

Briefing Paper



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Consumer Participation in Standardisation Process

This briefing paper aims to inform the consumers and their representatives about the standardisation process and its importance. The main objective of the briefing paper is to increase informed participation and interventions by consumers and consumer organisations to make the standardisation process more effective and consumer-friendly.

Standards

Have you ever thought what would happen if a Sim Card bought by you does not fit into your mobile or new movie CD/DVD does not fit well in your CD/DVD player or a bulb does not fit into the holder or your pen drive does not fit well in your computer's drive or so on? You can well imagine how the life will be in such situations. But, **thanks to standards** for averting such problems.

The specific meaning of the term "standard" varies, depending on context: it can refer to a screw thread, a unit of measurement, a regular set of practices or a way of looking at the world.

As per ISO/IEC guide 2, standard is a "document, established by consensus and approved by a recognised body that provides for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for activities or their results, aimed at the achievement of the optimum degree of order in a given context". In simple terms, we can say that standard is a published document, established by consensus and approved by a recognised body, which sets out specifications and procedures to ensure that a material, product, method or service meets its purpose and consistently performs to its intended use.

Brief History of Standardisation

Based on relics found, standardisation can be traced back to the ancient civilisations of Babylon and early Egypt. The earliest standards were the physical standards for weights and measures. As trade and commerce developed, written documents evolved that set mutually agreed upon standards for products and services, such as agriculture, ships, buildings and weapons. Initially, these standards were part of a single contract between supplier and purchaser. Later, the same standards came to be used across a range of transactions forming the basis for modern

standardisation. Standardisation, today, goes beyond product specifications and requirements to include global issues such as health care, environment and safety.

Benefits of Standardisation and Standards

Standards solve issues ranging from product compatibility to addressing consumer safety and health concerns. Standards also simplify product development and reduce non-value-adding costs, thereby increasing user's ability to compare competing products. Standards are the fundamental building blocks for international trade. Only through the use of standards can requirements of interconnectivity and interoperability can be assured.

The impact of standards can be felt around the globe as they affect world trade, ensure public safety and drive market developments. An extensive study initiated by DIN (German Standards Institute) and the German Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and Technology provides detailed insight into the economic benefits for standards—to businesses and to the economy.

For consumers, standards play a very important role in ensuring quality, ease of use, safety and sustainability of goods and services at lower prices with a wide variety to choose from. Standards improve products and services by enhancing:

- ◆ Quality and reliability;
- ◆ Protection of safety and health;
- ◆ Compatibility between products;
- ◆ Consistency in the delivery of services;
- ◆ Greater choice of goods and services;
- ◆ Transparent product information;
- ◆ Lower costs and greater competition, hence lower prices for consumers;
- ◆ Suitability of products for vulnerable populations; and
- ◆ Environmental protection.

Importance of Consumer Participation in Standardisation

Consumer participation in standardisation is essential to ensure that the standardised goods and services are accessible, credible, useful, cost-effective, adaptable, durable, convenient, effective and user-friendly. Standardisation allows consumers to have confidence in the quality and reliability of the products and services that they purchase. That level of confidence increases significantly with consumer participation in the standardisation process.

Consumers lend their unique perspective to the creation of the voluntary standards that govern the manufacture of many of the products and the structure of services used in everyday life.

All Stakeholders can both contribute to and benefit from standardisation



How Consumers Can Participate in Standardisation Process?

Despite standards being technical documents (though not all are), inputs by the consumers are especially vital, particularly for standards affecting consumers. Most of the standardisation agencies have space for consumer representation, by way of nomination, in working groups, expert/technical committees, advisory committees, management committees, etc.

For example, International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) coordinates its consumer policy through the ISO Committee on Consumer Policy (COPOLCO). COPOLCO members are National Standards Bodies (NSBs), who are members of ISO and who designate a person who is responsible for consumer liaison at this level. In addition, international consumer associations, like Consumers International, sometimes, participate directly in technical work.

About Indian Standards

Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) is a national standards body engaged in the preparation and implementation of standards, operation of certification schemes both for products and systems, organisation and management of testing laboratories, creating consumer awareness and maintaining close liaison with international standards bodies. It came into existence, through an Act of Parliament on April 01, 1987, with a broadened scope and more powers taking over the staff, assets, liabilities and functions of erstwhile Indian Standards Institution (ISI) with following objectives: (i) harmonious development of activities of standardisation, marking and quality certification; (ii) provide new thrust to standardisation and quality control; and (iii) evolve a national strategy for according recognition to standards and integrating them with growth and development of Industrial production and exports.

More details can be viewed at: www.bis.org.in

The BIS has also provisions for consumer representation in its governance by nomination of consumer representatives in the Bureau itself, Executive Committee and Advisory Committees. It also involves consumer representation in Technical Committees, Comparative Testing, Market Surveys, Education, Promotion of National Standards, etc.

Therefore, consumer representatives should understand the importance and prepare well to participate in the process. They should utilise the space for effectively addressing concerns of consumers in standard-making. Given below are key principles which they should adhere to for effective participation in standards making:

- ◆ **Preparation is vital:** Know the rules, read the papers.
- ◆ **Find a friend:** Confidence building is important, find help to learn the ropes and provide guidance in those early meetings.
- ◆ **Secure funding for the longer term:** Involvement costs money and standards can take years to write.
- ◆ **Learn to compromise:** Stubborn consumer views, especially negative ones, are rarely persuasive.
- ◆ **Know the consumer context:** Use the consumer rights to help frame your policy aims.
- ◆ **Prepare a robust case:** Do background research, get hard data – don't campaign on a hunch.
- ◆ **Make sure the national standards body recognises that consumers are major stakeholders:** Request a seat on the Board and seek a role at policy-making level.
- ◆ **Avoid empty commitment:** Make sure the host organisation will permit your voice to be heard.
- ◆ **Submit comments in writing:** Written comments cannot be ignored or forgotten.
- ◆ **Be there!** Standards have a huge impact on consumers. Who better to write them than you?

Key Standardisation Agencies		
S.No.	Name of Agency	Functions Related to Standardisation
International Level		
1.	International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO)	To develop standards for the remaining products and services
2.	Codex Alimentarius Commission (CODEX)	To develop standards for food
3.	International Telecommunications Union (ITU)	To develop standards for telecommunications equipment
4.	International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC)	To develop standards for electrical equipment
5.	International Labour Organisation (ILO)	For drawing up and overseeing international labour standards
National Level (India)		
1.	The Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS)	The National Standards Body dealing with matters concerning standardisation, certification and quality
2.	Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI)	Statutory body for laying down science-based standards for articles of food
3.	Central/State Drugs Standard Control Organisations	Laying down standards of drugs, cosmetics, diagnostics and devices. Apart from Central Drug Control organisation there are state level organisations for the same functions
4.	Central & State level Electricity Regulation Commissions	These commissions are involved in formulation standard for quality of service, safety and performance for electricity companies/services
5.	Directorate of Marketing and Inspection (DMI)	Its functions include standardisation, grading and quality control of agricultural and allied produce. It is responsible for AGMARK and Quality Certification Mark for food products
6.	Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)	It is responsible for Environmental Standards
7.	Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB)	To lay down technical standards and specifications including safety standards in activities relating to petroleum, petroleum products and natural gas and related operations
8.	Standardisation Testing and Quality Certification (STQC)	Responsible for maintaining e-Governance Standards
9.	The Central Council for Research in Ayurveda & Siddha (CCRAS)	Autonomous body to develop standards related Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy services and medicines
10.	The Department of Legal Metrology	To form policy and standards related to weights and measures and enforcement thereof
11.	Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA)	It is responsible for regulation of air transport services and enforcement of civil air regulations, air safety and airworthiness standards
12.	Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI)	ASCI is a self-regulatory voluntary organisation to promote responsible advertising. ASCI's Code for Self-Regulation in Advertising is now part of ad code under Cable TV Act's Rules
13.	The Banking Codes and Standards Board of India	It is an independent banking industry watchdog formulating standards for banking service for its member banks

There are number of organisations and departments in India which develop and publish standards in accordance with their allocation of business at the national level. More information on such departments is made available through portal (www.standardsdata.in/) developed under the Central Scheme of the Department of Consumer Affairs, Government of India.

Consumers or VCOs should also know the mandate and functioning of all agencies involved in standard-making, especially affecting the consumers.

Major Roadblocks in Consumer Participation

Lack of Capacity: Citizen today depends on products, design and construction of which he or she may not understand because they are not fully aware of these standardisation benefits, thus are having ignorant attitude. In this situation, reassurance is an over-riding need; reassurance that the product is reliable and will meet the expectations of consumers in terms of performance, safety, durability etc. In this regard, the role of the voluntary consumer organisations, consumer activists, non-governmental organisations, educational institutions and media cannot be ignored.

Therefore, it is bounden duty to jointly and effectively disseminate intensively various aspects of standardisation to the common consumers of the country on regular interval. Once common consumers are educated and made aware of the schemes that have been drawn up for their benefit and also the redressal forum that is available, the benefit in true sense, will reach the common consumers of the country.

Multiplicity of Standardisation Agencies: Products standards are made by 14 Technical Division Councils pertaining to specific fields. During 2007-08, BIS formulated 321 (170 new and 151 revised) standards, bringing the total number of standards in force to 18424 as on 31 March 2008. Whereas, several other services related standard were formulated, which were having severe impact on the consumer. Therefore, agencies responsible for formulation of standardisation should form a committees that are represented by various experts including end users, traders, manufacturers, technicians and grassroots voluntary organisations from various regions in formulation

of national standards to clear the chaotic situation over agencies. Simultaneously, agencies should come out with a joint statements on issues interlinked and are directly affecting common consumer.

Inadequate Efforts and Will Power to Involve Consumers and so on: During formulating standardisation unilateral assumptions and decisions are conceived by the agencies. Further, it has been observed that the people for, whom various schemes have been taken up do not get benefit as expected. This is mainly because end users are not fully aware of these schemes and their benefits but in most of the cases it is a regular phenomenon. BIS as nodal agency should formulate strategies to induct consumers, voluntary organisations, media and other institutions to eradicate unawareness in consumers and unilateral stand of agencies and also to promote and propagate attention and speedy redressal of grievances.

Recommendations

To promote consumer participation in the process, we need to convert these limitations into opportunities. Following recommendations are made for the purpose:

1. Standardisation agencies should have designated persons to develop and co-ordinate two way communications with VCOs.
2. Standardisation agencies should have not only institutional mechanism for consumer participation and capacity building but also provide required eco-system to promote consumers to participate effectively.
3. VCOs should also update themselves using various sources like ISO/COPOLCO and BIS for effectively representing the concerns of consumers in the standardisation process.
4. There is need to form a cadre of informed VCOs/ consumer activists and network them and organise training of trainers for them.
5. Awareness programmes should be conducted for consumers, local bodies and disadvantaged groups about the importance of standards and participation process, using social media and other technologies.
6. The multiplicity of standard-making agencies should be avoided as far as possible to avoid ambiguity about the role and function of different agencies. This task of sectoral agencies can be transferred to National Standard Body (BIS).

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