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Management note to the annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services for 2025

Draft decision*

The Board takes note of the management note to the annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services for 2025 (WFP/EB.A/2026/7-F/Add.1).

* 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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1. Management welcomes the annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services (OBD) for 2025. The report provides a clear account of the experiences of employees across WFP during a year of significant organizational change, and management appreciates the rigour and honesty with which OBD has captured and reported on its findings.
2. In 2025 WFP experienced significant organizational change alongside severe funding constraints. OBD handled 762 cases drawn from a workforce of approximately 22,000 employees, a 14 percent increase in cases compared with 2024 in absolute terms, despite the reduction in the size of the workforce and in the number of field missions conducted. That increase reflects both the impact of the year's changes on employees and continued employee confidence in OBD as a trusted source of confidential support.
3. WFP managed a period of significant organizational transition in a responsible manner. The move to a two-layered structure was not simply a response to the funding crisis. It was a deliberate redesign intended to strengthen accountability, place authority closer to operations and create a leaner global headquarters focused on supporting country offices. WFP introduced these changes earlier and more deliberately than other entities in the United Nations system, managing workforce measures in a way that avoided the sudden reductions that affected many peer organizations. Resources continued to be directed to where they were most needed – human resources support, the informal justice network and WFP's duty of care commitment – in a manner consistent with the organization's obligations to its people and accountability to donors.
4. Sustained investment in values and workplace culture has contributed to measurable progress. The continued decline in cases of abusive conduct, from 44 percent of OBD's caseload in 2019 to 12 percent in 2024, reflects sustained institutional improvement. OBD's visitor data further supports that trend: 86 percent of respondents in 2025 reported feeling more comfortable addressing workplace issues following their interaction with OBD. The Mediation Framework, launched in late 2024, saw a significant increase in uptake within its first year. In addition, OBD's introduction of organizational risk ratings in 2025 has helped to strengthen the contribution of the office to institutional governance.
5. The annual report also identifies areas in which implementation and communication processes did not consistently meet expectations, including communication that was not always sufficiently timely or consistent, workloads that were not always reprioritized, and situations in which employees did not always feel fully able to raise concerns. WFP takes these observations seriously. At the same time, it is important to consider the nature of OBD's evidence base: the 762 cases involve approximately 3 percent of WFP's workforce and reflect the experiences of employees who chose to seek support through OBD. The findings should therefore be considered alongside broader organizational data. For example, the 2025 Executive Director's assurance exercise indicated that 93 percent of country offices reported positive or neutral perceptions of the global headquarters model. Where challenges with the new structure were reported, they were linked in significant part to the reduction in global headquarters capacity resulting from the funding crisis, rather than structural design alone.

Management observations on the 2025 report

6. Three observations in the annual report of OBD are particularly relevant to management's response. The first concerns the transition to the global headquarters model. The organizational alignment brought together headquarters and regional bureau teams within an integrated global headquarters structure designed to provide country offices with direct support. In its report, OBD highlights employee concerns regarding accountability and policy-related consistency during the transition. Those concerns arise in the context of a

model whose implementation will continue through 2026, with further adjustments planned throughout the year. In addition, the reduction in global headquarters capacity resulting from the funding crisis has affected the level of support available to country offices, independently of the structural design itself. Management remains committed to completing implementation of the model, maintaining appropriate governance arrangements and ensuring that support to country offices remains clear, consistent and responsive to operational needs.

7. The second observation concerns deep field operations. The shift towards more strategic roles focused on national systems and policy engagement is both necessary and aligned with WFP's long-term objectives, but the pace of change has outstripped the provision of the support needed by employees to navigate it. Supporting employees through this transition remains a management priority. Challenges are further compounded where language creates structural barriers: although WFP has multiple working languages and continues to expand multilingual access to guidance, communications and learning materials, English remains the predominant working language across much of the organization. Employees working primarily in non-English-speaking environments may therefore experience a degree of disconnect in accessing information, engaging in organizational dialogue and navigating evolving organizational expectations. WFP is among the few United Nations entities offering multilingual learning tools to all employees, with more than 30 percent of its core learning catalogue now available in multiple languages. Management recognizes the importance of continuing to strengthen multilingual access to information across the workforce.
8. The third – and most significant – observation concerns what OBD describes as a “muted workforce”: employees who have concluded that silence is safer than speaking up. This issue underpins the commitments and actions outlined below.
9. The concerns identified by OBD regarding employee confidence, workplace culture and willingness to speak up arise from three interconnected pressures. First, teams are operating within multiple and overlapping oversight and compliance mechanisms, and there is a need to ensure that oversight arrangements are proportionate to risk and adapted to the two-layered structure. In this context, governance committees are being reviewed to improve efficiency and alignment with the new organizational arrangements. Second, the departure of colleagues and the ongoing process of workforce stabilization have affected team continuity, and rebuilding stable and effective teams will take time as new ways of working are consolidated. Third, the transition is unfolding in a context of diminishing resources and a volatile operating environment in which many employees face uncertainty regarding the future of WFP, the broader United Nations system and the communities WFP serves. Management recognizes that maintaining operational continuity under these conditions has required considerable resilience across the organization.
10. Management remains focused on maintaining operational effectiveness while continuing implementation of the two-layered model through 2026. The model was designed to strengthen effectiveness, agility and accountability, and those objectives remain central to its implementation. Management is fully aware of the impact that the past year has had on staff morale and will continue to take staff concerns seriously.

Management's response to OBD's observations and recommendations

Rebuilding teams and strengthening WFP's leadership culture

11. WFP has made sustained investments in leadership culture over recent years, including by embedding leadership behaviours in the Performance and Competency Enhancement (PACE) system, rolling out the "Leading with Safety and Accountability" initiative to more than 1,000 managers, building an internal coaching pool and launching the Team Effectiveness Journey. These investments have produced concrete results, including the long-term decline in the number of abusive conduct cases. OBD's observations in this area also highlight the need to ensure that the leadership behaviour promoted through training is consistently put into practice and reinforced at senior levels, and that access to development opportunities does not depend on location or office resources.

Observations of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services	Management response
1.1 Building leadership capacity <i>Increase access to practical leadership training through a structured approach covering conflict competence, active listening, feedback skills and inclusive facilitation. Without sustained corporate investment, access to such training risks becoming concentrated in better-resourced offices.</i>	Agreed. Leadership development is one of WFP's four human resources priorities for 2026. Current initiatives relating to talent development and leading with safety and accountability, together with induction sessions for country directors and deputy country directors, provide a strong foundation for current and future leaders. WFP is committed to further strengthening its leadership development initiatives. A broad range of learning opportunities is available to employees across grades, regions and contract types. WFP is also strengthening peer learning and field-based support mechanisms to complement these programmes and help ensure that access does not depend on local office resources.
1.2 Supporting team-level "resets" <i>Strengthen workload planning, collectively revisit roles and expectations, and provide supervisors with practical guidance for managing change. Well-planned handovers can safeguard institutional knowledge.</i>	Agreed. When teams shrink and responsibilities shift, structured support and clear management expectations are essential. OBD's report highlights the risks of excessive workloads and role ambiguity during periods of transition. WFP is committed to establishing minimum backstopping expectations for critical functions during transition periods and to ensuring that workload reprioritization is treated as an explicit leadership responsibility. Two practical toolkits are available, one for all staff on navigating change and one for managers on leading teams through transition. Management is committed to promoting the use of those toolkits, which are available in English, French and Spanish.

Observations of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services	Management response
1.3 Visible sponsorship of leadership skills <i>WFP does not lack good policies, but rather the visible modelling of the desired leadership skills. Persistent management challenges may be better addressed as issues of performance and organizational risk rather than matters of personal leadership style.</i>	Agreed. WFP is committed to holding managers at all levels accountable for demonstrating and promoting people-centred leadership behaviour. Managers are expected to provide timely, constructive and documented feedback and to address performance concerns proactively. The Human Resources Division provides guidance and support to managers where needed. The revised country director performance cycle strengthens accountability among senior managers. Where concerns relating to managerial conduct are identified, any reassignment is accompanied by continued oversight, leadership coaching and clear behavioural expectations.
1.4 Transparent and proactive communication <i>Regular updates on the rationale for downsizing decisions, anticipated timelines and areas of uncertainty can reduce speculation, anxiety and the spread of rumours. Senior leadership visibility when major decisions are announced is particularly important. Middle managers need timely and consistent information to communicate credibly and manage expectations.</i>	Agreed. WFP invested significantly in change communication during 2025, including through leadership team and director-level briefing sessions, "open hours" meetings, all-employee emails and meetings, the development of toolkits and briefing materials for managers, and the provision of guidance on communicating workforce-related changes. The Communications and Media Office also published articles, guidance materials and frequently asked questions on the WFPgo intranet portal, conducted surveys following all-employee meetings and held focus group discussions to support direct, two-way engagement. The organizational culture team in the Workplace and Management Department also held "Together through Change: Manager Peer Learning" sessions, with OBD serving as a key facilitating partner, to support managers in leading teams through periods of uncertainty. OBD's observation is not that communication was absent, but that it was not always sufficiently consistent or timely to reach the employees who needed it most. WFP is committed to strengthening communication standards for major change processes by ensuring greater clarity regarding what managers need to know and when information should be communicated and prioritizing the visibility of senior leadership during challenging periods.

Living the new organizational structure

12. The global headquarters model places authority and accountability closer to operations. Its implementation will continue through 2026. The 2025 Executive Director's assurance exercise indicates that most country offices have a neutral or positive view of the direction of organizational change. The commitments outlined below are intended to support more consistent implementation of the model in operational settings.

Observations of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services	Management response
2.1 Reinforcing understanding of the new structure <i>Reiterate new roles, reporting lines and support structures. Greater clarity on where technical guidance sits and how country offices should access it could ease uncertainty.</i>	Agreed. As implementation of the global headquarters model continues through 2026, ensuring that managers and employees fully understand the new structure remains a priority. Engagement and communication activities have been a major focus during the first half of 2026, including orientation sessions designed to support understanding of the new model. Articles and guidance materials have been published on WFPgo, together with frequently asked questions and video explainers addressing areas of confusion. Regular “open hours” meetings with country directors, deputy country directors and global headquarters directors are also being held to identify recurring areas of misunderstanding and support timely corrective action. More than 30 such meetings have taken place to date. Regular updates have also been provided to the staff representative bodies. Management is committed to ensuring that WFP’s management accountability framework and the global headquarters service catalogue are reflected in practical guidance for country teams that outlines clear pathways for accessing technical support, effective escalation mechanisms and, where appropriate, designated focal points, thereby helping to ensure that country offices receive consistent, timely and context-sensitive support.
2.2 Strengthening accountability at the country office level <i>Maintain consistent oversight mechanisms alongside the empowerment of country directors. Clearer communication channels, periodic dialogue on policy interpretation, and safe channels for staff to raise concerns are all needed. Accountability and empowerment must reinforce each other.</i>	Agreed. Management recognizes that greater authority without corresponding accountability is a governance risk. At the same time, it acknowledges concerns regarding the cumulative burden of oversight and compliance processes at all levels of the organization and is therefore focused on ensuring that oversight arrangements are proportionate to risk and aligned with the new global headquarters structure, without adding to the compliance burden. All governance committees are currently under review with a view to streamlining their activities and strengthening their alignment with the recently approved WFP accountability and oversight framework. WFP is committed to ensuring that the accountability arrangements associated with the global headquarters model are clear and effective. This includes establishing clear expectations for employees, promoting regular dialogue between leadership levels and maintaining safe channels through which employees can raise concerns without fear of negative repercussions. The revised country director performance cycle, together with regular strategic alignment meetings involving the Deputy Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer, regional directors, country directors and functional directors, provides a structured mechanism for accountability.

Observations of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services	Management response
	Management oversight arrangements are also being strengthened through updated oversight procedures, the management oversight framework and targeted engagement with country and global headquarters directors. The WFP accountability and oversight framework further clarifies roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability, while the ongoing consolidation and review of delegations of authority will help ensure that accountability arrangements remain clear, up to date and accessible. In addition, the change management process was referenced in the 2025 Executive Director's assurance exercise and reported on through the management review of significant risk and control issues, with the detailed feedback provided by country offices shared with the relevant global headquarters functions and entities for follow-up.
2.3 Rebuilding a strong sense of belonging and pride <i>Promote targeted employee engagement initiatives, direct engagement by senior managers with employees across offices and duty stations, and address concerns relating to the return to full office-based working arrangements through enhanced flexible working options where operationally feasible.</i>	Agreed. Fostering a sense of belonging and engagement requires employees to feel heard, supported and treated fairly, particularly during challenging periods. Efforts to strengthen employee engagement and maintain a sense of belonging have involved all levels of management. Heads of department continued to hold regular town hall meetings throughout 2025, helping to maintain the visible engagement of senior leadership across the organization. The employee support programme, led by the Workplace and Management Department with OBD as a key delivery partner, is evolving into a longer-term initiative grounded in WFP's values and designed to support employees throughout their time with the organization, rather than as a temporary response to organizational change. WFP acknowledges that the announcement of the termination of hybrid working arrangements was difficult for many employees to hear at the close of a particularly demanding year, and the organization remains committed to engaging constructively on flexible working arrangements.

Duty of care: a commitment to every employee

13. WFP's duty of care commitments reflect its responsibilities as an organization operating in some of the world's most demanding environments. In 2025, even under severe budgetary constraints, WFP upheld its core duty of care commitments.
14. The annual report of OBD identifies areas in which employees' experiences do not yet fully reflect WFP's duty of care commitments, particularly in conflict-affected duty stations where physical risk and job insecurity compound one another. Addressing those gaps remains a priority for WFP management.

15. To achieve that objective, management will seek to provide clear guidance adapted to different operational environments, including transparent communication regarding the support that WFP can provide and the limitations that may apply in specific situations. Management will also strive to uphold minimum duty of care standards across the organization in a consistent manner. Management will, moreover, endeavour to make and communicate organizational decisions affecting employees' daily working lives in a manner consistent with WFP's duty of care commitments.
16. The 2025 Joint Inspection Unit review of the ombuds and mediation function across the United Nations system confirmed that informal conflict resolution is both highly effective and cost-efficient, and that the independence of ombuds functions is essential for maintaining employee trust. In that regard, management welcomes the steps taken by OBD to strengthen the role of the respectful workplace allies network as an early-warning mechanism, recognizing that the network's 168 trained volunteers, particularly those serving in deep field locations, are an important component of WFP's informal conflict resolution architecture. WFP remains committed to ensuring adequate resources for the network. Management also supports OBD's priority of further integrating mediation within WFP's formal internal justice system. The significant increase in mediations in 2025 reflects growing confidence in informal resolution mechanisms, and WFP remains committed to further strengthening those mechanisms.

Looking ahead

17. The 762 colleagues who approached OBD in 2025 did so in the belief that it would lead to meaningful support and engagement. Maintaining that trust, which has been sustained through an exceptionally demanding year, remains central to the commitments outlined in this response.
18. Over the period ahead, management's objective is to ensure that transitions are managed in a structured and disciplined manner, that middle managers are equipped to lead in times of uncertainty and that communication remains transparent and timely. This also requires that employees whose roles continue to evolve receive appropriate development support, and that leadership accountability is reflected not only in training but also in recruitment, selection and reassignment processes. WFP will continue to strengthen its duty of care commitments so that all employees, regardless of contract type or operational environment, can rely on clear and consistent minimum standards. Management also remains committed to maintaining strong informal conflict resolution mechanisms, including OBD, the respectful workplace allies network and other mediation services, as an important component of organizational well-being and accountability.
19. Management looks forward to continued close collaboration with OBD. The commitments outlined in this management note will continue to be translated into practical action aimed at enhancing the day-to-day experience of employees throughout the organization.