



WORLD BANK GROUP

World Development Report 2025 Roundtable

Geneva, Switzerland

– **Executive brief**

Standards for Development
ISO & World Bank Group

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On 15 January 2026, ISO and the World Bank convened a high-level roundtable to mark the release of the *World Development Report 2025: Standards for Development*.

For the first time in its 45-year history, the World Bank Group's flagship report is dedicated to the role of standards in driving development.



Purpose of the roundtable

To examine how standards can function as core development infrastructure, based on the findings of the *World Development Report 2025*, and to identify practical actions for governments, development institutions, standards bodies and the private sector – especially to strengthen developing-country participation, implementation capacity and impact at scale.



Strategic context

The roundtable brought together leadership from ISO, the World Bank Group, UN agencies, national standards bodies, public and private-sector representatives to discuss standards as a “quiet catalyst” of development – often unnoticed when functioning well, but highly visible when absent or misused. Participants underscored that standards are increasingly central to trade competitiveness, policy delivery, climate and environmental action, health and safety, and digital transformation, while also being exposed to rising geopolitical and market pressures.

Key insights



1. Standards as development infrastructure

Standards were repeatedly framed as foundational infrastructure – supporting productivity, safety, interoperability, innovation diffusion, and market integration, including for SMEs and emerging sectors (e.g. services and digital).



2. Inclusion is essential: from “Takers” to “Shapers”

A major theme was the participation gap: many developing countries adopt standards to access markets, but are underrepresented in shaping them – reducing relevance, raising compliance costs and creating unintended barriers.



3. Standards and regulation must work together

Participants emphasized the need for stronger alignment between International Standards and national policy/regulatory frameworks, so that standards reinforce policy goals (e.g. public health, human rights, environmental protection) without creating counterproductive compliance burdens.



4. Capacity is the critical enabler

The discussion highlighted the central role of national quality infrastructure – metrology, testing, inspection, certification, and accreditation – as the practical backbone for implementing standards. Where institutions are small or under-resourced, functions are often bundled, creating capacity constraints and potential conflicts of interest.



5. Standards are becoming “noisy”: trade, climate and digital risks

Standards are increasingly used in trade policy and supply chains, including via non-tariff measures and sustainability requirements. Participants warned that disclosure frameworks may become more contested and confrontational, driven by geopolitical fragmentation and economic interests.



6. Emerging technology needs faster, more forward-looking standardization

The roundtable stressed that standards bodies must anticipate fast-moving technology shifts (AI, digitalization, smart systems). Developing economies need pathways to engage earlier – before the rules are set – and to ensure implementable, context-appropriate outcomes.





Afternoon sessions key takeaways

The afternoon programme moved from discussion to delivery, with two panels focused on what it will take to turn the World Development Report's findings into practical change.

Panel 1 focused on how International Standards can drive inclusion rather than act as barriers. Speakers stressed that impact depends on meaningful participation by developing countries in shaping standards, supported by the adapt-align-author framework, the use of tiered approaches that align ambition with capacity, investment in national quality infrastructure, and strong policy ownership. Practical models – such as Rwanda's SME maturity ZU model – illustrated how incremental, targeted support can reduce compliance costs, build trust, and expand market access for smaller firms. The message was clear: scale requires partnerships, regulatory coherence, regional and international cooperation, and close alignment with development priorities.



Panel 2 examined how standards can strengthen regulation without slowing innovation or fragmenting trade. The discussion highlighted good regulatory practice: regulate only where necessary, anchor rules in international standards, and keep frameworks flexible for fast-moving technologies. AI illustrated how principle-based laws, backed by adaptable standards and enforcement capacity, can balance innovation with risk. Speakers emphasized early collaboration between regulators and standards bodies, clear institutional roles, and sustained investment in quality infrastructure.

Across both panels, participants pointed to the *ISO Action Plan for developing countries 2026-2030* as a practical pathway to advance this agenda – scaling participation, strengthening national quality infrastructure, and turning standards into tools for competitiveness, resilience and inclusive growth.



Priority actions identified

Across interventions, the “way forward” coalesced around:

- ➔ **Mainstreaming standards into national development strategies earlier**
- ➔ **Investing in quality infrastructure and capacity (including regional pooling)**
- ➔ **Improving participation in International Standards setting and making it more accessible**
- ➔ **Promoting tiered/progressive pathways for firms and countries**
- ➔ **Reducing fragmentation and duplication across standards ecosystems**
- ➔ **Strengthening the value proposition (market/finance links) for businesses**

The World Development Report 2025 was widely seen as a pivotal validation tool that can help shift awareness and political attention – especially in developing-country contexts – toward standards as a driver of competitiveness, resilience, and sustainable development.



The World Bank Group and ISO welcome further interest in building on the report through joint activities, such as follow-up events, publications, or media engagements.

If this is of interest, please feel free to reach out to wdr2025@worldbank.org and press@iso.org.



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