



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

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Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations on matters concerning personnel policy and conditions of service

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

1. This year, we have decided to focus our statement on an important element of the Secretariat's work: reform of human resources management. Beyond conventional courtesies, we should like to express our gratitude to the Director-General for her determination to undertake this reform. Allow me to take this opportunity to describe in detail the reactions of the staff to this reform.
2. The reform, its fundamental principles and the associated items, as presented to you in the various documents, have enjoyed the unanimous support of the members of staff, and we shall help the Organization to put them into practice. This means continuing with a concerted approach, and further exploring other areas so as to avoid setbacks. We have therefore expressed our concerns and put forward proposals on issues relating to the management of temporary staff, the new types of contract for non-temporary staff, the elimination of the system of posts without guaranteeing previously acquired rights, recruitment of retired staff and of persons having taken mutually agreed separation and the introduction of a legal framework for improving the management of relations between the administration and the staff associations.
3. We welcome the more fair and long-term approach to the problem of managing temporary staff, in order to comply with the general principles of labour law. As you may have noted, in some sectors of the Organization, there will soon be more than 50% of temporary staff carrying out long-term tasks; this creates an unfair and demotivating contractual situation for the staff. These circumstances have led to a sense of unease for which the current management team cannot be held responsible but which, if it is not rapidly dealt with, will continue to deprive the Organization of certain skills and will also cost it dearly. For example, temporary staff are not entitled to maternity leave or in-grade promotion, or even to the health insurance benefits that come with other types of contract. Proposals have been put forward, together with options, that are potentially acceptable solutions for both the Organization and its staff, and we are convinced that the rapid adoption of some of these simple and inexpensive measures will help to reduce injustice between the different categories of staff. Other more significant measures will address the long-term problem. However, in order to make savings and to cut long-term costs, certain investments must be made, or at least planned, this year if they are to achieve an impact and to ensure the consistency of reforms within a more efficient WHO. The staff associations do not intend, however, to upset the existing budgetary balance: these measures must be introduced through planning.
4. As regards contractual reform, we are convinced that there is every reason to simplify the types of contract; we have identified more than 20 types of contract within the Organization. We do not

believe that in order to attract more skilled staff there is any need for more and more different types of contract or for different scales. The Organization wishes to simplify a number of bureaucratic rules that apparently encumber or slow down the selection and recruitment process, and we support this. We have participated in this simplification exercise, which has made it easier, in particular, to recruit staff for the poliomyelitis eradication programme. Nevertheless, we are convinced that such team work has been so beneficial because the staff has been associated with it as a full partner. It is important for this commitment to continue so that we may play our role as intermediary and facilitate the work of the administration and of the technical programmes. If it is to be constructive, any review of the existing contractual arrangements must be carried out with the active participation of the staff.

5. Needless to say, the Organization must comply with the age limit for retirement. While we understand the need for a degree of flexibility, we are constantly amazed to find certain offices occupied by staff who are well over retirement age and who occupy special adviser posts, where they exert considerable influence or undeniable authority over project management. We cannot but denounce the improper recruitment at headquarters and in two regional offices of retirees and of persons who have benefited from a mutually agreed separation. Each serving staff member should make provision, at least two years before retirement, for his or her succession, and there should be a ban on recruitment, within a certain period, of staff whose contracts have been terminated by mutual agreement.

6. As regards relations between the staff and the administration, there is one salient point which we hold dear – freedom of association. This principle is upheld by the Declaration of Principles of the International Labour Organization, which stipulates that members of staff may freely associate and freely express their opinions without being subjected to any kind of pressure. It has to be said that unfortunately this freedom does not exist at the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. We have been deeply shocked by the administrative and other types of harassment to which our colleagues representing that office's staff have repeatedly been subjected. This constant harassment was intended to get rid of the President of the staff association, who finally accepted separation by mutual agreement despite having several years still to serve in an essential post and despite being well below retirement age. In this connection, we have taken note of the support received from our Director-General, who has endeavoured to come up with an acceptable solution. None the less, this is a disturbing situation, because it still persists, and we have recently expressed our concerns for the remaining members representing this staff association. It is our hope that the Executive Board will recognize and show its support for freedom of association and expression; we believe that it is appropriate to propose a statute for staff representatives in order to ensure their career does not suffer as a result of their activities and mandate.

7. A further issue is the financial and logistical support required by the staff associations in order properly to carry out their activities. There is no denying that it is unfair to expect staff to choose representatives and to contribute to the reform effort without doing anything to help their representatives to carry out their mandate. Changes have to be made to enable the staff associations to continue to make a constructive contribution to the work of the Organization. The basic principles for these changes are an increase in the time formally allowed to staff representatives, depending on the size and requirements of the associations, improved logistical support for regional associations in the form of offices, telecommunications and budgetary resources, and lastly, greater recognition for the contribution made by staff associations towards preventing appeals to the boards of appeal and the Tribunal. Coordinated steps to avert appeals are a source of appreciable savings for the Organization's budget. This year, we have actively helped to avert several appeals, thus saving the Organization several hundred million dollars, because an appeal is always paid for by the Organization, regardless of its outcome. In addition, the staff associations are also seeking ways of organizing themselves to obtain funds and thus reduce the costs charged to the Organization's budget.

8. In practice, reforming the management of human resources has led to the development of a form of collective bargaining between the administration and the staff representatives. However, well before that, it was initiated by our Director-General in the form of the Global Staff Management Council (GSMC), which has unquestionably been a valuable forum. We have already submitted, in June 2000, at the Global Council, a collective bargaining project which has the full agreement of all the staff associations. This type of proposal reflects the desire of the staff, who would like to formalize certain types of coordination with the administration. It is important to consult staff when undertaking anything that will have an impact on them. Regrettably, only recently we have been witness to a case in which a decision was taken to transfer more than one hundred WHO staff members working at the International Computing Centre (ICC) in Geneva without any consultation whatsoever with the headquarters staff association. Our investigation has shown that the Organization is likely to encounter serious legal problems unless it thoroughly reviews the terms of the transfer of these staff members. The Centre is a unique computing and technical tool in the United Nations system; it enhances the Organization's image without costing it a penny, because financially, it is wholly self-supporting. We have put forward proposals to the administration suggesting that it reconsider its decision to transfer the staff, in the light of the most recent information, and thus allow the serving staff members to preserve their status as staff members of the Organization. We would unquestionably be concerned and distressed if the decision to transfer the staff members were final. If the kind of collective bargaining we are advocating had been possible in the case of the International Computing Centre, this kind of problem could easily have been avoided. Such agreements exist and are recognized in many countries; they are the basis of a genuine partnership that significantly improves the existing system of collaboration and offers a far better response to the aspirations of staff members as they enter the third millennium.

9. Mr Chairman, honourable members of the Executive Board, Director-General, there is no such thing as a perfect world, and as in the world around us, there is still room for improvement in our Organization. Even if some of these problems have disturbed the administration, we are confident that acceptable solutions are always available, and they are always more readily understood if the staff, through their representatives, are party to them. We frequently act as warning signals, and we strongly urge that we be associated in detecting, identifying and preventing staff problems. It is with this end in mind that we have organized a survey of staff motivation, whose results should be available shortly. To conclude, we hope that you will provide our Director-General with your support in successfully reforming the management of human resources, and provide her with the means to accomplish her task.

10. We have set out before you our position on the most salient aspects of WHO staff management. We are ready to listen to you and to transmit to the staff your reactions and response to our concerns.

Thank you for your attention. Allow me, on behalf of the staff of WHO, to wish you every success in 2001.

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