

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACCREDITATION OF CONFORMITY ASSESSMENT AND TEST HOUSES IN TANZANIA

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Sometimes experts meet and begin to wonder whether the other party (colleague) is doing the right thing! Then finally they believe they need an arbitrator to judge their competence to make sure that they are in the right path.

So it is imperative to be sure of the competence of test houses, certification bodies, inspection bodies and other government agencies dealing with conformity assessment of products and services in Tanzania. According to international standards accreditation is part of the national regulatory framework. Briefly, this feature article will highlight the need for accreditation of these services in Tanzania as part of the need to regulate their competence

There is a need to understand what accreditation means in the area of conformity assessment as well as for regulatory bodies. In simple terms accreditation is the approval by an authoritative impartial legal third party organization of the competence of the activities done by the conformity assessment bodies as well as regulatory entities. Another question may be what is meant by conformity assessment?

Conformity assessment is the demonstration that products or services meet or fulfill specific requirements. The requirements may be national standards such as Tanzania standards, regional standards or international standards. The requirements may also be regulations or directives as specified by states or member states, in regional communities. Usually these requirements are verified through a number of ways. The first one may be certification. Through certification the customer is given a certificate that products or services conform to the stated requirements.

A good example is the certification by the Tanzania Bureau of Standards (TBS) to manufacturers that products conform to Tanzania standards. Hence, TBS grants the “tbs” mark license and regularly carries out surveillance inspections to ensure that compliance to the stated standards is maintained.

The second one is inspection. Inspection is done through inspectors carrying out sampling to check whether products and services conform to requirements. Inspection may be systematic or random depending on the inspection and sampling plans followed. Regulatory bodies also do inspections. For example, ship and marine inspections, occupational health inspection, building inspection etc.

The third is testing. Testing is widely used in test houses to see whether products tested are according to standards or certain expectations. Test houses are laboratories, which have to meet specific requirements according to the products tested. A range of products are tested ranging from chemicals, food, engineering materials to human products like blood, urine etc.

The fourth is calibration. Calibration is the science of ensuring that measurements conform to specific values. In reality, calibration is the backbone of all the tests and inspections done anywhere in the world. This science is called metrology which all testing and inspection bodies have to adhere to in order to give the correct measured value.

Various bodies and government departments or agencies in Tanzania perform all the above conformity assessment activities. The major question is whether any of these actors have been accredited. **Do they have the required competence to carry out what they do? Has any of these bodies been accredited and by whom in order to provide the technical confidence required?**

Tanzania is a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and signatory to the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) agreements. World Trade Organization requires free movement of goods/ products and services. Hence, the need for competition of services in the area of conformity assessment bodies and test houses as well. This means certificates whether test reports; inspection reports, calibration reports or certified products should enjoy this free movement and acceptability. In other words **“tested or inspected once but accepted anywhere” if proven competence has been granted.**

WTO-TBT recognizes this equivalency of certificates provided the competence or accreditation has been granted to the body granting the certificate or report.

What does accreditation involve? Or why does an institution need to be accredited? Well, this depends on the activities performed by the organization seeking accreditation. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has published standards to which organizations may be accredited. The standard has been adopted by Tanzania in preparation for accrediting a number of organizations dealing with testing and calibration. The ISO/IEC 17025 details what is required for testing and calibration laboratories to be accredited. This standard may be purchased from TBS. It is not the purpose of this article to cover what the standard contains but essentially meeting the requirements of this standard can prove competence of your organization to carry out the intended functions.

It is deemed necessary that all laboratories in Tanzania purchase the ISO/IEC 17025 standard and train their staff on the technical requirements of the standard.

There are however, few problems that need to be mentioned that may require laboratories to work together before gaining accreditation.

The first issue is participation in Proficiency Testing Schemes. Test laboratories need to participate in Proficiency Testing Schemes (PTS) with other laboratories. In other words, proficiency test samples are acquired to compare and gauge if one laboratory compares with other laboratories. PTS are available at regional and international levels. Tanzania laboratories may not afford participation costs.

Why PTS? Well there is a saying that among fools there is always number one! So, in participating in PTS you know how your laboratory performs. The accreditor would like to see how the laboratory applying for accreditation performs in PTS.

Proficiency testing is a problem in Tanzania as laboratories which are ready to be the providers of Proficiency Testing Schemes lack basic resources. However, TBS has initiated a scheme where several laboratories participate in inter-laboratory testing to compare how they perform. PTS is an issue that is being discussed at regional and international levels. Within SADC there is a big discussion on how to assist test houses and calibration laboratories to solve the issue of PTS. At the international level that is at the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) there is a committee also discussing the issue of assisting developing countries on the issue of PT samples. Tanzania is represented in ILAC committee for developing countries and TBS is the chairperson for the Developing Countries Support Committee on the International Accreditation Forum (IAF). SADC Committees on accreditation (SADCA) and metrology (SADCMET) are also working on this. The major concern is the need for test houses and laboratories to fully understand the issue of participating in PTS.

The second issue is the need to acquire reference materials (RMs) and certified reference materials (CRMs). These are essential for ensuring the quality of testing laboratories. Availability of RM and CRM is a problem. Purchasing and transportation of CRM across borders has been a problem especially for microbiology laboratories.

Lastly, training in ISO/IEC 17025 is a problem. No test house or laboratory can acquire accreditation without documenting and implementing a proper quality manual conforming to the standard.

In summary this is for the test houses and calibration laboratories.

Inspection is the examination by professional judgment of products, processes or services as to their conformity to requirements. A number of inspection bodies are operating in Tanzania. These also need to conform to international standard, ISO/IEC 17020 in order to get accredited. The standard can be purchased from TBS. In order to carry out internationally accepted inspection service, the inspection bodies have to be accredited to ISO/IEC 17020. Inspection results may be used to support certification.

Certification is attestation in form of a certificate that products or services meet specified requirements. Certification bodies have to meet requirements of ISO/IEC Guides 28, 65 and ISO/IEC 17021 respectively, depending on the type of certification they offer. All these standards are available at TBS.

Certification bodies also need to be accredited.

The big challenge that faces Tanzania is whether there is a legally instituted body to accredit all these organizations. Usually, people confuse accreditation and certification. There is hence a need to differentiate the two. The usual and simple explanation is whether any parent would like to take his child to a non-accredited school, where at the end of the child's education, the certificate or reports obtained are not recognized!. A national accreditation body must be initiated which meets the requirements of ISO/IEC 17011.

The answer of course is that accreditation provides confidence of the conformity assessment provided and hence, the need for the rigidity in acquiring accreditation. It is even more difficult if accreditation is granted to provide confidence in the movement of goods/products and services across borders. Tanzania is currently considering this issue of starting a National

Accreditation System. The SADC committee of experts on cooperation in accreditation (SADCA) has started training assessors who will serve on the regional accreditation body, SADCAS that will provide accreditation services to Member States.

Tanzania has already nominated her National Accreditation Focal Point (NAFP) who has been trained on various aspects of accreditation to serve as the “national branch office” for SADCAS. Once SADCAS is fully established all bodies are free to seek accreditation to the recognized standards. SADCAS will be a member of the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) and the International Accreditation Forum (IAF) and sign Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) so that its accredited members will be recognized internationally. SADCAS will be like any other national accreditation body will undergo peer assessments by ILAC and IAF and hence become signatory to their MRAs. Meanwhile, Tanzania will be coming up with her national Accreditation Body (TANAS)!

Well, the journey is too long but we have started. We must keep it up! The challenges are many but the opportunities of accreditation are also many.

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