SEA Risk Identification and Mitigation Checklist Food Security

Sexual exploitation and abuse **(SEA) involves humanitarian and development workers committing unwanted acts of a sexual nature against beneficiaries and members of affected communities**. It is a serious abuse of power and trust. Everyone involved in food security has a duty to protect affected communities from SEA. This includes ensuring assistance is delivered safely, respectfully, and without harm.

This checklist is designed for humanitarian aid workers to identify and address SEA risks in food security programming. It is not exhaustive, and can be adapted to each context. For additional resources, consult the IASC PSEA guidelines, IASC SEA Risk Point Mapping methodology, and Empowered Aid materials linked below, all of which support further contextualisation.

KEY SEA RISK POINTS: FOOD SECURITY PROGRAMMES

Below are key risks points in Food Security programmes. In many contexts, community members are unaware of their rights or what constitutes SEA and/or have limited knowledge of how or where to report abuse confidentially. This heightens risks of SEA.

OVERALL RISKS

Gender imbalance and limited oversight

- **Most actors involved in food security** – enumerators, volunteers, vendors, and service providers – **are men**, often hired without background checks, PSEA training, or behaviour-based contracts.
- **Ongoing monitoring, oversight and enforcement of conduct are limited,** heightening the risk of abuse, allowing misconduct to go unchecked and reducing accountability.
- **Survivors face retaliation or stigma for reporting abuse**, particularly in close-knit communities.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Assessment tools that undermine safe participation

- **Survey tools are long, complex, untranslated, and not adapted for low-literacy participants**, creating reliance on enumerators who may manipulate responses.
- **SEA risks** – e.g. sale or exchange of sex and other coping strategies – are **rarely analysed or used to shape programme design or targeting**.

Lack of meaningful community engagement

- **Communities are rarely informed about their rights**, staff conduct expectations, or how to report SEA.
- **Complaint systems are weak**, inconsistently applied, and often overlook trusted intermediaries like female leaders.
- **Women, girls**, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised groups are **excluded from communication, feedback, and decision-making** – raising SEA risk and limiting their influence.
- **Activities often fail to consider women's safety, mobility constraints, or care responsibilities**, making safe participation difficult for at-risk groups.

Inadequate supervision and communication to community

- **Enumerators often work alone and enter homes unsupervised**, increasing the risk of abuse.
- Women, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised groups are frequently excluded from assessments and communication.
- **Some community members believe participation guarantees aid**, making them more vulnerable to exploitation.

TARGETING AND REGISTRATION

Misuse of power by aid workers & weak safeguarding measures

- Aid workers and community leaders were reported **demanding sexual favours in exchange for inclusion on distribution lists**.
- **Volunteers involved in registration are rarely vetted or trained** on PSEA, and oversight is minimal – misconduct often goes undetected and unreported.
- **Untrained staff collect personal data** (age, sex, marital status, address) without confidentiality agreements or safeguards. Some of this data is shared publicly, increasing risks for affected individuals.

Lack of community engagement and inclusive access

- **Communities often receive little or no clear information about selection criteria, their rights, or how to report SEA**.
- **Registration activities often fail to consider women's safety, mobility constraints, or care responsibilities**, limiting their ability to participate safely.
- **Women, persons with disabilities, and marginalised groups are frequently excluded from registratio**n and communication, increasing their exposure to SEA.

EMERGENCY LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES

Misuse of power by aid workers & weak safeguarding measures

- **Government counterparts involved in implementation are not held to SEA standards**, creating risks of abuse.
- **Supervisors – often community leaders with little knowledge of expected conduct – have exploited participants** (mainly women) by offering work or payment in exchange for sexual favours.
- **Land for agriculture is often accessed informally**, exposing women to coercion from landowners.
- **Partner agreements often lack SEA safeguards**, enabling abuse by third-party staff.
- **Mobile payments** may be inaccessible to participants with limited digital skills, and financial service providers are rarely held accountable for misconduct by their staff.

DISTRIBUTIONS

Design programmes with mitigation in mind

- Food security programmes designed without regard for **unsafe locations of distribution sites, long distances required to reach the sites.**
- **Heavy weight of food rations or other inputs** requiring women and girls to seek assistance for transportation.
- **Food, cash or livelihoods programming insufficient** to meet a family's food needs that may force beneficiaries to sell or exchange sex for income or items.
- **Program design inadvertently excluding most at-risk groups** - e.g. distribution modalities not adapted to vulnerable persons, or forcing unaccompanied children to collect food or other items without safety measures in place.

> **Well, if they have all of the information about her and know she is in great need and she has no other resource, they might threaten not giving her anything but for something in return, and of course he would use her being a girl.**
>
> – Refugee adolescent girl and Empowered Aid co-researcher in Lebanon

UNDERSTANDING AND CONTEXTUALISING SEA RISKS

WITH COMMUNITIES: RECOGNISING THEIR EXPERTISE

Women, girls, and other marginalised groups are experts in identifying the SEA risks they face when accessing aid. They know which people, places, and processes feel unsafe – and what helps reduce those risks. **Their meaningful participation to assess and monitor risks is essential for designing safer programmes**.

Consult them by using participatory methods (see Empowered Aid's Contextualisation Toolkit or M&E Tip Sheets). Ensure discussions are:

- Led by trained, same-sex facilitators in safe, confidential spaces
- Focused on community-level risks, not personal experiences

Examples of safe and unsafe questions:

- ✅ "Are there parts of the [activity or aid process] where women, girls, or other marginalised groups feel unsafe?"
- ✅ "What do they do to protect themselves?
- ❌ "Have you experienced SEA?" or "Who was the perpetrator?"

WITH PARTNERS: IDENTIFYING RISK POINTS IN ACTIVITIES

SEA risks also need to be identified within internal processes. The IASC SEA Risk Point Mapping exercise is designed for staff and partners, not community members. It provides a practical entry point for reflecting on SEA risks in day-to-day programming.

Facilitators (e.g. Cluster Coordinators) guide participants through:

- A short introduction on SEA risks and threats
- A group discussion to map potential risk points in at least two core activities they implement
- A focus on recognising risks – not yet mitigating them – to strengthen awareness and support mainstreaming of PSEA

This exercise can be done in person using flipcharts or online via Miro or PowerPoint. For full guidance, refer to the IASC SEA Risk Point Mapping Tool (Link to workshop package)

As risks evolve, continuous participatory monitoring ensures programmes remain responsive and community-centred.

Before consulting women and girls directly, consult the PSEA network and GBV sub cluster to obtain existing relevant information and coordinate around any consultations you plan to conduct (e.g. safety planning, sharing findings).

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Cluster Coordination Team

- Share SEA risk information across the sector and advocate for risk mitigation at every stage of programming.
- Support partners to apply SEA risk mitigation measures in line with this checklist.
- Liaise with the PSEA Network to ensure coordinated response and clear referral pathways.

All Food Security Partners

- Brief all staff, volunteers, & third-party providers on SEA and expected conduct.
- Inform communities about their rights & safe ways to report concerns.
- Act immediately and confidentially on SEA reports—use referral pathways & prioritise the survivor's needs.
- Monitor staff behaviour & regularly gather community feedback to identify & reduce risks.

PSEA Network, Focal Points, Advisory Groups, GBV AoR & Women's groups

- Train focal points and staff on how to receive disclosures and refer safely.
- Keep referral pathways updated and share them with cluster members.
- Provide guidance on safe, survivor-centred SEA reporting systems.
- Support awareness-raising and safe feedback mechanisms in communities.

RISK MITIGATION MEASURES

CROSS-CUTTING RISK MITIGATION MEASURES

Recruit and engage women meaningfully

- **Hire more women** as staff, enumerators, and volunteers to strengthen representation and include women's committees in decision-making.
- **Review job profiles to address gender gaps** and prioritise skills for inclusive programming.
- **Support women's groups to develop local safety strategies** (e.g. walking in pairs, having someone to call).
- **Regularly ask women and girls what makes them feel unsafe** and adapt programmes accordingly.
- **Work with women's groups and other actors to improve access** for margina-lised groups through tailored messaging, accessible formats, and safe transport

Build trust through clear communication and visibility

- **Share clear, regular information** – using local languages and diverse formats –o n rights, how to report SEA, and where to get help (e.g. via radio, posters, megaphones, visuals). Refer to tools like PSEA at the Frontline.
- **Introduce staff during community meetings and ensure they wear visible identifiers** (e.g. branded T-shirts, vests, or ID cards).
- **Provide timely information** on registration and distribution to avoid confusion and crowding.
- **Make expected staff behaviour known** so communities feel confident reporting misconduct.

Strengthen training & on-site monitoring

- **Train all staff, volunteers, and third-party workers** (e.g. vendors, engineers, drivers) on SEA. Ensure they sign a code of conduct and are regularly supervised.
- **Set up safe, accessible reporting options** through multiple channels, including anonymous and face-to-face reporting via trusted female intermediaries, with materials adapted to local languages and low literacy levels.
- **Monitor activities with attention to gender dynamics.** Observe staff behaviour, watch for SEA risk indicators (e.g. favouritism or exchange of phone numbers), and ensure safeguards such as sex-segregated lines, well-timed activities, and visible PSEA messaging.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Prepare and equip the assessment team

- **Train teams on PSEA**, the code of conduct, and referral pathways.
- **Conduct sex-matched interviews** (e.g. women with women).
- **Provide enumerators with a script** explaining that participation is voluntary, won't affect aid access, and how to report SEA.
- **Pilot questionnaires with diverse households** to identify barriers; ensure they are simple, in local languages, and use visual aids.
- **Include safe, non-personal questions on harmful coping strategies** (e.g. exchanging sex for aid).
- **Share assessment and verification information through trusted channels**, liaising with women's and minority groups.

Ensure safe, inclusive communication and feedback

- **Display IEC materials on rights and SEA reporting channels** at assessment locations and village centres.
- **Use feedback mechanisms that are gender and literacy inclusive** – e.g. involve women's groups, not only male leaders or complaints boxes.
- **Clearly communicate the purpose of the assessment,** how data will be used, and how to provide confidential feedback or complaints.

TARGETING AND REGISTRATION

Engage communities and ensure inclusive registration

- **Involve women's groups and leaders in vetting community volunteers** for targeting and registration.
- **Consult women's groups and other marginalised groups** – including organisations of persons with disabilities – **on timing, location, language, and communication channels**.
- **Ensure registration sites are accessible**, not crowded or isolated, and scheduled at safe times.
- **Ensure all volunteers are briefed on SEA**, sign a code of conduct, and are supervised.
- **Separate teams conducting registration vs. conducting verification and selection.** Clear division of roles helps to mitigate SEA risks associated with potential manipulation during registration.

EMERGENCY LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES

Set safeguarding standards and ensure safe access

- **Brief third-party actors** (vendors, service providers, engineers, technicians) **and government partners on PSEA**, include clauses in contracts, and support integration of PSEA into their activities.
- **Secure access to land through formal agreements** and sensitise landlords on PSEA.
- **Provide info sessions for women on safe use of mobile money** or cash systems, and ensure access points are safe and well-lit.

Strengthen communication on SEA reporting and protection personal data

- **Share selection criteria and outcomes via trusted male and female leaders** and in minority languages to avoid reliance on power brokers.
- **Use inclusive formats** (e.g. visual/oral) and display information where women are likely to see it. Communicate the registration and selection criteria in an open and transparent manner, preferably, with relevant community stakeholders.
- **Set up community feedback mechanisms** for targeting and registration.
- **Restrict access to personal data to trained staff only**, ensure strong oversight, and use password protection.
- **Post-intervention monitoring** is conducted and includes questions enabling the identification of red flags related to SEA risks linked to targeting, registration and selection.

Engage women and monitor risks continuously

- **Ask women and girls how they prefer to receive payments**, and select the safest modalities.
- **Include groups at risk of SEA in programme eligibility criteria**.
- **Establish community feedback mechanisms and regularly monitor activities**, consulting with community-based structures to identify and address emerging risks.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SEE, HEAR, OR SUSPECT SEA

If someone shares a concern with you, or you witness or suspect SEA, it's your responsibility to act – safely and appropriately. Here's how:

- Stay calm and listen. Don't pressure the person to share more. Never ask for details.
- Believe them. Don't question their story or make promises you can't keep.
- Keep it confidential. Only share the information with those who need to know to take action.
- Follow your organisation's reporting procedure. If you're not sure how, speak to your PSEA focal point, local PSEA network, or supervisor immediately.

Always put the survivor's safety, dignity, and wishes at the centre of your response.
Do not try to investigate or intervene yourself.

Looking for more tips on safe distributions?

The **Empowered Aid** food tip sheet (available in French, Spanish and Arabic here) and cash and voucher assistance (CVA) tip sheet offer practical, community-driven guidance to reduce SEA risks in food distributions & CVA activities. **WFP & UNHCR's** responsiblecash.org **website** provides tools for mitigating risks of abuse in cash assistance.