



Getting help from a Technical Cooperation Agency

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This bulletin is the reproduction of an article by S.K. Gujadhur, which appeared in the December 2004 issue of ISO Focus, the magazine of the International Organization for Standardization. It highlights the tools and services available from the Standards and Quality Management service of ITC.

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1. Introduction

The International Trade Centre (ITC) is a trade-related technical cooperation agency reporting to both the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. Its main focus is to work with developing and transition economies – particularly their business sectors – to help them develop their exports and improve their import operations.

There are a number of areas in which ITC may intervene to achieve its objectives, such as product and market development, international purchasing and supply management. This article describes our activities in the area of standards and quality management to enable businesses in developing and transition economies overcome the technical barriers they face when exporting.

2. Information, information, information – the key to success

How can exporters overcome these technical barriers? They have to obtain information about the technical requirements for their products in their export markets, produce consistently to those requirements and demonstrate the conformity of their products to the requirements, to the satisfaction of their customers or to the regulatory authorities in the importing country. Exporters can fulfil these prerequisites only if the country has an adequate infrastructure for standardization, quality assurance, accreditation and metrology, known as SQAM.

An exporter has various options for obtaining information about the technical requirements for his products and these have been detailed in *Information Retrieval on Standards, Technical Regulations and Conformity Assessment Procedures*, one of the ITC Export Quality bulletins, which can be downloaded from the agency's web site. Organizations, which can be contacted for information, are available in the *World Directory of Information Sources on Standards, Conformity Assessment, Accreditation, Metrology, Technical Regulations, and Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures*, which can be consulted online at ITC's web site (www.intracen.org).

3. Taking advantage of the facilitating role of standards

Standards and conformity assessment play a key role in facilitating trade. It can nevertheless be difficult for small and medium-sized exporters to understand the complex issues involved. Taking this into account, ITC has published *Export Quality Management – An answer book for small and medium-sized exporters*, which aims to answer the most frequently asked questions on SQAM. This book can be customized and printed by partner organizations through the addition of two annexes that describe the national SQAM infrastructure and list the contact details of SQAM organizations

in the partner's country. National editions of the book have been published in Brazil, Malaysia and Argentina.

An information pack on *Improving and Maintaining Market Access through Standards and Conformity Assessment* also has been developed for use in conjunction with this *Export Quality Management* publication to create awareness of the importance of standards and conformity assessment in international trade.

National structures for information related to standards and technical regulations are necessary to facilitate information retrieval. Seven national enquiry points for TBT (Technical Barriers to Trade) have now been strengthened through advisory services, study tours and assistance to create national databases on standards and technical regulations, this under the Joint Integrated Technical Assistance Programme of WTO/UNCTAD/ITC which aims to facilitate the integration of countries in the multilateral trading system.

4. Help for exporters

Exporters can benefit tremendously by taking advantage of the new opportunities that can be derived from the WTO Agreements on TBT and on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS). However, there is a tendency to focus on the obligations of countries under these agreements. We should emphasize that the obligations imposed on the importing country can be converted into benefits for the exporting country, which can use these agreements to enhance market access.

To help the business community better understand these issues, ITC has developed information/training packs on the TBT and SPS agreements from a business perspective under its WorldTr@deNet programme, which aims primarily at facilitating the creation of and providing catalytic support to interactive national networks that bring together all groups dealing with WTO issues. Regional workshops using these packs have been conducted in Brazil, the Philippines and Egypt.

As noted earlier, once the technical requirements in export markets have been identified, there is a need to produce consistently to these requirements. One route is to set up a quality management system according to ISO 9001 but that may be costly if recourse is made to an outside consultant. ITC has developed the *ISO 9001 Fitness Checker*, a tool designed to assess an enterprise's readiness for certification and to identify the main areas for improvement prior to certification. Partner organizations in countries such as Nigeria and India have reproduced and distributed this tool in their countries. Direct assistance to set up quality management systems also is provided to enterprises under national projects implemented by ITC, one recent example being Bolivia.

Setting up a SQAM infrastructure is required to underpin the facilitation of exports, especially by providing access to conformity assessment certificates that are recognized in importing countries. ITC has recently published *Road Map for Quality – Guidelines for the Review of the SQAM Infrastructure at National Level*. This needs-assessment tool is currently being used in St. Lucia in its effort to develop a

national export strategy using ITC's template developed under its Executive Forum, which provides a venue for senior public-sector decision makers and business leaders to debate "best practice" in national export strategy design and management.

This tool has also been used in four Central Asian countries to develop the quality management components in their national trade promotion projects. Some examples of the technical assistance given under these projects are the strengthening of the ISO 9000 certification body in one country, the review of the national laboratory accreditation bodies in three countries to align them with International Standards, and study tours to take cognizance of the functioning of SQAM systems in market economies.

5. The issue of funding

It needs to be emphasized that ITC is a technical cooperation agency, not a funding agency. Its projects are funded by donors, mostly developed countries but also developing countries acting singly or jointly, in the form of trust funds. Often the recipient country itself might fund a project as a fund-in-trust programme. An example of such a project is the recent review of the role and organizational structure of the national standards body in Mauritius.

Some larger global projects, such as the WorldTr@deNet programme, are funded collectively by a number of donors, whereas the recently created Asia Trust Fund is funded by the European Union and is aimed at short-term trade-related interventions at national and regional level in Asian countries. There are also a number of national projects. ITC can make short-term interventions under its Global Trust Fund, however, and requests are considered on a case-by-case basis. Furthermore, ITC tools and publications are available to organizations in all developing and transition economies under specific terms and conditions.

ITC: Your Partner in Trade Development

The International Trade Centre (ITC) is the technical cooperation agency of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) for operational, enterprise-oriented aspects of trade development.

ITC supports developing and transition economies, and particularly their business sectors, in their efforts to realize their full potential for developing exports and improving import operations.

ITC works in six areas:

- ▶ Product and market development
- ▶ Development of trade support services
- ▶ Trade information
- ▶ Human resource development
- ▶ International purchasing and supply management
- ▶ Needs assessment, programme design for trade promotion



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