



Standards Engage!

Pilot project on benefitting from standards through effective public-private sector stakeholder engagement by National Standards Bodies



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SUMMARY DOCUMENT ON THE OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES INVOLVED IN STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The following is based on the findings of the internal and external stakeholder engagement investigation with ISO members in five project countries.

Contents

1. Findings from the internal stakeholder engagement survey ⁷
 - 1.1 Obstacles to stakeholder engagement ⁷
 - 1.2 Success factors supporting stakeholder engagement ¹⁰
2. Findings from the external stakeholder engagement surveys ¹³
 - 2.1 Common obstacles ¹³
 - 2.2 Positive findings and conclusions ¹⁴
3. Overall conclusions to be drawn from the work with the five project countries ¹⁶



About the Standards Engage! project

The objective of this pilot project is two-fold: firstly, to increase effective stakeholder engagement in the standardization work of National Standards Bodies (NSBs), and second, to enhance the recognition of the value and benefit of standards by public- and private-sector stakeholders in developing countries.

As part of the project's preparation phase, stakeholder investigation work was undertaken with the NSBs and their external stakeholders. This has helped to identify obstacles and opportunities linked to stakeholder engagement, now summarized in this document.

Beneficiary countries: Ecuador, India, Moldova, Rwanda, Zambia

Donor: Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt (PTB) on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development

Implementation period: 2021 to 2023

1. Findings from the internal stakeholder engagement survey

1.1 Obstacles to stakeholder engagement

- **Role of the public sector**

The public sector drives and is mainly responsible for standardization in the project countries. Although engagement from relevant government representatives is very important and highly appreciated, it is felt that stronger participation from the private sector (particularly from industry), NGOs, consumers and other stakeholder groups would add value. The representatives of different stakeholder groups may be encouraged to contribute to standardization activities by providing adequate representation in governance structures, and/or by allowing them to perceive that they can have influence on National Standards Bodies (NSB). A public-private partnership involving a wider range of stakeholder groups can have a positive effect and strengthen the national standardization system. It is important to have the involvement of all relevant stakeholder groups at the governance level to ensure that organizational priorities more accurately reflect all stakeholder groups' needs and expectations.

- **Activities for stakeholder engagement**

Although NSBs routinely carry out activities for improving stakeholder engagement, a systematic approach would help achieve the desired outcomes. It is therefore important to develop a detailed plan for identifying and approaching all important stakeholder groups and to ensure tailored outreach and active, ongoing engagement. This plan should include regular dialogue with representatives of the identified key stakeholder groups.

- **Limited resources**

As a matter of principle, NSBs noted that they should be responsive to the needs of all stakeholder groups. The findings, however, reveal that scarcity of resources may not allow NSBs to allocate sufficient resources to identify the interests, expectations and concerns of all their stakeholders. This problem is critical in the case of smaller NSBs.

- **Continuous improvement**

Although some NSBs have developed mechanisms for analysing stakeholder feedback, this is normally linked with periodic reviews of their organizational performance and identifying areas for continuous improvement. A systematic approach for gathering and analysing feedback received from stakeholders could help NSBs improve their engagement with – and help meet the expectations of – stakeholders. It would be useful to develop targeted action plans for further improving NSBs' performance in a cost-effective and sustainable way.

- **Decisions on work programmes**

In some NSBs, stakeholders were not directly involved in decisions related to work programmes and priorities. As a matter of principle, NSB work programmes should reflect economic priorities and address societal needs. Providing equal opportunities to all important stakeholders to continuously contribute to the decision-making processes for work programmes – including the identification and setting of standardization priorities – can help achieve this objective. Most countries also have in place a national standardization strategy, which offers a basis for setting work programme priorities.

- **International participation**

Several challenges were identified regarding active international participation. It is not always easy to find experts with appropriate experience and related language skills. Another problem is the lack of resources for encouraging participation of NSB staff and representatives of key sectors in regional and international meetings. NSBs also highlighted that resource constraints inhibit them from hosting ISO technical meetings for priority sectors.

- **Dialogue with users of standards**

Continuous dialogue with users of standards is an important element of stakeholder engagement. NSBs revealed that a systematic approach for interaction with stakeholder groups and for collection, analysis, use and feedback related to their input would help establish constructive dialogues with stakeholders. NSBs were encouraged to also consider establishing user groups where stakeholders can exchange their experiences on the application of standards. This would generate valuable and additional feedback for further improving the performance of standards. A good example of such a user group at the international level is the International Federation of Standards Users (IFAN).

1.2 Success factors supporting stakeholder engagement

- **Role of management**

In most cases, senior management is actively engaged with selected stakeholders, usually other government officials. The findings also show that the introduction of a more systematic and structured approach, where roles and responsibilities and the type of interactions expected are made clear, would be beneficial. At a minimum, there should be a plan for regular meetings with all important stakeholder groups representing the public and private sectors to ensure a sustainable and tailored outreach approach for them.

- **Identification of stakeholders**

In general, NSBs are aware of, and have established procedures for, identifying relevant public and private-sector stakeholders. NSBs are encouraged to make greater efforts to establish appropriate relationships with regulatory authorities, industry, trade, consumers, research institutes, universities and NGOs.

- **Identification of stakeholders' needs**

Most NSBs make an effort to identify the interests, expectations and concerns of their stakeholders. There are regular interactions – in some instances through meetings – with these groups to help increase their understanding of the risks, opportunities and consequences of standardization decisions and activities. Participation and engagement throughout the standardization process increases opportunities for stakeholders to express their needs and expectations. Although the progress NSBs have made in this area is encouraging, greater efforts are required to better understand stakeholders' needs.

- **Monitoring stakeholder engagement**

Some NSBs have effective processes and tools for analysing their stakeholder engagement activities. In these instances, the participation and level of engagement of the relevant stakeholders is constantly monitored. There are various types of programmes available that explain the benefits of participation and the risks of non-participation in standardization processes. Official partnerships with stakeholder organizations would allow even greater achievement of mutually beneficial outcomes. A systematic approach to monitoring stakeholder engagement would benefit all project countries.

- **Awareness of national standardization work**

In most cases, development of standards at the national level is well organized. NSBs have processes in place to help ensure that stakeholders are aware of the standards development process. Stakeholders are also encouraged to participate in relevant technical committees. Currently, stakeholders have some opportunities to provide feedback on new standards proposals, but this could be strengthened in many cases. There was evidence of a systematic approach being adopted for identifying and contacting stakeholders for specific fields of standardization and for new areas of work.

- **Public enquiry**

NSBs seek public comments on draft standards. Technical committees record, consider and resolve each comment. Although relevant stakeholders should be informed of the decision of the technical committee on their comments, along with a justification, this is not followed in all cases. A more systematized approach is required.

- **Participation at the international level**

NSBs have instituted procedures for selecting stakeholder representatives in their delegations to the regional or international technical committees. In some cases, NSB employees are undertaking national representation work to project national viewpoints onto the issues under consideration. This reflects a lack of experience on the part of others as well as budgetary constraints. Chairpersons, convenors, delegates and members of national mirror committees are sometimes invited to attend training programmes to facilitate their effective contribution, but this should be further strengthened. Technical committees are responsible for developing the national position in their area of activity. Feedback from international work is not always communicated to the respective stakeholders.

- **Promoting standards**

All relevant information on publications is often made available through the NSB website. Where websites exist, there are several search functions available for stakeholders. All processes for supporting the dissemination of standards are well organized, even though some NSBs are still developing web-based systems in this area. There are often several communication channels that have been developed, which ensure that all stakeholders can obtain the relevant information on new standards.

2. Findings from the external stakeholder engagement surveys

2.1 Common obstacles

- **Improve training by making it more practical**

In most project countries, suggestions for improving training on standards focused on making it more practical. Specifically, there were suggestions for more: local case examples; opportunities to exchange experiences with others and to learn with others in study groups; real-life contextualization; hands-on learning; and coaching to prepare for the certification process.

- **Communicate through sectoral organizations and networks**

There were big differences between project countries in terms of how many stakeholders were aware of formal associations and informal networks in their sector. This is important because colleagues are the best communication channel for all sorts of awareness. This implies a focus on communications through professional and sectoral networks and associations.

Where sectoral organizations are limited, NSBs will have more success by bringing members of the sector together on the specific standard, for example, through seminars/webinars, courses and conference presentations. Fostering voluntary organizational structures within each sector helps to institutionalize the acceptance of standards more permanently.

- **Check whether customers respond better to products that meet standards**

For the improved organizational competitiveness from standards to motivate engagement, there must be a preference among consumers for the higher quality, more consistent product or service that results from applying standards. In some sectors such customer awareness might not exist, the NSB should investigate the level of customer awareness about the benefits of standards.

- **Give a basic orientation to new participants in the development process**

The most common form of participation was sitting on technical committees or working groups. In some countries or sectors there was a tension between the desire for more participation in standards development and the level of technical knowledge needed for this. In some countries there were suggestions for more preparation and technical orientation for participants. From the perspective of new participants, three suggestions were made:

- 1) Allowing more time to review documents that will be discussed in committee meetings,
- 2) To provide access to relevant background resources, and
- 3) To provide orientation regarding the whole standards development process.

2.2 Positive findings and conclusions

- **Colleagues are the best communications channel**

In all project countries, word-of-mouth communications by colleagues were by far the most common channel for receiving information about standards.

- **Process of applying standards is of 'normal difficulty'**

Applying standards by stakeholders was not seen as especially difficult. The plurality in all countries rated it as 'normal difficulty', meaning it is no more difficult than anything else.

- **Training helps**

In all project countries, training on standards application was rated as very helpful by external stakeholders who received it.

- **Ladder of participation**

Those who have not applied standards are less aware of how standards are developed and that there are opportunities to participate in their development. This implies a ladder of participation and knowledge about standards. Participation in development typically comes after experience with applying standards. If the lower rungs are not populated, the higher rungs will have few participants as well. Information about the opportunities for participation in standards development is best disseminated among those who are participating in applying standards.

- **Awareness by degrees**

Most NSBs found that many external stakeholders were aware of them. Some NSBs, however, found that those involved in applying standards but not developing them, were sometimes unaware of opportunities to participate during development. Again, those who are applying standards may be the prime audience for information about opportunities to develop them.

- **Promote both the organizational and personal benefits**

As for the messages to be communicated in terms of benefits, there was consistency throughout countries that there are two main categories of motivations for applying standards:

- 1) Organizational: competitiveness, customer satisfaction, and
- 2) Personal: professional development, quality work.

- **Standards are perceived as producing more benefits than costs**

The process of having external stakeholders apply standards was rated as profitable in all countries. There were no countries where the average rating was on the 'loss' side. This suggests that the occasional argument about the cost of applying standards can be answered by pointing to the greater benefits that survey respondents perceived in diverse economies.

3. Overall conclusions to be drawn from the work with the five project countries



- NSBs are fully aware that stakeholder engagement is a matter of the highest importance for them. All of them have established and are refining their procedures for this purpose. The major challenge now is to improve and strengthen these procedures.
- Some good best practice examples were identified. For example, establish and maintain close liaisons with all relevant stakeholder groups, including business and industry associations, ministries and regulatory authorities. Other examples include conducting sector-specific interactions on a regular basis, and establishing programmes explaining the benefits of participation and the risks of non-participation.
- A challenge is the lack of adequate resources. Although all NSBs have developed good initiatives, these have not always been sustainably implemented because of budgetary constraints. NSBs should ensure, while developing stakeholder initiatives, that the availability of appropriate resources is considered, and later that resources are well allocated and made available, as and when required.
- NSBs with the status of a governmental agency often face the problem that private-sector stakeholders lack interest in their standardization activities. In such instances, these stakeholders often ask why they should invest time and money in a 'government funded' activity. Convincing them often requires a compelling explanation of the important benefits of standardization and how it relates to their companies or organizations. It is important to offer them a mutually beneficial cooperation as equals, i.e., a model of public-private partnership that allows them to become part of the NSB's governance.
- It is important to recognize that requirements for stakeholder engagement are not necessarily the same for all countries. When developing appropriate procedures, criteria like country size, economic strength, stage of development, needs of the national economy, structure of stakeholders and availability of experts need to be carefully considered.

About ISO

ISO (International Organization for Standardization) is an independent, non-governmental international organization with a membership of 167* national standards bodies. Through its members, it brings together experts to share knowledge and develop voluntary, consensus-based, market-relevant International Standards that support innovation and provide solutions to global challenges.

ISO has published more than 24 600* International Standards and related documents covering almost every industry, from technology to food safety, to agriculture and healthcare.

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