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FINANCE COMMITTEE

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OIG Audit of the Staff Mobility Programme

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Inspector General is pleased to provide the Finance Committee with a summary report on the audit of the Staff Mobility Programme requested by the Council in December 2018 (CL-160/REP). This report is submitted in accordance with paragraph 18 of the Charter for the Office of the Inspector General. It presents a summary of the audit findings and conclusions and on the recommendations made.

DIRECTOR-GENERAL COMMENTS

- The Director-General welcomes the review conducted by OIG and concurs with its findings and conclusions. The recommendations made and criteria highlighted by OIG will be further analysed and will assist FAO in preparing a new staff mobility policy that is conducive to developing an adaptable, global, multi-skilled and versatile workforce and to fostering career development.

GUIDANCE SOUGHT FROM THE FINANCE COMMITTEE

- The Finance Committee is invited to take note of the summary report of the Inspector General on the audit of the Staff Mobility Programme.

Draft Advice

- **The Finance Committee noted the summary report of the Inspector General on the audit of the Staff Mobility Programme and encouraged Management to reflect its findings and conclusions in preparing a new staff mobility policy.**

Audit of the Staff Mobility Programme

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This document was prepared in accordance with paragraph 18 of the Charter for the Office of the Inspector General (OIG), whereby, at the discretion of the Inspector General, any audit report or any other issue may be submitted to the Finance Committee together with the Director-General's comments thereon.
2. As requested by the Council in December 2018 (CL-160/REP), OIG conducted an audit of the staff mobility programme. The audit was conducted from September to December 2019, and focused on mobility decisions in 2018 and 2019.
3. At its 178th session in November 2019, the Finance Committee requested to receive an update on the outcome and recommendations arising from the review by OIG of the staff mobility programme.
4. This report presents a summary of the audit findings and conclusions and of the recommendations made.

II. BACKGROUND

5. Staff Regulation 301.1.2 states that: "Staff members are subject to the authority of the Director-General, who may assign them to any of the activities or offices of the Organization." In 2014, FAO introduced the geographic mobility programme as a mandatory process for international professional staff members (P-1 to D-1 level) on a fixed-term or continuing appointment.¹ Prior to that date, geographic mobility cases were voluntary, lower in number, ad hoc in nature and had no governing policy.²
6. The current staff mobility programme is governed by the Guidelines for the FAO Geographic Mobility Programme (hereinafter referred to as "the Guidelines") issued in February 2015 and revised in October 2017 following consultations with staff representative bodies. As stated in the Guidelines, the geographic mobility programme aims to:
 - a) Ensure that the Organization has an adaptable, global, multiskilled and versatile workforce experienced in the work of different offices, both at headquarters and in the field, as well as in different functions of the Organization, to facilitate stronger relationships across the Organization and effective knowledge transfer.
 - b) Foster career development by providing staff with different opportunities and work challenges contributing to their professional development.
 - c) Support and enhance staff well-being by reducing the amount of time staff are required to serve in hardship locations.
 - d) Strengthen the partnership and interaction between the Organization's offices worldwide, and the various occupational families as well as with United Nations system organizations.

¹ Finance Committee FC 175/10 of March 2019 - Human Resources Management.

² Finance Committee FC 173/08 of November 2018 - Human Resources Management.

III. OVERALL ASSESSMENT

7. While OIG considers the objectives of the staff mobility programme as stated in the Guidelines to remain valid and relevant, OIG assessed that the policies and strategies are insufficient and the procedures in place are unsatisfactory to achieve those objectives. The key issues identified by the audit are summarized below.

IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

A. OBJECTIVES AND POLICIES GOVERNING THE STAFF MOBILITY PROGRAMME:

- To support the development of an adaptable, global, multiskilled and versatile workforce experienced in the work of different offices and functions, functional and geographic mobility is a must in an international organization such as FAO. However, the implementation arrangements were not conducive to achieving the programme's objectives.
- The Guidelines limit the definition of mobility to geographic reassignments, except for reassignments to Strategic Programme Management Teams (SPMTs).
- The Guidelines do not clearly define the workforce subject to mobility, and there is conflicting information on the categories of staff subject to mobility and the minimum length of assignments. The rationale for the annual mobility target of 7–10 percent of encumbered staffing positions funded by the regular programme budget (PWB positions) is unclear.
- Although career development is one of the programme's key objectives, there is no linkage between mobility and career development.
- The Guidelines define the maximum length of assignments by hardship classification of duty stations but there are no procedures for its enforcement. It excludes reassignment of FAO Representatives a number of whom are likely to be at hardship locations.
- Unlike other United Nations system organizations, FAO does not define job families or distinguish between rotational positions and non-rotational positions, which for functional reasons should not be subject to mobility. The Guidelines do not provide for redress mechanisms and appeal processes for staff selected for mobility.

B. STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR THE STAFF MOBILITY PROGRAMME:

- In its current form, the mobility programme is not sustainable because the pool of staff subject to mobility annually is shrinking. FAO also has not assessed the medium- to long-term financial implications of the staff mobility programme.
- In practice, the programme mostly applies to (P1 to D1 level) PWB positions, which represents only eight percent of the total FAO workforce, and is further reduced to approximately less than four percent by additional factors applied in practice.
- As more than 60 percent of all PWB positions are located at headquarters, the implementation of geographical reassignments, which included the out-posting of positions from headquarters to decentralized locations, has de-facto reduced the number of positions based at headquarters and, in some instances, without commensurate benefits to Decentralized Offices. In a number of cases, positions were out-posted in order to meet mobility targets without changing their terms of reference and staff reporting lines.

C. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STAFF MOBILITY PROGRAMME:

- Implementation of the programme was not consistently driven by FAO's needs, but rather by the pressure to meet mobility targets. Mobility decisions were mostly top-down and headquarters centric.
- Selection criteria for identification of staff for mobility varied by department and by year and was thus perceived as inconsistent and arbitrary. Inadequate consideration was given to the profile of staff in relation to the required expertise, experience and language skills, leading to knowledge gaps and ineffective workaround arrangements. The Guidelines state that a mobility panel should review mobility plans, but this panel was abolished in 2015.
- Some staff shared positive experiences of their reassignments, such as gaining new skills and field exposure that could help their career development. Negative feedback included separation from families and reduced purchasing power.
- In a number of cases, staff requests to defer or cancel mobility reassignments due to medical, family and personal circumstances were not adequately considered. This has led to some resignations, and to some appeals to the International Labour Organization Administrative Tribunal.
- In the absence of procedures to enforce the maximum length of assignment by classification of duty stations, 354 (34 percent) of 1 034 total PWB staff, including four staff at hardship locations, had overstayed the maximum length of their assignment.

D. COMMUNICATION OF MOBILITY DECISIONS

- Communication was insufficient and untimely resulting in the lack of buy-in from involved parties. Regional Offices were informed, but not adequately consulted on mobility decisions.
- Staff indicated that their selection criteria was neither transparent nor clearly communicated. They often felt "punished" and compelled to accept decisions with little room for flexibility.
- Available positions for mobility were not well communicated. There were no opportunities for staff to be proactive in applying for reassignment and take ownership of mobility for career development, except for some reassignments to SPMTs.
- Departments indicated there was some inconsistent verbal guidance from the Office of Human Resources (OHR) relating to the possibility of out-posting positions and reassigning non-PWB positions as part of mobility, as well as inconsistent practices relating to the recognition of SPMT reassignments as mobility.

E. MONITORING ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE STAFF MOBILITY PROGRAMME

- In the absence of established criteria and metrics, FAO is not able to fully measure the mobility programme's achievements and is hampered in defining required improvements.
- OHR only monitors the number of completed mobility assignments to achieve the biennial target of 75 reassignments. By excluding reassignments outside the mobility cycle, FAO has under-reported the actual staff reassignments. Under the 2018 and 2019 mobility programme, OHR recorded 69 geographic reassignments, whereas the total number of actual reassignments was 228.
- OHR has not conducted any survey to gather staff feedback, did not track the actual costs associated with staff mobility and did not regularly evaluate the impact of mobility decisions. Data on mobility is not easily identifiable and retrievable for analysis. In 2015, OHR made some proposals for improvement but did not follow up for their implementation.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

8. Given the serious weaknesses in the current policy and its implementation arrangements, OIG recommended that FAO reassess how to best achieve the mobility programme's objectives and develop a new policy for staff mobility, considering a number of elements highlighted by OIG and taking into account best practices in other United Nations system organizations.
9. Elements recommended for consideration are:
 - enlarge the pool of positions which are subject to mobility by expanding the scope to other workforce categories regardless of funding source and by expanding the scope to include changes in roles, functions or departments;
 - identify those positions which are not suitable for mobility due to their profile and define them as "non-rotational";
 - establish a maximum length of assignment for all rotational positions, taking into account the hardship classification of duty station, the position profile and the desirable number of rotations between headquarters and the field;
 - clearly define the conditions which may justify deviations from the standard length of the assignment, for personal reasons or in the interest of the Organization; and
 - make geographical mobility – within FAO or within the United Nations system organizations – a prerequisite for appointments at P-5 level and above.
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10. Furthermore, OIG recommended and Management agreed to:
 - assess the medium- to long-term financial implications and sustainability of the staff mobility programme and develop and implement a strategic plan accordingly;
 - establish procedures and processes to clarify accountabilities, roles and responsibilities to implement the new staff mobility policy for consistent application and improved transparency, taking into account the needs of the Organization and staff well-being;
 - develop and implement a communication strategy to ensure adequate consultation with all parties involved to promote buy-in of the staff mobility programme; and
 - define relevant key performance indicators and develop tools to measure achievements of the mobility programme in order to make appropriate adjustments as required.