

Arts and Creativity in Child Protection Work

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THERE ARE THOUSANDS of children across Southeast Asia who experience violence, neglect, abuse, and exploitation on a daily basis. Migrating children, and children affected by migrating families, are exposed to many situations that increase their vulnerability while structures for child protection from the local to national level are still in the process of development. Children living in poverty are pushed into migration by their circumstances and are especially vulnerable in their countries of origin, points of transit, and destination areas. They easily become marginalized and are denied such essential services as health care and education thereby reproducing cycles of poverty. In many cases children experience a series of protection issues during their childhood, which call for governments to set up protection systems that are able to respond to the multiple vulnerabilities that children face at home, workplace, school, and community.

When children are involved in or affected by migration, such vulnerabilities might be exacerbated. Children move for a variety of reasons: to look for better employment opportunities, for education, to escape violence at home, political repression or natural disasters, or can be trafficked for various exploitative purposes. Other children are left behind by migrating parents or face neglect from their families. Risks may emerge at any of the three stages of the migration process: departure from the place of origin, transit, and arrival at destination. The risks greatly increase when they cross

illegally through porous international borders. At destination points they face discrimination and lack access to basic services while their vulnerabilities are intensified by fractured social networks and the loss of support from extended family networks which migration unavoidably entails.

Across the region child protection policies and practices remain fragile. When they exist, they are often not devised to include children affected by migration. While some steps have been taken in the field of child trafficking, development and migration policies are still not responsive to the needs of protecting children from abuse and exploitation.

The aim of Save the Children UK's Cross-border Program is to influence policy and institutional development at the community, national, and regional levels; and to set up locally appropriate and sustainable child protection systems that are able to protect all children, including children on the move, from trafficking, and many other forms of exploitation, abuse, violence, and neglect. Building local capacity through children and communities is central to this aim. The effectiveness of child protection systems rely not only on the commitment and skills of the duty bearers but also on the capacity of children and their communities to protect themselves and each other. Strong child protection systems and empowered young people contribute to strengthening a country's social capital that is a necessary element to combat poverty and address the challenges of migration.

Introduction to Save the Children UK

Save the Children UK, founded in 1919, is the world's independent child rights organization and has sought to support children through emergency relief, health and education support, and is a leader in the advocacy for child rights and protection. Save the Children UK is a member of the Save the Children Alliance which acts to improve children's lives in over one hundred countries. Working across Asia, Save the Children UK acts in the best interest of children through the implementation of programs aimed at improving their lives while supporting them as decision making actors.

a. The Cross-border Program

Originally conceived on the premise that child trafficking is a transnational issue, and thus requires a regional approach to address its challenges, the Cross-border Program has evolved to address the protection of all

vulnerable children through the establishment of child protection systems. Began in 1999, the Cross-border Program has worked with local partners to help children in the Mekong Sub-Region. It has previously addressed the needs of children by focusing on trafficking in communities of origin. Save the Children has also worked on improving the access and quality of local and national child protection systems. It derives its sense of mission from Article 6 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which proclaims that state parties recognize that every child has the inherent right to life and that they shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.

The current Phase 4 of the Cross-border Program, “Sustainable Multi-Actor Solutions to Migration Related Child Poverty in the Greater Mekong Sub-region,” largely funded by the European Commission of the European Union, aims to consolidate past successes and scale up Save the Children’s work on anti-trafficking and child protection. Beginning with community-based models of child protection, the Cross-border Program seeks to replicate good practices in new communities while using successful examples of child protection to advocate for locally appropriate policy changes at different levels of government. It also seeks to find more durable solutions for children affected by poverty, migration, and social exclusion through strengthening the currently fragile child protection structures in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). This will be implemented through capacity-building on child protection, child rights and child-participation, and supporting actions that enable authorities and non-state actors, especially children to lead actual programs for child protection related to response and prevention in their localities. The program seeks stronger policy commitments for child protection for all children, particularly for migrant and other socially excluded children, among the governments of Cambodia, China, Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Working with four groups affected by migration—unaccompanied migrant and stateless children, vulnerable children in areas with high level of outward migration, children left behind by migrating parents, and children returning from migration or trafficking in danger of exploitation and discrimination, the Cross-border Program promotes the development of child protection systems supported by government structures.

As a program with a regional scope, it works with local and national partners across the target countries. In China it works closely with the

Women's Federation at the provincial level allowing close cooperation with government structures, while in Cambodia it is partnered with a local non-governmental organization (NGO) in a province that is a high source of outward migration. The Burma/Myanmar program is directly implemented by Save the Children, and the Cross-border Program in Vietnam works closely with the government's Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA). The Thailand program has partnered with NGOs situated along many of the country's borders in order to best meet the needs of migrants. Regionally, the Cross-border Program has partnered with the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) in order to build a closer relationship to artist and cultural communities, and to align with the arts in order to build stronger advocacy efforts. Close work with governments at the local and provincial levels in all countries have allowed children's voices to be heard by policymakers.

b. Training Activities in Mekong

Across the region the partners of the Cross-border Program are engaged in a variety of capacity-building trainings. In each target country, children learn about their rights while youth leaders learn how to organize peer education seminars on child rights. Government structures and case management for vulnerable children are supported through trainings in social work provided in Myanmar, and young lawyers are being trained to work with survivors of trafficking and risk migration in Thailand. Many trainings and projects are pilot activities that inform the lessons learned and strong practices which, if successful, can hopefully be expanded to meet the needs of more children.

A Regional Training Experience

In August 2009, PETA in partnership with Save the Children UK's Regional Cross-border Program held the 1st Regional Leadership Course on Child Protection. Thirty-three participants from seven countries working in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region met in Nakhon Nayok, Thailand to discuss the various forms of child protection in their own countries.

Chosen as one of the participants of this conference, I was able to work with community NGO staff members, government officials and Save the Children staff from Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Burma/Myanmar, Thailand,

Vietnam, and Pakistan in a ten-day transformative experience. Together, we developed our skills and understanding in promoting the protection of children using PETA's methods and learning techniques, discussing children's issues while creating art and synthesizing information on child protection and exploring various art forms—using drama, dance, visual arts and sculpture along with other techniques to explore our own stories as well as the stories of the children we work with.

The training consisted of six modules that required us to explore the situation of children in the region: covering topics on childhood and child rights, child protection, building child protection systems and improving our work on protection. We also examined child protection in Thailand through field visits to organizations dedicated to helping children and migrants. Site visits included learning about local NGOs and their work with migrants to meeting children at a local detention center. This allowed some participants to link their work in countries of origin to the situations and programs in a destination country. Over the course of the training and after several presentations centered on children supplemented by group work, we became deeply involved with the issues surrounding child protection.

Several of PETA's activities utilized art as a hook into broader discussion and self-reflection into children's issues. One such activity involved splitting the participants into two groups. Each group was instructed to contort their bodies into a sculpture representing the situation of a child. The first group represented children with their dignity disrespected while the second represented children with their dignity upheld. As participants molded themselves into sculptures, depictions of child abuse and abandonment were revealed. This spurred discussions on the qualities of each group of children and then the factors necessary to support children with dignity and self-esteem. The activity progressed with participants asked to interact with the human sculptures to display how the child could be helped or harmed by others. The activity allowed participants a way to discuss sensitive topics and provide more emotional reflections than would have been possible in a lecture format. It also allowed participants to personally exhibit examples of child rights demonstrating their understanding of rights and child protection.

Another activity utilizing sculpture divided participants by country and provided them with modeling clay. Each person was asked to use the clay to model the situation of a child they knew or worked with. Working with

different colored clay along with an assortment of beads, buttons, and other bric-a-brac, participants molded detailed creations. The time spent working with the clay was used to meditate on the child they knew, allowing detailed, and heart-felt discussions when it was time to share our work. The situations of children ranged from abandonment to abuse and neglect while also planting the seeds for further discussion on the socio-economic situation and status of the child. As participants discussed their work, others fell silent with nods of agreement as they recognized the situations of children in their communities were similar. The activity reinforced who we work for and why. The broader discussion of the causes for these situations that followed displayed the need for child rights by displaying concrete and emotive examples of the daily situations children face in the Mekong region. Participants felt the activity allowed reflection and remembrance that provided a strong connection with their work and our discussions on child rights.

Through various activities, we were able to unlock our inner-child and release our creative spirits. Many participants, just like myself, also commented on how we enjoyed learning new tools with which to engage children and their communities.

Aside from our personal discoveries, we were also focused on weaving together the story of children in the Mekong region: discussing the lives of children in our own countries, the similarity of the difficulties facing children across the area and the gaps of the various protection systems that eventually led to a dialogue on what participants could do to start overcoming and addressing these issues.

There were further sessions on topics ranging from child abuse, corporal punishment, stateless children, and children in emergencies. These were followed by a session on creating an advocacy plan to support children at the national level. Underpinning these activities were the understandings reached by the participants through their involvement in PETA's art activities.

Outside of the main curriculum, we were also able to gain practical skills and techniques in story-telling while using different mediums such as photography, videography, and shadow-theatre which enabled us to more effectively tell stories on child protection as well as provide children with the creative tools to tell their own stories.

At the end of the training, the event experienced one of its highlights as Ernie Cloma, Associate Curriculum Director of PETA, received the Child

Protection Champion award from Save the Children UK's Cross-border Program. For over forty years, Tito Ernie, as many would call him, has passionately conducted integrated theater arts workshops for disadvantaged children in the Philippines and abroad—inspiring many of us to do the same, to become instruments and channels for the protection and promotion of child rights in our own communities.

The closing ceremony brought together new friends as we shared traditional songs and dances throughout the region. Possessing new knowledge and skills, exposed to PETA's pedagogy and supported by a new network of like-minded people, we have benefited greatly from PETA and Save the Children UK's first leadership training.

As the project came to an end, it was possible to see the personal growth that many of us had felt, and as we bring this experience back to our communities, hopefully, stronger child protection systems will start to grow throughout the communities and across the region.

Assessing the Project

Participant feedback of the training program has been overwhelmingly positive, and participants have initiated their own workshops based on the methodology and content of this regional training. In Nanning, China, Save the Children's Cross-border team along with the local Women's Federation hosted a training for local officials, social work students, and community volunteers. Over a period of several days, participants explored their conceptions of children while developing tools to increase their abilities to support children.

As the training brought together both NGO practitioners and government officials, their perspectives were essential in determining how the training could be applied to their work. Nguyen Phoung Thuy of Save the Children's Cross-border Program in Vietnam felt the new methods that she learned about teaching child protection would be easy to apply when working with children and looked forward to applying the lessons learned in her work. Her sense is that the creative approach allowed participants to be more open in sharing their ideas and thoughts. The training sessions on advocacy strategies and emergency response for child protection were also helpful, providing new views on pushing child protection work forward.

Monthip Kityingsopon, of the Thai government's Bureau of Anti-Trafficking of Women and Children, expressed similar feelings about the training. Talking to an audience a month after the training, she explained how the creative approach reinvigorated her work and the new approaches informed her of different ways of working. On a personal level, she rediscovered the artist within which also provided greater appreciation for the work NGO staff are undertaking in the field.

The main difficulties of the training were its length and the challenges imposed by simultaneous translation. Ten days of training requires patience and commitment, and the time frame is necessary in order to immerse oneself in the experience and be open to transformations allowed by the creative arts. Bringing together Save the Children staff, local NGO partners, and government counterpart officials was also useful in order to develop a network of professionals across different institutions addressing child protection. Although there were language difficulties, future trainings may be held in target countries utilizing the host country language.

Participants began the training intrigued with PETA's methodology which required self-reflection and engagement. Through art, participants found themselves analyzing familiar issues through a new lens. This group of attendees, most with several years of child protection work, had many people who remarked that they felt engaged and re-invigorated by the material from the workshop, and that they were able to come to new understandings of their work.

Convinced that an arts approach to working with children was valuable, an arts camp for migrant children was also held in Thailand by local partners where youth leaders from minority communities shared their stories while developing their skills in performing arts. Children responded to the use of creative outlets and were able to produce stunning pieces of work. As youth leaders they will return to their communities with new tools in which to engage their peers.

Other avenues for integrating arts and advocacy have opened up as well. As a result of the training, artist groups are being approached to help develop ways in which child participation can be supported and provide new platforms for children's voices and their stories to be heard. Bringing artists to migrant communities informs their views on the issues of migration while NGO staffs learn new tools with which to interact with children as they develop their skills of self-expression.

Conclusion

With the success of the first regional training on child protection using PETA's creative methodologies, the Cross-border Program will continue to explore ways in which arts can be used to support children's participation in advocacy work. Support for the Children and Youth Bloc during November 2009 Mekong Media and Arts Festival in Phnom Penh, Cambodia brought artists, children, NGO staff, and the media together and explore new ways of amplifying the voices of children and exploring new ways to discuss child rights.

Building new networks between policy makers, government officials, NGOs, and artists, the Cross-border Program planted the first seeds for broader cooperation during the Regional Leadership Training on Child Protection. Partners have begun to utilize artistic approaches to reach and communicate with children, while the use of arts have allowed officials and NGO staff to deepen their personal understanding of each other, facilitating our working relationship. Artists, in turn, were able to understand our priorities and methods of work. Stronger partnerships with artists, and their ability to create culture were recognized as powerful engines for personal and societal change. The arts provide a positive forum for interaction between different groups while also using creative methods to focus on our end goal of better protection for children.

Although Save the Children UK's Cross-border Program focuses on policy change in order to create sustainable child protection systems, the use of art will play an important role in delivering change. Faced with discrimination and bias, migrants need their stories to be told in ways that allow their acceptance into a new society. Furthermore, arts can help heal the broken social rifts caused by the migration experience. Cultural and behavioral change can be inspired and supported through arts, and migrants without a voice can also have a powerful medium to share their experiences.

As the Cross-border Program continues its fourth phase, child participation and child protection will continue to be focal points as partners throughout the region will host a series of national level youth forums leading up to the Mekong Youth Forum in 2010. These forums will build on the skills that facilitators learned during the regional training in order to support child participants. The Mekong Youth Forum itself will bring together youth leaders from across the region to discuss child rights advocacy with

national and regional policy makers. Continued efforts through the arts and creative methods will help to increase the visibility of our work in promoting the protection and participation of children while providing children the opportunity to create new artwork that will resonate with the public.