

Final Report of the Independent Special Commission: Update on Progress

6 June 2024

STATEMENT BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES INTERNATIONAL

In 2021, SOS Children's Villages established the Independent Special Commission (ISC) as part of our Safeguarding Action Plan to provide an expert and impartial assessment of past safeguarding and compliance failures and to make recommendations for strengthening our policies and procedures. One year ago, the ISC published its final report, and we have incorporated most of its recommendations into our operational planning.

Overall, we have made good progress during the past three years in strengthening our safeguarding across the federation and in addressing past organizational failures, much of which is reflected in the [most recent Safeguarding Action Plan progress report](#), published in April 2024. Some specific areas of progress are summarized here:

Policies. Revising, modernizing and professionalizing the policies and procedures that make up the core of our safeguarding system has provided greater clarity on how to put into practice our commitment to providing a safe environment – in both preventing and responding to incidents. Since the ISC was formed, we have developed seven major [safeguarding-related policies and regulations](#).

Awareness. Our awareness-raising efforts have been successful in ensuring safeguarding is at the front of our colleagues' minds. An update of our [Strategy 2030](#) explicitly commits us to ensuring we live safeguarding in our daily actions. Training on child and youth safeguarding is incorporated into the staff learning and development processes; it is part of our procedures when working with partners in the General Secretariat and in the vast majority of member associations. As of now, 100 out of 125 member associations with domestic operations report that they fully meet the training requirements, with 23 more still in process of complying.

Organizational culture. To address organizational culture issues, first steps were taken. A new values-based Code of Conduct is now in place, and a "Living Our Values" framework has been integrated into guidance for member associations on recruitment, onboarding, learning and development, and leadership. Safeguarding leadership awareness raising and training have shown promise, and a new people and culture policy is expected to be finalized and approved in the General Assembly 2025.

Ombuds. A global ombuds system has been developed to complement the existing safeguarding operations. When fully in place, the Ombuds – at national, regional and international levels – will help us to ensure consistent and quality safeguarding across the whole federation, supporting awareness raising, child participation, and support for those affected by abuse. National ombuds are in place in four countries and equivalent external systems have been approved in another seven. Ombuds implementation or evaluation of alternative external ombuds services is in

progress in 50 countries. Member associations establishing an ombuds (or equivalent) have now consulted over 1,100 children in SOS Children's Villages programmes about barriers and enablers to sharing their concerns.

Governance. SOS Children's Villages is a federation of independent member associations who locally deliver services according to the needs of the children and communities in each country. The ISC had recommended fundamental reforms to governance and leadership structures through strengthened commitment to objectives-based approach to transparency, checks and balances, and accountability.

Currently, the federation is undertaking a governance reform process, led by member associations. The process, which was set up by the [International Senate](#), the highest supervisory body of the SOS Children's Villages federation, will implement relevant recommendations of the ISC.

A Governance Reform Group, consisting of members of the International Senate plus representatives of 16 member associations covering all regions was formed in November 2023. It has two workstreams: one focusing on refining the statutes/bylaws, and another one developing proposals for the federation's overall architecture. A first change to the statutes will be presented to the Extraordinary General Assembly of July 2024, while substantive changes will be presented towards the end of the year.

This work is essential for responding to the ISC's recommendations for addressing non-compliance with federation policies and standards and global power imbalances between members and the Secretariat. We expect the process to be completed by July 2025 when our federation's [General Assembly](#) takes place. The significant changes require sufficient time to be inclusive and workable in our large and diverse federation.

Accountability. To date, our follow-up efforts include reporting individuals to legal authorities and pursuing cases in accordance with national laws and our internal policies and procedures. SOS Children's Villages International is actively supporting member associations investigating substantiated allegations based on the ISC findings.

Seven cases prioritized by the ISC were detailed in dedicated chapters of its report. At the country level, member association teams have been supported by SOS Children's Villages International regional offices to develop action plans addressing recommendations and information in the ISC report, and work continues to investigate and confirm data. So far, allegations of misconduct in those seven cases, as substantiated and confirmed by the ISC, currently involve 17 individuals, none of which are still in the organization. To date, follow-up has included: one individual has been reported to legal authorities and has been convicted, two employees have been dismissed; two individuals have since deceased. The remainder of the 17 are pending further action. We continue investigating and following up on allegations presented by the ISC, which may result in additional individuals implicated as well as further actions taken.

To complement our accountability efforts, SOS Children's Villages International has obtained the support of the international law firm Latham & Watkins to review the ISC report and related materials to establish and prioritize areas to act, including obligations of SOS Children's Villages International resulting from the investigation report results. We expect to receive this analysis in Q3 2024.

In November 2023, the International Senate decided to revoke the Honorary President's title due to past safeguarding failures during his tenure as President of SOS Children's Villages International from 1985 to 2012, as reports revealed a culture of complacency with regards to reporting and responding to safeguarding concerns.

Programme quality. The ISC also identified issues regarding consistency of programme quality as well as working conditions and support for care practitioners. In response, member associations are working on programmatic innovation to support families at risk, reduce family separation and loss of parental care, widen alternative care options, improve integration of children that have lost parental care into the communities, and increase services for reintegration and independent living of young people. The roll out of the Results Based Management approach, which facilitates continuous programme improvement, has been started in 336 programmes worldwide, with more than 80 programmes having reached the desired standard. Additionally, a new Programme Services Regulation establishes minimum programme quality standards. Further work has also been done to support mental health of the children and care practitioners and to standardize data collection and monitoring standards.

We are committed to continuing external reviews of our work in the area of safeguarding. We will be working with the Independent Review Panel of Accountable Now to report on our progress regarding implementation of the ISC recommendations.

Moving forward

The findings by the Independent Special Commission have informed the development of a comprehensive Safeguarding Strategy for the General Secretariat and 25 country operations under the direct management of SOS Children's Villages International. While it is not binding for all 130+ member associations, we are promoting its use to support the management of safeguarding risks in all operations and programmes. This Safeguarding Strategy supports the implementation of the binding policies and regulations applicable to all member associations.

The integrated strategy – including child, youth and adult safeguarding, plus anti-corruption and asset protection – is designed to embed strong safeguarding in everything we do – every programme, every office and every partnership. The strategy identifies six outcomes towards which we are working, with KPIs reflecting that safeguarding must be mainstreamed into management structures and work plans. The strategy will guide our efforts through to 2030, and we will be reporting on progress transparently.

Strong safeguarding – including clear policies, prioritizing prevention through safe programming, and timely and transparent incident response and support to victims and survivors – is essential to fulfil our purpose of ensuring children develop the bonds they need to become their strongest selves. A holistic approach also requires effective governance and broader mechanisms to ensure compliance with obligations and minimum standards. In a federation directly supporting more than half a million children, young people and adults – to ensure quality safeguarding is a massive challenge. We do not underestimate the scale of the work still ahead of us.

OVERVIEW OF PROGRESS

ISC Recommendation	Summary of progress	Assessment (not started, in progress or completed)
1. Fundamental reforms to governance and leadership structures through strengthened commitment to objectives-based approach to transparency, checks and balances, and accountability	Establishment of Governance Reform Group by International Senate; revised statutes to be presented to an Extraordinary General Assembly in July 2024 and further governance reforms to be presented at General Assembly in 2025. Substantial work required.	In progress
2. Child Safeguarding: enhancing implementation of policies and procedures through commitment to resourcing, training, and accountability for adherence failures.	Substantial progress against Safeguarding Action Plan has included a range of new policies and regulations across all safeguarding areas, accompanied by training and awareness programmes. Additional work required.	In progress
3. Reassess and recommit to the welfare and rights of survivors and to reconciling the safeguarding failures endured.	New regulation on Support for Persons Affected by Abuse is in place and being implemented. Incident management Teams (IMTs) have been established and certified across the International Office and all regional offices. Many member associations have also established their IMTs. Substantial work is required, including on accountability for individuals in cases investigated by ISC.	In progress
4. Fundamental recommitment to asset safeguarding frameworks developing and instilling internal controls to improve implementation, governance, assessment management, audit, and whistleblower protection.	Anti-corruption and asset protection team now in place, following through on establishing new systems and training across the federation. A draft of the new anti-corruption regulation, plus guidelines on sanctions compliance, anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing, are currently under review to be submitted for approval in the upcoming weeks. A global pool of investigators is currently in the planning stage, with a multifaceted/ integrated focus for the safeguarding departments. Substantial work required.	In progress
5. Secure funding, policy, and procedures commitment to revamp Human Resources guided by fundamental considerations for safeguarding prevention and staff protection.	Rollout of the PSHEA (sexual misconduct) regulation, the Code of Conduct regulation, and a "Living Our Values" framework are all progressing, with training and tools in multiple languages available. Target is for all federation staff to be trained in the PSHEA and Code of Conduct. A new people and culture policy is expected to be finalized and approved in the General Assembly 2025. Substantial work required.	In progress

6. Reform confidence in the autonomy of MA governance and leadership through improved multilateral communications and improved member level administration of SOS CV policies and procedures.	The Office of the Chief Programme Officer has set up a system for member associations to discuss best practice in governance topics. Substantial work required.	In progress
7. Effectuate diversity and representation through proactive inclusion from across the federation to leadership position and structures.	Governance Reform Group will be addressing global power imbalances. Development of a People and Culture Policy and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion regulation are pending. Substantial work required.	In progress
Country-specific investigations (cases that were the subject of dedicated chapters in the ISC final report)	All member associations except for one have developed their action plans, addressing ISC concerns, with support from regional teams. Progress in most cases has been dependent on the country specific context (including national laws). However, the majority of the MAs are at the phase of implementing their action plans and several have closed cases that were mentioned in the ISC report.	In progress