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Introduction: message from the Ombudsperson

It is a special privilege to encounter, through the work of the Ombuds Office, so many talented and dedicated people who, whatever the workplace dispute that brings them to our door, share a true commitment to the work of FAO in combatting hunger and improving nutrition and food security for the peoples of the world. However, high-pressure, high-stakes work and the difficulties of working across continents and within diverse teams can sometimes result in challenges which impact relations between colleagues and create disharmony in the workplace.

The Ombuds Office is here to proactively address issues at work before they cause significant harm to the people involved and beyond. Studies have repeatedly shown that unhappy employees are less likely to fulfil their potential and that this impacts on overall productivity and performance, not just of those individuals directly affected, but the Organization as a whole.

In 2023, its third full year of operation, the Ombuds Office continued to take a preventative approach firmly believing that, in the workplace, an informal solution is often the best solution. This is why we encourage all personnel to consider approaching the Ombuds Office as a safe first option, so that together we can explore the situation they are facing from different perspectives, and look at ways to bring it to, ideally, a swift and satisfactory resolution.

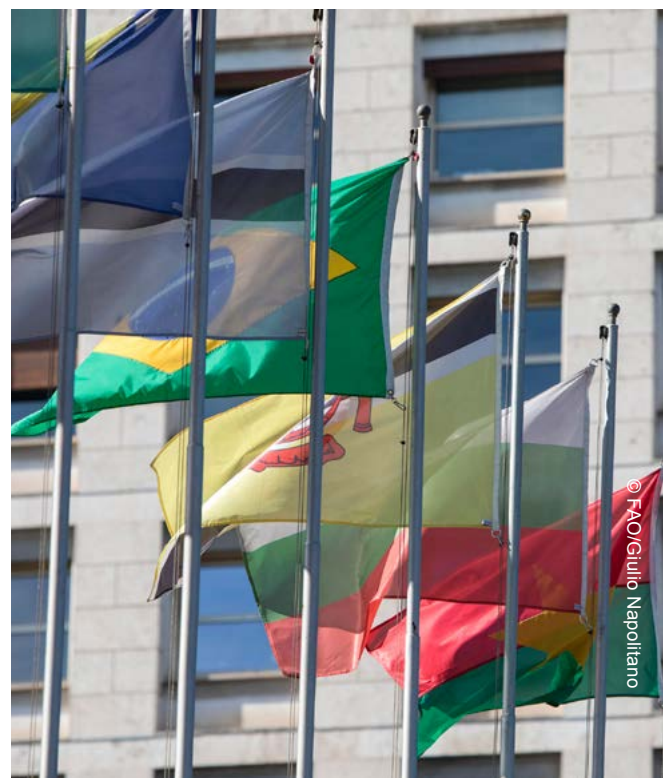
Perhaps because of this approach, 2023 saw an increase in visitors to the office. Hopefully this is also a reflection of a more proactive, “speak-up”, culture developing across the Organization.

This Report outlines a number of issues of general concern, which were raised with senior management during the year, and some recommendations are given from the Ombuds’ perspective.

Also included in this Report are three **Case Studies (page 22)**, drawn from real experiences and presented here to better illustrate how the Ombuds Office can help.

I hope they will be informative and will further encourage use of this Ombuds services when difficulties are faced in the workplace.

The Report also presents data about the cases this office has handled during the year. While the Ombuds’ work remains uncompromisingly confidential, the general trends which can be gleaned from the statistics should provide interesting reading for those of us aiming to make FAO a better, more satisfying and more efficient workplace, for everyone.





What is the Ombuds Office?

The Office of the FAO Ombudsperson (the Ombuds Office) is a confidential, informal, and neutral entity, which is independent from other parts of the organizational structure of FAO. Established in 2020, the Office provides FAO employees with informal resources to help prevent and resolve workplace conflicts. The Ombuds Office also provides upward feedback to the Director-General and senior management on trends and patterns of conflict or other areas of concern. The Ombudsperson is available to speak with anyone in the Organization about any workplace related concern whatsoever.

Core principles of Ombuds practice

As the informal pillar of the conflict resolution system of the Organization, the Ombuds Office aims to facilitate the resolution of workplace conflict at an early stage. This includes listening without judgement, providing problem-solving guidance, informal fact-finding, facilitating conversations, shuttle diplomacy (acting as an intermediate), and direct mediation.

The Ombuds Office is guided in the conduct of its work by five core principles: Independence, Neutrality, Impartiality, Confidentiality and Informality.

Independence

The Ombuds Office maintains independence from other entities, organs and officials of FAO and has direct access to the Director-General and to senior management throughout the Organization, as needed. The Ombuds Office provides feedback directly to the Oversight Advisory Committee.

Neutrality

The Ombuds Office does not take sides but instead helps conflicting parties to reach a mutually acceptable resolution.

Impartiality

The Ombuds Office serves as an advocate for just, fair and equitably administered processes, takes into account the rights and obligations of both the Organization and its personnel, and does not act on behalf of any individual within the Organization.

Confidentiality

The Ombuds Office maintains strict confidentiality and does not disclose information about individual cases or visits from personnel; it cannot be compelled to break this confidence by any FAO organ or official.

Informality

The Ombuds Office seeks to resolve workplace conflicts and problems using informal means. The Ombuds Office is therefore an alternative dispute resolution mechanism to formal adjudication. The Ombuds Office is not an office of record: it does not keep records on behalf of the Organization nor for any other party. It does not conduct formal investigations or inquiries and does not have decision-making powers.



Overview of work in 2023

2023 was an exciting year for the Ombuds Office, as it saw the successful rollout of the Ombuds Respectful Workplace Facilitator Network, as well as the recruitment of two Ombuds Specialists based in the RLC and RAP regions respectively. In May, the Ombuds Office was proud to host the Chief Executives Board (CEB) Network of Ombudsman and Mediators at FAO in Rome, bringing together UN-system Ombuds practitioners from all over the world to share best practice and promote the use of informal conflict resolution mechanisms as a safe and often beneficial first step. 2023 also saw the promulgation of Revised Manual Section 331, which now provides for a possible extension of deadlines for the formal appeals process where informal resolution is sought (331.2.13), and encourages staff members to resolve grievances as early as possible through informal problem-solving discussions or mediation. Under the Revised Manual Section, the Ombudsperson shall be responsible for the mediation process, which may be initiated at any time before or during the Administrative Review and/or Appeal process, and may be proposed by the Chairperson of the Appeals Committee.

Providing services to FAO personnel

In 2023, the Ombuds Office handled 412 cases brought by individual visitors, raising 827 issues. This is an increase on previous years, which perhaps reflects better knowledge and understanding of the role of the Ombuds Office as well as greater confidence in approaching it for assistance. The Ombuds Office also conducted Team Climate Assessments in various offices as well as mediation.





We treat as a “visitor” or user of Ombuds services any individual who approaches our office with a request for assistance that requires our knowledge or experience as Ombuds/Mediators to address. We also include those whom we have approached directly as a result of an existing case, and who then also requests guidance or assistance that we would give as an Ombuds/ Mediator.

As can be seen, the number of cases is increasing year on year, which it is hoped reflects greater awareness of the informal conflict resolution services available to personnel, as well as a tangible shift in culture across the Organization.

Outreach and awareness raising

During 2023 various efforts were made to raise awareness across the Organization of the role of the Ombudsperson and the services available to personnel through the Office. These included virtual Town Halls for various offices, as well as visits to the Asia-Pacific Regional Office in Bangkok, FAO Office in Pakistan, the Africa Regional Office in Accra, and country office in Côte d’Ivoire, in collaboration with the Inspector-General and the Ethics Office. Field visits create an opportunity to invite all personnel, whatever the level, to engage in interactive meetings and familiarise themselves with the Ombuds Office. During our joint

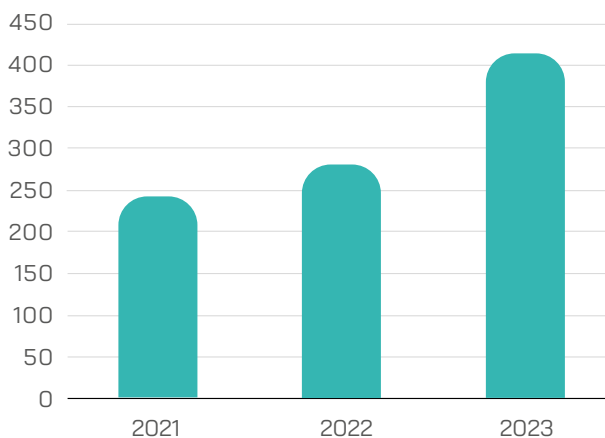
missions, the three integrity offices met with senior leadership and key offices, addressed all staff in Town Halls, provided many individual consultations, and visited several FAO projects to better understand the nature of the Organization’s work in the field. Through the expansion of the Ombuds Office with the recruitment of two Ombuds Specialists, based in the Latin-America and Caribbean and Asia-Pacific Regions, the Office was thus able to increase capacity to assist the decentralised offices in the second half of the year.

Collaboration across the UN system

In May 2023, the Ombudsperson was delighted to welcome to Rome the **Annual Meeting of the Ombudsman and Mediator Network of Chief Executives Board (CEB) Member Organizations**, which brings together the ombuds and mediation offices of different UN entities. The Network aims to collaborate where possible on developing best practice and sharing knowledge and experience, with the overall goal of expanding and improving the provision of Ombuds services to all UN-system personnel.

At the start of the year, the FAO Ombudsperson chaired a Network Working Group on the development of **UN-specific Standards of Practice** for the Ombuds function. These were finalised and presented to the Network during the meeting in Rome, and ultimately adopted by the Network and presented to the UN Secretary-General in his capacity as Chair of the Chief Executives Board, in November 2023. The new Standards were developed to harmonise the operating standards of ombudsman and mediation practitioners and are based on the principles of informality, confidentiality, independence, neutrality and impartiality, which represent the foundation of any ombudsman and mediation function. It is hoped that before too long these Standards of Practice will be used in all UN-system organizations to guide the work of the Ombuds and Mediation Offices therein and to help better align the terms of reference across the board.

Figure 1 - No. of cases per year of operation



Source: author’s elaboration.

Ombuds Respectful Workplace Facilitator programme

2023 saw the expansion of the Respectful Workplace Facilitator Network, and a series of dedicated training sessions were held to ensure that all Ombuds “RWFs” are suitably equipped to carry out this important voluntary role. At the end of the year there were over **180 Ombuds RWFs in 105 countries.**

The Ombuds RWFs are local focal points for the Ombuds Office and serve as a first point of contact for all personnel in the decentralised offices. They are nominated and elected by their peers and help to strengthen local capacity for conflict-resolution. This not only provides a ‘rapid response’ on the ground but also mitigates against perceived escalation of matters by raising them to a Headquarters-based office. The Ombuds RWFs are sworn to confidentiality when operating in this voluntary capacity, and they provide a safe space for colleagues to raise work-related concerns. Ombuds RWFs are volunteers who only serve in this function for a maximum of 3 hours per week.

The training provided from September-December 2023 has better enabled the Ombuds RWFs to support personnel by active listening, providing guidance, and offering simple coaching to help address workplace conflicts and difficulties as and when they arise.

The Ombuds RWF network continues to build conflict-resolution capacity beyond Headquarters. The Ombuds RWFs provide an informal, confidential, trustworthy and readily accessible source of early assistance for personnel with questions or concerns regarding a respectful workplace. They can also provide general information about where to seek assistance in the particular circumstances of the case. Matters raised with them might include interpersonal conflicts, unfair treatment, harassment, disrespectful and improper behaviours, performance, possible misconduct, and other workplace stresses. They do not intervene, investigate, mediate, or actively participate in resolving issues. They do not represent personnel, nor do they choose a course of action for the visitors whom they serve.

If not addressed, conflict in the workplace can have significant costs to the individuals involved as well as to the Organization. It is very often the case that conflicts are left unchecked because the parties are unprepared or reluctant to engage in difficult or challenging conversations. It is for this reason that the Ombuds RWF network has been designed to build additional local capacity for simple conflict coaching and effective, active, listening, promoting a safe space for FAO personnel to go to when in need.





Data analysis

In 2023, a total of 412 cases were handled by the Ombuds Office, raising a total of 827 separate issues. A case is any matter raised by a visitor or user of the Office which requires the specialist knowledge and experience of an Ombuds or Mediator function in order to provide assistance. Cases often involve multiple issues, but the Ombuds Office only records the most significant of these, up to a maximum of 3 per case. If an individual approaches the office with a simple query which does not require substantive work, the Office does not count such an enquiry as a case.

Based on the data for total personnel numbers provided in the Human Resources Annual Report published in 2023 (FC 195/10 Rev. 1) the usage rate for the services of the Ombuds is 2.84%, i.e. 412 of 14,506 personnel. This is in line with other United Nations entities and international practice, which indicates that in normal circumstances an organization can expect to have between 1 and 5% of its employees seeking Ombuds' services annually (JIU/REP/2015/6).

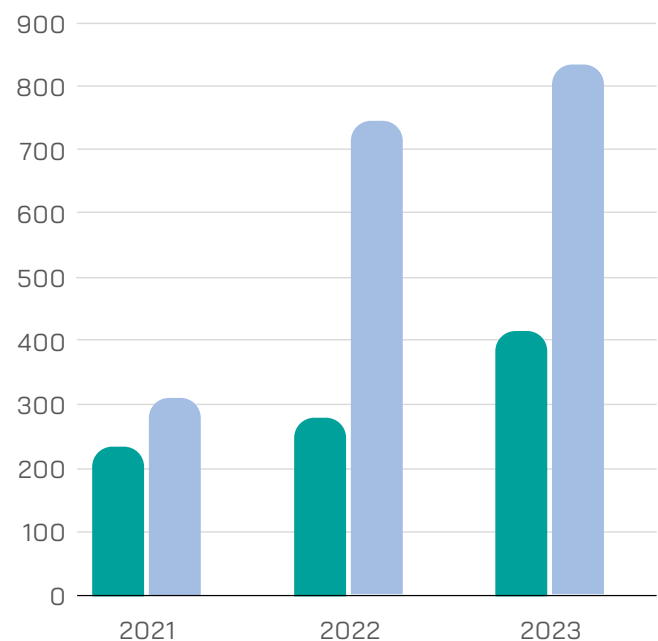
As in the previous years, it is noteworthy that the majority (59% in 2023) of personnel who use Ombuds services are based in Headquarters, and are staff members (68%) rather than members of the affiliate workforce. More women than men made use of the Ombuds Office in 2023, in line with past years.

There are several possible causes for the disproportionately high number of visitors from Headquarters. As the Office is based in Rome, it is possible that proximity builds confidence in personnel to visit, and some visitors from the decentralised offices have stated that they were initially reluctant to approach the Ombuds Office because they were concerned about "escalating" the problem, or found contacting an entity in Headquarters intimidating.

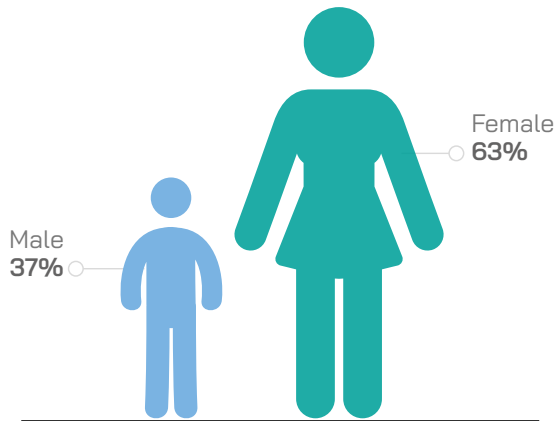
Personnel in Headquarters have previously reported less overall satisfaction with work than colleagues in the decentralised offices, as evidenced by the 2022 Employee Satisfaction Survey.

The development of the Ombuds RWF network, with volunteers located in many of the decentralised offices, has already enhanced the reach of the Ombuds Office whilst providing a safe, local, space for colleagues to seek assistance. Additionally, the recruitment of Ombuds Specialists based in other regions has expanded capacity there, with a notable increase in cases in the Latin-America and Caribbean region compared to previous years.

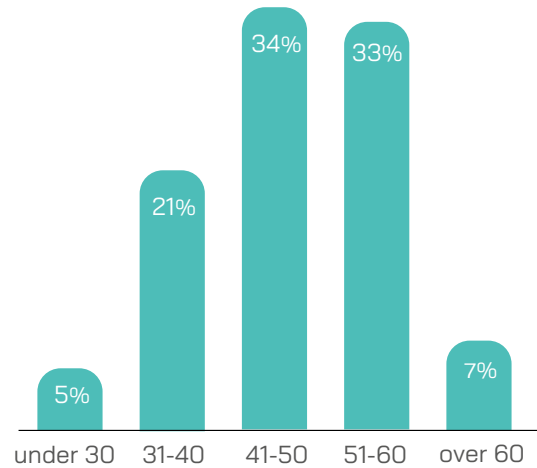
Figure 2 - Case and issue numbers by year



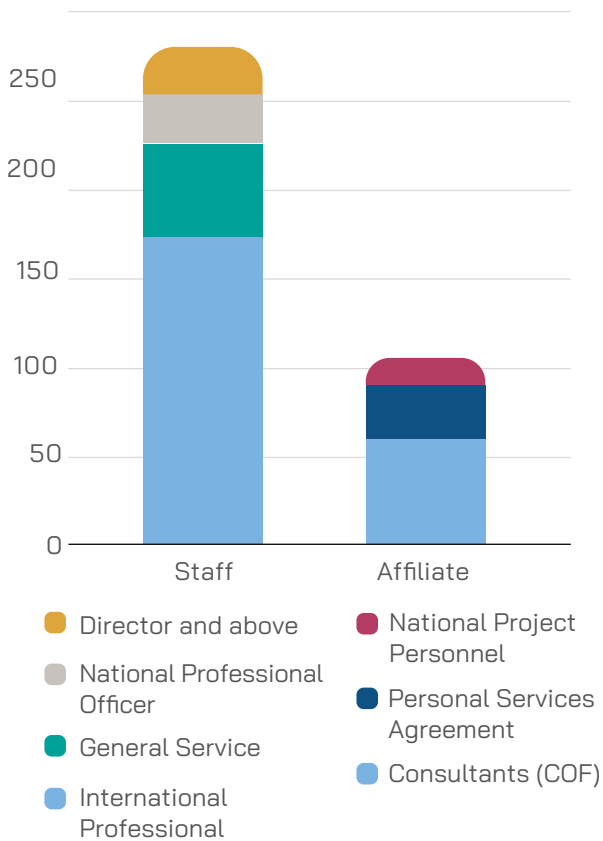
Source: author's elaboration.

Figure 3 - Visitors by gender

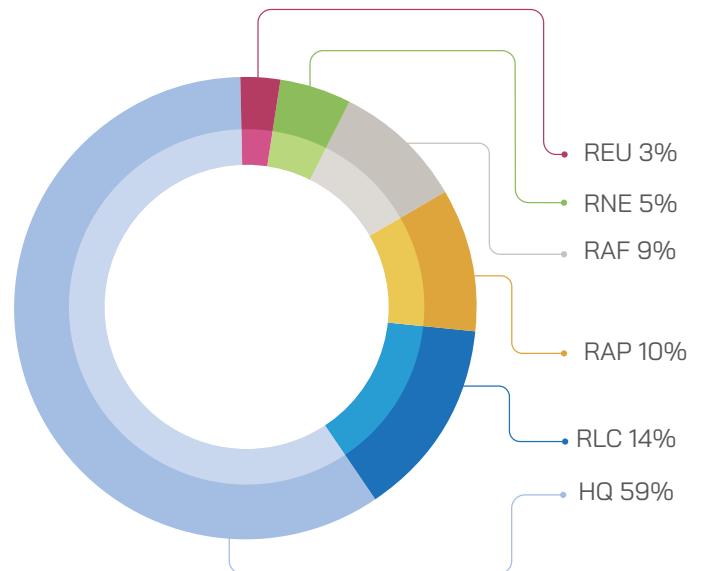
Source: author's elaboration.

Figure 4 - Visitors' age

Source: author's elaboration.

Figure 5 - Visitors by contract type

Source: author's elaboration.

Figure 6 - Visitors by Region

Source: author's elaboration.



Issues raised by visitors

Every visitor to the Ombuds Office raises at least one issue, often many. Using the broad categories established by the International Ombuds Association, the Ombuds categorises and sub-categorises each issue, to better understand and analyse trends in the concerns of personnel. By categorising issues, the Ombuds Office seeks to identify trends so as to better inform the understanding of current systemic problem areas and give a more comprehensive view of the climate within the Organization.

Where visitors raise multiple issues, the most significant are recorded. 827 separate issues were raised in 2023. The largest single main category was **Evaluative Relationships**, with 262 issues raised, being 32 percent of the total. The next largest main category was **Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance**, which totalled 208 or 25 percent of issues. The third largest category, in contrast to the previous two years, was **Peer and Colleague Relationships**, which totalled 139, or 17 percent of total issues. The issues raised within these three largest categories are further discussed below.

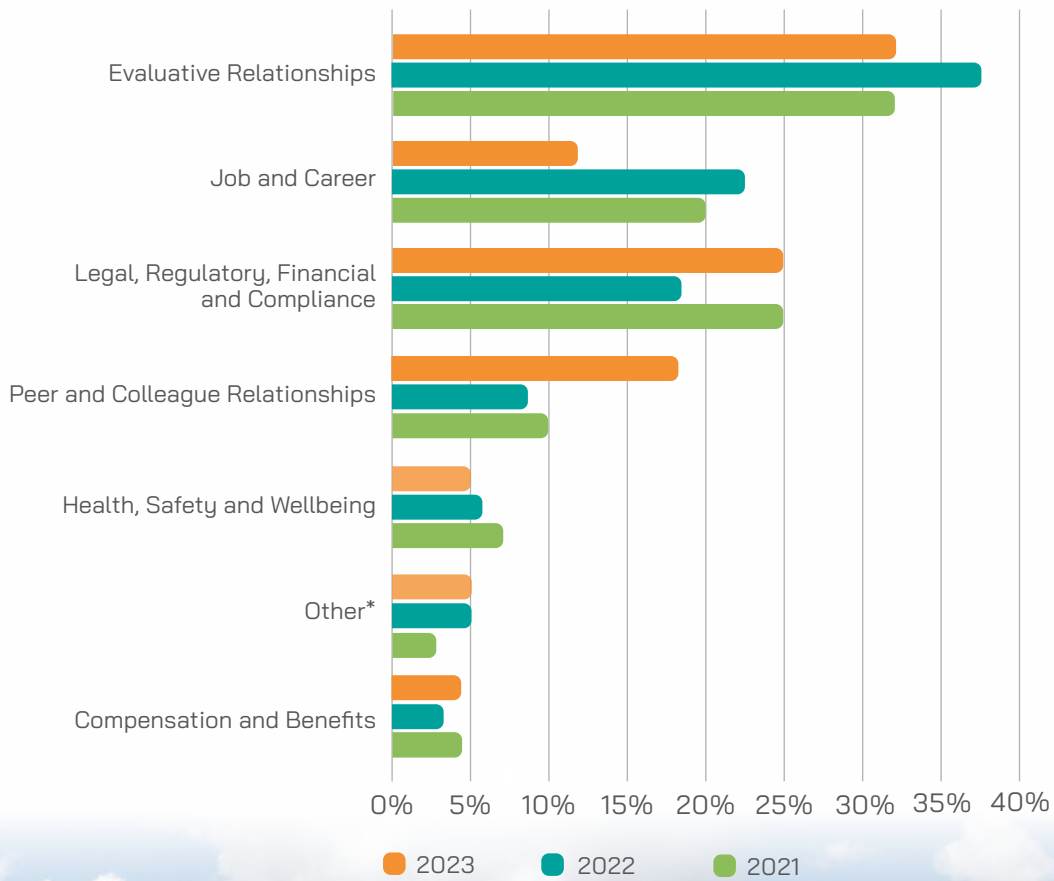
Figure 7 - Main issues raised, 2023



Source: author's elaboration.



Figure 8 - Main issues raised 2021-2023



* includes Services and administrative issues, organizational strategy and values.
Source: author's elaboration.





Evaluative Relationships

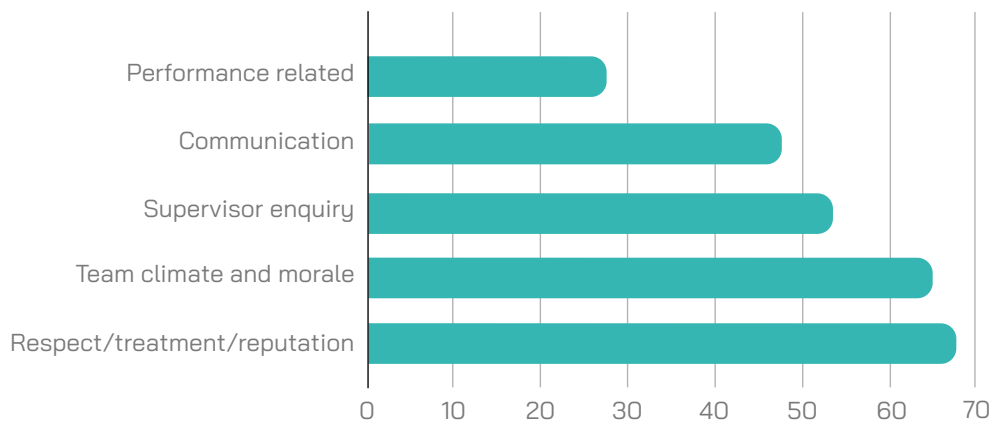
Similar to other UN-system organizations, the largest single broad issue category in 2023 was *Evaluative Relationships*. Even if not the main issue brought to the Ombuds Office, 50 percent of all visitors raised concerns around supervisory relationships, though this is a decrease on the previous year.

The Evaluative Relationships category covers concerns and issues, as well as conflicts, raised between employees who are in an evaluative relationship – most often a direct supervisory relationship. Issues raised under this category were subdivided as shown in [Figure 7](#).

Supervisees raised the majority of issues (209 out of 262). However, 53 issues were brought forward by supervisors who sought the assistance of the Ombuds Office in handling a conflictual situation with one or more supervisees. At the root of these were often communication and/or interpersonal differences, as well as disputes about perceived or actual underperformance.

Consistent with last year, the largest sub-issue within the Evaluative Relationships category, with 26 percent, is **respect/treatment**, which generally involves demonstration of a lack of consideration for people, including not listening, dismissive or rude behaviour, and unfair or preferential treatment (as described by the visitor). This is closely followed by the **team climate and morale** subcategory at 25 percent, followed by **supervisor enquiries**, at 20 percent, excluding performance appraisal and grading related concerns.

Figure 9 - Evaluative Relationships breakdown (all personnel)



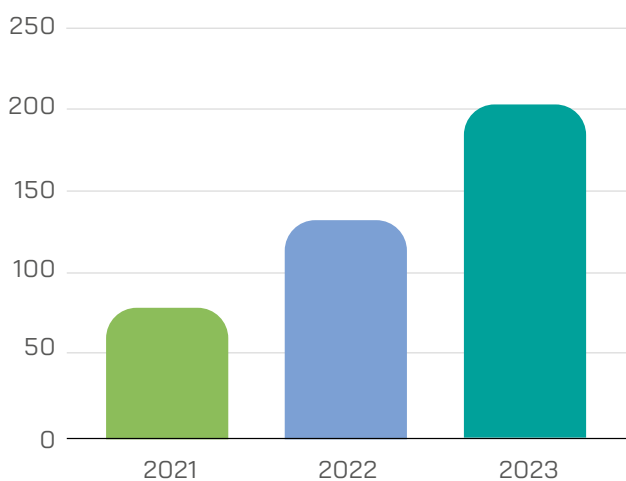
Source: author's elaboration.

Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance

The Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance category is the second largest category of issues raised, with 208 in total. Being 25 percent of all issues brought by visitors, issues in this category were raised by 246, or 60 percent, of all visitors. This category includes all **matters which would constitute misconduct** if established through FAO investigative and disciplinary processes, and **specifically harassment, sexual harassment, discrimination, abuse of authority, and retaliation for whistleblowing**. It also covers those matters falling within the general remit of the Ethics Office, such as conflicts of interest or outside activities.

The year-on-year increase in matters falling within this category is consistent with the experience of sister offices such as the Office of the Inspector-General and the Ethics Office, and is not necessarily a cause for concern, as it may simply be reflective of a better “speak up” culture, which is to be applauded. However, if this trend continues, additional resources should be invested in informal resolution mechanisms, such as the Ombuds Office and CSH, to better enable swift and practical resolution of such matters before they escalate.

Figure 10 - Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance issues by year



Source: author's elaboration.





Figure 11 - Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance issues breakdown (all personnel)

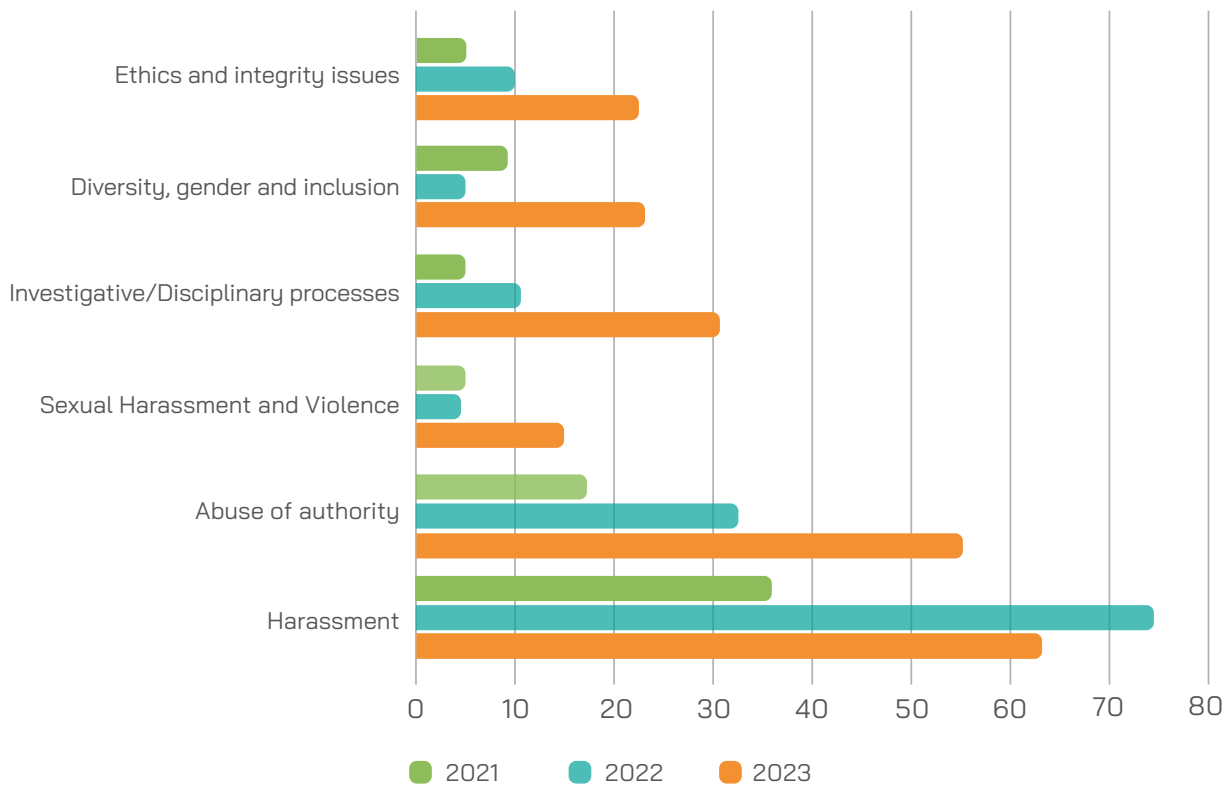


Source: author's elaboration.

Figure 12 show that the largest number of issues within this category were those described as harassment or abuse of authority. This may be a definition provided by the visitor or attributed to the situation by the Ombuds Office. However, as the Ombuds Office does not investigate, this may not be how the matter would be

viewed by the Inspector-General, or the Administration, were it investigated. Figure 12 provides the same breakdown across the years 2021-2023, showing the overall increase in harassment and abuse of authority matters raised with the Ombuds Office year on year.

Figure 12 - Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance issue breakdown, 2021-2023 (all personnel)



Source: author's elaboration.

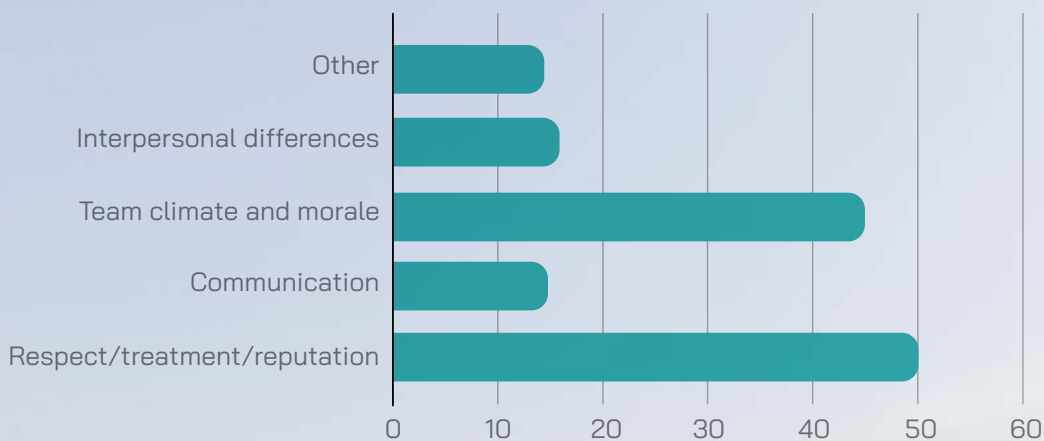


Peer and Colleague Relationships

In 2023, there were 139 issues raised which fell within the Peer and Colleague Relationships category, a significant increase on 2022, when only 66 were raised. Peer and Colleague Relationships issues tie in to the overall pattern of incivility and (dis)respect and treatment issues observed in the past years. Again,

this may be the result of a greater willingness amongst personnel to try to address matters, but it is also reflective of an underlying pattern of stress caused by real or perceived increasing workloads, tight deadlines, and the different cultural and linguistic norms that exist in a highly diverse workforce such as that at FAO.

Figure 13 - Peer and Colleague Relationships issues breakdown (all personnel)



Source: author's elaboration.







Observations and recommendations on systemic issues

The Ombudsperson hears from those who contact the Office voluntarily but does not verify the information received. The Ombudsperson may nonetheless report on matters of particular concern or apparent prevalence, stressing that the Organization must undertake its own due diligence in ascertaining the nature and extent of the problems raised.

During the reporting period, the following issues were of concern, and were raised with the Director-General and/or other senior managers for consideration.

Harassment and abuse of authority

Harassment and abuse of authority cases have increased in general terms since 2021. As stated above, this case categorisation is not an exact science, and cases are defined as such either because the visitor raising the issues defines it as such, or because the Ombuds Office considers the matter to fall into this broad category. But it is not the role of the Ombudsperson to determine whether or not misconduct has occurred, and it cannot be said with certainty that any matters described as harassment or abuse of authority would be defined in that way were they investigated by the Office of the Inspector-General.

The Ombuds Office is pleased that the Organization is in the process of revising its policy on Harassment, Sexual Harassment, and Abuse of Authority, which will be promulgated in 2024. This should bring greater clarity as to what might constitute such misconduct, and how best to see it addressed.

Harassment in the workplace can take various forms, including bullying and intimidation. It involves behaviour that creates a hostile or offensive working environment, and ultimately has a negative impact on the affected person's performance. Abuse of authority occurs when individuals misuse their power exploit or manipulate others, leading to unfair treatment and breaches of trust.

Properly tackling harassment and abuse of authority at FAO is complex and challenging, due to factors such as power imbalances, fear of retaliation, and diverse cultural norms. However, failure to address improper conduct can have significant repercussions for the Organization, including low morale amongst personnel, lower productivity, and reputational harm.

The revised policy may help address some of these issues but perhaps more important is the need to create a stronger culture of greater respect and accountability. Figures 9 and 13 show the prevalence of respect and treatment issues raised with the Ombuds Office. It is from these that harassment and abuse of authority are derived. Promoting diversity, inclusion and equality, as well as fostering more open communication channels, and encouraging a "speak up" culture, will help build such an environment at FAO.

Also needed is greater focus on and resources provided to informal resolution, including and in particular through the Ombuds Office. At its current capacity, providing in-depth and fully effective coaching and mediation services in cases of alleged harassment and abuse of authority is often not possible. At the same time, the investigative and disciplinary capacities are being augmented. While the latter is welcome, it arguably places emphasis at the wrong end of the process. Increasing the capacity for putting informal resolution first is to be encouraged.

Better performance management

The Ombuds Office considers that the current performance management framework in FAO (both the PEMS and QAR systems) are in need of revision. It is paramount that FAO develop a culture of frequent, honest, and constructive feedback to all personnel.

A good performance management system in the workplace is instrumental in promoting accountability and professional development, aligning efforts with organizational goals, and motivating employees. Objective performance evaluations based on predetermined criteria promote fairness and equity in the workplace. All personnel should be evaluated using consistent standards which reduce the likelihood of bias or favouritism.

By setting clear goals and providing regular feedback, a good performance management system helps employees understand their strengths and areas for improvement, which in turn should lead to better outputs, whatever the field of work. Ideally, discussions about performance are also opportunities to explore training and development needs, potentially enabling

skills and knowledge acquisition and building the foundations for future career development. In short, performance appraisal should be a positive thing, even where there are performance weaknesses.

It is important for employing organizations to regularly review and update their performance management systems to ensure that they effectively support employee development and organizational success, since the two go very much hand in hand.

As can be seen from Figure 7, issues around the supervisor-supervisee relationship are the most numerous of those raised with the Ombuds Office, year after year. It is observed that, when it comes to performance-related discussions, there is a tendency among supervisors to avoid confronting the issue until the end of the performance management cycle (or, as is the case with consultants' QARs, at the end of the contract). It seems some supervisors avoid in-person discussions altogether, and simply provide written comments which are then "on the record" and leave limited scope for discussion or negotiation.





The Ombuds Office has observed that in some cases, supervisors who have long-standing performance concerns, nonetheless give entirely positive feedback in the PEMS/QAR to avoid confrontation, and sometimes expressly to avoid being accused of harassment or abuse of authority.

The cost of this can be high: mediocre output, low productivity, employees occupying roles that do not fit their skillsets and other employees suffering stress because they must make up for the gaps in the work of their colleagues who underperform. Managers must develop mentorship skills and see themselves not only as having a product to deliver but also as coaches for those they supervise, encouraging career growth and enhancing development opportunities amongst the teams they manage.

Fostering an environment where constructive feedback and guidance are valued demands courage and leadership. This practice must be embedded into an organizational culture where continuous dialogue between supervisors and their teams regarding performance is not only the norm, but is perceived and understood to be highly beneficial to all parties, including FAO.

Risk of burnout

Although often not the reason for the visit to the Ombuds Office, it was observed in 2023 that a troubling number of visitors stated they were experiencing, or were likely to experience 'burnout'. Generally defined as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress or overwork, burnout is not merely a fleeting discomfort but poses a real threat to individual health, and consequently, organizational success.

At FAO there is an understandable desire to increase productivity, often with fewer or more limited resources, and an emphasis on greater efficiency in every aspect of its work, which is, after all, for the public good. However, we must caution against unrealistic expectations, excessively heavy workloads,

and ever-tighter deadlines, all of which contribute to a workplace culture of high pressure and stress, and which blur the critical boundaries between work and personal life.

Visitors to the Ombuds Office have described emotional, physical, and cognitive exhaustion; insomnia; and frequent bouts of sickness. Whilst working ever harder, they also demonstrate a loss of engagement and motivation.

It is essential that burnout is recognised by the Organization not as a personal predicament, but as a systemic issue warranting urgent attention. The danger of not addressing this issue is that FAO will likely see increasing levels of absenteeism, higher turnover, and decreasing job satisfaction rates.

To combat burnout effectively, FAO must prioritise fostering a culture of psychological safety, where employees feel empowered to voice their concerns and seek support without fear of repercussion. Implementing more flexible work arrangements, setting realistic goals, and providing adequate resources are instrumental in alleviating strain on personnel at all levels. It is crucial also to prioritise fair and sensible distribution of tasks, plan transitions effectively, and align employee skills with assigned responsibilities. Moreover, promoting work-life balance and encouraging regular breaks can mitigate the risk of burnout and foster holistic well-being.

Internal justice

2023 saw the promulgation of the revised Manual Section 331. The new manual section provides the parties to litigation with a clear pathway to informal resolution at any stage in a dispute. The new Staff Rule 301.1.24 also provides for suspension of separation decisions pending the outcome of an appeal, which is a positive and welcome change. However, there remain concerns around both access to justice for all personnel, and the lack of transparency in the current system.

The majority of FAO personnel form part of the “affiliate” workforce, most of whom cannot use the internal justice mechanisms in place, since their contracts do not allow for it. The only recourse available to them is arbitration at UNCITRAL, which is an expensive and largely out-of-reach remedy for an individual contractor. The Ombuds Office is particularly concerned about this lack of access to justice in an Organization where such a high percentage of the total workforce fall into this category. 63% of personnel are neither staff or consultants to whom the internal appeals process applies. The danger is not only that such a large part of the organization has no reasonable recourse if the terms and conditions of their employment are breached, but it can also lead to a culture of not only perceived but real impunity. The Ombuds Office has observed a number of cases where, for example, a Head of Office has decided to terminate the employment of a long-standing member of workforce, and because the latter was employed under a non-staff contract, in spite of many successive years in post, they have no reasonable recourse, even where the decision is not properly justifiable.

Even for those to whom the internal appeals process is available, the lack of transparency as to outcomes and remedies makes it very difficult for individuals to know whether or not they have any prospect of success, or indeed, if successful, what they would likely gain. The recommendations of the Appeals Committee are not published, nor is any information available to employees as to whether recommendations are followed, or not. It is recommended that an annual summary of outcomes is published, along the lines the annual *Administrative Circular Practice of the Organization in Disciplinary Matters*.





Structure of the Decentralised Offices

The structure of FAO's country offices has been noted by the Ombudsperson, who has identified two areas that may need attention to ensure the well-being of personnel and the effective functioning of the offices. Firstly, there have been instances where FAO Representative positions have remained vacant for extended periods, leaving personnel without clear leadership. Addressing the speed of recruitment for these critical roles could be beneficial.

Secondly, concerns have been raised about the influence of some long-serving national staff in senior positions, which could potentially lead to conflicts of interest. To mitigate this, it may be worth considering whether roles such as Assistant FAOR, should be of limited terms and/or held by rotating international staff to ensure impartiality and minimize any undue influence.

The importance of the decentralised offices should not be understated, and the need to ensure that they are appropriately, and timely, staffed should remain a priority.







Case studies: how the Ombuds Office can help

To better understand how the services of the Ombuds Office provide assistance to both the Organization and its personnel, the following **case studies** have been developed, based on real cases handled by the Office in 2023, but with names and identifying details changed for anonymity, and edited for clarity.

These three studies show how **shuttle diplomacy**, **coaching**, and **facilitated conversations** with through the Ombuds Office can help build a better working environment for employees facing friction in the workplace.



Case study



Better communication, better work

The following study shows how the Ombuds Office can help improve the working environment, both literally and figuratively, through encouraging and coaching open communication, with **shuttle diplomacy**.

“Lee” and “Miranda” contacted us separately from the same office. They were both complaining about a lack of respect from some of their colleagues that has made the workplace generally unpleasant, and a difficult place in which to concentrate. Overall, the team’s outputs remained on track, but due to the time of year there was additional stress due to impending deadlines, and both colleagues were finding the working environment intolerable. The negative behaviours they described included running in the hallway, talking too loudly, slamming doors, and colleagues not cleaning up after themselves in the shared kitchen. Lee and Miranda had both raised these issues with their supervisor, “Sam”, but it seemed he was unable or unwilling to deal with it.

We suggested to both Lee and Miranda that they speak with Sam again, this time proposing he hold a meeting with the whole team, to gently remind them all of the rules for behaviour and etiquette in the office. They both agreed to try this as a first step. Lee reported that his conversation with Sam went well: he let Sam know how he felt about the situation and the repercussions it was having on his work and welfare. Miranda, on the other hand, came to our office a couple more times before she felt able to raise the issue with her supervisor. She was nervous and did not want to be seen as a “troublemaker”. Through conversation coaching, we practised different ways she could approach her supervisor and bring up the issue, and this gave her the confidence, eventually, to talk to him about it again.

Unfortunately, a few months later both Lee and Miranda came back to the Ombuds Office, stating that nothing much had changed. At this point we thought it was time for us to flag the issue directly with Sam, and also hear his perspective on it. With Lee and Miranda’s permission, we did so. During our meeting Sam, he was transparent and admitted having problems communicating with this particular team since he was new and was heavily focused on end-of-year tasks and reports.

We gave some tips to Sam on how to communicate better with his new colleagues; encouraged him to have a team meeting every week, and let him know the importance of reminding the entire group about office rules and etiquette, and suggested inviting all team members to contribute to drawing up some rules of etiquette to be placed in the corridors, kitchen and other common areas. We also brainstormed ideas on how to improve daily interactions within the group, including holding regular “brown bag” lunches and organising occasional social events outside office hours.

Both Miranda and Lee have since reported a significant improvement in the working environment, particular because they feel that their concerns have been validated by Sam’s supportive action.

This case is an example of how the Ombuds Office can help tackle from several fronts same issue in a confidential and impartial manner, giving tools to colleagues to help them communicate better to improve their working environment.



Case study



Improving performance appraisal

In this case study, we explore the role of the Ombuds Office in helping a staff member address a conflict over performance evaluation through constructive dialogue and **facilitated conversation**.

“Sarah” a staff member with several years of service, approached the Ombuds Office expressing dissatisfaction with her recent performance appraisal. She felt that her supervisor’s evaluation did not accurately reflect her contributions and unfairly criticised her performance in certain areas, but at the same time gave her a high overall appraisal. Sarah understandably found this confusing, but it also caused her distress and frustration, and anger, and she felt there was now a breakdown in communication between her and her supervisor, which was only likely to get worse if the issue was not resolved.

Upon receiving Sarah’s complaint, we arranged a couple of confidential meetings with Sarah to understand her perspective and explore potential avenues for resolution. This approach included listening attentively to Sarah’s concerns, acknowledging her feelings of frustration and confirming and normalising her experiences and reactions in a confidential setting. This created a safe space for Sarah to express herself openly. We were then able to explore Sarah’s interests and rights within the performance appraisal process, and outline the steps involved in addressing her concerns. This clarification of rights and procedures empowered Sarah with knowledge and helped her understand her options and priorities moving forward.

Utilising mediation and conflict resolution techniques, the Ombuds Office facilitated a constructive dialogue between Sarah and her supervisor. By encouraging open communication and fostering mutual understanding, the process was aimed at finding common ground and reaching a resolution which was acceptable to both parties. Recognising Sarah’s desire to improve her performance and address the issues raised in the appraisal, the Ombuds Office provided personalised coaching and guidance. This included strategies for enhancing collaborative communication with the supervisor, setting clear performance goals, and seeking constructive feedback.

With the help of the Ombuds Office, Sarah and her supervisor were able to engage in a productive dialogue and collaboratively revise the performance appraisal to better reflect Sarah’s contributions and areas for development. The coaching provided empowered Sarah to assertively communicate her interests and advocate for fair and objective treatment in the workplace.

In this case study, the Ombuds Office played a crucial role in aiding the staff member navigate a performance appraisal dispute with her supervisor. Through active listening, coaching, and conflict resolution techniques, the Ombuds Office helped the staff member assert her rights, improve communication, and achieve a positive outcome. This underscores the significance of Ombuds services in promoting fairness, transparency, and staff member well-being in the workplace.

Case study



An “informal first” approach

This case study shows how with **conflict coaching** and **guidance** from the Ombuds Office, a serious and sensitive situation could be timely addressed in an informal manner. The Ombuds Office, being a neutral and confidential resource, was able to help the employee raise her concerns effectively.

“Alicia” came to the Ombuds Office to discuss her uncomfortable relationship with her supervisor “Ben”, who had only recently been promoted to the position of Team Leader. Alicia, relatively new to FAO, explained that since she joined the team, Ben had always acted a bit strangely towards her, but things had got a lot worse since his promotion. Alicia was reluctant to define Ben’s behaviour as sexual harassment, but she described behaviour that would fall into that definition. For example, she said that Ben often asked her if she would meet him outside work for dinner or drinks, and that he seemed offended when she declined. She described how he would come into her office and lean over her shoulder to review work on her computer, coming too close and making her feel extremely uncomfortable. On one occasion recently, when the team was celebrating a successfully completed project, Ben had put his arm around her waist, which she felt was quite inappropriate.

Alicia approached the Ombuds Office unsure what to do, but aware that she had the right to make a formal complaint of sexual harassment against Ben. We explained the relevant policy to her and talked through what the process would involve, including the likely time-frame if an investigation were to take place. We also discussed other avenues of support, like the Staff Counsellor’s service, and explored the possibility of an informal first step, through frank and open dialogue with Ben himself.

Though the Organization has zero tolerance of sexual harassment, it also has a victim-centered approach, meaning that the wishes of the person affected are paramount. In order for Alicia to decide what to do, she needed first to talk through all the options.

Alicia was at first reluctant to tackle the issue directly with Ben, since he was her supervisor and she was afraid of his reaction – which she assumed would be a complete denial of any wrongdoing, and possible upset and retaliation – she was also concerned not to get him into trouble, since she liked and respected him. With the advice of the Ombuds Office, she decided as a first step to inform Ben that some of his behaviour and communications made her feel uncomfortable, and to do so not in their workspace but in a neutral, public environment, like the cafeteria, over a coffee. With some guidance from the Ombuds Office, Alicia prepared notes for the conversation and was therefore able to control the conversation, and ensure she covered everything she wanted to.

Although very nervous beforehand, Alicia chose to follow this informal first step to tackle sexual harassment, and it worked. Ben seemed genuinely surprised that he was making her so uncomfortable, apologised, and promised to be more thoughtful in the future. He has since been careful to keep a respectful distance, and though she knows their relationship can never be entirely “normal” after this, she no longer feels oppressed by his behaviour and is confident it will not reoccur.

This case highlights how, even in a case of possible misconduct, and informal solution with the help of the Ombuds Office can be the best one, avoiding escalation when that is not desired, and enabling a continued successful working relationship between the parties involved.



Conclusion

2023 was another successful year for the FAO Ombuds Office, with enhanced service provision in the Asia Pacific and Latin America and Caribbean regions through the recruitment of Ombuds Specialists located there. The Office continued to champion fair, transparent, respectful behaviour across the Organization, with the aim always to ensure that the core values of FAO are upheld inside the Organization as they are externally.

In 2024 the Ombuds Office hopes to expand its reach to include a regionally based Ombuds Specialist in Africa, and to enhance the capacity of the Respectful

Workplace Facilitators through further training and regular 'Office Hours'. Outreach work will continue, with visits to regional and country offices in the pipeline. The Ombudsperson will continue to play a leading role in the UN system network of Ombudsman and Mediation professionals and to raise the profile of FAO's informal conflict resolution mechanisms.

As always, there is more to do. We must embrace the wonderful diversity of our international personnel, and continue to build a more resilient, civil, and harmonious workforce, through providing advocacy, coaching and guidance to colleagues in a safe and informal space.





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