

Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations

1. We, the Global Executive Office of the staff associations of WHO, IARC, PAHO and UNAIDS, continue to work closely with our senior management worldwide and acknowledge the strong collaboration we have through our Global Staff/Management Council forum.
2. This statement is presented to the Executive Board on behalf of the collective staff associations of WHO, IARC, PAHO and UNAIDS, representing over 10 000 staff globally, 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.
3. 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.
4. The staff commend the various initiatives aimed at fostering this sense of acknowledgement, 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.
5. It is important to highlight that, over the years, Member States 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. There are no more continuing appointments. This impacts on job security.
 - Staff compensation packages have been significantly reduced or frozen due to recommendations of the International Civil Service Commission, and despite alarmingly high inflation rates.
 - A mandatory mobility policy is under deliberation, deviating from the initial recommendation for a managed approach.

- Organizational restructures and functional reviews are reportedly being conducted without adequate mechanisms to streamline consultation and communication and enable transparency, resulting in perceptions of unfairness and disregard for rules and regulations.
- In many instances, the work responsibilities of staff members have increased, covering several broad additional areas of work, and areas of work of the Organization have increased; and while there has been an increase in staff numbers, numerous positions in core areas remain vacant.
- We acknowledge the efforts taken to improve the efficiency of several internal processes, notably at headquarters. The Director-General's continued commitment to meet regularly with staff representatives and engage actively with us demonstrates his willingness to find solutions that benefit both the Organization and its workforce. However, the numerous administrative requirements that still exist across the Organization continue to take up a substantial amount of time, detracting from our ability to focus on producing 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, present challenges in terms of attracting and retaining skilled professionals. We are concerned by the decision of the International Civil Service Commission to: (a) conduct surveys during the period 2020–2022, when the patterns of spending and consumption were much reduced and distorted due to global lockdowns; and (b) implement these survey results despite globally high inflation rates.

6. 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, Tunisia and countries in other regions.

7. 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.

8. 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

9. The staff commend the initiatives taken to provide staff with the opportunity to experience the full breadth of WHO, enabling them to engage at all levels, in varied settings and countries.

10. The current draft 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.

11. 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.

12. 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 a 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.

13. Most critically, the current draft policy does not yet address all recommendations of the Global Staff/Management Council 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

14. 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 the International Civil Service Commission, staff were not given any notice from either the International Civil Service Commission or the Organization prior to the reduction that was seen in their March 2023 pay slips. When 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 countries of origin, which are also subject to high inflation rates.

RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE PROGRAMME

15. 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.

16. The staff associations describe a respectful workplace as one where the workforce feels that their rights are protected, they feel included and are treated fairly, and where a culture exists that fosters empowerment, cooperation, and appreciation for diversity. We believe the institutionalization of the Respectful Workplace Programme, capturing all related policies and initiatives such as diversity, equity and inclusion, workplace culture, preventing and responding to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, preventing and addressing abusive conduct, and internal justice system reforms, has great potential to positively impact the health and well-being of the workforce.

17. 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.

18. 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.

19. 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.

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

INTERNAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

21. We are pleased with and committed to the great deal of work and progress made in the area of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. WHO has put in place the Department of Prevention of and Response to Sexual Misconduct under the Office of the Director-General to find innovative methodologies to respond to and address all cases and is committed to deadlines for coming to a final decision. We ask that these efforts continue and are strongly committed to the zero-tolerance approach to preventing and responding to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

22. However, much work remains to be done. The system administered by the Office of Internal Oversight Services still needs to process staff cases faster. We need a stronger and more robust internal justice system that handles cases with equal priority. Justice delayed is justice denied. Cases may go on for years with no decision made, while staff are put on administrative leave at a high cost to the Organization. This again has a negative effect on staff health and well-being, both the victim and those accused.

CONTRACTUAL MODALITIES

23. The overall goal of WHO transformation was to modernize the Organization and work seamlessly to make a measurable difference in the people's health at the country level, and that also includes staff. Staff have been promised for a number of years that a contractual reform is coming. 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 around the Organization, and we request that their report be published as early as possible.

24. The human resources reform stated that core functions must be handled by staff on fixed-term appointments. However, while temporary contracts or consultancies serve to patch the gap, they sometimes extend for years, which is against the policy. And this can only be remedied by sustainable financing.

25. 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.

26. We also want to stress the importance of recruiting staff on generic post descriptions in order to allow for mobility and career development.

27. Lastly, we are still experiencing challenges in uniformity and transparency around the recruitment processes. Much attention is necessary to preserve the purpose of the competitive recruitment process.

28. The current practices have a direct effect on our workforce's mental health and overall well-being.

29. Predictable long-term flexible funding of the Organization is necessary to address the root causes of the contractual situation.

STAFF HEALTH INSURANCE

30. 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

31. 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.

32. In summary, the Organization relies heavily on its staff, and the 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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