

# SEARO

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Risk Overview

## Frequently Asked Questions 2025 SEARO Global Index

### 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) Risk Index<sup>2</sup>, which measures the risk of crises that could exceed national capacity, and the INFORM Severity Index<sup>3</sup>, 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 over time. SEARO is a composite index that is focused on the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)

in humanitarian crises and disasters. It organizes and presents relevant data to increase understanding of risk factors and support more informed policies, planning and decision-making.

#### Which countries are included in the SEARO Global Index?

Countries included in the SEARO Global Index are 'IASC Priority Countries', defined as those with an active Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP), Flash Appeal (FA) or similar response mechanism in the current or previous calendar year. Countries that were included in the index in past years but do not currently meet this criteria may be retained in the index at the discretion of the authors. At launch in November 2024, the Global Index covered 37 countries that met these inclusion criteria. The Index will be updated as needed to include countries in which a new response plan is launched.

### DIMENSIONS, CATEGORIES AND COMPONENTS OF THE SEARO ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

Dimension	Enabling Environment				Situational Context				Operational Context				Protective Environment			
Category	Laws & Practices		Human Rights & Inequalities		People at Risk		Needs & Complexity		Response Institutions		Response Modalities		Capacity & Resources		Mechanisms & Accountability	
Component	Laws & Practices	Institutional Strength	Violence Against Women & Children	Gender Inequalities	People Affected	Vulnerability	Scale of Needs	Situational Complexity	Staffing	Organizational Culture	Operational Design	Resource Gaps	PSEA Coordination	PSEA Resources	Reporting & Accountability	Survivor Assistance

1 <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#indicities/HDI>  
 2 <https://drmkc.jrc.ec.europa.eu/inform-index/>  
 3 <https://drmkc.jrc.ec.europa.eu/inform-index/INFORM-Severity>

## 2. How is the SEARO Analysis Framework structured?

An analysis framework organizes data in a way that facilitates analysis and understanding. The SEARO analysis framework organizes data into 4 high-level dimensions, 8 categories and 16 components. (see figure below). The framework highlights different factors that influence the risk of SEA as well as how these factors relate to each other. As such, the framework provides users with multiple levels of detail to view and analyse the data. The SEARO Analysis Framework has been adopted by many organizations and country teams to help underpin other models and analysis that are addressing SEA .

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

The SEARO Global Index scores and ranks the overall risk of SEA for countries included in the mode, as well as scoring each dimension, category and component. 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.

## 4. How are the components weighted?

The index is equally weighted, so that each component contributes 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.

## 5. Where do the data come from?

SEARO aggregates data from a range of credible sources, such as United Nations agencies, governments and multilateral organizations. These data must meet six quality criteria to be included in SEARO: They must be relevant, of high quality, consistent across countries and over time, updated regularly, provide sufficient geographical coverage and be easy to obtain and process. At launch in November 2024, the 2025 SEARO Global Index uses 30 indicators from 12 sources and 10 organizations. The index will be reviewed annually to identify alternative sources and indicators that could improve the model.

## 6. What is an imputed indicator?

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

## 7. How often is SEARO updated?

SEARO will be updated at least twice annually, and on an ad-hoc basis to include countries with newly launched response plans. Because the underlying datasets are updated at different times and with different regularity, score for some components may not change from one update to the next.

## 8. What is the SEARO Global Index Extended Dataset?

The SEARO Global Index is designed to be quickly updated if a new response plan is launched in a country not already in the index. To support this flexibility, we maintain data on a pool of countries that are disaster prone, defined by their inclusion in the INFORM Severity Index. Although these countries are not part of the SEARO Global Index, we make the data available for use as an 'extended dataset', recognising that users of SEARO may wish to include SEA risk on a broader set of countries in their own analysis.

## 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 3.0 and progressively darker shades for values between 3.0 and 5.0, 5.0 and 7.0, and 7.0 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 average score of all components and its relative position among other countries in the index. A component score describes the risk identified for an individual factor, and it is possible for a country with low scores for some components to rank high in the overall risk score because of high scores in other components. Conversely, it is possible for a country with a 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?

### 12. 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.

### 13. 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 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).

### 14. 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.

### 15. 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.

### 16. 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 analysis framework that can guide and structure further exploration at country level to identify local factors that could be significant contributors to risk.

### 17. 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 the country level. The detailed analysis 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.

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

A pilot exercise took place in 2024 to explore adaptation of the SEARO analysis framework and index at the sub-national level, including pilots in Afghanistan and Colombia. A methodology will be published by early 2025 that will guide country teams through designing, building and maintaining a sub-national SEARO index that will reflect the specific risk factors they face and support local planning and operations.

### 19. 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.

## 20. 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.

## 21. 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 abate, 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 datasets. 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.

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

The fourth dimension of the SEARO analysis 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 Context). 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.