

Multilingualism

Report by the Director-General

1. In May 2018, the Seventy-first World Health Assembly adopted resolution WHA71.15 on multilingualism: respect for equality among the official languages, in which the Director-General was requested, *inter alia*, to develop a report, to be submitted to the Seventy-second World Health Assembly through the Executive Board, on “previous practices, possible technical options and solutions, including cost-effective, innovative measures and all programme and budgetary implications, to improve the current situation and ensure availability of the essential technical information of the Organization and WHO guidelines, whether in written, audiovisual or digital form in the six official languages”. The present report responds to that request. The Executive Board at its 144th session in January 2019, considered and noted an earlier version of this report.¹
2. Subsequent to the adoption of resolution WHA61.12 (2008), in which the Health Assembly requested the Director-General, *inter alia*, to implement the plan of action on multilingualism,² the Secretariat has been working in several areas to improve the balance between the official languages in its procedures and documentation.
3. **Translation priorities.** Departments are now able to indicate their plans for translation of publications at inception in the publishing clearance system. In the biennium 2016–2017, of 598 WHO titles assigned an international standard book number, 16 were published in Arabic, 16 in Chinese, 383 in English, 89 in French, seven in Portuguese, 32 in Russian and 55 in Spanish.
4. With the adoption of WHO’s policy on open access in 2016, any external party may reproduce, distribute and adapt the Organization’s output for non-commercial purposes, subject to publication under the same terms as the original licence. As adaptations include translations, the impact that this policy has on the availability of multilingual versions will be the subject of a future evaluation.
5. **Multilingual team of web editors.** A team of web editors identifies English-language content for translation, commissions translations through language services, builds the webpages and proofs the content. During the biennium 2016–2017, for 9379 webpages published in English, 1371 webpages were added in Arabic, 1918 in Chinese, 2181 in French, 1747 in Russian and 1828 in Spanish. During the same period, 3 million words were translated.
6. **Institutional repository.** The WHO Global Library Group has released a version upgrade for the Institutional Repository for Information Sharing (IRIS) that offers the following features: increased discoverability, an optimized search function with recommendations, a simplified interface with easy

¹ See document EB144/38 and the summary records of the Executive Board at its 144th session, fourteenth meeting, section 1.

² See document WHA61/2008/REC/1, resolution WHA61.12, paragraph 1.

citation, statistical reports with geolocation, tracking of social and traditional media citations, and metadata quality management. The repository contains 220 000 records and registers an average of 2.9 million downloads per month.

7. **Style and terms.** The Regional Office for Europe has produced localized versions of the *WHO Style Guide* in French, German and Russian; an Arabic version has been produced by the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean.

8. **Publications.** WHO offices have the option to publish in any of the official languages. In practice, however, English is the source language for most publications, with translations being produced as and when funding permits. WHO grants translation rights to external publishers; 410 translations of 273 publications into 58 languages (five official and 53 non-official) were authorized in the biennium 2016–2017.

9. WHO continues to publish the following serials with multilingual content: *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* (English full text; abstracts in Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish); *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal* (Arabic, English or French full text; abstracts in Arabic, English and French); *Public Health Panorama* (English and Russian); *Weekly Epidemiological Record* (English and French); *Pan American Journal of Public Health* (English, Portuguese and Spanish); *Western Pacific Surveillance and Response* (Chinese and English); *WHO Drug Information* (English, with International Nonproprietary Names in English, French, Latin and Spanish).

10. The *African Health Monitor* (English, French or Portuguese full text; abstracts in English, French and Portuguese) was last issued in July 2013.

11. In 2018, the Russian Federation provided funds to support a project for increasing the quality and quantity of WHO's technical and scientific information products available in Russian, and for improving their dissemination to Russian-speaking audiences. As a result of the project, 27 major publications have been translated and published in Russian at headquarters and by the Regional Office for Europe; 23 publications and five journals have been printed and distributed to target audience in Russian-speaking countries. Forty-five existing print publications in Russian have been digitized and data for 269 items have been added to IRIS. Two special issues of the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* in Russian and four issues of *Public Health Panorama* have been published. A glossary of public health terminology, Russian-language content for 10 health topics and a section on data and evidence have been created on the website of the Regional Office for Europe.

Coordination

12. WHO is working within the United Nations system on the shared services operating framework as part of the United Nations reform agenda; the global distribution of translation and interpretation services is one of the areas under discussion. In WHO's major offices, multilingualism is the remit of several departments, including those for human resources, governing bodies, communications and publications.

Staff development

13. WHO offers staff, through the Global Language Programme, an online distance learning language programme in the official languages and in German and Portuguese accessible for all WHO staff members in the same conditions, independently of the duty station they might be based. This has enabled staff language learning to be expanded to all duty stations, although stable Internet access remains an

issue in some places. Between 2016 and 2018, a total of 5409 staff members enrolled; 158 for Arabic, 77 for Chinese, 1890 for English, 2376 for French, 154 for German, 78 for Portuguese, 78 for Russian and 598 for Spanish. The courses cover from the beginner to the proficient level (A1 to C1 according to the Common European Framework Reference for Languages). Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Portuguese are delivered in virtual classrooms with a maximum number of eight participants, while English, French, German and Spanish are delivered in a blended e-learning format combining self-paced online activities with one-to-one phone lessons. WHO recognizes, in addition to the United Nations Language Proficiency Examination, other selected external language certificates as proof of required language proficiency.

14. Every vacancy notice issued by WHO specifies required and desirable language skills and candidates are assessed for proficiency in these through written tests and/or interviews. Vacancy notices and the online recruitment platform are currently available in English. Staff are able to report their language skills through the WHO directory.

Interpretation at meetings

15. WHO contracts interpreters for meetings in line with the United Nations system-wide agreement with the International Association of Conference Interpreters on the conditions of employment of short-term conference interpreters. During the biennium 2016–2017, WHO headquarters employed 433 interpreters for a total of 5236 interpreter days. Governing body meetings accounted for about half this total, at a cost of approximately US\$ 2 million.

16. Technical meetings at global and regional levels are usually not serviced by interpreters owing to the cost of the service and the infrastructure requirements in meeting rooms.

Official correspondence

17. Every year, WHO headquarters issues over 45 circular letters to Member States and over 4000 individual letters to high-level officials, in the official languages requested by Member States. Regional offices similarly issue letters in the official languages of the regions.

Language services

18. WHO provides governing bodies documentation and records in the official languages. The language services of each major office are responsible for the production of these documents as well as for corporate communications and publications. The language services at headquarters and some regional offices are also responsible for contracting external translators for technical publications, in order to assure quality and consistency across WHO.

19. In 2016 and 2017, WHO's language services at headquarters translated a total of 28.5 million words, in comparison with 25 million during the previous biennium. In 2017, French accounted for 37% of content translated, Spanish for 18.4%, Russian for 14.6%, Arabic for 13.5%, Chinese for 12.3%, and English for 3.4%. Approximately half of all translations are outsourced, almost all of which are technical publications.

Proposed actions

20. In response to the request in resolution WHA71.15, the Secretariat is working in cooperation with the United Nations languages services to develop cost-neutral approaches. In 2018, it reached an

agreement with the United Nations to implement eLUNa, the United Nations computer-assisted translation tool, on a cost-recovery basis that supports the continuing investment commitment of the United Nations but will save considerably on the use by WHO of commercially available tools. The agreement is expected to be fully operational for headquarters and the regional offices in 2019 and will benefit external translators of WHO technical content, enabling a corpus of common terms to be built up and shared through UNTERM. eLUNa includes a machine translation component, and WHO will be exploring further use of machine translation in collaboration with other organizations of the United Nations common system. WHO is also an active participant in the United Nations Semantic Interoperability Framework, a project that is expected to result in gains in the form of more timely production and more accessible governing bodies documentation in all languages.

21. In order to address the growing demand for WHO web content in multiple languages, potential collaborating centres will be identified to work on methodological developments in the following areas:

- measuring and responding to demand for multilingual content online (for example, allowing visitors to the WHO website to register their requests for information in different languages and facilitating, through machine translation, the provision of instant translations once a predetermined level of demand is registered);
- methods for prioritizing translations of WHO publications that take account of the size of the population speaking the target language, its access to alternative sources of similar information, and the context in which the publication is being produced;
- production of source documents in all official languages to promote diversity;
- measuring demand for content demonstrated by the use of multilingual search terms; developing auto summary and machine translation of the relevant WHO webpages, and delivering these immediately to readers with a disclaimer that the English version is the one of record;
- trials of closed-caption machine interpretation for technical meetings;
- measuring the impact of multilingualism on health outcomes.

22. The following potential developments will be explored in collaboration with regional offices:

- standardizing and translating all vacancy notices;
- ensuring that all WHO guidelines have, as a minimum, a summary of recommendations available in all official languages at the time of publication;
- participating in the United Nations programme for student translators;
- production of documents in more than the official languages;
- identifying the need for translations of, and the resources to produce, multilingual versions of WHO publications at their inception; and
- joint publishing and collaboration with external institutions to expand the availability and accessibility of WHO publications in appropriate languages.

Programme and budgetary implications

23. In the context of WHO reform, the planning and prioritization of normative and standard-setting products are the subject of process review (see table for details of estimated resource requirements). Preliminary recommendations from this review include the formation of a committee representing the three levels of the Organization to determine a title list for the biennium. A reduction in the number of publications should result in more resources being available for translations. Decisions on the funding of translations will balance needs at country level with the availability of resources.

24. Setting up a complete team of multilingual web editors for the headquarters website would require three additional professional staff to ensure one editor per language. The conclusions of the process review will inform new terms of reference for a special coordinator for multilingualism at WHO.

Table. Breakdown of estimated resource requirements (in US\$ millions)

Biennium	Costs	Headquarters	Region						Total
			African	The Americas	South-East Asia	European	Eastern Mediterranean	Western Pacific	
2018–2019 planned resources	Staff	19.73	2.60	3.10	–	3.25	1.43	0.14	30.25
	Activities	8.26	0.03	2.00	–	0.34	0.03	–	10.66
	Total	27.99	2.63	5.10	–	3.59	1.46	0.14	40.91
2018–2019 additional resources needed	Staff								
	Activities								
	Total								
2020–2021 resources to be planned	Staff	20.00	2.60	3.10	–	3.25	1.50	0.14	30.59
	Activities	8.00	0.50	2.00	–	0.50	0.50	–	11.50
	Total	28.00	3.10	5.10	–	3.75	2.00	0.14	42.09
Future bienniums resources to be planned	Staff	20.00	2.60	3.10	–	3.25	1.50	0.14	30.59
	Activities	8.00	0.50	2.00	–	0.50	0.50	–	11.50
	Total	28.00	3.10	5.10	–	3.75	2.00	0.14	42.09

ACTION BY THE HEALTH ASSEMBLY

25. The Health Assembly is invited to note this report and to provide guidance on next steps.

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