

Introductory Statement
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**Briefing Session on the Conference Launching the United Nations Forum on
Sustainability Standards for United Nations and World Trade Organization
Delegates**

18 February 2013, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Room XXVII, Palais des Nations

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the briefing on the conference that will launch the UN Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS), scheduled for 21-22 March at conference room XVIII in this building.

Based on existing and rather elaborate mandates, five UN agencies have come together to launch the UNFSS in order to better respond in a coordinated way to build or strengthen capacity of developing countries to pro-actively deal with the wide spectrum of sustainability standards. The UNFSS is conceptualized and will be implemented as a living example of the 'UN acting as one'. I would like to welcome the representatives of our partner organizations, FAO, ITC, UNEP and UNIDO, on the podium and look forward to their active participation in today's discussion.

Voluntary Sustainability Standards, developed by commercial and non-commercial private bodies and that typically cover health, safety, environmental, economic, social and animal welfare issues, are of key importance for market entry and sustainable development. Unless pro-actively addressed, such standards can become a serious market entry hurdle and a key challenge in particular for small-scale producers. Real developmental opportunities exist in the light of strong dynamics in markets for sustainably produced products, which generally expand much faster than conventional markets.

Mistakenly, voluntary sustainability standards are still seen by most key policymakers in developing countries as a technicality, not as a strategic policy issue on the internalization of environmental and social costs; the promotion of sustainable production and consumption methods, including opportunities for cost savings; and sustainable competitiveness in growing and lucrative markets. Voluntary sustainability standards are thus a key element in the toolbox of measures in moving towards a greener economy, improving resource, material and energy efficiency and agricultural production methods.

This said, it is however of critical importance to balance the public interest for sustainability gains and improvement of public goods and services with the private interest of using voluntary sustainability standards for reducing costs, improving product quality and expanding market shares. To be effectively and pro-actively used,

developing countries need to strengthen their institutional, managerial, infra-structural and public-private dialogue capacity. They also need to have sufficient impartial information on the benefits and costs of such standards and the requirements for their effective use.

Understandably, developing country decision-makers, both at the government and business levels, are concerned about the challenges resulting from voluntary sustainability standards. Their lack of supply capacity and difficulty in determining justifiable requirements tend to put decision-makers into a mere passive, reactive corner that mostly deals with such standards from a market-access perspective. Voluntary sustainability standards thus become an end in themselves, rather than being proactively used as a means of achieving or contributing to specific sustainable development objectives.

In recent years, voluntary sustainability standards have greatly increased in number, complexity and stringency. Not rarely, implementing several standards is required for effective market entry. Voluntary sustainability standards have thus gradually become a new governance system that is largely outside the disciplines of the WTO, although such standards are related to public policy objectives and often receive direct and indirect government support. It is thus important that such standards are not undermining the hard-won disciplines of the WTO TBT and SPS Agreements.

The key mission of the UNFSS will be to address the issues I have just mentioned, based on a well-informed policy dialogue, which will be supported by impartial empirical information gathering, analytical work, and capacity building. The five UN agencies partnering on the UNFSS are determined to make the Forum a clearly demand-driven exercise. We therefore look forward to your suggestions on the setting of thematic and commodity group priorities for UNFSS activities.