

IFAN Position on a possible revision of ISO 26000:2010

Background

After a six year development process, *ISO 26000 Guidance on Social Responsibility* was finalized and published in November 2010. The publication of the various national language versions followed in the subsequent months so that ISO 26000:2010 has been available for global use since the first months of 2011.

The systematic review will primarily seek to gain insight on ISO national member body experience with the ISO 26000 guidance standard, and this will then be used to make a decision on whether or not to revise ISO 26000:2010.

As one of nearly 40 D-Liaison organizations participating in ISO 26000, IFAN intends to provide input on behalf of its members but also, input that is representative of its members' interests.

Main concern: IFAN recommends leaving ISO 26000:2010 unchanged for the time being, in order to gain more practical experience and to eventually develop a revised ISO 26000:20xx on the basis of:

- a) a systematic evaluation of that increased experience;
- b) the outcome of a research project (yet to be conducted) on "Globally Agreed Set of Societal Values;" and
- c) an investigation of the relevance of ISO 26000 in the context of practiced sustainability management.

Supporting Rationale, Further Concerns and Recommendations for a Revised Standard:

A. General

Maintain freedom and autonomy of use

In view of the dynamic evolution of societies, it is considered adequate and appropriate that an ISO standard on a broad topic such as this offers (only) guidance and not requirements. Both the *freedom* of use and the *autonomy* of use are key to its broadest possible application.

IFAN recommends that the freedom and autonomy of use be maintained.

B. Building on experiences and investigations preceding a revision

B.1 More practical experience

Three years of usage seems to be a relatively short period of time with which to base an accurate assessment, particularly since reliable data on the use of ISO 26000 in various sectors of society and the global economy (and evidences why it is possibly not used) do not appear readily available, yet. Such a comprehensive investigation would mean that (a) all sectors get included, because a revision based on industry experience only would not be considered sufficient, and (b) that the data also show *why* ISO 26000 is not (or almost not) used by a particular sector. Society or economy "sectors" are e.g., education, labour, or public administration etc.

IFAN recommends that ISO and its national member bodies, possibly supported by a professional market research institute, gather realistic application data so that sectoral strengths and potential deficits can be identified and fed into the revision process.

B.2 Identification of globally agreed societal values

Since societies differ in their histories, cultures, traditions, religions, beliefs, etc., a globally agreed set of broad-ranging societal values seems not to be identified (or even particularly plausible) yet. This sets limits on the development of internationally agreeable societal standards. A research project on a set of globally agreed societal values would have merit and value to base a revised ISO 26000 on.

IFAN recommends that a study is undertaken, under the auspices of ISO, to identify the set of globally agreed values, so that they can be taken into account once ISO 26000 should be revised.

B.3 The realistic role of ISO 26000 in sustainability management

Social responsibility is often considered a part of sustainability management. Most of today's larger enterprises seem to focus their sustainability communication first of all on the enterprise's values, their specific strategic challenges and goals, and on regulatory/societal requirements of their specific sector. On top of such practical means, general political goals and multinational agreements like the UN Global Compact, the GRI Global Reporting Initiative, the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, the ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles Concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy, the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, or the UN Guiding Principles for Human Rights and Business play a major role. Therefore, it is an open question which role ISO 26000 can realistically play in sustainability management.

IFAN recommends that ISO investigate the relevance of ISO 26000 in the context of practised sustainability management, taking into account the various sizes of organizations.

C. Suggested changes in case of a revision

C.1 Reduce content and volume

Taking into account that the vast majority of organizations are micro, small and medium-sized ones (up to 50 employees, some 98% of all organizations) and – at least in industry and services – their primary goal is to survive in competition, it seems somewhat implausible to believe that an owner of such a small organization would take much or any of their valuable time to study some 480 recommendations in order to find that the majority of them would most probably not really apply to his/her organization.

IFAN recommends that an eventual revision focus on half the number of detailed recommendations, and to change the style from a textbook to a standard which is free of redundancies. The goal should be a document of less than 50 pages. Perhaps the number of recommendations and the volume of their context may be better handled by consolidation and broadening recommendations.

C.2 Delete redundancies and industry bias

The majority of quoted examples are taken from industry, and primarily from multinational enterprises. That demonstrates an industry bias, thereby undermining the claim of being applicable to **all** types of organizations.

IFAN recommends that practical examples should be selected in such a way that they fairly represent all types of organizations, including governmental administrations and agencies, education related organizations like schools and universities, health care related organizations like hospitals and other service providers, NGOs, non-profit organizations, labour unions and administrative organizations like standardization bodies, certification institutes, etc.

C.3 Modify the all-encompassing claim

In several places within the guidance standard, one can read the claim that all core subjects are

relevant to all organizations. Paradoxically as regards the 37 issues, one can read at various instances that “not all issues are necessarily *relevant* to an organization.” So, it can be concluded: if all issues listed under a core subject are considered not relevant, then the core subject in its entirety cannot be claimed to be relevant. For example: a manufacturer of components for high-voltage grids can determine categorically without hesitation that the whole core subject “consumer issues” is not relevant.

IFAN recommends that a revised guidance standard on social responsibility no longer expresses that all core subjects are relevant to all organizations; this would increase its credibility and consequently, the number of users, particularly among small and medium-sized organizations.

D. Standardization policy

D.1 Specify a new standards category GUIDANCE STANDARD

Since ISO standards are generally understood as containing requirements, the character of a standard offering (only) guidance without requirements may be the prime cause for profound misunderstandings and the subsequent creation of various kinds of conformity assessment services, which are misusing the ISO 26000 recommendations as quasi-requirements.

IFAN encourages ISO to consider the creation of a new category of standards, called “guidance standard”, which are characterized as follows: (a) they cannot be used for conformity assessment and regulatory purposes; (b) they are applicable without services external to an organization; and (c) the way of use is not part of the guidance standard itself but is at the users’ discretion.

D.2 New pricing

ISO 26000 is not a typical standard and in some way “competes” with other social responsibility related codes and standards, which are available for free.

IFAN recommends that ISO 26000 be provided in electronic form as an inexpensive download and that the price for the paper version is limited to printing and shipping costs, plus the “inexpensive” price. IFAN believes that this would enhance the global use of ISO 26000 and demonstrate – in part - a “socially responsible contribution” of ISO and its national member bodies to societal development.

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