

The need for accreditation

Since the international trade agreements overseen by WTO went into force and in view of the globalization of commerce, accreditation has become an important part of quality assurance. Accreditation underpins the mutual recognition agreements entered into by countries and certification bodies to facilitate trade. As accreditation must now be built into the quality infrastructure, there has been a shift from an emphasis on MSTQ (metrology or measurement traceability, standards, testing and quality assurance) to SQAM (standards, quality assurance, *accreditation* and metrology).

Accreditation of conformity assessment procedures is needed to ensure a level playing field among competitors.

Formerly, the national standards bodies in developing countries, where they existed, provided services in all areas of MSTQ and had no competitors. The emphasis was on import control and consumer protection. Now conformity assessment activities (testing, calibration, certification and inspection) have been liberalized. These need to be accredited to ensure a level playing field among competitors.

Countries need an adequate quality infrastructure

In addition, to benefit from the WTO Agreements on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS), countries must have an adequate SQAM infrastructure so that they can:

- Take an active part in preparing international standards;
- Provide information to importers and exporters on technical regulations, standards and conformity assessment procedures;
- Have accredited conformity assessment bodies; and
- Enter into mutual recognition agreements with trading partners.

In this new situation, the government's role in SQAM is in the following

- Standardization: the establishment of national standards, membership of international standards bodies and participation in international standardization work;
- Metrology: maintenance of national physical standards which are traceable to international standards;

- Legal metrology: consumer protection to ensure that weights and measures used in trade are accurate;
- Accreditation: ensuring that conformity assessment bodies are competent, impartial and work with integrity; and
- Information on standards, technical regulations and conformity assessment procedures: setting up national enquiry points under the TBT and SPS Agreements to provide information to exporters *from* the country and exporters *to* the country.

Few enquiry services

However, of the 30 LDCs that are Members of WTO, fewer than half have TBT and SPS enquiry points. Though 16 LDCs are members of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), only two are full members and can vote on ISO standards.

The situation is better with regard to the standards-setting organizations mentioned in the WTO SPS Agreement. Some 39 LDCs are members of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (which deals with food products), for example, but no LDC is a member of the international bodies concerned with measurement traceability and accreditation.

In general, LDCs are not members of these international organizations because they do not have the national infrastructure to enable them to participate effectively. Some simply do not have the financial and/or human resources for membership.

Major problems for LDCs

As a result, LDCs face major problems in:

- Playing an effective part in the international standardization process;
- Meeting international standards and technical regulations in export markets;
- Having an adequate national conformity assessment and accreditation infrastructure, because of limited physical and technical resources; and
- Concluding mutual recognition agreements for conformity assessment procedures.

Models in other developing countries

Despite this, LDCs can look to other developing countries for models of successful SQAM infrastructures. The private sector is being called on to play an increasing role in conformity assessment. For example, Mauritius has a national standards body which provides MSTQ services and has been accredited for ISO 9000 certification. Private bodies compete with the national standards body in providing testing and certification services. The national accreditation body was at the pre-operational stage at the start of 2001. Malaysia provides the secretariat for the ISO Technical Committee on rubber and rubber products. A separate Malaysian body offering MSTQ services has been accredited for ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 certification and for quality in three-quarters of its laboratories.

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The private sector in many developing countries is being given an increasing role in conformity assessment.

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Export quality management

Export quality management (EQM) is becoming indispensable for exporters, including those in LDCs. Health and safety regulations, whether for human beings, animals or plants, and environmental protection standards, are constantly changing at the international and national level. It is difficult for export-oriented small businesses in developing and transition economies to keep up with the changes. The results can be lost contracts, rejected shipments and costly repairs.

ITC's Export Quality Management Service provides training, information and advice. It has held many seminars on the business implications of the TBT and SPS Agreements since the establishment of WTO in 1995. It handles about 500 inquiries a year. It has implemented major projects of technical cooperation on export quality management issues in several countries.

The EQM Service publishes guides and technical notes on key quality-related subjects: standards, technical regulations, conformity assessment and quality management (including the ISO 9000:2000 family of standards). Its inquiry service and publications are free of charge for institutions and firms in developing countries and economies in transition.

The EQM Service works closely with standardization and quality-monitoring institutions at the international, regional and national level. As a result, trade support institutions are increasingly adapting their facilities and services to the requirements of the WTO Agreements concerned.