

STATEMENT BY THE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNAIDS STAFF ASSOCIATION

Additional documents for this item: none

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 (USSA)

Cost implications for the implementation of the decisions: none

Introduction

1. The UNAIDS Secretariat Staff Association's (USSA) mission is to:
 - advocate for fair and supportive employment conditions that enable staff to make the most positive contribution to the HIV response;
 - ensure that conditions of employment conform to commonly accepted standards established by the International Labour Organization's (ILO) and World Health Organization's (WHO) Staff Rules and Regulations;
 - safeguard the rights and interests of members of staff; and
 - promote staff welfare and well-being so that all staff, and ultimately the organization, function at peak levels in leading on and contributing to the global HIV response.
2. The USSA represents the rights and interests of the 727 fixed-term and temporary staff (as at 16 November 2020) around the world. As of November 2020, over 60% of staff were dues-paying members. Membership has increased in the past months due to increased staff confidence in the USSA representing and protecting the rights and welfare of all staff members.
3. The USSA is governed by a Constitution, which has been ratified by all dues paying members, and has an Executive Committee of 15 staff representatives who are elected by dues paying members to two-year terms. The Executive Committee strives to maintain an open and constructive dialogue with the Senior Management Team on key issues affecting staff. The USSA's discussions with management are guided by principles laid out in the *Agreement on Cooperation* between the UNAIDS administration and the USSA, which was formalized and signed with management in 2010. This agreement commits senior management and the USSA to mutually engage in a timely and constructive manner on all issues affecting staff; to communicate openly, honestly, transparently, and regularly; and to apply good faith in resolving issues.
4. The USSA Executive Committee significantly reflects the demographics of the organization with seven female and eight male members, racial and ethnic diversity, and members from the LGBTIQ and people living with HIV communities.
5. The USSA channels the voices of staff as expressed in regular staff surveys, pulse surveys, regional townhalls and through direct communication to the USSA Secretariat. The USSA is confident that it is fulfilling its role of representing the collective interests of all staff, irrespective of location, staffing level or personal characteristic, and we welcome constructive input on how to improve our outreach and communication with staff and thus provide better support. The USSA rejects allegations which have been made that we represent a limited number of staff or a particular demographic. We also recognize that staff have differing views on the various policies and management initiatives that affect them, so our positions must be grounded in the basic rights of staff and the principles of fairness and transparency.
6. The USSA embraces its role and functions as an Association. It has based its *Memorandum of Cooperation* with management on the ILO *Note on the Right to Staff Representation in Organisations of the United Nations Family* adopted in amended form in 2005, and which references Statutes of the International Civil Service Commission dating as far back as 1948. The ILO Document defines a *Staff Association* as "... a workers' organization constituted for the purpose of furthering and defending the interests of staff".

7. The USSA understands that its role does not include the role of a union, defined by the ILO as “an Association which may engage in collective bargaining on legal contract issues”.
8. Since June 2004 the USSA has reported annually to the Programme Coordinating Board (PCB). This report highlights key developments since the USSA’s previous report to the PCB in June 2020, as well as priorities which staff identified in the latest annual USSA staff survey of 2020. An oral statement to the Board will complement this report.

Relationships between the USSA and management

9. Since the Staff Association’s previous report to the PCB, the USSA Executive Committee has had a productive dialogue with the Deputy Executive Director a.i., Tim Martineau, the Director of Human Resources Management, Alison Holmes, and the Chief of Staff, Efraim Gomez. USSA thanks them for their collaboration and constructive engagement with the Staff Association and we look forward to continuing and improving our engagement with them and their teams.
10. The USSA has also had infrequent but robust exchanges, both in public and in private, with the Executive Director. The USSA will continue to engage with her as and when possible and will seek to improve the current level and nature of engagement. The USSA will continue to represent staff concerns directly and clearly, and we will continue to present the issues and concerns which staff communicate to the USSA through active outreach and engagement. Neither the USSA Chair nor other elected staff representatives make unilateral statements. Key messaging to management or other stakeholders is collectively agreed to as an Executive Committee and is wholly based on input from staff.
11. The USSA continues to underscore the importance of ensuring a stable work environment with minimum negative impact on staff as we finalize the transition towards a global AIDS Strategy and begin the alignment process at UNAIDS in earnest.

Recent Staff Pulse Survey and Regional Townhalls

12. The USSA normally attends annual Regional Management Meetings in order to facilitate dialogue with staff and to foster a better understanding of regional and country-level challenges on the minds of staff. Due to COVID-19 this has not been possible. As a result, the USSA has engaged in virtual dialogues with Regional and Country Office staff. In preparation for this exercise, the USSA launched a mini survey (Staff Pulse) to acquire a better and more nuanced understanding of specific challenges in order to tailor presentations and dialogue with staff.
13. This report to the PCB highlights significant personal, professional, organizational and HIV response concerns which staff have raised with the USSA Executive Committee directly and through the key findings and issues reported in the pulse survey.
14. Survey respondent rates for the ad hoc pulse survey conducted recently were high and consistent across regions (a pulse survey and townhall with Headquarters staff is being scheduled following this meeting of the PCB). Consistently, the main issues raised by staff relate to organizational alignment; staff well-being, culture change; Staff Health Insurance; and COVID-related issues, such as remote working modalities.

15. Many survey respondents recognized the significant positive changes taking place at UNAIDS, including initiatives to build more consultative management systems such as the formation of the Extended Cabinet, the establishment of a Senior Leadership Team, and better communication from management on activities and programmes. Staff appreciate meetings being offered in languages other than English, and/or the use of virtual meeting applications which offer translation facilities.
16. Staff remain supportive of and engaged in the culture change initiatives, including discussions on key issues of concern to staff such as racism, harassment, abuse of authority, and management practices.
17. Staff have expressed very strong support for the stated intention to introduce more and improved engagement of staff in the organization's systems and operations (what senior management has been referring to as the application of "feminist principles"): co-shaping a vision, a common narrative for our values; enhancing dialogue; engaging staff; creating safer and more empowering workplaces; management accountability; the importance of the organization's duty of care to staff; the need for greater transparency, inclusivity, trust and accountability; the importance of addressing structural barriers; and accelerating the devolution of power, especially to Regional and Country Offices.
18. A number of staff have suggested the inclusion of some type of reconciliation process in the culture change initiative to help put to rest issues of the past which continue to inform the thinking and reactions of staff to current management practices and initiatives. The Staff Association has made a recommendation to the Executive Director based on these suggestions from staff and will continue to do so.

Issues noted in the staff pulse survey and townhall meetings—November 2020

Alignment

19. Globally 55% of UNAIDS staff responding to the Staff Pulse survey in October and November 2020 said that their greatest concern at the moment relates to uncertainties about, and the lack of clear and regular communication on the impending alignment process and its possible impact on individual staff.
20. Alignment-related issues were the most concerning in all regions, except in Asia-Pacific and eastern and southern Africa. In both those regions, concerns around staff well-being were of greatest importance, with alignment a very close second priority.
21. Comments made by staff in the survey make it clear that, while people understand that no formal alignment processes have begun to date, there is widespread speculation among staff that the offer of Separation by Mutual Agreement packages, the movement of some positions to new duty stations, the perceived increase in the use of temporary positions, and other actions currently being taken suggest that a "quiet" alignment process has already begun. More frequent and transparent communication from management is needed to help reduce the circulation of possibly false narratives.
22. A significant proportion of staff have expressed concern that new working groups and consultative groups for change management have been composed almost entirely of staff members who have been unilaterally appointed by senior management with either limited or token consultation, and no consultation with the Staff Association as the representatives of staff. This concern is not about the people who have been chosen to participate but about the process. Staff have been calling strongly for transparency of

process, timely communication on membership and terms of reference, and overall adherence to the more feminist principles that management is asking staff to embrace.

Staff well-being and Health Insurance

23. Globally, 54% of UNAIDS staff responding to the USSA staff pulse survey in October and November 2020 said that their greatest concern at the moment relates to staff well-being. Regionally this was the issue of greatest concern for staff in Asia and the Pacific, and in eastern and southern Africa.
24. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected a number of staff, and in several of the USSA townhall discussions (most notably in eastern Europe and central Asia) concerns were raised about a failure of business continuity planning when faced with the realities of high levels of illness among staff and dependent.
25. Staff responding to the recent pulse survey offered thanks and expressed their appreciation to management for their approach to the COVID 19 pandemic and its impact on staff, including the flexible application of alternative working modalities and the provision of remuneration for costs incurred while working from home.
26. The USSA will continue working with management to take stock of the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic response, including the functioning of alternative working and convening modalities and how more extensive use of such modalities could promote staff well-being.
27. We draw attention to the issues around duty of care which the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted. The Staff Association will work with management to continue to advocate for better access to medical service and for equitable access for staff to COVID-19 vaccines, irrespective of location, staff level or type.
28. As UNAIDS increasingly focuses on the importance of Universal Health Coverage in our programmes, we must also ensure that we have our own house in order. While progress is being made, Staff Health Insurance issues remain high on the minds of staff, retirees, and their dependents. It was either the first or second priority issue for all recent pulse survey respondents. Specifically, staff continue to be concerned about access to quality care, recognition of the Staff Health Insurance by service providers, the need to pay directly for medical services and then experience delayed reimbursement, and support for staff and their families living with chronic illnesses.
29. The staff pulse survey indicates that increasing workloads, stress and burnout remain significant issues for staff. The USSA notes with great concern the negative impacts which increasing workloads and stress have had on staff well-being, productivity and overall organizational performance. We call on management to continue to seek ways to strengthen the organization's duty of care through staff support services and to improve the prioritization of work through improved planning and workload distribution. Staff have noted that, while the offer of separation packages to staff has freed up positions for alignment purposes, it is also transferring even greater workloads onto existing staff, at least in the short term.

Cultural transformation, transparency and fairness

30. The USSA has repeatedly stressed to management and the PCB that the organization's recruitment, promotion and mobility policies and practices are perceived by staff as lacking transparency and enabling favoritism.

31. The staff Pulse Survey received a significant number of comments related to compliance with existing rules and provisions that relate to:
 - recruitment, including compliance with UNAIDS recruitment policies stipulating internal advertisement of international professional vacancies before advertising externally;
 - applying the existing regulations and rules governing reclassification, including lifting the freeze on all reclassifications; and
 - transparency in hiring practices and decision-making.
32. The USSA once again notes that the Management Action Plan specifies the need to review and redesign the staff mobility policy, the organization's recruitment and workforce planning processes, and its career development modalities.
33. The USSA has presented a detailed public position on mobility, supporting it in principal but calling for major changes to make the process fair and transparent, with a specific focus on:
 - improving the process for management and staff to request waivers;
 - designation of rotational/nonrotational posts;
 - the composition/functioning of the Mobility and Reassignment Committee;
 - far greater provision of and access to staff training and career development initiatives;
 - provision of improved support to staff and their families/dependents within the context of mobility; and
 - exploration of interagency mobility.
34. The USSA continues to provide an increasing number of individual staff members with legal advice to address their concerns over mobility and other employment matters.
35. The USSA will continue to support management to prioritize ensuring that all staffing and other decisions are taken fairly, equitably, honestly and transparently. Our position is clear: increasing transparency and the consistent application of rules is critical, not only for helping ensure accountability, but for helping build trust among staff that these processes are and will be fair.

Incivility, discrimination, abuse of authority, harassment and other misconduct

36. The issues of incivility, discrimination, abuse of authority, harassment and other forms of misconduct continue to be of concern for a significant number of staff members who responded to the Pulse Survey.
37. The USSA welcomes the draft WHO document, *Promoting a respectful workplace: policy and procedures on preventing and addressing abusive conduct*. The USSA has provided input during the drafting of this policy. We are pleased that improvements have been introduced, such as inclusion of all types of incivility, greater focus on protection of affected individuals and witnesses, and a reduction in the duration of the process of reporting, investigation and implementation of findings. We request management to incorporate the same, if not a better version, into the draft UNAIDS *Policy on preventing and addressing harassment, sexual harassment, discrimination and abuse of authority*.
38. A significant number of Pulse Survey respondents indicated that they have experienced incivility in the workplace from peers and by managers (including senior managers of the organization), which left them feeling offended, humiliated or intimidated. The USSA repeats its call for management to take a zero-tolerance approach to incivility, and to strengthen the engagement of Dignity at Work Advisers, the Gender Action Plan Challenge Group, UN Plus, Young UN, UN Globe, and the Diversity Task Force. It

repeats its call that management coaching should be required for *all* managers as part of ensuring that UNAIDS is a safe environment for all staff.

39. The USSA notes the Executive Director's organizational culture transformation plans, including her focus on challenging power structures through feminist thinking and the rollout of specific initiatives such as the "Gender at Work" consultancy. The Staff Association welcomes these changes. It requests regular and wider consultation with staff on the progress of this work, as well as improved communication on what these initiatives mean for the organization and staff, especially in the context of the alignment process, and how the main change processes (strategy, alignment and culture change) interact and link. The USSA repeats its call for all staff and managers at all levels to embrace and "live" the principles being promoted by the Executive Director, in all aspects of our work and management practice.

USSA proposals and priorities

40. The USSA will continue to urge management to explore and improve opportunities for staff to undertake learning and training programmes, and for staff to be allowed adequate time within work schedules for such initiatives. The USSA believes this is an important element in addressing staff concerns about lack of opportunities for career progression and growth.
41. The USSA will continue to make strong calls for compliance with existing rules and provisions that relate to:
- recruitment, including compliance with UNAIDS recruitment policies stipulating internal advertisement of international professional vacancies before advertising externally;
 - application of the existing regulations and rules governing reclassification, including lifting the freeze on all reclassifications; and
 - transparency in hiring practices and decision-making.
42. The USSA has issued a position paper cautioning management that a binary approach in performance evaluation would have been challenging for supervisors and supervisees alike. Its voice has not been heard and the reform was adopted in the current cycle. The Staff Association shares the concerns expressed by staff during webinars announcing the policy change and townhall meetings, and requests management to revert to the earlier four-point scale.
43. The USSA notes that, while there has been considerable discussion around elements of the Strategy, alignment and culture change processes that are underway, there is a sense (expressed in staff comments appended to the staff survey) that many things are happening which are not being communicated to staff regularly and with clarity, honesty, transparency and consistency. The USSA will continue to express these staff concerns to management and will maintain its independent staff survey, which has been conducted annually for a number of years.
44. The USSA is regularly approached by staff who are seeking clarity on how the new strategy and organizational alignment will affect the organization's mandate and what the impact will be on the staffing footprint and workloads. The Staff Association requests regular, transparent and unfiltered communication on this subject to be the norm in order to allay the escalating staff anxiety and "corridor talk" about restructuring, which could undermine positive change.

45. The USSA will continue to focus on advocating for staff on their critical concerns: how well management and staff are living management's change principles; staff wellness and related Staff Health Insurance issues, especially issues brought to light by the COVID-19 pandemic; fairness and transparency; the review and reform of the recruitment policy and mobility system; the reclassification freeze; zero tolerance around harassment, bullying, discrimination, sexual harassment and other forms of abuse; the performance management system; remote working modalities; and professional and career development opportunities.

Closing

46. The USSA thanks the PCB Bureau and the Executive Director for affording us this opportunity to report to the Board. We will continue to deliver statements and messages we have been tasked to make on behalf of all staff, in good faith. We will continue to draw from surveys, from our regional townhalls and from correspondence with staff members who reach out to us. In our carefully considered public statements and reports we will continue to give praise and credit where it is due. Equally, we will continue to speak in robust terms when merited. We, the Staff association, are committed to finding a positive path forward for staff, who are the backbone of the organization, and the people on the ground who implement the work of the organization. Our future and the future of the response depends on that.

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