

UNISERV – Address to the FICSA Council – 6 February 2023

Dear Colleagues, Friends, and Fellow Staff Representatives,

It is an honour and a pleasure to attend part of your Council deliberations and address this Council in my capacity as UNISERV Federation President.

As you know, the relationship between FICSA and UNISERV has been strong for a long time, built over time by our predecessors. This further strengthened and deepened over the last few years because of the excellent cooperation and coordination between our executive and yours.

A relationship based on honesty, trust, and the realisation that “we are stronger together”. This is also the motto we adopted for the staff union I am currently leading, the UNFSU.

Although we, as staff representative bodies, share a “unity of purpose”, it is clear that “unity” in this world and amongst the Member States that form our governing bodies is strained, to put it mildly.

These stresses on the multilateral institutions have a current, direct, and, expected future impact on the international civil service as we know it.

Economic and geopolitical realities are already resulting in “belt-tightening” and closer scrutiny than ever before on the conditions of service of international civil servants.

The “Edelman” trust barometer shows clear signs of the continuing erosion of trust in governments and government institutions. *“A lack of faith in societal institutions triggered by economic anxiety, disinformation, mass-class divide, and a failure of leadership has brought us to where we are today – deeply and dangerously polarised.”*¹

As staff representatives, we must guard against these polarisations and lack of faith in societal institutions getting translated into a weakening of the international civil service and, consequently, the conditions of service of the staff, which have been hard fought for many years.

¹ <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer>

As federations, we must continue to be pragmatic, fair, and honest in our presentations and expressed positions before the governing bodies we attend, ensuring that the conditions of service of our joint constituencies are defended and optimised where feasible.

With trust on the decline, similarly, the corruption perception index which is created by Transparency International, *“shows that most countries are failing to stop corruption”*²

Unfortunately, the United Nations and other international organisations are not free from incidents of corruption and fraud, which directly lead to a deterioration in trust, not just from the public towards our organisations' but internally as well, mainly when perceptions grow of continuous attempted “cover-ups” or denials of wrongdoing and a seeming lack of accountability. Worse yet, those who choose to speak up and report wrongdoing often become victims, as whistleblowers, instead of the story's heroes.

We must insist with both the leadership and the Member States that govern our organisations that the integrity of the international civil service is safeguarded by strengthening whistleblower mechanisms and systems, improving protections of whistleblowers, enhancing, and improving investigative means, as applied by entities who must be more independent from their organisations than they currently are. Furthermore, we must continue scrutinising the UN's internal justice systems, including to make it more independent and accountable.

Lastly, I wish to speak about mental health in the workplace. Recent research by the McKinsey Health Institute showed that globally, the number one reason for burnout and other mental health problems in the workplace is toxic behaviours.

McKinsey: *“In all 15 countries and across all dimensions assessed, toxic workplace behaviour had the biggest impact predicting burnout symptoms and intent to leave by a large margin.”*³

A more recent study suggests that “sixty per cent of employees worldwide say that their job is the biggest factor influencing their mental health, with managers having just as much impact on people's mental health as their spouses (both 69%) and even more of an impact than their doctors (51%) or therapist (41%)”.⁴

² <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022>

³ <https://www.mckinsey.com/mhi/our-insights/addressing-employee-burnout-are-you-solving-the-right-problem>

⁴ <https://www.ukg.com/resources/article/mental-health-work-managers-and-money>

While there are increasing efforts across the UN organisations to address mental health issues in the workplace, we must insist that the elephant in the room within our organisations is addressed. Unless we understand to what extent and where toxic work environments exist and develop clear policies for interventions, not just to remedy but prevent toxic behaviour, we will not see significant improvements soon.

Last year, the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization called for concrete actions to address mental health concerns in the workplace, highlighting that “an estimated 12 billion workdays are lost annually due to depression and anxiety.”⁵

UNISERV’s constituency has a very high proportion of its personnel working in what the UN refers to as the “field”, often under challenging conditions that already put much stress on them. Therefore, it is conceivable that the potential for burnout and anxiety due to various factors is disproportionately high. Many of FICSA’s member organisations operate in the same theatres.

We owe it to the people we represent to demand from our employers that concrete action is taken, with dedicated resources and close involvement of the staff representative bodies. More resources need to go into mental health and well-being programs focusing on prevention, stigma reduction, support and treatment.

An important aspect of our work as Federations of Staff Unions and Associations is to empower our colleagues across the globe, including in hardship duty stations. The issues faced at the local level are best addressed through close coordination between the staff representatives of all organisations and entities present in a given location. The landscape has evolved considerably with the repositioning of the development system and the growing coordinating role of RCO/DCO. As Federations, we must ensure we are at least as well coordinated as the organisations, if not more!

We look forward to working closely with FICSA to create specific proposals towards the improvement of the conditions of service for the people we represent.

Enhancing trust, improving justice, strengthening and enhancing investigative and ethics mechanisms in the UN System that are more independent, and a mental health and well-being mechanism that is well-resourced is of paramount importance.

Thank you all for having us here. We look forward to participating in some of your deliberations.

Sincerely.

⁵ <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/28-09-2022-who-and-ilo-call-for-new-measures-to-tackle-mental-health-issues-at-work>