

Statement

SOS Children's Villages
Innsbruck, 21. March 2023

Statement on the results of the ICC investigations

In May 2021, we disclosed allegations of serious child safeguarding violations, pedagogical misconduct and mismanagement in individual national SOS Children's Villages associations, identified by two internal investigations. We mandated a commission headed by Waltraud Klasnic to conduct a detailed external investigation of these allegations and to derive recommendations for action. The investigation of the Independent Childprotection Commission (ICC) has now been completed and the final report is available. With this statement, we would like to respond to the findings of the ICC and the publication of their final report.

We welcome the report of the ICC and thank Chairperson Ms Klasnic and all commission members for their work. This external review was crucial as it provided a transparent analysis about the underlying structures that led to child safeguarding violations and mismanagement in our organisation. We need to draw from the past in order to improve our efforts in the best interest of the children and their families in the future.

Below we would like to address some key points in more detail:

Support for those affected

SOS Children's Villages reaches a total of 1.2 million people worldwide and more than 65,000 children and young people grow up in our care. We help these young people in crises situations quickly and unbureaucratically. Their safety and well-being are the focus of all our efforts. Children and young people need adults they can trust. However, we have to recognise that mistakes have been made and that we were not always able to guarantee the consistent safeguarding of children in the past. When the safeguarding of children is compromised, we have not fulfilled our primary task. **Every single time a child is harmed is one time too many. For this we would like to sincerely apologise to all those affected.** We cannot undo the past and as an organisation, we have to take responsibility for it. This is particularly true when it comes to supporting those affected, for instance by providing for psychological counselling or other financial compensation.

The overwhelming majority of our colleagues around the world do great work and are committed to provide their utmost care for and accompany children in the best possible way. Nevertheless, we are aware that mistakes and child protection violations can never be completely ruled out in such a sensitive work environment. This is something we have to address. We want to continue to be there for the children and young people in our care, because we are accountable. To live up to this responsibility, we have decided to intensively work through mistakes and further develop our organisation.

The task now is to look closely and implement considerable changes together, in Austria and worldwide.

Implementing the recommendations and development in child safeguarding

Since allegations became known in 2021, SOS Children's Villages has set out and started an organisational development process. The objective is the ongoing transparent examination of our main task - child safeguarding. We are therefore very pleased that the ICC recognises these developments and has already recorded improvements to our child safeguarding standards. Now it is of course necessary to implement them.

Between June 2021 and December 2022, throughout the ICC's investigative work, SOS Children's Villages has been actively involved in the review and the improvement of existing structures. In addition to the ongoing implementation and response to a total of 78 recommendations and 62 further enquiries in five interim reports, some initial consequences have already been drawn, internal reflection processes started, derivations made and changes initiated. In the coming months, a multidisciplinary working group will address the recommendations of the final report in detail, supported by external experts.

REGULATIONS AND STANDARDS

Development and implementation of international standards and regulations

SOS Children's Villages is organised worldwide as a federation, under the umbrella of SOS Children's Villages International. The member associations in the individual countries decide and act very autonomously. This is correct and sensible. Because the SOS Children's Villages national associations can respond individually to regional circumstances and must inevitably consider political and legal circumstances in their countries. At the same time, there are international and generally applicable regulations and standards that form the core framework that member associations can operate within. A major challenge is to ensure the implementation of a centralised framework within different local contexts. As a member of the Federation, SOS Children's Villages in Austria shares the responsibility to identify gaps that become apparent and to close them in cooperation with other SOS Children's Villages national associations and the umbrella organisation. Following the recommendation of the ICC, SOS Children's Villages in Austria has also intensively discussed the matter with the umbrella organisation and identified a need for action.

Having a certain discretionary scope, for example with regard to reporting obligations to the authorities, makes sense in those countries where criminal prosecution sometimes threatens to result in human rights violations. However, SOS Children's Villages recognises the Commission's findings and considers it necessary to define this discretionary scope more precisely and to limit it.

Gaps must be closed

An important mechanism for identifying and closing gaps is the global ombudsperson system, which is part of the International Child Safeguarding Action Plan and will be rolled out worldwide by 2026. This system serves as an independent complaints channel and point of contact for children and young people who are dissatisfied with the way their concerns are handled by the respective SOS Children's Villages national associations.

As determined by the ICC, SOS Children's Villages in Austria has a particular responsibility as trademark owner. A major challenge is to ensure compliance with standards and regulations and to enforce consequences in the event of gross violations. The trademark is one way of enforcing obligations, and the right to use it can be withdrawn as a last resort. First and foremost, it is always a matter of ensuring the best interests of the children. This means that we have to be very sensitive when considering a possible withdrawal of the right to use the trademark and take into account how child welfare would be affected by such a decision. The goal must always be to create incentives that lead to compliance with our centralised framework.

Clear guidelines and strengthening of local responsibilities

Furthermore, competences, standards and regulations must be reorganised in a form that is up-to-date and takes into account local conditions and legislation. Child safeguarding is paramount and it is important to implement global standards throughout the SOS Children's Villages Federation. Consequences must be drawn where this is not the case. We would like to point out how well the

cooperation at the operational level works worldwide. We are in daily contact with our colleagues from those national associations with whom we implement joint projects.

When it comes to the management level with high responsibility, we recognise the need for action towards a culture of cooperation and clear, value-oriented leadership. Decisions must be made first and foremost with children's best interests in mind. For example, national associations with financial power have greater decision-making power around the world. It is important to reflect on dependencies and power relations. If disagreements arise, they must be negotiated within a framework where administrative safeguards apply, including clarity of roles and responsibilities and transparency. However, we must also be aware of where we draw the line and, where appropriate, be uncompromising in drawing the necessary consequences.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Strongest as federation - autonomy brings responsibility

SOS Children's Villages is the world's largest non-governmental organisation focused on supporting children and young people who lack parental care or are at risk of losing it. Organised as a federation, we now work in 138 countries and territories under local leadership and responsibility. Around 40,000 employees reach more than 1.2 million children, young people and families every year in a wide range of programmes, from direct care in group homes and SOS Children's Village families to preventive work with families in challenging situations. Children and young people all over the world grow up under different conditions. It is crucial to be able to respond to them in a needs-oriented manner.

We remain convinced that we are strongest as a federation and that the benefits of the autonomy of the national associations outweigh any other organisational form. In this way, the member associations around the world can quickly and in a variety of ways give children a loving and safe home or, in crisis situations, provide emergency aid more quickly with the local authorities and partners. And yet, this autonomy comes with certain challenges. There needs to be specific requirements and a clear framework within which all member associations can operate, and furthermore, ways of cooperation need to be formalised. In many areas, this is already happening, for example through performance agreements or partnership agreements.

However, collaboration within the federation will be more contractually defined in future, both with the umbrella association and with other national associations that we cooperate with directly. This is essential to ensure clear roles and responsibilities in cooperation and it strengthens the sense of responsibility and ownership, and thus the autonomy of all national associations in the long term.

DONOR SERVICES

Child safeguarding comes first

Our paramount principle is working towards the best interest for each child (Article 3, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). The objective of SOS Children's Villages is to enable children to grow up safely, lovingly and free of violence. Child safeguarding is our most important goal, and we can, and must all contribute to it. In reality, however, this aspiration sometimes encounters limitations, as experience from our daily work shows. There are risks inherent in the emergence of abuse of power, violence and misconduct if they are not consciously reflected upon and dealt with.

As part of the investigations of a case in Asia involving a donor from Austria, we must also continue a critical review process. SOS Children's Villages in Austria are doing everything possible to assess its responsibility in donor relations in this case, to evaluate it and to derive appropriate measures. We are deeply saddened that we did not succeed in protecting the children and young people in our programmes. Supporting those affected is of the utmost importance to us. Those affected by abuse have received support for recovery and reconciliation, including psychological counselling. Following initial personnel consequences and the commissioning of an internal investigation at one Austrian location, a criminal law expert has now been brought in to further assess the matter. We too need to continue to critically question how this could have happened and what additional measures are necessary in order to anchor the best interests of the child as the paramount principle, in prevention but also in handling transgressions.

New understanding and extended regulations for donation services

Our mission is to provide care and counselling to an extremely vulnerable group - children and young people who have lost parental care, as well as to care for families in exceptional situations. First of all, we would like to emphasise that a significant part of our work would simply not be possible without the great support of our many donors. They have accompanied the development of SOS Children's Villages from the very beginning and have repeatedly placed their trust in us over the years. Therefore, we would like to take this opportunity to thank all our supporters.

SOS Children's Villages offers a wide range of support, from legacy administration, digital and personal support of sponsors to major donors and companies. In Austria, there are other ways of support that are not linked to financial contributions, such as volunteering and, increasingly, activism. This wide range of services also brings about challenges. Our supporters trust us to work with them in the best interest of the child. During our daily work, we also have to address the expectations of our donors. Many of the donors' interests are justified and understandable and we are obliged to meet them. For example, with regard to transparency in the use of donations or accountability for the impact of their donation. Within this frame, we must always be mindful of the safeguarding of children. For example, the question of dependencies and the imbalance between sponsors and beneficiaries. These are questions that we also have to face as a society.

As an organisation, we have determined: child safeguarding concerns all of us, in all organisational areas. One first step that we have already implemented is the revision of our visiting guidelines for donors at SOS Children's Villages programmes. Furthermore, at the beginning of 2023, SOS Children's Villages in Austria presented and implemented a new child safeguarding guideline covering all organisational areas. For the first time, it provides a common framework for all child safeguarding activities, standards and guidelines and applies to all employees, including those working with donors.

„Our primary aim is to enable children and young people to grow up in a loving and safe environment. We are convinced that we as an organisation, with all the expertise and commitment of our staff and the many supporters in all areas, volunteers, donors, child and youth welfare, can achieve our common goal. “

Elisabeth Hauser
National Director

Christian Moser
National Director

Nora Deinhammer
National Director

Reporting channels in Austria

We set up various ways to get in touch with us if you notice misconduct or wrongdoing at SOS Children's Villages or are affected by it yourself. Your attention helps us to identify risks at an early stage and to follow up on errors and misconduct quickly and consistently. In addition to SOS Children's Villages employees, our external [ombudsperson](#) services and, since summer 2022, a [whistleblowing platform](#) are also available for reporting suspicions in Austria.