

Don't assume they're orphans

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From the Spanish Civil War to the genocide in Rwanda to the Asian tsunami, outsiders have used tragedy as an occasion to evacuate girls and boys out of their homelands, usually with dire consequences. We see history repeating itself yet again in Haiti as international actors with misplaced sympathy advocate sending children "orphaned" by the earthquake to other countries.

Americans from Idaho were arrested in Port-au-Prince recently for trying to take 33 "orphaned" Haitian children to a haven in the Dominican Republic. One of the many troubling aspects of this incident is that many of the children do have parents, some of whom willingly put their children in the Americans' care reportedly in hope that the children would have access to better opportunities.

The presumption that the children would be better cared for outside of Haiti contradicts the lessons learned from previous disasters.

First, the global community needs to understand that "orphan" is often a misnomer in poor countries as many children living in orphanages have at least one parent alive. They may be in the orphanage to receive food and education that their parents could not provide or sent there for their own safety during a crisis situation, like the one facing Haiti today.

In cases like these, parents continue to visit their children until they are better able to care for and support the children at home.

Eligible for adoption

Make no mistake, in recent years Haiti has had serious child- and family-care issues. UNICEF estimated in 2007 that 380,000 children lived in orphanages. Prior to the earthquake, a reported 1,100 children were in the process of being adopted. This catastrophe adds to an already weak system with an estimated additional 50,000 children separated from their families.

The "humanitarian parole policy" approved by the Obama administration appropriately targets those children who were already in the adoption pipeline before the earthquake and legally confirmed by the Haitian government as orphans eligible for adoption.

But citizens should not ask the government to relax our immigration rules to save children who were "orphaned" by the earthquake. While the images of Haitian children haunt us, our first responsibility is to focus on reunification not separation. It must be a priority to find families -- the parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins or godparents.

Instead we should support the Haitian government in enforcing existing adoption laws designed to protect children. These strict guidelines are not meant to keep children in desperate straits, but to prevent unintended separations from families or, worse yet, the very real possibility of abuse or trafficking.

We -- the outsiders -- need to understand that separating Haitian children from their extended families and their countries of origin can result in long-term harm above and beyond the devastation they have already experienced.

Today, Haitian families continue to desperately search for loved ones. Others are injured and unable to connect with their families. For unaccompanied Haitian children, trying to survive one of the worst humanitarian crises the world has seen in a generation, being branded as orphans should not be used as an excuse to spirit them out of the country.

Focusing on the immediate care and placement needs of separated children, UNICEF and Save the Children are promoting much needed family tracing and reunification assistance for all separated children.

More Haitian women need to be enlisted by agencies to provide individualized care for children, especially infants and young children already in orphanages.

Keep families together

Food for work and cash-assistance programs, if targeted to the most vulnerable, can enable poor families to remain together and allow extended families to care for separated children. And economic support can also prevent poor families from having to place their children in orphanages because they cannot afford food and education on their own.

In essence, we need to take a long-term systems approach to help Haiti rebuild to become a safe and secure place where families have the economic means to raise their own children.

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