
WHEN VULNERABILITY MEETS POWER
WELCOME
4 MARCH 2026
Safeguarding in
the International Aid and Development Sector

How To Build Safer Cultures Through Leadership - and Why It's Essential That We Do

Frances Longley and Sally Proudlove

What do we mean by culture?

‘How we do things around here’

EFFECTIVE SAFEGUARDING CULTURE: #1 POLICIES & PROCESSES

Non-compliance

Safeguarding policy for children & vulnerable adults either does not exist, is of **poor** quality or outdated

Staff are **unaware** of the existence of the policy or know that it is in place but there is no requirement to adhere to it

Safeguarding policy is not reflected in/connected to other relevant policies

Policy does not seek to address **power** or **gender** imbalances;

Processes do not consider the **unique** needs of different at-risk groups

Staff do not understand how they can influence the policy; there is a **lack of transparency** about policy development

Widespread belief that the rules in the policy are easily or often **flouted** or **ignored**

Minimal Compliance

An up to date Safeguarding policy exists, but limited evidence that staff are **adhering** to the policy, or have been trained to do so

Staff feel uncertain about the Policy, unclear about how to **access** it (where it is located), who 'owns' it, and and apply it

There is mention of safeguarding in some, though not all, related policies and there is no adequate process for **checking implementation**

Some evidence that processes supporting the policy are attempting to be inclusive; however this is experienced as **tokenistic**

Some Senior leaders exhibit **behaviour** that is not **consistent** with the policy, which suggests or that 'the rules do not apply to them'

Rules are followed without an understanding of their reasoning - leading to **inconsistent/ inappropriate implementation** in different contexts

Effective Safeguarding Culture

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Effective Safeguarding Culture

A robust and effective policy exists, is a key part of induction and is **lived** day-to-day, with supporting processes in place and used.

Policy is well **integrated** - staff **proactively** refer & adhere to policy & processes which **guide** behaviour and actions.

Relevant organisational policies have safeguarding as an integrated element and are actively considered by all those who have safeguarding integrated into their role & functions.

Processes are sensitive to gender and power imbalances, **inclusive** and explicitly ensure that the perspectives of those most at risk are addressed. Staff are able and willing to challenge when that is not achieved

There is **rigour** amongst all staff in adhering to and upholding policies & processes

Demonstrable contextualised, localised and effective approaches to **embedding** core, consistent safeguarding standards

S

MALL

THINGS

MATTER

IN SAFE

GUARDING

unicef | for every child

‘Safeguarding is a thread not a blanket’

It all starts with power

Your safeguarding culture doesn't stand a chance without the right leadership

(We can help with that)

LEADERS

are individuals with the authority and power to make decisions and allocate resources

“The behaviour of senior leaders has a powerful impact on the overall culture. Whatever values statements and policies say, people take their biggest behavioural cues from ***what their leaders are seen to role model and what they are seen to tolerate****.”*

Understanding how senior leaders affect culture

1. Do our words match our deeds and what do we do when they don’t?
2. How are we seen to handle failure?
3. How are our values seen to be lived and acted out?
4. How are our relationships and dealings with other senior managers seen and understood by the entire organisation?
5. How do we decide who is hired and fired, and why?
6. How do we decide who is valued and rewarded, who isn’t, and why?
7. Which systems and processes do we champion and prioritise?

Ethical leadership and healthy cultures are a daily practice

- What power do you hold: personally? As an organisation?
- Is the question of power, leadership and accountability part of your daily conversation?
- What changes can you make to your personal conduct and leadership to role-model ethical, values-led leadership?
- What can you do to support better leadership in others?

WHEN VULNERABILITY MEETS POWER:
SAFEGUARDING IN THE INTERNATIONAL AID AND DEVELOPMENT SECTOR

Chapter 3: Aid Workers –
Risks, Responsibilities and Recovery

Dr Noreen Tehrani: Chartered Psychologist

www.noreen.tehrani.com

BEYOND PTSD: TRAUMA, MORAL INJURY & ORGANISATIONAL HARM

- A typical humanitarian story

- Aid workers are victims of
  - Trauma (primary and secondary)
  - Burnout, Anxiety and Depression
  - Moral injury
  - Organisational trauma

WHY AID WORK IS PSYCHOLOGICALLY DANGEROUS

The world aid workers operate in

- 16% of the world's population is facing a protracted crisis
- Fragile states lack:
  - **Authority:** The power to make laws and maintain control
  - **Legitimacy:** The extent to which the government is respected and trusted by everyone
  - **Capacity:** The ability to use and employ aid resources for the good of the whole population
- Aid becomes a substitute for political action
  - Humanitarian aid is increasingly being used to manage the human consequences of political failure rather than to resolve the conditions that create suffering.
  - Aid is asked to keep people alive in situations where justice, security and political will are absent

THE AID WORKER'S DILEMMA

Aid workers are not just responding to disasters — they are working inside a global system where fragile states cannot govern, political solutions are stalled, and humanitarian aid has become the default response to problems that should be resolved through power, diplomacy and justice.

MAINTAINING CONTROL OVER THE SPENDING

Complexity vs donor logic

- Donors want:
  - Certainty, Targets, Auditability
- The Reality is:
  - Unpredictability, Political, Chaotic

Aid organisations are forced to impose simple solutions on complex and chaotic realities.

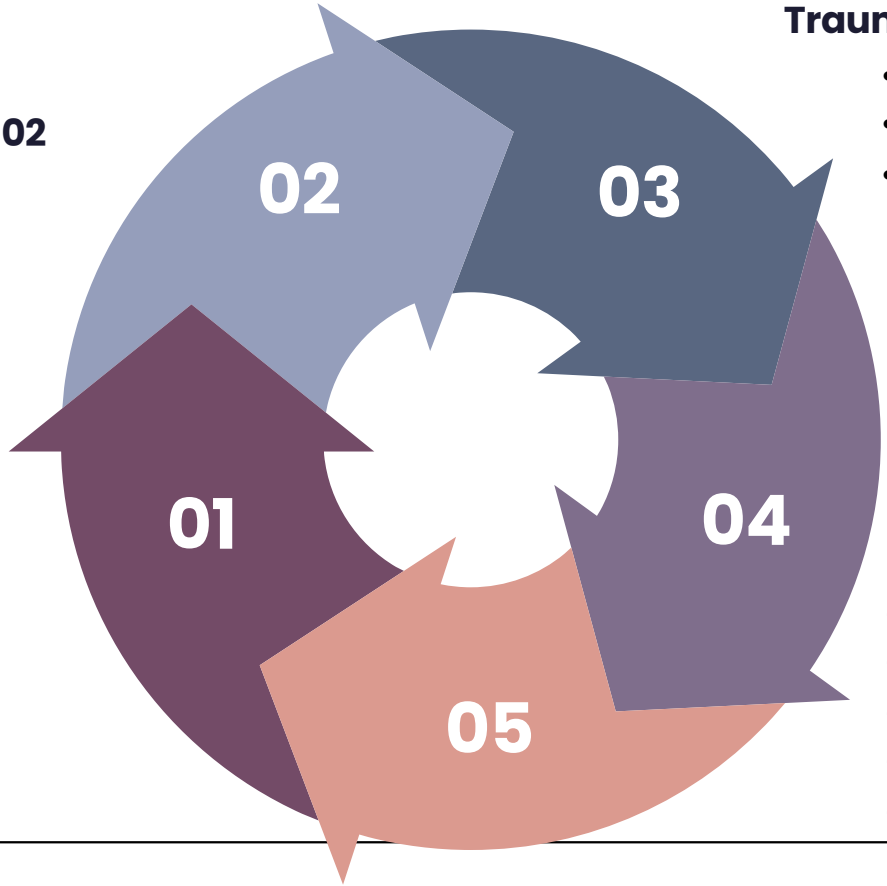
HOW DONOR PRESSURE BECOMES ORGANISATIONAL TRAUMA

Organisational Response 02

- Pressure to Perform
- Fear of Failure
- Defensive Reporting
- Silencing of Risk
- Blame for missed Targets

Donor Demands 01

- Targets
- Audits
- Certainty
- Value for Money
- No Bad News



Traumatised Organisation 03

- Avoidance: problems not discussed
- Arousal: Overreaction, punishment
- Re-experience: Repeating failures, Over-reaction to triggers scapegoating

Workplace Dynamics 04

- Persecution/Victim/Rescuer/Avenger
- Conflict replaces problem-solving
- Whistleblowers become a threat
- The trauma is acted out

Aid Worker Experience 05

- Moral Injury
- Anxiety & depression
- Burnout
- PTSD & Secondary Trauma
- Resignations

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES TO AID WORKERS

- The mismatch produces:
  - Frustration
  - Powerlessness
  - Moral injury
  - Embitterment
  - Organisational breakdown

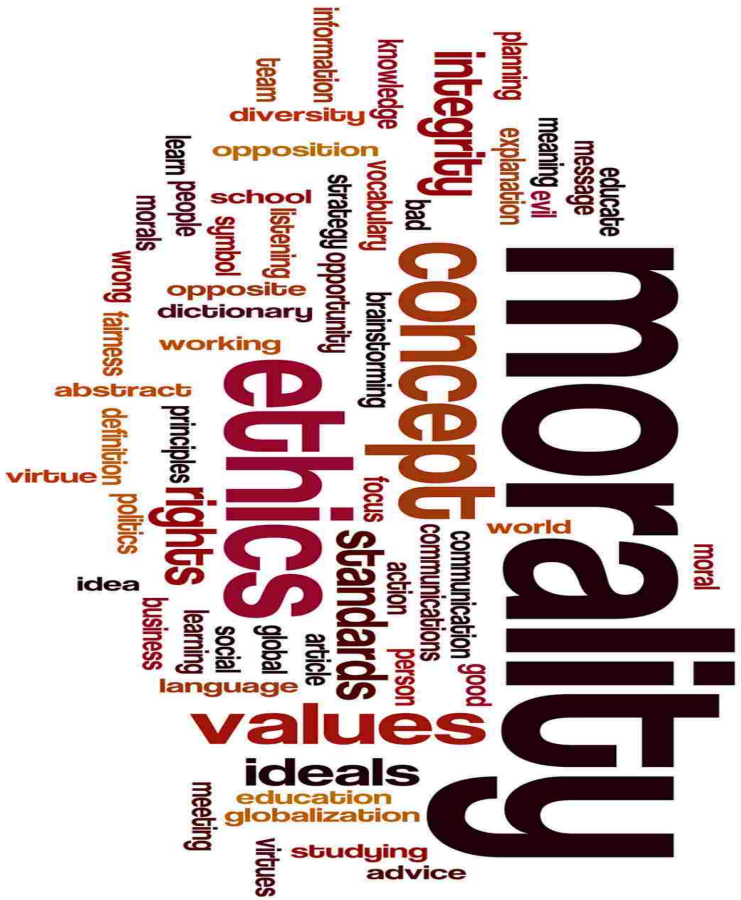
"Aid workers are asked to deliver neat, measurable results in situations that are not neat or measurable. That mismatch—between how donors think and how crises actually behave—creates frustration, a sense of powerlessness, moral injury, embitterment and eventually organisational breakdown."

COMPARISONS BETWEEN SAFEGUARDING GROUPS

Clinical Symptom	Humanitarian (n=649)	Lawyers (n=17)	Social Work (n = 87)	Teachers (n=23)	UK Police Safeguarding (n=1410)	Youth Charities (n=476)	General Public
Anxiety	35%	24%	42%	22%	22%	15%	3.5%
Depression	40%	29%	48%	30%	26%	22%	8-12%
PTSD	21%	18%	16%	9%	8%	5%	3%
Burnout	28%	47%	54%	26%	15%	17%	NA
Secondary Trauma	32%	47%	29%	17%	14%	14%	NA

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

- Humanitarians experience very high levels of PTSD, anxiety, and depression
- They are also burnt out and experiencing compassion fatigue
- At the same time, they have high levels of compassion satisfaction
- They are faced with professional and ethical dilemmas leading to Moral Injury
- They become burnt out and exhausted, which can cause Embitterment when their needs are left unheard



BURNOUT AND COMPASSION FATIGUE

Burnout and compassion fatigue are occupational hazards that can affect individuals working in physically and emotionally demanding roles. While they share some similarities, they are fundamentally different in their origins, manifestations, and impacts.

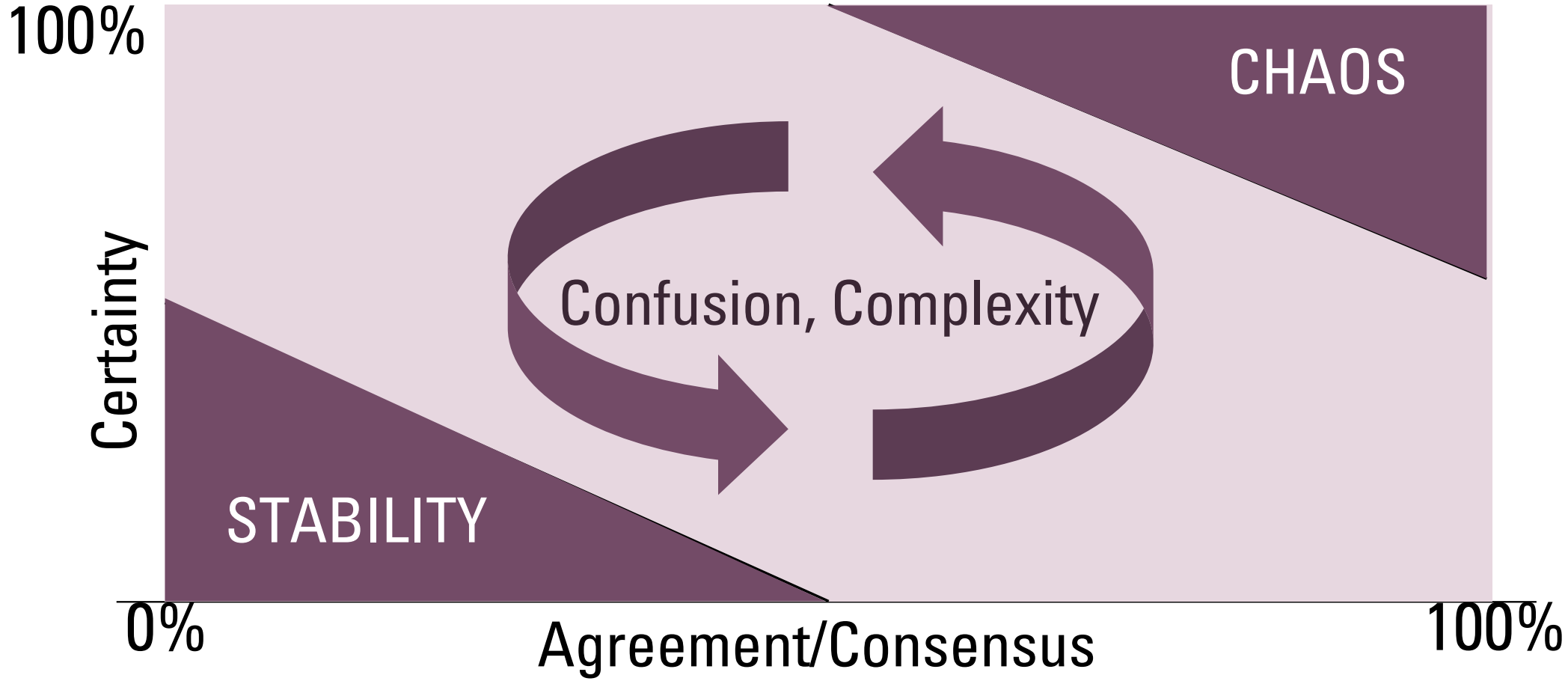
- Compassion fatigue is the cost of caring, which results from the emotional burden of being exposed to other people's stress and trauma.
- Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that develops gradually over time, often due to prolonged exposure to high levels of job stress.

MORAL INJURY AND EMBITTERMENT SYNDROME

Humanitarian workers experience moral injury and embitterment when they must act in ways that violate their ethical values because political, organisational, or security constraints prevent them from doing what they know is right. Over time, this unresolved ethical conflict is compounded by frustration, powerlessness and lack of acknowledgement, leading to shame, anger and disengagement.

- Moral injury arises when individuals perpetrate, fail to prevent, or witness acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs, producing guilt, shame and loss of meaning (Litz et al., 2009; Lloyd et al., 2020).
- Embitterment develops when people perceive persistent injustice, humiliation or betrayal by institutions they trusted, leading to resentment, withdrawal and loss of motivation (Linden, 2003; Linden & Arnold, 2021).

STABILITY, COMPLEXITY AND CHAOS

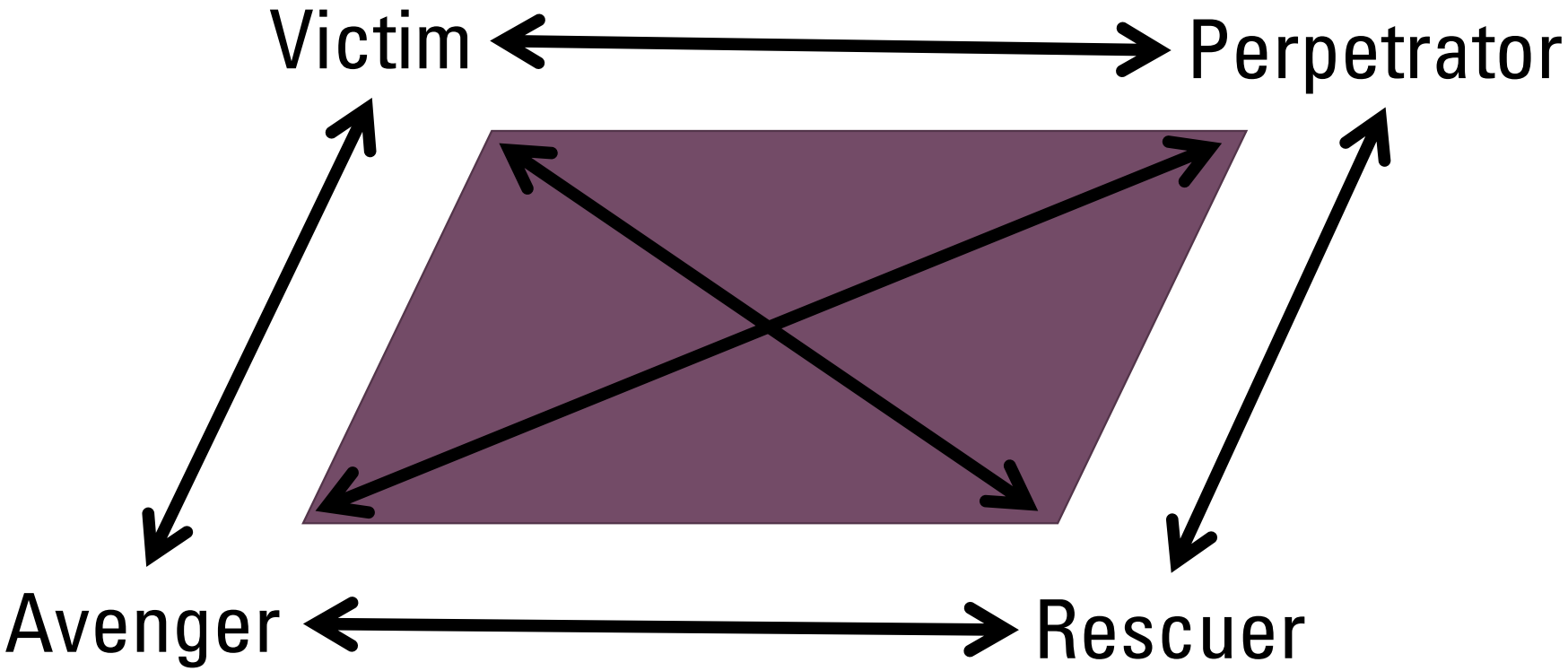


PARALLEL PROCESS LEADING TO ORGANISATIONAL TRAUMA

TRAUMATISED ORGANISATIONS

1. Avoidance: Elephant in the Room, scapegoating
2. Arousal: Overreaction to information, knee-jerk responses, and a frantic need to be in control
3. Re-enacting: repeating past failures, responding to triggers and generalisation of fears.

THE HUMANITARIAN DRAMA



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SURFACE SOLUTIONS

The perceived victim is recognised

The perceived perpetrator is punished

The perceived rescuer is pleased

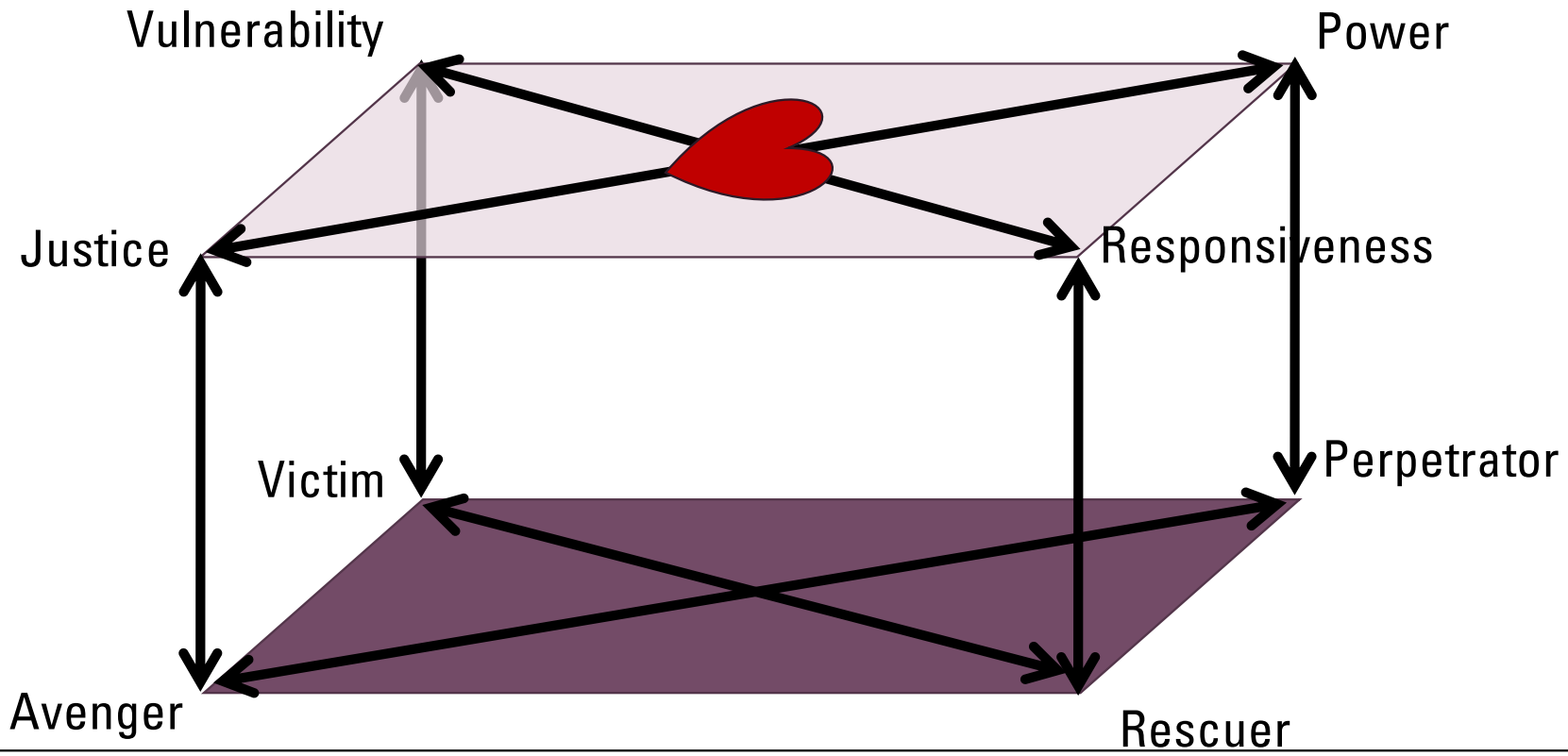
The perceived avenger is vanquished

- but nothing has been learnt and the game starts again

ABUSE, DRAMA, AND ORGANISATIONS

- Organisations maintain the abuse drama by taking part in the abuse game
- Organisations need to:
  - Acknowledge their shadow side
  - Balance power with justice, vulnerability and responsiveness
  - Address the underlying processes that support abuse in the organisation

THE RESTORATION MODEL



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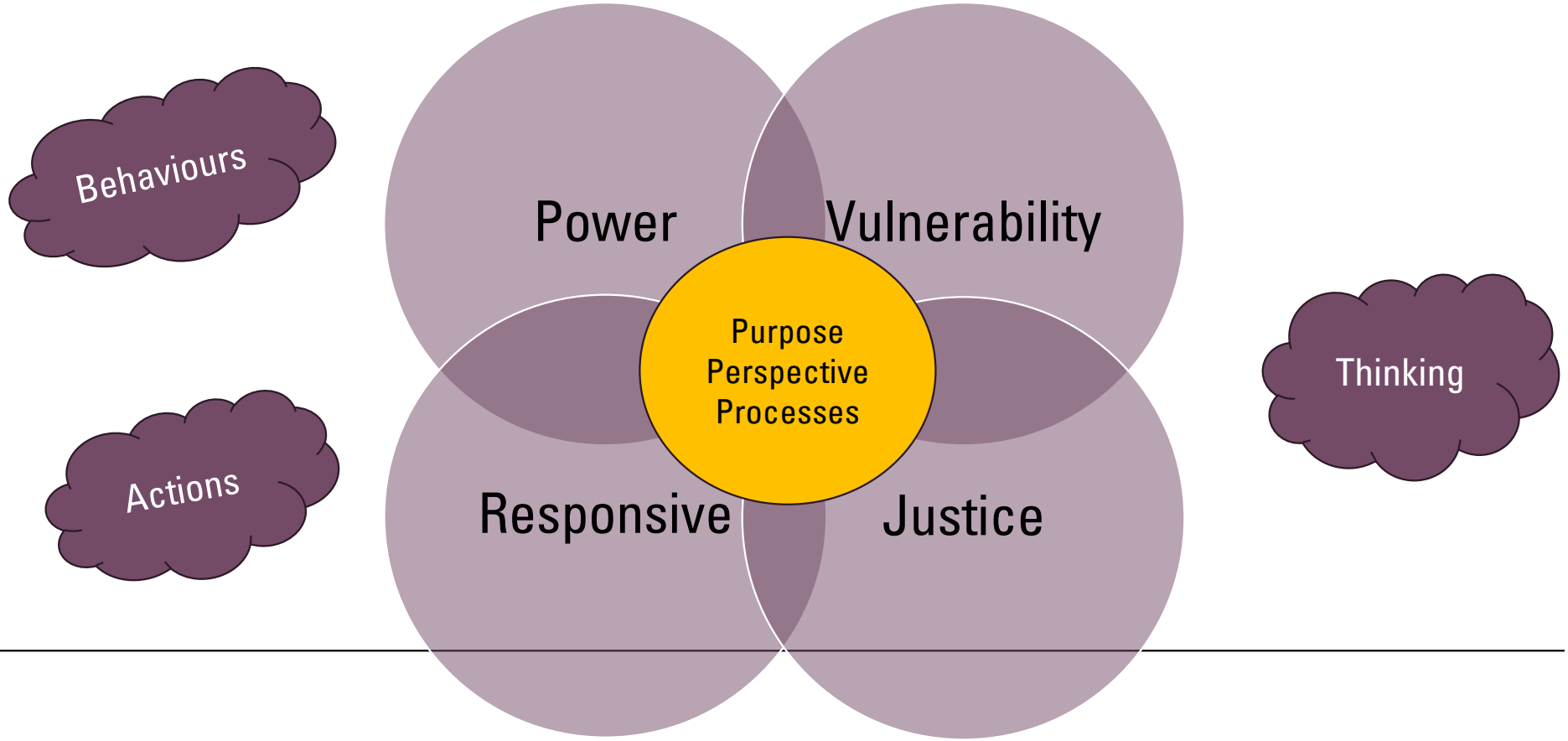
THE HEART OF THE MATTER



CASE STUDIES

- Kabul Teacher: Political Failure, Moral Injury
- Sudan: Can you tell them how to deal with trauma?
- Vulnerable Worker: Lack of screening and naivety

WHAT THIS MEANS

- Aid worker mental health requires:
  - Political responsibility
  - Trauma-informed organisations
  - Real safeguarding systems
  - Psychological screening & support
  - Moral injury awareness
- Not
  - resilience training
  - yoga
  - mindfulness

FINAL THOUGHTS

“If we keep treating aid worker distress as a personal weakness rather than a systems failure, we will keep producing broken people inside broken systems — while telling ourselves we are helping.”

Funder Safeguarding Collaborative

The Challenge of Standards-Based Approaches & Donor Power

Dr. Karen Walker-Simpson, Steina Bjorgvinsdottir,
& Shermin Moledina

Building an Evidence Base

The Challenge of a Standards-Based Approach

Donor Power & Safeguarding

Latest findings!!

https://fundersafeguardingcollaborative.org/resources/

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Funder Power....

And the power that lies beneath

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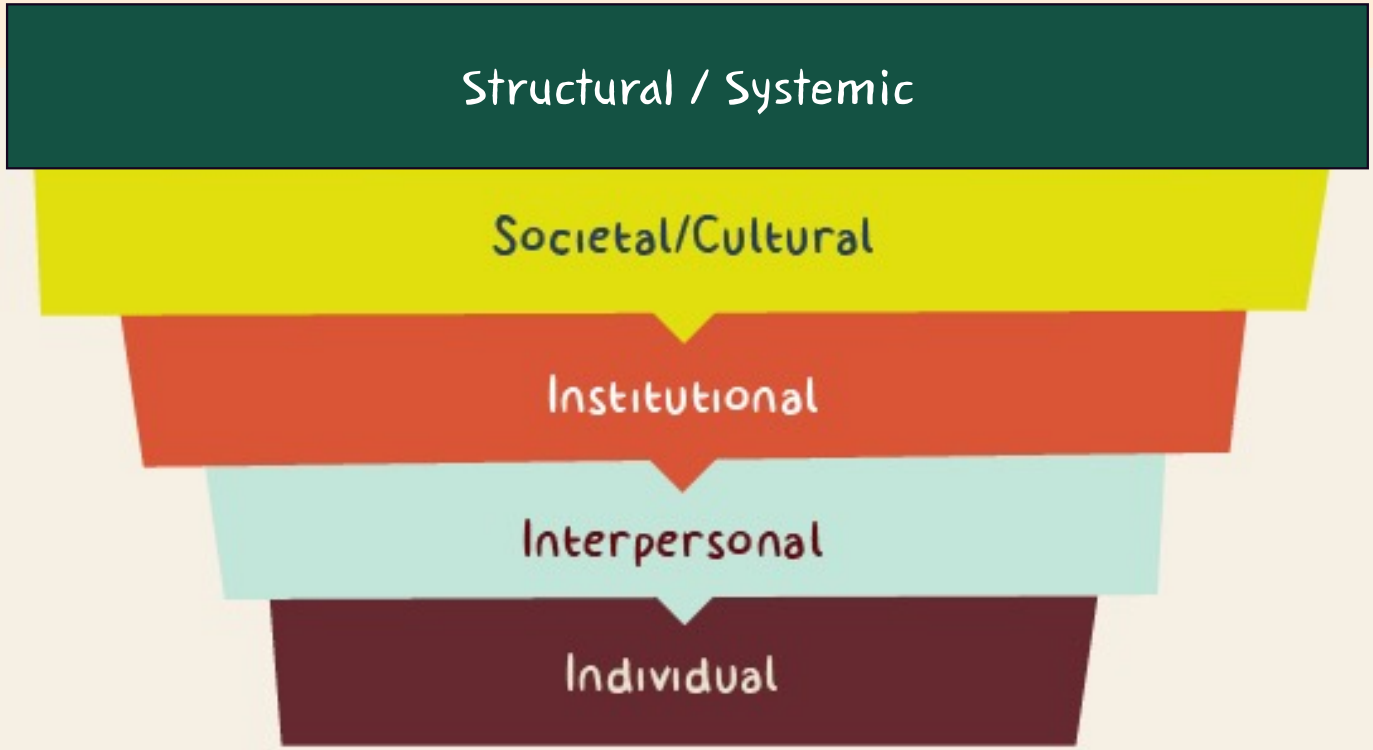
Power, privilege and vulnerability



Systemic Power

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1989

Children Act 1989

2001

2003-4

ZERO TOLERANCE FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Stop, prevent, protect

HAP Humanitarian Accountability Partnership

2012-14

2018

MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES

OXFAM

Save the Children

EQUAL EDUCATION

Institutional Power

COMIC RELIEF

PORTICU

OAK JNDATION

THE FREEDO

MALALA FUND

MALALA FUND

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THE GLOBAL FUND

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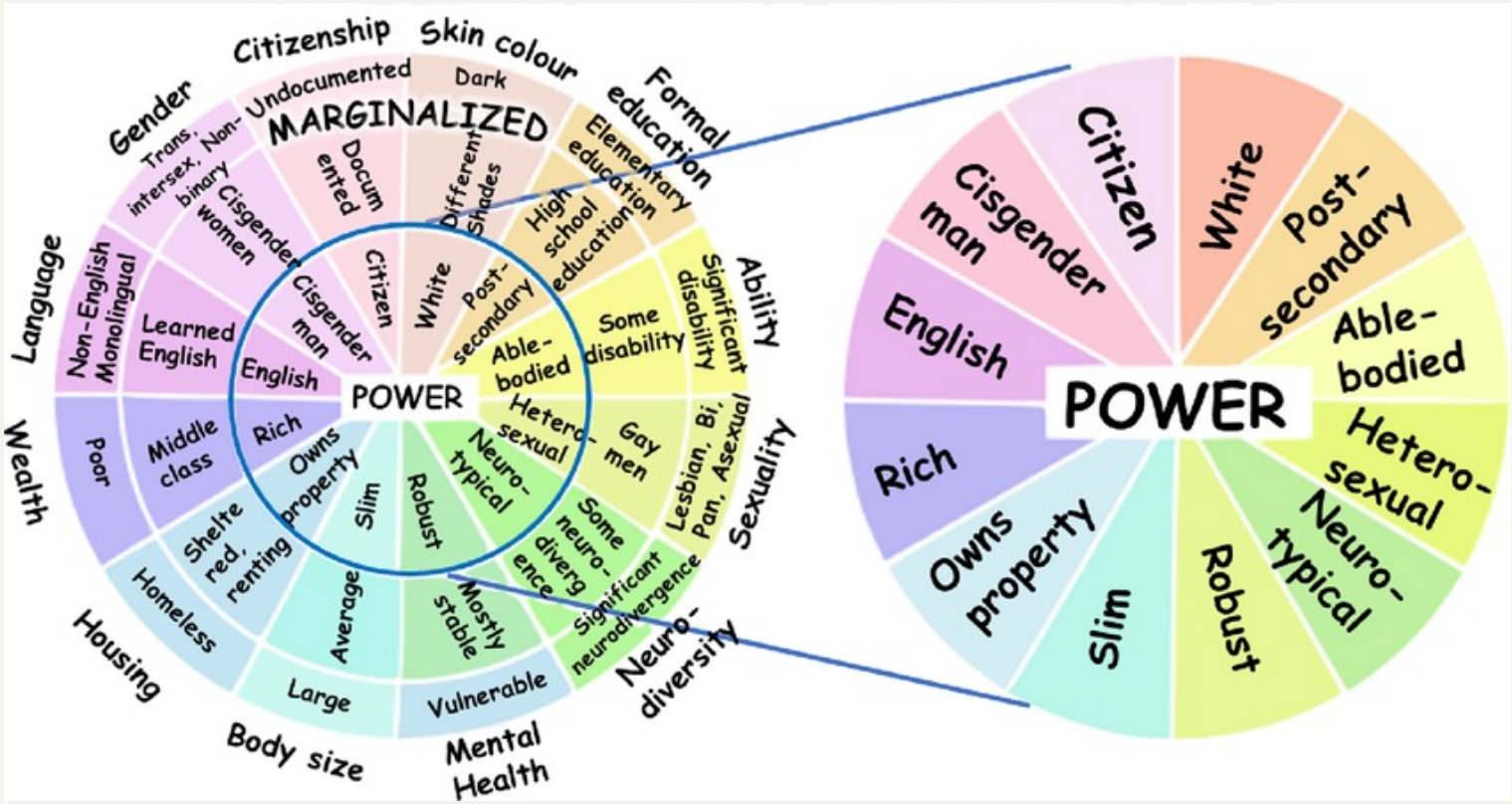
Individual Power



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Rebalancing Power

Funder power is not intrinsically bad.
BUT reflecting on power is a prerequisite for harnessing it better.

Focus on yourself	Have you reflected on the power you hold and how this influences your work?
Focus on grantees & communities	How open are we – and our organisations – to shifting control, resources and decision making?
Focus on the goals	Is the current system actually working to keep people safe?

Adapted from NPC (2020) A Rebalancing Act: How funders can address power dynamic

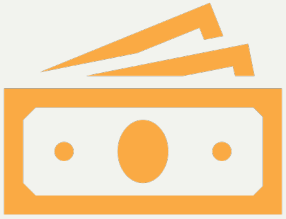
Where next....?

What needs to change to keep people safe

Key Challenges

Are we speaking the same language?

Does our approach help organisations navigate complex risks?



Are our expectations realistic given available resources?

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Scenario 1

You are an intermediate funder focusing on reducing the impact of climate change and environmental degradation.

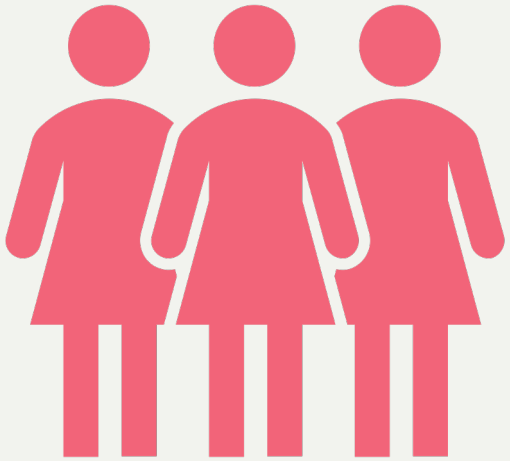
Most of your funding goes to activists and small community groups working in their local communities. They don't work with children and have never heard of 'safeguarding'. The biggest risk they face is violence from park rangers and authorities who oppose their work.

One of your institutional funders has integrated the Keeping Children Safe standards into their requirements. They want you to ensure that anyone receiving funding from you has the appropriate policies and practices in place to meet these standards. They have not allocated any additional funds for this aspect of the work.

Meet people where they are

- ‘Flip the conversation’
  - Start by talking through the safeguarding risks
  - Identify existing safeguards – even if not called ‘Safeguarding’
  - Flexibility in how to define & operationalise safeguarding
- Prioritise practice not policies or compliance
  - On-going learning, not just one-off training
  - Prioritise contextual expertise
  - Opportunities for peer learning & sharing

The system is relational



- It’s about people, not just process
  - People talk to people they trust
  - Explicit consideration of power, identity and trust
  - Consider person ‘in context’ & impact on relationships
- Trust and open dialogue is important
  - Communication is a two-way process
  - Champion safety, listen & respond to realities
  - Move beyond mapping to inter-organisational relationships

Accountability is Mutual

- Those in positions of power have to walk the talk
  - Training for leadership, Boards and funding staff
  - Recognition of impact & action to reduce burden
  - Matching accountability with support
- Resources matter
  - Discuss costs and include realistic budget lines
  - Investment in wider system & services
  - Threat of funding being withdrawn is counter-productive

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Thank you

Safer grant-making. Higher impact.

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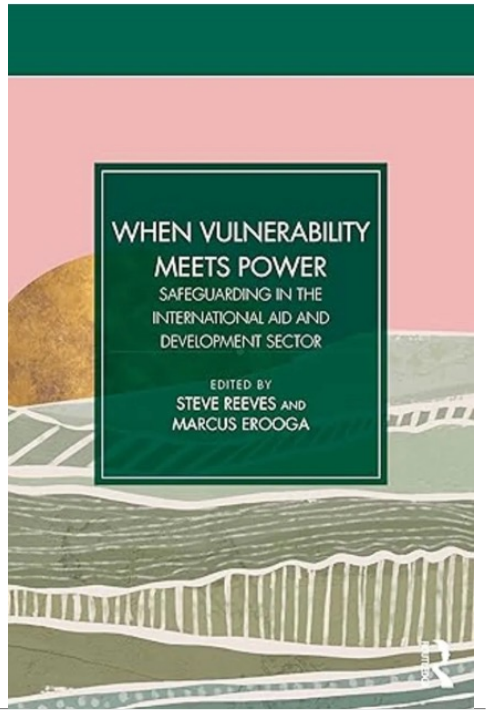
www.fundersafeguardingcollaborative.org

Chapter 7: Gender as a lens into safeguarding



DR. MAYUMI FUCHI

HEAD OF QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

HUMAN APPEAL

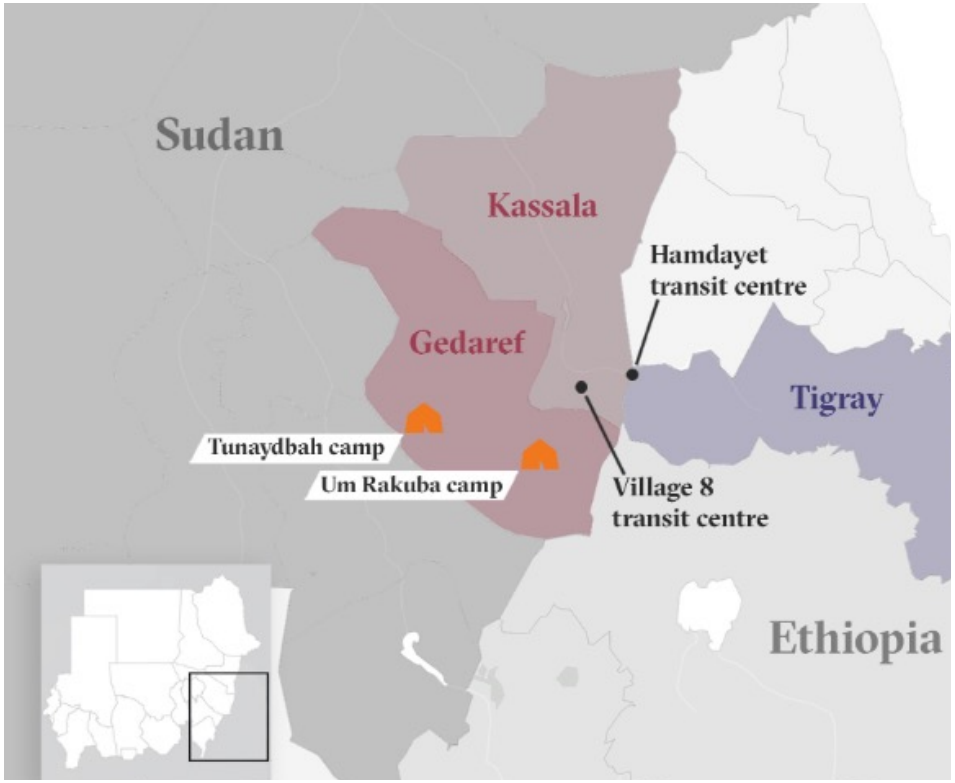
Objectives

- Examine safeguarding challenges in the aid sector rooted in gendered power imbalances.
- Show how these imbalances enable abuse, exploitation, and the normalisation of harmful behaviour.
- Use Sudanese refugee camps as a case study to illustrate these dynamics.
- Apply a gender-sensitive PowerCube framework to analyse power across levels, spaces, and forms.
- Offer practical insights for practitioners and calls for context-sensitive safeguarding approaches.

Setting the scene – refugee camps

- Refugee camps – high prevalence of SEA reported compared to others, making them a critical context to study.
- The particular vulnerabilities of refugees in these camps, marked by reduced access to basic needs, disrupted community structures, and limited social cohesion, creates an environment conducive to the flourishing of SEA
- Host states and aid workers hold significant power over affected populations, creating conditions where SEA is silenced.
- Fear of losing aid or facing retaliation prevents survivors from reporting abuse.
- Limited bargaining power leaves affected communities unable to challenge exploitation.
- Gendered, racial and structural inequalities within the aid sector reinforce impunity.
- Failure to address these entrenched power dynamics enables a culture where SEA persists unchecked.

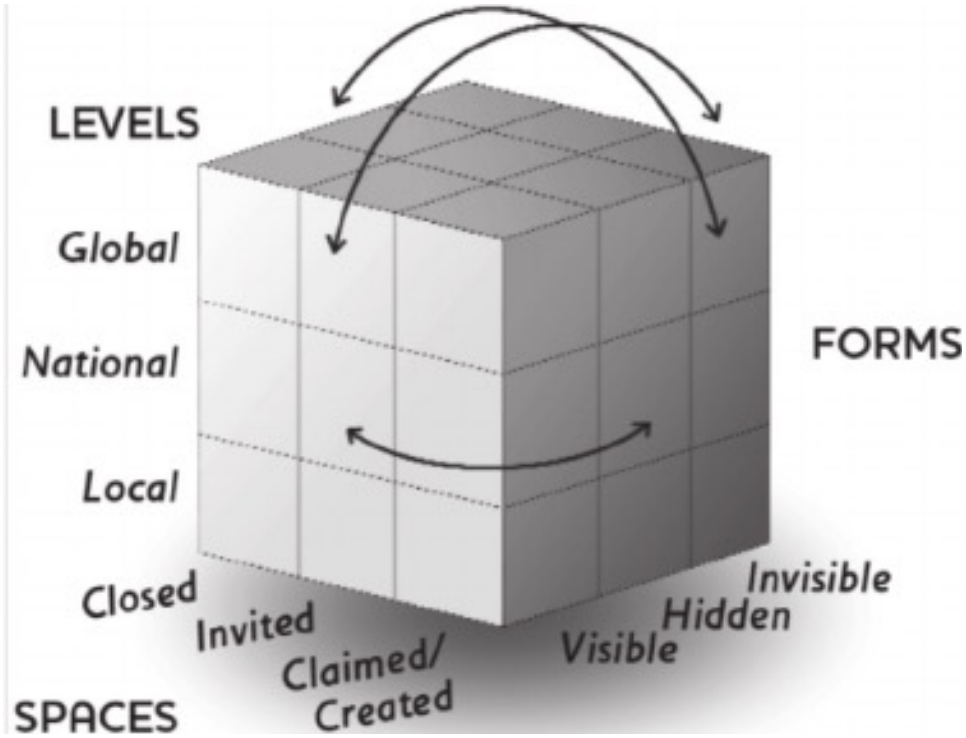
Case Study : Um Rakuba Camp & Tunaydbah Camp, East Sudan



Snapshot of reality of SEA

- SEA in the camps is widespread and is committed before displacement in conflict through walking journey on route to the transit centre across the border, as well as upon arrival at refugee camps.
- The types of SEA uncovered include exploitative relationships, transactional sex, forced pregnancy, prostitution, coercive sex work, and rape.
- The perpetrators identified include host state government officials, police officers, UNHCR and NGO staff, and host communities.
- Sexual violence by host states/host communities: the most frequently committed

Powercube framework (developed by J. Gaventa)



Key actors at refugee camps

- The host states' responsibility and abuse of power
- UNHCR's quasi-state role
- NGO aid workers and power: Rhetoric vs. practice discrepancies
- Power(lessness) of refugees

The host states' responsibility & abuse of visible power

- Host state – entrusted with the responsibility to provide a safe place for refugees, legally accountable to diverse types of stakeholders (refugees, NGOs, global community)
- Commissioners of Refugees (COR) – responsible for the protection of refugees in Sudan

"Some guys from COR are violating women's dignity … When female refugees go to COR to complain, they always ask them for a favour. They use their power and money for sexual violence …"

UNHCR's quasi-state role

- The first point of contact for refugees - significant control over resources, protection, and decision-making processes within camps, acting in a governmental capacity
- Perceived as a distant authority visible only at the transition centre
- Fostering a lack of trust and confidence in their ability to provide protections
- Abuse of power by soliciting sexual favours from female refugees

"When my friend approached UNHCR for a permission to move from one camp to another because of ethnic conflicts within the camp, UNHCR staff asks for a favour. If you are a boy, they ask for money. If you are a girl, they ask for sex. They are corrupted"

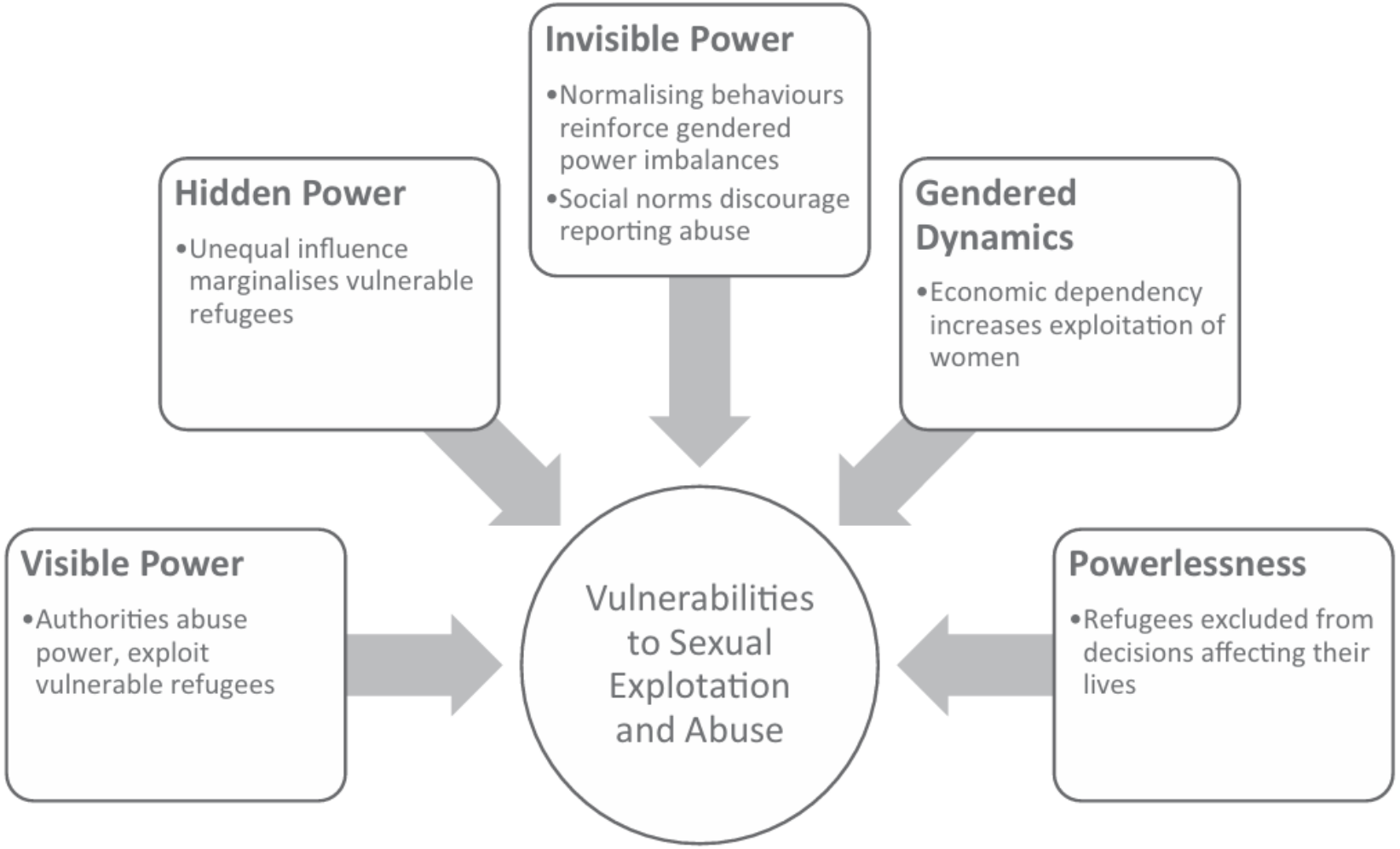
NGO aid workers and power: Rhetoric vs. practice discrepancies

- Hold significant operational roles in refugee camps
- Frontline agencies to organise and deliver aid distribution
- Instances of SEAs, contradicting NGOs' stated accountability goals
- Consensual yet exploitative relationships between aid workers and refugees – widely accepted

"Refugees are controlled by "moneyed elites—UN, aid workers, peacekeepers—whose resources are 10×, 100×, 1000× more than what the refugees have. They can afford to exploit this extreme disparity and pay for sex when they want and with whom they want"

Power(lessness) of refugees

- Refugees – trapped in close space of power, systematically excluded from decision making processes
- Powerlessness contributing to an environment in which SEA can flourish, with misconduct going unaddressed and victims left without adequate support
- Camp management committee – female committee members with minimum influence, never get invited to community leaders' meetings
- Hidden power marginalising women's voices, reducing their ability to advocate for the needs of vulnerable groups


Invisible Power
•Normalising behaviours reinforce gendered power imbalances
•Social norms discourage reporting abuse
Hidden Power
•Unequal influence marginalises vulnerable refugees
Gendered Dynamics
•Economic dependency increases exploitation of women
Visible Power
•Authorities abuse power, exploit vulnerable refugees
Vulnerabilities to Sexual Explotation and Abuse
Powerlessness
•Refugees excluded from decisions affecting their lives

Deeply entrenched cultures of impunity

Conclusion

- Safeguarding gaps are rooted in gendered power imbalances.
- SEA thrives where visible, hidden, and invisible power go unchallenged.
- Evidence from aid workers and refugees shows multiple forms of SEA.

Impact on Women & Girls

- Gendered power intersects with social and economic inequalities.
- Exclusion from decision-making and harmful norms deepen vulnerability.
- Women and girls face compounded risks across all levels of power.
- Leadership dominated by white men, with frontline workers and beneficiaries largely people of colour, deepens these power gaps.
- Intersectional factors - especially gender and race - make women of colour most vulnerable and least able to report abuse.

Key messages for NGOs

- Prioritise ethical conduct, accountability, and the dismantling of deep-rooted power inequalities.
- Embed safeguarding in organisational culture
- Strengthen legal and policy frameworks
- Empower women by promoting economic independence
- Address vulnerabilities by designing accountability mechanisms that tackle invisible/hidden power
  - Consultation with community leaders: Dismantle their hidden power by creating platforms whereby female community leaders are the frontline and representatives of community leaders as a whole.
  - Make mandatory consultation with specific at-risk groups including specific age-groups of boys, girls, orphans, people with disabilities and widows.
  - Regular engagement with the host communities on their needs and integration approach

CHILDLIGHT

Global Child Safety Institute

Global Policing Response

March 2026

Established by HUMAN DIGNITY FOUNDATION

Hosted by THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

The Global Policing Response - Recommendations

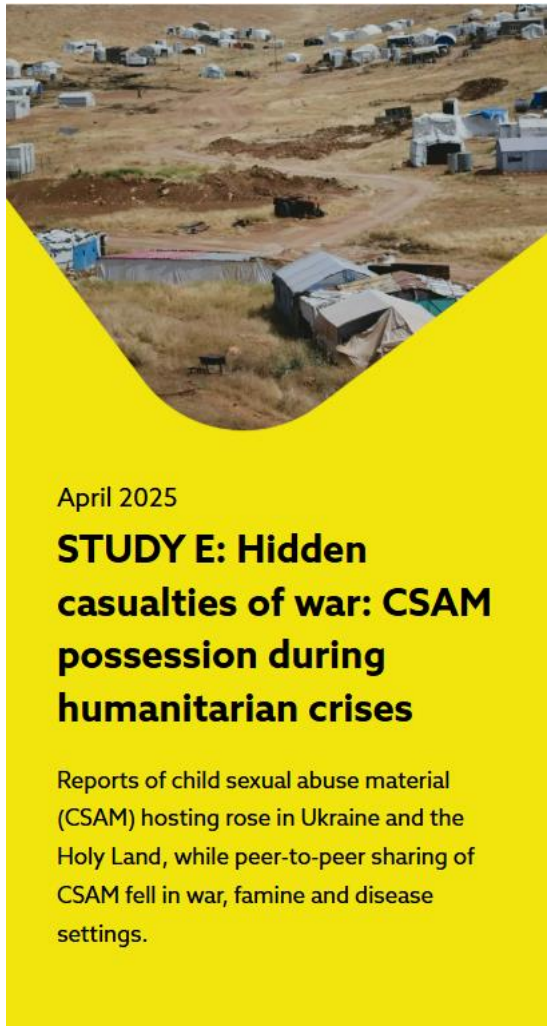
- **Build a strong evidence base** (shared, comparable, long-term tracking).
- **Global standards** for reporting/investigation/prosecution.
- **Stronger vetting** (expand tools like ICPC; close cross-border gaps).
- **Transparency & accountability** (reporting cases/outcomes; no cover-ups).
- **Victim/witness protection** (independent oversight; safe reporting).
- **Remove legal barriers** (close loopholes; address immunity protections).
- **NGO–law enforcement collaboration** (including sharing with INTERPOL where appropriate).
- **Invest in local law enforcement capacity** (skills, resources, specialist capability).
- **Zero-tolerance culture** (leadership responsibility; protect whistleblowers).
- **Treat exploitation as a public health issue** (multi-sector prevention, not just response).

The Importance of Data and Evidence

“Data Driven, Evidenced Based Data doesn’t just inform - it *obliges*.

It reduces deniability, raises the cost of inaction, and creates the pressure needed for systems to change.”

Searchlight - Hidden casualties of war: CSAM possession during humanitarian crises



- Conflict and war zones exhibit the highest rates of CSAM-sharing.
- Ukraine, the Holy Land and Venezuela show a substantial number of IP addresses linked to CSAM possession, as well as a sharp rise in reports of CSAM hosting or uploads.
- Conversely, countries experiencing famine and natural disasters tend to report lower rates of CSAM possession compared to conflict and war zones.
- The decline in CSAM activity over time in several countries, including those impacted by conflict, suggests that interventions and restrictions on P2P networks may have had an effect, but that CSAM sharing and uploads are occurring in these countries/regions outside of peer-peer networks.
- Some hotspots warrant more focused monitoring. Countries in active conflict zones, especially those with significant displacement of populations, remain high-risk areas for both contact and TF-CSEA.

https://www.childlight.org/searchlight

Roundtable conclusions (Edinburgh) Jan 2026

- Minimum Standards workstream (the spine)
- Governance, accountability, due diligence (stop recycling risk)
- Training and professional standards (make it interdisciplinary)
- Data + trend analysis (what to build next)

Chapter 13

Strengthening Safeguarding and Accountability through an International Aid Ombuds for Children

Kirsten Pontalti (online)
Ma-Luschka Jean-Louis

SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES

An *organisational* Ombuds is an independent, confidential, impartial and informal resource. It is different from a *government* Ombuds for children, which focuses on public services for children.

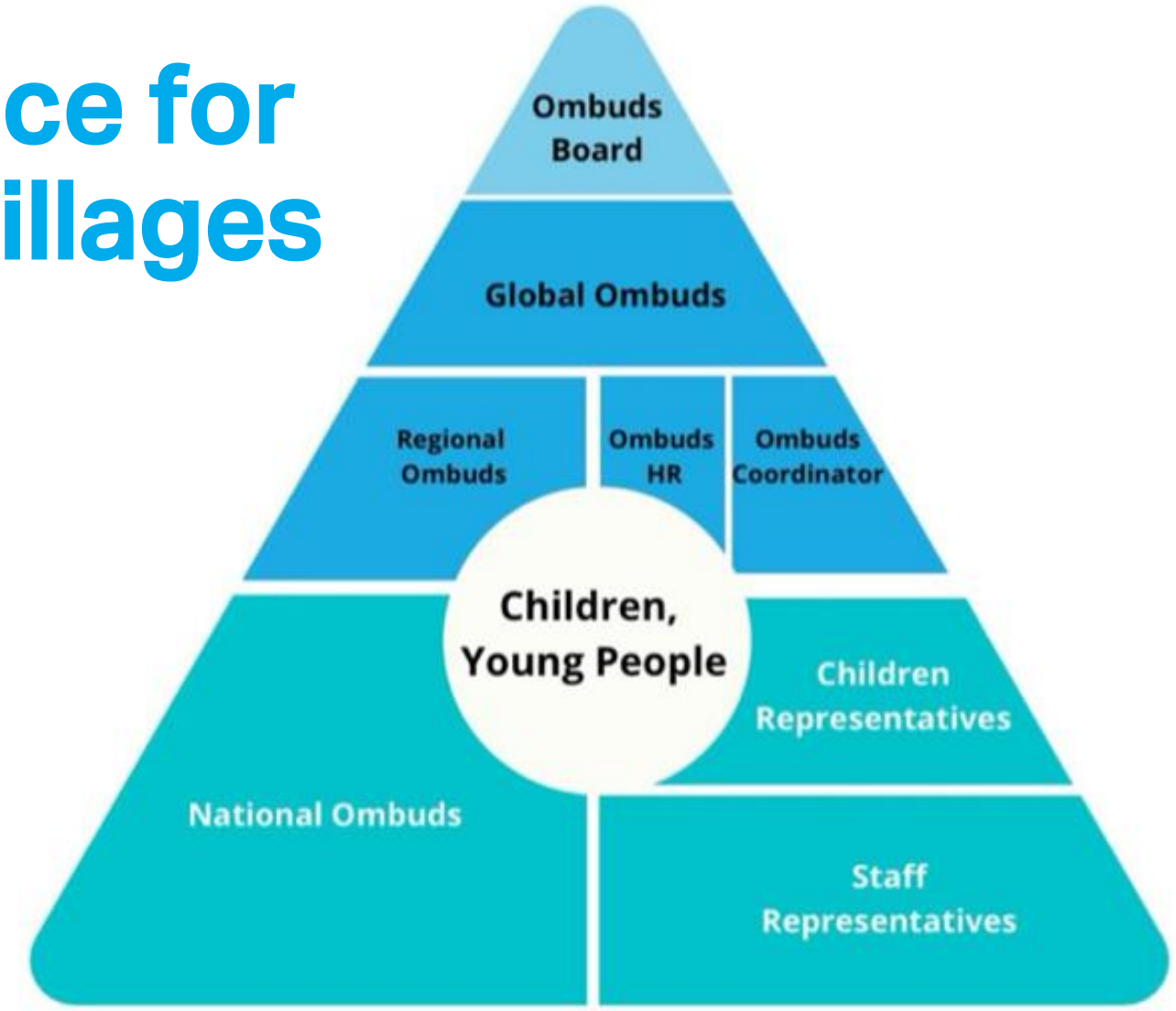
Ombuds person

-Why does it matter for safeguarding?

- Ombuds provide a safe space for children and adults to raise concerns. They are especially helpful where power imbalances exist.
- Ombuds for children and youth improve accountability to rights-holders and beneficiaries – they are not for staff discipline.
- Ombuds complement **safeguarding** systems by identifying risks, patterns and gaps and providing a “thought partner” for staff and management.
- Ombuds encourage a "speak up" culture, listening to concerns (hopefully) before they become incidents.

The Ombuds Office for SOS Children's Villages

- The first-ever global organizational Ombuds system dedicated to children and young people in programmes and services.
- Created in response to a federation-wide safeguarding crisis; embedded in statutes and regulations.
- **Mandate:** Listen to concerns related to any current or former child or young person in SOS Children's Villages programmes and support the 'inquirer' to navigate and find solutions.



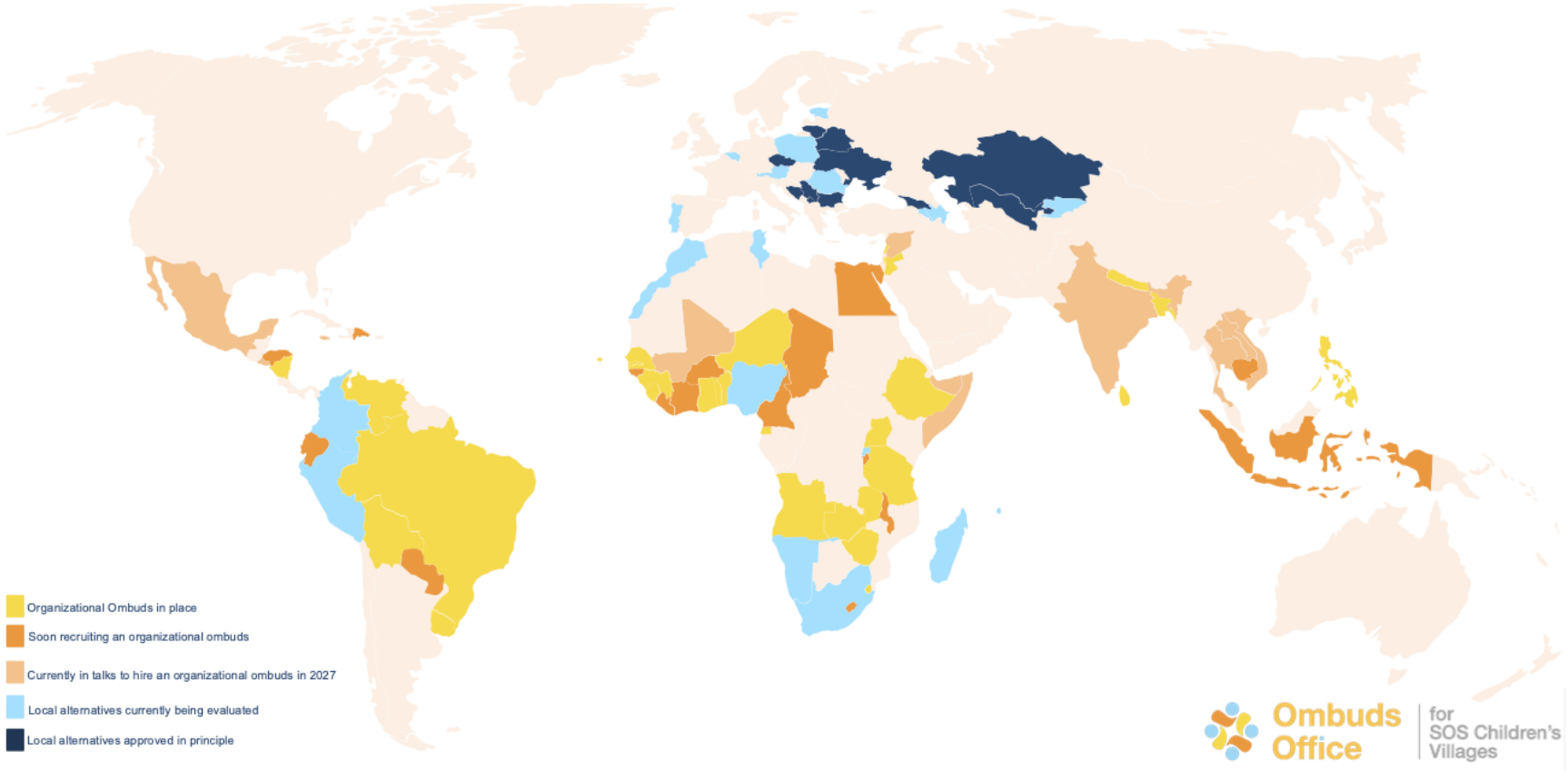
Progress and early impact

"IT WAS US AS ADOLESCENTS WHO POSED THE QUESTIONS THAT WERE GOING TO BE ASKED IN THE INTERVIEWS, AND WE HAD SUPPORT TO DO SO. IT WAS CLEAR [TO ME] WHAT AN OMBUDS HAS TO DO, AS I HAVE EXPERIENCE LIVING IN SOS SINCE I WAS 2 YEARS OLD. IT WAS GOOD BECAUSE MY FEARS WENT AWAY AND I LEARNED AND I FELT LIKE THE BOSS OF MY OWN COMPANY... THE WHOLE PROCESS WAS GOOD."

(Child panel member, Uruguay)

- **Expansion:** Global Ombuds, 5 Regional Ombuds, 30 National Ombuds and growing…
- **Meaningful participation:** Children involved in localizing the ombuds approach, Ombuds recruitment, and sharing feedback – a learning experience for National associations.
- **Collaboration and independence:** Ombuds and SOS CV staff work in complementary ways and together strengthen safe environments for all.
- **Children's rights & care:** Ombuds regularly dialogue with staff working groups to enhance care quality and respect for children's rights.
- **Early outcomes:** Increased physical security, trust, reporting, and resolution of complex and historical concerns.

Scale-up Progress as of December 2025



What does this look like on the ground?

Example 1: Experience with the incident management system run by safeguarding colleagues

- Dissatisfaction of reporters and survivors
- Quality check and review
- Trend analysis and correlation to programmes

Example 2: Youth coming to speak with the Ombuds

- Over 50% of inquirers are children and youth
- Neglect and emotional, sexual and physical abuse are the most common concerns

- Discussion:

In the current landscape of unprecedented funding cuts, why should an INGO or the international aid sector invest in an organizational ombuds for young people?