



SESSION 1: What are resilient and sustainable ombuds institutions?

Introduction

In recent years, ombuds institutions have increasingly become the target of the ire of both government officials, from the military, from members of the executive and parliament, as well as other prominent figures in society. There have been several high profile instances of ombuds institutions' coming under attack: from budgets being decimated from one year to the next, being the target of a coordinated national media campaign to undermine the institution's credibility, leaving the head of office unappointed for multiple years, to staff of ombuds institutions being kidnapped and murdered by armed groups that detest the promotion of human rights.

While these examples represent the most extreme threats and may not be likely to happen, elements of these sorts of threats are relevant for all ombuds institutions. Budgetary cuts, negative media coverage, and a lack of cooperation with other government bodies are issues that trouble all institutions. And while these most extreme examples may not seem likely to occur, ombuds institutions should proactively about how to adapt to new challenges and how to strengthen their office's resilience in the face of such crises in order maintain their momentum in protecting the rights of soldiers and contributing to a more effective military.

Challenges and Risks of Ombuds Institutions

All participants at the conference were asked to answer several questions about their office's current situation with regards to budgetary allocation, external interference in their office's affairs and public criticism, and what specific types of threats they perceive to be concerning. Interestingly, many respondents indicated they were not under significant pressure. About 30% of all respondents indicated their budget had actually increased in recent years, and 60% have sustained even funding. Furthermore, 80% of respondents did not perceive an increase in criticism or resistance in recent years, and fewer than 10% indicated that their head of office had been removed from office before the completion of their term and was removed almost always on legal grounds.

These results are positive and should be viewed as such. However, it should also be mentioned that while they are small minorities, a significant number of respondents have indicated that they are currently facing budget cuts (10%) and increased external pressures (20%). The difficult realities faced by the minority should not be dismissed. Furthermore, while many respondents indicated that their budget has not decreased, many participants still indicated that their current budget was still insufficient to carry out their work effectively. Similarly, while criticism or resistance may not have increased in recent years, "Criticism is normal and part of our work," as one respondent put it. Budgetary restrictions and resistance to their work are often ever-present conditions to the day to day work of ombuds institutions.



Strategies and Responses

One tool in the arsenal of ombuds institutions to think strategically in how to maintain stability and momentum in the long term is by developing long-term work plans or strategies. The objective of this conference is to generate strategic thinking of each institution's challenges, to learn good practices from one's peers and to return home with some initial ideas. Translating these ideas into action can be done through institutional strategies. All participants were asked whether their office developed long term strategy, and roughly two-thirds of participants indicated that their office does, half of these respondents indicating their strategy lasted from two to three years, with the other half indicating their strategy lasts for four years or longer.

An interesting practice shared by several respondents indicated that they have several commissioners whom rotate their terms over different time periods. This has the effect of maintaining continuity. When one commissioner's term ends, his or her replacement is able to get up to speed while the work of the other commissioners continues uninterrupted. This also ensures that institutional knowledge and memory is more effectively maintained, as the new commissioner can learn from his or her peers and share that same knowledge with the new commissioners when their term comes to an end.

Other respondents indicated that they maintain continuity and institutional knowledge through the staff of the office. When the head of office changes, it is the support staff that assist in the transition. This approach is more likely for offices that do not possess multiple commissioners, but just one head of office. One risk of such an approach can be that at the conclusion of the head of office's term, many staff, including other senior staff, may also depart, leaving little continuity. One respondent indicated a solution to this issue through their long-term strategy. They employ a strategy that extends beyond the term of the head of office, so that when the new head of office is appointed, they still have one or two additional years to enact the existing strategy before designing their own. This ensures that the new officeholder has the opportunity to grow into the role before defining their long-term vision.

Altogether, there are many interesting techniques employed by ombuds institutions to ensure they are more effective and resilient to potential risks and threats. It is hoped that participants will share their experiences with one another throughout the conference.

Questions for Discussion:

- Have you observed your office coming under increasing pressure or scrutiny from external actors?
- How does your office handle negative press or public comments directed at it?
- How is your annual budget agreed upon?
- What measures does your office take to strengthen continuity from one head of office to the next?