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Report of the Ethics Office of UNICEF for 2020

Summary

The present report is submitted to the UNICEF Executive Board in accordance with Executive Board decision 2014/12. The report was reviewed and recommendations were provided by the Ethics Panel of the United Nations, as envisaged in section 5.4 of the Secretary-General's bulletin on United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes ([ST/SGB/2007/11](#)).

The annual report covers each of the mandated areas of work for the Office: (a) standard-setting and policy support; (b) training, education and outreach; (c) confidential advice and guidance; (d) the Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure Programme; (e) protection of staff against retaliation; and (f) participation in the Ethics Panel of the United Nations and the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations. In accordance with Executive Board decision 2014/12, the report also presents recommendations to management to strengthen the organizational culture of integrity and compliance. The report covers activities relating to UNICEF staff and services provided to UNICEF staff, as well as consultants and other non-staff, to the extent applicable.

* [E/ICEF/2021/9](#).



I. Introduction

1. The present report, the twelfth since the establishment of the UNICEF Ethics Office in December 2007, covers the period 1 January to 31 December 2020. The report, prepared in accordance with the Secretary-General's bulletin on United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes (ST/SGB/2007/11), is submitted to the Executive Board at its annual session in 2021.

II. Overview and general information on the activities of the Ethics Office

2. UNICEF is present in more than 190 countries and territories around the globe, advocating for the protection of children's rights to help to meet their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to reach their full potential. The Ethics Office provides services to more than 15,000 UNICEF staff members in addition to a non-staff population of more than 5,000.

3. The activities of the Ethics Office were undertaken in the following mandated areas of work during the reporting year:

(a) Provide guidance and policy support to management on ethics standard-setting by reviewing and advising on the rules, policies, procedures and practices of the organization in order to reinforce and promote the highest standards of ethics and integrity as required by the Charter of the United Nations; other applicable staff rules and regulations; the directives of UNICEF; and the standards of conduct for the international civil service;

(b) Raise the awareness of staff regarding the values and expected standards of conduct and procedures of the United Nations, through training and other outreach;

(c) Provide confidential advice and guidance to staff and management, at their request, on ethical issues;

(d) Administer the Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure Programme;

(e) Undertake assigned responsibilities under the UNICEF Policy on Whistle-Blower Protection against Retaliation;

(f) Contribute to harmonized approaches to ethics issues within the United Nations system.

4. Globally, the year 2020 was marked by unprecedented challenges due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. However, it was also a year of exciting transformation and transition for the Ethics Office, which presented potential for impact and growth. The Ethics Office: (1) was established as an independent organizational unit headed by a Director instead of a Principal Adviser; (2) generated a greater number of positive responses in the 2020 Global Staff Survey, in particular on trust in handling retaliation-related matters; (3) increased and enhanced collaboration with various new affinity working groups and offices within the organization, championing ethics, organizational transformation and values; and (4) reached more than a third of UNICEF staff members through outreach activities during the annual Ethics Month initiative and other efforts.

5. It is worth noting at the outset that during 2020, the Ethics Office operated with a reduced complement of ethics personnel, not only to support its various work programmes but also to respond to a spike of new activities and institutional demands as a result of the various organizational culture and transformational change initiatives that were under way. Between March 2020 and early February 2021, the Director position was vacant pending completion of the recruitment process. For most

of the reporting period therefore, the entire work programme was supported by three staff members and an interim consultant adviser.

6. In 2018, the UNICEF Executive Director established the Independent Task Force on Workplace Gender-Discrimination, Sexual Harassment, Harassment and Abuse of Authority. The report of the Independent Task Force highlighted, among other issues, that staff felt those who complain about harassment or abuse of authority face repercussions. It further observed that “staff feel that the Ethics Office, while trusted for confidential advice, is “without teeth” when it comes to ensuring protection.” The Independent Task Force specifically recommended that UNICEF must “ensure that staff are protected against retaliation by strengthening the mandate and capabilities of the Ethics Office and safeguarding its independence.” Similarly, the Joint Inspection Unit, in its 2018 review of whistle-blower policies and practices in United Nations system organizations (JIU/REP/2018/4), recommended the strengthening of the mandate and capabilities of the Ethics Office and safeguarding its independence. At its 2019 annual session, the UNICEF Executive Board, in decision 2019/15, called for the implementation of the UNICEF-related recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit.

7. In March 2020, as briefly mentioned above, the Ethics Office was strengthened by establishing an independent unit headed by a Director, Ethics, reporting to the Executive Director substantively (in accordance with existing arrangements) and to the Deputy Executive Director, Management administratively (similar to arrangements followed for the other independent offices).

8. The separation of the Office strengthened institutional independence, which will help to build trust and drive staff engagement with the ethics function. However, this institutional realignment needs to be complemented by corresponding support and resources as the Ethics Office ramps up its activities to respond to the anticipated increase in and new demands for its services; explores other areas for impactful interventions; does additional outreach to field-based and regional constituencies; fills identified institutional or policy gaps, or both; and, most importantly, proactively advises on and addresses potential ethical failures before they ripen into full workplace conflicts, misconduct or other risks. The new Ethics Office will increasingly focus on this preventive aspect of its role, in close coordination with other units and affiliated accountability and oversight offices, to help UNICEF to manage risks early and to provide actionable and practical advice, guidance and assistance to personnel so that they can better identify, assess and resolve their concerns. By detecting and preventing conflicts of interest from materializing and alerting the organization regarding significant risks, the Ethics Office plays a vital role in preventing and mitigating organizational harm and identifying remedies and corrective actions. Ethics is at its best when it helps to prevent ethical failures from occurring.

9. In the most recent Global Staff Survey conducted in 2020, there was a 4 per cent increase in the positive responses (compared to the 2017 survey) on the question of whether staff felt they would be protected from retaliation if they reported misconduct through the appropriate channels. The Office looks forward to continuing to drive this positive momentum and investing in the expansion of training and outreach to raise further awareness of this issue, with the leadership of the new Director, Ethics, requisite support from management and continuing engagement by UNICEF personnel.

10. The Ethics Office was able to reach approximately one-third of UNICEF personnel (more than 6,300) through Ethics Month and other outreach activities. This far-reaching outreach campaign during the year was made possible through the active engagement of more than 300 Ethics Dialogue Facilitators in the country and regional offices. This brings to light the key role played by the Facilitators, who serve as

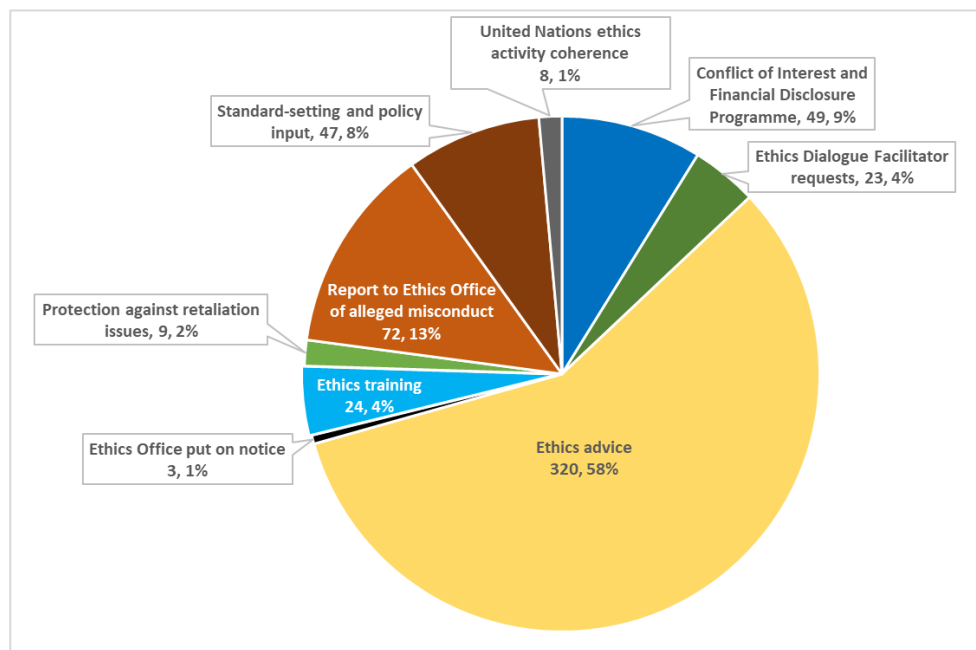
amplifiers and force multipliers at the decentralized levels. With additional resources and support, the Ethics Office will continue to build the capacity of the Facilitators.

11. As shown in the table 1 below, the Ethics Office recorded and responded to 555 requests for services in 2020, compared with 788 requests in 2019 and 738 in 2018. The number of recorded requests for services decreased, which may be due to limited face-to-face interaction among personnel as a result of the pandemic, including limited opportunities to provide in-person training, which has often led to an increase in individual inquiries. However, the Office has seen a spike in engagements provided to division/office-level support for groups of staff, particularly around anti-racism and discrimination-related matters and organizational change efforts. It is worth noting that there has been a significant increase in the number of requests for advice on reporting alleged misconduct at 72 requests in 2020, as compared with 49 in 2019 and 32 in 2018. The Office continued to respond to requests in a timely manner, meeting the seven-day response period set in the Office's standard operating procedure for 99 per cent of advice and guidance requests.

12. As shown in figure I below, of the recorded requests for services in 2020, 58 per cent were requests for confidential ethics advice and guidance; 13 per cent were requests for advice on reporting alleged misconduct; 8 per cent were related to standard-setting and policy input; and another 9 per cent were related to providing guidance on the Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure Programme.

Figure I

Number and percentage of requests for Ethics Office services, by category, 2020



13. In line with the Ethics Office workplan, the areas of emphasis for 2020 activities were as follows: prioritizing the key functions while the position of Director, Ethics, was under recruitment, such as administering the Policy on Whistle-Blower Protection against Retaliation and the Financial Disclosure and Declaration of Interest Statements policy, providing confidential advice and guidance; and conducting outreach based on requests. In addition, following the practice in recent years, the Office organized an institution-wide outreach campaign during Ethics Month with the theme “Ethics in Action”. The campaign involved colleagues from 54 country offices and divisions, and was instrumental in facilitating conversations

on the core values of care and integrity in light of the challenges faced due to COVID-19 and the issues of racism and discrimination.

14. Throughout 2020, the Ethics Office continued to collaborate with the Office of the Executive Director and other key stakeholders to respond to the recommendations made in the 2018 report of the Independent Task Force. In addition to strengthening its institutional independence, the Office implemented mandatory one-on-one conversations with senior leaders upon their onboarding and appointment, to discuss expected conduct as a senior leader and to introduce key policies and procedures. The Ethics Office, as in previous years, continued its strong collaboration with the cross-divisional task team on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, the Child Safeguarding Unit, and the Principal Adviser, Organizational Culture. It was also actively involved in the work of the Task Team on Anti-Racism and Discrimination and looks forward to playing an active role as an independent office in the implementation of the recommendations of the Task Team in 2021.

15. The Ethics Office also collaborated with the Global Staff Association at the global and regional levels, the New York Staff Association and country offices. In addition, until her departure in March 2020, the Principal Adviser, Ethics, met regularly with the Executive Director and the Chief of Staff. Following her departure – and due to the pandemic – the Ethics Office continued to meet with the Chief of Staff virtually.

Table 1
Requests for ethics services, by category, 2018–2020

<i>Category</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2020</i>
Confidential ethics advice ¹	352	409	320
Ethics Panel protection against retaliation appeal matters ²	3	0	0
Ethics Office put on notice ³	38	45	3
Ethics Dialogue Facilitator requests	0	12	23
Ethics training	116	71	24
Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure Programme	70	61	49
General information requests by staff	20	12	0
Press	0	1	0
Protection against retaliation	12	10	9
Report to Ethics Office of alleged misconduct	32	49	72

¹ The Ethics Office counts as a request for confidential ethics advice any individual request for advice and guidance by a staff member or non-staff personnel in relation to a set of facts. In many instances, one request for confidential ethics advice may require multiple communications by email and/or conversations. In other instances, one request for confidential advice may require a single exchange.

² This refers to consultations by the Alternate Chair of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations with its members, in relation to the review of determinations in protection against retaliation cases by member agencies. In essence, the members of the panel exercise a peer-review function in relation to cases that are determined by another member. Such review is triggered upon request by a complainant (staff member or non-staff personnel).

³ This category refers to situations in which the Ethics Office is notified of a particular situation by a staff member or non-staff personnel, but the individual specifically requests the Office not to take any action.

<i>Category</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2020</i>
Standard-setting and policy input	26	47	47
United Nations ethics coherence (consultations within the Ethics Panel)	69	71	8
Total	738	788	555

III. Training, education and outreach

16. During the year, the Ethics Office reached more than 6,300 personnel through ethics training and Ethics Month outreach activities. The goal of the training, education and outreach activities was to continue raising awareness and understanding of the applicable United Nations staff regulations and rules and standards of conduct. In 2020, the emphasis of these activities was addressing the key challenges faced by headquarters, regional and country offices, which included the COVID-19 pandemic, racism and discrimination, and political activities linked to engaging in demonstrations or protests or the use of social media.

A. Mandatory online Ethics and Integrity course

17. All UNICEF personnel are required to complete the UNICEF online course on ethics and integrity. As at 30 January 2021, 93 per cent of active staff members, or 15,081 staff, had completed the course. The Ethics Office is pleased to report that, in collaboration with the United Nations Ethics Office and the Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring, it updated the online course “Ethics and Integrity at UNICEF”, which was launched in December 2020. This updated course addresses concerns previously raised related to accessibility, and now reaches additional personnel and regions. The Office completed a holistic review of the course content to improve information-sharing, reflect updated policies and changes in functions and add more practical case scenarios. This course is mandatory for all UNICEF staff and non-staff personnel, and is available in Arabic, English, French and Spanish.

B. Customized training

18. The Ethics Office conducted 24 customized training and awareness-raising sessions throughout 2020. These trainings covered 6 country offices, 14 headquarters divisions/offices and 4 regional offices. The Office also held one global webinar. Through these customized trainings, the Office reached 1,181 staff members, with one face-to-face training that was completed before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the remainder through remote sessions due to social distancing and travel restrictions.

19. In New York, the Ethics Office held one face-to-face and five virtual ethics sessions. These included ethics inductions for new staff organized by the Division of Human Resources and Division of Communication, and ethics inductions for the global panel of mediators in the Office of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes and for investigation specialists in the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations (OIAI).

C. Ethics Dialogue Facilitators

20. The Ethics Office maintained the global Ethics Dialogue Facilitator programme, which was introduced in 2014 and is based on the train-the-trainer model. Ethics Dialogue Facilitators are nominated by heads of office and serve on a voluntary basis.

The Facilitators help to raise understanding and awareness of ethics and integrity issues in relation to staff conduct by holding regular meetings for all personnel in their respective regional or country office, and facilitating conversations around particular ethics-related topics using case studies and presentations. The Ethics Dialogue Facilitators were a key resource in leading the Ethics Month initiatives in each office and in providing feedback to the Ethics Office.

21. Due to resource constraints, in 2020 the Ethics Office had reduced capacity to conduct periodic and updated training for the Ethics Dialogue Facilitators. During the year, 16 offices nominated additional Facilitators who engaged in pre-training by watching the recordings of interactive trainings. The Ethics Office plans to revamp its communication and monitoring mechanisms to secure up-to-date information on the activity of the more than 300 Facilitators around the globe. In addition, the Ethics Office plans to organize capacity-building sessions and provide updated training and communication materials to the Facilitators.

D. Global campaign: Ethics Month

22. The Ethics Office for the fourth time coordinated and led an outreach campaign during Ethics Month (October 2020), reaching more than 5,133 personnel. The theme was “Ethics in Action” with a focus on the core values of care and integrity. These values were highlighted with specific reference to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic as well in response to the recent global protests and movements against racism and discrimination. The Ethics Office provided guidance and support to the Facilitators and human resource focal points to initiate conversations on the selected themes in the country and regional offices and at headquarters. As a result, 179 Facilitators and human resource focal points organized more than 60 sessions in 54 offices and divisions.

23. In an effort to ensure staff engagement and reflection, offices and divisions were invited to share a video message with staff on the meaning of care and integrity in light of the challenges brought about the pandemic and the issues of racism and discrimination. This initiative led to the submission of recordings from personnel in 10 offices and divisions, which included interesting and creative messages related to their understanding of the values and how they should be practiced. This effort made engagement more authentic, organic and relatable for UNICEF personnel.

24. On Global Ethics Day, 21 October 2020, the Ethics Office organized a global webinar that attracted the attendance of close to 600 personnel. Similar to the theme of the month, the webinar focused on the values of care and integrity in light of the pandemic and the issues of racism and discrimination. The panellists were drawn from the Division of Human Resources, the Global Staff Association, the Office of the Executive Director, and the Task Team on Anti-Racism and Discrimination, and included the Principal Adviser, Organizational Culture. The participation of panellists from different offices provided the opportunity to address the questions and multifaceted concerns raised by the participants.

E. Communications and outreach materials

25. The Ethics Office continued to raise its profile in terms of internal communications to UNICEF personnel around the globe. The Office maintained an internal social media presence via its intranet site and via Yammer (the UNICEF internal equivalent of Twitter). The Office updated the document “Addressing workplace issues in UNICEF: A roadmap on where to go and when”, which provides guidance to all UNICEF personnel on seeking support, advice, guidance and, ultimately, resolution in cases of workplace conflict. The document reflects updated policies and guidance as well as changes in the relevant offices and functions. It is accessible to all UNICEF personnel in electronic format in four languages.

IV. Advice and guidance

26. The Ethics Office provides confidential advice and guidance to help personnel facing ethical dilemmas. The Office acts as a sounding board for planned actions to address concerns or to help personnel to find the resources they need to address the issues they face.

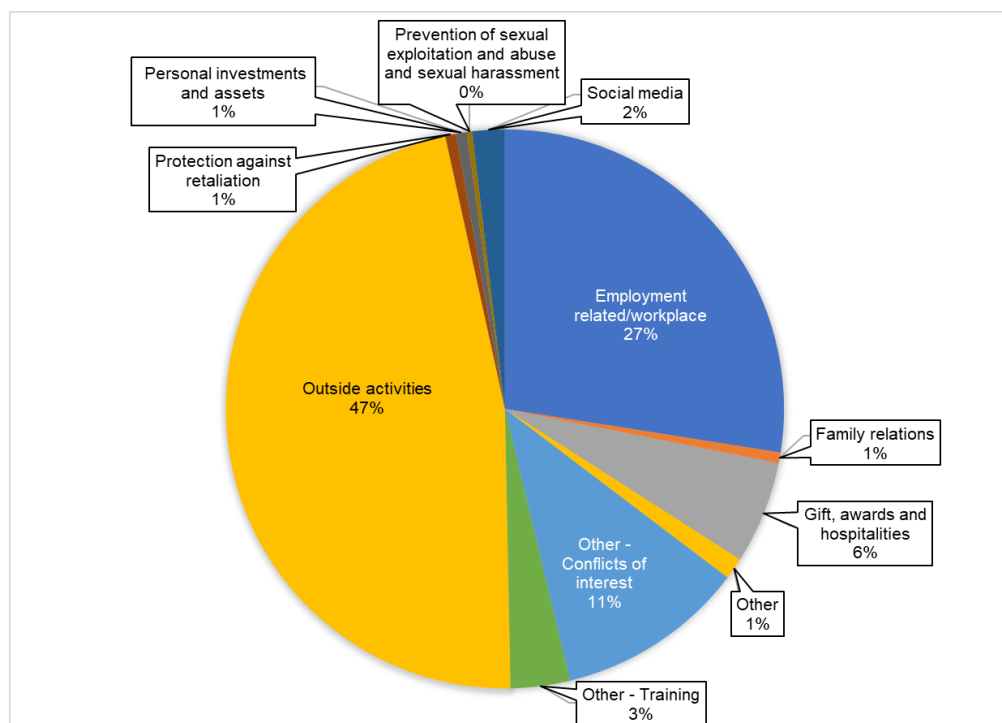
27. The Ethics Office responded to 320 individual requests for confidential ethics advice in 2020, compared with 409 in 2019 and 352 in 2018. The decrease may be due to less face-to-face interaction among personnel due to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as reduced opportunities to provide in-person training, which has often led to individual inquiries.

28. As shown in figure II, 47 per cent of the requests were related to the outside activities of staff members and 27 per cent to employment-related and workplace issues, which includes abuse of authority and discrimination-related issues. In terms of representation by duty station, 48 per cent of requests were from country offices and 45 per cent from headquarters locations. The remaining 7 per cent came from regional offices and external stakeholders (i.e., other United Nations agencies or non-UNICEF personnel). Considering that 83 per cent of UNICEF staff members are in non-headquarters locations, the Ethics Office notes this underrepresentation of inquiries from these locations and the need to invest additional resources at the regional and country office levels.

29. In terms of gender representation, 52 per cent of the individual requests came from female personnel and 44 per cent from male personnel (the remaining 4 per cent were group and anonymous requests). However, in terms of representation by post categories, 87 per cent of the requests were received from international or national professional staff members (international professional and national officers) and 8 per cent from general service staff members. The remaining 5 per cent were requests from executive-level staff, non-staff personnel and anonymous requests. Considering that 64 per cent of the workforce are professional staff members and 36 per cent are in the general service category, the Ethics Office notes the underrepresentation of requests from general service staff members. The Ethics Office finds that this underrepresentation further supports the need for investment to raise awareness and to strengthen the speak-up and listen-up culture, as well as to provide additional language support for the services provided.

30. Throughout 2020, the Ethics Office noted a significant rise in the level of interest in and concerns about engaging in political activities in relation to issues raised during the recent global movements and protests against racism and discrimination, as well as respecting organizational values during the COVID-19 pandemic. The advice and guidance around engagement in political activities were provided in line with the comprehensive guidance issued by the United Nations Ethics Office in June 2020 and the UNICEF guidance note on the use of social media. The Office responded to requests from offices and divisions for group conversations to ensure colleagues were well informed of the guidance. The Office received individual inquiries concerning the challenges faced by personnel working under new modalities during the pandemic and those having to complete remote onboarding. These included requests for advice and guidance in applying UNICEF values in privately challenging situations, such as managing family care needs while teleworking; stress from fear of the virus; isolation or increased financial burden, or both; and concerns linked to the workplace culture from new staff members who had not yet had in-person interactions or learning opportunities. The Ethics Office issued advice and guidance to guide conduct during the pandemic based on the core organizational values (care, respect, integrity, trust and accountability), complementing the information provided through the COVID-19 portal maintained by the Division of Human Resources.

Figure II
Requests for confidential ethics advice by subcategory, 2020^a



^a For consistency with previous years' reporting, advice and guidance related to protection against retaliation are captured as a confidential ethics advice subcategory.

V. Standard-setting and policy support

31. In line with its mandate under the Secretary-General's bulletin on United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes (ST/SGB/2007/11) to provide standard-setting and policy support to management, during the reporting year the Ethics Office reviewed and provided advice on the rules, policies, procedures and practices of the organization in order to reinforce and promote the highest standards of ethics and integrity.

32. In accordance with the standard policy consultation and development process coordinated by the policy focal point within the Division of Financial and Administrative Management, the Ethics Office is consulted and is able to contribute at an early stage to policy consultation and development.

33. The Ethics Office has contributed to a range of policy development initiatives. Among those reviewed by the Office in the reporting year were the draft policies and procedures developed by the Private Fundraising and Partnerships Division to set standards and implement processes to ensure ethical fundraising. The Office also contributed to draft policies on topics related to human resources administration and to a proposed amendment to the policy on disciplinary processes and measures.

34. The Ethics Office contributed to the UNICEF response and follow-up related to the Joint Inspection Unit reports on conflict of interest and whistle-blower protection against retaliation. In addition, the Office provided the required information to the Joint Inspection Unit for the review on the current state of the ethics function in the United Nations system. The Ethics Office provided required clarification to Member States, such as the United States Mission to the United Nations, on whistle-blower protection against retaliation, and to the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network on a range of issues.

35. Lastly, as part of its ethics standard-setting and policy support function, the Ethics Office provided the UNICEF Audit Advisory Committee with a written update on the activities of the Office during the year.

VI. Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure Programme

36. The Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure Programme was managed by the Ethics Office to protect UNICEF from conflicts of interest and organizational risks relating to the relationships, outside activities and financial interests of staff members.

37. The Ethics Office in the reporting year continued to implement the recommendations shared in 2018 by an external financial services provider (KPMG) based on a gap analysis done on the programme. Hence, the Office took measures to ensure the implementation of the recommendations at all stages of the programme cycle.

38. One of the key recommendations made by KPMG was to refocus the Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure Programme based on seniority and organizational risk, thus making it more impactful. In the 2020 cycle, 1,626 staff members were registered (compared to 1,613 in the 2019 cycle) in line with the recommendation to focus on senior positions and those involving organizational risk.

39. Another recommendation made by KPMG was to tighten compliance timelines in all key areas (registration, filing cycle, review process) to significantly reduce programme length. Despite the challenges faced by filers to get updated information on their assets and finances due to restrictions linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office was able to implement the recommendation and completed the full cycle by 31 October 2020, reducing the duration of the annual cycle to 8 months compared to 13 months prior to the KPMG recommendation. In line with the recommendation of KPMG, at the beginning of the filing cycle the Ethics Office communicated the potential consequences of non-compliance and provided clear timelines. Notwithstanding the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, all participating staff members complied with the requirements of filing and verification. Hence, in 2020 the Ethics Office once again achieved a 100 per cent compliance rate, as it did in 2019.

40. Further improving the information technology system used to facilitate the programme was another KPMG recommendation. Through strong collaboration with the UNICEF Information and Communication Technology Division, the Ethics Office was able to make relevant upgrades to the Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure system to facilitate faster, more user-friendly and secure filing, review and verification processes.

Table 2

Compliance with the Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure Programme, 2010–2020

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of staff required to file</i>	<i>Compliance rate (percentage)</i>
2010	2 365	99.6
2011	2 592	99.7
2012	2 694	99.9
2013	2 498	100.0
2014	2 594	100.0
2015	2 549	98.9

2016	2 524	99.3
2017	2 067	99.9
2018	2 160	99.9
2019	1 613	100.0
2020	1 626	100.0

41. The Ethics Office reviewed 1,626 staff members as part of the 2020 Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure Programme covering the reporting year ending 31 December 2019. Director-level staff comprised 9.2 per cent of the total number of reviews (compared to 8.9 per cent in 2019), staff members in the international professional category 61.7 per cent (compared to 68.8 per cent in 2019), staff in the national professional category 22.8 per cent (compared to 25 per cent in 2019) and staff in the general service category 6.3 per cent (compared to 6.2 per cent in 2019).

42. A summary of the review of Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure Programme statements filed in 2020 indicates that 95.6 per cent of staff participating in the 2020 exercise either had nothing to declare, had no conflict of interest, or had already taken mitigating steps or declared personal circumstances in which there was a remote connection to the United Nations or UNICEF that did not present an actual or potential conflict of interest; and 3.3 per cent of staff had a potential conflict of interest for which guidance was issued. In addition, 1 per cent of participating staff members had recognized their own conflicts of interest and had already taken proactive steps to mitigate them.

43. Among staff selected to participate in the 2020 exercise, 4.7 per cent (compared to 3.7 in 2019) had spouses who worked for UNICEF and 9.7 per cent (compared to 13.1 in 2019) had spouses who worked for other United Nations entities or UNICEF-related entities, such as non-governmental organizations or other partners. In addition, 16.3 per cent (compared to 14.8 in 2019) of participating staff had relatives who worked for other United Nations entities or UNICEF-related entities.

44. Another source of potential conflict of interest is related to the outside activities of staff members. Among staff selected to participate in the 2020 Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure exercise, 4.8 per cent (compared to 3.5 in 2019) were involved in outside activities or had leadership roles with non-United Nations entities. In the reporting year, the Office has seen a positive trend where most staff members involved with outside activities have sought approval from the relevant authority within UNICEF for these engagements. However, there were instances in which staff members were engaged in the outside activities without prior authorization, as envisaged under the Policy on Financial Disclosure and Declaration of Interest Statements. In these instances, the Ethics Office issued specific guidance notes requesting the staff members to seek approval, take the required measures to avoid or mitigate a conflict of interest, if any, and notify the Office of the outcome.

45. Regarding the verification requirement, a randomly selected number of staff members from among the annual filers participated in an exercise during which they were required to provide supporting documents for the Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure Statements they had filed. In the 2020 Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure exercise, around 4 per cent of the participating staff members were selected for this verification. Due to travel restrictions and office closures in different parts of the world, some staff members requested extended deadlines to present the verification documents. All staff members who were selected for verification were cleared by the Ethics Office based on the supporting documentation they submitted for their Conflict of Interest and Financial Disclosure Statements.

VII. Protection against retaliation and outcomes of the 2020 Global Staff Survey

46. Under the UNICEF Policy on Whistle-Blower Protection against Retaliation, UNICEF is obligated to protect its personnel who report misconduct or cooperate with duly authorized audits, investigations and other oversight activities against retaliation. The policy sets out the definitions of retaliation and protected activity and outlines the procedures for lodging a complaint and the mechanisms available to address retaliation.

47. The Ethics Office receives a request for protection against retaliation and conducts a preliminary review to determine if there has been a prima facie case of retaliation – in other words, direct or indirect detrimental action was recommended, threatened or taken because an individual engaged, in good faith, in a protected activity. In cases where the Ethics Office determines that a prima facie case of retaliation has been established, the matter is referred to OIAI for investigation. Once the investigation is complete and the findings have been shared with the Ethics Office, the Office conducts an independent review of the findings. If retaliation is established, the Office makes recommendations to the Executive Director on the appropriate actions to be taken, including to amend the negative consequences suffered as a result of the retaliatory action.

48. During the reporting period, the Ethics Office received nine formal requests for protection under the UNICEF Policy on Whistle-Blower Protection against Retaliation. Based on the preliminary review, one request was referred to the United Nations Ethics Office due to a conflict of interest. For five of the requests received, the Office determined that there was no prima facie retaliation. In these cases, the Office provided alternate or informal resolution options for the staff members concerned. One case was pending completion of preliminary review as at 28 February 2021.

49. The Ethics Office, on the basis of its preliminary review, determined that in two of the requests there was prima facie retaliation; these requests were thus referred to OIAI for investigation. In one of those cases, the outcome of the investigation was shared with the Ethics Office. However, following an independent review of the OIAI report on the case, the Ethics Office concluded that there was no finding of retaliation. The second case was still under investigation as at 28 February 2021. In each of the two cases that were referred to OIAI, interim preventive measures were granted to protect the complainant during the investigation and review process.

50. The Office also received six inquiries linked to protection against retaliation that did not proceed to formal requests for protection. The Office handled these cases as confidential advice and guidance inquiries and guided the staff members on how to find adequate resources to address the issues.

51. To further strengthen the tone at the top and ensure awareness of key ethics guidance and policy issues, the Ethics Office implemented mandatory one-on-one conversations with the head of Ethics for staff appointed to senior leadership positions upon onboarding. Discussions centred around the conduct expected of senior leader and highlighted key policies and procedures. In collaboration with the Division of Human Resources and as part of promotion and appointment decisions, the Ethics Office is consulted on the need to undertake an in-depth due diligence check on conduct and behaviour-related issues to ensure that staff members appointed or promoted to senior leadership positions meet the highest standards of ethics and integrity.

52. In June 2020, the Division of Human Resources, in partnership with the Global Staff Association, organized and administered the 2020 Global Staff Survey. This was the first survey conducted since the 2018 report of the Independent Task Force on Workplace Gender-Discrimination, Sexual Harassment, Harassment and Abuse of

Authority. The responses to the questions were 77 per cent positive, representing a 11 per cent improvement compared to the survey conducted in 2017, and a 15 per cent improvement compared to the one conducted in 2014. The 2020 survey contained five questions on standards of conduct⁴, and, for the first time, collected data on diversity. The survey also included questions concerning the UNICEF response to COVID-19, with 89 per cent of the answers positive. Diversity received a lower rating (than the UNICEF response to COVID-19) in many offices, with overall responses 65 per cent positive.

53. There were notable variations in the answers to different questions: the responses indicated that personnel generally felt positive that they knew how and to whom to report misconduct. But personnel were much less confident that the mechanisms to resolve questions of misconduct were being applied fairly and in a timely manner. While the responses around protection against retaliation showed a 4 per cent improvement in trust from the 2017 survey, the Ethics Office believes that it is imperative to make further investments in outreach and training to continue driving positive momentum around protection against retaliation. This will require both financial and human resources. While providing personnel with confidential advice and guidance, the Office noted that personnel did not demonstrate a consistent understanding of the scope of “retaliation” under the UNICEF Policy on Whistle-Blower Protection against Retaliation, or of the mechanisms to address issues that lay outside of its scope.

54. Based on the outcomes of 2020 Global Staff Survey, the Principal Adviser, Organizational Culture, along with the Division of Human Resources, rolled out follow-up actions to be taken by UNICEF at all levels. These actions were designed to develop more office-specific responses by conducting conversations with high- and low-scoring offices to obtain lessons learned and identify key areas for improvement. Through this exercise, observations will be summarized at the country, regional and global levels and classified by theme. This will be a valuable contribution to the Ethics Office’s training and outreach strategy and focus. Further, each division and office will be required to self-assess and build its own follow-up actions based on the survey results, using the tool designed by the Division of Human Resources.

VIII. Ethics Panel of the United Nations and the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations

55. In 2020, prior to the departure of the Principal Adviser, Ethics in March, UNICEF participated in two meetings of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations.

56. In November 2020, the Ethics Office took part in a discussion organized by the Ethics Panel in collaboration with the International Civil Service Commission on the issue of political participation of staff members.

57. In addition, to ensure coherence in the interpretation and application of policies and standards, the Ethics Office consulted the Ethics Panel on eight cases.

58. The Ethics Office was not represented at the annual meeting of the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations in 2020.

⁴ Question 67: “At UNICEF, the mechanisms to resolve questions of misconduct are applied fairly and timely.” (53 per cent positive response); Question 68: “I believe that if I report misconduct through appropriate channels within UNICEF, I would be protected from retaliation.” (55 per cent positive response); Question 69: (“In my office, people at all levels are held accountable for ethical behaviour.”) (65 per cent positive response); Question 70: “Management in my office acts with honesty and integrity.” (73 per cent positive response); Question 71: “I know how and to whom to report misconduct within UNICEF.” (84 per cent positive response).

IX. Follow-up on 2019 observations

59. As previously discussed, UNICEF strengthened the Ethics Office's institutional independence by establishing it as a separate business unit from the Office of Executive Director headed by a (newly titled) Director, Ethics, and a revised five-year term (renewable once) for the head of the unit, in line with the practice of some other United Nations agencies. The requested increase in the staffing of the Ethics Office was postponed so that the review and submission could be completed as part of office management planning for 2022–2025 with the incoming Director, who assumed duties in February 2021. As the availability of financial and human resources will be critical to the success of the Office's mandate and to address the areas in need of focus and investment, the Office plans to prioritize its strategic focus and make the corresponding submission for budget review for the next cycle and strategic planning period.

60. In its annual report for 2019, the Ethics Office observed that it will be important to ensure that the terms of reference for the newly created roles in the Office of the Executive Director (the Senior Coordinator for Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Workplace Abuse; and the Principal Adviser, Organizational Culture), as well as the newly created Child Safeguarding Unit, are carefully reconsidered and fine-tuned to ensure that they do not overlap or compete with the mandates of the independent offices. In this regard, the UNICEF management has completed several actions during the reporting year, including: discontinuation of the time-bound role of the Senior Coordinator for Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Workplace Abuse by September 2020, whose functions were subsequently absorbed by the Child Safeguarding Unit. The Child Safeguarding Unit and OIAI are collaborating closely on incident response, and regulations have been amended to clarify that confidential and independent advice is available only through the independent offices. As indicated by management, the functions of the above-mentioned time-bound roles in the Office of the Executive Director are expected to cease and subsequently be integrated into the relevant divisions and offices, including the Ethics Office.

61. The Ethics Office built strong and close collaboration with the Principal Adviser, Organizational Culture and with the Child Safeguarding Unit during the year, by conducting joint webinars and actively engaging in the internal Task Team on Anti-Racism and Discrimination. There was frequent communication and consultation among the offices around developing the Values Charter, monitoring and reporting around follow-up to the report of the Independent Task Force and the different ways to promote how staff are living the core values of UNICEF. However, as some of these time-bound functions will cease and are expected to be absorbed by the Ethics Office in the future, further consideration on resource implications will be imperative to ensure that these key functions in supporting personnel will continue to be provided.

62. In 2019, the Ethics Office also observed the need for a careful and robust assessment of the various initiatives to trigger intended changes in behaviour, attitudes and perceptions among UNICEF personnel at all levels. In June 2020, the Division of Human Resources administered the Global Staff Survey, which included questions on racism and discrimination. The Division also designed a follow-up action plan to identify office-specific solutions for those areas that require improvement.

63. The Ethics Office therefore considers that UNICEF management has effectively responded to and implemented the observations and recommendations made in its annual report for 2019.

X. Observations, recommendations and conclusions

64. The following recommendations are informed by and based on the experience of the Ethics Office in 2020 and relevant developments during the first two months of 2021.

65. The Ethics Office appreciates the strong support received from management during the reporting year. Especially during times of crisis, it is important for the institution and its personnel to continue to observe and adhere to the highest standards of ethical conduct.

66. As a newly established independent office, and with the appointment of its first Director, the Ethics Office will be expected to perform enhanced functions and to occupy a more prominent stature within UNICEF. With this comes new expectations to deliver on strategic and impactful work for the organization and its personnel. The Office will need to make sure its services are more accessible to offices at the country level and to all levels of personnel, given the decentralized structure of UNICEF operations, with almost 90 per cent of personnel working in the field at any given time. Subject to improved travel conditions, this will necessitate a vigorous outreach strategy and options for increased and more frequent appearances or presence in various locations and for various events and activities.

67. As discussed above, the Office will focus on its preventive role by proactively identifying, addressing and mitigating emergent ethical risks and failures. The Office will further: reinvigorate the Ethics Dialogue Facilitator Programme; strategically focus on addressing high-risk conflict of interest issues; revisit and improve its outreach and training materials and modalities; collaborate with other units to continue to improve staff engagement by nurturing a speak up and listen up culture, and by clarifying and facilitating reporting channels and availability of the various resolution systems for UNICEF personnel. The Office, under the leadership of its new Director, will work to identify other strategic priorities in the coming months.

68. The Ethics Office takes note of the initiative to develop a safeguarding office accountability framework. With the forthcoming discontinuation of time-bound roles, such as the Senior Coordinator for Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Workplace Abuse, it is important to ensure that such a framework will provide clarity on the different roles and responsibilities. The Ethics Office is keen to contribute its share of the task in taking on these roles, in line with its mandate and with the requisite resource allocation.

69. The Ethics Office appreciates the prompt action taken by UNICEF in setting up the Task Team on Anti-Racism and Discrimination to address the concerns expressed by personnel. As an active member of the Task Team and as an independent office, the Ethics Office looks forward to the implementation of the recommendations. It would also be important for UNICEF to put in place a mechanism to regularly monitor and measure progress in these areas across the different offices and divisions.

70. Many of the initiatives and recommendations following the report of the Independent Task Force and reports of the Joint Inspection Unit are led and supported by time-bound and ad hoc roles and/or task forces, and will continue to generate recommendations, enhancements, upgrades and new priorities for the organization. The numerous action plans that are anticipated to be produced will necessitate significant engagement by and support from the Ethics Office, in both the near and medium term, for implementation and monitoring. In fact, the Ethics Office will likely be expected to lead on key aspects. The continuing spike in the work related to these initiatives and the expected handover of the significant responsibilities performed by other roles to the Ethics Office will present tremendous pressure on the already-stretched resources of the Office. This current gap and the critical need to adequately resource the ethics function will need to be addressed in a timely fashion, in order for the Office to meet its existing mandate and service these new and important organizational priorities. The Ethics Office looks forward to continuing its constructive engagement with management on these issues.

IX. Draft decision

The Executive Board

Takes note of the report of the Ethics Office of UNICEF for 2020 ([E/ICEF/2021/16](#)) and its management response ([E/ICEF/2021/17](#)).
