

ECOSOC OAS 2025 – Session 8 - 22 May 2025

Remarks by Mr. Christian F. Saunders, Under-Secretary-General and Special Coordinator on improving the United Nations Response to SEA

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Mr. Chair, excellencies, distinguished delegates

I would first like to thank the ECOSOC Bureau, the Chair, Ambassador Mba, Madame Vice Chair, Ambassador Valverde, and the members for providing a dedicated forum to discuss this important issue. In sum, Accountability lies at the heart of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment.

Over the last two decades, the United Nations has made important investments to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse – by strengthening investigations, improving vetting, victim assistance, reporting, and training. Country-level coordination has improved, and transparency has increased through publication of information. We are also working much more inclusively with NGOs and other partners to better manage risks and address this issue.

Despite this progress, sexual exploitation and abuse remains an urgent concern. In 2024, we received 675 allegations of SEA. Nearly 30 per cent of these allegations involved child victims. These numbers however don't tell the full story. Many more cases go unreported, for many reasons, including stigma and fear, and a lack of trust that reports will lead to tangible outcomes. Each of these cases undermines the UN's credibility and violates the trust placed in us by the communities we serve.

One of the key challenges we face, is the lack of committed leadership, leadership at various levels of the UN system. Here I am not referring to the SG, who as you know has championed this issue from his first day in office. Leadership is the cornerstone of preventing and responding to sexual exploitation, abuse, and sexual harassment. It shapes the tone, culture, and values of our organizations and teams, creating an environment where such behaviour is neither tolerated nor overlooked. Strong leadership establishes and enforces clear policies, ensuring that a zero-tolerance approach is not just a statement but a practiced reality. As leaders in the United Nations, we must lead by example, to actively prevent SEA, and respond with urgency and seriousness when allegations arise. I understand it's not easy; it's uncomfortable to talk about these issues, which, frankly, is partly why sexual exploitation and abuse continues to occur. Even in this room I can see people who look uncomfortable speaking about this issue, but we need to get over our reservations and talk about it - openly, honestly and often.

The UN must act urgently to rebuild trust and deliver visible and tangible accountability.

This challenge has been amplified by the recent funding cuts. As resources and services decrease, the risk of SEA increases and our capacity to prevent, detect, and respond to SEA is also diminished. Securing sustainable funding for PSEA has never been more urgent. The United Nations needs to shift from an ad-hoc reactive PSEA approach to a model where PSEA or safeguarding as it is more commonly known is institutionalized and embedded, in everything we do. The resources required to prevent and respond to SEA must be part of the core operating costs

of every entity and every country programme. This includes resources for ensuring adequate and sustainable assistance to victims and children born of SEA.

What we need is a proactive, system-wide *safeguarding approach*, rather than the current reactive or ad hoc response.

The current UN80 discourse has appropriately emphasized coordination and efficiency—both essential elements. However, we must also ensure that *accountability* is at the heart of this conversation: accountability to the charter, the communities we serve, to our staff, and to you the Member States.

More importantly, PSEA cannot be separated from efficiency- it is integral to it. An accountable, survivor-centred approach strengthens trust, improves outcomes, and upholds the values that define the UN. As we look toward the future of the Organization, safeguarding must be positioned as a core pillar of our collective effectiveness and credibility.

Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates,

Addressing sexual exploitation and abuse requires collective action. The United Nations cannot do this alone. The role of Member States is crucial. Sexual exploitation and abuse are rooted in deep structural issues-power imbalances, inequality, poverty, and weak rule of law, among others. Until these root causes are addressed, the scourge of SEA will persist.

Member States have a sovereign responsibility to address these root causes and ensure strong effective legal and institutional frameworks to tackle this issue.

To this end, we are strengthening our partnership with Member States to ensure a system-wide (common) approach in addressing SEA. In 2024, as a first step, the United Nations developed a model PSEA Clause that will be integrated into all Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks going forward and will help the UN and governments work together to embed PSEA into national systems.

As mentioned by the Deputy-Secretary-General in her opening remarks Resident Coordinators play a vital role in coordinating, convening and leveraging efforts to match the scale and the urgency needed to achieve the SDGs. The same is true for PSEA. Resident Coordinators will lead this effort—but to do so effectively, they need your support and access to dedicated, sustainable resources.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates

The path forward requires collective action and unwavering commitment from all. Inbuilt reservations, biases or taboos over this issue and resource constraints cannot be an excuse for putting at risk the communities we are mandated to serve. We must take decisive action to institutionalize safeguarding within each organization and government department to effectively prevent and respond to SEA. We owe it to those communities we serve and to those who serve alongside us, as our colleagues.

Thank you.