

Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations

1. The staff at the World Health Organization (WHO) are deeply dedicated to fulfilling WHO's mission, which includes enabling the vision of WHO's Thirteenth and subsequent General Programmes of Work and the health-related Sustainable Development Goals. Their responsibilities encompass the diverse activities outlined in the Organization's constitution, such as establishing norms and standards, providing policy advice, and coordinating field and emergency operations.

2. To effectively address the demanding nature of their work and the numerous personal and professional challenges they encounter, our workforce requires the support of the Organization with a sense of reassurance regarding their professional stability and future trajectory.

3. The staff commend the various initiatives aimed at fostering this sense of acknowledgment, belonging and support. Examples include the recently approved exemplary parental leave policy, flexible working arrangements policy, collaborative working groups with management such as the newly established Respectful Workplace Programme that encourage kindness, diversity, equity, inclusion, cohesiveness and mutual respect, as well as other activities on mental health and well-being, and the Leap, Engage, Accelerate and Disrupt (LEAD) Innovation Hub, to name a few.

4. It is important to highlight that, over the years, Member States have requested a series of measures to be implemented that have significantly impacted the work environment. The following changes have occurred or are being considered:

- New contracts are all time-limited.
- Allowances experienced reductions.
- A mandatory mobility policy is under deliberation, deviating from the initial recommendation for a managed approach.
- Work responsibilities have expanded to cover several broad additional areas, and while there has been an increase in staff, numerous positions in core areas remain vacant.
- Increased administrative requirements take up a substantial amount of time, detracting from the generation of tangible outcomes.
- The principles established by the International Civil Service Commission, which guide the methodology for determining post adjustment and local remuneration in duty stations globally, are currently presenting challenges to attract and retain skilled professionals.

5. We also would like to reiterate the concerns about the hardship experienced in particular by locally recruited staff in duty stations where salaries are based on local currency and where inflation rates are very high, such as in Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan, Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia.

6. These changes to working conditions, including shorter-term contracts, increased rotation, and elevated workloads without sufficient human resources, and while we are still waiting for sustainable financing to be introduced, create a stressful atmosphere with the following consequences:

- Employees may not feel safe to voice their concerns or provide candid feedback regarding management and workplace behaviour.
- Job satisfaction and morale are lowered due to a lack of resources necessary for maintaining the highest possible standards and efficiencies, and due to the fact that a significant amount of working time is dedicated to administrative and reporting tasks, which could be greatly streamlined and reduced with fewer mandatory approvals and clearances.
- A lack of medium- and long-term predictability to plan projects and resource them accordingly.
- A risk of loss of institutional knowledge and increased onboarding costs.
- The stress experienced by employees erodes resilience, has a negative impact on health over time, and adversely affects the collaborative spirit and camaraderie among colleagues.

7. These conditions ultimately impact staff morale and job security, making it challenging for individuals, particularly those with families, to plan their lives with certainty and contribute meaningfully.

MOBILITY POLICY

8. The current mobility policy presents several risks, including – if not managed properly – the loss of institutional and specialized knowledge, disruptions to ongoing projects or initiatives, and reduced efficiency, as key staff members with specialized knowledge are rotated out. Some organizations, such as IARC and ICC, the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, have been exempted from mandatory mobility a priori, while PAHO regionally employs a practically functioning combination of generic positions for rotation and fixed positions for specialists. However, this approach has not been adopted throughout the rest of the Organization.

9. Moreover, the currently proposed mobility policy lacks the clarity and transparency that staff require. There is mention of potential settlement support, but no established criteria for requesting assistance. Employees have the right to decline an assignment, yet the acceptable reasons for doing so remain ambiguous.

10. It is essential to recognize that significant financial and human resources are necessary to implement this policy. Since 2014, the Staff Association has highlighted aspects such as unsustainability in view of the specialization of staff in combination with the duration of stays in duty stations. The Organization worldwide has not adopted generic post descriptions; staff working in specialized areas may not have a counterpart position to move to or their counterpart position may be at higher grade making it impossible for them to apply. In conclusion, it is important to consider the potential implications on ongoing projects when staff are moving to other posts during the implementation of the project.

11. Most critically, the current policy does not yet address all the recommendations of the Global Staff/Management Council (GSMC) in 2022 that mobility should be managed rather than mandatory, and currently, many criteria, such as those for matching workforce with positions, are missing.

POST ADJUSTMENTS

12. Additional concerns regarding the International Civil Service Commission persist, such as the recent reduction of the post adjustment by 9.8% at the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, without any explanation provided to staff. It should be noted that, a 10% decrease would trigger a local cost of living survey, which it did not. Although some explanation was provided by International Civil Service Commission, staff were not given any notice by either the Commission or the Organization prior to the reduction that was seen in their March 2023 pay slips. Where our workforce chooses to work outside of headquarters duty stations in order to achieve our mandates more effectively, they should not be reprimanded for such a noble cause by losing 10% of their salary as a result. Our international staff have commitments not simply in their host country but also in their country of origin, which are also subject to high inflation rates.

RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE PROGRAMME

13. The Respectful Workplace Programme, established following the decisions made at the 152nd session of the Executive Board, held from 30 January to 7 February 2023, was a direct outcome of a Global Staff/Management Council decision in 2022 to transition from the Respectful Workplace Initiative to a programme. The Eastern Mediterranean Region Staff Association played a crucial role in ensuring that this decision was placed on the agenda through the Global Executive Office, comprising the Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the staff associations of WHO headquarters, the Regional Office for Africa, the Regional Office for the Americas/PAHO, the Regional Office for South-East Asia, the Regional Office for Europe, the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean and the Regional Office for the Western Pacific, and the Global Service Centre, UNAIDS and IARC, and as a result was unanimously agreed to by the Global Staff/Management Council in 2022.

14. The Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean's Respectful Workplace Working Group, consisting of the Eastern Mediterranean Region Staff Association, Ombuds Office, Staff Counsellor, Human Resources Policy Coordinator and Internal Justice unit at headquarters and Business Operations, conducted a Training-of-Facilitators course to co-create a respectful workplace and uphold WHO values.

15. Seventeen country offices participated in the three-day training course focused on co-creating a respectful workplace, respectful communication in a high emotional intelligence workplace and enhancing resilience: skills for personal and professional effectiveness.

16. The pilot training was a first of its kind at WHO and will be used as a model across the Regions.

INTERNAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

17. We are pleased with the great deal of work and progress made in the area of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. However, we feel that the system administered by the Office of Internal Oversight Services still needs to process staff cases faster. Only high-profile cases seem to be fast tracked while other cases go on for years with no decision made. This again has a negative effect on staff, both the victim and those accused.

CONTRACTUAL MODALITIES

18. We have been promised for a number of years that a contractual reform is coming, but nothing has surfaced to date. The human resources reform during the transformation stated that core functions must be handled by staff, while temporary contracts or consultancies serve to patch the gap, sometimes extending for years.
19. We recognize the efforts and contribution of the Task Force on Contractual Modalities, which worked for two years to produce some recommendations that may improve the current implementation of contract types within the Organization, and we request that their report be published as early as possible.
20. We really need to address the root causes for the choice of contract types such as the rigid funding structure, headcount limitations and organizational culture.
21. Staff core functions require staff, and mechanisms need to be in place for this, rather than patching the gaps with temporary contracts or consultancies.
22. We also want to stress the importance of recruiting staff on generic post descriptions in order to allow for mobility and career development.
23. Lastly, we are still experiencing challenges in the uniformity and transparency around the recruitment processes. Much attention is necessary to preserve the purpose of the competitive recruitment process.
24. The current practices have a direct effect on our workforce's mental health and overall well-being.

STAFF HEALTH INSURANCE

25. Once again we reiterate our request that further work be done to find a way for participants to have a Staff Health Insurance card that is widely recognized to enable staff members to only pay the 20% upfront when possible, not the whole amount, which is detrimental to the financial situation of some participants, precisely for those with a relatively low income, who very often cannot afford to pay 100% of their invoices. We wish for this request, which we have been making for several consecutive years now, to be taken into account, to ensure participants are not left stranded, particularly in regions such as the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

ASSESSED CONTRIBUTIONS

26. The Staff Committee welcomes the World Health Assembly's decision to support sustainable financing, which we hope will have a positive impact on the retention of our workforce talent. We encourage Member States to remain steadfast in their commitment, particularly in light of the expanded areas of work noted above. This has implications for both staff well-being and tangible products.
27. In summary, the Organization relies heavily on its staff, and Member States expect tangible results. We respectfully request that you enable us to perform our duties effectively, and that you thoroughly assess the impact of the aforementioned policies and issues.

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