



## SMC Ad Hoc: Staff-Side Paper

### Alternate Work Arrangements: Guidance, Criteria and Application

In March 2020, the Secretary-General decided to restrict physical access to UN premises while keeping offices open virtually during the Coronavirus (C-19) pandemic. Guidance to staff clarified that this was not a flexible but alternate work arrangement, as follows:

*"This is neither an optional nor a voluntary telecommuting arrangement between managers and staff members but a mandatory requirement by the Organization. All must comply. Concretely, it means that staff members are requested to discharge their functions from a remote location, generally their home, as an **alternate work arrangement**. ... As such, it should not be confused with **flexible working arrangements** as regulated by ST/SGB/2019/3 and ST/IC/2019/15 and staff members are not required to fill any agreement or form. However, at the end of every week, you should ensure that telecommuting days are entered in Umoja."*<sup>1</sup>

Guidance related to C-19 also stated that "a staff member cannot be forced to telecommute. Telecommuting is a voluntary agreement between staff and their managers."<sup>2</sup> It clarified that staff members are allowed to carry out their functions from anywhere **within or outside of the duty station**, subject to managerial approval and based on the nature of the functions, since a staff member's physical presence on the UN premises was not required<sup>3</sup>. Updated guidance further clarified that alternate work arrangements outside the duty station normally should not exceed six months, but a Head of Entity **may suspend or extend the duration**, based on local conditions<sup>4</sup>.

Administrative guidelines on C-19 further clarified that "*alternate work arrangements are implemented at the request of the Organization and are therefore different from flexible working arrangements although both may involve working from a location within or outside the duty station. The authority to implement alternate work arrangements rests with the Executive Heads of the Organizations, as per the recommendation of the Designated Official for Security*"<sup>5</sup>. The guideline did not clarify which criteria a Head of Entity needed to consider before declaring alternate work arrangements are in place and when doing so, what criteria needed to be met to allow for working from a location outside of the duty station.

Alternate work arrangement remained in place at some duty stations for the duration of C-19 and were at times coupled with staff working from UN premises one or more days per week, depending on the building occupancy rates established locally.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from guidance developed for C-19, UN Secretariat staff do not have access to information, including what criteria need to be met, to allow for alternate work arrangements under other circumstances. Several UN Secretariat entities have faced unique circumstances related to office premises and have applied alternate or flexible working arrangements, irregularly, as indicated in the following examples:

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<sup>1</sup> Frequently Asked Questions - All Duty Stations on alternate work arrangements and telecommuting in connection with the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, Release as of 23 March 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 4. Further, a JIU report (JIU/REP/2023/6) noted that "by virtue of their voluntary character, flexible working arrangements are initiated by personnel."

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page 2-3

<sup>4</sup> Frequently Asked Questions - All Duty Stations Alternate working arrangements (AWA) and Flexible working arrangements (FWA) in the context of COVID-19 Version 3 – 12 October 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Administrative Guidelines for Offices on the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic: Framework for the management of staff members in United Nations Common System Headquarters and Field Duty Stations, CEB Human Resources Network, Version 4.0, 14 April 2020.

<sup>6</sup> UNOG Broadcast sent on Friday, 25 June 2021 at 15:07.



- **ESCAP:** Since 1 January 2022 to date, the Executive Secretary of ESCAP decided to apply **alternate work arrangements<sup>7</sup> in Bangkok** during the Seismic Mitigation Project (SMP). The SMP limits the building occupancy rate to 30%, allowing staff to work 1-2 days per week from a swing space<sup>8</sup>. ESCAP guidance allows for alternate work arrangements outside of Bangkok but within Thailand, as long as it is within commuting distance and with the stipulation that the staff member can return to Bangkok on short notice (i.e. within 24 hours) if the supervisor requires it; working outside of Bangkok but within Thailand does not require the completion of a flexible working arrangement agreement. Staff who wish to work outside of Thailand must request a flexible working arrangement and indicate personal compelling circumstances for the request; if approved, they would be allowed to work away from Thailand for up to 9 months exceptionally.
- **UNOG:** In October 2023, due to the financial liquidity crisis, the Director-General of UNOG decided to close the Palais des Nations campus in Geneva from 20 December 2023 to 7 January 2024, noting that “UNOG will grant teleworking requests for its staff, allowing them to operate away from the Duty Station”<sup>9</sup>; other entities working in the Palais had to determine how to apply flexible working arrangements to its Geneva-based staff. In a subsequent update, the Director-General announced the extension of the Palais closure until 15 January 2024 and further noted that “if your role is not directly related to servicing the conference that week or your physical presence on campus is not required, you will continue to work remotely for one additional week. ... [and that] managers are encouraged to favorably consider any extension requests for staff telecommuting from outside the duty station, subject to exigencies of service.”<sup>10</sup> At no point did the Director-General decide to put in place alternate work arrangements despite the fact that staff had no access to their offices in the Palais. Staff members, who worked in the Palais but did not work for UNOG, were left to negotiate the terms of their ‘flexible working arrangement’ with their managers for circumstances created by UNOG.

As of 22 April 2024, the Director-General decided to implement “austerity measures”, which entailed “optimizing [the] use of space, closing certain buildings”.<sup>11</sup> Four buildings were fully or partially closed, with staff required to relocate to buildings that remained opened; this affected thousands of staff members – both those who relocated and those who had to consolidate office space, leaving all to work in cramped conditions. Despite the acknowledgement that the workspace reorganization would “affect the delivery of our services and mandates and impact our daily routines and working conditions”<sup>12</sup>, and the fact that staff were required to work from an alternate site at least part of the week to make this office space consolidation work, the Director-General confirmed that the policy on telecommuting would be applied to these unique circumstances, noting:

*“there [was] no change to the FWA framework. As per the SG’s Bulletin on Flexible Work Arrangements – ST/SGB/2019/3 – staff may work from home for up to 3 days a week, with their manager’s approval. Staff with compelling circumstances continue to have the opportunity to request special arrangements to work full-time remotely. **In the context of space optimization, staff members whose functions allow so are encouraged to fully avail themselves of FWAs, and managers are encouraged to consider favourably, whenever possible, staff’s requests.**”*

**Maximizing telecommuting policies reduces the need for physical office space, thereby saving on heating, cooling, and lighting.**

*Services for staff will continue to be available online and in person. Staff members who need additional IT equipment at home can reach out to ICTS for assistance.*

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<sup>7</sup> ESCAP guidance defines alternate work arrangements as follows: “AWA is an organization-mandated remote working modality to ensure business continuity (reliable, continuous, uninterrupted operation, also keeping in mind that this is an important element of the public image of the United Nations system). **This can be in circumstances where a UN office is not (fully) accessible (e. g. during pandemic situations, war, building damage due to earthquake, construction).** The Head of Entity has delegated authority to implement AWA in accordance with the need of the entity (full/partial closure, limited AWA for a certain duty station, ...). AWA is not an entitlement. ... If the Organization mandates the use of AWA, there is no requirement for managers and staff to complete any approval form.”

<sup>8</sup> See Interoffice Memorandum OES/B/2 from 12 December 2022; email from ESCAP-HRMS to ESCAP-ALL dated 3 January 2023 at 12.34; and ESCAP HRMS guidance on AWA-SMP & FWA dated January 2023.

<sup>9</sup> See UNOG Broadcast sent on 11 October 2023 at 15.29.

<sup>10</sup> See UNOG Broadcast sent on 4 January 2024 at 11.48.

<sup>11</sup> See UNOG Broadcast sent on 18 April 2024 at 15.24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid



*If the decision is made to temporarily close the Buildings on Campus during the summer, our instructions may be re-evaluated to potentially offer greater flexibility for working away from the duty station.”<sup>13</sup>*

At a townhall in March 2024, UNOG advised staff to request teleworking up to five days a week due to “exigencies of service” given the workspace consolidation. Despite repeated requests from staff and the union, the Director-General decided not to put in place alternate work arrangements and instead emphasized “maximizing the use of telecommuting options.”<sup>14</sup>

- **OCHA:** As part of a decentralization process, the first OCHA staff member relocated to Istanbul in August 2021 to establish a global hub to cover headquarters functions away from headquarters. However, OCHA did not have a physical office in Istanbul. The number of OCHA staff in Istanbul has steadily increased to about 60 to date. However, due to various factors, OCHA continues not to have a physical office in Istanbul. From 2021 to June 2024, WFP provided OCHA with 7-15 desks in its office, increasing the number of desks over time; at best, this arrangement only provided 25% of staff with a desk. With WFP’s office now closed, OCHA no longer has access to these desks. It is expected that OCHA will have its first physical office space in August 2024. For the entire time that staff have been in Istanbul, they have been advised to use flexible working arrangements, including under the current circumstances where OCHA has no physical office in Istanbul<sup>15</sup>. Despite repeated requests from staff and staff representatives, alternate work arrangements have not been put in place.

It is worth reemphasizing that as per [SGB/2019/3](#), a flexible working arrangement is a “voluntary arrangement” for “work-life balance”. It is limited to three days a week and only in compelling personal circumstances are five days allowed. Yet, some UN Secretariat entities have required staff to be on flexible working arrangements – sometimes up to five days a week and without the agreement of staff members – based on financial difficulties and/or lack of a physical office. Further, paragraph 1.3 of SGB/2019/3 clearly states that flexible working arrangements should not be used in some circumstances described above:

*“In line with the policy on the organizational resilience management system and in order to facilitate business continuity during crises, staff members may be requested to work from an alternate work site. Such situations are exceptional and **shall not be considered as flexible working arrangements**. During such exceptional situations, **the Organization shall, to the extent possible, provide affected staff members with the equipment and resources required to discharge their official functions.**”*

When Heads of Entity have decided to restrict physical access to UN premises, this is not optional nor a voluntary telecommuting arrangement between managers and staff but a mandatory requirement by the Organization. The Head of Entity must decide to apply alternate work arrangements. This declaration would also allow staff to request equipment and resources required to discharge their functions at the Organization’s expense. This would also avoid undermining the policy on flexible working arrangements.

Given the above points, the staff-side kindly requests management to

1. Establish guidance (and criteria) to inform both managers and staff, which define circumstances when alternate work arrangements must be in place and what equipment/resources can staff reasonably expect from the Organization in discharging their functions.
2. Clarify under what circumstances may staff be authorized to discharge their functions away from the duty station (both away from the city and country of the UN premises) under alternate work arrangements, when their presence on UN premises is not required;
3. Ensure the uniform application of alternate work arrangements in all circumstances where physical access to UN premises is partially or fully restricted.

<sup>13</sup> See frequently asked questions on [Public Announcement | The United Nations Office at Geneva \(ungeneva.org\)](#)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> See email entitled Office Space Transition: OCHA Istanbul, dated 30 May2024 at 18.58