

Statement

PREVENTING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE AND SEXUAL HARASSEMENT AND ABUSE

June 2018

Endorsed by IASC Principals

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR MARK LOWCOCK**

Statement as Chair of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principals met in New York on 31 May. A key part of our discussion focused on how we can collectively strengthen the humanitarian sector's approach to preventing sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual harassment and abuse (SHA).

IASC Principals committed to a vision of a humanitarian eco-system in which people caught up in crises feel safe and respected and can access the assistance they need without fear of exploitation, abuse or harassment by any aid worker. We agreed, as leaders, to role model values and behaviours to promote a culture in which sexual harassment, bullying, and any abuse of authority is never acceptable across the humanitarian sector. We will create working environments in which our staff feel supported, respected and empowered to deliver the help that people caught up in crises want and need. In doing so, we reiterated our zero-tolerance policy towards SEA and SHA and agreed on the need to take concrete steps to strengthen some of our collective systems, processes and capacities to make this vision a reality for the humanitarian community.

IASC Principals recognized that SEA and SHA are a symptom of power imbalances which have allowed a culture of impunity to take root in some places. This power imbalance exists between aid workers and the vulnerable people that we seek to assist, as well as, sometimes, between men and women working within humanitarian agencies.

We therefore committed to take actions to address the root causes of the problem and eradicate the culture of impunity. We will urgently accelerate work to strengthen the accountability of the aid community to the people we are trying to help. We will be even more pro-active in improving gender parity in staffing in all our organizations, especially at the most senior levels, while recognizing that abuse and harassment affects both men and women. We are also committed to strengthening the accountability and internal justice mechanisms of each of our organizations.

Individual IASC organizations have each taken important actions in recent months in this regard. We agreed that to bolster these individual efforts, there was value in collective, sector-wide action by the IASC members in some specific areas.

IASC Principals welcomed the structured and systematic sharing of good practices on how individual IASC agencies prevent, investigate and respond to SEA and SHA. A compendium of good practices has been produced to facilitate learning among IASC members on how to most effectively meet some of these challenges. The compendium highlights good examples of standards and policies; effective means to communicate these standards to our staff; robust systems through which staff can raise concerns; sufficient investigatory capacities; approaches to sanctioning staff who have transgressed; and ways to share information across the sector on staff that have transgressed.

In addition to sharing good practices, IASC Principals agreed to implement a shared approach to two specific issues: improving our sector-wide referencing system and strengthening investigations capacity.

On referencing, we agreed that a priority was to find more effective ways to stop transgressors from moving through the humanitarian system. We each therefore committed to integrate self-certification, screening questions, consent provisions and the verification of references into our respective recruitment processes. This will allow better sharing of available information within the sector, and make it easier to deal appropriately with transgressors.

In practice, this means that candidates being considered for employment with any IASC agency will have to complete a self-declaration during the recruitment process as to whether there had been any prior issues of sexual or other misconduct, and the circumstances of termination of past employment. Any false, inaccurate or incomplete information would be grounds for disciplinary action, if discovered. Furthermore, when providing references from former employers, candidates will be asked to expressly agree on the disclosure of specific information about issues of sexual or other misconduct and the circumstances of termination of employment by the referenced human resources department. Failure to agree to the disclosure of information could lead to their withdrawal from the recruitment process. We also committed to collaborate on the establishment of collective databases, where possible. Each organization will work out how to implement these commitments independently, taking into account their own governance and accountability frameworks.

On investigations, we recognized that too many victims of SEA and SHA lack confidence that a reported incident will be investigated quickly or competently. Many IASC entities have already taken important steps to bolster their capacity to investigate allegations. However, several require additional resources to conduct investigations. We therefore agreed to establish a \$1 million fund, financed and managed by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), to provide rapid grants to IASC entities to support investigations into SEA and SHA allegations, as required. We also committed to convene a meeting later this year of the heads of the investigatory bodies for all IASC members to discuss the challenges in this area, how we can plug gaps and further strengthen investigatory capacities across the humanitarian sector.

In addition to immediate collective action on these two issues, we committed to continued visible leadership from each of us to address these issues. We recognized the importance of setting an ambitious forward agenda of action to build on our agreements on 31 May.

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In doing all this, IASC Principals are committed to ensuring a victim-centred approach to addressing SEA and SHA. We agreed that this required robust systems, sufficient capacities, and resources to ensure victims of SEA and SHA are provided the support, services and remedies to which they are entitled. We will continue to closely coordinate our efforts with Jane Connors, the Secretary-General's system-wide Victims' Rights Advocate. And we will continue to actively advocate for additional financing for the Secretary-General's Trust Fund to Support Victims of SEA.

IASC Principals expressed their sincere appreciation for the work of William Lacy Swing, Director General of the International Organization for Migration, for his work as PSEA Champion since 2011. We also thanked Kate Gilmore and Lindsay Coates for their work as Co-Champions for tackling SHA of aid workers. They have all played a pivotal role in maintaining the IASC focus on these issues and proposing practical ways forward to address the challenges we face.

As Bill, Lindsay and Kate have announced their intention to step down from their respective roles, we are delighted that Henrietta Fore, Executive Director of UNICEF, has agreed to take over the role of IASC Principals' Champion on SEA and SHA for the next year. She will bring a wealth of experience, energy and ideas to help us make further progress on these issues. She will be succeeded by Filippo Grandi, United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees, in June 2019, and he will continue Henrietta's work and ensure that we have sustained senior attention on these issues.

IASC Principals will meet again on 29 November 2018. We agreed that SEA and SHA would remain a standing item on the IASC Principals agenda until further notice.

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