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20 April 2004

**Feel You've Been Unfairly Treated? Call the Office of the Ombudsperson!**

Open for business since June 2002, the Office of the UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS Ombudsperson helps to find solutions to a wide variety of issues through informal means. The Office is staffed by Ombudsperson **James Lee**, consultant Ombudspersons **Linda Schieber** and **Sheila Smith**, and communications consultant **Selome Yifru**.



James Lee

"We recorded over 175 UNDP cases up to 10 March of this year," says Selome Yifru, adding that a breakdown by type of case is available on the web site (<http://intra.undp.org/ombudsperson>), which she developed and keeps up to date. "Slightly more than half of the cases came from the country offices," she noted.

Reaching out to the country offices is a high priority for the Office. "We want staff serving in the country offices to know that they have equal access to the services of the Ombudsperson," Jim Lee emphasizes.



Selome Yifru

Cases range from unsolved issues concerning entitlements to abuse of authority, with a fair amount of overlap, as shown in the statistical overview on the web site. "We work with both parties in a dispute," Linda Schieber notes, "being very careful to point out that our aim is to help them to find their own solution, one that they can themselves put into operation."

Conflicts arise when corporate policies are not carried out as intended. "Take the RCA, for example," observes Sheila Smith. "When it is not done on time or when performance has not been fairly evaluated, unresolved conflicts can arise that eventually reach the Ombudsperson."

"It is always very hard to deal with these situations once they have reached that point," she says.

Managers can be reluctant to criticize colleagues – but in a reprofiling exercise, for example, those same managers may later be forced to acknowledge that a staff member does not have the skills required for the position even though this hasn't been reflected in the RCA. The staff member, never having been given the signal to improve those skills, feels wronged and confused. "That is where we come in," the staff of the Office all agree.

The Office sometimes has to bring issues to the notice of senior management – always with the staff member's consent to use the information provided in

the confidential conversations. "In one particular reprofiling exercise, senior management actually went over the exercise and took actions to address the grievances," says Schieber. As a result of such complaints, the Office worked closely with OHR to develop a [reprofiling process checklist](#) to enable staff to ascertain that the process was followed correctly.



Linda Scheiber

Confidentiality is assured when dealing with the ombuds staff. Jim Lee describes the measures he typically takes to put staff at ease.

"When I visit a country office, I make a general presentation to all staff, without referring to the particular case that has brought me there," he says. "I refer to our web site, let staff know where I am staying and give them a cell phone number. This way everybody can make discrete confidential arrangements to talk with me."



Sheila Smith

"Staff can always contact the Office of the Ombudsperson via work or personal e-mail or by telephone, giving only a 'safe' telephone number and a time at which the staff member wishes to be contacted," Smith points out. Ombuds staff can contact the staff member at home or after hours if desired. Adds Yifru, "Staff can communicate with us in English, French or Spanish, the UNDP working languages."

Lee reminds everyone that his terms of reference give the assurance that staff should not fear reprisals for approaching an ombudsperson. "Every consultation takes place behind closed doors and we never move forward without the staff member's consent," he says. "Remember, too, that we are a strictly non-aligned office. We work very closely with everyone but we are here to serve you, the staff member, wherever you are. We can provide you with information that you may feel uncomfortable soliciting on your own or walk you through your options if you feel you have been unfairly treated."

The Ombuds staff take their growing number of cases as a sign not only of their effectiveness but also of staff's increasing awareness of the services they provide.

"Due process must be observed – and not just in letter but in spirit as well," they all agree. "We think UNDP staff and management will take established procedures much more seriously once they realize that anyone who seeks justice can come to the Office of the Ombudsperson."

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