

Closing speech of the Paris EUFASA conference, by Agnès ROMATET-ESPAGNE, Director of Human Resources of the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs – May 3, 2022

La Présidente, Mesdames et Messieurs les délégués (EUFASA delegates), mesdames et messieurs les family officers, Mesdames et messieurs les membres et volontaires de l'ACFA,

C'est un réel plaisir pour moi de conclure ces deux journées de travail, de rencontres, d'échanges, de networking. Je comprends que vos travaux ont été intenses et je l'espère fructueux.

I'll switch now to English for the comfort of all those attending this meeting. In a nutshell, it is with great pleasure that I now bring to a close the fruitful and successful exchanges of your-conference.

Hopefully, you also had the chance to meet new people and network while enjoying a little bit of Paris in spring time. I am really thankful to Zoé Meyer and AFCA for all the time they have dedicated to the preparation of this conference and for their dedication to AFCA !

During his opening address, our Permanent Secretary has mentioned that EUFASA has a research Department dedicated to proposing and impulsing new areas of cooperation so that we can offer better support to spouses, partners and families of diplomats.

I would like to share with you what I, as the director of Human Resources in a Foreign Affairs Ministry, believe could be next areas of research for this Department.

The Covid pandemic, the repeated international crises that our diplomats have to tackle, the arrival on the labor market of new generations with different aspirations, as well as other factors have accelerated and emphasized changes which we must take into account in our human resources family policies.

Several factors are challenging. I will mention seven of them :

- 1 - **The post pandemic staff are more selective** about the places they will consider based on countries' experience with COVID. They have seen how countries have responded with varying levels of lock down (or lack of controls) and are concerned for what life might be like, especially as COVID-19 variants re-emerge. If we take the example of postings in China, I do not know today what to say to families who are wondering about their early return or who are considering giving up a posting there. I do not know today what to say to parents whose children have been deprived of face to face school for two years.

- 2 - Another challenge is the need for more and more families to have **two incomes**, which makes postings that do not provide the opportunity for staff and their spouses to work less attractive.

It's no longer the norm to have a single working spouse and we are seeing more staff considering posting without families to enable their partner to continue working – placing stress on the family unit (I can speak from experience on this matter).

Can remote work then be a solution? I am really interested in your thoughts on the subject.

- 3 - The costs associated with **travel** (and carbon emission targets) are challenging the freedom to travel regularly to reconnect with family and friends. It's becoming less affordable (and possibly less acceptable) to

be flying as frequently as we once did. Therefore, the concept of Fly In Fly Out is not the solution today for those separated from their families.

- 4- **In some posts, the costs of education, childcare, etc. are increasingly high and make it difficult to place families in certain countries.**

- 5 – **The diversity of family units** that are not accepted in some places also continues to be a problem. We have to find a balance between what is possible within the framework of the Vienna Conventions/country specific situation/reciprocity and what can be acceptable also in terms of personal security. This balance doesn't always meet the expectations of the staff and partners concerned.

- 6 - **Geopolitical instability** in some regions – clearly the current situation in Russia/Ukraine- and talk of various forms of weaponry (chemical, nuclear, etc.) are raising anxieties within families about the safety of posting in certain places.

We can foresee in the immediate future an increase in threats in all countries which will be deeply affected by food shortages and a dramatic inflation in the costs of basic needs. What can we offer to families in terms of personal safety? And if we cannot guarantee their security, what are the alternatives (ex : Haiti) ?

- 7- I would also like to add that for older diplomats, like myself, there is now the issue of **caring for our own dependent parents.**

I cannot accept a posting abroad because I have to look after my mother who is 92 years old and would never accept to leave her home.

Therefore, the increasing life expectancy of our parents is another factor that we have to take into account in human resource management, especially once our children have left the household for good.

We are experiencing all these challenges, especially also in view of new generations ("generation Y and Z") entering the international labor market.

These newcomers to the labor market have different expectations than the older generations: they do not want to sacrifice their personal life or accept an assignment at any cost for their family; they are ready to take breaks if it allows them to accommodate the needs of their family; they challenge the idea of authority much more than we used to and it is almost impossible to "oblige them to take up a posting". At the end of the day, they do not feel "married to the job, to the career" and just because they have gone through a lot of hardship to get into this career doesn't mean they are not willing to give it all up.

In this context, there are two challenges for us as employer, and for EUFASA :

- First, we must document these new trends. What are the main new and recurring factors we have to address?

Which countries pose a specific challenge today and which ones might do so tomorrow and why? In terms of staff demographics, what age groups and profile are we talking about? Is the pool of jobs they can apply for abroad more limited than before?

- Second, we need to share ideas and feedback on our experiments. What works and doesn't work? Why ?

I am an optimist. I am convinced that this profession will continue to attract exceptional profiles, curious minds and personalities with a sense of public service. But I also know that we will have to offer them a different 'social contract' than the one I signed almost forty years ago. That we will have to be more flexible, more creative, more imaginative.

That we will finally have to accept, without seeing it as a failure, that some staff will only be with us for a short time because they belong to a generation that will change jobs four or five times in a professional life. This raises another challenge, that of training which I invite you to work on as well.

I would like you to know that my teams and I are ready to contribute to your work on this subject. And that my European colleagues, or at least some of them with whom I have had discussions, are also ready to do so.

Once again, I would like to thank you all for your presence in Paris, with special thanks to the whole AFCA team, and especially its president, Mrs Zoé Meyer, for her involvement in the preparation of the conference, as well as all the members and volunteers of the association. Finally, I would like to wish the President of the Spanish Association, who will be hosting the annual conference in Madrid next year every success and all the best.