
Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations

1. The staff associations of WHO, UNAIDS and IARC are pleased to make this statement to the Executive Board on behalf of over 9000 staff members. This report highlights staff perspectives on staff mental health, abuse of authority, harassment and sexual exploitation, and on WHO's transformation agenda. It also briefly touches on three other issues that have an impact on the ability of staff to deliver on our shared mandate: flexible working arrangements, local salary surveys and geographical mobility. A verbal statement to the Executive Board will be delivered during its 144th session to complement this report.

2. We, the staff associations, acknowledge senior management's continuing effort to address staffing gaps related to diversity and gender parity. We also recognize efforts in proposing draft policies and principles that address career development and management, such as initiatives to recognize excellence, amend requirements in vacancy notices to accommodate a broader spectrum of staff in the competitive process for higher grades, and relocate staff who have served in hardship or remote duty stations.

MENTAL HEALTH

3. In 2015, just over 17 000 United Nations staff members across 11 United Nations entities completed a Global Well-Being survey. Approximately half of all United Nations staff members who responded to the survey reported experiencing symptoms that can be interpreted as consistent with serious mental health conditions. These results suggest that United Nations staff members experience higher levels of common mental health conditions than would be expected among the workforce of an organization concerned with public health, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and irresponsible drinking.¹

4. The United Nations Secretary General launched a system-wide mental health and well-being strategy on 16 October 2018.² It is reassuring to see that the United Nations system is finally putting the mental health of staff members on a par with their physical health. This is a commendable example of United Nations organizations honouring their duty to care for staff and "walking the talk" with regard to their own workplace.

¹ Specific data on staff of WHO and related organizations are not available. The results of a separate survey carried out by WHO Staff Health and Wellbeing services have not been released to staff.

² A healthy workforce for a better world: United Nations system mental health and well-being strategy, May 2018 (https://www.unsystem.org/CEBPublicFiles/mental_health_well_being_strategy_final_2018_may_25th_english.pdf, accessed 6 November 2018).

5. Going forward, the staff associations would like to see a holistic approach to addressing staff mental health concerns and aligning the implementation of the strategy with policies related to return to work, harassment and other relevant issues. We look forward to working with the administration to eliminate the stigma associated with mental health conditions.

6. The staff associations will make every effort to support the implementation of the UN mental health and well-being strategy, including a WHO-specific strategy, in the interest of a healthy and enabling workplace for WHO staff. We will report on steps towards implementing this strategy in WHO and affiliated organizations in our verbal statement to the Board.

ZERO TOLERANCE FOR ABUSE OF AUTHORITY, SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND HARASSMENT

7. A safe, enabling and inclusive work environment allows staff to contribute to the fullest towards the mandate and objectives of the Organization. We welcome the introduction of the two mandatory online training courses, “The prevention of harassment, sexual harassment and abuse of authority” and “To serve with pride – zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse”, and the effort made to ensure that all staff, including at the highest levels of the Organization, completed this training. We have received positive feedback from staff on the benefits of being educated about acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in the workplace. New staff are now required to take these courses within the first three months of their employment with WHO.

8. The staff associations look forward to working with the administration to identify how to supplement these mandatory courses with other actions to prevent and address harassment, sexual harassment and abuse of authority at the workplace as well as the sexual exploitation of beneficiary populations. These actions could include collectively defining and modelling behaviours that promote an inclusive and respectful work environment, implementing an active bystander programme, and providing information about access to psychosocial support and about how to navigate the WHO internal justice system.

9. We also look forward to further supporting the efforts of the administration to revise and modernize its policy on the prevention of harassment and sexual harassment, based on international best practice, to ensure that it is victim-centred, protects reporters against retaliation and false claims and ensures timely access to justice and accountability for implementation. Staff associations have been actively engaged with the administration in revising the policy and will continue to cooperate in this regard in the best interests of both staff and the Organization. We hope to be able to report on the adoption of the revised policy in our verbal statement.

TRANSFORMATION AGENDA

10. We, the staff associations, support the Director-General in his vision for transformation, and take note of the several independent and interdependent streams of work, including those that seek to review the values of the Organization and identify a revised operating model with the aim of achieving full transparency in related processes, re-establishing and boosting trust among the workforce, restoring staff morale and ensuring the optimal use of skill sets of existing staff.

11. We believe that as we move forward with the transformation agenda, it is important for staff at all levels and in all duty stations to be fully involved and to have a common understanding of how the various ongoing processes will contribute to “making WHO a modern organization that works seamlessly to make a measurable difference in people’s health at the country level”, and how this will

translate into 1 billion more people having health coverage, 1 billion more being safe, and 1 billion more living improved lives in countries where we serve by 2023.

12. Staff look forward to clear processes across the Organization as well as clear communication and consultation that actively engage us and keep us informed on the transformation agenda. We particularly commend the “Values in Action” training programme initiated in 2016 as one of several tools for staff engagement and credible feedback on decisions made. While this programme ran for several months, lack of sustainable funding limited its impact. We would therefore welcome additional resources to allow global access to this empowering training programme.

INTERNAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

13. The staff associations recognize and commend the work being done to strengthen the internal justice system, which aims to ensure that staff have early access to a forum for justice, before referring the issue to international administrative tribunals.

14. We point out that equality before courts or judicial entities, and a fair trial, are basic human rights that are enforced in international organizations by international administrative tribunals such as the Administrative Tribunal of the International Labour Organization (ILOAT). The principles of an independent justice system and the separation of powers are enshrined in national laws as well as international conventions. ‘Independent’, in this sense, means enabling judges to act according to their conscience and to adjudicate cases fairly, free from pressures from governments, funding bodies, armies, or any other source of state power or inappropriate influence.

15. We are also of the view that the best way to protect the Organization and its important work from the risks of litigation and lawsuits is to promote amendments to existing statutes in the judicial system that positively impact justice, and ensure that all parties act within the prescribed rules, regulations and procedures.

16. With this in mind, the WHO staff associations look forward to collaborating with our legal office to review the ILOAT statutes, and thereby continue to influence and ensure a high standard of justice for staff.

RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE

17. The Global Staff Management Council in October 2018 provided us with an opportunity to present the respectful workplace initiative, highlight the reality on the ground in major offices, and discuss what has worked and what has not worked. In some regions the importance of establishing and maintaining a respectful workplace has been recognized, and both Organization-driven activities (such as awards recognizing efforts to build a respectful workplace given by certain Regional Directors) and staff-led activities are taking place in this regard. In this context, celebrating a respectful workplace day and organizing related activities throughout the year are good initiatives that allow staff to revisit and reinforce shared organizational values. The staff associations recognize however that the mechanisms for ensuring and sustaining cultural shifts towards agreed values and aspirations are currently lacking, and we urge the administration to make use of the ongoing work of transformation to scale up efforts in this regard. We encourage ongoing engagement and financial support from the administration to focal persons in major offices to allow for expansion of activities in support of a respectful workplace that hones existing values and aspirations so that the Organization can over time reap benefits such as a healthy workforce, high performers, motivated staff members and continued collaboration between management and staff associations.

FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

18. Teleworking as part of a comprehensive flexible working arrangement has been proven to motivate employees, increase their productivity and decrease organizational costs. Notably, in 2003, the United Nations adopted a comprehensive and universal policy on flexible working arrangements which provides for work away from the office, or “telecommuting”.¹ This experience at the United Nations, including its offices in Geneva, has also served to identify and correct a number of misconceptions about teleworking.² Similar policies have also been implemented with positive outcomes in other major international organizations such as the European Commission.

19. However, across the Organization there are varying levels of support for teleworking, which may be granted on an exceptional basis (normally for health reasons) or on an occasional or ad hoc basis. Consequently, the application of teleworking differs from one duty station to another.

20. While this can be explained by the decentralized structure of the Organization, the lack of promulgation of a fully developed and global teleworking policy is a barrier to providing flexible ways of working for an organization which is seeking to transform itself into a modern and agile workplace.

21. We, the staff associations, believe that a harmonized policy on teleworking would allow us to better achieve our collective vision of having a positive impact in the countries we serve. We would therefore like management to consider further developing the policy so that it addresses teleworking challenges such as inconsistent internet connectivity in some countries, by providing well-defined guidelines that can be applied by individual country offices to suit different working environments and personnel. In this way, WHO can put into place teleworking arrangements that help staff to benefit from a healthy work–life balance, increase productivity and continue working in the face of events such as extreme weather conditions and public transport strikes.

SALARY SURVEYS AND DEVALUATION OF LOCAL CURRENCY

22. Staff conditions of service in the United Nations common system are regulated and coordinated by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC). Nevertheless, the staff associations wish to draw attention to a few issues affecting WHO staff.

23. The ICSC is required to ensure that the salaries and conditions of service for locally recruited staff in United Nations organizations are based on best prevailing local conditions (the Flemming principle). However, locally recruited staff in some WHO country and regional offices have faced considerable losses in terms of real income due to consistent devaluation of local currencies in their corresponding duty stations. This constitutes a major problem for locally recruited staff, including both general services and national professional officers, to the extent that some affected staff members are unable to meet their financial obligations, and some have taken the step of opting for early retirement to avoid further losses in their pension. The staff associations are also concerned that local salaries in some WHO offices do not reflect prevailing salary trends, further undercutting local staff earnings and consequently affecting the ability of WHO to attract and retain suitably qualified staff.

¹ See <https://hr.un.org/page/flexible-working-arrangements> (accessed 6 November 2018).

² See Myths and Facts about Flexible Working Arrangements at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/ianwge/myths%20and%20facts%20%20FWAs%203.pdf> (accessed 6 November 2018).

24. Working through the Federation of International Civil Servants Associations, we advocate for improving mechanisms for responding to the negative effects of high inflation and currency devaluations on salaries and pensions. We would welcome the support of the Executive Board for more responsive measures that can uphold purchasing power for all staff, irrespective of where they serve.

MOBILITY

25. The latest version of the mandatory geographical mobility policy is expected to take effect during 2019, in five out of six regions of the Organization.¹ Given the importance of this policy for developing a modern WHO workforce with broad and diverse experience, the Global Staff/Management Council, at its meeting in October 2018, discussed a set of principles presented by management and staff representatives. These include fairness to staff, objective and transparent processes, gradual roll-out that serves organizational goals, continued learning from best practices of other United Nations agencies and streamlining other WHO policies such as selection and promotion so that they place value on the mobility process.

26. While these principles align with some of the expectations of staff, the staff associations are of the view that the implementation of a mobility policy should also include the optimal use of workforce.

27. We, the staff associations, would like to thank the members of the Executive Board for taking an interest in the welfare of staff of WHO and related entities, so that staff can continue to give their best and move the Organization to greater heights.

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¹ Staff members of the Pan American Health Organization are exempt from the WHO geographical mobility policy.