
Statement by the representative of the WHO staff associations

Mr Chairman, honourable members of the Executive Board, distinguished delegates and colleagues,

1. The WHO, UNAIDS and IARC staff associations have been working with senior management on several important topics in 2015, including emergency workforce and reform, geographical mobility, administration of internal justice, and the gender targets of the United Nations System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN–SWAP). Exchanges were marked throughout by a constructive working relationship. Management engages actively when issues are brought to it and the staff associations remain strong partners in a satisfactory relationship to address staff matters jointly. We currently have memoranda of understanding signed with management in the European and Eastern Mediterranean regional offices and headquarters; the memorandum at headquarters was negotiated successfully in December 2015. These agreements provide a strong basis for collaboration of the staff associations with management across the Organization. They also offer a good foundation for the staff representatives to fulfil their duty to observe and act on matters that promote and protect the rights and well-being of staff members.

2. The outcomes of our debates are constructive and based on a healthy dialogue. However, some issues are of concern. Below we outline the main areas under discussion and those which staff associations consider important.

EMERGENCY WORKFORCE AND REFORM

3. The continuing reform of WHO's work in outbreaks and health emergencies has the potential to transform the Organization to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Staff of WHO, including senior management, stand shoulder to shoulder to bring about the changes that are needed, and we propose three actions to take this process forward.

4. The first is to harness the expertise, experience and motivation of staff members for meaningful WHO reform. As the reforms are shaped by Member States, senior policy-makers and public health experts (both within and from outside the Organization), it is important to recognize that staff members at all levels and locations of the Organization (and especially in WHO country offices) have first-hand experience of both the problems and the solutions. **Management should tap into the accumulated expertise, experience and motivation of staff members already working on integrated disease surveillance, disease control, and simple and complex emergencies and humanitarian crises, in order to ensure better organizational performance and results for outbreaks and health emergencies.**

5. Secondly, staff members need to be respected and adequately protected and their rights observed. Flexible systems for recruitment and deployment of personnel for emergency work have to be based on established and clear rules. **Through their representatives, the staff associations are willing to work with management to map out and propose a staff development and career development pathway for colleagues who want to continue to work on emergencies.**

6. Thirdly, we **call on management to fully execute its duty of care for staff**. All staff members who are deployed to work in settings of disease outbreaks and emergencies must be adequately prepared, briefed and trained. They must be supported during missions and be debriefed and supported on their return. Psychological support must also be provided for an adequate period following the return, as post-traumatic symptoms often occur after prolonged periods. In the response to the Ebola virus disease outbreak in West Africa, for the first time in WHO's history pre-deployment trainings were developed and delivered; more than 8000 staff members, consultants and partners were trained.

7. In that line, duty of care for staff members should not be limited to the transfer of technical knowledge and operations. It requires also integrating knowledge, attitude and skills for engaging with different countries, cultures, contexts and communities. A broad induction into emergency risk communication and community engagement should be mandatory to help to culturally adapt the biomedical and operational approach envisaged by WHO reform. **The full implementation of this integrated approach should be management's highest priority.**

8. **The staff associations propose the establishment of a joint staff-management working group to put into practice these three proposals.**

GEOGRAPHICAL MOBILITY

9. During the past year, staff representatives have been constructively involved in, and have supported throughout, the process of defining a fair, equitable, and transparent geographical mobility policy and implementation plan to support improvements to WHO's organizational performance. The importance of staff buy-in has been clearly and consistently recognized by all parties. At a recent meeting (October 2015), the Global Staff/Management Council decided and agreed changes that were integrated into the subsequent (November 2015) draft version of the policy document.

10. We, the staff associations, were extremely disappointed to learn of the decisions reached by the Global Policy Group at its meeting in November 2015, which ignore the important staff input and decisions of a formal body set up under an official staff/management mechanism. **It is now, more than ever, crucial to prove our relevance to the wider global health community and WHO's Member States. We consider, however, that the decisions of the Global Policy Group clearly undermine staff-management relations at a very inopportune time. The Global Policy Group has announced its intention to reduce the number of staff representatives on the Global Mobility Committee. We have strongly, officially, and in writing objected to the Director-General and the regional directors about this. The Global Policy Group has further proposed to downgrade the participatory status of the staff associations to that of observers. We have strongly, officially, and in writing requested that the staff associations must retain full membership covering all regions and headquarters, as previously agreed by the Global Staff/Management Council.**

11. Furthermore, and within the context of mobility, we were informed of a further Global Policy Group decision that all vacant positions should automatically be downgraded by one grade. We strongly feel that this seriously endangers the core United Nations principle of *equal pay for work of equal value* which is guaranteed in WHO's eManual III.2.1.30. This principle ensures fairness,

transparency and trust between management and staff members. An “automatic” downgrade also jeopardizes the goals set out by the global mobility framework, as the global mobility process is seeking to find coherence among similar positions across the Organization. **We, therefore, insist that management follow the official mechanism for changing the grade of posts. Any procedure to change a grade must include a proper review in compliance with the International Civil Service Commission’s job evaluation standards.**

12. Furthermore, the Director of Human Resources Management has proposed changes to the current Staff Rule 230 (Classification review) which provides that “[a] staff member may request a re-examination of the classification of the post which [s/he] occupies”. The proposed change would remove that right from staff members and deprive them of the right to request an adjustment of their post according to the functions performed, particularly if these have drastically changed over time. It may also inadvertently provide the potential for abuse by managers through overburdening staff with additional responsibilities over prolonged periods without due recognition and/or commensurate pay or adjustment in grade. This again would be contrary to the United Nations core principle of *equal pay for work of equal value*. Therefore, **we, the staff associations, have strongly voiced our objection to this proposed change of Staff Rule 230.**

13. At the time of writing this statement, management has not responded to the staff associations’ letter with our objections. Nor have we received any information about further changes to the policy which were announced by the Director of Human Resources Management. **We reiterate that staff members must remain engaged in the development of the policy and the implementation plan in order to ensure the success of the mobility scheme.**

ADMINISTRATION OF INTERNAL JUSTICE

14. WHO’s internal justice system continues to remain opaque with long delays and lack of transparency – in investigations, outcomes and action on official complaints – on the part of the Department of Human Resources Management, the Headquarters Board of Appeal and the Office of Internal Oversight Services for review.

15. A report commissioned by the Director-General and dated October 2014 on the review of the WHO internal justice system analysed key elements, both strengths and weaknesses, of the system and laid out 41 recommended actions for implementation to bring it into line with best practices and standards across the United Nations system and similar organizations.

16. The endorsement of the recommended actions by the Director-General and the Global Policy Group has been an essential and welcome response to this candid and accurate report. The joint staff-management working group oversaw the commissioning of the report and continues to meet to develop mechanisms for the implementation of these recommendations, several of which are covered by items on the provisional agenda of the Board at its 138th session. This represents another excellent example of the fruitful collaboration between representatives of senior management and the staff associations. Key examples of positive outcomes from this work include a renewed focus on the importance of a respectful workplace free from harassment and other misconduct, the development and strengthening of informal mechanisms for the swift and cost-effective resolution of injustice issues as they arise, the redesign of formal mechanisms to ensure that they are more timely and efficient, and the standardization of justice mechanisms, such as the function of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services, across the Organization to ensure that all WHO staff members are treated fairly and equally.

17. **The staff associations recognize this positive initiative, and count on your continued support for accelerated efforts to deliver better access to and timely delivery of justice within WHO, leading to a more efficient, effective and productive Organization. Both WHO staff members and WHO as a United Nations specialized agency are held to the highest standards in their conduct and performance. We all need to be able to work in a positive environment that proactively promotes justice, fairness, transparency and accountability.**

MEETING THE UN–SWAP GENDER TARGETS

18. For many years the staff associations have been involved and committed to promote gender equity and equal gender opportunities to access leadership positions. In 2015, two years before the due date to meet the UN–SWAP standards, the headquarters Staff Association initiated a Joint Staff-Management Think Tank on Gender Equity with the blessing of the Director-General. The Think Tank developed a strategy to contribute to the achievement of the UN–SWAP performance standards, which include – throughout the Organization – a gender balance in the recruitment for posts at the P5 level and higher.

19. Organizations in the United Nations system are expected to meet all 15 performance standards by 2017, and progress is reported annually on 31 January of the respective calendar year. In 2012, WHO met just 20% of the UN–SWAP performance indicators, whereas the average compliance rate among 55 other United Nations entities was 31%. In 2013, the figure for WHO had improved to 30%, but the average among 62 agencies reporting was 42%. In 2014, WHO achieved 52% of indicators, leaving seven performance indicators still to be reached by 2017 in order to meet the overall requirements.

20. To enable gender balance at senior levels, WHO must attract and retain more qualified female staff. This must be realized through a fair recruitment policy, a flexible working environment that promotes work-life balance, the promotion of the mother and family, and also women-centred capacity-development and training.

21. In January 2016, the Think Tank will present to the Director-General its strategy with a solid set of recommendations for endorsement. These will focus on consistent policy changes and dedicated funding for a set of targeted initiatives, including setting up an effective monitoring and evaluation mechanism to measure progress and ensure sustainability. **The gender strategy strongly contributes towards gender equity in higher posts within WHO and needs to be reflected appropriately in the geographical mobility policy and its implementation practices.**

22. Please be assured that we, the staff associations, are fully committed to continuing the constructive dialogue with the administration to safeguard staff members' rights and, through that, to actively contributing to our Organization's mission by regular meetings with the administration, joint staff/management working groups and representation on all Committees that concern staff members' rights.

23. We hope that you will view our comments and concerns as a contribution to the success of the Organization's mission and that you will support our approach. As always, we thank you for this opportunity to report to the Executive Board and to provide our recommendations in the interest of the Organization and its greatest asset: its staff.

= = =