The international applicability and feasibility of Contextual Safeguarding

Contextual Safeguarding Across Borders
September 2021 – September 2023

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Key messages

The contextual nature of extra-familial harm in adolescence

It is an isolation to live in [refugee] accommodation. It is also intended as such, as a structure... how can you work on mobility to be made easier for [refugee] girls so that they can move more freely ... creating better access?

(Professional Interview, Germany, January 2023)

It's not seen as if we are making the streets safe...rather it's [seen as] us facilitating the environment to be more friendly, [and therefore encouraging] the children to stay.

(Professional Interview, Tanzania, April 2023)

We know that adolescents experience significant harm beyond their families in various parts of the word, and that there is a common challenge in how governments, public services and the public in general respond – the risk that adolescents are seen as culpable (sometimes criminally) for their experiences of significant harm[1][2]. Adolescents in both settings we partnered with for this study experienced harm beyond their families; in some cases, this included sexual violence and criminal exploitation, and in others this was in the form of harassment and marginalisation, as well as the wider insidious impact of policy contexts that are hostile to refugee and street-connected young people (for example isolating them in accommodation centres, or wanting to disperse them from the streets). These forms of extra-familial harm were inter-related with young people's experiences of harm and safety in their families; in Tanzania, poverty and/or harm in the home was cited as a push factor for young people leaving their homes to live and work on the streets. In Germany, young people lived in segregated accommodation centres with their families, making the family home an important source of safety in otherwise unfamiliar contexts. However, **the provision of support to young people and their families alone could not address the harmful contexts these young people are navigating**.

In both contexts, young people's peers played a significant role in their experiences of safety. In Tanzania and Germany, young people's peer relationships were a crucial site of safety building. In Tanzania, young people were encouraged to look out for each other on the street,

[1] csab-year-one-scoping-report.pdf (contextualsafeguarding.org.uk)
[2] Is transactional sex exploitative? A social norms perspective, with implications for interventions with adolescent girls and young women in Tanzania | PLOS ONE

to form networks of support and to connect new arrivals to the street with support services. In Germany, strong peer group bonds were formed and supported within the accommodation centre as a means of galvanising a positive identity and support network for young people living in segregated environments.

Whilst these extra-familial contexts and relationships were a central part of young people's experiences of harm and safety, frequently support is **targeted and measured** in relation to young people or their parents' behaviour change, by building resilience and raising awareness to help them to navigate harmful contexts. Drug use awareness raising sessions with young boys in Tanzania were offered to support young people in contexts where local drug dealers targeted 'street-connected' young people; and awareness raising sessions on gender inequality and racism were offered to refugee girls in Germany to support them to understand their intersecting experiences of harassment (i.e., being stared at for wearing a hijab) in the local area. This work is vital (and we have learnt about brilliant ways in which this can align with support to harmful contexts) and at the same time in the absence of contextual interventions, there is a risk that the harmful spaces that young people are navigating can be left unaddressed.

For both partners children's rights and empowerment were at the heart of their approach, but this often came into conflict with other local and national practice and policy **frameworks**. For example, children's rights came into conflict with immigration or policing or even government objectives, or a children rights perspective clashed with how young people were viewed in the community where they experienced harassment and/or violence. Of course, the negative treatment of young people by members of the community cannot be separated from wider policy contexts in which (particularly refugee or 'street connected') young people are seen as problem to be solved.

In Tanzania, we learnt about extensive **partnership** building to build safety for young people in the spaces where they were being harmed. Community members, local vendors, professionals and young people came together to make spaces safer in cohesive and tangible ways. For both projects, partnerships were identified as critical to building safety for young people in contexts beyond the family. Where these partnerships were present with the organisations and people who have reach into the spaces where young people are being harmed, the harmful nature of these spaces was slowly being transformed through the provision of 'guardianship' and direct support to young people. Where these partnerships were less cohesive, there was a lack of clarity about who was responsible for the spaces where young people reported harassment or were feeling unsafe. Echoing work carried out in the UK[3], NGOs seemed to be uniquely positioned to build relationships with young people, having the flexibility and values needed to promote and deliver child-centred support, yet are chronically under-funded and resourced.

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[3] Towards Safety | Contextual Safeguarding

Through this work we have seen impressive examples of what it can look like to safeguard contextually: by working with peer groups to enhance the support they already provide to one and other; and by identifying and training community champions, people who have existing trusted relationships of care with young people, and who offer support and positively influence the attitudes and behaviour of other adults toward the young people. These types of interventions build safety in young people's extra-familial spaces and relationships. In both projects, Contextual Safeguarding resources, including safety mapping, context and peer assessment, and context weighting, supported professionals to further develop their understanding of these extra-familial contexts and importantly to capture **contextual outcomes** that relate to the positive impact of their work on groups and locations, as well as on individual young people.

These collaborations were useful in **informing an understanding of how Contextual Safeguarding might be relevant to contexts beyond the UK**, but also crucially on some of the universal **conditions required to implement a Contextual Safeguarding framework** with adolescents at risk beyond their families. Both of which are discussed further below.

Background

Contextual Safeguarding Across Borders is a two-year project that aimed to test the applicability and feasibility of the Contextual Safeguarding framework in two international settings. The project was led by Dr Lauren Wroe with Delphine Peace, Vanessa Bradbury and Dr Nathalie Huegler. The work was funded by Porticus.

Specifically, the project aimed to:

- Understand the relevance and usefulness of Contextual Safeguarding in developing and supporting statutory and non-statutory responses to extra-familial forms of harm
- Explore how knowledge and expertise from international settings transforms, troubles or improves how Contextual Safeguarding is understood and/or practiced
- Consider whether Contextual Safeguarding can support the development of child protection responses that acknowledge and address the relationship between structural inequalities and extra-familial forms of harm

We partnered with the International Rescue Committee in Germany and Railway Children Africa in Tanzania. The International Rescue Committee work with refugee girls and young women* in refugee accommodation centres in Germany, delivering an empowerment programme with a focus on tackling discrimination faced by teenage girls. Railway Children Africa work in Tanzania with street-connected young people, providing direct support to children living and working on the street, and advocating for them to be seen as vulnerable and in need of protection. We tested resources from Contextual Safeguarding Network to

understand the applicability and feasibility of the Contextual Safeguarding framework in contexts beyond the UK.

girls with an asterisk is used by the IRC to denote a diverse and LGBTQ+ inclusive definition of gender

Contextual Safeguarding

Contextual Safeguarding is a framework developed in the UK to address significant harm in adolescence, these forms of harm often take place in contexts beyond the family home, and as such can be understood as 'extra-familial harms':
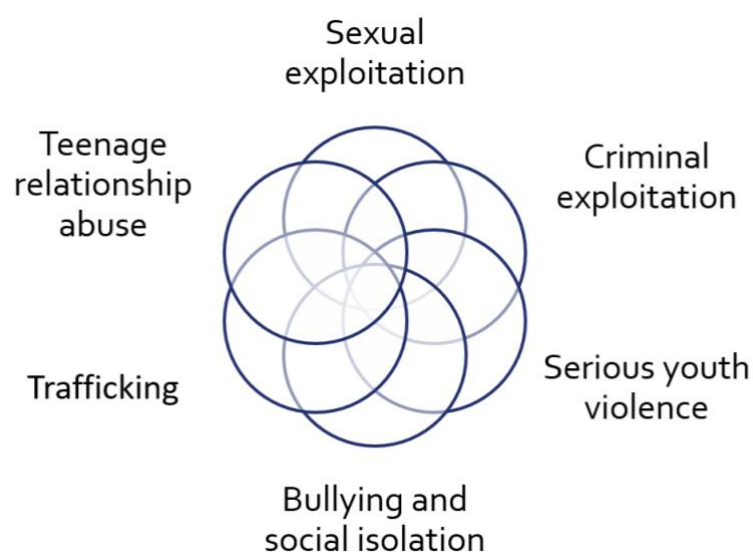

Figure one: Extra-familial forms of harm

Traditionally, child protection systems in the UK are concerned with harm that happens in the home and where parenting capacity is of concern. The forms of harm described above often take place in spaces and relationships outside of the family and family home, and therefore child protection systems have been limited in their ability to recognise, and build safety, around these types of harm using traditional methods of family assessment and support. Contextual Safeguarding has been developed as a framework to assess and support safety in the extra-familial contexts and relationships where adolescents experience these forms of harm, for example in the peer group, school and neighbourhood contexts.
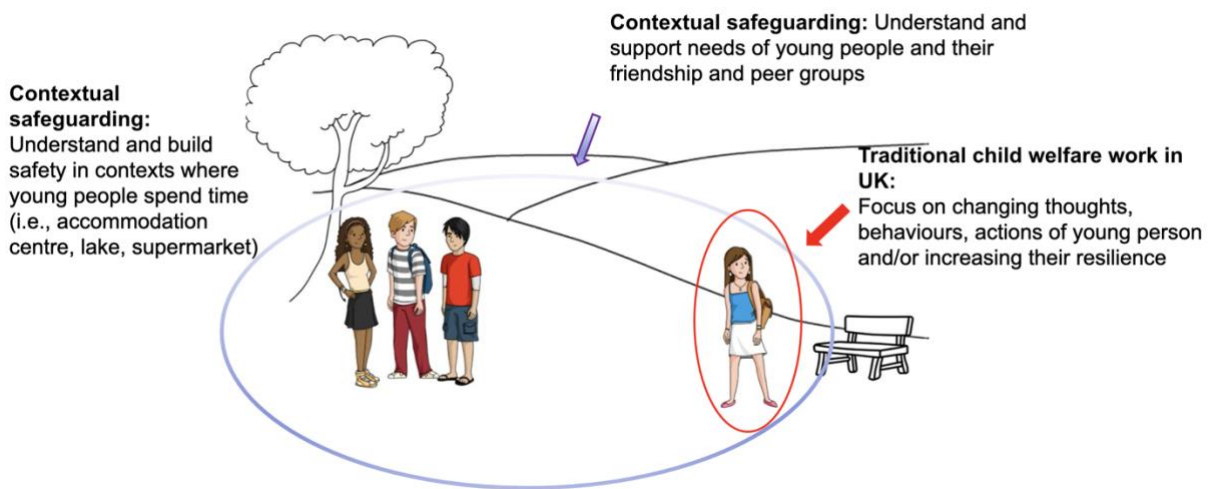
Figure two: Approaches to creating safety in contexts

The framework is organised around four 'domains' and five values. The approach has been developed in England and Wales since 2016 by the Contextual Safeguarding Research Programme in partnership with local authorities, schools and voluntary and community sector organisations.

The four domains of Contextual Safeguarding are:

Domain 1: Target

Seeks to prevent, identify, assess and intervene with the social conditions of abuse

Domain 2: Legislative framework

Incorporate extra-familial contexts into child protection frameworks

Domain 3: Partnerships

Develop partnerships with sectors/individuals who are responsible for the nature of extra-familial contexts

Domain 4: Outcomes measurement

Monitor outcomes of success in relation to contextual, as well as individual, change
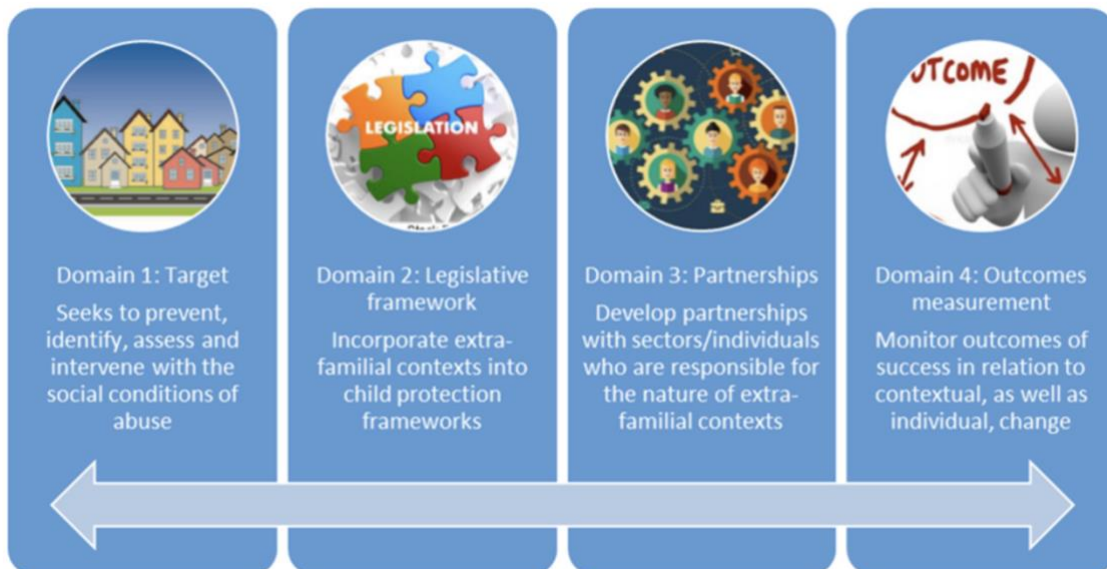
Figure three: The four domains of Contextual Safeguarding

The five values that underpin Contextual Safeguarding are:

Figure four: The five values underpinning Contextual Safeguarding

Methodology

The Contextual Safeguarding Across Borders study used an embedded qualitative research methodology developed as part of our on-going programme of work in the UK. This involved:

- Building partnership with practice partners
- Carrying out document reviews to understand current policy and practice frameworks
- Doing qualitative semi-structured interviews with professionals
- Engaging young people in focus groups and activity sessions
- Observing meetings
- Discussing case studies in practitioner workshops

The data collected via these methods was analysed against the Contextual Safeguarding framework (the domains and values), as well as being iteratively fed-back to practice partners to build a shared understanding and interpretation of findings.

In both settings we collected data as described above and tested, monitored and evaluated the use of resources from the Contextual Safeguarding Network to understand the applicability and feasibility of the approach. The resources used included:

- Safety mapping
- Context weighting
- Context assessment
- Peer assessment
- Outcomes measures

The resources were used by our partners to support them to assess the contexts that were most impacting on young people's experiences of harm and safety, including weighting these contexts by understanding how they were informing harm and informing resource allocation (context assessment and context weighting). They also supported our partners to begin to think about how to build safety in these contexts, by mapping support needs to young people's experiences of harm and safety in their local areas (safety and support mapping). Finally, these tools supported our partners to understand and document the impact of their work on groups and spaces, as well as on individual young people (contextual outcome measures).

For a full overview of the work carried out with both partners, see our detailed case studies on the project page.

The following additional resources produced from the study, freely available on the project page, share how we tested Contextual Safeguarding activities with our partners and learning from the project:

- A scoping review for the European strand of the work
- A methodological approach for the European scoping review
- A blog about safeguarding asylum-seeking adolescents from extra-familial harm in Europe
- A blog about the complexities of cross-national piloting and an overview of the European work
- A podcast on the use of safety mapping with refugee girls in Germany
- The cross-project learning on the role of international NGOs within Contextual Safeguarding

International applicability and feasibility

To me, it somewhat sounds as though you are saying these are known things. But that what this project might be able to do is to highlight it even more.

Exactly. To actually put it into focus. These are all things that are occurring and that we know about. What daily situations they face at school or in their neighbourhoods. You always think about that, but you don't think separately about it. Getting to the heart of it and putting the focus on it, to bring it along for debates and concepts for protection from violence and children's rights.

(Professional Interview, Germany, February 2022)

The international testing of the Contextual Safeguarding framework has informed our understanding of how Contextual Safeguarding may be relevant for contexts beyond the UK. This learning is laid out below, organised in alignment with the four domains of Contextual Safeguarding.

Domain One: Target

In both contexts young people's experiences of harm were informed by the social conditions in which harm took place. The reported harms, from marginalisation and harassment to sexual abuse and criminal exploitation, required a response that targeted these social conditions. **Family support alone would not have been enough to build safety for these young people who were experiencing harassment and abuse in their local communities.** Targeted interventions, such as the presence of community guardians, were required to build safety in these extra-familial spaces. Underscoring experiences of inter-personal harm were hostile policy environments where young people were segregated (in the case of refugee young people in Germany) and experiencing the fall out of a racist immigration system, or were experiencing extreme poverty and stigma in the community (in the case of street connected young people in Tanzania). The activities of both partners sought in various ways to address these wider hostile environments and the Contextual Safeguarding resources, specifically the safety mapping and context assessment and weighting, were useful tools to support this on-going work.

the method of safety mapping is actually a really interesting method, to walk around the area a bit and to talk it through with the girls as to what different experiences and memories and feelings are that they connect this place. And then to consider which subjects are currently at the surface. Because sometimes, it is difficult in this age group to generate subjects yourself that are beyond cooking, picnics, going to the cinema or things like that, or a bit of make-up – like the usual things. I couldn't have done anything else in that age, either. I think that is a cool approach in order to check what is actually happening in their surroundings.

(Professionals Interview, Germany, Jan 2023)

for me, there's something about making it a hostile environment for those who want to abuse or hurt children, and making, making it a safer environment for those children who are there, and those two bits, I think, just make it, I think there's things that we can still do that I haven't yet spotted, to be honest. And I think that sometimes it's the staff who were, most of the time, it's the staff who were coming up with the initiatives, not the managers, or the ideas. And, yeah, some of the, some of the street workers, you know, they might have ideas better than, better than the managers. But some of the little practical things that you just think, oh, that just worked, you know?

(Professional Interview, Tanzania, April 2023)

Domain Two: Legislative frameworks

Our project partners had varying degrees of engagement with local child welfare systems, but both projects were rooted in children's welfare and children's rights. The work demonstrated to us the importance of rooting responses to extra-familial risk in children's rights and children's welfare practice and policy frameworks. Where this was not the case, children who were vulnerable to abuse in extra-familial spaces were at risk of being criminalised, dispersed or blamed by external agencies and the community due to their experiences of harm. The work indicated that **government child welfare agencies can sometimes see their role as limited to supporting families, but then when they are in engaged in wider stakeholder partnerships with a focus on building safety in extra-familial spaces (such as the bus terminal by our Tanzanian partners) this could be very effective.**

I would say adolescent protection is insufficient... It's not set up to really protect children and adolescents... The people working in the police departments and youth welfare offices are almost not at all sensitised for such types of violence, in particular gender specific or racist violence. Different structures have to be created.

(Professional Interview Germany, August 2022)

My main problem is that the welfare state that we are living in is not a welfare state, one that is focused on protection.

(Professional Interview, Germany, August 2022)

Our scoping report[4] indicated that there are some shared issues across countries in Europe in relation to how governments and other agencies respond when adolescents are harmed beyond their families[5] and that there is often a **need for clearer frameworks for supporting adolescents who are harmed but are also harming and engaging in criminalised activity as a result of their experiences of exploitation or abuse**. Whilst the refugee young people engaged in our work in Germany did not report significant harm beyond their families, we know that adolescent trafficking and exploitation is an issue across Europe and that hyperbolic discourses on migration do little to support a nuanced approach that is able to facilitate a child welfare response to young people who harm others or engage in illegal activity as a result of exploitation.[6]

there were regular roundups of children, the media would refer to them as 'rat children', and the, the attitude of the police was that, you know, they committed the crimes, these children committed the crimes

(Professional Interview, Tanzania, April 2023)

Finally, in both locations there were conflicts between child welfare and children's rights approaches and the objectives of other agencies including policing and immigration enforcement. This speaks to the **urgency for cohesive child and youth welfare approaches to adolescents between agencies** and of the **barriers of competing legislative frameworks** that are not aligned on children and young people's best interests.

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[4] csab-year-one-scoping-report.pdf (contextualsafeguarding.org.uk)
[5] csab-year-one-scoping-report.pdf (contextualsafeguarding.org.uk)
[6] csab-year-one-scoping-report.pdf (contextualsafeguarding.org.uk)

the government people are saying oh you need to build a shelter, so you can take all these children to that shelter and whatever. And for us, we don't believe in shelters. We believe in the families. So that has become a battle. They don't understand. Previous year, they arrested... they collected all the children on the street, they put them on the buses and sending them back... so we didn't participate in that because, for us, we say that is against the child protection. So I was like, you are taking these children back. Did you assess? Did you work with the reason why the child came with that reason?

(Professional Interview, Tanzania, April 2023)

Did you also work together with the youth welfare office?

Not in my work with the refugees. To be honest, I have the feeling they are looking away.

(Professional Interview, Germany, August 2022)

Domain Three: Partnerships

Related to this, **partnerships were identified as critical to building extra-familial safety for adolescents and yet were often a challenge**. The partner organisations we worked with had a role in advocating to local partners for young people to be seen as in need of support and protection and had varying degrees of integration with other agencies responsible for children's safety and protection. Where this worked well, a range of agencies were able to come together to form a stakeholder group around a specific location, with local vendors, community champions, the youth welfare office and a range of other local agencies all meeting to discuss safety planning in the area. **It was crucial that individuals who had reach into the spaces where young people were being harmed – the people who worked in the area (i.e., the bus conductors at the bus terminal) and the people who had existing relationships and presence in the area – were part of this network of support**. Where partnerships were less developed it was unclear who had responsibility for the spaces where young people reported feeling unsafe, or how plans be coordinated to make them safer. As discussed, a key role of such partnerships was aligning people's attitudes and approaches to young people with an inclusive, child welfare approach.

It did not have the impact in that I have more contact now with school social workers within this girl's group or something. Because we just don't have the resources for that. It would need to be a much longer project with extra persons who can put together a network. It always depends on project funds and such things. If there was a position for it, then I would have agreed to perhaps let this project run for an entire year.

(Project Manager Interview, Germany, Feb 2023)

The committee for the child support desk. We've sort of looked at the community [anon area] especially. What kind of people are coming into contact with children. And that's how we've identified the people that we need to engage with. So, bus drivers, the conductors, the small businesspeople around [anon area], the transport people that are in charge of the transport, long distance transport… the police, the social welfare officer. So, we look at the people that are in contact with the children around the bus terminal, and that's how we've identified them as being stakeholders.

(Professional Interview, Tanzania, April 2023)

These community champions... these are the people who are supporting children on the street, and we came to contact them through children themselves. The children, themselves, they told us maybe that food vendor is the one who is supporting us in case I'm sick or in case I have been abused on the street, I normally report it to that mother or to that brother. So we identify them, we conduct the safeguarding training to them and convene a meeting with them. So they're also being ambassadors and also, through those, they are also providing community awareness to the people about the child support desk.

(Professional Interview, Tanzania, April 2023)

Domain Four: Outcomes

There has been much learning for the Contextual Safeguarding Programme through this work as to how creative partnerships can be formed that can deliver interventions that build safety in extra-familial contexts. Whilst not necessarily described as 'Contextual Safeguarding' or 'extra-familial' harm or safety (language that is very specific to the UK) the NGOs we

partnered with were all variably working with young people to identify and understand harm in their environments and in some cases delivering interventions that sought to change the nature of those spaces; i.e. by advocating locally for inclusive attitudes to young people and providing training to local business people to help keep young people safe, or ensuring safe and trusted adults were visible and supported in areas where young people were coming to harm.

One area where the Contextual Safeguarding framework was able to add to the work our project partners were doing was in relation to measuring the impact of existing work not just on individual young people but on spaces and groups. Both organisations, as discussed, were doing brilliant work to support young people to form safe and supportive peer groups that were a vital part of their safety network and in some cases working with community members to promote positive and protective attitudes toward young people. This has individual-level impact; enhancing the safety of individual children and young people, but it also has an impact on how groups of young people are treated and cared for and how inclusive or safe certain areas are for them. Ideas on how to measure impact on spaces and groups were formed throughout the testing and may enhance the work our partners are doing as well as supporting them to communicate the wide-ranging impact of their work. **Measuring 'contextual outcomes' was important as it begins to move us away from work that is limited to educational work with young people to support them to better navigate harmful spaces, instead focussing us on what we can do as adults and professionals to make those spaces safer for them.**

the presence of the child support desk at the bus terminal, it's helped the children and the community to speak out about the incident that's happening around the bus stand

(Professional Interview, Tanzania, April 2023)

I don't have any new insights. Instead, that it's good something is now recognised as a stand-alone project, that something is seen as a topic and that it will be updated, where this topic has been latent existence for a long time already. There has always been the overriding racism, without there so far having been a focus on it contextually and how to address it.

(Professional Interview, Germany, August 2022)

Inequality and extra-familial harm

what can we do when the whole society is working against you, all the violence … the girls have to encounter. How can we contribute to another system when this other system isn't politically wanted? The society or city structure isn't orientated to the needs of young adults, this is not a world that is made for children or young adults. I suggest that for any young person, not just those living in segregated accommodation.

(Field work notes from discussion with professionals, Germany, April 2023)

This international work has raised important questions about the relationship between structural inequality and young people's experiences of violence and abuse beyond their families. What does it mean to create safety for young people in their peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods when government policy, media discourses and the socio-economic conditions in the society are explicitly hostile to young people, particularly those who have insecure immigration status, are racially minoritised, or are living in situations of extreme poverty? These are questions that have begun to emerge from our UK work particularly given how marginalisation and discrimination intersect with young people's experiences of extra-familial risk, and they ways in which policy makers and professionals go on to support them (or not)[7].

I think that's the challenge I see, like, especially when you talk about contextual safeguarding for street-connected children. Just where they are on the streets, it sometimes feels like, is it enough? What we are doing, is it enough? Because, at the end of the day, these children are going back… some of them are going back to sleep on the streets. The street itself is just… it's not safe, and… so it's never feels like it's enough

(Professional Interview, Tanzania, April 2023)

In principle sexism and racism are still very much anchored in our society and it is very difficult to break that. Many things are a drop in the ocean, at least that is what it feels like. So you need to see how you stop this

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[7] Wroe, Lloyd and Manister (2023) From peers and parks to patriarch and poverty: inequalities in young people's experiences of extra-familial harm and the child protection system in Policy Press | Contextual Safeguarding - The Next Chapter, Edited by Carlene Firmin and Jenny Lloyd (bristoluniversitypress.co.uk)

patriarchal system slowly without putting too much on the girls and the mentors and everyone else involved.

(Professional Interview, Germany, August 2022)

Contextual Safeguarding is an ecological and rights-based approach to building safety around young people who are at risk of abuse in extra-familial settings, as we have seen this often involves supporting young people and advocating for their protection from inter-personal forms of violence, but also advocating for a better social contract for young people in general and for marginalised young people in particular. The message is clear from our partners, if we want to help young people to be safer in their communities, we need to seriously integrate considerations of tackling the harms caused by poverty and patriarchal gender norms (for example) into our safeguarding work and into government agendas on ending youth violence and adolescent abuse.

The conditions required to do Contextual Safeguarding

Our Contextual Safeguarding Across Borders international partnerships have enhanced our understanding of the conditions required to do Contextual Safeguarding in the UK and beyond. They have demonstrated to us that:

Target: we need to think about contexts as spaces that can feature hostility and violence not just from individuals who want to abuse children and young people, but from government policy, the media, and that this can trickle down to the community.

Legislative frameworks: that competing legislative frameworks that govern young people's lives (i.e., child protection, policing, immigration) lead to conflicting and contradictory understanding of, and responses to, adolescents experiences of significant harm beyond their families and the extent to which their best interest are prioritised in different decision-making forums.

Partnerships: that creative and broad partnerships, with the people and organisations that young people trust, are critical to building safety for young people who experience/are at risk of abuse in extra-familial settings. These partnerships need to be aligned in their child welfare objectives, have reach into the spaces where young people are harmed, be grounded in deep trust and respect with young people, and be properly resourced.

Outcomes: that it is necessary to measure outcomes in relation to spaces and groups as well as individual young people, this is particularly important for marginalised young people (i.e., refugee or asylum-seeking young people, or those who are living outside of their families and

in situations of extreme poverty) because it is these hostile spaces that need to change and because friendships and peer networks are often such a crucial source of safety and support.

These findings resonate with Contextual Safeguarding testing in England Wales and suggest that the following conditions are required to do Contextual Safeguarding:
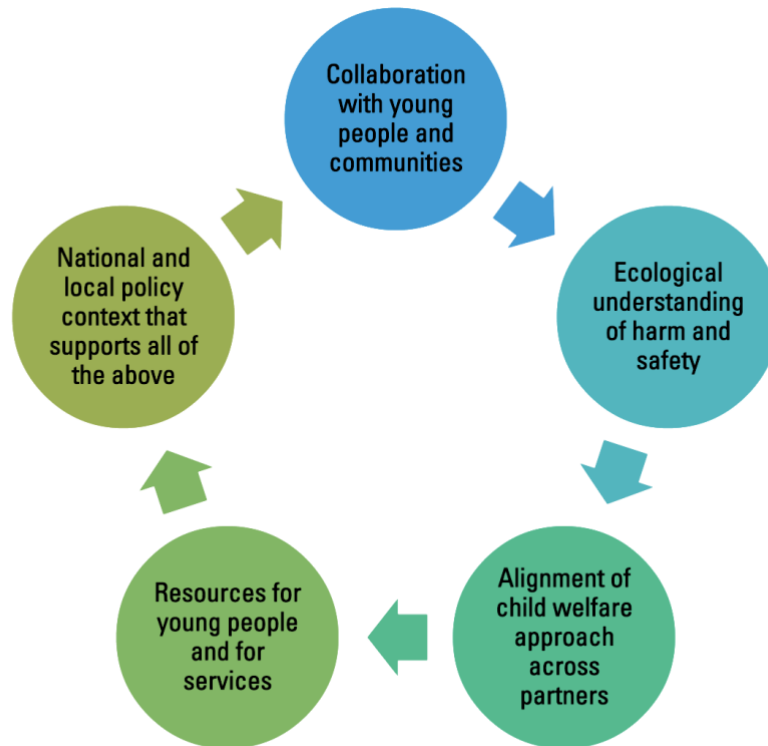

Figure five: The conditions required to do Contextual Safeguarding

Contextual Safeguarding has been developed in response to specific features of UK child protection systems, specifically systems that are centred around parenting capacity and that this results in a system that is focused on parenting and harm that happens in families. It is also an approach that has been developed in a Western nation where individualism and individualised ways of understanding social phenomena, such as violence, are the norm. This cultural context structures how our public services operate, and individualised, behaviourist approaches are the standard in our education, social care and criminal justice systems. Testing Contextual Safeguarding ideas outside of the UK has allowed us to gain insight into how the methods work outside of traditional UK child protection systems and the sorts of social conditions that facilitate a more community-centred and ecological approach. This is not without challenge; westernised models of child protection are increasingly ubiquitous across the globe and a final observation from this work is that rather than seeking to transplant western models (even those that seek to transcend certain elements of the system as

standard) into non-western settings, we should be seeking to mutually learn and un-learn the 'rules' of child protection and be guided by young people, their families and communities, and the contexts of their lives when doing so.

we're aware that it's, sort of, formulated from this UK context, and how can you apply it in your own context in a way that makes sense for what you're experiencing?

Yeah, it feels more natural than foreign. When it feels foreign [it] means you're not really addressing to their real needs, you're looking at 'Okay, this is something we have to do, let's do it', rather than 'Okay, what is needed? What would be, given the circumstances, the situation, what response is needed?

(Professional Interview, Tanzania, April 2023)