TOKYO, JAPAN ¦ 7 December 2010 -- The World Health Organization (WHO) will develop, for the first time, a classification of traditional medicine, paving the way for the objective evaluation of its benefits.

The International Classification of Traditional Medicine project will assist in creating an evidence base for traditional medicine – producing terminologies and classifications for diagnoses and interventions.

"We recognize that the use of traditional medicine is widespread. For many people – especially in the Western Pacific, South-East Asia, Africa and Latin America – traditional medicine is the primary source of health care," said Dr Marie-Paule Kieny, Assistant Director-General of Innovation, Information, Evidence and Research at WHO. "Throughout the rest of the world, particularly Europe and North America , use of herbal medicines, acupuncture, and other traditional medicine practices is increasing. Global classification and terminology tools, for traditional medicine, however, have been lacking.

The International Classification of Traditional Medicine will have an interactive web-based platform to allow users from all countries to document the terms and concepts used in traditional medicine.

"Several countries have created national standards for the classification of traditional medicine but there is no international platform that allows the harmonization of data for clinical, epidemiological and statistical use. There is a need for this info rmation to allow clinicians, researchers and policy-makers to comprehensively monitor safety, efficacy, use, spending and trends in health care," said Kieny.

The classification will initially focus on traditional medicine practices from China , Japan and the Republic of Korea that have evolved and spread worldwide.