

## WTO TBT WORKSHOP

### Technical assistance and special and differential treatment in the context of the TBT Agreement

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JOHN ADANK, CHAIRMAN (NEW ZEALAND)

#### Background

At the First Triennial Review of the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade in 1997, the TBT Committee held discussions on technical assistance and special and differential treatment. It was noted that some members, particularly developing countries, encountered difficulties in the implementation and operation of the Agreement, and it was decided that technical assistance should be provided, for example in the preparation of technical regulations, the establishment of national standardising bodies, regulatory bodies, or conformity assessment bodies. The Committee therefore decided to hold this Workshop in order to promote information exchange and to facilitate discussion on technical assistance in the lead up to the Second Triennial Review, to be conducted before the end of 2000.

#### The Workshop

The two day Workshop provided a valuable opportunity for exchange of information and ideas on the problems faced by developing countries in respect to the implementation and operation of the TBT Agreement. The discussion was practical and solution-oriented. The discussions on each of the four themes:

- Implementation;
- International Standards;
- Conformity assessment; and
- Capacity building

highlighted the real world challenges that developing countries face in both pursuing their rights and meeting

their obligations under the Agreement. One clear theme arising from the discussion was “identifying specific strategies and solutions to address common challenges”.

All countries have specific technical assistance needs and requirements. It was noted that there was no one single model bureaucratic or administrative structure that all countries should follow. A number of speakers highlighted the importance of ensuring that solutions were targeted at the specific priorities and needs identified by individual, or groups of developing countries that would allow them to effectively implement as well as benefit from the Agreement. This calls for an assessment at the national level - an assessment which some speakers pointed out might need to be assisted by guidance from outside - including through bilateral cooperation or cooperation at the regional or international level. However, it was emphasised that any solutions must be carefully tailored to take into account the specific situation of each country. The discussions also highlighted a range of common challenges faced by developing and least developed countries in the four subject areas discussed.

#### Implementation of the TBT Agreement

In regard to implementation, effective coordination at the national level (among all relevant agencies and departments) and achieving increased awareness of TBT requirements were emphasised.

The importance of securing political commitment to support the contribution that could be made at the technical level was underlined in this regard. The value of training opportunities, including internships, “in house” experts (“twinning” arrangements), as well as arrangements involving personnel from other developing countries who had faced similar challenges in the past (South-South Cooperation) was highlighted. In addition, it was suggested that involvement of all interested parties, including the private sector, was important to further understand the benefits of the TBT Agreement and to support implementation by national authorities. It was noted that minimising the use of mandatory technical regulations and utilising international standards, rather than preparing separate national standards, could reduce the regulatory burden and open up market access opportunities.

#### International standardisation

International standardisation was recognised as an area in which developing country participation is still

limited and constrained as a result of technical capacity, the location of Secretariats and meetings as well as other constraints in the areas of financial and human resources which impeded participation in meetings. This was an area for ongoing attention within international and regional bodies. Regional cooperation was recognised as a useful way to influence the international standardisation process. The useful role that Internet and video-conferencing could play in facilitating the negotiations and discussions within international standardising bodies was underlined by a number of speakers, as well as the importance of working to secure greater participation among developing country participants to act as Chairs or secretariats in various technical committees. Prioritising key areas of interest in participating in international standardising bodies was seen as essential. Securing effective translation arrangements for international standards was also seen as an area in which progress needs to be made.

### Conformity assessment

The discussions on conformity assessment highlighted the importance of effective capacity building and technical assistance through enhanced regional and international cooperation, as well as the use of relevant international Guides and Recommendations. A coordinated strategy at the national level to identify relevant infrastructural requirements and needs was important, given the limited human and financial resources, as well as training opportunities in developing countries. It was recognised that technical assistance in this area was an evolving process, given the need to nurture skills and institutional development over a long time-frame.

### Capacity building

In regard to capacity building more generally, the need for more effective human resource development as well as for information and knowledge dissemination was highlighted. The importance of supporting the capacity

building process through effective coordination at the national level was also emphasised - lack of effective national coordination could seriously impede the capacity building process. A number of speakers emphasised the need to sensitise industry about the importance of standards, quality and metrology. Needs assessment and identification were seen as an essential first step in devising effective strategies and solutions. Regional seminars, involving participation from countries with similar needs, as well as relevant international and regional agencies were considered useful ways of exchanging experience and identifying solutions.

### Conclusions

The important role that information technology and the Internet could play in assisting national bodies, both in the domestic sphere as well as in the context of regional and international cooperation, was emphasised throughout the two days of discussions. A number of developing country participants drew attention to their need for basic computer resources in this regard. Finally, the need to look for ways to achieve more effective coordination of technical assistance activities was very much highlighted, with a specific proposal made to establish a centralised mechanism relating to co-ordination of TBT-related technical assistance activities. It was considered useful to keep this idea under review, taking account of the initiatives under way to collect data on technical assistance in various bodies, as well as the relationship that such a proposal might have in regard to the Integrated Framework.

The European Community, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom were thanked for their generous contribution in funding the participation of speakers from developing countries and participants from least developed countries.

It was suggested that there should be further reflection at the national level and in the context of the ongoing discussions of the TBT Committee on the report of the Workshop. In the light of the Workshop, regional and international bodies should also reflect further on the contribution that they could make in the area of TBT-related technical assistance. ■