

# SEARO

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE RISK OVERVIEW

Frequently Asked Questions  
BETA V.1.1. OCTOBER 2022

## HOW DOES THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE RISK OVERVIEW (SEARO) WORK?

### 1. What is a composite index and how is SEARO different from other humanitarian indices?

A composite index is a means of simplifying a large amount of information to facilitate the analysis of complex issues. One of the best known composite indices is the Human Development Index,<sup>1</sup> which uses data on education, health and living standards to benchmark and monitor national development. There are a growing number of composite indices in the humanitarian field, including the Index for Risk Management (INFORM),<sup>2</sup> which measures the risk of crises that could exceed national capacity, and the INFORM Severity Index, which compares the severity of existing crises. These tools do not directly drive decision-making, but they can be valuable for understanding the factors that drive risk, creating a shared evidence base, identifying issues that warrant further exploration and making comparisons between countries and over time.

SEARO is a composite index that is focused on the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in humanitarian response operations. It organizes and presents relevant data to increase understanding of risk factors and support more informed policies, planning and decision-making.

### 2. Which countries are included in the index?

SEARO covers countries that have a Humanitarian Response Plan, Emergency Response Plan or Flash Appeal.<sup>3</sup> The beta 1.1 model covers 33 countries as of October 2022. Future versions of the model will see countries added and removed in line with the publication of response plans.

### 3. What is an analytical framework and how is the SEARO analytical framework structured?

An analytical framework systematically organizes data in a way that facilitates analysis and understanding. The SEARO analytical framework organizes data into 4 high-level dimensions, followed by 8 categories and 16 components. (see figure below). This approach highlights the different factors that influence the risk of SEA as well as how these factors relate to each other. As such, the framework provides users multiple levels of detail to view and analyse data. It is a standalone product that can be used to enrich the global discussion on drivers and contributors to SEA.

## Dimensions, categories and components of the SEARO analytical framework

| RISK OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION & ABUSE |                            |                         |                                   |                          |                             |                     |                       |                        |                                 |                   |                       |                                   |                     |                            |                            |                     |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Dimension                           | Enabling Environment       |                         |                                   | Humanitarian Context     |                             | Operational Context |                       |                        | Protective Environment          |                   |                       |                                   |                     |                            |                            |                     |
| Category                            | Policy & Societal Norms    |                         | Human Rights & Gender Equality    | Crisis Scope & Intensity | Response Scale & Complexity | Response Modalities | Response Institutions | Capacity & Resources   | Mechanisms & Accountability     |                   |                       |                                   |                     |                            |                            |                     |
| Component                           | Laws, Policies & Practices | Institutions & Services | Violence Against Women & Children | Gender Inequalities      | Crisis Scope & Intensity    | Crisis Severity     | Operational Size      | Operational Complexity | Operational design & Management | Operational Reach | Leadership & Staffing | Institutional Culture & Practices | Funding & Resources | Coordination & Programming | Reporting & Accountability | Survivor Assistance |

1. <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>.

2. <https://drmkc.jrc.ec.europa.eu/inform-index/>.

3. <https://hum-insight.info>.

#### 4. What are the SEARO scores and how are they calculated?

SEARO scores and ranks the overall risk of SEA for countries with humanitarian response operations. It also individually scores each dimension, category and component in the analytical framework. Because the underlying data have huge variations and different formats, the score for each component is “normalized” to a common scale between 1.0 and 9.9, with a higher number denoting higher risk. This provides a consistent way to understand each component and also enables comparisons among components and countries.

#### 5. How are the components weighted?

The entire index uses equal weighting, with each component contributing the same weight to the overall risk score. The eight categories are calculated as the arithmetic average of their components, and the four dimensions are the arithmetic average of their categories. The overall risk score is similarly calculated as the arithmetic average of the four dimensions.

#### 6. Where do the data come from?

SEARO aggregates data from a range of credible, publicly available sources, such as United Nations agencies, governments and multilateral organizations. These data must meet five criteria to be included in SEARO: They must be relevant, of high quality, consistent across countries and over time, updated regularly and provide sufficient geographical coverage. The beta 1.1 version of SEARO uses data from 11 sources collected between March and September 2022.

#### 7. What is an imputed indicator?

If an indicator is not available for one or more countries in one of the source data sets, a value is estimated or “imputed” to fill such gaps in the data set. For transparency, imputed values in SEARO are highlighted in the spreadsheet and include a description of the estimation method.

#### 8. How often is SEARO updated?

SEARO will be updated in accordance with new emerging humanitarian responses. To improve the usefulness and validity of the tool over time, an annual review will be undertaken to assess the underlying data and incorporate new data sources as they become available. In the event of a major new humanitarian emergency arising between updates, a special update of the index could be carried out to include the affected country.

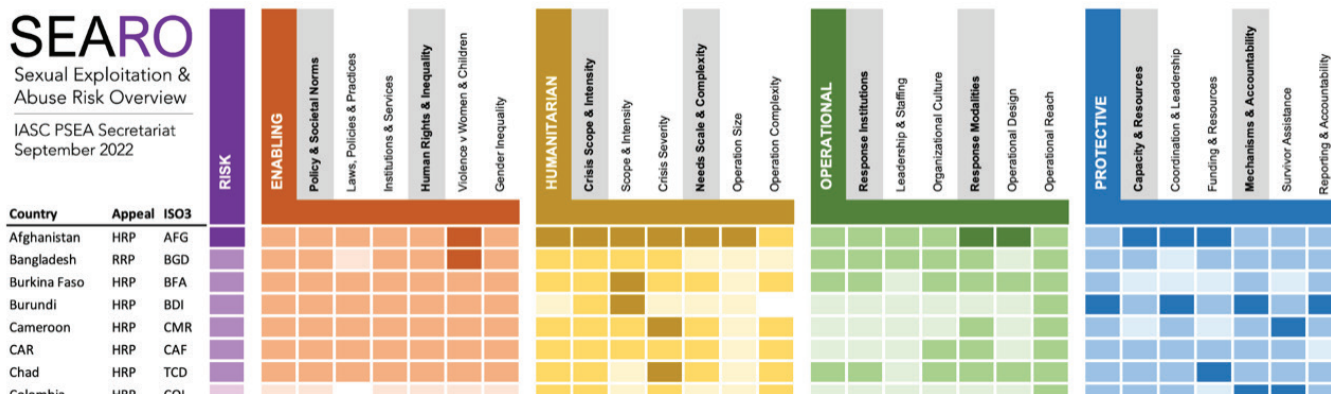
#### 9. How do I interpret the scores?

Higher values in SEARO denote higher risk, with 9.9 as the highest possible value. To illustrate this, SEARO colour-codes every cell by quartile, with lighter colours for values between 1.0 and 2.5 and progressively darker shades for values between 2.5 and 5.0, 5.0 and 7.5, and 7.5 and 9.9.

|     |     |     |     |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 2.0 | 4.0 | 6.0 | 8.0 |
| 2.0 | 4.0 | 6.0 | 8.0 |
| 2.0 | 4.0 | 6.0 | 8.0 |
| 2.0 | 4.0 | 6.0 | 8.0 |

#### 10. How can a country have a high overall risk score, but low risk scores for one or more components?

A country’s overall risk score reflects the overall average score and its relative position among all other countries with humanitarian responses. A component score describes the risk identified for an individual factor, and it is possible for a country with low scores for some components (e.g. prevalence of violence against women and children) to rank high in the overall risk score because of high scores in other components. Conversely, it is possible for a country with low overall risk score to have high scores in some components.



## 11. Why doesn't the index include data on incidents or allegations of SEA?

Incidents of SEA involving humanitarian workers are known to be underreported, and the available data are considered incomplete. As such, there are currently no data sets that meet the criteria for inclusion in SEARO in terms of relevance, coverage, frequency, consistency and accuracy. For this reason, comparisons between existing data on SEA incidents or allegations and SEARO results should be made with caution, acknowledging the limitations of data sources. SEARO does not predict the occurrence of SEA but rather identifies and measures different contributing and protective factors that are thought to increase or reduce risk.

## HOW CAN SEARO BE USED?

### 13. Why was SEARO created?

SEA undermines the aid sector as a whole and limits our collective ability to deliver positive change. SEA is completely unacceptable, and actors across the humanitarian sector have dedicated resources to end impunity, appoint dedicated staff, build the sector's capability, develop or refresh standards, support survivors, and put in place systematic and robust reporting mechanisms. To effectively deliver the limited support and resources that are available requires an understanding of country priorities. In the absence of reliable, comprehensive and current information on where incidents are taking place, risk analysis is one means of identifying priorities. SEARO was created to provide an evidence-based analysis of factors that are thought to contribute to increased risk of SEA. In doing so, SEARO aims to both increase understanding of the different risk factors influencing SEA and provide an objective means of analysing those risks.

### 14. Why is SEARO being launched as a "beta"?

SEARO is being pre-released as a beta version in order to allow use and testing of the model under real-world conditions. We encourage feedback and suggestions on how the model can be improved to better reflect SEA risks and serve as a useful tool in understanding and addressing such risks. Please forward your feedback and suggestions to [ocha.psea@un.org](mailto:ocha.psea@un.org) and [kwepplo@unicef.org](mailto:kwepplo@unicef.org).

### 15. For whom is SEARO intended?

SEARO was developed on behalf of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Secretariat to provide a common, shared and informed basis for identifying SEA risks and comparing risks across countries and over time. It is intended to help in the design of effective mitigation measures and make the most strategic use of limited humanitarian resources by prioritizing countries of concern for additional allocation of resources, capacity, projects, advocacy and stakeholder dialogue. It is

## 12. Does low risk mean that SEA is probably not happening in a particular operation?

Even countries with a low overall risk score in SEARO are likely to have pockets of risk or components and categories with high risk scores. No country ranks low for all components or categories, and it is important that a comprehensive analysis is undertaken to acknowledge areas of potential vulnerability and identify opportunities to mitigate risk.

expected that IASC members and donors will incorporate this information into their decision-making at global level. At country level, SEARO is intended to be used by inter-agency PSEA Coordinators and members of inter-agency PSEA Networks under the umbrella of the Humanitarian Coordinator and Humanitarian Country Team that hold the primary accountability, decision-making and oversight authority on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA).

### 16. Can SEARO predict where SEA will occur?

No. The occurrence of SEA, like other forms of gender-based violence, cannot be predicted. By better understanding the factors that influence SEA incidents, SEARO can show where those risk factors are greatest and therefore where incidents are *more likely* to occur. Incidents are likely to be more prevalent where underlying factors create an enabling environment for perpetrators, where humanitarian needs create greater vulnerability, where large and complex response operations create opportunities for perpetrators, and where reporting and mitigation is limited.

### 17. How can SEARO indicate that a country is high risk in the absence of reports of a large number of SEA allegations or incidents?

Incidents of SEA by humanitarian workers are typically underreported in all humanitarian contexts. Fear of retaliation, powerlessness and lack of trust in the system make underreporting a chronic problem in some countries. In addition, SEARO includes a limited set of indicators that represent common risk factors for SEA, and there may be other factors in a country that have a strong influence on either increasing or reducing risk that are not represented in the model. For this reason, SEARO was designed around a detailed analytical framework that can guide and structure further exploration at country level to identify local factors that could be significant contributors to risk.

## 18. Can SEARO be used at country level?

SEARO was designed as a tool for global- and regional-level actors to compare risks across countries and over time. However, SEARO can also be a useful tool at country level. The detailed analytical framework can help country-level actors understand where risks are being generated, i.e. as a result of underlying policy or societal factors, the scope and scale of an emergency, the design of the response or weaknesses in protection. This can in turn be used as the basis for exploring localized high risk factors in more detail and to inform in-country responses to reduce those risks.

## 19. Can SEARO be adapted to analyse risks at sub-national level?

The SEARO analytical framework could potentially be adapted for use at sub-national level. Such an approach has been successfully used by the INFORM project, whereby the INFORM analytical framework is adapted by country- or regional-level actors to reflect the specific risk factors they are facing. This may be an area for future consideration by the SEARO partnership.

## 20. What are the limitations of the index?

The index does not consider all determinants for SEA or the intricate interdependencies that exist among other economic, social and cultural factors. Accurately mapping out all drivers of SEA and the various levels of influence in different contexts is beyond the capability of SEARO. The SEARO index was created to allow broad comparisons between countries, and it is not a substitute for in-country risk assessments. Internationally standardized and publicly available data sets used as input for the index are not as accurate as national/sub-national data. Thus, SEARO should always be used in concert with other information sources and expert opinion and never used as the sole basis for decision-making.

## 21. How sensitive is the tool in constantly evolving contexts?

Humanitarian emergencies are chaotic and extremely dynamic by nature. It can be especially difficult to secure accurate information in an emergency setting or to ensure the timeliness of the available information when events are rapidly evolving. SEARO and tools like it should therefore be used alongside other sources of information that can support informed policymaking and a deeper level of analysis.

## 22. How quickly does SEARO respond to changes in risk?

Changes to the risk score in SEARO will happen as changes in the underlying data occur. For example, as laws are passed, the severity of crises abates, training of humanitarian staff increases, and reporting mechanisms are established the risk score will change accordingly. However, such changes will only occur as the underlying data reflect the new situation, which happens at a different frequency for different data sets. Some underlying data sets may be updated only once per year. Therefore models such as SEARO reflect the situation over the past 12 months or more, rather than the situation on the day a score is published.

## 23. How can the humanitarian sector reduce SEA risk?

The fourth dimension of the SEARO analytical framework (the Protective Environment) reflects protective factors such as structures, capacities and resources to prevent and respond to SEA. In addition, indicators on PSEA capacities and knowledge within humanitarian institutions are included under dimension three (Operational Response). Improvements within these dimensions will be reflected in the overall risk scores as long as the underlying data echo these changes. However, since SEARO uses equal weighting for all four dimensions, the relative impact on the global score will depend on changes reflected in other components.