ECOWAS:

The WAQP – supporting exporters and consumers across West Africa

Context

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is composed of 15 member states – Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo – and covers an area of approximately 5,112, 903 km². It strives to promote greater regional integration through unified trade and tariff policies.

Economic integration is facilitating intraregional trade. At the same time, improving the quality and compliance of local products is expected to further increase trade volume, towards both regional and international markets. Such actions will allow West African states to achieve a sustainable expansion of their export base, by complying with the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures. In view of this, ECOWAS took the initiative to develop and harmonize their quality infrastructure as a means to promote regional trade. UNIDO's technical assistance was requested to help achieve this objective.

Main approach

In response, UNIDO developed a technical assistance programme aimed at improving the quality infrastructure of 16 West African states, with the overall objective of increasing the competitiveness of enterprises across the region, while ensuring better consumer protection. The West Africa Quality Programme (WAQP) was originally conceived as technical support to the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU – in French UEMOA), a sub-set of eight ECOWAS member states. After a successful initial five year phase, it was expanded to include the remaining seven members of ECOWAS, as well as Mauritania.

Quality is the byword of the Programme, starting with the formulation and implementation of a regional quality policy for ECOWAS. Quality promotion was the second step, serving to create a quality culture and demand for WAQP services among the region's enterprises – both public and private. At the same time, a quality infrastructure was put in place, resting on the pillars of standardization, metrology and accreditation, which are essential for internationally recognized conformity assessment of goods and services supplied by West African enterprises.

Impact and results

The project supported the formulation and adoption of an ECOWAS regional quality policy, as well as national quality policies (NQPs) and legal frameworks in several countries. In order to harmonize standards across the region, a coordination mechanism was established and a first set of regional standards was adopted for products such as food items, textiles, as well as leather and hides. Fourteen countries are now members of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

The WAQP also laid the foundations for a West African accreditation system by setting up a regional secretariat and establishing a pool of experts who were provided with training, as well as opportunities to participate in laboratory accreditation processes alongside their international peers. In parallel, metrology facilities were improved across the region. The skills of over 500 technicians from over 100 laboratories were strengthened, inspectors received additional training, and testing and calibration laboratories were supported towards accreditation along ISO standards.

With an upgraded quality infrastructure in effect across 16 West African countries, the region's exporters have a far better opportunity to improve their competitiveness and break into new markets, while consumers have more confidence in the products they are buying. To date, 21 laboratories have been accredited and approximately 120 manufacturing enterprises, mainly in the agro-food sector, have achieved compliance with international standards.

At a glance

Project title: Support to the competitiveness and harmonization of TBT and SPS measures
Donor: European Union
Budget: EUR 16,900,000
Country coverage: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Mauritania
Thematic areas: Accreditation, metrology, quality, standardization, testing