

**Report of the InterAction Task Force
On the Prevention of
Sexual Exploitation of Displaced Children**



June 2002

FOREWORD

The recommendations in this report are offered by the Task Force on the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation of Displaced Children created in March 2002 by InterAction, a voluntary membership alliance of 160 U.S.-based international development and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations. Operating in all developing countries, the activities of the member agencies range from emergency disaster relief to refugee assistance and long-term development.

The creation of the Task Force followed the release of a report written by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Save the Children-U.K. alleging that displaced children in three West African countries were sexually exploited by among others humanitarian workers, sometimes in exchange for food. The Task Force did not investigate the allegations themselves but rather looked for actions that humanitarian agencies, particularly InterAction members, should take to prevent the abuse of displaced children.

There are many explanations—but no excuses—for the abuse of these children. The possibility of abuse and exploitation is heightened by the scarcity of food and other resources that characterize many refugee camps and displaced communities. In addition, among agencies and personnel who care for displaced populations, the Task Force found weaknesses in training, monitoring, accountability and camp management.

Many changes must be made to reduce the possibility of exploitation, and are noted in the report. Nothing, however, shook the conviction of the InterAction Task Force members that the sexual exploitation of displaced children by humanitarian workers constitutes intolerable abuse of power, violation of the rights of individual children, misuse of humanitarian assistance, and violation of the fundamental duty of humanitarian workers to protect and assist refugee and displaced populations, particularly vulnerable children. Accordingly, the core of InterAction's recommendations for its member agencies are summarized by a recommended code of conduct that can be found in Annex I of this report.

In creating this Task Force, InterAction acknowledged its particular responsibility to help its member agencies examine their own roles in the international response to the problem of sexual exploitation of displaced children. Without equivocation, all agree that humanitarian workers must strive to create an environment of respect, trust and integrity in order to prevent sexual abuse of displaced children and to promote responsible and accountable behavior with respect to each and every beneficiary.

InterAction Task Force Members

Father Richard Ryscavage, Chair
Director, Jesuit Refugee Service

Kenneth Bacon
President & CEO, Refugees International

Geeta Rao Gupta
President, International Center for Research on Women

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Task Force Mandate

In March 2002, InterAction created a Task Force following the release of a confidential report alleging that displaced children were sexually exploited by employees of “a range of agencies responsible for the care and protection” of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in three countries in West Africa (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone). The report,¹ written by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Save the Children-UK, alleged that girls as young as 13 were coerced into sex in exchange for food, other commodities and services because they felt otherwise unable to provide for their own survival needs and those of their families. Among other causes, the report identified failures of protection and accountability by humanitarian agencies and power inequities between humanitarian workers² and refugees without jobs or access to other income-generating activities.

These allegations drew immediate, sharp reactions from the international humanitarian community both because they were shocking, and because the charges against specific individuals and agencies had not been thoroughly investigated or substantiated at the time of release. InterAction President Mary McClymont deplored the “horrible acts” mentioned in the report, if proven accurate by subsequent investigations. InterAction believes that the vast majority of humanitarian workers are committed to protecting the rights of the displaced, particularly vulnerable children, and are performing their jobs with integrity and honesty. Nonetheless, InterAction and its member agencies³ are deeply concerned about serious questions raised by the report regarding the plight of displaced children, the standards of professional conduct of humanitarian workers, the accountability of humanitarian agencies entrusted with the protection of vulnerable refugees and IDPs, and the possible misuse of scarce humanitarian resources.

As a call to action to its 160 member agencies, InterAction therefore created its Task Force to be forward looking and to develop recommendations to enhance child protection and agency accountability to prevent such abuses against displaced children in the future. In contrast to investigations of alleged past misconduct, the Task Force was asked to look broadly at the underlying causes of the vulnerability of displaced children and to develop remedial steps that humanitarian agencies, particularly InterAction members, should take to prevent future abuse against displaced children and ensure that their employees are held accountable to the highest standards of professional conduct.

¹ The report mentions allegations of sexual exploitation against 67 individual employees and “widespread” sexual abuse in the camps and surrounding communities, including by humanitarian workers, UN Peacekeepers, local national security staff, loggers and diamond miners, among others. Among “humanitarian workers,” the report said that most sexual exploiters were the locally hired employees of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations (IOs), including refugees and IDPs. *Note for Implementing and Operational Partners by UNHCR and Save the Children-UK on Sexual Violence & Exploitation: The Experience of Refugee Children in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone based on Initial Finding and Recommendations from Assessment Mission 22 October-30 November 2001*, February 2002.

² For the purposes of the InterAction Task Force report, “humanitarian workers” or “humanitarian agencies” are defined as all employees of NGOs and IOs providing protection and assistance to refugees and IDPs.

³ InterAction is a voluntary membership alliance of 160 US-based, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in humanitarian and development assistance in all developing countries. The activities of InterAction member agencies range from emergency disaster relief to refugee assistance and long-term development.

InterAction recognizes that effective change must involve concerted efforts by all players in the international humanitarian community, and it is actively working with other international players within the structure of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), whose members include the CEOs of sixteen UN and other international humanitarian agencies and several international non-governmental organizations (NGO) consortia (including InterAction). However, in creating the Task Force, InterAction acknowledged its particular responsibility to help its member agencies examine their own roles in the international response to the problem of sexual exploitation of displaced children.⁴

The members of the InterAction Task Force are:

- Father Richard Ryscavage [Chair], Director, Jesuit Refugee Services
- Kenneth Bacon, President and CEO, Refugees International
- Geeta Rao Gupta, President, International Center for Research on Women
- Leonard Rubenstein, Executive Director, Physicians for Human Rights
- John Schultz, President, Christian Children's Fund

In support of its work, besides using information from the UNHCR/Save the Children UK report and other relevant literature, the InterAction Task Force surveyed a broad range of materials and heard from member agencies about their codes of conduct, child protection policies and accountability mechanisms, as well as reform measures that some have begun in light of the charges in the UNHCR/Save-UK report. The Task Force met the refugee chairwoman of a camp in West Africa and independent experts on child protection, gender-based violence, and other related issues. The Task Force also benefited from the participation of InterAction (including its Task Force Chair) in the work of a similar international task force under the umbrella of the IASC.

Summary of Findings

Nothing in the course of its deliberations shook the conviction of the InterAction Task Force members that **the sexual exploitation of displaced children by humanitarian workers constitutes intolerable abuse of power, violation of the rights of individual children, misuse of humanitarian assistance, and violation of the fundamental duty of humanitarian workers to protect and assist refugee and displaced populations, particularly vulnerable children. This conviction is embodied in core elements that the Task Force urges all InterAction member agencies to incorporate into their codes of conduct in order to prevent such abuse in the future [see Annex I].**

The Task Force found many explanations for the vulnerability of displaced children to sexual abuse, *but it found no excuses*. The complex web of factors that have contributed to the sexual exploitation of children in the past must be understood in order to prevent such exploitation in the future, *but these factors must never justify inaction*. The Task Force findings reinforce the urgent need to act quickly and decisively to address the root causes of the vulnerability of displaced children, protect them from exploitation, and ensure the highest standards of conduct for humanitarian workers in the future.

⁴ InterAction recognizes that the UNHCR/Save-UK report, while focused on children, also raises serious questions about protection for women in their own right and in their capacity as caretakers for displaced children. While fully acknowledging the importance of addressing the rights and needs of displaced women, InterAction chose to limit the mandate of its task force to the UNHCR/Save-UK charges to displaced children. References to displaced children and women in the present Task Force report reflect the inextricable relationship between these two vulnerable groups, but this report is not intended to delve deeply into broader gender issues or the separate protection issues of women *per se*.

First, camps for refugees and IDPs unfortunately combine many of the elements that are now recognized as contributing to sexual exploitation and abuse of power:

- Exploitation of power occurs in many settings, and in camps some humanitarian workers have abused their power to coerce displaced children under 18 to engage in sex in exchange for food, clothing, and other humanitarian supplies and services.
- Scarcity of humanitarian relief in general, and fragility of food pipelines in particular, often force refugees and IDPs to seek other means of providing for their families.
- Displaced children and women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation because of limited access to skills training, jobs and other income-generating activities in camps that would increase their self-sufficiency and give them a dignified alternative to “transactional” sex as a means of securing adequate food and other necessities for themselves and their families.

Second, weaknesses in training, monitoring and accountability mechanisms and camp management have contributed to the exploitation of displaced children. We note, among others:

- Existing NGO and international agency policies, procedures, training programs, monitoring and accountability mechanisms have been inadequate to protect displaced children from sexual exploitation and abuse in camps, to provide adequate assistance to victims, or to bring justice and discipline to offenders.
- In some circumstances, humanitarian agencies have failed to make displaced children aware of their rights to protection and assistance, to give children access to effective channels of redress, and to make humanitarian workers aware of their duty to respect the rights of children and provide them adequate assistance.
- The often limited presence of UNHCR protection officers and trained NGO managerial staff in camps, especially at night, exacerbates the vulnerability of children to abuse by, in particular, fellow camp residents and nearby local residents.

Third, the following factors indicate the magnitude and complexity of issues facing humanitarian agencies in preventing the sexual exploitation of displaced children:

- The vulnerability of displaced children to sexual exploitation and abuse is not limited to West Africa; rather it is a problem that affects all regions of the world.
- Sexual violence, impunity and corruption are all unfortunately endemic in crisis situations, including the conflicts that displaced children have fled and the camps where they seek refuge.
- Children are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation in such circumstances because security, policing, justice, and traditional social safeguards may be compromised or absent.
- Displaced children may receive little protection under local laws and practices, which may set the age of marriage or consent to sexual relations as low as 14.

Finally, the Task Force found that given the growing magnitude of refugee and IDP populations worldwide, there appear to be no effective “quick fixes” for the weaknesses and resource deficits of the NGOs and international organizations (IOs) entrusted with the protection of displaced children. Taken together, these factors create a troubling picture with widely shared responsibility for both the abuses and the potential remedial steps.

Summary of Recommendations

The Task Force recognizes that its three-month review was in no way the definitive study of the plight of displaced children or remedies to ensure their protection in the future. Its work should be seen as the beginning of a longer process of review, reflection, and reform that will ultimately involve all players in the international humanitarian community. For its part, InterAction should continue to work closely with the IASC, which is expected to issue a report including extensive recommendations for UN agencies and other IOs, as well as NGOs. InterAction should facilitate with its members any follow-up efforts emanating from the IASC Task Force report.

The Task Force believes that InterAction member agencies will have an important role in this international effort. The following recommendations are intended to strengthen the ability of InterAction members to respond to this challenge individually and collectively.

The Task Force is acutely aware that NGOs will not be able to bring about desired lasting changes without effective partnerships with relevant UN agencies and other players in the international humanitarian community. This process will also require the renewed efforts by donors and host-country governments to address underlying resource and protection issues. The Task Force is therefore including recommendations to other players in the international community, although its primary focus is on InterAction and its member agencies.

1) Recommendations to InterAction Member Agencies:

Overall, the Task Force urges InterAction member agencies to reaffirm their commitment to the international standards that guide and inspire humanitarian assistance,⁵ and accord a high priority to the protection of displaced children from sexual exploitation and abuse.

At a minimum, InterAction members should make it emphatically clear to their employees and all beneficiaries of their services, including children, that: **Sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian workers constitute acts of gross misconduct and are therefore grounds for termination of employment. Exchange of money, employment, goods, or services for sex, including sexual favors or other forms of humiliating, degrading or exploitative behavior, is prohibited.**

This message – and its consequences for offenders — should be reiterated frequently and incorporated into codes of conduct, new hire orientation, training for new field assignments, periodic special training programs and posters visible to refugees and IDPs.

In addition, InterAction member agencies should:

- **Adopt or revise codes of conduct** over the next six months to incorporate the core elements identified by the Task Force in Annex I and ensure that all staff are fully aware of the codes and the sanctions for failing to respect them.
- **Complete reviews as soon as possible of their own policies, procedures, training programs, and accountability mechanisms** to identify gaps and weaknesses that should be addressed to ensure the protection of displaced children from sexual exploitation.

⁵ Including international human rights and refugee law and UN conventions and covenants.

- **Strengthen training and accountability mechanisms (including supervision, reporting, and disciplinary action)** to deter misconduct and address suspected abuse in a way that protects the rights of victims and the accused.
- **Create monitoring mechanisms** to determine whether abuses are occurring, even in the absence of complaints; these might include periodic information gathering, or having an ombudsman in camp charged with monitoring.
- **Develop psycho-social assistance programs targeted at child victims of exploitation and youth at risk, and consult with children in the design of programs affecting their rights and needs.**
- **Improve the access of displaced children and women to training programs and income-generating activities** (including employment with NGOs) to increase the self-sufficiency of children who are unaccompanied or with female family members.

2) Recommendations to InterAction:

The Task Force recommends that InterAction facilitate and support its member agencies in the achievement of the recommendations above in the following ways:

- **Help set higher standards of professional behavior** by working within both the IASC and the InterAction structure to refine core elements of codes of conduct and guidelines on the prevention of sexual exploitation.
- **Work with InterAction members to incorporate such elements and guidelines into InterAction's Private Voluntary Organization (PVO) Standards, as needed.**
- **Encourage the sharing of good practices** by creating a resource center with information on effective policies, procedures and training materials, as well as a roster of experts on child protection and related issues.
- **Press for consistency in the future of strategies, messages and action steps** undertaken by InterAction members, in collaboration with other members of the international humanitarian community.
- Continue to **serve as the liaison between InterAction members and the IASC** on all matters pertaining to child protection and enhancement of accountability.

3) Recommendations to the International Community:

Responsibility for responding to the plight of displaced children and addressing the root causes of sexual exploitation rests with a broad range of players in the international community: UN agencies, other IOs, donor governments, host-country governments, and all NGOs and NGO consortia, including InterAction and its members. The IASC, as an umbrella body for the international humanitarian community, has a special role to play coordinating international action steps and examining the responsibilities and remedies of UN agencies and other IOs with respect to child protection and accountability mechanisms. In addition, the InterAction Task Force strongly recommends that:

- All players collaborate in field testing proposed models of **joint monitoring teams and accountability mechanisms at the camp, country or regional level.**
- All players collaborate on ways to strengthen child protection through **improved camp design and management**, including **increased presence of protection officers and experienced managerial staff, particularly women**, in camps.
- All players work with donors and other aid providers to **re-evaluate aid levels and develop new ways to increase the self-sufficiency of displaced children and their families or caretakers.**

REPORT ON THE PREVENTION OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF DISPLACED CHILDREN

I. The Context and Magnitude of the Problem Worldwide

The InterAction Task Force members are deeply troubled by the allegations that displaced children have been victimized by some of the very people who have been entrusted with their care and protection in camps. While many of the specific allegations in the UNHCR/Save-UK report have not been substantiated, there is evidence of abuse by some humanitarian workers, as well as complicity by those who did nothing to report or prevent suspected exploitation. Even if on-going investigations disprove some of the specific allegations about misconduct and abuse in West Africa, the international community must face this wake-up call and address the magnitude of the vulnerability of displaced children around the world, the complexity of underlying causes of exploitation, and the urgency of enhancing their protection in the future.

The vulnerability of displaced children is not limited to West Africa, nor does it affect only a small number of children. It is a global problem of enormous magnitude. Almost half of the world's estimated 37.5 million refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are children,⁶ using the definition of children as those under the age of 18 in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. Displaced children are tragically vulnerable to exploitation and abuse not only in the crisis situations they have fled, but in their flight to safety, and in the camps where they seek refuge and protection.

The Task Force found many explanations for the vulnerability of displaced children to sexual abuse, *but it found no excuses*. The complex web of factors that have contributed to the sexual exploitation of children in the past must be understood to in order to prevent such exploitation in the future, *but these factors must never justify inaction*.

Around the world, the very conditions of conflict, persecution, and human rights abuses that generate refugees and IDPs subject children to severe dislocation, deprivation, physical and emotional trauma, and responsibility for other family members at an early age. Prolonged conflict often tears apart social fabric, pushes large numbers of people into abject poverty, and engenders a culture of brutality, impunity, and corruption. Sexual violence and exploitation are endemic in such circumstances, and children are all too often the victims.

Displaced children arrive in camps traumatized by the abuse and deprivation that they and their families have already experienced. Unfortunately, they often face continued threats to their well being and dignity from a variety of sources in the camps and in the surrounding areas. Refugee populations inured to violence, impunity, and corruption during conflict and social chaos are apt to perpetuate or condone violent and exploitative behaviors if they are frustrated and uncertain about their own futures. In addition, displaced children may find little protection from community leaders

⁶ The US Committee on Refugees' World Refugee Survey 2002 estimates that at the beginning of 2002, there were 14.9 million refugees and 22.5 million IDPs worldwide at the start of 2002. According to UNHCR Populations Data Unit statistics, the number of refugees under 18 was 56% in Africa in 2000 and has averaged near 50% worldwide over time (*Meeting the rights and protection needs of refugee children: An independent evaluation of UNHCR's activities*, UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, May 2002, p. iii.).

or even parents where local laws and practices assume that the age of majority and consent for sexual relations is considerably younger than the age of 18 set by the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Sexual abuse and exploitation occur in many settings. In camps for refugees and IDPs, they are exacerbated by difficult and even humiliating living conditions, such as crowded quarters with little privacy or security, and dependence on humanitarian agencies for scarce supplies of food and other essential commodities. Food rations may consist of a few staples, some of which are not familiar to the refugees. Quantities may be so limited that families run out of food between distributions, and fragile food pipelines may result in unpredictable deliveries. Refugees and IDPs who miss out on camp registration and food ration cards are left even more at the mercy of those around them. Vulnerable children and women rarely have legitimate opportunities to generate income or products to barter for additional food and other supplies.

Virtually the only employment available to refugees is with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations (IOs) operating in the camps. Although wages are limited, these positions are coveted as much for the perceived power, status and access to humanitarian supplies and services that they convey. Children and women rarely meet the education and skill requirements for such jobs, so they are often left at the mercy of more fortunate members of the refugee community.

These conditions of scarcity and inequality of power and access present a volatile combination in camps, particularly given limited social protections, security, policing and justice in many circumstances. Unequal power relationships lead to widespread sexual exploitation of the most vulnerable members of camp society. There are numerous chilling examples of such exploitation affecting children, including as desperate parents who run out of food and force their young daughters into prostitution to provide for their families. Girls under 18 with their own children to care for say they must resort to scavenging in the countryside or prostitution in order to obtain food and other essentials. Similarly, since girls are not issued shoes or underwear (two requirements for attending school) they must choose between not attending school or forming a sexual relationship with someone who can provide the needed articles.

The Task Force learned of a number of areas where NGOs and IOs must squarely face their responsibility for the gaps and weaknesses — in training, accountability, camp management and delivery of assistance, for instance — that permit or even exacerbate the sexual exploitation of displaced children by humanitarian workers:

- In some cases, existing NGO and international agency policies, procedures, training programs, and accountability mechanisms have been inadequate to protect displaced children from sexual exploitation and abuse in camps, to provide adequate assistance to victims, or to bring justice and discipline to offenders.
- Until now, monitoring and accountability have been primarily internal concerns of individual agencies active in the camps, and gaps and weaknesses in behavior standards and accountability mechanisms appear to have deflected needed attention from many offenders and their victims.
- In some circumstances, humanitarian agencies have failed to make displaced children aware of their rights to protection and assistance, and to give children access to channels of redress.
- Similarly, some humanitarian agencies have failed to make all their employees fully cognizant of their duty to respect the rights of children and provide them adequate assistance.
- The international humanitarian community has given vulnerable children and women inadequate access to skills training, jobs and other income-generating activities in camps that would increase

their self-sufficiency and give them a dignified alternative to “transactional” sex as a means of securing adequate food and other necessities for themselves and their families.

- The often limited presence of UNHCR protection officers, and trained NGO managerial staff in camps, especially at night, exacerbates the vulnerability of displaced children to abuse, in particular, by fellow camp residents and nearby local residents.

In addition, the Task Force is convinced that children would be much less vulnerable to such exploitation if they and their families had adequate food rations, clothing, soap, etc., or could provide these things for themselves through legitimate income-generating activities. While the cost of minimal care of refugees and IDPs around the world already far outstrips available donor contributions and the chances of substantially increased contributions are slim, the Task Force believes that, in light of the vulnerability of half the world’s refugees and IDPs to sexual exploitation, donors and aid providers alike should urgently re-evaluate their aid levels, including resources for accountability efforts, and develop new ways to increase the self-sufficiency of children and their families.

II. Setting a Higher Priority for Vulnerable Displaced Children

The problems facing vulnerable displaced children are not news to those who have worked in camps. The Task Force found numerous studies, guidelines and policy statements issued in the last decade on the protection of vulnerable displaced children. Yet until recently, the special protection and other needs of displaced children have not always received high priority in camp settings. Serious resource and personnel limitations, among other factors, have made it difficult for many agencies to translate priorities into special programs. A UNHCR report of May 2002 states that “despite a high level of awareness that children are a ‘policy priority’, in practice, children and children’s concerns are consistently addressed and often regarded as something ‘extra’ to core protection and assistance work.”⁷

The Task Force found a similar gap between awareness and action in the monitoring and accountability mechanisms that should come into play to protect displaced children from sexual exploitation and abuse. InterAction members surveyed uniformly stated their deep concern about the alleged exploitation of children and their commitment to instituting new codes of conduct, training modules, reporting mechanisms, and disciplinary procedures to prevent such exploitation in the future. But before 2002, there were gaps and inconsistencies in the policies and procedures humanitarian agencies had in place to screen out potential child abusers; to ensure that employees are fully aware of proper and improper staff behavior with respect to child protection and the prevention of sexual exploitation; and to enforce proper behavior through supervision, monitoring, reporting, investigation, and disciplinary action for proven exploitation and abuse. Some agencies already had very detailed and specific codes of conduct and guidelines for training and accountability; others have since begun to revise or implement them. Some accountability mechanisms appeared flawed for failing to respect confidentiality and rights of appeal, or in the opposite extreme, for being so legalistic and cumbersome as to allow recognized offenders to remain in their positions for long periods of time pending appeals.

The Task Force is pleased that overall, InterAction member agencies are fully aware of the need to institute more effective and consistent safeguards, although they do not all have the same in-house capabilities to achieve this goal quickly. To address problems of this magnitude and complexity

⁷ *Meeting the rights and protection needs of refugee children, an independent evaluation of the impact of UNHCR’s activities*, UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, May 2002, p. 1.

effectively, NGOs will need support and coordination. Inescapably, the efforts of the entire humanitarian community will have personnel and resource implications.

III. Recommended Remedial Steps

The growing magnitude and complexity of refugee-generating situations around the world today present an ever-increasing challenge to the international community, which seems locked in a perpetual game of catch-up. But the fact remains that nearly half the world's refugees and IDPs are children, whose needs for protection and assistance may be quite different from adults.

The InterAction Task Force is firmly convinced that all players in the international community must work together to develop effective ways to address the particular needs of the very large and growing numbers of vulnerable displaced children. This effort must be based on effective partnerships not just of all humanitarian NGOs, but also relevant UN agencies and other IOs, donor countries, and host-country governments. The need for concerted action is particularly urgent because there do not appear to be any off-the-shelf or easy solutions.

The Task Force, however, found extensive work already completed by a wide range of groups and organizations on effective methods of communicating and training staff on the human rights of beneficiaries, gender and power issues, and the prevention of gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the work place. The Task Force urges InterAction members to review and assess the applicability of this material to the challenges of protecting displaced children from sexual abuse. It also encourages all agencies to consider conceptual approaches to humanitarian work that train employees and community members to respond to refugees and IDPs, particularly vulnerable children, in ways that affirm their rights and do them no harm.

The following additional recommendations are intended primarily for InterAction member agencies, although it is clear that consistent and effective action will require the coordinated efforts of all players in the international community. InterAction will have an important role to play in facilitating the efforts of its member agencies and coordinating with the IASC. The Task Force's recommendations fall generally in four categories: accountability; communications and training; camp design and delivery of assistance; and resource implications.

A. Action Steps for Greater Accountability

The InterAction Task Force believes that sexual exploitation by NGO workers of "beneficiaries" (i.e., refugees and IDPs receiving assistance and services) constitutes a gross misuse of power and influence. It is also a violation of the fundamental commitments of humanitarian workers to protect vulnerable persons from abuse and exploitation and to address such violations quickly and appropriately. Displaced children have the right to aid and should never have to provide sexual services in order to obtain aid. Any sexual activity involving the exchange of aid is by definition exploitative, humiliating, and degrading behavior, and should be grounds for termination of employment. The withholding or granting of scarce supplies services in exchange for sexual favors is also an intolerable misuse of humanitarian aid, and it only exacerbates the inequalities and insufficiencies in camp settings.

To strengthen awareness and accountability, the Task Force urges InterAction members and other humanitarian organizations in the international community to:

- **Positively reaffirm their commitment to the international standards that guide and inspire humanitarian assistance and accord a high priority to child protection.**
- **Adopt or revise codes of conduct** over the next six months to incorporate the core elements identified by the Task Force in Annex I, and ensure that all staff are fully aware of the codes and the sanctions for failing to respect them.
- **State clearly** — and frequently reiterate — to displaced children and employees alike **that sexual exploitation of children under 18 by humanitarian workers is prohibited and grounds for dismissal.**
- **Incorporate this message and its consequences for offenders into new hire orientation, training for new field assignments, periodic special training programs and posters visible to refugees and IDPs.**
- **Complete reviews as soon as possible of their own policies, procedures, and training and assistance programs** to identify 1) gaps and weaknesses that should be addressed to ensure the protection of displaced children from sexual exploitation and abuse, and 2) examples of effective standards, accountability mechanisms and training programs that should be shared with InterAction and other humanitarian agencies.
- **Strengthen accountability mechanisms — including supervision, reporting, and disciplinary action** — with a view to protecting the rights and confidentiality of both alleged victims and the accused, bringing swift justice and closure to incidents of exploitation, and deterring other transgressions of agency codes, policies and procedures.
- **Create monitoring mechanisms** to determine whether abuses are occurring, even in the absence of complaints; these might include periodic information gathering, or having an ombudsman in camp charged with monitoring.
- **Communicate clearly to employees and beneficiaries the channels of reporting and the consequences of misconduct**, as well as the consequences of complicity in and failure to report misconduct.
- **Increase the access to and transparency of complaint mechanisms** so that children are more likely to seek help when they feel at risk or have been exploited.
- **Consider designating a staff person as the focal point for complaints from children and employees, and for compliance with codes of conduct.**
- **Determine whether joint systems of accountability** at the camp, country or regional level are workable and would enhance the enforcement of higher standards of conduct.

B. Action Steps for Communications and Training Strategies

To be effective, new accountability mechanisms must be supported by employee training and educational campaigns for beneficiaries so that all segments of the camp population are fully aware of their rights and responsibilities. The Task Force believes that the process of changing attitudes and conduct will require a multifaceted communications and training strategy for NGOs to:

- **Translate and explain codes of conduct and accountability procedures** so that local national and refugee employees of humanitarian agencies are fully aware of their own rights and obligations, as well as the rights of vulnerable refugees and IDPs.
- **Require staff to sign statements that they have been informed of and will abide by the code of conduct**, including disciplinary procedures and appropriate sanctions for any misconduct,

particularly with respect to the prohibition of sexual exploitation of children and the responsibility to report suspected exploitation by others.

- **Ensure the availability and use of training modules on the prevention of sexual exploitation** in new-hire orientation and periodic upgrading of skills and awareness for all field and headquarters staff.
- **Conduct sensitivity training among all staff members** on what constitutes sexual exploitation and abuse of children, and on such related issues as gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the work place.
- **Conduct campaigns to make displaced children aware of their rights**, the resources to which they are entitled, and available channels for redress in cases of exploitation; and
- **Foster an environment of respect, trust and accountability** in camps so that children feel comfortable talking about their problems, employees respect children's boundaries, and adults and children are willing to challenge exploitative or abusive behavior at an early stage.

C. Action Steps to Improve Protection, Camp Management and Delivery of Assistance

The Task Force recommends that UNHCR and other relevant UN agencies and IOs take the lead, in full consultation with NGOs, in designing and testing new approaches to protection, camp design, camp management, and delivery of assistance to beneficiaries. The recommendations below are by no means an exhaustive list, but they are intended to indicate the broad nature of the remedial steps that will be necessary over the coming year to address the complex and far-reaching problem of protecting displaced children from sexual exploitation.

Wherever possible, humanitarian agencies should work together to:

- **Improve camp layouts to enhance the security, privacy, and protection of displaced children.**
- **Increase the number of female staff members in field situations**, particularly in activities that affect women and children, such as food distribution, health care, counseling, and skills training and income-generating programs.
- **Increase the participation of experienced managerial staff in all field activities.**
- **Modify the distribution of food, other commodities and services in camps** to ensure that women and children receive adequate/appropriate levels of aid.
- Work with local authorities and UNHCR **to increase the number of protection officers in camps, particularly at night**, and communicate to local residents near camps that exploitation of refugees, particularly children, will be dealt with swiftly and definitively.
- **Ensure the access of child victims of sexual exploitation and abuse to counseling and other appropriate psycho-social programs of assistance**, including mental and reproductive health care; and
- **Increase the participation of displaced women and children in the design and implementation of programs affecting their rights and well-being**, to ensure that assistance responds to their needs and that they are fully aware of services and recourse available to them.

D. Recommendations on Resource Implications

The InterAction Task Force is acutely aware that the demands of growing refugee and IDP populations around the world are already straining available resources. However, child protection and agency accountability are too important to the core responsibilities of the international humanitarian commu-

nity to treat as yet another set of priorities that must somehow be addressed within the constraints of existing resources. The Task Force therefore urges all players to work with donors and other aid providers to:

- **Re-evaluate aid levels** with an eye to increasing key staff (particularly protection officers), improving training and accountability, and providing refugees and IDPs, particularly vulnerable children and women, with adequate food, clothing, and other essentials for a dignified and secure — if spare — existence while they have to remain in camps, and
- **Develop new ways to increase the self-sufficiency of displaced children and their families** in order to relieve some of their dependency on already scarce humanitarian assistance and minimize their vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse.

Conclusion

The InterAction Task Force deplores any actions that violate the rights and well-being of displaced children, especially by humanitarian workers entrusted with their protection and assistance. Even if past misconduct and abuse prove to be less widespread than originally alleged, the UNHCR/Save-UK report obliges the international humanitarian community to enhance child protection, strengthen training, monitoring and accountability, and address the underlying factors that have contributed to the sexual exploitation of displaced children.

This will be a long and difficult process involving committed partnerships of many players at different levels in the international community. It will require changing attitudes and behavior of many different groups of people who work with displaced children, some of whose cultural and moral norms may be at odds with international standards. It will also require a painful reassessment of already scarce commodities and services available to refugee and displaced children, improved distribution methods, and the personnel levels necessary to implement these changes effectively.

The Task Force calls on InterAction and its members to conduct this process in a way that effectively addresses apparent weaknesses of the international humanitarian system, but also emphasizes that the vast majority of humanitarian workers perform their duties with honor, integrity and full respect for the rights of beneficiaries, often working in very difficult situations and at great personal sacrifice. Similarly, the international community should strive to communicate that the alleged transgressions of a few should not in any way undermine the value of sustained refugee assistance, nor the growing need worldwide for increased international support.

ANNEX I

Recommended Core Elements For Codes of Conduct Of InterAction Member Agencies

The InterAction Task Force believes that InterAction member agencies should have codes of conduct that clearly state their fundamental responsibility to assist displaced children with respect, as well as their specific obligation to protect displaced children from sexual exploitation and abuse. To that end, codes of conduct should include agreed core elements for standards of behavior. The following core elements, recommended by the InterAction Task Force, have also been recommended by the IASC Task Force.

Humanitarian agencies have a duty of care to beneficiaries and a responsibility to ensure that beneficiaries are treated with dignity and respect and that certain minimum standards of behavior are observed. In order to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse, the following core principles should be incorporated into agency codes of conduct¹:

- Sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian workers constitute acts of gross misconduct and are therefore grounds for termination of employment;
- Sexual activity with children (persons under the age of 18) is prohibited regardless of the age of majority or age of consent locally. Mistaken belief in the age of a child is not a defense;
- Exchange of money, employment, goods, or services for sex, including sexual favors or other forms of humiliating, degrading or exploitative behavior is prohibited. This includes exchange of assistance that is due to beneficiaries.
- 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.
- Where a humanitarian worker develops concerns or suspicions regarding sexual abuse or exploitation by a fellow worker, whether in the same agency or not, s/he must report such concerns via established agency reporting mechanisms.
- Humanitarian workers are obliged to create and maintain an environment which prevents sexual exploitation and abuse and promotes the implementation of their code of conduct. Managers at all levels have particular responsibilities to support and develop systems which maintain this environment.

¹ Different considerations will arise regarding the enforcement of some of these principles for humanitarian workers hired from 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.



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