

Classifications of hardship duty stations

What does it mean in the duty of care regime and what can i do to impact them?

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Article only available in English

If the UN is to continue to be able to recruit staff of the highest caliber to work in all duty stations of the world, it must respect its Duty of Care towards its personnel. This is a topic increasingly on the agenda across the board. One of the critical aspects of the Duty of Care is the classification of a duty station according to its level of hardship.

In March 2018, a new methodology for the hardship classification was approved by the ICSC Chairman after months of intensive work and analysis in the TWG. The new methodology represents a significant shift in the interpretation of hardship and thus in the UN system's Duty of Care towards staff. Whereas the classification in the past was mainly based on a security assessment (by UNDSS and with additional input from the UNCTs), an index has now been put in

place, capturing a wider range of hardship elements, as presented in the table below.

Each of the sub-factors are scored and weighed together to create the overall hardship classification. However, the final classification is based on a flexible and detailed analysis of each of the scores, with extremes carrying more weight than just A or B classifications, which is why the TWG was of the opinion that the Health and Security indicators were given too much emphasis compared to the other factors which have an overall bigger impact on the daily life of UN staff deployed in the field (overall local conditions in the duty station, overall level of isolation, housing situation, climatic elements, etc.).

What is the hardship classification?

Each UN duty station where international staff is deployed, is classified according to its level of hardship, ranging from E (the highest level of hardship) to A (acceptable level of hardship). The H duty-stations are Headquarters' duty stations where the UN does not carry out developmental or peace-keeping operations. The classification is based on various variables collected at country level and updated regularly.

What is the hardship classification used for?

- Establishing hardship entitlements including hardship allowances (Cat B and below) and danger pay
- Designation of duty stations as non-family (Cat C and below) and establishing Rest and Recuperation Entitlements
- Ensuring that proper deployment briefings are given to staff members and his/her dependents
- Ensuring that appropriate Duty of Care towards personnel is exercised; for example, providing extra support to individuals who have been constantly deployed in difficult duty stations and risk stress/burnout; and
- Impacts mobility schemes in some agencies.

See more about this in a separate article of this magazine!

Abbreviation	Sub-factor	Description	Comment
SEC	Security	Assessment based on UNDSS categorization, related to armed conflict, robbery, theft, kidnap etc.	Original core sub-factor as main determinant
HEA	Health	Relates both to availability of adequate medical facilities (including availability of medicines, lifesaving equipment etc.), but also access to these facilities for all nationals	New variables introduced, which now all weigh at par with security. Determined through questionnaires and special field missions of the ICSC
ISO	Isolation	Captures both physical and social, e.g. local recreation facilities not easily accessible, local population speaks only the local language, airport is far, remote island states, etc.	
LOC	Local Conditions	Covers a wide range of considerations, for example pollution and limited infrastructure	
HOU	Housing	Captures the relative availability of adequate housing opportunities	
CLI	Climate	Captures the occurrence of significant natural disasters (such as tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes), 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),	New sub-factor of secondary importance, where there might be exceptional cases to be reviewed case-by-case

The new methodology was developed based on a careful analysis of the reported cases and based on the general principle that there needs to be flexibility in the interpretation of the data, in the analysis of the country specific context and in the careful treatment of special cases (e.g. Iran, Cuba, Venezuela). It has also been observed that, in the past, the difference between “A” and “B” category duty stations was not clear, creating some confusion and frustrations amongst staff.

2019 achievements of the TWG

In the TWG session of November 2019, duty stations in the Asia and Pacific region (89 duty stations) were reviewed, as well as 11 duty stations classified on a transitional basis; and 9 new duty stations classified on a temporary basis, as a number of agencies have to deploy staff there. Examples include:

- Colombo, Sri Lanka, where the situation is still being monitored following the terrorist attacks in April 2019
- Pristina, Pec and Mitrovica, Serbia, which face serious issues about health facilities, visas for staff and dependents and thus lack of freedom of movement, leading to isolation. A fact-finding

mission led to a classification at the C level for these duty stations

- Islamabad, Pakistan has had family restrictions lifted in June 2019 as security conditions had improved dramatically – this was the result of 5 years of intense discussions between local authorities and the UN RCs/Heads of Agencies

The TWG continues to pursue flexibility in interpretation of the index, to cater for specific situations such as the below:

- 28 duty stations, for example Buenos Aires, Tel Aviv, Panama City, Seoul, Singapore and small European towns like Brindisi, Lesbos, Valencia are classified as “A” in all sub-factors, except CLI which could be A or B. Removing these from the hardship scheme and into the “H” classification could free up assessment resources to other duty stations where hardship is a significant factor.
- About 30 “E” duty stations, each with only few staff, are not designated as non-family, although local conditions do not seem conducive to the “normal” life of an expatriate child or spouse. For example, Cox’ Bazar, Bangladesh (home to

Field issues

many Rohingya refugees) is currently a family-duty station (although classified as “C” in overall hardship), while at the same time women need to be escorted around and staff members are to reside inside the UNDSS designated compounds.

- Many countries in the South Pacific are prone to hurricanes, typhoons or flooding but do not have robust systems to manage the situations, exposing UN staff to high risk. This means that duty stations such as Fiji, Samoa, Tuvalu, Cook Islands or Vanuatu could warrant an overall “B” in the level of hardship.

What can we do as FICSA – and as individual members?

The TWG relies on data collected by the UN system in-country (see a separate article in this newsletter). This is usually coordinated through the Resident Coordinator and UN Country Teams (UNCT). If the UNCT feels that the hardship classification is not correct, or there have been significant changes in the situation at country level since the last review, an out-of-cycle review can be requested for. Fact finding missions from the ICSC Secretariat can also

be requested to ensure that the situation is properly understood. In some cases, questionnaires are not returned or data on important variables are missing and no informed decision can be made. Yet, a duty station must always have a hardship classification. Therefore, we want to hear from everyone about the issues they are facing. Specific actions to be taken could include:

- FICSA could push for a systematic assessment of all the factors above, so that we ensure that all duty stations are classified properly
- Staff members may all contribute to collecting data from the field and share it with the ICSC, through their UN agency locally
- Staff representatives can ensure that UNCTs are aware of the exercise and that sufficient time and manpower is allocated to answer questionnaires in detail
- Members deployed in the field should keep the FICSA EXCOM informed of the actual conditions of living for staff and this could be supported by Regional Representatives.

