

**International Conference  
of Ombuds Institutions  
For the Armed Forces**



**11<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF OMBUDS INSTITUTIONS FOR THE ARMED  
FORCES**

**Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina**

**27-29 October 2019**

**Conference Statement**

As the International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces (ICOAF) enters its eleventh year, the conference has promoted the exchange of experiences and deepened cooperation among Ombuds institutions.

Jointly hosted by the Parliamentary Military Commissioner of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and DCAF - Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, the 11<sup>th</sup> ICOAF took place in Sarajevo on 27-29 October 2019. The 11<sup>th</sup> ICOAF focused on building resilient and sustainable ombuds institutions.

As was the case in previous years, the conference reached out to representatives of ombuds institutions for the armed forces from nearly 50 countries. Throughout this conference, ICOAF has been able to further strengthen its function as a platform for promoting democratic oversight of the armed forces and preventing maladministration and human rights abuses.

This conference statement serves as a compilation of good practices discussed at the conference and does not serve as an obligation to act on or implement these practices. Each ombuds institution possesses specific and unique mandates, and therefore all good practices may not be relevant to all conference participants.

*The Conferees declare the following:*

### Introduction

1. Building on the successes of the previous ten 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), and Johannesburg (2018) the conference in Sarajevo sought to strengthen the resilience of ombuds institutions and increase cooperation and the sharing of good practices among independent oversight institutions.
2. We recognise that ICOAF has established itself as an important international forum for promoting and ensuring 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.

### Building resilient and sustainable ombuds institutions

4. In recent years, many ombuds institutions have increasingly come under pressure from various figures in society.
5. Resilient ombuds institutions, able to effectively carry out their mandate unabated by external and internal pressures, are a mechanism to foster more resilient and effective armed forces and societies generally, where the rule of law is improved.

6. Participants discussed various ways in which ombuds institutions can strengthen their resilience, including by adopting international standards, such as the Paris Principles and Venice Principles, to ensure that all institutions adhere to similar minimum standards, while also acknowledging the differences of each ombuds institution.
  
7. Participants reiterated the importance of greater cooperation and coordination with other public bodies, both internal and external to their own countries, to increase their resilience against such threats.

#### How ombuds institutions can prevent crises and threats

8. The conferees identified threats facing their institutions through risk-assessments. Some threats identified were *inter alia*:
  - a. increased public scrutiny and questioning of their independence and impartiality,
  - b. reduced budgetary allocations,
  - c. diminished levels of cooperation with other public bodies, namely the Ministry of Defence,
  - d. changing political environments and political attacks,
  - e. and the difficulty of effectively communicating in news cycles which change rapidly.

These threats have impeded the ability of ombuds institutions to carry out their work.

9. Participants noted that taking preventative action and anticipating threats to their offices and the armed forces is important to mitigating potential threats.

10. Participants shared strengths and opportunities for how ombuds institutions can increase their resilience. Some strengths of ombuds institutions include their constitutional mandate which gives them a prominent place in society, their legal mandate, their independence from the bodies that they are mandated to oversee, and the considerable expertise and knowledge of their staff, as well as their independence to select their own staff.
11. Participants noted that while the institutions which they represent may have different mandates and may be situated differently compared to their peers, they share many of the same strengths and opportunities, and weaknesses and threats.

#### How ombuds institutions can maintain stability and sustain momentum

12. Participants acknowledged the importance of their independence in ensuring that they can effectively carry out their mandates to exert oversight of the armed forces and protect and promote the rights of armed forces personnel.
13. Independence is crucial to ombuds institutions for the armed forces in order to grant them impartiality, effectiveness and credibility.
14. Participants noted the importance to constantly reflect on their effectiveness to ensure that they continue to fulfil their mandate, and that an institution's work must also be flexible to evolve as the armed forces change too. As such, ombuds institutions should continuously work to strengthen their mandate to be more effective and to better adapt to fit an increasingly changing environment.
15. Ombuds institutions should be proactive in identifying potential threats and challenges to their work, to use their powers to the fullest extent, and devise innovative ways to overcome these obstacles.

### How ombuds institutions can respond to crises and threats:

16. Participants recognized the following threats as obstacles to carrying out their work: budgetary cuts, insufficient allocation of staff, political attacks, negative media coverage, lack of cooperation with the Ministry of Defence, and their recommendations not being respected or fully implemented.
  
17. Participants noted the following concrete actions to overcome these threats:
  - a. When dealing with political attacks, ombuds institutions can protect their credibility and maintain or enhance transparency by issuing recommendations or reports. They can also work with other key actors, such as parliaments and judicial bodies.
  - b. When dealing with negative media coverage, ombuds institutions can proactively take action to counteract negative media coverage and report on successful cases or other positive media opportunities. Ombuds institutions can also draw upon existing experience in handling social media, including through DCAF's *Social Media Guide for Ombuds Institutions*, to be better equipped to engage with social media.
  - c. When handling threats to the budget, ombuds institutions can proactively take action to prevent budgetary cuts, they can engage with those that determine the budget needs in the future, and build the capacities of the institution's staff.
  - d. When dealing with a lack of cooperation with the Ministry of Defence, ombuds institutions can ensure that their legal mandate and powers are clearly communicated to MoD staff; can establish and build relationships with key actors in the MoD, and sensitize them to the role of ombuds institutions, and can share good practices and lessons learned between the ombuds institutions and the MoD.
  - e. When faced with one's recommendations not being implemented or respected, ombuds institutions can seek to improve or reaffirm their powers to allow for greater enforcement and can work with key actors, such as parliaments, NGOs and the media to amplify their message and create more pressure to comply.

### How ombuds institutions can contribute to sustainable development: Linkages with the SDGs

18. Participants noted that ombuds institutions can play an important role in contributing to and enhancing the respect of the Sustainable Development Goals.

19. Once again, prevention has an important role, and if ombuds institutions can anticipate specific problems before they spiral into larger issues, they can contribute to more peaceful, just and inclusive societies, which is the aim of SDG16.
  
20. Participants noted the important role ombuds institutions already play in the collection of data, which can augment recommendations with an empirical evidence base.
  
21. The immense policy clout surrounding the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development offers a window of opportunity for oversight bodies to raise their profile as vehicles of Human Rights and Good Governance.

## Conclusions

22. ICOAF is a platform to exchange information, good practices and experiences among the ICOAF partner institutions. Recognising that ICOAF is growing - and that 11ICOAF with over 100 participants representing 50 countries is indeed evidence of this - it calls upon DCAF to explore future avenues to strengthen effective cooperation, for example with inter-ICOAF activities and knowledge products to address the specific needs of participating institutions.
  
23. One particular area that demands international cooperation among ICOAF partner institutions is international missions (military deployments abroad). Participants request DCAF to explore how the international exchange of information and experiences between ombuds institutions in relation to international missions can be enhanced beyond the current scope of ICOAF, while at the same time respecting the particularities of national legal and institutional frameworks of ombuds institutions.

24. ICOAF continues to be a useful platform to enhance dialogue between ombuds institutions and to strengthen their cooperation and networks. Future conferences will continue to expand and deepen this cooperation.

25. ICOAF remains open to relevant institutions from countries that have not participated in the previous conferences.

26. The twelfth ICOAF will take place in Vienna, Austria in June 2020.

Sarajevo, 29 October 2019