



# Mixed Feelings

## Attitudes of Sabah-based Filipinos to Returning to the Philippines

IMAN Research and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue  
May 2019

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the 1970s, migrants from Mindanao have migrated to Sabah fleeing violence and economic deprivation. Recent progress in the Mindanao peace process has inspired optimism that the Philippine Government can cooperate with the newly-established Bangsamoro Government to facilitate a transition to peace and prosperity. This improvement could allow many of the Sabah-based Filipinos to return to their homelands. In similar contexts around the world, governments have established voluntary return and reintegration programs to help displaced people overcome financial, legal, logistical, and social obstacles to returning to their place of origin.

This research investigates the attitudes of Sabah-based Filipinos to returning home to Mindanao. During informal discussions, Malaysian and Philippine Government officials identified having a better understanding of Sabah-based Filipinos' attitudes as a necessary step to exploring the establishment of a voluntary return and reintegration program. This research project draws on 30 in-depth interviews with Sabah-based Filipinos, most of whom live in Sabah without the permission of the Malaysian authorities.

### Wide Variation in Attitudes about Returning to Mindanao

The research found that there was a near universal cultural affinity for the Philippines and a desire to visit Mindanao. However, attitudes to returning permanently to the Philippines varied across a spectrum. There were some respondents who would consider returning if they were provided limited support. A larger number would require stronger incentives to return, or are unlikely to ever consider returning.

Unlikely to ever consider returning	Require strong incentives to return	Actively considering returning
This population would not consider voluntarily returning to Mindanao. Typically they have legal residency, are highly integrated into Sabahan society, have good career prospects, consider Mindanao to be near uniformly violent, and have minimal contact with family members in Mindanao.	This population would only consider returning to Mindanao if they were incentivised by a substantial and attractive reintegration program. Typically they do not have Malaysian residency documents but may have short-term visas, have some extended family in Mindanao but are not in regular contact, have family members who are somewhat integrated into Sabahan society, and have reasonable career prospects in Sabah.	This population would consider returning to Mindanao if limited support was provided to overcome legal obstacles, transport issues, and set-up costs. Typically they work low-skilled and low-status jobs in Sabah, are in regular contact with close family members in Mindanao, understand there are variations in the level of violence in different parts of Mindanao, and have typically been in Sabah for less than 20 years.

### Concerns about Employment Opportunities and Violence

The respondents who live in Sabah without authorisation from the Malaysian authorities live under constant risk of arrest and deportation. They are typically worried that they will be unable to find satisfactory employment in Mindanao and believe that wages are higher in Sabah. Secondly, many respondents worry about crime and insecurity in Mindanao. Those with closer family connections will acknowledge insecurity is a problem in some parts of Mindanao, but claim that their hometowns remain peaceful. Moreover, fear of violence is not strong enough to dissuade people from wanting to visit temporarily.

### Implications for a Future Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program

There is an appetite amongst a small percentage of Sabah-based Filipinos for a voluntary return and reintegration program. Between 250,000 and 800,000 Filipinos live in Sabah, so even if a small percentage of the population is interested, that could translate into 10,000s of potential voluntary returnees. This number could increase as the situation in the Bangsamoro continues to improve and people become more confident about their economic security and physical safety.

A voluntary return and reintegration program is only part of the solution as there remains a large number of Sabah-based Filipinos who are unlikely to ever return voluntarily to Mindanao. For this population, an alternative must be developed to avoid multi-generational exclusion.

## CONTENTS

Executive Summary	2
I. Background	4
II. Research Findings	5
A. Legal Residency Status, Fear of Arrest, and Deportation in Sabah	6
B. The Influence of Family	6
C. Temporary versus Permanent Return	7
D. Cultural Attachment to the Philippines	8
E. Livelihoods and Prices	9
F. Security Concerns	9
G. Education and Health Services	11
H. Reintegration into Mindanao Society	12
I. Locations of Return	12
J. Existing Skills of Respondents	13
K. Support Required if Returning to the Philippines	13
III. Willingness to Participate in a Future Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program	14
IV. Implications for the Design of a Future Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program	16
V. Annex A - Demographic Characteristics of Respondents	18

*Report prepared by:*

**Dr. Vilashini Somiah**

**Siti Sarah binti Mohamed Ali**

**Akil Yunus**

**Alexander Douglas**

*With the help of on-site researchers:*

**Asrin bin Utong**

**Azhar bin Usman**

**Dayang Safiah binti Awang Maslan**

*This research was conducted and compiled by IMAN Research, with the generous support of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD). Cover Photo Credit: Greg Constantine, Lost Children of Sabah.*



## I. BACKGROUND

Since the 1970s, people have migrated from Mindanao to Sabah to flee ongoing conflict and the accompanying economic deprivation. The most intense period of migration was during the conflict between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Philippine Government during which many fled Mindanao's island provinces of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. Following peace talks with the MNLF, the most severe violence was driven by the conflict between the Philippines Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Throughout this period, the island provinces struggled with high levels of criminality and the activities of extremist groups. Collectively, this instability crippled the economy of many of the Muslim-majority areas of the southern Philippines.

Those fleeing the violence and economic deprivation were attracted to Sabah because of its comparative stability and economic prosperity. They could also live alongside their co-ethnics; Sabah has long-standing populations of Suluk-Tausug and the Sama-Bajau who are Malaysian citizens. In Sabah they could find jobs, as the state's economy has large oil, gas, agriculture and tourism sectors. While they received lower wages than their Malaysian counterparts, these migrant workers still earned more than they would have in Mindanao. The Filipinos, many of whom live without residency rights from the Malaysian Government, are now an important part of the Sabah economy - particularly in the areas of construction, agriculture and fishing.

The influx of irregular migrants from the Philippines provoked hostility among some Malaysian residents, particularly native Sabahans. These tensions continued to escalate due to various forms of Malaysian civil documentation allegedly being issued to the Filipino population. Known as 'Project IC', it is believed that thousands of Filipinos were granted citizenship in the 1980s and 1990s in an effort to transform the demographic make-up of the Sabah electorate. In 2012, the Malaysian government established a Royal Commission of Inquiry to investigate 'Project IC' and its political connections to irregular migrants in Sabah. While details of the connection remains unclear, indigenous Sabahans commonly see the presence of Filipino migrants as a threat to their political influence and cultural continuity.

Despite the allegations that Malaysian authorities have unlawfully provided identity documents, there is still a very large number of Sabah-based Filipinos who do not possess civil registration documents from either the Philippines or Malaysian Governments. This inhibits their ability to access mainstream public services such as health and education in Sabah.

To date, the Malaysian Government's main response to the presence of undocumented Filipinos is to arrest and deport them back to Mindanao. Approximately 10,000 Filipinos are deported each year, but the vast majority of these deportees find a way back into Sabah, most of them within a month.<sup>1</sup> Given the nature of arrests, many of those deported have spouses or children who remain in Sabah, giving them little choice but to return. The arrest, detention and deportation process costs the Malaysian Government approximately RM50million annually.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Preliminary Results of Research into Philippines Nationals Deported from Sabah' Research Conducted by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, available upon request.

## **Recent Improvements in the southern Philippines**

Over the last decade, the Philippine Government has been engaging in peace negotiations with the MILF, the largest of the Muslim separatist groups. After a complex series of peace agreements, negotiated with the assistance of Malaysian facilitators, a new Bangsamoro Government was established in early 2019. This represents an important milestone in the journey towards peace and prosperity in the southern Philippines, and there is now widespread optimism about the future of the Bangsamoro. With the security and economy of the Bangsamoro beginning to improve, some of the Filipinos currently residing in Sabah may be interested in voluntarily returning home.

## **The Potential Establishment of a Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program**

Around the world Voluntary Return and Reintegration (VRR) programs have been established to help people overcome the legal, social, economic and logistical challenges to returning home. Since 2018, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) has been organising a series of informal discussions between Malaysian and Philippine officials and experts about how a VRR program could be established. During those meetings, it became clear that further planning could benefit from a more detailed understanding of the attitudes of Sabah-based Filipinos towards returning to Mindanao. This research, which was led by IMAN Research in cooperation with HD, investigates the realities of undocumented migrant communities in Sabah, and gauges their willingness to voluntarily return to the Philippines.

## **II. RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The research conducted in-depth interviews with 30 individuals (19 male, 11 female)<sup>2</sup> of Filipino-descent across Kota Kinabalu, Lahad Datu, and Sandakan in January and February 2019. The research found that there was a near universal cultural affinity for the Philippines and a desire to visit Mindanao. However, attitudes to returning permanently to the Philippines varied across a broad spectrum. There were some respondents who would consider returning if they were provided limited support to do so. A larger number would require substantial incentives to return or were unlikely to ever consider returning.

Respondents generally approached the decision about whether to return home by imagining the positive and negative aspects of living in both places. These attitudes are summarised in Table 1. Generally, their reasons for remaining in Sabah are highly pragmatic and driven by economic opportunities and better security, while still identifying Mindanao as their homeland. But they also viewed the prospect of returning permanently to the Philippines as a massive decision that would profoundly affect almost all aspects of their lives - either for better or worse. With the average respondent living in Sabah for 25 years or more, returning to the Philippines involved making a courageous decision with many uncertainties. Respondents typically did not consider the prospect of returning to the Philippines without their Sabah-based family and therefore weighed the costs and benefits not as individuals but as households. Based on the evidence gathered by the on-site researchers, the findings were divided into distinct themes which are discussed in more detail below.

---

<sup>2</sup> There were more male than female respondents as females were less willing to participate, mainly due to suspicion that on-site researchers were government agents in addition to concerns pertaining to personal safety.

*Table 1: Comparative of Respondent Attitudes about Living in Sabah versus Mindanao*

	Sabah	Mindanao
<b>Subjects of Positive Feelings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good employment opportunities, particularly in the low-skilled sector</li> <li>- Relative peace and safety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feeling of belonging and cultural affinity to their homeland</li> <li>- Able to access mainstream education and other government services</li> </ul>
<b>Subjects of Negative Feelings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Constant threat of arrest and deportation</li> <li>- Unable to access mainstream schools</li> <li>- High costs of healthcare for non-citizens</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of employment opportunities, particularly for low-skilled workers.</li> <li>- Instability and crime</li> <li>- Expensive prices for staple goods</li> </ul>

### **A. Legal Residency Status, Fear of Arrest, and Deportation in Sabah**

Many aspects of life for Filipinos in Sabah depends on whether a person has the legal residency rights from the Malaysian authorities. Those with legal residency are far more reluctant to return to the Philippines because they are not worried about being deported, able to access public services, and have better job opportunities. The majority of people interviewed did not have the right to reside legally in Sabah from the Malaysian Government and therefore risk being deported back to the Philippines. The implications of living under the constant threat of arrest is clearly demonstrated by the reluctance of many respondents who did not want to provide personal contact information to researchers out of fear that it would be used by local authorities to arrest them.

“Often we will get early information about the time and place of a [immigration arrest] raid. We take the opportunity to get into the middle of the field to hide. We are afraid of being captured... We spend months in custody before being sent back to the Philippines. If we hear news of a raid while in the field, whether true or not, we will feel anxious.” - Lan\*, 33, Lahad Datu

“[In Mindanao] you can move freely. There are no arrests like in Sabah for those who have no identification documents” - Maria\*, 26, Sandakan

Some of the participants had previously been arrested and deported to Mindanao only to return illegally to Sabah. One participant admitted to having previously been deported but sneaked back in to Sabah “because my child and wife are here”.<sup>3</sup> Tellingly, this respondent was among the most willing to return to the Philippines voluntarily if provided limited support. Another had returned illegally to Mindanao in order to apply for a Filipino passport, only to realise that he had fallen victim to a scam.

### **B. The Influence of Family**

Respondents’ attitudes towards returning to the Philippines were predominantly shaped by what they considered to be in the best interests of their families. Twenty-two of these respondents were married, six were single while the remaining two were widowed. Asked whether they would consider

<sup>3</sup> Farouq\*, 38, Sandakan



relocating to the Philippines, married respondents suggested that it would be difficult for them to leave considering that their livelihoods and families were rooted in Sabah. The married respondents had been living in Sabah for an average of 20 to 25 years, with some of them having lived there for almost 40 years. As such, they found it harder to entertain the prospect of moving back to the Philippines permanently as Sabah offered them relative stability and better work prospects. Chief among the obstacles were that their spouses had steady jobs in Sabah, while others did not wish to uproot their children from the Sabah school system.

“We wish to return but we don’t have any money, plus my husband can no longer work here [Sabah] if we return.”  
- Minah\*, 28, Sandakan

“I wish to go back to the Philippines, but my child is in school, it will be difficult for him/her.” - Farah\*, 48, Sandakan

“My children have been living here [Sabah] for a long time, they were all born here... *susah sudah mau lari ke sana* (it is very difficult for us to run off to the Philippines now).” - Abu\*, 51, Sandakan

When families were split between Sabah and Mindanao, people were much more likely to consider returning to the Philippines. For example, Joned\*, a 27-year-old living in Lahad Datu expressed a deep desire to return to Mindanao, despite being born in Sabah. He wished to locate his parents, who had been deported from Sabah. Young respondents who still maintained close family linkages to Mindanao were more willing to return home, provided they could find employment.

“I do miss it [Sabah]. Because my family is there. But there it is difficult to make a livelihood, jobs are hard to find. That’s why I came to Sabah to find work.” - Lan\*, 33, Lahad Datu

Almost all participants still have extended family residing in Mindanao. Those with close family (parents or siblings) generally maintain regular contact with them and one said he occasionally sent small volumes of remittances home.

### C. Temporary versus Permanent Return

All respondents expressed a desire to visit the Philippines, but far fewer desired to restart their lives permanently in Mindanao. Many indicated that short trips to see family members and relatives were a more viable option given the uncertain situation in the southern Philippines.

“just to visit family there, not to stay there permanently.”  
- Wafi\*, 30, Lahad Datu

“But I don’t plan on staying there [Philippines] forever.”  
- Safiyya\*, 30, Kota Kinabalu

“I really do wish to go back there [Philippines], but will likely return to Sabah again. *Curi-curi keluar dan curi-curi masuk semula* (Illegally leave and illegally re-enter).” - Lan\*, 33, Lahad Datu

Despite their desire to return to Mindanao temporarily, respondents were also restrained by the lack of civil registration documents, whether issued by the Malaysian or Filipino governments.

“There [Philippines], you need documents.”- Maria\*, 26, Sandakan

“[About visiting the Philippines] the problem is transportation and logistics. For those of us who have no documents, we cannot pass through the immigration checks. And if we choose to use *laluhan tikus* [illegal routes without passing immigration checks], we worry again about checks at our borders.” - Wafi\*, 30, Lahad Datu

“I am also worried about the border, there are security checks. Right now, if I return without documents, the situation would be the same as living in Malaysia without documents.”- Syahid\*, 52, Lahad Datu

“Travelling to the Philippines is risky.” - Dino\*, 35, Sandakan

Several of the respondents had previously returned illegally to the Philippines for various family responsibilities. However, respondents commented that it was becoming increasingly expensive. This could indicate that increased border enforcement by Malaysian authorities could be severing Sabah-based Filipinos’ connection to Mindanao, making them less likely to return home permanently.

“In 2013, I went home [to Mindanao] as my child was sick. Elders believe that if you are sick while overseas you must visit the graves of your ancestors. I spent about one month there as I had to wait for my child to send me money to travel back [to Sabah]”  
- Nadira\*, 42, Lahad Datu

#### D. Cultural Attachment to the Philippines

Almost all respondents continued to feel cultural attachment to the Philippines as their homeland. Most of the respondents were melancholic. Many of them said they truly missed life in the Philippines and expressed sadness for the family members they had left behind, who were suffering from the effects of war and unrest. The respondents appeared to balance their feelings of belonging towards Mindanao with purely pragmatic reasons for staying in Sabah. Others recalled a “hard life” in Mindanao due to economic uncertainties and political instability.

“In Philippines not so easy... here [in Sabah] it is easier.” - Ali\*, 25, Sandakan

“It is difficult to earn a livelihood there. It’s also difficult to be without a home...” - Farouq\*, 38, Sandakan

Many respondents suggested that they were content with remaining in Sabah, despite an evident longing to return to their birthplace. Meanwhile, a small number of respondents in this study were originally born in Sabah and as such, indicated that it would be difficult to assimilate with their Filipino counterparts as they are unable to converse in Tagalog.



“The language factor, because there they speak Tagalog, and I am not fluent in Tagalog.” - Latifah\*, 30, Sandakan

“The problem is that if I go back to the Philippines, I cannot speak Tagalog.” - Saffiya\*, 30, Kota Kinabalu

## E. Livelihoods and Prices

Employment opportunities and cheaper prices of staple goods are the most important drivers of recent migration from Mindanao to Sabah. The improved employment prospects in Sabah were seen as particularly important for those without educational qualifications. Respondents generally felt there was reasonable employment prospects, although not having documents did put them at a disadvantage.

“But in the Philippines, goods are rather expensive compared to Sabah. In Sabah, I may live with RM10.” - Ali\*, 25, Sandakan

“Here [Sabah] is cheaper, because in the Philippines, it's hard to get a job. Even with approval, it's still hard work. Here, as long as you have the desire to work there will be a job, even if it is just as a construction worker.” - Wafi\*, 30, Lahad Datu

“Only those who graduate from school can work. I think that if I returned to the Philippines, I may not have a job.” - Maria\*, 26, Sandakan

“The cost of living here is good, unlike in the Philippines.” - Farah\*, 48, Sandakan

“Over there [Philippines], if you don't have land to start a business, life would be very difficult.” - Joshua\*, 27, Sandakan

Respondents also highlighted the types of employment opportunities, with several expressing reluctance to return to agricultural work.

“[In Mindanao] getting a job is quite impossible. In my village, I can only do agriculture. In the city, it is important to be educated. For instance, a degree holder can only be a restaurant waiter.” - Dino\*, 35, Sandakan

## F. Security Concerns

A majority of the respondents shared a similar perception when it came to the safety of the Philippines in relation to Sabah. The study did take place soon after the bombing of a church in Sulu, which may have exacerbated respondents' worries about insecurity in the southern Philippines. Out of the thirty respondents, 21 of them cited security concerns as an obstacle to returning to the Philippines. More specifically, the war and unrest in the southern Philippines were among the most common fears expressed by the respondents, while some listed the “rampant kidnappings” by the Abu Sayyaf Group, robberies, lax maritime security, and inadequate law enforcement as among the reasons they were afraid to return permanently. Several respondents cited specific examples of violence they experienced as children. For example, Farah\*, a 48-year-old woman living in Sandakan explained how as a teenager she came across dead bodies during fighting between rebels and the

then-Philippine Government. The belief of insecurity were most common among the 17 respondents who were originally from Sulu and Basilan as well as those born in Sabah.

It is clear that insecurity does remain a reason why many of the respondents are reluctant to return to Mindanao.

*"Di sini [Sabah] aman, tidak macam di Jolo [Philippines], tembak sini, tembak sana."* (It is peaceful here [Sabah], not like in Jolo, shootings everywhere) - Abu\*, 51, Sandakan

"A lot of conflict is taking place there, so I'm just avoiding it." - Syahid\*, 52, Lahad Datu

"Sure, there are laws there, but their laws are different... If you get caught by the authorities, you will immediately be killed. For example, in cases involving drugs." - Ali\*, 25, Sandakan

*"Kalau kau pergi laut tanam rumpai laut, kau ada perahu. Banyak yang merompak. Dia ambik kita punya enjin... itu la susahnyanya disana."* (If let's say you're going to sea to plant seaweed, you have a boat. Many of them rob you. They stole my engine... that's how difficult it is in the Philippines.) - Azman\*, 48, Sandakan

Despite this general perception of violence and instability, respondents commonly felt that their *specific* area or village of origin was relatively peaceful. This may reflect the difference between Malaysian media's coverage of the Philippines that highlights instability and on the ground sentiments of respondents' relatives, who report general peacefulness.

"There are kidnappings by militants. Although it does not take place in my village, during the return trip there is potential to meet them." - Dino\*, 35, Sandakan

"[I will return to] Tawi-Tawi. I will not go anywhere else because of the danger and I have no family. After all, Tawi-Tawi has been safe since the new president of the Philippines came into power." - Azman\*, 49, Sandakan

A handful of respondents, such as Farouq\*, a fisherman who has been living in Sabah with his wife and child for less than 10 years, considered the Philippines to be safe. The 38-year-old was previously detained by the authorities and deported back to the Philippines but returned to Sabah to be with his family. Despite the uncertain conditions there, he was one of the few respondents to suggest that life in his homeland would be easier as he could run his own business without interference by the authorities.

Similarly, Robbie\*, a 39-year-old manual labourer living in Kota Kinabalu, said that the security situation in the Philippines would not stop him from returning, provided the place became a "bit more economically developed". Another elderly respondent, Jamie\*, who moved to Sabah following her marriage and has been living there for 49 years, said she yearned to return to the Philippines, but would only do so once the war had ended and "things were peaceful" again. While there were three respondents who spoke of occasional conflicts between the Suluk/Tausug and Bugis communities, most claimed that Sabah was safe and relatively peaceful. They also expressed support for the new Sabah State and Malaysian Federal Governments.

## G. Education and Health Services

Filipinos without legal residency rights are unable to access the formal schooling system. Instead, many children attend informal learning centres or use the *madrasah* education system. Generally, people were relatively happy with this informal system, but conceded that the formal system in the Philippines was probably better quality.

*“Di Filipina, kualiti pendidikan memang bagus, tapi akhirnya pendidikan akan merendahkan moral diri. Sebab di sana semua perlukan rasuah termasuk pendidikan.”* (In the Philippines, the standard of education is good, but eventually it is demoralising. Because there you need bribes for everything, including education). - Syahid\*, 52, Lahad Datu

“Schools in the Philippines are better compared to Sabah... I wish to study there, but my parents are here [in Sabah].”  
- Maria\*, 26, Sandakan

“Education here is more accessible than in the Philippines. But my children still cannot attend government school *kerana tiada surat* (because they do not have proper documentation).”  
- Azman\*, 49, Sandakan

“In the Philippines, education is more accessible and convenient. Every village has a school, no uniform, it’s cheap and close to home. Access to education in the Philippines is very easy and even the elderly can still go to school.” - Dino\*, 35, Sandakan

Some respondents worry that the children would struggle to move from the informal schooling system in Sabah into the formal system in Mindanao, which was perceived to be at a more advanced academic level. For those respondents who had documents that allowed them access to the formal Malaysian education system, they were reluctant to remove them.

*“Kemungkinan saya akan pulang sendiri* (I will most probably go back to the Philippines alone) because I have family members who are currently schooling and working in Sabah.” - Farah\*, 48, Sandakan

“My extended family live and my children are now schooling in Sabah.” - Fatimah\*, 32, Kota Kinabalu

In contrast to education, most respondents were legally permitted to access the Malaysian health system which they considered to be of good quality. But many highlighted that because they did not possess legal documents, the high fees effectively prevented them from accessing medical services.

“Access to health here is easy but expensive. I need to pay RM40 every time I go to the clinic so sometimes if there is no money, I am forced to only buy medicine [without a doctor consultation].”  
- Dino\*, 35, Sandakan

## H. Reintegration into Mindanao Society

Only five out of the thirty respondents interviewed were born in Sabah, while the remaining twenty-five were born in Mindanao. Of the respondents, the shortest duration of stay in Sabah was 5 years, whereas the longest was approximately 59 years. Respondents did not anticipate that they would be rejected or otherwise treated with hostility if they returned to their original communities in Mindanao, but did generally feel like they would need psychosocial support upon return. They particularly highlighted that they required guidance on overcoming general problems caused by their prolonged absence from their homeland.

“I will need some guidance, because I’ve never been back to the Philippines.” - Joned\*, 27, Lahad Datu

“[I will] need to find someone who knows the positives and negatives of being in the Philippines.” - Zakir\*, 27, Lahad Datu

“If I decide to return, of course I will need some advice, who will help me if I encounter problems?” - Nadira\*, 42, Lahad Datu.

Most respondents admitted to not having Filipino identification documents, but were divided about whether this posed a significant obstacle to returning in Mindanao. Some believed either civil registration documents would not be needed, or alternatively could be easily obtained. Others worried that they would be accused of being criminals if caught without proper documentation, and requested support to obtain them.

All respondents spoke at least one regional language of the Philippines; generally Suluk/Tausug/ or Bajau/Sinama. For those who had been born in Sabah, and who were unlikely to return to Mindanao, they did express concerns about their inability to understand Tagalog. However, this appeared to be less of a concern for people who were born in the Philippines.

## I. Locations of Return

Researchers asked respondents where in the Philippines they were likely to return to if they decided to participate in a voluntary return program. Of the 25 respondents born in Mindanao (as opposed to Sabah), 17 wanted to return to their home province. Of the eight that wanted to move elsewhere, six wished to move to Manila or the regional centre of Zamboanga. This is most likely driven by the fact that many of the respondents are currently residing in urban areas, and is reflective of a broader general trend towards urbanisation.

Figure 1: Locations respondents identified as being the places they would most likely to return to if they departed Sabah



## J. Existing Skills of Respondents

Respondents were employed in a wide variety of occupations in Sabah, primarily in the informal and semi-skilled sectors. Those with some type of civil registration documents (either from Malaysia or the Philippines) were more likely to have a semi-skilled occupation such as a teacher in an informal school, tailor, or carpenter. In contrast, those without documentation were typically employed as labourers, garbage collectors, and fishermen. Several of the respondents possessed skills in construction that are likely to be in high-demand in Mindanao as economic growth accelerates following the establishment of the Bangsamoro Government.

When imagining returning to the Philippines, many of the respondents would try to capitalise on their existing skills that include sewing, baking, welding, shipbuilding, hairdressing, carpentry, and electronics maintenance. Several of them explained that they would want to open their own business if they could obtain sufficient capital. Some 21 out of the 30 respondents said they would value the opportunity to undertake vocational training. Women expressed interest in cooking and sewing training, while men favoured construction, shipbuilding, mechanical and gastronomical training. Generally, respondents were reluctant to work in agriculture upon returning to Mindanao and instead, were hopeful about starting a job they believed would be more respectable.

## K. Support Required if Returning to the Philippines

Researchers asked participants about the nature of support they would require if they decided to voluntarily return to the Philippines. The most common answer was financial support to cover travel costs. Most respondents had limited resources, and the cost of the boat trip to Mindanao alone was a daunting expense. Participants said they would benefit from an initial allowance for daily needs while they established themselves and also some funding to start a small business.

In addition to funding, participants also thought they would need help to resolve administrative issues with the Philippines Government, particularly in obtaining civil registration documentation. The need for temporary housing, assistance to find a job, and vocational training were all cited as useful assistance that could be provided.

Most respondents felt that it was more important to have financial support than to possess the necessary administrative or legal documents to facilitate their possible relocation to the Philippines. This is evidenced in the responses of all but one of the participants interviewed. The lone respondent, a former nurse, replied that he perceived himself to be economically stable and therefore did not require financial assistance. For many, the financial support they received would be channelled towards covering the cost of travelling back to their homeland.

“I want to return but am lacking funds... no money.” - Azman\*, 49, Sandakan

“*Kalau kita balik kampung, tambangnya sahaja berapa?*” - (If I return to my village [in the Philippines], the travel fare alone would be high...) - Farah\*, 48, Sandakan

“If I return there (Philippines), the return journey will incur high costs, and there are other costs as well.” - Lan\*, 33, Lahad Datu

Respondents deemed administrative support as less significant because most of them envision themselves moving back to their hometowns which are generally located outside of city-centres. The rural setting of these villages mean that respondents are less likely to encounter Filipino authorities as compared to their counterparts living in cities and therefore will they be highly dependent on legal documents to secure jobs or other governmental services. For the most part, participants said they would be seeking jobs in areas such as carpentry, welding, shipbuilding, and fishing when asked about their work plans upon returning to the Philippines.

Others hoped to open small businesses for themselves with the financial assistance received, while the remaining six respondents said that they did not have any concrete plans for work after relocating.

“It is possible to run a business, but working there is difficult, even when you have received education and schooling there.”  
- Safiyya\*, 30, Kota Kinabalu

### **III. WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE IN A FUTURE VOLUNTARY RETURN AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAM**

This research was undertaken in order to understand the appetite for the establishment of a Voluntary Return and Reintegration program. Around the world, voluntary return and reintegration programs have been established to facilitate people displaced by conflict to return to their homes and re-integrate into their communities. They generally consist of three components: support during preparation for departure, assistance during the return journey, and helping people re-establish their lives. Given their voluntary nature, these programs require a population who are willing to return.



The overall finding of this research is that Sabah-based Filipinos maintain a strong cultural attachment to the Philippines and almost all are interested in returning to the Philippines temporarily to visit. Beyond this, however, there is a wide variety of attitudes towards returning voluntarily. Some respondents are interested in returning voluntarily if they could be provided limited support, such as indicated in the passage below.

“I came to Sabah to look for opportunities. But I’ve been here for years, no changes have taken effect. I think it’s good to go back to the Philippines. But what prevented me from going home was the lack of money. The atmosphere of the Philippines and Sabah is no different. Everything is repeated to us. If we do our own work, look for food and work, don’t follow people whose behaviour is not good, then we have no problem. The only difference in Sabah is that we don’t have documents.” - Farouq\*, 26, Sandakan

However, the people actively considering a return to Mindanao constitute a minority. Many others would either require substantial incentives or are unlikely to ever consider voluntarily returning. The table below outlines the characteristics of three broad categories of the population based on their likelihood of returning to Mindanao.

*Table 2: Characteristics of Filipino-based Sabah population based on their likelihood of returning voluntarily to Mindanao*

Unlikely to ever consider returning	Require strong incentives to return	Actively considering returning
<p>Would not consider voluntarily returning to the Philippines unless there were very substantial changes in the environment in Sabah or Mindanao.</p> <p><b>Typical Characteristics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hold some type of legal documentation issued by the Malaysian Government, such as IMM13 or Permanent Residency.</li> <li>- Born in Sabah or lived in Sabah for a period of more than 30 years.</li> <li>- Highly integrated into Malaysian society, including able to speak Bahasa Malaysia.</li> <li>- Possess immovable capital such as shops.</li> <li>- Have multiple generations present in Sabah, with children in mainstream Malaysian schooling.</li> </ul>	<p>Would only consider returning if they were incentivised by a substantial and attractive reintegration program.</p> <p><b>Typical Characteristics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do not possess any Malaysian identity documents, but may have the right to temporarily reside in Sabah using documents such as a work visa.</li> <li>- Have resided in Malaysia between 10 and 30 years.</li> <li>- Have some family members in Mindanao, but are not in regular contact.</li> <li>- Have a family that is at least somewhat integrated into Malaysian society.</li> </ul>	<p>Would consider returning to the Philippines if limited support was provided to overcome the legal obstacles, transport issues and set-up costs.</p> <p><b>Typical Characteristics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Does not have the right to reside in Sabah due to lack of documents from the Malaysian Government, and may not hold any documents from the Philippines Government, and therefore subject to deportation by Malaysian authorities.</li> <li>- Have typically resided in Sabah for less than 20 years.</li> <li>- Have parents, or other immediate family residing in Mindanao with whom they maintain regular contact.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hold a 'respectable' job in the formal sector.</li> <li>- Have never visited the Philippines since moving to Sabah.</li> <li>- Do not have any close family in Mindanao.</li> <li>- Consider Mindanao to be chaotic and highly dangerous.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have either a semi-skilled job or otherwise have reasonable career prospects.</li> <li>- Consider Mindanao to be chaotic and highly dangerous.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have close family connections in Mindanao.</li> <li>- Have precarious or low-status employment in Sabah.</li> <li>- Have previously visited the Philippines.</li> <li>- Understand that there are large variations in the levels of violence between different locations within Mindanao.</li> </ul>
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

As outlined above, the proportion of people who could be classified as 'Actively considering returning' is relatively small. However, given the population of Sabah-based Filipinos (estimated between 250,000 to 800,000 people), even a small percentage of this could translate into 10,000s people being interested in a voluntary return and reintegration program. Moreover, most voluntary return and reintegration programs begin with a small number of families, and then see progressively increasing participation rates as families who have successfully established their lives communicate their successful integration to their extended networks.

For the large number of Sabah-based Filipinos that can be classified as 'Unlikely to Ever Consider Returning', a voluntary return program is not relevant. This population, many of whom have lost all contact with the Philippines, have not been integrated into Sabahan society largely due to their lack of documents. As they are unlikely to ever return permanently to the Philippines, other options need to be explored for this group to avoid inter-generational marginalization.

A striking discovery in this study was that a very high proportion of respondents are interested in returning home temporarily to visit Mindanao. However, many note the risks of arrest if they are caught re-entering Sabah and the high costs involved in this trip. For many interested in visiting Mindanao, being able to witness first-hand the security improvements there may be an important step in helping them imagine a more permanent future in the Philippines. Voluntary return and reintegration programs around the world have organised 'go-and-see visits' for key leaders of a refugee population. This could be seen as part of a broader process of creating channels for continuous mobility between Malaysia and the Philippines.

#### IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DESIGN OF A FUTURE VOLUNTARY RETURN AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAM

To be effective, the design and implementation of voluntary return and reintegration programs should be carefully adapted to suit their contexts. While further discussion with potential participants and both governments are required, the findings of this research led to some recommendations for the design of a future voluntary return and reintegration program.

- **Target the segments of the Sabah-based Filipino population that are most inclined to return to Mindanao.** Many Sabah-based Filipinos are unlikely to ever return. Therefore, a future program must address the needs and requirements of those most likely to return. Specifically, this means publicising the program to those who: do not have legal residency

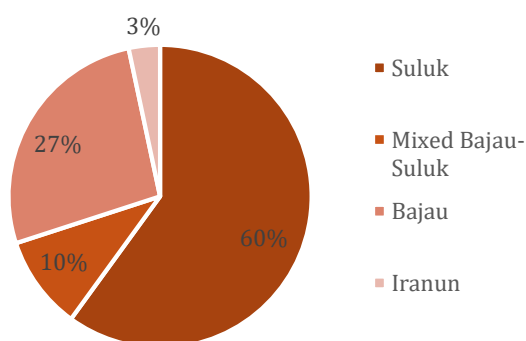
from Malaysian authorities, work in low-paying and low status jobs, maintain a strong connection with their family in the Philippines, and have lived in Sabah for less than 20 years.

- **Address potential returnees' worries regarding economic security and physical safety.** The main reason people cite for not wanting to return to Mindanao is the scarcity of suitable employment. A voluntary return program should therefore explain how returnees will be assisted in finding jobs. Secondly, a VRR program should also address people's concerns about safety. Many Sabah-based Filipinos' perception of safety and security in Mindanao have not changed since their departure, despite some dramatic security improvements in recent years. Any VRR program should fully inform potential participants of the risks, but also ensure that people understand the security-related progress that has been made.
- **Permit returnees to legally visit Sabah once they have re-established their lives in Mindanao.** Most potential participants for a VRR program have formed strong connections to their local communities in Sabah. A VRR program is likely to be most attractive to them if they are permitted to legally visit these communities. This requires for them not to be placed on any 'blacklist' banning their future entry to Sabah.
- **Support the return of households, not just individuals.** Most people will only consider returning to Mindanao as a single family unit and in consideration of the welfare of all family members. For this reason, a VRR program must address the needs of children as well as adults.
- **Support people to return to place of origin, but also other urban centres.** Some participants want to return to their place of origin which are overwhelmingly in the islands of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. However, a substantial number identified Zamboanga and Manila as their preferred places of return. A VRR program would need to be equipped to provide services in each of these locations.
- **Leverage the skills of returnees to meaningfully contribute to the Bangsamoro's development.** Many of the potential returnees possess skills in welding, carpentry, shipbuilding, and electronics that are likely to be important to realising the Bangsamoro's development aspirations.
- **The reintegration element of a VRR program would need to be adaptable to suit the needs of returnees.** Almost all respondents felt they would need financial support for transport back to the Philippines. However, beyond this, their needs varied. Several said they would value capital to begin a business, while others specified vocational training and social support to reintegrate into their communities

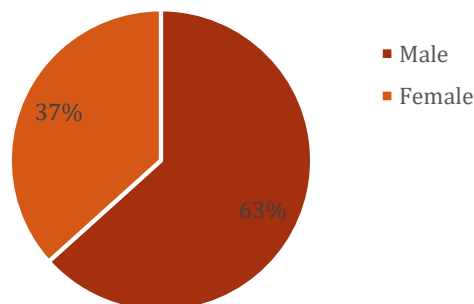
## V. ANNEX A - DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

In order to develop a sophisticated understanding of the views of Sabah-based Filipinos, the research team adopted a qualitative research methodology. We did not intend to select a representative sample of the population as a whole. Instead, the data contained below aims to provide a background of the individuals whose views are represented in this research.

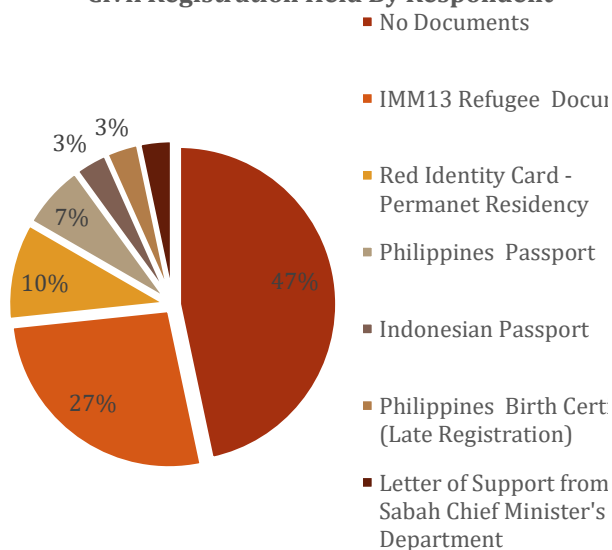
**Ethnicity of Respondents**



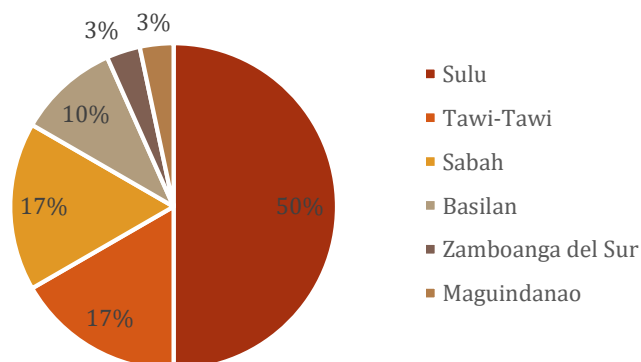
**Sex of Respondents**



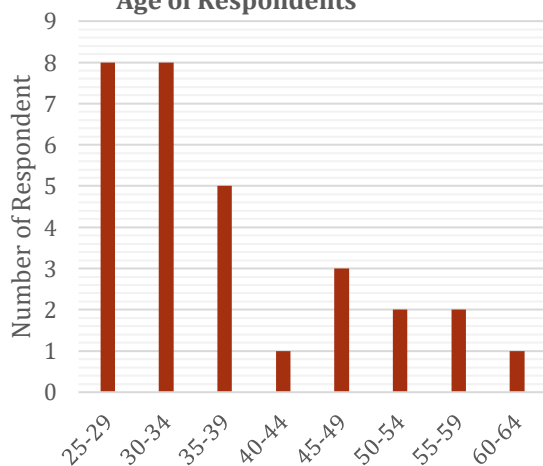
**Civil Registration Held By Respondent**



**State / Province of Birth**



**Age of Respondents**



**Years Living in Sabah**

