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EDITORIAL

The adoption of older children: A project that measures up to the children's needs? (First part)

Whilst the number of older children intended to be adopted internationally increases, what about the abilities of adoption actors to undertake these specific projects? The ISS/IRC, which had already initiated this task in 20081, invites you to address, at first, the perspective of the child, and subsequently that of the parents (a second part will be published in our next Editorial).

In parallel to an ongoing decrease in the number of intercountry adoptions, which started in 2005, the age of children adopted internationally has been increasing without interruption (see Monthly Review N° 07-08/2008, 10/2010 and 09/2011). The numbers are revealing: *with regards to the receiving countries*, in France, 25% of those children adopted in 2011 were over the age of five years, 30% in 2012 and 33% in 2013². In Italy, the age of children adopted internationally has experienced a steady increase between 2000 and 2011 and is placed, on average, at five and six years old³. In Switzerland, 41% of those children adopted internationally in 2011 were over the age of five years, increasing to 53% in 2012⁴. *In relation to countries of origin*, in 2012, 41% of the total number of Peruvian children adopted domestically and internationally were aged between six and 17 years⁵; in Lithuania, 51% of the children were between seven and 14 years old⁶, in Burkina Faso and Chile, 45%⁷ and 81%⁸, respectively, of those adopted internationally were over the age of five years. Faced with this new reality, have measures been set up by the countries to promote the success of these particular adoptions?

Diverging factors of definition

Among the challenges raised by these adoptions, the considerable differences of opinion

relating to the factors that define an older child, and which may be seen depending on the countries, may be mentioned. This situation is obvious with regards to the child's age: thus, in Burkina Faso, a child is considered to be older from the age of two years, in the Czech Republic, this age goes up to three years, in India and in Chile, to five years, in South Africa to six years, in Lithuania, it rises to eight years, and in Colombia and Peru, up to nine years⁹. In addition to this most obvious factor, others may also have an impact, such as the child's development as well as his personality, his ability to adjust and to create a solid bond with adults, his life story and his background.

This last issue refers, in particular, to the child's cultural identity which, with his age, will take up an important place. Thus, an older child will already have gained a certain cultural background, which he will have to give up or distance himself from to some extent upon his arrival in the receiving country. For example, when the child comes from a country where the concept of family is clan-like, or if he has grown up in a family with several parental characters, he will have to give up this model upon his arrival in the receiving country, and learn to live within a more reduced nuclear family. This also applies to older children, who have spent a considerable part of their life in an institutional environment.



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This may be even more difficult when he becomes a single child, for example. The language also deserves a particular focus in the context of the child's adjustment to his new environment and educational learning (see p. 5). An in-depth dialogue will, therefore, have to be initiated between the professionals caring for the child and the prospective parents, in order to work together on these differences and to provide the prospective family with as many tools as possible. It is, in this sense of cooperation, that the *Enfant en Recherche de Famille (ERF)* programme – launched in 1981 by *Enfance et Famille d'Adoption* – is implemented in partnership with those bodies in charge of the alternative care of children (see Monthly Review 04/2012)¹⁰.

Persistent obstacles

Receiving countries as well as countries of origin are faced with the same obstacle: most prospective adoptive parents wish to adopt, as a priority, younger and healthy children for a variety of reasons, such as the wish to share their first times (first steps, first words, etc) or the fear of not being able to respond to the increased attention required by an older child. However, this trend is progressively changing in some countries, such as Chile and India, where, according to the Central Adoption Authority, a change in the Indian parents' attitude towards older children may be observed, in particular due to the long waiting list for domestic adoptions. Furthermore, several countries have launched initiatives aimed at promoting the adoption of children with special needs, including older children. In addition to the examples offered in the article on p. 9, others may be mentioned, such as the *Llamado Especial* programme, set up in Chile in 2010, which intends to reverse the flow of files for this type of adoption, the awareness-raising campaigns in the media in Lithuania, etc¹¹.

Are these adoptions respectful of the child's needs?

In order to respond to the child's needs, these specific adoption projects must, on the one hand,

be subject to an informed decision by the adoptive parents; it is not a matter of considering these children by default. On the other hand, the preparation provided to these children must be adapted to their age and degree of maturity. Indeed, it will play an essential role in the child's ability to overcome the challenges linked to his numerous past experiences and in his integration in a new permanent family (see pp. 5 and 8). Ideally, several aspects of this preparation should be addressed and clarified, such as his identity-building (see p. 3), the process of transmission of information to the child, the gathering of his opinion or how his participation is foreseen. In particular, the child's preparation must take into account the specific features of this type of adoption and be adapted to each particular case. For example, when the older child proves to be the eldest child among various siblings, and he has assumed the responsibility for his younger brothers and sisters for some time, the preparation will then have to address the issue of integration into the adoptive family and the its dynamics in such a context. Although some countries of origin have experienced important developments in this field (see pp. 3 and 5), gaps still remain.

If the adoption of older children clearly fits into the future of intercountry adoption, then receiving countries and countries of origin must work together to continue providing adoption actors with tools and to support, to the best of their ability, the children and the parents, whose skills and resources will be strongly required in order to complete this life project. Finally, is the adoption of an older child not a means to give adoption its full meaning as a measure of protection of a child, who truly needs it?

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