



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

EXECUTIVE BOARD
115th Session
Provisional agenda item 7.6

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Follow-up to Executive Board deliberations on multilingualism

Report by the Secretariat

1. In view of the growing importance accorded by Member States to multilingualism, the following paragraphs provide clarification on questions raised by the Executive Board during its discussion on the subject at its 114th session,¹ and that are not addressed by the Joint Inspection Unit in its report on multilingualism in WHO.²
2. **Basis for six official languages.** The languages used in WHO are those common to other organizations of the United Nations system. They originally reflected the composition of the Security Council. Rule 41 of the Provisional Rules of Procedure of the Security Council stated that “Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish shall be the official languages of the Security Council and English and French the working languages”. Arabic was adopted as an official language in 1977.
3. **Equality of official languages.** Resolution WHA50.32 requires the Secretariat to make documentation related to the agendas of the Health Assembly and the Executive Board available in all six official languages at the same time, which has been the case since 1998. Likewise, simultaneous interpretation into the six languages is provided at all governing body sessions.
4. **Summary records of the Health Assembly and the Executive Board.** The Secretariat is committed, as part of its package of improvement measures planned for the medium term, to ensure that the summary records, currently issued in English, French, Russian and Spanish, will also be translated into the remaining two official languages.
5. **Proceedings and output of drafting groups.** Drafting groups at governing body sessions benefit from interpretation in the required languages. Proceedings of drafting groups are usually not produced because of their intermediate nature. The output of a drafting group is either conveyed orally if the matter is to be urgently debated in plenary or committee meeting, or it is translated into the six languages, printed, and distributed as a conference paper the following morning.
6. **Correspondence between WHO and Member States.** Both the rule and current practice is that correspondence is usually prepared in the official language of, or requested by, the country

¹ See document EB114/2004/REC/1, summary record of the sixth meeting, section 2.

² See document EB115/24.

concerned. In certain cases, however, such as in emergency situations or at expert meetings on specific diseases, for convenience and speed, correspondence may sometimes be drafted in another language.

7. **Simultaneous interpretation during meetings other than of governing bodies.** Simultaneous interpretation is provided for expert meetings whenever the language proficiency of those participating so require. A departure from this flexible approach, which has so far proved its usefulness, towards introduction of mandatory interpretation during all official WHO meetings would incur considerable costs.¹

8. **Support to translation services.** The strains on WHO's translation services as a result of spiralling demand and staff cuts have indeed been recognized as a problem and a number of remedial steps have been taken. Three half-time translator posts have been created at headquarters for Web translations, and negotiations with regional and country offices have resulted in a significant increase in their support to such translation efforts; technical documents are being outsourced to the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean for Arabic translation, with quality control arranged by headquarters; the flow of translation undertaken in China is being rationalized by headquarters, the Regional Office for the Western Pacific, and the office of the WHO Representative in China and as a result, high quality translation is being provided more quickly and cheaply; improved communication among translation services in the different offices reduces delay and duplication; and texts produced at headquarters requiring translation into official languages are coordinated in order to ensure that the best solutions are found in terms of quality and cost.

9. **Drafting by the Secretariat of WHO's documentation and publications in languages other than English.** WHO's Secretariat encourages the drafting of publications and technical documents in the languages of their major target audiences. Efforts to enable individual authors to draft in their native language, in so far as it is an official one, would reduce the resources available for other priority translation projects.

10. **Knowledge of languages as an essential element in the recruitment of staff.** Very good knowledge of one of two official languages of WHO and a good working knowledge of a second one is a routine in recruitment notices. However, to request more from candidates for WHO posts at the outset would risk excluding nationals from among a large number of countries from eligibility as WHO staff; they would be placed at a disadvantage if the official languages of the United Nations system were not widely taught in their home regions. WHO's recruitment policies therefore favour the gradual improvement of the language proficiency of its staff by way of staff development and training efforts, for example, through the extensive provision of free language training.

ACTION BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

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

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¹ See also document EB113/2004/REC/2, summary record of the tenth meeting, section 5.