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INTERVIEW WITH

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The UNECE's trade programme works to develop closer economic relations among Member States, as well as to better integrate their economies into the world economy. The trade programme's inter-governmental bodies make policy recommendations, develop standards for use in trade and assist Member States in implementing them. These bodies also suggest ways and means of creating legal and administrative frameworks for fostering trade. Work includes a range of activities to assist Member States with: trade facilitation; regulatory and standards policy; commercial agricultural standards; and e-business standards.

## Trade Best Practices with the UNECE

**What are the responsibilities of the Trade Programme of the UNECE? Maybe, what is its role in assisting the European industry?**

The trade subprogramme of UNECE brings the countries of the region closer together and works for their integration in the global economy. One of the most important responsibilities of the subprogramme is to develop Policy recommendations, technical standards, best practice and practical tools that help translate policy goals into actionable documents, in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of Agenda 2030.

This large toolbox is made freely available on our website and is developed in broad consultations carried out by four intergovernmental bodies. To give an analogy, an intergovernmental body in the United Nations is like a technical committee in a Standardization organization. At your meetings, delegates are mostly from industry, in ours, mostly from governments. Yet, we work in similar ways: Member States confront shared challenges, build on existing good approaches, and share progress and bottlenecks.

**How does UNECE, and Europe, fit into the wider system of the UN?**

The UNECE is one of five regional commissions of the United Nations. Unlike its name suggests, the UNECE membership

extends well beyond Europe, to include the Caucasus, Central-Asia as well as North America.

All United Nations Member States can participate in the work of UNECE. A number of UN members from outside the UNECE region attend to our meetings and actively contribute to the discussions and the development of our best practice, standards tools. This is true in all divisions of UNECE and in particular in the trade programme, the tools we develop are really of universal applicability.

**Could you please explain the motivation behind UNECE's Steering Committee on Trade Capacity and Standards? How do they guide the development of international norms and standards?**

One of the most interesting deliverables of the Steering Committee are the UNECE's "Studies on regulatory and procedural barriers to trade". These studies are demand-driven, conducted upon the request of Member States, and are truly a live scan of a country's quality of infrastructure and overall trade support system. They aim at helping countries establish the sound institutional and legislative framework that is the foundation for integration in regional and global supply chains (GVCs) and also inform donors as to where assistance might be required.

**“UNECE encourages and empowers policy-makers to use international standards to develop and implement regulations in different sectors.” What does this statement mean, in practice?**

UNECE encourages rule makers to base their regulations on international standards. These provide a common denominator to their policies and reduce the need to customise and retest the products whenever they cross a national border. They also represent a reservoir of best practice that is immediately applicable as administrations develop and implement new policies to tackle the challenges of sustainability, climate change and resilience.

When regulations are mostly homegrown and developed with little reference to international best practice, they create unnecessary barriers to international trade. Exporters may need to customise their products so that they comply with different and sometimes conflicting regulations. They will then have to test and certify their products multiple times over to ensure that compliance is proved to the satisfaction of the local authorities, according to the legislation in place in the each national market.

Multiple tests and multiple certification requirements do little to enhance safety and quality for consumers and end users. On the other hand, in some sectors, they make a product or equipment so expensive that it may not be in the interest of a global firm to market the product to a specific country, especially if its market is small and heavily regulated.

UNECE has developed a concrete tool to address this challenge: the “International Model” enshrined in UNECE Recommendation L. At the heart of this approach are the “common regulatory objectives (CROs)” which are jointly drafted by regulators wishing to approximate their regulations in a specific sector, and should address legitimate concerns for the sector(s) in question with regard to public health, safety, environmental protection and other relevant national interests. These CROs are in defined with reference to applicable international standards, and also specify how to assess compliance with these standards. If relevant, CROs should include a list of conformity assessment bodies that are recognised as competent, e.g. through detail ways to be accredited. Additionally, and to recognise that increasingly conformity assessment is only one way of ensuring compliance, CROs should include market surveillance provisions.

In the International Model, while standards are used as the basis for regulation, regulators are first to agree on if and why there is a need to regulate in that sector in the first place and what the purpose of regulation is. There is also a need for coherence of their regulations in order to refer to/use the same international standards internationally.

**What is the best path for industry to maintain and develop a high level of competitiveness in the current global environment?**

The current global environment is characterised by deep uncertainty, deriving among others from climate change-related disasters; the politicised use of trade measures, as well as technological disruptions. These trends are accompanied by decreasing confidence in multilateral institutions as the foundation of the international trade system. Standards - as appropriate supported by certification and conformity assessment - are a universal passport to access global markets and are an invaluable

tool to navigate the increased complexity of international trade.

More than ever, then, industry must be a driving force in the continuous improvement of national and international quality infrastructure systems. Far from being technical institutions, these are truly the foundation of competitiveness, sustainability and resilience. As industry invests its expertise in the development of standards and supports as appropriate all other flanking institutions, not only domestically but internationally, it makes an investment into its own long-term future. I particularly encourage the business community to step up its support to multilateral institutions so as to ensure that quality infrastructure systems in developing countries are strengthened. In a globalized trade system, quality of goods and infrastructure cannot be guaranteed anywhere if it is not guaranteed everywhere.

**How do you see that standards contribute to the wider objectives of the United Nations and, specifically, to achieving the SDGs?**

Meeting the goals of Agenda 2030 requires new ways of doing all we do and developing partnerships beyond our traditional constituencies. We need new technologies and new paradigms both for the management of private businesses and for action by communities and administrations.

The backbone of the transformation towards sustainable consumption and production will be spelled out in national, regional and international standards. Standards support all three dimensions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

They are clearly indispensable for placing products on international markets and scaling-up technological innovation, hence are at the basis of increased competitiveness and economic progress.

At the same time, standards support the uptake of resource-saving products and technologies, and therefore help embed sustainable practices and help advancing the environmental dimension of sustainability.

The contribution of standards to a world that is more just is still not as well understood, yet it is of key relevance. Let me then illustrate how standards can contribute also to the social dimension of sustainability. First, standards integrate an inclusive decision-making process, which empowers all stakeholders: this is also at the heart of the 2030 Agenda. Second, we see an increasing number of standards that are designed to assist the integration of vulnerable people – such as people with disabilities, or the elderly, for example - into the fabric of society. Finally, with the “Gender Responsive Standards Declaration”, more than 60 standards bodies have come together to reaffirm their wish to strengthen the use of standards and technical regulations as powerful tools to attain SDG 5 (Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls) and integrate a gender lens in the development of both standards and technical regulations. This is a great example of how the standards community can fulfil its role in progressing towards the “world we want”. A world where, truly, no one is left behind, and everyone can play their part.

**Where can readers find out more information about the activities of the Trade Programme and the UNECE?**

<http://www.unece.org/tradewelcome/trade-programme.html>