

Intercountry Adoption. A Comment on the Number of "Adoptable" Children and the Number of Persons Seeking to Adopt Internationally –

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The term "adoptable" refers to a child who is "officially recognised as having a legal status enabling adoption to be considered, and deemed to require and to be potentially able to benefit from such a measure". These are the only objectively valid criteria for determining "adoptability".

"Children on the Brink 2002"¹ puts at almost 108 million (in the 88 African, Asian and Latin American countries considered) the number of children under 15 who have lost one or both parents. However, of these, over 90 per cent still have one parent. Regarding the 9.5 million "double orphans", the same report (p.9) states that, at present, "[E]xtended families take in the overwhelming majority of orphans who lose both parents". It is of course not possible to ascertain how many of the consequently small minority of 9.5 million double orphans might potentially be identified and recognised as "adoptable". Formalised adoption and fostering are, in addition, unusual in most of the countries concerned. Strategies and principles for programming set out in this report naturally revolve uniquely around enabling their families and communities to cope on all levels. Nowhere is cross-border displacement of the children envisaged.

The MONEE report "A Decade of Transition"² (covering Central and Eastern Europe, the CIS and the Baltics) notes that over 1.5 million children (N.B. up to 18 years of age) were in "out-of-home" care in 1999, of whom some 900,000 were in residential facilities - and not, I would stress, in "orphanages". Individual country situations in the region vary considerably, and adequately disaggregated data are generally missing. This means that we rarely know, inter alia, how many of those children are placed temporarily and how many may not yet have been identified as potentially "adoptable" (including double orphans, cases where parental rights have been definitively withdrawn, etc.). We do

¹ USAID, UNAIDS, UNICEF (2002) "Children on the Brink 2002: A joint Report on Orphan Estimates and Program Strategies", Washington, D.C.

² UNICEF (2001) "A Decade of Transition", Regional Monitoring Report No. 8, Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

know, however, that double orphans usually constitute a small minority, rarely more than 10 per cent and usually very substantially less.

It is important not to confuse the concept of "adoptable children" with that of "children currently in out-of-home care". The situation in Romania, as just one example, clearly demonstrates that it is entirely wrong to try to equate "children in institutions" with "adoptable children". To quote a recent speech of the UNICEF Representative to that country: "there is clear evidence that the whole process of institutionalization is affecting many more children than ever thought. The system is enormously volatile. The proportion of institutionalised children was in 1997 almost two percent of all children. The real number of affected children is much higher, because many children stay for short periods in an institution (e.g. illness of mother, the winter period, the harvest period etc.). Nearly 7% of ALL children were for some time in an Infant, Child Home, Camin Spital or a Special School... It is always thought that most children enter the system because they are abandoned at Maternity Hospitals [but] the big challenge is represented by the age group of twelve and older. Over sixty percent of the institutionalised children are above the age of twelve. Every year the major inflow is increasing in the higher age group." In other words, the great majority of individual children in institutions in Romania are there on a short-term basis and most are above the age of 12.

Children generally recognised as "difficult to place" in adoption precisely include those who are "older" (a term used to describe those above a variety of ages, in some cases as low as 1 year but more usually as of 4, 5 or 6), as well as those with disabilities, those with HIV/AIDS or diagnosed with other serious medical conditions, those in sibling groups and, sometimes, those of certain ethnic or racial origins. For example, the BAAF (British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering) recently lamented the fact that not a single enquiry was received concerning one quarter of the adoptable children in Britain on its register, all "difficult to place" because of one or more of the above considerations. It is in relation to these children, clearly, that there are too few potential adoptive parents. This might be seen to add another dimension to the term "adoptable".

There are various indications that, on the other hand, the number of persons seeking to adopt a child considerably outnumbers that of children who have previously been identified as requiring adoption and who correspond to the prospective adoptive parents' desires. Statistics from the Italian Central Authority show that, from 1994 to 1999, the number of domestic adoptions granted corresponded to just 10.2 per cent of applicants, while the corresponding figure for intercountry adoptions averaged 34.1 per cent for that period. The French (governmental) Mission de l'Adoption Internationale tellingly notes that, in recent talks, "the Adoption Centre of the Ministry of Education in Kiev set out the growing difficulties that it has in meeting requests, from Ukrainian and foreign families alike, for adopting young healthy children". Data from Guatemala show that only 12 per cent of intercountry adoptions take place from institutions; the other 88 per cent concern children relinquished directly by their parents. In the early Nineties, children adopted abroad directly from their families in Albania and Romania came to exceed substantially those from institutions - and both countries consequently felt it necessary to place moratoria on intercountry adoptions since the latter were in many cases, regrettably, simply "creating orphans".

It should be further noted that many countries set, explicitly or implicitly, a minimum age at which a child may be adopted - particularly internationally - in an attempt to tackle various illicit acts and to ensure that parents relinquishing their children may reconsider their consent and continue to care for the child. Where it exists, this age may be as high as 7 years (henceforth for intercountry adoptions from Ukraine, for example). In the countries concerned, children below the specified age therefore cannot be considered adoptable.

By way of conclusion, there are very good grounds for maintaining that, as far as young children in good health are concerned, requests for adoption would seem to outstrip the number of adoptable children, though it would undoubtedly be impossible at this point to estimate a precise ratio in this regard. The reverse seems to be true, however, as regards children described as "difficult to place", for whom suitable prospective adoptive parents would indeed appear to be lacking.