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# COUNCIL

## Hundred and Sixty-eighth Session

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### Progress Report on Multilingualism at FAO

#### Executive Summary

This document responds to the request of the 166th Session of the Council “to present a progress report on Multilingualism at FAO to the next main session of the Council, including with regard to a strategic policy framework for multilingualism, Human Resources policies and use of digital innovations and language technologies, and further data on language products and services”. This Progress Report presents an update on the work and results achieved so far, and charts out future measures in the Organization’s efforts to strengthen multilingualism at FAO.

#### Suggested action by the Council

The Council is invited to note the progress made by the Organization in strengthening multilingualism at FAO and provide any guidance it may find appropriate in particular as regards the development of a strategic policy framework for multilingualism.

*Queries on the substantive content of this document may be addressed to:*

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## **Section I: Progress on the Implementation of Multilingualism at FAO**

### **I. Introduction**

1. This Progress Report is prepared in response to the request by the 166th Session of the FAO Council, where FAO Management was requested “to present a progress report on Multilingualism at FAO to the next main session of the Council, including with regard to a strategic policy framework for multilingualism, Human Resources policies and use of digital innovations and language technologies, and further data on language products and services”<sup>1</sup>.

2. The Medium Term Plan (2022-25) and Programme of Work and Budget (2022-23) has reiterated the importance and value of multilingualism for FAO<sup>2</sup>. Correspondingly, since the 166th Session of the FAO Council, FAO Management has taken a series of administrative and operational measures to strengthen multilingualism in FAO from various angles, including the appointment of a corporate Coordinator for Multilingualism, the development of a strategic policy framework for multilingualism and the implementation of a series of human resources policies, taking into account, inter alia, actions of other entities of the United Nations system. This document aims to update Members on the work and results achieved so far, and charts out future steps.

### **II. Appointment of Corporate Coordinator for Multilingualism**

3. The Coordinator for Multilingualism was appointed in November 2021 and will be responsible for the development and implementation of a corporate strategic policy framework for multilingualism, supporting organizational units at headquarters and in decentralized locations in gearing up their multilingual activities, delivery of language services for Governing and Statutory Bodies, monitoring progress in implementation of mandates relating to multilingualism across the Organization, and participation in efforts for enhancement of multilingualism within the United Nations system.

### **III. Development of Strategic Policy Framework for Multilingualism**

4. A strategic policy framework for multilingualism is being developed. The framework aims to provide a holistic and practical guidance to enhance multilingualism in FAO at the corporate scale, and globally at all levels. This document presents the outline of the policy framework (see Section II) which covers those aspects of multilingualism most relevant to the Organization. Any guidance Members may wish to offer is welcomed.

### **IV. Data on Language Products and Services**

5. As mentioned in document CL 166/17, *Multilingualism at FAO*<sup>3</sup>, there has been a surge in translation and interpretation goods and services provided by the Governing Bodies Servicing Division, especially in the context of remote operation mode adopted as a measure to address the challenges of COVID-19. All efforts have been made to absorb the growing requirements of Governing Body servicing, providing strong support to ensure the success of major events, in particular the 42nd Session of Conference and the Pre-Summit of the United Nations Food Systems Summit. Additionally, further measures have been implemented to deliver additional products and services aiming to facilitate the access to and use of FAO’s knowledge products for a wider range of users, including but not limited to a revamping of FAO’s main website with updated content and user experience, as well as new projects to translate the training and education courses on FAO’s E-learning Academy for use by non-English speaking users. In the Programme Implementation Report (PIR) 2020-2021, the Organization will provide detailed information on language products and services delivered during the period, and present an in-depth and comprehensive picture of FAO’s output on multilingualism.

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<sup>1</sup> CL 166/REP, paragraph 45 j)

<sup>2</sup> C 2021/3, paragraph 113 f)

<sup>3</sup> CL 166/17

## V. Digital Innovations and Language Technologies

6. Divisions housing the Organization's specialized knowledge and expertise are developing and digitalizing multilingual knowledge databases, such as AGROVOC<sup>4</sup>, to provide a structured collection of concepts, terms, definitions and relationships for more efficient and effective information retrieval. Meanwhile, the Language Service unit of the Organization has been actively deploying digital innovations and exploring technologies to improve the quality and timeliness of language products and services, including translation, interpretation as well as digital storage and referencing of major documents, such as the new Portal<sup>5</sup> for FAO's Conference resolutions and Constitution, based on Akoma Ntoso XML-based documentation standard. Testing is ongoing on the use of new technologies and tools for document processing and translation so as to identify solutions to further consolidate and streamline working procedures, and expedite and improve delivery.

## VI. Human Resources

7. A diverse workforce is a key strength for the Organization in order to promote successful intercultural communication and cooperation internally and with its diverse partners. FAO's human resources policies introduce measures to promote diversity, including language skills, starting at the recruitment stage, and supporting staff members throughout their service and talent development.

8. FAO is placing great importance in recruiting staff who display knowledge of FAO official languages. Once staff are on-board, the Organization's policy highlights the importance of multilingualism and encourages staff to further develop their linguistic capabilities through trainings in all six FAO languages, funded by corporate staff development funds. Even faced with challenges presented by COVID-19, language classes have been provided through virtual delivery. Furthermore, such planned language training is included as part of staff member's development plan in the Organization's Performance Evaluation and Management System (PEMS), so as to enhance accountability.

9. In line with other UN Agencies, in July 2021 FAO reintroduced a language allowance for eligible staff in the General Service category to promote the acquisition and use of official languages within the Organization.

10. Specific data on the linguistic profile of FAO staff will be included in the Human Resources Annual report to be presented at the 2022 spring session of the Finance Committee. This will form part of the section on diversity and inclusion, together with data and updates on policies and actions on gender and geographic distribution. The development of a multilingual workforce is an important objective for FAO.

## VII. Conclusion

11. In summary, multilingualism is being given increasing importance in the Organization, as one of the core values of FAO as a specialized UN agency to serve the needs and interests of its Members. Specific initiatives and measures have been taken at all levels of the Organization, supported by dedicated resources, to ensure the continuous production and improvement of multilingual products and services.

12. Bearing in mind that implementation of multilingualism is by essence an ongoing process, the adoption of the strategic policy framework for multilingualism by the end of 2022 will provide a more holistic and systematic blueprint to guide targeted efforts and should allow a more comprehensive presentation of the products and services produced by the Organization. This will support reaching the ultimate goal of facilitating Members participation to the governance of FAO in a more transparent, efficient and effective way, and of improving users access to FAO's expertise and specialized knowledge.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.fao.org/agrovoc/home>

<sup>5</sup> <https://resolutionsportal.fao.org/>

## **Section II: Outline of FAO's strategic policy framework for multilingualism**

### **I. Introduction**

13. Multilingualism is a defining characteristic of FAO as an international, intergovernmental agency. It is firmly rooted in FAO's Basic Texts, results framework and established policy. Rule XLVIII of the General Rules of the Organization establishes that "Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish are the languages of the Organization"<sup>6</sup>. Thus, all six languages enjoy equal status within FAO, without the distinction of "official" and "working" languages which exists in other multilateral and United Nations institutions.

14. Multilingualism is more than a linguistic factor. It enables the participation of Members in the governance of the Organization in an efficient, effective and transparent manner; it promotes unity in diversity, recognizing the importance to communicate to the peoples of the world in their own languages; it is deeply imbued in the goods and services produced by FAO; and it is pervasive in the composition and workings of the Secretariat.

15. Since the election of Director-General QU Dongyu in 2019, there has been increased commitment to multilingualism at FAO as one of the key areas for efficiency and modernization in the Organization's enabling environment<sup>7</sup>. The 166th Session of the Council of FAO requested "Management to present a progress report on Multilingualism at FAO to the next main session of the Council, including with regard to a strategic policy framework for multilingualism"<sup>8</sup>.

16. Building on such momentum, this strategic policy framework for multilingualism is developed so as to mainstream multilingualism in the work of FAO in a more balanced, coherent, efficient and effective manner.

### **II. Objective**

17. This strategic policy framework aims to provide a holistic and practical guidance to the mainstreaming of multilingualism in FAO's work, in order to enhance the use of all FAO languages in a balanced, coherent, efficient and effective manner to support the governance of the Organization as well as the delivery and communication of its work and programmes.

### **III. Scopes**

18. This strategic policy framework is to serve at the corporate level to guide the application of multilingualism, development of related and essential policies and capacities, as well as provision of technology and resource support, in order to achieve demand-driven and well targeted outcomes and results for improved performance and optimized resource utilization on multilingualism.

### **IV. Corporate Coordinator for Multilingualism**

19. The Coordinator for Multilingualism will be responsible for the development and implementation of a corporate strategic policy framework for multilingualism, supporting organisational units at headquarters and in decentralized locations in gearing up their multilingual activities, delivery of language services for Governing and Statutory Bodies, monitoring progress in implementation of mandates relating to multilingualism across the Organization, and participation in efforts for enhancement of multilingualism within the United Nations system.

### **V. Meeting Documents and Services**

20. FAO Management, with the support of the corporate coordinator, will adopt various administrative and operational measures to ensure simultaneous, timely and quality delivery and dissemination of meeting documents of Governing and Statutory Bodies sessions in all pertaining languages to facilitate deliberation and decision-making of Members.

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<sup>6</sup> Basic Text, 2017 Edition, Rule XLVIII. <http://www.fao.org/3/mp046e/mp046e.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> C 2021/3, Medium Term Plan 2022-25 and Programme of Work and Budget 2022-23, paragraph 113 f) <http://www.fao.org/3/ne576en/ne576en.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> CL 166/REP, paragraph 45 j)

21. Furthermore, interpretation service will also be provided for meetings of Governing and Statutory Bodies and in informal substantive consultations to facilitate communications and exchange among Members and between Members and the Management.

22. In addition, storage and referencing of documents will be digitalized for convenient search and checking regarding Governing Bodies major documents, including but not limited to Conference and Council documents and reports.

## **VI. Communication and Outreach**

23. Awareness to multilingualism will also be reflected in FAO's communication and outreach activities and products in order to emphasize equality among all FAO languages and reach out to a wider range of audience. In particular, focus will be given to the development, maintaining and update of FAO's multilingual main website [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org), as well as key communication platforms of respective languages to guide the targeted flow of messaging and information for maximum impact.

24. Moreover, in order to maximize the use of FAO expertise and specialized knowledge, various publicly available resources, such as publications and training courses on FAO E-learning Academy will be increasingly provided in all FAO language versions to facilitate their utilization by users and address the disparity between English and other languages.

## **VII. Human Resources and Capacity**

25. All language service units are given equal treatment and are provided with equally favourable working conditions and resources, with a view to achieving maximum quality of services, with full respect for the specificities of the six languages of the Organization. Efforts will be undertaken to ensure that the recruitment of language service staff retains candidates competent to deliver services up to the quality criteria required by the Organization. Constant training will be provided through strengthened partnerships internally and externally for continued improvement of language service staff to meet the needs in the six FAO languages.

26. Acknowledging the ability to interact with target audiences in their own language as an essential skill, FAO staff members will be reviewed for their language skills during selection and recruitment, and are encouraged to continue to actively use existing training opportunities to acquire and enhance their proficiency in one or more of the six FAO languages. Staff members will be encouraged, in meetings with interpretation services, to use any of the six FAO languages of which they have a command.

## **VIII. Resources and Technology**

27. Understanding that multilingualism is an essential and integral part of FAO's core values and organizational identity, regular programme resources will be guaranteed to fund the implementation of multilingualism in FAO to cover all six languages.

28. Non-FAO language products and services requested to support the implementation of field operations will be provided based on availability of extrabudgetary resources.

29. Technologies, such as digital tools, remote working platforms, terminology databases and digital registry of documents, will be explored and applied to absorb the surging requirement for language products and services in a cost-effective way, without detrimental impact on the quality delivered and user experience.