

Children are not for sale

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

"Children are not for sale, that's a social taboo", says the sociologist Christian Tribowski. In his dissertation at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies he is using intercountry adoptions as a basis to examine the functioning of a money-based system that may not operate as a market due to ethical and emotional reasons. "My findings might be applied to other areas such as health or education because they pose similarly sensitive questions: where is money's influence socially

acceptable and where not?" is how he describes the aims of his research in the field economic sociology, research that goes beyond examination of an as yet unexplored field.

For many childless people, intercountry adoptions are the only way to realize dreams of forming a family. But this route can create problems. Adoptions of children from impoverished regions of the world are perceived in Germany as dubious – because money is involved and fees have to be paid. How much one pays depends on the child's country of origin and the documents, certificates, and attestations required.

"Agencies check adoptive applicants regarding their eligibility to adopt and then prepare the prospective parents for the subsequent process," says Tribowski on the [adoption](#) practice. Court fees as well as travel costs also have to be paid in the child's country of origin. Prospective adoptive parents can expect to pay between 10,000 and 15,000 euros for the adoption. "For many observers, intercountry adoptions look like a market where children can be purchased," says Tribowski. This perception has been reinforced through several public cases of child trafficking.

Children are not commodities

In interviews with adoptive parents, Tribowski observed that the emotional desire to form a family and then to pay money for an adoption creates a moral tension. Adoption is one of the areas in which economic action is taboo. However, he discovered that it is possible to cope with these tensions during the adoption process when the circumstances of the adoption are clear. "Many adoptive parents conduct their own research about whether the process is being conducted according to legal rules and whether the child has been freely given up by its parents," says the sociologist.

Money ultimately becomes a crucial topic for all involved – not just for

the adoptive parents, but also for the authorities and adoption agencies. "Because where money is, the risk is that the child turns into a commodity and child trafficking occurs," says Tribowski. "It is therefore very important to adoptive parents that nobody gains financially through the payments. Adoption legislation stipulates that the money paid is not directly for the child but rather for services such as applicant-eligibility checks and administrative procedures," he says, explaining the legal situation.

"The legal framework in Germany offers many safeguards when interested parties apply at either a public or one of the 14 private but state licensed and monitored adoption agencies. Private agencies are accredited for different countries and support applicants during the procedures abroad – which can vary in difficulty depending on the child's country of origin. Illegal and dubious practices can take place in countries with underdeveloped administrative systems, a lack of public monitoring, and huge poverty," says the sociologist.

Absence of market characteristics

In Germany and other member states of the Hague Convention – which was drawn up in 1993 as a transnational measure against child trafficking – intercountry adoption procedures are regulated. But not every major sending country belongs to the approximately 90 member states. "Ethiopia for instance," says Tribowski.

The central aim of the convention is for intercountry adoptions to take place solely in the best interests of the child. An intercountry adoption should be considered only after a foster family or [adoptive parents](#) are unavailable in the child's country of origin. "Furthermore, rules are in place which determine how the money is used," says Tribowski. Agencies are obliged to be transparent about all their costs and to operate on a not-for-profit basis. "That means they must disclose each payment

made by the adoptive applicants and authorities and how it's been used," he adds. Also, financial surpluses must be re-invested in adoption work. This should ensure that the work is done in the best interests of the children and not on a for-profit basis. "One cannot therefore speak of a market for adoptions," he concludes.

Free market characteristics are also absent, such as the freedom for market actors to choose from different offers. The child cannot be chosen. Experts such as social workers, authorities, and youth welfare officers, who base their judgments on knowledge from fields such as education, social psychology, and medicine, match children to adoptive applicants. "Adoption is not a self-service checkout, but a process involving experts who choose children and parents," says Tribowski. Who actually gets a child is not a question of purchasing power. "More important is whether applicants can offer a [child](#) – who usually has special needs – a stable, loving, and good home."

Transparency, clear rules, and the absence of market-like actions lead to a resolution of the moral tensions. "Most people are put at ease when they realize that adoptions are not organized like markets."

Provided by Max Planck Society

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