



The quest for **social responsibility**

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The notions of social development and social responsibility (SR) were first associated with the needs of the poor. Over time, this idea has expanded to include a number of issues, such as the protection of the environment and the fight against corruption. Today, ISO is undertaking an unprecedented worldwide initiative to develop an International Standard giving guidelines on SR (ISO 26000, *Guidance on social responsibility*).

The end of charity

During the Middle Ages, the poor in certain parts of Europe formed massive urban and rural clusters, and the initiatives to alleviate their suffering were generally under the influence of the Christian charity doctrine. It was only in the Modern Age that the concept of social responsibility became associated with poverty.

As the traditional system of workmanship corporations declined, and with it the assistance provided to its members in old age, their widows, orphans and the sick, governments in several countries took responsibility for the unemployed and neglected.

Beneficence, benefaction and philanthropy were some of the new terms that replaced the religious oriented notion of charity, as poverty alleviation became the duty of the state. With time, other issues would join poverty under the concerns of social responsibility, such as the respect for human diversity, fight against corruption, promotion of quality of life in the workplace and protection of the environment.



- the different ways of understanding an organization and its relations to society and the environment ;
- an organization's activities and its aim to obtain favourable economic results.

A sustainable organization

There are today a number of initiatives addressing social responsibility and sustainability, which converge to form the models for a sustainable organization. A core concept in both social responsibility and sustainable development is the idea of the triple bottom line (TBL) across three spheres – economic, environmental and societal. A range of local, national and regional initiatives provide guidance, standards and other management tools to implement these concepts. The great challenge now is to make them applicable to all organizations on an international scale.

Life as we know it

But why is the world so intent on working together to develop an International Standard on social responsibility? International standardization is indispensable to society in the 21st century. Without it, many aspects of our lives such as transport, trade and the Internet would falter.

Standards address issues from all spheres of life ranging from healthcare to banking. Safety standards for toys protect our children and keep our refrigerators connected in an environmentally friendly way. Television, DVD players, mobile phones and computers rely on standards for compatibility. Paper sizes, electronic file formats, e-banking, nanotechnologies, doors, faxes, security systems, disaster reduction and much more, benefit from International Standards.

“International standardization is indispensable to life in the 21st century.”

Not only do standards contribute to increasing safety and performance, but they bring the world closer together by disseminating knowledge, promoting innovation and facilitating trade.

Speak one language

ISO standards facilitate the exchange of goods and services in the international marketplace and promote cooperation amongst countries in the scientific, technological and production sectors. The goal of ISO is to publish documents that establish internationally accepted practices.

In the universe of tools and concepts upholding socially responsible management, there is a wide spectrum of possibility: from the ISO 14001 and the social accountability SA 8000 management standards, to the Declaration of Human Rights and the Global Compact principles, to mention a few.

The guidance in ISO 26000 will draw on the good practices developed by existing public and private sector SR initiatives, and be complementary to these instruments, including the

Power to the individual or to the organization ?

Our modern notion of social responsibility starts with perhaps one of the greatest liberal thinkers, Adam Smith. Smith's liberalism is based upon the doctrine of individualism as explained by Friederich Hayek, 1974 Nobel Prize winner, who concludes that humanitarian aid, philanthropy and other assistance for the poor should be decided by an organization's owners as individuals and, therefore, as judges in their own causes. However, this can create conflict between owners and executives.

In the 1990s this view suffered serious criticisms due to the raising of social and environmental demands. A new concept of social responsibility was created including the power of stakeholders.

SR practices can present some implementation difficulties due to :

- the diversity of issues involved, translated into a myriad of rights, duties and expectations for a variety of internal and external stakeholders ;



In the array of initiatives aiming to promote social responsibility, the myriad of options is so vast that ranking, classification and further instruction are necessary. Common, for example, are questions on how to use the Millennium Development Goals or the United Nations (UN) Agenda 21 in corporate missions or visions.

While some of these concepts are not as friendly for application in the day-to-day environment of an organization, others – such as ISO management standards like ISO 9001 on quality management or ISO 14001 on environmental management systems – allow for the establishment of procedures to implement, monitor, control and improve products and processes.

relevant conventions and declarations by the UN and its constituents, notably the International Labour Organization (ILO), and consistent with the principles of the Global Compact and ILO labour standards.

Advantages of working together

It is generally accepted that inter-governmental instruments, such as those of the UN, ILO and Global Compact have a significant role to play in any effective approach to social responsibility, constituting important building blocks for any ISO guidance on SR. At the same time, we should not detract from the valuable contribution of other relevant stakeholders.

ISO standards have been developed through open and transparent multi-stakeholder processes, and used by many organizations around the world. A clear statement at the outset of the value of aligning with related SR initiatives will reassure stakeholders that the ISO SR standard draws on, and potentially provides links to a variety of different SR tools currently in operation, while recognizing that distinctions do exist between different types of instruments.

In addition, an ISO standard for SR would provide numerous advantages, including:

- provide a global “common understanding” of SR issues, thereby creating a reference point that is appropriate, understood, accepted and distributed in all countries;

- give marginal voices a platform to participate in the development of requirements that will affect them. This is particularly relevant for developing countries, which had little involvement in the creation of existing SR initiatives, and could not ensure that their priorities and concerns were satisfactorily addressed;
- level the playing field at the global level for business organizations, developing and developed countries, and stakeholders of all types;
- assemble a broader range of experience and expertise on SR, resulting in deliverables that could replace relatively less effective standards, while promoting good-practice and technology dissemination;
- reduce transaction costs, improve communications and facilitate trade at an international level, widening the scope of national and regional initiatives;
- add trust to the area of social responsibility with a standard developed and implemented in a credible manner.

A global challenge

The greatest challenge for management in modern organizations is to show that these tools are compatible with the various management levels, and can be applied individually to each of the sustainability dimensions: societal, economic and environmental. The alignment of these three dimensions depends on management maturity. To

this end, the international community needs an ISO standard giving guidance on SR for a more harmonious and balanced society.

In face of the above mentioned issues, an organization’s social responsibility is a means to reach organizational sustainability. This can be defined as how the organization carries out its business management in order to be economically efficient, socially inclusive and environmentally judicious.

“The future ISO 26000 will help implement ethical and sustainability commitments.”

The model that guides the future ISO 26000 will be attuned to these converging movements: social responsibility and sustainable development. One of its basic premises is that an organization’s social responsibility involves contributing to overcoming social and environmental crises. Thus, without intending to be prescriptive or superpose existing initiatives, the future ISO 26000 will provide a practical tool to implement ethical and sustainability commitments, for example, in the daily routine of an organization.

ISO is taking action to ensure that the standard will benefit from broad input by all those with a serious interest in social responsibility. This is being achieved by a balanced representation in the working group, the largest multi-stakeholder participation of its kind. For this reason, participation and the capacity to include multi-stakeholder interests in the standard’s development is as important as its content.

Finally, the writing of this standard presents a tricky path. It is only through innovation in the consensus mechanism that we have taken successful steps, as out of an infinite combination of stakeholders and country interests there can only emerge a single document aligned to sustainable development. ISO constitutes an ideal international platform to meet this unique challenge. ■

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