South Africa, 28 May 2012

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**SOS Children’s Villages**

**Children’s Rights Still Trampled On Despite One of Best Charters in South Africa**

***Statistics of abandonment, abuse and poverty among SA’s Children a National Shame***

A few short weeks ago South Africans and indeed the international community were sickened by the gang rape of a young girl in Soweto. Had it not been for the fact that the evil attack went viral on social networks, we are left wondering whether this young child would ever have been saved from a sickening and inhumane situation. Would her family, her community continue to turn a blind eye? Reports concluded that this was not the first time that the young girl had endured this horror.

Just days later, sickening reports followed of a day-old baby, still alive, found abandoned by a vagrant in a rubbish bag. Cases of child abandonment seem to be the new South African way – not taking responsibility for our actions and at the same time, committing one of the most heinous, most cruel, most selfish acts against a defenceless baby, a child - a soul entrusted to us to be cared for, loved and adored and yet we treat that baby with the same contempt as a discarded sweet wrapper. We have to ask ourselves what kind of a society we are living in when a well-known radio DJ goes on air to publicly thank his mother for not abandoning him when he was a baby.

During Child Protection Week from 28 May to 3 June 2012, SOS Children’s Villages will be drawing attention to the plight of South Africa’s vulnerable children with the hope of entrenching a culture of action and accountability for children’s rights that lasts long after Child Protection Week has passed. 2012 marks the 30th anniversary of the SOS Children’s Villages which have been providing loving homes for abandoned and orphaned children and implementing Family Strengthening programmes within impoverished communities to ensure children don’t fall from their family safety net in the first place.

“South Africans are in a state of deep denial when it comes to the crisis facing our most vulnerable children living in dire poverty, often in situations of sexual and physical abuse, and of utter neglect and hopelessness. Added to this we have the burden of HIV Aids – the culmination of which is tearing apart family structures and leaving our most vulnerable children exposed and devastated. As much as these reports are enough to wrench tears from even the hardest of people, the angst seems short lived as we go about returning to the activities of our daily lives soon afterwards. You have to ask if this is a coping mechanism...or simply detachment from the realities of our society?” asks Siphiwe Maphanga, National Director of SOS Children’s Villages South Africa.

The concerns of SOS Children’s Villages are underpinned by a damning report by the United Nations, *State of the World’s Children 2012,* with research showing that more than 50% of South African’s children lived under the dollar-a-day international poverty line in 2008. Four years later in 2012, that figure has escalated to two thirds of South Africa’s 19 million children living in poverty. Many of these children live in homes with single, unemployed, chronically ill, elderly parents or caregivers. Adding to this is South Africa’s burden of disease, poor service delivery and high unemployment rates. These factors all contribute to denying children in poor communities their basic rights.

“The reality for the vast majority of these children is that they will be forced into dangerous, abusive and exploitative situations as they try to eke out a semblance of a living. Losing a parent is devastating enough, yet many of these children will fall into the traps of being cared for by distant relatives who neglect and abuse them, and who squander their child grants on anything barring food and proper care for the child.

“Child labour and child prostitution are realities for these children as they have to exhaust all resources in order to feed and clothe themselves. They often have to endure abusive family environments with parents or relatives who are either not fully involved or are dependent on alcohol or drugs,” says Siphiwe.

According to the UN report an estimated 850 000 South African children are involved in some form of child labour. An estimated 120 000 children live in child-headed households. South Africa also has the world’s highest child mortality rates – in 2010, 58 000 children died before their fifth birthday and around 50 000 children were victims of violent crime. In 2010, 1.9 million children lived in informal dwellings. The poor state of our public education system is further seriously compromising our children. Many will be born and remain illiterate and their births will go unregistered, with them falling between the cracks of bureaucracy and remaining unaccounted for.

“South Africa currently faces many challenges – attacks on our hard-earned democracy, corruption, crime, political and security instability and more. By far the one we should be most concerned about is the 11.4 million children who are living in extreme conditions of poverty, abuse and neglect. If South Africa does not muster the political and social will to tackle this problem in a serious, concerted and consistent manner, the implications and consequences for our country – socially and economically – are going to be dire,” warns Siphiwe.

SOS Children’s Villages along with a number of other organisations, individuals and sponsors are vocal in the fight to protect children’s rights and care for abandoned and orphaned children. “However, compared with the crisis we are facing, it’s a drop in the ocean and budgets are simply nowhere near what is needed. We need much greater political and business will to pull our efforts together and make a real impact in an impending crisis in so far as our vulnerable children are concerned,” says Siphiwe.

“As a nation, we mustered up the will and the action to take the e-tolling issue to court. We raised millions of Rands to fight court battles and won. We demonstrated until our voices were heard. And yet, when our children are abused, raped and abandoned, when 11.4 million of our children live in conditions not fit for a human being, we stay silent. Is it not time for us to as a nation to stand together to fight for our children’s rights, to stand up for the weak and oppressed, and give a voice to the poorest of the poor in society? If we fail to do this, the implications for us all will be much, much more than a R550 capped monthly toll fee,” concludes Siphiwe.

[SOS Children’s Villages](http://www.sosvillages.co.za) take action for children as an independent non-governmental social development organisation. We respect varying religions and cultures, and we work in communities where our mission can contribute to development. We work in the spirit of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](http://www.sosvillages.org.za/about-us/united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child-summary) and we promote these rights around the world. SOS Children’s Villages is the only independent organisation that has observer status with the United Nations, advising governments and bodies on children’s rights and issues.

Make Child Protection and Children’s rights your priority every day. To support SOS Children’s Villages go to [www.sosvillages.org.za](http://www.sosvillages.org.za)

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**Background for Media about SOS Children’s Villages**

Thirty years ago, the first SOS Village was built in Ennerdale, south of Johannesburg based on the original model founded by Hermann Gmeiner, the founding father of the SOS Children’s Villages. Having experienced the horrors of war himself as a soldier in Russia, Hermann Gmeiner was then confronted with the isolation and suffering of the many war orphans and homeless children as a child welfare worker after the end of the Second World War. In his unswerving conviction that help can never be effective as long as the children have to grow up without a home of their own, he set about implementing his idea for SOS Children's Villages.

With just 600 Austrian Schillings (approx. 40 US Dollars) in his pocket, Hermann Gmeiner established the SOS Children's Village Association in 1949, and in the same year the foundation stone was laid for the first SOS Children's Village in Imst, in the Austrian Tyrol. His work with the children and the development of the SOS Children's Village organisation kept Hermann Gmeiner so busy that he finally decided to discontinue his medical degree studies.

In the following decades his life was inseparably linked with his commitment to a family-based care concept with the four pillars of a mother, a house, brothers and sisters, and a village. Given his exclusive focus on the need to help abandoned children, the rest of his biography reads like the history of SOS Children's Villages themselves. He served as village director in Imst, organised the construction of further SOS Children's Villages in Austria, and helped to set up SOS Children's Villages in many other countries in Europe. In 1960, SOS Children's Villages International was established in Strasbourg as the umbrella organisation for SOS Children's Villages with Hermann Gmeiner as the first president.

In the following years the activities of SOS Children's Villages spread beyond Europe. The sensational "grain of rice" campaign raised enough funds to permit the first non-European SOS Children's Village to be built in Daegu, South Korea in 1963. SOS Children's Villages on the American and African continents followed.

In recognition of his services to orphaned and abandoned children he received numerous awards. However, he was always at pains to stress that it was only thanks to the support of millions of people that it had been possible to achieve the goal of providing abandoned children with a permanent home, and that still applies today. Hermann Gmeiner died in Innsbruck, Austria, in 1986. He is buried at the SOS Children's Village in Imst.

Today, his legacy lives on and there are 539 villages in 133 countries. In South Africa, the SOS Children’s Villages concept was established and registered in 1982, with the first village built in 1983 in Ennerdale. This was followed by seven more in Mamelodi, Port Elizabeth, Cape Town, Pietermartizburg, Mthatha, Nelspruit and Rustenburg. In addition to the village concept, the growing orphan crisis in Southern Africa, largely attributed to the HIV & AIDS pandemic, saw the establishment of the SOS Family Strengthening Programme. SOS realised that there was a need to expand beyond its children's village operations to prevent children from becoming orphaned and abandoned, and falling out of the family environment. SOS responded by developing community-based family strengthening programmes, which provide support to families caring for orphans and vulnerable children, with the aim of keeping these children in their families and communities of origin.

**Interview Opportunities**

If you are interested in interviewing Siphiwe Maphanga, National Director of SOS Children’s Villages South Africa, please contact Kirby Louis on (011) 894 2767 or [Kirby@tscommunications.co.za](mailto:Kirby@tscommunications.co.za) to make the necessary arrangements.

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