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EDITORIAL

In Africa, the word 'adoption' does not exist

The African conference held in Addis Ababa on 29-30 May on Intercountry Adoption: Alternatives and Controversies *brought together hundreds of participants concerned by this issue from across the continent.*

Under the initiative of the non-governmental organisation African Child Policy Forum[1] (ACPF), the first African conference devoted to intercountry adoption took place at the heart of the Ethiopian capital. Over 500 people travelled to Addis Ababa, among them several high-level national delegations, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, and Mr Van Loon, Secretary General of the Hague Conference. Several receiving countries (United States, France, The Netherlands, etc) were also represented, as well as civil society, several international experts and accredited bodies.

An African perspective

Both the preparatory works (publications are available on the ACPF's website[2]), and the debates that fuelled these two days of work have clearly underlined the need and the will to see African actors reclaim child protection-related issues. Indeed, placing children in institutions or their adoption by Western prospective adopters do not reflect traditional African values, which rather promote informal forms of care by the extended family and the community. It is true that the objective constraints faced by a high number of countries (political, humanitarian, economic, health crises, etc) weaken these social protection mechanisms, but the informal care of children remains the most common and often the most effective answer across the continent. It was within the context of this debate that one speaker pointed out that in Africa, the word 'adoption' did not exist, which clearly illustrates the fact that this means of parenthood is still perceived as an 'imported', or even 'imposed', model. On the other hand, a similar dialogue also developed in relation to orphanages, whose increase has been mainly driven by the intervention of foreign actors – mostly NGOs – and which, to date, still avoid strict state control.

Three national reports

In the framework of the preparation for the Conference, Malawi, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo all prepared national reports on the situation of adoption in their respective countries. These three reports agree on the main conclusions, which stress the need to strengthen child protection systems, to harmonise domestic law with international standards (Convention on the Rights of the Child, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1993 Hague Convention), to improve the monitoring of private actors (within the framework of adoption and orphanages), and to fight against improper material gain.

Conclusions

The conclusions adopted by the Conference - available in French and English on ACPF's website - reiterate the main principles that must govern child protection and intercountry adoption, but they also stress the need to identify needs (through the establishment of a database), to prepare children for their adoption, to ban

independent and private adoption, and to combat unlawful financial gain.

From a less formal perspective, this event has mostly been an opportunity for professionals from the continent to share their practices and the issues resulting from them. Several sub-regional cooperation initiatives were mentioned, and it is hoped that they will become a reality and consequently enable African countries to experience progress similar to that of other countries of origin across the world, which have been able to achieve it.

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The ISS/IRC team
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[1] The African Child Policy Forum, http://www.africanchildforum.org/site/.

[2] Addis Ababa Communiqué on Intercountry Adoption, https://www.box.com/s/1431254ed2748e6172ee#/s/1431254ed2748e6172ee/1/295360660/2376417510/1