

French Language Day at the United Nations
20 March 2017, 1.15-2.45PM
ECOSOC Chamber

**Transcript of the remarks by Ms. Catherine Pollard
Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management
Secretariat-wide Coordinator for Multilingualism**

Question from the moderator (Ms. Melissa Kent, CBC/Radio Canada):

Multilingualism was recently recognized as a core value of the United Nations. Could you tell us more about your role as Secretariat-wide Coordinator for Multilingualism?

Excellences, Mesdames et Messieurs, Chers collègues,

First of all let me begin by warmly thanking the OIF, which requested my collaboration for this event, and all our panel members and interviewees for their interest and openness to other language groups, and our shared commitment to realizing the full potential of the UN through multilingualism.

My role of Secretariat-wide Coordinator is closely intertwined with the francophone group. Interestingly enough, this group was very instrumental in adding the item “multilingualism” to the UN General Assembly agenda in 1995. And a few years later, the UNGA requested the Secretary-General, through this very resolution on multilingualism, to designate a senior official to serve as Coordinator. So, I could say that I owe the francophone group this important role and additional hat of being the Coordinator.

I see my role, first of all, as an entry point for concerns and queries from Member States and Secretariat entities, and as a facilitator to attain a coordinated, consistent and coherent approach to multilingualism in the Secretariat. But most importantly, I believe that I should inspire all the departments and offices by initiating and proposing innovative solutions to foster an organizational culture that is conducive to multilingualism.

What is fascinating about my role as Coordinator is that it is really about managing change in an Organization. We have about 44,000-staff, we have four main duty stations, five regional commissions, and many field missions and offices.

How do I do this? Well, first of all, I rely on a network of focal points, composed of one or more staff member in every UN [Secretariat] entity. I regularly convene the focal points meetings and ensure that my office works through them on all matters that relate to multilingualism.

I would say that over the past few months – it has been less than a year – we have managed to achieve a lot:

- we certainly have reactivated the network of focal points,
- we are just completing the Secretary-General's report on multilingualism, which was a lot of consultations with all of the entities in the Secretariat,
- we've added a webpage on DGACM website, dedicated to multilingualism and it's in all six official languages
- we've upgraded our social media presence
- and we've seized every opportunity to raise awareness both of internal and external audiences. This is why I am here today. Also internally, we have made sure that this is an item on the Management Committee, which is chaired by the Chef de Cabinet and comprises many of the Heads of Departments. And we've done many internal presentations and outreach efforts with universities and disseminated various information.

So, on a day-to-day basis, we have a combination of advocacy and activities and consulting across the Secretariat and we seize every opportunity to highlight this important aspect of the UN's work. Thank you.

[remarks by other speakers]

Question from the moderator:

We just heard that one of the biggest challenges at the United Nations is the dominance of English when it comes to the recruitment process. We spoke about peacekeeping. And not just the interview, but training materials, at a time when there is a shortage of French [-speaking] peacekeepers. Can you tell us, in your role, what are the bigger challenges that you are facing, that your Department is facing, to implement multilingualism at the United Nations?

Well, I think my colleagues have spoken very clearly about some of the practical issues that we do face and the good news is that this is a challenge that the Organization has recognized. It does require a change and certain measures to respond, but we will take it and it won't happen overnight but there is now a willingness to address this. This was one of the issues that I put forward when I presented the issue of the need for really grounding and integrating multilingualism into all aspects of our work.

And a lot of it relate to the area of human resources, and also – which have not come up here – in the area of procurement. So our colleagues in human resources have been asked to come up with a series of measures and initiatives that they will pursue, together with the Department of Field Support, so that we can address this issue, including doing a mapping of the language skills of all of our 44'000 staff across the Organization. So, to get some idea of the baseline and the inventory of where we actually are, so we can see how we are going to be able to respond to this very practical issue that we have.

On a larger issue, in a larger sense, of course I would say that the common expectation would be to talk about a lack of resources. Yes, of course, everything has a cost. But we have to bring best practices and innovative measures to bear on how we actually tackle this. So, I am not going to sit here and make a pitch for resources because I know very well in terms of how the Organization works. Nevertheless, we will get on with what we have to do, because this is not a new mandate. It has always been a mandate of the Organization. We just have to get on with being very conscious of it and to do it. And the cost of not doing it, I would say, is greater than actually whatever investment we might make now. And I think that my colleagues on the podium have given some clear examples of some of that impact.

We can also see some of the positive benefits of it. Just two years ago, in 2015, we had a number of intergovernmental successes, with financing for development, the adoption of the SDGs, we had the climate change agreement. And what we saw was that all these preparatory processes and the negotiation of these outcome documents that were actually done in all languages of the United Nations. And so far the practice was usually to conduct these informal negotiations in English only and then do the formal adoption in languages. But the delegates were very clear that this was so fundamental, so politically important that they must have the six languages available to be able to work and to communicate and ultimately to have an outcome that all Member States, politically, took ownership of and bought into, which was a major success for the multilateral system.

2015 was referred to as a golden year for multilateralism. And multilingualism was a key ingredient in that success. So, from the larger picture, I think that we have a lot of benefits to continue inspiring us. And on a practical measure, yes, we have taken steps, we have a lot of work to do. But the good news is that this is now I would say very much at the forefront, it is very much in the minds of the managers and the most senior managers.

And we are also going to be working on putting out a Secretary-General's Bulletin, which is setting all the policy framework for implementing multilingualism.