

Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations

1. This statement is presented to the Executive Board on behalf of WHO, IARC, PAHO and UNAIDS staff associations, representing over 9000 staff of the United Nations common system.
2. The staff associations have regularly brought the issues and concerns of staff members to your attention, and some of those are highlighted here. This time however, rather than only highlighting areas of concern, we would also like to point to progress made over the years on issues raised previously.
3. We, the staff associations, appreciate the efforts made by the Director-General and the senior management to nurture a healthy staff–management relationship. The Director-General’s commitment to meeting regularly with staff representatives and engaging actively with us demonstrates his willingness to find solutions that benefit the Organization and its employees, both immediately and in the medium and long term.
4. We appreciate the collaboration and attention from the Director-General to the staff associations and staff as a whole, at headquarters as well as in the regions, through the monthly meetings with the headquarters staff association, the bi-monthly meetings with the global staff associations as well as with individual staff members through the Thursday open-door policy. Not only does this display a good spirit of cooperation and recognition of the positive role of the staff associations in policy development in the Organization, but it is also an excellent way to let the entire staff know, as they so much need to know, that they are being listened to. We are pleased to note that there has been marked improvement in the staff/management consultative process at headquarters. It is imperative that the same spirit of active partnership is further extended to all WHO offices across the three levels of the Organization.
5. In previous statements, we have highlighted a number of issues that needed the Executive Board’s attention. Most recently, we requested that management instigate an external evaluation of WHO transformation. We are pleased to inform you that an evaluation of WHO transformation led by an external company, as per the request we submitted to the 147th session of the Executive Board, and supported by you, has since been launched. We are also grateful that the staff associations have been asked to take part in the evaluation. We look forward to reporting back on this once the report is finalized and shared with staff.
6. Other important issues we have highlighted in the past include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - **Maternity leave** – we are glad that a central mechanism for funding maternity leave has since been put in place to ensure that female staff members prior to giving birth are not discriminated against or placed at risk because of possible lack of funds to cover their maternity leave absences. Furthermore, we appreciate that our call to extend maternity leave to all parents and

to four months, with an additional two months for the parent who gives birth, has been implemented.

- **Work-life balance, teleworking and flexible working arrangements** - we are glad to note that the Director-General has established a task force to prepare a framework for flexible working arrangements for implementation across all WHO offices. The Task Force is in the final stages of discussions and we hope to see the framework completed in the very near future. WHO offices will then prepare the framework's context-specific implementation.
- **Staff representation in selection processes** - this was requested at the 122nd session of the Executive Board, and we are glad to confirm that at headquarters, staff association representatives sit in at all longer-term position selections. We would however like to see this applied to all WHO regions.
- **Harmonized selection process** - we are glad to inform you that since this issue was brought to your attention, we now have a harmonized selection process policy in place, which is being implemented at headquarters. We request that this policy be implemented by all offices to ensure that recruitment is uniform across all the levels of the Organization.
- **Staff development and learning fund** - in the past, we have mentioned that this fund should be uniformly applied to all offices with accountability and transparency and with periodic reports. We are glad that the Global Learning and Development Committee, comprising the Office of the Ombudsman, staff associations and the administration, has since been formed and will receive funds for staff learning and development activities. Additionally, a Task Force for Career Development was established during transformation, which has made recommendations to the WHO Academy.
- We also brought to your attention the importance of the **Global Staff/ Management Council** – the principal consultative body which brings together management and staff associations annually to discuss personnel policies and service conditions. At the time of raising this issue, certain meetings of the Council had not been held, notably that of 2007. We are glad to note that annual face-to-face meetings, with the exception of 2020, when the meeting was virtual due to the current COVID-19 situation, have taken place and discussions have been constructive. However, we would like to stress that this platform should continue to be a discussion platform throughout the year. We therefore wish to request management to reinstate the quarterly teleconferences, rather than waiting for the annual face-to-face meetings. Continuous dialogue through the quarterly teleconferences will help resolve issues at hand rapidly and will reduce the agendas of the annual face-to-face meetings.
- **The WHO staff performance management system** has always been a “one-way road map” where supervisors express their opinion on supervisees but where supervisees have no way to provide feedback on their supervisors. This is why we have stressed in the past the need and the importance of introducing a comprehensive and fair 360-degree performance management system, a review that should link holistically with team goals and an overall organizational performance review, supported by periodic, independent evaluation of WHO departments and programmes, in line with the General Programme of Work. This is most definitely needed now as, in a move that we very much appreciate, our Director-General has declared this year to be the Year of the WHO Workforce: Building a More Respectful Working Environment.

- **Ombudsman services** should be made available in all major offices. We are glad to see that some regions now have an Ombudsman. We are however still very concerned that some regions continue to have management officers acting as Ombudsmen. This not only creates a major conflict of interest with regards to neutrality, but it is also creates difficulties for the staff members who have to act as Ombudsman, a duty that requires 100% of their time.
- We applaud the Director-General for the introduction of **stipends/living allowances to WHO interns**, a request that we have made in previous staff association statements.
- We note the efforts of the current administration to address **gender equity** at WHO, and are pleased to see that there are now several women at senior management level. However, to truly achieve gender equity within the WHO workforce it is imperative that more is done across the P3 to P6 levels.
- We have previously called on management to invest in a **staff health well-being programme and campaign** to address the findings of the staff health risk surveys, with a strong focus on **mental health** and supporting colleagues serving in difficult field environments. We are happy to see that a task force on mental health was recently formed and we look forward to the recommendations of this task force. We reiterate our previous call and urge management to reactivate the staff health and well-being committees where they do not exist including at headquarters. The committees provide an essential platform to discuss issues around staff health and well-being, especially under the current COVID-19 context, which has forced us to adapt rapidly to different working conditions and most staff members find themselves in isolation.
- In an effort to create career development opportunities for staff at all grades, we appreciate the recently launched roster at G6 level, allowing staff at the lower G category to apply for G6 level positions through the roster. You are aware that we have a siege situation in WHO without properly identified ways of career development. It is very difficult at the moment for staff at WHO to get a promotion other than through reclassification, which is not intended to be used for this purpose. The only existing way today for staff to climb the ladder is by applying to positions at higher grade. We encourage the Organization to continue exploring better ways to make sure that staff have opportunities to climb the career ladder.
- In almost all our statements, we have made **mobility policy** a standing item. During the transformation process, we were glad to see a standing task force on mobility created and appreciated that the staff associations were included and involved in this task force. While much has been discussed and agreed on, we reiterate that the Geographical Mobility Policy should include professional growth, including opportunities for upward movement, it should include family-friendly environments, and advance gender equality and women's leadership across all offices. Previously, we had requested the establishment of a mobility advisory board to consider special and exceptional situations of staff when the policy is rolled out. We reiterate the importance of having this board continue beyond the simulation exercise. In view of our continuous dialogue with management, and taking note of the Director-General's statement that staff members will not be moved for the sake of moving them, we believe that we will arrive at a policy-fit for the Organization and for all staff members.
- The staff associations made a call for internal justice to be equally accessible to all WHO staff across the Organization, including access to legal advice. We are pleased that management has replaced the headquarters Board of Appeal by the Global Board of Appeal, which sits at Budapest to ensure equal access to all staff.

- We also appreciate the agreement by the administration to recognize the length of service of staff who had been with the Organization for 10 years or more by 1 September 2019, by rewarding them with a day of compensatory leave.
- The staff associations appreciate that the issues of diversity and inclusion have been rising up the administration's agenda. Those issues are integral to obtaining a respectful workplace, and essential in motivating the entire WHO workforce, in all its diversity, to jointly contribute to WHO's strategic objectives. We call on all regions to actively participate and we expect the staff associations to be consulted on the programme of work in this area.

7. The Director-General has acknowledged the important consultative role that the staff associations play in matters related to personnel policy and conditions of service, recognizing the need for effective staff associations to operate in a constructive atmosphere. While staff associations at headquarters and in some regions have noted greater management and administration commitment to building a stronger, more dynamic consultative process, there has been little or no progress elsewhere. In order for the staff associations to work effectively with the management and the administration, we again repeat the need for an Organization-wide policy of strong support to the staff associations, including the provision of adequate time off from regular duties (release time) to allow the representatives to perform their functions. That is still lacking in some regions.

INTERNAL JUSTICE

8. Delays in responding to allegations of wrongdoings still affect the work environment of too many WHO personnel. Therefore, the staff associations welcome recent decisions to assign more resources to the WHO internal investigation function. We expect that these will contribute to increasing timeliness and fairness in investigations. However, adding resources can only be part of the solution. We expect the Office of Internal Oversight Services to implement recommendations that it accepted in its 2018 report to the Health Assembly. In particular, the Office of Internal Oversight Services agreed to revise and share its investigation policy, and to establish time targets and indicators for monitoring investigations (see the Report of the Internal Auditor, 2018, page 33, recommendation No. 22). We are glad to see that the new Policy on Preventing and Addressing Abusive Conduct includes indicative timelines for the investigation process and we look forward to seeing these in effect. We expect the Executive Board and the Independent Expert Oversight Advisory Committee (IEOAC) to keep the Office of Internal Oversight Services accountable for implementing these recommendations and for demonstrating measurable improvements in the conduct of investigations.

9. **Equal access to justice to all staff:** Today, many staff members are not able to exercise their right to an appeal process because they cannot afford the legal fees. Staff members who feel they are victims of wrong-doing by the Organization are in a disadvantaged situation vis-à-vis the Organization in terms of means for the defence of their case. In particular, staff members must personally spend considerable amounts of money from their salaries or savings to pay for a lawyer. That is the case even when they benefit from the limited insurance coverage provided by the staff associations, a benefit that staff in regions do not have. Some staff are even obliged to take out a private financial loan to be able to afford the appeal process. The staff member is thus on an unequal footing with the Organization in the face of litigation. Therefore we, the staff associations, would support considering the creation by the administration of a fund to ensure equal access to justice for all WHO staff. Such a fund would underscore the administration's commitment to providing adequate access to internal justice and the importance that resolving workplace issues, including workplace conflict, plays in supporting the occupational health and well-being of staff.

10. Based on the above, we request a review, revision and transformation of the internal justice system to cover the following responsibilities:

- transparent global approach to the prevention of disputes through the form of educational and learning activities for staff, supervisors, leads, management;
- fair and adequate access to justice mechanism for staff, including the removal of financial and other potential barriers thereto;
- distribution of resources to focus on preventive and solution-finding work, aiming to reduce costs of later legal decisions and corrective actions, reduce risk to staff health and well-being, and reduce risk to the Organization;
- decisions on administrative review requests aligned with relevant WHO policies in the areas of ethics, equality and inclusion, and respectful workplace;
- review of reporting line for decision-making on request for administrative review;
- transparent global reporting on continued improvement and data in the area of internal justice as a whole.

STAFF HEALTH INSURANCE

11. As the leading authority in public health, WHO must set the example to the world and to its Member States in respect of minimum standards for health insurance.

12. The staff associations have expressed concerns for several years concerning access to treatment for all staff health insurance participants, regardless of their location. We are pleased to note that our voice has been heard, and welcome the launch of the new pilot to improve access to treatment in the African and Eastern Mediterranean regions on 29 January 2021. We will be monitoring this pilot closely with the staff health insurance to ensure it meets the needs of staff and their insured family members. We are also pleased to see that efforts have been made globally to reduce delays in reimbursement time, but note that work still needs to be done to maintain a consistent maximum reimbursement time of 15 days across all regions.

13. The staff health insurance secretariat recently conducted a satisfaction survey in consultation with the staff associations, and we believe the fact that approximately 84% of respondents said they are satisfied or very satisfied in general with the staff health insurance is a reflection of the improvements that have been made in recent years, in collaboration with the different staff associations. The survey has however identified several concerns, and we request that these be addressed as a priority in 2021 by implementing a global ticketing system and a new process for advance payments, in order to provide a consistent level of service globally and further assist access to treatment for participants with low incomes.

14. We are also pleased to see that the staff health insurance maintained closer communication with participants in 2020 and ask that this trend continue as now, more than ever, staff need to know that they have the support of their staff health insurance.

15. Finally we, the staff of WHO, recognize and appreciate the trust placed in us by our governing bodies and reiterate our commitment to continue working to accomplish the mandates you have given

the Organization and towards the attainment of the goals of the Organization. We thank you for your support and encouragement and look forward to the continued support and guidance of the Executive Board. For our part, we restate our dedication, as committed international civil servants, to the service of the Member States and the health of their populations.

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