

INF.12 Strengthening Agricultural Quality Standards work in the UNECE
Contribution from the UNECE Secretariat

STRENGTHENING AGRICULTURAL QUALITY STANDARDS

WORK IN THE UNECE:

DRAFT TRANSITION PLAN

Submitted by the secretariat under consultation with the Bureau
for discussion and approval

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2005, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) launched an external evaluation of its work. As a result of extensive consultations with member States to review UNECE activities and set new priorities, a Work Plan on ECE Reform was adopted on 2 December 2005. In the plan member States decided that UNECE work in agricultural quality standards should be strengthened and that “Consultations should be initiated with the OECD in order to concentrate the activities of the two organizations within the ECE.”¹

In the UNECE, the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards (WP.7) develops commercial quality standards for fruit and vegetables, as well as other agricultural produce. The OECD Scheme for the Application of International Standards for Fruit and Vegetables (“OECD Scheme”) adopts the UNECE standards and develops explanatory material to interpret them. It also develops guidelines on conformity inspection and organizes meetings for national inspectors to discuss the implementation of the guidelines and of UNECE standards.

The proposed transfer of activities from the OECD is an opportunity for all United Nations Member States to contribute to the development of the standards and explanatory brochures. This broader participation would give the standards higher recognition and prominence. A clear possibility for synergy also exists in bringing together the activities of the two organizations, because many of the same experts work on the same material in both bodies. Standards and brochures would become available in Russian as well as in English, French and Spanish. In addition, countries would only provide financial contributions for those activities that are not covered by the United Nations regular budget. Making a financial contribution would no longer be a condition for participating in the development of the implementation guidelines.

To initiate the consultations requested under the Work Plan for ECE Reform, the Director of the UNECE Trade and Timber Division visited the OECD in January 2006. It was agreed that the UNECE would submit to the OECD a transition plan, for the countries participating in the OECD Scheme to decide whether or not they wanted to accept all or part of the plan or modify it. The UNECE and OECD would then draft a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on the cooperation required for implementing the decisions.

As a result, the UNECE secretariat, in consultation with interested parties, has developed the present draft transition plan for discussion. The plan proposes that all the OECD work on fresh fruit and vegetables standards and related training and conformity inspection be transferred to the UNECE.

The UNECE can undertake all of the existing OECD Scheme activities (provided that travel expenses for any meetings held outside Geneva are covered by extrabudgetary funds or contributions in kind). There are also some additional activities, not currently undertaken by the OECD, that would enhance the work, but these would have to be analyzed on an individual basis to see what could be covered by the regular budget and what would need to be covered by extrabudgetary resources.

¹ E/ECE/1434/Rev.1, para. 56.

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INTRODUCTION

1. The sections below provide information related to the work on standards in UNECE and OECD and the organization of a transition for the consolidation of these activities. The text contains recommendations and suggests action to be undertaken by the two organizations and member States, as appropriate. Annex I indicates the membership in the OECD Scheme, with an estimate of the contributions paid by countries. It also shows the participation in the UNECE WP.7. Annex II summarizes the additional activities to be covered by the UNECE as a result of the consolidation, and their financial implications. It also provides estimates for possible additional costs. Annex III provides information about the cost of different publication formats.

1. TRANSITION TASK FORCE

2. To ensure a smooth transition it is proposed that an OECD/UNECE task force be set up. WP.7 and the OECD Scheme will elect an equal number of task force members with the chair being appointed separately by the Bureau of the UNECE Committee on Trade, the parent body of WP.7. This group would be serviced by the UNECE secretariat. Representatives from both the UNECE and OECD secretariats would be invited to participate.

3. All outputs of the transition task force, such as transition plans and joint programmes of work, would be approved by annual joint meetings of the UNECE Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards and the OECD Scheme for the Application of International Standards for Fruit and Vegetables, and where appropriate, by their parent organizations.

4. The transition task force should be established as soon as possible, and no later than early 2007. It would then be responsible for:

- (a) Drafting a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between UNECE and OECD covering the transition period.
- (b) Proposing a joint programme of work for the transition period, to be revised annually during the transition.
- (c) Drawing up a realistic timetable for the transition, including the timing, length and organization of joint meetings. Discussions seem to indicate that a two-year period with the possibility of annual extensions for a maximum of two additional years should be adequate to guarantee a smooth transition.
- (d) Developing the draft text for a revised Geneva Protocol, as the underlying legal document for the work.
- (e) Evaluating and reporting annually on the progress of the transition.
- (f) Communicating the benefits of the consolidation and progress on its implementation to concerned national administrations and experts.
- (g) Developing strategies for financing activities not covered by the United Nations regular budget, for example by identifying sources for contributions in kind or donations.

- (h) Assisting, where needed, in the transfer of technical relationships that OECD has already established to the UNECE.

2. PARTICIPATION

5. Any Member State of the United Nations can participate in the UNECE meetings at no cost. Participation in the OECD Scheme is open to all Member States of the United Nations that agree to contribute financially to the Scheme and that meet the requirements laid out in Annex II of the Council Decision on the OECD Scheme. Eighteen OECD members and five non-member countries currently participate in the Scheme. In recent years, 32 UNECE member and 8 non-member countries have taken part in the work of WP.7 and its Specialized Sections on Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables and on Dry and Dried Produce.
6. The concentration of the OECD Scheme activities in the UNECE would open the work on standards and explanatory brochures to any United Nations Member State. The exact rules for participation would be set out in a modified Geneva Protocol.
7. The UNECE believes that open participation and a programme of peer reviews would increase credibility and practical use of standards. It would also improve quality in conformity inspection and promote mutual recognition.

3. UNDERLYING LEGAL DOCUMENTS

8. The UNECE Geneva Protocol on Agricultural Quality Standards and the Council Decision on the OECD Scheme for the Application of International Standards for Fruit and Vegetables are the two legal documents underlying the work on, respectively, the development of internationally agreed commercial quality standards for agriculture and their application.
9. Overall recommendations:
- (a) The work transferred to the UNECE should be carried out under a revised Geneva Protocol.
 - (b) Once the decision has been made on the transfer of activities, the joint UNECE/OECD transition task force should agree upon the changes to the Geneva Protocol to be recommended for approval to WP.7 and the UNECE Executive Committee.
 - (c) The UNECE secretariat should consult with the UN Office of Legal Affairs and suggest the procedure that countries should follow for adopting the Protocol.²

² At its sixty-first session, WP.7 asked the secretariat to clarify the process for adopting the Geneva Protocol and “explore the best way of doing it” (document TRADE/WP.7/2005/9, para. 98).

A. *Suggested modifications to the Geneva Protocol*

10. The transition task force, in consultation with the UN Office of Legal Affairs, may wish to take the following suggestions into account:

- (a) Encourage the widest possible participation by stating that the Protocol is open to any United Nations Member State that accepts the standards-setting process (as set out in the terms of reference and working procedures of WP.7) and agrees to inform the secretariat annually about its application of the standards³.
- (b) Open the work on explanatory brochures to all countries.
- (c) Open the work on conformity inspection to all countries. The UNECE believes that more benefits could be provided to a wider range of countries if resources were concentrated on carrying out peer reviews, rather than on reviews for qualifying to become a participant. The contents of peer reviews could be drafted to include an evaluation of many, or most, of the requirements in Annex II to the Council Decision on the OECD Scheme. Recommendations could also be drawn up on how these peer reviews could best be used to support bilateral or multilateral mutual recognition agreements.
- (d) Include any activities transferred from the OECD in the programme of work of WP.7.
- (e) Give Codex Alimentarius a special partner status, should the two organizations decide to do so, in consultation with the United Nations Legal Office.
- (f) Include and maintain an annex listing all UNECE standards and indicating those with explanatory brochures (UNECE also prepares brochures for its meat standards).
- (g) Allow all signatories to the Geneva Protocol to participate in the work on an equal footing with UNECE members. Inform all United Nations Member States that they are entitled to participate under article 11 of the UNECE Terms of Reference⁴ (as observers in a consensus process), even if they are not signatories to the Geneva Protocol and are not UNECE member States.

11. Actions by UNECE:

- (a) Assist the transition task force in revising the Geneva Protocol.

12. Actions by OECD:

³ The Working Group (European Community, Germany, United Kingdom, United States and the UNECE secretariat), formed to review the Geneva Protocol, made this proposal to WP.7 (document TRADE/WP.7/2005/9Add.1).

⁴ “The Commission shall invite any Member of the United Nations not a member of the Commission to participate in a consultative capacity in its consideration of any matter of particular concern to that non-member.”

- (a) Participate in the discussions in the transition task force.
- (b) Modify the OECD Scheme, if necessary.

4. STANDARDS

13. Recommendations:

- (a) All United Nations Member States should be entitled to participate in the development of standards, as described above under the Geneva Protocol.

14. Actions by UNECE:

- (a) Continue to develop the standards as in the past.

5. EXPLANATORY BROCHURES

15. Recommendations:

- (a) During the transition, both the OECD and UNECE should be preparing explanatory brochures in order to transfer the relevant expertise to the UNECE and to close the gap between the number of adopted standards and the number of available brochures (currently there are 71 fruit and vegetable standards and 9 recommendations as compared to only 36 brochures). The UNECE will publish the brochures jointly with the OECD (under the same arrangements as agreed upon for the walnut kernel charts published in 2006).
- (b) UNECE should continue to prepare explanatory brochures for its other quality standards, which are not published jointly with OECD (for example, its meat quality standards).

16. Actions by UNECE:

- (a) Approve/revise existing explanatory brochures.
- (b) Develop new explanatory brochures.
- (c) Support meetings for defining the content of the brochures.
- (d) Translate new and revised brochures into French and Russian.
- (e) Publish new and revised brochures in English, French, Russian and Spanish.
- (f) Publish the electronic versions of the brochures on the UNECE website.
- (g) Provide an Electronic Discussion Group facility to review and discuss brochure contents.
- (h) If the OECD so wishes, develop an agreement with the United Nations publications service for the sale of the explanatory brochures by the OECD as well as by the United Nations.

- (i) Arrange for the brochures to be translated into Spanish with those who are currently doing this for the OECD as a contribution in kind.

17. Actions by OECD:

- (a) Give legal permission to the UNECE to revise and publish existing brochures and provide the electronic versions to the UNECE so as to facilitate their updating.
- (b) Continue develop new explanatory brochures during transition.
- (c) If the OECD so wishes, continue sales of all brochures, including new brochures, based on an agreement with the United Nations office responsible for publication sales and make electronic versions of brochures available on the OECD web site.
- (d) Draw up an agreement with the UNECE to allow the United Nations to sell the brochures developed by the OECD that have not been revised.
- (e) Provide the UNECE with the information on the organizations contributing in kind for translating the brochures into languages other than English and French.

6. CONFORMITY INSPECTION

18. Countries participating in the Scheme consider that “the Scheme should lean towards enforcing a greater degree of mutual recognition of inspections while taking into account the legitimate objectives put forward by importing countries to protect their consumers”⁵. The OECD has also recently started to develop a peer review programme “to help countries to establish an inspection service, to restructure an existing inspection service, to prepare a mutual recognition process or to improve the exchange of information”⁶. This work would be continued by the UNECE.

19. Recommendations:

- (a) The Geneva Protocol should be extended to cover the conformity inspection related activities currently carried out by the OECD, i.e. organizing ad hoc meetings of heads of national inspection services, undertaking capacity-building activities, developing training tools and guidelines for the application of quality control systems, reinforcing frameworks to facilitate mutual recognition, and conducting peer reviews.
- (b) The UNECE should continue the work on peer reviews developed so far by the OECD⁷ and begin their implementation.

⁵ Document AGR/CA/FVS(2004)3/REV1, Section B.4.1.

⁶ Document AGR/CA/FVS(2004)3/REV1, Section B.4.2.

⁷ Implementation of peer reviews (document AGR/CA/FVS(2005)5 and paragraph 13 of AGR/CA/FVS/M(2005)1).

- (c) All United Nations Member States should be invited to participate in peer reviews, subject to the availability of funding for their implementation. Members of the evaluation teams (or their countries/organizations) would cover the costs of their participation in the team. The country being evaluated would bear the cost of the UNECE secretariat's participation in the evaluation as well as the meeting room, interpretation and other logistical costs.
 - (d) The UNECE Specialized Sections should set priorities for and decide on the content of "guidance material on the interpretation of standards and the application of inspection methods that could be used by interested parties to offer a training programme for new inspectors or other trainees"⁸.
20. Actions by UNECE:
- (a) Expand the terms of reference of the UNECE Specialized Sections to cover conformity assessment activities.
 - (b) Support the meetings of heads of national inspection services (meeting facilities, documentation, interpretation, etc).
 - (c) Advise the Specialized Sections on how to organize peer reviews.
 - (d) Organize peer reviews based on agreed procedures.
 - (e) Publish guidelines on the website and in other formats. Create electronic distance-learning versions, if extra-budgetary funding can be obtained.
21. Actions by the OECD:
- (a) Provide information to the UNECE on the plans for peer reviews.
22. Actions by member States:
- (a) Finance the peer reviews as recommended above.

7. CAPACITY-BUILDING

23. The United Nations rules for trust funds allow donors to designate the specific activities for which their donations will be used (for example a peer review or a workshop in a given country). Donors can also request to be sent financial reports on how their money has been spent. Donations must include a percentage to cover overhead and management.
24. Recommendations:

⁸ Document AGR/CA/FVS(2004)3/REV1, Section A.3.1.

- (a) The UNECE should establish a capacity-building trust fund to promote agricultural commercial quality standards and to help countries implement them. The fund should be used to support the following main activities:
 - (i) One to three workshops per year.
 - (ii) Peer reviews.
 - (iii) Participation of experts from less developed countries in expert group meetings and training sessions.
 - (b) UNECE should cooperate on capacity-building activities with OECD and Codex Alimentarius. Wherever possible, joint workshops should be organized. It may be useful for some countries to have information about the OECD Seed Scheme and about Codex food quality and safety standards, together with information about the UNECE agricultural commercial quality standards and their implementation.
25. Actions by UNECE:
- (a) Establish, promote and manage a trust fund and develop specific project proposals for external funding.
26. Actions by OECD:
- (b) Provide UNECE with information about past capacity-building workshops and contribute to future joint workshops.

Annex I

**Countries participating in the OECD Scheme for Fruit and Vegetables
and their 2006 estimated contributions**

Countries	Scale of contributions (per cent)¹	2006 contributions (Euros)	2006 contributions (US Dollars) 1 Euro=1.24 USD
OECD Members			
Austria	2.631	5 536	6 865
Belgium	3.275	6 891	8 545
Finland	1.659	3 491	4 329
France	18.262	38 423	47 645
Germany	24.975	52 547	65 158
Greece	1.727	3 634	4 506
Hungary	0.707	1 488	1 845
Ireland	1.333	2 805	3 478
Italy	14.717	30 965	38 397
Luxembourg	0.246	518	642
Netherlands	5.640	11 867	14 715
New Zealand	0.767	1 614	2 001
Poland	2.063	4 341	5 383
Slovakia	0.323	680	843
Spain	9.027	18 993	23 551
Sweden	3.027	6 369	7 898
Switzerland	3.989	8 393	10 407
Turkey	2.060	4 334	5 374
Non-OECD Members			
Bulgaria	0.165	347	430
Israel	1.136	2 390	2 964
Morocco	0.326	686	851
Romania	0.491	1 033	1 281
South Africa	1.454	3 059	3 793
TOTAL	100	210 400	260 901

¹ OECD Document C(2006)31.

Note: The breakdown of the total expenditure for 2003 and 2004 was: 68 per cent – staff costs, 8 – conference services (meeting rooms, interpretation, translation and distribution of documents), 11 – publication costs, 13 – operational costs (office rental, general overheads, photocopying, missions).

Annex I (continued)

**Countries participating in the Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards and in its
Specialized Sections on Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables and on Dry and
Dried Produce (since 2000)**

UNECE Members

Austria	Israel
Belarus	Italy
Belgium	Lithuania
Bulgaria	Netherlands
Canada	Poland
Czech Republic	Republic of Moldova
Cyprus	Romania
Denmark	Russian Federation
Estonia	Slovakia
Finland	Spain
France	Sweden
Georgia	Switzerland
Germany	Turkey
Greece	Ukraine
Hungary	United Kingdom
Ireland	United States

Non-UNECE Members

Australia
Chile
Cote d'Ivoire
Ghana
India
Morocco
New Zealand
South Africa

Annex II
Summary of the additional activities and
extrabudgetary (XB) financial implications for UNECE

<i>Additional activity</i>	<i>Regular budget (RB) or extra-budgetary/in kind (XB)</i>	<i>Additional XB costs per year(US\$)</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Revise the Geneva Protocol	RB	-	
Support joint meetings with OECD	RB	-	Travel to meetings in Paris
Prepare content of new and revise existing explanatory brochures	RB		
Support meetings for defining the content of the brochures	RB and XB	Depends on meeting location	RB staff time and meeting facilities in Geneva; XB travel and meeting facilities, if convened outside Geneva
Translate new and revised brochures into French and Russian	RB	-	
Publish new and revised brochures in English, French, Russian and Spanish	RB and XB	See Annex III	XB for above 2-3 additional publications per year in the programme
Make available the electronic versions of all brochures on the UNECE web site	RB	-	
Provide an Electronic Discussion Group facility to review and discuss brochure contents	RB	-	
Develop an agreement with the Sales section on the sale of brochures	RB	-	
Make an agreement with the OECD allowing them to sell the brochures (on a commission basis)	RB	-	
Arrange for the translation of the brochures into Spanish with those who are currently doing this for the OECD as a contribution in kind	XB	-	Contribution in kind
Organize a joint meeting in 2007 with the OECD Meeting of Heads of National Inspection Services to ensure a smooth transfer of activities	RB	-	

Support the meetings of the Specialized Section for Heads of National Inspection Services (meeting facilities, documentation, interpretation, etc)	EB and XB	Depends on meeting location	RB staff time and meeting facilities in Geneva XB travel and meeting facilities, if convened outside Geneva
Review what has been done by the OECD to advance peer reviews and advise the Specialized Section on the work to be completed before peer reviews could start	RB	-	
Organize peer reviews based on agreed procedures	XB	Depends on destination	Travel for secretariat staff and some experts plus meeting facilities
Publish Guidelines on inspection on the web	RB	-	
Produce printed copies of guidelines on inspection	RB and XB	See Annex III	XB for above 2 – 3 additional publications per year in the programme
Produce interactive distance or CD-Rom learning versions	XB	10000-80000	Depends upon the technology selected
Establish a trust fund and develop specific project proposals for external funding	RB	-	
Manage the trust fund and related projects	RB	-	
Prepare meeting documentation, provide meeting facilities and interpretation	RB and XB	730	XB, interpretation into Spanish, per day

Annex III

Publication printing option

<i>Option</i>	<i>Reason for expenditure</i>	<i>Estimate in USD</i>	<i>Source of funds</i>
A	1500 copies of an A4 glossy paper brochure of X pages with stapled binding	5700	RB for 2-3 publications per year,
B	1500 copies of an A5 glossy paper brochure of X pages with a spine for printing the title	6000	RB for 2-3 publications per year
C	1500 copies of current OECD non-standard size binder (X cm by X cm) with X glossy-paper, loose-leaf pages	17900	XB
D	1500 copies of A4 size binder with X glossy-paper, loose-leaf pages	16800	XB

Note: The UNECE expects that the regular budget would be able to cover 2-3 additional publications per year using the format options A or B. These could be explanatory brochures or guidelines as agreed by participating countries.