

## Providing Psychosocial Support to Family Development Workers following Very Vulnerable Families in the slums of Manila Port Area

**Dynamic Family Development Program for the poorest families in Manila, Philippines - Inter Aide-ATIA/ EnFaNCE**

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Summary	<p>This paper was written for the 4<sup>th</sup> CONGRESS OF THE ASEAN REGIONAL UNION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETIES (ARUPS) &amp; 50<sup>th</sup> convention of the Psychological Association of the Philippines, which took place in Manila in October 2013. <a href="http://www.papconvention.org/">http://www.papconvention.org/</a></p> <p>It describes the staff care set-up developed by Inter Aide / ATIA for ENFaNCE Foundation's team of Family Development Workers: <b>monthly group sessions</b> which serve as venue for <b>clinical supervision</b>; depending on needs, these monthly sessions can serve as <b>group therapy, critical incident stress debriefing, conflict resolution</b> group. The group sessions can also <b>address key themes</b> such as Work-Life Balance, Self Care, etc.</p>

### IMPORTANT NOTICE

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*We would like to stress here that these technical notes are not prescriptive. Their purpose is not to "say what should be done" but to present experiences that have given positive results in the context in which they were carried out.*

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## Introduction

Poverty incidence in the Philippines is 27.9% in the first half of 2012 ([www.philstar.com](http://www.philstar.com), [www.inquirer.net](http://www.inquirer.net))

This means that despite high economic growth in the country over a quarter of the population remain locked in poverty.

Among the families benefitting from EnFaNCE's activities, a survey conducted in 2013 with 982 families (among the 2 145 families member of the micro-saving program « Piso Pisong Ipon » developed by Inter Aide & EnFaNCE) show that 68% of these families are below the threshold of 1 US\$/person/day (45 pesos for 1US\$) and 93% below the 2US\$/person/day poverty threshold.

### Psychosocial impact of poverty (Blacksher, 2002)

- Poor people have poorer health conditions and shorter life expectancy than those who are economically better off.
- Studies have shown that they suffer greater incidences of low self-esteem, poor self-mastery, cynicism, hostility, and diminished sense of agency.
- Poverty conditions do not facilitate the development of self-empowerment, such as the capacity for self-determination.

There are people and organizations helping those in extreme poverty. However, being exposed to such harsh realities may also take its toll on those who help others. As one researcher on humanitarian work says, "helping may come at a price."

### The costs of helping

- Compassion fatigue (which should actually be called "empathy fatigue"<sup>1</sup>), is the negative experience associated with helping in extremely stressful situations, like disasters, extreme poverty, and human suffering.
- Studies have also show that those dealing with people who are experiencing intense distress are prone to experiencing distress themselves (Roberts et al., 2003; McGregor et al., 2008).
- A worker's own psychological issues may generate secondary stress that s/he may develop through helping people in extreme poverty, and that may intensify the worker's overall distress.
- Helping people in extreme poverty is a very difficult task, and the fruits of one's labor may come across as elusive, which may result to feelings of hopelessness about the work that they do, and feelings of inadequacy and ineffectiveness.

<sup>1</sup> According to Mathieu Ricard, feeling empathy with people in distress (meaning that you actually feel their distress) can lead what is called « compassion fatigue ». But compassion is a positive feeling closest to love whereas empathy (from Greek, suffering within) is the process by which the others' emotions can be felt : <http://www.matthieuricard.org/blog/posts/remedier-a-la-fatigue-de-l-empathie-1> and <http://www.matthieuricard.org/blog/posts/remedier-a-la-fatigue-de-l-empathie-2>



### The joy of helping

- Some studies have shown that exposure to adverse experiences may lead to personal growth.
- One of the positive effects of helping is compassion satisfaction.

Given these, there is a recognition that those who help people in extreme poverty should also be helped.

Being helpers, the worker's self is his/her most important tool, and it is important that this tool should be in 'top shape' in order to be effective.

This paper presents the issues confronting workers in EnFaNCE foundation, an NGO that works among the poorest of the poor communities. The paper also describes how the organization is able to address such needs through their staff care-oriented psychosocial support program.

It is hoped that insights from this paper will inspire research work that will elucidate more clearly the challenges facing people who work among the poorest of the poor, and clarify conditions that can better moderate the "cost of helping" and thus facilitate the worker's ability not only to resist adversities but even grow from experiences of adversity.

### **EnFaNCE Foundation's activities**

EnFaNCE Foundation is a non-profit, non-governmental organization based in Del Pan, Manila, Philippines, and operating in the slums of Baseco & Tondo, Manila. It has been operating for ten years and employs a non-political, non-religious, non dole-out approach to work with the poorest of the poor. The overall goal of organization is to bridge the gap between the poorest of the poor and the existing organizations providing health, education, economic, employment and documentation services. The organization works at the family level to build the families resilience, autonomy, confidence and problem resolution skills, thus enabling the families to improve their own lives in a sustainable way. Activities implemented to achieve this include family counseling, referrals, financial services, trainings and workshops.



↑ The building Gawan Kaligan (GK) in Aroma Temporary Housing » where EnFaNCE has been working since 2009 with ultra-poor families



↑ The rainy season in Aroma Temporary housing: when the area is flooded, the living conditions are even worse

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**Places of service:**

↑ Baseco, the beach



Katuparan ("achieving one's dream" in Tagalog...)↑

**BASECO**

The whole Barangay of Baseco (54 hectares) is a very poor area, and is home to an estimated 51,060 individuals (10,712 families). The primary sources of income for the families in Baseco are fishing, vending, scavenging, tricycle/pedicab driving and carriers for boats docking at the pier. Over half of the families live on less than PhP 5,000 (approximately \$125) a month. Due to its location on the shoreline, Baseco is heavily prone to disasters.

**TONDO**

EnFaNCE works in three pockets of poverty in Tondo: Sitio Damayan (home to approximately 1,500 families), Aroma Temporary Housing (home to around 1,500 families) and Katuparan (home to approximately 2,100 families). The main source of income for the families is scavenging since they live near the port area where garbage is shipped to Bulacan. There are no latrines, sanitation nor sewage. There is lack of access to public services such as water, electricity, sanitary infrastructures, etc. The area is rampant with drugs and the associated crime. There are very few NGOs and no services willing to operate directly in the community (services are located outside the slums areas).

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TONDO Sitio Damayan ↑



↑ "Temporary Housing" Area

EnFaNCE's seven Family Development Workers (FDWs) spend four out of every five workday a week visiting the poorest families in these areas.



Home-based family follow-up during 6 to 9 months



Training sessions in small groups, called « *pulong* » in tagalog, are delivered every week within the communities and are opened to all the people living in the areas

### Profile of the Family Development Workers

EnFaNCE employs seven Family Development Workers (FDWs) who conduct counseling home visits in the aforementioned areas. Their ages range between 32 years and 48 years of age. All staff live in similar and slightly higher conditions than the beneficiaries they help. Six of the seven workers hold an undergraduate degree from a Philippine University primarily in the social sciences/psychology fields of study. EnFaNCE has a very low turnover rate of staff with two staff being with the organization from 1-3 years, one staff being with the organization for 2-5 years, three staff being with the organization for 5-8 years and one staff working with EnFaNCE since its beginning, 10 years ago.

**Sources of data:** Data for this paper came from interviews with the staff and content analysis of the narratives noted in the minutes of the processing sessions with the consultant

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psychologist, Dr Bautista, and content analysis of minutes of the team meetings the programme manager facilitated. The social workers' names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

## **Results and discussion:**

### **Stressors and challenges of working with the poorest of the poor:-**

The FDWs gave the following answers:

- Encountering emergency life or death situations. There are many crisis situations that come up in the community such as getting seriously sick, someone dying, people getting into fights and petty thefts and robbery. The FDWs are witnesses to these events. They lend psychological support and point to agencies that can provide material assistance. Here is what one worker had to say about this issue: "Many things I can take. But one thing that really eats up my heart is seeing infants and children dying because they do not have enough food to eat. Why should helpless children die of hunger? You know, many times, I go to homes here, and I see some newly born babies who are so thin you can see their bones sticking out... and to my mind comes the thought "How long will this baby last here?" It takes me some time to recover these kinds of things.
- Overwhelming, difficult situations of the families. Poverty brings with it many complications, both material and non material. Often the workers report a combination of problems that they find families having to deal with, and this sometimes overwhelms them. Marta talks about such experiences: "Sometimes the problems of our families can be overwhelming. It feels like you are drowning! Maybe even people with PHDs would feel the same. For instance, we have one mother, Aimylyn, who has two children, a six month old who was so severely malnourished that he had stopped responding to stimuli altogether and a two year old who had leptospirosis and an ear infection on top of being malnourished The mother reacted positively to our counseling and took her children to a doctor and was given prescriptions for medicine. However, when she asked for money to buy medicine from her husband he would not give any centavo and beat her up simply for asking. He then used whatever little money he had to buy drugs".
- Not being able to give anything material. One thing that makes the work difficult for the workers is their being a non-dole out organization so part of the policy is not to give money as a form of help. Myrna has this to say about this problem: "But you know, part of my agony is seeing their need and not being able to give even a little from my meager salary. Standing by and being witness to so much suffering without being able to give material aid about it is sheer agony for me."
- Having to help others while you are having your own issues. Here is how it is experienced by a worker: "There is the saying "The show must go on." You know, we are very good at that. Many times, we have to go to work, with a heavy heart because we have had difficult encounters with our own families. Like me, you know (*naman*), I am dealing with my partner and his addiction problem and other extra curricular activities. It is not easy but I basically can manage. But sometimes, the going gets rough when the problems your family brings to you is almost exactly like the problem that is presented to you by your client...so it is just *KAPOW!* I get home very tired on those days."

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Other problems that the staff had to deal with which tax their reserve energy would be:

- Safety in the area — not even DSWD<sup>2</sup> will go
- Changing the families outlook on life
- The family needs to and wants to work to improve their situation and we cannot help them (problems beyond EnFaNCE's scope of intervention and/or no services available to refer the family to, as is the case with severe addictions for instance)
- If the family is not interested/responsive and doesn't want the help
- Having enough agencies to refer for all the family needs
- Unrealistic expectations and needs of the community
- Heavy addiction problems of the families
- The environment the families are in (lack of sanitation, etc.)
- Travel every day to and from the office and then to the communities.

### **Coping strategies:**

When asked how they cope with such challenges/stressors, the workers gave the following answers:

- Try to network more with different agencies to have referrals for all needs so even if we do not have money to give them to meet their need, we can connect them to people who can give them the service;
- Telling ourselves to be strong
- Doing our best with our families, setting objectives with them so they can focus;
- Practice understanding and acceptance, so as not to judge families
- Wait for the growth sessions so as to process issues and work on our personal problems so they do not weigh us down
- Practice family time - separating work and home life
- Sports/exercise
- Gain more knowledge to be equipped to face challenges (e.g. professional trainings)
- By working with the family to overcome problems and using their successes as a source of energy to continue
- We share our stories to each other.

### **Sources of work satisfaction:**

It is interesting to note the low turnover rate among staff. Several times, some of the staff were offered jobs with higher salaries, but they opted to stay with EnFaNCE saying that they love

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<sup>2</sup> Philippines' Department of Social Welfare & Development



their job and do not wish to leave their client-families. The following present the greatest rewards of working with the poorest of the poor for EnFaNCE workers:

- Happiness of knowing you are helping them
- Many learnings
- Coming to the community and seeing how appreciated and welcome you are
- When you are able to save a life; like you are able to bring a dying child in the hospital and she survived;
- Seeing the changes during and after intervention
- Meeting families in different developmental stages of their life
- Seeing the family becoming self-reliant/autonomous
- Having co-workers you can trust
- Having friends in the organization who listen to your problems
- Personal growth: It is not only my families who grow, I do as well; before I could not open up and be assertive, now I am stronger and more confident;
- My work inspires me to learn. I am pursuing Masters studies at UP<sup>3</sup> now.
- Seeing the smile and hope on the families' faces.

### Staff Care Program

EnFaNCE ensures the care of their staff by working on four core dimensions of organizational stress reduction:

#### 1. Growth group sessions:

In 2007, EnFaNCE identified the need for more intensive support for the team. As such, they linked up with a clinical psychologist, Dr. B. to set up **clinical supervision**. The core dimensions of staff care came out of this.

Doc B. then proceeded to hold **growth group sessions** at least once a month. These sessions vary in terms of structure and objectives. Most of the time, it serves as venue for **clinical supervision**; if personal issues are raised by the work with the client-families, or occur in the life of field workers, then moments of **group therapy** allow the workers to share their issues and process them with the help of the group and Doc B. At other times, the group sessions become **more structured, addressing key themes** such as Work-Life Balance, self care, etc. At times when a critical incident occurs in the community, the group becomes an opportunity for **critical incident stress debriefing**. Then there are times when the workers get into misunderstandings and conflicts, so the group then is transformed into a **conflict resolution** group.

The following are the narratives obtained from the workers regarding the impact of such sessions on them:

<sup>3</sup> University of the Philippines <http://www.up.edu.ph/>



**Impact of the Growth group:**

- ✘ Helped me know more about myself
- ✘ Has given me motivation to make changes in my life and be stronger — builds my resilience
- ✘ Helped me understand the situations at work and in my personal life, and how the two interact
- ✘ They helped to relieve my stress and baggage
- ✘ Allowed time for us to talk about our issues as well as have professional learnings that can be applied personally and professionally
- ✘ It helped me become a better me
- ✘ Because I am not so burdened with personal issues I can help the families better
- ✘ Enabled me to air out my concerns in a safe environment
- ✘ Discussing personal issues so I do not transfer them to my client-families
- ✘ *Kumustahan* (how are you) sessions helped me to open up, and trust others
- ✘ “These sessions have a cost for the organization, I know that. That’s why they make me appreciate the concern of the organization on us... this makes me all the more committed to my work”.

**2. “HEALTHFUL” recruitment and standard operating procedures**

The following are policies in recruitment and work habits that we have found to be healthful at EnFaNCE.

- (i) Giving premium value to personality-work fit. This is very important. We try to get staff whose life experiences are not so far from the people they are serving.
- (ii) Caring and concern for people and “emotional intelligence” as more important than cognitive or mental intelligence and educational accomplishment. We noted that what makes the difference in facilitating change is the field workers’ care and engagement with their client-families and not the good grades and educational background;
- (iii) Immersion in the community and with the group - Part of our hiring process is having the short listed applicant to have immersion in the community and in the office. It seems relevant to give the priority to applicants who are comfortable with the community and with the team over those who are uptight in the presence of the staff and when in the community;
- (iv) Other characteristics that are proven to be important:
  - Applicant should not live in the same area as the beneficiaries they follow up, so as to be able to keep a healthy professional distance with the families;
  - Capacity to deal with stress
  - Openness to consider and respect the beneficiaries’ capacities;
  - Willingness to learn new skills, a new approach and capacity to work as a team.

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### 3. Psychologically sensitive work policies:

- Limited Caseload – especially limiting number of families with ‘heavy’ situations
- Case conferences of families are conducted weekly in team meetings, in this way, the staff feel supported and collegial learning processes are instituted;
- The worker should not operate alone. S/he should at least have a partner. This lightens the load.
- Human Resource policies and benefits are also in place to ensure maximum support: on top of regular benefits, we encourage, three breaks, staff benefits like transportation and cell card allowance etc. as well as extra health coverage for bronchial problems due to the nature of the work areas. Flexi-time working hours is possible.
- Documentation of learning sessions and meetings, as well as of what transpired in family visits. There is no book on family support for poor families<sup>4</sup>. We hope to be able to distil insights from our experiences, write about them, so they can be shared, and feedback from others would help us to have outside perspective on the work that we do;
- Participatory and understanding management style – allowing room to debrief and work together is practiced to ensure all workers are able to get support when needed and systems are in place to ensure ideas flow from all levels of the team.
- Staff Care: the organization has people whose job is to take care of those who take care of others. This makes the workers feel that the organization care for them and that they are not alone in the midst of their struggles.
- Personal issues and work conflicts are addressed and dealt with.
- Connectedness: the organization creates venues for workers to connect with each other so they do not feel alone in facing the challenges of their work.
- Training and orientation. When the worker knows what s/he is doing, s/he will be more confident in the work that s/he does; hence, the feeling of being effective.

### 4. Professional development and the “Community Based Training Program”

EnFaNCE offers all its workers opportunities for professional development through a number of internal and external trainings throughout the year. In 2013 alone, staff have been trained in Disaster Management by the Red Cross, Philippines Chapter; on Effects of Disaster on Mental Health by CCWC; and in financial literacy by SEED. They also have office based trainings on health issues and topics useful to their family work such as basic counseling, family counseling,

<sup>4</sup> Pratiques Network’s website capitalizes the experiences of the Family Development Programs implemented by Inter Aide and its partners. [www.interaide.org/pratiques/social/social](http://www.interaide.org/pratiques/social/social) A document on the Family Development Approach was written and is online in French (updated 2010) and in English (updated 2009) <http://www.interaide.org/pratiques/node/500?language=en> – Cebu Family Development Program (Inter Aide / STePS) had also documented the Family Development Approach <http://www.interaide.org/pratiques/node/90>

Enfants & Développement has also developed a website to share the experiences of its programs & partners [http://www.enfantsetdeveloppement.org/new\\_bdd/?lang=en](http://www.enfantsetdeveloppement.org/new_bdd/?lang=en)



working with couples, etc. They are also encouraged to attend seminars and conferences. The organization also encourages sharing of EnFaNCE experience with communities outside of work, as in the case of reading paper in conferences like the Psychological Association of the Philippines' conferences<sup>5</sup>. The workers also develop skills and self-confidence as they are able to facilitate learning sessions with students and practitioners who would like to do psychosocial work in marginalized communities.

The Community-based Training (CBT) Program was developed after the team attended a graduate class in Family Therapy where the workers shared their experiences to graduate students in the MA/Ph.D. program of University of the Philippines<sup>6</sup> in family therapy. The team received positive feedback: the students told them how much they learned from their experiences which they cannot get from books; this led to the idea of developing an internship program as well as a training program for other NGOs. The CBT Program enables learning to be shared but also, it builds the workers confidence in themselves and motivates them. This is an important driving force in the difficult nature of their work.

### Caring for Caregivers

Working among the poorest of the poor is taxing on the psychological reserve of NGO workers. It is therefore imperative that we all become committed to caring for our caregivers in a way that enables them to continue their fight against poverty.

#### Recommendations:

- ✘ Document efforts on staff care of organizations working among the poor;
- ✘ Evaluate the effectiveness of aspects of their staff care program using action-research model;
- ✘ Have shared data bank among NGOs working among the poor on the subject of staff care.

We are glad to end with a quotation from a staff about the value of her work at EnFaNCE:

“By working at EnFaNCE I get something that money cannot buy and that cannot be found in books: ‘First Hand Experience’ It is tiring and lots of work but it serves a purpose, we are able to provide hope and inspiration to many people and gain lots of self-satisfaction! What more could we ask for?”

<sup>5</sup> <http://pap.org.ph/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.up.edu.ph/>

