

Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations

1. This statement is presented on behalf of the staff associations of WHO, IARC, PAHO and UNAIDS, collectively representing staff across all major offices and duty stations.

Honouring colleagues and acknowledging loss of expertise

2. We begin by paying tribute to colleagues whose contracts ended in 2025 as a result of the prioritization and realignment exercise, and those who will be leaving in 2026 as the process concludes.

3. Behind every abolished post stood a colleague who contributed expertise, institutional memory and dedication to WHO's mission. Their departure represents not only a workforce adjustment but a significant human and technical loss.

4. We also recognize the impact on those who remain. Many have had to absorb additional responsibilities in an environment of uncertainty. Institutional recovery must therefore address not only structural alignment but also the human consequences of change, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Engagement, appreciation and shared responsibility

5. At the outset, we acknowledge that management engaged with the staff associations during one of the most challenging periods in WHO's recent history. We recognize the stated intention to apply principles of transparency, fairness and humanity throughout the prioritization and realignment process.

6. At the same time, it is important to reflect on how these principles were experienced in practice by staff and their representatives during implementation, with a view to strengthening future reform processes.

7. We reiterate our appreciation for the exceptional measures adopted in fulfilment of the Organization's duty of care towards the colleagues concerned, which provided meaningful support during a difficult transition.

8. We also wish to acknowledge the value of existing structured engagement platforms. Regular exchanges, including monthly meetings between the Director-General and the staff

associations, together with the Global Staff Management Council, provide a valuable space for dialogue and mutual understanding on workforce matters. As the Organization looks ahead, we trust that these strong foundations for engagement will be maintained and further strengthened in the next phase of leadership.

9. Staff across headquarters and regional and country offices continue to contribute to the Organization's mission in diverse operational contexts, including fragile and conflict-affected settings where the pressure is particularly acute. In this regard, we thank Member States for their recognition, at the previous meeting of the Programme, Budget and Administration Committee,¹ of the resilience and commitment of WHO's workforce. That recognition is highly valued by staff members across all levels of the Organization.

Communication and trust during change

10. While a number of briefings were held for Member States throughout the prioritization and realignment process, internal communication with staff followed a different rhythm. In a year marked by significant workforce reductions and structural change, opportunities for direct engagement with staff were perceived as limited.

11. Timely communication is an essential element of transparency and duty of care. Earlier clarity on priorities and structural changes could have reduced uncertainty, speculation and anxiety across the Organization.

12. Regular opportunities for direct dialogue between management and staff, including structured exchanges, will be important to rebuild trust and strengthen shared understanding going forward.

13. While staff association representatives participated actively in ad hoc review committees, their involvement was not always upstream, and access to background information from earlier stages of the prioritization process was limited. Participation at later stages did not equate to full involvement in earlier design considerations.

14. Early and structured engagement of staff associations in future reform processes will strengthen transparency, improve mutual understanding and enhance confidence in outcomes.

Organizational capacity and delivery expectations

15. The discussions at the previous Committee meeting acknowledged concerns regarding workload pressures across the Organization.¹

16. Despite structural realignment, workload levels remain high in many areas, particularly in country offices and emergency settings. Programme expectations continue to be significant, while staffing levels have been reduced.

17. We respectfully echo Member States' call to focus on core priorities. Without recalibration, there is a risk that fewer staff will continue to be expected to deliver pre-crisis outputs.

¹ See document EB158/4, paragraph 45.

18. Efforts to improve efficiency and sustainability must be balanced against a holistic consideration of the conditions required to maintain an effective and resilient workforce.

19. In some areas, staff perceive a growing mismatch between organizational priorities, Member State mandates and available human and financial resources.

Workplace mental health and well-being, occupational factors and organizational sustainability

20. In recent months, more and more staff members have expressed concern about workload pressure, psychological distress and declining well-being following the restructuring exercise. They have described a “more work with fewer staff” environment, sustained high unrealistic workloads and limited recovery time, added to accumulated job insecurity, uncertainty and conflicts in teams. In hardship duty stations and emergency settings, where staff already operate under demanding living and security conditions, these pressures may be further amplified.

21. Evidence from occupational health research consistently shows that staff shortages and workload intensification are primary risk factors for burnout, absenteeism and turnover. The Organization is not immune to these dynamics. Not addressing worsening working conditions will lead to lower performance, disengagement, poorer team dynamics and threat to health of the workforce.

22. Staff have highlighted several areas that could benefit from additional attention:

- the mounting burden in terms of responsibilities, administrative work and reporting;
- under-resourced staff support mechanisms, including Ombudsperson coverage and staff counselling services; and
- reports of conflicts, retaliation and strain within teams.

23. The report of the Ombudsperson to the 158th session of the Executive Board² highlighted the persistent fear of retaliation, conflict between staff members and performance management concerns in parts of the Organization. Informal resolution mechanisms remain an important safeguard; they are essential components of institutional health. Strengthening them must remain a priority.

24. Staff health and well-being services have indicated the need to address organizational, team and individual level factors at the workplace. While demand for managerial, team and counselling support has been extremely high and is increasing, and the number of higher-risk cases are rising, there are no adequate resources to address the needs.

25. We welcome the Director-General’s acknowledgement of the pressures faced by staff. Continued action is needed, including a proactive, Organization-wide response combining:

- adequate resourcing and strengthening of Ombudsperson and staff counselling services across all regions;

² Document EB158/INF./2.

- a structured review of workload sustainability aligned with current staffing levels;
- inclusion of the occupational mental health risk in the corporate risk registry and meaningful implementation of mitigation measures; and
- preventive, as opposed to only reactive, measures to mitigate burnout and other negative outcomes.

26. Workplace mental health is not an optional issue. The Organization has a responsibility to create a safe and healthy working environment at WHO.³ It is directly linked to programme delivery, organizational credibility and WHO's standing as a global leader in health.

Artificial intelligence and digital transformation

27. The Organization has signalled an increased emphasis on digital literacy and artificial intelligence (AI) within performance management frameworks.

28. The staff associations recognize that AI and digital tools can augment productivity, streamline processes and ease the administrative burden. However, AI must be framed and implemented as a supportive technology. It should complement, rather than replace, institutional expertise, tacit knowledge and professional judgement, and should not be positioned as a structural solution to workforce reductions.

29. Introducing AI-related objectives into performance management, particularly in a post-realignment context, may be perceived by staff as reinforcing an expectation to “do more with less”. Clear framing is therefore essential to avoid unintended messaging.

30. We encourage management to:

- clarify that AI is intended to support staff, not replace them;
- ensure that digital transformation is accompanied by process simplification; and
- engage staff associations early in discussions related to performance management reform.

31. In this context, the integrity of performance management reform is essential. The introduction of 360° review mechanisms for managers is a positive step in principle. However, for such mechanisms to be credible, reviewer selection processes must ensure independence, diversity of perspectives and protection against perceived bias. A process that allows managers to disproportionately select their own reviewers risks undermining confidence in the system.

32. Performance dialogue should also be reciprocal. While supervisors assess supervisees, structured and safe channels should exist for staff to provide upward feedback on leadership behaviour and managerial practices. Two-way accountability strengthens trust, improves organizational culture and is in line with WHO's commitment to transparency and fairness.

³ As recognized by the ILO in 2022, a safe and healthy working environment is a fundamental principle and right at work and a key building block of decent work, social justice and sustainable development. See the [ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up](#) (accessed 5 May 2026).

33. Technological innovation must reinforce, not undermine, workforce sustainability. In parallel with digital transformation, performance management reform must strengthen accountability and trust across the Organization.

Internal justice and institutional trust

34. The increase in requests for administrative reviews shows that staff seek clarity and fairness in decision-making processes. Timely resolution remains essential.

35. Delays in internal justice mechanisms risk compounding uncertainty and distress, and may erode confidence in institutional processes. Trust is built through consistent experience of fairness, transparency and responsiveness.

Financing sustainability and workforce stability

36. The financial constraints experienced over the past year, together with an increasingly complex global environment, continue to place significant demands on the Organization and its workforce.

37. We acknowledge management's sustained efforts to advance financing reform, and welcome the decision by Member States to progressively increase assessed contributions. Continued progress towards the agreed target of 50% of the base budget funded through assessed contributions will be essential to ensure a more predictable, sustainable and flexible financing model for WHO.

38. However, the effectiveness of this reform depends not only on commitments but also on timely payment of contributions. In this context, we encourage Member States to continue supporting WHO through the timely and full payment of assessed contributions, in line with agreed schedules. Meeting payment deadlines, including key instalments due within the current and upcoming financing cycles, is essential to maintaining financial stability, enabling effective programme planning and supporting workforce continuity.

39. Delays in payments can create operational uncertainty and planning challenges. A predictable cash flow is needed for programme planning, workforce stability and the Organization's ability to respond rapidly to emerging health threats.

40. A motivated, supported and stable workforce is central not only to programme delivery, but also to maintaining the confidence of Member States and donors in the Organization's ability to deliver on its mandate.

41. Sustainable financing is not only a budgetary issue; it is also a workforce issue. Financing uncertainty translates directly into workforce uncertainty. When the Organization cannot rely on predictable resources, staffing structures become fragile, reliance on short-term contracts increases and institutional expertise is at risk.

42. A more predictable funding base with fewer earmarked contributions would enable the Organization to progressively move towards more stable and sustainable contractual modalities, strengthening continuity and accountability and ensuring the preservation of institutional knowledge.

Contract modalities and structural vulnerability

43. The review of contractual modalities is a timely and essential means of ensuring greater predictability, equity and sustainability in the Organization's employment framework. The 2025 prioritization and realignment exercise demonstrated this clearly. Long-serving colleagues on successive short-term contracts were disproportionately affected, including in cases where functions remained necessary. This experience underscores the need to move towards more sustainable and predictable contractual models.

44. Attracting and retaining qualified professionals increasingly depends on predictability, stability, well-being and career development, which are essential to maintaining a competitive and credible international workforce.

45. A modernized framework should more clearly distinguish genuinely temporary functions from structurally recurrent ones, and provide pathways towards greater employment stability where functions are ongoing in nature.

46. We recognize the efforts of leadership and staff to maintain programme delivery under significant constraints. The staff associations look forward to continued engagement and collaboration as the Organization moves forward.

Conclusion

47. WHO has undergone significant transformation. Structural stabilization is necessary, but organizational resilience ultimately depends on human resilience. It is not enough to pay tribute to colleagues who have left; we must also protect and support those who remain.

48. In conclusion, we would like to highlight the following key priorities:

- a coordinated response to mental health and workload sustainability;
- alignment between programme expectations and staffing capacity;
- careful framing of AI and digital transformation;
- strengthened internal justice and support mechanisms;
- preservation and strengthening of staff health and well-being services, ensuring accessible and timely occupational health support, in line with WHO's role as a global leader in health; and
- continued structured engagement with staff associations.

49. The success of reform will be measured by whether the Organization emerges stronger, with its people supported, protected and able to deliver on WHO's mandate.

50. We remain committed to working constructively with management and Member States in this shared endeavour.