



Commitment to Wider Community: The Global Child “An Example from Southeast Asia”

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Good Afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen. My name is Takako Fukatsu from Tokyo, Japan. Before I begin my speech today, I would like to thank the Australian AMI Alumni Association and Montessori Association of New Zealand for inviting me to speak at this beautiful city of Sydney. My personal thanks goes to Sally Connellan for her supportive friendship with me that made this trip possible and a most memorable one for me. (Arigato-gozaïmasu)

“Aid to life”

Dr. Montessori referred her method as an Aid to life: something that helps the needs of the children as well as protecting the healthy development of the children.

I personally feel “Aid to Life” can be given in any location, inside or outside of a classroom or even in a non-classroom setting. “Aid to Life” can be applied to any children, and any time of the day and any time in human history, just as, in the same manner, Maria Montessori began her work in the slum of San Lorenzo 96 years ago.

“Aid to Life” can take place as long as we have: **firstly**, the clear understanding of how a human being develops; **secondly**, the keen sensitivities to feel the needs of children as well as their community; and, **thirdly**, lots and lots of creative and imaginative ideas.

“Aid to Life” does not necessarily cost money. “Aid to Life” can be done in the corner within a Hospital or on the street where children are living, working and sleeping, and it can even be done in the closed environment with barbed wire, such as in the refugee camps. This is one of the main subjects of my talk today.

My encounter with refugee problem

From 1981 to 1984, I was living in Thailand, working in the Indo-Chinese Refugee Camp at the northern part of Thailand. I was a volunteer language teacher for the refugees who had escaped from their Communist country, Laos.

In my spare time, I was also helping the distribution of rations and clothes that were sent for the refugees from all over the world. Every morning the numbers of new arrivals were posted at the office of United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR). It became my morning chore to go to the office and check the numbers of people who had fled their country the night before to come into the safe asylum, Thailand. The more refugees arrived, the more distribution of food, water, buckets, blankets, T-shirts, shoes, and so on had to be allocated. As I continued this routine every morning, I started to hate the job.

I wondered, “Who is producing refugees at the first place? What are the causes of people leaving their own country?” And many more questions arose in my mind. “What am I doing here? Just

giving things to the refugees does not really solve this problem.” I wanted to go home.

I wanted to be a part of “Direct Peace Making Project”. Instead of being preoccupied with sorting the mountain-full of used clothes into a smaller mountain of long and short sleeves, I wanted to be involved in finding the background and causes of conflict and war.

It was my second year in Thailand, and I started to search for the answer to my question, “What is the surest way to Peace?”

Which way to Peace?

Being very frustrated, I decided to visit other refugee camps in the southern part of Thailand where people from Cambodia were living, called Khao-I-Dang. There, I found a childcare center called, “House of Hope”. I asked the lady who was in charge of this Center my nagging questions, “What do you think we can do to create Peace?” and “How can we stop people from fighting and help make Peace?”

The lady quietly answered, “You know, we can start from small children.” At that time, I didn’t understand what she meant. How can a small child of 3 or 4 years of age be linked with the idea of Peace? I was totally confused, but at the same time, I was completely mesmerized by her answer.

Now, more than 20 years have passed since the encounter. I have become a Montessori teacher and have worked at a children’s house in Tokyo, and I have decided to get involved in that aid agency that taught me the greatest lesson in my life, which is “We can start Peace from children.” Four years ago, with this belief in my mind, I decided to participate the first assembly of Educateurs sans Frontieres. I was very fortunate to meet Victoria Barres, who is my wonderful partner today, as well as twenty other people from all over the world with the same enthusiasm.

Indo-Chinese Refugees

My talk today is mainly based on the trial and error experience of this aid agency called, “Caring for Young Refugees” (CYR, for short), of which I became a board member five years ago. CYR operated a childcare program for the Cambodian refugee children in Thailand for thirteen years (from 1980 to 1993) and another “community-based childcare program” in the rural villages near the capital city of Cambodia, Phnom Penh from 1991 to the present time. Let me proceed my talk while showing you some slides to help you.

1 Slide: (The Map)

This is the map of Southeast Asia. When people say Indo-Chinese Refugees, they refer to the displaced persons from these three countries: Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. Due to the radical political changes in their governments around 1975, the total of more than three million desperate Indo-Chinese Refugees fled their homeland for safety.

People from Laos had to swim across the Mekong River at night to come into the Thai border. For Vietnamese, as you know the term “Boat People”, they had to sail out for their freedom in a small drifting boat across the Indo-Chinese ocean with the unpredictable monsoon wind as their only guide. Some lucky ones reached the southern shore of Thailand, some even reached south island in Japan, but most of them were killed either by ocean pirates or drowned or died of hunger.

Cambodians were often called “Land People”, because every single person had to walk across the land through a deep jungle filled with millions of landmines to get to the refugee camp in Thailand.

Cambodia was a French colony until 1945 and became independent in 1953. During the Khmer Rouge regime, (also known as Pol Pot regime) between 1975 and 1979, more than two million people died due to the torture, forced labor, hunger, sickness and mostly execution. That means the one quarter of the whole population of Cambodia perished within less than four years.

What goes on in the refugee camp?

2 Slide: (The view of the houses in Khao I Dang camp)

This is the view of the refugee camp for Cambodians called Khao I Dang, situated at the eastern

border of Thailand with Cambodia. The Thai government opened this camp in November 1979 in order to cope with the problem of a sudden influx of refugees from Cambodia. At the beginning of 1980, this was the home for more than 100,000 Cambodians. This camp was open for 14 years and closed in 1993 because the war in Cambodia finally ceased, and it was safe to repatriate.

3 Slide: (The refugees at the border)

The majority of refugees were farmers. These are the people who have survived through many nights & days of desperate journey. As you can imagine from their faces wrapped in Kroma, which is the traditional hand-woven cotton cloth, they were all fear stricken for the past and for the coming future.

There are 3 possible ways to solve the refugee problems:

- **Integration** in the host country, which is Thailand for them.
- **Resettlement** in a third country, such as here in Australia, or New Zealand or Japan, mostly developed countries.
- **Repatriation** to homeland, Cambodia

4 Slide: (The refugees with buckets & blankets)

Every morning, newcomers arrived at the border. Each family is given from UNHCR, a shelter with roof, a bucket, a blanket and a mosquito net to prevent malaria attack. But, they are not allowed to go outside the camp, nor can they grow any farm produce such as fruits and vegetables, nor are they allowed to earn any wages in the camp. Their family life in the camp was totally dependent on the aid of the international community which was so different from the life they were leading in Cambodia.

Children's needs in the camp

5 Slides: a (An injured child being treated); b (A girl eating with spoon); and c (Cooking with huge wok).

Now, very quickly I would like to show you some of the needs of children in the camp and some services offered to them by other international aid agencies.

Many children reach the camp with injuries, illness and malnourishment. Having stepped on a landmine, some children needed immediate amputation of a leg or foot and his/her appropriate prosthesis had to be made right away. Even after the amputation, children's bone keep on growing and keep pushing the skin. Because their bodies are still in the process of growing, children who are victims of landmines suffer physically so much more than the adult victims.

Almost all the children arrived malnourished and needed supplementary feeding. Medical and health care services were in great demand especially in the early stage of a refugee camp. It was very critical that these children were immediately attended to by caring adults with whom they could build trust because they have gone through such a traumatic experience in their flight from Cambodia.

6 Slides: a (Water Truck); and b (Carrying water)

- (a) Water supply was one of the fundamental needs in the refugee camp. Every morning the water truck came into the camp and each family had to wait in queue to fetch water.
- (b) A limited amount of water was supplied to them and they had to economize their use of that water. Cambodians move so beautifully. Carrying water on a pole is very difficult, but they can manage to carry without spilling even a single drop of it.

Children, first

This was the kind of life that children were observing and absorbing every single day in the camp. To most of the adult refugees, the camp was a temporary haven from which they could leave for another country to start new life. However, for the very young children, the camp meant everything. Their future development depended entirely upon today's activities.

During the war, children were cut off from any form of schooling in Cambodia. Here in the camp,

the world they encountered was limited, inadequate and abnormal. The situation that young children were facing in the camp was like “silent emergency” and urgent needs of educational opportunities for the growing children were indispensable.

7 Slides: a (Three children playing on the ground); and b (Childcare center).

In 1979, a group of Japanese school teachers and childcare workers visited the camp. They found that secure places for children, who are the most vulnerable group among all refugees, were extremely limited within the camp. They noted the urgent need and made an appeal for a secure and clean environment for them. This group believed strongly that in the future Cambodia might face another devastation, if we neglect to take good care of the children of today, now.

After these people returned to Japan, they started talking to friends and the children in their classes about what they saw in the camp. Then children who heard the story went home and told their parents about the situation in the camp, and the parents started to show concern and started to ask each other, “What can we do to help the situation in the camp get better?” These parents, their children and teachers and friends started to collect money to be used in the Khao I Dang refugee camp for the children.

In the following year, these people organized an aid agency called, “Caring for Young Refugees”, in hope of better organizing of the individual effort to help children in the distress of war and conflict. Out of all the humanitarian relief activities, these people prioritized the needs of children first and chose to care for children, who were the most vulnerable beings in the camp.

It is the responsibility of the adults to prepare an environment for children in the camp because it was the adult’s involvement with war that deprived children from following their natural path of development when they were in Cambodia.

The money donated from children and their families was brought to Thailand and used for building the childcare center in the camp.

House of Hope

The center was named “Kibo-no-ie” which means “House of Hope” in Japanese, because the children in the camp were the hope of the whole community.

The building was made of locally available materials such as bamboo and coconut leaves. Every stick of bamboo was carefully chosen in different diameters for the childcare center. Because of the strong sun in Southeast Asia, the rooftop was designed to extend out further to create deep shade for the children in the daytime.

House of Hope had spacious playrooms and a play ground in the middle. Also included was a weaving room and carpentry workshop for the parents, so that while children were in the Center, parents could learn some skills and also expand their understanding of early childhood care and development. One of the center’s policies was, “Children first, but act together with the community.”

8 Slide: (Children singing on the stage)

During the Pol Pot Regime, people were not allowed to sing or dance. All forms of art and religion were denied, and all systems of education and economy were abolished. Textbooks, picture books, dictionaries and novels were all destroyed, and people who could read and write were considered an obstacle in achieving political reform in Cambodia. Even the people with eye-glasses were suspected of being dangerous informers, and they were executed along with other educators.

These children were born in the camp, and they have never seen their homeland. It was very important that the childcare workers introduced some traditional songs and dances of Cambodia to the children.

“What is a doll?”

9 _ Slides: a (Children playing with dolls); b (Two dolls); c(Parents making dolls); and,

d (Mother weaving with baby)

- (a) One day, a child of four years asked a staff member, "What is a doll?" Many children have never seen a doll in their life because they did not have toys to play with nor did they experience childhood itself in their country. Instead, many children witnessed inhuman atrocities committed by adults. The dolls have become one of the very important materials in the House of Hope, and some children needed to hold them for a longer period of time than others.
- (b) Mother's hand-woven Kroma has become a part of dolls life. Kroma, the beautiful traditional weaving, and these dolls were both taken to Japan and were sold at a CYR charity bazaar. The money raised from them was then put back to buy more weaving materials.(c)
- (d) Parents started to help make the materials for childcare center. This experience gave the parents not only the knowledge of how to sew but also taught them the needs of children at the different developmental stages. Both children and mothers were free to visit each other in the House of Hope, since they both had gone through intense physical and emotional separation in escape from Cambodia. The staff felt it was very important to make them feel at home and to feel the family ties stronger in the House of Hope

10 Slides: a (An old man making the box); and, b (Two girls in the rocking box)

- (a) People with skills slowly started to come forward to offer some help in the childcare center. Using locally available materials, people took joy in making something for the community. It was also a delight for children to see the adults doing something creative and positive for the community and for themselves.
- (b) The smiling faces of the children encouraged the people in the camp. After the long suffering of people in the war-raged country, the people in the camp sought hope for their future, their children.

11 Slides: a (Two children carrying a bucket); b (A boy carrying the pole); and, c (A boy watering plants)

- (a) No matter where children are living, they are constantly observing adult behavior and are constantly demanding their own independence.
- (b) A local staff member had an idea of making a carrying-pole out of a bamboo trunk for the children so that they could start taking part in the care of the plants in the community.
- (c) Children started to show interest in pouring water from the bamboo scoop. A can of baby powder milk also became a perfect watering bucket.

Staff Training

12 Slides: a (Trainer and trainees); and, b (Handbook for parents on child care).

- (a) Because CYR's objective was not only the implementation of the childcare center but also the self-reliance of the whole community revolving around the center, it was necessary to find eligible people with some experience in teaching literacy skills to children. Unfortunately, people with higher education were either killed during the Pol Pot Regime or had applied to leave the camp for a better future in a new country. So when the experienced worker departed the camp for the resettlement, we had to start the training program all over again.
- (b) The need of compiling a handbook on childcare arose because of the constant turn over of trained staff. This handbook was compiled by the trained staff, printed in Khmer (the language in Cambodia) and English, used for the training of the new staff as well as for guiding Cambodian mothers and young adults in support of the healthy development of young children.

Practical Life Exercises and Personal hygiene

13 Slides: a (A boy washing); b (Boys putting on the shirt in front of a toilet); c (Dressing frame);
d (A girl working with dressing frame); e (Elder girl helping hand to a small one); and, f (A girl looking into a mirror).

- (a) Under the circumstance such as in a refugee camp, the adults were responsible for encouraging children to exercise cleanliness and good health habits. Children just loved washing their clothes and drying them on the trees. All the materials were carefully made in the camp by the helping carpenter.
- (b) Another lesson that we had to show was how to use the toilet which they had never done in their life in Cambodia.
- (c) The mirror is always crowded after the bathing. Childcare workers have to check the comb for the presence of lice in their hair.

14 Slide: (Outside of House of Hope)

This is the front gate of the House of Hope, taken at the later days of its operation in 1993. A total of 8,000 Cambodian children attended the House of Hope over its 13 years of operation. And, a total of 700 childcare workers have taken the training and worked at the center together. These children and workers must be living all over the world by now, well adjusted to a new culture. I sincerely hope that they will never be refugees again nor will anyone else become a refugee in the future.

Working in the rural villages

15 Slide: (Rural villages in Cambodia)

Now, let's take a short trip to the rural villages in Cambodia for a while. After the refugee camp was closed, 350,000 Cambodians returned home. CYR decided to follow these people back to their country and open a new community-based childcare center in their homeland. In 1991, we moved our new activity site and now, we are operating four childcare centers in the state of Kandal which is where the capital city, Phnom Penh is located.

16 Slides: a (Water tank for collecting rain water); b (Digging well); c (Well celebration); and, e (Children bathing).

In the refugee camp, everything was supplied by the international communities. But in the remote villages like here, we had to start from zero. Usually, there is no water supply, no electricity and no gas.

- (a) We either have to buy one of these huge water jar for collecting rain water. Or, when there is a shortage of rain, villagers have to buy water from a store.
- (b) A well is another alternative choice. Digging the well with villagers and the parents of the children can be challenging. When they finally find the water source underneath,
- (c) Cambodians express gratitude to Buddha and celebrate around the well. This kind of cultural ceremony was missing in the life in the refugee camp.
- (d) This is the bathing area for the children in one of the childcare centers. Children love to help drawing water from the well, delivering the water to the kitchen in their cart. I was told by a Cambodian staff that the design of this bathing place is so beautiful that many visitors from other villages come and see the work.

17 Slide: a (Lunch being served)

- (a) Compared to the food ration in the refugee camp, the villagers' daily diet is very poor and off-balanced in protein. The day I visited, the lunch menu was just steamed rice with soup with some bits of vegetables and fish. Since 40% of children here were underweight compared to other villages, we decided to supply a hard-boiled egg to each child once a week to supplement their daily lunch program.

In Japan, we are now campaigning for a “Hard boiled Egg Drive” so that Japanese children also can take part in helping the children in Cambodia.

18 Slides: a(Child washing hands); b (Children brushing their teeth);
c (Individual tooth brushes); and, d (The very first toilet in the village)

(a) As in the refugee camp, the cleanliness and health habits are the important issues and we, as an outsiders can bring changes into the community.

The childcare workers have decided to focus more on the practical life exercises in the beginning of the semester with emphasis on the personal hygiene and sanitation. Washing hands was very well accepted by the childcare workers and the children. The problems are: the water in the sink gets dirty soon and needs to be changed often. Another problem is that the soap is rather expensive in the village and so the local staff don't bother buying the new one when the soap is gone. In the future, it would be worthwhile to hold a “soap making workshop” in the village, recycling the used oil in the village.

(b) Before we came into the village, there was no custom of brushing teeth with a toothbrush. After many days of demonstration and explanation, the childcare workers finally started to introduce it to children, but by sharing one toothbrush for the whole community of 52 children.

(c) Now, every child has his/her own toothbrush kept in the individual pocket that a childcare worker have made for the children.

(d) There was no custom of using a toilet in the rural villages before we came in. When I first went into the rural village and asked for the toilet, a farmer pointed his fingers to the field with pigs. They also help clean the environment. But in order to prevent the outbreak of contagious intestinal disease in the childcare center, we decided to build a toilet and we showed them how to use the toilet.

Still, children are not using the toilet frequently, because they don't have the toilet at home and also, they don't see people using it. The childcare workers are not so frequent users either. We feel it will take a long time to get used to the new custom brought in from outside. We just have to keep showing them and be patient with the problem like this.

How to cut the vicious cycle of Poverty

20 Slide: (Photo of the villagers)

The most serious problem in running the childcare center in the rural villages is the problem of Poverty. Most of the parents are farmers, and the returnees from refugee camp do not own the land. They have to work as tenant farmers or day laborers. Their monthly income is less than the average income of Cambodia which is \$20 per month. Because they do not have enough food, children get sick easily. The treatment costs are unexpected and families become more destitute, not enough fooda vicious cycle of poverty continues.

The monthly tuition of our childcare center is 1kg. of rice (\$1.57) plus 500Riel (\$1.30) per a child, but still 40% of the parents can't afford to pay for the full amount so that CYR is covering the cost of the lunch and snacks for the children from poor families.

The local staff and childcare workers have discussed many times how to generate money in the village so that the childcare center becomes financially independent and the parents can increase their income. In December, last year, we started “Micro Credit Project” in the village so that villagers can loan money from CYR (up to US\$100 per person) for 10 months. The interest rate is 3% per month, which is lower than the prevailing rate in Cambodia. With the money returned for the interest, we hope this project will support the running cost of the childcare center and also help increase the income of poor families so that eventually they can pay the tuition as well as further educational costs.

Lessons learned

One of the lessons learned in running the childcare center in the rural villages was that it is not enough to just run a successful classroom. We have to take the whole community into account. It is not a classroom that we want to improve but the whole community surrounding the children. Another fact that we have to keep in mind is that we cannot stay in the village forever. We must go on to the next village or next country where children are waiting. I strongly feel the attitude of Educateurs sans Frontieres has this similar principle in mind. As Maria Montessori said in the letter addressed to two granddaughters from India in 1940: "We abandon all and travel the world, as did those in former times who would sow seeds and go on their way. This is our destiny: to sow! To sow everywhere, without ceasing, never to harvest."

Lastly,

As you have seen in the case of Cambodia, it takes a minute to start a war, but it takes forever to reconstruct the country, including its nature, its people and its beautiful customs and cultures. We must never let war take place. Let's not waste money, energy and human wisdom for the stupidity of war. Instead, let's invest the same amount of money, energy and human wisdom for the future of the earth. Let's educate our children, everywhere!.

Thank you.