Summary

Barriers to reporting on Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Sexual Harassment (SEAH)

This Summary has been adapted from the following report: Reporting Complaints Mechanisms, Barriers to Reporting and Support in the Aid Sector for Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment, by the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Helpdesk.

1. Barriers to reporting on SEAH

It is widely understood that there is a "chronic under-reporting" of abuse of all kinds in the development sector, which has made "data collection on the scale and type of SEA difficult, analysis of the problem inaccurate and remedial measures ill-targeted".[1] Particularly abuse of children is likely to go under-reported, with evidence indicating that between 30-80% of survivors and victims of any childhood sexual abuse do not disclose their experiences until adulthood, with many others never disclosing – not lastly because they feel powerless to speak up and fear being blamed or not being believed when they do speak out about abuse.[2] Sexual exploitation and abuse incites deep stigma, shame and silence – particularly when the perpetrator was perceived to be trustworthy by the child; or when families deem it better to hide these incidents to protect their children's reputation, or if they lack guidance as to how they are able to report or who to report to.[3] Meanwhile, data from a number of countries shows that individuals would not report without the support of a parent or adult (Csaky, 2010).

The success of any measure to tackle SEAH depends on the willingness and the ability of survivors and victims (along with parents or guardians where appropriate), to report the abuse they have experienced – however there are numerous powerful factors and barriers which prevent those affected from speaking out and often interact, and which affects the effectiveness of complaints mechanisms in place (Csaky, 2010). It is well recognised that recent efforts to foster an enabling environment to report abuse of any kind have been largely inadequate, and that many existing barriers play a key role in the vast under-reporting, resulting in a lack of oversight of the true extent of the problem, which is often combined with an inadequate response to assisting those affected and holding perpetrators accountable (Martin, 2010).

Some of these barriers are outlined in this section. While barriers to reporting are well represented in a wide range of recent discourse, they are also context-specific, as has been illustrated by a study with communities and international organisations across Cote d'Ivoire, Haiti and Southern Sudan (Csaky, 2010). Common overarching themes which interact to create these barriers to reporting include:

- Lack of adequate support and encouragement for communities (and particularly children and young people) to speak out about the abuse against them;
- Recognised good practice and new processes are sufficiently implemented, requiring stronger and more consistent leadership in the development sector;

- A critical lack of investment in tackling the underlying causes of SEAH in communities, perpetrated by both development workers as well as wide-ranging local actors.

2. Institutional culture affects implementation of effective reporting mechanisms

- **The effectiveness of whistleblowing mechanisms is closely linked to an organisational culture which encourages people to speak up without fear:** A survey41[4] of 137 heads of internal audits across a range of sectors noted that "there is a symbiotic relationship between whistleblowing and an organisation's culture" – the right organisational culture encourages people to speak up, and effective internal whistleblowing arrangements are a key part of a healthy corporate culture. In contrast, a review of two years of UN Dispute Tribunals and UN Appeals Tribunals found that whistleblowers were subject to 'intense retaliation', leading to a situation where "almost every complainant and employee we spoke with believed that UN employees are afraid to speak up when they have information about potential misconduct in a peacekeeping mission"[5]

- **A lack of visible leadership also affects the functionality of effective mechanisms:** A review of 14 UN agencies and NGOs, including country studies in DRC, Nepal and Liberia, observed that senior management were not communicating policies to field-level with "sufficient authority or clear direction", for example, PSEA focal points were not being supported; effective personnel awareness raising and complaints mechanisms were not in place; and monitoring of activity or sharing of good practice was not happening.[6] The importance of visible leadership in the success of PSEA efforts has also been highlighted in Davey et al. (2010).

- **Depending on the context, reporting may not always have been mandatory:** A report as recent as 2015 recommended making it mandatory within the UN (UN, 2015). Now, staff members are required to report any concerns or suspicions regarding SEA by any fellow workers.[7]

3. Intersecting factors of fear, stigma, unawareness or powerlessness[8] act as a barrier to effective reporting mechanisms

- **Power imbalances between beneficiaries and aid agencies:** The extreme power imbalances between those delivering and those receiving aid and support has been highlighted; with many agencies reportedly operating "under some of the most entrenched power imbalances that you can imagine".[9] Not reporting abuse due to respect for/fear of a senior officer and/or expatriate staff member (IASC, 2004) can be linked to a recent statement by the UK International Development Committee that a full response to SEA must consider the interlinked dimensions of empowerment, reporting, accountability and screening.[10]

- **Power relations active within communities:** Lack of permission to attend meetings or confidence to speak up in groups, due to low power or standing of individuals (World Vision, 2016)

- **Belief** that complaining or challenging those in authority is not acceptable (Hileman and Burnett, 2016; IASC, 2004; World Vision, 2016);

- **Impunity for abusers** and fear that authorities could be bribed by abusers or side with them (Hilton, 2008);

- **Fear of not being taken seriously or not being believed** – this is also a factor for children (IASC, 2004; Csaky, 2010; Wood, 2015)

- Lack of awareness that sexual exploitation and abuse is wrong, SEAH is seen as a normal or acceptable (or at least unimportant) practice in that context[11];
- Lack of rights awareness: Some beneficiaries indicated that if they knew their rights better, they might be more likely to report (Csaky, 2010). However, a study with humanitarian aid beneficiaries and their perceptions of PSEA efforts in Kenya, Namibia and Thailand showed that despite an awareness of 'pervasive misconduct' in their communities, a large majority were not going to file a complaint for a number of reasons, including a concern that they would be seen as a 'troublemaker' or potentially cause harm to their peers (Lattu et al., 2008);
- Fear of losing benefits from an intervention, a job, status, income or prospects, or fear that aid would be withdrawn (particularly food aid in some settings)[12];
- Personal safety concerns: Many fear retribution, stigmatization or discrimination as a result of complaining (particularly if a complaint is not treated confidentially, which can pose serious risks to safety)[13] – as well as being blamed for their experience.[14] In a study of under-reporting conducted in Haiti, one third of respondents said children who reported abuse feared physical reprisal (or even death) by the perpetrator or the perpetrator's family, while others feared abuse by parents (Csaky, 2010);
- Fear of 'getting it wrong' (IASC, 2004)
- Fear of retaliation experienced by whistle-blowers: Humanitarian staff members (volunteer, incentive and salaried) consulted in a study of PSEA efforts in Kenya, Namibia and Thailand were reluctant to report on fellow aid workers for fear of retaliation (Lattu et al., 2008).
- Gender-specific factors include:
  - Boys and their caretakers may experience further barriers to reporting if approaches taken only emphasise the vulnerability of girls and women: A study from Cambodia (Hilton, 2008) illustrated that boys who experienced sexual exploitation and did not report this were influenced by factors similar to the above, however notably also by a fear and belief that their abusers would not be held accountable to the same extent as abusers of girls (whom authorities are perceived to want to protect more or have less negative attitudes towards when they experience abuse)
  - Girls fear losing the opportunity to exchange sex for food, but also fear stigma: A study of girls in Cote d' Ivoire who were engaging in exchanging sex for aid did not want to report this due to a fear that they would be stigmatised by the community, and be seen as "spoiled" and unmarriageable (placing more culpability on girls in this scenario); cases of forced sex were more likely to be reported (Csaky, 2010). In Liberia, girls who were being abused or sexually exploited sometimes expressed benefitting from the transaction and did not want others to report their cases; sometimes parents refrained from reporting as they were benefiting from their children's activities (Save the Children, 2006). In Southern Sudan, a study of underreporting showed that a girl who is revealed as having been abused will no longer merit a high dowry of cattle, reducing the family's expected income to nothing. Thus the negative economic impact of the abuse is great and therefore inhibits reporting (Csaky, 2010).

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[1] Csaky, C. (2010); Overseas Development Institute, cited in International Development Committee – UK Parliament (2018b)

[2] Alaggia (2005); United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children (2012)

[3] United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children (2012)

[4] Chartered Institute of Internal Auditors (2014), cited in Fraser and Naidu (2018)

[5] Walden and Edwards (2012), cited in Fraser and Naidu (2018)

[6] IASC (2010), cited in Fraser (2018)

[7] https://www.chsalliance.org/files/files/UN%20Leaflet%20Reporting%20SEA.pdf

[8] A combination of stigma, fear, ignorance and powerlessness is a key factor which prevents people from reporting, based on qualitative research undertaken with people living in chronic emergencies in Côte d'Ivoire, Haiti Southern Sudan and humanitarian, peace and security professionals and secondary research (Csaky, 2010)

[9] International Development Committee – UK Parliament (2018a); Parker (2018)

[10] International Development Committee – UK Parliament (2018a)

[11] Csaky (2010); IASC (2010); Hileman and Burnett (2016); IASC (2004)

[12] IASC (2004); Csaky (2010); . Lattu et al. (2008); Martin (2010); Save the Children (2006)

[13] Simply the act of data collection carries risks for the survivors and victims in case of breaches of confidentiality. Beneficiaries worry about the lack of confidentiality and lack of security assurance. There is also a risk of exposing survivors and victims to additional harm if incidents are non-discriminately referred to authorities without consent (Lattu et al., 2008; International Development Committee – UK Parliament, 2018b).

[14] Hileman and Burnett (2016); Hilton (2008); IASC (2004); Lattu et al. (2008); Martin (2010); Save the Children (2006); Wood (2015); World Vision (2016).