



Research – A Quality Criterion of SOS Children's Villages

Position paper of the institutes



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„A global network like SOS Children’s Villages can only maintain its vitality and dynamism if it continually attempts to adapt to changing social conditions and to accept new challenges in the best interests of the child. By means of this on-going process of adapting to the most different social realities in the world, the work of SOS Children’s Villages will continue to bring about specific developments in the facilities and services we offer.”

Hermann Gmeiner

SOS Children’s Villages is a non-governmental, non-party, non-confessional and international social organisation for children, youths and families. SOS Children’s Villages runs 423 Children’s Villages and over 1,000 other facilities and services in 131 countries: youth facilities and other forms of youth welfare services, child day-care centres, schools, training and employment centres, residences for people with special needs, medical centres, ambulant and flexible services, counselling services, social centres, mother and family centres.

Research is a quality criterion of SOS Children’s Villages because it significantly contributes towards a constructive evaluation of our professional actions, supports creative thinking and learning processes in the organisation and enhances its potential for change.

Preamble

In 2003, with the establishment of the Strategic Plan, research was firmly anchored as one of the international fields of activity of SOS Children's Villages (Strategic Initiative 7: "Research"). Thereby research, together with other initiatives on issues such as human resources development or international relationships and partnership, was assigned a central role in the strategic development of the organisation. By carrying out research within the framework of acknowledged scientific standards, the organisation aims to gain substantial results and to introduce a cross-national exchange of experience. Furthermore, research processes contribute to a determined further development of the SOS Children's Villages work in the best interests of children and youths and in the spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. To this end, the aim is to establish a research culture orientated towards the needs of children and youths in their different socio-cultural contexts and specific living conditions.

Within the framework of this strategic initiative, the research team of the Hermann Gmeiner Academy and the socio-educational institutes of the German and Austrian SOS Children's Village associations established a research platform in 2002. They have developed a common understanding of research and regularly exchange information on planned research ventures, current projects and results, research questions and methods as well as standards and quality factors.

The Research Strategic Initiative encompasses the fields of research, evaluation and information systematisation. The position paper at hand focuses on research and provides a framework of criteria for the quality of research projects. All research projects are to be integrated into this framework and evaluated accordingly. The corresponding positions for the fields of evaluation and information systematisation yet have to be planned in detail.

Research objectives at SOS Children's Villages

Research at SOS Children's Villages contributes to improving the living conditions and the prospects of socially disadvantaged children, youths and families. The central point of reference for this undertaking are the rights of children as established in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Research at SOS Children's Villages is above all directed towards those children, youths and families who enlist the assistance of social services, in particular of child and youth care and youth welfare services. Within this process, all research activities consistently aim to serve the best interests of and to derive maximum benefit for the persons concerned and explicitly include their views.

All research activities aim at continuously improving the quality of SOS Children's Village services. To this end, new research results are integrated into the facility and organisational discourses, thereby contributing to the further development of concrete practices.

Since the research results are realised within the context of international child and youth care research, they also enrich the relevant specialist discourse. Thus, research at SOS Children's Villages not only serves intraorganisational objectives but furthermore makes a valuable contribution to the development of psycho-social work, its theories and general conditions.

All in all, well-founded research supports SOS Children's Villages in positioning itself as a professionally qualified service for socially disadvantaged children and youths, above all.

The understanding of research at SOS Children's Villages

For us, research at SOS Children's Villages is a systematic search orientated towards the organisational work fields and the practice of social work, the results of this search supporting the further development of professional ways of acting in social work.

Research at SOS Children's Villages, as a socio-scientific research into practice, is orientated towards practical implementation. It operates in the area of conflict between result-oriented research and implementation-oriented practice with their different frameworks of reference and needs. On the one hand it refers to theoretical socio-scientific approaches and on the other to the practical discourses of social work.

Practical research is reflective research. It operates on the basis of questions arising from real life situations, develops new questions in dialogue with the practitioners and gives its results back into day-to-day practice. According to the concept of practical research any research process thus directly influences a particular real life situation.

Practical research is under particular obligation to the beneficiaries of social work. Their viewpoints and experiences are a central aspect of consideration in practice-orientated research. Research methods are chosen with the objective of finding an adequate means of integrating all the people involved in the research process as specialists in their own right.

Consequently, practical research unites the views of the persons involved with those of the institutional logic, of the social and cultural conditions for social behaviour and of social work. Social inequalities resulting from gender group or migration background, for example, are addressed explicitly in the interpretation of individual and social realities.

The paradigms, theories and spectrum of methods of social science form the basis of practical research. It rests upon a solid quantitative data base combined with concepts of qualitative social research. Practical research follows the principle of multi-disciplinarity and incorporates the discourses of educational science, social psychology and sociology as its scientific points of reference. The complex field of social work demands a multi-perspective approach.

Practical research at SOS Children's Villages is an independent field of action at the interface between science and practice systems. Issues such as organisational and quality development and the involved assessment processes such as evaluation, legitimisation or reflective practice approaches each represent individual fields of action which can, however, cooperate adequately with research. The designers of new projects always thoroughly reflect on their classification and on the interdependencies and synergies that can arise and be benefited from.

Practical research at SOS Children's Villages takes into account the concerns of the affected persons, the coordination among the social sciences and the interests of the organisation. Within this area of conflict our researchers act with critical loyalty towards SOS Children's Villages. Furthermore, they take a critical look at politically effective attitudes and norms and their interdependencies with the practice of social work. This socio-political commitment is expressed in our research publications.

Quality factors of research at SOS Children's Villages

With regard to the formulation of questions and the methods of data acquisition and usage, we adhere to the quality standards of socio-scientific research, the principles of scientific honesty and to ethical premises which we, in particular, express in our attitude towards the persons involved in the research process. We perceive them as experts on their lives and professional practice and, in a respectful way which considers the principle of informed agreement in the research process, ask them for their subjective viewpoints. We make the objectives and application context of the research projects transparent for everyone involved and inform them on the voluntary character of their participation. We furthermore commit ourselves to dealing carefully with data in accordance with the data protection laws in order to protect personal rights.

Practical research is self-reflective research. The development and processing of knowledge in this field takes place within social processes which demand ethical considerations and decisions at all stages. The researchers are aware of the resulting special responsibility. They also know that they approach the practice on the basis of theories and from a specialist viewpoint and that this has implications for both the research and the practice process. They anticipate as best they can chances and risks for individuals, groups and organisations that can arise from research processes and the utilisation of their results. These chances and risks are communicated openly to encourage everyone involved to comprehensively assess the undertaking and to avoid unfavourable consequences.

Practical research is committed research. The transfer of the knowledge gained and the practical implementation of results are of central concern; the feedback to the people involved is an integral part of the projects. By adequately communicating their results, the researchers invite those involved on the practical side

as well as the decision makers to develop their own interpretations and to continuously review the situation with the aim of constantly improving their ways of acting in the best interests of the children, youths and families concerned. In the researcher's understanding, the practical implementation of research results is a negotiation process. In the course of this process the people involved can rearrange their interests by means of the perspectives gained during the research process and communicated to them, thereby becoming open for new solutions.

The research process is furthermore influenced by the attitudes and norms of the researchers as it reflects their socialisation experiences, positions and role understanding regarding gender and the profession.

The design and realisation of research projects as well as the generation of results is to be comprehensible for outsiders. The research process and its results are documented and made available for internal and external specialist discourse. We choose our research approaches, methods, resources and means of implementation so as to assure that they correspond to the field of research and the research objective.

In order to guarantee our research quality, we put accordingly qualified social scientists in charge of designing, carrying out and evaluating the projects. If a research project is carried out by practitioners, the necessary reflection spaces outside the practice concerned are established. Adequate resources are always a prerequisite for high-quality research.

The research institutes participating in the research platform operate within one umbrella organisation and investigate the organisation-specific practice. They aim at establishing project-oriented co-operation with other social work organisations and facilities,

research institutions and individual researchers, in order to ensure a critical loyalty which is adequate for both the socio-scientific discourse and the SOS Children's Villages context.

Socio-Educational Institute of SOS-Kinderdorf e.V. Germany

The Socio-Educational Institute forms part of the Human Resources & Educational Science area of operations of SOS-Kinderdorf e.V. Germany and carries out socio-scientific and counselling work. Its main fields of work are publications, events, research into practice projects and projects on strategic associational development. One of the tasks of the institute is to propose for discussion the practice of SOS facilities in the context of current youth welfare and socio-political developments and to carry out research projects on selected questions.

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Socio-Educational Institute, SOS Children's Village Austria

The Socio-Educational Institute is part of the Department of Educational Science of the Austrian SOS Children's Village Association. Since 2004, the Socio-Educational Institute has been working in the fields of research co-ordination and co-operation and socio-scientific practical research. The main focus of the institute is on promoting discourse and exchange between socio-scientific research and educational practice, supporting the development of the practice and participating in the development of the professional discourse on youth welfare issues.

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Hermann Gmeiner Academy Innsbruck

The Hermann Gmeiner Academy is an independent association and, in its function as a meeting and convention centre, is a place of intercultural encounter and specialist exchange. It supports the educational work in the SOS Children's Village facilities world-wide by focusing on analysing and further developing the SOS idea. It is also involved in assuring the quality of SOS work and is responsible for training programmes, advice and research activities.

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