



Seventh session
Agenda item 62

QUESTION OF THE ADOPTION BY THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL AND ITS
FUNCTIONAL COMMISSIONS OF SPANISH AS A WORKING LANGUAGE

Report of the Fifth Committee

Rapporteur: Mr. K.G. BRENNAN (Australia)

1. At its fourteenth session, the Economic and Social Council adopted, on 22 July 1952, resolution 456 C (XIV), transmitting to the General Assembly, with a favourable opinion, the question of adopting Spanish as a third working language of the Council and its functional commissions.
2. Following instructions given by the General Assembly at its 382nd plenary meeting, the Fifth Committee, at its 356th to 360th meetings, reviewed the question.
3. In a report to the Committee (A/C.5/501), the Secretary-General had expressed the opinion that, if meetings of the Council and its commissions were held at Headquarters, the adoption of Spanish as a working language of the Economic and Social Council and its functional commissions would require supplementary provisions under various sections of the budget amounting to \$472,000, subject to reduction through the application of the Staff Assessment Plan. If the Economic and Social Council were to meet in Europe, additional expenses amounting to \$41,500 would be required. If the Commission on Human Rights were to meet in Geneva, further additional expenses amounting to \$27,500 would be necessitated.
4. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions gave its conclusions in its sixth report to the seventh session of the General Assembly (A/2242). The Advisory Committee was of the opinion that for the year 1953 additional costs could be held within a maximum of \$350,000 gross. It considered that the Secretary-General had not taken sufficient account of unavoidable delays

in the recruitment of staff and the fluctuating workload of the Secretariat from January to March. The Committee, however, considered it necessary, purely on administrative and financial grounds, to recommend that expenditure of the magnitude proposed should, for the present, be deferred.

5. The majority of delegations taking part in the discussion considered the desirability of the Economic and Social Council's decision to be beyond doubt. It was pointed out that the fact that Spanish was the language of almost one-third of the existing Member States would, in itself, provide justification for a favourable recommendation by the Fifth Committee to the General Assembly. The Council's desire to adopt Spanish as a working language had been motivated by a wish to secure greater publicity for its work and in that way to facilitate the achievement of its purposes.

6. The Spanish language had given to the peoples of Latin America a sense of solidarity and fraternity. These peoples were deeply interested in the work of the United Nations, particularly in the economic and social fields. That work should be given as much publicity as possible, not only to offset the emphasis continually given to the difficulties of the Organization in the political sphere, but also to facilitate a wider and better understanding of the activities in which the Organization had achieved a considerable degree of success and which should be better known and understood in order that a climate more favourable to their continued development and progress could be created.

7. It was stated that, since adoption by the General Assembly of Spanish as one of its working languages, the discussions in that body had gained in flexibility and closer relations had been achieved between Spanish-speaking delegations and their governments. Such action by the General Assembly in any case implied certain rights and the recognition of the merits of Spanish as a language. Not only on this account, but for very practical reasons, the Fifth Committee should endeavour to meet the Council's wishes, which in effect would be a logical corollary to the General Assembly's decision regarding Spanish in 1948.

8. As far as the work of the Economic and Social Council was concerned, the Spanish-speaking countries saw in the adoption of Spanish as a working language more than a method of facilitating their participation in the debates of the Council and its commissions. They considered that it would mean that the work of

the Council could be followed, step by step, by their peoples at home. This applied particularly to those who directed the economic affairs of the various Latin American countries. In that way the Latin American members of the Economic and Social Council would be able to contribute more to the economic and social work of the Council, and it was from this standpoint that the Spanish-speaking countries regarded the problem; it was not that they wanted to receive more from the United Nations, but that they wanted to give more. It could not be overlooked, too, that a favourable decision by the Assembly would enable the engineers, the economists and the administrators who were contributing so much to the development of South America to make extensive use of important economic and social publications in their own language.

9. These delegations considered that the legitimate request to have Spanish accorded a wider place in United Nations usage could by no means be regarded as an extravagance. The expense of its adoption would be more than offset by the added contributions that could be made to the future work of the United Nations. It was suggested by several representatives that provision of the necessary funds would, in a sense, be a contribution to the economic development of the underdeveloped countries of Latin America. The Fifth Committee should, therefore, consider the question before it not only from an administrative or financial standpoint, but from the point of view that the decision of the Council was an expression of its desire to increase the scope and effectiveness of its work. There was little doubt that this particular decision, far from impoverishing the Organization financially, would stimulate its work for peace and for the economic, social and cultural progress of all peoples.

10. It was further stressed that the Council had taken a decision it was fully entitled to take under Article 72 of the Charter. It was essential to note the difference between this and other Articles in Chapter X of the Charter defining the powers which the Council could only exercise under the authority of the General Assembly. No reservation was made in Article 72, which authorized the Council to adopt its own rules of procedure. The Fifth Committee should respect the independence of the Council's decision and find the means to implement it.

11. The feeling of most of these delegations was that the Committee should not accept the recommendations of the Advisory Committee to defer implementation of the Council's decision. A question of principle was involved that should not be set aside for financial reasons.

12. Furthermore, it was contrary to the principle of equality of rights of Members large or small to attempt an evaluation of the total cost of implementing the Council's decision by a comparison with the individual contributions of Members to the budget. This was an invalid argument; the General Assembly itself had fixed the principles for the actual scale of assessments upon individual Members thus ensuring an equitable distribution of total expenditure. The fact that these contributions were paid into a common budget without specifying the proportion of contributions to be allocated to particular projects, further invalidated any argument based on a disparity between contributions of different Members or groups of Members. A remarkable feature of the debate was the number of non-Spanish-speaking delegations which favoured the adoption of Spanish as a working language of the Economic and Social Council. Several delegations spoke of the historical associations between the Spanish language and that of their own countries and of the close ties between their own cultures and those of the Spanish-speaking countries.
13. A number of delegations felt that the Secretary-General had substantially over-estimated the cost of giving effect to the Council's wishes and that it should be possible even to reduce the amount suggested by the Advisory Committee for 1953. It was pointed out that the existing budget covered already a substantial portion of work, since rules 38 and 39 of the Council's rules of procedure permitted Spanish-speaking delegations to request that summary records, resolutions and other important documents should be distributed in Spanish. The Fifth Committee should, therefore, consider only such costs as exclusively related to the change over from an official to a working language, and other expenditures on items to which delegations were already entitled should be rigorously excluded from the total estimate.
14. As a means of reducing total expenditure a number of representatives suggested the possibility of dispensing with the whole or a substantial part of the 1946 - 1949 backlog in Spanish translation. They considered that a judicious selection of material for translation should be made by abandoning altogether some of the material in which interest was now clearly diminished and by arranging for the translation of the remainder on the basis of a long-term programme so that each year available resources in the budget could be concentrated on current work and

no additional budgetary provision would need to be provided to deal with backlog. It was the view of these delegations that the total amount of \$350,000 suggested for 1953 should be a maximum figure and that a serious attempt should be made to reduce expenditures below that figure, especially since the statistics given for the daily out-put of translation appeared somewhat on the low side.

15. In furtherance of this view, the delegation of Uruguay, together with all other Latin American delegations, proposed at the 359th meeting, that the Fifth Committee should include in the budget for 1953 the amount of \$350,000 to cover the expenses of adopting Spanish as a working language, and should authorize the Rapporteur to inform the General Assembly of the Committee's discussion on this item (A/C.5/L.189).

16. Several delegations, while supporting the proposal for the adoption of Spanish as a working language of the Economic and Social Council and its functional commissions, did so on a provisional basis only. They considered that should the total budget for 1953 exceed the target figure of \$48,700,000 (gross) they might have to reconsider the position taken at the present stage and move that on purely financial grounds the proposal should be deferred.

17. In this context, the delegation of the United Kingdom submitted a proposal at the 359th meeting recommending to the General Assembly that Spanish should be adopted as a working language by the Economic and Social Council and its functional commissions; informing the Assembly of the costs involved in 1953 and subsequent years; and recommending that the Committee should consider in the light of the over-all budgetary situation, the question of the actual appropriation of funds (A/C.5/L.188).

18. Delegations opposing the proposal were unanimous in paying tribute to the cultural contribution which the Spanish-speaking peoples had made to the United Nations and the ideals for which it stood. They did not feel, however, that the measure of the participation of any group of countries in the work of the United Nations should determine whether the language of those countries should be a working language of the Organization. It was pointed out that some twenty-five Member States had no practical possibility of speaking their languages in debate, still less of having them adopted as working languages. The question of adding to the working languages should therefore be considered and decided purely on practical and budgetary grounds.

19. In the opinion of these delegations, the formal adoption of Spanish as a working language for the Council would not be conducive to greater administrative efficiency, the more so since the reasons advanced for the adoption of Spanish applied equally to other languages, and especially to Russian and Chinese. The Council had managed effectively so far with its two working languages; the introduction of a third language would tend to complicate its decisions and the multiplication of technical difficulties inherent in the proposal would increase rather than diminish the length of the sessions. The remarks of the Advisory Committee were objective and pertinent in this connexion. It was not only the Economic and Social Council which was concerned; there were other Councils, each with subsidiary bodies, and these could not be disregarded. The Committee, in taking its decision at the present stage, must bear in mind the possible repercussions of these facts on future budgets, and the significant additional expenditures they foreshadowed.

20. Neither could it be overlooked that rules 38 and 39 of the rules of procedure of the Economic and Social Council already provided for the translation into Spanish of important documents covering the Council's work. It might be worth while to look a little more closely into this point so that, through judicious selection and consultations with governments and non-governmental organizations, these vital documents might be given a much wider distribution in the Spanish language, assuring them the requisite publicity. This was a matter which should be examined in connexion with the estimates for the Department of Public Information. Not all the material connected with the Council's work was of equal weight and, given the existing facilities, the full implementation of the Council's resolution now proposed was of doubtful value in relation to the additional costs to the United Nations which it would entail. Presumably, many documents were already being translated by governments at their own expense. In the circumstances, the recommendations of the Advisory Committee in paragraph 11 of its report should not be disregarded.

21. It was illogical for the Fifth Committee, on the one hand, to request the Secretary-General to make proposals to reduce expenditure in 1953 as it had done in approving the United Kingdom draft resolution (A/C.5/L.184); and, on the other hand, to accept proposals involving expenditures which were so high that the Advisory Committee had felt unable to recommend them and which would, if approved,

nullify the major part of the economies the Committee had effected in its first reading of the estimates.

22. In his budget proposals, the Secretary-General had made a serious effort to show a reduction in the Headquarters establishment; the current proposal before the Committee would add sixty-five new posts to the establishment. In relation to the total budget, current expenditures for language services were already large enough for the essential needs of the Organization and the Committee should favour no other opinion than the one it had consistently voiced for a number of years, namely, that the assessment on Members must be reduced wherever possible by postponement of projects and the elimination of anything which was not clearly necessary. New expenditures should be authorized only when they would clearly benefit the totality of the Members of the Organization.

23. A large number of Member States were having difficulty in meeting their commitments, not only to the regular budget of the Organization, but also to extra-budgetary programmes. It was clearly necessary at this stage for contributions to be devoted to urgent activities only.

24. The adoption of Spanish as a working language would, in the opinion of some delegations, be of benefit to a section only of the membership paying a small percentage of the total assessment; the benefits for other Members would be indirect only. On the other hand, a number of delegations pointed out that all expenses of the United Nations were shared according to capacity to pay and any attempt to distribute costs according to function and use would be contrary to tradition and divisive in its effect. It was further pointed out that the Spanish-speaking countries in turn contributed to the expense of the use of French and English as working languages in all organs of the United Nations.

25. One member considered that the use of a number of languages by the Council introduced an element of division which might prove to be contrary to the real interest of the United Nations; he was opposed to linguistic barriers separating the representatives of various countries, when the end in view was unity.

26. The delegation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics considered that this whole question raised the legitimate issue of extending the proposal before the Committee to include Russian also as a working language of the Council. He was informed by the representative of the Secretary-General that the costs

involved for this purpose, while approximating the total of the estimated costs for the adoption of Spanish, would be a little lower since a larger proportion of Council documents was in fact already being translated on request under rules 38 and 39 of the Council's rules of procedure.

27. The delegation of the USSR stated that it shared the desire of other delegations to see Spanish made a working language of the Council, but since the Russian language was spoken and understood by a greater number of people than Spanish, and since the Member States concerned bore a large proportion of the budgetary contributions, there was full justification for the standpoint that the rights to be accorded to the Russian language should not be less than those accorded to Spanish. Accordingly, at the 358th meeting the USSR submitted a draft resolution recommending that the General Assembly should concur in the adoption of Spanish and Russian as working languages of the Economic and Social Council and of its functional commissions, and informing the General Assembly regarding the consequential budgetary appropriations for such purposes (A/C.5/L.186).

28. Some delegations stated that, unless the Soviet proposal was afforded the consideration due to it, they would have no alternative but to vote against the adoption of Spanish since the adoption of one only of the languages would be a discriminatory measure.

29. A number of delegations stated that they did not object in principle to the proposal that Russian should be a working language of the Council, but they pointed out that this particular proposal was unrelated to the item before the Fifth Committee. They considered that the normal procedure should be followed and that this question should come before the Assembly only if the Council referred it to the Assembly.

30. At the 359th meeting, the USSR proposal was put to the vote and was rejected by 31 votes to 9, with 12 abstentions.

31. The representative of China stated that his delegation favoured in principle the adoption of Spanish as a working language. He recalled, however, that the Fifth Committee had refused at first reading his proposal for a credit of only \$50,000 to clear some of the backlog in Chinese translation. He could not, therefore, for the same financial reasons which motivated the Fifth Committee

in its earlier decision, vote for the adoption of Spanish at the current session, since such action would result not only in a considerable increase in the budget but would also tend to increase the backlog rather than diminish it.

32. Several delegations expressed the hope that in future the number of working languages would be extended to include Arabic and added that, with the increase in Arab membership likely to result when more Arab countries gained their independence, adoption of Arabic under rule 59 of the General Assembly rules of procedure would be imperative.

33. Since a number of delegations referred to the estimates of the Secretary-General during the discussion, and in some cases had requested more details of the actual breakdown of the estimates, the representative of the Secretary-General explained briefly the factors which had been taken into account in preparing the estimates following the decision of the Economic and Social Council. The Secretary-General, after careful consideration, had come to the conclusion that the annual requirement would be \$432,000 (gross) plus a non-recurring expenditure of \$40,000 for additional equipment.

34. The adoption of Spanish as a working language would mean that all summary records, supplements, annexes, resolutions and necessary working papers for the Council and its subsidiary organs would have to be translated into Spanish within a strict time limit. Although, under rules 38 and 39 of the Council's rules of procedure, documents have to be translated into Spanish if a delegation should so request, there was no time limit within which such translations had to be completed. Of the total annual volume of translation for the Council, amounting to some 20,000 pages, requests under rules 38 and 39 accounted for approximately 3,500 pages. On the basis of past experience, the Secretary-General's budget estimates for 1953 provided for translations of a like quantity. The high degree of co-operation which the Spanish-speaking delegations had shown in this respect had enabled the Secretary-General to deal with requests under rules 38 and 39 with a minimum complement of staff. The translation of documents within specific time limits as required under the rules of procedure relating to working languages, however, would necessitate the recruitment of additional staff, and the estimates before the Committee had in consequence to cover these requirements.

35. The representative of the Secretary-General stated that the reduced amount of \$350,000 recommended by the Advisory Committee for 1953 could be accepted on the understanding that the Secretary-General, while making the best possible arrangements to meet the workload in the meanwhile, would not undertake to meet all the obligations involved in the adoption of Spanish as a working language until the summer session of the Economic and Social Council in 1953 because of the inevitable delays in the recruitment and training of staff, and also that he would not be called upon to publish in Spanish studies of the Departments of Economic Affairs and Social Affairs, other than those for which funds had been requested in section 26 of the estimates (Publications), since the figures under consideration did not allow for such expansion.

36. The Chairman of the Advisory Committee was of the opinion that both the Secretary-General's and the Advisory Committee's estimates were reasonably accurate. The difference between the two figures was due to the Advisory Committee's view that delays in recruitment and the fluctuating workload during the early part of the year would substantially decrease the costs in the first year of operation. He further stated that most of the factors upon which these estimates were based were known and were more or less constant. For example, the output of the Spanish Translation Section, each translator performing an average of eight pages a day approximately, had been established on the basis of six years' experience. It was unlikely that new recruits would achieve a higher rate. In fact, for the first year the contrary was rather to be expected. There was also the known factor of the number of sessions of the Council and its functional commissions in 1953 proposed in the calendar of conferences. The precise volume of documentation to be translated was not known, but it could be estimated with reasonable accuracy in the light of past experience and of the work programme for 1953.

37. It was further emphasized both by the representative of the Secretary-General and the Chairman of the Advisory Committee that the sums under consideration related primarily to the financial year 1953. Adoption of the proposal would lead to higher expenditures in later years. No precise estimate of costs during 1954 and following years could be given, but the figure of \$350,000 would clearly be exceeded. Only experience could show by how much that figure was likely to fall short of actual future requirements.

38. The estimates under discussion, it was noted, related to meetings at Headquarters. Although the Secretary-General was of the opinion that a total additional amount of \$69,000 would be required under sections 3 and 20 of the budget to provide for facilities in Spanish, should the calendar of conferences proposed for 1953, which covers certain meetings in Geneva, be approved, the Advisory Committee had not commented on those additional requirements, since it was necessary in the first instance to reach a decision on the principles currently at issue.

39. In the closing stages of its discussion, the Fifth Committee considered at some length the varying opinions of delegations as to the precise form of the Committee's recommendations to the General Assembly on this particular item. The clarification of the respective standpoints of delegations was brought into focus in the Committee's consideration of a new draft proposal of the United States of America (A/C.5/L.190) which revised and consolidated in a single text the proposals of Uruguay and other Latin American delegations and of the United Kingdom referred to in paragraphs 15 and 17 above. This new draft resolution would recommend the adoption of Spanish as a working language of the Council and of its functional commissions, inform the General Assembly of the maximum cost in 1953 and approve at first reading a provision of \$350,000 in the budget estimates for 1953 for that purpose.

40. Three distinct points of view were expressed in the discussion. Some delegations felt that the Committee should follow a course similar to that it took whenever it considered proposals within the context of rule 152 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly; namely, to confine its advice to the financial implications of the proposal and to the other administrative and budgetary aspects referred to in paragraph 11 of the report of the Advisory Committee. These delegations considered that so long as the General Assembly had not taken a decision on the substance of the issue, namely, the adoption of Spanish as a working language, the Fifth Committee should not make a decision to appropriate funds.

41. A second group of delegations considered that the Committee should give a clear indication to the General Assembly as to whether or not it endorsed the favourable opinion of the Economic and Social Council regarding the adoption of

Spanish and, at the same time, inform the General Assembly of the financial implications involved. It was emphasized in this connexion that the Committee was seized with item 62 of the agenda; it should confine its specific action to that item and not deal concretely at the present stage with aspects of item 42, the budget estimates for 1953.

42. A third group of delegations considered that the Committee should concur both in the favourable opinion of the Economic and Social Council on the substance of the question, and take a similar action on the budgetary consequences of such a recommendation, as it had done on every other activity which it had considered in the first reading of the estimates.

43. Consequent upon this discussion, the draft resolutions (A/C.5/L.188, 189 and 190) were withdrawn by their sponsors in favour of a joint draft resolution (A/C.5/L.191) sponsored by twenty-two Powers. According to this draft resolution, the Fifth Committee would:

- (i) Recommend that the General Assembly should endorse the opinion of the Economic and Social Council that Spanish should be adopted as a working language of the Economic and Social Council and its functional commissions;
- (ii) Inform the General Assembly that the amount estimated by the Advisory Committee (\$350,000 gross) was the maximum provision necessary in 1953 to cover the expenses of adopting Spanish as a working language;
- (iii) Decide to include in the recommended budget for 1953, \$350,000 for this purpose; and
- (iv) Request the Rapporteur to inform the General Assembly of the debates on this subject in the Fifth Committee.

44. The delegation of Poland proposed the deletion of paragraphs 1 and 3 in the joint draft text and an amendment to paragraph 2 which would make it clear that the provision of \$350,000 in 1953 would only arise in the event that the Assembly approved the adoption of Spanish as a working language.

45. The Committee rejected all three parts of the Polish amendment; that to delete paragraph 1 by 42 votes to 10, with 2 abstentions; that to redraft paragraph 2 by 38 votes to 9, with 7 abstentions; and that to delete paragraph 3 by 37 votes to 12, with 6 abstentions.

46. The joint draft resolution sponsored by the twenty-two Powers was then adopted by 43 votes to 11, with 1 abstention. The vote was by roll-call and the result was as follows:

In favour: Afghanistan, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Burma, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, France, Greece, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Liberia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Uruguay, Venezuela, Yemen, Yugoslavia.

Against: Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Union of South Africa, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Abstaining: China.

47. In consequence of this decision, the Fifth Committee decided to recommend to the General Assembly the adoption of the following resolution:

ADOPTION BY THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL AND ITS
FUNCTIONAL COMMISSIONS OF SPANISH AS A WORKING
LANGUAGE

"The General Assembly,

"Endorses the opinion of the Economic and Social Council that Spanish be adopted as a working language of the Economic and Social Council and its functional commissions".

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48. The Fifth Committee further informs the General Assembly that the amount estimated by the Advisory Committee (\$350,000 gross) is the maximum provision necessary in 1953 to cover the expenses of the adoption of Spanish as a working language by the Economic and Social Council and its functional commissions, and that it has decided to include in the recommended budget for 1953 the amount of \$350,000 for this purpose. Observations on the financial implications for subsequent years are noted in paragraph 37 above.
