
WHO publication policy

Report by the Secretariat

1. In January 2007, the Executive Board at its 120th session asked the Director-General to submit a review of WHO's publication policy to the Programme, Budget and Administration Committee at its sixth meeting in May 2007.¹ This report responds to that request.

Background

2. Since WHO was established in 1948, publishing has been an integral part of its programme delivery. Publishing policies have been instituted in order to help the Organization to fulfil its mandate and more specifically:

- to promote the production of relevant, authoritative and technically validated information and its dissemination in appropriate forms to defined audiences;
- to ensure that WHO is clearly recognized as the source of such information (with implications of quality, authority and impartiality);
- to safeguard WHO's intellectual property against any use contrary to the Organization's principles.

3. WHO publishes primarily material prepared or commissioned by its technical programmes. It does not publish unsolicited material from non-WHO sources, except in its journals, for which articles are accepted for publication only after screening for originality, relevance and scientific rigour, and subsequent peer review.

4. Quality assurance procedures, including peer review, have helped to establish the credibility of information published by WHO and the Organization's reputation for reliability and impartiality. These procedures must be maintained and enhanced in order to ensure that the work of WHO continues to have the desired impact.

5. For many years WHO had a dual system of formal publications and technical documents. Concern about inconsistent standards of preparation led to an internal review of publication procedures. The outcome of that review was a recommendation in 1999 that all information materials published by WHO (in all formats) should be subject to the same quality control and editorial and

¹ Document EB119/2006-EB120/2007/REC/2, summary record of the second meeting of the 120th session, section 2.

design standards. In April 2001, the distinction between formal publications and technical documents was abolished, and executive and regional directors were given full responsibility for the information material produced by their cluster or region. In headquarters the Publications Committee was disestablished and central editorial services were disbanded.

Technical excellence

6. All WHO's published materials must meet standards appropriate to the leading international public health agency. If WHO publishes too narrow a range of views or makes inconsistent recommendations, its credibility is damaged. WHO's information materials are valued for their accuracy, credibility, reliability and impartiality. They are expected to reflect the latest scientific and medical research. The information is respected because it reflects a balanced international perspective that puts health, rather than any kind of vested interest, in first place. In order to satisfy those criteria, a mechanism of quality control is essential. Such a mechanism should apply to printed materials and information published in other media (electronic and audiovisual). Where materials are intended to facilitate debate, they should be evidence-based, balanced and constructive.

7. WHO's technical departments are required to ensure that all their materials for publication are reviewed as appropriate by relevant WHO offices and by external, independent experts before they are made publicly available. Assistant directors-general and regional directors are responsible for this process and for confirming that the materials are consistent with the Organization's corporate policies and strategies. They give final clearance, although in some regions this function is delegated to a publications committee.

Accessibility

8. In general, WHO wishes to make its information as widely accessible as possible, and therefore most of its information materials can be freely downloaded from its web sites.

9. It may be appropriate to deliver information that is aimed at journalists, students or the general public in developed countries through the WHO web sites, but information that is intended for health workers or the general public in developing countries also needs to be made available through other channels. The Secretariat aims to disseminate information to specific target audiences in all Member States through channels that can reach them effectively, in clear language, consistent with WHO style, and in formats that they can use and are appropriate.

10. People who need WHO's information but cannot afford to pay for it must be able to obtain it without charge. At the same time, it is not unreasonable to recover costs from audiences who can afford to pay, especially those in developed countries or those who intend to reuse the information to enhance their commercial products or services.

11. WHO disseminates its for-sale information materials both through normal commercial channels, partially in order to reach consumers worldwide and to recover some costs, and without charge to target groups such as Member States, WHO offices and depository libraries. Efforts are being made to extend this practice to unpriced materials.

Language use

12. The development of multilingual WHO web sites in the official languages of the Organization has been a significant step forward in making WHO's information more accessible. Nevertheless

WHO's published output in English, in all formats, far exceeds that in any other language. Yet the provision of health information that is culturally relevant and in appropriate languages is of paramount importance for global public health. A draft plan of action on multilingualism is being submitted to the Executive Board at its 121st session.¹

13. WHO regularly collaborates with external publishers worldwide on translation of its technical publications into a wide variety of languages. Some 200 agreements are concluded each year for WHO's books and reports to be translated and published under licence. Thus, during the biennium 2004–2005, WHO licensed publication of translations of its material in 50 languages. Both commercial publishers and non-profit bodies thus make WHO's information available to audiences that are beyond the reach of WHO's traditional publication activities.

Protecting WHO's brand

14. WHO accepts full legal responsibility for the material it publishes under its own copyright. Before publication, all materials undergo a quality review by technical staff and clearance by the relevant assistant director-general or Regional Director. Publications by named authors carry a prominent disclaimer that the authors are responsible for the views expressed.

15. In order to achieve its programmatic goals, WHO occasionally submits its copyright materials for publication by external publishers (e.g. articles submitted to peer-reviewed journals, chapters of books and books submitted for external publication on behalf of WHO). Efforts are being made to ensure that such materials are subject to the same quality control and clearances as are applied to those published by WHO and, in the case of books published externally, to ensure that the resulting publications are subject to the same standard free dissemination as would be the case if they were published by WHO.

16. In common with many other public institutions, WHO is committed to an "open access" policy for all its information materials. Even though most of its information materials are already freely accessible on the WHO web site, externally published materials should also be made freely accessible. For this reason, WHO will no longer transfer to external publishers the copyright in materials prepared by its staff.

17. Sometimes it may be advantageous for WHO to issue publications jointly (and even to hold copyright jointly) with other intergovernmental organizations where both institutions fully subscribe to the policies described or views expressed. However, proposals for joint publications with nongovernmental organizations or private bodies will be scrutinized to assess what benefit they bring to the Organization.

Ensuring quality in a decentralized publishing environment

18. Since November 2005, proposals for the development of health information products have had to be cleared through the Office of the Director-General. Products and actions with policy implications for the Organization have to receive final clearance from the relevant assistant director-general or Director-General's representative. These procedures apply to all information materials except

¹ Document EB121/6.

governing bodies documentation and communications products, which are cleared through other mechanisms. In regional offices, all information products have to be cleared by the regional director.

19. The Publishing Policy Review Group was established in order to review the effectiveness of current publishing policies and to formulate new Organization-wide policies as appropriate. New or revised policies were approved by the Acting Director-General in October 2006. A policy on authorship aims to clarify whether published material reflects WHO's policies or best practice recommended by experts. A copyright policy strengthens WHO's ownership of all materials it produces (whether published by the Organization or externally) in order to ensure wide dissemination of such materials and control the use of its content. A revised policy on minimum criteria sets clearer standards for all WHO's health information products materials that are made available to the public.

20. Because of the importance of translation in communicating WHO's information globally, and thus the need for effective quality control, technical departments have to arrange for any translation of information materials into other official languages in consultation with the Secretariat's translation services.

21. The Publishing Policy Review Group will also examine ways of ensuring that all materials intended for publication are produced in a manner that facilitates multi-format publishing, and that all WHO's publications can be easily recognized as such. The Group continues to review existing publishing policies and procedures, and to draft new ones as appropriate.

ACTION BY THE PROGRAMME, BUDGET AND ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

22. The Committee is invited to note the reports.

= = =