

## **Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations**

1. This statement is presented to the Executive Board on behalf of the staff associations of WHO, IARC, PAHO and UNAIDS, which represent the views of over 10 000 staff members. It highlights both staff concerns and progress made on the current systemic issues that impact the ability of staff to deliver on our shared mandate to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable. We urge Member States to engage constructively in addressing these concerns and to collaborate towards implementing the necessary reforms for a stronger, more inclusive and effective WHO.

2. We extend gratitude to the members of the Executive Board and our management for this opportunity to represent and commend our dedicated workforce. Despite facing considerable challenges, including natural disasters and conflicts, our staff persist in efforts to deliver on our mandate innovatively and effectively. Often operating in isolation from our support networks and sometimes with limited access to essential services, we are driven by a commitment to the principle that universal health coverage is a fundamental human right and that everyone should have access to high-quality health care. We undertake our work with passion and a deep sense of duty but recognize the need for ongoing support and sustainable financing to ensure continuity of our efforts.

3. We highlight six key areas for attention and collaboration:

- safeguarding well-being and mental health of staff
- staff mobility
- classification of duty stations and remuneration of staff
- staff health insurance
- contractual conditions and career development opportunities
- internal justice system

### **SAFEGUARDING THE WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH OF STAFF**

4. The well-being of our staff is not just a matter of policy but the foundation upon which our global health mission rests. Our workforce must be physically and mentally fit for duty. As such, we support the findings of the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations System's comprehensive review on mental health and well-being, which emphasizes the importance of preventing risks to mental health at work, protecting and promoting mental health, and supporting people with mental health and cognitive conditions to thrive. The report also advocates for more staff counsellors. We thus again request from management that the number of staff counsellors be increased, particularly in D and E duty stations.

5. WHO's approach to mental health and well-being in the workplace requires enhancement, in order to achieve full alignment with the United Nations Workplace Mental Health and Well-being Strategy. United Nations agencies are due to report to the United Nations Secretariat against the new strategy as of 2024. Although WHO has already developed a workforce mental health and well-being plan, the financial allocations for its implementation should be increased in 2024 to facilitate progress. The establishment of a dedicated and adequately resourced team to support workforce mental health and well-being is crucial for closing this gap and ensuring WHO's alignment with best practices in workforce mental health. This team should lead the development of innovative, evidence-based interventions that deal with the challenges posed to all staff by the unique stresses of work in global health, paying particular attention to country-based colleagues, who may experience greater difficulties in accessing the necessary support. Current issues such as mobility and contract-based work should also be taken into consideration. This effort should help to set new benchmarks in mental health support and advocacy within the United Nations system.

6. We also note that predictability, a collaborative work environment and positive working conditions are crucial foundations for supporting staff's mental health and well-being. We are receiving multiple reports of burnouts and many staff are struggling with their mental health. Improved working conditions and staff empowerment will be critical to reducing growing risks in this regard.

## **STAFF MOBILITY**

7. Staff across the Organization support greater opportunities for mobility. However, the level of support for the current mobility policy varies depending on the region and geographical location. At headquarters, only approximately 21% of eligible staff support this approach, compared to 73% of eligible staff in the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean that welcome mobility. Notwithstanding the wide range of staff views, we advocate for a mobility framework that ensures staff rights and well-being, and protects WHO's vital normative work, while meeting the needs of staff in hardship postings. The needs of staff in these postings are urgent, and they deserve specific and immediate attention. We therefore request our management to ensure that staff posted in hardship stations are considered first for any advertised positions, as well as in any upcoming mobility compendiums.

8. Staff associations from headquarters, the Regional Office for Europe and the Regional Office for South-East Asia have requested several assurances to improve the current mobility policy, which is creating significant anxiety and mental health issues for many staff. These include measures to ensure that the policy reflects twenty-first century demographics, notably the challenge of dual-career households. WHO management has offered verbal assurances on a range of special circumstances relating to spouses and family, safeguards for LGBTQI+ staff and their families, in-country support to manage transitions, or maintaining continuity within teams and projects. However, concrete plans on how to address these commitments have yet to transpire.

9. Many staff also fear ramifications for WHO's technical and normative work, which engages highly specialized personnel recruited for their specific technical expertise. This creates distinct challenges for a mobility approach based on increasingly standardized roles. While country office presence is strengthened, this must come alongside efforts to bolster WHO's standard-setting expertise. Both technical leadership, and empowered country and regional offices, will ultimately be critical for our success. Preparation for implementing the policy will be crucial. And yet, even as we look towards the ambitious plans ahead, there remain unresolved challenges from the implementation of the first voluntary stage. Currently, staff are not allowed to apply for positions frozen in the mobility compendium and the results of the voluntary phase have not been formally announced.

10. Lastly, mobility incurs significant costs, including direct financial impacts, as well as indirect associated costs for human resources management, planning, support and productivity loss during constant adjustments to new positions, as staff rotate around the world every 2–5 years. Management is targeting 200–250 moves per year through mobility, with an average cost of approximately US\$ 60 000 per move from one duty station; the additional indirect costs have the potential to be much higher. To ensure the global sustainability of the scheme, it will be important to provide detailed financial costings and movement projections. Incorporation of lessons learned from comparable technical organizations would help to ensure that mobility can meet WHO’s specific programmatic and normative needs.

## **CLASSIFICATION OF DUTY STATIONS AND RENUMERATION OF STAFF**

11. As the economic downturns continue to plague many of our duty stations, we find that the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) remains rigid and archaic in its methodologies. This does not serve our workforce or allow our Organization to attract the best in class, and threatens the integrity and effectiveness of our operations. The ICSC lacks transparency regarding its decision-making processes and criteria for its determinations, such as its categorization of duty stations. It has also shown a lack of interest in addressing the disparity among duty stations and finding mitigating measures to support national staff, particularly during financial crises. There is no clear mechanism to appeal against decisions. We again call on Member States to support our workforce to be adequately compensated, based on equal pay for equal work and retaining a best-in-class workforce.

12. As mentioned in previous statements, we respectfully appeal to the members of the Executive Board to call on the ICSC to ensure that the purchasing power of our staff is at least equal to that of comparable employers, especially in duty stations seeing real-term salary decreases (staff paid in the local currency) because of soaring inflation and currency devaluation. This is a global trend affecting duty stations in Africa, Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe. It is imperative to address the longstanding issue of stagnant local staff salaries in countries such as Republic of the Congo, where the stagnation of local staff salaries since 2008 in the face of escalating living costs has reached a critical juncture. We also once again point out that the Cairo duty station has, for the fourth time since 2022, been hit with a drastic devaluation that has reduced the purchasing power of locally recruited staff by 62% and yet another unfounded drop in their post adjustment multiplier was applied to their March 2024 payslips. If steps are not taken to urgently address the declining purchasing power of local salaries to reflect the evolving economic landscape, this will have a direct impact on the Organization’s ability to attract, recruit and retain staff.

13. We are cautiously optimistic that the latest ICSC comprehensive review of the United Nations common system compensation package will shed light on the needs of staff and will inform decisions and policies on the future of the United Nations compensation system, including compensation elements and conditions of service. We respectfully appeal to the members of the Executive Board to advocate for a more transparent and systemic application of the system-wide global staff survey to improve working conditions for international civil servants, particularly those based in duty stations classified as category D and E. In the long term, we further advocate for moving away from a cumbersome and subjective survey process to relying instead on established cost-of-living statistics based on purchasing power parity and local economic conditions.

## **STAFF HEALTH INSURANCE**

14. Affordability and out-of-pocket expenses have long been problematic issues for WHO’s Staff Health Insurance (SHI), especially for colleagues with low income worldwide, including single-income parents. Reducing out-of-pocket expenses has become a critical issue as our workforce salaries remain

effectively stagnant or are decreasing. We are now hearing that members of our workforce, particularly locally recruited staff, are delaying medical care due to their lack of purchasing power and inability to pay upfront health care costs and wait for reimbursement, which can take a month or more.

15. Given that there is close to US\$ 87 million surplus in Staff Health Insurance accounts, we advocate that this should be used to strengthen the insurance scheme, particularly in ensuring no vacancies are left unfilled, that there is harmonization across the positions, and that the reimbursement threshold to staff is increased from the current level of 80%. It is equally important to rid the health insurance scheme of any discriminatory practices, such as reduced coverage in the United States of America.

16. We would like to commend our Staff Health Insurance team for their ongoing work to address inequities in access to health care, and we look forward to the results of the benchmarking study that is currently under way to explore opportunities to expand the benefits package to all in a sustainable way. We also welcome the new Staff Health Insurance initiative to develop a network of health care providers in Cairo and hope that this pilot will be a success that can be replicated worldwide.

## **CONTRACTUAL CONDITIONS AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

17. The WHO staff associations welcome regularization of contracts to ensure job security and equitable treatment for all staff members. Temporary contracts that last for years are, by definition, not temporary, but affect entitlements, make it difficult for staff to establish homes, plan their futures or unite with their families, and they undermine mental health and morale. We appreciate that management has committed to addressing these inequities.

18. However, we stress that contractual reforms should represent a levelling up and should not worsen job security for staff overall. Many details about implementation of the new rules remain unclear, especially regarding the transition process from temporary to staff positions. To avoid unnecessary anxiety and minimize disruptions for departments and for WHO's work, we advocate for rational decision-making to ensure continuity and stability for staff, many of whom have served the Organization for many years.

19. We commend WHO management for the establishment of the core predictable country presence initiative, which will lead to increased career opportunities at the country and regional levels. Meanwhile, as the contractual modalities reform is currently ongoing, working conditions such as short-term contracts, increased rotation, heavier workloads and limited career development opportunities continue to impact staff morale. We ask that management take steps to plan and prioritize the various transformation initiatives under way, ensuring that systems function efficiently and that they are designed in a way that support both the needs of the Organization and its staff.

## **INTERNAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**

20. We are pleased with the significant progress made in addressing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. However, many staff report concerns about abusive conduct more broadly, where the internal justice system often seems to lag, and considerable uncertainty remains around processes. It can take years before a decision is reached in certain cases administered by the Office of Internal Oversight Services. Our internal justice system must remain transparent, providing clear parameters on what cases can or cannot be investigated, with clear expectations on timelines and communication when those timelines are not met. Failure to do so has a negative effect on staff, both on the victims and those accused.

21. While great strides have been taken to reform our internal justice system, much more is required. Our workforce must feel complete trust in the system and that their rights are protected. Overall, in the area of internal justice, communications should take a more human-centered and empathetic tone. We request that management expand training and outreach activities which educate staff members on the internal justice system. Moreover, it is important to ensure that there is continuous support for conflict resolution and arbitration, with a greater focus on prevention, and that abuse of authority is curtailed before it can cause harm. In this context, we request that management step up efforts to establish the WHO Office of Staff Legal Assistance, including a dedicated legal adviser for each region, given that each regional office has its own unique complexities and challenges. This team of specialized lawyers will support staff members in their grievances before the internal justice system mechanisms.

22. We welcome the effort by WHO's administration to ensure each major office has an Ombudsperson. However, we note that the Regional Office for South-East Asia has not had a designated Ombudsperson for several years, that the recruitment process for the Ombudsperson of the Regional Office for Europe is still ongoing, and that the appointment of a second Ombudsperson for the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services – which serves WHO headquarters, headquarters' outposted offices and several other agencies – has taken nearly two years. We are concerned that this persistent situation of reduced capacity and increased workload will jeopardize the already stretched system of informal resolution of staff complaints. We request that all Ombudspersons positions at headquarters and in the regions remain full-time, and that further consideration be given to strengthening the offices to meet with the high demand, in line with the recommendations of the review of the internal justice system carried out in 2022.

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