

Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations

Mr Chairman, honourable members of the Executive Board, Director-General, Regional Directors, colleagues,

1. We would like to start by stating that we greatly appreciate the initiative of Dr Chan to meet with the Presidents of all WHO staff associations in March, and her acknowledgement of the important consultative role the staff associations have in matters related to personnel policy and conditions of service.

2. System-wide United Nations reform is entering a critical phase in its effort to build a “stronger Organization worldwide”. Representing the staff of WHO globally, we welcome this reform if it contributes to a more effective working environment, and to a healthy and empowered workforce that is better positioned to improve health outcomes in Member States. To do this, we believe, WHO needs a coherent vision capable of sustaining the morale and the commitment of staff as the Organization grows, changes and adapts in response to the shifting needs of the global environment. In brief, we, the staff of WHO, have understood that we need to continue to learn to embody the principles of a learning organization.

3. Without such a vision, and adopting what is perhaps a cynical perspective, over the past 10 years WHO staff have been subjected to a seemingly never-ending series of organizational and managerial reforms, reforms which have been introduced at times with little or no meaningful consultation with the global staff associations. More worryingly, if one is inclined to be pessimistic, one could conclude that some of these reforms have not been explicitly linked to a positive long-term strategic vision for WHO; and that they have not had their desired impact, or have not been systematically assessed for efficiency and effectiveness. Examples include the creation of the management support units, which have by now undergone several successive “face lifts”; the imposition of the “four years and out” rule; and, more recently, the headquarters-based strategic direction and competency review. While positive in parts, all of these reforms have been limited in achieving their intended objectives and have had, as an unintended consequence, some serious negative impacts on staff.

4. We may soon see perhaps the most significant reform exercise undertaken to date, namely: the harmonization of global business practices and the establishment of explicit policies for delegation and decentralization worldwide, as well as the corresponding implementation of the global management system and the subsequent relocation and “offshoring” of back-office transactions in a centralized service delivery centre.

5. These measures hold real potential for positive change, and it appears that they are linked to an explicit strategic vision for WHO. There is no doubt that they will significantly change how we work and manage the resources of the Organization. The global staff associations do not object to these

measures; in fact we welcome them and stand ready to support them, especially if they help to enable the adoption of a learning approach throughout the Organization. We note, however, that, at least in the short to medium term, whether staff in general and the external world will benefit from these changes will depend largely on the actions of rank-and-file line managers currently serving throughout the Organization.

6. It has been said that there is “nothing worse than an inefficient bureaucracy, except for an efficient bureaucracy”. The relevance of these words for us here today is that the authority of managers and staff at all levels will inevitably be significantly increased, as WHO puts into place a technical and policy environment in which routine administration can be more tightly controlled and monitored, while also being more decentralized than ever before; as we become, in other words, an organization in which resourcing, planning and implementation are part of a seamless whole. If, however, their knowledge of and adherence to the Organization’s policies and business rules do not keep pace with their responsibilities, and if compliance and accountability are not actively monitored, we feel compelled to note that there is a real risk of widespread demotivation and frustration among staff.

7. Unless the Organization can deliver an acceptable level of system-wide performance – in terms of its core, managerial and leadership competencies – through reinforced training and the establishment of robust checks and balances, it is conceivable that those who are ultimately responsible for this Organization, the Member States, may some day regret having created what is, in effect, nothing more than “an efficient bureaucracy”. We call to your attention, in this regard, that staff in country offices, who are removed in both time and space from certain oversight mechanisms, can be particularly vulnerable to shortfalls in organizational competence and performance.

8. While we believe that the technical aspects of the global management system are closely managed, we fear that the corresponding human-resources issues, with their requirements of human adaptation and learning, may require more time to implement and absorb than has been foreseen in the timetable for the roll-out of the global management system. In other words, it is not enough for a global management system to function fully according to its purely technical specifications, if the rank and file of the staff who will be affected by it have not had sufficient time to absorb and integrate its implications into their knowledge and behaviour. In order to mitigate any negative impact on staff, and on the Organization’s delivery of essential services, we would like to see adequate emphasis given to these issues.

9. We believe, moreover, that a core part of the success of any reform initiative should be an increased focus on the development and learning of staff at all levels of the Organization. A set of policies on career development – integrating rotation, mobility and learning – should be promoted to develop and sustain a versatile workforce. We are pleased that this has been partially realized by the inclusion of a staff development module in the electronic performance management and development system. However, this individual-level measure clearly needs to be supported with corresponding and coherent measures at the level of programme planning and budgeting, as well as, possibly, a rethinking of the strategic purposes of the programme on staff development and learning.

10. We acknowledge the decision by the administration to engage the global staff associations in the task forces that will have responsibility for oversight of issues, including development of a strong set of safety net policies, arising from implementation of the global management system and the setting up of the service delivery centre. We are also encouraged by the policies of the contract reform that is coming into force on 1 July of this year, which offer many significant benefits to staff.

11. The Director-General has spoken strongly and consistently about her policy of zero tolerance for harassment, abuse of authority and misconduct in WHO, and we are also encouraged by these signs. We are pleased to report that, in addition to “talking the talk”, Dr Chan has evidently been “walking the walk” – in other words, leading by example. Consistency of words and actions, we argue, is even more important for our colleagues in decentralized locations, who may have limited or no access to an ombudsman and who may legitimately fear retaliation when they express concerns about conditions of service.

12. Nevertheless, it can frequently appear that the reigning vision of the Organization – from the Programme, Budget and Administration Committee, through the Executive Board, and ultimately to the Secretariat, of which the Director-General is the highest-ranking officer – is still one that effectively minimizes consultation with staff on the development of the high-level policies that affect the conditions of service most profoundly. The input of staff representatives is all too often limited to the implementation of policies that have already been decided. Regrettably, in our view, this was also the case with respect to the high-level policies surrounding the global management system. The staff associations, for their part, would like to have the opportunity to demonstrate that they can contribute to such policy formulation in a constructive way that not only adds value to the process but also provides a unique channel for staff to express their interests and concerns.

13. Our intention is not to be negative: WHO staff are proud to serve the Organization, and have demonstrated their loyalty, adaptability and willingness to learn and grow. However, staff also change, and now staff are weary, anxious and suffering from a case of “chronic reform fatigue syndrome”. The global staff associations therefore feel it is critical at this juncture for the Organization to make extraordinary efforts to protect and absorb staff who will be affected by forthcoming changes, not only those resulting from the implementation of the global management system and the service delivery centre, but also those to come thereafter.

14. In summary, we acknowledge with appreciation the efforts of the current administration to build a stronger and more dynamic consultative process with the global staff associations, and we have been encouraged by the progress made towards a more open and frank atmosphere for discussion of issues and concerns affecting personnel policy and the conditions of service.

15. Mr Chairman, honourable members of the Executive Board, Director-General, Regional Directors, colleagues, thank you for your consideration of the issues and concerns raised here today.

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