

Sub-Committee on Least Developed Countries

ENHANCING LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES' PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE: FOOD SAFETY AND QUALITY, STANDARDS AND TECHNICAL REGULATIONS

Compliance with WTO rules in the areas of food safety and quality, standards and technical regulations are of critical importance for LDCs' effective participation in international trade. The SPS and TBT Agreements limit the scope for importing countries to impose arbitrary and unjustified requirements on exports from LDCs and encourage the use of internationally developed standards as the safety/quality reference for products moving in world trade irrespective of the supplier. In addition, the WTO has provided a forum for LDCs to raise particular problems to challenge measures imposed on their exports, and to identify their specific technical assistance needs.

- The WTO provides training and technical assistance to LDCs, who request it, to enhance their understanding and use of the SPS and TBT Agreements. These workshops and seminars are conducted at the regional or national level, frequently with the involvement of appropriate national experts. Besides providing assistance for the better implementation of the two Agreements, focus is also placed on how LDCs could benefit from the Agreements and participate more effectively in international trade, including through the use of the transparency provisions and international standards. Sessions are often arranged to cover specific areas e.g. the application of risk analysis in food safety, animal or plant health, as well as standards information and conformity assessment procedures.
- The WTO Secretariat is producing a CD-rom training module on the SPS Agreement and its application which should assist LDCs regulatory officials (target date for distribution September 2001). A Handbook on the Transparency Provisions of the SPS Agreement was distributed in early 2001, which provides practical guidance and models to LDC officials regarding notifications and the operation of national enquiry points.
- The Secretariat also produces monthly summaries of SPS and TBT notifications, to facilitate their examination by LDCs, and has established an e-mail subscription list for unrestricted SPS documents. A system has also been established to draw attention of LDCs to any TBT notifications relating to products of particular interest to them.
- WTO has a close working relationship with the relevant standard-setting organizations, particularly those involved in health protection (FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission, FAO International Plant Protection Convention, Office international des epizooties). It has worked with these organizations to enhance LDC participation and benefits, for example in organizing back-to-back meetings of the relevant committees; joint regional/national workshops and seminars – often in the margins of each other's meetings; referrals from the SPS Committee of issues for consideration by the standard-setting bodies. In the case of the TBT Agreement, the WTO has close working relationship with relevant organizations (such as FAO, IEC, ISO, ITC, OIML, UNIDO, WHO, FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission). These organizations are invited on a regular basis to update the TBT Committee on their technical assistance activities and the ways in which they are seeking to ensure effective participation of LDCs in their activities.

- At the request of the General Council, the Director-General has sought to enhance further these common efforts to increase the effective participation of LDCs in the standard-setting process, and to coordinate technical assistance activities to improve the capacity of LDCs to make full use of the international standards. This further cooperation has been discussed and agreed at high level meetings between the secretariats of the relevant organizations.
 - In addition to the intense collaboration with the standard-setting bodies above, the WTO is also cooperating with the World Bank, WHO and other international and regional organizations on training and technical assistance activities which address the needs for LDCs with regard to food safety and quality, standards and technical regulations. Efforts to expand this cooperation will be continued.
 - As a result of the Second Triennial Review of the TBT Agreement (concluded in 2000), the TBT Committee has started to develop a demand-driven TBT-related Technical Cooperation Programme. The Programme will cover different TBT-related technical assistance needs such as in the areas of the implementation of the TBT Agreement, technical regulations, standards, conformity assessment procedures and capacity building. As a first step information gathering from Members and relevant international, regional and national bodies is underway on developing countries' needs as well as the existing technical assistance activities. The identification of priorities and technical assistance partners as well as elaborating specific actions will follow. This exercise goes hand in hand with the Secretariat's response to the request made to the Director General by the General Council mentioned above.
 - In this context, the WTO welcomes the FAO proposal for the establishment of a Food Safety and Quality Facility for LDCs. This fund, to be managed by FAO, responds to a request from several WTO Members in the context of implementation concerns and targets both the need for enhancing participation of LDCs in standard setting as well as the underlying need for improved infrastructure and capacity to produce safe and high quality food products in LDCs. With careful coordination, the proposed programmes of UNIDO could be complementary to this effort.
 - One element of the proposed FAO Food Safety and Quality Facility, as well as of the UNIDO programmes, requires information and training sessions for appropriate LDCs' regulatory authorities to understand fully the rights, obligations and procedures of the SPS and TBT Agreements. The WTO could increase, to the extent resources permit and in response to demand, its training and technical assistance activities with respect to the SPS and TBT Agreements in LDCs, to permit them to use the opportunities provided by these agreements to their maximum advantage.
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