



Statement of the Coordinating Committee of International Staff Unions and Associations (CCISUA) to the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly

Item 141, UN Common System, Tuesday 10 November 2015

Delivered by Ian Richards, President

Check upon delivery

Thank you Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, and good morning, Allow me first to congratulate you Mr. Chairman, and the Bureau, on your election and trust that under your wise leadership, this Committee will this year complete its deliberations by Christmas.

Allow me also to thank the ICSC for their annual report, A/70/30, as well as the Chairman's presentation. I would also like to thank the Chair of ACABQ, Mr. Carlos Ruiz Massieu, the Controller, Ms. Bettina Tucci Bartsiotas, the delegates speaking this morning, and my colleagues Imed Zabaar of FICSA and Dimitri Samaras of Uniserv.

I have the honour of addressing you on behalf of the organizations constituting the Coordinating Committee for International Staff Unions and Associations (CCISUA). Together, our members represent 60,000 staff across the UN Common System and many of whom are operating in the deep field.

These are the staff whose skills, experience and commitment are dedicated every day to delivering the UN's proudest achievement: its humanitarian aid and emergency assistance programmes.

They are feeding more than 80 million people in 75 countries, supporting more than 60 million refugees, returnees, displaced and stateless people in the world's crisis zones, and taking forward aid, development and human rights programmes that no other organisation is capable of.

Thousands of our members are prepared to put their lives at risk in order to support populations in Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Iraq and other countries where their work is desperately needed.

The personal risks for staff in danger zones already deter all but the most highly motivated. Carrying out the UN's mission has led to 319 UN staff and contractors being killed in service, 325 being injured and 164 kidnappings since 2000.

Please accept my submission that the staff have the highest levels of commitment, motivated by their belief, and the evidence, that their work is saving lives.

But an organisation that has seen more than 600 of its workers killed or injured on duty in 15 years must have an active, sustainable strategy for keeping staff motivated and productive, and for attracting new talent to replace staff who leave.

Distinguished delegates, that is the challenge facing the United Nations today.

The ICSC Compensation Review

Turning to the Compensation Review, we have serious, justified concerns.

These concerns are shared by the Secretary-General and the agency chiefs, who have described the proposed new system as ‘not fit for purpose’ in supporting the UN’s staff strategy to appoint more women to senior roles; to achieve greater mobility; and to promote staff health and well-being, especially mental health.

But first I would like to return to the original purpose of the Compensation Review. The staff have actively participated in the Review, providing information and insights to the Commission and supporting the objectives it set for itself.

Above all else, the Review was intended to “review all remuneration elements holistically in order to safeguard the core values of the organizations of the United Nations common system.”

It was intended to produce a revised system that “should support the delivery of the organizations’ mandates.”

It is with regret that the staff submit that the Report before you today fails to meet those objectives.

The ICSC’s well-intended objectives and its work to achieve a streamlined, unified structure has created unintended consequences in the detail that mean it will not work as a “holistic” system.

If implemented, the new system would damage the living standards, working conditions and family lives of thousands of your staff working in the world’s most dangerous locations as well as those who support them.

In the medium term it will degrade the collective skills and experience available to the UN in professional and management grades. This would progressively undermine the effectiveness of the humanitarian aid and emergency assistance programmes that are the UN’s proudest achievement.

I would like to describe the human impact of the proposals and the risks to motivation and morale, then look at the detail, and finally propose a way forward.

Lourdes Ibarra, is currently the WFP's Head of Programmes for Syria, and is one of the UN's most experienced managers, having worked in South Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq and other 'hardship stations'.

Lourdes and her staff cross the front line between government and opposition control in conditions of extreme danger, organising daily food rations for more than four million people.

I would like to read out a statement Lourdes made when she heard about the changes:

"We work in dangerous, challenging conditions. Some colleagues leave because of the conditions and the strain on their families, and we have lost colleagues who were killed in armed attacks and bombings.

"What keeps us working here is knowing that we can save lives, and to do that takes a highly committed, highly motivated staff.

"One of the most stressful situations is not actually the physical danger – it is the feeling of not being supported by some people we work with, and more so by the UN itself.

"If my staff are not being supported, and conditions mean we cannot make a difference, what do we think will keep them working here?"

Impact on staff

Looking at the detail of the changes, we are deeply concerned that staff who have experienced a three-year pay freeze are now facing real cuts to pay and allowances.

As well as the impact on living standards, pay is the ultimate measure of how an organisation values its staff.

The negative impacts have not been balanced across the staff. The review proposes some increases on paper, generally for single staff with no dependants, but their gains will be wiped out by the changes to step progression.

It is, again, of deep concern that the redefinition of dependency status means that cuts of between 2.5 and 3.5 percent fall hardest on single parents, who are mainly women. This jars with efforts by the Secretary-General to promote a policy that supports career development for women, especially to the highest grades.

In addition, the proposals remove accelerated home leave under which staff and their families in C to E duty stations receive an annual ticket to travel home, often for medical check ups and to purchase basic staples, including children's clothes and other items hard to obtain in post.

The proposals also significantly cut the mobility allowance for staff who move the most. This will send the wrong signal to staff at a time when the Secretary-General and many other executive heads are putting in place managed mobility programmes.

Tying step progression to periods of two years after step 7, rather than to annual performance reviews, will undermine the link between salary progression and performance.

Further, in an organization where many staff join between P-2 and P-3 and retire at P-5, and in which promotions are few and far between, salary progression through steps remains and important motivating factor.

The revised scale of the education grant will also hurt parents, including in the field, where cheaper schools are not necessarily available.

Overall we should keep in mind the principle underlying UN compensation, called the Noblemaire principle, which is that professional staff be paid by reference to the best paying national civil service – in this case United States Federal employees.

As you will note in the report, the ICSC reports UN net remuneration to be 2 percent above equivalent US pay, taking into account expatriation. This is the result of earlier cost of living rises in New York. However, as you are aware, a freeze has been in place for the last three years to address this. And it is recommended that this freeze continue until the midpoint is reached.

Yet taking salaries and allowances together, the US Government Accountability Office has certified total compensation of UN staff and US staff to be broadly comparable.

The ICSC needs more time

Building on these concerns, which are shared at all levels within the UN and its agencies, we believe the ICSC needs more time to examine how the negative impacts on staff and the risks to the effectiveness of the agencies can be avoided.

The staff associations are ready and able to participate in further work together with UN senior management so that we can jointly review and advise amendment of the ICSC proposals.

This joint work would seek to remove the damaging impacts of the proposals for the UN's HR strategy as described by the agency chiefs.

As a minimum it should ensure that no staff members or their families are worse off in the future than they are today.

Mandatory age of separation

Allow me to turn now to the mandatory age of separation.

As you may be aware, some of our most experienced and productive staff are still required to retire at 60 or 62. This stands in contrast to the comparator service, which has no retirement age at all.

Last year you considered the option of current staff being able to choose to retire at 65 as of 2016. You asked for further consultations on the matter and the results and decision of the ICSC are now in your hands.

We fully support the proposed implementation date of no later than 1 January 2017 for staff being able to choose to retire at 65.

As you will be aware, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, whose authority extends over the Secretariat, UNDP, UNOPS, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN-Women and UNFPA has also publicly urged support for this measure.

Some agencies have stated that this will upset their workforce planning. Others are undergoing yet another round of reforms and say this isn't the right time. Let's not forget though that this has been under discussion since 2009 and should have already been taken into account in workforce planning in the organizations where it exists, which according to the Joint Inspection Unit is almost nowhere.¹

As a result, 71 percent of retirees are rehired and we regularly receive reports of executive heads using their discretion to either extend staff beyond retirement age or rehire them by demanding loyalty of the kind that requires staff members to turn a blind eye to violations of the rules.²

If organizations are concerned about the impact on workforce planning we propose that staff simply be asked to state well in advance their intention on whether they wish to avail of the choice to retire at 65.

Local salary survey in New York

Before ending allow me to express or regret at the Secretary-General's decision to implement a reduction of 5.8% to the local salary scale in New York, which will affect the staff who operate as the backbone of operations here, including those servicing this committee. We believe the process of the survey was flawed and should be revisited.

In conclusion

Allow me to conclude Mr. Chairman, by returning to September this year, when Pope Francis visited the UN. Welcoming him, the Secretary-General asked His Holiness to bless the staff and called us "the heart and soul" of the UN's work.

Distinguished delegates, that same "heart and soul" of the UN is asking you to consider our evidence, to implement the mandatory age of separation as recommended, and to give the ICSC more time to make its proposals in the compensation review truly "fit for purpose."

Thank you

¹ Note of the Joint Inspection Unit, JIU/NOTE/2014/1, para. 107: "In general, organizations have no comprehensive workforce/succession planning policies or practices".

² Note of the Joint Inspection Unit, JIU/NOTE/2014/1, Executive Summary.