

# **GLOBALLY HARMONIZED SYSTEM OF CLASSIFICATION AND LABELLING OF CHEMICALS (GHS)**



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## FOREWORD

1. The Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals (GHS) which is described in this document is the culmination of more than a decade of work. There were many individuals involved, from a multitude of countries, international organizations, and stakeholder organizations. Their work spanned a wide range of expertise, from toxicology to fire protection, and ultimately required extensive goodwill and the willingness to compromise, in order to achieve this system.

2. The work began with the premise that existing systems should be harmonized in order to develop a single, globally harmonized system to address classification of chemicals, labels, and safety data sheets. This was not a totally novel concept since harmonization of classification and labelling was already largely in place for physical hazards and acute toxicity in the transport sector, based on the work of the United Nations Economic and Social Council's Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods (UNCEDTG). Harmonization had not been achieved in the workplace or consumer sectors, however, and transport requirements in countries were often not harmonized with those of other sectors in that country.

3. The international mandate that provided the impetus for completing this work was adopted in the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), as reflected in Agenda 21, para.19.27

*"A globally harmonized hazard classification and compatible labelling system, including national safety data sheets and easily understandable symbols, should be available, if feasible, by the year 2000".*

4. The work was coordinated and managed under the auspices of the Interorganization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals (IOMC) Coordinating Group for the Harmonization of Chemical Classification Systems (CG/HCCS). The technical focal points for completing the work were the International Labour Organization (ILO); the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); and the United Nations Economic and Social Council's Sub Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods (UNSCETDG).

5. Once completed in 2001, the work was transmitted by the IOMC to the new United Nations Economic and Social Council's Sub-Committee of Experts on the Globally Harmonized System of Classification (UNSCEGHS) established by the Council's resolution 1999/65 of 26 October 1999 as a subsidiary body of the former UNCETDG, renamed at the same occasion "Committee of Experts on the Transport of Dangerous Goods and on the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals" (UNCETDG/GHS). The Committee and its sub-committees work on a biennium basis and the first task of the UNSCEGHS was to make the GHS available for worldwide use and application. This document, elaborated from the original proposal by IOMC and approved by the Committee at its first session (11-13 December 2002) is intended to serve as the initial basis for global implementation of the GHS.

6. Nevertheless, the system should be dynamic, and be revised and made more efficient as experience is gained in implementation. While national or regional governments are the primary audiences for this document, it also contains sufficient context and guidance for those in industry who will ultimately be implementing the national requirements which are adopted. The UNSCEGHS is responsible for maintaining the GHS and promoting its implementation. It will provide additional guidance as needs arise, while maintaining stability in the system to encourage its adoption. Under its auspices, this document will be revised and updated to reflect national, regional and international experiences in implementing requirements into national, regional and international laws, as well as experiences of those doing the classification and labelling.

7. Bearing in mind that, in paragraph 22 (c) of its Plan of Action adopted in Johannesburg on 4 September 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development encouraged countries to implement the new GHS as soon as possible with a view to having the system fully operational by 2008, the Committee hopes that countries and international organizations concerned with chemical safety will adopt it in the near future. Availability of information about chemicals, their hazards, and ways to protect people, will provide the foundation for national programs for the safe management of chemicals. Widespread management of chemicals in countries around the world will lead to safer conditions for the global population and the environment, while allowing the benefits of chemical use to continue. Harmonization will also have benefits in terms of facilitating international trade, by promoting greater consistency in the national requirements for chemical hazard classification and communication that companies engaged in international trade must meet.

8. This publication has been prepared by the secretariat of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN/ECE) which provides secretariat services to the Economic and Social Council's Sub-Committee of Experts on the Classification and Labelling of Chemicals.

9. Additional information, including corrigenda to this publication, if any, may be found on the UN/ECE Transport Division web site: <http://www.unece.org/trans/danger/danger.htm>.

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