



SIXTH ITEM ON THE AGENDA

Report of the ILO Working Group on Harmonization of Chemical Hazard Communication

Background

1. First as a follow-up to the ILO Chemicals Convention, 1990 (No. 170) and later as a response to recommendations made by the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) concerning environmentally sound management of toxic chemicals (Agenda 21, Chapter 19), the ILO has provided the policy and technical basis as well as the lead in coordinating international work to elaborate a globally harmonized system for the classification and labelling of chemicals (GHS) designed to cover in an integrated and coherent manner the hazard communication needs of the transport sector, the workplace and consumers, and, in general, those of all sectors of economic activities where chemicals are produced, transported, used and disposed of.
2. Over the years, the GHS work has been overseen by a Coordinating Group for the Harmonization of Chemical Classification (CG/HCCS), first created by the ILO in 1991 under the umbrella of the joint ILO/WHO/UNEP International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS), and then moved in 1995 under the umbrella of the Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals (IOMC). The IOMC, presently chaired by the ILO, coordinates the chemical safety activities of FAO, OECD, ILO, UNEP, UNIDO, UNITAR and WHO, aimed at implementing the recommendations in UNCED's Agenda 21.
3. Within the CG/HCCS, the different aspects of the technical work were carried out by three bodies. The OECD was responsible for the harmonization of criteria for the classification of substances and mixtures hazardous to health and to the environment, the United Nations Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods (UN CETDG) worked on the harmonization of classification criteria for physical hazards (explosive, flammable, reactive and corrosive properties), and the ILO focused on hazard communication tools.
4. When the task of harmonizing classification criteria was nearly completed at the end of 1997, the ILO undertook to start work on the hazard communication part of the GHS. Upon a request by the CG/HCCS, the Governing Body of the ILO established a Tripartite Working Group at its 271st (March 1998) Session with the task of harmonizing hazard communication tools including labelling elements such as hazard symbols and statements

for each hazard category and related levels of severity, as well as the format and contents of chemical safety data sheets.¹

Completion of the assigned task

5. The Working Group met seven times and completed its assigned task at the conclusion of the last meeting in May 2001 at ILO headquarters in Geneva. In the meantime, and acting on a proposal by a number of countries involved in the GHS work, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) decided in October 1999 to restructure the UN CETDG into a permanent United Nations Committee on the Transport of Dangerous Goods (TDG) and on the globally harmonized system for the classification and labelling of chemicals (GHS).² This Committee will oversee two subcommittees, one on TDG and one on the GHS. The Subcommittee on GHS held its first organizational session on 9-11 July 2001 in Geneva and will meet on a regular basis twice a year in July and December to maintain and update the GHS. It will function under the rules of ECOSOC subsidiary bodies and the secretariat will be provided by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe in Geneva. All sessions will be held in Geneva with interpretation in six languages.
6. The harmonized hazard communication tools developed by the ILO Working Group are currently in the process of being integrated into the classification part of the GHS to form the final integrated GHS document which will include also the necessary decision logic and guidance to classify chemicals according to their hazardous properties and to select related labelling elements. The document will provide guidance on the preparation of chemical safety data sheets and on the evaluation of the comprehensibility of hazard communication elements. The final draft of the integrated document will be formally transmitted through the IOMC to the Subcommittee on GHS for consideration at its December 2001 session in Geneva. English and French versions of the draft will be posted on the Internet site of the UN SC/GHS together with all other working papers for the meeting.³
7. After formal approval by ECOSOC, the first official publication of the GHS will be released in 2003 in the six official languages of the UN. Since the GHS is a complex technical document, its translation in the six languages will require lengthy validation by the UN SC/GHS of equivalent terminology, particularly concerning hazard and precautionary statements. The technical terminology in the report of the ILO Working Group is final as concerns the English language and will be transposed without any modifications in the integrated GHS document. However, in order to avoid pre-empting final decisions by the UN SC/GHS in this area, it has not been translated in French and Spanish. The ILO report is therefore considered as a transitional document and as such is made available in the English language only. Together with all working documents related

¹ GB.271/STM/7/1.

² ECOSOC: Resolution 1999/65 concerning the "Reconfiguration of the Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods into a Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods and on the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals", 26 Oct. 1999.

³ <http://www.unece.org/trans/main/dgdb>

to the GHS, an electronic version of the document is available on the Internet site of the ILO.⁴

Impact

8. It should be noted that it is the first time within the ILO that a non-binding technical standard with universal coverage has been elaborated fully on a consensus basis and through voluntary cooperation between national institutions and various intergovernmental, regional and non-governmental organizations. The ILO was fully recognized as the initiator and leader in bringing this project to completion. The GHS reflects fully the principles defined in the ILO Chemicals Convention and its accompanying Recommendation and confirms the relevance of this international instrument.
9. It is estimated that over the ten years it took to develop the GHS, the overall cost to countries and other stakeholders amounted to US\$30 million. The cost to the ILO was limited to providing the secretariat for the coordinating and working groups and covering the participation of a small number of developing countries to ensure geographic representation, as well as that of the Employer and Worker representatives designated by the Governing Body as members of the IPCS Programme Advisory Committee.

Proposed follow-up

10. It is expected that, as a universal standard, the GHS will have far-reaching impact on both international and national legislation on toxic chemicals. It will also provide practical and coherent tools for communicating the hazards of chemicals and related preventive and protective measures to workers and consumers and thus enhance protection of human and environmental health. One country, namely New Zealand, has already integrated the GHS into its legislation relevant to chemical safety.
11. Full implementation of the GHS worldwide will require the provision of technical assistance to a large number of developing countries to upgrade or establish chemical hazard communication systems. Under IOMC coordination, the ILO and UNITAR have already developed a draft strategy document and a plan of action to implement a global capacity-building programme on chemical hazard communication aimed at helping interested countries in establishing the technical and regulatory structures needed to implement the GHS and chemicals management systems in general.⁵ The long-term objective of the proposed programme is to improve safety in the use, and environmentally sound management, of chemicals in all sectors of economic activity through the implementation of international instruments such as the ILO Chemicals Convention or the UNEP Rotterdam Convention.⁶
12. *The Committee on Sectoral and Technical Meetings and Related Issues may wish to recommend to the Governing Body that it:*

⁴ <http://www.ilo.org/safework/ghs>

⁵ <http://www.unitar.org/cwm/publications>

⁶ UNEP: *Rotterdam Convention on prior informed consent for certain hazardous chemicals in international trade*, <http://www.unep.ch>

- (a) take note of the successful completion of the task given to the ILO Working Group on Harmonization of Chemical Hazard Communication;*
- (b) take note of the establishment of a new United Nations body to maintain and update the globally harmonized system for the classification of labelling of chemicals;*
- (c) endorse the work of the ILO Working Group.*

Geneva, 28 September 2001.

Point for decision: Paragraph 12.