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Distr.
LIMITED
E/ESCWA/SDPD/2011/WG.11/Report
5 January 2012
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

WORKSHOP ON VOLUNTARY SUSTAINABILITY STANDARDS TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION, FOOD QUALITY AND SAFETY, ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND TRADE IN THE ARAB REGION BEIRUT, 27 SEPTEMBER 2011

Summary

The workshop, organized in collaboration with the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and under the patronage of the Minister of Agriculture of Lebanon, took place on 27 September 2010 at the United Nations House in Beirut, Lebanon. The aim of the workshop was to highlight the growing importance of voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) in the region, to assess how these VSS could be used to support the adoption of sustainable agricultural production practices and to propose a framework for developing a regional initiative on VSS with the view to support the development of a sustainable agriculture system. The workshop came at an opportune time as people are becoming increasingly aware of the need to produce “safe” and “fair” products for both the people and the environment, while seeking to establish regional products within international markets.

This one-day workshop focused on four main themes, aimed to: (i) review the VSS concept and its implication for the region; (ii) discuss the challenges and opportunities facing the adoption of VSS in the region; (iii) review the application of VSS through specific case studies; and (iv) assess the prospect of VSS development in the region including forward planning. Consequently, an in-depth review of the concept, role and trends together with a review of experiences in key areas took place. This was complemented by a high-level discussion on key issues pertaining to the adoption, development and promotion of VSS in the region. Participants at the workshop were in agreement that VSS and standards are important for the region and therefore should be promoted. Both producers and consumers would benefit from VSS, which would allow regional producers access not only into regional and global markets but also to become more competitive on local markets.

CONTENTS

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
Introduction.....	1-4	3
<i>Chapter</i>		
I. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	5-7	3
A. Conclusions	5-6	3
B. Recommendations	7	4
II. PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS	8-24	4
A. Session 1. VSS: concept and implication for the ESCWA region	8-12	4
B. Session 2. Challenges and opportunities for adopting VSS: private sector initiatives and case studies	13-18	5
C. Session 3. High-level panel discussion: prospective of VSS in the region and the way forward.....	19-24	7
III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK AND ATTENDANCE	25-30	8
A. Organization of work.....	25	8
B. Opening the workshop.....	26-29	8
C. Participants	30	9
IV. EVALUATION	31-32	9
<i>Annex. List of participants</i>		11

Introduction

1. The world's natural resources are increasingly coming under threat, mainly as a result of human behaviour. There is a need to protect natural resources by ensuring that economic systems are progressively more eco-friendly and socially just. This is the basic principle of sustainability which was adopted by the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Since 1992, the imperative of meeting the needs of present generations without sacrificing those of the future has emerged as a global call to action. This has led to a growing recognition of the social, economic and environmental impacts of global markets and the potential power of leveraging market forces in order to bring positive change to sustainable development. As a result, there is an increasing demand for sustainably produced goods and services that not only comply with the safety regulations of importing countries, which is a general prerequisite for market access particularly in developed countries, but also in accordance with changing local preferences. Local consumers increasingly demand products that are "safe" and "fair" to both the people and the environment, products that are healthy with proper remuneration and that carry a small carbon and water footprint.

2. This has led to the development of voluntary eco-labeling and private corporate social responsibility initiatives, in line with growing interest in voluntary labels, standards and other *global* and *sector-wide* voluntary certification systems. The notion of sustainability is also evident within the term "Green Economy", which has emerged as one of the two major themes of next year's follow up conference to the 1992 Rio Summit, namely Rio+20. Sustainability standards aim to improve the quality of the environment, therefore the move towards a market for green goods and services supports the advent of a green economy.

3. It is in this context that the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), under the patronage of His Excellency Mr. Hussein Al Hajj Hassan, Minister of Agriculture of Lebanon, organized a workshop on voluntary sustainability standards on 27 September 2011, at the United Nations House in Beirut, Lebanon. During the workshop, officials, experts and other stakeholders from ESCWA member countries and the wider international community were able to discuss and share experiences with a view to highlight the growing importance of voluntary sustainability standards in the region and to assess how they could be used to encourage the adoption of sustainable production practices in the Arab region.

4. The major objectives of the workshop were to:

(a) Review the concept of voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) and its potential contribution to enhancing market access and increasing market share for products and commodities from the region;

(b) Raise awareness, exchange experiences and identify best practices related to VSS use;

(c) Highlight the growing importance of VSS for the region and assess how VSS could be used to encourage the adoption of sustainable production practices;

(d) Propose a framework for developing an operational regional initiative for VSS that could support the development of a sustainable agriculture system.

I. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. CONCLUSIONS

5. In order to encourage a debate on the subject of VSS, the workshop was set up to allow for in-depth presentations on a few selected topics and the sharing of experiences. Presentations were interspersed with discussions, which culminated in a high-level discussion panel. The presentations provided an overall review of the region's agriculture as related to VSS, an introduction to the concept of VSS together with its role and

related trends, an overview of how VSS facilitates market access, and a review of VSS and standards in the ESCWA region. Other presentations included a review of how VSS impacts local water management, the importance of VSS in promoting good agricultural practices, and an overview of the experiences of “Healthy Basket” in organic agriculture in Lebanon. Between the presentations, participants were able to ask clarifying questions, to provide their own views and to share their experiences on issues related to standards and VSS. A high-level discussion panel was held where eminent personalities from Lebanon’s Ministry of Agriculture, ESCWA, GIZ and the Arab Industrial Development and Mining Organization (AIDMO) engaged in a debate on a number of key issues related to VSS and standards, with a view to identify the most effective way to promote VSS in the region.

6. Overall, deliberations revealed participants agreed that VSS are important for the region and that there is an urgent need for their promotion. Both producers and consumers would benefit from VSS. It was also stressed that VSS would allow regional producers easier access not only into regional and global markets, but also to become more competitive on local markets.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

7. The following major points emerged from the various presentations and deliberations:

(a) In order to promote VSS, there is a need to build strong partnerships and to strengthen bilateral cooperation and agreements, while taking advantage of already existing regional initiatives;

(b) Governments must play a strong role as the main powerbrokers amongst various stakeholders by setting the right policies, instituting an adequate legal environment and providing appropriate incentives;

(c) VSS should be promoted as they offer increasing opportunities for the region’s agricultural sector. They benefit both producers, through better pricing, and consumers, through higher quality and safer products;

(d) There is a need to act on the development and/or adoption of VSS in all countries of the region. Emphasis should be placed on adopting and adapting already existing global VSS in order to both ease and speed up the process of conforming to VSS so the region is quickly able to reap the benefits;

(e) The development of an ArabGAP should be explored. Such an organization would help local and regional agricultural production through the adoption of standardized agricultural practices that would improve the quality and safety of local produce, while enhancing intraregional trade.

II. PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. SESSION 1. VSS: CONCEPT AND IMPLICATION FOR THE ESCWA REGION

8. A presentation by Mr. Fady Asmar, a Consultant for ESCWA, provided an overview of the region’s agriculture sector with emphasis on agricultural-related VSS, including an assessment of their impact and recommendations for their promotion. The presentation highlighted that the region’s agricultural sector makes a low contribution to GDP and that it also faces major challenges, such as scarce resources, low productivity and low competitiveness on international markets. It also provided an overview of VSS, relevant models and their importance to the agricultural sector. The presentation noted that VSS contributes to the development of organic agriculture in the region and leads to improved agricultural production both in terms of quantity and quality, although they impose additional burdens on smallholders and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) who must bear the costs of compliance and adapt to new technical and technological challenges. The presentation concluded by advocating for the promotion, adoption and development of VSS in the region through measures such as, improved technical assistance, enhanced capacity-building, improved legislation, increased awareness and the provision of adequate incentives.

9. A presentation by Mr. Carsten Schmitz-Hoffmann from GIZ provided an introduction to VSS and emphasized their concept, role and trends. The presentation reviewed global challenges facing the agricultural sector, such as increasing competition and access to limited resources, the need to ensure food security and food safety, the impact of factors such as climate change, increasing water scarcity and the lack of adequate infrastructure in rural areas. It noted that the VSS movement dates from the 1970s and emphasizes good management practices along national, regional and global supply chains in order to improve marketing opportunities. VSS are sponsored by civil societies and businesses as they are not mandatory, even though they are increasingly being requested by trading partners. Numerous VSS exist, which differ in size, area of concern and reach. VSS aim at improving productivity, efficiency, quality, safety and traceability, amongst other goals.

10. A presentation by Ms. Müge Dolun from UNIDO provided an overview of the impact of VSS on market access. It noted that VSS cover various areas from labour rights to fair trade, environmental management, organic production, sustainable development, energy efficiency or carbon and water-footprints. VSS are growing in importance due to the combined effect of increasing consumer awareness, a perceived government gap in the provision of standards and their ability to act as a differentiation tool among similar or related products. The presentation noted that the multiplication of standards could impede trade as the majority of companies are currently operating outside the control of multilateral trade and environment systems. The presentation concluded by recommending the region increases its capacity to take advantage of voluntary standards, i.e. to adopt and use VSS, in order to ensure that it can reap the benefits arising from the economic and trading opportunities offered by VSS.

11. A presentation by Ms. Lena Dergham from the Lebanese Standards Institution (LIBNOR) highlighted the importance of standards, noting that they ensure safety and efficiency by linking laws and regulations to people and markets. The presentation noted that standards extend to all areas including climate, energy, transport and finance, amongst others. Standards contribute to sustainable economic development by increasing efficiency and effectiveness and therefore support the conservation of resources. They require organizations and companies to act in a socially responsible manner; building reputation, attracting and retaining workers, clients and users, and maintaining or improving productivity, safety and quality. The presentation noted that when standards are adopted they become technical regulations, which must be abided to; while standards, which have yet to become technical regulations, are voluntary, which is the case for most VSS. It concluded by noting that the adoption of VSS can be enhanced by addressing four major priorities, which are: raising awareness, improving infrastructure and the legal environment, building capacity and engaging stakeholders, while taking a proactive stance in the development process.

12. In the ensuing discussions it was noted that VSS are important and could be highly beneficial to the region and as such, should be adopted. It was also noted that cultural preferences are often overlooked in VSS, though consumers tend to buy products that conform to local customs. It was suggested that VSS that take into account local customs (halal products) should be developed. Questions were raised concerning why VSS should be introduced when few of the region's commodities are exported into international markets, i.e. outside the region. However, it was noted that preferences are also rapidly changing at local level as consumers are increasingly looking for improved safety and quality of the product. It was emphasized that VSS takes the issue of food safety into account. However, there is a need to improve the region's infrastructural capacity to meet these demands through for example, building more laboratories. There is also a need to increase the capacity of producers as they must initiate the changes, through adopting new techniques and methods of production.

B. SESSION 2. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADOPTING VSS: PRIVATE SECTOR INITIATIVES AND CASE STUDIES

13. A presentation by Mr. Adrian Sym from the Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS), an international standard addressing water issues based in Germany, provided an overview of the organization's structure and aim. AWS is composed of ten organizations that include among others the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the

International Water Management Institute (IWMI) and the Nature Conservancy. It aims to promote the responsible use of freshwater resources in order to make water resources both socially and economically beneficial as well as environmentally sustainable. The organization addresses issues of scarcity, quality, environment and social inequity with a view to enhance water quality, protect habitats and ensure good governance. Water stewardship implies collective actions aimed at addressing negative impacts that are shared by various stakeholders. The approach followed by AWS consists in raising awareness about water issues, measuring water use, measuring water impacts, understanding risks, devising appropriate response and carrying out a consistent follow-up. An international standard is currently being developed and is expected to be finalized by 2013 after various public consultations and testing takes place, currently on Lake Naivasha in Kenya.

14. In the ensuing discussions it was highlighted that the international standard will seek to engage smallholders and improve water governance. The international standard will aim to focus on whole basins instead of on a country-by-country basis, as is currently the case for Lake Naivasha in Kenya. It was also understood that current testing will help to assess the applicability of the standard at the field level and in the context of developing countries and poor households.

15. A presentation by Ms. Kerstin Uhlig from Global Good Agriculture Practices (GlobalGAP), a global certification programme for good agricultural practices based in Germany, provided an overview of the issues involved with global certification in order to promote good agricultural practices. GlobalGAP brings together producers and retailers with a view to encourage the production of market safe and quality products, while ensuring that farmers spend less time complying with standards than on production. Members of GlobalGAP include major retail and food service companies including supermarkets (Aldi, Carrefour, Walmart, etc.), food chains (McDonald, Wegmans, etc.) and agro-industries (Del Monte, Cargill, Bonita, etc.). Management is conducted through various technical committees that are accountable to a board, while certification is conducted by independent third party entities. The number of certified producers is continuously increasing on all continents, though the majority is located in developed countries. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has more than three thousand certified producers. GlobalGAP follows a holistic approach to ensure that the food consumed is produced according to good agricultural practices in order to market products which are safe and eco-friendly, ensure workers welfare and traceability of the product along the supply chain. A case-study was presented on how GAP was implemented in Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates).

16. It was noted that Lebanon had seven farms certified for GlobalGAP until a project funded by USAID increased the number to fourteen. Emphasis was placed on improving farm management through less input and the smart use of water, while also improving market access. It was further emphasized that GlobalGAP does not exclude small farmers although they are not well represented on the various boards and committees. Efforts are being made to encourage greater participation of small farmers.

17. A presentation by Ms. Rania Touma from “Healthy Basket”, a company involved in the organic market in Lebanon, provided an overview of organic agriculture production in Lebanon. Healthy Basket aims to promote social responsibility while linking small organic food producers to high value domestic and regional markets. It started operation in 1999 with a view to improve the livelihood of small farmers. Producers are certified by Libancert, a local certifying body. The presentation noted that organic agriculture promotes a system that places emphasis on ecosystem management rather than the use of synthetic agricultural inputs. The term “Organic” is a label which indicates that the concerned product has gone through a certification process with regards to facilities, ingredients and practices used. The producer is required to pay a fee for certification, to keep thorough records and to follow specific guidelines. The label “Organic” is different from the term “natural”, which is not a regulated certification system. Organic standards are very technical, strict and specific and producers have to abide by them in order to be certified and to maintain that certification. These include, for example, not using synthetic fertilizers but instead relying on biological control, green manure and mechanical weeding, amongst others.

18. The discussions highlighted that there is an increased cost for organic producers, but they usually receive a premium on their products. It was also noted that some regional products are not part of the Codex Alimentarius or other VSS and so are not readily marketable on international markets, as they do not conform to international norms. It was suggested that VSS should be developed for these products in order to improve their safeness, quality and marketability. It was highlighted that in Lebanon a law on organic agriculture is being developed and is expected to facilitate the development of organic agriculture. In Egypt organic farmers are required to be registered in order to ease control but also to facilitate access to markets. Concerns were raised as to how to ensure that contamination does not take place, especially when organic farms are contiguous to non-organic ones. It was noted that contamination does occur but it must be minimized as much as possible to avoid losing certification.

C. SESSION 3. HIGH-LEVEL PANEL DISCUSSION: PROSPECTIVE OF VSS IN THE REGION AND THE WAY FORWARD

19. The third session of the workshop was entirely devoted to a high-level discussion which featured eminent personalities including Mr. M. Khansa, Adviser to the Minister of Agriculture (MoA), Lebanon, Mr. N. Khoury, Deputy Executive Secretary, ESCWA, Mr. M. Haouari, Director of Industrial Development, AIDMO, and Mr. C. Schmitz-Hoffman, Head of Division of Trade and Standards, GIZ. The panel was chaired by Professor R. Zuraik, from the American University of Beirut (AUB). The panelists were invited to share their views and opinions on a few VSS related key issues, as follows:

20. On the issue of how a country that exports agricultural commodities mainly onto Arab markets could overcome the difficulties and constraints faced in order to improve trade flow with its main regional trading partners and the rest of the world, it was underscored that various attempts should be made to improve the marketability of agricultural commodities, as only some attempts will be successful. It was stressed that there is need for a strong political will and commitment and collaboration amongst various ministries and stakeholders in order to push through the agenda. It was also suggested that there is a need to strengthen ties with other Arab countries by improving bilateral agreements and cooperation, while taking advantage of existing regional initiatives as the starting point. For example, a new multi-billion fund was recently established to promote intraregional trade in the region. It was also stressed that improvement in trade leads to improved welfare, but appropriate standards need to be adopted as part of an overall agricultural development strategy for the region in order for this to happen.

21. On the issue of how organizations could support the development of VSS, especially those that enhance the competitiveness of small producers and SMEs which have less means for adaptation, it was noted that there is a need to adopt comprehensive plans which put emphasis on (a) inclusiveness: by ensuring that all farmers and producers are included; (b) cooperation: organizations must plan in collaboration and implement plans in a cohesive manner; (c) knowledge and information sharing: ensuring the impact on the farms is mitigated while potentialities are embraced; (d) providing proper incentives while at the same time facilitating market access; and (e) ensuring coherence, especially at the political level as both national and regional efforts need the support of regional and international organizations. It was also stressed that adopting and enforcing standards requires strong partnerships and therefore international collaboration is needed. In addition, there is a need to address market failures, which will require interventions from either the government or the private sector. This was the case for “Healthy Basket”, which was set up by consumers in order to meet their needs at the same time as supporting producers. It was noted that the eminent question is repeatedly whether VSS should continue to be voluntary or become mandatory. Governments must play a strong role in this as they are the main powerbrokers amongst various stakeholders and progress could be achieved by setting the right policies and providing appropriate incentives.

22. On the question of whether standards serve only large producers and therefore how to improve the reality of smaller producers, notably with regards to providing appropriate incentives to enhance trade, it was noted that there is a need to commit producers to certain standards. The Arab region has sectors that are attractive to both producers and investors but are neither well organized nor advertised. For example,

products labeled “produit terroir” could improve marketability and profitability but in most cases the term is being used in an anarchic manner as there are no appropriate VSS and/or other standards to support its use. There is a need to devise such standards or VSS and to link these to international standards. The ultimate goal of the certification process is to encourage farmers to rely on good agricultural practices, which would help improve overall farm efficiency, reduce environmental impact and enhance food safety and, therefore improving trade and market access.

23. On the issue of whether standards are the best way to provide incentives in order to increase trade in the Arab region, it was noted that VSS could help if a proper enabling environment could also be provided, such as adequate incentives or a fair legal framework, amongst others. VSS could offer positive opportunities to the agricultural sector of the region as they benefit farmers directly by ensuring farmers receive better prices, while also ensuring that consumers benefit through higher quality and safer products. It was highlighted that it would be best to begin on a small scale and to focus on small producers, which would not preclude the government from taking a strong role. There is also a need to support activities that are beneficial to small farmers.

24. On the question of whether regional collaboration and cooperation is important, it was noted that it could help in the development and/or adoption of standards applicable to all countries of the region. However it was emphasized that the focus should not only be on developing new regional standards but also on adopting and adapting already proven international models, which enable them to fit local settings. Otherwise the whole process would risk being too slow, which would discourage stakeholders. Making use of existing tools and building on them would ensure that the new systems are in compliance with prevailing international standards and regulations. It was also noted that VSS are linked to food security as the option of achieving self-sufficiency has been disproved as a viable long-term strategy. It was suggested to consider how to develop an Arab GAP that could help local and regional agricultural production especially as existing intraregional trade is strong. However, to achieve this goal requires a better organization and harmonization of institutions from the region. The approach suggested was to rely on existing institutions and to adapt them in line with those found in other parts of the World. Consequently, it would be necessary to revisit and update existing agreements and to ensure their implementation. In order for this to happen there would be substantial associated costs, including on small farmers. There would also remain a need to conduct proper monitoring in order to remain compliant with international, regional and national agreements.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK AND ATTENDANCE

A. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

25. The workshop was held on 27 September 2011 at the United Nations House in Beirut, Lebanon. The one-day workshop had four main themes which were to (a) review the VSS concept and its implication for the region; (b) discuss the challenges and opportunities facing the adoption of VSS in the region; (c) review the application of VSS through specific case studies; and (d) assess the prospects of VSS in the region, while also proposing a way forward. The workshop was divided into three sessions in order to allow for an in-depth review of the concept and role of VSS together with sharing experiences in key areas (good agricultural practices, water stewardship and organic agriculture, amongst others). These were complemented by a high-level discussion panel on selected key issues in order to reach a consensus on the way forward for VSS in the region.

B. OPENING OF THE WORKSHOP

26. The workshop was opened by Mr. Thomas Engelhardt, GIZ Country Director for Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, Mr. Nadim Khouri, Deputy Executive Secretary of ESCWA, and H.E. Mr. Hussein Hajj Hassan, Minister of Agriculture of Lebanon and Patron of the Workshop.

27. Mr. Engelhardt noted that the world is facing numerous challenges and therefore is under pressure to move towards a more sustainable economic growth. He noted that there has been an increase in the number of voluntary eco-labeling and private social responsibility strategies. He further noted the need to clarify issues concerning the processes, criteria and actors involved, which is why GIZ is joining forces with international partners and national governments in order to strengthen sustainable development and production, and the development of VSS.

28. Mr. Khouri noted that the challenge of achieving safety and quality in production processes is evolving worldwide, especially in the context of globalization and rapid technological change. He noted that VSS are tools to ensure that both goods and services are produced in an eco-friendly and socially responsible manner and therefore play an important role in promoting global trade and access to markets. He noted that countries of the region are yet to effectively utilize these tools although they could help local producers improve the quality of their products, while also allowing greater access to markets beyond national and regional borders. He concluded by saying that it is time for Arab stakeholders to take advantage of these tools and to participate in their development, with a view to move the region towards a greener path.

29. H.E. Mr. Al Hajj Hassan emphasized the importance of the workshop as VSS issues are vital at the global level particularly in light of the rapidly evolving politico-economic challenges in the world. He noted that current consumer patterns and the culture of consumption has provided people with basic welfare care, but are also leading to increased politico-economic competition and ever increasing spending in order to maintain such a lifestyle. He further noted that this reality is leading numerous economic systems to the brink of collapse, instead of a path to economic prosperity. He stressed the fact that for the global economy to recover from the current crises, difficult decisions must be faced, which require strong political leadership. He noted that VSS are primarily moral obligations and posed the question of whether VSS should be supported through appropriate incentives or enforced through relevant regulations. He closed by recommending enforcing VSS in order to stop wasting resources.

C. PARTICIPANTS

30. The workshop was attended by officials and experts from eight ESCWA member countries (Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic and United Arab Emirates), one non-ESCWA member country (Tunisia), experts from various regional and international institutions and organizations (Italian Cooperation, USAID, GlobalGAP, Alliance for Water Stewardship, AIDMO, ACSAD, UNIDO and FAO), experts from various Lebanese institutions, organizations and companies (American University of Beirut (AUB), Investment Development Authority of Lebanon, Lebanese Standard Institution, Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture of Beirut and Mount Lebanon, Syndicate of Lebanese Food Industrialists, Middle East North Africa Food Safety Associates, Healthy Basket, Arc-en-Ciel, Fair Trade Lebanon, GlobalGap Lebanon, LibanCert, Somoplast Industrial Company, Daher for Agricultural Development Co., Jana Agricultural Supply & Investment, ACDI/VOCA, Emkan for Microfinance and Community Development, Green Line Association and the Association of the Friends of Ibrahim Abd El Al), in addition to consultants and experts from the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and ESCWA. The full list of participants is attached in the annex.

IV. EVALUATION

31. An evaluation questionnaire was distributed in order to assess the relevance, effectiveness and impact of the meeting. The feedback received was positive with nearly all the respondents rating the quality, usefulness, organization and logistical arrangements of the meeting as good or excellent. The majority of the participants found that the workshop met its objectives and expectations. In addition, the participants found that the subject of the workshop was relevant, the duration was adequate, it introduced new ideas and the workshop overall was beneficial. Nearly all respondents indicated that they would like follow-up activities, such as capacity-building, assessing local and regional capacities, organizing multi-stakeholder meetings to review and assess existing standards, a network of VSS organizations and stakeholders to exchange

information and experiences, assessing possibilities for a regional GlobalGAP or ArabGAP, organizing follow up meetings on the subject and investigating the short and medium-term impact of VSS on farmers and other stakeholders including those not participating in standards or the implementation of related projects.

32. Some participants did make recommendations for improving upcoming meetings. These included, for example, the distribution of presentations and other material prior to the meeting, allowing the sharing of more regional experiences and more time for discussion.

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