

## Addressing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse within the Humanitarian Community in Haiti

### Statement by the InterAction Sub-Working Group on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

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Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) of beneficiaries by humanitarian workers is an important consideration in any humanitarian setting worldwide. Following the earthquake in Haiti, the ensuing social disruption and the desperation of the people as they sought to meet their basic needs illustrated why effective accountability to beneficiaries is a critical aspect of the humanitarian mandate. Effective accountability also means making prevention of and response to SEA a top priority for all agencies.

#### **SEA response in Haiti**

Addressing SEA in a focused fashion was slow to happen in Haiti. Due to long presences in Haiti, entities such as the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) had already set up SEA response mechanisms, such as the Unit for Conduct and Discipline, prior to the earthquake. The Executive Committees on Humanitarian Affairs and Peace and Security (ECHA/ECPS) UN and NGO Task Force for the Protection from SEA quickly formulated and distributed materials to raise awareness of key SEA prevention messages. However, uneven responses by different agencies and a lack of coordination among agencies have resulted in beneficiaries receiving inconsistent messaging about SEA and not having a clear system for reporting SEA. The current piecemeal reporting systems place the burden of identifying SEA and reporting it to the appropriate agency on the beneficiary.

#### **InterAction member response**

Since its inception in 2006, the InterAction SEA Sub-Working Group has been working with members to strengthen their institutional responses to SEA. Due to the attention paid to this issue, many NGO members working in Haiti, prior to the earthquake, already had SEA prevention and response systems in place, and many of those who began work after the earthquake arrived with institutional systems embedded into their organizational operations. The scale of the Haiti response reinforced the belief that SEA systems must be in place prior to the onset of a humanitarian emergency.

Additionally, many NGOs, as part of their programmatic operations, have services for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) that can be accessed, as needed, in instances of SEA. Also, policing and judicial reform initiatives have been undertaken by NGOs to reduce impunity in regard to GBV and SEA. NGO capacity and

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experience in protecting beneficiaries can contribute to promoting a robust focus on addressing SEA in the humanitarian response.

Beyond the immediate response, NGOs' initiatives to set up community-based systems for addressing SEA can have the added beneficial effect of providing a working model of how community confidence can be built in accountable systems. In a country where mistrust of government has long plagued community development, a methodology illustrating trust relationships, where the population feels their concerns are heard and handled adequately, is a useful, sustainable tool. As active participants in the system to address SEA, the community develops an understanding of how such a system works, acquires knowledge of their rights, and has an opportunity to exercise and demand these rights. Thus, NGOs' work in addressing SEA hand in hand with the community has positive implications for longer term community development and capacity building.

### **Recommendations for strengthening SEA response**

The Haiti context has proven to be one ripe for lessons learned about effective ways to handle SEA. InterAction's SEA Sub-Working Group offers the following recommendations. While all of these recommendations are critical for consideration in the next large humanitarian emergency, Haiti will continue to need a sustained humanitarian response; thus, all of these are applicable immediately.

#### *Coordination/National-Level Monitoring*

- **A fully funded, staffed, and resourced coordination cell must be set up at the outset of an emergency to oversee the aspects of SEA coordination that require participation by multiple actors.** Donors need to fund cluster coordination as it pertains to SEA for the long term, in order to ensure ongoing coordination and monitoring. The coordination function would include setting up systems to ensure inter-agency cooperation in SEA complaints handling; ensuring that beneficiary messaging is consistent and reaches all beneficiaries; monitoring the complaints systems; acting in a liaison capacity with key actors, such as relevant government ministries, local NGOs, police, and the judicial system; providing education to government partners on government responsibilities for the protection of its own citizens from SEA and its responsibility toward enforcing proper conduct of government employees. At present, an SEA Coordinator has been deployed to Haiti under the auspices of OCHA, which is a positive step in recognizing the necessity of having staff dedicated exclusively to this task.

Another positive step taken by the international community (specifically the ECHA/ECPS UN and NGO Task Force for the Protection from SEA) has been the development and distribution of quality materials on SEA. The coordination cell can help ensure wider distribution for such materials that already exist and help fill newly identified needs for information, including proper translations of relevant documents.

- **SEA needs to be its own sub-cluster under the Protection Cluster, to be activated immediately at the outset of an emergency with full staffing, funding, and resources, as noted above.** The biggest challenge in regard to SEA in the Haiti response has been the lack of a home for the responsibility for coordinating an SEA system. In light of the absence of leadership, action was slow to be undertaken during the early stages of the disaster response—and then only by individuals participating in groups such as the GBV and Child Protection sub-clusters, due to their own interests in the subject of SEA. Surge capacity in SEA coordination should be built so that in future humanitarian emergencies, SEA coordination will be an activity launched at the beginning of a response.
- **The geographic reach of SEA coordination mechanisms must be the entire country.** In order to effectively ensure consistent systems, the SEA coordination cell must have adequate resources to ensure that proper systems are set up outside of the capital.

- **The systems developed during the emergency/humanitarian response phase should continue to be in place as agencies move into the early-recovery and development phase.** Addressing SEA should remain a critical continuing element of the re-development strategy, increasing the need to continue to coordinate with new development actors who may not be as familiar with SEA systems.

#### *Communications/Messaging*

- **SEA prevention messages need to be strongly communicated among all humanitarian workers.** All humanitarian workers, regardless of whether they are international or local staff, should be aware that there is zero tolerance for SEA. At the least, all humanitarian workers should understand and sign a code of conduct prohibiting SEA. Rapid scale-up and hiring during an emergency phase is not an excuse to neglect proper induction of staff on SEA. On the contrary, it is the most important time.  
The messages developed and communication strategies targeting humanitarian workers need to engage those outside the capital, to ensure a seamless protection system is in place.
- **Beneficiaries should receive a consistent message regarding their right to services and assistance free from SEA.** All NGOs – whether humanitarian workers, development actors, local or international staff – need to convey the same message to beneficiary community members about the right to be free from SEA. Messages need to be available in all languages and, for those who are not literate, should be available in audio and other media. Special attention should be given to those already vulnerable (e.g., people with disabilities, the elderly, women-headed households, children, etc.), as their vulnerability increases their risk of SEA.

While SEA often comes to light in the emergency phase, it is not just an emergency issue. The systems put in place as development continues will build confidence in the process on the part of the people in Haiti, while demonstrating accountability of their humanitarian partners.