

Scaling-up Commitment for Implementation of the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling

Generating High-Level Commitment by ICCM 5, July 2021

29 December 2020

Summary

As the global community negotiates the elements of a global platform on the Strategic Approach and the sound management of chemicals and waste beyond 2020, there is one topic for which consensus exists that it is a priority for implementation: the Globally Harmonized System for the Classification and Labelling of Chemicals (GHS).

Building upon the valuable work of a range of stakeholders, including through the UN GHS Sub-Committee of Experts, the UNITAR/ILO/OECD Global Partnership for Capacity Building and other initiatives to support implementation of the GHS, it is proposed to secure commitment in 2019-2020 from a coalition of stakeholders which are dedicated to scaling up GHS implementation. Such commitment could be announced (or launched) at ICCM5 in Bonn, Germany, July 2021, possibly at a high-level event.

Context

Classification, labelling and safety data sheets (SDS) provide the fundamentals for the sound management of chemicals and waste; maximising the benefits of chemicals and enhancing the protection of human health and the environment by providing an internationally comprehensible system for hazard communication. Following a decade of development triggered at the Rio Summit in 1992, the GHS was adopted in 2001 as a ground-breaking, voluntary international instrument to support the sound management of chemicals. In 2002, Heads of State and Government encouraged countries to implement the GHS with a view to having the system fully operational by 2008.

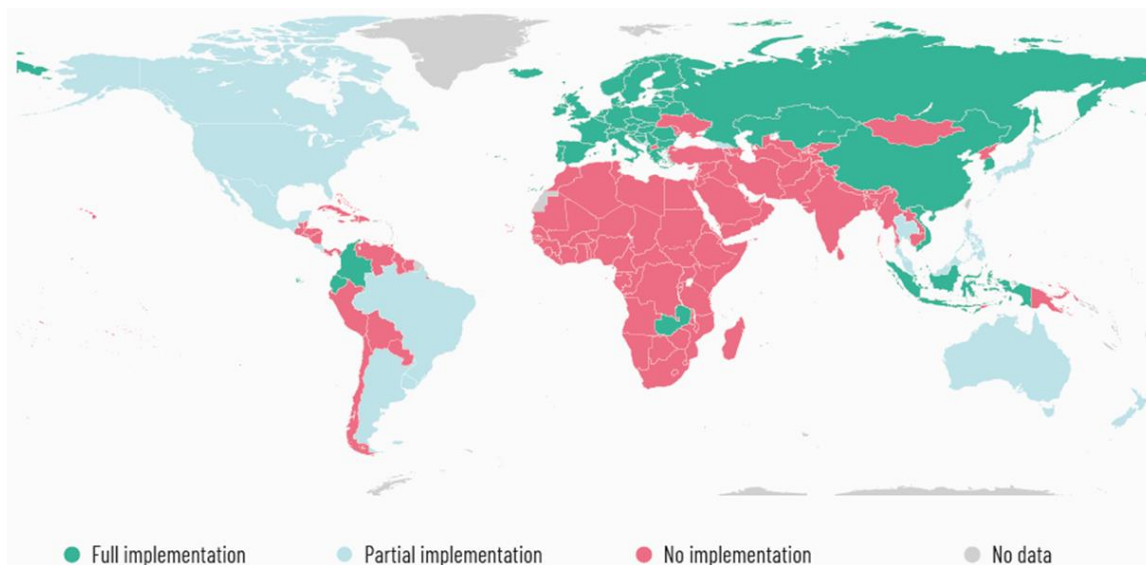
The GHS provides harmonized chemical hazard classification criteria, universal pictograms, as well as common elements of labels and SDS across countries. GHS implementation has been cited to have a range of benefits, including health and environmental benefits (e.g. the protection of workers, citizens and the environment), as well as economic benefits (e.g. reduced costs for industry in cross-border trade through harmonized labelling, and reduced regulatory costs for testing).

While a number of countries have implemented the GHS, the recently published Global Chemicals Outlook-II indicates that the majority of countries have not yet done so. While many of the countries producing a large proportion of chemicals are implementing the system, those that do not include a significant number of developing countries, including countries with economies in transition with growing chemicals industries and levels of uses; implementation may enhance trade and economic growth. Countries in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and South Asia are of particular note (see figure below).

Given a range of identified gaps, including for GHS implementation, GCO-II states that, “business as usual is not an option” and that urgent and ambitious action is essential by all stakeholders (GCO-II, UNEP, 2019).

Global GHS implementation status (2019)

(UNEP 2019, Global Chemicals Outlook-II, adapted and updated based on Persson et al 2018)



Due to GHS implementation gaps, in many countries, hazardous chemicals are not labelled, or not properly labelled (e.g. using language understood by users). Particular challenges have been identified in small and medium-size industries and in the informal sector. Other challenges include ensuring that hazard information communicated through the GHS is fully understood by the target audience, e.g. workers, consumers and emergency responders.

With ICCM5 in July 2021 around the corner, a new approach to fulfilling the call for ambitious action in the GCO-II on communicating hazards and implementing the GHS is needed. New commitments and strengthened partnerships that encourage and support more countries to implement the GHS in a practical and, as far as possible, consistent manner, including through legislation, is key to meeting this call to action. ICCM5 provides an ideal opportunity to advance and announce a collective and sustained commitment to implement the GHS.

Scaling-up activities, exploring opportunities

Intergovernmental organisations engaged in the development and implementation of the GHS include FAO, ILO, OECD, UNEP, UNECE, UNITAR and WHO. The Sub-Committee of Experts on the GHS acts as custodian of the GHS, with a secretariat provided by the UNECE. To support GHS capacity building towards implementation, UNITAR and ILO serve as focal points for training, supported by a Programme Advisory Group, comprising those from the Sub-Committee of Experts. OECD serves as the technical focal point for health and environmental hazards.

The UNITAR/ILO/OECD Global Partnership to Implement the GHS was initiated in 2002 in the margins of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. It has involved a wide range of countries and non-governmental stakeholders and was one of the Partnerships featured as a success story at the Rio plus 20 Summit in 2012.¹ There are opportunities to revitalize and strengthen the Partnership, based on lessons-learned.

Over the years, the UNITAR/ILO GHS training programme has provided a range of capacity building services. These have included: Regional workshops in Africa (including ECOWAS), Latin America and Caribbean (including MERCOSUR and the Andean Community), the Asia-Pacific (including ASEAN) and Central and Eastern Europe; National projects for the development of capacities and GHS implementation strategies; an e-Learning GHS course (12 editions run) with expert tutors, focusing on technical skills for classification and labelling; and publication of guidance documents to support national GHS implementation.

Challenges

Precise global monitoring of GHS implementation has been challenging, caused by the complexity of the GHS and its relevance to various sectors (it covers transport, the workplace, consumer products and agriculture) and varying modalities for “implementation” (ranging from voluntary initiatives to legal systems). Further monitoring may therefore be warranted to obtain a more detailed assessment of GHS implementation world-wide.

Despite many efforts, and although considered a fundamental building block for the sound management of chemicals and waste, existing studies reveal major GHS implementation gaps. One factor is the lack of political awareness concerning the importance of the system for sustainable development. Equally important, financial and technical support has been limited, in comparison to the challenge faced. Public bodies, but also industry, may therefore want to scale up their commitment.

Opportunities

- Formation of an international, multi-sectoral coalition to assess progress made in global GHS implementation, define priorities and support global GHS implementation, and to scale up action within the framework of the UNITAR/ILO/OECD Global GHS Partnership.
- Synthesis of studies to raise awareness of the economic, health, social and environmental benefits of implementing the GHS, including case studies. This could raise the awareness of decision makers to invest in GHS implementation.
- Increase access and availability to existing classifications of chemicals in countries and the underlying data.
- Identification of lessons learned and good practices from GHS activities and capacity development projects to identify key determinants which fostered successful GHS implementation, as well as factors impeding success, and integrating these lessons into international guidance documents.
- Compendium of legislation, regulatory and standard-setting approaches to implement the GHS at the national level and in regions.

¹ https://www.ilo.org/safework/info/promo/WCMS_183351/lang--en/index.htm

- Identification of 5-10 potential front-runner countries where political commitment is in place to develop GHS-relevant legislation and standards, and build capacity for effective implementation. These countries could in the future share their experience with other countries through South-South collaboration and foster regional implementation. Countries/regions that have already implemented the GHS could already serve in a supporting capacity to those embarking on implementation.
- Engagement with regional economic integration organizations supporting international trade, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Mercosur, the EU and other trade bodies.
- Mobilization of resources and commitment from the global chemicals industry and the public sector to support implementation projects in selected countries.
- Development of a study of GHS-related activities to inform a gap analysis to identify priority areas
- Development of a global GHS implementation strategy with key messages and guiding principles, and results and indicators supporting and being compatible with a future approach to chemicals and waste management beyond 2020.

Governance

- Commitment from key stakeholders, including through funding and technical support for implementation activities.
- Identification of opportunities within current governance frameworks to focus commitment on the GHS (e.g. through governing bodies of relevant intergovernmental organizations).
- Further strengthen coordination among international bodies and other stakeholders.
- Flexible approach to bring support swiftly to where it has the biggest impact.
- Annual meeting of key stakeholders to track progress and foster further action.
- Small informal secretariat to facilitate coordination and knowledge-sharing, which could draw upon the experience of the Global GHS Partnership. The existing collaboration of UNITAR, ILO and OECD under the Global GHS Partnership could provide supporting services, as appropriate.

Next steps

- Informal dialogue with a small number of stakeholders to explore the feasibility to mobilize political support for GHS implementation in advance of ICCM5.
- Identification of a number of stakeholders (including countries and private sector organizations) willing to provide financial and technical support to maintain sustained global commitment and enhance impact.
- Meetings among the “friends of the GHS coalition” to continue momentum.
- Development of a concept note to share with a broader group of potentially interested stakeholders.

Feedback and contact

This note was prepared through collaboration of UNITAR, ILO and OECD with support of a senior adviser. Contact points in the three organizations are:

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Please feel free to send any written comments to us.