

## Article

# Food for thought

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Accepted 7 August, 2009

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## DEAR FRIENDS OF THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

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Today I would like to raise the question of international child adoption, that we have come to call inter country adoption or ICA in the twenty first century. Some of you may know that DCI was a forerunner in raising awareness about the child hostile aspects of international adoption in the eighties, when inter-country adoption had taken on quite some importance in the aftermath of some of the decolonisation and communist/non-communist wars (Korea, Vietnam). Even though these wars happened in countries where extended families usually took care of orphans, as a result of war there were too many orphans and there was too much economic and social disarray for the afflicted populations to bridge all the gaps in their families internally.

Initially everyone was convinced that the bottomline was that this was in the best interest of the child, even

though the circumstances were not always very well controlled and led to collateral damage. It took thorough study and analytical reflection to discover that the damage to the interest of the child was not only collateral, but often fundamental. DCI was a leader in this reflection and the subsequent development of rules and guidelines to control inter country adoption better.

For a number of historical and practical reasons, the issue of international adoption has been removed from our international horizon, but two events shook me up and made me wonder if DCI should not start thinking about it aloud again, that is, audible for civil society and decision makers. We can't take it on on a scale as juvenile justice, but we said in the Brussels declaration that we would systematically denounce situations of grave violations of children's rights. Does international child adoption still qualify as such, or again qualify as such?

Two events this year set me wondering about this. Recently a woman came to see us at the International Secretariat. She came to ask what DCI was doing nowadays about child trafficking and child buying for international adoption, for that was continuing unabated in Latin America, she said.

She explained that she was herself a child internationally adopted when she was a one year old baby, from a Latin American country. She said that from her earliest days she has struggled with her identity. Though she had had a good relationship with her adoptive parents, she had found out much later that her mother had tried to recover her, and that her mother had been misled into believing

she was going to get a good education as an intern somewhere, but remain her daughter and eventually accessible- very similar to the Arche of Zoe scandal in Sudan.

She is convinced that this situation has not improved and that child trafficking for international child adoption is continuing on the American continent. The cost of these adoptions is high, not only in human suffering and contempt for human dignity, but also financially, in all manner of administrative and legal fees, and then of course the long distance travel.

With that money alternative forms of care could be financed, whereby the orphaned or abandoned child can remain in his own community and culture. Such a project had been successful in Costa Rica for children of African descent, who were offered a family type environment structured as the «children's village movement», with a single mature woman as a mother running a household with some five to six children. For lack of funds that project has petered out. But the money now spent on international adoption by individuals and couples could be used better for this alternative care, our visitor argued. That would be more in the interest of the child. Of course this argument completely disregards the desire for children of loving couples who, to their great sadness, find they cannot conceive- still the majority of cases of international child adoption.

Several factors make it impossible to fulfil the demand for adoption in-country in the industrialised nations. Very reliable anti-conception that has been used widely by two generations of women by now, complemented with relaxed abortion laws and access to the latest version of the morning after pill have drastically reduced « the offer » of children for adoption in the belt of highly developed countries. So the offer has fallen, but the demand has risen, for concomitant sociological and physiological reasons. The rising age of marriage and delayed attempts to conceive in many industrialised countries, especially of the highly educated, and the reduced fertility of men, which scientists suspect is due to widespread

use of hormones and chemicals in key parts and sectors of the food chain, combine to increase the number of couples that cannot conceive spontaneously.

My other experience that caused me to think more about international child adoption in the context of DCI's role was a news item reporting that a celebrity had gone to a village in Africa to negotiate about the adoption of a child that was not even an orphan. The negotiations as reported in the press seem to come close to bargaining, in other words, they made one think of buying rather than an administrative adoption process in the best interest of the child otherwise left without adequate and loving care.

But here again appearances may deceive us, both for the motives of the adoptive parents and the transaction we observe through the eyes of the press. As Helen Bayes of DCI Australia wrote when I shared this concern with her: «these celebrities do seem to have an inward drive to adopt children and if they aren't conceiving, why not, and the media coverage will inevitably follow.»

To conclude: what do you think about international adoption in the twenty first century? Why do prospective parents choose this solution for their desire to create a family? For example, prospective parents opting for international adoption may think that their family gains in respectability in their own community. Has anyone done research on public attitudes to international child adoption? Public attitudes can be influenced if necessary, provided we have strong, well-founded arguments.

As for the concern that trafficking for adoption remains rampant, there has been a scandal recently in Australia about a Madras adoption agency, found to send stolen children to Australia- a clear case of trafficking then.

Has anyone done any research on the current situation for trafficking for adoption in their country or region? Are the fears of our visitor well-founded or is trafficking for adoption an exception and the national, regional and international control structures adequate to detect it quickly and stop it?