



# WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

**FIFTY-SECOND WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY**  
**Supplementary agenda item**

**A52/31**  
**19 May 1999**

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## **Use of languages in WHO**

### **Report by the Secretariat**

#### **BACKGROUND**

1. In response to the request to add a supplementary agenda item to the agenda of the Fifty-second World Health Assembly, this report has been prepared to assist the Health Assembly in its deliberations on the use of languages in the Organization.

2. Multilingualism and equality among official languages of WHO have been the subject of a number of resolutions of the Health Assembly.

C Resolution WHA51.30 (1998) requested the Director-General to ensure that the governing body documents for forthcoming sessions are dispatched and made available on the Internet in the six official languages not less than 30 days before the date fixed for the opening of the session.

C Resolution WHA50.32 (1997) requested the Director-General

to ensure the strict application of the rules of the Organization which establish linguistic practice,

to ensure that the documents related to the agendas of the Health Assembly and the Executive Board are distributed simultaneously in the six official languages of the Organization,

to take the necessary steps to ensure that the essential technical information of the Organization is disseminated in as many of the official languages as is required, and

to submit a report on the implementation of the resolution to the Fifty-first World Health Assembly.<sup>1</sup>

C Resolution WHA31.13 (1978) defined the official and working languages of the Health Assembly and the Executive Board, namely, Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish, and decided that the practices and decisions extending or limiting their use in varying degrees should be allowed to remain, except for any further modifications which may result from agreements negotiated between the governments concerned and the Organization.

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## ISSUES

3. The Director-General is committed to multilingualism in the Organization.
4. In response to resolutions WHA50.32 and WHA51.30, all documents related to the agendas of governing body meetings are dispatched simultaneously and made available on the Internet in the six official languages of the Organization. This practice will be maintained.
5. The subject of translation services at headquarters is expected to be considered within the Director-General's cabinet after the Fifty-second World Health Assembly. The objective is to examine alternatives that will ensure the most equitable match of needs with available resources, while maintaining acceptable standards of quality. This initiative is a further effort to respond to resolution WHA50.32.
6. A cross-cluster review of the publications policies and practices in the Organization will be completed in June 1999, and will address, among other issues, that of different language versions of publications and other forms of health information, within the broader context of information needs of different target audiences and appropriate ways of meeting these needs.
7. There is no formal legal text relating to the establishment of any working language for the Secretariat or the Organization as a whole, as distinct from the various governing bodies of the Organization (which are specified in the relevant rules of procedure). There are, however, provisions dealing with the languages to be used for publications and for various types of communications to entities outside the Organization. There are also provisions dealing with the payment of language allowances with respect to knowledge of specified languages (for headquarters these are the six official and working languages of the Health Assembly and Executive Board). The languages used for the aforementioned purposes, however, may vary among regional offices.

## ACTION BY THE HEALTH ASSEMBLY

8. The Assembly may wish to note the work that is being undertaken with regard to multilingualism in WHO.

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