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vol 6, No. 1
April 2003
pp.

FEATURE

The International Labour Organisation Definition of 'Decent Work': Implications for the Well-being of Families in the Philippines

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Abstract - An Action Program for Decent Work was launched in the Philippines in May, 2002, by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity are foundational to the performance of decent work. Poverty alleviation and sustainable growth in an increasingly globalised economy, are viewed by the ILO as integral to the decent work concept. The wellbeing of individuals and their families is intrinsically linked to their capacity to earn an adequate income to meet their basic needs of food, a safe and secure water supply, shelter and clothing. This paper analyses the notion of 'decent work' according to the ILO definition, and focuses on two aspects of work in the Philippines for their impacts on individual and family wellbeing: Overseas Filipino Workers; and Child Labour.

Background

The research for the preparation of this paper was triggered by an article on the front page of the *Manila Bulletin*, May 13 2002, announcing the launching of an Action Program for Decent Work in the Philippines, the first of four pilot countries selected by the

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International Labour Organisation (ILO) to put into effect 'decent work' initiatives (Suarez, 2002a). Other participating countries in the pilot program are Denmark, representative of high income countries, Bangladesh a low income country, and Morocco which along with the Philippines, is designated as a middle income country (ILO, 2001b).

An overarching goal of the ILO is to secure 'decent work for women and men everywhere' (ILO, 2001b), by building on the 'four pillars' of:

1. the fundamental rights of all workers to core labour standards, which include no forced labour, no child labour in conditions of abuse, no discrimination in work offers and practices, and freedom of association for working people worldwide;
2. employment generation and appropriate remuneration of all employees;
3. social protection which includes healthy and safe working conditions; and social security benefits for the unemployed, with pension coverage for all workers; and
4. social dialogue between worker organisations and employers. (ILO 2000)

The general definition of decent work is inclusive of all kinds of work, 'including housework, work carried out from home, unpaid work, voluntary work, part-time and informal sector work' where women are the predominant workers and 'deprived of most of the attributes associated with decent work' (ILO 2000, 22). The ILO recognises that only a minority of the world's workforce enjoys the

full benefits of decent work. Where it does exist '...it may be under stress in the process of globalisation; and there is a need to close the gap between the goal of decency in work and actual working and living conditions' (ILO 2001b).

The ILO was formed in 1919 as a result of the Treaty of Versailles and became a United Nations specialised agency in 1946. The ILO has established Conventions and Recommendations for setting minimum standards of basic rights across the entire spectrum of work related areas. It provides training, technical assistance, and operates a tripartite structure with workers, employers and governments participating as equal partners (Somavia, 2002). The Philippines are a signatory to the ILO labour conventions.

A first step by the ILO in establishing a decent work pilot program is to ascertain and document the general economic and social situation of a country in relation to the fundamental rights of its workers (ILO 2001b); identify where decent work deficits exist and the reasons behind them; then move towards reducing them (ILO 2001a).

Program for Decent Work in the Philippines

The Republic of the Philippines is an archipelago of some 7,106 islands, and home to over 80 million people, mostly of Malay descent. The legal system is based on Spanish and Anglo-American law, reflective of the influences of earlier occupations. Catholicism is the dominant religion, with 83% of the population, as adherents. The two main spoken languages are English and Tagalog. Pesos are the currency of the Philippines, while official economic and trade related financial statistics are often quoted in United States dollar terms.

It is estimated by various sources that between 34 – 40% of the population lives in poverty (Asian Development Bank, 2001; Central Intelligence Agency, 2001; National Statistics Office, Philippines, 2000b). This situation is a far cry from the previous levels of affluence experienced in the Philippines prior to the 1970s when it was the second richest country in Asia after Japan (The Economist, 2001).

Although the Philippine government has ratified international instruments that pertain to labour standards, and adopted labour laws to reflect these standards, 'effective compliance at the workplace level remains a serious matter of concern' (Tenorio, 2002). For example, the ILO has observed that despite the fact that existing Philippine laws recognise women's entitlement to full participation and benefits of the paid workforce, 'women continue to face a narrower range of occupational choices, less access to the formal sector, and fewer opportunities to find full-time jobs relative to men despite their higher average level of education' (reported by Tenorio, 2002). As in many other countries, women also earn less than males holding similar positions.

Decent Work and a Decent Living Wage

A key concern for Filipino workers is the payment of a realistic salary as a 'living wage' rather than a minimum wage, so that they can support themselves and their families above poverty levels (Bloom, 2002). The average annual family income for 2000 in the Philippines was estimated as P144,000, equivalent to \$AUD5,044 (as at September 30, 2002), with an average household expenditure of P118,002 or \$AUD4,133. In the Autonomous Region of Muslim

Mindanao (ARMM), where the greatest levels of poverty exist, the annual family income was P79,590 or \$AUD2,788, with a household expenditure of P66,288 or \$AUD2,323. Nationally, 44% of wages was spent on food, with the ARMM having the highest food expenditure of 57% (National Statistics Office, Philippines, 2000a).

Minimum daily wages are set by tripartite wage boards. Wages vary across regions with the National Capital Region (NCR) of Manila being set at the highest rate, which at the end of 2001, was P280 (about AUD\$10) per day, producing an annual per capita income of P72,800. When the average household expenditure of P118,002 is taken into account, the notion of the 'working poor' comes into effect. In order to reduce poverty levels, more than one family member must be in paid work. The lowest minimum daily wages of P131 (about \$AUD4.70), have been set for the ARMM Region (Economic Research Institute, 2002).

Motor vehicle ownership can be further used as a comparative measure of a country's level of affluence. In the Philippines, the number of people per motor vehicle in 1998 was estimated as 32.3, in contrast with the United States ownership rate of 1.3 people per motor vehicle (Energy Information Administration, 2002).

By July, 2002, the median annual family income was P88,782 (\$AUD3,110), the unemployment rate was 11% with an underemployment rate of 17% (National Statistics Office, Philippines 2002a). From these figures, the endemic levels of poverty can be better understood. In order to implement decent work principles, there must first of all be available work, with remuneration levels at a decent living wage level.

Trade union officials have reported that underpayment of the minimum wage is common practice, as is the use of short term contract labour to avoid payments of required benefits, thus denying employees security of tenure, financial returns, and union membership (Bloom, 2002; Economic Research Institute, 2002; Trade Union Congress, 2002). While the Philippine Constitution and laws provide for the rights of workers to form and join trade unions, only 11% of the total Philippine workforce are members of a union, thus producing a weak bargaining base for improving wages and conditions. In many instances, workers are not aware of their entitlements, and Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE) administrators estimate a 30 to 40 percent noncompliance rate with the minimum wage legislation. (Economic Research Institute, 2002).

The unrecorded, informal economy built on the sustenance and caring spheres of the household, family run small businesses, and agricultural activity, poses a special challenge to the decent work agenda. Unfortunately, according to the ILO, most of the policies, rules and practices that govern the formal economy, are ineffective in the informal sector where abject poverty is more likely to be found (ILO, 2001a). The Philippine Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE) recognises the need to ensure that international labour standards are met in the informal economy (DOLE, 2002b).

Serious deficits appear in the protection of two vulnerable groups that are the focus of this paper: Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), and children involved in child labour, despite laws enacted to protect them (Tenorio, 2002).

Decent Work initiatives aim towards poverty reduction (ILO, 2001b). Poverty is considered to be more than just a lack of income. Poverty is defined more broadly as:

...the state of deprivation in relation to a social standard, the absence of capabilities, opportunities and power that result in the exclusion of individuals and social groups from productive participation in the economic and social life of the nation. (Asian Development Bank 2001)

It is against a backdrop of ongoing poverty, that an estimated seven to eight million Filipinos (10% of the population) work overseas to support their families (DOLE, 2002a; Suarez, 2002b; Wichterlich, 2000); while four million children between the ages of five and seventeen throughout the Philippines, are economically active within both the formal and informal sectors (National Statistics Office, Philippines 2002a).

Overseas Filipino Workers – Impacts on Families

The phenomenon of the large-scale deployment of Filipino workers overseas, became official government policy enacted in 1974 under the Marcos regime (Semyonov & Gorodzeisky, 2002). The underlying reasons were to alleviate ongoing problems of unemployment and associated poverty, along with high fertility rates, political instability, and slow economic growth (Go, 1998 in Semyonov & Gorodzeisky, 2002). Overseas migration has continued to receive the active support of successive government administrations (Kabiling & Suarez, 2002; Morada, 2001).

Filipinos have been considered to be ideally suited to working overseas because of their adaptability and English language skills (Mission, n.d.). Money earned in the host countries is returned to families in the Philippines in the form of remittances. Cash remittances by OFWs constitute the biggest single revenue provider of the Philippine economy (DOLE, 2002a), with almost 85% of the country's gross domestic earnings derived from this source (Batino, 2003). In 2002, the annual remittances amounted to \$US7 billion, a 16.6% increase from the \$US6.2 of the previous year (Batino, 2003; DOLE, 2002b).

Overseas Filipino Workers are frequently described as 'unsung heroes' (Estrella-Gust, 1999; Takei, n.d.), 'modern day heroes' (Uda, 1999), and more recently, 'modern economic heroes' (Araya, 2002). It has been estimated that the 10% of the Philippine population that works overseas at any one time, represents 20% of the productive Filipino workforce, with between 34-53% of the total population, dependent on the remittances from these migrant workers (Mission, n.d.).

While initially, male workers were sent abroad to work, by the year 2000 women comprised 69% of OFWs, prompted by a growing demand for domestic helpers and entertainers (Morada, 2001). It has been found that women OFWs prove 'to be more reliable than men in sending money back home on a regular basis and in higher amounts' (Semyonov & Gorodzeisky, 2002), within the realm of a 71% increase in remittances over their male counterparts (Mission, n.d.). Daughters too, are seen as more reliable than sons in forwarding remittances home (Tacoli, 1996 cited by Guerrero et al 2000).

A recent study has revealed that employment overseas, benefits workers substantially in an economic sense, with a fivefold increase in wages for men and a fourfold increase for women, than if they tried to secure work within the Philippines (Semyonov & Gorodzeisky, 2002). That income is then used to purchase household items and to improve standards of living through increased educational opportunities for children, improved housing and health care, and more family leisure time (Estrella-Gust, 1999).

Male OFWs work overseas, on an average of 8.0 years, while females stay in their host countries for an average of 6.8 years. The most frequent destinations for men, are the oil producing countries of the Middle East (Semyonov & Gorodzeisky, 2002). For women, Hong Kong, the closest neighbour of the Philippines, is the main destination of choice, where most are employed as 'amahs' (maids). Of the Hong Kong amahs, about half are mothers earning money to send to their children back home. The eldest daughters of families working to feed siblings, tend to make up the other half (The Economist, 2001).

Despite adversities and missing families back home, cheerfulness is observed among many of the 154,000 or so Filipino amahs in Hong Kong, who congregate in the centre of the city on Sundays, their day off. Filipinos ascribe 'kapwa' (a Tagalog word meaning 'shared being') to their apparent happiness. It is the notion of kapwa that drives OFWs in the faithful payment of remittances. 'Bayani' is the Tagalog nickname for heroine, and Filipino amahs acknowledge this description in their response: 'We are heroes because we sacrifice for the ones we love' (The Economist, 2001).

Arizala (2002), has observed further that:

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Filipinos will be able to survive miseries even if 'brutalized' by globalization because of their resilient character, by the spirit of 'pakikisama' (shared sacrifices and happiness), faith in the Almighty, ability to work hard and smile despite adversities.

However, this spirit with a 'come what may', stoic attitude, and generous altruistic motives, may well be an impediment for the full implementation of the Decent Work agenda, particularly related to the maintenance of core labour standards, and social protection in workplaces.

The decision for a Filipino to work overseas mostly takes place within the family unit or household, and for the specific purpose of promoting the welfare of the family (Guerrero et al, 2002; Semyonov & Gorodzeisky, 2002). However, there are costs as well as benefits in making this decision, and material benefits (often short term) may not outweigh the social and psychological costs.

While OFWs hold a variety of jobs, they are usually those considered undesirable in the host country and are described as the '3 Ds': 'Dirty, Dangerous and Demanding' (Tigno, 1998 in Semyonov & Gorodzeisky, 2002). Filipino women entertainers deployed to Japan in particular, find that entertainment work is likely to entrap them in prostitution. Reports indicate that over the past decade, 150,000 Filipino women have been trafficked into prostitution throughout Asia (particularly Japan), Europe and the United States (Economic Research Institute, 2002). Employer mistreatment within host countries results in deaths of some 700 workers each year, mainly women (Mission, n.d.). 'Tempting fate' is an idea held by

many women when they set off from the Philippines in search of better work opportunities (Wichterlich, 2000).

In a number of cases, there is the deskilling of women's previous professional status, as teachers and health professionals for instance, take up roles as domestic servants because of the considerable increase in pay (Winterlich, 2000). Men also, often give up professional positions to take on better paid but lower status work, to which they are held under the terms of their contracts, producing 'downward social mobility' (Semyonov & Gorodzeisky, 2002).

One of the more difficult to quantify costs is that of family disruption and breakdown, which occurs more frequently in families where there are long separations between husbands and wives (Estrella-Gust, 1999; Guerrero et al, 2000; Mission, n.d.; Uda, 1999). When mothers leave, young children have been found to be adversely affected in terms of school performance and social adjustment. For older children, while they felt the absence of mothers, they claimed to have become more independent (Ballisto & Conaco, 1998 in Guerrero, 2000).

Ultimately, most of the OFWs return home to the Philippines, and discover a number of adjustments have to be made.

Returning Home: Reintegration Programs

An aspect of international labour migration that has not been studied extensively, is the return migration and reintegration of migrant workers. For example, questions need to be examined in relation to the effects of migration for unmarried women in comparison with married women; and on plans for family formation

(Guerrero et al, 2000). The same questions also apply to male OFWs, who tend to stay away for longer periods than women.

Real pressures have been placed on government institutions to manage the repatriation of illegal migrant workers particularly, as well as those holding formal contracts, who have been sent back to the Philippines in their thousands since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, with no prospects of a job on their return (Crowell, 1998; ILO, 2001a).

Apart from economic downturns, disasters in the host country, political strife, or their own illness or abuse, may mean that OFWs have to return home prematurely. Many will need help, but there is very little government support for what it gives claim to as 'modern day heroes'. In the case of marriage breakdown, the children of returning OFWs may have been turned against them, and there are few counselling services to assist in this situation (Uda, 1999).

There are concerns that many OFWs have been unable to save and prepare economically for their return home (Araya, 2002). When they do return, they face a job market increasingly influenced by the economic forces of globalisation, which demand that employees are highly educated, particularly with skills in information and communication technology. There is the strong likelihood that the skills deficits of OFWs have become more marked due to holding low skills level jobs for the period of their migration. To secure so called decent work and a decent living wage, in competition with young, recent graduates, will be daunting (Uda, 1999). Many returning OFWs, soon find themselves falling back into poverty levels that they sought to eliminate by working overseas.

Then there are challenges in social adjustments. Many domestic helpers on their return home to their rural barangays for instance, find:

Years abroad have made them used to the fast pace of city life and the shift to leisurely ways in the provinces has not been easy – chatting seems too leisurely. They discover newfound independence and drive while abroad, allowing the emergence of self-reliance, open-mindedness, thrift and self discipline. While these are not necessarily negative changes, neighbours who have not gone through similar experiences, being ‘restless and needing something to do’, can be misconstrued as ‘showing off’, especially when the returnees no longer mingle as much as they did before. (Uda, 1999).

The Philippine government through the Department of Labour and Employment, has established several agencies to formally support the migration and return of OFWs. These include the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, and Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (Suarez, 2002b). Numerous Non Government Organisations, also provide a range of services (Araya, 2002; Semyonov and Gorodzeisky, 2002). However, the government services provided for migrants while they are overseas, and returning migrants, haven't been as supportive as for those Filipinos about to migrate (Araya, 2002; Estrella-Gust, 1999; Uda, 1999).

In order to redress this situation, the First National Conference on OFW Reintegration was held in Manila over two days in April, 2002. Some 146 delegates representative of a coalition of government and non government agencies, drew up a Comprehensive OFW

Reintegration program (CORP). Included in the proposals were the establishment of viable programs to provide counselling services, assistance with managing savings, setting up business enterprises, or in forming cooperatives. In addition, it was recognised that mechanisms for informing returnees of the various services in understandable language, would be essential (Araya, 2002).

The ultimate aim of the reintegration program is to bolster 'social stability, promoting national good, and reinforcing the protection, morale and welfare of OFWs' and their families' (Suarez, 2002b).

Another phenomenon identified by both the ILO and the Philippine government that has an impact on the wellbeing of individuals and their families in the Philippines, is that of child labour.

Child Labour

The ILO declared June 12, 2002 the first *World Day Against Child Labour* (ILO, 2002d) following their earlier global reports into the prevalence of child labour (ILO, 2002a; 2002b). In providing facts related to the incidence of child labour worldwide, the ILO estimated that some 246 million children aged between five and seventeen years are involved in child labour, which represents about one out of every six children in the world. The concern of the ILO is that many of the children are involved in jobs 'for which they are too young, or jobs that otherwise endanger their health and wellbeing' (ILO, 2002d). The worst forms of child labour, which are particularly hazardous for children, are performed by nearly three-quarters of the world's child workers with some 73 million under age ten. Hazards such as harsh and dangerous physical and environmental conditions,

producing heavy physical work in unsafe worksites, biological infections, contact with toxic chemicals, and the more abhorrent forms of child slavery, 'trafficking, debt bondage, prostitution, and pornography,' endanger children's health, minds and morals (ILO, 2002d).

The largest number of working children aged 14 years and under, are in the Asian and Pacific regions, and it appears that girls and boys are equally at risk, but with boys holding a slight majority, especially when engaged in hazardous work (55% - ILO, 2002d).

In response to the launch of the *World Day against Child Labour*, Ms Patricia Sto. Thomas (2002), Secretary, Department of Labour and Employment, Philippines and a Philippine representative to the ILO, acknowledged the ILO statistics related to child labour, with reference to the three million or so Filipino children caught in this plight.

A 2001 Philippine survey on children however, indicated that some four million children aged between five and seventeen years were economically active. It was found that the majority of children were either labourers or unskilled workers, engaged in unpaid work in agriculture on a seasonal basis. Fifty percent of the children worked on farms, with a further 28% within their own homes, or in their employer's house. Approximately 60% of the four million children were found to be working in hazardous conditions. Figure 1 more clearly shows the numbers of children involved in the main forms of hazardous work.

Figure 1. Venn Diagram of Number of Working Children 5 – 17 Years in Hazardous Environments: October 2001

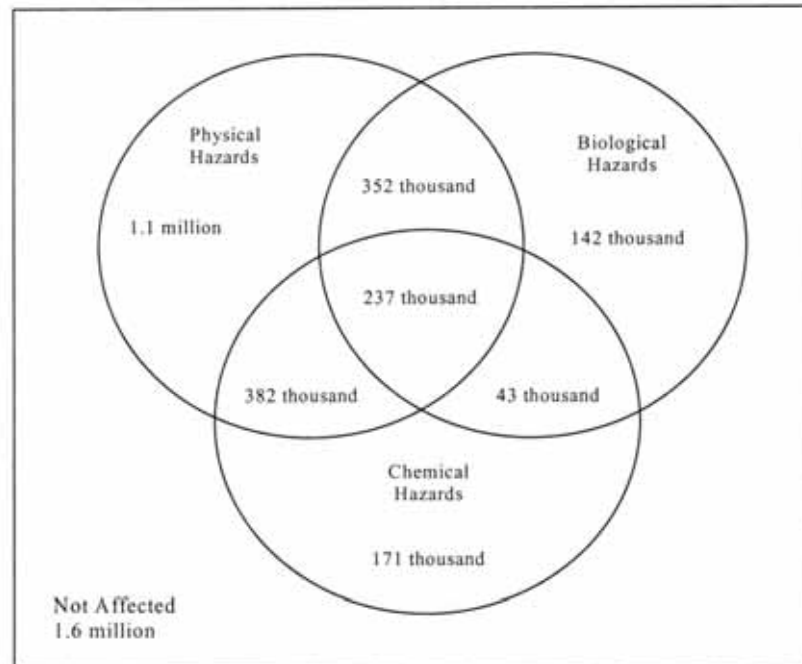


Figure 1. Venn Diagram of number of working children 5–17 years in hazardous environments: October 2001.

Source: National Statistics Office, Philippines 2002a.

Of the children exposed to hazards, 70% were males, while around 10% of working children were exposed to the three forms of hazardous environments. Much of the work was heavy, physical work (National Statistics Office, Philippines 2002a).

A particular concern, apart from the harshness of the working conditions, has to be the future life chances of the children. An adequate education may be the only mechanism by which children can break out of cycles of poverty. However, the survey found that 45% of those attending school had difficulty catching up with lessons

through fatigue and noticeable levels of absenteeism. Also 40% of working children dropped out of school. Boys were twice as likely to drop out of school as girls.

There have been reported instances in the Philippines of children in the provinces of central and western Mindanao, being trained as soldiers, and working in mines. An estimate has been given of between 2,000 – 3,000 child soldiers, 20% of which are girls. The child soldiers carry out the same assignments as adult soldiers and spend 7.61 hours on average per day in soldiering duties. As part of the fulfilment of 'jihad', they receive no pay. Of the numerous dangers they are exposed to, they are strongly convinced that they are doing the right thing in defence of their Islamic beliefs. While hostilities continue between various insurgent groups that enlist child soldiers, and the Philippine government, there have been attempts at amicable solutions through relief and rehabilitation programs, as these regions also suffer the highest levels of poverty (Cagaco-Guiam, 2002).

A 1995 study identified 114 children (including seven girls) working on a gold-mining site, one third of which were aged 7-12 years. The children were exposed to toxic chemicals, hazards of working in makeshift tunnels, and having to carry heavy sacks of ore on their backs or in carts. Half of the children in this study were not attending school. It is not known to what extent children are working in other small scale mines in the Philippines, however mining is considered one of the most hazardous occupations for children (Estrella-Gust, n.d.).

Children have been found working illegally on docks in central and southern Philippines, where they are paid piece rates to unload

bulk cargo, which exposes them to harmful chemicals and dust in ship's holds. Employment of children as divers on fishing vessels, in dangerous conditions, is also prevalent. Within the formal manufacturing sector, children have been discovered working in sweatshop conditions, often for well-known fashion labels (Economic Research Institute, 2002).

Philippine law forbids forced labour including forced and bonded labour by children. However, there have been reports of children forced into prostitution, drug-trafficking, and other areas of work in the non-regulated, informal sector (Economic Research Institute, 2002).

A Philippine Non Government Organisation, the Visayan Forum Foundation Incorporated (2002), in a submission to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, focused on the issue of child domestic workers and links with trafficking and sexual exploitation. While they wanted these disturbing elements addressed, a question posed by them and their answer to follow, perhaps provides clear cultural insights as to why child labour persists in the Philippines:

...what helps keep the Asian family alive despite the increasing pressures of economic globalisation? It is the everyday army of maids, cooks and babysitters who remain out of sight and out of mind while they free working mothers and care for children in exchange for low salaries that they remit back to their poor families in rural areas. They are the hidden workforce multipliers that make the formal labour force more productive. Societies therefore still desire and necessitate the existence of domestic workers – the practice

is deeply rooted. (Visayan Forum Foundation Incorporated, 2002).

The Visayan platform solution to this dilemma, was an appeal to the United Nations, to recognise 'domestic work as decent and productive work, having real impact on national economies', and to then set minimum international standards for governing domestic work as an industry (Visayan Forum Foundation Incorporated, 2002).

According to Patricia Sto. Thomas (2002), Secretary of the Philippine Department of Labour and Employment, the government has initiated a number of measures to reduce the incidence of child labour. Increased government services have been provided in vulnerable geographic regions, through poverty reduction schemes; directing children back to school; and surveillance of airports, bus stations and other travel venues for possible trafficking of children to cities. She acknowledges that while there is still much to be done, concerted efforts are being made to address child labour in both the formal and informal sectors. Sto. Thomas foresees that when parents can be gainfully employed, then the economic burden is lifted from children, freeing them to attend school.

From policy to practice, rhetoric to reality

On the basis of research for this paper, it is evident that a number of comprehensive international and Philippine policies are already in place to redeem the negative aspects of overseas work and child labour. It needs to be understood though, that policies are considered to be 'operational statements of values' which have been allocated authoritatively by particular interest groups to 'project images of an ideal society' (Ball 1990, 3). However, the language of policy

documents is couched in rhetoric (Ball, 1990, 213). Because of the idealism inherent in rhetoric, goals within reform policies may never be achieved as by definition, 'ideals are always at odds with reality'. (Pakulski, 1991, 209). Rhetoric nevertheless has an important role to play as a constant reminder of principles and standards against which society can measure its practice. This reminder is essential, not only for the implementation, but more importantly, the integration of decent work principles into all spheres of Filipino life.

The solutions to ensure decent work for individual Filipinos and their families, taking into account the pressures of global economic forces; the deeply entrenched cultural attitudes of stoicism and 'come what may'; with practices of overseas migration and child labour to sustain basic living standards, are complex.

Much stronger efforts for building the Philippine economy to alleviate poverty, ensuring children's increased participation in education, full monitoring and implementation of protective laws, and a stronger political will at all levels of governance, are needed for the restoration of the wellbeing and dignity of families and their children in the Philippines.

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