

**MEMORANDUM**

To: Mr. Ian Richards
Ms. Prisca Chaoui

From: Languages Service Sectoral Assembly, UNOG

Geneva, 14 December 2017

Subject: Proposed increase of workload standards for translators to six pages per day

The Languages Service Sectoral Assembly (LSSA) is grateful to the Coordinating Council for alerting it to the upcoming vote by the General Assembly on a 20-per cent increase of the workload standard for translators, from five to six pages per day, and hereby presents its position in this regard.

LSSA strongly opposes such an ill-considered measure.

Should the proposal be adopted, the decision will have been taken without any consultation with the individuals who actually carry out the work or with frontline managers. Staff recognize that the system is under pressure and are eager to be part of the solution. They should not be excluded from decisions on their work as they understand better than anyone where efficiencies can be gained. Any such decisions are bound to have serious consequences, including low morale, increased absenteeism, lower retention and distortions in statistics, which would ultimately defeat the purpose of the measure and harm the Organization.

Increasing the workload standard would be at odds with the Secretary-General's initiatives on staff engagement and staff well-being. As productivity figures attest, staff are already struggling to meet the current workload standards, which do not take into account the difficulty of texts, the breadth of subject areas or the many – and ever-increasing – activities, such as editing, terminology and referencing, which have become part of the job of translators over the years as cuts are made in support services and other parts of the system. The pressure on translation time caused by these added activities is compounded by imposed, yet exogenous, tasks, including email management, administrative tasks and managerial duties. Constant emphasis on productivity is undermining the well-being and job satisfaction of staff. Moreover, there is a perception that translators, who are easy pickings for added cuts and pressure because their work has been reduced to numbers, are being treated unfairly compared to other language professionals and staff in substantive posts who are not subject to strict workload standards. The unrelenting pressure and hyper-monitoring could be considered as discrimination and harassment against a specific category of professionals.

The increase would also be at odds with General Assembly resolution 71/288 on the role of professional translation, which requested the Secretary-General to “preserve high quality and excellence in the work of language professionals in the United Nations”, as well as with the recommendation of the DGACM Steering Group regarding workflow improvement, whereby the “current workload standards should be retained as the correct current point of balance between productivity and quality”. LSSA is categorical: **quality cannot be maintained at higher output.**

Furthermore, computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools, chiefly eLuna, are not a panacea. They may be useful for some types of documents and some language combinations, but, as seen in the annexed report on the survey on tools conducted by the Director of the Division of Conference Management, they are not appropriate¹ for most of the documents translated at UNOG, 68 per cent² of which are written by external authors and are not edited upstream. Therefore, CAT tools should under no circumstances be used as justification for increasing workload standards. An overemphasis on productivity will lead to a steady decline in the quality of translations and, subsequently, of the corpora that feed CAT tools, thus creating a vicious circle.

For these reasons, the LSSA Bureau requests that language staff be duly consulted as part of the current discussion on workload standards, including with the aim of finding other avenues for cost-cutting that do not undermine the quality of translations or the health of staff, and that their views be taken into account in any future decisions on this and other aspects of their work. It also requests that an independent, unbiased assessment of the impact of CAT tools on output be carried out.

The Languages Service Sectoral Assembly at UNOG

Annexed: DGACM Steering Group – Workflow Improvement Process
DCM Key Messages
Report – Survey on tools and services used by translators
General Assembly resolution 71/288

¹ “The most common response received for each tool’s authoritativeness was “satisfied” or “very satisfied” except for eLUNA where the most common response (34%) was “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied”. The second most common response (30%) received for eLUNA’s authoritativeness was “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied”.” (p. 8)

² DCM Key Messages, p. 5.