

## **Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations**

1. Mr Chairman, honourable members of the Executive Board, Director-General, Regional Directors, colleagues, on behalf of the staff associations of WHO and IARC, I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak to the Board.

2. I shall address some of the main issues currently of importance or concern to the staff associations, specifically the operation of staff associations in the different regions and at headquarters, staff learning, general service staff salaries at non-headquarters duty stations, and gender equality. Finally, I shall raise some points about the one issue that has left staff in headquarters and the Western Pacific Region with many frustrations since July 2008, namely, the global management system.

### **Operation of staff associations**

3. At the opening of the most recent Global Staff/Management Council meeting (Geneva, 8–10 April 2008), the Director-General re-emphasized that “staff are WHO’s most valuable asset” and that “staff/management consultation, collaboration and shared objectives are of critical importance in contributing to a unified global corporate culture”. The staff associations fully agree with these statements and consider them the principles that form the basis of the staff/management relationship.

4. The WHO staff associations appreciate the efforts of both staff and management to improve their working relationship. We see a clear trend towards the deeper and, more importantly, more useful involvement of the staff associations in the way the Organization operates. However, we emphasize that this involvement is not the same across the WHO regions. For example, the manner in which the staff associations are involved with, and participate in, the recruitment process and their participation in different committees vary considerably between WHO regions. Another example is the service of an ombudsman, which in headquarters is provided by a full-time staff member. In the Western Pacific Region, however, the ombudsman services are provided by a professional staff member, on top of his normal duties. We look forward to further progress in harmonizing these practices across the Organization.

### **Staff learning**

5. For many years the staff associations have had serious reservations about WHO’s efforts to retain staff. There was little evidence of attempts to support staff in the advancement of their careers, to help them to develop skills that would increase their “value” to the Organization, and maybe most importantly, to create better managers, able to make the Organization a more efficient and effective leader and provider of technical support in the field of public health. Then, some five years ago, a global staff development and learning fund was established through a levy on salaries. The staff

associations welcomed this fund as a unique opportunity to create a “learning organization”. Now, a few years and many disappointments later, it has to be concluded that little is left of the original intention of the global staff development and learning fund. Apart from financing large management retreats that proved good networking and team-building exercises, the fund’s application has had little impact on the way staff are managed. Moreover, it remains to be seen if more staff members are retained as a result of the staff development and learning programme.

6. In 2008 much of the available fund was used to cover training activities related to the introduction of the global management system, for which use the staff association representatives expressed their disappointment in a meeting with the Director-General in April 2008. General training activities have been significantly reduced, postponed or cancelled altogether, while many staff did not consider the training on the global management system to be adequate or useful. And where benefits were visible, these were limited to staff in headquarters and the Western Pacific Region, while other regions were affected by the reduced funding available for staff development and learning.

7. We also understand that the Global Learning Committee, with membership from across the Organization, has been reformed with the Director-General as its Chairman. We see this as a welcome sign that the Organization will make this an effort that will be effective and have a positive impact on all staff at all levels and locations. We are optimistic that with high-level leadership and support, the programme will pursue a more strategic approach that will empower staff and make the Organization more capable of handling the formidable challenges ahead.

8. The staff associations, therefore, would like to reiterate the importance of the availability and effective utilization of the fund. In view of the experiences of the past few years, the cynicism about how the fund has been spent and what real change has resulted, it is necessary for staff and management to sit down to discuss new approaches that will lead to embedding learning and learning processes in the way we work.

### **General service staff salaries**

9. The current financial crisis is not just a global concern but has raised concern with the staff associations as well. In WHO, among the hardest hit by the rising cost of basic commodities and services are the general service staff in the lower grades, some of whom have to resort to loans to cover the increasing cost of their basic expenses. In addition, WHO is facing problems in retaining or recruiting local staff (general service staff and national professional officers) stationed at non-headquarters duty stations. The current financial crisis and the recruitment difficulties for general service staff highlight the problem that the staff associations have with the existing mechanism to adjust general service salaries, namely, the local salary survey methodology.

10. It is stated under Article 101 of the Charter of the United Nations that “the paramount consideration in the employment of the staff and in the determination of the conditions of service shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity.” To comply with the standards established by the Charter as regards the employment of **locally recruited staff**, the organizations of the United Nations system must be competitive with those employers in the same labour market that recruit staff of equally high calibre and qualifications for work and which is similar in nature and equal in value to that of the organizations.

11. Recently the International Civil Service Commission has sought to revise the local salary survey methodology. The staff associations feel that the proposed revisions are insufficient to deal with the difficulties related to salary levels and recruitment. We ask our administration to ensure that

management and staff representatives in local offices are fully involved in the entire process of the local salary survey. We would also like to see that a further revision of the local salary survey methodology will lead to better adherence to Article 101 of the Charter of the United Nations.

## **Gender**

12. The staff associations are concerned about the continuing gender imbalance in the employment of staff in the Organization. In the Western Pacific Region, for example, only one staff member in every four in the professional category is female. While we feel that employment conditions in some countries may discourage women from applying to vacant posts, it would be useful to conduct a careful analysis of the possible reasons for such an imbalance, with clear recommendations for measures that would encourage women to apply for jobs and that would result in a higher proportion of women among the recruited staff. Such an analysis would also help to identify measures that could contribute to a higher retention rate of women in the Organization. The staff associations are also ready to work with management on the identification of employment opportunities for spouses in countries with a serious gender imbalance in order to ensure equal recruitment opportunities.

## **Global management system**

13. Following the introduction of the global management system, the staff at headquarters and in the Regional Office for the Western Pacific have experienced many frustrations. In an open letter to the Director-General dated 5 September 2008, the headquarters Staff Association, supported by the Staff Association of WHO in the Western Pacific Region, expressed its concern about the many reports of bugs and problems in the implementation of the system. At headquarters and in the Western Pacific Region, staff have been very supportive in trying to make the system work, but sometimes frustration has got the upper hand, particularly when staff are affected by payroll problems. Another concern has been the difficulties related to payment of suppliers, including consultants, forcing staff to explain repeatedly why payments are delayed. Obviously, these frustrations have an impact on the working atmosphere.

14. The staff associations are pleased to know that the Director-General has indicated that further roll-out of the global management system to other regions will take place only when the system is working smoothly and most of the problems have been resolved. I assure you that the staff at headquarters and in the Western Pacific Region are fully committed to making the system work, and I conclude with a quote from the aforementioned open letter to the Director-General: "All of us joined WHO under the assumption that what we do saves lives. When we are prevented from doing that work, it is more than professional frustration or fear that our own performance will be judged negatively in a 'results-based' system. We are concerned for the lives of people whom we affect, whether it is a staff member who is a single mother trying to make rent, or a small business dependent on a contract, or a person living with AIDS in Africa."

15. Once again, I emphasize that the staff associations are pleased that the Director-General is committed to an effective and open dialogue between management and staff. We are confident that this open dialogue not only serves the interests of the individual staff of the Organization but also benefits the Organization at large.

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