

Combating Exploitative Child Labor: *A Social Work Experience*

Alejandro W. Apit

The Child Labor Issue

Child labor was already a serious problem in South Asia. During the 80's, a series of child labor issues were exposed in the *Child Workers in Asia* publication.

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, the child labor problem was yet a topic of debates. Only a few insisted that it was a problem caused by poverty and irresponsible parents. They insisted that it was something helpful to the children themselves as well as to their parents and families. Through labor, children earned some money, contributed to their families' income and supported their studies to become successful professionals or businessmen/women.

Thus, a lesson taught by successful child-workers-turned-professionals and businessmen/women was that the children of poverty should work hard and support their studies until they finish their schooling and be able to save their families from poverty and consequently build their own poverty-free families. Child labor was perceived as a means to education, a better-paying job, and a better future characterized by the uplift of the family of origin from abject poverty.

It seemed then that the gravity of the problem was determined by the exposure of the worst forms of child labor, and, where such worst forms were undiscovered and unexposed, the tendency was to regard it as not a serious problem and one that deserved less or no attention. Even the labor officials, inspectors and many others think that child labor does not exist in Philippine factories.

But there were already those who considered the need to dig deeper into the core of reality. These are the child rights advocates among the UP faculty members who, with UNICEF support, conducted researches on child labor in Benguet, Bulacan, Eastern Rizal, and Eastern Visayas. However, while their studies yielded some significant findings, these had obviously failed to reach the minds of the Philippine public.

Community Organizing and Action Research

In 1991, a professional social worker was invited by the UNICEF Child Labor Office to conduct a research on child labor in Philippine factories. The basis for such invitation consisted of his experience in organizing work among the factory workers in Metro Manila. The office also took him as a consultant on child labor.

The professional social worker organized a core group of two (2) women workers and one (1) urban poor woman who were then in their early twenties to conduct an action research on working children in certain Metro Manila factories. The four held a series of meetings on the research project and, in January 1992, they organized a workers' NGO called Kamalayan Development Center (KDC). It has the following VMG:

- 1) the vision: a society freed from the exploitation of humans by humans;
- 2) the mission: to serve as an instrument of the poor, deprived and oppressed people including, among others, the workers, urban poor, peasants, indigenous peoples, women, youth and children, for the development of their consciousness, organization and capacity for transformation; and
- 3) the goals: the development of social consciousness among the people including the children; the development of strong and durable people's (including children's) organizations; and the achievement among the people (including children) of capability for internal and external transformation and their conduct of actions for such purposes.

The main approach used by KDC was community organizing (CO). The other methods included working with individuals, working with groups, research and documentation, and social work administration. KDC's approach therefore, was generalist and integrative social work.

Exploring Child Labor in Urban Poor Communities

KDC worked on the hypotheses that 1) there were working children in certain factories in Las Piñas and in other parts of Metro Manila; and 2) these children were sons and daughters of urban poor parents residing in slum communities. These hypotheses were grounded on the prevalent view that poverty is the root cause of child labor.

The site of the research project was one of the most populous slums in Metro Manila, the Civil Aeronautic Aviation (CAA) compound in Las Piñas. After six months of organizing-research work, the KDC organizers did not find any child factory worker residing in the vast slum community. There were young people who worked in certain factories but they were already 18 years old and above. There were child workers but they were not working in any factory. Instead, they were driving pedicabs and vending cigarettes and other goods in the sidewalks.

Indeed, in the CAA community or, perhaps, in other parts of Las Piñas, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) officials were proven to be correct.

KDC did not stop at CAA or Las Piñas. They expanded the coverage of their search to include certain urban poor communities in Pasay, Manila, Navotas, and Malabon. They established links with an independent workers' federation in Pasay, organized the vendors at the CCP Complex in a Pasay-Manila border, established contacts with certain urban poor leaders in Parola, Tondo, Manila, and formed youth associations in Navotas and Malabon.

The absence of child labor in Las Piñas pushed them to continue their search for factory child workers. They were then entertaining the probability that, if they ever existed, factory child workers would not be children of the urban poor but migrants from outside Metro Manila.

The Worst Form of Child Labor

After one year and six months since they began the research, they chanced upon a lead. Their youth organizing work in Malabon brought them face to face with three adolescents aged 16 to 17 who worked in a Young's Town sardines factory in Navotas.

These adolescent child workers lived in Malabon but they worked in Navotas. Everyday, they woke up early in the morning, prepared their food, left their homes for the factory, and, at 7:00 a.m., began their ten-hour daily work in that sardines factory. They were subjected to a 10-hour working day and received a very low wage of Php22 a day which were both blatant violations of the Labor Code.

These child workers shared their complaints without hesitation. They started to orient the KDF workers on their particular situation. They related about some younger workers who were not allowed to be exposed to the people outside the factory premises. The situation of these stay-in child workers was worse than those who were allowed to go home and the worst in the factory. These most unfortunate child workers were deliberately separated physically from the rest of the work force so that they would not be able to ask help from the other workers or from other people, including the authorities.

In a certain division of the factory, the younger stay-in child workers worked standing up throughout the day, fronting the table, using their bare hands, putting the sliced parts of the fishes on small tin cans, doing their work as fast as they can as commanded by their supervisor; and, oftentimes wounding their fingers as they worked their way with the sharp edges of every can. Wounding their fingers meant pain and bleeding with their blood dropping down to join the sauce and add some dark redness to it. Indeed, child labor existed in the Young's Town sardine factory.

This concrete reality disproved the DOLE propaganda that child labor did not exist in Philippine factories. It threw a big mound of mud hitting bull's eye the faces of the labor inspectors.

Children Recruits from the Provinces

By exchanging information with the three stay-out child workers, KDC confirmed the existence of child labor in the Young's Town sardines factory. And so, to see the real situation, they decided to send three KDC members to apply for work in the sardine factory.

Gladly for the Young's Town management, three experienced women workers joined its work force without any expectation except to work diligently, earn and feed themselves to survive in this urban world away from their provincial homes. But in reality, they were there to learn more about the situation of the child workers, prepare for their deliverance and expose their deplorable situation.

They saw that the child workers were all girls like them. Through informal and secret private exchanges, they learned a lot about them. They sincerely befriended them, earned their trust, and became close to them.

These stay-in child workers were daughters of urban poor families, plantation workers, semi-proletarians, poor peasants, poor fisherfolk, and indigenous people. They came from the provinces in Luzon, but the main bulk were from Visayas and Mindanao. Accompanied by their recruiters, they reached Metro Manila by bus, private vans, or inter-island passenger ships. They were among the batches of 5 to 50 recruits from the provinces brought to the employment agencies in Metro Manila, then to the different workplaces in Metro Manila and Luzon. They fell victims to the lies and deception peddled by recruiters connected with such agencies.

Dehumanization for the Purpose of Survival

The children were made to work in the agencies without any pay for one or more days until they are hired. Employers flocked to the agencies and chose their child workers according to their needs. Relatively good-looking girls were the first to be chosen by employers of prostitution, while relatively muscular boys were the first choices of factory owners.

In their respective workplaces, the children learned from the owners or personnel managers that they had to pay back the amount spent for their travel, food and accommodation in the course of their transfer from their provinces to the workplace in Metro Manila or in a nearby province. They also had to shoulder the service fees for the recruiter, the agency and the one who brought them to the factory. And so, their wages for the first three or more months went to paying their debts.

Indeed, working for three or more months without pay just so they could finish off their debts was bonded labor. And to aggravate their dehumanizing condition, they worked for 12, 16, 18 or even 20 hours per day with a monthly wage of Php700 to Php1,000 effective on the month following the complete liquidation of the debt. Moreover, they were given subhuman food and accommodations within the workplace compound, and the various prohibitions. These prohibitions included those imposed upon their movement, communication, assembly and joining a union.

Thus began the tragedy and the ordeal, the expressed frustration and regrets and the concomitant desire for freedom from such gross inhumanity. But there was no immediate way out. They were left with no choice but to adjust and quickly adapt to their dehumanizing condition for their immediate physical and psychological survival.

Due to such situation, there were several instances in the past when some daring boys attempted to escape. Some successfully did and found shelter in poor peasant or urban poor families in adjacent communities while others were caught in the act of escaping and were severely punished.

Extent of Factory Child Labor

The eight (8) children exposed the presence of child labor in the country. For the first time, the July 19, 1993 rescue operation and press conference made possible by the joint efforts of KDC, DOLE and National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) brought child labor to the front pages and editorials of the nation's newspapers and tabloids for a few weeks following the event. These were accompanied by the appearances of the rescued children in television talk shows also guested by representatives of UNICEF, DOLE and KDC and on-the-air interviews with them by radio program hosts.

Nonetheless, KDC did not stop its operations. Their workers developed their detection tactics as they spread to other parts of Metro Manila, Rizal and Bulacan. This led to the discovery of more child exploitation in the Robina Cooking Oil factory in Cainta, Rizal and Gold Tap Corporation in Kalookan City and subsequent rescue operations and exposés of factory child labor during the same year. Such events gave some child workers of the Ocean World Cooking Oil in San Juan, Rizal the courage to slip out of their workplace and convince the police to join them for the rescue of several other child workers in December 1993.

In May 1994, the recognition of the gravity of the problem by the leading government organizations (DOLE, several other cabinet departments, NBI, PNP, and others) and non-government organizations (KDC and the National Council on Social Development) led to the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that established the Sagip Batang Manggagawa Quick Action Programme (SBMQAP). The programme began the institutionalization of the search, arrest and rescue operation as a quick action response to the problem of children trapped in various forms of hazardous occupations, extreme exploitation, oppressive treatment and/or virtual incarceration in various workplaces. They also underlined the necessity of post-rescue services such as the rehabilitation of rescued children, reintegration with their families and communities, filing legal actions against the owners of those workplaces, follow-up of the situation of the rescued children in their homes and communities, and other services.

Since 1994 up to the present, the rescue of children from those factories and sweatshops where they are extremely exploited and oppressed has been going on through the initiatives of DOLE, KDC, police agencies and media organizations including such TV programs as the ABS-CBN's *TV Patrol*, GMA's *Imbestigador* and RPN's *Isumbong Mo Kay Tulfo*.

Bonded Child Labor

The form of child labor that began to appear in 1993 had the following features:

- 1) Children working in environment that is often hazardous to their safety, health and growth;

- 2) Working long hours from 12 to even 20 hours daily with only two (2) or three (3) brief periods of rest;
- 3) Working under pressure under the command of heartless supervisors, managers or owners;
- 4) Receiving nothing during the first 3 to 6 months of work to pay their debts to the owner of their workplace;
- 5) Receiving very low wages equivalent to 25% to 35% only of the minimum wage pegged by the government at that time;
- 6) Staying-in and being separated from those not-so-unfortunate workers who went home to their families every day;
- 7) Deprived of the freedom of movement, communication, and interaction with other people during non-working hours;
- 8) Deprived of their rights (to redress of grievances, free expression, self-organization, participation in legitimate unions, collective bargaining, etc.) and benefits (overtime pay, 13th month pay, SSS, medicare, sick leave, vacation leave, etc.) provided by the law for factory workers;
- 9) Locked in poorly equipped, unventilated, unsanitary, and congested quarters most hazardous to their lives in the event of a fire;
- 10) Fed with meals of past hardened rice coupled with dried fish or noodles kept in cabinets with cockroaches;
- 11) Warned by the blue guards against any violation of the factory rules and against any attempt to escape from the factory; and
- 12) Subjected to painful verbal and/or physical punishment by the blue guard or their supervisor or any member of the management in the event of committing even a small mistake related or not related to their work.

According to the UNICEF and International Labor Organization (ILO) experts from USA and Geneva who visited KDC and Navotas and heard the testimonies of the KDC workers and the three stay-out child workers then employed at the Young's Town sardines factory, this was "bonded child labor, a phenomenon similar to those in operation in the carpet and other manufacturing firms in South Asia," and "a modern form of slavery." And, for the sake of the children, "the most immediate need is to rescue the child slaves!"

From the Factory to Livestock, Prostitution and Domestic Work

In line with the SBMQAP, KDC together with DOLE, Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Commission on Human Rights (CHR), NBI, PNP, mass media, and other organizations launched more rescue operations to free more children from the bondage of child labor. The most significant rescue event was the one that freed 10 children from the Central Bleach Manufacturing Corporation in Marilao, Bulacan in 1995. These children suffered itches in certain parts of their hands and feet, blurred eyesight, and chest pains. Their daily contact with and exposure to chlorine, asbestos fiber, and other dangerous chemicals was manifested in their small, thin, pale and sickly bodies.

Refusing a considerable monetary offer from the factory owners, the children and KDC filed a case against them for violating Republic Act (RA) 7610 or the Special Protection against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act of 1992 in the Regional Trial Court (RTC) in Malolos, Bulacan. Another against case for violation of RA 7658 or the Child Labor Deterrence Act of 1995 was filed in the Municipal Trial Court (MTC) in Marilao.

When the cases filed were no longer progressing, KDC appealed for political support from the Swedish Trade Union Federation and other foreign allies that participated in the 1997 International Child Labor Conference in Norway. This advocacy resulted in letters and telegrams that reached then Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos, the Secretary of Justice, the Supreme Court Chief Justice, and the Malolos RTC Judge along with the subsequent revival and expedition of the trials. Thus, after seven years, the RTC found the factory owner guilty as charged, but the MTC dismissed the case.

For the first time, KDC, its children and DOJ, its persevering ally, experienced a taste of victory in the court fight against factory child labor.

However, such victory was a needle prick upon the guilty party because the penalty consisted only of what the RA 7610 provides as "a fine of not less than Php1,000 but not more than Php10,000 or imprisonment of not less than 3 months but not more than 3 years or both at the discretion of the court." As the crime committed was bailable, the whole process ended with the factory owner paying the fine and bail money to the government. Such victory was not only pyrrhic; it could even be regarded as not worth the struggle.

Also in 1994, KDC extended its rescue work to the child victims of prostitution. Together with the DSWD, NBI, ABS-CBN and GMA-Channel 7, it raided the Sky Blue, Blue Star and Liberty beer joints and retrieved 46 young women including 13 children from prostitution in Kalookan City. In the same year, they started a series of rescue operations for child domestic workers from oppressive employers in San Jose del Monte (Bulacan), Manila, Quezon City, and Mandaluyong. Thereafter, they conducted more rescue operations that freed children from several livestock farms in San Jose del Monte, Marilao, Santa Maria, Pandi and Baliwag in Bulacan province. From 1995 to 1998, the detection and surveillance strategy of the KDC known as Exodus from Child Labor to Integration, Play, Socialization and Education (ECLIPSE) led to the arrest and imprisonment of at least three (3) notorious recruiters of children in Ormoc City and the freedom of several child trafficking victims.

In 1995, KDC started focusing on prevention particularly of children from falling into the worst forms of child labor in Metro Manila and Luzon. Thus, it organized its first two units in Leyte and Southern Mindanao with the immediate mission of preventing and eliminating child trafficking. A significant result of this mission was the discovery of child laborers in commercial agriculture: sugarcane plantations in Leyte, Negros, Davao del Sur and Sarangani, rubber plantations in Davao del Sur and North Cotabato and pineapple, mango and other fruit plantations in Ormoc City, Davao City and Davao del Sur.

Child workers in the sugarcane plantations were short, thin and thickly clad, who worked under the heat of the sun for several hours everyday and used a particular type of bolo called "machete" or "espading" which was quite heavy for smaller children. They planted cane parts, applied fertilizer powder, cleaned the surroundings of every plant, cut the canes, tied them into bundles or put them in big baskets, carried the heavy loads upon their shoulders or

their heads, and loaded these into the truck. They also had to guard themselves against unexpected centipedes and snakes, the sharp edge of the cane leaves and their heavy bolo.

In other commercial agricultural plantations like rubber, mango, durian, asparagus, etc., the child workers were exposed to the chemical hazards of the pesticides used in cultivating the trees and producing the raw products. These hazards were greatly damaging their health and lives.

The child workers wanted to study but their families were very poor and cannot support them. Thus, they had no other way but to work to earn and help their parents. Later, they became aware and realized that child labor is not a means to alleviating poverty, instead education is a better option.

With the assistance of KDC, which was renamed Kamalayan Development Foundation, Inc. (KDF) in late 1996, sugarcane child workers in Leyte were organized. From 1996 up to the present, not less than 50 child workers associations, three coordinating councils in the municipal level and one coordinating council in the semi-provincial level were established. They encouraged the youth, women and parents to also organize themselves in support of the children's struggle and as response to their respective sectoral needs and interests.

Under KDF continuous guidance, such organizations had been in the forefront of advocacy campaigns and mobilizations. These mass actions were geared towards the heightening of the government and people's awareness and responsibility, the development of pro-people and pro-child ordinances, policies and programs, the advancement of education for the working children and for all children, and the reduction and eventual eradication of child exploitation in the plantations and other related workplaces in the countryside.

The year 1998 started with the Global March against Child Labor and the Philippine participation in such global action ushered in the **period of advocacy and legislation** (1998-2004) in the Philippines. The Global March was a great advocacy campaign and it led to the International Labor Conference (ILC) in Geneva in 1998-1999 and the promulgation and ratification of the ILO's Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (Convention 182) in 1999. After a series of advocacy campaigns and mobilizations, the Philip-

pine Senate ratified the ILO Convention 182 and the Philippine Congress passed laws on child labor and trafficking of persons during the first four years of the 21st century.

During this period, KDF organized and expanded the child workers associations in Leyte, Negros Occidental and Southern Mindanao and mounted quite a big participation in the Global March. It also launched mass mobilizations to fight child exploitation and advocate for education and legislations to eradicate the worst forms of child labor. Its sectoral and multisectoral organizations and mobilizations had their own contributions to the successful campaigns for the ratification of the ILO Convention 182 and the promulgation of the new child labor law.

In 1998, KDF, through its various children organizations, POs and partner NGOs, was able to mobilize 2,500 participants in Metro Manila, 3,500 in Leyte, 100 in Negros Occidental, 1000 in Capiz and 500 in Sarangani to stage marches and rallies in their respective areas as a form of participation in the Global March. In all such actions, they raised the issue of the worst forms of child labor and its immediate eradication as well as the demand for the education of all children.

Also in 1998, KDF merged with ECLIPSE in Leyte but still pursued KDF's VMG. With the support of ILO-IPEC and Terre Des Homme Netherlands, ECLIPSE expanded its various organizations and mounted bigger mobilizations. Since 1999 up to the present, it has annually mobilized 2,000 to 5,000 children, youth, and adults to celebrate the Labor Day and the Universal Children's Day and highlight the children's demands for the realization of their rights, education, development and participation. It has also given educational and related assistance to not less than 700 child workers who chose to go back to school in Leyte and Southern Mindanao. In Leyte, they have organized a micro-finance project that has put together the small monies of the poor sugarcane workers and has helped several poor families through low-interest lending in times of emergency.

At present, the GOs and NGOs are preparing for the next period of the time-bound projects. These are projects that are consciously addressed to bring about the systematic eradication of the worst forms of child labor within definite time periods and the reintegration of the working children in elementary and high schools. Led by DOLE and supported by the US De-

partment of Labor, they organized the ILOC 182 National Implementation Team (NIT) to make possible the implementation of such projects. Identified by the NIT, the six priority worst forms of child labor in the country included those in prostitution (and pornography), deep sea fishing, mining and quarrying, pyrotechnics, domestics, and agricultural plantations (sugarcane and others).

At the same time, KDC continued to undertake rescue operations. It was responsible for the series of rescue operations of children from factories and pig farms in Pandi and Marilao, Bulacan and from a prostitution den in Laoag City during the first three years of the 21st century. Last August 2004, together with the DOLE, DSWD, NBI and three UP social work students, the latest operation rescued six (6) children from a garment manufacturer called Conico Enterprises in La Loma, Quezon City.

Post-Rescue Modes of Intervention

After each successful rescue operation, the following processes are almost simultaneously done: 1) the NBI-sponsored press conference; 2) filing of the cases against the factory owner(s) by the victims; 3) the DOLE-mediated settlement of the victims' wage claims, and 4) the temporary custody of the rescued children at the DSWD centers.

During the press conference, the NBI presented the violation committed by the factory or workplace owner, the action taken as immediate response to such violation, and the children rescued by such action. Exchanges between the media people on the one hand and the children and the KDF workers on the other hand, took place at the last part of the conference which unfolded the details of the case and clarified questions. The most important result of the operation consisted of the media exposés on the issue of child labor on newspapers' and tabloids' headline, editorial, column and news articles, on-the-air discussions, and TV public affairs programs.

The series of media exposés gradually raised the child labor problem to the level of government and NGO concern and priority. Thus, whenever the NBI failed to conduct a press conference, KDF held its own with the various media groups. Hence, there are now more people who are concerned with these exploited children.

During and after the rescue operation, the KDF workers were in close contact with the rescued child workers and helped them build their awareness of their rights. At the NBI, the children individually composed their sworn statements, and went out to collectively file cases against the violators at the fiscal's office or at the office of the DOJ's task force on children.

However, the cases these children filed ushered in another process of struggle for months or even years. More often they found themselves not only exhausted, but more unfortunately, frustrated at the end of every series of fiscal or court hearings. Indeed, almost all the cases had been dismissed, and such negative experiences discouraged them from filing cases in court. The "victorious" Manilao experience underlined a negative lesson: the longer the judicial process, the more dislocation on the lives of the affected children. Any court triumph was not enough to compensate for all such dislocation. Worse, the bleach factory has never stopped its operation and has long liquidated the penalty imposed by the RTC for its proven crime against the children. Hence, KDF is, at the moment, no longer encouraging this struggle.

There is certainly the need to make the Philippine justice system more child-friendly and impartial in its decisions. Although there have been some developments in the judiciary such as the establishment of family courts to handle children's cases and the numerous trainings and seminars conducted to orient the judges and the prosecutors on the correct way of dealing with children. However, more qualitative judicial transformation is needed for the best interest of the child.

In the face of all these, the KDF workers continued to orient the child workers on labor laws, minimum wage, overtime work and helped them come up with their calculations of what each one deserves to receive in accordance with the labor laws. However, in a situation where they longed to go home as soon as possible, they were faced with no other option except to give in to the DOLE's and owner's proposal and receive monetary compensation quite below what the law considered fair for them. And so, they went home with only very little in their pockets with which to help their poor families.

While all the above mentioned processes were taking place, the KDF and the DSWD workers facilitated the orderly transfer of the fourteen (14) year-old children and below to the Nayan ng Kabataan and the older ones, fifteen (15) years old and above, to the Fabella Rehabilitation Center both in Mandaluyong City. There, the DSWD provided them a tempo-

rary shelter with daily meals while preparing for their safe return to their families in the provinces.

There were some rescued child workers who remained with KDF and stayed with the agency workers in their staff house. These children did not go through institutionalization and rehabilitation. Instead, the KDF workers facilitated their reintegration with the children and youth in the poor communities in Malabon, Kalookan City, Quezon City and Antipolo City. In November 1993, the firsts of these children organized the *Koalisyon ng mga Grupong Kabataan para sa mga Karapatan ng Bata* (Coalition of Youth Groups for the Rights of the Child). They assisted the KDF workers in their organizing work, detection, surveillance, and conduct of the SBMQAP rescue operations in Metro Manila and adjacent provinces. Later, five of them became staff members of KDF in Quezon City, Leyte and Southern Mindanao.

The Role of the Social in the Campaign Against Child Labor

Together with the factory workers and rescued child workers a professional social worker organized the KDC in 1992 and has continued to lead the agency up to the present. To the social worker, the working children are not only his clientele, they are his friends, brothers and sisters, and partners in the fight against exploitative child labor and in the promotion of children's rights, people's development and social transformation.

The social worker's motivation is always to serve the people and their children especially those in need of special protection. Such motivation has been enriched by the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the basic social work values, principles and responsibilities in dealing with every individual, family, community and the broader society. These social work values include genuine service to the people, inherent worth and dignity of the human person, social change and social justice, total human development, human relationship, integrity, and competence.

Driven by the social worker's personal commitment and the values and principles of the profession, he creatively applies the social work theory in concrete practice, particularly in combating exploitative child labor and promoting the rights of the working children. At all times, he is mindful of and true to his ethical responsibilities. He makes sure that his practice emphasizes and promotes the laudable standards of the social work profession.

An Initial Problem: Child Welfare in Response to Child Labor?

The social worker had a problem at the start. The particular field of combating exploitative, clandestine and bonded child labor was a new setting. It has expanded to include many other forms of child labor including those in prostitution, livestock farms, domestics and commercial agricultural plantations. It also includes the trafficking of children from the countryside to the cities.

Nothing has been said about the role of social workers in such most unacceptable situation. There have been roles of social workers in child welfare, youth welfare and development, drug rehabilitation, family welfare, urban housing and development, industry and trade unions, agrarian reform and rural development, policy advocacy and development, etc. but not in the setting of combating exploitative child labor.

So, can child welfare effectively respond to child labor? Working in child welfare and working in response to child labor are related in certain ways as both deal with children and have the same aim: the well-being, development and future of the children. But while general principles do not change, approaches and interventions vary due to the marked differences in the settings. Child welfare, as it has been, is different from the needed programs, services and interventions to resolve the child labor problem, perhaps, in the same way that DSWD is different from DOLE.

In fact, through the centuries, child welfare has dealt mainly with children having physical, mental and/or social deficiencies like malnourished children, differently-abled children, mentally retarded children, emotionally disturbed children, neglected or abandoned children, orphaned children, delinquent children, etc. At present, it consists of policies, programs, services, approaches and interventions meant to deliver them from those deficiencies or minimize such deficiencies and help them adjust themselves to their environment or improve their social functioning. Already deficient as they are, such children are emphatically dealt with as deficient and thus treated as mere recipients of services usually in institutional settings. Often, these children are regarded as special groups in need of special treatment and services for which they should be thankful for, especially to their donors. Indeed, child welfare at present needs to be assessed and subsequently retooled in the light of the development of the current approach to children highlighting children's rights and participation.

Exploitative Child Labor

The immediate or presenting problems of deficient children are their individual deficiencies. During the intake process, as the child narrates her/his story, the social worker diagnoses her/him and formulates a treatment plan. The plan includes treating the child either in her/his own family or in an institution, providing her/him the service that responds to her/his specific problem, and implementing an appropriate approach to improve her/his social functioning. If the social worker finds that her agency's programs and services cannot adequately respond to the child's problems, the case will be referred to another agency.

Guided by the child welfare paradigm, the social worker limits herself to the small world of the child that consists of her/his problem, history, family, and, perhaps, certain factors in the immediate environment that affect her/him. And so, efforts to do casework and/or group work are deemed sufficient. However, in some cases the social worker fails to relate the child's problem to the broader realities as in a child labor case involving more than one child. In this case, the social worker should refer the children to another agency and not insist her child welfare approach.

Although the working children are not vocal about their internal problems and have their own share of deficiencies, they have an innate strength to live and withstand their cruel environment. Many sugarcane child workers are malnourished; those in the streets are victims of parental neglect or abuse; some are abandoned or orphaned; others are maladjusted. But they are not mainly troubled by their situation. They are concerned with immediate problems such as the dangers in the streets, the heat of the sun, the lack of freedom of movement within the factory premises, the physical punishment by the father, etc. These problems reflect not their deficiencies but those of other individuals, groups, organizations, and structures in the society. Amid the inhumanities of adults, elites and structures, working children possess the driving force to live.

The operation of basic exploitative societal structure begets, maintains, perpetuates and reinforces the poverty of working children and their families on the one hand and the amassing of wealth and power of the workplace owners and their colleagues in the industry, in agriculture and in the government on the other.

No doubt, in such situation, the child welfare approach does not fit. Going back to 1993, faced with the problem in a new setting and the lack of approach, the social worker and his co-workers in KDC asked, listened, read, learned, and creatively applied the social work theory and their learnings to the actual situation of the child workers. They even asked the then visiting UNICEF and ILO officials and experts what ought to be done. They read the issues of the *Child Workers in Asia* magazine where they learned about the Bonded Labor Liberation Front (BLLF) and the South Asian Coalition Against Child Servitude (SACCS) and how they rescued child slaves in Pakistan and India. The documents of the UN including the CRC, the World Declaration for the Survival, Protection, Development and Participation of Children were additional sources of information. They also consulted the working children on what they can do to help them.

Since then, KDC has made possible a lot of relationships, interventions and responses which have contributed to the nationwide exposé of the problem, the development of government and civil society's awareness and responsibility, the organization of the children and other sectors, and the mobilization of the children and people for broader actions meant for the eradication of the worst forms of child labor and the realization of children's rights.

Social Work Versus Exploitative Child Labor

Based on the 12-year KDF experience in combating exploitative child labor, below are the main approaches and strategies in handling child labor cases:

- 1) Commitment to Human Development, Human Rights and Child's Rights

Undoubtedly, commitment to human development is not particular to the social work profession. All other professions aim for human development. Perhaps, the most important element that differentiates the social work profession from all other professions is its proximity to the poor, deprived, oppressed and marginalized people. Therefore, the social work professionals have a bridge through which they can cross and establish genuine unity with the poor and foster a truly humanizing profession.

The social workers in this setting are human rights and child's rights workers. They work for the restoration, achievement, enhancement, promotion and full enjoyment of such rights among the children — individually, as groups or organizations, and as a sector in the society. Thus, they equip themselves with an adequate understanding, if not a mastery, of all such rights through self-study, group study, staff development, attendance and participation in seminars and trainings, and applying the knowledge they have acquired in the work to enhance and promote the children's rights.

2) **Broadening of Knowledge Concerning Children, Child Labor, and Children's Laws**

Effective response to the problem of exploitative child labor demands broadening and deepening of knowledge concerning children, child labor and children's laws. Equipped with the basic knowledge provided by social work education, the social workers further enrich themselves with knowledge concerning child labor, its causes and effects and the various responses of the government, NGOs, trade unions, employers' associations, etc. They learn from the Philippine experience as well as from the experiences of other countries. They value the best practices of the children's associations and related organizations in Asia, Africa, Latin America, etc. They also orient themselves to the national and local policies, programs, services and approaches.

Merged among the working children, social workers distinguish between those engaged in acceptable and favorable forms of child labor, those in the less acceptable ones, those in the unfavorable and unacceptable ones, and those in the worst forms. They orient themselves to the eradication of the worst forms of child labor and to the immediate emancipation of the child workers.

Social workers thus expand their minds beyond the traditional categories of deficient children (sick, needy, malnourished, out-of-school, neglected, abandoned, orphaned, etc.)

to include the less deficient and stronger ones such as the street children, working children, prostituted children, trafficked children, children in war, children in conflict with the law, etc. By so doing, they are able to see the more real and important characteristics of strength, capabilities and potentials in every child including the so-called deficient ones. They strive so that all children are provided with all the needed opportunities for education, development, participation and a better future.

3) Redefinition of Views on and Attitude Towards Children

With a deepened commitment to and a broadened and deepened knowledge, the social workers redefine their views on and attitude towards the working children. They rid themselves off the deficiency and dependency paradigms as these underestimate and disenfranchise children.

Undoubtedly, children have potentials for independence and development and even potentials for contribution to the development of other individuals and the society. In dealing with such children, it is the task of the social worker to help them discover their potentials, cultivate and express these for their total development. This means accompanying them towards the fullness of their childhood and humanity. This is humanization.

Only then will the society realize that children are not objects of charity. They are no longer to be regarded as recipients who need to develop "utang na loob" to the social workers and the rich donors. For they deserve not just services but effective services that will serve their best interest.

4) Wholistic View and Approach to the Child Labor Problem

Social workers adopt a wholistic approach to the child labor problem. They see the whole as well as their parts and recognize the interrelation between the two.

While dealing with the symptoms, social workers make sure that their interventions have more impact on the causes. They carry out rescue operations, facilitate reintegration, advocate for justice, and mobilize people for policy and structural reforms.

Committed to the values and goals of the profession, they do not confine themselves "within the box". Even where their agency limits genuine service to the people and children, they work to inaugurate changes, they advocate, mobilize and press for policy reforms and development.

5) Creative and Integrative Use of the Social Work Methods

The wholistic view and approach finds concrete expression in the creative and integrative application of the social work methods in the problem of exploitative child labor. These methods are: a) working with individuals, b) working with groups, c) working with communities, d) social work research and e) social administration.

While the limitation of practice to casework and group work cannot respond effectively to the child labor problem, appropriate interventions help the child workers develop their strength and resiliency, enhance their participation and leadership, and thus hasten the organizing process and the development of strong child workers' associations.

In cases where individual child workers are subjected to physical, psychological or sexual abuse, social workers intervene to help each one grapple effectively with the trauma. They make use of group activities to strengthen each other through enhancing relationships and mutual learning and support. They also help the child workers organize themselves, build federations and coalesce with other children's association, represent their sector and actively participate in the various levels of decision-making and governance, as well as carry out advocacy and mobilization activities to express themselves and effect changes.

The social workers also recognize the importance of social work research for continuous updating of information regarding child labor. Those in the administration turn the agency into a work environment wherein individuals, singly or in groups, carry out their functions efficiently and effectively for the achievement of the agency goals and objectives.

6) Search, Rescue, Reintegration and Education of the Victimized Children

In the field of combating the worst forms of child labor, the social workers' task is to search and locate those who are less visible, document them, and, when necessary, rescue them from extremely dehumanizing situation. They are in the best position to do this. Since they are in close contact with the people, they are able to get vital information through social investigation or other creative means that may later lead to discovery and eventual rescue.

The role of rescuing belongs to the rescue operations group composed of the representatives of agencies like KDF, DOLE, DSWD, NBI or PNP, and the mass media groups. They collectively conduct rescue operations. DOLE leads in operations of the children covered by the Sagip Batang Manggagawa Quick Action Programme. DSWD on the other hand, leads operations directed against child abuse or child prostitution. In some instances, KDF leads the operations, while the other NGOs, the police and the media play as support groups.

The social workers of the agencies involved play active roles throughout the operation. In helping the child workers pursue the cases filed against the workplace owners including wage claims, they are always there to uphold the best interest of the children. They have the knowledge and skills to deal with the children in a manner that provides them moral and psychological support to fight for their rights.

Abused children especially sexually abused ones may need the privacy and care of an institution or a rehabilitation center where they are individually helped by social workers and/or other professionals. Similar interventions and environment may be needed

by working children who have been subjected to extremely traumatic oppressions.

Wherever possible, reintegration of the rescued children should include the continuation of their studies. In the SBMQAP-MOA, the Department of Education, Department of Interior and Local Government, and Department of Social Welfare and Development play a major role in ensuring proper education for these children. For the social worker, this means not only material and financial assistance and adjustment to the school environment but also helping him internalize the values of childhood, education and development.

7. Emphasis on Organizing and Alliances for Expression and Participation

The social workers deem it necessary to conduct organizing activities in communities where child labor exists. But organizing in this setting is not just child workers organizing; it is also organizing the other children, the community and the other sectors in support of the children's struggle. It is relating the child workers' association to the other children's associations and other sectoral organizations to build an alliance against exploitative child labor and advocate for children's rights.

Several child workers' and children's associations coalesce into bigger and stronger children's federations. With such bigger and more powerful organizations, parades, marches, rallies and other forms of mass action are held to put pressure on the government and other institutions. They aim to come up with, improve, and implement more responsive national and local laws, policies, programs and services. They may even get sectoral recognition and seats of representation in relevant bodies like the Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC) and its various counterparts in the municipal, city, provincial, regional and even national level [MSCWC (Municipal Sub-Committee for the Welfare of Children), CSCWC, PSCWC, RSCWC and the CWC] and also the Barangay Development Council (BDC) and its various counterparts in those same levels (MDC, CDC, PDC, RDC and NEDA).

At present there is a great need to organize children because out of 42,000 barangays, only a few have children's associations. Moreover, there is a need to consolidate these associations to maximize children's participation particularly in decision making.

In order to help the children build stronger associations the social workers follow the scientific process of organizing: preparation, core group formation, organization-building, expansion and consolidation and sustainability development.

8) Networking and Collaboration with other Organizations and Sectors

The problem of exploitative child labor is a concern of everybody — children, particularly working children, parents, people's organizations, NGOs, trade unions, schools, churches, health organizations, lawyers groups, mass media, police, civil government, business community, and others.

The search, arrest and rescue operations have been made possible not by one agency or organization but by the joint efforts of both civil society and government organizations. Such operations are followed immediately by efforts and actions of more organizations meant to reintegrate the rescued children with their families and communities, achieve justice for the victims, and build public awareness and responsibility. Later, they expand to include some other organizations that are meant to intensify discovery and rescue operations, send back children to their schools, help their families augment their daily incomes, curb the trafficking of children from the provinces to the cities and organize the children for participation in decision-making.

A National Programme Against Child Labor in the Philippines (NPACLCP) has been started. Led and coordinated by the DOLE and assisted by the ILO-IPEC and the US Department of Labor, it represents the unity and collaboration of the various civil societies, private sectors and government agencies for the effective implementation of the ILO 182 and immediate eradication of the worst forms of child labor. Through cursory

deep assessment of the country's child labor situation, it has identified six priority worst forms of child labor that demand immediate elimination throughout the country. These worst forms are those in mining and quarrying, deep sea fishing, child prostitution, child domestics, pyrotechnics, and agricultural plantations. However, since 2002, it has not yet gone beyond making the preparations for the launching of the time-bound projects.

9. Advocacy, Mobilization, Policy Development and Responsive Structures

Undoubtedly, the problem of child exploitation is massive. The objective is to end the exploitative relationships between the employers and the child workers. Advocacy campaigns and activities are needed to achieve such objective. Hand in hand, the social workers and the child workers hold mass actions to advocate anti-worst form of child labor (WFCL) struggles and get the participation and support of more influential individuals and groups. They advocate, mobilize and lobby for the passage of laws and development of structures that promote the rights of children and dissuade child abuse, exploitation and discrimination.

Where they are in positions of influence, social workers use such influence to effect the needed changes in the thinking, feelings and behavior of the government officials and the private sector. But importantly, they enable and facilitate the children to express themselves collectively, communicate their views, aspirations and demands, and carry out actions to effect changes in the policies, institutions and structures. Other children and people's associations and their alliances and coalitions actively participate and support these advocacy campaigns and mobilization activities.

10) Participation in Broader Movements and Actions against Child Labor

The social workers relate the micro to the mezzo and/or to the macro. Social transformation demands interrelated interventions

that constitute an integrated approach development. She plays the roles of guide, motivator, enabler and facilitator of children's participation in the broader movements and actions against exploitative child labor particularly the worst forms of child labor.

By linking the micro with the macro and the global in the work to eradicate the worst forms of child labor, the social workers contribute to the advancement of the global workers, people's and children's movements for the realization of human rights and children's rights and the achievement of total human development.

Skills and Competencies of the Social Worker

Perhaps, the most important skills and competencies needed by the social worker in this particular setting are the following:

- 1) skill and competency in organizing, that is, children organizing, sectoral organizing, and community organizing and the building, strengthening and sustaining of the children's associations, other sectoral associations, and multisectoral organizations;
- 2) skill and competency in networking and alliance/coalition building with other children's associations, civil society organizations like the churches, schools, other NGOs, POs, trade unions, mass media, etc., and government organizations;
- 3) skill and competency in participatory planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programs, projects and activities including, among others, advocacy campaigns, mobilizations and related activities;
- 4) skill and competency in commitment-building, awareness-building and capability-building meant to continuously develop child leaders, second liners, organizers, advocates, instructors, trainers, and others;
- 5) skill and competency in creating, developing, strengthening and/or sustaining policies, programs, and structures that can

deal systematically and effectively with the problems affecting children, especially the worst forms of child labor;

- 6) skill and competency in planning, coordinating, conducting and assessing search, arrest and rescue operations in collaboration with appropriate government organizations, other NGOs and mass media groups;
- 7) skill and competency in creatively and effectively communicating to the children and transmitting to them information and knowledge most specially concerning their rights and responsibilities;
- 8) skill and competency in relating and working with individuals and groups and establishing human relationships that are characterized by trust, openness, mutual learning, cooperation and collaboration in pro-child actions and are healthful to individuals with traumatic experiences;
- 9) skill and competency in relating the local agency and its various organizations and facilitating their participation in broader movements and actions including national and global actions against exploitative child labor; and
- 10) skill and competency in documenting every case of WFCL, the action undertaken against it, the results of such action, the organizing of children and other sectors, the conduct of advocacy and mobilization, the building and development of the multisectoral structures or mechanisms and programs, etc.

Concluding Remarks

Social work has had its significant contributions to the progress made in dealing effective blows upon exploitative child labor and in particular the worst forms of child labor throughout the country. This has been made possible through the involvement of a relatively few professional social workers in the particular setting of combating exploitative child labor.

Such contributions have been made in, among others, 1) the exposés that have led to the mainstreaming of the problem of exploitative child labor; 2) the rescue of several children from various forms of grave inhumanities; 3) the reintegration of the rescued children with their families and communities in the provinces; 4) the prevention of some children from falling into certain worst forms of child labor; 5) the organization of child workers and children's associations to advance the cause of children's rights, education, development and participation; 6) the organization of other sectoral, multisectoral and community organizations in support of the child workers' and children's struggle; 7) the advocacy and mobilization activities that resulted in the ratification by the Philippine government of the ILO Convention 182 and promulgation of the laws against child labor, trafficking of persons, and others; and 8) the participation of the Filipino working children in international gatherings and global movements and actions against exploitative child labor.

Moreover, a number of working children have resumed their studies; some have finished high school; and a few have completed a college course. Breaking the culture of silence, the working children have become outspoken and committed child leaders, advocates, educators, organizers, and mobilizers. Many have come to achieve their basic rights including the rights to play, socialize with peers, to be educated, and to express themselves freely.

Through the years, an increasing number of government agencies, NGOs, POs, trade unions and others are now engaged in programs and services for the working children. The mass media has also given more attention to the child labor problems: a number of TV programs have been involved in quickly responding to reports concerning children grossly exploited in factories, sweatshops and prostitution dens by coordinating with the NBI or the police and conducting rescue operations and in showing to the viewing public such operations. This has resulted to a growing concern among the citizenry for working children and citizens' actions against the worst forms of child labor.

However, all such contributions and successes are still far from resolving the problem. In fact, while a considerable number of working children have been taken out of the "underworld", more children have replaced

them especially in those areas where child labor-focused government agencies, non-government organizations, people's organizations, trade unions or the like are not in existence. Thus, it is possible that the incidence of exploitative child labor is still increasing. Hence, a lot more remains to be done.

More social workers are called upon to take the challenge of continuing and intensifying the professional involvement in this particular setting. It is always said that social work, since its beginnings, has always cared for the children and those involved in family and community welfare have always prioritized the poorest of the poor. Now, they are challenged to care for especially the children of the poorest of the poor, the children in need of special protection, and the children trapped in the worst forms of child labor.

But to attain complete victory over exploitative child labor especially the worst forms of child labor, they have to deal simultaneously with such broader problems of poverty, globalization and the exploitative structures. They have to use various tested and creative strategies, methods and interventions. These strategies and methods should build, develop and strengthen, among others, the working children, their associations as well as organizations in the various levels of society.

The working children and their closest allies such as the youth, women, parents and the various concerned sectors including the government, churches, schools, mass media, NGOs, POs, trade unions, must deal effectively with the worst forms of child labor as well as with all other related problems such as resources, policies and structures. Indeed this is a herculean task that cannot be achieved in many years and can never be achieved without the broader task of people's liberation and social transformation. But this is the only way to realize what all working children and people dream of and seek to achieve: the immediate eradication of the worst forms of child labor, the emancipation of the working children, the achievement of the children's rights for all children, and the realization of a society that is fit for the children and all humanity.

References:

- Apit, Alejandro W. *A Worst Form of Child Labor Discovered and Rescue*. Kamalayan Development Foundation, Quezon City, 1996.
- _____. *Some of the Most Hazardous Forms of Child Labor in the Philippines: A KDF Experience*. Kamalayan Development Foundatio, Quezon City, 1998.
- By the Sweat and Toil of Children*, Volume I. Washington, D.C.: US Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 1994.
- By the Sweat and Toil of Children*, Volume II. Washington, D.C.: US Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 1995.
- Child Workers in Asia Magazine*, published by the Child Workers in Asia, a regional network of NGOs involved in the problem of child labor in Asia based in Bangkok, Thailand.
- Convention on the Rights of the Child*, UN, November 20, 1989.
- del Rosario, Rosario and Melinda A. Bonga, *Child Labor in the Philippines: A Review of Selected Studies and Policy Papers*. Manila, Philippines: Authors and Publishers, 2000.
- ILO Convention 135 or Minimum Age Convention*, ILO
- ILO Convention 182 or Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention*, ILO.
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, UN, December 10, 1948