

Misean Cara Learning Brief 2020/02

# Coming Together to Keep Children Safe

Learning from the experience of the Inter-congregational  
Child Safeguarding Group in Kenya



## Introduction

Since 2017, Misean Cara member organisations working in Kenya have joined forces, working together and sharing skills to keep children safe, both within the projects they manage, and through advocacy and awareness-raising throughout Kenya and even into neighbouring countries. This has been achieved through the development of an **Inter-congregational Child Safeguarding Group** of Misean Cara members in Kenya.<sup>1</sup>

Given the importance of this initiative, and Misean Cara's belief that this experience could generate

valuable learning on child safeguarding for development projects in other countries, an investigation of the Kenya Safeguarding Group's experience became a key element of our "*Transformative Child Safeguarding*" research programme in 2019.<sup>2</sup>

This learning brief summarises the history of the Inter-congregational Child Safeguarding Group, Misean Cara's research with the members of the group, the research findings, and the main lessons learnt.

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### The main events in the history of the Inter-congregational Child Safeguarding Group, 2016-2018

2016	Safeguarding workshop with all Misean Cara members in Kenya: The idea of forming a committee was born.
2017	Steering Committee established on a voluntary basis. Election of Committee officers: Chair, Secretary, Treasurer etc. Meetings: Identifying needs among member organisations. Gradually growing membership as more groups join. Planning Safeguarding training for 2018. First funding proposal to Misean Cara.
2018	Training for religious leaders and safeguarding officers. Major planning meeting in Kitale. Funding received from Misean Cara. Expansion of Steering Committee with new members joining. Election of new officers. Creation of task focused Sub-Committees. Planning a new funding proposal. Steering Committee capacity-building and team building. Members providing mutual support to one another.
2019	Misean Cara's <i>Transformative Child Safeguarding</i> research team visited the group in January 2019. The visit is described on the following page.

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<sup>1</sup> The group was originally known as the "Child Safeguarding Steering Committee" and is referred to by this name in Misean Cara's research report. The members decided to adopt the new name "Inter-congregational Child Safeguarding Group" later in 2019, and so that newer name is now used in this learning brief.

<sup>2</sup> The findings of the "*Transformative Child Safeguarding*" research programme are discussed in Misean Cara's Learning Brief 2020/01: <https://www.miseancara.ie/public-resources/>. In addition, the full research report is available at: <http://www.miseancara.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Safeguarding-Research-Final-Report-25-Feb-2020.pdf>

## “Sistematización” of the experience of the Misean Cara members’ Inter-Congregational Child Safeguarding Group in Kenya

The Misean Cara members’ Inter-congregational Child Safeguarding Group in Kenya was seen as a unique initiative, in that it represents the coming together of 17 of Misean Cara’s member organisations working in collaboration to enhance the practice of child safeguarding throughout the country by creating awareness, building capacity and sharing knowledge and resources. The research team therefore sought the most appropriate methodological approach to investigate the experience of this group and maximise the potential learning from it.



*As the first stage in the “sistematización” process, Group members put their heads together to capture their shared experience.*

This is where a group of people who have lived through a shared experience – in this case the founding and subsequent development of the Child Safeguarding Group – come together to recount, capture, and reflect on that experience in a structured way that enables the key lessons learnt at each stage to be acknowledged, explored, analysed and re-formulated, and by doing so maximises the potential for sharing and reproducing the learning (see photos in this Learning Brief). A significant feature of *sistematización* is that it can only be done by the people who have personally lived through the experience. It can also be seen as a powerful example of “learning without teaching”.

The *sistematización* workshop was hosted by the De La Salle Brothers at their education centre in Nairobi on 15 January 2019. Thirteen people participated from nine Misean Cara member organisations. During the workshop they re-captured and reflected on this shared experience, and were supported by the researchers in a structured analysis to draw out the lessons learned.



*Completing the sistematización: Reflecting on the challenges faced along the way and how they were confronted.*

In addition, twelve in-depth individual interviews were carried out with key people representing Misean Cara members and projects that are active participants in the Group. As with the Key Informant Interviews carried out during other project visits, consent was sought to record the interviews for the purpose of researcher fact-checking only. A range of key documents produced by the group and its members over the preceding two years was also studied for background information.

The important lessons learnt, as captured by the *sistematización* process, are summarised in the following pages.



*Child Safeguarding Group members participating in the Sistematización, including Misean Cara Mentor Paul Gichuki, with research facilitators Harry Shier and Rose Kioko.*

## Learning from experience

### 1. The value of mutual support

Working together, sharing knowledge, resources and experiences, and supporting one another has helped everyone to progress on safeguarding. This is most clearly seen in the experience of the smaller organisations, some of whom are only setting out on the road to safeguarding. They have been able to receive support and guidance from more experienced, better resourced organisations in drawing up their first safeguarding policies, and subsequently in building the capacity to implement these in practice.

The larger organisations, particularly those that have experienced safeguarding specialists in their ranks, may be seen to give more than they get, but by working in solidarity in this way, they too continue to learn and grow, enhancing the depth of their knowledge and the reach of their influence to keep children safe throughout society.

Quite apart from the sharing of skills and resources, many members of the group spoke of being energised, inspired and renewed in their commitment just by meeting and sharing with others at their regular meetings and workshops.

### 2. Diverse skills for different roles

As the group drew up its plans, it became clear that in order to achieve its goals, there were many jobs to be done, requiring a wide range of knowledge, skills and experience. The tasks to be covered included: Communications, media and publicity; office administration; finance and fund-raising; needs analysis, research and surveys; capacity-building, including staff training; producing training materials and resources; advocacy with government agencies and working the legal system; providing counselling and peer support to members who need help.

To help focus the collective effort where it was needed, the group established four sub-committees: Training and Capacity-Building, Advocacy and Networking, Finance and Resource Mobilisation, and Logistics. This created opportunities for every member to volunteer their particular skills, contribute to the maximum and at the same time continue their own learning and growth.

### 3. Getting away from the capital

The challenge of involving those based a long way from the capital was raised by several members, and, of course, the problem that “everything happens in the capital city” is not unique to Kenya. Although one

important planning meeting was held in the regional city of Kitale in 2018 and members spoke positively about this experience, in general the group’s meetings are held in the capital, Nairobi.

This problem does not have an easy solution. In many countries, efforts to move major meetings away from the capital, while welcomed by those close to the alternative venue, have led to consistently lower attendance overall. Another option suggested by members is to have those based some distance from the capital organise sub-regional meetings or establish working groups bringing people in their own region together to tackle local issues. Similarly, training workshops and other capacity-building events can be hosted at regional locations. As rural internet connectivity improves, the use of virtual meetings may provide a partial solution.

### 4. The policy document is the first step

Adopting a Safeguarding Policy is an important first step for every organisation. Indeed, no member organisation can receive financial support from Misean Cara until such a policy is in place, and other donors are likely to have similar requirements. While all the active members of the group, who are members of Misean Cara and in receipt of funding, have their Safeguarding Policies in place, it was noted that there are still small religious groups, often in remote locations, who do not yet have such policies in place. Group members have been willing to share their experience and expertise in this area with such groups by providing examples and templates, and advising on how to draft and adopt appropriate policies.

The bigger problem identified by the group, however, is that faced by groups who have adopted a policy, but feel they lack the skills and resources needed to ensure its proper implementation. Here again, the Safeguarding Group has an important role to play, organising training and capacity-building, and sharing resources, so that such groups can identify the actions they need to take to turn policy into practice.

### 5. Backing up passion and commitment with financial support

Many interviewees spoke about the extraordinary level of voluntary commitment shown by the members of the group. In the early stages, the group had no resources of its own and depended entirely on people giving their time and energy freely to keep going. At the same time, however, when talking about the challenges they faced, members mentioned how busy everyone was, as everyone already had a full-time commitment to their own organisation, with the work of the Safeguarding

Group as an extra commitment on top of this. In analysing the group's achievements, it was indeed impressive to see how much had been done through this purely voluntary commitment. Some people saw this as a corollary of their faith-based approach, or what Misean Cara would describe as the "Missionary Approach to Development".

At the same time, interviewees spoke of the great difference it made when the group received financial support from Misean Cara in 2018. Although this did not pay for staff time, and members continued to commit their time and energy voluntarily, it did cover the logistical cost of activities like meetings and training events, and greatly eased the burden on the active member organisations who had previously had to find these extra resources. The consensus of members was that the group had achieved an astonishing amount without resources, but a great deal more once Misean Cara's financial support became available.

## 6. The importance of leadership support and buy-in

A challenge mentioned by several interviewees, particularly the religious, was that their own leaders were often reluctant to release them from their normal duties so they could participate in the Safeguarding Group's activities. Often this was on the grounds that, for example, a Sister could not be spared from her daily duties at the clinic or school where she worked. However, interviewees indicated that behind this was either a lack of awareness, or worse, an unwillingness to engage with the issue.

Given the hierarchical structure of most religious organisations, maintaining a commitment to the work of the Safeguarding Group without the support of one's religious superiors is almost impossible. Whilst it was noted that overall leadership support for safeguarding has improved, in some instances the necessary support is still lacking. Continuing to influence church leadership and gain stronger backing for safeguarding work therefore remains a priority for the group.

## 7. Harmonising with government policy, standards and guidelines

Several interviewees mentioned the importance of working in harmony with policies, standards and guidelines established by the government. It was pointed out that in general Kenya has positive and progressive laws and policies in relation to child protection, and a local authority infrastructure in place to put these into

practice throughout the country. On the other hand, it was also pointed out that under-resourcing, lack of capacity and corruption often prevent progressive policies from being implemented in practice.

Harmonisation with government policy and standards is particularly important in the area of staff training, both in getting official recognition or validation for local qualifications, and in ensuring that all those working with children know and understand the legal framework and how to use it to advantage in keeping children safe.

## 8. Advocacy and influence

As well as making sure children were safe and protected from harm within their own organisations, group members expressed a commitment to advocacy and awareness-raising in the wider society. The focus of such advocacy might include promoting children's rights, challenging harmful traditional practices such as FGM and child marriage, encouraging alternatives to corporal punishment, campaigning for justice for survivors of abuse, and greater accountability on the part of duty-bearers.

## 9. From informal gathering to legal identity

When asked about their future plans, several members prioritised the establishment of an autonomous legal identity for the group. At the time of our research the then "Steering Committee" had no legal status other than as an informal gathering of representatives of Misean Cara member organisations with a shared interest in child safeguarding. This was seen as a weakness for two reasons. First, the group had no authority to act independently, since control rested ultimately with the leadership of the religious organisations its members belonged to. Given that some religious leaders' support for safeguarding work can at times be lacking as referred to above, this structure was seen as putting undue constraints on the group's potential influence and effectiveness.

Secondly, the group's members saw the enhancement and diversification of funding as crucial to its long-term growth and development. Without an autonomous legal identity, it had no bank account and was ineligible to present proposals to most major donors. Members believed a number of donors would be interested in supporting the Safeguarding Group's work once it had its own legal structure and identity. Establishing this was thus a priority issue for members.

## **The power of coming together to keep children safe: Nine key learnings from the Inter-congregational Child Safeguarding Group's experience**

1. Working together brings collective strength, mutual support, a stronger voice, inspiration and motivation; together you can achieve more.
2. Working together means every member can offer their skills, contribute to the maximum and at the same time continue their own learning and growth.
3. Everything doesn't have to be in the capital city
4. The safeguarding policy document is just a first step: training, implementation, monitoring and review are ongoing.
5. Much can be achieved with passion and commitment; but more can be achieved with financial support.
6. Leadership support and buy-in are crucial, especially in organisations with a hierarchical structure based on top-down governance.
7. It pays to work in harmony with government policy, standards and guidelines.
8. Working as a collective strengthens capacity for advocacy and influence all the way to national government level.
9. The collective can start out as an informal gathering with shared commitment, but sooner or later will need to consider establishing an independent legal identity – for autonomy, influence and access to external funding.

## **About Misean Cara**

Established in 2004, Misean Cara is an international and Irish faith-based missionary development movement made up of 88 member organisations working in over 50 countries. We work with some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in developing countries. Adopting a human rights focus, we support communities addressing basic needs in the areas of education, health, and livelihoods, as well as advocating for economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. At times of humanitarian crisis, the trusted and long-term presence of missionaries in affected communities also allows for rapid, efficient and targeted responses.

Misean Cara and our members work collectively and individually through the missionary approach to development. This framework is based on five values: respect, justice, commitment, compassion and integrity. Together, these establish the basis for the approach of missionaries to good development practice.

Our Strategy 2017-2021 identifies five goals:

- Uphold the right to quality education
- Uphold the right to better health, clean water and sanitation
- Uphold the right to sustainable livelihoods
- Uphold and advocate for human rights
- Enhance and promote the missionary approach to development.

Further expressing our desire to reach the most vulnerable and marginalised, the Strategy sees Misean Cara bringing a particular focus to bear on targeting five groups: women, children, refugees, displaced people and people with disabilities.

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An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála