WHO initiates action on IC Report recommendations

On 28th September 2021 the Independent Commission tasked with investigating allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse during the 10th Ebola outbreak in the Democratic republic of Congo released its findings. WHO Director General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus apologized to the victims and survivors who suffered such egregious abuse and thanked them for their courage in coming forward. Because of this, perpetrators can be brought to account, negligence and failures of the current system can be recognized and the work to address them as quickly and effectively as possible can start, he stated.

Despite the challenges during the response to the 10th Ebola Outbreak in DRC and recognizing the commitment by the majority of the staff and collaborators to stop it, this is no excuse for SEA of the communities WHO serves, and no excuse for managerial inaction and delay.

The IC made 8 recommendations and 20 concrete activities in its report. In response WHO will:
1. Support, protection and justice for the victims and survivors - including ramping up victim services in Democratic Republic of the Congo and globally to shift to a victim and survivor-centred approach that takes into account their needs, preferences and participation;
2. Address management and staff failures to take action on SEA; and
3. Wholesale reform of WHO's structures and culture to address SEA.

“This is not business as usual. SEA is everybody's business.”
#stopSEAH
#LearningSavesLives
webinar series launched

Joining forces across agencies can power our efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse. On 15 September 2021, WHO launched its first #stopSEA webinar “Protecting communities from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA): are we doing enough?”. With a total of 700 participants from around the world, the webinar brought together experts from the UN system and the IASC to explore progress and challenges that humanitarian and emergency response agencies face in combatting SEAH.

Wendy Cue, senior PSEA manager from the IASC, identified coherence, credibility, and capacity at the IASC level as challenge areas. Coherence issues are addressed by the Six Core Principles and credibility is about upholding the standards when victims are referred. She highlighted that dedicated capacity is essential to deliver effectively. Dr Ibrahima Soce Fall, WHO’s Assistant Director General for Emergency Response, pointed out that WHO is often the first agency on the ground in health emergencies. WHO, in its efforts to reinforce prevention, aims to embed PSEA expertise in its operations from the very beginning.

Training and collaboration with partners are core to effective PRSEA work. Mariska de Keersmaecker, PSEA expert from IOM, pointed to the lack of clarity on the role of PSEA focal point and how the Generic Terms of Reference shared at IASC-level can help address this. Domenica Costantini from UNFPA described the championship strategy that they led this year and on the challenges in measuring the progress made on PSEA. Clifford Isabelle, Safeguarding Director, from OXFAM UK talked about the challenges faced at the beginning of their journey to have effective measures in place, especially case management and investigation, survivor-centred approach and addressing barriers to reporting. OXFAM has currently a strong system in place with trained investigators accompanied by a purpose-built system to monitor the flow of information, and a 12 week timeline to complete investigations. The survivor-centred approach is paired with safety and clear procedures to keep victims safe throughout the process of investigation.

Other key ideas included:
- The need to conduct joint SEA risk assessment
- Conduct community consultations to improve knowledge of barrier reporting, community reporting preferences, and perception on SEA
- Explore ways to better pool our resources