



FAO ENGAGING PARTNERS ON VOLUNTARY STANDARDS

Standards for food and agricultural products specify characteristics linked to the product's content or composition, function or performance, process or production methods, origin, and/or labelling or packaging¹.

Voluntary standards refer to a broad group of public and private standards whose adoption by users is not mandatory. They are developed by governments, intergovernmental organizations, private companies or consortia, non-governmental organizations or multiple stakeholders.

Voluntary standards can offer market opportunities by facilitating compliance with international trade regulations and differentiating among products. They can deliver positive economic, environmental or social impacts, but they can also present challenges (costs and exclusivity), particularly for small-scale producers.

The **core aim** of FAO's work on voluntary standards is to contribute to *mechanisms for ensuring that the interests of the public sector and smaller-scale stakeholders are addressed in the development and application of public and private voluntary standards.*

Standards in the World Trade Organizations' (WTO) Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures

FAO provides the secretariat of the SPS referenced standards developed in the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission.

These standards become mandatory when adopted by governments and play a regulatory role in international trade.

FAO's work on these standards provides experience and expertise that can be applied to voluntary standard schemes.

¹ Adapted from the World Trade Organization definition

FAO ACTIONS

FAO provides expertise on standards for food, agriculture, livestock, fisheries and forestry. It works with partners to benchmark, analyse, share knowledge and provide guidance on voluntary standards in the following ways.

Analysing trends in and impacts of voluntary standards. Recent work has focused on challenges and opportunities for smallholder participation in markets², tropical timber product standards, carbon footprints and livestock production.

Disseminating information about voluntary standards through online portals and other communication tools, including Web sites on voluntary standards for responsible agricultural production and trade³, organic agriculture⁴, bioenergy sustainability initiatives⁵, geographical indications⁶ and food labelling⁷.

Building capacity of policy-makers and private stakeholders through field projects. Worldwide, projects have provided assistance on market strategies, the implementation of standards, and farm certification processes for organic products, geographical indications, fair trade and GlobalGAP.

Setting up global tools, guidelines and benchmarking systems for use by the private and public sectors. Flagship tools are the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, the Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification, the Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agriculture Systems, and the Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture Regulations.

Providing policy guidance to member countries on identifying priorities related to voluntary standards through advice on national policies,

² www.fao.org/ag/ags/agribusiness-development/food-quality-assurance-and-certification

³ www.fao.org/economic/est/international-trade/standards-certification

⁴ www.fao.org/organicag

⁵ www.fao.org/energy/befs/compilation

⁶ www.foodquality-origin.org

⁷ www.fao.org/ag/humannutrition/foodlabel



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regulatory frameworks and strategies that can enhance food quality. Options include a broad range of quality schemes, from global standards, through national GAPs, to schemes based on traditional attributes, geographical origin and local knowledge.

Building partnerships by convening or participating in multi-stakeholder fora for discussing voluntary standards. Key partnerships include the Sustainable Food Systems Programme between FAO and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Cotton Advisory Committee, the World Banana Forum and the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards.

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