

ETUC STAND PROJECT

Strengthening trade union intervention to represent social interests in the standardisation process at European level

PROJECT OVERVIEW AND GENERAL INFORMATION

The European Trade Union Confederation is pleased to announce that the ETUC STAND project aimed at sustaining and reinforcing trade union representation and effective participation in European standardisation has been launched **mid-February 2015**. The project is financially supported by the European Commission (EC) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in the context of a Framework Partnership Agreement concluded for 4+2 years (December 2020). This document provides some background and general information regarding the project and the world of standards.

Why standards matter - some background on European and international standardisation

Standards refer here to voluntary technical specifications explicitly documented, published and sold as tools used in the organisation of production and exchange of goods and services. More than a decade ago, the OECD has estimated that “up to 80% of trade (equivalent to around \$4 trillion annually) is affected by standards or associated technical regulations”¹. Standards are ubiquitous and their reach has extended beyond products safety and interoperability to affect a wide range of issues such as occupational health and safety management system, sustainability, open source software, nanotechnologies or services. As such, the significance of international and European standards not only pertains to their growing share in the economy, but also to their impact upon the organisation of production and working conditions as well as to the institutional environment that establishes a formal devolution of power to standard-setting organisations.

European and international standardisation is increasingly promoted as a new form of regulation in contemporary capitalism. For instance, the entry into force of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Agreement in 1995 gave international standards a major role in harmonising the technical specifications of goods traded on the global markets so as to avoid such specifications to be turned as an impediment to international trade. According to the WTO TBT agreement, state regulations in this domain must comply with “legitimate objectives” related to health, safety, and environmental issues and the goal of removing “unnecessary” barriers to trade should be pursued insofar as possible by substituting international standards for domestic standards.

Developments also clearly take place at the European level. In 1985, Council Resolution 85/C 136/01 on a ‘new approach’ to technical harmonisation and standardisation instigated a completely new regulatory technique. The new approach provides a framework for the harmonisation of EU public law

¹ OECD (1999), *Regulatory Reform and International Standardisation*, Paris, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Trade Committee Working Party, p.4.

only for the general and essential requirements of goods traded on the European market, particularly in the fields of health and safety, environment and consumer protection. Depending on the sectors affected, technical specifications are either based on mutual recognition of national standards or delegated to private organisations, i.e. the European standardisation organisations (ESOs)². More recently the new approach has been revised, leading to the adoption of **the Regulation 1025/2012 on European Standardisation**. Its entry into force in 2013 most notably lead to the extension of the new approach to the field of services while also recognizing the importance of an effective participation of the “European stakeholder organisations”³ representing societal interests in the European standardisation process, such as trade unions. Such organisations are now officially eligible for receiving Union financing intended to enable them to represent their interest and to effectively participate in European standard-setting activities.

While the extending scope of European and international standards and the formal devolution of power to standard-setting bodies provide strong rationale for trade unions action in standardisation, the relevance of technical specifications for workers also encroach upon wider market competition and industrial strategies. Standards are increasingly used as quality marking instruments enabling products/services differentiation on the market according to quality rather than pricing. As such, taking part to standardisation activities provides a mean to define general and/or sectorial market referentials contributing to frame the relevant dimensions on which market competition takes place - and thus also framing the competitiveness of entire economic sectors. In this view, standardisation may help to foster a competitiveness agenda focusing on quality rather than price and thus promoting the high quality and advanced know-how of European businesses and work forces. It is also worth noting that technical specifications are an important industrial strategic tool. By defining the properties and/or production processes of products and services, standardisation processes affect the added- value creation process. They may contribute to shift the added-value creation along transnational production chains that will in turn impact the localisation of employment and of job creation. Participation in standardisation is thus enabling trade unions to have a better grip on the location and shift of value creation processes and underlying consequences for workers⁴. In short, the relevance of standards for trade unions is multifaceted, a fact standing in sharp contrast with the actors currently involved in their definition.

The growing political significance of European and international standards reinforces enduring questions about their legitimacy: who decides about the content of standards and their drafting rules? What can/should be standardised and not? What are the mechanisms ensuring standards can contribute to create some order in ruling market practices? These are among the main questions upon which trade union action in standardisation encroach and as such it is important to always bear them in mind. Even though national trade unions have been occasionally involved in standard setting

² There is three ESOs, namely: the Comité Européen de Normalisation (CEN), the Comité Européen de Normalisation Electrotechnique (CENELEC) and the European Telecommunications Standards Institute (ETSI).

³ These organisations are known as the “Annex III organisations” within the new Regulation.

⁴ Please, find here is a short example of how standards in the construction field contributed to displace added-value creation and employment. Before the introduction of prefabricated building blocks for houses, building materials were cut on the site of the construction by skilled worker and thus the added-value was created within/by the building companies. With the introduction of prefabricated building blocks, this added-value shifted towards a corresponding emerging industry producing standard building blocks in mass and by the same time enabling building companies to hire non-skilled worker. Even though this process happened at national level in the beginning of the twentieth century, it highlights how standards can shift added-value creation and affect employment.

process, it is widely acknowledged that most national and European standardisation organisations are characterized by an important democratic deficit. It has to be noted that the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) has a long experience in European standardisation but focuses on very specific field (i.e. machinery, personal protective equipment and ergonomics). So it remains that standardisation is characterized by the paradox of “huge minorities (...), the two largest affected groups (370 million consumers, including 165 million employees, within the EU) are minorities within the standards committees, if indeed they are represented at all.”⁵ While conventional explanations emphasise the lack of time, expertise and resources of these large minorities, difficult access to standardisation activities, complexity of standard-setting procedures as well as the risk of legitimizing forms of private regulation failing to ensure a democratic decision-making process are important elements accounting for the under-representation of trade unions. While the ETUC STAND project is primarily aimed at sustaining the voice of trade union in European standardisation, it will also provide a new opportunity to reflect on trade unions position and strategy regarding the role of European and international standardisation in the contemporary regulatory framework.

The ETUC STAND project: rationale and overall functioning of the system

There is evidence that working conditions are among the major societal challenges that standards can help to address, under the precondition that trade unions are able to achieve appropriate representation and effective participation in the European standardisation organisations. In this context, the ETUC STAND project crystallises its long held demand that standards ensure the highest quality of working conditions, including among other high level of public and occupational health and safety across Europe. Moreover, the ETUC, recognizing that many of the areas subjected to standardisation are political by nature, strongly insists on the autonomy of the social partners and on the respect of collective bargaining and collective agreements that may potentially be challenged by the development of standards.

The ETUC STAND project takes into account this context and aims at improving the situation by means of a series of actions, including:

- The effective participation in the standardisation work at a policy level (by interfacing with ESOs governing bodies, the European Commission, Annex III Organizations).
- The effective participation in the standardisation work at a technical level by means of direct involvement of experts within technical committees and working groups on selected standards.
- The training of trade union experts participating in technical committees and networking with workers representatives involved in standardisation activities in order to share experience and improve trade unions capacity to act in standardisation.
- The communication and sharing of information related to standardisation with trade unions and workers’ representatives (website, newsletter, resolution), including the organization of meetings on standardisation (i.e. the ETUC Permanent Committee on “Standardisation”).

⁵ Bamberg, Ulrich (2004), “The Role of German trade unions in the national and European standardization process”. *TUTB Newsletter*, n°24-25, p. 13.

The ETUC STAND project will pursue these objectives by acting as a vehicle for trade union intervention in the standardisation processes at European and, where necessary, International level. The project involves different actors or groups to fulfil its objectives, these are mainly:

- Policy officer: ETUC staff member coordinating the all project and (among other) participating at policy level meetings, organizing training, communication and network building.
- Advisors: ETUC staff member providing input and area of interests/concerns regarding standardisation work (such as on standardisation mandates given by the EC to ESOs, relevance of technical committees, etc.).
- Experts: trade unions professional or workers' representatives that will effectively participate in technical committee and Working Group meetings and providing the "technical" input (with support of the policy officer and/or advisors). These experts will be members of the selected technical committee through ETUC affiliation (see below).
- ETUC permanent committee on standardisation (PCS): consists of the workers' representatives nominated by ETUC's affiliates, the experts and selected guests to deal with broader standardisation strategy and policy issues. Ideally, this group is intended to include representatives of all national trade unions and European federation affiliated to the ETUC.

The figure presented in annex 1 offers a summary and overview of the main actions and actors of the ETUC STAND project.

At an operational level, trade union experts attending technical committee meetings will receive a per diem allowance and their travel and accommodation costs will be reimbursed by the project. Moreover, these experts will be trained to standardisation working procedure, if possible prior to their involvement in the technical work. Travel and accommodation costs of participants attending the PCS meeting will also be reimbursed by the project. Last but not least, the project requires ETUC to be member or partner of European standardisation organisations in order to access the different standardisation policy and technical committee and corresponding documents. The ETUC is an official ETSI member since the 17th of March 2015 and is a CEN Partner Organization since May 2015.

Standardisation themes selected for participation

In order to select priority areas for trade union participation in European standardisation, the ETUC organised a consultation of its European members. This consultation led to the selection of two main areas of involvement, advanced manufacturing and services (see table 1 for related technical committees).

Table 1: ETUC STAND selected technical committees for participation – September 2018

Areas	Committee
Maintenance services	(CEN/TC 319)
Facility Management services	(CEN/TC 348)
Cabin air quality on civil aircraft	(CEN/TC 436)
Private security services	(CEN TC 439)
Horizontal standards for the provision of services	(CEN/TC 447)
Quality of care for elderly people	(CEN/TC 449)
Minimum requirements of patient involvement in person-centred care”	(CEN/TC 450)
EC Multi-Stakeholder Platform on ICT	--
Cybersecurity and Data Protection	CEN-CLC TC 13
CEN Focus Group on Blockchain and Ledger Technologies	--
Human Resources Management	(ISO/TC 260)
Healthcare organisation management	(ISO/TC 304)
Ageing Societies	(ISO/TC 314)
Occupational health and safety management	(ISO/TC 283)
European Quality Framework for Internships	(CEN/Workshop)

Over the course of the project, selected standardisation topics evolve depending on: the publication of standards selected for participation; the priorities and inputs of ETUC affiliates; the European Union annual work programme on standardisation and corresponding standardisation mandates addressed to ESOs; emerging areas of work of European standardisation organisations.

Interested?

The ETUC strongly encourage all trade union members and representatives interested in the world of standards to take contact with us! For any further information regarding the ETUC STAND project and/or standard-setting activities, do not hesitate to take contact with the ETUC standardisation policy officers:

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ETUC STAND project - overview

