A TRULY MULTILINGUAL WHO

With more than 6500 languages in the world and only six official UN languages, how can one expect to reach out to all people in all countries and also deliver information to the most remote areas if not in the local language? For us in the World Health Organization (WHO), how can we expect to deliver health information reliably if it is disseminated only in just a few languages?

WHO

WHO chose to bridge this tangible gap in meeting health information needs in all relevant languages through multilingualism, which was embedded in every aspect of the Organization’s work.

Multilingualism has always been an integral feature of WHO’s work in publications and health information products, which are valued as benchmarks of health research and standards by institutions all over the world. UN Special Was in conversation with Dr. Hooman Momen, Coordinator, WHO Press and Special Coordinator for the promotion of multilingualism at WHO.

Hooman joined WHO in 2001 as Editor of the Bulletin of the World Health Organization and was appointed Special Coordinator for the promotion of multilingualism in 2006. Today multilingualism in WHO’s work is an exemplary collaboration between various resources, teams and structures, including the Online Communications team, the IRIS project in the WHO library, Staff Development and Learning, the Translation team and ePORTUGUÉS, among others, he observes.

A mandate for WHO

While WHO has six official languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish), the Regional Office for Europe uses German as an official language. and Portuguese is an official language in the American regions.

Multilingualism has been the subject of a series of discussions and resolutions by the WHO Executive Board and World Health Assembly. it gained renewed emphasis with the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) of the United Nations on Multilingualism (2003). The report recommended that all UN institutions nominate a ‘Coordinator’ for multilingualism and have a Plan of Action. [Read the JIU report here: http://intranet.who.int/homes/whp/documents/jiurep_2003_4_english[1].pdf].

Accordingly, the World Health Assembly approved a Plan of Action on Multilingualism in 2007. The following year the Francophone Member States also proposed a resolution on the subject, which among other actions requested a biennial report on progress with the plan of action to be presented in Health Assembly. The next progress be presented to the Sixty-seventh World Health Assembly in May 2014.

In another development to promote WHO as a multilingual agency, in 2012 the Russian Federation provided nearly US$ 2 million to increase the quality and quantity of WHO technical and scientific information products in the Russian language. Under this initiative, the Russian government funded the translation of 40 WHO key publications. In addition 120 existing print publications in Russian have been digitalized and entered in IRIS and over 20 new technical websites in Russian created or updated on the WHO website, Dr. Momen informed.

A truly multilingual Web

One of the highlights of successfully incorporating multilingualism in WHO’s work can be seen in the Organization’s website, says Dr. Momen. “The website is completely navigable in each of the six official languages. It is not just the content that is in all official languages but it is also searchable in each language. That makes our corporate website a model for UN websites.”

Similarly IRIS, the Institutional Repository for Information Sharing (http://apps.who.int/iris/) also has an interface in six languages. Governing Body documentation, res-
olutions and other publications of WHO in any language are uploaded there, and can be searched for in all six languages.

A tapestry of languages spoken by staff

Another feature of WHO’s work through which multilingualism’s objectives have been promoted is the language training offered to all staff. WHO staff have the option of learning all six official languages free of charge through distance learning and face-to-face sessions, subject to certain criteria, which was another of the JIU recommendations.

In the directory a language skills of staff on the intranet (http://intranet.who.int/), all staff members can report their language competencies. A large number of WHO staff are multilingual. A total of 1241 staff have entered their language skills in the directory, and between them they speak 155 different languages. As many as 630 staff have advanced proficiency in two official languages, and 171 in three. One staff is fluent in five official languages.

Multilingual flagship publications

WHO’s information products also incorporate multilingualism. Flagship publications such as the World Health Report, other key reports and all Governing Body documents are available in the six official languages. The Bulletin of WHO comes out every month with summaries of articles in all six languages. A translated version of the full contents in Arabic is brought out by the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. A summary of the Bulletin is also published in Russian with funds made available by the Russian Federation. One significant recent milestone was to have the ICD-10 (International Classification of Diseases) translated into 60 languages.

Language initiatives

Within WHO’s multilingual programme is ePORTUGUÊSe, a platform to support the development of resources for health in the eight Portuguese-speaking Member States across four WHO regions. This facilitates collaboration among institutions, delivery of health information, and promoting capacity-building in that language. (Read the article on ePORTUGUÊSe la this issue for more information).

The Blue Trunk Library (BTL) in French, English, Arabic, Spanish and Portuguese is another multilingual activity in WHO. The Blue Trunks make available key publications to health facilities in low-income countries in the language of the country. Many medical hospitals and universities in Africa, Asia and South America have received BTLs from WHO.

Recent milestones

Dr. Momen looks back at the many significant improvements in the range and scope of multilingual content made available by WHO since 2006. There is now a lot more multilingual content in the Web, although English still dominates in terms of the number of pages. Increasingly our websites are accessed in other languages. IRIS makes WHO’s work greatly visible, making accessible online more and more WHO publications in an easy-to-find fashion. Web style guides in the official languages are available. Efforts to create new Style Guides in different languages, and especially to incentivize glossaries, are also being planned,” he says.

Understandably, funds are key to plans for a wholly multilingual future. Preparing glossaries and terminologies and translating publications need more and more resources. To have the same level of workflow on the Web, creating a multilingual HTML-based workflow and software is also being considered, he informed. On another vein, he added that while staff developing language skills is now based on a voluntary exercise, the same can be incentivized. Constrained by resources, WHP now makes use of existing structures such as the Web team, IRIS and PORTUGUÊSe to promote multilingualism.

Looking to the future

Dr. Jun Xing, Adviser to the Director-General at headquarters who deals with multilingualism, synthesizes its progress and future in WHO’s work succinctly: “In fulfilling its mandate to address the health needs or Member States, it is critical for WHO to be well equipped to communicate health messages, and produce and disseminate health information in multilingual settings. Through years of effort, much progress has been made in promoting cultural and linguistic diversity in WHO’s work. WHO is one of the few organizations of the UN system to have websites with user interface and navigation in all official languages. Efforts have also been made to ensure that WHO’s information products are available in official as well as non-official languages.”

“Looking to the future, we need to build up on the progress made and strengthen our partnerships with government agencies, NGOs and the private sector in promoting multilingualism and leveraging resources to support this important area of work. Meanwhile, the linguistic capacity or our staff could be further promoted and better utilized.”

UN Special