



MULTILINGUALISM IN THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

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Background

Multilingualism remains essential to multilateral communications. Through multilingualism, the United Nations system organizations ensure that the decisions of intergovernmental bodies are understood, observed, implemented and accepted by the peoples they serve. Through multilingualism, the United Nations system communicates globally with the most vulnerable populations, brings conflicting parties to the negotiating table, delivers aid, addresses disaster risks, spreads understanding about human rights and fundamental freedoms, and advances understanding on dignity and justice for all. Multilingualism reaffirms the commitment of the United Nations system to advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as it is an indispensable means of achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.



Objectives

The objective of the present report is to review multilingualism across the United Nations system organizations with a view to examining:

- (a) existing strategies, policies, practices and mechanisms in place with reference to the relevant resolutions or decisions on multilingualism adopted by the respective legislative or governing bodies of JIU participating organizations;
- (b) incentives for staff to promote and enhance multilingualism;
- (c) opportunities to improve the use of external resources and partnerships (with academia, the private sector and civil society) as well as language technologies in the digital era, wherever applicable (in connection with, inter alia, communication and information, including social media and websites; conference management; interpretation; translation; publication; and learning); and
- (d) the relevance and status of implementation of previous JIU recommendations on multilingualism.



What the JIU found

1. Lack of a holistic perspective translated into a strategic framework and action plans

In its 2011 report on multilingualism, JIU issued two recommendations encouraging the executive heads of the United Nations system organizations to “formulate strategies” and propose “strategic action plans for the effective implementation of multilingualism” within their respective organizations. Nevertheless, the present review found that – almost 10 years later – most secretariats of the United Nations system organizations had not yet implemented those recommendations, as they had neither formulated relevant strategies nor proposed relevant strategic actions. Therefore, at present, most JIU participating organizations do not have a strategic framework in place that would regulate and provide guidance on the overall equitable use of languages and the implementation of multilingualism in the organization.

In the 2011 report on multilingualism, JIU already recommended that the executive heads of the organizations appoint “senior officials” as coordinators for multilingualism, who should implement multilingualism with the assistance of a network of focal points across their respective organizations. Given that the executive heads of the JIU participating organizations have not taken into account all the elements required for the full implementation of this recommendation, the conditions of the appointment and the assigned responsibilities of focal points for multilingualism should be reconsidered by the concerned organizations.

2. Actual implementation of multilingualism within the organizations

The essence of the United Nations is the universality of the Organization and its mission. Multilingualism is the main instrument of the Organization for its governance, but also for reaching out to its constituencies, the peoples of its Member States. The founding instruments of the United Nations system organizations have established that the universal character of the Charter of the United Nations should be reflected in their staff members, who should be linguistically competent and master more than one of the official and working languages. Multilingualism facilitates the cause of the United Nations with respect to maintaining peace and security, promoting human rights and the rule of law, and conducting operational activities for sustainable development. Especially in the area of development, with only one decade remaining to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda, it is important that the United Nations system organizations communicate in the languages of the peoples on the ground, including local languages, so that no one is left behind.

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. Only in a couple of JIU participating organizations, the secretariats are formally monolingual, and there is no such obligation (see annex I). The review found that the United Nations system organizations do not implement the relevant rules, neither at the recruitment stage nor during the selection of staff for promotion.

3. Slow progress in system-wide initiatives supporting multilingualism as a system core value

Until 2017, no progress was reported by the Secretary-General with regard to the specific request that the General Assembly addressed to him in his capacity as the Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) to support “a comprehensive and coordinated approach on multilingualism within the United Nations system”, and no action has been taken yet in response to the relevant JIU recommendations issued in 2011.

In December 2018, the Secretary-General designated the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management in the capacity of Coordinator for Multilingualism of the United Nations to initiate and lead a system-wide dialogue on multilingualism among the CEB member organizations.

4. For a forward trajectory

The present review reconfirmed the absence of a coherent approach to multilingualism, starting with the lack of a common definition for the terms “official language” and “working language” in the United Nations system and ending with the lack of a strategic framework for multilingualism in the JIU participating organizations and a system-wide approach to the issue. Now is the time for the terminology to be harmonized at a system-wide level and discussed in the CEB framework along with other issues related to multilingualism.



Methodology



Participation of 26 of the 28 JIU participating organizations, and **submission of 22 responses to the JIU questionnaire.**

More than 100 interviews conducted with numerous individuals and groups of **officials** representing inter alia **conference and language services, including secretariats of legislative or governing bodies; publication, information and communication services; human resources services; and language learning programmes**, during **missions** undertaken to Brussels, Geneva, Nicosia, New York, Paris, Rome, Vienna and Washington D.C.



Discussions with groups of Member States and individual Member States, whose delegates often act jointly or individually, in the framework of decision-making bodies or other mechanisms of the system, with respect to multilingual matters.

Attendance - either physically or virtually - of numerous **linguistic conferences and events**, such as celebrations of international days, including those dedicated to languages or methods of understanding them, and the celebration of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages.



Meetings with university scholars and practitioners that focus on the **promotion of multilingualism in the United Nations**, or work for **educational institutes of the network of universities** that have **bilateral agreements with United Nations system organizations** for exchanges and mutual assistance.



What the JIU Recommends

The report contains 7 recommendations addressed to legislative or governing bodies (3), executive heads (3), and the United Nations Secretary-General (1), as well as 6 soft recommendations addressed to executive heads.

The timely and effective implementation of the report's recommendations addressed to the executive heads will be greatly facilitated by the explicit support of the legislative or governing bodies and their follow-up with the executive heads to verify implementation.

Legislative or governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations are asked to:

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.

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.

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.

Executive heads of the United Nations system organizations are called upon to:

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.

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.

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.

The United Nations Secretary-General is called upon to:

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.



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