



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

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Implementation of multilingualism in WHO

Report by the Secretariat

1. Multilingualism and equality among official languages of WHO have been the subject of several resolutions of the Health Assembly.¹ Since 2000 a number of measures to strengthen WHO's status as a multilingual organization have been implemented. These included: full reimbursement of the cost of language training for WHO staff; expansion of translation and interpretation services at meetings; improved availability of documents and publications in all official languages and broadening the range of languages on the WHO web site; and the appointment of a Special Coordinator for promotion of multilingualism in WHO. This document provides an update on the implementation of this policy.
2. **Governing bodies.** WHO provides simultaneous interpretation in the official languages of the Health Assembly, the Executive Board and the regional committees. In 2000, this service was extended to sessions of governing body working and drafting groups, thus benefiting the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body on the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the Ad hoc open-ended intergovernmental working group to review the working methods of the Executive Board, and the forthcoming Open-ended intergovernmental working group on revision of the International Health Regulations.
3. Documents for the Health Assembly are dispatched to participants in the six official languages 30 days prior to the opening of the session. The same deadline applies to other governing body meetings, with the exception of the Executive Board, whose rules of procedure were amended in 2003, such that documents are now dispatched to participants six weeks before commencement of the session. Summary records of the Executive Board and of committees of the Health Assembly are made available in English, French, Russian and Spanish. In 1998-1999 a total of 24 560 pages were translated into the six languages for governing body meetings; in 2000-2001, the figure was 28 640; in 2002-2003 it was 29 500. This increase derives largely from the additional series of governing body meetings held in recent bienniums.
4. **Printed materials.** Other than documents for governing bodies, printed materials are issued by the Organization predominantly in English, with certain key materials in the other official languages. This needs to be improved and a review is being undertaken. Certain materials are also published, in

¹ Resolution WHA50.32 on respect for equality among the official languages and resolution WHA51.30 requiring WHO governing body documents to be dispatched and made available on the Internet in the six official languages not less than 30 days before the opening of the sessions, in addition to resolution WHA31.13 defining the official and working languages of the Health Assembly and the Board.

nonofficial languages, through outside bodies, at no cost to the Organization. This activity has grown in recent years.

5. **World Wide Web.** The top navigational layers of the WHO web site (<http://www.who.int>) are designed to display content in English, French and Spanish. WHO press releases and “Outbreak News” are now posted on the web site in those languages, along with a growing quantity of departmental information. Texts have been posted ad hoc in other languages.

6. **WHO staff.** As of 1 January 2000, members of WHO staff at headquarters have been fully reimbursed for training in all six official languages of the Organization provided at WHO, ILO and the United Nations Office at Geneva. New classrooms have been instituted at headquarters. As a result, staff participation in language training has increased significantly: for the period September to December 2003, 811 staff members enrolled in language classes, compared to 463 staff for the same period in 2000.

7. Criteria for vacancy announcements and recruitment of staff include strict adherence to requirements for language skills, with a scoring system introduced for the assessment of candidates.

8. **Radio and press.** The initiative to provide the francophone news media with high-quality health information continues to develop. Through external contracting to an independent specialist producer, WHO now provides a monthly distribution of French-language health information material on a compact disc, entitled *Destination Santé*, intended for broadcasting. The CD contains each month one main subject and 20 two-minute messages on different technical subjects related to health, distributed in two versions, one for Europe and the other for listeners in the rest of the world. The demand for this material has grown rapidly; it is currently being broadcast on 500 frequencies in Europe by 200 operators and 118 radio stations in all other regions of WHO. Following a request from Algeria, steps have been taken to develop a programme in Arabic, and consultations are taking place with China to issue a Chinese version. A special programme on counterfeit drugs has been made available for 14 different national audiences.

9. **Special Coordinator.** The terms of reference of the Special Coordinator for promotion of multilingualism in WHO include dialogue with groups of Member States on ways of advancing multilingualism and multiculturalism in WHO. The incumbent monitors the implementation of the language policy, and reports to the Director-General on progress and problems.

10. **The Joint Inspection Unit report and case study.** The aim of the Unit’s report on implementation of multilingualism in the United Nations system,¹ was to assist legislative bodies and secretariats in maintaining and improving the multilingual content of services required by the universal character of organizations in the United Nations system. A previous report to the Board² sets out WHO’s position in respect of each recommendation of that report. The Joint Inspection Unit followed the report with a case study,³ which recommends, among other things, that the Health Assembly set priorities in order to reconcile multilingualism with budgetary constraints, and that the Director-General submit to the Fifty-eighth World Health Assembly a draft medium- and long-term

¹ Document JIU/REP/2002/11.

² Document EB113/25.

³ Document JIU/REP/2003/4.

plan of action on multilingualism for the entire Organization. The case study will be submitted to the Executive Board at its 115th session.

ACTION BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

11. The Board is invited to note the above report.

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