

Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA): a collective responsibility



OVERVIEW

Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) of the forcibly displaced by humanitarian & development workers causes irrevocable harm to victims and their communities. Even one incident of SEA breaks community trust and undermines the work of the entire sector. For this reason agencies have been working collectively to take coordinated action to protect those we serve from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA).

Sexual exploitation is the abuse of someone's position of vulnerability, differential power or trust, to obtain sexual favours, including by offering money or other advantages (this includes prostitution). Sexual abuse means the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force, or under unequal or coercive conditions. This includes any sexual activity with a child (under 18 years old), and sexual assault.

All UN personnel have an obligation to report whenever they suspect that SEA has occurred by a fellow worker, whether in UNHCR or any other organisation. You can report [directly to the IGO](#), or via the confidential and anonymous [SpeakUp Helpline](#). This also applies to all entities with a funding agreement with the UN, such as partners and suppliers.

Inter-agency and multi-sectoral coordination are critically important to effectively integrate PSEA from the outset, including prevention, risk mitigation, community engagement, safe and accessible reporting, and a victim-centred response.

PSEA policies and practices aim to prevent SEA by UN personnel, partner organisations, and others involved in providing humanitarian or development assistance, and ensure that allegations of SEA are reported and victims are assisted and supported in line with a victim centred approach. UNHCR works in close collaboration with UN agencies, civil society organisations, governments and other partners to coordinate engagement, strengthen prevention and promote a [victim-centred approach](#) in response to SEA within the humanitarian and development systems.

In-country inter-agency PSEA networks serve as the primary body for technical level coordination and oversight of PSEA activities to prevent and respond to SEA of the forcibly displaced and mitigate risks. In 2018, the High Commissioner (HC) appointed a [Senior Coordinator](#) to lead and coordinate UNHCR's PSEA efforts, including through participation in inter-agency fora. At the global level, the primary fora for inter-agency coordination on PSEA at technical level include the IASC PSEA Technical Advisory Group as well as the SEA Working Group chaired the UN Office of the Special Coordinator (OSC).

OBJECTIVE AND APPROACH

Close coordination among organisations is essential for PSEA efforts to be coherent and effective. Inter-agency coordination brings organizations together under a common situation analysis, strategy and approach, so as to ensure consistent messaging on PSEA to communities and stakeholders, build on good practices and expertise of partners, streamline procedures and mechanisms for reporting and referral, and ensure complementarity of interventions.

“ In recent years it has become clear that inter-agency coordination is essential to effectively prevent and response to SEA. [Click here](#) to read more on the history of SEA in the humanitarian sector. ”



Prevention is the core of the UN strategy to combat SEA.

KEY COMPONENTS OF PSEA COORDINATION

Under the auspices of the Refugee Coordinator (UNHCR Representative) in a refugee situation and the Resident Coordinator / Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) in an internal displacement situation, an in-country inter-agency PSEA Network should be established (if one does not already exist) as the primary body for technical-level coordination and oversight of PSEA. In mixed situations, where a Humanitarian Coordinator has been appointed and the populations of humanitarian concern include refugees, IDPs and other affected groups, the [UNHCR/OCHA Joint Note on Mixed Situations Coordination \(2014\)](#) applies and the PSEA Coordinator has a shared reporting line to the HC and the UNHCR Representative.

The PSEA Network is responsible for implementing coordinated activities between member organizations to minimize the risk of SEA, support the capacity of Network members to respond when incidents do arise, and raise awareness of PSEA. It provides technical level coordination on PSEA, including:

- developing and/or adapting country level strategies, workplan, guidelines, procedures and mechanisms contextualizing global and/or regional guidelines and tools where applicable;
- carrying out joint SEA risk assessments;
- and organizing activities and advocacy for prevention, and risk mitigation for PSEA.

The PSEA Network activities should follow a victim-centered approach and respect the principles of safety, confidentiality, respect, and non-discrimination. The Network ensures that initiatives by agencies are well coordinated and provides a forum through which joint inter-agency efforts for PSEA can be undertaken collectively.

UNHCR ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In refugee situations, UNHCR has leadership and coordination responsibilities for PSEA, in line with its mandated accountabilities and reflected in the [Refugee Coordination Model \(RCM\)](#) which is applicable in all refugee emergency situations and throughout a refugee response. Within this overall structure, it is recommended the PSEA Network is part of the RCM coordination structure as a cross-sectoral forum, and UNHCR has the role to take the lead to establish (if one does not exist already) and coordinate the PSEA Network. It is highly recommended that there is a dedicated PSEA coordinator position wherever possible. For non-refugee emergencies, UNHCR should be actively engaged in the inter-agency PSEA network, which may include co-chairing depending on the operational context. UNHCR would normally be represented by the PSEA focal point in such situations, which may or may not be a dedicated position.

In addition to engagement in inter-agency PSEA efforts, UNHCR remains accountable to implement its internal PSEA programs. In accordance with the 2021 [UN system-wide](#) & UNHCR Internal Guidance Note on requirements and procedures for information sharing on SEA allegations, UNHCR is also responsible to share information on SEA allegations related to its personnel with the Resident Coordinator (RC), Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators (RC/HC), Special Representatives of the Secretary General (SRSG) and Heads of Mission (HoM), depending on the country context. In all actions UNHCR should be guided by its policy on a [Victim-Centred Approach in Responding to Sexual Misconduct](#).

UNHCR's accelerated actions have a strategic focus in four areas: i) a victim centered approach; ii) equipping and empowering UNHCR and partner personnel to prevent, identify and respond to sexual misconduct; iii) upholding of organizational accountability in tackling sexual misconduct; iv) and maintaining UNHCR's active role in interagency efforts. Some specific actions are:

- All personnel must take the mandatory e-learning course on PSEA.
- Mandatory vetting and reference checking of all new personnel
- All offices must have a PSEA focal point
- Strengthened complaints mechanisms and community-based feedback tools using a variety of channels are required in all operations, including in emergency.
- PSEA training & awareness raising must be conducted for all staff, and for partners. Dedicated resources are available for this [here](#).
- UNHCR has revised its partnership agreements to ensure they comply with the UN Protocol on Allegations of SEA involving Implementing Partners. UNHCR must vet all its partners and strengthen the capacity of partners as required.
- Country operations plans must integrate PSEA activities as instructed in the Planning Factsheet.

The presence of the PSEA Network does not lessen the responsibility of individual network members to develop, implement, and strengthen internal PSEA programs at the country level. Senior management within each member organization is accountable for PSEA within their organizations.

