



POLICY

SOS

# VALUING DIVERSITY – VALUING DIFFERING ABILITY

## Policy on the Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

November 2008

This policy expresses the organisation's stand on the inclusion of children with disabilities and sets an action framework for the SOS Children's Villages organisation. It is implemented by co-workers and other relevant stakeholders within the organisation, and has an impact on all aspects of the organisation's work. It has been elaborated in accordance with SOS Children's Villages' roots, vision, mission and values ("Who we are"), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). It has followed a consultative development process with participation and feedback from national associations, and in consideration of the views of children, including children and young people with disabilities.



**SOS-KINDERDORF**  
International

# WHAT WE STRIVE FOR: POLICY STATEMENT

Children with disabilities as social actors growing up in a caring family

We strive for the fulfilment of the rights of children with disabilities to play a role as full, active, and resourceful members of their communities and believe that

- children with disabilities should be empowered to claim their rights
- a caring family is the best environment in which children with disabilities can develop to their full potential
- families of children with disabilities as well as their communities should be strengthened in their capacity to care for their children, and should be empowered to claim rights on behalf of and with children with disabilities
- children with disabilities who cannot be adequately cared for within their families should be offered alternative care that serves their best interests, with priority given to seeking family-based care options

## INTRODUCTION

### A. Background and scope

Globally, an estimated 150-200 million children (about 10% of the total child population) are living with disabilities (Save the Children UK, 2006). The reported figures vary significantly from one country to another. Specialists, however, agree on a working approximation giving a minimum benchmark of 2.5% of all children aged 0-14 with self-evident moderate-to-severe levels of sensory, physical and intellectual impairments; and an additional 8% of children in the same age-range can be expected to have learning or behavioural difficulties or both (UNICEF, 2007).

**As many as 50% of disabilities are preventable** (Save the Children UK, 2006); the other 50% reflect the diversity of life.

**Causes** are often linked to generalised poverty, affected by factors such as prenatal care, vaccination, and malnutrition. Other major causative factors of disability include accidents, trauma and war, as well as congenital, infectious, and non-infectious diseases.

Equal rights

Article 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) refers in particular to the rights of children with disabilities: "a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community." In addition, in Article 2, for the first time in an international human rights treaty, the UNCRC addresses the right to protection from discrimination on grounds of disability. Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD 2006) affirms that 'States Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children'.

Despite an increasingly strong international normative framework for children with disabilities, national legislation, policy and funding mechanisms remain weak the world over. **The rights of children with disabilities are grossly violated all over the world.** Children



## Equal opportunities?

with disabilities are four times more likely to be neglected and physically abused and over three times more likely to be emotionally abused than other children. Often their lives are not treated as of equal value with others (Lansdown, 2001).

Children with disabilities are disproportionately likely to live in poverty. The majority of children with disabilities have no access to health care and rehabilitation services and 98% of children with disabilities receive no formal education in developing countries (Save the Children UK, 2006). Multiple discrimination is a reality for a range of children with disabilities. Girls with disabilities are often discriminated against both in terms of their gender and their disabilities.

Children with disabilities are at high risk of living without adequate parental care. They are often hidden from view or forced to live in unsuitable institutional care (Lansdown, 2001). Families of children with disabilities often lack information, support, and training to cope with their specific situation. They are often confronted with rejection by the extended family and the community; and the overall stress on the entire family can be very high, leading in many cases to abandonment of the child (UNICEF, 2005).

SOS Children's Villages has extensive experience in providing care for and offering support to children with disabilities and their families (SOS-Kinderdorf International, 2007a). Children with different kinds of disabilities are and have always been cared for in SOS Children's Village programmes with a focus on enabling them to develop and reach their potential – ideally, while being fully integrated in community life.

### B. Target group

SOS Children's Villages works with and for children who live without parental care or who are at the risk of being left without it. Since children with disabilities face a significantly higher risk of abandonment, they are a particularly vulnerable group of children within the overall organisational target group.

Consequently, the organisation's target group includes:

- children with disabilities living without parental care (though we do not offer family-based care to children with disabilities who need specialised life-long care)
- children with disabilities living at risk of losing their parental care, very often as a direct consequence of their disability

### C. Definitions and terminology

By using the term "**children with disabilities**", SOS Children's Villages wants to underline the condition of being a "child", first; and we consider "disabilities" as a secondary characteristic, one which is acknowledged as an important part of the individual child's reality. In our approach we view the child as a whole with all his or her attributes including views, opinions, abilities and vulnerabilities, of which a disability is one of many other elements in this child's life.

**The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)** defines people with disabilities as: "Those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various (attitudinal and environmental) barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others".

This definition points out the disabling aspects of social and physical environments. The term '**impairment**' is used to refer to the loss or limitation of physical, mental or sensory function on a long-term or permanent basis (UNICEF, 2007). **Disability** is understood as a complex interaction between a person's evolving capacities and the context in which that person lives – and not as a simple state or static condition. This definition acknowledges that at some point in their lives most people experience some degree of disability.

Following the same line of thinking, the World Health Organisation established the **International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO, 2001)**. This is an internationally acknowledged classification of health components of functioning and disability, which focuses on a child's abilities and strengths and not just on impairments and limitations. Only 2 out of 10 children with disabilities face severe impairments (UNICEF, 2007) that may hinder them in leading an independent life.

**Inclusion** of children in this context means the recognition of all children as full members of society and the respect of all of their rights, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, language, poverty or impairment. The process towards an inclusive society demands the removal of barriers that might prevent the enjoyment of these rights and requires the creation of appropriate supportive and protective environments. Inclusion is a process that involves all children, not just a number of 'special' children. It gives non-disabled children the experience of growing up in an environment where diversity is the norm rather than the exception (UNICEF, 2007).

## PRINCIPLES GUIDING SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES ACTION

1. The **best interests** of the individual child with disabilities are the primary consideration in all matters affecting him or her. In practice, all protective and care measures are taken in the best interests of the child.
2. Children with disabilities benefit from **access to the full range of quality services in the community**, such as care, health, education and recreation, guaranteeing their survival and development. As the primary duty-bearer, the State must develop policies and allocate resources to ensure access to adequate services for all children with disabilities. Families of children with disabilities are empowered and supported in their responsibilities towards their children.
3. Stigma, misconception and discrimination resulting in the social exclusion of children with disabilities must be addressed at all levels of society: within the family, across communities, in civil society and within State structures. **We do not accept any form of discrimination** against children with disabilities (be it cultural, religious or any other form), and we place special attention on children with disabilities that might experience multiple discrimination.
4. All children with disabilities are equal rights-holders and are empowered to make their **participation** a meaningful and integral part of community life. In practice, we build a culture of participation within our organisation and see children with disabilities as active members of their family and community, recognising and valuing their evolving capacities.

5. **Partnerships** among relevant stakeholders ensure the mobilisation of the maximum available resources and competencies to achieve the highest positive impact on the lives of children with disabilities. We enter partnerships with stakeholders who share our values and principles, and who commit themselves to being equitable, inclusive and diverse organisations.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WORK OF SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES

The SOS Children's Villages Organisation commits to the inclusion of children with disabilities as outlined in the above policy statement and defined in this policy paper. In a long-term process, we set targets, identify milestones, and progressively implement necessary actions to achieve our ambitions within the scope of our available resources.

Acting in the  
best interests of  
children with  
disabilities

### 1. The best interests of the individual child with disabilities are the primary consideration in all matters affecting him or her

- 1a. Views of children with disabilities are always considered when determining their best interests. In accordance with the child's evolving capacities, due weight is given to his or her opinions when deciding on matters affecting the child.
- 1b. All co-workers involved in the admission of children to protection and care programmes provided by SOS Children's Villages ensure that admission of children with disabilities is done in their best interests. SOS Children's Villages actively supports the process of searching for the most suitable alternative care for those children with disabilities who are without parental care if their needs cannot be met within an SOS family.
- 1c. Whenever it is in the best interests of children with disabilities to stay together with their siblings while they are in the care of SOS Children's Village, this will be ensured.
- 1d. SOS Children's Villages strengthens the relationship of children with disabilities with their biological/extended family and works towards their re-integration into their families.
- 1e. SOS Children's Villages supports governments and local authorities in their efforts to develop and implement admission procedures to care and protection services that take into consideration the best interests of children with disabilities.

## 2. Children with disabilities benefit from access to the full range of quality services in the community, such as care, health, education and recreation, guaranteeing their survival and development

- 2a. Our priority in working towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in society is to strengthen the capacities of families and communities to protect and care for children with disabilities and to prevent their abandonment. Families are supported to cope with additional challenges directly related to having a child with a disability in the family.
- 2b. The SOS Children's Villages Organisation supports early identification, assessment, and intervention through adequate services provided by the State and/or specialised organisations to ensure that children with disabilities receive the necessary assistance as early in their lives as possible.
- 2c. The SOS Children's Villages Organisation promotes access to community-based nutrition programmes and improved food security for the poorest and more vulnerable families, improved vaccination coverage, quality prenatal care, access to treatment, care and prevention of, as well as information about, HIV and AIDS in order to reduce the risk of preventable disabilities.
- 2d. We support the establishment of community-based intervention and rehabilitation services, such as networking of families, volunteers and home-based care.
- 2e. We offer **family-based care** to those children with disabilities who do not receive adequate care from within their biological or extended families and whose needs can best be met through our family-based care approach.
- Those children with disabilities who join family-based care should be able to live independently after leaving care, although this is sometimes difficult to predict. We consequently support them to develop to their full potential.
  - We do not offer family-based care for children with disabilities who require life-long care.
  - SOS Children's Villages does not create segregated families or villages exclusively for children with disabilities. Children with disabilities and their non-disabled peers live together in one family.
  - We make all available services accessible for children with disabilities in our care, but do not set up specialised services for them within SOS Children's Villages. We rather seek to ensure that children with disabilities in family-based care are included in the wider community and have non-discriminatory access to all available services.
  - Special attention is paid to the training and working conditions of care-givers who work with children with disabilities. Among other forms of support, coaching, counselling and additional assistance by supporting co-workers are offered, if needed.
- 2f. We identify and develop the capabilities of children with disabilities in our programmes and support them to further develop their talents (e.g. through family and individual child development plans). We encourage both families and communities to actively incorporate these abilities and talents into their daily interaction with children with disabilities. The children with disabilities are also encouraged to contribute their talents and abilities in the daily life of the family and community.
- 2g. We promote opportunities for children with disabilities to play and take part in sports and cultural activities on an equal basis with children without disabilities.

## Inclusive education

2h. We make the inclusion of children with disabilities possible in all SOS Children's Villages fields of work (family strengthening, family-based care, education). Existing infrastructure becomes progressively accessible depending on programme plans and objectives. Simple, locally adapted solutions are sought. In the construction of new facilities, basic accessibility criteria are applied.

2i. SOS Children's Villages promotes an inclusive approach in educational facilities. Specially trained teachers, adapted curricula, as well as a barrier-free physical environment support the inclusion of children with disabilities within the educational field.

2j. Based on our experience, we lobby the State duty-bearers, in partnership with relevant stakeholders, for the allocation of adequate and sufficient resources to assure the survival and development of children with disabilities as well as adequate support for their families.

2k. Together with other like-minded organisations, SOS Children's Villages makes governments aware of their responsibilities towards children with disabilities. In particular, we demand that governments ensure the full observance of all the rights of children with disabilities. We also encourage governments to develop and apply data-gathering and monitoring systems concerning the situation of children with disabilities in order to identify the nature and extent of action needed to ensure that their rights are fully realised.

2l. We advocate for and promote deinstitutionalisation of children with disabilities by

- supporting their families in order to prevent the abandonment of children with disabilities,
- promoting the development of family- and community-based care alternatives for children with disabilities, and
- promoting quality care in their best interests for children with disabilities in alternative care.

### **3. Stigma, misconception and discrimination resulting in the social exclusion of children with disabilities must be addressed at all levels of society: within the family, across communities, in civil society and within State structures**

3a. SOS Children's Villages advocates for the elimination of existing environmental, political, cultural, and emotional barriers that hinder the inclusion of children with disabilities in society.

3b. The external and internal communication of SOS Children's Villages reflects the diversity of children in our programmes (in terms of disability, ethnicity, gender, etc.) and conveys a message of inclusion and acceptance.

3c. Through human resource development, SOS Children's Villages supports each co-worker to build a non-discriminatory attitude and the required competencies related to the work with children with disabilities.

- New co-workers receive clear guidance during the orientation phase on the organisation's non-discriminatory approach of inclusion.

## Making duty-bearers aware of their responsibilities

## Promoting non-discrimination



- Co-workers working directly with children with disabilities are provided with relevant training (e.g. around types of disabilities and the required support), ongoing development and knowledge sharing opportunities.

3d. Families and communities are empowered to fight against prejudice, misconception, and discrimination directed against persons with disabilities.

3e. We assist all children and young people whom we work with in their developing a non-discriminatory attitude, and encourage them to value diversity and act with respect for others.

3f. Children with disabilities in our programmes are provided with accessible, safe and confidential avenues to report their concerns. Existing structures such as the reporting and responding systems according to the SOS Children's Villages Child Protection Policy are accessible to them on an equal basis.

## Enabling participation

### **4. All children with disabilities are equal rights-holders and are empowered to make their participation a meaningful and integral part of community life**

4a. Children with disabilities and their families are informed, consulted, and directly involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the SOS Children's Villages programme. Their contribution is taken seriously.

4b. We support the participation of children with disabilities in consultation processes by providing them with adequate communication tools (e.g. using a language accessible to the child) as well as adequate locations and a safe environment.

4c. We encourage the participation of those children with disabilities who are hidden from view.

4d. Within our programme, we support families of children with disabilities in setting up their own initiatives to build an inclusive society for children with disabilities.

4e. We support children with disabilities in becoming peer advocates within their communities, for instance by encouraging the development of child-led councils or clubs through which children with disabilities can advocate for their rights.

4f. We cooperate with external partners who are experienced in the field of participation of children with disabilities.

## Working in partnerships

### **5. Partnerships among relevant stakeholders ensure the mobilisation of the maximum available resources and competencies and their highest positive impact on the lives of children with disabilities**

5a. SOS Children's Villages identifies existing networks and potential partner organisations and the services they provide for children with disabilities within the communities.

- 5b. We engage in partnerships that facilitate the access of children with disabilities and their families to services and resources that cannot be made available within SOS Children's Villages.
- 5c. We engage in networks and partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organisations, disabled people's organisations, specialised service providers, communities, families and children in order to support and facilitate the coordination of services provided by different partners.

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