

ADVANCING CHILD-CENTERED ACCOUNTABILITY: THE SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES OMBUDS MODEL

When 1,300 children and young people co-design their own protection mechanisms, what emerges?

At ISPCAN 2025 in Vilnius, I will present findings from our pioneering implementation of ombuds principles within humanitarian child protection, representing the first systematic adaptation of this accountability framework for international development contexts.

Our evidence-based model addresses a critical gap in child protection systems: the need for accessible, child-friendly mechanisms that complement formal safeguarding procedures without replacing them. Built on four fundamental ombuds principles— independence, impartiality, confidentiality, and informality, this approach represents a departure from organizational cultures dominated by formal systems. The emphasis on informality is particularly noteworthy, moving away from procedure-heavy safeguarding mechanisms that can intimidate children, instead creating welcoming processes that fundamentally shift power dynamics by positioning children and young people as active agents in their own protection.

Key innovations include:

- A hybrid implementation framework allowing organizations to establish internal ombuds functions or partner with existing State Ombuds institutions
- Genuine child participation throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation phases
- Integration of informal resolution mechanisms alongside formal child protection procedures
- Development of child-defined success metrics and feedback loops

Preliminary outcomes demonstrate significant impact: Children's insights function as early warning indicators, identifying systemic issues before they escalate into serious protection concerns. This preventive approach has led to measurable improvements in program quality and organizational responsiveness that traditional monitoring mechanisms had not captured.

The model's relevance extends beyond SOS Children's Villages operations. As child protection systems worldwide grapple with increasing complexity and scale, the principles underlying our ombuds approach offer practical tools for enhancing accountability, participation, and prevention across diverse humanitarian and development contexts.

For colleagues attending ISPCAN 2025: Our session will examine both implementation challenges and adaptation opportunities, providing concrete frameworks for organizations considering similar innovations. Given the conference setting in Vilnius – under the distinguished hosting of Lithuania's Ombudsperson for Child's Rights – we have a unique opportunity to explore how ombuds institutions can strengthen child protection ecosystems at multiple levels.

The evidence is clear: when children are given genuine agency in designing protection mechanisms, they create systems that are more effective, accessible, and responsive.

Join the discussion on scaling child-centered accountability mechanisms at ISPCAN 2025, October 6-9, Vilnius, Lithuania

Full Interview:

Interview questions to Pierre Cazenave, Global Ombuds at SOS Children's Villages International

• What exactly does a "Global Ombudsperson" do at SOS Children's Villages?

The Ombuds approach that SOS Children's Villages adopted is two-fold. Member Associations decide whether they would like to embrace an "organizational ombuds model" or a "classical ombuds model". While the latter essentially consists in a formal collaboration with state mechanisms (such as the office of a State Ombuds for Children or an independent Human and Child Rights Commission), the former is implemented by the Ombuds Office for SOS CV for whom I work. We discharge our function independently from the federation of SOS CV or any of its affiliated entities. The federation of SOS CV is a very complex umbrella organisation uniting more than 130 independent and autonomous national Member Associations across the world. The Ombuds Office for SOS CV mirrors this organisation through the placement of a National Ombuds in those countries who decided to collaborate with our office. Each National Ombuds is directly supervised (to protect the independence of their office at national level) by a Regional Ombuds. In my capacity of Global Ombuds, I provide

guidance and supervision to 5 Regional Ombuds (ROs). Within the boundaries of the mandate entrusted to us by SOS CV – and as is the case with any social innovations, the development of the Ombuds Office follows an iterative approach to the design, testing and refinement of our processes and standards of practice. I am privileged to spearhead these efforts in close collaboration with National and Regional Ombuds, SOS CV colleagues and, most importantly, together with children and young persons who have played and continue to play an instrumental role at all levels of development of the Office and the approach. More than 1500 children and young persons contributed directly to the design of our model, participate in the recruitment of all Ombuds [including myself] on an equal footing with adults, and are instrumental in the execution of the approach at national level. Bringing accountability to children to a level unmatched in other initiatives, National Ombuds and the Ombuds Approach will also be directly evaluated by children and young persons themselves.

I also directly receive inquiries from, and listen to, children and young persons to support them in identifying solutions to situations which they feel SOS CV cannot resolve to their satisfaction. This is as rewarding as it is challenging, since I mostly engage with children and young persons whose issues are either of a cross-border nature or are particularly complex.

• How does your role differ from other complaints bodies?

It is fundamentally different: as mentioned earlier, the Ombuds Office for SOS CV is following an “organizational ombuds approach” which is based on 4 principles which we cannot depart from: independence, impartiality, informality and confidentiality. The Ombuds Office is not mandated to act as an appeal mechanism, nor is it allowed to audit, investigate or formally review actions, omissions or decisions that might have compromised the well-being or safety of a child or young person. We act informally and help children, young persons or adults who have a concern, or a question related to the wellbeing and/or safety of a child to find solutions when and where formal protection and safeguarding mechanisms could not.

• What personally motivated you to become an ombudsperson?

I fundamentally believe that no matter how advanced, well-resourced or holistic a formal system is, there will always be individuals falling through the cracks. Those persons (adults and children alike) are invisible and are often faced with a wall, trying to cope with their challenging circumstances in a state of heightened vulnerability. Throughout my career, I have focussed on protecting vulnerable children from such loopholes in systems or practice (e.g. children on the move, children belonging to disenfranchised or

discriminated communities). I have witnessed how we as adults often fail children as we see the world from an adult-centric perspective with little regard or power shared with them.

When I read that SOS CV was creating an informal mechanism designed for and with children, and exclusively aimed at listening to them, I did not hesitate a second and took the jump. With no regrets so far.

• What challenges do you face most frequently?

One of our biggest challenge is to explain to professionals – who are used to formal processes – how we discharge our function through informal intervention. We know that the administration likes paperwork, and so do we as professionals. For example, in our everyday practice as organizational ombuds, we try to avoid as much as possible the use of written communication and privilege oral communication. This often clashes with an organizational culture whose functioning is entirely based on formal mechanisms.

• Is there a case (without any details) that has particularly moved or impacted you?

All children and young persons come with a different story and their unique perspective, and they are always moving. We find it particularly challenging to handle inquiries from children who attempted to take their own life or approach us with suicidal thoughts.

• How do you ensure that children and staff feel safe to speak up?

With time. We need time to build trust and we need to demonstrate that we are trustworthy. Children and young people have no reason to trust us, and we work hard with each MA to build this during the first year, trying to meet regularly all children and young persons serviced by the organization. This is particularly challenging in the context of our Family Strengthening Programmes.

Also, many stakeholders, internally and externally, are observing from far to see how the approach develops. We have to watch our every step and avoid making mistakes which can have serious consequences on how we are perceived. Perception is key in our work!

• How do you ensure the independence of ombuds persons?

Thanks to our Ombuds Board, which is composed of 7 experienced professionals with Ombuds background and/or child protection or child safeguarding expertise who are all external to SOS CV. The Ombuds Board could be described as the guardian of our independence at the top of a pyramidal governance model. We as ombuds report to them, instead of reporting to SOS CV leadership at either MA or SOS CVI level.

• How does your work contribute to the organisational development in child and youth safeguarding?

Through what we call *upward feedback*: we are trying to provide as much feedback as possible to the organization, sharing the observations from our work on the field with children and young people at both individual and organizational level. We bring “another pair of eyes” not only to our hard-working child and youth safeguarding colleagues, but also to those in charge of programmes. We have built in special spaces to provide this feedback to the leadership (without compromising confidentiality or any other of our fundamental principles of course) through quarterly meetings where we informally give an account of the work we did but also share our observations or facts as reported to us. It is up to the leadership to act on the feedback we give, we are not here to make recommendations of change or advocate for a particular issue.

• What motivates you every day?

The fact that in each country where a National Ombuds is in place for at least a year, we see that the number of children and young persons using our services is increasing steadily. It shows us that not only trust with children and young persons is being built, but also that our service is considered useful by them.

• How do you manage to maintain your personal balance when dealing with such stressful issues?

Whenever the pressure at work is growing and that the entire world around us seem to accelerate, I just... slow down.

• What values are most important to you personally in your role?

Courage and integrity.

August 2025

Pierre Cazenave, Global Ombuds at SOS Children's Villages International