**Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards of
UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN Women and WFP**
30 May 2025

## BACKGROUND NOTE

## Topic 2:
**Enabling greater coherence on the United Nation's Duty of Care guidance and frameworks to promote accountability, efficiency and commitment to the United Nations workforce**

## I.    Introduction

2024 was the deadliest year for front-line workers globally, highlighting the growing risks United Nations personnel face, particularly national employees, impacting operational efficiency and the people we serve. As United Nations entities continue to operate in increasingly complex and high-risk environments where they are required to regularly evaluate their risk tolerance, duty of care is a cornerstone of operational effectiveness and capacity. Considering the criticality of United Nations presence in fragile settings, duty of care is essential not only from an ethical standpoint but as a prerequisite for programme continuity. Amid these challenges, United Nations entities must run operations that not only ensure efficiency and accountability but are also inherently resilient and people centred.

The resolution on the 2024–2028 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) offers the United Nations development system guidance on improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence of United Nations development efforts, ensuring they align with shared goals. The resolution emphasizes the need for better coordination among United Nations agencies to avoid duplication and ensure a unified approach to development challenges. It stresses the importance of results-based management and accountability, ensuring that operation activities lead to tangible improvements in the lives of people. Duty of care is aligned with this resolution. Effectiveness, efficiency, and coherence is achieved by embedding duty of care into decision-making, accountability, and financial resource planning. UN 2.0 efforts to foster the workforce of the future are also a key component of the broader initiative, which aims to modernize the United Nations system to be more agile, diverse, responsive, and impactful.

The High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM) has over the past decade emphasized the importance of duty of care within the United Nations system, highlighting the need for compliance with and further operationalization of existing rules and policies. HLCM recommends enhancing duty of care for United Nations personnel by: strengthening tailored and responsive psychosocial support; integrating occupational safety and health into risk management; improving administrative support; enhancing safety and security measures; and implementing robust monitoring and evaluation systems.[1] Duty of care is defined by HLCM as a non-waivable duty on the part of organizations to mitigate or address foreseeable risks that may harm or injure personnel and their eligible family members.[2]

## II. Duty of care: A system-wide enabler for delivery, accountability, and operational resilience

Across the United Nations system, employees are increasingly deployed in volatile, high-risk, and complex operating environments. From protracted conflict and climate shocks to shrinking humanitarian access, these conditions elevate operational risk while underscoring the imperative for continuity, accountability, and presence. The stay and deliver management approach is essential for serving affected populations but growing complex operational landscapes alongside shrinking resources make it increasingly difficult to implement duty of care effectively especially for front-line workers.

As a strategic enabler, duty of care requires clearer accountabilities and a mutual commitment between the organization and its employees to ensure that all reasonable measures to reduce risks are implemented effectively, transparently, and with clear results. Challenges with the current trend require a people-centred, mutually enforced model embedded within ongoing reform initiatives that is grounded in shared standards, embedded within corporate planning and performance frameworks, and underpinned by sustainable, risk-aligned financing. Furthermore, there is greater awareness on the need to minimize transferring risk to partners, ensuring they also have the policies, resources and capacities to promote the duty of care of their staff.

The Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards offers United Nations entities an opportunity to raise awareness about their duty of care approaches, to acknowledge progress since the COVID-19 pandemic and to highlight the potential for shared tools, interoperable standards, and harmonized frameworks that support safer, more effective, and accountable operations. To this end, it remains critical that duty of care is upheld as a central element in ongoing reform initiatives, in close dialogue with Member States as key stakeholders in challenges times.

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[1] The 2024 United Nations mental health audit by the Joint Inspection Unit highlighted significant challenges and the need for comprehensive mental health strategies, integration of mental health into organizational policies, enhanced support systems, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and improved inter-agency coordination. These recommendations aim to create a healthier and more supportive work environment for United Nations personnel.

[2] United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination. 2016. *Final Report – HLCM Working Group on "Reconciling Duty of Care for UN personnel while operating in high risk environments"* (CEB/2016/HLCM/11).

## III.   Conclusion

Inadequate duty of care provisions expose agencies to operational disruption impacting the efficiency and effectiveness of service, reputational harm, legal as well as financial risk – particularly in contexts where United Nations entities are expected to stay and deliver. Systematic and transparent implementation of duty of care reinforces the broader reforms outlined in the 2024–2028 QCPR, particularly those related to risk-informed planning, workforce resilience, and enables improved and organizational accountability. That enables more effective and coordinated addressing of concerns also expressed in the QCPR[3] with regard to appropriate attention to workplace.

Efforts across United Nations entities demonstrate that duty of care can be institutionalized through planning systems, financing tools, and governance structures. Shared innovation – through pooled platforms, common metrics, or co-hosted services – can further support safety, resilience, and continuity of operations including in hardship duty stations. Moving forward, the United Nations entities should leverage this opportunity to strengthen coherence, facilitate learning across entities, and advance practical solutions that respond to the shared duty to protect personnel while fulfilling organizational mandates.

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[3] United Nations General Assembly. 2024. *Resolution 79/226: Quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system* (A/RES/79/226).