

# YEAR IN REVIEW

---

## OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN AND MEDIATOR

# Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgements.....   | 3  |
| Message from the Ombudsman and Mediator .....   | 4  |
| Two Sides of the Same Storm .....   | 6  |
| A Manager’s Perspective.....  | 6  |
| A Team Member’s Perspective.....  | 6  |
| What the 2025 Numbers Tell Us .....   | 8  |
| From Impasse to Dialogue: Mediation in Action .....   | 10 |
| Systemic Observations: Emerging Themes .....  | 11 |
| Conditions Reducing Safe Spaces to Speak Up .....   | 12 |
| Conditions Contributing to Conflict Avoidance and Over-Reliance on Formal Mechanisms.....       | 12 |
| Conditions Affecting the Independence and Effectiveness of Recourse Mechanisms .....            | 13 |
| Conditions Affecting Transparency and Staff Confidence in Recruitment and Selection Processes.  | 13 |
| Conditions Affecting Procedural Fairness in Medical-Related Decision Making.....                | 14 |
| Conditions Limiting Meaningful Staff Representation and Dialogue .....                          | 14 |
| Conditions Contributing to Abrasive Relationships and Heightened Vulnerability for Female Staff | 14 |
| Conditions Affecting Staff Capacity Due to Sustained Workload Pressure and Fatigue .....        | 15 |
| Looking Ahead: Our Commitments for 2026 .....   | 15 |
| Rebuilding Trust and Supporting Team Recovery .....   | 15 |
| Deepening Early Intervention and Informal Resolution Pathways .....                             | 16 |
| Ensuring Access to Ombuds Services Across Regions.....  | 16 |
| Strengthening the Independence and Sustainability of Recourse Mechanisms.....                   | 16 |
| Emerging Concern: Colleagues in Affiliate Workforce Arrangements .....                          | 16 |
| Annexe I.....   | 18 |

## Acknowledgements

The Office wishes to express its sincere appreciation to colleagues, staff representatives, managers, and senior leaders who engaged with the Office during the year and supported our mandate. We are grateful for the trust placed in the Office and for the constructive engagement across our work, including mediation services, outreach and learning activities, and global Ombuds events such as the Ubuntu Community Cafes.

We extend our particular thanks to the High Commissioner, the Senior Executive Team, the Global Staff Council, Regional Bureau Directors and their management teams, as well as the leadership and personnel of the operations and offices with which the Office engaged. Constructive engagement with leadership remains essential to ensuring that individual experiences, raised in confidence, can inform broader organizational understanding.

The Office values its close collaboration with staff support and accountability functions, including the Global Staff Council and Staff Associations, Peer Advisors, the Legal Affairs Service, the Division of Human Resources, the Inspector General's Office, the Ethics Office, Personnel Welfare Services, and colleagues in Internal Communications and across the regions. These relationships contribute to dialogue, coordination, and learning, particularly in periods of institutional stress.

We also acknowledge with appreciation the Office's external partners, including the Swiss SYNI programme, the International Ombuds Association, the Chief Executive Board of UN Ombuds and Mediators, and the Network of Ombuds and Mediators of Multilateral Organizations. Their collaboration strengthens the Office's professional practice and its ability to serve colleagues worldwide.

### CONTACT US

**Dr. Youssoupha Niang**

UNHCR Ombudsperson and Mediator  
Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator

Email: [ombuds@unhcr.org](mailto:ombuds@unhcr.org)

## Message from the Ombudsman and Mediator

Dear Colleagues,

The past year was one of profound transition for UNHCR. Funding constraints, restructuring, and rapid organizational change reshaped not only structures and posts, but the daily realities of colleagues across regions, functions, and levels.

In my role as Ombudsman and Mediator, I had the privilege of listening to colleagues navigate this period of uncertainty. What I consistently heard was not simply conflict, but a need for confidential, impartial space: a place to make sense of change, to reflect on difficult experiences, and to regain footing at a time when much felt unsettled.

Throughout 2025, the Office experienced a significant increase in demand. Colleagues reached out for individual consultations, mediation, facilitated dialogues, and community-based spaces for reflection. This rise did not point to an increase in interpersonal discord alone, but to the strain created when rapid organizational decisions unfold under pressure and with limited opportunity for dialogue. In response, the Office adapted its modalities and expanded its outreach to make informal, neutral support accessible at scale.

This heightened demand was not felt by the Ombudsman Office in isolation. Other staff support and oversight functions similarly faced increased complexity while operating with reduced capacity. Taken together, these pressures highlighted the importance of clarity of roles, coordination across functions, and sustained attention to the systems that support colleagues during periods of transition.

What colleagues shared throughout the year also revealed how deeply process matters. Many described a rupture in trust and in the psychological contract with the organization, shaped not only by the crisis itself but by how change was communicated and experienced over time. These patterns informed the Office's December 2025 Special Report and contributed to the High Commissioner's 2026 Integrity Plan of Action. They serve as a reminder that confidential conversations, when considered collectively, can carry meaning beyond the individual encounter.

As the organization looks ahead, the Office's focus is on supporting recovery. This includes helping teams re-establish stability in new structures, strengthening access to early and informal resolution, and continuing to offer spaces where concerns can be raised safely and constructively. Initiatives such as Ubuntu Community Cafés 2.0 in 2026 will remain an important part of that effort, providing structured opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and upward feedback.

I wish to express my deep appreciation to the Ombuds team, whose professionalism, care, and steadiness were especially evident during a demanding year. And to every colleague who placed their trust in the Office, thank you. It is an honor for my team and me to accompany you through moments of change, and a responsibility we approach with humility and care.

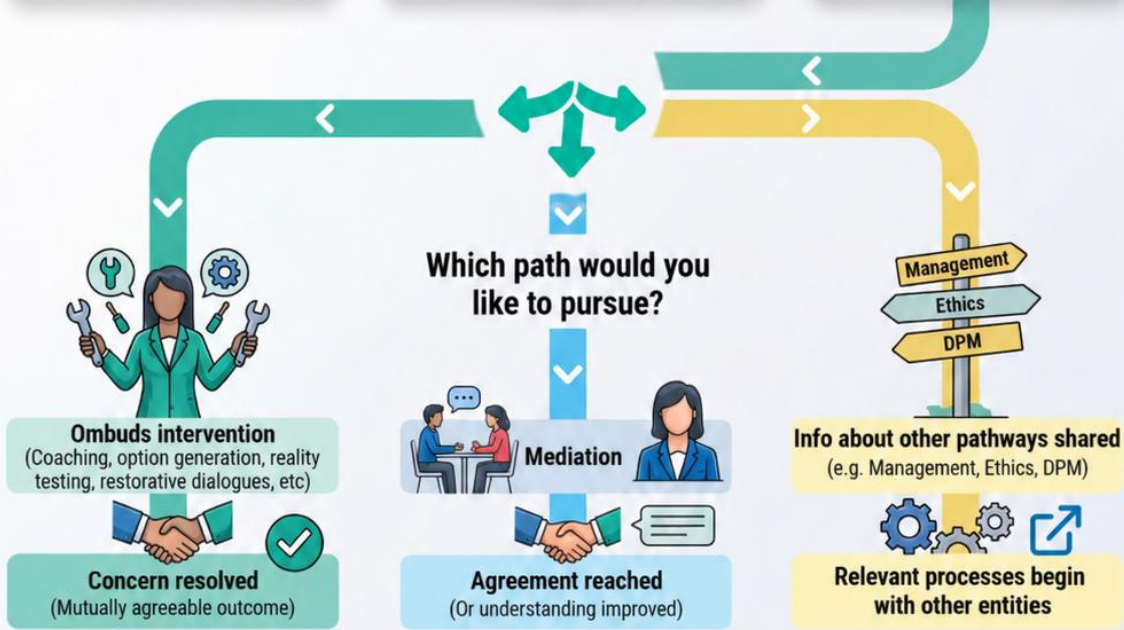
With appreciation for your continued commitment to dialogue,

***"To whom much is given, much is expected." African proverb***



Dr. Youssoupha Niang

## What happens when you reach out to our office



Throughout all pathways: anonymised trends and systemic issues identified and channelled through the organization.

**Impartial**  
Focus is on fair process

**Independent**  
The office operates free from interference or control from other parts of the organization

### The Principles We Follow

**Confidential**  
with exception for imminent risk of serious harm, all interactions remain strictly confidential

**Informal**  
A safe, flexible space to explore concerns and solutions early



## Two Sides of the Same Storm

*The narratives below are composite accounts reflecting recurring patterns observed by the Office throughout 2025. They do not describe any single individual and instead illustrates how organizational change was experienced from different institutional positions during a period of sustained uncertainty.*

### A Manager's Perspective

When restructuring announcements began, "Sara," a P3 Head of Office, learned that her team would be reduced shortly before affected colleagues received notifications. She had limited advance information and no role in shaping the decisions affecting her office yet immediately became the focal point for questions she could not answer.



In the weeks that followed, guidance continued to shift. Timelines were revised, figures adjusted, and expectations clarified incrementally. Sara remained accountable for maintaining performance and trust while uncertain about the limits of her authority and discretion. She struggled to determine how to communicate transparently without speculating or assuming responsibility for decisions taken elsewhere.

Sara contacted the Ombuds Office seeking a confidential, impartial space to think through her leadership role. The discussion focused on role clarity. The Ombuds helped her distinguish between

authority she retained as a manager and constraints imposed at other levels, supporting her in identifying where she could exercise judgement and where she could not.

The conversation also addressed holding boundaries: knowing how to acknowledge uncertainty whilst identifying the source of concern, structuring conversations so concerns could be heard constructively, and finding how to avoid raising expectations in an unsettled environment. The discussion did not change the decisions affecting the office and instead helped Sara approach her leadership responsibilities with greater clarity and steadiness.


### A Team Member's Perspective

When the restructuring reached his team, "Omar" received a notification informing him that his post would be discontinued. The message provided limited information about timelines, transition arrangements, or points of contact. Attempts to seek clarification yielded fragmented responses, leaving Omar unsure how the process would unfold or how to engage without escalating the situation.


As uncertainty persisted, Omar found himself caught between waiting and acting. He was reluctant to pursue formal channels, yet increasingly unclear how to obtain reliable information or express concerns productively. His manager, facing similar information gaps, appeared equally constrained.


Omar contacted the Ombuds Office seeking assistance not with the decision itself, but with the conditions surrounding the process. In discussion, the Ombuds helped him identify how process opacity — rather than the outcome alone — was driving disengagement and frustration.

**A TEAM MEMBER'S PERSPECTIVE ('OMAR')**




**Post Discontinuation:**  
Received notification with limited timelines, transition info, or points of contact.





**Process Opacity:**  
Fragmented responses yielded confusion. Unsure how to engage. Reluctant to pursue formal channels. disengagement drivers.



Beyond individual consultation, the Ombuds intervened at a systemic containment level. Without naming Omar, the Office raised anonymized, real-time feedback with relevant stakeholders about inconsistent messaging, unclear points of contact, and gaps in communication during the post abolition process. This intervention was aimed not at revisiting decisions, but at interrupting a pattern contributing to confusion across multiple cases.

As communication parameters were clarified, Omar experienced the process as more structured and legible. While the outcome regarding his post

did not change, the intervention helped restore workable channels for communication, enabling him to navigate next steps with greater predictability during a difficult transition.

*Together, these accounts reflect a pattern observed in 2025: where uncertainty was compounded by ambiguity about roles or process, ombuds interventions operated at different levels, supporting managerial boundary holding on the one hand, and stabilizing how organizational processes were engaged with on the other.*

# What the 2025 Numbers Tell Us

## 2025 in Numbers

1,806 persons engage in case management  
19,051 engagements in 2025



In a year of organizational crisis, the Office saw a **72% rise in visitors** and expanded its outreach to tens of thousands more personnel, reflecting the organization's **heightened need for neutral guidance and constructive support**.

### SYSTEMIC OBSERVATIONS



#### Perceived Inequity

Staff felt **retention** and selection were driven by **managerial proximity** and **favoritism** rather than objective criteria.



#### Support System Strain

Critical functions (Ethics, Ombudsman, PWS, Staff Council) were weakened by **reduced resources** despite **soaring demand**.



#### 'Survival Mode' Dominance

Crisis response triggered pervasive organizational withdrawal; staff prioritized **personal security**, leading to **burnout** and a eroded "psychological contract" with leadership.



#### Amplified by Culture

Long-standing dynamics like **hierarchical control**, **conflict avoidance**, and **guarded senior power** exacerbated the crisis's impact.



#### One-Way Communication

Despite initial efforts, staff increasingly perceived communication as **lacking transparency**, **contradictory**, and **lacking decision-making clarity**.

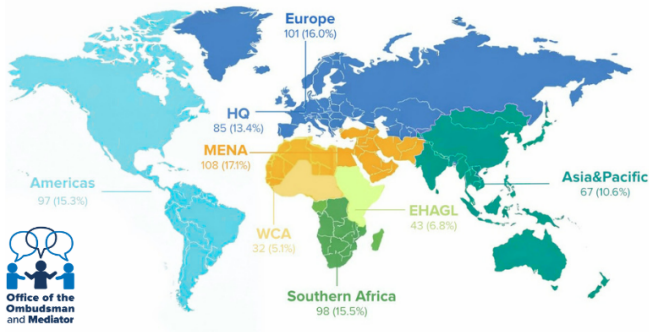
### TOP 5 CONCERNS RAISED



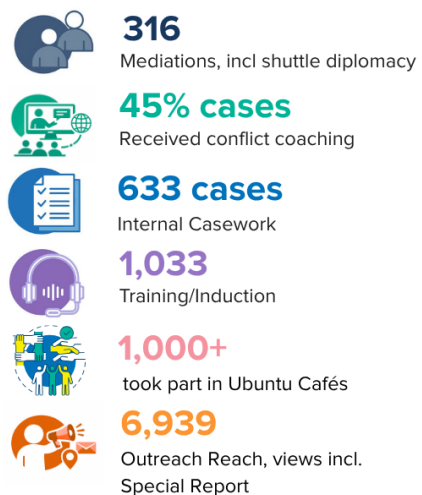
### PROFILE OF VISITORS



### PERCENTAGE OF CASES BY REGION



### AT A GLANCE



\*Figure represents a weighted average for engagement types

The data from 2025 tells a story that goes beyond volume. While demand for the Office's services increased significantly, the more consequential shift was what colleagues brought forward. Concerns were often layered and interconnected, emerging in a context where certainty was limited and trust was under strain. The figures presented here reflect how that pressure was experienced across the organization.

Five concern categories dominated casework during the year: job and career, evaluative relationships, organizational leadership and management, peer and colleague relationships, and legal and compliance matters. These concerns were rarely experienced in isolation. Colleagues typically described situations in which uncertainty about roles or contracts coincided with strained supervisory relationships, gaps in communication, or a sense that decisions affecting them had been taken without sufficient transparency. The concentration of concerns in the first three categories reflects how the restructuring affected not only structures, but also the relationships and trust that hold teams together.

Colleagues seeking support came from all staff categories, contract types, regions, and levels. This wide distribution underscores that the pressures of 2025 were not confined to specific functions or locations but were felt throughout the institution. Within that breadth, several patterns were particularly visible.

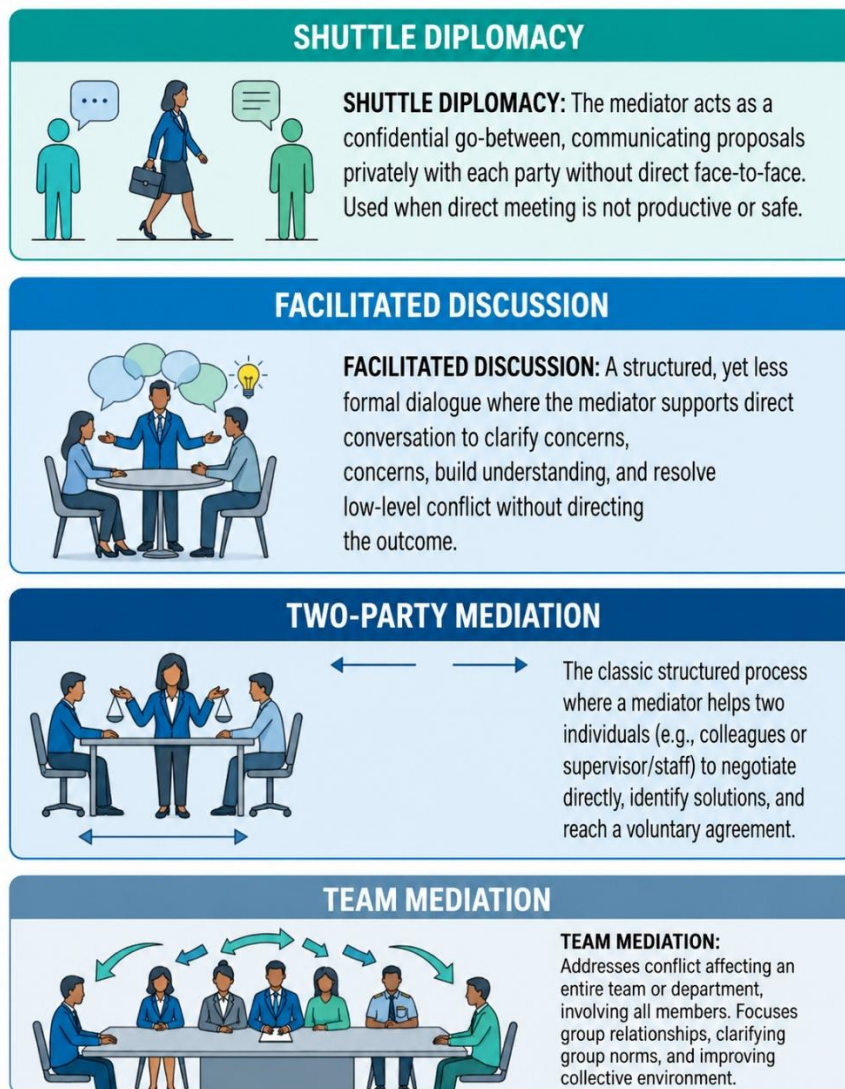
Female colleagues represented the majority of visitors to the Office, consistent with trends observed in previous years. Colleagues on fixed term appointments accounted for the largest share of casework, highlighting the particular vulnerability associated with employment precarity during periods of organizational change.

We observed a relatively similar utilization of the Office's services across the Regions. Most of the cases were related to the downsizing process.

Across individual casework, conflict coaching was the most frequent modality, applied in approximately forty-five per cent of cases. This reflects the Office's emphasis on early and informal engagement. Through these conversations, colleagues were supported to clarify what was unfolding in their situation, reflect on their interests, and consider constructive options before concerns hardened into entrenched disputes or escalated into formal processes. In many cases, a single well-timed conversation was sufficient to shift a dynamic that had been building over time.

Together, these patterns illustrate how the pressures of 2025 translated into concrete workplace concerns. They also underscore the role of early, informal resolution in helping colleagues navigate complexity at a moment when organizational conditions made clarity and dialogue particularly difficult.

## From Impasse to Dialogue: Mediation in Action



Where communication had broken down or trust between parties had eroded beyond what individual conflict coaching could address, mediation provided a more structured pathway for engagement. During the reporting period, the Office facilitated 316 mediation processes, including cases conducted through shuttle diplomacy, involving situations that could no longer be addressed through one-party consultation alone.

Most mediations involved disputes between colleagues or between staff members and supervisors. These cases typically emerged after prolonged unresolved disagreement, sustained workload pressure, or extended uncertainty about roles and contracts had taken a toll on working relationships. Through a confidential and voluntary process supported by a neutral third party, mediation created conditions for direct engagement that were not otherwise available, enabling parties to clarify concerns, test assumptions, and where possible, identify a way forward.

Across all mediation cases, timely access to neutral facilitation supported more constructive engagement and helped prevent further deterioration of working relationships. Themes emerging from mediation, including the impact of uncertainty, strain within evaluative relationships, and misalignment between individual expectations and organizational processes, consistently echoed those observed

across individual casework. Viewed collectively, these cases offered insight not only into discrete disputes, but into the organizational conditions in which conflict took root, which the following section examines in greater depth.

## Systemic Observations: Emerging Themes

In December 2025, the Office issued a [Special Report](#): consolidating the systemic dynamics observed across thousands of engagements during the restructuring and downsizing process. The overview below draws on that report and on patterns that emerged more prominently toward the end of the year. The full report is available in Annex A.

The defining theme of 2025 was a rupture in trust and in the psychological contract between colleagues and the institution. Many staff described feeling disconnected from decisions affecting their teams and work, not only because of the financial crisis itself, but because of how the process unfolded. Rapid announcements, limited consultation, and uneven communication eroded confidence in the fairness of retention and selection processes. Colleagues repeatedly emphasized that it was the experience of the process, its pace, sequencing, and absence of dialogue, contributed most to uncertainty, fear, and disengagement. The crisis was the earthquake; the process became its aftershock.

As the restructuring progressed, many colleagues shifted into what they described as a "survival state", characterized by heightened vigilance, reduced collaboration, and increased sensitivity to perceived inequities. These pressures contributed to misunderstandings, strained relationships, and diminished team cohesion. Communication gaps, combined with widespread reliance on informal channels such as WhatsApp groups, further amplified uncertainty and widened perception gaps around decisions, roles, and expectations.

The following themes grew more visible as the year progressed:

**Systemic conditions shaping workplace conflict and trust in 2025**

- 

**Conditions reducing safe spaces to speak up**  
Prolonged instability narrowed the perceived safety of raising concerns.
- 

**Conditions contributing to conflict avoidance and over-reliance on formal mechanisms**  
Uncertainty reduced early dialogue, leading to escalation and greater use of formal processes.
- 

**Conditions affecting the independence and effectiveness of recourse mechanisms**  
Reduced capacity and structural changes across independent recourse functions limited timely access to impartial support at a moment of increased organizational need.
- 

**Conditions affecting transparency and staff confidence in recruitment processes**  
Recruitment processes were widely experienced as unclear and insufficiently transparent.
- 

**Conditions affecting procedural fairness in medical-related decision making**  
Limited clarity and review reduced confidence in the fairness of medical decisions
- 

**Conditions limiting meaningful staff representation and dialogue**  
Constrained consultation weakened staff representation in decisions with major impact.
- 

**Conditions contributing to abrasive relationships and heightened vulnerability for female staff**  
Pressure and reduced safety intensified abrasive behavior, disproportionately affecting female staff.
- 

**Conditions affecting staff capacity due to sustained workload pressure and fatigue**  
Reduced staffing and sustained pressure eroded individual and team capacity.

## Conditions Reducing Safe Spaces to Speak Up

Against the backdrop of sustained instability, the Office observed a growing reluctance among colleagues to raise concerns or speak openly about workplace issues. Many described choosing silence not because concerns were absent, but because they no longer felt confident that doing so was safe or worthwhile. Continued uncertainty about organizational direction, coupled with recent experiences of disruption and loss, appeared to narrow the perceived space for raising questions, offering dissenting views, or initiating difficult conversations.

This contraction of a safe space to speak up had tangible consequences. Issues that might previously have been surfaced and addressed early were more likely to remain unvoiced, allowing frustration and mistrust to accumulate over time. The Office observed that, in this context, the erosion of psychological safety was less a sudden shift than a gradual adaptation to prolonged instability, with colleagues recalibrating their engagement to minimize perceived risk. These dynamics underscore the importance of restoring predictable, safe channels for dialogue if early intervention and informal resolution are to remain viable.

## Conditions Contributing to Conflict Avoidance and Over-Reliance on Formal Mechanisms

The pressures of restructuring amplified a longstanding tendency toward conflict avoidance across the organization. The Office observed that many concerns brought forward during the reporting period had the potential to be addressed earlier at the team or supervisory level but instead remained unspoken or unresolved. Hesitation to engage directly was commonly linked to fear of repercussions, uncertainty about how to initiate difficult conversations, or a preference to wait until organizational instability subsided. As a result, issues were more likely to accumulate and escalate, limiting the opportunity for early, informal resolution.

At the same time, the Office observed a growing reliance on formal recourse mechanisms, including Management Evaluation Review (MER), without prior exploration of informal pathways. This dynamic contributed to an increased number of cases reaching formal processes that might otherwise have benefited from earlier dialogue, and it diverted attention from situations where timely neutral support could have helped prevent further escalation.

Managers and internal support structures operated under significant strain throughout this period. Many supervisors reported feeling underinformed about decisions affecting their teams, uncertain about the scope of their authority, and constrained in their ability to provide guidance while navigating their own professional uncertainty. Teams undergoing repeated structural changes frequently experienced diminished cohesion and expressed the need for structured spaces to surface concerns, realign expectations, and re-establish shared working norms.

In a small number of particularly sensitive situations, these dynamics extended beyond individual working relationships and directly engaged the organization as a party. During the reporting period, the Office facilitated five mediation processes between staff and the Administration/Management following Management Evaluation Requests. These cases were treated as exceptional and required careful attention to power dynamics and clear articulation of the voluntary nature of the process. While mediation does not replace formal accountability mechanisms, these limited cases demonstrate how structured, impartial dialogue can complement existing processes by enabling clearer understanding of options, supporting dignified transitions, and helping both the organization and affected colleagues move forward without further escalation. These very limited number of mediations post MER highlight

the need for Administration/Management to make more use of mediation in situations where administrative decisions are contested through MER.

## Conditions Affecting the Independence and Effectiveness of Recourse Mechanisms

The Office observed increasing strain across the institution's independent support and recourse mechanisms during a period of heightened organizational pressure. Functions such as Human Resources, Legal Affairs, Personnel Welfare Services, the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator, and the Ethics Office experienced a significant rise in demand at the same time as their own capacity, staffing, or representation was reduced. Collectively, these functions serve as early access points for staff seeking guidance, clarification, or support. Constraints on their availability and reach created observable gaps at a moment when reliance on independent, impartial services was especially high.

As reflected in [JIU/REP/2025/5](#), the effectiveness of the ombudsman and mediation function rests on its independence and the availability of adequate human and financial resources. Similar principles apply to other independent oversight and support functions. The Office observed that reductions or structural changes affecting these mechanisms limited the organization's ability to respond informally and proactively to emerging concerns. Administrative adjustments, including changes affecting the seniority or positioning of impartial offices, also risk signaling a diminished institutional emphasis on independence. Taken together, these dynamics reduced staff confidence in recourse mechanisms and constrained the organization's overall capacity to manage conflict and organizational stress in a resilient manner.

## Conditions Affecting Transparency and Staff Confidence in Recruitment and Selection Processes

The restructuring brought recruitment and selection processes under heightened scrutiny. Across engagements, the Office observed persistent concern among staff about the transparency and fairness of how recruitment decisions were made and communicated. While the Office does not assess the merits of individual decisions, colleagues frequently raised questions about how selection processes were applied in practice, particularly in relation to the scope of managerial discretion and the consistency of criteria used.

The reported concerns were the following: (a) feedback following recruitment exercises was general in nature and did not meaningfully explain the basis for selection outcomes; (b) colleagues on priority consideration lists expressed uncertainty about why they had not been selected for posts for which they met the requirements; (c) in several cases, the Office also noted confusion when positions abolished during restructuring were subsequently re-advertised, which regardless of the underlying rationale, contributed to doubts about the predictability and integrity of the process.

Taken together, these experiences point to a gap between how recruitment processes are designed and implemented and how they are experienced by staff during periods of organizational change. They underscore the importance of clear communication, meaningful and role-specific feedback, and consistent application of recruitment criteria to sustain staff confidence in the fairness of selection and recruitment mechanisms.

## Conditions Affecting Procedural Fairness in Medical-Related Decision Making

The Office observed a pattern of concerns related to the application of UNHCR's sick leave and medical clearance frameworks. The concerns span the timeliness and transparency of medical determinations, the consistency of communication regarding decisions affecting sick leave status, and the accessibility of independent review mechanisms when those decisions were contested. The Office observed uncertainty about the criteria applied to cases and limited opportunities to engage meaningfully with the process.

Taken together, these observations point to structural questions about how medical discretion is exercised, communicated, and reviewed, and about whether current frameworks provide staff with sufficient clarity and access to procedurally fair processes. The Office has shared these concerns with relevant stakeholders and will continue to monitor developments in this area.

## Conditions Limiting Meaningful Staff Representation and Dialogue

During the reporting period, the Office observed growing concern about the limited space for meaningful staff representation and dialogue in decision making processes with profound impact on staff. Colleagues and staff representatives described situations where consultation felt constrained or perfunctory, with limited opportunity for independent input before decisions were taken. In the context of ongoing instability, this narrowed the perceived role of staff representation and weakened confidence that staff perspectives could meaningfully influence outcomes.

At the same time, staff representatives shared with the Office a heightened sense of vulnerability in carrying out their representative functions. Many were, and are still, operating in environments where tensions are high, stakes are significant, and personal exposure feels increased. They also operate in highly hierarchical bureaucracies (operations, bureaus, etc.). This constrains their ability to raise concerns robustly or to act as effective interlocutors between staff and management. The Office observed that when representatives themselves feel insufficiently protected or heard, the space for constructive dialogue contracts further, increasing the risk that concerns remain unaddressed or surface only through escalatory channels.

## Conditions Contributing to Abrasive Relationships and Heightened Vulnerability for Female Staff

Over the course of the year, the Office observed an increase in concerns involving abrasive or strained working relationships, particularly in environments characterized by sustained pressure and reduced tolerance for challenge. While these dynamics affected colleagues across roles and levels, female staff appeared to experience heightened vulnerability within such interactions. Colleagues described patterns of dismissive communication, disproportionate scrutiny, or abrupt managerial responses, which were more difficult to address openly in a context marked by ongoing instability.

These dynamics were closely linked to the broader contraction of psychological safety observed during the year. The Office noted that in environments where the space for speaking up had narrowed, abrasive behavior was more likely to go unchallenged and to persist over time. Female staff described hesitancy in raising concerns or setting boundaries, citing fear of negative repercussions in an already

uncertain professional landscape. Taken together, these observations highlight how prolonged instability can amplify relational harm and unequally affect staff where power dynamics and gender intersect, reinforcing silence and limiting early intervention.

## Conditions Affecting Staff Capacity Due to Sustained Workload Pressure and Fatigue

The Office also observed widespread fatigue linked to sustained workload pressure and diminished team capacity. Following staffing reductions, many colleagues described operating with fewer resources while carrying broader responsibilities over extended periods. This combination of increased demands and reduced capacity contributed to exhaustion, reduced resilience, and limited bandwidth for addressing emerging concerns early.

The Office noted that fatigue in this context was not simply an individual wellbeing issue, but a systemic condition affecting how teams functioned, decisions were made, and conflicts were managed. Colleagues and managers alike described reduced space for reflection, more reactive communication, and lower tolerance for uncertainty or disagreement. These dynamics increased the risk that misunderstandings would escalate and that concerns requiring thoughtful engagement would instead be deferred, formalized, or left unaddressed.

Taken together, the above observations reflect how organizational conditions can profoundly shape how colleagues experienced conflict in 2025. They form the foundation for the Office's priorities in 2026.

## Looking Ahead: Our Commitments for 2026

The events of 2025 left a lasting imprint on colleagues' trust, sense of safety, and confidence in the institution. As UNHCR moves into a period of relative stabilization, the Office's priorities for 2026 reflect what colleagues have consistently highlighted across engagements: the need for clearer communication, earlier support, and spaces where concerns can be raised without fear of repercussion. The commitments outlined below are grounded in what the Office observed across thousands of confidential interactions and in the systemic issues that remain unaddressed.

### Rebuilding Trust and Supporting Team Recovery

Many colleagues emphasized the importance of clearer communication, space to ask questions, and leadership behaviors that model fairness and accountability. As new structures take shape, teams will require opportunities to re-establish shared norms, rebuild cohesion, and reconnect after prolonged periods of uncertainty. The Office will continue to offer individual and group-based spaces that support reflection, dialogue, and confidence in institutional processes, particularly where teams are navigating the aftereffects of rapid change.

In 2026, the Office will convene a renewed series of Ubuntu Community Cafés 2026, designed as structured and confidential forums for dialogue and upward feedback. These sessions will provide opportunities for collective reflection and engagement around shared values, including those articulated in the High Commissioner's Integrity Plan of Action. By creating predictable and impartial spaces for dialogue, the Office aims to support conditions that enable trust to be rebuilt over time and psychological safety to be strengthened in teams.

---

## Deepening Early Intervention and Informal Resolution Pathways

One of the clearest lessons of 2025 was the cost of waiting. Concerns that might have been resolved through a direct conversation instead escalated because the conditions for early dialogue were absent. In 2026, the Office will continue promoting informal-first approaches in management responses to workplace grievances. In other domains, informal first approaches will be promoted through conflict coaching, training in difficult conversations, and tailored support to managers navigating early-stage issues. Building conflict competence across the workforce remains a long-term investment, and will result in healthier team climates, reduced escalation, and in an organization better equipped to navigate the next period of change.

## Ensuring Access to Ombuds Services Across Regions

Access to informal resolution remains uneven, and 2025 made that gap more visible. The Office strengthened its presence in Asia and the Pacific through its hub in Bangkok, while financial pressures required a reduction in presence in Nairobi and Pretoria. Colleagues across those regions continued to receive support through active hubs and remote modalities, but equitable access remains an unfinished commitment. The Office will continue strengthening outreach and working toward more consistent coverage as resources allow.

## Strengthening the Independence and Sustainability of Recourse Mechanisms

A primary commitment for 2026 is advocating for the institutional conditions that allow independent offices to function effectively. As reflected in JIU/REP/2025/5, the effectiveness of the Ombudsman and Mediation function – and by extension, the Ethics Office and other oversight bodies – is fundamentally dependent on independence and the availability of adequate human and financial resources.

In the coming year, the Office will engage with leadership to ensure that administrative or structural changes do not inadvertently signal a diminished institutional emphasis on independence or seniority. Protecting the reach and capacity of these "early access points" is not merely a matter of administrative compliance, it is a prerequisite for managing organizational stress in a resilient manner. Without robust, visible, and well-resourced recourse mechanisms, the organization risks a permanent reduction in staff confidence and an inability to address emerging concerns before they escalate into crises.

## Emerging Concern: Colleagues in Affiliate Workforce Arrangements

As the organization expands the use of affiliate workforce arrangements alongside a reduction in fixed-term appointments, the Office observed increasing uncertainty among colleagues regarding applicable administrative frameworks, entitlements, performance management processes, and avenues for raising concerns. These observations point to a growing gap between the reach of informal resolution services and the diversity of workforce arrangements within UNHCR. The Office will engage with relevant stakeholders to support greater clarity about available support pathways and to help ensure that colleagues, regardless of contractual status, can access informal resolution pathways.

\*\*\*

Together, these priorities reflect the Ombuds Office's role as a space where individual experiences, shared in confidence, can inform broader organizational understanding. The insights in this report belong to the colleagues who placed their trust in the Office and are offered as a contribution to ongoing reflection about what UNHCR's staff need and how institutional conditions can better support them. The year ahead will require sustained attention to colleagues still carrying the effects of the recent organizational change, to teams adjusting to new realities, and to the conditions that enable concerns to be raised early rather than crystallizing into crises.

The Office remains committed to accompanying colleagues and managers in this work and to supporting UNHCR in fostering an internal environment where its people feel as protected and respected as those it serves externally.

## Annexe I

# Ombuds Special Report: Systemic Observations on UNHCR's 2025 Downsizing and Restructuring Process

December 2025

---

**OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN  
AND MEDIATOR**



---

## Executive Summary

The 2025 funding freeze by the United States, combined with additional donor reductions, constituted an unprecedented shock to UNHCR's operations, financial stability, and workforce. Following this turn, the organization undertook a rapid coping response with restructuring and downsizing process ("the process") to preserve operational viability, resulting in approximately 5,400 staff departures and widespread office reductions or closures between late 2024 and September 2025. Staff who engaged with the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator consistently acknowledged the scale and immediacy of the crisis and understood that leadership had to take urgent, painful decisions to safeguard the organization. Many colleagues expressed appreciation for early communication efforts, town halls, videos and visible engagement from several senior leaders including the Global Staff Council, which contributed to initial feelings of solidarity and shared purpose.

As the crisis evolved, however, staff repeatedly reported that this early goodwill was difficult to sustain. Across categories and levels, colleagues described perceptions of very limited transparency, unclear decision-making criteria and opacity, and restricted opportunities to engage in collective problem-solving. Managers and Representatives—who themselves felt insufficiently informed—reported difficulty supporting their teams. These perceptions were shaped not only by the crisis itself and its management, but also by long-standing cultural patterns of hierarchical decision-making, conflict avoidance, and guarded power at senior levels, with decision-making largely centralized and fewer opportunities for dialogue and social negotiation that are typically needed in large-scale crisis management and transitions.

A consistent theme in staff feedback was the emergence of a pervasive "survival mode" or "survival state." Staff described withdrawing from organizational processes, focusing on personal security, and experiencing heightened anxiety and fatigue as restructuring and downsizing expanded from initially affected groups to the broader workforce without seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. Messages intended to convey fairness—such as "no one will be immune" or "we are all in the same boat"—were often experienced as increasing uncertainty and fueling competition among staff categories. Colleagues expressed that this survival dynamic had tangible impacts on morale, psychological safety, collaboration, productivity, and organizational functioning, and contributed to what many experienced as a rupture in the "psychological contract": the unwritten mutual expectations that support trust and engagement.

Staff repeatedly noted that while the funding cuts were an undeniable and unavoidable shock, the way the crisis was managed created an internal crisis – much like an earthquake and its aftershocks. This led to a prolonged survival state with consequential impact on UNHCR's short-, medium-, and long-term resilience, effectiveness, and reputation. Many expressed concern that the absence of a sustained crisis management mechanism and participatory engagement after the initial shock contributed to a loss of direction, diminished belonging, and weakened cohesion across the organization.

This Special Report, authored by the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator, does not evaluate or review the decisions made by leadership. Rather, it consolidates the themes, perceptions, and systemic patterns consistently raised by colleagues through the Office's confidential channels and through its broader engagement, including case work, dialogues, stakeholders' engagements, workshops, surveys, ethnographic observations and Ubuntu Community Cafés. These individual and collective (teams) realities have real impacts on organizational functioning and are offered for leadership reflection.

In keeping with the Ombudsman's mandate as an independent, neutral, and informal resource within the UN internal justice system, this report is to support organizational health without prescribing

binding solutions or attributing responsibility. Additionally, the report identifies critical areas for reflection to help the organization transition from survival to recovery. It presents options for consideration—such as the potential establishment of a standing cross-functional crisis response mechanism and the safeguarding of independent and oversight bodies—to strengthen communication, rebuild trust, foster inclusion, and support the organization’s recovery and renewed collective purpose.

I seize this opportunity to extend my profound gratitude to the UNHCR leadership and managers; the Global Staff Council and Staff Association; our dedicated colleagues around the world; our key stakeholders; and the invaluable Ombudsman and Mediation team.

With appreciation,



Dr Youssoupha Niang

Ombudsman and Mediator

# Table of contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Mandate and Purpose of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator .....      | 22 |
| Methodology, Scope and Limitations.....                                    | 23 |
| Context: Organizational Crisis and Funding Cuts .....                      | 24 |
| Pre-existing Financial Strain (2023–2024) and transformation fatigue ..... | 24 |
| Shock of the 2025 US Funding Freeze.....                                   | 24 |
| Culture as an Amplifier of Crisis.....                                     | 25 |
| The Institutional Response.....  | 26 |
| The Community Reaction.....  | 27 |
| Systemic observations on the Process .....                                 | 28 |
| Perception gaps.....   | 28 |
| Lack of pause and reflect .....  | 29 |
| Limited two-way communication and dialogue.....                            | 29 |
| Communication inconsistencies.....   | 30 |
| Perceived gaps in holistic crisis management.....                          | 30 |
| Fragmentation and weakening of services and support mechanisms.....        | 30 |
| Workload and needs-based analysis.....                                     | 30 |
| Systemic observations on Process Impact: .....                             | 31 |
| Impact on the Organization .....   | 31 |
| Impact on People .....   | 34 |
| Options for the Way Forward.....   | 37 |
| Conclusion.....  | 39 |
| Annexe .....   | 40 |

# Mandate and Purpose of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator

The Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator (the Office) is a confidential, neutral, independent, and informal resource available to all UNHCR personnel. As part of the United Nations internal justice system, its mandate is to support the resolution of workplace concerns, enable constructive dialogue, and surface systemic insights that may help strengthen organizational health.

The Office provides a safe and impartial avenue for staff and managers to explore concerns, clarify issues, consider options, and reflect on challenges occurring at individual, team, or organizational levels. Engagement with the Office is voluntary and informal; it is not a channel for formal investigations or determinations of wrongdoing. However, the Office uses informal fact findings to triangulate information.

Through its work at these different levels, ranging from individual case work to operational support, the Office has access to multiple perspectives on how organizational dynamics are experienced across the institution. Supporting staff globally, facilitating dialogue, engaging line managers, observing systemic patterns, and reviewing organizational dynamics gives the Office a unique vantage point on how policies, decisions, and internal processes are experienced by the workforce. These experiences are important indicators of organizational health.

When widespread, recurring issues emerge, the Ombuds function may consolidate those observations into a Special Report, with the aim of assisting leadership in understanding the human and organizational dynamics at stake. This Special Report is issued in that spirit. It does not assign blame or judge decisions made during a moment of extraordinary constraint. Rather, it documents how the restructuring and downsizing process was experienced by staff across grades, contract types, and duty stations, and what these experiences reveal about the organization's culture, governance, and resilience.

The purpose of this report is to:

- Provide senior leadership with an integrated, organization-wide view of systemic dynamics observed since the onset of the 2025 funding crisis.
- Highlight factors that contributed to staff perceptions, reactions, and challenges.
- Support informed reflection during the current transition and recovery phase; and
- Offer non-prescriptive options for strengthening organizational trust, cohesion, and resilience.

The Office remains committed to supporting both staff and leadership in navigating this challenging period and supporting a healthier, more sustainable organizational future

# Methodology, Scope and Limitations

The observations presented in this report are derived from aggregated and anonymized insights from:

- Ombudsman and Mediator consultations and case trends
- Facilitated dialogues
- Stakeholders' engagements
- Staff feedback, notably the Design and Development Service (DDS) survey at the outset of the process, Pigeonhole inputs, and the Global Staff Council (GSC) survey on workplace well-being and dignity
- Internal communications, including town halls, official notices, HR communications, policy updates, and video messages
- Review of administrative information, including data from Workday and Power BI
- Global and regional workshops delivered by the Office, including delivering difficult news and supporting organizational transformation
- Ubuntu Community Cafés facilitated by the Office
- Informal fact finding and triangulation to validate recurring themes
- Upward feedback and systemic conversations with managers, teams, and oversight and integrity entities

The findings are qualitative and reflect the experiences of more than 4,000 colleagues across all regions and operations who engaged directly or indirectly with the Office during the period from February to November 2025. Inputs include perspectives from both separated and remaining staff, collected with full respect for confidentiality, and span headquarters, regional bureaus, and operations. This report aims to complement other internal reviews, evaluations, and audits covering the same period and should be read as a reflection of how the restructuring and downsizing were experienced across the organization.

Several limitations should be noted, including that travel constraints during the reporting period limited the extent of direct, in-person field engagement by the Office, as well as the participation in dialogues, surveys, and other inputs was voluntary and self-selecting rather than randomized, which may introduce memory, and information biases, thereby preventing the statistical analysis of the findings.

The Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator was itself affected by the downsizing and restructuring processes, which influenced its capacity to fully implement all aspects of its mandate during this period. Other departments were also undergoing changes, which may have affected their ability to respond to requests for information and to engage with the Office in a timely and comprehensive manner.

# Context: Organizational Crisis and Funding Cuts

The organizational crisis that unfolded in 2025 did not emerge in isolation. The period leading into 2025 was shaped by significant global and internal pressures.

## Pre-existing Financial Strain (2023–2024) and transformation fatigue

The 2025 crisis was not an isolated event but a culmination of pre-existing pressures. For the two years preceding the shock (2023–2024), UNHCR was already navigating a period of significant financial strain, driven by global dynamics such as inflationary shocks, economic contraction, and the redirection of donor priorities toward other contexts. These continuous budget shortfalls had already necessitated progressive reductions in available funding, leading to early post cuts, persistent calls for efficiency measures, and internal discussions on reshaping the organization's viability. This context of uncertainty, combined with the consequences of long-running transformation processes, had already begun to strain staff morale and contribute to widespread fatigue, prompting colleagues to question the organizational model. This established a foundation of anxiety and disillusionment, encapsulated by the recurring sentiment, "I don't recognize my organization anymore," long before the deeper rupture of the "psychological contract" in 2025.

## Shock of the 2025 US Funding Freeze

The freeze of US funding in late January/early February 2025 triggered an unprecedented crisis. Funding that had already been approved for the fiscal year was suddenly withdrawn or frozen, creating a seismic financial shock. While some degree of reduction had been anticipated due to the political context, the immediacy, scale, and retroactive nature of the freeze, affecting already-approved allocations, were not foreseen.

The impact was further compounded by additional cuts from other major donors, particularly from the European Union and the United Kingdom, creating a sudden and severe liquidity shock. Within days, the organization was forced to take measures previously unimaginable in timeframe or scope. Many staff described the situation as "seismic," "destabilizing," or "unprecedented," both in terms of financial magnitude and the speed with which the organization had to react.

This event fundamentally altered the organization's operational and financial viability and accelerated restructuring and downsizing measures. At the time of writing, elements of this organizational change are still ongoing, and structures, roles, and workloads continue to evolve in many parts of the organization.

As colleagues brought their experiences of this prolonged period of financial strain, restructuring, and downsizing to the Office, recurring patterns and systemic themes began to emerge. This Special Report was prepared in that context to consolidate those observations, situate them within a broader organizational perspective, and contribute to learning and preparedness for current and future periods of crisis and transition.

# Culture as an Amplifier of Crisis

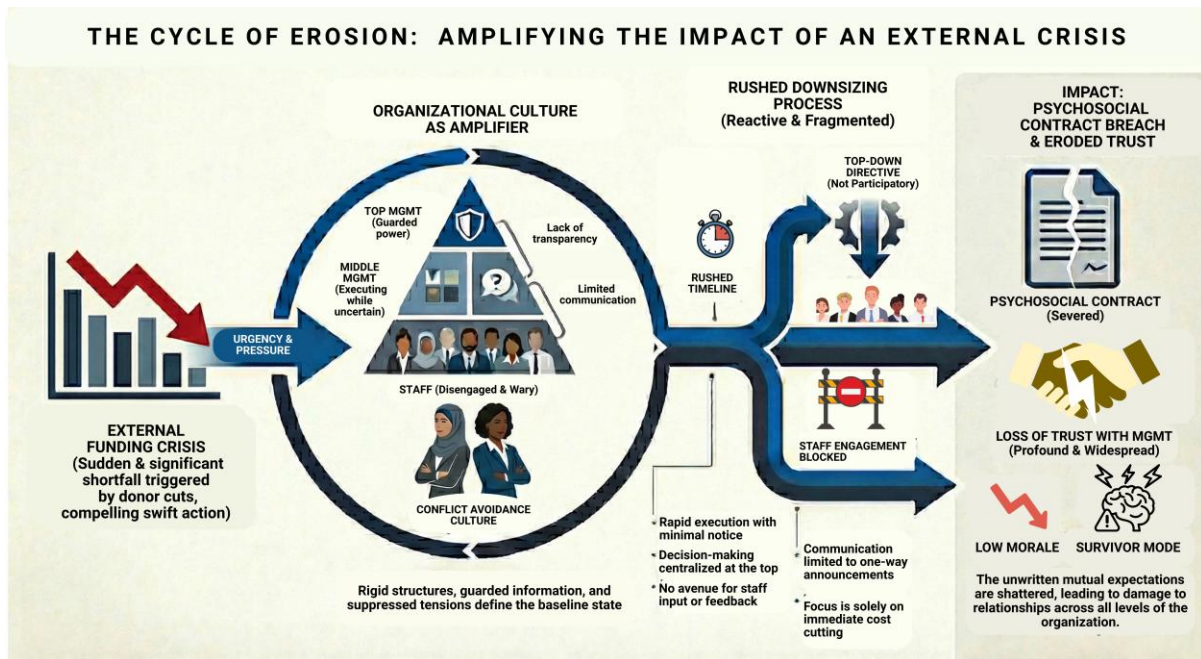


Figure 1. The cycle of erosion; how pre-existing cultural dynamics in UNHCR amplified the impact of the external funding crisis.

Prior to and during the 2025 crisis, several pre-existing cultural patterns within the organization acted as amplifiers of the crisis rather than buffers against it. These dynamics were consistently visible in both staff cases brought to the Office and in broader organizational processes.

Colleagues frequently described a long-standing tendency towards conflict avoidance and guarded power at senior levels, coupled with an extremely hierarchical organizational structure and significant opacity in its functioning. This culture severely limited open dialogue on difficult issues, resulting in decision-making that felt highly centralized. Staff reported few opportunities for either genuine consultation or social negotiation, both of which are essential during major organizational changes. In a time of crisis, these patterns led people to experience decision making processes as solely top-down, which naturally increased feelings of disempowerment, frustration, and a weakening of trust.

The crisis also acutely surfaced signs of what many described as “friction” in the organizational culture: energy was diverted away from core mandate implementation towards internal, survival-oriented behaviors. Even before the restructuring began, many colleagues expressed reluctance and fear to raise concerns openly, signaling limited psychological safety. As the restructuring and downsizing unfolded, this led to staff spending more time and effort navigating internal dynamics, protecting positions, and competing for posts and resources rather than focusing primarily on operational delivery.

This sustained pressure contributed to what many staff referred to as a “survival state”: a climate in which competition and self-protection overshadowed collaboration. Messages intended to convey fairness—such as “no one will be immune,” “we are all in the same boat,” or “it is not you, it is the post”—were often experienced as inconsistent with the uneven impacts on different groups and levels, eroding confidence in organizational fairness and illustrating a deeper culture of conflict avoidance.

Taken together, these cultural dynamics—conflict avoidance, guarded decision-making, fear-based, and survival-oriented competition—created the very conditions in which the external funding crisis

and internal restructuring were experienced as significantly more destabilizing than they might have been in a more open, dialogic, and trust-rich environment.

Finally, it is essential to note that other elements also shaped the context: a strong commitment to the mandate and an expectation of organizational growth comparable to mandate needs. However, the organizational culture was defined by staff vulnerability and rigid hierarchy that precipitated the formal escalation of workplace grievances. Notably, while leadership was perceived as benefitting from a sense of ‘esprit de corps’, the wider staff body remained deeply fractured.

## The Institutional Response

In response to the financial shock and associated budgetary constraints described above, UNHCR leadership implemented wide-ranging emergency measures to ensure operational viability, continuity of protection and assistance, and compliance with financial responsibilities. The primary purpose of these measures was to slow expenditure quickly and enable the organization to meet its financial obligations in the face of a severe liquidity shock.

Many staff who contacted the Office indicated that they understood these early decisions as necessary, given the severity and immediacy of the situation. Several described the initial phase as one of solidarity and collective resolve, despite shock, fear, and sadness.

Early actions focused on rapid cost containment and structural adjustment. These included freezing non-essential travel, implementing operation-level budget reductions (OL), increasing energy efficiencies in UNHCR facilities, adjusting cleaning, maintenance and local expenditure arrangements, revising parking arrangements, and initiating wider post reductions. In parallel, the organization accelerated restructuring efforts that had already been under discussion, including adjustments to contractual arrangements, suspension or non-renewal of certain temporary assignments and other non-staff contracts, and, over time, the reconfiguration, downsizing, or closure of some field offices.

Leadership and DHR (now DPM) also activated a series of measures to communicate with staff and create spaces for interaction. These included three global town halls convened by the High Commissioner, targeted HR webinars (including PWS) tailored to different contract types, meetings between the High Commissioner and Representatives, regional briefings, Ubuntu Community Cafés facilitated by the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator, the Rapid-Response Line managed by the Global Staff Council and increased written communication through official notices and intranet updates. These efforts were generally appreciated and well attended, particularly in the early stages, and contributed to a sense of shared concern for the organization’s future.

Over time, however, many colleagues reported that these engagements were experienced more as one-way information-sharing than as opportunities for dialogue, influence, or joint problem-solving. Staff frequently described uncertainty regarding the broader strategy, the timeline, and how various decisions and measures were connected. From the perspective of those who contacted the Office, the overall response increasingly appeared fragmented, opaque and reactive rather than part of a clearly articulated, coordinated crisis-management approach.

Staff accounts also indicate that the scope, pace, and perceived timing of downsizing and restructuring measures varied considerably across operations, regions, and headquarters. Some operations received earlier, clearer direction while others reported receiving rapidly shifting or contradictory instructions. In several incidences, managers themselves learned about changes only at the point of implementation, which limited their ability to support their teams and to contextualize decisions locally. These variations shaped how staff interpreted the fairness, coherence, and rationale of the

overall

process.

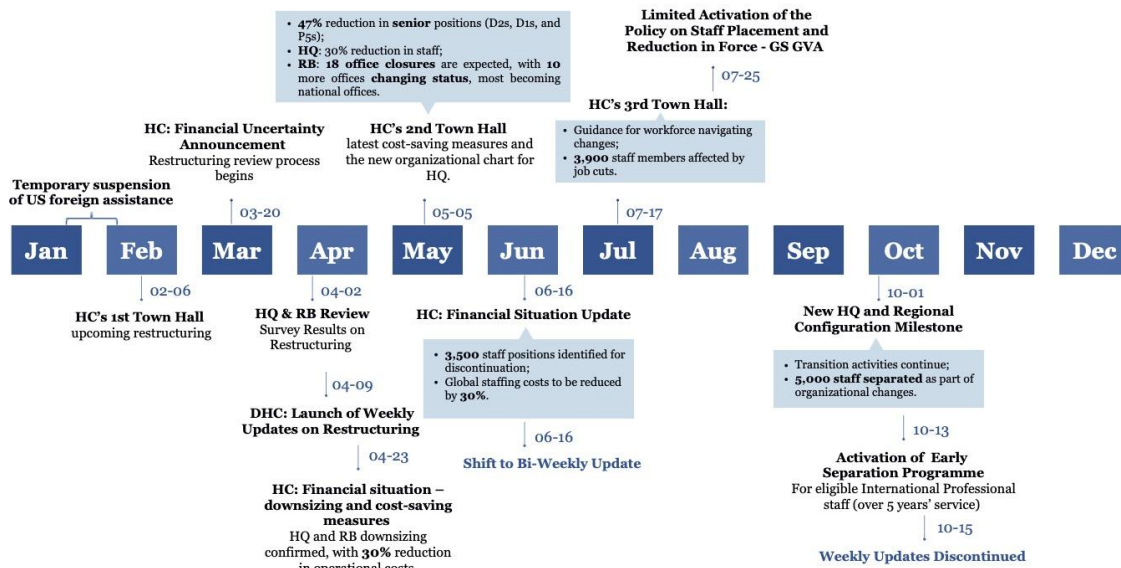


Figure 2. Timeline of the 2025 Funding Crisis and Restructuring Milestones in UNHCR.

This figure illustrates the institutional response to the funding crisis. It highlights also two different moments of institutional communication, before August and after August where the institution became quite silent in terms of communication.

A more detailed timeline with key dates and events is provided in Annex.

## The Community Reaction

In the early stages of the crisis response, staff demonstrated a strong awareness of the external nature of the shock and expressed solidarity and empathy with one another. Many mobilized informal support structures such as peer networks, ad hoc check-ins, and other channels of care, —reflecting both resilience and a shared commitment to the organization’s mandate.

As the situation evolved, and as uncertainty and perception of fairness and transparency over the restructuring and downsizing measures persisted over time, this initial cohesion and solidarity devolved into feelings of fatigue, anxiety, disillusion and disengagement. Prolonged exposure to uncertainty, perceived lack of direction in addressing the crisis and concerns about the organization’s future direction as well as the ability of its workplace grievance mechanisms to fully operate contributed to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and powerlessness of personnel about how the restructuring and downsizing process were being carried out.

Many colleagues described a growing mistrust in both the decision-making process and in those perceived as key decision-makers. For some managers and teams, this was experienced as disempowerment and disengagement. These dynamics were further reflected in heightened interpersonal and organizational conflicts brought to the attention of the Office, indicating that the strain was being felt not only at structural levels but also in day-to-day working relationships.

From the perspective of staff who contacted the Office, the crisis response did not always appear to be guided by a clear, centralized crisis-management structure. Many decisions were perceived as having been made and implemented in silos, and communication gaps were reported to have widened over time. From an Ombuds perspective, the absence of a visible, holistic response mechanism that could integrate perspectives from the administration, the Ethics office, the Global Staff Council, Medical Services, the Inspector General's Office, and the Ombudsman and Mediator's Office, and others, may have limited the extent to which the transition could be experienced as coherent, empathetic, and well-coordinated. In the same vein, process design and coordination from inside the organization introduced several biases (status quo bias, in-group bias, procedural bias, implicit bias, parochial empathy), and thereby suspicion of the outcomes and recommendations.

## Systemic observations on the Process

The process unfolded under extraordinary circumstances. Faced with a sudden and significant funding shortfall, the organization was compelled to act swiftly to preserve operational viability. This urgency shaped a response that many staff experienced as reactive, fragmented, and at times lacking overall coherence.

### Perception gaps

From the accounts brought to the Office, three main perception gaps emerged in how the process was understood:

- **Rationale and objectives.** Staff reported receiving differing messages as to whether the process was driven by a pre-existing three-year plan or by the financial crisis only.
- **Geneva G staff with indefinite contract and staff in between assignments:** Similar to the rationale gap, deeply held assumptions prevailed that these two specific groups of staff were the perceived target to “get rid of” during the restructuring. These perceptions were not only circulating informally but were, in some instances, validated by their own managers or reinforced by the significant and valid questions raised about the fairness of the selection processes in which they were compelled to participate. This dynamic amplified their anxiety and fueled the sense that the process was driven by hidden agendas rather than objective, needs-based criteria, further contributing to the fundamental shift in the psychological and social contract between personnel and the institution.
- **Retention and selection processes:** In many instances, colleagues consistently reported a perception that the decision to retain post/personnel or to be selected for a new position was solely driven by the proximity with the manager rather than by objective, clear criteria aligned with the mandate needs. This perceived manipulation of the selection system severely undermined confidence in organizational fairness, amplifying anxiety and fueling the sense that decisions were based on favoritism rather than merit, further corroding institutional trust and the psychological contract.
- **Differences across locations and levels:** Experiences varied significantly between field offices, regional bureaus, and Headquarters, as well as across personnel categories. For many, these disparities appeared to contradict institutional values of unity, raising serious questions regarding leadership accountability.
- **Unspoken assumptions and perceived parallel agendas:** Colleagues described assumptions about anticipated leadership changes or a return to 2017 staffing levels, which influenced how they interpreted the process.

Taken together, these perception gaps contributed to a sense, among many staff that the organization's engagement in the change process was not always clearly articulated or consistently understood, and that responses were sometimes experienced as piecemeal. This, in turn, generated additional uncertainty, mistrust in the process and fundamental shift in the psychological and social contract between personnel and the institution.

## Lack of pause and reflect

Staff repeatedly noted that decisions were made and implemented at a rapid, non-negotiable pace, leaving virtually limited space to process the seismic situation and its short- and long-term implications, to consult and negotiate, or to engage in adaptation and inclusive planning. The predominantly top-down nature of the organization and its crisis response severely disrupted the kind of social negotiation that is often necessary for a large-scale transition, thereby increasing feelings of imposition and powerlessness.

Managers and frontline entities, including the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator, the Ethics Office, Psychosocial Wellbeing Service and other integrity and accountability offices, were frequently disempowered despite their critical relevance to organizational resilience and integrity. They were nonetheless expected to provide critical support to staff while they themselves were learning in real-time about decisions affecting personnel and operations. This created a dynamic that strained their capacity and undermined their effectiveness as frontline responders.

Any potential for a "pause and reflect" period was severely limited by the DDS questionnaire, which was experienced as creating significant disturbances, fueling competition rather than collaboration and the facilitation of thoughtful input. Critically, while this exercise was underway, the downsizing process continued apace in several operations, further eliminating any true space for reflection. This unrelenting urgency mirrors a response dynamic where a crisis pushes organizations and communities into fight-fright-freeze response modalities expressed as rapid, reactive decisions, increasingly with narrow focus, and resulting in emotional overload. This prevents the necessary cognitive reset that is fundamental in order to shift from short-term reactivity towards a purposeful and more sustainable recovery strategy.

## Limited two-way communication and dialogue

The organization's bureaucratic and hierarchical structure reinforced the top-down approach. Initiatives designed to promote two-way communication, such as the Ubuntu Cafés, Psychosocial Wellbeing hosted webinars could not be sustained due to operational and staffing reductions. Town halls from the High Commissioner, while appreciated, were infrequent and tended to function more as one-way information sharing than as a dialogue in which staff could ask questions and receive answers to diffuse or cope with anxiety.

In operations and in many teams at headquarters, staff reported being notified of decisions affecting them or their teams with limited room for discussion. In many instances, the way notifications were done was perceived as impersonal and not dignifying. There were, however, some exceptions where managers, HR staff, and PWS met individually with staff members to communicate decisions in a more personal and respectful way. Unfortunately, colleagues also reported instances where they were notified of abolishment of the post they encumbered during all staff meetings, or they discovered that their position was discontinued from Workday.

## Communication inconsistencies

Communication during the process was at times experienced as inconsistent or contradictory. Staff reported receiving conflicting messages from headquarters and field leadership—sometimes within hours—undermining confidence in the process and in those tasked with implementing it. For example, the head of an office was instructed to reduce their team by a certain number. Thirty minutes after informing the staff, they were told that the reduction had almost tripled. As formal communication faltered or silenced, individuals increasingly relied on informal channels, including organizational gossip, to fill information gaps.

In parallel, some policies were introduced without broad communication and socialization, and HR, administrative services, and senior leadership were often perceived as inaccessible or unresponsive during critical moments, particularly when individuals were in distress about their personal situation and unable to receive a definitive answer on how the policies affected them. Internal information, such as organigrams or staff appointments, was at times reported to have been leaked before meetings had concluded, creating confusion and further eroding trust.

## Perceived gaps in holistic crisis management

The Design and Delivery Structure (DDS), while intended to guide the reorganization, was experienced by many as focusing primarily on structural design and not providing the holistic crisis management coordination needed to accompany the process with the anticipation and the readjustments needed as the organization navigated the crisis. From an Ombuds perspective, the absence of a visible cross-functional crisis response team—one that could have integrated perspectives from HR, the “Integrity Family”, the Staff Council, regional bureaus, and operations—limited the extent to which the process could be experienced as empathetic, transparent, accountable, and collaborative.

## Fragmentation and weakening of services and support mechanisms

DHR, PWS, the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator, the Staff Council and Staff Associations, the Peer Advisors, and the Ethics Office faced increased demand for services and support at the same time as their own resources and representation were reduced. This occurred at a time when their support was most needed. These functions serve as an early warning system for the organization, as frontline responders for colleagues seeking support and help reinforce engagement between the institution and staff. With lessened support from these entities, staff described this as leaving gaps in support at a time of heightened need.

## Workload and needs-based analysis

Many colleagues reported difficulties in understanding and accepting structural decisions in the absence of a clear workload and needs-based analysis on which restructuring decisions were explicitly based. From their perspective, the lack of visible criteria or explanation for how workloads and needs were assessed made it more difficult to see the overall logic of the new structures and to trust that the changes were aligned with operational realities.

---

# Systemic observations on Process Impact:

## Impact on the Organization

The restructuring process reshaped the organizational fabric in profound ways. One of the most visible consequences, as described by many colleagues, has been a rupture in the psychological and social contract between the institution and its personnel. This unwritten set of mutual expectations and obligations underpins trust, engagement, and a sense of reciprocity. Research on psychological contracts indicates that when staff perceive organizational promises as broken, job satisfaction, commitment, and trust tend to decline, while intentions to leave and resentment increase; breach is often followed by an emotional “violation” phase, marked by anger, frustration, and a sense of betrayal, particularly in periods of organizational change.<sup>1</sup> These patterns are consistent with what the Office observed during this period: when people experience a rupture in the psychological contract, morale and engagement erode over time.

Within this rupture, a fundamental component was weakened: trust in the institution and in its leadership. Many colleagues reported losing confidence that leadership would act consistently, advocate for the mandate, and apply principles of fairness when decisions were made and implemented.

The crisis and its management also aggravated pre-existing schisms within the organization. Antagonisms were reported between different groups and levels: leadership and staff; operations and headquarters; national and international staff; colleagues from the global North and global South; and between staff on different types of contracts. Lines of division that existed before the crisis were perceived to have widened and, in some areas, hardened.

As the restructuring unfolded, many colleagues described entering a “survival mode” in which they felt compelled to focus on preserving their own positions and immediate interests. Externally, this was reflected in patterns such as increased LinkedIn activity, and intensified competition for increasingly limited posts and recruitment processes. Internally, the tone in forums like Ubuntu Cafés shifted over time—from initial denial or cautious optimism to anxiety, fatigue, and, in some instances, resignation. Other symptoms such as presenteeism, survival guilt, decreased moral and engagement, and the Office observed an increase in gossip and the spreading of rumors.

The combination of resource scarcity, conflict avoidance, and declining trust in the fairness and consistency of decisions contributed to a broader survival state. In such an environment, collaboration tends to give way to competition. Research on social interdependence suggests that when goals are experienced as competitive rather than cooperative, information sharing and joint problem-solving

---

### <sup>1</sup> Psychological contract breach, violation, and change

- Zhao, H., Wayne, S. J., Glibkowski, B. C., & Bravo, J. (2007). *The impact of psychological contract breach on work-related outcomes: A meta-analysis*. *Personnel Psychology*, 60(3), 647–680.
- Cassar, V., & Briner, R. B. (2011). *The relationship between psychological contract breach and organizational commitment: Exchange imbalance as a moderator of the mediating role of violation*. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 78(2), 283–289.
- Topa, G., Aranda-Carmena, M., & de-Maria, B. (2022). *Psychological contract breach and outcomes: A systematic review of reviews*. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(13), 8080.

deteriorate while friction increases.<sup>2</sup> Under these conditions, staff are more likely to withhold or ration information, and knowledge-hiding becomes more common.<sup>3</sup> Studies also associate such competitive climates with higher levels of relationship conflict<sup>4</sup> and “office politics”, including subtle forms of sabotage and rivalry.<sup>5</sup> These findings align with patterns described to the Office during this period.

The perceived lack of transparency is a significant contributor to the decline in collaboration and trust. According to the Global Staff Council survey, out of more than 2,500 respondents, only 3 per cent indicated that they believed the process was transparent.<sup>6</sup> This finding echoes the observations brought to the Ombudsman and Mediator’s Office. Multiple policy changes, reduced access to information and decision-makers, limited two-way communication, and the perceived weakening of oversight and integrity mechanisms all reinforced a sense of opacity.

The erosion of collaboration had a cascading effect. As departments and units began to operate more in isolation, the organization’s ability to function as a cohesive whole diminished. The restructuring disrupted established workflows, severed interdependent relationships, and weakened informal networks that typically sustain institutional resilience. Research on intra-organizational networks suggests that when inter-unit competition increases and lateral ties are not deliberately maintained, cross-unit knowledge sharing falls and “siloeing” deepens,<sup>7</sup> as observed in many of the situations brought to the Office.

---

## <sup>2</sup> Competition vs. cooperation and information sharing

- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2009). *An educational psychology success story: Social interdependence theory and cooperative learning*. *Educational Psychologist*, 44(1), 15–29.

## <sup>3</sup> Knowledge hiding in competitive climates

- Černe, M., Nerstad, C. G. L., Dysvik, A., & Škerlavaj, M. (2014). *What goes around comes around: Knowledge hiding, perceived motivational climate, and creativity*. *Academy of Management Journal*, 57(1), 172–192.

## <sup>4</sup> Relationship conflict and performance

- De Dreu, C. K. W., & Weingart, L. R. (2003). *Task versus relationship conflict, team performance, and team member satisfaction: A meta-analysis*. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(4), 741–749.

## <sup>5</sup> Internal competition, sabotage, and office politics

- Carpenter, J., Matthews, P. H., & Schirm, J. (2010). *Tournaments and office politics: Evidence from a real effort experiment*. *American Economic Review (Papers & Proceedings)*, 100(2), 504–507.
- Harbring, C., & Irlenbusch, B. (2011). *Sabotage in tournaments: Evidence from a laboratory experiment*. *Management Science*, 57(4), 611–627.

## <sup>6</sup> Internal staff perceptions of transparency, fear of speaking up, anger, and discrimination

- UNHCR Global Staff Council. (2025). *Survey on workplace issues affecting staff wellbeing and dignity*. Internal UNHCR survey report.

## <sup>7</sup> Siloeing, inter-unit competition, and knowledge sharing

- Tsai, W. (2002). *Social structure of “coopetition” within a multiunit organization: Coordination, competition, and intraorganizational knowledge sharing*. *Organization Science*, 13(2), 179–190.

As uncertainty and distrust rose, psychological safety fell. Staff reported becoming more cautious about speaking up, particularly on sensitive issues related to the restructuring and its implementation. This was reflected both in cases brought to the Office and in the GSC survey, where 31 per cent of respondents reported being afraid to speak up.<sup>6</sup> Many described an environment they perceived as toxic or fear driven. Research on psychological safety and organizational silence shows that, in such climates, people are more likely to withhold concerns, ideas, and feedback, undermining learning, adaptation, and collective problem-solving.<sup>8</sup> Over time, this contributes to disengagement and an erosion of collective trust. In the organization, the result was a reported breakdown in synergy: departments that once complemented one another became more siloed, defensive, and, in some areas, disengaged. While limited “coopetition” can sometimes be productive, the evidence suggests that this requires strong lateral ties and shared governance. Absent these, competitive pressures tend to overwhelm collaboration.<sup>7</sup>

Disengagement and capacity constraints were particularly acute among support services and administrative entities. Administrative services dealing with workplace concerns were frequently cited to the Office as unresponsive, absent, or insufficient during critical phases of the restructuring. Most of them were overwhelmed. This created a perceived vacuum in which staff were left without guidance, reassurance, or procedural clarity at moments of high personal and professional stress. Other services, similarly, exposed and under-resourced, struggled to maintain their functions. In some cases, they were perceived as unable to fully perform their roles—not due to lack of will, but due to lack of resources and support.

Accountability and oversight functions were also affected. A spike in workplace grievances, coupled with reduction of resources, placed additional strain and resulted in weakened internal controls, and the capacity to detect emerging risks. Errors and omissions from staff also increase and can affect the organization’s reputation if not addressed in a timely and coherent manner. These concerning dynamics were brought to the attention of the Office from a range of colleagues.

Managers were in a particularly difficult position. Evidence from organizational research suggests that managers account for a substantial share of staff engagement.<sup>9</sup> During this crisis, many reported feeling disempowered in the decision-making process and struggled to act as drivers of engagement for their teams and operations. They were asked to implement decisions in which they had not been meaningfully consulted, and that, in some instances, affected them personally. This limited their ability to provide clear direction, reassurance, and a sense of fairness to their teams. When they were in position to make decisions (selection per instance or retention), they were perceived to manipulate the process in favor of their candidate.

The crisis and how it was managed simultaneously affected the organization at both individual and structural levels. This meant there were few, if any, pockets of normalcy to maintain routine and predictability, which are critical for resilience and recovery. On a structural level, successive waves of restructuring created a loss of continuity and normalcy. Service lines were reconfigured, then

---

#### <sup>8</sup> Psychological safety and organizational silence

- Edmondson, A. (1999). *Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams*. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350–383.
- Morrison, E. W., & Milliken, F. J. (2000). *Organizational silence: A barrier to change and development in a pluralistic world*. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(4), 706–725.

#### <sup>9</sup> Managers’ influence on staff engagement

- Gallup, Inc. (2015). *State of the American Manager: Analytics and Advice for Leaders*. Gallup.

reconfigured again, producing breakdowns in service continuity and institutional memory. The combined impact on individuals and structures added “a crisis within the crisis”: staff were coping not only with the external funding shock and its consequences, but also with an internal environment marked by instability and fragmentation.

The long-term impact is still unfolding. Early signs point to weakened institutional memory and talent, fractured internal relationships, and diminished trust in organizational processes. The restructuring did not only change structures; it altered how the organization sees itself, how it communicates, and how it responds to crises. Without deliberate efforts to rebuild collaboration, restore functionality, and re-establish trust, these impacts may persist well beyond the immediate transition period.

## Impact on People

The human impact of the 2025 restructuring was profound and complex and was felt across all levels of the organization. While the process was framed as affecting everyone equally, the lived experience was perceived as far more uneven.

An approach rooted in conflict avoidance created conditions in which confusion and resentment could grow. Unanswered questions and limited explanations invited rumor and conjecture,<sup>10</sup> while the absence of transparent, respectful process cues was experienced as procedurally unfair—an established driver of anger toward decision-makers.<sup>11</sup>

Anger was a salient reaction for many staff members in cases brought to the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator. The GSC survey found that 36 per cent of the remaining staff reported feeling angry.<sup>12</sup> Over time, colleagues described that leaving disparities unaddressed did not dissipate tensions but hardened them, which is consistent with evidence that conflict avoidance tends to escalate rather than resolve conflict.<sup>13</sup>

---

### <sup>10</sup> Rumour and conjecture in low-transparency contexts

- DiFonzo, N., & Bordia, P. (2006). *Rumor psychology: Social and organizational approaches*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

### <sup>11</sup> Procedural justice and anger toward decision-makers

- Colquitt, J. A. (2001). *On the dimensionality of organizational justice: A construct validation of a measure*. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 386–400.
- Bobocel, D. R. (2013). *Coping with unfair events constructively or destructively: The effects of overall justice and self-other orientation*. In S. W. Gilliland, D. D. Steiner, & D. P. Skarlicki (Eds.), *Social justice in organizations* (pp. 149–170). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

### <sup>12</sup> Misconduct, discrimination, and under-reporting

- UNHCR Global Staff Council. (2025). *Survey on workplace issues affecting staff wellbeing and dignity*. Internal UNHCR survey report.

### <sup>13</sup> Conflict avoidance and escalation

- Pruitt, D. G., & Kim, S. H. (2004). *Social conflict: Escalation, stalemate, and settlement* (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Glasl, F. (2000). *Conflict escalation model*. In G. B. J. Bomers & R. B. Peterson (Eds.), *Conflict management and industrial relations* (reprinted discussions of the nine-stage model).

This erosion of perceived procedural fairness was particularly visible in key management processes, including decisions on post reductions and selections for vacant positions. During this period, the downsizing methodology and selection system were, in several instances, perceived as unfair and open to manipulation, allowing managers to remove or retain staff based on preference rather than clear, consistently applied criteria. Whether accurate or not, the perception that selection depended on proximity to a manager rather than on performance had a corrosive effect on trust. Research on procedural and distributive justice indicates that perceived manipulation of performance and selection systems is a strong predictor of cynicism and disengagement.<sup>14</sup> For many staff, what should have been a feedback and development process became, in effect, a proxy for selection, amplifying anxiety and reinforcing the belief that fairness was contingent on personal relationships.

Competition for survival became a dominant theme in many accounts. Instead of fostering collaboration or merging roles in a spirit of shared purpose, staff often found themselves competing for rebranded posts. This dynamic not only created interpersonal tensions but also undermined team cohesion and trust. As attention shifted toward internal competition, energy was diverted from mandate delivery to political navigation and protection of positions. Colleagues described higher perceptions of organizational politics, knowledge hiding, and weakening lateral ties—patterns that research associates with reduced trust, diminished cohesion, and lower performance.<sup>15</sup>

Managers and other stakeholders were frequently left with limited clarity or authority to support their teams. The absence of adequate emotional, procedural, and structural support was felt acutely by those on the frontlines. Many staff reported feeling abandoned, unheard, and unprotected. The organization's perceived silence in the face of distress, coupled with perceptions of inaccessible leadership, contributed to widespread disengagement.

The conflict-avoidance mantra “nobody is immune” became emblematic of the process. While intended to signal fairness, it was perceived as inconsistent when some leadership roles appeared insulated from the sacrifices being asked of others. Some examples include perceived extensions of posts for some and not others, maintaining position levels for some positions, or maintaining travel privileges. This happened during a period of limited validation of staff experiences and a vacuum of visible gestures of solidarity. This perceived double standard further eroded trust and deepened cynicism.

The restructuring also exacerbated existing divides and highlighted concerns related to discrimination, echoing the organizational impacts described earlier. Differences in separation arrangements and perceived disparities between groups (for instance, between G and P staff) further entrenched a sense

---

<sup>14</sup> **Procedural and distributive justice, manipulation, and cynicism**

- Greenberg, J. (1990). *Employee theft as a reaction to underpayment inequity: The hidden cost of pay cuts*. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 75(5), 561–568.
- Cropanzano, R., & Folger, R. (1989). *Referent cognitions and task decision autonomy: Beyond equity theory*. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 74(2), 293–299.

<sup>15</sup> **Organizational politics, knowledge hiding, and performance**

- Bedi, A., & Schat, A. C. H. (2013). *Perceptions of organizational politics: A meta-analysis of its attitudinal, health, and behavioural consequences*. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*, 54(4), 246–259.
- Černe, M., Nerstad, C. G. L., Dysvik, A., & Škerlavaj, M. (2014). *What goes around comes around: Knowledge hiding, perceived motivational climate, and creativity*. *Academy of Management Journal*, 57(1), 172–192.

of inequality. Many staff perceived that decisions about who left and who was selected for open positions were influenced by favoritism rather than merit.

The GSC survey found that around one third of respondents reported having witnessed or experienced discrimination, with the most frequently reported grounds including nationality, grade, contract type, and gender identity.<sup>12</sup> In a context of heightened fear, more than half of those who experienced misconduct did not report it, citing fear of retaliation, lack of confidence that action would be taken, fear of losing their job, and distrust in internal mechanisms.

Disillusion and disengagement spread not only among staff but also among managers. Many reported losing faith in the organization's values and leadership. The psychological toll was significant: staff described feeling deflated, exhausted, and emotionally drained.

The Office observed an increase in fear and a sense of futility about speaking up through existing escalation mechanisms. Mental health concerns—including anticipated burnout, anxiety, stress, and depressive moods—were brought to the Office from the early stages of the process, including during Ubuntu Cafés, and appeared to gain momentum over time.

Survivors are now facing heavier workloads with fewer resources, often without adequate acknowledgment or support. The Office has observed that this consequence falls particularly on G-staff, who are being asked to assume tasks previously handled by P-staff.

From April onwards, the Office observed clearer signs of “survivor syndrome,” a pattern described in the literature on organizational downsizing. Survivors frequently report guilt, anxiety, and uncertainty alongside lower morale, fatigue, trust, and commitment.<sup>16</sup> These reactions are shaped by whether the downsizing is seen as procedurally fair and by whether leadership signals trustworthiness and care. Where these cues are weak, survivors' engagement, citizenship behavior, and retention tend to decline.<sup>16</sup>

The perceived optics of the restructuring also mattered. Changes that appeared to weaken independent oversight were reported as eroding fairness and institutional legitimacy; research on procedural justice shows that such signals are central to cooperation and confidence in authorities.<sup>17</sup> Governance research similarly underscores that oversight capacity is a pillar of accountability and that reducing it can undermine confidence in decision-making even when the underlying intent is benign.

Taken together, both the evidence and our observations support the description of survivor-era emotions of guilt, anxiety, isolation, and their downstream consequences, including disengagement, lower morale, and increased turnover intention. At the same time, research points to factors associated with more constructive survivor responses: transparent procedures, respectful treatment,

---

#### <sup>16</sup> Survivor syndrome and downsizing

- Brockner, J. (1992). *Managing the effects of layoffs on survivors*. *California Management Review*, 34(2), 9–28.
- van Dick, R., Ullrich, J., & Tissington, P. A. (2016). *Working under a black cloud: How to sustain organizational identification after downsizing*. *British Journal of Management*, 27(1), 5–20.
- Mishra, A. K., & Spreitzer, G. M. (1998). *Explaining how survivors respond to downsizing: The roles of trust, empowerment, justice, and work redesign*. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), 567–588.

#### <sup>17</sup> Procedural justice, legitimacy, and cooperation

- Tyler, T. R., & Blader, S. L. (2003). *The group engagement model: Procedural justice, social identity, and cooperative behavior*. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 7(4), 349–361.

clear communication about criteria, and visible protection of oversight, Ethics and internal justice functions.<sup>16 17 18</sup>

Based on our observations, survivor syndrome remains pronounced among many of the remaining staff and is associated with exhaustion, disengagement, burnout, anxiety, and loss of motivation. It is therefore important to rebuild trust and psychological safety, to communicate clearly and transparently about decisions and future directions, and to validate staff experiences to better support them. Finally, it is crucial that the organization explains how processes and goals are being adapted to match the reduced workforce.

## Options for the Way Forward

In keeping with the methodology of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator, this report does not offer prescriptive recommendations. Instead, it presents a series of options generated through systemic reflection and grounded in staff experience that may support the organization's recovery and future resilience.

These options are intended to provoke dialogue, invite innovation, and encourage inclusive decision-making. They are not exhaustive nor definitive; rather, they reflect themes and patterns observed during this period of crisis and transition.

### 1. Establish a Standing Crisis Response Mechanism

A critical option for future resilience is to establish a Standing Crisis Response Mechanism. This involves the creation of a cross-functional team in a designated crisis management model that can be rapidly and formally convened at the onset of any significant organizational crisis. Such a group is vital to overcome the "perceived gaps in holistic crisis management" observed during the 2025 financial shock. It should be structured to ensure an integrated and inclusive coordination of all responses, comprising high-level representatives from DPM-relevant stakeholders, the Internal Justice and Ethics offices, the oversight offices, the Staff Council, Regional bureaus, and operational representatives. The mechanism's primary role would be to ensure that all strategic and operational decisions are informed by multiple perspectives, fully inclusive of all constituent groups, and demonstrably sustainable, thereby preventing the reactive, fragmented, and siloed approach that contributed to the internal crisis and weakened institutional trust.

### 2. Ensure Transparent and Inclusive Communication

Rebuilding trust will require a sustained commitment to dialogue, transparency, and authentic two-way communication to counter the perceptions of "very limited transparency, unclear decision-making criteria and opacity" reported during the crisis. Communication protocols must be urgently reformed to prioritize clarity, consistency, and timeliness, moving beyond one-way information sharing. Crucially, this involves explicitly sharing the rationale behind decisions in addition to the decisions themselves, as providing a clear justification is essential for staff to "buy into the decision" and restore confidence in organizational fairness. Mechanisms for genuine feedback and dialogue—including structured Q&A opportunities, regular, consistent updates, and safe channels for staff "voice"—could be fully

<sup>18</sup> **Oversight, accountability, and governance capacity**

- Drolc, C. A., & Keiser, L. R. (2021). *The importance of oversight and agency capacity in enhancing performance in public service delivery*. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 31(4), 773–789.

integrated into every stage of organizational change to ensure communication is not merely top-down, but truly responsive, inclusive, and capable of preventing the spread of rumor and conjecture that eroded trust.

### 3. Protect Independent Offices

Safeguarding and strengthening the integrity and operational independence of internal justice and oversight bodies—specifically the offices of the Ombudsman and Mediator, the Ethics Office, and the Inspector General—is a non-negotiable step for maintaining trust, restoring accountability, and reinforcing institutional legitimacy, particularly during and after periods of significant upheaval. The report noted that the crisis resulted in the "Fragmentation and weakening of services and support mechanisms" which undermined staff confidence. Therefore, ensuring that these entities have sufficient access, visibility, and resources is critical. This investment will not only support the early detection of emerging risks and a spike in workplace grievances but, most importantly, it will provide staff with credible, impartial avenues for support and redress, serving as a vital confidence-builder and a necessary check against the erosion of perceived fairness and the "survival state" in the organization.

### 4. Rebuild Trust Through Behavioral Consistency

Rebuilding trust through behavioral consistency is fundamentally dependent on visible alignment between leadership's words and their actions to overcome the pervasive cynicism and erosion of confidence reported in the process. Leadership must actively work to model the values the organization espouses through demonstrably transparent communication, inclusive decision-making, and meaningful, sustained engagement with those most affected by change, directly addressing the perceived inconsistencies and "double standards" that severely weakened the "psychological contract".

To embed this consistency, options must include strengthening accountability mechanisms to ensure leaders are visibly and consistently held responsible for any misconduct or misaligned behavior that undermines fairness. This must be complemented by equipping all staff and managers with essential tools for constructive conflict resolution and building healthy team dynamics, directly challenging the organization's long-standing pattern of conflict avoidance and the perceived "guarded power at senior levels." Existing training programs could be significantly strengthened and complemented through joint, holistic initiatives creating a unified front to restore a trust-rich environment.

### 5. Support Survivors

After a year dominated by heavy, process-driven restructuring and a pervasive "survival state," the organization's next phase must pivot from structural imperatives to a resolute focus on its people. Recovery will have to concentrate far more on human capital—re-establishing trust, repairing the ruptured "psychological contract," and rebuilding psychological safety. Ultimately, it is the dedicated staff who will drive the transition from crisis-induced fragmentation to renewed cohesion and resilience, thereby securing the organization's long-term effectiveness and collective purpose.

Strengthening psychological and peer support mechanisms is paramount to ensuring staff have access to comprehensive care, not just during a crisis, but also throughout the prolonged recovery phase, as the psychological impact and "survivor syndrome" persist well beyond the formal transition. Support structures must evolve to reflect this extended duration of need. Beyond technical mental health expertise, a core element of recovery requires the wide infusion of empathy throughout the organization, positioning managers as "chief empathy officers" to actively rebuild psychological safety, restore the "psychological contract," and foster the trust essential for renewed organizational cohesion.

Supporting survivors will also require a deliberate, multi-faceted approach. This includes immediately addressing the acute workload imbalances that are disproportionately burdening the remaining workforce, particularly G-staff. Furthermore, leaders must consciously and proactively tackle the various schisms and internal divisions in teams, including those stemming from the perceived unfair or unequal distribution of managerial attention and support, to move beyond the current competitive, "survival state." Finally, and critically, achieving organizational and individual emotional closure necessitates acknowledging the profound emotional toll of the restructuring and downsizing process, and visibly honoring those who departed from the teams as an essential step in rebuilding trust and restoring the organization's sense of shared humanity (ubuntu) and protection of dignity.

## 6. Document Lessons Learned

Creating a deliberate and sustained space for reflection and institutional learning is essential to ensure the profound and disruptive experience of the 2025 crisis actively informs future planning, directly countering the initial "lack of pause and reflect" that contributed to the crisis's internal escalation. This imperative involves systematically capturing, analyzing, and consolidating staff experiences, both what worked (initial solidarity) and, more critically, what did not (fragmented response, communication inconsistencies). Integrating these systemic insights into core policies and crisis procedures is essential. A genuine culture of learning could be cultivated, where managerial and organizational mistakes are examined constructively rather than being hidden or fueling fear. This shift will strengthen long-term resilience, help the organization move beyond the reactive "fight-fright-freeze response modalities", support individual closure and significantly reduce the risk of repeating similar patterns of cultural dynamics, such as conflict avoidance and guarded decision-making, in future periods of upheaval.

## 7. Reaffirm Human-Centered Values and Dignity

Reaffirming human-centered values and the UN Charter to protect human dignity is a fundamental imperative, as the crisis caused a perceived rupture in the "psychological contract" and a sense of powerlessness among staff. Ensuring that all future decisions reflect UNHCR's humanitarian ethos internally as well as externally is central to restoring confidence and overcoming the current cynicism. Staff must be consistently and visibly seen and treated as people, not merely as abstract "positions or budget lines", to counter the transactional, fear-driven atmosphere that dominated the restructuring.

This human-centered principle must be deliberately embedded across policy, practice, and leadership culture to rebuild trust. Concrete actions could include establishing people-centered decision criteria, clearly defining leadership expectations that prioritize staff well-being, and fundamentally overhauling how difficult news is communicated and followed up to ensure it is both respectful and dignifying. The path forward demands courage, humility, and a willingness to listen at all levels to transition from the "survival state" to recovery, a journey which the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator remains committed to supporting with its confidential avenues for dialogue and systemic insight.

## Conclusion

This Special Report has sought to capture the systemic dynamics, organizational impacts, and human consequences of UNHCR's 2025 restructuring and downsizing process. Through the lens of the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator, it documents not only what occurred, but how it was perceived and experienced by colleagues across grades, contract types, and duty stations, and what these experiences reveal about the organization's culture, governance, and resilience.

The observations presented here are not intended to assign blame or to evaluate specific decisions. They reflect patterns and themes raised through confidential channels and other informal engagements, offered as upward feedback to support reflection and learning. The crisis was unprecedented in scale and speed, and the response—while imperfect—was shaped by urgency, pressure, and extraordinary constraints. At the same time, staff accounts show that the ways in which decisions were communicated, implemented, and experienced have lasting effects on trust, cohesion, and wellbeing.

Recovery will require more than structural adjustments. It will call for a renewed commitment to transparency, empathy, and integrity; for leadership that listens and engages and models the values it espouses; and for systems to adapt in ways that are inclusive and fair. It will also require sustained attention to the needs of those who remain, and to the conditions that enable them to feel safe, respected, and able to contribute.

The options outlined in this report are offered in a constructive spirit, as possible avenues to rebuild trust, restore collaboration, and strengthen organizational resilience. The Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator remain committed to supporting both staff and leadership in navigating this period and contributing to a healthier, more sustainable organizational future, one in which people are valued not only for the roles they occupy, but as individuals with dignity, voice, and purpose.

The path to recovery lies in bridging the distance between decisions and those impacted by them. In the words of the Secretary-General, we must strive to *'move from fear of each other, to trust in each other'*, a trust grounded in transparency, empathy, and the values that bind this organization together.

## Annex

### Detailed Timeline of Communication

| Date                      | Event   | Impact  |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| 2025-Jan<br>~<br>2025-Feb | <a href="#"><u>Temporary Suspension of US Foreign Assistance</u></a>    | Immediate cost-containment measures and scenario planning initiated.                                      |
| 2025-02-06                | <a href="#"><u>HC's 1st Town Hall</u></a>                               | Funding freeze due to US contributions, impact on operations, and announcement of upcoming restructuring. |
| 2025-03-20                | <a href="#"><u>HC's Message: Financial Uncertainty Announcement</u></a> | HC addresses funding shortfall due to US freeze. Restructuring review process begins.                     |
| 2025-04-02                | <a href="#"><u>Headquarters and Regional Bureaus review</u></a>         | 1,200 colleagues provide feedback, guiding the restructuring process.                                     |
| 2025-04-09                | <a href="#"><u>Launch of Weekly Updates</u></a>                         | Regular updates on restructuring, shared  |

|                               |  |   |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
|                               |  | services model, and operational footprint review.   |
| 2025-04-23                    | <a href="#"><u>Financial situation – downsizing and cost-saving measures</u></a>                           | HQ and RB downsizing confirmed, with <b>30%</b> reduction in operational costs.   |
| 2025-05-05                    | <a href="#"><u>HC’s 2nd Global Town Hall</u></a>   | Announcement of latest cost-saving measures and the new organizational chart for HQ.  |
| 2025-06-16                    | <a href="#"><u>HC’s Message – Financial Situation Update</u></a>   | 3,500 staff positions identified for discontinuation. Global staffing costs to be reduced by 30%.   |
| 2025-06-16<br>~<br>2025-07-17 | <b>Shift to Bi-Weekly Update</b>   | After a brief pause in June 2025, the updates are back on a bi-weekly basis.  |
| 2025-07-17                    | <a href="#"><u>HC’s 3rd Town Hall</u></a>  | Guidance for workforce navigating changes. 3,900 staff members affected by job cuts.  |
| 2025-07-25                    | <a href="#"><u>Limited Activation of the Policy on Staff Placement and Reduction in Force - GS GVA</u></a> | Policy activated for GS Staff in Geneva.  |
| 2025-10-01                    | <a href="#"><u>New HQ and Regional Configuration Milestone</u></a>   | Transition activities continue; 5,000 staff separated as part of organizational changes.  |
| 2025-10-13                    | <a href="#"><u>Activation of the Early Separation Programme</u></a>  | Launch of a voluntary Early Separation Programme for eligible <b>International</b> Professional staff (over five years’ service) to help mitigate the impact of organizational realignment. |
| Since<br>2025-10-15           | <b>Weekly Updates discontinued</b>   | Regular Weekly Updates on restructuring and the financial situation ends.   |

