COOPÉRATION CANADA

Safeguarding, PSEAH and Decoloniality in Canada and the Humanitarian, Development and Peacebuilding Sector

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Introduction

This resource summarises key concepts explored in a seven-week learning programme on decoloniality, Safeguarding and Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH). The programme combined facilitated learning, individual coaching and peer reflection to examine how power operates within organisations, programmes and communities, and how these dynamics influence safeguarding practices within participants' organisations. It looked at the coloniality in the Canadian and international humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sector.

This introduces to key ideas explored in the programme. It invites readers to consider how historical and contemporary power structures shape vulnerability, safety, accountability and trust, and what this means for safeguarding and PSEAH in practice.

Key Concepts

Decolonisation originally referred to the process by which colonised territories gained independence and self-governance. More broadly, it involves challenging and transforming the systems, assumptions and power relations that colonialism has left behind (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, cited in Fajita, 2020).

Coloniality refers to the continuation of colonial forms of domination beyond formal colonial rule. These patterns are embedded in institutions, cultures, knowledge systems and power structures that continue to shape societies today. (Grosfoguel, 2007, cited in Fajita, 2020)

At their core, coloniality, Safeguarding and PSEAH violations all involve the misuse of power. Strengthening safeguarding therefore requires more than policies and procedures. It requires us to:

- Understand how power operates within our organisations, programmes and communities.
- Examine and address the structures and assumptions that reinforce unequal power relationships.
- Support locally led approaches to prevention, accountability and response.
- Build systems that promote dignity, participation, trust and collective safety.

Colonisation in the Canadian Context

Colonisation is not simply a historical event; it continues to shape systems, policies and access to resources today. Prior to European contact, Indigenous Nations across what is now Canada maintained diverse systems of governance, law, land stewardship and community care.

Colonial policies disrupted these systems through land dispossession, externally imposed governance structures and legislation such as the Indian Act. The effects continue to influence access to land, resources, cultural practices and decision-making, contributing to contemporary vulnerabilities and safeguarding risks.

Policies that restricted movement, confined communities to reserves and replaced traditional governance systems weakened community-led mechanisms for safety and wellbeing while increasing dependence on externally controlled institutions. As a result, definitions of safety, support and protection are often shaped by dominant systems rather than community-based understandings of care and accountability.

As Nancy Kachingwe argues:

> “What currently seems to be missing... is that sexual violence and abuse in the sector go far beyond a failure to apply established safeguarding measures: if the aid sector has a safeguarding problem, it is firstly because it has a misogyny problem – and a race problem, and a class problem, and an imperialism problem.” (Kachingwe, 2020)

Safeguarding, Colonisation and Indigenous Communities

In Indigenous contexts, safeguarding cannot be separated from the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation. Understanding safeguarding requires understanding how structural inequalities were created and how they continue to influence access to resources, decision-making and protection.

Case example: Residential schools

The residential school system forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families and communities and placed them in institutions that lacked accountability to those most affected. This disrupted family structures, community care systems and the intergenerational trans fer of knowledge about safety, wellbeing and protection.

The legacy of these experiences continues to shape relationships with institutions today. Where systems are perceived as externally imposed, unaccountable or associated with historical harm, trust may be limited. This can affect whether individuals and communities engage with safeguarding mechanisms, particularly where those mechanisms rely on formal reporting systems or institutional intervention.

The example highlights an important lesson for safeguarding practice: measures designed to provide protection may not be experienced as safe or trustworthy unless they are grounded in local realities, histories and understandings of care.

What Can the Humanitarian, Development and Peacebuilding Sector Learn?

The Canadian example demonstrates that safeguarding risks do not emerge only from individual behaviour; they are also shaped by broader structures and systems of power.

For humanitarian, development and peacebuilding organisations, coloniality remains relevant because it influences whose knowledge is valued, who makes decisions, who controls resources and whose voices are heard. When programmes are designed and implemented without meaningful local ownership, they can unintentionally reproduce unequal power relationships and undermine trust.

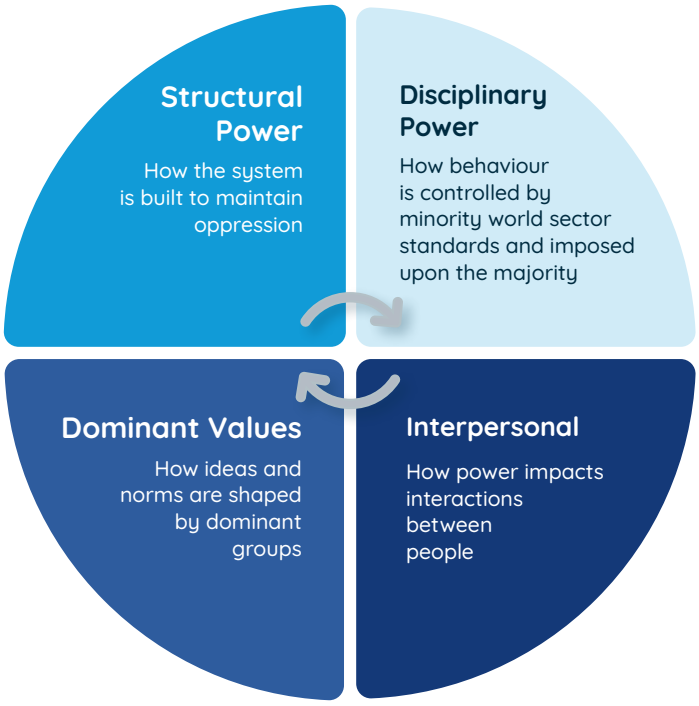
A decolonial approach to safeguarding therefore requires organisations to move beyond compliance and consider how power, participation, accountability and trust are experienced by the people and communities they seek to serve.

Safeguarding Matrix of Domination

The Safeguarding Matrix of Domination (SMOD) draws on the scholarship of Patricia Hill Collins and Dr Melissa Brown.

The model recognises that power operates through systems, policies, ideas and everyday interactions. It provides a framework for examining how different forms of power influence safeguarding and PSEAH practice.

The SMOD encourages reflection on how safeguarding policies, procedures and interventions affect relationships, trust and wellbeing over time. It is particularly useful for exploring whether safeguarding approaches strengthen community ownership and collective care or unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities.



Conclusion

A decolonial approach to safeguarding does not replace existing safeguarding and PSEAH frameworks; rather, it strengthens them by encouraging deeper reflection on power, history and accountability. Effective safeguarding requires more than responding to incidents. It requires attention to the structural conditions that create vulnerability, shape trust and influence whose voices are heard.

By recognising the ongoing impacts of coloniality and actively examining how power operates within our organisations and programmes, we can move towards safeguarding approaches that are more equitable, locally grounded and responsive to the realities of the communities we work alongside.

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