



The present document lists the general and COVID-19-related questions raised by staff during the iSeek live session with Ms. Shireen Dodson, UN Ombudsman, on 23 April 2020, and the answers provided by the UN Ombudsman and Mediation Services (UNOMS). For any additional help or questions, please contact us at unoms@un.org or call +1-917-367-5731.

General Questions

Ombudsman role and profession

What is an Ombudsman? Merriam-Webster: "Ombudsman = a government official appointed to receive and investigate complaints made by individuals against abuses or capricious acts of public officials". Isn't "Ombudsman & Mediation" a contradiction in terms? You seem to view your function all about Mediation and not much about defending individuals against maladministration. Staff are understandably confused about the Office's role.

There are indeed two types of Ombudsman roles:

- the “classical” ombudsman, a government representative with broad powers to investigate complaints of maladministration, monitor treatment of citizens under the law and recommend appropriate remedial actions; and
- the “organizational” ombudsman, a designated neutral within a specific organization, who is independent, who does not conduct investigations or keep records, and who works to help managers and staff resolve their workplace concerns informally through facilitation, shuttle diplomacy, conflict coaching and mediation.

The organizational ombudsman also identifies trends and cross-cutting systemic issues in terms of how the rules and regulations are applied within their organization and, on that basis, provides upward feedback to management for remedial measures and organizational change. Monitoring application of the laws could be viewed as a similarity between the two roles, although the two are drastically different.

The United Nations applies the “organizational ombudsman” model, as mandated by its General Assembly.

What is the difference between an Ombudsman and a Mediator and what is the difference between a conversation facilitated by an Ombudsman and a mediation?

Ombudsman and mediators have more in common than differences. They are independent; they are neutral and do not represent anyone; they work informally to resolve conflict, and they work in the strictest confidence. Ombudsmen have a broad range of tools at their disposal and can work with individuals, parties in conflict or teams. They provide a safe space for anyone to share their fears and concerns confidentially. They can help to

clarify policies and their application to someone in need of perspective and options regarding their workplace concerns. They do conflict coaching to help an individual become their own best advocate. They can facilitate a conversation between two parties by bringing them together in a confidential setting. They can shuttle between the two (known as “shuttle diplomacy”) and share feedback to clarify perspectives. They provide training to enhance conflict resolution skills. They also develop and conduct team-building activities.

Mediators are trained to help parties in dispute come to the table and engage in an effective dialogue to resolve their differences by following a structured process. Parties in mediation sign an agreement to mediate and can settle their differences verbally, which is then documented through a written agreement. Said agreement is binding on the parties once signed. Mediators are particularly effective in mediating court cases, which often involve administrative decisions, and cases of an interpersonal nature, where they assist the parties in finding and building on common ground, thereby helping to restore trust and improve relationships.

A mediator is not an ombudsman by default and vice versa. At the World Bank and IMF for example, the services are not integrated and there are separate offices providing mediation and ombudsman services, respectively. It has become quite common for practitioners in the alternate dispute resolution field to be trained in both areas. At UNOMS, ombudsman and mediators are professionally trained in both fields and can provide both services, as required.

Why is the Ombudsperson called "Ombudsman"? The official is a woman, and it's 2020...

The word Ombudsman is of Swedish origin “umboosmaor”, meaning representative of the people. In our practice, we see ourselves as “ears to the people.” In Amharic, the word for Ombudsman is "emba tebak'i", meaning, “keeper of the people's tears.” Ombudsman, Ombuds or Ombudsperson are used interchangeably in the profession. The history of the word suggests that it is not gender-specific and it is the common brand name used in the profession throughout the world. At the United Nations, another mandate established by the Security Council under the Sanctions Committee uses the term “Ombudsperson.” Said mandate has a completely different context and purpose. Therefore, it was also deemed necessary to maintain the existing brand name “ombudsman” to clearly distinguish between the two mandates.

Governing principles

Please explain in more detail your neutrality principle when a staff member presents in your office with an obvious case of misconduct and not an inter-personal conflict.

The work of an ombudsman or mediator is governed by the principles of independence, informality, confidentiality and neutrality. Neutrality means that the Ombudsman does not represent management, nor does he/she advocate for the visitor who needs help. The Ombudsman will not take sides and will not judge the merits of a case. Allegations of misconduct or unethical behavior as defined by policy need to be reported through the appropriate formal channels. If the visitor is unsure, the Ombudsman can discuss options with the visitor and refer them to the appropriate channels by providing the necessary information on policies and the necessary contacts.

Is conflict a bad thing?

Do you have conflicts within the Ombudsman's Office? :)?

We are certainly not immune to conflict as we are all human. Conflict presents us with challenges, but it also offers opportunities for growth and change. If the need arises, as practitioners, we have the skills needed to handle any misunderstandings effectively. We also have a large pool of practitioners to choose from within our ranks for any help needed. The work of an ombudsman can be quite draining and isolating. We, therefore, rely on the help of external ombudsman for any support or assistance needed.

Conflict in and of itself is not necessarily a bad thing it often leads to the most innovative and creative solutions. the determining factor is how we handle the conflict.

What can I expect when working with an Ombudsman?

Can managers initiate the request to ombudsman for possible mediation involving two (or multiple) staff members working under them, or does it have to be initiated by the individuals themselves?

Yes, a manager can approach the Office of the Ombudsman regarding concerns within a team involving two or more colleagues. However, an ombudsman can only intervene if the manager gives him/her permission to do so, given the confidential nature of our work. If the situation involves two individuals within a team who are not getting along, with permission from the manager, the Ombudsman can reach out to each party individually for private meetings to get a better understanding of the concerns. If both colleagues are willing and interested in resolving matters informally, the Ombudsman can facilitate a dialogue by bringing them together and/or by conducting a mediation. If the situation involves more than two colleagues and is affecting an entire team, the Ombudsman can explore conflict competence and team-building activities with the manager and team.

Do you have an authoritative or advisory mandate to take action if you see an injustice has taken place, meaning what actions could you take if you see some wrong-doing?

As ombudsman and mediators, we do not have decision-making authority, nor do we play an advisory role. This is inherently linked to our neutrality principle and critical to our operations. It sets us apart from any other mechanism available for the handling of grievances within the Organization. We cannot compel any party to do anything they may not want to do, and we do not give advice regarding what aggrieved parties or management should do in any given scenario. We are also bound by the confidentiality principle and we cannot intervene unless expressly permitted to do so by the party or parties who have sought our help and who may fear retaliation. The only exception to our confidentiality rule is when someone threatens to harm themselves or others. In cases where serious wrong-doing or misconduct have occurred, formal recourse is necessary, and we help to channel such complaints through the system.

In our peacemaking role, we work with managers and staff who seek our services to get them to see the full picture, analyze the problem from different perspectives, attain a good understanding of the rules and regulations, thereby empowering them to make the best decisions that serve their interests and those of the Organization. If, for example, we learn from a visitor that their manager regularly yells at them and disrespects them in front of others, we would certainly be interested to engage with the manager concerned to help both sides. We would try to help the staff member feel empowered and confident to tackle the issues at hand, on their own or with our help. We all tend to have blind spots in that we don't really see how our behavior or

inaction can impact others. Managers also have blind spots. In this case scenario, we would help the manager see their blind spots, change their mindset and coach them on how to overcome them. In an ideal scenario, we would bring the two parties together for an honest conversation and a new path agreed upon by both. Without breaching confidentiality, the UN Ombudsman can also point to upper management any problem areas that warrant closer attention.

By providing upward feedback to the Secretary-General, management as well as reporting to the General Assembly on trends and systemic issues identified through the cases we handle, we also help to test the pulse of the Organization and change policies that may be ineffective, flawed or perceived to be unjust.

If a staff member has filed a misconduct case (now pending 4 months) and it has been shuffled back and forth between the USG's office and OIOS, can your office become involved?

We can help to clarify process and ascertain the status of the matter without getting involved in the substance of the allegations or interfering with the process in any way. We are often approached by both, the individual who has lodged a complaint and the subject of allegations, for purposes of understanding process or clarifying status in case of delays. We can also help by making the parties feel heard and coaching them on how best to handle a specific situation. Throughout the years, we have highlighted investigative delays as a systemic issue and continue to work with relevant stakeholders to ensure that these processes are handled timely and that the parties concerned are duly informed of status and outcome.

Who can request or access the services of an Ombudsman?

Are your regional offices also assisting UN agencies?

UNOMS consists of three pillars serving staff and contract holders from the Secretariat, the funds and programs (UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNOPS, and UN-Women) and UNHCR. Each pillar provides dedicated ombudsman and mediation services to its respective constituency. In situations where a staff member from a UN agency approaches any of the regional ombudsman offices, contact is quickly established by the regional ombudsman with the ombudsman serving the organization in question for coordination purposes. Similarly, the Ombudsman for the funds and programs or UNHCR will liaise with the UN Ombudsman or relevant regional ombudsman for cases they may receive that arise in the Secretariat.

To contact the UN Ombudsman and regional offices, you can send an email to: unoms@un.org.

For more information regarding the Ombudsman for the Funds and Programmes, please visit fpombudsman.org.

To contact the Ombudsman for UNHCR, please send an email to: ombuds@unhcr.org.

Can UNICEF staff approach the UN Ombudsman, or do they need to use the Ombudsman for the funds and programs?

UNICEF staff are requested to approach the Ombudsman for the funds and programs directly for any assistance. However, in situations where there may be a conflict of interest or special circumstances warranting involvement by the UN Ombudsman, this can be considered in close coordination with the Ombudsman for the funds and programs.

Can UNVs benefit from Ombudsman Office services? What about national staff?

Yes, UNVs have access to ombudsman services through the Ombudsman for the funds and programs or the ombudsman for the host agency/entity. National staff and non-staff personnel also have access to ombudsman services. As a matter of practice, we do not turn people away. Incoming requests (via unoms@un.org) are quickly channeled through the appropriate ombudsman office for speedy assistance.

As UNVs, we do not have a real idea of rules and conditions concerning the application process for other UNV jobs while on active duty. Some say there needs to be a break of 3 months between contracts; others say it is not so. I am concerned about the fact that, in my Mission, exceptions were made and some UNVs were able to get interviewed by other agencies, but others weren't.

For optimal assistance, please contact your ombudsman to discuss matters in more detail. You may also consult the [UN Volunteer Handbook](#) for more information regarding the conditions of service for UN volunteers.

Do we have mediation professionals from UNOMS in United Nations agencies e.g. International Maritime Organization, or other agencies such as, UNICEF? Or is it only in the UN global Secretariat?

Mediation services are provided to Secretariat offices and UN agencies through their dedicated ombudsman offices. For the Secretariat, mediation services are provided by the Mediation Service, headquartered in NY, and by our regional ombudsman offices around the globe. The International Maritime Organization currently receives ombudsman and mediation services through UNOMS.

Shireen, I want you to be aware that the satellite offices need your attention. I find that whenever there is an initiative implemented in the organization, these are not extended to small offices very quickly or at all. We are the forgotten ones.

Please be assured that we spare no effort to reach those in need wherever they may be and to ensure that no one is left behind. Our decentralized structure with eight regional offices around the world was specifically designed and approved by the General Assembly to expand our global reach and to provide equal access to our services for all UN staff. The regional ombudsman and staff travel within their respective regions to provide in-person conflict resolution services to staff within their respective areas of coverage. This is particularly important for small satellite and regional offices as well as missions and entities in the deep field. Therefore, our standard training portfolio is available to staff around the world. New initiatives, such as the civility initiative, are also implemented simultaneously across our regional offices, in various official languages. Our services are always available virtually when exceptional circumstances, such as the financial crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic, hamper our movement and travel capacity.

What types of issues can I bring to the Ombudsman?

Can I bring any issues to the attention of the UN Ombudsman?

Yes, it is always a safe first step to raise any concerns related to, or arising in, the workplace with the UN Ombudsman. No issue is too big or too small for us to review. However, if the issues raised are not within our purview, for example, formal complaints, requests for investigation or reports of retaliation, we will refer you to the appropriate office for assistance.

I am in full support of the gender balance and, in the past, I have been first to implement it in my daily tasks. In the past years, however, I have seen selections/promotions that were not based on whom was the best candidate (left behind demoralized) but more in support of the gender quotas. Do you think this is fair? Could the Ombudsman intervene?

Through our work with individual staff members over time, we have identified and reported on trends that show that women did not participate equally at all levels of the Organization. Concerns about lack of career prospects, equal treatment and inclusion were recurring themes. Organizational priorities aimed at achieving gender parity have certainly helped point the compass in a new direction. It is often the case, however, that progress in one area might create concerns elsewhere and we have frequently worked with staff who believed they were disadvantaged by gender or geographic considerations in selection processes. At the systemic level, therefore, we have and will continue to monitor trends, in order to highlight areas that require closer attention by the Organization. Although we cannot reverse a selection process or interfere in it, we work with individual staff to help them address their specific concerns in this area. How we help really depends on what the staff member wants to achieve. An initial conversation with us helps to brainstorm, gain different perspectives and generate viable options on how best to handle the situation. Feedback could be sought from the hiring manager, if deemed helpful. We could also facilitate a dialogue between the staff member, if they are willing, and management. If irregularities are suspected in the process, formal recourse can be pursued, and we can refer you to the appropriate channels. In all cases, we work with the staff members impacted to help them identify the actions that would be in their best interests and to focus on what they can control to reach their optimal potential.

I work with a toxic colleague who likes bullying the more junior staff in the team. The Manager seems to be ignoring the situation. What can be done in this case?

We regularly work with teams to help achieve a more harmonious environment through team-building activities that are tailored to their needs, through training initiatives, mediation and individual conflict coaching. In this case scenario, the nature of our intervention will depend on what the visitor seeking help would want to achieve and what they would authorize us to do. Our services are voluntary and triggered by the individual(s) impacted or those interested in changing their work dynamic. There are a series of potential conversations to be had in this case scenario, with the alleged “office bully” to convey the impact of their actions in ways that will help them to understand the need for change; with the manager, to convey the impact of their managerial style and low morale within the team and discuss strategies for effective handling of the situation; with members of the team to understand their individual concerns; and group discussions with the entire team to help promote understanding and collegiality. We discuss all possible scenarios and entry points with our visitor and agree together on the best course of action.

UN Core Values are clear: Integrity, Professionalism and Respect for Diversity. They are evaluated in the ePAS, but how many managers really don't fully fill these requirements? While you have Managers/Supervisors that are really Leaders, what about those that are not?

Poor managerial skills, abrasive management and performance management issues have been at the forefront of systemics issues flagged by our Office over time. We often work with leaders, managers and staff at all levels on how best to handle situations arising within their teams. We also work with relevant stakeholders, particularly Human Resources, on various initiatives related to guidance and training for managers. In the area of performance management, we offer training modules on giving and receiving feedback at the beginning, middle point and end of cycle. This is especially geared towards coaching staff and managers on how to plan and conduct effective conversations during the performance cycle. Our civility campaign is also aimed at restarting the

conversation around our shared values, what civility means in our personal lives, what it means in the work environment and how we can help our UN community, individually and collectively, in the promotion of dignity through civility. It should be noted also that the UN Ombudsman holds a *tête-à-tête* with newly appointed senior officials as part of their induction and onboarding process.

Where does the Ombudsman fit in the UN's internal justice system?

How do we make a formal complaint about a supervisor or a subordinate?

If we are approached as a first step in this case scenario, we would be keen to provide you with a confidential space to discuss the situation privately to assess viable options that would serve your interests and the interests of the Organization. Depending on the nature of the concerns, various options can be explored, including the potential for informal resolution, and relevant information provided to you regarding applicable policies. Following such initial consultation with an ombudsman, if you feel that you have exhausted all available remedies, or if you believe that the concerns rise to the level of misconduct, harassment or abuse of authority and must be reported, you are guided by the [Secretary-General's bulletin on discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority \(ST/SGB/2019/8\)](#).

My question is in relation to timelines with the Justice system which has a cap of 90 days to file. From my understanding, your office tends to find an amicable solution to issues. Are we then required to file a case with your office and OSLA simultaneously?

The dispute resolution architecture at the UN allows for different mechanisms to be used simultaneously. There are different schools of thought on whether this is the best modality. In other organizations, for example, there is a mandatory first step requiring aggrieved staff to try and resolve matters informally first, before they lodge formal complaints. In our organization, there is no requirement at present to approach the Ombudsman prior to seeking legal advice from the Office of Staff Legal Assistance (OSLA) or prior to filing a request for management evaluation. In fact, it is quite common for a visitor to approach the Ombudsman for help, seek legal advice from OSLA and lodge or consider lodging a complaint simultaneously. However, it should be borne in mind that there are timelines in the formal system. In most cases, staff must first request a management evaluation (MEU) of the administrative decision they are contesting (within 60 days from receipt) before they file an application with the UN Dispute Tribunal (UNDT).

In contrast with the formal system, there are no timelines or restrictions on how and when to approach the Ombudsman. It can be done as soon as concerns arise or at any point in the formal process, i.e. at the MEU, UNDT or UNAT stage. Informal efforts are most effective when pursued early on. However, even in situations where matters have escalated to the level of the MEU or UNDT, informal efforts can be pursued by the Ombudsman and, if successful, lead to the withdrawal of formal complaints with the MEU and/or UNDT.

See the [A Staff Member's Guide to finding the right place](#) or the site of the [internal justice system](#).

Ombudsman is neutral and in case a work-related conflict persists, what is the next stage?

Our work with managers and staff who seek our assistance is essentially to help them identify what is not working for them and look to the future in order to conceptualize what might be viable solutions. Conversations that ombudsman have with their visitors are often compared to the process of peeling an onion, allowing visitors to talk out their frustration and find the problem within the problem within the problem. By digging a few layers deep, there is more depth in the conversation and the visitor is better able to assess what they really need or

want and why. Because they remain in control of the process and because we do not intervene or take any action without specific permission from the visitor, what the next stage looks like is up to the visitor and how they choose to proceed. Aside from the informal track, staff have a range of formal options available to them for redress. The ombudsman can review such options with interested visitors.

Can the Ombudsman help with questions of accountability?

During the live iSeek session, many staff members signaled accountability, or lack thereof, as a major issue of concern. It was felt strongly that underperformance of managers and supervisees was not addressed adequately overall and that this greatly impacted team spirit and morale and undermined core organizational values. Many were of the view that nothing was being done to address these problems by the Organization. The Ombudsman's office was also deemed to be "soft" and urged to do more to tackle staff complaints in this area.

As ombudsman and mediators, we work with all parties, managers and staff, but remain impartial in helping everyone to resolve conflict, restore harmony and move forward. We start from the basic premise that, as international civil servants, we must be held accountable for the public trust vested in us. Failure to uphold United Nations values and competencies expected by the UN are often root causes of cases brought to our attention. In our informal approach, we give a chance to all parties to be involved in finding solutions, by speaking objectively, by using shuttle diplomacy between the parties, by bringing everyone to the table so that a frank exchange of views and perspectives can take place in the non-threatening environment that our office provides. If a supervisee believes that the supervisor is engaging in bullying, tyrannical behavior, for example, we as ombudsman can convey the impact of the managerial style in ways that will hopefully help the supervisor to understand the need for change. The supervisor-supervisee relationship is one that causes a great deal of conflict in the global workplace, not only in the United Nations. As noted in the town hall chat, many staff members signaled this as a major issue. We have years of experience in dealing with this problem and we certainly encourage you to come individually to us to seek help.

On a more general level, one of the responsibilities of an ombudsman is to act as an agent of change by speaking truth to power and by providing an early-warning system for trends that may cause difficulties in the organization and can be avoided by a cultural change. This applies particularly to managerial responsibility in all its aspects. It is one area that our current UN Ombudsman sees as a priority. The Ombudsman can report only on what is brought to her attention and is ready to do so. You can help by coming to see an ombudsman. The more we discuss the problems; the more effective action can be taken. In handling cases, the Ombudsman also seeks to identify any systemic issues arising from the concerns brought to our office and will provide feedback on our systemic observations to the relevant officials, without breaching confidentiality. For example, we previously reported on perceived shortcomings of the formal investigations process, about fear of speaking up and fear of retaliation, all issues that affect the exercise of proper accountability

Contacting an ombudsman does not preclude you from seeking recourse through the formal channels. An ombudsman will analyze each option with you, including formal and informal ways to address a situation. You remain in control throughout the consultation process, including in the decision on what option to follow. Should you decide to utilize formal mechanisms, we can guide you on how best to approach this.

How can an Ombudsman help in a situation of abuse of authority?

Several concerns were raised during the live session about abuse behaviors that remained unchecked or underreported. It was noted that efforts focused essentially on sexual abuse and/or sexual harassment but that abuse of authority by UN managers, including in field missions, was often ignored and that this had led to a deterioration of mental health for the staff impacted. UN managers were perceived to be protected and relevant procedures were deemed ineffective for that very reason.

Early intervention is key. Quite often, the Ombudsman is contacted at late stages when relationships have already significantly deteriorated, and the problem has escalated to levels which are no longer conducive to informal resolution. Moreover, some employees who have experienced or witnessed abuse might be reluctant to come forward and address the issue through formal channels out of concerns of retaliation, and/or loss of control of the process/outcome.

In these circumstances, an informal process can provide an open, non-threatening, and non-contentious platform to address the alleged abuse. The alleged offender may not be aware of the impact of his/her actions and a facilitated conversation may help to stop or alter his/her behavior. Therefore, you, as staff members and non-staff personnel alike, are encouraged to consider informing the alleged offenders, through our office or in bilateral conversations, that their actions are causing harm, are unwelcome, and to request that such behavior cease immediately. This can be done with the support of an ombudsman as outlined in the Secretary-General's bulletin on addressing discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority of [ST/SGB/2019/8](#). It is important to note that the ombudsman is a neutral third party, and as such, will afford the same consideration to all parties involved.

The ombudsman's role may include one-on-one conflict coaching with you, as the affected individual to seek to enhance your individual capacities to voice concerns effectively. Shuttle diplomacy can be offered, allowing for communication with the alleged abuser through an intermediary without the necessity to share the same physical space. Where both parties are willing to engage, the ombudsman may also conduct a facilitated discussion or structured mediation which allows for direct communication between the parties where a third-party neutral assists them to listen effectively to each other's perspective, concerns, and interests and allowing them to jointly consider concrete next steps.

If informal interventions have not succeeded, you can be advised of formal avenues and can receive useful guidance in weighing the various options and avenues available in the Organization.

UNOMS is furthermore engaged in preventive efforts against harassment, abuse of authority and all forms of abuse. Through the workshops it offers, the Office assists managers and staff to increase awareness and to develop competencies to manage conflicts constructively. With 40% of all cases having an underlying behaviour related to lack of civility, the Office launched a [“Dignity through Civility” campaign](#), comprising of series of “C3: Civility, Communication and Community” workshops and civility cafés. The C3 workshops and civility cafés can be delivered to offices and teams that may require tailored interventions on lack of civility issues.

How can the Ombudsman help in case of retaliation or fear thereof?

Concerns were raised during the live session about fear of retaliation. It was noted that a lot of staff were hesitant to bring up their issues with the Ombudsman or to speak up because of potential backlash from the individual they were having issues with (supervisor or subordinate).

Our services are voluntary. The decision whether or not to approach the Ombudsman for help rests entirely with you, our visitors, irrespective of your role or function within the Organization. Similarly, the decision to approach third parties regarding your concerns is also yours to make. All interactions with our office are strictly confidential and off the record. We cannot intervene without the consent of the individual(s) who approached us for help and when we do, it is clear to all parties that we act as the only “designated neutrals” in the system, serving all, for the benefit of all.

In accordance with our [Terms of Reference \(ST/SGB/2016/7\)](#), para 1.4, “no staff member who brings a matter to the attention of the Office, provides information to the Office, uses its services or pursues an informal resolution of conflict shall be subject to any reprisal, whether threatened to be taken or actually taken, because he or she sought the assistance of an ombudsman. Any staff member who engages in such reprisal may be subject to disciplinary measures, in accordance with chapter X of the Staff Rules, if such misconduct is established.”

In the words of many whom we have helped, “it takes courage to approach the Ombudsman” initially. This is especially true for first time visitors, who may fear reprisals or breaching confidentiality within a team by “taking the issue outside.” In cases where a visitor may be concerned about retaliation, we discuss the matter from various angles to understand the concerns and we explore options to reduce the risk or perception of it. Inaction can also be risky if workplace issues are allowed to fester over time and no help is sought. It is generally understood that informal efforts by the Ombudsman should be supported, encouraged and accommodated by the Organization and all possible use should be made of our services for the benefit of all, staff and management.

All staff members, interns, UN Volunteers and individual contractors or consultants are protected from retaliation under the protection against retaliation policy managed by the [Ethics Office](#). If you are not sure which mechanism to use to report retaliation, misconduct or related matters, we can guide you and provide you with relevant information on how best to approach this and whom to contact.

COVID-19-related Questions

How can I contact the Ombudsman during the COVID-19 crisis and how can you help?

Can you please advise what kind of situation(s) are we to contact the Ombudsman? Are there any tips you can provide in our current working situation?

During this unprecedented health crisis and time of uncertainty and high stress, we continue to offer our services remotely in your preferred official language and remain a vital resource to UN employees worldwide. Many of you have approached us with specific concerns around telecommuting and the exigencies of work; the very challenging circumstances under which we are all operating; and the impact that this is having on us mentally and physically. Pre-existing, ineffective or toxic relationships at work were exacerbated by the pandemic. Family dynamics have also been impacted. As practitioners who understand the complexities of our organization, we have been very attentive and responsive to your needs. By discussing these challenges together in a private, neutral, empathetic and safe space, we help you gain a better understanding of your feelings and perspectives and we help to provide insights into the special measures taken by the Organization in response to the crisis. We liaise with managers, HR and any third parties as needed to help you obtain the advice you need and we facilitate dialogue to help you negotiate the outcomes you seek.

Working from home or an alternate space in times of crisis can be especially draining if we are not mindful of the need to take care of ourselves so that we can take care of others and attend to our work obligations. This relates to the quality of our sleep and eating habits as well as our mental and physical stamina. Make sure that you dedicate some time during your workday to rest and recuperate; stay connected to your loved ones and establish routines that work for you. For more tips published by our Office, please see the various [articles posted on iSeek](#). For the tips sent by the UN Ombudsman to all senior managers, please visit the "[Tips for working well during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)" page.

If you need help, please send an email to unoms@un.org or contact +1-917-367-5731. You may also reach out to your [Regional Ombudsman](#) directly.

Concerns related to telecommuting (family needs and circumstances, work demands, jobs that could not be performed remotely...)

We received many comments during the live session regarding concerns with telecommuting. It was noted that since staff were working from home, some supervisors were operating on the notion that staff were available 24/7. This created additional stress on top of health concerns. Some managers were said to be insensitive and indifferent to the needs of staff, their family circumstances, even in situations where performance on the part of the staff concerned was top notch during the crisis.

We have dealt with telecommuting concerns for years and we are available to help you manage challenges related to telework and high work demands. We can discuss coping strategies and work together to identify the best modalities for triggering the change that you seek. This will require a conversation with your manager (s)

to convey the impact, help change their perspective and get them to be more responsive to your needs. Whether you decide to have a bilateral talk or whether you request us to facilitate such a dialogue, we can help you develop a strategy that would prepare you for the conversation and allow you to achieve your goals and maintain your own well-being.

Can the Ombudsman help me with a situation of increased abuse?

Some staff reported that situations of harassment and abuse of authority by managers have been exacerbated during COVID-19 and continue to deteriorate. A lot of staff were said to be working around the clock to cover deliverables (weekends, UN holidays etc.) leading to abuse of power in many situations. Questions were raised about any special measures or policies to mitigate the potential of abuse of power or harassment during the crisis.

We remain concerned about reports of harassment or abusive behaviors that may have been exacerbated by the pandemic. We encourage those impacted to approach us directly to help them resolve specific situations. Special measures and administrative guidelines are being issued and/or updated regularly to address many of the concerns raised by staff, including on telecommuting issues. Managers have been asked to exercise maximum flexibility in this area. We can help both managers and staff identify what is not working for them and agree on the best modalities for change. *(Please also see response in general section above on how the Ombudsman can help with questions of abuse of authority.)*

Can the Ombudsman help me with HR issues?

Most of us who have served in the system have basic knowledge about the work of an ombudsman. What we are interested in is how the Ombudsman would assist those who are affected by the COVID-19 crisis on HR issues.

Concerns brought to the attention of the Ombudsman in relation to work almost always have an HR component in terms of how the rules, regulations and policies are being implemented. During COVID-19, the situation is no different, and we help you navigate the system and get the answers, advice or resolution you need. We cannot determine policy, make decisions on behalf of management or substitute for HR but we can be an effective and neutral conduit for your concerns and queries. By sharing our insights with management regarding systemic issues our visitors bring forward, we also help bring about remedial change to address situations as they emerge.

Impact of COVID-19 on mental health

Concerns were raised about family circumstances, taking care of, or worrying about the safety of elderly parents; families or unmarried partners who were separated due to the crisis. Separation from loved ones had caused a sense of isolation for many and greatly impacted their mental health and well-being. For those who had to care for their children, parents or others while trying to fulfill their demanding job obligations, the situation was deemed to be especially difficult and draining. Some who recognized that they were struggling with mental health issues due to the pandemic were concerned about how best to manage the situation with their managers to avoid any stigma or having such issues be used against them in the future.

We recognize that the current crisis has been very draining, both physically and mentally. Staff members feel isolated in different ways and for different reasons and are distressed due to the immediate health impacts of

the virus and related anxiety and uncertainties. This inevitably starts to impact the work dynamic and manifests itself on many levels. We have started to hear from some colleagues that they are tired, that isolation is taking a toll on them and that they are worried if they come forward, it will impact their jobs or how they are perceived. We listen with respect and empathy. From the insights we gain, we help to assess concerns and identify the desired outcomes. Medical information is privileged and confidential. If you are struggling with mental health issues, please consult a mental health professional or contact the UN Medical Services or Staff Counsellors. They are best equipped to advise you regarding your health-related concerns in accordance with administrative policies and requirements.

COVID-19 in the field

In field missions, stress levels were reported to be quite high due to COVID-19. Questions about transparency regarding alternate working arrangement, or lack thereof, were raised. Many were on leave before the lockdown and ended up being stuck in their home countries, some with jobs that could not be performed remotely, worried about job security and potential layoffs. Concerns about new hot spots emerging in the field and the lack of proper facilities for treatment or lack of options for potential treatment in the absence of flights, evacuation plans, and properly equipped health facilities. How can the Ombudsman help in such cases?

Conditions in peacekeeping and special political missions, which sometimes require living and working together in the same compound, create challenges of a specific nature. During COVID-19, our regional ombudsman have spared no effort to help you address your needs and concerns, wherever you are in these challenging times. We continue to serve you, relying on various communication tools that are available to you based on your location. The presence of ombudsman in the main regional hubs and in two peacekeeping areas has deepened our understanding of the regional context and local dynamics in field missions. It has greatly facilitated access to our services for staff based in the regions and strengthened our engagement with senior management, staff representatives and human resources in those areas, which is critical to our effectiveness in helping to resolve workplace concerns. We also help by monitoring and identifying emerging systemic trends and concerns in a specific context, and injecting new understanding that could lead to remedial change.

Can the Ombudsman assist with specific situations related to return to campuses?

One of the predominant concerns noted by staff during the live iSeek session related to fears around returning to their respective campuses. Many were of the view that telecommuting should continue and return to campus should be held off until a vaccine became available. It was suggested that formal guidance to supervisors on return to campus was needed, as many were fearful of the health and hygiene risks associated with a potential return, including the use of public transportation and sharing space in the era of hot-desking which was deemed “completely unsafe” in the current circumstances.

The process of staff's physical return to the office will be a phased one and will be carefully reviewed and decided upon by relevant committees established for this purpose. Such assessments by the Organization would certainly take into account local government rules and guidance. Any staff member who has a specific issue relating to a decision by management regarding their return or denied return to the office can consult with an ombudsman. We can help to liaise with relevant offices and identify together viable solutions to the problem.

COVID-19 and accountability

There were situations where senior staff member(s) disobeyed the rule to self-quarantine after visiting hot hit areas when the COVID-19 saga began. They put staff members at risk by doing so. How sure are we that the managers will follow the rules after we all return to the office? Can we hold them accountable in case someone falls sick?

This case scenario requires consultation with HR and a review of applicable special measures and policies. *(Please also see response in general section above on how the Ombudsman can help with questions relating to accountability.)*

Is the Dignity through Civility campaign going virtual?

We received numerous questions about the civility initiative and whether our civility cafes and workshops would be offered virtually during COVID-19. Many expressed the view that such offerings should be made compulsory for all staff, noting that there was “so much bias, prejudice, stereotyping as well as systemic discrimination in the workplace – all ongoing issues that were simply a reflection of a toxic organizational culture.”

Core elements of the “Dignity through Civility” campaign will soon be offered virtually. If you would like to request a virtual civility café or civility workshop for your team or if you have specific questions regarding the “C3: Civility, Communication and Community” workshops and civility cafés, please contact unoms@un.org. More information can also be found in the iSeek article entitled “[Civility is everyone’s business.](#)”



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