

Statement by the representative of the UNAIDS Secretariat Staff Association

Additional documents for this item: N/A

Action required at this meeting—the Programme Coordinating Board is invited to:

- *Take note* of the statement by the representative of the UNAIDS Secretariat Staff Association;

Cost implications for the implementation of the decisions: *none*

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Introduction

1. On behalf of the UNAIDS Secretariat Staff Association (USSA), I thank you for the opportunity to share with you this report about the issues affecting staff. Our presentation is informed by data collected by the USSA, all staff town halls, regional outreach and direct communication from staff. It also provides an update on the implementation of recommendations which the USSA proposed last year.
2. The USSA had limited time to provide holistic comments on the new organogram, as it was released only on Monday 16 June.

Background on the UNAIDS Staff Association

3. The USSA was established in April 2005 as an independent staff association, representing all staff in the UNAIDS Secretariat. By virtue of our constitution, the purposes of the Staff Association are to:
 - ensure the conditions of employment of all staff conform to generally accepted labour standards, particularly those recommended by the International Labour Organization, the principles of the Staff Rules and Regulations, and other provisions of law applicable to all staff;
 - safeguard the rights and interests of all staff and promote their welfare; and
 - cooperate in achieving the objectives of UNAIDS.
4. In addition, to enable the work of the Staff Association, the 2010 Agreement of Cooperation between the UNAIDS management and the USSA stipulates collaboration in good faith for consultation on policies, procedures and practices relating to conditions of employment and issues affecting staff arising from the day-to-day management and administration of the organization. That Agreement also commits management to contribute operational resources to the Staff Association.
5. We are one of the few UN staff associations which manage a legal support mechanism for staff. However, while the Staff Association represents all UNAIDS staff, only 350 dues paying members are eligible to claim limited legal support should the need arise during their employment with UNAIDS. Over the past two years, the USSA assisted eight staff in accessing legal guidance to review decisions on employment conditions that were considered inconsistent with labour standards and/or staff rules and regulations or in violation of staff rights.
6. First, a few general remarks before I delve into the specifics.
 - a. The last couple of years have been very demanding for staff. There have been numerous disruptions, yet, as the most precious resource UNAIDS possesses, we have remained resilient and committed to doing our part to end AIDS. Due to financial constraints, programme reconfiguration and organizational restructuring, the workload of Secretariat staff has increased significantly, making stress-related burnout almost inevitable for many.
 - b. Restructuring that will result in a more-than-55% cut in positions will have a significant negative impact on organizational capacity to implement the Global AIDS Strategy and respond to expectations from governments and communities, especially at a time when resources are already dwindling at country level, due to decisions by the U.S. Government to drastically reduce funding for many HIV programmes.

- c. Notwithstanding this, we remain fully committed to our mandate and mission. Not even the current restructuring, unprecedented in its scope and severity, dampens our spirits or blinds us to the opportunity for creative, constructive debate about the future of the organization and of the HIV response broadly. That said, the USSA remains wholly unconvinced that the solution presented by the Cabinet even qualifies as the “least bad” one.
- d. The USSA assumed that trust and transparency—and not just plain solvency—would be the key operating principles as UNAIDS navigates these changes and works towards our shared goals. Staff have emphasized and demanded this of management at every opportunity, including in the last global staff survey in 2022. However, the process leading to restructuring has not been inclusive and there was very low meaningful engagement of staff in the decision-making around redesigning their own organization. The project team did not consult anybody below the level of Regional Directors and Practice Leads, and USSA’s request to have broader consultation with staff and the USSA executive committee were not accepted. Management cited time and financial constraints as the main reason to push this fast, rough and tough process.
- e. The USSA acknowledges, with thanks, the adoption of its suggestions into policies that will save organizational resources, and it urges management to use those savings for creating or preserving jobs for staff. That includes allowing the hiring of separated staff as consultants, prioritizing them in future recruitment and allowing flexible part-time, remote-working arrangements for staff. We urge management to ensure that staff can avail themselves of those provisions to the fullest, thus allowing for their dignified exit. Staff are concerned about financial health and the capacity of human resources in UNAIDS and the Global Service Management facilities of WHO to pay separation entitlements to staff in a timely manner.
- f. While staff will not waver in their commitment to the people and communities we serve and in their engagement in the HIV response, it is now clear to the USSA that, by deciding to sacrifice its core assets, UNAIDS will face a profound struggle to deliver its mandate and achieve the new global AIDS targets, the usual rhetorical legerdemain aside. “Doing more with less” is fine in the short term. In the long term, it is nothing more than “magical thinking”. We therefore urge the Programme Coordinating Board (PCB) to put its weight behind the resource mobilization efforts of the organization and to use its influence to convince contributing entities to increase its contributions to the UNAIDS core budget.

Progress on USSA recommendations from PCB 54

- 7. Chair, I will now provide an update on progress or actions that have been taken following the recommendations the Staff Association made last year.

USSA Recommendation 1. A clear, comprehensive report on the conclusion of realignment and the People Strategy. What is the human resources plan? What shape will mobility take in the new UNAIDS?

8. Staff still did not receive a comprehensive report on the implementation of realignment after more than two years. However, having another major restructuring, a mere two years after the last full-blown exercise, raises huge concerns among staff.
9. The earliest indication that the total resources available to the global HIV response, including the Joint Programme, were flat-lining, dates to 2015, if not earlier. Attempts to mitigate the impact of continuous reductions in donor contributions to the HIV response, or reverse them, including any “strategic” planning for our human resources, have been cursory, cosmetic and clearly unsuccessful.
10. Having reached one more inflection point in the life of the organization, it will once again be us, the people of this organization, who will be expected to pay the price, not because it offers a cast-iron guarantee of long-term survival and/or achievement of SDG target 3.3—making it a justifiable, if painful sacrifice—but because it is the quickest and simplest solution the organization can come up with. It is also the least imaginative one.

USSA Recommendation 2. A biannual update on UNAIDS resource mobilization efforts.

11. Staff have been requesting and are still waiting for a regular update on the financial situation from the organization's senior leadership. The absence and/or non-availability of such information raises a major concern over the effectiveness of the ongoing restructuring exercise. Such a report must reflect on accountability for mobilizing resources.

USSA Recommendation 3. Implementation of support measures for staff to cope with large workloads.

12. The UNAIDS Secretariat is at a critical juncture, as it is engaged in the development of the new Global AIDS Strategy for 2026–2030 and this process requires robust engagement and maximum attention from all UNAIDS staff. However, staff are highly stressed due to their large workloads and an ongoing restructuring exercise, with many vacant positions kept frozen indefinitely. The Staff Association calls on the Board to support the UNAIDS Secretariat's resource mobilization efforts to enable us together to end AIDS as threat to public health by 2030.

USSA Recommendation 4. Staff Health Insurance coverage that is accessible, reasonable and available all the time to staff globally.

13. The USSA has worked with the Global Executive Office of WHO, UNAIDS, PAHO/AMRO Staff Associations and Staff Health Insurance colleagues to push for more accessible and reasonable health insurance services, by pointing out bottlenecks and procedural issues. Staff Health Insurance is also undertaking a review of its package and procedures, benchmarking them against those of other health insurance providers.

USSA Recommendation 5. Ensuring a supportive and enabling environment for the Staff Association and ensuring it is adequately resourced.

14. As the representative voice of all staff, it is crucial for the USSA to be involved and consulted at every stage of UNAIDS's restructuring plans and

any other changes affecting staff. This involvement must be meaningful, not cosmetic, and is essential for fostering transparency, building trust and creating a supportive working environment at UNAIDS.

Working relationship between management and USSA

15. Chair, as is customary, I wish to share a brief update on the working relationship between UNAIDS management and the Staff Association.
 - The USSA participates in numerous oversight and human resources-related bodies at UNAIDS, including as observer with the Senior Leadership Team, and as a member on the Recruitment Review Board and Duty-of-Care Working Groups. We will continue working with management to improve Staff Health Insurance in the coming year.
 - We also have regular monthly meetings with the Director of Management, Director Human Resources and Change Management. Overall, we believe that, after a few difficult years, our relationship with management is improving and will hopefully continue doing so, given our shared goal of improving the HIV response, while keeping the staff's well-being front and centre.
 - The USSA Chair was appointed as Co-Chair of the Restructuring Staff Consultation Group.

Challenges faced and way forward

Implementation of restructuring

15. The USSA has noted the staff's deep concern about the seeming lack of transparency in the current restructuring process for several reasons, as well as the lack of meaningful consultation with staff and the Staff Association on restructuring decisions. The process was rough and fast and it provided no space for a meaningful consultation.
 - The USSA captured staff's opinions and shared them with Cabinet, but we do not know whether and how they were used.
 - The lack of communication from all managerial levels (Global Centre, regions, etc.) regarding the restructuring caused significant anxiety among staff. The process was very centralized and this communication gap eroded trust in the restructuring process, as well as jeopardizing the work and affecting the mental health of staff.
 - The USSA organized an all-staff legal session on rights and entitlements and offered legal support to staff in sessions that were attended by more than 300 staff members.
16. Chair, it is imperative that the Board and management be mindful of the fact that this restructuring comes on the heels of the 2022 realignment, which caused much anxiety and heartache. Those experiences, those wounds, are still fresh for some staff. So, the onus is on management in this phase of restructuring to convince staff that the process was truly carried out in accordance with the principles of fairness, transparency and accountability.

Discussions on the memorandum of understanding revision

16. The USSA has been struggling to fully resource itself. Management has requested a review of the memorandum of understanding and indicated a major reduction in budgetary support to the USSA. The proposed reduction is mainly around withdrawing the support for the once-a-year face-to-face meeting of USSA ExCom with senior management. The Staff Association will continue advocating for a fully resourced USSA to allow it to raise issues affecting staff and to work with management constructively. For its part, the Staff Association will also review its structure and constitution after the restructuring to achieve alignment with the new UNAIDS structure.

Workload, mental well-being and global commitment to the HIV response

17. We understand the difficult circumstances faced by the organization, which have forced many of us to take on additional duties, working around the clock, well beyond the required time for executing our duties. Across offices, both in the field and at the Global Centre, staff are bombarded with a tremendous number of tasks—many of which are classified as urgent—that often require extremely long workdays and make work-life balance difficult. The well-being of staff is paramount and it is our hope that management will address this issue as quickly as possible.

No funding received this year

18. The USSA voluntarily decided not to request funds from Management due to the current financial situation, except for the FICSA Counsel which took place earlier this year.

Proposed recommendations

19. The Staff Association presents below a summary of outstanding issues which staff would like senior management to address.
- Management should take concrete and proactive steps, communicating to staff the objective criteria used to arrive at decisions and convincing staff that the process was truly carried out in accordance with the principles of fairness, transparency and accountability.
 - We have seen the organogram and it shows UNAIDS remaining a top-heavy structure. Management must produce a clear, final report describing its decision-making and methodology as they pertain to restructuring, not just disseminate summary results through “town halls” or the intranet. At the very least, the report of the management consultancy firm that was recruited should be disseminated among staff. Even the harshest decisions, when clearly reasoned, can be digested.
 - The USSA welcomes the decision to ensure that staff openly living with HIV are meaningfully engaged and adequately supported and are not disproportionately impacted during this period of uncertainty.
 - The restructuring should be designed from the outset with a realistic understanding of potential resource flows, with a good resource mobilization strategy or a contingency plan in place. This means avoiding the creation of elaborate structures that are perpetually understaffed and underfunded.
 - UNAIDS should leave no stone unturned to mobilize additional

resources to retain its most valuable asset: its staff. It should report clearly on its efforts thus far to mobilize or free additional resources—e.g. emergency appeals to Member States or making savings by implementing flexible working policies, etc.—as well as on its plans going forward.

- For smooth resource mobilization efforts, staff are concerned about there being too many layers of screening processes of funding proposals by the Global Centre, which is also understaffed. This situation creates unnecessary workloads and stress, and it entails spending too much time on screening and too little on concluding agreements with potential donors at country or regional levels. Our processes and operations must be aligned with the new realities.
- The organization should ensure dignified exit of staff for who are separated and ensure the timely release of their separation entitlements, as well as and prioritize duty-of-care during this challenging period.
- The USSA must be adequately resourced and protected so it can continue to safeguard staff's interests.

20. I would like to close by saying: PCB members, observers, colleagues and friends, on behalf of all UNAIDS staff, I wish to convey our deepest appreciation to you—for believing in us, for consistently acknowledging our work, and for emphasizing the importance of prioritizing staff well-being. We count on your continued support to fully fund the Joint Programme—our UBRAF—as we look forward to the day when the HIV response is fully resourced, and we can complete our work to end inequalities and end AIDS

21. Rather than pushing for “sunsetting” UNAIDS, let us focus our joint efforts on reaching the finishing line together and celebrating that victory together. It is the global solidarity and unique model of the UNAIDS Joint Programme that has contributed in achieving the SDG; let us strengthen it until our mission is accomplished. That will be a true service to the communities we serve.

22. So, as we slowly emerge from our “winter of discontent,” the Staff Association is committed to continue being a credible, trusted and respected institution: credible and trusted by the staff it serves and credible and respected by UNAIDS management. Thank you.

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