About UNRWA

UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 with a mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to registered Palestine refugees in the Agency’s area of operations, namely the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. Thousands of Palestine refugees who lost both their homes and livelihood because of the 1948 conflict have remained displaced and in need of significant support for over seventy years. UNRWA helps them achieve their full potential in human development through quality services it provides in education, health care, relief and social services, protection, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.

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introduction

1. In accordance with Organization Directive (OD) 14, the present report, the eleventh since the designation of an Ethics Officer in UNRWA in January 2008 and the tenth since the establishment of the UNRWA Ethics Office in September 2009, is submitted pursuant to UN Secretary-General Bulletin ST/SGB/2007/11 and the updated UNRWA Organizational Directive 30 (OD 30 Terms of Reference of the Ethics Office), requiring annual reporting on the activities of the Ethics Office and any evaluations and assessments relating to such activities. In accordance with Section 24 of the OD 30, the draft report was shared for review and advice with the Advisory Committee on Internal Oversight (ACIO) and the UN Ethics Panel. The report will be submitted to the Commissioner-General and to the Advisory Commission on UNRWA.

2. In accordance with its mandate to help nurture a culture of ethics, integrity and accountability within the Agency, the present report provides an overview and assessment of the work and achievements of the Ethics Office over the reporting period.

background and general information

3. The Ethics Office in UNRWA was first established in 2009 after the promulgation of the instruction from the Secretary-General to all separately administered organs and programmes, including UNRWA, to establish their own separate ethics offices (ST/SGB/2007/11).

4. Until October 2020, the Ethics Office was administratively attached to the Department of Internal Oversight Services (DIOS), although it operated independently and with full impartiality and confidentiality as required by ST/SGB/2007/11 and OD 30. In late 2019, when UNRWA launched a package of Management Initiatives aiming to achieve the highest standards of good governance, effectiveness, transparency and accountability, the need emerged for the Ethics Office to update its OD 30 and reposition itself within the Agency structure. The Ethics Office is now administered by the Executive Office while maintaining full independence.

5. Major changes in the revised OD 30 relate to the Office’s independence and authority, reporting, performance, investigations and term limits for the Chief, Ethics Office. The updated OD 30 reaffirms the “operational independence” of the Ethics Office, and specifies the authority of the Chief, Ethics Office, to “initiate, carry out and report on any action, which he/she considers necessary to fulfil the Office’s responsibilities for ethics as set forth in this Directive”. The Chief, Ethics Office, has also informal access to the Advisory Commission on UNRWA.

6. In 2020, the Ethics Office participated in the quarterly ACIO meetings. The Chief, Ethics Office was also invited to become a member of UNRWA’s Management Committee, which advises the Commissioner-General on issues relating to the Policy, Strategy and Governance of the Agency and will be invited when required, to discussions at the Executive Committee which assists the Commissioner-General in taking decisions of strategic consequence and requiring principal level attention across all major pillars of the Agency.

7. The overall objective of the Ethics Office is to assist the Commissioner-General in promoting a culture of ethics, integrity and accountability and to create an environment free of harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of power, and thereby to enhance the trust in and the credibility of UNRWA, both internally and externally. The Ethics Office fulfills this mission by providing services to management and individual staff members in six areas:

   a. Confidential ethics advice and guidance.
   b. Financial and outside interest disclosure.
   c. Protection against retaliation.
   d. Training, education and outreach.
   e. Policy support and standard setting.
   f. Coordination of initiatives on preventing and responding to Prohibited Conduct (Discrimination, Harassment, including Sexual Harassment, and Abuse of Authority) and Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.

8. The Ethics Office comprises a Chief, at P-5 level and an Ethics Officer (grade 17). The new Chief joined the Agency on 15 March 2020 and the new Ethics Officer joined in October 2020.

9. In July 2020, the Sexual Misconduct Task Force Coordinator position was transferred from the Department of Legal Affairs (DLA) to the Ethics Office. This post was established in April 2020 and is supported with a one-year project grant to lead the coordination of UN-wide initiatives against sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment and sexual exploitation and abuse.

10. Administrative support was received from DIOS until...
late 2020, following the promulgation of the OD30 and the administrative transfer to the Executive Office. For the first time the Ethics Office has a separate budget enabling it to manage its own finances and function independently. The Administrative Assistant (grade 11) post which was abolished at the end of 2018 has not been reinstated, due to the austerity measures facing UNRWA in financial crisis. The absence of an Administrative Assistant has severely impacted the good functioning of the Ethics Office as this role was critical in providing support for case management, record keeping and filing, administrative correspondence, and broader logistical and administrative support.

11. At the end of 2020 the Agency faced an unprecedented financial crisis which limited programme funds being made available. The Ethics Office was unable to proceed with its plan to convert the Ethics e-course to a new online platform but reached agreement with UNICEF to temporarily use their online learning.

12. As a result of the global pandemic and the limitations it imposed, including general travel bans, the Ethics Office was compelled to adapt to this emerging context and significantly change the way it had operated previously. As it was unable to provide face-to-face and in-person advice and training, the Ethics Office initially focused on its core activities – this included providing confidential ethics advice and protection against retaliation, and managing the financial disclosure programme (both the United Nations Financial Disclosure Programme (UNFDP) and the Area Staff Declaration of Interest Programme) – while attending to policy support and standard-setting. Later in the reporting year, after completing the revision of the OD30, the Ethics Office shifted its focus on finding alternative yet durable ways to deliver training to the largest audiences possible, while at the same time making it more innovative, interactive and impactful, bearing in mind the remote working conditions of staff.

13. With the support of two consultants, the Ethics Office started developing three blended trainings: Anti-Fraud and Anti-Corruption, Ethical Leadership and Respectful Workplace, which are expected to be rolled out in the second quarter of 2021. The Ethics Office also embarked on updating the UNRWA Ethics Handbook which was issued in 2014.

14. Since July 2020, the Ethics Office, together with the Human Resources Department (HRD) and the Gender Focal Point, began working on an Agency-wide Organizational Culture Change initiative. The initiative is meant to improve the working and living culture in UNRWA, specifically focusing on issues such as gender sensitivity, inclusion and diversity, neutrality, accountability and transparency but also integrating digital transformation and modernization.

15. The Ethics Office collaborated closely with the newly appointed members of the Executive Office and provided advice and guidance on a number of confidential cases. It has become a full member of the Management Committee and on occasion will be invited to the Executive Committee especially when discussions are held affecting ethical issues.

16. In 2020, the office received a total of 286 ethics requests. This represents a decrease of 11 per cent compared with 2019. A more significant drop was witnessed in the number of requests for confidential ethics advice: compared with 2019 there were 30 per cent fewer requests. While the Ethics Office remained available and accessible through online platforms (MS teams) in addition to phone or (later in the year) in-person visits, this is believed to be because staff mainly prefer in-person contacts through field visits or meetings in the Ethics Offices, which for most of the year, and especially for the field offices outside Jordan, was impossible. It is also notable that the absence of an Arabic speaking Ethics Officer for most of the year impacted area staff accessibility to the Ethics Office. The Ethics Office still managed to reach out to staff by chairing, for example, a Facebook live session on UNRWA’s staff page. It also updated the Ethics Office webpages, both internal and external, rationalizing their content and rendering them more user-friendly.

17. The Ethics Office also held discussions with key stakeholders to gather inputs on the trainings and policies that were being revised and chaired the Research Review Board established in 2019 and reviewed through the Board 11 requests for approval of research requests, coordinating the inputs from the different departments and fields.

18. In line with the mandate of the Ethics Office, requests for services covered a broad range of categories: ethics advice (122 requests), training and outreach (47), protection against retaliation (PaR) for reporting misconduct and for cooperating with duly authorized audits or investigations (8), requests from Ethics Panel of the UN (EPUN) members (coherence) (9), policy support and standard-setting (12), matters in respect of which the Ethics Office was alerted (55), requests related to alleging wrongdoing (5), and general information and others (8). Figure 2 provides a breakdown of requests by category.

activities of the ethics office

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19. In addition to recorded requests for services, the Ethics Office has also responded to a large number of emails and phone calls with respect to the administration of the UN Financial Disclosure Programme (UNFDP), the Area Staff Declaration of Interest Programme, and the roll-out of the ethics e-course and other e-courses managed by Moodle platform such as Social Media and Neutrality, Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Authority (PSHAA) and Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA). Due to software updates that made Flash technology obsolete at the start of 2021, the online ethics training available via UNRWA’s Moodle platform was no longer accessible after 31 December 2020. In response, the Ethics Office began working to find alternative and temporary solutions, as this issue directly impacted its mandatory training courses.
A. Advice and guidance

21. The Ethics Office serves as an independent, objective, confidential and impartial office that represents neither management nor staff and remains neutral and advisory in nature. The Office assists managers and other staff in upholding the highest levels of integrity, efficiency and competence by providing confidential advice on relevant standards of conduct and by clarifying staff and Agency obligations. In helping staff make decisions consistent with the values and rules of the Agency, the Ethics Office provides an essential risk prevention function.

22. The Ethics Office advises staff on various concerns, including actual or perceived personal conflicts of interest, engagement in outside activities, prohibited conduct, workplace issues and employment-related concerns. While providing a secure and confidential resource for staff, the Office does not replace existing mechanisms for reporting misconduct or resolving grievances. The independent and confidential nature of the Office facilitates its approachability and builds trust.

23. During the reporting year, the Ethics Office responded to 122 requests for confidential ethics advice, a decrease of 30 per cent in comparison with 2019. Figure 3 provides a breakdown of the various types of advice requested.

24. The Office continues to respond to requests related to prevention and/or mitigation of potential or actual conflicts of interests, including outside employment and other outside activities. The majority of these requests are with the relevant Field Director or Headquarters Human Resources Departments, as UNRWA has a decentralized system to deal with outside employment and other outside activities requests. As for international staff, the Ethics Office is being consulted by the Chief of Staff on outside employment and outside activities requests. For Area staff, the Ethics Office does not engage on, nor has insight into, the details on their requests for outside activities as submitted to respective Field/Human Resources Directors. This may appear inconsistent and not fair to some.

25. The decrease in requests for confidential ethics advice is very likely related to the pandemic, which has profoundly changed the way staff experience the workplace and interact with colleagues. Many telecommuted from home for almost the entire year. Most requests still related to prohibited conduct and employment-related issues, such as issues relating to managerial actions, conditions of work and contractual matters. Despite not being physically in the office, the managerial issues were mainly the result of harassment and abuse of authority, with a growing number of online disrespectful communications and an increasing perception of gender discrimination. It is worth noting that whereas female staff represent 44.2 per cent of the overall requests for ethics advice, they represent 57 per cent of the requests related to prohibited conduct. This could indicate that female staff are at greater risk of harassment and abuse of authority. It echoed the conclusion, also drawn from a survey that the human resources department had conducted earlier in 2020, that pointed to a problem in the area of gender sensitivity.

26. The individual requests for confidential ethics advice indicate that 53.3 per cent of requests came from male staff. 56 per cent came from Area staff, while 27 per cent came from International staff and 17 per cent from anonymous or external sources. A breakdown by location shows that most of the of requests came from Headquarters, representing 31 per cent of the requests, followed by 25 per cent from the Jordan Field Office. There were fewer requests from the other Field Offices, with the least requests from the Lebanon Field Office. The physical presence of the Ethics Office staff in Jordan, and the opportunity this provides for face-to-face approaches, probably explains the higher prevalence of requests both from Headquarters and the Jordan Field Office. In the absence of an ombudsman at UNRWA, the Ethics Office also facilitated discussions between two parties over employment related issues. The Ethics Office ensures presence as a neutral party and acts within the parameters of its mandate. As the Ethics Office does not have the mandate to directly engage in the resolution of staff grievances, the guidance provided by the Office was limited to drawing attention to the applicable policies, advising about options to address concerns through supervisors or other offices and/or referral to such offices. Where appropriate, the Office encouraged complainants’ staff to speak up and make use of these resources. UNRWA approved the establishment of an Ombudsman Office which is expected to be operational in the second quarter of 2021.
Figure 3: Ethics advice requests (2020)

Figure 4: Ethics advice requests per Area (2020)

Figure 5: Ethics advice requests per Staff (2020)

Figure 6: Ethics advice requests per Area (2020)
B. Financial and outside interest disclosure

27. UNRWA joins the UN and other funds and programmes in requiring staff members who are in senior positions of authority or who hold specific positions which entail financial decision-making authority to annually disclose personal financial assets and outside affiliations and interests. Any international staff required to disclose is required to do so by participating in the United Nations Financial Disclosure Programme administered by the UN Ethics Office with support from the UNRWA Ethics Office. The UNRWA Ethics Office administers a separate programme for (locally recruited) area staff required to disclose outside affiliations and interests. Both programmes promote staff awareness of conflict-of-interest situations and preserve and protect the integrity of the organization and participating staff, thereby maintaining and enhancing public trust in UNRWA. The Ethics Office, or a designated third party in the case of international staff, reviews these disclosures in order to identify real or potential conflicts of interest, and provide advice accordingly.

28. A total of 76 international staff members were required to file financial disclosure statements. This includes all staff members at the D-1 level and above, all staff (regardless of grade) whose principal duties include procurement and investment functions, staff from the Ethics Office and all staff with access to confidential procurement or investment information. All had fully complied with their filing obligations at the end of the programme closing date.

Of the area staff, those required to file a Declaration of Interest Form covering their outside affiliations and other interests include all those whose principal occupational duties involve procurement or investment functions, all those responsible for requisitioning and certifying requisitions of significant quantities of goods and/or services, and all staff with access to confidential procurement or investment information. All had fully complied with their filing obligations at the end of the programme closing date.

29. The Agency’s policy for protection against retaliation encourages UNRWA personnel to report misconduct and/or cooperate with authorized audits or investigations without fear of reprisal. In promoting and providing protection for such reporting and cooperation, the policy enhances UNRWA’s ability to investigate and remedy conduct that, if otherwise left unaddressed, could cause significant damage to UNRWA’s operations and reputation. In accordance with the policy, the Ethics Office receives requests for protection against retaliation and conducts preliminary assessments to determine whether a complainant has engaged in a protected activity and, if so, whether the protected activity was a contributing factor in causing the alleged retaliation. If the Office determines that a prima facie case of retaliation has been established, the matter is normally referred to DIOS for investigation.

30. The Ethics Office received eight new PaR requests pertaining to an equal number of international and Area staff from all five fields offices as well as Headquarters. The Ethics Office assessed all eight cases, of which one was found to be a prima facie case of retaliation, and a referral to DIOS was made. In two cases, one of which withdrew the request for protection, the Ethics Office recommended protective measures to prevent further detrimental actions from taking place; these were both followed up and implemented by one respective Field Office and one respective Headquarters Department.

D. Training, education and outreach

31. In early 2020, the Ethics Office started with its planned programme on training and outreach by providing face-to-face training to mostly manual workers in Gaza on PSEA and PSHAA, with 13 sessions involving 359 staff. It also provided punctual induction training to new staff, conflict resolution training for Ethics Focal points in Gaza, and training on Anti-Fraud and Anti-Corruption, Prohibited Conduct and Administration of Justice to the ASU Representatives. However, with the onset of the pandemic all travel was halted. The new Chief, Ethics Office, responded to training requests from the field through new alternative means, while leading the development of new ways of outreach and training delivery through blended training. The Ethics Office provided training to the Strategic Partnerships Division, and to ASU Representatives on Ethics in general, and on dealing with the Media in particular. In addition, new methods for delivering ethics messages were used such as a Facebook live session through the UNRWA Staff closed group, held in November 2020 which attracted over 2,600
views and over one hundred commentaries. The Ethics Office sent out messages of clarification related to participation in demonstrations in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. It also prepared a draft year-end message from the Commissioner-General on the prohibition of sexual misconduct, with a particular focus on disseminating the Chief Executives Board’s (CEB) Guidance for Managers on Preventing and Responding to Sexual Harassment. The message also announced that the Ethics Office would begin rolling out two-hour interactive information sessions for managers across UNRWA Field Offices starting in the first quarter of 2021.

32. The Ethics Office saw value in integrating the promotion of a good ethical culture into a broader organizational culture change initiative. It therefore started working with the Department of Human Resources, and the Gender Focal Point in UNRWA to elaborate a vision and strategy to change the organizational culture to a safer, respectful, and more gender-inclusive and gender-sensitive culture. The Chief, Ethics Office, also led a dedicated session on the initiative at the Management Committee in December 2020.

33. In addition to the targeted awareness-raising sessions, the Ethics Office continued to monitor compliance with completion of its e-courses including the Ethics e-learning, the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Authority (PSHAA) and the Social Media and Neutrality e-course. A General Staff Circular issued on 14 July 2020 made these courses mandatory for all personnel and introduced measures to ensure their completion within a set timeline, which would be monitored through staff performance appraisals. Final compliance rates at the end of 2020, stood at 76.63 per cent, 69.67 per cent, 70.10 per cent, and 88.11 per cent respectively. At the end of 2020, the Ethics Office started working on the creation of a blended training programme on Anti-Fraud Anti-Corruption, and a concept note for blended training on Respectful Workplace and Ethical Leadership. These blended trainings will consist of self-learning interactive Modules and a stand-alone Module for face-to-face (or virtual) workshop, using a variety of scenarios and activities. They will be rolled out in the second quarter of 2021.

34. Another important initiative that started near the end of 2020 was the revision of the Ethics Handbook which will reflect updated policy, samples of ethical dilemmas, together with tips for managers. The Ethics Office was successful in developing and securing a project grant from the United Kingdom to complete this revision. Its launch is expected in the second quarter of 2021.

35. On PSEA and PSHAA, raising staff awareness continues to be a key priority for UNRWA. This was supported by the results of the UN-wide survey on PSEA, in which over 1,200 UNRWA staff participated. In response to staff requests for additional training that would go beyond the existing e-courses, the Ethics Office began working on two specific initiatives. The first involves the creation of material for a virtual information session for Managers on Preventing and Responding to Sexual Harassment. It aims to target mid to senior level managers in 2021. The two-hour session was developed with the intention of sharing key information from the CEB Guidance document, while also allowing for a dialogue with managers around sexual harassment case examples and scenarios. As part of this initiative, there are also plans to develop a short, animated video on sexual harassment that reflects the cultural context of the region.

36. For the second initiative, the Ethics Office also noted the need for a more in-depth training session for PSEA focal points and frontline staff. It succeeded in securing project funds from the United Kingdom to develop this training session, which will be finalized in the first quarter of 2021, with roll out starting in the second quarter. While the training is being developed in expectation of a face-to-face roll out, it will be adapted to permit a virtual roll out as well. As part of this package, there is also a condensed session including some of the key points that will be used as a resource for PSEA Focal Points to roll out to all staff, either virtually or face-to-face.

37. The Ethics Office is also working on ensuring that information on PSEA and sexual harassment is included in all of the new training and informational materials that are presently under development. There was a segment on PSEA and sexual harassment included in the Ethics Facebook live session in November 2020, which also received some questions from staff. The Ethics Office also provided feedback to the SEA Working Group about the annual PSEA survey to request that the survey be translated into Arabic in 2021 to allow for greater participation of UNRWA staff.

E. Standard-setting and policy support

38. During the reporting period, the Ethics Office provided policy-related and technical comments to seven requests related to the Organizational Directive 30, a Circular reminding Personnel on Standards of Conduct and Social media, the updated Due Diligence Policy, Strengthening of Codes of Conduct in Vocational Training Centres, Signed Undertaking for commitment to non-violence against children, sanctions involving allegations of SEA and SH, and draft Compact letter for signature by Directors. The Ethics Office provided input to the requests from the Board of Auditors interim audit as well as implementation on open recommendations and contributed to JIU’s Review of the Ethics Function in the UN.

39. As part of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations (EPUN), UNRWA has been sharing experiences and best practices with other Agencies of the United Nations. The collaboration with EPUN members serves to promote coherence of UNRWA’s ethics-related policies, strategies and standards with those of the UN Secretariat and the other specialized organs and programmes in accordance with ST/SGB/2007/11.
40. In 2020, the Ethics Office began the task of assessing the required changes to the PSEA and SH normative framework and identified that updates are required in relation to the SEA, SH and Protection Against Retaliation polices, and that an overall strategy on sexual misconduct should be outlined. Over the year, some progress was made in terms of moving forward on drafts of the Agency’s new SH policy as well as the PAR policy. However, due to a lack of human resource capacity, the Ethics Office strategically focused on outlining the need for a comprehensive policy review in a project proposal that has been included on UNRWA’s priority project list for 2021. It is expected that with additional resources secured, the Ethics Office will be able to move forward on key policy revisions in 2021, which need to be considered holistically and incorporate new system-wide definitions of victim centred approaches related to SEA and SH.

41. In 2020, The Ethics Office also began consultations with Fields and key HQ departments on how to ensure systematic support is provided to SEA and SH victims. These consultations aim to help identify how to proceed with the necessary policy changes required in 2021. As part of this process, the Ethics Office worked on a draft procedure and flowchart on the reporting and referral of SEA cases.

42. The Ethics Office helped lead the process in coordination with the Addressing Violence Against Children (AVAC) initiative to strengthen clauses on PSEA in its school canteen contracts. This is a key effort related to cooperative arrangements which will ensure that standards on PSEA are included in different contract types, especially with high-risk contractors who are in direct contact with children and beneficiaries. In addition, to ensure that both UNRWA staff and canteen contractors are informed of their obligations in relation to PSEA, the Ethics Office and AVAC led the development of a signed affirmation against violence, including SEA to help increase awareness of these key obligations. It is expected that both the new canteen contracts and the affirmations for both staff and canteen contractors will be implemented in 2021. Additionally, in coordination with AVAC, the Ethics Office assisted with the design and review of pocket cards on reporting misconduct, including SEA and sexual harassment. The pocket cards will be distributed to personnel in all fields in 2021.

43. In July 2020, after becoming the Chair of UNRWA’s Sexual Misconduct Task Force, the Ethics Office focused on improving internal and external coordination related to UNRWA’s work on sexual misconduct. A key area of focus involved revising the Agency’s PSEA and SH Focal Point structure to improve coordination and address gaps in victim support. Both SEA and sexual harassment are priority issues for the UN, and the growing number of system-wide initiatives on prevention and response requires all Agencies to step up their efforts in a number of different areas. Building on work done since 2018, the Ethics Office engaged in increased external coordination with UN forums such as the SEA WG and the Chief Executive Board’s Task Force on Sexual Harassment. The Office participated in drafting an UN-wide victims’ rights statement, contributed content to the PSEA page of the UN’s knowledge gateway, and led the development of UNRWA’s Agency Action plan on PSEA while contributing to a number of workstreams of the CEB’s workplan on SH. The Ethics Office has also been working on improving reporting on victim support to UN channels.

44. The Ethics Office also took steps to enhance internal coordination between HQ departments and the field offices to move key initiatives on SEA and sexual harassment forward. In September 2020 new terms of reference for PSEA field focal points were drafted and approved to ensure that each Field Office has at least two focal points to address gaps in victim support, community outreach and reporting. These appointments ensure UNRWA is dedicating necessary resources and creating clear links between UN activities at the country level and initiatives at the HQ level. This included the development of work plans to track PSEA initiatives, the creation of a shared platform for PSEA resources such as posters, messages and standard operating procedures, and improved follow up and reporting on victim support. In addition, the Ethics Office also helped ensure meetings took place with the PSEA coordinator or co-chairs in each of the UNRWA’s countries of operations, to discuss priority issues and work on addressing gaps through inter agency coordination.

45. In addition to the revised structure, key achievements in 2020 have also been providing technical support to Field Offices on PSEA initiatives. As part of the Agency’s response to COVID-19, Inter Agency Standing Committee technical guidance on PSEA was disseminated and the Ethics Office developed UNRWA-specific recommendations and shared examples of potential initiatives to undertake with the Sexual Misconduct Task Force. All fields used new or existing hotlines to improve reporting and response to GBV cases, including instances of SEA. LFO and GFO disseminated messages on SEA reporting channels through official communication and social media channels, as well as through community groups on WhatsApp networks. The Ethics Office also provided input on an agreement being signed between LFO and an NGO partner to create an isolation centre in Lebanon to ensure clear SEA prevention and response elements were included.

46. Efforts in 2021 will focus on ensuring the completion of a specialized PSEA training that is expected to be rolled out to the PSEA Field Focal Points in Q2 to ensure they are supported in understanding their role and functions. Ethics will also support in completing a PSEA training session for all staff in Arabic that PSEA Focal Points will be able to roll out to other staff in their own Fields. In relation to sexual harassment, the Ethics Office will continue to work on a mapping of support services and engaging with staff, other departments and UN entities and private organizations to understand more about best practices for victim support within the Agency’s context.

F. Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment

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conclusion and recommendations

47. The Chief, Ethics Office, and other senior management appointments occurred during the reporting year. Working relationships developed rapidly with the senior management and were characterized by good coordination and joint perspectives on organizational issues of ethical importance. A joint outlook and efforts to improve the organization’s ethical culture are top priorities for both the Commissioner-General and the Chief, Ethics Office. The Chief Ethics made full use of the year’s budget by spending the balance of unused travel funds to support the development of new learning materials. Relations with other oversight actors such as DIOS were also productive and laid the foundations for further coordinated actions and responses in future.

48. The period covered by this report was particularly challenging given the combined impact of the Agency’s financial constraints and COVID-19 on staff and operations. The Ethics Office, while maintaining its regular functions with limited resources, nevertheless made some necessary changes to the way it should function. These reflect both how it should operate optimally in normal circumstances and anticipate how it may need to adjust to a post pandemic environment. They include the adjustments to the internal setting of the Ethics Office with respect to its autonomy and authority, its participation in the UNRWA Management Committee, the ongoing alignment of the Ethics Office Work programme with the organizational culture change initiatives, and the upgrading and updating of its training and communications materials.

49. The improvement and adaptation of training materials deserves particular attention. It is clear that the traditional face-to-face training that has proved useful most of the times will still be required. However, the last year also exposed its limitations and the excessive amount of resources required for reaching large audiences, especially when finances are constrained. The roll-out in 2021 of an AFAC blended training, a blended training on Respectful Workplace and Ethical Leadership, as well as the Information Session on Preventing and Responding to Sexual Harassment hopes to address this constraint and respond to the considerable need for information and dialogue on ethics, albeit in the most cost-effective manner. The steady requests, even if they were lower in 2020, of ethics advice from all fields, also demonstrates that the Ethics Office will need to continue to promote itself and make available all means to staff to reach out to it. An easy to understand and accessible Intranet page with step-by-step practical guidance on Outside Employment and other outside activities, prohibited conduct and other ethics issues will be necessary to enable staff to understand and act in accordance with the Standards of Conduct expected from them. The revised Code of Ethics will be an important feature.

50. As demonstrated by the numbers of staff reaching out to the Ethics Office, and in order to have a broader overview of the state of ethics in the fields, the upgrading of the Ethics Focal Points Network, will be a top priority for the Ethics Office in 2021. This peer-to-peer field-based support and advice network will be essential to have a meaningful impact on the field in the area of ethics.

51. The full consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and their implications for the future work of the Ethics Office will be the subject of continuing assessment and consultations with staff and with the Field Offices and other Services. The process will draw on the experiences and insights acquired over the last twelve months and build on the initiatives that have already been introduced. The particular challenges faced by the Ethics Office in 2020-21 related mainly to the pressures from operating in a difficult environment with limited human and financial resources. This resulted in delays in responding to PAR requests. The large amount of time taken to address requests for ethics advice, as well as its recording system, will be key areas of focus in 2021. To address these shortcomings, investment in upgrading the current systems will enable the Ethics Office to be more proactive, to analyse data at regular intervals and to identify recurrent themes and issues. The need for an Administrative support staff would alleviate the burden on the Ethics Officer, the Chief, Ethics Office, and the Sexual Misconduct Coordinator who have spent considerable time with pure administrative and logistical issues to the detriment of higher priorities. It also strongly recommends the creation of a P-3 Ethics Officer to assist with (i) the basic functions of assessing PAR requests, (ii) the development, roll out and delivery of training and awareness raising and (iii) the important task of updating its own policies and in particular the Protection against Retaliation Policy.

52. The Ethics Office’s principal recommendations in relation to the period under review in this report are the following. Firstly, there is a need to further align ethics with broader organizational culture change initiatives. Ethics should be addressed with a better knowledge of issues surrounding staff wellbeing, HR processes and tools, staff conflict resolution and in coordination with oversight. Secondly, a proper risk management system including benchmarking for ethical risks, to be used and monitored directly by the Field Offices, would be a useful step and tool to achieving a culture of ethics, integrity, and accountability. Finally, for the Office to be able to function optimally, an administrative support function as well as a P-3 Ethics Officer position are required and recommended.
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