

# THE EXPANSION OF ISO

“Decade by decade”

Olle Sturen

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Secretary-General Emeritus of ISO



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## Background

In 1986, when Olle Sturen attended his last ISO Council meeting as Secretary-General, the ISO president, Mr. Yamashita, was handed a sheet of paper to provide information for his farewell speech. The sheet of paper included a list of the following “challenges” that ISO had responded to from 1968 to 1986, the eighteen and a half years of Sturen’s leadership. The challenges were as follows:

- a six-fold increase in the number of available ISO standards;
- the establishment of 58 new technical committees, responding to new needs for international standardization in fields ranging from graphic technology to air and water quality;
- the establishment of special programmes in ISO for developing countries (DEVPRO), testing and certification (CASCO), standards information (INFCO/ISONET), standards and consumer interest representation (COPOLCO);
- the granting to ISO by the United Nations of Category I consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council;
- the establishment of the GATT standards code (1980) calling on all signatory governments to rely on international standards as the basis for technical regulations.

This list gives some sense of the expansion of ISO that had taken place since 1968. The number of staff of the Central Secretariat had more or less

doubled, and the annual production of published standards had doubled as well (in addition to the other duties the Central Secretariat had taken on). Clearly, as Olle Sturen would be the first to say, this was not all due to one man. According to ISO's first-ever Annual Review in 1972, the underlying causes of the acceleration of the pace of international standardization included "an explosive growth in international trade" caused by a "revolution in transportation methods". "By the mid-sixties," the Review claimed, "a demand, not only a desire, for international standards had developed." The sources of this demand included multinational companies, standards institutions in developing countries, and government regulatory authorities.

In one of his last speeches as Secretary-General, given in 1986 at the Standards Institute of Israel, Olle Sturen made the further point that what had laid the foundation for the growth in the output of ISO during the seventies was the "turn in emphasis from national to international standards which took place in the late 1960s." This change in emphasis was underlined by the decision in 1971 to begin publishing the results of ISO's technical work as International Standards rather than Recommendations. As Sturen commented to ISO Council in 1975:

"As long as ISO published only Recommendations... ISO was hardly anything more than a federation of national bodies. With the publication of the ISO results as International Standards and the extension of the ISO contacts with inter-governmental organizations engaged in the harmonization of technical regulations in which reference could be made to ISO standards, ISO has started...to be directly involved in the international community – as an international specialized agency."

It was this new profile in the international community which led to ISO being upgraded by the UN Economic and Social Council in 1975 from consultative category II to category I.

Olle Sturen's interview surveys four decades of ISO's existence, from 1947 through to 1986. He is in a good position to conduct such a survey because, as he points out, his own forty years' involvement with standardization coincided with the same period. On the way to becoming ISO Secretary-General, Olle Sturen organized his first ISO technical meeting in 1953, organized the ISO General Assembly in Stockholm in 1955, and became Director of the Swedish Standards Institution in 1957. That led him to serve on ISO Council, and in his interview he describes how in 1966 he chaired a committee "assigned to look into the future of ISO" and, at a time of "discontent and turmoil" for the organization, was approached and asked to take on the job of Secretary-General. His achievements in the role are spoken of admiringly by many people in the standardization world. Olle Sturen was designated Secretary-General Emeritus on his retirement.

## “Decade by decade”

When I left as ISO Secretary-General in 1986, I had forty years of standards activity (national and international) behind me; forty years which coincided with the first four decades of ISO operation. On the basis of my involvement with ISO over the years, I would divide the period 1947-1986 into four parts, decade by decade. The first part was the establishment of ISO; the second – discontent and turmoil; the third – rebuilding confidence; and the fourth – enjoying the fruit of our efforts.

ISO took on a very ambitious programme right from the beginning. Sixty-seven technical committees were established in 1947, which was a huge workload to assign to an organization which as yet had neither a proper Central Secretariat nor enough trained secretarial staff at the technical committee level. Most of the 67 committees were inherited from ISO's predecessor before the war, the ISA. But there were a few new committees, such as Plastics, which illustrated that ISO was prepared to take on new technologies as they developed. There were also a couple of committees which had nothing to do with products of any kind. We had one committee dealing with Documentation which was primarily directed at librarians (TC 46). This was a very successful committee which inter alia developed the International Standard Book Numbering (ISBN). Today you will see this ISO standard referred to on almost every new book published in the world. Out of these 67 committees, some 50 are still operating, which is amazing.

So ISO had a big programme, and it was a question of how to tackle that programme. The first Secretary-General of ISO was very good at this point. He built up a good system for the classification, handling and distribution of all the documents circulated within technical committees and between member bodies, so the Central Secretariat could keep all the work under control. This helped to stabilize the decentralized ISO structure, and the system is still, in the main, intact. For several years things went smoothly. Meetings were held and some progress could be recorded. New technical committees, such as the committee for Nuclear energy and the one for Information processing, were added to the programme. Both were examples of ISO's ability to mirror in standardization the development of society at large.

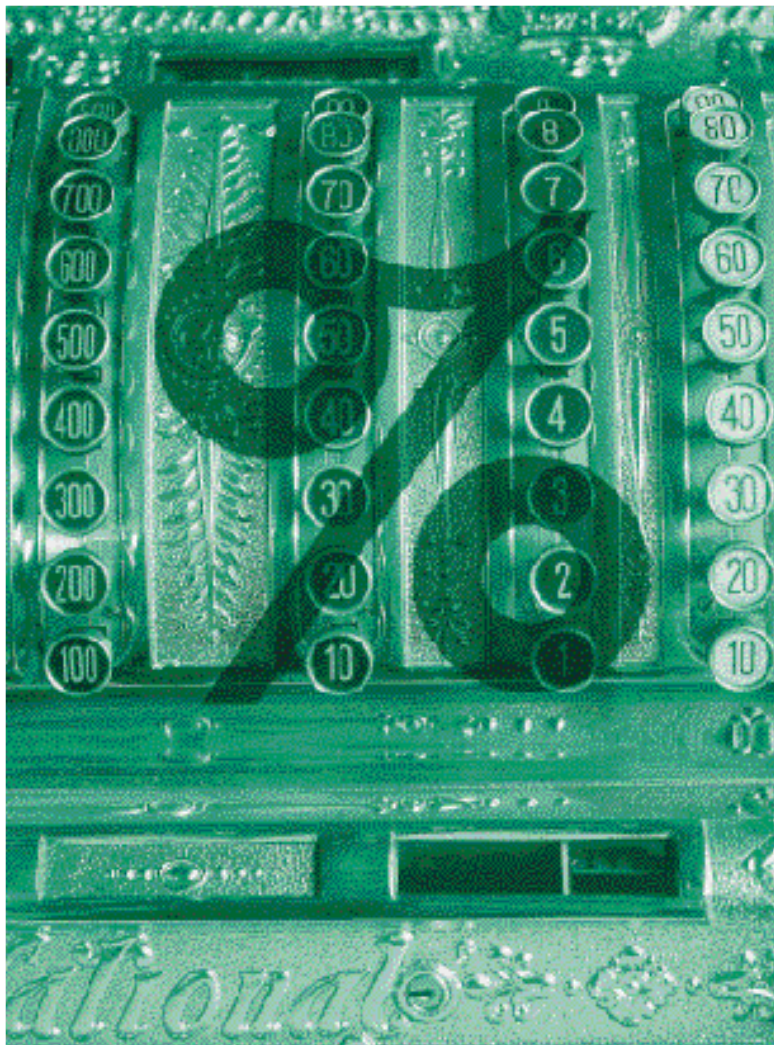
I attended my first ISO meeting in Paris, 1951. It was Technical Committee 73, the embryo of the ISO Certification programme. International meetings at that time were nothing like today. A meeting lasted for a minimum of three days and very often took care of a whole week. There were receptions, luncheons and dinners. International cooperation was a rather virgin territory. It very much served the purpose of getting people acquainted with each other.

In the middle of the 50s, the technical committees started to produce results which called on the Central Secretariat to perform. The first few Recommendations, as they were called at that time, went through all right, but then production expanded dramatically – after all, there were some one hundred committees working for that purpose. Drastic changes were necessary in order to cope with the workload.

That was then the beginning of the second decade. Cracks appeared, and there began to be more and more criticism. This really came to the forefront at the ISO General Assembly in New Delhi in 1964. A number of members were critical and there was a heated discussion. The Dutch member body presented a paper to the General Assembly, which asked for a study to be made of the role of ISO in the future. The General Assembly responded by setting up a study group which was baptized NEDCO (the Netherlands Committee, so to speak). Parallel with that the ISO Vice-President, Roy Binney (UK) proposed that an organizing committee be formed with the main task of finding suitable people – engineers – to strengthen the technical competence of the Central Secretariat. So two committees came out of the '64 General Assembly. It is not surprising that the Secretary-General interpreted this as a no-confidence vote in himself. He therefore resigned and accepted an offer to become an international adviser to the Bureau of Standards in South Africa. Then started what was supposed to be the building up of ISO after the turmoil we had had for almost ten years.

The Organizing Committee (ORCO), where Roy Binney had been appointed Chairman, was set up to sort out the catastrophic situation at the Central Secretariat. But when it came to getting a new Secretary-General, there was a new conflict. The first Secretary-General had been an American. The French therefore thought that the new Secretary-General should be a European, and were sure that their candidate was the best. ORCO in corpore, however, was not convinced. There was no enthusiasm either for the candidate put forward by Roy Binney. I became aware of what was going on when some members of ORCO approached me and asked if I was available. But I declined the offer – I was not prepared to take over as Secretary-General at that time. So the British candidate was the one who ultimately was appointed. However, he turned out not to be a success. He listened too much to different people and tried to accommodate whatever proposal they put forward instead of having a plan of his own. Therefore ORCO was soon back at zero.

NEDCO, which was assigned to look into the future of ISO, was a group of seven people, and I became Chairman of the group. We were the ones who called for better technical coordination by the Central Secretariat and proposed that Recommendations should be called International Standards. We took up the



Olle Sturen took up his post in Geneva in September 1968 as Secretary-General. On arrival, he discovered that the Organization had virtually no money...

wider aspects of consumer questions and developing country participation in standardization. The architect behind most of what we discussed in NEDCO was the Dutch member Franz van Rhijn (a director from Phillips). One day he said: "We must develop a system for information retrieval." I had never heard of the word "retrieval". I had to look it up in a dictionary. On the basis of his knowledge we initiated what ultimately became ISONET. When we had presented the final NEDCO report to the ISO Council in 1966, I was attached to ORCO in order to be available for any implementation problem linked to the NEDCO report.

In February 1968, the ISO Council was called to an extraordinary meeting in Geneva. The subject for discussion was the problem with the Secretary-General. There was a lot of criticism of him at the meeting but no decision or plan of action was agreed upon. In spite of this, within a few months a number of Council members contacted me and asked me to agree to take over as ISO Secretary-General. Then things moved very quickly. In mid-April my wife and I gave our consent. In June, the incumbent Secretary-General was relieved of his duties and at a follow-up Council meeting in London, at which I was not even present, I was appointed the third Secretary-General of ISO. Here I was with a new challenging responsibility, and I had not yet given notice to my employer in Sweden! Only one person outside my family had been continuously informed – Ake Vrethem, then President of the Swedish Standards Institute.

I arrived in September as the Secretary-General in Geneva. When I started to look at things, I found that the organization had hardly any money – not even enough to pay my salary. I therefore made an arrangement by which the Swedish Standards Institute paid my full salary up to the end of the year, though I worked half-time for ISO and half-time for Sweden. That gave me some months to try to see what I could do about the financial situation at the Central Secretariat, which was worse than I had believed. With the help of Jean-Claude Hentsch, the ISO Treasurer at the time, we made gradual improvements. Jean-Claude Hentsch was my adviser – he was the professional, I was the amateur. His assistance to ISO was crucial. He was the first recipient of the ISO cuff-links.

In the talks with ORCO members and other members of Council before I agreed to become the new Secretary-General, two "conditions" were constantly stressed: my first priority (beside the reorganization of the Central Secretariat) should be to restore confidence in ISO among the member bodies and other organizations with an interest in ISO's work; the second priority should be, together with my wife, to restore the family feeling within ISO.

To these "conditions", I added two priorities of my own. One was that I wanted ISO to be known as an important international organization, outside the

circle of professional standardizers. The next was that I wanted to show that ISO was a global organization – that all the members could be players in ISO.

Consequently, in February 1969, I made courtesy visits to the Head of the UN office in Geneva, to the Directors-General of all the UN specialized agencies located in Geneva (ILO, ITU, WHO, WIPO, WMO), and to the Executive Secretaries of the UN Economic Commission for Europe, EFTA and GATT. I also met with some 25 ambassadors stationed in Geneva where they were accredited to the UN and other international agencies. These were in many ways superficial contacts, but they had a certain meaning – they emphasized that ISO was important in the international arena. It was therefore with some satisfaction that I received a new Norwegian ambassador in my office. He had been to a meeting in the Palais des Nations and the other participants had laughed at him when he asked: “What is ISO?”

My next personal priority concerned the fact that ISO was created by 25 countries in 1947, but only European countries had become fully active in ISO. A lot of the others did very little, besides attending the General Assembly every third year. Thus, my first long trip as ISO Secretary-General was scheduled to prove that a new time had come. The trip included Iran, Pakistan, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand, and, on the way back, USA. Was it worth it? It seemed so when soon afterwards we had our first ISO technical committee meeting in Australia, which was followed by many more meetings. In addition, the Director-General of the Standards Association of Australia became Chairman of the ISO Technical Board, and his successor became Vice-President of ISO. My first visit to Japan then followed, and resulted in the Japanese taking on secretarial duties for a number of ISO technical committees. Subsequently, at the ISO General Assembly in Tokyo in 1985, a Japanese businessman was elected as ISO President.

There remained two important parts of the world: China and the developing countries. One day in 1978, John Paton (Australia) contacted me and told me that, as the representative of the only “active” ISO member in the south-eastern part of the world, he had been invited to visit China with a view to establishing cooperation between the two countries and exploring ways in which China could get more involved in ISO’s work. This contact resulted in my wife and I being invited on an official visit, and soon after China became active, not only within ISO, but in the international standards world at large.

Visits to developing countries were important and sometimes had unexpected spin-offs. At a meeting in New Delhi (India) in 1972, I met Robert Oteng, the Director of the Ghana ISO member body. He impressed me, both then and

later at a meeting in Mexico, so I invited him to come to the Central Secretariat and take care of our Developing Country programme. We had had some political difficulties with developing countries. Oteng came and it was smoothed out! It was amazing. He became the king among all the standardizers of the developing countries – he was in complete command!

So, this is how we started to rebuild confidence in ISO. The 70s were a hectic and compressed period, given that I was both making contacts all round the world and finding qualified staff for the various functions at the Central Secretariat. It was important to bear in mind that we needed a good geographical distribution of employment in order to be looked upon as the International Organization for Standardization. In this, I think we succeeded: we had on average 25 nationalities represented, among them mastering 30 to 40 languages, and nationality meant nothing in the daily work.

On the technical side, some interesting initiatives were taken in parallel with the rebuilding of ISO. Environmental issues had already been debated in



One of Olle Sturen's priorities was to internationalize the Organization as widely as possible and to get more non-European members to participate actively in the work of ISO. It resulted in several long trips including an official visit to China.

NEDCO (1965-66), but had been put to rest for a while. However, in 1971 we asked ourselves whether there was not some need for standards in this field. This resulted in two new technical committees being created – one for Air quality and the other for Water quality. A committee for Solar energy followed later in 1980. This modest beginning of an ISO environmental programme ultimately picked up momentum so that we now have an ISO standard for Environmental management (ISO 14000). Other new technical committees were set up to deal with Implants for surgery and Ergonomics. ISO was on its way to show society that international standardization was about much more than nuts and bolts – the prevailing view when I entered the standards world.

For many years, ISO was participating in seminars dealing with testing and quality control, but not until 1978 did ISO start its own programme. The initiative was taken by “Spike” Spickernell, Director-General of the British Standards Institution, and stimulated a lot of discussion before the title and scope for a new technical committee were agreed upon. The result was a technical committee for Quality management and quality assurance (TC 176) which would eventually produce one of our most spectacular standards – the ISO 9000 series.

By 1980, a lot of what we had set out to do had been achieved. During the remaining years that I was Secretary-General, we enjoyed the fruits of what we had achieved in the 70s. There were many who had provided ideas and support, and who I had the pleasure of serving. In addition to two of the best Presidents ISO ever had – Frank LaQue (USA) and Ake Vrethem (Sweden) – there were four strong personalities who were fully devoted to the future of ISO: Roy Binney (UK), Nikolaus Ludwig (Germany), Donald Peyton (USA) and Franz van Rhijn (Netherlands).

At the time I became Secretary-General, my intention was to stay on only until the end of the 70s. But as this date approached, a number of member bodies expressed the wish that I should remain in the job for a few years for “political reasons”. In the end, this turned out to mean an extension of seven years.

Through the job of ISO Secretary-General, I got two corner stones of my wishes. I was working for international purposes, and I was involved in a very interesting activity which, in the main, was without human and political conflicts. Those two combined were ISO. In my first speech to ISO Council in 1969, I said: “Political nationalism will most probably prevail as long as we live. Economic nationalism is about to disappear. And technical nationalism has disappeared!” Technology is international; standardization should be international. I’m rather proud of this saying. I still stand for it 28 years later – perhaps with the modification that economic nationalism has now almost disappeared, and today there are signs of cracks in political nationalism.