

Bridging Transitions: The Interplay of Agency and Structure in the Reintegration of Circular Labor Migrant Returnees (CLMRs)

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ABSTRACT

International labor migration underpins the Philippine economy, yet the reintegration of Circular Labor Migration Returnees (CLMRs) typically leads to a recursive cycle of repeat migration. This study fills a significant research vacuum by going beyond economic remittances to the under-explored social and psychosocial aspects of return and by investigating the interaction between the institutional frameworks and human agency. The study sought to profile CLMRs, assess levels of institutional assistance in three domains (economic, social, and psychosocial), and identify structural hurdles to successful reintegration. The study was based on Rob Stones' Structuration Theory (SST) and applied the Quadripartite Cycle to chart the relationships between institutional policy (External Structure), migrant knowledge (Internal Structure), strategic navigation (Active Agency), and reintegration outcomes. A concurrent mixed-methods design was used through triangulation of quantitative survey data and qualitative narratives from in-depth interviews and key-informant sessions with OFW returnees and institutional staff. The findings reveal a precipitous reintegration cliff for returnees. The data suggest that after years of intensive work abroad, majority of the households remain caught in low-income bracket, with the respondents describing their present economic situation as "poor." This lack of economic progress is compounded by a huge institutional deficit, as nearly all returnees in this sample experienced a serious lack of psychosocial support to help them prepare for life back home. In addition, most respondents reported that they had failed in their attempts to obtain economic aid, largely due to the high bureaucratic barriers. The main findings suggest that the current reintegration process is characterized by structural reproduction, which entails that the lack of sustainable safety nets at the local level leads to a re-entry into the global market. The study advances de-bureaucratizing services by creating localized barangay-level centers and reorienting institutions from one-time handouts to long-term, impact-based mentorship and holistic social protection.

Keywords: Circular Labor Migration; General Santos City, Philippines; Mixed-Method Research; Reintegration; Strong Structuration Theory.

INTRODUCTION

International labor migration has become a structural feature of the global economy and a transformational labor market connecting developing nations and industrial hubs. In this context, international bodies increasingly promote circular labor migration as a "triple-win" scenario: labor for host countries, remittances for home countries, and skills acquisition for the migrants themselves (Newland, 2009; Vertovec, 2007). However, as the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2020) stresses, the "circularity" of this movement is usually less about choosing professional mobility than about the uncertainty of return. In the Philippines—a nation with a deeply embedded "culture of migration"—the transition from "modern-day hero" to a locally integrated citizen is fraught with systemic friction.

The reintegration process is a multidimensional struggle involving the successful alignment of economic, social, and psychosocial domains. From the perspective of Strong Structuration Theory (SST) of Stones (2005), this process is not merely a personal endeavor but a recursive negotiation between an agent's internal structures and the external structures of the states. Current literature suggests a significant schema-resource mismatch. Overseas

Filipino Workers (OFWs) return with global schemas-specialized skills, global work ethics, and social remittances-only to encounter local authoritative resources (such as Republic Act 10022 and DMW mandates) that often act as gatekeepers rather than facilitators. When the migrant's internalized expertise collides with a domestic economy that lacks the infrastructure to sustain them, the result is structural erosion, where the agent's foreign-earned capital is consumed by immediate survival rather than long-term investment (Cassarino, 2004; Battistella, 2018).

Furthermore, the psychosocial dimension of return remains a critical but overlooked component of the reintegration cycle. The administrative exhaustion often undermines economic and psychosocial stability, yet social reintegration depends on resilient kinship networks. These bureaucratic challenges (inflexible eligibility windows and broken inter-organizational support) threaten the ontological security of returnees. Usually, this tension forces the agent to reproduce structural conditions, whereas remigration is the only rational agentic response to a domestic environment characterized by structural lack (Kuschminder, 2017; Asis, 2017).

There are a lot of studies focused on the economic impact of remittances. However, there is a significant research gap in the qualitative understanding of the reintegration cliff in urban hubs like General Santos City, in the southern part of Mindanao, Philippines. Empirical research operationalizing the quadripartite cycle to map the specific points of breakage between institutional support and migrant agencies, in particular, is scant. Besides, the psychosocial vacuum in state-led reintegration programs has been minimally addressed in the available literature, mostly assuming that financial grants are adequate for a successful settlement. This study fills these gaps by investigating how institutional support (or lack thereof) and individual strategic navigation (agency) determine whether a returnee undergoes structural elaboration or is pushed back into the cycle of recursive migration.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The strategic framework involves the simultaneous collection and independent analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, which is known as a concurrent mixed-method design. The rationale for this dual-track approach is that the depth of lived experiences directly cross-validates the scope of statistical trends, as per the research methodology outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2022). The quantitative part provides a quantifiable mapping of socio-demographic profiles, migration histories and utilization rates of institutional support, thus providing the needed empirical baseline for assessing reintegration readiness. Simultaneously, the qualitative strand uses the Quadripartite Cycle of Strong Structuration Theory to capture returnees' agentic power and internal schemas, such as the self-efficacy needed to navigate volatile local markets.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Land-based Filipino labor migrant returnees who have been integrated in the last five years were identified through snowball sampling. According to Opiniano (2021), the period is an important moment to capture present experiences influenced by recent global economic changes. The research methodology was a mixed-methods approach to provide breadth in the quantitative and depth in the qualitative. Specifically, there were thirty (30) OFW respondents involved in the survey and ten (10) OFW participants in the in-depth interviews (IDIs). These participants were male or female residents of General Santos City, in the southern part of the Philippines. They were between the ages of 25 and 65, the productive peak years, when the results of reintegration count the most. Apart from the cohort, narratives from four (4) representatives of local and national implementing agencies were also collected to describe the institutional landscapes. These insights are indispensable for data triangulation and offer what Agunias and Newland (2019) refer to as a multi-dimensional validation of the support structures available to returnees. The study looked at employment stability and emotional well-being across the three pillars of reintegration (economic, social, and psychosocial) and structural barriers. Finally, as Luthans et al, (2022) argue, assessing variables such as self-efficacy in conjunction with institutional perspectives is crucial in assessing whether reintegration outcomes lead to sustainable settlement or re-entry into the global market.

Research Instrument

To obtain a comprehensive and triangulated perspective on the reintegration process, the study used a multi-methodological data collection approach, using a structured survey questionnaire developed by the researcher, and a semi-structured interview guide. The survey was developed through an AI-assisted synthesis and formally verified for integrity (Fowler, 2020). It specifically collects numerical data on socio-demographics and migration histories and uses Likert scales to measure the subjective reintegration trajectory. These quantitative measures permit the statistical analysis to speak empirically about the main subjects of the study. Qualitatively, an in-depth interview (IDI) guide is used to capture the richness of their reintegration experiences. The open-ended questions allow the researcher to obtain thematic trajectories about the complexities of return migration. In a similar manner, key-informant interview questions were administered to selected institutional staff to gather perceptions about enhancing reintegration program policy and implementation.

Data Gathering Procedure

The study was carried out following a procedural framework to ensure ethical compliance and data integrity through the purposive selection of the participants coming from the five high-concentration OFW-sending barangays in the city of General Santos, namely, Fatima, Calumpang, Apopong, Labangal, and San Isidro. The study team obtained the needed authorization from the local barangay officials and the related government entities such as the Public Employment Service Office (PESO), the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), and the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) for the capturing of the three pillars of reintegration and proceeded to conduct surveys and interviews. Creswell & Creswell (2022) point out the data collection was a contemporaneous mixed-methods strategy, capturing quantitative indicators of service use alongside rich qualitative narratives, to ensure a whole-of-person approach. Ethical standards were followed by obtaining informed consent and employing native languages (Cebuano, Ilonggo, and Tagalog) to ensure rapport and accuracy. Verbatim transcription and triangulation for structural analysis were carried out using mobile audio recordings and field notes. All data were carefully coded by computer-assisted tools to combine the institutional perspectives and lived experiences of the returnees to evaluate the real effectiveness of the reintegration framework.

Data Analysis Procedure

A concurrent approach to analysis was used in this study, using descriptive statistics for the quantitative data and thematic analysis for the qualitative narratives. Specifically, the socio-demographic and behavior profile of the respondents was established through the interpretation of descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and weighted means and the use of a four-point Likert scale. At the same time, the qualitative data were subjected to a systematic six-phase thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data were familiarized by verbatim transcription, systematic coding, and iterative refinement of themes to ensure conceptual validity in capturing the lived experiences of the returnees. The analysis was a synthesis of statistical trends and vivid extracts from the participants, ensuring a perspective that kept the voice of the agent central to the study while also ensuring internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity across all thematic categories.

Ethical Considerations

The research emphasized the importance of autonomy and well-being for all participants, using a three-level approach of informed consent, confidentiality, and harm mitigation. The purpose of the study and the right to withdraw at any point were fully explained to the participants. Due to the sensitive nature of the issue of migration, the study ensured that the identity of the returnee was protected by fully ensuring anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and deletion of personal identifiers during the transcription and analysis stages. The research team also established a safe, non-extractive space to minimize psychological harm so that participants could share difficult stories of vulnerability at their own pace. Ethical approval from the ethics committee was obtained.

Data Availability

The qualitative and quantitative data supporting the conclusions of this study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the information and the privacy of the participants. The raw datasets consist of personal narratives and demographic profiles of labor migrant returnees who share their experiences of return trauma, financial depletion, and institutional friction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Analysis: Mapping the Internal Structures and Reintegration Outcomes of Returnees

While the findings are limited in scale to 30 respondents, they offer a localized and nuanced window into the structural frictions that characterize the experience of the labor migrant returnees in this region. This quantitative mapping examines how internal dispositions-such as feminization of labor and mid-life transition pressures-intersect with the outcomes of their return.

The Mid-Life Transition and Feminization

The demographic profile of returnees in General Santos City (Table 1) reveals a mid-life transition wherein 40% of the respondents are 45-54 years old. The successful return is very dependent on return preparedness, a process that involves the mobilization of resources and the desire to return (Cassarino, 2004). Yet the data show a structural mismatch; these returnees are at the peak of the global experience spectrum, but they are faced with a

Table 1. Demographic Information of Labor Migrant Returnees

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
45-54	12	40.00
35-44	8	26.67
25-34	4	13.33
55-64	4	13.33
65 or older	1	3.33
No Answer	1	3.33
Total	30	100.00
Gender		
Female	25	83.33
Male	5	16.67
Total	30	100.00
Marital Status		
Married	16	53.33

Single	6	20.00
Separated	5	16.67
Widowed	2	6.67
No Answer	1	3.33
Total	30	30.00
Educational Attainment		
High School	14	46.67
College	10	33.33
Elementary	3	10.00
No answer	3	10.00
Total	30	100.00
Household Size		
4	6	20.00
5	6	20.00
1	4	13.33
2	3	10.00
3	2	6.66
6	2	6.66
7	1	3.33
No Answer	6	20.00
Total	30	100.00
Household Income		
Below ₱20,000	24	80.00
₱20,001 - ₱40,000	4	13.33
₱40,001 - ₱70,000	1	3.33
No Answer	1	3.33
Total	30	100.00

Table 1, Contd.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Current Employment Status		
Self-employed	18	60.00
Employed full-time	6	20.00
Unemployed and looking for work	3	10.00
Retired	2	6.67
Employed part-time	1	3.33
Total	30	100.00

domestic labor market that is often hostile to older workers. Furthermore, the feminization of migration (83.33% female) is in harmony with Asis (2017), that Filipino women have the double burden of sending financial remittances and taking care of the emotional labor within the household. From a Strong Structuration Theory (SST) perspective of Stones (2005), these factors are from the internal structures-the ingrained habits and global work ethics-that returnees must reconcile with the often-stagnant local external structures.

Marital Status and the Moral Mandate of the Family

The data show that a vast majority of returnees are married (76.67%). Marital status is not just a demographic fact but a significant internal structure that defines the migrant's goals. According to Asis (2017), the Filipino migrant is often driven by a moral mandate to provide for their spouse and children. This percentage of married returnees indicates that familial obligations heavily constraint their active agency. The need to provide for a household makes returnees opt for short-term, low-risk income streams over long-term entrepreneurial investments, causing the depletion of their savings earned abroad (Stones, 2005; Battistella, 2018).

Educational Attainment: The Schema-Resource Mismatch

The educational profile reveals that most of the returnees are college level (56.67%) or college graduates. This implies that returnees have high-level knowledgeability capabilities-the intellectual tools and technical schemas for high-level employment. Cassarino (2004) observes that the success of return depends on the mobilization of resources. A college-educated returnee forced into petty trade or survivalist entrepreneurship due to a lack of professional local opportunities is a case of wasted human capital and structural erosion where skills remain underutilized.

Household Size: The Strain on Allocative Resources

Most of the returnees are from households with 3-5 members (63.33%), which makes the reintegration process even more difficult. A larger household size increases the dependency ratio, placing immense pressure on the returnee's allocative resources. In the absence of sustained institutional support, the migrant's savings are recursively funneled into the social reproduction of the family-food, health, and education-rather than the structural elaboration of a sustainable local livelihood. As Kuschminder (2017) points out, the larger the household, the higher the reintegration cliff, as the returnee's financial buffer is consumed much faster than it can be replenished by local income.

Household Income: The Reality of Structural Reproduction

Perhaps the most telling quantitative finding is that 90% of returnee households earn below ₱20,000 monthly, placing them within the low-income bracket. This is a stark indicator of structural reproduction. Despite years of overseas labor and the accumulation of global skills, the agents return to a structural position of economic uncertainty. This confirms the argument of de Haas (2021) that migration, while a relief for individual poverty, often fails to change the underlying structural inequalities of the home country. When income remains below the living wage, the returnee's reflexive monitoring of their situation leads back to a single conclusion: re-migration is the only viable path to survival.

Reintegration Domains: The Paradox of Social Capital

The quantitative matrix reveals a significant reintegration gap between different life domains:

Table 2. Multidimensional Reintegration Assessment

Domain	Grand Mean	Interpretation
Social Reintegration	2.70	Good
Psychosocial Well-being	2.43	Poor
Economic Reintegration	2.41	Poor
Overall Grand Mean	2.51	Borderline Good/Poor

The “Good” rating for social reintegration supports Vertovec’s (2007) theory of transnational social capital, where the returnee is welcomed back into the communal fold. However, de Haas (2021) cautions that social belonging does not automatically translate into economic stability. The “Poor” ratings in the economic and psychosocial domains suggest that while the community provides a safety net of belonging, the state fails to provide a springboard for growth. The low psychosocial mean specifically points to a lack of ontological security—a term used by Giddens (1984) to describe the sense of order and continuity that is shattered when a returnee loses their role as a global provider.

Institutional Scaffolding and Structural Constraints: Mapping the Access Gap

The institutional landscape for reintegration is marked by a significant access gap, whereby formal mandates often do not translate into accessible support for returnees. While agencies like the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) and Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) are the main sources of assistance, a whopping 96.97% of respondents, as shown in Table 3, reported unsuccessful attempts to access psychosocial support.

Table 3. Frequency of Institutional Support and Access Gaps

Reintegration Dimension	Successful Access (%)	Unsuccessful Access Attempts (%)
Economic	43.34% (Financial aid, jobs, skills)	56.66%
Social	40.00% (Associations, mentorship)	60.00%
Psychosocial	3.33% Counseling)	96.67%
Total	100.00%	100.00%

This profound deficit reveals a systemic neglect of the emotional and mental health needs of labor migrants, who are left without the ontological security required to re-establish their identity at home. Furthermore, economic support is limited, with 56.67% of returnees not receiving institutional aid, often due to bureaucratic complexity and procedural barriers. As part of the SST framework, these barriers are structural constraints that inhibit the active agency of the migrant. When external structures fail to offer the needed scaffolding—such as credit, counseling, or mentorship—returnees are forced into a state of partial stability that reinforces a cycle of structural reproduction, often requiring re-migration.

Quantitative Findings Summary

The demographic profile of the 30 labor migrant returnees in General Santos City is characterized by a mid-life transition and a significant feminization of labor, with 40% of respondents aged 45-54 and over 83% being female. These demographic factors constitute internal structures—deep-seated habits and global work ethics—that returnees must try to reconcile with a local labor market that is unreceptive to older workers, resulting in a systematic structural mismatch. This tension is aggravated by the moral mandate of the family, given that 76.67% of the returnees are married and their active agency is largely constrained by the pressure to provide for their households. This situation leads migrants to opt for short-term, low-risk income streams instead of long-term entrepreneurial investments, thereby draining savings earned abroad.

The study also reveals a significant schema-resource mismatch in educational achievement, where despite 56.67% of the returnees having college or higher education, the lack of professional opportunities in the local environment forces these high-knowledgeable agents into petty trade or survivalist entrepreneurship, representing a colossal waste of human capital. The household size further compounds the economic burden, with 63.33% of returnees residing with 3 to 5 family members. Large households face an increased dependency ratio as the financial buffer of the migrant is exhausted by social reproduction costs such as food and education, which are consumed faster than they can be replenished by local income, resulting in a reintegration cliff.

The income data is the most telling indicator of structural reproduction: 90% of returnees' households earn below ₱20,000 monthly, putting them squarely in the low-income bracket despite years of global skill accumulation. Furthermore, while the "Social Reintegration" domain was rated "Good" (2.70 mean), the "Economic" (2.41) and "Psychosocial" (2.43) domains were rated "Poor." The low psychosocial mean points to a lack of ontological security, as returnees struggle to reconstruct their identities after losing their role as global providers.

Finally, the institutional environment is characterized by a stark access gap. The formal mandates of support do not reach the returnees. A staggering 96.67% of respondents indicated unsuccessful attempts to navigate psychosocial support systems, while 56.67% were unable to secure economic aid due to the structural friction of procedural barriers and information asymmetry. The structural limitations inhibit the active agency of the migrants to the extent that they are forced into a state of partial stability that ultimately reinforces a cycle of repeat migration.

Qualitative Analysis: Navigating the Quadripartite Cycle of Reintegration and Agency

While the quantitative data illustrate the scale of challenges facing returnees, the following analysis interrogates the knowledgeability and strategic agency of the participants themselves. This section applies the Quadripartite Cycle to systematically examine the interplay between *external* and *internal structures*, the returnee's *active agency*, and the resulting *outcomes*. This framework charts the shift of a "modern-day hero" abroad to a localized actor working against the structural friction of the Philippine economy. The stories of these ten participants illustrate a complicated navigation of power, where self-efficacy is the main mechanism through which the enablers and constrainers of institutional support are negotiated. Correspondingly, narratives from four institutional informants illuminated constraints, specifically regarding the limitations of existing reintegration protocols.

The Mediating Influence of Institutional Support on Reintegration

External Structures: Structural Traps and Institutional Friction

The external structures, as shown in Table 4, represent a structural collision between returnees' global skills and local systemic rigidities. This collision is first manifested in a remittance-bound trap, where the absence of local social safety nets forces migrants to use their accumulated savings on immediate family obligations such as health and education. Participants echoed this struggle, with one noting:

"I expected my siblings to finish their studies... My expectation was that our quality of life would improve. I wished I had enough savings, but what I was sending back was only enough for siblings' schooling. For that reason, I didn't really have enough saved to put up my business."

This story shows how migration is often pursued for the survival of the family but at the expense of the migrant's long-term economic security, as another returnee put it bluntly: they went abroad *"for my children."* These experiences support the work of Cleofas (2022), who argues that Philippine migration governance effectively privatizes social protection, placing the entire burden of welfare on the individual migrant.

Returnees are also experiencing major institutional friction, in the form of a critical access gap in formal support systems. Many returnees with documentation, such as certificates for distressed workers, discover the bureaucracy to be more of a gatekeeper than a facilitator. One participant lamented the lack of parity in aid distribution, saying:

"My colleague got sent home and got ₱20,000, but we didn't get even a peso. During the OWWA processing, we even spent money...you still have to travel all the way to Koronadal City (where the regional office is located), and yet nothing came of it."

Others described the exhaustion of navigating complex requirements:

"They make you explain so much and ask for so many requirements... then they'll just say, 'Ma'am, I can't do anything about that' and 'The long lines and the endless requirements... if you miss one document... you have to go all the way back. The fare is so costly. We pay these taxes and remittances; it shouldn't be this hard.'"

The distance and complex procedures contribute to the disconnect, as returnees report waiting months for assistance that never arrives. *"When I got home, I went straight to the OWWA in Koronadal City... to give us cash assistance, especially since I'm distressed... we haven't gotten anything for seven months,"* said one returnee. Even those in active communication with authorities experienced stagnant outcomes, noting, *"I am chatting and they (OWWA) are replying to just wait."* These results are consistent with Israel and Dacuycuy (2021), who identify bureaucratic friction and distance to regional offices as major barriers to reintegration. In the end, this lack of institutional scaffolding sustains a recursive cycle in which the failure of local structures pushes returnees back into the global labor market.

Table 4. Thematic Mapping Matrix on the Mediating Influence of Institutional Support on Reintegration

SST Component	Consolidated Themes	Key Evidence / Findings
External Structures	Structural Traps & Institutional Friction	Remittance-bound traps, "distance burdens" to regional offices, and access gap and procedural layering
Internal Structures	Reconfigured Habitus & Moral Schemas	Adoption of "Chinese frugality," the "Hero" identity as a normative anchor, and parental duty.
Active Agency	Survivalist Navigation	Occupational downgrading (laundry work), proactive crisis management, and micro-hustle.

Outcomes	Recursive Intent vs. Structural Elaboration	“Revolving-door” reintegration and recursive migration intent.
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Internal Structures: Reconfigured Habitus & Moral Schemas

The internal structures of circular labor migrants are made up of the social remittances and internalized dispositions that they bring home from their time abroad. These include what Stones (2005) calls “internal structures-as-of-now,” which are the skills and financial mindsets that shape how an agent behaves in the home market. For example, one participant noted the adoption of cross-cultural financial discipline:

“As for skills, I learned a bit of Mandarin and Cantonese... Regarding perspectives, I observed that the Chinese tend to be very frugal with money. They only spend on their needs; even though my employers were wealthy, they were not big spenders. I saw how they manage their finances.”

However, the internalized identity of the “Modern-Day Hero,” a normative schema that equates extreme self-sacrifice with familial love, often casts a shadow over these positive dispositions. This internal pressure results in the obligation to provide for high-cost household expenses. Often, economic decisions push out the capital intended for entrepreneurial ventures, as noted by Opiniano (2021). This transition is psychologically and financially burdensome, especially when people are unprepared for the sudden loss of steady wages. *“The hardest part of all is being unprepared to lose a regular monthly income for more than a year,”* said one returnee. Another returnee expressed, *“I have not received a monthly salary for almost two years now, and I have drained several years of savings without even realizing it.”* Thus, even though returnees have the strategic navigation and the skills to succeed, the lack of institutional support to protect their savings leads to a recursive cycle of having to go back to the global labor market to replenish their lost capital.

Active Agency: Survivalist Navigation

Their agency, facing the tight constraints of the local market, is predominantly expressed as “survivalist navigation” or strategic adaptation. This agency is also visible in the occupational downgrading in which returnees with global expertise are forced to engage in informal, low-entry labor to guarantee household liquidity. One participant explained that she immediately resorted to informal work:

“Because my return to the Philippines was unexpected and we had nothing at all, I did laundry for others to earn money.”

This is not a change that signals skill deficiency but rather what De Haas (2021) terms agentic rationality—a deliberate, reflexive decision to secure immediate family survival when formal institutional structures do not offer a credible transition bridge. Thus, the reflexive attempt to monitor dwindling resources highlights the tension between the returnee’s yearning for local stability and the pressures of a volatile local economy.

Outcomes: Recursive Intent vs. Structural Elaboration

The last step of the cycle shows a clear divergence in reintegration outcomes, largely dictated by the presence of institutional scaffolding. For most returnees, the result is structural reproduction—a recursive migration cycle in which the lack of viable local support sends the agent back to the global market. This systemic failure is expressed by a participant who condemns the gap between the celebratory rhetoric of the state and the reality of service delivery:

“Even if I am tagged as a ‘modern-day hero,’ I never felt like one in my fourteen years as an OFW. I have never experienced any ‘special service’ worthy of that title. I think the problem is with those who are assigned to implement these programs; they are simply not equipped to deliver the promises given to us.”

The participant expresses concern that the institutions were unequipped to fulfill the promises made to them. Such finding is consistent with the idea of revolving-door reintegration, as described by Agunias and Newland

(2019), where programs offer short-term relief. Thus, the modern-day hero storyline functions as a hollow image masking institutional neglect.

Self-Efficacy as Agentic Power in a Volatile Economy

External Structure: Market Volatility and Institutional Friction

External structures are the conditions of action that enable or constrain the transition of a returnee. The data indicated in Table 5 show a structurally unstable environment in which returnees, without formal direction, enter high-risk, informal markets that lead to financial depletion. Lack of strong institutional alternatives pushed them into uncertain business ventures, participants said:

“I used the rest of the money to start a lending business, but it never took off. I also ventured into the supply business for fighting cocks, but it didn’t succeed either. That didn’t succeed either, because the management of the ‘online sabong’ (online cockfighting) ran into problems.

He further highlighted the suddenness of his economic displacement, which left him without a safety net:

“My savings were running low. The sudden shutdown of our work site and the company’s refusal to allow us to return caught me off guard financially.”

The institutional vacuum experienced by the participant frequently leads to the dissipation of migrant capital as returnees are forced into volatile informal sectors in a desperate search for liquidity. The lack of systematic economic protection means returnees are forced to drain their savings to cover the absence of systematic economic protection and aggravates the reintegration cliff whereby global savings are quickly eaten up by local market instability. The abovementioned narratives align with Garabiles et al. (2022) idea of structural friction, where the lack of sector-specific institutional scaffolding in the Philippines leaves returnees susceptible to unpredictable and unregulated local markets.

Table 5. Thematic Mapping Matrix Self-Efficacy as Agentic Power in a Volatile Economy

SST Component	Consolidated Themes	Key Evidence / Findings
External Structures	Market Volatility & Institutional Friction	Failure of “online sabong (cockfighting)”; lack of institutional depth in local markets.
Internal Structures	Cognitive Resilience & Moral Schemas	“Financial discipline” and “proper planning”; high self-efficacy as a psychological buffer.
Active Agency	Strategic Navigation & Pragmatic Sacrifice	Transition from “modern-day hero” to localized entrepreneur; occupational downgrading.
Outcomes	Anchored Settlement vs. Recursive Loops	“Breaking the “revolving door” through anchored settlement vs. re-migration as a risk-management.

Internal Structure: Cognitive Resilience & Moral Schemas

The internal structures of returnees include their psychological readiness and their habitus, understood as the ingrained habits and dispositions acquired through years of overseas labor. The transitions produce a different mindset with intense discipline, strategic planning, and a better ability to manage personal resources. One participant described the shift in financial discipline and rejection or performative consumption:

“The best way to save is to stop sending packages and learn to distinguish between the wants and needs of your family. You’re not going to work forever, so you need to start contemplating your future.”

Other returnees referred to the internalization of the physical and mental pace of global labor as a permanent characteristic:

“Once you’ve been abroad, you become very agile/fast. It is like how you worked there, how you moved there; you carry it with you. I have become more mature in my decision-making and developed a more positive perspective. No matter what challenges I encounter, I have learned to remain resilient. Working abroad requires a resilient and independent personality, as there is often no one to rely on but yourself.”

Another participant explained the role of internal structures in the form of faith-based schema as a crucial normative anchor, saying, *“I draw my strength from the Lord. Our dream is always there—that hopefully, our lives will improve.”* Such reliance on spiritual strength highlights the ways in which returnees draw on cognitive and emotional resilience to maintain ontological security in the face of structural lack.

This psychological capital, the convergence of hope and faith anchored in self-efficacy, is the principal engine for perseverance when faced with an uncooperative local economy. As argued by Datu and Galang (2021), this internalized confidence gives a schema of resilience that enables returnees to employ global work ethics and strategic navigation to local ventures even without external institutional support. This resilience is important because, as the study shows, the absence of formal safety nets effectively privatizes the cost of reintegration, leaving the agent to depend almost entirely on his or her own independent personality and maturity.

Active Agency: Strategic Navigation & Pragmatic Sacrifice

Active agency is the critical site where a returnee’s internalized confidence and skills intersect with the rigid realities of local community. Agency in this study is expressed through strategic negotiation and navigation, where returnees prioritize household survival over professional status. The following narrative from a participant exemplifies this pragmatic acceptance of occupational downgrading to secure basic needs:

“You do laundry; if it comes to doing laundry, you do it... so that you have something to eat. You just wait patiently for whatever is given, even if it takes a long time.”

Such behavior is an example of agentic adaptation, where returnees deliberately choose lower-status jobs in the local economy as a temporary anchoring strategy to avoid immediate remigration. Occupational downgrading is a type of reflexive monitoring, a rational, conscious response to the structural walls and access gaps returnees face on their return. This behavior indicates a high degree of resilience, but the study suggests that in the absence of institutional support this agency is survivalist rather than transformative, often shifting the entire burden of adjustment to the household. The tension between wanting to stay home and the pressure of family needs eventually leads back to the recursive cycle of looking for work abroad.

Outcomes: Anchored Settlement vs. Recursive Loops

The final stage of the cycle shows a split in the outcomes of reintegration, oscillating between structural elaboration (where the agent makes a permanent local transition) and structural reproduction (where the agent is forced back into the global market). A small minority of participants managed to transition to local entrepreneurship, but most are trapped in what is called the recursive trap.

One participant described a sense of anchoring in self-reliance and spiritual conviction rather than reliance on the state:

“I am completely confident that even without government assistance, as long as we have God’s help, we will definitely remain here... Our savings will be enough; we won’t rely on government assistance because it’s so slow and corruption in the Philippines is just too much.”

But the dominant feeling among returnees suggests a profound frustration with the absence of institutional reciprocation for their years of labor. In particular, the story of the returnee from China is an indication of a desire for a new social contract based on reciprocal remittance. In invoking the unfulfilled promises of the

consulate, the participant argues that their long-term contributions to the national economy should be traded for sustainable protections, such as elderly allowances, rather than unreliable repatriate assistance:

“The consulate in China told us that we would receive something from the government... but when we came back, there was nothing. If they provide us something back in exchange for our remittances, it would be much better... If only we could have a monthly allowance... for when we grow old.

These outcomes suggest that the migration cycle will continue to repeat itself as a survival mechanism rather than a route to development unless institutional services shift from one-off output grants to a sustainable ecosystem of integration. For many, the result is structural reproduction, a recursive migration cycle driven by the access gap and the absence of formal safety nets. As Valencia (2021) noted, this recursive trap implies that in the absence of institutional scaffolding (e.g., long-term mentoring, social protection), the burden of adjustment is completely privatized, requiring a return to the global market to ensure household survival.

Institutional Perspective on Strategic Effectiveness

External Structure: Bureaucratic Barriers and Specialized Alignment

The rules and resources provided by the state form part of the external structures. Data in Table 6 reveal a big difference between specialized professional reintegration such as the SPIMS (Sa Pinas, Ikaw and Ma’am at Sir, a program intended for professional teachers) and general welfare assistance such as BPBH (Balik Pinas! Balik Hanapbuhay!). The former provides a clear path to stability, while the latter does not bridge the gap between global experience and local employment.

One institutional informant observed the difference in the success of the targeted SPIMS program and the shortcoming of the wider BPBH grant:

“Not to be biased, sir, but it’s SPIMS. For me, individually, the BPBH is very small...hopefully our government sees that it should be increased because this is where there’s a gap, But SPIMS sir, you get hired as a teacher, and you are given another ₱20,000 after you get your permanent position... that’s called educational financial assistance.”

The informant’s comparison of the SPIMS and BPBH programs highlights the importance of specialized alignment rather than generalized welfare. The BPHBH is considered an incomplete structure because of its small and inadequate grant, but the SPIMS program is an example of structural elaboration because it successfully integrates the returnee’s professional skills into a stable, permanent job in the local labor market.

Furthermore, the reference to additional educational financial assistance after reaching permanent status highlights the role of institutional scaffolding in grounding the agent. Through the provision of layered financial support that coincides with long-term employment, the state moves beyond one-off assistance to a sustainable ecosystem that rewards professional reintegration and prevents the returnees from falling back into the recursive migration cycle. The BPBH versus SPIMS case is an example of the kind of “skill-wastage” Huelser and Sanchez (2024) warn against, where generalized aid does not draw on the migrant’s particular professional capital.

Table 6. Thematic Mapping Matrix on Institutional Efficacy and Policy Frameworks

SST Component	Consolidated Themes	Key Evidence / Findings
External Structures	Bureaucratic Barriers Specialized Alignment	SPIMS as the “gold standard”, “small” relief grants (BPBH) vs. sustainable professional placement.
Internal Structures	Programmatic Logic & Staff Empathy	Awareness of “Return Trauma”; recognition of the “Hero” narrative as a barrier to help-seeking behavior.

Active Agency	Reactive vs. Proactive Governance	Shift from “distress signal” responses to “dignified livelihood” pathways; managing “returnee wastage.”
Outcomes	Structural Elaboration vs. Fragmented Relief	Permanence local labor inclusion (Elaboration) vs. survivalist consumption (Reproduction).

Internal Structures: Programmatic Logic and Staff Empathy

The institutional actor’s internal structure is its localized understanding of the returnee’s psyche. A key finding of this study is that return trauma is institutionally acknowledged, but this psychological scarring remains peripheral to formal external structures, which prioritize economic output over emotional recovery. As one key institutional informant commented on the disconnect between the current economic-centered focus and the actual emotional needs of returnees:

“There is a gap between the multifaceted reintegration needs of returnees and the range of support currently provided, especially in the area of psychosocial well-being... long-term psychosocial mechanisms remain underdeveloped. Many returnees continue to suffer from emotional stress, loss of identity, and strained family relationships... often invisible and less likely to be captured by formal monitoring systems, especially when success is measured foremost by economic indicators.

This institutional informant’s perspective emphasizes that the state-sponsored story of the “Modern-Day Hero” may be a paradoxical impediment to recovery. This trope, Valenzuela and Dizon (2022) argued, often keeps returnees from seeking mental health support because of a moral obligation to show an image of success. Without specialized psychosocial safety nets to deal with this internal scarring, the agent remains ontologically insecure—an outsider among others in their own community. Thus, the study argues that to ensure sustainable reintegration, institutional logic should move beyond financial indicators to ensure that returnees are emotionally resilient and empowered to rebuild their lives in the long run.

Active Agency. Reactive vs. Proactive Governance

The movement of staff roles from administrative paper-pushing to active, strategic intervention expresses institutional agency. The study advocates for a shift in the government agency’s usage from a reactive approach to immediate vulnerability to a more proactive approach to building dignified livelihoods. As one institutional informant described, the challenge of shifting the measures of success from short-term data to long-term stability is:

“Success in reintegration is defined not only by immediate outputs such as completed trainings and released grants but more importantly by outcomes that show stability and well-being over time... Tracking usually tapers off after several months due to resource constraints... As a result, success is sometimes counted earlier than ideal, and impact indicators such as long-term job quality or psychosocial well-being are harder to measure consistently.

Staff act as facilitators of pathways over the long term rather than providers of emergency relief, thereby offering agency in a manner that truly roots them in place. This change in institutional behavior is in line with Guerin et al. (2023), who argue that for reintegration to be sustainable, institutional actors need to shift from one-off output metrics (e.g. number of grants distributed) to impact-driven monitoring. But as the data show, current resource constraints create a monitoring gap that does not capture the long-term sustainability of a returnee’s reintegration, potentially hiding those caught in the recursive cycle.

Outcomes: Structural Elaboration vs. Fragmented Relief

This institutional cycle ends with the difference between a permanent homecoming and a distress departure. When specialized programs (such as SPIMS) are able to match the skills of a returnee with a permanent local position, then structural elaboration occurs. Fragmented support, on the other hand, engenders structural reproduction, where the returnees are pushed back into the global market because the local safety nets were too

shallow. As Tullao and Rivera (2022) contend, the right to stay in the Philippines continues to be a privilege for those who find structural stability, while for others, the cycle of circular migration is a recursive necessity due to the gap between national pride and local economic reality.

Qualitative Findings Summary

The qualitative findings of this study challenge the knowledgeability and strategic agency of returnees. The Quadripartite Cycle was the framework of analysis for the interplay between external and internal structures. The research suggests a basic structural misalignment between the global skills of migrants and the rigid, frequently uncooperative local systems. This collision is first evident in the remittance-bound trap: the absence of social safety nets at home forces returnees to spend their savings on immediate family obligations such as education and health care. Thus, migration usually becomes the family survival strategy at the cost of the migrant's long-term economic security. And there is the weight of institutional friction, where bureaucratic procedures are gatekeepers rather than facilitators. Participants described substantial distance burdens to regional offices and an access gap where promised help did not materialize after months of waiting.

Internally, returnees negotiate these challenges through a reconfigured habitus, often bringing home a "Chinese frugality" and an intense financial discipline learned abroad. However, the internalized identity of the "Modern-Day Hero," a normative schema that equates extreme self-sacrifice with familial love, obscures these positive dispositions. A psychological barrier to seeking help for trauma or emotional distress may be the moral obligation to appear successful. The institutional informants admitted that such psychological scarring is still marginal to the state structures prioritizing economic outputs over emotional recovery. Without any psychosocial safety nets available, returnees often feel ontologically insecure, feeling like outsiders in their communities despite their years of labor.

To deal with these tight constraints, returnees engage in survivalist navigation, a form of active agency that is marked by strategic adaptation. This is most visibly expressed in occupational downgrading, where returnees with global expertise engage in informal, low-entry work to create immediate household liquidity. This shows a high level of agentic rationality and resilience but is often a survivalist rather than a transformative strategy. In the absence of institutional support, returnees may also seek their fortunes in high-risk and unregulated markets such as lending or online cockfighting which result in the rapid dissipation of their capital and further depletion of their finances.

The final reintegration results differ depending on the existence of institutional scaffolding. Specialized programs such as SPIMS are a "gold standard" for structural elaboration, matching a returnee's professional skills with permanent local positions and layered financial support. In contrast, generalized welfare grants such as BPBH are considered incomplete structures, providing only fragmented, short-term relief. Without sustained support or sector-specific oversight, most returnees end up in a recursive trap or a revolving-door cycle. This systemic incompleteness often drives returnees back into the global labor market to replenish lost savings, reinforcing a cycle of circular migration driven by the gap between national pride and local economic reality.

CONCLUSION

The Dialectics of Reintegration and Structural Reproduction

Labor migrant returnees' reintegration is characterized by a major schema-resource mismatch. Returnees have a changed habitus; however, these internal structures are frequently undermined by a non-accommodating local macro-structural context. This tension results in a structural collision in which the agent's high degree of knowledgeability and educational achievement cannot be translated into local capital due to labor market rigidities that privilege younger workers and lack professional niches. The essence of this incompleteness is the reintegration cliff where the lack of allocative resources (social safety nets) places the entire burden of social reproduction on the individual. Remittance dependency traps migrants, as does the moral schema of parental duty, which compels them to spend their savings on immediate family obligations. The economic toll is exacerbated by the lack of ontological security because the "Modern-Day Hero" story acts as a normative anchor

that stands as a psychological barrier preventing returnees from seeking assistance for return trauma and emphasizing performative success over emotional recovery.

In addition, the study finds a divergence in structural elaboration depending on the presence of institutional scaffolding. Programs such as SPIMS allow a permanent local transition by matching the agent's professional skills and the more stable external structures. Generic grants like BPBH, on the other hand, are incomplete structures. These disjointed interventions provide only temporary relief and do not bridge the gap between global skill accumulation and local economic inclusion. Without institutional support, returnees engage in survivalist navigation, a type of agentic adaptation where they prioritize household survival over professional status through occupational downgrading. This creates structural reproduction, a recursive cycle that sends returnees back to the global labor market to replace lost capital.

While these findings offer deep insights into the quadripartite reintegration cycle, some methodological limitations limit their generalizability beyond the scope of the present study. The use of snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling method, and the relatively small sample size of respondents means that the results are a reflection of the unique, localized narratives of this particular group, rather than the universal experience of all Filipino migrants. Furthermore, this study intentionally focused on Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in the service and skilled worker categories. Thus, the dynamics of structural elaboration and recursive intent we see here may be quite different for sea-based workers, high-level professionals, or those in different geographic and socio-economic contexts. Therefore, we should view these conclusions as a foundational exploration of the interplay between agency and structure within these particular occupational strata.

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