What is a Sustainability Standard?

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A Sustainability Standard consists on a *set of rules and obligations, as well as prohibitions and limitations, in order to guide the production of a given product or service.* The obligations and restrictions are based on environmental, social and other values.

There is usually a control and certification scheme coupled to a Sustainability Standard. This ensures that companies who adopt the standard are true to their word, as checked by an independent third party. By keeping non-compliers out, it increases the reliability of the Standard in public eyes.

Therefore, reliable and certified Sustainability Standards can help consumers differentiate products based on their sustainability. An environmentally motivated consumer may, for example, acquire FSC or PEFC (standards for timber industry) certified paper, and be sure to contribute to sustainable forest exploitation.

There is an important feedback effect in consumer differentiation of these products. If consumers do value them over non-certified products, this provides an incentive for even more companies to adopt such Standards. Because of this mechanism, when a new Standard is set, its developers hope that one day it will become the norm and not the exception in that sector. It is then time to develop even bolder Standards, surely clearing the path towards sustainability.

What is a Sustainability Standard?

A Sustainability Standard, also known as sustainability guidelines, consists on a set of rules and obligations, as well as prohibitions and limitations, in order to guide the production of a given product or service. The obligations and restrictions are based on environmental, social and other values.

Some examples of what is in a Sustainability Standard are:

• Which materials and other inputs to select;

• How manufacturing processes should be handled;

• To which degree are environmental impacts are tolerable;

• How wastes are prevented and dealt with.

Nowadays, existing standards go beyond standardizing behavior. A Standard facilitates measurement of product improvements over time, providing a metric for the quantification of continual improvement. If understood correctly, they provide the company with a management tool with positive effects in all respects. The implementation of a standard requires knowledge of the productive system and a gathering of different people and sector within the company that previously would not have been possible. Therefore, the adoption of a Sustainability Standard is, first of all, a managing tool.

However, most companies search for a Standard to differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive market. Consumers are now, more than ever, motivated by environmental concerns, and so sustainable products may be recognized and valued above other conventional products. Then, as a feedback effect, consumer differentiation provides an incentive for even more companies to adopt such Standards.

Some useful **characteristics are usually pinpointed for Sustainability Standards:**

• All **information and calculations** must be made **transparent**, in order to be revised by peers and the community;

• It must **cover all relevant environmental impacts** resulting **from all activities.** Both direct and indirect impacts must be contemplated;

• If it's a true Sustainability Standard, then the **economic and social part must be paired with the environmental side;**

• Has taken into account the **opinions of stakeholders.**

It's easy to see from these characteristics that a good Sustainability Standard must be clear and easily understandable, based on Life Cycle Assessment so it does not neglect indirect impacts, incorporate all criteria for sustainability, and must be subjected to public scrutiny before published.

There are **three steps for a company to adopt a Sustainability Standard:**

• The **first one** is the implementation of all requirements. Only a company that fully (or at least almost fully) complies the standard is ready for the next step.

- The **second step** is the verification of their accomplishment by a third part. An independent certification company should necessarily state that the company does comply with the standard. This brings more credit to the process and the company's claims.

- The **third and final step** is continuous, and consists on the maintenance of a control system that ensures that the Standard is always applied. Third-party periodic verification is required.

Some Standards are only communicated to economic players and regarding the company itself and not its products. Such is the case, for example, of the European Union's Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), where no label can be show in any product of a certified company. There are others, however, that aim precisely the presentation of a label in products, in order to set a direct communication channel with consumers.

One way of creating that **direct link to consumers** is, then, by using an **eco-label**, also known as environmental label. Eco-labels are informative seals attached to a product. The seal states the environmental characteristics of the product. There are three types of Eco-labels, as defined by the ISO series:

Type I, environmental labelling (ISO 14024) – Environmental labels in form of symbol or logo awarded to a product that meet the requirements of preset multiple criteria developed by the third party which are based on life cycle consideration.

Type II, Self-declared environmental claims (ISO 14021) – Environmental claims made by importers, distributors, or retailers indicating a single environmental aspect of product through text and symbol.

Type III, Environmental declaration (ISO 14025) – Detailed environmental declaration through environmental profile data sheet evaluated by using Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) defined in ISO 14040 series.

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