PARTICIPANTS IN STANDARD SETTING

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Contents

Summary

Standard establishment and setting is a process which takes place in four phases. In each of these phases different participants are involved.

Phase 1 entails the establishment of a scientific-technical basis for environmental standards. Basic questions to be answered include: are there levels of exposure at which no (adverse) health and/or environmental effects are expected; what are the hazards of environmental exposure; what are the mathematical relationships describing doses and effects; what is the cost-benefit analysis of setting a standard at a defined level? In this phase authorities are assisted by international organizations such as the World Health Organization and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development which review the scientific data on their applicability for setting standards.

In Phase 2 authorities submit a standard proposal. In many countries national governments act in a sovereign way on this. However, most often, submitting a standard

might be driven by international factors, external to individual countries. This is the case, e.g., in the European Union where the different member states handle a harmonized system of (many) environmental standards.

Phase 3 involves the participation of societal stakeholders. In this phase authorities seek advice from environmental groups, farmers, business and industry, labor unions and other relevant societal actors for their proposal. The outcome should be a shared assessment of the environmental, socio-economic, political and ethical aspects of the proposal. As these societal actors meet in councils for sustainable development, the latter gain increasing importance through their participation in the process. This type of participatory decision-making is a rather recent development. This makes it subject to improvements on the responsibilities of the actors, specific methods to increase effectiveness and efficiency, and communication of the results.

During Phase 4, the government will decide upon the standard in a well informed way. The value will be enshrined in a law.

1. Introduction

The process of standards setting involves different actors. Authorities occupy a central position. They initialize the process, constitute a file entailing the scientific and technical elements of importance to the standard, guide and often contribute to the socio-economic discussion and take a final decision on the level of the standard, which they lay down in a law. This is the role of national or regional governments competent in environmental policies.

To collect the information on which environmental standards are based, authorities rely on scientific and technical information which is reviewed by international organizations. The World Health Organization (WHO) has a long standing reputation in establishing guidelines for air and drinking water quality. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provides its member countries with essential data for norm setting on chemicals. Moreover, there is a forthright tendency to harmonize environmental standards on an international basis. In Western Europe for instance the European Union (EU) is very influential in setting standards in the different member countries.

These standard targeted reviews provided by international organizations are strongly driven by technical-scientific experts. The latter are also involved at the national and regional levels. Here they provide advice on the specific vulnerability of the local ecosystems or are involved in cost-benefit analyses related to the implementation of new or revised standards.

However, in addition to the science and technology basis, standard establishment also involves socio-economical considerations. Traditionally these considerations were taken into account by the authorities and influenced the final decision. More recently, this part of the process has been structured and made official. Before deciding upon a standard the authorities will submit their proposal to receive comments from the main societal stakeholders: environmental groups, business and industry, farmers, small and medium

sized businesses, labor unions, local authorities. In the post-Rio era, these groups have met in councils for sustainable development. Submitting a standard proposal to this forum might result in a shared assessment on the environmental, socio-economical, political and ethical impacts of the implementation of a new standard. Figure 1 schematically compares the traditional, authorities-driven way of decision-making, with the more contemporary approach in which the stakeholders participate in the final decision-making process.

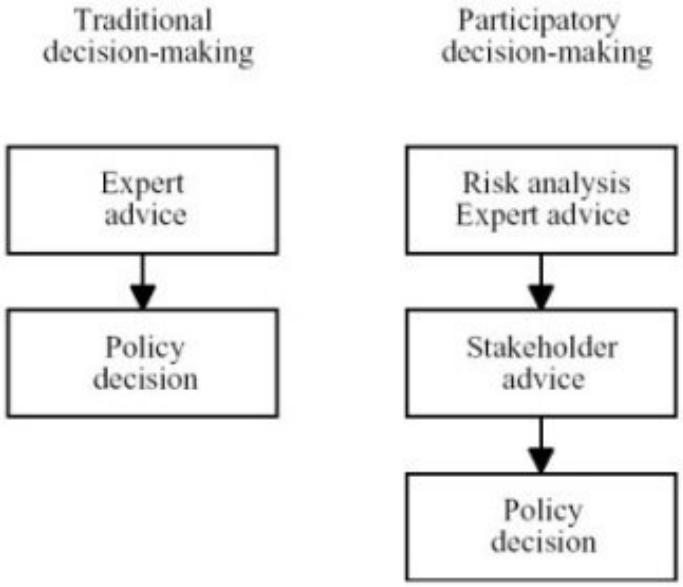

Figure 1: Comparison between traditional and participatory models of decision-making. Source: Olsthoorn et al. (1997)

This article analyzes the process of standards setting, focusing on the participants in the process. It analyses the contributions of authorities, international bodies, and societal actors in the different stages of standards establishment. The paper also describes the main rationale and lines of thought followed by the actors in the discussion and looks into possibilities to improve both the effectivity and the efficiency of the process.

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Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD. http://www.oecd.org/. [The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development runs a program on basic data for standard setting for priority chemicals]

International Standards Organization – ISO. http://www.iso.ch/. [The International Standards Organization establishes technical and managerial standards. Among the latter, e.g., the ISO 14000 series is important for environmental management. This organization does not produce environmental quality guidelines]

Food and Agriculture Organization – FAO. http://www.fao.org/. [The Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN provides international guidelines for food]

Belgian Federal Council for Sustainable Development – FRDO. http://www.frdo.be/en/frontpag.htm. [The Belgian Federal Council for Sustainable Development is one of the many councils worldwide that provides advice to stakeholders on e.g. product standards]

Biographical Sketch

Professor Luc Hens obtained his Licentiate in Biology from the Free University of Brussels (VUB) in 1974, Aggregation of Higher Secondary School Teaching from the VUB in 1975, and PhD from the Faculty of Science of the VUB in 1981.

Professor Hens is a member of several professional societies and recipient of a number of honours and awards, including the prestigious award of the Belgian Royal Academy of Sciences and Arts which he was awarded in 1984. Currently he is the Head of the Department of Human Ecology at the VUB.

He has been responsible for organising and/or participating in several international research and postgraduate teaching programmes in many countries including Bolivia, Bulgaria, Brazil, Brussels, the Czech Republic, Ghana, Hungary, Turkey, the Ukraine and Vietnam.

To date the publications of Professor Hens number about 200 including twenty-six books. He is also the co-editor of the journals *Environment, Development and Sustainability* and *Environmental Pollution.* His teaching and research interests include environmental management, sustainable development, human ecology, and related issues.