Introduction

The Philippines is among the member states of the United Nations which adopted the Millennium Declaration in September 2000 and affirmed its commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs are aimed at 1) reducing by half the number of people who live in extreme poverty and hunger; 2) making primary education accessible to all; 3) reducing gender disparities; 4) reducing deaths of children below five years old; 5) providing access to reproductive health services, and reducing deaths of mothers; 6) combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other infectious diseases; 7) ensuring environmental protection and sustainability; and 8) developing a global partnership for development.

The abundance of street children in major cities in the country, however, does not sit well with such commitment. Street children are everywhere, especially in urban areas. And sadly, they include children as young as four years old or even younger.

Magnitude of street children

Lamberte (2002)[1] estimates the population of street children in the Philippines to be 3 percent (246,011) of the population 0–17 years old. Street children comprise 5 percent of the country's urban poor children, which is estimated to be 4,832,000. Of the 246,011 street children, 20 percent are identified to be "highly visible on the streets." This cohort of street children comprises 1.61 percent of the urban young population between 0–17 years old. Using the criteria set in the

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[1] Heavily used with author's permission as reference in the joint PIDS and UNICEF study.
[2] Based on UNICEF's definition, child protection pertains to "preventing and responding to violence, exploitation, and abuse against children."

Proliferation of street children: a threat to the MDGs

In the context of child protection, street children are among those children in need of special protection (CNSP) because of the risks and hazards they face while on the streets without adult supervision. In particular, they are exposed to violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, STI and/or HIV/AIDS, drug or substance addiction, and accidents. If not properly addressed, the proliferation of street children poses a threat to the attainment of the MDGs.

Lamberte study, the estimated number of highly visible street children for the 22 major cities covered in the study is 22,556. Metro Manila had the highest number at 11,346 children. The disaggregation is as follows:

- Manila City - 3,266
- Quezon City - 2,867
- Kalookan City - 1,530
- Pasay City - 1,420
- rest of Metro Manila - 2,263

At the national level, the number of highly visible children on the streets was placed at 45,000 to 50,000.

What's the concern?

In the context of child protection,[2] street children are among those children in need of special protection (CNSP) because of the risks and hazards they face while on the streets without adult supervision. In particular, they are exposed to violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, STI and/or HIV/

AIDS, drug or substance addiction, and accidents. More specifically, violence against children can lead to child mortality while sexual abuse and exploitation can lead to unwanted pregnancies and also infection of boys and girls with STI and HIV/AIDS. If not properly addressed, the proliferation of street children poses a threat to the attainment of the MDGs, particularly MDGs 2, 4, and 6 by 2015. While it is true that government and nongovernment organizations have done much work in this regard, street children have nonetheless become a regular sight especially in urban areas such as Metro Manila.

How do we take them off the streets?

One of the factors that determine the visibility of children on the street is their being away from school. According to Lamberte (2002), about 34.4 percent of the street children covered in the study indicated that they have

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not gone to schooling in the previous year. Further, less participation in schooling is notable among street children in the National Capital Region (NCR) and in the Visayas. Instead of schooling, street children engage in various activities such as playing with friends and peers, sleeping, and earning a living (e.g., scavenging, vending, car washing/watching, and shoe shining). What is alarming is their indulgence in high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse (e.g., rugby sniffing), unprotected sex, and illegal acts (e.g., gambling and petty theft such as pickpocketing).

Bringing and keeping them in school is a good idea. It is very consistent with the country's commitment to the MDGs and the Philippine Education For All (EFA) 2015 National Action Plan.

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[3] Functional literacy means that all individuals should possess a complete range of skills and competencies, i.e., cognitive, affective, and behavioral.

The EFA Plan aims to provide basic competencies for all, thus bringing about functional literacy[3] for all by 2015. Nevertheless, street children have unique circumstances (e.g., some of them may not have ever gone to formal schooling), which make it difficult for educators/advocates to integrate them into the formal education system.

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development of self and a sense of community; and expanding one's world vision. Thus, ALS is a promising partner of the formal system in the delivery of basic education services.

The ALS programs are implemented through mobile teachers, literacy facilitators, and instructional managers who are adequately trained to ensure quality teaching services. In addition, ALS materials come in various forms such as posters, booklets, flip charts, comics, leaflets, games, videos, audio tapes, and others. Just like formal education, however, ALS requires funds to be able to deliver the expected services. Obviously, the DepEd cannot possibly do it alone. There is a need to encourage partnership (e.g., cost sharing) among local government units (LGUs), nongovernment organizations (NGOs), private sector, and the civil society to make ALS work. At the end of the day, ALS might be what the street children really need, not ALMS. □

References

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