



The 17th International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces – 17ICOAF

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

Session Summaries

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SESSION 1: Awareness of What, Awareness by Whom?

At the most fundamental level, awareness of an ombuds institution's existence, mandate, and procedures, is a precondition for its effective functioning. As such, the first session unpacked the concept of awareness, positioning it within the work of ombuds institutions and establishing its significance for effective oversight. It explored both its substance – awareness of an institution's existence, mandate, procedures, and the rights it safeguards – and its social reach, encompassing service members, their families, the chain of command and public authorities, other oversight bodies, and the wider public. The discussion sought to move beyond a narrow understanding of awareness limited to visibility and publicity toward awareness understood as a set of informed, trusting relationships that enable individuals to access redress mechanisms safely and effectively.

Discussions framed awareness as relational, dynamic, and context-dependent. In military settings marked by hierarchy and insular culture, awareness does not arise automatically from legal mandates or public communication. It is shaped by perceptions of credibility, impartiality, confidentiality, and an institution's capacity to deliver tangible results. In this sense, a high volume of complaints is less indicative of institutional failure as opposed to a healthy culture of recourse – one in which individuals know where to turn, trust they will be heard, and correspondingly make use of the redress mechanisms available to them. Notably, this understanding requires a nuanced reading of complaint volumes that takes into account other indicators such as recurring patterns, resolution timelines, and complainant demographics. Without such context, surges in complaints may instead reflect institutional deficiencies such as persistent bottlenecks, systemic mismanagement, or diminished faith in existing remedies rather than heightened awareness of and trust in the ombuds institution.

More broadly, levels of awareness themselves are shaped by the wider political context and information environment. Episodes of political crises, high-profile cases, or societal challenges such as disinformation are recurrent forces that can erode public understanding of ombuds institutions or distort perceptions of what they are empowered to do. These dynamics underscore the importance of sustained and transparent outreach, not only to maintain their credibility but also to articulate the normative foundations of ombuds work. As institutions that embody and advocate for accountability, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, ombuds offices are inherently political actors – not in alignment with any party or government, but in their commitment to security sector governance grounded in principles of democratic oversight. Institutions that are attuned to their environment – and how they are perceived within it – are better equipped to translate this awareness into strategic engagement on specific issues. Depending on the matter at hand, prevailing public

perceptions, the political climate, and the responsiveness of other state actors, ombuds institutions may choose to take on different roles: engaging publicly or with discretion, and either with state institutions or with society at large. Such strategic awareness guides ombuds offices in how to most effectively engage – be it through formal investigation, quiet diplomacy, public advocacy, or informal dialogue.

A practical illustration of such context-sensitive engagement concerned veterans and their families. Complaint intake processes that rely primarily on office-based and digital channels risk excluding individuals for whom formal procedures are difficult to access or navigate, and who may depend on face-to-face conversations that foster confidentiality and trust. Providing such personal engagement in familiar settings can be crucial in surfacing problems that rarely appear in public forums, such as persistent delays in compensation processes due to medical/legal complexities or the everyday burdens borne by the families of service members affected by PTSD. Collaborating closely with relevant partners, such as veterans' and family support bodies, helps ensure that outreach and awareness-raising efforts are grounded in individual experiences and that these insights, in turn, inform broader institutional reform. Against this backdrop, awareness also extends to the institution itself, which cultivates an internal awareness of systemic shortcomings and vulnerabilities by capturing individual grievances and signals gathered through outreach, and by analysing the broader patterns and trends they reveal. Periodic, accessible reporting on such patterns supported by thematic investigations then, not only addresses root causes of grievances but demonstrates to potential complainants that their issues are neither isolated nor futile to raise. In other contexts, awareness of an ombuds office requires adaptation to social and cultural realities. Efforts must take account of linguistic diversity, geography, varying levels of literacy, and the importance of community networks as facilitators of understanding and trust. Engagement may therefore be rooted in local idioms, storytelling, and trusted platforms and networks. Such approaches embed awareness within societal practices that individuals already recognise and rely on, and help ensure that the ombuds office reaches those in remote areas.

The session further underscored that awareness must extend beyond those directly covered by an ombuds institution's mandate. Ombuds offices not only raise awareness among service members but also among the wider network of public authorities whose actions affect them. By engaging municipal services, social protection agencies, and other state bodies, ombuds institutions help ensure that these actors understand their respective duties when an ombuds process exposes gaps – for example, where a law guarantees care for service members that is not effectively delivered in practice. Equally, awareness among other governmental actors and the broader public contributes to safeguarding an ombuds institution's operational independence. When key institutions and citizens alike understand its mandate and value, the ombuds office is better positioned to carry out visits, access information, and maintain credibility as an impartial oversight body. In this sense, awareness serves both

as a reminder to duty-bearers of their obligations and as a safeguard of an ombuds institution's ability to operate independently.

SESSION 2: Operationalising Awareness through Outreach

Operationalising awareness through outreach efforts requires a thorough examination and nuanced understanding of what outreach entails, as well as how its various forms can be systematised, embedded within institutional practices, and aligned with broader strategic objectives. The second session thus explored how ombuds institutions are guided by the strategies and frameworks that underpin outreach efforts to turn awareness into practice.

Notably, effective approaches are based on the understanding that outreach often goes beyond merely conveying information – it frequently carries a political dimension by shaping how issues are framed and understood – depending not only on the message itself, but also the format, tone, and intended audience. Outreach strategies and frameworks should thus be grounded in a clear understanding of whom outreach seeks to reach, what barriers or challenges limit access and awareness, and how specific formats of engagement interact with said audiences and challenges.

As such, a primary point of discussion centred on the need for studies, surveys, and assessments to inform outreach policy and ensure it is evidence-based. Awareness surveys and thematic studies can establish baselines, identify blind spots and systemic gaps, and should consequently guide where ombuds institutions direct their outreach efforts and resources. Crucially, assessments or studies that rely solely on statistics cannot provide a complete picture and should be complemented by qualitative methods to capture lived experiences and ensure that certain issues are examined in depth. Beyond understanding whether individuals are aware of an institution's existence, studies should cover how the institution is perceived, preferred communication channels and most trusted sources of information, and the longer-term effects of specific outreach practices or specific issues. For instance, comprehensive studies on discrimination and sexualised violence within the armed forces can reveal not only the symptomatic effects of a culture condoning such behaviour, but also its far-reaching implications on morale and operational effectiveness. Equally important is the practice of embedding assessments and studies that inform outreach policy into regular institutional processes rather than conducting them on an ad hoc basis. This ensures outreach measures developed in response to specific issues remain relevant and are demonstrated to be effective. Finally, ombuds offices may partner with external organisations, such as universities or think tanks, to further strengthen such evidence-based approaches, leveraging their expertise, capacity, and credibility.

As a recurring theme throughout the conference, discussions on outreach strategies and corresponding measures emphasised the need for context-specific approaches. In settings where an institution is newly established or operates with constrained capacity, outreach efforts may be focus on raising awareness among those state actors whose cooperation they rely upon and service members who are most vulnerable to rights violations. In geographically remote areas, temporary offices or partnerships with civil society organisations may mitigate acute gaps in awareness and access. Ombuds offices herein employ continually creative outreach formats, including for instance placing flyers on the inside of water bottles used by service members, making their mandate visible in the daily environments of service personnel. In conflict-affected contexts, outreach strategies must account for heightened risks, emotional strain, and the limitations of formal and digital communication channels. Awareness underpinned by trust is built through a continuous in-person presence and communication that is sensitive to the suffering and loss of service members and their families. Compounded by the volatile information environment of today wherein misinformation is rife, outreach must also be precise and measured. Lastly, the discussion emphasised the importance of word-of-mouth: when a grievance is addressed in a fair and effective manner, the resulting awareness and trust circulates informally among peers.

SESSION 3: Outreach Channels and Tools – Best Practices and Lessons Learned

After exploring how awareness is translated into practice through outreach strategies, session three turned to the channels and tools through which these strategies are implemented, assessing their effectiveness, context-specific lessons learned, and the challenges they present in practice. The session illustrated how outreach practices translate into access, emphasising that effectiveness depends less on a single method than on disciplined design, continual evaluation, and consequent adaptation to the audience, geography, and mandate. Accordingly, outreach efforts are imbued with inherent trade-offs: in-person engagement builds trust and enables raising sensitive issues, yet is resource-intensive and limited in reach; digital channels operate effectively at scale but may result in shallow engagement and fail to reach those most in need; media engagement helps clarify the roles and responsibilities of ombuds offices but also operates in inherently politicised spaces where narratives can be reinterpreted or instrumentalised. As such, the tools, channels and methods of awareness-raising and outreach efforts in ombuds work must be carefully considered and evaluated to ensure that approaches are effective and efficient, and support the perceived legitimacy and independence of ombuds institutions among its various audiences.

In-person engagement was highlighted as a central component of effective outreach. In doing so, several factors shape the extent to which in-person outreach cultivates candour, trust, and access among the audiences it intends to reach. For instance, ombuds visits coordinated with local actors – service member and family support networks, civil society organisations, or municipal authorities – increases access and thus encourages a participation that is representative of the wider military community. Furthermore, engagement with local bodies strengthens access to the ombuds institution by increasing their understanding of, and recognition for, its role, in addition to supporting the implementation of decisions or benefits granted to service members. Troop visits may be structured to begin with broad engagement to maximise reach, followed by more targeted engagement with specific vulnerable groups or on particular thematic issues. Building on this, focus groups may be organised by rank, exclude the chain of command, or be anonymised so that names are not recorded, thereby helping to create a space for the candid and frank expression of grievances. Notably, participants emphasised that in-person outreach should be considered as a two-way street. Focus groups which repeatedly draw on the same individuals and are organised in a way that feels procedural rather than meaningful may risk alienating those they intend to reach. Furthermore, how outreach is delivered matters as much as what is being said – even more so in person. The physical setting in which engagement takes place, the tone and accessibility of the language used, and even other aesthetic elements such as uniforms or the institutional symbols all shape perceptions of independence and approachability. For instance, case-based examples can be more effective in conveying information than language that is overly legalistic or bureaucratic, as they are more relatable, memorable, and directly connected to the realities service members face. Equally, when ombuds personnel have personal service experience or reflect the diversity of those they serve, they are better able to anticipate how messages may be received, select language that resonates, and relate to the experiences they encounter. In some contexts, it may also be more important to acknowledge past shortcomings and negative experiences with the complaints system – and to demonstrate how these have been addressed – than to focus solely on raising visibility alone.

Digital tools, particularly the use of social media, were recognised as a form of outreach that offers significant opportunities but also carries distinct risks. On the one hand, their reach extends far beyond what is possible through in-person engagement or printed materials, enabling engagement with service members deployed in remote areas or spread across different locations. Online spaces can also serve as informal avenues of support, allowing individuals to express concerns and feel heard without the procedural burden of filing a formal complaint. These forums further create space for those indirectly affected – such as family members or others outside the formal mandate of the respective ombuds institution – who may nonetheless experience the consequences of institutional shortcomings and seek acknowledgment or solidarity. When such accounts accumulate, they may reveal broader patterns of grievances that merit the ombuds institutions' attention. On the other hand, digital tools and the wider information environment in which they operate present several distinct challenges.

Oversight bodies are not well positioned to host or moderate informal online spaces, as they risk creating unrealistic expectations, compromising confidentiality or due process, and blurring the line between informal expression and formal complaints. Moreover, digital platforms are susceptible to misinformation, wherein grievances shared online can rapidly spread beyond their original context or be reshaped by partial narratives and political agendas. Thus, engaging with digital channels and tools requires a careful understanding of both their potential benefits and inherent risks.

Beyond both in-person and digital engagement, more conventional forms of outreach – such as annual reports, press briefings, or media appearances – were recognised as equally important channels of raise awareness, particularly among external stakeholders such as parliaments, other public authorities, and the wider public. Annual reports provide an empirically founded point of reference that allows ombuds institutions to follow-up on previous recommendations and assess whether structural sources of grievances are being addressed. In annual reports, quantitative data and statistical overviews – such as complaint volumes, demographic breakdowns, or recurring themes – can establish the scope and distribution of grievances, while anonymised case examples convey how these issues unfold in practice. In similar vein, press briefings used deliberately allow ombuds institutions to frame their findings, demonstrate responsiveness to public concerns, and reinforce the legitimacy of their work.

SESSION 4: Reaching Intended Audiences

Identifying and effectively reaching distinct audiences is essential to ensuring that the diverse groups of military personnel – including active-duty members, reservists, conscripts, veterans, those deployed internationally, and groups who face structural barriers – have equitable access to information on how to seek grievance redress through the ombuds institution. This should include particular attention to structurally marginalised groups, such as ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities, LGBTQ personnel, and women, who encounter compounded barriers related to institutional bias and discrimination. These and other audiences may hold varying levels of trust in the ombuds institution, encounter the institution with uneven knowledge of its mandate, face distinct structural or cultural obstacles, and may require adapted messaging and communication channels to ensure that information is both accessible and meaningful within their specific context. To meet the differentiated needs of diverse audiences, ombuds institutions can adapt both the content and format of their outreach efforts and build internal capacity to engage meaningfully with specific groups.

Trusted intermediaries, such as military associations, trade unions, veterans' organisations, family networks, or informal peer groups, are valuable partners of ombuds office's in reaching specific audiences and strengthening access to grievance redress. They often form the first point of contact for complainants due to their proximity to the lived realities of service members – even more so in contexts where institutional trust is fragile. Among peers with shared experience or within associations who speak in familiar terms and are outside of formal state and military institutions, individuals may feel more comfortable airing their grievances. Their complementary involvement in outreach efforts by ombuds bodies may thus lower barriers to disclosure while helping direct grievances towards their appropriate channels by clarifying mandates and available mechanisms, accompanying complainants throughout the process, or signalling prevailing issues directly to the ombuds office. In practice, this has included cases where female service members felt more comfortable approaching associations or informal networks, which then facilitated contact with the ombuds institution. Their function is equally important for veterans, wherein intermediary organisations generally maintain contact with individuals who have left military structures and may no longer engage with official information channels. Similarly, family members are often able to detect problems – such as stress, substance misuse, or post-deployment trauma – before they become visible to ombuds institutions.

Tailoring outreach to specific audiences also requires assessing how different communication formats shape awareness of the ombuds institution, and adapting

these where necessary. This is better achieved when ombuds institution staff are able to relate to potential complainants – whether through prior or active military service, specialised training, or diverse professional backgrounds. Younger recruits and conscripts often respond more readily to concise, visually oriented content delivered through digital platforms, whereas veterans may be more effectively reached through local associations, community events, or printed materials. Families – whether formally included in an ombuds institution’s mandate or not – can be engaged through community briefings, information sessions at military bases, or targeted materials distributed through support networks, and their involvement has, in some contexts, encouraged higher uptake of complaint mechanisms. For external stakeholders such as public authorities, civil society organisations, or the wider public, formats such as annual reports, policy briefs, parliamentary submissions, or participation in inter-agency working groups are more appropriate, as they provide structured information, institutional accountability, and opportunities for dialogue in formal settings. Awareness among these actors not only ensures that obligations towards service members are understood and met but also safeguards the ombuds institution’s operational independence – for example, by protecting its access to information or ensuring adequate resources. Evaluating which communication formats are most effective at raising awareness or the use of grievance channels enables ombuds institutions to adjust their strategies and ensure outreach efforts resonate with their intended audiences.

SESSION 5: Safeguarding Integrity: The Role of Ombuds Institutions in Preventing Abuse of Power

Ombuds institutions play an increasingly recognised role in tackling corruption within the armed forces, as corruption itself is more widely understood in its broader sense – not only as bribery or embezzlement, but as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, encompassing nepotism, clientelism, opaque decision-making, and systemic violations of integrity standards. In the defence sector, such forms of corruption undermine operational effectiveness, erode internal discipline, and weaken public trust in military institutions. As bodies whose mandates are well placed to identify and address such practices through the lens of maladministration, abuse of power, and rights violations, ombuds institutions are uniquely positioned to address forms of corruption that are embedded in organisational culture or obscured by military hierarchy. Session five thus provided the space for participants to reflect on how the work of ombuds institutions safeguard integrity within the armed forces and how ombuds practices can be strengthened to detect patterns of abuse, close accountability gaps, and prevent misconduct from becoming systemic.

Discussions highlighted that integrity and corruption are two sides of the same coin. As such, ensuring that preventative measures and frameworks are in place to

foster a culture of integrity within the armed forces form a core pillar of anti-corruption efforts by ombuds institutions. Notably, these include clearly defined ethical standards and integrity regulations (e.g., on gender and inclusion, potential conflicts of interest, or complaint mechanisms), training on such policies and the corresponding rights of service members, transparent decision-making processes, and leadership that upholds these accountability standards by challenging permissive cultures and proactively addressing misconduct. Regular surveys on harassment and bullying can further inform ombuds recommendations in terms of which groups are most affected by abuses of power and provide an early warning function by identifying and addressing grievances before these become systemic. Herein, internal desk officers embedded within military units may be used to monitor situations and act as a direct liaison to the ombuds institution. Ombuds bodies may further regularly engage and cooperate with representative bodies of service members to identify emerging integrity risks and gain an early understanding of patterns such as a rising tolerance for harassment and favouritism or gaps in leadership accountability. Notably, whistleblower protection laws not only provide safeguards for individuals who report wrongdoing but also serve a preventive function. By introducing legal consequences for retaliation, ensuring confidentiality, and obliging military command and oversight bodies to investigate disclosures, such frameworks increase the cost of suppressing complaints and thereby discourage practices that foster a culture of fear or silence. Robust whistleblowing regimes – especially in defence settings which can be hostile to disclosure – further include practical safeguards such as physical protection, psychosocial support, and legal assistance. Finally, coordination between ombuds institutions and anti-corruption bodies, audit offices, human rights commission, and civil society can reinforce preventative measures by aligning integrity frameworks and drawing on international initiatives – such as the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group – to legitimise and advance reform efforts.

Beyond preventative efforts, ombuds institutions – though not vested with prosecutorial powers – are able to investigate maladministration and patterns of abuse, referring cases with criminal elements to competent bodies. Ombuds institutions therefore play a role in the enforcement of integrity within the armed forces, even if this role is exercised indirectly and remains contingent on strong institutional and operational independence. Their ability to contribute meaningfully to integrity enforcement depends on specific powers – such as the right for own-motion investigations or access to classified information. Furthermore, effective action also relies on effective coordination across multiple bodies – both state and non-state – as integrity breaches rarely fall within the remit of a single institution. Establishing clear referral pathways and memoranda of understanding that delineate responsibilities and prevent duplication can enhance coherence and close accountability gaps. At the same time, cooperation may be constrained by confidentiality requirements which necessitate carefully designed procedures to ensure that information-sharing remains both lawful and operationally feasible.

Lastly, defence procurement was highlighted as a domain wherein both the preventative and investigative roles of ombuds institutions are increasingly relevant against the backdrop of rising military expenditures. Given the concentration of financial resources, discretionary decision-making, and institutional secrecy, procurement processes can become vulnerable to undue influence, clientelism, or organisational capture. In this area, ombuds institutions can identify administrative precursors to corruption – such as conflicts of interest, opaque exemptions or decision-making, gaps in documentation, or the bypassing of standard budgeting and auditing procedures.