

# SAFEGUARDING IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

## BRIEFING PAPER

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Key findings for policy and practice from the review</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Key principles</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Good practice guidance</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Suggestions to evaluate change</b>	<b>8</b>

## Introduction

Following significant concerns about safeguarding practice and responses in the international development and humanitarian NGO sector, there has been an intensified focus on prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH). International donors have imposed conditions on funding to ensure that safeguarding issues are taken seriously by recipients. The UK's Department for International Development responded by undertaking considerable work on reform across the aid sector, including the introduction of new 'due diligence' safeguarding requirements for all suppliers in June 2018. In October 2018, UK funders of international development research issued a joint statement affirming their commitment to safeguarding ([UKCDR 2018](#)) at the 'Putting People First: Tackling Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment in the Aid Sector' Summit. Following this, members of the UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) commissioned a report to explore what research already exists, gather views from key stakeholders, and derive recommendations for potential guidance and principles of good practice. This briefing document summarises the findings from the evidence review's literature, media and policy reviews, and key stakeholder interviews, and invites responses from stakeholders.

Varying definitions of safeguarding exist, from the prevention of, and appropriate response to, abuse and/or neglect of children and vulnerable adults in UK statute, to safeguarding 'everyone within our organisation at all times' ([Bond 2018](#)), which includes staff 'bullying' as a safeguarding issue (*ibid*; [DIFD 2018](#), p. 4). The scope of safeguarding for purposes of this review was specified by UKCDR as follows:

*'any sexual exploitation, abuse or harassment of research participants, communities and research staff, plus any broader forms of violence, exploitation and abuse relevant to research, such as bullying, psychological abuse and physical violence.'*

It is worth noting that this scope goes well beyond 'do no harm' to also encompass so-called 'bystander' concerns where researchers become aware of abuse not directly associated with their research activities.

For the purposes of this review, ‘international development research’ (‘research’ throughout this report) is defined as UK-funded research undertaken in ODA (Official Development Assistance)-recipient countries. Such research covers a range of different disciplines, countries and scales of project, which might, for example, involve community fieldwork, lab science, policy work or product development, within academia, NGOs conducting research, or small enterprises funded under the auspices of Innovate UK. Any principles or guidance developed for the sector must therefore be flexible enough to apply across very different social contexts, to different research methods and disciplinary traditions, and for different topics and modes of engagement with participants. It must be recognised, however, that the existing evidence-base for effective safeguarding practice within research is limited. These proposals are therefore put forward for consultation on their feasibility and utility, rather than proposed as definitive solutions.

## Key findings for policy and practice from the review

1. A scoping review of international academic and grey literature and media reports identified incidents of risks to researchers and fieldworkers. These included sexual harassment by researchers towards colleagues or research participants, and risks of harm arising within communities, from gatekeepers or from state agencies, as well as research contexts or sensitive research topics. Little literature was identified addressing researchers’ responsibilities in responding to safeguarding concerns, or harm caused by researchers to participants or community members. Available evidence does not give a clear picture of the prevalence of safeguarding concerns within research, but suggests areas for attention.
2. The literature identified that risks and vulnerabilities for researchers and research participants are unequally distributed. Women, junior researchers and local fieldworkers are more likely to be at risk of violence and harassment by fellow researchers and/or risks posed by particular research contexts. Risks posed to communities and research participants increases where researchers have easy access to personal information about service beneficiaries, where people might feel compelled to participate in research, and in the context of unequal international collaborations. While no research is without risks, this highlights the importance of anticipating and taking reasonable steps to address these risks.
3. Safeguarding is an unfamiliar term to many researchers outside the UK and barely featured in the international research literature. Few HEI (Higher Education Institutions) safeguarding policies explicitly addressed international development research contexts. Some of those that did stated that safeguarding in research is the responsibility of the Research Ethics Committee (REC). Most safeguarding policies used definitions of safeguarding found in UK statutes, whereas RECs used wider definitions of vulnerability.
4. While researchers can and should take responsibility for ensuring that they ‘do no harm’, expectations that they respond to ‘all forms of harm’ they may encounter should recognise the limits of expertise and role. While safeguarding is relevant to everyone, some research by its nature (e.g. research into gender-based violence) foregrounds safeguarding risks, while researchers in other areas may be less used to

considering wider safeguarding risks. This underlines the importance of clear response pathways, training, guidance and named sources of advice on safeguarding to support decision-making across different disciplines.

5. Several stakeholders highlighted the potential value of shared resources, which non-specialists can access for relevant advice on local contexts and reporting pathways in drawing up their safeguarding plans for a project.
6. Research organisations are expected by funders to meet the same safeguarding requirements as NGOs. Ethics reviews were highlighted as a distinctive feature of research governance and are explicitly identified in some HEI policies as having responsibility for safeguarding. Existing ethics review systems may address issues such as risks to researchers or routes for reporting, but these are likely to be project-specific and could leave gaps in relation to safeguarding (which are more appropriately filled by other policies and contractual or legal obligations). Some examples of these gaps may include:
  - a. Conduct towards colleagues/other research team members;
  - b. In-country conduct in researchers' personal, rather than professional, lives, as well as risks associated with different research relationships;
  - c. In-country legal aspects of safeguarding and reporting;
  - d. Recruitment of research assistants and training in safeguarding;
  - e. Policies of research partners.
7. Hence, while existing REC practice may be mapped to identify safeguarding-relevant elements and fortify them where necessary, this mapping should also identify gaps and ensure they are filled by other policies and systems, for example in Human Resources, Research Services, Staff Development or elsewhere.
8. Research organisations vary in the extent, availability and scope of safeguarding training, reflecting differences in prioritisation and resources to provide such training, and therefore research and other training might lack systematic attention to safeguarding. Where training is provided, it was experienced as most helpful when tailored to specific research needs and existing knowledge.
9. With respect to guidance and policies, some safeguarding policies provided researchers with basic preparation for how to respond to safeguarding disclosures from colleagues and research participants, while others did not. The literature review highlighted the need for clear codes of conduct in research sites and accountability for violations.
10. Efforts to establish equitable research partnerships with organisations in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs) can produce tensions due to differing policies, ethical and practical mandates as well as new requirements for explicit safeguarding policies. Developing policies to meet these requirements can lead to administrative burdens for partner organisations and challenge the collaborative nature of the partnership if imposed as demands. These demands often also replicate international power inequalities and colonial legacies. Approaches that are honest about obligations, seek to simplify procedures and demands, and build in two-way learning are experienced as most helpful by all parties, in line with commitments to genuine, equitable global research partnerships.
11. There are several key barriers to research employees and research participants raising concerns or complaints. These may include unequal power relations, experience of unsupportive reactions, fear of retribution, fears of impacts on

research outcomes, personal safety or negative consequences, lack of trust that an appropriate response will result, and inaccessible reporting mechanisms.

12. Researchers expressed concerns that mandatory reporting to authorities potentially puts victims/survivors at risk, e.g. where there may be penalties for sexual activity even where the individual did not consent, or where authorities are seen to present a threat to communities or individuals. In keeping with a survivor-centred approach to safeguarding, these risks must be addressed.

## Key principles

**Based on the research findings, 9 key principles for safeguarding practice in international development research are proposed:**

1. Funders, researchers and research organisations recognise their safeguarding responsibilities and declare their commitment to taking all reasonable steps to prevent harm to those involved with research.
2. Safeguarding expectations should be proportionate, contextually sensitive and appropriate to the scope and nature of the research, while upholding international standards governing 'do no harm'.
3. Safeguarding efforts should be joined up within and between organisations as far as possible, with clarity on their nature and scope within the context of each project.
4. Safeguarding should integrate and build on existing measures where these meet requirements, within UK research organisations and in collaborating organisations.
5. Safeguarding is a shared responsibility between collaborating research organisations and should be approached in a spirit of inclusiveness and mutual learning, with attention to risk of unintended harms that could arise from dictating standards.
6. The approach to safeguarding capacity development should encourage open and constructive engagement, cognisant of power differentials, and responsive to emergent needs across the research process.
7. Sufficient provision for safeguarding requires resources and time to build expertise, meet requirements, and respond to safeguarding needs.
8. Underpinning all of these should be attention to the gendered, classed and racialised, as well as sexuality-, age-, (dis)ability-, faith-related and other dynamics of vulnerability, risk, and harm. Research takes place within contexts often structured by inequalities and power imbalances, which directly shape research relations and activities.
9. Approaches to safeguarding should adopt a victim/survivor-centred approach, as recognised by the International Development Committee ([Parliament UK, 2018](#)), by clearly articulating standards of behaviour, contextually appropriate and safe reporting, commitment to the rights and needs of victims and survivors, and listening to their voices in the development of policies and practice.

## Good practice guidance

### Clarity and scope of safeguarding

- The scope of safeguarding needs to be made clear within organisational policies, in a joined-up fashion. Differences in approach (e.g. between statutory legislation and funder definitions) should be explained clearly to avoid confusion.
- Alignment of requirements between funders is important to avoid organisations needing to respond to multiple sets of requirements. NGOs and research organisations funded by DFID are contractually required to meet DFID's due diligence requirements, so these serve as a useful basis for other funders to adopt.
- Existing policies and practice on bullying or research ethics may appropriately stand separately from safeguarding policies, but there should be an overarching framework making the relationship clear and enabling organisational mapping and audit.
- While recognising that no research is without risk, researchers are expected to make ethical decisions in thinking through risks in relation to specific research projects and putting in place reasonable steps to minimise and mitigate these, centring the interests of the person at risk.
- Researchers cannot realistically be expected to resolve 'all forms of harm' they may encounter through their research or as a bystander, and boundaries of responsibility and expertise must be clearly defined, with team members having access to safeguarding advice.

### Guidance and resources

- Many research organisations have a lead safeguarding officer and some have safeguarding champions in different areas of the organisation. These may be key sources of advice, guidance and awareness-raising. It is important that among them there is familiarity also with safeguarding specifically in international development contexts.
- Organisational guidance should include advice and resources for identifying and responding to safeguarding concerns, including (a) anticipating and mitigating concerns in advance of a project starting, and (b) in terms of support or advice when concerns arise in the course of a project.
- Safeguarding policies should include or link to: scope of safeguarding; responding roles and responsibilities within the organisation; whistleblowing policy and appropriate reporting routes; interface with ethics, research integrity and misconduct, and human resources; training expectations; vetting procedures; risk management; how safeguarding incidents are recorded and reviewed; and accountability and management of safeguarding within the organisation. It may be useful to include specific discussion of international research contexts.
- Resources for safeguarding should be budgeted in from initial development of research proposals. Funders should consider requiring entries in the budget for appropriate safeguarding activity, e.g. specialist training on safeguarding (for both UK-based and LMIC researchers), consultation with LMIC partners and community

members on safeguarding needs and strategies, the development of project-specific safeguarding materials and translation of existing materials (policies, codes of conduct, and so on), printing of documents, and support for reporting mechanisms.

- Research organisations would benefit from a repository to make template safeguarding resources available in different languages. This could include: example codes of conduct and awareness-raising resources; initial resource mapping of referral support points and reporting requirements in different settings; case studies of how safeguarding issues have been addressed in the context of research studies.
- To avoid duplication or inconsistencies associated with proliferating regulation, as well as gaps between different regulations, organisations should undertake mapping of existing resources and systems (e.g., HR, research ethics) and to develop these only as necessary to encompass safeguarding requirements.

### Training and researcher support

- Generic safeguarding training, often done through online modules or as part of induction, should be mandatory for relevant employees, students (e.g. doctoral) and researchers throughout research organisations. At a minimum, this should cover awareness of what safeguarding is, common risks and vulnerabilities, expectations on responding, and knowing where to find further guidance and advice.
- In keeping with the advice above to build on existing strengths where possible, organisations should map safeguarding content currently incorporated in ethics and research methods training and adapt if necessary.
- Awareness of safeguarding could form part of assessment of researcher capacity and expertise in funders' assessment of grant applications as part of wider efforts to build culture change and encourage engagement in training, although this should be complemented by commitment to invest in resources for safeguarding within research funding.
- As generic safeguarding training in some institutions is unlikely to focus on international activities, further training may be necessary for international development research. This might focus specifically on PSEAH in international contexts (including common risks and vulnerabilities); safeguarding challenges when working in contexts with different cultural norms and legal systems; managing the challenges of safeguarding within international partnerships; and building safeguarding alert and whistleblowing mechanisms and responses into research plans. Wherever possible, such training should be based on case studies relevant to situations researchers might encounter and take into account trainees' baseline knowledge. Because of the wide variety of safeguarding challenges that different research projects may face, it is hard to be prescriptive about content and this training may be best delivered largely within research teams or communities of practice familiar with the specific risks, in consultation with safeguarding leads, and linked to fieldwork or project needs.
- Research projects should incorporate ongoing training and capacity building, e.g. by scheduling regular discussions of safeguarding issues for researchers in the field and, where warranted by the project, through appointment of a safeguarding advisor.

- Support for fieldworkers who are confronted with emotionally challenging safeguarding situations in the community should be available.

### Safeguarding and ethical review

- Safeguarding processes should be reviewed by research organisations to ensure that responsibilities for different aspects of safeguarding are clear between RECs, Human Resources, and Safeguarding Officers/Committees, and that key issues do not slip through the cracks between research ethics review and other procedures (see Finding 6, p. 3).
- Existing research ethics frameworks are likely to address many aspects of safeguarding, and this might be made more explicit within ethics review processes to facilitate recognition and mitigation of potential safeguarding risks and foster the development of a common language for discussing safeguarding with collaborators and funders. This practice would also highlight the potential for RECs to support researchers with monitoring and ongoing management of safeguarding concerns and reporting, in line with existing frameworks (e.g. [ESRC](#), [UKRI](#)). Elements of project applications which are found not to sit comfortably within the research ethics review process might be given parallel review by an appropriate safeguarding officer.
- RECs should consider the attention given to feedback, reporting back on field experiences, and learning lessons in their processes. Particular attention may be given to closing the learning loop between decisions by RECs in the UK, RECs in the countries where the research is conducted, and feedback from communities about safeguarding concerns or avenues for reporting (see below).
- In research projects where ethical reviews may not be required or appropriate (e.g. where research does not directly involve human subjects), project leaders should take reasonable steps to show that they have alternative risk-proportionate and sufficient measures in place with regards to mitigating risks and vulnerability.

### Working in partnerships

- A basic requirement for research projects should be to map, agree, and regularly review codes of conduct, key referral points for safeguarding concerns, and relevant legal reporting requirements.
- Discussions about safeguarding with partner organisations should be conducted in the spirit of two-way learning and capacity building, rather than imposed as a set of top-down requirements in recognition of the neo-colonial dynamics of imposing UK-centric standards. This will require honest acknowledgement of the requirements imposed by funders, existing international commitments and legal requirements.
- Safeguarding guidance should recognise that collaborative approaches to safeguarding (e.g. in relation to information sharing, the limits of confidentiality and reporting policies) involving communities and partner organisations are not only ethically sound, but also ensure greater buy-in.

## Reporting and whistleblowing

- Communities and research participants should be consulted about how they would wish to report concerns, and viable means of reporting made available to them accordingly.
- Reporting mechanisms should be clear and should anticipate and address the key barriers to reporting identified above.
- Reporting mechanisms need to be independent and accessible. Wherever possible, there should be multiple reporting options, but at least one should be clearly independent of the research team.
- People reporting should be advised of the response and what to expect. Consideration should be given to what immediate support can be provided, reflecting a victim/survivor centred approach.
- A suitable individual within one of the collaborating research organisations should be designated as 'safeguarding focal point' for any research collaboration, providing a clear line of accountability and oversight in-country.
- To mitigate one barrier discouraging reporting, funders should reinforce the message that support for projects will not normally be threatened by responses to infractions by one individual or organisation.

## Learning lessons

- Where research involves community participants, opportunities to learn from them about their experience of the research, including safeguarding aspects and strategies, should be built in to research design and fed back to research communities wherever possible.
- At both a project and an organisational level, collective review of safeguarding issues should be regularly scheduled and action points carefully followed up. Lessons learned from this should feed into regular review and ongoing adaptation of safeguarding guidance, policies and resources, building on input from local partners and communities. At organisational level, it is recommended that safeguarding become a standing item for senior management to consider reporting rates and lessons learned.

## Suggestions to evaluate change

Meaningful evaluation of the impact of changes to safeguarding in research is challenging, as stakeholders consulted were only too aware. Uncertainty over the scope of safeguarding may lead to confusion or inconsistency, with variations in reporting practices. Funders could therefore consider focusing on specific priority areas of safeguarding, as in the DFID due diligence requirements, in order to set effective SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-limited) goals. The following three levels set out which changes in practice could be assessed.

### 1. Design and adoption of policies

This is the easiest level to assess through audit mechanisms and policy content analysis. It is relatively straightforward to determine whether: (a) organisations have policies in place that



make explicit the safeguarding aspects of research and researchers' responsibilities; (b) have instituted and mapped the content of safeguarding training provided; (c) make use of codes of conduct for all international development research and agree these with collaborating organisations; (d) require a safeguarding focal point to be named for each research project; (e) follow good practice in establishing reporting mechanisms; and (f) have procedures in place to review and learn from safeguarding events in the course of research.

One example of how this is already being done is DFID's due diligence assessments on grant applications received. Other funders could consider instituting similar assessment processes on incoming grants and adopting similar formats to reduce administrative burden.

## **2. Change in knowledge and attitudes of researchers**

Confirming the existence of policies does not in itself prove that they are being implemented. Knowledge and attitude change of researchers can be evaluated through future research, in any or all of the following ways:

- Evaluation of safeguarding training received by relevant researchers
- Survey of fieldwork experiences regarding risk and safeguarding
- Levels of researcher reporting of safeguarding concerns

Evaluation of training is standard practice in most organisations, so could be applied once safeguarding training has been mapped or developed. Evaluations could be collated on an ongoing basis at organisational level, to inform further development and ensure relevance.

## **3. Effects on the conduct of research**

Reporting is often used as a proxy for real levels of safeguarding concerns. However, low reporting could mean that preventive measures have been effective or, equally, that the reporting mechanisms in place are inaccessible or ineffective. Reporting levels cannot therefore be treated in isolation from the context but are a valuable indicator where mechanisms have been put in place to address the barriers highlighted earlier. Research teams should as a rule actively seek feedback from both local fieldworkers and community members to establish how far this has been successful. This is a particular area where attention to ethics applications and practice should show what is being done.

A key indicator of safeguarding success is whether any persons affected feel that the response has been satisfactory. Inevitably, research organisations may often not be told of individual outcomes, although they should keep the person(s) informed of actions being taken and provide every opportunity for feedback. Where known, the views of the person(s) on outcomes are an important element in learning lessons to improve safeguarding processes. Funders should consider carefully how much information is needed in order to monitor change and require the minimum of case details commensurate with that goal. This will limit confidentiality and legal concerns.