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EDITORIAL

Exposing myths about the number of adoptable children and the need for more precision when defining who is adoptable

Sorting through the myriad of definitions being used and misused to identify the number of adoptable children can be an onerous task and requires clarification for better policy making

Misunderstanding about the number of adoptable children abounds due to different definitions of the same term and various terms such as orphan, unaccompanied or separated children being used interchangeably. This uncertainty creates havoc for policy makers when deciding which children should be targeted and by which program, resulting in the prevalence of myths, which this editorial seeks to debunk.

Myth 1: There are millions of orphans and all are adoptable

UNICEF has a broad definition of orphan which includes any child who has lost one or both parents and accordingly estimates that in 2005 there were over 132 million orphans in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Of this number “only” 13 million had lost both parents, which according to the UNHCR and many industrialised countries is the definition of an orphan. To avoid confusion ‘double orphan’ for a child who has lost both parents and ‘single orphan’ for those who have lost one parent can be used.

Whether one refers to a double or single orphan, not all orphans are adoptable. UNICEF believes there is clear evidence that ‘the vast majority of orphans are living with a

surviving parent, grandparent, or other family member’. Therefore whilst it can be said that there are 13 million orphans, one can not conclude that this entire number is in need of a new family, accommodation or alternative care let alone adoptable. The aim for policy makers should be on supporting the families who are caring for orphans.

Myth 2: There are millions of unaccompanied and separated children and all are adoptable

There is general agreement by UN agencies about the definition of “unaccompanied children” and “separated children” (UASC). Unaccompanied children are those who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so. Whereas separated children are those who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives such as another adult family member.

Whilst there is general agreement about the terms UASC, there can be a false assumption that all UASC are adoptable. The reality is that children become separated from their parents usually for a temporary period and for a number of reasons including the persecution of the child or his parents;

international conflict and civil war; natural disaster, trafficking in various contexts and forms, including sale by parents; and the search for better economic opportunities. For example as a result of the Tsunami in 2004, there were 1 709 UASC of which 1 605 were reunited with their immediate families in Thailand.

The main priority during the separation period should be the implementation of procedures for the registration of children, the identification of their family and temporary placements whilst waiting. If the principle of subsidiarity is respected and solutions that allow the child to stay in his/her own country are given preference; the number of children left for intercountry adoption is therefore limited.

Myth 3: There are millions of children who are in institutions in countries of origin and all are adoptable

About 1.5 million children in the CEE/CIS live in public care. In Europe and Central Asia, over one million children live in residential institutions. There are limited statistics on sub-Saharan Africa, although statistics in 2004 indicate that 7,500 children were in residential facilities in Liberia and 5,000 in Zambia.

Despite this number of children being in institutions, not all children in institutions are adoptable. There can be legal and traditional constraints so that the notion of adoption is practically inexistent in regions such as the sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover many children in institutions are not adoptable because they still have parents, who have not abdicated their parental rights, nor has a court made a judgement of their incapacity or the placement is temporary with a view of being reunited with their family. For example in Russia where there are 750 000 children who have been identified as living in an institution or placed in alternative family care, only 17% were identified as being without parental care.

Even when children are declared adoptable, the reality is that not all these children are available for intercountry adoption, nor should they be if the principle of subsidiarity is to be respected. Developing national solutions for their children, including foster care and national adoptions and the improvement in economic and social conditions in the countries of origins has also

created the possibility for middle class families to adopt children.

Myth 4: There are millions of babies waiting to be adopted

The ideal of adopting a baby less than 6 months old and with good health does not reflect current actuality. In reality, there are countries who expressly set a minimum age at which a child may be adopted in an effort to counter various illicit acts (eg: sale of babies), to ensure that parents relinquishing their children have the opportunity to reconsider their consent and to encourage the adoption of older children based on the realities within the country. For example, the Philippine Inter-country Adoption Board states that the children mostly available for intercountry adoption are older between 5 - 15 years old.

In practice there is also an augmentation in the age of the children who are being adopted as shown the ISS/IRC Monthly bulletin 6-7/2008. Also in the USA, from the 129 000 children adoptable in 2006, 4% of the children were less than 1 year of age and 39% were over 10 years of age.

Another reality is that the many children being adopted have special needs. For example in Italy, in 2007, 6.8% of the children adopted had special needs amounting to 233 children. Of this group, 10.7% had major problems with 89.3% having problems that were reversible. Currently in Latvia, the only children available for adoption are those part sibling groups (3 children or more), older children with more than 10 years; children with disabilities or mental illness.

Conclusion

The ISS/IRC agrees with Cantwell's definition of "adoptable" as referring 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". Moreover in determining whether a child is adoptable there must be regard to social, psychological, medical and legal aspects, as well the establishment of a fact that the child can not be cared for or reintegrated into their family of origin. Hasty assumptions that orphaned, UASC and children living in institutions are all in need of adoption should therefore be avoided. More objective information should be obtained about the characteristics of children waiting to be adopted in order to

ensure a better matching process and successful adoptions. The ISS/IRC encourages complementary reading of the article 'The lie we live' in Foreign Policy Nov/Dec 2008 which provides insightful

information about the tragic consequences of actions based on myths.

The ISS/IRC team
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