



World Food Programme
Programme Alimentaire Mondial
Programa Mundial de Alimentos
برنامج الأغذية العالمي

Executive Board
Annual session
Rome, 23–26 June 2025

Distribution: General

Agenda item 7

Date: 20 May 2025

WFP/EB.A/2025/7-F

Original: English

Oversight functions

For decision

Executive Board documents are available on WFP's website (<https://executiveboard.wfp.org>).

Annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services for 2024

Draft decision*

The Board takes note of the annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services for 2024 (WFP/EB.A/2025/7-F).

* This is a draft decision. For the final decision adopted by the Board, please refer to the decisions and recommendations document issued at the end of the session.

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Introduction

1. In 2024, the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services (OBD) focused on providing in-person conflict-resolution services through confidential consultations, guidance and, where needed, facilitation or intervention to help resolve workplace-related concerns. The office also developed a new mediation framework as the first step in positioning informal resolution as the foremost means of resolving conflict in the workplace. While the number of colleagues using OBD's services has remained steady over recent years, in 2024 the office expanded its capacity-strengthening efforts and held a significant number of workshops and webinars aimed at strengthening employees' skills in conflict management and resolution, and communication.
2. As well as providing an overview of OBD's work during the year, this report includes observations on the systemic issues and trends identified by the office, and suggestions for positive organizational change. In times of flux, accountability and fair processes are paramount, and in 2024 OBD continued to provide a confidential and impartial forum for promoting a respectful and civil working environment for all employees. To showcase this work – and encourage any WFP employees facing difficulties in the workplace to make use of OBD's services – for the first time, this annual report presents two case studies drawn from real situations faced by colleagues during the year, which were resolved with the office's help.
3. The theme of this annual report is “uncharted waters”. 2024 was a challenging year for WFP, and the future is uncertain, but what stands out from the many conversations that OBD has had with employees across the organization is the unwavering commitment of the workforce to make further progress towards WFP's goal of saving lives. To successfully achieve this, employees need a workplace that is free from detrimental conflict and where respect, professionalism and integrity take precedence. OBD works towards that end, making WFP a better, more efficient and more satisfying place to work.

Overview of work in 2024

Providing services to WFP employees

4. WFP's OBD offers confidential, informal and neutral support and is independent from other parts of the organization. Established in 2010, the office provides WFP employees with informal resources that help to prevent and resolve workplace conflicts. Access to the office is available to everyone in the organization for consultation about any workplace-related concern.
5. In 2024, OBD handled 653 cases brought by “visitors” – the users of the office's services – representing about 3 percent of the total workforce and in line with the proportion supported by ombuds offices throughout the United Nations system.¹ These visitors raised 927 distinct issues, which are discussed in the section on data below.
6. To bring its services to the field, OBD visited 34 country offices in 2024, providing in-person support, usually for one or two weeks, including tailored training, team interventions and work on specific systemic issues with respective leaders.
7. As part of its efforts to strengthen capacity among employees, the office offered 81 training sessions attended by 3,400 employees located in all WFP regions and held in multiple languages. The training enhanced the skills of WFP's workforce in conflict management and resolution, interpersonal communications, and the giving and receiving of feedback.

¹ Joint Inspection Unit. 2015. *Review of the Organizational Ombudsman Services across the United Nations System* (JIU/REP/2015/6).

Team interventions

8. In 2024, OBD conducted 16 “team climate assessments” involving 350 employees in various WFP regions and at central headquarters. These assessments help supervisors to understand the atmosphere in their teams and how their supervisees perceive their leadership styles. They are based on feedback from team members on communication, cohesion and morale within teams, and they help heads of teams to find realistic and workable solutions to the issues raised. The effectiveness and impact of a team climate assessment, particularly when used for self-improvement, can have profound effects on the supervisor’s skills development and on team dynamics. As a voluntary follow-up to the assessments, OBD provided four employees with coaching in team climate matters.

Respectful workplace advisor network

9. In 2024, OBD continued to manage a network of 190 volunteer respectful workplace advisors (RWAs) across WFP offices globally. In doing so, the office strengthened local capacity for effective listening and, ultimately, conflict resolution, by providing a safe space within easy reach for WFP employees to discuss challenges and share available resources. OBD provided dedicated training for new RWAs and an advanced training course for those who had been in the role for four years.
10. Consultations with RWAs serve as an early warning system by providing timely feedback to OBD on emerging issues in their respective duty stations, which helps the office to provide appropriate professional support where it is most needed. RWAs play an important role in helping employees to manage situations of uncertainty and in promoting a respectful and inclusive work environment throughout WFP.

“I really did not know what I should do when I was so stressed about the behaviour of my supervisor. Then the RWA in our suboffice walked me through the different support options available at WFP – that made all the difference!”

- RWA visitor based in a field office in the Eastern Africa region

Mediation framework

11. Mediation offers a collaborative and effective approach to resolving disputes, promoting understanding and building healthier professional relationships. It can be a powerful tool in settling disputes that otherwise might persist. The mediator assists the parties to the dispute by providing a platform where they can express their concerns openly, gain insights into the perspectives of others, and find solutions that benefit all involved. Mediation fosters a culture of respect, trust and collaboration, leading to a better and more productive workplace. Please find a case study on mediation on page 13 of this report.
12. Despite its value, mediation has been underused in WFP. To address this, in 2024 OBD developed a new mediation framework, which was issued by the Executive Director as circular OED2024/008 on International Ombuds Day in October 2024.
13. The framework aims to increase the use of mediation throughout WFP and encourages all employees to seek informal resolution as a first step in addressing disputes, thereby facilitating faster and more satisfying resolution of workplace disputes and potentially litigious matters. The framework highlights the possibility for parties to request mediation

“Thank you for facilitating the conversation with my supervisee. It helped me put the key issues on the table, and I am hopeful that the mediation will allow us to move forward more effectively.”

Ombuds visitor in a regional bureau

before or during a formal appeal process at WFP. It is thus a cornerstone of efforts to increase the synergy within WFP's internal justice system.

Extra support in times of change

14. In light of the organizational restructuring and reduced funding forecast, a group of offices involved in human resource management, workplace culture and employees' well-being joined forces in early 2024 and set up the employee support programme as an organization-wide initiative. OBD provided sessions on "connecting and moving forward in times of change", creating a safe space for colleagues to come together to reflect and connect with one another. In total, the office conducted 11 sessions in multiple languages, supporting 230 employees who shared their experiences and strategies for enhancing their resilience and learned different approaches for successfully navigating towards new horizons.

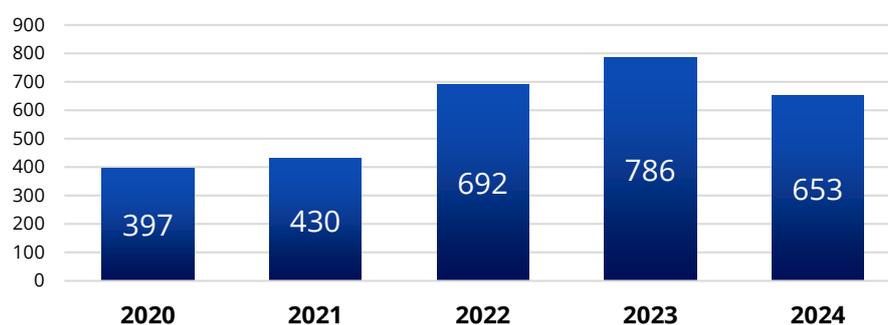
Visitor satisfaction

15. Visitors to OBD are asked to complete a survey which provides valuable feedback about their experiences. The survey serves two main purposes: it is an instrument of internal quality control, and it helps OBD to measure the impact and added value of its work. Survey results for 2024 confirm the benefits that OBD provides to WFP employees and the organization as a whole:
- 95 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "The ombuds officer helped me to identify options for addressing my concerns", and 92 percent "would recommend the office".
 - A key goal of OBD is to empower employees to address issues on their own. In this regard, 85 percent of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that "through [my] interaction with the office, I feel more comfortable addressing workplace issues in the future".

Data

16. During 2024, OBD handled 653 cases brought by visitors raising 927 issues (figure 1). The office records as a case any workplace issue(s) or question(s) brought to it by a visitor who requests information, resolution options, or assistance that requires specific ombuds skills or knowledge. If an individual approaches the office with a simple query that does not require substantial work, OBD does not count the enquiry as a case.
17. Having a high number of employees contact OBD does not necessarily indicate a problematic workplace culture: OBD observes that employees are increasingly willing to address situations that make them uncomfortable, suggesting that seeking help in such situations is no longer viewed negatively.

Figure 1: Number of cases raised with the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services, 2020–2024

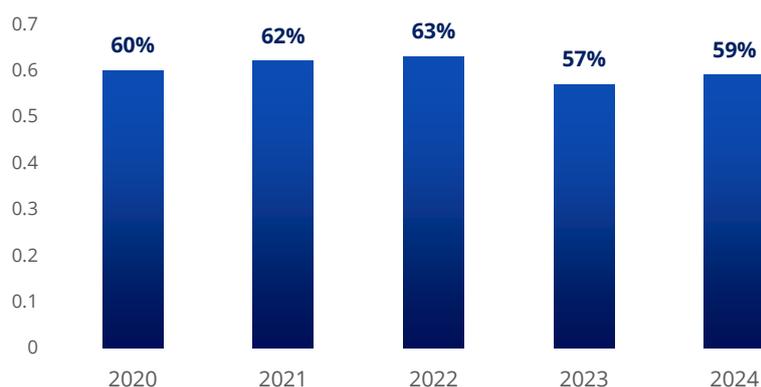


18. The profile of employees contacting OBD (figure 2) broadly reflects the overall composition of WFP in terms of contract types, and includes fixed-term staff, long-term staff and short-term employees. In 2024, 54 percent of visitors held fixed-term appointments, which may have given them a greater sense of job security, as reflected in the feedback received. It is not uncommon to hear that consultants or other short-term personnel hesitate to approach OBD owing to concerns about the potential retaliatory implications for the renewal of their contracts.
19. As in previous years, more women than men sought support from OBD in 2024. However, the gender gap (figure 3) has narrowed and appears to have stabilized in the last two years: about 60 percent of OBD's visitors are women, although women make up only 42 percent of WFP's workforce. While there is no clear explanation for this discrepancy, the office suggests that it may be the result of WFP's successful efforts to achieve gender parity and equality across its staffing in recent years. Although this has created a more comfortable working environment for women, women employees still face gender-specific barriers and discrimination in many duty stations. They are also more willing than men to address problems when they arise. OBD observes that men employees are concerned that they are being put at a disadvantage by WFP's quest for gender parity, particularly during recruitment processes.

Figure 2: Visitors to the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services by contract type, 2024



Figure 3: Share of women visitors to the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services, 2020–2024



Issues raised by visitors

20. Every visitor to OBD raises one or more issues which are classified using the broad categories established by the Network of Ombudsman and Mediators of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination with the aim of encouraging coherence throughout the United Nations system. By categorizing issues, OBD obtains a perspective on the dynamics, trends and systemic issues within WFP, which provides a comprehensive picture of the organizational climate.
21. Consistent with previous years and data from other ombuds offices in the United Nations system, the largest category of issues in 2024 was “supervisory relationships”, accounting for 37 percent of all the issues raised. In this category, “supervisory effectiveness” was the concern most frequently raised by supervisees. Not all of these issues are raised by supervisees however: 22 percent of the cases in this category were brought by supervisors looking for assistance in handling their managerial responsibilities.
22. The second largest category was “job and career”, accounting for 17 percent of the issues raised. Thirty-five percent of the cases in this category related to the abolition of posts and the ending of contracts, including such matters as termination or non-renewal. Twenty percent were related to recruitment processes.
23. The third largest category of cases in 2024 was “prohibited conduct and compliance”, accounting for 11 percent of the total. Of these cases, 70 percent related to abusive conduct, including harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of authority and discrimination. A breakdown of all the issues by main category is shown in figure 4, and a comparison over the last three years is shown in figure 5.
24. The following chapter examines some of the stories behind these data.

Figure 4: Share of cases by issue category, 2024

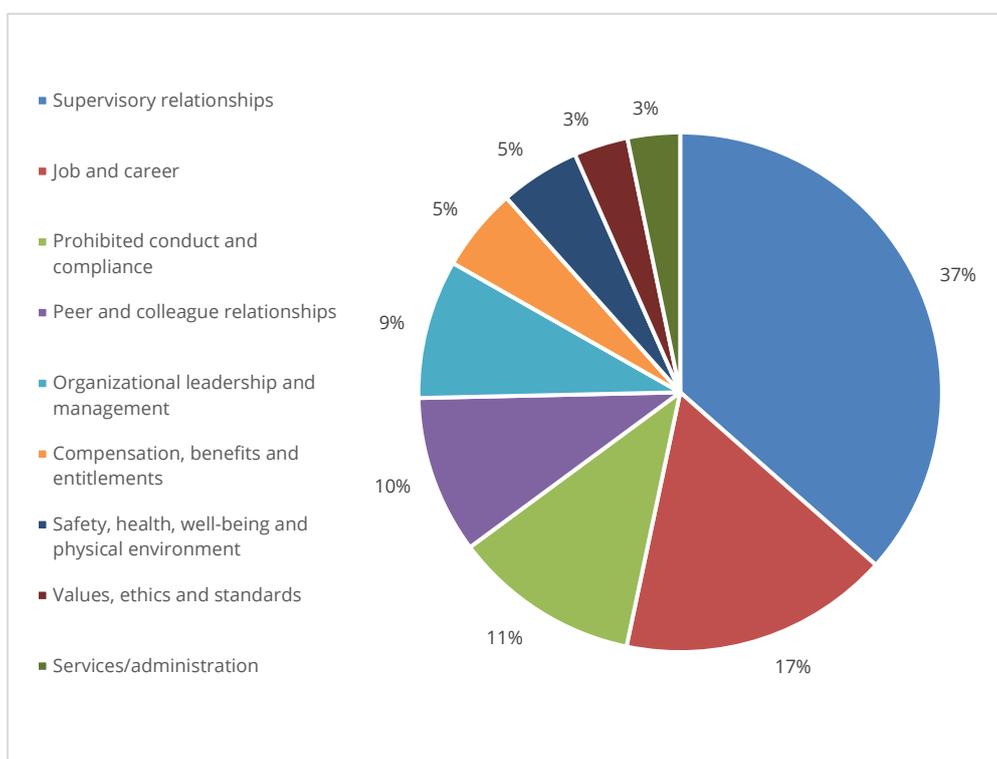
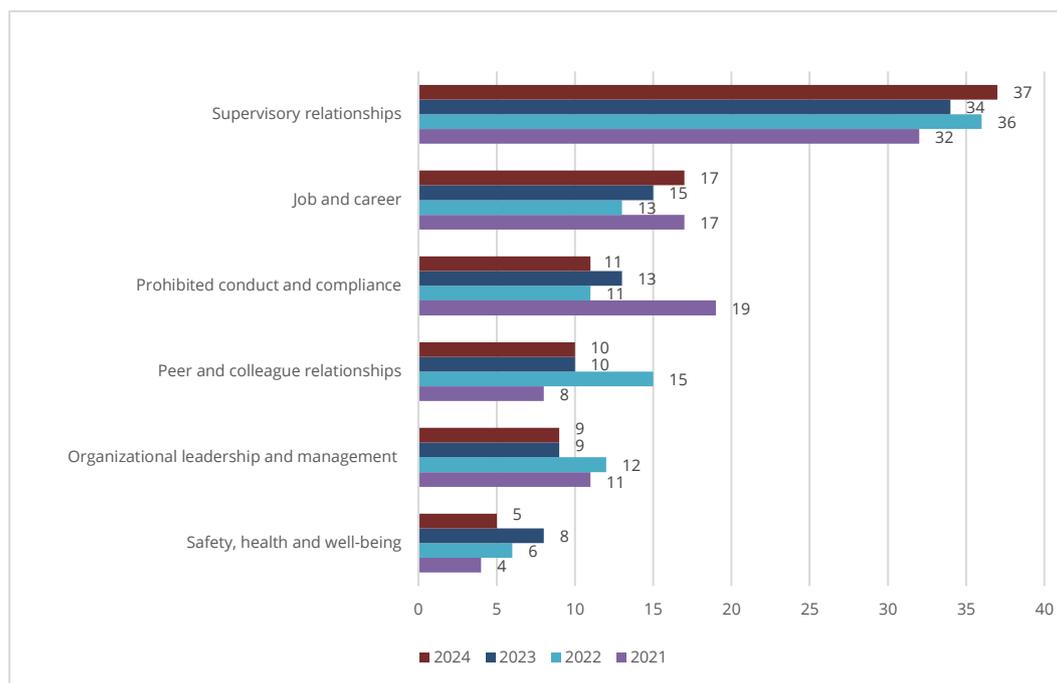


Figure 5: Main categories of issues reported to the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services, 2021–2024



Trends and systemic issues at WFP

A prolonged period of uncertainty

25. Throughout 2024 and into 2025, there has been a sustained atmosphere of uncertainty and consequent anxiety among WFP personnel. The instability began with the organizational restructuring launched in 2023, which initially affected employees at central headquarters, and subsequently colleagues in the field. This was compounded by significant reductions in the funding outlook and the funding received, resulting in the downsizing of operations in many country offices. While the emotional and other impacts of these changes were widespread, they were not uniform. By late 2024, some country offices had regained a measure of stability and confidence, largely because major downsizing processes had been implemented by then.
26. However, the trend shifted again in early 2025. The introduction of the “one global headquarters” model prompted a new wave of concern, especially among employees in the regional bureaux. Visitors approached OBD with questions about their future roles, voicing confusion about the broader vision and objectives of the realignment. A perceived lack of transparency contributed to the proliferation of rumours, undermining trust in the process and in WFP.
27. In parallel, concerns about the sustainability of funding from WFP’s top donors have added significantly to the prevailing sense of instability. As a result, OBD has seen a stream of colleagues seeking support, often expressing distress over the implications of the organizational changes for their roles and future prospects.

“As a consultant, and the newest member of the team, I know I will be the first who has to go.”

- Ombuds visitor in a country office, Latin America and the Caribbean region

28. Several key themes have emerged from these consultations:

- *An atmosphere of fear and emotional toll:* Employees with all types of contracts report a pervasive fear of job loss. Many feel that they have only just “survived” earlier downsizing rounds, which have had a significant emotional impact. Individuals with short-term contracts conveyed particular frustration and anxiety regarding their future. Many had hoped that their consistent service to WFP would lead to them gaining a staff position in the future.
- *Burden on middle management:* Leaders in middle management roles express deep anxiety about their own positions while simultaneously bearing the responsibility for implementing decisions regarding the downsizing of operations, which were taken without their involvement by managers at more senior levels.
- *Impact on international professional staff:* These employees typically have a high level of responsibility in leading many aspects of the work of a country office and, in almost all cases, have supervisory responsibilities. Cases where these employees are personally affected by the downsizing can have a trickle-down effect on the morale and motivation of entire teams.
- *Interpersonal tension and competition for remaining posts:* In country offices where positions are being abolished, employees are often required to compete for a limited number of remaining roles. These competitive environments give rise to interpersonal tension and rumours of irregularity. OBD observes that greater transparency and adherence to established standard operating procedures could mitigate many of these issues.
- *“Survivor’s guilt” and increased workloads:* Employees who remain in their roles after downsizing often express a strong sense of “survivor’s guilt” regarding colleagues who have lost their jobs. Concerns about rising workloads are also widespread.
- *Concerns related to values:* A cause of notable and deeply felt concern throughout the workforce is the anticipated reduction in assistance for WFP’s beneficiaries. Many staff express distress that the individuals and communities served by WFP will be “left behind”. This reflects the organization’s strong values-driven culture.

29. These qualitative observations are corroborated by OBD’s data, as shown in figure 5. In 2024, the office observed an increase in cases concerning supervisory relationships, including communication and feedback issues. Concerns related to job security and career progression also increased again. In the “job and career” reporting category, 35 percent of the issues reported were related to the abolition of posts and the ending of contracts, and another 20 percent to recruitment processes, mainly when employees competed for remaining positions after their current posts were abolished.

“I cannot do any more with any less. Something has to give.”

- Ombuds visitor in headquarters

30. In the current climate of prolonged uncertainty, many employees hesitate to raise issues with supervisors or address dysfunction within teams. OBD has noted an increase in returning visitors – individuals facing ongoing challenges who feel unable to take steps towards resolution because of concerns about the stability of their positions. This sustained insecurity has contributed to reduced resilience and mental well-being, often resulting in a self-reinforcing cycle of stress and inaction.

What WFP can do

31. In the current situation, WFP is forced to implement change at a fast pace. To foster buy-in from employees, WFP's senior leadership must continue to demonstrate the highest levels of empathy and compassion, communicate proactively and lead by example. Even when there is no new information, it is important to communicate transparently, frequently and openly while being honest about the difficult decisions that the organization must make. Although the situation remains highly uncertain, it is essential that WFP employees, particularly those in supervisory roles, receive as much clarity as possible regarding the future.
32. Supervisors at all levels, especially those in mid-level positions, require increased support on how to communicate and explain certain decisions. The establishment of an employee support programme for employees affected by the organizational downsizing in early 2024, and its revitalization at the beginning of 2025, provides a strong example of meaningful support. It also demonstrates the power of collaboration and the value of cutting across functions where possible.

"When others leave, we go in" – WFP employees in emergency settings

33. WFP's senior leadership continues to highlight the increasing number of emergency settings in which the organization operates. In 2024, the world witnessed 120 active armed conflicts – the highest number since the Second World War – and 325 humanitarian workers lost their lives, making it the deadliest year on record. It has become increasingly difficult to conduct humanitarian work safely.
34. Particularly in field duty stations, WFP employees are often required to carry out life-saving work while being directly affected by the conflict themselves, as in the Gaza Strip, Myanmar and the Sudan. In 2024, in several field locations, WFP employees faced the difficult situation of lacking access to the field owing to security concerns and restrictions imposed by armed actors. This, in turn, led to the abolition of their positions and their separation from WFP.
35. While WFP employees are generally aware of the risks and potential mental strain associated with their work, OBD observes that employees have been increasingly affected by the combination of job-related uncertainty and high-risk work environments, which has had a significant impact on their mental health.

Duty of care

36. In November 2024, WFP launched its accountability and governance framework for duty of care, which outlines the organization's commitment to ensuring a healthy, safe, respectful workplace in which all employees can participate freely and safely. This initiative has led to the formation of a duty of care and inclusion committee. WFP employees have expressed their sincere appreciation of these efforts, particularly regarding the emphasis on equitable treatment across different contract types. However, some employees have voiced concern about a perceived gap between the framework's well-intentioned aims and the reality that they experience in their daily work.

"What does duty of care concretely mean for me in the current crisis?"

- Ombuds visitor, country office in the Middle East, Northern Africa and Eastern Europe region

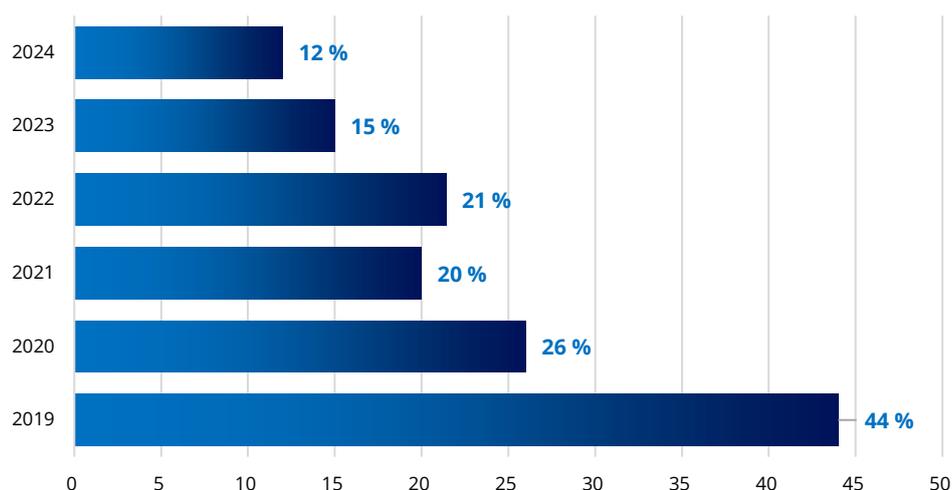
What WFP can do

37. It would be beneficial for WFP to explain and demonstrate to its employees what duty of care means for them, particularly for employees in field duty stations. To manage expectations, this explanation should stress the limits of the approach, as OBD has observed that the term “duty of care” creates expectations among some employees that are not within the scope of the initiative.

Workplace culture

38. The launch of the duty of care framework builds on other efforts by WFP to improve its workplace culture, which have been remarkable. Over the past five years, WFP has introduced a series of new policies and frameworks, including definitions of WFP’s values, the leadership framework and the Respect+ campaign. One indication that these efforts are yielding positive results is the decrease in the number of abusive conduct cases brought to the attention of OBD. As a share of the total caseload, cases involving harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of authority or discrimination continued to decline in 2024. Following the peak of 44 percent in 2019, in 2024 12 percent of all the cases received were related to abusive conduct (figure 6).

Figure 6: Cases related to abusive conduct as a proportion of the total caseload received by the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services



39. OBD observes that at all levels of WFP, the ongoing drive to preserve jobs and reduce costs often takes precedence over the improvement of workplace culture. In this context, the critical question for the organization is: “How can WFP maintain a focus on improving workplace culture while undergoing organizational realignment and responding to the ongoing funding crisis?”

What WFP can do

40. It is crucial for WFP to maintain momentum and uphold its values in continuing to advance efforts towards a more respectful workplace, particularly during this period of transition. WFP’s values, which were developed in a truly participatory manner by its workforce, can serve as a compass and should be actively reaffirmed.
41. OBD has observed that some of the concerns brought by visitors are rooted in the lack of a coherent and consistent induction programme for newly appointed employees throughout WFP. Neglect of onboarding can lead to confusion regarding roles, expectations and the culture of the organization. It decreases morale and productivity, sometimes leading to disappointment on both sides. In addition, inconsistency in the onboarding process, with

different teams and offices implementing different approaches, creates a fragmented and disjointed experience for new employees.

What WFP can do

42. It would be beneficial for WFP to understand how newly appointed employees, at all levels, perceive the onboarding process. The different approaches among offices could be analysed further, with the resulting data forming the basis for more consistent corporate approach to onboarding that gives new employees a better start at WFP.

Leadership, communication and feedback culture

43. Improving the quality of leadership, fostering accountability at all levels, and reinforcing WFP's corporate values have been central to the organization's efforts to enhance workplace culture. In 2024, 60 percent of all cases brought to OBD raised concerns related to the leadership, communication and feedback culture in WFP. In the "supervisory relationship" category of cases, "supervisory effectiveness" was the most frequent concern brought to an ombuds officer. The office also observes a significantly higher proportion of cases related to supervisory relationships being brought by employees at central headquarters, compared with headquarters' share of the global workforce.

44. A common concern among employees is the perception of unfair treatment by supervisors, particularly regarding unexpected final performance ratings when no prior feedback has

"In the current environment where everybody fears for their job, any feedback I give is seen as a threat."

- Ombuds visitor, country office in the Asia and the Pacific region

been given throughout the year. Other employees feel that their evaluations were influenced by biases related to gender, ethnicity or culture. When speaking with supervisors, OBD often hears conflicting stories, with managers believing that they have legitimate reasons for giving specific performance evaluations. The underlying issue is

twofold: supervisors frequently fail to communicate consistently and adequately about employees' performance throughout the year; and some employees struggle to accept constructive feedback. This combination often results in surprise and dissatisfaction with the outcome of the performance evaluation process.

45. Another issue is supervisors' failure to set clear work goals and provide regular feedback meetings and sufficient coaching to improve team performance. This is especially true in cases of underperformance, which can create challenges for supervisors and their teams. Communication on difficult topics is often avoided, unclear or overly direct, and sometimes perceived as "rude". Employees assessed as underperforming often feel unsupported and perceive that their supervisors are setting them up for failure. In addition, second-level supervisors sometimes fail to adequately oversee these situations, leading employees to believe that they will inevitably agree with the direct supervisor. This is particularly concerning as the revised performance and competency enhancement process, effective in 2025, makes the second-level supervisor responsible for the final revision of a performance review prior to a formal appeal.

What WFP can do

46. OBD commends WFP's ongoing training efforts for supervisors. In previous years, the training provided by WFP has been widely acknowledged as having an impact. With the reduction of corporate funding, in particular the end of the related critical corporate initiative, there is a risk that the only supervisors to benefit from training will be those in offices that have the means and willingness to invest in leadership skills. However, there is

a clear need for further improvement in the ability of many supervisors to coach and guide employees consistently throughout the year.

47. Feedback must be delivered through a two-way process, and WFP continues to struggle in this area. Some managers are unwilling to acknowledge their own shortcomings, while supervisees often react poorly to even the slightest criticism. Their fear is often rooted in a perception that critical feedback creates a direct threat to their employment. There is a need to foster a culture where regular conversations about performance improvement and development are the norm. This can be achieved by creating an environment in which employees feel comfortable and encouraged to give and receive feedback – promoting open communication, continuous growth and stronger organizational performance.

Managerial responsibility to address conflict in teams

48. In 2024 OBD heard of a number of cases where managers either ignored or mishandled conflict among their team members, causing emotional distress, frustration and poor team dynamics. In some instances, managers appear to dismiss conflict as “interpersonal” without addressing the underlying issues, while others focus on treating the symptoms instead of the root causes. Conflict often arises when decisions are delayed, roles and responsibilities are unclear, or communication is insufficient and opaque. Allowing these issues to persist makes it difficult for managers to address the real problem, which may be task-related, process-oriented, attitude-based or behavioural, leading to issues being personalized, which complicates resolution when relationships are strained. In addition, middle managers often lack the support they need from senior management to resolve conflicts, exacerbating delays in finding effective solutions. Another challenge to efficient conflict management is the fear of being perceived as, or wrongly accused of, harassing or bullying. This fear is often evident when a recently appointed or reassigned manager is confronted with deep-rooted challenges in the team that they are expected to lead.
49. Given the crucial role that leadership plays in ensuring effective team dynamics and overall organizational success, more emphasis could be placed on leadership training and onboarding programmes. Without dedicated resources and a clear focus on nurturing leadership skills, WFP struggles to equip its leaders with the necessary tools to manage conflict, support teams and drive the organization’s mission forward. Lack of investment in these areas undermines employees’ satisfaction and hampers organizational growth.

What WFP can do

50. To ensure effective leadership at every level, managers need to be held accountable for how they manage their teams. At the same time, people management skills should be given more weight in recruitment, promotion and reassignment processes. Starting at the most senior levels, supervisors need to ensure that the people reporting to them directly lead by example and in accordance with WFP’s leadership framework. Where this is not the case, the supervisor should be offered support that facilitates the monitoring of improvements in their leadership skills. Top management sets the tone for middle-management, so rigorous evaluation of senior-level managers is essential.

Addressing “known secrets”

51. Visitors to OBD also raised situations in which they perceived that WFP was not addressing instances of abusive behaviour, particularly by senior leaders such as heads of field and area offices, and country directors. This reluctance to intervene is concerning, especially given the potential risks posed by the planned increase in responsibilities at the country office level. There is a perception that managers with reputations for inappropriate or even abusive behaviour are often simply reassigned to other offices, perpetuating dissatisfaction and distrust among staff and merely shifting the problem to another part of WFP.

What WFP can do

52. More proactive coaching and the rigorous monitoring of improvements in behaviour are needed. People management and leadership skills should be taken into consideration when hiring or reassigning employees, especially in the case of what are often described as “known secrets” within WFP: supervisors with a reputation for being poor or even abusive managers but who continue to be reassigned from one duty station to another. These instances, widely observed within the organization, undermine employees’ trust in WFP regarding whether it addresses abusive conduct or poor supervisory skills adequately. It is essential to understand the depth of the inappropriate behaviour in each case, to make informed and appropriate reassignment decisions, and to equip the managers concerned with tools that address their behavioural problems. Any reassignment should then be effectively monitored by the managers’ supervisors to make sure that problematic behaviour is being addressed.
53. Despite the challenges, OBD has observed a positive shift, with more of the employees in supervisory roles – especially in middle management – seeking coaching in order to improve their communications, conflict resolution skills and leadership of diverse teams. This signals a positive step in improving the use of support services and reflects a growing recognition of the value of informal conflict resolution.

How the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services works – two case studies

54. The following case studies provide insights into how OBD operates.

Coaching conversations: empowering a national employee

55. This case study highlights how guidance from OBD helped an employee to develop the skills needed to hold a challenging conversation, enabling him to speak up for himself in a constructive and ultimately beneficial way.
56. Syranus, a G-6 employee who has been with WFP for 13 years, was transferred to a new duty station three years ago. In his new role, he found himself leading a sub-unit and supervising one colleague, without any specific terms of reference to guide him. Despite this ambiguity, Syranus drew on his experience and, in collaboration with his supervisee, successfully developed and implemented a workplan.
57. Over the past ten months, however, Syranus began facing challenges with communication and collaboration within the wider team at his office. An international consultant had joined the unit, and Syranus started to receive unclear instructions and contradictory guidance, and to have limited access to timely information. He began to feel unfairly blamed for issues that were beyond his control and, at one point, was told that his contract might not be renewed. According to Syranus, his supervisor took credit for his work without giving him recognition, denied him a long-awaited opportunity for a temporary duty assignment, and excluded him from important meetings with local partners, despite the fact that he was responsible for the planning, contents and execution of activities with those partners. When he saw no action being taken by management, Syranus became increasingly discouraged. Feeling powerless and unheard, he began to draft a letter to report the situation to relevant national authorities, a

“I would never have dared raise these issues with my boss without the help of the ombuds officer. They gave me the tools I needed to express myself well, and it really worked!”

- Syranus

step he considered only as a result of deep frustration and the lack of support. At this point, Syranus contacted OBD.

58. In consultations with the ombuds officer, he was given space to share his experience, reflect on the challenges that he and the team faced, and clarify how he wanted to proceed. A key issue that became clear in his conversations with the ombuds officer was that he had responded to the situation mainly by withdrawing. So far, he had not spoken about the issue with his supervisor. Based on this observation, the ombuds officer supported Syranus through a coaching process that included a role-playing exercise preparing him for a conversation with his supervisor – one that Syranus feared would be difficult. A key focus of the role-play was on defining how Syranus could raise his concerns in a way that would not be perceived as an attack by his supervisor. The ombuds officer and Syranus also explored practical, work-related proposals that he could suggest as ways of helping to move the situation forward.
59. The conversation with his supervisor thus became an opportunity for Syranus to express his concerns and propose practical ways of improving collaboration, such as by holding regular feedback sessions. He also raised the issue of his career development.
60. After the conversation with his supervisor, Syranus felt relieved as they had agreed on more productive ways of working together. At the same time, his supervisor's continued lack of support for possible temporary duty assignments remained a source of frustration for Syranus. In follow-up conversations with the ombuds officer, he explored alternatives to temporary duty assignments as ways of gaining more experience and building international contacts. Through this informal process, OBD empowered Syranus to reclaim ownership of his role and to advocate change in a constructive way. The open dialogue helped to de-escalate a tense situation and gave Syranus tools for approaching future challenges with greater confidence.

Conflicting management styles: the power of mediation

61. This case study demonstrates how mediation can bring even the most sceptical parties to a better understanding and foster more trusting working relationships for the future.
62. Louisa, a Deputy Country Director, and Tan, a Unit Head, were both well respected by their colleagues, but their working relationship had become increasingly strained over the past year. As they were responsible for collaborating on many initiatives, their support for one another, and their need to appear as a united front to their supervisees, were critical. However, their differing communication styles led to constant tension and misunderstandings, and distrust was growing rapidly between them. Louisa was more direct and disorganized, while Tan was indirect but very organized. These differences, although not inherently problematic, became

"I was very nervous going into the mediation. But having the ombuds officer there made it much easier. I was finally able to feel heard."

- Tan

real sources of tension in their working relationship, so much so that Tan was considering leaving WFP.

63. Rather than allowing the conflict to escalate, Tan contacted OBD for help. After listening intently and asking questions, the ombuds officer offered mediation as one of several options for resolving the conflict. Tan, although nervous at the prospect, agreed to try mediation after the ombuds officer explained the process. Once Tan decided that this was the informal path that he would try, Louisa was contacted, and Tan's desire to create a healthier work environment through a mediated conversation was explained to her. She shared many of her own frustrations with Tan and agreed that mediation could be helpful.

64. The ombuds officer had separate meetings with each of the two parties to ensure that they understood the process, and to help them to clarify the issues that they would raise during mediation and how best to communicate without making the other party defensive. Through these meetings, the ombuds officer discovered that both parties were actively avoiding each other, and both described a feeling of dread prior to their weekly meetings. The mediation process focused on open and transparent communication, understanding the other's perspective, and finding mutually acceptable solutions for moving forward. Both Louisa and Tan were encouraged to express their perspectives and listen to one another without judgement.
65. Through the mediation process, both parties were able to recognize and understand their differences and develop a sense of empathy for one another's communication styles. Louisa became mindful of the need for connection and positivity in her interactions, while Tan learned that he needed to provide clearer and more efficient updates to help reduce confusion and frustration.
66. With their communication barriers reduced, both Louisa and Tan were able to focus more on their respective tasks. Tan's clearer updates allowed Louisa to make faster decisions, and part of their mediation agreement was to meet every second week to ensure that they collaborated effectively.
67. When the ombuds officer followed up three months after the mediation, Louisa was very enthusiastic and described how the increased efficiency in their communication had also allowed the country office to meet important project deadlines without unnecessary delays. Tan, on the other hand, still expressed some frustration, as he felt that Louisa's disorganized style continued to create many problems for him. However, he also confirmed that the tension that had once permeated their interactions had dissipated. The team's overall morale also improved, as other colleagues noticed the positive shift in their relationship. What began as a troublesome relationship became an opportunity for personal and professional growth, better understanding and enhanced teamwork.

"I was doubtful the process would work but found it surprisingly helpful to have an open conversation with a neutral third party in the room"

- Louisa

Future direction

68. The year 2025 looks set to be a difficult one for both WFP and its beneficiaries. The impact of funding restrictions on the workforce must not be underestimated in terms of both likely job losses and the increased burden on the employees who remain. In these difficult circumstances, the need for strong informal conflict resolution services is likely to be greater than ever.
69. To help colleagues through these trying and uncertain times, OBD aims to further strengthen its support to the field by providing tailor-made in-person and virtual assistance to all employees globally, in their own time zones and languages. Particular focus will be given to Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia and the Pacific, as OBD currently has no outposted ombuds officers in these regions.
70. OBD also aims to strengthen its mediation services by developing a roster of mediators and enhancing the office's outreach to encourage greater use of this excellent solution to all kinds of dispute in the workplace. The mediation framework is already showing results: in the first quarter of 2025, OBD conducted 11 mediation processes in comparison with only 14 carried out in the whole of 2024.

71. Greater use of mediation within the internal justice system is part of OBD's mission to improve collaboration in this area. In 2025 the office hopes to see an increase in the referrals of cases from the formal to the informal system, in the firm belief that informal solutions can be more efficient and, ultimately, more satisfying for the parties involved than formal ones. OBD will work closely with other parts of WFP's internal justice system to ensure that all employees have access to the right support in the shortest possible time. The office is also in the process of updating its terms of reference to better reflect this aim and align more closely with the United Nations system.
72. OBD will continue to collaborate with ombuds and mediation colleagues across the United Nations system, fostering cohesion, the setting of standards, and knowledge exchange with a view to developing best practices for the very specific conditions of employment within the United Nations. By engaging in inter-organizational working groups on mediation, restorative practices and accountability, OBD will play a leading role in shaping the future of ombuds and mediation practices throughout the United Nations system.

Conclusion

73. Conflict in the workplace affects everyone – as employees, team members, managers and colleagues – and ultimately has an impact on WFP's ability to deliver on its mandate. Resolving conflict quickly and informally allows employees to return their attention to their core functions, and nurtures trust in their employer. Investment in good conflict resolution services is therefore investment in the organization, but in the current challenging times, there are likely to be many competing priorities. However, there is never any excuse for deviating from the fundamental principles of accountability, fairness and integrity in the workplace. By remaining committed to these values, all colleagues in WFP should be able to successfully navigate their ways through uncharted waters and, if they encounter a storm, OBD will remain a safe place to turn to.