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FOLLOW-UP TO DECISIONS AND RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD AND THE GENERAL CONFERENCE AT THEIR PREVIOUS SESSIONS

PART IV

HUMAN RESOURCES ISSUES

COMMENTS OF THE INTERNATIONAL STAFF ASSOCIATION OF UNESCO (ISAU)

SUMMARY

A. Use of contracts for non-staff personnel*, including those for consultants, over the period 2021–2022

Pursuant to item 9.2.7 of the UNESCO Human Resources Manual, the International Staff Association of UNESCO (ISAU) submits its comments on human resources issues (document 217 EX/4.IV.A Add.2).

**Hereafter, the term “non-staff personnel” is to be replaced by the term “affiliate personnel”.*



Job: 202303270

Introduction

1. The document presented clearly demonstrates that the Administration is fully aware of the essential role played by affiliate personnel, as well as of the uncertainty and lack of job security which they face. This uncertainty and lack of job security are the result of the frequent misuse of affiliate-personnel contracts by the sectors and offices, and of the relative passivity of central services, particularly the Bureau of Human Resources Management (HRM). ISAU believes that a solution to this situation must be found urgently, and that it is not appropriate to wait for the conclusions and recommendations “expected” of the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations system (JIU). Best practices in this area need to be implemented as soon as possible, even if this means adjusting them in accordance with the JIU’s recommendations.

2. In its document, the Administration states that “[a]s a source of time-limited and/or specialized support, affiliate personnel are a key component of UNESCO’s programme delivery”. This statement is ambiguous, however, as it confuses the nature of contracts with the use to which they are put. While it is undeniable that an organization needs a variety of contracts, some of which are designed to provide a degree of flexibility, it cannot misuse these contracts. Affiliate personnel are therefore a key component in UNESCO programme delivery, but this is not due to the limited duration of their contracts or the specialization of the contract holders. These contract holders work alongside holders of fixed-term contracts, often on similar tasks, essential to the fulfilment of the Organization’s mandate.

Workforce distribution and gender balance

3. Inertia seems to be the Administration’s hallmark in these matters, as is evident in the fact that the percentage of affiliate personnel has remained at 49%, the same level as in 2020.

4. HRM argues that, at UNESCO, the “trend remains similar to [that at] other United Nations system organizations”. However, nothing supports this percentage, which is actually four points higher than the United Nations average, according to 2014 data. That no progress has been made over the years, according to the graph provided by the Administration in paragraph 5 of its document, implicitly reveals the real problem here: indifference to working conditions and staff welfare. The very slight increases and decreases from one year to the next seem to be due solely to chance and external factors, and not to any action or policy to which the Administration has resolutely committed itself.

5. What is more, we note with concern that 73% of affiliate personnel serve in the field. In our experience, the high percentage of field contracts is in itself a symptom of the tendency to neglect the conditions of service of field staff and a sign of the fact that they feel overlooked. The accounts given by personnel to ISAU during its missions to field offices, as well as by colleagues who contact us, confirm that there is a climate of frustration and discontent linked to the job insecurity to which these people are exposed. That the meetings and sessions of UNESCO’s governing bodies take place at Headquarters should not obscure the fact that UNESCO’s presence is far from being limited to Paris.

6. In hopes of seeing this situation improve, we fully endorse the optimization of HRM’s structure and the streamlining of its functions with a view to supporting an increasingly decentralized workforce, recommendations made by the Division of Internal Oversight Services (IOS) in its evaluation report on the previous UNESCO Human Resources Management Strategy. In addition, we ask that these recommendations be **fully agreed to and implemented**. Increasing transparency in these matters is an essential objective, and it necessarily involves greater HRM involvement in the recruitment of affiliate personnel and in all decisions concerning said personnel.

7. With regard to gender equality, ISAU wishes to draw attention to the existing imbalance which often harms women. In fact, we note that the percentage of women holding service contracts was 51% in 2021 and 55% in 2022, while for the field offices in particular, the percentage was 57% in

2021 and 55% in 2022. It might be worth asking to what extent unconscious bias contributes to this imbalance.

Service contracts

8. We note that the language used by the Administration changes from one version of its document to the next. Whereas in its previous document it stated that service contracts “are used for” covering temporary activities or workloads, it now maintains that these contracts “are designed to” address temporary activities or workloads, which would support the fact that, in reality, they are not used in accordance with their regulatory purpose. In this connection, we deplore the approach according to which these contracts should “primarily” be used under conditions which are in fact those provided for in the Human Resources Manual (see paragraph 6 of the document under discussion). This word, used in an official document, creates an undesirable margin for manoeuvre and, what is more, makes for an endorsement of the misuse of these contracts.

9. While the criteria established in the Human Resources Manual with regard to the purpose of these contracts are very clear, some of the rules applicable to them no longer meet the demands of logic and fairness. Thus, the fact that service contracts must not exceed a total duration of 24 out of 36 months where they concern Headquarters, while no such condition exists for the field offices, inevitably creates greater inequality and job insecurity for field staff holding such contracts. We fail to see how the fact of pertaining to the field offices should ipso facto lead to such a difference in treatment in this area. It would therefore be advisable, and even necessary, to harmonize the conditions of service under these contracts, regardless of their holders’ duty stations.

10. The 4% increase in the number of service contracts in 2022 is cause for concern. In that connection, the reduction in costs, due to the reduction of spending at Headquarters, where the duration of contracts, which was very limited, shows the extent to which the issuing of this type of contract depends on the Organization’s financial position, and not on the nature of the responsibilities entrusted to the personnel in question. We can certainly understand the financial difficulties which the Administration can sometimes face. However, they should in no way be used as an excuse to accept the hiring of people on precarious contracts in order to meet needs unanimously recognized as permanent and essential to the fulfilment of UNESCO’s mandate. For the Administration, the fact that “[m]ost spending on service contracts [...] directly supports UNESCO’s programmes” seems to serve as justification. Here again, the language used by the Administration is aimed at creating confusion between the fact that service contracts meet flexibility needs and the fact that, in practice, they are used in a way which leads to certain personnel being treated as adjustment variables.

11. The same applies to consultant contracts, the number of which, in 2022, had decreased from the previous year. If this can be explained “by the budgetary pressures of inflation” and “by increased spending on service contracts”, it means, conversely, that their number will increase in proportion to the Organization’s financial situation. In our opinion, however, this is a question of policy, of a choice which must be made at the highest levels of management: will a better financial position mean the regularization of personnel in precarious situations or an increase in the number of affiliate-personnel contracts? With the return of the United States of America, the Administration’s choices will perhaps reveal its true aims.

12. The data relating to the uninterrupted service duration of service contract holders (table 6 in the document under discussion) are particularly revealing of the objectives actually pursued through the use of these contracts by the sectors and offices. The presentation of these data calls for two comments. First, we regret that the criteria used for creating statistics, namely the number of years of service, are not the same as those used in document 217 EX/4.IV.C on the UNESCO Human Resources Management Strategy (see paragraph 10 of Annex III to said document). This reduces the utility of these data by making them more difficult to use and compare. Second, we have serious doubts about the veracity of the data provided. For example, the document in question states that as at 31 December 2022, **59 service contract holders** had **10 or more years** of uninterrupted service, whereas document 217 EX/4.IV.C states that **91 persons** had **more than 10 consecutive**

years of service at UNESCO as at January 2023. This difference needs to be explained by the Administration.

13. In any case, it is unacceptable to maintain that the duties performed by people with so many years of service at UNESCO are of a temporary nature. On the contrary, it should be recognized that they are essential and should earn the personnel concerned a fixed-term appointment. Their regularization must be a priority of the UNESCO HR Strategy which is being implemented over the next four years. In the light of such an objective, it would be advisable to consider these individuals, as well as those hired under Project Appointments (PAs), “internal” candidates for recruitment purposes.

14. The real solution lies in recruiting these personnel, which must be a priority for HRM, which bears full responsibility in this situation. Indeed, it is surprising, for example, that HRM, which is aware of the contractual circumstances of these individuals for each sector and office, should accept for these units the creation of new posts, supposedly intended for regular duties, while they are also employing people on a long-term basis and therefore for regular duties of the Organization. As indicated in the comments submitted by ISAU on document 217 EX/4.IV.C, the implementation of an end-of-service grant or separation payment is only a superficial solution to what is actually a very deep-seated problem. The succession and renewal of precarious contracts and the resulting job instability have a significant impact on our colleagues’ personal and family lives, as well as on their mental and physical health. In the same vein, the introduction of a global medical insurance plan is certainly welcome, but it will inevitably prove insufficient. Above all, it should not be seen as an acceptance, not to say encouragement, of existing practices as regards renewals of this type of contract. In all cases, it should be emphasized that these practices are indicative of management styles which are seriously flawed on account of their lack of concern for effectiveness, compliance with the rules and, last but not least, ethics.

15. Similarly, the revised service-contract policy is also insufficient. We of course welcome the improvements it has introduced, which, incidentally, we supported. However, we remain deeply concerned. On the one hand, the Administration took too long to develop and implement this policy. Requested by the Executive Board at its 202nd session, which took place in 2017, it did not enter into force until 2023, during which time our colleagues were subject to highly unfavourable conditions of service. We can only be struck by the lack of agility on the part of the Organization, where improvements are often too slow to be accepted and implemented. On the other hand, we feel that this revision does not really respond to the Member States’ request that the Director-General “develop a short- and mid-term policy to address the recurrent practice of employing non-staff both at Headquarters and in the field” ([202 EX/Decision 5.IV.A](#)). Unfortunately, we fail to see how the revised policy will solve the problem of long-term precarious contracts.

Consultant contracts

16. There is good reason to believe that better planning is needed when it comes to hiring consultants. Indeed, while the number of former staff members issued such contracts has fallen (see table 14 in the document under discussion), the number of people in this category – 18 – remains high, in our view. It is therefore necessary to step up efforts in this area. The establishment of a more modern, agile, competent and competitive UNESCO requires making room for young talent.

17. In terms of planning, we would also like to draw attention to the increase in the number of consultants who are nationals of countries in regional group I countries, the percentage of which went from 26% in 2020 to 32% in 2022. This observation prompts us to reiterate our request, already made before the Executive Board, that the Administration provide a summary containing an overview of UNESCO’s workforce, including Professional category posts, project appointments and affiliate personnel, from the perspectives of geographical distribution and gender equality, as well as of distribution at Headquarters and in the field. Moreover, a more detailed presentation, including information on the duration of the consultant contracts issued and the extent to which these contracts

are issued to the same people or not, would contribute even more to transparency and enable an accurate appreciation of the situation surrounding human resources at the Organization.

18. Finally, with regard to the remuneration of consultants, we find it hard to understand the Administration's reasoning. Indeed, the stated aim is to attract the best experts and specialists in an increasingly competitive working environment. However, in the face of this objective, remuneration rates have remained the same, or have even been reduced, since 2013. We therefore wish to ask: how does UNESCO intend to remain an attractive employer in a highly competitive global environment?

Conclusion

19. To conclude, we wish to express our surprise and disappointment over the draft decision presented to the Member States. With regard to the hiring of consultants, first of all, the Director-General is encouraged to "continue" her efforts to ensure better geographical distribution and gender balance. We agree with this invitation, but it seems clear to us that it must be accompanied by concrete follow-up and evaluation measures because otherwise it will once again be nothing more than wishful thinking.

20. With regard to the encouragement to "improve the conditions of service of affiliate personnel as appropriate", we fail to understand why the Administration has used the qualifier "as appropriate". The document presented to the Member States clearly indicates that many of our colleagues suffer as a result of conditions of service unworthy of an intergovernmental organization such as UNESCO. Such conditionality is akin to a delaying tactic, which is not appropriate. We ask that concrete, measurable progress be made.

21. Finally, we would like to see a more substantial decision. This means one which requests the Administration to regularize a certain number of holders of precarious contracts (for example, those with more than 10 years of service at UNESCO), or which, at least, requests the Administration to endeavour to reduce the use of these contracts, recalling, for example, the decision adopted by the Executive Board at its 202nd session.