

Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations

Mr Chairman, honourable members of the Executive Board, distinguished delegates and colleagues,

1. The WHO, PAHO, UNAIDS and IARC staff associations, recognizing that this is the last session of the Executive Board under the outgoing Director-General, would like to acknowledge and thank Dr Margaret Chan for her leadership and guidance through various challenges and throughout the internal WHO reform, and for her support of the work and contributions of the staff associations.
2. Throughout 2016, the staff associations have continued to work with senior management in several important areas, and appreciate this opportunity to present to the Executive Board the staff's point of view on major issues that have a direct impact on the staff, as well as on the performance, efficiency and credibility of the Organization.

STAFF-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS

3. The staff associations acknowledge the prevailing positive staff-management relationships, which have been strengthened further by memoranda of understanding signed with management at several regional offices and at headquarters. Staff associations across the Organization remain committed to engaging constructively with management on issues that affect staff working conditions and influence WHO performance.
4. We note with concern, however, that important contributions made by the staff associations in the mutual interests of the Organization and its staff are often not incorporated. An example of this is the current harmonized selection process for longer-term positions, in which the administration has included a clause ending the practice by which vacancy notices are shared with the headquarters Staff Association prior to publication as a way of ensuring the adherence to agreed standards on minimum qualifications and experience. We request that this practice be reinstated.
5. We believe that it is in the Organization's interests to listen to and address staff concerns. For the future, we call for more meaningful consultation and engagement.

MANDATORY AGE OF SEPARATION

6. Through resolution 70/244 (2015), adopted by the Fifth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, Member States decided "that the mandatory age of separation for staff recruited before 1 January 2014 should be raised by the organizations of the United Nations common system to 65 years, at the latest by 1 January 2018, taking into account acquired rights of staff".

7. The staff associations note that this recommendation is fully aligned with WHO's public health policy on ageing and would allow staff to continue contributing to the health insurance and pension schemes for a longer period. However, WHO is now asking Member States to choose an implementation date beyond 1 January 2018.

8. The staff associations welcome and fully support the decision taken by the representatives of United Nations Member States through their permanent missions to the United Nations in New York, and specifically those participating in the work of the Fifth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, to implement the resolution on the mandatory age of separation "no later than 1 January 2018". We urge WHO to adhere to that timeline for implementation and sincerely hope that this will be emphasized during the Executive Board's discussions.

STAFF WORKING CONDITIONS

9. Several staff members have benefitted from the interim measures on teleworking, which were adopted in 2014. Given the Organization's vision for a more flexible workforce, and to address the persisting levels of gender inequity in the Organization, we welcome the administration's open commitment to rapidly adopt a comprehensive and modern policy, including an effective framework for implementation, and monitoring its uptake across the Organization with a view to increasing efficiency and productivity. The staff associations pledge to work with management in developing and rolling out this policy, which promises long-term benefits both for the staff and for WHO.

10. We are deeply concerned that harassment continues to remain a challenge at all levels of the Organization, often with undesirable consequences on staff health. This is unacceptable. There is a proposal to make human resources management (HRD) the main reference point for dealing with harassment cases. As much as we recognize the professionalism and expertise of our HRD colleagues on human resources issues, we strongly believe that harassment is a specialized area that should be managed by experts in that domain. Moreover, the possibility and fear of real and perceived conflicts of interest exist when harassment cases are handled by HRD. This may result in staff not accessing or being denied the full support that they may need. We strongly believe that, for the Organization to enjoy and reap the full benefit of a motivated and functional staff, it is important to establish an independent office, with the appropriate expertise, which is empowered to deal with and manage all instances of harassment in the workplace.

11. The Respectful Workplace initiative is a great initiative to improve staff working conditions. We applaud the administration for the importance given to this initiative thus far, which has been demonstrated by the designation of a day dedicated to this cause. However, there is need to delineate and clarify the scope of the Respectful Workplace Initiative for ease of implementation and monitoring. The staff associations commit to working with management to further define the behaviours and scenarios that constitute disrespect in the workplace. This will help identify mechanisms for their management.

GEOGRAPHICAL MOBILITY

12. We welcome the first annual evaluation of the implementation of the WHO geographical mobility policy published in January 2017. We support its recommendations to increase the frequency and reduce the duration of each compendium exercise, to increase the number of positions advertised in the compendium, to establish clear channels of communication and messages, and to promote mobility through innovative and equitable options, such as longer-term project-related staff exchange programmes and "staff swaps".

13. While we acknowledge the time and effort invested in the policy as it stands, we strongly recommend that the incentives proposed during the consultations on the policy, such as the introduction of promotions through mobility, should be reconsidered. It is also important to ensure that staff members who through no fault of their own cannot move to another post as required by the policy, such as in the absence of a suitable post to move to or in the event of personal circumstances beyond their control, are not penalized in any way.

14. The WHO mobility policy currently places the burden of finding a suitable post on the individual staff member. In light of the limitations of that approach, we recommend that the policy should integrate some of the good practices employed by other United Nations organizations with a long tradition and experience of mobility, such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Programme. Such good practices include prior identification and matching of staff to existing posts by the administration, rather than placing the burden of finding a suitable post on staff members themselves. In this approach, a performance-based system finds and offers a number of suitable choices to staff as their time for mobility draws near. We therefore recommend that HRD should take on the responsibility to identify some suitable choices for mobility for each staff member to help improve the planning and efficiency of the mobility exercise.

GENDER EQUITY

15. We congratulate the outgoing Director-General, Dr Margaret Chan, for championing the WHO policy on gender and note with appreciation the gains that have been made on several fronts. We are also pleased to note the significant increase in the number of women in Member State delegations to meetings of the WHO governing bodies. However, the lack of gender equity in WHO, with fewer than 38% of posts of grade P4 and above being held by women, should be considered a grave and urgent cause for concern not just for staff but also for Member States. Moreover, other inequities also exist with regard to posts below the P4 level, which should also be addressed.

16. The staff associations request that Member States catalyse and accelerate gender equity at WHO, and call on the administration to outline concrete actions in hiring practices, career development, teleworking and other interventions that will help bridge the gender gap faster, and report on progress by the next session of the Executive Board.

THE WHO HEALTH EMERGENCIES PROGRAMME

17. The newly established WHO Health Emergencies Programme is beginning to show results and demonstrate WHO's operational effectiveness. However, the Programme requires sustained commitment and funding from Member States for all three levels of the Organization if WHO, through its staff, is to make a sustained and greater impact on the populations it serves. The transition to the new way of working in health emergencies requires, as promised during the reform process, the retooling, reskilling and training of existing staff and the systematic training of new personnel. The staff associations call on Member States to ensure dedicated and predictable funding for this purpose. We call on the management to implement a comprehensive and systematic staff and personnel training programme. This will not only increase WHO's performance in emergencies but will serve the duty of care obligations the Organization has towards its staff, especially those working in the dangerous environments of health emergencies. We trust that, in rolling out the new Programme, staff working in the Programme will be treated no less fairly than staff outside it, including with regard to mobility, opportunities for career development, and deployments.

18. The staff associations note that the Health Emergencies Programme, which has many new functions and posts around the world, provides a great opportunity to pilot and test creative initiatives for staff career development. This may be through mobility, but must essentially also include opportunities for promotions.

CONCLUSION

19. In conclusion, we thank you for the opportunity to outline some of the key policy and practice areas that require further development, improvement and better articulation. Please be assured that we are fully committed to continuing the constructive dialogue with the administration to safeguard staff rights and thus to contribute actively to our Organization's mission through the joint staff-management consultations and working and collaborative efforts. It is our hope that you will view our concerns and requests as a contribution to the success of the Organization's mission.

20. We would like to take the opportunity to wish Dr Margaret Chan well after her term of office, and as always, we thank you for this opportunity to report to the Executive Board.

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