



Sustainability, sustainable development and social responsibility

ISO definitions and terminology



International
Organization for
Standardization



ISO in brief

ISO is the International Organization for Standardization. ISO has a membership of 163 national standards bodies from countries large and small, industrialized, developing and in transition, in all regions of the world. ISO's portfolio of over 19 100 standards provides business, government and society with practical tools for all three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, environmental and social.

ISO standards make a positive contribution to the world we live in. They facilitate trade, spread knowledge, disseminate innovative advances in technology, and share good management and conformity assessment practices.

ISO standards provide solutions and achieve benefits for almost all sectors of activity, including agriculture, construction, mechanical engineering, manufacturing, distribution, transport, healthcare, information and communication technologies, the environment, energy, safety and security, quality management, and services.

ISO only develops standards for which there is a clear market requirement. The work is carried out by experts in the subject drawn directly from the relevant industrial, business and technological sectors that have identified the need for the standard, and which subsequently put the standard to use. These experts may be joined by others with relevant knowledge, such as representatives of government agencies, testing laboratories, consumer associations and academia, and by international governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

An ISO International Standard represents a global consensus on the state of the art in the subject of that standard.

The achievement of sustainability is now recognized as the most fundamental requirement in every human endeavour and activity. Our failure to effectively address sustainability has led to a deterioration in our environmental, social and economic well being. Sustainability refers to the state of the global system in which the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs and is continually evolving. Achieving a balance between environmental, social and economic systems is considered essential for achieving sustainability.

The notion of sustainable development is based on the Rio Declaration and it encompasses the concepts of intergenerational equity, social cohesion, human well-being and international responsibility and its implementation is intended to lead to sustainability. Social responsibility encompasses the responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment and thus contributes to sustainable development.

The terms "sustainability", "sustainable development" and "social responsibility" are frequently used interchangeably, and although there is a close relationship between the three, they are different concepts and thus not interchangeable.

Standardizing terminology

To facilitate understanding of these three concepts, ISO uses the following definitions :

→ sustainability

state of the global system, which includes environmental, social and economic subsystems, in which the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Note 1 : The environmental, social and economic subsystems interact and are interdependent. They are often referred to with phrases such as the three dimensions/pillars/aspects of sustainability.

Note 2 : Sustainability is the goal of sustainable development.

→ sustainable development

development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. [SOURCE: Brundtland Report]

→ social responsibility

responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour that :

- contributes to sustainable development, including the health and the welfare of society
- takes into account the expectations of stakeholders
- is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behaviour, and
- is integrated throughout the organization and practised in its relationships.

Note 1 : Activities include products, services and processes.

Note 2 : Relationships refer to an organization's activities within its sphere of influence. [ISO 26000:2010, definition 2.18]



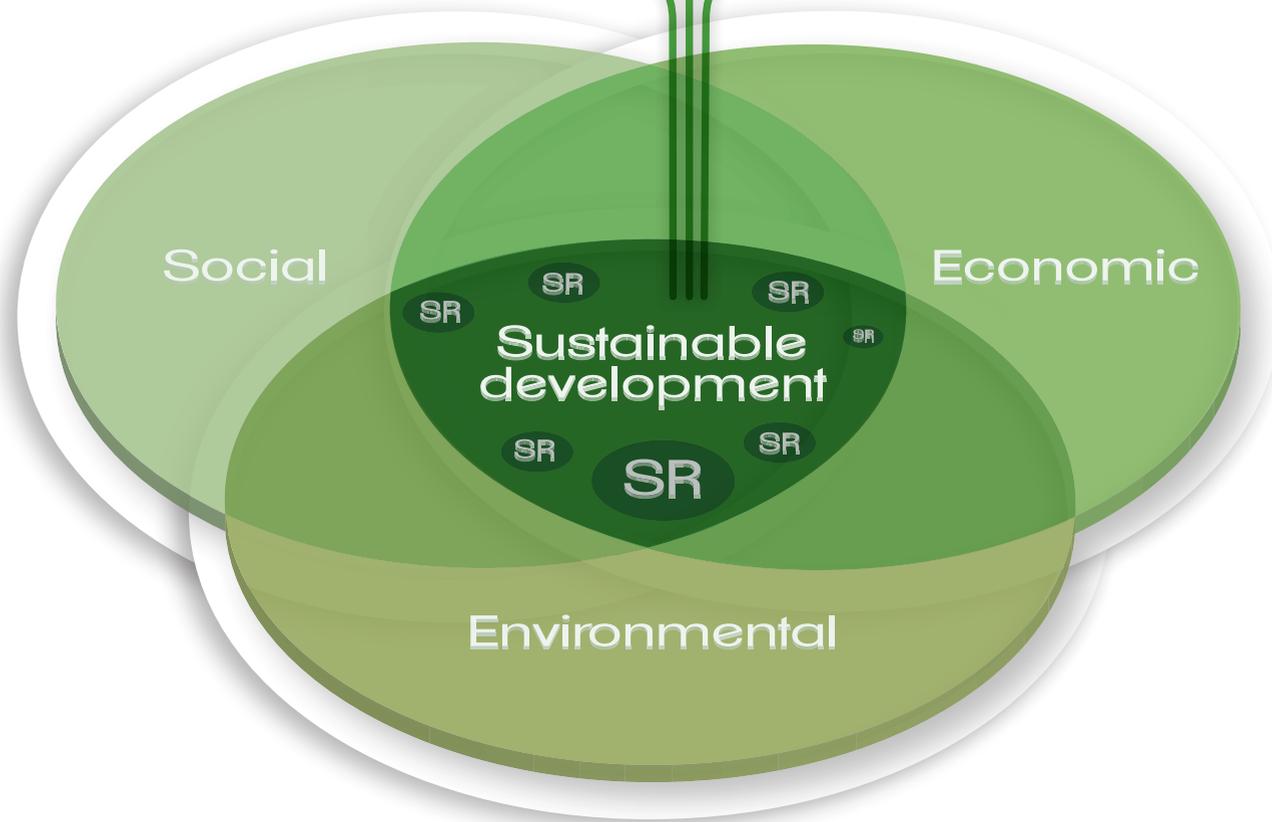
Widening the scope

Sustainability, as the goal of sustainable development, is a broadly applied concept and, as a guiding objective, gained international recognition following the publication in 1987 of the " Report of the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development : Our Common Future ". Since 1987, the importance of sustainability has been reiterated in numerous international fora, such as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002.

Sustainability encompasses three dimensions – economic, environmental and social, which are interdependent and can be mutually reinforcing. These three dimensions are founded on the perception of the environment being the natural surroundings in which society and the economy function. Both the economy and society are constrained by the limits of the earth's ecosystems.

Another perspective considers the sustainability issues related to the economy, the consumption of resources and the distribution and use of products as a subsystem or part of the social system. The social system, in this case, is seen as being made up of human institutions, individuals and organizations and as a subsystem of the earth's ecosystems.

Sustainability



SR = Social Responsibility

Evolving concepts

Sustainability was originally understood and applied primarily in an environmental sense, including critical issues related to the environment such as climate change, non-sustainable resource use or depletion, and loss of fertile soil and biodiversity.

However, sustainability has now evolved to take into consideration other critical non-environmental issues, including global economic crises, poverty and social disparities.

Sustainability is relevant to all levels of human activity, from the global to the national, regional and community levels, as well as to the behaviour of individuals. It is also affected by all kinds of organizations, including governments, non-governmental organizations, companies, co-operatives, federations and unions.

Sustainability is much more likely to be achieved by society as a whole by addressing social, economic and environmental aspects in an integrated manner.

Based on the Rio Declaration, sustainable development encompasses the concepts of intergenerational and gender equity, social cohesion, quality of life and international responsibility. Sustainable development encompasses an approach that recognizes the need to meet the challenges of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is about integrating the goals of an improved quality of life, health and prosperity with social justice and maintaining the earth's capacity to support life in all its diversity.

Sustainable development can be seen as a way of expressing the broader expectations of society that need to be taken into account by organizations, groups and individuals, each seeking to act responsibly.

Social responsibility encompasses the responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment and thus contributes to Sustainable Development.

Although "corporate social responsibility" (CSR) may be a more familiar term, the view that "social responsibility" is applicable to all organizations has recently emerged, as different types of entities or groups of people and facilities, not just those in the business world, recognized that they too had responsibilities for contributing to sustainable development and sustainability.

ISO and sustainable development ?

The standards development process allows the authors of standards to actively contribute to sustainable development, as they take the lead in calibrating the impact on society and the environment, of the tenets laid out in standards.

In general, ISO standards (whose development is based on a double level of consensus – between stakeholders and between countries) contribute to the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, environmental and social.

- They facilitate global trade, the dissemination of new technologies, good business practices and relations between economic actors
- They support good environmental practice and information, energy efficiency and the dissemination of new, eco-friendly and energy performance technologies
- They contribute to consumer protection, safety at work, improved healthcare, security and other social interests which may require technical or management standards for related products and services.

ISO's guidance to social responsibility

One of the most well-known standards in this context is undoubtedly ISO 26000:2010, *Guidance on social responsibility*. It is applicable to all types of organization, regardless of their size or location. It provides guidance on :

- Concepts, terms and definitions related to social responsibility
- The background, trends and characteristics of social responsibility
- Principles and practices relating to social responsibility
- The core subjects and issues of social responsibility
- Integrating, implementing and promoting socially responsible behaviour throughout an organization and, through its policies and practices, within its sphere of influence
- Identifying and engaging with stakeholders, and
- Communicating commitments, performance and other information related to social responsibility.

ISO 26000:2010 is intended to assist organizations in contributing to sustainable development. Its aim is to encourage them to go beyond mere legal compliance, recognizing that compliance with the law is the fundamental duty of any organization and a key element of social responsibility. Its objective is to promote common understanding, complementing other instruments and initiatives targeting social responsibility, not replacing them.



Resources

- **ISO's Website**
www.iso.org
(in English and French, with top levels in Russian and individual publications in other languages)
- **ISO Focus+ magazine**
www.iso.org/iso/iso-focus-plus
(10 editions annually in English and French)
- **ISO videos**
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