

WTO MEETING

First informal meeting on developing country participation in standard-setting activities and their TBT-related technical assistance needs

WTO, Geneva, 2001.01.23

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Background

Since May 2000, the WTO's General Council has been examining the concerns raised by various developing countries regarding what they consider to be the inadequate implementation of some WTO agreements. With regard to the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (the SPS Agreement) and the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (the TBT Agreement), developing countries proposed, *inter alia*, that:

"International standard-setting organizations shall ensure the presence of countries at different levels of development and from all geographical regions, throughout all phases of standard-setting."

On 18 October 2000, the WTO's General Council agreed that WTO Members should consider dealing with this proposal under the TBT Agreement, on the basis of elements similar to those identified for the SPS Agreement, which were as follows:

- 1 encouraging international standard-setting organizations to ensure the participation of Members at different levels of development and from all geographic regions, throughout all of standard development;
- 2 requesting the Director-General to explore, with relevant international standard-setting organizations and intergovernmental organizations, financial and technical mechanisms to assist the participation of developing countries in standard-setting activities;
- 3 requesting the Director-General to coordinate efforts with relevant international standard-setting organizations to identify SPS-related technical assistance needs and how best to address these, taking into consideration the importance of bilateral and regional technical assistance in this regard; and
- 4 requesting the Director-General to make a progress report on his initiatives regarding elements 2 and 3 above to the General Council at its Special Session in December 2000.

The WTO's Director-General, Mike Moore, thus decided to convene informal meetings with the relevant organizations in order to identify ways of facilitating developing country participation in standard-setting activities addressing their technical assistance needs. The WTO does not have a list of "international standard-setting organizations", but the OIML was invited to participate in these meetings as an organization which has observer status in the TBT Committee.

The meeting

The first meeting was chaired by Paul-Henri Ravier, Deputy Director-General of the WTO and was attended by representatives of the following organizations:

FAO	(Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations)
IEC	(International Electrotechnical Commission)
ISO	(International Organization for Standardization)
ITC	(International Trade Center)
OECD	(Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development)
UN/ECE	(United Nations Economic Commission for Europe)
UNIDO	(United Nations Industrial Development Organization)
WHO	(World Health Organization)

as well as by Jean-François Magaña and Ian Dunmill representing the OIML.

Since this was the first meeting of this group, the various organizations involved introduced themselves and explained how developing countries were encouraged to participate in their activities. They also highlighted problems which they encountered in trying to improve developing country participation, such as:

- The difficulties faced by developing countries in identifying appropriate projects of interest and relevance, given the quantity of projects in progress within some organizations;

- The existence of conflicting requirements within different organizations;
- The prohibitive cost of participation in standard-setting activities;
- The difference between participation in standard-setting activities and implementation of standards by developing countries;
- Although use of e-mail and Internet makes it easier to comment on documents, attendance at meetings is still required if a case is to be effectively argued;
- The difficulties in obtaining information on needs from developing countries.

Some of the solutions to improve participation, which are currently employed by various organizations were explained to be as follows:

- “Twinning” of committee secretariats between industrialized and developing countries;
- Compulsory distribution of secretariats on a geographical or developmental basis;
- Use of e-mail and Internet to make participation more accessible;
- Simplification of processes;
- The establishment of a trust fund to enable developing country participation and attendance at meetings, requiring a certain minimum domestic effort in order to benefit from such aid;
- Regional cost sharing initiatives.

The representatives of the WTO then asked the organizations present to supply them with responses to

a questionnaire which they had prepared. The information sought included the following:

- The extent to which developing countries are present at relevant meetings and contributing to the process of standards development;
- The reasons for, or problems causing limited participation;
- Current or planned activities to increase developing country participation;
- Assistance to developing countries concerning needs assessment and prioritization;
- Ways in which coordination and cooperation between relevant organizations (including regional and national bodies) may be improved;
- Financial considerations;
- Ways in which the provision of information to developing countries may be improved.

Conclusions

The WTO is to compile the information supplied by organizations in response to the above-mentioned questionnaire in order to prepare a report which will be presented to potential donor organizations, who have already been approached concerning their participation. ■