Some one hundred representatives of permanent missions, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, as well as academic institutions and the press, attended the second roundtable discussion on multilingualism, entitled “Multilingualism in international organizations: which investments for which objectives?”, held at the Palais des Nations in Geneva on Monday, 28 March 2011. The roundtable was organized by the Information Service of the United Nations Office at Geneva and the Permanent Representation of the International Organization of La Francophonie to the United Nations Office at Geneva to mark the International Day of Francophonie and the French Language Day at the United Nations (both on 20 March). The focus was on ways to reconcile the effective implementation of multilingualism in international organizations with financial and economic concerns.

The roundtable discussion was opened by the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, Mr. Sergei Ordzhonikidze, and the Permanent Observer of the International Organization of La Francophonie, Ambassador Ridha Bouabid, followed by presentations by François Grin, Professor at the University of Geneva, and Ambassador Papa Louis Fall, both members of the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations System and coordinators of the report “Situation of Multilingualism in Organizations of the United Nations System”. Ambassador Saad Al Farargi, Permanent Observer of the League of Arab States, Ambassador Rodolfo Reyes Rodriguez, Permanent Representative of Cuba, and Mr. Ala Almoman, UNOG Focal Point on Multilingualism, then presented their views on multilingualism, before opening the ensuing discussion with participants. The roundtable was concluded by Ambassador Mohamed Doualeh, Permanent Representative of Djibouti to UNOG and President of the Group of Francophone Ambassadors.

Opening the roundtable discussion, Mr. Sergei Ordzhonikidze, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, said multilingualism ensured effective and increased participation in all the work of the United Nations, as well as greater effectiveness and better outcomes. At the same time, financial constraints and economic realities could not be ignored, and it was unlikely that these constraints would ease in the near future. Yet these challenges must not be used as excuses for not making genuine progress towards multilingualism. Experts and economists had noted that, in today’s globalized world, multilingualism, far from being a financial burden, contributed to value creation and improved performance. That was why UNOG had long encouraged staff members to participate in its language training programmes. And these efforts had paid off: in a recent survey, 98 per cent of staff had indicated that they used English at work, 87 per cent French, 34 per cent Spanish and 10 per cent Russian, demonstrating that UNOG could rely on a truly multilingual workforce.

In introductory remarks, Ambassador Ridha Bouabid, Permanent Observer, International Organization of La Francophonie (IOF), said his organization, representing 75 Member States and Governments, attached great importance to the respect and promotion of multilingualism within the United Nations system. The IOF had consistently stressed the political and geo-cultural stakes of multilingualism, which were inseparable from the principle of equality among States and indispensable to their effective participation in international fora. As a lever and factor for the democratization of international relations, multilingualism was a fundamental right of States regarding their ability to communicate and defend their interests. Ambassador Bouabid underscored the need for international organizations and other actors to move from

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1 The following permanent missions were represented: Benin, Burundi, Canada, Central African Republic, Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Dominican Republic, Estonia, France, Ghana, Jordan, Laos, Mexico, Monaco, Moldova, Romania, Togo and Ukraine. The following United Nations entities were represented (in addition to UNOG): the World Meteorological Organization, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Development Fund and the World Health Organization.
words to deeds in this regard. Believing in and working for multilingualism meant resisting the omnipresent weight of mono-lingualism and acting together to mobilize human, financial and technological resources. In one word: invest.

François Grin, Professor at the University of Geneva and author of “The economics of multilingualism”, for his part, stressed how foreign language skills could make a considerable contribution to a country’s or a company’s production or an institution’s effectiveness. Mr. Grin explained that the apparent savings achieved by organizations switching to mono-lingualism were much reduced if examined through the rigorous lens of economics. He also cautioned that a decision to produce information in fewer languages would simply shift the costs of translation to recipient countries.

Ambassador Papa Louis Fall, member of the Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations System and coordinator of the report “Situation of Multilingualism in Organizations of the United Nations System”, briefed on the role and mandate of the Joint Inspection Unit. He also presented the mainstay of the forthcoming report, which would examine measures related to language service budget and financing mechanisms, establish an inventory of best practices and formulate concrete recommendations.

Other panellists, namely Ambassador Rodolfo Reyes Rodriguez, Permanent Representative of Cuba, Ambassador Saad Alfarargi, Permanent Observer of the League of Arab States, and Mr. Ala Almoman, UNOG Focal Point on Multilingualism, as well as other participants, all concurred that, by facilitating a wide range of actors’ access to and involvement in the work of the United Nations, multilingualism was at the heart of the Organization’s legitimacy. They stressed people’s fundamental right to understand and make themselves understood. Progress had been achieved in implementing decisions of the General Assembly, but much remained to be done in ensuring parity in the issuance of documentation or publication of information and in providing for a truly multilingual workforce. While all agreed that the resources required should be provided through the regular budget, some stressed the need to define priorities better, increase efficiencies in language services and develop creative solutions, based on partnerships and technology.

In concluding remarks, Ambassador Mohammed Siad Doualeh, Permanent Representative of Djibouti and President of the Group of Francophone Ambassadors, stressed the key role played by the Group of Francophone Ambassadors in the development of resolutions on multilingualism and their adoption by the General Assembly. Ambassador Doualeh indicated that he was very receptive to the recommendations emanating from the report of the Joint Inspection Unit and proposed several courses of action. These notably included enhancing and coordinating consultations with the Group of Francophone Ambassadors in New York, so that the General Assembly could shortly adopt the resolution on multilingualism proposed by Senegal, and closer coordination with other language groups and the coordinator for multilingualism. Ambassador Doualeh also announced the establishment of a working group within the Group of Francophone Ambassadors. Dedicated to multilingualism in its various aspects, it would conduct monitoring and give early warnings, provide relevant secretariats with reactions, and follow-up on the language dimension of recruitment.