

Will the Vietnamese Rục children come home?

“case closed” or is there hope?

Peter Bille Larsen, anthropologist

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Vietnamese adoption practices have recently come under fire following the release of a critical US embassy report. In this article, I point raise to the specific case of Rục ethnic minority children adopted from an isolated border area of Quảng Bình province in Northern Central Vietnam – and the urgent need for support.

In previous communications with institutions and organizations in Vietnam, I have sought to raise awareness of the situation of several children from one of Vietnam’s smallest ethnic minority communities, the Rục, being taken away and adopted under questionable circumstances without the appropriate conditions and informed consent of their parents.

Living in the middle of the Phong Nha Kẻ Bàng World Heritage site in Quảng Bình province, Rục communities only total a few hundred people characterized by high levels of poverty, illiteracy and poor access to basic services.

During a recent return to the area in 2007, some parents expressed a concern to me regarding their children. As one mother explained, local officials from the “Trung tâm nuôi dưỡng người có công đối tượng xã hội” Centre in Đồng Hới, the provincial capital, and communal authorities had come to the village offering help to the children. After some discussions and visits, several households agreed to send their children to the institution in Đồng Hới. These were supposed to be short stays, but now apparently many of the children were gone and had not come back to the Rục villages. One mother explained how she had become worried and gone to town to see her children, only to be informed that they were gone. “Do you know if my children have been sold?”, she had asked me. She had received a photo picturing what seemed like a ceremony of her children being handed over to foreigners and was now seriously worried about the fate of her children. Others told me that some villagers had received money, apparently as “poverty alleviation” support. Figures mentioned were between 500.000 VND (some 31 USD) and 1.000.000 VND (some 62 USD).

Mothers, many illiterate, had apparently signed two contracts. One official contract involving support to the child in a provincial children’s centre. The other, in hand-writing, entailed giving away all rights to the children. Apparently as many as 10 to 13 children in this small ethnic minority community had been sent to this institution, and many were being adopted without the formal or informed consent of the parents. These included older children such as the siblings Cao Duc Muoi and Cau Duc Buoï aged between 7 and 10 at the time of adoption.

While a more comprehensive investigation of the specific cases is urgently needed, the practices mentioned are strikingly similar to the “irregularities” raised in the unusually critical US embassy report (http://vietnam.usembassy.gov/irreg_adoptions042508.html). A US embassy warning issued in April notes how “recent field investigations have revealed incidents of serious adoption irregularities, including forged or altered documentation,

mothers paid, coerced or tricked into releasing their children, and children offered for adoption without the knowledge or consent of their birth parents.” The case of the Rục children would partially seem to fit the description. Whereas adoption cases generally involve some kind of research, verification and consent process, it is also likely that the area has not been accessed adequately by routine adoption investigations due to its status as a “border area”.

Government authorities and key international agencies have now been alerted, and it seems that adoption activities in the area have been limited and concerted responses are in the making. At least one international adoption agency active in the Quảng Bình province has discontinued its adoption activities of older children, although apparently for different reasons.

The US is now ending its 2005 intercountry adoption agreement with Vietnam due to stated irregularities. The Vietnamese government, according to the Vietnam News Agency, on April 25, announced it would allow the completion of adoption cases filed before July 1. While the head of the Vietnamese International Adoption Agency, Mr. Vũ Đức Long, questions many of the US embassy findings, he also, according to the Vietnamese News Agency recognized the presence of incorrect practices and that his department was taking corrective measures (May 2, 2008).

The case of the Rục children indeed calls for particular attention in this respect. Not only does the case point to certain types of irregularities raised in the US embassy report, it also involves older children whose reintegration “back home” could very well form part of corrective measures mentioned by Mr. Vũ.

These children, whose exact number needs to be determined, are hopefully living a positive experience, but may also likely be suffering from significant socio-cultural stress in new socio-cultural and linguistic environments.

What are the chances of these children seeing their families again? What are the chances of the mother, who expressed “coming to late” to the provincial capital to reunite with her children, of seeing her children again?

A Rục mother may be poor, illiterate and easy to convince about better “alternatives”, but would this justify that she will never see her children again?

The personal and social disasters experienced by indigenous, tribal and ethnic minority children being adopted and sent abroad have now been recognized at a global scale. The removal of children for residential schooling, growing up among non-natives were commonplace and policy-driven across the Arctic countries, Australia and one of the most painful experiences of indigenous peoples in those countries. Not only was removing children among indigenous children considered acceptable, it was considered an improvement framed in language of helping indigenous children to get out of native culture and getting into civilization. Many of these children have since lived with conflicting identities, personal and social problems.

The risks are likely to be similar in the case of the Rục children, whose integration in another socio-cultural environment, let alone another country is likely to pose significant personal and family challenges. If not now then in the future.

In other countries, a strong effort is now made to reconnect indigenous children with their parents even if years have passed by. Similar solutions need to be explored urgently for the Rục children before more harm is done.

Yet, will the concerned countries and government agencies make the additional effort to determine the situation and well being of a small group of Vietnamese ethnic minority children now living apart from their families? Is there now readiness and willingness to look carefully at the best interest of the Rục children that have been adopted without ethnocentric bias (e.g. presuming they will be better off in rich Western countries than back home?). I believe so.

I also believe that adoption agencies and adoptive parents are concerned about the well-being about the children they live and work for and will do what they can once they are informed about the real conditions.

What is at stake here is the best interest of the child. The Hague Adoption Convention, to which Vietnam is likely to adhere, in its article 21 speaks of the return of the child “as a last resort.. if his or her interests so require”.

In the US Vietnam bilateral agreement it is spelled out how competent adoption authorities may determine that it is no longer in the best interest of the child to keep it in the adoption family. Will adoption authorities explore the relevance of such steps?

I believe so. Clearly information gathering and exchange between countries (as spelled out in the US-VN bilateral agreement) will be necessary to identify the children, their new identities and their current well-being. Yet, the traumatic experiences of many other indigenous children growing up in other socio-cultural environments would more than justify such an effort.

The long history of socially engineered family disintegration among indigenous families on a global scale has been deeply harmful, yet also led the international community to determine “best practice.”

There is clear emphasis in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on the “best interests of the child”. One can only hope that local officials did not consider it in the best of interest to separate these children from their families. Clearly practices have not taken place in accordance with neither Vietnamese legislation, nor international standards.

The adoption process according to the CRC requires authorization and informed consent. The engineering of double “contracts” providing support to children on the one hand, and having (largely illiterate) parents sign over all rights to children on the other hand can hardly be considered informed, nor voluntary, consent.

Furthermore, the optional CRC protocol, ratified by Vietnam in 2001, in its article 10.2 also speaks of State Parties promoting “international cooperation to assist child victims in their physical and psychological recovery, social reintegration and repatriation.”

Addressing the particular conditions of indigenous children, the Committee on the Rights of the Child¹ in its 2003 recommended state Parties to safeguard “the integrity of indigenous families and assist them in their child-rearing responsibilities” (article 17).

This is indeed is very critical not least in the context of small ethnic minority communities as the Rục. I do not know to what extent such ideas have already been considered by Vietnamese authorities.

What I do know is that Rục people and Quảng Bình province suffered substantially during the war years from American bombing of the the Hồ Chí Minh trail system, and throughout the last 30 years continued to suffer from severe food shortages.

The Rục people is one of the the country’s smallest ethnic minority communities, only numbering a few hundred people. Within the last 40 years, they have experienced dramatic social, economic and cultural changes. Losing their children would be a both personal and socio-cultural catastrophe.

The plight of of ethnic minority children in the region is indeed urgent. Levels of malnutrition, disease and illiteracy remain high, and there is an urgent need to strengthen intercultural education efforts to preserve and value the unique languages, ways of life and cultures of this region.

As a first step, it is now critical to document what has happened to the Rục children, and identify ways of restoring the relationship between the children, the parents and the community. Things may not have taken place in a correct manner, but it is not too late to restore what has been broken. A second step it is critical to assess what is taking place and whether this is affecting other communities in the region as well.

Concerted action from authorities in Vietnam as well as receiving country authorities, adoptive families and agencies is now urgent to secure the best interest of the children.

For further information please contact peterbillelarsen@yahoo.com

¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003), Day of General Discussion on the Rights of Indigenous Children, 34th session, 15 September – 3 October 2003

Will the Rục children come home? : Part III

Revisiting the words of a Rục mother, legal loopholes and Vietnamese social policy

Peter Bille Larsen, anthropologist, 10/5/08

My concern about that situation of Rục children and questionable adoption practices was sparked off by a mother in the remote area of Quảng Bình province bordering Laos¹ asking me one day whether I thought her children had been sold. I was back in the area in 2007 after several years of absence researching completely different matters.

She explained that local officials from the “Trung tâm nuôi dưỡng người có công đối tượng xã hội” (Nurturing Centre) in Đồng Hới, the provincial capital, and communal authorities had come to the village offering help to the children. After some discussions and visits, several households agreed to send their children to the centre in Đồng Hới. These were supposed to be short stays, but now apparently many of the children were gone and had not come back to the Rục villages. The mother explained how she had become worried and gone to town to see her children, only to be informed that they were gone. “Thông cảm nhé đường xa quá”, officials had apparently told her implying that the distance had been too far to tell her about the children being adopted. She had received a photo picturing what seemed like a ceremony of her children being handed over to foreigners and was now seriously worried about the fate of her children. Others told me that some villagers had received money, apparently as “poverty alleviation” support. Figures mentioned were between 500.000 VND (some 31 USD) and 1.000.000 VND (some 62 USD). The mother interviewed did not know where the children were now.

She showed two “contracts”, which more specifically involved i) decisions from the provincial labour and social affairs administration and ii) a letter supposedly by herself. The decision from the social affairs administration, dated January 2006, confirmed the acceptance of her children for support in the provincial nurturing centre (likely to have been one more for the third child of hers) - and their return home upon improvement of their conditions.

The handwritten letter (dated 2005 without a specific date and month) to the nurturing centre supposedly written and signed by the illiterate mother (but in reality written by the centre representative) explained how she had lost her husband and had too many children to raise them properly. The letter expresses her desire to have two of her children, later amended to three, to be accepted in the centre as well as giving away all rights to the children to the centre (including adoption). The strong wording literally cutting the mother-child relationship in terms of rights and obligations stands in stark contrast with the provincial decision letters, which explicitly mentioned the return of the child once conditions had improved.

I have now realized that this type of wording was far from coincidental, but reflects somewhat of a loophole in Vietnamese adoption legislation. Furthermore, the mother did not know what she had entered into and now expressed worries that her children had been sold like “con lợn” (pigs).

¹ The Rục people, one of Vietnam’s smallest ethnic minority groups, only numbering some few hundred people live in Thượng Hóa commune, Minh Hóa district in the middle of Phong Nhà Kè Bàng World Heritage Site.

One of my first reactions had been that this could hardly be in accordance with neither Vietnamese legislation, nor international standards. Yet, it seems that parts of Vietnamese legislation related to adoption matters provide loopholes in this respect.

Vietnamese adoption legislation provides unusual emphasis and power in the hands of nurturing institutions, and little say and safeguard measures to poor birth mothers, as this Ruc mother, looking for alternatives and sending some of her children of to centres for support.

The core of the matter relates to Article 44 of decrees No. 68/2002/ND-CP and 69/2006/ND-CP. This article spells out some of the specific conditions allowing for the adoption of a child of particular relevance to understanding the case of the Ruc children. In the case of the Ruc children mentioned here, decree 68 was in vigueur.

Article 44 specifies that *heads of nurturing establishments can sign the papers agreeing to let children be adopted*. In other words, once the Ruc children had been sent to the centre, the head of the centre had in practice been granted unusual powers to determine the destiny of these children. As the birth mother now told me, these powers had now been used to send the children abroad. She, nor this author, does not know through which agency or to which country.

Legally speaking, heads of these centres can make such decisions on certain conditions. In decree 68, it specified that in « **cases where the father and/or mother of a child are/is still alive, there must also be the written agreement of the father and/or mother of that child, except where that child has been abandoned or left at a medical establishment, or when such child was sent into the nurturing establishment with his/her parents' written agreement to let their child be adopted** or the child's parents have lost their civil act capacity. » (emphasis added)².

Indeed, according to the illiterate Ruc mother, the representative of the centre had written up such a letter. I saw the copy, but she herself was not able to read it. It is fairly obvious that the mother did not know what was going on, and her visits to the provincial capital had been in vain. The comments would seem to indicate a likelihood that the adoption process, without consulting with the mother, had not happened in good faith.

From one perspective, however, the director was supposedly acting within the law given the presence of the letter where the illiterate mother supposedly gave away all rights and decision-making to the centre.

Yet, if one takes a closer look at the provincial decision for social relief support to the children mentioned above, one would then expect mentioning of adoption legislation and the possibility of the child being adopted as well. Neither were present.

Instead clear contradictions appear. What was mentioned as a legal basis was Decree 07/2000/ND-CP on social relief policies – as well as a specific article stating that the child

² I also include the wording from the revised decree 69 which has not solved the basic problem at stake in Article 44: a) The heads of the nurturing establishments lawfully set up in Vietnam voluntarily agree to let the adoption of children living in such establishments. In cases where the father and/or mother of a child are/is still alive, there must also be the written voluntary agreement of the father and/or mother of that child, except for the cases defined at Points a and c, Clause 2 of this Article or when such child was consigned into the nurturing establishment with his/her parents' written agreement to voluntarily let him/her be adopted; (Emphasis added)

would be returned once conditions had improved. Also mentioned is the provincial decree 42/2002/QĐ-UB, which speaks of organizing nurturing of the especially needy as well as providing guidance for nurturance in the community of other social relief beneficiaries (Article 2.2).

Indeed, from a Vietnamese social policy perspective, decree 07/2000/ND-CP clearly calls for social relief to « be chiefly rendered to families and communities where social relief beneficiaries live » (Article 3).

Yet, in practice the centre at least in the case of three children and likely others had letters written up from the (illiterate) parents to the centres allowing for the adoption of the child and handing over all rights to the centre. This stands in stark contrast with the idea of returning the child once conditions have improved.

This may indeed point to a possible conflict of interest between being a manager of a nurturing establishment aiming to return a child to his or her family, and a manager of an establishment receiving governmental support for each child in his centre (in this case 150.000 VND/ month³) as well as at times directly receiving or depending on support from foreign adoption organizations. This conflict of interest is further sharpened by the direct involvement of nurturing agencies in pro-actively looking for children, making adoption decisions **and** facilitating the matching of adoptive families and specific dossiers.

Thus registered adoption agencies in 2004 provided some 620.000 USD to 40 centres in 30 provinces, which apparently rose to 930.000 in 2005⁴. Such support has varied but reportedly included « building, repair and upgrading of their offices, purchase of medicines and medical instruments, provision of medical examination and treatment for children and job training for teenagers and partial support for payment of wages to their officials and employees. »

Was such support what had driven the apparent decision to have the child adopted without the informed consent of the Rục mother? What about the other children?

Whereas provincial decree 42/2002/QĐ-UB speaks of providing support to the needy through both nurturing centres and direct support to communities, there are indications of an over-emphasis on channeling ethnic minority children into nurturing centres, where support directly to the families in the communities would be more effective and beneficial to the child. This is not news for Vietnamese policy makers. Article 3 of the decree 07/2000/ND-CP clearly emphasizes social relief support where beneficiaries live, and that support through nurturing establishments is only for exceptional circumstance.

This is what should have been guiding the fate of Rục children. Not only according to the law, but likely according to most policy makers and the general Vietnamese population would conclude if they would hear the call from the Rục mother.

It would also seem obvious that a mother should have a right to make a voluntary informed decision about the fate of her children even if she is poor, illiterate and living in a remote corner of the province. Finally, from a social perspective, it would seem obvious that Rục children, or any other ethnic minority child would be better off at home than in a provincial

³ As established in Article 10 of the Social Relief law.

⁴ http://news.vnanet.vn/vietnamlaw/Reports.asp?CATEGORY_ID=1&NEWS_ID=1213&SUBCATEGORY_ID=8 (viewed 9/5/08)

centre or on a journey abroad. This is not to reduce the importance of social needs and support, nor to idealize their lives back home. Yet as Vietnamese social policy makers have said and legislated for years, social relief support should first and foremost be provided where beneficiaries live not in external institutions or abroad. Furthermore, adoption should be a last-resort measure.

Furthermore the current social relief law has no specific mentioning of sending needy ethnic minority children into nurturing establishments. The law mentions orphans, mentally ill, lonely elderly and seriously disabled persons in its articles 6 and 7. It is even mentioned in article 8 the other children who are sent voluntarily to such centres by parents would require families paying all costs. Other possible beneficiaries to be accepted include irregular “one-time” social relief support due to natural calamities or *force majeure* circumstances such as death, hunger and injured persons. Yet, these are exceptional measures, not regularized practice as in the case of ethnic minority children.

The law would seem to have been interpreted somewhat freely by local officials in terms of pro-actively seeking up and integrating ethnic minority children in the nurturing centre. I have not been able to do a more intensive survey, yet suspect ethnic minority children would seem to be overrepresented. An article from July 2007 also speaks of admitting 6 Vãn Kiêu ethnic minority from Truong Son commune in Quảng Ninh district children to the nurturing centre in July 07 (born between 2000 to 2005).

There seems to be a clear contradiction related to the continuous emphasis on including ethnic minority children in nurturing centres, where support would be better provided in the home communities – as Vietnamese law indeed stipulates.

Does this leave any hope then for the Rục mother seeing her children again? Most certainly.

The overarching policy statement in current Vietnamese adoption policy focuses adoption being carried out in the spirit of humanitarianism, « aiming to ensure the best interests for children and the respect for their fundamental rights. » This would arguably be brought into question when assessing the case and others. Apparently as many as 10 to 13 Rục children, many of them older children, had been sent to centre. Many of them have now been adopted.

In how many cases, had this involved illiterate parents writing off their rights to the child and decisions being made without the informed consent of the parents? Did this and other cases indeed involve general patterns of paternalism or even opportunism? What it has clearly not involved has been the genuine spirit of Vietnamese social and ethnic minority policy making seeking the best of the child. Yet, what it more specifically has involved will have to be determined by an in-depth investigation.

Furthermore, there is an urgent need to rethink current social and adoption policy and practice addressing the concerns raised above. Policy contradictions are part and parcel of dealing with complex social issues and Vietnam has already gone far in terms of improving its policies.

The Rục mother deserves to be heard. She may not have been able to read, reach authorities with her complaints and fully understand what was taking place. Yet, now is the time to identify not only where her children have gone, but equally listen to other Rục parents and possibly others.

During the war years, many ethnic minority families in the area helped and took care of young Vietnamese men venturing into the dangers of the Hồ Chí Minh trail under heavy American bombing. They found shelter, food and support from mothers and many soldiers, Uncle Hồ, the Party and the State have since then expressed their gratitude to the “đồng bào dân tộc thiểu số” for this help.

It is now time to “trả ơn” and recognize the deficiencies with current social support to these ethnic minority children. The Rục mother and others deserve to be heard and their cases investigated properly.

Social relief and current adoption policies are at least, in some cases, not having the intended effect, nor adequately designed to reach children in the best manner with sufficient safeguard mechanisms.

As mentioned earlier, I am convinced that not only Vietnamese authorities, but receiving countries, adoptive agencies and families will cooperate actively in securing the protection of these children and investigating the cases at stake.

I know few countries and cultures that value the mother child relationship as strongly and poetically as Vietnam. I am also convinced that the Vietnamese government will stop these loopholes as part of the efforts undertaken by Mr. Vũ Đức Long and the Vietnamese International Adoption Agency. Provincial authorities in Quảng Bình, who have done so much to rebuild a province after it was shattered during the war, will also need to look carefully at their social support and practice.

I can only repeat that it is now critical to document what has happened to the Rục children, and identify ways of restoring the relationship between the children, the parents and the community. Things may not have taken place in a correct manner, but it is not too late to restore what has been broken.

Both national, local and international registers should have the information necessary to identify the whereabouts of the children. As a second step, it is critical to what extent this is affecting other communities in the region as well.

A concerted effort is now clearly needed between Vietnamese authorities, international organizations, adoption agencies and embassies to do what they can to reunite the Rục mother and other parents with their children. This is the time to show that the emphasis in adoption agreements, international conventions and commitments on information sharing and cooperation for the best interest of the child really matters. « Trẻ em hôm nay, thế giới ngày mai » (children today, the world tomorrow) a billboard says in the district capital. This is the time to give the Rục mother a decent answer.

For more information please contact: peterbillelarsen@yahoo.com

**Will my child come home?
Shedding light on the grey-zones of international adoption**

Peter Bille Larsen, anthropologist

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Imagine, for a moment, that you were struck by poverty caused by the on-going financial crisis or harvest failure and took up an offer from local officials to have your child supported temporarily in a child care centre till your economic situation had improved. Now imagine going to visit your children, only to be informed that they had been sent abroad for international adoption and the official explaining that your house was too far away to inform you and let alone ask your opinion.

This was the story told to me by a Ruc mother in the remote part Quang Binh province of Central Vietnam. Ruc communities, a sedentarized hunter-gatherer people, only total a few hundred people. Within the last few years, several families had accepted to temporarily place their children in a provincial nurturing centre, only to later discover their children had been sent abroad. One mother explained how she had become worried and gone to town to see her children, only to be informed that they were gone. Officials had apparently told her that the distance had been too far to tell her about the children being adopted. She had received a photo picturing what seemed like a ceremony of her children being handed over to foreigners and was now seriously worried about the fate of her children. It seems likely that a legal loophole was used involving illiterate ethnic minority parents signing over all rights to their children thus allowing centre officials to have the children adopted without the consent of the parents. This despite official letters from social authorities specifying the return of the children upon the improvement of living conditions back home.

Authorities and other institutions have since then been alerted about the situation and a number of embassies, adoption agencies and have since then responded to the case. Field investigations by the US embassy quickly confirmed the gravity of the matter, one case is now in process in the US and Italian authorities are currently investigating at least 4 cases of Ruc children reported to be in Italy. Vietnamese authorities have also undertaken a series of efforts to address irregularities in both Quang Binh and elsewhere. In June, police arrested the heads of communal healthcare centres in another province (Nam Dinh) for illegally putting up some 300 children for adoption reportedly involving both Italian and French adoption agencies¹. Vietnam is also making a series of policy moves to strengthen legislation, centralize adoption activities and the management of funds. Interviewed about the specific case in Nam Dinh, the head of Ministry of Justice's International Adoption Agency, Mr. Vu Duc Long informed a journalist that "There will be no change for the children who were adopted. The violators in Vietnam will be penalised, the adopted children will not be brought back to Vietnam."²

Two questions thus remain. First, a part from the children whose cases are being investigated in the United States and Italy, Ruc parents mentioned up to 13 children from their 3 hamlets

¹ <http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/showarticle.php?num=01CAS150708>,
<http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/showarticle.php?num=02COM160708>, accessed 14/10/08

² <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/politics/2008/08/800516/>, accessed 14/10/08

alone. It is also known that other ethnic minority children have gone through the centre in question. The total number and the status of these cases is yet verified and assessed. It is now critical that the respective countries, not only Vietnam, but also Italy and the United States, facilitate independent investigations into these cases giving the children a true chance to reunite with their families.

The second question now remains whether the Ruc children, and other victims of questionable adoption circumstances whose cases are documented, will see their families again. The question is not unique to Ruc parents, but is commonly experienced in many other cases of questionable international adoption practices. In the case of the Ruc children, it is particularly important to take their special situation and conditions into account when considering follow-up action. Whereas the Vietnamese decision in the case of the Nam Dinh children has been not to bring back trafficked children (many of whom were very young, even babies), the older Ruc children (born between 1997 and 2001) will surely remember where they came from, still speak their language and may even be suffering considerably due to the separation. Don't they have a right to see their parents again?

Many actors in the adoption community today acknowledge the problem of questionable adoption practices, yet the return of children afterwards remains a grey-zone. Whereas the return and support for reintegration of children being trafficked for sexual exploitation, child labour and child soldiers are now part and parcel of international action, the question whether children having been trafficked for child adoption is somehow left behind.

What are some of the challenges at stake?

Besides the logistical difficulties of identifying parents afterwards, one argument seems to be that in the interest of the child putting them through another process of separation, travel and change could pose difficulties. Nor is it an easy situation for Western adoptive parents, who have often waited years to adopt a child. Yet, exactly therefore, most adoptive parents will be the first to recognize the rights, wishes and ethical importance of birth parents being reunited with the children again. Nevertheless, there is also a widely held perception that poor rural children from Vietnam (or other Southern countries) in the end would be better off in Western families. The argument, however seductive from a material perspective, is fundamentally flawed and discriminatory.

For one, there is no doubt that the legal rights of birth families, who have not given their informed consent to adoption, to be reunited with their children should be upheld. I would certainly be happy to see my children again even if they had been sent to other end of the world and even if they had managed to adapt themselves to new living conditions. The fact that the parents are poor and largely illiterate should not influence how this basic human right is recognized and put into practice.

Secondly, there is easily a discriminatory bias in assuming that a child is better off in the West. Furthermore, all evidence from other indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities points to the traumatic experiences and stress children have experienced being placed in foreign cultural environments. In the case of the Ruc children, many are older children who speak their language and are socially and culturally integrated in Ruc society and culture. While global experience has shown how indigenous children have generally adapted themselves to new adoption circumstances, it is also evident how many of these exact children continuously

suffer from invisible wounds inflicted caused by separation. The emotions and relief expressed by indigenous representatives upon the recent official apologies in Canada and Australia are a case in point. Canada, for example, very recently delivered an official apology to the estimated 150.000 indigenous children who were separated from the families and sent to boarding schools. The suffering from this period continues to be felt to this day, but at least serves as a global lesson in terms of the consequences at stake when separating indigenous children from their families, communities and cultures however well-meant intentions may have been.

Thirdly, the argument about better material conditions in the West is fundamentally simplistic. Not only does it disregard the emotional and personal stress involved, the international community also has all the means and the responsibility to facilitate appropriate material conditions for the reintegration of poor children, who have been separated from their birth families. There is no lack well-intended child support programmes in development cooperation. Such support could very well form part of a reparation package ensuring that the Ruc and other children not only return to their birth families, but indeed received the support necessary (and available) for their reintegration, schooling and improvement. Such collaboration beyond boundaries is now urgently needed to bring back hope to Ruc parents and others, who have been separated from their children. This will require concerted action by both Vietnamese authorities and the international community. A number of steps have been taken in recent months to crack-down on questionable adoption practices revealing not just irregularities in relation to US adoption agencies, but equally European Union agencies as the Ruc and the Nam Dinh cases reveal. Both Vietnamese authorities and international agencies are undertaking a number of efforts to improve practice. Vietnam is centralizing adoption practices. The US is after having been unusually vocal and critical of adoption practice, in the process of renegotiating a bilateral agreement after heavy lobbying by the US adoption community. Similar efforts are likely underway among European Union countries. This has involved pushing for a rights-based approach and generally tightening regulations both on behalf of Vietnamese and international authorities.

Yet, the question remains in the end what this really matters for children, who have already been pushed through the adoption process. For the moment, after several months of documentation and further investigations in a context of unusual public discussion both within and outside Vietnam, a solution has yet to be found. Wouldn't efforts to reunite children being separated from their birth families be a clear sign to both the Vietnamese public and prospective adoption parents, that the system was indeed seeking to work in the best interest of the child? Wouldn't it be considered a minimum that the rights of birth parents and children are taken into account when questionable and illegal trafficking of children for adoption has taken place? Wouldn't it also be a sign of respect and support, not only for the specific families concerned but the wider Vietnamese population, if receiving countries of trafficked children committed themselves to provide the economic, moral and social support to facilitate rapid investigation, reunification and contact?

Vietnamese authorities alone cannot secure such a socially-responsive programme requiring concerted international collaboration. This will need the immediate support of US authorities currently renegotiating a bilateral agreement as well as a collective effort by the European Union. Had it been my children, I would certainly appreciate such respect and support. Wouldn't you?