

UNHCR'S HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

I. Background

1. In December 2001, UNHCR issued a paper, *The State of UNHCR's Staff*, in recognition of the crucial role played by the staff in achieving the organization's objectives and with the aim of providing a framework within which human resources policies could be discussed. The paper elaborated on the need to situate human resource policy firmly within the strategic direction of the organization, basing all policies on core values and addressing staff needs. The paper also attempted, for the first time, to give a comprehensive picture of the staff profile which could then form the basis of an evolving plan to match the needs of the organization (in terms of core objectives and goals) to the staff profile required to do the job.

2. In February 2001, the High Commissioner launched Actions 1, 2 and 3 which in part were intended to review and restate the role of the organization, adjusting the staffing component to meet these requirements. As a result of the proposals emerging from the Actions, the human resources policies may need to change in the medium to longer term to better support the evolving circumstances. In the short term, however, key policy needs arose that had to be addressed immediately, most notably mechanisms to allow for staff reductions in the least painful and most efficient manner. These proposals aim at retaining staff most needed by the organization and allowing for the dignified separation of those whose skills and services are no longer required in difficult financial times.

II. Immediate Concerns

3. The focus of human resources policy development over the first few months of 2001 has therefore been on how to right size the organization in a way that has the least negative effect on staff. A number of mechanisms are being proposed to achieve the reductions, including an Early Retirement Programme and a Voluntary Separation Package which also includes termination benefits for national staff. Details of these packages are currently under discussion. Proposals on the management of staff in-between assignments are also under discussion.

III. Policy Issues under Review

4. Over the past few years UNHCR has tried in various ways to adopt a modern and professional approach to management within the organization. Part of this effort has centred on human resources management. Taking as a starting point the guiding principle that performance and competence must be the main factors in deciding on postings, and acknowledging the universal standard of equal pay for equal work, UNHCR introduced a series of new policies in January 2000. These included a rank-in-post policy, a new approach to contracts, and a posting system that attempted to place the right person on the right post at the right time. Central to the philosophy of the policy is that the manager concerned makes the selection of the candidate (as opposed to the

Director) and is thus accountable for the choices made and the subsequent performance of the team. Issues such as seniority, assignment length, rotation history, gender and geographical balance are factors in making selections, but the primary criteria is suitability for the post.

5. There has been criticism of the new policy, and some delays in the posting process were experienced last year as managers and staff learned to use the new system. The main concern as regards the postings policy in particular has been that it is too complex and cumbersome and therefore hampers swift postings decisions which are necessary in UNHCR's highly operational environment. To make optimal use of the human resources available to UNHCR, a system which contains few, if any, barriers is required which will allow managers unrestricted access to the entire workforce when selecting members of their teams. It will also allow individual staff members the greatest number of placement opportunities for possible advancement and development. While meeting the wishes and needs of managers and staff to the extent possible and desirable, such a system must also meet the needs of the organization and reflect its corporate responsibility to ensure the best use of its human resources, and to safeguard their interests. Two different staff/management working groups have made recommendations for the improvement of the system. In addition, the Human Resources Service has also made proposals regarding a new, simplified postings process that would address some of the delays in the system and consequently in postings, as well as certain policy issues. All of these suggestions are currently under discussion.

6. No postings process can be truly successful without an accompanying support structure of performance management and career development. UNHCR has already implemented a competency-based appraisal process that assesses staff based on performance against agreed objectives. There has been a recognition however, and Actions 1, 2 and 3 confirmed this, that the organization needs to undergo a global profiling exercise that would evaluate the skills and competence of staff in the organization, and then match these to the required profile. This can then become a regular practice and part of the human resources planning process. Activities to develop and re-skill staff, such as the very successful learning programmes, can then be factored into staff profiles and assist in the career planning process.

7. A project currently underway, sponsored by the Danish Special Fund, aims to design and produce career supporting services in which mentoring and career planning are the main developmental areas. UNHCR needs to concentrate on bringing together the results of this consultancy, the global profiles and the postings process to achieve a logical, consistent and predictable career evolution for staff in the organization.

8. The changes brought about by the implementation of Action 2, require an increased and well-targeted response in the area of staff development and learning. The learning programmes will need to be consolidated to enhance the managerial and functional competencies of staff. Skills training opportunities for those who may need to seek work opportunities outside UNHCR might also need to be increased. Support must be given to localized field training initiatives so that learning opportunities can be extended further to all staff. Staff development is a tangible investment in people and sends a clear message that the organization is concerned about its staff. It also makes operational sense to enhance staff competencies when resources are stretched.

9. The human resources strategy would not be complete without factoring in the rotation policy. There is general agreement that the policy is not currently serving the needs of the organization or of staff. A Working Group on Rotation is currently reviewing this issue with a view to making proposals to improve the policy and make it more suited to the realities faced by UNHCR today, both in terms of operational demands and staff needs. Policies of various similar organizations are being examined and an all staff survey on rotation is underway. The results of the Working Group are expected by mid-year. Closely related to this undertaking is the consultancy

on Work:Life issues commissioned under the Canadian Management Consultant Trust Fund. The results of this study, due at the end of May, will need to be looked at in conjunction with the report of the Working Group on Rotation to form a comprehensive picture on which policy decisions can be based.

10. Staff security and welfare is always a central concern to UNHCR. In this connection, Action 2 confirmed the recommendations of a previous report on the subject to reinforce the resources of both the staff security section and the staff welfare unit. Additional staff will be outposted to various field locations, mostly in Africa, to protect and support staff working in the field, including six additional field security advisors and two staff welfare officers.

IV. Conclusion

11. This paper has outlined the current status of only a few of the high priority concerns in the area of human resources management. It is true that the need to develop appropriate solutions to the challenges posed by Action 2 has been a priority during 2001, and that the longer-term strategic activities have been temporarily put aside as a result. However, comprehensive follow-up on the broad range of issues covered in *The State of UNHCR's Staff* is planned.