

Transformative Child Safeguarding

**Learning from Misean Cara's International
Research Project**



misean cara
Mission Support from Ireland

Introduction

'Safeguarding' or 'keeping children safe' encompasses what is commonly understood as 'child protection' but extends this to recognition of children as active agents engaged in keeping themselves and their peers safe, rather than passive recipients who have protective measures applied to them.

Given the many hundreds of missionary development projects working with children and vulnerable people which Misean Cara supports around the world, safeguarding has been a priority area for the organisation for the past decade. Our funding guidelines make it a requirement that all members receiving financial support from Misean Cara have their own safeguarding policy in place, and our continuous monitoring programme ensures that these policies are implemented.

Misean Cara's strategic approach¹ integrates (a) the Missionary Approach to Development, (b) a strong human rights focus, and (c) contemporary best practice in development, all of which can potentially contribute to a firm framework for keeping children safe. In this context, exploring the current safeguarding practice and experience of missionaries and their allies, and the challenges they are facing, was identified as a priority research focus for Misean Cara.

This Learning Brief summarises the findings of a research project designed and led by Misean Cara in 2018 and 2019. It presents an approach to safeguarding that can truly be described as "transformative", and signposts the way for a strategic initiative where our missionary member organisations and their projects will be supported in committing to this transformative approach, going beyond obligatory policy compliance, to one that engages with children as both rights-holders and stakeholders.

The full report is available on Misean Cara's website.²

Why "Transformative" safeguarding?

In this report, the term "transformative" is not used lightly or without good reason. The approach to safeguarding described here is truly transformative because, as the evidence in this report demonstrates, it contributes to not one, but *five* social transformations:

1. It **empowers children**, helping them become active agents, contributing to keeping themselves and others safe from harm, advocating for change and defending their right to live without violence.
2. It **transforms social attitudes** in parents, teachers, community leaders and other adults, allowing them to see their own children, and the children of their school or community, in a new light, as rights-holders and agents of change.
3. It transforms projects such as schools, colleges, children's centres, health centres etc., so they become **places of safety and security** in themselves, and beacons of good practice for the wider community.
4. Over time it can be instrumental in transforming the **culture of society**, contributing to the stripping away of outdated values, beliefs and practices that are harming children, such as harmful traditional practices, valuing of corporal punishment, domestic violence, male domination, impunity of the powerful, shame and stigma for survivors etc.
5. All the above combine to transform the reality of **children's daily lives**; they are less exposed to risk, better defended, living more secure lives with less discrimination and greater freedom to grow and thrive.

	Key informant Interviews (all adults)			Focus Group Discussions						TOTAL
				Adults			Children			
	M	F	Sub-Total	M	F	Sub-Total	M	F	Sub-Total	
Kenya	8	9	17	21	48	69	63	76	139	225
South Africa	13	10	23	0	24	24	27	18	45	92
Nigeria	20	13	33	7	7	14	7	13	20	67
Uganda	13	24	35	24	30	54	23	16	39	128
Sub-totals	54	56	108	52	109	161	120	123	243	512
ICSG Kenya										25
GRAND TOTAL										537

¹ Misean Cara (2017), *Walking Together to Transform Lives, Misean Cara's strategy 2017-2021*

<http://www.miseancara.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/FINAL-Misean-Cara-Strategy-20172021.pdf>

² Misean Cara (2020), *Transformative Child Safeguarding. Insights from Missionary Development Projects in Africa*

<http://www.miseancara.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Safeguarding-Research-Final-Report-25-Feb-2020.pdf>

13 projects participating in the research



Focus group of children participating in the St Patrick's Missionary Society's **Sharing Education and Learning for Life (SELL)** project in Bauchi, Nigeria.



Children at **Village of Joy, Rushooka**, participating in focus group with help from adult support staff (Viatores Christi).



Focus group of children at **Children in Need** project, **Mukono**, Uganda (Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary).



Participants in a focus group of young people participating in the **Carmelite Youth Project** in Enugu, Nigeria.

Nigeria

Uganda

Kenya

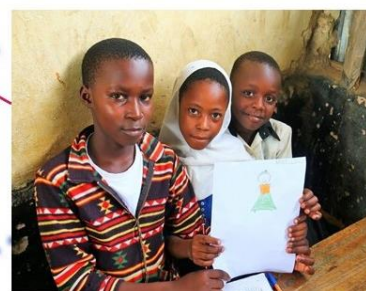
South Africa



Students attending the **Franciscan Primary School, Ogwashi-uku**, Nigeria (Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception).



Participants in focus group at **Twezimbe Integrated Development Programme, Jinja** (Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa).



Girls' Focus group at **Haki Yetu** (St. Patrick's Missionary Society).



Focus group of children participating in **Edmund Rice Camps** in Cape Town (Edmund Rice Development).



Focus Group of children participating in the **Catholic Institute of Education's 'Building Peaceful Schools'** project at Subiaco Primary School, Polokwane (Holy Cross Sisters/Salesians of Don Bosco).



Lessons in progress at **St Francis School, Korogocho** (Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa).



Girls' focus group at **St Teresa's Primary School, Port Elizabeth** (Missionary Sisters of the Assumption).



Girls Focus Group at the **TFGM project** in Isinya (Loreto Sisters).



Kenya Safeguarding Steering Committee members, including Misean Cara Mentor Paul Gichuki, with research facilitators Harry Shier and Rose Kioko.

Research methodology

The research used a qualitative social research methodology with a multi-stakeholder in-depth case-study approach to engage with 13 Misean-Cara-funded development projects in four African countries (Kenya, Uganda, South Africa and Nigeria). A core research team was formed, consisting of two Misean Cara staff with specialist expertise and two external research collaborators from Nairobi-based consultancy team Out of the Box Kenya. The core team was supported by Misean Cara's Development Mentors based in East, West and Southern Africa, and other members of Misean Cara's Dublin-based staff and management. The field research was carried out between September 2018 and June 2019.

In each country three contrasting missionary development projects were selected to participate in the research (see next page). In each project evidence was gathered on the organisation and its stakeholders' understanding of, approach to, and day-to-day practice of safeguarding and the challenges it brings, the current state of safeguarding and the lessons learned over time. This was done through in-depth discussion over several days with multiple stakeholders, including children and adolescents, parents, guardians, care-givers, teachers and local leaders (elected, traditional, local government and church leaders), backed by desk research. In total 108 Key Informant Interviews and 61 Focus Group Discussions with 512 participants (269 adults and 243 children/adolescents) were held across the twelve case-study projects (details in table overleaf). A separate in-depth investigation was undertaken to learn from the collective experience of the Misean Cara members' Inter-congregational Child Safeguarding Group (ICSG) in Kenya (covered in Learning Brief 2020/02³), bringing the total number of research participants to 537. Following the field visits the extensive data was compiled and analysed using a bespoke thematic analysis methodology to create a final report.

A notable feature of this work was the rigorous and robust ethical research guidelines and oversight process that Misean Cara created, involving regular meetings of a specialist advisory group including external safeguarding and child research experts. This ensured that the voices of vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, could be heard and valued on this sensitive topic.

Member validation

On completion of the data analysis and drafting of the report, all participating projects and their supporting Misean Cara Member Organisations were invited to participate in a final validation process. This involved validation meetings in Lagos and Nairobi (with projects based in Uganda participating in the Nairobi meeting), and a virtual validation event organised via internet at multiple locations to facilitate the participation of the widely dispersed participants in South Africa.



Members' validation event in Nairobi, September 2019

After this series of validation events, the draft report was revised again, and all Misean Cara's Members were invited to a final Learning Event in Dublin. 51 people representing 30 member organisations participated in the event, where they considered and discussed the findings and gave their endorsement to the "Signposts for the Future".

Findings

Ideas and understandings

Keeping children safe means getting people to work together. One of the first challenges is that different stakeholders have different understandings of certain key concepts.

- **Safeguarding:** Not everyone has a clear understanding of the concept of "safeguarding" and how it relates to the more familiar concept of "child protection".
- **Human rights and children's rights:** There are widely different understandings of human rights and their relevance to children and safeguarding. In some areas there is resistance to the concept of children's rights as something 'foreign' and incompatible with local culture.
- **Human dignity:** There is wide acceptance across cultures of the concept of human dignity. Since

³ Misean Cara Learning Brief 2020/02, Coming Together to Keep Children Safe (*Learning from the Development of the Inter-congregational Child Safeguarding Group in Kenya*): <https://www.miseancara.ie/public-resources/>

dignity and rights go hand in hand, this provides fertile ground for opening discussion of children's rights in challenging cultural contexts.

- **Rights and responsibilities:** Misunderstandings of the relationship between rights and responsibilities can cause difficulties, particularly in educational settings. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child offers a way to bring these ideas into fruitful balance. Keeping children safe however, remains an adult responsibility. While children can *assume responsibilities*, they must never be *held responsible* for safeguarding.

The external context

Keeping children safe presents many challenges, most of which have their roots in the wider socio-cultural context that surrounds them. This can be explored at different levels:

- **Home and family:** For many children violence and abuse are everyday occurrences in their home environment, so much so as to be considered the norm. Neglect and mistreatment of children with disabilities is common. Preservation of a family's honour and the avoidance of social stigma attached to abuse can lead to secrecy around what are regarded as "family matters", which leaves children at risk and unprotected. Their vulnerability is increased when families live in extreme poverty.
- **School, community and culture:** The power of culture and its resistance to change is felt both outside and inside the home. Differences are often fuelled by religious beliefs, adding additional challenges for missionaries working in multi-faith communities. These beliefs contribute to the cultural validation of corporal punishment and traditional practices that put children at risk such as female genital mutilation and child marriage. As with the home environment, violence on the streets can be so prevalent that children grow up perceiving it as normal. In the school setting this can manifest as gang subculture.
- **Public authorities:** The public authorities charged with preventing violence and abuse and supporting victims (police, judiciary, social services, local authorities) are often under-resourced and lacking capacity to respond. Corruption is rife in many areas, and people have come to expect little or no helpful response from the authorities.
- **Church leadership:** While this research showed that many in positions of leadership in the church are giving a strong lead on safeguarding, it also found evidence of reluctance to confront the problem and a lack of decisive action when needed.
- **The environment inside and outside the project:** Missionary projects have endeavoured to create secure environments and keep thousands of children safe within their walls. However, they face a tough challenge in keeping children safe from harm in the world beyond the gate.

Capacity and implementation

- **Policies:** All Misean Cara-funded projects have a safeguarding policy in place. However, there are still small, isolated groups who do not yet have such a policy. Some of Misean Cara's members are actively supporting these groups to help them get up to speed on safeguarding. Where policies are in place, there are many gaps in implementation, generally due to lack of training, capacity and resources.
- **Working with the whole child:** Safeguarding should not end at the school gates. This involves project teams venturing outside the relative safety of their project to engage with families and communities. It can also involve counselling and support for survivors and their families.
- **Building capacity in teachers:** Teachers and others working with children need new knowledge and skills for effective safeguarding. Besides covering safeguarding policies and procedures, capacity development initiatives include alternatives to physical and humiliating punishment, managing the classroom without violence, responses to bullying, and a balanced approach to "Rights and Responsibilities".
- **Advocacy and alliances:** Given the power of tradition and resistance to change, strong alliances are needed to achieve sustainable impact. Missionaries are building such alliances to help local communities forge cultural transformation from within, including inter-faith partnerships.
- **Working with government and public authorities:** For lasting change, it is necessary to work alongside the relevant public authorities, including local and national government, police, courts and judiciary, religious and traditional leaders. This may involve strengthening their capacity to fulfil their responsibilities as the duty-bearers for children's rights; but also resolutely pursuing justice for survivors in the face of powerful abusers and corrupt authorities.
- **Building support from church leaders: From 'compliance' to commitment:** Most church leaders readily comply with what is asked of them with regard to safeguarding. However, the projects visited in this research are asking for more: a strong commitment to wider social transformation, and a vision of a world where all children are safe everywhere.

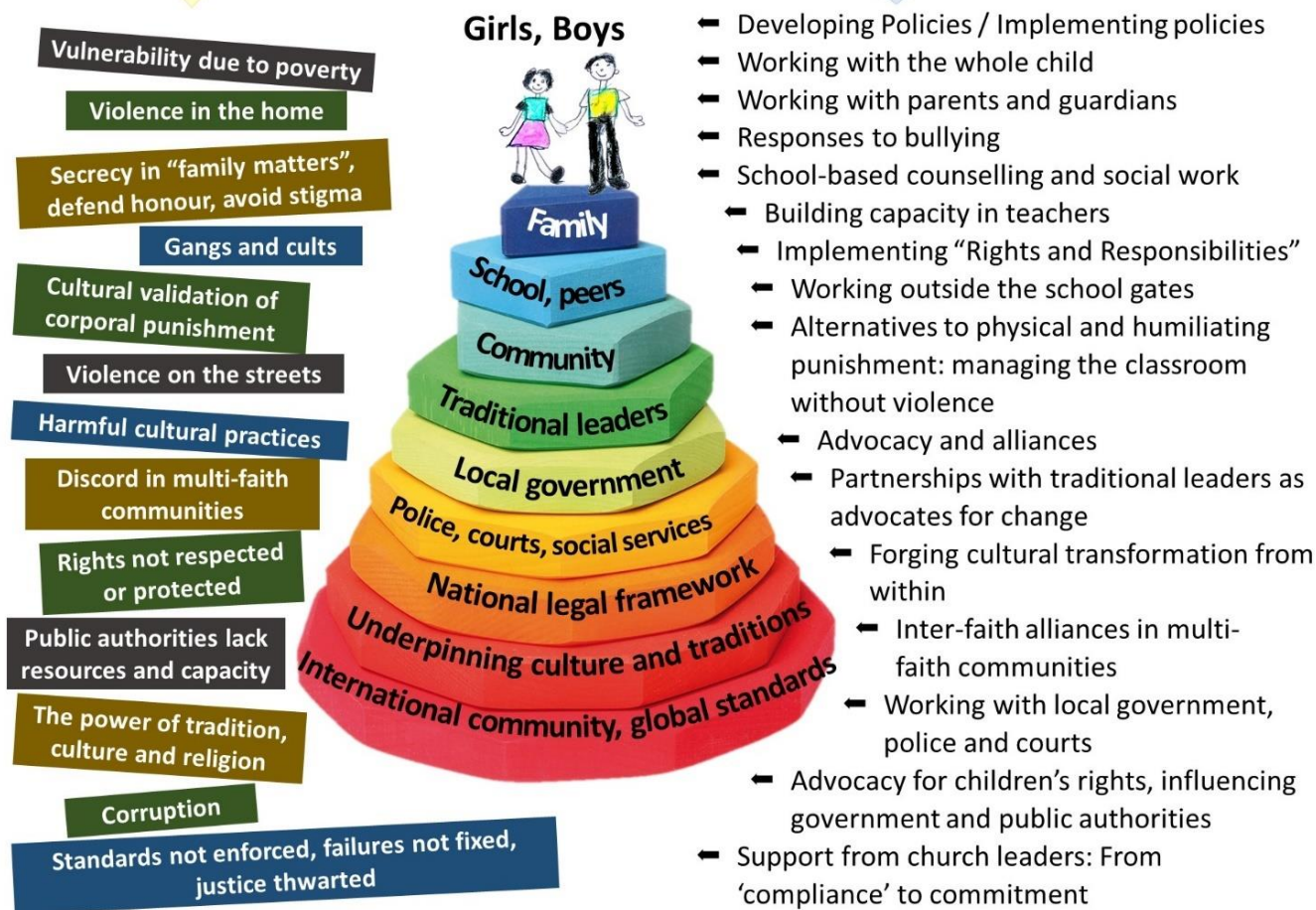
Missionary Approaches to Transformative Child Safeguarding

Key ideas that help...

- ✓ Children as active in safeguarding
- ✓ Children as human rights-holders
- ✓ Valuing Human Dignity hand in hand with rights
- ✓ Balancing Rights and Responsibilities

Challenges to be faced every day...

Missionary initiative, courage and commitment ...

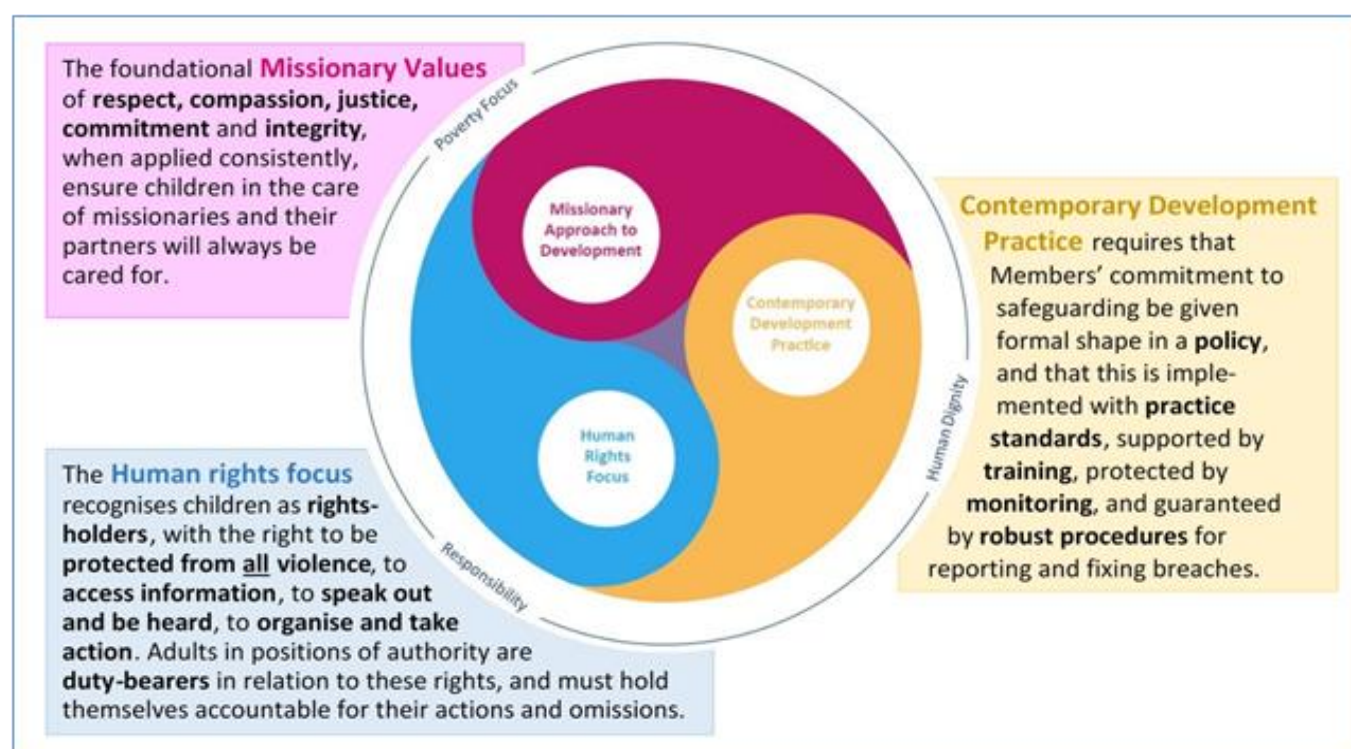


A visual summary of the research findings

Conclusion

These findings suggest that this approach offers a solid foundation for advancing child safeguarding across the missionary movement, building on the synergy between the three elements of Misean Cara's strategic approach as shown in the graphic below. There remain, however, gaps in learning and inconsistencies of approach across all stakeholders.

Reflecting on the findings of this research, two things are clear. One is the extraordinary scope and quality of work already being done by Missionary Development projects. The other is the equally extraordinary scale of the challenges to be faced. The best way to meet future challenges is to learn from the best of what has already been achieved and use this to move forward. To help with this, the final section of this Learning Brief offers Misean Cara's "Signposts for the Future".



Signposts for the future

This section contains the “signposts for the future” as they appeared in our original research report, signalling ways forward both for Misean Cara as an international NGO/funding agency, and for our member organisations engaging in missionary development work around the world. Though the signposts have been developed to reflect this orientation, we believe they are broadly relevant to all those concerned with keeping children safe in the international development sector.

While this Learning Brief focuses on the extraordinary scope and quality of the work *already being done* by many to ensure that all children are kept safe and realise their right to live without violence, abuse or mistreatment,⁴ it also clearly shows the scale of the challenges that have to be faced, particularly when we recognise that the child's right to live without violence extends beyond the secure walls of our community projects and schools into the communities where they live, and the society they belong to.

The best way to meet these challenges is to learn from the best of what has already been achieved, and use this learning to move forward; building on strengths, fixing weaknesses, overcoming obstacles and seeking new opportunities. Achieving the kind of changes advocated here will be a lengthy process and there may be many obstacles in the path to sustainable change. It will therefore be important for missionary development

project teams, their leadership and their allies, to persevere with patience in pushing forward towards the goal of keeping all children safe from harm.

There are three sets of signposts:

- A. Signposts for Misean Cara to follow;
- B. Signposts to strengthen organisations and projects as a force for transformative safeguarding;
- C. Signposts that point directly at proven and effective ways of keeping children safe.

To support member organisations in following these signposts, Misean Cara already has a range of support available. In particular there is a lot of information in our Resource Hub, and Misean Cara is committed to continue to add to this and increase accessibility to meet members' safeguarding information needs.

⁴ This specific right is set out in full in Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as follows: “States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.” Sometimes “The right to live without violence” is used as a shorthand expression, but is understood to cover all the forms of mistreatment referred to in Article 19.

A: Signposts for Misean Cara

If member organisations are to make the shift to a transformative approach to child safeguarding, Misean Cara must be in the forefront, providing vision and accompaniment, and making a significant effort to put the necessary resources in place. The first set of signposts, therefore, indicates a number of ways forward for Misean Cara itself.

1. Resources

- Recognising that adopting a transformative child safeguarding approach may require additional resources, Misean Cara should help members identify new resources for safeguarding initiatives.
- Review adequacy of funds for safeguarding in existing Misean Cara funding schemes.
- Increase resources for safeguarding through diversified funding and partnerships.

2. Capacity Development

- Misean Cara should gather information on training/capacity-building options (including web-based solutions), so as to provide guidance and recommendations to members.
- Promote the sharing of resources (including both members' resources and recommended resources from external sources) through extending the scope of the Resource Hub.
- Consider working in partnership with a specialist provider to develop a new on-line learning programme for Transformative Child Safeguarding.

3. Collecting and learning from data on safeguarding

- Develop a standardised approach to help projects monitor, collect data, and report on safeguarding.
- Consolidate and analyse safeguarding data from members to identify trends, track progress, and highlight issues of concern.
- Provide feedback to members to promote discussion and learning.

4. Raising awareness

- Capture and share case studies of good practice (e.g. short videos); publicise these on the Misean Cara Website.
- Disseminate insights and examples of good practice in safeguarding; consider options for doing this through social media.
- Publish this report on Misean Cara's website.
- Create a new resource based on this report for children.

B: Signposts to strengthen organisations and projects as a force for transformative safeguarding

If member organisations are to adopt a transformative approach to safeguarding and reach their full potential in keeping children safe, existing capacity will need to be strengthened and new capacity built. The second set of signposts, therefore, suggests a number of ways forward for developing capacity at individual, team and institutional level. The signposts do not indicate a single road for all, but rather a range of options which can be combined to deliver an effective strategic approach for every team and organisation.

5. Learn about children's rights

- Prioritise rights education for staff, children, parents, and leaders.
- Focus on the Right to be Heard, being aware that safeguarding involves active engagement with children, listening to them and trusting them, not just what adults do to children.
- Focus on the Right to live without violence.
- Focus on gender equality: Boys and girls have different experiences of risk, violence and abuse, but an equal right to be protected from harm, and to justice if harm is done to them.
- Focus on equal rights of children with disabilities: Ensure their full inclusion in education and social programmes (not just special projects that separate and label them).
- Identify the duty-bearers in relation to children's rights, in your country and in your community.
- Learn about rights and responsibilities – for both adults and children. Children have rights from birth, and can be guided in learning to take responsibility as their capacity and understanding develop.
- Learn about the pairing of human rights and human dignity by showing how these two go hand-in-hand.

6. Network, share, collaborate

- Join existing networks to share knowledge and experiences, join forces for a stronger voice and greater influence, unite in action for change.
- Where there is no local network, link up with neighbouring projects and organisations and create your own network (ask Misean Cara for support).
- If your organisation has professional skill and capacity in safeguarding, be generous in sharing with those who are just starting out. Working in solidarity keeps more children safe.

- If you have developed resources such as training materials, posters, practice guidelines, forms and protocols, child-friendly materials, case studies, parent-education resources etc., consider sharing them with others via the Misean Cara Resource Hub.

7. Invest in training and capacity-building

- Identify knowledge and skills gaps, and from this define training needs.
- Organise training opportunities for project teams as needed (consult Misean Cara for advice on how to resource this).
- Develop the habit of Reflective Practice throughout your team or organisation to maximise the benefits of learning from experience. Reflective Practice enables your team to learn by building on what works well, and by analysing why some things don't work so well, so practice is continually improving.
- Review how child safeguarding is addressed in Missionary formation (and in religious formation in general). Update and enhance the Safeguarding element of religious formation where needed, drawing on missionaries' extensive knowledge and experience as appropriate.

8. Implement, monitor and regularly review your safeguarding policy

- Check that your current policy is up to date. Review it if needed. Take the opportunity to introduce a forward-looking transformative approach into your policy, following ideas in this report that are relevant to your situation.
- If you already have a progressive, up-to-date policy, share it with others, and offer support to those who have some catching-up to do.
- Develop guidelines to ensure your policy is effectively implemented and monitored (or if you already have guidelines, review, update and share them).
- If you need additional resources to be able to implement and monitor your policy effectively, check Misean Cara's Resource Hub, or contact Misean Cara for advice.

9. Church leaders, encourage staff/members (lay and religious) to prioritise safeguarding and devote more time to it

- Learn from, support and build upon the growing understanding and awareness of safeguarding to be found within the Church hierarchy.
- Look favourably on staff/member requests to attend meetings, workshops, training events etc.
- Support members engaging in networking, advocacy and solidarity with others.

- Encourage sharing and joint working between missionaries and diocesan structures as part of the change process.
- Remember, the church as a whole, including religious congregations and other faith-based organisations, will be stronger in the long-run if children are kept safe.

C: Signposts for keeping children safe

The third set of signposts draws on the positive experiences and achievements of many missionary development projects in keeping children safe, to propose specific actions that have been shown to be effective in schools and communities. Not all will be relevant to every project, but these ideas can provide inspiration for project teams, and the communities they serve, in developing their own transformative safeguarding strategies and action plans.

10. Educate the whole child

- Work with families, work with communities.
- Work with play and recreation as well as studies.
- Educate parents, carers and other stakeholders to play their part in a holistic approach to education.
- Where violence passes from generation to generation and becomes "normalised", focus efforts on breaking the cycle.

11. Develop effective alternatives to corporal punishment

- Work for long-term cultural change, transforming the outmoded belief that beating is good for children (NB. This should not be seen as a particularly "African" problem; it is still legal for parents to hit their children in many parts of the world, including Northern Ireland for example).
- Work with parents to explain and encourage non-violent child-rearing and education, and support them in learning and implementing alternative approaches.
- Organise training for project staff, including teachers: Build capacity for creating and sustaining non-violent schools.

12. Work to keep children safe in the wider community

- Be aware of the environment outside the school or project.
- Develop advocacy for social change.
- Work on non-discrimination, and reducing stigmatisation.
- Practice solidarity, particularly inter-faith working in multi-faith communities.

- Use networks and partnerships (see above) to advocate for sustainable change up to national level.

13. Work to prevent harmful traditional practices

- Seek accurate information about harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage; the harm they can cause and the human rights that they violate.
- Be aware that established traditional beliefs and practices can only be changed with respect and understanding (most of these practices have already been made illegal, and this has not worked).
- Work for change through advocacy, education, forming alliances within local culture (e.g. seeking traditional leaders as allies), finding acceptable alternatives, extending rights awareness and helping children raise their own voices to speak out.

14. Support children in promoting, claiming and defending rights

- Listen to children, and create spaces where children can express themselves and be heard.

- Recognise that children themselves have a part to play as defenders of human rights, and support them in doing this.

- Where appropriate, support children in organising their own spaces, activities and campaigns in defence of human rights, dignity and justice.

- Work with those who are duty-bearers in relation to children's rights, supporting them in fulfilling their responsibilities, and holding them to account when they fail to do so.

15. Work in partnership with local authorities, police, traditional leaders etc.

- Where possible, maximise partnerships and solidarity with local and national government, police and the judiciary, traditional leaders etc. Work alongside local regulatory systems where possible.
- Where positions are opposed, use the skills of advocacy, campaigning and mobilisation to build a positive force for change.

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.

Misean Cara gratefully acknowledges the funding support of:



Irish Aid

An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
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