

# Standards of conduct for the international civil service

## Introduction

For the past half century the international civil service has been guided by the *Standards of Conduct in the International Civil Service* prepared in 1954 by the International Civil Service Advisory Board. Although these standards have stood the test of time, an earlier era resonates in some of the content and tone. The onset of a new millennium provided the impetus for the revision of these standards to take into account global changes and to reflect, in more modern, gender-neutral language, developments and concepts that either did not exist or were of lesser importance in 1954. A renewed interest in the subject on the part of national civil services and the private sector in responding to new ethical challenges was a further stimulus to a new text.

The *Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service* contained in this brochure were revised and updated by the International Civil Service Commission in consultation with participating organizations and the representatives of the staff over a three-year period. Upon their completion in 2001, they were welcomed by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution 56/244. The ICSC *Framework for Human Resources Management*, approved by the General Assembly in 2000, illustrates the overarching nature of *the Standards of Conduct*, noting that they are linked to all elements of the *Framework*, and states that "although organizations' internal cultures may vary, they face similar ethical challenges. Standards for ethical conduct promote common values and define the behaviour and performance expected of international civil servants".

This new text aims at providing for the international civil service standards that, like those of 1954, become an indispensable part of the culture and heritage of the organizations and are of similarly enduring quality.

**Mohsen Bel Hadj Amor**

Chairman

International Civil Service Commission

January 2002

## Standards of conduct for the international civil service

1. The United Nations and the specialized agencies embody the highest aspirations of the peoples of the world. Their aim is to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war and to enable every man, woman and child to live in dignity and freedom.
2. The international civil service bears responsibility for translating these ideals into reality. It relies on the great traditions of public administration that have grown up in member States: competence, integrity, impartiality, independence and discretion. But over and above this, international civil servants have a special calling: to serve the ideals of peace, of respect for fundamental rights, of economic and social progress, and of international cooperation. It is therefore incumbent on international civil servants to adhere to the highest standards of conduct; for, ultimately, it is the international civil service that will enable the United Nations system to bring about a just and peaceful world.

### **Guiding principles**

3. The values that are enshrined in the United Nations organizations must also be those that guide international civil servants in all their actions: fundamental human rights, social justice, the dignity and worth of the human person and respect for the equal rights of men and women and of nations great and small.
4. International civil servants should share the vision of their organizations. It is loyalty to this vision that ensures the integrity and international outlook of international civil servants; it guarantees that they will place the interests of their organization above their own and use its resources in a responsible manner.
5. The concept of integrity enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations embraces all aspects of behaviour of an international civil servant, including such qualities as honesty, truthfulness, impartiality and incorruptibility. These qualities are as basic as those of competence and efficiency, also enshrined in the Charter.
6. Tolerance and understanding are basic human values. They are essential for international civil servants, who must respect all persons equally, without any distinction whatsoever. This respect fosters a climate and a working environment sensitive to the needs of all. To achieve this in a multicultural setting calls for a positive affirmation going well beyond passive acceptance.
7. International loyalty means loyalty to the whole United Nations system and not only to the organization for which one works; international civil servants have an obligation to understand and exemplify this wider loyalty. The need for a cooperative and understanding attitude towards international civil servants of other United Nations organizations is obviously most important where international civil servants of several organizations are serving in the same country or region.

8. If the impartiality of the international civil service is to be maintained, international civil servants must remain independent of any authority outside their organization; their conduct must reflect that independence. In keeping with their oath of office, they should not seek nor should they accept instructions from any Government, person or entity external to the organization. It cannot be too strongly stressed that international civil servants are not, in any sense, representatives of Governments or other entities, nor are they proponents of their policies. This applies equally to those on secondment from Governments and to those whose services have been made available from elsewhere. International civil servants should be constantly aware that through their allegiance to the Charter and the corresponding instruments of each organization, member States and their representatives are committed to respect this independent status.

9. Impartiality implies tolerance and restraint, particularly in dealing with political or religious convictions. While their personal views remain inviolate, international civil servants do not have the freedom of private persons to take sides or to express their convictions publicly on controversial matters, either individually or as members of a group. This can mean that, in certain situations, personal views should only be expressed with tact and discretion.

10. This does not mean that international civil servants have to give up their personal political views or national perspectives. It does mean, however, that they must at all times maintain a broad international outlook and an understanding of the international community as a whole.

11. The independence of the international civil service does not conflict with, or obscure, the fact that it is the member States that collectively make up (in some cases with other constituents) the organization. Conduct that furthers good relations with individual member States and that contributes to their trust and confidence in the secretariat strengthens the organization and promotes its interest.

12. International civil servants who are responsible for projects in particular countries or regions may be called upon to exercise special care in maintaining their independence. At times they might receive instructions from the host country but this should not compromise their independence. If at any time they consider that such instructions threaten their independence, they must consult their supervisors.

13. An international outlook stems from an understanding of and loyalty to the objectives and purposes of the international organization itself as set forth in its legal instruments. It implies, inter alia, respect for the right of others to hold different points of view and follow different cultural patterns. It requires a willingness to work without bias with persons of all nationalities, religions and cultures; it calls for constant sensitivity to how proposals, events and statements may look to others. It requires punctilious avoidance of any expressions that could be interpreted as biased or intolerant. Working methods can be different in different cultures. International civil servants should not be wedded to the attitudes, working methods or work habits of their own country or region.

14. Freedom from discrimination is a basic human right. International civil servants are expected to respect the dignity, worth and equality of all people without any distinction whatsoever. Assumptions based on stereotypes must be assiduously avoided. One of the main tenets of the Charter is the equality of men and women, and organizations should therefore do their utmost to promote gender equality.

### **Working relations**

15. Managers and supervisors are in positions of leadership and it is their responsibility to ensure a harmonious workplace based on mutual respect; they should be open to all views and opinions and make sure that the merits of staff are properly recognized. They need to provide support to them; this is particularly important when they are subject to criticism arising from the carrying out of their duties. Managers are also responsible for guiding and motivating their staff and promoting their development.

16. It is natural for managers to be seen as role models and they have therefore a special obligation to uphold the highest standards of conduct. It would be quite improper for them to solicit favours, gifts or loans from their staff; they must act impartially, without intimidation and favouritism. In matters relating to the appointment or career of others, no international civil servant should try to influence colleagues for personal reasons.

17. It is naturally incumbent on managers and supervisors to communicate effectively with their staff and share information with them. International civil servants have a reciprocal responsibility to provide all pertinent facts and information to their supervisors and to abide by and defend any decisions taken, even when these do not accord with their personal views.

18. International civil servants have to follow the instructions they receive in connection with their official functions and if they have doubts as to whether an instruction is consistent with the Charter or any other constitutional instrument, decisions of the governing bodies or administrative rules and regulations, they should first consult their supervisors. If they cannot agree, the international civil servant may ask for written instructions. These may be challenged through the proper institutional mechanisms, but any challenge should not delay carrying out the instruction. International civil servants may also record their views in official files. They should not follow verbal or written instructions that are manifestly inconsistent with their official functions or that threaten their safety or that of others.

19. It must be the duty of international civil servants to report any breach of the organization's rules and regulations to a higher level official, whose responsibility it is to take appropriate action. An international civil servant who makes such a report in good faith has the right to be protected against reprisals or sanctions.

## **Harassment**

20. Harassment in any shape or form is an affront to human dignity and international civil servants must avoid it. They should not engage in any form of harassment and must be above any suspicion of it. International civil servants have the right to an environment free of harassment. It is the responsibility of organizations to explain their interpretation of the term and to establish rules and provide guidance on what constitutes harassment and how it will be dealt with.

## **Conflict of interest**

21. It can happen that international civil servants are confronted with a question entailing a conflict of interest; such questions can be very sensitive and need to be treated with care. Conflict of interest includes circumstances in which international civil servants, directly or indirectly, would appear to benefit improperly, or allow a third party to benefit improperly, from their association in the management or the holding of a financial interest in an enterprise that engages in any business or transaction with the organization.

22. There can be no question but that international civil servants should avoid assisting private bodies or persons in their dealings with their organization where this might lead to actual or perceived preferential treatment. This is particularly important in procurement matters or when negotiating prospective employment. At times, international civil servants may be required to disclose certain personal assets if this is necessary to enable their organizations to make sure that there is no conflict. They should also voluntarily disclose in advance possible conflicts of interest that arise in the course of carrying out their duties. They should perform their official duties and conduct their private affairs in a manner that preserves and enhances public confidence in their own integrity and that of their organization.

## **Role of the secretariat**

23. International organizations are constituted by member States, and their secretariats have the responsibility for providing services to them. The main function of the secretariat is to assist legislative bodies in their work and to carry out their decisions. The executive head is responsible for directing and controlling the work of the secretariat. Accordingly, when submitting proposals or advocating positions before a legislative body or committee, international civil servants are presenting the position of the executive head, not that of an individual or unit.

24. In providing services to a legislative or representative body, it goes without saying that international civil servants should serve only the interests of the organization. It would not be appropriate for international civil servants to prepare for government or other international civil service representatives any speeches, arguments or proposals on questions under discussion. It could, however, be quite appropriate to provide factual information, technical advice or assistance with such tasks as the preparation of draft resolutions.

25. It is entirely improper for international civil servants to lobby or seek support from government representatives or members of legislative organs to obtain advancement either for themselves or for others or to block or reverse unfavourable decisions regarding their status. By adhering to the Charter and the constitutions of the organizations of the United Nations system, Governments have undertaken to safeguard the independence of the international civil service; it is therefore understood that government representatives and members of legislative bodies will neither accede to such requests nor intervene in such matters. The proper method for an international civil servant to address such matters is through administrative channels; each organization is responsible for providing these.

### **Staff management relations**

26. Relations between management and staff should be guided by mutual respect. Elected staff representatives have a cardinal role to play in the consideration of conditions of employment and work, as well as in all matters of staff welfare. Freedom of association is a fundamental human right and international civil servants have the right to form and join associations, unions or other groupings to promote and defend their interests. Continuing dialogue between staff and management is indispensable. Management should facilitate this dialogue.

27. Elected staff representatives enjoy rights that derive from their status; this may include the opportunity to address legislative organs of their organization. These rights should be exercised in a manner that is consistent with the Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the international covenants on human rights and does not undermine the independence and integrity of the international civil service. In using the broad freedom of expression they enjoy, staff representatives must exercise a sense of responsibility and avoid undue criticism of the organization.

28. Staff representatives must be protected against discriminatory or prejudicial treatment based on their status or activities as staff representatives, both during their term of office and after it has ended.

### **Relations with member States and legislative bodies**

29. It is the clear duty of all international civil servants to maintain the best possible relations with Governments and avoid any action which might impair this; they should certainly not interfere in the policies or affairs of Governments. It is unacceptable for them, either individually or collectively, to criticize or try to discredit a Government. At the same time, it is understood that international civil servants may speak freely in support of their organizations' policies. Any activity, direct or indirect, to undermine or overthrow a Government constitutes serious misconduct.

30. International civil servants are not representatives of their countries, nor do they have authority to act as liaison agents between international organizations and their Governments. The executive head may, however, request an international civil servant to undertake such duties, a unique role for which international loyalty and integrity are

essential. For their part, neither Governments nor organizations should place international civil servants in a position where their international and national loyalties may conflict.

### **Relations with the public**

31. For an international organization to function successfully, it must have the support of the public. All international civil servants therefore have a continuing responsibility to promote a better understanding of the objectives and work of their organizations. This requires them to be well informed of the achievements not only of their own organizations but of the United Nations system as a whole. The opportunity to provide information to the public can arise at any time.

32. There is a risk that on occasion international civil servants may be subject to criticism from outside their organizations; in keeping with their responsibility as international civil servants, they should respond with tact and restraint. They have the right to be defended by their organizations against criticism for actions taken in fulfilment of their duties and they should be confident that this will be done.

33. It would not be proper for international civil servants to air personal grievances or criticize their organizations in public. International civil servants should endeavour at all times to promote a positive image of the international civil service, in conformity with their oath of loyalty.

### **Relations with the media**

34. Openness and transparency in relations with the media are effective means of communicating the organizations' messages, and the organizations should have guidelines and procedures for this purpose. Within that context, the following principles should apply: international civil servants should regard themselves as speaking in the name of their organizations and avoid personal references and views; in no circumstances should they use the media to further their own interests, to air their own grievances, to reveal unauthorized information or to attempt to influence policy decisions facing their organizations.

### **Use and protection of information**

35. The disclosure of confidential information may seriously jeopardize the efficiency and credibility of an organization. International civil servants are responsible for exercising discretion in all matters of official business. They must not divulge confidential information without authorization. Nor should international civil servants use information that has not been made public and is known to them by virtue of their official position to private advantage. These are obligations that do not cease upon separation from service. It is necessary for organizations to maintain guidelines for the use and protection of confidential information, and it is equally necessary for such guidelines to keep pace with developments in communications technology. It is understood that these provisions do not affect established practices governing the exchange of information between the secretariats

and member States, which ensure the fullest participation of member States in the life and work of the organizations.

### **Respect for different customs and culture**

36. The world is home to a myriad of different peoples, languages, cultures, customs and traditions. It is self-evident that a genuine respect for them all is fundamental for an international civil servant. Any behaviour that is not acceptable in a particular cultural context must be avoided. However, if a tradition is directly contrary to any human rights instrument adopted by the United Nations system, the international civil servant must be guided by it. International civil servants should avoid an ostentatious lifestyle and any display of an inflated sense of personal importance.

### **Security and safety**

37. While an executive head must remain free to assign staff in accordance with the exigencies of the service, it is the responsibility of organizations to make sure that the health, well-being and lives of their staff, without any discrimination whatsoever, will not be subject to undue risk. The organizations should take measures to protect their safety and that of their family members. On the other hand, it goes without saying that it is incumbent on international civil servants to comply with all instructions designed to protect their safety.

### **Personal conduct**

38. The private life of international civil servants is their own concern and organizations should not intrude upon it. There can be situations, however, in which the behaviour of an international civil servant can reflect on the organization. International civil servants must therefore bear in mind that their conduct and activities outside the workplace, even if unrelated to official duties, can compromise the image and the interests of the organization. This can also result from the conduct of members of international civil servants' households and it is the responsibility of international civil servants to make sure that their households are fully aware of this.

39. The privileges and immunities that international civil servants enjoy are conferred upon them solely in the interests of the organizations. They do not exempt international civil servants from observing local laws, nor do they provide an excuse for ignoring private legal or financial obligations. It should be remembered that only the executive head is competent to waive the immunity accorded to international civil servants or to determine its scope.

40. Violations of law can range from serious criminal activities to trivial offences, and organizations may be called upon to exercise judgement in the light of the nature and circumstances of individual cases. A conviction by a national court will usually, although not always, be persuasive evidence of the act for which an international civil servant was prosecuted, and acts that are generally recognized as offences by national criminal laws

will normally also be violations of the standards of conduct for the international civil service.

### **Outside employment and activities**

41. The primary obligation of international civil servants is to devote their energies to the work of their organizations. It is therefore improper for international civil servants to engage, without prior authorization, in any outside activity, whether remunerated or not, that interferes with that obligation or is incompatible with their status or conflicts with the interests of the organization. Any questions about this should be referred to the executive head.

42. Subject to the above, outside activities may, of course, be beneficial both to staff members and to their organizations. Organizations should allow, encourage and facilitate the participation of international civil servants in professional activities that foster contacts with private and public bodies and thus serve to maintain and enhance their professional and technical competencies.

43. International civil servants on leave, whether with or without pay, should bear in mind that they remain international civil servants in the employ of their organization and are still subject to its rules. They may, therefore, only accept employment, paid or unpaid, during their leave with proper authorization.

44. In view of the independence and impartiality that they must maintain, international civil servants, while retaining the right to vote, should not participate in political activities, such as standing for or holding local or national political office. This does not, however, preclude participation in local community or civic activities, provided that such participation is consistent with the oath of service in the United Nations system. It is necessary for international civil servants to exercise discretion in their support for a political party or campaign, and they should not accept or solicit funds, write articles or make public speeches or make statements to the press. These cases require the exercise of judgement and, where there is any doubt, should be referred to the executive head.

45. The significance of membership in a political party varies from country to country and it is difficult to formulate standards that will apply in all cases. In general, international civil servants may be members of a political party provided its prevailing views and the obligations imposed on its members are consistent with the oath of service in the United Nations system.

### **Gifts, honours and remuneration from outside sources**

46. To protect the international civil service from any appearance of impropriety, international civil servants must not accept, without authorization from the executive head, any honour, decoration, gift, remuneration, favour or economic benefit of more than nominal value from any source external to their organizations; it is understood that this includes Governments as well as commercial firms and other entities.

47. It is not proper for international civil servants to accept supplementary payments or other subsidies from a Government or any other source prior to, during or after their assignment with an international organization if the payment is related to that assignment. Balancing this requirement, it is understood that Governments or other entities should not make or offer such payments, recognizing that they are at variance with the spirit of the Charter and the constitutions of the organizations of the United Nations system.

### **Conclusion**

48. The attainment of the standards of conduct for the international civil service requires the highest commitment of all parties. International civil servants must be committed to the values, principles and standards set forth here. They are expected to take a positive and active approach in upholding them. They should feel responsible for contributing to the broad ideals to which they dedicated themselves in joining the United Nations system. International organizations have a particular responsibility to ensure that the necessary guidance or rules are adopted to implement these standards. For their part, member States are expected, through their allegiance to the Charter and other constituent instruments, to preserve the independence and impartiality of the international civil service.

49. For these standards to be effectively applied, it is essential that they be widely disseminated, and that measures be taken to ensure that their scope and importance are understood throughout the international civil service, the member States and the organizations of the United Nations system.

50. Respect for these standards assures that the international civil service will continue to be an effective instrument in fulfilling its responsibilities and in meeting the aspirations of the peoples of the world.