

**Statement by the  
Representative of the  
UNAIDS Secretariat Staff  
Association (USSA)**

**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 (USSA);

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

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## Introduction

1. Thank you Chair. Distinguished UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board (PCB) members and observers, colleagues and friends, as Chair of the UNAIDS Secretariat Staff Association (USSA), I thank you for giving us the opportunity to address the Board and to share with you priority issues that impact UNAIDS staff members. My statement will draw on data from the Global Staff Survey, the USSA mid-year check-in questionnaire, and direct communication from staff, and it will provide an update on the implementation of recommendations which the USSA made last year.

## Background on the USSA

2. Since April 2005, the UNAIDS Secretariat Staff Association has been an independent staff association representing all staff in the UNAIDS Secretariat. As stated in the USSA Constitution, the purposes of the USSA are to:
  - ensure that the conditions of employment of all staff of the UNAIDS Secretariat conform to generally accepted labour standards particularly the ILO, the principles of the Staff Rules and Regulations and other provisions of law applicable to all staff;
  - safeguard the rights and interests of all members of the UNAIDS Secretariat staff and to promote their welfare; and
  - cooperate in achieving the objectives of UNAIDS.
3. In addition, to enable the work of the USSA, the 2010 Agreement of Cooperation between 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 members arising from day-to-day management and administration of the Organization. This Agreement of Cooperation also commits management to contribute operational resources to the USSA.
4. While the USSA represents all UNAIDS staff, our 382 dues paying members are eligible to claim limited legal support should the need arise during their employment with the Organization. We are one of the few UN staff associations that manage a legal support mechanism for staff. Over the last two years, the USSA has been able to assist staff to access legal guidance to review decisions on their employment conditions that may be unfair or inconsistent with labour standards and/or staff rules and regulations or in violation of staff rights.
5. A few general remarks before I go into the details. This has not been an easy twelve months. It was the year when the rubber hit the road on realignment. We have had to say goodbye to many colleagues and support others going through a stressful reassignment process. We have seen additional funding cuts and the closing of one regional office and the downsizing and relocating of another. New systems, procedures, priorities and initiatives are being put in place – while staff try to cope with high workloads.
6. Despite reduced resources, the dedication and commitment of our staff means we have been working hard to ensure that our level of support to the communities we serve and the HIV response does not suffer. In more than a few cases this has been to the detriment of our health and wellbeing.

## Progress following USSA recommendations

7. Chair, I will now provide an update on progress or actions that have been taken following the recommendations USSA made last year.
8. USSA Recommendation 1: Prioritize retention of staff whose position have been abolished and who meet eligibility criteria for reassignment. This includes freezing all recruitment and appointment of external candidates.
  - a. USSA appreciates efforts made by senior management to provide opportunities for internal candidates to compete for reassignment and new positions, though we were disappointed to see that some external recruitment continued. The USSA does acknowledge that for most positions when external candidates were selected, eligible internal candidates were given opportunities to compete. A Review Board with USSA participation, has been established and has been functioning to review recruitment and selection procedures. USSA has offered to work with management to use the existing Review Board to fill the oversight gap created by the abolition of the Mobility and Reassignment Committee.
  - b. We do note that in our mid-year check-in, when asked about concerns and what the USSA should prioritize, the alignment continues to be a key concern, including transparency in recruitment decisions, particularly in view of the large number of positions abolished and staff losing their jobs, alongside the creation of many new positions and external recruitments.
9. USSA Recommendation 2: Revise staff recruitment policies to ensure fair, transparent, competitive process for all positions; and, where there are exceptions, robustly document the rationale and justification and shared that with all staff.
  - a. We observed slight improvements in some areas from the 2022 Global Staff Survey, but we remain concerned with the low scores (less than 40%) on key issues:
    - decisions are made in fair and transparent manner;
    - process of alignment has been handled effectively;
    - cabinet supports high performers to grow in their careers; and
    - cabinet understands the views and opinions of staffAnd 54% of respondents said they would like to receive more information about human resource processes and rules.
  - b. The USSA is working closely with senior management on ensuring that staff rights are protected in the development and implementation of new recruitment procedures, such as the recent pilot of screening of job applicants' social media profiles.
  - c. However, the USSA continues to contest the recruitment policies (for fixed- and short-term positions) on the basis of a lack of consultation prior to policy issuance, reduced oversight of hiring decisions, and reduced requirements for a competitive process, which can prejudice existing staff. This dispute is before the Global Board of Appeal, though we hope we can resolve the issues through consultations with management. We are also supporting staff seeking legal advice in relation to staffing decisions during alignment and more broadly. The USSA also notes with some concern that in 2022, 24 positions were filled through executive decision, amounting to over 20% of all staffing decisions.
10. USSA Recommendation 3: Urgently scale up, across all duty stations, support mechanisms for staff to navigate and cope with change (career and up-skilling support,

as well as counselling and mental health support), including prioritizing the development of strategies for preventing stress and burnout at the workplace).

11. USSA Recommendation 4: Secure additional resources to cover the anticipated human resource gap in order to safeguard core functions of the Secretariat.
  - b. The realignment exercise, among other things, resulted in the loss of 131 staff in 2022, through voluntary mutual separation, secondment/loan, resignation and contract termination. The financial deficit continues, and many positions remain vacant. The greatest loss was among general service staff.
  - c. In this environment, business continuity and manageable workloads are a significant challenge, as expectations of output have not changed to match the reduced resources. At the same time, new ways of working are being implemented at a rapid rate, including delocalization, matrix management and communities of practice. In our USSA Mid-Year Check-In, workload and mental health were the top priorities identified by staff for the USSA to focus on next year. We have information from the Staff Health and Well-being Unit that the number of sick leave at UNAIDS is high. Staff are working beyond eight-hour days and through the weekends to get things done.
  - d. This is not viable. The reality is we can't do more with less: we can only do less with less. If funding does not increase to allow UNAIDS to be fully resourced (financial and personnel), as difficult as it will be, we will need to talk about what to drop. Cabinet has issued a 2023 strategic priorities document, while this is a good step, we urgently need guidance for teams and country offices to be empowered to identify their key deliverables, as per the availability of their budget allocation and personnel and not to try to do everything. Should the funding deficit continue or, worse, further financial cuts occur, USSA calls on senior management to reduce the scope of UNAIDS's work to match the current staffing level and to scale-up staff access to support measures without delay. This is to be carried out with full staff engagement in order to ensure that staff needs are met.
  - e. USSA has also asked senior management to communicate more frequently to staff to update us on the Secretariat resource situation (expenditure levels, resource gaps, new funds received, and savings and efficiencies gained) in order to facilitate workplan adjustments, resource allocation reviews and securing of essential human resources to deliver results.

### Working relationship between management and USSA

12. Chair, as is customary, I wish to also briefly share an update on the working relationship between management and the staff association. The USSA participates in a number of oversight and human resources-related bodies at UNAIDS, including as observer, though not a member, with the Senior Leadership Team, and as a member of the Alignment Task Team, Alignment Steering Committee, the Recruitment Review Board and Duty of Care Working Group.
13. We will be working with management to improve staff health insurance in the next year. We also have regular meetings with the Directors of Management, Human Resources and Change Management. We have met with the Executive Director twice since the previous PCB and we appreciate her commitment to meet us and to hear us out. Overall, as is appropriate for such a relationship between management and USSA, it is not always easy. USSA's role is to push and advocate, but it is, we hope, a relationship based on mutual respect.

## Challenges faced and way forward

14. At the same time, the last couple of years have been a very difficult period for the Staff Association. The impact of global health and political insecurities have hit us hard. The financial shortfall, staff reduction, office relocations and closures have forced staff to cope, survive and adapt, while striving to deliver on our commitment to end AIDS as a global public health threat by 2030.
15. In this environment, the Staff Association has also lost its volunteers due to staff departures from the organization, competing priorities and fear of retaliation. From a full 15-member Executive Committee team, we are now down to nine people, and have been without administrative support for one year. For a team that is given four hours a week to work on staff association issues, the absence of a full-time assistant is devastating. When that position is filled it will be in Bonn, not Geneva—a decision that is also the subject of USSA initiated litigation.
16. We have managed to keep going by prioritizing our support to staff who are affected by the realignment and engaging regularly with senior management to relay concerns and needs from staff on key aspects of change management and staff well-being. The USSA will be holding elections shortly to fill in the vacant positions. We hope that staff will be encouraged to step up to take this important job and that senior management will fully support, facilitate and protect staff to empower them to take on this duty and provide them with adequate resources to function effectively.
17. As mentioned, UNAIDS is seeking to reform itself in line with key feminist principles. The Staff Association supports this approach, as it is in line with principles of collective action, solidarity and workers rights. New ways of working discussed today, such as knowledge management and communities of practice, help to create linkages and flatten structures and encourage communal decision making. There are also ongoing efforts to create a safe, empowering and diverse workplaces. However, more work is required if we are to achieve feminist principles of transparency and devolution of power. Workloads too are a feminist issue, as a lack of work-life balance continues to affect men and women differently within our societies. We look forward to working with management on these issues.
18. Finally, in the mid-year check-in we asked staff to tell us what they would like the USSA to prioritize for the next twelve months. The key areas that were identified were:
  - staff well-being, including mental health and workload issues;
  - harassment and abuse of authority;
  - alignment;
  - career advancement; and
  - fairness and transparency in policy implementation.
19. The USSA presents below a summary of outstanding issues on which staff wishes to have answers or commitment from senior management that action will be taken:
  - A townhall to comprehensively report to staff the conclusion of the realignment and the people strategy, particularly around the personnel situation. What is the human resource plan?
  - Quarterly update on the UNAIDS resource situation be shared with all staff to allow workplan adjustments, resource allocation reviews and securing of essential human resources to deliver results;
  - Implementation of support measures for staff to cope with high workloads; and

- A supportive, enabling and adequately resourced environment for the USSA to operate in.
20. PCB members, observers, colleagues and friends, on behalf of the USSA, and on behalf of 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—so that we will be able to look forward to better days when UNAIDS will be optimally resourced and we will thrive with high spirits to complete the work to end inequalities, and end AIDS. Thank you.

### Proposed recommendations/decision points

21. *Take note* of the statement by the representative of the UNAIDS Secretariat Staff Association (USSA).

*[Document ends]*