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para la
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y la
Alimentación

FINANCE COMMITTEE

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Review of Translation Services in FAO

Background

1. This document has been prepared in response to the request made at the 110th session of the Finance Committee for additional information and concrete proposals on FAO's translation services. It builds upon other Finance Committee decisions in 2005:
 - at its 109th session (May 2005), the Committee "*recognized the importance of translation services in the Organization and recommended that the secretariat provide further information on the funding of these services and on the financial mechanisms in place to ensure optimum results for members. It expressed concern that budgetary limitations could impact negatively on allocations for translation services*" (para. 103). To facilitate further review of this topic at its next session in September, the Committee "*requested that the current backcharging mechanism be assessed and compared with centralized funding, taking into consideration the practice and experience of similar UN agencies and the need for the translation services to be properly managed and funded*" (para. 104).
 - at its 110th session (September 2005), the Committee "*noted the information provided on the practice and experience in other organizations in terms of backcharging mechanism and centralized funding and noted that FAO's translation services compared favourably with other UN organizations. Given that some of the contacted organizations had not provided information yet, the Committee requested that a further and more complete review of this topic together with concrete proposals for implementation be presented at its next session in May 2006*" (para. 103). It "*recommended that the review should also include information on the methodology in place to guarantee the quality of the translations, both managed through backcharged translation services or outsourced directly by the technical divisions for the FAO web site and technical publications*" (para. 104).
2. The Secretariat undertook a review of translation services in FAO. The present document reports on the methodology in place for the quality control of translations in the Organization, and then compares FAO's backcharging system with practices in other UN organizations. As requested by the Committee, the document also puts forward concrete proposals to ensure the consistent quality control of outsourced translations throughout the Organization.

Methodology for quality control of FAO translations

3. The translation of documents for Governing Bodies, official correspondence and flagship publications must be to the highest quality standards and should therefore be assigned to experienced staff translators and revisers who apply FAO terminology and house style and work in close collaboration with subject matter specialists. They are assisted by professional reference and terminology services and information technology tools adapted to all FAO languages. Translation of such documents is managed by the Meeting Programming and Documentation Service (GICM), hereinafter “internal translation services”. The translation of technical publications, website texts and advocacy material can be managed directly by Divisions, which can outsource the work under their own responsibility.

QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF INTERNAL TRANSLATION SERVICES

4. Quality of translation is assessed on the basis of accuracy, completeness, readability, suitability, consistency and timeliness. Individuals may give different weights to these parameters. Internal translation services have developed procedures to ensure quality at each stage of the internal translation process. Revision by experienced professionals has traditionally been considered the main and most reliable quality control mechanism and still plays a major role in FAO, but quality can also be ensured by applying correct procedures at different stages, as illustrated below.

A. *Quality at source*

5. Concern for quality must be present from the initial stage of selection of qualified translators, whether staff or freelance. This is essential: if translators are rigorously selected, adequate standards are ensured and subsequent revision is kept to a minimum.

6. All staff translators are selected by competitive examination. A typical vacancy announcement for a translator post will attract hundreds of applications. The basic requisites to sit the examination are: a relevant university degree; good knowledge of three FAO languages, including excellent command of mother tongue; and relevant professional experience in translation, preferably in international organizations. The examinations consist of three different translation tests, corrected and scored by two revisers. The best candidates are interviewed in person and subjected to a further speed translation test during the interview. This rigorous process ensures that only top-quality translators are hired.

7. In 1996, the number of professional staff translators/revisers was reduced from 54 to 19, on the understanding that the volume of work assigned to GICM would decline in roughly the same proportion. However, after an initial decrease, the work volume rose from 7,393,619 words in 1997 to 12,085,082 words in 2005, forcing GICM to outsource some 50 percent of its workload to contractual translators working offsite. This high outsourcing presents advantages in terms of flexibility and cost, but it also entails more revision. The above quality standards also apply to external translators who must also meet the basic requisites and pass a written test. They are then offered assignments and receive systematic feedback so that they can learn FAO style and terminology, prior to inclusion in the FAO Sub-Roster of qualified translators.

B. *Quality monitoring, evaluation and feedback*

8. Junior staff translators are systematically revised during the first two years of service, then intermittently. Corrections are discussed with the revisers. When junior staff translators work with more senior translators on high-profile documents, their translations are as a rule revised in-house. This feedback allows junior translators to progress quickly on-the-job.

9. Similarly, external contractors are revised internally to ensure consistency of house style and quality standards. Experience shows that regular quality control keeps external translators up to standard and discourages any tendency to privilege volume over quality (external translators

are paid by the word). A standard evaluation sheet has been developed by internal translation services to assess the work of external contractors. In addition, revised texts are sent to external translators as feedback and to teach FAO terminology. A warning is sent in the case of sub-standard work; a second warning leads to removal from the FAO Sub-Roster of qualified translators.

C. Ensuring quality through workflow management

10. The Electronic Documentation Processing and Retrieval System (e-DPR) ensures workflow management and regular interaction between GICM and client Divisions. Translation requests are submitted electronically through the system, which monitors the status of translation in each target language and delivers the translated text in electronic format. The e-DPR can produce complex reports, including productivity per translation group and translator, and is a repository of past translations by language, session and topic, thereby adding significant value to the overall translation process. It provides an array of statistics for translation management and for the efficiency and transparency of backcharging. The system helps monitor adherence to deadlines for multiple jobs, as documents are classified as: “to be translated”, “work in progress” “closed” or “out of deadline” – the latter facilitating fast remedial action.

D. Ensuring quality through information technology tools

11. GICM has been keen to maximize benefit from the huge advance in information technology for translation. Since 1998, it has employed computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools to tap the knowledge available in past translations, the “Translation Memory”. Greater use of such tools and their further integration with FAO’s terminological database (FAOTERM) help ensure the accuracy and consistency of translations.

E. Quality control at the end of the process

12. Internal translation services also rely on quality control at the end of the process. The methods used depend on the nature of the controls at the previous stages and include final revision, consistency checks across language versions, proofreading and spot checks. Forecasting and planning tools based on Governing Body schedules, past trends and weekly document status reports are used to predict workload and set aside the capacity for final quality control.

QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF TRANSLATION UNDER THE RESPONSIBILITY OF DIVISIONS

13. The translation of technical publications, website texts, advocacy material and booklets can be managed directly by Divisions. These either commission external contractors or use internal translation services. The last option is not frequent, accounting for less than 4.5 percent of the internal translation services workload.

14. This mechanism allows Divisions to outsource translations directly to external contractors on the FAO Sub-Roster of qualified translators. This Sub-Roster is maintained by internal translation services to provide Divisions with a range of external contractors best qualified for particular jobs, in line with the concept of “quality at source” described above. At the same time, external contractors directly hired by Divisions use the terminological support, the retrieval of past translations and the linguistic advice provided by internal translation services. The cost of these services and the cost of maintaining the Sub-Roster are included in the overall cost of internal translation services.

15. Because of tighter budgets, there have been attempts to reduce translation costs by:

- assigning translation work to clerical staff, to young volunteers (unpaid interns) or to technical officers, often with quality implications (sometimes under the perception that staff time is free);

- assigning translations to external contractors not on the FAO Sub-Roster, often resulting in substandard work that then needs to be redone, including by internal translation services¹;
- creating posts within Divisions with duties that include the management of external translations, which carries the risk of overlapping responsibilities within the Organization.

16. The quality assurance of internal translation services involves the five steps described above (paras. 5 to 12). It is difficult to assess the quality control applied to translations outsourced directly by Divisions against those steps because the approaches followed across the Organization are not uniform. However, the most cost-efficient form of quality control available to Divisions would appear to be the “quality at source” strategy, i.e. referring to the FAO Sub-Roster of qualified translators.

17. Quality control of outsourced translations varies from one Division to the other, mainly according to type of document. High-profile documents might be checked by technical officers, edited by outside contractors or proofread by mother-tongue clerical staff, while there might be little or no quality control of working papers or website material, aside from simple spell-check. In some Divisions, publications clerks carry out spot checks and, sometimes, retired mother-tongue staff are hired to perform quality control.

Comparison with other organizations

18. The Finance Committee requested that the practice and experience of similar UN agencies be taken into consideration. The following table presents the information obtained from a number of international organizations. Various funding mechanisms are used for their translation services and there would appear to be no unanimously recognized best option.

Table - Comparative data on translations services

Organization	Number of staff translators /revisers	Yearly volume (million words)	Rate (\$/1,000 words)	Type of funding	Further information
FAO	19	12	475	Back-charging	The 2006-07 backcharging rates per 1,000 words are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • base rate for Governing Body documents: US\$475; • discounted rate for meeting documents submitted ahead of schedule and for publications: US\$356; • discounted rate for website material: US\$223
IAEA	31	12	720	Back-charging	IAEA applies a backcharging system covering the full cost of translation services
WHO	27	10	N.A.	Mixed	Backcharging was introduced recently for some types of documents (at a cost of US\$210/1,000 words), but the cost of translation of Governing Body documentation, high-profile website texts and selected priority products like <i>Disease Outbreak News</i> is absorbed within the regular budget

¹ Under Administrative Circular 1998/38 on Translation and Internal Reproduction of Meeting Documents and Selected Publications, “Departments and Divisions, including the decentralized structures, may outsource translation work to free-lance external translators listed on the Organization’s Corporate Sub-roster managed by AFP, at rates arranged directly by the Division. Translators on the Sub-roster have been evaluated by senior staff translators in GICM and meet the FAO standard for quality”. These provisions have been recently reiterated in Administrative Circular 2006/13 on the same matter.

Organization	Number of staff translators /revisers	Yearly volume (million words)	Rate (\$/1,000 words)	Type of funding	Further information
WTO	36	56	N.A.	Regular Budget	WTO has an additional 20 freelance translators contracted on a yearly basis, but only for French and Spanish, the main languages of the Organization after English
UNESCO	31	12	N.A.	Regular Budget	Backcharging was introduced for some types of document in January 2006, but the cost of translation of Governing Body documentation is absorbed within the regular budget
ILO	28	14	N.A.	Mixed	The cost of translation of official correspondence and meeting documentation is absorbed within the regular budget. The cost of project documents is backcharged
OECD	47	25	N.A.	Regular budget.	The workload is in only two main languages: English and French. Of the 47 staff translators/revisers, 41 translate into French and 6 into English
UNOV	38	18	815	Back-charging	
World Bank	27	12	See note	Mixed	If full backcharging were applied, the World Bank's rate would be US\$890/1,000 words. Instead, actual charges to users range from US\$280-290/1,000 words for publications to US\$230-240/1,000 words for "operational documents" (working documents for internal use only). A budget transfer (US\$5,500,000 in 2005) from the regular programme is therefore needed to cover the shortfall between actual cost and income from backcharging

19. The above comparative data show that FAO's translations services compare well with those of other organizations both in terms of staffing/workload ratio and in terms of rates backcharged to users.

20. On the other hand, many international organizations have a size and operation that are quite different to FAO, and thus translation services that also differ. The organizations listed in the paragraph below – which all fund their translation services through their regular budget – are not suitable for benchmarking, as their size is very different to FAO. In terms of professional staffing, recent data indicate that:

- the European Commission has 1,383 staff translators/revisers;
- the European Parliament has 650 staff translators/revisers;
- the UN Headquarters in New York (UNHQ) has 350 staff translators/revisers and uses a large number of freelance translators during the General Assembly;
- the UN Geneva Office has 190 staff translators/revisers.

Other relevant information brought to the attention of the Committee

21. In July 2006, an FAO inter-departmental meeting on translation and publishing processes was held to examine the most cost-effective and efficient long-term options for ensuring the continued quality of translation and publishing in support of FAO activities. The conclusions of direct relevance to the translation services were as follows:

- Sharpen FAO commitment to translation through improved policy and procedure;
- Identify elements of cost in translation processes;
- Establish mechanisms for effective participation in decisions on translation processes;
- Reconsider the provision for (staff and non-staff) translation costs in FAO budgeting.

22. The Secretariat also wishes to draw the Finance Committee's attention to the statement of the annual meeting of managers of translation services of international organizations (IAMLADP) held in Vienna in June 2006. The statement, reproduced in the Annex, emphasizes the need to further enhance the professional goals of quality, productivity, timeliness and cost-effectiveness of translation services.

Concrete proposals

23. The current review of translation services in FAO has identified three main shortcomings in the present system:

- it produces disparity in quality of translation of technical publications and website texts, on the one hand, and of Governing Body documentation, on the other;
- it discourages the use of internal translation services by Divisions as internal rates are higher than those of external contractors;
- the internal rates include a number of indirect, fixed costs not related to volume of translation which would be incurred even with full outsourcing. These are the costs of the quality assurance mechanisms that the Organization needs to have in place.

24. The following paragraphs make concrete proposals to address these shortcomings and to improve the quality of translation throughout the Organization.

A consistent quality control mechanism for all FAO documents and publications

25. It is proposed that the translation of technical publications and website texts managed directly by Divisions benefit from the same quality assurance mechanisms as the internal translation services. As the Service with the expertise, experience and technological capacity needed to ensure adequate quality control of the translation of FAO's technical work, GICM should coordinate, to the greatest possible extent, the handling of all external translation. This would provide additional advantages to FAO and its Governing Bodies, including the following:

From an administrative point of view:

- precise data on overall translation volumes and costs, with detailed breakdowns per language and category of document, with the incorporation of all translation assignments in the e-DPR system;
- economies of scale and the elimination of duplication of work by streamlining the recruitment of translators, currently done at service/branch level across the Organization;
- the integration of responsibility for recruiting translators with responsibility for evaluating translation;

From a quality assurance point of view:

- the contracting of external translators listed on the Sub-Roster of qualified translators;
- a formal and uniform performance evaluation system for external contractors;
- better use of external contractors by matching specialization with assignment.

26. These improvements would be implemented through the current backcharging system by extending the lower rate (currently applied to website material) to technical documents. This rate is presently US\$223/1,000 words (see para 20). However, with the additional volume generated by managing the outsourcing centrally, this rate could be brought down to US\$195/1,000 words for all technical publications and web material, which is comparable to the cost of direct outsourcing plus administrative expenses. This rate could be offered on a trial basis as another option available to FAO Divisions.

Identification of quality management cost and separation from translation cost

27. The Organization spends some US\$10,000,000 on internal translation services for the biennium, representing 1.7 percent of its biennial budget². This cost includes actual translation work and the structures required to manage the translation services and ensure quality control.

28. Direct comparison of internal translation rates with external contractor rates overlooks the fact that internal translation services also provide the Organization with quality assurance input that is not available from freelancers (though of benefit to them), in particular:

- availability of critical mass to respond effectively to unforeseen, urgent or peak translation requirements, including night work (particularly important for in-session translation of Governing Body reports);
- management and planning of corporate translation workflow to meet deadlines, with the advance booking of external assistance if necessary;
- development of FAO-tailored computer-assisted translation tools and a related computer-based workflow processing system: the e-DPR system. This has allowed the creation of the FAO Corporate Document Repository and the production of weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual breakdowns of translation volumes and costs per language, category, Division, etc;
- terminology, style and format coherence of documents;
- liaison with and advice to Divisions over linguistic queries, terminology support, identification of external translators, guidance on rates, settlement of disputes with freelancers (usually relating to quality of translation);
- authoritative linguistic determinations in emerging technical fields and subject areas for entry into FAO's terminological database;
- testing of external translators for inclusion in the Sub-Roster, with subsequent periodic performance appraisals;
- systematic quality control of external translators (through an evaluation sheet for each job), with feedback to improve quality and familiarity with FAO terminology and concepts;
- proofreading and final layout of documents, sometimes with complex formatting;
- acting as focal point for all queries sent to the Organization by external translators, UN agencies and other international and regional organizations, as well as translation and terminology bodies.

29. It is proposed that the Secretariat undertake a review of the cost structure of internal translation services to identify the share corresponding to translation work and the proportion ascribable to the institutional roles described above. The review should make a clear distinction between direct and indirect costs so that the quality costs can be centrally funded. This would bring actual translation costs close to market rates.

Conclusion

30. The Finance Committee is invited to review the additional information presented in this document and to provide any comment and guidance regarding the proposals it contains. It may wish to encourage the Secretariat to pursue corporate thinking on translation processes in order to arrive at an Organization-wide agreement on the most cost-efficient solutions for effective multilingual communication.

² The translation services of other international organizations account for 2 to 2.5 percent of the total budget.

International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications (IAMLADP) - Statement adopted by the Executive Session held at IAEA Headquarters, Vienna, on 28 June 2006

The managers of the conference and language services of the international organizations, having gathered in Vienna in June 2006 for their annual meeting, reconfirmed the continuing essential and substantive role of conference and language services in international organizations.

They reaffirmed their full commitment to continued reforms with a view to enhancing core professional goals of quality, productivity, timeliness and cost-effectiveness. Their collective experience has demonstrated that greater cost-effectiveness and productivity can be realized without compromising quality when reform measures are implemented in a continuing, forward-looking manner, with clearly defined goals for each stage, and are underpinned by reliable, transparent and comparable indicators.

It was stressed that the greatest asset of all participating organizations is their staff. Reform initiatives in the area of conference, language and publishing services – as in any other area – should involve staff in the design and implementation stages, in order to take full advantage of their experience and expertise to ensure that maximum benefits are attained.

Members of IAMLADP welcomed progress in the areas of information and communication technology, which created opportunities to improve service delivery by simplifying and modernizing management practices and work processes of conference and language services.

The need for clear and concise systems of accountability in the context of comprehensive results-based budgeting was underlined, as was the importance of transparent evaluation of the services provided. It was felt that managers responsible for programme activities should be given the necessary resources, delegated authority and flexibility in order to deliver targeted outcomes.

The participants reaffirmed the importance of sound personnel policies based on clear accountability lines and merit-based career development. They recommend that staff mobility policies take into account the specialized nature of the work of conference and language professionals, as well as the importance of preserving and enriching institutional memory; and that solid core structures be maintained.

They expressed concern that conference and language professionals possessing the high level of expertise and experience required by international organizations are in short supply on the commercial market. They felt, therefore, that the problem of identifying, attracting, recruiting and retaining such qualified professionals must be addressed in order to meet the demand, both at present and in the near future when large numbers of translators and interpreters retire.

The importance of developing skills and competencies of conference and language specialists was underlined. Therefore, investment in the training of staff should be accorded high priority. In particular, the participants recommend the enhancement of both internal and external training programmes and the further development of staff exchange programmes between organizations.

They also advocate closer cooperation between the international organizations and universities and other reputable academic institutions to promote the training of conference and language service professionals.

It was agreed that participating organizations would bring this statement of their collective commitments, concerns and recommendations to the attention of their respective Senior Managements for referral to governing bodies as they deem appropriate.