



CAPSEAH



**Common Approach to Protection from
Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment**



Part 1: Background and a collective vision for action

CAPSEAH is a guide to help all people and organisations working in humanitarian, development and peace (HDP) settings take action and align efforts to protect people from Sexual Exploitation, Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harassment (SEAH). CAPSEAH can be used in other settings too. It was developed by a multi-stakeholder group and with a global consultation.

CAPSEAH aims to:

- Prevent SEAH and improve accountability and support to victim-survivors when it occurs.
- Amplify existing standards as the basis for a stronger, more aligned approach.
- Set expectations about behaviours and minimum actions to protect from SEAH.

CAPSEAH provides a basis for long-term:

- Commitment to zero tolerance for inaction on SEAH.
- Collective action, partnerships and collaboration.
- Multistakeholder dialogue around how to mitigate the risk of SEAH in different contexts.
- Improved capability and capacity for work on PSEAH including for non-experts.
- Resourcing of PSEAH efforts at global, country and organisational levels.

What is PSEAH?

SEAH stands for 'sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment'. All three are unacceptable abuses of power. SEAH is rooted in power imbalances and often linked to inequality, notably gender inequality. Victim-survivors of SEAH usually have less power or are more marginalised than the perpetrators for various reasons. Women and girls are most often affected. The individual terms within PSEAH are commonly defined as:

- **Sexual Exploitation (SE)** – 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 of another. For example, coercing individuals into engaging in sexual activities in exchange for aid, services, employment opportunities, or other benefits.
- **Sexual Abuse (SA)** – the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions. This includes sexual assault, rape, molestation, and other forms of non-consensual sexual activity.
- **Sexual Harassment (SH)** – a range of unacceptable and unwelcome behaviours and practices of a sexual nature that may include, but are not limited to, sexual suggestions or demands, requests for 'sexual favours', sexual, verbal or physical conduct, or gestures that are or might reasonably be perceived as offensive or humiliating. This includes jokes, comments or messages of a sexual nature; suggestive looks, staring or leering; display of or circulation of pornographic material. It is sometimes used to describe behaviour in a work environment but can also occur in communities and public spaces.
- **Protection from SEAH (PSEAH)** – to prevent and actively manage and mitigate the risk of SEAH and respond appropriately when it occurs. This means taking all reasonable actions to: protect people, populations and personnel; proactively reduce SEAH risk and prevent SEAH incidents; create or strengthen ways in which concerns can be raised; and to respond robustly to concerns and cases in a way which prioritises the rights, dignity and needs of victim-survivors. PSEAH is sometimes also called 'safeguarding against SEAH'.

Some organisations distinguish between SEA and SH depending on whether the victim-survivor is a beneficiary of the services or support they provide (SEA), or a staff member (SH), and have separate policies and procedures on each. Other organisations have an overarching SEAH approach covering both SEA and SH.

CAPSEAH uses the collective term SEAH because each of SE, SA and SH are driven by power imbalances and inequality, particularly gender inequality, and all require action. Linking them encourages action to tackle all harmful and unwanted sexual behaviour by people delivering HDP work, regardless of where the incident happens or who the victim-survivor is.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) refers to any harmful act that occurs against a person's will and where their gender is a contributing factor. GBV covers a range of abuses, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence, and can happen anywhere. While both sexual GBV and SEAH involve harmful acts of a sexual nature, SEAH refers to acts committed by people delivering humanitarian, development or peace work.

SEAH in humanitarian, development and peace (HDP) settings

HDP work and operations provide assistance, support, partnership and protection to countries and people in need and underpin global efforts to build a safer, more equitable and sustainable future. HDP work is central to the delivery of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals](#), the overarching global framework to help governments, the private sector, civil society, multilateral organisations and many other actors to work together to tackle poverty, conflict, climate change, natural disasters and other crises. Acts of SEAH undermine the integrity and impact of HDP work.

Humanitarian aid or assistance delivers immediate lifesaving assistance to populations affected by crises such as conflicts, natural disasters, and other emergencies. E.g. delivering food, shelter, healthcare, and protection services to meet the urgent needs of affected populations and alleviate suffering.

In humanitarian contexts vulnerabilities among affected populations are heightened. This vulnerability can be exploited by individuals who may abuse their power or resources to commit sexual acts or coerce or manipulate vulnerable individuals into sexual activities in exchange for aid, services, or other forms of assistance, causing harm to individuals and local communities. The urgency and chaos of humanitarian crises can exacerbate these risks.

Development aid, assistance and cooperation seek to improve the longer-term welfare of lower income countries and address the underlying causes of poverty, inequality, and vulnerability. E.g. promoting economic growth, improving access to education and healthcare, strengthening governance and institutions, and fostering sustainable livelihoods.

In development contexts, the power dynamics may be different than in humanitarian settings, but SEAH risk can still be high and people can still abuse their power, e.g. by offering opportunities, support, or other benefits in exchange for sexual favours, or where people in positions of power such as teachers, healthcare or infrastructure workers or others may exploit their authority and/or proximity to sexually abuse children, women, or other vulnerable individuals. Development contexts can also rapidly change to emergency contexts due to natural disasters or conflict.

Peace settings covers activities that aim to manage and resolve conflicts, protect civilians and help countries transition from conflict to sustainable peace. This includes peacekeeping (the deployment of multinational forces, typically under the mandate of the United Nations or regional organizations, to maintain or restore peace in conflict-affected areas) and peacebuilding (addressing the root causes of conflict and promoting sustainable peace by fostering reconciliation, social cohesion, and development).

Individuals involved in peace-related operations and activities can misuse their authority and power to engage in sexual activities with local populations, including vulnerable individuals such as women and children. This can include transactional sex, coercion, or outright abuse. Vulnerabilities to SEAH in peace building are similar to those in a development setting.

The trajectory of PSEAH work in these three areas has been different in the past 20 years, with standards and systems of varying maturity in place. But countries, organisations and individuals may increasingly find themselves having to adapt to contexts where HDP needs, work and organisations evolve, overlap and interact.

How will CAPSEAH help?

Everyone working in humanitarian, development or peace settings needs to actively manage the risk that people linked to their work could abuse their power and sexually exploit, abuse or harass others, or could be victims. Many incidents go unreported or undetected. Having no reports of cases in an organisation, project etc is unlikely to mean there haven't been any incidents or they won't occur in the future. The risk of SEAH is made worse by factors such as climate change, instability and conflict which increase the need for HDP assistance and the vulnerability of people and communities.

Policies, commitments and standards to protect against SEAH have been developed and adopted over many years. These include:

- The [2003 UNSG Bulletin on Special Measures for PSEA](#) and the [UN's 2017 report on Special Measures for PSEA: a new approach](#) which includes a [Voluntary Compact](#) with Member States.
- The [UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee's \(IASC\) Six Core Principles on PSEA, Minimum Operating Standards on PSEA](#) and [Definition and Principles of a Victim/Survivor Centred Approach](#).
- UN resolutions, policies and resources to tackle SEA and SH across UN operations and to uphold rights of [victims-survivors](#).
- The [Core Humanitarian Standard](#) (CHS Alliance) sets out the essential elements of principled accountable and high-quality aid. Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Sexual Harassment (PSEAH) is woven throughout the Standard, with a [PSEAH index](#) which clearly sets out SEAH requirements.
- The [2018 Safeguarding Summit Commitments](#), including the [Joint Statement by Multilateral Finance Institutions](#).
- The 2019 [DAC Recommendation on ending SEAH](#).

These policies, commitments and standards are not joined up in one place. This means that those involved in HDP work are not working towards the same collective vision on protection from SEAH and are missing out on opportunities to work jointly and learn from one another.

CAPSEAH does not replace the above documents. It summarises and aligns the key actions from them for anyone working in humanitarian, development and/or peace settings to try and improve PSEAH standards globally, improve accountability to victim-survivors, and support preparedness and dialogue on PSEAH across HDP sectors and actors. It will help organisations and individuals who find themselves working with a variety of HDP actors or in new/evolving settings with a higher risk of SEAH, for example have mainly done development work but may now need to adapt to a humanitarian crisis.

A mapping of CAPSEAH against existing standards is included in Part 4.

CAPSEAH has four parts:

1. This background and collective vision for action
2. Common principles to guide all work
3. Minimum actions to protect against SEAH
4. Online practical guidance and further information on how different types of actors can implement the actions.

The full version of CAPSEAH is available online at CAPSEAH.safeguardingsupporthub.org and includes a list of organisations and others who have committed to use CAPSEAH to inform their work and which will be updated on an ongoing basis. Organisations can join this long-term global coalition to improve work to protect against SEAH at any time.



Part 2: Common PSEAH Principles

These principles are designed to underpin and guide the SEAH-related conduct of all people and organisations doing humanitarian, development or peace-related work.

- 1. SEAH is prohibited.** SEA constitutes gross misconduct and grounds for termination of contract, and potential prosecution under criminal, civil or military law. SH is misconduct and can constitute gross misconduct depending on its severity. Acts of SEAH are an abuse of power and undermine the integrity and impact of HDP work. In particular:
 - a. Actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions, is prohibited.**
 - b. Exchange of money, employment, goods, or services for sex, including demands for sex / 'sexual favours' or other forms of abusive, humiliating, degrading or exploitative behaviour is prohibited.** This includes exchange of any assistance or protection that is due to people or communities.
 - c. Any sexual relationship which involves improper use of rank, role or position, or any abuse of power and power imbalances, is prohibited.**
 - d. Sexual activity with children (persons under the age of 18) by those engaged in HDP work is prohibited, regardless of the age of majority or age of consent locally.** Mistaken belief regarding the age of a child is not a defence.
 - e. Sexual harassment of co-workers (whether in the same organisation or not) or people in communities receiving assistance or protection, is prohibited.**
- 2. Zero tolerance for inaction.** This means: zero tolerance for acts of SEAH; zero tolerance for inaction to prevent, report or respond to SEAH; and zero tolerance for retaliation against victim-survivors or whistleblowers. It does not mean having zero cases of SEAH being reported. Reporting is strongly encouraged and should not be penalised.
- 3. Tailor PSEAH approaches to the context and ensure the approaches are inclusive and victim-survivor centred.** Consult people and communities, particularly vulnerable groups. Build on and strengthen existing community and national mechanisms when assessing SEAH risk and designing PSEAH approaches. Embed and prioritise the rights, safety, needs, wellbeing and dignity of victim-survivors and their communities.
- 4. Embed SEAH prevention as part of working culture.** Always act with integrity and help create and maintain an environment which prevents, reports and responds to SEAH. Leaders and managers at all levels have particular responsibility to resource, develop, implement and support PSEAH systems to proactively identify, monitor and address SEAH risks and reports.
- 5. Respond appropriately to suspicions, reports and incidents of SEAH.** In particular:
 - a.** Knowledge, concerns or suspicions of SEAH by HDP personnel, whether in the same organisation or not, must be reported in line with organisational policies, guidance and reporting mechanisms.
 - b.** Assistance and investigations should prioritise the rights, safety, needs, wellbeing and dignity of victim-survivors. Help victim-survivors who report an incident to access support, regardless of whether they participate in an investigation.
 - c.** Hold those found to have committed SEAH accountable and take appropriate action in line with relevant due process.
- 6. Respect confidentiality and protect against retaliation.** Ensure reports can be made safely and confidentially. All those involved in an allegation should be protected against retaliation, have their confidentiality and dignity respected and receive appropriate support. This includes victim-survivors, complainants, witnesses, whistle-blowers, and the subject(s) of complaint.

Part 3: Minimum Actions

Summary: These actions are recommended to help all people and organisations do all they reasonably can to prevent and respond to SEAH. Part 4 has practical guidance on how the actions can be implemented at individual, international, national, organisation and project/programme levels. Different types and sizes of organisation or operation can implement them in ways that feel proportionate and most relevant to them.

1. POLICIES: Set, communicate, uphold and implement clear PSEAH policies.

- a. **Set, resource, implement and adhere to a PSEAH policy/strategy aligned to these common principles, minimum actions and the standards that underpin them.** Some organisations may have an overarching PSEAH strategy, while others may prefer separate policies for SEA (to guide external operations and project/programmes) and SH (to guide internal staff conduct).
- b. **Ensure PSEAH principles and standards of behaviour are embedded in codes of conduct with clear prohibition of SEAH.** Create or update a code of conduct to align with such action if required.
- c. **Ensure all personnel, volunteers and delivery partners are made aware of, sign up to and strive to comply with PSEAH policies and codes of conduct.** Ways to do this include mandatory induction and regular refresher training; adding text to contracts, job descriptions and cooperative agreements; assessing partner capacity to meet expectations on PSEAH; and discussion of compliance in performance reviews and evaluations.

2. LEADERSHIP: Prioritise and embed a culture of zero tolerance for inaction.

- a. **Leaders need to show clear and visible commitment to zero tolerance for inaction on SEAH.** Ways of doing this include appointing a senior PSEAH Champion, regularly highlighting the importance of taking action to prevent and respond to SEAH to staff and peers, training to recognise and address power imbalances, and fostering an inclusive and respectful working culture and environment where personnel and communities feel able to raise concerns.
- b. **Leaders should allocate sufficient resources to prevent and respond to SEAH.** Adequate human, technical and financial resources are needed to implement PSEAH policies, both within core business and specific pieces of work (projects/programmes etc). Put in place dedicated central PSEAH staff with overall responsibility for the development and implementation of PSEAH policies and activities, as well as networks of trained PSEAH champions or focal points.
- c. **Leaders should regularly assess and monitor the implementation and impact of efforts to prevent and respond to SEAH.** Case numbers, SEAH risk assessments, surveys, staff discussions and training completion rates, and routine monitoring can all help to track PSEAH culture and capability.
- d. **Leaders should set out and incentivise clear responsibilities on PSEAH.** Include specific responsibilities on PSEAH in relevant job descriptions and performance objectives, including those of senior managers. Monitor delivery of PSEAH objectives in performance appraisals.

3. COMMUNICATION: Consult, inform and coordinate with communities and partners.

- a. **Consult local people and communities.** Collaborate with, listen to, and use the knowledge of local people whose situation makes them most vulnerable to SEAH, and victim-survivors where possible, when designing PSEAH approaches, projects/programmes and reporting mechanisms.
- b. **Empower local communities.** Engage with civil society, including women's and human rights groups and national human rights institutions, to ensure those who come into contact with projects/programmes and operations know what standards of SEAH-related behaviour are expected, how to report, what happens if they report, their rights and what support is available to them. Do so in a way which takes account of local context, cultures, and is accessible to as many people as possible.
- c. **Collaborate and coordinate with partners and peers, and seek out learning and best practice to strengthen and align PSEAH approaches.** Participate in PSEAH networks and coordination efforts, and use resources to make PSEAH approaches effective, building where possible on existing structures to be accountable to affected populations and prevent and respond to gender-based violence.

4. PREVENTION: Assess SEAH risk and take action to prevent SEAH across all activities

- a. **Mainstream protection from SEAH.** Embed PSEAH measures (training, risk management, due diligence, reporting, detection and vetting) into the culture, design and running of offices, operations, projects/programmes and missions.
- b. **Understand, reduce and manage the risk of SEAH.** Assess and monitor SEAH risks regularly based on an understanding of the local delivery context or working environment and the specific vulnerabilities and needs of affected groups. Use targeted training and awareness raising, e.g. on power imbalance and PSEAH awareness, to mitigate risk of poor conduct. Use assessments to take actions which are revisited on a regular basis with evidence of how changes to programs and operations are being implemented.
- c. **Engage affected communities in the design of mechanisms to prevent and report SEAH.** Ensure people at high risk of SEAH, affected communities and others in contact with projects/programmes can raise the SEAH risks they face and help design prevention and risk mitigation strategies. Understand and support wider efforts to tackle gender equality, gender-based violence, and other power imbalances which enable SEAH to happen in a specific context.
- d. **Use relevant vetting schemes and recruitment processes to prevent the hiring of perpetrators of SEAH.** E.g. Conduct pre-employment checks such as references and use tools like the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme, and (for the UN) Clearcheck.

5. RESPONSE: Encourage reporting, accountability and a victim-survivor centred approach.

- a. **Establish, test, and encourage the use of safe and accessible mechanisms for receiving complaints and detecting concerns relating to personnel, operations and project/programmes.** Participate in community-based complaint mechanisms. Use surveys to seek feedback and track reporting levels to test if mechanisms are trusted and used. Having few reports does not necessarily mean few cases. Stay alert to SEAH risk and culture even in the absence of reports.
- b. **Help personnel to know what to do if they experience, witness or suspect SEAH.** Develop and implement guidance and training so that personnel know how to identify SEAH, and what to do if they receive a report about, become aware of, experience or witness SEA or SH.
- c. **Help victim-survivors who report to access support.** Ensure that they have the support and means to access, safely and confidentially, quality response services including medical, psychosocial, and legal assistance. Victim-survivors have a right to this support whether they choose to participate in an investigation or not.
- d. **Take a victim-survivor centred approach to reports and investigations.** Respond to and investigate cases in a timely, fair, confidential, safe and sensitive manner which is centred on the safety, agency, informed consent, dignity, needs and rights of victims-survivors.
- e. **Hold individuals to account.** Take timely and appropriate disciplinary action against people found guilty of SEAH or who retaliate against those who report concerns or participate in investigations. Use information-sharing tools e.g. the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme to prevent perpetrators moving between organisations undetected.
- f. **Consider legal accountability.** When cases may meet the definition of a criminal or civil offence, if the victim-survivor gives consent (or the parent/carer/guardian/ trusted person in the case of a child, and factoring in any mandatory legal reporting requirements) and it is safe to do so, refer to the appropriate jurisdiction or law enforcement agency.

6. MONITORING: check if efforts to protect against SEAH are working

- a. **Learn and improve from experience, including where things have gone wrong.** When cases occur, consider if prevention measures could be strengthened and follow up with victim-survivors to check if support can be improved.
- b. **Monitor and evaluate the implementation and impact of PSEAH policies and approaches.** Use feedback tools and surveys to check how well staff, implementing partners, and communities understand how to prevent and respond to SEAH and if perceptions/levels of risk are improving; use aggregate non-identifiable data to track case numbers to evaluate if reporting mechanisms are working; look for trends to see if there is a need to increase prevention for particular geographies or groups (e.g. children or people with disabilities).
- c. **Participate in joint efforts to strengthen and align PSEAH approaches.** Publish and share data, information and learning on SEAH in a way that protects confidentiality, to help build the evidence base on PSEAH, knowledge of what works, and track global progress on PSEAH.



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