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COMMENT

Developing countries: **Help yourselves!** Available information goes a long way to assist

Exporters from developing countries and transition economies face a growing number of problems when trying to obtain market access for their products in foreign countries. First, they have to obtain information about the voluntary and mandatory technical requirements in their export markets. Secondly, they have to adapt their products to those requirements and consistently meet them. And finally, they have to demonstrate conformity to those requirements.

ISO and ITC (International Trade Centre), the technical cooperation agency of UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) and WTO (World Trade Organization), work together in many areas to help them. Jointly, they explore ways to ensure a more effective participation of developing countries in the preparation of International Standards, ISO through national standards bodies and ITC through the business and industry associations and trade support institutions. This helps ensure that their specific requirements are taken into account in International Standards, as WTO members are required to base their technical regulations on these latter.

Information on standards and technical regulations in export markets is of no use if the products cannot be adapted to the requirements laid down by those countries. In many cases, enterprises need assistance. ISO, like the ITC, holds seminars and workshops for this purpose. For example, technical workshops were conducted by ITC in partnership with the American and European Spice Trade Associations to assist producers in India, Ethiopia and Madagascar to raise quality and value-addition through the introduction of new primary processing and cleaning techniques. Spice farmers and exporters were able, with the information gleaned, to meet the stringent market requirements, compete internationally, and obtain better prices.

It is not enough for exporters to meet the requirements of target markets. It is necessary for enterprises to produce consistently to those requirements by having a quality

management system such as ISO 9001. Information is available in *ISO 9001 for Small Businesses*, published jointly by ISO and ITC, and in the *ISO 9001 Fitness Checker*, an easy-to-use tool developed by ITC to assess an enterprise's readiness for certification to the ISO 9001 quality management system.

Information on current and future technical requirements is crucial for exporters to stay in business, and often more difficult to get for exporters in developing and transition economies. An exporter in Pakistan recently ran into problems when exporting apples to Sri Lanka when the latter demanded that the apples be transported in cardboard

boxes in place of wooden crates. The ITC has brought out a publication, *Export quality management – An answer book for small and medium-sized exporters*, with questions which are frequently asked by small businesses all over the world and that a novice exporter may wish to know about. This question-and-answer book is being reproduced by partner organizations after "customization", i.e. the reproduction of the book with additional information and local details on the standards and conformity assessment infrastructure of the specific country.

Obtaining and maintaining market access requires exporters to be alert to changes in both voluntary and mandatory technical requirements in their target markets. They should also try to influence proposed changes in these requirements through available channels such as their national standards bodies for voluntary standards and their delegations to the relevant WTO committees for mandatory technical requirements. They should also take the best advantage of the help that is available from international organizations in this area. It's there for the taking. □



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Cover photo:
ISO's standards for ergonomics, that have proved their value to design a user-friendly work environment, are now showing their worth in optimizing mental workloads with a view to helping each individual give of his or her best.

Photo: ISO



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