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REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

JERRY BARTON, President, FAFICS

Distinguished delegates, dear friends and colleagues, today it is my turn to say thank you. Thank you for working with me during the previous four years. As my maximum tenure as President come to an end, I decided to look back four years, instead of just one – a personal review. I find myself asking a few simple questions: Is FAFICS working well? Are we more effective? Are more people involved in our work? My answer is yes. Not because FAFICS is perfect, but because it is respected, it is active, and it is working for retirees. That is thanks to the dedication of many people: our elected and appointed officers and representatives, our Member Associations, our volunteers, and the Presidents and teams who came before us. Their commitment is what has carried us forward.

As President, I have tried to implement our Statutes, especially Article 2, which sets out our purposes. In simple terms, FAFICS exists to bring together Member Associations of former international civil servants, to support the purposes and principles of the United Nations system, to represent retirees and beneficiaries of the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund, to cooperate with staff federations and other organizations, and to support Member Associations on the issues that matter most, especially pensions and health protection. That is what I understood as my job description four years ago. If FAFICS has helped protect even a small part of the dignity, security, and well-being of former international civil servants, then I believe we can all take some pride in what has been achieved.

I have tried to live up to those purposes: supporting the principles of the United Nations, defending the interests of retirees, strengthening solidarity among us, ensuring that retirees are recognized in official fora, and improving coordination among our Member Associations. In everyday terms, that has meant listening carefully, sharing information, involving others, and, when necessary, reminding decision-makers that retirees are not an afterthought. We remain part of the United Nations family.

And of course, no President succeeds alone. Whatever has been accomplished over these four years is the work of many people: our Bureau, our Standing Committees, the Chairs and officers of our Member Associations, our representatives on committees, and the many volunteers whose dedication is often quiet but never unnoticed. To each of you, I offer my sincere gratitude. And I must give special thanks to Delia Barcelona, whose patience, organization, and good humour have saved me more times than I can count.

Today, I would like to organize my reflections around three simple questions. First, what have we achieved together in our public advocacy? Second, how have we strengthened

FAFICS itself? And third, what challenges must the next President, and all of us, prepare to meet?

Our Public Advocacy: Protecting the Interests of Retirees

The first responsibility of FAFICS is clear: to represent and defend the interests of former international civil servants throughout the United Nations common system. That mission is at the heart of who we are.

In practical terms, our advocacy has focused mainly on two issues that matter to every retiree: pension security and access to sustainable, affordable health insurance.
Pensions

Regarding pensions, our objective has never been to seek special treatment. It has been to protect the integrity of promises made to staff members throughout their careers—and to future staff members who will one day depend on those same promises.

We have worked closely with the Pension Board, with the Fund's management, and with Member States to ensure that the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund remains financially sound, professionally managed, and responsive to the needs of its beneficiaries.

The Fund remains one of the strongest international pension schemes in the world. But that strength depends on good governance, sound investment management, rigorous actuarial oversight, and constant vigilance. FAFICS brings something essential to these discussions: the perspective of people for whom the Fund is not an abstract institution, but the foundation of daily life. My own income depends entirely on my benefit from the Pension Fund. Perhaps yours does too. For many former international civil servants, the monthly benefit is what pays the rent, buys medicine, supports a surviving spouse, and preserves independence. That is why we care so deeply about protecting the Fund. During the last four years, I believe the Pension Board has increasingly recognized that retiree voice.

First, the increase in small pensions. Bringing the special adjustment to small pensions up to date was long overdue. FAFICS raised the issue, and, in collaboration with the Pension Administration, the adjustments were increased. For someone living on a small pension, even a modest increase can mean a little more stability, a little more dignity, and a little less anxiety at the end of the month. Just as importantly, a review will now occur automatically every two years, rather than waiting sixteen years. As always, it was a team effort, and, as so often, it was driven by Gerhard Schramek.

Second, we now have an official seat at the table in the Pension Board. You will remember that several years ago, there was an effort to remove FAFICS from active participation in the Board and its Committees. That issue was settled before my term, with changes to the Board's Rules of Procedure and governance procedures. But implementation took time. Retiree representatives are now non-voting members of Staff Pension Committees, and the terms of reference of all Pension Board Committees now state that membership will come from representatives of the tripartite groups—governing bodies, organizations, and participants—"and FAFICS." Membership. Not merely observers. We were there before, but now we are really there, hard-working and recognized.

A final important change came last year. As part of the governance review, the Pension Board introduced the concept of "Spokespersons." In practice, only one person per group could speak during Board meetings, usually the head of delegation. Until last year, that arrangement did not include the FAFICS Head of Delegation, even though the Board rules clearly provide that consultations should exist between the Bureau, the spokespersons of the constituent groups, and the head of the FAFICS delegation. That provision was finally implemented. The FAFICS President is now included in offline consultations with the three other spokespersons. In other words, when compromises are being discussed, FAFICS is in the room.

I should also underline that our relations with the Pension Administration are excellent. We are included in certain discussions, especially in efforts to reach retirees who have not returned the annual proof of life. We are encouraged by the readmission of some countries to the two-track option, and we remain engaged on the algorithms used to determine suspensions and reinstatements.

I believe our reputation for collegial, competent support of pension protection has grown and has been recognized. I take this opportunity to thank the Chair of the Standing Committee on Pension Issues, Suzanne Bishopric, and all members of the Committee.

After-Service Health Insurance

Equally important has been our work on health insurance.
Healthcare costs continue to rise around the world. Retirees everywhere face growing uncertainty about access, affordability, and long-term sustainability. Behind those words are very real worries: whether care will be available when it is needed, whether treatment will remain affordable, and whether people will be able to age with dignity and peace of mind. These concerns span organizations and borders, and the financial liabilities they create are enormous.

FAFICS does not pretend to have a single solution to these global challenges. But we have worked to ensure that retiree voices are heard whenever health insurance policies are reviewed: in UN working groups, in local committees, and in high-level committees. We have encouraged transparency, promoted dialogue, supported the exchange of good practices, and advocated for solutions that balance financial sustainability with the legitimate expectations of retired staff.

The success of our Standing Committee on ASHIL is due to the leadership of Jay Karia and the active involvement of the Member Association representatives who work in that group. One result is that we have strengthened cooperation among our Member Associations, so that successful approaches developed in one organization or duty station can benefit others. Advocacy is not always measured by dramatic victories. Much of it involves preventing undesirable changes, improving consultation, providing credible analysis, and ensuring decision-makers understand the real consequences of their choices.

That quiet, persistent work may be less visible than public campaigns, but it is often more effective. I believe FAFICS has earned respect as a constructive, knowledgeable, and trusted representative of retirees.

And that reputation is one of our greatest assets.

Communications

And speaking of reputation, our communications have grown significantly. During my tenure, I have written some 25 letters to all Member Associations to keep you informed and to ask for input. I have addressed numerous assemblies of Member Associations and governing bodies. I have written to the Secretary-General, to an Under-Secretary-General, and to Assistant Secretaries-General. FAFICS is better known today.

We also restored a former strength: our relationship with FICSA. We used to work closely with FICSA on social security issues, but that relationship had faded. When I addressed the FICSA Council last year, most attendees—staff association presidents—had never heard of FAFICS or were unaware that retiree associations existed. That has changed. I want to highlight the work of Ann van Hulle from WHO and AAFI-AFICS, who has continued to work with FICSA's social security committee on our behalf, especially for SC-ASHIL. Together, Jay Karia and Ann van Hulle also initiated a dialogue with UNISERV and shared several health insurance documents, including guidelines on long-term care, for distribution to active staff.
And of course, there is our website. It is now more robust, more content-rich, and more up to date than the previous one. You will hear more about its use and future improvements later this week, but I can already say that the new website is more useful and has increased our visibility. I thank the Chair of the Communications Standing Committee, Juan Casas, as well as all members of the Committee.

Strengthening FAFICS from Within

Let me now turn from our public advocacy to the work we have done inside FAFICS. This matters because our ability to influence others depends on the strength, credibility, and cohesion of our own Federation.

Our public advocacy is our main focus and mandate. But like all advocacy groups, our credibility depends on our size, the expertise of our volunteers, our visibility, and the visible support behind our work around the world. That is why our second priority over these four years has been to strengthen FAFICS itself.

We learned valuable lessons during the pandemic about virtual collaboration. We have tried to keep the best of those innovations while restoring the value of meeting in person. The FAFICS Bureau now has a work plan and meets monthly—a major change from the days when it met only twice a year. Nearly all of those meetings have been virtual. This Council is our only in-person meeting this year.

Perhaps our most important objective has been to increase the participation of our Member Associations. FAFICS is not simply an Executive Committee. It is a federation. Its vitality depends on active engagement by all its members. Encouraging a local association to form—or helping one to renew itself—is hard work, and it can take years. But we have made progress. I will mention Honduras, to be approved today; Mauritania; New Delhi; ARPUPU in Bern; Portugal; and Tanzania. Work is also continuing in Africa. Our first efforts in Eastern Europe have not yet succeeded, but visibility and local interest appear to be growing after recent meetings in Belgrade. As the number of former international civil servants continues to grow, we must continue to encourage growth in local Associations and in FAFICS membership. My thanks go to Marashetty Seenappa and Abdou Khader Diakhate, the group's co-chairs, and to Maria Machicado for her assistance in mentoring AFICS Honduras.

Over the past four years, we have worked to improve communication, encourage wider consultation before major decisions, make better use of our Standing Committees, and create more opportunities for Associations to contribute their expertise. Many Associations have responded with enthusiasm. Their participation has enriched our discussions and strengthened the legitimacy of our positions.

We have also sought to improve governance by clarifying procedures, strengthening coordination between meetings, and encouraging a culture of openness and collaboration.
No organization is ever finished with institutional improvement. There will always be opportunities to simplify processes, modernize communications, and involve more members. But I believe we leave behind a Federation that is stronger, more inclusive, and better prepared than it was four years ago.

One issue deserves particular emphasis: succession.
Every volunteer organization depends on renewal. Renewal is not the organization's prime purpose, but it facilitates growth.

Experience is invaluable, but experience alone is not enough. New generations of retirees bring different skills, fresh ideas, technological expertise, and new ways of working. Succession planning is not about replacing individuals. It is about preserving institutional memory while welcoming innovation. It is also about inviting volunteers who are committed to our principles, willing to work together, and motivated by the satisfaction of helping others.

A healthy Federation combines continuity with renewal. The question of whether the FAFICS Bureau needs a Standing Committee on Succession Planning is before you at this Council. Last year, the Council created a Working Group on Succession Planning and charged it "*to develop a succession planning strategy and operational plan*." The small group, under the leadership of Vice-President Nancy Hurtz-Soyka, has done that and more. It has helped the Bureau, and especially me, identify candidates for positions that needed to be filled during the year, and it has developed job descriptions. Whether a special succession-planning group is needed indefinitely is a question for you to discuss later this week.

Last year, I made a mistake by allowing one Member Association to vote after polling had closed. Although no objection was made at the time, objections later arose. I asked the Bureau to develop more detailed procedures for electronic voting, since these are not specified in our Rules. Under the leadership of Vice-President Nancy Hurtz-Soyka, a small group developed procedures that are essentially consistent with past practice but more rigorous. It also proposed a small independent oversight group, the Election Support Group, to support the FAFICS Secretary, who has overall authority over elections. Simply put, your Head of Delegation will vote electronically, as last year. The main change is that three votes must be cast for the open Vice-President positions, and that there can be no abstentions. These changes were approved by the Bureau for use in today's elections as a trial to be reviewed. The ESG will review the voter list and the process to ensure that only eligible voters can vote and that the polls open and close as planned. More on this topic later today.

Looking Ahead: The Challenges for the Next Four Years

Every generation of FAFICS leadership inherits unfinished work. The next four years will require the same persistence that brought us this far—but also new energy, new methods, and a clear understanding of the pressures already gathering around us.

The international environment is becoming more complex. Multilateral institutions face political pressure, financial constraints, and growing public scrutiny. United Nations organizations are adapting to reductions, new technologies, and changing employment patterns. You will hear directly from the Pension Fund about the high number of staff being "transitioned." These developments inevitably affect retirees.

Pensions

The first challenge will remain the long-term protection of pension rights. Although the Pension Fund is currently strong, sound governance can never be taken for granted. FAFICS must continue to contribute constructively to governance, investment policy, administration, and beneficiary services. The "holistic review" mandated by the General Assembly last December will propose options to the General Assembly in 2028. A Pension Board Working Group has been established, but most of the work will take place over the next two years. Some members of the General Assembly aim to reduce their contributions to our pensions. That could mean significant changes for existing and future staff, but it is not time to panic. It is time to put our most experienced and respected volunteers into that process, which is what I have tried to do.

By the 2030s, the number of Pension Fund beneficiaries may outnumber active staff. That should have implications for the role of FAFICS and for the size and composition of the Fund's governing groups. Investments will become even more important as the Fund relies more on investment income and less on contributions from active staff and Member States. Services to beneficiaries have improved tremendously during Rosemarie McClean's tenure, but there is still more to encourage and support: more digital self-services, while not forgetting those who are less comfortable with technology; and faster, more competent, and more caring support for surviving spouses.

I want to highlight one important improvement. Surviving spouses can now receive their first benefit within 15 days of the Pension Fund receiving the required documentation, instead of waiting months. That matters enormously. At a moment of grief, uncertainty, and practical difficulty, a surviving spouse should not also face avoidable financial anxiety. The remaining problem is knowing exactly what documents to submit and how to submit them. Solving that concern must be a joint effort among all Member Associations, the HR departments of former staff, the Pension Fund, and FAFICS.

ASHIL

The second challenge is healthcare. Population ageing is a global reality. Medical advances are extending lives, but they are also increasing costs. Organizations everywhere are searching for sustainable models of retiree health insurance. FAFICS must remain fully engaged in these discussions, advocating solutions that protect retirees while recognizing legitimate financial realities.

The membership of Associations is ageing as well. FAFICS must find ways to support Member Associations as they advocate for affordable health services and seek new members. Coverage differences between locations are likely to widen, with more individuals having to travel to other countries for proper care. The ASHIL report, which will be discussed tomorrow, includes proposals to address this situation.

Communications

The third challenge is communication. Future retirees have different expectations from previous generations. They expect rapid access to information, digital services, transparent decision-making, and opportunities for direct participation.

FAFICS and its Member Associations must continue modernizing how we communicate and engage. Digital transformation should not replace personal relationships—but it can strengthen them, speed up decision-making, and make participation easier.

Relevance

Can FAFICS stay relevant to retirees? Each year, thousands of staff members retire from organizations across the United Nations system. Many know little about FAFICS or about the important role played by retiree Associations. We must reach future retirees before they leave service, helping them understand that retirement is not the end of professional engagement, but the beginning of a different form of contribution. We are all volunteers, and volunteerism does not always receive the attention it deserves in a busy and individualistic world, where many have grown up with a philosophy of "me first". But we have a different story to tell: that service to others can be deeply rewarding, and that it keeps our minds active, curious, and engaged.

A down-to-earth note. FAFICS also needs to work on its financial stability. We do a great deal with an astonishingly low budget. Individual volunteers are paying out of their own pockets to carry out tasks under our work plan. Can we receive bequests or other donations? UNFCU has been very generous in supporting us, and we are very grateful.

Solidarity

Finally, there is perhaps the greatest challenge of all: preserving solidarity. Our Member Associations vary greatly in size, geography, language, and mandate. Yet we share common interests and common values.

The strength of FAFICS lies precisely in bringing those diverse voices together. And FAFICS needs more of those voices, even as membership in many Associations decreases.

Working together requires mutual respect, patient dialogue, and a willingness to seek common ground—a spirit that has characterized FAFICS throughout its history. Technology is giving us more multilingual translation and live interpretation, but I am not sure that becoming fully multilingual is the entire solution. Nor am I sure that regional requirements are the answer. We should encourage Associations to put forward volunteers, but we should not put location above competence, dedication, or willingness to work together. The Bureau should be representative of our Member Associations, while avoiding the concentration of too much leadership in any one Association.

When I took office, I was warned about FAFICS's tendency to put process before product, and procedures before substance. I have seen that tendency during my career and over the 16 years I have been actively involved in FAFICS, and I cannot say that I eliminated it. My experience is that too many job descriptions and reviews turn dedication into common jobs. Perhaps this is your experience as well. Two items on this week's Council agenda raise that concern for me: permanent succession planning and an Election Support Group. I understand the reasons behind both proposals, and I respect the colleagues who have worked on them. At the same time, I hope we will be careful not to create structures that unintentionally reduce trust in elected and appointed volunteers, discourage dedicated individuals, or make our work heavier than it needs to be. Maintaining the right balance among productive work, institutional memory, mentoring, and the growth of new volunteers is a challenge I leave to the new President.

And just one more word about elections. Let us try to keep them grounded in trust, fairness, and the equal voice of every Member Association. We are all volunteers, and we serve best when we avoid unnecessary politics. I understand that Associations and regions will naturally discuss candidates, but I hope those discussions will not become a form of party discipline or arranged voting before colleagues have had the chance to hear from all candidates. Each Member Association is equal in FAFICS. Our election practices should reflect that equality, and also the goodwill that has always allowed this Federation to work.

A Personal Reflection

Allow me to conclude on a personal note. When I accepted the responsibility of serving as President, I knew expectations would be high. The President plays an important role as the face of FAFICS, making decisions for the benefit of all of us and helping to lead the Bureau and its committees.

Leadership in a federation such as ours is about building consensus. It is about helping talented volunteers work together toward common goals. The Rules of Procedure approved in 2022, which I helped create, give more authority to the Bureau and require the President to consult on many issues—even on the President's Report to Council. Some might say that perhaps too much authority is now shared. Mostly, it works. And if, during these four years, I have helped strengthen a spirit of cooperation even a little, then I shall consider my presidency worthwhile. For all our differences, we are all in this together. We rise or fall as one.

I leave this office with confidence in the next leadership, in our elected and appointed representatives, in our Member Associations, and above all, in FAFICS itself.
Our Federation has evolved over many decades because successive generations of retired international civil servants believed that solidarity does not end with retirement.
To my successor, I offer my warmest congratulations and every good wish. You will inherit challenges, certainly. But you will also inherit a Federation rich in experience, commitment, and goodwill. I hope that we will continue to be here to serve – not to score points or take credit, but to make peoples' lives better.

To all of you, thank you for your trust, your friendship, your advice, your patience, and your support. Serving as your President has been a great honour. As I leave this office, I do so with gratitude and with confidence: confidence that FAFICS will continue to grow, adapt, and serve future generations of former international civil servants with the same dedication that has defined its history.

Thank you.