

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. This statement is presented to the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board (PCB), on behalf of the Staff association of UNAIDS, which represents over 700 staff members of the UNAIDS Secretariat. It highlights staff concerns as well as progress made on the current systemic issues identified over the past 12 months and which affect the ability of staff to deliver on our shared mandate to serve people living with and affected by HIV.
2. In this statement, we highlight the following key areas and issues of concern, and point to opportunities for further collaboration around:
 - staff health and well-being,
 - a respectful working environment,
 - alignment and organization-wide restructuring; and
 - the staff-management relationship and collaboration.

Staff health and well-being

3. The health and well-being of staff members at UNAIDS is fundamental to the organization's ability to achieve its strategic goals. The simultaneous stress of working during COVID-19 pandemic; extraordinary workloads to deliver a new Global AIDS Strategy, the 2021 High-Level Meeting, a new United Budget, Results and Accountability Framework (UBRAF); the need to ensure continuity of HIV programmes and services during the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts and political crises; and organization-wide restructuring—all this has presented unprecedented challenges to the health and well-being of UNAIDS staff members.
4. In 2021, the USSA conducted two pulse surveys six months apart, each of which had a response rate of 51%. The survey results showed troubling levels of exhaustion, anxiety and stress among staff. The June 2021 staff survey showed that 80% of respondents felt that their workloads had increased in the previous 12 months, due to a combination of greater demand on UNAIDS to deliver on ambitious targets and increased absenteeism due to illness or family emergencies. Fifty-nine percent of respondents felt that their performance had suffered due to work-related stress or anxiety, and 82% reported having performed extra hours in response to internal UNAIDS requests.
5. The USSA continued to note the negative impacts of increased workloads and stress on staff well-being, productivity and overall organizational performance. It consistently called on UNAIDS management to seek ways to strengthen staff support services and to better prioritize work through improved planning and workload distribution. We anticipate that the situation will worsen in the coming weeks and months as a significant number of staff members depart the organization as a result of the restructuring exercise (due to abolition of posts, termination of employment or acceptance of a separation-by-mutual-agreement package).
6. There is a need for more targeted care and workplace well-being support to effectively support our workforce to deliver UNAIDS' mandate. We recognize and appreciate that UNAIDS initiated programmes in 2020 to support staff, such as the employment of one full-time staff counsellor for well-being and mental health. It also entered into an agreement with the Rome Institute, which enables staff members to access counselling support from a network of counsellors, and it promoted the UN-wide online resource "Mental health matters, a healthy workforce for a better world". UNAIDS offered access to the Headspace application to all staff in August 2021 and launched the "Workplace mental health and well-being: lead and learn programme", which is focused on well-

being and mental health at work as part of the global UN Mental Health Strategy. The staff counsellor also offered many individual and collective support sessions to staff, with Staff Association assistance.

7. However, this remains insufficient, particularly in the current world environment, and requires: (1) proper assessment of staff needs for mental health support; (2) development of internal mental health support programmes; (3) integrations of mental health solutions into policies to promote staff well-being; (4) operational mental health support with adequate commitment from management to facilitate staff access to services when needed; and (5) identification of viable and appropriate mental health support mechanisms at country level taking into account local context and differentiated services. Staff Association referrals to well-being, medical, mental health and mediation services more than tripled in 2021 and early 2022, up from single digits in 2020. Staff reported to pulse surveys and check-in sessions that they were “struggling” and “not doing OK”. The USSA calls for increased financing to support well-being and mental health services including preventative measures at UNAIDS. It is also critical to ensure that staff members are supported to take time at work to access tools, training and mental health support briefing sessions as part of duty of care, especially in regions where these services are not readily available.
8. It must be noted that any alignment or restructuring exercise, with its implications for change and job loss, creates anxiety and stress among staff. In the case of UNAIDS, the restructuring exercise is taking place amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As staff try to cope with the impact of COVID-19, the added pressures of job insecurity and changing conditions of work create disturbing situations. Therefore, USSA urges senior management to adopt the utmost latitude and flexibility in supporting staff members whose jobs are lost or significantly altered, and for whom this will mean considerable personal or family risk.
9. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to the health and well-being of all peoples across the globe, including our colleagues. The USSA would like to express appreciation for the commitment and support demonstrated by senior management and the Executive Director to ensure that UNAIDS staff members receive timely support and that flexible working arrangements are implemented. The majority of staff members surveyed during COVID-19 pandemic expressed satisfaction with UNAIDS business continuity efforts. Eighty-seven per cent of respondents agreed that administrative and programmatic processes continued without much disruption and that the remote working policy supported their home situation. The achievement of the Global AIDS Strategy and the High-Level Meeting Political Declaration in 2021 and the resulting new UBRAF attested to UNAIDS's ability to achieve its strategic goals despite the challenges posed by COVID-19.
10. The USSA and staff have appreciated UNAIDS management's support through the interdepartmental COVID crisis response group (which includes representatives from the USSA). Management has taken extraordinary measures to adapt to the situation, including the implementation of a flexible work policy; provision of communication and IT tools for enhancing remote work; improving timely access to health services and settlement of health insurance and direct payments; and offering counselling support for staff.
11. In collaboration with UNAIDS' People Management Department, the USSA produced a briefing document, *Know your SHI*, and organized webinars for all staff on the staff health insurance scheme. The aim was to help ensure easy and timely access to

important insurance entitlements and case-processing information so staff can access timely and quality care, particularly life-saving emergency health services.

12. The USSA continues to advocate for increased access to quality health care and insurance coverage for staff, dependents and retirees, and it requests senior management to engage at the highest level with its UN system counterparts to continue to ensure optimal care, support and health insurance coverage for all UNAIDS staff.
13. Despite noted progress however, challenges remain that require expansion of pragmatic options for supporting staff to deliver on UNAIDS' mandate. The USSA urges senior management to take measures such as continued structural and psychosocial support for all members of the workforce, particularly at country and regional levels. The required support includes updating policies that impact on working conditions and well-being of staff, for example by reviewing policies on how to support staff working and living in countries that are experiencing severe climate change and pollution; challenges in managing workloads; flexible work arrangements; and compliance with staff rules and regulations.

Respectful working environment

14. The past 18 months saw many initiatives launched to deepen and broaden the Management Action Plan which the PCB had endorsed. In mid-2020, the culture transformation programme brought together many change processes and provided opportunities for individuals and teams across the organization to reflect on and shift team cultures in order to build a more equal, safe and empowering workplace. This will enable UNAIDS to deliver on the new Global AIDS Strategy with a focus on ending inequalities, both internally and externally.
15. The USSA and senior management collaborated effectively to finalize and publish the new *Preventing and addressing abusive conduct: policy and procedures concerning harassment, sexual harassment, discrimination, and abuse of authority* policy in 2020. While the policy provides clear information on how staff can report abusive conduct, staff surveys show more work is needed to provide information on reporting and redress channels that staff members can utilize without fearing retaliation. Eighty-four per cent of staff survey in 2021 say they know where to report and/or request support, but only 26% report such incidents when they occur. The most frequent reasons given for not reporting cases of abusive behaviour are that staff do not believe corrective action will be taken (58%) and are concerned about retaliation (45%). In this regard, the USSA looks forward to the results of the ongoing review undertaken by the World Health Organization (WHO) on the effectiveness of internal justice mechanisms.
16. The USSA applauds senior management's appointment of the ethics adviser. In line with the Joint Inspection Unit recommendation, the Ethics Office is now independent from the Executive Office (in the new organogram). This addresses concerns about possible conflicts of interest due to direct reporting to the Executive Director. The USSA looks forward to continued collaboration with the ethics adviser, the culture transformation team, the People Management department, the Ombudsman and legal advisors, to help staff navigate different support options to address their situation.

Alignment: organization-wide restructuring

17. Upon the successful launch of the new Global AIDS Strategy and the adoption of the new Political Declaration on AIDS in 2021, UNAIDS embarked on an organization-wide restructuring process, which it called an "alignment exercise". This exercise has been

the priority and focus of the UNAIDS Secretariat for the past 18 months. It has created significant anxiety and stress for many staff members, and the resulting reduction in workforce has dealt a blow to staff morale across the organization.

18. While the alignment exercise started out as an opportunity to consolidate resources to strengthen Country Offices that are on the front line of the HIV response, significant funding cuts by donors midway through the process resulted in a different scenario than staff had hoped for. Before the alignment exercise, the UNAIDS Secretariat had 723 staff members; at the end of the process, the final staff count is expected to be 653. While staff members appreciated the Executive Director's decision to offer two rounds of separation-by-mutual-agreement packages, the alignment exercise has caused a high number of post abolitions and the UNAIDS Secretariat is expected to lose a significant number of skilled and expert staff members in this process.
19. To date, 103 staff members have applied for separation by mutual agreement and 105 positions have been abolished. Despite creating 85 new positions for eligible and qualified internal candidates, not all staff whose posts were abolished will be selected.
20. Due to the significant impact on staff members, the USSA has requested senior management to show the utmost latitude and flexibility in supporting staff members whose jobs are lost or significantly altered, and for whom this will mean extreme personal or family risk during implementation of the alignment exercise.
21. The USSA has advised senior management that, given the disruption to business continuity, the potential costs of implementing the alignment, and the impact on staff well-being and job security, a risk/benefit analysis should be conducted prior to implementation. In addition, significant effort must be made to retain talent and expertise, and to protect staff well-being and safety. If it is absolutely necessary to reduce staff numbers, every effort must be made to support staff to transition to new roles preferably within UNAIDS but if not possible beyond UNAIDS. The USSA looks forward to collaborating with senior management on conducting the risk/benefit analysis.
22. Between the alignment design and finalization periods in 2021, staff surveys indicated staff disappointment and dissatisfaction about several matters, including the lengthy co-creation process. In particular, there was dissatisfaction that staff inputs on how best to allocate human resources for implementing the Global AIDS Strategy at country, regional and global levels and staff ideas for alternative cost-saving strategies (such as work-sharing, flexible working arrangements, reductions in travel, reducing office rental requirements, diversification of contract types, etc.) were not sufficiently considered in the final decisions that yielded the new organogram and the new structure of UNAIDS. The USSA will continue to follow up with senior management on staff recommendations, as UNAIDS will have to continue to identify cost-savings amid a likely continuing trend of shrinking resources for the global AIDS response.
23. During the current alignment implementation stage, staff have expressed concerns regarding the insufficient rationale given as to why certain posts have been reprofiled, relocated or abolished. They are also concerned that the promised hiring freeze for the duration of the alignment exercise has been ignored: external hiring and recruitment has continued to occur, including direct appointments without competitive process. This potentially reduces the opportunities for internal staff members to apply for these new positions. Since 2021, more than 10 positions have been created and/or filled with direct appointments or through a recruitment process that does not favour internal candidates. In April–May 2022 alone, 19 international and national professional and general support positions were opened outside the alignment compendium of positions, allowing

external applicants to apply at the same time as internal staff. The USSA has urged senior management to prioritize the reassignment of eligible staff whose posts are abolished and to minimize job losses to the extent possible, including through due consideration of eligible and qualified internal staff for all vacancies, in line with staff rules and regulations.

24. In this regard, the USSA is also negotiating with senior management to revise key sections of the new recruitment policy to ensure that direct appointments and recruitments without competitive processes occur only exceptionally, in order to allow and prioritize fair and equal opportunities for internal candidates. Affected staff members have also requested for an extension on the separation timeframe in cases where positions are lost due to the closure of Country Offices, or when staff are being relocated or have chosen to leave the organization. It is critically important for staff to have adequate timeframes in which to seek alternative employment, especially in light of the poor economic outlook due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of the Ukraine war and the limited UN employment opportunities in many countries where offices are closing or where the UNAIDS Country Office will be moved to the UN Resident Coordinator Office.
25. The USSA will continue to work with senior management during the alignment implementation period to ensure that the information provided to staff is clear and transparent, and that affected staff are treated fairly and equally. The USSA is also working with the staff counsellor to support staff mental health and well-being; linking staff to legal advisers for consultations; and providing information through “know your rights” fact sheets and townhall briefings on legal rights of staff.
26. The USSA would like to express its heartfelt appreciation to all our colleagues who, despite knowing their position has been abolished, continue to carry out their work with professionalism. The People Management department has also had to work extra-hard to provide information, conduct webinars, finalize job reviews and classifications, advocate for a maximum number of posts to be made available in the alignment compendium, and provide skills-building support to prepare staff for alternative employment.

Staff-management relationships and collaboration

27. The UNAIDS Agreement of Cooperation (2011) between the USSA and senior management has been referred to as a good practice by the Federation of International Civil Servants’ Association. The main principles that underpin the Agreement of Cooperation are:
 - engagement—timely and constructive consultation on policies and monitoring of practices;
 - reciprocal communication—open and regular communication and dialogue between the USSA and management, and vice versa; and
 - good faith—genuine concern for and involvement in issues affecting the working lives of staff.
28. In the past 18 months, staff surveys and pulse check-ins responses indicate divided sentiments on the alignment process: only 51% of staff respondents agreed that the alignment process was being carried out transparently and 36% believed that UNAIDS would be more fit for purpose as a result of the alignment. Responding to staff concerns and requests for more information, the USSA put the following recommendations to senior management for consideration in anticipation of a positive response:

- Place an immediate freeze on external recruitment during the alignment exercise;
 - Include all vacant and soon-to-be vacant positions in the alignment compendium and ensure that the filling of all positions follows the reassignment process;
 - Provide support to staff to mitigate any negative consequences (for example, career counselling and psychosocial support), organize employment opportunities with UNAIDS Secretariat partners and Cosponsors, and facilitate their new roles;
 - Provide priority consideration to eligible staff for reassignment, particularly those affected by the abolition of posts, and apply the utmost flexibility in order to minimize job losses (for example, through special consideration for staff who are less than one year from retirement);
 - Revise the new recruitment policy, issued in March 2022, to provide fair and transparent opportunities for all internal staff members to compete for all vacant positions, and allow direct appointments and noncompetitive recruitment processes only in truly exceptional and necessary circumstances;
 - Finalize the new mobility policy and consider providing exceptional, one-year extensions of mobility incentives to staff members who are required to stay beyond their standard duration of assignment; and
 - Explore alternative contract modalities funded by extrabudgetary sources to supplement the workforce (for example, temporary contracts, job-sharing, project-specific consultancies, etc.) and allow staff affected by the abolition of posts to apply for these alternative contracts.
29. The USSA is working with management to strengthen meaningful consultation and ensure regular dialogue at all UNAIDS organizational communication and information fora. That includes exploring the review and revision of the USSA and Management Cooperation Agreement to ensure that policies and decisions that impact staff working conditions and well-being are developed and implemented with staff input and engagement.

Conclusion

30. The PCB is requested to take note of the Statement of the USSA and to encourage that the best conditions and well-being for staff members be prioritized throughout the restructuring of UNAIDS, with a focus on improved capacity and minimum disruptions to UNAIDS Secretariat business continuity in order to deliver on the Global AIDS Strategy 2021–2026.

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