Coordination on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)

16 January 2026

Key points

- Ensure that structures for inter-agency coordination on PSEA are established from the outset of the emergency

- Take lead in establishing and coordinating in-country PSEA Networks in refugee emergencies

- Actively engage in in-country PSEA Networks in non-refugee emergencies in collaboration with other actors

- Ensure close coordination with all concerned sectors / clusters for PSEA to be effectively mainstreamed across the emergency response

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1. Overview

Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) of forcibly displaced and stateless persons and other affected communities by aid workers causes irrevocable harm to victims and their communities. Even one incident of SEA breaks community trust and undermines the work of the entire humanitarian response. UNHCR works in close collaboration with sister UN agencies, non-governmental and civil society organisations, government 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 emergency situations which continue to rapidly evolve, inter-agency and multi-sectoral coordination is of critical importance to ensure that protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) is effectively integrated into the emergency response from the outset, including prevention, risk mitigation, community engagement, safe and accessible reporting, and a victim/survivor-centred response.

While PSEA is the responsibility of all UNHCR personnel, at UNHCR, PSEA Focal Points (FPs) are

formally appointed by the Representative to coordinate and facilitate efforts for PSEA in the operation, working together with a multi-functional team. Usually, the PSEA FP represents UNHCR in the inter-agency PSEA Network at the technical level, while the Representative ensures UNHCR representation and engagement in collective PSEA efforts at the strategic level, for example through the UN Country Team /Humanitarian Country Team (UNCT/HCT).

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 and mitigate risks thereof. The network is responsible for implementing coordinated activities between members to prevent and minimize the risk of SEA by aid workers and associated personnel delivering humanitarian assistance, and ensure effective response when incidents do arise. The network should also ensure collaboration and coordination with other sectoral working groups or clusters in relevant thematic areas to ensure that PSEA is mainstreamed across the response.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

Close coordination amongst all actors is essential for PSEA efforts to be coherent and effective in an emergency response. During emergencies, displacement to an unfamiliar environment, the breakdown of usual protective structures, lack of security and access to basic services, and disruption of means of livelihood, among other factors, expose forcibly displaced persons to heightened risks of SEA. Emergencies also bring a rapid increase in the number of partners and actors for the humanitarian response, rapid recruitments and high staff turnover, and higher-risk delivery models, thereby exacerbating risks.

Inter-agency and multi-sectoral coordination are therefore of critical importance to ensure that all actors in the emergency response take robust measures to ensure that PSEA is effectively integrated across the response from the outset through a coordinated approach.

3. Main guidance

Close coordination amongst agencies is essential for PSEA efforts to be coherent and effective in an emergency response. Inter-agency coordination brings organizations together under a common situation analysis, strategy and approach, 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, utilize shared tools and resources, ensure complementarity of interventions and avoid duplication, and increase overall efficacy of interventions.

In addition, coordination with various sectors / clusters is essential in order to mainstream PSEA prevention, risk mitigation and response across sectors, including mapping potential SEA risk areas by sector and taking actions to mitigate those risks, integrating PSEA messages into community outreach and capacity-building sessions, and ensuring multi-sectoral services and referral pathways are in place for survivors to access the support that they may require including

safety and security measures, basic material assistance, medical care, psychosocial support or legal services as part of GBV and child protection response.

PSEA is a cross-cutting issue requiring a range of technical expertise. Working to prevent and respond to SEA is a collective responsibility for all actors in all sectors. For this reason, the PSEA Network should be an independent, standalone structure and not a sub-group of Protection, GBV, Gender, or AAP.

PSEA inter-agency coordination in refugee, IDP, development and mixed contexts

Under the auspices of the Refugee Coordinator (UNHCR Representative) in a refugee situation and the Resident Coordinator / Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) in a development or an internal displacement situation, an in-country PSEA Network should be established (if one does not exist already) as the primary body for technical-level coordination and oversight of PSEA activities. It is recommended that the PSEA Network is situated as a cross-sectoral group, rather than under a specific sectoral / cluster working group, given the cross-cutting nature of PSEA which requires mainstreaming across sectors and clusters. The PSEA Network should liaise regularly and closely with the broader inter/multi-sector coordination group.

For refugee emergencies, ensuring integration of PSEA in the refugee response is one of the responsibilities of the Refugee Coordinator (UNHCR Representative), as per the [Refugee Coordination Model: Updated Guidance (October 2024)](#), p.11. Accordingly, UNHCR has the role to take the lead to establish (if one does not exist already) and coordinate / co-lead the PSEA Network, as one of the cross-cutting response priorities, in accordance with the [Refugee Coordination Model (RCM)](#). For related guidance and tools, please refer to the RCM sample coordination structure and the section on the PSEA Network in the Updated [RCM Guidance](#) (pages 17 and 21). For non-refugee emergencies, UNHCR should actively engage in the PSEA Network, which may include co-chairing if appropriate or required depending on the operational context. (See also [UNHCR's Policy on Emergency Preparedness and Response](#), paragraphs 7.1 and 7.2)

- The above structure is an example, to be adapted depending on the local context of the operation.

- UNHCR Representative / Refugee Coordinator is accountable for coordination of the refugee response.

- UNHCR establishes sectoral coordination mechanisms, with government counterparts wherever possible. PSEA Network is part of the RCM coordination structure.

- The PSEA Coordinator reports to the UNHCR Representative / Refugee Coordinator.

In mixed situations, where a Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) 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 Refugee Coordinator / UNHCR Representative. On PSEA, UNHCR maintains overall coordination and leadership responsibilities for PSEA in the refugee response, while the configuration of PSEA coordination structure will need to be guided by the operational context, what structures already exist, and what would be fit for purpose and optimize results (e.g. separate PSEA Network for refugee response or merged PSEA Network covering both refugee and IDP operations), as outlined in the [Updated RCM Guidance](#) (p.29). Moreover, the UNHCR Representative, as Refugee Coordinator, actively engages in coordinating PSEA efforts with the HC, shares updates on developments on PSEA in the refugee response with the HC and UN Country Team (UNCT)/ Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and actively contributes to system-wide efforts maximizing resources, efficiency, and impact in addressing PSEA. In accordance with the [IASC Vision and Strategy : Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (PSEAH) 2022-2026](#) and the IASC's [Generic Terms of Reference for In-Country PSEA Coordinator](#), in country contexts where refugee situations are the predominant humanitarian concern, the PSEA Coordinator should be situated within the UNHCR office with a shared reporting line to the UNHCR Representative and the (D)SRSG/RC/HC as appropriate.

These considerations, as outlined in the [Updated RCM Guidance](#) (p.29), also apply in countries where there is a refugee response as well as a UN development coordination system under the auspices of the UN Resident Coordinator (RC). UNHCR maintains overall coordination and leadership responsibilities for PSEA in the refugee response and the configuration of PSEA coordination structures will need to be guided by the operational context, what structures already exist, and what would be fit for purpose and optimize results (e.g. sub-national PSEA Network for refugee response or integration into the national PSEA Network if one exists, etc). The UNHCR Representative, as Refugee Coordinator, actively engages in coordinating PSEA efforts with the RC, shares updates on developments on PSEA in the refugee response with the RC and UNCT and contributes to system-wide efforts, maximizing efficiency and impact in addressing SEA.

In situations of mixed movements of refugees and migrants, UNHCR and IOM seek to achieve co-leadership of the response and establish adequate coordination mechanisms in accordance with the [UNHCR-IOM Framework of Engagement.](#) While guidance and models of coordination arrangements in mixed refugee / migrant movement situations is evolving, building on experience in the Coordination Platform for refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V model) and other existing models, it is considered good practice to establish a cross-cutting PSEA Network as part of the inter-agency coordination structure for coordination of response to the mixed movements, in a similar way to refugee and mixed refugee / IDP situations.

The role of the Inter-Agency PSEA Network

The PSEA Network is responsible for implementing coordinated activities between member organizations to prevent and minimize the risk of SEA, ensure that systems are in place for effective response when incidents do arise, and raise awareness of PSEA in the operation. It provides technical level coordination and oversight on PSEA, including: developing and/or

adapting country level strategies for endorsement by country-level leadership (e.g. UNCT / HCT, Refugee Coordination Forum, depending on the operational context), action plan, 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, response and risk mitigation for PSEA. The PSEA Network activities should follow a victim-centered approach in accordance with the [IASC Definition and Principles of a Victim / Survivor Centred Approach](#) and respect the principles of safety, confidentiality, respect, and non-discrimination. For further information on the role of the Network, please refer to the Generic ToRs of an in-country PSEA Network available at the links below.

The Network should be open to all UN agencies, international and national NGOs, and local / community-based / women-led organizations operating in the response and engage in outreach with relevant non-member organizations as part of ongoing activities. The presence of the PSEA Network does not lessen the responsibility of individual network members to develop, implement, and strengthen measures, activities and programmes internally for PSEA at the country level. Senior management within each member organization is accountable for PSEA within their organizations. However, 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.

The PSEA Network is not responsible for investigating or adjudicating complaints. Within UNHCR these functions rest exclusively with the Inspector-General's Office (IGO), or in case of allegations against individuals employed by other agencies the entity that employs the individual against whom a complaint has been alleged, in line with internal policy and procedures.

To ensure adequate coordination capacity in a rapidly evolving environment, it is highly recommended that a dedicated PSEA Coordinator is appointed wherever possible to coordinate the PSEA Network, particularly in a refugee emergency where UNHCR is responsible to take lead. The PSEA Coordinator is responsible for coordinating and reporting on Network activities, including progress made against key objectives and priorities. The PSEA Coordinator also represents the Network in relevant coordination bodies and advises actors in country on good practice to support effective PSEA implementation. PSEA Network Co-chairs take an active role at the Network level in convening and managing network meetings and events and help coordinate and oversee the PSEA Network Action Plan. In operations where there is no PSEA Coordinator position available in the country, the Coordinator role will usually be divided between the co-chair agencies as appropriate. In some countries the PSEA Coordinator may serve as the Network Chair or co-chair.

Relationship between the PSEA Network and other inter-agency coordination groups

It is important that the PSEA Network and PSEA Coordinator ensure close coordination with inter-agency coordination structures and focal points for GBV, child protection, accountability to affected people (AAP), community-based protection and other sectors / clusters, with a view to ensure effective inclusion of SEA victims in GBV and child protection referral pathways and services, inclusion of PSEA in community engagement and outreach and the development and running of feedback and response mechanisms, integration of PSEA in programmes for groups at heightened risk (including children, persons with disabilities, older persons, women at risk, and

LGBTIQ+), and assessment and mitigation of SEA risks in programming by sectors / clusters / working groups such as shelter, WASH, health, food security, education, camp management and coordination, cash assistance, etc.

Member organizations of the PSEA Network will be represented by their PSEA focal points, who actively participate in the meetings and activities of the Network on behalf of their organizations. Additionally, membership to the network is also open to sector / cluster coordinators, who are strongly encouraged to attend PSEA Network meetings in order to improve two-way coordination between sectors / clusters and the network and ensure that PSEA considerations are integrated in multi-sectoral programming.

PSEA in the Inter-Agency Programme cycle

In refugee contexts, in order to mainstream PSEA across the [Refugee Response Plan (RRP)](#) cycle, the active engagement of the PSEA Network in the RRP development process is critical. It is also important to integrate PSEA across the full programming cycle, including: collecting information on PSEA through multi-sector needs assessments (MSNAs); including PSEA indicators in monitoring frameworks (both regionally and nationally); including PSEA activities in RRP budget and resource requirements; and ensuring the active engagement of the PSEA Network in the RRP development process. Please also see the [Guidance on Reflecting PSEA in RRPs](#) and some sample indicators in the [RRP indicator repository](#).

In IDP contexts, integrating PSEA in the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) is critical to embed PSEA within the cluster system as a standard and integrated part of the humanitarian response and to ensure that PSEA activities are properly resourced. SEA risks and PSEA indicators should be integrated into needs assessments and perception surveys, as its findings shape the country-level Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO). The HNO is then used as a basis for the design of the HNRP. Sectoral response planning must articulate how PSEA will be operationalized considering the specificities of each sector as part of promoting accountable, inclusive and quality programming, and PSEA should also be integrated in the HRNP financial requirement and progress monitoring framework. Please refer to the [OCHA Updated Guidance on Reflecting PSEA into the Humanitarian Programming Cycle](#).

Role of partners involved

- **Host government authorities**: The Government has the primary responsibility for the protection of forcibly displaced and stateless persons. Therefore, engagement of national and local governmental structures early on is essential for the success and sustainability of inter-agency coordination on PSEA. Without government support and buy-in, it will not be possible for the PSEA Network to undertake its roles and responsibilities. As SEA can also be perpetrated by government officials, it is important that the relevant authorities are included in initiatives for awareness-raising, capacity-building sessions, and risk assessment and mitigation as appropriate. In this respect, [a model PSEA clause](#) was adopted by the UN High Level Steering Group on SEA in May 2024 to be included in the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), co-signed by the Government and UN Country Team. The clause is part of the [Joint UN-Government Framework on PSEA](#), and should be included in all new UNSDCFs that are being designed.

- **UN agencies, international and national NGOs**: It is important that agencies designate PSEA focal points who coordinate PSEA activities within their organization and actively engage in the PSEA Network. Based on their area of expertise, experience and available resources, such agencies may take on the co-chair role of the PSEA Network, contribute to the work of the PSEA Network, take lead on specific activities in coordination with other Network members, and ensure linkages with sectors / clusters to promote mainstreaming of PSEA.

- **Community-based organizations (CBOs) and community-based structures**: Community-based organizations and structures, including those led by forcibly displaced and stateless persons, are often the bridge between affected communities and organizations. CBOs and community-based structures have a good understanding of the needs, views and situation of the community, and also often enjoy great trust within communities and can provide links between agencies and the communities that they serve. Therefore, they are ideally situated to help identify relevant entry points to feedback and response mechanisms, communication channels for effective community outreach and awareness-raising, identify protection risk areas including SEA risks, and social and cultural dynamics that must be taken into account in designing appropriate and relevant prevention and response mechanisms. They also have responsibility to ensure PSEA in their own activities and projects, with the support of UNHCR and other larger organizations and PSEA Network as appropriate. Please also refer to the [Guidance on Engagement with Organizations of People with Lived Experience of Forced Displacement and/or Statelessness in relation to PSEA](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only)

- **Forcibly displaced and stateless persons**: It is important that PSEA Networks closely engage with and work in partnership with affected communities. Consultations with members of affected communities, including those of diverse age, gender and backgrounds and groups at heightened risk, to help to design and tailor PSEA messages, information campaigns, community outreach strategies, and feedback and response mechanisms to ensure that they are effective in reaching the community and are accessible. Furthermore, engaging the community in programme design, adjustment, implementation and monitoring of interventions and risk assessment and mitigation will also allow more ownership by the community and sustainability.

S**ector / cluster coordinators**: Close engagement with sector / clusters is key to ensure that PSEA is mainstreamed across the emergency response, including integrating SEA prevention, risk mitigation and response assessment and [mitigation of SEA risks](#) in programming by sectors / clusters. To this end, sector / cluster coordinators are strongly encouraged to attend PSEA Network meetings, and the PSEA Network and PSEA Coordinator must maintain channels of communication with relevant sector working groups / clusters through the inter-sector / cluster coordination group and bilaterally where appropriate.

UNHCR's role and accountabilities

As noted above, UNHCR has leadership and coordination responsibilities in refugee situations, in

line with its mandated accountabilities and reflected in the [Refugee Coordination Model (RCM)](). For refugee emergencies, UNHCR therefore has the role to take the lead to establish (if one does not exist already) and coordinate the PSEA Network in the refugee response in accordance with the [Refugee Coordination Model](). It must also ensure that referral pathways and services are in place for the provision of needed assistance to SEA survivors, in line with a victim centred approach, through inclusion of SEA victims in GBV and child protection referral pathways. For non-refugee emergencies, UNHCR should be actively engaged in the PSEA Network, which may include co-chairing if appropriate or the situation so requires, depending on the operational context.

In accordance with the UN system-wide "[Guidance Note: Requirements and procedures for all United Nations entities on information on allegations of sexual exploitation and/or abuse related to United Nations staff and related personnel and implementing partner personnel with the most senior United Nations official in country](https://)" dated 8 June 2023, as well as the "[UNHCR Internal Guidance Note to UNHCR Representatives on Sharing Incident Information on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse with Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators](https://)" of June 2023 (link accessible to UNHCR staff only), UNHCR Representatives are also responsible to share information on SEA allegations related to its personnel and personnel of UNHCR funded partners 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 addition to engagement in inter-agency PSEA efforts, UNHCR remains accountable to ensure that mechanisms and measures are in place to prevent and respond to SEA and to mitigate risks thereof throughout its programmes, while ensuring that a [victim-centred approach]() is applied throughout all related processes and procedures. (Please refer to entry [Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)]() for further details)

Senior level coordination responsibilities

While everyone has a responsibility to prevent and respond to PSEA, Senior Management has a particular coordination role at the strategic and leadership level – to promote a multi-functional approach to PSEA in inter-agency response; pool resources to enhance what's being done; burden share; and identify what needs strengthening. Whether as Heads of Office, Sector / Cluster leads, or Inter-Agency Coordinators – their role is to cultivate a culture of collective responsibility, and create a space where members reflect honestly on SEA risk areas in their organisations and sector / cluster programming, seek support from others, raise concerns, acknowledge shortcomings and commit to agreed actions.

In refugee contexts, the PSEA Network reports directly to the Refugee Coordinator (who is also the UNHCR Representative) and the Refugee Coordination Forum at the strategic level. The Representative, therefore, has overall accountability and strategic oversight for PSEA inter-agency coordination within the refugee response, as reflected in the [updated RCM Guidance]() p.11.

A [Checklist on PSEA/SH for Representatives and Senior Managers" (accessible to UNHCR staff only)]() and a [PSEA Practical Toolkit for UN Senior Leaders]() In-Country are also available as resources.

Post emergency phase

While risks of SEA are particularly elevated in an emergency context, SEA can occur in any context where the UN and its partners operate and are providing aid to people in need. Therefore, effective PSEA coordination for must continue in the post emergency phase.

A post-emergency phase normally provides opportunities to deepen and make more sustainable responses, and it is important that PSEA, as a cross-cutting priority, is integrated across post emergency interventions and coordination structures. This may include, for example, enhancing coordination and engagement on PSEA with a broader range of actors and stakeholders, including government authorities and development actors.

4. Policies, Guidelines and Useful Links

[UNHCR policy on addressing sexual misconduct](#)

[UNHCR, 2023-2025 Strategy and Action Plan: Tackling Sexual Exploitation and Abu...](#)

[Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: A Collective Responsibility](#)

5. Learning and field practices

[Accessible to UNHCR staff only: UN Online course on PSEA](#)

[Accessible to partners: UN Online course on PSEA](#)

[Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Module 10 - Inter-Agency Coordination on PSEA](#)

[Accessible to UNHCR staff only: pdf document - Inter-agency Coordination on PSEA](#)

6. Links

[Accessible to UNHCR staff only: UNHCR intranet page on SEA and sexual harassmen...](#) [Accessible to UNHCR staff only: DESS Emergency Preparedness and Response Portal...](#) [Reflecting Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) in RRPs](#) [Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Checklist on PSEA/SH for Representatives and Se...](#) [Accessible to UNHCR staff only: Checklist for emergency deployees – PSEA/SH](#) [Resources for PSEA Network in refugee responses from the RCM tools and](#)

resource... [UNHCR website: Tackling sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment](#) [IASC Vision and Strategy: Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sex...](#) [IASC PSEA resource library](#) [Generic Terms of Reference for In-Country PSEA Coordinator](#) [IASC, Deployment Package for PSEA Coordinators - 2024 revision](#) [UN website: preventing sexual exploitation and abuse](#) [Interagency PSEA Community Outreach and Communication Fund](#) [Guidance Note: Inter-agency SEA Referral Procedures](#) [SEA Risk Mapping and Mitigation Package for Clusters](#)

7. Main contacts

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