

Report of the Ombudsman¹

1. Since 2018, as part of the Ombudsman's² accountability, all ombudsmen across WHO have issued an annual report on their activities to the Executive Board. This report describes the activities of the Ombudsman during 2021, outlines the most relevant systemic issues identified during that period and follows up on the administration's response to the recommendations made in previous reports.³ The administration's response to the recommendations made by the Ombudsman is described in a separate document.⁴

2. The Ombudsman's primary role⁵ is to provide confidential assistance to staff members who voluntarily approach the office.⁶ Based on those confidential conversations, the Ombudsman monitors trends to enable the early detection of systemic issues of potential relevance, provides feedback to management, and advises top leadership on appropriate remedial and preventive action. By assisting individual visitors and providing upward feedback to management, the Ombudsman helps the Organization to better address significant problems that may hinder its mission. Ultimately, the Ombudsman aims to foster a better working environment in which core institutional values, such as, respect, integrity, tolerance and non-discrimination, prevail.

3. Combating the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic was a major focus of WHO's work in 2020 and continued to be a priority for the Organization throughout 2021. The health crisis across the globe imposed new virtual ways of working and reshaped the working environment, which, in turn, had a significant impact on the life and work of many colleagues. The effect of the pandemic was also reflected in the workload of the Ombudsman, as many of the cases dealt with related to the difficulties faced under the new working conditions and the communication challenges they occasioned, for both individual staff members and whole teams.

¹ This information document is submitted in line with the conclusions of the Board at its 141st session in May 2017 regarding the recommendation of the United Nations Joint Inspection Unit that all legislative bodies in the United Nations system "make it possible for the ombudsman to report to them on identified systemic issues on a regular basis" (See document EB141/2, noted by the Board at its 141st session, and document EB141/2017/REC/1, summary records of the first meeting, section 6).

² This document has been prepared by the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services in consultation with all WHO's regional ombudsmen. It reflects the views of all WHO ombudsmen and thus any mention of the Ombudsman refers to the work of both the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services and the regional ombudsmen.

³ See documents EB148/INF./2 and EB148/INF./3.

⁴ See document EB150/INF./3.

⁵ Background information on the role of the Ombudsman and the structure of the Ombudsman's services is annexed to this report.

⁶ Hereafter referred to as "visitors".

4. The new reality has resulted in differences in working conditions and practices between colleagues working from home and those who are physically present in the workplace. While most staff continued to work from home, others have continued to work on WHO premises, based on the nature of their work or their managerial role. The number of staff present in the office changed over time depending on prevailing health conditions. The differences in working conditions have contributed to tension among staff. For example, some staff working from home felt that the importance of their work was undermined because they were not considered “essential” workers. In other cases, staff required to come to the office feared the risks posed by physical contact with colleagues.

5. More generally, the challenges posed by the pandemic caused prolonged stress in the WHO workforce as a whole, with a significant mental health impact. The situation has taken a toll on the cohesion of many teams and departments, leaving some staff at the point of exhaustion. The present report has therefore focused on this problem and includes several related recommendations, some of which follow up on issues already raised in last year’s report.

6. While these recommendations highlight deficiencies which WHO needs to address, the Ombudsman is mindful that, since the beginning of the pandemic, the outstanding feature of the Organization’s response to the health crisis has been the extraordinary commitment and loyalty of every single WHO staff member towards achieving the Organization’s mission. As the Ombudsman underlined in last year’s report, recognition must be given to the hard work and tireless efforts of all staff during such difficult times.

7. In December 2020, the Director-General announced that 2021 would be the “Year of the Workforce”. The stated aim of this initiative is to empower staff to contribute to WHO’s mission and give all WHO colleagues a seat at the table when it comes to charting the Organization’s future.¹ Those goals align with the culture change pillar of the WHO transformation agenda, which seeks to put staff at the centre of the Organization’s change process. The Ombudsman has seized the opportunity provided by the “Year of the Workforce” to support efforts to strengthen the new organizational culture by promoting greater staff engagement across the three levels of the Organization, particularly as regards the implementation of key policies. Specific recommendations are included in this report.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES RESULTING FROM THE OMBUDSMAN’S REPORTS

8. This is the fifth report submitted by the Ombudsman to the Executive Board. By giving the Ombudsman the opportunity to report to the Board, WHO signalled its commitment towards transparency and accountability. This is a remarkable initiative, when considering that among the organizations served by the Ombudsman and Mediation Services in headquarters,² only WHO has made it possible for the Ombudsman to interact directly with its legislative bodies. The experience gained in the past five years has been enormously positive and merits a more thorough analysis.

9. Having the Ombudsman report directly to the Executive Board has produced tangible results. While a few of the recommendations made by the Ombudsman in past years are still outstanding, most of them are either being, or have already been, implemented by the Secretariat. Such an outcome shows the value of the Ombudsman’s reporting to the Board in bringing about real change within the Organization. There could have been no such achievement without the support of top management, notably the Director-General,

¹ Message to all staff from the Director-General – End of Year Letter to WHO Colleagues – 2020; 23 December 2020.

² The Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services serves WHO, the UNAIDS Secretariat, the International Agency for Research on Cancer and the United Nations International Computing Centre.

and close collaboration with services across the Secretariat, both at headquarters and the WHO regions, including areas such as human resources, ethics and staff health and well-being.

10. The Secretariat has responded by and large positively to the Ombudsman's recommendations. Some examples of the positive response are provided below.

Legal, regulatory, financial and compliance

(a) Need to address disrespectful behaviour and harassment Facilitated reassignment of staff members confronting untenable situations

Among the Ombudsman's recommendations in this area, which the Secretariat have implemented, are: (i) to revamp the policy on the prevention of harassment; (ii) to establish mandatory training on prevention of harassment for all staff; and (iii) to set up an expedited mechanism for the reassignment of staff in special cases, most notably in situations of harassment, through a special inter-service group comprising the Office of the Director-General, Human Resources, Ethics, Staff Health and Well-being and the Ombudsman, to review harassment related situations and other systemic issues.¹ A concerted effort to identify solutions, including reassignment, has been made through this inter-service group, which should be endowed with a special fund to finance such operations.²

(b) Equal access to informal resolution across WHO

The Ombudsman recommended that: (i) similar opportunities for access to informal resolution should be given to all staff independent of their location; and (ii) that all regional offices should establish a dedicated/professional regional ombudsman's office.¹ Significant progress has been made in this regard as almost all the regional offices have now established a dedicated/professional regional ombudsman to assist staff in the informal resolution of work-related issues.

Values, ethics and standards

(a) Progress towards greater diversity on grounds of race/age/gender

Recommendations made by the Ombudsman, which the Secretariat has implemented, include: (i) to encourage communication between senior management and staff on diversity and inclusion issues; and (ii) to set up training initiatives to prevent biases.³ It is inspiring to see how the Secretariat has moved well beyond those modest targets by setting up a new structure in WHO to specifically address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion.

(b) Active engagement of staff

Among the changes needed to allow staff to speak up and engage as active bystanders on work related issues, the Ombudsman recommended that: (i) all managers should implement an open-door policy mirroring the example of the Director-General; and (ii) information should be provided to all staff

¹ See document EB142/INF./2 – January 2018.

² See document EB146/INF./2 – January 2020.

³ See documents EB144/INF./2 – January 2019 and EB148/INF./2 – January 2021.

regarding available avenues to address work-related issues.¹ The Ombudsman notes that the Secretariat has made significant progress on those issues.

(c) WHO's duty of care towards its staff

The Ombudsman recommended that the Secretariat: (i) should set up broader means to foster career development; and (ii) should pay greater attention to the importance of career development.² Those recommendations have been implemented by the Secretariat through a number of human resources policies, including, the launching, in March 2018, of the short-term developmental assignments policy, the approval in November 2018 of the global mentoring programme, and the implementation of one-to-one career counselling sessions.

Organizational, leadership and management

Need for WHO to invest in managers

Among the initiatives recommended by the Ombudsman to improve the supervisory skills of managers were: (i) development of a mentoring programme; and (ii) implementation of a 360 degree performance assessment mechanism.² The Ombudsman acknowledges that the Secretariat has moved forward with a new programme for mentoring and coaching, and has made significant efforts towards establishing a more comprehensive performance assessment system.

CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

11. Based on confidential interactions with visitors, the Ombudsman has singled out two systemic issues that have been the object of subsequent discussions with senior management:

- (i) new challenges for WHO's working environment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic; and,
- (ii) need to take effective steps to bring real culture change to WHO.

NEW CHALLENGES FOR WHO'S WORKING ENVIRONMENT RESULTING FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

12. Following the onset of the COVID-19 health crisis, in March 2020, the Secretariat decided to ask colleagues at headquarters to work from home, with the exception of those deemed to be "critical staff". All regional offices adopted a similar course of action. Whereas the numbers of staff working from home and those in the office have changed over time depending on the prevailing health conditions, the majority of colleagues have been carrying out their tasks from home. The new working conditions have remained in force during 2021.

13. The Ombudsman notes that from the beginning of the pandemic, despite critical challenges, staff have shown extraordinary loyalty and commitment. WHO's response would not have been possible without the dedication of all colleagues who, for months on end, have worked around the clock in a very stressful environment and under great pressure. The new working environment meant that staff had to adjust to the

¹ See document EB144/INF./2 – January 2019.

² See document EB142/INF./2 – January 2018.

challenges of working from home, as well as recalibrate some of the work objectives as initially planned. Such issues were described in detail in the 2020 Report of the Ombudsman to the Executive Board.

14. Whether working from home or in the office, all WHO staff had to operate in a new working environment defined by virtual communications. This new reality was particularly hard for staff caring for children or elderly family members – as was the case primarily with female colleagues or single parents – or for staff members who lived alone, far from their families. The pandemic also impacted on the well-being and mental health of some colleagues, making it difficult for them to carry out their work because of concerns regarding their own health or that of their relatives. The situation was harder still for temporary staff and consultants who experienced additional anxiety over their future careers, because of the precarious nature of their contracts and the grim financial outlook.

15. Some of the main themes outlined in the 2020 report have re-emerged in 2021. During the year, based on the Ombudsman's interactions, most colleagues appear to have adapted well to the new virtual ways of working. However, several issues made the process difficult at the outset. The lack of regular in-person contact meant that relatively minor issues had to be addressed through virtual meetings, which increased exponentially as a result. That, in turn, eroded colleagues' time, leaving them exhausted by the end of the day, and limiting the time available for important tasks. Furthermore, some colleagues working from home found setting clear boundaries between work and personal life challenging, which had an impact on family life.

16. Another issue which became apparent in some teams during the course of 2021, particularly in headquarters, was the divide between colleagues working in the office and those teleworking. The criteria that defined these groups was based on the nature of the work performed, and, in some cases, the supervisory role of the staff member – with some flexibility for individual requests. However, in some cases, staff members who were teleworking seemed to feel that not being required to be present in the office reflected on the importance of their work. On the other hand, certain colleagues who were called to work in the office did so reluctantly because of concerns about health risks or because they would have preferred the flexibility afforded by working from home. The move to a new headquarters building with smaller capacity is likely to compound the problem as some colleagues will be required to share a common space and to work on a rotational basis to be agreed among them. As the situation continues to evolve in accordance with the prevailing health conditions, staff will be kept regularly informed through communications from the Secretariat and briefings from supervisors during team meetings.

17. The workloads, deliverables and programmatic objectives initially planned for the 2020–2021 biennium were also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Its effect was particularly felt by those colleagues directly involved in the response, who had to deal with heavy workloads and operate under tremendous pressure with little or no rest for weeks on end. Even colleagues who were not in the front line of the response found themselves overwhelmed by multiple tasks as they undertook assignments related to COVID-19 in addition to their regular work programme. Furthermore, staff members who were not involved in the pandemic response and whose workloads remained almost unchanged often felt drained by the need to produce results while simultaneously dealing with family, household and health-related issues.

18. As a result of the above situation, a sense of exhaustion is apparent among many colleagues, some of whom seem to have reached their limit. The sense of exhaustion affects not only colleagues dealing with emergencies, but also those in other departments. The mental health impact of the situation is undeniable and further efforts in that regard are essential in line with the recommendations being drafted by the WHO Mental Health Task Force.

19. In that context, specific attention should be paid to the situation of supervisors who, as the crisis deepened, found themselves at a loss. As the first port of call, supervisors should have interacted regularly with staff during the crisis so as to gain an understanding of individual problems, help those affected, make changes in roles and responsibilities, and adjust workloads. However, not all supervisors were able to have frank conversations with their teammates about reviewing working arrangements or establishing more realistic objectives for the 2020 performance assessment exercise. Many supervisors were seriously impacted by the crisis through having to cope with anxiety resulting from concerns about work, health and family. For senior management and many heads of country offices, the situation was even more challenging as they had to respond to extraordinary political and media pressure.

20. In the 2020 report, the Ombudsman pointed out that supervisors, like many staff members, had been impacted by lockdown and had found themselves ill-fitted to engage with staff. Accordingly, the Ombudsman recommended giving consideration to providing adequate support for supervisors, including targeted webinars, coaching and clinics on performance management and development. While several services and initiatives have been developed to support managers, the nature and scope of the problem suggests that additional efforts are needed.

21. Team cohesion, on the other hand, can only be achieved in an atmosphere of open and frank exchanges, particularly in the context of virtual communications. In the recent past, however, this has not been the case in a number of departments, where regular and honest exchanges among colleagues have been lacking. Such a situation is limiting the potential of the teams concerned and compromising their working environment by eroding their sense of inclusion and belonging. Dysfunctional communication may result from mistrust, which, in turn, can be caused by a lack of psychological safety. Unless colleagues feel able to speak openly with their managers or in team meetings, give opinions, and put forward ideas without fear of retaliation, the effectiveness of the team will be undermined. The problem is concerning as trust, cohesion and mutual confidence in the value of, and support for, each team member is the fabric of any social group.

22. To address some of the shortcomings identified above, the Secretariat might wish to consider the following actions and approaches:

(a) Need for senior management to lead additional efforts to motivate and encourage staff

- The sense of exhaustion experienced by many colleagues and teams as a result of the pressures WHO has faced in combating COVID-19, and the challenges posed by the new virtual working environment, requires an additional effort on the part of senior management to encourage and motivate our workforce.
- A key role for senior management is to lead and inspire staff with a view to ensuring that all colleagues believe in the Organization's vision, mission and values, and that they embed those aspects in their daily work. To that end, senior management should reflect on the need for further initiatives to cement internal cohesion, including, by encouraging greater trust as a means of fostering an inclusive and open working environment in which staff are not afraid to speak up.

(b) The Secretariat should assess how staff are coping with the situation in different departments

- As a sense of exhaustion seems to be affecting the internal cohesion of a number of teams, mistrust and a lack of psychological safety among team members are symptoms that have been observed across the board.

- To prevent further escalation of the problem, the Secretariat should consider evaluating the nature and extent of the problem. To that end, a thorough assessment of the situation, department by department, may be appropriate as a means of gathering relevant information on the impact of the pandemic on the Organization's working environment. The Ombudsman is ready to collaborate with management in this endeavour.

(c) The Secretariat should foster the implementation of practical measures for the protection of staff well-being and mental health

- The tremendous efforts of WHO staff in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic have taken a toll on the well-being and mental health of many of them. To prevent the situation from deteriorating further, the Secretariat should consider strengthening its efforts to support and implement the workplan and recommendations being drawn up by the WHO Mental Health Task Force. In this regard, additional practical measures to be implemented in the near future might be considered.

(d) Further support for managers and supervisors in how to interact with their staff

- While the Secretariat has already adopted a number of initiatives aimed at supporting supervisors in handling the new working reality in line with the 2020 Ombudsman's recommendations, nevertheless, some supervisors have felt overwhelmed and unable to engage with staff to address individual problems, assist those in need, and adjust workplans or workloads.
- In that context, the Secretariat should consider additional means to foster supervisory skills by providing advice and hints on best practices in matters such as, conducting virtual meetings, addressing written communications, and checking assignments, so that supervisors are able to clearly define priorities and encourage staff to discuss deadlines and the terms of a given assignment, in order to promote a healthy work-life balance.

NEED TO TAKE EFFECTIVE STEPS TO BRING REAL CULTURE CHANGE

23. A key component of the Ombudsman's work is to contribute to developing and strengthening a workplace culture that upholds fundamental organizational values, notably integrity, respect, dignity and diversity.¹ In pursuit of this mandate, the Ombudsman has undertaken a number of initiatives over the years, such as, promoting the clear definition of WHO corporate values and their effective practical application. Recommendations in this regard were made in previous reports of the Ombudsman to the Executive Board.²

24. In the 2019 report, the Ombudsman strongly supported the definition of a new set of corporate values as part of the transformation agenda. Those values were consolidated in the 2019 WHO Values Charter, which singled out Trust, Excellence, Integrity, Collaboration and Care as the bedrock of WHO's corporate culture. The Ombudsman recommended several measures to embed these values in the daily work of the Secretariat, including: (i) encouraging top management to publicly show their commitment to those values and to refer to them as the basis of key decisions; (ii) engaging managers in this process by having them apply these principles in dealing with conflicts or taking relevant decisions; (iii) providing proper guidance

¹ See for instance, OMB Terms of Reference, para. 2 in fine: "The Ombudsman [c]ontributes to developing and strengthening a workplace and culture that uphold the values of the Organization, its ethical and functional integrity, respect for the dignity, diversity and rights of staff, in compliance with the Organization's rules and regulations and the Code of Conduct for International Civil Servants."

² See 2018 Report of the Ombudsman to the Executive Board, document EB142/INF./2, paragraph 18; 2019 Report of the Ombudsman to the Executive Board, document EB144/INF./2, paragraphs 9 et ff.

and training on the Values Charter to staff at all levels with initiatives, such as, coaching, mentoring and training for supervisors; and (iv) including perceptions of cultural change and the application of those values in any further staff survey to assess the impact of the Values Charter.

25. Until now, little progress has been made in embedding the principles enshrined in the WHO Values Charter in the Organization's decision-making process or as part of the training programmes offered to staff. The Ombudsman's views appear to have been echoed in the recent Evaluation Report of WHO Transformation.¹ The report observed that there have been some tangible though limited improvements towards a new organizational culture, the so-called "soft-wiring"² aspects of the transformation agenda.³ Among those improvements, the report outlines initiatives, such as, the Values Charter, the open-door policy, and the Task Force on Flexible Working Arrangements.⁴ Nevertheless, the report underlines that cultural change has proved more elusive than structural or process change,⁴ the so-called "hard wiring" components of the transformation agenda.⁵ The report is particularly critical about the lack of progress at the country level,⁶ as transformation does not seem to have fully reached WHO country offices.⁷ Based on those findings, the report recommended, *inter alia*, that "additional measures that are necessary for improving transformation at country level [...] should be identified and pursued".⁸

26. However, in this context, a new window of opportunity for culture change in WHO was opened by the Director-General at the end of 2020 when he declared 2021 the "Year of the Workforce: Building a More Respectful Working Environment". There seems to be a clear parallel between the main goal of this initiative and that of the transformation agenda, namely, to put staff at the centre of the Organization's change process.

27. By repositioning the workforce as key to WHO's actions and setting respect as the basis of WHO culture, the Director-General's declaration appears aligned with the main goals of the transformation agenda. In the Ombudsman's view, the potential of the declaration to drive further culture change in WHO will depend on: (i) whether its implementation is connected to the Organization's core values and is in tune with its transformation journey; and (ii) whether staff are truly engaged in the development and discussion of related policy changes. From a practical perspective, staff engagement in initiatives under the Year of the Workforce seems to be of paramount importance, notably, the new policy on preventing and addressing abusive conduct, the programme on diversity, equity and inclusion, the work of the Task Force on Mental Health, the new human resources policies and further initiatives related to core values.

28. A shift of organizational culture, as envisioned in both the transformation agenda and the Year of the Workforce, requires the engagement of staff across the board, particularly at country level. For staff to be at the centre of WHO's decision-making process, colleagues should be given a say in the content of new policy initiatives and should also provide feedback on implementation. The engagement of colleagues

¹ See Volume 1: Report – Evaluation of WHO Transformation - [who-transformation-final-report.pdf](#).

² See Volume 1: Report – Evaluation of WHO Transformation, paragraph 3, page ix.

³ See WHO (2018 WHO reform processes, including the transformation agenda, and implementation of United Nations development system reform (EB144/31)), 28 December 2018.

⁴ See Volume 1: Report – Evaluation of WHO Transformation, paragraph 2, page x.

⁵ See Volume 1: Report – Evaluation of WHO Transformation, paragraph 3, page ix.

⁶ See Volume 1: Report – Evaluation of WHO Transformation, paragraph 2, page xii.

⁷ See Volume 1: Report – Evaluation of WHO Transformation, paragraph 5, page xii.

⁸ See Volume 1: Report – Evaluation of WHO Transformation, recommendation 3, page 78.

across the three levels of the Organization in a bottom-up approach will require their buy-in and sense of ownership of any new proposal.¹

29. The transformation agenda sought this type of staff engagement through a network of focal points, the so-called Global Change Network, comprising between two and three hundred individuals across the Organization. It aimed to translate the organizational culture change into daily behaviours. However, in the Ombudsman's view, the potential of the Network could not be fully realized, primarily because of too few participants, its limited supporting role for management, and the lack of ownership, mission and continuous training in relevant areas.

30. Learning from the experience of the Global Change Network, for any such network to be operational, particular attention has to be paid to the terms of reference, in particular, organization and structure, reporting lines, member selection process, training, role and mission. Many other United Nations agencies have established similar types of networks,² which are being coordinated by the Ombudsman jointly with other stakeholders. Their experience over the years shows that this type of structure can be very helpful in empowering staff and preventing difficult situations from festering.

31. As a way to address some of the issues identified above, the Secretariat might wish to consider the following actions and approaches:

(a) Further steps should be taken to embed the WHO Values Charter in WHO's practices

- As recommended in the 2019 Report of the Ombudsman to the Executive Board, the principles enshrined in the WHO Values Charter should have been embedded in the rationale for the WHO decision-making process, most notably for key decisions adopted by senior management. To date, however, the effective implementation of this initiative has been slow at best and little progress has been made.
- In order to improve on the current situation, the Secretariat should reposition the Values Charter as a reference point in WHO's legislative decision-making process, to ensure that relevant new policy initiatives are anchored in WHO core values.
- The WHO Values Charter is also intended as a guide for the actions of managers and staff, and to set a new tone in how teams interact. Proper guidance and training should therefore be offered to all staff. It will not be possible to bring about the desired change in WHO's organizational culture until all colleagues share a belief in a common set of core values. Staff members should be encouraged, guided and supported to follow the example of leaders and managers and show adherence to WHO's values. Behavioural adherence to the WHO Values Charter through training, coaching, mentoring and focus group discussions should therefore be a priority.

¹ This is the central objective of both the transformation agenda and the Thirteenth General Programme of Work 2019–2023.

² See for instance the different respectful workplace advisors programmes set up by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, United Nations Funds and Programmes (UNDP, UNICEF, UN Women, the United Nations Office for Project Services, UNFPA), the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Programme.

(b) Need to place staff at the centre of WHO culture change

- The engagement of staff across the board, particularly at country level, is fundamental in placing staff at the centre of the Organization's change process as intended under both the transformation agenda and the Year of the Workforce. Such a shift in mindset requires the buy-in of staff and their participation in any new proposal touching on key WHO values, not only in headquarters and the regional offices, but most importantly, in country offices.
- The Secretariat should therefore explore new ways of eliciting further staff engagement across all levels of the Organization, particularly with regard to initiatives linked to culture change, such as those envisioned for the Year of the Workforce. Some of the initiatives already foresee the development of a network of focal points. However, care should be taken to avoid duplication in the development of such networks as that could lead to fragmentation and a lack of real staff participation. To secure staff engagement, staff members will need to feel that they can speak up safely.¹ Current developments in fostering emotional intelligence and a respectful workplace could prepare the ground for an ambitious programme to strengthen psychological safety in every department and team across WHO.
- The establishment of a unified network of focal points across all levels of the Organization could strengthen staff engagement as long as the focal points are selected in a way that allows for the adequate representation of members not only from headquarters and regional offices, but also from country offices. Such a network could help to ensure proper engagement by staff and managers. Particular attention would need to be paid to its terms of reference, in particular on supervision, mission and the need for continuous training in relevant areas, bearing in mind the experience gained through similar initiatives in other United Nations agencies. The Secretariat might therefore wish to establish such a network, with the goal of fostering staff engagement in new initiatives connected with WHO core values, through a unified approach to prevent fragmentation. Feedback on any discussions should be provided to senior management and other existing joint structures, such as the working group of the joint Staff Management Respectful Workplace Initiative.

UPDATE ON PROGRESS SINCE LAST YEAR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

32. The Ombudsman is mindful that, as the 2015 report of the Joint Inspection Unit noted,² it is not the Ombudsman's task to prescribe a specific course of action on systemic issues and then monitor it, but rather to draw attention to such matters and thus elicit a proper response from management. In this vein, a report by the Secretariat, describing the recommendations made in the 2020 Report of the Ombudsman to the Executive Board, will be issued in a separate document³ and will provide an update on the actions taken by the administration to address those matters.

33. The Ombudsman acknowledges with appreciation the significant efforts the Secretariat has made to address the recommendations. As there may be outstanding matters requiring further work, the Ombudsman is prepared to engage with the Secretariat in order to explore future opportunities for improvement in those areas.

¹ Aristotle Project, Google. The Fearless Organization by Amy Edmondson.

² JIU. Review of the organizational ombudsman services across the United Nations system; document JIU/REP/2015/6. Geneva: United Nations Joint Inspection Unit; 2015.
(https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_document_files/products/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU_REP_2015_6_English.pdf, accessed 15 November 2021).

³ See document EB150/INF./3.

ANNEX

ROLE OF THE OMBUDSMAN

1. As set out in the current Staff Rules, prevention, early response and informal justice are fundamental components of WHO's new standardized system of internal justice. In that framework, the Ombudsman plays a key role as the primary pillar for the informal resolution of disputes. In line with international standards of practice developed by the International Ombudsman Association, the Ombudsman is an independent and neutral interlocutor who provides confidential assistance for the informal resolution of work-related difficulties. The Ombudsman listens impartially to those seeking assistance; develops options for the informal resolution of concerns; provides confidential, informal, independent and impartial advice to visitors; mediates disputes; and identifies systemic trends. The Ombudsman does not advocate on behalf of any particular individual, issue or interest, but rather for fair and equitable processes. The Ombudsman does not represent any side in a dispute, conduct formal investigations or participate in formal processes.
2. The main task of an ombudsman is therefore to assist staff members in dealing with work-related concerns through informal means, thereby preventing conflict and avoiding escalation of the problem. In addition, through confidential exchanges with visitors and other stakeholders within the Organization, the Ombudsman may act as an "early warning" mechanism by detecting problems that go beyond individual issues and relate instead to broad systemic matters. In such a role, the Ombudsman provides feedback to senior management and advises them on appropriate remedial and preventive action to correct those systemic problems, thereby averting unexpected risks for the Organization.
3. The Ombudsman's major functions are therefore: to mediate and facilitate conflict resolution; to monitor trends in support of early detection of potentially significant issues and provide feedback to senior management; to support preventive action; and to foster a workplace culture that upholds WHO's fundamental values, most notably a respectful workplace environment.
4. The establishment of the Office of the Ombudsman represents a commitment by the Organization to promoting the well-being of its employees and improving the policies, rules and practices that affect its working environment.

OMBUDSMAN SERVICES IN WHO

5. Ombudsman services in WHO are decentralized. In addition to the Ombudsman and Mediation Services unit in headquarters, which is available to all WHO staff members regardless of type of contract and location, most regional offices have established their own ombudsman positions to promote informal resolution within their geographical areas.
6. The Ombudsman and Mediation Services unit in headquarters comprises a small team of two ombudsmen, who have professional experience and are fully dedicated to the function of the position, and one assistant. It provides informal resolution services to staff members of WHO as well as those of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, the International Agency for Research on Cancer and the United Nations International Computing Centre.
7. The regional offices for Africa, the Americas, South-East Asia and Europe have established positions for dedicated, professional ombudsmen, and the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean will follow the same path in the future as a recruitment process for a dedicated/professional ombudsman

is under way. The Regional Office for the Western Pacific has four part-time ombudsmen who, in addition to their technical duties, carry out this function with the assistance of an external consultant.

8. Regional ombudsmen ensure that all staff in their respective regions are supported in the informal resolution of work-related issues. To that end, each regional ombudsman's workplan should contemplate regular visits to country offices as well as emergency outposts in the region as a way to prevent potential conflicts or irregular situations that may end up tarnishing the Organization's reputation.

9. WHO aims to ensure an ombudsman practice across the Organization aligned with international professional standards. To that end, the Ombudsman and Mediation Services in headquarters provides coordination and support to all regional ombudsmen.

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