

MOBILITY

In his report on human resources management reform in 2000, Secretary-General Annan noted that UN operations had expanded worldwide to cover a great range of field activities, but the management of staff mobility had been "passive." The UN now needed a "more versatile, multi-skilled and experienced" staff.

Mr. Annan noted that existing processes were fragmented and weak, arrangements for special assignments were cumbersome, and staff had many different kinds of contractual arrangements, creating among other problems a major division between "field" and "headquarters" staff. A mobility policy had been established and implementation mechanisms would be developed and introduced in a phased manner. The process would include such things as "occupational networks," time-limited occupation of posts, tying mobility to promotion, encouraging mission service, and -- last but not least -- a strong central role for OHRM to ensure accountability.

"Human resources management reform: Report of the Secretary-General, UN document A/55/253 of **1 August 2000**, section II.D and Annex III.

The General Assembly recognized the value of mobility, but requested the Secretary-General to make proposals for solving problems resulting from staff mobility, and the ICSC to make a comprehensive study on the issue and report thereon in 2002. It also made several quite cautionary statements, requesting the Secretary-General to:

"... develop further criteria for mobility to maximize its benefits ... and to ensure the fair and equitable treatment of all staff and to avoid its possible abuse as an instrument of coercion against staff ...; ...

... to ensure that lateral mobility does not negatively affect the continuity and quality of the services required for the implementation of mandated programmes and activities."

"Human resources management", General Assembly resolution 55/258 of **27 June 2001**, section V, esp. paras. 1 and 5.

In 2002 the Secretary-General noted that the mobility policy had been promulgated, and managed reassignment exercises had begun, with the other activities cited in 2000 to follow. With regard to "solving problems" as the Assembly requested, he said that he could not, since the system had just been introduced, but that he and OHRM would follow events closely. In

terms of "revitalizing the organization," he stated regarding mobility that:

"The new staff selection policy provided for limited post occupancy, which will require staff to change functions, occupational group, department or duty station. In addition, the requirement of two lateral moves prior to consideration for promotion to the P-5 level will help to ensure that staff have acquired a broader range of competencies and experience before reaching senior positions."

"Human resources management reform: Report of the Secretary-General, UN document A/57/293 of **8 August 2002**, section II.D, Annex IV.C, and esp. para. 82 (b).

The ICSC agreed in discussing the report requested of it in 2002 that mobility is a complex core element of human resources management, which may have negative impact at the individual and organizational level. The CEB representative, for the agencies, noted that mobility was not an end in itself, and that much work needs to be done on the matter, including addressing more supportive programmes in a large range of work-and-family issues.

The representative of agency staffs supported mobility, provided it was monitored and managed in a responsible manner. A mandatory mobility policy was not considered to be effective and might inhibit recruitment and retention. The Commission itself concluded that mobility had to be addressed in a holistic manner, considering *inter alia* work/life, pay and benefit, and contractual issues. The Commission requested its secretariat to develop a programme of work for the future in this area, with an analysis of the advantages, disadvantages, and obstacles involved.

"Report of the International Civil Service Commission for 2002," UN document A/57/30, **2002**, paras. 82-92.

The General Assembly responded in May 2003 by repeating the cautions it had expressed in 2001. It again called on the Secretary-General to closely monitor mobility and to submit proposals to the Assembly in 2004 to solve any problems resulting therefrom.

"Human resources management", General Assembly resolution 57/305 of **1 May 2003**, paras. 47-53.

The 2004 report of the US General Accounting Office on UN reform progress cited the mobility issue under a section on "Secretariat Faces Challenges in its Efforts to Achieve Its Human Capital Reform Goals." The report stated that:

" ... one of the Secretary-General's major reform initiatives was ... a staff mobility policy intended to facilitate the movement of staff ... U.N. officials have identified key challenges that may impede the successful implementation of the mobility policy when

the requirements go into effect in 2007. U.N. staff, for example, are employed under different types of contracts, some of which place restrictions on the duration of employment and the type of work an employee can undertake. Another barrier to staff mobility is spousal employment.

A related challenge is the need for further improvements in strategic workforce planning ... The Secretary-General has recognized the need for building this capacity ..."

U.S. General Accounting Office, United Nations: Reforms progressing, but comprehensive assessments needed to measure impact, GAO 04-339, **February, 2004**, pp. 18-19.

[Note: the GAO goes on to say that screening applications for UN recruitment and placement is quite a challenge under the UN's new computerized system, since the UN now receives about 1,000 applications for each vacancy announcement, versus about 100 previously.]

Some reasoned mobility is of course absolutely essential for a global organization. However, the General Assembly knows that lots of things could go wrong with this grand new scheme. Certainly an organization with a well-known reputation for hiring many people, at many levels, with "or other" credentials, and in batches of 1,000 per job opening, which then decides that it will shuffle them around the world among occupations, contract types, functions, and duty stations, risks not only losing institutional memory and highly-refined skills, but letting anybody do pretty much anything.

These risks are enhanced by the new freedom given UN managers to hire whom they want, the continuing risk for "human resources" abuses at far-flung and difficult field duty stations, and the realization that oversight, monitoring, and accountability for all this mind-boggling complexity will be entrusted to OHRM (see the next and concluding subsection).

In this respect, IO Watch wishes to note some quite relevant quotes from other subsections of this archive. For instance:

" ... [The UN programs which eat] up the great bulk of U.N. resources ... the economic, social and humanitarian programs aimed at development, emergency relief and 'better standards of life' around the world ... [get little scrutiny.] ...

Clearly, the United Nations employs many hard-working and idealistic people. [but] ... Parts of the system are overstuffed and lethargic, while others, particularly field offices in unpleasant places, are overstuffed and overworked. ...

Local employees tend to bear the brunt of disciplinary action ... when fraud or abuse are discovered ... while erring international professional staffers often survive and even advance in the organization. At the same time, U.N. employees who complain about irregularities [lose promotions or must transfer elsewhere.]

It is a system that tends to cover up its abuses and discourage whistle-blowers.

...

A European U.N. official, who recently left his agency in frustration, [said] 'A certain enabling environment ... allows [fraud] to happen. The question is not whether

you do it or not, but whether you're stupid enough to be caught.'

'Basically, there's a lack of determination to combat the sleaze factor' he said. 'In an environment where mediocrity has a strong self-protective interest, these things flourish.'

William Branigin, "The U.N. empire: polished image, tarnished reality", "As U.N. expands, so do its problems: Critics cite mismanagement, waste", Washington Post, **September 20, 1992**, pp. 3-4.

"[Concerning allegations of corruption at UNHCR in articles in the Washington Post in September 1992] with respect to discipline in UNHCR, a courageous staff member in Angola immediately brought the Boubakar wrongdoing to my attention. The case was airtight, and U.N. headquarters found it impossible to avoid our recommendation for dismissal.

In the more complicated Lukika case in Uganda, UNHCR's recommendation for dismissal was equally strong. The Secretary-General's office rejected it (on grounds that the United Nations lacks precedents in firing for incompetence) and forced UNHCR to take Lukika back. Threats and intimidation in no way dampened our efforts in UNHCR to deal with corruption and incompetence. The Secretary-General at the time just did not support us. Ensuing troubles with Lukika after headquarters directed that he stay in UNHCR should surprise no one."

Arthur E. Dewey, "No laxity", UN Special (Geneva), **November, 1992**, p. 31.

[Note: Mr. Dewey was deputy high commissioner of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.]

"The conventional wisdom in Third World upmarket employment circles is that the best job opportunities in these recessionary days are still available in the United Nations system -- a bewildering alphabet soup rich in countless commissions, subcommissions, fact-finding missions, agencies, expert groups, blue-ribbon panels and blue-helmet peacekeeping operations. For the most part, it is a sprawling secretive system, where many modern-day rajahs reign with conspicuous disregard for accountability"

Pranay Gupte, "United Nations shenanigans", Newsweek International, **May 24, 1993**, p. 6.

"On the very day the Sunday Times [(UK published a very critical report on UN mismanagement] ... I received the news of the killing of one more UNHCR colleague, Boris Zeravic, in Bosnia. The report failed to mention the sacrifices that the vast majority of the United Nations staff make, particularly the loss of life, while working in conflict situations.

The Staff Council in UNHCR agrees with the thrust of the criticisms. The staff wants to weed out corruption, mismanagement, nepotism, double-dippers, desk-warmers, and all other irregularities ... Staff representatives have been tirelessly pointing out unsavory management tendencies and reported to the governing body of UNHCR ... on how to strengthen the organization and to ensure the effective use of its human resources. The question is: what do these government representatives do with these reports when they return to their capitals ...

UNHCR ... staff on the ground work with dedication and have twice won the Nobel Peace Prize, but they are demoralized when subjected to unjustified criticism. UNHCR staff needs the help of the media to further strengthen its humanitarian commitment to work for refugees."

Nasr Ishak, "HCR staff replies", UN Special (Geneva), **October 1993**, p. 20.

[Note: the quote is from a reply letter to the Sunday Times, by the Chairman of the Staff Council, UNHCR]. [emphasis added.]

"UN employees -- who request anonymity because they fear they will suffer more professional harm than the corrupt officials they want to expose -- have provided numerous accounts of officials being transferred rather than dismissed after being caught breaking the rules.

This happens frequently in cases of sexual harassment, nepotism, and occasionally violence, according to these accounts. Whistle-blowers are neither encouraged nor rewarded."

Barbara Crossette, "In war on corruption, UN confronts well-entrenched foe," International Herald Tribune, **November 3, 1997**.

As these quotations and experiences indicate (and see also particularly the many related quotations in the Peacekeeping and Humanitarian subsections under UN Performance Problems) IO Watch wishes to note that the grand new UN mobility programme has many hidden aspects, including:

-- a way to move managers more easily far out of trouble when they (or the subordinates for whom they are responsible) have seriously fouled things up in their present assignment;

-- an instability in units that makes accountability more and more difficult, because people at various responsibility levels are more frequently moving in and out;

-- a further blurring of UN job descriptions, duties, and experience, so that poorly qualified people can be more readily placed into more jobs, with quite negative impact on organizational performance;

-- a wealth of unpleasant duty stations where abusive managers can arrange to send those they deem to be "troublemakers, or can at least threaten them with this fate;

-- a much more confusing game of "musical chairs", which allows even more diplomatic and other job seekers to jump into the UN jobs game;

-- many more chances for manipulative managers to trade and bargain the jobs they have, as all of these jobs rotate more quickly;

-- a question of how the people who are "parachuted in" to UN jobs at higher levels are handled, versus those struggling along the rotational path between duty stations before moving up;

-- extra new pressure on well-qualified staff, with spouses who need jobs and young children, and who want a stable family environment;

-- exposing more people to the nasty bureaucratic (as well as the life-threatening) things that can go on in UN field missions far from headquarters -- a young adventurous person can handle such unpleasantries with a shrug and walk away, but an older one with a family may find his or her entire life disrupted, not a good thing for a UN seeking to "attract, develop and retain staff of the highest quality" as the Secretary-General emphasized in his 2002 human resources management reform report;

-- and a feeling that while general UN staff begin to move around and around, that somehow the managers and barons and their friends will stay quite stable and comfortable in headquarters assignments (i.e., there will always "rotators" and "rotatees.")

UN veterans are well aware of how its mobility programmes can operate in practice. Some variations are offered under the Staff Self-Defense subsection of this archive under UN Management Accountability Struggles. A first variant is also added here, from a Geneva viewpoint, and others will be added in the future as this grand new mobility system takes shape.

"[You won't read this article in New York] ... Guess why?

It is hot here in Geneva ... 110 degrees in my office [yesterday] ... because there is no air conditioning. ...

Another thing which makes me lose weight is [that] ... all of us here ... are very worried about you guys in New York. What is happening to you? ... managers are not [staying] in office long.

Sometimes from here, your big glasshouse looks like a big merry-go-round turning more and more quickly. ...

Of course we enjoy having people from New York here. But some people here feel a little bit ... frustrated: they wait for a promotion and suddenly a parachute lands in their coveted seat ... They ... [can only hope] that no stork, carrying a healthy baby chief from abroad, will pass by when the cradle of their dreams becomes vacant.

We understand that ... when a 'rotatee' comes to Geneva for a short while before returning to New York and then [comes] back again, with little promotions [in between] ... that is what we call career development, mobility ... That is why I presume we have such a dynamic administration."

Jean Michel Jakobowicz, "Guess why?", UN Special (Geneva), **September 1994**, p. 31.

IO Watch certainly hopes the General Assembly continues to keep a close and skeptical eye on the operations, monitoring, and control of abuses in the new mobility system. Will this archive soon have to switch the "mobility" topic from under OHRM's protective wing in this subsection to the Other Major Problems

subsection?