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WFP ACTIONS TO PREVENT SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES

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INTRODUCTION

1. At the Executive Board's Annual Session in 2002, the Executive Director addressed allegations of sexual exploitation in West Africa and WFP's zero-tolerance policy towards staff involved in sexual exploitation or other forms of abuse of power against beneficiaries. Senior staff briefed the Board on the Programme's active participation in inter-agency efforts to address the issue in West Africa and to ensure that such abuses involving humanitarian staff did not occur in the future anywhere in the world. The Board expressed support for the zero-tolerance policy and asked the Secretariat to report further on the matter at the Board's Third Regular Session in 2002.

UNITED NATIONS INVESTIGATION

2. In late February 2002, a report commissioned by UNHCR and Save the Children Fund (SCF) United Kingdom drew attention to and raised serious concerns about the problem of sexual exploitation and abuse of women and children in refugee settings in West Africa. That report made a number of grave allegations against staff of humanitarian organizations, including United Nations agencies and the broader non-governmental organization (NGO) and humanitarian community in the region.
3. On the basis of the allegations raised in the report, and upon a direct request from UNHCR, the United Nations Office for Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) immediately started an investigation to establish the degree of abuses that had taken place and to identify the perpetrators. WFP has followed very closely the investigations undertaken by OIOS and has facilitated their work. The Programme is ready to take firm disciplinary action in response to any substantiated allegations concerning WFP staff.
4. At the time this paper was prepared, the results of the OIOS investigation had not yet been presented at the United Nations General Assembly. However, WFP has been informed that OIOS has found no evidence that a WFP staff member has been involved in sexual exploitation or abuse of beneficiaries. Overall, the investigation did not find the widespread level of sexual exploitation as had been indicated by the initial UNHCR/SCF-commissioned report.

INITIAL WFP RESPONSE

5. When the UNHCR/SCF-commissioned report was released, WFP took immediate action, condemning all forms of abuse and violence against beneficiary populations anywhere in the world. Given the gravity of the allegations, WFP launched a number of initiatives to improve the protection of beneficiaries and to prevent future misuse of humanitarian food resources. The zero-tolerance policy was communicated to all offices and staff. WFP also became an active participant in all inter-agency fora and initiatives



addressing the problem, such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee¹ (IASC) Task Force on the Prevention from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises.

6. In West Africa, specifically, WFP implemented the following measures promptly after the release of the UNHCR/SCF report:
 - a) All WFP staff at country office and sub-office levels were called together to review the summary findings of the report. The United Nations Code of Conduct and issues related to abuse of power and sexual harassment were reviewed and discussed with staff.
 - b) WFP reviewed the gender composition of food monitoring and implementation staff, acting on the premise that the likelihood of sexual abuse is reduced when the proportion of female food monitors is increased. These efforts are consistent with WFP's Gender Policy, which strives to reach equal representation of men and women on its staff.
 - c) The number of international staff working on monitoring and other field-based activities was increased in an effort to enhance the supervisory capacity of locally recruited staff. Additionally, and as appropriate, some national staff were reassigned to other locations, to further strengthen objectivity in food distribution and monitoring.
 - d) The post-distribution monitoring (PDM) system in refugee camps was strengthened as an important tool for detecting socio-economic factors that may lead to the abuse of power. A number of tripartite agreements, clarifying PDM responsibilities, were signed between WFP, UNHCR and implementing partners.
 - e) Memoranda of Understanding with implementing partners were modified to incorporate language on preventing the abuse of power. Standards of accountability were attached to these agreements.

IASC TASK FORCE

7. Alerted by the West Africa allegations and recognizing the potential risk of sexual exploitation and abuse in any humanitarian crisis, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee promptly established a Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises. The task force was created to outline the specific steps needed to eliminate sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian personnel and the misuse of humanitarian assistance for sexual purposes.
8. The task force was formed in March 2002 as an immediate response to the allegations of sexual exploitation in West Africa, while the OIOS investigation was ongoing. Although the results of the OIOS investigation indicate that the abuse was not as widely spread as originally feared, the allegations highlight the potential risk of exploitation of beneficiaries in any emergency.
9. Coordinated by OCHA and UNICEF, the IASC Task Force involves the broad participation of United Nations agencies and NGOs. WFP has been actively involved in the work of the task force from the very beginning.

¹ The Inter-Agency Standing Committee comprises members (FAO, OCHA, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP, WHO) and standing invitees (International Committee of the Red Cross, International Council of Voluntary Agencies, International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, InterAction, International Organization for Migration, Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response, Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on IDPs, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the World Bank).



10. The task force is not an investigative body, but is focused on ways to strengthen and improve existing systems and mechanisms by reviewing and enhancing:
- codes of conduct for humanitarian workers;
 - capacity for protection from sexual abuse and exploitation; and
 - mechanisms for the delivery of relief assistance.

Sub-groups were formed to focus on each one of these three objectives, with WFP chairing the sub-group on delivery assistance mechanisms.

11. In June 2002 the task force issued a report that identifies a number of factors that put women and children at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation. Additionally, a detailed inter-agency plan of action was developed to reduce the vulnerability of beneficiaries in humanitarian crises and minimize the risk of exploitation and abuse. The plan of action was endorsed by the IASC Working Group in June 2002 and subsequently by the Executive Heads of 16 of the 17 agency members or standing invitees of the IASC.²
12. A report on the implementation of the plan of action will be presented at the November IASC Working Group meeting. A preliminary report was presented at the September meeting of the same forum.
13. The main recommendations of the IASC Task Force have been incorporated in WFP's internal plan of action, and also apply to the Programme's implementing partners.
- a) Code of conduct core principles that specifically relate to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse have been established (see Annex) and will be incorporated in the appropriate codes of conduct, including disciplinary procedures for violations.
 - b) A strategy for dissemination of and training activities on the code of conduct will be developed and implemented for agency staff and the staff of implementing partners.
 - c) Core principles will be pursued with all partners in humanitarian operations, including governments.
 - d) Indicators of vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse will be incorporated into assessment processes and guidelines, and specific guidelines to deal with sexual exploitation and abuse will be issued.
 - e) Benchmarks will be defined to determine the adequacy of staff who are directly responsible for protection and assistance activities, in terms of number and sex. These will be used by all agencies.
 - f) The economic and social empowerment of women and girls will be promoted to reduce their vulnerability to abuse. This will be accomplished by working towards the equal representation of women and men among beneficiary staff, in decision-making structures and in school or training programmes.
 - g) Appropriate measures will be taken to ensure that beneficiaries are informed of the rationale for assistance eligibility criteria, individual entitlements, and distribution venues and schedules.
 - h) Adequate opportunities to educate populations at risk about sexual exploitation and abuse will be ensured. Such education will include information about rights, entitlements and responsibilities, procedures for complaints, and survivor assistance.

² ICRC, a standing invitee, maintains its independence from policy statements issued by the IASC and its subsidiary bodies.



- i) Relevant guidelines and resource materials relating to protection issues will be compiled and disseminated to all agencies, as a basis for understanding areas of responsibility and accountability.
- j) Confidential systems will be established for receiving, directly and indirectly, reports of possible sexual exploitation and abuse. Follow-up and the determination of appropriate redress and support for survivors will be ensured.
- k) The accountability and capacity of senior management to ensure protection against sexual exploitation and abuse will be increased.
- l) Inter-agency field reviews will be carried out to: assess the degree to which specialized staff and programmes contribute to strengthening prevention and response to sexual exploitation and abuse; identify ways of better prioritizing direct distribution of food and non-food items to beneficiaries to minimize the risk of exploitation; establish and understand the relationship between the level and nature of humanitarian assistance and vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse; and provide technical assistance and support for implementation of the plan of action.

WFP PLAN OF ACTION

14. WFP is committed to implementing the recommendations of the IASC Task Force, whose plan of action was promptly distributed to WFP offices through the regional bureaux. An internal WFP plan of action has been developed, specifying the individual activities planned and identifying the individual WFP divisions or offices responsible for coordinating implementation.
15. WFP is already implementing a number of the IASC recommendations, while continuing work on inter-agency and internal initiatives to improve systems, structures and procedures. The initiatives to reduce the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse are most advanced in West Africa, but various initiatives have been started in other regions.
16. In Southern Africa, WFP has been proactive in including checks against sexual exploitation of beneficiaries from the early stages of current emergency operation, including with its partners. Furthermore, WFP and the UNICEF are jointly organizing an awareness and training campaign for theirs and their partners' staff. This training programme could be used as a model for others during the beginning phases of future emergency responses.

CONCLUSION

17. Sexual exploitation and abuse can occur in many different environments; however in humanitarian crises the dependency of affected populations on humanitarian agencies for their basic needs creates a particular responsibility on the part of humanitarian workers. Unequal power relationships provide the basis for sexual exploitation and abuse. The international community must ensure that shortages of assistance, including food, do not become weapons in the hands of abusers. WFP is committed to addressing this problem and will take the steps necessary to do so.



18. In addition, consistent donor support is crucial to avoiding situations that increase the vulnerability of beneficiaries through scarcity of desperately needed humanitarian aid. The resources available to affected populations, and to the humanitarian community that is there to assist them, are frequently insufficient to meet basic needs. Pipeline breaks in food and other relief items can be a contributing factor to an environment conducive to abuse of power.



ANNEX**IASC Core Principles of a Code of Conduct**

Humanitarian agencies have a duty to care for beneficiaries and a responsibility to ensure that beneficiaries are treated with dignity and respect and that certain minimum standards of behaviour are observed. In order to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse, the following core principles must be incorporated into agency codes of conduct:³

- a) Sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian workers constitute acts of gross misconduct and are therefore grounds for termination of employment.
- b) Sexual activity with children (persons under the age of 18) is prohibited regardless of the local age of majority or consent. Mistaken assumption about a child's age is not a defence.
- c) Exchange of money, employment, goods or services for sex, including sexual favours or other forms of humiliating, degrading or exploitative behaviour, is prohibited. This includes exchange of the assistance that is due to beneficiaries.
- d) Sexual relationships between humanitarian workers and beneficiaries are strongly discouraged since they are based on inherently unequal power dynamics. Such relationships undermine the credibility and integrity of humanitarian aid work.
- e) Where a humanitarian worker develops concerns or suspicions regarding sexual abuse or exploitation by a fellow worker, whether in the same agency or not, he/she must report such concerns via established agency reporting mechanisms.
- f) Humanitarian workers are obliged to create and maintain an environment that prevents sexual exploitation and abuse and promotes the implementation of their respective agencies' code of conduct. Managers at all levels have particular responsibilities to support and develop systems that maintain this environment.

³ Different considerations will arise regarding the enforcement of some of these principles for humanitarian workers hired from among the beneficiary community. While sexual exploitation and abuse and the misuse of humanitarian assistance will always be prohibited, discretion may be used in the application of the principles regarding sexual relationships for this category of humanitarian worker.

