



Daily Summary, 29 October 2020

## Session 4: Impact of COVID-19 on fieldwork

### In-country field visits

COVID-19 has negatively affected all ombuds institutions in their ability to conduct field visits, forcing offices to explore new ways of personal engagement with troops, raising their profile among the armed forces, and conducting investigations. Hereby, participants noted a differential impact between the first and second wave of the pandemic. During the former, many offices stopped conducting field visits entirely and were instead focused on implementing new modalities of remote work. Presently, many offices have been able to overcome the current impediments by taking a wide range of safety precautions, including the wearing of personal protective equipment (PPE), regular health screens among their staff, and abiding by social distancing rules. Some offices were also able to conduct field visits in the summer when COVID-19 numbers were relatively low, compensating in advance for the limited ability to conduct these as infection rates rose once more. Furthermore, many offices have found new modalities to substitute their presence during field visits by increasing other channels of communications, such as questionnaires, phone calls, and even virtual visits. In addition, participants reported new techniques of gathering information, such as through closer collaboration with military officials or the use of CCTV footage. While new technologies offer a wide range of possibilities, they will not be able to completely match the insight and trust gained through personal interactions.

### Overseas visits

Similarly to field visits, most if not all overseas visits to troops abroad were put on hold at the outset of the pandemic to minimize affection rates and protect troops based abroad, including international contacts between colleague ombuds institutions. However, in most cases, soldiers on missions abroad rarely lodge complaints during deployment and instead wait until they have returned back home. Therefore, complaints handling to overseas troops largely continued uninterrupted. Nonetheless, ombuds institutions shared the ways through which the lack of oversea contact may be somewhat compensated, including among others, a greater reliance on ICT channels or through scheduled meetings with troop contingents that had just returned from overseas missions, gathering feedback and gauging experiences.

### Adapting to the new normal

Participants stressed the continued need and importance of conducting field visits, and that the current exceptional circumstances should not usher in a “new normal” manifest in a reduced field presence. As offices streamline their adaptive practices to maintain operations, participants stressed the need that field visits should not be replaced. In some cases, resources have been re-allocated towards the procurement of PPE or IT infrastructure. Others have called to decentralize the ombuds institution by posting members of the office in remote places that may not have access to ICT channels. Staff that have been working from home further shared their experiences on how the resulting higher level of informality (i.e. sharing of private contact information, balancing work and private life) has to an extent substituted the lack of personal interaction during fieldwork. Lastly, the hope was expressed that the increased impetus to digitalize and modernize will greatly supplement conventional modes of conducting field work after the pandemic has largely subsided.