As globalization progresses and migration increases, the number of international and bi-national families is rising. This brings a new richness and diversity to our society, but also brings new challenges and difficulties for those involved to overcome. One of the difficulties that can arise is international parental child abduction, where one parent abducts the child or children in one country, often their country of origin, without the other parent's consent. This usually results in complex legal proceedings under the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (1980), to which 86 countries are parties, the only issue that can be decided in the court is whether the child or children should be returned or not, and in which country they shall live. This means that the court has no jurisdiction to decide on any other matters relevant to the future of the family, such as custody, access, maintenance or any other matters not related to the return of the child.

Mediation however offers a number of specific advantages in cases of international child abduction. For instance, when a dispute arises over the language or culture of the mediation, a mediator can bring in a non-migrant mediator or a child psychologist to assist with the process. This means that the mediator has more flexibility in terms of understanding the parties' needs and interests.

Mediation can also be used in cases where the parties are separated by a large distance, such as in cases of international parental child abduction. In such cases, the mediator can use technology to facilitate the communication between the parties. This can be done through video conferencing or other forms of digital communication.

Additional skills are required for such mediations. The mediator must be familiar with the legal structures and frameworks within which such mediations take place, with which a mediator must be comfortable working. Mediators practicing in this area must be clear about and comfortable with working within these structures.

Knowing who, in different cultures, has a stake in and may need to be a part of the mediation is essential, as the different cultural and religious beliefs, values and traditions can significantly influence the process of mediation. The mediator must be able to understand and respect these differences.

Last and by no means least such mediations require a certain structure in order to be successful and workable in practice. This includes the need for a neutral third party such as a psychologist or social worker, the parties' legal representatives are actively involved in the process, and the parties must be clear about and comfortable with working within these structures.

When the parties are able to agree on a certain structure, the mediator and the neutral third party can then focus on the needs and interests of the parties, in particular their children, in a safe, confidential environment, with the aim of achieving a solution that is workable and enforceable.

I recently had the privilege of taking part in the first Training in International Family Mediation, organised by a number of organisations involved in international child abduction and mediation - UNDP from Brussels, Child Focus and the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven from Belgium, and Deutsches Kinderamt Bonn from Germany. The project was funded by the European Commission. Twenty one mediators from twenty one member states of the EU took part in two exceptional weeks of training in Brussels. The outcome of this first stage of the project has not only been an enormous learning experience for me personally, but has also resulted in the foundation of a network of specially trained international family mediators.

I must admit to being very pleased, when I first heard about the project, how mediation could possibly work in such an exceptional and difficult situation as child abduction, from the basic premise that mediation could work when the legal positions of the parties, by definition, would be in different countries caused me to scratch my head. However, just as I was beginning to conclude that mediation could not possibly work in such a scenario, one of the participants, a lawyer from Holland, said that mediation could work when the other country party must first comply with the legal process for return, even if the legal process for return is an easier one. In mediation, the real needs and interests of the parties can quickly be uncovered and distinguished from their legal positions, and the actual issues can be worked out as much as is possible out of the legal process.

One of the key advantages of mediation is that it is a cost-effective and time-efficient process. In cases of international parental child abduction, where one parent abducts the child or children in one country, often their country of origin, without the other parent's consent, this usually results in complex legal proceedings under the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (1980), to which 86 countries are parties, the only issue that can be decided in the court is whether the child or children should be returned or not, and in which country they shall live. This means, in many cases, the parties need to meet face-to-face in court, which can be a lengthy and expensive process, especially for families involved in a child abduction case.

In mediation, the mediator can facilitate the communication between the parties, and the parties can work together to reach a solution that is workable and enforceable. This means that the parties can save money and time, and it can significantly reduce the stress on everyone involved, in particular the children.

Another key advantage of mediation is that it offers a number of specific advantages to parents in the context of a child abduction case. For instance, it offers a forum for the resolution of the dispute, in which the parties can come together to discuss their needs and interests. The mediator can facilitate this discussion, and the parties can work together to reach a solution that is workable and enforceable.

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