
Multilingualism: plan of action

Report by the Secretariat

1. Multilingualism has been the subject of a series of discussions and resolutions by the Executive Board and the Health Assembly.¹ In particular, the governing bodies have considered the recommendations of the United Nations Joint Inspection Unit for improving multilingualism and access to information at WHO, including drafting of a plan of action,² and progress made in implementation.³ In response to the Unit's recommendation, a draft plan of action is submitted below, which contains a set of concrete proposals to further multilingualism at WHO. The draft plan sets medium- and long-term goals that are linked to objectives and indicators to monitor and evaluate progress.

2. In order to work effectively, WHO needs to exchange information and communicate in multiple languages. Language should not be a barrier to fulfilling its mandate: to address the health needs of Member States. A multilingual WHO is better equipped to communicate health messages, to produce and disseminate health information and to generate, share and use knowledge about health in an equitable manner. It is also better placed to meet today's major public health challenge: strengthening health systems in order to provide essential health care for all.

3. Progress has been made in promoting cultural and linguistic diversity in WHO's work. Governing body documentation, which has been available in all official languages in print since 1978, has been similarly available online since 1998. Simultaneous interpretation has also been provided at governing body sessions since 1978 and was recently introduced for meetings of drafting groups during the sessions. WHO is one of the few organizations of the United Nations system to have web sites, with user interface and navigation in the official languages. Since 2006 WHO has greatly increased the provision of multilingual health information, including information products in multiple languages, multilingual online interfaces and deep layers of multilingual content on the web. The WHO Regional Office for the Americas has produced a multilingual dictionary and WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean has a project to increase the provision of health information in indigenous languages. The Secretariat offers free language training to all staff.

4. Nonetheless, Member States have raised concerns that some aspects of WHO's work are still not sufficiently multilingual, in particular that there is no mechanism for the Secretariat to set priority of information products for the purpose of equitable access, and that these products are not always provided in full on time in all official languages. Member States have called for improvements in the

¹ See, for example, resolutions WHA50.32, WHA51.30 and EB105.R6.

² Document JIU/REP/2003/4.

³ See document EB117/25.

quantity and timeliness of translations, and for more extensive quality control; they have stressed that multilingualism is more than the six United Nations official languages, and that translations of WHO publications and documents should be provided in local languages where required. The Secretariat will address these concerns within the Medium-term strategic plan (2008–2013).

PROPOSED ACTIONS

5. **Translation priorities.** The Publishing Policy Review Group obtained data on the languages and groups of languages that are similar enough to allow mutual understanding, which can be used to target language groups and prioritize languages for translation of publications for specific health issues and geographical areas. However, the key to providing more equitable access to multilingual information is “by being more selective about the information products to which the Secretariat should give priority”.¹ The Secretariat therefore intends to establish a clear and effective strategy and mechanism for setting translation priorities for selected technical and other information products. In some regional offices a publishing committee sets priorities for key publications. A similarly authoritative body, which had existed previously could be established in other regions, and reinstated at headquarters.

Resources: the proposed body would comprise senior technical and managerial staff

Goal: to set priorities for translation of selected information products

Indicator: number of multilingual titles published.

6. **Multilingual team of web editors.** It is also intended to set up a team of full-time editors for the six-language web site that would collaborate with staff across the Organization. The team would help to provide content for multilingual web sites at all levels of the Organization tailored to language audiences, ensuring quality and depth of web site layers, and submit proposals through a clearance mechanism.

Resources: some multilingual editorial capacity already exists for the web, which could be expanded to ensure there are editors for all languages

Goal: to increase the volume of high-quality multilingual content on the web

Indicators: number of multilingual pages on the web.

7. **Institutional repository.** Governing body documentation and WHO publications and documents have been available for many years through WHO’s online library, WHOLIS, and through other WHO web sites. However, part of this material is only available in print, and not all documents available online can be searched in all official languages. It is proposed that WHO’s online library, WHOLIS, should be expanded and rationalized into an institutional repository that would collect and store, in digital form, WHO’s intellectual output in a single location. The repository would contain governing body documentation, technical publications, regional documentation, and so forth. All items would receive appropriate metadata (i.e. sets of data providing information about other data) that

¹ Document JIU/REP/2003/4.

allows multilingual searching of the content through a web browser. This would involve scanning legacy documents and publications available only in print and converting documents from image to character format where appropriate. Other advantages of an institutional repository would be to provide an open archive of WHO's documentation, making this available online, and providing a more efficient, cost-effective system of communicating information and of storing data.

Resources: about six million pages of publications and documents need to be scanned and metadata added to allow multilingual searching of the entire collection

Goal: to establish multilingual institutional repository that is online, searchable and freely accessible

Indicator: number of documents and publications scanned and converted.

8. **Style and terms.** Effective communication in all languages requires consistent use of key terms and phrases. Although regional variations exist in some languages, they remain the exception where public health is concerned. Language usage and, in particular, technical and specific public-health terms and phrases in each language need to be consistent across the Organization. It is intended to frame a clear policy in order to standardize style and terms across the Organization. Standardization would improve the quality of WHO's multilingual information products and web content. Many programmes have style guidelines and glossaries of terms, which would be consolidated for each language.

Resources: style guides and glossaries of terms are already available. Technical editors working in relevant languages would be needed for the consolidation process

Goal: to consolidate style guides and glossaries of key terms in all official languages

Indicators: number of style guides published. Percentage of technical areas covered in glossaries in each official language.

9. **Publications.** In order to streamline current processes and to promote publishing in a more cost-efficient, standardized electronic format, it is proposed to introduce a rationalized workflow based on extensible markup language (XML). Pilot studies show that XML-based typesetting can be 30% to 40% cheaper than traditional typesetting. With source files in XML, an information product can be produced in multiple formats at little additional cost, and the typesetting and web publishing costs of multiple language versions of the same document can be reduced. These source files also facilitate re-use of the content in updated editions.

10. One of the formats available from the XML workflow at little additional cost are print on demand files, by which publications can be printed at multiple destinations. This process produces savings on printing and mailing, releasing funds to spend of multilingual versions. Local users can also adapt WHO's content to their culture and language.

Resources: funds could be made available by reducing publishing costs through introduction of a rationalized workflow and production process

Goal: to establish an XML workflow for information products in order to facilitate provision in different languages

Indicators: number of multilingual publications in multiple formats.

Coordination of multilingualism

11. Implementation of the actions proposed above would be overseen by a coordinator until multilingual projects have been integrated into the work of the Secretariat. Functions would include:

- coordinating multilingual activities, drafting a strategy for multilingualism and consolidating policy and guidelines
- developing a mechanism, in collaboration with the authoritative bodies, to provide guidance for setting of priorities for translation of publications
- encouraging use of new technologies to rationalize workflows and eventually release resources for multilingual projects
- establishing technical guidelines for multilingual publications and documents and enforcing existing ones
- providing advice on all aspects of multilingualism
- working with staff training services and human resources to design courses for staff that raise awareness about multilingualism and multiculturalism
- building and maintaining a database of best practices in multilingualism
- working closely with all levels of the Organization to facilitate more collaboration and exchange
- in partnership with various language groups within and outside the Organization, reviewing health-information needs and encouraging implementation of virtual health libraries.

Resources required for the plan of action

12. The cost of implementing the above proposed actions, including staff and activity costs, during period of the Medium-term strategic plan (2008–2013) is estimated at US\$ 20 million. When fully implemented a number of activities will achieve cost savings for the Organization. Investments in technology need to be made initially in central services, whereas savings will be made later by programmes through reduced costs for publishing and dissemination.

ACTION BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

13. The Executive Board is invited to consider the above report and to provide appropriate advice.

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