europe-focused informational campaigns are driven by research insights, carefully selected content from our news and policy watch, and targeted knowledge shared by our team of Migration Specialists based on their experience with clients. This includes insights into common and emerging trends in the recruitment industry. The content published by our team aims to inform former, current, and future OFWs at all stages of their migration journey to Europe, helping them make informed decisions, providing appropriate assistance, and safeguarding them from illegal recruitment practices.

Categories and Number of Posts by Category (June 2022-May 2023)



Examples of Posts by Category

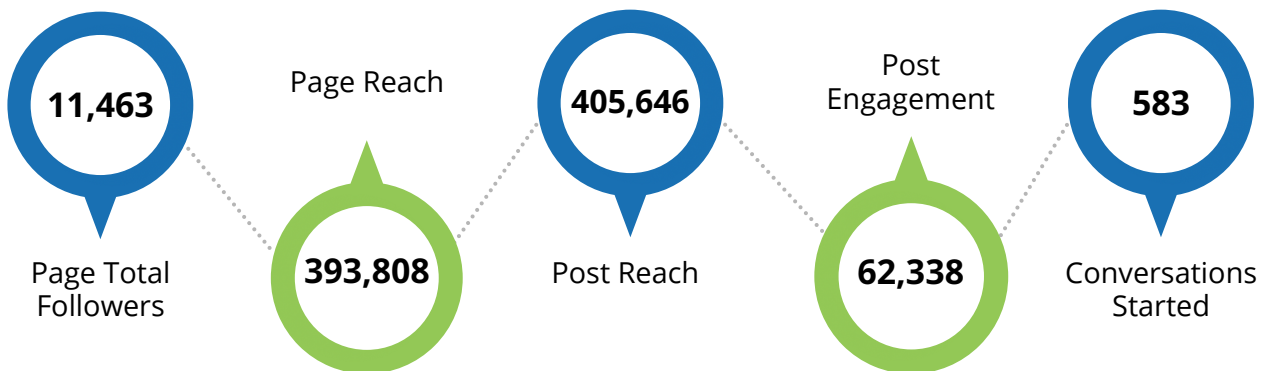
<p>01</p> <p>Assistance and Access to Complaint Mechanisms</p> <p>Online complaint submission guide, engaging calls to action, inspiring client success stories</p>	<p>02</p> <p>Experiences of Illegal Recruitment and Scams</p> <p>Typologies of illegal recruitment schemes, identification of unlawful employment agencies, call for supporting evidence</p>	<p>03</p> <p>Promotion of Safe Migration</p> <p>Legal migration pathways, prohibition on direct hiring, absence of Schengen work visas</p>	<p>04</p> <p>Motivational Content</p> <p>Celebration of International Days, personal experiences, inspiring messages and quotes</p>	<p>05</p> <p>OFWs and Migration in Europe</p> <p>Work visas, rights of third-country nationals, bilateral labor agreements, minimum wage information</p>
<p>06</p> <p>OFWs and Migration in Transit Countries</p> <p>Process of recruitment, rights and living/working conditions of OFWs in transit countries, direct hiring from intermediary countries</p>	<p>07</p> <p>OFWs and Migration in the Philippines</p> <p>Pre-departure training, overseas employment application process and requirements, special policies tailored for OFWs</p>	<p>08</p> <p>Policies and Laws</p> <p>Updates and advisories from Philippine authorities, relevant news articles and press releases</p>	<p>09</p> <p>Finances and Currency</p> <p>Currency exchange rates, articles on remittances, financial training opportunities</p>	

Social Media Engagement Data

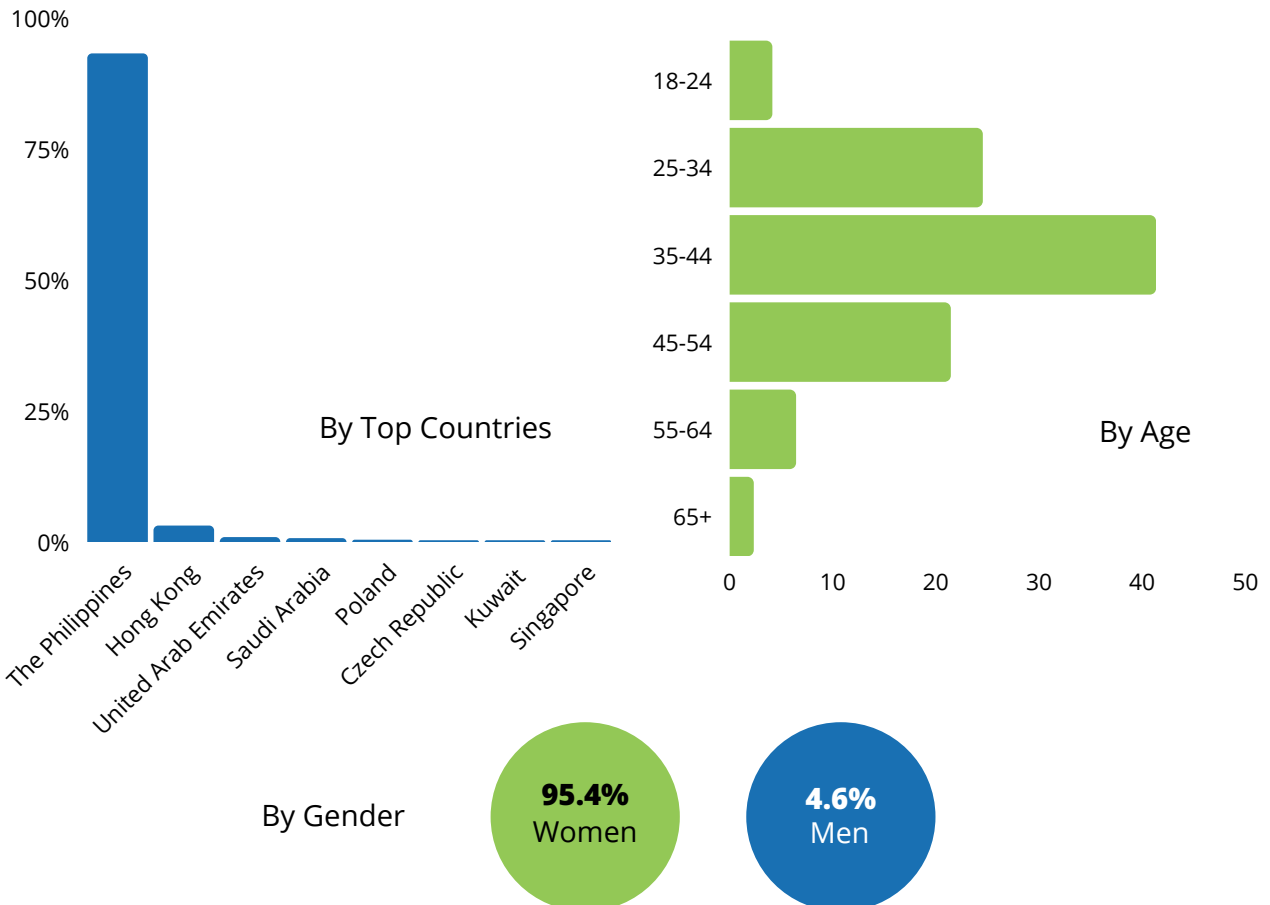
As of May 31, 2023

During the project period, our dedicated Facebook Page reached over 390,000 people (those who saw any content from or about this page) and received over 32,000 visits. We published 460 posts, which reached over 400,000 people and generated nearly 3,000 reactions, including over 600 shares.

Facebook Page Performance



Audience



CLIENT SUPPORT AT A GLANCE

Throughout the period, Migrasia attended to queries from workers who expressed interest in migrating to or were already employed in Europe. Our team promptly responded to their queries through our dedicated Europe Facebook Page and other channels. We provided tailored support and valuable resources, including insights into recruitment policies and contact details for NGO helplines in Europe. Additionally, workers heading to other countries sought assistance from our Europe Page, seeking further guidance.



Client Assistance

- **190** workers en route to or in Europe supported through our Migration Support System
- **42** resolved queries (22%)*
- **471** individuals supported online through our Europe Facebook Page specifically
- **185** resolved queries (39%)



Client Profile

Europe-bound Workers

- **Sectors of Work**
Mostly domestic and factory work
- **Countries of Destination**
Poland, Czech Republic, Malta, Finland, Norway, Cyprus, Romania etc.



Type of Concern

Europe Facebook Page

- **Agency Concerns**
73% of enquiries
- **Money Lender Concerns**
5% of enquiries



Refunds

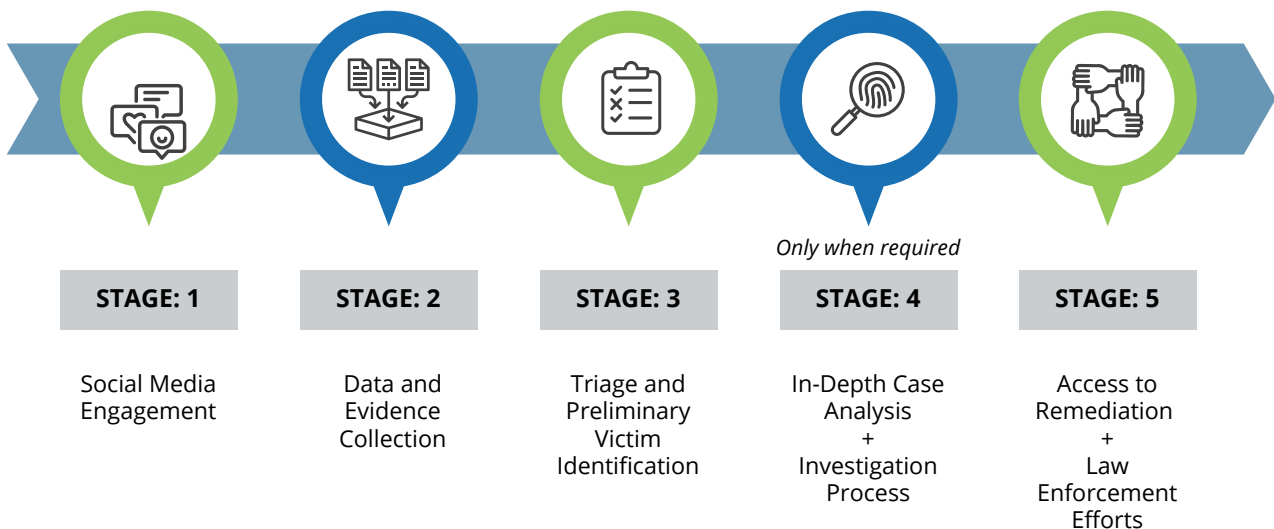
HKD25,199 (PHP 175,525)

*Queries are categorized into various statuses, such as pending, inactive, or withdrawn, depending on the progress of the investigation and the level of cooperation from clients.



ENFORCEMENT STRATEGIES

Investigative Work



Investigation is a crucial step in Migrasia's work, enabling victims to file complaints and ensuring the accountability of labor migration actors, particularly as we expand our Support System to new regions. When our team receives inquiries involving a new employment agency or when clients are unable to obtain resolution through "simple" conciliation with relevant parties, we initiate a comprehensive analysis of their case. This may involve a detailed examination of the agency's online presence and recruitment methods.

We use a range of techniques to gather evidence of unlawful recruitment practices occurring within the migration route from the Philippines to Europe. They include reviewing official records (e.g. lists of licensed employment agencies), analyzing postings in dedicated Facebook job groups that we moderate, contacting applicants who comment on job postings, and soliciting evidence of illegal practices by labor intermediaries through other social media channels. Throughout this process, we make sure to exercise caution to maintain the confidentiality of information provided by the victims, aiming to prevent any potential retaliation against them or our team. Subsequently, the gathered data is shared with law enforcement agencies in the Philippines, such as the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), as well as abroad through Migrant Workers Offices, for official investigation.

Over the past year, our team has identified several common traits among illegal recruiters operating in the Philippines-to-Europe migration corridor. These characteristics include the predominant offering of factory jobs, excessive fees compared to other regions, and the requirement, or even compulsion, to transit through a third country, particularly in the Middle East, before being deployed to Europe (if it occurs).

The Case of Filipino Workers in Poland



In early 2021, Migrasia was contacted for the first time by a Filipino national who was the victim of unlawful methods by an employment agency promising him a job in Poland. With 38.5 million inhabitants, Poland is currently the largest labor market in Central and Eastern Europe. It has become a source of labor immigration since the fall of the USSR and the liberalization of its border regime in the early 1990s, and is now also a source of labor emigration. Rapid recovery from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, solid economic growth in recent years, relatively low labor costs, and low unemployment all contribute to growing labor shortages in several sectors, including construction, food service, healthcare, and education.

The labor shortage was exacerbated by the departure of many Ukrainian workers who returned home when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Polish companies that relied heavily on the Ukrainian workforce – which accounted for about 80 percent of third-country nationals living and working in Poland – began to look to countries like the Philippines for additional workforce. However, because language, travel and visa requirements make it difficult to fill vacancies quickly, fraudulent employment agencies are now taking advantage of the situation to lure prospective Filipino workers into illegal hiring schemes, using social media as a tool to reach them.

The expansion of our Migration Support System to selected destination countries in Europe in 2022, with a particular emphasis on Poland, has allowed us not only to identify and provide support to victims of illegal recruiters, but also to gain insight into the state of the labor market in Poland and assess the extent of labor migration needs to the country. Our social media approach also allows us to investigate suspicious employment agencies, in line with information shared by clients on our new dedicated Facebook Page. Secondary research we conducted early in the project has also informed our day-to-day work with Filipino workers bound to Poland, with the team better prepared to meet their specific needs.

The characteristics of fraudulent hiring schemes in the Philippines-to-Poland migration corridor differ slightly from what the team usually observes in Asian migration corridors. In particular, difficulties with immigration requirements in Poland (and Europe at large) make it easier for unlicensed recruiters to charge very high fees to vulnerable applicants seeking to work in the country. Nonetheless, dubious employment agencies often use the same tactics to scam aspiring workers and discourage them from filing complaints, especially when the scheme involves travelling to a transit country first.

Violations Documented

The most common violations and abuses encountered by Filipino workers intending to work in Europe, which our team of Migration Specialists has documented, are perpetrated by malicious employment agencies:

No. 01 — Lack of a Licence

Of all the employment agencies we investigated, none were authorized by the Philippine authorities to recruit Filipino nationals to work in Europe.

No. 02 — Illegal Agency Fees

Many Filipino workers have been duped by recruiters into paying exorbitant placement fees for jobs in Europe, way in excess of the maximum legal amount set by the Philippine government.

No. 03 — Referrals for Discount

Some employment agencies even promise discounts on placement fees to applicants who recommend the agency to friends or relatives, which has the potential to multiply the number of victims of debt bondage.

No. 04 — Deception

Malicious labor intermediaries persuade migrant workers to pay placement fees upfront for jobs in Europe that never materialise ("pay now, fly later").

No. 05 — Aggressive Tactics

Some Filipino workers reported aggressive behavior by recruiters, some threatening to cancel work permit or visa applications if applicants didn't make payments quickly enough.

No. 06 — Identity Fraud

Victims have reported that recruiters, especially in transit countries such as the United Arab Emirates, use pseudonyms and false identity documents.

No. 07 — Illegal Commissions

Sometimes, fraudulent recruiters deduct their own commissions from the receipt given to the candidate, which therefore does not reflect the total amount paid by the worker.



CASE STUDY

Third-Country Hiring to Poland

With the dedicated support of our Migration Specialists, we have successfully integrated informational campaigns, trafficking syndicate identification, and assistance in the migration corridor from the Philippines to Europe into our daily operations. Below is an illustrative case that our team identified and screened, leading to subsequent investigations by authorities in the Philippines, Hong Kong SAR (HKSAR), and Poland.

A significant number of Filipino domestic workers residing in HKSAR, as well as some in the Philippines and other countries, were deceived by a dubious recruitment scheme that offered employment opportunities in Poland. The recruitment process primarily targeted applicants online and through the affiliated company in HKSAR of a Polish employment agency. After paying placement fees of up to HK\$30,000 to Filipino "coordinators," a few workers were placed with an employer and sent to Poland. However, the majority of these positions turned out to be non-existent, and the applicants were never deployed to Europe, nor did they receive a refund of the incurred costs.

Although several arrests related to the scheme were made in the summer of 2022 in HKSAR, placement services have continued. In November 2022, we reviewed the case based on new complaints and desk-based research to explore further opportunities for remediation and enforcement across the different jurisdictions. Apart from implementing an awareness strategy on social media to warn aspiring migrant workers against using the services of these agencies, we have worked towards ensuring that victims receive reimbursement for their fees. To this end, our team identified new reporting channels in the countries where the Polish agency is registered and operates, and submitted a comprehensive binder of evidence to competent local authorities for the perpetrators to be duly investigated.

As a result, the HKSAR-based agency lost its accreditation from Philippine labor authorities in HKSAR and has initiated the process of refunding some of the victims residing there. Furthermore, after a meeting with the Philippine Embassy in Prague, the Polish agency expressed its willingness to undergo the accreditation process by the DMW. This accreditation would allow them to legally employ Filipino workers in Europe while adhering to the regulations established by the Philippine government. Additionally, they have committed to providing settlements to the victims.

We believe that this dual approach of deterrence and advocacy for remediation can be replicated and utilized as a best practice for addressing other instances of cross-border illegal recruitment, especially those targeting Europe. Such cases can be challenging to tackle due to the intricacy of legal frameworks and the involvement of various authorities worldwide.



PHILIPPINE-TO-EUROPE MIGRATION CORRIDOR: IMPACT SNAPSHOT

As of May 31, 2023

Focus Countries



The Philippines



Poland



The Czech Republic



Slovakia

Social Media and Client Engagement

Facebook Page Dedicated to OFWs in Europe

390,000+

Facebook Page Reach

11,000+

Facebook Followers

580+

Private Conversations
Initiated

185

Queries Resolved

HKD
25,000+

Reached in Refunds

Migrasia

Migrasia Global Solutions Limited is a Hong Kong registered charity exempted from tax under Section 88 of the Inland Revenue Ordinance (Registered Charity 91/16858).

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