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## Session 5: Ombuds institutions after COVID-19

### The glimmer of a silver lining

Ombuds institutions have adapted in a variety of ways to face the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and, in turn, have grown increasingly resilient to analogous shocks in the future. Across the board, the acceleration of digitalization processes has allowed ombuds institutions to reach more remote individuals through a greater online presence and increased remote accessibility. Formerly resource-intensive complaints-handling procedures have been streamlined and made more efficient – as some communications shift from in-person meetings to phone calls or in light of specialized software. In some cases, ombuds institutions report a higher level of complaints now than prior to the pandemic. However, more sophisticated IT infrastructures increase the training needs of ombuds institution staff as they access these from the comfort of their own homes. The forceful transition to working from home has also produced positive outcomes. Ombuds institutions have grown more comfortable to home office working arrangements as their staff retains – and even exceeds – levels of productivity in pre-COVID periods. Lastly, many offices have been equipped with sanitary facilities to adhere to various health and safety regulations – facilities that will undoubtedly remain put in the near future.

### Balancing employee welfare and work continuity

As ombuds institution offices undergo rapid flux, the sub-optimal arrangements that result thereof require difficult choices and a special attention to employee welfare. For instance, ombuds institutions may find that conducting investigations in a way that adheres to their strict ethical standards is currently not possible. This may be due to an inability to conduct in-person interviews or to examine certain classified documents that may not be digitalized due to their nature. Similar decisions must be made in ensuring combat readiness of the armed forces, e.g. pertaining to the continuation of training with sufficient PPE, and ombuds institutions have large role to play in ensuring that these decisions comply with the needs and rights of soldiers. Most importantly, ensuring work continuity demands that ombuds institutions sustain their efforts in holding governments accountable for their enacted measures – even more so in times of crisis. The stricter the anti-COVID-19 measures are, the stricter the oversight of their implementation should be. Lastly, ombuds institutions must pay special attention to the mental health of their staff, taking pro-active measures (e.g. daily telephone check-ins) against the increased social isolation experienced by everybody.

### A future after COVID

While being out of reach currently, COVID-19 will end. In the process of returning to normalcy, ombuds institutions will be crucial in contributing to the accountability of those in charge and in ensuring that all security actors with temporarily changed roles and responsibilities return to their regular, legally mandated activities. In anticipation of that role, ombuds institutions should take pre-emptive measures, for instance by engaging relevant stakeholders in discussions on the increased budgetary needs of their offices or by raising the trainings needs of soldiers deployed in civilian contexts. Regardless, ombuds institutions must continually draw lessons from their experiences and share these across multilateral contexts.

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