

Social Work and International Collaboration in Child Placement

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Introduction

Although the first child welfare priority is to strengthen the family unit to enable the biological parents to care for their children, there are still a number of children placed out through adoption. The practice of foreigners adopting Filipino children dates back to early 1920's but limited only to foreigners who are residents of the Philippines. However, on June 10, 1975, the Child and Youth Welfare Code (PD 603) took effect that opened the adoption of Filipino children to non-resident aliens. This was later governed by the Council for the Welfare of Children (CWC) Rule 1- the Rules and Regulations on Foreign Adoption issued on February 23, 1976. The Bureau of Child and Youth Welfare (BCYW) of then Department of Social Welfare (DSW) formulated policies and procedures on the adoption of a Filipino child in a foreign country. On December 19, 1986, Executive Order No. 91 (EO 91) was signed stating that aliens will be allowed to adopt in Philippine courts only if they have resided in the Philippines for at least one year and can comply with the mandatory supervised trial custody of six (6) months. This Executive Order took effect on January 27, 1987.

In the same year, a Task Force for Intercountry Adoption composed of representatives from non-government organizations (NGOs) was created by then Secretary of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to improve the process of intercountry adoption. This task force initiated the empowerment of the child caring agencies by allowing them to participate in matching the children to foreign adoptive families, which used to be undertaken simply by DSWD authorities in consultation with experts.

Since 1995, the intercountry adoption of Filipino children is governed by Republic Act (RA) 8043 otherwise known as the Intercountry Adoption Act of 1995. The law created the Intercountry Adoption Board (ICAB) as the Central Authority (CA) on all matters related to intercountry adoption. This recent amendment of EO 91 to RA 8043 on the implementing rules and regulations on intercountry adoption not only enshrined the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child but also the relevant provisions of RA 8552 otherwise known as the Domestic Adoption Act of 1998 and the provisions of the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation. This international measures ensure the protection of children and promote cooperation among countries.

Moreover, the greater emphasis on global citizenship will likely lessen the effect of racial and cultural difference on the psychological adjustment of children outside the country of origin. Most developing nations in Asia-Pacific are "sending countries" whereas many developed or affluent nations are "receiving countries" of children needing alternative parental care. The role and collaboration of the professional social workers both in sending and receiving countries are critical in child placement.

The collaboration in the placement of a child from the State of Origin (SO) or sending state to the *Receiving State* (RS) under the Hague Convention (HC) is shown in Figure 1.

All contracting states to the Hague Convention shall designate a Central Authority. Central Authorities shall cooperate with each other and promote cooperation amongst competent authorities in their States to protect children and take all appropriate measures to prevent improper financial or other gains from the adoption process and to deter all practices contrary to the objects of the convention (HC, articles 7 & 8). Social workers in both the SO and RS have to interact with the social and legal systems of both countries in order to insure the best interests of the child and respect for his or her fundamental rights.

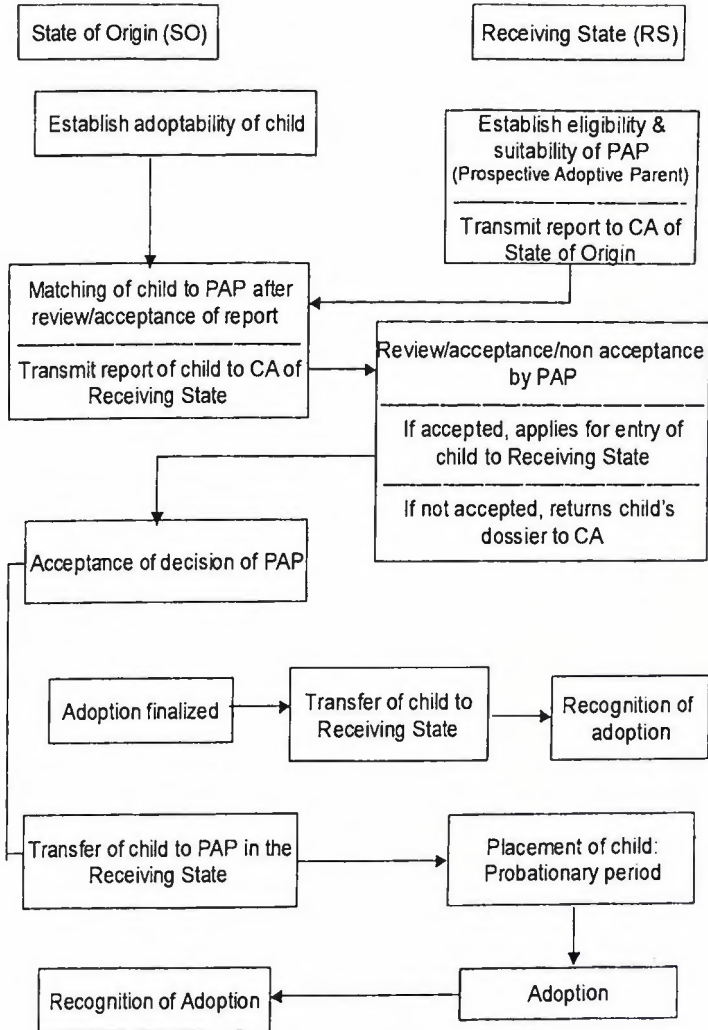


Figure 1

The Role and Professional Inputs of Social Workers in Intercountry Adoption

It is noteworthy to review the goals of the social work profession translated into more specific directions for actions by DuBois & Miley (2002) as follows:

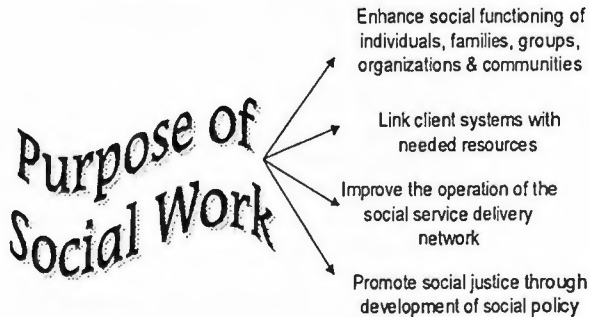


Figure 2

The above goals and objectives lead social workers to enhance client's competence, link them with resources, and foster changes that make organizations and social institutions more responsive to citizen's needs. (NASW, 1981) Evidently, the social worker's roles range from face to face contact with clients to indirect practice of advocating favorable structures and policies for them.

Child welfare is among the traditional field in social work practice. As with the other field settings, social workers working with children have a variety of roles. The schema on the *Roles Social Workers Play* presented in Lister (1987) cited in Hepworth et. al. (1997) can be of interest in the area of international adoption:

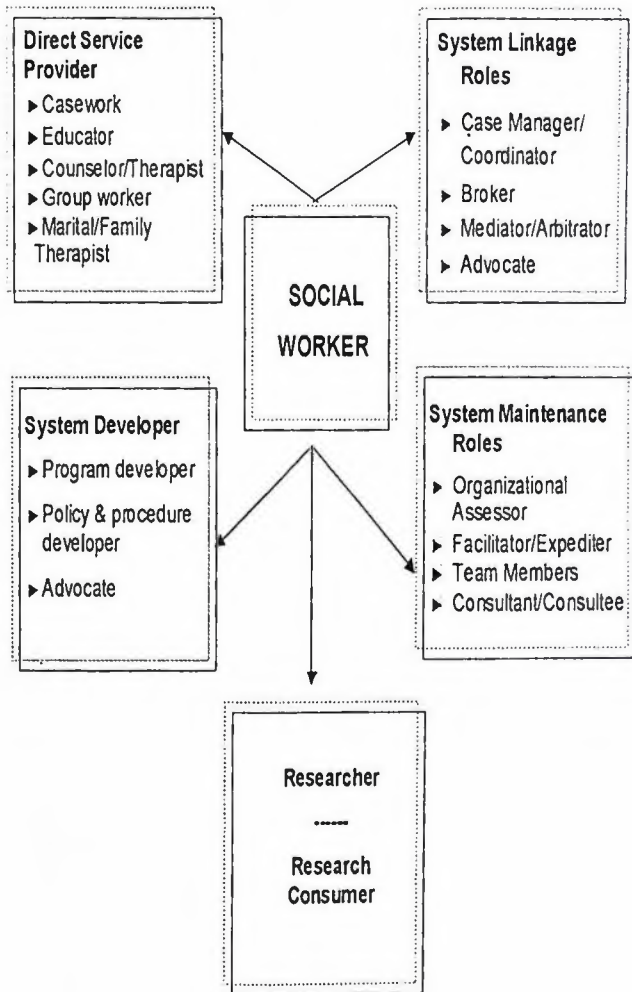


Figure 3

Direct Service Provider and System Linkage Roles

The direct service provider and system linkage are mutually supporting roles in child placement in both state of origin of the child and the receiving state.

Generally, social workers of SO help to enable mothers plan in the case of an unwanted pregnancy. They are crucial in assessing and helping a mother decide the best option of whether to keep or place a child for adoption. They work directly with the child and her/his family or sometimes with current caretakers. The social worker assesses what services and resources are needed to keep the child with her/his family of origin. Here, the importance of keeping the family intact is likely to receive greater weight than material security. The quality of social service extended to keep children within their own family is a central social work role in the adoption process. Roles subsumed under this category are those in which social workers meet face-to-face with clients or other service providers.

Moreover, an indispensable role of the social worker is to exercise her professional judgment on whether to terminate parental rights and deem adoption as an alternative permanent placement. Intercountry Adoption option holds only if preserving the original family is unsuccessful and inappropriate and when there is no suitable local adoptive family. The social workers in the Philippines further assume the critical role to review the matching of the child with the prospective parents and propose whom s/he considers will best promote the child's well being from among the pool of approved foreign families.

Brown (2002) noted that if there are a number of Prospective Adoptive Parents (PAPs) ready to take children, a "good enough" matching is possible. For social work practitioners to make the most suitable matching decisions and placement for a child, a range of adoptive families should be available to meet the diverse needs of children needing placements. In contrast, when there is a shortage of PAPs, the sensitivity of matching is likely to be significantly blunted and reduced to "who has space". Equally important in matching is a thorough and accurate assessment that takes into consideration the child's needs, wishes, abilities, age, race and ethnicity, care plan and their need for contact with their family in the future. Figure 4 shows the Process of Approval/Clearance of a Child for Intercountry Adoption (ICA).

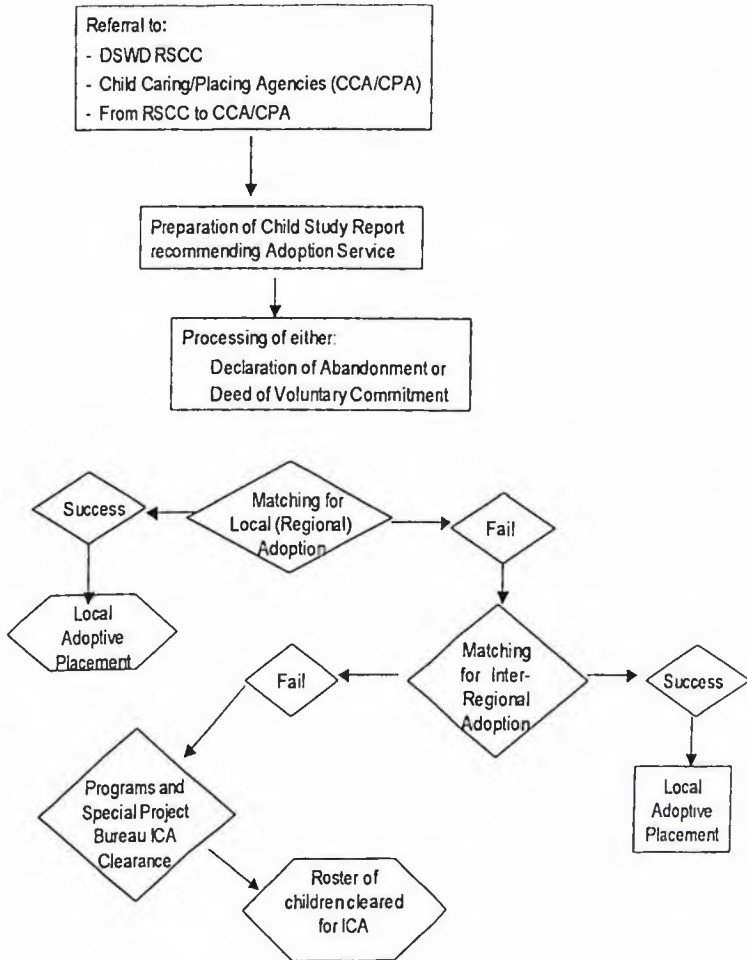


Figure 4

On the part of the social workers of the RS, direct service role involves recruitment, screening and development of quality PAPs to generate a pool of adoptive families available for children needing alternative homes. In order to establish the suitability of PAPs to care for a child, the social worker often teams with other disciplines to carefully assess and prepare PAPs by letting them consider seriously their motivation, their practical and emotional readiness to parent certain type of children. Figure 5 illustrates the application process of PAPs.

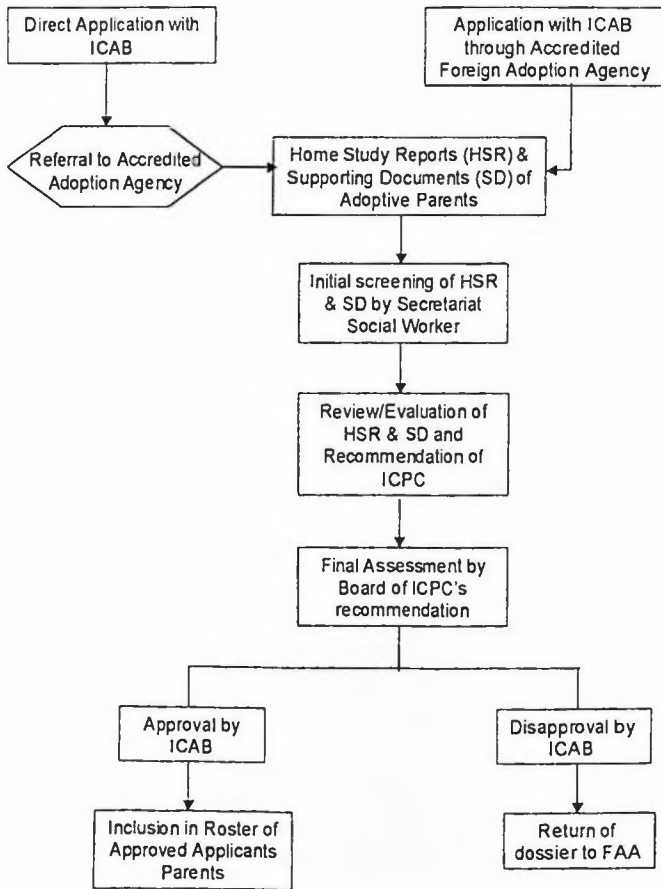


Figure 5

Foremost in the process is the professional wisdom of the social workers to project how a child who will join this particular adoptive family will likely adjust, grow and become secure. Consequently, the social worker can enable applicants wanting to adopt realize their parenting capacity and expand beyond their initial child preference. On the other hand, applicants who are not ready or incapable to parent a child should be helped to recognize their limitations and *self-screen* themselves by foregoing their adoption plan. The Process for Matching for Intercountry Adoption is shown in Figure 6.

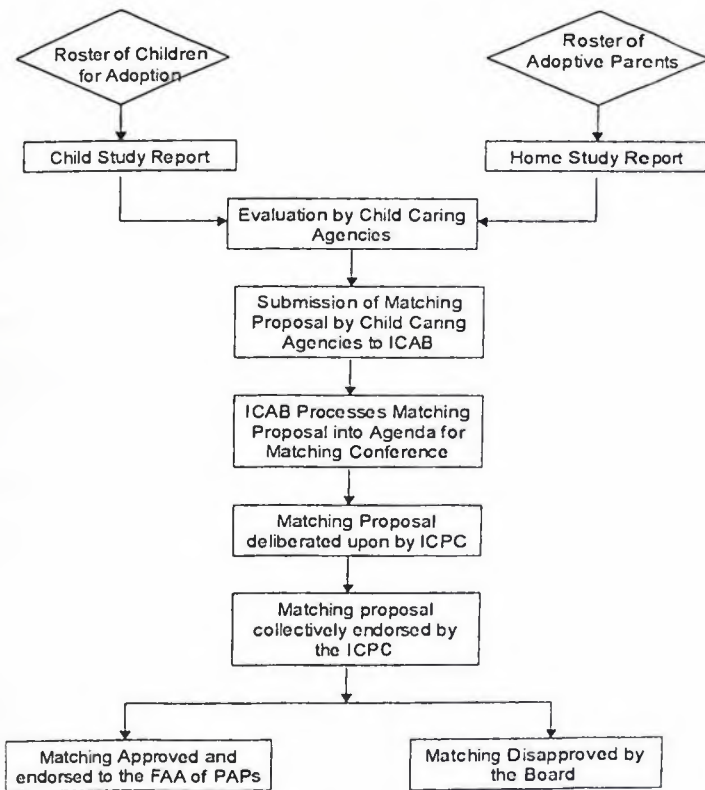


Figure 6

On the part of the social workers of the SO, the quality of her professional input will largely depend on her knowledge of the child under her care and her social work skills and sensitivity in balancing the needs of the child and the resources that an adoptive family has to offer.

On the other hand, the social worker of the RS extends supervision and supportive services to the adoptive parents and children once placement has been made. They assume the ongoing responsibility to support the adoptive families who are caring for children with complex needs. Similarly, children are also often in need of consistent and effective social work input to enable them to make use of the placement, to sustain meaningful relationships and make sure that their needs are being met and their voice heard. (Brown, 2002) When support for a child and the adoptive family is delivered by separate social workers, they both have to act as professional partners.

The case manager role of the social worker of the RS is paramount in the post placement period as s/he maintains close contact with the child and/or adoptive family in order to monitor the progress of the bonding between them. As case managers, social workers assume primary responsibility in assessing the needs of the child and her/his adoptive family and advocating access to services and benefits entitled them. An important role of the social worker is to make certain that the necessary documents and processes for the finalization of the adoption are completed as planned. Here, social workers function at the interface between the client and the environment more than in any other role.

Figure 7 shows the Process of Placement and Legal Adoption.

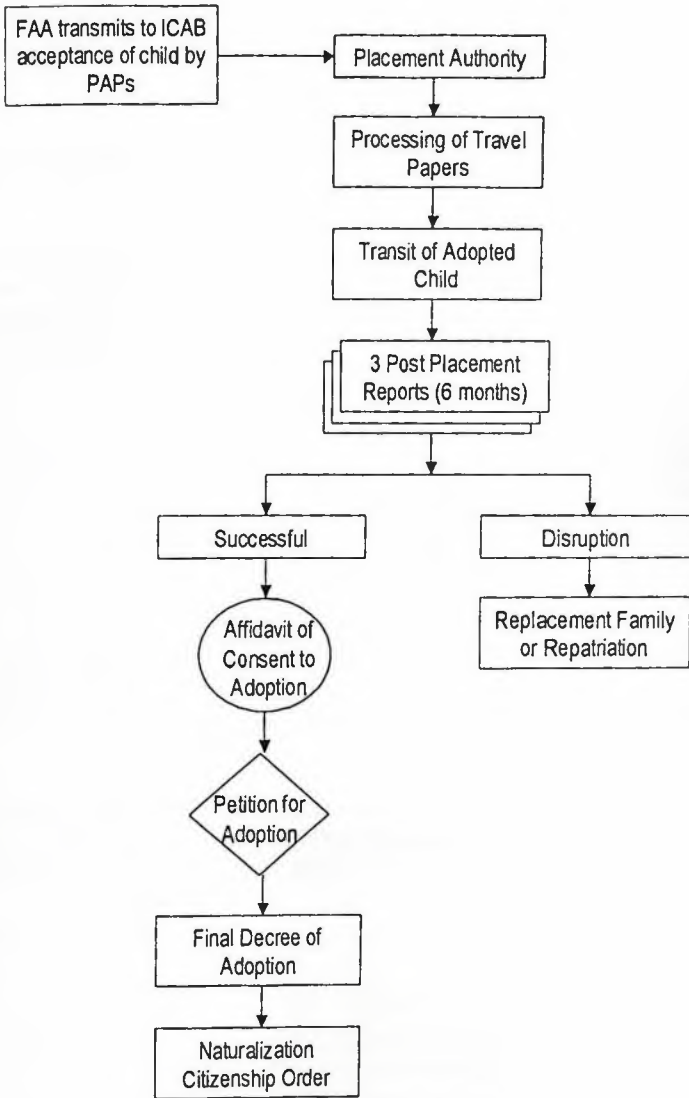


Figure 7

In the Philippines, the ICAB secretariat social workers collaborate with adoption agencies in different countries to ensure a reasonable number of adoptive homes as resource for Filipino children needing placement.

System Developer and Maintenance Roles; Researcher and Research Consumer

Social work practitioners in both SO and RS are in a strategic position to assess unmet as well as emerging client needs, gaps in services, and adequacy of the system in terms of structure and policies. Aside from evaluating client needs, social workers are in the best position to evaluate how policies and procedures promote or fail to uphold the best interests of children. After identifying the factors that impede service delivery, they have the responsibility to plan and implement ways of enhancing service delivery. Advocating for legislation and social policies aimed at providing needed resources and enhancing social justice becomes inevitable.

Furthermore, social workers play a significant role in system maintenance and enhancement. As organizational analyst, knowledge of organizational and administrative theory is essential in identifying the factors in agency structure, policy, and procedures that have a negative impact on service delivery. As team members, social workers often contribute knowledge related to family dynamics and provide therapeutic interventions. When teams tend to be deficit focused, social workers are expected to apply their systems and strengths perspectives to the teams.

Social workers in either SO or RS need to have a close professional collaboration in reciprocally supporting each other on the best practices and ethical standards in international child placement founded on practice experience and research.

Conclusion

In the global context of child placement, countless children and adoptive families will truly obtain social justice and peace if there is international collaboration among social workers in ensuring quality professional input and ethical social work practice in adoption both by the sending and receiving countries.

If social workers all over the world exercise professional judgment at various levels of practice and adhere to the ethical standards of the profession, intercountry adoption will not run the risk of being trapped by economic considerations, bureaucratic procedures, and political pressures.

Adoption comes with losses and gains for both the adoptee and the adoptive parents. The most difficult component about my adoption has been accepting the realities of loss, being given a second chance and how to find a healthy balance. I was raised with American values and know that my life began in the Philippines. I will always have a strong bond to the Philippines because it was once my home. (Lorial E. Crowder, Filipina Adoptee, 1981)

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