HOW-TO note

How to design and deliver safe and ethical monitoring, evaluation and research

For M&E staff at CSOs and research organisations in humanitarian or development settings

This how-to note will help organisations understand the potential safeguarding risks associated with monitoring, evaluation and research so they can put processes in place to protect everyone involved from harm. Monitoring, evaluation (M&E) and research involves staff and researchers interacting with communities and participants, to collect, analyse and use information. The behaviour of M&E staff and researchers and the acitvities they carry out can result in potential harm or safeguarding risks including sexual exploitation, abuse, or sexual harassment (SEAH). These risks need to be addressed to ensure these activities are safe for everyone involved.

What is safe monitoring, evaluation, and research?

- Safe M&E and research ensures everyone involved is protected from harm either as a direct or indirect result of the activity.

- It considers and seeks to address the power imbalances between those conducting monitoring, evaluation and research activities and those participating in them.

- It ensures privacy and confidentiality for all participants.

- It considers safeguarding and ethical concerns to identify potential risks and how to mitigate and manage them during the different stages of the cycle.

    i. Planning and design

    ii. Conducting data collection

    iii. Analysis, reporting and sharing of findings

Distinction between safeguarding and ethics

Both safeguarding and research ethics are concerned with preventing harm to people and participants in the delivery of development and humanitarian assistance and research. The two terms are often used interchangeably and whilst there are complementarities and overlaps there are also some clear differences.

- **Research ethics** are the moral principles that govern how researchers should carry out their work involving data collection, analysis and reporting. Key ethical considerations include ensuring data collection is necessary, the benefits of data collection outweigh the potential risk of harm, voluntary participation, informed consent and protecting the confidentiality of participants. Safeguarding risks are considered as part of delivering ethical research, however research ethics extends beyond safeguarding.

- **Safeguarding for research** concerns all aspects of the behaviour of the researchers and the safeguarding risks for individuals participating in the research. It involves understanding power imbalances, how power can be abused, and putting in place the necessary measures to prevent harm to staff, research participants and communities, as well as mechanisms to respond to concerns. Safeguarding encompasses harm caused by staff behaviour, and harm caused by M&E and research.

Research ethics encompasses safeguarding, however, does not always explicitly capture all safeguarding risks.

What is needed to ensure safe and ethical monitoring, evaluation and research?

The following needs to be in place to ensure safe M&E and research:

✓ An organisational Code of Conduct that explains standards of behaviour expected of staff and associates and is a part of all contracts.

✓ An appointed safeguarding focal point (SFP) to provide training and support to colleagues and monitor and manage safeguarding risks and respond to reports.

✓ Identified referral pathways and support service for responding to safeguarding issues.

✓ Safeguarding reporting mechanisms with clear roles and responsibilities for responding to safeguarding issues

✓ M&E staff and researchers trained in safeguarding, including safe data collection methods (see below)

✓ Sufficient time, resources and budget to ensure appropriate safeguarding measures are adequately addressed

✓ An organisational ethics framework to guide all M&E and research activities – this might be integrated into the M&E plan.

For more, read How-To Note on Safe Programming and Tops 10 Tips for Conducting Safe Project Monitoring Visits

How to integrate safeguarding and ethics throughout the MER cycle

1. Planning and design

1.1 Conduct a risk assessment

• Assess the potential safeguarding risks associated with working in a particular location and with a particular population (e.g. vulnerable or marginalised groups), and consider the mitigations for those risks.

• The risk assessment should be continually reviewed and updated to take account of any changes in the context or programme delivery.

1.2 Understand the local context and population group

Having knowledge and understanding of the local context, will ensure the M&E and research is

Who are we keeping safe through safe MER?

Anyone who is involved in M&E and research activities, including:

→ Programme participants and wider community members

→ M&E staff, volunteers and researchers

Examples of M&E safeguarding risks:

→ A M&E volunteer representing a CSO gets a young man's phone number from monitoring data and sends him sexually inappropriate messages.

→ A girl walking to and from a research activity location is abused or harassed by community members on that journey.

→ A senior M&E staff member acts inappropriately with a junior M&E staff member.

→ A member of the community discloses an incident where a CSO staff member touched them inappropriately during an interview.

→ A young woman faces stigma in the community after sharing personal information with a researcher in an open setting where others overheard.

→ A participant invites a data collector into their home for to conduct the interview, whilst in the house the data collector observes evidence of domestic violence.

These risks might arise at any point during M&E and research activities:

→ Planning and design phase

→ Data collection in location

→ Data management and analysis

→ Dissemination

For more, read: What is safeguarding?

appropriately designed, protect research participants and avoid doing harm. Where possible include a range of community members and/or community-based organisations to help identify:

✓ Where and in what situations community members feel safe/less safe.
✓ Groups at greater risk of SEAH, groups that are often excluded or harder to reach. Identify potential barriers to participation of these groups, and solutions for overcoming them.
✓ Which language and terminology is appropriate for use in the research to avoid causing harm, embarrassment or re-traumatising participants, see RSH how-to note on considering language when researching SEAH
✓ Any codes or hand signals commonly used to flag whether an individual is in immediate risk of violence.

To hear more on real world practice, take a listen to this Spotlight on podcast on 'Monitoring safeguarding in Research'

1.3 Identify referral pathways and reporting mechanisms

Reporting mechanisms and referral pathways need to be identified and established before M&E and research activities begin so M&E staff and researchers are equipped to respond to reports of SEAH or other safeguarding issues as they arise. See Scenario 1 in the annex for an example.

- Design or identify **safe feedback and reporting channels for communities** and participants to share feedback about the monitoring, evaluation or research activity. See How to design and manage community-based complaints mechanisms (CBCM)

- Identify the **local reporting laws and procedures**, and what the likely process and outcomes may be. Develop a plan from the outset on how the research team will handle cases requiring mandatory reporting. e.g. for criminal allegations, allegations involving children, vulnerable individuals or those at risk of violence or harm.

- Undertake a **mapping of support services and referral pathways** where M&E and research activities will take place. Involve representatives of the community or participants to ensure they are acceptable and perceived as safe by the group (e.g., are police seen as trustworthy, are counselling services adolescent friendly). In situations where there is a lack of available, trusted or accessible referral services (e.g., in remote locations) provision should be made to ensure that support is available to those that need it.

1.4 Select or recruit data collectors and researchers safely

All staff involved in data collection (including consultants, data collectors, translators, and volunteers) need to be recruited following safe recruitment practices, to understand the risks see scenario 3 in the annex and the RSH Webinar on safe recruitment.

- Undertake **adequate background checks** such as asking specific questions at interview and obtaining references when recruiting individuals to assist with data collection. Disclosure checks should be carried out when working with children or high-risk groups.

- Ensure all new staff, including external consultants read and sign **their commitment to the organisation Code of Conduct**; for guidance see RSH Inclusive Safeguarding Code of Conduct.

1.5 Prepare appropriate methods, approaches and tools for safe data collection

M&E and research methods and tools should be informed by community consultation and the risk assessment to ensure they are contextually appropriate for use with the representative group.

Design **informed consent procedures** and forms appropriate for the participants.

- Develop clear **protocols** on where and how to conduct M&E and research activities and guidance on supervision of data collection teams.

- Consider **what type of data collection is most ethically appropriate** for your research. For example, one-to-one interviews may be more appropriate than focus groups when discussing sensitive topics: See RSH How-to-note how to research SEAH safely.

- Consider **the risks and benefits of research designs**; for sensitive subjects, qualitative, narrative-based and participatory approaches may be better suited than quantitative approaches.

- When **designing data collection tools**, remember:

> **Informed consent means that individuals understand:**
>
> → What information is being collected, how and why.
>
> → What personal risks or benefits, if any, there might be to their participation.
>
> → How the information will be used, who will have access to it and how it will be kept safe.
>
> → How long the information will be held and that it is destroyed after that time.
>
> → That refusing to participate will not affect their relationship with or support from the organisation.
>
> → That they can withdraw their consent to participating or to the storage or reporting of their data at any time.
>
> → Under which circumstances confidentiality may have to be broken due to mandatory reporting. For example if a participant or individual is at immediate risk of harm or the safety of a child is at risk. This will vary based on location depending on mandatory reporting laws.

- ✓ Not to use terms that might be misunderstood, stigmatising or embarrassing. For further information see the RSH how-to note on considering language when researching SEAH.

- ✓ Not to use stories or examples that present harmful gender norms or stigmatise participants.

- ✓ Not to ask for personal information that would make the individual identifiable or place them at risk.

- ✓ To always pre-test instruments to make sure they make sense to participants, are worded sensitively and do not cause distress without adequate support.

- ✓ Not to ask questions that could embarrass, cause harm or re-traumatise participants. For further information see the RSH How-to-note on how to research SEAH safely.

If you intend to use mobile phones or online platforms for data collection and communications, there are additional considerations in design and application of tools.

1.6 Train data collectors and researchers

It is essential that all M&E staff and researchers receive training on how to conduct monitoring, evaluation and research activities safely.

- Safeguarding training must be provided for all M&E staff and researchers and it must be tailored to the specific data collection activity and community needs. It should include:

  - ✓ Outline of all **relevant processes and procedures** including how to identify, respond and report concerns, the code of conduct and the informed consent principles.

  - ✓ Opportunities to **practice key research skills** through role plays and pilot testing, including how to maintain confidentiality, non-judgemental listening and how to identify, manage and refer cases of distress, embarrassment or re-traumatisation when exploring sensitive topics or how to ask sensitive questions to avoid causing harm, embarrassment or re-traumatising participants (e.g., Psychological First Aid). See RSH How-to-note how to research SEAH safely.

For more, see Safeguarding Support Hub E-learning.

2   Data collection

Power imbalances exist between data collectors and participants. M&E staff and researchers have control over the types of questions being asked, over the setting in which questions are asked, and who to include or exclude. They are generally able to move freely during the data collection process. This places M&E staff and researchers in a position of power which may lead to the following challenges:

- Difficulty obtaining informed, voluntary consent to participate when a person feels obliged to take part or unable to refuse.

- Barriers to reporting SEAH may be exacerbated if a participant doesn't trust the research or feel safe.

- Fear of reporting a SEAH incident in case of backlash from the perpetrator or stigma from the wider community.

Please see Scenario 4 in the annex to understand how this could impact data collection.

2.1 Ensure privacy and safety of participants during data collection activities

When conducting data collection, it is essential to protect the privacy and safety of participants. During data collection, you should:

✓ Ensure the time and location of **data collection allows for safe travel and protects the privacy** of participants. This is particularly important for women and girls, who may be safer moving during the day.

✓ Ensure interviews or FGDs are conducted by **same-gender facilitators** and where possible, data collection should be done in pairs or teams.

✓ **Ensure M&E staff and researchers carry a photo ID** or some other identifying documentation so that communities and research participants can be confident of the identity of researchers.   Where appropriate and deemed safe for both researchers and research participants it may be advised to wear branded t-shirt or other identifying materials, but this will be context specific and should be identified through the risk assessment.

✓ **Ensure informed consent is obtained** from participants and that they understand mandatory reporting processes, forms should be translated or read to the participant if illiterate. Explain clearly when seeking informed consent what the organisation's duty of care and safeguarding responsibilities are so that the intended research participants can make an informed decision on whether they wish to participate on that basis.

✓ Ensure **appropriate procedures are in place for working with children** / young people, such as obtaining assent where consent needs to be given by a parent/ carer/ guardian (verbal or written agreement to participate from the child).

✓ Ensure communities and participants are aware of **feedback and reporting channels** available to them as part of the introduction to the data collection activity (e.g., share the information verbally, hand out information sheets or flyers etc.).

✓ Ensure **personal data is always kept safe and secure** and that data collected on mobile phones and devices are password encrypted and only accessible by the data collector/ researcher.

✓ Always ask participants' **permission to record interviews** and take or use photos. The taking of photographs should be included in the risk assessment, as in some cases participants may not feel able to say No.

For more on this please refer to Tops 10 Tips for Conducting Safe Project Monitoring Visits

2.2 Ensure any safeguarding reports received during data collection are handled appropriately

Safeguarding concerns or instances of SEAH could be reported through M&E and research activities even when this is not the subject of the data collection, and may not relate to the specific activity, e.g., it may be an incident that occurred in the wider programme or at home or in the community. It is important for M&E staff and researchers to understand this.

- M&E staff and researchers may find themselves in a situation where their **ethical obligation to protect participants' confidentiality comes into conflict with their legal obligation to report** incidents of harm, violence and abuse.

- M&E staff and researchers should be aware of the **local reporting laws and procedures** identified during the planning stages. All M&E staff and researchers should be aware of the plan for handling cases that require mandatory reporting. This may be required for certain disclosures where the participants' welfare is in immediate danger (e.g. sexual violence, incidence involving children).

- M&E staff and researchers should be aware of the **referral pathways** mapped in the planning stage and be able to refer research participants to appropriate referral pathways where there is adequate information or observation of the incident.

- All research participants should understand under what circumstances **researchers or M&E staff might be obliged to report incidences or concerns that are observed or discussed** as part of the research. Be clear beforehand what your organisation would do if observing or discussing a situation where the research participant is, for example, at current risk of violence in the home and this has been observed or discussed because of the research underway.

It is important to be aware that <u>in some cases reporting could lead to increased risk of violence or abuse and make women and children more vulnerable.</u> This needs to be carefully considered and all actions should be in the best interest of the individual concerned. See RSH How-to-note how to research SEAH safely.

2.3 Ensure the wellbeing of M&E staff and researchers

It is important that appropriate measures are put in place to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all M&E staff and researchers, so they are protected from any harm during data collection.

- Conduct thorough **security checks** if data collection teams are required to carry out activities in remote or new locations and seek appropriate permission and support from local authorities.

- Consider **the gender, sexuality and other characteristics of data collectors** in relation to the context or location of data collection to determine if this places them at risk.

- **Supervision visits or daily 'check-ins'** via phone or WhatsApp should be done for all data collection teams. Where possible data collectors should work in pairs or small groups.

- Consider both **the physical and mental risks that M&E staff and researchers may be exposed to**, including the impact of dealing with sensitive topics. Include advice on how to maintain professional boundaries in the training and ensure appropriate self-care support, such as debrief sessions, supervision or counselling services are available to staff. See RSH How-to-note how to research SEAH safely.

- Acknowledge **unequal power relationships** between junior staff such as students, volunteers or data collectors and senior staff which may create safeguarding risks, e.g. bullying, harassment or coercion.

3   Analysis, reporting and sharing of data

3.1 Ensure data protection and privacy

Information about individuals must be kept confidential and anonymous to protect participants and maintain their right to privacy.

- **All data analysed should be anonymised**. Ensure any identifiable information related to personal experiences are removed as this could put people at risk. When aggregating data be mindful that identifying a specific location for the findings could still represent a risk to participants (e.g. identifying a group of displaced people in a particular area may lead to their arrest).

- **Do not share personal or sensitive data** (e.g. non-anonymised databases, registration lists) with third parties, such as donors, governments or police unless a data sharing agreement is agreed with the participants.

- All data including data collection notes and consent forms should be kept safe and destroyed when they are no longer needed.

- Ensure all staff handling data (e.g. data entry and analysis) are aware of how to identify safeguarding concerns in the data and how to refer them. For example, in an evaluation of an education programme you may see reports of corporal punishment, these should be reported through internal reporting processes and agreed protocols.

See Scenario 2 for more on this.

3.3 Share back findings with the community

Once the reports are completed it is good practice to present findings back to the community, and discuss how you will use the information, what actions will be taken as a result. If your data and research address sensitive issues, such as SEAH, you will need to be particularly careful about how you share those findings back. Your data protection and privacy guidelines should be used to support your decisions on what is or is not safe to communicate. This stage in the cycle must be considered when developing your risk assessment and mitigations.

Resources

- Balch. A, Garimella, S, Mansaray, B. (2020) Guidance on Safeguarding in International Development Research (UKCDR), London.

- Geneva: World health Organisation. February 2016. Ethical and safety recommendations for intervention research on violence against women. Building on lessons from the WHO publication Putting women first: ethical and safety recommendations for research on domestic violence against women.

- Save the Children International, UK. 2019. Safeguarding in MEAL and Research.

- The Global Women's Institute, 2017. Gender-Based Violence Research, Monitoring and Evaluation with Refugee and Conflict-Affected Populations: A Manual and Toolkit for Researchers and Practitioners

- The Global Women's Institute (GWI). (2020) Empowered Aid: Participatory Action Research Workshop Facilitation Guide. Washington DC: The Global Women's institute at The George Washington University

- United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG). (2020). Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation.

- UN women & WHO (2020). Violence Against Women and Girls Data Collection during COVID-19.

- Ward, J, Ethics in Researching Gender-based Violence in Humanitarian Settings: Reflections from the Field, (2020)

Scenarios

Scenario 1: Discovery of an incidence of sexual exploitation in another project

Musa works for a research firm conducting a study among displaced children in a humanitarian camp in Nigeria. An international NGO is also working in the camp as part of a large humanitarian programme distributing shelter kits and food to families. During Musa's discussions with families in the camp, he hears complaints about the distribution not being fair or transparent. People also mention that volunteers working for the INGO managing the distribution were asking young women for sex in return for being added to the distribution list. Musa is very well trained in research ethics and safeguarding principles within his own organisation but is still unsure what to do. He is concerned about how to report the incident about another organisation, especially as the organisation is well known. He does not want them to stop their operations, but at the same time he knows he has a duty of care to the community with whom he is working, and the behaviour is harmful.

What should happen now?

This information should be reported to the safeguarding focal point person at Musa's organisation and through the external reporting mechanisms identified in the referral mechanism mapping (where this does not place the survivor at risk). If a survivor discloses this information to him during data collection, the survivor should be referred to the identified support services. This information should be kept anonymous in any analysis and in reporting programme findings and results.

Scenario 2: Poor data protection and inappropriate relationships with programme participants

Regina is a M&E officer and works on a Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) project for a CSO in Malawi. The project involves working with young people who are trained to be 'WASH Champions' to raise awareness of the people in their communities about the dangers of drinking unclean water, as well as teaching about how to purify and store water safely. Regina's job is to monitor the work of the project volunteers. Due to the Covid-19 lockdown, Regina could not visit the communities and therefore communication with the volunteers was done remotely. The WASH Champions were given a mobile phone to use for this project only. Regina would regularly talk to the volunteers on a WhatsApp group chat. A male staff member got access to the list of names and numbers of the volunteers he found in the office and started to send text messages to one of the young volunteers. As the staff member is kind and promises the chance to work on another project the volunteer continues to respond and agrees to meet him out of work hours.

What should happen now?

This information should be reported to the safeguarding focal point person at Regina's organisation, where investigation protocols should be actioned. Whilst Regina is not at fault here and is not responsible for the actions of other team members, there are lessons to be learnt from this incident including the need to ensure phone numbers of the volunteers are kept securely. Part of the training for volunteers should include information about what they can expect from staff and what are acceptable forms and channels of communication and how and where to report concerns if behaviour deviates from this. Regina can reassure the volunteers that all staff members sign a code of conduct which includes a protocol for using phones for data collection, and inform them of what is in the code of conduct.

Scenario 3: Unsafe recruitment and supervision of data collection teams

Joseph is the M&E lead for a CSO in Ethiopia that supports people with disabilities to access sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. There is a request from a donor to collect feedback on the services from users, Joseph must quickly design data collection. The usual data collection team that Joseph would use are busy and due to time pressures, he decides to use a team he heard about through an ex-colleague. The safe recruitment is rushed and only a short briefing on requirements is provided. As data collection needs to happen quickly and in remote areas, Joseph decides he is unable to supervise all data collection but that it must go ahead. A few months after this data collection exercise, Joseph hears some concerns about the data collection during a programme monitoring visit. Some of the participants raised concerns about these interviews being conducted in unsafe locations, others reported feeling embarrassed after the interviews due to inappropriate comments made by the data collectors.

What should happen now?

This incident should be reported to the safeguarding focal point and the reporting processes followed. The programme team needs to ensure they listen and respond to community views, especially those of the people who were unfairly treated. They should give feedback to the community around how they are going to address this behaviour, and work to restore trust both in the programme but also in the SRH services. The organisation must strengthen procedures and processes to prevent incidents from re-occurring.

Scenario 4: Power imbalance between research staff and participants and unclear safeguarding reporting procedures

Grace is a research assistant working for a small research organisation. The research team is evaluating an education project that supports young teenage mothers who do not attend school. Grace and her senior male colleague, Wisdom, have a lot of FGDs to conduct in each school. The only way that they can complete these in time is if they run them separately. After each FGD, Grace and Wisdom meet to debrief. Grace goes to meet Wisdom and observes him talking closely to one of the participants and taking a photo on his phone of them both together. She also witnesses him putting his arm around her before letting her leave. Grace knows this is not right but isn't sure what to say or do to help the girl and prevent this happening again. She is not sure she can do anything without the girl's permission, and is worried if she does speak out she may not be believed as her colleague is a senior member of staff and very popular in the office.

What should happen now?

Grace should recognise this as something that needs reporting and report it through the appropriate reporting mechanism to her organisation. Wisdom should receive information and training on appropriate conduct when conducting programme visits. In future any research activities that are conducted should ensure facilitators work in pairs, so no one is left alone with a participant, and use same sex facilitators for all FGDs. Refresher training should be provided to staff around how to recognise safeguarding incidents and be confident about how to report them, and how to support survivors. Whistle blowing lines or anonymous reporting mechanisms might make junior colleagues more comfortable when reporting.