

SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES CHILD SAFEGUARDING JOURNEY: PROGRESS AND LEARNING ANALYSIS (1949 – 2021)

Summary of report submitted to the International Senate of SOS Children's Villages on 10 February 2021

This document describes SOS Children's Villages own child safeguarding journey from 1949 until June 2021. Recognising that safeguarding is never "done", we are constantly drawing learnings from our failures and working on making tangible improvements.

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Executive Summary

The establishment of the first SOS Children's Village in 1949 was driven by the conviction that children throughout the world have the right to quality care. SOS Children's Villages approach to child safeguarding is informed by best practice and learnings as a global organisation.

In 1993, child rights were adopted for the first time into the SOS Children's Villages International Statutes. The [statutes](#) state that "SOS CV works in the spirit of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and we promote these rights around the world."

The organisation continued to build on this foundation, and in 2018 adopted the SOS Care Promise, stating that "We commit to create a safe environment for children in all our programmes at all times by implementing child safeguarding measures and procedures in line with our child protection policy, international standards and best practices."

In 2019, we reached more than 1.2 million people, including more than 65,000 children and young people in our direct care. We are present in 137 countries and territories around the world. This makes us the largest non-governmental organisation focusing on children and young people without parental care, or at risk of losing it. We tap into the experiences of our diverse Federation and its accumulative body of knowledge on how to ensure quality care and a safe environment in all contexts.

As an alternative care service provider, we are aware of the higher child safeguarding risk profile compared to other child focused organisations. Child and youth care practitioners work in, and share living spaces with, children and young people who have complex needs, often due to traumatic experiences. This requires a careful balance between nurturing, learning, support, guidance, and where and as appropriate, certain measures to provide containment, structure and safety.

Experiences from around the world confirm that child abuse has happened in the past within our facilities and programmes. We are aware that there is a risk of abuse occurring in the future and are actively working towards minimising that risk. In 2018 we have also begun publishing an annual Child Safeguarding Report in order to provide transparency and management with regards to any reported incidents.

Phase 1 – Pioneering and expansion

1949 to 2004

Key achievements and challenges:

- Established an innovative approach to child care that cared for children in a family-like environment and stable community
- Established independent and locally rooted national organisations in countries around the world as the organisation grew beyond its roots in Austria and Europe
- Developed the SOS Children's Villages Manual in 2002 setting ten basic standards of best practices

SOS Children's Villages was established in 1949 as an alternative to care provided in big institutions, introducing a new model of child care that focused on creating family environments and a stable

community. For many children who experienced abandonment and past traumas, this childcare model positively impacted their lives.¹

From the 1960s onwards SOS Children's Villages expanded beyond Europe. Consciously avoiding a centralised organisational structure, a range of diverse and locally rooted, independent national organizations were established. This local rooting was a strength when countries faced internal conflict or disruptions and helped SOS Children's Villages to continue its work in some locations where many international organisations had departed.

With the organisation's rapid growth also came the need to professionalize care quality according to agreed standards and regulations. As part of the international General Secretariat, regional offices were formed in the early 1990 aligning practices across countries, and introducing a first set of manuals covering all operations. This was followed by the development and approval of the SOS Children's Village Manual in 2002 laying out ten standards based on good practices and experience of staff from around the world.

Phase 2 – Laying the foundation for child safeguarding

2004 to 2012

Key achievements and challenges:

- Leadership breaks the silence and puts child safeguarding issues in the spotlight
- Development and implementation of key policy papers: Child Protection Policy and Code of Conduct

In this phase, the organisation grew to embrace more specialist and expert knowledge in a number of modern social fields. This included child protection and safeguarding in many member associations. In 2005, the organisation made a [Child Protection Statement](#) to encourage open dialogue about cases of child abuse, and to further develop child protection practices.

As a result, the organisation formed an International Child Protection Team whose role was to develop the [Child Protection Policy](#). The diversity of the team ensured that the Child Protection Policy was based on the experiences and learnings from programmes in different contexts and regions of the world. The Child Protection Policy was officially launched at the SOS Children's Villages General Assembly in 2008, followed by implementation of the policy in all member associations. Furthermore, the development of the [Code of Conduct](#) in 2011 complemented the policy and defined clear behaviour expectations for all SOS Children's Villages staff and associates.

Phase 3 – Building on the foundation

2013 - 2020

Key achievements and challenges:

- Raising the quality of overall care through [SOS Care Promise](#) policy document
- Strengthening of existing child safeguarding networks to improve monitoring
- Development and implementation of additional awareness programmes across the federation

¹ SOS Children's Villages International. 2019. 70 Years of Impact: Improving the Lives of Children Without Adequate Parental Care. This report can be downloaded [here](#).



- Improvement of child safeguarding reporting and responding procedures
- Establishment of the Independent Child Safeguarding Review to systematically review and learn from past failings
- Increased focus on tailored support of child safeguarding efforts in programmes operating in challenging contexts

Between 2013 and 2020, SOS Children's Villages gained more experience and a deeper understanding of the factors that impact the prevention of, and response to, child abuse – particularly as an alternative care service provider.

3.1 Development and implementation of programme quality frameworks

During this phase, the development of the [SOS Care Promise](#) was an important milestone. The policy outlines actions to ensure quality services for children and young people. It provides a framework for all other programme-related regulations and user guides, including child safeguarding. In April 2018, the SOS Care Promise was approved by the International Senate and serves as a binding policy for all member associations and all employees.

3.2 Functioning of child safeguarding networks

The global and regional child safeguarding networks were significantly strengthened during this phase. The role of the child safeguarding networks is to: a) monitor and coordinate the implementation of the SOS Child Protection Policy and related policy support documents; b) develop and update policy support documents and tools; c) promote practice sharing and exchange for learning between countries; d) facilitate and coordinate relevant child safeguarding trainings for staff in member associations and the General Secretariat.

3.3 Improved awareness and prevention efforts

Significant improvements were made during this phase on targeted awareness raising and prevention measures. Through its regional teams SOS Children's Villages was able to address a number of different gaps in its awareness efforts. New approaches that resulted out of these efforts relate to positive parenting, prevention of child-to-child abuse, and support for child and youth care professionals regarding care of children and young people who experienced trauma, abuse, violence and discrimination.

SOS Children's Villages continued its preventive work through the Protective Behaviours programme, focusing on SOS parents and their biological children and taking a supportive policy position on responding to teenage pregnancies. The latest awareness program that was developed at that time was concerned with better care for children and young people who identify as LGBTI. This has led to an increase of number of attendees to professional development courses from 240 to 2,054.

3.4 More effective reporting and responding procedures

Experiences gained during this phase showed critical gaps in the organisational response to child safeguarding incidents. A focus was therefore placed on addressing reporting and responding gaps, and to clarify roles and responsibilities of line management within the Federation. As a result, three key policy support documents were updated and developed on [reporting and responding within member associations](#), [child safeguarding investigations](#), and [reporting and responding within the General Secretariat](#). They are mandatory for member associations and the General Secretariat.

SOS Children's Villages also established a global pool of more than 20 certified child safeguarding investigators from all regions. They received advanced trainings and capacity building almost every year since 2015 to ensure that they can lead complicated investigations in often challenging contexts where authorities are unable or unwilling to conduct such investigations.

3.5 Improved monitoring of Child Protection Policy implementation

Significant improvements were made on monitoring member associations' compliance to the Child Protection Policy, related procedures and the International Child Safeguarding Standards through the annual child safeguarding [survey](#). The results of the annual child safeguarding survey provide member associations with robust evidence to guide future actions. The survey is adapted from the Keeping Children Safe self-assessment tool.

3.6 Improved accountability and transparency

The overwhelming majority of child safeguarding incidents, as reported through the [Child Safeguarding Annual Report](#), are managed and responded to by member associations. Those responses are required to be in line with respective national laws, the SOS Child Protection Policy and related reporting and responding procedures.

Every year, only a very small fraction of all child safeguarding incidents reported in member associations across the Federation are escalated to the General Secretariat to be monitored or managed (1.33% in 2020). Incidents are escalated to the General Secretariat for *monitoring* purposes when they are related to sexual abuse. Incidents are escalated to the General Secretariat for *managing* purposes when there is a conflict of interest as a result of an allegation including the management of a particular office or association, or when there is evidence of negligence on the part of the responsible member association or General Secretariat office to meet the organisational requirements in dealing with the incident.

Each year the Child Care and Safeguarding team prepares an annual report that is presented to both the Management Council and the International Senate's Programme Audit Committee. This report is based on the results of the annual child safeguarding survey and an analysis of the child safeguarding actions and developments during the year. Since 2018, the Annual Child Safeguarding reports were made available externally on the SOS Children's Village International [website](#) and to relevant partners.

3.7 The Independent Child Safeguarding Review

Many child safeguarding learnings have been drawn over the past 15 years. The Independent Child Safeguarding Review (ICSR) contributed to those learnings. Mandated by the International Senate in October 2016 and begun in 2017, it reviewed known past child safeguarding cases in four countries to ensure that our child safeguarding practices in line with best practice. The set-up of the Independent Child Safeguarding Review was informed by the experiences of SOS Children's Villages Austria's review of historic care practices and abuse which led to the publication of the book, [Bound to Silence](#). To ensure an objective and high-quality review that can stand independent scrutiny, the child safeguarding organisation Keeping Children Safe was commissioned to conduct the review.

Keeping Children Safe has consolidated its findings and recommendations in a global report. The findings of this report are vital for internal learning and are a substantial input for programme and child safeguarding improvements. By making the report available externally, SOS Children's Villages aims to contribute to learning in the whole child care and INGO sector.

3.8 Focusing on Child Safeguarding in challenging environments

As a result of SOS Children's Villages' child safeguarding journey, the organisation has gained a deeper understanding of the specific local circumstances that increase the risks of children experiencing harm. This may include weak or ineffective national child protection systems, inconclusive child protection laws and weak law enforcement, political and socio-economic instability and security threats. In such challenging contexts, the organisation does recognise that it has to do much more to uphold child rights and keep children safe. SOS Children's Villages is very clear on one thing: it cannot contextualise rights; we can only contextualise our *approach* to implementing child rights. This requires more direct support to high-risk countries and programmes.



Phase 4 – Learning areas and future perspective

2021 and beyond – six learning areas in which to take next steps on child safeguarding journey

Our child safeguarding journey up until today has shown that SOS Children's Villages is continuously engaged in identifying and learning from past mistakes. We are committed to be a learning organisation. We aim to build on the achievements of the past to prevent more incidents in the future. The Independent Child Safeguarding Review has contributed to the identification of six learning areas on which to focus our future actions.

4.1 Holistic support, justice and incident management

Critical gaps in relation to the incident management of child safeguarding incidents still exist. Those gaps relate to the holistic support to children, young people and persons affected by abuse, the protection of whistle-blowers, the monitoring of follow-up actions, record-keeping, and timely referrals to national authorities. In particular, the Independent Child Safeguarding Review identified the lack of incident management resources and capacity in some member associations, the General Secretariat and legal bodies. This means that SOS Children's Villages must develop guidance on individual support and access to justice for children, young people and others who are affected by abuse. The existing child safeguarding policies and procedures must be updated to reflect these changes.

4.2 Children and youth for safeguarding action

Children, young people and staff must be trained and enabled to participate in a meaningful way in shaping measures that increase their safety. This includes offering training to all children and young people to strengthen their resilience and identify and respond to unsafe situations, including abuse. Steps have already been taken to include children and young people in the local child safeguarding risk assessments in the last few years, but there is potential to do more on the location level, for example, in the design of prevention actions and reporting and responding mechanism. Children and young people are also active agents to prevent *peer-to-peer* violence and abuse. They must have a stronger voice to ensure that the child safeguarding measures are fit for purpose.

4.3 Child and youth care practitioners for safeguarding

Child and youth care practitioners need the right skills, working conditions and reliable support and development to be able to provide quality care to children. Situations where boundary violations occur can be complicated, and child and youth care professionals are often under a lot of pressure to respond appropriately. It is therefore essential that they are equipped and empowered to respond to such situations in a balanced, safe and caring manner. Relationships and boundaries are aspects of everyday care, and child and youth care practitioners have to navigate and renegotiate them daily. To effectively support children and young people's development, child and youth care practitioners need continuous learning and development opportunities and professional supervision, support and self-care. It also requires addressing critical working conditions gaps. Lastly, child and youth care practitioners must be part of decision-making on child safeguarding and management on all levels.

4.4 People, culture and HR practices for safeguarding

Child safeguarding and workplace culture go hand-in-hand. We know from experience that abuse does not take place in isolation. It is often preceded or accompanied by a history of concerns, poor behaviour and misconduct that were not appropriately responded to. The presence of an unhealthy authoritarian workplace culture increases the risk of exploitation and abuse. In such environments, children and staff members often fear speaking out and refrain from questioning authority as they are often punished for doing so. Unsafe and unhealthy environments are made worse when power imbalances and gender disparities are exploited, when possible conflicts of interest are not sufficiently attended to, and when there are dismissive attitudes to children, young people, staff members and persons affected by abuse, neglect and exploitation. Leaders and managers need to be supported to understand the importance of

being trauma-informed, as many abuse cases reflect little or no knowledge of trauma and mental well-being. There is a need to update our Code of Conduct and train all staff members across the Federation. This should be accompanied by a shift in how we do our work. Emphasis must be placed on leaders leading by example and reflecting with their teams on values, how they apply to specific situations and the way we do our work. Through this, we strengthen value-based conduct towards a safe workplace culture.

4.5 Oversight, leadership, governance and accountability for safeguarding

Members of SOS Children's Villages legal bodies must be supported to fulfil their safeguarding management and oversight roles. National board members, International Senate members, national and General Secretariat management must receive appropriate orientation, continuous training and reflection on our child safeguarding policies, procedures and practices, applicable laws and their specific child safeguarding roles. Oversight by legal bodies must become an ingrained part of the organisational child safeguarding response. Where there are disagreements, for example, between management and an investigation team on investigation findings, the appropriate mechanisms must be in place to review the substantive basis of the opposing positions. This process should make recommendations for improvements and resolving disputes, including options to sanction non-compliance. In addition, we also need to pay more attention to governance and ethical issues that influence our national and global operations and increase our safeguarding risks in a fast-changing world. This requires a stronger focus on managing safeguarding risks and ensuring appropriate risk mitigation measures. Countries with a higher child safeguarding risk profile must receive additional support and resources.

4.6 Investment for high quality programmes across the federation

Quality of care is the foundation of children being safe and protected. When there are gaps in the quality of care that a child receives, there is a higher risk that the child is harmed and that the organisational response is insufficient. Children are more vulnerable to being harmed when there is a lack of quality care, for example when:

- their individual needs are not met;
- they are not empowered to participate in making decisions on issues that affect their own lives;
- they are stigmatised for being in alternative care;
- their placement in alternative care is not necessary or suitable to meet their individual needs and best interest;
- they are not supported to keep in contact with their family, friends and community;
- the leaving care and after care support does not prepare young people well for independent living;
- educational choices are limited or forced and do not align with young people's abilities, interests and work/job opportunities;
- children and young people who have been exposed to traumatic experiences do not receive the mental health support they need to heal;
- child and youth care professionals respond inappropriately to problematic behaviours;
- training and support to child and youth care professionals to deal with challenging situations or to provide trauma-informed care is inadequate;
- the well-being of children and young people is not adequately and holistically promoted and their resilience enhanced;
- leadership and management is perceived as separate and distance from care environment;
- gender disparities and patriarchal structures cause discrimination of girls and young women.

This applies to all children and young people, whether they have experienced abuse or not. For this reason, we are committed to continue raising the quality of care and programmes overall.