

# The INTERNORM Project: Bridging Two Worlds of Expert- and Lay-Knowledge in Standardization

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper presents a pilot project to reinforce participatory practices in standardization. The INTERNORM project creates an interactive knowledge center based on the sharing of academic skills and experiences accumulated by the civil society, especially consumer associations, environmental associations and trade unions to strengthen the participatory process of standardization. The first objective of the project is action-oriented: INTERNORM provides a common knowledge pool supporting the participation of civil society actors to international standard-setting activities by bringing them together with academic experts in working groups and providing logistic and financial support to their participation in meetings of national and international technical committees. The second objective is analytical: the standardization action provides a research field for a better understanding of the participatory dynamics underpinning international standardization. This paper presents three incentives that explain civil society (non-)involvement in standardization that overcome conventional resource-based hypotheses: an operational incentive related to the use of standards in the selective goods provided by associations to their membership; a thematic incentive provided by the setting of priorities by strategic committees created in some standardization organization; and a rhetorical incentive related to the discursive resource that civil society concerns offers to the different stakeholders.*

*Keywords: Civil Society, Consumer, Knowledge, Participation, Stakeholders' Involvement, Standardization, Trade Union*

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## INTRODUCTION

Standardization is part of the infrastructure of globalization providing cross-border nongovernmental coordination mechanisms, which formally respect state sovereignty. Various studies in economics (Blind, 2004), in law (Schepel, 2005) in organizational science (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000), and international relations

have examined how voluntary and consensual standards have become crucial tools in the organization of global markets (Graz, 2004, 2006; Tamm-Hallström, 2004; Krewer, 2005).

As the increased usage of standards affects a wide range of issues, such as environmental management, psychological tests, measures of the quality of medical services, and nanotechnologies, the quantitative and qualitative expansion of international standardization has reinforced enduring questions on the legitimacy of standards (Werle & Iversen, 2006, p. 20;

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Ruwet, 2009, pp. 12-13). In other words, who defines standard matters for the recognition of their greater use in society at large. In that respect, the participation of all stakeholders, including the weakest one (unions, NGO, consumers' associations) is crucial (Raines, 2003; Boström, 2006). Given the recognized role of consumers' associations, unions and environmental associations to express legitimate objectives, the question of their representation becomes central. Surprisingly, civil society participation in international standardization received little attention from scholars dedicated to the study of standardization (Wilcock & Colina, 2007, p. 3). Despite this lack of specific attention, studies on the world of standardization never fail to stress the under-representation of civil society actors, such as consumers' associations, environmental protection organizations, unions, and NGOs.

This paper presents a pilot project called INTERNORM which was recently successfully submitted to the University of Lausanne in order to engage at both analytical and practical level the under-representation of civil society. INTERNORM aims to create an interactive knowledge center based on the sharing of academic skills and the experiences accumulated by the civil society, especially consumer associations, environmental associations and trade unions to strengthen the participatory process of standardization.

The INTERNORM project has a twofold objective. The first is action-oriented. At this level, INTERNORM is aimed at bridging the actors of the civil society and academics in order to sustain civil society participation in international standard-setting activities by the common pooling of the specific knowledge of these actors. Moreover the project should provide financial support to civil society actors for their participation in committees - most notably for the membership fees allowing access to national standardization bodies and for traveling and accommodation costs. The second objective of the project is an analytical one. The standardization action initiated through INTERNORM will provide a useful research field for

a better understanding of the political, social and economic implications of standardization for society by studying the role of consumer associations, trade unions and environmental associations in the setting of the technical specifications governing globalization. Adopting a more long-term perspective on the links between standardization and civil society associations, we identify three incentives which explain the dynamic of their involvement. An operational incentive, related to the use of standards in the product and services provided by these associations to their members. A thematic incentive, provided by the setting of priorities by strategic committees created in some standardization organization. And a rhetorical incentive, related to the discursive resource that civil society concerns offers to stakeholders. These three incentives will be illustrated using the case of the consumers association as a precursory civil society associations (Hilton, 2008, p. 215).

In the next section, we present the rationale, the modus operandi and the different partners involved in the INTERNORM project. Then we will review the literature and outline the theoretical framework from which we analyze the dynamics governing the participation of civil society actors in international standard-setting activities. After some methodological considerations, we will conclude and discuss the strength and weakness of the project. As far as we know, no similar research-action project exists and in case of success, this project could generate parallel initiatives in other countries.

## **INTERNORM: RATIONALE, MODUS OPERANDI AND PARTNERS INVOLVEMENT**

### **Rationale of the Project**

The INTERNORM project proposes to establish a platform that links knowledge and action in defining technical specifications governing the globalization of markets. It aims to develop exchanges between the scientific knowledge of academic scholars and the knowledge of civil society associations in order to support

their participation in the development of international standards. The provision of academic knowledge in the construction of a “pluralistic expertise” (Kaufmann et al., 2004) and putting it into action will encourage the participation of under-represented actors in strengthening their competences. INTERNORM will thus allow a detailed analysis of the role of these actors.

One of the central issues raised by the growing role of international standards is their legitimacy regarding the participants in committees in charge of their development. In other words, who defines standards? Work on the world of standards never fail to emphasize how enterprises are over-represented. In contrast, civil society actors are under-represented, despite their recognized role in defending legitimate interests such as access to transparent information, protection of environment or health and safety issues. The reasons commonly invoked to explain this under-representation are the lack of financial resources, knowledge and time (Schmidt & Werle, 1998; Tamm-Hallström, 2004). According to a recent study (Hauert, 2008), consumer representatives were in 2007 involved in less than one committee out of five in the Swiss standardization organization (SNV); despite a slight increase since 1987, their involvement has been confined to consumer goods and some transversal themes (such as corporate social responsibility).

It appears that many objects are standardized in the absence of consumers’ and workers’ representatives. In the few interviews conducted within the same study, the problem of expertise was a unanimously mentioned. A major consumer organizations in Switzerland has explicitly regretted the lack of participation of representatives from the academic world within the technical committees as well as the lack of academic support at their disposal. The highly technical nature of the deliberations in committees is an obstacle to greater involvement and effective participation of civil society associations: whether to understand or make suggestions, expertise is at the basis of the arguments mobilized in the committee deliberations. While these associations have a unique expertise in

terms of consumers, workers, or environmental protection, they experience great difficulties in translating general concerns into the technical language which is a “compulsory figure” of the standard-setting activities (Mallard, 2000a, p. 57). For example, consumer associations wish to have condoms of quality, particularly in regard to resistance. The standardization work implies to translate the concept of resistance in a way that enables its physical measurement. In other words, a translation work must be accomplished between public health, safety or environmental concerns made in general terms and a series of tests organized and manipulated in a laboratory (Callon et al., 2001). Finally, in addition to technical expertise and lack of financial resources and time, the lack of knowledge of the formal and informal rules governing the standardization process has also emerged as a barrier to participation.

To improve the representation of the weakest stakeholder, some national standards bodies have established, often on the basis of public funding, consumers committees. In Switzerland no such body exists and at the government level, the Federal Office of Consumer Affairs participates in only a limited number of committees. Thus, the INTERNORM project will contribute to overcome this shortcomings in providing an interactive knowledge-building platform that sustain and support the participation of civil society associations in standard-setting activities.

## Modus Operandi

INTERNORM is a four years project and will end in 2013. In order to ensure the operational activities, a project manager as well as a junior researcher will constitute the platform staff. At the operational level, the focus will be first to inform stakeholders on the objectives and functioning of INTERNORM and, if necessary, to raise their awareness of the issues of standardization. The realization of workshops will allow the different partners to select five technical committees of mutual interest on a deliberative basis. Then, the INTERNORM staff will have

to manage information flows between academics, civil society and standardization bodies and provide logistical support for the organization of workshops and for the participation in SNV and ISO technical committees. Within the latter, an academic and a representative of civil society will ensure the joint implementation of prior knowledge developed during the workshops. The presence of an observer during the workshop and committees deliberations with a greater attention to the dynamics of work will feed the analysis.

We limit the purpose of participation in committees under the auspices of ISO. The delimitation of the research-action field is mainly justified by the costs of participation in international committees (travel, accommodation) as well as by the existence of the ANEC (the European consumer voice in standardization) in charge of consumer protection within the various European standardization bodies. In addition, the proximity of the central secretariat of ISO (in Geneva) facilitates the establishment of the collaboration. The participation in an ISO standard-setting committee involves the participation in the national mirror committee, where national experts to the ISO committee are appointed. Following this procedure, INTERNORM will support the representation of consumers associations, environmental associations and trade unions at the international level through the participation in the Swiss mirror committees.

To sum up, in order to strengthen the participation of civil society actors in standard-setting activities, the INTERNORM platform will:

- Disseminate information on the existence of the platform within the various associations of civil society interested in participating in standardization work.
- Provide organizational support for the exchange of knowledge between civil society actors and academics on the process and purpose of standardization.

- Materially support the access of consumer associations, environmental associations and trade unions in the work of Swiss and international standard-setting bodies.
- Analyze more precisely the standards development process with regard to the participation of different stakeholders, their resources and interests.
- Disseminate and exploit the output of INTERNORM through conferences, scientific publications, and the use of the relay provided by the media of the partners.
- And, according to the results obtained, undertake the necessary steps to sustain the operation of the platform. Various funding sources will then be considered.

## Partners Involvement

INTERNORM is a pilot project. In order to create an interactive knowledge center based on the sharing of academic skills and the experiences accumulated by the civil society, especially consumer associations, environmental protection and trade, the project relies on the practical involvement of these actors in the elaboration of standards. Thus we have to identify the possible partners and ensure their support.

A first category of partners is logically constituted by standardization bodies. The ISO and the SNV showed strong interest in the project and formally support it. The involvement of these partners secures the presence of observers during the committee deliberation as well as sustains the appointment of INTERNORM representatives (an academic scholar and a civil society representative) as experts to ISO committees.

On the academic side, professors and researchers from various departments of the University of Lausanne have been contacted to act as departmental correspondent of the INTERNORM platform. Their support is vital as they will bring their own academic knowledge to the project and offer it a large and highly

specialized research pool. Actually, we received support of scholars belonging to the following bodies of the University of Lausanne:

- Faculty of Law and criminal justice
- Faculty of Business and Economics
- Faculty of Geosciences and Environment
- Faculty of Social and Political Sciences

The identification of civil society association was facilitated by the existence of a research which identified the actual civil society actors involved in standard-setting activities in Switzerland. These actors were asked for support and we have also included actors who were not previously involved in standard-setting activities. Most contacted associations were at first glance interested in the project, but some have expressed fears in relation to the workload that an effective participation would imply. Others – most notably trade union – were not aware of the importance of their participation and of the way in which standard affect their members. A few example of standardization's impact on their field of activity have then helped to raise their awareness. Today the following associations have provided a formal support to the project:

- Swiss Trade Union (the umbrella association for most trade unions in Switzerland)
- World Wildlife Fund - Switzerland
- Swiss Patients Organization

We are also in contact with the main Swiss consumers associations, but some procedural questions are delaying their official support.

Finally we have also seek and receive support from the Federal Office of Consumer Affairs, who is active in standardization issue. This office could provide a substantial support in order to sustain the platform after the end of the project.

The practical involvement of the academics and associational partners will occur within the INTERNORM workshops and within the SNV and ISO selected committees. The INTERNORM workshops will first provide a forum where the relevant standards committees will be identified.

Then, it is in these workshops that standards will be discussed and propositions elaborated. The partners are also asked to diffuse the work and achievement of INTERNORM through their specific media. They should lastly take part to different valorization action which are planned – most notably a conference at the end of the project.

## Analytical Framework

INTERNORM provides an excellent opportunity to analyze the dynamic of civil society actors participation in standard-setting activities. Standardization studies conventionally explain the under-representation of civil society actors in international committees of standardization by lack of financial, cognitive and temporal resources (Egan, 1998, p. 492; Schmidt & Werle, 1998, pp. 87-89; Tamm-Hallström, 2004, p. 32). As a recent email exchange (initiated by K. Jakobs, April 3, 2009) between EURAS members about “Evaluating standards people” suggests, negotiating skills and the knowledge of procedure are also essential for effective participation of all stakeholders, and education is a major element in that regard (de Vries & Simons, 2006, p. 19). The development of a standard at the ISO can be viewed as a long-term activity, taking an average of 36 months. Active participation involves the reading and understanding of the standard discussed during committee meetings, and participation in the latter further adds to the workload. In addition, participation in committees incurs a number of expenses, especially at the logistical level (travel and accommodation) and fees. Finally, technical expertise is required to comprehend and formulate propositions, since it is the basis of argumentation during deliberations. As stated above, the technical language is a “compulsory figure” of the standardization work (Mallard, 2000a, p. 57). While industries have access to the required technical expertise by their involvement in the production process of the goods and services subject to standardization, civil society actors find themselves far removed from the manufacturing process and its underlying technical expertise.

These explanations are general and could not benefit from a real fieldwork following the ongoing process within existing committees. They provide few information about the specific dynamic of the involvement of civil society associations in standard-setting activities. It remains unclear, in particular, who participates and why, where do they participate and how do they impact upon standards definitions procedures. Why, for instance, an association rather than another is taking part to such activities? Moreover, as the thematic scope of standard-setting organizations has expanded behind purely technical matters, it is important to evaluate the extent to which the involvement of these associations reflects this evolution. In other words, where do they participate? Finally, it seems necessary to move beyond the statement of their under-representation in order to evaluate their real impact on committee deliberations when they are present. Here, the core question to be tackled is how these associations could achieve significant impact upon the standardization work once their participation has improved?

In order to get a better understanding of the specific dynamic of the involvement of civil society associations in standard-setting activities, it is fruitful to identify the main factors which contributed to link these associations to standard-setting activities. As "civil society" is a very broad category, we focus on the case of the consumers associations to illustrate how links were established and how they are likely to impact upon their participation. These links lead to the identification of three main incentives that govern the participation of consumers in standard-setting activities: an *operational incentive*, a *thematic incentive* and a *rhetorical incentive*. These incentives constitute our analytical framework and are aimed at explaining why consumers associations participate, where, and how; in other words they help us to understand the dynamic of the involvement of consumers associations.

The participation of consumers is important in order to bring "real world requirements" to the standard-setting process (Jakobs et al., 1997). Moreover their inclusion brings various

material, cognitive and symbolic resources that can be mobilized by standardization bodies to bolster their credibility (Boström, 2006, p. 361). Thus, involving consumers and taking their claims into account contribute to the construction of the authority of standardization bodies through input and throughput legitimacy. While the importance of consumer representation was recognised long ago by the creation in 1978 of the ISO Committee on consumer policy (COPOLCO), it must be noted that the input of this body cannot be equated with direct participation in technical committees in which it has for instance no voting rights. According to its terms of reference, COPOLCO only "selects areas in ISO's work that are of priority to consumers... develops publications to promote consumer participation in standards work and to train consumer representatives for this task. It coordinates training activities and representation ... organizes annual workshops that bring together representatives of consumers, public authorities, manufacturers and standardization experts" (ISO, n.d.). Whatever the positive outcomes of such procedures, they differ from potential results to be expected from the direct participation of consumers' group and civil society associations in the technical work to be sustained by the INTERNORM platform.

It is worth noting that standardization has offered a valuable tool for associations and governments in charge of consumer protection. As early as 1929, comparative testing activities were launched in order to provide the consumer with accurate information he could mobilized in his buying decision (Hilton, 2008, p. 216; Ruffat, 1987, pp. 32-33). According to Mallard (2000b, p. 392), conducting comparative tests is a current practice that serves to feed "the consumer press" which represents a substantive part of consumers' associations' financing. In other words, comparative tests belongs to products that consumers associations provide to their membership as it usually includes a subscription to a magazine with valuable consumer-oriented information. The realization of these comparative tests has encouraged consumer associations to take a closer look at

the work of standardization bodies. As Arthur Kallet, director of Consumers Union put it in 1956, “ Few of the testing agencies’ technical problems, from brand sampling to rating, are outside the orbit of cooperatives approaches to solutions under the aegis of standardization bodies”; he consequently pointed up “(...) the need for aid by other qualified agencies, primarily through the standardization process.” (Kallet, 1956, p. 288). So, “It is understood that for comparative testing to be reliable it must use testing standards and even develop future standards” (Cochoy, 2005, p. S45). As we see, consumers’ associations may achieve significant benefits in using standards. In that regard, the participation in standard-setting activities is not only a resource-consuming activity, but also a resource-providing activity through its inclusion in the production of selective goods. So the usage of standards by an association in the provision of selective goods (i.e. through comparative testing) supports and encourages its participation to the committee in charge of its definition. Their involvement will thus follow an *operational incentive*.

According to Marcus-Steiff (1977, p. 88), one of the main purpose of consumers’ associations is to inform consumers. These informational tasks can be performed through comparative testing or labeling activities, which are mainly standard-based activities. However, consumers’ associations’ informational tasks concerned not every objects, but are concentrated on products and services of « mass » consumption as well as on broader societal issue (health, safety, environment). Consequently, the topical specificity of consumers’ associations’ implication in standardization committees should reflect these themes. Moreover, the institutionalization of the consumer representation through the COPOLCO provides a framework that also oriented their thematic involvement. But “These new institutional arrangements did not, however, mean that consumers took part directly in the standardizing process. Consumer were involved in the setting of priorities, but remained outside the technical work. Consumers were, therefore, more “trustees” than “execu-

tives” in the standardization process” (Cochoy, 2006, p. 153). Even if consumers were more “trustees” than “executives”, the setting of priorities in this strategic committee should be reflected in their thematic involvement in the technical committees. The topical specificity of the participation of consumers association will thus follow a *thematic incentive*.

A last and more general incentive is rhetorical. Frank Cochoy suggest that “Industrialists took consumer protection as a means to prevent unfair competition, and standardizers promoted the consumer standpoint as a way to “exist” in discussions with their industrial partners” (2006, p. 145). Following his argument, consumers provide a rhetorical resource for standardizers as well as for industrialists which in turn reinforce consumers’ effective participation (Cochoy, 2000, p. 84). This rhetorical incentive refers primarily to the dynamics driving their effective involvement. We also extend this notion to the distinct way that allows consumers stakes to be taken into account during the committees’ deliberations. For example, a lighter manufacturer has achieved significant success in promoting higher security standards for lighters in the name of the consumers (Ben Youssef et al., 2005, pp. 381-382). As we see, all stakeholders can talk in the name of the consumer. This suggest that the propensity to include consumers associations stakes depends of the adequacy of the different interests speaking for the consumer. The participation of consumers association will thus follow a *rhetorical incentive*.

To sum up, the lack of cognitive and material support unquestionably explains to some extent the under-representation of civil society actors in standardization. Yet, the following assumptions may well supplement such a conventional resource-based explanation:

1. The frequent use of national or international standards in the products and services provided by an association (comparative testing or labeling activities) encourages its participation (operational incentive).
2. The participation of associations is likely to be focused in committees dealing with

cross-cutting themes regarded as inherently more controversial and in those relating to products or services to which it has acquired specific expertise and identified as strategic priorities (thematic incentive).

3. Taking into account demands from consumer associations, environmental organization and trade unions depends on the rhetorical resource that they represent for other stakeholders (rhetorical incentive).

These three hypotheses should contribute to a more detailed and comprehensive explanation of the participation of consumer associations, environmental organizations and trade unions in the standardization process. The first hypothesis explains *who* participates and *why* by focusing on the selectivity of the operational incentive provided by standard-based comparative testing and labeling activities; the second clarifies *where* their participation takes place by examining the thematic incentive of the distinct issues to be standardized; the third untangles *how* the influence of civil society associations in standardization is likely to be reinforced by pointing to the rhetorical incentives that their participation offers to other participants.

### Methodological Considerations

The analysis of the standard-setting process is prompt to direct observation, because negotiations on distinct standards involve a limited number of places, persons, and actions allowing increasingly fine-tuned observations (Arborio & Fournier, 1999). Moreover direct observation is particularly relevant in understanding how a microcosm functions and evolves over a “long term” period and standards-setting belongs to such a microcosm. Furthermore, standard-setting in committee is a research field where the recording is a recurring activity and the presence of observers a widespread practice. Direct observation will allow us to identify participants in the international committees and to follow “step by step” the actions taking place in these committees (Peretz, 1998). Fur-

thermore we will detect the resources mobilized during the discussions and the dynamic of the standardization work within the committee. This ethnographic approach will not be limited to the work in the deliberation room, but will also be used in coffee breaks and lunches in order to broaden our understanding of coalition building process. Access to the field research will be facilitated by the institutional membership of INTERNORM to the SNV and by the contacts already woven with the SNV during a past internship of an INTERNORM staff member. Finally, these observations will be supplemented by interviews and consultation of written documents.

### Discussion

Standardization actions initiated through INTERNORM should sustain and reinforce the participatory process of standardization organization and provide a useful research field for a better understanding of the role of consumer associations, trade unions and environmental associations in the setting of the technical specifications governing globalization. This represents the major strength of the project. We have to turn now to the possible weaknesses of the project which identification can lead to a significant improvement of the project.

Concerning the rationale of the project, it could be argued that what is needed from a participation of the civil society is not so a technical competence, but more a contribution in term of real-world requirements. Following this argument, the task of civil society actors is to make other stakeholders aware of the possible (mis-) use that end users will make of the object under standardization. Consequently, academic knowledge will be of minor use in strengthening their participation – consumers’ association do not need an academic to sustain the fact that small mechanical parts of toys can be eaten by kids. Being aware of that different line of reasoning will enable us to assess this argument. Even if the interviews with key representatives of civil society actors tend to invalidate this



argument, the participation in standard-setting committee will allow us to assess the extent to which these actors can bring “real world” requirement on a trivial – or non technical – basis. By so doing, we have to keep in mind that the validity of this argument is perhaps related to the thematic of the committee, as suggested by Jakobs et al. (1997).

A second weakness can be related to the tension between the two aims of project, on the one hand a practical involvement of partners in standardization activities, and on the other an analysis of the dynamic governing their involvement. As the project itself provides material and cognitive support for participation, it impacts upon the possibility to assess the operational incentive. This argument is correct, but it does not invalidate the framework of analysis. First, on epistemological ground, a non positivist understanding of social sciences takes for granted that knowledge production interferes with the reality which such knowledge refers to. Second, in providing crucial resources for participation to civil society associations, the project tries to move beyond the classical resource-based explanations. Third, the incentive provided by the project does not invalidate other incentives: if, for instance, the operational incentive is important in explaining why an association rather than another takes part to standardization processes, associations using standards in the provision of selective goods should be even more interested in taking part to the INTERNORM project than associations who do not include standards in their provisions.

To conclude, the INTERNORM project represents a great opportunity to achieve significant impact on standardization in regard to civil society concerns as well as to raise consciousness about the social, economical and political impacts of standards in society at large. If this goal is attained, the viability of the INTERNORM platform should be more easily secured through external funding. Such an outcome should in turn encourage a replication of the project in other countries.

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