Meeting of the UN Secretariat network of Multilingualism Focal Points
Monday, 15 November 2021

SYNOPSIS

Chair

Mr. Movses Abelian, UN Coordinator for Multilingualism, Under-Secretary-General, Department for General Assembly and Conference Management.

Attendance

42 UN Secretariat entities were represented[1] by 69 meeting participants, representing a total of 20 duty stations[2].

Synopsis

Opening

- The Coordinator for Multilingualism recalled the network had considerably expanded with the implementation of the delegation of authority and welcomed the appointment of at least two focal points per entity to ensure business continuity.

Agenda item 1 - Update on oversight bodies and the Management Committee

a) *Update from the General Assembly*

- The Public Information and Multilingualism Officer serving in the Coordinator's office recalled that consideration of the Secretary-General's report on multilingualism A/75/798 and the Joint Inspection Unit's review on multilingualism in the UN system (JIU/REP/2020/6) had been postponed to the 76th session of the General Assembly. It was expected that informal consultations, to be co-chaired by Andorra and Colombia, would start in January 2022.

- She called on the multilingualism focal points' cooperation to support the compilation of inputs when the consultations open, highlighting the following topics, which were expected to brought up by the Member States: (a) the development of a strategic policy framework on multilingualism; (b) guidelines on setting language requirements in job openings; (c) language assessments in staff selection; (d) the UN Language Framework; (e) the inventory of the staff's language skills; (f) language parity among the six official languages on UN websites; and (g) the availability UN webcast video recordings in the official languages.

b) *Update from the Joint Inspection Unit*

- The Coordinator for Multilingualism briefed the focal points about the recommendations contained in the latest JIU report on multilingualism (JIU/REP/2020/6)as well as the SG's feedback on the report contained in his note A/75/960/Add.1.

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[1] CTED, DESA, DGACM, DGC, DMSPC, DMSPC/OHR, DOS, DPO/DPPA, ECA, ECLAC, EOSG, ESCAP, ESCWA, Ethics Office, MINUSCA, MINUSMA, OCHA, ODA, OHCHR, OIOS, OSESG-YEMEN, OSRSG CAC, OSRSG SAV, OSRSG SVC, OVRA, UNAMA, UNAMI, UNCTAD, UNDRR, UNEP, UNIFIL, UNISFA, UNMISS, UNOCA, UNOG, UNOMS, UNON, UNOV, UNRGID, UNSMIL, UNSOM/UNSOS, UNTSO/UNSCO.

[2] Abyei, Addis Ababa, Bagdad, Bamako, Bangkok, Bangui, Beirut, Geneva, Jerusalem, Kabul, Libreville, Mogadishu, Nairobi, Naqoura, New York, Paris, Sanaa, Santiago, Tripoli, Vienna.

c) *Update from the Management Committee*

- Recalling the role and membership of the Management Committee, the Coordinator stated that he had been regularly requested to brief the Committee on issues pertaining with multilingualism. He shared a list of outstanding Management Committee decisions, in order to raise the respective stakeholders' awareness.

- He noted that its March meeting, the Management Committee approved the launch of a working group to oversee the development of a strategic policy framework on multilingualism. The Committee further requested that the guidelines (to be developed) on setting language requirements in job openings, build on the newly finalized UN Language Framework.

Agenda item 2 – Development of a strategic policy framework on multilingualism

- The Coordinator informed the focal points that the working group tasked with the development of the strategic policy framework would be set up, drawing members from the network and seeking to represent the diversity of the UN Secretariat.

- The Director of the Division of Conference Management at UNOG, Ms. Kira Kruglikova, also serving as the UNOG Multilingualism Focal Point, would be chairing the working group on behalf of the Coordinator.

- The topics that the policy framework was expected to cover and a proposed roadmap until the adoption of the strategic policy framework were also shared.

Agenda item 3 – Information sharing:

a) The UNOG Multilingualism Action Team

- The UNOG Multilingualism Focal Point provided insights into the recently launched UNOG Multilingualism Action Team.

- She presented the Geneva approach to mainstreaming multilingualism, which consisted of building on UNOG's staff itself, along the same lines as for the International Gender Champion initiative.

- The UNOG Multilingualism Action Team was launched in the summer of 2021, pulling together the resources of about 20 volunteers from various areas of work. The team had developed a Multilingualism Action Plan, and was expected to meet quarterly and to report yearly to the Director-General and the senior management team on progress made.

- As per the UNOG Multilingualism Action Plan, all UN Geneva staff were expected to understand what multilingualism was, why it was so, and to understand their responsibility in the mainstreaming of multilingualism. Some specific objectives were also assigned to specific roles, including the senior management, which was expected to serve as role model. Senior managers were also expected to promote the benefits of multilingualism at all levels, to use both working languages, to encourage staff to do likewise, to allocate resources to support language acquisition with a view to building a multilingual workforce, and to generally value and recognize multilingualism.

- She mentioned the Multilingualism Champions Initiative, aimed to encourage information-sharing across Geneva-based entities to promote a truly multilingual, diverse and inclusive workplace, and she brought ongoing and upcoming language-related activities to light.

b) The UN Language Framework

- DMSPC/OHR and DOS delivered a joint presentation on the UN Language Framework, a new tool for describing language proficiency, consistent with internationally recognized frameworks. The framework was meant to standardize the way languages are learned, taught, and assessed throughout the Organization, regardless of official languages.

- Recalling the many benefits of multilingualism, DMSPC/OHR's representative observed it was also key for upholding diversity and inclusion, and recalled the 2019-21 Global Human Resources Strategy (A/RES/73/372), and the new Values and Behaviours framework and Global learning strategy, which all mainstreamed multilingualism and language learning.

- It was expected that the UN Language Framework would enable greater coherence and transparency in human resources processes, including recruitment, mobility, workforce planning, learning, development and outreach. In terms of present applications, it was the standard for language learning at certain duty stations, and for the Language Proficiency Examination (LPE). It was used when mapping language skills in a recent pilot project and could serve as a benchmark for a wider inventory of language skills. The framework could additionally be used in language assessments for UN Levels I and II.

- The framework had four levels of competence (UN Level I, II, III, IV) unique and specific to the UN which were available, with the LPE positioned at UN Level III. A common core curriculum, and specific curricula per official language had been developed, assisting language teachers and learners set clear goals. In addition, the framework also identified three different domains of language use: personal, public and professional domains. Specific descriptors had been developed, so the expectations for each level would be clear for all stakeholders.

- DOS provided further background information about the Language Proficiency Examination (LPE), and criticisms it underwent in the past, which triggered the establishment of a working group in 2016 to improve the exam's reliability, validity and consistency throughout the Organization. Such efforts resulted in the issuance of the UN Language Framework.

- Current efforts to pilot exams at UN levels I and II, and to produce illustrations of written and oral production and interactions for the different levels/domains were elaborated on.

- In terms of potential future applications of the UN Language Framework, DMSPC/OHR noted that the framework could be used in the future for assessing language needs and setting language requirements, for assessing and mapping language skills, for nurturing language learning, for assessing performance and addressing any performance gaps, for building development plans, and for identifying counselors, trainers, speakers and interview panelists with adequate language combinations.