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and Standardization Policies

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Item 8 (d) of the provisional agenda

Forest Certification and Organic Agriculture

Note by the secretariat

The present document contains information (a) on the activities of the UNECE Timber Committee related to the certification of sustainable forest management and (b) on the activities of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) related to the harmonization of norms and standards for organic agriculture.

It is presented to the delegations for information and consideration.

The delegations might wish to inform their national agencies about activities on forest certification and organic agriculture.

I. POLICY FORUM ON “FOREST CERTIFICATION – DO GOVERNMENTS HAVE A ROLE?”

29 September 2005, Palais des Nations, Geneva

1. Forest certification is a tool whose core element is to provide information on an intangible characteristic of wood products, the quality of the forest management during the process of producing the raw material. The purpose of setting up a system to provide this information is to promote sustainable forest management, notably by giving consumers information which will enable them to distinguish between products made from wood which has been produced sustainably and products made of wood from non-sustainable sources. Certified forest products should have a market advantage compared to non-certified products, creating an incentive to manage the forest according to the standards of the certification schemes. Compliance with the standards is audited by accredited certifiers and proven through labels on the products.

2. However, even if this definition may not assign a role for Governments, their overall responsibilities and roles may influence these developments and may make it necessary to take a position: not only do they have an overall commitment to promote sustainable forest management (inside and outside their own country), they also own and manage forests themselves, procure goods and services according to agreed rules, set the rules for international trade and provide a legal framework for domestic trade, standardisation and technical regulation and consumer information.

3. Different stakeholder groups urge Governments to strengthen or reduce their actions in these different areas, posing complex issues of principle and of practical choice for governments in the ECE region and elsewhere. The aim of the policy forum is to explore these issues, for Governments, but with the participation of stakeholders, to promote rational and balanced choices. The policy forum will focus on the following questions:

- a. Should governments use forest certification to promote sustainable forest management, and if so, how?
- b. Forest certification is an obstacle to international trade: do its benefits outweigh its disadvantages, and how can Governments promote trade in wood and forest products which is sustainable in all respects?

4. The policy forum is planned as a whole-day event with presentations from different Government standpoints and stakeholder perspectives, a panel discussion, with a clear emphasis for open discussions. For a lively exchange of information, government representatives are encouraged to share their views and experiences at the national level. Members of the Working Party are encouraged to participate in the forum, for which the Chair is preparing a paper.

5. Additional information about the event will be posted on the UNECE/FAO Timber Branch website (<http://www.unece.org/trade/timber/docs/tc-sessions/tc-63/tc-63.htm>).

II. INTERNATIONAL TASK FORCE ON HARMONIZATION AND EQUIVALENCE IN ORGANIC AGRICULTURE

6. It is recalled that an UNCTAD/FAO/IFOAM International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF) was established in February 2003 to study the issue of harmonization and equivalence in organic agriculture. The main purpose of the Task Force has been to promote the international trade of environmentally friendly products, in particular from developing countries. Representatives of the Working Party on Regulatory Cooperation and Standardization Policies participated in establishing this Task Force.

7. The Task Force tries to bring together regulators, standardizers and consumers to look at means of facilitating trade; hence the Working Party's interest in monitoring ITF's activities which have been presented at previous WP.6 sessions.

8. WP.6 representatives have also taken part in some ITF meetings and shared with ITF experts WP.6's regulatory approaches (in particular UNECE WP.6 "Recommendation "L" - "International Model for Technical Harmonization"). The Working Party had noted that Eastern European countries were not participating in the activities of the Task Force and had requested UNECE member State delegates to inform their respective agencies of the ITF projects.

9. The Task Force, whose main objective is to overcome "organic" trade barriers caused by standards and regulations, has made considerable progress. There are now more than 20 people from Governments at the table, and in addition, people from the WTO (World Trade Organization), OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme), and UNECE are participating. The private sector is also represented, including certification bodies, accreditators, trade, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the international level. IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements), FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) and UNCTAD continue to lead the process. According to the Task Force secretariat, ITF is getting closer to proposing some tangible solutions for the members to consider. The discussions have been fruitful. Already there are results from this dialogue as is reflected in the initiatives of individual members in both the government and the private sector.

10. So far, the ITF has identified:

- (a) Criteria for the assessment of solutions for harmonization of regulation of the organic sector. These have led to the development of initial objectives for a solution and should continue to guide the ITF during the implementation of its work programme.
- (b) Three main areas for attention have been identified and broadly called:
 - Rationalization of standards
 - Rationalization of conformity assessment requirements at the certification level; and
 - Rationalization of the approval mechanism of the Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs)
- (c) A proposal based on one international standard, one international conformity assessment requirement and an array of possible mechanisms for recognition of CABs is to be developed

- (d) A number of considerations that require attention and investigation or information arising from other sources should feed into the process as ITF moves toward a harmonized system.
 - (e) A number of alternative approaches also need to be investigated on the way.
11. The next ITF meeting will take place in Hammamet, Tunisia, from 5 to 7 December 2005.
 12. Among other papers to be discussed at that event will be a proposal for developing Common Regulatory Objectives for Organic Norms. This proposal is based on the WP.6 “International Model”.
 13. The Working Party will be informed at the current session about the Task Force’s work (for more information on ITF visit: http://www.unctad.org/trade_env/itf-organic).

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