



Accountable Now
Agricolastraße 26
10555 Berlin
Germany

22 October 2021

Response to Feedback from the Independent Review Panel (Review Round May 2021)

Dear members of the Independent Review Panel,

On behalf of the Executive Board of SOS Children's Villages International, I would like to thank you for your feedback on our 2019 accountability report, which remains a valuable frame of reference for reflection and development. I would also like to express my gratitude for the open and constructive follow-up discussion, which provided us with helpful recommendations on approaching our organization's main areas of improvement.

Since the beginning of 2021, our organization has learned significant safeguarding lessons, which have naturally come to dominate our accountability priorities. As announced previously, this extended letter is a temporary departure from the usual format of our interim reporting: it combines our formal response to the feedback on our 2019 report with updates on recent developments of direct relevance to accountability. This format will help us address what we have learned as well as adjust to a swifter reporting timeline, with our next full report scheduled by the end of June 2022.

Learning from our past to develop a culture of safeguarding

As we have reported on previously, in 2017 we commissioned the expert organization Keeping Children Safe to conduct an Independent Child Safeguarding Review, and this review concluded in 2021. The review noted important progress SOS Children's Villages has made in the last decade. At the same time, it identified significant gaps where we were not able to prevent harm and did not respond appropriately. We published Keeping Children Safe's report on our international website, along with a public apology for past failures and a Safeguarding Action Plan, which establishes clear commitments for the next three years to address the identified gaps.

The plan commits the organization to making significant changes, not just in our safeguarding practices but also in overall programme quality and organizational culture, in order to ensure that such failures do not happen again. The holistic plan addresses all recommendations made in the independent review, approaching the broader challenge of achieving strong safeguarding through:

- Prioritizing, in everything we do, support for the people who experienced abuse towards healing, reconciliation, and becoming self-reliant
- Improving overall programme quality, which is essential for prevention of abuse
- Improving our policies and systems specifically related to child safeguarding
- Addressing broader governance and organizational culture matters – creating a safe environment for all

On 8 October 2021, we published on our website the first interim report on progress against the plan, which includes the establishment of an Independent Special Commission. This commission has begun its work, and updates will be provided on our website.

Furthermore, at our General Assembly in June 2021, the SOS Children's Villages federation approved a mid-term strategy for 2021–2024, which adds a third organizational goal: "We ensure and live safeguarding in our daily actions."

The members of the Executive Board of SOS Children's Villages International are personally committed to delivering on this goal and reporting back on our progress. We know that there are significant challenges entailed in driving change within a federation that has a footprint in 137 countries and territories. But we have been transparent with our partners, donors, and the children, young people and families we support. We have shared with them our past failures and our plan for going forward, and we are grateful for the continued commitment and solidarity with our mission that they have demonstrated.

Working to address key areas for improvement in the Review Panel's Feedback

Progress and challenges over the reporting period (A3)

Our recently adopted mid-term strategy for 2021–2024, which defines our [priorities](#) and introduces a revised set of strategic indicators, has provided an opportunity to tackle the ongoing challenge of tracking, quantifying and reporting on our progress. Building on the feedback provided for section A3, we are planning to publish regular updates on the status of our strategic indicators in both qualitative and quantitative terms in our accountability reports.

People and partners have gained capacities that last beyond your immediate intervention (E4)

We acknowledge the gap in our reporting so far on how we contribute to building partner organizations' capacity, which we consider a key component to sustainable long-term impact. We will be working to address this area better in our upcoming reports.

The governing body and management are held accountable for fulfilling strategic promises (K1)

Strengthening our governance frameworks and practices has been articulated as a clear priority at all levels of organizational leadership, including by our newly elected President and International Senate. The lessons we have recently learned only emphasize this work as a foundation for a culture of safeguarding and accountability. Some groundwork for a more structured performance management process at the governance and management levels has already been made – for example, performance management of Executive Board members including myself have been significantly reinforced by the new President. At the level of the Senate, in line with the election manifesto of the President to improve good governance, an external expert on governance has been contracted to accompany the Senate for one year to support its ability to function as a board. The first board meeting in September 2021 included, for example, a dedicated onboarding

session for the newly elected International Senate. Further, we will make an effort to engage the International Senate in the accountability reflection and reporting process in a more systematic way. The recently adopted revised statutes of our federation provide for more frequent General Assembly meetings with a view to increasing accountability vis-à-vis our members.

Among other areas of improvement that have been the focus of our planning so far are the following:

- We find the recommendation to measure fairness and equity in compensation and benefits (G2) particularly relevant to the development of our organizational culture as part of our newly formulated third strategic goal. In the short term, we are planning to start by measuring the pay gap between the highest- and lowest-earning employees of the SOS Children's Villages General Secretariat. In addition, one of the Senate committees has agreed to create a working group to examine executive remuneration.
- With reference to item K2, we are currently considering mechanisms to include more of our staff in the upcoming reporting round. As far as more representation of our member associations' specific realities (K3), we are exploring options including encouraging individual associations to apply for Accountable Now membership.
- Both the Senate and the Management Council are considering how they could have representation from young people and/or children from our programmes included in meetings.

These areas as well as the remaining items of feedback will be discussed more substantively in our upcoming 2020/2021 accountability report.

Building on the insights we gained this year, we look forward to working together – with our new President, the members of the International Senate, our staff, our member associations as well as our partners, supporters and, most importantly, the children, families and communities for whom we work – to achieve lasting impact while demonstrating the highest standard of integrity, transparency and accountability.

Sincerely,



Ingrid Maria Johansen
Chief Executive Officer
SOS Children's Villages International