



STORY 1

Children and young people's participation in the design and implementation of the Ombuds Office

June 2024

Introduction

In mid-2021, SOS Children's Villages faced a crisis in child safeguarding. In response to recommendations in the 2021 Independent Child Safeguarding Review (ICSR) global report, they took steps to establish the first ever global organisational ombuds system for children and young people.

The goal was to:

- strengthen child safeguarding;
- ensure children and young people in their programmes have an independent, trusted person they can go to with their concerns; and
- provide anyone with a concern about a child or young person in SOS Children's Villages programmes and services (past or present) with an independent, impartial, and confidential ombuds to listen and help find solutions.

From the outset, the Ombuds Office for SOS Children's Villages' was shaped and informed by SOS Children's Villages commitment to the meaningful participation of, and accountability to, children and young people. Building upon successful initiatives such as [YouthCan!](#) and the [International Youth Coalition \(IYC\)](#), SOS Children's Villages determined to involve children and young people in the design of its ombuds approach.

This story is the first in a series about children and young people's participation in the design, implementation, and monitoring of the Ombuds Office for SOS Children's Villages. The stories share experience and learning as well as promising practices for child participation, child safeguarding, safe recruitment, accountability to children, and participatory program design.

A participatory, 'ground up' approach

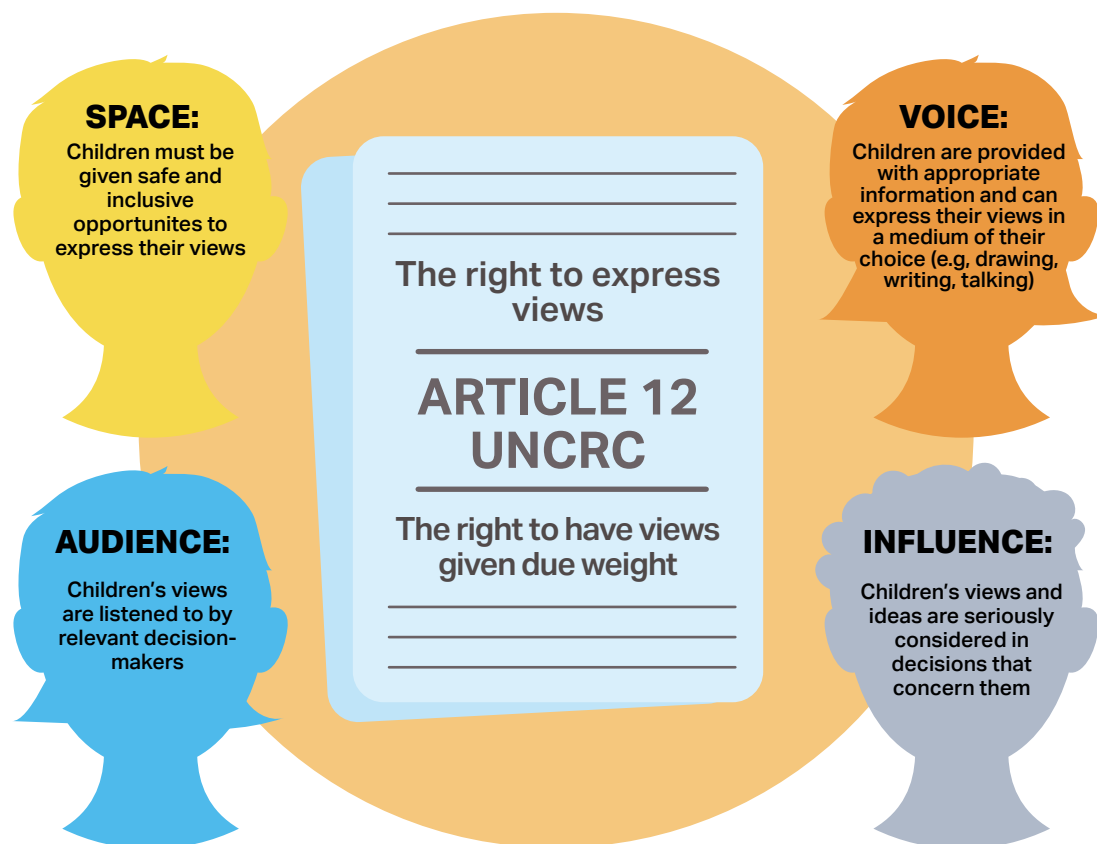
The starting point for the Ombuds Office is that children and young people are agents of change and rights holders. [Articles 12-17](#) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) enshrine children's fundamental rights to participation, including the rights to express their views and to be heard in decisions that affect them.

The Ombuds Office recognised that listening to and learning from children and young people's experiences, views, and suggestions would result in an ombuds approach that was more accessible, relevant, and responsive to the needs and rights of children and young people.

●● “[HAVING AN OMBUDS] IS A GOOD IDEA BECAUSE, SINCE IT IS AN INDEPENDENT OFFICE, IT WILL GIVE ME CONFIDENCE TO SHARE MY CONCERNS AND MY CONCERNS WILL BE LOOKED INTO.”
———●● (17-year-old, Sierra Leone)

[Proteknôn Foundation](#) was hired to lead a **child-centred, participatory** process that engaged children, young people, and staff in designing and piloting the ombuds approach. The process was guided by SOS Children's Villages' [Youth Participation User Guide](#), [Lundy's model](#) (Figure 1), and [The Nine Basic Requirements for Effective and Ethical Participation of Children](#) (from the [Committee on the Rights of the Child](#)). This guidance ensured that participation was i) transparent and informative, ii) voluntary, iii) respectful, iv) relevant, v) child friendly, vi) inclusive, vii) supported by training, viii) safe and sensitive to risk, and ix) accountable.

FIGURE 1. Lundy's Model for child participation



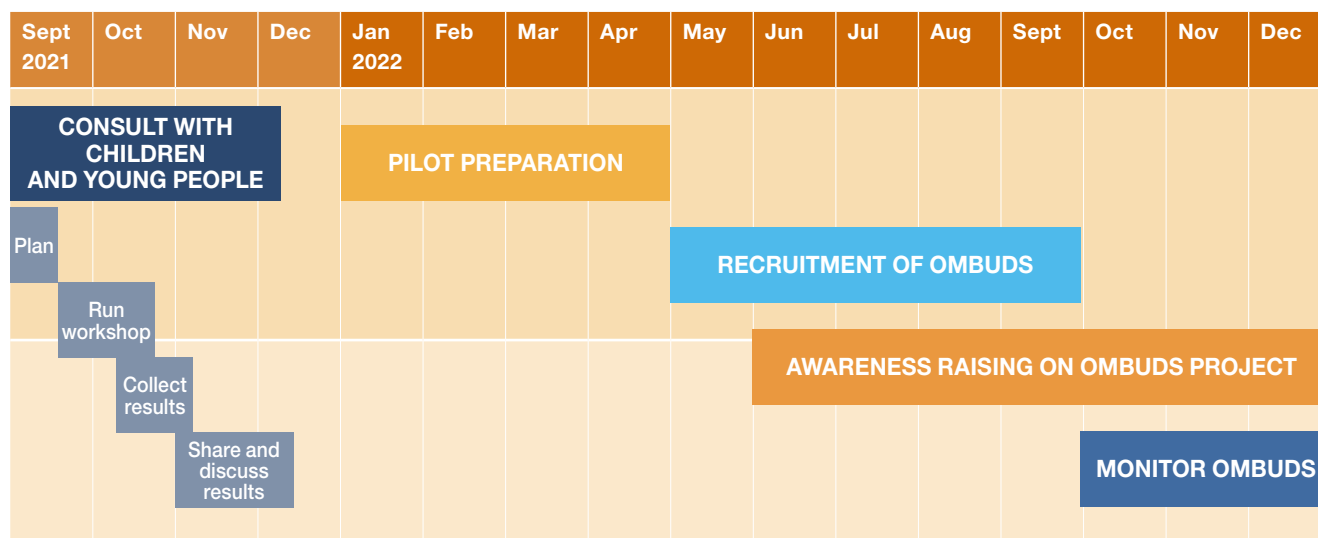
The ombuds project team also adopted a ‘ground-up’ approach that adapts the model to each national context and seeks local solutions to local challenges. In three pilot countries—Benin, Sierra Leone, and Uruguay— member associations formed National Advisory Groups to guide implementation. Proteknôn team members collaborated with the Advisory Groups to prepare for and support children and young people’s meaningful participation. They also consulted with members of SOS Children’s Villages’ International Youth Coalition, who expressed interest in—and later became part of—a “Safeguarding Champions Task Group”.

An initial timeline (Figure 2) was developed that outlined opportunities for children to inform the design, ombuds recruitment, awareness raising, and monitoring of the Ombuds Office.

Initial consultations to inform the design of the ombuds approach

Proteknôn and SOS Children’s Villages youth participation advisers had regular meetings and trainings with Advisory Groups, especially with the Youth Participation Coordinators, to prepare for consultations with children and young people. Advisory groups in the three pilot countries used the [Guidelines for consultation](#) that the Proteknôn team developed to organise, facilitate, and document findings from face-to-face consultations with children and young people of different genders, ages (10-13 years, 14-17 years, 18-24 years), and backgrounds. Pro-active efforts were made to include children and young people with different abilities as well as those who were in and out of school, from different backgrounds, and in alternative care services and family strengthening programmes.

FIGURE 2. Timeline for child and youth participation in the ombuds approach (2021-2022)



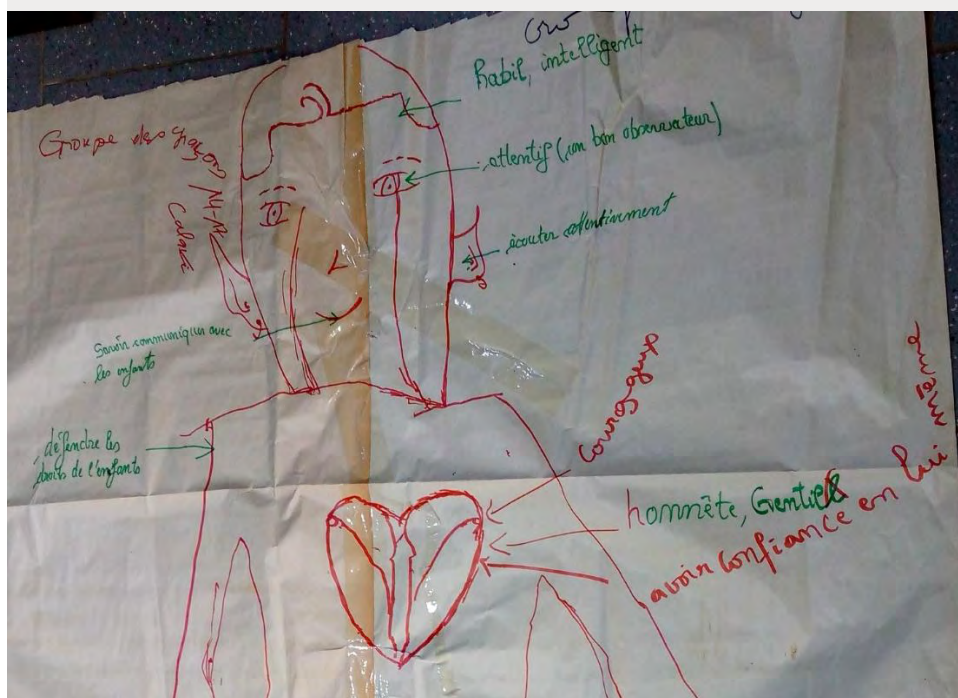
The content of the ombuds consultations was sensitive as it involved discussing safeguarding concerns. Therefore, systematic efforts were made to build trust and create a safe space for children and young people to freely express their views, experiences, and suggestions without fear of negative repercussions. Local teams took the following practical steps to create safe spaces for children's expression. They:

- **appointed an independent facilitator to collaborate with SOS Children's Villages facilitators** to reassure children and young people that all their views and experiences would be seriously considered.
- **appointed a child safeguarding focal point** with the relevant knowledge and skills to sensitively listen and respond to children's distress and disclosure and support referrals.
- **ensured the focal point was available** during preparations for and consultations with children and young people.
- tasked the safeguarding focal point with **ensuring that consultation team members were aware of and in compliance with the SOS Children's Villages Child Protection Policy** and that they **contributed to a risk assessment and risk mitigation plan** to minimise any risk associated with children and young people's participation.
- **organised initial information-sharing and trust-building sessions with children and young people** in advance of the actual consultations to enable

informed, voluntary participation, and to enable participants to develop ground rules for the consultation workshops.

- **shared information with guardians of children under the age of 18 years** to seek their informed consent.
- **adapted and disseminated child-/youth-friendly information** about children's rights, safeguarding, and the ombuds approach.
- **used creative consultation activities** that provided opportunities for children and young people to express their views and ideas through interactive games and activities. For example, they used a "Snakes and Ladders" activity to explore barriers and enablers to raising concerns and "Body Mapping" (Figure 3) to indicate the qualities of an ideal ombuds.

FIGURE 3. Example of a "Body map" designed by children to show the qualities of an ideal Ombuds



During the consultations, children and young people emphasised the importance of building upon their existing child and youth participation structures and processes so that their representatives could collaborate with the Ombuds Office to raise awareness about the National Ombuds and how to contact them.

●● “THE BEST WAYS OF INFORMING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT THE OMBUDS ARE MEETINGS AND EXCHANGES WITH THE CHILD/YOUTH EXECUTIVE COUNCILS (CEE/CEJ)”
———●● (14- to 17-year-old, Benin)

To overcome barriers to reporting safeguarding concerns, children and young people also emphasised the importance of establishing relationships of trust with staff and the child safeguarding focal points/teams in each programme location.

●● “IF YOU HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH SOMEONE YOU TRUST, IT MAKES IT EASIER TO TALK ABOUT YOUR CONCERNS. ALSO, IF I SEE THAT IT IS AN ORGANISATION THAT TAKES THINGS SERIOUSLY, I WILL SPEAK UP.”
———●● (IYC female)

The Youth Participation Coordinators in each pilot country cultivated partnerships with existing child and youth groups/councils/committees and their representatives to enable the ongoing, meaningful participation of children and young people in the Ombuds Office. In addition, the global Youth

Team adapted and organised a series of online consultations and collaborations with IYC members who were part of the Safeguarding Champions Task Group.

Analysing and applying the consultation findings

The ombuds project team organised an online, participatory analysis workshop with members of the IYC’s Safeguarding Champions Task Group to review, analyse, and validate the consultation findings from the pilot countries. The project team then wrote and disseminated the “Learning to Listen and Respond” report of findings from the consultations with children and young people. In addition, [summary child-friendly posters of key findings](#)—such as the ideal qualities of an ombuds - were shared with all those involved.

The consultation findings were systematically reviewed and applied to shape and inform:

- **the Ombuds Office model**, which places children and young people at the centre (Figure 4).
- **the pilot Master Charter for the Ombuds Office**, including key principles such as confidentiality, which children and young people identified as especially important.
- **ombuds’ job descriptions** (especially for National Ombuds).
- **guidance and training materials** to support children and young people’s ongoing role in recruitment of National, Regional and Global Ombuds.
- **collaboration with Children’s Representatives** and other child participation groups (e.g., Youth Councils) for awareness-raising and monitoring of the National Ombuds.

FIGURE 4. The Ombuds Office for SOS Children’s Villages model

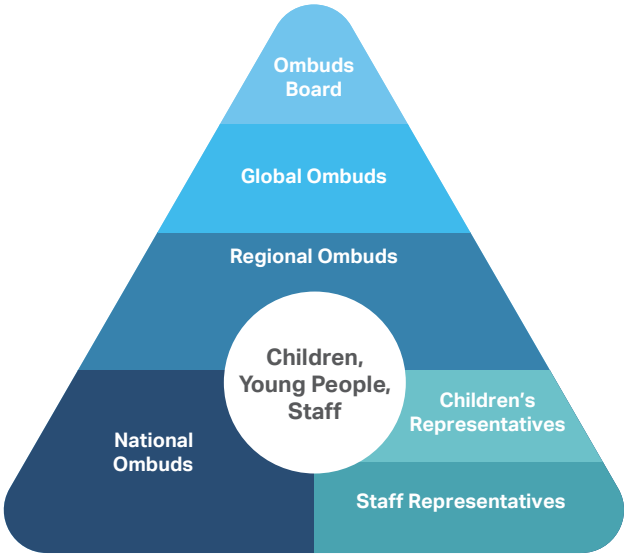
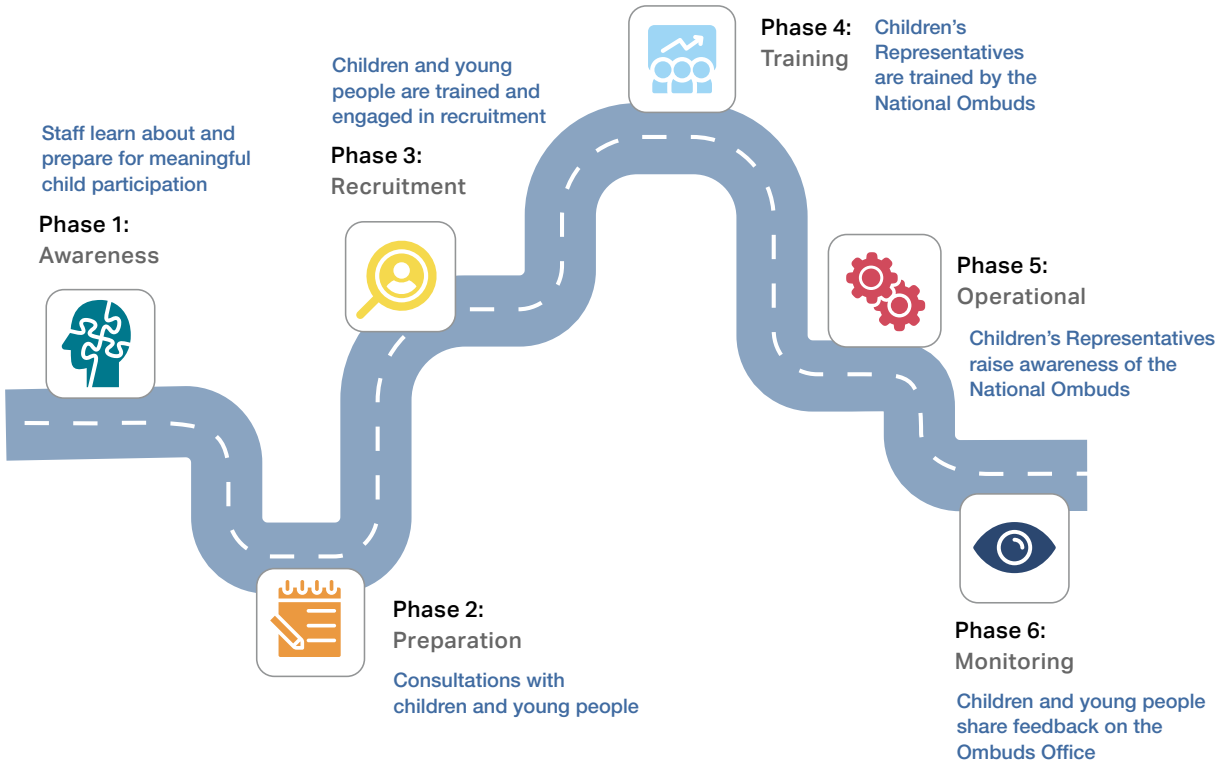


FIGURE 5. Road Map for Ombuds Office implementation and children and young people’s participation



Learning from the initial consultations informed the road map for implementing the Ombuds Office. As Figure 5 illustrates, child participation is integrated into all phases of the process.

Conclusion

From the outset, SOS Children's Villages was clear that children and young people must inform the design and development of the Ombuds Office.

They prioritised child participation because they recognise that children have the right to express their views and be heard on matters that affect them. But they also recognised that they had a child safeguarding crisis in part because children and young people face barriers to sharing their concerns. Those barriers must be fully understood - alongside factors that enable children to speak up - for the Ombuds Office to be effective.

Today, children and young people participate in all aspects of the Ombuds Office, from consultations and Ombuds recruitment to awareness raising and monitoring and evaluation. Learning from young people continues to shape and inform the ombuds approach as it is scaled up globally.

Children and young people say they need an independent, confidential, impartial person they can trust to share their concerns with.

SOS Children's Villages is responding by implementing independent Ombuds for children and young people (or equivalent) across the federation. A group of young people in one country recently wrote to their National Ombuds saying:

“YOUR EFFORTS HAVE MADE A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE IN OUR LIVES, AND WE ARE DEEPLY APPRECIATIVE OF YOUR COMMITMENT TO OUR WELL-BEING.”

This early success is a direct outcome of child participation.



STORY 2:
Learning from children and young people about barriers and enablers to sharing safe-guarding concerns



STORY 3:
Children and young people's participation in recruitment for the Ombuds Office

Read the other stories in this series to learn more about child participation in the Ombuds Office for SOS Children's Villages.

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