



Safeguarding in successful partnerships – Change statement

Introduction

Bond, in collaboration with its members, has produced this change statement. In this statement we are calling for a fundamental shift in mindset in the development and humanitarian sectors, with the goal of addressing immediate safeguarding challenges by ensuring partner organisations are valued as equal partners.

A significant concern of many UK-based INGOs is addressing safeguarding challenges with partner organisations, specifically those in the Global South. INGOs are required by, and face pressure from, donors to immediately demonstrate that partner organisations already have sufficient safeguarding policies and systems in place.

For safeguarding measures to be most effective, they must be culturally appropriate - with the commitment and ownership coming from within partner organisations. Partner organisations are often the most closely connected to highly marginalised people, and they often have the skills, knowledge, and expertise (eg language and cultural understanding) needed to tailor safeguarding policies and processes in different and relevant contexts.

Despite this, the role of partners is more often defined as an implementer of other organisations' approaches and programmes, a "downstream partner" – stifling their voices, ideas and solutions. If INGOs are to truly ensure that people most at risk can live in safety and dignity, supported by international aid when they need it, then they need to redefine their relationships with partner organisations.

Defining the change needed

Problem: Partner organisations with safeguarding expertise, from small community-based organisations to large NGOs, are often neither listened to nor given realistic implementation timescales for safeguarding outputs. Their existing safeguarding policies, systems, and good practices, as well as their solutions to safeguarding challenges, go unheard by donors of UK-based INGOs. INGOs should not assume that safeguarding expertise does not exist within partner organisations. Alternatively, partner organisations who do not have sufficient expertise or resources to develop their own processes are left to adopt those of INGOs. As such, they do not get the opportunity to build capacity and take ownership of their safeguarding approaches, even when they may want to.

Cause: A funding and aid management environment that is driven by pressure on INGOs to comply with donor and statutory requirements and having to demonstrate such compliance. This environment lacks unrestricted funding for local partners, and prioritises large-scale delivery and low unit costs over partners setting their own capacity building, development, and safeguarding agendas.

Change: Partner organisations play a key role in developing locally, contextually relevant safeguarding solutions, policies and systems.

Definitions

Implementation partners: Those that manage project funds and play a prominent role in project management and delivery.¹

¹ <https://www.ukaidirect.org/apply/partnerships-and-consortiums/>

Collaborative partners: Those that play a key role in supporting the delivery of the project, but do not directly manage project funds.²

Top-down management: The process of senior management reaching independent conclusions and sharing them with other managers, with the aim of creating, changing, or improving strategy, policies, and action plans.³

Bottom-up management: The process of team members being invited to participate in every step of the management process with the aim of creating, changing, or improving strategy, policies and action plans.⁴

Current situation

Safeguarding with partner organisations is generally approached as a compliance issue with an immediate sense of urgency. The expertise of partners is invaluable for effective and relevant safeguarding, but to get to the point of these expertise being fully utilised or developed, there is a need for a long-term shift in mindsets, whereby INGOs and donors commit to ensuring partner organisations are treated as equal partners. This could be done in a variety of ways, such as:

- Support for partner organisations to improve prevention of safeguarding issues; and preparedness for safeguarding in emergencies and complex casework.
- Recognition that partner organisations, especially the smallest, may need more time to present their safeguarding approaches in a way that fulfils donor requirements.
- Use of knowledge of partner organisations in risks assessment, planning, and coordination.
- Recognition of the value of local cultures and languages.
- More direct, predictable and multi-year funding for partner organisations from donors to cover safeguarding costs long-term.⁵

Safeguarding practice

- Ensuring that safeguarding is carried out in real partnership with partner organisations has not been prioritised within the sector. Advocacy is required to convince donors and INGOs that in-country safeguarding needs to be carried out in this way in order to be more effective.
- The sector is largely focussed on responding to casework and quick solutions to safeguarding compliance issues, which prevents partner organisations' initiatives playing a significant role in resolving more complex, longstanding in-country issues.
- Due diligence standards are expected to be applied at every level of partnerships, and donors expect to see evidence that standards have been shared and that partner organisations are clear about expectations. This can inadvertently create a box-ticking culture that fails to allow for the development of systems and policies that effectively meet standards at a local level.
- Funding for safeguarding as part of projects and wider programmes is not always provided by donors. Therefore it makes it difficult for UK-based INGOs and partner organisations to suitably prioritise it. International development is an increasingly competitive and demanding environment for INGOs in terms of funding opportunities and donor reporting expectations. This can work against collaborative practices and joint working with partner organisations.
- Cases of wrong-doing by individuals may be automatically escalated and can make working with an entire partner organisation less likely. This approach may risk incidents not being reported by partners anxious about

² Ibid.

³ <https://www.tuw.edu/business/top-down-bottom-up-management/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.humanitarianleadershipacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/1543-Background-paper-1-June-WP.pdf>

losing funding, and potentially hinder the progress of organisations struggling with prevention, which is counter-productive to effective case management, learning and growth.

Power relations

- There is a triangular relationship between donors and INGOs working with partners, where the partner organisations are not necessarily treated as equal and, regardless of their size and capacity, it may be assumed they have no safeguarding expertise.
- This amplifies colonialist histories between major donor countries, the headquarters of major INGOs, and where local partners work.
- Power dynamics and the complex impact that these have on behaviours are not adequately analysed and understood from everyone's perspectives, including partner organisations. This can lead to inadequate information sharing and unaccountable decision making.

Opportunities

- INGOs and donors addressing unequal power dynamics with partner organisations, and accepting partner organisations' safeguarding systems and policies where they are sufficient, should:
 - Allow staff at all levels of INGOs and partner organisations to have a voice in influencing how safeguarding work is carried out.
 - Promote inclusive leadership and accountable decision-making.
 - Allow locally appropriate safeguarding to continually form part of programmes.

Risks

- Accepting local safeguarding mechanisms without scrutiny, or an absence of shared concepts and standards, may lead to safeguarding issues and cases being dealt with in a way that increases risks for those participating in programmes.

Vision

Safeguarding practice

- Practical and relevant solutions based on contextual experience found at country-level within partner organisations provide the basis of safeguarding input into programme design as required. This reduces the likelihood of:
 - Cultural and social norms and language barriers not being taken into account. In places where the term "safeguarding" is not known or well understood, there are processes to keep people safe.
 - Risk approaches which do not fully involve partner organisations in identifying context specific safeguarding risks and mitigation measures.
- Consistent, rigorous reporting and complaints mechanisms that are intersectional and survivor-centred, with which partner organisations have confidence that they, and INGOs as required, will be able to deal with alleged incidents swiftly and comprehensively.
 - Partner organisations will have more confidence because reporting and complaints processes have been designed with country-level involvement and the use of their contextual knowledge. This ensures that responses can be locally led wherever possible.
- Due diligence processes promoted as a tool to start dialogue on strengths and gaps within partner organisations, to help develop each other's capacities:
 - Policies, minimum standards, and training materials, if not available already, should be shared with partner organisations, alongside facilitation and tailored guidance that substantiates them and makes them useful at a local level.

- Preferable to INGOs sharing existing materials, partner organisations should have their own existing materials to share or at least have the resources to develop and take ownership of their policies, minimum standards and training materials.
- Funding commitments and timelines from donors allow for bespoke, collaborative safeguarding approaches and dialogue and participation within programmes from partner organisations.
 - Organisations are able to stress the importance of safeguarding funding as a clear priority now and in the future.
- Safeguarding is an area where INGOs do not work competitively and instead commit to collaboration, understanding, and appropriate sharing of information and expertise between organisations.
- Instances when the acts of individuals provide the basis for ending partnership arrangements only occur when it is fully understood by the INGO and partner organisation how safeguarding requirements have not been met.

Power relations

- One-way relationships between INGOs and partner organisations are eliminated and replaced by more equal relationships, which include bottom-up management. Regardless of their size and capacity, it is never assumed that partner organisations lack safeguarding expertise.
 - Strategic direction, policies and action plans in relation to safeguarding are designed collaboratively with the partner organisation at a country-level.
 - Safeguarding policies and processes of partner organisations have their effectiveness monitored and reviewed at an in-country level.
 - Relationships move beyond those primarily focussing on following guidance, tools, and compliance with partner organisations towards being people and conversation led.
 - Wider principles from [previous partnership initiatives](#), such as equality, transparency, results-oriented approaches, responsibility and complementarity, are acknowledged within safeguarding work.
- Misperceptions regarding where expertise lie and power dynamics such as funding, organisational structure, gender, race, sexual orientation, and age are broken down, and their negative impact on delivering high quality safeguarding programming are understood.
 - Scepticism around safeguarding capacity and experience within partner organisations and their respective countries is replaced with an appreciation of trust in local expertise and contextual knowledge.
 - Power is shared as a result of others being willing to give up power, not just for ideological reasons but for practical reasons too. This is an effective means of mitigating risk, managing security concerns, and best understanding the needs of people at risk of harm.
 - Partner organisations' safeguarding initiatives that strengthen practice and INGOs' understanding of the local dynamics are encouraged.

Addressing the problem

The nature of change required to shift the mindsets and actions of INGOs and donors towards localising safeguarding into the hands of partner organisations is long term. Therefore, it is important to consider what practical actions can be undertaken by INGOs and donors to use or build the skills, knowledge, and expertise of partner organisations in overcoming safeguarding challenges. These can include, as examples:

- Assessing the safeguarding policies, processes, and training within partner organisations, and facilitating them to address those of INGOs, in order to understand where both organisation's approaches can be improved and redesigned using local knowledge and expertise.

- Following any assessments, adapt and translate all safeguarding policies, reporting mechanisms, guidance, training, and other relevant documents into local languages and dialects (where not available already).
- In instances where safeguarding expertise do not already exist within a partner organisation, given realistic timeframes for implementation, INGOs fully commit to a programme of capacity building. The long-term goal of such an activity is for the partner organisation to meet international minimum standards and lead on safeguarding.
- Holding or re-examining safeguarding due diligence checks with partner organisations in order to evaluate the existing strengths and weaknesses of their safeguarding approach and go beyond compliance by covering, for example, organisational culture, good governance, and risk management.
 - These strengths and weaknesses can be used as the basis of a plan to share local expertise with the INGO or address existing safeguarding challenges.
 - Partner organisations should be encouraged to detail any safeguarding initiatives they have in mind.
- INGOs and partner organisations examining other organisations working in partnership locally should discuss with them how they carry out safeguarding, with the aim of sharing learning and experiences.
- Ensuring that all future risk assessments and planning exercises include at least one member of staff from a partner organisation in order to fully utilise local knowledge and expertise.
- INGOs and partner organisations should create their own safeguarding decision logs, which can be periodically reviewed to see where power imbalances in relation to their partnership arrangements can be immediately addressed.
- Donors and INGOs should be flexible in the language they use with partner organisations in relation to this work, on the understanding that whilst the term “safeguarding” may not exist in certain places, there may still be clear ideas on how to keep people safe from harm.
- Donors are encouraged to take a staggered approach to safeguarding compliance with partner organisations. This could be implemented by making sure key progress checkpoints are built in, so that there is not the expectation of immediate implementation.

Conversation is an effective means for organisations to learn from each other and those who work with partners, and as a means for building trust and addressing power imbalances. Promoting conversations that lead to action and sharing examples of what has worked in the past amongst Bond members and the wider sector seems to be the most effective way INGOs can start to move beyond a top-down, compliance perspective that fails to address immediate and longer-term safeguarding needs when working with partner organisations on safeguarding.

By having such conversations, it should always be the goal that safeguarding expertise within partner organisations can be easily recognised where it already exists, developed through INGO-led capacity building where it may not yet exist, and never assumed by INGOs and/or donors to not exist from the outset of a working relationship.

