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World Health Organization

WHO publications policy: guidance on implementation and evaluation

Report by the Secretariat

1.   In January 2008, at its seventh meeting, the Programme, Budget and Administration Committee of the Executive Board stressed the need for a transparent and unbiased evaluation of the effectiveness of the publication policy and of individual publications, and for a formal clearance process that would apply to publications from all levels of the Organization. The Committee requested the Director-General to continue work on the issue and to provide more detailed guidance on how the policy would be implemented and evaluated.[1] The Executive Board, at its 122nd session, followed the Committee's recommendation and noted the report on WHO publications.[2] Board members concurred that WHO's publishing procedures should be efficient and cost-effective with appropriate quality control, while maintaining an appropriate balance between excessive centralization and complete decentralization of publishing activities. Members stressed the need for both staff accountability and editorial freedom from political or other pressures. Commending the commitment to disseminate WHO's information products by electronic means whenever possible, members welcomed the intention to evaluate the effectiveness of the publication policy.

2.   This report describes the steps being taken to implement and evaluate the publication policy, as requested by the Committee and Executive Board.

3.   For the purposes of the policy, WHO's information products are defined as written or illustrated works that the Organization makes publicly accessible. Examples include documents on the web site and journal articles, guidelines, reports, training materials and advocacy materials in any format (printed, web, CD-ROM/DVD or audiovisual), whether sold or distributed free of charge. They are referred to here as "products" or "titles".

4.   The policy is designed to ensure that all WHO's information products comply with agreed standards of quality, in terms of technical content, relevance and presentation; cost–effectiveness, in terms of production and distribution; and accessibility, in terms of appropriate formats and languages.[3] All the products must contribute to WHO's reputation as a provider of authoritative and impartial information.

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[1] Document EB122/3.

[2] See document EB122/2008/REC/2, summary record of the eighth meeting, section 2.

[3] Separate mechanisms apply to governing bodies' documentation and communications products.

5.   In order to ensure the attainment of these goals, specific procedures have been defined for each stage of the publishing process, from planning through content development to production and dissemination. In addition, a policy coordination group, which will report to the Director-General, is being formed in order to oversee implementation of the policy.

6.   Implementing the policy will ensure that WHO's products are made available in formats and languages that are relevant to the needs of target audiences, and will improve the quality and efficiency of the publishing process across the Organization. The result will be lower costs, fewer publication delays, more accurate products, fewer titles published and a smaller number of copies printed, distributed, and stocked in WHO.

Principal strategies in implementing the publications policy

Clear mechanisms for approval

7.   Clear mechanisms for approval have been established at three stages of the publishing process: planning, content development up to layout and type-setting, and production.

8.   All technical officers who initiate information products must ensure that needs have been fully assessed, that the product meets the objectives and is included in the workplan of the department concerned, and that measures are in place to ensure the quality of the final content.

9.   In order to enable responsible officers to record their planned products and senior managers to approve them, a tool has been developed and pilot tested. Products will be approved only if the following criteria are met: there are sufficient resources to cover the costs of content development, production and translation; publishing the products represents the best use of the Organization's human and financial resources; and there is no duplication with other planned or published products.

10.   Forms for executive clearance and production clearance will be incorporated into the approval process management tool. Those responsible for clearing a product must check for technical accuracy and conformity with the Organization's policies, house style and publishing standards. They must also recognize when to refer products to the Office of the Director-General for additional clearance (for example, for publications that have policy implications for the Organization and/or raise potentially controversial health-related issues). Guidance will be made available in this regard.

Categorization of products

11.   Another important strategy is the categorization of products. The assignment of a product to a specific category will trigger the relevant pathway for content development, production and dissemination, and the appropriate criteria for clearance. For example, a product that falls into the category of guidelines must be developed according to the procedures put in place by the Guidelines Review Committee, whereas advocacy material must be created in accordance with the standards set by the Department of Communications in headquarters. For some other products, such as annual reports of technical units, dissemination will be restricted to electronic media and "print on demand".

Cost–effectiveness in production and dissemination

12.   The policy foresees considerable cost savings and workflow efficiencies in the production process resulting from the gradual implementation of typesetting with an extensible mark-up language (which provides multiple file types for printing and web dissemination), the use of standardized

templates for certain categories of products, and the adoption of international standards for print files. Print-on-demand technologies will also be applied more widely in order to reduce the need for large print runs and storage of large numbers of titles. These technologies also enable products to be printed closer to the location of their target audiences, thereby lowering the costs of distribution.

13.   The policy recommends electronic distribution as the preferred means for disseminating WHO's information products, all of which should be made available on the WHO web site. Electronic publishing will enable information products to be updated rapidly.

14.   The policy foresees that products will also be made available in print for intended target audiences that do not have reliable access to the Internet or when a product is considered by WHO Press to have sales potential. In order to reduce mailing costs, printed copies of products will be distributed free of charge only to WHO depository libraries and, where appropriate, district health authorities in developing countries. Health ministries and permanent missions will receive monthly a list of information products (and their translations) newly published on the WHO web site.

15.   In order to facilitate access to information on specific subjects, the policy foresees the creation of an electronic library. This "e-library" would be the definitive collection of WHO's information products in electronic form, a searchable database of information products in full text, which would be accessible to users through a single web interface. Such products are at present usually distributed to Member States in printed form.

Enhanced support for publishing

16.   For WHO staff, an electronic guide containing complete information on WHO's publishing policies and procedures will soon be available on WHO's Intranet. This comprehensive guide will contain links to all relevant forms and documents required by staff for publishing and guidance on, and criteria for, making publishing decisions.

17.   Staff training on publishing has been intensified, with new or more frequent briefings on house style, copyright and outsourcing work to freelance editors; workshops on improving text revision skills, writing WHO guidelines, scientific writing and basic proof-checking; and seminars on content development and use of evidence.

18.   On the basis of an independently commissioned study of the need for further training on the publishing process, targeted briefings are being prepared for different categories of WHO staff, including directors and assistant directors-general.

Evaluation

19.   As part of a comprehensive process of evaluation, a set of indicators will be devised for monitoring the successful implementation of the publication policy, covering outcomes that include: improved technical content, relevance and presentation of WHO's information products; better cost–effectiveness in production and dissemination; greater availability of products in appropriate forms and languages; and WHO's enhanced reputation as a provider of authoritative and impartial information. Various areas of the Organization's publishing activities will be assessed in detail for their relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability, in accordance with the norms of the United Nations Evaluation Group.

20. The evaluation process will also include assessment of the short-term, intermediate and long-term impact of individual information products. User satisfaction with content, presentation and delivery will be evaluated within WHO's results-based performance management framework. Indicators that will be used include the number of titles published, the number of times each title is downloaded from the WHO web site, and the number of titles translated into WHO's official and other languages. In addition, indicators from independent external evaluations will be used, such as the number of citations of WHO titles in the academic literature, the number of WHO titles receiving awards, and sales statistics, including those from major online sales agents. Finally, questionnaires, interviews and focus groups will be used to provide qualitative data for the evaluation.

21. The policy will be regularly evaluated at the highest levels and progress will be reported periodically to the governing bodies as part of the biennial report on the programme budget performance assessment. In addition, a full report on the implementation of the policy will be submitted to the Executive Board at its 129th session in 2011.

ACTION BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

22. The Board is invited to note the report.

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