



# General Assembly

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**Multilingualism**

**Joint Inspection Unit**

## **Multilingualism in the United Nations system**

### **Note by the Secretary-General**

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled “Multilingualism in the United Nations system” (see [A/75/960](#)).



## I. Introduction

1. In its report entitled “Multilingualism in the United Nations system” (see [A/75/960](#)),<sup>1</sup> the Joint Inspection Unit reviews how multilingualism is addressed in the organizations of the United Nations system.

## II. General comments

2. Organizations welcome the report and its findings.

3. Most entities are committed to encouraging initiatives that support multilingualism as a core value and to advancing system-wide alignment efforts. Several also attach great importance to multilingualism as key factor in achieving an environment of diversity and inclusion.

4. Some organizations consider multilingualism broadly, looking beyond their official languages, and advocate an inclusive approach, one that intrinsically recognizes the value of languages as humanity’s heritage and that aspires to address the wide variety of language needs of their personnel and the communities and beneficiaries whom they serve, especially in reference to recommendations 5 and 6.

5. While most organizations support the underlying rationale of the recommendations, some note that their language needs vary by office and country programme and that implementation will need to be adjusted to their realities.

6. In such entities as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, where funding for language learning programmes is regarded as outside the scope of the core mandate, greater emphasis has been placed on selecting staff with the necessary language skills upon recruitment, making some of the recommendations on language learning less relevant and in fact financially hazardous in the current circumstances. Other entities suggest integrating multilingualism into aspects of talent management or diversity/inclusion programmes, thereby increasing coherence across the human resources continuum, rather than taking it as a stand-alone programme.

7. Organizations note that the suggestion of reducing the cost of sign language services by employing persons with disabilities through social companies ([JIU/REP/2020/6](#), para. 158) would not be aligned with international labour standards, anti-discrimination policies, the principle of equal pay for work of equal value or the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy.

8. Entities recognize the critical importance of fully leveraging new technologies in support of multilingualism, including with regard to interpretation and translation, noting that current tools for remote engagement often already include global language services.

9. While strongly supporting the value and necessity of achieving a multilingual workforce and the multiplying impact of a leadership that leads by example, the Secretariat partially agrees with the following finding: “In accordance with administrative rules in force, the officials of some secretariats should be at least bilingual, that is, proficient and able to communicate in at least two languages of the respective organizations” ([JIU/REP/2020/6](#), p. iv). The Secretariat notes that, pursuant to the guidance of the General Assembly:

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<sup>1</sup> The report of the Joint Inspection Unit is available under the symbols [JIU/REP/2020/6](#) and [JIU/REP/2020/6/Corr.1](#).

(a) The minimal requirement that all Secretariat staff members must meet upon recruitment is the ability to use one of the working languages of the Secretariat;<sup>2</sup>

(b) Vacancy announcements are expected to specify the need for either English or French, unless the functions of the post require a specific working language;<sup>3</sup>

(c) All promotions from one grade to another, from P-1 to D-2 inclusive, for staff subject to geographic distribution are conditional upon adequate and confirmed knowledge of a second language, not to be limited to the working languages.<sup>4</sup>

10. The Secretariat notes that, without prejudice to the foregoing, language requirements should be driven by operational needs in relation to the functions of a post. Those needs may vary by mandate, convening body, a post's other specific requirements or organizational setting.

11. It is noted that language requirements inconsistent with applicable mandates or operational needs may have unintended consequences for the ability to attract, recruit and retain talent matching all the requirements of the functions, in terms of education, experience and language skills.

12. Organizations partially support the recommendations.

### III. Comments on specific recommendations

#### Recommendation 1

**The legislative or governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should request the executive heads of their respective organizations that have not yet done so, to prepare a strategic policy framework for multilingualism, accompanied by administrative and operational guidelines for its implementation, and submit this for adoption by the end of 2022.**

13. Organizations note that the recommendation is addressed to their legislative or governing bodies.

14. Among the entities that have not yet implemented the recommendation, some express reservations regarding the time frame and scope, considering the resource restraints and competing priorities during the current coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and liquidity situation, while others note that such policy frameworks would not necessarily require formal adoption by their governing bodies. Others, viewing multilingualism holistically, consider that the concept would benefit from being increasingly integrated into talent management or diversity/inclusion programmes, thereby increasing coherence across the human resources continuum, rather than being taken as a stand-alone programme.

#### Recommendation 2

**The legislative or governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should request the executive heads of their respective organizations that have not yet done so, to appoint, by the end of 2022, a senior official as a coordinator or focal point for multilingualism, with clearly defined responsibilities and delegated authority, tasked with the coordination of the implementation of the strategic policy framework for multilingualism across their respective organizations.**

<sup>2</sup> Resolution 2480 B (XXIII), as reiterated in resolution 73/346.

<sup>3</sup> Resolution 71/263.

<sup>4</sup> Resolution 2480 B (XXIII), reiterated in resolution 73/346.

15. Organizations note that the recommendation is addressed to their legislative or governing bodies.

16. While recognizing the value of a dedicated senior official for the coordination of action plans and the implementation of strategic frameworks for multilingualism, some entities note that the idea would probably lend itself better to organizations that have dedicated language teams and programmes and related resources. Others support their commitment to multilingualism throughout their work by embedding it in their operational, administrative and governance processes and express the concern that having dedicated coordinators may inadvertently result in a siloed approach to multilingualism.

### **Recommendation 3**

**The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations that have not yet done so, should, where appropriate, introduce or enhance, by the end of 2022, their policies for attracting new translators and interpreters and retaining talented and skilled language professionals, including the preparation of succession plans with specifications for required languages and language combinations, as well as the expansion of outreach programmes.**

17. Organizations partially support the recommendation.

18. Many recognize the importance of sustained outreach for succession planning and of fully leveraging technologies in support of multilingualism.

19. Entities that do not employ a cadre of dedicated language professionals utilize a mix of approaches for conference services, including resorting to skilled staff linguists among existing staff, using remote interpretation, entering into long-term or service-based agreements with language service providers and engaging the services of language professionals in regional offices or the Secretariat's translation services. For those entities, formal succession and outreach planning for dedicated language professionals may not be applicable.

### **Recommendation 4**

**The legislative or governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should request the executive heads of their respective organizations that have not yet done so, to introduce, by the end of 2022, learning policies that encourage continuous learning and improvement of the language skills of their staff members in the official languages of the respective organizations as well as in other languages, as appropriate, securing sufficient funding for this.**

20. Organizations note that the recommendation is addressed to their legislative or governing bodies.

21. Many underscore that multilingualism is an aspirational goal that is valued and encouraged at all levels across their organizations.

22. The Secretariat supports the recommendation and notes that it complements previous recommendations made by the Joint Inspection Unit, in particular recommendations 3 and 11 in the report entitled "Multilingualism in the United Nations system organizations: status of implementation" ([A/67/78](#)), which remain relevant. It is also noted that the recommendation is to be implemented alongside a related "soft" recommendation ([JIU/REP/2020/6](#), para. 135).

23. Other organizations link language learning to improving organizational results and point to the need to frame it within the entity's strategic needs, an aspect that is not explicitly covered in the recommendation. In that regard, suggestions were made to encourage voluntary contributions to complement other sources of funding in

support of multilingualism, with a view to accelerating learning and, thus, the achievement of results.

#### **Recommendation 5**

**The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should request the High-level Committee on Management of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) to establish a working group on the preparation for adoption, by the end of 2022, of a United Nations system language framework for language teaching, learning, assessment, and certification in the six official languages of the United Nations, which could be based, inter alia, on the results of the work already undertaken by the United Nations Secretariat in this area.**

24. Organizations partially support the recommendation.

25. In his reform agenda, the Secretary-General has repeatedly underscored the need to use existing structures and refrain from creating new ones. The existing Human Resources Network of the CEB High-level Committee on Management is well placed, with the support of the system-wide multilingualism structures, to lead and develop a system-wide language framework for language teaching, learning, assessment and certification in the six official languages.

26. Organizations recognize the existence and relevance of the Human Resources Network and the system-wide network of multilingualism focal points, in which the Coordinator for Multilingualism takes the lead.

27. The Coordinator for Multilingualism, pursuant to the terms of reference (see [A/71/757](#), annex II), serves as a facilitator to attain a coordinated, consistent and coherent approach to multilingualism at the United Nations system level through CEB and coordinates joint measures with the CEB secretariat to support a comprehensive and coordinated approach on multilingualism within the system. The Human Resources Network, which has periodically placed items related to language learning and assessment on its agenda, provides strategic advice in the management of human resources, focusing on specific strategic issues, as well as preparing views and proposals for the High-level Committee on Management and the International Civil Service Commission and liaising with the federations of staff associations. Consequently, organizations do not support the establishment of additional mechanisms and processes at the system level.

28. Alignment with the work undertaken by the Secretariat is seen positively by some, as it promotes system-wide consistency across official languages and duty stations in how languages are taught and language skills assessed, thereby allowing the emergence of a common understanding of proficiency levels in the various areas (writing, speaking, listening and reading) across languages.

29. However, others note that the recommendation should not limit the ability of organizations to resort to internationally recognized certificates or externally sourced language training, as needed, especially considering the rapidly expanding e-tools sector for learning. Due consideration should also be given to ensuring that such a framework benefits both headquarters and field-based staff (who, before the pandemic, had limited access to language courses).

30. While some entities support the development of a common standard within the United Nations system, which will build a common understanding of language proficiency across organizations, languages and duty stations and avoid redundancies, others would rather support tailored approaches driven by their specific needs. In that regard, some recall the recommendation made by the Human Resources Network in 2015 to move to internationally recognized certifications aligned with the Common

European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment as a measure to support comparability of the levels of language proficiency of United Nations staff with individuals external to the United Nations system, such as partners and applicants, and to contribute to mobility and a diverse workforce. The Secretariat notes that the United Nations language framework currently in development could be used as a benchmark against which internationally recognized certificates could be compared and/or the language needs for a post assessed.

**Recommendation 6**

**The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, in their capacity as members of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, should direct the High-level Committee on Management to develop a system-wide, comprehensive and coordinated approach to multilingualism as a core value of the United Nations system organizations.**

31. Organizations partially support the recommendation.

32. Organizations are of the view that the existing network of multilingualism focal points from across the system, under the leadership of the Coordinator for Multilingualism, is well placed to support the efforts by the High-level Committee on Management.

**Recommendation 7**

**The Secretary-General of the United Nations should envisage that the resident coordinators, who represent him at country level and lead the United Nations country teams, plan awareness initiatives, including language-related events or other events on the promotion of multilingualism as an expression of diversity and a vehicle for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals during the last decade of the 2030 Agenda.**

33. Organizations note that the recommendation is addressed to the Secretary-General.

34. The Secretariat notes that multilingualism is recognized by the General Assembly as a core value of the United Nations and, as such, requires the active involvement and participation of all stakeholders. All Secretariat entities and United Nations country and regional offices are expected to participate fully in its mainstreaming in all its aspects, including by means of language-related events, in line with mandated priorities.