

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

1. This statement is presented to the Executive Board on behalf of the collective staff associations of WHO, IARC, PAHO and UNAIDS. We would like to take this opportunity to reaffirm the commitment and dedication of the staff we represent to fulfilling WHO's mission, as outlined in its Constitution, and the mandates from Member States to implement the next general programme of work and the health-related Sustainable Development Goals. In this context, we recognize that the increase in assessed contributions marks a radical shift, paving the way towards a more sustainably financed Organization. Staff play a key role, supporting WHO's work at the country level and the delivery of results at the global and regional levels.
2. Recognizing that the world is currently facing emerging and re-emerging diseases, and that our countries are experiencing global, regional and national challenges and threats, we would like to express our solidarity in these challenging times with Member States and their national health workforces.
3. We would also like to take a moment to mention all the United Nations staff who have lost their lives in duty stations in areas of conflict; during 2023 alone some 134 United Nations staff members lost their lives.<sup>1</sup> Growing violence, fuelled by civil unrest, organized crime and geopolitical conflict is affecting communities around the world and global peacebuilding efforts.<sup>2</sup> We would like to recognize all United Nations system staff and health workers operating in areas of conflict.
4. We acknowledge the unique role that staff play in achieving international development objectives. As international civil servants, our members work in particular and unique circumstances linked to their roles and responsibilities in distinct functions and duty stations, which require specific human resources policies and regulations that take their specific working conditions into account, in accordance with the principles of the International Civil Service Commission and corporate culture.
5. The working relationship between the staff associations and WHO management is based upon cooperation and mutual interest, with the aim of making the Organization a workplace that is free of harassment, inclusive, respectful and diverse, and that fosters a balance between work and personal life, with a strong sense of solidarity with Member States and populations in need.
6. As staff representatives, we participate openly and on voluntary basis. We engage in dialogue within the framework of the Global Staff/Management Council forum, and with our respective Regional Directors and WHO management. In addition, the Director-General's ongoing commitment to regularly

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<sup>1</sup> Information provided by United Nations Peacekeeping, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities> (accessed 20 November 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Reference taken from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/situations/conflict-in-Israel-and-oPt> (accessed 21 November 2023).

meeting and engaging with staff representatives demonstrates his willingness to find solutions that benefit both the Organization and its workforce.

7. The staff associations commend WHO management for various initiatives aimed at promoting efficiencies, transparency and accountability, including: the implementation of the Business Management System; the establishment of the Respectful Workplace Programme to encourage kindness, diversity, equity, inclusion, cohesiveness and mutual respect; other activities on mental health and well-being; and the recent establishment of the Transparency and Fairness Committee (Mobility TFC), as part of the Global Geographical Mobility Programme.

8. In this statement, we would like to focus on the following issues:

- transparent methodologies for the remuneration of staff and classification of duty stations
- the internal justice system
- career development opportunities
- staff mobility
- safeguarding the well-being of staff.

## **TRANSPARENT METHODOLOGIES FOR THE REMUNERATION OF STAFF AND CLASSIFICATION OF DUTY STATIONS**

9. As international civil servants, our working conditions are regulated by the principles established by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC), which guide the methodologies and processes for determining salaries, allowances and the hardship classification of duty stations, among other conditions of employment. The work of the ICSC is complex, lengthy and does not facilitate mutual understanding of, and therefore transparency in, the application of those methodologies.

10. This situation limits the Organization's potential to be ranked as one of the most competitive employers for international professional staff and locally recruited staff. The current system and methodologies used to determine post adjustments and local remuneration in duty stations present serious challenges, especially in the delivery of results. Most United Nations agencies, and in particular specialized agencies such as WHO – which require highly specific competencies and skills – find it difficult to attract staff on the basis of the current compensation package. At the same time, there is ongoing pressure from Member States for increased flexibility and mobility, and it is difficult to make special arrangements for particular duty stations or areas of work.

11. We have mentioned this situation in previous statements and respectfully appeal to the members of the Executive Board to call on the ICSC to take steps to ensure that the purchasing power of our staff is at least equal to that of comparable employers, especially in duty stations seeing real-terms salary decreases (staff paid in the local currency) as a result of soaring inflation, and therefore currency devaluation, in those countries. This is a global trend, affecting duty stations in Africa, Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean, Latin America and the Caribbean, and even in certain European countries.

12. With regard to the hardship classification of duty stations, it is critical that the methodology applied accurately reflects the realities of the surveyed duty station. According to the information

available on the ICSC site,<sup>1</sup> a total of 46 United Nations Member States (24% of countries surveyed) have duty stations classified as category D and E. The classification of duty stations is a critical element, with a direct impact on the Organization's ability to attract, recruit and retain staff, as well as on their mobility. We respectfully appeal to the members of the Executive Board to advocate for a more transparent and systematic application of the relevant methodology.

13. In March 2023, the ICSC launched a comprehensive review of the United Nations common system compensation package (salaries, allowances and benefits), carried out on a five-year cycle, involving a system-wide global staff survey to assess factors affecting staff retention. The survey results and analysis will be submitted to the United Nations General Assembly and will inform decisions on the future of the United Nations compensation system, including compensation elements to be reviewed and conditions of service to be considered for policy updates. The survey is to be completed by staff members in the general service category, national professional officers and those in the professional and higher categories holding open-ended, fixed-term and temporary appointments, as well as junior professional officers at duty stations across the globe.

14. We are optimistic that the survey results will help the ICSC to understand the needs of staff, and in particular to consider certain specific duty stations, to facilitate mobility within the Organization and with respect to other agencies and programmes of the United Nations common system.

## **INTERNAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**

15. We advocate for an internal justice system anchored in the international human rights framework and upheld through a mechanism that provides affordable and confidential access to fair and due process. We welcome the initiative to establish an office similar to the United Nations Office of Staff Legal Assistance, or a staff (legal) counsellor, in each regional office and at headquarters, with a view to providing support to country offices and geographically dispersed offices. Moreover, we welcome the recommendation for a focus on outreach and serious investment in training on the functioning of the internal justice system, including the creation of a toolkit for applicants who choose to represent themselves.

16. One of the recommendations resulting from the 2022 review of the internal justice system, which WHO management made a commitment to implement, was to establish an office for legal assistance to staff. Given that not all staff have the necessary resources or access to legal representation, the advantage of such a service is that it operates on the principles of equity and fairness. While some staff associations provide legal support to their membership (EURO, WHO headquarters and PAHO/AMRO), the majority of staff do not have access to legal assistance, especially in the area of international administrative law, a highly specialized and expensive field. It is important for all staff to have equal access to legal services. This approach is not new within the United Nations system, and staff legal services are currently provided by the United Nations Secretariat and by various United Nations funds and programmes.

17. Another advantage of this type of service is that legal counsels will have a common understanding of the WHO internal justice system, which may help to resolve cases in a timely and efficient manner. In addition, the service could be decentralized at the regional level and performance monitored using key indicators.

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<sup>1</sup> International Civil Service Commission: Hardship Classification – consolidated list of entitlements circular (document ICSC/CIRC/HC/31, <https://icsc.un.org/Home/GetDataFile/7385>, accessed 21 November 2023).

18. In the light of the above, we recommend that WHO management expedite investigations and allocate additional human resources to WHO regional offices to speed up the resolution of internal justice cases.

## **CAREER DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

19. The adoption of measures such as the WHO Global Geographical Mobility Policy, the short-term developmental assignment policy and policies relating to the promotion of staff, aimed to foster gender-neutral professional growth and career development, as well as access to career progression opportunities and experiences. Last year, the Department of Human Resources and Talent Management<sup>1</sup> informed the Executive Board that a high-level career management framework had been established and updated, focusing on two main WHO career streams: public health and operations. The new career development programme is entitled “Advance”. We recognize the potential of this programme to enhance staff excellence in different fields and functions, and we encourage the establishment of key performance indicators.

20. We also want to stress to the management the importance of recruiting staff using generic post descriptions wherever possible, in order to facilitate mobility and promote career development.

## **STAFF MOBILITY**

21. Staff mobility presents both an opportunity and a challenge. Mobility should be strategically implemented to benefit the Organization and promote global health, while ensuring the health and well-being of staff. For years, the staff associations have advocated for well-managed mobility and the establishment of generic post descriptions to streamline the mobility process. The policy has since been revised to address non-matchable positions (specialists), special circumstances relating to LGBTIQ+ and family circumstances, and maintaining continuity within teams. The implementation of the voluntary phase of the mobility policy will reveal the practical impact of these changes. The inclusion of current post holders in selection panels has already proven advantageous. A comprehensive staff survey might reveal the varying mobility preferences in major offices (including at WHO headquarters) and country offices, potentially leading to further reviews. Factors that need to be taken into account in the Organization’s geographical mobility policy and its implementation include job security, life planning, evolving security conditions at duty stations, time-limited contracts, funding constraints, mobility costs and planning needs relating to the personal and family lives of staff working for an organization which has not previously had a mobility framework.

22. We would like to highlight the importance of duty of care towards staff. WHO staff cannot continue to repeatedly serve in hardship duty stations without reprieve. African Region and Eastern Mediterranean Region staff associations urge management to prioritize the rotation of eligible staff working in hardship duty stations to serve in other locations, where they can be reunited with their families.

## **SAFEGUARDING THE WELL-BEING OF STAFF**

23. The WHO workforce should not be subjected to direct or indirect forms of discrimination, or any form of harassment. The staff associations advocate for a work environment that fosters freedom of expression, respect and trust, and is free from fear of retaliation and microaggressions. The work culture

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<sup>1</sup> Document EB152/47, Human resources: update.

needs to enhance staff work–life balance, happiness and belonging, and thereby their productivity, while protecting against an excessive workload and mental and physical exhaustion. It also needs to responsibly leverage technology in employees’ daily work.

24. All WHO’s workforce have demonstrated their commitment to the Organization’s objectives and adapted to the new working arrangements that have emerged following the COVID-19 pandemic; we welcome the efforts made to raise awareness of, and prioritize, mental health as part of staff well-being. We are committed to supporting efforts to introduce preventive measures and strengthen access to mental, psychological and emotional well-being services, especially in duty stations where such services are not readily available. One of the recommendations made by the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations System, which published its first comprehensive review of mental health and well-being in United Nations system organizations, was that staff counsellors should be employed in D and E duty stations. There is no health without mental health, and we need to be better at practising what we preach in this area. To that end, we would like to ask the Member States to assist the Organization in implementing the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit.

25. While we recognize that the current working arrangements provide flexibility in terms of working hours and administrative matters, it has also come to our attention that: staff sometimes feel obliged to work or respond to phone calls and emails outside working hours, with an impact on their private life and leading to burn out; the scheduling of back-to-back meetings can create an excessive burden; and more support could be offered to members of staff experiencing isolation and anxiety.

26. The evidence indicates that there is no such thing as “back to normal”; if we consider as normal the status quo prior to the pandemic, it is clear that the workforce is facing dramatic changes, including: shifting family dynamics; the impact of certain processes becoming virtual, including consultations, training, learning, administrative and enabling functions; and new trends relating to the use of resources for face-to-face meetings, missions and travel in general, which need to take into account public health and security. Ongoing monitoring is required by management.

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