



Safeguarding Failures and Lessons

*A Case Study
on SOS Children's Villages
with Accountable Now*

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Co-created by Accountable Now and SOS Children's Villages

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the civil society sector has increasingly prioritized localization and decolonization practices in its work, emphasizing a clear shift in power to those closest to the programmes and points of impact. To ensure accountability to their stakeholders, many International Non-Governmental Organizations have been transitioning their internal frameworks to align with these evolving needs and emerging trends, including adding new or buttressing existing safeguarding regulations.

This transition process requires acknowledging past failures, addressing root causes, and fostering lasting change through a dynamic approach to accountability.

For SOS Children's Villages to fulfill its mission — “ensuring that children and young people without parental care or at risk of losing it grow up with the bonds they need to become their strongest selves” — the organization recognizes the need to create a safe environment for everyone who comes into contact with it. Safeguarding measures are put in place to protect all programme participants, and their wider communities, from any adverse effects of SOS Children's Villages' work. Continuous improvement, based on lessons learned, is necessary for this ongoing work.



In 2024, after confronting and learning from past safeguarding failures, SOS Children's Villages launched a new Safeguarding Strategy. Developed through findings from independent reviews and engagement with numerous stakeholders, the strategy acknowledges and works to mainstream stronger safeguarding mechanisms, with continuous review. This case study, co-created between SOS Children's Villages and Accountable Now, details the context leading up to and the development of the 2024 Safeguarding Strategy and shares the strategic plan moving forward.

Child and youth safeguarding is the responsibility that SOS Children's Villages has to take all possible steps to make sure its staff and representatives, its operations and its programmes do not harm children and young people or expose them to any risk of harm, including harm caused by other children and young people in care of and supported by SOS Children's Villages, and to respond appropriately when harm does occur.

In this context, harm means abuse, neglect or exploitation of children and young people...

Abuse, neglect and exploitation of children and young people:

- i. can be a deliberate act, accident or omission (such as failure to protect children, for example not supervising them adequately)
- ii. can be caused or carried out by an adult or a peer
- iii. result in actual harm to a child or young person or are likely to result in harm

[2023 Child and Youth Safeguarding Policy](#)



2. Background

SOS Children's Villages reaches nearly three million children, young people, and adults across more than 130 countries and territories, through a range of programmes, including family strengthening, education and training, medical care, and humanitarian action. See SOS Children's Villages' [international annual reports](#) for more on the spread and scale of its programmes. As a provider of alternative care, 24-hours-a-day for more than 60,000 children and young people, SOS Children's Villages has a particularly high safeguarding risk profile.

Safeguarding incidents throughout the federation do take place, and the vast majority are managed in line with the mandatory policies and procedures that are part of the [safeguarding framework](#). Statistics specifically on child and youth safeguarding incidents have been externally reported since 2018 on SOS Children's Villages' website through an [Annual Child and Youth Safeguarding Report](#).

First Formal Steps

SOS Children's Villages' first formal step towards a consistent approach safeguarding across the entire international federation began in 2008 with the introduction of the [Child Protection Policy](#), and followed in 2011 by a federation-wide mandatory [Code of Conduct](#). These foundational guidelines shaped SOS Children's Villages' approach to safeguarding primarily through reporting and addressing gaps.



Review and Learning

In response to cases where there was evidence that mandatory safeguarding policies were not adhered to, the International Senate of SOS Children's Villages commissioned an Independent Child Safeguarding Review in 2017. Conducted by Keeping Children Safe, the review included both extensive desk research, as well as in-person and virtual data collection through interviews and surveys in four countries. The review, culminating in the Independent Child Safeguarding Review Global Report (ICSR Global Report), identified the historical complexities of past safeguarding failures, outlined proposed policy changes aimed at mitigating future risks, and provided recommendations for both holistic support for survivors and strengthening the SOS Children's Villages safeguarding approach. Ultimately, the ICSR Global Report revealed that, despite SOS Children's Villages' ongoing safeguarding efforts, the organization "did not adequately consider and mitigate child safeguarding risks and therefore exposed children to abuse."

Continuous Improvement and Honest Reflections

Findings and recommendations from the independent research led to the development of an interim Safeguarding Action Plan. This plan, introduced and approved by the SOS General Assembly in 2021, required regular reporting on safeguarding progress as well as the creation of an Ombuds Office that would provide a safe space with anyone with concerns about a child in SOS Children's Villages programmes to get support in finding solutions.



2008

First formal federation-wide
Child Protection Policy.

2017 - 2020

Independent Child
Safeguarding Review
(ICSR)

First federation-wide
Code of Conduct

2011



2021

Publication of the ICSR Report

Adoption of the Safeguarding Action Plan

Establishment of the Independent Special Commission (ISC)

Creation of the Ombuds Office

2023

Final Report of ISC

Development of Safeguarding Strategy

Interim Report of ISC

2022

Publication of Safeguarding Strategy

2024



3. Strategic Transformation

Rooted in the learnings from the ICSR Global Report and the Independent Special Commission, SOS Children's Villages developed a new framework, the Safeguarding Strategy 2024 - 2030. The strategy draws from learnings of recent independent reviews and, in one cohesive document, brings together numerous policies and good practices under a unified framework. Accordingly, it is a tool that the General Secretariat and all 130+ member associations can use to support the management of safeguarding risks in all operations and programmes.

The detailed framework revolves around an overarching vision: "In everything we do, children, young people, and adults are safe, treated with dignity and their rights are respected." This integrated approach extends beyond child and youth safeguarding and includes adult safeguarding and anti-corruption and asset protection.

The Strategy is built around achieving six **outcomes**:

1. Staff in **leadership and governance** positions have the required commitment and competences to mitigate safeguarding risks in our daily operations.
2. Essential safeguarding **standards** are set and monitored through independent **oversight**, with possible external certification.
3. **Anti-corruption** and asset protection are integrated into federation-wide standard processes.
4. Safeguarding risks are mitigated through **programme quality** and child and youth **participation**.
5. Safeguarding risks are mitigated through a **people and culture framework** aligned with international standards.
6. Individuals affected by **misconduct** receive appropriate, timely and transparent **responses**.



The holistic nature of the strategy guides the federation towards both preventing and responding to harm, with a greater focus on awareness and accountability. The strategy also recognizes that effective safeguarding relies on a broader framework of high-quality programming, good governance, and organizational culture. The vision is that safeguarding will be mainstreamed into all aspects of how the organization works – such as risk assessments, departmental plans and work processes, job descriptions and performance management, and training and induction – across all functions such as Human Resources, Programme Development, Fund Development, Advocacy, and others.

The Safeguarding Strategy will be implemented over several years:

2024

Implementing the safeguarding policy framework and setting up of targets in a Safeguarding Plan

2025

Building capacity and ownership of safeguarding risks associated to each General Secretariat department

2026

Review

**2027-
2029**

Strong safeguarding mechanisms for prevention and response in place

≥2030

Continuous capacity building and strengthening of incident and risk management systems



With future-focused vision, the implementation of the new strategy aims to drive significant developments across all layers of the organization. Upholding meaningful stakeholder engagement, the framework emphasizes enabling children, young people, and adults involved in SOS Children's Villages' programs to "discuss and co-decide on matters that affect them." By the end of the implementation period, each stakeholder category will have numerous safeguarding mechanisms in place, including:

- Programme Participants understand their rights and co-decide on matters that affect them. They are encouraged to report concerns and are supported when their rights are violated.
- Staff understand their rights, know their safeguarding responsibilities, and have the competencies needed to create a safe environment for all. They are encouraged to speak up and their concerns are properly addressed.
- Assets and finances are used responsibly, operations are managed ethically, and anti-corruption measures are embedded in daily operations.
- SOS Children's Villages will "respond appropriately to misconduct"

These targeted developments, informed by learnings of past mistakes and gaps in previous safeguarding efforts, require ongoing monitoring, engagement, and accountability to be successfully realized. Achieving the framework's vision of "an ethical, equitable, and accountable federation proactively delivers its commitments," depends on continuous feedback, learning, and adaptation. That's why review and ongoing improvement are deeply embedded in the new safeguarding approach, ensuring dynamic accountability remains at its core.



4. Dynamic Accountability

As reflected in the “Review” Milestone and extending beyond 2030, dynamic accountability is an integral component of strengthening safeguarding mechanisms at SOS Children’s Villages. The organization’s work toward its goal is guided by this iterative and stakeholder-driven approach.

The Dynamic Accountability approach promoted by Accountable Now is an iterative approach to learning and improvement around a shared set of values and commitments. As a process and as a practice, it develops strong partnerships rooted in two-way feedback, trust, and equity.

At Accountable Now, we know this dynamic approach to accountability is necessary to truly achieve systemic change in the form of a power-shift with and outside the organisation. By centering the people and communities we work for and with, they become recognized drivers of civil society efforts, ensuring more meaningful, genuine, and lasting positive change.

In the ICSR Global Report, Keeping Children Safe commended SOS Children’s Villages for learning and growing from past failures, another important aspect of dynamic accountability. In this way, SOS Children’s Villages incorporated learnings from the ICSR Global Report and critically assessed internal policies and procedures, backed by data and stakeholder involvement, strengthening them for those they serve.



However, safeguarding is never “finished.” Through a commitment to continuous improvement, SOS Children’s Villages aims to drive systemic change by addressing power imbalances and enhancing safeguarding practices for the future. While safeguarding through a lens of dynamic accountability is an evolving process, centering those most affected paves the way for long-lasting change.

Dynamic Accountability in Practice:

After the “wake-up call” of the ICSR Global Report, SOS Children’s Villages implemented dynamic accountability to assess their organizational culture and power imbalances. Dynamic accountability, including iterative stakeholder involvement, was key to driving long-lasting change. With input from senior leadership and feedback from employees across geographic regions, SOS Children’s Villages approved “[Living Our Values](#)” in 2022. As a values-based competency framework, it sets definitions and outlines expectations for the global team revolving in three components: values, values-based core competencies, and values-based leadership competencies. “Living Our Values” focuses on Leaders and Human Resources, cognizant that for systemic change, the organizational culture must truly live its values and uphold dynamic accountability.



5. Continuous Learning

Building on feedback and learnings, SOS Children's Villages emphasizes that their safeguarding journey is more than just amending policies and systems. It reflects a deep commitment to the children, young people, staff, and everyone the organization comes into contact with.

The Safeguarding Action Plan 2021-2024 grouped recommendations from the ICSR into six goals for learning, reflecting areas for improvement:

- A. Ensure rigorous incident management and holistic support and justice for those affected by misconduct
- B. Promote participation of children and young people in understanding their rights and shaping safeguarding measures
- C. Support child and youth care practitioners in their working conditions, wellbeing, learning, and development
- D. Establish broader people culture and human resources practices that enable safeguarding
- E. Strengthen oversight, leadership, governance, and accountability for safeguarding
- F. Invest in high quality programmes across the Federation

By focusing on these learnings, SOS Children's Villages works to embed safeguarding in their culture and practices, striving towards a safer, more supportive environment for all those involved.



Safeguarding is never 'finished'; there is always something more to do, some way to improve.

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