

Executive Summary

Meeting the standard for trade



International
Trade
Centre

TRADE IMPACT FOR GOOD

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Foreword



Making trade 'possible' is an important part of crafting international trade rules. Making trade 'happen' is very much at the core of the work of the International Trade Centre (ITC).

Making 'good' trade happen hinges upon effective standards that protect consumers and the environment, including plant and animal life – and ensuring that all countries and their micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) have the tools to address these standards. Standards and regulations for both goods and services are essential tools to achieve the social and environmental sustainability of trade, contribute to consumer protection and facilitate trade by guaranteeing compatibility.

In addition to public standards and regulations, the 21st century trade landscape is also marked by a proliferation of voluntary sustainability standards (VSS), which must be considered in any business or policy discussion about regulatory frameworks. They are at the heart of international value chains (IVCs), supporting better traceability, transparency and efficiency. The majority of VSS originate in the industrialized world. But this trend is shifting: between 2010 and 2015, over one-third of new VSS originated in non-OECD countries.

Standards are pervasive and diverse. Toys, drugs, business processes and food require very different sets of standards, regulations and technical infrastructure. Navigating the maze of standards and regulations – which many trade practitioners call non-tariff measures (NTMs) – is complex, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These are particularly vulnerable to the compliance costs that standards and regulations can represent.

Given that getting SMEs into international markets is critical to inclusive global growth and job

creation, it is imperative that standards are both known and achievable.

This is why this year's *SME Competitiveness Outlook* focuses on standards. It combines data analysis, academic insights, thought leader opinions and case studies to provide new insights and guidance on how to navigate this complex world of standards. Policymakers, SME managers, trade experts and standard setters will find information, analysis and cutting-edge tools on the links between standards, trade and competitiveness.

To assist SME managers in navigating the complex world of standards, the report contains guidance for SME managers on how to select and implement standards and regulations.

Policymakers and trade and investment support institutions (TISIs) can help SMEs by ensuring that standards promote 'better' trade, rather than become a bottleneck. This report offers policymakers a five-point action plan to strengthen firms' ability to adopt standards and prove compliance.

A key role for policymakers is to provide well-functioning, appropriate technical infrastructure for standards. This technical infrastructure includes the multitude of bodies involved in creating, maintaining and implementing standards and regulations, both at and behind the border, in the form of national standards agencies, conformity assessment bodies, metrology and accreditation bodies and more. The sheer number of agencies, together with the complex nature of their interdependence, makes improving technical infrastructure a real challenge. Nevertheless, it is a prerequisite for firms interested in selling abroad.

A component of this infrastructure is shaping governance at the border to facilitate trade. The policymaker's role, however, does not stop at the border. Pro-active involvement in international initiatives working towards mutual recognition or harmonization of procedures, certifications and standards can be highly beneficial. Fostering public-private dialogue can also help in facilitating absorption of standards by firms.

Resource-constrained governments have to make strategic decisions about which product lines they will support with new or more internationally recognized technical infrastructure. This is the case because such infrastructure can be costly.

Regional integration can play a role here. Where domestic market size is insufficient to justify costly investments, governments can come together and pool resources to build the necessary technical infrastructure at a regional level. This is an especially useful approach for small economies and least developed countries (LDCs).

Investment decisions in technical infrastructure have serious long-term implications; they ultimately influence the content of countries' export baskets. To support policymakers in thinking through their investment decisions, this report contains regional snapshots, as well as 35 country profiles featuring information on product lines with unexploited export potential and on diversification opportunities.

This is combined with data on regulatory intensity across sectors, along with SME weaknesses and strengths when dealing with standards and regulations in the relevant economies. Together, policymakers can find a comprehensive, nuanced picture of where opportunities may lie for further investment to boost exports, and where support may be required for SMEs to overcome related burdens.

ITC, the joint agency of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization (WTO), has a long tradition of assisting governments in this endeavour. We collect data on government regulations, on business perceptions of such regulations and on VSS. These data are made available via online platforms designed for the business community.

ITC's policy advice to trade policymakers and standard setters is designed to support them in making standards work for SME competitiveness. Much of this advice is based on public-private dialogue facilitated by ITC. We assist TISIs directly in

building the technical infrastructure that underpins standards and in obtaining international accreditation. We also work with SMEs to meet technical requirements in international markets and overcome technical barriers to trade.

ITC does not work in isolation. Both in the field and in Geneva, ITC works closely with public and private-sector partners to synergise efforts for greater impact on the ground. In our data collection and dissemination, we work with partner agencies like the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the World Bank and WTO – as well as with our network of private-sector partners. On the capacity-building side, we value our longstanding relationship with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). Our analytical work this year has benefited from collaboration with the European University Institute and from ITC's involvement in the research network on Productivity, Non-Tariff Measures and Openness (PRONTO). I thank all of these partners for our excellent working relationship, and look forward to further collaboration.

My particular thanks go to the five global thought leaders who contributed personally to this report by outlining their views and visions on the role of standards and regulations for international trade. My thanks also go to Sri Lanka, the host of this year's World Export Development Forum, which contributed a special feature to *SME Competitiveness Outlook 2016*.

This year marks the first full year of the implementation of the UN Global Goals. With this report, ITC wants to support the efforts of UN Member States towards meeting these goals. Firm in our conviction that SME competitiveness is key for the inclusiveness of trade, we believe that greater integration of SMEs in IVCs can be achieved in a way that is socially and environmentally sustainable. I am confident that this report provides valuable insights into how this can be achieved.



Arancha González
Executive Director, ITC

This year's ***SME Competitiveness Outlook*** focuses on making the most of standards and regulations for the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The report combines data analysis, academic insights, thought leader opinions and case studies to provide guidance for policymakers, SME managers and standard setters.

This report uses these databases for econometric analysis, and draws new and useful insights on sustainable value chain governance and the discriminatory effect of burdensome standards and regulations. The effect of this burden is twice as negative for the exports of small firms as for the exports of large firms.

The findings presented in this report allow us to provide readers with:

- Standards and regulations are here to stay because of their positive impact on sustainability, compatibility and consumer protection.*

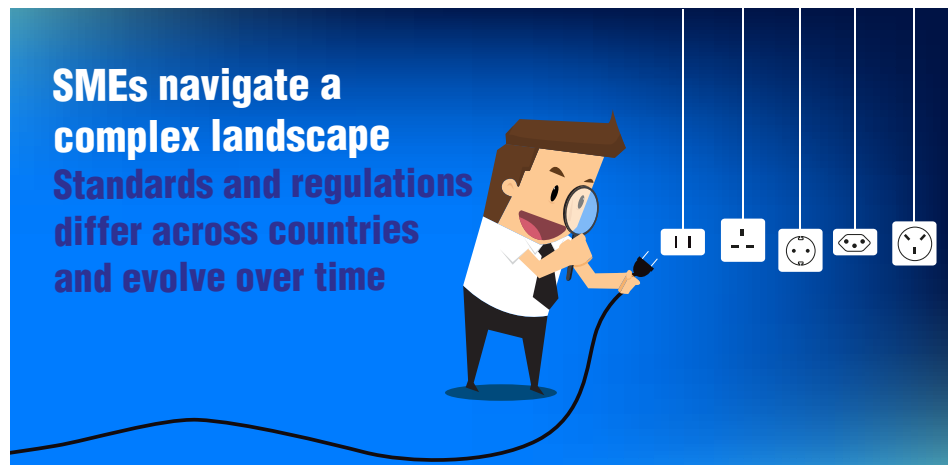
A hand holding a smartphone with a globe icon, connected by lines to various lifestyle icons including a car, bicycle, refrigerator, and exercise equipment.

Standards – a part of our daily life

Standards and regulations are an integral, if easily overlooked, part of our daily life. They determine whether a plug fits into a socket, whether one mobile phone can connect to another, or whether we understand the traffic signs when driving in another country. They determine whether water is safe for human consumption, whether a medicine can be sold or whether a financial institution is allowed to accept deposits and provide credit.

Standards are pervasive

Any company wanting to export is likely to have to meet at least one standard or regulation, be it a governmental regulation affecting imports, a voluntary sustainability standard or a services regulation. An exporter of toddler beds to the United States of America, for instance, must comply with the federal regulation defining safety standards for toddler beds. For exporters producing wooden beds, it is also worth considering employing wood certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), as the FSC standard is widely used in the furniture industry. Agriculture exporters are likely to employ standards developed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) as 70% of fruits and vegetables comply with UNECE agricultural standards.



Standards set the bar

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