United Nations Children’s Fund
Executive Board
First regular session 2012
7-10 February 2012
Item 10 of the provisional agenda

Oral briefing on challenges and progress in addressing the issue of high vacancy rates

Background note

Summary

The oral briefing and background note were prepared in accordance with Executive Board decision 2011/4.

I. Analysis of the vacancy rate

1. The vacancy rate of an organization identifies the percentage of unfilled positions compared with the total number of approved positions. High vacancy rates as well as long-term vacancies may impact overall delivery of organizational results. Regular monitoring and analysis of vacancy rates play a critical role in understanding gaps, the supply of talent, and the issues that impact an organization’s ability to ensure adequate staffing.

2. In the report of the United Nations Board of Auditors on the financial statements of UNICEF for the biennium ended 31 December 2009, vacancy rates for UNICEF of 18 per cent overall and of 30 per cent in selected offices were reported.\(^1\) This generated concern among some Executive Board members. Fortunately, these percentages represented a misunderstanding based on figures provided by UNICEF that did not distinguish between “fillable” positions for which funding has been secured, and unfunded positions. However, differentiated data for funded and unfunded posts are now available as of 1 March 2011.

\(^1\) E/ICEF/2012/1.

\(^{1}\) See United Nations Children’s Fund, Financial report and audited financial statements for the biennium ended 31 December 2009 and Report of the Board of Auditors (A/65/5/Add.2), pp. 5 and 39. On page 5 the document states, “As at 31 December 2009, 1,898 (18 per cent) of the 10,518 approved posts were vacant. In 13 field offices and headquarters divisions, the vacancy rates were more than 30 per cent. The high vacancy rates could adversely affect the capacity of UNICEF to implement the planned activities”.

3. Unfunded positions are positions that have received approval but not funding. Unfunded positions must remain vacant until they are funded; they cannot be recruited for, or filled. Many positions created remain unfunded through an entire budget cycle, and therefore recruitment is not started for these posts. In contrast, funded positions should be recruited and filled as quickly as possible.

4. Being able to distinguish the funding status of positions makes a significant difference, as illustrated in figure 1. In 2011, the vacancy rate for unfunded and funded positions combined ranged from 16 to 17 per cent. For the same period, the true vacancy rate ranged from 5 to 6 per cent for funded positions, the only positions against which recruitment was possible.

5. The true vacancy rate is in line within the United Nations Common System. For example, the United Nations Secretariat, as at 31 October 2010, reported a cumulative average vacancy rate of 5.5 per cent for the Professional and General Service categories under all 34 sections of the programme budget, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported an average vacancy rate of 8.4 per cent across all duty stations.

6. Based on data provided by UNICEF that did not distinguish between funded and unfunded positions, the Board of Auditors has reported International Professional (IP) position vacancy rates in excess of 26 per cent since 2007. The newly available data show that the true vacancy rate for IP positions in 2011 is 12 per cent. The vacancy rates for National Professional Officer positions is 3 per cent, and for General Service staff positions 4 per cent. The vacancy rate for IP positions is higher largely because IP staff members are expected to ‘rotate’ every two to five years.

II. Efforts to reduce vacancy rates

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2 See First performance report on the programme budget for the biennium 2010-2011—Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (A/65/604), para. 5, which states, “The Committee notes the cumulative average vacancy rate of 5.5 per cent for both staff categories under all 34 sections of the programme budget”.


4 A/65/5/Add.2, p. 39.

5 Year to date to 30 September 2011; year-end data was not available at the time of writing due to the documentation deadlines.

6 Rotations are determined by the tour of duty of the specific duty station and range from two years in a duty station classified as an “E” by the International Civil Service Commission, to five years in a duty station classified as an “A” or “H”.
7. In considering reducing vacancy rates, UNICEF bears in mind the potential trade-off between fast recruitment and recruitment of the highest-quality candidates. The need for balance between speed and quality informs the organization’s thinking on this issue. While the vacancy rate of UNICEF is not as high as was thought, the organization is nevertheless committed to filling the 5 to 6 per cent of fillable vacant posts in the shortest recruitment lead time.

8. UNICEF has implemented a series of initiatives to address this. In November 2009, Executive Directives were issued to streamline the process of staff selection\(^7\) and central review bodies\(^8\). One month later UNICEF launched e-Recruitment, a technology system that facilitates the recruitment process. As of October 2011, more than 124,000 applications had been submitted using e-Recruitment, leading to 1,256 appointments.

9. There has been steady progress in reducing recruiting time, with 44 per cent of all recruitments meeting the key performance indicator (KPI) of 90 days from the closing of the vacancy announcement to the initial offer letter for established IP posts, compared to 24 per cent in 2008 (see figure 2 below).

![Figure 2. Recruitment lead time, 2008 to 2011 (as of 1 November 2011) (in number of days)](image)

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\(^7\) CF/EXD/2009-008 on Staff Selection Policy.

\(^8\) CF/EXD/2009-009 on Central Review Bodies.
10. In November 2010, an executive directive on recruitment and staffing in emergency situations\(^9\) was issued to fast-track the process for emergency recruitment in identified country offices. Now, most regular recruitments for emergencies meet the KPI of 56 days as set out in the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, and most surge deployments are completed within 20 days, well below the 56-day target.

11. Further progress is needed. Like the United Nations Secretariat, UNICEF is establishing pre-screened “talent groups” from which hiring units can quickly select candidates. Early indications are that this process of “direct selection” is one of the most efficient recruitment mechanisms, with an average time to recruit of 28 days. This process will require more targeted outreach among UNICEF staff members, as well as among professional networks and institutions, to ensure geographic and gender diversity. By 18 November 2011, 501 candidates in 34 talent groups had been identified.

12. This also requires providing proactive guidance to hiring units on anticipating and filling their vacancies using the most effective recruitment mechanism. The restructuring of the Division of Human Resources in 2010 established Business Partner roles as the support structure for partnering with managers.

13. Future work in 2012–2013 will focus on further implementing of talent groups, continuing the roll-out of initiatives that have been launched, and further streamlining existing policies, processes and systems.

\(^9\) CF/EXD/2010-005 on Recruitment and Staffing in in Emergency Situations.