

UNHCR-NGO Consultations 2010: Thematic Session on:
Back to Basics: Listening and Acting on Preventing Sexual Exploitation
and Abuse Together

Tuesday, 29 June 2010

16:15-18:00

Room 4, International Conference Centre Geneva (CICG)

Since the 2002 UNHCR/Save the Children report on sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in West Africa by humanitarian aid workers of refugees and other vulnerable populations, policy and guidance to address this issue have been developed both by individual agencies and inter-agency bodies to ensure that populations are better protected from SEA. In addition, concerted efforts have been made by NGOs to work on preventing SEA and to work on ways to investigate complaints when they arose. However, the attention that was generated to the issue in 2002 has been hard to sustain and it has been difficult to maintain a consistency of strong and clear messaging of what constitutes SEA and that SEA by aid workers is a gross breach of accountability to affected populations.

In 2008, two reports looking at progress made on PSEA were produced: "No One to Turn to" by Save the Children UK <www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/54_5706.htm> and "To Complain or Not to Complain: This is Still the Question" by the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International (HAP)

<www.hapinternational.org/projects/publications.aspx#TCONTC>. Both found that there is still much progress to be made in preventing SEA. In 2009, the IASC agreed to a stock-taking and needs analysis to look at where the humanitarian community is with regards to PSEA and to suggest ways forward. The review took the form of self-assessments of several UN agencies and a few international NGOs, two field visits to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nepal, desk reviews, and headquarters interviews. The review found that much more is required to be done and that it must start at the level of institutional accountability and leadership. The review found that, at a policy and guidance level, organisations, in general, have made substantive progress, but that acceptance and absorption of this guidance at the field level must increase and managers must be held accountable for their responsibility to implement PSEA measures. In order to increase the use of guidance, there is the need for enhanced capacity to implement, coherent management attention, and – most crucially – for the leadership within agencies, and of the humanitarian sector, to profile the issue. The report makes recommendations in order for NGOs and UN agencies to better fulfil their PSEA obligations, as well as suggesting that the issue of PSEA be brought back to the IASC and be subject to collective monitoring.

Humanitarian organisations have a direct responsibility to prevent SEA by their staff. We are not, collectively, taking that responsibility seriously enough. As stated above, there is a need for senior managers of humanitarian organisations to make this issue an ongoing priority for their staff, as a means to ensure accountability to populations. In the locations visited by the review team there was little or no community awareness activity taking place, and community complaints mechanisms that did exist were not profiled as being appropriate for

SEA complaints. There are some good examples of where organisations have worked to prevent SEA either individually or collectively, but there is still much to be done. Humanitarian organisations, particularly under the leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator in a country, need to do more early on in crises to put in place collective complaints' mechanisms and ensure that these efforts result in action when complaints are filed. Agencies need to consider if the capacity they currently have to respond will be adequate once awareness-raising and complaints mechanisms are functioning.

More than eight years after the West Africa report, it is unacceptable that we, as humanitarian organisations, have not done more to prevent SEA by our staff. This session will highlight the responsibility that we have, as humanitarian organisations, on this most important issue. The panel, which will be chaired by Katharina Samara, acting Executive Director of HAP International and former Project Manager of Building Safer Organisations (BSO), will bring together the author of the IASC PSEA Review, consultant Moira Reddick, and UNHCR's Senior Liaison Officer, Philip Karani. Moira will provide an overview of the findings of the PSEA review, some of the main conclusions, and the recommendations that will be presented to the IASC Working Group (WG) meeting for adoption in July 2010. Philip will give an overview of how UNHCR has continued to prevent SEA and how it will be responding to the findings of the review. We are hoping to have one of the founders of the BSO project join the panel. It is hoped that NGO participants in the session will bring their practical experiences of what has and has not worked in terms of preventing SEA.

One of the desired outcomes of the session will be to get some clear direction from NGOs on how they view the findings and recommendations of the PSEA Review and how they would like to see the IASC respond to the recommendations. ICVA, as one of the organisers of the panel, will be able to carry the views of the session to the IASC WG meeting so that NGO perspectives are clearly put on the table. In addition, and most importantly, the session will hopefully lead to a recommitment by NGOs and UNHCR to ensure that we are working better together to prevent SEA. After all, preventing SEA by humanitarian staff is one of the most basic forms of accountability that we should be demonstrating to all the populations with whom, and for whom, we work.