

A professor on a mission

Prof. Graz began his love affair with standards a long time ago, but it was only recently, when he started leading the INTERNORM project, that he figured out a way to influence their development. Here he uncovers the real power of academia.

I fell into standardization 15 years ago, quite by chance, as I was rekindling an old interest in contemporary trade policy. I had just spent five years pouring over a PhD in Political Science about the ill-fated Havana Charter, an agreement intended to lay down the rules for international trade after the Second World War, but which never came to fruition. Early discussions on the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade and high-profile disputes like the beef hormones transatlantic trade war brought home to a wider audience just how important technical standards are in trade policy and in helping to make informed societal choices. And so it was that I submitted a project for a post-doctoral research paper on the "Public and Private Authority in Global Trade Governance", which included a module on the impact of standards for regulating international trade. I later became immersed in a larger project focusing more specifically on service offshoring and standardization.

Pushing the doors of academia

These days, I work as a professor of international relations at the University of Lausanne. Clearly, teachers have a harder time "selling" standards to the uninitiated than national standards bodies. Most students and

colleagues have never heard of them before and, when they have, it is either in negative terms as something hampered by bureaucratic constraints, or overwhelmed by confusing labels and all manner of social responsibility and environmental schemes. What's more, standards are usually seen as the private, voluntary tools of the economic world and there is no easy way, as part of a political science curriculum, to demonstrate their relevance in terms of (state) power and regulation.

Happily, such misgivings can generally be overcome with appropriate documentation, topical news items and applied teaching using concrete case studies. I did this once with my MA political science students. After a few general lectures on the broader aspects of standardization and some briefing notes on technical issues, I asked them to collect data on highly topical standardization issues, such as training and education, Microsoft diplomacy on open document files (Open XML versus ODF, for example), or quality, security and performance standards used in offshore call and customer centres. It did the trick, even with students who did not have the faintest idea about standards.

Notwithstanding this success, the exercise basically remained an exploratory case study that examined the emergence of non-state actors in international relations and questioned their legitimacy in transnational private governance.

Which brings me to one of the challenges of standardization in the classroom, and that is that, in my opinion, it is not possible to consider it as a discipline in its own right because it cuts across so many other subject fields.

Tackling the democratic deficit

As an academic, one of the projects I have been heavily involved in is INTERNORM, a pilot project funded by the University of Lausanne (2010–2014) to foster the involvement of civil society in ISO technical committees. The scheme is part of a wider programme looking at new ways to reinforce the ties between academic knowledge and society. In that vein, INTERNORM is designed to respond to the "democratic deficit" which is rampant in the field standardization. The truth is that, although formally open



to the participation of civil society, international standardization is still largely dominated by industry experts and key market players.

Many International Standards have direct implications for lay persons and society as a whole, yet organizations, such as consumer and environmental associations and trade unions, are grossly underrepresented in the negotiating arena – when they are not quite simply absent. In an attempt to correct this imbalance, INTERNORM acts as a sort of “interactive knowledge centre”, pooling expert know-how and the experience accumulated by civil society on specific issues of international standardization.

INTERNORM is a member of the Swiss national standardization body (SNV), ISO’s member for Switzerland, which gives it the right to participate in two ISO technical committees. As the basis for its study, our steering committee selected a number of general-interest topics, of which our partners picked two: tourism (ISO/TC 228) and nanotechnologies (ISO/TC 229). We hold meetings to discuss specific technical points and our views are then escalated, in the form of written comments, to the national and international levels. We have a limited budget to attend international meetings, but we were often amazed at how easily our INTERNORM comments would be accepted – not always, of course – and what a substantial impact they had. For instance, the expertise of our partners – including a renowned toxicologist – lead to a successful technical comment for revising the cut-off values used to create nanomaterial safety data sheets. And as regards the tourism industry, an entire new section of a Committee Draft on complaints handling was approved based on INTERNORM comments.

Overcoming mistrust

Before we got that far, we needed to convince our potential partners of the overall relevance of taking part in standardization activities. This was no mean feat. We had to overcome a general mistrust of standards, reputed for bringing additional constraints without any visible benefits for civil society organizations, whose strategic objectives and scope of action are often poles apart from ISO’s pursuits.

Luckily, some were already convinced as was the case with one large consumer organization that had been taking part in ISO committee work for decades; others were easily swayed. Interestingly, one of our partners, a trade union, noted the huge impact standards had on the workplace; it was therefore essential, in its view, to gain a better understanding of the world of standardization by making the shift from standards taker to standards maker.



Fast facts

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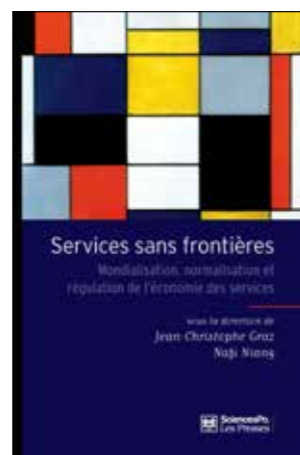
Nationality: Swiss

Age: 47

Profession: Professor of International Relations at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland

Hobbies: Cycling in summer and skiing in winter (not unlike most Swiss citizens!)

Distinguishing feature: Never managed to quit the academic world for long since his studies



“Services without borders, a study on globalization, standardization and regulation” by Jean-Christophe Graz and Nafi Niang.

Taking stock

There are a few easy lessons to be learned from this alternative way of addressing the democratic deficit in international standardization. The discussion platform works by pooling the knowledge of standardization experts with ad hoc specialists on specific issues and the experience of lay professionals from civil society. With hindsight, three things come to the fore. First of all, we now know that civil society organizations are more likely to jump on the bandwagon once they discover how standardization can serve their strategic goals. Secondly, monitoring ISO activities, getting to grips with the complex procedures and language of standardization, and reaching out to civil society partners on a peer-to-peer basis are all crucial if one is to secure their allegiance and keep them on board for the long term. And lastly, participating directly with the technical committee experts involved in writing the standards is far more stimulating than the consultative status offered by the ISO Committee on consumer policy (ISO/COPOLCO) mirror committees, because you actually stand a good chance of influencing the process.

The next step forward

All associations involved in INTERNORM – including the SNV, the Swiss Federal Consumers’ Affairs Bureau and ISO/COPOLCO that enjoy an observer status – have recognized the project’s significance when it comes to promoting civil society participation in the development of International Standards.

So where do we go from here? Well, to avoid losing what has been achieved so far, it is crucial that we establish a permanent structure to ensure civil society organizations are represented in the arena of standardization. This could be done by reforming the existing framework at the regional level, especially in the context of the recently passed 1025/2012 regulation on European standardization, whose role to stakeholder organizations remains an advisory one. But we must also extend our reach to the grassroots of society, by mobilizing people on a national level, and we are working on this with our partners. As a matter of fact, projects such as these are among the greatest challenges we face as International Standards gain momentum in contemporary society. ML



INTERNORM’s winning team. From left: **Christophe Hauert**, Project Manager, **Prof. Jean-Christophe Graz**, Project Leader.