

CHILD PROTECTION POLICY

The child we care for today will care for their country tomorrow

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1. INTRODUCTION

a. COTM's vision of the child and the human person

Since 1958, the aim of Children of the Mekong has been to help children in Southeast Asia.

Our vision is that the dignity of children and families living in extreme poverty must be recognized, and their needs met.

Our mission is to enable very poor children to escape poverty through education: to educate, train and support children and young people, enabling them to improve their material living conditions and build themselves intellectually, emotionally and morally. Since 2010, COTM has been working with local players to develop a holistic approach to personal development based on 3 pillars: building oneself, opening up to the world and getting involved in society.

In the values promoted by COTM, the child and every human being must be respected, whatever their condition, culture or religion.

COTM is fundamentally a work of education, and therefore particularly sensitive to the issue of child protection.

The reference document to which COTM unreservedly adheres is the **International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**, signed by 195 countries in 1989.

We would like to emphasize the importance of article 3 of this convention:

"In all decisions concerning children, the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration.

b. Scope of application

Anyone working with children needs to pay special attention to them.

COTM as an institution and all COTM stakeholders must recognize the risks to children, assume responsibility for protecting them from abuse and exploitation, behave with professionalism and integrity at all times, and act in the best interests of the child at all times.

This policy therefore aims to protect children from any abuse or maltreatment committed intentionally or unintentionally against them. This policy applies to COTM as an institution, and to any person collaborating with COTM, i.e. :

- COTM Directors
- Any person holding a fixed-term or open-ended employment contract with COTM.
- Anyone holding a VSI contract with COTM (overseas volunteers called Bamboos)
- Volunteers and interns in France and Asia
- COTM partner organizations
- Service providers, in particular those who may come into contact with children
- Anyone who may come into contact with the children, especially sponsors and donors.

For people under COTM's responsibility (directors, people with an employment contract or a VSI contract with COTM, volunteers, trainees, or anyone invited to COTM's premises or programs), this policy applies in all situations, professional or otherwise, on or off company time.

c. Definitions

Child

A child is defined as any human being under the age of 18, unless national law provides for an earlier age of majority (article 1^{er} of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Child abuse

Child abuse is a generic term that includes all forms of physical or emotional maltreatment, including sexual abuse, neglect or exploitation involving potential or actual harm to a child's health, survival, development or dignity, particularly in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.

Physical abuse

This refers to actual or suspected physical abuse, or a failure to prevent physical violence or suffering by a child.

Emotional abuse:

Emotional abuse includes verbal abuse, discrimination, neglect and psychological maltreatment. It refers to the real or supposed harmful effects on a child's emotional development or behavior caused by repeated or severe mistreatment or rejection.

Sexual abuse

This refers to any physical intrusion of a sexual nature committed by force, under duress or through an unequal relationship, or the threat of such an intrusion.

Neglect

Neglect is any act, intentional or not, by omission or inadequacy, which compromises the health, safety and development of the child, taking into account the context, resources and circumstances. It refers to the sustained inability to meet the child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, which is likely to result in serious impairment of the child's physical and cognitive development.

Moral harassment

Moral harassment occurs when a person's repeated actions undermine a person's rights and dignity, resulting in consequences for their physical or mental health and potentially compromising their professional or personal future.

Child labor

Child labor is governed by the 1973 International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 138, which sets several age limits, including the following:

- The -minimum age for admission to employment or work must not be lower than the age at which compulsory schooling ends, and in any case not lower than 15.
- This minimum age must not be lower than 18 for employment or work which, by its nature or the conditions in which it is carried out, is likely to compromise the health, safety or morals of children. This age limit may be raised to 16 if the health, safety and morals of the adolescents concerned are fully guaranteed, and if they have received specific and adequate instruction or training in the relevant branch of activity.
- Light work: this refers to a child's participation in an occasional paid activity that does not affect his or her health or development, and does not interfere with his or her schooling or vocational training. Under-12s are not allowed to take part in light work (ILO convention 138).

2. ABUSE PREVENTION

1. General principles

As mentioned above, COTM is committed to the principles of the 1989 International Convention on the Rights of the Child (ICRC), including its optional protocols:

- All children have the right to protection from abuse and exploitation.
- All adults have a responsibility to support and protect children, and must act with the child's best interests in mind.
- Organizations have a duty of care towards the children they, or their representatives, come into contact with in the course of carrying out their activities. They must do their utmost to provide children with the support they need and contribute to a protective environment.

COTM is committed to children's rights and reaffirms its pledge to combat child abuse.

A code of conduct sets out the expected behaviors and practices that constitute the minimum standards for the organization of COTM's action, as well as the actions to be avoided. It constitutes paragraph 7 of the present Charter.

COTM encourages the creation, within its programs, of spaces/times reserved for children to enable them to raise issues relating to their safety.

2. Risk awareness and prevention

i. Risk awareness

1. Raising awareness

COTM ensures that any person collaborating with it is informed of the existence and content of the child protection policy, in particular the following documents:

- COTM child protection charter, including code of conduct
 - o Reference is made to this charter in all employment and volunteer contracts, and the signatory acknowledges having read it.
- Youth protection policy, documents specific to our countries of action, where we have children in our care in COTM centers and homes.
 - o These documents adapt COTM's general child protection charter to the realities of the country, and serve as a local reference.
 - o These documents include a code of conduct.

- Reference is made to these documents in all employment or volunteer contracts, of which the signatory working in the country certifies having taken cognizance.
- Sponsor's visit charter to sponsored child
 - The initial file received by each sponsor when the sponsorship is set up includes the sponsor's charter for visiting the sponsored child.
 - This charter stipulates in particular that at no time may a sponsor be alone with a sponsored child, and that any meeting must take place in the presence of the program manager, a member of his or her team, or a Bamboo volunteer.

2. Raising awareness among families

- Children of the Mekong mainly supports children living with their families. Parents are primarily responsible for their children.
- Through sponsorship program managers and social workers, COTM's role is as far as possible to raise parents' awareness of family abuse prevention through training and advice.

3. Raising awareness of the use of children's images in any digital medium or device

Author in 2015 of a Manifesto for useful, original, positive and beautiful information, Children of the Mekong is particularly attached to quality information about its action, absolutely respectful of children's dignity.

A great deal of attention is therefore paid to visual content and its distribution, and COTM's various stakeholders are regularly made aware of this, with the following recommendations:

- Information, no matter how tragic, can always free itself from misery and prefer joy. It is therefore out of the question to use photos or films of children in a miserabilistic way that does not respect their dignity.
- When photos or videos are taken or published, with the appropriate prior authorization, the author must systematically ensure that the children are not posed in a degrading manner or in a way that could carry a sexual connotation, or dressed inappropriately for the situation in which they are depicted.
- Under no circumstances may anyone involved with COTM watch, produce, publish or share pornographic material featuring children (and adults), and/or show such material to children.
- All parties involved must systematically ensure that all audio, written or visual communications respect the dignity and human rights of the person represented (including anonymity where necessary, and for all children), and do not expose them to any risk of reprisal or abuse of any kind.

4. Raising awareness of child trafficking

With a deep and fundamental vision of the absolute dignity of the child, and in application of the three articles of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child:

-Article 3:

- *In all decisions concerning children, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration.*

-Article 7:

- *The child is registered as soon as he or she is born, and from that moment has the right to a name, the right to acquire a nationality, and as far as possible, the right to know and be raised by his or her parents.*

-Article 35:

- *States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to prevent the abduction of, the sale of or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form.*

Children of the Mekong is particularly sensitive to all forms of child trafficking, be it abduction, organ trafficking, prostitution, sex tourism or any other form of trafficking that endangers children or takes them out of their natural environment.

In the interests of young women and unborn children, Children of the Mekong pays particular attention to the issue of surrogate motherhood. Indeed, the first victims are potentially young women from very poor backgrounds forced against their will to carry babies for third parties from rich countries. With more than half of our sponsored children being girls, COTM is working to give them the chance of a dignified and free life. We are therefore justified in protecting them from trafficking, and in discouraging, in the spirit of the three aforementioned articles, the "manufacture" of babies, the objects of such trafficking.

ii. Risk prevention

1. Recruitment

Children of the Mekong pays particular attention to recruiting its collaborators (directors, salaried employees in France and Asia, Bamboos volunteers and voluntary workers).

The following measures are systematically taken for staff who come into contact with children:

- The hiring of an employee is preceded by three interviews
 - With the HR manager concerned by the hiring
 - With operational N+1
 - With the COTM head office CEO or General Manager, or the Country Manager or his/her deputy when the hiring concerns one of our countries of operation.
- Recruiting a Bamboo volunteer
 - is preceded by three interviews at COTM headquarters:
 - With the volunteer manager or his/her deputy

- With a psychologist
 - With COTM deputy general manager
 - Group discernment day for all candidates pre-selected, complementary individual interviews, particularly in the area of behavior.
 - Is confirmed by the signing of the volunteer contract, which takes place at the end of the week's training before the assignment.
- Recruiting a volunteer
- At COTM's head office, the process is the same as for hiring an employee.
 - In our countries of action, is the subject of several in-depth meetings with Bamboo volunteers and is based on the recommendations of the current network of volunteers.
- During interviews, particular emphasis is placed on COTM's vocation to help children escape extreme poverty, and to help them grow up through education, responsibility and confidence, so that as adults they can lead dignified and free lives. Particular attention is therefore paid to the candidates' motivation, thoughts and experience on these subjects.
- *A fortiori* when people do not come to COTM on referral, we systematically ask for the contact details of referees, preferably other than professional referees, who know the person in particular through their associative commitments and experiences that have previously brought them into contact with children.
- As mentioned above, by signing their contract, recruited candidates (employees, volunteers or voluntary workers) certify that they have read the child protection policy and code of conduct applicable to them (headquarters and/or country of action).

2. Prevention for sponsors and donors

The first principle of child protection with our sponsors and donors is that at no time may a sponsor or donor be with a sponsored child or a child supported by COTM without the presence of an COTM representative.

As mentioned above, a folder is sent to each new sponsor at the start of the sponsorship. It contains the sponsor's Visiting Charter for the sponsored child, which specifies:

- The duration of the visit, which must not exceed half a day.
- That this visit is made in the presence of an COTM manager, close to the sponsored child's usual place of residence.
- That any gift to the sponsored child must be proportionate, appropriate and brought to the attention of the accompanying COTM representative.
- The best visit a sponsor can make to a sponsored child is when he or she visits the sponsored child's family, to showcase the family's role in the child's education.

The second principle is that there must be no Internet link between a sponsor and sponsored child as long as the latter is a minor:

- The sponsor receives a special information pack at the start of the sponsorship.
- Our partners, volunteers and local employees also make the sponsored child aware of the need to avoid any attempt to contact the sponsor by e-mail or any other social network.

The third principle concerns the epistolary relationship between sponsor and sponsored child. Risk prevention is achieved through the following elements:

- The majority of sponsored children live with their families, so parents can monitor the mail received by their children.
- For those living in foster homes, the foster carer can carry out the same check.
- Finally, the vast majority of mail sent to sponsored children, and from sponsored children to sponsors, passes *through* translation committees, which check the mail.

3. Partner organizations

In all the countries where it operates, COTM works with local partners. These include the following structures:

- Institutional structures (Ministry of Education, Social Affairs, etc.)
- Religious structures (dioceses, religious congregations, Caritas, etc.)
- Foundations or associations under international law
- Foundations or associations under local law
- Public or private schools
-

COTM constantly assesses the trust it can place in its partners through the presence of bamboos in the field and regular visits by permanent staff. The means used are :

- Program visits
- Local networking
- Discussions on child protection policy
- Interviews with sponsored children and their families
- ...

3. WARNING PROCEDURE IN THE EVENT OF NON-COMPLIANCE WITH CHILD PROTECTION POLICY

To ensure that all Children of the Mekong stakeholders are aware that any suspicions or reports of abuse or negligence will be followed up and dealt with, an alert procedure has been put in place and made known to all stakeholders. The purpose of this procedure is to define in detail the mechanisms for transmitting and handling alerts.

It can be found in the TEAMS file entitled "Alert, incident, crisis management and child protection procedures". This file is communicated in full to country managers, who act as coordinators in the event of an alert. It records the history of alerts triggered.

Its purpose is to define in detail the mechanisms for transmitting and processing the various alerts.

Country managers are responsible for distributing this procedure to COTM staff who may be called upon to trigger an alert.

It is updated annually by the Action Asia Director and his team.

Summary of the main points of the procedure:

- Contacts for alert escalation must be defined and published regularly. They must be able to deal with all possible situations.
- All alerts must be indexed to ensure traceability. The parts associated with the alert are identified by their directory number.
- Lines of escalation must be clearly defined, as must the decision-making framework for handling alerts.
- Temporary disciplinary measures that may be taken during the investigation are defined within the legal limits (temporary layoff, etc.). A framework is also specified in the case of partners.
- Any disciplinary sanctions that may be necessary after the alert has been dealt with must be appropriate to the seriousness of the misconduct and in accordance with the applicable laws. In all cases, COTM cooperates with and informs the local authorities. COTM does not interfere with local legislation.
- The procedure defines the measures to be taken in the event of a false, malicious or insulting report made against a member of the association.

4. PRIVACY

Respect for confidentiality prevails in all matters relating to this policy.

This means that no information reported by children and/or others about any form of child abuse should be made public without the prior approval of the child/parent/legal guardian and/or the person who reported it.

Children of the Mekong ensures that the children concerned (and their families) are kept informed of the process put in place to manage the incident and its consequences.

Children of the Mekong's alert policy therefore also defines the mechanisms for archiving and confidentiality of alerts within the following framework:

- Suspicious, allegations or disclosures are recorded in writing. Reports are as precise as possible, and must contain an accurate account of the facts, their chronology and the measures taken.
- Reports are stored in a protected area (physical and/or electronic) with clearly defined access authorizations, under the control of the association's head office.
- Any transfer of information (verbal, written in hard copy or electronically) must respect confidentiality.
- The management of confidentiality in the event that the accusation concerns a member of another organization is defined.
 - Privacy management complies with local legislation.
 - Access to COTM's Salesforce database is managed by login and password.
It is limited to users who need it, by profession and geographical area.

5. REFERENCE DOCUMENTS

	Documents	Training
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alert procedure - Incident procedure - Code of ethics - Document unique d'évaluation des risques professionnels 	
Cambodia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internal regulations - HR Policy - Youth protection policy 	
COTM Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth protection policy - HR policy - Manual of operations 	
Employees		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - France: Regular training and information workshops - Asia: annual workshops and training courses
Bamboos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bamboo volunteer charter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mandatory pre-departure training for VSIs, including presentation of this charter and the incident procedure - Mid-term interviews
Local managers		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regular workshops and training courses (every one or two years) - Educator training
Families		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parent training
Delegations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Volunteer Charter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Annual training course: "Family reunion"
Sponsors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sponsored child visiting charter - Ambassador Charter 	

6. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

This policy and its implementation are monitored on an ongoing basis.

The Director of Action Asia, in liaison with the Director of Personnel, the Asia Operations Director based in Bangkok and the country managers, is responsible for disseminating information concerning this policy and its implementation, as well as monitoring abuse-related issues within the Children of the Mekong network.

He is also responsible for ensuring the consistency of all documents relating to child protection, particularly between head office and the various countries.