

Supplementary Information to the Mobility and Hardship Booklet

PROCESS FOR HARDSHIP CLASSIFICATION

Overview

1. The hardship classification process provides a standardized, objective, and evidence-based mechanism for evaluating living and working conditions at field duty stations across the United Nations common system. The primary purpose of the process is to establish accurate, globally consistent hardship ratings (categories A through E) that reflect the duty station's conditions across six core hardship factors – health, security, climate, housing, local conditions, and isolation, ensuring equitable treatment of staff across all participating organizations. Duty stations are reviewed and classified under the ICSC hardship classification scheme¹.

Hardship Classification Review Process:

2. The hardship classification of a duty station is established through local field data collection, followed by technical analysis and inter-agency review by the Tripartite Working Group (TWG)², taking into account expert assessments of security and health-related factors provided by the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) and the United Nations Division of Healthcare Management and Occupational Safety and Health (DHMOH), and formal promulgation by the Chair of the ICSC.

1. Data Collection of Duty Station Information

3. The hardship classification review process relies primarily on data collected through the ICSC hardship classification questionnaire, completed under the responsibility and supervision of Resident Coordinators.

4. The ICSC secretariat provides the current questionnaire and communicates the submission deadline for each review cycle. Resident Coordinators should submit a completed questionnaire for each duty station under review in accordance with communicated instructions.

5. As these questionnaires form the baseline for evaluating local living and working conditions experienced by internationally recruited staff and their eligible dependants at the duty station, the accuracy, completeness, and evidence-based nature of the response are critical. Incomplete or inconsistent data may delay the review process or lead to an inaccurate assessment of the duty station's hardship classification. Strict adherence to the submission deadline is required to align with the ICSC review cycle. Resident Coordinators play a key leadership role in ensuring that the input reflects consolidated, accurate and evidence-based input from participating UN agencies at the duty station.

¹ For details regarding the ICSC hardship classification scheme, category H designations, field related allowances and benefits eligibility rules, rates and policy frameworks governing benefits and entitlements, please refer to the main mobility and [hardship](#) booklet, available at ICSC website.

² The Commission formally renamed the Tripartite Working Group to the Working Group for the Review of Conditions of Life and Work in Field Duty Stations in 2004. Reference to TWG is kept as an abbreviation under established practice. See Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-ninth Session, Supplement No. 30 (A/59/30 (Vol.I)), chap. III, sect. C, para. 130.

2. Preliminary Evaluation by the ICSC secretariat.

6. The ICSC secretariat processes all completed questionnaires, conducts preliminary hardship classification reviews, and prepares technical recommendations for consideration by the TWG and the ICSC Chair, taking into account expert input from UNDSS and DHMOSH on security, health, and occupational safety matters.

3. Technical Assessment of Security and Health.

7. In addition to the information provided in the questionnaires, the evaluation draws on specialized input from expert technical bodies:

- **Security Factor:** The United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) provides specialized evaluations and security factor ratings based on assessment of local security conditions.
- **Health Factor:** The United Nations Division of Healthcare Management and Occupational Safety and Health (DHMOSH) evaluates health-related aspects, including the technical review of the health section of the hardship questionnaire completed by the UN Examining Physician or World Health Organization (WHO) Representative, and assigns the health factor rating.

4. TWG Review

8. The Working Group for the Review of Conditions of Life and Work in Field Duty Stations (referred to as TWG) meets twice a year, during the mid-year and annual review cycles, to review the proposed hardship classifications for field duty stations.

9. Composed of representatives from participating organizations, recognized staff federations (FICSA, CCISUA, and UNISERV), and the ICSC secretariat, the TWG considers the preliminary ratings prepared by the secretariat along with the technical evaluations provided by DHMOSH and UNDSS.

10. Following its deliberations, the TWG formulates recommendations, including any justified adjustments to the overall hardship rating, for consideration and final approval by the Chair of the ICSC.

5. Promulgation and Implementation

11. Following the TWG review, the Chair of the ICSC, under authority delegated by the Commission, formally approves and promulgates the hardship classifications for all reviewed duty stations, retaining the authority to adjust proposed ratings as appropriate.

12. Formally promulgated hardship classifications normally take effect on **1 January** following the annual review or on **1 July** for mid-year reviews. To ensure system-wide transparency and operational implementation, the ICSC secretariat publishes a consolidated list of hardship classifications for all active duty stations on the ICSC website twice annually and updates it as required when hardship classification changes are approved.

Cycle and Review Types

Regular review cycles

13. **Mandatory regional reviews (Three-Year Cycle):** All field duty stations are subject to a mandatory review every three years, organized by geographic region (Africa; Latin America and the Middle East; Asia-Pacific), with one region reviewed annually. The annual review also includes duty stations under security watch, transitional monitoring, temporary hardship classifications and approved out-of-cycle reviews. The annual review is normally held in November.

14. **Mid-year review:** Conducted primarily to formally evaluate temporarily classified duty stations, as well as resubmissions and approved out-of-cycle reviews. The mid-year review is normally held in June.

Additional Reviews and Monitoring

15. **Resubmission:** A duty station may request a re-evaluation of its hardship classification following a mandatory review. Any request for resubmission must be submitted immediately following the mandatory annual review. Where the request is approved prior to the mid-year review, and the resubmitted questionnaire is assessed during the mid-year review, any resulting decision (whether the rating is confirmed or changed) applies retroactively to 1 January of the review year, which is the effective date of the original annual review. Any resubmission request evaluated after that mid-year session is treated as an out-of-cycle review.

16. **Out-of-cycle review:** When the conditions of life and work at a duty station change significantly between regular mandatory reviews, the Resident Coordinator may submit a request for an out-of-cycle review. Any such request should be supported by evidence demonstrating the significant changes that have occurred since the last review. Only if the Chair determines that an out-of-cycle review is warranted and approves the request will a complete questionnaire be required and an out-of-cycle review be scheduled. Where an out-of-cycle review results in a hardship classification change, the new rating takes effect on 1 July of the review year (if approved at mid-year) or 1 January of the following year (if approved at annual review). Resubmissions and reviews of duty stations under transitional hardship classification are also considered out-of-cycle reviews for the purposes of the hardship classification process, subject to the specific procedures and effective dates applicable to each review type.

17. **Security watch:** An annual review conducted during the regular annual review process for duty stations where security conditions pose heightened risks, based on United Nations Department of Safety and Security recommendations on the security factor.

18. **Transitional hardship classification:** A duty station may be placed under transitional hardship classification when it is being carefully monitored for a period of one year by the TWG for potential hardship reclassification. A duty station under transitional hardship classification is required to submit a full questionnaire within one year. Organizations are informed of those duty stations assigned a transitional hardship classification through an official memorandum issued by the Chair of ICSC during promulgation.

Exceptional reviews

19. **Temporary hardship classification:** Temporary hardship classifications to new or reactivated duty stations are assigned by the ICSC upon request by the organizations, without a formal review. A temporary hardship classification assigned to a new duty station or reactivated duty station is normally valid for a period of up to one year. In the absence of subsequent hardship classification decision, the temporary hardship classification automatically expires and the duty station becomes inactive at the end of that period. In addition, a temporary hardship classification rating becomes inactive when a duty station no longer has internationally recruited staff assigned to it. Once the staff are assigned, a temporary hardship classification is subject to a subsequent review by the TWG for the hardship classification of duty stations according to conditions of life and work, based on the submission of a questionnaire by the duty station within a year.

20. **Special temporary hardship classification:** Following an extraordinary catastrophic event affecting a duty station, such as a natural disaster, active conflict, explosion, or extreme security incident, an exceptional special temporary hardship classification may be granted without prior formal review. Initiated upon request by the Resident Coordinator or at the ICSC secretariat initiative, these hardship classifications are granted under the authority of the ICSC Chair for a specified period, subject to ongoing monitoring and further review as conditions evolve.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

International Civil Service Commission

21. The Commission establishes the hardship classification methodology and policy criteria governing the hardship scheme and undertakes periodic reviews of the scheme, including the level of the hardship allowance. The Chairman, Vice-Chairman and, from time to time, other members of the Commission may also visit hardship locations to gain a first-hand perspective of the field experience. The ICSC Chairman, by authority delegated to him by the Commission, approves and promulgates all formal hardship classifications, temporary hardship classifications for new or reactivated locations, special temporary hardship classifications following extraordinary events, and out-of-cycle reviews.

ICSC secretariat

22. The ICSC secretariat manages the operational execution of the hardship scheme, ensuring that all duty stations are reviewed in a timely manner. It processes completed questionnaires, conducts preliminary hardship classification reviews in collaboration with UNDSS and DHMOSH, and prepares recommendations for consideration by the TWG and the ICSC Chair. The secretariat provides rapid-response support for sudden political, economic, or security fluctuations, reviewing requests for temporary, special temporary, and out-of-cycle hardship classifications on behalf of the Commission.

23. To maintain rating validity and operational relevance, the secretariat conducts ongoing monitoring, periodically visits field locations (typically undertaking an annual mission to the region under review), and evaluates the continuing applicability of hardship classification criteria. Additionally, it supports the review and discussion of technical task forces and working groups established by the Commission or the Chair, while providing policy guidance to human resources management staff of participating organizations, Resident Coordinators, and field country teams regarding the hardship scheme's implementation and the completion of the questionnaires.

United Nations Department of Safety and Security

24. The United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) provides specialized technical evaluations regarding safety and security conditions at field duty stations. It assesses local security risks, and submits objective security factor ratings and inputs to the ICSC secretariat for consideration by the TWG.

United Nations Division of Healthcare Management and Occupational Safety and Health

25. The Division of Healthcare Management and Occupational Safety and Health (DHMOSH), in collaboration with WHO representatives and local UN examining physicians, provides technical evaluation of health-related factors across field duty stations. DHMOSH reviews and validates the health section of the hardship

questionnaire, assesses local medical infrastructure, health risks, and sanitation conditions, and assigns technical health factor ratings for submission to the TWG.

Organizations

Human resources management staff

26. Human resources management staff of participating organizations are responsible for administering the hardship scheme for their respective staff members. Representatives of organizations, particularly those with a significant field presence, participate alongside the ICSC secretariat and recognized staff federations in the TWG. They liaise with the secretariat on an ad hoc basis to discuss, as needed, the hardship classification reviews for specific duty stations as operational needs arise. In cooperation with the Resident Coordinators, they support field staff in completing the ICSC questionnaire, ensuring access to the latest version of the questionnaire and clarifying implementation of the scheme.

Resident Coordinators

27. The Resident Coordinators lead the inter-agency process for completing the hardship questionnaire at the duty station. They play a key role in ensuring that the hardship classification is an accurate reflection of conditions at the duty station, and the preparation of the questionnaire is an interagency exercise. The hardship questionnaire is the main source of information for determining the hardship classification. The Resident Coordinators are responsible for timely submission from all active duty stations in the country, and verifying that the replies are complete and accurate and that ICSC is informed when a duty station no longer has staff assigned to it. The Resident Coordinators provide critical comments on the questionnaire to supply the broader operational context needed for the review. These comments explain trends over time, compare hardship across duty stations in the country, highlight recent changes or emerging issues affecting conditions, and contextualize differing staff perspectives to ensure the review reflects the duty station as a whole.

Internationally Recruited Staff

28. The hardship classification questionnaire applies exclusively to internationally recruited staff in the United Nations common system organizations normally assigned to the reporting duty station for one year or longer. It excludes locally recruited staff, UN Volunteers (UNVs), consultants, individual contractors, and personnel from non-common system entities (e.g. World Bank, IMF, IOM). Eligible staff members are expected to acquaint themselves with the hardship scheme and ensure that they provide accurate input concerning local conditions of life and work for the completion of the questionnaire.

Staff Federations

29. The Federation of International Civil Servants' Associations (FICSA), the Coordinating Committee of Independent Staff Unions and Associations of the United Nations System (CCISUA) and the United Nations International Civil Servants Federation (UNISERV) represent international civil servants in the hardship review process. They participate in the TWG, alongside the organization representatives and the ICSC secretariat. In this role, the federations review preliminary hardship classification findings, present staff perspectives on living and working conditions at field duty stations, and contribute to formulating consensus recommendations for review and decision by the ICSC Chair.