IDENTIFYING AREAS WITH UNDER-REPORTING OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE AND OTHER SAFEGUARDING VIOLATIONS

Introduction

This case study showcases the experience of World Vision (WV) International as it strives to create a proactive environment for reporting of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) violations. It is well-known that sexual exploitation and abuse cases are under-reported in even the safest and most survivor-friendly contexts, which is only exacerbated in contexts of extreme vulnerability. In this case study, you will find the lessons learned of a comprehensive review of SEA reports to World Vision offices globally to address under-reporting. Also provided are recommendations for proactive prevention and detection measures based upon WV's experience addressing under-reporting at the field-office level.

Recommendations

Based on the experience of World Vision, the following actions are recommended for all organizations:

Proactive Detection:

- **Adopt the assumption: that underreporting exists**; and implement vigorous and proactive prevention and detection.
- **Set up and/or participate in interagency teams that proactively engage the community**, talk about safeguarding and (in safe, gendered and appropriate ways) ask if violations took place. This is especially important for those responding in fragile or humanitarian responses.
- Some organizations, particularly local women's organizations, will be more trusted than others, and interagency work can build on these strengths.

- Managers should **request safeguarding 'peer reviews' or 'health checks' of programming from third parties** (e.g., local women's groups, health clusters, protection clusters, GBV clusters, PSEA networks, faith leaders and government ministries).

Leadership:

- **Leaders must regularly and repeatedly share and reinforce messaging from the top** that the organization has a culture and policy of zero tolerance for inaction towards any allegation of sexual misconduct, sexual harassment or sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Organizations must promote awareness among leaders that **increased reporting is a sign that systems are working, and reward it when it happens**. We must combat the mistaken belief that reporting is a bad sign in order to support strong, level-headed crisis and incident management. One option is to conduct 'Safeguarding Awareness Weeks' and other leadership-led conversations at regular intervals, including when senior leadership team members and safeguarding focal points visit field offices. Leaders must remember to emphasize the need to report even unconfirmed information. In World Vision's experience, when Country Directors speak often and repeatedly about zero tolerance and celebrate and acknowledge reporting, more reporting will occur.
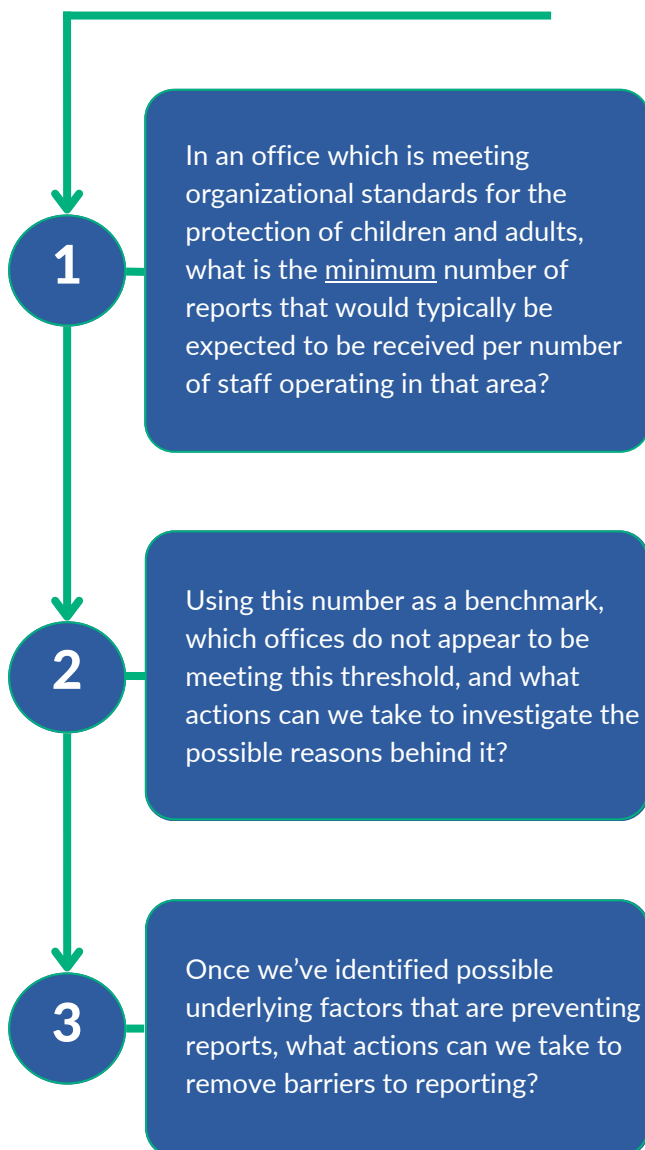
Background

Since 2017, World Vision found there were unequal number of reports of safeguarding violations, including sexual exploitation and abuse, among its offices that operate programmes with children and communities. In some situations, offices were in similar contexts and cultures, but had high variance in the number of reports being submitted either through community-based feedback and complaints mechanisms, or directly to World Vision.

Tool Methodology

World Vision has a zero tolerance for risk of SEA violations. As such, we assume there should be reporting in all operations and programs. Using the organization's policy controls analysis, World Vision determined a figure that represented a minimum number of cases per 100 staff that would typically be reported in an office that had a relatively healthy safeguarding system in place.[1] The intent was not to determine how many incidents are actually happening, but the minimum number of allegations that are expected to be reported, across the board, proportionally, based on size.

World Vision asked:

1 In an office which is meeting organizational standards for the protection of children and adults, what is the minimum number of reports that would typically be expected to be received per number of staff operating in that area?

2 Using this number as a benchmark, which offices do not appear to be meeting this threshold, and what actions can we take to investigate the possible reasons behind it?

3 Once we've identified possible underlying factors that are preventing reports, what actions can we take to remove barriers to reporting?

Purpose

This under-reporting analysis is a management tool that can be used to open conversations on sensitive topics such as sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. This is particularly important as in many contexts admitting weaknesses or faults in a system is discouraged. Starting at the point of "We would expect to see X number of reports from your office, but to date this minimum has not been reached, what might be causing this?" provides opportunity to explore solutions together.

[1] World Vision created an internal benchmark, based on offices which adhered closely to safeguarding standards. The benchmark was adjusted for degrees of vulnerability, resulting in a figure that was considered the minimum number that any context would typically be expected to have in a year period if they had a healthy and functioning system in place.
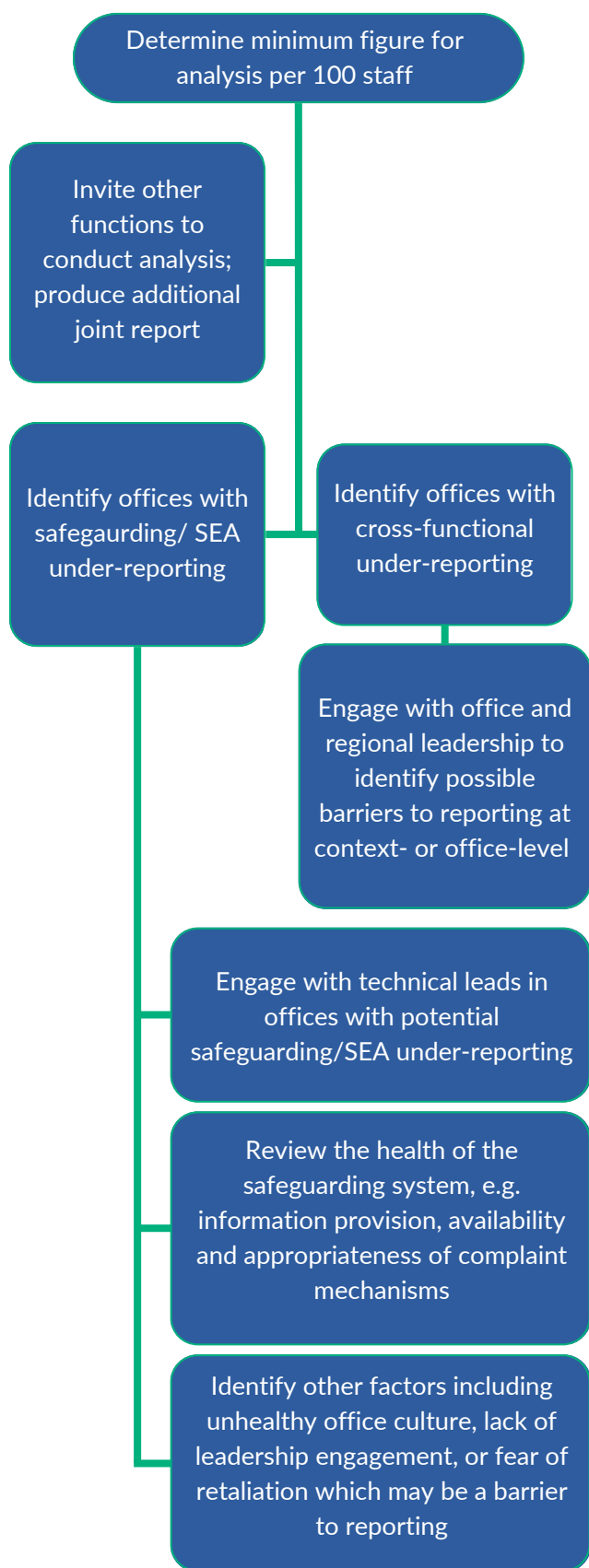
Multiple years of analysis also brings out trends and concerns which could reflect leadership, office culture, or local culture continuing to prevent complaints from being reported. It must be noted that this is one metric in assessing underreporting, and organizations - including WVI - cannot and should not be overly reliant on this, and should continuously seek to develop holistic risk assessments.

Application

Once the minimum figure was established, World Vision ran the analysis through annual figures of reports for all offices that operate programmes in World Vision International. This resulted in a short list of offices who did not meet this minimum threshold. This list of offices was shared with global-level and regional leadership, as well as with the national leaders of those offices. The safeguarding team followed up to conduct a deep dive, including additional monitoring and accountability activities at implementation level in some offices. Its critical to note again that this tool is not used as a performance metric but as a management tool to kick start conversations with leadership of field offices potentially facing under-reporting challenges.

Shortly after Safeguarding produced this analysis, functions such as human resources, emergency management, safeguarding and child protection staff came together to develop recommendations to address the results.

Examples of actions taken:

Determine minimum figure for analysis per 100 staff

Invite other functions to conduct analysis; produce additional joint report

Identify offices with safegaurding/ SEA under-reporting

Identify offices with cross-functional under-reporting

Engage with office and regional leadership to identify possible barriers to reporting at context- or office-level

Engage with technical leads in offices with potential safeguarding/SEA under-reporting

Review the health of the safeguarding system, e.g. information provision, availability and appropriateness of complaint mechanisms

Identify other factors including unhealthy office culture, lack of leadership engagement, or fear of retaliation which may be a barrier to reporting

- Improvements to safeguarding system at programming level (improved access to and appropriateness of complaint mechanisms)
- Renewed process of providing information both to community members and to staff on behaviour that is inappropriate
- Focus group discussions with staff to ask why there might be under-reporting of cases (responses included "people don't know it's wrong", "people don't know how to report", "we went through extensive training and removed members of staff already who weren't aligned with our values", etc.)
- Positive reinforcement of offices tackling the issue to encourage ongoing efforts
- Annual dashboard showing offices improving and those still appearing on the list
- Message to all World Vision staff from the President on the essential value of safeguarding as an expression of our mission and vision (during triennial Safeguarding Awareness Week)

What is safeguarding week?

A dedicated campaign for staff awareness and pride in Safeguarding is a meaningful act that leadership can take to begin changing office culture and increase reporting of violations. At both office and organizational levels, World Vision enacted awareness campaigns and deeper-dive training. The tone of these events was positive: being an organization that safeguards children is worthy of our pride and commitment. WV conducted an internal campaign, the Safeguarding Awareness Week, where staff spent 15-30 minutes each day on safeguarding learning activities. These were both virtual and in-person, global and local.

About World Vision

World Vision is a global Christian humanitarian relief, development organization, partnering with children, families and communities to tackle the root causes of poverty and injustice. World Vision works in over 100 countries helping 4 million children. Safeguarding children and adults living in communities we serve is foundational to all of WV's work. Central to everything we do is our commitment to do no harm to any child anywhere nor to adults living where World Vision has a programming presence. We uphold the best interests of children, adults and communities as a primary consideration in all actions and decisions.