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Global staff associations statement to the World Health Organization Executive Board

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The WHO staff associations appreciate the opportunity of informing the Executive Board about the issues that concern the staff and that have been discussed at the global level. We want to express our appreciation for the attention that the Director-General gave the associations since her nomination.

We value the opportunity of the global telephone conference and the visits of her representatives to the regions. We want to express our appreciation for the decision regarding grade step increases for short-term professional and general service staff. This issue was a concern for various EURO staff committees and the Administration's agreement was received with great satisfaction. The associations are grateful for the October global meeting initiated by the Director-General. This meeting was a welcome opportunity to learn about Dr Brundtland's organizational restructuring and approach to staff matters. We are optimistic about new ways of doing things and hopeful for a partnership where transparency, consultation, and negotiation, will be a reality. We also hope that WHO will soon be a unified organization. On this occasion, we want to express our support to the new Director-General.

The WHO staff associations have differences among the regions. However, they are all dedicated to upholding the values for which the institution stands. Their goals are to ensure (1) compliance by the Administration of the rules established by the governing bodies; (2) respect in the treatment of the staff, as implied in the scope of the staff rules and regulations; and (3) access to the governing bodies. We are confident the Director-General shares these goals with us. We consider that there has to be consistency in the facilities given to the associations for their functioning. In the pursuit of this consistency, we have requested the following.

SUPPORT FOR THE ADMINISTRATION AND ACTIVITIES OF STAFF ASSOCIATIONS

Time for the staff association president

Representing the staff requires - among other things - absorption of information, meeting with individuals, groups and organizations, and overseeing the association's administrative operations. If this work is recognized, the Administration would agree that to be effective in carrying out the work of the associations, elected officials need time. We have requested from the Administration an allocation of 50% of the official

time of a staff association president. In institutions such as the World Bank, the staff association president is released 100% of the time for the association's activities.

Office support for the staff association administration

The work of the associations is extensive because it covers not only the main office but also every office in the countries of a region. An association's office is customarily the first point of contact for staff concerns; information needs to be broadcast; staff activities organized, and many other functions need to be done. To be effective in carrying out this workload we have presented to the Administration a request for two full-time office assistants in each association.

PERSONNEL MATTERS

Recruitment and selection procedures

The staff associations support the idea of staff recruitment and promotion through panels, provided there is staff representation during selection for all positions below the D2 level. However, more discussion is needed to establish procedures and guidelines. Among the guidelines, a target should be set to give preference to staff members already in the Organization. This would also stimulate career development.

Geographic distribution and quotas

The Organization should not use an applicant's nationality as a deciding factor for employment. Although we recognize that geographic distribution is desirable, the most qualified person should be selected. It is essential that WHO be seen as an unbiased, non-political organization, which cannot be pressured by either donors or governments.

Contracts

The staff associations request that a five-year contract after four years be established as entitlement for staff. So far, a five-year contract after four years of work is extended and maintained at the discretion of the Administration.

Compensation and benefits

Compensation and benefits are critical to recruiting and retaining the expertise needed to carry out the Organization's mission. Professional salaries should be brought up to the level that permits the retention of the best talent. Professional salaries should be made competitive through the implementation of objective surveys, such as those of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, so that staff are compensated in accordance with the best prevailing salaries.

In addition, professional staff is being penalized because governments are trying to restrict their expenses in the United Nations common system. Consequently, professional salaries are stagnating and certain United Nations organizations are facing a serious situation in the recruitment of specialists. Fair compensation is crucial to the continuous deliverance of critical outputs by making it possible to recruit and retain sound professional advice.

General service salaries should be commensurate with the best prevailing rates and not to an uneven array of comparators intended to decrease remuneration levels. The associations are concerned about the changes to the general service salary methodology. There is a perception that general service salaries need to be reduced and that their pensions are “too generous”. There are cases where general service top salaries have gone higher than those of the professional staff at the lower end, which only proves that professional salaries are inadequate and not that general service salaries are too high.

The fluctuations in the exchange rate have had a detrimental impact on the pensions of retirees. There are cases of retired staff living near or below the poverty level because of these fluctuations. A pension earned through many years of devoted service is no longer adequate to maintain a single individual, much less a family. Moreover, in some cases the longer people work, the less pension they receive.

Expatriation benefits should be geared towards staff satisfaction and should be enhanced and not reduced. Termination benefits should be flexible so when there is a need to separate staff this is done under conditions that are convenient to the Administration and the staff. Experience has demonstrated that suitable termination arrangements are less costly and more satisfying to both parties.

We have requested the Administration to impress upon the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) that there is no need for different post adjustment indexes between New York and Washington, D.C., which has been detrimental to staff in the latter city.

Mobility of staff

We support the Director-General’s actions on staff mobility as long as the acquired rights of the staff are respected. Throughout their careers, staff should have the opportunity to move back and forth between country offices, regional offices, and headquarters. This exposure should make staff more valuable to the Organization as they would have a thorough understanding of the field of operations and an awareness of needs that arise which require attention.

Performance evaluation

Performance evaluation is an excellent tool for staff development. This process is useful in guiding staff when there are plans to change job descriptions, so that training and development leads to effective career planning. This is especially important in cases of reorganization and restructuring.

Promotional opportunities

The staff associations have pointed out that in spite of the fact that the Organization was celebrating its fiftieth year of existence, it has not established any career development plans for its staff. Human resources are vital in the performance of the Organization’s mission and yet there are cases where staff remain without a single promotion for 20 years. This happens because of the Organization’s preference for recruiting from outside instead of promoting from within. We are confident that the issue of career development, which is identified in the document “A progress report on a hundred days of change”, will soon become a reality. We will request the reinstatement of meritorious increases for both categories of staff.

Rehiring of pensioners

Retirees should not be hired into long-term vacant posts. Their services should be restricted to ad hoc tasks where their experience and knowledge can be useful to thoroughness and efficiency.

National professional officers

The national professional officer (NPO) modality was introduced for a trial three-year period. The experience has been encouraging and we have requested that this category be introduced in regional offices as well. This will not only enhance the functional ability of the regional offices but would also provide opportunities for career development for general service staff with the proper qualifications.

Staff representation in classification and reclassification matters

Staff representation is critical in classification and reclassification matters. Now only Geneva headquarters must have staff participation in a reclassification committee. We have requested the Administration to standardize staff participation in all regions in classification and reclassification committees. These committees should be operational in both main offices and country offices and should be charged with the preparation of new post descriptions and the revision of existing ones.

Different categories of staff

The staff associations will request that the different categories of staff be eliminated and that staff be integrated into a single classification system. The concept staff classification as general service, professional, and director is an old-fashioned class system that has no place in modern management. The World Bank, where categories were eliminated years ago, is a good example of new thinking and has shown the way forward in this respect.

Human resources unit

We will request the establishment in all regions of human resources units. The objective of this unit would be the efficient utilization of the human resources available in the Organization, as opposed to the simple administration of these resources. As an example of one responsibility of this unit, we can mention the need for an updated inventory of the skills available to meet evolving organizational needs. Based on this inventory, training needs can be identified and staff made available for projects.

Pension fund officers

The associations have been concerned with the recruitment of pension fund committee officers. We believe that proper procedures should be followed in the selection of officers and that, as the rules establish, at least three candidates should be submitted for consideration. Staff members are part of the decision-making process because staff owns part of the pension fund.

Flexibility of the health insurance and pension fund rules

The staff associations recognize that when the Organization needs to reduce its costs, abolishing positions can be one method of achieving savings. We have requested a change in the health insurance rules to allow those who depart the Organization to be able to keep full insurance coverage after 20 years of contributions. We would like to see a pension system with alternative plans and would be willing to make suggestions to the WHO Pension Committee. Voluntary departures would reduce the need for forced terminations and the ensuing costs of convening committees and administrative procedures that consume so much time and so many resources.

We are looking forward to working with the new Director-General and participating actively with ideas and initiatives that contribute to WHO's mission of alleviating human suffering. We also know that a process of consultation and negotiation will permit the staff associations to contribute to the enhancement of the working conditions of the staff while preserving the interests of the Organization. We hope that our requests receive favourable consideration.

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