

Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations

1. The staff associations of WHO, PAHO, IARC and UNAIDS, representing over 9000 staff globally, welcome the opportunity to make this statement to the Executive Board.

RESPECTFUL WORKING ENVIRONMENT

2. We recognize that a respectful workplace at WHO is one where the entire workforce, including all categories of colleagues (staff, consultants, interns, young professionals and other collaborators) working at and with WHO, feel respected, that their rights are protected without infringement or encroachment, and that they are treated fairly and able to achieve their full potential. It is a work environment in which a culture of empowerment and cooperation is cultivated, and where the value of diversity is appreciated and valued, and inclusion is encouraged through open and courteous channels of communication. This is also an initiative that we have agreed with management will be the umbrella for all policies, initiatives and strategies pertaining to the WHO Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, such as those relating to preventing and addressing abusive conduct, to diversity, equity and inclusion, and to preventing and responding to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

INTERNAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

3. An internal justice system is the foundation on which trust within an organization is built and sustained. In order for WHO's internal justice system to inspire trust, it must be transparent, accountable and equitable. Above all, it cannot be seen to discriminate in favour of those who are more senior, and who possess more power and authority. In this regard, it has come to our attention that there are several Global Board of Appeal cases where a recommendation has been proposed by the Global Board of Appeal panel to the Director-General, and where the 60-day statutory deadline for a decision to be made and communicated has passed with no decision taken, without clear justification as to why. We would like to see more transparency on why delays occur in the near future. If we, at WHO, UNAIDS, PAHO and affiliated agencies, are serious about creating trust within the Organization, we must inevitably take on the difficult task of strengthening our internal justice system to serve us all, across all three levels of the Organization.

4. We therefore welcome the call by Judge Teresa Bravo¹ for the need to establish an office like the Office of Staff Legal Assistance or a staff (legal) counsellor at each regional office, with a focus on providing support to country offices and geographically dispersed offices. Moreover, we welcome the recommendation by Judge Bravo for a focus on outreach and a serious investment in training on the functioning of the internal justice system (including the creation of a toolkit for self-represented applicants). In this respect, consideration should be given to holding at least one yearly seminar on the

¹ Judge Teresa Maria da Silva Bravo is a full-time judge of the United Nations Dispute Tribunal who was engaged by WHO to conduct a review of the Internal Justice System of WHO/UNAIDS and its affiliated entities.

internal justice system and establishing the position of “staff relations officer” or staff (legal) counsellor, in line with the practice of other international organizations. Nevertheless, further reflection and discussion are needed to agree on a balance between an external and an internal legal counsellor, as we value the trust and independence of such legal advice.

CONDITIONS OF WORK

5. We congratulate the Organization in launching the flexible working arrangement policy, which we hope will begin to be rolled out in all regions and countries quickly, as we hope that this will help with staff’s ability to have a better work-life balance. We are also happy with the progress of the contractual modalities task force and look forward to reading the final report and recommendations. We hope to see a roll-out of generic post descriptions across the Organization and implementation of the forthcoming short development policy as well, in addition to managed mobility and global rosters that will further career development. We hope that the new business management system will continue to enhance and support the work of the Organization.

MENTAL HEALTH AND STAFF HEALTH INSURANCE

6. The Global Executive Office applauds management for addressing the mental health of staff by recruiting staff counsellors, and hopes to see further work in this area, particularly for staff in countries experiencing health emergencies. We welcome the recently adopted changes to the WHO staff health insurance rules related to mental health benefits, namely the medical report definition, hospitalization for psychiatric care, psychotherapy and speech therapy, improved access to treatment for participants who rely on substances and changes to definitions to avoid stigma, the new definition of mental health professional, and changes to the benefits relating to substance abuse. This is an important step forward, which sends the message that we value the mental health of staff health insurance participants. In addition, we recognize that staff health insurance contributions have not increased in 2022, and we understand they will not increase in 2023.

7. However, we would like to renew our request for further work to be done to find a way for participants to have a WHO staff health insurance card that is widely recognized, to enable staff members, whenever possible, to pay only 20% of their medical costs upfront, rather than the full amount, which can be detrimental to the financial situation of some participants, precisely for those with a relatively low income, who very often cannot afford to pay the full amount of their invoices. We wish to see this request, which we have now made for several years in a row, taken into account, to ensure participants are not left stranded, particularly in regions such as the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

SUPPORT TO STAFF WHOSE SALARIES ARE DIMINISHED AS A RESULT OF CURRENCY DEVALUATION

8. We would like to draw your attention to an issue that is jeopardizing our staff in a number of locations, such as Egypt. The Flemming principle, by which the United Nations General Service conditions of employment are based on the best prevailing local conditions, has been violated, since WHO staff at the lower end of the salary scale are paid less than the staff of comparable employers and are nearing the poverty line. This situation has arisen because of the devaluation of the Egyptian pound, causing a severe drop in the purchasing power of local staff salaries. The many salary increases in recent years, following International Civil Service Commission methodology, are not sufficient to compensate for this devaluation. It is thus not surprising, albeit regrettable, that locally recruited staff in the Cairo duty station have taken a collective stand: 83% of them have exercised their right to legally object to the conditions of service.

9. It would of course be preferable to resolve the situation amicably, without having recourse to the internal justice system. Therefore, we respectfully invite the honourable members of the Executive Board to kindly support the balancing of local salaries by adopting changes in the assessment methodology or the payment of at least a portion of the salary in a foreign currency. It is important to take immediate steps to ensure that the purchasing power of our staff is at least equal to that of comparable employers. I also want to take this opportunity to impress upon you that Egypt is not the only country suffering from high inflation and harsh currency devaluation. We are witnessing similar events in a number of countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, including Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and the Syrian Arab Republic. As such, we ask for your support in raising our concerns to ensure that our Organization adheres to the principle of equal pay for equal work, in line with the recommendations of the International Civil Service Commission. A similar situation is already affecting locally recruited staff based in Hungary, who can only receive their salaries in the local currency that has fluctuated significantly in the past year, which is having a negative impact on the purchasing power of their income. With the WHO Budapest Centre now housing more and more teams, we deem it necessary for WHO to remain an attractive employer in that duty station.

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