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UNFPA – Reports of UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS Ethics Offices

United Nations Population Fund

Report of the Ethics Office 2020

Summary

This report is submitted to the Executive Board pursuant to paragraph 9 of Executive Board decision 2010/17: Reports of the Ethics Offices of UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS. In accordance with the Secretary-General's bulletin entitled United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes (ST/SGB/2007/11/Amend.1), the report was reviewed by the Ethics Panel of the United Nations in 2021 and presented to the UNFPA Executive Director.

The report provides a summary of the activities of the UNFPA Ethics Office during 2020, and describes trends in the mandated areas of its work. It also provides recommendations to management to further strengthen the organizational culture of integrity and compliance.

The report was considered at the 131st meeting of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations.

Elements of a decision

The Executive Board may wish to take note of the present report, and welcome continued progress in the work of the UNFPA Ethics Office.



I. Introduction

1. The present report, the 13th since establishment of the UNFPA Ethics Office in 2008, covers the 2020 calendar year. Pursuant to paragraph 9 of Executive Board decision 2010/17, the report, prepared in accordance with the Secretary-General's bulletin, "United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes" (ST/SGB/2007/11, as amended), is submitted to the Board at its annual session in 2021.
2. The Ethics Office supports the Executive Director in helping to ensure that all UNFPA staff and other personnel perform their functions consistent with the highest ethical standards required by the Charter of the United Nations, the Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service, the Staff Regulations and Staff Rules, and UNFPA policies and procedures. The Ethics Office operates on principles of independence, impartiality and confidentiality. Its activities aim to promote an organizational culture based on shared values of integrity, accountability, transparency, professionalism, respect and tolerance.
3. This report describes the key activities undertaken by the Ethics Office in 2020. It also suggests ways to strengthen the organization's ability to maintain the ethical standards necessary for UNFPA to continue to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled.
4. Key outputs for 2020 were as follows:
 - (a) The number of personnel trained live (1,150) increased by 262 per cent from 2019.
 - (b) Compliance with online training increased from 50 per cent to 72 per cent.
 - (c) Personnel engagement with the Ethics intranet page increased by 95 per cent from 2019 (6,114 page views in a three-month period).
 - (d) The Ethics Office provided advice and guidance to 209 personnel (up from 186 in 2019). The number of personnel seeking advice and guidance on workplace issues, such as harassment, abuse of authority and other misconduct, remained stable (34, compared with 29 in 2019).
 - (e) The number of allegations of retaliation (2) remained stable.
 - (f) The Ethics Office achieved 100 per cent compliance with the financial disclosure programme. External verification did not identify any conflicts of interest among filers.

II. Activities of the UNFPA Ethics Office

5. As in previous years, the activities of the Ethics Office were undertaken in the following mandated areas of work:
 - (a) Providing confidential advice and guidance;
 - (b) Administering the financial disclosure programme;
 - (c) Taking responsibility for activities assigned to the Ethics Office under the policy for the protection against retaliation;
 - (d) Developing standards, training and education on ethics issues, and conducting ethics outreach, in coordination with relevant units of UNFPA and with the Ethics Panel of the

United Nations (EPUN), to ensure consistent application of ethics-related policies and standards in the United Nations system; and

- (e) Providing guidance to management to ensure that the organization's rules, policies, procedures and practices reinforce and promote the highest standards of ethics and integrity required by the United Nations Charter and other applicable staff regulations and rules.
6. In furtherance of this mandate, the Ethics Office provided services on 430 occasions in 2020 (compared with 309 in 2019).
7. Figure 1 below shows that most of the 430 services provided in 2020 were advisory (209), followed by standard-setting (58) and financial disclosure matters (55). Table 1 below summarizes the services provided by the Ethics Office over the most recent four-year period, 2017-2020.

Figure 1
Requests for services, by category, in 2020

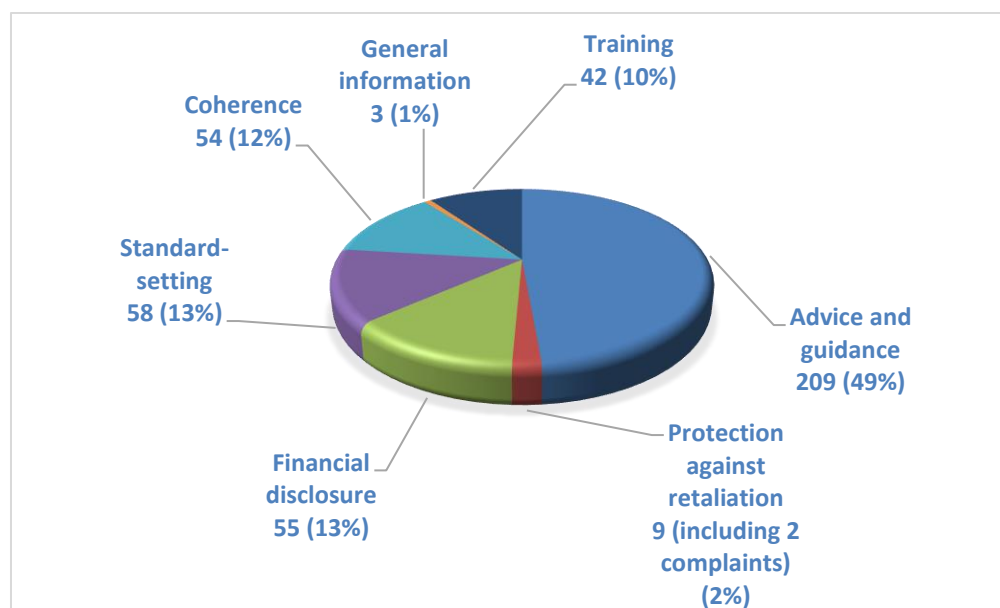


Table 1
Overview of services, by category, 2017-2020

Year	Advice and guidance	Retaliation	Financial disclosure	Standard-setting	Coherence	General information	Training	Total
2017	280	5	24	33	61	3	37	443
2018	257	7	7	32	44	2	48	397
2019	186	9	9	14	68	2	21	309
2020	209	9	55	58	54	3	42	430

A. Advice and guidance

8. Confidential advice and guidance matters constituted 49 per cent of the Ethics Office's caseload. Approximately 89 per cent of the requests came from fixed-term staff, while the remainder came from non-staff personnel and other third parties.
9. Requests for advisory services increased from 186 in 2019 to 209 in 2020. The reduced number of requests for advice and guidance and training in 2019 was most likely related to the transition between the outgoing and incoming Ethics Advisers. There was a significant increase in the reported number of requests related to financial disclosure and standard setting. This can be attributed to different recording by the incoming and outgoing Ethics Advisers (questions on financial disclosure statements were not previously recorded).

Table 2
Requests for ethics advice and guidance, by geographic location, 2017-2020

Year	HQ	Eastern and Southern Africa	Western and Central Africa	Latin America and the Caribbean	Asia and the Pacific	Eastern Europe and Central Asia	Arab States	Total
2017	133	16	9	26	74	10	12	280
2018	109	31	13	41	44	9	10	257
2019	90	15	10	9	32	18	12	186
2020	71	22	18	24	31	17	26	209

10. Of the 209 requests for advice, 74 per cent (154 requests) concerned conflicts of interest issues (see table 3 below). Of these, 90 per cent (139 requests) related to participation in outside activities and employment, such as teaching assignments, volunteering, serving on boards of non-governmental organizations, and publishing articles or books. Formal permission was sought in respect of 39 per cent of requests.
11. Employment-related inquiries constituted 26 per cent of all requests for advice, concerning allegations or queries about workplace conduct, including possible misconduct, harassment and sexual harassment and fair application of policies. The Ethics Office provided substantive advice, and referred personnel to the Office of Audit and Investigation Services (OAIS), the Ombudsman for the funds and programmes, or the relevant human resources strategic partner or senior manager for further assistance.
12. Requests for advice and guidance in the field typically spikes in response to in-person or live online outreach by the Ethics Office. Real-time access to the Ethics Officer encourages personnel to seek advice and guidance from the Ethics Office, and may explain the disproportionate number of request from headquarters (HQ) personnel relative to overall personnel numbers (other factors may include language barriers, cultural norms and confidence in the efficacy, professionalism and confidentiality of the Ethics Office).
13. While personnel from HQ have historically been more likely to seek advice and guidance than field personnel, this trend is declining. The Ethics Office extended its outreach to all UNFPA locations for the first time in 2020. Request for services increased overall, but showed a proportionate decline for HQ personnel and increase for field personnel. 34 per cent of requests for services came from personnel in HQ, despite the fact that only 10 per cent of personnel are located in HQ. This compared with 43 per cent in 2019. Conversely, the proportion of requests from the field increased across the board, and

more than doubled in the West and Central Africa (WCARO), Latin America and the Caribbean (LACRO) and the Arab States (ASRO) regional offices.

Table 3
Requests for ethics advice and guidance by category

Category	Headquarters	Field	Total cases
Conflicts of interest			
– Outside activities	45	94	139
– Gifts, awards and hospitality	1	8	9
– Organizational conflicts of interest	1	3	4
– Other	0	2	2
<i>Subtotal</i>	47	107	154
Employment-related concerns			
– Workplace conduct issues	13	21	34
– Clarification of personnel-related policies	6	2	8
– Recruitment and promotion processes	1	5	6
– Other inquiries	4	3	7
<i>Subtotal</i>	24	31	55
Grand Total	71	138	209

B. Financial disclosure programme

14. Mandated by the Secretary-General, the financial disclosure programme is intended to help UNFPA to preserve and protect its integrity, thus building donor and public confidence in the Organization and its staff. The programme is a primary tool for identifying and assessing conflict-of-interest risks arising from the private holdings and activities of staff and their immediate family members.
15. For the 2020 filing cycle, 542 staff were required to submit financial disclosure statements, covering the 2019 calendar year (see table 4). Of the staff required to file, 137 were based at headquarters and 405 were field-based. The staff members filing disclosures comprised 336 in the professional category (62 per cent) and 206 administrative staff (38 per cent).

Table 4
Financial disclosure participation, by location and calendar year, 2016-2019

Year	Headquarters	Field	Total by year
2016	132	371	503
2017	147	364	511
2018	143	372	515
2019	137	405	542

16. Of the 542 staff members required to file, six left before submitting any form. Thus, 536 forms underwent a complete review. The Ethics Adviser reviewed each financial disclosure statement to ensure completion, and to consider whether any of the holdings

or activities of the staff member or their immediate family members could present a conflict of interest, given the organization's mission and activities and the staff member's role.

17. Following review of the financial disclosure statements, the Ethics Office additionally subjected a random sample of 51 statements of the entire filing population to verification of their financial disclosures. This verification process allows the Ethics Office to ensure that staff members are diligently and accurately completing their financial disclosure statements, and detect when this is not the case. An outside firm retained by the Ethics Office reviewed the documentation submitted in support of the staff members' original disclosures. The selected staff were diversified by location, grade and function. External verification did not identify any conflicts of interest among the filers.
18. The Ethics Office conducted a review of the financial disclosure programme in consultation with EPUN members and internal stakeholders. The Executive Director has approved the development of a revised programme proposal for 2021. Consistent with UNOPS, it is proposed that the disclosure process be divided into three distinct requirements: (a) conflict-of-interest questionnaire (for all eligible filers); (b) asset disclosure for a subset of filers whose responses to questions in the conflict-of-interest questionnaire or whose profile warrant further review; and (c) verification of 10 per cent of all filers by an external verification party. The Ethics Office is currently undertaking consultations with internal stakeholders on the proposal.

C. Protection of staff against retaliation

19. The policy on protection against retaliation sets forth the prohibition against retaliation, the procedures for lodging a complaint, and the steps the organization may take to address retaliation. The Ethics Office undertakes a preliminary review of requests for protection against retaliation. If the Ethics Office determines that a *prima facie* case of retaliation has been established, the matter is referred to OAIS for investigation.
20. The Ethics Office received two complaints of retaliation in 2020. Both complaints arose in the context of the staff members' reports of misconduct. One matter was closed due to insufficient evidence. The second matter was referred for investigation, with recommendations for protective measures.
21. The Ethics Office received one investigation report in 2020, relating to a 2019 complaint of retaliation. The Ethics Office made an independent finding that retaliation had not been established, and the matter was closed.
22. The Ethics Office responded to seven retaliation-related inquiries, including questions about the policy, procedures and specific instances of alleged retaliation.

D. Training, education and outreach

23. The training, education and outreach programme of the Ethics Office aims to reinforce the core values and principles of the United Nations and the international civil service, increase knowledge of and compliance with ethics-related policies, and encourage staff and management to adhere to high ethical standards.
24. In 2020, the Ethics Office provided training and training-related services on 42 occasions (see figure 1 above). This included 26 sessions (in-person and virtual) that reached approximately 1,150 UNFPA personnel and included all UNFPA regional locations and headquarters (see table 4 below). The dramatic increase in persons trained live can be attributed to a greater willingness of personnel to attend live webinars in the new

pandemic work environment. In addition, the Ethics Adviser was able to dedicate more time to webinars as a result of her reduced outreach travel schedule.

Table 4
Number of Persons Trained Live

2020	2019	2018
1150	317	543

25. Training material included core values, principles, expected behaviour and conflicts of interest; the staff code of conduct; ethics for non-staff personnel; ethics and social media; ethics and culture; and ethical leadership. The Ethics Adviser also conducted an outreach mission to the country office in Brazil and co-facilitated a regional culture change workshop in Sao Paulo and Headquarters.
26. Compliance with the online training programme, “Ethics and Integrity at the United Nations Population Fund”, is at 72 per cent. This represents a 44 per cent increase in compliance from 2019.
27. The Ethics Office re-launched the ethics intranet page over a three-month period in 2020 with a new, informal virtual blog approach to information sharing. Topics covered included managing conflict, ethical dilemmas, and ethical standards and obligations. This method of outreach was well received, achieving 6,114 page views during the three-month period, and 95 per cent more views than in 2019. In addition, the Ethics Office sent out 21 informational emails to all staff emails on a range of ethics-related topics. Finally, the Ethics Office participated as a panel member in a global town hall hosted by the United Nations on United Nations values in practice during COVID-19.

E. Standard-setting and policy support

28. A key function of the Ethics Office is to provide guidance to management on ethics standard-setting so that the policies and practices of the organization reflect and promote the expectations of integrity, impartiality and fairness required of UNFPA and its staff. During the reporting period, the Ethics Office collaborated with other UNFPA offices on 58 occasions to review, provide input and seek clarification on new and revised organizational policies and procedures. This work included providing input to draft policies, reports and training packages; and responding to donor inquiries about UNFPA ethics practices and policies.

F. Coherence

29. The Ethics Office contributed substantially to coherence in the United Nations system in 2020. Much of the coherence-related work of the Ethics Office involved interaction with EPUN, established under ST/SGB/2007/11/Amend.1. The Ethics Office participated in 11 official meetings of EPUN (including a special session co-chaired by UNFPA and UNHCR on protection against retaliation). In addition, the Ethics Office gave substantive input to other EPUN-related matters outside of EPUN meetings, and solicited advice from EPUN in return.
30. The Ethics Adviser was elected as the Alternate Chair of EPUN in August 2020 and will serve until August 2021. In this capacity, the Ethics Adviser conducted two reviews of United Nations Ethics Office protection against retaliation determinations (at the request of complainants).

31. Further information on the work of EPUN will be provided in the upcoming report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Ethics Office.
32. The Ethics Office continued its active participation in the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations (ENMO). The Ethics Adviser attended the ENMO annual meeting in February 2020.

III. **Observations and recommendations to management**

33. In 2020, the incoming Ethics Adviser conducted a review of the demand for services, and opportunities to partner in training and outreach with other organizations of the United Nations common system and within UNFPA. This review has provisionally determined the need for a professional staff member at the P4 level. The Ethics Office has submitted this proposal to the integrated budget plan for 2022-2025, with the support of management.

IV. **Conclusion**

34. The UNFPA operating environment is marked by increasing complexity. This includes a proliferation of stakeholders in our work; trust crises in the finance, technology and public sectors, and global demands for action in response to human rights abuses, racism and sexual violence. These trends have resulted in a shift in the way our personnel engage on the question of ethics and integrity, and their expectations and demand for services from the Ethics Office. The year 2020 was marked by lively debate, reflection on personal dilemmas and institutional integrity. In the face of a hyperpolitical environment, our personnel are asking how they as individuals, ought to operationalize the principles of independence, integrity and international loyalty. The Ethics Office is an active participant in the culture change initiative, and engages in ongoing dialog with management (formally and informally) in its efforts to create an enabling environment for adherence to UNFPA rules and standards. In every interaction with staff and personnel, the Office has emphasized the importance of loyalty to the vision of the United Nations, and the values of independence, impartiality, and respect and tolerance.
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