

Inaugural Event of the CoNGO Committee on Language and Languages
Held remotely on 7 December 2021, 9 a.m. (EST)

**Transcript of the remarks by Mr. Movses Abelian,
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[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]**

Thank you, Professor, for the introduction.

I wish to congratulate the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, on establishing its substantive committee on language and languages, which serves as a just recognition of the role – and critical importance – of multilingualism at the UN.

While we are talking about multilingualism, I feel guilty we are going to speak English only as a language of communication for today. At least, I am hoping that people will be able to put their questions in other languages than English, maybe French or other languages. My colleagues will be able to respond to a number of issues in different languages.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is no coincidence that an international organization such as the UN, built on universal and human-centred precepts, has multilingualism at its core. Languages are, in essence, a profoundly human privilege. They are what makes us, as humans, stand out. And it's through language that human beings can establish peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding, and collaborative arrangements which are at the heart of the UN's mission.

Let's look at the three pillars of the UN, international peace and security, development and human rights.

- UN field missions for instance operate in tense environments where language skills are key to the success of the mission but also to the very safety of the peacekeepers and that of civilians.
- In the area of development, the Sustainable Development Goals have made it a motto “leave no one behind”, and this naturally requires integrating the language dimension to be able to communicate with beneficiary institutions and people.
- And if we look at the area of human rights, it is most likely that, without speaking the language of the victims, we could not even identify human rights violations.

It is against this backdrop that multilingualism has been embedded into the work of the UN ever since its inception, with its founding document, the Charter of the United Nations, signed in five equally authentic language versions originally. Soon thereafter, the second resolution since the birth of the UN General Assembly was dedicated to the rules of procedure concerning languages, a resolution that still applies today. This served as a testimonial that no international organization aspiring to become a universal beacon of peace and equality, could operate successfully, with all members treated equally, without language provisions.

By providing that multilingualism shall be the rule; that no UN body shall have only one working or official language, resolution 2 (I) of 1 February 1946 effectively set the course for a multilingual, inclusive, and diverse United Nations organization. From then on, the UN organs have adopted language arrangements building on – or expanding – this 1946 guidance from the General Assembly, which still provides a framework for multilingualism at the UN, including the UN Secretariat.

Over the following decades, however, with the rapid expansion of the UN membership and the rise of globalization, a belief that international organizations could operate more efficiently and cost-effectively in a single *lingua franca* gained prominence, shaking the very founding principles of our multilateral system. This prompted the UN Secretary-General, then Javier Perez de Cuellar, to express his concerns in 1983 over the perceived imbalances between the use of English and French, the working languages of the Secretariat.

Member States also increasingly expressed concerns, in various bodies, about what they regarded as an unequal treatment of UN official languages, especially in areas that are not explicitly covered by rules of procedure such as communications or unofficial documents, and, later, websites. It is in this context that Member States, in 1995, requested the inclusion of a new item in the agenda of the General Assembly, to discuss specifically matters relating to multilingualism.

Multilingualism had previously been addressed in a wide range of UN bodies, but it is only from 1995 onward that a stand-alone resolution on multilingualism has been adopted by the General Assembly, more or less every two years. Building on this momentum, in 1999, the General Assembly recognized there was a need for greater coherence within the UN, and it requested the Secretary-General to appoint a senior Secretariat official as “coordinator of questions relating to multilingualism throughout the Secretariat”. In 2015, the General Assembly requested that the head of DGACM be appointed as Coordinator – that is the reason why I am currently the Coordinator for Multilingualism.

Since 2015, a lot of changes took place in the UN regarding multilingualism. First and foremost, we observed a substantive change in the Member States’ characterization of multilingualism, which is now being referred to as a “core value” of the UN. Previously recognized as a

“founding principle of the UN”, which referred to a sort of “golden age” of the Organization, the idea of “core value” had a much more contemporary, management-related, connotation.

“Multilingualism as a core value of the UN” became a sort of motto, which has really blossomed since 2016 as it’s been increasingly picked up by the Member States in their statements, by intergovernmental bodies in their resolutions, and of course by the Secretariat in its reports. This change of rhetoric also occurred at a time of change of leadership at the UN, with Mr. António Guterres joining as Secretary-General in early 2017, and bringing along his own personal views on multilingualism as an enabler of multilateral diplomacy, and, generally speaking, as a multiplier in the achievement of the goals of the UN. Soon after his appointment, he elevated multilingualism to become one of his priorities for his tenure, and incorporated multilingualism into the overall accountability framework by including indicators on multilingualism in all compacts he signs with all UN senior managers.

It is in this context that the network of multilingualism focal points serving in the various departments, offices and field missions was re-energized, and we now have more than 100 focal points serving in a wide range of duty stations, in different linguistic environments. The responsibilities of the focal points were also clarified, and those of the Coordinator were spelled out and endorsed by the General Assembly.

Just very briefly, as per these terms of reference, I am expected to serve:

- a. As an entry point for concerns and queries from the UN membership and Secretariat entities alike.
- b. But also as a facilitator to achieve a coordinated, consistent and coherent approach in the UN Secretariat, on multilingualism.
- c. And, finally, as an agent of innovation inspiring solutions needed to foster a UN organizational culture conducive to multilingualism

My office is currently engaged in a thorough review of existing challenges and opportunities for improvement of the status of multilingualism at the UN. One of our areas of focus has been human resources. This builds on the undisputable fact that language is in essence a human feature and that only through adequate people management will we be able to strengthen multilingualism, whether we are talking about staff members using their language toolbox to communicate, language professionals providing linguistic mediation, or computational linguists providing support to develop language assistance tools, or data specialists developing monitoring systems to help us track progress, to name only a few areas.

As an initial step, in our work, we analysed all the data available regarding language requirements in job openings in the UN Secretariat for the years 2017 and 2019. For us, it serves as a baseline, and I know it is not perfect, but this is what we have and how we measure progress.

In addition to this quantitative stock-taking exercise, we also launched a Secretariat staff survey on multilingualism and language skills, which helped us to better grasp how multilingual the staff is, and to identify gaps between how much one knows a language and much they utilize it in a professional context. The survey also allowed us to validate the benefits of multilingualism that my office had previously identified, and to collect thousands of open comments and suggestions on strengthening multilingualism. I have to say that those comments, those suggestions were very inspiring, and they generally supported some initiatives that are in the pipeline, such as:

- The development of guidelines on setting language requirements in job openings (under the Office of Human Resources).
- The building of a tool to better map – or inventory – language skills (also our colleagues of human resources).
- Also in the pipeline is the development of language assessment tools, meant to assist hiring managers in the staff selection process (and this is being done by the Department of Operational Support).
- Another call we heard through the survey was the need for an overarching policy on multilingualism. We have received support from all departments in this regard, and budgetary support from external donors, and we are launching a working group specifically tasked with the development of a strategic policy framework on multilingualism.

One thing also is that we have to be pragmatic. This provides a snapshot of what happened, but the road to the mainstreaming of multilingualism at the UN is not expected to be smooth. There are bumps along the road, sometimes unexpected. The COVID-19 pandemic is one such bump, which forced international organizations to significantly adapt their working methods to ensure business continuity. When I'm looking back last year, 2020, March 16, when everyone was told to go home and work from home, at the same time, I had to come up with ideas about how to continue the work of the General Assembly, of the Committees. So we had to be creative to come up with procedures and to find ways to continue to provide multilingual support. And what we realized at the time was there was no platform in existence close to our standards, which could be used for interpretation purposes. Remote interpretation was previously a very simple subject: you have interpreters outside and meeting participants are in the conference room. But all of a sudden, we started using remote interpretation platforms for also remote participation, and those platforms were never designed for that purpose. So these are the challenges and now interpreters have a very difficult task, with health issues, which all impact on their work. And Member States are also learning how to use the technologies, which became an obstacle but we are still providing multilingual context for those meetings. This was not an issue only at the UN, it was all international organizations learning from each other including European institutions, exchanging our tools, exchanging our views.

And our colleagues translators, all of a sudden, were asked to deliver their work from home, and I have to give the credit to them again because they worked heroically, delivering all documents in the six languages, from home. Of course, we had prepared and had the tools for that, but their achievement is absolutely unique.

Overall, the Secretariat was able to assist all intergovernmental bodies, but there is no official definition yet of what a virtual is or what a hybrid meeting is. This is business continuity and we have to do this as business continuity. If Member States decide to use such tools in the future, then they'll have to define those meetings. They'll have to adjust the rules of procedures. They'll have to define how the rules of procedures will be applied to those meetings. They'll have to define how the authentication of participants can take place. There are many challenges ahead, but I would say one thing: our language staff adapt to these new circumstances, and we, as one of the largest employers of language professionals in the world, monitor closely how these changes may impact the staff's overall health and wellbeing. And for me, the number one priority is the wellbeing and overall health of the staff

Just a few words about civil society and how it can contribute to advancing multilingualism at the UN. One practical area where the civil society can help is related to our partnerships with academic institutions that train language professionals. We have the guidelines from the General Assembly; they are very strict ones: it has consistently requested my Department, as a key enabler of multilingualism, to make further outreach efforts, notably through partnerships with language institutions, with a particular focus on closing the gap of qualified candidates originating from Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. Our main challenge has been to identify academic institutions in those areas providing training of language professionals that meet the UN standards. The standards in some academic institutions are not going to be enough. The basic principle at the UN is the ability to work from two source languages into one target language. Civil society's assistance in raising awareness about outreach opportunities for academia from these regions would be absolutely crucial for our work.

Another area where civil society can contribute to advancing multilingualism is research. Multilingualism in educational systems is a well-documented subject while multilingualism in international organizations remains largely an open research field. As we need to communicate multilingualism's value for money, we must clearly demonstrate its return on investment. And, even more importantly, we need to demonstrate that the alternative – using a single *lingua franca*, disregarding language diversity within our staff or our beneficiaries – will result in greater costs, direct or indirect, including an erosion of the people's trust in our multilateral system in general and in the UN in particular. This is no less what this is about. Ensuring the efficiency, transparency and credibility of the UN.

Multilingualism is a topic one can talk about at length, but I know we have some important work ahead and these are just comments for opening the discussion. We'd be happy to respond to questions that participants might have.

Thank you.