



**Practical step-by-step guide for
Humanitarian Coordinators (HC) and
Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT) to ensure
that Protection from Sexual Exploitation and
Abuse (PSEA)**

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Photo: OCHA/Alioune Ndiaye

This practical step-by-step guide, illustrated with examples can be used by Humanitarian Coordinators (HC) and Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT) to ensure that Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) is prioritised by senior leadership and implemented throughout the system-wide humanitarian response, with a [victim/survivor-centered approach](#), in line with the [2024 Inter-Agency Standing Committee Principals Statement](#). The IASC statement reinforces the responsibilities of the Humanitarian Coordinator, to ensure that PSEA is staffed and resourced within the humanitarian architecture and that a collective country PSEA action plan is institutionalized. This note is also aligned with the [2022-26 Inter-Agency Standing Committee Vision and Strategy on PSEAH](#).

What is Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and why must humanitarian leaders prioritise this issue?

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA, see annex for definitions) is a form of sexual misconduct perpetrated against a member of the affected population by national or international aid workers, including those working for the host state¹, NGOs or anyone affiliated with the UN system, including UN staff or related personnel. Acts of sexual abuse or exploitation of the affected population are always serious misconduct and grounds for immediate termination of contract and potential criminal prosecution under national law.

These acts are a symptom of power imbalances that are particularly acute in humanitarian contexts and even greater for those who are systematically marginalized. When aid workers commit acts of sexual exploitation and abuse against affected populations in need of protection and assistance, humanitarian values are betrayed, and the trust and the credibility of the entire operation is undermined.

Considering the implications of such acts on operations, it is critical for humanitarian leaders to proactively prevent SEA and to have systems in place to respond appropriately when prevention efforts fail.

¹For the purposes of this Note, 'personnel' or 'staff' is a broad and inclusive term to refer to any person engaged by any entity/service provider to support, provide services and offer protection to the affected community, whether internationally or nationally recruited, whether as an employee, volunteer, intern, contractor or service provider, or engaged from the community with a contractual link with the entity, remunerated or not (e.g. community volunteers, incentive workers, community mobilisers, etc).

HUMANITARIAN COORDINATORS AND COUNTRY TEAMS RESPONSIBILITIES TO PREVENT, PROTECT FROM, AND RESPOND TO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

The HCT [terms of reference](#) and the [HCT Compact](#) clearly highlight that PSEA constitutes a **collective responsibility**, and the HC and humanitarian leaders are held to account for their efforts. The HC accountabilities are specified in the [Leadership in Humanitarian Action: Handbook for the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator](#) and [Humanitarian Coordinator Terms of Reference](#), 2024.

The [2024 IASC Statement on PSEA](#) calls upon Humanitarian Coordinators to ensure “**that PSEA is staffed and resourced within the humanitarian architecture, and IASC system-wide responsibility for ensuring that a collective country PSEA Action Plan is institutionalized. This requires that in-country PSEA networks² are in place, led by an inter-agency PSEA Coordinator³, that safe and accessible community feedback mechanisms are available, and inter-agency [SEA Referral Procedures](#) are adopted in all humanitarian contexts... ensuring that victims/survivors have access to appropriate immediate and longer-term assistance.**” HCs are also expected to report regularly to the Emergency Relief Coordinator on PSEA, and incorporate PSEA throughout strategic planning, including the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP).

PSEA in the HCT Compact

[Somalia’s HCT Accountability compact](#) (2023) references concrete commitments to several PSEA workstreams, including training, data/information sharing, risk assessments.

Humanitarian leadership PSEA responsibilities are summarized as follows:

- 1. Articulate collective commitments and accountability at the most senior level** (Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and Deputy SRSG, RC / HC, and HCT), in the **HCT compact** as well as the **country-specific HCT ToRs**. Prioritize country-specific commitments over generic references to global standards.
- 2. Oversee the inclusion of PSEA into the Humanitarian Programme Cycle:** Include an assessment of SEA risks and drivers⁴ Articulate how SEA prevention will be integrated in the response: which safe, accessible, confidential reporting channels are foreseen; How victims’ right to assistance will be operationalized⁵; How accountability will be ensured. HRPs must include PSEA financial requirements and articulate how progress will be monitored.

At the onset of any **new emergency**, ensure PSEA is raised upfront in all discussions as early as possible with all partners and at all forums. An SEA risk assessment should be conducted, and prevention and mitigation measures identified, integrated into strategic planning/resource mobilisation and implemented.

PSEA in the HNRP

[Nigeria HNO 2023](#) and [Burkina Faso HNO 2023](#) highlight satisfaction with aid workers’ behaviour and risks of staff misconduct in their needs assessment.

[Ukraine’s HNRP 2024](#) includes a joint mapping of PSEA and AAP complaints and feedback mechanisms as par of the needs analysis.

[Haiti HNRP 2024](#) includes PSEA as part of the strategic pillar of the response.

[Central African Republic HRP 2024](#) uses PSEA indicators to monitor the [strategic objectives](#) p. 31, 32

[Ethiopia HRP 2022](#) and [DRC HRP 2023](#) and [DRC HRP 2024](#), factor PSEA into the financial requirements of the humanitarian response.

² See IASC [Generic terms of reference for PSEA Networks](#).

³ See IASC [Generic terms of reference for PSEA Coordinators](#)

⁴ The definition of “risk” encompasses the risk of SEA happening as well as the risk that organizations operating in-country cannot respond effectively when incidents occur. The IASC has established complementary risk assessment tools through the [SEA RO](#) and the IARA which are useful for this purpose.

⁵ In particular, how the relevant IASC standards and the [Technical Note on the Implementation of the UN Protocol on the Provision of Assistance to Victims of SEA](#) and the [IA SEA referral procedures](#) will be taken into account.

3. Lead the development of a collective UNCT/HCT action plan. As per UN system-wide guidance, UN and Humanitarian Country Teams should have an annual [PSEA action plan](#). The plan must outline the priorities agreed by the HCT members to advance the collective in-country PSEA programme, articulated around the following areas: policy and oversight; risk management and prevention; safe and accessible reporting; victims' rights to assistance; accountability and investigations; PSEA coordination mechanisms/structures. It should be based on an assessment of SEA risks and include a mapping of existing feedback and complaints mechanisms.

The plan should clearly attribute responsibilities among the HCT/UNCT members, identify timeframes and required resources and detail how these resources will be mobilized. The HCT should monitor the action plan regularly against the indicators as defined in the [IASC PSEA Mapping Exercise](#), which helps track collective inter-agency progress among all countries with HRP/HNRPs on accelerating PSEA.

PSEA action plans validated by the HCT and UNCT can be found on the [IASC Global Dashboard](#)

Currently, all HRP countries have action plans. Examples include the [Burkina Faso](#), [Afghanistan](#)

4. Mobilise funding to implement the PSEA action plan: Options include: cost-shared budgets among the country team to support collective PSEA programming or the identifying PSEA budget allocations all project proposals. Humanitarian Funds/ Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPF) or Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) can provide seed funding to catalyze PSEA initiatives and support further resource mobilization. Such funding has contributed to:

- a. The establishment of effective PSEA mechanisms and coordination platforms
- b. PSEA risk assessment and mapping activities
- c. Strengthening the capacity of local organizations and associations and awareness raising on PSEA among affected communities

Funding for PSEA action plans and collective PSEA programmes

In **Chad**, the RC/HC issued [Programming Guidelines](#) requesting all HCT/UNCT members to include in every project proposal at least four PSEA-related activities which must be duly budgeted for. These are articulated around the priority areas of capacity-building; community engagement; safe, accessible complaints mechanisms; risk monitoring.

In **Somalia**, cost-sharing among UNCT/HCT members is in place for certain aspects of the collective PSEA programme.

In **Afghanistan**, the RC/HC personal engagement with HCT members and donors has contributed immensely to ensuring that the PSEA Country Action Plan was fully-funded ([Afghanistan 2023-2024](#))

Funding for PSEA through CBPF and CERF allocations

In **DRC**, the HC/RC/DSRSG launched a special reserve allocation in 2021 of USD 1.5 M to support the PSEA action plan, by strengthening complaints mechanisms and assistance for survivors.

The **oPt** Humanitarian Fund supported the PSEA Network to create a responsive accountability mechanism, which supported the overall effectiveness and inclusiveness of the response.

In **Mozambique**, CERF funding helped PSEA coordination through deployment and humanitarian staff trainings, translation and production of PSEA materials and radio spots in local languages.

In **Malawi**, CERF funding was used for reorientation of 300 emergency workers on GBV and PSEA. 72,315 people were reached with awareness on GBV and PSEA and the available pathways within the camps.

5. Demonstrate leadership engagement: including PSEA in the HCT It is good practice for PSEA to be a recurring HCT agenda item to demonstrate the priority accorded to it. *Ad hoc* PSEA-focused HCT meetings can allow for sufficient time to dedicate to meaningful discussion and also allow to monitor the implementation of the collective PSEA action plan (see above). and invite the PSEA Coordinator to share updates regularly, and also for inclusion of relevant stakeholders (e.g. organizations leading PSEA initiatives not represented in the HCT).

6. Strengthen PSEA Coordination Each country should have a PSEA structure in place (see figure below). This includes an inter-agency PSEA Network facilitated by a dedicated inter-agency PSEA Coordinator. The UNCT/HCT acts as a strategic level decision-making body for the PSEA Network.

At the onset of an emergency, the RC must ensure that existing in-country PSEA systems are sufficiently robust and adapted for the emergency context. As the lead coordinator, it is the RC/HC responsibility to drive home the message that SEA and inaction upon allegations by the UN are not tolerated, and to ensure that all entities, sectors and heads of office within the humanitarian response take appropriate measures to prevent SEA and are accountable for their responsibility to respond diligently to allegations.

Leadership support also to PSEA Network Coordination

In Central African Republic, the DSRSG/RC/HC regularly chairs the Network at national level. At Provincial level, the most Senior UN Official chairs the network.



A dedicated PSEA Coordinator with appropriate seniority is an integral part of a robust PSEA system. Reporting directly to the HC, they have the responsibility to lead a PSEA [Network](#) at country level and support strategic leadership on PSEA decision-making.

A 2021 review of the IASC [PSEA](#) system concluded that “dedicated capacity for PSEA Coordinators, PSEA Networks and activities must be provided”.⁶

In its [2022-2026 Vision and Strategy](#), the IASC agreed to a collective approach to strengthen country capacities. In 2022, the IASC endorsed the PSEA Capacity Project ([PSEACap](#)) which provides dedicated inter-agency PSEA Coordinators to high-risk countries, identified through the [SEA Risk Overview Index](#).

Funding for inter-agency PSEA Coordinators – the [PSEACap project](#)



To sustainably staff priority crises with high-quality, capable individuals, the PSEACap has established a pool of PSEA experts, combined with talent management to enable rapid deployments into newly emerging or persistent high-risk crises. The project provides a **minimum of two year** contracts which enables the PSEA Coordinator to establish and sustain safe and accessible reporting channels, inter-agency referral procedures, progress the application of a victim-centered approach, among other activities as articulated in the annual country PSEA action plans. Following the launch of PSEACap, nine inter-agency PSEA Coordinators have deployed to Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Haiti and Mali.

The PSEA Coordinator collaborates with all relevant actors, inter alia, to facilitate [Inter-Agency SEA Referral](#) of complaints as well as assistance and protection of SEA survivors, as per the [Victim/Survivor Centred Approach](#) (IASC, 2023).

7. Strategic media engagement is an opportunity to highlight collective PSEA efforts, inform communities on assistance available and investigation efforts, and promote trust-building. Prepare agreed key messages with the UNCT/HCT that explain procedures in place, as well as UN policies, services, and actions, including what happens when there is an allegation. These can be contextualised and adapted according to the situation⁷. When hearing allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse, including in the media, **act immediately** by following-up with the PSEA coordinator.

8. Collaborate with national and local authorities Where non-UN military personnel have contact points with the humanitarian aid cycle (i.e. provision of escorts, security around displacement sites), a clear framework for the referral of such complaints should be built into country-level SOPs. OHCHR has the lead role within the UN system to monitor, investigate, report, and follow up on allegations of SEA involving non-UN forces. NB: a [Joint UN-Government Framework on PSEA](#) aims to harmonize system-wide engagement with Government stakeholders on PSEA.

Examples of Mainstreaming PSEA into existing systems

Using existing reporting mechanisms: In **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)** and **Chad**, existing AAP reporting mechanisms, such as the hotlines, are used by affected people to report cases of SEA. In **DRC**, the CBPF supported the toll-free 495555 hotline which is also used by a number of survivors to report their cases and seek assistance. In Chad, the 2024 CERF allocation supports an interoperable Inter-Agency PSEA CFM and one AAP/PSEA CFM platform to ensure their upgrade and functionality.

Using the humanitarian fund to integrate PSEA: In **CAR**, the CBPF instituted PSEA activities, to be duly budgeted, which all partners need to integrate into project proposals to be considered for the funding.

Using UNHAS to disseminate awareness-raising information on PSEA: In **DRC**, UNHAS operated flights and airports feature ample awareness-raising materials on PSEA targeting humanitarian personnel.

⁶ [IASC GLOBAL REPORT ON PROTECTION FROM SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT](#), 2021

⁷ See the OSC SEA Toolkit for Senior Leaders sample Messages (May 2024)

9. Promote a speak-up culture and a safe and inclusive work environment. Lead reflections to understand what aspects of the organizational culture are preventing/hindering complaints, agree on a minimum of benchmarks and agree on measures to be taken when this minimum is not reached. ⁸Conduct a [session with the HCT](#) and leadership teams on organizational values.

Create safe spaces for dialogue. Opportunities (town hall meetings, training sessions, workshops and bi-lateral meetings) that bring together personnel and/or partners should foster trust and participants should feel safe to express their opinions. To create such safe spaces, it is important to encourage respect, non-judgmental listening and diversity of thought among all participants.

The important **gender dimension** of SEA and sexual harassment indicate the need to “*strengthen the role of women, girls and people at risk as key partners and accelerate work to increase accountability of the aid community to the affected people.*” ([IASC statement on PSEAH April 2024](#)).

ESSENTIAL IN-COUNTRY PROTOCOLS

- HCT Compact with reference to PSEA
- InterAgency SEA Referral Protocol SOPs
- Terms of reference PSEA Focal Points
- Terms of reference PSEA Network
- Terms of reference PSEA coordinator
- PSEA Action Plan + budget,
- code(s) of conduct and complaint handling protocols

WHERE TO GO FOR SUPPORT

IASC Secretariat PSEA Team
Ocha.psea@un.org

⁸ See SCHR on the Evolution of the collective IASC member culture on PSEAH

	Gender-Based Violence ¹	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse ²	Sexual Harassment
Parties	Perpetrator: Anyone Survivor: Anyone	Perpetrator: Aid Worker Survivor: Beneficiary or member of the community / affected population	Perpetrator: Aid Worker Survivor: Aid Worker*
	GBV is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. These acts can occur in public or in private. ³	Sexual Exploitation Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from the sexual exploitation another. Sexual Abuse: The actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions. ⁴ All sexual activity with a child is considered as sexual abuse.	Sexual Harassment is any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected, or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation, when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. Sexual harassment may occur in the workplace or in connection with work. While typically involving a pattern of conduct, sexual harassment may take the form of a single incident. In assessing the reasonableness of expectations or perceptions, the perspective of the person who is the target of the conduct shall be considered. ⁵ *For many organisations, Sexual Harassment as included in the spectrum of behaviours that are not acceptable conduct by staff, be it in the workplace or with affected populations. ⁶

1 Further information about how SEA is distinguished from other forms of GBV is in the IASC GBV Guidelines (pp. 8 and 322).

2 Source: IASC's Definition and Principles of a Victim/Survivor Centered Approach

3 Source: IASC GBV Guidelines

4 Secretary-General's Bulletin: Special Measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (ST/SGB/2003/13), Section 1.

5 Source: IASC's Definition and Principles of a Victim/Survivor Centered Approach; See Definitions for complete definition of SH.

6 Source: CHS Alliance PSEAH Quick Reference Handbook, 2020