SOS KINDERDORF

SOS KINDERDÖRFER WELTWEIT

Call for proposals for a scientific study

Commissioning organizations:
SOS Children's Villages worldwide, Hermann-Gmeiner-Fonds Deutschland e.V. and SOS Children's Villages Austria

Study title:
Power structures and violence – Identification of contemporary witnesses, analysis of institutional structures and handling of incidents of violence at SOS Children's Villages with a special focus on founding and leading figures and their long-term impact on the organization.

Background:
In recent years, SOS Children's Villages has repeatedly faced allegations of violence, abuse of power, and child abuse – both nationally (including in Germany and Austria) and internationally. As a result, investigations were conducted into compliance with child safeguarding standards, with a particular focus on the perspective of those affected. Since 2021, increased emphasis has been placed on acknowledging the victims and survivors and systematically investigating individual incidents. Nevertheless, there is a significant need for further research regarding potential perpetrators, the mechanisms of cover-up or suppression of information, and the structural conditions under which abuse was possible. While these topics have been addressed in previous investigation reports, a comprehensive academic study focusing on the enabling structures and mechanisms of concealment is still lacking. Particularly in the international context, there is a lack of a systematic academic approach to these incidents.

The study focuses
on abuse of power, intimidation, and the covering-up and concealment of cases of violence and abuse. It aims to comprehensively identify and analyze networks, individuals involved, their motivations for concealment (e.g., financial self-interest versus protecting the organization's image), and the systemic connections.

Multidimensional impact:
Violence and abuse are complex, interconnected phenomena. Victims of abuse (psychological, physical, or sexual) and neglect often suffer long-term psychological consequences, including post-traumatic stress disorder, addiction, and reduced performance—a finding confirmed by numerous studies on institutional abuse (e.g., Lueger-Schuster et al., 2014, 2018). Recognition payments to victims have already been made e.g. by SOS Children's Villages Austria and SOS Children's Villages worldwide; further cases are still in the recognition process.

Objective of the study:
Based on the cases of violence and abuse documented by the investigative commissions, their further development and systematic connections will be examined. In particular, the following will be investigated:

- Under what conditions were violence and abuse possible?
- How did potential perpetrators and accomplices interact?
- What specific power and dependency structures can be identified in the international context?
- Which enabling structures and actors are relevant – both nationally and internationally?

The study will include both countries and organizations that have already been researched (including those in Germany and Austria) and national associations that have received little attention to date. Insights from previous investigation reports (e.g., the ISC report) and the travel patterns of leading figures may identify additional regions for research.
The final selection of countries and cases will be made following a review of the relevant archive material by the research team.

Methodology:
Based on existing documents and reports, the research team identifies relevant structures (e.g., regional offices, continental offices, national directors) that are significant in connection with incidents of violence, suspicions, and cover-ups. Responsible individuals with regional influence are also included in the analysis. Preliminary discussions with employees may be conducted as part of the proposal process.

Specific questions:
From a contemporary historical perspective, the study focuses on two key figures:

1. **The founder of SOS Children's Villages:**
   In the course of the investigation by SOS Children's Villages Austria, the founder was accused of sexual abuse of minors. The aim of this study is to gain further insights into these incidents, their origins and context, and their local setting. Patterns and impact on the organization will be identified, and the onset and frequency of the offenses, as well as the individuals involved and mechanisms of cover-up, will be analyzed. Groups of young adults who received specific support are of particular interest. The identification and analysis of these groups, their development, and any potential involvement in investigations or cover-ups are part of the research question.

2. **The long-serving president and successor to the founder:**
   No allegations of sexual violence have yet been made against him. However, the study will examine in particular the president's financial dealings, any irregularities, and his role in covering up abuse cases.

Further questions include the analysis of narratives surrounding leaders and their influence on the organization.

Researchers are granted access to relevant contemporary witnesses, archive material, and unauthorized biographies.

Application process:
Researchers can apply with immediate effect. The application deadline is February 28th, 2027. The following documents must be submitted :

- A concept paper in English of no more than 15 pages (including questions, methodology, process, evaluation, timetable, data management, dissemination strategy)
- Introduction of the team of scientists, we also welcome a consortium of several universities
- Detailed cost calculation
- Data protection concept

The project must meet the highest scientific standards and comply with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Project organization:
The following resources will be provided:

- Access to existing data and files
- Support in identifying interviewees
- Reports from contemporary witnesses and those affected, as well as archive material

The project duration is planned for 24 months.
A semi-annual report is expected, to be submitted to both the commissioning bodies and an independent social science advisory board (comprising international researchers and care leavers). The advisory board members will be appointed by the commissioning bodies.

Selection process:
The research team will be selected by an international scientific jury, which includes representatives of the commissioning bodies. The selection process is two-stage: After reviewing the submitted documents, a hearing will be held with the jury, at the end of which the study contract will be awarded.

Contact:
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