

Classification of duty stations according to the level of hardship and what you need to know before your next deployment

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This article will give you an overview of the importance of a properly classified duty station, from hardship levels A to E, for internationally-recruited UN staff to be in a position to make the right decision before deployment with or without the family. More than ever, the UN common system is having to operate in more risky, insecure and very remote locations with limited infrastructures and the Duty of Care of UN organizations deploying staff away from HQs calls for providing the right amount of information to UN staff before deployment.

The classification of duty stations according to the level of hardship is an annual exercise (November), conducted per region, by a tri-partite working group (the ICSC, representatives from UN organizations and representatives from the 3 Staff Federations) under the auspices of the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) to review a list of duty stations situated in three different regions: (a) Africa; (b) Asia and the Pacific; and (c) Latin America, the Middle East and Eastern Europe/Commonwealth of Independent States.

Under the hardship scheme, the duty stations are grouped into six categories by level of difficulty, “H” and “A” to “E”. The so-called “H” duty stations are headquarters’ duty stations and similarly designated locations where the United Nations has no developmental or humanitarian assistance programmes, or locations in countries that are members of the European Union. “A” to “E” duty stations are considered to be field duty stations, with “A” being the least difficult and “E” the most difficult.

A hardship allowance is paid for assignments at “B”, “C”, “D” and “E” duty stations; there is no hardship allowance at locations designated as a headquarters (“H”) or “A” duty station. The hardship allowance varies according to the category of the duty station, as well as staff member’s grade.

All duty stations, where the UN is deploying staff, are reviewed on a mandatory basis, once in a three-year period, through a lengthy and detailed questionnaire sent to the Resident Coordinators and other representatives of UN agencies in the duty stations. These questionnaires need to be returned to the ICSC dully filled out and accompanied by supplementary information and data (as much information on the duty station as possible, even pictures of the localities are good sources of information) provided by the UN community on-site. The questionnaires do prove to be a useful tool which, when completed correctly, provide a good insight into the life and work of internationally-recruited P-staff in the field.

Duty stations where security conditions pose risks are reviewed annually. If conditions have changed enough to merit a review in the period between mandatory reviews, a duty station may submit a request to the Chairman of the ICSC Commission for an out-of-cycle review. In addition, the Commission may also request an out-of-cycle review for a duty station that it is monitoring closely.

The methodology to classify these duty stations was revised in 2017-2018 and this review was necessary in order to assess better the weight given to factors

others than security and health, such as isolation (ISO), local conditions (LOC), housing (HOU) and climate (CLI). Over the years and the different cycles of classification, the Tripartite Working Group (TWG) realized that duty stations with no real security challenges per se but with significant hardship due to the other factors such as ISO (physical or social), LOC, HOU, CLI were not treated in a similar fashion. The TWG came up with a suitable definition of hardship: circumstances and living conditions that pose on-going discomfort, deprivation and difficulties.

One might ask what type of questions are asked in the questionnaires to assess the different criteria listed above. Here are a few insights:

- Under the criteria HOUSING: for instance availability of or lack of adequate housing; availability or not of the basic amenities of life for an acceptable standard of living for staff and their families, basic facilities, level of general hygiene in the duty station, quality of the running water, reliability of the electricity, public transportation.
- Under the criteria ISOLATION: internet connections, are they reliable or existing? Airport facilities: airlines serving the airport, availability of frequent flights and flight connections, entry or residency status of the family members, etc. Local language is mostly spoken with English or French not easily understood by the local population. It is, therefore, difficult to communicate with the local population. Also, if the population of expatriate women does not feel safe to walk around in the streets or the parks of the duty station, it is good to mention it.
- Under the criteria LOCAL CONDITIONS: although the health facilities are assessed through other means, it is good to record the state of the local hospitals and the local health infrastructure/ facilities for the population of expatriate UN staff, or the access or lack of it to local specialist care. You may also inform about the availability of fresh products and fresh food in the duty station and the state of local supermarkets (decent food distribution systems), the sanitation system, the state of the roads and local means of transportation (road infrastructure), the existence or not of sports facilities and movie-theatres and other entertainment;
- Under the criteria CLIMATE, it is relevant to mention the occurrence of significant natural disasters, the impact of climate and environmental factors on the life at the duty station, the extreme pollution events (air, water and noise pollution and food contamination), the mitigation measures put in place (if any) and the severe weather incidents with impacts on the health of UN staff so that they can be properly reflected in the health ratings

The FICSA Federation will continue advocating for deployment briefings to communicate to UN staff the real hardship levels (actual conditions of living on-site) and whether or not it is a duty station appropriate for families to live a decent life. The Federation could also engage in discussions to put in place more resources in terms of wellness programmes, proper medical and psychological care, and assessments of the psycho-social impacts of a deployment in a duty-station with a high level of hardship.

