

Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations

1. We would like to open our statement by extending our best wishes for 2014 to the Director-General, Dr Margaret Chan, to our respective executive heads, and to all Executive Board members.
2. Our statement is supported by the 10 staff associations that represent nearly 9000 United Nations employees serving under WHO Staff Regulations and Rules.¹ We address you at an important moment in the history of international health and development, as many of you engage with various processes to chart the future post-2015, with a view to building on successes and intensifying efforts to tackle the many remaining gaps. You have the full commitment of staff in working with you to take on a new generation of challenges, and in strengthening our work so as to maximize our collective impact for the health of people around the world. The issues we raise here are presented in this context, one of our service and dedication to the principles and objectives of our organizations. In this regard, we wish to draw your attention to issues that affect the workforce and our overall performance.
3. In October 2013, we met with management representatives at the 12th meeting of the WHO Global Staff/Management Council. We were pleased with our refreshing discussion with the newly appointed Director of Human Resources Management, Ms Françoise Nocquet, at headquarters, in relation to her vision for the Organization's human resources strategy. Like her, we strongly believe that the promotion of an enabling work environment is key to the future of our organizations and their ability to attract and retain the best people. We furthermore share her belief that the cross-cutting principles of gender equality, diversity, collaboration and accountability will strengthen us as a workforce and increase our impact.
4. Just as organizations need flexibility, staff – with their diverse personal and family circumstances – also need flexibility. Our personal and professional situations evolve over time, for example when having children, enhancing our professional qualifications or responding to unexpected illness – in ourselves or our loved ones. We look forward to ongoing dialogue with management on how to strengthen the enabling environment. By taking diverse circumstances into account, we will ensure conditions that maximize inclusion and diversity by providing social security, support and reasonable accommodation measures required in relation to family obligations, illness and disability. Renewed focus on the enabling environment is of particular importance as WHO takes steps towards implementing a staff mobility programme. Experience drawn from various United Nations entities shows that mobility works best when it creates win-win situations for staff and the Organization, advances professional development, and remains family-friendly in its implementation.

¹ WHO headquarters Staff Association; WHO Staff Association, GSC Chapter; Staff Association of the African Region; Staff Association of the Eastern Mediterranean Region; Staff Association of the European Region; Staff Association of the Pan American Health Organization; Staff Association of the South-East Asia Region; Staff Association of the Western Pacific Region; UNAIDS Secretariat Staff Association; and IARC Staff Association.

5. With this recent meeting of the Global Staff/Management Council, we hope to have started a new and positive discussion on “flexibility”. In recent years, flexibility has become a euphemism; too often it was perceived as a code word for downsizing or eroding conditions of service. For example, we remain concerned about the eventual implications of the recent changes to the qualifying period for reassignment from five years to 10 years of service. Through our earlier statement to the Executive Board and our discussions with management, we advised on those potential negative implications, particularly for women in the organizations. We hope that in the years to come we can monitor the situation closely and mitigate it as necessary.

6. Looking to the future, we feel that we have turned a page, renewing in our staff-management dialogue the focus on strengthening our workforce and our collective ability to deliver. By necessity, such discussions must be underpinned by and focus on an enabling environment. We hope that we can count on the support of Member States in this regard, so that global best practice in advancing healthy working environments can, over time, be enshrined in the regulations, rules, policies and practices of the World Health Organization, and even serve as a model for other United Nations entities and beyond.

7. We also count on Member States to ensure that our governing bodies are platforms for accountability, upholding and advancing excellence from recruitment to the Organization’s overall programmatic agenda. We are concerned by allegations of interference by certain Member States in recruitment and selection processes, whereby senior officials are reportedly put under pressure to appoint nationals of specific countries without strict reference to securing “the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity”, as is required under the Staff Regulations of the World Health Organization.¹ Staff are also concerned by examples of budgetary allocations following specific – and often shifting – national priorities rather than the pursuit of shared, strategic health goals and standards. We hope to promote open, constructive dialogue on such issues in order to ensure that our common interest in the excellence, independence and impartiality of the organizations and the workforce prevails.

8. As part of our aspirations to serve as a model and employer of choice, we must be clear that there is important and urgent work to be done to remedy shortcomings that are having a negative impact on the organizations and their performance. We wish to draw your attention to three urgent priorities from the perspective of staff:

- (a) **Reform of WHO staff health insurance:** the current approach to WHO staff health insurance service delivery is failing to meet the needs of staff and their families, most acutely for staff working in the field, and represents a serious risk to health and security, especially when health emergencies arise. The Global Staff/Management Council had a candid discussion on the failures and shortcomings of the current services – most notably the lack of local recognition of WHO staff health insurance in health facilities and the need for major, up-front, cash guarantees – and the related harm, hardships and risks these deficiencies are creating for staff, retirees and their dependants. Some locally-recruited country-based staff have reported that they are delaying needed care due to high up-front costs and delays in reimbursing claims. We urge the Director-General to undertake an urgent, rapid review of the situation and options for reform, so as to put in place a modern system that ensures: (a) local recognition of our insurance, (b) access to better prices for medical services, and (c) direct payment by staff health insurance to the health care providers. In addition to the human imperative, we also see a strong

¹ Basic documents, 47th ed., Geneva: World Health Organization; 2009.

business case for reform, as it will reduce the overall cost of health care to the Staff Health Insurance Fund.

(b) **Reform of internal justice mechanisms:** accountability and integrity are essential features of the obligations and standards of conduct of United Nations staff. Better systems are needed, however, to reinforce these standards and ensure access to justice for all staff of the Organization wherever there are grievances, from headquarters to country level. Staff are not confident that the current approaches and mechanism are serving us well. Processes are protracted; investigative functions lack sufficient independence; and the grievance mechanism does not have adequate legal expertise. Expedious delivery of justice is key to staff satisfaction. We are pleased that the Director-General has committed to undertaking a review and reform process, and we look forward to giving her our full support and engagement. A fair and just workplace reinforces staff commitment, confidence, well-being and health, and ultimately drives success.

(c) **Investment in career development and workforce management:** many speak about staff as the “most valuable asset” of the organizations. We fully agree with this statement; however, we see a need and an opportunity to increase investment in staff and take a more active approach to workforce management that aims to get the most out of people by offering a range of dynamic career paths that evolve in terms of responsibility and complexity. The proposed staff mobility programme has the potential to create new opportunities, expose staff to different social and political contexts, and reinforce cohesion across offices. The staff associations have advocated for both geographical and functional mobility, with an approach to implementation that is family-friendly and takes into account various personal and professional considerations. With the significant number of retirements foreseen in the next 10 years, we also see opportunities to support the growth of high-performing, currently serving staff, and further implement the United Nations system-wide action plan on gender equality and women’s empowerment,¹ in order to overcome the gender imbalance at senior levels of the organizations.

9. We also wish to raise an important issue which is common to the United Nations system and goes beyond WHO’s framework. For WHO to be an employer of choice, compensation packages for both nationally- and internationally-recruited staff must be commensurate with their skills and qualifications, as well as the cost of living at the duty station. In the case of locally-recruited staff at non-headquarters duty stations, the salary survey methodology does not sufficiently take into consideration the factors eroding the value of money, most notably that of runaway inflation. Furthermore, the International Civil Service Commission methodology is limited in its ability to fully compare the packages offered by comparators in the labour market. This is compounded by the notion of “official” and “unofficial” compensation in some places. There have been allegations that some comparators’ pay packages – driven by profitability – include cash bonuses and other forms of compensation that may even be “off the books” and not reported to national tax and other authorities. Whenever official compensation does not reflect real compensation, United Nations staff are further disadvantaged. To be able to attract and retain the best staff, the United Nations common system needs the appropriate methods for establishing a competitive compensation package. We count on your engagement and support as the compensation package is reviewed in the years to come at the United Nations system level.

¹ System-wide action plan for implementation of the United Nations CEB policy on gender equality and the empowerment of women. New York, United Nations Women, April 2012.

10. At an earlier session of the Executive Board, we noted that the threat of job loss – in any organization – can have a profoundly negative effect on staff morale and sense of security. For international civil servants, the potential impacts are heightened as staff generally do not have the protection of their national social security mechanisms. At the most recent meeting of the Global Staff/Management Council, the staff associations received an update from management on their exploration of options for the development of an unemployment protection scheme. We are disappointed that the model put forward by staff – involving co-financing by staff and the Organization, similar to the approach of the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund, the WHO Staff Health Insurance Fund and a number of well-established Member State models – is viewed as being “too administratively complex”. We look forward to continued discussions on ways of enhancing social security for staff so as to promote alignment with international standards and good practice.

11. To conclude, we thank you for this important opportunity to address the Board today and to engage in dialogue. We see our ongoing engagement with our respective management structures, as well as collectively with the Director-General, as an important force for the promotion of an enabling working environment, advancing organizational excellence and maximizing our positive impact for the health of people around the world.

Thank you.

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