



OCTOBER 2019

THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE OF PSEA

Workshop Outcome Report¹



¹ See agenda and objectives for the workshop [here](#).

WHY SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT LANGUAGE AND CULTURE FOR PSEA?

Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) is an endemic problem undermining the ability of humanitarian actors to respond to the needs of communities affected by conflict and natural disasters and one of the many challenges facing organizations in their efforts to prevent and respond to SEA is the linguistic and cultural differences inherent in humanitarian contexts.

As a sector, humanitarians are accustomed to looking at factors such as poverty, gender, age, and disability as common drivers of vulnerability. Yet language and culture are also intertwined with vulnerability. For example, speakers of minority languages often experience multiple layers of disadvantage when they seek information; similarly, cultural biases and practices can inhibit or discourage certain groups from access to education and health care, nutrition, human rights, representation, and technology. Failing to tackle differences in culture and language will certainly exacerbate any existing vulnerability related to SEA, complicating prevention efforts, inhibiting PSEA reporting, access to justice, and appropriate service provisions for survivors of SEA.

“VIOLENT WOMEN”

Because there is no word for ‘gender’ in the Rohingya language, at the beginning of the Rohingya refugee response gender was translated as ‘women,’ and gender-based violence became ‘violent women.’

Many operational NGOs report challenges communicating SEA concepts/principles to field teams and communities. Linguistic and cultural barriers are key dilemmas, with many unresolved questions on how to best navigate a multilingual and multicultural humanitarian crises characterized by complex power dynamics and interests.

NGOs and the wider humanitarian community have not done enough to “get our own house in order” when it comes to clarifying issues of terminology and our own language of PSEA, let alone accounting for and adapting to the linguistic and cultural differences within and across the communities we serve. Each donor (and many UN Agencies and NGOs) has its own policies and procedures, resulting in the use of different terms or different definitions of the same terminology.

“OCEAN”

The acronym ‘SEA’ was translated in Hausa as ‘Teku’ meaning ‘ocean’ or a body of water. This illustrates how important it is to avoid or explain acronyms.

Beyond definitions and translation, the language of PSEA needs to incorporate the voices of affected communities, yet we remain unprepared and unequipped to integrate this insight. NGOs want to come together and provide input, options, and recommendations to various humanitarian actors—including UN agencies, donors, and the wider NGO community—as well as decision-making bodies and

coordination fora, on how we can collectively improve our response to SEA in a way that is more informed by linguistic and cultural awareness and understanding.

CHALLENGES

WE DO NOT COLLECT LANGUAGE DATA OR INVEST IN RESEARCH ON LOCAL CULTURE

It is clear from the research findings of TWB² that we as a community are not informed by data and appropriate analyses of local language and culture when developing and contextualizing PSEA policies and mechanisms. We must increase investment in research and analysis to

better understand the relationship between language and culture and how it impacts the effectiveness of PSEA. Development and humanitarian actors do not routinely collect information on the languages of people they work with. When we record gender, age, and household size, we don’t systematically ask about language and literacy. Organizations that do occasionally collect language data don’t routinely share it.

It is common for contexts of humanitarian crises to be both multilingual and multicultural. Humanitarian actors frequently struggle to communicate with minority language speakers, who are inherently more vulnerable than those who speak the majority language. Many of the countries currently or recurrently facing humanitarian crises are multilingual and have populations who speak languages aside from the

“CENTERS FOR MAD PEOPLE”

‘Mental health’ was translated in Hausa as ‘Hauka’ meaning ‘Madness’ – so Mental Health Centers had signs outside saying ‘centers for mad people’.

² TWB Studies: [Language barriers in the humanitarian response in north-eastern Nigeria](#), [Language matters: Improving accountability and operational effectiveness in northeast Nigeria](#), and [The language lesson: What we've learned about communicating with Rohingya Refugees](#).

official language(s). For example, Nigeria has 550 languages, yet according to an assessment from TWB³ core humanitarian staff speak predominately English, Hausa. Globally 204,413,000 people, speaking almost 5,000 languages are in need in 60 countries experiencing humanitarian crises.⁴ However, the humanitarian community continues to operate primarily in English and sometimes in French and Spanish. The majority of the sector remains unaware of gaps in the prevention and response to SEA resulting from a lack of local language usage. If we do not collect data about the languages people speak, these gaps will persist.

Humanitarian organizations often rely on their national staff to provide insight and expertise on local culture and language. This fails to recognize that the national staff may be from a majority language group and may need to rely on personal experience and networks to provide this information if no data exists. This approach can also reinforce a dominant linguistic and cultural narrative by putting those from the dominant or official language group in positions of power and responsible for framing translations and often sensitive subjects. In addition, organizations often place translation responsibilities on staff who may not be fluent in the local language and who innately have their own biases. If national staff are not adequately attuned to the local culture, they may inadvertently come up against cultural barriers in ways that cause harm to the very people they seek to protect.

Mapping the language and cultural background of staff as it relates to the communities that humanitarian organizations seek to assist is critical. Understanding the linguistic and cultural characteristics of staff better enables organizations to identify the power dynamics between staff and communities. Such power dynamics can influence access and perception of aid. For example, when beneficiaries are of a minority ethnic group, having staff of a dominant ethnic group risks overlooking issues such as appropriate translation or historical grievances/dynamics that can potentially deter or reduce access to services.

³ [Language barriers in the humanitarian response in north-eastern Nigeria, Language matters: Improving accountability and operational effectiveness in northeast Nigeria](#)

⁴ [ACAPS Language Map](#)

WE OFTEN VIEW CAPACITY BUILDING ON PSEA AND ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS CHANGE AS ONE-OFF ACTIVITIES

Discussions throughout the day highlighted that many organizations rely on one-time trainings, sometimes delivered in English or the official national language in a community, to convey PSEA policies including reporting and compliance mechanisms to staff. Many staff, such as drivers and short-term contract workers, sign codes of conduct yet are not provided the comprehensive training or translation into local languages that are needed to fully understand the underlying concepts and expectations of conduct. Policies are often in writing (despite many staff being illiterate), and other methods of conveying the code of conduct rarely exist.

There is little evidence—if any—to prove that staff and communities understand trainings on SEA. As a community, we often do not take linguistic, literacy, or culturally-tailored learning styles into consideration when designing training, awareness, or outreach programs and materials. In fact, available research shows that despite staff reporting they have received training, their comprehension of terms and definitions remain low. This could be a reflection of poor capacity-building methodology, mistranslations of terms, or more systemic issues around cultural norms that make the concepts of SEA difficult to comprehend in certain contexts.

To ensure that the power dynamics inherent in humanitarian aid work are understood, training, and capacity building of staff, partners, and communities need to be ongoing and dynamic. They should also be iterative, interactive, and contextualized for the target audience.

WE DO NOT CONSISTENTLY INVEST ENOUGH TIME TO BUILD TRUST WITH PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS OR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Each organization, from small to large, is often tackling SEA independently, resulting in an uncoordinated and disorganized overall approach. This can be confusing to staff when it comes to reporting, conducting investigations, and understanding their own responsibilities as aid workers as well as to community members who may not know how or to which organization to report their concerns.

Relationships with partners are characterized by strict compliance with donor regulations, emphasis on outputs, and an expectation of extending the reach of larger INGOs. Lack of trust within this transactional relationship does not foster a dynamic that enables thoughtful and collaborative capacity building, including around issues of PSEA. Simply passing down codes of conduct or holding one-off trainings on the basics of PSEA with partners does not result in local partners' increased willingness or capability to implement SEA prevention and response measures. It also does not foster an environment in which local partners feel comfortable reporting, either because they are unsure how to report and respond or because they are worried such reports will result in negative consequences for their organization.

Short program cycles and rapid handover processes to national partners can impede organizations' ability to maintain consistent procedures for PSEA and ensure that partners are prepared to maintain them. Participants reported that these quick handovers can result in a top-down approach which undermines the impact and sustainability of PSEA mechanisms. To build trust between partners and international organizations, donors, and other stakeholders, there needs to be a common appreciation for each actor's added value. Engaging partners to build capacity on PSEA requires more than simply passing down our own policies, but rather truly investing the time and resources to build sustainable and trusting partnerships informed by context-specific language and culture

Humanitarian organizations and PSEA networks working in emergencies often do not prioritize discussions with crisis-affected people to learn about the best reporting mechanisms for them. Nor do they work out how minority language speakers, those with special needs, or those with varying levels of literacy, might engage differently with reporting systems. Learning needs to happen at every level, recognizing that the inclusion of local organizations and communities is necessary for building impactful and sustainable responses to SEA.

A SHARED 'TO-DO' LIST AND OTHER KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To-Do List:

1. Develop agreed upon terminology and definitions
2. Invest in collective humanitarian to humanitarian (H2H) learning and action around SEA informed by linguistic and cultural awareness
3. Continuously hold workshops and learning events to improve understanding of legal frameworks, human resourcing etc.



For the NGO Community

1. Engage different staff and departments to develop and implement policies and programs on PSEA. Increase buy-in and ownership across the entire organization by countering the perception that one department or focal point is responsible or “owns” the issue.
2. Collect, share, and analyze language data to inform decision-making and policy development and **use this data to understand who remains excluded.**
3. Dedicate time to understanding the terminology staff and communities use for concepts around SEA. Find and share the best-understood terms to build consistent messaging. Recognize that this process is iterative and ongoing. Addressing SEA requires constant effort to mitigate risks.
4. Contextualize trainings for local use, informed by research and analysis of language data.
5. Do not rely on one-off training sessions. The language and culture of sexual exploitation and abuse is a complex and uncomfortable issue and people need space for critical reflection and dialogue on a continuous basis.



For Donors

1. Recognize that translations, quality training, culturally- and linguistically-informed policy design and implementation, and continuous capacity building are time-consuming and costly. There should be available resources for this in all program budgets and dedicated funds should be created as common services in humanitarian responses.
2. Donors should use their unique position to bring organizations together by supporting collective efforts to design accessible complaint and feedback mechanisms and PSEA policies including reporting and investigation systems. This should be done in consultation with local organizations and communities. For these mechanisms to be impactful, they must be highly contextualized and linguistically- and culturally- informed and accessible. For example, donors can commit resources to NGO-led initiatives that develop publicly available materials to benefit the collective response to SEA.
3. Fund initiatives to learn from language and culture around PSEA (i.e. disaggregation by language in reporting, language mapping and cultural sensitivity) so it is considered in the design phase of a project.
4. Reinforce messaging that reports of SEA demonstrate accountability and having cases of SEA won't preclude organizations from funding. SEA can only be effectively addressed when it is reported. Measures should be taken against inaction in the face of reporting, not because reports are filed.
5. Donors should include funding for PSEA infrastructure, including core staff and appropriate context-specific research, to ensure culturally- and linguistically- appropriate materials. Donors should understand that preventing and responding to SEA is not a 'one-off' and must be continuous to ensure the necessary paradigm shift.



For UN Agencies

1. Promote longer program cycles to give implementing partners time to build necessary systems informed by an understanding and appreciation of linguistic and cultural differences.
2. Improve systems of localization and ensure decisions and processes for handing over programs are informed by analysis and carried out over a period sufficient to provide necessary capacity building.
3. Be intentional when consulting NGOs and communities on policies and procedures from the outset to build buy-in and ensure a transparent process.
4. Ensure SEA coordinators have standard ToRs that are implemented consistently across country contexts. Strengthen responsibility for leading on language and cultural learning into these ToRs.
5. Harmonize policies and procedures such as reporting mechanisms in-country and across agencies and ensure consistency with partners. Make sure that any mechanisms are accessible to multilingual and multicultural communities.
6. Encourage joint training of UN and NGO staff on PSEA using innovative and participatory training methodologies informed by the local language and culture.
7. Recognize that the value of local organizations, training, and capacity building should not only flow one way or be solely a top-down approach. Although the UN brings global technical expertise, knowledge of local organizations must also be incorporated into country-specific policies.
8. Pass down benefits shared by donors to implementing partners on PSEA best practices and avoid shifting risk to implementing partners.

“SLOW DOWN TO SPEED UP”

The endemic issue of SEA undermines our fundamental responsibilities to prevent and alleviate human suffering. As a global humanitarian community, it is essential to not only invest more financial resources in PSEA, but to also look internally at our organizational and programming structures and systems to holistically address the issue. We should “slow down to speed up,” and avoid rushing into policy and programmatic decisions before properly understanding context-specific challenges of language and culture and use that knowledge to collectively inform our actions and approaches.

We need to shift power dynamics between aid workers and communities and be more inclusive of communities in the design of PSEA measures and policies. The inclusion of marginalized communities and local organizations, such as women’s organizations and youth groups, is vital. This is the only way we can move from a box-checking exercise to a meaningful and impactful response.

We, as a humanitarian community, need to improve our conceptual clarity of SEA before we can properly translate PSEA into different languages and ensure that our messaging/training is culturally appropriate and easily understood. We need leadership from the top to maintain a focus and emphasis on PSEA, but also need to move away from formulaic responses and toward intentionality. This will require organizations to shift PSEA from an activity to an integral part of every program and response, with shared responsibility and accountability across and through the staffing structure and humanitarian architecture.

It is important to recognize that our community has not yet figured out how to effectively prevent and respond to SEA and we need to be intentional in our dialogue and consultations with affected communities to improve our learning around what works. There is significant positive momentum around the issue, and collectively we can improve our response through continued investment in research, analysis, and coordinated action.

ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

On October 10, 2019 InterAction hosted a joint workshop entitled *The Language and Culture of PSEA*, co-facilitated with Translators Without Borders (TWB). A reference group including CRS, Islamic Relief, InterAction and TWB planned and designed the workshop. It aimed to investigate the intersection of current prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) programming and policies with local culture and language. In recognition that the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) is one we must address as a community, the workshop provided a platform for 23 different organizations to come together and share experiences, including challenges and best practices.

The objectives for the workshop were to:

1. Increase shared awareness of the role culture and language have, as interlinked factors on SEA prevention and response.
2. Identify critical measures to ensure SEA prevention and response are continuously informed by perspective and input of communities and staff.
3. Agree on recommendations for UN agencies, donors and the wider NGO community to better communicate PSEA to staff, communities and partners

ABOUT INTERACTION

InterAction is a convener, thought leader, and voice for nearly 200 NGOs working to eliminate extreme poverty, strengthen human rights and citizen participation, safeguard a sustainable planet, promote peace, and ensure dignity for all people.