

ICSC Questionnaire for the Hardship Classification of Duty Stations According to Conditions of Life and Work

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Q: What is the ICSC questionnaire for the hardship classification of duty stations according to conditions of life and work?

A: The questionnaire is the tool used by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) to review the level of hardship of duty stations within distinct regions where the United Nations (UN) operates. The questionnaire is presented to the ICSC Tripartite Working Group for the Review of Conditions of Life and Work in the Field Duty Stations (the Tripartite Working Group, TWG) to determine the level of hardship experienced by internationally-recruited UN staff. Each region is being reviewed every three years; ad hoc reviews are also possible (*cf.* more information below). Therefore, each duty station goes through mandatory review at least once every 36 months. Current geographical groups are (group 1): Asia and the Pacific; (group 2): Africa; (group 3): Latin America and the Caribbean, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Middle East.

2. Q: Why does ICSC run the assessment?

A: As the conditions of life and work vary across the world, the UN System provides compensation to staff for hardship incurred while working and living in difficult duty stations. The purpose of the assessment is to review existing classification or to designate new classification and determine the respective levels of the annual hardship allowance based on the category of duty station. In addition, the level of classification of the duty impacts other entitlements, such as the frequency of home leave and danger pay.

3. Q: Why do I need to fill out the questionnaire?

A: If a questionnaire is not submitted, the ICSC nonetheless assigns a classification based on other available information, even if outdated information. Therefore, filling out the questionnaire is your opportunity to inform the ICSC of the real conditions of life and work in your duty station and to be able to advocate for appropriate entitlements.

4. Q: What are categories of UN duty stations?

A: All UN duty stations are categorized into one of six duty stations: H, A, B, C, D or E. The consolidated list of all classified duty stations can be found here:
<https://icsc.un.org/Home/DataMobility>

5. Q: What do these letters/categories mean?

A: “H” category duty stations are assigned to either Headquarters, other similarly designated locations with no UN development/humanitarian assistance programmes or in the countries, which are members of the European Union. The current list of “H” category duty stations can be found in Annex 1. All other duty stations are categorized based on the level of hardship experienced when working and living in these duty stations, with “A” category duty stations being the least difficult and “E” category duty stations being the most difficult and with the highest level of hardship.

6. Q: Do all staff receive hardship allowance?

A: The hardship allowance is payable to internationally recruited UN staff members who serve in either “B”, “C”, “D” or “E” category duty station. The allowance is not payable to: (i) internationally recruited staff serving in duty stations belonging to either “H” or “A”; (ii) internationally recruited staff who are in receipt of a daily subsistence allowance (*per diem*); (iii) locally recruited UN staff; (iv) UN volunteers (internationally or locally recruited); (v) consultants or contractors (local or international).

7. Q: How much is the hardship allowance?

A: The hardship allowance varies according to the grade of staff and the category that has been assigned to a duty station and is reviewed every 3 years (next revision scheduled for January 2023). Annual hardship allowance, in effect from 1 January 2020, amounts to (in \$US):

Duty station category	Staff group 1 (P1, P2, P3)	Staff group 2 (P4 and P5)	Staff group 3 (P6/D1 and above)
A	not payable	not payable	not payable
B	5,930	7,110	8,300
C	10,680	13,040	15,410
D	14,230	16,610	18,960
E	17,790	21,340	23,720

8. Q: Can reviews take place on an *ad hoc* basis or more often?

A: If work and living conditions in a duty station have significantly changed in the period between mandatory reviews, the duty station may request the Chair of ICSC for an ‘out of cycle’ review. In addition, the ICSC may also request a duty station that is being closely monitored (for instance, for security reasons or because of political instability) to submit an ‘out-of-cycle’ review. If UNDSS designates a D level for security and safety reasons in a particular duty station, the review will happen every year.

9. Q: So, what are types of classification?

A: In essence, there are three types of classifications:

Regular classification: the classification suggested by the work of the ICSC Tripartite Working Group (TWG) approved by the Chair of ICSC and which is valid for three years, until the next cycle of the mandatory review.

Transitional classification: the classification that has been given to a duty station which is being carefully monitored for one year. Such classification indicates possible reclassification of the duty station, with the duty station being required to submit a new questionnaire the following year after the temporary classification has been granted.

Temporary classification: the classification of a duty station that is not on the latest Consolidated List (available at: <https://icsc.un.org/Home/DataMobility>). As a rule, this applies to locations where a UN agency plans to assign international staff and where no UN agency has had internationally recruited staff serving before. Such classification is valid for one year, after which a questionnaire must be submitted for formal review.

Classification type	Validity period	Interim/ad hoc review	Serving UN staff
Regular	3 years	Yes	Yes
Transitional	1 year	Yes	Yes
Temporary	1 year	Yes	Not yet

10. Q: Who does the review?

A: The review is managed by the ICSC secretariat and carried out by the ICSC Tripartite Working Group (TWG). The TWG consists of the ICSC secretariat, representatives of UN organizations which deploy staff in the field and the representatives from the recognized three UN staff federations. The Working Group reviews the results of the questionnaire and makes the recommendation to the Chair of ICSC, who makes the final decision about the hardship classification.

11. Q: When the review is done?

A: The Working Group meets once a year, usually in November. In addition, it may meet in June to review newly established duty stations (to assign a temporary classification) or to review duty stations that are ‘out of cycle’ (to assign a transitional classification). The promulgated results of the reviews are published twice a year, effective 1 January and 1 July, unless otherwise announced. Current results can be found at: <https://icsc.un.org/Home/DataMobility>

12. Q: How is the review done?

A: Upon receiving a completed questionnaire from a duty station, the ICSC secretariat conducts initial review and assigns preliminary scores. Questions on security are reviewed by the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS). Questions on health are reviewed by the UN Healthcare Management and Occupational Safety and Health -DHMOSH (formally UN Medical Services). After the initial scoring, the Tripartite Working Group examines the initial ranking, as done by the ICSC secretariat, and discusses the ranking. In addition, the Working Group may seek eye-witness accounts and views of its members and others who have recently traveled to or served in a location under review. A final recommendation on the classification is made by consensus. The Working Group then presents its recommendations to the Chair of ICSC who makes the final decision.

13. Q: What is a hardship questionnaire?

A: The ICSC Secretariat has developed a questionnaire to assess hardship conditions of live and work of UN staff across UN duty stations. The questionnaire seeks to collect detailed information about six discrete factors: health, security, local conditions, isolation, climate and housing based on 130 questions. The questionnaire is available here: <https://icsc.un.org/Home/DataMobility>

14. Q: Why is the questionnaire so detailed?

A: The purpose of the assessment is to determine, based on as much information as possible, various levels of hardship that UN staff experience while serving in different places. The questionnaire aimed at covering a variety of issues that diverse teams of UN agencies may experience, based on numerous factors, such as safety and security, access to services and their quality, ethnic or gender-specific limitations that UN staff may face, overall quality of life, isolation and others.

15. Q: How many questionnaires does a duty station need to submit?

A: For each duty station only one completed questionnaire should be submitted, usually by the UN Resident Coordinator. However, in preparing responses, internationally recruited staff from all resident agencies in the duty station should provide feedback to capture all aspects of living and work conditions experienced by expatriate UN system staff.

16. Q: What is the approved way to fill out the questionnaire?

A: There is no official/formal way or rule on how the questionnaire should be filled out. Each duty station should determine the approach that is best fit, reflecting the number of resident UN agencies, total staff count, availability of information. However, a good practice is to establish a ‘within duty station’ working group or committee tasked with coordinating the timely and quality submission process. Agencies may consider assigning a lead agency to cover specific section of the questionnaire (for instance, section B on climate and environment factors may be filled out by UNEP and UNDP; section C on housing may be filled out by UN-Habitat, etc.). Section F on security must be filled out by security officers in the local UN Security Management System and UNDSS will review this input; while section G on health must be filled out either by the local WHO representative or the local UN examining physician or by both and the DHMOSH will review this input too.

17. Q: How do I fill out the questionnaire?

A: The ICSC Secretariat sends out the questionnaire to a designated lead agency, usually UNRC office, in a timely manner (usually in early July with a deadline of mid-August). In addition, the questionnaire is available on the ICSC website here: <https://icsc.un.org/Home/DataMobility>. ICSC will accept only one completed questionnaire for each duty station. Therefore, a consensus among all UN resident agencies in a duty station should be reached prior to the submission of filled questionnaire. If the consensus cannot be reached, UNRC takes the final decision as to the information to be submitted to ICSC.

18. Q: What information should the responses to questionnaire contain?

A: Most of the questions in the questionnaire will require to either provide numeric response or to select respective answer by ticking relevant box. The responses can be accompanied by additional information, such as links to articles, photos, videos, testimonies or other pieces of information in support of responses. Providing additional information – either narrative or visual – is not mandatory. However, doing so will support UNRC’s proposal for requesting a specific classification and provide evidence for ICSC to accurately classify a duty station.

19. Q: Do you have any tips on how to better fill out the questionnaire?

A: When preparing your responses, put yourself in the shoes of the reviewers who may have never been to your duty station and will have to make the decision about life and work conditions solely based on the information that you have provided. It is important to convey all information as accurately and as in details as possible. Do not assume that what is widely known to you will be widely known to the ICSC Secretariat or the members of the Working Group.

Do not concentrate only on listing services that are not available (for instance, specific housing or recreational facilities). If relevant, provide evidence that mere availability of services does not imply their quality. The ICSC Secretariat needs to know all aspects of hardship that UN staff experience. That includes both availability/absence of services and facilities as well as their quality and accessibility. Below are tips for some of the survey’s sections:

Section D: ISOLATION

Provide information on both internal and external mobility opportunities. If there is an international airport in your duty station, it’s worth assessing to which extent the airport is well connected with major cities in the region comparing with other neighboring duty stations. You may find that despite having an international airport, there are only a handful of nonstop flights or destinations that the airport serves, and available transit airports do not provide opportunities for wider onward connections. Similarly, consider possible travel restriction that are in place (visa requirements, availability of visa and consular services in your duty station). In this section, it’s worth informing the ICSC on the availability and diversity of recreational facilities that allows you to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Make sure to also specify factors that may negatively impact your life, such as restrictions to move around due to safety, security, gender-based discrimination or environmental issues. This may include stray animals, gangs, terrain configuration. If there are ongoing local unrests in your duty station that influence your life and work, make sure to mention them, as such news may not have been covered in international media. Also mention the internet connections and availability. Do mention if a staff member life and well-being is impacted by the country’s socio-cultural or other norms and traditions.

Section E: LOCAL CONDITIONS

If you serve in a family duty station and yet local work and living conditions prevent you from having your family members living with you, you should outline this and provide reasons. This can be, for instance, difficulty to obtain work visas for family members, unrecognition of same-sex

partnerships or marriages, absence of international schools for children or poor quality of educational services, etc. Reflect on availability, quality and safety of local transport and taxis. You may wish to provide more details on the diversity of available food and other commodities, whether you experience water, electricity, heating supply interruptions and how they impact your work and life. Similar, narrate about quality of air and noise pollution, trash utilization, general hygiene of the place, prevalence of smoking in public places. If you work in a duty station where people of certain ethnic origin may experience direct/indirect discrimination, make sure to mention this and how it has impacted work and life conditions of such staff.

Section G: HEALTH

Colleagues from WHO or UN examining physician should critically assess both the availability and quality of curative and preventive health services at a duty station. This includes the assessment of hospital safety, knowledge and skills of medical staff of the infection prevention and control, availability of general and specialized health workforce. Consider doing research on the level of antimicrobial consumption in your duty station, prevalence of counterfeit medicines and products, as well as enforcement of regulatory and quality control mechanisms on pharmaceuticals. Consider reflecting on preventive services that UN staff can access, for instance, on routine cancer screening and immunization. Of utmost importance is to inform about the availability and quality of emergency medical services and infrastructure, most notably, on the number and conditions of ambulances. If in your duty station female UN staff members cannot access services on sexual and reproductive health, make sure to mention this in respective section. If you have had a medical emergency, please tell if the diagnosis was reliable, if the medical equipment was in good order, if the medications are easily available, etc.

20. Q: Where can I get additional support?

A: FICSA is currently creating a pool of experts who can support its members in filling out the questionnaire. On FICSA's webpage we have a dedicated section, where you can find additional information and support materials. Furthermore, you may contact colleagues from the ICSC Secretariat to seek further guidance.

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Annex 1: List of “H” category duty stations (all cities in an entire country)

Locations of headquarters of the UN organizations	Similar designated locations with the UN presence	Locations in the countries of the European Union
Austria Canada France Italy Spain Switzerland United Kingdom United States of America	Australia Japan Norway New Zealand	Austria Belgium Bulgaria Cyprus Czechia Denmark Finland France Germany Greece Hungary Ireland Italy Latvia Lithuania Luxembourg Malta Netherlands Poland Portugal Romania Slovakia Slovenia Spain Sweden