

UNFSS | United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards

Scheduled for 21–22 March 2013 in Geneva

Why a United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards?

The health, social, economic and environmental impacts of production and consumption play an increasingly important role in shaping consumer preferences, particularly in developed countries. Governments have reacted by implementing policies and regulations relating mostly to product characteristics, while non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private companies are developing voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) to inform consumers about production and processing methods.

The rapid expansion of VSS is having a significant impact on developing countries, including through the emerging role of VSS as important supply-chain management mechanisms. VSS are also addressing important strategic policy issues of (a) internalization of environmental and social costs; (b) promotion of sustainable production and consumption methods, including opportunities for energy/material/resource efficiency and related cost savings; and (c) sustainable competitiveness in growing and lucrative markets with many job- and income-generating opportunities.



Against this background, VSS have the potential to generate significant economic and social development opportunities and can help to mitigate economic, food, water, and environmental risks in developing countries. However, key developing country decision-makers frequently express concerns about standards, including the lack of credible information about standards; considerable compliance costs; the marginalization of small-scale producers; the lack of harmonization and equivalence, resulting in the need to comply with multiple standards for a single product; and the lack of transparent governance. Therefore, VSS need to be appreciated as strategic policy issues and as means to promote sustainable development, not as ends in themselves or mere technical tools.

VSS are a reality in the global market. They are also a trendsetter for further standard development, including mandatory requirements. It is therefore essential that developing country decision-makers have access to adequate and relevant information, can exchange experiences and seek assistance on VSS. The United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS) can help achieve these goals and can give participants a voice in the global dialogue on VSS.

Why the United Nations?

The United Nations has the mandate and objective to promote sustainable development. Many VSS concern public goods or services, bear on development objectives and strategies as well as on market structures and market access. The five UN agencies partnering on UNFSS are all actively working on VSS. The UNFSS is rooted in the existing mandates and activities of the five UN agencies. Thus, the UNFSS aims at pooling resources, synchronizing efforts, and assuring policy coherence, coordination and collaboration among United Nations agencies (“One UN” concept) and key stakeholder groups.

How does the UNFSS work?

The objective of UNFSS is to facilitate and strengthen the effective and active participation by developing countries in the international dialogue on VSS. This dialogue will inform developing country decision-makers about the strategic significance and key policy requirements of VSS. The dialogue will also help the decision-makers formulate strategies that address the potential negative impacts of VSS while maximizing the sustainable development benefits that VSS can offer.

UNFSS is demand-driven, and its activities will respond to the needs of the participating stakeholders.

Examples of UNFSS activities include:

- Holding UNFSS annual meetings and issue-focused workshops with key decision-makers (in government, the public and private sector, academia and non-governmental organizations) to identify and discuss priority VSS issues;
- Undertaking research to provide reliable and independent information on VSS;
- Providing consistent information through, for instance, newsletters, policy briefs, web pages and more in-depth publications on VSS;
- Supporting developing country decision-makers' participation in standard setting;
- Providing assistance to implement proactive VSS strategies at the national level, upon the request of developing country governments.

All VSS are covered, but initial attention will focus on VSS in the agri-food sector and in the area of resource- and energy efficiency, including product carbon footprints.

Who is involved in the UNFSS?

UNFSS is open to all Member States of the United Nations, but particularly seeks and facilitates participation by key public and private decision-makers from developing countries.

UNFSS is facilitated by a Steering Committee consisting of five United Nations agencies (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Trade Centre, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, United Nations Environment Programme and United Nations Industrial Development Organization). UNFSS Steering Committee agencies are actively involved in VSS work, including support with formulating national strategies, developing standards, impact assessment, harmonization and equivalence, coordinated capacity-building, access to affordable finance, and trade aspects of VSS. A multi-stakeholder advisory panel with appropriate developing country representation supports the UNFSS process.

What is the added value of the UNFSS?

UNFSS is a credible policy forum that benefits from the analytical, empirical, and capacity-building activities of the participating United Nations agencies, engagement with a broad, multi-stakeholder advisory panel, and with relevant multi-stakeholder initiatives. This collaboration is key to improving the understanding of VSS impacts and opportunities in developing countries in an efficient, consistent, inclusive, and demand-driven manner. Given the structure of UNFSS, with guidance by five United Nations Agencies, and the expertise of its members, UNFSS is uniquely positioned to provide credible information and assist in giving developing countries a voice in the dialogue on standard-setting and governance. UNFSS is committed to addressing the growing need for VSS-related information and assistance in developing countries and is seeking the support of interested parties.

UNFSS Structure



For more information, please consult the UNFSS website at: unfss.org