



United Nations
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STAFF UNION



SYNDICAT DU PERSONNEL

Date: 28 July 2020

Letter to the ES of ECA on failure to respond to Staff Union emails and request for Virtual meeting /
Management relations

Ms. Vera Songwe

Executive Secretary of ECA

Dear Madame, Executive Secretary,

We the Staff Union are writing this letter as a follow up to **your failure to** respond to our request to virtually meet you. This request and its reminder were preceded by several earlier emails which you didn't respond to. You have not talked to the Staff Union since end of March 2020, although we interacted in some other platforms.

Staff Union recognizes the psychological and mental stress brought to all staff as a result of this unprecedented and trying times where isolation, misinformation, anxiety, fear have taken a toll.

In view of our responsibility to discharge our duty to safeguard staff concerns, rights, privileges and interests in line with the United Nations rules and regulations, we deem it necessary to contact you this way.

Background

The tradition of any sound institution or organization is providing a platform for regular communication between management and its constituents at large, its staff members.

Regular and healthy communication provides a forum for reinforcing a common understanding of the organizational goals and values. More importantly it allows for Staff Union to express their main concerns, and urgent concerns of staff, and for the senior leadership to update staff on important developments and provide the staff an opportunity to ask questions and share their views. Therefore, it is a critical means for building trust, ensuring accountability and forming a transparent mechanism.

At ECA, we have had, ups and downs, back and forth, but it always came back to having good communication. For such a large organization this two-way communication between staff and management is the only way out. Open and good communication becomes an important vehicle for dialogue, and strengthening a positive working environment, taking care of staff well-being, good moral, safety and more.

However, contrary to the UN practices and under the current unprecedented, uncertain and trying times, when staff were confronted with several challenges on top of the challenges of COVID-19, the ES simply turned her back and decided not to respond to several pertinent and time sensitive emails from the Staff Union president requesting to meet with her. Before asking for a virtual meeting the Staff Union president sent four (4) emails to the ES which were ignored.

We at Staff Union believe that regular communication gives paramount importance to Staff voices, we, at ECA have recurrently observed that staff are relegated to observer status in moments where they should be at the discussion table. This was quite obvious when a small committee composed of the ES, the RC, WHO Country representative and one or two more agencies, made decisions on behalf of Staff without prior consultations with Staff Union. A decision was taken to act contrary to the Ethiopian Government Memo which relaxed the quarantine rules for UNLP holders and AU passport holders including embassies in Addis. This might have been in good faith from our leadership, but the decision was taken on behalf of the staff without the staff presence and consent. Later, at a FUNSA meeting with the RC, all members of FUNSA unanimously rejected that decision and during the subsequent townhall meeting, the FUNSA president conveyed the position of ECA and that of all UN agencies based in Addis Ababa and requested to be part of that deciding-committee which the RC accepted publicly but FUNSA has still never received any invitation to date.

This breakdown of communication is a matter of concern as it was previously raised, and a commitment was made by the leadership to involve Staff Union of matters that concern staff members. We acknowledge that the ES made tremendous progress last year after continuous pressure from Staff Union for inclusion in discussions on decisions concerning staff. The current lack of communication is likely to reverse progress made and potentially render the Staff Union to assume an observer seat again. The staff union will never accept that.

Going to Details: Emails to the ES which were Ignored

Staff Union wrote to the ES on the following dates;

1) **July 6, 2020** - A request for approval for staff asking to telework from outside of Addis Ababa or assigned duty station The email was not responded to;

2) July 6, 2020 - A request to the ES to grant access of the Vice President of Staff Management Committee so he can continue to lead the SMC meeting as interim president due to internet outage: No response;

3) July 8 2020 - A request for a Virtual meeting with Staff Union President: No response;

4) July 9, 2020 – A request for an extension of recovery period of education grants: No response

5) July 17, 2020 - A reminder was sent for the “July 8 request” for virtual meeting: No response

Staff are the greatest asset of ECA and such behavior from the top will only continue to demoralize staff and bring morale to an all-time low. If staff members are not allowed to interact with top management and their voices suppressed not to raise issues deemed important, or seek clarifications, then it will dissuade frank exchanges and openness.

It is not a surprise that Staff-engagement exercises are met with low rating numbers because of this kind of communication gap. The staff are calling for a return to the regular respectful practice of communication in order to improve the working environment. The least anyone can do is to answer an email as this is basic courtesy and a solemn sign of respect.

ECA is our organization and its success is our priority. The staff have been diligently supporting the ES in her mission. The courageous staff has delivered in many fronts under these challenging times. ECA is breaking so many grounds, especially during this COVID 19 uncertain times. It is the fruit of the hard work of the staff who beyond the call are doing everything they can to support the ES initiative. Therefore, when the Staff Union president tries to bring messages from the staff, we think it should be listened. A captain without a crew will quickly realize that attainment of mission is impossible.

Mismanagement of Compound Closure Coupled with Electricity and Internet Outage:

This has been a nightmare for staff to manage, especially international staff who beside being cut off from their families living abroad, could not perform a simple money transfer to them.

Alternative ways could have been considered such as allowing staff in the compound by batches and for a certain amount of time but staying in their cars. Some measures could have been suggested if Staff Union was consulted. For instance; Staff union could have had a say on the compilation of the critical list. Staff were completely disconnected from the outside world. Needless to say, Staff have experienced psychological break down, Mental stress and Loneliness and majority felt abandoned. I personally stood up and made money transfers from here to staff families on their requests waiting for the electricity and internet to be restored as those families were in emergencies and there was no other way than going to AU to beg for internet access. It doesn't have to be this way.

We just finished the APPR, and we are proud to say that all this milestone achievements were done by staff under tremendous stress. Sometimes, let's take a break and focus on the process rather than results and on people rather than papers and power-points deadlines.

Let's Build back ourselves Better in the Building Back Better Processes. In the whole Covid management, who has talked about "caring about" families of staff affected"?

Business Continuity Plan:

It will fair to say that Business-Continuity Plan has not really been properly thought through and during the period we are mentioning here, e.g. compound closing, internet and electricity outage, **it has failed.**

The Staff Union call on the management to revisit the Business Continuity Plan as with the postponement of the election and existing tension around the country on top of Covid 19, this is very likely to repeat itself again.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The intention of this letter is nothing else than expressing our concerns in the sudden turning away of the ES and breakdown of communication with Staff Union, but most of all, to affirm our commitment to support the fabric of the United Nations and ECA leadership in achieving a shared vision for the future of our organization and beloved continent. In this line we are proposing the following:

- 1) To restore communication with Staff Union as it was before. We are therefore requesting that for every action which will potentially touch on staff welfare and wellbeing, that Staff Union be involved.
- 2) To send clear messages, guidance and information on administrative procedures related to teleworking from outside as we have requested. Staff are still being deny the right to telework from outside duty station while a memo from OHRM is clear about it.
- 3) To restore trust: Ethiopia current state of affairs since Covid -19 is like a disarray which is creating an atmosphere of low morale, insecurity and a sense of being left alone among the staff which is disrupting the normal order of business and mentally disturbing. Staff should never feel abandoned by Senior Leadership.
- 4) To adhere to the UN rules: Staff Union is a UN statutory body which represents the voice of the entire staff and need to be respected and listened to. We are calling on the leadership of ECA to adhere to UN rules and regulations.
- 5) To adhere to the core values: We call on our leadership to ensure that ECA is guided by the core values of the UN.

We the staff union stand ready to work and support the Senior leadership of ECA as full partners and remain committed to work with management at large to ensure the success of the ECA initiative in this unprecedented Covid 19 times.

M. Nassirou Ba
President,
ECA Staff Union, & Federation of United Nations Staff Association (FUNSA)