



Guidance Note

HOW TO COMMUNICATE SAFEGUARDING AND PSEA MESSAGES TO COMMUNITIES DURING COVID-19

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Acronyms:

- **PSEA** – Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
- **SEA** – Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

1. INTRODUCTION: Why is safeguarding messaging important during COVID-19

During emergency responses, it is imperative that aid agencies communicate PSEA messaging to the communities where they are implementing programmes. Ensuring that everyone (men, women, boys, and girls) know what behaviours they should and should not expect of aid workers – and that aid is always free and should never be given in exchange for financial or sexual gain – is key to PSEA and effective safeguarding. However, getting the message to communities in a **safe, appropriate, and effective** way can be challenging, not least when safety and security restrictions are put in place.

“No person – child or adult – should come to harm as a result of their engagement with a humanitarian organisation or programme”

No person – child or adult – should come to harm as a result of their engagement with a humanitarian organisation or programme. We must ensure *and communicate* to communities at every appropriate opportunity that the aid sector operates a zero-tolerance approach to any form of abuse, harm, exploitation, or neglect perpetrated by those who have a responsibility to keep children and adults safe.

We know that in emergency situations it is likely that harm, exploitation, neglect, and abuse will increase. Humanitarian crises exacerbate the unequal power dynamic between those in receipt of, and those with access to, aid. Opportunities to abuse therefore also increase.

Pandemics such as COVID-19 present more opportunities for exploitation and abuse. As the need for aid increases, with supply of and access to aid decreasing simultaneously, these unequal power dynamics are exacerbated further. Concurrently, due to the restrictions placed on movement, domestic violence, intimate partner, and gender-based violence are also likely to increase. This can be heightened as school closures occur, and household stressors increase – such as job losses, economic burden, and caring responsibilities (which surge, especially for women and adolescent girls). Children and adults with disabilities are at an increased risk of being harmed, abused, or exploited due to perceived power dynamics and their reduced opportunity to report concerns, when compared with their non-disabled peers. Humanitarian workers should be mindful of the increased risk to certain groups, know what signs of abuse to look for and champion the rights of at-risk groups in all settings, especially high-risk ones. Furthermore, if parents / carers are forced to self-isolate or are hospitalised, the risk of exploitation for children will increase. For some, this will result in them resorting to negative coping mechanisms such as early marriage, forced labour, trafficking and sex work.

Given the high-risk environment presented by a humanitarian emergency, and the associated increase in opportunities for exploitation and abuse, it is vital that we ensure we are doubling-down on our safeguarding and PSEA messaging within communities – to more effectively prevent harm, and hold perpetrators to account for their actions.

The aim of this guidance is to support practitioners working with at-risk communities, providing advice on how to safely and appropriately communicate PSEA and safeguarding messages, including examples of best practice.

2. CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CREATING MESSAGING

DO:

- Always **consult the community**, and ensure this builds on what they have found works and learns from previous challenges
- Where it is possible and safe to do so, **reinforce / support existing mechanisms** for communication
- If present, **speak to the GBV and Protection clusters** for consistent messaging and existing reporting mechanisms
- Ensure you have **mapped out and tested reporting mechanisms** – if there is a community hotline for reporting abuse and exploitation, use this
- Always give details on how to report abuse – make sure these are **accessible, functioning, and safe** to use
- Ensure that **reporting mechanisms are located in safe spaces** – there needs to be privacy, confidentiality, and safety. Use sensitive language and appropriate images – where possible use cartoons / artist impressions
- Ensure the **language** in the communication is inclusive, and survivor centred
- Ensure you check any **unintended outcomes** of the communication, and mitigate against any risks

DO NOT:

- Create messages without consulting the community and the audience** for whom the message is intended
- Use overly explicit language** that could cause harm
- Use inappropriate and irrelevant images**
- Use identifiable images of survivors** (or any individuals who may be assumed to be survivors) – this can put them at extreme risk of retaliation
- Have reporting mechanisms in places which will **compromise confidentiality**

GUIDANCE IN DETAIL: Key Considerations

TRANSLATION

‘Safeguarding’ does not always translate in the communities in which we work. It is therefore vital that you speak to local and national colleagues to ensure that you use the most appropriate words/language and that any translation is understood. There is a risk that this translation is lost even further when using sign language interpreters to convey messages.

CONTEXTUALISED

Ensure that you are speaking with communities, as they may have their own ways to describe harm, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. They may use **signs, symbols or expressions** which suggest they are concerned. Your messaging should therefore reflect this.

ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE

All your messaging must be accessible. Consider how those who are **illiterate** or live in communities where written communication is not the main form of communicating, or those living with **disabilities**, can access your messages on the prevention of / response to safeguarding risks and exploitation. When designing a **communication plan**, ensure you have representatives from a range of demographics to help design the plan

LOCATION

Think about where you are displaying your safeguarding messages and who has access to them. Displaying posters in toilets, communal kitchens, at all your project sites and in community centres will help to ensure that everyone sees them. Place your posters in a **range of locations and at a range of heights**, so that all people can read them in a **safe place**.

MULTIPLE PLATFORMS

To ensure that you are reaching as many people as possible, you should incorporate safeguarding messaging into as many relevant platforms as you can. These include **posters, radio shows, videos, online platforms (such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook), books and pictures**. Online platforms should only be used if a comprehensive risk assessment has been conducted to ensure that you are not putting any one at risk of harm. You must also ensure that there is a built in or established reporting mechanism when using digital platforms/ if all contact is remote – this includes informing users at the start of any digital programme delivery how to report concerns. Be aware that not everyone who you are communicating with will be literate, so including images / drawings to aid understanding is crucial.

Radio shows can be a very effective way of messaging communities – they have a wide coverage and listening to the radio is often universal, so access and reach is maximised. You also do not have to be literate in order to understand the messaging. Be aware, that those people living with **hearing impairments** will not be able to access radio messages. It is important to tailor the communication and ensure that your programme is aired at the most **appropriate time of the day**, when it is likely to be heard by your target audience (E.g. when they do not have to leave the house to fetch water, when children are at school and/or prayer time).

COMMUNITY-LED

In areas where there is limited or no access to technology, you will need to **utilise / reinforce existing platforms and mechanisms** within the community. Be proactive and transparent with your messaging! To do this effectively and safely, you must **map out the current norms and values** in order to understand who can access those groups you want to share your message with (those within the community who are respected and listened to e.g. community elders, religious leaders, teachers, health care professionals), and who can safely travel to deliver the messages. **Work with communities to ensure nobody is left behind.**

Knowing how communities move is particularly important to ensure that messages can go from village to village / group-to-group in a 'normal' way, so you are able to capitalise on this to get your communication out there. Once you are aware of the platforms and person(s) to use, you can then **support local committees, groups, and people** in communicating your messages, and establish focal persons and committees who can **raise awareness and give feedback on your behalf**. Make sure you always consider the **safety** of those delivering the message – if it is known that they are reporting on other community members, you could be putting them at risk of harm and retaliation. Likewise, you must ensure that you are not overburdening individuals with additional tasks, and that you have the required resources in place to respond to any safeguarding concerns.

“Make sure you always consider the safety of those delivering the message – if it is known that they are reporting on other community members, you could be putting them at risk of harm and retaliation.”

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Safeguarding can be a complicated topic to explain, as well as being a sensitive subject. It is also a relatively new concept; thus, it is very important that you **keep your messaging clear, concise, and simple**. There are five key concepts which you should aim to convey with every type of message

- **Aid is *always* free** and should never be given in exchange for anything, this includes sexual and financial gain
- **Children are often at higher risk** of exploitation and abuse during emergencies due to their age and vulnerability

- **Where to report concerns** (always give details of reporting mechanisms available e.g. contact number / email of Safeguarding / PSEA focal points)
- **To whom to report these** (Give the details of your designed focal point)
- **You will be listened to**, the aid agency will respond to your concern, and provide support to people who have experienced harm

CONSULT WITH CLUSTERS

If you are including COVID-19 messaging, ensure that any **guidance / comms have been written in coordination with national health actors and/or Health Clusters**. You should also consult with **PSEA / GBV clusters** to ensure that the messaging is consistent, contextualised, and up to date.

IMAGES

It is really important that you **include images (cartoons / drawings / avatars etc)** in your messaging to communities; this will help those who are **illiterate and young children** to understand. **Ensure that everyone is represented** in picture form – children, women, men, the elderly, persons with disabilities etc – so that the entire community can relate. **Avoid using photographs of people** in posters as this can imply that those depicted are survivors of SEA, and can put the individual at risk of harm, retaliation, and stigma.

If you are creating posters with visual examples of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, neglect and exploitation), it is important to **avoid reinforcing stereotypes**. For example, if you are showing a visual depiction of sexual abuse, do not always depict a male perpetrator and a female victim / survivor. You should, where possible, use gender-neutral avatars. Consider the ethnicity of the avatars – you want them to be **relatable to the community**. Lastly, if you are naming the avatars in communication materials, choose names which are context relevant.

SENSITIVE & CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE

It is rare that sexual exploitation and abuse is openly discussed in communities; it is intimately **associated with shame, stigma, and fear of reprisal** if a person discloses abuse. Thus, it is vital that **language is context-sensitive, and the images used are appropriate**. Being overly explicit in with your language and/or images has the potential to cause distress both to those viewing the materials and survivors.

PURPOSE

Ensure that your **messaging aligns with your programmes and is fit-for-purpose**. If your programmes are online, you will need to include **online safety** in your messages so that children, adults, parents / carers are able to keep themselves and others safe. Equally, if you are working on food and/ or non-food item distributions consider delivering your messaging within the food package / NFI kit, or whilst people are queuing.

“If you are working on food and/ or non-food item distributions consider delivering your messaging within the food package / NFI kit, or whilst people are queuing”

CREATION

Ask children to design posters. Work with your child safeguarding / child protection teams to design participatory sessions for different groups in the community to design their own materials. They are the best place to create something which their peers will understand.

Work with your MEAL team and protection colleagues to consult community groups (for example women’s groups) to **co-create your messages** for the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. If you are working in an emergency and you have **pre-prepared messages, consult with focus groups** to ensure that they can be comprehended by the community, that the language is appropriate, and that images are culturally sensitive.

4. EXAMPLES OF PSEA MESSAGING

KEY MESSAGES FOR ADULTS / STAFF

All aid is free - aid should not be given in exchange for sexual favours, economic or political gain

Humanitarian organisations and their staff must work to the **principles of humanity, impartiality, dignity for all and respect**. If you feel that you have been harmed or discriminated against due to your gender, ethnicity, religion, age or political affiliations, or someone working for an humanitarian organisation has asked you to do something that was inappropriate in return for services, please report this [insert reporting mechanisms].

If you have a concern about the **welfare of a child, or the conduct of an aid worker** you should report to [insert reporting mechanisms] – you may be the only person speaking out, and the only person who can help keep the child safe’

All persons regardless of age, gender, religion, ethnicity etc have the right to be safe from harm and abuse. If you are concerned about a child, or a member of your community then you should report to [insert reporting mechanisms].

All persons regardless of age, gender, religion ethnicity etc has the **right to say how humanitarian assistance is provided** – your views are needed in order to ensure that organisations are responding with the good and services you need. This included locations of services, distributions, child friendly spaces etc. Please make your views known to [insert reporting mechanisms].

All humanitarian organisations must endeavour to provide **appropriate, safe assistance to all, with dignity and respect** shown to those they are working with. If you have any concerns about the delivery of aid in your community or the behaviour of humanitarian organisation staff, you should report to [insert reporting mechanisms].

You have the right to complain and to report any inappropriate behaviour, exploitation, or abuse by a humanitarian worker. A complaints system has been set up at [insert reporting mechanisms]. Contact [insert reporting mechanisms] for further support and advice about this. All complaints are kept **confidential** and no harm will come to you for reporting the issue.

KEY MESSAGES FOR ADOLESCENTS / SIMPLIFIED MESSAGES FOR THE COMMUNITY ON SAFEGUARDING / PSEA

Aid is *always* free. Aid workers should never ask you to give them anything, or to do anything, in return for their help.

Aid workers must always treat you fairly and kindly, with dignity and respect, no matter who you are. If an aid worker has hurt you or upset you or asked you for anything in return for their help, you must report this straight away to [insert reporting mechanisms].

If you are worried about the **wellbeing or safety of a child** or have seen or heard of an **aid worker acting improperly**, you must report this to [insert reporting mechanisms]. You may be the only person with this information, and the only one who can help keep the child safe.

Every person - no matter who you are, how old you are, where you come from, or what your beliefs are - has the **right to be safe from harm and abuse**. If you are worried about the wellbeing of a child or someone you know/know of, you must report this to [insert reporting mechanisms].

Everyone of all ages - no matter who you are, where you come from, or what your beliefs are - can **give their opinion on any aid or help they receive and how it is carried out**. Your views help organisations/us to improve and make sure they/we provide the right goods and services (for your community).

All aid organisations must provide help/support safely and properly to every person they work with, treating them with dignity and respect. If you are worried about how aid work

is being carried out in your community, or how an aid worker is behaving, you must report this to [insert reporting mechanisms].

We will listen to you- you have the right to report an aid worker if they harm or upset you in any way. The way to do this is [insert reporting mechanisms], and please speak to [insert reporting mechanisms]. if you would like any advice or support. Any report/complaint you make will be kept **completely private**, and you will not be at risk by reporting someone. Your safety is our priority!

We will respond, listen, and act on what you tell us – we will always investigate any abuse that you report to us and make sure that those who are harming you are held to account. We will tell you as much as it is safe to share and keep you informed when we can of the process.

KEY MESSAGES FOR CHILDREN

We should always treat you with kindness, respect, and dignity – if someone hurts you, makes you feel sad, or touches you in a way that you do not like do not blame yourself. It is not your fault!

Aid is always free! No one has the right to ask you for anything in exchange for the services that XXXX is giving you. This includes food, water, schoolbooks, games – everything! Tell all your friends this too!

Aid workers must never hit you or make you feel upset – they should make you feel happy and safe. Tell your friends this too!

We will always listen to you – tell us if someone who works for us has done something wrong. Keeping you safe is what matters the most to us!

Aid workers should never shout at you, touch you somewhere you don't like, or make you feel sad - if they are hurting you, you should tell us and we will help you!

5. KEY MESSAGES FOR ONLINE SAFETY:

Key Messages for Parents

Talk to your child/ren about online safety and that it is important to stay safe online.

Have **open and honest conversations** with them – ask them if they have discovered anything new or exciting online, or anything which concerned them

Try to **limit screen time** and only let children visit **age appropriate websites**

Explain to your children that it is **not safe to put their personal details online** because people who they do not know may get access to them – if you wouldn't give the information face-to-face, don't put it online.

Avoid posting pictures of your children online to protect their identity

If a member of staff from any organisation contacts you, or your child outside of recognised communication mechanisms or they ask you to do something which makes you feel uncomfortable you should report this in confidence to [insert reporting mechanisms] – they will listen to you and respond to your concern

Key Messages for Children

Now that you cannot go out as much or go to school you will probably be spending more time online playing games and chatting to friends. Your schoolwork might also be online. That is **exciting but there are some dangers too** and we need you to stay safe!

Never give out your personal information or anyone else's that you know online – this includes your full name, your picture and where you live. You should also avoid telling people how old you are.

Talk to your parents / carers about your time online – tell them about all the new things you learnt or found, but also tell them if something made you feel worried or uncomfortable.

Not everyone online is who they say they are - don't make friends with people you don't know. If you're not sure about someone, speak to your parents /carers and they can help you decide.

If you see something that makes you **feel sad, worried, or uncomfortable leave the webpage or the WhatsApp group and tell a trusted adult** straight away.

If a member of staff from [insert organisation] makes you **feel sad or asks you to do something that makes you feel uncomfortable like sending a picture, or talking to you outside your class group, tell your parents / carer** or [insert reporting mechanisms]– they will help to keep you safe.

Tell your friends about staying safe online! You can be the champion of online safety!

6. COVID-19 & SEA: Examples of Messages

COVID-19 impacts all our lives. Because of the social distancing measures, **we may no longer have access to adults we trust, or safe places to go**. If you are concerned that a member of your community is at risk of harm you should contact [insert reporting mechanisms].

Masks, gloves, soap, and alcohol gel might be distributed to you by an aid worker to protect you from COVID. **These are free** and must never be in return for sexual or financial

gain. If someone is asking you to do something in return for these items, you should report this to [insert reporting mechanisms].

We are all spending more time online - talking with friends, working or for school. If you see something that upsets you or someone asks you to do something you do not want to do, you should report this to [insert reporting mechanisms].

We all need to keep each other safe and try to stop the spread of COVID-19 – if/when you come into contact with others, make sure you are 2 metres apart, you avoid touching each other, and you cough into your elbow.

7. EXAMPLES OF APPROPRIATE IMAGES

ADULTS MUST NEVER HURT YOU



NO EXPLOITATION



NO NEGLECT



NO PHYSICAL ABUSE



NO EMOTIONAL ABUSE



NO SEXUAL ABUSE

8. GUIDANCE DOCUMENTS / FURTHER READING:

- [UNICEF, COVID-19 and its implications for keeping children safe online, April 2020](#)
- [IDDC Consortium, COVID-19 and Inclusive Safeguarding](#)
- [Interim Technical Note: Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse \(PSEA\) during COVID-19 Response](#)