

ASSISTANCE ISS MAY OFFER IN THE 26 DECEMBER TSUNAMI AFTERMATH

1. What is ISS: its mandate, competences and expertise

International Social Service is an international federative NGO, with its General Secretariat based in Geneva. ISS was founded in 1924 following the large-scale migrations and the disruptions of families in the wake of World War I. Originally, ISS was set up to provide services for families who became separated.

Today, ISS consists of 18 National Branches and over 120 Correspondents throughout the world. Much of the work of ISS relates to the protection of children and families, when two or more countries are involved. ISS staff across the world is specifically trained to understand local customs as well as the law, regulations and administration both at national and international levels.

Over the years, in addition, it has come to pay special attention to a number of questions that are key to its ability to fulfil optimally its fundamental casework role. In this context, it has increasingly focused on what solutions are proposed for children deprived of parental care – whether they are in their own country or abroad. Backed up by its practical experience and specific research and documentation, ISS has developed four main thrusts in this regard:

- *Development of international standards:* ISS has played an active and significant role in advocating for, and in the drafting of, the major relevant international texts, including: the 1980 Hague Convention on Child Abduction, the 1986 UN Declaration of Legal and Social Principles on fostering and adoption, pertinent aspects of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1993 Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoption, the 1996 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and the 1996 Hong Kong Guidelines on adoption, fostering and the child's right to grow up in a family.
- *Advisory services and capacity-building:* often in collaboration with UNICEF and/or other bodies, ISS has carried out many field missions on the issue of alternative care, including Romania (1991-1993), Albania (1992), Armenia (1998) and Rwanda (2002). It advises countries in their law and policy reforms when facing new challenges concerning children deprived of family (2004: Cambodia, South Africa and Madagascar). It has organised numerous training workshops and seminars, from Kosovo to South Africa and Bolivia. Capacity-building has also been effected by the organisation of, and/or active representation in, international meetings such as the 1992 Sofia seminar for Central and Eastern Europe on Seeking Family-Based Alternatives for Children who are Abandoned or at Risk of Abandonment (co-organised with UNICEF, DCI, ICCB) and a "Substitute Family" Workshop at the NGO Forum to Launch the International Year of the Family, Malta 1994.
- *The International Reference Centre for the Rights of Children Deprived of Parental Care (ISS/IRC),* established by ISS in 1993, which promotes, in close relation with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and The Hague Conference on Private International Law, first and foremost a global policy giving priority to maintaining children within the family of origin, to permanent family-based care and to local, community and national solutions.

- *Publications*, including *Unaccompanied Children in Emergencies: A Field Guide for their Care and Protection* (1988), *The Rights of the Child in Internal and Inter-country Adoption: Ethics and Principles, Guidelines for Practice* (1999, rev. 2004), *Young People in Migration, A Challenge for Social Services* (2000), *Internal and Inter-country Adoption Laws* (Kluwer) as well as the IRC Monthly Review.

ISS has been in the forefront of the international NGO community in giving special attention to the issue of all forms of out-of-home care, both at the level of individual cases and at policy-making level. ISS has also global outreach, long-standing and unique practical experience in dealing with these issues and a solid track record of investment in negotiating international legal texts.

Currently, ISS is leading with UNICEF and in co-ordination with a number of other NGOs a project aiming at drafting UN international standards for the protection of children deprived of parental care, in particular in emergency situations.

2. ISS's Principles in its Children and Family-related activities

ISS's activities are first and foremost developed in full adequacy with the principles of the major international texts relating to Children's Rights, especially of course "*the best interest of the child, his/her right to survival and development, his/her right to participation in decision-taking processes and the non-discrimination principle*". Beyond these self-given requirements, ISS's principles in all its work can be summarized by:

- Promotion of a global policy in favour of children and their families;
- Prevention of abandonment of children;
- The child should be kept/reintegrated in his/her family of origin, unless there are serious reasons to the contrary;
- Institutional care should be avoided as much as possible, or if there are no other possibilities, should be seen in principle as a temporary measure and organized in a family-like and child-friendly way;
- Any placement should aim at permanency planning (search for the most adequate permanent protection solution, according to the specificities and needs of each child);
- Placement of children should first look at national family-based solutions (kinship or foster care, domestic adoption when foreseen by the national law), then international solutions as a last resort;
- Safeguarding the right of the child to have access to both his/her parents and to extended family (especially in cases of international movements).

ISS's principles are comprehensively described in its ethical guidelines: *The Rights of the Child in internal and inter-country Adoption: Ethics and Principles, Guidelines for Practice* (1999-2004) and *Unaccompanied Children in Emergencies: A Field Guide for their Care and Protection* (1988). As the latter has been updated and completed since by the Inter-Agency Group into the *Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children*, it is evident that ISS also entirely subscribes to the principles laid down therein.

3. Assistance ISS can provide

Given its mandate, competences/expertise and principles, ISS can provide assistance in the following fields in the regions struck by the tsunami:

- provide professional advice and support to national authorities in the definition and/or the adaptation/improvement of care arrangements and policy (law, regulations, procedures) for separated children,
- provide professional guidance in the design and implementation of national guidelines for such arrangements,

- in full co-operation with the national authorities, design and carry out training programmes for local/national/international professionals dealing with separated children. Topics could include for instance:
 - permanency planning for each child, including the assessment of the situation of the family of origin;
 - home study relating to the child and the possible receiving family;
 - preparation of the child and of the family;
 - follow-up of placements in the area struck by the disaster,
- look at institutionalization issues and offer guidance in seeking alternative permanency planning for the children,
- make its international network available – particularly the Units in the Asia/Pacific region – for:
 - assisting in any cross-border solution that is deemed, in last resort, as best for the child,
 - location of family members outside the country of origin,
 - psycho-social investigation in order to establish the eligibility of the family members to care permanently for the child,
 - preparation of the child and of the family, and safe transfer of the child,
 - monitoring of the first contacts between the child and the family,
 - follow-up of the placement, support to solve the administrative problems in the receiving State in order to ensure that the best interests of the child are being taken into account.

Within these fields, ISS is ready to offer its assistance and expertise to the local and national authorities to, according to the needs they will have identified or expressed, help them in setting, reviewing and/or carrying out their policies and actions related to child welfare and protection. Of course, ISS would closely co-ordinate its activities with the national authorities concerned and, beyond, with whichever organization is currently involved in the area, which shares its views and principles regarding children's rights.

In practical terms, once such potential partnership is identified and a project outline is worked out, ISS could delegate promptly an Expert team to the area, to fine tune the projected activities.

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