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Exploring Safeguarding

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# AKN Exploring Safeguarding Research

The AKN, with support from additional funding from the AHRC/GCRF, is undertaking a research project to explore the concept and practices of ‘safeguarding’ in the field of anti-slavery across the African countries we are working with from August 2019 – July 2020.

This project will explore and assess what local practice and methods are employed around safeguarding, reflect on how participants’ needs are currently being met, and work collaboratively to design and disseminate new systems and approaches.

We aim to examine, analyse and work together collaboratively with our Phase 2 projects to explore the concept, identify challenges and highlight local knowledge and systems to ultimately enhance our practices in safeguarding. The outcome will be a set of co-developed capacity-building tools which bring attention to pre-existing local cultural safeguarding practices and outline the power-related challenges and opportunities for collaborative work. These will be disseminated to our wider network and beyond.

In addition, we are extending an additional funding opportunity to our Phase 2 projects to investigate current safeguarding practices and understandings within the communities in which they are already working.

We will then work with the Primary Investigators in the second stage of the research, developing webinars and online-materials which support our projects and can be used throughout the region.

Objectives:

1. To gain insights into safeguarding in anti-slavery work in Sub-Saharan Africa that can be utilised to create a safe and trusted environment for researchers, participants and communities, and to explore the potential for these to be used in other fields
2. To drive organisational change (in the first instance, in those involved in the AKN, but longer-term in the wider research community) around the way research organisations and their partners think about their research, their participants, the communities they are working in, and how their work directly affects individuals and wider society.
3. To improve the ways in which policies that aim to provide protection and safety are understood and communicated in wider UK and African research communities for example ensuring that incidents or reports of improper behaviour are appropriately acted upon

Activities:

1. To examine current safeguarding practices in our Phase 2 projects and work together with the rest of the Network + Management Team and International Steering Group to enhance existing safeguarding practices and share and further develop common principles.
2. To commission Phase 2 projects to undertake additional work that may include auditing and assessing local safeguarding needs
3. To develop a set of capacity-building tools e.g. webinars and online materials, for dissemination to our partners as well as previous applicants and partners to our phase 2 funding, based upon consultation with relevant projects and partners
4. To hold an end of project event to disseminate findings from our Phase 2 Projects on existing and developing effective safeguarding practices in research in LMIC countries
5. Following an initial exploratory phase we expect to work intensively with a smaller sub-group of 2 or 3 projects who will then help us to organise capability training based on our collaborative work to the full range of partners and co-organise the final event.

# Context of Safeguarding in UK

‘Safeguarding’ is an area of law, policy and practice which has a longstanding tradition in the provision of services, especially to children and other ‘vulnerable’ groups in the UK e.g. child protection system. It is, at its core, an attempt to anticipate, avoid and prevent harm from occurring. In the context of international research and development, it is an issue which has received intense scrutiny and consideration following high profile incidents of abuse[[1]](#footnote-1).

For international research, ‘safeguarding’ is a concept and practice that goes beyond established ethical research practice. It is currently defined by UKCDR (UK Collaborative on Development Research) as any physical, sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment against participants (children and adults), communities and research staff which also includes broader forms of violence, exploitation and abuse relevant to research including bullying, psychological abuse and physical violence (Orr et al, 2019)[[2]](#footnote-2).

The UKCDR briefing on safeguarding and the draft principles for researchers, both UK based and in-country organisations working with UK researchers, suggests that the Department for International Development (DfID) statement ‘Enhanced Due Diligence: Safeguarding for External Partners’[[3]](#footnote-3), should be central to safeguarding practices in international research.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The work by UKCDR and DfID makes some important acknowledgements about safeguarding in international contexts:

* Safeguarding is a term that is unfamiliar to many researchers outside UK
* Research principles have to be flexible to apply in different social contexts, research methods and disciplines, not only to make them more practical but also to avoid colonial imposition and address power inequalities.
* Safeguarding risks are also posed to communities when unequal power relationships exist e.g. control over personal information; not feeling free to say no, especially in situations where they are funding or aid dependent.
* Mandatory reporting of disclosure of harm can risk more harm to victims
* Safeguarding approaches in equitable partnerships need to be honest about obligations, simplify procedures and demands, rather than over-burden less well-resourced partners, and build in two-way learning.
* Safeguarding Policy in UK often uses legal definitions (e.g. significant harm), whereas the broader vulnerability concept is what is used in ethics.
* The Ethical Review process in research institutions is often seen as panacea for safeguarding, but it leaves gaps on researcher conduct (including in-country involvement in social/personal life), the researcher capability to deal with safeguarding issues/challenges (i.e. training), the in-country legal contexts (e.g. consent), the extent to which research partners are also responsible for safeguarding/ethical practice.
* Safeguarding risks to researchers are unequally distributed e.g. children/adults, male/female, UK/indigenous or in-country, early career or junior researchers/senior researchers)
* Research which by its nature foregrounds safeguarding risks (e.g. researching ‘modern slavery’), is claimed to imply a more advanced understanding than others.
* Training for safeguarding in research is inconsistent and varies in availability.

The UKCDR briefing advocates for a ‘victim/survivor-centred approach’ to safeguarding and makes a number of specific recommendations, referred to as ‘9 Key Principles’ (Orr et al, 2019: 4) for research organisations to anticipate, mitigate, report and respond to safeguarding situations:

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| 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.

 1. 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.
2. 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.
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The briefing specifically identifies a gap in an evidence base for effective safeguarding practices in research, stating that there is little literature which addresses ‘researcher responsibilities in responding to safeguarding concerns, or harm caused by researchers to participants or community members’ (Orr et al, 2019: 2).

# Activity 1: Existing Safeguarding Policies Review

In the first activity stage of this research, the AKN Phase 1 Projects policies and statements relating to safeguarding have been reviewed and analysed against the UKCDR principles and DfID statement on safeguarding. The intention of this review was to identify key areas for further exploration, not to ensure compliance.

## Key Areas Identified

***Defining Safeguarding***

2 out of 8 policies/statements utilise a similar definition to that given by UKCDR. The key areas of variation in the other policies were whether the policy only applied to children, and if the policy also applied to staff/researchers as potential targets of abuse or exploitation.

***Scope of Safeguarding***

The policies all imagined ‘scope’ in various ways. The proposed scope of anticipation, prevention, mitigation and reporting of harm, with all of the actions that attempts to address this full scope would require (e.g. community informed risk assessment at design, implementation and review stages of research projects; appropriate internal and external reporting e.g. procedures for handling disclosure and whistle blowing; procedures for vetting staff; procedures for investigations of allegations; policies on supporting victims), were not reflected in the policies.

***Responsibilities, Expectations and Partnerships/Collaboration for Safeguarding***

Policies broadly did not identify that it was their responsibility to prevent any potential harm to communities that their research could create or amplify. 1 policy mentions this specifically.

4 out of 8 policies refer to some form of framework guiding work on safeguarding which addressed cultural norms and local or international law, policy and practice e.g. the international standard of do no harm, organisational ethics etc.

Policies varied in their explanations of whether they should be proactive or reactive to harm and where their organisational responsibility to prevent harm to research participants begins and ends.

Policies expressed understanding of partnership approaches to safeguarding in various ways, but the least clarity was about how this responsibility was shared between UK research institutions and in-country research partners, how local NGO’s and Government departments could be involved and some of the challenges to this.

***Mainstreaming Safeguarding***

Policies differed in their approaches to mainstreamed safeguarding. Some had a stand-alone policy, others had a statement, and others had a statement of ethics. Within the documents, some explicitly signpost to other policies such as HR, staff codes of conduct, complaints, whistleblowing etc, and some did not.

***Learning in Safeguarding***

Policies broadly did not outline the methods for mutual learning from safeguarding experiences and local perceptions or experience of safeguarding challenges.

2 out of 8 policies gave a statement about learning opportunities (training/workshops) but generally projects did not refer to developing safeguarding capacity and capability for the organisation, researchers and research participants in ways that appreciate power dynamics that are considered endemic to this research field.

***Power in Safeguarding***

Policies did not explicitly articulate the safeguarding approaches in ways that appreciated structural inequalities (class, race, gender, disability, sexuality or age) and how they influence the power dynamics of who is seen as vulnerable, at risk or in need of protection. Gender sensitive and survivor/victim-centred approaches are not reflected in the language or content of policies.

# Next Steps

The findings from this analysis suggest that we need to explore specific areas of safeguarding in more depth and from the perspective of what happens in practice rather than what is currently written in policy.

This exploration will take place in three key ways:

1. Commissioning a number of projects to undertake in-country research to explore these key areas of safeguarding using various methods
2. Surveying all AKN projects about what existing practices are in place to keep researchers and participants safe, and what benefits and challenges the UKCDR principles may pose for practice
3. Interviewing a targeted number of Phase 1 Projects to explore the understanding and transferability of the safeguarding concept and explore existing in-country everyday practices for preventing harm.

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1. The sexual abuse scandal in Haiti prompted an investigation of Oxfam and the UK Government response to addressing safeguarding e.g. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/oxfam-child-abuse-haiti-scandal-inquiry-sexual-exploitation-charity-commission-a8953566.html>, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmintdev/840/840.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. UKCDR briefing available at <https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/guidance/safeguarding-resources/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. DfID document available at <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/767037/safeguarding-external-partners.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is also a recommendation for the Aid Sector, made in the BOND ‘Our Commitment to Change in Safeguarding’ for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO’s) <https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/our-commitment-to-change-in-safeguarding> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)