



**Ombuds
Office**

for
SOS Children's
Villages

Ombuds Office

Learning Report #5

for the period July 2023 to March 2024

1. Introduction

The Learning Report is a monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) tool that focuses on the Ombuds approach and rollout. It complements the Annual Global Report of the Ombuds Office, which also includes an analysis of risks, themes, and gaps identified by Ombuds. This Learning Report provides a short summary of progress, challenges, and learning in the period from July 2023 to March 2024. The report also identifies action points for SOS Children's Villages International ("SOS CVI") and the Ombuds Office.

2. Overview of activities and progress

Ombuds Office activities

- 3-5 July 2023: The Ombuds Office presented at the **General Assembly (GA)** in Innsbruck and raised awareness of its work through one-on-one meetings with national directors and group meetings with ESAF and EUCM Regional and National Directors and national Board Chairs.
- 24-29 July 2023: The WCNA Regional Ombuds and Benin and Sierra Leone National Ombuds joined the **WCNA regional child safeguarding meeting** in Cote d'Ivoire. The outcome was strong collaboration to strengthen child safeguarding across the region and improved understanding of the Ombuds' role.
- 31 July - 02 August 2023: The interim Global Ombuds met in person with the **Independent Special Commission (ISC)** to discuss possible handover issues with the Ombuds Office. It was decided that the ISC would close their cases and BKMS Whistleblower channel as the Ombuds Office does not have a whistleblower function.¹
- 28 November 2023: The Ombuds Office introduced the Ombuds Board Chair to the **International Senate** and presented the first Annual Global Ombuds Office Report.

Ombuds recruitment

- **Global Ombuds** recruitment concluded 29 February 2024. Pierre Cazenave, Global Ombuds, will begin onboarding on 2 May 2024.
- **Regional Ombuds** Harleen Walia (ASIA) and Nandisa Tilayi (ESAF) begin their onboarding on 02 April 2024 along with the first National Ombuds for Albania, Renis Meta.
- The next group of member associations (MA) expected to have a **National Ombuds** in place include Angola, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Gambia, Ghana, Lebanon, Niger, Philippines, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

The Ombuds recruitment processes benefited from the involvement of children and young people from WCNA, ESAF, EUCM and ASIA, who demonstrated great skill interviewing the candidates.

Additionally, the **Ombuds Board** is recruiting additional members with expertise in ombuds work and child safeguarding. After an open recruitment process, the interim Global Ombuds and Director of Safeguarding will interview candidates with the goal of appointing four new members by end of June.

¹ The Ombuds Office supports potential whistleblowers to navigate existing processes and, if their concern is still unresolved, directs them to the SOS CVI BKMS Whistleblower channel.

The Ombuds Office was pleased to add a part-time **Finance Coordinator** to its team in January 2024. [Dominik Hirth](#) will be the main contact point for MAs who are establishing national ombuds.

The Ombuds Office team is excited to begin a new season, transitioning from interim to permanent leadership comprised of the Global and Regional Ombuds.

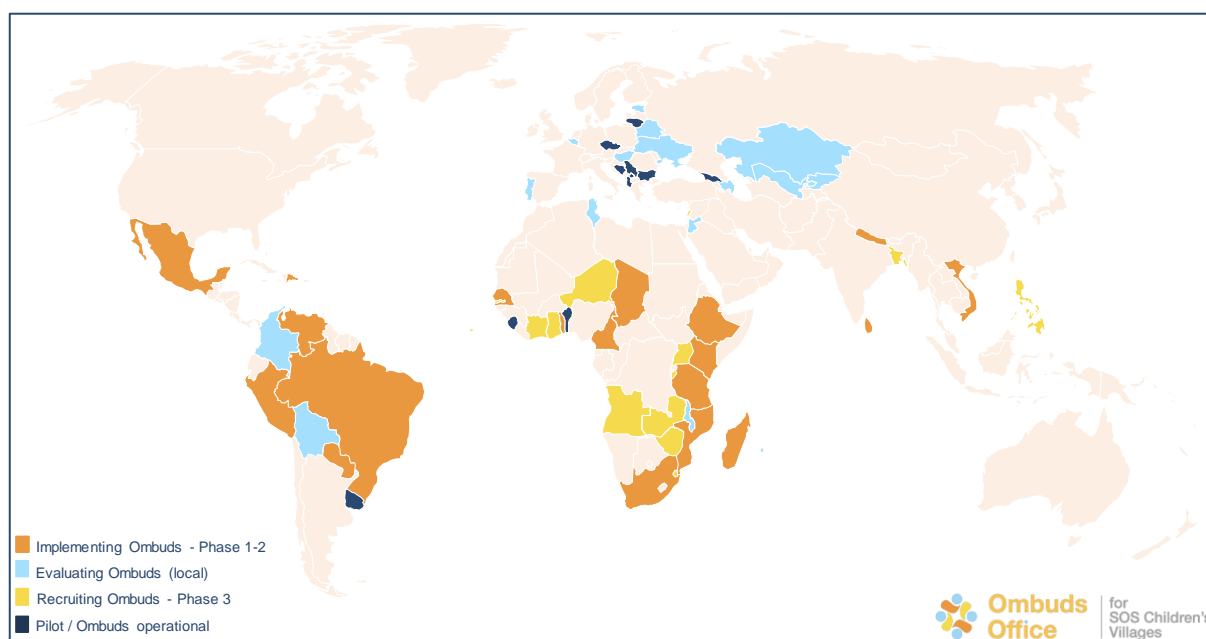
Scale up progress

As of 31 March 2024, the Ombuds Office had:

- 4 Regional Ombuds (ASIA, ESAF, LAAM, WCNA)
- 11 MAs with a National Ombuds (4; SOS CVI) or equivalent (7; evaluated)
- 33 MAs implementing a National Ombuds (SOS CVI)
- 17 MAs evaluating local ombuds 'equivalent' with Ombuds Office support.

In Quarter 1 2024, the Ombuds Office began to support 20 new MAs in all regions, either to implement a National Ombuds (SOS CVI) or to evaluate a local ombuds "equivalent". See [Annex 1](#) for details.

Figure 1. Scale up status as of 31 March 2024



3. Learning

The Ombuds Office is dynamic, continually evaluating and integrating learning into its operations, management, governance, and scale up. The following summarises key learning points at the global, pilot, and scale up levels.

Global learning

1. *Understanding the role of the Ombuds Office*

The Ombuds is not a check and balance with oversight or decision-making powers but, rather, someone to invite to the table to help find solutions (without exerting formal authority). Trust is a key factor. Children and young people in SOS CVI programs (past or present) are

safer because there is an independent Ombuds who helps find solutions to concerns with and/or about them. For example, the National Ombuds in Uruguay, a respected child psychiatrist, has built trust and rapport with SOS Uruguay staff and management. As a result, they consult her on complex child protection cases. Children and young people also come to her with a variety of concerns. Some inquiries have easy solutions; inquirers just want to talk with someone they trust. Other inquiries have required working with safeguarding and programs to find solutions.

2. Reconceptualising the impact and outcomes of the Ombuds Office

The expected **impact** of the Ombuds Office is that children and young people in SOS CVI programs (past or present) are safer because there is an independent Ombuds who helps find solutions to concerns with and/or about them.

The “4 Ps” summarise the intended **outcomes** of the Ombuds Office:

- **Promotion:** All SOS CVI programme stakeholders understand the Ombuds’ role, including how Ombuds uphold children’s rights and responsibilities.
- **Prevention:** All SOS CVI programme stakeholders know how to keep children and young people safe by defining risks, gaps, and themes and recommending preventative actions.
- **Participation:** Children and young people are actively involved in the development, implementation (including recruitment), awareness raising, and monitoring of the Ombuds Office, and in their own protection.
- **Protection:** All MAs have an organisational ombuds or equivalent who supports child protection and addresses concerns and inquiries appropriately using the principles of independence, confidentiality, and impartiality.

3. Child participation informs program development, increases accountability to children, and empowers young people

MAs establishing an ombuds (or equivalent) have now consulted over 1,000 children in SOS CVI programs about what they need to be safe. These consultations confirm initial findings, namely that children and young people face significant barriers to sharing their concerns. They want and need an independent, confidential, impartial person they can trust to help them find solutions. These findings support SOS CVI’s decision to require MAs to have an external, independent ombuds or equivalent as part of a robust safeguarding system.

Involving children and young people in Ombuds consultations, recruitment, and monitoring helps build their life skills and trust in SOS CVI and Ombuds, while increasing accountability to young people. Staff are witnessing how child participation can positively impact programme development and effectiveness.

4. Good communication and collaboration are as important as independence

The Ombuds Office principle of independence is compatible with good communication and collaboration. Ombuds must have a good working relationship with their MA/IO/IO counterparts if they are to help strengthen safe culture and environments across all programmes and services. At the same time, the Ombuds Office and each Ombuds must clearly define what is confidential and how they operationalise and protect their independence.

5. The recruitment process requires significant time and care

Recruiting an Ombuds at the national, regional, or global level requires a significant time investment because:

- children and young people are involved in recruitment,

- recruitment is happening in diverse jurisdictions and cultural contexts,
- the candidate will work with children and vulnerable populations, and
- the process must guard the independence of the Ombuds Office.

The Ombuds Recruitment Plan helps guide the process, but vigilance is essential. Rushing the process is likely to result in negative outcomes.

Ombuds inquiries: case example #1

A National Ombuds for SOS Children's Villages observed peer-to-peer violence in an SOS CVI village. After intervening and ensuring safety, the Ombuds asked the MA to conduct anger management trainings for the children and to train staff on how to prevent peer-to-peer violence and support children. In response, the MA hired a consultant to train three staff in each location. The staff then started engagements with children on anger management. The children appreciated these sessions as they got to understand the source of their anger (i.e., trauma), the harm they were inflicting on each other, the need for change, and how to change.

Pilot and operational learning

1. *Ombuds must engage in dialogue, not report 'on'*

In response to learning related to the role of the Ombuds (above), the Ombuds Office has changed its reporting approach from quarterly written reports (reporting “on” the MA/IO) to a quarterly dialogue *with* the national / regional Ombuds advisory group about Ombuds activities; risks, themes, and gaps; SOS CVI actions taken since the last meeting; and how to move forward collaboratively. This dialogue builds trust, ensures understanding on both sides, and helps achieve the goal of safe culture and environments for children and young people.

2. *The scope of child safeguarding has just increased. National Ombuds can help.*

Prior to the 2023 Child and Youth Safeguarding Policy and Regulation, the scope of child safeguarding was limited to alternative care. Now all children and young people in SOS CVI programs and services – including in schools and family strengthening – must be safeguarded. Given the number of children and young people involved, it will be challenging for MAs to scale up safeguarding. As National Ombuds receive inquiries about any child or young person in SOS CVI programs and services, they are uniquely positioned to understand where the greatest risks exist and to be a thought partner, supporting the MA to effectively expand safeguarding.

3. *It takes effort to understand how to be independent while working collaboratively*

The Ombuds Office and SOS CVI continue to learn how to work independently and collaboratively. A key learning area is related to contracting and managing Ombuds: to maintain independence, the MA contracts the Ombuds, but Ombuds are accountable to the Ombuds Office. The MA Resolution and IDR Agreement both outline formal channels management can use to express concerns related to an Ombuds performance. The Ombuds Office also asks for performance feedback prior to the annual performance assessment talks (PAT) it has with Ombuds.

4. *Developing National Ombuds annual budgets*

It can be challenging to estimate the annual budget for an Ombuds, given they are in diverse country contexts. The current approach involves:

- Estimating the full-time equivalent (FTE) needed for an Ombuds based on the number of program participants and self-reported safeguarding risk levels in the MA.
- Estimating the full compensation cost based on MA job grading and market data.
- MA budget estimates for travel and other expenses.
- Expected start date.

The Ombuds Office makes an initial budget prior to contracting. After contracting, the contracted Ombuds refines their budget (within the existing envelope) as they develop their workplan. The Ombuds Office then finalises and shares the budget with the MA. (The process for Regional Ombuds budgets is similar.)

5. *It can be difficult to operationalise the National Ombuds budget*

To ensure financial independence, the Ombuds Office approves each National Ombuds budget while the MA is responsible to disburse funds according to budget. In practice, it can be difficult for a National Ombuds to access budgeted funds, either because the Ombuds is unfamiliar with the MA's financial processes or because the MA does not prioritise the Ombuds requests for funds. To address this challenge, the Ombuds Office is:

- training each National Ombuds on how to manage and report on their budget.
- ensuring new National Ombuds begin by meeting with their MA Finance to learn their preferred ways of working.
- offering webinars on Ombuds finance and budget topics to MA's finance managers.

Continued attention is needed to understand the best administrative fit between National Ombuds and an MA. Learning in pilot MAs can inform improved processes.

Ombuds inquiries: case example #2

A National Ombuds for SOS Children's Villages received an inquiry from children and young people who felt the national child safeguarding team was not looking into their concerns. After discussing the issue with the safeguarding team, the Ombuds realised that the team was looking into the concerns, but they were not communicating back to the young people. The national director responded by asking the Ombuds to conduct a training session for Staff Representatives (staff volunteers who help children, young people, community members and staff navigate between safeguarding and ombuds systems) and local safeguarding focal points on effective communication with those reporting concerns. The Ombuds did this, and when a new safeguarding coordinator subsequently joined the national office, the ombuds also coached them on the issue.

Scale up learning

1. *The Ombuds Implementation Toolkit and approach is effective*

Feedback from National and Regional Ombuds advisory groups indicates that teams find the Ombuds Implementation Toolkit easy to follow; supporting documents are helpful and relevant; teams feel they are well-supported; and Ombuds Office personnel are very approachable.

2. *It is essential to evaluate ombuds alternatives before accepting them as 'equivalent'*

Ombuds systems vary across countries in terms of mandate, model, accessibility, resources, and effectiveness. As the Ombuds Office evaluates local ombuds 'equivalents' with MAs, more questions arise. For example,

- “Does the local ombuds meet the minimum standards in the Ombuds Master Charter?”
- “How will we know if the local ombuds is an effective independent support for children and young people in the MA’s programmes and services?”
- “Will the local ombuds provide feedback and/or help strengthen child safeguarding in the MA?”
- “Can the Ombuds Office collaborate with the government ombuds (or equivalent)? If so, how?”

To explore these questions, the Ombuds Office is holding a series of learning and exchange forums with MAs. Because learning has just begun, the Ombuds Office is treating “approval” of the local ombuds as “approval in principle”. Until the Ombuds’ effectiveness can be established through an evaluation with children and young people in the MA’s programs, the Ombuds Office and the MA are in a learning phase.²

3. Member Association boards and management must be engaged from the outset

National boards and management teams need to be engaged from the outset so they are informed enough to decide whether to evaluate local alternatives or implement a national ombuds and support rollout. Informing them includes ensuring they understand the 2023 Child and Youth Safeguarding Policy and Regulation. Dialogue with both management and governance is key to success.

4. There are several elements critical to successful scale up

The first year scaling up the ombuds approach has demonstrated that the elements critical to success include:

- a **ground up approach** that relies on the MA owning the process, developing a workplan and timeline that is doable, and adapting the model to their context and needs.
- **child participation** in consultations, recruitment, awareness raising, and feedback.
- **regular risk assessments and mitigation planning** at the MA, IOR and IO level that is reviewed quarterly.
- dynamic **evaluation** methods that enable the Ombuds Office to integrate learning into practice in real time and assess the impact of scale up on the federation more broadly.
- **strong support** for National and Regional Ombuds. Ombuds operate independently and alone on location. They need to feel supported as part of a team and learn from each other.

5. A lack of stable, sustainable funding is a deterrent to starting

MA costs are increasing at the same time they are being asked to establish a National Ombuds. Many are reticent to begin implementation unless they can be assured that there is stable, sustainable funding. SOS CVI and the Ombuds Office are working on a long-term solution to ensure financial stability.

6. The ombuds approach must be adapted for MAs that are large and/or working in emergency contexts

The Ombuds Office is beginning to identify key questions to guide implementation in MAs that are large (geographically and/or numerically) and/or operating in emergency or humanitarian contexts. The approach must be informed by the MA, which understands its context and options best. The Ombuds Office will host learning and exchange forums with MAs in these categories to support learning and practice.

² The Ombuds Office recognises that in some countries, it may not be possible to establish an organisational ombuds as it would be perceived to conflict with the government ombudsperson. Decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis.

4. Action points

This Learning Report was prepared in the context of significant federation crisis and change. The action points must be considered within this broader context. They may need to be adapted quickly in the short term in response to unexpected change. The following action points are priorities for 2024 quarters one and two:

Action points for SOS Children's Villages and the Ombuds Office:

1. Structure and relationship: Clarify the relationship between SOS CVI and the Ombuds Office through an organisational diagram and key documents. Responsibilities fall as follows:
 - GSC, HGFD and Ombuds Office: revise and sign HGFD Funding Agreement (April 2024)
 - Ombuds Office and GSC: Refine guidance (in Master Charter, Collaboration Principles) on how MAs work with an independent partner funded through their budget and finance system and contribute to performance management.
 - GSC: SOS CVI Ombuds Office Collaboration Principles (May 2024)
 - Ombuds Office with approval by Executive Board, MCO and International Senate: Ombuds Master Charter Regulation and Guidance (by November 2024)
 - Ombuds Office: Ombuds Board Terms of Reference (revise after Master Charter approval)
2. Alignment: SOS CVI Safeguarding (child, adult, asset), Human Resources, Internal Audit, and other departments work with the Ombuds Office to align safe environment processes. In person meetings on this topic took place 25-28 March with follow up planned through existing meeting structures.
3. Transition from interim to permanent Ombuds Office amidst GSC transformation: SOS CVI (i.e., International Director of Programme Development, Stewart Wilms, Executive Board, Ombuds Steering Committee, MCO, SOS HGFD) will support the Ombuds Office transition with clear, timely communication and guidance upon request. Considering federation changes, the transition period will be extended to December 2025 to ensure the stability of the Ombuds Office.
4. Risk assessment and mitigation: IO, IOR, and MA level risks and mitigation measures will be reviewed and revised at least once by the Ombuds Office and SOS CVI in 2024 Quarters 1-2.

Action points for SOS Children's Villages:

5. Funding: SOS CVI Office of the CEO will take responsibility for funding the Ombuds Office. SOS CVI will lead the development and rollout of a funding strategy for Ombuds Office national budgets with support from the Ombuds Office.
6. Evaluating ombuds alternatives: SOS CVI will support the Ombuds Office's decision-making role in assessing whether ombuds 'equivalents' meet the minimum standards in the Ombuds Master Charter. SOS CVI will also support the Ombuds Office's evaluation process for ombuds alternatives, which includes consulting children and young people on their views of local ombuds 'equivalents'.
7. Ombuds budgets: MAs will disburse National Ombuds funds as budgeted by the Ombuds Office. SOS CVI will intervene to uphold the independence of the Ombuds Office as and when requested.

Action points for Ombuds Office:

8. Communications strategic plan: The Ombuds Office will finalise and implement its Communications Strategic Plan by May 2024. It will focus on building understanding of the role and purpose of the Ombuds Office across the federation with key stakeholders. It will also share its stories with donor and external audiences to create funding opportunities and share promising practice.
9. MEAL Plan: The Ombuds Office will revise and finalise its MEAL Plan by May 2024, drawing on contributions by Queens University (Canada) and feedback from Ombuds and MAs. The goal is to strengthen the MEAL plan, including how child participation in Ombuds Office is impacting children.

Reporting on action taken is the responsibility of the SOS CVI CEO. Given this position is vacant, reporting will be the responsibility of the Acting CEO at the November meeting of the International Senate.

Annex 1: Scale up status as of 31 March 2024

IOR + Targets →	ASIA (7 MAs)	ESAF (19 MAs)	EUCM (21 MAs)	EUNA (2)	LAAM (11 MAs)	WCNA (17MAs)
Operational (SOS CVI) (4 MAs)	Regional Ombuds	Regional Ombuds	Albania		*Uruguay, Regional Ombuds	*Benin, *Sierra Leone, Regional Ombuds
Operational (Local, evaluated) (7 MAs)			Bosnia-Herz., Bulgaria, Czech, Georgia, Kosovo, Lithuania, Serbia			
MAs currently implementing (33 MAs)	Bangladesh Nepal Philippines Sri Lanka Vietnam	Angola, Burundi Ethiopia, Eswatini Ghana , Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique South Africa Tanzania, Uganda Zambia, Zimbabwe	Lebanon		Brazil, Dom.Rep Mexico, Paraguay Peru, Venezuela	Chad, Cameroon Cape Verde Côte d'Ivoire Gambia, Niger Senegal, Togo
MAs evaluating local alternatives (17 MAs)		Mauritius, Malawi	Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Hungary, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, Ukraine, Uzbekistan	Belgium Portugal	Bolivia, Colombia	Tunisia
Proposed to start in late 2024 (16 MAs)	Cambodia, Lao	S Sudan, Rwanda, Lesotho, Nigeria	Syria, Mongolia		El Salvador, Nicaragua	Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali
Total: 77 MAs						