

Preventing Abuses in the International Aid Sector: A Global Effort, and a British-based Case Study

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Abstract

Embarrassing international revelations of aid workers' sexual involvement with populations they serve have contributed to major efforts at eradicating sexual and other abuses of vulnerable people in international work. With buy-in from diverse governments, the United Nations and the World Health Organization have led an endeavour at countering abuses globally, especially among those in receipt of various forms of international aid. This article provides an overall introduction to this effort, adds a case study of how the British government sees itself as taking a lead, and concludes with ways in which this endeavour impacts Christian mission work by British citizens.

Key Words: Africa, child protection, international aid, mission, safeguarding

Introduction

Embarrassing international revelations of aid workers' sexual involvement with populations they serve have contributed to an instigation of major efforts at eradicating sexual and other abuses of vulnerable people in international work. With buy-in from diverse governments, the United Nations (UN), especially the World Health Organization (WHO), have led an endeavour at countering abuses globally (World Health Organization, 2023). The focus tends to be on abuses of girls and women but also vulnerable people in general, especially those in receipt of various forms of international aid. After explaining my personal concerns, I give an overview of this effort up to the present (2023). A detailed case study of particular ways the British government sees itself as taking a lead draws heavily on recent literature regarding safeguarding against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). The article concludes with ways in which this endeavour impacts Christian mission work by British citizens and advocates for foundational policy transformations.

Personal Concerns

My personal investment in this topic arises from finding myself being under pressure to comply with new British laws, the implementation of which could not only disrupt or destroy my 35 years of ministry in East Africa but could also put my life at risk, along with the well-being of many with whom I associate closely.

Possible consequences for being in non-compliance with British law include involvement of INTERPOL, imprisonment, being considered guilty unless proven innocent, and making it illegal for British people to support me financially. Locally, foreigners raising concerns about sexual misdemeanours by missionaries through insisting that externally-rooted checks be put in place may easily imply that they have evidence that the person concerned has engaged in illicit sexual activity. The impact of such implication could at best be confusing and at worst could result in physical attacks

(lynchings) of missionaries and colleagues, or different possibilities between these extremes.

As I will explain further below, the apparent intolerance of new international regulations for anything but their own solutions clashes with existing means of preventing abuses in the African communities in which I am embedded.

Overview: What is Happening Globally

The following draws particularly on what the UN is doing and the USA's determined support and insistence on it (Office of the Spokesperson, 2018). The features below characterize discussion on efforts at countering abuse:

1. *Zero Tolerance.* Language used frequently makes it very clear that there should be no exceptions and no tolerance for any abuse at all (Office of the Spokesperson, 2018), including zero tolerance for inaction when abuse is suspected (World Health Organization, 2023).
2. *Victim / survivor centered.* Policies being devised and implemented seek to: a) investigate, b) support survivors/victims, and c) discipline perpetrators (World Health Organization, 2023, p. 2). Supporting, listening to, and protecting victims, typically women and girls, is considered the most important part of proposed strategies.
3. *Do no harm.* Throughout, interventions are perceived as correcting abuses while having a neutral or positive wider impact, so that they "do no harm" (World Health Organization, 2023, 1).
4. *Criminalization.* Many want to make sexual abuses a criminal offence, to be harshly dealt with using criminal law (United Nations, 2019, 6).
5. *Religion seen as a barrier.* Any "religious" objections or perceived desire for compromise are perceived as "barriers" to necessary processes of legal implementation with zero tolerance (United Nations, 2019, 6).
6. *International Aid is the fulcrum of concern.* Efforts are being primarily oriented to correcting of faults in the international aid system. The same policies engulf related international activity that are not international aid as such, like Christian mission.
7. *Avoiding discrimination.* The above are rooted in the UN charter that prohibits discrimination according to sex (United Nations, 2019, p. 2).
8. *Translatability assumed.* While questions of language are mentioned, the easy and straightforward translatability of what is being proposed is generally assumed.
9. *The proposals are Western/individualistic.* So, for example, victims are expected to "tell on" perpetrators of abuse, expecting international bodies to protect them from revenge, while "traditional" values, such as respect for age and the need to maintain the integrity of a family, are ignored.
10. *Victims are to be compensated.* There is a not-closely-detailed anticipation that victims will be cared for, as were 92 in the Congo (World Health Organization, 2023, p. 4) in unspecified ways and for unspecified durations.

Need for Changes in Countering Abuse

While these principles are already being implemented in many countries, it is clear that all is not well. Attempts at preventing SEA are acknowledged as having been grave failures in the past (World Health Organization, 2023, p. 14). A need for continuous feedback on the system indicates that what is currently being implemented remains fluid (World Health Organization, 2023, p. 19). There is an acute shortage of qualified people who can implement proposed strategies (World Health Organization, 2023, p. 13). Just this year (2023), there is acknowledgement of a need for a comprehensive overhaul of what is currently being implemented (World Health Organization, 2023, p. 9).

An alternative engagement in LMIC that could help to counter widespread abuse, known as vulnerable mission (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission, 2022), is given no official consideration in new legislation. Neither does the UN literature incorporate the kinds of extension of grace for which Jesus is known.

A British Case Study

The British government sees itself as leading efforts at stamping out SEA in the aid and development sector in LMIC. However, responses intended to provide relief, such as the handing out of aid, can open doors to SEA through providers of relief acquiring power-over-locals (International Development Committee, 2021, section 4:61). In the LMIC in which Britain is active, the whole population can be seen as “vulnerable” to outsiders who wield financial and material power on which locals are dependent (Orr et al., 2019, pp. 24, 29; Sandvik, 2019, p. 1).

This case study first describes UK policies aimed at eliminating SEA and then critiques those policies on a number of scores:

1. This study points to a clear risk that British efforts at imposing safeguarding from afar can result in dangers to British people and projects as well as locals in LMIC, who understand safeguarding (i.e., ways of preventing sexual and other abuse of vulnerable people) differently.
2. Assessments of safeguarding policies tend to make erroneous assumptions regarding language and translation. Correcting such assumptions would undermine the logic that is widely used to defend safeguarding in the international aid and development sector.
3. Using the threat of legal action and punishment to deter British involvement in SEA in LMIC may culminate in a “cutting off” of LMICs from supportive understanding by the wider world.

Explanation of British Attempts to Eradicate SEA

A safeguarding policy that legitimizes a dominating voice from the UK inadvertently allows the UK government a heavy-handed intervention reminiscent of empire into other people’s business. This intervention is justified as necessary to prevent SEA of vulnerable children and adults (Mednick & Craze, 2022; Sandvik, 2019, p. 2). The UK endeavours to ensure compliance with strict accountability structures, designed to make SEA impossible wherever British influence extends around the world, in a ‘root and branch transformation’ (International Development Committee, 2021, section 1:7). In some instances, UK authorities would value having victims beyond its shores contact

them directly (International Development Committee, 2021, conclusion section 13, paragraph 56), especially where indigenous systems of justice may seem wanting or corrupt. British citizens can be prosecuted in the UK for offences carried out overseas (International Development Committee, 2021, section 3:59). Terminology used to describe the UK's stand against SEA in the aid sector often focuses on its conviction and determination to succeed (International Development Committee, 2021, summary). Prevention of SEA is purposely not a box-ticking exercise (International Development Committee, 2021, summary). It is not enough to have an employee responsible for safeguarding (Orr et al. 2019, p. 25). Instead, real radical action is required. This action should not merely be a “scurry of activity” as some might consider it (Gecim et al., 2020). It should make abuse ‘as impossible as possible’ (Zollner, 2022, p. 18).

Evaluation of British Attempts to Eradicate SEA

Power Imbalance

Abuses are likely to arise in contexts of gross power by one group over another. The solution seen to such abuse of the vulnerable is to look for means to empower *beneficiaries* of aid and development assistance (International Development Committee, 2021, summary). One of these means is to make it unacceptable to relate sexually across power differentials, which has led to a “*de facto* criminalization” of payment for sex (Sandvik, 2019, p. 3). This step represents a determined effort to thwart the tendency—especially for those in powerful institutions responsible for distributing aid—to take advantage of the vulnerable. Reporting of abuses has become mandatory for Brits and those in British funded projects (Orr et al., 2019, p. 22). In order to maintain accountability, lone working is discouraged (Orr et al., 2019, p. 35).

The Church

British government efforts at protecting the vulnerable could be interpreted as an attempt at marginalizing church authority. Hence sexual abuse by clergy has received singular attention (Zollner, 2022, p. 16), the results of which are used to discredit them. There is little evidence to suggest that clergy are more likely to engage in abuses than others. Instead, there seems to be an underlying expectation that clergy should never have exploited anyone at all, and that any cases of SEA by clergy in the past should have been made public and led to prosecution. Oviedo points out that the October 2022 “Report of the Independent Inquiry” (Jay et al., 2022, p. 39) indicates that just 6 percent of child sexual abuse is due to religious staff. “It is of little use to focus on the Catholic church,” suggests Oviedo (2022). The church is criticized for its human weakness without apparent regard to the strengths it brings to the table resulting from the role of God and his Holy Spirit working through weak vessels.

Labeling LMIC as Vulnerable

Considering the whole population of LMIC to be ‘vulnerable’ can be a means to disenfranchise them. Outsiders, like the British government, seem to be needed to protect them. An orientation to needing to take care of victims when all are victims empowers Westerners to dominate the lives of whole populations.

For someone familiar with Christian theology, labelling all LMIC citizens as “vulnerable” can be a means of Westerners usurping power that rightly belongs to God. Safeguarding can itself be a usurping of power and denial of the capability of LMIC people to adequately protect themselves.

Translatability

The British recommendation that there should be “active engagement with local populations” can be problematic if English is the operative language rather than the native language of the LMIC (International Development Committee, 2021, section 4:65).

The very concept of “safeguarding” as contemporarily understood in the UK may well be untranslatable, according to the UKs Department of Foreign and International Development (DFID) (Bayley, 2022). Use of English or European languages in LMIC generally assumes that what can be said in one language can simply and clearly be heard in another, for example that English can be easily, satisfactorily, and “completely,” translated into Swahili (Ezekiel et al., 2017). However, such an assumption ignores ways in which Swahili is used in African contexts that are culturally (and in almost every other way, e.g, historically, religiously, environmentally, ethnically) vastly different from those of English as used say in the UK. In actuality, a language can only ever be correctly understood in relation to the context of its use.

Use of outside resources to entice people to use languages rooted in distant and foreign communities can itself be very destructive. It can prompt young and old alike to discount what makes sense locally in favour of linking to generous outside networks. The undermining of local language and culture over decades or generations can contribute to rendering indigenous communities incompetent in running their own affairs. Thus, insofar as British implementation of safeguarding requires cooperation with nationals, and if those nationals are engaged using English, then implementation of safeguarding is itself “doing harm” (Harries, 2013).

Development workers who believe that their work that is engaged using English in LMIC does no harm are deceiving themselves. This deception is rendered dangerous because of the resources they use to back what they are doing. Differences between the cultures of native-English-speaking peoples and those of many African peoples is such that use of English:

1. Often forces LMIC populations to learn by rote (“African innovations ... have ... been viewed as errors” (Muthwii, 2007, p. 53). To not make errors, Africans imitate and as far as possible learn by rote. So presumably do others in LMIC.
2. Renders avenues advocated for indigenous development consistently dependent on being led by Westerners. When the West dominates, the way for people in LMIC to thrive is to appear to understand and to appear to do what they understand they are being told to do (Spivak, 1988).
3. Undermines efforts made by indigenous people to make sense of their own lives using their own thinking.
4. Sets indigenous people onto a course of incompetence and dependence.

Humanitarian workers who want to “do no harm” need to engage people using their own languages, having learned those languages in culturally appropriate ways. They should not connect their interventions to financial incentives. Following this kind of recommendation may well, I suggest, obviate the need for a great deal of safeguarding.

Accountability

Safeguarding, as designed for British people and British funded projects overseas, aims to facilitate whistle blowing on SEA and protect whistle blowers (International Development Committee, 2021, section 2:32). The orienting assumption is that a British person in an LMIC, through distributing resources, is likely to be tempted to take advantage of people’s dependence on their resources in order to abuse the vulnerable. The consistent supposition is that the Brit relates to citizens of LMIC as a benefactor. An alternative option that I consider here is that a British national perhaps ought to relate to people in ways other than as a benefactor.

UK in-country safeguarding strictures require reporting any instances in which harm is inflicted (or reported to be inflicted) on vulnerable adults or children. The same reporting should, according to the UK government, happen internationally. However, implementing such reporting can prove difficult, as discussed in *Progress on Tackling the Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Aid Beneficiaries* (International Development Committee, 2021). Perpetrators will be punished (International Development Committee, 2021, section 6:124), yet this requirement has its own dangers. “There is potential for reporting to have negative consequences for victims / survivors in certain situations” (Balch et al., 2020, p. 8). “Operating with precise guidelines can be inflexible and dangerous,” commented one aid worker (Orr et al., 2019, p. 35), adding that “the duty to report may need to be met in ways that avoid putting the person in further harm’s way” as a result of reporting (Orr et al., 2019, p. 35). “Imposing ... protection values and practices on people in other [unfamiliar] settings ... might be quite dangerous” (Orr et al., 2019, p. 43). Even when asked to do something that would be abusive to them, people may still be unwilling to refuse (Balch et al., 2020, p. 25). Such a reluctance reflects a wider tendency in parts of LMIC of people being keen to agree with and loath to contradict a potentially generous outsider (Balch et al., 2020, p. 25).

The imposition of safeguarding structures linked to funding can result in people thinking, “I need to be accountable to those people over there rather than accountable to the people I am serving,” suggests Faith Mwangi-Powell with respect to Africa (Gecim et al., 2020). Such misplaced accountability can negate vital and deeply ingrained “normal” local accountability structures.

Local Involvement in Accountability

Outside efforts at safeguarding by holding people accountable risk undermining indigenous safeguarding processes in potentially dangerous ways. Local communities have their own means of keeping the sexual habits of high libido males within bounds. These mechanisms include shaming, shunning, exclusion facilitated by gossip on the village grapevine (to which safeguarding advocates from outside will have very limited access), fining, calling young men to councils should their wives walk out on them, instruction on relationships in circumcision camps, advocating for salvation in Christ then

insisting on sexual chastity, and so on. Reliance on safeguarding processes that meet the satisfaction of people guided by the UK could easily undermine local means while providing much less-effective alternatives.

Safeguarding protocols can wrongly assume that young people's preferences—expressed according to what they have been told in school using English—are workable and helpful in the long term, when they may instead lead to disaster.

Undermining indigenous sensibilities risks leading to flagrant sexual abuse of vulnerable children and adults. Foreign mandates can contribute to conflicts, fights, propagation of witchcraft, unwanted pregnancies, dangerous abortions, depression, suicide, infection by AIDS and other painful debilitating sexually transmitted diseases, lack of accountability by men to the women they have impregnated, children being discarded who are born to unmarried women, and so on (Amann & Sleigh, 2021, pp. 715, 719, 722; International Development Committee, 2021, section 2:25; Orr et al., 2019, pp. 6, 29, 36, 37, 41, 43; Bayley, 2022; Kaviani-Johnson & Sloth-Nielsen, 2020, pp. 1, 14; Medrick, 2022).

I suggest that efforts at ensuring that British foreign nationals are held accountable to the UK government while living and working overseas may often not be helpful. While they may help those who are short term (and largely existing inside foreign bubbles apart from occasional ventures into “the indigenous”), foreign accountability efforts could be extremely harmful in cases where British citizens and their activities are already being “safeguarded” by local mechanisms that outside interventions could undermine.

Cutting off Africa

My major fear regarding the UK's contemporary efforts at promoting safeguarding against SEA may be that they are condemning LMIC populations to a kind of second-class subject status from which they may never be able to recover. I have expanded on this fear elsewhere (Harries, 2021). British efforts at safeguarding can imply a denial of the capability of LMIC people to adequately protect themselves, so outsiders, like the British government, seem to be needed to protect them. Considering the whole population of LMIC to be “vulnerable” (Orr et al., 2019, pp 24, 29; Sandvik, 2019, p. 1) can be a means to disenfranchise them. An orientation to needing to take care of victims, when all are seen as victims, empowers Westerners to dominate the lives of whole populations, portraying Whites as being needed to save brown bodies from themselves.

Partly no doubt arising from fear of Westerners getting caught in safeguarding traps, “humanitarian action is [increasingly] quantified and remotely controlled” (Sandvik, 2019, p. 4). That is to say, Westerners who have enormous influence over LMIC are being discouraged from coming close to the people they are guiding. The disaster that this distance portends is concealed by the unfounded but widely promoted assumption of inter-ethnic global cultural uniformity, which amounts to an assumption that all people of all ethnicities around the world either are, or can quickly and easily become, modern, liberal, and secular in their thinking, i.e., like Westerners. The myth that it is simple for all other populations to become like Europeans can be considered dangerous, implying that no special effort is required to bring about cultural change by indigenous people.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The cultural change needed in Africa and other LMIC must be a part of what is spiritual, based on biblical principles that underlie Western humanism's humanitarian practices. "Humanism is a Christian Heresy," suggests Tom Holland (Holland, 2022). That heresy includes practices advocated by the West for the Majority World today in the humanitarian and aid sector. Yes, the aid sector needs reform, but I suggest the needed reform will not be achieved by ramping up rules and laws in hand with severe penalties for those that break them by taking sexual advantage of the "vulnerable" in foreign contexts. Reform must be achieved through a re-Christianisation, a revealing of the origins of the humanitarianism that underlies contemporary practice in the aid sector. Sinners practicing SEA should be brought to repentance and to a living relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Power imbalance plus lack of mutual understanding leads to a heightened likelihood of British people in the aid and development sector reaching out to LMIC becoming involved in exploitative relationships. Rather than safeguarding originating in the UK, indigenous safeguarding measures are more durable and incorporate better those outsiders who avoid misunderstandings through vulnerable use of indigenous languages and participation in indigenous accountability structures.

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