Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Workshop on Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) to promote sustainable agricultural production, food quality and safety, environmental protection and trade in the Arab Region
27 September 2011
UN House – Beirut, Lebanon

INFORMATION NOTE

A. INTRODUCTION

The world natural resources are finite and increasingly becoming scarce as a result of human behavior and this is leading to threatening crises and conflicts. There is a need to make economic systems more environmentally sustainable, eco-friendly and socially fair. This basic principle of sustainability was adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and since then the imperative to meet the needs of present generations without sacrificing those of future ones, has become a call to action not only for politicians but also for citizens and businesses. The notion of sustainability finds within the term “Green Economy” a new meaning and updating for the future, as the world prepares for next year’s 1992 Rio Summit follow up conference, also known as Rio+20.

There is an increasing demand for sustainably produced goods and services, which is a result of a growing recognition of the social, economic and environmental impacts of global markets and the potential power of leveraging market forces to bring about positive change for sustainable development. While compliance with food safety regulations of importing countries is a general prerequisite for market access, producers and traders have to adjust also to changing local preferences, as, increasingly, consumers want not only "safe" products but also products, which are "fair" to people and the environment (proper remuneration and smaller carbon footprint). An immediate outcome has been a growth in the development of voluntary eco-labeling and private Corporate Social Responsibility strategies in line with the increasing interest in voluntary labels, standards and other global and sector-wide voluntary certification systems.

In this context, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the German Agency for International Cooperation (giz) are organizing, under the patronage of His Excellency Dr. Hussein Al Hajj Hassan, Minister of Agriculture of Lebanon, a workshop on voluntary sustainability standards in order to highlight their growing importance in the region and to assess how they could be used to encourage the adoption of sustainable production practices. The workshop comes as the region prepares for Rio + 20, which calls for a renewed commitment towards sustainable development revolving around two main themes, namely “green economy” and “institutional framework for sustainable development.” As sustainability standards raise awareness on environmental quality, they help move towards a market for green goods and services and thus to the advent of a green economy.

The meeting targets particularly agricultural and agro-industry stakeholders in order to introduce them relevant voluntary sustainability standards (VSS), which have major implication for promoting sustainable agriculture concept and practices of employment generation in rural areas, and safeguarding scarce, precious and strategic resources such as water in the Arab region. It will be held back-to-back with the Green Industries Conference, which will be held 28-29 September 2011, in order to build on synergies between sustainability standards and opportunities for developing green industries, i.e. industries, which use more efficiently the dwindling natural resources of the region while producing "fairer" and "safer" products.
B. OBJECTIVE

The workshop aims to:

- Review the concept of Voluntary Sustainability Standard (VSS) and its potential contribution to enhancing market share and market access for products and commodities from the region; and
- Raise awareness, exchange experience, identify best practices related to VSS and propose a framework for developing an operational regional initiative that enhances sustainable agriculture through voluntary sustainability standards.

C. MAJOR THEMES

The major themes of the meeting include:

- Review of the concept and policy implication of Voluntary Sustainability Standard (VSS) for the region;
- Discussion of the challenges and opportunities facing the adoption of voluntary sustainability standards in the region;
- Review of the application of voluntary sustainability standards in the region through specific case-studies; and
- Discussion of the prospect for streamlining voluntary sustainability standards in the region and outline of a way forward.

D. PARTICIPANTS

The workshop will target experts and public officials from the agricultural and agro-industries sectors as well as officials from chambers of commerce and related ministries such as trade, industry and the environment.

E. ORGANIZATION

The workshop is organized by ESCWA and giz, Under the Patronage of His Excellency, Dr. Hussein Al Hajj Hassan, Minister of Agriculture of Lebanon, and will be conducted in both English and Arabic with translation provided.

F. ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES

Date and venue: The workshop will be held on 27 September 2011 at the United Nations House in downtown Beirut, Lebanon. Registration will start at 8:30 a.m. and the opening session at 9:00 a.m.

Accommodation and transportation: Special arrangements will be made with local hotels for accommodation packages for participants needing the service. Details will be communicated at a later date.

Visas: Participants may obtain an entry visa from the Lebanese embassy in their country of residence. Those in need of a visa could inform ESCWA ahead of time so that proper arrangements could be made.

G. CORRESPONDENCE

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