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Summary of the Annual Global Report of the Ombuds Office for SOS Children's Villages

December 2023

# 1. Overview

The [Ombuds Office for SOS Children's Villages](https://www.ombuds-sos-childrensvillages.org/) (the "Ombuds Office") was conceptualised and established in response to a safeguarding crisis across the federation.[[1]](#footnote-1) Its goal is to establish Ombuds or equivalent for all children and young people in SOS Children’s Village (SOS CV) programmes and services by 2026. Within that timeframe, the intention is to begin to expand the scope of the Ombuds Office to address inquiries from staff in member associations (MA).

This summary of the first global annual Ombuds Office report reflects on progress and learning from mid-2021 to June 2023. The summary concludes with next steps, which are intended to inform action by SOS CV governance and management and identify next steps for the Ombuds Office.

The Ombuds Office follows the **organisational ombuds** model, but it has innovated this approach in response to the needs of the organisation and the children and young people participating in its programmes. The Ombuds Office’s **child-centred** approach follows **four principles**: independence, confidentiality, impartiality, and informality. The Ombuds Office also follows a **'ground-up' approach**, meaning that MAs and National Ombuds adapt the approach to their national context and look for solutions within that context.

The Ombuds Office has been fully operational since the Ombuds Board was appointed in March 2023. Until the permanent Global Ombuds role is filled, the Office is being led by interim Global Ombuds who are accountable to the Ombuds Board.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Office is also comprised of an Ombuds Office Coordinator and Human Resource Coordinator based in Vienna, Regional Ombuds in LAAM and WCNA, and National Ombuds piloting in Benin, Sierra Leone, and Uruguay.[[3]](#footnote-3) Additionally, Regional Ombuds are being recruited in ASIA, ESAF and EUCM with the goal of selecting candidates by the end of 2023.

*“The leadership of this Office (the boards from the grassroots to the global structures) [...] must comprise women and men of integrity, individuals who can speak truth to power, and who are staunchly committed to the vision of the Federation."*

Independent Special Commission Final Report-Part One, April 2023, p.53

The goal of the Ombuds Office is to strengthen safeguarding across the federation with a primary focus on children and young people. This goal includes listening to inquirers and finding solutions to their concerns. It also includes preventing harm and neglect, strengthening safeguarding systems and mechanisms, increasing meaningful child participation, and supporting children to take a role in their own protection. To achieve these goals, the Ombuds Office works with a range of partners and collaborates closely with SOS CV Child Safeguarding while maintaining its independence.

SOS CV has demonstrated its strong commitment to establishing the Ombuds Office in several ways:

1. The International Senate made the Ombuds Office a key component of the [Safeguarding Action Plan (2021-2024).](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https:/www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/27ffd60d-1207-41ac-95ef-686cdf3973e3/Safeguarding-Action-Plan.pdf)
2. Having a National Ombuds (or equivalent) is now a federation Minimum Standard and a minimum funding requirement for SOS Hermann Gmeiner Fonds Deutschland (HGFD).
3. The [2023 Child and Youth Safeguarding Regulations](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https:/www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/469b587c-0b4a-4109-955f-7b8c9f7aa3b0/Child_and_Youth_Safeguarding_Regulation_2023_EN_LIBRARY.pdf) (5.2, 7.15) require MAs to have a national ombuds (or equivalent) available to children and young people in its programmes (past or present).[[4]](#footnote-4)

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| "The Global Ombuds Office and structure must have the support, respect, and protection of the leadership of the Federation right from the grassroots at the MA level, to the IOR, IO, GA, and the IS. This Office must be well resourced." (Ibid.) |

# 2. Progress

Up to June 2023, the Ombuds Office has been focused on: 1) operationalising the global Ombuds Office; 2) piloting the ombuds approach; and 3) scaling up the ombuds approach.

Scale up has been progressing well (see [Annex 1](#_Annex_1._Scale)). Rollout continues across regions according to individual MA plans with a first wave of 30 in 2023, a similar wave in 2024, and a final group in 2025/26. MAs report on progress towards implementing a National Ombuds (or equivalent) in their annual Results Based Management (RBM) reporting.

Figure 1. Scale-up progress in 2023: 32 MAs and IORs are establishing Ombuds



The Ombuds Office has seen progress in several areas:

**Funding:** In January 2023, SOS HGFD agreed to fully fund the global Ombuds Office budget for five years (2023-2027). This funding strengthens the independence of the Ombuds Office by insulating it from SOS CV financial pressures and creates financial stability for the coming years. Additionally, Strategic Priority Fund 1.8 will fund implementation and the first annual national ombuds budget for subsidy receiving MAs.

**Meaningful child participation**, combined with the Ombuds Office's 'ground up' approach (i.e., localisation), exemplifies best practice within the international development and humanitarian sector. While INGOs in the child protection sector advocate for meaningful child participation, localisation, and accountability,[[5]](#footnote-5) the Ombuds Office for SOS CV is demonstrating how it can be done and that it is a highly effective approach to programme design and implementation. Meaningful participation often builds upon existing child and youth participation processes and structures (especially at local and national levels) and involves ongoing effort to apply the nine basic requirements for effective and ethical participation.[[6]](#footnote-6) Supporting the meaningful participation of children and young people requires time investments by children and adult supporters, the use of child friendly training materials, and flexibility to engage with children and young people at times they are available.

The Ombuds Office has implemented child participation by consulting young people to inform its child-centred model and approach and by involving them in recruitment. The Office also solicits feedback on the ombuds approach from Children's Representatives in each location. **SOS CV is one of the only global organisations to ever train and engage children in recruitment.** The effort has been a tremendous success: both young people and candidates find the process highly rewarding. Moreover, having children select and monitor their Ombuds signals to the Ombuds that they are accountable to the young people they serve. This adds an additional layer of accountability to the Ombuds Office system.

**Positioning:** Ombuds have invested significant effort in awareness raising and discussions aimed at positioning and clarifying the Ombuds' role vis-a-vis child safeguarding, child protection, and human resources roles. This effort has included applying an [Inquiry Flowchart](https://soscv.sharepoint.com/:i:/r/sites/WS_002282/Public%20Documents/0%20-%20Scale%20up%20toolkit%20material/Toolkit%20Documents/Ombuds_Inquiry_flowchart_EN%2020230210.png?csf=1&web=1&e=30kD7d) (developed by SOS CV Child Safeguarding and the Ombuds Office) in each local context and agreeing on points of contact and how Ombuds will access children and young people. While this is an ongoing effort, significant progress has been made in each pilot, with staff (including caregivers) understanding the role and how it is different from and complimentary to their own.

**Prevention:** Ombuds have been working on harm prevention and raising awareness of how they strengthen prevention, for example by:

* supporting staff to improve programme risk assessments.
* promoting a rights-based framework and emphasising that child safeguarding includes preventing and responding to child neglect, which is a failure to guarantee children's rights as detailed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
* enabling children to participate in protecting themselves, for example, through workshop sessions with young people on child rights and child safeguarding and Ombuds.
* being an independent accountability mechanism for SOS CV.

**Ombuds-Safeguarding Collaboration:** The Ombuds Office advanced and formalised collaboration with SOS CV safeguarding through meetings in Innsbruck, a child safeguarding webinar in January 2023, meetings with the global Child Safeguarding Network, and by establishing an Ombuds-Safeguarding Collaboration group that meets regularly.

Every responsibility was carried out to **establish and protect the independence of the Ombuds Office** and **keep children at the centre** of the model and approach.

# 3. Lessons Learned

## 3.1 Key lessons

The Ombuds Office is continually evaluating learning and integrating lessons learned into its approach and scale up. The main lessons learned are:

**Independence:** The Ombuds Office must be - and be perceived to be - independent to succeed. It must also collaborate with SOS CV Safeguarding. The Ombuds Office is continually assessing how it can strengthen its independence, and perceptions of independence, as a matter of priority.

**Ombuds approach:** The Ombuds Office model is based on an organisational ombuds approach, but it is a novel hybrid approach that responds to the needs of the organisation and the needs, views, and suggestions of children and young people within the framework of children's rights.

**Child participation and a ‘ground up’ approach** take time and careful planning, but they result in more responsive, locally relevant, and effective work.

**A child rights-based approach** is essential to supporting the federation to make the improvements required for good quality care and protection.

**Communication and awareness raising at national level** must begin during the scale-up preparation and recruitment phases and be a significant focus of the National Ombuds' first six months.

**Child participation, localisation, and accountability require full executive-level support from the international to national level to ensure the Ombuds model and approach are firmly embedded within organisational systems and that stories and rationale for change are clearly communicated.**

**Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL)** outcomes and outputs need to be revised to ensure that all the ways the Ombuds Office strengthens safeguarding are measured and evaluated. In particular, the importance of inquiries needs to be balanced with other key objectives, such as risk management and prevention.

**The funding approach** must continue to be agile, creative, and ongoing. It must tell the Ombuds story clearly, while seeking opportunities for funding that promotes independence and stability.

**Risks** at the national, regional and international levelsmust be carefully assessed and mitigated by key stakeholders on an on-going basis.

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| *"This Office [...] must be vigilantly monitored by all stakeholders to ensure it scrutinizes the Federation and holds it accountable." (Ibid., pp.53-54)* |

## 3.1 Insights into child safeguarding

The Ombuds Office can offer some initial insights into SOS CV Child Safeguarding from working with MAs that are pilots or part of the scale up, but these insights are limited due to a six-month perspective:

* MAs are committed to prioritising child safeguarding and are already increasing their safeguarding efforts. Some face significant challenges to strengthening safeguarding that are related to historical cases, large programs, large geographies, limited staff capacity, and budget constraints.
* The new Child and Youth Safeguarding Policy and Regulation are very important, but to be impactful their rollout requires carefully planning because it expands the responsibilities of SOS CV Child Safeguarding teams - especially within Family Strengthening, foster family care and education - who are already stretched.
* In alternative care, caregivers often feel alone and unsure how to handle negative behaviours from their children and young people. They worry about allegations against them and losing their job.
* Bullying and peer-to-peer violence are not being adequately addressed by the MAs.
* In some MAs, it will take a long time for children to learn to trust child safeguarding again because trust has been broken.
* Child participation in safeguarding is important, but ultimately every adult in SOS CV is responsible for the safety of children and young people in SOS CV programmes and services. Building this awareness and ownership will take time and resources.
* The MA's historical, political, and cultural environment directly impacts staff and children and young people and influences efforts to establish effective and responsible child safeguarding.
* Within child safeguarding, it's important to protect all of the rights of children. It is not enough to focus on preventing and responding to visible violations. Child neglect - though less visible - is a harm that stems from children not realising their basic rights, as defined in the UNCRC.
* Prevention plays a critical role in keeping children safe, as the 2023 Child and Youth Safeguarding Regulation asserts. It will need to be systematically integrated into all SOS CV programme and services. The Ombuds have an important role to play in prevention through supporting child safeguarding to strengthen its systems.
* Many children within SOS CV programmes have been traumatized on some level. Trauma informed work needs to guide the SOS CV Child Safeguarding response at all levels.

Overall, SOS CV has taken a big step forward in prioritizing child safeguarding. There are many challenges on the ground, but there are also many committed people and leaders. Ombuds pilots and the first cohort of MAs scaling up have demonstrated a strong level of commitment to child safeguarding, in part through implementing Ombuds.

# 4. Next Steps

## **4.1 Issues for SOS CV Governance and Management to address**

SOS CV governance and management are encouraged to take the following steps to strengthen the Ombuds Office implementation process and operations:

1. **Communication:** Foster continued trust, transparency, and accountability through clear and ongoing communications to increase MAs' and IORs' confidence in and openness to collaboration with the Ombuds Office. Likewise, communicate federation changes with the Ombuds Office in a timely way so that it has time to plan and adapt.
2. **Independence:** Strengthen and protect the independence of the Ombuds Office operations and funds, including by:
   1. upholding the Ombuds-IDR Agreement and MA Resolutions
   2. supporting a new Ombuds Board selection process, and
   3. respecting Ombuds Office management of its budgets at the national, regional, and global levels.
3. **Finance:** Explore funding options that would provide more independence and long-term stability for National Ombuds annual budgets through ongoing communication with PSAs and external funders.
4. **Resources:** Continue to prioritise child safeguarding by providing the resources needed and advocating for more timely responses to concerns raised by the Ombuds Office and SOS CV Child Safeguarding.
5. **Principled, values-based safeguarding:** Apply the Ombuds principles of confidentiality and impartiality to all SOS CV Child Safeguarding work to increase trust in the system and process. Collaborate with the Ombuds Office to ensure that child safeguarding prioritises prevention and applies a child-rights approach that addresses child neglect (of rights) as a matter of priority.

**The Ombuds Board welcomes CEO reporting to the International Senate on actions taken in response to the Global Annual Ombuds Office report.**

## **4.2 Outlook for the next period**

In addition to operating the Ombuds Office, piloting and scaling up, the Ombuds Office will focus activities in the next period on the following thematic areas:

**Promote independence:**

1. Continually evaluate the Ombuds Office's practices and approach to ensure that it is acting, and perceived to be acting, independently at all levels and in all contexts.
2. Strengthen the financial independence of the Ombuds Office by establishing a sustainable financial management approach.

**Increase communication and awareness raising:**

1. Work with SOS CV Communications to educate national directors and boards on the Ombuds Office.
2. Continue to invest in training and awareness raising with all staff groups and children and young people in each pilot or scale-up MA.
3. Develop a clear story about the Ombuds Office that external donors can feel confident investing in.
4. Raise awareness of how the Ombuds Office contributes to
   1. child participation, including in safeguarding, and
   2. the prevention of harm, abuse, exploitation, and neglect.

**Build relationships and foster collaboration:**

1. Build relationships and understanding about the Ombuds Office with PSAs through information sessions and sharing the Ombuds learning journey, reports, MA Ombuds budgets and status updates, requests, and mutual expectations.
2. Build collaborative relationships with SOS CV Child Safeguarding through orienting the Director of Safeguarding to the Ombuds Office and establishing regular meetings and collaborative events with child safeguarding at the regional and national levels.
3. Exchange global learning, trends, and gaps through Ombuds-Safeguarding Collaboration meetings every six weeks.
4. Build relationships with approved local ombuds alternatives and support MAs to ensure the service is meeting the minimum criteria outlined in the Ombuds Pilot Master Charter.

# Annex 1. Scale up progress as of 15 December 2023

\*Operational

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| SCALE-UP PHASE | ASIA | ESAF | EUCM | EUNA | LAAM | WCNA |
| 1. Awareness | Nepal | Madagascar |  |  | Brazil, Mexico | Cameroun, Chad, Senegal, Togo |
| 1. Preparation | Bangladesh Philippines | Angola, Eswatini, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe |  |  | Venezuela, Peru |  |
| 1. Recruitment |  | Burundi | Lebanon |  |  | Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Niger |
| 1. Contracted/ Training |  |  | Albania |  |  |  |
| 1. Operational |  |  |  |  | Uruguay | Benin  Sierra Leone |
| * Reporting local alternative |  |  | Azerbaijan, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, N. Macedonia | Austria  HGFD, Israel | Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Paraguay, Venezuela |  |
| * Evaluating local alternative |  | Mauritius | Belarus, Bosnia & Herz, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan | Belgium  Portugal | Bolivia |  |
| * Local alternative approved |  |  | Bulgaria, Czech, Kosovo, Serbia |  |  |  |
| MA TOTAL: 45  2023 TARGET: (30) | **3**  **(3)** | **11**  **(9)** | **13**  **(6)** | **2** | **6**  **(5)** | **10**  **(7)** |
| Regional Ombuds | Interviewing | Interviewing | Interviewing | - | Operational | Operational |

1. See the following reports for background: [Independent Child Safeguarding Review Global Report](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https:/www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/b8a30286-2e00-4358-b011-3bef63729081/ICSR-Global-Report_EN.pdf) (ICSR) by Keeping Children Safe, [Independent Special Commission Final Report (Part 1)](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https:/www.sos-childrensvillages.org/getmedia/35ceea40-a0fb-469b-a3c9-5500e23fa88c/ISC-Final-Report.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The interim Ombuds Office is being supported and led by a team of consultants from [Proteknon Foundation](http://www.proteknon.net/). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ombuds start dates: Benin-Oct 2023; Sierra Leone: Feb 2023; Uruguay: Mar 2023; WCNA: May 2023; LAAM: June 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. MAs can evaluate whether a local ombuds "equivalent" meets minimum standards outlined in the Ombuds Master Charter by following the [Guidance to Evaluate Alternatives to Ombuds](https://soscv.sharepoint.com/:f:/r/sites/WS_002282/Public%20Documents/0%20-%20Scale%20up%20toolkit%20material/Toolkit%20Documents/Guidance%20on%20Evaluating%20Ombuds%20Alternatives?csf=1&web=1&e=ZI0F92). The process outlined includes consulting children and local services, documenting the MA's decision, and meeting with the Ombuds Office to discuss next steps. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action five-year strategy, ['The Alliance Strategy (2021-2025) | A Clarion Call: The Centrality of Children and their Protection within Humanitarian Action'](https://alliancecpha.org/en/alliance-strategy-2021-2025#:~:text=The%20Alliance%20for%20Child%20Protection,SAVING%20across%20the%20humanitarian%20system.) which outlines these goals. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See the [Ombuds Implementation Toolkit](https://soscv.sharepoint.com/:f:/r/sites/WS_002282/Public%20Documents/9%20-%20Communication/Ombuds%20toolkit?csf=1&web=1&e=vGNb9x) for details. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)