

# 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 implementation of decisions: *none***

**Table of contents**

Introduction ..... 4

Background on the USSA..... 4

Progress on USSA recommendations from PCB 52 ..... 5

Working relationship between management and USSA..... 6

Challenges faced and way forward..... 6

## Introduction

1. Thank you Chair, distinguished members and observers of the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board, colleagues, friends. As Chair of the UNAIDS Secretariat Staff Association, I thank you for giving us the opportunity to address the Board and share with you the priority issues affecting UNAIDS staff members. My statement will draw on data from the global staff survey, the Staff Association's mid-year check-in questionnaire and direct communication from staff, and it will provide an update on the implementation of recommendations which the Staff Association made last year.

## Background on the UNAIDS Staff Association

2. Since April 2005, the UNAIDS Secretariat Staff Association (USSA) has been an independent staff association representing all staff in the UNAIDS Secretariat. As stated in its 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 those recommended by 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 promote their welfare; and
  - cooperate in achieving the objectives of UNAIDS.
3. 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 members arising from day-to-day management and administration of the organization. That agreement also commits management to contribute operational resources to the Staff Association.
4. While the Staff Association represents all UNAIDS staff, 363 dues paying members are eligible to claim limited legal support should the need arise during their employment with UNAIDS. We are one of the few UN staff associations that manage a legal support mechanism for staff. Over the past two years, the Staff Association has been able to assist 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.
5. First, a few general remarks before I delve into the specifics.
  - a. The last few years have been tough for UNAIDS staff. We have faced numerous disruptions, some of which persist to this day. However, amid these challenges, we have remained resilient. Due to restructuring, staff members are doing extra work that puts them at risk of burnout. Despite the hardships, we have endured and staff remain committed to the UNAIDS mandate and mission regardless of any grievances they may have. We are ready to shift back into gear, if you will.
  - b. As internal dialogue and debate picks up again, it reflects not only a renewed spirit and creativity, but also our enduring motivation to propel our mission forward. As the USSA, we know that we can—and we should—play a positive role in this period of transition and transformation. We are committed to active and constructive involvement in this ongoing process and to serve as an honest broker where needed.

- c. Trust and transparency will undoubtedly be key as we navigate these changes and work towards our shared goals. It is essential that we foster an environment of openness and collaboration, ensuring that every voice is heard and valued. These issues were made very clear in the last global staff survey in 2022.
6. Our staff remain dedicated to ensuring that our support to the people and communities we serve, and our engagement in the HIV response, continue unabated. UNAIDS's staff, with their unique combination of commitment, knowledge and experience, are the organization's core assets. Without them, success is unattainable. It's imperative that we, together, ensure they feel valued and rewarded.

### Progress on USSA recommendations from PCB 52

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.
8. **USSA Recommendation 1.** Prioritize retention of staff whose positions have been abolished and who meet eligibility criteria for reassignment.
9. While the Staff Association appreciates efforts made to this end by the organization, we were disappointed to see that external recruitment continues. A Review Board, with USSA participation, has been reviewing recruitment and selection procedures, and USSA has offered to work with management to use this mechanism to fill the oversight gap created by the abolition of the Mobility and Reassignment Committee. However, we propose that it is time to evaluate the effectiveness of the Review Board and whether it is truly able to replace the Mobility and Reassignment Committee. Transparency in recruitment decisions, within the framework of alignment or beyond it, continues to be a major concern to UNAIDS staff.
10. **USSA Recommendation 2.** Revise staff recruitment policies to ensure a fair, transparent, competitive process for all positions. Where there are exceptions, the rationale and justification must be robustly documented and shared with all staff.
11. The USSA notes the slight improvements reported in the 2022 global staff survey, but it remains concerned that nearly two thirds of staff had reservations regarding how decisions are made within the organization, whether it has handled alignment effectively, the career support it offers to high performers, and whether the Senior Leadership Team truly understands the views and opinions of staff.
12. The USSA is deeply concerned by some of the proposed changes to our recruitment policies (for fixed term and short-term positions), which reduce oversight, transparency and fairness. While the Staff Association remains committed to working closely with senior management to ensure staff rights are protected under the new recruitment procedures, it will continue to contest any change to our rules and regulations that prejudices the rights of staff. The USSA notes with some concern that in 2022, 24 positions (i.e., one in five staffing decisions) were filled through Executive decision.
13. **USSA Recommendation 3.** Urgently scale up, across all duty stations, support mechanisms for staff to navigate and cope with change (e.g., career and upskilling support, as well as counselling and mental health support), including prioritizing the development of strategies for preventing stress and burn out at the workplace and in the Staff Association.

14. The Secretariat has one Staff Counsellor who is based in Geneva, to support all staff across duty stations. We recommend additional staffing in this office to avoid overloading and possible burn out of the Staff Counsellor.
15. **USSA Recommendation 4.** Secure additional resources to cover the anticipated human resources gap to safeguard core functions of the Secretariat.
16. The realignment exercise, among other things, resulted in the loss of 131 staff in 2022. Our financial predicament continues and many positions remain vacant. The greatest loss was among general service staff, and this places a premium on business continuity and manageable workloads. Units are expected to deliver the same outputs with resources that are markedly reduced.
17. At the same time, new ways of working are being implemented at a rapid rate, yet workload and mental health are the top priorities identified by staff for the Staff Association to focus on. The number of sick leave days taken at UNAIDS is high. Staff are working well beyond eight-hour days and through the weekends to get things done. This is not viable in the long run. Doing “more with less” is fine rhetoric and probably workable as a stop-gap measure, but it is not a solution.
18. Should the funding deficit continue, or even worsen, the Staff Association **calls on senior management to structure the scope of UNAIDS’s work to match our current staffing level, and rapidly scale up staff access to support measures without delay, based on the needs expressed by staff.**
19. The Staff Association also asks senior management to communicate more frequently with staff—to update us on resource mobilization and resource utilization to facilitate workplan adjustments, resource allocation reviews, and the securing of essential human resources to deliver results.

### Working relationship between management and USSA

20. Chair, as is customary, I wish to share a brief update on the working relationship between management and the Staff Association.
21. 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 be working with management to improve Staff Health Insurance in the coming year.
22. We also have regular meetings with the Director 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 with us and hear us out. Overall, we believe that emerging from a few difficult years, our relationship with management is improving and will hopefully continue to do so, given our common intent to further the HIV response, while keeping staff well-being front and centre.

### Challenges faced and way forward

23. At the same time, the past couple of years have been a very difficult period for staff and, inevitably, the Staff Association. Our precarious financial situation impacts every aspect of our work, including staff retention and programme delivery, and it has forced staff to cope and adapt under conditions of great uncertainty and hardship, while continuing to deliver on our commitment to end AIDS by 2030.

24. Since the previous PCB, the Staff Association has managed to secure 14 seats out of 15 seats, but we lost one volunteer due to departure from the organization. Following the latest round of elections, the Executive Committee is at near-full complement with 14 members.
25. We also have been reassigned a full-time administrative assistant in the past six months, but the person is in Bonn rather than Geneva. The decision to relocate may be justified on financial grounds, but it is by every other measure detrimental to the greater welfare and broader interests of UNAIDS Secretariat staff since it deprives the Staff Association of a “24/7”, on-the-ground presence in the Global Centre. This sets an unwelcome precedent. However, we have managed to keep going “*tant bien que mal*” by prioritizing our support to staff who are affected by the realignment and by conveying staff concerns and needs regarding change management and their well-being to senior management.
26. In the recently concluded 2024 elections to the Executive Committee, participation was nearly 5% higher compared with 2023. This is welcome news, although the question remains as to why so few candidates come forward from the Global Centre. We hope senior management will fully support, facilitate and protect staff who take on this duty and provide them with adequate resources to function effectively.
27. As noted, UNAIDS is seeking to reform itself in line with key feminist principles. The Staff Association supports this approach, as it is in line with the principles of collective action, solidarity and workers’ rights. The new ways of working being introduced by the organization, such as knowledge management and communities of practice, help to create linkages and flatten structures and encourage communal decision-making. We hope that the organization takes note of the past experiences of its Cosponsors and other UN entities in these areas.
28. There are also ongoing efforts to create a safe, empowering and diverse workplace. However, more work is required if we are to achieve feminist principles of transparency and devolution of power. Workload is also 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.
29. 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;
  - (re)alignment and mobility;
  - career advancement; and
  - fairness and transparency in policy implementation.
30. **Proposed recommendations.** The Staff Association presents below a summary of outstanding issues which staff would like the senior management to address.
  - 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?
  - A biannual update on UNAIDS resource mobilization efforts.
  - Implementation of support measures for staff to cope with high workloads.

- Staff Health Insurance coverage that is accessible, reasonable and available all the time to staff globally.
  - Ensuring a supportive and enabling environment for the Staff Association and ensuring it is adequately resourced.
31. PCB members, observers, colleagues and friends, on behalf of the USSA, and 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 AIDS response is fully resourced and we can complete our work to end inequalities and end AIDS.
32. So, as we slowly emerge from our “winter of discontent”, the Staff Association is committed to become a credible, trusted and respected institution once more: credible and trusted by the staff it serves, and credible and respected by UNAIDS management. Thank you.

*[End of document]*