

*74th session of the FICSA Council*

*Statement by Ms. Kelly Clements - HLCM Vice-Chair*

*9 February 2021*

- Dear colleagues and partners, greetings to you all.
- And thank you sincerely for inviting us to join this council meeting. We really appreciate the chance to discuss with you today and to speak, through the federation, with nearly 40,000 colleagues around the world. It's a rare opportunity, and apologies on behalf of the HLCM Chair for not being able to join herself today.
- After the last year perhaps more than ever, we appreciate the tireless efforts of our UN teams throughout this exceptional moment in history. As I mentioned yesterday to Member States, in a briefing on the work of the CEB Task Force on Sexual Harassment, we are living and working through an unprecedented public health challenge. The long-term impact on human development are only starting to emerge, putting at risk decades of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.
- The needs are massive and our teams have worked courageously and tirelessly to meet them, under uniquely difficult circumstances. It is therefore incumbent upon us - as members of agencies and entities, as the High-Level Committee on Management, and as representatives of our workforce - to continue to work to improve the system in which they work.
- The pandemic has also changed how we work. Last March, in only a matter of days, the vast majority of us rapidly shifted to full-time teleworking. Since then, we have built a global medical evacuation and first line of defence medical support system, developed and adapted layers of business continuity and back to office plans, and all while having to harvest emerging lessons about work-life balance in this new environment.

- We are all, I think, a little shaken up, a bit tired, and looking forward to a post-pandemic world. But, with disruption comes opportunity, and it is incumbent upon us to seize it. The pandemic represents a chance to rethink how we do things and build back better. It also allows us to see clearly where our strengths lie, and certainly our people carry enormous strength, so they are first and foremost in our view.
- In the spirit of carrying on with the important matters at hand, this 74th FICSA Council is also the first to take place virtually. Congratulations for doing so. Certainly from our experience with High Level Committee on Management, it takes some adjustment to work virtually. But our collective work has never been more urgent, and we would not want to miss the opportunity for this open and constructive dialogue and cooperation with Staff Federations. It is timely, important and appreciated.
- Colleagues, we are all well aware that, given the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, Member States will continue to be under immense pressure to drive their domestic recoveries. At the same time, they expect us to continue to deliver on our mandates, meet ever growing needs, and continue to provide them strong support.
- This will mean that our efficiency and effectiveness as UN organizations will be under even more intense scrutiny in the years to come.
- I believe we have proven that we can and will find innovative solutions, drawing upon best practices and lessons identified, to enable us to continue to deliver around the world. Indeed, I would submit our collective response to the pandemic, especially on the business continuity side, is a paramount example of just that.
- The credit for this goes, above else, to the personnel of the UN system, for your commitment and dedication to our common cause. Thank you.
- Meanwhile, HLCM's role is to enable greater effectiveness and efficiency. I would especially like to single out colleagues in the HR network who have worked very hard to coordinate and align policy frameworks to enable business continuity; they have gone above and beyond the call of duty given exceptional challenges.

- We also understand that vaccines are a major preoccupation for everyone right now, and colleagues are looking to leadership for information, guidance and solutions. Here again, FICSA and the HR Network, along with the UN Medical Directors, are playing a key role in support of the UN system.
- But those jabs alone will not undo the impact of the pandemic, certainly not on the people we serve, nor on our colleagues, amongst whom we are seeing more worrying signs of mental health challenges, stress and burnout. The HR network and UN Medical Directors are increasingly focused on the need for long-term psychosocial and wellbeing support, and welcome FICSA's perspective on this as well.
- So we ask for your ideas and continued contribution to this ongoing dialogue. But we also ask for your patience and support in 2021, a year which will likely be another very challenging one for the United Nations.
- Colleagues, looking beyond the current "acute" phase of the pandemic, as you know HLCM has initiated a strategic thinking process on the "Future of Work for the UN Workforce." The Task Force is an inter-agency and cross-functional effort to look at the future challenges and opportunities for the UN, including but not limited to changing workforce dynamics.
- We have approached this process by reviewing the experience of HLCM member organizations, and drawing on best practices from thought leaders outside the system. FICSA was part of the very first discussion on this topic at the UN Staff College in October 2019, after which we established the Task Force.
- Not long after that discussion, the pandemic hit, and everything became filtered through that lens, for better or worse. For better because the disruption brought us opportunities and insights, especially on teleworking, flexibility and location-independent functions. But also for worse, in a sense, because we have had to adapt our approach in the context of a greater number of unknowns, and that has had a trickle-down effect on everything else, including how we engage together.

- A year on, we have tried to strike a balance between absorbing lessons and adapting to a rapidly changing world, while also not being reactive or impulsive. What has not changed is our objective - to be as efficient and effective as possible, and to attract and retain the best talent for the UN system to deliver for the people we serve.
- Within that broad context, I also understand you have some questions, including those submitted in advance of today's session, on the role of the Staff Federations in this process going forward.
- First, to be clear, there has always been a plan to consult, we are just taking this in phases. The Task Force has a broad mandate, and three distinct but interconnected workstreams: contractual arrangements; new ways of working and workplace culture; and digital technology. Some work streams have been able to advance more quickly than others, which is why work stream 2 is more prepared for such engagement at this point in time.
- But to be very clear, we welcome the Staff Federations' full engagement, across all work streams. There is a tendency amongst some - including within the Task Force itself - to focus heavily on the contractual arrangements piece, but it is only one piece of a much bigger puzzle. We are looking forward to your reflections on the efforts of other work streams as well, such as providing for better social and family care policies, promoting work-life balance, and implementing technological tools that would better support of work.
- Still, we need to be realistic and, in order for the UN to remain relevant, we have to adapt to the changing world, just like every other industry and organisation out there. Our contractual framework is ten years old, it may need some re-thinking, but that does not mean - as some have suggested - we are moving to an Uberization of our workforce.
- On that specific concern, two things I would note that are hopefully reassuring. First, I think there is a lingering misconception about the goal of the Task Force and I would invite all of you to read the last interim report presented to HLCM last October. There is no proposal in there for any particular contract modality.

- At this stage, we are only doing our due diligence to look at what we have, what we do not have but could benefit the system, and contrast that against the programmatic needs (now and in the future) for the UN and its workforce. While it would be irresponsible not to consider financial sustainability in any such exercise - we cannot make policy without taking that into account – resources are not the driving factor.
- What we can say is that several considerations have emerged on the issue of contract modalities and a key one is the following -- the social protections of staff will be an important aspect of any new contractual framework. However, we are a long way from concluding this due diligence phase, and the Task Force will continue to engage with the Staff Federations and a range of key stakeholders, including the UN Joint Staff Pension Fund.
- Moreover, we take the point that we should also look at opportunities within the existing contractual framework, and to that end, the International Civil Service Commission has just established a working group on this.
- In short, the Task Force is doing its due diligence on available options, and certainly by no means rushing into anything. This is a long-term discussion.
- Second issue, we must recognize that our workforce is not homogenous, and the concerns and priorities of the future generation of the workforce may be different. For the very first time ever, we have to lead three generations within our workplaces, and the reality is it will be challenging to reconcile those various perspectives. Again, that is why we are not rushing things.
- But we hear requests from younger colleagues for flexibility and agility, especially given emerging lessons in the pandemic, and we need to ensure the UN remains an attractive employer in a changing professional landscape. Rest assured, any potential future model would only apply prospectively and would not impact any contractual arrangements of currently serving staff.

- The Task Force's first deliverable to date is the Model Policy for Flexible Working, which is expected to guide efforts to bridge the needs of organizations and personnel alike, and promote its expanded use throughout the system. HLCM, of course, cannot mandate any of its members to implement a model policy. We can make policy, inspire innovation, and promote improvement, but HLCM is not an enforcement body.
- For that reason, we take great care in developing these frameworks and model policies in a manner which gives them the greatest probability of buy-in and implementation. Inclusive multi-stakeholder consultation is central to this approach.
- A final note on the Future of Work: the Senior Leadership Commitments aim to operationalize the behaviours needed to facilitate a modern workplace, building upon the UN Leadership model which states that a healthy, constructive and appreciative work relationship between supervisor and supervisee is at the heart of a harmonious workplace. Doubly true in our virtual set-up, as managers have to be even more intentional in building that team spirit.
- Colleagues, you have rightly highlighted in your questions the need to appropriately connect the Future of Work discussion with other projects under the purview of HLCM that aim to promote a harassment-free environment, and safeguard occupational health and safety principles, including mental health.
- While we could talk at length about these issues, especially on occupational safety and health, recalling our previous Task Force on Duty of Care and focus on high-risk duty stations, I would like to focus for a moment on another key priority area for all of us, sexual harassment.
- The CEB Task Force on Sexual Harassment was initiated in 2017 by the Secretary-General to instill a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment, strengthen victim-centred prevention and response; and foster a safe, equal and inclusive working environment across the UN system. Since then, we have made substantial progress.

- We have some tools now in the system: a model policy, the ClearCheck database, a guide for managers to prevent and respond to sexual harassment, a code of conduct for UN events, and soon a new Manual for investigations. These are good first steps.
- We now have data that was simply not available before, and which unequivocally tells us that sexual harassment remains clearly a gender issue and one related to power differentials, and that in cases of sexual harassment, survivors at present strongly favour formal reporting over informal dispute resolution.
- And, we know we need to strike the right combination of accountability and trust. On one hand, the majority of cases where an investigation substantiated the allegations led to a disciplinary measure. On the other hand, we have acquired valuable lessons about the need for a coherent and consistent victim-centred approach.
- COVID-19 has changed how we work and interact with each other, and issues of racism, inclusion and diversity and the complexity of our challenge has only grown in the last year. Our task is by no means complete and change takes time.
- So here is what we have decided that we need to do between now and the end of the year:
- Number one: we need to steer the UN towards always putting victims and survivors at the centre of our approach. Easier said than done. For reasons of fear, mistrust, and confidentiality, it can sometimes be hard to get the full perspective from them, although we are developing a survey, voluntary and anonymous, to capture those experiences. This information, coupled with UN-wide definitions and principles for a victim-centred approach, will help to ensure that the support we provide is appropriate for survivors.
- Number two, we need to get training and communication materials out to our teams and colleagues around the world. We need to reach everybody, because we understand that it is colleagues in the field and in high-risk duty stations, who are often the hardest to reach and most powerless to speak up. We need outputs which

are useful, accessible and build trust in the system. We have a lot of materials already – now we must insist on their accessibility and use.

- **Number three, we need to start rolling out and monitoring the use of the common tools we already have. This may seem mundane, but it helps us promote accountability within the system and leverage emerging evidence to course correct where necessary, including to ensure everything we do is survivor-centred.**
- **Number four, we need to work closely with others on sexual harassment and many interconnected issues, especially sexual exploitation and abuse of authority with gender inequality and power imbalances at its core. We are learning and applying best practices from each other and from others, including from member states and NGO partners. We welcome any tips you may have on this, by the way.**
- **Which brings me to my fifth and final point, which is leadership and culture change. All the tools, trainings and briefings in the world will have little effect if we do not address head-on underlying issues of values, attitudes and culture. This is where we could use your help. Addressing the root causes of sexual misconduct and creating workplaces of respect, inclusion and accountability, are an important area of focus for HLCM and its membership in the coming year.**
- **Given organizational culture is an important intersectional issue, we are consulting and cooperating closely with the Task Force on the Future of the UN Workforce to address those root causes issues of values, attitudes, behaviour and culture. We also plan to connect the dots with the Occupational Safety and Health Forum, led by the WHO, especially on some of the more technical areas of support to our colleagues.**
- **With that, I hope you have a better sense of where HLCM is going in 2021 and the areas in which we count on your continued collaboration. Thank you again for the opportunity to be here with you, to participate in this important dialogue, and happy to take any quick follow-up questions. We look forward to working with you on these important challenges and opportunities. The stakes are too high for us not to succeed together.**