



United Nations

Review of the Ombudsman and Mediation function in the United Nations system organizations

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit

Prepared by Gönke Roscher



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Acronyms

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMO	International Maritime Organization
ITC	International Trade Centre
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
JIU	Joint Inspection Unit
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UN Tourism	World Tourism Organization
UN-Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UPU	Universal Postal Union
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization
WMO	World Meteorological Organization

I. Introduction

1. The present review was included in the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) programme of work for 2024. It is part of the JIU cluster of reports addressing oversight, integrity and accountability. The review is system-wide and covers all 28 JIU participating organizations.¹
2. The present review expands on previous JIU work, in particular two reports, the 2015 JIU review of the organizational ombudsman services across the United Nations system ([JIU/REP/2015/6](#)) and the 2023 JIU review of the internal pre-tribunal-stage appeal mechanisms available to staff of the United Nations system organizations ([JIU/REP/2023/2](#)).
3. The review objectives are: (a) to provide a system-wide, comparative and independent assessment of the current state of the ombudsman and mediation function; (b) to assess progress since 2015; (c) to examine the policy framework, mandate, organizational set-up and resourcing; (d) to analyse inter-agency cooperation and coherence; and (e) to highlight good practices and areas for improvement.
4. The review was conducted in accordance with the statute of JIU and its internal regulations. A mix of qualitative and quantitative data-collection methods were applied, including a desk review of relevant documents, a corporate questionnaire and interviews with 177 individuals from 22 participating organizations (in-person or remotely).
5. In accordance with article 11.2 of the JIU statute, a draft of the present report underwent an internal peer review for quality assurance and was subsequently shared with JIU participating organizations. The Inspector affirms that independence, impartiality and professional integrity were maintained throughout the entire process.
6. The report contains eight formal recommendations: seven addressed to executive heads and one to the executive boards of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women). The formal recommendations are complemented by 18 informal recommendations, which are indicated in bold in the report, as suggestions for further improvements.
7. To facilitate the implementation of the recommendations and the monitoring thereof, the annex indicates whether the report is to be submitted to a legislative organ, governing body or executive head of the respective organization for action or for information.
8. Two JIU outputs were produced: (a) the present report, focusing on main findings, conclusions and recommendations and available in the six official languages of the United Nations; and (b) an expanded report, issued under the symbol [JIU/REP/2025/5 \[Expanded report\]](#), providing a broader analysis, detailed findings and supporting information, including annexes.
9. The Inspector wishes to express her sincere appreciation to all representatives of United Nations system organizations and of other bodies and entities who assisted in the preparation of the report, in particular those who participated in interviews or

¹ The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Trade Centre (ITC) are not covered in detail as they are serviced by the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services.

responded to questionnaires and other information requests and so willingly shared their knowledge and expertise.

Key terms and definitions

10. **Ombudsman in United Nations system organizations.** The ombudsman is the only designated neutral resource that provides confidential, impartial and independent services within each organization to informally address workplace-related concerns. The mandate of the ombudsman is to assist visitors through informal conflict resolution services to address workplace-related concerns. This includes but is not limited to voluntary consultation, guidance and assistance in developing options, conflict coaching, capacity-building and mediation. In addition, the ombudsman identifies systemic issues, policy gaps, procedural irregularities and problematic behaviour patterns. The ombudsman facilitates outcomes that build trust, enhance relationships and improve communication within the organization, as well as between the organization and its workforce.²

11. **Mediation.** Mediation is a confidential dispute resolution process in which a neutral third-party professional – a mediator – helps the parties in dispute to engage in a constructive conversation, discuss issues, express interests, brainstorm options, find common ground and, where applicable, reach consensus with a view to resolving the dispute.³

12. **United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services.** Although the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services comprises (a) the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman; (b) the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes and (c) the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the present review uses “UNOMS” in lieu of “the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman” due to the lack of an appropriate acronym.

² Standards of Practice for United Nations System Ombudsman and Mediators, sects. 1.1 and 1.2.

³ Definition in accordance with the standard operating procedures of the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services, February 2024.

II. Main findings

A. Progress made since the 2015 Joint Inspection Unit review

13. The 2015 JIU review set forth several key policy and operational standards and included recommendations that targeted core characteristics of the function, including recommendations related to (a) terms of reference; (b) awareness and understanding of the function; (c) the option for staff to use the ombudsman of any United Nations system organization present in their field location; (d) insufficient investment; (e) underutilization of mediation services; (f) a lack of harmonized procedures; (g) the need for continuous training and certification; (h) the need for special performance evaluation mechanisms; and (i) the need for a subgroup limited to United Nations system organizations.

14. Organizations have made progress strengthening their ombudsman and mediation functions since 2015:

(a) An increase in the number of internal stand-alone ombudsman and mediation functions, from 7⁴ to 10, with the addition of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA);

(b) Development of other arrangements: since January 2020, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) has been serviced by the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services. Starting in 2026, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) will share an ombudsman position under the authority of UNOMS. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) is serviced by the World Health Organization (WHO) ombudsman. The Universal Postal Union (UPU) uses a service provider from the private sector;

(c) The continuing professionalization of the function;

(d) The increased relevance attributed to the function, such as recognition of its contribution to a respectful and harmonious workplace culture and informal conflict resolution, if not the prevention of conflict;

(e) Establishment of the Network of United Nations System Ombudsman and Mediators of member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination aimed at, among other things, harmonizing practices across the United Nations system.

15. The present review identified several shortcomings in the current ombudsman and mediation arrangements of the United Nations system organizations. The Inspector considers it essential to further strengthen the ombudsman and mediation function, as it supports informal conflict resolution and fosters a healthier organizational culture, ultimately enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the United Nations system.

⁴ United Nations Secretariat (including UNCTAD, UNEP, UN-Habitat, UNODC and ITC), the separately administered funds and programmes (UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS and UN-Women), International Labour Organization (ILO), UNHCR, World Food Programme (WFP), WHO and WIPO.

B. Shortcomings in the implementation of the formal recommendations of the 2015 Joint Inspection Unit report

16. The 2015 report included eight formal recommendations: one addressed to the governing bodies and legislative organs and seven to the executive heads. Although the rate of self-reported acceptance and implementation is high,⁵ deficiencies regarding the full implementation of several recommendations exist.

17. Recommendation 3 was accepted by most organizations, yet field staff in most organizations⁶ lack access to an ombudsman in the same location. **The Inspector considers this a serious lacuna and urges the organizations concerned to implement recommendation 3 of the JIU 2015 report at the earliest.**

18. Although most organizations reported that recommendation 4 had been implemented, a few⁷ had yet to develop case management manuals to enhance harmonization across the system.

19. Recommendation 5 included a request for regular reporting of ombudsman activities to governing bodies, as a key indicator of independence and oversight. Most organizations lack such reporting.

C. Persisting lacunae and deficiencies

20. There are other deficiencies and shortcomings that persist and new challenges to be addressed, including with regard to the following:

- (a) The role of the ombudsman and mediation function in the internal justice system of organizations;
- (b) Organizational set-up;
- (c) Terms of reference;
- (d) Professional standards;
- (e) Independence;
- (f) Resourcing;
- (g) Outreach.

⁵ The status of acceptance stands at 79 per cent, while the status of implementation is 92 per cent.

⁶ In all except for the United Nations Secretariat, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNOPS and UN-Women.

⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UNRWA and WHO.

III. Role of the ombudsman and mediation function in the systems of administration of justice

A. Role of the function in the system of administration of justice applicable to the United Nations

21. In 2007, a new system of administration of justice for the United Nations was established. To that end, in 2007, the General Assembly, in its resolution [61/261](#), decided to create a single, decentralized Office of the Ombudsman and to establish a Mediation Division.

22. It further recognized informal conflict resolution as a crucial element of the system of administration of justice, to avoid unnecessary litigation. The internal justice reform transformed how employment-related disputes were handled and launched a new era in the administration of justice, specifically for the United Nations Secretariat and the organizations that apply the Staff Regulations and Rules of the United Nations.

23. Since then, annual resolutions of the General Assembly on the administration of justice have included a reaffirmation of the crucial role of the ombudsman and mediation function as the informal part of the system of administration of justice.

B. Role of the function in the system of administration of justice applicable to United Nations system organizations under the jurisdiction of the International Labour Organization Administrative Tribunal

24. The other organizations of the United Nations system apply a system that has not undergone reform and, as a result, does not always recognize the ombudsman and mediation function as its informal part. There is a diverse landscape for informal conflict resolution and its mechanisms in the specialized agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

1. Role of the function in the internal justice system of the World Health Organization

25. WHO made informal conflict resolution a priority in its internal justice system. In 2016, a major reform was implemented following an external experts' report⁸ and the decisions taken on it by its governing bodies.⁹ The external experts had recommended that "the Ombudsman function should be formalized and included in the Staff Rules and be formally part of the dispute resolution chapter". The internal justice system was reviewed again in 2022. Currently, the WHO Staff Rules, in section 12 (Dispute resolution), dedicate seven paragraphs to "informal resolution", in which the use of informal channels is encouraged and facilitated.

⁸ Report of the External Panel of Experts on the Review of the Internal Justice System of the World Health Organization, 15 October 2014.

⁹ World Health Assembly resolution WHA69.17 of 28 May 2016 on amendments to the Staff Regulations: dispute resolution (WHA69/2016/REC/1) and WHO Executive Board resolution EB138.R12 of 30 January 2016 on confirmation of amendments to the Staff Rules: internal justice reform.

2. Role of the function in the internal justice system of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Civil Aviation Organization, the International Labour Organization, the World Food Programme and the World Intellectual Property Organization

26. The Service Code of ICAO briefly mentions the Ombudsperson, while its staff regulations and rules provide detailed provisions on the role.¹⁰ The ILO staff regulations include a chapter on conflict resolution outlining informal mechanisms prior to formal channels.¹¹ The regulations of WIPO also contain a conflict resolution chapter, detailing informal processes and the role of the Ombudsperson.¹² FAO and WFP also revised their respective legal frameworks on the administration of justice with the aim of further enhancing the use of informal resolution.¹³

27. There are no references to informal conflict resolution and the ombudsman and mediation function in the staff regulations and rules of other specialized agencies (IAEA, ITU, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism), UPU and WMO).

28. The Inspector suggests that those organizations that lack references to informal conflict resolution in their staff regulations and rules introduce similar language at the time of the next revision highlighting the priority given to informal conflict resolution in their internal justice systems.

¹⁰ ICAO staff rule 101.16 (staff regulation 1.16), 1 January 2011, with all amendments up to 1 May 2021; and ICAO Service Code, staff regulations, article I.16, 2011, including all amendments up to 22 February 2021.

¹¹ ILO staff regulations, March 2021, chapter XIII, art. 13.1.

¹² Staff regulations and rules of the International Bureau of WIPO, chap. XI, regulations 11.1, 11.2 and 11.3 (1 October 2022).

¹³ FAO Staff Rules, sect. 303.1.1; FAO Manual, sect. 331; and WFP human resources manual, sects. VIII.2 and VIII.3.

IV. Added value of the ombudsman and mediation function

29. In its 2015 report, JIU stated that “organizations without any informal dispute resolution function received on average twice as many grievances per year as the organizations with at least one mechanism”.¹⁴ The 2015 review also found that “[t]he role of the ombudsman today is to promote and support conflict management and conflict prevention”.

30. Since 2015, the function has evolved further, which is reflected in the increased diversity of its services and the strong increase in the number of visitors and of cases. The question that remains, however, is what its added value is exactly, and how to measure it, if at all.

31. Each case before a tribunal has a cost for the organization regardless of whether the matter may be decided in its favour or not.¹⁵ Furthermore, there is the overall time each case takes until a judgment is issued. Cases that remain unresolved over a longer period have an impact on organizational culture; pending conflicts have a bearing on loyalty, engagement, productivity and motivation. Thus, unresolved disputes have a cost to the organizations, too.

32. Turning to informal conflict resolution through the ombudsman and mediation function or other means is possible at any stage of a formal appeal process in all organizations reviewed. The functions involved, such as human resources, review bodies or legal offices, were found to examine whether cases might lend themselves to informal conflict resolution. They often suggest using the ombudsman and mediation function for settling them informally.

33. Data contained in figure A.1 of annex I to the report of the Secretary-General on the administration of justice at the United Nations ([A/79/127](#)) indicate that the volume of requests handled by the ombudsman’s offices, the Office of Staff Legal Assistance and the management evaluation functions in the organizations is far greater than the number of cases before the United Nations Dispute Tribunal and the United Nations Appeals Tribunal. Figure A.1 shows that early and consistently available informal resolution of disputes minimizes the number of cases going to the formal element of the system, evidencing efficiency.

34. Based on an assessment of the statistics available, the figures show that the number of cases that exhaust the formal channels for appeals is relatively low compared with the total number of staff and with the number of visitors and cases handled by the ombudsman and mediation functions.

35. In the case of the United Nations Secretariat, with a total staff of 36,757, in 2023 there were 401 requests for management evaluation, of which the Management Advice and Evaluation Unit closed 345 by the end of that year. In 2023, the United Nations Dispute Tribunal received 198 cases and the United Nations Appeals Tribunal 116 cases. In comparison, in 2023 UNOMS had 2,014 requests for its services while the Office of Staff Legal Assistance had 1,388 requests for its services, of which 1,225 were closed through settlement or otherwise with or without the involvement of UNOMS.

36. The funds and programmes, with a total staff of 30,418, in 2023 received 83 requests for management evaluation, of which 12 decisions were appealed to the United Nations Dispute Tribunal. During the same period, the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes handled 563 cases, again indicating that most issues

¹⁴ See [JIU/REP/2015/6](#), para. 40.

¹⁵ At the International Labour Organization Administrative Tribunal, the fee is \$20,000 per case, at the United Nations Dispute Tribunal the flat fee is \$14,153 and at the United Nations Appeals Tribunal the fee is \$16,778.

are resolved informally. In UNHCR (with a total of 16,021 staff), there were 90 requests for management evaluation, of which 12 decisions were appealed at the United Nations Dispute Tribunal, compared with the 634 cases serviced by its Ombudsman in 2023.

37. Although the caseloads are not entirely comparable, the Inspector is of the view that the numbers provide sufficient evidence for the added value of the ombudsman and mediation function to cost-effectiveness and reducing costly litigation. The functions clearly make an important contribution to organizational success, add value and create savings for the benefit of their organizations.

V. Establishment and evolution of the ombudsman and mediation function

A. Organizational set-up

1. The three pillars of the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services

(a) United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services

38. Since 2008, the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services¹⁶ has been a single, integrated and decentralized office that comprises three pillars: (a) the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman; (b) the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes; and (c) the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator at UNHCR. UNOMS has regional offices in Bangkok; Beirut; Entebbe, Uganda; Geneva; Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Nairobi, Santiago and Vienna, in addition to its headquarters in New York.

(b) Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes

39. The Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes, based in New York, provides informal dispute resolution and mediation services to UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS and UN-Women. Regional posts have been established in Bangkok; Copenhagen; Istanbul, Turkey; and Panama City. The Respectful Workplace Facilitators programme, launched in 2019 and managed by the Office, trains peer staff to support conflict resolution and is active in over 70 country offices, with more than 100 such facilitators.

(c) Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

40. The Office, based in Geneva, has evolved since its inception, with mediation dating back to 1993 and the formal ombudsman function established in 2008. As of October 2025, the office had a regional presence in Bangkok and Panama City.

41. The Secretary-General's bulletin on terms of reference for the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services ([ST/SGB/2016/7](#)) outlines how the Office operates as a single, integrated and decentralized office structured in three pillars, with the three offices mentioned above. In practice, however, they function as three separate and independent offices. Given the current financial and organizational challenges, fully implementing the integrated three-pillar model, as envisioned in the Secretary-General's bulletin, would be a strategic step towards enhancing coherence, fostering synergies and improving overall efficiency. This approach would also allow for better utilization of the geographical coverage and resources of all three offices, thereby contributing to greater cost-effectiveness and operational alignment.

42. The Inspector therefore suggests considering the full integration of the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes and the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediator at UNHCR into UNOMS, as envisaged by the Secretary-General in [ST/SGB/2016/7](#).

¹⁶ Initially established in 2002 as the "Office of the Ombudsman".

2. The ombudsman and mediation functions in the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the World Food Programme

43. UNRWA established its ombudsman function in 2021, following a service agreement with UNOMS. In 2023, the post became managed by UNRWA and based in Amman; it is currently supported by an additional Professional post and a consultant.

44. The WFP Office of the Ombudsperson and Mediation Services was established in 2005. Based in Rome, the Office is supported by regional posts in Nairobi and Dakar, and a consultant in Amman. Since 2007, the Office has managed the Respectful Workplace Advisers¹⁷ network. As of 2023, the network included nearly 200 peer-nominated volunteers across the global offices of WFP, supporting informal conflict resolution.

3. The ombudsman and mediation functions in specialized agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency

(a) Specialized agencies with an internal stand-alone ombudsman and mediation function

(i) Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

45. The informal conflict resolution function in FAO was established in 2009 as a combined post of Ethics Officer and Ombudsman. Following the 2015 JIU report, the roles were separated in 2019, and a stand-alone Ombuds Office became operational in 2020. Since 2023, four regional ombuds specialists (consultants) have supported outreach across the Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Caribbean, Near East and Europe regions.

46. In 2023, FAO launched the Respectful Workplace Facilitator network with 150 trained facilitators. While the facilitators do not manage cases, they assist in resolving concerns.

(ii) International Civil Aviation Organization

47. ICAO is the most recent organization to establish its stand-alone ombudsman and mediation function, in 2024; the function replaced a dual role. The newly created office has no dedicated budget and must request resources from the executive office. To address this shortcoming, **the Inspector suggests that ICAO assign a budget to its ombudsman function to strengthen its operational independence.** In 2024, ICAO established a network of trustful workplace ambassadors.

(iii) International Labour Organization

48. The function in ILO was originally established in 2000 and revisited in 2004. The Collective Agreement on Conflict Prevention and Resolution redefined the role and changed the title from Ombudsperson to Mediator. The function also extends its services to the ILO International Training Centre and the International Social Security Association.

49. Previously, ILO had a network of facilitators to enhance regional access. While the former network is no longer active, its original purpose to enhance regional access and outreach remains relevant. **The Inspector suggests that ILO consider improving regional access, either by revisiting the network of facilitators model or exploring other mechanisms.**

¹⁷ Title changed in 2025 to Respectful Workplace Allies.

(iv) **World Health Organization (serving also the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS)**

50. Established in 1974, the WHO Ombudsperson and Mediation Services Office also serves the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the United Nations International Computing Centre, UNAIDS and WHO outposted offices. Regional ombudsmen in the six regional offices report to their respective WHO regional directors independently.

51. UNAIDS relies on the WHO Ombudsperson and Mediation Services Office, which also provides systemic feedback to UNAIDS leadership and collaborates with its Ethics Office to align policies and address organizational issues.¹⁸

(b) **Special cases**

(i) **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization**

52. UNESCO lacks a stand-alone ombudsman function. The original Ombudsman post created in 1974 was abolished in 1992 and replaced by a college of mediators, composed of retired staff serving pro bono. Eligibility is limited to retirees under 68, with no standardized selection process, skills assessment or requirement for professional mediation training.

53. Unlike other organizations, the UNESCO Ethics Office performs ombudsman activities. Its terms of reference explicitly cover informal conflict resolution. A feasibility study confirmed the need for a stand-alone ombudsman function and proposed revising the Ethics Office's terms of reference. The Executive Board decided to establish the function while its implementation is pending.

54. In the view of the Inspector, the current situation, in which the Ethics Office performs the responsibilities of an ombudsman (at the expense of core ethics responsibilities) and the college of mediators lacks professional expertise, is not conducive to offering a workforce of 4,762 employees the appropriate means for informal conflict resolution. **The Inspector suggests professionalizing the informal conflict resolution system in UNESCO through the establishment of a stand-alone internal ombudsman and mediation function at the earliest.**

(ii) **World Meteorological Organization**

55. Prior to 2017, WMO lacked an internal ombudsman function due to its limited number of personnel.¹⁹ It opted for outsourcing after shifting jurisdiction from the International Labour Organization Administrative Tribunal to the United Nations Dispute Tribunal and United Nations Appeals Tribunal. WMO signed a memorandum of understanding with UNOMS in 2017 for ombudsman and mediation services. The memorandum excludes reporting provisions. **The Inspector suggests that, at the time of the next renewal of the memorandum of understanding, a provision on reporting be introduced to allow WMO to benefit from the findings of the ombudsman on trends and systemic issues identified.**

(iii) **International Telecommunication Union and World Intellectual Property Organization**

56. In November 2024, ITU and WIPO signed a memorandum of understanding with UNOMS to establish an ombudsman post in Geneva on a 50/50 basis, which is scheduled to start in 2026. This marks the first shared ombudsman model in the United Nations system, which has been found to be a good practice. WIPO had an

¹⁸ UNAIDS, *Report of the Ethics Office*, 11 June 2021 (UNAIDS/PCB (48)/21.6).

¹⁹ A total of 450 personnel in 2023.

ombudsman post, created in 2009, that was long vacant and had been filled on a temporary basis by a consultant working part time. ITU lacked such a function, relying on two staff members acting as voluntary mediators.

(c) Other organizations

(i) International Maritime Organization

57. With only four formal cases in five years, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) deemed an internal ombudsman unnecessary. It relies on a few staff trained in mediation, as well as certified mediators from the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution and other experts as required. As part of its transition to United Nations Dispute Tribunal jurisdiction, IMO will review further options, including formalizing mediation.

(ii) Universal Postal Union

58. UPU has outsourced ombudsman and mediation services since 2020 to a private service provider under a four-year contract. The service is supervised by the Human Resources Directorate, an arrangement in conflict with the standard operating procedures of the Network of United Nations System Ombudsman and Mediators. **The Inspector therefore suggests that UPU move the supervisory role to its executive head.**

(iii) World Tourism Organization

59. Informal conflict resolution is handled internally through a dual role in the human resources entity. This arrangement does not, however, offer the necessary level of independence, impartiality or professional expertise. Therefore, **the Inspector suggests that UN Tourism discontinue the current model and give its workforce access to professional ombudsman and mediation services, either through an agreement with an existing United Nations ombudsman function or by engaging external experts.**

(d) Organizations without an ombudsman or mediation function

United Nations Industrial Development Organization

60. In 2024, UNIDO created the Employee Relations Unit within its human resources entity to support informal conflict resolution. The Unit lacks independence and impartiality, making it unsuitable as a substitute for an ombudsman function. Therefore, **the Inspector suggests that UNIDO discontinue the current model and give its workforce access to professional ombudsman and mediation services, either by establishing its own internal stand-alone function or through an arrangement with an existing United Nations ombudsman function.**

International Atomic Energy Agency

61. Despite meeting the 2015 JIU threshold, IAEA has not established an internal ombudsman or mediation function, nor has it made an arrangement with other organizations. A shared-service option was explored but deemed unfeasible due to resource constraints. Instead, informal conflict resolution is handled by the Staff Relations Unit within the human resources entity, staffed with four Professional posts and one General Service post, all full-time. Being part of the human resources entity, the Unit lacks independence, impartiality and confidentiality, creating risks of conflicts of interest (e.g. staff may be required to disclose case details before the International Labour Organization Administrative Tribunal), making it unsuitable as a substitute for an ombudsman function.

62. Therefore, the Inspector expresses serious concerns and requests IAEA to implement the recommendation from the 2015 JIU report to establish its own internal stand-alone ombudsman and mediation function to give its workforce access to professional ombudsman and mediation services.

B. Policy framework, mandate and terms of reference

63. The ombudsman and mediation functions operate under a policy framework comprising provisions in staff regulations and rules, terms of reference, standard operating procedures and, in some cases, mediation-specific or other policies.

64. A foundational component of this framework is the terms of reference, which formally establish the mandate and scope of the function. Eight²⁰ out of eleven ombudsman and/or mediation functions have approved terms of reference. Exceptions include UNESCO, UNRWA and ICAO. Where terms of reference exist, they are often outdated.

65. The Inspector stresses the importance of ensuring that terms of reference remain relevant, and reflective of evolving mandates and operational realities. She reiterates recommendation 1 of the 2015 JIU review²¹ and urges organizations to implement it at the earliest. Furthermore, the Inspector underlines the need for organizations without terms of reference to develop and adopt them.

66. The following recommendation is intended to enhance transparency and accountability.

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations with an internal stand-alone ombudsman and mediation function who have not yet done so should, by the end of 2027, develop and adopt formal terms of reference in consultation with the function and other relevant stakeholders, including staff representatives.

67. Many ombudsman functions maintain standard operating procedures to operationalize their services. The Standards of Practice for United Nations System Ombudsman and Mediators,²² updated in 2023, provide a common foundation. In terms of mediation-specific guidance, only a few (Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes, UNHCR, WFP and WHO) have dedicated instruments such as mediation rules, codes of conduct or policies.

68. In the view of the Inspector, sustained attention to the continued validity, clarity and accessibility of these documents will be essential for maintaining the independence, credibility and effectiveness of the function.

²⁰ UNOMS, Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes, FAO, ILO, UNHCR, WFP, WHO and WIPO.

²¹ The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, in consultation with staff representatives and the existing Ombudsmen, should review, update and disseminate across their respective organizations the terms of reference of the ombudsman, giving due consideration to the direction provided by the present report and using a staff-management consultation mechanism.

²² www.un.org/ombudsman/sites/www.un.org.ombudsman/files/standards-of-practice-network-en.pdf.

Core responsibilities

69. The core responsibilities of the ombudsman and mediation functions are broadly consistent across the system and typically include informal conflict resolution, mediation, coaching, referral and the identification of systemic trends. The mandate of the function has evolved in recent years, reflecting changing organizational needs and an increasing emphasis on early conflict prevention and a harmonious workplace culture.

70. In all organizations, the mandate of the ombudsman and mediation function extends beyond staff to encompass the affiliated workforce, marking a notable shift from 2015, when access was mostly restricted to staff.

71. In the case of the United Nations Secretariat, this expansion was formalized through General Assembly resolution [78/248](#), enabling the affiliated workforce to access the services of UNOMS within existing resources. All other organizations with an ombudsman and mediation function reported similar inclusion. The Inspector considers this a good practice given the clearly disadvantaged and unprotected environment in which the affiliated workforce operates, lacking access to the formal justice system.

C. Professional standards and best practices

72. The Standards of Practice for United Nations System Ombudsman and Mediators, developed through the Network of United Nations System Ombudsman and Mediators, draw upon international best practices, including International Ombuds Association standards²³ and the 2015 JIU report.

73. There is no uniform approach to recruiting ombudsmen and mediators across United Nations system organizations. Organizations consider a combination of education and professional experience in fields such as alternative dispute resolution, public administration, law, social sciences and human resources as a solid basis for selection to ombudsman and mediation roles. This is often combined with desirable training or certification in informal dispute resolution.

74. Only ILO and UPU include certification or accreditation as an ombudsman practitioner among their eligibility criteria. For the Ombudsman of the United Nations Funds and Programmes, FAO, ICAO, UNHCR and WHO, it remains a desirable criterion in the selection process. For UNOMS, UNRWA, UNESCO, WFP and WIPO, certification or accreditation is neither a requirement nor a desired criterion.

²³ International Ombuds Association Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics.

VI. Independence of the ombudsman and mediation function

A. Independence as a prerequisite for effectiveness

75. Independence is a foundational principle for an effective ombudsman and mediation function. Its credibility and value depend on institutional and operational independence. Without it, the function cannot serve as a neutral, confidential resource or contribute meaningfully to early conflict resolution and a healthy workplace environment.

76. The principle of independence is articulated in numerous standards and resolutions, including the Secretary-General's bulletin on terms of reference for the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services ([ST/SGB/2016/7](#)) and the Standards of Practice for United Nations System Ombudsman and Mediators. Institutionally, it requires that the ombudsman office not be subordinate to any management unit, and that the head of the function report directly to the executive head of the organization. Operational independence is characterized by sole discretion in managing cases, the ability to act free from interference, and the authority to determine the scope and manner of engagement with staff concerns.

77. In its 2015 report, JIU recognized that the absence of full independence, either perceived or actual, undermines the ombudsman's ability to be effective. The present review reaffirms that independence remains a prerequisite not only for effective service delivery but also for the integrity of the broader system of administration of justice. Personnel may be reluctant to seek assistance from an ombudsman perceived as aligned with management or constrained in the ability to act. This undermines the early resolution of conflicts and can contribute to a culture of mistrust or disengagement.

78. Independence also enables the ombudsman to surface broader systemic issues and advise leadership accordingly. For this role to be effective, the ombudsman must hold a sufficiently senior position and have direct and unimpeded access to senior leadership.

79. Independence must be protected through formal provisions and continuously reinforced in practice. Best practices include transparent and inclusive selection processes involving staff representatives, term limits and post-employment restrictions. Organizations that fail to ensure the independence of their ombudsman and mediation function risk weakening the credibility and trust essential to informal conflict resolution.

B. Assessment of independence

1. Institutional positioning

80. Most organizations reference independence in their terms of reference or equivalent documents. In some organizations,²⁴ independence is explicitly defined, highlighting that the function is separate from management and that all case-related decisions lie solely with the ombudsman.

81. In others,²⁵ references to independence are more general, without outlining specific institutional safeguards. In the view of the Inspector, clearly defining and operationalizing the principle of independence in governing documents is essential to reinforcing the integrity and institutional positioning of the ombudsman and mediation function. **The Inspector suggests that organizations review the relevant documents with a view to defining the independence of the function in institutional and operational terms.**

²⁴ Such as UNOMS, the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes, WFP, WHO and WIPO.

²⁵ Such as ICAO, ILO, UNHCR and UNRWA.

2. Level of position

82. The level of the position held by the head of the ombudsman and mediation function varies across organizations. At the most senior level, the head of UNOMS is appointed at the Assistant Secretary-General level.

83. Among the organizations with dedicated ombudsman offices, the head of the function is at the D-1 level: the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes and the ombudsmen for UNHCR, WFP and WHO. UNHCR downgraded this position to the P-5 level in 2025 due to dramatic funding constraints. A further seven organizations, including FAO, ICAO, ILO and UNRWA, place the head of the function at the P-5 level.

3. Selection and appointment

84. The independence of the ombudsman and mediation function is significantly influenced by the procedures governing the selection and appointment of its head. This area was identified in the 2015 JIU report as the most critical in need of improvement.

85. The authority to appoint the head of the ombudsman function rests with the executive head in all organizations. In nine organizations,²⁶ staff representatives are involved in the selection process. This participation takes various forms, from full membership on the selection panel to participation in an observer capacity. In a few organizations (such as funds and programmes, UPU and UNRWA), staff representatives are not involved at all.

4. Dismissal/removal

86. In all organizations, the decision to dismiss or remove the head of the ombudsman function rests with the executive head. While this is a common arrangement, it can present a risk if not counterbalanced by procedural safeguards. Staff involvement in dismissal procedures is rare. Only three organizations (ICAO, ILO and WFP) formally involve or consult staff representatives. Introducing structured procedures, including staff involvement, would provide additional institutional protection and reinforce the independence of the role.

87. The following recommendation is intended to enhance the transparency and accountability of the selection process of the heads of the ombudsman and mediation functions.

Recommendation 2

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should, by the end of 2027, include the active participation of staff representatives in the selection and appointment process of the heads of their ombudsman and mediation functions, as well as in decisions concerning their dismissal or removal.

5. Term limits

88. Term limits are widely recognized as a good practice for safeguarding the independence of the ombudsman and mediation function. Most of the heads of the ombudsman and mediation functions have term limits of four to five years, with several allowing renewal for one additional term. Two organizations, ICAO and UNRWA, have no term limits in place, creating a potential risk to independence by

²⁶ United Nations Secretariat, FAO, ICAO, ILO, UNHCR, UNESCO, WFP, WHO and WIPO.

allowing indefinite service at the discretion of the executive head. **The Inspector suggests that ICAO and UNRWA introduce term limits for the heads of their ombudsman and mediation function at the earliest.**

6. Post-employment restrictions

89. Post-employment restrictions serve as a complementary safeguard to prevent conflicts of interest and protect the impartiality of the function. Most organizations prohibit heads of the ombudsman function from taking up further employment within the same organization following the end of their term. ICAO and UNRWA do not apply such restrictions.

90. The following recommendation is intended to enhance transparency and accountability.

Recommendation 3

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should, by the end of 2027, establish term limits of a minimal duration of four years for renewable terms and a maximum duration of seven years for non-renewable terms for the heads of their ombudsman and mediation functions, with a post-employment restriction within the same organization.

7. Consecutive contracts during one term

91. In some organizations (FAO, ICAO, ILO and WHO), the term of office of the head of the ombudsman and mediation function is split into several consecutive contracts in addition to an initial probationary period. The Inspector considers this a serious impediment to their independence and to security of tenure. She is of the view that the organizations concerned need to discontinue this practice. Similar concerns were expressed in the JIU review of the ethics function in the United Nations system ([JIU/REP/2021/5](#)).

92. A good practice observed in nine organizations, including the United Nations Secretariat, UNHCR and WFP, is the issuance of a single contract covering the entire term. Ensuring that the contract aligns with the full duration of the designated term reinforces the stability and operational independence of the role.

93. The following recommendation is intended to enhance transparency and accountability.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should, with immediate effect, ensure that the contracts of newly appointed heads of ombudsman and mediation functions are issued for a full term.

8. Performance evaluation

94. Approaches to performance evaluation of the head of the ombudsman and mediation function vary widely. In some organizations, such as the United Nations Secretariat, UNDP and WHO, the head of the function signs an annual compact with the executive head, which serves as the primary performance assessment tool.

95. In contrast, FAO, ICAO, UNHCR, UNRWA and WIPO apply standard internal performance management frameworks that involve direct supervisors or senior leadership. The use of these systems risks undermining independence if not carefully adapted to the unique character of the ombudsman role.²⁷ As noted in the 2015 JIU report, subjecting an ombudsman to the regular performance evaluation processes applied to staff disregards the distinct nature of the function and can expose the incumbent to undue influence or retaliation, thereby compromising the neutrality and credibility of the role. Therefore, **the Inspector requests the organizations concerned to implement recommendation 7 of the 2015 JIU report at the earliest.**

9. Reporting lines

96. A direct reporting line of the head of the ombudsman and mediation function to the executive head is a critical determinant of institutional independence. This applies to all organizations except ILO, given the latter's tripartite structure. Furthermore, a few ombudsmen (UNOMS, WFP, WHO and WIPO) also report to their governing bodies through the presentation of annual reports.

10. Access to senior management groups

97. Access to senior management and related groups represents a key channel of communication and information-sharing. The heads of only six functions (UNOMS, Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes, ICAO, UNHCR, UNRWA and WHO) have access to senior leadership meetings, typically as an observer or ex officio participant. **The Inspector suggests that the executive heads who have not yet done so ensure access of the heads of the function to senior management groups.**

²⁷ [JIU/REP/2015/6](#), para. 124.

VII. Activities and services of the ombudsman and mediation function

A. Activities and services

98. There is still a lack of clarity among personnel regarding the activities and services provided under the function's mandate. Furthermore, as responsibilities have evolved over time and continue to evolve, new activities and services have been and are being added. This expansion highlights the need to clearly outline and explain the full range of activities and services.

99. As illustrated on the UNOMS web page under the "Our Services" section, the activities and services provided can be broadly grouped into three main categories: services to individual visitors; services to groups and teams; and services for the organization.

100. Services for the organization relate primarily to the function's reporting and feedback relationship with the organization it serves. Organizations are informed of recurring systemic issues and trends, enabling them to make informed decisions, and revise and thus improve policies, procedures and initiatives.

101. Mediation is another important service that is offered by most functions as an integral part of their mandate. Mediation can be initiated at the request of the parties involved or referred to the ombudsman and mediation function at any time and at any level during the formal appeal process. Mediation can conclude with a legally binding and enforceable agreement which may include financial compensation.

1. Main issue categories

102. The workplace concerns fall into nine main issue categories and include several sub-issues. These relate to: (a) compensation, benefits and entitlements; (b) supervisory relationships; (c) peer and colleague relationships; (d) job and career; (e) prohibited conduct and compliance; (f) safety, health, well-being and physical environment; (g) services/administration; (h) organizational, leadership and management issues; and (i) values, ethics and standards. The categories are based on the agreed definitions developed by the Network of United Nations System Ombudsman and Mediators.

2. Cross-functional collaboration

103. While the ombudsman and mediation function operates independently, it does not conduct its activities in isolation. Effective cross-functional collaboration and exchange with other functions in the organization is not only necessary for achieving its objectives but also highly beneficial for the culture and working environment of organizations. Interaction within the organizations usually occurs with departments responsible for human resources, legal matters, internal oversight, ethics and risk management, and with staff representatives.

3. Annual reporting

104. Providing an annual report is a core responsibility of the ombudsman and mediation function as a "service to the organization". The annual reports are a key instrument through which activities, including systemic insights, are communicated. All 10 stand-alone internal ombudsman and mediation functions issue an annual report. Of these, only five (UNOMS, Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes, WFP, WHO and WIPO) present the annual report to their governing body or legislative organ. The Inspector considers the lack of presentation of the annual report to governing bodies a serious lacuna. It prevents their consideration of ombudsman- and mediation-related matters that may affect the culture and efficient operation of organizations.

105. The following recommendation is intended to enhance transparency and accountability.

Recommendation 5

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should ensure that, by the end of 2027, the annual reports of their ombudsman and mediation functions are submitted to their respective governing bodies or legislative organs, to enhance transparency and accountability.

4. Management response

106. Official feedback from executive management in response to the annual reports remains uncommon. Only a few organizations issue management responses. Notable examples include the United Nations Secretariat (via the report of the Secretary-General on the administration of justice), WFP and WHO. As noted in the 2015 JIU report, not addressing systemic issues in a formal context is a missed opportunity for management on their follow-up. Strengthening both the dissemination of and engagement with the ombudsman's findings remains an area for further improvement.

107. The Inspector considers the issuance of a management response to be a good practice, as it fosters accountability and signals leadership commitment to addressing systemic concerns and supporting informal conflict resolution. Therefore, **the Inspector suggests that organizations issue management responses to the annual reports of their ombudsman and mediation function for presentation to their governing bodies.**

5. Public availability of annual reports

108. In most cases, the annual reports are made publicly available through the official websites. This is the case for UNOMS and the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes, as well as for FAO, ILO, WFP, WHO and WIPO. This practice enhances transparency, promotes broader awareness of workplace issues and strengthens the credibility and visibility of the function. By contrast, some organizations (UNESCO, UNHCR and UPU) treat these reports as internal documents.

109. The following recommendation is intended to enhance transparency and accountability.

Recommendation 6

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations who have not yet done so should, by the end of 2027, make the annual reports of their ombudsman and mediation functions publicly available to enhance transparency and accountability and promote broader awareness of the function.

B. Outreach activities and promotion of the “informal first” approach

1. “Informal first” approach

110. The “informal first” approach is a core principle within United Nations organizations. It advocates the resolution of workplace conflicts through informal channels. This approach is grounded in the recognition that early, informal conflict resolution can help reduce workplace tensions, preserve working relationships and avoid unnecessary escalation into formal disputes.

111. The General Assembly has repeatedly underscored the importance of informal conflict resolution. In its resolution [77/260](#), it requested the Secretary-General to strengthen staff awareness of the option to engage with UNOMS to explore informal resolution pathways, including mediation, as a first step, where feasible, prior to filing a formal complaint.

112. In response, a significant step was taken in 2023 through the memorandum entitled “Informal conflict resolution: the preferred first step in resolving workplace concerns”. The memorandum reaffirmed the institutional commitment of the United Nations Secretariat to informal mechanisms and encouraged managers and staff alike to utilize the services of UNOMS as a primary step in addressing concerns. UNOMS reported an increase in outreach and engagement with senior leadership following the dissemination of the memorandum.

2. Informal First Champions initiative

113. To further embed the “informal first” approach into organizational culture, UNOMS launched the Informal First Champions initiative in 2024. Inter-agency collaboration through the Network of United Nations System Ombudsman and Mediators has played an instrumental role in advancing the campaign system-wide. Although the level of adoption varies, the approach has gained broad recognition as a good practice across the system.

3. Mediation pledge and similar initiatives

114. The Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes established a similar model through the “mediation pledge”. Under this initiative, the executive heads of UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS and UN-Women formally committed to consistently considering mediation as a resolution pathway for workplace conflict.

115. Other organizations have launched targeted initiatives to reinforce the “informal first” approach. UNHCR introduced a multi-year mediation campaign entitled “Resolution is more than a solution”. At WIPO, a series of guidance materials were developed to steer staff towards appropriate informal and formal mechanisms.

4. Outreach efforts and raising of awareness of the function

116. Compared with 2015, awareness of ombudsman and mediation services has increased considerably, due largely to comprehensive and sustained outreach and awareness-raising efforts. In organizations with decentralized operations, regional and field outreach is a critical dimension. Most offices reported undertaking a wide range of activities, including webinars, in-person briefings, knowledge cafés, conflict resolution training sessions and participation in staff induction programmes and staff representatives’ meetings.

5. Tone at the top

117. The tone set by senior leadership also plays a critical role in encouraging the use of informal services. While more progress is needed in this area, positive examples were observed in organizations where executive heads or senior managers publicly endorsed informal conflict resolution as a first response option.

6. Collaboration with internal stakeholders

118. Strategic collaboration with internal stakeholders has further reinforced outreach efforts. In addition, several formal system actors actively promote informal pathways. The Office of Staff Legal Assistance encourages clients to consider informal options early in the process and works closely with UNOMS. The Management Advice and Evaluation Section has also institutionalized informal-first messaging in its formal intake processes.

VIII. Capacity and performance

A. Resources and capacity (human and financial)

119. The staffing of ombudsman and mediation functions varies widely. Most organizations maintain relatively small offices, typically staffed by a single ombudsperson at the P-5 or D-1 level. In some cases, limited administrative support is provided, often on a part-time basis. Based on 2023 data, 5 of the 11 ombudsman and mediation functions operated with only one ombudsman: FAO, ILO, UNRWA, WHO and WIPO.

120. In contrast, a limited number of organizations, such as UNHCR, WFP, UNOMS and the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes, have established larger ombudsman and mediation structures.

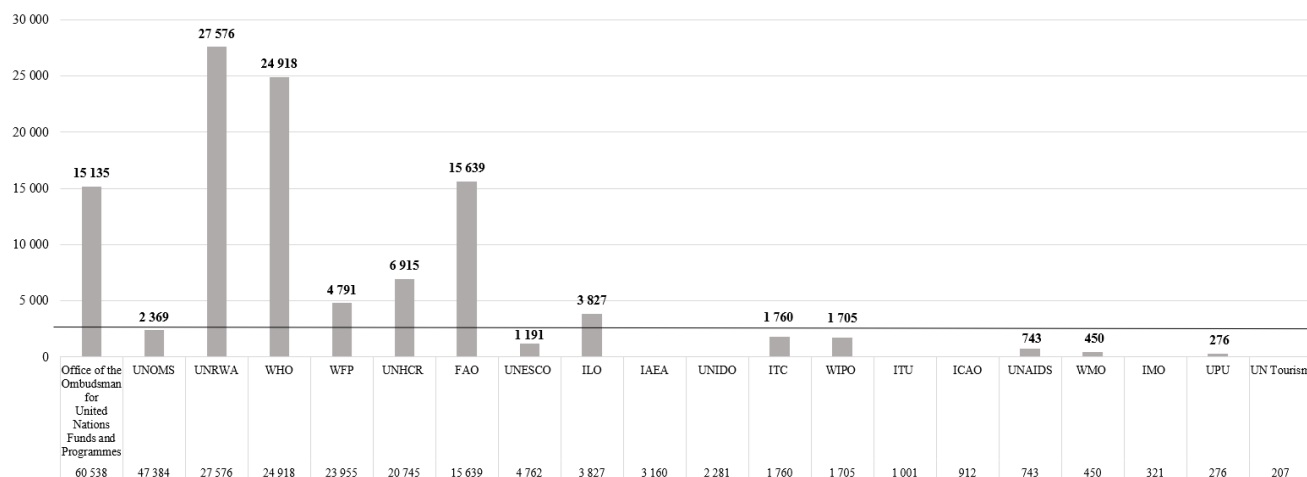
121. The review examined whether current staffing levels align with organizational needs and whether capacities are adequate to deliver mandated services effectively and equitably.

122. Figure I provides comparative data on staffing ratios and personnel (both staff and non-staff) served per ombudsman. Organizations are arranged in descending order according to the overall workforce size. The data for UNOMS include personnel from the United Nations Secretariat,²⁸ including UNCTAD, UNEP, UN-Habitat and UNODC. Similarly, the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes is treated as a single function supporting the combined workforce of UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS and UN-Women.

123. Three organizations (ITC, UNESCO and WMO) are presented differently due to their unique structural arrangements. ITC and WMO are serviced by UNOMS; however, for the sake of comparison, each is counted as having one ombudsperson, even though this does not reflect the actual allocation of resources. UNESCO relies on a college of mediators composed of four retired staff members, with its Ethics Office assuming several ombudsman responsibilities.

²⁸ See [A/79/584](#), figure II, which uses the seven-entity grouping approach: corporate service entities; field-focused entities; Headquarters-based entities; offices away from Headquarters; peace operations, which include peacekeeping operations; special political missions and other political presences; regional economic commissions; and the resident coordinator system.

Figure I
Number of personnel served by one staff ombudsperson at the Director or Professional level, 2023



Source: Prepared by JIU.

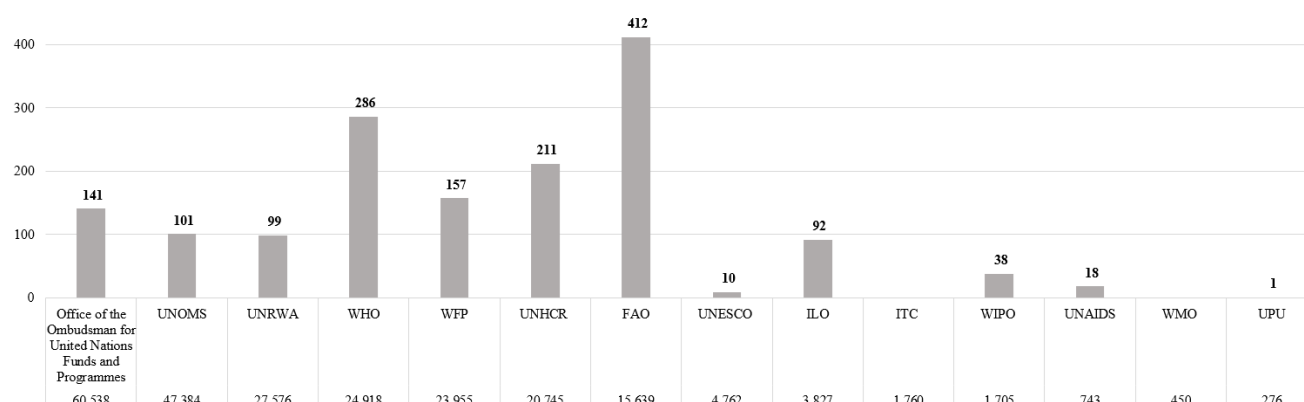
1. 2015 Joint Inspection Unit benchmarks

124. In its 2015 report, JIU provided a broad benchmark suggesting that organizations with approximately 2,500 staff may want to consider employing a full-time ombudsman. (This threshold is represented by the red line in figure I.) In addition, it suggested that organizations with 1,000 or more staff may want to consider opting for part-time arrangements or shared services. UNRWA, IAEA and UNESCO were identified as being on the threshold of requiring an ombudsman function.²⁹ Since then, UNRWA has established its function, doing so in 2021, while in UNESCO the establishment is pending. IAEA, despite a workforce of 3,160, has not yet done so.

125. Figure II presents the average number of cases handled per ombudsperson at the Director or Professional level in 2023. While this metric offers additional perspectives on caseload distribution relative to staffing capacity, data gaps remain, such as the unavailability of disaggregated data for ITC and WMO. At UNESCO, the Ethics Office handled approximately 300 cases, compared with 30 cases covered by the college of mediators.

²⁹ JIU/REP/2015/6, para. 42.

Figure II
Average caseload per ombudsperson at the Director or Professional level, 2023



Source: Prepared by JIU.

2. Adequacy of resources

126. In its 2015 report, JIU noted that one ombudsperson could manage up to 200 cases annually, depending on other responsibilities. The scope of activities has expanded since then. Staffing adequacy must therefore be assessed in relation to the full range of mandated activities. In addition, effective service delivery requires consideration of geographical distribution, linguistic capabilities and time zone coverage, and the ability to reach personnel in field operations and remote duty stations.

127. The adequacy of resources allocated to ombudsman and mediation functions across the United Nations system remains a widespread concern. Most ombudsman and mediation functions operate with limited financial and human resources and reported that resources were insufficient or only marginally adequate to meet the responsibilities. Several offices indicated that even where budgets had remained stable, current allocations did not support the full implementation of mandates.

128. The Inspector expresses concern that, in the current climate of financial uncertainty, these already constrained budgets may be further reduced, with adverse consequences for outreach, regional coverage and mediation capacity. The Inspector is of the view that such constraints may be particularly detrimental at a time when reliance on informal resolution mechanisms is more critical than ever.

129. In some organizations, financial pressures have resulted in decisions to downgrade the ombudsman function (UNHCR) or leave key posts vacant (WHO). These developments risk undermining the effectiveness of informal conflict resolution mechanisms.

130. The Inspector is mindful of the fact that many organizations are grappling with the effect of severe funding constraints, which lead to budget cuts, including downsizing and downgrading. She suggests a prudent approach, as any financial savings may result in an increased cost elsewhere. Furthermore, they may have a negative impact on organizational culture and the workplace environment at a time when the engagement of personnel is needed more than ever.

131. While recognizing ongoing funding constraints, the Inspector emphasizes that the adequacy of the resourcing of the ombudsman and mediation functions must be reassessed in light of their evolving mandates and the increasing expectations with regard to their activities and services.

132. The following recommendation is intended to enhance the effectiveness of the ombudsman and mediation function.

Recommendation 7

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should review the human and financial resources of their respective ombudsman and mediation functions regularly to ensure that the functions are adequately equipped to fulfil their mandate. This review should take into account geographical dispersion of the workforce, linguistic diversity and the full range of responsibilities.

B. Process for determination and approval of resources

133. Approaches to determining the human and financial resources required for the ombudsman and mediation function vary significantly across organizations and reflect a mixture of centralized budgetary processes, needs-based assessments and cost-sharing mechanisms.

1. Funding arrangements for the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes

134. In 2020, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS and UN-Women signed a memorandum of understanding on the budgetary process for the annual budget of the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes, including the sharing of the cost (based on an annual head count at each agency).

135. Under the memorandum of understanding, the Office of the Ombudsman proposes a draft annual budget by 30 September each year, which must be agreed by all five organizations by 30 November. UNDP then issues a consolidated budget, with final cost apportionments and invoicing, before 31 December. The arrangement is contingent on timely payments, with delays affecting the Office's ability to provide services.

136. While the funding arrangement appears sound in theory, its practical application is uneven. For example, all posts of the Office are allocated by UNDP and the cost is shared among the five agencies. Two mediator positions, however, are directly funded by UNICEF and not cost-shared.

137. Similar issues regarding the resourcing of the Office have been identified by two different assessments. A 2023 UNDP audit noted, among other things, delays in the payments to be made by UNDP which could have an impact on the Office's ability to provide services. A subsequent 2024 external evaluation made several recommendations to ensure that the Office is adequately funded.

138. The following recommendation is intended to enhance control and compliance with regard to the funding of the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes.

Recommendation 8

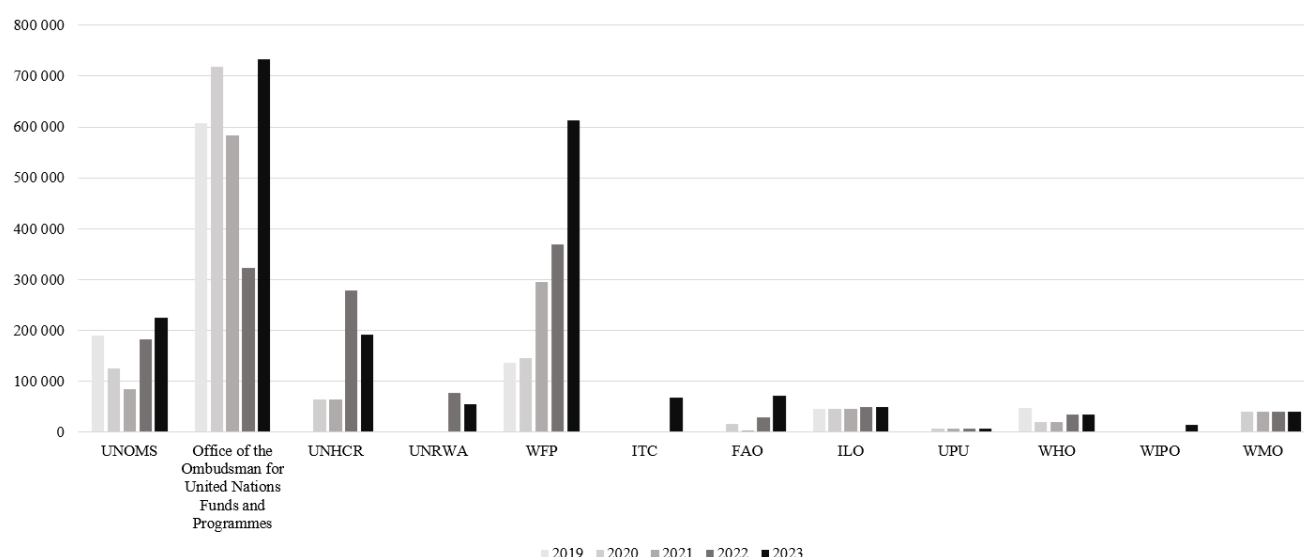
The Executive Boards of UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS and UN-Women should ensure that the office of their ombudsman is provided with the required resources in line with the provisions of the memorandum of understanding.

139. If the issues around the funding situation of the Office continue, the Inspector is of the view that other options need to be explored. One option she suggests is to integrate the budget of the Office into the UNOMS budget structure. Once the UNOMS budget is adopted, the five organizations would need to provide their share.

140. Other organizations apply diverse approaches to determining the resource needs of their functions. While the decision-making process for resource allocations varies in terms of structure and degree of internal consultation, the final authority for the proposed programme budget typically rests with executive heads and the final approval with governing bodies.

Figure III

Budget of the ombudsman function (without staff cost)



Source: Prepared by JIU.

2. Allocation of a dedicated budget to the ombudsman and mediation function

141. All ombudsman and mediation functions with a dedicated budget have full authority over the management of resources. A few functions, however, have no dedicated resources at their disposal.³⁰ A dedicated budget is considered essential to preserve effectiveness, impartiality and relevance in a changing work environment. **The Inspector recommends that the ombudsman and mediation functions be granted a dedicated budget with full authority to utilize and manage their allocated financial and human resources.**

³⁰ ICAO, ILO, UNESCO and WIPO.

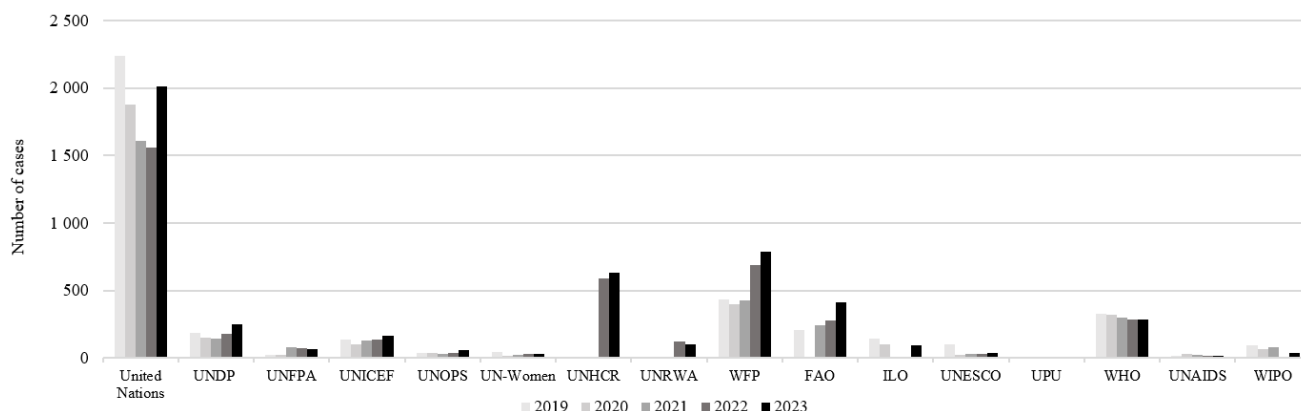
C. Case management

142. Casework constitutes a core element of the ombudsman and mediation function. The analysis of case data provides insight into the workload of ombudsman offices across organizations.

143. Ten functions³¹ report annual case volumes in their annual reports. Of these, seven³² also report on the number of visitors served. Since a single case may involve multiple parties, for the purposes of the present review and to support cross-organizational comparison, the number of cases has been used as the main reference point.

144. Figure IV presents the annual case volumes for organizations between 2019 and 2023. UNOMS consistently reported the highest number of cases, exceeding 1,500 annually, with a slight decline observed over the five-year period. Several entities experienced significant increases in case volumes during this period, most notably UNFPA, FAO, WFP and UNOPS.

Figure IV
Annual case counts by organization, 2019–2023



Source: Prepared by JIU.

D. Assessment of performance

145. The performance and effectiveness of the ombudsman and mediation function are assessed to varying degrees. Only 12 organizations³³ reported undertaking some form of performance assessment; the methodologies, frequency and benchmarks differed significantly.

146. Most organizations rely on internal mechanisms such as staff surveys, user feedback or standard internal evaluation tools. Several organizations, including WFP, UNESCO and WIPO, reported having no formal assessment of the ombudsman and mediation function in place. **The Inspector recommends that organizations establish transparent and inclusive mechanisms to assess the performance of their ombudsman and mediation functions, in order to build confidence in their relevance and effectiveness.**

³¹ UNOMS, Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes, UNHCR, WFP, FAO, ILO, UNESCO, UPU, WHO and WIPO.

³² WFP, FAO, ILO, UNESCO, UPU, WHO and WIPO.

³³ United Nations Secretariat, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS, UN-Women, UNHCR, UNRWA, FAO, ICAO, ILO and WHO.

IX. System-wide cooperation and coherence

147. In its 2015 report, JIU deemed interaction with peers in other organizations essential for sharing experiences, developing best practices and ensuring coherence.

A. International Ombuds Association

148. One of the existing professional networks is the International Ombuds Association, which is seen as a valuable reference point for professional standards. Interviewees stressed that its value for globally operating international organizations such as the United Nations is limited due to its focus on the private and academic sectors in North America, where most of its membership is based.

B. Network of Ombuds and Mediators of Multilateral Organizations, formerly Network of Ombudsmen and Mediators of the United Nations and Related International Organizations

149. Another platform is the Network of Ombuds and Mediators of Multilateral Organizations, formerly the Network of Ombudsmen and Mediators of the United Nations and Related International Organizations (UNARIO),³⁴ which has existed since 2007 and brings together ombudsman practitioners from multilateral intergovernmental organizations. It is considered by United Nations ombudsmen and mediators mostly as an informal forum for exchange. The Network has not issued any benchmarks or standards of relevance for the United Nations system.

150. Given the expansion, JIU suggested in its 2015 report that “the ombudsman practitioners in the United Nations system organizations create a subgroup within UNARIO so that specific United Nations-related issues can have a higher profile and receive the necessary attention”.

C. Network of United Nations System Ombudsman and Mediators

151. To address this gap, the Network of United Nations System Ombudsman and Mediators was created in 2019 and is open to all organizations that are members of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination. Members of the network liaise on cross-cutting workplace matters and focus on harmonizing informal conflict resolution practices. The network has facilitated the development of best practices, including standards of practice, the “informal first” campaign and standardized case classification and closure practices. It has also established working groups on mediation, accountability, restorative processes, artificial intelligence in conflict resolution and case cost calculation methodologies.

152. The Inspector considers the creation of this network a positive development, aligning with the suggestion in the 2015 JIU report. It provides a dedicated space for United Nations-specific issues. In the view of the Inspector, the achievements of the network represent commendable progress toward system-wide coherence, the harmonization of practices and the development of applicable standards and best practices to meet the unique needs of the United Nations.

³⁴ The name of the network was changed by its members in September 2025.

Overview of actions to be taken by participating organizations on the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit

		Intended impact	Participating organizations of the Joint Inspection Unit																											
			United Nations ^a	UNAIDS	UNCTAD	ITC	UNDP	UNEP	UNFPA	UN-Habitat	UNHCR	UNICEF	UNODC	UNOPS	UNRWA	UN-Women	WFP	FAO	IAEA	ICAO	ILO	IMO	ITU	UNESCO	UNIDO	UN Tourism	UPU	WHO	WIPO	WMO
			For action	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Report	For information		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recommendation 1		a												E						E										
Recommendation 2		a					E		E		E	E		E	E	E		E						E			E	E		
Recommendation 3		a												E					E	E		E					E	E		
Recommendation 4		a					E		E		E		E	E	E		E		E	E			E				E			
Recommendation 5		a								E				E			E		E	E		E	E			E		E		
Recommendation 6		a								E												E	E			E		E		E
Recommendation 7		f	E				E		E		E	E		E	E	E	E		E	E		E	E		E	E	E	E	E	
Recommendation 8		e					L		L		L		L		L															

Legend:

- L:** Recommendation for decision by legislative organ
E: Recommendation for action by executive head
☐: Recommendation does not require action by this organization

Intended impact:

a: Enhanced transparency and accountability; **b:** Dissemination of good/best practices; **c:** Enhanced coordination and cooperation; **d:** Strengthened coherence and harmonization;
e: Enhanced control and compliance; **f:** Enhanced effectiveness; **g:** Significant financial savings; **h:** Enhanced efficiency; **i:** Other.

^a As listed in ST/SGB/2015/3.