

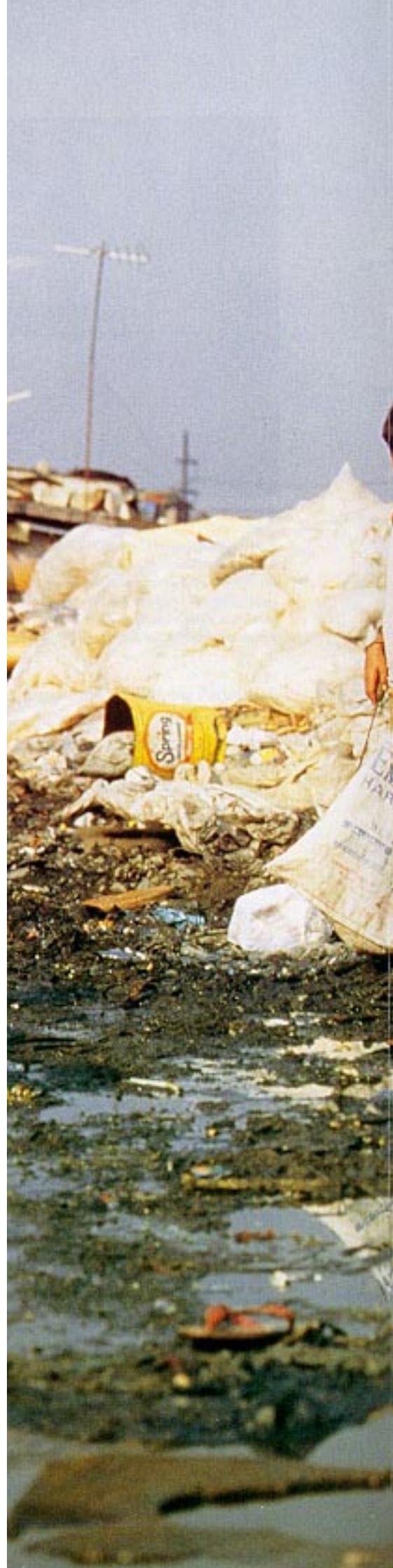
CHILDREN'S PROTECTION PROGRAMS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Margie Cook
Photos by Palani Mohan

Against the background of intense media attention on the participation of Australians in the sex industry in the Philippines, it is pleasing to report on the development of innovative programs focused specifically on redressing the damage done to exploited children. Children, among the most vulnerable and easily exploited in any community, are the target of new initiatives supported by the Australian aid program through UNICEF and the World Food Programme.

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Three major projects specifically target these “children in especially difficult circumstances”.





The \$2.4 million Towards Protecting Exploited Child Labourers and Sexually Prostituted Children Project with UNICEF and the Department of Labor and Employment in the Philippines began mid 1995 and will run over four years. It aims to strengthen the system of protecting children involved in exploitative and hazardous work situations with priority given to children victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation. The project involves the setting up of quick action protection centers and rescue teams, investigative reporting and the provision of basic and special services to abused child labourers through the operation of 24 hour centres. It is expected to benefit 3 000 child victims of trafficking and abuse as well as lay the foundations to ultimately reach an estimated 2 million child labourers in the Philippines.

Australia is contributing rice worth \$3.2 million to the Street Children Nutrition and Education Project. Implemented by the World Food Programme in partnership with the Philippines Department of Interior and Local Government, the project provides rice as an incentive to street children and their parents to better access educational and training opportunities. It also incorporates an income generation credit fund, formal and non-formal education, drop-in centres, skills training and a feeding program. About 13 000 children and 3 400 parents are expected to directly benefit from the program.

The \$650 000 Psycho Social Intervention for Street Children Project, also implemented through UNICEF is researching data and piloting an intervention program for the street children of Manila. The project addresses the need for psychosocial intervention programs for sexually abused/ exploited children, drug dependent street children, and street children in conflict with the law. Training of field workers and case managers is an important element of the program.

Child Labour in the Philippines

It's 9.00 pm and in the deserted carpark of one of Manila's largest supermarkets, school is in. Traffic roars down the adjacent freeway, screeching to a halt at the nearby intersection. Huddled round a lone torch, umbrellas at the ready - for this is the wet season - five little girls in shorts and t-shirts pore over their maths timetables, oblivious to the oddity of their school

surroundings. Sums are added and divided. Streams of questions are pelted at the volunteer teacher, a young college student, who marks last night's homework and lavishes praise on her students. When the skies open the classroom hurriedly transfers to a bus shelter, 50 metres up the street.

Among the exercise books are the girl's other work tools, garlands of the highly scented sampaguita flower.



Most nights, sometimes until 3.00 pm, these little girls are among the street vendors of Manila, scurrying in and out of the traffic lanes, tapping on car windows, urging sales of flowers, cigarettes, lollies and car wash rags on the drivers. Their workplace is the intersection just over the wall from the carpark classroom. "Rainy nights are the best," says one fragile ten year old. "People feel sorry for us and we can go home early." A typical child worker, she's also typical of those most vulnerable to the sexual predators of the streets. The carpark classroom is a project of Defence for Children

International, one of many non-government organisations working with street children and child workers in the Philippines. They are part of an extensive network whose links with UNICEF and government departments are now a powerful lobby for child protection. Almost without fail, education is a primary focus of their activities.

In the front room of the Kamalayan Development Foundation in Manila I eat rocky road icecream with Yugs, Brian, Jerry and Romeo and listen to their stories of kidnap and forced labour. All are from Mindanao, the southern-most and one of the poorest and least developed regions of the country; all started work around age 13; all were tricked by shonky employment agencies into accepting "work" in Manila and all were recently rescued by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) from the

factories into which they had been forced.

"I was promised free food, transportation to Manila and a job in a store at 1500 (A\$88) a month," says Romeo. "I wanted a job so decided to go. Twenty eight other children came with me on the boat but when we got to Manila, we all went to different places. I went to the sardine factory. When I arrived the other children asked why I had come. I tried to get away but was locked in . We had to work from 6 in the morning until midnight. At 9 pm all the regular workers left, but we had to stay on working. The food was terrible. Always noodles or the leftovers from other factory workers. I worked seven days a week. I was never paid. We had to sleep on the boxes the sardine tins went into. There were 10 of us. There was another room with 15 girls."

“We rejoiced when DOLE came and rescued us... the owner was twitching.”

The raid which rescued Romeo and his friends was carried out by the Department and Labor and Employment (DOLE) in Manila. These rescues - there have been fourteen so far this year - are a proactive and highly visible part of the Child Labor Project, which is now supported with funds from the Australian aid program. The project is implemented in the Philippines by UNICEF in partnership with DOLE and other government agencies and is an integral part of the Philippines Plan of Action for Children (PPAC). The PPAC was formulated by the Philippines Government as a follow up to the World Summit for Children and is, in part, the face of the Government's social reform agenda.

DOLE's immediate targets are the banning of children from

hazardous occupations; the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of children in difficult circumstances, and the protection and rehabilitation of exploited children. This work is by necessity and because of the poor resourcing of government instrumentalities, a joint effort by government and non government organisations. It is why, for example, the Kamalayan Development Foundation houses children removed from factories. Resources of the Child Welfare departments are unable to cope at present.

At a meeting of NGOs active in children's rights hosted by the Philippines Human Rights Commission, representatives explained that a decade ago it was socially and politically unacceptable to lobby for the protection and rights of children. Today, however, the Child Rights Centre of the Human Rights Commission is funded solely by the Philippines

Government and the NGO and government sector are working in a united way not only to intervene directly where children are being exploited, but to strengthen those departments responsible for the implementation of child protection and other legislation.

The Program for Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances which is supported by AusAID has three major components, aimed at child labourers, street children and children in armed conflict. It is estimated that in the Philippines about 100 000 thousand children die each year from preventable diseases; more than two million school age children are out of the educational system; that there are upwards of 2 million working children and that street children number about 200 000 in 57 cities. UNICEF figures put the number of sexually prostituted children at around 60 000.





While progress in social reform has been slow in the Philippines, and the problems can appear almost insurmountable, a major and positive factor about the UNICEF/DOLE programs is the honesty brought to the work by all participants. No-one pretends that problems of children in especially difficult circumstances are not massive; that poverty is not endemic; that vast health, educational and income generation needs remain unaddressed.

However, as DOLE indicates: "While it is a fact that child labour can not be abolished readily, the seriously growing incidence of child labour in the country requires immediate national attention. We do not gloss over the problem. We do not cover it up. All we ask is that rather than imposing sanctions or taking other drastic action, you help us solve the problem, not make it larger."

The linking of non-government and government sectors is one of the strongest factors in the project and, according to NGO representatives, was unheard of ten years ago. Other government

departments active in the child labor project include the Departments of Health, Education, Social Welfare, Interior and Local Government and the Philippines Information Agency. Public awareness is a high priority area in the project. Trade unions - often instrumental in bringing to DOLE's attention the child slave labour conditions in factories - and the Employers Federation of the Philippines are also involved.

The project began in three pilot areas and has since expanded to eight other regions. This regional aspect is interesting as the nature of work carried out by children is identifiable on a regional basis.

Rizal, for instance, is a garment manufacturing area just out of Manila where income generation programs for mothers have enabled their daughters to return to the educational system. The Rizal community I visited is desperately impoverished. Very modest homes are built over water in a hostile and unhealthy environment where for years, women and children had completed piece work on a contract basis for nearby factories. With training in business skills, women are now better able to negotiate work, incomes have been enhanced and children have returned to education. Children can still be seen, heads bent over the smocking of a nightie, but this work is done after school and on weekends. It is not an end in itself.

At the local barangay (community) level, the child labor project is reliant on the support of local barangay captains and parents for effective implementation. In Pasay City, a region of greater Manila, I visited a community of 650 families where about 30 child labourers had been identified. Some of them had worked in the local slaughterhouse, skinning

carcasses from three or four in the morning. Others worked as sweepers in the bus station. Eleven year old Roman, one of nine children supported by father who is an ice cream vendor is now back in school, thanks to the program. He started work at age ten earning 30 pesos (A\$1.50) for sweeping at the bus station from 6 - 10 am. His friend Elvis, whose father is an upholstery maker supporting five children, also earned 30 pesos, spending 10 on bread for himself and giving the balance to his parents. Twenty six of these children have now returned to the school system, sponsored by the Department of Social Welfare.

Other work environments include dumpsites, rock quarries, markets and even the 'pyrotechnics' industry.

In Cebu I came across a small village where children commonly work on weekends - and school days in some instances - putting wicks in to endless hundreds of crackers known as 'Judas belts'. Their mothers have now been incorporated into an income generation program with the hope that the enhanced family income will provide an escape from work for the children. In the markets in town, children work as vendors, they cart trolleys of vegetables and perform other hard labour tasks.

Dumpsites are probably the most depressing of all work places. Smoky Mountain, still operating despite official claims to the contrary, is the most famous of all but is now riven by excessive publicity. Dumpsites can be found all over but one I visited, now supported by the Children's Laboratory for Drama in Education Foundation, is a beacon of hope for the children who work its filthy hills and on the more than

300 dumptrucks that each day skid their way down the muddy road that passes the school. The Foundation's school, registered with the Department of Education, runs two shifts each day for 230 children from kindergarten to about age 20. The shift not at school toils away on the dumpsite, separating glass from tin, plastic from paper. At school, real life is used as lesson material: "If there are three dumptrucks, one is carrying 8 tonnes, one 13 tonnes and one 9 tonnes, how many tonnes of garbage in all?"

The economic ravages of the Marcos era inherited first by Aquino and still borne by the Ramos Administration, mean that Filipinos have not yet regained the incomes they earned in 1982. It means that vast numbers of Filipinos remain condemned to sub-standard housing, with poor access to health services and education, but most tragically, it means children are still used as factory fodder and as cheap labour, with the most vulnerable easily exploited for sex. While economic reform powers ahead in the Philippines, social reform is slower and still under-resourced.

The UNICEF/Australian aid supported child labour project demonstrates however that while social reform has along way to go, direct intervention programs, training, institution strengthening and continued co-operation between the government and non-government sectors is making significant inroads into the problem. The numbers of children and families already assisted and yet to be reached by the program is testament to the effectiveness of the methodology and the energy and commitment of staff to ensuring the lives of children subject to exploitation changes for good in the shortest possible time.



The WFP Street Children Nutrition Project

A young man dozes sleepily on a shady tombstone above which his wooden house teeters on stilts. His home is part of a graveyard community in Cebu city in the Central Visayas region of the Philippines. Walking a little further

the homes open on to the cemetery where chickens strut around pecking at the ground, goats bleat, mothers chat, and children lined up on benches under a tree sing enthusiastically, directed by their teachers. This is the school of the graves, the cemetery home to about 65 dislocated and poor families unable to afford better. Here, with funds from the Australian aid program, the World Food Programme is working with

local government officials to induce the children of this and other impoverished communities to get back into the school system, to learn about nutrition and become involved in income generation schemes. The singing over, children break into groups for more formal lessons. Larger tombstones become improvised desks, a concrete crucified Jesus weeping concrete tears at the head of the table.

Sixty six of the children in this community receive rice supplements and Australian funds also provide basic classroom equipment including crayons and paper. "The rice is tremendously important," explains one mother. "What we save on rice we can spend on other food like vegetables and fish."

This community has no direct water supplies, there are no toilets. Diarrhoea, worms, fevers and coughing are common.

A few kilometres away, another tiny school operates among the stalls of the local market. The atmosphere is unsettled, almost threatening. Outside the schoolroom, older boys, high as kites, loll on the benches. Opposite, an old woman apparently belonging to no-one, rests on a market bench. Right next door to the schoolyard a woman released from jail only days before - she was a drug trafficker - stares at the coffin of her 18 year old son. A crude handpainted sign written on a piece of old cardboard reads "He died because of his vices". School is not on today as it would be bad luck for the pregnant teacher to be in the vicinity of a corpse. Still, the students hover. Some are homeless. Some are abandoned. The parents of others are either overseas contract workers or are in jail. The children come because here, they get fed as well as

Aid to the Philippines

Australian aid to the Philippines has grown rapidly since 1986 following the return to democratic government in that country. The Philippines is now the fourth largest recipient of Australian aid after PNG, Indonesia and China with total aid flows in 1995 - 96 expected to be in the order of \$76.2 million. More than 260 projects are supported by AusAID.

The overall goal of Australia's development assistance program is to assist the Philippines own efforts to alleviate poverty by raising living standards; developing economic and social infrastructure, and improving the skills base of its people.

The program also aims to make a practical contribution to Philippines development in areas of mutual interest where Australia offers a high degree of relevant expertise.

Programs range from small community based initiatives to

major projects with international organisations. Six main sectors are covered: education, health, natural resource management, community infrastructure, agriculture and mining and energy. The child labour and street children's projects outlined here are examples of some of the newer, community-based programs which address contemporary social issues. At the other end of the spectrum, during the recent visit to Australia by President Fidel Ramos, agreements were signed for a new \$30 million project to expand and rehabilitate Manila's traffic control system.

Australian aid is funded through a range of channels including non-government organisations both here and in the Philippines, through the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), the Development Import Finance Facility (DIFF) and through the bilateral program.

educated. "I am happy about school," says a tiny girl. "At school we get rice." In a massive understatement, one of the task force members explains that here, "we target out-of-school children."

The graveyard and market schoolteachers come from a coalition of 20 NGOs in Cebu City which inputs funds and personnel into this *Street Children Nutrition and Education* project. Estimated numbers of street children here are between 5 000 to 6 000, 10 per cent of whom are sexually abused in incestuous relationships.

This Street Children Nutrition and Education Project began a year ago and now operates in eight major cities including Cebu, Manila, Davao, Angeles and Olongapo. The rice supplements relieves short-term hunger and help the children to perform better in school. In addition, the rice is an incentive to parents to join in counselling, nutrition, health and sanitation classes as well as skills training.