



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

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Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations

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

1. On behalf of the staff associations of WHO and IARC, I have pleasure in submitting this statement to the Executive Board. We appreciate this opportunity to address the Board, to bring it up to date on matters concerning human resources policy and practice, and also to place on record some of the concerns of the staff associations in this regard. A number of matters were brought to your attention a year ago but these require highlighting again.

ISSUES FOR FOLLOW-UP

2. **Staff/management relations: partnership agreements.** A partnership approach to staff/management relations as a way of working within the Global Staff/Management Council, and more generally in the Organization, was initially proposed during discussions at the Global Staff/Management Council in 2002. Following the Council, the WHO staff associations developed a joint paper outlining the process that should be followed for the introduction of a partnership approach together with details of the relevant roles, responsibilities and mechanisms. The paper was submitted and discussed as an agenda item on the Global Staff/Management Council 2003 agenda. We feel this is a significant positive step which should enable our interactions with management to take place in a climate of confidence and mutual respect – an improvement that will allow us to work together more efficiently and effectively. We therefore look forward to continuing the work on the development of a partnership agreement.

3. **Security.** In the light of recent events, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, the staff associations are currently reassessing the welfare of WHO employees in conflict areas. We mourn the lost United Nations staff, including our colleagues from WHO – Nadia Younes and Ahmed Shukry. We are greatly troubled by the adverse physical and psychological effects upon staff due to armed conflict. We applaud the additional security training provided for staff as well as the measures taken to scale down the risk of additional attacks on WHO staff in conflict areas. However, our initial assessment has revealed a number of gaps. There are administrative gaps, for example, which leave some people without insurance coverage for malicious acts – a matter of particular concern to those employed locally on special services agreements. There are also broader institutional gaps which result in a failure to emphasize to Member States the adverse effects of armed conflicts. We need to explore how to make certain that staff well-being is ensured while maintaining a broader WHO mission of public health delivery in areas where it is most needed. We need to ensure that the dedicated work that we do is not in vain, cancelled out as a result of preventable security lapses. Such a balance is very

difficult to maintain but we call upon the Board to build up support for WHO staff in conflict areas and, on a broader scale, to provide evidence-based directives to promote a reduction in global armed conflict.

4. **Contractual reform.** Contractual reform is still under way throughout the Organization. One of the main intentions of the reform was to normalize recruitment procedures in line with best practice found in other organizations. In particular, the spirit enshrined in the reform was a commitment to tackle the unfair treatment of staff who are obliged to work on short-term contracts whilst engaged on long-term pieces of work. The stated intention was to address the situation of “long-term, short-term staff” and to ensure that short-term really meant short-term, thus abolishing old exploitative practices. Yet progress has been uneven throughout WHO, with many long-serving short-term staff still on short-term contracts. At the same time, the number of staff hired on short-term contracts has risen dramatically over the past two years – thereby potentially storing up trouble for the future. The staff associations feel that more planning needs to be undertaken and additional resources identified to ensure that contractual reform respects the spirit in which it was conceived; and that staff are fairly remunerated and provided with contracts appropriate to their function.

5. **Career development opportunities for professional and general services staff.** WHO’s workforce is composed of individuals whose motivation is to serve the community beyond personal gain; this does not mean, however, that they wish to put aside their own aspirations where career development is concerned. This applies to both professional and general services staff who often possess skills and competencies that are ignored or shamefully underused by the Organization. It does not seem to be the practice within most offices for human resources to undertake a skills inventory to ensure that each staff member’s specific strengths are used to the maximum benefit of the Organization. This is a pity as it would encourage organizational productivity, offer new challenges and increase job satisfaction among staff members. Rarely, if ever, do general services staff benefit from encouragement or opportunities to cross over to the professional track. On the contrary, they are effectively discouraged from moving between duty stations as they are not compensated for their expenses.

6. **Staff development and training.** To enhance career development opportunities, there should be appropriate and meaningful staff development and training proposals for both general services and professional staff, keeping in view the needs of the Organization at the same time. Good technical knowledge does not necessarily translate into staff management abilities. For those in supervisory positions, management training should be designed to be of appropriate length and of relevance to the Organization, tackling issues through an Organization-wide, concerted approach. In short, WHO staff should be receiving the highest quality training in management practices, as befits a large international organization; a leader in promoting and protecting one of the most precious human resources – health.

7. **Rewards and recognition.** The issue of rewards and recognition is very important to bring out the best in staff members; to encourage the accomplishment of common goals. While in the past the opportunities for personal promotion and meritorious increases were available, these were the object of a moratorium following cases of abuse and misuse. However, the staff associations urge that these be restored, albeit in a limited manner, with proper checks and balances, so that deserving staff members are able to enjoy the recompense they have earned. Recognition of this sort will go a long way particularly in addressing the career development dissatisfaction of staff stagnating at the top of their grades; it will also benefit those whose careers have no avenues for upward progress. We urge that action is initiated towards the implementation of meaningful proposals.

8. **Rehiring of retirees.** The staff associations are again raising the issue of the hiring and rehiring of retirees. Hiring retirees in certain special circumstances and for limited purposes may be justified

when some exceptional technical or scientific experience is required. However, at present retirees are being employed for vacant posts in executive positions. This practice, which is the case for professional and general service staff alike, blocks the career development of existing personnel and can be detrimental to morale, triggering dejection and frustration. We welcome the steps already taken to avoid this practice and urge that whenever a post becomes vacant, immediate action be taken to fill it by applying prospective personnel planning. We also ask that proper succession planning start well ahead of time so that suitable serving staff may be trained for higher grades to replace those retiring.

9. **Consequences of devaluation of local currencies.** Finally, although the Executive Board may not be the best audience, the Board should nevertheless be aware that staff are concerned about the devaluation of their salary and remuneration – in dollar terms – whenever there is a surge in the value of the United States dollar against local currencies. This phenomenon of currency devaluation against the United States dollar primarily affects salaries which are payable in local currencies. Since pensionable remuneration is calculated based on the salary in local currency, converted into United States dollars, the pensionable remuneration figure decreases as a consequence of each such devaluation. We appreciate that this is a complicated issue and would propose that an in-depth and comprehensive study be carried out to look into the consequences of the strong fluctuation of the dollar exchange rate for the pension of all categories of staff and in the different duty stations. It should also be considered whether countries with less stable economic conditions or unstable currencies should be able to opt for a United States dollar-based salary scale.

CONCLUSION

10. In conclusion, we are glad to note over the past few years several steps have been taken to address some of the long-standing issues that the staff associations have brought to the attention of this body on many occasions. We wish at this point to remember and acknowledge the contribution our late colleague, Maryan Baquerot, made in this regard. We are pleased that some progress has been made, but at the same time we know that much more needs to be done to bring the Organization up to the standards of good employment and management practice that may be found in many of the Member States represented here today. We conclude by urging the Organization to recognize (and remember) that if it respects the employment rights of its staff, the staff will continue to contribute more than is asked of them.

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