**Publication date:** 10 March 2023

**Title:** International standards support human rights

**Author:** IEC (International Electrotechnical Commission)

**Topic:** poverty and hunger alleviation, access to basic services (electricity, clean water, sanitation, healthcare), gender and inclusion, security, global cooperation, capacity building, quality infrastructure, policy tool and recommendations

# Background

On 13 July 2021, the Human Rights Council adopted resolution 47/23 on “New and emerging digital technologies and human rights”. As part of the expert consultation the IEC welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the report on the relationship between human rights and technical standards-setting processes for new and emerging digital technologies that OHCHR will present to the Human Rights Council at its 53rd session in June 2023. This input also provides explanations regarding IEC work and processes to complement what was said during the discussions that took place during the OHCHR consultation on 15 February 2023 at the Palais des Nations, Room XX, in Geneva and the [related call for input.](https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2023/call-inputs-relationship-between-human-rights-and-technical-standard-setting)

# How International Standards contribute

While measuring, reporting, planning and policy decisions are important, concrete actions on the ground are needed to achieve actual change.

High-level policy decisions by governments and regulators are supported through the adoption and reference to international standards and the use of conformity assessment. They open sustainable, climate-resilient and low emissions development pathways, providing the conditions and good practices for near-term adaptation action, including those that promote basic human rights.

International Standards also play a significant role in securing long-term financing for development and infrastructure projects. They create trust with investors and insurers since projects built to IEC International Standards and verified by the members of the IEC Conformity Assessment Systems rely on industry-wide best practice and are easier to maintain and repair. The World Bank often refers to IEC International Standards in its tenders to secure its long-term investments.

# Interaction of regulation/standards/conformity assessment

International standards of the IEC and ISO are always voluntary. They do not seek to establish, drive or motivate public policy, regulations, or social and political agendas. However, they can provide valuable support to the implementation of public policy through non-legislative actions such as codes of conducts or as references in laws.

For such legislative actions, regulators consider whether to reference parts of, or whole, international standards and how to make it clear that the implementation of the respective standard is one of the ways to comply with the law referencing it.  Regulators can also weigh how such compliance, including through conformity assessment, rests in a larger regulatory framework that can ultimately promote and protect human rights.

IEC and ISO International Standards represent global consensus on a solution to a particular issue. The core principles that guide their development process include openness, transparency, effectiveness, relevance, stakeholder engagement and consensus. Those principles also define good governance and policy-making practice.

A key benefit of international standards is that they facilitate trade. IEC and ISO International Standards are developed according to the principles agreed by the WTO Technical Barriers to Trade committee and fulfil WTO obligations by eliminating unnecessary obstacles to international trade.

Using international standards in governance and regulation is also more cost-efficient in terms of time, money and expertise required than the development of national norms. With its broad geographical reach, the IEC and ISO cover nearly the whole world population.

IEC and ISO International Standards are developed in a multi-stakeholder environment which ensures that many different views are represented. These standards already have broad relevance and acceptance, which offers a high level of applicability for policy guidance or legislation.

# IEC work and human rights

IEC International Standards and the IEC Conformity Assessment Systems contribute directly to targets and indicators of all [17 UN Sustainable Development Goals](https://www.iec.ch/sdgs/ceos), which in turn support fundamental human rights such as access to basic services including clean water, electricity, education, healthcare, as well as poverty and hunger alleviation, privacy, security, the right to economic stability, and a secure environment.

# How to engage with the IEC and IEC Members

While international standards support public policy, as detailed above, they do not establish the public policies that address human rights concerns. This is why it is important to help bring the appropriate focus to where government or regulators can further leverage the power of international standards to support their policy decisions. For example, human rights groups can contact IEC National Committees to better understand how they can directly contribute to standards work as further described below. Another concrete suggestion would be for the human rights community to consider developing a map of targets and indicators that support areas of focus and the standardization efforts that may reinforce them.

Such a map of targets and indicators would have the potential to become an important tool for users and developers of international standards to identify ways in which international standards can be further used to support the public policies that promote human rights.

# Contribute to standards work

Organizations who are interested in contributing to individual IEC International Standards can pursue the following options:

**Existing standard:**Identifying if a standard has been published or is in preparation:

* Published standards can be found on the [IEC webstore](https://webstore.iec.ch/) along with a short abstract
* The publication and work programme of all IEC technical committees can be found here: <https://www.iec.ch/technical-committees-and-subcommittees#tclist>
* For further concerns or questions, the IEC Secretariat in Geneva is available at: info@iec.ch

**New standard:**Commenting on a standard that is being developed:

* There is the possibility to comment via the [Public commenting platform](https://www.iec.ch/how-get-involved/public-commenting) once the Committee Draft for Vote (CDV) has been published
* Reaching out to the [IEC Member](https://www.iec.ch/national-committees) in the respective country to share insights and comments
* For further concerns or questions, the IEC Secretariat in Geneva is available at: info@iec.ch

**Request to become an official liaison:**Organizations that have the capacity to send experts can request a formal liaison directly via the [IEC Technical Committee](https://www.iec.ch/technical-committees-and-subcommittees#tclist) (click on the *TC number* in the first row and then on *Structure* to find the contact info for the *Technical Officer*) or contact the [IEC National Committee](https://www.iec.ch/national-committees) in the respective country, or the IEC Secretariat in Geneva: info@iec.ch

**Share needs or suggestions:**Share suggestions for the development of a new standard or for the improvement of an existing standard with the IEC Secretariat in Geneva at: info@iec.ch

Participation of developing countries:
Active participation in standardization, offers a good way of influencing the relevance of the final standard and to increase the ease with which it can be adopted and used nationally. But even without active participation, the use of IEC International Standards and acceptance of test certificates of the IEC Conformity Assessment Systems can allow developing countries to put in place an effective quality infrastructure at very low cost.

The IEC offers developing countries a globally unique way to get involved in IEC standardization and conformity assessment work, without the financial burden of membership. As part of the Affiliate Country Programme, developing countries can share their needs and comment on standards. The IEC provides them with mentoring and learning programmes and the possibility to adopt up to 400 IEC International Standards for national use, free of charge.

# Who is the IEC

The IEC is a global, not-for-profit membership organization that publishes international consensus standards and leads four conformity assessment programmes whose members certify that devices, systems, installations, and services perform as required.

The IEC brings together 174 countries that cover most of the global population. Each member country has a single vote[[1]](#footnote-1) and commits to represent the interests of all public and private national stakeholders at the global level in the IEC. Work on new standards is only started, if at least 5 member countries agree to send experts. This helps ensure that the standard is really needed and will be used. IEC work is funded through yearly dues by member countries and the sales of publications.

IEC International Standards reflect an international consensus of all member countries on how to achieve a given outcome repeatedly, consistently and safely. Together with the IEC Conformity Assessment Systems they represent the largest multilateral agreements in the world and allow countries around the globe to achieve quality infrastructure, adaptive capacity and increased climate resilience, while keeping humans and the living environment safe and secure. They also promote interoperability of products and services from different vendors and encourage competition that makes products and systems more affordable. International standards help level the playing field and are an important way to shape a society that is fair for everyone.

IEC International Standards and conformity assessment services are developed by more than 30’000 experts from around the world according to open and well documented procedures that are robust and proven.

IEC International Standards comply with the World Trade Organization Technical Trade Barriers (TBT) Agreement that aims to ensure that technical regulations, standards, and conformity assessment procedures are non-discriminatory and do not create unnecessary obstacles to trade.

Under its global, apolitical, consensus-based institutional framework, the IEC also welcomes and incorporates the science and expertise of many other international and regional organizations to deliver the technical foundation for everything that generates or uses electricity, contains electronics or information and communication technology.

1. This differs from standards development organizations and consortia, where corporations and organizations “pay to play” to represent their own interests. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)