



**Executive Board of the
United Nations Development
Programme, the United Nations
Population Fund and the United
Nations Office for Project Services**

Distr.: General
8 April 2022

Original: English

Annual session 2022

6–10 June 2022, New York

Item 4 of the provisional agenda

UNFPA – Reports of UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS Ethics Offices

United Nations Population Fund

Report of the Ethics Office 2021

Summary

This report is submitted to the Executive Board pursuant to paragraph 9 of Executive Board decision 2010/17: Reports of the Ethics Offices of UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS. In accordance with the Secretary-General's bulletin entitled United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes (ST/SGB/2007/11/Amend.1), the report was reviewed by the Ethics Panel of the United Nations in March 2022 and presented to the UNFPA Executive Director.

The report provides a summary of the activities of the UNFPA Ethics Office during 2021 and describes trends in the mandated areas of its work. It also provides recommendations to management to further strengthen the organizational culture of integrity and compliance.

Elements of a decision

The Executive Board may wish to take note of the present report, and welcome continued progress in the work of the UNFPA Ethics Office.

Note: The present document was processed in its entirety by UNFPA.



I. Introduction

1. This report (a) outlines outputs achieved by the Ethics Office in 2021; (b) provides an analysis of the operating environment for adherence to the United Nations ethical standards; and (c) suggests strategies to maintain the ethical standards necessary for UNFPA to continue to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled.
2. The report is submitted to the Board at its annual session in 2022, per paragraph 9 of Executive Board decision 2010/17. The contents of the report align with the Ethics Office mandate detailed in the Secretary-General's bulletin, "United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes" (ST/SGB/2007/11 as amended).
3. The Ethics Office supports the Executive Director to ensure that UNFPA staff and personnel perform their functions consistent with the highest ethical standards required by the Charter of the United Nations, the Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service, the Staff Regulations and Staff Rules, and UNFPA policies and procedures.
4. The Office serves a global workforce of over 4,000 personnel in more than 150 countries. The office is currently staffed by an Ethics Advisor (D1) and an Ethics Associate (G7). An additional Ethics Officer (P4) post was approved by the Board, and it is anticipated that the selected candidate will be on-boarded by May/June 2022.
5. The Ethics Office operates on principles of independence, impartiality, and confidentiality. Its activities aim to promote a culture of integrity, accountability, transparency, professionalism, respect, and tolerance.
6. The UNFPA organizational context demands greater transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to misconduct and retaliation than ever before. The Ethics Office is being called to address increasingly complex policy and practice matters. As a result, the work of the office has shifted from a reactive and individual-based service delivery model towards organizational ethics, culture/behaviour and prevention.
7. Objectives for the Ethics Office in 2021 were threefold: (a) increase the visibility and accessibility of ethics services; (b) promote confidence in Ethics as a practical, necessary, and trusted resource; and (c) extend the reach of the office to more personnel (through training, virtual engagement and delivery of services).
8. To achieve this objective, the Ethics Office expanded its virtual outreach, increased its training programmes, and modernized the tone, content and delivery of communications. Central to this strategy is a commitment to articulating the operational realities of adhering to United Nations rules and standards, emphasizing personal accountability and honouring the time and capacity for personnel to engage with the office by delivering high-impact programmes and interventions.
9. Success indicators include: the number of services provided; levels of engagement with virtual outreach platforms; number of people trained; training impact data; and, most importantly, the number of requests for advice and guidance. Notable outputs in 2021 were as follows:
 - (a) Provision of services by the Ethics Office more than doubled, (996, up from 430 in 2020, and 309 in 2019).
 - (b) A record number of individuals sought advice and guidance from the Ethics Office. Advisory services increased by 117 per cent (455 personnel served, up from 209 in 2020, and 186 in 2019). This included a significant increase (226 per cent) in advisory requests related to interpersonal conduct, fair application of rules and policies, and wrongdoing (111 in 2021, up from 34 in 2020, and 29 in 2019).

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- (c) The Ethics Office achieved a new milestone in the number of personnel who participated in live training (over the course of 31 training events). The total number of personnel trained increased by 129 per cent (2,641 up from 1,150 in 2020, and 317 in 2019). All training was delivered and/or facilitated by the Ethics Advisor. This included three core units on: essential ethics; public pronouncements/social media; and civility. The sessions scored highly in feedback polls relating to relevance and efficacy (based on a 91 per cent response rate). Some 95 per cent of participants reported that they learned something new; 97 per cent believed the session was a worthwhile investment of time; 89 per cent noted that their substantive knowledge on the topic had advanced; and 93 per cent reported that they felt better equipped/empowered to take ethical decisions or actions.
- (d) New outreach initiatives included an anonymous ‘ask ethics’ virtual portal, an intranet page with extensive guidance, and a ‘bite-size ethics’ information campaign. The virtual outreach strategy resulted in sustained staff engagement on a variety of ethics topics. Views of ethics-related content on the Ethics Vlog increased by 544 per cent (43,814 views, up from 6,798 in 2020).
- (e) Requests for protection from retaliation increased (8 in 2021, compared with two in 2020). This trend appears consistent with the increased reach of the Ethics Office in 2021, and the global impact of the pandemic on well-being (diminished capacity for self-regulation, lower stress tolerance, and an increased risk of wrongdoing). Three matters were referred for investigation; the remaining five were closed due to insufficient information to support a prima facie determination of retaliation.
- (f) The Ethics Advisor, in her capacity as Alternate Chair of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations, conducted 9 reviews of determinations by the United Nations Ethics Office on retaliation matters. In addition, the Ethics Advisor participated in 8 reviews of determinations conducted by the Chair of the Ethics Panel.
- (g) The Ethics Office notes, with appreciation, the vital contribution that the Ethics Panel of the United Nations (chaired by the United Nations Ethics Office) made to achieving coherence in ethics standards and practices in 2021. The UNFPA Ethics Office benefitted significantly from access to ethics guidance, information and practice tools through its participation with this interagency panel and from advice and guidance provided by the Chair.
- (h) The Ethics Office cooperated with the administration on two key policy and programme strategies in 2021: a culture change initiative (to operationalize UNFPA values and standards into everyday working practices), and the ‘integrity family initiative’ (to promote the informal resolution of interpersonal conflicts, greater reporting of misconduct and a victim/survivor-centred approach to the administration of justice).
- (i) The Ethics Office achieved 100 per cent compliance with the Financial Disclosure Programme. No notable conflicts of interest were identified upon review or verification of a random sample of statements. Due to its high caseload in 2020, the Ethics Office was unable to propose a policy revision for the Financial Disclosure Programme but will do so in 2022.
- (j) Compliance with mandatory online training remained stable, at 72 per cent. While the total number of persons trained did not change from 2020 to 2021, the compliance rate, relative to personnel numbers, declined slightly due to an increase in personnel numbers. The technology for the platform expired in 2021 and the programme was suspended. A new platform was developed in 2021 and it will be launched in 2022. The Ethics Office seeks to increase the compliance rate in 2022 to above 90 per cent.

II. Activities of the UNFPA Ethics Office

10. Activities of the Ethics Office align with six mandated areas:
- Confidential advice and guidance to all personnel;
 - Addressing requests for protection from retaliation;
 - Training and outreach to achieve compliance with UNFPA rules, values, standards and mechanisms to resolve complaints (including protection from retaliation);
 - Coordination with relevant units of UNFPA and with the Ethics Panel of the United Nations (EPUN), to ensure that there is a uniform and consistent application of ethics-related standards in the United Nations system;
 - Providing guidance to management to ensure that the organization’s rules, policies, procedures and practices reinforce and promote the highest standards of ethics and integrity required by the United Nations Charter and other applicable staff rules and regulations; and
 - Administer the Financial Disclosure Programme.
11. To execute this mandate, the Ethics Office provided services on 996 occasions, more than double the services provided in 2021 and 222 per cent more than in 2019.

Figure 1
Requests for services, in 2021

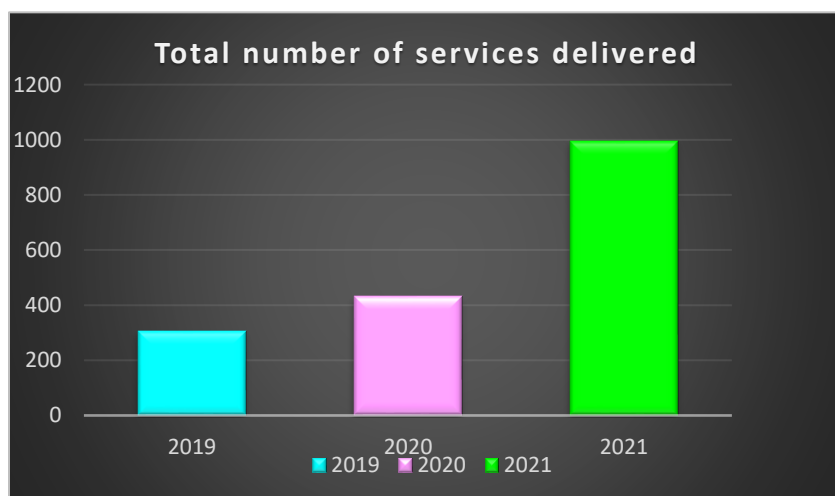
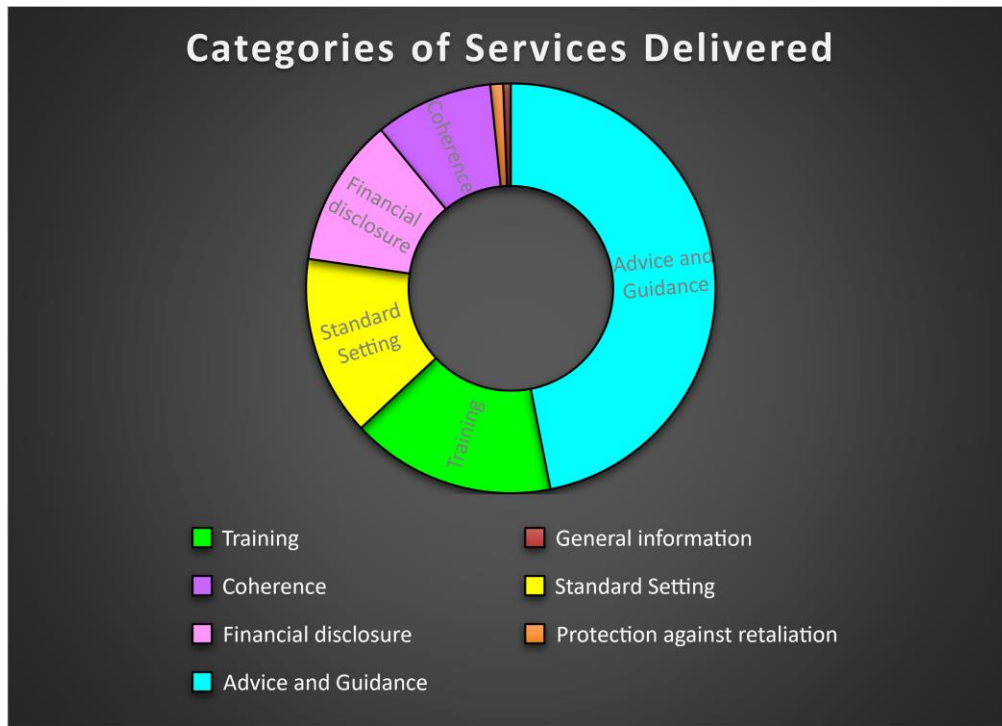


Table 1
Ethics services delivered: 2018-2021

Year	Advice and guidance	Retaliation	Financial disclosure	Standard-setting	Coherence	General information	Training	Total
2018	257	7	7	32	44	2	48	397
2019	186	9	9	14	68	2	21	309
2020	209	9	55	58	54	3	42	430
2021	455	10	117	150	93	6	165	996

12. Advice and guidance constituted 45 per cent of all services delivered.

Figure 2
Requests for services categories in 2021

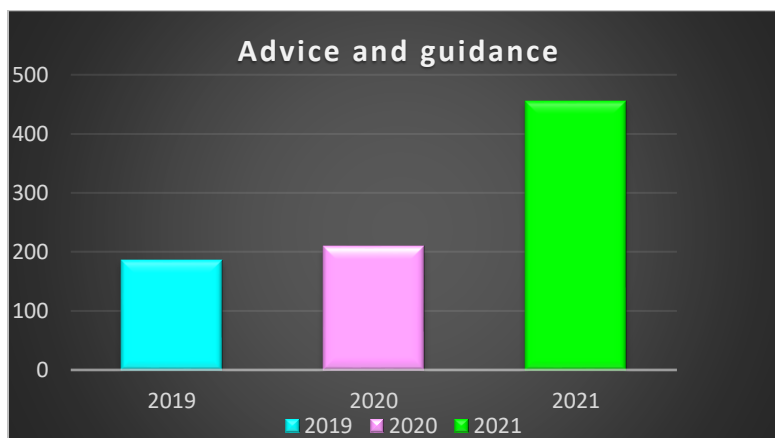


A. Advice and guidance

13. Requests for advice and guidance are one measure of staff confidence in the efficacy of the Ethics Office. Effective, timely and confidential advice and referral can prevent unnecessary escalation of issues, ensure compliance, promote reporting of serious wrongdoing, protect the well-being of UNFPA personnel, and mitigate risks.

14. A record number of individuals sought advice and guidance from the Ethics Office in 2021, 117 per cent more than in 2020 (455 personnel served, up from 209 in 2020).

Figure 3
Advice and guidance, in 2021



15. Some 48 per cent of advisory services concerned conflict-of-interest issues, including participation in outside activities and employment (see table 2 below).

16. There was a significant increase (221 per cent) in advisory requests related to interpersonal conduct, fair application of rules and policies, staff welfare and wrongdoing (111 in 2021, up from 34 in 2020). This trend appears consistent with the increased reach of the Ethics Office in 2021, and the global impact of the pandemic on well-being (diminished capacity for self-regulation, lower stress tolerance, and an increased risk of wrongdoing). Indeed, requests for advisory services have increased in other Ethics Offices of the United Nations funds and programmes.

Figure 4
Advice and guidance categories in 2021

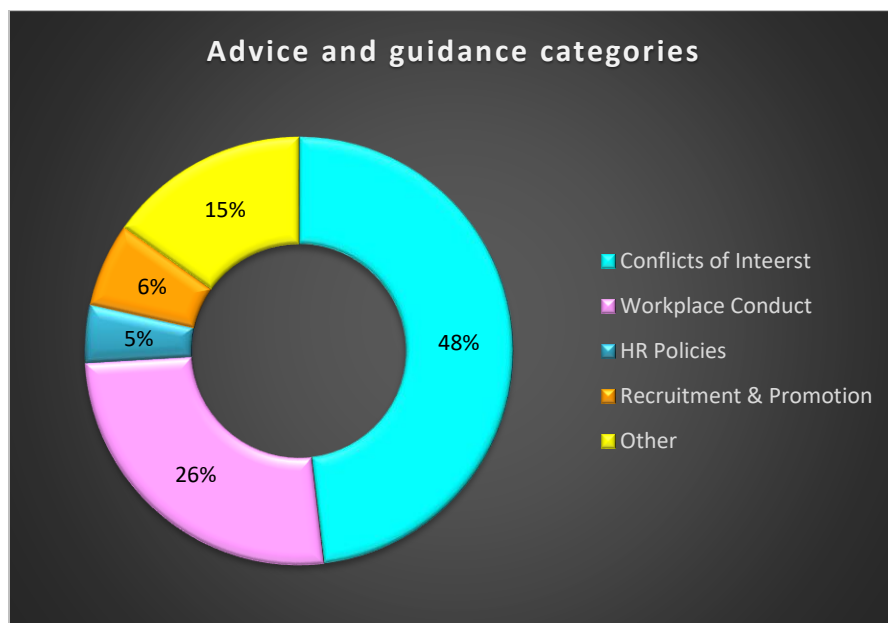


Table 2
Requests for ethics advice and guidance, by category

Category	Headquarters	Field	Total cases
Conflict of interest			
– Outside activities	45	94	146
– Gifts, awards and hospitality	1	8	12
– Organizational conflicts of interest	1	3	27
– Other	0	2	21
Subtotal	47	107	206
Employment-related concerns			
– Workplace conduct issues	13	21	111
– Clarification of personnel-related policies	6	2	19
– Recruitment and promotion processes	1	5	27
– Other inquiries	4	3	65
Subtotal	24	31	222
Grand total	71	138	428

17. Approximately 89 per cent of the requests for advice and guidance came from fixed-term staff, while the remainder came from non-staff personnel and other third parties. The low representation of non-staff personnel may relate to longevity with the organization and associated knowledge of and trust in the ethics function. However, it may also reflect the fact that staff members on more secure contracts tend to feel safer to speak up and seek help.

18. While field-based requests increased overall, the proportion of headquarters versus field-based requests declined, which is of concern (from 33 per cent of all requests in 2020 to 21 per cent in 2021).

Table 4
Financial disclosure participation, by location and calendar year, 2018-2021

Year	Headquarters	Eastern and Southern Africa	Western and Central Africa	Latin America and the Caribbean	Asia and the Pacific	Eastern Europe and Central Asia	Arab States	Total
2018	109	31	13	41	44	9	10	257
2019	90	15	10	9	32	18	12	186
2020	71	22	18	24	31	17	26	209
2021	89	40	43	34	65	31	51	428

B. Protection from retaliation

19. UNFPA is obligated to protect personnel who report misconduct, or who participate in an authorized fact-finding activity, from any actual or threatened detrimental action that they may face as a consequence of that report or their participation. The policy on protection against retaliation sets forth the prohibition against retaliation, the procedures for lodging a complaint, and the steps the organization may take to address retaliation.

20. The Ethics Office undertakes a preliminary review of requests for protection and if a prima facie case of retaliation is established, the matter is referred to the UNFPA Office of Audit and Investigation Services (OAI) for investigation.

21. The Ethics Office received eight formal requests for protection from retaliation in 2021, up from two requests in 2020. This trend appears consistent with the increased reach of the Ethics Office in 2021, and the global pandemic-related decline in well-being (and heightened risk of wrongdoing).

22. All complaints arose in the context of alleged reports of misconduct (primarily harassment and abuse of authority).

23. Five matters were closed because insufficient information was presented to support a prima facie determination of retaliation. An analysis of these cases reveals common misperceptions on the part of personnel about the scope of the policy on protection from retaliation. This includes a lack of knowledge about what constitutes established reporting mechanisms, and, in the case of alleged harassment, a lack of clarity on the distinction between a legitimate exercise of authority, incivility and behaviour that constitutes misconduct.

24. Three matters were referred for investigation (one in September and two in December 2021), with recommendations for interim protective measures. The Ethics Office received an investigation report relating to the September 2021 matter, wherein the OASIS concluded that there was insufficient evidence to support the complaint of retaliation and the Ethics Office determined that retaliation had not occurred. Investigation of the two December 2021 matters is ongoing. The Ethics Office received one investigation report in 2021, relating to a 2020 complaint of retaliation. OASIS concluded that there was insufficient evidence to support the complaint of retaliation and the Ethics Office determined that retaliation had not occurred. The matter was closed by the Executive Director.

25. The Ethics Office responded to three retaliation-related inquiries, including questions about the policy, procedures and specific instances of alleged retaliation.

C. Training, education and outreach

26. The Ethics Office is a protector of whistle-blowers and a gatekeeper for reporting misconduct, conflict resolution, conflict of interest and resolution of administrative issues. Effective, timely and confidential advice, guidance and referral can prevent unnecessary escalation of issues, ensure compliance, promote staff well-being, and mitigate risks. For reasons to do with trust-building, fear of retaliation, language and logistics, many staff will only flag concerns once they have had a face-to-face interaction with the Ethics Advisor (in-person or virtual). Requests for advice and guidance always spike after training and outreach interventions. Given COVID-19 related travel restrictions, the Ethics Office increased its virtual presence through an expanded outreach and training programme. In addition, live translation was provided for all regional training sessions.

27. The Ethics Office achieved a new milestone in the number of personnel who participated in training (over the course of 31 training events). The total number of personnel trained increased by 125 per cent (2,597 up from 1,150 in 2020). This number is particularly high relative to the total UNFPA workforce (approximately 3,000).

Table 4
Number of persons trained live

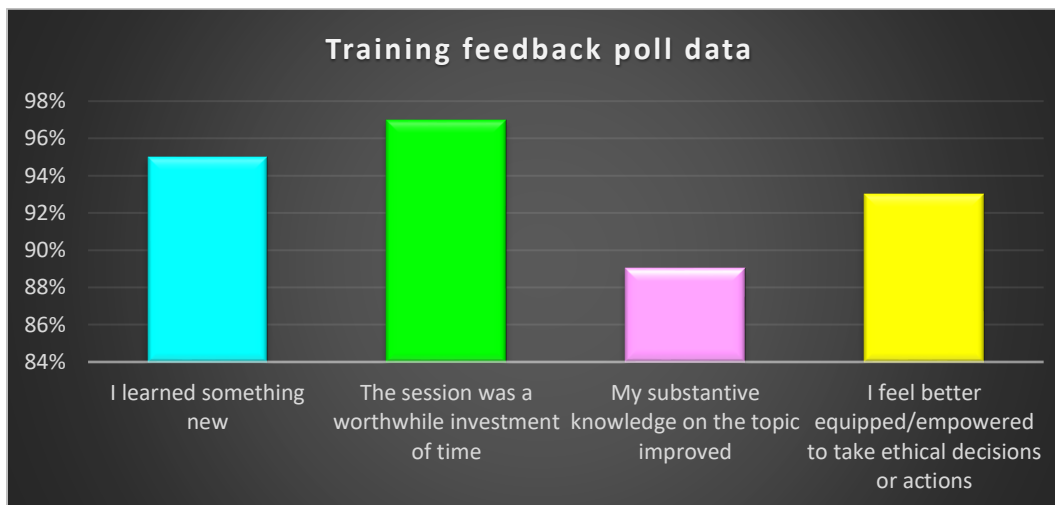
2019	2020	2021
317	1150	2164

28. All training was delivered and/or facilitated by the Ethics Advisor. This included three core units on: essential ethics; public pronouncements/social media; and civility.

29. The sessions scored highly in feedback polls relating to relevance and efficacy (based on a 91 per cent response rate). Overall, 95 per cent of participants reported that they learned something new; 97 per cent believed the session was a worthwhile investment of time; 89 per cent noted their substantive knowledge on the topic had advanced; and 93 per cent reported that

they felt better equipped/empowered to take ethical decisions or actions. Training was delivered in all regions and headquarters.

Figure 5
Training feedback, in 2021



30. Compliance with the online training programme, “Ethics and Integrity at the United Nations Population Fund”, for 2021 was 72 per cent (3,081 completions of 4,279). The technology for the platform expired in 2021 and the programme was suspended. A revised online training programme was developed (using content shared by the United Nations Ethics Office) and will be launched in 2022. The programme includes a “Statement of Commitment” that all personnel will be required to make on adherence to UNFPA rules, values and standards of conduct.

D. Outreach

31. The COVID-19 context provided the Ethics Office with an opportunity to test the impact of virtual engagement. Rather than depending upon physical outreach, the Ethics Office sought to strengthen its online presence. The Ethics Office’s virtual outreach strategy resulted in sustained staff engagement on a variety of ethics topics. Views of ethics-related content on the Ethics Vlog increased by 544 per cent (43,814 views, up from 6,798 in 2020). New outreach initiatives included an anonymous ‘ask ethics’ virtual portal, an intranet page with extensive guidance, and a ‘bite-size ethics’ information campaign.

E. Standard-setting and policy support

32. The Ethics Office provides ethics-related guidance to management to ensure that the policies and practices of the organization reflect and promote the expectations of integrity, impartiality and fairness required of UNFPA and its personnel. During the reporting period, the Ethics Office collaborated with other UNFPA offices on 150 occasions. This included coordination on two key programme strategies: a culture change initiative (to operationalize UNFPA values and standards into everyday working practices), and the ‘integrity family initiative’ (to promote the informal resolution of interpersonal conflicts, greater reporting of misconduct and survivor-centred approach to the administration of justice).

33. In addition, the Ethics Adviser provided ethics expertise and input to United Nations system entities and review processes, and provided comments concerning the draft terms of reference for the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) review on measures and mechanisms for preventing and addressing racism and racial discrimination in the institutions of the

United Nations system, and the JIU's review of the current state of the ethics function in the United Nations.

F. Coherence

34. The Ethics Adviser contributed to coherence in the United Nations system in 2021, principally through her participation with the Ethics Panel of the United Nations (EPUN), established under ST/SGB/2007/11/Amend.1. The Ethics Office participated in 10 official EPUN meetings in 2021.

35. The Ethics Office notes, with appreciation, the vital contribution that the Ethics Panel of the United Nations (chaired by the United Nations Ethics Office) made to achieving coherence in ethics standards and practices in 2021. This includes inputs to policies and practices on outside activities, conflicts of interest and retaliation. The UNFPA Ethics Office benefitted significantly from access to comparative ethics guidance, information and practice tools through its participation with this interagency panel.

36. The Ethics Advisor was elected as the Alternate Chair of EPUN in August 2020 and served in this capacity until August 2021. In this capacity, she conducted 9 reviews of determinations by the United Nations Ethics Office on protection against retaliation requests. The Ethics Advisor participated in 8 reviews of determinations conducted by the Chair of the Ethics Panel.

37. The Ethics Office also continued its active participation in the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations (ENMO), including participation in the annual meetings and co-facilitating a panel on the future of ethics.

G. Financial Disclosure Programme

38. Mandated by the Secretary-General, the Financial Disclosure Programme is intended to help UNFPA to preserve and protect its integrity, thus building donor and public confidence in the organization and its staff. The programme is a primary tool for identifying and assessing conflict-of-interest risks arising from the private holdings and external activities of staff and their immediate family members. For the 2021 filing cycle, 503 staff members were required to submit financial disclosure statements, covering the 2020 calendar year (the number of filers has remained relatively consistent since 2016). The Ethics Office achieved 100 per cent compliance with the disclosure programme.

39. The Ethics Adviser reviewed each financial disclosure statements to ensure completion, and to consider whether any of the holdings or external activities of the staff member or their immediate family members could present a conflict of interest, given the organization's mission and activities and the staff member's role.

40. Following review of the financial disclosure statements, a random sample of 48 statements of the entire filing population was subject to verification. The verification process reconciles information submitted by staff members in their financial disclosure statements (assets; liabilities; non-UN income; outside activities, etc.) with the third-party documentation. An outside firm retained by the Ethics Office reviewed the documentation submitted in support of the staff members' original disclosures. The selected staff members were diversified by location, grade and function.

41. At the conclusion of the verification exercise, 17 per cent (8 persons) were determined to have assets or transactions that were not reported in their financial disclosure statements. However, no conflict of interest was identified. One potential conflict of interest was identified; a staff member had failed to obtain approval to engage in a leadership role in an external organization. The matter was assessed and addressed by the Ethics Office.

42. It has been widely agreed among UNFPA internal stakeholders that a revision of the Financial Disclosure Programme is required, potentially with a greater emphasis on identifying

conflicts of interest versus asset disclosures. Due to the number of service requests in the past year, the Ethics Office was unable to propose a policy revision for the Financial Disclosure Programme in 2021 but will do so in 2022.

III. Observations and recommendations to management

43. The administration created an enabling environment for ethics in UNFPA 2021. This was marked by (a) the ‘tone at the top’: expectations for standards of conduct were consistently and emphatically communicated by the Executive Director in town halls and meetings; (b) implementation of all Ethics Office recommendations on retaliation matters; (c) investment in the Ethics Office (provision of a new P4 post, as approved by the Board), and investments in a positive culture initiative, staff welfare, and diversity and inclusion.

44. Notwithstanding these vital commitments, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have an ongoing impact on the demand for Ethics Services, as it is not just a health crisis but also a psychological crisis, prompted by grief, social isolation and unforeseen operational challenges. The pandemic has increased the risk of interpersonal misconduct. Global rates of depression and mental illness are growing at alarming rates. Chronic stress can change the brain and negatively impact mood, judgement, impulse control and self-regulation. Depleted mental reserves are known to spill over into incivility, harassment and abuse. At the same time, tolerance and resilience in the face of such conduct is at an all-time low. More people are likely to act out, making workplaces less safe, and more people are likely to report it, creating pressure on systems of administrative justice and staff welfare services. People who do not feel safe will not alert their organization to risks, mistakes, wrongdoing or waste. They will not learn and try again, innovate or evolve.

45. In the year ahead, it is reasonable to assume that UNFPA personnel, some of whom may also experience second-hand trauma in the performance of their duties, will also be impacted in this way. This as a moment of major disruption for duty of care and psychological safety in teams. What worked so far in upholding the standards of conduct (in particular interpersonal conduct) may not be sufficient to meet contemporary needs. The Ethics Office commits to working with management to monitor these trends and to advance the UNFPA ‘integrity family initiative’ (aimed at promoting the informal resolution of interpersonal conflicts, greater reporting of misconduct and a survivor-centred approach to the administration of justice).

IV. Conclusion

46. UNFPA personnel are among some of the brightest, most resilient and committed in the United Nations system. The Ethics Office is proud to serve UNFPA and assist in promoting loyalty to the organization’s vision and mandate, and the values of independence, impartiality, and respect and tolerance.
