38th UNOG Staff Coordinating Council
38ème Conseil de coordination du personnel de l'ONUG

Minutes of the 5th meeting

held on 1 September 2020 at 11 a.m. via MS Teams

Council members present: ABDELLAOUI Naima; ALEKSANDROVA Anna; ALMARIO Francis; BALD Iain; CHANTREL Dominique; CHAOUI Prisca; DAWADI Niraj; GAZIYEV Jamshid; JAMES Elizabeth; KALOTAY Kalman; KHAN Anjum; LIN Dan; NOVIKOVA Alina; PECK ARIF Catherine; RICHARDS Ian; SHELDON JOHNSON Laura; SMITH Bradford.

Council members absent: APOSTOLOV Mario; BALI Mohamed; DUPARC Philippe; JACQUIOT Cédric; KELLY Paul; MEYER Olivier; MONNET Aminata; STANOVIC Marko.

The meeting opened at 11.05 a.m.

1. Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted with changes as reflected below.

2. Adoption of the minutes of the 4th meeting

The minutes of the 4th meeting were adopted without changes as recorded in the Council secretariat.

3. Report of the Finance Commission

The FC presented the income and expenditure actuals of the ongoing financial year against the adopted budget. Overall, a sharp decrease in expenditures compared to the previous year was noted due to lack of travel and events in light of the Covid, accompanied by the uncertainty of certain income lines, e.g. SAFI, for the same reason. The SAFI board would be meeting in the near future to discuss its finances and determine if it was in a position to transfer dividends to the Council from its 2019 exercise, taking into account expected 2020 loses due to Covid.

4. Report of the Executive Bureau

The EB reported on its activities since the previous Council meeting (on matters not addressed under separate agenda items below):

Liquidity crisis: During the townhall several months earlier, the Controller indicated that payment of salaries was assured until September-October. The Council requested a new global townhall for staff to be updated on the matter. So far, no sign of alarm had been received in that regard. However, signs of potentially serious budget cuts to come were noted, and issue to be followed up with management. The matter of the liquidity crisis would also be raised at the upcoming townhall with the USG DMSPC and UNOG DG.

SAFI: The manager left the shop in July. Recruitment of a new manager was ongoing but put on hold waiting for clarity on SAFI's future location during and after renovations – on which there was still no certainty – following the Covid impact on the SHP project.

Fitness space: The Council had agreed to contribute CHF 30'000 for the reconditioning of the fitness space for clubs. Said contribution was placed on hold waiting for clarity on the SHP project.

Park benches: Two years earlier the Council had accepted to fund the purchase of park benches for the park, but this was suspended for budgetary reasons. Management recently approached the Council again on this, arguing it would be beneficial for staff to increase the number of park benches in light of Covid, asking whether the Council could contribute financially to that initiative. The EB agreed, before pursuing any investment, to bring up to the park, the outdoor chairs from the UN beach at the end of the season to measure the demand for them.

A question was raised about the request for legal assistance that had been submitted by the list New Wood, to fund legal action against the DMSPC's memorandum which expanded the SG's delegation of authority to heads of entities. It was mentioned that the request had been rejected by the EB for reasons explained to the requestor and recorded in EB minutes.

5. Collection for Lebanon

The Council was informed that a total amount CHF 15,696 had been collected in benefit of the victims of the explosion in Beirut in early August. The Council agreed to add a contribution of its own of CHF 10'000, in line with its guidelines on collections and its previous decision to cap humanitarian donations at that level. The beneficiary was to be the Lebanese Red Cross.

6. Return to office

Following administration's previous broadcast, that as of mid-September staff would be requested to be present in the office at least 2 days per week, managed by each department/section. This effectively marked the end of the exceptional working arrangement that allowed telecommuting up to 5 days per week, and back to the established provision of a maximum of 3 days per week. Staff representation made it clear to management that staff at risk or living with others at risk could not be obliged to go to the office.

The return-to-office decisions followed host country and WHO guidelines. Overall, the measures by management seemed to be respected by staff. Council members reiterated that a fully-fledged and long-term teleworking arrangement would be in detriment of staff working conditions. Staff representation would follow-up on complaints that hand sanitizers around the Palais required more frequent refilling.

7. Survey on racism

The Council recalled its survey on the issue of racism in the organization, and the survey results that were communicated to staff via broadcast, from which it showed that 1 out of 3 staff have faced discrimination or have witnessed it in colleagues. The plenary thanked Council member Niraj Dawadi for his key assistance in the drafting of the survey. A meeting with the UNOG DG was expected to take place to discuss this matter, including a potential plan of action. The Council noted a wish from management to work hand in hand with staff representation on this subject. Contact was also in contact with the Ombudsman's office who had received requests to animate discussions among staff.

Management in NY had also been in touch with staff unions on the matter, and consultation meetings had already been held twice. A plan of action was presented by management and the unions submitted comments. The Council recalled that UNHQ's recent global survey had to be withdrawn following strong criticism to its questions, noting it was mainly drafted by an external consultancy. While staff representation was consulted on the content of the failed survey and made observations – including on the criticized content – many were not taken into account by management which resulted in the failure of the survey.

8. Equal pay campaign

Council members recalled the UNDT judgment of June on the pay cut cases represented by OSLA, where the cuts were ruled to be legal despite the ILOAT having ruled the contrary. The other set of cases where applicants were represented by an external lawyer, were not yet ruled upon by the UNDT, although it was considered unlikely that the outcome would be different.

A townhall had been recently held jointly with OSLA concerning the potential appeal of the judgment. Both OSLA and the external lawyer were in favour of an appeal. OSLA would contact applicants to ask them whether they wished to opt out of the appeal.

The Council was informed that the WMO staff pay cut case before the UNAT had been remanded to the UNDT despite the lack of jurisdiction of UNDT at the time of submission of the case. This was deemed by the Council as proof that the UNAT was a politicized Tribunal.

The SG declined – without giving reason – to appear before Geneva staff at the townhall requested by the Council, where he would instead be represented by the USG DPSMC and the UNOG DG. The message

Council members take out from this, is that it appears that the SG is not interested in meeting his staff in Geneva. Other issues beside the pay cut concerning all categories of staff would also be raised at the townhall.

Caution was raised regarding the cost of living survey given the Covid situation. If rushed/advanced, it could result in a worsening pay cut.

An argument was raised that more funds should have been devoted to legal services than PR campaign efforts to fight the pay cut, where legal efforts should be deemed more important than political pressure. Also, that taking issues to UNDT should not be perceived as a war on management. It was counterargued that the Council would not hold off from going to the UNDT on any case that clearly has merit. It was stated that over CHF 20'000 had already been invested in legal representation in the context of the Equal Pay campaign, but careful thought was needed before spending staff funds, particularly concerning legal cases with very little or no chance of success. The importance of both political and legal fronts was highlighted.

9. Strategic Heritage Plan

The Council noted that staff would be expected to start moving into the new H building likely by end of March 2021. The working group on SHP had met multiple times. Management decided to continue with the project disregarding any potential impact of Covid in the long term, only implementing interim health safety measures as per available guidance, arguing it was too late to make any changes. SHP also remarked there was new uncertainty about tearing down the E building tower due to the budgetary deficit in the project that was aggravated with Covid. The General Assembly was expected to look into the project during its upcoming session. The DG was noted to be sympathetic to staff concerns but financial constraints made it difficult for her to take action.

10. Staff-Management Committee

Recent SMC discussions touched upon continuing and fixed-term appointments. No continuing appointments had been granted since 2015, and following pressure from staff unions, management began retroactively determining an envelope of posts for the first of the pending exercises (2015). The administration in NY informed no new continuing appointments were available for P staff, and only 500 globally for GS. Staff unions asked them to clarify their calculations noting irregularities on how the envelopes were being calculated.

On fixed-term appointments, staff unions raised with management the complete disparity between departments when it came to the length of fixed-term contracts awarded/renewed. Some departments were giving up to 5-year contracts, others 2 years, others even only a few months. Management's position remained that the rules allowed for that to be the case, but staff representation continued to strongly argue that length of contracts, in general and when warranted, could not be determined as if the organization would soon be closing, considering needed contractual stability for staff.

On the new policy of downsizing, the working group's report was adopted by the SMC and the new policy was expected to be issued soon.

11. CCISUA

The Council recalled that the CCISUA general assembly did not take place due to Covid, but rather shortened virtual meetings to discuss punctual and internal matters.

The federation issued a resolution on the Pension Fund against the transfer of posts from Geneva to NY with negative effects on the Fund's customer service for clients serviced by Geneva. This led to the Fund's board to request more information about said transfer, putting it temporarily on hold. The Council also tabled at CCISUA a resolution on the "future of work" (raising concerns about management's review of contractual arrangements in the organization); efforts were under way to reach consensus on a common approach among the members of the federation.

12. Language Service

The Council recalled the global townhall of Language Service staff held at the beginning of August (mainly concerning translators and editors) to discuss the worrisome evolution of their working conditions. With over

200 staff in attendance, a draft resolution was discussed, comments raised, and later on submitted for vote and was adopted.

A motion was raised for the Council to actively support the resolution, notably as it called on staff unions to raise the issue with management. The Council agreed the concerns raised in the resolution were valid and that it should actively support the resolution as it stood and take appropriate action vis-à-vis management to address the issues.

13. Security and Safety Service

Issues of concern in SSS were raised, notably on planning and rotation of staff in the context of Covid, availability of security guards to cover all needs, and the due respect of their work conditions and working hours. A working group was created within the service to address the concerns. The Council would also prepare a petition calling for transparency in SSS.

14. Any other business

On delegation of authority (DOA), a Council member raised the point that any legal action against the memorandum from DMSPC on the subject would have implications beyond the DOA and the right of staff unions to be consulted was not respected in the issuance of the memorandum.

The meeting was adjourned at 12.15 a.m.