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Annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services for 2025

Draft decision*

The Board takes note of the annual report of the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services for 2025 (WFP/EB.A/2026/7-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. For WFP, 2025 was undeniably a hard year. Severe funding cuts collided with a major restructuring effort, and the workforce shrank dramatically in a short period of time. At the same time, global narratives questioning the value of humanitarian work added to a sense of discouragement. Many employees were also coping with the shock and grief of seeing colleagues kidnapped or losing their lives while carrying out WFP's mission. In a year marked by loss, uncertainty and pressure, it was hard to find many bright spots.

2. Yet even in this most difficult period, there were moments of constructive change. Offices and colleagues across WFP stepped up to support affected employees, breaking down silos and offering all possible assistance. One of the quiet strengths of informal conflict resolution is that, because people are able to raise concerns early and safely, even tense situations can lead to healthier outcomes for everyone involved. As WFP went through profound change, the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services (OBD) saw a significant increase in colleagues reaching out – especially on issues related to jobs and careers. While OBD could not prevent the reduction of WFP's workforce, the office was able to provide support in multiple ways, providing a confidential space where employees could speak honestly about what they were experiencing. Their willingness to do so enabled the office to offer meaningful upward feedback at a time when it was most needed. Some of that feedback is provided in the present report, along with case studies that illustrate how OBD can facilitate greater dialogue and encourage collaboration.

3. While looking back on a challenging year, this report also looks ahead. The experiences that employees shared with OBD point to clear lessons and areas where WFP can strengthen how it supports its people during periods of strain and uncertainty. By reflecting openly on the difficulties of 2025 – and on what employees shared– the office hopes to help shape more supportive, transparent and resilient ways of working in the years to come.

Learning from 2025: reflections and observations

Weathering the storm: the impact of downsizing and restructuring

4. While the structural and workforce changes at WFP in 2025 increased stress, employees understood WFP's need to adjust its size and set-up in response to a shifting funding and political landscape. Many employees told OBD that they recognized that these were pressures beyond WFP's control. What was hardest for them, however, was *how* the change process was managed at various levels. Employees spoke about feeling confused or left in the dark at key moments, pointing to unclear, inconsistent or poorly timed communication. Others raised concerns about how decisions were made – whether they were fair, transparent and applied in a consistent way across the organization.

Structural overload and unclarity

5. In offices heavily affected by staffing reductions, where teams transitioned to significantly fewer personnel, employees felt that the overall workload remained largely unchanged. Responsibilities previously shared across larger teams were often simply redistributed among fewer colleagues, resulting in overload and concerns about the sustainability of working conditions. Employees described feeling exhausted and uncertain about how long such pressure could be maintained. While many acknowledged that WFP usually succeeded in setting priorities, they felt that deprioritizing tasks remained challenging in practice.

6. In the context of downsizing, concerns were raised that the order of retention described in the related framework was not uniformly observed and that decision-making regarding post abolition could be at best, arbitrary, and at worst, inappropriately personalized to target individual employees rather than posts. In some cases raised with OBD, final decisions on the abolition of posts or the separation of employees were not properly or fully articulated

until very late in the process, leaving employees unduly stressed for long periods and then with very limited time to make arrangements for their departure.

7. In some offices, posts were abolished and employees had to reapply for a reduced number of posts, placing colleagues in direct competition for continued employment. At the same time, human resources staff and hiring managers were necessarily placed under considerable strain in managing these processes while also coping with structural changes and staffing reductions in their own areas of work. Concerns were also raised that recruitment for newly created posts was at times overly hasty, with limited communication or transparency. Combined with the high personal stakes involved, these conditions led to increased interpersonal tensions, reduced trust and rumours of possible irregularities, such as favouritism in hiring decisions.

8. OBD also received reports of uneven task distribution within teams. Some employees sought help due to excessive workloads, while others expressed uncertainty regarding their roles, responsibilities or expected contributions. Visitors to OBD also described increasing difficulty in taking leave due to insufficient backstopping arrangements. For employees on short-term contracts, workload concerns were often left unvoiced for fear of negative repercussions.

Greater authority, less accountability?

9. Following the organizational realignment and the introduction of the "global headquarters" model, concerns were raised to OBD that country directors gained too much unchecked authority over matters within their country offices. While the organizational alignment was intended to enhance responsiveness and accelerate decision-making, it has also raised notable governance risks. WFP did develop a management accountability framework to address these risks, but employees reaching out to OBD expressed concern that in practice, this has had limited impact on the ground. They described how in some locations, country office leadership had adopted a "my office, my kingdom" approach, resulting in inconsistent policy application, reduced accountability and environments in which employees felt unable to question decisions. Over time, such dynamics risk eroding trust in leadership and fragmenting organizational culture across locations.

10. At the same time, the transition to the global headquarters concept introduced some ambiguity regarding roles, reporting lines and the scope of support expected for country offices. Many teams were still defining their functions, and employees told OBD that the restructuring had not meaningfully streamlined operations. They felt that this, combined with the organizational downsizing process, left gaps in local capacity and contributed to perceptions of slower decision-making, inconsistent guidance, and increased frustration among country offices seeking timely support.

11. Though well-intentioned, the empowerment of country offices has led to perceptions of an accountability gap and risks creating excessive autonomy in the field, while at the same time leading to uncertainty within supporting structures, slowing processes and straining relationships across the organization.

Evolving roles – challenges in the deep field

12. While the functional consolidation of WFP into a two-tier structure had a significant impact on global headquarters employees and many functions in country offices, colleagues in deep field locations approached OBD with concerns regarding a different change: the shift from direct "last-mile" delivery towards more strategic roles focused on strengthening national systems and policy engagement. This evolution has also affected the competencies required of employees, who raised related fears about not receiving sufficient support to adapt. In this context of evolving roles and expectations, language practices also emerged as a relevant factor. While WFP has adopted four official languages, English functions as the

predominant working language in practice, except in Western and Central Africa, parts of Southern Africa and Latin America. Employees in these regions note that the strong emphasis on English creates a sense of disconnect from headquarters in Rome and, at times, from other regions.

Pressures on middle management

13. The restructuring and the workforce reduction processes placed considerable strain on mid-level managers, many of whom were tasked with implementing staffing cuts despite limited involvement in the underlying decision-making. At the same time, they faced uncertainty about their own futures, leading to higher stress and feelings of lack of control.

14. Downsizing and restructuring also resulted in a number of supervisory roles being filled on an interim basis, often with unclear or evolving reporting lines. Employees reported that interim managers, lacking clarity regarding their scope of authority, were at times perceived as operating outside established reporting structures and assuming decision-making authority not formally assigned to them. Employees also described interim heads as being under significant strain, with some reporting tense interactions.

15. Performance management emerged as an increasingly sensitive issue. Against a backdrop of recent and prospective job losses, critical feedback was often perceived as a direct threat to employment security. Some employees also raised concerns about the ease with which WFP's PACE performance evaluation system could be weaponized, as well as the absence of consistent, documented feedback to support constructive performance discussions.

A muted workforce

16. Taken together, the move to the global headquarters model and drastic budget cuts contributed to widespread frustration, diminished trust and emotional detachment among employees. Many shared that in the prevailing environment it felt safest to "keep one's head down" to avoid drawing attention to oneself, even when faced with decisions that were apparently unjust. Employees also said that they would rather endure difficult relationships or issues within teams than try to address them for fear of being seen as a troublemaker and being pushed out at the next opportunity. Regrettably, in this kind of climate there is greater scope for abuse, and thus greater need than ever to ensure that accountability measures are in place and fit for purpose.

17. Feelings of anxiety and lack of trust were, regrettably, compounded by the announcement, towards the end of 2025, that in mid-2026 the hybrid working modality would come to an end. While employees acknowledged the importance of showing solidarity with colleagues in field situations or whose work could never permit telecommuting, the timing of the announcement, at the end of a very tough year, was seen by many as an unwarranted additional blow when it was least needed.

Pulling together for the future

Rebuilding teams

18. WFP has a significant opportunity to address the sentiments described above – to build and rebuild psychologically safe teams in which employees are willing to speak up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes and are open to taking interpersonal risks. Psychologically safe teams are known to adapt faster to change, as people raise issues early, take responsibility for outcomes and adjust without fear of blame – because sharing thoughts and speaking up are rewarded rather than penalized. In this respect, OBD has identified the following areas for possible further action.

19. **Building leadership capacity.** A key step towards building leadership capacity is to increase access to practical leadership training for new and existing supervisors and to increase leadership skills for all supervisors in a structured manner. Such skills include conflict resolution, active listening, feedback provision and inclusive meeting facilitation.

20. When leaders model openness and vulnerability, teams follow and collective commitment deepens. Linked to this is the ability to give and receive constructive feedback. Reinforcing the developmental purpose of WFP's performance management systems – and further supporting managers in delivering critical feedback constructively – could help to address persistent people management challenges.

21. **Supporting team-level "resets" after turnover or transition.** Constructive "resets" after significant change help teams adapt to and even embrace change. Such resets can include strengthening structured workload planning, collectively revisiting roles and expectations and providing supervisors with practical guidance for managing change. Clear communication regarding task prioritization and de-prioritization further reduce uncertainty and ensure that work is appropriately distributed.

22. Well-planned handovers can safeguard institutional knowledge by helping to retain critical expertise. The creation of rosters for employees affected by the downsizing process was a positive step that many appreciated.

23. **Visible sponsorship of leadership skills.** In recent years, WFP has invested significantly in creating the instruments needed to advance people-centred leadership, including its leadership framework and the integration of related leadership behaviours into the performance management and evaluation of all supervisors. Good policies are therefore in place, but what is lacking is visible sponsorship of the desired leadership skills. Leaders at all levels need to model a respectful leadership style and create accountability by actively encouraging, and where necessary, enforcing, the same standards among the supervisors they oversee. More realistic performance reviews, particularly in relation to the PACE system's "people" goal, alongside a stronger emphasis on management competencies in the reassignment process, would help to move this work forwards. Persistent management challenges may be better addressed as performance and organizational risk issues rather than matters of personal style.

24. **Transparent and proactive communication remains essential.** 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, as such decisions require personal accountability and empathetic engagement. For middle managers, the provision of timely and consistent information strengthens their ability to communicate credibly with teams and manage expectations, even when decisions are difficult. Overall, transparent and proactive communication at all levels helps to rebuild trust and creates shared understanding, especially in the context of ongoing resource pressure.

From design to delivery: Living the new organizational structure

25. **Reinforcing understanding of the new structure.** As WFP continues to adjust to the global headquarters model, it will be helpful to restate the new roles, reporting lines and support structures with greater emphasis. Many teams are still navigating this transition, and greater shared understanding – particularly regarding where technical guidance sits and how country offices should access it – could help ease some of the uncertainty that employees have expressed. Strengthening the links between global headquarters and country offices need not mean redistributing authority; rather, it may simply involve ensuring that those providing support have the necessary knowledge and continuity to respond effectively.

26. **Strengthening accountability at the country office level.** At the country office level, the shift towards greater empowerment offers real opportunities for tailored decision-making, but it also highlights the value of maintaining consistent oversight mechanisms. These need not be heavy-handed. Even small steps – such as clear communication channels, periodic dialogue on policy interpretation and spaces in which employees can safely raise concerns – may help to reinforce accountability while preserving the flexibility that country directors need to manage their unique environments. With these elements in place, decentralization can function as intended, enabling responsive leadership without leaving employees feeling isolated, exposed or unable to question decisions.

27. Likewise, offering ways for managers to reflect on ethical leadership, while maintaining safe and accessible channels for employees to raise concerns, can help ensure that autonomy is exercised with confidence and transparency. Regular audits and peer learning forums can serve not as punitive oversight mechanisms but as supportive guardrails that help to keep teams connected to shared organizational values.

28. Many of the uncertainties that employees have described should ease as roles and service expectations become clearer. The development of a global headquarters service catalogue is a helpful step in this direction, and expanding technical depth – whether through regional hubs, designated focal points or more consistent knowledge pathways – may help to ensure that country offices receive timely, context-sensitive guidance. Together, these efforts can support a system in which autonomy, accountability and clarity reinforce one another, strengthening confidence in leadership and the organization's ability to respond effectively in diverse operational settings.

29. **Rebuilding a strong sense of belonging and pride.** A sense of belonging and pride will be crucial to sustaining high levels of engagement and commitment among WFP employees and could be supported through targeted employee engagement initiatives, reinforced and consistent messaging from leadership at all levels and more direct engagement by senior leaders with employees across offices and duty stations. At the same time, addressing concerns about the full back-to-office working modality by enhancing the options for flexible working where required would likely improve well-being and go a considerable way towards reinforcing faith in the organization.

Case study: "Small shifts – big impact!" How the ombuds office works – a typical case

When Daniel, a consultant at headquarters in Rome, reached out to OBD, he was exhausted and discouraged. His team had just gone through a restructuring; several positions had been abolished and tasks had been reshuffled, and somehow everything seemed to land on his desk.

What bothered him most was not just the workload. It was the fear behind it: "If I say no, will they think I'm not committed? Could this cost me my job?"

In his conversation with the ombuds officer, the real issue surfaced: the team had never actually discussed how to redistribute the work. Everyone was improvising, and Daniel, eager to be seen as reliable and to secure the renewal of his consultant contract, struggled to set boundaries.

Together, he and the ombuds officer explored what was driving his stress and how he could raise these issues without sounding confrontational. They practised a conversation between him and his supervisor, and that preparation paid off. Daniel spoke with his supervisor, who agreed to bring the whole team together for a task redistribution workshop.

The immediate pressure eased, but Daniel admitted that he still felt anxious about turning down work. In a follow-up session, he and the ombuds officer worked on strategies for prioritizing, pacing himself and saying "no" in ways that felt safe.

Small shifts, big impact: Daniel is now clearer about his limits, is more confident in voicing them and is part of a team that finally has a shared plan for handling its workload.

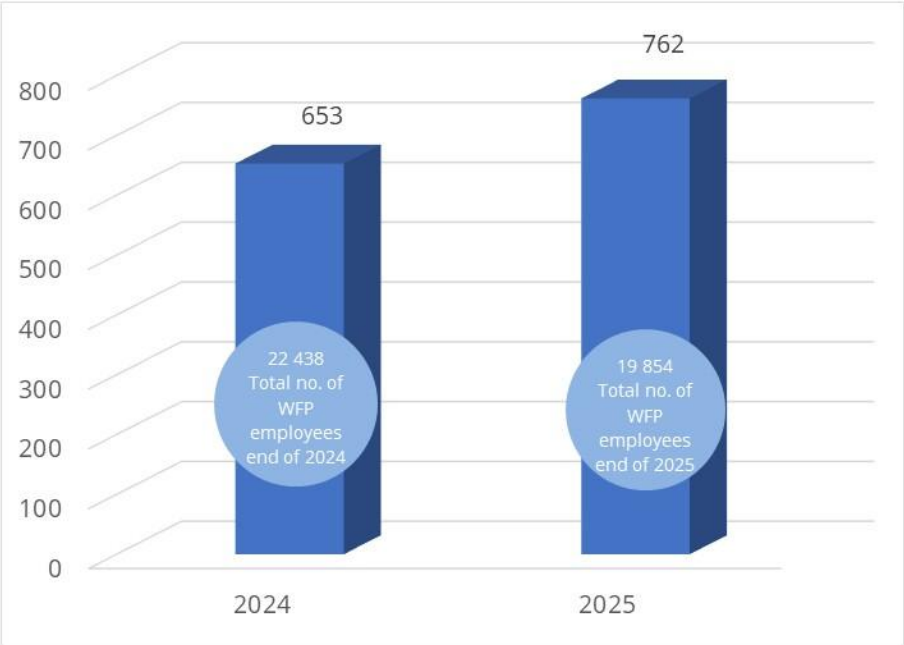
Ombuds office services in 2025

Data speaks: Increased need for ombuds support

30. In 2025, OBD handled **762 cases**[1] involving **1,094 issues**, representing a **14 percent increase** over the previous year driven primarily by the organizational downsizing (see below). The increase in caseload is all the more notable because it came against a background of severe travel restrictions. In previous years, extensive field missions by OBD enabled in-person contact with many more colleagues, building trust and enabling easier access to ombuds support. In 2025, travel restrictions reduced OBD field missions by half, yet the office still received more visitors. This is a clear indicator of the heightened level of concern expressed during the year.

[1] An ombuds case is defined as a workplace issue or question brought to the office by a visitor who requests information, resolution options or assistance that requires specific ombuds skills or knowledge.

Figure 1: Increase in cases brought to the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services from 2024 to 2025



31. In 2025 OBD began measuring its cases against risk criteria. In collaboration with the Risk Management Division, OBD developed a matrix to classify its cases by degree of **reputational, financial or operational harm.** Of the **762 cases for the year, 60,** or **8 percent, were considered by OBD to pose a high risk to the organization.** This underscores the important role the office plays in informally addressing matters with significant risk implications.

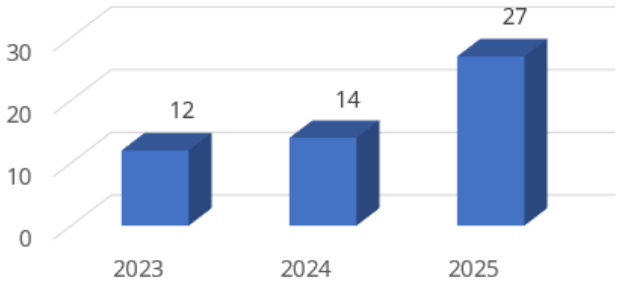
Figure 2: Ombuds cases in 2025 – number of cases by risk level (reputational, financial and operational risk)



Increasing use of mediation

32. With the introduction of a mediation framework in 2024, WFP has reinforced its support for informal dispute resolution and encourages its employees to use informal channels to resolve workplace matters. As a direct consequence, the number of mediations at WFP almost doubled in 2025 compared to 2024.

Figure 3: Number of mediations at WFP 2023–2025

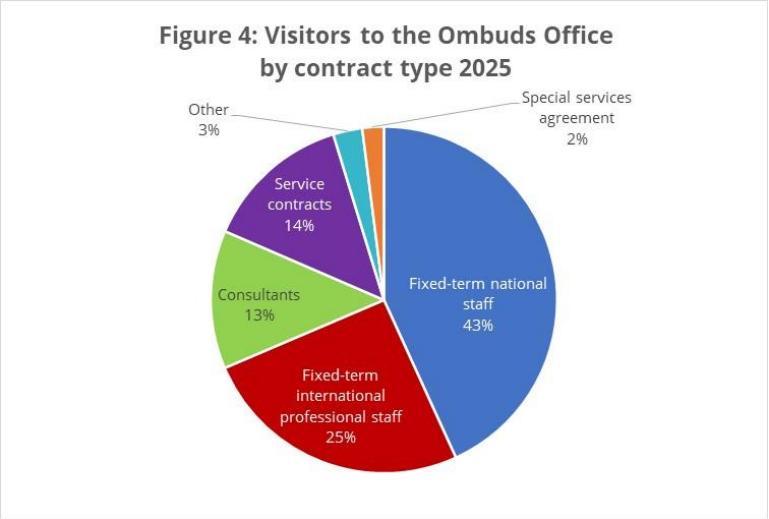


33. This increase reflects growing trust in informal resolution and a stronger commitment across the organization to addressing concerns constructively. OBD will continue to engage proactively with key stakeholders, including senior leadership and managers, to underscore the benefits of addressing challenges early and informally before they have the chance to escalate. Promoting timely dialogue and shared ownership of solutions helps to prevent polarization, enhances individual empowerment and reduces the organizational and human costs associated with prolonged disputes. This focus is especially valuable during periods of significant organizational change, when shifting roles and uncertainty can place added pressure on working relationships.

Who visited the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services in 2025?

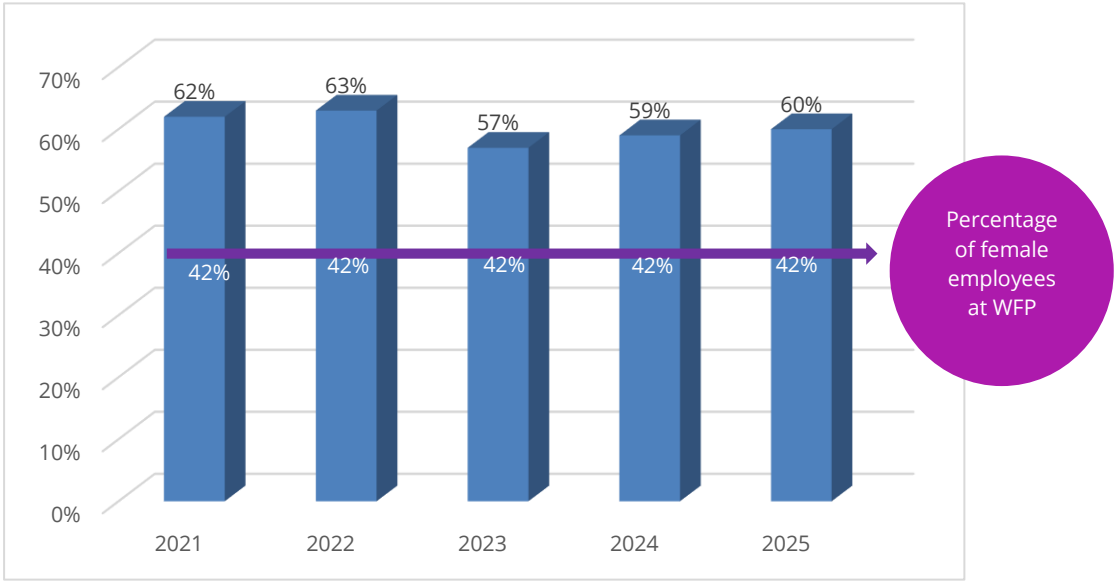
34. OBD consistently receives a substantial number of visitors employed under more secure contract types. Owing to their greater sense of job security, such employees are generally less concerned about possible reprisal than are short-term personnel, who sometimes hesitate to approach the office for fear that doing so may affect the renewal of their contracts.

35. In 2025, OBD observed a marked increase in the number of fixed-term employees seeking support. This trend may reflect the particularly strong – and often emotional – impact of the organizational downsizing on this category of personnel. Many fixed-term employees view their roles as long-term commitments to WFP. International fixed-term employees frequently make significant personal sacrifices, including repeated relocations, in service of the organization. National staff, meanwhile, often face limited alternative domestic employment opportunities and bear substantial financial responsibilities towards extended families. These factors intensified the vulnerability felt during the downsizing and probably contributed to the increased number of fixed-term employees reaching out to OBD.



36. As in previous years, more women than men sought support from OBD in 2025: 60 percent of OBD's visitors were women, even though they make up only 42 percent of WFP's workforce. The observed gender gap (figure 5) has remained consistent over the past five years. While WFP's efforts to achieve gender equality have created a more comfortable working environment for women, gender-specific barriers and discrimination still exist in many duty stations.

Figure 5: Female visitors as a percentage of all visitors 2021–2025



What issues did visitors bring to the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services in 2025?

37. Each employee that visits OBD to express concerns raises one or more issues, which are classified using broad categories established by the Network of Ombudsman and Mediators of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination. This system supports coherence across the United Nations and enables OBD to identify patterns, trends and systemic concerns at WFP, thereby providing a comprehensive view of the organizational climate.

38. In 2025, the greatest number of issues brought to OBD fell into the category of **supervisory relationships**, which accounted for **36 percent** of all issues raised. This aligns with trends from previous years and is consistent with data reported by other United Nations system ombuds offices. Within this category, the most frequent concerns pertained to **supervisory effectiveness, interpersonal differences** and **team climate and morale.** Of those who raised concerns within this category, **58 percent** reported concerns with their direct supervisor, while **22 percent** were supervisors seeking support regarding challenges with their supervisees, underlining the fact that OBD is also an important resource for supervisors seeking help on leadership issues.

39. A comparison with previous years (see figure 6) shows a **notable increase in job and career-related issues**. This category includes concerns about the abolition of positions and non-renewal of contracts and therefore directly reflects the impact of restructuring and downsizing. Issues related to **abusive conduct** (harassment, sexual harassment, abuse of authority and discrimination) are recorded under the "prohibited conduct and compliance" category. Of the abusive conduct issues raised in 2025, the majority related to abuse of authority and harassment, often linked to supervisory issues.

40. OBD also collects data on the roles, functions or other entities that are the focus of the issues brought to the office by visitors. The data for 2025 show the effects of the ongoing organizational realignment, as reflected in figure 7. The second largest category was **human resources,** which may be because human resource personnel played a central role in implementing the restructuring and downsizing processes.

Figure 6: Main issue categories 2022–2025 (percentage of total)

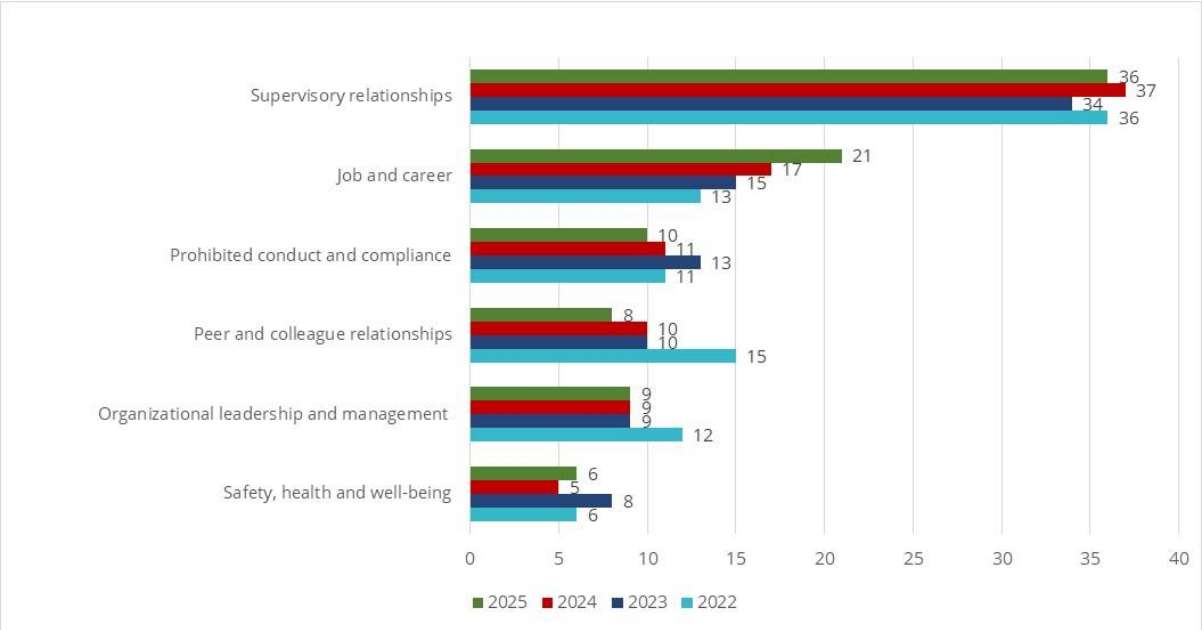
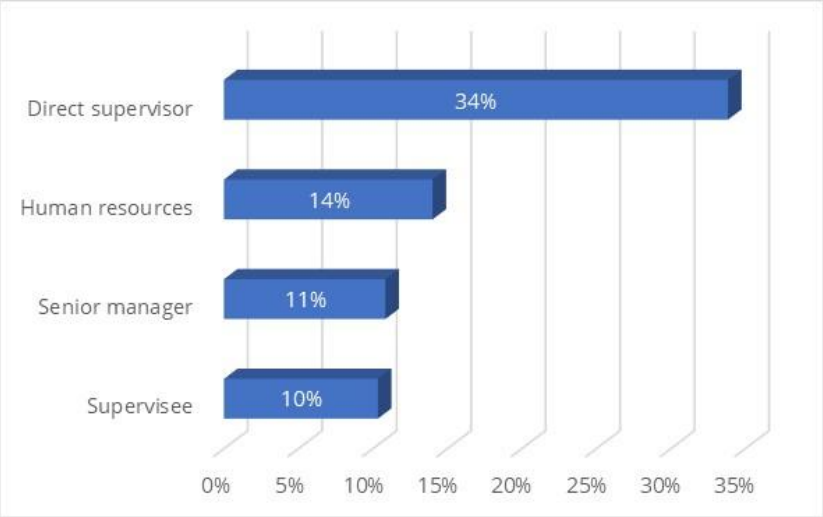


Figure 7: Top four roles or functions that were the focus of issues brought to the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services in 2025 (percentage of total)



In the regions

41. OBD caseload varies considerably across WFP regions. Headquarters and global offices, and WFP offices in the Middle East, Northern Africa and Eastern Europe, and in Latin America and the Caribbean all show shares of cases that are significantly higher than their shares of the workforce, while the remaining regions report case shares that are lower than their shares of the workforce (see figure 8). Since the start of 2026, OBD has been categorizing its cases in alignment with the new global headquarters structure, which will be reflected in the next annual report.

42. Interpreting these differences is complex, as multiple factors influence the rates at which employees seek OBD assistance. A large number of cases does not necessarily indicate a more challenging work environment or a higher prevalence of concerns. Regional variations may also reflect different cultural approaches to addressing workplace difficulties; varying levels of awareness of informal resolution services; and variations in the accessibility and visibility of OBD, for example as a result of the number of missions that the office has conducted in a given region (see below). Figure 9 shows the issues of principal concern in each region.

Figure 8: Ombuds cases 2025 – regional distribution

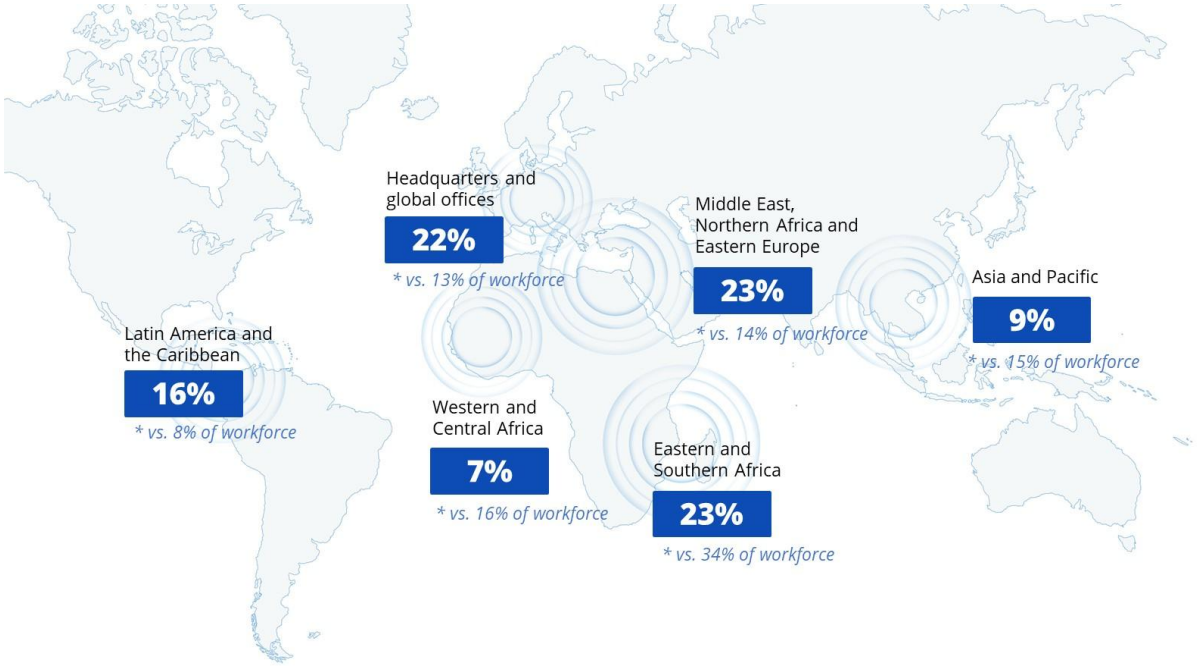
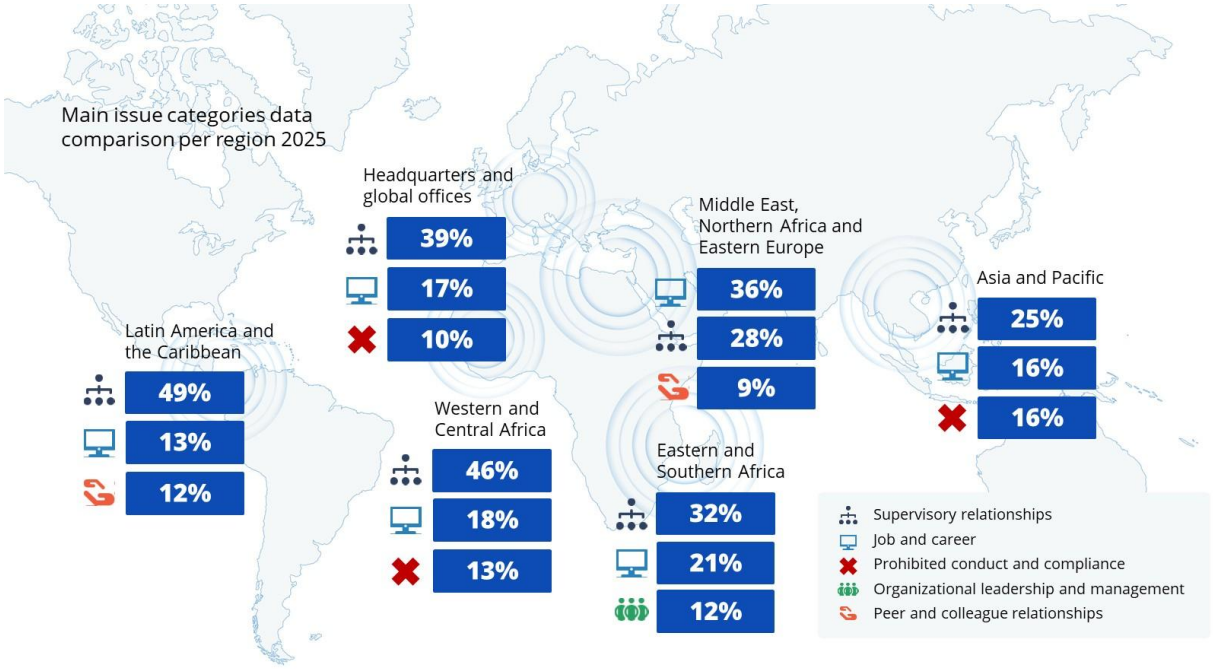


Figure 9: Main concerns by region

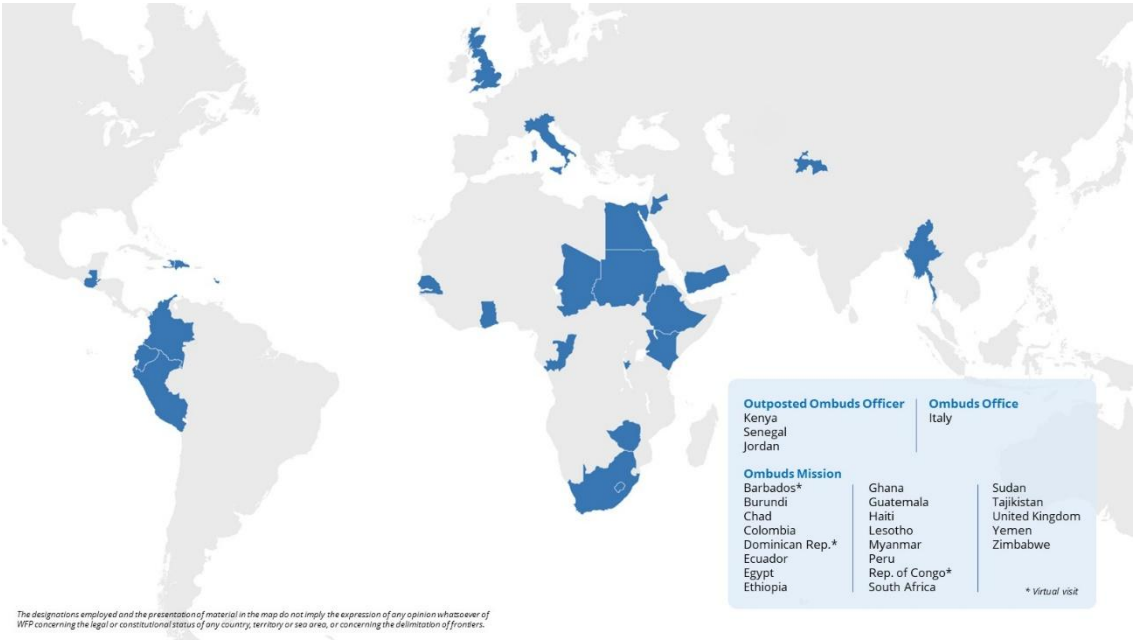


Proximity to employees improves access to ombuds services

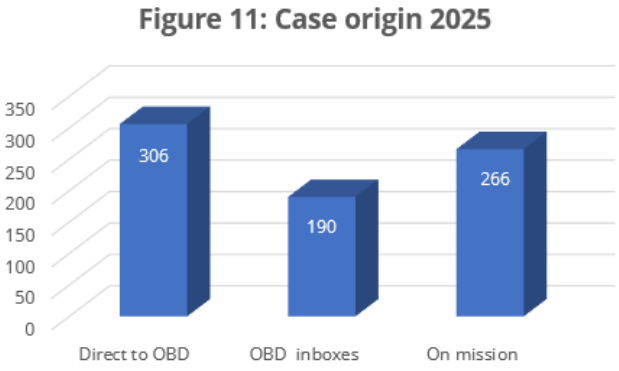
43. To bring its services to the field, OBD regularly conducts missions to country offices. These missions usually include training, visits to field offices, dedicated time for confidential conversations, ad hoc interventions and mediations upon request and as needed and the provision of feedback to leadership, including country directors and deputy country directors. A visit to a country office does not imply that there are more issues there than in other country offices, as OBD seeks to visit all key WFP operations on a regular basis. In some instances, country office leadership will ask OBD to visit in person to conduct training or other activities; missions may also be spurred by virtual collaboration between OBD and

country office teams. In 2025, due to budget restrictions, OBD was able to visit fewer countries than planned. As a mitigation measure, the office launched a series of webinars in English, Spanish, French and Arabic (see more information in the section below on capacity building), and conducted virtual visits to country offices, building on experience gained during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic. Figure 10 provides information on OBD missions.

Figure 10: Ombuds visits to countries – 2025



44. Regarding how cases reach OBD, a notable shift was observed in 2025. An increasing proportion of cases was initiated through direct in-person interactions with ombuds officers rather than through the OBD inbox or referrals from mission contacts.



45. This development is significant, as it suggests that the presence of outposted ombuds officers in the WFP regions is facilitating greater access to OBD services and reflects the trust that individual team members have established with colleagues in the field.

Capacity building

Team interventions by the Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services

46. In 2025, OBD conducted 20 "team climate assessments", engaging approximately 880 employees in several WFP regions and at headquarters in Rome. These assessments support supervisors in gaining a clearer understanding of the overall atmosphere within their teams and how their leadership styles are perceived. They also provide team members with a structured opportunity to raise challenges that they may be experiencing, strengthen communication and work collectively to improve team cohesion and foster a healthier working environment.

Ombuds training: support through transition and uncertainty

47. In direct response to the challenges that WFP faced in 2025, OBD significantly expanded its outreach, conducting **101 in-person training sessions and webinars for around 6,000 employees** – nearly a quarter of the workforce. These sessions focused on the most pressing needs of employees, including how supervisors can conduct difficult conversations during downsizing processes and how colleagues can address interpersonal conflict in a constructive and sustainable manner.

48. In collaboration with the Human Resources Division and OBD the Wellness and Culture Division, relaunched the WFP employee support programme, which is designed to provide timely, relevant and continuous support to employees across WFP. Within this framework, OBD facilitated peer learning sessions for supervisors in all WFP regions, strengthening leadership capacity and fostering healthier team dynamics throughout the organization.

Case study: Working on a better way to work together – a team climate assessment makes all the difference!

Azizi hesitated before drafting an email to OBD, but after yet another meeting where her supervisor's harsh tone left her feeling shut down, she realized she could not continue to navigate the situation alone. Others on her team felt the same strain, and she knew that they could not ignore it any longer.

With encouragement, Azizi's teammates also came forward. Together they agreed that the ombuds officer could approach their supervisor directly.

At first the supervisor pushed back. "This is just a few unhappy staff," she insisted. The ombuds officer therefore proposed a team climate assessment, an anonymous survey to reveal how the whole team truly felt. The results were clear. The supervisor was not seeing the unintended impact of her tone, and the team was not just struggling with communication from the top; gossip and siloed work were severely affecting morale.

Once she saw the data, the supervisor's defensiveness softened. In a private debrief with the ombuds officer, she acknowledged the need to grow and explored coaching options. Next came the turning point, a series of team workshops. With the ombuds officer's facilitation, the team mapped out practical ways to cut down gossip, increase collaboration and rebuild trust.

What began as one person's quiet concern became a catalyst for healthier leadership, stronger relationships and a more connected team.

The added value of the ombuds office: advancing informal conflict resolution at WFP

49. In 2025 the United Nations Joint Inspection Unit issued a review of the ombudsman and mediation function in United Nations system organizations (JIU/REP/2025/5), in which it confirms that informal conflict resolution is a **highly effective and cost-efficient** approach for addressing the concerns that employees in large organizations may face and that most workplace disputes can be addressed through open, honest dialogue and informal problem solving. The review finds that ombuds offices strengthen organizational culture, mitigate institutional risks and contribute to staff well-being.

Reducing the burden on formal systems

50. The review provides system-wide, evidence-based support for positioning ombuds offices as essential standalone structures within the internal justice systems of United Nations organizations. It confirms that informal mechanisms enable employees to raise concerns off the record, helping them to gain perspective, explore options and address issues early. This early intervention approach reduces the burden on formal systems and contributes to the preservation of working relationships, an essential factor in promoting employee well-being and supporting organizational productivity. The review also highlights the ombuds

function's role in providing leadership with valuable insights into workforce dynamics by identifying emerging trends and systemic issues. By highlighting matters that might otherwise go unnoticed, ombuds offices help to prevent crises, strengthen managerial practice and reinforce accountability.

Independence as a prerequisite for an effective ombuds function

51. A central finding of the review concerns independence. The JIU reiterated that independence – both functional and perceived – is a prerequisite for an effective ombuds function. This underscores the importance of maintaining standalone ombuds offices in order to ensure neutrality and build trust among personnel. Employees are significantly more likely to seek support at an early stage when they have confidence in the independence and confidentiality of the service in which they must confide their concerns.

52. The United Nations General Assembly, in a December 2022 resolution on the administration of justice at the United Nations (A/RES/77/260), similarly underlines the importance of informal resolution as an essential component of the administration of justice and as an efficient alternative to formal processes. This system-wide emphasis reflects the United Nations commitment to de-escalation, dialogue and early resolution.

The Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services visitor feedback underscores the effectiveness of informal conflict resolution

53. The high impact and cost-effectiveness of OBD's informal conflict resolution services is also reflected in the office's visitor survey, which is completed by visitors once their cases have concluded. The survey serves two main purposes: it functions as an instrument of internal quality control, and it enables OBD to assess the impact and added value of its services.

54. In 2025, 86 percent of respondents indicated that as a result of their interaction with OBD they felt more comfortable addressing workplace issues in the future. A third of respondents also reported that had they not contacted OBD, their situations would have escalated or they would have resorted to formal channels of dispute resolution such as the Office of Inspections and Investigations.

WFP's new mediation framework – interlinking formal and informal resolution

55. In 2024, WFP adopted a new mediation framework, which provides employees who are appealing administrative decisions at WFP, and are thus engaged in a highly formal process, with the option to request mediation at any stage of that process in order to seek a settlement without waiving any formal rights to continue with the process at a later date. OBD sees significant benefits in further deepening the systematic integration of mediation within WFP's formal resolution processes and plans to advance work to that end in 2026. This will be done in close collaboration with relevant offices, by clarifying referral pathways, promoting the use of mediation at appropriate stages of formal proceedings and strengthening alignment between informal and formal mechanisms. Embedding mediation more consistently across WFP's conflict management framework will foster greater coherence, fairness and efficiency in case handling while preserving opportunities for constructive, mutually beneficial outcomes whenever possible.

Case study: Finding clarity in a tough moment – how the ombuds office helps employees to get clarity

Ali, a national employee working in the Middle East, Northern Africa and Eastern Europe region, came to OBD feeling hurt and convinced that he had been discriminated against. His unit had shrunk dramatically, eight positions cut down to three, and all colleagues had to compete for the remaining posts. When Ali was not selected, he believed it was because of his ethnic background.

As he spoke, one thing became clear: he had been left almost entirely in the dark during the hiring process. No updates. No feedback. No explanation. In a period when everyone was overwhelmed, communication had simply fallen through the cracks.

With Ali's permission an ombuds officer reached out to the hiring manager and the Human Resources officer. They walked through the decision-making process and explained the reasons behind the selection, none of which had anything to do with Ali's ethnicity. What did become obvious, though, was that there had been a lack of transparency. The process had not been discriminatory, but neither had it been communicated well.

Following the conversation the human resources unit and leadership took steps to improve how they would communicate about recruitment and selection in the future in order to bring greater clarity to the process.

For Ali, hearing the full picture changed something. He let go of the idea of filing a formal complaint and found it easier to accept the outcome. He still faced unemployment, but in a follow-up session he and the ombuds officer shifted focus, identifying his strengths and reframing his WFP experience in an exploration of how to position himself to confidently make the most of new opportunities.

Thus a difficult moment turned into a path forward, through clarity, empathy and honest conversation.

Real people, real impact: The respectful workplace allies shaping respect across WFP

56. To promote early resolution of concerns and strengthen a culture of constructive dialogue, OBD oversees WFP's network of 168 "respectful workplace allies" (RWAs) – trained volunteers who serve as confidential, neutral and informal points of contact for colleagues facing workplace challenges. RWAs offer a safe way for employees to speak openly. They provide information on available informal and formal resolution avenues and act as sounding boards. They also raise awareness of respectful workplace practices, brief new personnel, remain informed about relevant policies and alert OBD to emerging trends. RWAs are expected to uphold strict confidentiality, neutrality and the highest standards of integrity.

Enhancing respectful workplace allies effectiveness

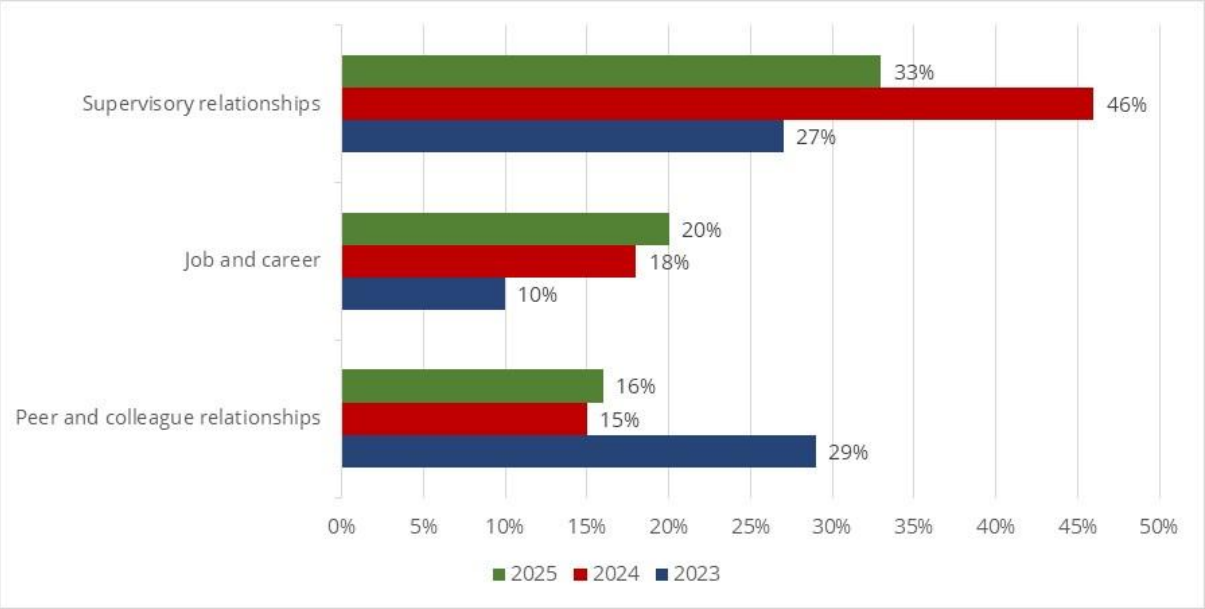
57. In line with WFP's corporate vision of reinforcing field operations, OBD undertook a comprehensive review of the terms of reference for the RWA network in 2025. The review focused on enhancing RWA effectiveness while reducing potential risks. As part of this process RWAs, previously known as "respectful workplace advisors", were renamed – "respectful workplace allies" to better reflect their purpose. The revised terms of reference reinforce the role of RWAs as an early-warning mechanism through the introduction of joint meetings between RWAs, ombuds officers and heads of offices to help identify potential systemic issues. The revised terms of reference also clarify the distinction between the functions of OBD and the RWAs: RWAs do not engage in coaching, advising, investigating, mediating or intervening in cases.

Fear of speaking up as a common theme observed by respectful workplace allies

58. RWAs routinely capture the types of concern that colleagues bring to them. In 2025 many RWAs reported that uncertainty and fear of speaking up were widespread in their offices. Employees raised concerns about future roles, job security and career prospects, describing heightened anxiety and a growing reluctance to voice honest opinions or raise issues. RWAs observed that meetings previously characterized by open dialogue were increasingly marked by cautious participation, with staff weighing their words due to concerns that questioning decisions or expressing dissent might be perceived as disloyalty or otherwise pose a risk to their standing.

59. According to RWAs, many employees also expressed confidentially their lack of trust in supervisors, managers and WFP systems during the downsizing process. Frequent concerns included gaps in communication, perceived lack of transparency and limited responsiveness to staff questions and information needs.

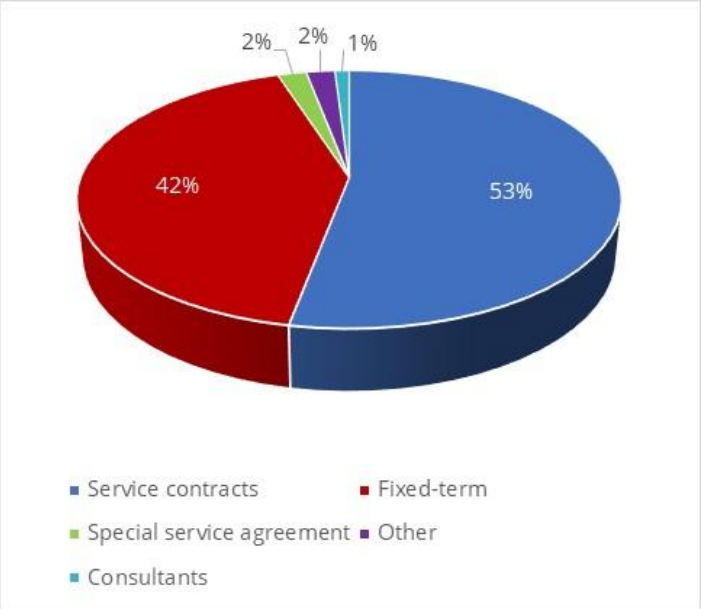
Figure 12: Respectful workplace Allies main issue categories, 2023–2025 (percentage of total)



The importance of respectful workplace allies for employees in the field

60. The added value of the RWAs is also evident in the issues they handle. RWAs typically deal with a range of concerns that might otherwise not reach OBD. For example, interpersonal tensions among colleagues are consistently reported more frequently to RWAs than to OBD, as employees often perceive such matters as not warranting what they may view as a higher level of escalation. Data from 2025 also show that a significant proportion of employees reaching out to RWAs are on service contracts – a contract modality widely used in the field – underscoring the accessibility of RWAs and their relevance to personnel in deep field locations.

Figure 13: Share of respectful workplace allies visitors in 2025 by contract modality



Looking forward

61. The reflections captured in this report highlight not only the challenges that WFP employees faced in 2025 but also their remarkable willingness to engage constructively in the midst of change. Through countless conversations, employees of all levels demonstrated a deep sense of integrity and a strong desire for WFP to thrive, even when the way forward was painful and uncertain. Their voices form the foundation of this report and will continue to guide how OBD supports the organization.

62. Looking ahead, the lessons of this year offer a chance to rebuild with greater clarity, empathy and connection. By listening closely to what employees have told OBD – about what worked and what they needed but did not receive – the office can help shape more supportive systems and more open, trusting ways of working. Advancing mediation, strengthening the link between the formal and informal elements of WFP's internal justice system, building capacity to resolve workplace issues and foster a respectful workplace, and maintaining strong engagement with all stakeholders are high on the agenda of OBD moving forward. The office remains committed to being a safe and confidential resource for all employees and to helping WFP continue learning, improving and caring for its people, even during difficult times.