

## From poor to rich

### Backlash against global adoption sparks complex ethical debate

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It was billed as a humanitarian rescue of orphaned Sudanese children fleeing the war in Darfur.

The 103 children would be evacuated from neighbouring Chad to France, where new families, who had each paid thousands of euros, would care for them.

The problem? They weren't orphans. And they weren't Sudanese, either.

They were Chadian youngsters who had reportedly been lured into custody with candy and cookies.

Chad's President Idriss Deby was enraged when the Zoe's Ark scandal erupted in October 2007, and suggested the children may have been sold into a pedophile ring or used to supply human organs.

Then he took a swipe at rich countries using poorer ones as a source for children.

"These people treat us like animals. So this is the image of the saviour Europe, which gives lessons to our countries. This is the image of Europe which helps Africa," Deby told reporters a year ago.

The Zoe's Ark incident sparked global controversy about international adoption, its regulation, and in the much broader picture, the ethics of First World people adopting developing world children.

Questions of child trafficking, organ harvesting and unscrupulous deals have also fueled resentment, and in some cases, led to complete border shutdowns.

The backlash against international adoption -- including violence against adoptive parents, agencies and their workers in foreign countries such as Guatemala and Chad -- also speaks to strong nationalist sensibilities that erupt when abuses are revealed.

Indeed, international adoptions spark many complex ethical questions from opponents and proponents of the practice.



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Eric Breteau, left, head of French charity Zoe's Ark, and two of his five charity workers charged with kidnapping 103 children in Chad arrive at the courthouse in N'Djamena last December. The group was convicted and sentenced to eight years of hard labour, but later pardoned by Chad's President Idriss Deby and returned to France.

At the heart of the issue is a thorny question: Is it right or wrong for westerners to adopt children from poorer nations?

According to critics, people from rich countries are pillaging poor countries' richest resource -- their children -- much to the anger and resentment of nationals in the countries of origin.

At the other end, advocates of international adoptions contend an impoverished child is rescued from a miserable life by an act of humanity and charity.

Even those who've adopted children from foreign countries are divided.

"It is an extremely good option for children. It is very likely the best option for children who don't have homes, don't have families, don't have food, don't have anyone to care for them," says international adoption expert Elizabeth Bartholet, a faculty director of the Child Advocacy Program at Harvard Law School in Boston.

But Karen Dubinsky, a history professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., and international adoption expert, believes it isn't cut and dried.

"Everybody is really encouraged to think of international adoption only as a good thing," says Dubinsky. "It can dazzle us, blind us to what's really going on," she says of the rescue explanation.

An adoptive mother herself of an eight-year-old Guatemalan boy, the Ontario university professor says these polemic views lead to dead-end discussions.

Conflicted about her child's adoption and others' reactions to it led Dubinsky to research the subject.

"It's harder and way more complicated to think about what are the sources of poverty that are creating the need for adoption," says Dubinsky, who is writing a book about these issues called *Babies without Borders*.

An estimated 40,000 children around the globe are adopted internationally every year and millions more -- the world's most impoverished children -- are left behind.

Trends in international adoptions are "at a crisis moment now," a consortium of adoption advocates, including the American Bar Association, declared in August.

In a position paper, the group lashed out at "powerful political forces" that would make regulations more restrictive. The group argues this leads to more border shutdowns, ultimately hurting the world's poorest orphans.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), however, points to serious abuses surrounding international adoption, saying its growing popularity has led to "lack of regulation and oversight," particularly within countries of origin, which in turn has led to many abuses, including abduction, coercion of birth parents and bribery.

The practice "has spurred the growth of an industry around adoption where profit, rather than the best interests of the children, takes centre stage," UNICEF says.

Before inter-country adoption is considered, families should get support to raise their own children, and if they can't, "an appropriate alternative family environment" within their country of origin should be found, the organization believes.

But UNICEF's stance is a "powerfully hostile position" and unrealistic, as all the world's

poorest children can't be properly cared for at home, counters Bartholet.

"We increase the chances of those (abuses) happening when we make international adoption illegal or almost impossible," says Bartholet, an adoptive mother of two Peruvian children and author of several books on the subject.

She challenges the policy-makers who restrict international adoption to weigh out the evils of an impoverished birth mother being compensated for a child she puts up for adoption versus a child who spends years being raised in institutional care.

"It's a small problem compared to the death and destruction of these kids."

However, Dominic Nutt with Save the Children, U.K., argues that demand for adoptees is fed by orphanages that make money from "selling children."

That commodification of children

creates conditions for abduction or simply puts pressure on birth parents, who, hoping to give their children a better life, relinquish them to local orphanages, he says. In that way, the system creates

"orphans," even if one or both parents are still alive.

In the case of Cochrane couple

Anjanette and Robin Bailey, their new three-year-old Ethiopian son's birth mother is still alive and living in the

impoverished east African country of

83 million.

The couple adopted the boy in April and met his mother before bringing the youngster home to Canada.

"There are so many children who have no family, but do I think it's probably best for them if they stay in their own country? Yes, but it's such an overwhelming issue," Anjanette says, pointing to the systemic poverty.

The answers aren't easy, she says.

"It isn't a black and white issue."

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