

Multilingualism: implementation of action plan

Report by the Secretariat

1. Multilingualism has been the subject of a series of discussions and resolutions by the Executive Board and World Health Assembly. In May 2007, the Board at its 121st session noted the report on the plan of action on multilingualism,¹ which proposed several measures to promote multilingualism in WHO's work, to be implemented as part of the Medium-term strategic plan 2008–2013. This report outlines the preliminary steps taken during 2007 and progress since the plan was implemented in January 2008.
2. In January 2008, members of the Board at its 122nd session observed that respect for the promotion of multilingualism contributed to the fulfilment of WHO's mandate to disseminate information and knowledge. They attached great importance to the effective use of WHO's official languages in its publications and work at all levels. Concern was expressed that English had become the default language of communication and publication because of the scarcity of financial resources, particularly for publishing. Some members called for more attention to be paid to communicating in the other official languages and in local languages.
3. The Board noted the progress report on the plan of action² and adopted resolution EB122.R9 entitled "Multilingualism: implementation of action plan". That resolution recommended to the Health Assembly adoption of a resolution that requested the Director-General to implement, as rapidly as possible, the plan of action, and, in particular, to prepare, before the 124th session of the Executive Board, a timetable for implementation of the plan, a table showing the financial implications within the framework of the Medium-term strategic plan 2008–2013, and a strategy to set translation priorities. It also requested the Director-General to take several other measures to support multilingualism.
4. As the leading global health organization, WHO needs to communicate in multiple languages in order to work effectively. A multilingual WHO can better fulfil its objective: the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health. It is better equipped to communicate health messages, to produce and disseminate health information, and to generate, share and apply knowledge about health in an equitable manner. An organization that is multilingual at every level is better placed to meet today's public health challenges.

¹ Documents EB121/6 and EB121/6 Corr.1.

² Document EB122/2008/REC/2, summary record of the ninth meeting.

5. The plan of action includes a proposal to establish a body that sets priorities for translation of selected information products, and work is under way to implement that proposal. A survey on the need for WHO's information products in Russian has been completed and the Secretariat is working with partners to see how those needs can best be met.
6. Progress has been made in promoting and making WHO's information products available in official and local languages. In 2007, 166 contracts were signed with publishers for translations into 34 languages of publications produced in WHO headquarters. Regional offices have also been increasingly active in this area. Also in 2007, the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean made 14 agreements for translation of WHO publications into local languages; it issued 32 publications in Arabic and increased the number of web pages by about 1000–2000 Arabic words a day.
7. In headquarters, a multilingual team of web editors has been formed, with language editors for all six official languages. The team has been increasing access to multilingual content by making available WHO publications and other documents that already exist in official languages, for example by creating separate publications pages on the Chinese and Russian home pages on the WHO web site. During the first half of 2008 the web team will conduct a survey of users of the different language versions of the WHO web site.
8. Progress has been made towards establishing an institutional repository of WHO's information products in all official languages, and a committee to oversee the project has been set up, with representatives from WHO headquarters and regional offices and which holds a weekly teleconference. Currently, it is possible to search for documents and other publications in English, French and Spanish in the WHO library database. Staff of the web and library services are considering technical options to enable searches to be made for documents in Arabic, Chinese and Russian. Scanning of multilingual documents that are currently available only in print has started; since October 2007, 179 major documents in official languages, mainly Chinese and Russian, have been scanned and added to the database.
9. The Regional Office for Europe encourages the translation of high-priority information products into non-official languages by country offices, and supports external requests to translate WHO's material. In 2007, some 65 publishing organizations and other companies expressed interest in the rights to translate and publish the Regional Office's publications in 30 local languages.
10. Glossaries of health-related terms in Arabic and other languages used in the Eastern Mediterranean Region are being expanded and developed, and are available in hard copy, on CD-ROM and on the web site of the Regional Office. For instance, one terminology database already contains 200 000 records in up to five languages. A final version will be produced by December 2009. The Arabization of Health-Related Science Network, a large and active network established in 2003, shares information and knowledge about public health terminology and translations in Arabic.
11. By means of a survey conducted in Member States and technical departments at headquarters, the quality of translation of all WHO's official documents, publications and other information products is being evaluated. The results will be issued later in 2008.
12. Language classes for each official language are offered to staff members across the Organization. In the biennium 2004–2005, 983 staff members attended such classes and in the next biennium that figure had increased to 1147. In headquarters, a new language school was awarded the contract to provide language classes and is offering new features, including distance-learning courses and classes aimed at enabling staff who have been absent on duty travel to catch up.

ACTION BY THE HEALTH ASSEMBLY

13. The Health Assembly is invited to consider the draft resolution contained in resolution EB122.R9.

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