

How-to note

Assessing and managing SEAH risks while working in informal camp settlements in Pakistan

This how-to note provides a comprehensive guide on assessing and managing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Sexual Harassment (SEAH) risks in informal camp settings in Pakistan during humanitarian and emergency response. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines informal settlements as in which “a group of asylum-seekers, refugees or [internally displaced people] choose to settle in self-identified spontaneous sites. Self-settled settlements can be located on state-owned, private or communal land, with or without negotiations with the local population or private landowners.”

This note outlines practical procedures for practitioners to effectively assess and mitigate potential SEAH risks while strengthening the resilience of camp communities. Designed as a vital resource, it supports those working in temporary informal camp settlements within humanitarian and emergency response contexts. Although tailored to the context of Pakistan, the guidance provided is relevant and adaptable to similar settings, offering valuable insights for safeguarding efforts across diverse environments.

This tool will be useful for:

- Staff (staff and associated staff, including volunteers, representatives, contractors) with safeguarding responsibilities
- Senior level staff with oversight of the risk management process
- Stakeholders
- Programme staff working on any programme area/sector

This how-to note outlines a range of actions for assessing and managing SEAH risks in informal camp settings. Recognising that humanitarian emergencies often involve urgency and limited resources, organisations are encouraged to adapt and select the actions most suitable to the specific context and circumstances they are responding to.

Informal camp settlements in Pakistan

Pakistan, being one of the countries frequently affected by natural disasters, faces considerable challenges in managing informal camp settlements during such crises. This issue became particularly critical following the catastrophic floods of 2022, which, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA), impacted

approximately 33 million people, with 20.6 million requiring urgent assistance. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) reported that over 2.2 million houses were damaged or destroyed, displacing millions, and the majority of those ends up in informal camps for an average of 1 to 6 months.



The informal camps often lack proper governance, essential services and security, creating an environment that exacerbates vulnerabilities, particularly for women, children and marginalised groups. Such conditions significantly heighten the risks of SEAH. The scale of the disaster, as underscored by UN-OCHA and NDMA, highlights the pressing need for robust safeguarding measures and proactive strategies to better protect and support affected populations in the future.

Some reasons for communities living in informal camps during natural disasters in Pakistan:

- **Proximity to land:** People prefer staying near their land to protect property and resume livelihoods.
- **Community ties:** Cultural norms encourage staying with tribal or village communities for comfort and security.
- **Livestock dependency:** Informal camps accommodate livestock, crucial for rural livelihoods.
- **Limited access to formal camps:** Formal camps may be overcrowded, far away or unavailable.
- **Distrust in formal camps:** Concerns about safety, cultural sensitivity and mixed-gender environments due to limited space.
- **Resistance to urban displacement:** Rural populations avoid urban settings to maintain their family values and identity.
- **Social and faith-based norms:** Preference for gender-segregated and their own family- and community-oriented living arrangements.

What is SEAH?

Sexual Exploitation is defined as any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power or trust for sexual purposes, including profiting from the Sexual Exploitation of others, often involving beneficiaries or those relying on support. Sexual Abuse refers to the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions, including acts such as sexual assault or non-consensual sexual contact. Sexual Harassment includes unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, typically directed toward colleagues, employees or peers within an organisational or workplace setting. Collectively, these definitions highlight the critical need for organisations, especially those in humanitarian and development sectors, to implement strong safeguarding measures to promote safe, respectful and accountable environments.

SEAH risks in informal camps

SEAH risks are often higher in informal camps than in formal ones due to the lack of structured oversight, secure infrastructure or established protections. Informal camps typically do not have organised management, leading to unregulated access to services and creating dependency on those in control, which can be exploited. Privacy is minimal, with limited or unsafe gender-segregated toilets and poor lighting, increasing vulnerability. Reporting mechanisms are often absent, making it hard for survivors to seek help or for offenders to be held accountable. Additionally, multiple actors without set standards increase SEAH risks, making informal camps less safe overall.

The table below outlines common risks and challenges encountered in informal camp settings that can heighten SEAH risks, along with practical suggestions for organisations to work more effectively in these contexts.

Challenges in informal camp settlements	Suggested actions for the organisations working to support the camps
Lack of formal governance structures	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify and engage community leaders to establish some level of governance within the camp. 2. Assign clear roles and responsibilities for safeguarding among community leaders and staff. 3. Regularly communicate with informal camp leadership to reinforce safeguarding standards and expectations.
Rapid population fluxes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Monitor population changes and assess how new arrivals may increase SEAH risks. 2. Implement flexible safeguarding mechanisms that adapt to fluctuating populations. 3. Engage community members in managing and mitigating SEAH risks as populations shift.
Security concerns	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assess the security situation in and around the camp. 2. Work with relevant professionals or organisations to create safer environments, such as installing lighting and securing camp perimeters. 3. Implement safety protocols for staff and residents and establish clear reporting lines for security breaches.
Social and cultural barriers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pay special attention to cultural sensitivities to understand barriers to SEAH reporting and prevention. 2. Engage with community leaders and respected figures to address cultural norms that may hinder safeguarding efforts. 3. Adapt SEAH risk mitigation strategies to be culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate.
Lack of privacy and overcrowding	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assess the camp's layout and identify overcrowded or high-risk areas. 2. Work with partners to improve shelter design and spacing to ensure privacy and reduce SEAH risks. 3. Create safe, private spaces for women and children.
Limited access to justice and legal recourse	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify local legal frameworks and recourse available to survivors of SEAH. 2. Provide information to camp residents about their legal rights and reporting mechanisms. 3. Establish partnerships with local legal aid organisations to provide survivors with access to justice.

Why it is important to assess and manage SEAH risks in these settlements?

For organisations working in these camps, the responsibility to assess and manage SEAH risks is paramount. Informal camp settings often leave vulnerable individuals exposed to heightened risks, and without protective measures from these organisations, exploitation and abuse may go unchecked. By thoroughly identifying SEAH risks and implementing robust safeguards, organisations not only protect those most vulnerable, but also build a foundation of trust and integrity within the community. This commitment is essential – it reflects an organisation’s unwavering dedication to fostering a safe, respectful environment where aid is delivered responsibly. Proactively managing SEAH risks reaffirms the organisation’s ethical duty to protect, support and uplift every resident, profoundly impacting their lives for the better.

How to prepare for the SEAH risk assessment

Ensure close coordination with local communities, particularly involving active men and women, to establish rapport and effective communication. Initiate or strengthen coordination with local authorities and any aid organisations working in the camp or surrounding area, if not already established.

- Select male and female staff members for the assessment who are knowledgeable in the local language.
- Prepare or develop a checklist of tools for SEAH risk assessment, such as a camp audit tool, key informant interview guides or focus group discussion tools.
- Provide orientation for the team on safeguarding concepts and the use of SEAH risk assessment tools.

Ways to assess SEAH risks

Conduct camp audit visits

What it is: A structured assessment of the camp’s layout, infrastructure and key risk areas.

Why it is important: Ensures that safety features, such as lighting and privacy measures, are in place to protect residents.

How to do it:

- Use a SEAH-specific checklist to review the layout of the camp, noting high-risk areas.
- Map essential resources, such as water points, pathways and community areas.

- Ensure critical safety measures are in place, such as lighting in public spaces and adequate privacy in residential areas.

Conduct key informant interviews (KIIs)

What it is: Interviews with selected community members who can provide insights into SEAH concerns.

Why it is important: Offers a direct line to community feedback and specific SEAH risks that residents face.

How to do it:

- Identify diverse key informants to capture a wide range of perspectives.
- Ask structured questions to explore SEAH risks and vulnerabilities within the community.
- Use the insights gathered to inform and improve SEAH management strategies.

Organise focus group discussions (FGDs)

What it is: Group discussions with different segments of the community, such as women, men and youth.

Why it is important: Enables the organisation to understand community-wide SEAH concerns and specific needs of different groups.

How to do it:

- Facilitate discussions to identify specific SEAH concerns for each group.
- Use findings to develop targeted SEAH mitigation plans that address each group's needs.
- Ensure the inclusion of all relevant groups to gain a full understanding of SEAH risks across the camp.

Coordinate with relevant government bodies

What it is: Engagement with local authorities responsible for camp oversight and community safety.

Why it is important: Helps align SEAH safeguarding with local laws and leverages government support.

How to do it:

- Meet with local government officials to understand SEAH-related policies and protections.
- Establish protocols for reporting and collaborating on SEAH incidents.
- Ensure SEAH measures are consistent with local governance structures and policies.

Consult with local organisations operating in the camp

What it is: Collaboration with non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations (CSOs) that are active in providing support within the camp.

Why it is important: Draws on local expertise and enhances resource availability for SEAH management.

How to do it:

- Identify local organisations working on SEAH issues and establish partnerships.
- Coordinate regularly to share knowledge and resources.
- Work together to ensure comprehensive SEAH risk management across all organisations involved.

Cultural sensitivity in SEAH management

What it is: Being aware of another person's set of beliefs or values which is attributed to that person's ethnical or racial background.

Why it is important: Ensures SEAH interventions are respectful and trusted by the community and helps in gaining community support and cooperation, especially when addressing sensitive issues.

How to do it:

- Engage with community leaders to understand cultural norms, particularly those related to gender roles and communication.
- Tailor SEAH initiatives to be culturally respectful while ensuring that protection measures are effective.
- Train staff on cultural sensitivity to ensure they can engage with community members respectfully and effectively.

Essential SEAH risk management measures for informal camps

This section provides a structured approach for assessing and managing SEAH risks in informal camp settlements, with practical steps for safeguarding vulnerable populations and building community trust through responsive SEAH measures.

SEAH risk register

What it is: A comprehensive record of SEAH risks in the camp environment.

Why it is important: Monitors, categories and manages SEAH risks to ensure proactive safeguarding.

How to do it:

- Regularly maintain the risk register based on assessments and community feedback received during SEAH risk assessment.
- Classify risks by severity and likelihood to prioritise safeguarding efforts.
- Share updates with field teams and adjust mitigation strategies accordingly.

Orient programme and field teams on SEAH risk register and safeguarding measures

What it is: Training programme and field staff on the SEAH risk register and safeguarding measures.

Why it is important: Ensures all personnel are informed about safeguarding measures, SEAH risks and their mitigation responsibilities.

How to do it:

- Conduct orientations on the SEAH risk register and safeguarding measures, including real-life scenario exercises.
- Encourage field teams to report observed risks to maintain an updated register.
- Reinforce the role of each team member in actively mitigating SEAH risks.

Review and tailor programme activities to prevent harm

What it is: A review of programme activities to identify and mitigate SEAH risks.

Why it is important: Reduces SEAH vulnerability by adapting activities to minimise risk.

How to do it:

- Assess activities like aid distribution and service provision for SEAH risks.
- Implement gender-sensitive measures, such as segregated queues or female staff presence.
- Monitor programme activities to ensure ongoing SEAH risk mitigation.

Identify and train community volunteers as safeguarding focal points

What it is: Selecting and training community volunteers as SEAH safeguarding contacts.

Why it is important: Leverages trusted individuals to improve SEAH reporting and support within the community.

How to do it:

- Select diverse, respected community members to act as focal points.
- Provide training on SEAH risk reporting and confidentiality.
- Regularly engage focal points for community feedback and SEAH response updates.

Community-level awareness raising on SEAH risks and reporting mechanisms

What it is: Raising awareness within the community about SEAH risks, prevention strategies and the mechanisms available for reporting incidents.

Why it is important: Empowers individuals with knowledge to recognise and address SEAH risks, reduces stigma around reporting, and fosters a culture of accountability and safety within the community.

How to do it:

- Develop and distribute culturally appropriate materials, such as posters, leaflets and audio messages, to educate community members about SEAH risks and reporting procedures.
- Organise interactive community sessions, using participatory methods like role-playing or storytelling, to ensure the message resonates with diverse groups.
- Collaborate with community leaders and trusted figures to deliver key messages and promote acceptance of reporting mechanisms.
- Ensure that reporting channels are clearly communicated and accessible to all, including marginalised groups such as women, children and persons with disabilities.
- Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of awareness campaigns through community feedback and adjust strategies as needed.

Create accessible community-based complaint mechanisms (CBCMs)

- Design or review CBCMs with the community on SEAH reporting mechanisms that are simple, confidential and accessible to all camp residents.

- Include multiple reporting channels (suggestion boxes, verbal reports etc.) to ensure accessibility.
- Train staff on SEAH reporting procedures.
- Ensure that all staff are trained in handling SEAH complaints with sensitivity and confidentiality.
- Make sure staff know how to document and escalate SEAH reports appropriately.
- Explain to residents what SEAH is, their rights and how to use reporting mechanisms.
- Regularly raise awareness within the community to ensure everyone knows how to report concerns and what will happen after a report is made.

Clear and accessible SEAH incident reporting channels

What it is: CBCMs to handle SEAH complaints.

Why it is important: Provides a confidential, structured reporting process for SEAH concerns.

How to do it:

- Set up CBCMs like hotlines or in-person reporting options.
- Ensure these mechanisms are accessible, confidential and trusted by the community.
- Train staff in complaint handling to protect the confidentiality of reporters.

Collaboration

What it is: Partnership with local authorities, police and CSOs to strengthen SEAH response.

Why it is important: Enhances SEAH response capacity and resources through collaborative support.

How to do it:

- Engage with government bodies, CSOs and legal aid organisations.
- Foster relationships with PSEA (Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse) networks to strengthen community support.
- Regularly coordinate to maintain an effective and aligned SEAH response.

Investigations of SEAH incidents

What it is: Conducting impartial investigations into SEAH incidents within the camp.

Why it is important: Ensures incidents are thoroughly addressed with consequences for perpetrators.

How to do it:

- Establish a team trained in SEAH investigation, ensuring confidentiality and sensitivity.
- Work with law enforcement to support swift and just responses.
- Protect survivors and informants from retaliation throughout the process.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of SEAH risk management

What it is: An ongoing process to assess the effectiveness of SEAH risk management strategies.

Why it is important: Ensures that SEAH practices are updated based on community feedback and changing needs.

How to do it:

- Regularly gather feedback from community members to evaluate the effectiveness of SEAH protocols.
- Adapt and improve SEAH measures based on M&E findings.
- Document lessons learned and shared best practices with stakeholders.

Considerations for recovery and preparedness phase(s)

Review internal safeguarding policies to ensure organisational SEAH policies are robust and align with local and international standards

How to do it:

- Regularly audit SEAH policies for relevance and effectiveness.
- Provide training to staff on SEAH policy requirements and updates.
- Make sure all policies are accessible and easily understood by all staff and volunteers.

Engage with national and local government on SEAH policies to ensure SEAH practices align with national and local legal frameworks

How to do it:

- Collaborate with government bodies to stay informed of SEAH-related policies.
- Identify any gaps in protection or enforcement and advocate for improvements.

- Ensure all SEAH initiatives are compliant with national laws and policies, including those specific to informal camps.

Annex 1: Examples of risks and suggested mitigations

Example of SEAH risks	Suggested risk management steps	Responsible persons or teams
SEAH risk for women during distribution of aid packages	All teams including field staff, volunteers and venders need to be trained or oriented in safeguarding. Ensure that all team members, including field staff, volunteers and venders, sign the safeguarding code of conduct which is clear and available in local languages.	Programme, Communications and HR Teams
	1. Clear guidelines and transparency: Display eligibility criteria and distribution procedures publicly in local languages.	
	2. Female-friendly distribution: Set up separate distribution lines and ensure female staff handle distribution for women beneficiaries.	Field Distribution Team
	3. Trained and monitored staff: Train all distribution staff on SEAH policies and assign monitors to oversee processes.	Safeguarding and HR Teams
	4. Confidential feedback mechanisms: Establish anonymous feedback channels (suggestion boxes, hotlines) and inform beneficiaries.	Safeguarding and Field Teams
SEAH risk during cash voucher encashment	1. Secure encashment points: Arrange private encashment areas with female-only spaces when possible.	Finance Team, Encashment Partners
	2. Transparent procedures: Clearly display encashment procedures and hotline numbers for reporting issues at all encashment sites.	Finance and Communications Teams
	3. Encashment monitoring: Assign staff to monitor encashment points, particularly during peak hours.	Monitoring Team

	4. Pre-encashment briefings: Inform beneficiaries about rights and reporting procedures before encashment.	Finance and Field Teams
SEAH risk for community members accessing services	1. Safe access to services: Arrange safe transport or locate services closer to communities.	Programme and Logistics Teams
	2. Training for service providers: Train all providers on SEAH prevention and display codes of conduct at service locations.	HR and Service Delivery Teams
	3. Confidential service areas: Set up private consultation areas and gender-segregated waiting areas where appropriate.	Facilities and Programme Teams
	4. Accessible complaint mechanisms: Implement confidential reporting channels (hotlines, suggestion boxes) accessible to all users.	Safeguarding and Communications Teams