

# **The 17<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces**

## **Building Bridges – Awareness and Outreach Efforts by Ombuds Institutions**

**7 – 9 October 2025, Johannesburg, South Africa**

### **Conference Statement**

As the International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces (ICOAF) enters its seventeenth year, the conference continues to promote the exchange of experiences and good practices, as well as foster increased cooperation among ombuds institutions.

Jointly hosted by the South African Military Ombud (SAMO) and DCAF – the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, the 17<sup>th</sup> ICOAF took place in Johannesburg from 7 to 9 October 2025.

Throughout the conference, ICOAF was able to further consolidate and strengthen its role as a platform to promote democratic oversight of the armed forces and prevent maladministration and human rights abuses.

This conference statement serves as a compilation of good practices and key reflections discussed during the conference and does not serve as an obligation for conference participants to act upon nor to implement said practices. Ombuds institutions possess specific and unique mandates, and therefore not all good practices may be relevant to all conference participants.

*The Conferees declare the following:*

#### **Introduction**

1. Building on the successes of the previous fourteen International Conferences of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces in Berlin (2009), Vienna (2010), Belgrade (2011), Ottawa (2012), Oslo (2013), Geneva (2014), Prague (2015),

Amsterdam (2016), London (2017), Johannesburg (2018), Sarajevo (2019), a virtual conference (2020), a hybrid conference hosted from Canberra (2021), Oslo (2022), Vienna (2023), and Berlin (2024), the 2025 conference was held under the theme “Building Bridges – Awareness and Outreach Efforts by Ombuds Institutions”.

2. We recognise that ICOAF has established itself as an important international forum to promote and strengthen democratic oversight of the armed forces, with participants sharing common aspirations towards preventing maladministration and human rights abuses.
3. Recognising that each national context is unique, we underline the importance of ongoing international dialogue among ombuds institutions to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms within and by the armed forces.

### **Awareness of What, Awareness by Whom?**

4. Awareness of an ombuds institution’s existence, mandate, and procedures is a prerequisite not only for access to justice, but also for the institution’s perceived legitimacy and effectiveness in holding the armed forces accountable. Regular assessments such as perception surveys and analysis of complaint trends are vital to identify and track awareness gaps, measure levels of trust and accessibility, and the institution’s overall visibility.
5. Legitimacy and trust depend not only on awareness, but also on how the institution is perceived in terms of its independence, impartiality, accessibility, and effectiveness. This underlines the need to understand awareness in a differentiated way: it is not sufficient for potential complainants merely to know that the institution exists, but also to recognise it as an independent and credible body that can respond effectively to their concerns. Accordingly, assessments of awareness should move beyond simple name recognition to examine perceptions of mandate, accessibility, and institutional integrity.
6. Broader public and governmental awareness of ombuds institutions reinforces civilian oversight of the armed forces, democratic governance, and resilience against democratic backsliding. Cultivating such awareness requires sustained engagement with parliamentarians, media, and civil society partners, whose recognition and support can amplify the institution’s visibility, enhance its

accountability functions, and anchor it more firmly within the broader democratic architecture.

7. Equally important is the awareness that ombuds institutions themselves generate by documenting societal grievances and systemic concerns. This awareness must be conveyed to parliaments, ensuring these grievances and systematic concerns shape and inform political debate and decision-making.

### **Operationalising Awareness through Outreach**

8. Outreach by ombuds institutions serves three interconnected goals: raising awareness of their role and accessibility among priority groups; empowering individuals to know and exercise their rights; and enabling the institution itself to gain a deeper understanding of societal grievances and systemic issues. To be effective, outreach must be supported by dedicated resources and institutionalised planning mechanisms, ensuring that it is sustained, consistent, and credible rather than ad hoc.
9. Outreach is not a one-way street limited to communicating with priority groups, but an ongoing engagement and dialogue with different parts of society. For outreach to be effective, its strategies and frameworks must also be attuned to the political environment in which they take place.
10. Offices must weigh risks, resources, and unintended consequences when designing outreach policies and practices. Systematic evaluations of outreach initiatives allow institutions to learn from mistakes and adapt strategies.

### **Outreach Channels and Tools – Best Practices and Lessons Learned**

11. Effective outreach goes beyond information-sharing: it actively shapes perceptions of the ombuds institution and carries political dimensions that require careful calibration. Case-based communication – utilising anonymised examples – are an effective method of illustrating an ombuds institution's impact and also strengthens the institution's credibility.

12. Outreach can combine in-person engagement, digital tools, and media channels, each offering distinct strengths and trade-offs. Best practices show that hybrid approaches, combining personal trust-building with digital reach, are most effective in building awareness.
13. Effectiveness of outreach depends on context, available resources, and the specific needs of target audiences, with particular attention to vulnerable or hard-to-reach groups. Building partnerships with NGOs, veterans' organisations, and community actors can expand reach and credibility.
14. Continuous evaluation and adaptation of tools and methods is crucial to maintaining trust, legitimacy, and impact. Institutions should regularly phase out ineffective tools and replace them with approaches proven to resonate with their audiences.

### **Reaching Intended Audiences**

15. Ombuds institutions identify priority groups by analysing complaint data, drawing on external statistics, engaging with trusted intermediaries, and conducting targeted research – ensuring that outreach is evidence-based and focused on communities that face barriers to accessing justice or require reinforced protection. Priority groups for ombuds institutions often include armed forces personnel, veterans, families of service members, as well as communities affected by the activities of the armed forces.
16. Outreach must be tailored to diverse audiences – service members, veterans, minorities, government actors, and the wider public – with sensitivity to their specific and distinct needs. Using plain language and culturally adapted materials improves accessibility and ensures that messages resonates across different groups.
17. Inclusive approaches and institutional diversity strengthen both accessibility and trust. By building diverse staff teams, ombuds institutions enhance their credibility and foster stronger connections with different groups within the armed forces and society.
18. For many ombuds institutions, reaching intended audience remains a challenge. Engaging relevant intermediaries – such as key figures, organisations with

frequent contact to these groups, experts, and third-sector actors – is therefore crucial, not only for identifying priority groups but also reaching them effectively.

### **Safeguarding Integrity: The Role of Ombuds Institutions in Preventing Abuse of Power**

19. By reframing corruption as both maladministration and a rights-based concern, ombuds institutions reinforce integrity and accountability. This framing mobilises both institutional reforms and public pressure for change.
20. Abuse of power and corrupt practices in the armed forces undermines effectiveness, discipline, and public trust. Ombuds institutions, by virtue of their proximity to personnel and their capacity to detect systemic abuse, are uniquely positioned to expose such practices and serve as early-warning mechanisms.
21. Independence and cooperation with other oversight actors are key enablers of effective anti-corruption work by ombuds institutions. Their role is most impactful when embedded in a broader ecosystem of independent and effective anti-corruption actors. By linking with existing mechanisms – both within the armed forces and beyond – they can contribute to a 360-degree approach that complements, rather than duplicates, the work of other bodies.
22. Integrity within the armed forces can only be safeguarded through strong whistleblower protection, ensuring confidential and trusted reporting channels that bring abuses of power and systemic violations to light.

### **Conclusions**

23. ICOAF is a platform to exchange information, good practices and experiences among the ICOAF partner institutions. The participation of over 75 participants, representing around 35 countries, is evidence of the platform's importance. It calls upon DCAF to explore future avenues to strengthen effective cooperation.
24. Participants call upon DCAF to continue its efforts in providing support to individual participating institutions, particularly through capacity-building exercises and peer-to-peer exchange.

25. International cooperation and peer exchange among ombuds institutions strengthen legitimacy, foster innovation, and enhance the ability to address cross-border challenges. Sharing experiences, tools, and lessons learned across regions builds collective capacity and reinforces the role of ombuds institutions in safeguarding democratic oversight worldwide.
26. Participants request DCAF to explore how existing international principles on National Human Rights Institutions may be applied to the work of ombuds institutions for the armed forces, while taking into account contextual differences, including national legal frameworks, institutional mandates, and political environments.
27. ICOAF calls for greater support to ombuds institutions through peer exchange and international cooperation, in the area of outreach, engagement strategies and awareness raising.
28. ICOAF remains open to relevant institutions from countries that have not participated at previous conferences.
29. The eighteenth ICOAF will take place in Sidney, Australia from 18 to 21 October 2026.

Johannesburg, 9 Octobre 2025