

Section Five

Looking forward – International and cross-cultural perspectives

Looking forward – international perspectives: an introduction
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Fostering the future

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Looking forward – International perspectives

An introduction

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The keynote address by Angela Maria Pangan gives a detailed account of the development of foster care services in the Philippines and the contemporary constraints, concerns and challenges for the further development of foster care in her country and other countries of the Asia Pacific Region. The story begins with a substantial system of residential institutions and works through attitudinal and systems changes in the sixties following Government and UNICEF work which revealed problems in the standard of care. Legislative change in the seventies facilitated program development of foster care. For many countries in the world today the demand for personal social services, as well as health and education services, substantially exceeds the supply of resources available. The agency NORFIL arose from intercountry collaboration between agencies in Norway and the Philippines.

Although the story in each country is unique given variations and historical changes in political form, cultural tradition and often mixed cultural and religious components in a society, physical and social circumstances, and vastly differing economic circumstances, there are many issues in common between countries and many issues warranting international interest and frequently international concern and action.

Thinking globally and cross culturally draws attention to the great variety of arrangements among family and clan for sharing the care of children in earlier history. In the late nineties however we encounter powerful reminders of the massive societal changes which have occurred in this century in most countries. Gone is subsistence affluence in most places and internally self sufficient clans and villages, although at the grass roots in many developing countries and some of the affluent ones, one can often encounter attempts to recapture the benefits of living more harmoniously with the environment. Increasingly the world population, still burgeoning in some countries, shops rather than produces for its needs.

Poverty is a serious concern for a majority of families in the global village. The regular reports of the United Nations Development Program reveal a growing divide between rich and poor among nations and within nations. Many countries are burdened by debt and many are financing wars rather than social development. Regardless of the merits of global economic policies and settings and hard questions around international governance and peacemaking and peacekeeping, questions of national sovereignty, the accountability of transnational organisations, regional governance and trading blocks, there is every indication that the nurture and care of children remain a fundamental concern in all countries. As an issue it does not always have much political clout, there is a deep expectation that families should and will provide. Politicians do take notice of children at election time but when

it comes to devoting substantial resources to supporting parents under strain and children in need, the formula is frequently still clouded by the enigmas of the public/private divide as well as class, race and gender issues. Other agendas to do with adult pride, profit or power tend to dominate.

In the short term and foreseeable future we can be confident that poverty, wars and disasters such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic will continue to generate children in need of extra family support and at times out of home care. IFCO 1999 provided many positive opportunities for people to share their perspective and experiences with others. White westernised, European or English speaking voices tended to dominate in formal presentations but there was a strong sense of the presence of a greater heterogeneity with the presence of others from Eastern Europe, various Asian countries, Africa and the Pacific Nations.

It is common to encounter reference to the colonial era which introduced European style institutional systems and legislation in many places. Economic stringency, the overwhelming magnitude of the family and child welfare problems, and a lack of research and progressive policy leaves some systems looking as though they are frozen in history. In general, however, it is part of national agendas to do better with the health, education and welfare of children. Doing so however has often been dependent on the work of religious institutions or the charitable work of outsiders. Recent decades have seen the world wide push toward national market economies and the imposition of public sector cutbacks under structural adjustment policies being imposed in exchange for economic assistance from the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. Structural adjustment demands that countries cut their cloth more closely according to their means, take action to be more competitive and stimulate economic growth but to minimise public sector spending. These theoretical positions and attitudes were boosted substantially by the oil crisis of the early seventies leading many governments to introduce cost containment approaches and to pay more attention to their role in the global economy. Public choice theory appears to have moved into a dominant position in economic discourse, placing faith in competition and markets through free trade to achieve productivity and growth. In theory the growth would benefit most people. Some though who cannot compete would need the help of a safety net. These ideas soon became established in the most powerful organisations and institutions, globally and to a considerable degree among nations. They have been major drivers of policies and events in recent decades.

Such principles though, commonly meant cutting back in ways which affect health, education and welfare programs. Solutions to these problems were largely left to international and local

aid agencies, families and communities themselves, including some impressive local self help and mutual support programs. The world has been startled by the effectiveness of the Grameen Bank which originated in Bangladesh where small loans to the poor generate productive returns with very high levels of successful repayment. It seems though that local efforts are usually struggling against the odds if national and international policies and practices fail to provide support or, worse, drain resources away or destroy habitats.

In more recent times these international institutions may be beginning to realise some of the negative impacts of the rigid application of structural adjustment principles and the various world forums are struggling with better ways to do things as countries erupt in civil war and/or default on their economic commitments. Some countries have had better fortune than others in the world economic system but most see themselves as having much to achieve in improving the well-being of children and families. During the conference the input of participants and other observers led the writer to develop the following summary of the position in Vietnam.

Vietnam is a country with a young population, children under 16 (the age of majority in Vietnam) make up a high proportion of the population. Around 1986 there was a major thrust into a market economy (Doi Moi) as well as a set of structural adjustment conditions imposed which resulted in the reduction or withdrawal of many social services. Economically the country gained through the late eighties and nineties from its relationship with the richer countries of Asia with some negative effects also from the more recent economic downturn experienced by those countries. Under the earlier form of government there were expectations that the government or mass organisations would have taken care of everybody's needs. However the shift to a market economy approach and structural adjustment requirements impinges on state provision of personal social services. The aftermath of the long war and significant emigration has had an impact on traditions of family solidarity. At this stage there remains a significant institutional care sector, alongside considerable street life survival. The last two decades have seen considerable expansion of intercountry adoption. This was boosted as the conditions for intercountry adoption were tightened in Thailand, the Philippines and Malaysia. A strong local adoption sector and the principles of family inclusive permanent care have not been developed. There has been a tradition of informal fostering among extended family which sometimes works well, but in the face of difficulties, insightful support and professional input is not available at this time. A visible problem with street children appears to be mounting to the degree that the government declared a commitment in May 1999 to improve the situation of children in especially difficult circumstances. Possible avenues for this might include strengthening family support and forms of temporary alternative family care. One agency has established a fostering program but at this stage it is dependent for its operation on income generated from intercountry adoption. Foster care as an option is not yet firmly on planning agendas in Vietnam, in spite of government commitment to improve the lot of children and in spite of increasing knowledge about its possible application.

At the IFCO conference there were quite a few presentations on services and particular issues in different countries apart from those in Western Europe and North America, including Japan, Indonesia, Fiji, Ukraine, Uganda. Regrettably the Ghanaian delegate was delayed in transit. Each potentially adds to our perspective which must inevitably include both local and

global components. Of course there were the Aussies and Kiwis, and one can see trouble brewing in the way we have lumped countries with each other. Oh well – we had better mention Canada and Ireland on their own at least – help! Hungary and Netherlands (both doing loads of work, some of it together), without forgetting the positive presence of people from other countries who participated in ways other than giving formal presentations, noting too that there were many nations not represented and the possible need for future friendly global outreach by us all.

It may be possible to draw on the examples of international collaboration evident within the IFCO network as a guide for future work. The adapting and sharing of technologies internationally was most evident in presentations concerning the migration of the British 'Looking After Children' information, assessment and case planning system for children in out of home care (presentations by Kufeldt and Jones; Wise et al; Dixon). It is also most evident in the international spread of the New Zealand Family Decision Making approach. This emerged from indigenous Maori culture. The article by McFadden and Worrall which follows in this issue elaborates on this theme. PRIDE from the United States appears to have legs (paper from Van Patee and Wadenbo - Netherlands and Sweden; Van Patee and Hertzog - Netherlands and Hungary) as does the Family Continuity paradigm described by McFadden and Worrall also. ISP (Integrated Services Program, a multi disciplinary- multi focus and strengths based approach) with multiple presentations from Kent appears to be clamoring to get out.

A relatively new opportunity to boost such endeavours in the Asia Pacific Region has emerged with the recent establishment of APFAM. Some delegates to the IFCO conference were also associated with this movement and an APFAM meeting was held at the end of the conference. The new journal is mentioned in the editorial of this issue of *Children Australia* and hopefully it will provide an opportunity for people to share their ideas to the benefit of research, projects and services in the region.

In addition to family decision making and family continuity, the paper from McFadden and Worrall points to shifting configurations of regions, countries and cities in population and cultural mix terms. The beginning of the new century is very different from the last. Looking forward into the 21st Century finds us with much knowledge in hand but much more yet to learn. Another contribution included in this section comes from Clive Sellick. He draws attention to the universality of the need for research to inform practice but also have local practice inform research. The form our sharing takes will also be influenced by the amazing growth of communications technology. It seems that the new millennium in this respect will also be very different from the last. John Hulskamp makes a contribution concerning the opportunities the web creates for stakeholders in foster care. Care will be needed to ensure that those with good information get as much chance to communicate it as those who simply have power.

As we learn from diverse communities, cultures and subcultures, we need to keep asking how well the next era accounts for the needs of children. Instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child become an important reference point as does international law and complementary protocols which aim to prevent harm to children and promote their capacity to thrive. Such things can grow from networking and sharing. □