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## Workfare for whom? A critical assessment of workfare programs in the Philippines

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*Workfare programs are social protection instruments used by governments to address the lack of jobs or inadequate incomes among the poor. In the Philippines, they are the largest public employment programs of the government. Despite this, there is very little understanding on how these programs actually work and whether or not they reach the intended beneficiaries. Synthesis of experience is limited and program data is inadequate, which altogether constrain the analytical work on this area. With a view to stir up policy debate on workfare programs in the Philippines, this paper provides an assessment of the key design and implementation features, including an analysis of benefit incidence.*

*Keywords: Philippines, workfare, public works, safety net, social protection*

### I. Introduction

Around the world, workfare programs have been used by governments as an important measure to assist workers cope with joblessness. They are targeted at workers who lost their jobs due to shocks, who have jobs but earn very little to support themselves and their families, or who are looking for temporary jobs while waiting for the more permanent ones.<sup>2</sup> Shocks such as economic crisis, natural disasters (typhoon, floods or drought), and man-made disasters (war and internal conflict) could result in shutdown of businesses, damage to productive assets, or closure of transport networks, which leave workers without jobs. Even in the absence of shocks, earnings of some workers are dependent on climate and season, such as farming and fishing, which leave them with reduced earnings. While some of the affected workers may have the means to cope in bad times, such as savings, insurance, financial and physical assets, or remittances from families and friends, many other affected workers do not. Workers who lack such support, combined with low prospects of finding another job, find

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<sup>2</sup> See Zimmerman (2014) for a summary of the main roles of workfare programs.



ways to cope—either by taking on any economic activity that provide income, however meagre; cutting their expenditures on basic commodities; or pulling their children out of school. Some of these coping strategies are detrimental to their economic well-being. Without interventions, they are likely to fall deeper into destitution.

In the Philippines, the government uses workfare programs not only to respond to shocks, but also to achieve other social development objectives. In rural areas where jobs are scarce, workfare programs serve as a mechanism to transfer benefits to the poor while, at the same time, create assets that can provide value to the community. In times of shocks, workfare programs serve as a safety net to assist workers cope with sudden unemployment. For instance, during the global financial crisis and food and fuel crisis in 2008–2009, and super typhoons in 2009 and 2013, the government implemented several workfare programs to assist the affected workers. The government also implements other types of direct job creation programs, including wage subsidy, government internships, and livelihood assistance programs (or microenterprise development programs). But among the direct job creation programs, workfare programs are always the largest, both in terms of the number of workers served and the amount of public spending.<sup>3</sup> One of the reasons behind the large coverage of workfare programs in the Philippines is that they are relatively easier to scale-up, as the government re-directs funds to expand small infrastructure projects to create productive community assets and help boost the domestic economy.

However, there is very little understanding on how these programs actually work, and whether or not they are effective. Research studies on workfare programs in the Philippines is scant.<sup>4</sup> The dearth of analytical work on this area can be mainly attributed to poor quality of program data. There is no single national or regional workfare program in the Philippines. Rather, workfare programs consist of numerous small-scale programs that are being implemented by various government agencies. The weak coordination among the agencies, combined with poor data management within an agency, result in a consolidated program information that is largely missing. Hence, while several countries have made significant advancement in the design and implementation of their workfare programs, the Philippines lags behind. The lack of synthesis of experience, including an estimate of benefit incidence, have limited the government's understanding of the potentials and limitations of workfare programs, which in turn have limited its capacity to introduce operational innovations that could improve program effectiveness.

This paper attempts to fill this gap. It provides a critical assessment of the design and implementation features of workfare programs in the Philippines with a view to expand the knowledge base on this area. It makes use of information about the programs, including related studies, reports from several implementing government agencies, unpublished documents, anecdotes, and interviews from program implementers. Recognizing the limitations on statistical data, this paper uses an alternative method of estimating the benefit incidence of workfare programs using the nationally-administered household surveys on labor force and family income.

## II. Key design features of workfare programs in the Philippines

Unlike other countries that have regular workfare programs, such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme Act in India, or the Productive Safety Net Program in Ethiopia, among others, the Philippines does not have one single workfare program. Workfare programs in the Philippines (also referred to as public works programs) consist of several small-scale programs that are being implemented independently by multiple government agencies. Taken altogether, workfare programs account for the largest among all direct employment programs of the Philippine government. This section provides a critical assessment of the key design and implementation features of workfare programs in the Philippines.

### Coverage

In 2014, a broad definition of public works (direct public employment) programs were estimated to have served about 2.3 million workers, or 6 percent of the Philippines' economically active population (Table 1). In monetary terms, these benefits amounted to about 260 billion pesos, or 2 percent of GDP. Compared to other direct employment programs of the government, public works programs are the largest in terms of the number of beneficiaries served. Other direct employment programs include youth bridging programs (e.g., wage subsidy and government internships), and livelihood assistance programs.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See World Bank (2016) for an overview of employment programs in the Philippines, including estimates of the number of beneficiaries and public expenditures.

<sup>4</sup> Among the studies that discussed workfare programs in the Philippines in relation to other programs or countries include Subbarao, et al (1996), Orbeta & Sanchez (1996), Subbarao (1997), and Islam (2006).

<sup>5</sup> See World Bank (2016) for more information on employment programs in the Philippines.

**Table 1.** Number of beneficiaries of direct public employment programs, 2014

Direct public employment program	Objective	Beneficiaries	
		In '000 <sup>a</sup>	% of target group <sup>b</sup>
Public works programs	Temporary income support	2,350	6.0
Youth bridging programs	Temporary income support and training	560	1.4
Livelihood assistance programs	Support for self-employment	210	0.7

*a* The number of beneficiaries refer to the number of jobs created by the workfare programs. It is possible that one beneficiary is counted twice if he availed of the workfare job twice in 2014.

*b* Target group is the economically active population; for youth bridging programs, target group is aged is 15-30.

Source: Community-Based Employment Program database; Labor Force Survey 2014; Authors' calculations.

In times of shocks, the Philippine government expands the coverage of direct employment programs. Workfare programs, in particular, are among the easiest to scale up as they have the added bonus of helping pump-prime the domestic economy through higher public spending on infrastructure projects. For instance, at the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, the government allocated more funds to small infrastructure projects, with the objective to create temporary jobs to affected workers (ILO, 2015).

### Objectives

In general, the primary objective of workfare programs in the Philippines is to provide temporary income support to workers from poor households. In addition to the primary objective, workfare programs also aim to build community assets that could help improve the productivity of small-scale entrepreneurs, such as irrigation system, farm-to-market roads, and shared service facilities. In times of shocks, workfare programs serve as stop gap measures to assist workers who, although may be non-poor, are at risk of falling into poverty without an assistance. These objectives of workfare programs in the Philippines are in-line with the primary objectives of a safety net-oriented workfare programs, which include mitigation of covariate and idiosyncratic shocks, poverty relief, and bridge to more permanent employment (Subbarao, et al, 2013).

### Target beneficiaries

In normal times, workfare programs are targeted at the poor unemployed workers who are looking for temporary jobs as well as at the poor employed workers who are looking for an additional job to augment their income (underemployed). In times of shocks, such as economic crisis or natural disasters, workfare programs are targeted at all affected workers, with less regard to their income status. For instance, during the Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, the government implemented workfare programs, which were open to all who wanted to have temporary income support in exchange for cleaning up the debris or constructing temporary shelters.

While workfare programs are broadly targeted at the poor, each implementing agency has its own target clientele. For example, the Department of Social Welfare and Development targets the poor households; the Department of Agriculture targets the poor farmers; and the Department of Labor and Employment targets the workers who are affected by closure businesses. However, the limited coordination among implementing agencies with regard to program guidelines imply that it is possible for some workfare programs to have overlapping target beneficiaries.

### Benefit levels

Workfare programs in the Philippines provide their beneficiaries a benefit level that is equivalent to the minimum wage. For some programs, the benefit levels are much higher because they also provide added benefits such as social security and medical insurance (ILO, 2015). The reason behind using the minimum wage as the benefit level is that the government aims to conform with the Labor Code, which states that each Filipino worker is entitled to receive a living wage. Minimum wage in the Philippines varies by administrative region. In some regions, the minimum wage is higher than the median wage. Hence, workfare programs also vary in benefit levels as they depend on the minimum wage in the region where the program is being implemented.

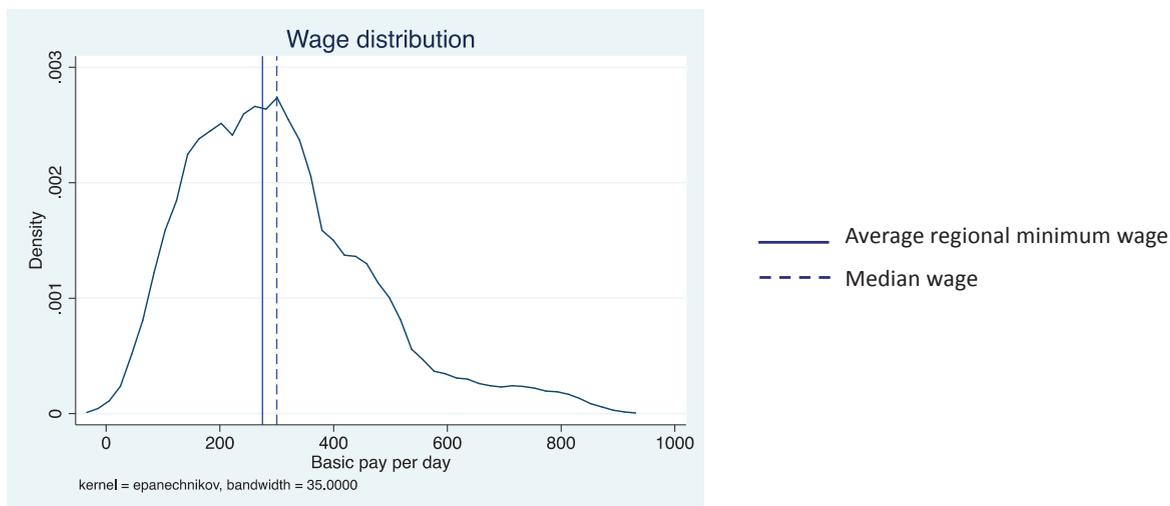
The Philippines is not the only country that sets the benefit level of workfare programs equal to the minimum wage. Programs such as the Expanded Public Works Program in South Africa, Padat Karya in Indonesia, Social Investment Project in Thailand, Promotion Nationale in Morocco, and Public Works in Botswana, also set their benefit levels equal to the minimum wage (Subbarao, et al, 2013).



While the appropriate level of benefit largely depends on the country context, lessons from workfare programs of other countries indicate that the minimum wage is an appropriate benefit level *only* if it allows the target beneficiaries (poor workers) to self-select into the program and discourages non-poor workers from participation.

However, in the Philippines, due mainly to pervasive informality and weak enforcement of labor regulations, the minimum wage cuts deep into the wage distribution (Figure 1). In fact, the minimum wage is about 90 percent of the median wage, implying that nearly half of wage workers in the Philippines earn less than the minimum wage. With the level of benefit equal to the minimum wage, it is therefore expected that all workers who earn below the minimum wage are likely to participate in workfare program because the program would give them higher earnings than their regular jobs.

Figure 1. Wage distribution in the Philippines, 2014



Note: The wage distribution covers wages of workers in private establishments only as the minimum wage is applicable only to them; the average regional minimum wage was computed using the average of minimum wages in all regions in the Philippines weighted by the number of workers for whom they are applied.  
Source: Labor Force Survey 2014; National Wages and Productivity Commission; Authors' calculations.

### Targeting method

In principle, implementing agencies employ a three-step targeting method. First, geographic targeting is used to select the area where the program will be implemented. These are usually the areas that experience shocks such as natural disasters. Second, using the benefit level, potential beneficiaries self-select into the program. Third, the list of potential beneficiaries undergoes community-validation to check whether or not the potential beneficiary is poor or not.

In reality, however, workfare programs do not strictly follow this targeting procedure. In normal times, the selection of areas of implementation depends on the availability of funds of the government agency's local office. Although the allocation of funds is determined at the national level, the amount largely depends on the capacity of the local agencies to liquidate previously allocated funds. Hence, the areas wherein local government agencies have weak administrative capacities tend to receive less budget allocation for these types of programs. In times of shocks, implementing agencies give priority to the affected areas. Workfare programs come mainly in the form of cleaning up the debris, building temporary shelters, or repairing damaged school buildings, in the case of natural calamities.

Moreover, workfare programs are concentrated in regions that are more economically developed. The distribution of workers who benefited from workfare programs in 2014 showed higher proportions in Davao Region, Cordillera Administrative Region, CALABARZON, and Eastern Visayas, which have relatively high regional GDP per capita and have relatively low poverty incidence among the economically active working age population (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Distribution of beneficiaries by region (%), 2014

Regions	Distribution (%)	Regional GDP (pesos)	Poverty Incidence* (%)
Davao Region	17.3	58	24.0
Cordillera Administrative Region	15.1	81	20.8
CALABARZON	13.9	93	8.5
Eastern Visayas	10.9	37	37.3
Northern Mindanao	6.9	59	34.6
Central Luzon	6.8	60	10.7
MIMAROPA	4.6	41	25.8
Bicol Region	4.5	25	33.0
Ilocos Region	3.9	44	14.7
Central Visayas	3.7	63	24.6
SOCCSKSARGEN	3.1	45	35.0
Caraga	3.0	34	32.2
Western Visayas	1.9	38	23.2
Zamboanga Peninsula	1.4	40	33.8
Cagayan Valley	1.2	38	18.5
National Capital Region	0.9	207	2.2
Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao	0.9	15	47.5
Philippines	100.0	73	20.6

\* Refers to the proportion of economically active working age population whose household per capita income is within the bottom 20 percent of income distribution.

Source: Community-Based Employment Program database; Labor Force Survey 2014; Authors' calculations.

To harmonize the targeting criteria across workfare programs, implementing government agencies are mandated by law to employ local workers in undertaking infrastructure projects.<sup>6</sup> However, while this law is somewhat conformed with by projects that are directly being managed by government agencies, it is often violated by projects that are fully contracted out to private firms. Private contractors tend to hire workers who have the skills to perform the task but do not necessarily reside in the local community. Furthermore, community validation of the list of potential beneficiaries is not strictly followed. There is tendency for contractors to hire whom they already know, without regard to whether they are the most in need of assistance.

While the government established the national household targeting system to select the beneficiaries of social protection programs, to date, most workfare programs do not use this targeting system to select their beneficiaries.<sup>7</sup> Among the reasons behind this are the following: 1) most workfare programs are implemented in times of shocks, whereby the affected workers also include the non-poor who also need such assistance; and 2) workfare programs that aim to build infrastructure require skills that may not be supplied by workers from poor households.

### **Institutional arrangements**

The implementation of workfare programs is the responsibility of different government agencies and each of these agencies follows its own implementation guidelines. Workfare programs could consist of as many as 66 programs that were being implemented by 29 government agencies (data from 2010). Some of these programs include, the department of social welfare's cash or food-for-work

<sup>6</sup> Republic Act 6686 requires private contractors to whom national, provincial, city and municipal public works projects have been awarded under contract to hire at least 50 percent of the unskilled and at least 30 percent of the skilled labor requirements to be taken from the available bona fide residents in the province, city or municipality in which the projects are to be undertaken, and penalizing those who fail to do so.

<sup>7</sup> The national household targeting system was established in 2008, primarily to select the beneficiaries of the conditional cash transfer program. It was later adopted by the government as the targeting system for all social protection programs (Fernandez, 2011).



program during post-disaster; the department of agriculture's various types of rural infrastructure projects intended to improve agricultural productivity; the department of public works' construction and maintenance of transport infrastructure; among others. While government agencies have the flexibility to design their own workfare programs, including the duration of the program, one element that is common to all workfare programs is the benefit level that is equivalent to the minimum wage.

There have been several attempts to consolidate the programs into one umbrella program, which has taken on various names depending on the administration. These included the Community Employment Development Program, which served as the government's response to the economic crisis in the Philippines in 1983-1985; the Rural Works Program, which was implemented in 1997 during the Asian financial crisis; the Kabuhayan 2000, which was implemented in 1994-1996 as a poverty alleviation measure; the Comprehensive Livelihood and Emergency Employment Program, which was implemented in 2009 during the global financial crisis; and, recently, the Community-Based Employment Program (CBEP) was established in 2010 to consolidate all employment-generating efforts of the government to achieve inclusive growth. However, these programs have limited success in rationalizing all workfare programs in the Philippines, which remain to be highly fragmented.

### Monitoring and evaluation

Each implementing agency is responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of their programs. However, agencies vary in their capacity to maintain an integrated database that could allow the monitoring of implementation as well as the evaluation of program impact. At best, agencies record the number of beneficiaries served for each of their programs. These information are submitted to the Department of Labor and Employment, which is in-charge of the overall coordination of all employment programs of the government. It does this by requesting implementing agencies to enrol their programs in CBEP. However, the quality of data that is generated from CBEP is only as good as what the agencies submit. It is limited only to the number of the workers served by the programs and does not include the profile of the beneficiaries, including the income status. Hence, one cannot estimate whether or not the actual beneficiaries are the intended beneficiaries of the program.

Moreover, not all implementing government agencies enrol their programs to CBEP, indicating that CBEP may not fully capture the number of beneficiaries actually served by workfare programs. The quality of information in CBEP also depends on the technical capacity of the implementing agencies to keep a record of their beneficiaries. Within an agency, the consolidated data comes from the local offices, with varying capacities to implement and monitor their programs.

## III. 3. Estimating the benefit incidence of workfare programs in the Philippines

One of the ways to assess whether or not a program is effective in delivering public services to those who need them is to estimate the benefit incidence. It is the proportion of the *actual* beneficiaries among the *target* beneficiaries of the program. Benefit incidence analysis allows researchers to estimate the distributional impacts of a program, with a view to help policy-makers understand how the program actually works and what can be done to improve its effectiveness. While workfare programs in other countries have undergone this type of analysis, unfortunately, no such analysis exists for workfare programs in the Philippines due to data limitations. This section elaborates more on these limitations and proposes an alternative method of estimating the benefit incidence.

### Data limitations

Ideally, in estimating the benefit incidence of a program, one uses the information on program participants. Workfare programs from other countries have benefited from this type of analysis because such information is available (for instance, Jalan & Ravallion, 2003; Ronconi, 2009). However, it is not the case for workfare programs in the Philippines. First, as indicated earlier, there is no consolidated information on the beneficiaries of workfare programs. Each implementing government agency manages its own database and there is no harmonization of program information across agencies. Second, even within a single agency, program data is limited only to names of beneficiaries. Third, what officially constitutes workfare programs in the Philippines is still unclear. Some workfare programs in the Philippines are combined with other programs such as the livelihood assistance programs.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> As specific example, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) implements the DOLE Integrated Livelihood and Emergency Employment Program (DILEEP).

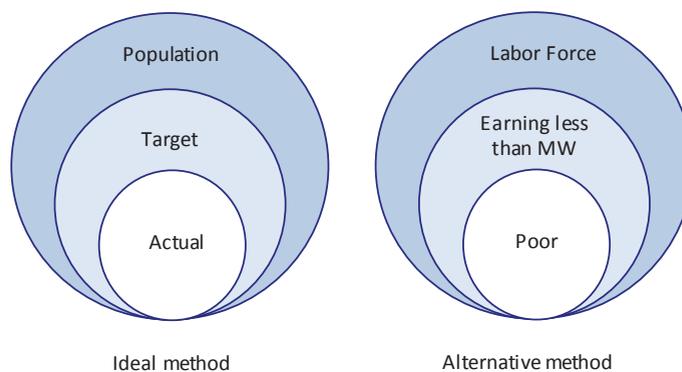
In the absence of program data, one uses a nationally-represented household survey that asks the respondents whether or not they benefited from the program. Although there are existing household surveys of this type in the Philippines,<sup>9</sup> which allow for a benefit incidence analysis of government programs—for instance, the conditional cash transfer program (Fernandez & Velarde, 2012; Acosta & Velarde, 2015)—these household surveys, unfortunately, do not yield a statistically sound result in the case of workfare programs. First, workfare programs are not implemented on a regular basis. If workfare programs do not coincide with the survey period, the number of respondents who would report that they benefited from the program would be low. Second, workfare programs in the Philippines come in different names and are being implemented by different government agencies. In the surveys, the respondent is being asked a question whether or not he or she benefited from an employment-generation program of the government. As employment-generation programs cover a wide range of programs, the respondent may not accurately report whether or not he or she benefitted specifically from the workfare program.

Expectedly, these data limitations have prevented analytical work on workfare programs in the Philippines. It is also the reason why, despite the large amount of public resources devoted for such programs, as well as the potential for these programs to serve as effective social safety nets, workfare programs in the Philippines have not advanced as they have not been subjected to any evaluations.

### An alternative method of estimating benefit incidence

Given the data limitations described above, this section presents an alternative method of estimating the benefit incidence of workfare programs in the Philippines. It does so by identifying the workers who earn less than the minimum wage among the Filipino labor force, and comparing them against those who belong to a household whose per capita income is at the bottom 20 percent of distribution (proxy for poor) (Figure 2).<sup>10</sup> The analysis uses the Labor Force Survey, Family Income and Expenditures Survey, and the regional minimum wage rates.

Figure 2. Ideal and alternative methods to estimate benefit incidence



Source: Authors' illustration.

The method to analyse the benefit incidence of workfare programs lies on the premise that the benefit level of the program (i.e., minimum wage) and that of alternative job (including current job) are both known to all workers. A worker becomes a potential beneficiary if the minimum wage (net of cost to participate) is higher than the earning from the alternative job (net of cost to take on the job). However, not all potential beneficiaries are the intended ones, as limited public resources put priority on workers who belong to poor households. Equation (1) is used to estimate the benefit incidence (BI):

$$BI (\%) = \frac{\sum_i BI_i * P_i * M_i}{\sum_i BI_i * M_i} \times 100 \quad (1)$$

<sup>9</sup> For example, Annual Poverty Indicators Survey, and Family Income and Expenditures Survey.

<sup>10</sup> Poor being defined as having per capita income at the bottom 20 percent of the income distribution is a good approximation of poverty in the Philippines as the official estimate of poverty incidence among Filipino families in 2015 was 21.1 percent (PSA, 2016).



where  $B_i$  is a worker (including unemployed or employed);  $P$  is dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if  $B_i$  belongs to a poor household, 0 otherwise; and  $M$  is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if  $B_i$ 's earnings from alternative job is less than the minimum wage and therefore participates in the workfare program, 0 otherwise. The numerator refers to the number of intended beneficiaries, while the denominator refers to the number of potential beneficiaries.

Using equation (1), estimates show that, on average, about 38 per cent of the Filipino labour force are likely to queue for workfare programs, which is equivalent to about 16 million workers (Table 3). These are the workers who have no earnings (unemployed) and those who have earnings but are lower than the minimum wage. However, among them, only 29 percent are poor.<sup>11</sup> This estimate implies that, given the current design features of workfare programs in the Philippines, many non-poor workers are likely to be attracted to the program. Another implication of this finding is that, given that the workfare programs in the Philippines have served only about 2.3 million workers, it is likely that the program benefits are rationed.

**Table 3.** Estimates of benefit incidence of workfare programs in the Philippines (%)

Regions	Proportion of workers who earn less than the minimum wage (%)	Of whom, proportion who belong to poor* households (%)
Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao	38	54
SOCCSKSARGEN	44	45
Northern Mindanao	49	43
Zamboanga Peninsula	45	41
Bicol Region	43	41
Caraga	41	39
Central Visayas	39	34
Eastern Visayas	44	34
MIMAROPA	25	32
Cordillera Administrative Region	38	32
Western Visayas	45	31
Davao Region	42	31
Cagayan Valley	50	26
Central Luzon	33	20
Ilocos Region	34	20
CALABARZON	24	14
National Capital Region	40	5
<b>Philippines</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>29</b>

\* Refers to the proportion of wage workers whose household per capita income is within the bottom 20 percent of income distribution.

Source: Labor Force Survey linked with Family Income and Expenditure Survey 2012; National Wages and Productivity Commission; Authors' calculations.

Some regions that have high poverty incidence also have high potential benefit incidence of workfare programs. For instance, the regions in Mindanao, such as the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, SOCCSKARGEN, Northern Mindanao, and Zamboanga Peninsula, have among the highest simulated benefit incidences of workfare programs, whereby nearly half of the workers who are likely to participate actually belong to poor households. In the absence of other targeting method, such as proxy means test or community-validation, self-targeting seems to work in these regions. This may be attributed to the high poverty incidences in these regions that most of the workers who earn less than the minimum wage are more likely to be poor.

<sup>11</sup> This estimate is particularly low compared to other targeted workfare programs such as the *Jefes de Hogar* in Argentina, wherein 80 percent of beneficiaries belong to the bottom income quintile (Ronconi, 2009).

#### 4. Conclusions and policy options

In principle, the intention of workfare programs in the Philippines is to protect the most vulnerable workers from the risks associated with joblessness or low household income. However, in reality, their design and implementation features fail to channel public resources to the intended beneficiaries, who are workers that belong to poor households. The targeting method is not systematic. Coordination among implementing agencies is lacking, which implies that geographic targeting is not actually applied. The self-selection among the *intended* beneficiaries is also missing—the benefit level is too high that it fails to select the workers who are in need of assistance as even those who have regular jobs are likely to be attracted to the program. Moreover, community-validation may not be effective without a complimenting method to identify the beneficiaries such as proxy means test. The lack of objective and transparent targeting method for workfare programs in the Philippines makes these programs vulnerable to discretion among implementers, and are prone to be used for political purposes. In addition to the design, the implementation arrangement suffers from severe limitations.

The Philippines can learn from lessons from other countries to implement its workfare programs. One option is to consolidate all workfare programs into one big program in order to harmonize the design and implementation features. The benefit level should be set appropriately for each locality, and done through an objective and transparent method. In normal times, workfare programs can use the national household targeting system to identify the potential beneficiaries and only those who were pre-identified by the targeting system can self-select into the program. A reliable data infrastructure should be set up to feed information for monitoring and evaluation. While the government is keen on using workfare programs to assist workers, and scaling up the coverage to include more workers during bad times, investing in improving the design and implementation features of these programs can also help in ensuring that the workers it assists are those who need such assistance the most.



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