

Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations

Mr Chairman, honourable members of the Executive Board, distinguished delegates and colleagues,

1. The WHO, UNAIDS and IARC staff associations are pleased to have the opportunity once again to present to the Executive Board the staff's point of view on several topics. Most of all, we appreciate that this statement, and future statements on behalf of the staff associations, will be made available to the Programme, Budget and Administration Committee prior to the session of the Executive Board.

2. On this occasion, we would like to follow up on the topics that we raised in our statement to the Executive Board in January this year. These include staff-management relations, and in particular the outcomes to date of joint staff-management working groups and initiatives. Our main focus, however, will be on the emergency workforce and reform, geographical mobility and the administration of internal justice. In addition, we would like to allude once again to the importance of gauging the impact of changes to the Staff Regulations and Staff Rules.

STAFF-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS

3. Generally, staff-management relations remain constructive and mutually beneficial. For example, we have jointly created a number of joint staff-management working groups and launched a number of joint initiatives and we note that this kind of collaboration has a positive impact in terms of improving our working environment, shaping and communicating our organizational values and enhancing our mutual understanding. It also helps cultivate an active and creative environment for finding solutions and makes a positive contribution to the implementation of our reform objectives.

4. One example of such collaboration is the joint staff-management think-tank on gender equity, which was established to accelerate the achievement of the gender targets of the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. The think-tank has developed 18 recommendations on what WHO needs to do in order to reach the gender targets. A next step will be the establishment of an Organization-wide staff-management consultative group that will take these recommendations forward.

5. Another example is the joint staff-management working group on promoting a respectful workplace, which recently conducted an Organization-wide survey and as a result identified a number of areas for improvement. The survey results strongly suggest an immediate need for a number of actions and the global working group is fully committed to improving the situation with the full engagement and support of senior management.

6. We would like to reiterate that a recent survey administered by the headquarters Staff Association confirmed that the large majority of staff members are committed to WHO's mandate and overall mission, and are proud to work for WHO. We, as staff, want to be able to fulfil our Organization's mandate to meet the significant global health challenges the world currently faces. Let us, therefore, jointly create the enabling framework.

EMERGENCY WORKFORCE AND REFORM

7. In January this year, the staff associations proposed the establishment of a joint staff-management working group to consider actions to take forward the process of reform of WHO's work in outbreaks and health emergencies, including with regard to retaining staff, providing staff with training to equip them with the necessary skills, reducing to a minimum the use of precarious contracts and enhancing the duty of care.

8. The global health emergency workforce proposed under the WHO emergency reform is a core area of interest to all staff. We request that representatives of the staff associations be involved throughout the reform process, especially in three key areas of the work of the proposed task force on staff issues related to the emergency reform.

9. First, the staff associations would like to be involved in and consulted with regard to identifying which positions could be filled by existing staff and which would need to be filled by the staff of other agencies or would require the recruitment of new staff with different profiles.

10. Second, we will continue to advocate the fair and transparent application of the Staff Rules in any road map or matching exercise associated with this.

11. Third, we propose to work with management to develop a strategy for promoting career advancement and opportunities for existing staff while at the same time meeting the expectations of the WHO reform.

12. We note with appreciation that, in the context of managerial reform, work has been initiated on the training of staff for emergency deployments and for employment in duty stations experiencing emergencies. We reiterate that sufficient attention and resources should be assigned to this work as well as to enhancing the Organization's duty of care for staff before, during and after they are deployed in emergencies. To facilitate our contribution, we respectfully request that the staff associations are considered to be an active and equal partner in the proposed task force on staff issues related to the emergency reform.

GEOGRAPHICAL MOBILITY

13. Since January this year, the geographical mobility policy has been in force on a voluntary basis and staff have been invited to consult the first compendium of international positions, which have been advertised for the purpose of being filled through the first annual mobility exercise. The staff concerned are the international professionals recruited with continuing or fixed-term contracts.

14. The mobility exercise is a sensitive and political matter that has been supported by WHO Member States. The WHO staff associations throughout the process have supported the principle of mobility under the premise that this exercise will be run in a manner that will benefit the Organization

and its staff. We have also insisted that security and personal health situations must be taken into account.

15. In January this year, the headquarters Staff Association conducted a survey on mobility. Staff responses were mostly in favour of mobility. However, concerns remain about the lack of incentives, gender equity, spousal employment and other support measures. In addition, staff largely felt that the scheme should be voluntary. Staff also asked for an analysis of the value for money of the mobility exercise.

16. An organizational evaluation of the exercise will be undertaken by WHO's Evaluation Unit with the involvement of the staff associations. This evaluation should include measurable key performance indicators, against which the policy and the process are tested and evaluated. For this purpose, the Organization and the Member States must be clear about and consistent in what they want from the mobility exercise. This was not evident at the session of the Executive Board in January this year, at which some Member States referred to the mobility policy as a mechanism for reducing cost and addressing poor performance. The staff, on the other hand, wish to see this exercise as a mechanism for enhancing the performance of WHO as a whole, thereby utilizing existing expertise where it is most needed.

17. For the first meeting of the Global Mobility Committee, staff representatives were invited to attend as observers. It was evident, however, throughout the course of the meeting, that they played a valuable participatory role. This, indeed, was recognized and appreciated by all parties in attendance. It is therefore our request that the unnecessary labelling as observers of staff representatives at the meetings of the Global Mobility Committee be removed, as it undermines both the respect that management has for its staff, and the important contributions by the staff representatives throughout the process. We are seeking your support once again to be equal partners in this process. This is common practice in all selection processes, and is in line with our harmonized selection process. This arrangement has proven to be beneficial not only in selection panels, but also in other committees.

18. The discussions during this first meeting of the Global Mobility Committee were constructive and respectful. Yet, the staff associations remain concerned as to how and when career paths, personal development, and promotional opportunities and incentives will be integrated into the mobility policy and its implementation. In the light of the experience gained during the first mobility exercise, it is clear that the staff capacity of the Department of Human Resources needs to be increased in future in order to deal efficiently with mobility matters.

19. In addition, two thirds of those who volunteered to move in the first exercise were men. Within the current implementation of the mobility framework, the staff associations question how talent can be retained and gender aspects be addressed. In addition, we noticed that among the few posts offered in this exercise, several had very narrow requirements with regard to education or experience. We would like to stress that mobility should offer an opportunity for staff to acquire new expertise, to promote talent use and staff development and to offer equal opportunities for men and women, and it should be open to general service staff who have the qualifications or experience or both.

20. Lastly, and of great concern, is the lack of clarity about the financial sustainability of different positions across offices and regions. Staff may have no option in the future but to apply and move to posts with shorter term and potentially less sustainable funding sources or to posts that are time bound. This will promote job insecurity unnecessarily. In this respect, it is important to ensure that posts offered under the mobility scheme are adequately and securely funded.

ADMINISTRATION OF INTERNAL JUSTICE

21. As reported by the external panel of experts commissioned to review the Organization's internal justice system, WHO is one of the most highly regarded international organizations, with "a worldwide reputation not only for its leadership role in epidemic alert and response, but also for its policies of prevention." According to the panel, it was "striking then, when it comes to the Organization's administration of justice mechanism, that WHO's approach is that of treatment or cure and not of prevention."

22. Currently, a high number of internal appeals have been filed against WHO with the ILO Administrative Tribunal. The Tribunal has issued a significant number of judgments in favour of aggrieved staff, which has undue and serious financial and reputational implications for our Organization.

23. For example, the Tribunal has issued judgments on eight cases involving WHO since the beginning of 2016. In five of these cases, the Tribunal ruled in favour of the staff member concerned, and two staff members were awarded moral damages.

24. In order to improve the situation, the staff associations have been working with management to reform our internal justice system and strengthen the preventive and informal mechanisms for conflict resolution. We strongly recommend the engagement of professional, dedicated and accredited ombudspersons and mediators across the Organization, who could put a brake on the escalation of conflict in its early stages.

25. At the same time, and in the interest of transparency, we would welcome it if the headquarters Ombudsperson were to report regularly to the Executive Board on trends affecting the whole Organization at all staffing levels. This would ensure that prevalent issues are addressed systemically. This could be a process similar to the regular reporting of the internal auditor on the performance of different technical departments. The auditor's report also contains recommendations on how to address particular performance issues, and examines actions taken by the respective departments to address these recommendations.

26. In addition, at its session in January this year, the Executive Board approved a new formal resolution process, which will soon be in place, whereby staff would need to undergo a mandatory administrative review before being able to lodge an internal formal appeal.

27. It is of critical importance to the WHO staff associations that the management ensure that the chair and the vice-chair of the Global Board of Appeal will be able to act in a fully independent and unbiased manner. We seek your support in ensuring that this independence is provided.

28. In short, we need a robust, independent, impartial internal justice mechanism to address staff grievances, with a strengthened preventive arm, which would focus on the strengthening of the Ombudsperson function and managerial training in interpersonal communication, conflict management and joint solution finding.

29. The next hurdle to overcome in parallel with the preventive approach is to identify and speedily implement an effective solution for the investigation of psychological harassment cases. The staff associations are seriously concerned that the current process is neither transparent, nor timely, adequate or effective. The Office of Internal Oversight Services where these cases are handled lacks expertise in investigating harassment. The staff associations respectfully request management once

again to address these concerns swiftly for the sake of both staff and the entire Organization. We hope that, by raising these issues, we can stimulate positive change.

30. In addition, we also urge Member States to request an audit of those departments and clusters that have the highest numbers of internal appeals and cases before the Tribunal. For meaningful change to occur, those responsible managers need to be held accountable, in line with the organizational accountability framework. At the same time, managers will also need to be provided with the necessary tools, including efficient and sustainable training and dedicated time, to deal with challenging situations and to avoid the escalation of conflicts. We reiterate that people management is a major part of the work of any supervisor.

CHANGES TO THE STAFF REGULATIONS AND STAFF RULES

31. The staff associations are troubled by the frequent changes to the Staff Regulations and Staff Rules, which are often to the detriment of acquired staff rights and conditions of work. For example, the changes to Staff Rule 230 (Classification review) remove the right of staff members to request a classification review of their post. We pointed out at the session of the Executive Board in January that this may inadvertently create the potential for abuse by managers through the overburdening of staff with additional responsibilities over prolonged periods without due recognition and commensurate pay or adjustment in grade.

32. We strongly voiced our objection to this change of Staff Rule 230, which became effective on 1 February this year, as it could have a negative impact on WHO's own core principle of equal pay for work of equal value and put a strain on staff and supervisory relations.

33. Generally, listening to and empowering employees are key to motivation. Staff have provided their representatives with the worrying feedback that only very few managers seem to have a sufficient understanding of the daily work of the staff they supervise. Personal preferences and relationships with staff play a big role in decision-making about reclassifications, which promotes favouritism.

34. Related to this is a perception among staff that the Staff Rules are not applied equally to all categories and grades of staff. The staff associations strongly request that the Organization re-examine this issue of unequal application, and at the same time develop a fair strategy for reviewing out-of-date post descriptions, the use of which is widespread across the Organization, that do not reflect the nature and complexity of the duties that staff members are actually expected to perform. In this context, we also call for increased attention to be paid to the strengthening of the accountability framework.

REQUESTS TO THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

35. Mr Chairman, honourable members of the Executive Board, distinguished delegates and colleagues, in summary, we respectfully request the members of the Executive Board to:

- support the full involvement of staff representatives in a transparent and inclusive way in the proposed **task force on staff issues related to the emergency reform** and associated processes;
- support the full membership of staff representatives in the **Global Mobility Committee**;

- take into account the results of the evaluation based on key performance indicators in the further refinement and implementation of the **Global Mobility Policy**;
- support a transparent process that ensures the independence of the chair and vice-chair of the future **Global Board of Appeal**;
- support the improvement of the **administration of internal justice** by:
 - (i) advocating the establishment of a speedy and effective mechanism to investigate cases of psychological harassment;
 - (ii) supporting the development of a professionalized informal system to address early conflict; and
 - (iii) supporting the reporting of apparent trends to the Executive Board by the Ombudsperson;
- request an audit of those departments and clusters that are involved in the highest numbers of internal appeals and cases before the ILO Tribunal so that meaningful change can occur in line with the **organizational accountability framework**;
- examine the potential impact of changes to the Staff Regulations and Staff Rules prior to approval and call for the equal application of the Staff Regulations and Staff Rules to all staff in line with a functioning accountability framework;
- support the development of a strategy for reviewing the out-of-date post descriptions for existing staff, the use of which is widespread across the Organization, while honouring the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.

36. Please be assured that we, the staff associations, are fully committed to continuing the constructive dialogue with management to safeguard staff members' rights and, through that, to contribute actively to achieving our Organization's mission.

37. An Organization that upholds the rights of individuals is one that can create the culture of high performance that all Member States and our stakeholders expect from us. It will have the benefits of an institution that will have credibility and professional excellence and inspires staff commitment, productivity and innovation.

38. We respectfully offer our observations in the best interest of the Organization and its greatest asset, its staff. We hope that you will view these as a contribution to the achievement of the Organization's mission. We thank you for this opportunity.

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