



Closure of the Ethiopia-Australia Intercountry Adoption Program

On 28 June 2012, the Australian Government announced its decision to close the Ethiopia-Australia Intercountry Adoption Program. This decision was made in response to the specific circumstances of the Ethiopian adoption environment, which was increasingly unpredictable, challenging and complex, as well as the program's unique operational structure.

Best interests of children

The Australian Government strives to ensure that all intercountry adoptions through Australia's programs take place in the best interests of the child and with respect for his or her fundamental rights. The changing and complex Ethiopian adoption environment meant that the Australian Government could no longer be confident that the program would continue to operate in a way that protected the best interests of Ethiopian children.

The Ethiopian Government is working to pursue the best interests of their children within Ethiopia, by facilitating domestic adoptions, long-term foster care arrangements and assisting families in crisis. The Australian Government supports these efforts by the Ethiopian Government.

Ethiopian adoption environment

At the time of closure, the program faced several challenges due to the changing Ethiopian adoption environment. This included ongoing challenges in identifying orphanages in which Australia could have trust and confidence. The growing numbers of non-government adoption agencies operating in Ethiopia, and the closure of orphanages due to greater government scrutiny, led to increased competition for referral of children to intercountry adoption programs. A competitive environment such as this is not always conducive to ethical adoption practices.

The program had also received stronger demands for community development assistance to be delivered in the region from which children would have been adopted. This made it increasingly difficult for the Australian Government to ensure such assistance would be delivered in a way that maintained an appropriate separation between the program and children referred to it for intercountry adoption. Such separation was needed in order to avoid the unintentional effect of encouraging communities to relinquish children for adoption.

Program Structure

The changes in the Ethiopian adoption environment also presented challenges to the program's operational structure.

The program's community development assistance and its operational costs, such as rent for office space, background checks for the children and the Australian Representative's salary, were covered by fees paid by prospective adoptive parents. The ongoing financial viability of the program depended on regular and foreseeable referrals of children to the program to generate these fees.

Such referrals could not be guaranteed in the Ethiopian adoption environment. This, combined with rising program costs in the last 18 months of operation, meant that the program could not have continued to meet its development assistance and operational costs without significantly increasing fees for prospective adoptive parents. Even with an increase in fees, it was unlikely the program would have been financially viable into the future, given Ethiopia's current inflation rates (approximately 20–40%).

In addition, the program's adoption service provider, Wide Horizons For Children, had decided to partially reallocate its resources and focus in Ethiopia, from adoptions to humanitarian activities. As a result, the program and Wide Horizons For Children agreed to end their arrangement. Wide Horizons For Children provided essential ancillary and support services to the program, including background checking and transition house facilities.

Replacing Wide Horizons For Children or restructuring the program would have required considerable expenditure of Government funds and resources. Such expenditure was not defensible in view of the other issues that would have continued to affect the long-term viability of the program.