

20 November 2014

Dear High Commissioner,

We have decided to write to you because we are extremely concerned about decisions that are being taken in relation to the financial crisis, which will have immediate and lasting impacts on OHCHR capacities to implement your mandate as High Commissioner and to meet expectations worldwide.

We are all affected; collectively as staff of this Organization, and individually through prospective post cuts and shuffling of functions and structures. We want and are entitled to be meaningfully consulted in decisions affecting us. We expect to be fully listened to, not just heard, in this process. We are understandably undergoing a serious crisis of confidence in the Organization and its senior management, which has been compounded by the hastily thought up and rushed exercises of prioritization, budget cuts and ongoing planning deadlines and unclear instructions in the midst of uncertainty and instability.

We care deeply for this Organization and we want to preserve its achievements, the human rights space it has created worldwide and the leadership it has displayed through many years of dedicated work. We joined OHCHR not merely to have a job, but because we wanted to work for values we genuinely believe in. For many of us, OHCHR is more than an employer; it is an institution that we have proudly contributed to, and we care deeply about what this Office stands for.

This letter does not address all issues we believe require further consultation, management consideration and a different process of decision-making, but focuses on three major concerns and related calls for action.

1. Individuals affected.

Some of us are personally affected by prospective decisions on post cuts and restructuring. We are men and women (although more women than men); with permanent, continuous, fixed-term or temporary contracts; internationally, locally or nationally recruited; at headquarters and in field presences; from G4 to P5 levels (mostly P3 staff, in fact, but no D positions); in all parts of the Office.

The lack of transparency, consultation and information on *who*, *where* or *how*, not to mention *why*, some of us are affected is deplorable and unacceptable. Moreover, while potential cuts were officially said to be identified on the basis of a prioritization exercise, the way information has been transmitted or has trickled down has resulted in everyone receiving only a slice of the picture as it affects them. The big picture is hidden from view and known only to a few at the very top. We are ashamed that while we, as OHCHR, are insisting on inclusive, participatory processes for others – their human right to have a say in decisions that affect their lives – we, as human rights workers, are witnessing a process affecting our lives from which we are denied the right to participate. We strongly believe we have a role to play – we understand our work and the impact of change on what we do. We may be able to propose alternatives. Why are we not trusted to contribute to the decision-making?

If and where staff redeployment is the course of action, it must take place in a transparent and fair manner and with due process.

As OHCHR staff, we stand in full solidarity with those among us who are individually affected, regardless of type of contract, level or duty station. It is not about “us vs. them”. We stand united and we expect fair solutions to be found for all, including those national and temporary staff who are losing their jobs.

We want the Staff Committee to have the space to continue to actively participate in the redeployment and follow the situation of national and temporary staff. This cannot be limited to receiving paltry information. It means, *inter alia*, being provided with comprehensive, accurate and timely information, including in writing; and participating in management discussions and decisions concerning the redeployment and its modalities.

2. Lack of accountability.

We are told OHCHR has been in financial deficit since 2009. This was five years ago. What measures and safeguards were (or were not) put in place to redress this situation, avoid being where we are today and prevent this crisis from recurring in the future? This is not the responsibility of a single individual, but not everyone shares the blame either. Key positions, structures and functions at senior management level evidently bear much more responsibility. Yet, it is other individuals at lower levels who are paying the price for this mismanagement. Even more paradoxically, it is those who are the most to blame for the current crisis that are manoeuvring the cuts and restructuring. We doubt that this will lead to a good solution for OHCHR and we reiterate our call for accountability measures.

3. Lack of dialogue and transparency in decision-making.

While we understand OHCHR must tighten its belt, we have to do our utmost to limit the damage. We appreciate and support that priority has been given to retaining the highest number of staff. However, some functions are being abolished and parts of the Office are severely deprived of resources. A longer term plan, including a hasty restructuring of the Office after several months and significant money and staff time have been invested in an ineffective functional review, is being imposed in a non-transparent and non-consultative manner. This is not only about safeguarding jobs. It is about furthering or at least preserving what OHCHR as an Organization stands for and has achieved, including and in particular in areas outside its ‘mandated’ activities, cutting-edge human rights issues, and field work where OHCHR independently and strategically decided to invest, building the expertise and vision of the Organization and giving to your voice, High Commissioner, the credibility and leadership it has today. This did not happen overnight. It is the result of years of tireless and tenacious work of committed and talented staff. It cannot be slashed by one stroke of a pen, with cuts and structural changes that will leave some strategic areas of work unable to function for years to come and risk taking OHCHR back to the time of the Human Rights Centre. It pains us all the more as the rationale, analysis or strategy behind the decisions is simply not available to us. We want you to see us as part of the solution, not as passive recipients of decisions. It cannot be in the interest of OHCHR to ignore the knowledge of its staff in making decisions about its future.

We consequently call for:

- Transparent and comprehensive information on prospective cuts and restructuring, detailing their impact on savings and OHCHR’s overall financial situation.
- A strong and empowered role for the Staff Committee so that it can continue to follow the redeployment and the situation of national and temporary staff as

necessary. This requires a genuine dialogue, transparency and collaboration from senior management.

- Tangible accountability measures by attributing responsibility for the present crisis and taking the requisite action to prevent another financial crisis of this magnitude in the future.
- A meaningful dialogue and truly consultative decision-making on ongoing financial measures, cuts and restructuring. This means, *inter alia*:
  - Putting decisions on hold to ensure adequate time for consultations and undertaking a range of consultation methods. We welcome your initiating an unprecedented number of all-staff meetings, but consultation needs to be ongoing and reflected in the methods adopted to take and validate decisions.
  - Decentralizing decision-making, which cannot be concentrated in one or two individuals and a handful of persons around them.
  - Allowing a reasonable degree of flexibility to planning entities in proposing and deciding how to reprioritize and reorganize work within new financial parameters and duly taking into consideration their proposals, including counterproposals on prospective cuts and restructuring.

We trust you will hear our call. We stand ready to take action to navigate this storm together in the interest of OHCHR.

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