

75th Session of the Executive Committee

October 2024

Speech, Inspector General's Office

Mr. Anthony Garnett, Inspector General

Chairperson,

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning / afternoon.

My Report on activities of the Inspector General's Office (A/AC.96/75/8) covers the work of my Office in the year to June 2024. It provides an account of the key activities and statistics for the IGO's work during the period. As is my usual practice, I want, through my comments today, to draw out some key points and themes from the IGO's work. In particular, as I come to this, my penultimate report to ExCom before the end of my mandate, I want to set out some thematic observations that I hope will be useful.

IGO strategy

Your excellencies, I continue to frame my comments within the context of the IGO's five-year strategy 2021-2026. This remains unchanged: its core aim is to ensure that 'UNHCR has an effective independent oversight system giving confidence to UNHCR's stakeholders over UNHCR's efficiency, economy and effectiveness'. It has been my aim as Inspector General to do things differently, making independent oversight, both for assurance and integrity matters, greater than the sum of its individual parts. This has required the application of systems thinking and the encouragement of the various independent entities to work collectively, applying their particular skills and talents to best effect, in partnership with UNHCR's management team.

This has been another year in which both the assurance and integrity oversight systems have stepped up to the challenge. Both have the various independent entities and actors working together, but there is more we can collectively do on integrity matters, where the issues can be more challenging and complex.

System-wide considerations

Distinguished delegates, I want to address some of the points that have arisen in various fora during the year.

On independence; independence is important to me as the Inspector General, and my freedom to take actions, or comment unfettered on things that are important, I take very seriously. Over the last few years, the independence of other third-line entities has improved. I am pleased to report that the High Commissioner continues to recognise this crucial aspect of my role and office, and he has been supportive of my Office's work, and that of the oversight system more generally, during the year.

On resourcing; it is a challenging period for resourcing of UNHCR more broadly, and independent oversight is not immune. I see the oversight system is stretched, and my Office is no exception. While we continue to seek and deliver efficiencies through technology and process, there are difficult choices, as the investigations data in my report shows. Despite these challenges, the oversight system has not been significantly scaled back. It does require, however, continued commitment and vigilance to ensure that a stable and fully effective independent oversight system continues to remain in place.

On transparency and reporting; my Office and I remain committed to full transparency of our work, especially on investigations matters, whilst protecting the integrity and safety of the process to ensure accountability for misconduct. *Your excellencies*, my door continues to remain open to address concerns you have, and issues you wish to raise. I note the trend for

increased requests for more detailed reporting. As you see from the data in my report, my Office runs a system at scale, a position that other organisations in the broader humanitarian system are also reaching. I ask, therefore, for your continued support for the multilateral approach, based on verifiable trust in UNHCR's and my Office's systems, which I will supplement with detail as needed. This approach will allow a focus on improving systems and overall outcomes.

Assurance

Distinguished delegates, I want to turn my attention to the assurance system. As a previous mentor of mine observed, 'there are two types of people in organisations, those that complain about problems loudly, and those that solve them quietly'. Independent oversight, of course, has a legitimate role to do both. I have, however, positioned my Office, and created its Strategic Oversight team, to focus on the latter.

In addition to its coordination and policy work, and provision of the secretariat service to the Independent Audit and Oversight Committee, Strategic Oversight is also an assurance provider in its own right. In this role it has provided a range of risk-based, strategic, advisory work for the attention of UNHCR's senior management team.

The IGO is uniquely positioned, with an independent overview across the whole oversight system, to identify cross-cutting and thematic risks. My Office worked with oversight colleagues to identify key themes arising from oversight providers' work. These themes included: continuing the positive progress on risk management maturity; completing the 'golden thread' of change from the business transformation programme, decentralisation and regionalisation, and headquarters realignment; enhancing overall approaches to data and management information; and enhancing accountability mechanisms at systems and individual performance level.

Of critical importance is the ongoing work of building and maintaining ‘frameworks of control’. Frameworks of control is oversight language for being clear about who does, and is accountable for what, and who is accountable for ensuring things happen as intended. UNHCR is making a set of sensible choices and taking actions to improve its control environment. There is a need, however, for UNHCR to ensure that the next 18 months sees consistent and coherent action to follow through those choices and consolidate the gains from those actions. My Office is working with the various assurance providers to ensure a coherent plan of work in 2025 to assist the Organisation to crystallise the gains from its transformation programme.

I am aware that the oversight system can at first appear complex, so my Office has developed a short video that explains, how the system fits together, and about each of its constituent parts. This is available on my Office’s portion of UNHCR’s website.

Investigations

Your excellencies, I turn my attention to the integrity system. The overall complaint numbers increased by a modest 8% in the reporting period. Comparing by calendar year, the steep 30% rise in complaints we saw last year is softening, with complaints reaching a likely plateau of around 2,100 by the end of 2024. You will recall that these are complaints that fall within the IGO’s mandate only, with a further 7-800 complaints, mostly protection-related, being referred by my Office to UNHCR’s operations around the world.

At this scale, the IGO is increasingly relying on others to take up complaints that my Office is not prioritising; or that are better handled by others, or through other processes. This includes referral to, funding partners; UN system counterparts; other integrity responses, for example Ethics Office or Ombudsperson; and also, UNHCR management. We have taken steps to build the capacity of our partners to handle these referrals, including a programme of training on

fraud and misconduct investigations and sexual misconduct, for UNHCR staff and funded partners. We have also developed and led two UN-system investigator training courses, recognising our system-leading position.

As part of my Office's efficiency agenda, we are actively working to integrate artificial intelligence solutions into our investigations work. We are working with our case management system software provider to use generative AI to speed up investigations analysis and reporting. Our pressing priority is, however, to make our intake assessment of complaints more efficient. We are working, therefore, on a machine learning AI model to provide a chatbot for complainants to report concerns to us and to assess the data provided. We are doing this carefully, with proper consideration of the risks, especially to victims of sexual misconduct. We will retain human oversight of decisions taken.

The SpeakUp Helpline, our anonymous misconduct reporting platform for staff, has been replaced with a new provider at lower cost, and with a system that automates data transfer to my Office.

I and my Office continue to promote a 'systems thinking', holistic, approach for integrity matters, encouraging the various independent and management entities to work collectively, whilst respecting confidentiality and mandates, to address integrity lapses. This approach continues to evolve, with additional work ongoing to, enhance the interface between my Office and the Ethics Office on protection against retaliation complaints; with the Division of Strategic Planning and Results on matters affecting funded partners; and with the Division of International Protection on fraud committed by displaced persons, including registration and resettlement fraud.

We have continued to enhance our proactive work to address financial fraud, specifically with our 'double dipping' project, where we compare funder data to shared implementing partners,

to identify duplicate claims. This project is having some success, and in 12 closed cases out of 18 opened, we have so far identified a significant number of duplicate claims. It is, however, being hampered by slow or incomplete cooperation from counterpart agencies to share data, and I encourage, in this public forum, increased system-wide cooperation to tackle this particular form of fraud.

Data observations

Distinguished delegates, I want to make a few observations from our investigations data. Whilst the overall trend for complaints remains up, albeit with less of an increase than in the prior period, we continue to have ‘cold spots’, both regionally and intra-regionally. For example, in the first half of 2024, 51% of complaints came from just 10 operations, with the remaining 107 operations comprising the rest. I have worked with the relevant management counterparts to enhance awareness, and build confidence to raise concerns, and this is having some effect. There is, however, still further work to do.

Sexual misconduct complaints remain my Office’s top priority, at both the intake and investigation stages of our work, and to ensure a victim-centred approach throughout the process. Sexual exploitation and abuse complaints continue on an upwards trend, with a majority of cases reported relating to UNHCR’s partners (79%), as also seen in previous years. Sexual harassment complaints remain steady, with a majority relating to UNHCR staff (76%). Whilst data are, rightly, confidential from UNHCR in the ‘not only me’ system, this system has, to our knowledge, resulted in one victim having confidence to come forward, and likely many more we unaware of. This suggests it is working, therefore, as intended. The IGO continues to work well with the Principal Advisor and her team on sexual misconduct matters, and to apply its victim-centred approach.

Finally, the most effective prevention method is to ensure organisational learning from misconduct events. We have issued, in line with previous years, 41 management implication reports. These are short memoranda, targeted at executive management, to ensure improvements to controls and systems that we identify as being ineffective from our investigations casework. We have targeted these at systems and process shortfalls, to maximise their impact.

Conclusion

In closing, *Distinguished Delegates*, the oversight system for both assurance and integrity remains effective, but it is under pressure. It continues to evolve, to rise to the challenge of assuring UNHCR's stakeholders, and addressing integrity lapses. Please accept my continued thanks for your support and engagement in my Office's work. I encourage the continued constructive engagement of Member States with the oversight community, and welcome continued dialogue outside of this formal meeting.