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UNFPA – Reports of UNDP, UNFPA, and UNOPS Ethics Offices

United Nations Population Fund

Report of the Ethics Office 2024

Summary

This report is submitted to the Executive Board pursuant to paragraph 9 of Executive Board decision 2010/17: Reports of the Ethics Offices of UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS. In accordance with the Secretary-General's bulletin entitled United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes (ST/SGB/2007/11, and as amended, ST/SGB/2007/Amend.1), the report was reviewed by the Ethics Panel of the United Nations in February 2025 and presented to the UNFPA Executive Director.

The report summarizes the activities of the UNFPA Ethics Office during 2024 and describes trends in the mandated areas of its work. It also provides recommendations to management to further strengthen the organizational culture of integrity and compliance.

Elements of a decision

The Executive Board may wish to take note of the present report and welcome continued progress in the work of the UNFPA Ethics Office.

I. Introduction

1. This report outlines the outputs and impact achieved by the Ethics Office in 2024 and makes recommendations to management to maintain the ethical standards necessary for UNFPA to continue to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled.
2. The report is submitted to the Board at its annual session in 2025, as per paragraph 9 of Executive Board decision 2010/17. The report's contents align with the Ethics Office mandate detailed in the Secretary-General's bulletin, United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes (ST/SGB/2007/11, as amended).
3. The Ethics Panel of the United Nations reviewed the report in February 2025 at its 175th meeting, as envisaged in section 5.4 of the Secretary-General's bulletin, United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes (ST/SGB/2007/11, as amended).
4. The mission of the Ethics Office is to assist the Executive Director in cultivating and nurturing a culture of ethics, integrity and accountability, thereby enhancing the trust in and the credibility of UNFPA, both internally and externally. The Ethics Office operates on the principles of independence, impartiality and confidentiality.
5. The UNFPA Ethics Office confirms its organizational independence for this reporting period. The office performed its activities with independence from parties within and outside of UNFPA.
6. The previous Ethics Advisor completed her mandate in mid-July 2024 and was succeeded by the current Ethics Advisor in mid-August 2024. This change of leadership led to an adjustment of the office's focus to improve its processes and the office's capacity, to strengthen the existing ethical framework and to renew and improve its existing communications and outreach activities. It built on the achievements by the previous Ethics Advisor and the main strategic focus to strengthen the UNFPA' ethics framework and create a sustainable speak-up culture.
7. The year 2024 was pivotal for the Ethics Office, characterized by transition, a renewed focus, and significant advancements. During this period of change, the team adapted and remained resilient, ensuring continuity and progress. It also provided an opportunity for reflection, enabling the office to strengthen its mechanisms and set the stage for a robust future.
8. By the year's end, the office had responded to 776 service requests, achieved a 100 per cent completion rate in its financial disclosure programme, advanced its use of technology, revamped its knowledge management systems, and expanded its multilingual outreach efforts. In pursuit of fulfilling its mandate of fostering a culture of integrity, the Ethics Office remains committed to implementing innovative approaches and strengthening collaboration within and outside the organization.

II. Outputs and impact of the UNFPA Ethics Office

9. The Ethics Office serves a global workforce of almost 6,000 personnel in 337 duty stations around the world. The office is staffed by an Ethics Advisor (D1), an Ethics Officer (P4), and an Ethics Associate (G7). In addition, it received in 2024 support from a consultant. Activities of the Ethics Office align with the following mandated functions:
 - (a) Confidential advice and guidance on ethical matters to all personnel;
 - (b) Addressing requests for protection from retaliation;
 - (c) Promoting ethical awareness and decision-making at all levels of UNFPA;

- (d) Administering the financial disclosure programme;
- (e) Guiding management to ensure that the organization's rules, policies, procedures and practices reinforce and promote the highest standards of ethics and integrity required by the United Nations Charter and other applicable staff rules and regulations; and;
- (f) Coordinating with relevant units of UNFPA and with the Ethics Panel of the United Nations to ensure a harmonized and consistent application of ethics-related standards in the United Nations system.

A. Strategic focus: Enhancing delivery on the Ethics Office's mandate

10. In 2024, making use of the transition of leadership, the Ethics Office leveraged this opportunity as a time of creative disruption; to improve on the way the Ethics Office acts as a champion for integrity, accountability and impartiality for all UNFPA personnel.

11. This prompted a renewed focus on technological advancements to enhance efficiency and impact of the Ethics Office's work. This included the integration of advanced tools, such as increased data analytics, AI solutions and integrated cloud-based productivity and data-collection tools into the office's workflows, thereby streamlining processes and boosting efficiency.

12. To strengthen its reporting capabilities, a new case management database and filing system has been developed within the Ethics Office, which will ensure greater accuracy and improved abilities for data analysis. In addition, standard practices applied across the United Nations system for recording and classification of consultations and cases have been adopted and are reflected in the numbers in this year's report. Definitions for categories have been clarified, and standard operating procedures are being developed. While this might affect the comparability with numbers in previous UNFPA Ethics Office reports in the short-term, as different criteria are being applied, it increases comparability with the Ethics Offices of other United Nations organizations' and enhances reliability of the data quality.

13. To increase the ability to deliver with limited resources, the office has exerted significant efforts to onboard new non-staff personnel. This process, while time-intensive, reflects the office's commitment to incorporating diverse perspectives and ensuring long-term organizational resilience.

14. Internal processes were improved, including through the introduction of new work planning tools, the development of standard operating procedures, improvement on knowledge management activities, use of new software, procurement of a new platform for the financial disclosure programme and refinement of verification processes to further ensure diligence in the financial disclosure programme.

15. Partnerships with other units have been leveraged to increase the Ethics Office's reach. This includes support and input to the UNFPA Integrity Group (see paragraph 48 below). The Ethics Office advocates for a stronger organizational focus on interdivisional responses to workplace conduct issues, including strengthened collaboration with the Ombudsman's Office and the Learning Branch within the Division of Human Resources (DHR) to integrate ethics content systematically into learning and development opportunities for the Respectful Workplace Facilitators network and for line managers.

16. The outreach and training function has been reinvigorated with new communication channels, including a review of the office's online presence, with a view to redesign and relaunch in 2025; a new mandatory ethics training course, launched for all personnel and available in English, French and Spanish; a new monthly newsletter on ethics issues; and outreach events for specific offices, culminating in a mission to five offices in the Western and Central Africa region in December 2024.

B. Confidential, independent advice and guidance

17. The Ethics Office provides actionable, timely and confidential guidance to UNFPA personnel. This proactive support has a preventive function in that it prevents potential misconduct, the unnecessary escalation of issues, ensures compliance with ethical standards, and promotes the reporting of serious wrongdoing. By offering a safe space to share concerns and ask questions, the Ethics Office protects the well-being of UNFPA personnel, mitigates risks to the organization and preserves UNFPA credibility, both internally and externally.

18. This service is especially crucial for personnel in countries with limited institutional trust, where local habits, practices and structures create negative attitudes towards victims of prohibited conduct, including sexual misconduct, and can lead to severe repercussions for those who report wrongdoing. UNFPA recognizes that the decision to speak up and report wrongdoing is often influenced by socio-cultural, economic and political factors beyond the organization's reach.

19. Overall, the Ethics Office responded to 644 requests for advice and guidance in 2024. Of these, 333 requests related to the financial disclosure programme. Another 237 requests related to 'conflict of interest,' including requests to engage in outside activities, which represents an increase based on a greater level of scrutiny during the financial disclosure process. Further, 74 requests related to 'employment-related concerns,' which includes workplace conduct issues or alleged wrongdoings, administrative claims and miscellaneous requests. The Ethics Office refers personnel presenting with employment-related concerns to the relevant offices for assistance, including the Office of Audit and Investigation Services (OAIS), the Ombudsman for Funds and Programs, the Director of Human Resources (including counselling services), the Office of Staff Legal Assistance (OSLA) and the Coordinator, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment. These numbers show a slight decrease, compared to the 2023 numbers, which is the result of applying the above-mentioned change in recording standards as well as less requests relating to the headquarters optimization process, which started in 2023.

Table 1
Requests for advice and guidance: 2019-2024

Advice categories	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Conflict of interest	132	139	206	178	184	237
Employment-related concerns	54	55	222	195	138	74
Total	186	194	428	373	322	311

C. Protecting personnel from retaliation

20. As per Executive Board decision 2023/8, the UNFPA Ethics Office also provides its annual update to the Board on its efforts to continue strengthening UNFPA protection against retaliation policies and related procedures to meet the standards of best international practices.

21. UNFPA is obligated to protect personnel who report misconduct or participate in an authorized fact-finding activity from any actual or threatened detrimental action they may face because of that reporting or their participation in related fact-finding activities. The policy on protection against retaliation sets forth the prohibition against retaliation, the procedures for requesting protection, and the steps the organization may take to address retaliation.

22. The Ethics Office undertakes a preliminary review of requests for protection. If a prima facie case of retaliation is established, the matter is referred to OAIS for investigation.

23. In 2024, the Ethics Office received 20 queries regarding protection against retaliation. Of those, 12 led to the submission of formal requests for protection against retaliation, up from four requests in 2023. Two matters were referred for investigation with recommendations for protective

measures, which were implemented by the administration. One investigation was finalized and closed, with a determination that retaliation was established. Remedial measures were recommended, which the administration implemented. The other investigation is ongoing. One request was withdrawn; and for the remaining nine, no prima facie case of retaliation was found. For eight inquiries the requesters, after having received advice on the process from the Ethics Office, decided not to go forward with a formal complaint.

24. Of the 20 queries, 10 were received from the Arab States region, three from the Asia Pacific region, three from Eastern and Southern Africa region, two from headquarters, one from the Latin America and Caribbean region and one from the Western and Central Africa region. Male and female colleagues equally approached the office. The majority (17 filers) were local personnel.

25. This 300 per cent increase in the number of formal requests received can be attributed to the Ethics Office's efforts to promote the protection against retaliation mechanism, which included dedicated outreach sessions and a systematic inclusion in all training sessions and other communications, in line with Executive Board decisions 2023/8 and 2023/9. While other trends will have to be analysed, this increase could also indicate a stronger speak-up culture at UNFPA as well as growing confidence and increasing trust in the protection mechanism and the work of the Ethics Office.

26. The Ethics Office received one investigation report relating to a 2023 matter, wherein retaliation was not substantiated.

D. Promoting ethical awareness and decision-making

27. For the first part of the year, the Ethics Office prioritized online training and outreach sessions. These included country-specific interactive workshops for the offices in South Sudan, Liberia, Libya and Syria, as well as Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and the Asia Pacific region.

28. Following the change in leadership, the Ethics Office renewed its efforts to offer in-person visits, which give personnel in the field a unique opportunity to have direct interactions with the office. This helps to create trust and overcome barriers for them to reach out to what is often perceived as a distant headquarters unit. Specifically, the office undertook an extensive mission to the West and Central Africa region, including to the country offices in Dakar, Bamako, Abuja and Calabar as well as the regional office, to offer workshops on issues relevant to the offices, moderate group discussions and hold one-to-one conversations with management and personnel. Sessions were offered in English and French. The scenario-based sessions focused on intercultural communication, conflicts of interest and whistleblower protection. The themes were chosen based on necessity and assessed need for awareness around the speak-up culture; a survey was conducted with the staff in the visited offices to gauge concerns, needs and interests in ethics-related matters affecting their professional and private conduct.

29. To give visibility to the importance of the ethics function for UNFPA leadership, the previous Ethics Advisor also joined the Executive Director for a mission to Australia.

30. In addition, the office also undertook an in-person training during the onboarding week, which included colleagues from all around the globe, and the Ethics Advisor provided an introduction to junior professional officers during their onboarding week at UNFPA headquarters.

31. Overall, the Ethics Office offered live (in person and virtual) training and outreach opportunities to 1,070 UNFPA personnel, which represents 18 per cent of the workforce.

32. Throughout 2024, the Ethics Office continued to build its suite of online resources, promoting self-directed learning and streamlining referral pathways to address work-related concerns and conflicts as well as queries on other ethical concerns. This included a major overhaul of the mandatory training course on ethics. The course is now available in English, French and Spanish. The mandatory course must be renewed every three years, in line with recommendation 3 in the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) report on the ethics function in the United Nations system

(JIU/REP/2021/5). Overall, 72 per cent of personnel have completed the mandatory online ethics training course, which includes a statement of commitment to adhere to United Nations and UNFPA standards of conduct, rules and regulations.

33. The Ethics Office also developed a comprehensive communication strategy, which includes an already launched monthly newsletter and a rebranding of the office, an overhaul of its online presence, as well as regular webinars on ethics issues and other opportunities for interaction with personnel. Work has also begun to prepare the relaunch of the 'Ask Ethics' platform, which allows personnel to anonymously submit queries and receive publicly posted responses.

34. The Ethics Office produced a range of publications to promote ethical awareness and provide guidance to personnel. These publications emphasized inclusivity and clarity in messaging, ensuring accessibility for all staff members. Specific examples include a brochure, issued in English, French and Spanish, for personnel on where to get help with workplace conduct issues, guidance on how to navigate social media and political activities, a gift guide for the end-of-year season, and the development of a screening form for senior recruitments to detect potential conflicts of interest.

35. By focusing on high-quality content with a consistent voice and a refreshed brand identity, the Ethics Office increases its visibility and recognition, credibility and overall impact on personnel. Analysing the success of the office's interactions will allow it to target efforts where they have the strongest impact.

E. Financial disclosure

36. UNFPA's financial disclosure programme implements the provisions on conflict of interest in Staff Regulations 1.2 (m) and (n), Staff Rules 1.2 (p) and (q) and the standards of conduct for international civil service. The primary implementation instrument is the annual financial disclosure statement, an online platform utilizing a questionnaire for certain categories of staff to disclose their personal and financial interests through self-reporting. Staff at the ASG level and above, as well as staff in the Ethics Office, participate in the United Nations Secretariat's financial disclosure programme, rather than that of UNFPA.

37. In 2024, the Ethics Office undertook a review of its current questionnaire, with a view to move beyond a mere financial review and obtain more information concerning other potential conflicts of interests.

38. In collaboration with the Information Technology Solutions Office, the existing platform was also reviewed from a security perspective. It was determined that, given the sensitive nature of the information contained, the platform's security features needed to be strengthened. To this end, an extensive exercise was conducted to decide on the best approach, which included considering options (a) to develop a new platform in-house; (b) to collaborate with other United Nations agencies; or (c) to procure a platform externally. Ultimately, it was determined that the best way forward, from a cost and security perspective, would be to procure the platform externally.

39. Overall, 946 staff members were required to file financial disclosures out of a staff population of 3,571; this represents 26.5 per cent of the staff population. All staff required to file (100 per cent) complied and all submission were reviewed by the Ethics Office.

40. In undertaking the 2024 financial disclosure programme, the Ethics Office applied an enhanced awareness-raising campaign and stricter compliance through follow-up questions, prompting more detailed information, which led to a significant increase in potential conflicts of interest, including previously undisclosed outside activities. By applying a more diligent approach, a greater understanding of ethical obligations among UNFPA personnel was achieved.

41. To streamline the work on the financial disclosure programme going forward, comprehensive standard operating procedures and guidance documents were developed, to ensure a consistent and transparent implementation of the programme and effective knowledge management and to prepare the office for times of transition.

42. The Ethics Office uses a third-party verification process for financial disclosure statements to verify the reliability of the information provided by staff members. To this end the third-party provider reviews the accuracy and completeness of the submissions. Some 50 submissions, or 5.3 per cent of filers, were required to participate in the verification process. All staff required to do so submitted the requested documentation. In four cases, it was found that they held assets that had not been previously disclosed. However, in none of these cases did the undisclosed assets create an actual or perceived conflict of interest.

43. Overall, the financial disclosure programme found four actual or perceived conflicts of interest among the filers as well as 48 undisclosed outside activities. The actual or perceived conflicts of interest were related to financial assets or personal relationships. All conflicts were resolved.

44. The lessons learned from the exercise were to the importance of developing a more refined catalogue of questions to better identify relevant conflicts of interest, improving instructions to staff on what is required from them and stressing the importance for staff to provide timely, accurate and complete information.

F. Guiding management, standard-setting and policy support

45. The Ethics Office provides ethics-related guidance to management to ensure that the policies and practices of the organization reflect and promote the expectations of integrity, impartiality and accountability required of UNFPA and its personnel.

46. Activities include monthly meetings with the Office of the Executive Director, periodical participation in meetings of (and briefings to) the Executive Committee and providing feedback to the Executive Board. In addition, a focus was placed on meeting with all senior managers, including all regional and division directors, in the first few weeks of the new Ethics Advisor's tenure and presenting at the senior management's induction workshop. It also regularly interacts with other internal compliance bodies, such as OAIS, and provides briefings to the Oversight Advisory Committee.

47. The Ethics Advisor is encouraged by the continued and full support of UNFPA leadership at all levels, including the Executive Director, for the integration of ethics into UNFPA work and by giving strong support to ethics-related issues in their communication, including in all-staff messages or at townhall meetings. Senior management also routinely requests advice from the Ethics Office on ethical issues. The participation of senior managers in outreach initiatives further demonstrates support for the ethics function and increases its visibility. Setting a clear tone from the top is an essential element for creating and maintaining an ethical workplace culture.

48. During 2024, the Ethics Office engaged with other UNFPA units on a range of culture change initiatives. This included renewed support for the UNFPA Integrity Group, a strategic initiative to create a forum for all offices involved in workplace conduct issues. The Ethics Office also reviewed 14 UNFPA policies that were presented to the Policy Committee, gave input into the development process of four human resource policies, and provided expertise and input to United Nations system entities and review processes, including the Joint Inspection Unit, the Oversight Advisory Committee and the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination.

G. Coherent application of ethical standards

49. The Ethics Advisor contributed to coherence in the United Nations system in 2024, principally through her participation within the Ethics Panel of the United Nations, established under ST/SGB/2007/11 and as amended, ST/SGB/2007/11/Amend.1. This included review of determinations conducted by the Chair and Alternate Chair of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations, and exchange of comparative ethics guidance, information, policies and practice tools.

50. The Ethics Office also participated in the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations, including its in-person annual meeting, ensuring UNFPA ethical policies remain in step with best practices across the United Nations system.

III. Observations and recommendations to management

51. In its decision 2011/24, the Executive Board called on the Ethics Office to make recommendations to management to strengthen the organizational culture of integrity and compliance.

52. The Ethics Advisor engages in regular dialogue with the Office of the Executive Director, where concerns and opportunities on improving the ethical culture are shared and addressed. The focus of the Ethics Advisor has been to be an active player in the internal justice framework by coordinating efforts and discussing with other stakeholders on how to improve the ethical culture, particularly in relation to addressing workplace issues. Activities in this direction will be continued by leveraging the existing coordination platforms, such as, but not limited to, the Integrity Group, and with the required support of management in this respect. In this context, no specific recommendations are being made to management.

53. The Ethics Office welcomes the commitment shown by UNFPA leadership to maintain the current Ethics Office budget for 2025, despite the challenging funding environment, which is in line with Executive Board decision 2022/16 to ensure that the Ethics Office can adequately execute its mandate.

IV. Conclusion

54. In a year marked by transition and change, the UNFPA Ethics Office demonstrated resilience, commitment and innovation in delivering on its core mission. Through confidential advice and impactful training, the office played a crucial role in fostering a culture of integrity within UNFPA. A focus on technological advancements further enhanced the efficiency and reach of its activities and a robust review of processes and procedure will strengthen the financial disclosure programme.

55. By empowering personnel to make ethical decisions, the Ethics Office plays a vital role in safeguarding the reputation of UNFPA as a trusted and respected institution. This commitment to integrity, transparency and accountability ultimately allows UNFPA to continue its critical work, positively impacting the lives of women, girls and young people globally. Looking ahead, the Ethics Office remains steadfast in its dedication to supporting the unwavering commitment of UNFPA to these core values.
