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*'Every child and young person should live in a supportive, protective
and caring environment that promotes his/her full potential.'*

Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, Para. 4

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EDITORIAL

Assessing adoptability and evaluating prospective adoptive parents: Also at various speeds in domestic adoptions?

Following up on last month's Editorial on the assessment and preparation of potential adoptive parents for intercountry adoptions, the present Editorial intends to address the challenges of promoting and implementing domestic adoption. Does this aspect also follow various speeds and degrees of development?

Whilst the assessment and preparation of prospective adoptive parents (PAPs) in receiving countries have clearly progressed in intercountry adoption, can the same be said of domestic adoptions? What are the PAPs' expectations? Have they considered an intercountry adoption from the beginning of their project? What has directed them towards that option to become a parent? What are their views of domestic adoption?

This Editorial intends to reflect on these questions and offer some reminders as to our obligations towards ALL adoptable children – whether domestically or internationally – and towards ALL PAPs. It therefore addresses two key issues indirectly linked to the decrease in intercountry adoption: (a) a reflection on the promotion of domestic adoption and the principle of subsidiarity in receiving countries (mentioned in the Editorial of Monthly Review No. 201, April 2016) from the assessment and preparation approach; and (b) the quality of the assessment and preparation of PAPs at domestic level for domestic adoption, when the main focus to date appears to be intercountry adoption.

Is intercountry adoption implicitly promoted by the child protection systems and the professionals?

Whilst many countries have made considerable efforts to promote and develop domestic adoption or have moved forward in this direction – in countries of origin, such as Guatemala (see p. 4) and India, but also in receiving countries, such as the United Kingdom and Australia (see p. 6) – the procedures for domestic adoption sometimes still appear to entail some challenges for the children and the PAPs interested in adopting within their countries of residence.

Indeed, in a number of countries, the administrative and judicial procedures to terminate a parent's parental responsibility are complex and result in lengthy periods of family and legal uncertainty for children separated from their parents. These often undergo various care placements and move back and forth between their family of origin and care measures before being declared adoptable. Whilst the ISS/IRC fully supports that the best option for a child would be to remain or return to his or her family of origin – with all the available support –, in line with Paras. 2, 3-10 and 32-68 of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, there is no doubt that

reasonable and effective procedures must be implemented to ensure that children do not remain in care unnecessarily, and that, when family reintegration is no longer a potential option, alternative family-based options, such as kinship care and foster care, should be sought, including appropriate domestic adoption.

We may, in fact, face varying speeds in the promotion of domestic adoption. Does this context explain why PAPs are often well aware of this situation and decide to turn to intercountry adoption? Does this explain why PAPs – and even professionals in this field – turn to intercountry adoption, and thereby do not fully respect the principle of subsidiarity?

Furthermore, there is no doubt that the assessment process and preparation of domestic adoptive parents would need to focus on very specific aspects relating to their doubts and concerns about domestic adoption. For example, some fear that the biological and extended families remain close geographically, that the child will therefore never feel totally integrated into the adoptive family and that this may represent a risk for the development of an attachment bond¹ – even though the proximity of the biological family may be just as relevant in intercountry adoptions, as new technologies nowadays make it easier to initiate or continue contact irrespective of the distance. On the other hand, some PAPs still believe – mostly incorrectly and inadequately – that adoption allows children to be ‘saved’ from complex situations in their countries, that adoption is a humanitarian act, and that children in developing countries are more in need of adoption than those in more affluent countries, such as their own². Would a better assessment and preparation process reverse these – often unfounded – beliefs and therefore offer a wider variety of options to PAPs?

Is the quality of the PAPs’ assessment and preparation equal in domestic and intercountry adoption?

In this context, the child protection system and adoption policies must include strategies to overcome these remaining challenges to promote domestic adoption and equip adequately PAPs as well as professionals to implement the necessary safeguards, amongst others in terms of assessment and preparation of PAPs. Indeed, there is no doubt that many children – whether in receiving countries or countries of origin – are adoptable at domestic level. These have the same right to benefit from efforts undertaken by all relevant actors to find a family environment, in which they will be able to grow and develop. A variety of options must be available, including open adoption (see p. 6).

How can the professionals be adequately equipped to identify potential suitable adopters for a domestic adoption? Professionals must be made aware of the numbers, profiles and needs of domestic adoptable children and adolescents. They must also be provided with comprehensive materials, as developed in some countries to undertake in-depth assessments (see p. 9), to promote ‘adoption from care’ (see Monthly Review no. 201 of April 2016), the adoption of older children (see Monthly Review No. 181 of May 2014 and No. 182 of June 2014), etc. They must believe that domestic adoption is just as necessary and worthy as intercountry adoption, and that the assessment and preparation process is just as vital for a domestic adoption as for an intercountry adoption, by focusing on the characteristics and complexities that are specific to domestic adoption. Finally, just as for intercountry adoption, it is important that the PAPs’ preparation becomes mandatory for domestic adopters and that it is of good quality, just as the post-adoption follow-up, as this would enable countries to increase quality and successful domestic adoption placements.

Undoubtedly, a solid process of assessment and preparation of PAPs is one element of the implementation of the principle of subsidiarity, as the same degree of effort should be undertaken to find suitable caring environments for children, both domestically and internationally. Furthermore, similar efforts must be undertaken to identify PAPs that would be suitable to move forward with a domestic adoption project. These reflections are relevant to countries of origin and receiving countries. Do they not all have the obligation to comply with the international standard of ensuring the subsidiarity of adoption and the subsidiarity of intercountry adoption for their children and adolescents?

References:

¹ As mentioned in a recent survey undertaken by the ISS/IRC on the assessment and preparation of PAPs, whose outcomes will be published in the coming weeks.

² For example, following the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, a large number of Mexican nationals expressed their interest in adopting in Haiti to help potentially orphaned children, whilst many children in Mexico were waiting for an adoption. See: 'La embajada de México en Haití ha recibido 2,500 solicitudes sobre adopción de menores', *Crónica*, 27 January 2010, <http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2010/483818.html>.

