

The role of NGOs within Contextual Safeguarding

Learning from our international partnerships



Through the Contextual Safeguarding Across Borders (CSAB) study, we have learnt about doing Contextual Safeguarding with two international NGOs: one supports refugee young people in Germany and the other supports 'street-connected' young people in Tanzania. This document provides a summary of what we have learnt from our international partnerships about the opportunities for NGO involvement in Contextual Safeguarding and shares key considerations for NGOs and voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations generally who are interested in Contextual Safeguarding. Further information about and resources from the CSAB [project](#), including case studies, are available on the Contextual Safeguarding Network.

How can NGOs contribute to Contextual Safeguarding?

Shared values

Both NGOs support young people in alignment with key underlying values and principles of Contextual Safeguarding.



Collaborative and trusted relationships with young people



Acknowledge impact of structural drivers of harm



Informed by young people's lived realities



Rooted in children's rights



Strengths-based – building on relationships (peers, guardians) to build safety

Trusted and collaborative relationships with young people

- Both NGOs are uniquely positioned to build collaborative and trusted relationships with young people, as they have the flexibility and values that enable them to promote and deliver child-centred support.
- These relationships help practitioners to better understand the different contexts of young people's lives and their experiences of harm and safety in these contexts.
- In both settings these relationships of trust contrasted with relationships of distrust that often characterised the interactions between young people and statutory services – such as children welfare services and the police – and with some members of the community. The groups of young people that these NGOs support are often perceived negatively by, and frequently experienced discrimination from, other local agencies and some members of the community.

Working with peer groups to create safety

- Both partners bring young people together and support them through sustained group work. Young people's peer groups play an important role in providing consistent trusted relationships (between the group and practitioners and between young people in the group) and increasing young people's sense of safety and wellbeing in their community. Peer groups provide young people with friendships, a sense of belonging and a space that is their own in environments where often they don't feel welcomed. NGOs that are rooted in youth work or community development models have more opportunity for doing group work than, say, child protection services that tend to work with individual young people and their families. This lends itself well to Contextual Safeguarding with its focus on building safety in extra-familial relationships.
- Safety mapping and peer assessment tools from the Contextual Safeguarding network have helped NGOs better understand how the following contribute to young people's experiences of harm or safety:
 - dynamics within the group
 - how the group perceives itself and is perceived by others in community contexts
 - features of various community contexts that make young people feel safe or unsafe
- Contextual Safeguarding has also prompted both NGOs to consider how they can more explicitly think about the groups of young people they support as a 'context' of safety and record the impact of their group work on the group (alongside the impact of group work on individual young people).

Making spaces safer through community guardianship

NGOs can support safe adults in the local community who regularly interact with and care about young people to act as 'community guardians'. For example, practitioners such as detached youth workers but also any adults that young people can encounter in these spaces – like shop vendors or bus drivers. NGOs can also support young people to access safe spaces where they can enjoy themselves in the local community.

Recognising the impact of structural harm

- Both NGOs already support young people in a way that is ecological, systemic, and that recognises the impact of structural harm on young people's experiences of safety – for example, how poverty, sexism or racism can influence their experiences of safety and harm.
- Context weighting, safety mapping and context assessment tools have helped to highlight the relationship between these broader forms of structural harm and the contexts – the physical spaces – in which young people spend time.

What were the challenges?

Gaps in child protection systems

- The absence of legislation and policies that target extra-familial harm – that is harm beyond young people's families – in both NGOs' respective countries makes it unclear whose responsibility it is to address extra-familial harm. Adolescents impacted by these forms of harm tend to fall through child protection nets or are criminalised.
- In both national contexts children welfare services were described as being under-resourced and intervening primarily in cases of intra-familial abuse. This can make collaborations between NGOs and statutory agencies difficult.

Developing partnerships

- Contextual Safeguarding requires partnership working between statutory agencies (with their duty to protect children from significant harm) and community organisations with a shared vision for providing a child welfare response. This is challenging in the absence of existing structures to facilitate these partnerships and when agencies have different objectives in relation to young people and their families.
- Contextual Safeguarding also requires for all partners to be committed to child welfare approaches to building safety – as opposed to approaches that seek to disrupt young people’s relationships, remove young people from an area and/or criminalise them.

Measuring contextual outcomes

- Extra-familial harm is primarily addressed by changing the behaviour of young people, parenting support, and/or disrupting crime. These approaches tend to be reflected in how services are commissioned and how outcomes and impact are measured.
- There is often pressure to demonstrate impact over short timescales. It is generally considered easier to measure the impact of an intervention on a young person via behaviour change than evidencing how a particular intervention has made a context – i.e. a group of young people and/or a specific location safer. This would require different methods for measuring impact over longer-timescales.
- NGOs/VCS organisations that are already working with peer groups or building safety in the community (for example through supporting community guardians) can begin to record the impact of this work alongside their work with individuals to demonstrate a need for funding and policy that supports contextual work.

Key considerations for NGOs/voluntary organisations

The role of NGOs in building safety to prevent extra-familial harm

Our research in the UK so far has focused on sexual and criminal child exploitation and abuse and violence between peers. In this project the forms of harm that were identified by young people included harassment, racism, sexism, and experiences of hostility from people at school and in the community, as well as experiences of inter-personal abuse and violence. This made us think of **extra-familial harm as happening on a spectrum** covering both what we would refer to in the UK as ‘significant harm’ – i.e. instances of significant inter-personal abuse which warrant the intervention of statutory services and structural harms such as inequality or racism that can lead to experiences of exclusion and marginalisation or surveillance that are harmful and can (but not always) create vulnerabilities to significant inter-personal violence. This raises a number of questions for organisations:

- How does **structural harm** (that is inequalities that are built into the structures of our societies) impact the young people you work with, how do you support them to understand and critically assess those experiences?
- Does your organisation have scope and capacity to work with **partners who have a reach into these contexts** to actively change these spaces? If not, who is doing this work and who needs to know?
- **What sorts of extra-familial harms** impact the young people you work with? How do you talk to young people about this?
- What role does your organisation currently play in **building safety in relation to extra-familial harm**? Who else does this work and where are the gaps?

How can organisations use Contextual Safeguarding?

Depending on how NGOs/voluntary organisations support young people, and how they see their remit in terms of addressing extra-familial harm, Contextual Safeguarding might support their work in various ways, including:

- **Supporting young people who have experienced exploitation and/or violence and abuse in extra-familial contexts:** In the UK for example, some voluntary organisations are adopting Contextual Safeguarding to respond to context-specific needs in innovative ways.
- **Universal services/youth work:** Many organisations might already support young people across different contexts of their lives. Contextual Safeguarding might prompt them to consider opportunities for partnerships with other organisations, agencies, and individuals who have a reach into these contexts – for example through building guardianship around young people (see case studies from the CSAB [study](#)).
- In the UK, some organisations have used the Contextual Safeguarding framework to **build safety within their own organisational contexts** – such as by reviewing their physical spaces or policies (see the [Towards Safety project](#)).

Opportunities and challenges?

- How do the values of Contextual Safeguarding align with your organisation's values?
- What organisational strengths could you build on? (e.g. relationships with young people; existing partnerships/networks; flexible funding)
- Do you already support young people contextually? If so, how do you capture it? (beyond recording outcomes for individuals)
- What would be the key barriers to doing Contextual Safeguarding (organisational/systemic) and how could you overcome them?

LEARN MORE



See other Contextual Safeguarding Across Borders project resources [here](#), and learn more about Contextual Safeguarding [here](#).

