MULTILINGUALISM IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Summary of a Roundtable Held at the Palais des Nations
24 March 2010

A roundtable discussion on “multilingualism in international organizations: challenges of diversity” was held at the Palais des Nations in Geneva on Wednesday, 24 March 2010. Organized by the United Nations Office at Geneva and the International Organization of La Francophonie, the roundtable was aimed at measuring progress accomplished towards multilingualism as well as to identify challenges and means to overcome them. The roundtable was moderated by Corinne Momal-Vanian, Director, United Nations Information Service at Geneva.

In opening remarks, Sergei Ordzhonikidze, Director-General, United Nations Office at Geneva, welcoming the audience in the six official United Nations languages, said that multilingualism was part of the United Nations’ identity. It was also an integral part of multilateralism. The United Nations General Assembly had stressed over the years the importance of multilingualism in saying that it helped promoting unity in diversity and international understanding. At the same time, it was also a United Nations system-wide challenge. Capacity to provide interpretation and translation in all official languages depended on sufficient budgetary resources being made available. He also noted that the number of visits to non-English United Nations websites was growing faster than the number of visits to English ones. Ensuring access to multilingualism for all conference delegates and staff was not an easy task as, in many areas, activities for multilingualism were to be carried out within the existing resources, within a zero-growth budget reality.

Libere Bararunyeretse, Permanent Observer of the International Organization of La Francophonie said that multilingualism was one of the priority-missions of his organization, whose membership was composed of a third of the United Nations Members. Humanity should be enriched by its differences. La Francophonie had no objections against other languages; it wanted to enhance the richness of humanity. Respect of multilingualism also imposed respect of the legal equality between States. On the other hand, monolingualism could lead to the sidelining of some countries from debates. The issue of multilingualism was indissociable from international democracy.

Najeeb Al-Shorbaji, Director of Knowledge Management and Sharing, World Health Organisation (WHO), presenting the situation in his organization noted that in some regions of the world the WHO regional offices were using other languages, in addition to the six United Nations official languages. This allowed them to respond to the needs and the specific situations at the local level. A plan of action on multilingualism had also been created at WHO stemming from the realization that a multilingual WHO would be better equipped to communicate health issues. One factor which increased the cost of translations at WHO however, was the fact that they needed to do quality controls of the translations, as a piece of health or medical information wrongly translated could kill people.

Ibrahim Salama, Chief, Treaty Division, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that the promotion of human rights could only be ensured if all human beings around the world were fully informed of their rights. Multilingualism should be understood and explored under the framework of human rights; every human being had the right to make use of its own language. Multilingualism was also a core element of cultural rights. He noted that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights held the record of being the most translated document in the world. His organization also looked forward to the creation of a new mandate of Independent Expert in the area of cultural rights, which would guide the international community in better respecting cultural rights.

David Chambers, Head, Language Service, Administration & Management Sector, World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), said that WIPO was currently looking at extending the use of languages throughout the organization. States parties and the Director-General had defined the current working languages. Conventions and Treaties were available in all six United Nations languages and sometimes even in German, Italian and Portuguese. On interpretation, he said that the majority of meetings were being held in the six United Nations languages and that they had added Portuguese for their General Assembly. In his opinion, the use of languages on the Internet should be extended beyond the official languages, in order to reach more local audiences. While there was a budgetary issue to achieve multilingualism, there were also human resources issues, which could be summarized by “finding, training and retaining the appropriate staff”. One of the
ideas WIPO was currently looking at, to reduce the cost of translation, was to reduce the length of
documents. Another challenge was the fast translation of webpages.

Carine Richard-Van Maele, Chief, Communications and Public Affairs, World Meteorological
Organization (WMO) said that unilingualism at WMO would mean death for many people around the
world, as they would fail to understand weather forecasts and extreme weather event alerts. WMO
was producing scientific information, which could save and improve lives, but only if made available
to the public in an understandable manner. Scientific acronyms and abbreviations had to be
translated for common people. WMO’s role was also to produce a science that explained to people
what to do in a case of hazards. WMO had thus set up a network of communicators made up of
scientists and meteorological presenters which were able to communicate scientific messages in the
language of the local population.

Christopher MacFarquahr, Chief, Intergovernmental Support Service, United Nations Conference on
Trade and Development (UNCTAD), said that his organization had recently gone though an
awareness raising stage. During their last Ministerial Conference they had addressed the issue of
how to make their organization more efficient and how to increase the impact of its work as they
had clearly noted that, while UNCTAD had very interesting activities, very few people were aware of
them. Thus, they had prepared a communication strategy. Turning to translation he said that
UNCTAD’s ability to translate documents was currently insufficient; they had not enough translators
and the budget was not sufficient. One could not continue to accept a static budget for translation
when multilingualism was being increasingly pushed for.

Corinne Perthuis, Chief, Strategic Communication, International Labour Organisation (ILO), said that
the question of multilingualism was important, especially in a time of globalization. Multilingualism
was an active choice made by the ILO. Her organization had three working languages: French,
English and Spanish. They had many ISBN publications throughout the year and they were making
sure that the high profile ones were all being translated in those three languages. They had also
entered in an agreement with the Ministry of Labour of Spain for the translation of publications. The
Ministry was deciding among a list, which publications it wanted to translate at their cost. Turning
to a specific example, she noted that their “Decent Work” document had also been made into a
Flash version for the Internet, which was available in almost 30 languages. The idea of adapting
offer to local needs was a key point for the ILO.

Jean-Philippe Chauzy, Head of Media and Public Information, International Organization for
Migration (IOM), said that multilingualism was important for his organization, which was tasked with
the facilitation of immigration and emigration, as well as the integration of people into societies.
French, English and Spanish were the three working languages and they had achieved to provide
regular information to the media in these three languages. However, it was also important to reach
local audiences in local languages, especially during an emergency, such as during the recent
earthquake in Haiti, when they had also addressed the local population in Creole. When working
with migrants in great distress it was highly important to be able to communicate effectively with
them in order to provide them with the best assistance possible.

In the following open discussion with the public, speakers said that the whole issue of the imbalance
between the languages was something of great concern to Member States. Each Member State had
the right and the duty to be understood. One speaker wondered whether there was a coordinating
mechanism on multilingualism in the United Nations System, which would allow harmonizing best
practices and experiences. Another speaker wondered whether by reducing the number of printed
document one could reduce their cost and use these resources for interpretation.

Mohammed Siad Doualeh, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Djibouti to the United
Nations Office at Geneva and President of the Group of Francophone Ambassadors, in closing
remarks said that multilingualism should be a part of multilateralism. The roundtable had not been
a narcissist exercise, very interesting best practices had been presented and the discussion had
showed the way forward. These kinds of meetings should be held at least once a year and should
bring together various stakeholders to pursue the thinking on these issues. Another measure could
be to appoint a coordinator on multilingualism for the United Nations system in Geneva.