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Management note to the annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services for 2024

Draft decision*

The Board takes note of the management note to the annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services for 2024 (WFP/EB.A/2025/7-F/Add.1).

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1. Management welcomes the annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services (OBD), which reflects the uncertainty faced by WFP and the broader humanitarian community during 2024. Management acknowledges that the rapidly evolving global context and internal changes at WFP have shaped both the challenges observed and the insights presented in the report.
2. Management appreciates the support that OBD provided to employees across the organization through confidential consultation, guidance and facilitated conflict resolution. In particular, OBD's sessions on "connecting and moving forward in times of change" offered a valuable opportunity for employees to reflect, connect and build resilience in response to WFP's organizational restructuring and other changes.
3. Management commends the introduction of WFP's new mediation framework, which reinforces informal resolution as the primary approach to addressing workplace conflict. This initiative is a significant step toward strengthening a culture of collaboration, mutual understanding and trust across the organization.
4. Management values OBD's expanded outreach and engagement efforts. In 2024 the office held 81 workshops and webinars attended by more than 3,400 employees across all WFP regions, helping to build essential skills in conflict management, communication and feedback. In addition 653 employees contacted OBD – a level consistent with previous years and a positive sign of employee willingness to seek support and accept informal conflict resolution mechanisms, as well as a reduction in any stigma attached to addressing workplace challenges.
5. Management welcomes the continued decline in cases involving abusive conduct such as harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of authority and discrimination. In 2024 such issues represented an estimated 12 percent of OBD's overall caseload, down from 44 percent in 2019. This trend may be attributable to WFP's efforts to promote a respectful workplace, including through the articulation of organizational values, WFP's leadership framework, the Respect+ campaign and the strengthening of workplace culture mechanisms.
6. Management notes that the prolonged period of uncertainty associated with the organizational realignment may have contributed to a modest increase in issues brought to OBD related to supervisory relationships (37 percent of all issues, up from 34 percent in 2023) and job and career matters (17 percent, up from 15 percent in 2023). These trends underscore the importance of continued investment in leadership development and transparent communication during periods of organizational change.
7. Finally, management appreciates OBD's ongoing efforts to identify systemic issues and the practical recommendations that it offered to address them. Management looks forward to continued close collaboration and open dialogue with OBD throughout 2025 with the aim of maintaining a healthy, respectful and inclusive work environment for all employees.

Prolonged period of uncertainty

8. Since 2024 WFP has navigated a prolonged period of uncertainty marked by organizational realignment, evolving workforce models and projections of reduced funding. Management recognizes the significant impact that these developments have had on employees throughout the organization, including heightened anxiety, diminished resilience and a reduced sense of stability. As noted by OBD these effects have been uneven, with employees in some parts of the organization regaining confidence while others continue to experience heightened concern and ambivalence, particularly in relation to the introduction of the "one global headquarters" model and ongoing funding pressures. In this context management remains committed to transparent communication, empathetic leadership and strengthened support systems to maintain trust, help employees navigate the transition, and foster a respectful workplace culture.

Recommendation of the Ombudsperson	Management response
1. <i>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.</i>	Agreed. WFP acknowledges the importance of empathetic and transparent leadership during times of rapid organizational change. Senior leaders remain committed to proactive, honest communication and visible leadership. In 2024 two all-employee events were held, one of which focused specifically on the changes under way in the organization. To facilitate communication about these changes the Communications and Media Office engaged an external expert in change management, who conducted webinars for directors and provided toolkits and guidance for leaders. Additional employee-wide events are under discussion at the leadership level, and technical leads from the various change workstreams are developing information products for dissemination to all employees. Throughout the change process senior leadership, the Change Management Office and key functional areas have worked together to ensure that employees – including those in supervisory roles – receive timely and clear updates, including with regard to human resources changes, so that they are clear about the future.
2. <i>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.</i>	Agreed. Numerous initiatives have been launched to support employees in navigating the ongoing organizational changes. A cross-functional employee support programme for 2025 includes specific resources for managers and supervisors such as targeted webinars and a pilot initiative focused on supporting mid-level leadership. The Wellness Service, in collaboration with the United Nations Staff Stress Counsellors Group, has developed best-practice guidelines for managers addressing downsizing and other difficult transitions. These guidelines will be delivered through a dedicated webinar in 2025 as part of the employee support programme. To further strengthen individual support the Human Resources Division (HRM) launched an internal coaching initiative in 2024, drawing on a pool of 38 trained internal coaches. While initially aimed at managers, coaching is now being offered to all employees and covers areas such as leadership, change management, career development and workplace relationships. In addition WFP's mentoring programme continues to provide valuable professional development opportunities for employees at all levels. Both mentors and mentees have reported that the programme has been especially beneficial during periods of uncertainty, fostering peer exchange and shared learning.

Duty of care

9. In 2024 WFP personnel faced increasingly dangerous and unpredictable conditions, with many employees working in high-risk duty stations affected by conflict, restrictions on movement stemming from a lack of humanitarian access, and job-related uncertainty. OBD observed that these overlapping pressures had a significant impact on employee well-being and resilience. In this context, the launch of WFP's duty of care accountability and governance framework marked an important milestone in strengthening organizational support systems. Management remains committed to ensuring that duty of care is clearly communicated, consistently applied and responsive to different operational environments.

Recommendation of the Ombudsperson	Management response
3. <i>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.</i>	Agreed. WFP fully acknowledges that duty of care is of heightened importance in the current global and organizational context, particularly for employees serving at high-risk duty stations. The organization is committed to providing a healthy, safe, respectful and inclusive workplace for all employees, recognizing that this commitment is foundational to its ability to execute its mission. In November 2024 WFP launched its first duty of care accountability and governance framework, which articulates the organization's responsibility to anticipate and mitigate foreseeable risks that could affect employees and their eligible family members. The framework sets out guiding principles, clarifies responsibilities and introduces mechanisms for greater accountability across the organization. It is complemented by the establishment of a duty of care and inclusion committee tasked with coordinating cross-functional efforts and promoting consistent standards, including with regard to equitable treatment across contract types. WFP appreciates the positive feedback received from employees regarding these efforts. Management is also aware that concerns have been raised through OBD regarding a perceived gap between the aspirations of the framework and the experiences of employees. To address this WFP is prioritizing clearer communication regarding what duty of care means in practice — including its scope and limitations — particularly in field duty stations where operating conditions may limit the available options. Efforts are under way to define minimum standards and standard operating procedures, refine the risk management model and distinguish between provisions supported by WFP headquarters and those that are context specific. These steps aim to ensure a realistic, transparent and actionable approach to duty of care across all duty stations and employee categories.

Maintaining the relevance of workplace culture

10. Management recognizes the importance – and the challenge – of upholding WFP's values during a period of significant organizational transition. As noted by OBD, uncertainty, job insecurity and increased pressure on teams have affected workplace dynamics and supervisory relationships. Management also acknowledges that strong and consistent onboarding is essential to reinforcing organizational culture, aligning expectations and supporting a positive start for all new employees.

Recommendation of the Ombudsperson	Management response
4. <i>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.</i>	Agreed. Management strongly emphasizes WFP's shared values, particularly during times of organizational transition. HRM has worked to raise awareness of respectful workplace principles and mechanisms for speaking up about inappropriate or abusive conduct. Psychological safety and accountability have also been emphasized, with managers playing a central role in sustaining a respectful environment. By the end of 2024, 1,184 managers across 15 offices had participated in the "Leading with Safety and Accountability" initiative, which provides practical guidance on preventing and addressing workplace behavioural issues. This initiative will continue in 2025. In parallel, WFP's leadership programmes – grounded in its leadership framework and aligned with its values – continue to promote ethical and inclusive leadership behaviours at all levels. The Respect+ campaign remains an important tool for facilitating team conversations and actions that foster a respectful workplace. A revised WFP values toolkit that teams can use to reaffirm and integrate core values into their daily work through adaptable, context-specific activities is currently being developed. In addition an ethics session has been incorporated into the induction programme for country directors and deputy country directors, underscoring management's commitment to fostering a respectful and values-based leadership culture. The Wellness Service and other units continue to provide technical guidance, tools and best practices on respectful workplace practices during this period of change. The Ethics Office continues its outreach on WFP's code of conduct, conflicts of interest and whistleblower protection to strengthen ethical awareness and behaviour throughout the organization.

Recommendation of the Ombudsperson	Management response
5. <i>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.</i>	Agreed. In early 2024 WFP launched a revamped global onboarding package, replacing the package adopted in 2018. Developed through collaboration between HRM and other offices, the new package begins onboarding at the offer acceptance stage, ensuring that new employees have timely access to essential tools and information. The global onboarding process was further strengthened with the roll-out of the Workday platform on 1 July 2024. Workday provides a structured automated onboarding journey that spans the pre-hire phase, the first day of employment and beyond. It is complemented by functional and local onboarding managed by individual units, with managers playing a key role in welcoming and integrating new team members. Management acknowledges OBD's recommendation and agrees that it needs to better understand onboarding experiences across duty stations. Insights from new hires will help inform future improvements and contribute to a more consistent and effective corporate onboarding approach.

Leadership, communication and feedback culture

11. Management recognizes that strong leadership, accountability and a culture of open and constructive communication are essential to building a respectful and inclusive workplace. In a time of transition it is particularly important that employees feel heard, supported and empowered to make meaningful contributions. Management acknowledges OBD's observations regarding challenges in supervisory communication, performance feedback and trust in performance management processes, and it is committed to strengthening leadership skills and promoting consistent two-way dialogue at all levels of the organization.

Recommendations of the Ombudsperson	Management response
6. <i>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.</i>	Agreed. HRM offers leadership development programmes on learning to lead, supervisory skills, leading people and leading teams, as well as the Senior Leadership Programme – all grounded in WFP's leadership framework. These programmes focus on equipping supervisors with the practical skills needed to coach, guide and support their teams effectively.

Recommendations of the Ombudsperson	Management response
	In recent years HRM introduced a “manager as coach” programme to reinforce coaching skills as a core aspect of leadership. Central funding for this programme has been limited, however, and some country offices and functional areas have independently financed additional rounds of the training. This uneven access highlights the need for sustained centralized investment to ensure that all supervisors across WFP benefit from leadership development opportunities, regardless of their location or office resources. HRM continues to redirect any available internal funding to support the delivery of centrally funded leadership development programmes each year and remains committed to expanding access to these critical learning opportunities.
7. <i>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.</i>	Agreed. Fostering a culture of open two-way feedback is essential to building trust and driving continuous improvement across WFP. HRM has long supported this objective through webinars and guidance materials on giving and receiving feedback as part of both performance management and leadership development. In 2025 the cross-functional employee support programme will include a series of webinars specifically focused on feedback skills for supervisors and supervisees. These sessions are intended to strengthen individual confidence in giving and receiving feedback constructively, outside the context of formal performance evaluations. Recognizing that managers set the tone for communication in teams, WFP is committed to identifying and strengthening people management competencies. A more systemic approach is being explored to ensure that managers are supported in having clear, respectful and well-intentioned conversations. In addition the Communications and Media Office, with support from HRM, conducts monthly global focus groups with employees to better understand how organizational changes are being perceived and internalized. These conversations serve as an important feedback channel for senior leadership and contribute to shaping communication strategies that are more responsive to employee needs.

Managerial responsibility to address conflicts in teams

12. Management recognizes the critical role of managers in creating respectful, collaborative and high-performing teams. Leading with empathy, addressing conflict proactively and upholding WFP's leadership framework are essential to fostering trust and psychological safety. Management is also committed to ensuring accountability at all levels of the organization so that employees feel safe, valued and empowered to raise concerns and contribute fully.

Recommendations of the Ombudsperson	Management response
8. <i>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.</i>	Agreed. WFP recognizes that effective leadership at all levels is central to strong team dynamics, employee well-being and the achievement of organizational goals. People management skills are integrated into all WFP job profiles and are a focus area in recruitment, promotion and reassignment processes. Vacancy announcements include clear expectations for leadership competencies, and interview panels assess candidates on their ability to lead teams, foster collaboration and manage conflict. WFP's staffing committee considers demonstrated people management capabilities and past performance when recommending candidates for managerial roles. In line with WFP's leadership framework supervisors are also assessed through a mandatory goal on team management in their annual performance evaluations. WFP acknowledges the importance of strengthening accountability and ensuring that leadership behaviours align with expected standards. Accurate and constructive performance assessments are key to identifying both strengths and areas for improvement. This supports a shift towards a culture of transparency, open feedback and accountability – including efforts to address long-standing concerns that may be widely known but little discussed within teams. Even in times of budget constraints it is essential to invest in leadership development. Colleagues identified for potential promotion or reassignment to managerial roles should have the opportunity to acquire skills that enhance their ability to manage teams effectively and support a respectful and inclusive workplace.

Addressing "open secrets"

13. Management reaffirms its zero tolerance of abusive behaviour at all levels, including among senior leadership. Inappropriate behaviour – particularly by those in positions of authority – can erode trust, damage team morale and pose reputational risks. It is therefore critical that inappropriate behaviour be addressed decisively, that managerial transitions be monitored and that accountability mechanisms be strengthened to maintain employee trust and uphold WFP's values.

Recommendations of the Ombudsperson	Management response
9. <i>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.</i>	Agreed. WFP is committed to ensuring that managers are held accountable for their behaviour and that any concerns about inappropriate or abusive conduct are addressed through appropriate action and ongoing monitoring. The organization recognizes that reassigning individuals with known behavioural concerns, without addressing the underlying issues, undermines trust and the integrity of leadership standards. To strengthen leadership behaviour WFP has invested in several initiatives. The Global Executive Inclusive Leadership Programme has reached close to 300 senior leaders – D-2 and above, country directors (D-1s) and deputy country directors – equipping them with the skills needed to lead diverse teams and to set an example of inclusive behaviour. This is complemented by mandatory six-month “nudge coaching” as well as catalytic conversations between leaders and employees aimed at enabling participants to understand different perspectives. Leadership accountability is further reinforced through initiatives on topics such as leading with safety and accountability, induction sessions for new country directors and deputy country directors and a programme for heads of field offices. These initiatives focus on the role of managers in creating psychologically safe work environments and addressing misconduct within their teams. The Ethics Office continues to play a key role in promoting a speak-up culture, providing training for managers and employees on WFP’s whistleblower protection policy and encouraging ethical behaviour across the organization. WFP also provides targeted support to managers through coaching, team effectiveness tools and behavioural improvement modules. HRM offers direct guidance to help managers document, address and correct inappropriate behaviour. A dedicated case management helpdesk, launched in 2023, supports both managers and employees in navigating issues of underperformance and behavioural concerns. Where reassignment of a manager is considered, WFP is committed to carefully examining all relevant circumstances and ensuring that any reassignment is accompanied by performance monitoring, development support and clear behavioural expectations. This approach seeks to break the cycle of unresolved behavioural problems and promote a workplace culture of respect and accountability.

Conclusion

14. WFP remains committed to fostering a respectful, inclusive and values-based workplace culture in which all employees feel safe, supported and empowered to contribute. The organization recognizes that effective communication, timely conflict resolution and strong leadership are essential to delivering on its mandate – particularly during times of organizational change and uncertainty. Management will continue to update employees on the progress of WFP's ongoing reorganization, the evolving funding environment and other operational developments, ensuring transparency and engagement throughout the process.
15. The annual report of OBD provides valuable insight and guidance as WFP continues to strengthen its internal culture. Management appreciates OBD's role in promoting accountability, fairness and integrity and reaffirms its commitment to these principles as the foundation of a healthy and high-performing organization.