

## **ABANDONED CHILDREN WITHOUT FAMILIES IN THE PHILIPPINES - PREVENTIVE AND PROTECTIVE MEASURES**

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by

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I am greatly honored to be participating in this international conference on Children's Development. I would like to share Childhope Asia Philippines' experience in assisting urban poor abandoned and neglected children living in urban poor communities or living without their families on the streets of Metro Manila. This paper aims to present three (3) program approaches: a) preventive and developmental, b) protective, and c) recovery or rehabilitation programs for children who are at risk of running away from home, living and working on the streets away from their families, and those who have entered temporary recovery centers. Let me begin with a definition of street children.

### **Who are the Street Children?**

They are children, aged 5 to 18 years, who stay most of the time on the streets and in public places (at least four hours and above everyday) and who are engaged in varied types of activities such as earning a living, playing with friends and peers, and sleeping. A 2002 estimate puts the number of street children in the Philippines at 246,000, of which about seventy-five percent (75%) are working street children who go home to families and twenty-five percent (25%) live on the streets. Street children are generally male (67.7%), 10 to

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15 years old, who have been physically or sexually abused at home or neglected, and whose parents are separated or whose families are dysfunctional. As a result, they seldom go home to their families.

The largest group of street children belong to the 6 – 12 year-old age bracket (47%), closely followed by the 13 – 15 year-old group (31.5%). In the Philippines, there are about 30,000 street children found in Metro Manila (National Capital Region), where the biggest commercial and residential districts are located.

### **Categories of Street Children**

There are two (2) major categories of street children in the Philippines:

- 1. Children on the street** – children who regularly work on the streets but still living with their families (75%) - including children of street families - some of whom still go to school half-day; and
- 2. Completely neglected and abandoned children** (children of the street) – those living on the streets with irregular or no contact at all with their families (25%), and who have dropped out of school.

### **What is Childhope Asia Philippines?**

Childhope is a non-profit, non-government organization, established in 1989, whose principal purpose is to advocate and facilitate the development of policies and programs for the rights of children, particularly street children, not only in the Philippines, but also through its capacity-building seminars in fourteen (14) other Asian countries. Its main direct service program is the Education on the Streets Program among Street Children in Metro Manila, which focuses on street children living on the streets with little or no contact at all with their families, but which also reaches out to children of street families. Childhope is one of three (3) sister NGOs that collaborate on implementing advocacy against child abuse, as well as **preventive, developmental, protective, recovery, and rehabilitation** programs for abandoned or neglected children in the community, on the streets, and in a crisis intervention center.

## **Program Approaches and Strategies**

### **I. Community-based Program Approach (Prevention and Development)**

Two years before Childhope Asia Philippines was established, we established an NGO called **Families and Children for Empowerment and Development (FCED)** in 1987. FCED's programs are community-based and benefit not only the child but also his family, including his siblings. Implemented in thirteen (13) to fifteen (15) *barangays*<sup>2</sup> in Districts V and VI of Manila, the programs include the organization of residents (including parents of street children) and leaders into **Barangay Councils for the Protection of Children (BCPCs)**<sup>3</sup> to assume responsibility for child and family development, advocacy, and protection of children's rights (UN CRC, National Laws, and CEDAW), health and nutrition, early childhood care and development, educational assistance to school-age children who are at risk of going to the streets to earn money for their schooling, parent education, and micro-finance and livelihood program for parents. Several years ago, there were about 250 working and abandoned children on the streets living in these *barangays*, because their families belonged to the poorest of the poor population. Now, because of the advocacy, monitoring, and education on children's rights among both children and parents, sessions on responsible parenthood and parent effectiveness, health and nutrition, value education, educational assistance, and the micro-finance/ livelihood programs that FCED has organized, the families are able to earn supplemental income, meet some of their basic needs, respect their children's rights, and send their children to school, without the children having to work on the streets.

FCED began working with these *barangays* by organizing BCPCs. The BCPC is a grassroots community council organized at the *barangay* level to serve as a network organization for all

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<sup>2</sup> smallest local government unit in the Philippines (headed by a Barangay Chairperson)

<sup>3</sup> as embodied in Article 87 of Presidential Decree 603 or the Child and Youth Welfare Code

children's concerns, including advocacy/ development/ protection/ participation programs and services. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Advocate for, promote, and monitor the survival, development, protection, and participation of children and youth at the community level; and
2. sustain an organized, effective, and responsive community-based structure that will promote and guarantee the welfare, safety, health, positive moral environment, and wholesome development of children and youth in every *barangay*.

Each BCPC has any or all of the following committees: **Health and Nutrition, Education, Livelihood, Advocacy and Protection, Early Childcare and Development**, and a **Youth Committee**. These committees are composed of members of the community (parents and youth), as well as representatives of local government and private agencies concerned with the welfare of children and youth. They are provided opportunities for training on the following knowledge and skills modules:

Module 1: Child's Rights and Parent Effectiveness

Module 2: Community Organization and Leadership Skills Enhancement

Module 3: Project Development and Management Skills Development

The BCPCs' main roles and functions as described in the Philippine Child and Youth Welfare Code are:

1. To foster the education of every child in the *barangay*;
2. To take steps to prevent juvenile delinquency and assist parents of children with problems so that they can get expert advice;
3. To adopt measures for the health of children;
4. To conduct capability-building projects to increase knowledge and skills in handling children's programs;
5. To encourage the proper performance of duties by the parents, and provide learning opportunities on the adequate rearing of children and on positive parent-child relationships;
6. To promote wholesome entertainment in the community;
7. To prepare Annual Work and Financial Plan (AWFP) for children and recommend appropriations to the Sanggunian (Council);
8. To provide coordinative linkages with other agencies and institutions in the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of plans for children;
9. To establish and maintain database on children in the *barangay*;
10. To advocate for the establishment and maintenance of playgrounds, day-care centers, and other facilities necessary for child and youth development;
11. To advocate for the passage of *barangay* resolution/ ordinances responsive to child-related issues/ concerns and ensure the inclusion of children's programs in the executive agenda;

12. To protect and assist children in need of special protection, i.e. abandoned, maltreated, and dependents, and refer cases filed against child abusers to proper agencies/ institutions;
13. To monitor situation reports on children and prepare quarterly updates on the implementation of children's programs and make recommendations to the city/ municipal CPC for consideration and nation-wide application; and
14. To perform such other functions to implement child-related laws especially in matters of child and parent education, health, entertainment, etc.

In addition to the BCPCs, our FCED community-based program conducts the following activities:

1. advocacy regarding the UN CRC and against all forms of abuse (drugs, sexual abuse, prostitution, trafficking) among parents, community leaders, children, and youth;
2. training of volunteer advocates among adults and youth;
3. orientation of parents on leadership development, community organization, program planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation;
4. Provision of the following services by the BCPCs and parent/ youth organizations, with our management support:
  - a. early childhood care and development
  - b. health and nutrition
  - c. education (parent education, sponsorship for primary/ secondary education, and vocational skills training, etc.)
  - d. livelihood skills training and projects, micro-finance

### **Foster Family Care (planned for future implementation)**

Through FCED's community-based programs, we hope to be able to identify families in our communities who are capable of taking care of an abandoned street child who has lived in a recovery center for one year. Parents can be trained by FCED or the Social Welfare Department, and eventually be licensed as a foster family.

A neglected/ abandoned child may be matched with the family, who will thereafter attend regular meetings with FCED for monitoring. Eventually, if biological relatives are identified, the child may be transferred to them after evaluation.

On the other hand, children below 10 or 11 years old, who have no available relatives, can be more readily placed for adoption.

### **Issues at the National Level**

The Geneva Committee on the UN CRC, in reviewing the Philippine Country Report on the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, raised the following issues in their Concluding Observations and Recommendations: 1) high number of children living in households below the national poverty line; 2) many *barangays* still not able to provide children with elementary education; 3) costs of schooling cause financial obstacles to access education; 4) massive narcotic trade and its adverse effects on children and adolescents; 5) high incidence of drug and substance abuse; 6) risk factors contributing to trafficking activities; 7) unlawful detention of children for extended period of time limited; 8) lack of access to appropriate legal aid/ assistance and to adequate social/ health services; 9) Foster Care Act has been pending in Congress for several years; 10) lengthy process of declaring a child for adoption; and 11) inter-country adoption is used rather than a more active campaign for local adoption.

Among the Committee's recommendations to the Philippine Government were:

- Take urgent efforts to raise standard of living among rural and urban poor population, through community development, including participation of children;
- Ensure that children living in poverty are provided access to social and health services, education, adequate housing;
- Pay particular attention to the schooling opportunities in the most remote *barangays*;
- Adopt effective measures to urgently decrease the drop-out rate in primary and secondary schools;
- Continue efforts to offer more facilities for non-formal learning and vocational training...;
- Tailor programs against specific drug abuse, including glue and solvent-sniffing, as well as recovery and social reintegration programs/ centers for street children and cooperate with NGOs in this respect;
- Conduct a comprehensive study to address the causes, nature, and extent of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking of children;
- Implement alternative measures of deprivation of liberty, such as probation, community service or suspended sentences;
- Train professionals in the areas of recovery and social reintegration of children;
- Ensure that all adoptions fully comply with the principles of the Convention as well as with other relevant international standards and are conducted in the best interests of the child;
- Use inter-country adoption as a last resort;
- Adopt and implement as a matter of priority, the Foster Care Act;
- Identify factors in the adoption process which result in children's prolonged stay in institutions; and

- Provide foster parents and foster children with adequate social services.

FCED's programs try to address some of the above-mentioned issues, particularly those on advocacy against child abuse, education, standard of living, and administration of juvenile justice. The educational assistance program in the district level, in particular, assists **200** early childhood care and development children, **440** elementary school students, **257** high school students, and **15** college students.

## **II. Outreach and Protection/ Street Education Program**

### **Vision, Mission, and Goal of the Street Education Program**

The program envisions "A society where street children can become responsible, productive, and respected members – fully exercising their rights and duties to achieve their full potential as human beings, upholding the rights of others and serving them with dignity and worth in the image of the Supreme Being".

Our Street Educators bind and commit themselves to the following mission:

- Advocate with the different sectors of society so they can gain awareness and understanding of the plight and potentials of street children, and to encourage the society to move into action for the cause of street children;
- Uphold the rights of each child through various education opportunities that include spiritual formation and values clarification among the children themselves;
- Provide protection for the children from any form of abuse, exploitation, and neglect;
- Facilitate the development of street children by providing them with psychological support and access to appropriate services and opportunities, and other interventions towards their empowerment and motivation to have a productive future;
- Help street children realize that they are valuable as members of society by accepting and assisting them to meet their challenges as they struggle towards positive change; and
- Continue their spiritual and professional development, conscious of their shortcomings and weaknesses, in order to become better persons and to improve the service to the street children.

The goal of the program is to assist children who live on the streets to protect themselves against all forms of abuse; to educate them on child's rights, the laws, basic education, life

skills and life goals; to motivate them to give up life on the streets; and to restore their self-esteem. The process of achieving such a goal requires a long-term process of positive interaction, education, psychosocial counseling, and support. While the intention is to motivate and counsel the children to go into recovery shelters/ centers or to be reconciled with their families, many of them remain on the streets for various reasons: freedom from authoritarian parents and adults; peer interaction and support; and limited number of space in licensed recovery centers. For this reason, the program offers early interventions such as protective and preventive education and counseling services right on the streets to motivate them to give up street life, to avail themselves of comprehensive shelter services, or to return to their families or relatives, when feasible.

The Street Educators/ Counselors of Childhope Asia Philippines work full-time on the streets – Tuesday to Saturday, for at least five (5) hours each day. They write reports and case summaries and make phone calls for referral of children to partner agencies during their first 3 hours of work in the office. By late afternoon, they leave for the streets to look for street children in their assigned areas. At present, there are twenty-eight (28) Street Educators working in fourteen (14) pairs (male-female) in six (6) cities of Metro Manila: Pasay City, Caloocan City, Makati City, Paranaque City, Quezon City, and Manila. In the streets, their main approach is to interact with the children's activities until they have gained the latter's trust. They then invite the children to participate in alternative education sessions whose topics are suited to the lifestyle of street children. These sessions include the following:

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) and National Laws on Children
- Values Education and Spiritual Formation
- Protective Behavior against Child Sexual Abuse
- Para-legal Education
- Substance Abuse Prevention Education
- Primary Health Education
- Adolescent Sexuality and STI-HIV/AIDS
- Life Skills and Life Goal Planning
- Basic Literacy and Numeracy

- Gender Sensitivity and Reproductive Health

During these sessions, the children raise issues or express feelings that need to be addressed through psychosocial case management and counseling. The cases may be simple enough to be managed by the street educator or too complex that they require treatment by professional psychiatrists or psychologists. This is where Childhope's partnership with other NGOs becomes essential. The referral of the children for psychiatric testing is facilitated, although the tests and medicines are often not free. The case management process basically involves the following steps:

1. Intake Interview, Assessment, and Formulation of Treatment/ Helping Plan
2. Implementation of the Treatment/ Helping Plan
3. Case Review Conference
4. Case Evaluation
5. Case Termination

### **Alternative Basic Education for Children in Need of Special Protection**

In the Philippine education system, two pathways of learning are available to school-age children: **formal education** and the **alternative learning system (ALS)**. As provided for in the Philippine Constitution, enrollment in the formal school system is free and open to all Filipino children, from first to sixth grade in the elementary level, and from first to fourth year in the secondary level. However, although formal education is free, many families still cannot send their children to school for various reasons.

The Alternative Learning System or ALS, therefore, is another option for children who wish to receive basic education, which is suited to their unique life situations but is equivalent to formal education in terms of learning goals, with recognition and accreditation from the **Department of Education-Bureau of Alternative Learning System (DepEd-BALS)**. A definition of some terms is in order before I proceed:

- **Alternative Learning System** – a parallel learning system that provides a viable alternative to the existing formal education institution. It encompasses both non-formal and informal sources of knowledge and skills:
  - **non-formal education** – any organized, systematic educational activity carried outside the framework of the formal school system to provide selected types of learning to a segment of the population
  - **informal education** – a lifelong process of learning by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes, and insights from daily experiences at home, at work, at play, and from life itself.
  
- **Basic Education** – education intended to meet basic learning needs, which lays the foundation on which subsequent learning can be based. It encompasses early childhood, elementary and high school education, as well as alternative learning systems for children, out-of-school youth, and adult learners, and includes education for those with special needs.

Fourteen (14) out of the twenty-eight (28) street educators of Childhope participated in two (2) training workshops conducted by officials and staff of the DepED-BALS in early 2005, and have since been registered as **Instructional Managers (IM)** for the **Basic Literacy Program (BLP)** now being implemented.

The ALS curriculum speaks of functionality and competency, not subject matter. It has 5 inter-related learning strands:

- Communication Skills
- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- Sustainable Use of Resources/ Productivity
- Developing Self and Sense of Community
- Expanding One's World Vision

### **Screening and Placement of Learners for Basic Literacy and NFE A&E Classes**

A screening and placement process is necessary to determine a child's entry-level vis-à-vis his reading, writing, and counting skills. Before this step, the potential learner attends an orientation session to know more about the learning program. If he decides to participate, he takes the screening test. It is also important for the IM to conduct an informal interview of the child during orientation to get some background information. Aside from this interview, the IM also makes use of screening/ placement instruments called **Assessment of Basic Literacy**

(**ABL**) and **Functional Literacy Test (FLT)**, as well as the **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)** and the **Learner Self-assessment Forms**.

For the street children assisted by Childhope, the Street Educators or IMs administered both the ABL and the FLT. However, results showed that the street children's level of literacy belonged to the basic literacy level.

The ABL is divided into three (3) Grade levels: I, II, and III, each of which has Reading, Writing, and Counting Tests. The entry-level for each child is determined by the grade level of the test, which he was able to answer/ complete.

These classes are conducted on the streets, in parks, parking lots or other more suitable venues in the community where the children-learners study their modules according to their level, with facilitation by their **IMs**. These modules are in the vernacular and were provided by the DepEd-BALS. Among the modules<sup>4</sup> that the children choose to study are:

- Even Though You are Far Away (Family Values)
- Tiny Piece of Cloth, You are Important! (Nationalism)
- Healthy on the Outside but not Inside (Health)
- Self-learning Modules on Reading and Writing
- There is Still a Way (Health)
- Take Care of Your Health (Health)
- I am Me, Why is it So? (Values)
- I Remember it Now! (Geography)
- Your Rights are My Rights! (Human Rights)
- How Will I Be Without You? (The Five Senses)
- Wherever...Whenever (Philippine Culture and Tradition)
- Heroes of the Past and of the Present (History)
- Symbols of our Nation (Social Studies)
- We Can if We Want To (The Value of Education)

We can see from the variety of modules used that the children's interests cover a wide range of topics. After this basic literacy program, the children will take and hopefully pass the

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<sup>4</sup> Translated into English for purposes of this paper

**Functional Literacy Test (FLT)** to move up to these next levels: **lower elementary, advanced elementary** or **secondary**.

Some of the methods used – participatory and experiential – are the Learning Experience Approach (LEA), Cooperative Learning Method, Group Analysis and Processing, the DOORS Method of Phonetic Pronunciation through Sounds.

### **Lessons Learned**

Some of the lessons that Childhope Asia Philippines has learned from its street education program are:

- The child-to-child approach contributes to sustaining and promoting the project's effectiveness (such as the Junior Health Workers and Junior Advocates Programs).
- There is a need for a total complementation of interventions to address the phenomenon of street children.
- A program needs to continue establishing working relationships with partner agencies implementing community-based and center-based programs, as well as health, psychiatric, and legal services.
- Provision of educational and medical assistance, as well as meals during alternative education sessions is essential to fruitful learning and education.
- A program needs to make itself and the project more visible in terms of advocacy and promotion strategies in order to gain support from various publics.

### **Issues on Street Children at the National Level**

With regard to street children, the UN Committee on the CRC was gravely concerned about the **high number of children living on the streets and their special vulnerability to various forms of violence and abuse, including sexual abuse and exploitation, economic exploitation, and substance abuse**. It noted the **lack of a systematic and comprehensive government strategy to address the situation and protect children living on the streets**. Despite the efforts taken by the Philippine Government and many NGOs working with and for street children, the Committee is concerned about the **street children's limited access to**

**adequate nutrition, clothing, housing, social and health services, and education** Lastly, the **health risks faced by these children** were also noted by the Committee.

The Committee made the following recommendations to the Philippine government, among others:

- Develop a comprehensive strategy, with active participation of street children, NGOs, and other relevant professionals to address the high number of street children, with the aim of reducing and preventing this phenomenon;
- Secure that children living on the streets are not unlawfully arrested or detained, to protect them from police brutality and, where needed, to secure their access to adequate legal services;
- Ensure that street children are reached through trained street educators and counselors and provided with adequate nutrition, clothing, and shelter, as well as with social and health services and educational opportunities, including vocational and life-skills training, in order to support their full development and provide them with adequate protection and assistance.
- Provide street children with adequate recovery and social reintegration services for physical, sexual, and substance abuse, and to promote reunification with their families, when feasible.

Childhope Asia Philippines was cited in the Committee's report as one of the NGOs responding to the needs of street children, through its Outreach and Protection/ Education on the Streets Program.

### **III. Temporary Recovery Centers**

If the child agrees to be referred to a temporary recovery center, a case summary is first sent to the receiving recovery center for assessment by its social worker. This reduces the probability that the child may not adjust in the center, in terms of his/ her profile or background. Upon approval by the Center, the street educator accompanies the child and later conducts periodic visits to check on his/ her condition. These are centers that are exclusively for children only. For centers with male and female adolescents, there are separate cottages. A Psychosocial Case Management process is likewise followed in most recovery centers. At the Tahanan Sta. Luisa (TSL) Crisis/ Intervention Center for Adolescent and Abused Street Girls, the primary aim is to

provide street girls and sexually-abused girls with a temporary but therapeutic home atmosphere for their healing and recovery. Its case management process consists of the following steps:

- Admission
- Data-gathering/ Assessment
- Treatment Planning
- Services/ Implementation of Plans
- Monitoring/ Evaluation
- Preparation for Discharge
- Discharge
- After-care Services

The case management processes for street-based and center-based children, although essentially the same, are suited to the setting and environment of the children. Monitoring and evaluation of the children in a center are easier to conduct and observe since they are in a home, participate in non-formal education and other therapeutic activities, and under constant supervision by a caring adult. On the streets, this process is more difficult to sustain because street children are very mobile, primarily because they do not go home to families and, secondly, they are constantly threatened by the Government's "rescue" operations – a system of apprehending street children in groups. The children are placed in a government-run reception center or an NGO center, which may be up to full capacity, without any social preparation or counseling. So, many times, the children escape and are back on the streets in no time at all. Another problem with this approach is that there are still limited and very few community-based programs that are child-focused and with no provisions made for family support and livelihood programs to help the families of these children to prevent child abuse and to meet basic needs. So children work and/or live on the streets – begging, selling cigarettes, garlands, newspaper, etc. Children living on the streets are subjected to more abuse through drugs and prostitution.

## Recommendations

The Comprehensive Program Framework for Street Children prepared by Childhope and implemented in collaboration with the Government and other NGOs seeks to provide a continuum among the three (3) program approaches in response to the needs of the following categories of street children:

1. **For working children on the streets and living with their families** – community- and street-based programs; and
2. **For children who live on the streets** – street-based programs (phase I), crisis intervention centers and longer-term recovery centers (phase II).

At the end of the spectrum are the long-term solutions: a) reuniting children from the streets or centers with their families; b) placing them in licensed foster families; or c) organizing them for independent group living arrangements. However, there is still a need for follow-up monitoring, especially among children in independent group living where the child/ youth is not under regular adult supervision. Reuniting the child with his/ her family is only feasible when there is no more apparent threat of further abuse to the child by any member of his/ her family or relatives. Either the perpetrator has been locked up in jail or has left the community.

Foster family care, on the other hand, is easier to provide for babies and younger children. Adolescent children are much more difficult to place in foster care because of their “acting out” behavior and emotional reactions to deep-seated family issues. Therefore, **adolescent street girls and boys require longer-term center-based or independent group living programs to facilitate and sustain recovery.** Before deciding on which of the three (3) long-term solutions is best for the child, **there must be intensive psychosocial case management, counseling, and support to the child by the social worker, and close consultation with the biological and/ or foster families.**

## **Concluding Remarks**

1. In conclusion, the most effective approach with reference to abandoned and neglected children is to advocate for the development of child- and family-focused community-based programs on the rights of the child, parent effectiveness education, and early childcare and development programs, as well as child and adolescent health and nutrition, and youth development. Also of great urgency are programs on micro-savings and finance and other livelihood activities to increase family income. A grassroots community structure with the capacity to conduct advocacy and to monitor, protect, and promote children's rights is essential in order to develop grassroots capacity for managing the above programs and for effective networking with groups within and outside the community.

2. With reference to school-age children, adolescents, and youth (in-school and out-of-school), it is strongly recommended that opportunities are provided for their participation in planning, managing, and evaluating all the above programs. The child-to-child approach has been found most effective, particularly in developing the capacities of children and youth for advocacy, non-formal education, and even for tutorial services for basic education, such as in our Junior Health Workers Project and advocacy program where children and youth are active actors, decision-makers, and participants.

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to share as well as to learn from others in this international conference!