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Technical Assistance and capacity building in the field of Technical Barriers to Trade

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EC submission to the TBT Committee

Technical assistance and capacity building in the field of Technical Barriers to Trade

1. Introduction.

This note aims to identify realistic and practical options for possible actions in the TBT technical assistance field, and to contribute to the development of a technical co-operation programme, as agreed in the 2nd Triennial Review of the TBT agreement. In developing its ideas, the EC has drawn on its extensive experience as a donor of technical assistance in the TBT field. It should be emphasised that any technical assistance programme must be demand driven and tailored to fit each recipient's specific needs.

2. Background.

Technical assistance has been the subject of considerable debate in the TBT Committee. The Committee organised in July 2000 a workshop on Technical Assistance and Special and Differential Treatment. This provided an opportunity for recipients of technical assistance to inform the Committee of their needs and for donors to inform the Committee about national and regional technical assistance programmes.

The Second Triennial Review of the TBT agreement was concluded in November 2000. One of the major results was that the Review recognised the importance of enhancing the effectiveness of technical assistance and co-operation and agreed that the Committee should develop a demand driven technical co-operation programme on the basis of the following elements:

- Design of a survey with the assistance of relevant international, regional and bilateral organisations to assist developing countries in technical assistance needs identification;
- Identification and prioritisation by developing and least developed country members of their specific technical assistance needs in the TBT field;
- Consideration of existing technical assistance activities by multilateral, regional and bilateral organisations with a view to the effective and efficient development of technical assistance programmes;
- Enhancement of co-operation between technical assistance donors and
- Reassessment of needs in light of agreed priorities, identification of technical assistance partners and financial considerations.

This paper focuses on the second and third elements of the above programme. The EC intends to follow-up this paper in due course through the submission to the TBT Committee of a list of existing and planned EC technical assistance and capacity building programmes.

3. TBT Technical Assistance - Identification of Needs.

A key requirement for the success of any technical assistance project is to be demand driven. Therefore it is essential to identify requirements of both private and public sectors and define priorities in order to take account of the specific needs and characteristics of each developing country. The needs for technical assistance in developing countries vary considerably depending upon their own priorities. A technical assistance project can only be of use to the recipient if it addresses the right needs. Donor countries should be flexible in helping recipient countries meet their prioritised needs. The EU does finance a large number of technical assistance projects in the TBT field and will continuously assess the effectiveness of this support based on prioritised needs.

Practical Options:

- The first element when planning technical assistance projects is therefore to identify and prioritise the needs for assistance if they are not already known.
- Assistance could be provided for a needs survey if necessary. The survey may describe as background the country's situation regarding the TBT Agreement and its implementation and present quality infrastructure. It may specify general development needs and specific needs e.g. regarding technical regulations, standardisation, accreditation, conformity assessment, metrology and market surveillance.
- Input from a range of concerned actors, including public authorities, standardisation and accreditation bodies, testing laboratories, manufacturers, trade and consumer organisations, may enhance the effectiveness of this first phase.

4. TBT Technical Assistance – Options for Addressing Needs.

4.1. Increasing Knowledge

The type of knowledge required to achieve maximum benefit varies from country to country. Knowledge and awareness is needed among all actors in the quality infrastructure field including government departments and agencies, testing laboratories, conformity assessment bodies and industry.

Practical Options:

- Information seminars and workshops could be provided to increase knowledge and raise awareness.
- More specific training for government departments, industry and other concerned parties of the importance of technical regulations, standards, conformity assessment, metrology and quality in global trade, as well as of the rights and obligations under the TBT Agreement.
- Hands-on training through participating in practical work and solving practical problems in developed or other developing country organisations could be provided.

- Training trainers, i.e. by improving the skills of trainers, policy-makers, accreditation professionals, technical assessors, laboratory personnel, industry personnel and other concerned parties. This could draw on existing know-how in both developed and developing countries, possibly through some form of twinning arrangement or mentorship scheme.

4.2. Infrastructure Related Measures.

A suitably functioning quality infrastructure would enable countries to make best use of the provisions of the TBT agreement and maximise their trading potential. Issues of importance in this respect include having the necessary legislation in place, and a general strategy for developing the infrastructure and necessary bodies for e.g. standardisation, accreditation conformity assessment, metrology and market surveillance.

Practical Options:

- Assistance could be provided to countries to help them be able to comply with specific technical regulations and standards in their export markets. These actions could target vital bottlenecks faced by exporters.
- Support could be provided to countries to develop a general strategy for the quality infrastructure field.
- Assistance and financial support could be provided for development of specific bodies e.g. for standardisation, accreditation, conformity assessment, metrology and market surveillance.
- Help establish national information-gathering and dissemination mechanisms related to technical barriers to trade, notably TBT enquiry points, in order to fulfil the obligations of and benefit from the TBT notification provisions.
- Support in the provision of effective means of communication and information processing, for example:
 - furthering the use of e-commerce applications to allow developing countries to receive technical notifications by electronic means, thereby encouraging participation;
 - to establish practical means to aid developing countries to procure necessary e-commerce hardware and networks.

4.3. Support for Participation in International Activities.

Developing country participation in international fora such as the TBT Committee itself, International Standardisation Bodies and also accreditation organisations is limited. Reasons include a lack of technical capacity and financial and human resource constraints. Participation through regional representation should be considered as an alternative to direct participation.

Practical Options:

- Countries or regions could be supported to participate (at the appropriate level) in international standardisation and accreditation activities, notably in areas that are important to their economic development and trade. Assistance could also be provided to help developing countries participate in other international activities in the TBT field.

4.4. Regional Arrangements.

The rapid growth of regional arrangements and groupings in recent years ought to be better reflected in the aims of technical assistance, which is still mostly delivered bilaterally or geared to national, rather than regional solutions. There is an interest in encouraging standardisation, and the development of technical regulations and conformity assessment on a regional basis.

Other fields where regional co-operation is of advantage are in accreditation, metrology and market surveillance. Useful regional co-operation activities are as follows:

Practical Options:

- Joint seminars and workshops – Joint multi-country seminars and workshops lead to useful contacts between countries and to the establishment of informal networks and also have an economy of scale.
- Multi-country groups – Working in multi-country groups may help solve problems and lead to the establishment and development of networks
- Joint use of expertise and facilities in a region – Co-operation between countries in a region through joint use of the available scarce expertise and facilities in the region helps utilise the resources efficiently and effectively.
- Proficiency tests – Multi-country proficiency tests may be effective benchmarking exercises for determining the competence of laboratories. They may also help promote higher standards of performance.
- Joint assessments of countries' progress – Assessments of progress of a group of countries in different fields/sectors have proven to be another useful benchmarking exercise. These assessments should be based on the same criteria in every country.
- Consistent use of outside experts – Establishing and maintaining a joint database of outside experts that can be used for short-term technical assistance to several countries leads to an economy of scale. It also leads to better and faster assistance because the experts can use the knowledge and experience they have obtained from previous assignments to similar countries.
- Direct and indirect representation in international bodies – Another successfully used form of co-operation between countries in a region is joint representation in international bodies. This has the potential to save time and expenses and gives still a possibility for all the countries in the region to indirectly express their opinions.