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## **Supervision Training in the Philippines**

This paper is based on our experiences gained from a two year project in “Capacity Building” for the staff of BALAY, an NGO in the Philippines. The project can be seen as building bridges between two fields of experience and competence in psychosocial treatment and counseling of traumatized refugees. While OASIS, with its roots in a western treatment tradition and society, has its strength in individual! family-oriented psychosocial-interdisciplinary rehabilitation work, BALAY is more community-oriented and rooted in the Human Rights Movement.

### **Background**

BALAY is a Philippine NGO, founded in September 1985, which offers psychosocial community rehabilitation services in their own country. Among the target beneficiaries are newly released political prisoners and their families, and other victims of human rights violations, but particularly the internally displaced persons. Most of them are women, youth and children. They are peasants and agricultural workers living in rural areas which continue to be sites of intensive military campaigns, harassment and forced evacuations. Because the Philippine government does not offer housing or any other kind of rehabilitation for the victims of the above the victims are dependent on help and support from NGO organizations like BALAY.

OASIS is a Danish NGO which offers psychosocial treatment and counseling to refugees and asylum seekers. The institution is 14 years old. We offer an “interdisciplinary” treatment to traumatized refugees. The treatment is comprised of psychotherapy, physical therapy, social counseling and medical evaluation (medical and psychiatric). OASIS’ clients come from many parts of the world. Approximately 25 nationalities have been represented by our clientele during OASIS’ years of existence. A large number of OASIS’ clients have belonged to the political opposition in their country of origin and have been persecuted, imprisoned and exposed to torture. Others come from a country of war or civil war and have either been active themselves in the war or have suffered severely from military assaults against the civilian population.

In 1996, in acknowledgment of our mutual field of work, OASIS was approached by another Danish NGO - Danchurch to evaluate the “BALAY Rehabilitation Program for Victims of Human Rights Violations” in the Philippines.

The Evaluation Report was prepared after 3 weeks of extensive traveling in the Philippines, visiting field offices and small communities who were beneficiaries of BALAY. Based on our direct interviews with BALAY workers and beneficiaries we experienced that many of the clients were severely traumatized. Many of BALAY’s staff worked under extreme conditions, in a country marked by post-dictatorship and civil war. They were dedicated and involved despite dangerous working conditions, driven by their political beliefs and engagement. It was clear that most of BALAY’s staff members had a double mission: a

humanitarian work and political awakening of their own people based on the Human Rights Movement.

Unlike their Danish colleagues the Philippine rehabilitation staff were themselves traumatized by the war in their own country. Some of them were jailed in the past, some have lost family members, some were still under daily surveillance of the regime. These severe conditions contributed to the risk of staff members' turnover, based on a feeling of being burned-out. A high turnover means that a necessary accumulation of human and professional experience gets lost and is difficult to replace. The continuity of work is often broken and creates problems for management and psychosocial rehabilitation of clients.

To alleviate and prevent those problems the evaluation report has recommended an upgraded training program for the staff of BALAY. OASIS' one psychologist and two psychotherapists, all with many years of experience in working with traumatized refugees conducted a training program in psycho-social supervision in March 1998 and August 1999.

In working with traumatized refugees who received asylum in Denmark, we have been very aware of the extreme emotional demands on each of OASIS' staff members secondary traumatization. For our BALAY colleagues, who themselves are survivors of the politics of oppression, and are often traumatized in ways similar to the people they counsel, the burden must be even harder. These particular conditions for BALAY's counselors create a special demand for professional training and necessity for the supervision.

An important part of our preparations consisted therefore of internal discussions about the differences between the two cultures (Eastern/Western). While we were aware of our own traditions and attitudes, both personal and professional, we did not have a profound knowledge of the Philippine culture and traditions. Based on that we decided to approach the training from a not-knowing position and at the same time inviting our colleagues to explore their own attitudes and traditions. This ongoing process gave both parts an opportunity to get to know one another without prejudice. Besides this we were able to facilitate a process of integration of proposed Western models without compromising the Philippine values.

## **Training**

BALAY management and staff participated in a total of 4 weeks training in 1998 and 1999: Two weeks in Manila for the National Office and two weeks for 3 Field Offices together. The training was composed as a combination of theory and practice. Our goal was to give the participants an opportunity to integrate the theory in practice. The participants were introduced to a specific method of supervision with the aim of enabling the staff members to give each other professional support.

The theory of trauma work created a core of the training and was established in the first year. The themes were:

- crisis intervention,
- traumatization and rehabilitation work,
- grief work,
- active listening,
- secondary traumatization and coping strategies
- theory of supervision.

The objective of the second year was a process of upgrading of the professional role in psychosocial rehabilitation work. The themes were:

- principles for the professional role,
- the professional relationship,
- universal principles in helping professions,
- children and war (reactions, symptoms, family work).

The main objective of the second year was an introduction of a supervision model based on a systemic approach and its integration through independent training groups among staff members. The systemic supervision is conducted in groups where there is one person who is being supervised (supervisee) one who is a supervisor (supervisor) and the rest creates a reflective team, giving a gentle, positive and professional feedback (supportive, challenging and corrective ideas) to the supervisee. The supervisor is responsible for the process and its professionalism. During the supervision training program for BALAY the trainers from OASIS contributed to the supervision process as consultants.

Both the management and the staff acknowledged and appreciated the need for supervision in their organization to secure the continuity of experience and to prevent the burnout among staff members. Based on this mutual understanding the management committed to implement the supervision model in BALAY's daily operation.

## **Experience**

There is a common ground in working with severely traumatized people. Whether it takes place in Denmark or the Philippines it takes its toll on the counselors in both places.

“In our work with severely traumatized refugees we are constantly and intensively in contact with the most primitive sides of human behavior: Calculated and deliberate violence used by one human being against another. Every day we are confronted with absolute helplessness, unbearable pain, deep grief, uncontrollable rage and depression. The job makes extreme emotional demands on each staff member” (Møller&Koberg, 1993).

There are also differences:

### **OASIS:**

For the refugees who live in Denmark the primary traumatic events have taken place in their country of origin and the professional psychotherapist are more able to distance themselves to the evil coming from somewhere else. OASIS' staff members experience most difficulty in working with the re-traumatization of the refugees in the country of exile. Especially in the later years where the political climate in Europe and Denmark have been infested by a strong anti-refugee sentiment. For us in Denmark working with the refugees, who have been victimized in their own country, is a psychosocial task but not a political struggle. We are able to carry on after work and have a life without military surveillance and repression.

### **BALAY:**

Our Philippine colleagues live and work in a country of oppression. Their daily life is still in a war zone and their psychosocial work is a part of their political activity and their own battle

for a better life and achievement of human rights for the Filipino people. In their field work they cover communities located far away from their homes and offices. To be able to reach the beneficiaries they have to travel long hours in dangerous areas without any protection or support. However the staff members are willing, open and eager to do good both in their rehabilitative work and political work and advocacy, that the limits between private and public disappear. Therefore a need for limits and structure becomes urgent to maintain mental health and prevent burn-out and a turnover within the organization.

Another main difference between OASIS' and BALAY' staff members are the latter's life conditions. As we have mentioned before many of them are either traumatized themselves or have experienced traumatization in their own family or community. We experienced during our supervision training that many of them had a hard time separating their own needs from the needs of the beneficiaries and not being aware of it. We realized that our Philippine colleagues had a tendency to fraternize with their clients in their mutual/national trauma of violence and oppression. Their orientation in working with individuals and communities took them away from the process and towards striving after efficiency and problem-solving, thus creating enmeshment of needs between the counselor and the client. Therefore we have decided to initiate a process of awareness concerning development of professional ethics with emphasis on more experience with process oriented interventions.

This process of awareness of their own motivation and reactions in rehabilitation work aimed to ensure that they are able to maintain professional boundaries. That they acknowledge that they are not omnipotent and recognize their own limitations and if necessary ask for assistance and support. This awareness seems to be especially important in institutions that work with traumatized refugees.

## **Conclusion**

As we have already mentioned we have based our training on a curious not-knowing, exploring approach. During the course of our encounters with the Philippine colleagues we became aware of a special obligation we have in our own country. The insight into the circumstances in the refugees' life in exile (in Denmark) obliges us to convey this knowledge to the public and to try to influence the politicians to establish better conditions for the people seeking and receiving asylum in Denmark.

Another lesson we have taken with us from the Philippines is the importance of networking locally and internationally.

Working with trauma is not easy. But there are also many professional and personal rewards in working with improvement of human conditions. This field of psychosocial work carries many strong unconscious dynamics in the institutions, among clients and staff. To maintain a sound enthusiasm and dedication to the tasks it's urgent that the institution provides continuous training of the whole staff group and the need of a regular supervision becomes obvious. A weekly schedule ought to honor supervision as an integrated part of organizational structure. Likewise it is imperative to develop a professional ethic code to protect the staff members and the clients.