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# Intercountry Adoption and Child Sponsorship in Vietnam: A Practicum-Based Exploration of a Complex Relationship

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**Intercountry Adoption and Child Sponsorship in Vietnam:  
A Practicum-Based Exploration of a Complex Relationship**

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## **ABSTRACT**

For over a decade, Vietnam ranked in the top ten countries providing the most children for intercountry adoption (ICA), sending almost 11,000 children abroad since 2003 (U.S. State Department, 2015). It is likely that many of these children, however, were not orphans; evidence reveals that a lucrative baby-buying industry falsified information and trafficked children for years in order to meet the high international demand for healthy infants.

In this paper, I relate this history of ICA fraud to contemporary child sponsorship in Vietnam. I find that ICA and child sponsorship are intertwined in two contradictory ways. First, child sponsorship programs justly work to reduce the systematic need for ICA; through a combination of community development programs and individualized support, these programs combat the root causes that lead to child abandonment. At the same time, however, child sponsorship also mirrors ICA's most fundamental problems, such as the prioritization of foreign needs over effective outcomes. Child sponsorship is thus simultaneously working to reduce the past problems of ICA while also inadvertently carrying on its most problematic legacies.

I investigated models and applications of child sponsorship in Vietnam through a practicum at the Center for Community Health and Development (COHED) in Hanoi, Vietnam. I worked with COHED for a total of 90 hours in three weeks. My practicum focus project was to create a child sponsorship program implementation strategy; upon completion, I presented my research and preliminary recommendations to COHED's directors. For my research, I also interviewed the country director of Holt International.

**Keywords:** Intercountry Adoption, Child Sponsorship, Development Studies,  
Public and Social Welfare

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

**ASP:** Adoption Service Provider

**COHED:** The Center for Community Health and Development

**DOJ** (referred to in some documents as **MOJ**): Vietnam's Department of Justice (Ministry of Justice)

**DOLISA** (referred to in some documents as **MOLISA**): Vietnam's Department of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs)

**ICA:** Intercountry Adoption

**MOA** (referred to in some documents as **MOU**): 2005 Memorandum of Agreement (Memorandum of Understanding)

## **INTRODUCTION**

Of the 250,000 children adopted by American families from around the world in the last fifteen years (U.S. Dept. of State, 2015), it is unclear how many of them were actually orphans. Reports of falsified information, systematic manipulation and child trafficking have steadily accompanied intercountry adoption systems around the world; almost half of the 40 countries listed by the U.S. State Department as the top sources for intercountry adoption over the past 15 years were required to temporarily halt or completely stop adoptions to the United States because of serious concerns about corruption and kidnapping (Graff, 60).

Unfortunately, Vietnam is no exception. For over a decade, Vietnam ranked in the top ten countries sending the most children abroad for ICA, ranking among much larger countries like China and Russia (Selman, 4). Since the 1990s however, the legitimacy of the orphan-status of these emigrating children has been under international speculation as overpowering evidence of irregularities and fraud has arisen. The United States officially ended its adoption agreement with Vietnam in 2008.

For this paper, intercountry adoption (ICA) is defined as an adoption in which the adopted child becomes a part of a family of a different country or nationality. ICA is also known as transnational adoption or international adoption.

In order to prevent the ICA fraud of the past, organizations in Vietnam today are creating a new 'child-centered' system of child protection in which meeting international demand no longer comes as a first priority. Programs like family strengthening and reunification, poverty alleviation and community support projects offer sustainable solutions that benefit children and their communities without the risk of rampant fraud.

A crucial component of these alternative programs is child sponsorship. Child sponsorship is an international fundraising tool in which an individual funds ('sponsors') a child in a developing country for a period of years. This giving is usually coupled with progress reports on the child and his/her community and letters are often exchanged to personalize the relationship. In

Vietnam, child sponsorship programs use a combination of community based development programs and individual child support to combat both the individual situations and the root causes that lead to child abandonment.

After researching Vietnam's history of ICA and conducting a practicum in Hanoi on child sponsorship, I find that ICA and contemporary child sponsorship are intertwined in two contradictory ways. First, child sponsorship programs justly work to reduce the systematic need for ICA; through a combination of community development programs and individualized support, these programs combat the root causes that lead to child abandonment. At the same time, however, child sponsorship also mirrors ICA's most fundamental problems, such as the prioritization of foreign needs over effective outcomes. Child sponsorship is thus simultaneously working to reduce the past problems of ICA while also inadvertently carrying on its most problematic legacies.

For my research, I investigated models and applications of child sponsorship in Vietnam through a practicum at the Center for Community Health and Development (COHED) in Hanoi, Vietnam. Since 2002, COHED has worked in communities across Northern and Central Vietnam, focusing on HIV/AIDS care, prevention and support, climate change responses, and sustainable poverty reduction strategies. COHED is classified as a Vietnamese non-governmental organization. I worked with COHED four days a week for three weeks, for a total of 90 hours. My practicum's focus project was child sponsorship program implementation. COHED wants to create a child sponsorship program to support its existing projects, and tasked me with child sponsorship research relevant to the COHED context.

My work sustainably contributed to the organization. I tailored my research to achieve a specific COHED goal and this foundational research will improve future program efficiency; my research provides future project leaders with a solid basis of background knowledge in the Vietnamese context, a step-by-step implementation plan and possible program challenges. This research was a first step to create COHED's child sponsorship program, which is hoped to provide long-term financial support for the organization's already successful and established programs.



My primary goal for my practicum was to experience how development projects are initially implemented in context of a Vietnamese organization. I felt that assisting this organization would not only give me a unique opportunity to research the effectiveness, advantages and drawbacks of child sponsorship as a development tool, but it would also allow me to contribute to meaningful development work for my ISP.

For this report, I also interviewed Ms. Dam Thi Thuy Hang, the country director for Holt International in Vietnam. This interview was crucial in forming my argument; I found that Holt Vietnam's alternative care system clearly exemplified the connection between child sponsorship and ICA, thus beginning my understanding of the overall relationship. Holt International is one of the largest child sponsorship organizations in the world and in Vietnam today, Holt is one of the only two organizations allowed to facilitate adoptions between the U.S. and Vietnam. Ms. Dam has worked with Holt Vietnam for 22 years and she graciously agreed to talk with me about her experience with ICA, contemporary forms of child protection and child sponsorship in Vietnam.

## **WORK UNDERTAKEN**

My practicum took place in the COHED office in Hanoi, where I worked for a total of 90 hours over the course of three weeks. My focus project was to research child sponsorship models and to provide COHED with preliminary recommendations and a suggested child sponsorship implementation plan.

I spent the first week of my practicum assembling background research and literature reviews on child sponsorship, studying successful child sponsorship models in specific operating organizations in Vietnam and abroad. I studied the arguments of both opponents and advocates of child sponsorship and their applications in Vietnam. After this analysis, I prepared preliminary recommendations for COHED, including an assessment of international and national Child Protection requirements, financial accountability strategies, and logistic considerations.

For the second week of my practicum, I visited Mai Chau, a rural province southwest of Hanoi where COHED has initiated several community

development programs, including community-based tourism initiatives and infrastructure projects. This week allowed me to see COHED's impact in rural communities.

During the third week of my practicum, I presented my research and recommendations to COHED's founder/director, assistant director and other important COHED staff. To see the complete list of child sponsorship recommendations for COHED, see the Appendix: Preliminary Recommendations for COHED.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The primary purpose of this research is to explore the complicated relationship between ICA and child sponsorship in Vietnam. Using primary sources and secondary reports, I assembled a literature review on historical intercountry adoption in Vietnam from which it was clear that ICA in Vietnam was a corrupt industry spurred by international demand rather than by sincere child protection goals. I chose to include this literature review in the Research Findings section rather than the Introduction in order to create a cohesive and chronological narrative that draws a strong line from historical adoption to contemporary child sponsorship.

To understand child sponsorship, my primary methodology was organizational observation in a specific context. My COHED experience was an immersive experience in the organization's culture, enabling me to be a part of program implementation in its natural setting. In addition to my research, my COHED practicum allowed me to gain data about child sponsorship relevant to a particular setting, allowing for deeper, more contextualized research.

In this paper, I use my COHED experience as a specific case-study of contemporary child sponsorship in Vietnam. This practicum experience is cohesive with my overall exploration of ICA and child sponsorship; I find that COHED is an example of how child sponsorship programs in Vietnam seek to reduce the systematic need for ICA by targeting the root causes that lead to child abandonment. Furthermore, my COHED experience grounds my understanding of child sponsorship into a particular setting that is actually operating in Vietnam.

In addition to my background research and observational practicum experience, I conducted one informal interview at the Holt Vietnam office in Hanoi on November 26, 2015 with Ms. Dam Thi Thuy Hang, the country director for Holt International in Vietnam. This interview helped to set up the transition and relationship between ICA and child sponsorship.

At the conclusion of my independent study and practicum, I present this analysis believing in the integrity of the research, while also being aware that my position as a foreigner or student may have unintentionally influenced my findings or created biases in my understandings. Throughout my practicum, interview, and project presentation, I conducted myself in accordance to ethical research criteria, gaining informed consent before conducting interviews and minimizing the potential risks to anyone involved. The information in this paper does not represent COHED or Holt International in any way.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **I. Background of Intercountry Adoption (ICA) Fraud in Vietnam**

ICA from Vietnam gained international attention in April 1975. Days before Saigon fell to the Northern forces, President Ford authorized \$2 million to fund “mercy flights” that would transport thousands of orphans from Saigon on passenger planes to waiting families in California. “I ordered American officials in Saigon to cut through any red tape that might stand in the way of the children's escape,” the president wrote in his memoir. “Everyone suffers in a war, but no one suffers more than the children, and the airlift was the least that we could do” (Ford, 252). The project was called Operation Babylift.

In less than a month, the United States airlifted an estimated two to three thousand babies out of Saigon and into families abroad, particularly in the U.S. The project’s mission was “an idea as old as time,” namely, that governments who could not protect the lives of their children should “abdicate responsibility” to volunteers whose responsibility “would be to let the children live, and to send them to where they could” (Rosemary Taylor; cited in Sachs, Location 552). Not all children made the journey however; many children left Saigon malnourished or sick, and all the children arrived in California exhausted and scared. The

second carrier plane, with some 230 children onboard, exploded shortly after take-off, killing an estimated 80 children and volunteers.

As President Ford greeted the first plane of children in California, it was already clear that record keeping was not a top priority. Despite attempts to record each child's identity, no one actually knew even how many children were on the flight; the San Francisco Chronicle reported that fifty-two children had arrived. The army's report documented fifty-nine. The Red Cross recounted fifty-seven (Sachs, Location 792).

Unfortunately, these lapses in record-keeping were more than innocuous mistakes. Instead, they foreshadow the structural devaluing of identity that would plague ICA from Vietnam, and countless other places in the world, for years. Even though the Operation Babylift lapses are dwarfed by the future identity fraud in ICA, they cannot simply be forgotten. There are pages of websites asking for information about lost loved ones who were misplaced during Operation Babylift; "I want to find my family," one entry reads. "I was dropped off at the orphanage about a week before the fall of Saigon by my mother and grandmother. That was the last time I saw them." Some entries give names or orphanage addresses; others simply state a plea: "I want to find my sister. Please help me find her" ("Looking For...", 2015).

Misreporting was not Operation Babylift's only issue. Critics argued that Operation Babylift did not offer a sustainable solution to Vietnam's war victims; by transporting a few thousands of orphans out of the bleak post-war situation, the U.S. was leaving thousands more vulnerable children behind and offering no long lasting impact on the ground in Vietnam. Not even all of the children who arrived in the U.S. were wanted; despite warnings that the children may be sick, some prospective parents were so unhappily startled that they wouldn't be given a healthy infant that they turned children away. "I want a baby that is perfectly normal," one woman said as she turned away a child with a bump. "For such a baby, I can provide a beautiful home" (quoted in Sachs, Location 2035).

This issue also foreshadows a major problem of ICA. As years went on, receiving countries (countries that primarily accept children from ICA, primarily European countries and the U.S.) put unrealistic demands on countries of origin (countries that primarily provide children for adoption) for high numbers of

healthy infants. The perception that countries like Vietnam have hordes of healthy infants waiting to be adopted is a dangerous myth; in reality, many of most at-risk children eligible for adoption are older than five or have physical or mental disabilities. Despite this fact, as ICA continued from Vietnam the vast majority of children adopted were infants; in 2003, 76.4% were under one-year-old (Selman, 197).

By 1995, Vietnam was one of the top four destinations (after China, South Korea, and Russia) for Westerners who wanted to adopt (Selman, 191). In 2005, the US and Vietnam signed the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) which allowed Americans to adopt Vietnamese children for a period of three years. Reports of adoption fraud and child trafficking arose almost immediately.

First, the number of abandoned children in Vietnam skyrocketed; after the 2005 MOA, the number of adoption cases involving desertions or abandonment rose to over 85% compared to the 20% before the agreement (U.S. Embassy in Vietnam, 2008). This increase didn't happen everywhere, however; orphanages not involved in intercountry adoption did not see any increase in the number of deserted children (U.S. Embassy in Vietnam, 2008). These figures suggest that the 2005 MOA triggered a drastic increase in the amount of abandoned children eligible for ICA, suggesting a dark connection between the demands for Vietnamese infants and their availability; as demand for orphans increased, so did the supply.

By October 2007, the US Embassy in Hanoi had investigated hundreds of adoption cases, looking for the cause of this increase. Their findings provided evidence that the abandonments were indeed a result of increased international demand:

This rapid increase in the number of newborns in orphanages indicates that local adoption facilitators are actively supplying infants to meet the demand created by U.S. adopting parents... Looking behind these abandonments, my consular officers have discovered networks that recruit pregnant women, pay them for their children, arrange for them to stay in safe houses, and then create fraudulent documents to make it appear that the child was abandoned (U.S. Embassy in Vietnam, 2007).

International demand for infants created a very real incentive for orphanages to meet this demand, regardless of the real resources. ICA in Vietnam was an extremely lucrative business; foreigners paid thousands of dollars for intercountry

adoptions and the “finder’s fee” given for a single child was often higher than a Vietnamese month wage. Hospital workers were so enticed by this money that they would manipulate mothers to give up their children after giving birth, threatening them with crippling hospital fees and making illiterate mothers sign documents that they couldn’t read (Graff, 64).

Reports even cited common instances of Adoption Service Providers (ASPs), the companies that oversee the adoption process between foreign families and orphanages in source countries, stealing children or manipulating families in order to sustain a constant supply of infants to send abroad. The US Embassy in Hanoi documented that ASPs were “offering monetary inducements to families for relinquishing children, and offering children for international adoption without the consent of the birth parents.” “Unfortunately,” the Embassy warns, “the glowing report of an adoptive parent who successfully ‘brought home’ a child cannot be taken as evidence that the adoption was ethical or fully legal” (U.S. Embassy in Vietnam, 2007).

According to U.S. Immigration law, an orphan is a child who A.) does not have any parents due to death, disappearance, abandonment or desertion or B.) has been relinquished by the surviving parent, in writing, for intercountry adoption and emigration (U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security, 2015). These reports conclude that is likely that many of the children adopted from Vietnam did not meet this definition.

By 2008, the Embassy concluded that corruption had become so widespread “that there is fraud in the overwhelming majority of cases of infants offered for international adoption” (U.S. Embassy in Vietnam, 2008) and when the MOA expired in 2008, the United States did not renew it. Although ICA from Vietnam would continue to other countries, almost no Vietnamese children would be adopted by American families for six years.

In 2010, two years after the U.S. stopped ICA with Vietnam, Vietnam restructured its adoption system. The change broke the direct link between birth families, orphanages and ASPs; without this direct communication, ASPs could no longer give unfiltered adoption demands directly to orphanages. The new system required ASPs to work through Vietnam’s Department of Adoption and

Department of Justice, who would regulate the communication between ASPs and orphanages.

In 2014, Vietnam's Central Adoption Authority granted two organizations a license to reopen a “Special Adoption Program” with the U.S. This restricted system allows American families to adopt only certain children from Vietnam: children older than 5, members of a sibling group, or children with disability (U.S. Dept. of State, 2014).

## **II. Interview with Holt International Country Director**

In 2014 alone, Holt International supported more than 2,462 children and 559 families in Vietnam through programs that target the roots causes that lead to child abandonment (“Vietnam Adoption,” 2015). In my interview with Holt’s Vietnam country director Ms. Dam Thi Thuy Hang, I learned that although Holt International is one of the only two organizations permitted to facilitate ICA between Vietnam and the US, ICA is not a priority for contemporary methods of child protection. Rather than aggrandizing ICA, Holt’s alternative care system uses early intervention and prevention as first priority projects to address the root causes of child abandonment and encourage sustainable methods of child protection.

Holt’s first step is to help vulnerable children stay with their families through family strengthening and family reunification projects. Holt’s services include increased access to early education for at-risk children, access to daycare for children with disabilities, increased work and loan opportunities for parents, and basic health, finance and child care support.

Holt also provides support to single mothers. Ms. Dam describes these young, single women as “invisible”; not only are they often abandoned by their family and the baby’s father, but unmarried mothers are also not given governmental support, as the government does not want to seem that they excuse the women’s behavior. According to Ms. Dam, Holt workers are trying to challenge this thinking. “The government doesn’t support the work of criminals, but they go to prison and get a chance to rehabilitate,” she says. “Where is this opportunity for women who have made a mistake?” In these situations, the children of these women are at a huge risk of abandonment or child trafficking,

and Holt's support programs reduce the likelihood of abandonment. The project is still small scale (this year, the program helped thirty to forty single mothers in Vietnam) but it is also successful; after coming to Holt, 95% of mothers keep their babies.

When family reunification is not a realistic option, Holt reaches out to foster families in the child's community or province. If these alternatives are not successful in one year, the child is eligible for intercountry adoption. The U.S. receives a still very small percentage; most of these adoptees go to France, Italy, Canada, Spain or Denmark. According to Ms. Dam, the number of domestic adoptions is rapidly increasing and the number of foreign adoptions decreasing. Most children adopted abroad are children with special needs.

"Holt is not an adoption agency," Ms. Dam says. "Adoption is one alternative, a last alternative. First, we work to improve the quality of care of children through family preservation, special care, foster care, or maybe domestic adoption. ICA is last alternative." Holt's goal now is to introduce this service model to social work professionals in the formal social welfare system.

70% of Holt's alternative care programs are funded by the sponsorship donations from the organization's child sponsorship program.

### **III. Child Sponsorship**

First arising in the late 1930s as a humanitarian effort to aid orphans and disabled children in post-war situations, child sponsorship programs currently support an estimated 9 million children around the world (Wydick, Glewwe & Rutledge, 2013). Throughout the twentieth century, the number of child sponsorship programs grew drastically; between 1982 and 1996, the combined number of World Vision, Foster Parents Plan, and Christian Children's Fund programs grew by a factor of more than six, increasing from a combined total of 701,000 children under sponsorship to 4,479,000 (Smillie, 121).

Child sponsorship is an appealing form of international aid because it personalizes development projects, giving sponsors the maximum 'feel-good' aspects of international donations. Child sponsorships 'shorten the perceptual distance between the giver and beneficiary,' which increases the sense of moral obligation and identification (Fowler, 14). Child sponsorship is also appealing to



organizations; it is an effective long-term fundraising tool for charities, as sponsors agree to make continual donations over a long period of time as a part of child sponsorship's unique relationship-building model of international aid.

The effectiveness of child sponsorship programs in comparison to other forms of humanitarian aid, however, is extremely understudied; there are only two independent studies that research the viability of child sponsorship and they both study only one operating model (Wydick, Glewwe & Rutledge, 2013). Critics argue that although it is a profitable fundraising tool, it is not the most effective poverty alleviation strategy; compared to other forms of poverty-alleviation, child sponsorship has high administrative costs due to the need to organize sponsorships and the processing, mailing and translation of letters.

There are three primary child sponsorship program models: direct/individual, community-based, and third party. For my practicum at COHED, I studied these models with particular emphasis on their relevant application in Vietnam. I found that Vietnamese organizations use primarily the direct and community-based models, both of which serve two distinct goals. The direct model is used to individually support at-risk population groups, while the community-based model is used to support long-term community development projects.

In the direct/individual model, sponsorship funds are used to directly benefit the individual sponsored child, funding things such as school fees, books, food, clothing, and housing. There is often particular emphasis placed on the relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored child, facilitated through frequent letter writing. This model is used by some of the largest sponsorship organizations, including Compassion International and Children International. Interestingly, after his research with Compassion International, Dr. Bruce Wydick argued that a strongpoint of the direct sponsorship model was its focus on alleviating 'internal constraints,' a term relating to low self-esteem or motivation, or in the terms of Compassion International, a lack of spiritual commitment. He argued that boosting these internal factors was as important as alleviating 'external constraints' like broader problems with education, health and infrastructure ("The Importance of Investing Directly in Children," 2015). This model is also appealing because it allows for measureable success; because funds

go directly to individual children or families, a direct correlation between sponsorship and outcomes can be drawn. In Vietnam, this model is used to support targeted at-risk groups, such as disadvantaged children, individual educational support or specific health care aims. For specific examples of organizations using this model in Vietnam, see the appendix.

There are prevalent issues with the direct/individual model, however. Critics argue that individual child sponsorship is unsustainable and short term, as it does not create self-sufficient communities or alleviate the root problems that lead to poverty. Instead, individual sponsorship creates a cycle of dependency as donors unsustainably help one child at a time, leaving no long-term alleviation to systematic causes of problems that affect children. Furthermore, the focus on internal constraints like motivation and self-esteem do not lead to a ‘spillover effect’; sponsored children achieved 1.38 more years of schooling compared to their unsponsored siblings and peers, demonstrating that the investment in a single child’s life does not reach the sponsored child’s siblings, peers, or community (Wydick, Glewwe, and Rutledge, 2013). This approach can also be divisive; Save the Children found that sponsored children who were privileged over their peers and siblings were the cause of envy and conflict (Clarke, 2005).

In the 1990s, child sponsorship began to transition away from this direct sponsor-child model in hopes to reduce some of these most pressing issues. Today, many organizations use the community-based sponsorship model, which focuses less on particular children and more on the systematic challenges that children face in developing communities. Although this community based model is not exempt from the criticisms of child sponsorship, it attempts to combine the emotional aspects of child sponsorship that attract donors with more sustainable community development projects.

In the community based model, sponsorship donations are used to tackle the root issues that lead to child vulnerability, rather than focusing on the symptoms. Unlike the direct model, sponsorship funds do not go directly to one child. Instead, funds are pooled to indirectly benefit children through investment in broad community development projects such as the improvement of education or health services, infrastructure development, and other poverty reduction techniques. In this way, organizations hope to provide sustainable support to

communities. Donors are still rewarded with a direct relationship with a child, and letters and progress reports are still a fundamental part of the community based model. This model also tries to minimize cultural confusions and foreign oversight by placing greater emphasis on local participation and leadership. In Vietnam, this model is used by organizations like Plan International and Save the Children. The community based model has a prevalent role in Vietnam, supporting broad development initiatives aimed at making long-last change in a community. For specific examples of organizations using this model in Vietnam, see the appendix.

The major problem with the community based sponsorship model is that its effectiveness is hard to study; because benefits are less concentrated, the direct correlation between sponsorship and results is hard to quantify. This leads to the increased use of process measures rather than actual beneficial outcomes; organizations, for example, will report how many schools have been built rather than whether sponsored children and their communities actually fair better than the general population in the long-term as a result of these schools (MacLeod, 2013). Critics sometimes cite community based sponsorship programs as an inefficient copy of other forms of poverty alleviation; community based sponsorship programs have the same goals as non-sponsorship organizations aimed at developing community and alleviating poverty, but they lose efficiency in high administrative costs and the challenge of clearly defining their beneficiaries.

Large organizations with a deep body of resources, capabilities, and financial support also combine the individual and community based models. This combined approach uses a portion of sponsorship funds to directly support individual children and families while keeping the other portion for the development projects of the community based model. World Vision, for example, uses a portion of its funds in Vietnam to support direct/individual programs, like individual child nutrition or support for specific ethnic minority families. The rest of the sponsorship funds are used on community based programs; World Vision sponsors village development boards, for example, which empower local leaders to plan, implement and monitor initiatives in their communities.

The third party sponsorship model is the least common model; it was also the least relevant model in the COHED context. Similar to the community based model in that sponsor donations are pooled together rather than given to individual children, this model raises sponsorship funds to benefit a separate organization. It is commonly used by small organizations that do not have the capabilities to implement development projects of their own. The major critique of this model is that it necessitates another level of oversight, leaving increasing room for miscommunication and corruption. The organization initiating the child-sponsorship program must take responsibility for the third party's use of their funds, and will thus have to monitor and oversee the third-party's policies in order to make sure that the funds are being used effectively. Because COHED already has so many well-established community development programs of its own and wanted to use their sponsorship model to support these initiatives, it was clear that this model would not be a good fit.

## **DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS**

Child sponsorship is playing a crucial role in ending ICA fraud in Vietnam. ICA was a tragic industry based on international demand rather than on 'child-centered' protection. Today, child sponsorship programs fund initiatives that work to end problematic ICA and invest in long-term child protection solutions by combating both the individual situations and root causes that lead to child abandonment. Interestingly, however, despite child sponsorship's significant role in developing child-centered alternative care systems, it is also arguably carrying on ICA's most problematic legacies; just like ICA, child sponsorship prioritizes foreign needs over effective outcomes and creates problematic paternalistic hierarchies.

After studying ICA evidence, it is clear that ICA from Vietnam was not driven by the need to sincerely help the most at-risk children in Vietnam. This statement is most clearly exemplified by the unproportioned desire for healthy Vietnamese infants in Vietnam's ICA history. Even though the children who are the most in need of adoption abroad are over 5 years old, more than 75% of children adopted from Vietnam were under one-year-old (Selman, 197).

Similarly, the most at-risk children in Vietnam are those with disabilities or illnesses and yet as early as Operation Babylift, women turned children away because of the possibility of illness. If ICA was truly invested in child protection, it would have catered towards these especially at-risk and vulnerable children. Furthermore, it was clear from the beginning that ICA did not offer long term solutions to the causes of child abandonment.

Unfortunately, ICA was driven by un-controlled international need. The reports discussed in the research findings all reiterate the same sentiment: there is a direct correlation between high international demand and increased rates of fraudulent child ‘abandonment.’ Because international ASPs unrealistically request high numbers of healthy infants, orphanages are pressured to meet this need through any means necessary. Ms. Dam confirmed this conclusion. “The future of ICA in Vietnam will rely on controlling demand,” she said in our interview. “The number of Vietnamese children in need of homes abroad is rapidly going down. If international demand once again skyrockets, however, these real resources will be ignored.”

In 2008, when ICA fraud in Vietnam was at its peak, The Hague acknowledged that the 1993 Convention on Intercountry Adoption, the international agreement that states ICA best practices, was not being carried out. In its “Guide to Good Practice” (2008), The Hague stated the best interests of children are always the priority. “Unfortunately,” the report continues, “this priority is not always recognized in practice and too much emphasis may be given to the needs of adoptive parents looking for a child, rather than the child’s needs for a suitable family” (79). The report also condemns international demand’s role in ICA fraud: “Countries of origin should not be expected to register large numbers of files from prospective adoptive parents and then be under pressure from those parents to give priority to their requests” (80).

Decreasing international demand for infants abroad will be a slow process. Until then, it is controlled by governmental restrictions. In Vietnam, for example, prospective parents are required to have, or not have, certain characteristics or backgrounds. E.J. Graff puts it bluntly. “Prospective foreign parents today are strictly judged by their age, marital history, family size, income, health, and even weight,” he writes. “That means that if you are single, gay, fat,

old, less than well off, too often divorced, too recently married, taking antidepressants, or already have four children,” you may be turned away (62). Although these restrictions are exclusive and ostracize particular groups of people, they are necessary until international demand can be controlled. Vietnam’s 2010 restructuring of its adoption system was an important step to reduce international demand; by removing the direct contact between ASPs and orphanages, ASPs will no longer be able to directly pressure orphanages for high numbers of infants.

Because ICA is not a child-centered method of child protection, it must be used only as a last option effort to help children. In some cases, especially cases of sibling groups or children with disabilities, ICA is an extremely valuable tool; when family preservation and national adoption prove unsuccessful, ICA exists as a legitimate option. Outside of those cases though, ICA should come second to other forms of child protection aimed at sustainable child-centered initiatives must be prioritized. In Vietnam, Holt International is pursuing this goal; Holt’s projects offer the sustainable solutions needed to reorient child-protection to a child-centered system. This alternative method is successful, too; experts agree that countries that prioritize family strengthening and domestic adoption while also limiting the power of ASPs have “a sharp decline in baby buying, fraud, coercion, and kidnapping for adoption” (Graff, 65).

In Vietnam, child sponsorship has a central role in this reframing; because child sponsorship programs fund the majority of these alternative care programs, child sponsorship is helping to establish systems of sustainable, domestic child protection that reduce the root causes of child abandonment and create the networks of alternative care that result in child centered ICA. COHED is the perfect example of this success; the organization is currently in the process of implementing a child sponsorship program so that long-term international donations can support their already successful development programs. If COHED chooses to use a community-based model to support their community development and poverty alleviation projects, entire communities will be better equipped to raise their children in a healthy and safe way, creating sustainable situations that will reduce the need for ICA and the likelihood of child abandonment. Similarly, if COHED chooses to use a direct/individual

sponsorship model to supplement its work with children and families affected by HIV/AIDs, child sponsorship will help COHED broaden its prevention, care and support services to create safer, healthier and more sustainable situations for some of the most vulnerable children in Vietnam. Either way, COHED's sponsorship program will be targeting the root causes of child abandonment and thus alleviating the systematic need for ICA.

In this way, contemporary child sponsorship in Vietnam is very relevant to the past of ICA. This is not the only connection between ICA and child sponsorship however. Despite child sponsorship's significant role in developing child-centered alternative care systems, it is also arguably carrying on ICA's most problematic legacies.

Just as ICA historically prioritized international demand rather than the needs of at-risk children, child sponsorship programs disregard the most effective development strategies to appeal to international donors. The effectiveness of child sponsorship in relation to other forms of international aid is questionable; critics argue that the high administrative costs of child sponsorship makes it less effective than other forms of humanitarian aid that do not waste time identifying exact beneficiaries or waste money on the high costs of letter mailing and translation. Child sponsorship is used because it appeals to foreigners, regardless of the legitimacy of the outcome; donors are rewarded with the 'feel-good' benefits of international donations, not realizing that their time or money could be more effectively used in systems that prioritize effective, sustainable development goals. Terence Wood at the Development Policy Centre in Australia describes this trend: "Child sponsorship is not used because it's thought to be the best possible way to tackle poverty, but rather because it's one of the better available ways of prising open people's wallets" (Wood 2012). Child sponsorship is used because it appeals to foreigners rather than because it is an effective development tool. In this way, child sponsorship is mirroring ICA's past prioritization of international actors rather than the legitimacy of the outcomes.

Child sponsorship is also reflective of ICA because both systems reinforce an overt paternalistic hierarchy between the North and the South. In "Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship," Sara Dorow (2006) describes ICA as a process in which children are "plunked

into an intimate proximity to difference” (5) as they are moved “across uneven racial, national, class, and gender spaces” (2) to homes that are distant from the child’s biological kin. To compensate for racial or national differences, transnationally and transracially adopted children and their families struggle to reconstruct ideas of identity in order to shape their family and national belonging. This identity forming, however, tends to reproduce “middle-class American kinship and its hegemonic whiteness and heterosexuality” (5). Indeed, the majority of arguments against ICA are “on the grounds of colonialism, cultural genocide, exploitation of women and poor people, and loss of racial and cultural identity” (Triseliotis, 279).

ICA allowed well-meaning foreigners to rescue poor children regardless, or in many cases unaware, of the possible repercussions of their actions. Although its implications may be less drastic, child sponsorship unfortunately does the same. Child sponsorship has the unfortunate potential to become the contemporary continuation of ICA:

[The donor] is still 'adopting' a child somewhere. S/he still writes letters to the child; still gets letters and pictures back. It is still costly. And it still encourages a literally paternalistic attitude on the part of hundreds of thousands of well-intentioned donors who are rarely made to understand that if each one wrote a single letter to their prime minister about, say, tied aid, it might have a more positive impact than all the child sponsorship combined (Smillie 2000, 122).

This critique is eerily reminiscent of past critiques against ICA; staunch opponents of ICA, commonly termed ‘abolitionists’, often argued that the millions of dollars spent on adoption fees would yield more results if they were given to development projects that benefit children in sending countries (Triseliotis, 22).

This connection between child sponsorship and ICA is the most worrisome aspect of child sponsorship. When one remembers the tragedies of ICA, it seems obvious that contemporary child sponsorship organizations would want to minimize this connection. Unfortunately, this is not always the case; on their website, Compassion International, one of the largest child sponsorship organizations in the world, heralds child sponsorship as the modern equivalent of ICA:



It's not easy to adopt a child. Here's a fast, affordable and gratifying alternative. While it's not always possible to adopt a child due to financial constraints and legal red tape, almost anybody can sponsor a child through Compassion International. Thousands of children around the world are living in poverty, and they are hoping and praying to be sponsored by a generous person like you (“Do You Want to Adopt,” 2015).

This statement is ignorant and insensitive; the narrative does not seek to distance its contemporary child sponsorship programs from ICA’s problematic legacy. Rather than citing the incredible strides child sponsorship is making in innovative methods of child protection, this statement proudly flaunts child sponsorship’s most problematic aspect: it’s bleak connection to ICA and its legacy of child-trafficking, baby-buying and manipulation.

On the one hand, child sponsorship works to stop ICA’s problematic legacy from continuing. Indeed, this is child sponsorship’s greatest success; it plays an invaluable role in targeting the root causes of child abandonment, thus alleviating the systematic need for ICA. At the same time however, the similarities between child sponsorship and historical ICA are evident; despite its successes, child sponsorship has the potential to carry on the most problematic aspects of ICA. It is imperative for operating organizations in Vietnam to recognize these ruinous similarities. From there, organizations must take an active role in capitalizing on child sponsorship’s successes and distancing their contemporary programs from the ICA practices of the past.

## **CONCLUSION**

After Operation Babylift caught millions of American’s attention, Vietnam remained one of the world’s top adoption source countries for almost two decades. Unfortunately, the problems of Operation Babylift accurately foreshadowed some of the major problems that would plague ICA around the world for years; in Vietnam, like in many ICA source countries, international demand for healthy infants resulted in a manipulative system of baby-buying in which child traffickers peripheralized the true needs of at-risk Vietnamese children in favor the lucrative returns of ICA.

In order for intercountry adoption to once again be child-centered, two changes must be made. First, international demand must be curbed to prevent babies being provided to meet international quotas. Vietnam's 2010 restructuring of its adoption model was an important step towards this goal. Second, ICA must be a last priority option after other sustainable protection measures aimed at keeping at-risk children with their birth families or communities. Holt Vietnam is pioneering these changes; the organization's alternative care model emphasizes a series of interventions before ICA is considered, including family strengthening programs and support for single mothers.

Child sponsorship is an important component to this new alternative care system. Child sponsorship plays a valuable role in Vietnam today; it is helping create this child-centered welfare system that creates sustainable solutions to the root causes behind child abandonment. In this way, child sponsorship is not only helping organizations create sustainable development and support initiatives throughout Vietnam, but it is also working to reduce the need for ICA and prevent future system abuses.

These findings are extremely relevant to my practicum experience with COHED. My COHED practicum allowed me to study different models of child sponsorship, using actual programs operating in Vietnam to create a list of best practices for COHED tailored directly to the Vietnamese context. By analyzing the models' differences, strengths and applications in Vietnam, I was able to create a preliminary implementation plan for COHED, including steps for necessary government approvals, an overview of international and national requirements for Child Protection Policies, and recommendations on financial accountability. Because COHED will use its child protection program to support its existing poverty reduction projects and initiatives aimed to help Vietnam's most at-risk children, COHED is a perfect example of how child sponsorship is working to stop the past frauds of ICA from continuing.

In 2011, when Susan Jacobs, the Ambassador to the U.S. Child's Issues Office in the State Department, visited Vietnam to reevaluate its ICA system, she applauded Vietnam's effort to create a sustainable child welfare system under The Hague Convention on the Protection of Children in Intercountry Adoption. As her visit suggests, Vietnam is in a crucial transition towards a sincerely child-

centered protection system that uses alternative care priorities to cater to the needs of children rather than the needs of international ASPs. Because of its role in funding sustainable community based development projects and individualized support to vulnerable populations, child sponsorship plays a crucial role in this transition. At the same time, however, it is absolutely necessary for child sponsorship organizations and donors to be critically aware that the major criticisms of child sponsorship are also worryingly reminiscent of Vietnam's past ICA. Child sponsorship has the unfortunate potential to become the contemporary continuation of ICA, complete with its paternalistic hierarchies and prioritization of foreign needs over sustainable solutions. When contextualized by the historical tragedies of intercountry adoption from Vietnam, it is clear that this continuation must be avoided. Organizations must take an active approach in optimizing child sponsorship's valuable role in creating a sustainable child protection system, while also remaining stringently aware of its solemn similarities to historical ICA. In this way, Vietnam will be on track to end its past of fraudulent ICA and move towards a future of sustainable methods of child protection.

## **APPENDIX: Initial Recommendations for COHED**

Based on COHED's already well-developed poverty reduction projects, I recommend that COHED pursue a community based child sponsorship model based on ChildFund Vietnam and World Vision Vietnam programs. Both organizations aim to increase sustainability and work to provide long-lasting solutions to the root causes of problems in communities. This model would easily supplement COHED's existing work in poverty reduction such as those in Phong Van, Mai Hich, and other rural villages.

An example of a successful operating community-based program in Vietnam is SOS Children's Village. This organization offers a unique 'sponsor a village' program, supporting youth facilities, schools, and vocational training centers throughout Vietnam. ChildFund Vietnam also uses child sponsorship to support community development aimed at building sustainable and resilient communities.

It would also be possible for COHED to implement an individual child sponsorship program, especially to support its existing work with HIV/AIDS affected children. As mentioned above, however, a disadvantage of this model is that it does not work to address the root causes of the issues. A combined model could be employed that would allow COHED to implement a child sponsorship program in conjunction with its work with these groups, allowing for both direct support and sustainable change.

An example of an operating individual/direct model of child sponsorship in Vietnam is VNHELP ("Vietnam Health, Education and Literature Projects"), which sponsors approximately 200 street children and orphans in Hanoi each year, working in partnership with local orphanages. Similarly, 'Families in Vietnam (FIV)' uses child sponsorship to help individual families living in Hanoi Slums.

### **Short term Recommendations**

- **Model Selection:**
  - Choose which programs will benefit from child sponsorship support

- Fund Allocation: What COHED community projects will the sponsorship donations contribute to? How do these projects affect children in a tangible way? Will a portion of each sponsorship go directly to a child's family?
- Introduce clear child sponsorship action plan to local leadership to determine community support. Bring up issues of privacy; are families comfortable having their children (with supervision) write to strangers?
- **DOLISA Support:** Sponsorship programs are monitored through Vietnam's Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA). Approval from this government body is necessary.
- **Child Protection Policy:** Vietnam lacks a legal framework for Child Protection (according to the 2011 Decision No. 267/QĐ-TTg, one is currently being formed). Vietnam is a signatory to the United Nation Convention on Child rights, however, which lays out an international legal framework of Child Protection. ChildFund and World Vision's comprehensive child protection policies can be used as an example.
- **Donor Advertising:** Launch sponsorship program on COHED website, giving clear intentions for the sponsorship model and raised funds:
  - Create a sponsorship page on COHED website. Consider publishing the following information: What's a Sponsor?/ What can I expect as a sponsor?/ What projects does my sponsorship contribute to?/ How do I become a sponsor?
  - Reach out to contacts to gather sponsor support and publicize the new program through existing contact networks.
- **Logistics:**
  - How much will a sponsorship cost each month? Why? (Most organizations set a minimum sponsorship between \$15 and \$30.)
  - Who will supervise letter writing and gather information of children, screening to maintain privacy? Will letters be written in Vietnamese? If so, who will translate?
  - Would email be a better alternative to letter writing? Email cuts down on administrative costs, but also requires greater oversight if written letters must be scanned.

- Establish a clear designation for the sponsorship funds: Will sponsor donations be combined with other COHED resources, or kept separate for particular projects? Spending must be kept transparent in order to show donors project legitimacy and direct correlation between their funds and the community.

**Long term Recommendations:**

- **Sponsor-Child Organizing:**
  - A clear system of organization will be necessary in order to facilitate the relationship between sponsors and children.
  - Publish monthly updates for all sponsors on the community projects.
- **Long-Term Effectiveness and Ethics:**
  - As with all development projects, COHED will continually need to check the effectiveness and sustainability of their projects: How are communities changing after COHED involvement? How are they changing after child-sponsorship is introduced? Is project leadership being transitioned to the local level, so that projects can be continued even after COHED support moves on?
- **Critical Reflection**
  - After some time of the sponsorship program, COHED should analyze the child sponsorship program in comparison to their other poverty reduction techniques. Is child sponsorship proving to be a lucrative fundraising tool? Are the issues with child sponsorship (high administrative costs, unclear connection between funds and community change, etc.) evident?

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