

## **Report of the Ombudsman**

### **Ombudsman's recommendations: progress on implementation**

#### **Report by the Director-General**

1. This document provides an overview of action taken by the administration in response to the recommendations made in the Ombudsman's report submitted to the Executive Board at its 150th session; it also complements the accompanying Ombudsman's report to the current session of the Board. The human resources update provides additional information on action and initiatives being implemented to address some of the challenges and recommendations contained in the Ombudsman's reports.

#### **FOLLOW-UP ON LAST YEAR'S RECOMMENDATIONS**

##### **New challenges for WHO's working environment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic**

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

2. Senior management has continued to take action to meet the Organization's objective to ensure an inclusive and respectful working environment, and to raise awareness of everyone's responsibilities in this regard. As part of efforts to implement WHO's policy and procedures to prevent and address abusive conduct, measures have been taken to communicate regularly with the workforce, through information and training sessions open to all staff and non-staff personnel. In March 2022, the mandatory United Nations online training course "United to Respect: Preventing Sexual Harassment and Other Prohibited Conduct" was released, adapted to the WHO context. Additionally, guidance and other resource materials continue to be made available to the whole workforce, and to managers and supervisors in particular, focusing on their role in ensuring respectful conduct within the Organization, including raising or responding to concerns in this area.

3. Events organized for 2022 as part of the Respectful Workplace Initiative focused on the following themes: diversity, equity and inclusion; creating a "speak-up" culture; and embedding the WHO Values Charter in the daily work of the Organization. A proposal to integrate the Respectful Workplace Initiative into the institutional framework as a standing programme was approved, and will be implemented from 2023 onwards.

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

4. In 2021, the WHO Taskforce on Workforce Mental Health and Well-being was established by the Director-General, with multiple stakeholders working across the three levels of the Organization, including: Staff Health and Well-being Services, the Department of Human Resources and Talent Management, the Ombudsman, Staff Associations, the Department of Communications, and WHO technical units. The Taskforce coordinates the different WHO initiatives on addressing organizational risks to the mental health and well-being of the workforce, including the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and the Respectful Workplace initiatives, as well as efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. In 2021, the Taskforce carried out a survey to gauge workforce needs and opinions to inform its work.

5. In September 2022, the Staff Health and Well-being Services, in collaboration with other United Nations entities, launched the annual United Nations-wide health survey. This comprehensive survey aims to evaluate the overall health and safety risks facing United Nations personnel, and to collect information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the physical and mental health of the United Nations workforce around the world.

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

6. The Department of Human Resources and Talent Management has, through the headquarters staff counselling service, designed and rolled out a range of services to protect staff mental health and well-being at work. They include individual counselling, focus groups and, in particular, team support, whereby staff counsellors facilitate team retreats and meetings. Regular, interactive webinars are organized on psychosocial issues (burnout prevention, interpersonal skills while teleworking, etc.). The webinars, aimed at all WHO staff, promote a healthier and more resilient working environment, while interactive workshops provide a safe space for colleagues to share experiences and learn from each other. Efforts have been undertaken to implement recommendations by the WHO Taskforce on Workforce Mental Health and Well-being, and the Mental Health at Work platform and application, launched by the Director-General, is available to all staff.

7. The WHO Taskforce on Workforce Mental Health and Well-being has also launched a webinar series entitled “Mental Health Mondays”, featuring resources and tips offered by external mental health specialists to WHO personnel. Participants from 70 to 100 countries across the six WHO regions attend the webinars, with an average of 500 participants for each session.

8. The Staff Health and Well-being Services, in collaboration with the Taskforce, have rolled out a new employee assistance programme, expanding access to counselling support across all locations (by telephone, video and in-person) and in 70+ languages.

9. After a competitive bidding process, a contract was signed with an external provider to deliver a new global health and well-being platform available to the entire WHO workforce. The platform, which was launched in January 2023 for a one-year period to promote healthy habits and employee interaction, is accessible both online and via a mobile application.

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

10. Senior management has continued to build on efforts to support managers’ and supervisors’ efforts to ensure a respectful working environment by implementing WHO’s policy and procedures on

preventing and addressing abusive conduct. Measures have included information and training sessions to provide guidance to managers and supervisors on how to fulfil their responsibilities and seek support if necessary. Furthermore, the mandatory United Nations online training course entitled “United to Respect: Preventing Sexual Harassment and Other Prohibited Conduct”, released in March 2022, has a version for staff with supervisory responsibilities. The course contains information on how supervisors can serve as role models by maintaining a high standard of personal conduct, guidance on how to engage in an ongoing, open dialogue within teams, and case studies illustrating how managers and supervisors can prevent and respond to incidents of inappropriate conduct. Additionally, the 2022 Electronic Performance Management and Development System (ePMDS) included a mandatory team objective relating to WHO’s zero tolerance approach to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, as well as an optional team objective relating to a respectful workplace. These objectives encouraged supervisors to take practical measures and to talk to their teams about improving workplace interactions. Additional resources are also being made available online, including step-by-step guidance documents and presentation slides in English and French, the policy on preventing and addressing abusive conduct – available in all official WHO languages – and WHO guidance on electronic communication, which promotes respectful behaviour when working remotely.

11. The Organization-wide roll-out of the Leadership Pathways programme is ongoing, and WHO is continuing to offer United Nations System Staff College leadership courses to staff members at different levels worldwide. Workshops are held for managers on remote working environments, and further training programmes for managers are under development.

### **Need to take effective steps to bring real culture change**

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

12. Under the WHO Values Charter and the WHO Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, all staff, irrespective of contract type, position or grade, are required to adhere to the WHO core values of diversity, inclusion and respect. Activities reported in this area in 2021 continued in 2022 and included measures to: implement the policy to prevent and address abusive conduct; prevent and respond to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment; and prepare the forthcoming roll-out of training on WHO Ethics Empowerment.

13. The Human Resources Agenda for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for the WHO Workforce, together with its action plan, was launched in May 2022. The Agenda aims to lay the foundations for attracting and retaining a diverse workforce and creating a welcoming work environment for all, where everyone feels valued and able to perform at their best. The outcomes of the “Listen, Learn and Act Together” initiative, which involved engaging experts to advise WHO on issues relating to diversity, equity and inclusion, will be included in further updates on the Agenda and action plan.

14. Embedding the WHO Values Charter in the day-to-day work of the Organization is also a key element of the Respectful Workplace Initiative for 2022 and beyond.

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

15. As mentioned in last year’s report, an Organization-wide survey was conducted in late 2017 and early 2018, focusing on: the WHO organizational culture as alignment towards a shared vision and strategy, working methods that uphold WHO values, and practices that help all staff members to continue to adapt to an evolving internal and external environment.

16. A review is currently underway of the approximately 25 workforce surveys conducted in 2021 and 2022 (or planned for the end of 2022) to inform the next Organization-wide workplace culture survey. The surveys covered a range of topics, including career pathways, contract modalities, mental health and well-being, performance management, and various topics relating to diversity, equity and inclusion.

## **ADDRESSING NEW CHALLENGES**

### **The place of informal resolution in the internal justices system: informal first**

17. Managers remain committed to exploring informal approaches to conflict resolution and addressing work-related issues at an early stage to effectively identify amicable solutions, without the need for staff to turn to the formal dispute settlement system. Even when a formal dispute resolution procedure is launched by a staff member through the administrative review process, informal efforts to resolve the complaint continue, in consultation with the staff member. Senior management also established the Special Cases Group, with representatives from the Department of Human Resources and Talent Management, the Office of the Director-General, the Office of Compliance, Risk Management and Ethics, the Ombudsman, and the Staff Health and Well-being Services, to examine: individual cases involving workplace conflict and/or employment-related concerns; and WHO departments, units or other entities where multiple instances of such conflicts or concerns have arisen.

18. Management is aware that finding solutions for all the parties involved in a work-related dispute may be a lengthy process with budgetary implications. The Special Cases Group meets on a biweekly basis to examine options such as the temporary reassignment of staff members to mitigate conflict until a long-term solution is found.

19. The Internal Justice System of WHO/UNAIDS and Affiliated Entities Review, conducted by an external consultant during the first half of 2022, emphasized the importance of strengthening mediation and the role of the Ombudsman as preferred mechanisms to address staff grievances. The internal justice system report recommended, inter alia, strengthening and promoting the use of mediation and other informal resolution mechanisms during the early stages of work-related conflicts, through outreach and training activities and the creation of a roster of external specialists to facilitate or mediate on an ad-hoc basis. The report also recommends considering creating the post of a Staff Relations Officer to help staff resolve work-related disputes.

20. The Secretariat has discussed these recommendations with stakeholders and is committed to working on an implementation plan, in close coordination with all relevant accountability functions, to strengthen WHO informal dispute resolution mechanisms. It is also determined to strengthen staff relations when handling work-related disputes at an early stage by considering the creation of the post of a Staff Relations Officer, in line with practice at other international organizations.

### **One Workforce: One Respectful Workplace**

21. In November 2020, a three-level global task force was established to review the use of WHO's existing contractual arrangements to: determine how they can be designed, adapted or used more effectively; establish how related processes can be further improved to support the business needs of the Organization; support hiring managers in choosing an approach that best meets their needs; and ensure that WHO's working environment is supportive and enabling, while remaining productive and responsive to the needs of the workforce and key stakeholders. The task force is expected to complete its work and submit its recommendations in the fourth quarter of 2022.

22. The recommendations of the task force will be implemented to address issues relating to arrangements for the employment of staff and non-staff personnel, and further updates will be provided during the course of 2023.

### **Hybrid working environment**

23. The Flexible Working Arrangements policy, published on the WHO Intranet in the WHO e-Manual, under section III.6.28 (Flexible working arrangements), came into force on 1 September 2022. To accompany the policy, specific guidance was also published on the WHO Intranet for staff and managers to consult, including:

- FAQ on teleworking;
- guidance for supervisors on the implementation of flexible working arrangements;
- guidance for WHO staff members on the implementation of flexible working arrangements;
- WHO–ILO Healthy and Safe Telework technical brief; and
- guidance for managers/supervisors on managing staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

24. Additionally, a wide range of short courses and guidance material on hybrid teams and workplaces can be accessed through the search function of the WHO iLearn platform.

25. The human resources team is available, where required, to assist with efforts to improve team cohesion and communication, including in coordination with specialized WHO technical units.

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<sup>1</sup> Included in the WHO e-Manual (III.22.1), in the document repository for human resources and administrative guidance for managing staff during the pandemic (COVID-19).