

Summary brief



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International Standards on Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Sexual Harassment

This brief provides civil society organisations (CSOs) with a summary of the different international standards on sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH). It is important for CSOs to meet the relevant standards when delivering development and humanitarian work to protect staff and do no harm in the communities where you work.

International standards and instruments to tackle SEAH

In 2018 and 2019 the major governmental donors who form the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD agreed that their work and that of all of their partners should adhere to the IASC and/or CHS standards (1-3 below). The KCS document (4 below) is mainly relevant for organisations working with children. The 2019 DAC Recommendation (5 below) is an international instrument primarily intended for donor governments, but has been included here so organisations understand what funders are committed to and the links to the IASC and CHS standards which will be more directly relevant.

1

Inter-Agency Standing Committee Six Core Principles Relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Why does the standard exist? In the wake of the West Africa SEAH allegations in 2002 the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) established a Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) in humanitarian crises. The Task Force was mandated to strengthen the protection and care of women and children particularly in situations of humanitarian crisis and conflict, and specifically to make recommendations aimed at eliminating sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). A key output was the six core principles which form a code of conduct on minimum acceptable behaviour that was operationalised in the UN Secretary General's Bulletin (ST/SGB/2003/13).

What does this standard cover? The standard: requires SEA to be treated as gross misconduct, with the potential for dismissal; prohibits staff paying for sex or exchanging goods etc. for sex; prohibits sexual activity with anyone under the age of 18; prohibits exploitative relationships with beneficiaries and or partners; obliges staff to report concerns; and obliges staff to create a culture which prevents SEA.

Who does the standard apply to? All United Nations (UN) staff and anyone working in partnership with/receiving funds from them. If you partner with the UN (or other organisations who adhere to these principles, e.g. International Financial Institutions (IFIs)), you must agree to follow these standards to prevent SEA.

Inter-Agency Standing Committee Minimum Operating Standards: Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by Own Personnel (MOS-PSEA)¹

Why does this standard exist? It was originally designed to standardise the way the UN and anyone who receives UN funding protects community members from experiencing sexual exploitation and abuse by their own staff. It does not cover sexual harassment of staff within the workplace. Other organisations, notably some major International Financial Institutions, also use it. International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), InterAction and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) are all permanent invitees to the IASC.

What does the standard cover? This standard requires the organisation and its partners to have a policy in place to prevent SEA. Local offices and partners must inform local communities about the steps their local office and its partners take to prevent SEA. These steps include having a culturally appropriate system in place for anyone to report concerns and access support, including community members and staff, ensuring recruitment processes identify appropriate people to hire, and staff training on how to implement the standard.

The standard also requires organisations to have a dedicated SEA focal point or department, a clear code of conduct and that the Secretary General's Bulletin (ST/SGB/2003/13) or respective codes of conduct should be included in contracts.

Who does the standard apply to? All UN staff and anyone working with or receiving funds from them. If you partner with the UN, you must agree to follow these standards to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse. DAC donors require adherence to MOS-PSEA and/or CHS. All three documents explicitly form the policy basis of the DAC Recommendation (see point 5 below).

Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS)²

Why does this standard exist? This standard provides a common approach to deliver humanitarian assistance to communities affected by crisis. This also includes how to prevent and respond to SEAH, with similar requirements to the MOS PSEA. A number of commitments within the Core Humanitarian Standard, if met, also contribute to creating safer organisations.

What does the standard cover? This standard requires SEAH risks to be identified and addressed within organisations and their programmes activities. Organisations must have policies in place to prevent and respond to SEAH. Communities must be informed of the organisation's work to prevent SEAH. Reporting systems must exist for communities to make reports. Reporting and investigation processes must prioritise the safety, needs and interests of victims and survivors. A [CHS PSEAH Index was published in 2020](#), when sexual harassment was included for the first time.

Who does the standard apply to? The CHS was written for humanitarian work but the CHS Alliance advocates that anyone delivering development work could use it.

¹ https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/3_minimum_operating_standards_mos-psea.pdf

² <https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard>

The International Child Safeguarding Standards by Keeping Children Safe³

Why does this standard exist? To protect children from all forms of violence and abuse, including SEA, that could arise for children from humanitarian or development assistance being delivered.

What does the standard cover? This standard requires all organisations coming into contact with children to have a child safeguarding policy in place. The standard ensures anyone working with children is trained and supported to safeguard children. Organisations must include child safeguarding measures across all organisational activities and processes. Reporting systems must be available to anyone who wants to report a concern, especially children.

Who does the standard apply to? These standards are voluntary for any organisation but are especially relevant to organisations whose work involves, or impacts on, children.

2019 Development Assistance Committee⁴ Recommendation on Ending Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance⁵

Why does the document exist? Governments that provide funding for development and humanitarian work wanted to standardise their work to prevent and respond to SEAH.

What does the document cover? It prioritises the rights, needs and wants of survivors and victims of SEAH. Organisations that receive funding must have a policy and code of conduct in place that addresses SEAH. Confidential and anonymous reporting systems must be available for anyone who wants to make a report. This includes staff members and community members. Organisations should keep a record of the safeguarding measures they implement. This allows them to keep track of their achievements and think about what to improve on.

The document itself recognises “*the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s Principles and Minimum Operating Standards on Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (MOS-PSEA), and the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS), as essential international standards*”. Therefore, the DAC Recommendation is not creating a new standard, but focuses on donors’ application of the IASC and CHS standards.

Who does the document apply to? Governments who are members of the Development Assistance Committee and any organisation who works with them should ensure their SEAH work is guided by it. Governments and organisations who are not members of the Development Assistance Committee are also encouraged to ‘adhere’ to the document and several United Nations organisations have done so.

To apply the standards and international instruments listed above, refer to the [RSH How-to Note on applying SEAH sector standards](#).

³ <https://www.keepingchildrensafe.global/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/KCS-CS-Standards-ENG-200218.pdf>

⁴ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an international organisation that works with governments, policy-makers and citizens to develop policies and international standards that promote equality and opportunities for all. The OECD has the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) that brings together some of the world’s largest providers of development assistance to monitor how funds are used, develop standards and monitor members’ work on development assistance. There are currently 30 DAC members. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/development-assistance-committee/>

⁵ [http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=DCD/DAC\(2019\)31/FINAL&docLanguage=En](http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=DCD/DAC(2019)31/FINAL&docLanguage=En)