

**DRAFT REPORT OF
THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FIELD ISSUES**

Introduction

1. The Standing Committee on Field Issues (SC – see Appendix 1 for participants) met twice to address its agenda, elected Véronique Allain (SCBD) as Rapporteur and took part in a joint session on 11 January 2021 to discuss remote working.

Important events in classifying field duty stations in 2020

2. The Member of the FICSA ExCom for Field and Regional Issues reviewed important events in classifying field duty stations during 2020: the mid-year review of a selected list of hardship duty stations (June) and the annual review of the ICSC working group for the classification of field duty stations according to living and working conditions for the Africa Region (December), along with special discussions of the factor of health in the classification of duty stations (July).

Review of duty stations

3. The ICSC Secretariat – working through a tripartite working group (TWG) composed of representatives of the ICSC Secretariat (Mobility and Hardship Division), the UN Secretariat human resources (HR) policy staff, HR policy specialists in UN specialized agencies (including UNHCR, WFP, the UN Secretariat and UNICEF) and the three staff federations – classified duty stations according to their level of hardship: the conditions of life and work for internationally recruited UN staff present for one or more years. This was done every two years, usually in June and November.

4. Duty stations in five regions (Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe/Commonwealth of Independent States) were classified with rankings from A to E. A hardship allowance was paid for duty stations rated B–E, its level increasing with the level of hardship. Duty stations where security conditions posed risks were reviewed annually. If conditions had changed enough to merit a review in the period between mandatory reviews, a duty station could request the Chairman of the ICSC for an out-of-cycle review, and ICSC could request an out-of-cycle review for a duty station that it was monitoring closely.

5. The results of a questionnaire completed by staff members posted in these duty stations determined hardship, on the basis of six factors:

- (a) climate: e.g. severe weather incidents affecting the health and the local living conditions of UN staff; and environmental factors including air, water and noise pollution and food contamination;
- (b) housing: e.g. whether there were adequate housing and proper water/electricity or sanitation systems; secured compounds; adequate refurbishing and repair available locally;
- (c) isolation: e.g. difficulty in communicating in English because of the local language, lack of cultural events, lack of easy changes of scenery, extreme or high levels of isolation with unreliable Internet connections, distant airport or poor flight connections, and no entry or residency for family members;
- (d) local conditions: e.g. lack of availability of the basic amenities for an acceptable standard of living for staff and their families, decent food distribution systems and local recreation facilities; low level of general hygiene in the duty station; and poor quality of running water, reliability of the electricity and public transportation;
- (e) health (assessed by WHO or UN Medical Services): e.g. availability of proper hospitals, specialist care and access, health infrastructure and facilities in general and access to them for UN staff; and
- (f) security and safety (assessed by the UN Department for Security and Safety): e.g. security concerns, rate of criminality and civil unrest, direct threats to UN staff and buildings, and security phases 1–5.

A duty station rated E for security and safety would have serious security concerns.

6. The ICSC Secretariat had held a virtual mid-year review of 18 duty stations, including new and reactivated ones under a temporary classification, and those that were in transition or that had to be classified temporarily prior to deployment of staff from different UN agencies. Since the questionnaires had been sent out before the pandemic had broken out or its effects could be properly assessed, TWG had been asked to refrain from applying a blanket COVID-19 hardship rate to the duty stations under review, but to assess them case by case. COVID-19 had severely affected many headquarters duty stations and their UN staff.

7. TWG adjusted its global rating of nine of the 18 duty stations under review, mostly owing to the effects of the pandemic: Manaus (Brazil), Cartagena (Colombia), Huaquillas (Ecuador), Nekemte (Ethiopia), Esquipulas (Guatemala), Shiraz (Iran), Palenque and Tijuana (Mexico), Beira (Mozambique) and Gaziantep (Turkey). A FICSA report ([FICSA/CIRC/1332](#)) provided further details.

8. The annual review of duty stations on the African continent, held virtually in December, covered 291 duty stations. The region contained the largest number of duty stations where the UN deployed staff. Close to 51% of all duty stations in Africa were rated E, 23% were rated D; 11.5%, C; close to 10%, B; and 5%, A. The top five countries in Africa with the most hardship duty stations were the Democratic Republic of Congo (33), Sudan (27), Ethiopia (20), South Sudan (19) and Nigeria (18).

9. UN organizations' and TWG's duty of care included giving staff being deployed to hardship duty stations accurate and credible information, to enable them to make informed decisions prior to deployment. The revised classification methodology, introduced in November 2017 for the previous review of Africa, had proven to be, although not perfect, better at assessing the factors other than security and health.

This had resulted in reclassifying a wide range of formerly A-rated duty stations in Africa as B, and making it easier to establish the difference between A and B duty stations in the 2020 review. For example, Lomé (Togo) and Cotonou (Bénin) were rated B overall, as they compared better with Luanda (Angola) or Brazzaville (Congo) than Dakar (Sénégal) or Windhoek (Namibia).

10. TWG's experience over the past few years had ensured various perspectives on and careful treatment of special cases. This had enabled the UN General Assembly to adopt a pilot project for 25 special E duty stations in 2018, where security was rated B but the other factors were not conducive to the deployment of families. An exceptional payment of a non-family service allowance of US\$ 15,000 had been introduced as a result. ICSC had been requested to submit a recommendation on the continuation of this payment, based on a review of its impact, including workforce planning and the actual costs to the organizations. The UN organizations with staff in these E duty stations were advised to work on building a strong business case that would help ICSC advise the UN General Assembly at the end of 2021. The COVID pandemic, however, hampered UN organizations with staff deployed in these E duty stations in gathering the information needed.

11. In the ensuing discussion, a participant asked what bearing climatic conditions would have on health ratings. The review of the methodology to classify hardship duty stations in 2017–2018 had allowed for a better reflection of those situations on another important factor: local conditions. The questionnaire now invited UN staff to provide as much information as needed to showcase effects on their everyday lives.

Special health discussions

12. For at least 10 years, TWG had called for more scrutiny of and attention to the health information and data collected through the hardship questionnaires. A separate discussion on this subject was highly needed, to improve the quality of the data provided. The important underlying issue was the staff's health and access to local health facilities meeting good standards. As a result, the FICSA ExCom Member for Field and Regional Issues, with the SC Chair and vice-chairs, had taken part in a special meeting on strengthening the capacity of data collection process for the health factor, organized by the ICSC Secretariat in July 2020. Several key high-level UN staff responsible for the health of their colleagues, in both the UN Secretariat and some specialized agencies (WHO, UNHCR, IMO), and members of TWG used that opportunity to stress the necessity to better capture the effects of COVID-19 on the health of staff in field duty stations.

13. The meeting:

- (a) reaffirmed that other sources of information and data should be explored to better assess the health factor, including the methodology for assessing health risks;
- (b) called for improved cooperation beyond WHO Representatives during the data collection phase, to capture the required health data from other available sources;
- (c) acknowledged that the health-assessment methodology should be reviewed, to better capture the overall classification level of a duty station;
- (d) confirmed the need to modernize and simplify the process of collecting health data, so that questionnaires captured more qualitative data, rather than too many quantitative data; and

- (e) encouraged the creation of an online tool to collect all available data on health in the UN system.

Conclusions

14. The classification exercise of December 2020 confirmed that resources for assessing the health portion of the hardship questionnaires continued to be limited, and that global health-risk assessments required more manpower and resources, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The disconnect between capital cities (where resident coordinators lived) and the smaller duty stations in the same countries continued to impede good assessments of the health facilities used by UN staff locally.

15. FICSA would continue to advocate interagency collaborative efforts to conduct global health-risk assessments and to inform UN staff working in the field of the available local health resources. This would only improve the overall process of hardship classification and help to fulfil UN organizations' duty of care.

Recommendations

16. The SC recommended that the FICSA ExCom should continue its active involvement in the meetings and discussions called for by ICSC and other stakeholders, to classify field duty stations according to their level of hardship. This would include gathering as much information as possible from the FICSA membership on specific issues related to their local living conditions.

17. The SC recommended that the FICSA ExCom should strongly support an improvement of the assessments of health in questionnaires used in the annual review of hardship classification, by gathering information from FICSA members on their experience with local health facilities and services and supplying the info to TWG.

Summary of the 32nd session of the Inter-Agency Security Management Network

18. The Inter-Agency Security Management Network (IASMN) comprised staff from the UN Secretariat and the specialized agencies who were highly knowledgeable in the field of security. IASMN usually met twice a year, inviting staff federations to attend; the Vice-President of UNISERV had represented FICSA at the 32nd session, held virtually in June 2020.

19. The 32nd session had had three main outcomes. First, it had established a new Strategic Communications Working Group to sell the role of UN security inside and outside the UN Security Management System (UNSMS) and to enhance the effectiveness of messages on security in the UN at large. Second, downloading the new eTA (Emergency Telecommunication Application – part of the Security Risk Management framework) was not yet mandatory; it should not be taken as a travel application but would facilitate providing assistance to UN personnel in crisis in a mission setting. As eTA showed many shortcomings, in comparison with other available security communications and analysis networks, however, UN agencies, funds and programmes were asked to put its introduction on hold for the time being.

20. Third, it was important to include the consideration of staff with disabilities or those with difficulty coping with crowds in the plans for security-risk management in

emergency evacuations from UN buildings. It was suggested that the FICSA Secretariat inform IASMN as soon as possible that such plans did not consider disability in many UN duty stations.

21. A participant asked about the level of information available before the deployment of UN staff belonging to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and intersex (LGBTQI) community. The rules and laws in many countries where the UN was active could lead to traumatic experiences for LGBTQI staff.

Recommendations

22. SC recommended that FICSA representatives should raise the issue of minimum standards for the security and accessibility in UN common buildings in all fora, including IASMN, as the opportunity arises.

23. SC recommended that the FICSA ExCom should work with [UN Globe](#) to identify key issues of concern related to security for LGBTQI staff that might be raised during IASMN meetings.

Medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) framework for UN personnel in a COVID-19 context

24. The COVID-19 pandemic had posed unprecedented challenges to all staff, which required the UN to rethink its operational model for MEDEVAC to ensure staff's wellbeing. The UN system had taken a number of steps – including establishing the MEDEVAC Task Force (MEDEVAC TF), constructing hospitals in the field in several countries and renewing operational procedures – although many staff were not aware of them. Staff representatives had a responsibility, under the duty of care, to assess the systems put in place and to ensure that they were adequate for the evolving environment.

25. Dr Nazar Al-Dabbagh, Chief of FAO Medical Services and a member of MEDEVAC TF, briefed SC on this subject. The UN system-wide MEDEVAC TF in response to COVID-19 had been established with a mandate until 31 December 2020. It had rapidly made agreements with countries (Australia, China, Cuba, Egypt, Kuwait, Singapore, the Russian Federation, Uganda and the United Arab Emirates) to accept COVID-19 patients on a case-by-case basis, and established regional hubs in Accra (Ghana), Nairobi (Kenya) and San José (Costa Rica). As the need to inform UN staff of available services became more obvious, 130 coordinators had been assigned and trained.

26. As of 2 December 2020, 100 MEDEVACs had been carried out. The top 10 countries with COVID-19 MEDEVACs were: Afghanistan and the Central African Republic (14 from each), South Sudan (9), Uzbekistan (7), Sudan (6), Bangladesh (5), Madagascar and Somalia (4 from each), and Albania, Tajikistan and Yemen (3 from each).

27. WFP was the financial administrator of MEDEVAC funds, and WFP, WHO and the UN Department of Operational Support (DOS) were responsible for contracting services and procuring equipment and other consumables for TF. The budget was on the order of US\$ 100 million; about US\$ 40 million had been spent on MEDEVACs by

the end of October 2020. That boded well for requesting an extension of the MEDEVAC TF until the end of 2021 and for rolling over the unspent funds.

28. The COVID-19 MEDEVAC TF was a well functioning mechanism with a good governance structure, and compensated very efficiently for the gaps in the normal MEDEVAC infrastructure available for UN staff. Robust mechanisms needed to be put in place in UN entities to inform their staff about the system, particularly those working and living in the field.

29. The ensuing discussion included a description of the first line of defence (FLOD): finding local medical facilities to treat UN staff for COVID-19 in order to avoid MEDEVACs. The best system of medical clinics was linked to IOM, which had the most extensive health network available in many countries, particularly for duty stations with substandard health facilities. FAO had approved FLOD arrangements for staff members and their dependents in 17 countries, and the FLOD plan covered consultants and their dependants through IOM.

30. Participants asked what categories of staff were entitled to MEDEVACs and what happened in the current context of teleworking outside of the assigned regular duty station. Entitlements to MEDEVACs were organization specific and based on factors such as the allocated budget, the size of the workforce and the mandate of the organization. In FAO in particular, consultants' dependents were not entitled to MEDEVACs that were not related to COVID-19. As to teleworking outside the regular duty station of assignment, staff members to be located in high-risk countries for COVID-19 cases, were warned that going to the countries would be too risky and to avoid travel. When the staff member would telecommute out of a duty station where the health facilities would be able to cope with the pandemic, there would be no problem.

31. SC supported carrying forward of MEDEVAC TF and its funding into 2021.

Recommendation

32. SC recommended that the FICSA ExCom should request membership in the MEDEVAC TF, and support the establishment of a UN-system-wide communications mechanism to ensure that staff know their rights, and that the MEDEVAC processes are adequately included in and aligned with the hardship-classification framework and the information packages provided to FICSA members based in the field.

ICSC mobility framework 2020, with emphasis on hardship duty stations

33. Staff mobility both helped the UN properly to develop its activities and programmes and to adapt its operations to the constantly changing global environment, and strongly influenced the professional and private lives of staff. Any policy on mobility needed to consider the requirements of both parties.

34. UN-system organizations moved staff through transfers, secondments and loans. ICSC, the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) and the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) revised the Inter-Organization Agreement and periodically examined mobility between agencies: those examinations consistently found that mobility was limited and staff driven, with little evident organizational interest; organizations knew the barriers well, but usually did nothing about them.

35. While many administrative tools had been provided to enable transactions to be carried out, a vital element was still lacking: a set of organizational policies and strategies that framed the use of interagency mobility in both the corporate interest of the UN system and the interest of staff. A 2020 ICSC [guide](#) contained updated information on the mobility and hardship scheme and related arrangements. Their primary aim was to offer a comprehensive approach to compensation for service in the field and provide incentives for staff to accept assignments to the difficult and sometimes dangerous locations where staffing and effective programme delivery were often the most challenging. The ICSC booklet was intended as a general information tool, however, and did not supersede organizations' staff rules and regulations.

36. In conclusion, the FICSA Council's discussion of mobility was meant to keep the dialogue open, not to find an immediate solution to the policy's many shortcomings. A survey of FICSA member organizations could show what mechanisms were in place to implement a mobility policy across functions, departments and duty stations. An additional analysis could look at the harmonization of practices within the UN system, if any, to facilitate interagency mobility. Those would eventually lead to a suite of unique tailored policies.

37. In the ensuing discussion, a participant asked about the overall guidance available from ICSC on the duration of stays in hardship duty stations. Unfortunately, no clear guidance was available, so each UN agency was left to implement its own framework. SC considered that detrimental to staff's wellbeing. Staff deployed in hardship duty stations raised many concerns about the improvement of working and living conditions, and potential of the implementation of the mobility policy as a means to share the burden among staff deployed in very challenging field locations and lacking the opportunity to move.

Recommendation

38. In view of the discussion of the ICSC mobility framework, SC recommended that the FICSA ExCom should ascertain through a survey what mechanisms FICSA members' organizations are implementing to achieve a mobility policy across functions, departments and duty stations.

Nomination of SC officers and core group members

39. The following delegates were nominated as Standing Committee officers:

- Cosimo Melpignano (UNGSC) as Chair
- Line Kaspersen (AP-in-FAO) as Vice-Chair
- Vito Musa (UNGSC) as Vice-Chair
- Véronique Allain (SCBD) as Rapporteur

40. The following participants in the SC were nominated as members of the core group:

- Jakob Skoet (AP-in-FAO)
- Susan Murray (FAO/WFP-UGSS)
- Anthony Ndinguri (ICAO)
- Andrea Palazzi (UNAIDS)

- Nizar Zaher (OSCE)
- Osadolor Akpata (UNIDO)
- Hamidou Bague (WHO/AFRO)
- Rajesh Meta (WHO NEW DELHI)
- Sanid Vlajcic (WHO/EURO)
- Priya Mannava (WHO/GSC)
- Po-lin Chang (WHO/WPRO).

Appendix 1. Participants

Chair	Cosimo Melpignano (UNGSC)
Vice-Chair	Line Kaspersen (AP-in-FAO)
Vice-Chair	Vito Musa (UNGSC)
Rapporteur and FICSA ExCom Member	Véronique Allain (SCBD)
FICSA President	Tanya Quinn-Maguire (UNAIDS)
FICSA General Secretary	Evelyn Kortum (WHO/HQ)
FICSA Regional Representative	Anthony Ndinguri (ICAO)
Staff association/union	
AP-in-FAO	Jakob Skoet
FAO/WFP-UGSS	Dina Franchi, Paola Franceschelli, Susan Murray, Silvia Mariangeloni
IAEA	Jean Bartocci
ICAO	Andrew Brown
OSCE	Nizar Zaher
SCBD	Lisa Pedicelli
UNAIDS	Andrea Palazzi
UNIDO	Osadolor Akpata, Laura Reynaldo
UNESCO	Steve Eales
UNGSC	Elia Matias, Cosimo Lunedi
WHO/AFRO	Hamidou Bague
WHO/EURO	Sanid Vljacic
WHO/GSC	Aizat Khalid
WHO/WPRO	Priya Mannava, Po-lin Chang
Members with associate status	
IOM	Deborah Fanin
Members with consultative status	
UNFCU	Timothy Challen, Elisabeth Philippe