UPDATE ON WORKPLACE CULTURE AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN THE WHO WESTERN PACIFIC REGION

1. Background and context

In February 2022, about 900 members of the World Health Organization (WHO) workforce from across the Western Pacific Region participated in a three-day virtual retreat to reflect on the findings of the For the Future stocktaking review in 2021; to consider how to accelerate the implementation of For the Future; and to discuss WHO’s workplace culture in the Region and how it could be strengthened and improved. The retreat also included a dedicated session on Prevention and Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment (PRSEAH).

Ahead of the retreat, WHO conducted an all-workforce survey to better understand workplace culture views and experiences in the Region. The survey was completed by 529 people or 59% of the approximately 900 members of the WHO workforce (including staff and consultants) in the Region. The survey results presented a mixed picture of the workforce experiences in the Region: the findings indicated both positive and negative aspects of the workplace culture. For example, some people felt appreciated for doing good work; many would recommend WHO in the Western Pacific Region as a good place to work; and relatively few respondents perceived discrimination on the basis of gender, religion/belief or sexual orientation. However, a significant proportion (nearly one third) of the workforce perceived that people are discriminated against on the basis of country of origin, race/ethnicity or “thinking style”. There were also mixed experiences of bullying, abuse and harassment: while the majority of staff reported not having experienced this, a worryingly high proportion (nearly 25%) did. Staff also expressed a sense of being overburdened by internal processes and “bureaucracy”.

During the retreat, staff discussed survey results, experiences working for WHO in the Region and areas for improvement to strengthen workplace culture. Many staff emphasized the importance of improving work–life balance (many reported challenges with workload, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic), strengthening inclusion and respect for diversity,
improving grievance and accountability mechanisms, and streamlining internal processes where possible.

2. **Responding to workforce concerns**

In response to the survey results and concerns expressed during the retreat, the Regional Director made three commitments: (1) to strengthen and expand existing systems for reporting and responding to complaints about harassment, bullying or abusive conduct; (2) to simplify and improve internal processes, where possible, while maintaining the Region’s commitment to accountability and risk management; and (3) to work towards reshaping the Region’s workplace culture “to be one we can all be proud of”.

Through work in these three broad areas of commitment, WHO aims to strengthen workplace culture and engage workforce members from across the Region in these efforts, improve staff well-being, and ensure workforce members are well supported to do high-quality work – in order to enhance WHO’s ability to serve the people and Member States of the Region, now and into the future.

This paper provides an overview of progress made in the three areas of commitment, as well as the Region’s work on PRSEAH, since February 2022. External consultants skilled in workplace culture change with a focus on diversity and inclusion have been engaged since before the February retreat to support this work.

3. **Commitment to strengthen and expand existing systems for reporting and responding to complaints about harassment, bullying or abusive conduct**

As a first step towards addressing staff concerns expressed during the February retreat and survey, including a lack of confidence in existing complaint-and-response mechanisms, the Regional Director committed to establish a full-time regional ombudsperson to work alongside the Region’s existing network of ombudspersons. Furthermore, in line with the Region’s commitment to support and align with global efforts on PRSEAH, the Regional Office has created a full-time management officer position dedicated to this area of concern. Through the creation of the two new posts, alongside existing informal and formal mechanisms, the aim is to provide multiple channels and safe spaces for members of the WHO workforce to raise concerns and receive support on workplace-related issues and concerns.

3.1 **Regional ombudsperson**

The new regional ombudsperson will work alongside the Region’s existing network of staff ombudspersons. Modelled on the practice in WHO headquarters and other regions, the
regional ombudsperson will serve as an informal resolution resource, providing impartial, independent and confidential individual assistance, advice and support on workplace-related grievances and concerns to all members of the WHO workforce. The regional ombudsperson will also play an important role in advising on and contributing to broader efforts to strengthen workplace culture. Recruitment of the regional ombudsperson was prioritized soon after the retreat, and the new regional ombudsperson commenced work in the WHO Regional Office in July 2022.

3.2 PRSEAH

The PRSEAH management officer will lead the Region’s efforts to strengthen the prevention of and response to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, support country office teams in the field, and integrate PRSEAH principles into existing work in the Region. The management officer will work closely with senior management in the WHO Regional Office and country offices. The management officer will provide a channel for confidential discussions on sexual misconduct, advise staff on available services and formal reporting mechanisms, and represent the Region in the global network of colleagues working on the Organization-wide approach to this issue. The management officer will lead the integration of PRSEAH efforts into broader work and workplace culture. The new PRSEAH management officer also commenced work in July 2022.

WHO in the Western Pacific Region is contributing to global efforts by testing a PRSEAH risk assessment tool developed by headquarters in four countries, selected to represent the diverse operational contexts and perspectives of the Western Pacific Region. WHO in the Region is holding internal consultations in each country to ensure that the tool is capturing risks and concerns relevant to the regional context. Synthesized feedback will be provided to WHO headquarters in advance of the global rollout of the tool.

After her appointment, the Management Officer organized missions to two country offices identified as test sites for the risk assessment tool, and consultations were held virtually in two other countries. She conducted all-staff and focal point trainings, held individual consultations and small group discussions on PRSEAH, tested the tool and discussed future country office efforts on PRSEAH. Furthermore, technical support was provided for staff and/or focal points in 10 other WHO country offices.

WHO in the Region has an active PRSEAH focal point network of 29 national and international staff. These focal points and the Management Officer have conducted awareness sessions in country offices and in the Regional Office, through town hall meetings, staff
meetings and focus group discussions. Across the Region, PRSEAH is being integrated into discussions on workplace culture.

The Regional Office is rolling out a set of victim-centred standard operating procedures, developed with headquarters, to country focal points and senior management, highlighting the Organization’s responsibilities to provide services and advice on reporting to victims, and the space for self-care. The Regional Office has also begun trauma-informed training for focal points, managers and other WHO employees who may be the first to receive complaints, to ensure that the victims are referred to services and/or reporting mechanisms without harming the victims.

3.3 Future directions

Through the creation of the two new posts, along with existing informal and formal mechanisms, WHO aims to provide multiple channels and safe spaces for workforce members to raise concerns and receive support to address issues in the workplace. With this in mind, WHO will continue to share information with the workforce about the grievance and complaint processes in order to build awareness and confidence in the existing mechanisms and how to engage with them. WHO will continue to pursue the objective of preventing all forms of abuse, bullying and harassment – in line with WHO’s zero-tolerance policy on these behaviours.

On PRSEAH, the WHO Regional Office is piloting a reference check tool that poses questions to employment candidates and their references on possible involvement in sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) prior to employment. This new safeguarding measure will complement the global ClearCheck vetting system and will be promoted in the Region. The Regional Office will roll out the risk assessment tool, finalized by headquarters, to all country offices in 2022 and 2023, with the expectation that country offices will put in place action plans identifying context-specific mitigations for risks identified by the end of 2023. The Regional Office will also host regional seminars on PRSEAH, focusing on regional complexities to improve understanding of SEAH-related issues in the Region. It will continue to strengthen the capacities of the country focal points, service pathways and reporting concerns to ensure that victims can access services with confidence and that they engage more actively with reporting mechanisms.

4. Commitment to simplify and improve internal processes

Through the February retreat and survey, staff reported feeling overburdened by internal processes. To respond to this concern, the Regional Director committed to a process, led by the Director of Programme Management and Director of Finance and Administration, to
review existing business processes with a view to simplifying and improving where possible, while maintaining the Region’s strong commitment to accountability and transparency.

4.1 Planning, piloting and identifying a standard methodology

To deliver on the Regional Director’s commitment to simplify and improve internal processes, the Regional Office initiated a review of business processes in six broad categories in April 2022: Programme Management (focusing on development and clearance of publications), Administration (focusing on duty travel approval processes), Finance (focusing on Direct Financial Cooperation agreements), Procurement (focusing on procurement of goods during emergencies), Resource Mobilization (focusing on clearance of donor agreements) and Human Resources (focusing on competitive selection processes). These categories were determined based on a range of inputs, including the February retreat and survey.

The intention of the review was not only to produce concrete recommendations for process improvements in these specific areas, but also to create and institutionalize a system to simplify processes on an ongoing basis with input from staff. Accordingly, this work was planned in several phases, beginning with establishing a standard methodology using select business processes, followed by a review of specific business processes by the working groups of the six categories outlined above.

The standard methodology includes a series of steps: documenting the “why” of the selected business process – that is, the purpose it serves, the critical organizational risks that are managed through this process, and the key quality measures and controls that exist to demonstrate the Region’s commitment to accountability; identifying and documenting the WHO global rules and regulations and regional guidance that govern the process; identifying and documenting current practices in the Region; identifying differences between the WHO global rules, regional guidance and current practices, including any persistent and recurrent problems and bottlenecks; and proposing recommendations for enhancing efficiency and simplifying, which are then reviewed with a risk lens to ensure that risk exposure arising from the proposed options is negligible or can be adequately mitigated.

4.2 Future directions

WHO will continue to improve and refine internal processes, and will use findings from the initial review of business processes to inform the system for institutionalizing continuous improvements to processes in the long term. The goal is to ensure that business processes are fit for purpose, agile and able to guide WHO’s work efficiently, commensurate with the level
of risk involved, while maintaining commitment to accountability to Member States and donors.

5. **Commitment to building a workplace culture we can all be proud of**

To support efforts to improve the Region’s workplace culture – focusing on strengthening inclusion and respect for diversity and on engaging workforce members across the Region in building a participatory approach to workplace culture change – the Regional Director committed to the establishment of a dedicated Workplace Culture Task Team. A series of other initiatives designed to strengthen WHO’s regional workplace culture has also been under way since February 2022.

5.1 **Workplace Culture Task Team**

The Workplace Culture Task Team was established in March 2022 and comprises a diverse and representative group of 25 workforce members from across the Region, led by the Director of the Regional Director’s Office, with support from external consultants and dedicated secretariat staff. The Task Team has identified several focus areas and priority activities to strengthen workplace culture, including values in action (that is, ensuring that everyday behaviours in the workplace align with organizational values), team building and work–life balance. The Task Team also supports efforts to align the Western Pacific Region’s workplace culture efforts with relevant global initiatives, in particular diversity, equity and inclusion. These areas and activities are iterative and will continue to evolve as the overall workplace culture and organizational change process continues.

5.2 **Ongoing listening to workforce concerns**

Following the retreat, focus group discussions were held with different groups of staff to learn more about their experiences working for WHO in the Region, and workplace culture more broadly. Facilitated by external consultants, these discussions were conducted with female staff, young people, professional and general service staff in the Regional Office, national professional officers and consultants. These discussions reaffirmed key themes and priorities that emerged from the survey and retreat in February and provided more detail on the experiences of different workforce cohorts.

Committed to listening and being accessible to all staff, the Regional Director established open office hours, following the example of the WHO Director-General. During dedicated times, staff are free to make an appointment to discuss any issue with the Regional
Director in person and virtually. As of mid-August 2022, the Regional Director had held 29 open office hours and met with more than 50 staff, including staff in country offices.

5.3 Building capacity, supporting career development

To demonstrate their commitment to improving workplace culture and listening to, learning about and addressing staff concerns, the Region’s senior management team – Regional Office directors and heads of country offices – has been engaged in a series of capacity-building activities designed to strengthen their ability to lead in the creation of a more respectful and inclusive workplace culture. Sessions have focused on values in action, cultural competency, deep listening and holding conversations about difficult topics, and leading workplace culture change. Individual coaching sessions providing tailored support have also been offered to senior managers.

A series of initiatives have been developed to strengthen career and professional development, in particular for general service staff and national professional officers. WHO staff called for action in these areas in February 2022. By August, the Regional Director had announced changes to general service staff position titles, replacing the title of Assistant with Associate. These changes were made to recognize the professional skills and capacities of general service staff and their contributions to the work of teams across the Region as colleagues and peers. A new Career Development Programme is also being established to help interested national professional officers to prepare for future job openings in the international professional staff category in the Region.

5.4 Future directions

WHO will continue the initiatives and activities outlined above, adjusting them over time to reflect lessons learnt from what works (and what does not) and workforce feedback and suggestions. For example, teams across the Region will continue to discuss values in action; once these dialogues are completed, their effectiveness and impact will be evaluated, and the same model may be applied to other value-based discussions – focusing on different themes – to be held periodically. The senior management capacity-building programme will continue until the end of the year, with future activity in this area informed by an evaluation of the first round of sessions. The Region will also continue to look for ways to improve recognition of, and professional development support for, WHO’s workforce members – in particular, local and national staff.

Further efforts will be made to align WHO’s regional work with global initiatives and policies on diversity, equity and inclusion, PRSEAH and *Preventing and Addressing Abusive*
Conduct. Further discussions are also needed to advance WHO’s work on ensuring inclusivity, safety and equity for LGBQTI+ workforce members, looking in particular at human resources, mobility, family benefits and safety issues, and recognizing that situations and needs may vary between countries and for national versus international staff, given different legal and social positions on LGBTIQIA+ issues in different countries.

6. Key principles underpinning the Region’s approach

Three key principles underpin the Region’s approach to workplace culture and organizational change: talanoa, values in action, and co-creation. The process is also reinforced by commitments to monitoring, evaluation and learning, and transparency and accountability.

Talanoa is an expression widely used in the Pacific to reflect a process of inclusive, participatory and transparent dialogue. The purpose of talanoa is to share stories, engage in dialogue, build empathy and make wise decisions for the collective good. The suggestion to use talanoa to describe the Region’s workplace culture change process came from the February retreat, with Pacific-based colleagues encouraging others to learn from the Pacific as discussions on workplace culture progress.

Values in action are the everyday actions and behaviours that should reflect core values and shape culture. Values are the beliefs and principles that drive behaviour, and culture is a reflection of this, expressed in everyday behaviours and interactions. Many of the concerns expressed by staff during the February retreat and survey reflected a misalignment between values and behaviour. For this reason, workplace culture change efforts are focused on values in action, that is, ensuring that everyday behaviours in the workplace reflect the values of WHO and the United Nations.

Co-creation is the collaborative development of new ideas and innovations. The Region’s workplace culture efforts draw on the idea of co-creation because it reflects both the shared responsibility of all workforce members to contribute to workplace culture change, as well as the conviction that these efforts will be stronger with contributions from the broader workforce.

To assess the impact of efforts to build a more respectful, supportive and accountable workplace culture, a number of monitoring and evaluation strategies are under development. These will include a follow-up staff survey, qualitative evaluation strategies, additional focus group discussions, and an evaluation of the capacity-building sessions conducted with senior leaders. The results of these evaluations will be shared with workforce members and used to
inform future work across all areas of commitment to improve effectiveness, in line with the regional learn-and-improve approach.

In addition to these principles, the Region’s senior management team is committed to the open and transparent sharing of information on progress, as well as challenges and lessons learnt. Regular email updates are sent to the regional workforce, and regular town-hall meetings are used to update staff and field questions.

7. Conclusions and next steps

This information document presents a summary of progress towards workplace culture and organizational change at WHO in the Western Pacific Region. Organizational and culture change is complex and takes time: the focus since February 2022 has been on establishing initiatives and systems that will create and sustain change into the future – towards creating a workplace that all workforce members can be proud of and where all are supported to do their best work for Member States.