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UNFPA – Reports of UNDP, UNFPA, and UNOPS Ethics Offices

United Nations Population Fund

Report of the Ethics Office 2023

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 April 2023 and presented to the UNFPA Executive Director.

The report summarizes the activities of the UNFPA Ethics Office during 2023 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.

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I. Introduction

1. This report: (a) outlines outputs and impacts achieved by the Ethics Office in 2023; (b) provides analysis of the operating environment for adherence to the standards of conduct for international civil servants; 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 2024, per paragraph 9 of Executive Board decision 2010/17. The report's contents 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 mission of the Ethics Office is to assist the Executive Director in cultivating and nurturing a culture of ethics, integrity and accountability, thereby enhancing the trust in and the credibility of UNFPA, both internally and externally. The Ethics Office operates on the principles of independence, impartiality and confidentiality.
4. Taking note of the standards and recommendations provided by the Joint Inspection Unit, the UNFPA Ethics Office confirms its organizational independence for this reporting period. The office performed its activities with independence from parties within and outside of UNFPA.

II. Activities of the UNFPA Ethics Office

5. The Ethics Office serves a global workforce of approximately 5,650 personnel in more than 150 countries and territories. The office is staffed by an Ethics Advisor (D1), Ethics Officer (P4), and an Ethics Associate (G7). The Ethics Advisor will complete her mandate in June 2024. Activities of the Ethics Office align with the following five mandated functions:
 - (a) Confidential advice and guidance to all personnel;
 - (b) Addressing requests for protection from retaliation;
 - (c) Coordination with relevant units of UNFPA and with the Ethics Panel of the United Nations to ensure that there is a uniform and consistent application of ethics-related standards in the United Nations system;
 - (d) Guiding 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
 - (e) Administer the financial disclosure programme.
6. UNFPA is proposing an additional investment of \$90,000 in the midterm review of the integrated budget to expand the activities of the Ethics office, through communications, outreach, travel and engagement of experts.

A. Strategic focus: ethics and social media

7. In 2023, the Ethics Office championed integrity, accountability, fairness and safety for all UNFPA personnel. A strategic focus was promoting responsible personal social media use, emphasizing the obligation to uphold professional standards, and avoid actions that could compromise the organization's reputation.
8. UNFPA personnel are operating as international civil servants in a context characterized by increasing divisiveness and polarization. Social media is a battleground for the rapid spread of misinformation and the mobilization of online communities against individuals and organizations.

United Nations personnel and organizations face unprecedented public scrutiny and attacks and are targeted for their perceived alignment with specific political agendas or policies.

9. At the same time, attitudes towards public expression of personal political opinions have become more permissive in the global arena. The digital era has fundamentally changed how people express their political views, making it easier than ever for individuals to share their perspectives. Many now feel a strong sense of responsibility to actively contribute to shaping the political landscape through social media activism, and this desire is easily and powerfully put into action.

10. In this context, simply reminding personnel of social media obligations may be insufficient, especially with the rise of temporary contracts (that may dilute a sense of long-term commitment to the organization). Proactive guidance and support are essential to ensure personnel make responsible choices that uphold organizational standards of conduct. In addition, fostering healthy dialogue and respectful dissent is crucial for maintaining unity, preventing public airing of grievances, and promoting transparency and accountability.

11. The Ethics Office addressed emerging risks and trends in social media use in 2023 through outreach, training and awareness-raising campaigns and by providing advice to senior leadership.

B. Confidential, independent advice and guidance

12. The Ethics Office provides practical, timely and confidential guidance to UNFPA personnel. This proactive support helps prevent unnecessary escalation of issues, ensures compliance with ethical standards, and promotes the reporting of serious wrongdoing. By offering a safe space to share concerns and ask questions, the Ethics Office protects the well-being of UNFPA personnel and mitigates risks to the organization.

13. This service is especially crucial for personnel in countries with limited institutional trust, where poverty, corruption and hostile attitudes towards survivors of sexual assault can lead to severe repercussions for those who report wrongdoing. UNFPA recognizes that the decision to speak up and report wrongdoing is often influenced by socio-cultural, economic and political factors beyond the organization's reach. In this context, personnel often choose to engage with the Ethics Office as a first step for advice on reporting options precisely because the Ethics Office does not have a mandate to accept formal reports of wrongdoing.

14. Following a 120 per cent increase in individual ethics inquiries in 2021 (including a 300 per cent increase in queries about wrongdoing and interpersonal conflict), the Ethics Office adopted new strategies to optimize resource allocation and empower personnel to navigate ethical issues effectively. This includes investment in online communication campaigns and products to promote self-driven learning, and referral pathways to address work-related concerns and conflicts (both formal and informal).

15. These initiatives have shown promise. In 2023, there was a slight increase in inquiries related to conflict of interest (directly relevant to the Ethics Office mandate), and a 28 per cent decline in employment-related concerns (outside the Ethics Office mandate). These figures suggest staff are becoming more comfortable addressing relevant ethical issues while utilizing alternative channels for non-ethics concerns.

16. The Ethics Office responded to 322 requests for advice and guidance in 2023. This compares with 373 in 2022. Just over half of all requests were related to potential conflicts of interest, including requests to engage in outside activities. The remainder comprises "employment-related" queries, which includes alleged harassment and abuse of authority, sexual harassment, other alleged wrongdoing and administrative claims. The Ethics Office refers personnel presenting with employment-related concerns to the relevant offices for assistance, including Oversight, Audit and Investigation Services (OAIS), the Ombudsman for Funds and Programs, Director of Human Resources (including counselling services), the Office of Staff Legal Assistance (OSLA) and the Coordinator, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment.

Table 1
Requests for advice and guidance: 2019-2023

Advice categories	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Conflict of interest	132	139	206	178	184
Employment-related concerns	54	55	222	195	138
Total	186	194	428	373	322

C. Protecting personnel from retaliation

17. UNFPA is obligated to protect personnel who report misconduct or participate in an authorized fact-finding activity from any actual or threatened detrimental action 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.

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

19. In 2023, the Ethics Office received four formal requests for protection against retaliation. Two matters were referred for investigation with recommendations for protective measures which were implemented by the administration. One investigation was finalized and closed with a determination that retaliation was not established. The other investigation is ongoing. Two matters were closed due to a no prima facie determination.

20. The Ethics Office received one investigation report relating to a 2022 matter, wherein retaliation was not substantiated.

D. Promoting ethical awareness and decision-making

21. The Ethics Office prioritized in-person visits to country offices in 2023, considering the significant investment in online resources and training in 2023. In-person meetings are vital for trust-building. The Ethics Advisor visited eight country offices, including those in the Balkans, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye and India. The Ethics Advisor led participatory workshops on “inclusive ethics”: exploring the cultural nuances, barriers and opportunities for reporting, by-stander/upstander interventions, drawing personal boundaries, and constructive dissent. Participants developed “culture maps” relating to each distinct category of speaking-up. These materials will inform the development of inclusive and accessible reporting and support mechanisms by the UNFPA integrated group of internal justice offices (including the Ethics Office, the Office of Oversight Audit and Investigation Services, the Office of the Ombudsman, and the Coordinator, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment).

22. The Ethics Office also delivered live training sessions for all personnel in 2023 (in-person and online); 1,333 personnel participated in these sessions. All training was delivered directly by the Ethics Advisor. Topics included: ethics essentials and ethics induction, conflicts of interest, psychological safety, ethical use of social media, drawing personal boundaries, preventing harassment, and abuse of authority and ethical leadership.

23. Throughout 2023, the Ethics Office continued to empower staff through its suite of online resources, promoting self-directed learning and streamlining access to critical guidance. This includes 19 micro-learning courses available in all United Nations languages, and dedicated multimedia platforms on financial disclosure, outside activities, and retaliation. In addition, the Ethics Office launched an online toolkit for managers to facilitate discussions on social media ethics with content sourced from the United Nations Ethics Office.

24. Personnel were invited to participate in an online survey about their experience with the Ethics Office micro-learning courses. Sixty-five per cent of respondents reported that they were ‘very satisfied’ or ‘satisfied’ with the quality of the course, 65 per cent said they would recommend the course to a colleague and 100 per cent stated that the course was a good use of their time

25. The Ethics Office promotes open communication through its Ask Ethics platform, which allows personnel to anonymously submit queries and receive publicly posted responses. Seventy Ask Ethics queries were received in 2023.

26. In May 2023, the Ethics Office partnered in a UNDP-led inter-agency ethics awareness month. This initiative is consistent with the Executive Board request in its decision 2022/16 that the ethics offices of UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS, “report on greater collaboration opportunities on field missions, on training and on outreach”. The campaign featured virtual sessions jointly delivered by the UNFPA, UNDP and UNOPS ethics offices, and included messages from the President of the Executive Board and from the executive heads of the three organizations, reinforcing tone-from-the-top and leadership commitment.

27. By focusing on high-quality content with a consistent voice and brand identity, the Ethics Office enhances its recognition, credibility and overall impact on personnel. In 2023, the Ethics Office shared 52 blog posts and 42 all-staff emails. The Ethics Office blog leverages United Nations Dispute Tribunal case studies to illuminate ethical dilemmas. These real-world examples, encompassing conflicts of interest, sexual harassment, fraud and corruption, showcase accountability for wrongdoing and equip staff to navigate complex ethical situations. UNFPA personnel viewed the Ethics intranet page and YouTube channel 30,700 times, including more than 1,000 hours of view time.

28. The vast majority (71 per cent) of personnel have completed the mandatory online ethics training course, which includes a statement of commitment to adhere to United Nations/UNFPA standards of conduct, rules and regulations.

29. The Ethics Office briefed the UNFPA Executive Committee, comprising the senior management team on ethics trends, and provided in-person briefings to the Office of the Executive Director on a monthly basis.

E. Financial disclosure

30. UNFPA established the financial disclosure programme to implement provisions on conflict of interest in the staff regulations, staff rules and the standards of conduct for international civil service. The primary implementation instrument is the annual financial disclosure statement, an online platform utilizing a questionnaire for certain categories of staff to disclose their personal and financial interests through self-reporting.

31. In 2023, the Ethics Office conducted a review of financial disclosure policy. This included an analysis of statements for three consecutive years and benchmarking provisions and processes against other United Nations organizations. The review identified undeclared outside activities as the most significant risk for UNFPA personnel. These activities could involve relationships or engagements with governments, non-governmental organization partners, implementing partners, vendors, and other personnel. Accordingly, the financial disclosure policy was revised to include an expanded conflict of interest section.

32. The Ethics Office reviewed 1015 financial disclosures in 2023 and responded to 127 disclosure-related queries. Additionally, the office identified and resolved 98 potential conflicts of interest, all stemming from undisclosed outside activities.

33. The Ethics Office implemented a third-party verification process for financial disclosure statements. This process aims to ensure staff members provide accurate and complete financial information.

34. The verification found no actual or perceived conflicts of interest among any of the filers. However, the exercise did identify some discrepancies in document submission. Thirty individuals (86 per cent of those selected) had submitted all required documents as originally disclosed. The remaining four individuals (11 per cent) omitted some financial assets exceeding \$10,000 and liabilities. These individuals were informed of this oversight and advised to ensure complete disclosure in future filings.

III. Standard-setting and policy support

35. 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.

36. During 2023, the Ethics Office engaged with other UNFPA offices on a range of prevention and culture change initiatives, including participation in the UNFPA Integrity Group, a strategic initiative to promote a more survivor-centred accessible, data-driven, transparent, accountable and trusted internal justice system. The Ethics Office also supported the review and development of various ethics-related policies, procedures and programmes and provided expertise and input to United Nations system entities and review processes (including the Joint Inspection Unit).

IV. Coherent application of ethical standards

37. The Ethics Adviser contributed to coherence in the United Nations system in 2023, principally through her participation within the Ethics Panel of the United Nations, established under ST/SGB/2007/11/Amend.1. This included review of determinations conducted by the Chair and Alternate Chair of Ethics Panel of the United Nations, and exchange of comparative ethics guidance, information, policies and practice tools.

38. The Ethics Advisor also participated in the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations, including its annual meeting, ensuring UNFPA ethical policies remain in step with best practices across the United Nations system.

V. Observations and recommendations to management

39. In its decision in 2011/24, the Executive Board called on the Ethics Office to make recommendations to management to strengthen the organizational culture of integrity and compliance. The Ethics Office engages regularly in an ongoing dialogue with management regarding opportunities in this regard.

40. For this reporting period, the Ethics Office is not submitting any management recommendations to the Executive Board.

VI. Conclusion

41. By empowering personnel to make ethical decisions, the Ethics Office plays a vital role in safeguarding the reputation of UNFPA as a trusted and respected institution. This commitment to integrity, transparency and accountability ultimately allows UNFPA to continue its critical work, positively impacting the lives of women, girls and young people globally. Looking ahead, the Ethics Office remains steadfast in its dedication to supporting the unwavering commitment of UNFPA to these core values.