



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

FIFTY-FOURTH WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY

A54/INF.DOC./2

2 April 2001

Use of languages 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 Consequently, the Director-General announced in January 2000 a number of measures aimed at strengthening WHO's status as a multicultural and multilingual organization, and to facilitate communication and exchange with and among its partners. These measures included, *inter alia*: full reimbursement of the cost of language training for WHO staff; the expansion of translation and interpretation services at meetings; increased use of new technologies to make documents, publications and WHO's Web site more accessible in all official languages; and the appointment of a Special Coordinator for promotion of WHO's multilingualism. This document provides an update on the implementation of these measures.

2. **Multilingualism during official meetings.** WHO has always provided simultaneous interpretation in the official languages of the Health Assembly, the Executive Board and the regional committees. Beginning in 2000, this service was extended to sessions of governing body working and drafting groups. Feedback has indicated that both the number and the quality of participation in such groups has improved. Similar arrangements apply for the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body on the WHO framework convention on tobacco control.

3. **Multilingualism within WHO.** As from 1 January 2000, WHO introduced full reimbursement for staff at headquarters to pursue training in an official language of the Organization, organized at WHO, ILO and the United Nations at Geneva. As a result, staff participation in language training has increased significantly. For the period September to December 2000, 463 staff members enrolled in a total of 38 language classes, compared to 213 staff in 22 classes for the same period in 1999; this rise in interest is also considerable compared to enrolments over the previous two years.

4. Criteria for selection of new staff now include strict adherence to language requirements, with a scoring system introduced for the assessment of candidates.

5. **Publications and Web site.** *The world health report 2000* was published in the six official languages of the governing bodies. A digest of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* is issued twice a year in French and Spanish, in addition to the monthly English edition which includes summaries of all articles in French and Spanish. These digests contain a selection of articles translated

¹ Resolution WHA50.32 on respect for equality among the official and working language chosen by Member States, and 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.

in full. Design of the top navigational layers of the WHO Web site (<http://www.who.int>) in English, French and Spanish is currently being finalized.

6. **Radio and press.** A special initiative has been launched to provide the Francophone news media with high-quality health information. 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 20 two-minute messages on different technical subjects related to health, distributed in two versions, one for Europe, the other for listeners in the rest of the world. In addition to dissemination to WHO's regional offices, distribution of this material has grown rapidly, in response to demand, currently reaching 172 outlets in 43 countries, and 388 subscribers. WHO is also developing a world health news programme intended for radio and television broadcasting in seven languages.¹ Special efforts are being made to ensure that official communications and WHO press releases are made available simultaneously in English and French, in response to requests from the Geneva-based media.

7. **Special Coordinator.** In recognition of the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity within the Organization, a Special Coordinator was appointed in February 2000 for the promotion of multilingualism in WHO. The terms of reference were to formalize dialogue with groups of countries on ways of advancing multilingualism and multiculturalism in WHO. So far, meetings have been held with representatives of the League of Arab States, French-speaking and Portuguese-speaking countries, Russia and Spain to review the situation and understand their requirements.

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¹ Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish.