Executive Summary:

The role of standards in supporting policy

...and the challenges that National Standards Bodies face

Commonwealth Standards Network

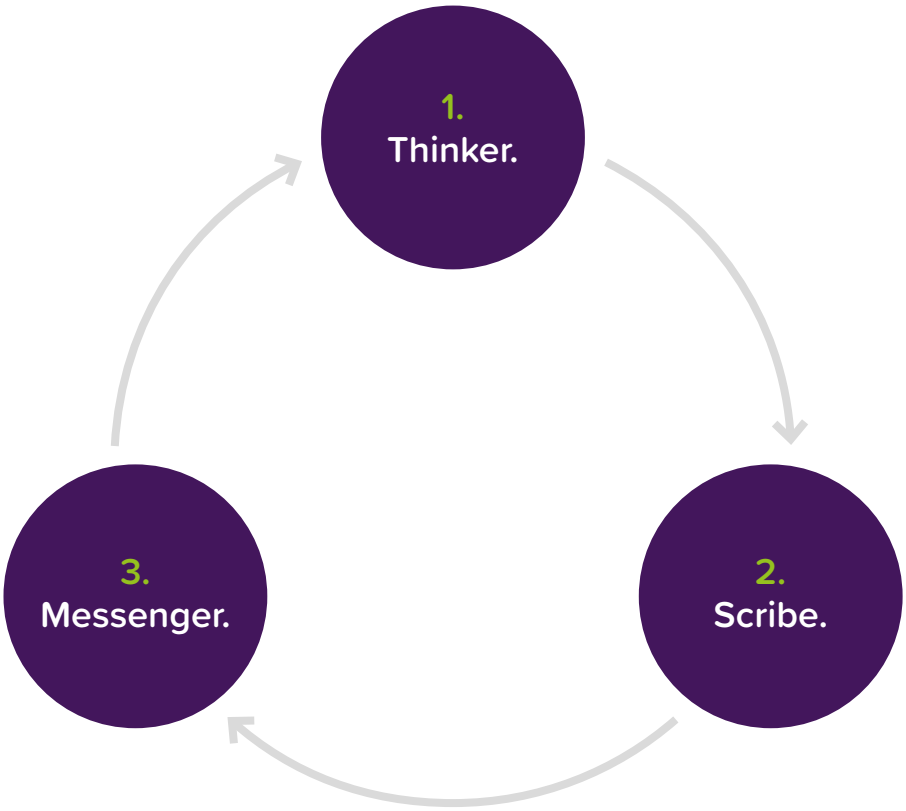
This brochure is the executive summary of a larger CSN document, it describes the role of standards in supporting policy, and the challenges that National Standards Bodies (NSBs) face. Ideally, NSBs should focus on technical matters and should have no role in setting policy; policy is for governments, however reality is not so black and white. In some countries standards are integral to government policy, in others they are peripheral – and in between there are many shades of grey. But standards always matter, in all countries alike.

Moving ideas

Diffusion of knowledge is essential for economic growth. The stock of standards is like a good cookbook: most can afford it, and all can derive value from it. Common and readily available ingredients can be put to good use. Recipes transcribed from knowledge (ideas) allow us to build a product or perform a service in a way that is tried and tested. The fact that someone has done it before, used that particular recipe over and over again, lends confidence. It gives business partners and consumers', confidence about safety and quality – attributes that can otherwise be difficult to assess.

A functioning standardization system is a good messenger: it moves both the ideas and confidence in their uses. It fosters the diffusion of knowledge, catalyses technical progress by providing building blocks for innovation, and supports the economy and international trade. Standards move, also, in the sense that they are never final documents; they evolve to reflect a continually changing state of the art.

The function of the NSB in three steps



1 Thinker.

A standard is a particular way of solving a problem; it may be instructions about how to produce something using a specific process, or a way of doing something that has value. As with most innovations, it has likely been an incremental, collaborative process.

2 Scribe.

Eventually, the idea is committed to a document. This is where the hows and whats of a technology are codified to enable common and repeated use. These instructions ensure that same result is achieved again and again, like a recipe. The NSB facilitates the stirring and mixing of ideas, at home, across borders and among a wide range of stakeholders. Consensus is integral. In this sense, the NSB shepherds the drafting of the recipe (the "document") in an efficient, effective and replicable way so that no matter who does the cooking, the outcome is the same.

3 Messenger.

The messenger function of the NSB is crucial. The more widely used the standard, the more valuable it becomes. Over time, experience is gained, and new ideas flourish.

...and back again

There is a feed-back loop from the messenger back to the thinker. The standard is a conduit for new ideas and opportunities. While it may not be the source of the original innovation, it is a catalyst for more. This spurs innovation and contributes to growing productivity. The NSB is the gatekeeper of this dynamic process. But it isn't always smooth.

Challenges for NSBs

1. Awareness about the importance and benefits of standards;
2. Adequate and balanced stakeholder participation and engagement;
3. Clarity between standards and technical regulations, or between the role of the NSB and that of the regulatory authorities.

Finding Solutions

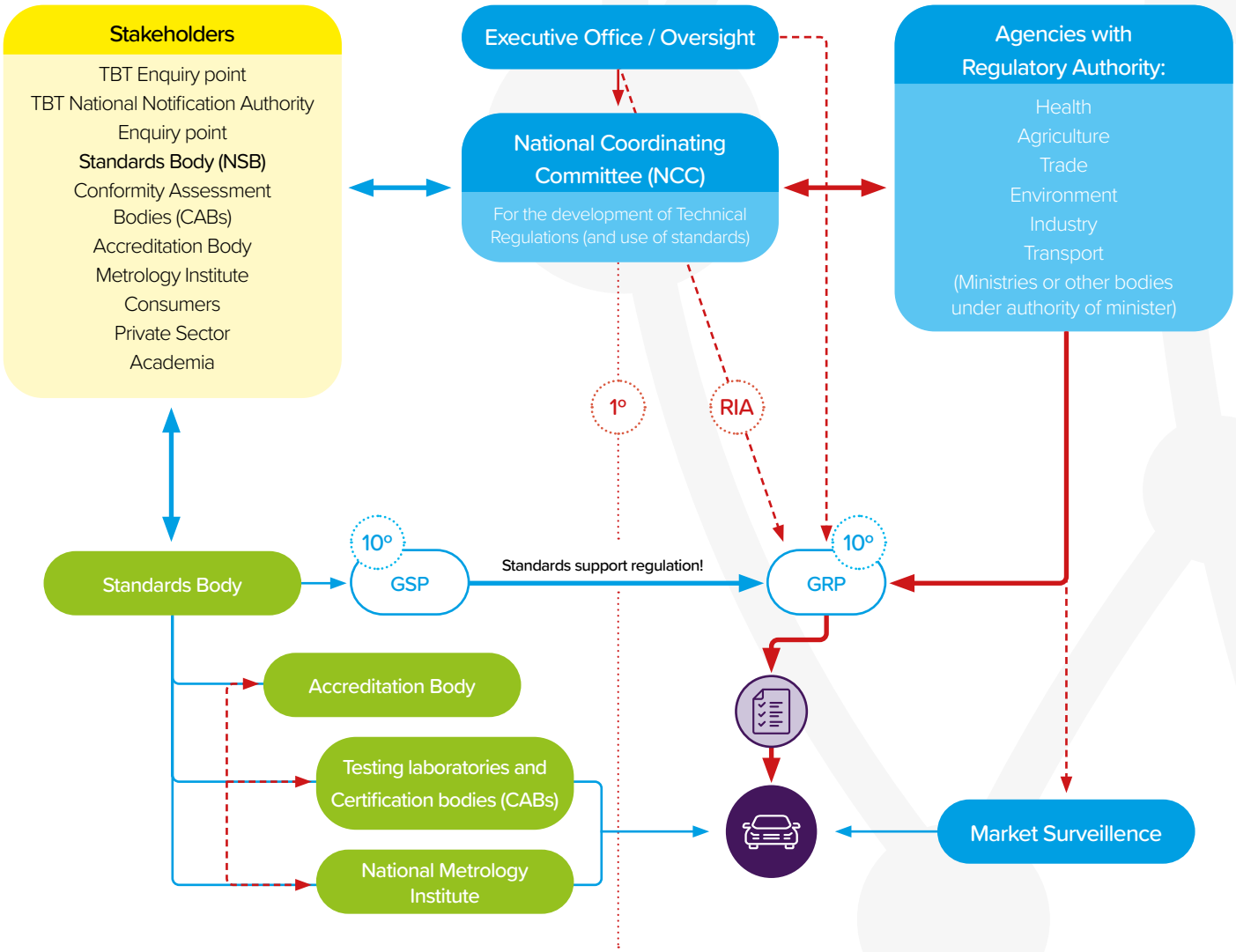
The challenges can hamper effective governance in the standards and regulatory sphere. We emphasize the importance of stepping back, assessing the big picture, and considering what good practices exist and can be drawn from.

The 'Big Picture'

Today's global economy is complex. International trade, facilitated by internationally agreed standards, plays a vital role in economic performance. As countries grow wealthier, the demand for better regulation increases. And so, then, do demands on regulators.

Standards sit at the nexus between knowledge and policy; they support regulation by providing key technical underpinnings. Recognizing the importance of standards for trade, the WTO Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Agreement requires that technical regulations be based on relevant international standards. It is therefore very important to consider how best to bring together the regulatory and standards streams of work in a way that is both efficient and effective in serving the public good.

In what way can standards best support regulation? This is best seen from a "whole-of-government" perspective.



economists agree that increasing international trade is correlated with economic growth.

Ten degrees of good practice

At the centre of the Big Picture Graph are the two nodes of Good Standards Practices (GSP) and Good Regulatory Practices (GRP). These are fundamental to the functioning of the whole system. Regulatory Impact Analysis is indicated as 'RIA'.

Fortunately, there is no need to start from scratch. The best collected experiences on GSP (standards) have been developed by ISO and IEC, based on those contained in the WTO TBT Agreement's Code of Good Practice and in conjunction with guidance developed by the WTO Members in the TBT Committee.

... and one degree of separation

It's important to keep GRP and GSP separate. We describe this as being akin to a driver and GPS. In the car, the driver (regulator) will set the destination (level of safety, environmental performance) and then be offered, by the GPS (standard setter), the best routes to get there. The suggested routes have been carefully considered and are based on technical and data-driven input. The driver may of course decide to deviate – but at their own risk. While a standard is about finding consensus for how to solve a particular technical problem (the best route), regulation is a decision about the choice of destination, about where to set the bar (the level and degree of government intervention). While this decision is not necessarily taken by consensus, it should be informed and not arbitrary.

There are a range of techniques that regulators can use to refer to standards. In the 'Big Picture' figure', the technical regulation framework is blue; it provides the legal basis for government policy – it is the "hand of government". It is intended to ensure that actions respect the rule of law, and that they stem from executive authority. The technical framework relies, however, on the services of the quality infrastructure (QI), in green, including the standards body. Indeed, standardization stands out as a key pillar of QI.

Trade and economic growth

When the regulatory framework and the quality infrastructure (the green and the blue) work together, trade is greatly facilitated. Fundamentally, the use of GSP and GRP will ensure that regulation is based on relevant international standards – a key tenet of the WTO TBT Agreement. This means that unnecessary restrictions on trade are avoided. It will also mean that the regulation itself is fit-for-purpose and will achieve the social, economic or environmental objectives sought.

This will boost confidence in products or services traded – be it a toy car, or the real one. To be clear, we are not stating that trade is an end of itself. But economists agree that increasing international trade is correlated with economic growth. In the end, this is what matters: the UN language on the SDGs speaks of international trade being "an engine for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction". The nature of this growth is equally important. It needs to be sustainable and equitable. The beauty of standards is that here, too, they can play in an important role because they provide essential tools for sound government policy that is based on international cooperation.

Next Steps

Asking the right questions is good place to start discussions, and learn from other NSBs. We have put together a list of questions and delve into this topic at a much deeper level in our longer document: 'The role of standards in supporting policy... and the challenges that NSBs face' you can access this document by visiting www.commonwealthstandards.net.

About Commonwealth Standards Network (CSN)

The CSN is a collaborative network that supports trade, economic growth and prosperity throughout the Commonwealth by promoting increased awareness, development and use of international standards.
Standards play an important role in promoting productivity and efficiency, reducing costs, removing barriers to trade, and driving economic growth. They are an agreed way of implementing best practice, and bring confidence to regulators, businesses and consumers that products and services are safe, reliable and of good quality.
To find out more please visit www.commonwealthstandards.net.

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