



## Statement of the Chairperson of the UNHCR Global Staff Council, Mrs. Nathalie Meynet, at the 73rd session of the Executive Committee

Geneva, 13 October 2022

Distinguished Chair,  
High Commissioner,  
Deputy High-Commissioner,  
Assistant High-Commissioners,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Dear colleagues,

I am pleased to take the floor again after one year in my function as Chair of the Global Staff Council, representing all staff and affiliates working in the organization.

Last year was marked by the situation in Afghanistan, at the time the Global Staff Council made a call for a comprehensive application of the duty of care framework for all our colleagues, national and international, who stayed and delivered under very perilous conditions. We are also continuing to keep an eye on the developments in Ethiopia and we recently shared with the High Commissioner our concerns for the security of our colleagues, with the renewed fighting in Tigray and ongoing airstrikes. We once again ask that comprehensive measures be taken to secure the safety and wellbeing of personnel, in all locations.

Earlier this year, faced with this emergency of an unprecedented scale in Ukraine, the organization had to mobilize colleagues from all corners of the globe to reinforce existing teams and set-up new offices. We are extremely proud of our colleagues who worked around the clock to support the internally displaced population and provide assistance to the millions of Ukrainians in neighboring countries.

Meanwhile, although COVID remains a reality, and despite the rise of other public health emergencies (such as Monkey pox and the outbreak of Ebola in Uganda), most offices have resumed full in person presence, with some managers now reluctant to allow their staff to telework. However, in the words of the Secretary-General, telework has become a “new way of working”, one that supports work/life harmony and contributes to institutional efforts to “green the blue.” We are glad that the High Commissioner has endorsed a new policy on flexible work arrangements. This policy is a recognition that throughout the pandemic, our colleagues continued their work and delivered, regardless of their functions. We will therefore continue to advocate for a fair application of all forms of flexible time arrangements, be it compressed schedule, part-time or telework.



As you well know, the organization is going through important business transformations that started concretely with decentralization to the regions three years ago. This week, our new HR platform, Workday, has been launched. We are happily leaving behind our old cumbersome system, to now manage our HR requests on our phones. In parallel with the launch of Workday, a number of policies have been revised to adapt to the new system, including a simplification of the way the organization recruits and reassigns staff, with all vacancies being advertised also externally. A new era is opening, where criteria for promotion in the international category are much more flexible.

This is of course welcomed progress, in particular for the “new talents” who joined the organization in recent years and may not yet fulfil all criteria. But it also raises questions among the international colleagues who have invested more than just their time in the organization. I am referring to those colleagues who have spent the best years of their lives moving from one difficult duty station to another, separated from family and loved ones, often sacrificing the comfort and security of life in their home countries. One would think that their experience should be recognized, valued, and put to good use in an organization where only 30% of its staff have served for more than five years.

Unfortunately, there is a real concern that the experience accumulated by the so-called “lifers” is no longer rewarded or appreciated and that “ageism” is becoming the norm. This is not only discouraging for the affected colleagues, but also impacts directly on the organization's capacity to manage emergencies. Of course, we welcome the newcomers with great appreciation, but we are troubled with the level of external recruitment at higher grades, instead of promoting experienced and valuable internal colleagues. This further gives the impression that the organization does not value loyalty or makes little effort to retain its staff.

We are hoping that this flexibility will be the opportunity for more national colleagues to convert to the international category, if they so wish, as they have also managed emergencies in their own countries. National staff will bring more diversity to the workforce across regions, helping the organization to improve its diversity markers as part of the Diversity and Inclusion workplan.

However, we are concerned that recent budgetary cuts will lead to the separation of experienced colleagues, particularly national ones who are always more impacted by staff reduction, for no remarkable gain given their low salaries. This is despite the important role they play, being the ones who know the local context and are instrumental in maintaining relationships with local authorities. While we acknowledge and understand the budgetary realities, the Global Staff Council would like to encourage that the cutting of national positions be the last resort as opposed to international positions, as these colleagues have the possibility to reapply and rotate. To that effect, the Council would like to see a rotation strategy that prioritizes impacted colleagues and that is compatible with this current reality, going beyond the regular compendium cycle. Furthermore, field colleagues have expressed their fear that the budget cuts will have a direct impact on the people we serve and care for.

Last year, I had mentioned the issue of contracts as the number one priority of the Global Staff Council and those we represent. We are therefore satisfied that the contracts' policy will be revised this year to hopefully include longer-term contracts and continuing contracts, as implemented in other UN agencies.



Since the one-time review of continuing contracts in 2008 (nearly 15 years ago), colleagues have only been granted contracts of two or three years at a time at best. Job security has become a priority for UNHCR staff and would be a powerful retention tool, bringing untold benefits to the organization in creating an environment where colleagues can speak-up and staff rewarded for their service and performance.

On the latter, the successful implementation of the programmes reported each year to the ExCom is also reflected in the performance evaluations of our senior managers, who could never have achieved their high ratings without their staff. We are looking forward to the new performance management system, Evolve, that we hope will celebrate the achievements of all team members.

On retention, we wish to highlight that in many countries where UNHCR operates, the current high rate of inflation, as a result of localized and global factors, has greatly reduced the value of salaries, this requires urgent review if UNHCR is to maintain its attractiveness as an employer. As a direct impact, it has become nearly impossible to recruit national staff in Eastern and Central Europe, with the rare exception of those who join UNHCR “for the mandate”. Case in point, the Global Service Center in Budapest, where staff turnover is particularly high, with a growing feeling that they are being treated as second-class citizens, though supposed to be an outposted HQ location. We are concerned in this context that UNHCR is more and more turning to precarious affiliate and service contracts, to fill gaps. Technical and complicated or not, the issue of local salaries needs to be solved, as it isn’t acceptable when the starting salary to work for the UN, is lower than the minimum wage in a country.

Similarly, the post adjustment and benefits for International Professional colleagues must as well be realigned to an acceptable and competitive level. We all know that the first and foremost motivation for UNHCR staff is our mandate and the “call of duty”, requiring a special type of strength and resilience, different from any other work. However, short-term contracts coupled with low financial compensation is a reality against which the belief that UNHCR will maintain a motivated workforce is wishful thinking.

Although it is understood that you do not have a direct say on this issue, as it rests with the General Assembly and ICSC, I can assure you that UNHCR staff would be grateful for your support as member states, in highlighting the challenges faced by those with boots on the ground.

I wish to highlight that the Global Staff Council is committed to reinforce Staff Management Relations, as this is key to building trust and collaboration between Senior Management, the Staff Representatives and the wider staff, especially in these times of fundamental change. This trust should be extended to the joint staff/management bodies established as per UN Staff Rules 4.15 to “provide advice on recommendations for selection of staff” and 8.2 for the general staff/management machinery.



To this end, we would like to see unequivocal faith and trust placed in the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) which has the clear role to “advise the High Commissioner on questions relating to human resources policies and their effective functioning (...)”. The JAC should not simply be regarded as an editorial board, its recommendations on HR policies should be fully considered by the High Commissioner.

We equally want to see the role of the Joint Review Board (JRB) on recruitment and assignment of international professional staff strengthened, not only in the context of the recent changes in the recruitment policy, but also to monitor the implementation of diversity targets.

Last, but not least, the GSC will soon be launching a campaign on Dignity at Work, to promote harmonious work relations, taking a stand against disrespectful behaviours, including all forms of harassment, discrimination, racism, bullying and abuse of authority. While we have decided to engage in this campaign primarily for the sake of those suffering in silence, the impact on the mental health of our colleagues, results in a high cost for the organization and should not be underestimated. We would welcome your support also in this area.

Distinguished delegates and colleagues, please know that the Global Staff Council, speaking for all colleagues, renew our commitment to uphold the values of our mandate, despite the many challenges we face. There can be no greater mission than to work for UNHCR and for us to serve its personnel.

We can only kindly ask that you continue to support the staff as well.

Thank you.