

Malawi Violence Against Women and Girls Prevention and Response Programme

Reflections on Effective Safeguarding Practice within
a Consortium

August 2021

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Introduction

This technical briefing note provides an overview of how effective safeguarding practice was implemented by the consortium delivering the Malawi Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Prevention and Response Programme also known as Tithetse Nkhanza (TN).

Grounded in the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) approach to safeguarding,¹ the TN programme defined safeguarding as “taking all reasonable steps to prevent harm, exploitation, abuse and neglect from occurring – and to protect people from that harm (especially beneficiaries, children and vulnerable adults, such as survivors of violence or people with disabilities) and to adopt a survivor-centred approach to response.”

Establishing appropriate and effective safeguarding policies and procedures amongst independent organisations that have chosen to work together for the delivery of a programme can be complicated. Despite the consortium lead bearing overall accountability toward the populations engaged by the programme, other consortium partners and implementing partners are responsible for ensuring their contributions to the programme embed adequate safeguarding measures to protect both their staff, associated personnel and anyone directly engaged in their work.

Throughout delivery and following programme closure in 2021, TN engaged the leadership of their civil society organisation (CSO) and women’s rights organisation (WRO) partners to glean their views on the safeguarding policies and procedures the programme had established. This brief presents the steps undertaken by the TN consortium to embed effective safeguarding practice across all programme efforts and provides reflections from the team and partners on good practice and lessons learned. This brief was produced in line with TN’s larger commitment to share learning with the wider sector and contribute to the Community of Practice on VAWG. It is hoped that the experiences shared herein will be helpful to others who are seeking to establish effective safeguarding practice within a consortium.

Tithetse Nkhanza

The TN programme aimed to reduce the prevalence of violence against women and girls and support progress towards the full realisation of women and children’s human rights in Malawi. The programme began in 2019 with funding from the UK FCDO and was delivered by a consortium of Tetra Tech International Development, Social Development Direct and Plan International. Regrettably, TN was closed early due to UK aid budget cuts in 2021.

Aspects of the TN programme were also delivered through partnerships with national CSOs and WROs, who were provided accountable grants by Tetra Tech International Development and Plan International. All partners, both consortium partners and ‘downstream’ implementing partners, were accountable for safeguarding the populations they serve, and their own staff, against harm, exploitation, abuse, and neglect.

TN implemented a range of approaches focused on addressing intimate partner violence (IPV), violence within the household, harmful traditional practices such as early marriage, as well as improving response services for survivors. These interventions posed various safeguarding risks which needed to be mitigated, as outlined briefly in **Table 1**.

Who is this paper for?

This paper is for practitioners implementing safeguarding policies and procedures within a consortium. This brief focuses on a programme implemented in Malawi, Southern Africa, but many lessons and learning are relevant to a global audience.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safeguarding-against-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-and-sexual-harassment-seah-in-the-aid-sector>

Table 1: TN programme interventions and associated safeguarding risks

Intervention	Safeguarding risks
VAWG Prevention	
SASA! Together , ² a community mobilisation approach to address the imbalance of power between men and women, girls and boys as a key driver of VAWG.	Risk of sexual exploitation and abuse and harassment (SEAH) perpetrated by TN volunteers engaging with communities, including children and vulnerable adults.
Champions of Change ³ (CoC), aims to advance gender equality through youth engagement, and was adapted specifically to TN to focus on VAWG.	Risk of SEAH perpetrated by TN volunteers engaging with in-school and out-of-school young people aged between 10-18, and caregivers who may be vulnerable adults.
Moyo Olemekezeka (MO) , a women's social and economic empowerment intervention, developed by the TN team drawing from proven, evidence-based models.	Risk of SEAH perpetrated by programme volunteers engaging with couples and in-laws who may be vulnerable adults.
VAWG Response	
Development and rollout of a Gender Transformative Curriculum (GTC) aimed to shift attitudes and associated behaviours of service providers towards VAWG survivors.	Risk of SEAH perpetrated by TN staff against officials within the targeted institutions.
Development and rollout of National VAWG Response Referral Pathway Guidelines across all implementation areas, aimed to show services available for VAWG survivors and standards of case handling for response actors.	Risk of SEAH perpetrated by TN staff against officials within the targeted institutions; officials from state institutions, with weak safeguarding policies & practices, engaging communities; service users experiencing abuse when accessing referral services recommended by TN.
Assessment, capacity building and support to Community Victim Support Units (CVSUs) operating in all implementation areas.	Risk of SEAH perpetrated by TN staff against officials within the targeted institutions; officials from state institutions, with weak safeguarding policies & practices, engaging vulnerable groups.
Creation of a Survivor Support Fund (SSF) and formalised accompaniment services , which provided financial support to women who experienced violence to enable them access to essential VAWG services. The SSF was administered by community-based WROs.	Risk of SEAH perpetrated by programme volunteers engaging with very vulnerable girls and adults seeking protection and other services.
Creation of a Strategic Opportunities Fund (SOF) to support civil society and government institutions to strengthen safeguarding practice.	Risk of SEAH perpetrated by TN staff against officials within the targeted institutions; officials from state institutions, with weak safeguarding policies & practices, engaging vulnerable groups with TN-funded initiatives.

Consortium Structure and Safeguarding Responsibilities

Safeguarding responsibilities were split amongst the three consortium partners with participation and representation provided across multiple levels of the programme's management and governance structures. Consortium partners applied an agile approach to ensuring the programme received sufficient levels of safeguarding technical support in response to the evolving needs of the team and delivery. Implementing partners, in their role delivering key programme activities, also played a central role in delivering safeguarding responsibilities as per the consortium's requirements.

Tetra Tech International Development | As the consortium prime, Tetra Tech was ultimately accountable for safeguarding across the programme. This was managed at a strategic governance level with the Programme

² <https://raisingvoices.org/sasatogether/>

³ <https://plan-international.org/youth-activism/champions-change>

REFLECTIONS ON EFFECTIVE SAFEGUARDING PRACTICE WITHIN A CONSORTIUM

Management Board (PMB), as well as ensuring safeguarding was embedded into the day-to-day implementation of programme activities. The Programme Manager was ultimately responsible for the oversight of any safeguarding case management and reporting to the donor (FCDO). Tetra Tech also ensured the implementing partners they managed adhered to TN's safeguarding policies and procedures. Tetra Tech also provided safeguarding technical expertise, particularly during the start-up and inception phases.

Plan International | Plan International Malawi recruited and managed the Safeguarding Officer at 40% of a full-time equivalent role. The Safeguarding Officer was also TN's Safeguarding Focal Point and bore responsibility for delivering safeguarding activities on a day-to-day basis for the programme. Plan also provided senior technical support, particularly at the early stages of programme implementation.

Social Development Direct | At the time of TN's closure, SDDirect was providing senior safeguarding technical support to the consortium and convened the Safeguarding Steering Committee, which included representatives from all consortium members. SDDirect also provided safeguarding technical support to the in-country Safeguarding Officer to ensure effective delivery of safeguarding responsibilities.

Safeguarding Steering Committee (SCC) | The consortium formed a Safeguarding Steering Committee with representation from each consortium partner, the role of which was to oversee Safeguarding practices through delivery. Further information is provided below.

Implementing partners | Implementing Partners (IPs) were responsible for adhering to TN's safeguarding policies and procedures in the delivery of their work, including developing new procedures as required to meet the programme's requirements. IP management attended safeguarding training provided by TN and were responsible for cascading safeguarding knowledge to their staff and volunteers to ensure familiarity with the policies and procedures, all of whom were required to sign the Tetra Tech Code of Conduct.

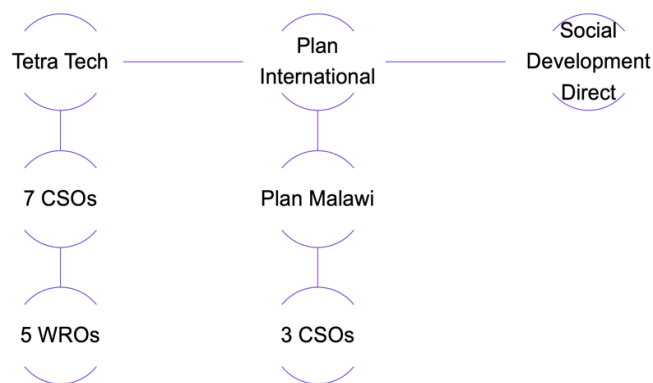
TN Safeguarding Policies and Procedures

As the consortium prime, Tetra Tech reviewed each consortium partners' safeguarding policies and procedures during programme inception, so that each partner's strengths were understood, and differences in safeguarding approaches were identified. The consortium acknowledged the need for a programme-wide, contextualised set of safeguarding policies and procedures that were relevant to the Malawian context. To achieve this, Tetra Tech's Safeguarding Policy and Code of Conduct was agreed to by all consortium partners to be the foundational set of policies. A subsequent Safeguarding Framework was developed specific to the TN programme.

All TN staff were trained on the programme's safeguarding policies and procedures and were required to sign the Code of Conduct. Refresher training was provided for staff during a TN learning review dedicated to safeguarding.

For implementing partners, the policies and procedures were included in partnership agreements and in-depth training was provided as well as on-going support. Had programme activities continued, partners would have undergone regular safeguarding monitoring visits from TN's Safeguarding Officer.

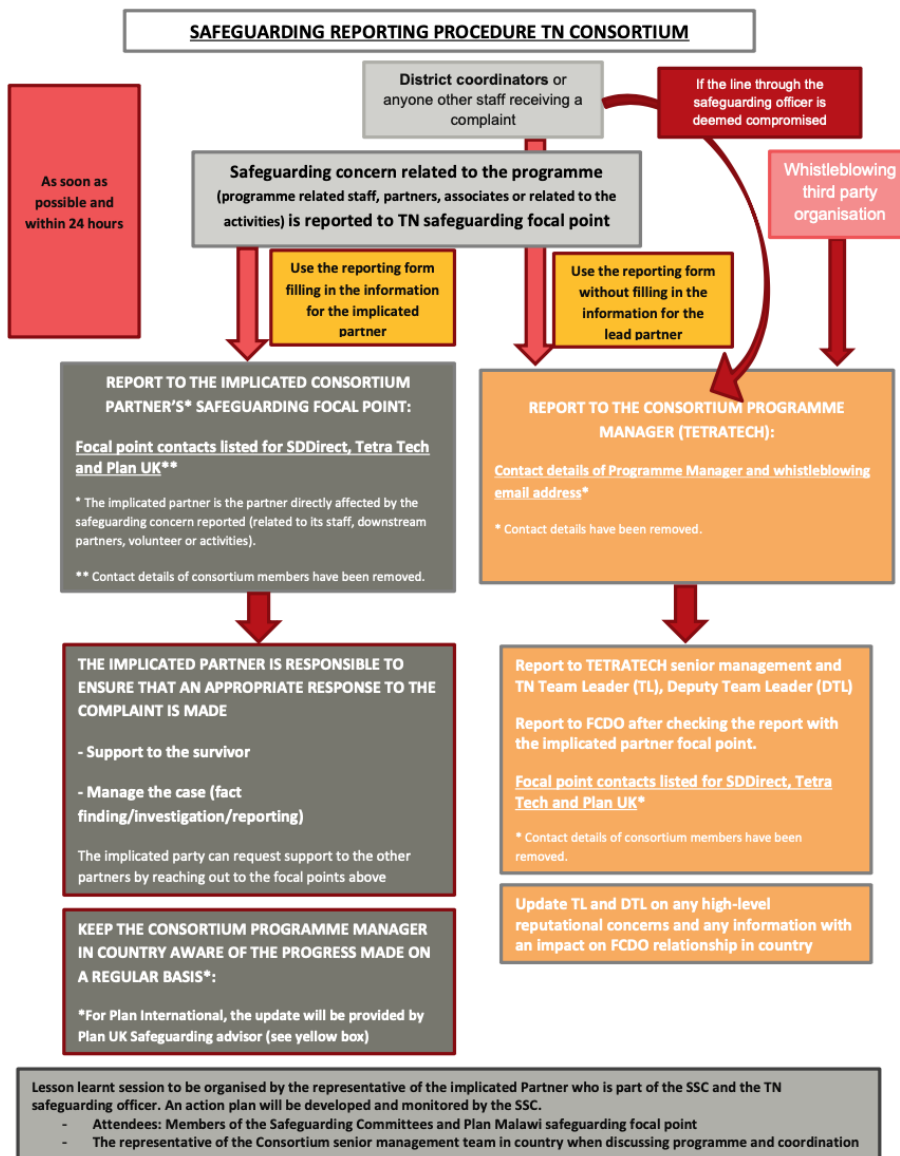
Figure 1: TN consortium structure



TN reporting procedures

It was essential that the consortium was aligned on safeguarding reporting procedures. As depicted in **Figure 2**, incident reports would be sent to the implicated consortium partner's safeguarding focal point, or the TN Programme Manager, depending on the mechanism used by the complainant to raise the concern. Consortium partners bore responsibility for all aspects of case handling if the concern related to an activity they managed, their staff, or an implementing partner they contracted. The consortium partner was able to request support from other consortium members as they deemed appropriate. Outside of the consortium partner, the Programme Manager was made aware of the report as well as the Safeguarding Steering Committee. This meant that any report concerning an implementing partner did not involve staff from that organisation and was solely managed by the consortium partner. Whilst this has merits in the levels of confidentiality and independence maintained, not including implementing partners in the case handling procedure did raise challenges that are explored further below.

Figure 2: TN safeguarding reporting flowchart



What Worked Well

Prioritising safeguarding from the outset

Safeguarding was a priority issue for consortium partners at the bidding stage. Significant effort went into reviewing all consortium members' safeguarding policies to identify strengths and areas that differed from each other. This initial effort reaped benefit when the TN Safeguarding Framework was written during the inception phase as the groundwork had already been done. The programme's start-up workshop also provided the consortium an opportunity to come together and discuss in-depth their approach to safeguarding, which facilitated the identification of strengths and existing safeguarding skills across the three organisations, and individual team members. It was also effective for agreeing the level of resourcing and seniority required for safeguarding posts within the programme. An agile approach was also taken with regard to safeguarding resource allocation. The senior technical support that was provided shifted amongst the consortium partners, particularly from inception to implementation, dependent on resource availability, personnel availability and expertise required. This was critical as it allowed for flexible resource allocation to respond to demand in an evolving and adaptive programme.

An established and effective Safeguarding Steering Committee

The Safeguarding Steering Committee (SSC) included a technical expert from each consortium partner, the Deputy Team Leader, TN Safeguarding Officer and Programme Manager. The initial ambition was to hold monthly meetings though this was not consistently achieved during programme delivery, due to the fast-paced, high ambition of the programme, which resulted in these meetings being convened less frequently. When convened, the SSC discussed a range of issues, including strategic matters to raise with the Programme Management Board, resourcing, learning and good practice, and risks. The SSC did not have a formal role in case handling and management. The Safeguarding Officer was able to use the forum to highlight immediate issues they felt they required support and guidance on. Other SSC members benefitted from the opportunity these meetings provided to remain connected to the programme, especially those who did not have a direct role in supporting the implementation of safeguarding activities.

In-depth training provided to implementing partners

All implementing partners participated in a 3.5-day training workshop dedicated to safeguarding, as well as refresher training throughout programme implementation. The training covered a theoretical framing of safeguarding, definitions of key concepts addressed in the TN Safeguarding Policy, root causes of harm and abuse of power, reporting and response mechanisms, survivor-centred approaches, identifying, mitigating and monitoring safeguarding risks, consent, and awareness-raising. Multiple staff from each implementing partner organisation were invited to attend the training to ensure the information and knowledge acquired could be cascaded through to all implementing partner staff and programme participants. Implementing partners were provided with the training material for reference.

Strengthened implementing partner safeguarding policy and practice

It is no surprise that when forming a consortium of three consortium partners and nine implementing partners, organisations were at different stages in relation to having established safeguarding policies and practice in place, with varying levels of staff knowledge and technical ability on safeguarding. In some cases, TN's safeguarding policies and procedures were more robust and detailed than the implementing partners'. As implementing partners were required to follow TN's policies as part of the partnership agreement, several organisations noted that they drew from TN's policies to expand and strengthen their own organisational safeguarding policy and practice that was eventually applied to their work beyond the TN programme.

"TN's safeguarding policies were more detailed than our internal code of conduct and therefore, we prioritised TN's version over our own. We ended up merging the two together which was positive as it improved our own policy."

Foundation for Community Support Services (FOCUS), TN Implementing Partner

Lessons for Improvement

The need for clear roles and responsibilities

Despite roles and responsibilities for safeguarding being defined between consortium partners during inception, as programme delivery commenced this structure was confronted with the reality of implementation. At times, this meant that some key decisions on safeguarding lacked ownership as each consortium partner had a role and some level of responsibility for various areas of safeguarding. This created complexity around some difficult decisions, such as resourcing requirements for safeguarding positions and a difference of opinion in terms of the level of seniority required for the Safeguarding Officer role. The need for greater levels of safeguarding expertise also evolved during implementation, as the consortium partners identified team skillsets and gaps. When such issues became apparent, a series of discussions ensured collective agreement was achieved. Such matters arose less frequently as the SSC became an established forum and many of these discussions were held and flagged to the appropriate decision-makers as required.

Recommendation | It is inevitable that multiple organisations joining together as a consortium will have different experiences, approaches, and expectations for how to ensure effective safeguarding practice is embedded throughout programmatic work. The TN consortium's approach was effective in that the safeguarding responsibility each partner had played to their organisation's strength and relevance to their role in the consortium. However, when multiple consortium members are responsible for safeguarding, it is necessary to have a clear matrix in place that clarifies each partner's role in the decision-making process. During the inception phase, practitioners should map out all areas where decisions about safeguarding are required so the management team has oversight of the types of decisions required to be made and when. This process should be regularly reviewed because, as was TN's experience, the reality of implementation will bring forward issues that were not contemplated. A skills mapping exercise will also help to identify the levels of expertise within a team structure and will expose gaps where additional expertise is required. Whilst the agile and fluid approach to resourcing safeguarding expertise provided some benefits to the programme, upon reflection, a programme of this scale and nature would have benefitted from dedicated safeguarding resources with a deep level of skills and expertise.

Maintaining safeguarding as a priority

TN was a fast-paced, high ambition programme that was required to report tangible achievements on a quarterly basis to its donor. There were times when some safeguarding activities were de-prioritised due to other urgent external or internal matters arising, with the exception of responding to safeguarding reports or complaints which were always prioritised. It is not unusual for programmes to face multiple, competing deadlines that place unrealistic expectations on teams to deliver, or be faced with difficult decisions on where to invest finite resources. However, in TN's case, this sometimes resulted in resources being diverted from safeguarding priorities. For example, the establishment of a toll-free line as an additional mechanism for programme participants to report safeguarding concerns was delayed during the start-up phase and therefore was inactive when the programme's implementation started. Likewise, implementing partners did not adequately factor in time and resources to deliver cascaded safeguarding training, which resulted in shorter training sessions being held with their staff and volunteers. At a strategic level, safeguarding policies were not reviewed after their initial development due to other competing priorities that required management's time. A review was underway in early 2021 prior to the programme's closure. Lastly, only 40% of a full-time position was allocated for the Safeguarding Officer, which placed significant time constraints on their ability to fully perform their safeguarding duties.

Recommendation | Safeguarding personnel and activities must be adequately budgeted for in order to deliver effective prevention, mitigation, and response work. Consortium partners must consult their safeguarding technical experts early on in programme planning and implementation to ensure sufficient safeguarding needs are identified. Certain safeguarding procedures will also take time to develop, such as community reporting mechanisms. Programme implementers should ensure adequate time is built in during programme start-up to ensure effective and appropriate mechanisms can be designed. Donors could also ask for evidence that reporting mechanisms have been established before moving from inception to delivery, providing the inception period is long enough to allow for quality processes to be held to inform the development of appropriate reporting mechanisms. It is also important to build reflection sessions with the consortium and implementing partners into the programme, to review areas of good practice and identify risks or concerns. Where donors set challenging expectations that could compromise on safeguarding work, it is vital to communicate this and agree alternative solutions that do not jeopardise the quality of such work. At a programme management and governance level, ensure safeguarding remains a recurring agenda item and periodically invite safeguarding team members to provide updates and feedback on areas that require attention and support. Lastly, it is important that staff with safeguarding responsibilities have sufficient time built into their portfolio to execute their role, such as attending meetings like the SSC. Identifying someone with responsibility for convening meetings will help drive accountability.

Building and sustaining safeguarding knowledge and confidence across a consortium

With a total staff and volunteer team of approximately 270 people, the TN programme adopted a model of cascade training in order to reach all programme associates with safeguarding training. This cascade model, though lower cost, created a number of challenges and ultimately reduced its cost-effectiveness. Despite an initial 3.5-day training workshop with a select number of implementing partner staff, and refresher training, it is unrealistic to expect non-safeguarding experts to cascade technical training. Safeguarding involves a host of complex concepts and approaches that can be context specific and highly nuanced. Expecting the same level of technical accuracy to be communicated through multiple

cascaded trainings was a heavy toll to place on implementing partners. This resulted in lower quality outputs than anticipated, and lower levels of confidence and knowledge on safeguarding. Implementing partners also struggled to find the time with their busy workloads to schedule in cascade training to their colleagues, volunteers and programme participants. In some cases, safeguarding training was embedded into other training which did not leave enough time to adequately go through the training material.

Recommendation | Practitioners should ensure that adequate staff time and financial resources are factored into programme budgeting and planning. It is a core cost that is often overlooked, under resourced or compromised in some way, for example tagging safeguarding training onto an already packed training programme. Sufficient resources must also be invested in safeguarding training, ensuring skilled trainers are able to deliver in-depth training to staff with varied skills and knowledge of safeguarding. It is also critical that ongoing support and technical guidance be provided to implementing partners to build their safeguarding expertise. Safeguarding technical clinics could be offered which would allow implementing partners to access technical expertise on specific areas they require support on. Having set standards for embedding safeguarding across organisational policy, procedures and practice, and supporting partners to understand them and be able to meet, them will contribute to benchmarking strong safeguarding across all programme activities. Monitoring visits are also a critical opportunity to allocate time to review safeguarding practice and identify areas where further support is required. Developing a robust monitoring checklist to review core safeguarding areas will ensure all critical areas are regularly reviewed. Lastly, building an open, safe and trusted relationship with implementing partners will encourage dialogue, questions and requests for support from implementing partners. Without this, it is likely that consortium members will not have a complete picture of the reality on the ground which could lead to harm occurring.

“Our team was trained and then they trained the facilitators and mentors. Safeguarding was just one topic in the wider training rather than a standalone training. The facilitators and mentors were to pass on information to young people and parents, but it was not done in detail. A lack of time was a challenge, and a trickle-down approach diminished the quality.”

Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), TN Implementing Partner

Investigation procedures and the role of implementing partners

As noted above, TN’s reporting and response procedures stated that investigations into complaints should be undertaken by consortium partners only. In an event whereby an implementing partner staff member or volunteer was the subject of a complaint, the contracting consortium partner was responsible for undertaking that investigation. Furthermore, only the safeguarding focal people from that consortium partner would be privy to the details of the investigation to protect the confidentiality of the complainant and subject of the complaint. Whilst some partners commented that they felt it was appropriate that TN would investigate a complaint against the partner’s own staff member ‘independently’ and that the partner’s management be excluded from involvement, others felt that this may not be appropriate. Concerns were raised relating to the constraints a partner organisation would face in undertaking disciplinary action as a result of a substantiated allegation if they were not involved in the investigation. Another partner commented that they would feel ‘embarrassed’ if a complainant who was a community member or community activist used TN’s direct reporting line to report concerns about the partner’s staff over their own management body, stating that it would ‘*paint a bad picture that we’re not trusted to offer assistance*’.

Recommendation | Though TN made concerted efforts to ensure that all partners understood the justification behind various policy positions relating to investigating complaints, and felt comfortable with these, the feedback from implementing partners noted above suggests that the investigation procedure may not have been fully understood or accepted. As such, consortia leads should consult implementing partners during programme inception periods on specific safeguarding policies and procedures before implementation begins to ensure the right balance is struck between impartiality, robust procedures, and ownership and buy-in of all partners. The fundamental principles of confidentiality and independence cannot be compromised, but all partners who are accountable to a policy should be included when designing procedures to ensure they are fit for purpose. This will also help to clarify expectations and the role of all consortium partners from the outset.