



Link Education places safeguarding at the heart of the organisation and at the centre of all projects, across all country contexts. Safeguarding cuts across all of Link's strategic goals<sup>2</sup> under which projects are designed, delivered, monitored and evaluated. Strong safeguarding policies, systems and mechanisms underline Links accountability to the people who benefit from projects across the different contexts in which Link works.

Safeguarding is a legal and moral obligation which applies to everyone Link works with - children, vulnerable adults, staff, and associated personnel. This is the case for all those who work in international development agencies<sup>3</sup>, and for Link the highest level of priority.

## About Link

Link Education is an international education charity, working to improve education for children and communities in some of the poorest rural areas of Ethiopia, Malawi, Rwanda and Uganda, helping thousands of people escape the cycle of poverty. We focus on enhancing teaching and learning in schools, as well as building life-skills and promoting inclusion for the most marginalised. Safeguarding cuts across all of Link's work at all levels and extends to all who come in contact with or are sub-contracted by our organisation.

Our vision is one where all children have access to safe, quality education, giving them hope and a strong foundation for a brighter future. We take both a top-down and bottom-up approach to transform education, supporting broad system and school-wide improvements while recognising the need for more tailored, localised support to overcome specific challenges. We emphasise that quality education is a protective measure in itself.

Link Education is committed to achieving the highest level of safeguarding and protecting the rights and welfare of the children and young people with whom we come into contact. We affirm our belief in the right of all children, vulnerable adults and people at risk, to be protected from all forms of sexual, physical and emotional violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, in line with national child protection legislation and UN recommendations. It is the duty of all to prevent harm and abuse of every kind, and to report any abuse discovered or suspected.



<sup>1</sup>In this paper we are using the term 'safeguarding' to also include wider child protection practices.

<sup>2</sup>Strategic Goals include, transforming girls' education, strengthening education systems, engaging community voice and accountability, building climate change resilience and supporting education in emergencies.

<sup>3</sup> Open University and FCDO, Introduction to Safeguarding in the International Aid Sector, <https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/mod/book/view.php?id=193957&chapterid=28048>

## Background

High-profile safeguarding incidents in the aid sector, widely reported by the media in recent years<sup>4</sup>, highlighted weaknesses in safeguarding policies and application of these, bringing about much change in the way organisations work. In some instances, these cases revealed an awareness of safeguarding breaches by aid sector personnel and the inadequate attention paid to them, or to the personal and wider implications of these breaches and associated challenges<sup>5</sup>. Chronic underreporting of sexual exploitation, abuse, and sexual harassment (SEAH) across the international aid sector<sup>6</sup> was exposed.

This led to many aid and relief agencies reviewing their safeguarding policy and practice at the highest level and ensuring that these are adhered to throughout the organisation. Robust safeguarding policies, strategies and programmes aimed at mitigating these challenges were developed with clear lines of reporting, communication and follow-up. Humanitarian and development efforts require a very clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities towards the care and protection of children, vulnerable adults, and staff<sup>7</sup>.

## Approach

In approaching Safeguarding, Link Education acknowledges fully and acts upon the duty to keep children, vulnerable adults and people at risk safe in our programmes, ensure all participants are treated with dignity and respect, and that all our safeguarding measures are embedded, accessible and communicated clearly to staff, partners, children and their communities, in languages they understand<sup>8</sup>. We adopt a Do No Harm approach in our programming.

Our Safeguarding policies and procedures demonstrate accountability to trustees, employees, volunteers and suppliers. We promote an organisational culture that tackles power imbalances and gender inequality and have in place rigorous, anonymous, and safe reporting and complaints mechanisms.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> House of Commons International Development Committee, *Sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector: Government response to the Committee's Eighth Report*, 2018  
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmintdev/1764/1764.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> DFID Safeguarding Unit, *Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (SEAH) in the International Aid Sector: Victim and Survivor Voices*, 2018  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/749741/Listing-Exercise1.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/749741/Listing-Exercise1.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Link Education, *Child Safeguarding Policy* <http://linkededucation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/LEI-Child-Safeguarding-Policy-Web-Version.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Link Education, *Child Safeguarding Policy* <http://linkededucation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/LEI-Child-Safeguarding-Policy-Web-Version.pdf>

Link Education uses the following<sup>9</sup> to ensure that all offices and programmes are safe for children, vulnerable adults, and people at risk:



**Policy:** Link Education has in place a clear and robust policy framework that ensures safeguarding for all and reflects safeguarding principles. This ensures that all our work is designed with the safety of the people we work with in mind.



**Recruitment:** We practice safe recruitment whereby all potential employees or volunteers partake in a screening process with the local police office to make sure they do not have prohibitions to working with children, vulnerable adults and/or people at risk.



**Reporting:** Link Education has a range of mechanisms for reporting safeguarding issues. These mechanisms are made available and accessible to everyone we work with. At community level, Link has reporting boxes and dedicated phone numbers which community members can use. Link also has a whistleblowing e-mail for reporting any breach of our safeguarding policy.



**Code of conduct:** Link Education has a code of conduct that all personnel working with Link abide by. This includes volunteers, consultants, trustees and contractors.



**Training:** Link regularly builds the capacity, skills and safeguarding knowledge for staff and the people we work with. Staff training is conducted annually followed by reflective discussions. Link Education also holds orientation and community awareness sessions on safeguarding that target community members.



**Focal Persons:** All Link Education offices have lead personnel who are Safeguarding Champions. These Champions lead on capacity building for staff, integrating safeguarding into project activities, and safeguarding case management. Link also has Safeguarding Champions on their boards with specially trained safeguarding investigators in each country office.



**Risk Assessment:** Link Education conducts organisational Safeguarding Risk Assessments which help us stay on top of potential areas of harm. This exercise is also done at programme level and revisited on a quarterly basis. This helps with implementing safe programmes in the communities we work with.

<sup>9</sup> Link Education, *Our Commitment to Safeguarding* <https://linkeducation.org.uk/our-commitment-to-safeguarding/>

## Experience

### Uganda



Link Uganda trains school managers to embed and mainstream safeguarding in school planning and management processes to create a safe learning environment for all children in school. This means involving a wide range of stakeholders, including learners, in setting a goal to make the school safe, agreeing the steps to reach the goal, monitoring progress towards it, and then planning again to address any remaining gaps. This has resulted in the implementation of a variety of safeguarding actions in schools, including ensuring reporting mechanisms are clear and visible around the school grounds, or that a school code of conduct is adhered to. These actions make schools safer places for children to be and to learn.

School Improvement Planning is a government mandated process that every school must complete. These plans are reviewed by local government education specialists, who report to national education departments. As a result, integrating safeguarding as a priority at school level has the potential to raise this as a key area for local and national government policy and support, highlighting the importance of safeguarding throughout the education system.

### Malawi



Link Malawi works through relevant government and local authorities to advance safeguarding and integrate it throughout existing government education systems and structures. At district level, the social welfare and victim support units are key safeguarding anchors, who receive training and collaborative support on safeguarding and child protection. At community level, Traditional Leaders (chiefs), Village Development Committees (VDCs), Community Policing Committees, Learning Centre Management Committees, Teachers/Headteachers, Mother Groups and Complementary Basic Education Facilitators receive training in reporting, follow up, and general awareness raising of child protection and safeguarding, including child marriage.

VDCs have become responsible for scrutinizing volunteers in their area and ensuring those working with children, either directly or indirectly, are safe, responsible and understand safeguarding and child protection. Safeguarding has been embedded as one key factor in the safe recruitment and conduct of volunteers working in their localities. One traditional leader<sup>10</sup> at a learning centre near Lilongwe, stated, *“Among the things I do, when I come to this centre is to listen, support and observe conduct of our [teachers] as they work with children. I want our area to develop, and as a leader, I admire other areas whose children are advancing in education and not facing any abuse [enabling them to succeed in education].”*

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<sup>10</sup> Traditional leaders by their role, are chairs of the respective VDCs (unless other arrangement).

## Ethiopia



Link Ethiopia has supported schools in a variety of ways to be respectful of inclusion and diversity and a safe space where girls and boys feel comfortable to learn. Schools develop a Safe School Checklist which during the annual school improvement planning process, leaders use to ensure gender, safeguarding and inclusion are part of their action plans; codes of conduct and safeguarding messages are posted in classrooms and around the compound; and service maps show referral pathways and details of where and how to report.

Link Ethiopia has mainstreamed safeguarding across all programming including training packs for pedagogical leadership, gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogy training, and language competency and numeracy training, and trained government Education Experts, Supervisors, Headteachers, deputies and teachers in 'Safeguarding and School Related Gender Based Violence' to improve understanding of child protection and safeguarding, and reporting and responding procedures. Link Ethiopia has also trained kebele (community) leaders, women and child affairs staff and community polices in case-management.

This approach has improved safety in schools and has ultimately led to improved attendance, retention, and learning outcomes. One project evaluation<sup>11</sup> noted how girls have started to speak up more, likely as a response to authorities actively pursuing instances of gender-based violence in schools and communities. A cluster supervisor said, "Girls know about violence and how to report it. Hence, the confidence of female students has increased, and whatever it is, they can express without shame." One woreda education official described the impact, saying, "Now it is becoming common to hear small girls say, 'It is my right! Do not touch me.'"



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<sup>11</sup> STAGES midline 1 - <https://linkededucation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/STAGES-Mid-1-and-2-Summary.pdf>



## Special Focus on Child Marriage

Acknowledging that early and forced marriage is a major barrier to learning for girls, and that this was accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, Link works through schools, communities, and governments to promote efforts to end this harmful practice and support girls who experience early marriage to continue their education.

### **Ethiopia**



In Ethiopia a rapid assessment during COVID-19 school closures revealed that 72 project girls, many under the age of 18, had been married while schools were closed. The project team facilitated a visit to the households of the 72 girls immediately with members of the Mother Groups, joined also by District Gender Officers, and Kebele Education and Training Board Chairpersons. Their mission was to find out the cause behind the girls' early marriage, their general circumstances, their well-being, and to understand possibilities of them returning to school, despite possibly also being pregnant.

The visiting team encouraged the girls to talk with their new husbands and families on returning to school to finish their education, highlighting the value for their family and community at large. The Gender Officers who are female government staff responsible for gender mainstreaming support to government offices, narrated their own life stories to convince the girls and their families about the benefit of education to their personal and professional life. As a result, 65 of the 72 girls re-enrolled in school.

To support these girls and prevent further dropout due to child marriage, the project integrated child marriage awareness across its activities, including counselling sessions and follow-up by the school-based Girls' Education Advisory Committees. Bursaries were provided to girls at risk, drama and poetry sessions set up, and gender clubs for students strengthened to focus on challenging social norms around girls' education. Additional sessions on child marriage were provided to Mother and Father Groups, in teacher training, and through partnerships with local government.

As a result of this emphasis, the forceful abduction of girls as brides has also been curtailed. A woreda official reported how one abduction was thwarted before it happened and how police saved another abducted girl. Another woreda official shared how elders have become more involved.

### **Malawi**



In Malawi we work closely with communities to raise awareness of child rights, the benefits of education and the harm early marriage can do to girls, their families and communities. With our partners *Theatre for a Change*, we use interactive radio and community dramas to highlight these topics and engage people to reflect on them. Through Girls' Clubs we raise girls' awareness of their right to say no to child marriage and develop their skills to negotiate their own decisions. CBE Facilitators trained on inclusion are aware of the barriers married girls face, and work with them to overcome these. Mother Groups are engaged to work directly with girls and their families to find ways for married girls to continue learning. The community level safeguarding system picks up reports of child marriage and offers psychosocial counselling to families and girls involved, aiming to re-engage girls in education and where possible to end underage marriage. We work within the Malawi legal system which outlaws marriage under the age of 18, and in partnership with the police and district social welfare officers, as well as with local chiefs in communities where this practice is commonly

accepted. Recognising that poverty is a major driving factor for child marriage, the project links girls and their families to income -generating opportunities through partnerships with specialised organisations that focus on sanitary-pad production and microfinance.