

GLOBAL HARMONISATION OF HAZARD COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION

One of the topics addressed at the RIO Conference in 1992 on Environment and Development was the development and introduction of a globally harmonised hazard classification and compatible labelling system (GHS), including safety data sheets and easily understood symbols, to be introduced, if feasible, by the end of the year 2000. Harmonisation means establishing a common and coherent basis for chemical hazard classification and communication, from which appropriate elements relevant to means of transport, consumer, worker and environmental protection can be selected.

Amongst the **goals** listed for GHS were:

- To enhance the protection of mankind and the environment by providing an internationally comprehensible system for hazard communication
- To provide a recognised framework for those countries without an existing system
- To reduce the need for testing and evaluation of chemicals
- To facilitate international trade in chemicals whose hazards have been properly assessed and identified on an international basis

In order to achieve this, three main work areas were identified, namely

Classification of Substances

Classification of Mixtures

Hazard Communication (labels and safety data sheets)

A number of bodies are involved, e.g.

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) have been involved in developing the harmonisation of classification criteria of substances and mixtures with regard to health and the environment.

UNCETDG (Committee of Experts on Transport of Dangerous Goods) have been involved in developing the harmonisation of classification criteria for physical/chemical properties.

ILO (International Labour Organisation) have been involved in developing the harmonisation of hazard communication.

BACKGROUND

1. The involvement of international organizations in the field of classification and labelling of chemicals started in the early fifties. In 1952, the International Labour Organization (ILO) called on its Chemical Industries Committee to study the classification and labelling of dangerous substances. In 1953, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) created within the Economic Council for Europe, the UN Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods (UN CETDG). This Committee elaborated the first internationally recognized classification and labelling system for the purpose of transporting dangerous goods. It was first published in 1956 as the UN Recommendations on the Transport of Dangerous Goods (UN RTDG). UN organizations such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) as well as other international and regional bodies covering all transport modes use the RTDG as a basis for classification and labelling of chemicals for the purpose of transport. The RTDG are now included in the transport legislation of most of the UN member States and are also used for labelling chemicals in the workplace in a large number of developing countries. A number of classification and labelling systems for chemicals have been elaborated by regional organizations such as the European Communities and by individual member States such as Australia, Canada, Japan and the USA, to cover consumers, workers and the environment.

2. The ILO adopted in 1989 a Resolution concerning the harmonization of systems of classification and labelling for the use of hazardous chemicals at work, and in 1990, a Convention (No.170) and a Recommendation (No.177) concerning safety in the use of chemicals at work. In response to the Resolution, the ILO evaluated the size of the task of harmonizing

classification systems and issued a report which was further reviewed at a consultation of experts (Geneva, 14-15 November 1991) and presented to the Director General of the ILO in December 1992 after appropriate updating to reflect recent developments.

3. The Joint Meeting of the Chemicals Group and Management Committee of the OECD endorsed on 20 November 1991 the participation of the OECD in international ongoing and future harmonization activities, particularly those initiated within the IPCS. A clearinghouse led by the CEC, Sweden and the USA was established to undertake harmonization of classification criteria for acute oral toxicity and hazard to the environment.

4. Proposals for the establishment, within the IPCS, of a Coordinating Group for the Harmonization of Chemical Classification Systems (CG/HCCS), were recommended at the ILO Consultation of Experts (Geneva, 14-15 November 1991) and elaborated between the ILO, the WHO, UNEP, the Secretariat of the UN Committee of Experts on Transport of Dangerous Goods (UN CETDG) and the OECD in the course of two meetings in Geneva (29 November 1991) and London (19 December 1991). The establishment of the Coordinating Group was endorsed by the IPCS Intersecretariat Coordinating Committee at its 29 January 1992 meeting in Geneva. At its second meeting (Geneva, 23 March 1992), the secretariat (ILO) of the Coordinating Group was asked to draft a Workplan for achieving harmonization within a reasonable period of time and to include in this workplan a set of general principles, the elements of the classification and hazard communication process for the purpose of prioritisation and, where possible, an assignment of priorities and tasks.

5. In its adopted Agenda 21, more particularly in Chapter 19 regarding the environmentally sound management of toxic chemicals, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) (3-13 June 1992, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), has identified harmonization of classification and labelling of chemicals by the year 2000 as being one of the six action programmes (see Annex 1), and has recommended that "...the International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS) should be the nucleus for international cooperation on environmentally sound management of toxic chemicals."

6. In April 1994, the International Conference on Chemical Safety (ICCS), held in Stockholm, Sweden, established an Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS) which adopted a resolution defining priorities for action to achieve environmentally sound management of chemicals worldwide. The priorities relevant to harmonization of chemical classification and labelling included recommended completion deadlines of 1997 for classification criteria and 2000 for completion of hazard communication elements. Another key priority was the consideration of an international framework to translate the technical work of harmonization into an instrument or recommendations applicable legally at the national level.

7. In November 1994, six intergovernmental organisations, namely the WHO, ILO, UNEP, FAO, UNIDO and the OECD have agreed to a Memorandum of Understanding establishing an Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals (IOMC). The Memorandum came into force in March 1995 after its signature by the six participating organisation. This umbrella programme will coordinate the chemical safety activities of the six partners through an Inter-Organization Coordinating Committee (IOCC). The existing IPCS will remain as a joint technical programme of WHO, ILO and UNEP within the framework of the IOMC. At its first official meeting of the IOCC in Rome (June 1995) it was decided that the CG/HCCS would report to the IOCC rather than to the IPCS. Both the Secretariats of the Forum and the IOCC are located in WHO, Geneva.

8. The central role of the CG/HCCS in coordinating and overseeing the work of harmonizing existing systems of classification and labelling of chemicals was acknowledged by the UNCED, further reaffirmed by the ICCS in 1994. The Intersectoral Group of the Forum, at its March 1995 1st meeting in Bruges, Belgium, requested the Group to elaborate a plan of action to translate the technical work of harmonization into an instrument or recommendation applicable at the national level.

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