



**SOS-KINDERDORF**  
International

**“SOS Children’s Villages experience of supporting the transition process from out-of-home care to independent living”**

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“children without parental care”**

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## **A care concept favourable to transition towards independent living**

Well completed transition towards independent living is a key indicator for successful out-of-home child care.

The early stage of a child's life in out-of-home care is very fundamental for his/her development and later ability for transition to independence. The foundation for a young person's successful transition is laid the day he/she enters into out-of-home care. A child rights-based, participatory educational process focusing on the individual child and the creation of an appropriate environment for his/her optimal development has to aim from the first day on the child's independent living, accompanying him/her to become a self-responsible, self-confident and active citizen with a realistic assessment of his/her social and professional reality. The SOS family-based child care model has found a number of its features to be of importance in that respect:

- **Being part of a family unit:** The security and stability provided by reliable relationships, belonging to a family setting and sibling bonds support a child's recovery from traumatic past experiences. It creates an environment that helps him/her develop a positive attitude, which is essential for further growth and development. The experience of uniqueness and individual attention within that family setting also contributes to the child's identity-building and self-esteem.
- **Participatory child and youth development planning:** From the day of admission, a future-oriented, regularly reviewed child development plan is laid out, focusing on the child's individual needs and capacities. It is individually followed-up on and in every stage of the process, the child is listened to and consulted, and takes part in decision making according to his/her evolving capacity. This includes drafting of an individual career plan taking into consideration the potential, talents and wishes of the child. Accurate and comprehensive documentation of development planning facilitates smooth accompaniment, periodic review and proper follow-up by all involved (teachers, social workers, psycho-social support staff, youth leader).
- **Attention to and support of a child's potential:** The child is encouraged to fully discover and develop his/her personal abilities and talents and he/she receives guidance in his/her chosen fields of work. This contributes to the development of self-confidence and self-reliance and later on facilitates career choices and ability for independent living.
- **Maintaining the link with the biological family:** it has proven favourable for the child's development that maintaining ties with his/her natural family where they exist, which is particularly crucial during adolescence for the development of a sound personal identity. Often, relatives have been supportive to the young person at a later stage of his/her social and professional integration.
- **Ongoing educational opportunities:** from kindergartens to schooling and vocational training, including non-formal education (see below).

## **A step by step process of supporting independent living**

Over time, SOS Children's Villages has developed a step-by-step process supporting the child/young person in care to become progressively independent. This process has been laid out in the "SOS Children's Villages Manual", a manual for quality assurance elaborated, endorsed and followed by all national member associations of SOS-Kinderdorf International. The transition from dependence to independence is planned deliberately and carefully.

- A young person moves out of the SOS family into a **youth facility** around the age of fourteen, depending on his/her personal situation and professional path. The youth maintains close ties with his/her SOS family. The youth facility provides focused individual attention on personal development and social skill building, preparation for independent living and self-reliance, educational training and career building. 10 to 18 young people live together in one home with a youth leader, who guides them in participatory self-management of their lives. They are involved in the management and administration of the youth facility. Decision-making in their day-to-day activities prepares them for life ahead.
- The later move to **semi-independent living** takes place when the youth enters a vocational/skills training or tertiary education.
- The stage of **full independent living** is normally reached after completion of a youth's education or vocational training or once he/she has found employment and is able to support himself/herself. When needed, decreasing financial support is provided. Aftercare is provided as long as individually necessary.
- Lack of employment, social insecurity and underemployment sometimes cause youth to fall back on the biological family and their resources such as land, property and income from business etc. This is often not possible for children in out-of-home care. Therefore, the youths who grew up under the care of SOS Children's Villages can apply for **head-start programmes** to assist them toward self-sufficiency. A range of programmes may be offered: income support, business start-up loans or educational scholarships.
- Some **housing support programmes** are also being developed, especially in CEE/CIS/Baltics. They provide a model of financial support for SOS youth in case they want to purchase or build a flat or house. One part of the amount is the youth's own money (heritage, money gifts, state subsidies...) and SOS Children's Villages complements this sum up to maximum 70 % of the total amount of the purchase. This sum is not to be paid back by the youth. For the rest of the sum, the youth uses his/her own savings and bank loans. Exceptionally, SOS can give a loan to a youth if the bank system is not functioning or housing loans are not common or affordable in the respective countries. SOS can also support the demand for a bank loan being a guarantee.

A step-by-step toward process independence cannot be based on age alone, but requires individualised solutions depending on a child's maturity, capacity and specific needs. Particular individualised attention needs to be given to young people with special needs, disabilities, health, psychological or social difficulties.

Enabling youth who left care to maintain a good relationship and contact with his/her SOS

family was found of crucial importance, sparing them the feeling of being cut off from previous relationships. Continued bonding, mutual visits and maintaining his/her “space” in the family house or the Village are essential and contribute to the feeling of trust, security and self-confidence.

Youth care workers are responsible for guiding the youth to independence. The following was found to be important:

- Recruitment and retention of skilled and experienced staff is imperative. Initial and on-going training programmes, adequate training, and empowerment are key elements to carefully guide the transition programmes and adequately deal with related challenges. Previous work experience in related fields such as teaching or social work was found useful.
- Youth leaders serve as role models for young people in the crucial age when their identity is formed. Both boys and girls benefit from guidance, attachment and friendship with youth leaders of the same sex in developing their own attitude and understanding of gender roles and gender identity, and to best meet their specific needs.
- High staff turn-over has proven counter-productive and is often linked to insufficient remuneration of staff and a lack of clear cut career opportunities.
- Too high a ratio between the youth leader and the number of youth he/she is in charge of can lead to a lack of attention, communication and participation possibilities for the youths. This can result in insufficient individual problem identification and neglect of emotions and desires. Psychological and emotional well-being plays a crucial role for educational and professional development.

The following documents and tools are at the disposal of the staff in the SOS Children’ Villages to support and facilitate youth transition and integration work: Youth Care Guidelines and Youth Development Plan, Quality Assurance for Youth Care, Youth Policy Career Guidance and Counselling instrument, Manuals on Family Education, Transition Education, Sexuality Education, and Comprehensive Educational Programme, Partnership Contract with Youth, “Working Journal for Youth” (self-assessment instruments) and various evaluation tools, etc.<sup>1</sup>

It was found important that staff and youth in the Villages have these documents available and accessible in their own language, and that they are carefully introduced to avoid misinterpretation and mishandling.

### **SOS Children’s Villages India: challenges of gender and marriage**

In India, children constitute more than 40 per cent of the population, an estimated 400 million (0-18 yrs)<sup>2</sup>. Some of the statistics on children in India are alarming, around 11.28 million children are engaged in child labour<sup>3</sup>, children are often trafficked for prostitution, labour etc. Youth literacy rate is 73.3% (2001)<sup>4</sup>. Young people from a disadvantaged background have

1 Report from the Central and West Africa Regional Youth Development Meeting, March 2005

2 UNICEF website

3 National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child development (2002) ‘Children in difficult circumstances, summaries of research’

4 Report of Task force on employment opportunities, Govt. of India, Planning commission, 2001.

little chance for professional integration. Youth employment pattern in SOS Children's Villages India reflects that most are engaged in technical and vocational trades, others work in the hospitality industry, sales, marketing and secretarial practices. Girls usually take up more traditional professions such as teaching, dress designing, beauty culture and nursing.

In India there are less than 93 women for every 100 men, the reason of such disparity is the practice of female infanticide prompted by the existence of the dowry system where the family pays out a large sum of money when a female child is married. Female adult literacy rate is 46.4% (2001) as compared to male adult literacy rate which is 69%. India's maternal mortality rates in rural areas are among the worlds highest. Maternal mortality ratio reported (per 100,000 live births) 1985-2001 is 540. The gender related development index rank 2001 is 103<sup>5</sup>.

For their specific cultural situation, girls continue to stay in their SOS Children's Village till they finish schooling. When they move out for studies or training, SOS Children's Villages provides special girls facilities in case student hostel accommodation is not available. They are protected and their growth and career building is supported in a learning environment.

In the Indian context the settlement of youth is very strongly linked to their marriage. As in society the parents are responsible for arranging the marriage of their children, the SOS Children's Villages also emulates the family in this regard and provides support and marriage counselling. In India marriages are equally a family affair as an individual affair. With marriage one gains increased social and financial security, acceptance into huge network of relations, one also gains property and other rights.

SOS Children's Villages India does nevertheless not follow the dowry system; and unlike in the traditional family system, girls have to be self-supportive after marriage and are encouraged to complete a good education. Marriages are performed according to the local customs and rituals with the partners' consent. So far, in India, over 900 marriages have been performed in SOS families. The marriages in SOS-India in most cases are successful, as it has created families with secure environment. There are reportedly very few cases of marital discord and divorce.

### **Formal and non-formal education**

At each stage there are formal or non-formal socio-educational programmes offered to promote development of talents and personality, such as social or sporting programmes (football, baseball, clubs, game teams, music and dance groups, cultural activities; excursions and exhibitions; remedial/extra classes, youth camps). Such activities should integrate the local community youth where possible, and are often done in cooperation with other organizations or local authorities. Personal development programmes include social skill building, communication, interpersonal relationship, resource management, attitudinal orientation. They aim at development of dynamism and autonomous decision-making; or support to the emotional and spiritual well-being of the youth as e.g. through *ashram* integration camps in India. Voluntary /community service programmes serve to support the development of social and humanitarian skills, the comprehension of social contexts, personal

and social skill-building, peace and solidarity education. They normally consist of supporting the social, health or educational services in the local community.

SOS Children's Villages also runs schools and vocational training centres, which are built in case there are insufficient public facilities catering for the educational development of children in care. These educational institutions are attended by both youth in SOS care and youth from the community, which also further promotes integration. For example, SOS Children's Villages offers advanced training or educational opportunities to young people in West- and Central Africa through the Arts and Music Secondary School Calavi in Benin; the Agricultural Training Institute Kara in Togo; the Technical Institute of Kigali in Rwanda (Computer studies, accounting, electrical, carpentry and joinery, masonry); the Hermann Gmeiner International College Tema, Ghana; and the Lycée SOS de Bujumbura, Burundi (Science, literary arts, management studies). Partnerships are also established with educational institutions and universities to obtain scholarships and grants for students.

In order to enable the youth in care to better benefit from special and advanced educational opportunities and studies, it is important:

- To stimulate learning interest and widen possibilities from an early age on, educational programmes and libraries should be a permanent component in out-of-home care facilities, and must be, as much as possible, a part of locally available services.
- To offer sufficient information and counselling on existing educational opportunities and related professional perspectives, database on available opportunities can be helpful.
- To cater for sufficient host structures in countries concerned in the cases of studies abroad.
- To support children in identifying their potentials and interests in courses offered and prepare them for admission
- To financially support the students

### **Professional integration in the labour market**

As in most countries, rising rates of youth unemployment make the labour market insertion a great challenge. Therefore, the support of SOS to integrate the youth professionally is important. An annual evaluation, classification and career orientation for each youth is conducted.

Internship places are found for the youths to enable them to acquire the necessary technical and managerial experience, or to support future employment and employability. Such programmes help them to get to know the labour market. Visits to production, business and service establishments are scheduled, and the youths are supported in working at those places during the summer holidays. Consultants and experts are invited to exchange and advice on proper career orientation.

Various support mechanisms help the youth in his/her employment search. One important avenue is the co-operation and close partnership of SOS Children's Villages with the corporate sector, institutions, agencies and organizations. Long standing relationships are established, direct meetings with leaders arranged and recruitment information is updated. Relatives of the young people have also proven to be supportive, by recruiting them directly, if they hold positions in enterprises, or by recommending them. Support from youths who

lived in the SOS Children's Villages is also helpful. They form a mutual assistance network, inform the other youths about upcoming opportunities in their companies, or even employ fellow youths after having created their own businesses.

A reasonable number of youths are self-employed after completing vocational training, and open their own businesses, such as tailor shops, fine art handicraft shops, bakeries, or civil electro-refrigeration repair shops. In some cases, with the help of initial seed money, entrepreneur ventures by youths have been supported.

Experience shows that special emphasis has to be given to training in social and communication skills. Due to their backgrounds, young people in care are often more insecure in their search for jobs, and lack self-confidence e.g. in employment interviews.

### **SOS Children's Villages Vietnam: support in professional insertion**

The total number of children in the care of SOS Children's Villages Vietnam amounts to 2,025. Among them, 111 youngsters are working and enjoying the semi-independent programme<sup>6</sup> and 118 youngsters are working and living independently. 230 young people who formerly lived in SOS families are working in different economic sectors; 70% in the private sector, 18% in textile and garment industries, 13% in restaurants and hotels, 8% as teachers, 7% in sale, 5% as mechanics, carpenters, electricians, bricklayers, etc. The majority is finishing a two-year training course at the vocational school and only a few are completing a university education.

The challenges faced when entering the labour market are increasing, as are requirements for professional qualifications and skills. The labour market offers little employment, as Vietnam's economy is making a transition from a subsidy to a market economy. The role of SOS Children's Villages' mutual supportive relations with potential employers is therefore crucial and the employment supply service of young people stem mainly from it. Direct contacts and exchange with enterprises are established on occasions such as Children's Day, Full Moon Festival or Lunar New Year.

Each SOS Children's Villages displays recruitment information and job advertisements on a board called "career orientation corner", fed by companies, media, visitors and relatives. The co-workers and teachers of SOS Children's Villages also play an important role in searching for work for youngsters and this makes up 28.4 % of employment. SOS Vietnam also offers the youths additional short-term training courses on carpentry, mechanics and electricity; and cooperates with employment training centres in big cities such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, where youth attend short-term employment training courses and are then recommended. These jobs are in the informal sector as cooks, house-maids, barbers and hairdressers, or make-up designers.

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<sup>6</sup> The semi-independent programme is a three -year transition process for youths to full community integration. A youth still receives support including food and clothing from the SOS Children's Village in his/her first three years of work. The SOS financial support is 100 per cent of food and clothing in the first year of work, two thirds of food and clothing in the second year and one third in the third year.

## **Social integration**

“Tracking Footprints<sup>7</sup>”, a study undertaken by the SOS Kinderdorf Hermann Gmeiner Academy, showed that the integration within the community functions usually extremely well. More than 60 % of the interviewees (around 700 young people who lived in SOS Children’s Villages families in 16 different countries) lived with a partner or were married. Half of the interviewees had one or two children. About 70 % of them described their living conditions as satisfactory.

## **General policy recommendations**

- For out-of-home care providers, it can be crucial to seek external financial assistance (e.g. for scholarships) and develop partnerships with other organisations, state agencies, academic institutions and the private sector in order to increase the chances of professional integration of the youths in their care.
- Education is a critical factor to integration. Quality education and vocational training are key elements to increase employability. Unlike the provision of basic education, that of secondary and professional education tackling the challenge of youth unemployment, are not yet given sufficient political attention.
- Schools often do not meet or sufficiently consider the needs of children in care, especially those with special requirements. Teachers often have bad working conditions, including low salaries and therefore little motivation, and are not sufficiently aware of the role they play in a child’s development. In-depth orientation/training and individual follow-up for teachers working with youths from out-of-home care is recommended.
- A number of governments show a real will to put national youth policies in place, through the creation and funding of respective ministerial departments. However, when it comes to implementing the defined strategies and plans, they are often not harmonious and take the priorities and the major problems of young people insufficiently into account.
- As the economic situation and formal job markets in many countries in Africa and Asia offer little employment chances for young people, early entrepreneurial training on job creation and small scale business management is crucial to support young people’s self-employment capacity.
- Aftercare concepts are often severely underdeveloped in out-of-home care and insufficient attention is given to the transition process of the young person. International guidelines on children without parental care should give adequate consideration to this point to clearly direct out-of-home care providers and policy makers in this respect.

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7 Pittracher B., Rudisch-Pfurtscheller A. „Tracking Footprints Outcome reports 2002 and 2003“, SOS Kinderdorf Hermann Gmeiner Akademie

- It can be noted that a certain percentage of children in out-of home care cannot go beyond basic education despite attempts, due to retarded development or childhood experiences. Not enough attention is currently being given to formulating strategies and developing support for their settlement and social support. An individual approach is required for youth with special needs. Specific efforts and programmes should be tailor made for these children and young people.

**For more information, contact the Liaison & Advocacy Office of SOS-Kinderdorf International: [lao@sos-kd.org](mailto:lao@sos-kd.org)**