Chapter 14

Refusing the Mobility Imperative Among the Left-Behind Generation in the Northern Philippines

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Abstract

The production of the 'good life' or the 'less bad-life' (Berlant, 2007, 2011), especially among generations of the Marcos dictatorship and the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue revolutions (henceforth, EDSA revolutions) in the Philippines, is animated by the 'mobility imperative' (Farrugia, 2016). The mobility imperative includes processes that encourage or demand mobility (Farrugia, 2016) for individuals and institutions. It figures in various 'systems of practice' (Levitt, 1998, 2001) among families in migrant-sending communities, government and corporations that magnify how migration is the ticket to better life (McKay, 2012) or its glorification as a heroic act (de los Reyes, 2013, 2014). Among the generations of the Martial Law and the EDSA revolutions, therefore, the 'good life' is hinged upon departure as professionals (e.g. nurses and engineers), workers in elementary occupations (e.g. construction and domestic workers) or mail-order brides or pen pals. Put simply, the good life in these generations is a function of remittances.

This chapter examines how the contemporary generation of young people construct the 'good life' in differential and new terms (de los Reyes, 2023; McKay & Brady, 2005) from previous generations. Using interviews and vision boards of left-behind children (15–18 years old), it argues that left-behind children critically appraise the 'mobility imperative'. The chapter shows that there is a growing imagination of alternatives to the migration-induced good life among left-behind children, and therefore, they gradually refuse the 'mobility imperative'. For them, the aspired good life

consists of potentially being employees or entrepreneurs in their own villages and living a life with their own families (de los Reyes, 2019, 2020).

Introduction

In 2016, Western Union, an American financial services company launched an advertising campaign to ramp up their engagement with the younger and tech-savvy remittance-sending immigrants in Canada. According to the company's research, these tech-savvy immigrants perceived the Company as conventional (Harris, 2016)[1] rather than embracing digital connectivity through the use of mobile applications to send remittances. The campaign involved encouraging immigrants to take a selfie and use a frame that bears the phrase 'moving money for the better to [country of origin of the selfie taker]'. One of the faces that were used in the marketing campaign was a Filipina immigrant named Jojie who was photographed wearing a traditional *Filipiniana* dress and a flower in her right ear. Less than a decade before the Western Union campaign, back in the Philippines, the remittance company M Lhuiller in one of their music videos used the metaphor, *'tulay ng Pilipino'* (bridge of the Filipino) and suggested that *'matutupad ang lahat ng hangarin mo'* (all your aspirations will come true) through the company.[2] In one of their Christmas campaigns years later, they had Ogie Alcasid, one of the Philippines' top singers and songwriters sing these lines as chorus of the song 'Send My Love Home'[3]:

> Away from home;
>
> I'll send it home
>
> Send my love home
>
> for Christmas

Surrounding the central concept of remittances are other key words that could be picked up from the advertising campaigns of these financial services companies which include 'better', 'come true', 'love' and 'home'. What this suggests is that the remittance economy overflows with so much positive emotions in everyday practices not only by the domination of love as the MLhuiller song explicitly says but also by emotions such as making up for absence or being away (McKay, 2007), and doing good for the family and the community (Mosuela, 2018; Opiniano, 2005; Salazar, 2012) as also explicitly suggested by the Western Union campaign in Canada. Therefore, remittances play a significant role in the emotional vocabulary

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[1]See http://marketingmag.ca/advertising/western-union-finds-newfaces-for-the-brand-183329/.
[2]See the music video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrfItkgeIUc.
[3]See the complete music video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyP0UDXW8xg.

of Filipinos because of the attribution or attachment of positivity to it, and as such, a central role in the shaping of people's imagination of the future.

The centrality of these positive emotional vocabulary in everyday media experiences of Filipinos about remittances reveals a long history of the country's participation in transnational labour migration. On the one hand, it could be surmised that migration was induced by severe socio-economic conditions that Filipinos experienced or their need to flee for safety and seek better opportunities for their families (Laguatan, 2011) especially during the Marcos dictatorship. On the other hand, it is the states' brokerage for external labour markets, oftentimes, launching campaigns for Filipino workers to be employed in other countries such as those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (Asis, 2017). But going back to the central role of mobility-induced positive emotions in the Filipino imagination of the 'good life' or the 'less-bad life' (Berlant, 2007, 2011), this has also been a resource that the Philippine government had tapped into (de los Reyes, 2014). The government has drummed up the glorification of transnational labour migration through participation with the private sector in the 'Bagong Bayani Awards'[4] and the *Balikbayan Programme*[5] (Returnee Programme) (de los Reyes, 2014, p. 200).

In my earlier work (see de los Reyes, 2020), I described how towns like To'to (not the real name), where the first cohort of left-behind children I worked with in 2017 was located, became sites of ostentatious display of transnational connections, and as such, the site for the reproduction of the imaginary of transnational mobility as a way to the 'good life':

> . . .The establishment where I usually 'hung-out' with Carlo, Gigi, Tina, Damien, and Louie is called 'Texas Minimart' because the owners have relatives who are based in Texas. Inside, one of the walls is decorated with car plates from different states in the U.S. Another side is full of pennants from different provinces in Canada. The centrepiece of the widest wall are the flags of the Philippines and the United States hung parallel to each other, emphasising the establishment's US-Philippines connections. In one of our afternoon walks, we passed by a house where a U.S.

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[4]This award-giving body recognises outstanding and exemplary Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Literally, *Bagong Bayani* means 'new heroes' which equates migration as an act of heroism. This award-giving body was originally set up by Ramon Fuentes but was transferred to the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) in 1983. Eventually, it was passed to the Bagong Bayani Foundation incorporated in 1989. (Bagong Bayani Foundation Incorporated, 2019). According to the Bagong Bayani Foundation (2019), there are now more than 200 OFWs who have received the award.

[5]The word *balikbayan* is composed of two Filipino words: *balik* which means return and *bayan* which means country or homeland. Put simply, *balikbayan* means a returnee. The Balikbayan Programme was implemented in 1989 to encourage OFWs to visit the Philippines by providing them certain privileges such as travel tax exemption, visa-free entry if they have become holders of foreign passport and duty-free shopping up to 2,000 USD (Philippine Consulate General, Los Angeles).

flag was hoisted. Damien explained that the woman who owns the house is married to an American man. Three Western Union remittance centres are also strategically positioned in the town making the sight of people claiming remittances rather common. Also, the LBCs [left-behind children] tell me how the opening of the balikbayan box that facilitates influx of consumer goods that would not be easily accessible from To'to, is a big family event during the holidays.

(de los Reyes, 2020, p. 170)

Therefore, it can be surmised that the notion of the 'good life' as revealed by the 'systems of practice' (Levitt, 1998, 2001) in the villages where left-behind children live is hinged upon familial investments and affirmative response to the mobility imperative (Farrugia, 2016; Yeoh et al., 2020).

State of Childhood or Youth Studies in the Philippines

This chapter, while contextualised in the Philippines, engages with two wider fields. On the one hand, youth studies and on the other, migration studies. For this section, an overview of youth studies in the Philippines is provided and then followed by a brief outline of the place of children or young people specifically among transnational families. This is important in so far as understanding left-behind children's responses to the mobility imperative as a differential and new mode of engagement with transnational migration is concerned.

In a 2004 article written by Gerry Lanuza in the journal *Young*, he argues that generally, there are two characteristics of studies about the Filipino youth. On the one hand, there is the dominance of the functionalist paradigm. On the other hand, there is the marginal influence of critical theory (Lanuza, 2004). For the former, the objective is 'to reveal the structural patterns' (p. 363) of youth life in order to take stock of how youth culture fits within wider society and to assist young people to transition into adulthood (pp. 363–364). For the latter, it aims to reveal the agency of young people. Unfortunately, Lanuza (2004) claims that Marxist and neo-Marxist thoughts, which are believed to highlight young people's will, are seldom used in studies about young people in the Philippines.

In relation to the place of young people in migration studies, de los Reyes (2019) argues that young people are heavily implicated by the pronounced 'mobility-centrism' and 'adult-centrism' of migration studies in general. For example, de los Reyes (2019, p. 37; 2020, p. 169) notes that there is a plethora of scholarship that take stock of the experiences of Filipina migrants in various destinations such as Hong Kong (Constable, 2007), Rome (Tacoli, 1999), Barcelona (Zontini, 2004), Taiwan (Lan, 2006, 2008), France (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009), Malaysia (Gan et al., 2015), Denmark (Dalgas, 2015), Canada (Palmer, 2007; Vahabi & Wong, 2017) and China (Mendoza et al., 2017). However, he observed that not only are children rarely accounted for. When they are, these are usually children who are also on the move (Battistella & Conaco, 1998; de los Reyes, 2019, pp. iii, 37; Graham, Jordan et al., 2012; Martin, 2015). Aside from these proclivities in migration studies along

with the tendency of youth studies in the Philippines as described by Lanuza (2004), research also shows that in terms of parent–left-behind children relations, the latter are usually put in a marginal position of power in relation to adults (Nagasaka & Fresnoza-Flot, 2015). This also aligns with wider studies of young people in other contexts. These include how young people's voices are treated as secondary or accessory (Fassetta, 2011) to their parents' within Ghanaian transnational families; as victims of their parents' hunger for money in the case of Poland and Ukraine (Lutz & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2012); or as a group in need of saving in the context of China (Gu, 2022).

The place of left-behind children and their aspirations for the future in the context of Filipino transnational families is heavily shaped by the changing arrangements of domestic life as well as wider global labour arrangements and conditions. In the region where I did my fieldwork at in the Philippines, the number of women leaving were twice the number of their men counterparts for years (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a). This gendered nature of emigration also has had serious implications to labour conditions in migrant's host countries as well as potential for social mobility of sending families. In 2018, 59% of women emigrants, compared to 10% of men, were deployed in elementary occupations (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2019b) that reproduce gendered imaginaries of work, and also gendered inequality in terms of pay. Gendered migration has also serious consequences in terms of family relations. While traditionally, men were considered as breadwinners and women as caregivers, the increase in number of women migrants has changed family arrangements (Yeoh et al., 2020). As a result, face-to-face child-rearing is often left to the father or some relatives. Migrant women, however, continue to participate in taking care of their children remotely through the use of mobile phones, or in the earlier days, letters and cassette tapes (Madianou & Miller, 2011). The social remittances (Levitt, 1998) sent by migrant Filipinas as argued by Hoang and Yeoh (2015) also affect migrant women and left-behind children relations. As an example, Hoang and Yeoh (2015, pp. 191–192) mention that Filipinas in Hong Kong send photographs of themselves having a great time (e.g. wearing nice clothes) which construct a positive narrative of migrancy. Because of this, their left-behind children tend to have a sense of resentment against their mothers (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015). Therefore, an analysis of left-behind children's reaction to the mobility imperative needs to account for these domestic and economic relations. In doing so, this chapter, as will be argued in the next section, attempts to add to a number of other studies that highlight the views of left-behind children about their family's investment on mobility projects and their views of what constitutes the 'good life'.

Objectives and Perspectives

As already alluded to in the preceding section, this chapter responds to the two salient proclivities of migration research, namely, *mobility-centrism* and *adult-centrism* (de los Reyes, 2019) on the one hand. On the other, it also intervenes in the state of Philippine youth studies by adding more analyses of young people in ways that highlight their agency as this is wanting as argued by Lanuza (2004).

In the context of the Filipino diaspora, mobility-centrism is characterised by an obsession with Filipinos who are geographically on the move. Adult-centrism on the other hand privileges the view and experiences of adult migrants (Robertson et al., 2018) as primary objects of study. Scholarly attention has been mostly directed towards experiences of immigrants in their places of destination and when children are included, they are usually those who are either born in the Philippines but eventually moved to their parents' host countries and are referred to as '1.5 generation' (Nagasaka & Flot, 2015) or second-generation immigrant children's challenges such as well-being or mental health and their ways of navigating home and away. Therefore, this chapter's positioning of left-behind children as full subjects who are capable of being informed and making sound imagination of their own futures is a deliberate response to and intervention to the proclivities of both migration and youth studies in the context of the Philippines.

In relation to the deliberate highlighting of young people's agency, this chapter is informed by the sub-discipline of *Geographies of Children, Youth and Families* (GCYF) in human geography. This area of study holds as its core assumption the notion that 'children and youth are competent social actors' and aims to 'make visible a group who were relatively absent from academic accounts, and whose views were often overlooked in politics and society' (Holloway et al., 2019, p. 458). As James (2010) argues, children 'should be regarded as social actors…and that childhood…should be understood as a social construction' (p. 216). In this case, given that migration studies have tended to emphasise on adult migrants in making sense of migration (Robertson et al., 2018), this chapter's aim to intervene in the domination of scholarship on adult migrants on the move reflects GCYF's core value. This chapter also positions itself along with earlier call within migration studies for more scholarship that account for children's lived experience and agency such as their knowledge and awareness of the migration process and their ways of navigating through tailoring their aspirations (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015).

Despite this chapter's aim at highlighting young people's agency, it is also informed by a nuanced view of young people's agency and is tempered by the recognition that there are limits to young people's agency. As Langevang and Gough (2009) argue, young people's agency can be conceptualised as 'tactic'. For them, young people's agency is 'more a matter of continuously adjusting to a changing situation than having complete control over their lives' (p. 752) (see examples of young people's tactical responses in López & de los Reyes, 2022). Or, in other instances, can be formed or exercised by young people because of their specific knowledge or experience of certain circumstances (for children's aspiration among transnational families, see Somaiah et al., 2020, p. 252).

It is inevitable, therefore, that part of engaging with the concept of the 'mobility imperative', forces that encourage or force mobility (Farrugia, 2016), is engaging with the concept of 'aspiration'. This is because responses to the mobility imperative on the one hand is constructed as a desirable act that might happen in the future (McKay, 2012) and therefore, is one that is aspired for. On the other hand, the aspirational aspect of mobility shapes the behaviour of individuals and families as seen in the account of McKay (2012) of sending

communities in the Cordillera region of the Philippines. McKay (2012) argues that in the case of thinking of migration as the 'ticket to better life', people's desires for better life 'are what create change in their world through their lived lives'. In the case of migration projects, it shapes the educational investments made by left-behind children and their families and obviously, in education policy too (de los Reyes, 2013, 2020). In the context of this chapter, the social practices that reinforce the desirability of mobility in the villages where young people are based at heavily shape their aspirations for mobility. In other words, their experience of gendered mobility, either directly through their mothers' emigration to take part in what Parreñas (2000) calls 'international transfer of caretaking', or vicariously through witnessing other families' experiences with it, forms part of their 'archive of memories' (Appadurai, 2013, p. 288). These memories, both tangible and abstract, provide some rules of thumb or as resources that guide young people's calculation for alternative possibilities of their futures. Echoing Appadurai in his ideas about aspiration as a form of navigational capacity, Cornelio and Calamba (2022) state:

> In his [Appadurai's] view, aspirations are ambitions or possibilities that drive people to behave in practical and feasible ways to achieve them. But he [Appadurai] also notes that what is possible for people is shaped by their current social conditions. The capacity to aspire, in other words, is not the same for everyone.
>
> (Cornelio & Calamba, 2022, p. 3)

This chapter takes Appadurai's view by taking into account how left-behind children negotiate the tension between pre-existing imaginaries of the good life and their own version of the imagined good life under circumstances of disadvantage. This is done by highlighting young people's imagination of living other possible lives as ways of increasing what Appadurai (2013) calls the 'horizons of hope' (p. 295) with a view to changing their lives in the future.

Methodology

The data used for this chapter emerged from various months of working with young people in To'to (not the real name of the town), Cordillera Mountains, the northern Philippines. The first source are interviews and observations done with April, Brian, Judith, Mark and Michael (not their real names), five left-behind children (15–18 years old) who were Grade 11 students in To'to High School (not the real name of school) in 2017. The 2017 fieldwork involved participant observations in school, at home, at places of work and leisure. Activities observed included having lunch, karaoke, watching movies at home, walking home in the afternoon or visiting the mining tunnels where some of the male left-behind children worked. Focus group discussions, individual and pair interviews and incidental go-along interviews were also conducted over several months. Some

vision boards used to elicit responses from the left-behind children in 2017 are also used in this chapter. These participants were recruited from To'to High School with approval from the Principal and assistance from the Grade Level Adviser. The second source of data is online interviews conducted in 2021 with three left-behind children John, Xyra and Lara (15–18 years old). The three were recruited through their mothers from the northern Philippines who were based in Singapore as Foreign Domestic Workers (FDW) and have agreed to be interviewed first. Eventually, through the mothers' help, the researcher was connected to their children via Facebook, WhatsApp, or Instagram. Because fieldwork coincided with travel restrictions in 2021 and 2022 while the author was based in Singapore, there were limited face-to-face engagement with the second cohort of participants from the northern Philippines. In both instances of fieldwork, ethics approvals were obtained from the different institutions where the author was affiliated with. All participants were provided with information sheets and their informed consent was sought prior to interviews.

Results

Making Sense of Mobilities and the Good Life

There are striking differences in left-behind children's experience of the mobility-induced 'good life'. There are some who clearly acknowledge the radical positive changes in their family's socio-economic status. In contrast, there are those who feel their lives have worsened when their family affirmatively responded to the mobility imperative. Lara, 18, whose mother had been working in Singapore for 14 years as an FDW, believes that her mother's decision to leave has changed their life forever. When I asked her in an interview in 2021 how her mother's work impacted them, she said:

> Aaaw! It's a lot. It's really helped us relieve ourselves from our troubles when she decided to go to Singapore. She was able to build our house. You know? It's so surreal. Like it feels so great that we have our own house. She's also able to buy so many things. Whatever we want, she provides. Unlike before, I remember she once gave us cell phones, the ones with a keypad. Of course, we can't talk to her using them. It's the Nokia phone with a keypad. Each of us [siblings] had one but we cannot talk to her using that but only if we use her roaming number [for texting].

April, too, whose mother had been working in Cyprus for four years at the time of interview in 2017 affirmed what Lara thinks. Below, April explains how her mother's emigration has positively changed their status in life:

Jay: Is your life better than your classmates' whose parents are not abroad?

April: Yes. Because even if my mother is very tight with money, she manages to provide for our needs. Look, she came home now [on vacation from Cyprus] and she only gives me 30–40 Php as daily allowance. But when I ask her for extra money for bookbinding or printing, she yields. I have other classmates whose parents hand them 100 Php per day. Others don't have enough. Some others don't have lunch.

Jay: How do you feel about them?

April: It's like, I pity them.

Simultaneously, there are also other left-behind children who are critical about the circulating imaginary of the mobility-induced 'good life'. For example, Michael and Mark, boys I have interviewed in 2017, seemed to have experienced a stark contrast from what April and Lara narrated.

Mark, who was 17 during my interview in 2021, complained that he needs to work to provide for himself even if his mother in Kuala Lumpur sends remittances regularly. This is because according to him, his father is mismanaging the funds. Michael, 18, whose mother recently returned to their village from Hong Kong recalls how the remittances sent for the repair of their decrepit house was spent by their father on women and alcohol. Worse, Michael was often physically harmed by his father when he was drunk. The father has left for another province since Michael's mother returned. And now that Michael's mother is back, she resorted to borrowing money most of the time.

The contrasting narratives suggest that affirmatively responding to the 'mobility imperative' brings forth radical and positive changes to a family's socio-economic status, allowing various opportunities for the second generation to break the chain of poverty through potential for university schooling and many more. However, the narratives also show that to some, familial investments on mobilities sometimes fail and when they do, children are mostly implicated as seen in the experience of Michael and Mark (de los Reyes, 2019).

To Leave or Not to Leave?

It is important to emphasise that because of the contrasting experiences of the families of left-behind children, whether directly or indirectly, left-behind children are now taking stock of the mobility–good life nexus more critically. In my interview with John, who in 2021 was 18 years old and whose mother has worked in Singapore since 2007, I asked him the question, 'do you think that you will leave your town in the future? Will you also go abroad? Do you see that happening to you and will you have a choice?':

John: If there is ever that choice, I will choose to stay closer [...] because I don't want to be too far from them. I really want to be close to them (parents and siblings).

> Jay: Is this because of your experience (mother leaving for work abroad)?
> John: Because when there are problems, it would be easier to go to them, to see what's going on. Something like that.
> Jay: Oh, so you're saying you're really close to your father and mother?
> John: Yes.

Lara, on the other hand, says that she is seeing the possibility of going abroad in the future but in a different way from how her mother did it:

> Jay: What if eventually, you'd have a family, kids etc., will you also go abroad? Like put yourself in your mom's situation when she left?
> Lara: For me, yes.
> Jay: Why?
> Lara: Of course, in situations like that, it's only challenging in the beginning. We'll get used to it. But I will not be like her who sort of 'ghosted' us. All of a sudden, she's gone! For me, I really want connection among all of us on a daily basis. Or even if it's not every day as long as we talk, and we give updates. Just like that. Unlike how she was just gone and we did not know if she was still alive or not. I still want real updates about…being updated with what's happening with one another. If ever I will go abroad.

In my continued conversation with Lara, aside from the emotional effects of how her mother left, she also emphasised so many layers of considerations related to employment both in the Philippines and abroad before deciding to leave.

> Lara: […] Because I am seeing others, like our neighbours, they are working in Japan. I see that they are earning well. It's enticing but I am also considering that it is really challenging because I will be away from family. That is why I kind of prefer to just, like, stay here in the meantime when I do not have a job. I prefer to not rush things. It's not like an easy job. I don't wanna just leave and go abroad. I want to wait. I will study and wait and then…
> Jay: So, it's like you're saying you will go abroad if? Like you have a condition?
> Lara: Yes.

In my earlier conversations with Mark in 2017, he also alluded the same attitude that John and Lara exhibited:

> Jay: Are you willing to leave?
> Mark: Yes, because… when you see the situation and you really need to, then push through. When I need to leave, I will leave.

Jay: What will make you stay?

Mark: I get homesick easily. Even if life here is more challenging, I like it because we have neighbours. It's really different when you stay at the place where you were born and raised at.

The outright display of choosing to stay as seen in John, imagining alternative ways of being away exhibited by Lara, and the 'as needed' approach of Mark echo the GCYF's assumption that young people are social actors who are able to constantly adjust their views of things based on shifting life conditions (Langevang & Gough, 2009) or depending on what is contained in their 'archive of memories' Appadurai (2013). This also aligns with what I have previously argued about young people's views of local–global 'spatiotemporalities' where young people understand their locality both in temporal and spatial terms through the lens of difference (de los Reyes, 2019, 2023) and as such perceive it as a new form of place (McKay & Brady, 2005). In my 2017 fieldwork, Judith, whose mother works in Cyprus like April's mother, justified why she prefers to work in the village eventually by comparing the experience of time between her and her mother in Cyprus. For her, time in Cyprus is 'running' and her mother always has to exhibit 'military moves' in order to cope (de los Reyes, 2019, p. 154; de los Reyes, 2023). Because of these distinctions, the desirability of the mobility-induced good life is also diminished. This is most evident in Mark's thinking about leaving as only when needed and not because moving away always guarantees the good life.

Based on the preceding discussion, we are gradually seeing how the contemporary generation of left-behind children by emigrant women domestic workers are being trepidatious around the mobility imperative and are able to imagine not only other ways of leaving but even being moored. We will return to this but for now, let us take a look at what for these young people makes up the good life.
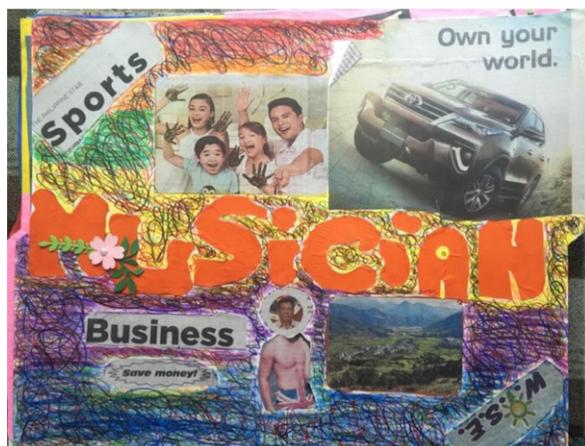
The Future Good Life

In what follows, I explore the left-behind children's visualisation of the future through a vision board activity. This activity was done in 2017 to have a sense about how left-behind children are imagining their future in relatively concrete terms. Each of them was handed a newspaper (same date of publication), scissors, glue, colouring pens and coloured papers. They had an hour to paste cut-outs that reflected what they wished for in the future. I present the vision boards of April, Michael and Brian. Below each vision board are brief explanations they shared with me (Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

There are four key themes of the imagined good life from the visualisations and descriptions that April, Michael and Brian made. First is the centrality of family that is intact, complete and growing which is, on the one hand, a reflection of the traditional notions of family as primarily nuclear. On the other hand,
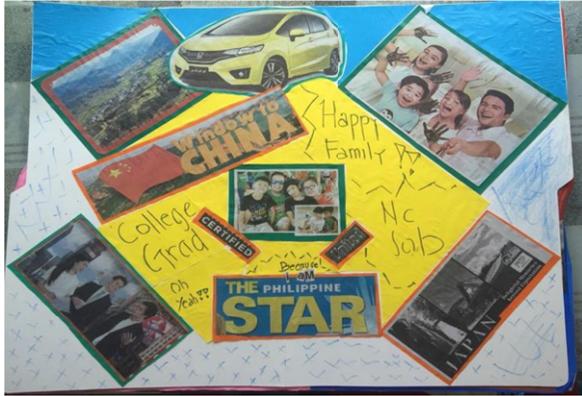
'It is so beautiful […] (Pointing at the phrase 'own your world') It's because you are the only one who will *agkwa* (linguistic filler) for yourself, for your future. Whoever you will become someday. 'For all lives you live' so just enjoy it. Then, like that. 'Feed your mind' because that is where… 'Let's grow together' with family… (Referring to the phrase 'behind a good plot is a prolific scriptwriter) It's because in your life, it's like you are its sole scriptwriter. You are the one who is running it, whatever future you may like.

Fig. 1.   April's Vision Board.

I only desire simple things. Just simple. I have a family that's great. I have a business too. I am able to save money. And perhaps, I'd be able to get a car so that … I want to live in a place like this, mountains *ngay* (pointing at the image of the mountains) … That's where I will live … I want to be a musician. If I can. But … If I have time, I can.

Fig. 2.   Michael's Vision Board.

The first one is relationship with family. Happy. Complete family. Nobody is… Complete and then happy. *Dyay lang met* (just that) …There is sharing between the two of them… *Kasjay* (just like that). This is work [points to the image] … They are like discussing about *dyay* (something). What's this? It's a job for a business administration person… I could not find a picture of a graduate that's why I just wrote it ('College Grad') … For travel, these will be the places (Japan and China). I will be travelling to these places. It's like they have respect that is why it is good.

Fig. 3.   Brian's Vision Board.

because the images used for the vision board activity were drawn from a local daily newspaper, this also reflects media and advertising companies' subscription to traditional notions of family. These views are seen in April's use of the line 'let's grow together' and Michael's and Brian's choice of the image of a happy nuclear family. For them, the good life is characterised by simplicity, of desiring less. As Brian and Michael say, *'dyay lang'* (just that) and *'simple lang'* (just simple), respectively. Second and in relation to mobility, the idea of leaving for family did not stand out. Instead, travel to places like China and Japan were striking. Brian, for example, wants his future family to travel to China and Japan. He says, *'kasla gamin adda ti respect da isu nga mayat idjay'* (they seem to have respect/are respectful that's why it is good there). Third is entrepreneurialism as seen in Michael's wish to have his own business or April's desire to have her own restaurant or café as seen in their vision boards. Fourth is a demonstration of an imagined agency in so far as they are able to exercise self-determination. This is most pronounced in April's line, 'it's because in your life, it's like you are its sole scriptwriter. You are the one who is running it, whatever future you may like'. In relation to mobility and agency, my more recent conversation with John and Lara in 2021 also affirm the visualisations of April, Michael and Brian. For example, John explained that he did not really want to leave because the job he wants is in the village:

Jay: So even if you'd have a family and a house built close to your parents, you wouldn't think of going abroad?

John: No.

Jay: Why?

John: What I can only say is that the job that I am looking for is here in our town.

Jay: So, you think that it's fine to be a policeman here because they are paid quite well?

John: Yes.

In contrast, Lara acknowledges the difficulty of going abroad and explains that this is the reason why she is having second thoughts:

Jay: So, if you are ever going abroad, what job do you see yourself doing? Let's say you've finished university already?

Lara: Maybe...I was told, well, I've only heard it and it's been enticing to do farming in Japan according to some. They say the pay is good. Like...

Jay: So, you want to do farming?

Lara: Yes. But from what I am seeing, I think it is also a tough job. It's not that easy. Because when you say farming, people think you're just planting, like...Or just looking after animals. But what I am seeing them do can be tough too. It's not like it's an easy and straightforward job. That's why I am having second thoughts.

What is noteworthy at this point is that when the left-behind children imagine having to face and respond to the mobility imperative, some of them are able to outrightly refuse it. This is evident in John's choice to be a policeman and Judith's dream of becoming an accountant in their town hall. Both jobs allow them to stay in their town. However, for others, when put in an imagined encounter with the mobility imperative, left-behind children resort to calculative tropes and use of conditions to justify their decision. This is seen in Lara who uses the experience of their neighbours who work as farmers in Japan and concludes that even if it is financially rewarding, it is not an easy work. In the end, she decides that it is better to not rush things. For her, it is better to wait for the right opportunity. On the other hand, Mark says that responding affirmatively to the mobility imperative should only be when it is really necessary. He says, 'when I need to leave, I will leave'. These clearly affirm what Langevang and Gough (2009) make of children's agency as tactical in so far as it is not about having complete control over their lives, but being able to adjust their responses depending on the situation. In this case and on the question of emigrating in the future, they respond by waiting, cost-benefit analysis and thinking through contingency.

Concluding Thoughts

The documented attitudes of the left-behind children in my interviews with them as well as through their vision boards surface important lessons in thinking about familial responses to the mobility imperative. The left-behind children's responses to the mobility imperative as discussed in this chapter suggest that the systems of practice such as the glorification of migration through the media and villagers' ostentatious display of transnational connections, along with worsening social conditions, and previous generations' motivations for transnational migration do not always elicit an aspiration to leave. More importantly, there are instructive implications in thinking about young people's agency in relation to the mobility imperative.

First, the left-behind children's outright, conditional and calculative attitude towards the mobility imperative demonstrate young people's 'tactical' agency, in so far as they are constantly recalibrating their responses (Langevang & Gough, 2009) or as a 'make-do' response by tapping into their knowledge of migration through their experience of it and potential opportunities in the village for them. Despite the efforts of the remittance economy through companies such as MLhuiller and Western Union to produce and circulate positive emotions, or even when they are bombarded by material display of transnational connections in the villages (de los Reyes, 2019), the left-behind children instead use the experiences of their mother and their kin to inform their decisions for future mobility. This is best seen in their use of conditionalities such as need (I will leave when needed) or even doubting the move to leave (I am having second thoughts). As such, their agency is seen through their capacity to widen their 'horizons of hope' (Appadurai, 2013) beyond what their immediate milieu makes available for them.

Second, the left-behind children are imagining alternative responses to the mobility imperative that is characterised by willingness to wait for the right opportunity and capacity to make opportunities happen through education and entrepreneurialism in the villages. Their desire to finish their university education as a policeman, accountant, engineer or as a nurse and their weighing of possible options and contrasting it with their status quo show a more critical and active alternative approach to the mobility imperative. This stands in sharp contrast with earlier generations of migrants that either left because of extremely difficult circumstances to find safer places because of the dictatorship (Laguatan, 2011) or in search of greener pastures that are not available domestically. This is evident in their awareness of rewarding opportunities in the village (policemen are paid well) or the potential to venture into new businesses related to food and tourism as shown by fellow villagers who have put up small businesses such as computer shops, grocery store and cafes. These are increasingly seen as viable alternatives from the declining rewards and precarity of working in the small-scale mines which was the predominant source of income in their community. This is also affirmed by other cases such as Indonesian women's aspiration to stay because of their accumulation of educational capital funded by remittances and their

awareness of the social risks of migration (Somaiah et al., 2020; Hoang & Yeoh, 2015).

Third, by offering alternative responses to the mobility imperative, left-behind children are also changing the 'politics of recognition' (Fraser, 2005, 2008) between home and away, the local and the global. What they are doing is highlighting the equal weight and value of building a future in the village as opposed to leaving for another country in search of opportunities. Their choice to stay and thinking of their dreams (e.g. having a complete family) as *dyay lang* (just that) or *simple lang* (just simple) rebuke the normativity of the mobility-induced good life. For them, leaving is no longer the only ticket to the good life. This resembles to some extent what Somaiah et al. (2020) found from their Indonesian women participants' use of the concept of *cukup* (enough) in relation to their aspiration to remain. For them, *cukup* can be considered as an alternative to 'excessive migration and development' which also parallels the To'to left-behind children's social context of romanticised migration.

Overall, the left-behind children's demonstration of conditional and calculative approach to the mobility imperative and their refusal to potentially leave prove what Cook and Cuervo (2020, p. 72) argue about choosing to remain:

> . . .the decision to either remain in or return to rural areas should not necessarily be perceived as a coerced choice or be associated purely with a deficit of opportunities, especially when it is informed predominantly by non-economic motivations.

I conclude this chapter by arguing that the imagined refusal of the mobility imperative and its important place in left-behind children's notions of the good life must be understood in relation to other factors. This include left-behind children's attitudes as produced in relation to their location in particular classes and regions (McLeod, 2000) and changing labour market conditions (Cornelio & Calamba, 2022) as important structural limits in young people's agency. When thought this way, not only is the refusal of the mobility imperative a decision that is continuously being adjusted depending on the situation (Langevang & Gough, 2009). It is also nuanced by the awareness that other left-behind children from relatively more privileged classes (e.g. children of IT professionals and nurses) might not behave in similar ways as the ones reported on in this chapter. Overall, what we are seeing from the cohort of left-behind children reported in this chapter is that there is a move away from the notion of the good life as a function of remittances.

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