



World Food Programme

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Evaluation of WFP's Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)

CONTEXT

Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) is a serious risk for the people that WFP seeks to serve, a violation of humanitarian principles, and an ethical and reputational risk for WFP. SEA, according to WFP, constitutes “acts of gross misconduct” that establish grounds for termination of employment. PSEA, which includes activities to prevent, reduce, mitigate and respond to SEA risks, is considered a “moral imperative” by WFP. Over the past two decades, in light of allegations of SEA within the humanitarian sphere, the international community has strengthened awareness, mechanisms, and coordination with other agencies to address SEA.

SUBJECT AND FOCUS OF THE EVALUATION

Derived from UN and Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) standards, WFP's strategic and policy direction on PSEA comes from the Executive Director's (ED) Circular on PSEA, as updated in May 2023. This complements the direction on PSEA set out in WFP's strategic plan for 2022–2025.

This strategic evaluation assessed the efforts of WFP toward PSEA from March 2017 to October 2023 to understand what has worked well, and where efforts can be further strengthened. The evaluation considered four interrelated components as the basis for effective PSEA: norms and standards, capacity and assets, partnerships, and management and leadership.

OBJECTIVES AND USERS OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation served the dual objectives of learning and accountability, with an emphasis on the latter. The main intended users of the evaluation include WFP management and staff at country, regional and HQ level, Executive Board members, WFP partners, donors, and other actors in the

humanitarian and development sector, and the communities served by WFP.

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

How relevant are WFP policies and strategies for guiding PSEA?

The 2023 ED Circular on PSEA brings WFP in step with UN and IASC system wide commitments on PSEA. Notably, the Circular introduced a commitment to zero tolerance to *inaction* and a victim-centred approach. WFP's strategic plan for 2022-2025, for the first time, makes an explicit commitment to integrate PSEA in programming. The evaluation found that PSEA is increasingly included in country strategic plans and WFP policies.

Despite WFP being aligned with system-wide standards on PSEA, WFP's approach to PSEA differs from other UN agencies. WFP separates SEA from sexual harassment, and the power imbalances underlying both offenses are not described in the Circular. Critically, WFP lacks an organization-wide strategy to clarify or guide implementation of PSEA commitments. This may contribute to WFP managers' uncertainty about their responsibilities for PSEA and managers' confidence that PSEA commitments are being met.

How do WFP systems and structures facilitate action and learning on PSEA?

The Ethics Office and a committed network of global focal points have driven progress on PSEA. Compliance with mandatory staff training requirements for PSEA is high and clauses are consistently included in partner contracts. WFP has introduced indicators in the corporate results framework for tracking PSEA.

However, WFP's efforts to address PSEA on the ground are constrained by limited resources, and limited data for decision-making at country and regional levels.

Community feedback mechanisms, which are the backbone for reporting on SEA, are not always suited for highly sensitive cases. Country offices require additional support to tailor their PSEA approach to different contexts and understand SEA risk and risk mitigation. The evaluation found that an absence of SEA reports is not perceived as problematic by WFP managers and tends not to trigger enquiry into whether reporting channels are accessible or fit for purpose.

How does WFP strengthen external coherence on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse for improved implementation?

The evaluation assessed the coherence of WFP's inter-agency and UN partnerships, engagement with governments, and its work with NGOs/CSOs, and other types of partners. WFP has increased its contribution and visibility of PSEA in UN and interagency partnerships and taken steps to assess the capacity of cooperating partners using inter-agency tools.

WFP has not yet fully realized its potential leadership capacity for PSEA within the cluster system or clarified commitments for PSEA related to government partnerships. Additionally, there has been a lack of proactive dialogue with donors on escalating risks related to SEA arising from funding cuts.

Is WFP programming delivering on its PSEA commitments?

WFP's delivery of PSEA commitments has been affected by lack of time to implement PSEA activities for focal points, lack of confidence in PSEA measures, and lack of tailored guidance for PSEA across programming. . Corporate guidance for operationalizing victim assistance and case management is not in place and WFP does not routinely adapt its PSEA approach to specific contexts, such as emergencies.

The evaluation found that the incidence of SEA reporting is low relative to WFP's organizational footprint and expenditure. Despite improved investigation turnaround times, staff perceive that investigations on SEA remain protracted.

How is WFP PSEA capability positioned to be responsive to a changing operational environment?

Taking up the role of IASC Champion on PSEA and Sexual Harassment gives WFP a visible role in global leadership. WFP has made progress toward the medium-term commitments of the IASC Vision and Strategy.

Going forward, WFP is operating within a context of declining funding and increasing projected needs. Efforts to identify cost -efficiencies may overlook the increasing SEA risk extending arising from escalating vulnerabilities and decreased budgets.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Assessment

Overall, the evaluation found that WFP has made important steps towards meeting PSEA commitments. Even with its lean capacity, the Ethics Office has taken the agenda forward corporately, providing valuable guidance and support to focal points globally. WFP is now a key player in inter-agency PSEA platforms.

While noting these achievements, the evaluation found that delivery on PSEA commitments had been hindered by lack of prioritization and accountability, inadequate human and financial resources and limitations in the monitoring and internal feedback loops for understanding SEA prevalence and PSEA effectiveness. Consequently, WFP programming does not yet adequately assess and mitigate SEA risk across all settings and programming modalities.

The absence of consistent past investment in PSEA is only being recognized now, as WFP faces considerable operational and institutional challenges that are likely to increase its SEA risk exposure in the immediate term.

Recommendations

The evaluation makes six recommendations. Three immediate steps are recommended to address SEA risk exposure, and three medium-term steps are recommended to enhance the visibility attention and cross-organizational response to PSEA.

Recommendation 1. Urgently invigorate and strengthen commitment to, and accountability for PSEA across WFP by appointing a cross-organizational task force to operationalize the 2023 Executive Director's circular through an implementation plan for 2024–2026.

Recommendation 2. In line with international obligations on PSEA and within available resources, commit sufficient capacity and resources at headquarters, regional bureaux, and country offices for effective PSEA.

Recommendation 3. Build on the opportunity presented by the IASC championship on PSEA and sexual harassment to enhance the visibility, priority, and clarity of PSEA for WFP.

Recommendation 4. Develop a PSEA policy and accompanying strategy by 2026 to formally affirm and elevate WFP's commitment to PSEA and to ensure that PSEA considerations fully inform the next strategic plan.

Recommendation 5. Enhance the links between SEA risk assessment, programme design and implementation.

Recommendation 6. Ensure that WFP's role and contributions to inter-agency efforts are commensurate with WFP's operational size and strength, to support the development of PSEA global goods.