The "Un-Ethics" of International Adoption
and the Guiding Principles of an Ethical Approach

If you're reading this, it is a given that you have an interest in the global orphan crisis. Delving into this issue necessitates a recognition that there are deeply complex issues underlying the crisis; in turn, to respond well to the crisis brings up similar complex issues. This article addresses the world of international adoption, and more specifically targets within this what we as advocates must demand: *ethical* international adoption.

We'll address the topic by first portraying why ethical international adoption is distinctive (and more difficult and rare) from the simple practice of international adoption. We can best begin by understanding what *unethical* practices look like, and to do this we need to understand what's happening from the side of the "sending country" (i.e. the country and community in which the vulnerable child is living).

I. A glimpse into the "un-ethics"

Among the usually-intertwining causes of the global orphan crisis, a few are most commonplace: poverty, death and disease, cultural practices, war and corruption. But let's see what this would look like on the family and individual level. A mother with two children, plus one on the way, loses her husband in a tragic accident. As is customary in this country, her husband's family takes all of their property and belongings, leaving the mother and children in poverty. Desperate and unable to provide for her children, the mother comes to an orphanage and says that she will relinquish her rights once her baby is born so that the baby can be adopted. Causes of this child being orphaned: death, poverty, cultural practices, corruption.

What is the orphanage's response? Let's consider some possible scenarios: perhaps the orphanage agrees to facilitate a legal relinquishment of rights. Or perhaps the orphanage pays her $100 for her child once the baby is born. The orphanage may document the child's history in a number of ways: maternal or family death, abandonment, neglect or relinquishment. The orphanage's partner (adoption agency) is made aware of the availability of a child for adoption, and so the process begins. A family is given a referral; legal documents are filed; a child is adopted.

This is only one scenario, but what strikes you about this? Is international adoption *in the best interest* of this child? We would argue that for this scenario, as well as a thousand other scenarios *that happen each and every day* with vulnerable families, international adoption is not in the best interest of the child, and that an ensuing international adoption process is therefore *unethical*.

For international adoption to be in the best interest of the child, our organization holds a set of values that delineate the following: **international adoption is in the best interest of the child *only* 1) when family preservation or family reunification (including reunification with extended family) is neither possible nor safe *and* 2) when ethical local adoption is not possible.**

What happens then?

Many people are shocked to learn the deeply disturbing details behind the practices of or-phanages, adoption agencies and international adoption stakeholders. Hear this: we aren't talking about the stories that make headline news and shut down adoption agencies who partner with notorious countries. We're talking about the real, everyday, common practice of international adoption within accredited, reputable agencies and countries. So how does this happen? We have to understand a little more about what the practice of in-ternational adoption has created.

Adoption agencies certainly look noble by their involvement in such a seemingly benevo-lent venture; however, a deeper look will find agencies unwittingly involved with certain organizations that are more interested in darker and more ulterior motives. To put it blunt-ly, international adoption has created a simple and crude supply and demand dynamic. In other words, a "supply" of adoptable children is met by the "demand" of adoptive fami-lies.

In practice, adoptive families finalize a process to adopt a child, travel to said country, and bring that child back home. It seems straightforward enough from 'our' Western perspec-tive. But what happens here? You see, the citizens of the "survival-mode" countries in which these children reside always see that the international adoptive families are com-paratively people with means. The opportunity for personal gain is undeniable as the de-mand side of the equation is recognized. The supply must increase to meet the demand.

(this paragraph below would be a helpful footnote or could be left into the main text) Often, there is a predictable "adoption boom cycle" in countries where international adoption is increasing. "The first stage begins with a legitimate need for large numbers of children facing a particular crisis. In the second most of the original children have been placed, but adoption demand has grown as a result of pro-adoption advocacy that recruit-ed potential parents. As a result, paid "child finders" enter the scene. In the third stage pressure to find children increases to keep pace with demand, and bad players begin to appear…In the fourth stage adoptive parents begin to come forward with their experiences of corruption or fraud, and governments and adoption agencies begin to respond…" Kathryn Joyce <u>Child Catchers</u>.

How are agencies implicated?

Any solid adoption agency will advocate for ethical adoption practices. It's easy to say that international adoption is only appropriate for a child in "true need" of an adoptive family. But the ethical *practice* of this is significantly more challenging and rare. What happens when an agency has no real means of obtaining accurate information about a child's so-cial history? What happens when the agency is disconnected from the real actions of its representatives, partners and agents on the ground? How does an agency respond to the inherent conflict of interest that more adoptions means more revenue for the agency? How do they respond to the organizational disincentive to preserve and reunify children with families?

We who desire the best interest of the child; we who believe the global orphan crisis must end… we MUST demand better. We must demand ETHICAL international adoption.

II. Guiding principles of an ethical approach

We propose that the guiding principles of ethical international adoption can be seen in three categories: the child's best interest; verification of information; and transparency.

As previously stated, we uphold that international adoption is *only* ethical when it is in a child's best interest. These are scenarios when the child's circumstances meet two essential qualifications: 1) when family preservation or family reunification (including reunification with extended family) is neither possible nor safe and 2) when ethical local adoption is not possible.

Does this ever happen? Absolutely—there are certainly children for whom international adoption is the only appropriate solution. This may include scenarios of abandonment, abuse, neglect or parental/family death. Secondarily, adoption practices are deeply influenced by the local culture and for a variety of reasons (whether cultural, legal, religious or governmental) may not be possible. Given these realities, there are scenarios where international adoption is in the best interest of the child. However most importantly, we must insist on verifying that international adoption is, in truth and fact, the best possible scenario for the child.

The verification of information is critical and pivotal in the international adoption process. We should ask ourselves: "who stands to benefit from this child being adopted?" Often, if we follow the money, we will uncover motives and incentives for international adoption when it may not be the best scenario. Many, many people stand to "benefit" from a completed international adoption process: adoption agency employees, orphanage directors, birth parents or extended relatives, attorneys, court clerks, social service officials and police, and the list goes on. So if that is the case, we must ensure that the social history presented is *verifiable* by a disinterested party who has nothing to gain by the completed adoption. If an adoption agency or their in-country partners are unwilling to take these additional measures, or allow families to independently take these measures, the red flags go up.

Throughout the process of an international adoption, *transparency* must be a key value adapted by all. Transparency is often a difficult cultural practice in 'survival-mode' countries and communities, but we must insist. There must be transparency of financial accountability (who is being paid and how much?); transparency of motive (is there a disincentive to reunify a child?); transparency of legal process (are bribes being paid? are testimonies falsified? are judges or clerks participants in trafficking rings?) and so forth. Adoptive families can be equipped to ask their agencies pressing, difficult questions not only about their adoption practices, but just as importantly about their in-country partners.

For us to take international adoption ethics seriously, we must demonstrate a commitment to these guiding principles. If at any time we find our agency, its partners or ourselves out of step with these ethics, we must be willing to do what may be the hardest action of all: step away.

Being an advocate doesn't mean that we don't engage in the complex world of international adoption, but it DOES mean we fight against the all-too-easy "un-ethics" that are so commonplace. We refuse to endorse organizations who operate on the "supply and demand" model of adoption. We support organizations who prioritize reunification and preservation over adoption. In word and deed, we uphold only what is the child's BEST interest. Together, we can do it.

—Wellon Bridgers
March 2018